

Four Poems

TIMOTHY HOLMES

Reaction to Conquest

*Three blows from a steel axe
Broke through the heart
Of a rare, extinction-threatened tree
Which though standing yet
Browns to fall.*

*Such was the time of the year
That tight-skinned berries
Waiting to explode, dried too soon
And clatter-clattered
To the ground.*

*Around the root-tops, naked once,
Hungry grass has crept,
Now moss, bark-feeding insects,
Woodpeckers, fungus,
Dark leaf-mould.*

Goodbye

*Comrades of old speak with muted tongues,
Whisper through ink,
Shuffle in the doorways of the mind,
Grow quieter, paler, sink.*

*What challenge then can everyman
Bound to time and space
Present this liquefaction of the brain?
Nothing. No heart-pounding race
Against the earth's rotation
Can be ever, ever won.*

Conquest

*One throw breaking the evening air,
A broken scream, a silent fall,
A bounce from shrub to rock and bush,
Finished a generation, left clear
For newcomer with plough and gun
The dew-bejewelled country, rich
In soil, trees, birds, red meat,
Rivers, the bounty of a kingly sun.*

*Three days before, the last tired clan
Of a lost people, four generations,
Were hunted from their eyrie; grandfather
Of wife, ancestor of child — and ran
Up mountain slopes that quailed the kite,
Pursued by shouts and voices born
Six thousand miles away.*

*Shot after shot
Felled ancestor, father, uncle, husband. Fright
Sent mother-wise to scale the highest bluff.
There two final deaths gave the country over
To strangers.*

The Lost People

*Refuged in secret places far from concourses,
Hidden near living rock, home among windiness,
A long breath self-promised into the future,
Peril came to our valley, shirring flat waters
With smoke, dust of ironstone, startling soft palates.*

*Viewing hard fastnesses, western protectors,
Seeing on bronzed hill-curves filtered sunlight,
Our evening blaze a comfort, air-sweetener,
With a rush of starlings night was present:
On those distant clifftops, a line of fires lighted,
Their smoke, a burnt bitter, towards us blown.*

*From both sides advancing, signs of danger,
Choking encroachment, forewarnings confirmed,
Broad lanes to a future closed up with poisons.
Walls of our refuge drew us against them,
Pressed us right through them, hid us behind
Leaving small shadows of us and our chattels
Painted upon them. For others.*