

HAROLD WHIT WILLIAMS

POETRY PRIZE WINNER

BLUES DREAMS

— *for Hubert Sumlin*

I.

At this juncture the river is too wide,
Too swift and too strong. A bottleneck
Slide scraped along taut catgut strings
That sing and moan like a crop-beaten
Beast of burden. Cry gee, then cry haw.
Cry over evil deeds done at midnight.
Holler sweet Lucifer back in his hole.
What a sight! This old muddy flooding
Fields, lapping the levee. I'll get there
Somehow, someway, and on that day
You'll be sorry you've done me wrong.
My High John the Conqueror root,
My gris-gris bag, thirty-eight special
Hot in my hand. I just quit that band,
Burnt down your house of blues. You
Say two of us forever but my aim is true.

II.

Salt these wounds my sweaty friend
And let the noise begin with Elmore,
Blind Lemon, Muddy and all the Kings.
Men do feel the need to be useful
Even when low on gas, passed out,
Flaccid, drunk upon scuffed hardwoods.

I'll be good by tomorrow morn.
Your sneer, your scorn is my rye
Whiskey and draft beer. Do you hear
Sonny Boy's harp out of tune and yet
Perfect? Do you taste champagne, smell
The reefer? Can't you see sooner or
Later we all live our blues. We enter
That cutting contest bound to lose.

III.

Along the way somebody hefted an axe
And took some whacks against my family tree.
Those dead branch second cousins, those
Low-hanging aunts and uncles gone
Soggy and rotten - they all had it coming.
To this day I bay like the neighbor's cur
Drunken from the fermented windfalls.
I droop and dream of daddy's orchard,
All the shiny and soft pears and plums.
Honeybees up in the sun-bright blossoms.
Each trunk, weatherworn, bug-scarred.
Each fruit wearing a face I'll fondly forget.