

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.

The yellow/grey dawn, traditional symbol of optimism and new beginnings, is the background against which we meet Charley, the Athabaskan whose work at feeding the huskies is actually an act of guarding an hereditary ritual, one which binds man in a cooperative harmony with animal. This relationship is in marked contrast with the way in which the chief's grandson describes "that Vet" who uses his purchasing power to gradually obtain more and more dogs from the village. Those who sold him the dogs perhaps had a limited knowledge of the power that the vet wanted to wield. Forever encroaching on new territory, forever in search of a new race to win, the vet does not just beat Charley, he puts the entire village in a "second place" because Charley is part of the "we" the chief's grandson describes—those who must at times borrow dogs from neighboring villages to even be able to participate in the race. One can draw an analogy here to the second class position which all American Indians occupy in the larger context of western society—a result of having lost many an economic and political contest with those whom the vet in Zimmerman's poem represents.

In the closing scene Zimmerman returns to Charley at the oil drum who, in spite of his defeat at the race, continues to feed the village dogs. His intense concentration to his evening task is highlighted by a brilliant moon, the firelight and the stars which "brought the sky alive." This would suggest a defiant vitality and a reaffirmation of the relationship between man and animal—a relationship which will persist as a cultural trait regardless of the numerous tragic mistakes American Indians have made in their dealings with the pilgrims and their descendants.

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