

THE PRIDE

by john newlove

The image/the pawnees
in their earth-lodge villages
the clear image
of teton sioux, wild
fickle people the chronicler says,

the crazy dogs, men
tethered with leather dog-thongs
to a stake, fighting until dead,

image: arikaras
with traded spanish sabre blades
mounted on the long
heavy buffalo lances,
riding the sioux
down, the centaurs, the horsemen
scouring the level plains
in war or hunt
until smallpox got them,
4000 warriors

image of a desolate country,
a long way between fires,
unfounded lakes, mirages, cold rocks,
and lone men going through it,

cree with good guns
creating terror in athabaska
among the inhabitants, frightened
stone-age people, "so that
they fled at the mere sight
of a strange smoke miles away."

This western country crammed
with the ghosts of indians,
haunting the coastal stones & shores,
the forested pacific islands,
mountains, hills and plains:

beside the ocean ethlinga
man in the moon, empties
his bucket, on
a sign from Spirit
of the Wind ethlinga
empties his bucket, refreshing
the earth, and it rains
on the white cities;

that black joker, broken-
jawed raven, most prominent
among haida and tsimshyan tribes,
is in the kwakiutl
dance-masks too—
it was he who brought fire,
food and water to man,
the trickster;

and thunderbird hilunga,
little thought of
by haida for lack of thunderstorms
in their district, goes
by many names, exquisite disguises
carved in the painted wood,

he is nootka tootooch, the wings
causing thunder and the tongue
or flashing eyes engendering
rabid white lightning,
whose food was whales,
called kwunusela by the kwakiutl,
It was he who laid down the house-
logs for the people at Place
Where Kwunusela Alighted;

in full force and virtue
and terror of the law, eagle—
he is the authority, the sun
assumed his form once,
the sun which used to be
a flicker's egg, success-
fully transformed;

and malevolence comes to the land,
the wild woman of the woods;
grinning she wears
a hummingbird in her hair,
d'sonoqua, the furious one—

they are all ready
to be found, the legends
and the people, or
all their ghosts and memories.
whatever is strong enough
to be remembered.

But what image, bewildered
son of all men
under the hot sun,
do you worship,
what completeness
do you hope to have
from these tales,
a half-understood massiveness,
mirage, in men's minds—what
is your purpose;

with what force
will you proceed
along a line
neither straight nor short,
whose future
you cannot know
or result foretell
whose meaning is still
obscured as the incidents
occur and accumulate?

The country moves on;
there are orchards in the interior,
the mountain passes
are broken, the foothills
covered with cattle and fences,
and the fading hills covered;

but the plains are bare,
not barren, easy
for me to love their people,
for me to love their people
without selection.

In 1737, the old cree saukamappee
aged 75 or thereabout, speaking then
of things that had happened
when he was 16,
just a man, told david thompson,
of the raids the shoshonis,
the snakes, had made on the
westward-reaching peigan,
of their war parties sometimes sent
ten days' journey to enemy camps,
the men all afoot in battle array for
the encounter, crouching
behind their giant shields;

the peigan armed with guns
drove those snakes out of the plains,
the plains where their
strength had been,
where they had been settled since
living memory (though nothing is
remembered beyond a grandfather's
time), to the west of the rockies;

these people moved without rest,
backward and forward with the wind,
the seasons, the game, great herds,
in hunger and abundance—

in summer and in the bloody fall
they gathered on the killing grounds,
fat and shining with fat, amused
with the luxuries of war and death,

relieved from the stream of know-
relieved from the stream of
knowledge,
consoled by the stream of blood
and stream rising from the fresh
hides and tired horses, wheeling in
their pride on the sweating horses,
their pride.

Those are all stories;
the pride, the grand poem
of our land, of the earth itself,
will come, welcome and
sought for, and found,
in a line of running verse,
sweating, our pride:

we seize on
what has happened before,
one line only
will be enough

a single line and
the sunlit brilliant image suddenly
floods us with understanding,
shocks our attentions, and all desire
stops, stands alone;

we stand alone,
we are no longer lonely
but have roots
and the rooted words
recur in the mind, mirror, so that
we dwell on nothing else,
in nothing else,
touched, repeating them,
at home freely
at last, in amazement;

"the unyielding phrase
in tune with the epoch."
the thing made up
of our desires,
not of its words, not only
of them, but of something else,
as well, that which we desire
so ardently, that which
will not come when
it is summoned alone,
but grows in us
and idles about and hides
until the moment is due—

the knowledge of
our origins, and where
we are in truth,
whose land this is
and is to be.

The unyielding phrase
when the moment is due, then
It springs upon us
out of our own mouths,
unconsidered, overwhelming
in its knowledge, complete—

not this handful
of fragments, as the indians
are not composed of
the romantic stories
about them, or of the stories
they tell only, but

still ride the soil
in us, dry bones a part
of the dust in our eyes,
needed and troubling
in the glare, in
our breath, in our
ears, in our mouths,
in our bodies entire, in our minds,
until at last we become them

in our desires, our desires
mirages, mirrors, that are theirs,
hard-riding desires, and they
become our true forebears, moulded
by the same wind and rain,
and in this land we
are their people, come
back to life again.