

# West of Midnight

## *New and Selected Poems*

Franz Douskey

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## ROWING ACROSS THE DARK

my morphined father  
spent the Depression  
holed up in a hotel  
trying to become a writer  
but ended up spending forty years  
climbing ladders  
and at the top he took out  
his paintbrush and painted  
church steeples and water tanks

count the winter nights  
he'd come home hands numb  
his gaunt face frozen  
afraid to say he'd been laid off

tonight in morphine dreams  
he rows across the dark  
where he lowers his line  
and while the black lake licks  
the sides of his solitary boat  
an eight pound rainbow trout  
slaps through the air  
glistening in moonlight  
silver hook flashing through its upper lip

my father so far under  
he doesn't feel a thing

## NERUDA

they've taken the poet's hand  
and chained it to the bed of the ocean  
where he dreams of blood

he was standing by the window  
looking across the ocean  
when the lights went out

when the lights went out  
the people  
pretended to be asleep  
but the heart of the poet  
stopped

the poet dreams of stars  
at the bottom of the ocean

the poet's body is empty

if you hold it to your ear  
you'll hear the ocean

you'll hear how a man sounds  
as his life leaves his body

it's an old song you'll never forget

## SOMETHING FOR THE MOUNTAINS FAR AWAY

The mountains have no slogans,  
just impenetrable shadows  
where coyotes sing praises.

Even the old folks, who know  
the back ways and call animals  
by name, are shadows.

The mountains have been here forever  
and they will not end like us,  
floating away in the snow,  
like the Tibetans say we will.

Downstream, where Phelps-Dodge  
builds mountains of slag  
and elf owls abandon saguaros,  
one fact remains:

nothing accessible survives.

Mountains are the great teachers.  
They multiply in the night and  
in the day sleep under their labor.

I dream of moving to the mountains.

Solitude has something to do  
with immortality, and there's  
more to me than I know.

But it's clear that I'm trapped.  
Surrounded by silence and snow,

I won't touch ground all winter.



## MISFORTUNES OF HARMONY: What The River Knows

When the river sprang a leak,  
the Corps of Army Engineers  
tried  
to remake its bed,  
tried to cover its mouth,  
but even the muddy incantations  
of the snake doctor couldn't halt  
the run on the banks.

When the river crested at  
forty-seven feet the Army Corps  
of Engineers sent forms in triplicate,  
sent sponges the size of Yankee Stadium,  
but the rain, sensing a photo opportunity,  
sent whorls and swirls downstream  
along with rigid cattle and elysian catfish.

When the boats of CNN arrived, the  
Engineers of Army Corps said, Memories,  
just like the river, empty and are often unquenched.  
but the snake doctor knew what to say: Fools,  
don't build next to the river.

The CNN retinue scanned the  
waters, saw that they had  
taped enough human misery  
followed by empty official explanations.

Ever grateful, they headed upriver  
to the next profoundly, unbearable disaster.