

Leaving New York

In May I give New York back to itself
say to goodbye to the hungry mouth of the Lincoln Tunnel
and declare the city is through.

After I leave, they will tear it all down
find other things to do for the panhandlers
and prophets hawking the Bilial News.
The men with perfumed hair on the subway
will have to give up their briefcases
and learn to forage in the woods,
the crowds at Time Square will thin to empty streets
and the sparrows will inherit Forty-Second Street.

The city taught me well:
survive on stale air if you must,
death by city street can be avoided.
Watching a sailor outside Macy's coughing up blood
I know how painful life can be.
Measuring my thumb against the Exxon building,
I know we all are equal.

Wild Jerusalem artichoke will bloom on Broadway;
dandelion and plantain will rule the Avenue of the Americas.
But I'll never forget the rooftop ads of liquor bottles
taller than houses
painted in those smoky skies by Madison Avenue DaVincis,
shouting those colours that insist
we must consume to live
and having consumed we will always give whatever's left
back to New York.

We sent old lies back there to die;
they'll dream away into old age in the cracks of sidewalks,
they'll wrap up in the Daily News and be happy.
All our failures will be there for daily reunions
near the statue of General Grant
while the Village and the Bowery will be reserved
for ambition short on change.

Some of us will miss our companions, the ones we never really knew
-- the young junkie who sat beside me
while I ate liverwurst sandwiches on a bench
behind the public library.
I got used to him tightening the belt around his arm,

the slow press of the needle into the vein,
admired his casual demeanor
there beneath the statue of William Cullen Bryant,
author of Thanatopsis.
It's possible they will both be swallowed by the streets
before they find a way out.

As I ride the bus west, confident of the finale of New York,
I expect there will be surprises for some.
Tomorrow someone else will fill this seat headed east;
he'll be here near the back of the bus
hoping no one will sit beside him
on the thirty mile trip.
He'll crack the window slightly
and stare at the dandruff on the shoulders
of the career builder in front of him.
On his way to work he is already returning home in his mind;
the day's over except for the putting in of time.
The bus will slip into the dark tunnel and he'll rest his eyes
and when he opens them again,
he will have emerged onto the island and discovered
along with the rest
that someone has replaced the city
with a million possible avenues
into the future.