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.)
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How the Songs Come Down

New and Selected Poems

Carter Revard
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.
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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 archæopteryxexes,
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
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