

Roger Dunsmore

BLACK SUN/PURE LIGHT

Simon Ortiz in his poem, "For Our Brothers: Blue Jay, Gold Finch, Flicker, Squirrel" (pp. 128-31, *The Good Journey*), sets before us the full impact of Euro-American society on North America, its life and people. These four creatures are the shattered remains of themselves, after being struck by cars on Colorado Highway 17. Ortiz refers to the events of their deaths as occurring in an "unnecessary war," and the brotherhood with them of the title is deep, for,

Gold Finch, goddammit,
the same thing is happening to us.

What makes the deaths of these bird and animal brothers even more devastating than its suddenness and unnecessariness is that "nobody knows it," they are "forgotten," and forgotten in their lives as well as their deaths, except by the ants who are feeding on the decaying body of Blue Jay. Ortiz asks

... them to do a good job,
return Blue jay completely
back into the earth,
back into the life.

The knowledge of the ants is the knowledge of cycles of life processes, decay being a process of return of one life back into other lives, or "into the life," As Ortiz says. The ants in this poem have more knowledge than the human beings who manufacture and drive the big machines at high speeds, and who create "the poorly made, cracked asphalt road" beside and on which these dead brothers lie.

But even here in the midst of this "unnecessary war," with the rotting, swollen, shattered bodies of his dead brothers, perhaps especially here because here it is most necessary, Ortiz manages passages of lyric intensity and beauty. As he looks at the remains of Blue Jay lying there, the thought of him in flight comes to Ortiz:

the summer sunlight catching
a blade of wing, flashing

the bluegreen blackness,
the sun actually black, turning
into the purest flash of light.

It is this memory of the power of Blue Jay to transform the sun itself into "actually black" with its wing feathers, and to flash the purest light from that black sun, that astonishes us, especially in comparison to the shiny steel, plastic, and chrome of the speeding machines, flashy in a lesser sense, though Blue Jay, too, has been "in a mighty big hurry."

Ortiz's reference to the "unnecessary war" that is this highway carnage of birds and animals is heightened by the fact that Blue Jay (also "Blue Crow") is associated with warfare by the Pueblos. Other features of Blue Jay for the Pueblos are his ability to kill ghosts, his association with the direction west, and the appearance of his feathers in the hair of Zuni priests on ceremonial occasions. Blue Jay feathers are fastened to the prayer sticks of Zuni war priests before going on a raid and when a house or field is dedicated.¹ And,

In the Tewa pueblo of Tesuque, feathers of an unspecified jay are scattered on the ground or under stones in a shrine on a hill to the south. Because these offerings are made as a part of a Game dance, it is thought that they may be for the increase of game.²

It is clear from this that Blue Jay is a brother and more — a significant presence in the ceremonial life of Pueblo people. But his fearless swooping into the tall grasses and warlike cries make him no match for the speeding steel machines. The ministrations of the ants are a fitting "return" for his body, something of his spirit having been released into that purest light of black sun off the wing blade.

From the dead body of Gold Finch, Ortiz takes "four tiny feathers," hoping to be blessed by the bird. He notices the "fading blood stain on a wing tip," bringing sorrow. He tells of his admiration for the yellow color of this bird, "the color of corn pollen," as it "glittered" in the tree branches. After mentioning how its voice would allow him to find it in the shade of his grandfather's peach tree, he again notes its color — "Gold Finch. A pollen bird/with tips of black."³

Here the yellow light of corn, of the sun, of Gold Finch, glittering among the leaves of the trees, with the light of his song "reasonably pretty and revealing" is like the flash of purest light from Blue Jay in its power to reveal the connections between things — peaches, corn, feathers, sun, moving yellow on the air like pollen, like warm light. And like Blue Jay, "forgotten, too,/the hard knots of gravel around/and under you."

With Flicker, the "proud brother" of the shortest section of this poem, Ortiz jamps the language together in harsh repetition of the damage to bird bodies from hurtling steel machines:

Askew.
Head crushed.
Misshapen.
Mere chips of rotting wood
for your dead eyes.
Crushed.
Askew.
You always were one to fly
too close to flat, open ground.
Crushed.

By saying less about Flicker, and piling up the words "Crushed," "Askew," "Misshapen," he says more, actually intensifying the impact. And in the lines, "Your ochre wings were meant/for the prayer sticks," he gives the ritualistic importance of this bird, too. At A'coma, prayer sticks are regarded as gifts to the K'atsina. "They like to get these hatcamuni from us."

"All important occasions must be preceded by, or accompanied with, the making and depositing of prayer sticks" might well be taken as a valid generalization of ceremonial procedure. They are made before all masked dances, the solstice ceremonies, at birth, and at death, for all ceremonial occasions are intimately concerned with the supernatural world, and prayer sticks are the most formal and satisfactory means of establishing the desired rapport with the spirits.⁴

Flicker, the "proud brother," was meant to have his rightful place in this ceremonial order of the Pueblo world, his ochre wings meant for the prayer sticks. The acknowledgment of that place makes his crushed body even more painful, for it expresses the crushing and skewing of the very order of the Pueblo reality by the speeding machines and the society that puts its belief in them, in its capacity to make them.

Squirrel is last. Again, there is the detailed knowledge of the animal's life, its sudden and gray "flashing" as it runs, its "shrieks of sound." Again, there is the soft vegetable world, this time "underbrush oak" rather than cottonwood or peach trees, or "the tall dry grasses" of Blue Jay. "One dim eye" stares across the road at these oaks it can neither see nor reach. As Ortiz tries to lift its body into the high grass it comes apart. "It is glued heavily/to the ground with its rot" so that he has to push it into the grass with his foot,

. . . being careful
that it remains upright
and is facing the rainwater
that will wash it downstream.

This carefulness in the handling of the rotting remains of the quashed squirrel, keeping it upright and facing the rainwater, expresses his reverence for its life, even at this unsavory extreme. His response to its remains is ritualistic in the simplest, most direct meaning of the term. He extends this into the next lines where he smells its rot "and wipe[s] its fur on my fingers/off with a stone/with a prayer for it/and murmur[s] a curse." He does not recoil from the smell nor the touch of its decaying flesh. It must be accorded the respect due to the remains of any living thing. That is without question. Those who have forgotten this in their speeding machines along the poorly-made cracked asphalt have disturbed this ceremonially ordered world, and appear ignorant of or aloof from any awareness of their impact. His anger, sorrow, and puzzlement are clear. But the poem ends powerfully, affirming the importance of doing "this much" for them, and more —

knowing your names, telling about you.

He cannot change their deaths, and the conditions that caused them, but he is far from helpless in the face of them. For his knowledge of their names, and lives, and his ability to tell their story, as well as his care for their remains, allows him to express the meaning of and respect for their lives, and to present a way of living that does not *necessitate* the ignorant sacrifice of innocent forms of life in the pursuit of our own ends. Perhaps it is the ignorance, the forgetting, and the unnecessariness of this destruction that is the real terror of it: the total lack of regard for those we have crushed along our way. In this poem Ortiz gives real meaning to the term "Brothers" as applied to birds and animals through the pain, sorrow, and anger he feels at their deaths, and the care with which he knows their lives and handles their remains.

It is clear from our examination of the underlying ritualistic element in Ortiz's poem that he has been able to keep his poetry open to its roots in ancient Pueblo culture. What is even more striking about Ortiz's work is that the birds and animals of the poem are obviously literally real, and to take them only in their mythic, symbolic, or metaphoric meanings, as a sort of poetic way of understanding them, is to reduce the reality of their living and dying to the conceptual categories of Euro-American literary consciousness. We must work to open ourselves to receive these poems with the full meaning they have for Indian people.

Notes

¹Hamilton A. Tyler, *Pueblo Birds and Myths*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979, pp. 255-56.

²*Ibid.*, p. 357.

³The significance of pollen, especially corn pollen, in the Pueblos is widely known. Parsons, in her report of work at Isleta, states,

Corn meal or pollen (our informant uses the terms indiscriminately) is in very general ritual use. It is sprinkled by everybody to the sun at sunrise. In ceremonials it is sprinkled to sun, moon, stars. It is sprinkled in all directions, or in

the direction of any spirit that is being addressed. It is sprinkled on prayer feathers, on the altar, and on the sun spot. It is placed in the basket or on the hand where sacrosanct objects are to be placed or given. It is thrown in the river or buried in the field. The meal and pollen are contained separately in buckskin in the pouch of the bandoleer. Corn pollen only is used; not as in some other places pollen from flowers. Corn pollen may be gathered by anybody, "with a song," asking one of the cornstalks in the row for it. "We always ask for what we gather."

Elsie Clew Parsons, *Isleta, New Mexico*. Ann. Rpts. of Bur. Am. Ethnology, Vol. 47, pp. 275-76.

⁴Leslie A. White, *The A'coma Indians, People of the Sky City*. Glorieta, NM: Rio Grande Press, 1973, p. 69.

At the summer solstice ceremony,

everyone makes prayer sticks to be deposited on the morning of the solstice. Each person makes four sticks which are tied together and wrapped in a corn husk. On the morning of the solstice two men and two women take the sticks for all the people to the east side of the cliff and offer them to the sun and to the K'obictaiya.

And during the winter solstice ceremony, on

the third day before the solstice, the men take their prayer sticks out to their fields and bury them; the women carry theirs to the east edge of the mesa and throw them down. p. 85.

And at a death ceremony

the father makes four prayer sticks, painted black, which he puts in the right hand of the deceased. Then he makes four more which he puts

in a pottery bowl, together with four made by the mother. Four days after the death a medicine man, solicited with corn meal by the father of the deceased, takes a burnt stick which has been placed where the deceased lay, the prayer sticks made by the father and the mother, and a "lunch," and goes to the grave, where he prays. Then he goes down the sand trail to the foot of the mesa, and then to the north. He goes out to some mesa or canyon, where he deposits his burden. The sticks are for Iatik [the All-Mother]. p. 137-38.



Gene Armstrong

LIFT

I don't know who saw them first, the seagulls
on the thermal; gliding,
circling, rising
out of sight against the sun
above The Great Salt Lake.
They weren't hunting or fleeing
or passing on genes;
just catching the wind
and adjusting their wings.