Nigger

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with embryonic intensity, a life-form evolving the attributes of consciousness and spite. I could learn much from the man who carries the day out in a bucket. As he steps from his door, another load of sunlight steaming in his pail, he looks happy, pleased by the pace of his busy work, much as the woman tying the devil to a pillow has a glow of satisfaction, beams with the sense of a job well done. And of course I look up to the man who shoots arrows through the roof. It’s hard work threading the shafts one after another through the same tiny hole, yet he rarely stops. When he does it’s to drag an arm across his face and look toward the sea as if he owns this country. Even from here I’m stunned by the militancy of this

shy boast.

NIGGER

It was a new word and as words went then astonishing. After popping in the air it fell like the silence of a sheet snapped out over a bed. Reaching the flanneled back of a man leaving the store, it paralyzed him,
gripped his stride and the swing of his arms
in the cast
of a momentary statue. From the thicket
of belts I could see half-moon smiles
rise over the Sunday
stubbled chins of men huddled at the counter.

When the man had gone they laughed except
for my father
and one other, who set pliers, picture hooks
and nine volts on the counter and walked away.
Each head turned
to follow him as if blown by the same wind.

As he passed in front of the tube-tester,
someone shouted
exotic words which tore the air like a bike
skidding on gravel. The door opened magically
as he approached
and was closed some time before the owner
slammed the register drawer, releasing them
from the space
they'd been staring at, a bit of air bounded
by rakes and lawnmowers through which
they'd each soon pass
after paying what was asked for what was wanted.