

## How the Songs Come Down

CARTER REVARD, Osage on his father's side, grew up on the Osage Reservation in Oklahoma. After work as farm hand and greyhound trainer, he took B.A.s from the University of Tulsa and Oxford (Rhodes Scholarship, Oklahoma and Merton 1952), was given his Osage name and a Yale Ph.D., then taught medieval and American Indian literatures before retiring in 1997. He has published *Ponca War Dancers*; *Cowboys and Indians*, *Christmas Shopping*; *An Eagle Nation*; *Family Matters*, *Tribal Affairs*; and *Winning the Dust Bowl*, as well as translations into heroic couplets of X-rated fabliaux (published in *The Chaucer Review*). He has also won fame in the Footnote Stakes by piling high and deep proof that the scribe of the Harley Lyrics, who copied those fabliaux, was a Ludlow Lad ("O down in lovely muck he's lain"), very like Absalom in *The Miller's Tale*, who died *in medias res* (1349) of the Black Death. (One Harley Lyricist describes standing at a window and kissing the girl, but unlike Absalom this lad kissed the right orifice, and was invited in.)



**Earthworks Series**

*Series Editor:* Janet McAdams

HEID E. ERDRICH: *The Mother's Tongue*

DIANE GLANCY: *Rooms: New and Selected Poems*

LEANNE HOWE: *Evidence of Red: Poems and Prose*

DEBORAH A. MIRANDA: *The Zen of La Llorona*

CARTER REVARD: *How the Songs Come Down: New and Selected Poems*

# How the Songs Come Down

NEW AND SELECTED POEMS

CARTER REVARD



CAMBRIDGE

PUBLISHED BY SALT PUBLISHING  
PO Box 937, Great Wilbraham, Cambridge PDO CB1 5JX United Kingdom

All rights reserved

© Carter Revard, 2005

The right of Carter Revard to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Salt Publishing.

First published 2005

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by Lightning Source

Typeset in Swift 9.5 / 13

*This book is sold subject to the conditions that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.*

ISBN 1 84471 064 5 paperback

SP

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Dedication

to

the small birds only  
whose life continues on the gourd,  
whose life continues in our dance,  
that flutter as the gourd is rattled and  
we dance to honor on a sunbright day  
and in the moonbright night  
the little girl being brought in,  
becoming one of us,  
as once was done for me,  
for each of us who dance.  
The small birds only, who have given  
their bodies that a small girl  
may live to see old age.  
I have called them here  
to set them into song  
who made their rainbow bodies long before  
we came to earth,  
who learning song and flight became  
beings for whom the infinite sky  
and trackless ocean are  
a path to spring:  
now they will sing and we  
are dancing with them, here.



## Contents

INDIAN TERRITORY	1
Coyote Tells Why He Sings	3
Geode	4
Stone Age	6
Skins as Old Testament	7
Dancing with Dinosaurs	8
Driving in Oklahoma	11
What the Eagle Fan Says	12
Birch Canoe	13
In Chigger Heaven	14
Close Encounters	16
Wazhazhe Grandmother	20
Ponca War Dancers	23
Over by Fairfax, Leaving Tracks	31
Getting Across	32
Pure Country	33
Cowboys and Indians	36
Communing Before Supermarkets	38
An Eagle Nation	40
Dragon-watching in St Louis	45
That Lightning's Hard to Climb	46
And Don't Be Deaf to the Singing Beyond	48
Looking Before and After	50
Aunt Jewell as Powwow Princess	51
When Earth Brings	56
IN THE SUBURBS	57
A Mandala of Sorts	59
In the Changing Light	60

Outside in St. Louis	62
What the Poet's Cottage in Tucson Said	64
How the Songs Come Down	65
Making Money	70
Transactions	72
Earth and Diamonds	73
Amber and Lightning	77
Snowflakes, Waterdrops, Time, Eternity and So On	78
Unzipping Angels	80
Christmas Shopping	83
Given	86
Liquid Crystal Thoughts	88
Sea-changes, Easter 1990	90
<b>LAW AND ORDER</b>	95
Discovery of the New World	97
November in Washington, D.C.	99
History into Words	101
Another Sunday Morning	102
Parading with the Veterans of Foreign Wars	105
Coming of Age in the County Jail	107
Free White and Fifteen	109
Firewater	111
A Response to Terrorists	113
Hamlet and Fortinbras Exchange Pleasantries	115
The Biograbbers	117
Support your Local Police Dog	119
Criminals as Creators of Capital	121
Chimes at Midnight	123
The Secret Verbs	125
On the Planet of Blue-eyed Cats	127



A Song That We Still Sing	130
Starring America	133
1. To The Eastern Shores of Light	133
2. New York, With Reservations	136
3. On The Reservation	138
OVER THERE	143
Advice from Euterpe	145
Jetliner from Angel City	146
Where the Muses Haunt	147
The Swan's Song	149
Pilotless Angel: Christmas, 2004	150
Letter to Friends on the Isle of Skye	151
Postcolonial Hyperbaggage	154
Columbus Looks Out Far, In Deep	155
But Still in Israel's Paths They Shine	157
Songs of the Wine-throated Hummingbird	159



## Acknowledgments

Some of these poems were published in *Ponca War Dancers and Cowboys and Indians*, *Christmas Shopping*: I am grateful to Frank Parman and Arn Henderson of Point Riders Press. Others appeared in *An Eagle Nation*, *Winning the Dust Bowl*, and *Family Matters*, *Tribal Affairs*; I thank the University of Arizona Press and the editors of its Sun Tracks Series for permission to reprint those here. Some have appeared over the years in the following journals, to whose editors I give thanks: the *Massachusetts Review*, *Iowa Review*, *Nimrod*, *The American Oxonian*, *Studies in American Indian Literature*, *American Indian Culture and Research Quarterly*, *Florilegium*. Other poems in this collection have not previously been published.

I am very grateful for residencies that helped write and revise: in 1994 at the Millay Colony for the Arts; in 1996 at the Villa Serbelloni in Bellagio, Italy; in 1998 at the MacDowell Colony; in 2002 in Mojàcar, Spain, with the Fundación Valparaíso. In autumn 1997, I had spousal housal at the Villa dei Pini of the Bogliasco Foundation, while my wife wrote on Pindar and Milton and swam on sunny days in the Golfo di Paradiso. My sisters Maxine, Ireta, and Josephine; my brothers Antwine, Jim, and Junior; my Aunt Jewell and all her children have given invaluable time in Buck Creek and White Eagle, on remembered roads and streams and meadows, in many worlds. Kathryn and Charles Red Corn more recently, and over many years Grandma Josephine, Uncle Kenneth, Aunt Arita, Flora and family, and Aunt Jewell, have been there for and with me at the Pawhuska and White Eagle dances. Evelyne Wahkinney Voelker and family taught some of the ways of Gourd Dancers. Frank and Sarah in Norman, Norma and Jerry in South Dakota, are friends I treasure. Janet McAdams made this book possible: to her, Chris, and Jen I am truly grateful.

To my Osage, Ponca, Scotch-Irish and Irish and French brothers and sisters, parents and grandparents, uncles and aunts, cousins and kinfolk and friends, I owe my being and what I can manage to give back with thanks. When I dedicate this book to the small birds, it is also for all my relations, through time and space. I have been very lucky to have them to learn from, as also from teachers in schools from whom to learn: Mrs. Fisher, Mrs. Ridgeway, Miss Conner, Mr. Loyd; Miss Wentz, Miss Spencer, Señorita Newkirk, Miss Paxton, Miss Corbin, Mr. Haley, Mr. Den Adel among others. And at the University of Tulsa, two wonderful teachers (among many fine ones), Eikenberry and Hayden; at Merton College, Oxford, Hugo Dyson and Geoffrey Smithers, and later Alan Robson and Roger Highfield and Norman Davis, showed me scholarly ways; at Yale, Louis Martz and Talbot Donaldson. At Amherst College my students did their best to educate me, Rolfe Humphries showed me ways to write, and I respect Ben DeMott as the most gifted and brilliant colleague I have known. I have admired and tried to learn some ways with words from Simon Ortiz, Wendy Rose, Robert Frost, Louise Erdrich, Scott Momaday, X. J. Kennedy. I have had good colleagues and friends at Washington University, St. Louis, and I have found libraries and librarians to be the best part of the civilized world, from the time Miss Conner (when I was in the sixth grade at Buck Creek) first brought that carload of books and stacked them onto the newly built bookshelves.

In some of these poems there are even references to our children and their beautiful mother, who has put up with me for almost fifty years. I hope they won't mind.

# Indian Territory



## Coyote Tells Why He Sings

There was a little rill of water, near the den,  
That showed a trickle, all the dry summer  
When I was born. One night in late August, it rained —  
The Thunder waked us. Drops came crashing down  
In dust, on stiff blackjack leaves, on lichened rocks,  
And the rain came in a pelting rush down over the hill,  
Wind blew wet into our cave as I heard the sounds  
Of leaf-drip, rustling of soggy branches in gusts of wind.

And then the rill's tune changed—I heard a rock drop  
That set new ripples gurgling, in a lower key.  
Where the new ripples were, I drank, next morning,  
Fresh muddy water that set my teeth on edge.  
I thought how delicate that rock's poise was and how  
*The storm made music, when it changed my world.*

## Geode

I still remember ocean, how  
she came in with all I wanted, how we opened  
the hard shell we had made  
of what she gave me and painted into  
that lodge's white walls the shifting  
rainbows of wave-spray—  
I remember even the vague drifting  
before the shell was made, my slow swimming  
amidst the manna until I sank  
down into stone, married, rooted there, joined  
its stillness where the moving waters  
would serve us as the moon would bring them by.  
Growing, I remember how softness  
of pale flesh secreted the smooth hardness  
of shell, how the gritty pain  
was healed with rainbow tears  
of pearl,  
I remember dreaming  
of the new creatures flying through air  
as the sharks swam through ocean  
hallucinating feathers and dinosaurs,  
pterodactyls and archæopteryxes,  
great turquoise dragonflies  
hovering, shimmering, hawking after the huge  
mosquitoes fat with brontosaurus blood. And when  
I died and the softness vanished inside  
my shell and the sea flowed in I watched  
it drying as the waters ebbed, saw how my bony whiteness held  
at its heart the salty gel whose desire swelled  
and grew and globed against the limey mud,  
chalcedony selving edged and spiked its way  
through dreams of being flowers trembling  
against the wind, snowflakes falling  
into a desert spring. But the rain  
of limestone hardened round us and my walls



grew full of holes, I waked into  
a continent of caves, a karst-land where  
sweet water chuckled and trickled, siliceated through  
my crevices as once the salty ocean had, and I felt  
purple quartz-crystals blossom where  
my pale flesh had been.  
Then I knew my dream  
was true, and I waited for  
the soft hands to come down like a dream  
and lift me into sunlight, give me there to diamond  
saws that sliced me in two, to diamond dust that polished  
my new selves of banded agate,  
I let them separate and shelve them heavy  
on either side of a word-hoard whose light leaves  
held heavy thoughts between  
the heavier, wiser, older lines of all  
my mirrored selves, the wave-marks left  
by snowflake-feathery amethyst  
ways of being,  
by all those words,  
by the Word, made slowly,  
slowly, in-  
to Stone.

## Stone Age

Whoever broke a rock first wasn't trying  
to look inside it, surely—  
was looking for an edge  
or trying just to hammer with it, and it broke—  
then he saw it glitter,  
how BRIGHT inside it was; noticed how things  
unseen are fresh. Maybe he said  
it's like the sky, that when the sun has  
crashed down through the west  
breaks open to the Milky Way and we see  
farther than we are seen for once, as far  
as light and time can reach and almost over  
the edge of time, its spiral track like agate  
swirls in rock from when it still  
was water-stains, had not yet found its  
non-solution to the puzzle  
of dissolution, keeping within its darkness  
the traces of its origin as day keeps night and  
night keeps stars.  
Pebbles, headstones,  
Altamira,  
dust-wrinkles over darkness.  
What shines within?

## Skins as Old Testament

Wonder who first slid in  
to use another creature's skin  
for staying warm—blood-smeared  
heresy almost, Hunter becoming  
Deer, Shepherd the Lamb as in flamelit  
Dordogne caves or dim cathedrals—  
crawling inside the deer's  
still-vivid presence there  
to take their lives from what had moved  
within, to eat delicious life  
then spread its likeness over a sleeping  
and breathing self, musk-wrapped  
inside the wind,  
the rain,  
the sleet—  
to roll up in a seal-skin self beneath  
a mammoth heaven  
on which the sleet would rap and tap,  
to feel both feet  
grow warm even on ice  
or in the snow—hand-chalicing  
new tallow flame as spirit  
of passing life  
and every time a tingling  
revelation when the life  
came back into a freezing hand or foot  
after the fur embraced its flesh, still deeper  
when human bodies coupling in  
a bear's dark fur  
found winter's warmth and then  
its child  
within the woman  
came alive.

## Dancing with Dinosaurs

Before we came to earth,  
before the birds had come,  
they were dinosaurs, their feathers  
were a bright idea  
that came this way:  
see, two tiny creatures weighing  
two ounces each keep quiet and among  
the ferns observe bright-eyed  
the monsters tear each other  
and disappear; these two watch from  
the edge of what, some fifty billion spins  
of the cooling earth ahead, will be  
called Nova Scotia—now, with reptilian  
whistles they look southward as  
Pan-Gaea breaks apart and lets  
a young Atlantic send its thunder crashing  
up to the pines where they cling  
with minuscule bodies in a tossing wind,  
September night in the chilly rain and  
they sing, they spread  
small wings to flutter out above  
surf-spray and rise to  
twenty thousand feet on swirling  
winds of a passing cold front that lift  
them over the grin of sharks southeastward into sun  
and all day winging under him pass high above  
the pink and snowy beaches of Bermuda flying  
through zero cold and brilliance into darkness  
then into moonlight over steel  
Leviathans with their mimic pines that call them down  
to rest and die—  
they bear  
southeast steadily but the Trade  
Winds come and float them curving  
back southward over the Windward Islands and

southwestward into marine and scarlet of  
their third day coming down  
to four thousand feet still winging over  
Tobago, descending till  
the scaled waves stretch and widen into the surf of  
Venezuela and they drop  
through moonlight down to perch  
on South America's shoulder, having become  
the Male and Female Singers, having  
put on their feathers and survived.

2.

When I was named  
a Thunder person, I was told:  
here is a being  
of whom you may make your body  
that you may live to see old age: now  
as we face the drum  
and dance shaking the gourds, this gourd  
is like a rainbow of feathers, lightly  
fastened with buckskin,  
fluttering as the gourd is shaken.  
The eagle feathers I  
have still not earned, it is  
the small birds only  
whose life continues on the gourd,  
whose life continues in our dance,  
that flutter as the gourd is rattled and  
we dance to honor on a sunbright day  
and in the moonbright night  
the little girl being brought in,  
becoming one of us,  
as once was done for me,  
for each of us who dance.

The small birds only, who have given  
their bodies that a small girl  
may live to see old age.  
*I have called them here  
to set them into song  
who made their rainbow bodies long before  
we came to earth,  
who learning song and flight became  
beings for whom the infinite sky  
and trackless ocean are  
a path to spring:  
now they will sing and we  
are dancing with them, here.*