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kinnickinnic

POETRY BY THOMAS R. SMITH

PARALLEL PRESS

A PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOK

Kinnickinnic

Poems by
Thomas R. Smith



PARALLEL PRESS 2008

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In memory of
Robert Samarotto and Bruce Foster,
setting suns on the river

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Red Willow

Red osier dogwood,
the Indians called
it kinnickinnic,
took inside their lungs
smoke from its bark
mixed with bear
root and tobacco
leaves. Lime-green
during warm months,
a cut branch
can grow new roots
even in sandy soil,
earning red willow
its reputation
for resurrection.
At spring equinox
when the summer
yet to be born
has traveled midway
on its long path
out of darkness,
I drive past fields
still sealed by snow,
where March clouds ruffle
like eaglets' down.
The most vivid color
above or below
is the crimson shine
of kinnickinnic

woven from the smoky
gray ditches.

My winter-
emptied heart
gathers itself,
a willow basket,
to catch that dark
alizarin burnish.

Then I too stand up
out of the scabbed ice
of a dead season,
ready to flower and leaf
again from a bare
red stick.

Confluence

(where the South Fork flows into the Kinnickinnic River)

After the rain: mud, standing pools,
dead leaves' slick mirror. Does this throbbing
come from inside or outside my body?

The surplus of spring storms surges
over falls, clambers down both
rocky channels to consolidate here,

white water ropy with a mineral
yellow like animal fat or aging hair,
gnarly shoreline braiding them toward union.

A Native American man once told me
that, walking along the river in autumn,
he heard the heartbeat of the earth.

When heart cell cultures are placed near
each other, the smaller one's rhythm
synchronizes with the larger. So my pulse flows

into your drumming, planet muscle, heart river!

The Snapping Turtle

Early morning on the park
road, a raw soul, low,
rounded, encumbered, regards
me with small, slowly
blinking eyes. Her wonderfully
aged, pointed face
pokes from a cowl of wrinkles,
bound by a shell leathery
and scuffed as the cover
of an antique book,
speckled with green confetti
of her climb through wet woods.
I seize her from behind,
try to lift clear
of traffic her heavy volume,
but she rears, stiffens,
balloons her scaly throat,
hisses.
Backing off, I tease
open with the end of a stick
her razor lips
so that her strange V-
shaped smile reveals
a baby-pink tongue.

She clamps on long enough
to be rocked and pulled
a few inches off balance,
then sinks her claws more
determinedly in the same patch
she's chosen to deposit her
eggs. Later the DNR
warden tells me
the gravel substrata of road-
sides attracts them,
sometimes miles, to dig
the right rough nest.
All the rest of the day I dwell
in her old woman's squint
from shadows of her boxy
shawl, stubborn armored
mother, earth-tenant
who has clambered her
arduous, faithful way
out of the water and up
the forest slope's steep
washouts to this mysteriously
desirable shoulder,
battered breast plate
shielding from roots and stones
her wild river heart.

Raccoon

Returning from my morning walk along the river, passing the culvert a second time, I suddenly see it: grey-faced animal wrapped from inside around the grate, its posture the ancient agony and submission to death. Stiff front and hind legs thrust out, the body folds around the metal bars that caught it mid-belly, snout twisted down and outward, baring the white corn of the teeth.

Our summer has been dry, followed by heavy rains. This concrete tunnel under meadows empties down from housing construction off South Main. A contained flood inside the storm sewer swept the raccoon away, slammed and pinned it here, where it died from drowning or concussion or both.

Pass by in your haste, and ignore it. Or notice the coarse-furred limbs extended, reaching for some withheld deliverance. Think of the new streets and homes, the people who no longer know where they are. Notice how closely the hands resemble your own.

The Forest Floor

Early March in the woods. Half the sky is clear, half cloudy. A layer of diffuse sunlight rests over everything, lightly, as the present rests over the world of the past.

The mat of dead leaves has dried on top, but remains moist underneath, half-lifted from the damp soil. The scabrous mantle of leaf-mulch stretches, pulls loose, and gradually breaks up. . . .

I'm drowsing, while under the forest's papery winter skin the earth is awakening. In exposed spaces tiny perfect stars gather their green rays. Small fires move darkly on thin legs.

Earth is trying to remove a stiff mask from her green and black face. We all know that attachment to the past and the engulfing splendor from which it shrinks. What do I conceal from myself, laying down my thousands of dead leaves?

Noon on the Kinnickinnic

The water gleams in glassy protuberances where the tops of submerged rocks surface. The sound they make says, "It's all right." We follow a path among lacy white flowers of April. Limestone bluffs and black branches shine intricately against blue sky. Every space that the shade will flood in a few weeks is still wide open and filled with light. How I love the shadows of trunks this time of year, flowing over the radiant floor of the woods. They pulse with life like the striped snake we watched pull itself in muscular S-curves broadside the swift current, its head glistening darkly, disappearing in reeds on the opposite shore.

Old Willow

The enormous old willow by the river doesn't
worry whether parts of itself have died.
It still has work to do, stretching
far. Its leaves still have
to consider the whole sky.

After a storm, it doesn't count its losses.
What falls nourishes the part still standing.
The immense trunk folds the September
sunset into the armoires of its bark,
warming the slender naked one

inside its simple green heart.

Cottonwood Seeds

This time of year the air fills with stars,
the warm wind pushing them upstream
against the river's fast glimmer.

From their radiant swarm, one can sometimes
pluck a tuft so insubstantial
it's difficult to pinch the gossamer

wings back from flight. The seed, white inside
its silver aura, sails the light's current
to arrive at a darkness it needs.

We might imagine it there, planted,
growing an angel instead of a thick-
barked, deep-rooted cottonwood tree.

Sesquicentennial Song
For Wisconsin statehood, 1848

In Ouisconsin the Blackrobes wanted souls, but the traders wanted furs and
squaws, and the settlers who followed them wanted land, lumber,
and wheat.

At Portage a mile-and-a-half-long trail fifteen thousand years old tied the knot of
Empire, marrying the North Atlantic to the Gulf of Mexico.

Immigrants wrote to relatives in Germany and Sweden of the sails on Milwaukee
Harbor, struck out following maps that repeated the same speculators'
errors for decades.

At night on raw farmsteads still moist with native blood, enraged spirits hissed in
the trees while candle-light caught the gilt-edged Bible.

We who were born in the shadow of the shot towers took lead in through the soles
of our shoes, grew heavy-footed with a drunken shuffling.

We never looked askance at our assumed innocence, nor at the crowded docks on
Lake Michigan, convinced that our bad luck, depression, and illness were
only our own.

To Summer

I sleepwalk through your heated noons and midnights.
You demand my complete allegiance,
so disloyally I slip away.
You birth a thousand fields of white clover,
to scathe them down in a single day.
To your intense spendthrift sun I bring
only a miser's hoarded match-flame. You
lay your burning hands all over my body,
but I can only reach to touch your face.

Family at Sunset

The back-lighting lake confers drama
on even the most modest faces.

Shadows of birch and linden trees bend
to whisper to the late-summer earth.

An almost hushed chorus of “Happy Birthday” . . .
Camera shutters admit the withdrawing sun.

The younger boys and girls grow so quickly
their shadows lengthen even at noon.

And the widowed grandmother alone knows
what a lucky thing it is to cast a shadow.

Mother and Child

When I turn the corner at Double F
onto the State Park road, I look
for the brown colt and its white mother.
Both are glossy against the dusty fence,
the colt standing near her in the open
or under the roofed shelter built for them.
They are so quiet, graceful and shy
they seem to live outside of time,
though the colt is no longer so small
as it was (all summer I've watched them).
Let the green fields turn to ochre
and crickets' song fall to the frosty ground.
Let the autumn sky brood nearer the river:
Between heaven and earth the brown colt and the white mare shine.

Baby Wrens' Voices

I am a student of wrens.
When the mother bird returns
to her brood, beak squirming
with winged breakfast, a shrill
clamor rises like jingling
from tiny, high-pitched bells.
Who'd have guessed such a small
house contained so many voices?
The sound they make is the pure sound
of life's hunger. Who hangs our house
in the world's branches, and listens
when we sing from our hunger?
Because I love best those songs
that shake the house of the singer,
I am a student of wrens.

Sharp-Shinned Hawk

Overhead, the hawk circled
in clear September air,
sun blotting through his banded
wing-feathers, hovered near, came
down. Was something wrong? We
strode to the edge of the field
where he settled on his belly,
pebbled grey wings extended,
yellow feet drawn up behind him,
his red eyes pure wild sparks.
He panted, his only movement.
We squatted near, talked to him,
feared he was hurt or dying.
But this was September and

our camp on his migratory
route. After resting, he drew
himself together, as though
with a single magic word
reassembling scattered parts,
and lifted again, light-infused,
nearly weightless. And that was
the last we saw of him who
had dropped here fatigued a moment
among men who also pressed chests
to earth, obeying gravity
that brought us low, vulnerable,
remembering flight, our wings
stretched out in each others' presence.

The Prey

Afternoon, late summer, driving fast
around a bend, I startled a hawk dipping,
then slicing upward from the deep meadow,
the beak leading, wings and tail together
one reddish blade against the hot blue
sky and clouds white as clean-picked bones.

Almost too late I saw the reason,
as it rose away from me in the high gold rays,
the small, shocked cargo it clutched beneath
itself, mouse or other furry creeper
extracted with deadly precision
from thick, long-shadowed prairie grass.

To be born of the loamy fields, to make
one's world at the roots of things and gnaw
their seed, to arrive at this moment
with tail drawn tight to the body, lifted
clear of one's good, quick life, one's world
incomprehensibly dwindling yet enlarged

by a searing vast radiant unfolding . . .

Opossum

A life, beyond this night-tracking of words,
snuffles along the foundation of the farmhouse,

mutters over firewood stacked on the porch,
drags a tail as naked and pink as a rat's,

marauds the cat's dish on the cement stoop
saturated with February eaves'-melt,

raises itself on haunches in the same electric
glow that lets me look deep into poems, and waves

its tapered snout just inches from my face:
Should I alarm it by opening the door,

it might collapse into its famous swoon—
“white animal” of the Algonquins,

pale-fleshed, pig-nosed rooter,
finder of food in the dark, and protection

in apparent faint-heartedness—though its teeth
might as easily razor fingers from my hand.

Doe in the Headlights

1

Misty morning in early December.
On the gravel shoulder of the highway
a tan and white sack—it's
a doe on her side, neck twisted,
muzzle up, dry cord of blood
drawn down from her open mouth.

In these mild winters, herds
fatten, multiply. I drive past
prime farmland fingered by developers,
fallow before the bulldozers.

2

Returning late under a cloudy moon,
I glance aslant the oncoming
dazzle, brighter each year. She's
there, poised to cross, shadowy
snout lifted toward the road. *Don't,*
please . . .

Is it possible she hears?

The rest of the way into our
small but growing city I wonder
how long she can keep coming back.

A Young Popple Grove in the North

Popples come to the edge of this
corridor in woods, an old logging road
now bare in early spring, whose only
traffic are clouds and ghosts.

The tawny earth dips and rises,
the slender branches thresh softly
the small wheat of the wind.

A fair-faced bride's embroidered
train spreads shimmering
around her. Sun on her veil,
she waits for a man she will
marry. When he arrives,
she will tell him stories
she has saved for this day.

North Country

1. Abandoned Cottage

This cottage among popples
on the highway to Laporte
has lost its ability to speak.
No voice, not even the dry
tongue of television. No
cars gossiping in the yard,
only junk metal rusting down
in red autumn grasses.
Only the dream,
in disappearing sun,
of someone who perhaps
more than anything
wanted to be left alone . . .

2. Off-Season

A girl in a leather
jacket and miniskirt
walks out of the Bee-
hive Hair Salon.
A dog behind a fence
dances on hind legs,
frantic for attention.

Curtains are drawn
in the hotel lobby.
Docks brought in,
the marina reverts
to the ducks. Honeyed
light of November
rolls off their backs.

Holiday decorations
wait for snow. Women
go on finding ways
to make themselves beautiful,
while men fire
rifles at moving shadows
in the sunset woods.

3. The Railroad Bed

On the railroad bed out of Walker,
the gravel turns from black to red.
I pick up a pebble—
dust reddens my fingertips.
Maybe the old Leech Lake people
knew some use for this iron rock.

The wind rests, where locomotives
once pulled loads of lumber
and white faces. The rails are gone,
along with the old-growth forests.
The air is forgiven its part. Are we?
Red on my hands, red beneath my feet . . .

Small Town during a Popular War

On a corner of the highway, a post office, restaurant, and grocery store huddle together, each a cinderblock bunker in the long siege called America. A banner on the grocer's facade announces in six-inch letters names of a dozen who have enlisted in the fighting. There must be one like it in every tiny village in the country.

A lone high school student in a Metallica T-shirt loiters in the park, a clearing edged with burnt brush by the lake shore. Strange to think of leaving these springtime woods and lakes to bomb a foreign desert . . . Small towns are full of desperate men and women looking for a way out of their lives. FOR SALE signs remain on some houses all year. Grass grows untended in the cemetery.

This far north, summer is a legend. The birches are indifferent to human longing; they think constantly of snow. The squirrel on a budding branch wraps its tail around the sun. We are losing the battle with winter, although the people here before us knew how to warm their dark skins without the aid of petrochemicals.

Windy Day at Kabekona

Only a picture window stands between us and the full force of gusts that lift the branches of the red pine. Draft under the cabin door rolls the rug resolutely into a tube despite my attempts to spread it flat.

Foot-high waves spume across the lake; near shore the color of the long, gleaming swells softens to a milky jade, warmer looking than it is, almost southern. But the drift of this world is northerly; lawn chairs are hurled into woodpiles, propellers of outboard motors scrape against stones. The door bangs loosely in its sill. Jack pines groan as if they could snap and fall.

There is something in all this fury that makes the day oceanic: We're near at any moment being swamped, drowned, pinned by wreckage. In the cloudless sky, the sun gleefully conducts the turbulence as though it were Wagnerian opera. A gull white as our idea of angels hovers above the shore for a moment—fully awake—fighting the wind before being torn from its place.

The Library at Cry of the Loon Lodge
For Nancy and Bill Booth

No need for the current bestseller—
so many reliable classics are here,
old and patient in their frayed spines,
their faded jackets out of fashion.

They stand not as means to outward ends
but for living larger inside. They've lost
none of their generosity, ready
to give you the best that was given to them.

Handle them gently. They still wait to open
their most intimate thoughts at a touch.
Generations sailed by their trusted stars
across a dark ocean without shores.

Rice Lake Burial Mounds

Hot evening at the end of a day's travel. Condensation from air conditioning drips under parked cars at the rest stop. My shirt unsticks from my back as we walk in a breeze like weak tea. The path leads farther than one would expect, past the toilets and woods just scrubby and littered enough to suggest illicit meetings and drug deals.

Strangely, we're walking only a few yards from the shoulder of the freeway. On our right, dust clouds from a denuded field where bulldozers scuff and rumble. Here, on the path, some large machine trampled and dragged branches, which lie crushed and green-smelling.

Just ahead are the mounds, a dozen or so feet tall, overgrown, fenced in. The plaque says that the people who built them lived between 800 and 1700, hunting, fishing and farming around Rice Lake, which we can glimpse from this slight elevation, sparkling hazily across the freeway.

There's not much here but some leafy hillocks in the shaded quiet of a cul-de-sac surrounded by concrete and concrete-to-be. Still a presence of some sort offers itself in the deepening shadows. To fully partake, one would have to clear away the mechanical noise and frenzy to live as the dwellers in this place once did.

Before them, I feel loss and shame, but also a twinge of awe thinking of the old ones who've lain in these mulchy hillocks, some of them for a thousand years.

Turning back toward the car, we still hear bulldozers working overtime to scrape more land bare for houses for commuters who will buy more gasoline to operate their minivans to make more oil wars necessary. But for a moment the mounds' strength overrides all that, settles on my spirit like a memory of some glory that has left the world. An intense horizontal copper-red beads through the tree line. Where we have been, we were not alone.

Firewood

Flames are taking the rough pine slab I've leaned into the fireplace kindling. The bed of embers is polymorphous—feathery, scaly, slaty, silky. Caves glow far inside the miniature black mountain that squeaks faintly in its torments like rubbed glass.

I set to one side, in the fireplace but apart from the fire, three heavy chunks of slightly damp oak. Looking on, they begin to steam, their grainy faces combed by firelight. Not as blank as one might expect—a knothole says *O!*

The flame is not external to the wood, but instead is its essence, dancing its religion, its long tongues licking the pine board's belly and evaporating upward into the most ephemeral scarves. If asked, it would have made a roof to keep us dry for a hundred years. Above the flue and into the night, it escapes toward its homeland of stars.



Thomas R. Smith is a poet, essayist, editor, and teacher living in River Falls, Wisconsin. His writing has appeared in hundreds of journals in the United States and abroad. His work was selected for *The Best American Poetry 1999* (Scribner) and has reached large national audiences on Garrison Keillor's public radio show, "Writer's Almanac," and in U.S. Poet Laureate Ted Kooser's syndicated newspaper column, "American Life in Poetry." He is the author of five books of poems: *Keeping the Star* (New Rivers Press, 1988), *Horse of Earth* (Holy Cow! Press, 1994), *The Dark Indigo Current* (Holy Cow! Press, 2000), *Winter Hours* (Red Dragonfly Press, 2005), and *Waking Before Dawn* (Red Dragonfly Press, 2007). He has edited *Walking Swiftly: Writings and Images on the Occasion of Robert Bly's 65th Birthday* (Ally Press, 1992; HarperCollins, 1993), and *What Happened When He Went to the Store for Bread* (Nineties Press, 1993), a selection of the Canadian poet Alden Nowlan. He is currently a Master Track poetry instructor at the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis.

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