

## *Western Primitive*

1.

Settling his subjects among the props,  
Ben Wittick frontier photographer anticipated  
a yen for the exotic.  
And so against a desert backdrop  
he assembled his capture:

feathered headdress, strands of glass beads  
sagebrush, scrub pine  
turquoise pendant  
the heavily fringed and beaded garment.  
And always the rifle held in hard readiness  
or casually like a walking stick.

2.

Their eyes sweep past the photo's wdgcs  
and out over the vast plain emptied now  
of buffalo. Chief Strange Horse searches for  
his eagle brother of the mountain promontory.  
He sits, solitary, feathers cascading down  
from the massive headdress, down the heavily  
fringed and beaded garment  
and over the ledge his crossed arms make  
against his chest. Who knows how  
the old Sioux chief was lured  
to the display of capture and defeat.

3.

The sun that fired his face to bronze  
smolders in Geronimo's eyes, black coals  
whitened by a vow. Ashen knuckles  
grip the gun's barrel. He holds  
the look of leap and kill until death  
comes and steals the old Apache the same year  
Wittick takes his likeness.

*Now, Chief, kneel down on your right knee  
and take hold of this rifle and show me  
what you would do to the ones who killed  
off your whole family back in '58.  
And hold it.*

4.

Calamity Jane lurched after Wild Bill  
into Deadwood, South Dakota.  
By what need was she stopped short  
astride her rough life, to haul herself  
into Wittick's studio and face his camera  
with hardly time to yank her grubby buckskin  
jacket down and shove it under a slipshod belt?  
The fringes hang matted and ripped,  
her trousers rumpled and filthy.  
Three fingers hook around the rifle prop.  
And like the town crier, her wide face  
blares the sad news of smallpox.  
Scorn circles her eyes,  
and mixes with despair when Wittick says:

*Calamity, I don't know what Bill  
sees in you. I hear they call you  
the White Devil of the Yellowstone.  
Now show me what the damned creature looks like.  
And hold it.*

### ***Every One Was a Real One But Gertrude***

Alice and I sat in the shadows  
of the salon drinking tea  
and talking hats with Fernande  
while from the hive that Gertrude  
made with Ernest and Pablo and  
a heap of Persian rugs  
came a steady hum.

Alice was saying her job was  
to keep the wives occupied so  
Gertrude could talk to Genius:

*The masterpiece is opposed  
to the business of living  
which is relation and necessity.*

Once, Gertrude told her she should  
write a book and call it  
*Wives of Geniuses I Have Sat With.*

Fernande didn't think that funny  
and she was tired of talking hats.  
She bolted up and strode to the armchair  
where the Queen Bee was housed.

The droning stopped. Fernande tipped her teacup and the stream pooled in Gertrude's capacious lap. *Masterpiece, my ass.* She slapped her fanny and yanked her husband up beside her.

*He's not your Pablo, he's mine. And that one's not your Ernest, he's Hadley's. You want the "continuous present"? Go to the movies.*

Later, Katherine Anne Porter paid a visit to *La Rue de Fleurus*. What a dazzler I bet, with her terrific legs and her emeralds plunging. When she left she said Gertrude Stein was a barbarian.

### *Above the Brim*

October. The haying is done and the hay snugged into plastic wrap and stacked up in the fields like shiny white hassocks. The cornfields are shorn, the corn chopped to silage and trucked away. Dozens of blackbirds and crows are gleaning the stubble. Our gardens, too, have given their all, the plants so spent they cannot resist the rough winds that hack through the tangle of stalks and vines. Tall stands of cosmos are forced to the ground from which they sprang in July, their stems arrayed in spokes that imperceptibly turn the blooms sunward like saucers to collect the last sweet warmth of summer.

These Indian summer days hold us captive. The hills burn and glow with color, and we rejoice, even knowing that we are seeing the last shreds of summer, a slender force trying to hold back the winter days that are waiting around the corner to rush in like hoodlums.

And so it happens. One day in mid-November the first winter storm rears up and lays the whole garden to waste; pummels the tall grass and shoves over the cattails down by the pond. Sharp winds blast through, and in a single day strip the maples and birches of their last crimson and yellow leaves. Gusts of rain slash at the trees; the maples stand their ground, but the slender birches and red elderberries bend and twist under the assault.

The days shorten quickly, as if shriveled by cold and wind.

Daylight hustles across the landscape so fast that by mid-afternoon it is shrinking back against the dark line of cedars whose long pointed shadows seem to reach for us as we walk along the road. At dusk, quiet descends and the bells of evensong peal from the Church on the Common. The old sweet hymn rolls across the fields, down the hills into the valleys; it circles the houses calling everyone together in a blessing. Finally, sunset sweeps up broad sashes of orange, violet, blue, yellow and red, then in one swift stroke pulls down the tumult to evening. Night will hand up a fat gold hunter's moon, and later, if it is dark enough, we might see the northern lights shake their bright-winged cymbals down the furthest, deepest darks.

The land turns stiff and formal under first hard freeze, throws a glittering cloak over the grass, the pond, fields, high pastures, and the boulder-strewn hills that rise up to the woods. We look up to a thick, lowering sky as the first snowstorm gathers. We go outside for a few more loads of firewood, and we fill the wood box to the brim and above the brim. The snow begins drifting down in loose feathers, then picks up speed, thickens and blows down hard. By nightfall, the first six inches have been laid down in silence. Snow continues all night, by morning another foot. Winter drives a hard bargain. Life gets serious, work harder. Pipes freeze, wood runs low, power cuts off, cars skid on black ice, cold and wind and dark days rule. Most take it in stride — what needs to be done next? — others not. There are any number of ways to take on winter, but never with indifference. Stay close to others and go off on your own. Look out for the neighbors. Share wood and help shovel. The earth is covered in white, a foundation that will hold us captive for the months ahead. We settle in.