

Jerry Ward

Southern Towns

Before Colonel Sanders
reinvented fried chicken
only to be done out
by the Cajun craftiness
of Popeye and the briefcase Yankees,
before the wrong side
of the tracks began
driving on the right
side of the road
(and prompted Miss Lydia
to allow as how she
never thought manners
would come to this),
before the flush toilets
created chaos in the land,
Southern towns were
eternal units of talk,
vibrant histories
of the human kind.

All that's gone
as if yesteryear's wind
turned towns into vacuums,
God's little acres of blight,
weathered backboards
for the sport of hit and run
language among people
too poor to pay attention.

©Jerry Ward. Used by permission of author.

Jerry Ward

Each Day I Break These Bloody Shackles

*Constans et perpetua voluntas,
jus suum cuique tribuendi.
Institutes of Justinian*

Each day I break these bloody shackles
and set eagles free
and let eagles conspire
like fire around the core of sun
and let eagles, in polished light,
quicksilver evil from the earth.

Each day I break these bloody shackles,
the crack of iron on flesh
silent as slippage of clay under cotton
under a place named Tougaloo.
Silent too the omniscient gleam
of the ancient Mendi eyes,
scanning the crossroads of time past and future.
Silent as the salt
of unrecovered words,
we press digits of fear
in our oppressor's hearts.
Each day in iron and in our blood
our revolution starts.

Each day I break these bloody shackles.
Eagles, inspired by spirits written in oaks,
move as stopless as ocean motion
under Amistad, swoop and swerve like magic,
their obsidian intelligence
confounds all art with subtle self-named destiny.
Each day in iron and in our blood
our revolution starts.

Each day I break these bloody shackles
and let eagles utter
a rainbow sign, a sacred story
of slaveship and guile and trial,
the sable metaphors and self-named destiny.

Each day I break these bloody shackles
in the renaissance thunder of Tougaloo
and eagles assume the endless liberties
of the good, the beautiful, the true.

©Jerry Ward. Used by permission of author.

Jerry Ward

Volcano: An African Phenomenon

Ask not to be surprised
if volcanoes and Africans
disrupt in harmony;

cast no superior glance,
no least grimace of disdain:
WHEN WATER GOES PAST BOIL
THE POT WILL BREAK.

A wise man told me twice
A world on fire is a world on ice
A world on fire is
A world on ice

and I have screwed my eyes
down tunnels red beautiful
and rose velvet perfect,
climbed a ladder of vision
for mountain peak previews
of the scream/screenplay.

I will have grown cold,
grown cold as love in aspic and
mammy liberty will be pure rust,
plate tectonics an ancient art
when motion and moment merge
and volcano and African sit on the verge
of a reality called satisfaction.

Ask not to be surprised
the morning the Africans and
the volcanoes belch ash in your eye,
the volcanoes/the Africans
belch ash in your eye;

you couldn't have thought,
but you did, but you did not think,
but you should have, but you should
have thought not to think
justice could be a virgin forever.

Jerry Ward

Something of a Gulf

this pine-weighted ribbon of earth
wanted more than the brave Biloxi
whipping a fierce surprise
on the peaceful Pascagoula

even now the blessed will hear
the proud destruction,
a whole possession of destiny
in the death song of the Pascagoula
when the buzz of sawmill
and the sparked clap of iron on steel
among the shipyard crew
is still on a summer evening:
the timely ripples of the river
repeat, repent, repeat
the costly sacrifice

my grandfather heard
the Pascagoula singing,
but I've only seen the grander
prospects from the Pyramid of the Sun

even now, my feet like granite
on the salt-scented soil on the coast,
the grey-green Gulf so much a mysterious notion
to explore, the primal motion
calling me into a history
I can guess, can never know

something of a gulf
between the sand and sky
trawls endlessly for the absence of a life

and
in its wake
names Biloxi Pascagoula
purifies the stench of burning crosses
celebrates eternity
in a bright, mosquitoed night
when a whole procession of destiny
surges through a Mississippi mind.