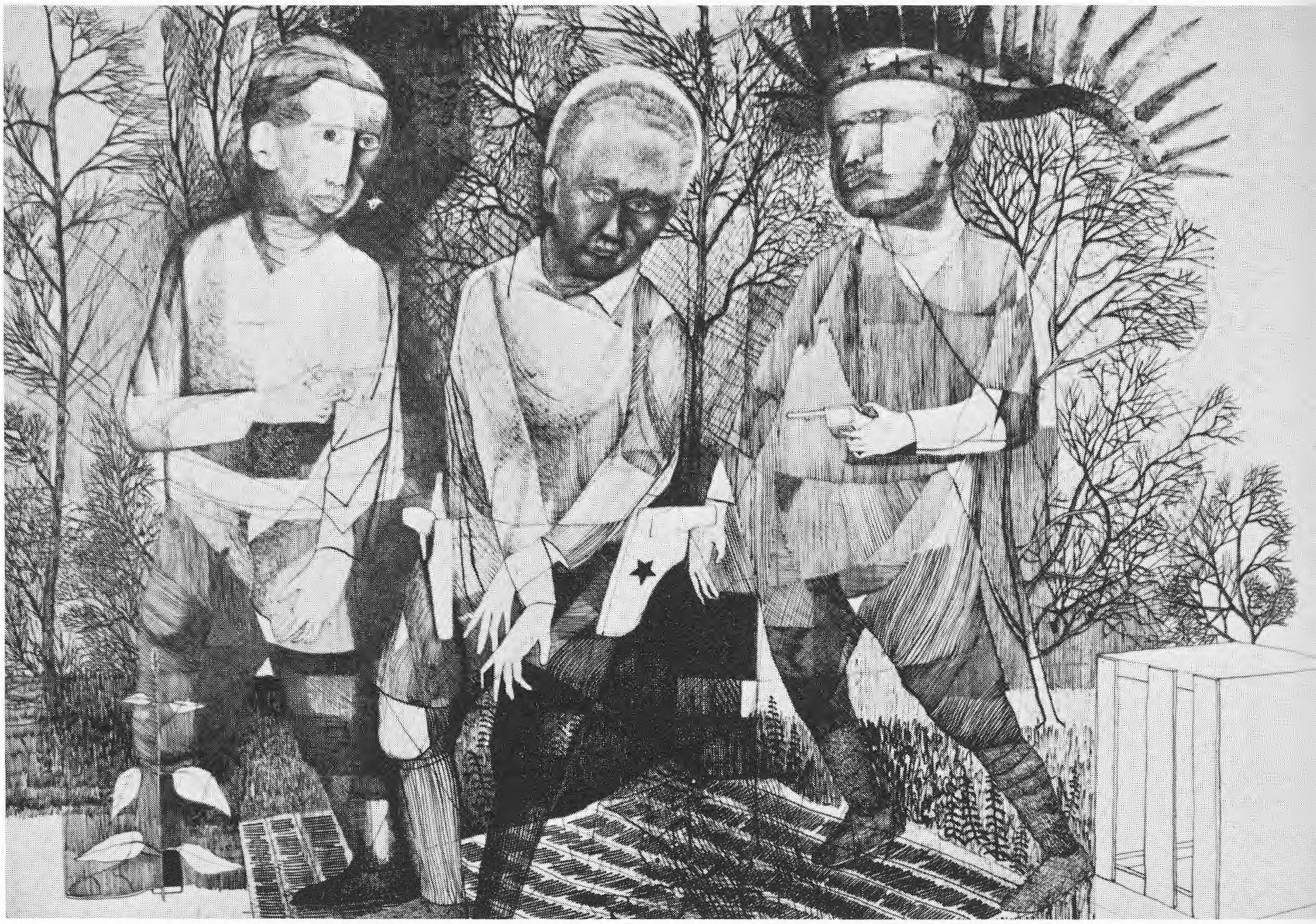


Etching by Richard Wilt

Nancy Willard, the author of THE LIVELY ANATOMY OF GOD (Eakins) and poems in many periodicals, teaches at Vassar.

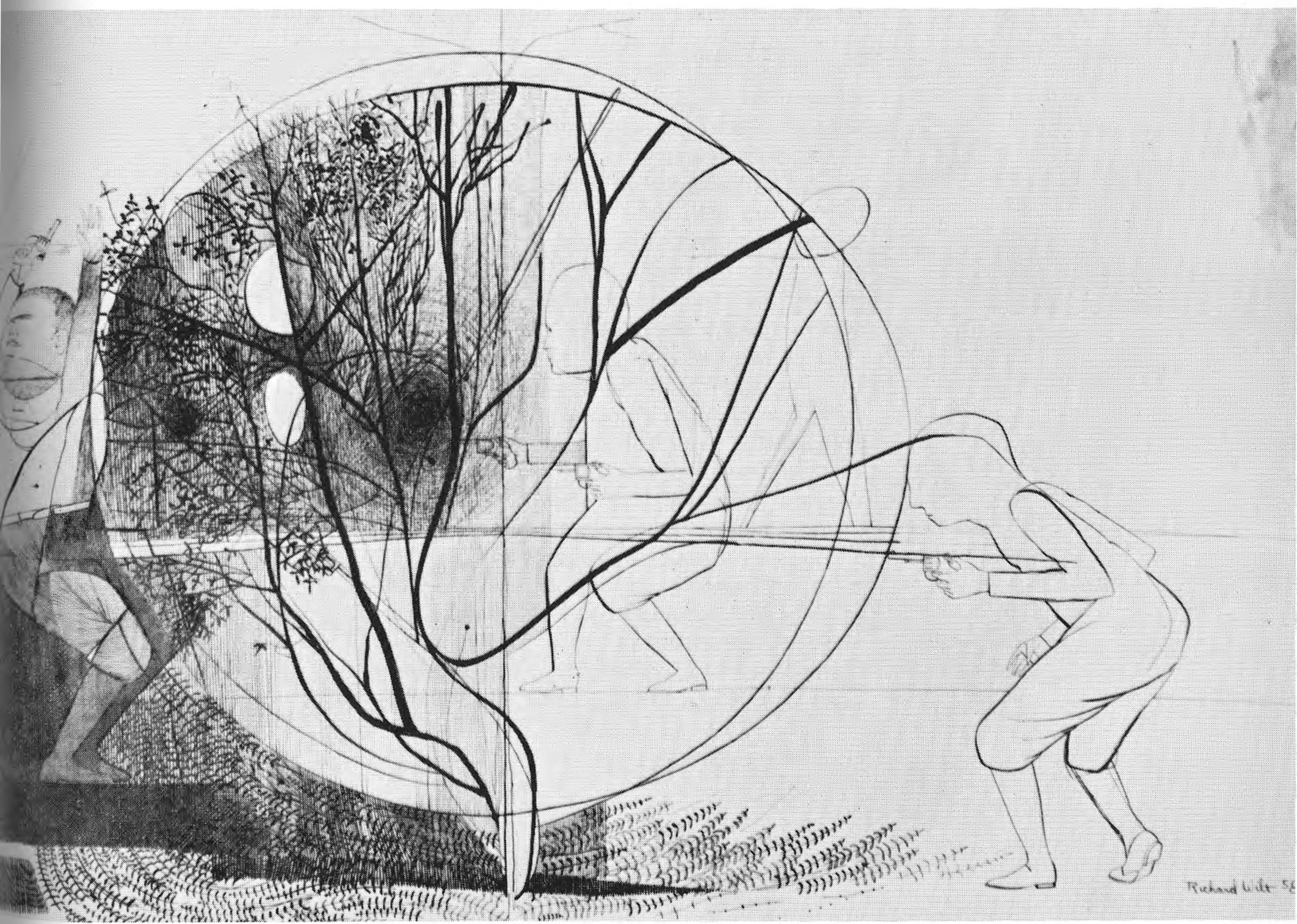
A POEM TO TELL THE TIME BY

Last night you packed and left home.
I would guess you are almost twenty.
You take your seat on this train at Albany
and share your sandwich with me at Buffalo.
A journey makes fathers and sons of strangers.
So I will tell you how I lost everything.

At sixteen I pitched straw in my father's barn,
under its wishbone windows pointing to heaven.
The black bull hunched like a fallen priest,
the congregation of grass leaned after him,
whitening toward winter and turning to hay.
My grandmother was kind to Indians.
She met a wolf in the fields and prayed.
Where two dogs rolled one night, the parched corn
stood up for joy. Where my father's plough
skirted a headstone like a buoy
I heard the running sleep of a stone man.

The next year I packed and left.
Like a cavity in my tooth, the city throbbed.
For thirty years I painted its heart white,
courting it from scaffolds with colors and cries,
licking its bridges silver, its offices gold.
Now I am black as the air I breathe.

On hundreds of screens, in eyeballs turning to metal,
cowboys and Indians settle an old score.
I stride into Woolworth's and purchase a pistol.
From my window I can shoot the new leaves
off the tree of heaven. Each night I kneel
in sleep to spigots and boilers and hear
the slow leak in my heart. By the ocean
a child frayed as a dishrag taps my knee.
What time do they turn off the water?
Each night I shoot the black bull
who knows the way home and won't tell.



Etching by Richard Wilt

Riding with you, I am almost twenty.
I am riding to meet my father.
Now I am lifting the blinds in terror.
The freight cars have bedded down in poppy fields.
Nothing is left of Pittsburgh but angels
haloed in helmets, lighting their torches.

They have taken over the smokestacks.
They are washing the water clean.
In my daughter's house there are many rooms
whiter than flour. So I went to the suburbs.
Someone had taken the trees away.
New houses popped up like remarkable toys.
People bought sconces and spindles, precious with age
in an age where nothing was old.
They have declared death obsolete.
So I found my solace in vivid machines.
I made snow in one and rode the grass short with another.

The new children, taller and clipped like lambs
built aluminum playrooms on the stumps of trees.
In camp they made tepees and saw, at the City Museum,
Indian shards and a petrified man,
one hand still shading his eyes from the new sun.
He slept through air-raids, corals, the grief of birds.

If only our lives were as whole as his death,
touched by the skilled hands of the rain to a star.
Through his hair, bees comb their mysterious honey.
In his head poems sharpen their smoky crystals.
Did butterflies light on his hands like rings?
Did he run with deer in the broken light of morning?
Did his thoughts stop dead in their tracks
like insects in amber, a fresco of buffaloes
friezing his skull? Are his veins diamonds,
does a starfish sleep in his navel, do shells
hum in his ears pierced by the snouts of worms?

There are children whose prayers are stamped by machine,
and there is you. You are almost twenty.
All their comforts you have left behind.
You are going into the cities, you carry your birth
like a hand grenade in your smile.
If you keep a plan for revolt tucked
in your knapsack, under your tongue, your heart,
be as hard and gentle as this man's death.
I see you in prison, in parks, in love,
sharing your last crust with policemen and swans.
Make us a place to love, make us a new earth.