

## Joseph Bruchac: Sample Poems

### Ellis Island

Beyond the red brick of Ellis Island  
where the two Slovak children  
who became my grandparents  
waited the long days of quarantine  
after leaving the sickness,  
the old Empires of Europe,  
a Circle Line ship slips easily  
on its way to the island  
of the tall woman, green  
as dreams of forests and meadows  
waiting for those who'd worked  
a thousand years  
yet never owned their own.

Like millions of others,  
I, too, come to this island,  
nine decades the answerer  
of dreams.

Yet only one part of my blood  
loves that memory.

Another voice speaks  
of Native lands  
within this nation.  
Lands invaded  
when the earth became owned.  
Lands of those who followed  
the changing Moons,  
knowledge of the seasons  
in their veins.

## Prints

Seeing photos  
of ancestors  
a century past

is like looking  
at your own  
fingerprints—

circles  
and lines  
you can't  
recognize

until someone else  
with a stranger's eyes  
looks close and says  
that's you.

## The Geyser

There is a story  
some people tell  
of how they came  
from a world beneath  
this world through a hole in the Earth.

And here, through an hole in the Earth,  
there rises a fine clear plume  
of mineral water, a Geyser  
which lends its name to the brook  
that flows about the red stone cone  
which has formed from the iron  
of its waters.

Drink its water, as the wind  
wraps the mist about you  
and feel the life that rises here  
like people coming out of the darkness  
of a world with no Sun  
to this place of light.

One winter I drove  
past the Geyser and saw  
a White-tailed Deer standing on the cone,  
the cold morning air as clean and new  
as it must have been on that first day  
where we saw this place  
where the magic of waters  
rises up from old Earth  
to join with the Wind and the Sun.

## **My Father, Baiting My Hook**

He has pushed his glasses up onto his forehead  
as he always does for such close work  
as shoving the needle through a deer's thick hide.

The boat hardly moves, held steady by anchors  
he fashioned from coffee cans filled with concrete.

I'm holding still, myself a father twice,  
he won't have to warn me not to fidget  
or bang a clumsy foot against the side.

And though I could bait my own hook now,  
I still sit back and let him show me how.

It's all right that he thinks this is another  
job that he'll always do better  
than me no matter how hard I've tried  
even in this dream, twenty years after he died.

## Snake Hill

Beyond the beach  
where Kaydeross Amusement Park once stood  
the hill rises, two miles away  
at the edge of Saratoga Lake  
the great green head of an earth snake.

A hermit lived there  
in the years when horses  
followed the dirt road  
at the water's edge.

He made his living  
from the bounty paid on rattlesnakes.

Each month to the County Seat  
he brought in bags  
filled with clicking rings  
cut from the tails of arrow-headed rattlers.

He had Indian blood  
some people said  
who wondered how  
he found so many every year  
and if the words  
he used as he stepped  
among those rocks  
were the same as those we spoke.

When he died  
and people went to get  
his few possessions  
from his shack  
they found in back  
two dozen cages  
filled with fat and drowsing  
tail-less rattlesnakes.

## **Birdfoot's Grampa**

The old man  
must have stopped our car  
two dozen times to climb out  
and gather into his hands  
the small toads blinded  
by our lights and leaping,  
live drops of rain.

The rain was falling,  
a mist about his white hair  
and I kept saying  
you can't save them all,  
accept it, get back in  
we've got places to go.

But, leathery hands full  
of wet brown life  
knee deep in the summer  
roadside grass  
he just smiled and said  
they have places to go to  
too.

## The Bottle

Walking through tall hemlocks  
familiar to me as the lines  
of a poem I once wrote,  
I glanced down and saw  
an old milk bottle  
thrusting up  
from the shine of needles.

As a boy, I might have sought a stone  
to cascade that shape into bright shards.  
Instead, I reached down,  
took it into my hand.

Within it was a maidenhair fern,  
green moss and light mist  
formed from my hand's heat,  
condensing drops of water beneath  
the child's face of transparent white  
etched into glass.

And I was wise or foolish enough  
to take that bottle as a gift,  
a message that however fragile  
or empty the things we make might be,  
given long enough, green may grow within them,  
and decades spent close to the earth  
can become filled with life.

## Forking Manure

His long-tined fork slid easy in,  
lifting away the dark top layer  
where straw and manure from thirty Herefords  
had just begun its journey toward soil.  
Beneath it, the color was bright golden,  
moist beneath our feet as we loaded in  
this second harvest from the Arnold's fields.

His father was still in the hospital,  
from the stroke that hit at fifty-two—  
a man I remembered from three decades before,  
one eye gone glassy from a farm accident,  
sitting in front of my grandfather's store.  
That's why that dark-haired boy in his teens  
was taking his dad's promised place  
to load our pick-up, fork by fork, smiling  
as he said he'd have the bucket welded  
and back on the tractor, come three days.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon,  
an April Sunday and soon the driver  
from the UFO would be pulling up,  
his tank truck shiny as a flying saucer  
to measure and load the day's milking in  
taking it off to the Amsterdam Dairy.

I paused my fork and looked over at him.  
"Your day about half over," I asked.  
He laughed at that. "Not hardly a quarter."

Up before dawn, in long after my supper,  
he knew enough to leave it at that,  
not say what I was thinking then—how hard  
this life of farming that I would only  
skirt in my spare moments of home gardening.



I saw he was one who would not go away  
to work at the GE, find some easier state.  
At sixteen his hands were already rough,  
his voice had the same soft-spoken tone  
as his father's, looking down as if  
not talking to me but to the land.

He nodded, added another ten forkfuls  
to top off my ten dollar load.  
“Guess that will just about do it,” he said,  
wiping his palm on his overalls  
before he shook my uncalloused hand.

**The Wind in Keta**    In memory of Kofi Awoonor

When the wind changed  
those years when we lived  
at the head of the sand  
beside Keta Lagoon  
we could smell the smoke  
from its northern side  
where farmers set fires  
to burn the dry grass  
before planting their fields.

If it changed again,  
wind brought to our ears  
the thud of the surf  
on the long golden sands,  
the clang of the two-throated bells  
the small boys played to mark  
the rhythm for the fishermen's feet  
as they pulled in their long blue nets  
filled with the silver throb of mackerel.

But on some calm nights  
we also heard the far-off howling  
of the dogs in Anloga down the peninsula,  
an arm thrust into the Gulf of Guinea.  
From one village to the next  
that echoing chorus came closer and closer,  
until it reached us in Dzelukopfe,  
then passed by toward Togo.

They sense the ghosts,  
Kofi said to me, spirits  
still walking that long road  
where lives were traded  
for copra and gold.  
Their restless feet  
waking from sleep  
not just dogs, but those  
who remember.

