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COMMENTARY

Beads, Wampum, Money, Words—and Old English Riddles¹

CARTER REVARD

There's an old chestnut that Indians traded Manhattan for beads. Considering what Indians have since made out of beads, and the Europeans out of Manhattan—that small granitic bead, set in a silver river which civilization has so poisoned that even New Yorkers know better than to drink it—I think the Indians came out ahead, though Europeans may disagree. Indians were making and using beads (from shells, for instance) long before Peter Minuit bought Manhattan and Wall Street was built, or for that matter before Jupiter raped Europa and produced a bull market. Still, it was great to have bits of colored glass poured from Italy or Czechoslovakia into our savage palms. Now audiences at our powwows can see some of the rainbow ideas our hands have made visible, as we move around the drum at dances and ceremonies.

We can make Homeric similes with foreign beads and foreign words; but I'd like to move here the previous question of what "beads" and "money" really are—and "wampum" as well, because sometimes, when that Manhattan chestnut is once more being served up (maybe at Thanksgiving), the term *wampum* still burbles forth—as if it were a word for "Indian money."

Wampum, as I understand it, was not necessarily beads, nor was it "just" money; it was more a historical record, in beautiful form, of matters held sacred—but because the Europeans saw that it was given such respect, they naturally took it as "money." The *Encyclopædia Britannica* tells us that wampum was originally used primarily as a record of an important agreement or treaty

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and as an object of tribute given by subject tribes, and came to be used as money in the Western sense only after white contact. The value of wampum came partly from its desirability (for the socio-religious reasons just mentioned), partly from the labor value of the skill and time involved in making it. Once Europeans saw that it was considered “valuable”—more so, by Indians, than European currency—strings of wampum were used as “money” by whites and Indians in what is now the eastern United States.²

But what, for that matter, was European *money*? Certainly it was not, and is not, just the metal it was made from, nor just metal with a king’s (or god’s, or totem’s, or president’s) profile on it, nor does it simply stand for the goods and services represented by a piece of metal with such a picture on it. Maybe we should listen again to the *Britannica*, this time talking about money:

The subject of money ... is ... full of mystery and paradox. The piece of paper labelled one dollar or ... 1000 yen is little different, as paper, from a piece of the same size torn from a newspaper or magazine, yet it will enable its bearer to command some measure of food, drink, clothing, and the remaining goods of life while the other is fit only to light the fire. Whence the difference? The easy answer, and the right one, is that people accept money as such because they know that others will. The pieces of paper are valuable because everyone thinks they are, and everyone thinks they are because in his experience they always have been. At bottom money is, then, a social convention.... The strength of the convention ... enables governments to profit by inflating the currency. But it is not indestructible. When great variations occur in the quantity of these pieces of paper—as they have during and after wars—they may be seen to be, after all, no more than pieces of paper....³

For all the knowingness of that passage, its author—the “monetarist” Milton Friedman—shows the usual lunkheadedness of economists in assuming that “a piece of paper torn from a magazine or newspaper” can *only* be of use, if not made into official money, “to light the fire.” He thus regards paper as *either* money, *or* worthless—never mind what words might be printed on it, whether the *U.S. Constitution*, the *Pentagon Papers*, or *The Tragedy of Hamlet*.

But on some points even an economist may be right, and I agree with Uncle Miltie that money is indeed a form of belief: a coin is worthless unless we believe it has worth, just as a bank will fail if its depositors stop believing in its safety and try to withdraw what they have deposited. Money, in other words, comes down at last to “credit,” a word from the same root as “creed” and “credibility.” What “money” reduces to is just a credible promise to pay something truly valuable—a promise given by the whole society through its governing body. Of course!—people give you things for money because they believe it has value. And I agree also with Friedman when he remarks, a little further into his *Encyclopaedia* essay, “there is hardly a contrivance man possesses that can do more damage to a society when it goes wrong.”

As for what goes wrong, Friedman keeps talking about wars and such, but I wonder whether that only hides a more basic problem, which I think is that

money is really just a promise to pay, which must keep being postponed because it is essentially a pyramid scheme. How much “credibility” money has at any time is shown by what we call the *interest* rate, a word made out of Latin *inter*, “between” and *est*, “is”: that is, interest is the difference between what you borrow now and what you must later repay the *creditor*, who *believes* you will be able to pay this extra amount in the future. You must pay back more than you borrow because, in effect, the creditor believes money will not buy as much next year as it does this year: what sets the interest rates is what people *believe* the rate of inflation will be, that is, how much more expensive things will be next year, and therefore how much less your money will be worth at that time.⁴

The actual materials of which money is made can be anything “credible,” and people will believe in an amazing range of “promising” materials—gold, silver, copper, zinc, paper, plastic, magnetically patterned iron filings, electrons zapping through space between banks in Tulsa and Timbuktu, photons glinting through quartz tubules on the Pacific floor, or just the significant blink of some commodity trader’s eye in Chicago or Tokyo—so long as people *believe* the promise made in that medium (or understood to be made by it) that this money is credited by the society as a whole and by its elected representatives as having a certain specified value. Friedman gives a neat short history of paper money and bank notes from their first appearance in Europe in the late eighteenth century.

Paper money—as he does *not* say—often carries pictures of people whose credibility is supposed to make us believe that even though next year everything will cost us more—which means our money will be worth that much less—there will still be some value attributed to that piece of paper by any person or persons within the polity where it serves as money.⁵ The reason the U.S. government prints mostly paper money is that it has had to keep “debasement” the currency, and it seems that making paper into money costs less than stamping gold, silver, or copper into money. Even the buffalo-and-Indian “nickle” was coined from “base” nickel to take advantage of the difference between what the medium (nickel) was said to be worth and what the message (five-hundredths of a dollar) was said to be. Taking advantage of this difference meant the United States could keep up the pyramid scheme longer, “watering the stock,” or “postponing debt payment,” or “debasement the currency,” or however critics chose to describe it. This must sound radical or silly, but let me again quote Friedman, this time on the U.S. central reserve bank’s way of creating “high-powered money”:

[T]hese bookkeeping operations simply record a process whereby the central bank has created, out of thin air as it were, additional high-powered money—the direct counterpart of printing Federal Reserve Notes.⁶

Having now seen, I hope, that money is no less mystical than that primitive Indian wampum, maybe we can go back to look at the beads-for-Manhattan exchange and think a little more about the difference between what the Indians got and what the Europeans got in the exchange for Manhattan Island. Certainly those bits of metal, or cooking pots, or goods, or

beads would not now be worth as much as that island is. After all, it is or has been the center of the world's financial markets, and a square yard of real estate at, say, Seventh Avenue and Central Park South, would command far more credit than the pittance paid to the Indians for the whole island. Now I probably ought to get into the question of what real estate is, and relate that to beads and money and words—even though the Las Vegas odds on any reader's willingness to stay with me for such a trip must be strongly against my setting out on it. Well—look at the next paragraph and see what the decision was.

Nah, I don't dare talk at length about real estate. All I will say is, if you'd been Indian and you controlled the west bank of the Hudson, and some Dutchman wanted to give you a lot of useful things to let him and his bunch have a not very big island with its foot almost in the ocean, a pretty rocky place with not enough game or plants for many people to live on, I bet you'd have taken those trinkets and made the deal. Yet that place had value for the Dutchman in 1624, not because it was anything in itself, but because of what makes any real estate valuable—location. The Indians “sold” a location worthless to their nation in return for something useful and pretty; he “bought” what for his nation was invaluable located, for some trinkets and a song and dance about forever after.

Now can I say one more thing? It's about location. You know how this earth is a globe, with no lines on it anywhere except the imaginary net of latitude and longitude we humans have wrapped around it so we can locate ourselves. Thinking globally, the Acoma poet Simon Ortiz said (when pointing out his son's location, his place on the earth): anywhere you are is the center, not that this makes you special, but that it is your way of being rightly related to all the rest of earth's beings. But thinking nationally and imperially and monetarily, I'd say location means placing yourself wherever you have an advantage over other beings. That was what Manhattan meant to Peter Minuit in 1624, when Holland was setting out to be an empire. Manhattan was a place where the Dutch could think of expanding their trade with the Dutch West India Company, established in 1621, just as they had been doing since 1602 with the Dutch East India Company and as they later would in South Africa (as the Boers). In short, Manhattan for them was a place of great hope and credit.

However, for the Dutch, Manhattan did not turn out to have the kinds of goods that could make a fast buck for traders, and the British were able to push them out of it in the imperial wars of the seventeenth century. Manhattan was not full of spices and slaves. So when the British took over Manhattan and Long Island and the Hudson Valley, and began to link up their parcels of real estate in Massachusetts and Connecticut with those in Virginia, it was a good place to become lords, bring in and own slaves, and sell the new drugs of the New World—nicotine, sugar, black slavery, Empire.

Now, let me turn this into something that looks entirely different from a lecture about money and real estate and beads—let me sketch some ways of doing with English words just what we have historically done with “beads” and “money.” I'd better not try to look at what words are, though—they are a lot more mysterious than money or beads or even wampum because it is

mostly with words that we construct all those mysteries, and it is in great part from words that we build our notions of each other. I can “read” your clothes and your facial expressions, but over the telephone, with only your words, I may be able to “read” what you are much more fully, if you will put the words out there to be read, than from your face. And if you give me your “vita” to read or a poem or a Gettysburg Address, isn’t that made out of words?

So I am hoping, just now, to talk a little about how we can do with words what we have done with beads that we took in exchange—so it has been said—for the land: use the words, as we use the beads, to make some beautiful things of real value, helping each other see the mysterious inwardness of everyday things. Among many Indian peoples this is still being done with words and music together, making songs to put into the drum, but the Europeans have separated songs from other word forms so that now what they call poems are put into books, not usually to be sung but to be read silently and alone. Even so, the lone and silent reader is finding a way through these poems to join a phantom community of other readers. They sit, or lie, or stand, far apart from each other, unable to see or hear or feel each other’s presence except through the words they share, which creates this community of writers and readers. Usually they do not know each other, and they may be separated in time as well as space. Someone moved a bird’s feather across a piece of sheepskin, leaving marks with the ink into which he had dipped that feather’s quill, and one thousand years later, on a continent which that writer did not know existed, the track of this feather is followed by a reader who says quietly, “I hear you, I see what you mean.” And we answer, maybe not with a feather’s trail of ink, but by using our fingertips to rearrange magnetic patterns in tiny wafers of doped silicon more fragile than sheepskin, not likely to last as long, though a little longer than an aero-quiver of spoken words—we answer with some other word patterns, not so beautiful maybe, but stepping to the same drum-beat, hearing the same song, as if we were still together.

One way to respect our elders is to listen carefully. When we listen, we take part in their conversation with those far older than themselves, so that we may learn things from elders which will help us in ways we did not know we needed to be helped. We can see that they put a lot of thought into the words they spoke, we can hear in the songs or the poems how they had reflected deeply on the things that concern us, on the way the world touches our senses and fills our needs with its many and various beings. And when we see this we may want to learn how they put those careful thoughts into words, just as we want to learn how the gourd-stitch craft created the beautiful handle of an eagle fan or the beaded medallion on the otter skin of a straight-dancer’s outfit.

I am not a singer at the drum, I don’t have that gift, I can’t do so much as that for Indian people. But what I can do is like that, if not so important or so useful. I can show a little of how the European elders worked in words, and how those skills can be used to speak in English about our own ways and concerns. The Hopi and Diné took silver dollars and beat them into squash-blossom necklaces. I take English words and beat them, or bead them, into pat-

terns. I can show a little of how it is done, and then if it is of interest and use, those who have a gift for it can try putting words together to locate ourselves, to reach across time and space as the elders do, keep a community alive for us where our nations can come and go around the drum at the right time and in the right way.

So I will be looking with you at some feather tracks of “Old English” poems, trying to show how the words were put together. Here, first, are one translation and some imitations of the Old English poetic form called riddle. This was a short poem spoken by a creature—animal, vegetable or mineral—telling enigmatically where it comes from, what it is made of or does: in short, everything but its name, which we are invited to infer from what it has told us. Riddles illuminate for composer and audience the world’s mysteries and powers as these exist in ordinary beings—a ship, a swan, a thunderstorm, a falcon or hunting horn, an anchor, a book, an onion, a shirt, bread dough. The point of any game is not so much who wins as the communal experience of it, and that is true of the riddle game also. In a good many of the riddles the fun is in discovering how many things a given “speaker” might be, which is one way of poetically demonstrating the likeness of totally different things and the differences of apparently identical things, spotlighting the nimbleness and grace needed in all mental acts as we divorce or marry ideas and things.

Let me give an example by providing a translation of one Old English riddle found in the *Exeter Book*, a great collection of poetry put together in (probably) the late tenth century A.D. in Exeter, still preserved in Exeter Cathedral. We think this riddle is spoken by a swan—so ostensibly the poet is asking readers to listen to a swan describe itself in oblique ways and then to deduce that this *must* be a swan speaking. But we have only begun to “understand” the poem when we say, “Aha! this is spoken by a *swan!*” We certainly are meant to play Sherlock and identify this voice as a swan’s—by observing that the creature speaking to us lives just as a mute swan does—in silence, among human beings or riding on the water—and that like a swan it takes flight and looks down from a great height on even the most heroic of human beings who dwell below. We realize that when it moves at that height, its “ornaments” (which the Old English words imply are the same as its “robes”) “sing” and “shine”—just as do the feathers of a swan when it catches the high sunlight, and we hear what Yeats (in “The Wild Swans at Coole”) called “the bell-beat of [its] wings” above our heads. It is an accurate “natural” portrait, that is, of the creature we see and hear and know as a swan. But we are surely meant to see with astonishment, in the poem’s last few words, that this earth-mute, heaven-musical traveler is also a human soul on pilgrimage toward heaven. The meaning of everything in the poem’s first eight and a half lines is transformed by its last half-line, in fact by the very last word of that Old English phrase, *ferende gæst*—literally, “a traveling spirit” or (no less literally) “a way-faring soul,” since *ferende* is just the present participle of the verb *faran*, “to go, travel, fare on a journey,” and *gæst* is our modern word *ghost* in the sense of “spirit, soul.” Here is the swan riddle:

The Swan's Song

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------|------------------------|
| 1 | Garbed in silence | I go on earth, |
| 2 | dwell among men | or move on the waters. |
| 3 | Yet far over halls | of heroes in time |
| 4 | my robes and the high | air may raise |
| 5 | and bear me up | in heaven's power |
| 6 | over all nations. | My ornaments then |
| 7 | are singing glories, | and I go in song |
| 8 | bright as a star | unstaying above |
| 9 | the world's wide waters, | a wayfaring soul. |

You may wonder what the poetic metre is here. It is alliterative, and each line is divided into two half-lines, which I have separated by several spaces. Each half-line should have two heavy beats (stressed syllables), so that each line will have a total of four heavily stressed syllables—and either two or three of these stressed syllables must alliterate. In line 1, the alliteration is on the *g* of *garbed* and *go*; in line 2, on the *m* of *among*, *men* and *move*; in line 3, the alliteration is on *halls* and *heroes*, and so on. The key syllable is the third stress—that is, the first stress of the second half-line. Whatever sound this third syllable begins with, at least one of the two stresses in the first half-line must also begin with that sound. For instance, in line 8, the second half-line's first stress comes in the word *unstaying*, on the syllable *-stay*. But one rule that helped Old English poets is that all vowels alliterate with each other and with all words beginning with *h*, so in line 4 you will notice that *high* alliterates with *air*, in line 5 *up* with *heaven's*, in line 6 *all* with *ornaments*.

Now, the point of learning such poetic techniques can be academic, learning for its own interesting sake—but it can also be practical, learning how to do something that might still work. We can't expect an Archæopteryx to unfold from its delicate slate and take wing, but we can maybe plant an acorn from Cahokia Mound and hear, with a little patience, a robin sing from its branches. One thing the Old English alliterative meter does is to get us out of the ka-thump-kathump-kathump of iambs, into which our English is so apt to fall, and at the same time to save us from the thunkety-blam-and-clang-bonks of free versing. It lets us do the Liquid Crystal instead of dancing the Pentagon Chip all the time. So it may be worth your while to have a go at the riddle jabberwock in its alliterative lair. I have been fiddling with it and offer the following pizzicati samplings.

Amber and Lightning⁷

Down the rough whale-road	I ride white-manes into
living-rooms, am wrapped	around word-wings,
dangle gold-lights	gleaming by love-fountains,
in shining time-windows	show the miniature
dragon-monsters flying	through millions of years—
sometimes as teeth	I sibilate through
the golden glory	of girls in mirrors,
freeing fireflies	to flash in darkness
electron, electron,	and lightning my name.

Riddle: Sony TV⁸

On this azure eyeball
 its monstrous mushrooms,
 where holster hardened
 from barrels of black
 on floating steel
 through a gate of gold,
 to an iron horse
 unpacked me, pinned
 a long tail tipped
 A woman acquired me,
 set me high on altar
 drove Dracula teeth
 touched me until
 I reached into heaven
 from its ether Caruso's
 spread time at her toes
 until she yawned,
 and I went blind.
 who know my name

where hell twice raised
 mind-eye opened
 for hot ghost-gun
 dinosaur-blood. Shortly
 men steered me eastward
 gave me then
 that hauled me here,
 upon my backside
 with metallic teeth.
 carried me home,
 for adoration,
 into tight joyholes,
 she turned me on—
 and handed her down
 heart in clown-suit,
 like a tigerskin
 touched me again,
 I bless FAR-SEERS
 and now will speak it.

Riddle: Eagle-Feather Fan with Beaded Handle⁹

I strung dazzling thrones
 on a spiraling thread
 beading dawn's blood
 to the gold and dark
 circling with Sun
 over turquoise eyes
 her silver veins
 heard human relatives
 calling me down,
 that I bring them closer
 and I turned from heaven
 When the bullet came
 the hunter's hands
 loosened light beings
 toward the sacred center
 but fixed us first
 that green light-dancers
 ash-heart in hiding where
 and a one-eyed serpent
 strung tiny rattles
 in beaded harmonies
 Now I move lightly
 above dancing feet
 around old songs
 on human breath,

of thunder beings
 of spinning flight,
 and blue of noon
 of day's leaving,
 the soaring heaven
 of Earth below,
 and sable fur,
 hunting beneath
 crying their need
 to Wakonda's ways,
 to help them then.
 it caught my heart,
 gave earth its blood,
 and let us float
 of song in the drum,
 firm in song-home
 gave to men's knives,
 a deer's heart had beat,
 with silver-straight head
 around white softness
 of blue and red.
 in a man's left hand
 follow the sun
 soaring toward heaven
 and I help them rise.

The Poet's Cottage Speaks, Serving a Multicultural Breakfast with Cable TV¹⁰

At your finger's touch	my turquoise flower
of fossil sunlight	flashes, you call
from mountain springs	bright spurts of water
that dancing boil	on its blue petals
crushed seeds, their life's	loss repaid
with offered words.	Watchful electrons
in copper wall-snakes	await your cue
to dance like Talking God	down from heaven
and bring Mozart's	melodies back,
pixel this world's	woe and wonder, but
through wind's eye you see	the sun rising
as creatures of earth	from heaven's darkness
open iris-nets	to the harsh light
of human mysteries,	your <i>here</i> and <i>now</i> ,
needle points	where numberless
angels are dancing,	<i>always</i> and <i>everywhere</i> .

Refrigerator¹¹

As winter snows	come sifting down,
white cold around	this kitchen's summer,
my heart's blue flame	freezes out famine,
swallows Provence	and provides Alaska's
food-filled winter in	my warm white body
whose Freon blood	around belly's ice
pulsing, expanding,	purring breathes out
warmth for cats	curled at my feet
to lick their furred	forepaws clean,
pink-tonguing cream	from tipped whiskers—
between two winters	warm as toast.

RIDDLES WAITING FOR WORDS

If the examples above interest you, and you would like to try your hand at writing some alliterative verse, perhaps in the form of a riddle, why not have at it? If you recall that a riddle usually is “spoken” by an animal, vegetable, or mineral being, sometimes one which has been Frankensteined into its existing shape by humans, you should find it easy to think of such beings who need your help to put themselves into words. For instance, a floppy disk, or a photocopier or fax machine, a Stealth Bomber, a hydroelectric generator, a garbage disposal or faucet or air conditioner, a starling or possum or chimpanzee, an earthworm or a human kidney or gonad or tongue, microphone,

hummingbird or radio, tape recorder or videocam, paddlefish or spotted owl, alumni magazine or passport or ATM, bluejay or pigeon or sparrow hawk or roadrunner, rattlesnake or anaconda, killer whale, barracuda, bluefin tuna, bottlenose dolphin, skateboard, an Ozark spring or the Mississippi, Atlantic or Gulf Stream or toilet bowl or Aurora Borealis, quasar or black hole or superstring, sleeping bag or hiking boots or tent or four wheeler or racing car: for any one of thousands of such “things” you could think back into its origins, its uses, its powers, and the way it uses or is used by these. You would want to think about what human wants or needs it serves, what sacrifices were required for its existence, what trans-human realities it presents and how and why, what social implications and consequences it holds or releases. Then you would want to play with what you understand of these matters and present them in a way that the reader or listener would find illuminating and at the same time puzzling, a way that would help us see and hear how the world has briefly come together in this enigmatic being. You could think of the riddle as part of a social game, educational and fun, difficult like a video game but with a little more to show us than just hand-eye coordination used to illustrate our love of violence and use of it, in semiotic fashion, to solve all problems confronting iconic protagonists.

In short, you could think poems, speak poems, maybe even write them—that is, try to understand the human culture in and around you, the trans-human world interplaying with this human one, and put into words a little of the new exaltation and humility which these small new understandings will give you, so that those who read or hear your words may also see, hear, sense, know better and with new exaltation and humility themselves and you and the shared world. You could pay some of the great accumulated interest debt for Manhattan and America, you could bead a fan of word-wings for the sun dance or the Green Corn dance. So go ahead: you have nothing to lose but a little breath. We may be listening, or we may be singing along.

NOTES

1. I wrote this especially for American Indian readers, but others are welcome to make of it what use they please.

2. *The New Encyclopædia Britannica*, 15th ed., *Micropædia* 10 (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1983), 536.

3. *Encyclopædia Britannica, Macropædia* 15, 349.

4. Yes, this ignores the fact, or theory, that the interest is also said to be “a fee for the use of the creditor’s money during the period before it is repaid.” I suppose there is a kind of rental arrangement here, and on these terms one can regard money as something used, a kind of surrogate tool. But that ignores the question of how we decide how much this “rental fee” should be—and to answer this question, we have to look beyond the mechanisms involved (statutes that are supposed to distinguish between legal interest and illegal usury) to the reasons given for setting and resetting the interest rate at a given time. Those reasons always involve predictions as to what the inflation rate will be and goals for what it ought to be, of which the main point in a “democracy” is to keep in power the politicians setting the interest rates. There is thus a Siamese twin relationship though not an identity between political credibility and interest rates. Economists—Friedman or others—may offer some other incredible

explanation of money; politicians always consult them before setting interest rates, and economists can reasonably expect that if their advice is taken and the politicians reelected, their own consultation fees will go up remarkably.

5. It is very interesting that in the United States such credible pictures are of former presidents and elected or appointed persons of the national government, whereas in Italy they are often of artists and writers—Leonardo Da Vinci, Caravaggio, Raffaello. England may have the queen on one side of a currency note and Charles Dickens on the other.

6. *Macropædia* 15, 352.

7. This riddle—"Amber and Lightning"—is revised from the version printed in my collection *Cowboys and Indians, Christmas Shopping* (Norman, OK: Point Riders Press, 1992). Because I am offering this and other samples of "word-beading" for any poets who might want to try their hands at crafting their own riddles, I am going to be really pedantic and detailed in these footnotes. I do understand that this "beadwork" may seem strange, and nobody will want to try making other such riddles. Yet I believe there is common ground between Old English riddles and American Indian songs or chants celebrating mysterious and powerful beings and relating individual and tribal history to medicine beings. I think, for instance, of the buffalo robe that used to be given to the mother of an Osage child who was receiving its sacred name: the robe was marked with the three red circles set on a straight red line from head to heart to tail of the robe, a visible reminder of the power of the Sun as it moves every day, its rising at dawn, its standing overhead at noon, its setting in the west each night, so that as the mother wrapped this robe around the child and herself at night, the prayer would be that this power and order of the Sun would find its likeness in the child's life. (The three red circles would be the three times in the day when the mother would feed the child.) If a poet wanted to try making a riddle in which the buffalo robe spoke, it might tell first of the death by which it became a symbol of life to the new Osage person, and then go on to describe what it is, how life is brought and sustained for the child. But I don't want to go further into that, which would require serious meditation and great care. Here I am concerned with offering a possible way of viewing and getting into words some reminders of power objects in the world as we now live in it.

One of those objects, about which my "Amber and Lightning" is composed, is the fossil resin from prehistoric plants that we call amber. The chunks of it that we see are tens of millions of years old, and some of them wash ashore (in Denmark, for instance) from deposits that are now undersea, so this riddle begins with Amber, telling us that it rides the "horses of the sea" (which in the first line are the "white-manes" of the waves), and rides them along the "whale-road" (one of the standard metaphors for the ocean in Old English poetry) to arrive in our livingrooms in the shape of beautiful amber jewelry, often made into pendants dangling from necklaces worn by women. A necklace is "wrapped around word-wings," in the sense that our words come up through our throats and voice boxes, and the words fly out into the air as if on wings ("winged words" is the standard metaphor in classical Greek poems).

But amber preserves some of the creatures who lived millions of years ago—insects, perhaps feathers, leaves, things that are supposed to have vanished forever. In that sense a piece of amber is a "shining time-window" through which we can see a dragonfly hover as it did over ancient marshes and ponds. If a craftsman has made a large piece of amber into a comb which some Minoan lady wore to a party in the palace of Knossos, say, then the riddle maker can let Amber tell us that the comb "sibilated" (whispered) as it moved through the "golden glory" (hair) of that lady in her mirror as she prepared for the party.

And, finally, in some ways the most powerful dimension of amber's being, for humans, is that we get our words for *electron*, *electric*, and *electricity* from the Greek word

meaning “shining” which was also a word for amber. The Greeks and others noticed that when amber is rubbed (for instance, when an amber comb is run through a woman’s hair), static electricity is generated: in the darkness, little sparks leap and play. In this riddle, I describe this moment when the ancient beauty combed her hair with an amber comb, creating sparks, as “freeing fireflies to flash in darkness”—and they literally flash the name of amber in Greek, *electron*, *electron*. In that sense, they do just what lightning does: as they come into being, they “sign” their names.

8. I have discussed this riddle at some length in “Herbs of Healing,” an essay on American Indian poetry in comparison with certain “classic” European and American poets, in *Family Matters, Tribal Affairs* (Tucson: University of Arizona, 1998), 179–81, so offer no comments here.

9. This poem offers thanks for the honor of being given eagle feathers which were then set into a beaded fan. It tells how the eagle in flight pierces clouds just as a beadworker’s needle goes through beads and buckskin, spiraling round sky and fan handle; how the eagle flies from dawn to sunset, linking their colors as they are linked on a gourd dancer’s blanket (half dawn-scarlet, half midnight blue), and just as they are beaded onto the handle of this eagle fan. The clouds are figuratively called “dazzling thrones of thunder beings,” sunrise is “dawn’s blood,” small lakes as seen from the eagle’s great height are “turquoise eyes,” while rivers are “silver veins” and forests “sable fur.” The eagle’s feathers are also alive, “light beings,” and are set into a wooden handle, the wood being referred to as “song-home” (trees where birds make their homes and sing), carved by men’s knives from the “green light-dancers” (trees and their leaves), which when white buckskin is wrapped around it is referred to as “ash-heart in hiding” (an ash tree’s wood, hidden and wrapped in the hide of a deer, where a deer’s heart had beat; I hoped the readers who know Gerard Manly Hopkins’ magnificent poem “The Windhover” would recall that he referred to “my heart in hiding stirred for a bird”). And, finally, of course I expect Indian readers to know that the eagle feathers do the things that the poem mentions them doing.

10. This poem has not been printed elsewhere. In January 1994 the University of Arizona Press and the university’s Department of English invited me to give a medieval lecture and a poetry reading in Tucson, and let me stay in the Poet’s Cottage there. I waked before daylight and fixed myself a breakfast of oatmeal and coffee, and listened to the radio and television a little. It occurred to me that a house had never been given its chance to speak its being, and I tried to let it do that in this poem. The house is speaking to its occupant (in this case me, or the poem’s reader). The natural gas stove on which I made the oatmeal and coffee had automatic burners, so I needed only a finger’s touch to start the flames, and the natural gas burns with a hard gemlike flame, in this case of a turquoise color and in the shape of a flower. I was struck with how very beautiful those flames are—form following function, of course; the flames spread like a cactus flower for the same reasons, to perpetuate the species (the flower is a sex organ and must be beautiful and attractive to pollinators; the flame is a food organ and must do its job efficiently so people will keep such stoves “alive”). And the natural gas, brought up from deep within the earth, is methane from the old marshes and jungles and seas, the result of our star’s immense energy having been absorbed into “life-beings” and transformed into carbohydrates and then into hydrocarbon “fossils”—thus being a kind of “fossil sunlight.” So we “turn on the stove,” and then we “turn on the faucet” from which water flows, water that in Tucson comes down from the great reservoirs fed by mountain springs. And into the pot of water we pour the dried and crushed seeds of oats, set the pot over the turquoise flower that makes the water dance and boils the oatmeal. We offer words of thanks for this food, for the loss of life in these seeds that becomes our continuing in life as we eat them.

And then we “turn on” the radio and television sets: the electricity was “waiting” in the walls for us, its copper wires hidden like snakes in the walls, and given their cue these electrons come dancing out like Talking God (in the *Diné Bahané*), and what they “bring down from heaven” (through their antennae) might be the music of Mozart, could be some of our songs for that matter. The pixels on the TV screen show us the “news” (“this world’s woe and wonder”), but then as daylight grows outside the house, a look through the window (the Old English noun compound from which *window* comes literally means “wind-eye”) shows that the sun is rising, and the birds and other “creatures of earth” are moving out of night (“heaven’s darkness”) and opening their eyes (“iris-nets” to “catch” the sights—Iris was a Greek morning goddess, and is a flower and a rainbow and a part of the human eye, its “color” part; and our word *retina* means “little net”). To these creatures, this light reveals mysterious humans, and the very great mysteries which we dismiss by calling them *here* and *now*—that is, present space and present time. The finale of the riddle is to remind us that these mysteries are small and sharp-pointed as that needlepoint upon which the medieval scholars used to try and count the angels dancing, and in this sense a *here* is an *everywhere*, a *now* is an *always*.

11. The paradox central to this riddle is that a refrigerator needs a source of intense heat in order to freeze things. It is a “white body” within which (if it is an old-fashioned gas refrigerator like the one we had in Oklahoma when I was growing up) a flame heats the gas (it used to be Freon, I’m not sure what it now may be) whose expansion and contraction cycles drive the cooling of what is within the refrigerator, while the heat being taken out of the interior is “breathed out” by a gentle fan at the foot of the refrigerator—making a warm place where sometimes our cats, in the wintertime, may curl up. I hope the rest of this riddle is clear enough.