

**FROM UTAH POEMS :
TO ELIAS**

I

I brought my daughters to your grave
There in the river's bend
Not far from where, their age,
I watched you dedicate the monument
To Jim Bridger: trapper, river-searcher.

You lay deep in Utah's summer
So still they couldn't imagine
This was their grandfather,
Yourself a monument now
To probing dry country.

Would you have known them?
They're coastal girls
Full of mysteries:
Dancers to new music,
Long-limbed, smooth-haired
Swimmers from beaches.

I thought of you swimming.
In this same river bending around us
You could plunge in and not come up
Until you were under the willows
On the far side. You frightened me
With that miracle, as a boy.

I thought of you as having
Plunged and never come up.

II

I see our farm a raft we poled
Through many a shallow and deep,
Many a bend and straight.

No masted ship there in the mountains,
Not so perilous a journey
As our ancestors made. Yet the raft
Was buoyant, moved through time.
We tied up, seasons, below the sandbars,
Watched the beavers, raised crops,
Built warm fires at Thanksgivings.
I've learned since (maybe you knew)
We were other Jews on another journey.
At Sukkoth a house of branches is built
And a feast eaten. It's nothing
Without knowing you're going on together.

We saw our desolate stretches too:
Times the river was barren of fish,
No berries on the banks for the girls
To gather. Worms stripped the country
Of green one summer. Remember?
Only the mountains kept us.

I thought the raft had made itself.
But you'd found timbers, hewed
And tied them, you, your brother,
The others. The land was desert
When you came. Little wild antelope
Leaping through sagebrush, you told me.
No sure forms but the Indian camps
You more than others came to love.

I marvel now you got the farm
Afloat. Apple and cherry trees,
Sweet clover, grass, sugar beets, barley—
Hard-won raft of richness.

Was it mine to go on poling
After you dived?

III

The sea gulls came in spring:
That slow dance of gray and white,
Those wails behind our plows.

I wondered what they meant, God's birds?
They'd come that century ago
To stop the crickets. Now they came
Asking tribute. Yet none stayed,
None took wheat I threw. Some signal
Given I could not name, their wings
Would lift them off, white discs.

Propellers were like that, I saw
When the war came. Whirls of white
Lifted me on vibrant wings into the air.

At seaports, waiting for clear weather
Eastward, I watched gulls wheel and shriek
For fish heads. Scavengers, they fought
For scraps, hurled taunts, turned circles
Tight as watchsprings. Birds of clangor.

I lay, though, listening to them,
Mornings in softer ports,
My own flesh washed by love
As by their raspy cries—
A song alive in me alive despite
The blading wings, the clanking shells.
I heard them cry out what I longed for.

You heard them cry in Trondheim,
That harbor your mission took you to
Before the wars. I thought of that
As I lay dreaming sea gulls.

When I came back, the raft was small.
You saw me sorrowing for friends
Gone down. I wept as well
For Europe like a close-knit quilt
We tore with bombs,
For enemies we killed,
For Jews lost in the camps.

Between me and the fields stood images
Too bright to bear: bomb-sheltered
Mothers feeding children. Cathedrals
Turning air to colored breath.
Girls leaning back on English dunes,
Friends younger still than I

Climbing into aircraft,
And the inscrutable long slow
Turns above the sea.

With you I wrapped the farm around me
Like a coat of greeny air, and knew
The sea gull's painful cry
Was finding home in homelessness.

IV

The Utah roads are changed.
They're wide and straight where
You knew narrow windings, crossings,
Dips we coasted through
To reach a town.

Cars ran off those old roads,
Missed bridges, slid off curves.
Wouldn't you know—beside me
Once when I was learning?

The roads are safer now
At sixty, seventy, eighty—
Smooth rafting!

Even the canyons are straightened:
Blind turns past cliffs cut off,
The dizzy grades reduced.
You hardly know you're probing hills
Before you're dropping down again.
Last year, at night,
I thought I'd lost my way
And struck another state.

It's easier to leave now.
Kids born since the war
Go farther, sooner. Your grandson
Heads for California in winter,
The Great Lakes in summer.

But returning's not so hard
As once I think it was.
Beyond the band of deserts
In glittering cities races clash,
The generations squabble. Love's
Not simpler than in Utah. Roads back
Are tempting too. An airline
Takes you there in an hour's patience.

You find a clear calm atmosphere
Between you and the mountains still.
I suppose they were that way
An age ago, as well as when
We poled our raft.
They stand relating green
To granite.

You think: They'll last. They'll
Slowly forest, keep water cold,
Await millennium.

V

The landmarks fade. I never thought
They would. Jim Bridger's monument
Is off the highway now
Sunk in fields. The farm itself
Is minutes out of Brigham.
I'm not sure I know the turn-off.

But there are searchers yet in Utah
Who know their way,
Like you, like me. They range
Through valleys finding places
To look out from.

Unconsciously they say
What the strong old prophet said,
Choosing Utah in the beginning:
A place, a possibility,
To make green, to make blossom.

All the world's a desert really.
We only live to bring
Communal beauty to it.

We build our rafts, some large,
Some small. They hold or break.
Others come after. The sea gulls cry.
The world is crowded.

Rest easy.