Going Across the Water

New and Selected Poems of Harry Humes

Edited by Harry Humes and Daniel Donaghy

with contributions by Michael Garrigan

Foreword by Bruce Weigl

SWALLOW PRESS

ATHENS, OHIO

The Great Wilno

Dressed in a silver skin-tight suit,
he'd come out of the red and yellow tent,
his cape rising behind him with each step,
and a beautiful young girl
in sequins holding his hand
in the night that arced
over the Pennsylvania mining town,
and walk to the flatbed truck
with its mounted black cannon
where the beautiful girl in tights
would take his cape and kiss him goodbye
as he climbed a ladder
and lowered himself into the muzzle,
waving once to us before sinking from view,
a large clock showing the seconds left
before the explosion.
Hardly a sound in the fairgrounds,
the bats in and out of the shadows,
and across the black creek,
a child crying.

And then the whump of it, the smoke,
and the Great Wilno flying out,
helmet and goggles filled with the blaze
of lights from two Ferris wheels
he'd sail over each night for a week,
free of us, somersaulting among the stars
high in the darkness over the valley,
until I'd imagine he'd never come down,
or land too far away to find his way back,
and so come to another town, become a clerk
in a grocery, marry, have children,
buy his own small store,
and once in a while on summer evenings

run his fingers over the powder burns
on both his arms and wonder.

But down he'd come to us
and to the girl in sequins
who would run to the net beyond the Ferris wheels,
down he'd come like a toy parachute
dropped from a Piper Cub,
and at the last-minute roll over in air
to hit the net perfectly on the small of his back,
spring to his feet, wave to us again,
then do a rollover along the net's edge,
a backflip to the ground
and vanish with the beautiful girl,
while the rest of us turned home,
talking about Wilno and the girl,
about the red and yellow tent,
about the years ahead of us,
about what we were going to do.

The Miners' Vacation

They come up out of the rockholes
and gangways past the pockets of gas,
lanterns swinging from belts,
lunch cans rattling as they step
out of the gunboats into the ribbed light
falling past laurel and huckleberry bush.

They will ride the surface for two weeks like corks,
and gather near corners testing noon light
for cracks or turning out a sound behind them
like fuses burning down.

At evening beneath the circling pigeons
they will tell their small sons
Do not
follow us ever do not come down
to where water and blue fire
wait behind walls or underfoot
to break loose near shovel or pick
to rise days later smoking and swirling
with more white messages
Do not put on black rubber boots

And wake each dawn
thinking of treacherous Furnace Slope,
ribs bending, pushing out,
the great slips gathering speed,
crushing timber down the Buck vein.

Think of them
in white linen pants and shirts,
white shoes, as their arms and faces turned brown
near sunny spill bank or wash dam.

Think of them walking past open doors,
of the songs they begin to hear
in such long days of light.

My Father Planted Tomatoes in Coal Ash

All through March and April he'd carry bucket after bucket
of ashes to the place below the chicken coop, icicles of sap
still hanging each morning from split ends of maple limbs.
He'd take each bucket and scatter it inside the line he'd strung,
then stand watching his pigeons circling clothesline and slate roof,
the dust over the mine where he worked. For weeks he was a man
unsettled by a world stubbornly keeping to its ways,
unwilling to be turned by spade or hoe. Nights he'd play poker,
clinking his winnings into a Mason jar.
                                A dozen plants
grew leggy on a basement sill. I'd go down and touch
the leaves, the odor over my fingers like the day in late July
when my father, his face black with coal dust,
would walk down the concrete walk and sit on the grass
with saltshaker and can of beer. What he must have been thinking,
those years of dark tunnels and dynamite fumes. He'd look
a long time at that first tomato, easing it from hand to hand,
sitting there in the reddest season he knew at last underway.

From the Apple Tree

Four deer, one with antlers
rubbed smooth against saplings,
eat apples, jaws circling and grinding,
their ears moving constantly,
listening for twig snap,
brush of a sleeve against bark.
I could watch them the rest of my life,
teaching my children how to live
in such light as this,
how to move just so through the world,
how to sit still,
to let nothing get by,
musk glands inside the hind legs,
the swollen curve of the buck's neck,
his antlers dipping
as he sniffs the doe,
branches cool and rough
against my fingers.
Over the pond the dark presses in,
and one deer suddenly balances on hind legs,
front feet tucked under its chest,
head stretched toward some rose-hip berries,
and above it an early star I don't know,
and this need to have the deer
vanish on their own,
not scared away by me,
everything intact, unchanged,
as if I'd not been there at all.

The river I love most

has a dry oxbow and flows through mountains
filled with wild grapevines rotted logs honeysuckle
and there is a railroad along it and the river roars
through a trestle's stone arches and it is a day river
and a night river made of hellgrammites and brown trout
though sometimes there is a bear in it
and deer swim across it toward cornfields
it shimmers or turns gray over places
called Haystacks the Whirlpool Sandy Bottom
and along its shore are crumbling rip-raps cellar holes
in autumn cardinal flowers blossom
the water always cool and the rocks slippery
and where exactly did I step into the current
the last time I was there was it a month ago or a year
and was I thinking of Vivaldi or The Stones
I remember killing one trout and saying a prayer
before eating its pink flesh and even the bones

The Snowy Owl

We saw it first, white and big,
on the spill bank near town.
Then the others came,
old Parnell talking about such whiteness,
such an easy target.

All afternoon that great head
made of weather we'd never seen.

Then feathers flew up
and Parnell sent his son after it,
carrying it home,
head down, wings worthless,
and the whole autumn changed,
suddenly, as if someone
had told us a story of going away.

Photograph of Three Young Women on a Spill Bank

for Doris McCaffrey Humes, 1900–1987

All are wearing white blouses,
long skirts, high leather shoes.
Two of them smile. One has long braids,
one has hair like evening clouds.
One wears a black headband.
You expect each of them to hold flowers.
Behind them, a mine engine and coal cars,
the colliery tipple with its cable and great wheels,
dullness of slag, piles of timber.
It might be Sunday, the mine idle.
A picnic, the young miners off to one side
playing baseball or talking of hounds and pigeons.
Each of the women would marry a miner.
Each would have children.
One husband would die slowly
in a caved-in tunnel even the rats had left.
He left a message scratched in his belt.
One, before he was thirty, would die
of a stroke caused by steady drink.
And the third, slowly running out of breath
in a miners' hospital, jumped from a window.
One of the women frowns, one turns slightly
to the left, and the one
in the middle stares straight ahead.
All the arms are bare from the elbow down,
the long white necks purposefully set.
Farther back you can see the ridge
all bumpy and cluttered with new laurel.
Seventy years ago, those smiles,
before it all came down,
before one of them began walking
ramrod straight, back and forth, past
the doors of all the saloons on Second Street.

Before one grew lonely with her orchids
and African violets, the memorized Bible.
Before one of them each evening
went into a dirt cellar to cry and shriek.
All of them dead, the place where they stood
dug up or covered with birch and briars.
All of them alive, eyes steady
with the rest of the long afternoon,
their white blouses brimful of life.