



Peldaños

SONG OF THE SAN JOAQUIN

Michael Irwin



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Paintings by Jampa Dorje



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SONG OF THE SAN JOAQUIN RIVER

The San Joaquin in November,
Tamed, subdued, unassuming,
Drained of danger by the rainless summer,
Without thought of its risky youth in the Sierra,
Lacking, not thinking too,
On your back,
Your shimmering surface drenched in sky,
On your belly, slow moving stones,
Muffled sound, muted color
Salamandering the alluvials,
But now, darkened, merely
Marking, while passing, cooling in the air,
Being together.

OPEN AIR MOVING MUSEUM

Still life with cows and salt block

Behaving Sierra river diverted to Los Angeles

Two draw bridges and trestle together
Where the transcontinental railroad ended,
No longer on display

A surprising cut beneath the highway,
A river and its history

A seep of water through last year's weeds
Like melted solder

Two sided hills, seen both ways

Cows in the shade of an oak,
Like cards left on the table.

Cows in the field
Like just after the ticket window unexpectedly closes,
The people qued up, several minutes after they leave

Cows scattered like boats after a storm
Near dusk, the cows are closer,
At a distance, or nudging, licking, looking back,
Black In the gold, companionable,
Recollecting the day together.

THE STORE CALLED THE BIG DIPPER

Displaced Mien have settled, collecting strawberries that
Become a moon of ice cream
Balanced by a scooped and rolled peach
Picked by trabajadores migrantes nearby,
In summer in Escalon, on a curve in the road
Where girls have jeans that slip on the hip
And motorcycles are heavy down with double riders,
Reading Lama Jampa's
"Days without numbers the snow pack melts"

BY THE BAY

Bright, like a head in the sun,
A light left on in a park in the dark,
A granite cliff at noon:
The bay at low tide,
Welcome garden for birds
Walkers drawn from the hills
And voices from the earth
Drawn from the sky,
Shimmering, flat as a knife,
Its shimmering end, right where the freeway begins,
Bi polar creation of traffic jam and eroding sand
With joggers along the yin yang line.
I intrude into the balanced world,

Leaving the sand crab seeking ducks
And the herons shuffling in the cypress
And head for the rush hour traffic
Feeling like an ugly smear,
Angry at this, regretting the loss of that,
My mother, soon to be lost,
Watching as my fortune washes away.
Only the heart of awareness remains,
The island gone.
A fresh and fit jogger,
Feasting on carrots
Waits to throw her ball to her dog
But he just wants to explore the water's changing shoreline.
The dog goes along with the owner's plan,
Cheerfully extending to the back seat of the car.

CANADA GEESE

The geese come from the canyon,
Are high, flying to the lake.
They know their height from the earth,
Their place in the vee
And cry out to their neighbor
The gaudy exuberance of I am goose we are goose.

Your cry blooms from the sky.
I look up at you suspended

And call out these beastly elaborations to be there.

We hear one, then see the others group.

Wings beating in our chest, we fly to feeding places,
Duck ponds and open lakes,
but ours are campuses and coffee houses,
With their own uncertainties.

You egg born, pithy boned, mud sifting shimmerance,
We meet without gravity.
I help you find a nesting, in wet grass and logs.

FIVE COWS

Five cows in the tawny afternoon
On a ridge where one hill laps into the other,
Sitting down in the heat, look like crows.
The sky, refreshed by the sun all day
Mothers them gently,
Far flung sky without movement,
Almost nudges them there, pillowed on the sky,
But they remember their job:
To be patient, stay near their shadows,
And make vivid the hills.

On the last ridge before the sky
Two more cows, then four, now nine are appearing,

Pushed over the edge by the sky,
Like pebbles in the surf.
No one sees it. A carful is fixing a flat,
Siting, standing, texting, photographing the tire,
Hips full of alertness, dancing in place,
Fresh and lovely, like eating a peach.
The cows continue being pushed,
Like a hearty exhale. There is laughter in the sky.
The cows are joined by the wind as the sun goes down.

ALTAMONT PASS

Half way from and half way to,
Buoyed up by Diablo Ridge
The hills in suspended fall
Toss underhanded shade collecting oaks
And falling fences in their waves.
Solid certainties break into song
And evermores are spun
And everywheres are woven
To a day.

A WEDDING

A wedding should
not be bigger than your happiness

so it's not false,
not be smaller than your happiness
to acknowledge and celebrate your joy
singing and food
dancing and drink
so the guests get married
with the two of you too.

ONE ISN'T SERIOUS AT SEVENTEEN

On n'est pas serieux, quand on a dix-sept ans.
—Rimbaud

One isn't serious at seventeen.
We leave the cafe, ozata sodas and peach frappees,
balding phonies and their chess.
Walking beneath trees in the night,
Shutting our eyes, the wild sweet alyssum's scent
Crowds us, like sheep pushing us to an edge.

Seventeen, June. Night. We give in to it.
It's sap is like champagne,
The push of the air is a kiss,
The gentle animal wind visiting our lips

One is Robinson Crusoe on the island of being seventeen.
The little town opens to the day.
Summer is trained in leafing rectangles.

Musicians wrap legs around cellos, lean cheek to violin.
Oboes look down as though by a lake, making sound through reeds.
Then, a bright face shines above the glasses and food,
Shadowed by her formal mustached father.

She finds you tremendously boyish.
She turns with quick movements
And laughs in her dress.

One could ask: "Is this real?"
No one says "Look clearly at this intoxication."
One thinks beneath thinking, "This intoxication
will free me from suffering."
Who would know that looking at suffering
would free one from suffering?

Seventeen grows from sixteen and unfolds as eighteen.
It is not a bird in the sky without a nest,
A rainbow without a sun,
It is not found beside a stream, full grown.
If years were cards, it flashes in a riffle,
Without a root in permanence.

Wet grass in the morning has made a dewy mirror, a world.
Soon the sun has dried each blade.

Blocking the sun her gentle arm holds a parasol,
As if walking within a Seurat painting.
Her black dress hides her body,
like closed eyelids hide the day.

Amorously, one moves closer
and she dissolves as if in strokes of paint.

The force of life, yes:
Flecks, bright flecks of light.

Love goes out like grass crosses the fields,
Green, yellow, red, depending how they lean,
Rising like oaks up the hills,
Leaping to the heat accumulated clouds,
Dancing like light in all directions,
Without direction.
Here we can be seventeen,
Generous, spacious and passionate.

They ski their bodies' terrain.
Every powdery folding is lips.
One slips and emerges,
An enchanted butterfly's dance
From granite to penstemon, manzanita to buckwheat,

Sharing their given,
Adding their molten resources.

THE CRAWL PAST THE YAWL

Swimming upstream past Rimbaud's boat,
I took the time to stop and float.
The rigging blasted, half masted-
All those shards past tidy yards-

Mark Twain, somehow,
I don't know how-took it all in
Smoking, by the bank of the fleuve
With Huck and African American Jim
And wished for luck-but he did.

I recommenced swimming, life's short.
The boat she stopped and came athwart.
What the heck, I pulled up on board.
We stood together.
I thanked Rimbaud for crazy weather.

THE LIGHTS

The lights are extending out, stretched from richmond to frisco.
A curly blond little girl, with red and green circles on her shoes
Touching with interested fingers everything in the shop
While her mom is drinking coffee,
Then eats her cookie at home in her sheets
And these lights are the crumbs that became fireflies.

Look down through each light, a family is moving -

Like a microscope on a drop-
Turns toward the sink, walks down the hall-

The shook out sheet is wide, embroidered with bus lines,
Tied with cables underneath,
Wired to dams in the mountains
That keep it from floating away.

It's not a gypsy camp or signals to other planets,
Or candles floating down a stream in Festivals
Or lizard scales in the sun,
It's so reasonable and personal-
People watching moving postage stamps,
Red lights turn to green and lines of cars move ahead.

The reason is rooted in joyful unreason,
An untamed offering of the forces that are,
To themselves, and sharing this awareness
With the girl in the store.

STARBUCKS POEM

Lonely and unfamiliar in his hometown
Gathered around a cappuccino,
Billy Holliday's profoundly hard life,
Like worn saddle leather
And Sweets Edison Airlines

Playing from Sonora or Waikiki Starbucks
To passing surfers with their boards
Living, they hope, without consequences,
He thanks the music and New York City being built
Just so Tommy Flanagan could have a place
To play the piano.

WE HAVE RANDOMLY ARRIVED OFF A SIDE ROAD

we have randomly arrived off a side road
like cows on a hillside
there are sprightly fennels, yellow dancers
too close to the fence to be cut
near posts of the chain link fence
protecting a no longer necessary building
I'm with my mother who once happened to give birth
watching a strong intentioned gull veered off
to chancical power poles
and pittoporum withstanding wind on any continent
by the rock jumble thrown here that provokes
mandelbrots of breaking waters
You and I are tossed here beneath changing clouds
rizzle nizzle muff periwinkle happenstance
yellow taxi in the weed patch

WALKING TO THE RIVER

Walking to the river, looking for quiet,
She lay in the tangled willows, listening to the sun
As ripples of water were pushed by.
Too crossed and almost sharing the same space,
She would have to extract herself carefully balancing.
She couldn't just leap up and turn on some machine.
The tall light and long rays weren't speckled on the shelves of leaves
And manes of grasses, but the movement of the limbs was dappled.
She extended out the joints of her arms and legs and finger joints
Until she was fresher than the duck flying by,
And spoke to his low humming thought.
Then she packed up her day and crossed the bridge home
With a song for all, just where they were hurting.

MOUNTAIN PRAYER

Scooped skyward sunlight limned masses of clouds
Make a contained sky, encroaching on their neighbor:
A horse-headed compressed rain-suspending belly.
Below, zig-sliding snow is melting away from firs and pines.
Through a window of limbs,
Loaf-shaped stones form a cliff,
With a haircut of trees.

Many good spirits have come now to this opening.
The low mat of oaks is welcoming

And the afternoon sun lights up
The mosses on the trees as candles.
May they be happy here and be at ease.
May those who see and hear this be delighted.

FOR MEXICO

*Spanish, whose natural beauty requires no poetry
or novels to make the ugly baby smile*

—C. Boyce

Like the muscles of a butterfly opening its wings
Over its head in the morning
Are the Spanish open vowels
Semana, cuchara
Opening then further- opening to emphasize-
Mucho
A bright sun is shining through a crack in the roof
Quinze
Watch a phrase lift the world, showing it to be good,
Like bringing a rich and heavy dress from the closet,
Showing it to friends
Por lo general
The sudden appearance out of the fog, of a city,
Its edges softened by unvoiced labial and dentals
Podemos
The unexploded consonants
Fragrant open vowels

“we have to learn to get along with our enemies”

Come down from our scabbled towers,
Chancycal, like a raven's nest,
Touch the ground, feel the ground,
See the fortuitous cascade of solitudes,
Life being lived as clouds go by.

I'd like to find a loving place of friendship, half way,
With those, my enemies,
A park bench of the heart that circles in space
Where we could give up our small views,
Circles the sun slowly, taking a year
So we can learn its life-giving generosity
From all sides.

