

## Bruce Morton – Five Poems



### Feature Poet

#### **Anthill**

Each year it was we watched,  
The grandchildren and I,  
They squatting, the child's  
Microscope, and I bending  
Over, the grown-up's trope.  
Each year it grew rounder,  
Larger, grain on grain, fluffed  
By pine needle's soft rain.

The myrmidon metropolis,  
Mechanical scurry, frenetic  
In the earth as they hurried  
To drag the detritus of life  
Deep into the tunnel of their  
Living, each doing what each  
Must. How did they know  
What was enough? We wonder.

Come last spring's springing,  
Our anthill'd gone dormant,  
Deserted, as if the queen had  
Abdicated. A civilization gone,  
Eradicated for no apparent  
Cause, like Mesa Verde under  
The cliff, still there but vacant.  
Pine needles continue to fall.

## **At Root**

This root riven rock is  
Improbable, providing  
Both succor and anchor  
For just one pine sucking  
Life from where there is  
None, hard nourishment  
From granite and schist.

First it protrudes horizontal,  
A jut that bends reaching  
Upward to light. An arc  
Of life, growth that defies  
Gravity and sustenance.  
Is it the stone's generosity  
Or the seed's insistence?

## **The Restaurant**

I think it was called Mueller's.

I think it was near Madison  
Square Garden. I think it was  
One of their haunts from back

In the day, from before, before  
They married, before the war  
Started, when they were happy.

I remember it, vaguely,  
Except for the large parrot,  
Which I remember distinctly.

"The kid'll have a burger.  
The kid'll have a burger.  
Well done. Well done"

That bird would put on a show,  
Avian Tourette's, repeating what  
It had heard from its caged perch.

"She's a bitch, he's a Jew. She  
Sleeps around, he doesn't care.  
Please don't stare. Please, don't."

The bartender finally approached  
And placed a hood over the cage  
To silence the blathering beak.

Couldn't help but wonder who  
Would be treated to whatever  
We said, laughing at the prospect.

Eventually, our attention turned  
To drink and our food as we ate  
In silence. Not one damn word.

## **The Ambush**

We carried the snowballs, a half-bushel  
Basket, up a ladder to the hayloft.  
The straw had been swept long ago, replaced  
With junk that would ripen into antiques.

Through the space where barn boards had gone  
Missing we could see the road rising up to us  
Just where drivers had to slow on the ice,  
As they approached like geese waddling to feed.

Together we tossed our cold grenades down  
To explode with a crack on the windshield.  
Part of the buzz was not knowing just how  
A driver would respond—pass by or stop.

We could only hope some irate victim  
Would decide to chasten us, give us what  
For, a piece of his enraged mind, come for  
Us. We had staged multiple escape routes.

We the quick foxes to his baying hound  
As we bolted from the barn fleeing out  
Through the apple orchard, dodging branches  
Heavy with ghost fruit, snow crack underfoot.

Adrenaline fueled our joy of the chase,  
The thrill of being pursued, knowing that  
Old rage would not catch reckless youth this day.  
Our clouds of laughter outran his profane puffs.

Today the old barn is no more, long gone.  
Its contents decorate home and garden.  
What was done by two boys is remembered  
With equal measure of guilt and pleasure.

## **Chickenshit**

There it was, my first job.  
We each had our shovel.  
We lied that knew our shit.  
As summers came and went  
That one of all of them  
Taught that life is a lot  
Like a chicken coop ladder,  
Where gravity and rung  
Settle pecking order.

That August it was deep,  
At least twelve inches, then  
With flattened, mummified  
Hens to toss like frisbees.  
The humidity high, held  
A golden patina of dust  
Thick on my neck, face, arms,  
To form a sweat-based paste  
That would crack when dried.

The ammonia waft reeked  
Until the nose bled. The pay  
Was chickenshit because  
We were kids with nothing  
Better to do. Mother was  
Not thrilled that she had to  
Everyday hose me down,  
Her chickenshit godling,  
Naked in the back yard.

I could not know it then,  
That to endure manure  
Was the best lesson earned  
For drills and soldiering,  
For myriad meetings,  
For being boss without  
Loss of humility, patience,  
Or self-respect. In this respect,  
Yes, I do know chickenshit.

**Bruce Morton** splits his time between Montana and Arizona. He was formerly Dean of Libraries at Montana State University.