

# A LETTER to ED McCLANAHAN & GURNEY NORMAN in California

That was a lovely time we had out there,  
those months of talk and laughter, correcting us.  
Our words took on a generosity of time, passing  
in the free equality of men who knew each other  
as boys. We escaped all deadly official boundaries  
into the natural brotherhood of countrymen,  
Kentucky speaking in us, mountain and river and ridge,  
before a California hearth-fire, half the night.

\*

Now back in Kentucky, far from you again,  
I often think of those days and nights, and long  
for their music and their mirth. And then  
I remind myself: The past is gone. Remember it.

\*

Returning, I always put on a new body,  
waking in wet dawn and going to work.  
Weary at nightfall, I learn again  
the trusting departure into sleep, so deeply  
here I might as well be gone. Already  
a new garden has fallen from my hands  
into the ground. Having trusted seed  
to the world, how should I not be a new man?

\*

The cities have forgot the earth,  
and they will rot at heart  
till they remember it again.  
In the streets, abstraction  
contends with outcry,  
hungering for men's flesh.  
In the city I measured time  
by the life of no living thing,  
but by the running down  
of engines. I grew a skin  
that did not know the sun. Now  
once more I have shrugged  
in my city skin and sloughed it off  
and emerged, new waked.

\*

The streets of the broken city  
nurture the vogue of the revolutionary  
-- another kind of politician, another  
slogan-sayer, ready to level the world  
with a little truth. Those who wait  
to change until a crowd agrees  
with their opinions, will never change.

\*

But the man of the earth abides in the flow.  
The ground moves beneath him, and he knows  
it moves. His house is his vessel, afloat  
only for a while. He moves, willing  
through a thousand phases of the sun,  
changing as the day changes, and the year.  
His mind is like the dirt, lightened  
by bloom, weighted by rain.

\*

The fragment of the earth  
that is now me is only on its way  
through me. It is on its way  
from having been a tree,  
a school of fish, a terrapin,  
a flock of birds. It will pass  
through all those forms again.

\*

(for Chloe, this one)  
I come into the community of the creatures:  
lily and fern, sycamore and thrush,  
they turn to the light, and to the earth again.  
Light and leaf, man and wife,  
bird and tree -- each one  
a blind dancer, whose partner sees.

\*

And friend and friend,  
together though only in thought,  
our bond is speech  
grown out of native ground  
and laughter grown out of speech,  
surpassing all ends.

\*

In spring I always return  
to a blue flower of the woods,  
rising out of the dead  
leaves whose life it is. As I look  
it wears my face's shadow.  
A man always overshadows  
what he sees, his presence  
becoming part of its mystery.  
So all his ideas fall short.  
Unless his speech humbles him,  
keeping him steadfast in love  
beyond his understanding,  
go goes blind to the season.  
Speech can never fathom  
this flower's silence. Enough  
to honor it, and to live  
in my place beside it. I know  
it holds in its throat a sweet  
brief moisture of welcome.

Early May, 1969

WENDELL BERRY