

Honeymoon

A delirium of blossoms, he recalled.
*Here we are on the bank of the Huzo,
walking in pink snow.*

They were Americans, in love with love,
spellbound by pictures of Mount Fuji
they'd seen in *National Geographic*.
And there it was, appearing at sunrise
on the train window. *How about that,*
he'd said, waking her. *It seems to hover.*
*It's a vision, a floating island,
a perfect cone, just like the photos—
so symmetrical, so ideal, darling, like you.*

In Kyoto, the river glided,
bright as mica, tinged with glacial till.
All the city, it seemed, had come to savor
the soft explosions of cherry trees,
just as they had come, these newlyweds,
arriving in a rickshaw, crowding with others
onto boats poled by young men
whose tanned arms glistened in April sun.

Then, excursions to temples and gardens,
where the azaleas had just begun to ignite
among the Zen stones. *Such tranquility,*
he told her on a stroll. *Such harmony
with the natural world, don't you think?
You won't find that back home.*

They even made love in a bamboo grove,
he remembered, thinking at the time
they were alone, with only the calls
of the different birds high in the green light,

then noticing as she rolled off him onto the moss,

her skirt askew, they were being watched.
An old woman in a conical hat smiled.
They smiled, mortified, unable to answer
the woman's slight bow and greeting: *Konnichiwa*.

So long ago it was, that afternoon in the city
of pagodas and monuments, markets thronged
and rich with smells they'd never smelled.

*Now, for Christ's sake, they want to try out
the new bomb—Fat Boy, or Fat Man, or something—
on Kyoto, our Kyoto, where we climbed above the river
to that temple. What was it called? She wept, even,
when statues of the Buddha would appear
as if by magic, like sudden awakenings, among the pines.*

He could imagine the shrines flattened,
ancient timbers blown to kindling by the blast,
the curved black roof tiles of ten-thousand buildings
swirling in typhoons of white fire.

Our city, for God's sake. Our city.

Even the ice-fed Huzo would boil,
its boats aflame by the collapsed bridge
they'd walked across a dozen times,
and the young men who poled the boats—
they'd be burned to death in seconds.

So charmed the couple had been, so taken
by the politeness of the bowing Japanese,
so delighted were they when,
pulling their phrasebooks from their rucksacks,
they'd stutter a few words to a shopkeeper
or a woman planting rice shoots
along a road, and be understood.

He would demand that the committee
remove Kyoto from the list of targets.
Surely there were other cities more suitable
from a military standpoint,
more appropriate strategically.

What about Kokura's munitions plants?

What about Yokohama or Hiroshima?

No matter what General X said or what General Y
argued would be the Emperor's next move,
no matter what logic or tactical line of thinking
they'd array on their table of maps,
damage projections, casualty estimates,
he'd hold the line. He would not stand by
to see Kyoto—their Kyoto—
reduced to miles of radioactive ash.

The bomb, he vowed, would be dropped,
just not on the city he loved, his Kyoto.
His decision would be final.

Was he or was he not Secretary of War?
He'd go to Truman, if necessary,
get the full backing of the President.

Not one Shinto shrine, goddamn it.

Not one Zen pavilion. Not one pond of koi,

not one boy—I see him plain as day—

little canvas knapsack on his back,

riding his rickety bike to school,

pausing on the bridge to cover his ears

against the howl of air raid sirens.

I see him turn for home at the instant

the sun comes down to earth, flowering

like God knows what—a rose, a death rose
of heat and fire. No, no and no.

Not in Kyoto. Not in our Kyoto.

They'll have to add another city to the list.

[Author's note: Henry L. Stimson (1867-1950,) US Secretary of War, 1940-1945, was de facto head of the Manhattan Project. This poem is loosely based on an event from Stimson's life.]

Spoon

Thrift store find. Fifty cents. I like how stout
it is, carved of some uncertain hardwood,
one black scar on the handle suggesting
its owner snatched it off a hot burner.

I like the wear on the tip of the spoon.
Someone stirred and stirred, sanding the right side
of the bowl to near-flatness—the stirrer
left-handed, it appears, more than likely

a woman, perhaps living—wild surmise—
in Iowa in the thirties, baby
balanced on her right hip while she stands
in the heat of her Monarch cast iron stove

stirring porridge or corn mush or mutton stew.
Now it's my turn to keep milk from scalding,
milk into which I will stir chocolate
pudding powder. It's three a.m., the third

of January. I can't claim to see
the light snow that dusts the cars parked out front,
since I'm at the stove stirring the pudding.
I can, however, see grains fall like salt

on the outer sill of the near kitchen window,
just as she too might have seen snow
or rain fall as she stood and stirred, switching
hands when her left grew tired, as my left hand
does now. Yes, it was a woman who carved

the much-used spoon in my hand. And if not
on an Iowa farm, then somewhere else,
preparing countless meals, hanging the spoon

on its nail, through the augured off-center
hole in the handle, taking down the spoon,
putting it on its nail, taking it down,
putting it on, down, on, the years passing,

kids having grown and left the farm, removed,
I'd venture, to the city. So the spoon
contains all the sadness of her left hand.
Even the spoon journeyed away from her,

settling against all odds in my kitchen
to stir the just-now-bubbling pudding.
It's as if I've entered another life,
one where I cook, clean, give birth, raise children,

watch snow whiten a stack of cordwood.
It's as if she's beside me as I write, as if she has
given me the spoon and taken my free hand
in hers to stroll the garden of our two worlds.

Clearing Brush

I'd fallen asleep in the snow. Waking,
a thin coverlet slid off my poncho.

There lay the handle of my machete,
long as my forearm, its dented blue blade

already stained with rust, blade and forearm

put to the test that winter to clear brush.

I rose and re-entered my sodden life,
the one I'd just left, the one on a bluff

above the beach where on clear days you'd see
the blue Olympic Range across the Sound.

If the tide was slack, the Sound flat as glass,
you'd see, far out, the dark backs of orcas

rise and fall, the blades of their dorsal fins
knifing through the swells. No clear view that day.

No mountains. All horizons hemmed by snow,
a wet smattering on the boughs of firs

and alders along the cliff
of seldom-visited Alder Park.

Our job: to whack scotch broom, a buck an hour,
paid in cash by a cadaverous park
supervisor, Basil, who never spoke,
merely nodded and appeared not to breathe.

My workmate, Walter—aka "Waltzer"—
McCann, claimed title to a Cadillac,

a decrepit thing, once green, now the grey
of waste-water. An oily knotted rope

held the passenger door forever closed.
No window. In the predawn he'd honk twice,

beckon me to *crawl* in, a 5-minute
endeavor, lunch bucket first, then to hunch

on a mush of newspapers that did not

well cover the seat springs. He'd creep

the long way to the park, as if giving
a guided tour of cheap motels, car lots,

mini-marts along Aurora, always
taking the detour to pass Golden View

Cemetery, rolling down his window
to call out "Good morning, darling"

to Delores, his wife, asleep among maples.
Six hours a day we'd swing our machetes,

the blades ringing when they bit the wrist-sized
trunks of broom and dogwood. By March,
we'd slashed and piled a mountain of brush
just as snow began to fall, lacing our ugly heap

into a thing of delicate beauty.
After lunch, shoulder squealing, I lay next

to the pile, using a red bandanna to shield
my eyes from the pricks of wet snow.

The nap was a white cradle of silence,
broken by the Cadillac's throaty growl.

I never understood why we were there,
Waltzer and me, clearing the bluff of brush.

Brushing off my poncho, blinking away
the icy splats, all I knew is that I'd been reborn—

not into the radiance of paradise,
but close enough—a white newness

to everything, a cloud of blue exhaust,

a furious choir of sparrows from within our pile,

and the rattling emphysemic rasp of Waltzer McCann
calling to me to clamber through the window,

asking would I be so kind as to spot him a Big Mac,
large fries and Diet Coke on the way home.