

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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In early September 1970, Bly and his wife packed the car, loaded the three kids, and decamped to Inverness.

My dear children, do you remember the morning
We climbed into the old Plymouth
And drove west straight toward the Pacific?

So he writes in “Driving West in 1970.”

[...] And we were driving to the sea.
We had closed the farm, tucked in
The flap, and were eating the honey

Of distance and the word “there.”

They were singing Bob Dylan’s “You Ain’t Goin’ Nowhere.”
He continues:

[...] We weren’t afraid.
And a hole had opened in the world.

[...] There was enough gaiety
For all of us, and ahead of us was

The ocean. [...]
And the war was over, almost.

That hole was welcome—an escape hatch, but also an entrance to unknown possibilities.

* * *

Soon after getting settled, Bly wrote the poet Donald Hall, “The house is fine, the climate weird, the growth jungular, the mood vein-like, not artery-like, the beaches magnificent, full of cruising sea lions.” Although, as poet and scholar Howard Nelson notes, “even two thousand miles inland [Bly] felt the presence of some invisible sea,” this was different. He definitely was not in Minnesota any more. Sea lions, starfish, and octopuses had (mostly) replaced horses, badgers, and other animals of farm and forest. He told Hall his plan, “I’m fixing up a garden shed for a study, will be at work soon.”

A short time later he did a reading and talk at Santa Rosa Junior College, “with a large crowd, as last year, but

[I] did better with the students this year, talking not of brains, but of meditation, the Tibetans, and the Mother.” By January the next year Bly’s great antiwar poem, *The Teeth Mother Naked at Last*, was published as the title poem in his poetry collection of the same name for the City Lights Pocket Poets Series. It had been freely circulated some months earlier on a single folded sheet, a “gift to the resistance” from Bly and Ferlinghetti. Now it would reach a wider audience.

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Privacy, solitude, and silence were always important to Bly. At the same time his ambition and vigorous sense of mission inevitably entailed a regular public presence, gregariousness, and plenty of talk. His journals show him, over and over, setting and trying to follow a routine that would provide ample room for his creative work. Here is a resolution that autumn:

One day for letters—
one day—a sunny day—for being out at the sea
that leaves 4 whole days for writing and the spirit.

He had been immersed in Erich Neumann’s *The Great Mother* and *The Origins and History of Consciousness* and was working out the poems and prose that would comprise *Sleepers Joining Hands*. During his California stay he kept reading, writing, revising, and corresponding, while also making many public appearances (an economic necessity). He admits that the time turned out to be “not as calm” as he had intended.

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After another month or so, and a trip to Taos, he wrote Hall:

Inverness is marvelous! It’s on this wild peninsula, which has basically only 8 ranches, and the rest are hills full of cow pies looking out over the ocean! . . . I work on busywork in my study . . . from seven to twelve, then head for the hills and the sea, then go back to the shed again, writing this time, in the evening.

I decided not to teach a day a week at Sacramento. . . . I don’t want to ruin this cow-sea visit with a lot of humans.

At the same time, he adds: “I’m doing readings this winter the first week of every month, and then am home the last three weeks. No exceptions.” But there were exceptions. The first seems to have been two days midmonth at the College of Marin for a writers’ conference. In early November he flew out to SUNY Buffalo, and in early December, visited several colleges in Indiana and Ohio.

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Meanwhile, at his home away from home, Bly was getting acclimated, walking, exploring, and writing as he went. He started sending early versions of his prose poems to the local newspaper, the *Point Reyes Light*. “November Day at McClure’s” begins: “Alone on the jagged rock at the south end of McClure’s Beach. The sky low.” Careful observation of the sea, waves, and seaweed then moves to the black ducks, who never (paraphrasing Whitman) “‘feel pity for themselves,’ and ‘do not lie awake weeping for their sins.’” The poem ends: “It is not our life we need to weep for. Inside us there is some secret. We are following a narrow ledge around a mountain, we are sailing on skeletal eerie craft over the buoyant ocean.”

Bly was not putting his moral outrage front and center, instead choosing a quieter, more restrained mode. Nevertheless, Vietnam was close at hand (if usually implicit). For instance, in “Finding a Salamander on Inverness Ridge” he writes: “Walking. Afternoon. The war still going on, I stoop down to pick up a salamander.” Straightforward description follows, but rather quickly deviates: “The belly brilliant orange, color of airplane gasoline on fire.” The poet picks up the creature, which has fallen from his hand, once again:

But he is patient, this war. . . . When I roll my hand over, I see the long orange-black tail hanging down into the cathedral of the open palm, circling back and forth, rolling and unrolling like a snake, or some rudder on an immensely long boat, a rudder that can’t be seen by those on board, who walk up and down, looking over the handrail.

He sees, he meditates on what he’s seeing, and soon—even though the salamander is up on a ridge—we are back on a boat (as in the previous poem), unable to quite make out, through some willful ignorance, maybe the poet

Antonio Machado’s “fear of going down,” what lies just below the surface of the interior sea of the psyche.

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The prose poem, hard to define, has, in Bly’s hands, several typical features. It focuses on the physical world, with meticulous attention to detail, to things as they are. This observing leads ultimately to the joyful understanding that plants, rocks, and animals have “a physical life and a moral life and a spiritual life that is complete without us.” Furthermore, as he also writes in *The Morning Glory*, “whoever wants to see the invisible has to penetrate more deeply into the visible.” This is akin to Blake’s sense of “twofold vision,” the creative energy enabling one to see meaning below the surface. The objective scrutiny of a thing can lead, almost predictably, to emotional and subjective human concerns. The professor and poet James Mersmann, who wrote an essay on Bly in his book *Out of the Vietnam Vortex* says, “Bly is an excited little boy gleefully noticing everything . . . except that in this case the little boy knows nearly everything about Carl Jung, and Meister Eckhart, and Hinduism, and Kabir, and world history.” In Bly’s wide-eyed state of wonder and humility there is both innocence and experience. The poet takes an apparently passive stance that is in fact actively receptive, with channels open to the unconscious, ecstatically realizing that all things are connected.

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Bly got caught up in the eclectic independent printing and publishing scene. His stand against the war and the draft came to the attention of the Institute for the Study of Nonviolence, then in Palo Alto, which Joan Baez had founded (with Ira Sandperl). Will Kirkland, a staff member, had contacted Bly before he had left Minnesota, wanting a poem and inviting him to do a reading. One result was that the institute printed broadsides of Bly’s most well-known shorter poem against the war, “Counting Small-Boned Bodies,” and his translation of “Her Visit During Sleep” by Ibn Hazm. Frog in the Well, a collective closely associated with the institute, printed his translation of César Vallejo’s “Masses.” Then, for the live album recorded at the Big Sur Folk Festival in Monterey on October 3 (featuring the Beach Boys, Merry Clayton, Kris Kristofferson, Country Joe McDonald, Linda Ronstadt, and herself), Baez wanted

to include all of “The Teeth Mother Naked at Last” on an insert. After consulting Ferlinghetti, Bly assented.

He had been listening to Baez for years. On December 20, Bly attended her concert at Pepperland in San Rafael. In a pocket notebook he wrote a first and only draft of a prose poem on Baez (in similar fashion to his affectionate portraits of Robert Creeley and Gary Snyder).

She does look oddly like a movie star—somehow elevated above wretchedness—in every way. By nature, and by money, and by fame. Her imagination doesn’t lift her—it isn’t very good. It’s only her voice—the spirit inside this fantastically dignified human tree—her art form is the voice—her own brain can’t understand the grief that her voice understands.

As for “The Teeth Mother,” it was the first poem he wrote for the voice. He says, “in fact the voice wrote it.” Ferlinghetti had witnessed its shaping in the late 1960s. Bly recalls: “He and I gave readings around California when I was developing that poem, and sometimes I would do the lines right on stage, and write them down when I got off. We were driving up to San Francisco when I did the final lines.”

the mad beast covered with European hair rushes through the mesa bushes in Mendocino County, pigs rush toward the cliff, the waters underneath part: in one ocean luminous globes float up (in them hairy and ecstatic men—) in the other, the teeth mother, naked at last.

Bly continues: “He said, ‘Robert, do you know that you are insane?’ That was sort of nice. It had gone beyond French surrealism, and he couldn’t quite follow it.” (Ed Sanders, another poet who had heard some of the same vocalized improvisations, wanted his own Fuck You Press to publish it.)

Also in December, Ferlinghetti talked to Bly about his Pablo Neruda translation, “Letter to Miguel Otero Silva, in Caracas (1948).” He had gotten wind of it from Joel Weishaus (editor of *On the Mesa: An Anthology of Bolinas Writing*), who had first offered it to Jann Wenner of *Rolling Stone*. Probably Ferlinghetti put Bly in touch with Clifford Burke, whose Cranium Press issued it as a single folded sheet, “to be printed free forever.” This was very much part of the

communal zeitgeist. (Another sign of the times: a small group of fans from Eureka on the north coast felt that Bly had finally sold out, considering the just-announced move to have his Sixties Press books published by the more expensive and mainstream Beacon Press. Their mimeographed screed was entitled “The FameGreed Father Bare-Assed at Last.”) Burke would eventually print Bly’s versions of *Basho* and *Point Reyes Poems* under his Mudra imprint. In turn he connected Bly with Holbrook Teter, who did the typesetting for the *Seventies* and, with Zephyrus Image press, an especially zany purveyor of much free material, printed Bly’s translations of Rilke and Kabir.

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Just after Christmas, Bly was in New York, reading at the MLA Convention. Then, in early January, he read down in Claremont and reconnected with poets Bert Meyers and Alvaro Cardona-Hine, all three of them friends of the leftist poet Thomas McGrath, a Midwesterner who had lived in Los Angeles until he was blacklisted in the 1950s and lost his teaching position and moved back to North Dakota. The latter subsequently wrote to Bly:

My impression . . . was that you are a thoroughly committed man, fully alive, searching, in anguish. . . What was most beautiful in the midst of your anguish at your reading-lecture-sermons was that you didn’t have any answers. It is the people with answers that are dangerous, the ones who think they know the way out, who hold salvation in their hands.

He also noted, “You are a busy man, a tired one because of all the activity and the readings. Go back to the table in the room, to the clear sight of the sky, to what is important.” If he was correct, Bly’s sabbatical was not having at least one intended effect.

Back home, Bly went to a “groovy party” (per poet Andrei Codrescu) in nearby Bolinas. The town had, as writer Tom Clark said, “so many poets it’s hard to see the trees.” The current selection included New York Schoolers, Black Mountaineers, and Beats; not Bly’s comrades, exactly, though Creeley was a longtime friend. (The poet William Everson, who shared some of Bly’s views, was in nearby Stinson Beach.) They were there seeking a kind

of refuge, somewhat similar to Bly’s rationale for his own temporary relocation.

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On January 19, two Standard Oil tankers collided in San Francisco Bay, spilling eight hundred thousand gallons of oil, some of which made it up to the Bolinas Lagoon and beyond. After this Bly wrote “The Dead Seal near McClure’s Beach.” The poet comes upon a seal he reckons is dead; rather, it is still alive, though dying, “Here on its back is the oil that heats our houses so efficiently.” The next day, he returns:

Goodbye, brother, die in the sound of the waves. Forgive us if we have killed you. Long live your race, your inner-tube race, so uncomfortable on land, so comfortable in the water. Be comfortable in death then, when the sand will be out of your nostrils, and you can swim in long loops through the pure death, ducking under as assassinations break above you. You don’t want to be touched by me. I climb the cliff and go home the other way.

This, his first poem to acknowledge human environmental damage, may be seen, in part, as pointing toward his anthology, *News of the Universe: Poems of Twofold Consciousness*. That would be the Sierra Club’s first book of poetry.

January ended with a joint Bly/Snyder benefit for the Tibetan Nyingma Meditation Center in Berkeley, “reading and talking on the dharma of poetry.” (Bly was also regularly visiting the San Francisco Zen Center.) Snyder wrote: “Good evening together. One of these times I trust we won’t be so busy and can be silent together.” He added:

Zach Stewart, my brilliant architect friend, is very moved by your work and asked me to ask you if you might be interested in collaborating with him and a small group to produce a live, anonymous, one-shot poetical/magical/religious tribute to the whale and the pelican, with a song/s or poem/s to/for whale & pelican—to be sung or chanted—Grace Cathedral—SF—mid-March.

Snyder, Stewart, and others appreciated Bly’s work in relation to animal life and consciousness. A new friend

from Inverness, Michael Whitt, wrote: “What a fine reading! I think you overshadowed Snyder. . . . Barbara and I were also protective of a spell that had been cast over us. She likened it to a high.” Bly later dedicated a poem to the two of them, “Sunday Morning in Tomales Bay,” written about an experience he and they had shared. It begins, “The blue sky suddenly gone—we are in fog—we drift, lost.” Then they see sea lions. “We float in among them. The whiskered heads peer over at us attentively, like angels called to look at a baby. They have risen from their sea-mangers to peer at us.” The humans, befogged, stay on the surface. “The lions are gone, they are somewhere in the water underneath us.” But letting go, just drifting, can be exhilarating.

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In February, Bly called on Alan Watts at his houseboat in Sausalito, whose work on Buddhism and psychology was of manifest interest, just before he and Ferlinghetti traveled to Vancouver to read with Andrei Voznesensky. (Their translations of his poems later appeared in *Dogalypse*, from City Lights.) Soon after, Bly received a letter from his Russian friend: “For my brother Robly—love you and your poetry. . . Hope to meet in autumn. . . I wrote a long poem about our reading together.” Bly wrote his own poem, “Andrei Voznesensky Reading in Vancouver.” Again, attention to voice is prominent:

a fantastic and resonant voice booms out, like enormous dynamos, like immense waterfalls falling, tremendous winds in the west sweeping up. . . .

The face has much mother-quality, his poems are mother-quality of fire, tenderness in flames, his voice is rushing water on fire, he is saying, it’s okay to be on fire.

Bly later told the poet Allen Ginsberg about the experience: “He spoke of you often with tenderness and affection—we all did!”

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William Witherup had Bly down for a reading at Monterey Peninsula College in March. Bly then went to Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma. Back East he performed at the Poetry Project at St. Mark’s. He also reviewed Octavio Paz’s

new book, *Configurations*. Appearing in April in the *New York Times Book Review*, Bly's review upset many Paz fans, including poet Pete Winslow. Obsessed with surrealism and enthralled by Philip Lamantia (a contributor to the *Seventies*, whom Bly also visited in San Francisco), Winslow arranged a meeting with Bly. In his subsequent essay (unpublished, as he died soon after), he is highly critical of Bly's first two books; first because they aren't surrealist enough, second because of Bly's preference for the surrealism of Neruda, Vallejo, and Federico García Lorca over that of Breton and the French, and third because of his recent appraisal of Paz.

Then he turns to "The Teeth Mother," adding, "There is still nothing remotely hip about Bly . . . but there is something about this poem which makes it looser and more free than anything else he has published." Maybe a brief tangent via the writer Norman Mailer's hipster theory (in "The White Negro") will shed some useful light. Mailer says, "One is Hip or one is Square . . . one is a rebel or one conforms," and those are the terms in which Winslow seems to think. But there has to be a gray area; there must have been at least *something* "remotely hip" about Bly. Furthermore, Mailer writes, "to be with it is to have grace, is to be closer to the secrets of that inner unconscious life which will nourish you if you can hear it." Few poets were more "with it" in this way. And finally, "there is not the hipster alive who is not absorbed in his own tumultuous hypotheses." From any angle, this absorption fits Bly to a tee.

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The April itinerary included Tennessee and Texas, then back to New York. That month's *San Francisco Review of Books* was entirely given over to a long interview with Bly. It displays the range of his current favorite "tumultuous hypotheses." He speaks of "the interior animal life" as opposed to "the interior intellectual life," and of using animal imagery, as García Lorca does, "to penetrate down into an evolutionary part of the mind." Bly argues that Whitman was aware of this tradition, and that Snyder, with his attention to the East, was returning to it, and that "an entire generation now is moving in that direction." Meditation is an important factor, with its attention to breath. "After all, breath is the one thing in our body that we have in common with the alligators and all the other creatures. It's the one thing we can't stop. . . . Therefore it has a deeper evolutionary link than any

other thing in our body." He names Lamantia and Robinson Jeffers, among others, as poets with an animal connection. "Surrealism has links . . . not so much to the spiritual, but to the biological evolutionary part of the mind."

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The California furlough was winding down, and he reflected on the broad sand beach near Inverness. "Welcoming a Child in the Limantour Dunes" opens, "Thinking of a child soon to be born, I hunch down among friendly sand grains . . ." The underlying sense of contentment holds to the last: "Something seems to love this planet abandoned here at the edge of the Milky Way, and this child floating inside the Pacific of the womb, near the walls, hearing the breakers roaring." The Blys' second son was born a short time after they left Inverness. But even before that, Bly wrote to Hall in mid-May: "I'm back at work on the farm, happily, gorgeously, privately, broodily. I have many poems from Inverness to copy out—I don't know if they're any good or not. But I think a few are!"

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Inland again, in Minnesota, happily brooding—had Point Reyes made any difference? The prose poem form was more in hand. The war was slowly winding down. He had experienced much and was reoriented, ready to embark on a new phase in his career and personal life. It would be no less wavy than the previous one, but differently so.

"Oceans," by Juan Ramón Jiménez (translated by Bly), is apt:

I have a feeling that my boat
has struck, down there in the depths,
against a great thing.
And nothing
happens! Nothing . . . Silence . . . Waves . . .
—Nothing happens? Or has everything happened,
and are we standing now, quietly, in the new life?

Mark Gustafson lives in Minneapolis. His essays have appeared in the *Antioch Review*, *Great River Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Poetry Daily*, *Rain Taxi*, and elsewhere. Red Dragonfly Press (Northfield, Minnesota) has recently published a revised trade edition of *The Odin House Harvest*. He is writing Robert Bly's biography.

BILL TAYLOR

El Jay, 1970
Oil on Masonite, 21 x 40 in



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