

Nels Hanson

Voyage

I didn't mean to go so far from town.
I didn't plan to walk the country road
until the last white farmhouse disappeared.
I surprised myself when I climbed the dry hills
of the Sierra Madre. I didn't fear I wasn't tired
at the crest when I saw the sea, the Pacific.
It was blue, as I remembered, far white lines
of surf. On the downslope I reached the pier
in the bay's harbor and hadn't thought to buy
a ticket. On the gangplank my heels were
silent as a rabbit's paws. I knew I'd wandered
miles but didn't know the path ended with
a farewell. At the rail of the ship without
a captain, other sailors or passengers
I saw Morro Rock as in the channel the empty
boat crossed the breakwater. Westward
bound beyond the sight of land I realized
every step had lead me to this voyage.

Caravans

Morning coffee, combing hair
after a shower, today's clothes
chosen from the closet, shoes

for work. A routine unfolds as
at the four corners of your life
columns rise like dwarf cedars

stripped of branches, their tops
joined by timbers in a square,
mesh thrown over, not plastic

but wire with a cyclone fence's
diamond pattern. The cage on
wheels begins to roll, stopping,

starting, the rider thrown back
and forth onto screened walls.
On thoroughfares white horses

pulling wagons flinch at lashes
meant for edgy captives, their
swayed backs stinging as they

recall old champions in armor,
a cavalcade with silver fists to
pound at a king's locked door.

Seeds

The sidewalk's squares are blank
as spaces on a calendar or empty
tic-tac-toe, flecks of iron pyrite,

fool's gold, winking fallen stars in
the smooth cement. The lines are
ladder rungs set always sideways,

forever horizontal on the ground
as if to reach a place from here
that isn't here but another step

between vague distances. Since
we can't climb then let's descend,
with sledge and pick dig down

to find a lost black loam, only
buried treasure worth hunting
for. There sleep roots of giant

trees that like the plum or peach
bloom in spring before summer's
fruit on branches beyond the city.

The Clouds Off Morro Bay

At dawn, Black Friday, 13th of October, 1307,
King Philip of France arrested Jacques de Molay,
Grandmaster of the Templars, and 60 knights

he tortured to extract confessions of heresy and
incontinence, to shun repayment of the Order's
vast loans. A legend tells the long night before

the 24 Templars loaded crates on seven wagons
and escaped to the Atlantic port of La Rochelle,
all 18 galleys lifting anchor with unfurled sails

not seen again. Grail, Thorn Crown, Holy Lance
the legionnaire St. Longinus held, True Shroud
still glowing that can't be touched, Veronica,

the Purple Robe won at dice? Once a year at
sunset a fleet appears on our horizon, hulls low
with gold and sapphire, rose pennants flashing

a scarlet cross, in the changing light now almost
turning towards us to mistake us when the boy
lookout again cries "*Home!*" sure he spies at last

their fabled haven – Like *The Flying Dutchman*
the ships blur, begin to disappear, outward bound
at dark for deeper fathoms, far harbors westerly.

Strange Clouds

Those musty books we threw
from our speeding cars as we raced
for the waiting treasure dissolving now
like the polar icecap melting to the fabled

Northwest Passage stand up in a wall
open to a single page with words freshly
chiseled in the stone. Careful, now
warnings turn to epitaphs. Suddenly

the lies we told turn backward, bullets
swerving to massacre the shooter.
The greed, the daily betrayals as natural
as morning coffee that never woke

the sleeper present their urgent bills
demanding payment. What I should do
and what I must do merge to a simple
sentence as above the freeway signs

strange clouds gather, golden coins
start to rain perfectly on our closing
eyes. It was all true all along, the world
really is a hall of mirrors – our faces

change to masks of dying animals, mouths
of the starving, blank look of murdered
children, skin that was never white. At
the end the killer identifies the victim.