

BILL TAYLOR

Whisky A Go Go, 1969
Oil on canvas board, 24 x 18 in



COURTESY RISK PRESS GALLERY

MARK GUSTAFSON

A Hole in the World

Robert Bly's Point Reyes Chronicle

The crow shall find new mud to walk upon.
—“Where We Must Look for Help”

The poet Robert Bly was forty-three years old when he went to stay in Inverness in Marin County, California, for nine months. While Bly's work is most strongly associated with the fields, woods, and lakes of Minnesota, his lifelong home, he did spend extended periods away—in Cambridge, Massachusetts; New York City; Norway; and England—but only the time in Inverness inspired him enough to get into his poetry explicitly and thematically. It was a revitalizing and transformative experience. At least a handful of the *Point Reyes Poems*, a collection (of ten poems, later augmented) from that time, are fixed in the Bly canon.

He had sampled the state several times. After one year at St. Olaf College, and well before Kerouac's *On the Road* and the interstate highway system—on Monday morning, June 30, 1947, to be exact—Bly started hitchhiking west. His destination was Pasadena, the home of an aunt and uncle, where he would stay for close to two months. Upon arrival, he set to work preparing for Harvard in the fall, reading voraciously, studying, and writing. He was still recuperating from a bout with rheumatic fever he

had caught while in the Navy. He told his parents, “I feel good out here—[Uncle] Eric says I'm gaining weight, but I doubt that—I just give people that illusion.”

Fourteen years later, in 1961, now the zealous and brazen editor of the *Sixties*, an influential literary magazine that had set the poetry establishment on its ear, Bly did his first reading tour on the West Coast. He saw poet friends and made new ones, including George Hitchcock in San Francisco, who, in 1964, started his own little magazine, *kayak*, acknowledging Bly's as a forebear. In Portland, Oregon, the alliance of American Writers Against the Vietnam War, cofounded by Bly and David Ray, was launched in 1965. One participant at those first read-ins was Lawrence Ferlinghetti. In their wake he wrote Bly, inviting him to visit and asking him to contribute poems to his *City Lights Journal*.

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Having assumed the mantle of leadership in the antiwar movement, Bly was barnstorming campuses across the country. In 1968, in a speech at the National Book Awards ceremony, he denounced the war and even his own publisher's complicity, and invited prosecution by giving his award check (for his second book, *The Light Around the Body*) to a draft resister planted in the audience. Bly's notoriety was at an early peak. His charismatic presence supplied a jolt of electricity to public events, and he was in increasingly high demand.

After some time he realized that he needed a break, self-imposed exile from the “anguish and madness” of his nearly all-consuming preoccupation with the conflict that had riven the U.S. population. A relative urged him to come to Marin County. The Bay Area was buzzing with radical ideas, psychedelia, Eastern philosophies, antiwar activism, the *Whole Earth Catalog*, and vibrant small presses. Bly's long-held interest in Chinese poetry, his deepening involvement with Tibetan Buddhism and meditation, his work on the South Asian mystic poet Kabir, his research into the nature of human consciousness—all this and more had primed him for the move.

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