



GORDON PARKS (1912 - 2006)



Gordon Parks, a native of Ft. Scott, Kansas, is best known as a photographer and filmmaker, but he also wrote books of poetry. In an interview he claimed he liked writing poetry best, but making a living directed his energies to other fields. Like Parks, many arts practitioners find writing poetry helps them to learn techniques that adapt to other uses. Parks was adept at screenwriting, fiction, memoir, essays, and narrative photography as well as poetry. He published 20 books.

The poem "The Funeral" shows Parks' ability to compress a story into a few strong images. Homecoming is an archetypal situation, like the biblical Prodigal Son's return. With three imaginative—or "leaping" (to use Robert Bly's term)—comparisons, the poet shows the shift from childhood perspective to adulthood. The "mountains," "raging rivers," and "wide roads" the narrator knew as a boy have become "hills," "streams," and "a crooked path of dust." Like a sonnet, this poem pivots near the end, to the true drama of mortality. The narrator contemplates not only his childhood home, but also the final home, a resting place in a cemetery. The depiction of his father as a "giant" and the weight of the coffin imply a larger story about character. The mythic father kept his exaggerated status to both the child and the man who narrates this. This appears to be an autobiographical poem, but even when the facts and intent are autobiographical, the artifice of verse makes the narrator into a somewhat fictionalized character who speaks directly to readers through carefully chosen words.

THE FUNERAL

After many snows I was home again.
Time had whittled down to mere hills the great mountains
of my childhood.
Raging rivers I once swam trickled now like gentle streams
and the wide road curving on to China or Kansas City
or perhaps Calcutta
had withered to a crooked path of dust
ending abruptly at the county burial ground.
Only the giant that was my father remained the same.
A hundred strong men strained beneath his coffin
when they bore him to his grave.

Education: Gordon Parks attended public schools in Ft. Scott, Kansas, and Minneapolis.

Career: Parks' writing credits include *The Learning Tree* (1963). Collections of poetry (some with photographs) are: *A Poet and His Camera* (Viking 1968), *Whispers of Intimate Things* (Viking 1971), *In Love* (Lippincott 1971), *Moments Without Proper Names* (Viking 1975), *Arias of Silence* (Bulfinch Press 1994), *Glimpses Toward Infinity* (Little, Brown 1996), *A Star for Noon: An Homage to Women in Images, Poetry and Music* (Bulfinch 2000), *Eyes with Winged Thoughts* (Atria 2006). The Gordon Parks Center is <http://gordonparkscenter.org/>