

Our Own Dogs

Dawn is like a yellow mist, with grey light
Glinting on snow, flooding across clustered trees,
The frozen river, the slope and rise of hill.
Here, the small village has wrested protection.
Between one cabin and the river bank,
An oil drum with the top cut out
Stands perched on rough stones.
Flames from the wood fire roll against the bottom.
An Athabaskan in corduroy pants,
Army surplus parka, and caribou skin boots
Stands guard like, stirring with a paddle.
The dog boxes spread out in a half circle.
The Huskies sit on their haunches, watching.
The man takes a five gallon can,
Walks with easy steps, throwing one, two
Pieces of dried salmon to each dog.
I saw him once, resting, near the fireplace
Of the combination gas station, motel, and grocery.
His pickup was outside, with supplies.
The owner, from his leather chair, began,
“Well, Charley, how do you think you’ll do, next week?”
The Indian began analyzing the dog race,
The competition, emphasizing no single word.
. . . Yet it was the grandson of the chief
Who told me why Charley finished second.
“That vet come up here three years ago, raced.
He lost bad . . . bought a couple of our dogs.
Next year he did better, bought more dogs.
Last year he bought two lead dogs.
Paid a thousand dollars each.
You don’t see it, but before he starts,
He has two thousand dollars out in front.
When one of us goes to the race,
We take our best, borrow dogs,
Even from another village.
This year the vet came back,
Beat us, with our own dogs.
. . . That night there was a dance at the village hall.
The music started live, with my friends
Playing lead guitar. A fellow from another village sang.

Later, canned music took over:
Singles played on a tiny record player.
I stepped out into the night,
To be alone in the dark, to think.
Next week I would be back on the job,
And carrying my books to classes,
Studying the distant dreams of the European poets,
Listening to the anthropology professor.
. . . Charley was at the oil drum, again,
Stirring the mixture of water and dried feed.
Spruce smoke penetrated the stillness.
The moon, in the dome of heaven,
Was like a brilliant, white melon slice.
Firelight touched Charley's face, the intent eyes.
Many stars brought the sky alive.
The level river ran white, to the bend.
Spruce forests spread off, struck with shadows,
Mounded, rising, growing fainter.

—Robert N. Zimmerman

A Response to “Our Own Dogs”

In contemporary American Indian songs and stories the Iroquois, Shawnee, and Lakota all voice a rueful hindsight over the hereditary “Great Mistake,” or the friendship and kindness which their naive, trusting ancestors extended to the pilgrims on the Mayflower. Thanksgiving Day for many American Indians is a day of bitter mourning. In Robert Zimmerman’s “Our Own Dogs” he effectively blends concise images, accurate characterization, and situational irony into a structurally symmetrical poem whose central idea is a moving variation on this same theme. While far removed geographically from Plymouth Rock, the Athabascans in the poem nonetheless voice a similar bitter resignation not only to the mistake made in selling their dogs to “that Vet,” but also to the guitar, canned music, European poets and an anthropology professor all of which represent the domineering presence of a literate, technological culture with which they must contend.