

The Great Serpent Mound, located in Adams County, Ohio, is a human-made mound of earth that researchers believe was created between 300 B.C. and A.D. 1100 by an indigenous culture.

Serpent Mound

Ohio, 1846

Brush Creek stood low when the museum men came
with their measuring tapes and sketchbooks.

It was winter. Fringed with ice,
the creek doubled back on itself
5 as if it had forgotten something.
Pa was in Cincinnati, or else on his way home,
so Ma told me to lead the men
into the marshy low grounds. It being winter,
there was little underbrush to speak of—
10 in the summer there would have been
briars, poison ivy, biting flies. I listened
for the *swish* of a beaver's heavy tail,
the chitter of a chickadee, or the cry of a hawk,
but the winter silence of the creek pressed
15 down on all of us like a weight.

The humps in the ground were all but
invisible until you were right up on them. The figure
was even less obvious: the sinuous body,
the tail coiled three times around,
20 and at the other end, the mouth wide open.
In the summer the creek bottom was crowded
with so much life that you could trip over
the ridges of earth before you saw
anything at all. In winter you could climb
25 a tree and get some idea of the whole thing:
the serpent's body undulating, slithering
silently across the ancient
earth. At the mouth end, there was an oval mound
as if the snake were about to swallow an egg—
30 as snakes sometimes did in our rickety
henhouse—my Pa always said, or
as if swallowing the sun, one of the museum
men suggested, taking notes with his quill pen,
an old-style inkhorn slung at his side.
35 I liked that: swallowing the sun,
just the sort of thing a snake might do,
might want to do. When, later, I told my sister Ruth,
she disagreed. It is singing to the sun,
she insisted. That is why its mouth
40 is wide open. She said, "Sometimes I think
I hear it on summer nights. Not swallowing, singing."