

**Five Poems from**  
***This Error is the Sign of Love***

(Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 1988)

© 1988 Lewis Hyde

• • •

**On the Grey Wolf River**

Little ouzel bird,  
under  
    cliffs of pillow lava,  
over  
    ice-green  
glacier rapids,  
    should I  
go back to the university,  
    or what?

• • •

**Desert**

*"We have to be in a desert,  
for he whom we must love is absent."  
— Simone Weil*

Early morning and the mist, saturated with light,  
obscures the disappearing powerlines. A damp obscurity  
but a desert nonetheless: birds that fly into it  
lose their bodies and survive  
as the songs of birds, the tallest locust  
is nothing but the rustle of its leaves.  
Slowly the sun cuts and burns the haze away  
to re-embody each in a seedy yellow sleep.

• • •

## For Pablo Neruda, Dead in Chile

It has rained every day since you died.

This is October in West Virginia, mountains and limestone, and the water runs over everything, the stream near the house sounds like a waterfall and there is water in my room, water runs down the wall I covered with a bedspread, water drops on my papers and books, water makes the bearskin rug smell where I shoved it under the bed.

I think of you when everything turns to muck.

I think of you when I go to town and see the puffy faces of the people without money, the idiot boy counting his fingers in the laundromat, and the rich man's house with its tree growing up through the living room roof.

I thought of you when the horses got out of the pasture and came to chew on the rotting porch.

I thought of you when I woke from a nightmare, with no one beside me in the bed.

You said your father was buried in the rainiest graveyard in Chile.

I wish the same for you.

I hope your casket rots and the water breaks in and soaks through the shroud and the grave clothes.

I hope the water eats your body.

I hope it comes and clears your tired reptile's eyelids,  
and breaks down your bones and your teeth  
and carries your hair off to float like a nest.

I want it to dissolve your white mouth  
and take you along in the River Mapocho  
with the garbage and the fruit and the beaten bodies  
that spin slowly out to sea  
where there is space enough and time enough at last.

• • •

## Hotel with Birds

*(Mexico)*

Across the courtyard from the balcony  
the pigeons walk the red clay tile  
of the hotel roof, a scramble of pipes  
and chimneys, flower pots, extra tile,  
discarded fluorescent lights....

The tiles are not fastened down.  
The hot air rises through them,  
the rain runs off. There is  
a gutter where the pigeons sleep.

They land on the rim of the wooden water barrel  
and bend over to drink, their tails  
flipped up like hands raised in salutation.

They are a bird like us, with their persistent courting  
and the song they mumble about the bushes of love.

I gave my heart away this winter. I had held it  
in my fingers so long, heavy red clay muscle  
waking me up tired in the morning.  
How fine it is to have this circulation start  
in another body, and come back! I am easy  
on my feet, like a young girl dancing in her room,  
like yesterday's sparrow that coasted through the door  
swooped 'round our room, and left without grazing a wall.

Plain brown sparrows nest in the beams  
over the balcony. They hop through  
the bars of the parrot's cage  
and drink his water, peck at his feed.

We saw black swans in the lake at the park  
bobbing their heads for each other, cooing, their song  
like a wind between their bodies, not a word to be heard  
just some nonsense caught in the nodes of harmony  
and sent out over the dirty water and the peanut shells.

Where did I get this phrase about the heart? I just  
remember Reverend Francis in his woodshop, bored,  
listening to the woman complain about her son who  
"hasn't given his heart to Jesus" (and Francis

nodding, rocking in his chair, leaving her alone).

Last year I'd sit by myself and read  
in the barrio church. At one of the side altars  
an old black-and-white etching  
of the Child with an armful of hearts,  
holding one forward with his left hand.  
Drops of blood. The small clipped photos  
of children stuck around the image  
in thanks or petition. Solemn faces,  
the serious mood of a photographer's booth.  
Outside, a courtyard and trees painted white  
at the bottom. Birds and dust.

The tiles on the hotel roof are a porous, earthy red,  
like flower pots. They are just laid there without  
mortar and soak up the sunlight and the heat.  
The pigeons move confidently, their wiry feet clicking  
as they go. They stop and coo at anything their size,  
then fly up and circle, a clapping of wings, an ovation.

She took my heart as lightly as one of her own breaths,  
one of her laundry hums, simple—not that  
acrylic green and bossy parrot yelling *papá*,  
but the dun-colored birds at the peak of the roof  
where the mud tiles fold over as if melted,  
where the song carries—take my heart, my purr,  
my ruffled blood—and the pigeons walk,

all shoulder and breast beneath the bobbing, servant head.

• • •

## This Error is the Sign of Love

*"Man has to seek God in error and  
forgetfulness and foolishness."  
— Meister Eckhart*

This error is the sign of love,  
the crack in the ice where the otters breathe,  
the tear that saves a man from power,  
the puff of smoke blown down the chimney one morning, and the widower sighs and gives  
up his loneliness,  
the lines transposed in the will so the widow must scatter coins from the cliff instead of ashes  
and she marries again, for love,  
the speechlessness of lovers that forces them to leave it alone while it sends up its first pale  
shoot like an onion sprouting in the pantry,  
this error is the sign of love.

The leak in the nest, the hole in the coffin,  
the crack in the picture plate a young girl fills with her secret life to survive the grade school,  
the deaf twins who wander house to house, eating, 'til the neighbors have become neighbors.  
The teacher's failings in which the students ripen,  
Luther's fit in the choir, Darwin's dyspepsia, boy children stuttering in the gun shop,  
boredom, shyness, bodily discomforts like long rows of white stones at the edge of the  
highway,  
blown head gaskets, darkened choir lofts, stolen kisses,  
this error is the sign of love.

The nickel in the butter churn, the farthing in the cake,  
the first reggae rhythms like seasonal cracks in a government building,  
the rain-damaged instrument that taught us the melodies of black emotion and red and yellow  
emotion,  
the bubble of erotic energy escaped from a marriage and a week later the wife dreams of a  
tiger,  
the bee that flies into the guitar and hangs transfixed in the sound of sound 'til all his wetness  
leaves him and he rides that high wind to the Galapagos,  
this error is the sign of love.

The fault in the sea floor where the fish linger and mate,  
the birthmark that sets the girl apart and years later she alone of the sisters finds her calling,  
Whitman's idiot brother whom he fed like the rest of us,  
those few seconds Bréton fell asleep and dreamed of a pit of sand with the water starting to  
flow,  
the earth's wobbling axis uncoiling seasons—seeds that need six months of drought, flowers  
shaped for the tongues of moths, summertime  
and death's polarized light caught beneath the surface of Florentine oils,  
this error is the sign of love.

The beggar buried in the cathedral,  
the wisdom-hole in the façade of the library,  
the hail storm in a South Dakota town that started the Farmers' Cooperative in 1933,  
the Sargasso Sea that gives false hope to sailors and they sail on and find a new world,  
the picnic basket that slips overboard and leads to the invention of the lobster trap,  
the one slack line in a poem where the listener relaxes and suddenly the poem is in your heart  
    like a fruit wasp in an apple,  
this error is the sign of love!

• • •