

MOTHER EARTH'S STRETCH MARKS

**Poems of the Land, Critters, Desert,
Class Warfare, Loss and Memories**

by T. Jackson King

Mother Earth's Stretch Marks 2

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this collection of poems are either fictitious or are used fictitiously.

MOTHER EARTH'S STRETCH MARKS
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Dedication

To my children Kevin, Karen and Keith, who have always brightened my life.

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LAND

Whether you call her Gaea, Mother, the Earth, the Big Lonesome or the Land, I have long felt a deep attachment to that on which we live, thrive and expire. To me, the mountains are Mother's stretch marks, the rivers are both her tears and her nourishment, while the oceans are her deep reservoir of lifeweb essence.

Nightfall On The Trans-Siberian Express

Nineteen years I counted to my name
when first I rode the Trans-Siberian Express
from Moscow east to Vladivostok Port so deep,
a span of eight days riding the rails
across Siberia's land of mountains, plains, rivers,
and a people wondrous in their differences,
each to each as strange
as me to them was strange.

A hundred stops or more we made
at smoky towns small and great,
pausing beside hamlets cut with a blade
out of raw red clay and hills oblate,
the forests a Persian rug all in green
yet snagged up
in tripping ridges that fled to the horizon.

Never saw so many trees.
Never saw so much sky.
Never felt so small.
And still, full twenty and five years later
never met people more plainly honest,
friendly, and curious of eye.

Strange as a three-humped camel
strode I their land
endless, as beyond borders of sea and iron
the play called Vietnam drew sell-out crowds
to a foreign land.
But not a cross word was heard
from sea captain, car attendant, student,

workers leaving family behind,
mothers alone with children wide-eyed,
or babushkas who cared only
that I was not the Hun from the West.
One and all did not call
me enemy that summer of '67.

So I crossed the River Don by nightfall,
ever so peacefully.
The Urals slept a rocky sleep,
Lake Baikal's waves so deep
moved sluggish, as if asleep,
gray waters lap-lapping at my feet,
and the tight passage beside the Amur's trickle
clackety-clacked away into the night,
our dreams ever so sweet.

Out of time we moved, caught in the pause
between two giants breathing deep,
as we so many enjoyed our sleep,
just folks passing nightfall
on the Trans-Siberian Express.

—August 1994

In Tucson Downtown

Summer thunderstorms
kettle-drum loud
shake bones, ears and fears
as water down-pours in Tucson downtown,
caught between strobing flashes sulphur-yellow
cracking through nerves jumpy
uncertain to proceed,
go back
or sit and drown,
as low-lying highway underpasses
gurgle with desert rainwater sand-brown
and all-surround.

Try driving a car in Tucson downtown,
drenched as a mouse
caught out in the open.
The hawk plummets.
The snake surrounds.
Stand still and drown.
Move and be fried.
Driving.
What a bitch
in Tucson downtown.

—August 1994

Skull Valley

Passing through
the dry parched throat
of Skull Valley,
one chances upon
a few white-pillared Neo-Classical homes,
their presence a shock so far away
from anywhere.

A bit threadbare
and abandoned they seem,
though they call themselves the dream
of Iosepa.
It is a Biblical place
well-suited to cattle-herding
amidst the sandy wastelands
of sagebrush and saltweed,
a memoried place shared quietly with Indian lands.

Seems fit somehow—
the Mormon Saints build homes
from another time,
while the Goshute Indians
lease their land to engineers
who blow up rocket engines
in Skull Valley.

—July 1994

Capulin Volcano

Stopped on the high east rim
of Johnson Mesa,
you can see golden grasslands
caressing
volcano country.

A place where buffalo died
long ago, near Folsom,
so men could eat,
women might rest awhile,
and children could play hide and seek
among the cutbank arroyos.

A place where white fossil bones
first taught pioneer America about stones,
and extinction.
Bison antiquus still speaks
in the bated growl
of Capulin Volcano,
its last roar
just ten thousand years ago.

The rusty red cinder cones
poke up through the bones
covered by golden grasslands,
lumières ever ready
to torch
hubris human.

—August 1994

Slick Rock Slide

Slick Rock Slide is the back door
to the Colorado Plateau, a place in the sky
where the wind long ago stripped away
the red loessy soil from bare sandstone bones.
'Bout the only way in is from the south,
by way of Highway 141,
which ain't much of a highway to anyone,
just a two lane strip of asphalt black
as tar, that snakes across the high dry plateau
quite far, as if it had someplace to go
but lost the map to hopes uncertain.

It's the gateway to back of the beyond
hamlets named Uravan, Naturita and Nucla,
the latter a place so down on its luck
they thought a nuclear waste dump
might bring them some bucks.
A few jobs paying better than pinto bean farming,
now that coal mining and yellow cake prospecting
are long gone, leaving behind waste piles
in rounded lumps, here and there,
acne on a moonscape rocky and bare.

Good people live up there,
beyond Slick Rock Slide,
people who asked me to come teach their kids
'bout archaeology and dead peoples.
So off I drove, out past Dove Creek and Egnar
then turned hard right
across a washboard land so ridged
with yellow rock eroded
it seemed as if Mother Earth's stretch marks
had gathered here in folds maternal.

For at Slick Rock Slide
the road so narrow
now drops down,
plummets really,
deep into the carved red canyons
of the River Dolores.
Nothing much at bottom, 'cept a cafe and gas stop
sitting all alone
by the back door.

You don't drive down Slick Rock Slide
in winter. Not unless you like ski ramps.
Nor in summer, without extra gas and water,
but in the fall when children so tall
open the schoolhouse door with a smile
wide as the rocky horizon,
why then you forget
about Slick Rock Slide
and the backside of nowhere.

For here is somewhere
close to the heart of people good and honest,
people who listen every day
to the whispers and echoes
the wind leaves behind
when it drops down Slick Rock Slide,
on its way to Mother Earth
with the latest gossip.

So in Nucla, Naturita, Uravan,
Paradox and Bedrock too,
no dead people can be found,
no, none at all.
Just folks happy to see a new face

who made it past Slick Rock Slide
and came in the back door.
Like country friends often do
when they come to sit awhile,
on their side of
Slick Rock Slide.

—August 1994

The Trees Near Prospect

Traveling north to Amon-Ra,
one passes through a stately retinue
of cloud-touching black spruce trees.
Their posture so upright,
their heavenly aim so bright,
one justly wonders
if they are cousins Egyptian
to the stately columns at Karnak.

For each does provide
a corridor wide
for our pilgrimage to the gods
mortal
and immortal.

Passing through the wooden cleft
left behind by man's stony ribbon
of asphalt Ethiopian black,
one cannot but wonder
if Karnak's roof of stones,
once carried upon the River Nile,
could ever be so fine
as the open sky
of cerulean blue tile
that towers high above
the trees near Prospect.

One suspects
the gods of Thebes
would ever be
jealous.

—August 1994

Saguaro Plays

Walking the sandy horse trails
of Saguaro National Monument
not far east of Tucson,
smells dry and piquant overwhelm
as saguaro cactus flowers red and sweet
burst out from avocado-green
trunks wearing porcupine skins
and traffic-stop arms uplifted,
their words silent, grim and ancient.

Cutbank arroyos scissor across
the tan horizon of blue seamed by coffee brown
dryscapes, all direction lost as arms uplifted
look the same no matter whether
you're coming or going. Don't matter.

Sun bakes. Lips parch. Skin peels.
The stage play begins as the shimmering curtain
lifts, the libretto always the same.
Live or die.
Makes no difference to spiny arms uplifted.
At high noon
benediction looks the same
as condemnation.

—August 1994

Alkali Ridge

I

Mountains are the Land breathing deep.
Deserts are a mother's patience,
endless, and forever free.
Together they are the force of spirit writ large.
Though you might never know it sitting atop
Alkali Ridge.

That is a place of yellow soil hotter than the Sun's
backside,
a place in the Mojave Desert rarely touched
by the outside.
A hunkering down spot, austere, calm and deadly.
Sitting atop Alkali Ridge
one bets on which scorpion will make it across
that hot vale
alive.
Brown husks foretell its ancestral fate.

Even here the Land breathes,
though mostly at night.
Coolness brings a gasping indrawn breath
and the survivors of the white hot day
lurch around frenziedly,
hungry for dinner, famished really,
for not long after Moon-rise
comes the Sun
and neighborly death.

II

The Mesa Verdes, now, they welcome you.

With a green smile, a soft sloping embrace,
and a red rock patience
they make you welcome.
Yet their whispers drive men mad,
and break the legs of horses.

Like the footstools of God they rise to the sky,
flat-topped, stately and riven with ravines
guaranteed to surpass the Cretan labyrinth.
Perhaps it is their smooth jade blanket
of pinyon and juniper
that bewitches man, woman and beast.
But if one listens closely to the whispers,
and deciphers their archaic tongue,
water seeps and *tinaja* pools
give comfort, rest and life.

Resting, you discover the Anasazi Dream
of hearth, home and love,
of corn, beans and squash,
lived to the full measure
even as the Land took away
her weeping rains.
Perhaps for some transgression mean,
perhaps for that perennial sin of man—
hubris that we think we live
without the kiss of mountain and desert.
Folly, folly, and blindness eternal.

III

Close by the serpentine Green River lies
a place of banded red rock and brown arches,
where Wind disputed with Land
and voices left their touch

in red rock buttes carved ornately.
Like a dowager's hair coifed
for the Emperor's surmise,
one fossil outlasting another.

Nearby lie the broken guts of Land's rocky heart,
torn open by the River's kiss,
its languid flow a match for any fossil,
any argument,
for it drowns them all, one and many,
in wetness democratic, perennial
and merciless.

Thus do Mountains kiss the Desert,
and River quenches the Land's thirst
for vitality mortal.

—July 1994

Takelma Gorge

Nine million years ago
you began your dispute eternal
with the acid waters of the wild Rogue River.
First lava flowed,
then water flowed,
then lava, now water
each debating which is harder.

The sigil of your embrace
now runs across the high Cascades
like a seam plutonic,
the angled blocks of black lava rocks
dance with layers of ash thick and gray,
in a minuet temporal,
as rock debates with water
which one is harder.

But curling and tumbling
all over your fevered embrace
are lichen and moss of vivid vitality,
their colors emerald green, mustard yellow
and garnet red, the color of blood.

For the Rogue is Mother Earth's own dear blood,
shared easily with all creatures great and small,
while the rocks of Takelma Gorge
rise up from Mother's great forge
to rinse clean the Land
of impurities mortal
and trespassers vain,
as rock debates with water
which one is harder.