Table of Contents

[War in the West 2](#_Toc125581421)

[CHICAGO: FIRST LADY OF THE LAKE 4](#_Toc125581422)

[ELF OWL - (Micrathene whitneyi) 5](#_Toc125581423)

[CLOSE HARMONY 6](#_Toc125581424)

[THOUGHTS OF A BRITISH SOLDIER, BELFAST 7](#_Toc125581425)

[NIGHTKILL - (Felis leo) 8](#_Toc125581426)

[WINGING IT 9](#_Toc125581427)

[A BOWL OF BLUE BLOSSOMS 11](#_Toc125581428)

[STOPPING IN THE DESERT ALONE 12](#_Toc125581429)

[THE SUITOR 13](#_Toc125581430)

[CLOSE HARMONY 14](#_Toc125581431)

[THE SPECIALIST 15](#_Toc125581432)

[THE VINING TIME 16](#_Toc125581433)

[THE ANSWERING - A Sequel to Browning's "Evelyn Hope" 17](#_Toc125581434)

[THE CRAFTSMAN 18](#_Toc125581435)

[GULL-WATCHING 18](#_Toc125581436)

[LISTENING TO THE MOUNTAINS 19](#_Toc125581437)

[SOMEONE ELSE'S TROPICS 19](#_Toc125581438)

## War in the West

Robert E. Lee said, "It is well that war is so terrible else we

might come to like it too much."

Maybe the premise isn't working. Or maybe war is still not terrible

enough. For most Americans, knowledge of war is hearsay, second and

third hand. Asked to describe their reactions to the Gulf War, a group

of young television viewers replied "awesome," "fascinating,"

"incredible." Some of their answers were even more banal, and while

"awesome" is an appropriate adjective, it's doubtful if the users

understood it beyond its current click-phrase status.

Fascination, though, may come close to what many people feel. War as

they know it, see it, read about it, engages them on the same level asa

wide-screen, technicolor David Lean production. It pushes all the

emotional buttons they're accustomed to feeling, offers excitement,

diversion, a measure of forgetfulness of their personal problems, a few

surprises--and if their side is winning, a shot of pride. A football

game doesn't quite cover the whole spectrum and a movie doesn't last as

long.

One war news junkie said, "I didn't want anybody I knew to get hurt,

you know, but I really miss the nightly footage. Vietnam was before my

time. But this war really brought people together. It's what we talked

about at the office, Now it's the same old stuff--who's marrying or

divorcing or being transferred."

"One serviceman even said, "It made life interesting. I don't think

I'll ever do anything else that will give me such a high."

Privately, commanders admit their joy at being able to use their

hardware and theoretical expertise in actual battle conditions. Other

men and women of all ranks have expressed enthusiasm for the chance to

test themselves.

All of this seems bleached, almost trivial and far removed from the

essence of war which is killing. Bleeding. Destruction. Every degree of

human injury, deprivation, grief and indignity. Even the military often

speak in euphemisms. Blowing an enemy to bits is sometimes called

"servicing the target."

But it seems we don't need verbal deflection or pulled punches to

make war more palatable. Our own eyes and our own perception have glazed

over the horror and filth more successfully than any public relations

firm we might have hired to do it.

This, in spite of the fact that big screen entertainment sagas have

spared no expense, no special effect, to show us depravity and death at

its worst. So we've already seen it all. Now we have to consciously tell

ourselves when something is actually happening. The wounded are not

actors, the pathetic refugees are not extras. The property being

demolished is not a plywood set on MGM's back lot. Also, the truth

usually appears far less dramatic than staged versions. Audio-visual

productions have bludgeoned our sensibilities to the real thing. Experts

have been warning us about that for years. Movies and TV are bound to be

contributing factors but not the whole problem.

Maybe it's the late 20th century concept of self, the custom-fitted

American designer dream. Everything that goes on is perceived in terms

of how it affects us personally. Will it involve our own friends, our

own relatives, US? Will it raise our taxes, cut down on our favorite

consumer goods, cause gas to be rationed, put our jobs or our lifestyles

in jeopardy? How will it threaten US? If we detect that we shall go

relatively untouched by it all, the matter goes into a data bank ona

different level, there to be processed by different sensors. Americans

are an insular people. We've abandoned our larger kinship with those

unlike ourselves.

Public wailing and handwringing won't help. And in order to survive

it, people do have to become somewhat inured to the horrors of war. But

many Americans are already inured without ever sitting in a bomb shelter

for so much as an hour or missing: a meal.

The idea of our dehumanization via the media has been worked over

enough. It's time for each of us to take responsibility ourselves. For

all our spoon-fed, high-tech knowledge, our vicarious experience, we've

forgotten how to feel, deeply and caringly, outside our own perimeters.

We've forgotten that all of us, the entire planet's fill of us, whether

we acknowledge it or not, are children of the same God. We've forgotten

that He commanded us to love one another and that He grieves for all who

suffer. We need to review and practice understanding and empathy for

mankind. Even if we seem to be forced to fight, even if we participate

unwillingly, even if we win gloriously, war is still the ignoble last

ditch of human failure.

## CHICAGO: FIRST LADY OF THE LAKE

She moved leanly through Indian twilight,

shabby and unmet, slogging through swamps,

trailing her long skirts through blackest mud

and the evil smell of skunk cabbage.

She stumbled and fell on shores that bullied her

with dares and promises others never heard.

She lay on the flats in bosomy youth, gazing

blueward-- high hollow blue, pale-seamed

with deep wet blue, cerulean and indigo

priming the canvas, waiting for a subject.

Waiting for her to quiet her urgent hunger,

waiting for her to find a wintersmith husband

and breed a breed taller and stubborner

than blue emptiness. Without first-glance beauty,

without dowry or lineage-- a razorish termagant

on Tuesday, demure as dimity on Wednesday,

racy as red sequins on Saturday night

then Sunday-caring through the rains

gone white and heavy on her head-- she was

an enigma-- fine figure, unfathomable sum.

After her wedding for better and worse, feast

and fire, splinter and gilt, she took her time

with the art of ladyhood, more earned

than learned, writing her own music while moving

miles of gritty railcars, tons of bloody meat.

She roughed-in composition with charcoal,

handling mixture and brushes her way,

toning the flattering, fuming, prodding blues

waiting for their match, icing and steaming,

waiting for her to model her rising brood

with the back of her hand. Teaching them

to pose substance on air and water,

add the warm shades to the palette,

riches to the minor key chords. And at last

to put in perspective a million highlights

framing the watercolor palimpsest,

the sound and light-stretched gamut of blues.

## ELF OWL - (Micrathene whitneyi)

The saguaros lose weight and pleat

and enter the death phase. It may last

for years. Tt's been so long since water

made good the sky's promises

there's a rattle in the desert's breath

not made by the sidewinder.

Leafless ocotillos comet lone blips of color

across day's end, arcing like sparks,

like warnings or red beacons

for the elf owl emerging to hunt.

In midnight sandshine, the tiny raptor

withdraws to its hollow in the oldest saguaro.

The cactus tightens on its own tall thirst,

narrowing its cells tough as hardwood,

its clustered spines like medieval maces

guarding its deep secret moisture.

Twice more the pigmy predator haunts the night,

silence feathering swiftly over empty silence,

coming home empty.

## CLOSE HARMONY

Their camera-smiles in cracked sepia

insist nothing will change-- the lift

of her chin, her secret pressure on his shoulder,

his long Irish hands on the old upright Steinway

reeking of early Moonlight Sonata

and Gershwin jazz. Her dress is back in style

along with her untamed red hair

like mine. And I have the hands he had.

A month before their wedding, coming home

from graduation, their train derailed.

Her sister and his twin brother met

at the funerals, two years later they became

my parents. Outraged nature hates to lose,

refuses to lose it all. I'm the only red

in the family; I know her in my static electricity,

the low notes of my laugh. He's my walking bass,

my easy octave reach, my treble sass

and those late night blue chords

always looking for a lyric.

This piano still resonates with their chemistry

warming and fizzing beneath my touch--

telling me how to phrase this passage--

telling me this music composed in my head

is theirs...

## THOUGHTS OF A BRITISH SOLDIER, BELFAST

News item, Northern Ireland: "A 15-year-old boy was killed

by a pipe bomb he attempted to place in the vehicle of

British military who sought him for questioning about

earlier bombings."

There is my enemy's face:

He's young, unseasoned and scared.

Still another will take his place.

Shop doors hide him without trace,

Bluejeaned schoolboy, short, dark-haired.

There is my enemy's face.

Caught, he may cry in disgrace

Or curse us with eyeteeth bared.

Still, another will take his place.

Neighborhoods pose in workday pace.

I stalk reflections, self unprepared.

There-- is my enemy's face--

Will our kinds ever embrace?

When his last dare has been dared,

Still another will take his place?

Now arms hold death in winless race

of beliefs our rifles declared.

There is my enemy's face.

Still. Another will take his place.

## NIGHTKILL - (Felis leo)

Not for hunger. His motives

as old as allegiance to his kind,

the strange cat followed the pride

for days. Four lithe females, three cubs.

He was part of kopje shadows and grass

extravagant with his smell. He chuffed

his presence on cooling twilight,

letting his sounds roll downhill

to bank off termite mounds,

rattle crumbling basalt.

In the seventh moonless dark, impatient

sovereignty moved black as his mane

to snap the neck of each hidden cub.

And while his blood was high, waiting

for the females to return, to feel

their triggered heat for him,

his oldest bane, always trailing

death, came near. Jaws that could break

his hindquarters missed their chance.

He left the boldest pair gaping

inches above the torn-out final laughter

as the lionesses welcomed their new king.

## WINGING IT

Two brothers scanned the cold front stalled northeast.

Not promising at all, and yet their blood

Was humming yes! --their bones agreeing, genes

Evolved beyond the wax and feather stage,

The Icaros infection now afire

Inside a circuit rider's gangling sons.

Here where a continental splinter spared

The Carolina coast from Neptune's wrath,

Here where his aviary wintered, bred,

A new breed waited for its fledging time.

No more a cold pretender, now a bird,

Warm-blooded thirst for fuel in its craw.

The wind increased as Orville thought of past

Debacles-- men he held in awe, who knew

Much more, and yet they clung to principles

Now proven false if he could dare believe

His own. He thought how Wilbur's first box made

The Bankers laugh: A kite, a straining toy

To lift a man and let him guide it down.

Then came a larger one. They set it free--

No lines to grounded hands-- a managed arch

Responsive to their afterthought of rudder

And shifting body weight. Its shallow glide

Was like a petrel's outspread, unflapped wings.

"Good lads but daft--" The Bankers winked and watched

The brothers sweat two summers on the beach.

One day a wizened fisherman had warned:

"You Wright boys had your triumph. Sailed the sky

Like seamen rolling combers in a skiff.

"It's time you set your minds on solid things."

Home in their cluttered shop when flight seemed doomed,

An artist's misbegotten fiction/farce,

Those words were added drag on Orville's hope.

But he, the uncured optimist, would spark

Once more the re-ignition of them both.

Today he revved his faith to soar again.

The coast guard station men came out to help,

No longer snickerers, but not convinced.

So many things gone wrong, so many times.

The shapes, the shafts, the theories of lift.

Just yesterday the half-tamed hawk had failed

When guards helped pulley Flyer up the hill.

It blundered down Kill Devil, broke a skid.

But now with gawkers gone-- today-- today

Could unchain history from gravity,

Could free man from the limits of his ground.

As Orville's big Ohio hand lay on his dream,

He felt it thrum with life, its substance sound.

Fresh winds concaved the dunes as Orville prayed,

An upturned-head, an unclosed-eyes petition.

Then Wilbur slowly nodded, yanked his cap

And hurried up the strand where Flyer stood

A hulking hawk with wings of forty feet,

Repaired, impatient to perform its role.

Old Bankers cooked fish stew and mended nets.

Out on its tracks, the hawk was warm, intent

On lifting its own weight with man along

To hold it true. And Orville mounted, prone,

The trembling species growling to be freed

Upwind, his leanness part of Flyer's form.

The hybrid, flesh and fabric, wire and oil,

Left wooden rails and climbed its element

As startled gulls veered from the creature's path.

And high as they fled, cheers went higher still.

In flight for thirteen seconds--but enough!

It vindicated its design, its name.

As Orville grinned, his brother ran to meet

The clumsy crate he rode. To take his turn

To keep the noisy dream aloft, inhale

Its fumes, extend its reach, exceed the the time.

Twice each, the brothers broke an earthly law

Until almost a minute Flyer flew.

It claimed the air and arced the emptiness,

Its altitude eight-hundred-fifty feet

For half a mile above the ancient shore

Of Hatteras, above the tossed-up caps

And shouts of coast guards plus one Dayton boy,

Half-owner of the dream he pushed so high.

## A BOWL OF BLUE BLOSSOMS

As soon as the delphiniums bloomed

they insisted on their own container,

a chalice competent enough for such blue.

The bowl began cold and slimy

to my touch, a fat gray coil of earth

reluctant to accept my warmth or my will

while cut cosmos watched blandly

from pitchers. Unbiased persistence

produced a shape true and deep,

a reservoir to prolong the blue.

Free of my potter's hands,

the clay surrendered its moisture slowly,

rearranging its molecules, determined

to shrink like last May's dried roses.

Resigned to my intentions,

it began suspecting its future,

anticipating the touch of petals

like no other blue.

Settling grainy dry as a fossil

on a shelf, it lusted for light

and waited, its dark hollow encased

in continental crust, a sampling

of eons that started in stars never blue.

Graduate of the first fire,

its rough apprentice brown drank deeply

of earth's unguents; cool manganese

and copper anointed its flaws,

comparing its country coarseness \w:

to big buck-toothed zinnias

rampant in my studio jars and cans.

In its final revelation it vibrated

orange to white in the kiln, healed

and ripened in hereditary heat.

Today it came into its own

first flowering, gleaming iridescence

alloyed with now pollinated sisters

of the soil, sharing the meaning of blue.

## STOPPING IN THE DESERT ALONE

Did you drive 400 miles just to bow

your head over your sweaty hands?

To memorize every blue vein

like ruckled roads crossing hot desolation

leading to the interior?

The interior is what you're running from.

Nothing in there

worth keeping-- mucked up

with misbegotten cells and superchemicals

that don't know good from bad.

Slash and burn, then poison for dessert.

You sit staring, a damaged ecosystem.

A logogram for ignorance posing

as medical prowess. When you die

the prime time experimenters

will cluck and say, Well, it didn't work

this time but maybe we'll hit the right

combo next time. And next time is

already sitting in their waiting rooms

filling out the forms that'll fill

coffers and coffins equally.

Stop it.

What can they do but try?

Listen, if you've got two months,

why spend it driving? You can still

dance, dammit. You could adagio Se

with that dust devil out there--

what's left of your hair

standing straight up-- grit to grind

your teeth on like a soft shoe rhythm section

--grit to sting you pink and alive--

enough grit to sand your scars smooth

and touchable as fine-grained wood.

Look at that wild thing dervish around,

winding down now--slow spins--almost graceful.

How strong is it? Could it lift you

like an apache partner? If you cover

your eyes and nose could it harm you?

Actually--

could anything?

## THE SUITOR

I used to hear him talking to someone

Long after I had read him all the news,

Long after dosing him, dousing his light.

One morning I asked who. He sighed and said,

"Just polishing up how to court a woman.

I'd hate to be refused when I'm all set.

"When I decide to call her, I want her,

Not some pale imitation lacking nerve.

No youngish-looking dreamboat with long hair."

I asked about this lady-- when he met

Her, what her name was, where she lived--

"Don't be naive," he said, "we've yet to meet.

"My gripe is with her half-baked surrogates.

I've had my fill of false alarms and pikers.

It's her cold hand I want, no feverish

Caress, no teasing smile. A grip that won't

Let go. A full-out grin. A woman sure

Of what she wants exactly, wanting me."

I felt surprise that death could be a woman

But not that she was his intense desire.

Each day his praise became more like a lover's:

"Sweet stroke that changes everything there is,

The sweat of truth as bright as mercury--

There's nothing else on earth that's so complete."

Accustomed to a struggle, even from

The old in Morpheus's careless arms,

What woman could resist his ardent pleas?

I heard him pause, a muffled privacy

Exchanged, my hand around the doorknob's chill.

She locked the room a moment while they fled.

## CLOSE HARMONY

Their camera-smiles in cracked sepia

insist nothing will change-- the lift

of her chin, her secret pressure on his shoulder,

his long Irish hands on the old upright Steinway

reeking of early Moonlight Sonata

and Gershwin jazz. Her dress is back in style

along with her untamed red hair

like mine. And I have the hands he had.

A month before their wedding, coming home

from graduation, their train derailed.

Her sister and his twin brother met f

at the funerals, two years later they became .

my parents. Outraged nature doesn't like to lose,

refuses to lose it all. I'm the only red

in the family; I know her in my static electricity,

the low notes of my laugh. He's my walking bass,

my easy octave reach, my treble sass

and those late night blue chords

always looking for a lyric.

This piano still resonates with their chemistry

warming and fizzing beneath my touch--

telling me how to phrase this passage--

telling me this music composed in my head

## THE SPECIALIST

Confident in step and hand,

cachet of well-trained youth,

a coat of nineties gloss--

But his eyes are ancient.

He listens with them,

connecting deep behind

the asking eyes he faces. ‘

His patients--the ones beyond

sophistication's pose, ,

will tell you :

he has hearing of the heart.

Yesterday I needed

more than bottled nostrums

and prescribed smooth-speak,

more than surgical steel wizardry.

Consulting this practitioner

of modern internal medicine,

I recalled that blue comes from

the cool part of the spectrum.

But his warm irises incised

confusion and fear

and applied non-synthetic caring.

My hidden sore was lanced,

more balm applied

than words alone can deliver

and I slept in the healing ward.

## 

## THE VINING TIME

She didn't mind telling her age. At least

not in summer when she looked good

and the backyard honeysuckle detonated

enough possessive perfume to fill her pores,

or lie in wait in her pillows after dark.

Enough to make her want a man around.

But lately vines bothered her with lurking

metaphor. Some leaned limp on whatever

they touched. Some gushed out of containers--

luxuriant tips, atrophic at the roots.

Like her hair-- losing ground, paling.

Like memories when the house still smelled

of Jason's Kaywoodie and roast quail with almonds.

She'd taken to counting the hairs in her comb,

counting tiny lines sprouting around her mouth.

And she caught herself slavishly counting

the clock chimes or stair steps up and down

although she climbed them lightly.

There was some immutable law governing

the accumulation of the unwanted: great piles

of papers, drawers of generic clutter,

small somatic plagues-- and the diminishing

of the desired: old friends, her chances

of leaving Elm Street-- huge namesakes

stumped, diseased, marked for the saw's whine.

And the honeysuckle smothering

the verbena bed in hyperbole, sagging

the fence, strangling the trusting white phlox.

Nobody was interested in buying the place

anymore. Nobody wanted to do yard work

except the unaffordable "landscape architects"

boxed and fancy—bordered in the yellow pages.

She bought a magnifying mirror on a stand

to put on eye liner, redefining eyes

that still held the blue-violet flicker

of hummingbird wings. Feeling the sap

and celebration of morning-glories at her waking,

sometimes she still felt the green of promises

she believed she could keep. And sometimes-—

sometimes honeysuckle was a whiff of hell.

## 

## THE ANSWERING - A Sequel to Browning's "Evelyn Hope"

Because no one has ever spoken

Back from here, we've all supposed

This coldest seal remains unbroken,

This ancient passage always closed.

If only you who think I died

Could know this is a sweet exchange,

Could know how boundaries fade inside

The spectrum's unimagined range!

You never would have come to me

Had I remained a normal length

In mortal phase. Oh, can you see

The structured weave, the narrow strength

Of patterns granting us a place

In that frame's weft? A giddy girl,

A proper gentleman of grace

In middle years allowed to purl

Into the fabric of acceptance?

Not while I lived, but only after,

Could you speak love without the chance

Of shock, rebuke, or even laughter.

Like you, I never dared express

My secret. Silly child, you might

Have thought. But by this leaf you press

Into my hand, we will unite.

Don't grieve, my dear, your words are not

Earthbound. I hear your lover's heart

With mine and don't despair our lot.

Now new dimensions frame my part

As they will yours at your last breath.

The cycling portals pivot, spin

On far-off stars that hinge on death--

An old wronged term that means begin.

And by your token, I transmit

My pledge through veins of green leaf stillness:

We'll meet renewed, a better fit

With time, my touch then free of chillness.

It's fitting that my name was Hope--

Please don't despair its muffled call

Or waver in transition's scope.

Here, time is nothing; love is all!

## 

## THE CRAFTSMAN

His hands were wise in the ways of wood,

understanding the grain and strength

of maple, cherry, oak. His hands could handle

a gangling board and know its heart, foresee

the gain from a saw's hot bite. He pursued

the hidden beauty of natural patterns,

bending and clamping as needed. And when

his sure pressure was released, no part

of his chosen trees returned to a former intent.

His hands are over eighty now, twin burls,

mahogany stained, dovetailed across his jeans.

They've passed their treasury to nimbler heirs-—-

a dozen boys, now men, who once knew

the cold clang of the state's steel doors.

He aligned them with a spirit level, turned

them on a lathe of love joining part of himself

with each-- mortise and steadfast tenon

from the plans of a Nazarene carpenter.

When people marvel at the finish, the old man

smiles. And bows to the Master Craftsman.

## GULL-WATCHING

Some fly fran cliffs where rock and sky are patched

With ice and snow-- to sueded cypress knees

Where shade-striped quietude is laced and thatched

With sun-bleached moss festooned from wading trees.

For weeks gulls ply deep sea, its folding foam

Uncertain as the earthbound ways of men.

But once the birds have claimed a southern home,

They troll tidepools and settle down again.

Some plumb the light-probed wells of tepid green

Or dive where sequin-flashing smelt appear

In silver schools against a coral screen.

Some hang around to steal fish from the weir.

White wings pursue all boats. And gulls in flocks

Of dark-eyed patience spend their days on docks.

## 

## LISTENING TO THE MOUNTAINS

Somewhere high and separate,

leftover music lingers,

recorded when old continents collided.

Pangaean voices must have chanted

as shores of ancient seas heaved up whole,

as earth's fabric lifted

to block the unsuspecting sun

and wrinkled layers plunged, emptying

dark lockers of the deep.

There were surely trumpets and timpani

when hemispheres shook, folded, cleaved,

smoking for millenia as fluid fire spewed

the planet's melted viscera to the light.

The harmonics are here still,

maybe coded in these blue-gray graphs

on heaven-- or chambered in spirals

of crystalline shells, foundations of fish

and armatures of dinosaurs.

These granite seams are staffs

for fossil notes, an alien scale,

a key I can't yet read-- arranged

for instruments no man has played.

But if I climb with every sense attuned,

if I reckon right the season and the wind

and the rock beneath my boot--

and if the Jesus rope holds at the pinnacle--

those jagged treble notes will sound again.

## SOMEONE ELSE'S TROPICS

The aroma of her hangs there

after she passes. Nothing she douses

herself with--just warm sweet hair

and skin and whatever wild herbs

she's been gathering to dry or press.

And sometimes wnen we talk,

if I'm close enough to smell ginger

or vanilla beans and green jungle

clinging to her--

which means too damn close-- I press

the minute in a public library volume

between pages that belong only to me.