



Stephen Yenser was born in Wichita, Kansas in 1941 and is currently Distinguished Professor of English and Director of Creative Writing at UCLA and curator of the Hammer Poetry Series at the Hammer Museum.

He took his B.A. from the University of Wichita and his M.S. and Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin at Madison. His most recent volume of poems is *Blue Guide* (University of Chicago Press). *The Fire in All Things* (LSU Press) received the Walt Whitman Award from the Academy of American Poets. His other awards include the B. F. Connors Prize from the *Paris Review*, an Ingram Merrill Fellowship, a Pushcart Prize, two appearances in the Best American Poetry series, and two Fulbright

Fellowships, one to France and one to Greece, and the Harvey L. Eby Award for the Art of Teaching at UCLA. He has also taught for a year at the University of Baghdad.

Yenser has written three critical books (*Circle to Circle: The Poetry of Robert Lowell*; *The Consuming Myth: The Work of James Merrill*; and *A Boundless Field: American Poetry at Large*) and is completing a fourth (*Extravagant Engagements: American Poetries beyond the Pale*). He is co-editor with J. D. McClatchy of James Merrill's work, including the *Collected Poems*, the *Collected Prose*, the *Collected Novels and Plays*, the verse epic *The Changing Light at Sandover*, and the *Selected Poems* (all from Alfred A. Knopf). An edition of Merrill's *Selected Letters* is underway.

Homecoming At Lammas

The August sun starts in against the green
And rugged Kansas grain.
The rented Dodge whines on through heat so candid

It puts last year, its palmy days of arak
And cloudy rhetoric,
Flatly in the shade. The very air

Above the pavement wilts, yet feed corn grows
In ranks of tasseled scarecrows
So tall a boy could lose his way in it.

The posted fields shoot past, glaring bad rhymes,
Flashing close shaves, cheap rooms,
The shrike's barbed-wire kabob of bug and vole.

Poor, starchy soul, this dry plain seems to say,
Unsoiled habitué
Of souks, casinos, elevating tells,

There are certain states that you must work
Yourself not up but back
Down into. Like the first. Stop here, dig in,

Study the disc, the sprouting stump, cicadas,
And all of those old saws.
Acknowledge the corn: you've been plowing sand.

No root, no fruit. So come on down to earth—
Maybe you'll spring up yet,
Giving as good as you are bound to get.

From *The Fire in All Things*

Additional poems on following pages



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Carnal Knowledge

Now LeRoy on the kill room floor
Was almost larger than life.
Mondays the green fatigues he wore
Had creases sharp as the knife

That was his very bread and butter,
And his face was hand-carved ebony.
For the days the new boy with the stutter
Stayed out of LeRoy's way.

Later that summer he learned to tell
(After LeRoy had his fun)
A skinned pizzle from a skinned tail
And not to grind the one

Into the dogfood mix he'd pour
In boxes, freeze in lots.
He'd scoop up cheeks, sweet and sour
As rotting apricots,

And fill each barrel till it weighed
200 pounds and more.
The elevator rope had frayed
So many years before

He couldn't look up as he let
His load down 20 feet.
LeRoy laughed to see him sweat
And went on boning meat.

Across the street, at The Blue Moon,
He flashed a friend's draft card
And drank one tall red beer each noon.
The barmaid made it hard

(He would have said he had "a heart on"),
But he'd punch in on time,
Hose the concrete down, then start on
The tripe, slick with chyme.

He marveled at the huge pink lungs
("They's soft as a big gal's knockers")
That he hung up with hearts and tongues
On hooks in chilling lockers.

He learned it paid to be precise.
Learned an esophagus
Was really easier to slice
Than greasy radiator hose.

LeRoy owned he'd eaten dogfood.
The kid swore he would last
Till school began. The pay was good.
"The rules are hard and fast,"

LeRoy'd sigh. "But they's the only
Ones," he'd wink and grin.
"Whatcha do when you get lonely?"
Before the days drew in

He met a girl, wheatshocking blonde.
On weekend nights they drove
Out Sweetbriar Lane and by the pond
Made love, like mad, made love.

From The Fire in All Things

Continued at right



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A Table Of Greene Fields

For Willard Yenser

Your wife, who polished verse,
Was duty-bound to quarrel
With much that we'd rehearse
For you at the corner billiard parlor:
The homespun language,
And where to put the accents
For English and massé,
And how to break loose racks,

And cut, and kiss, and bridge.
You never could insist
That we play for small change
But hated to see us risk
Minimum wages
Before we'd learned to hold
Our own with hustlers
Whom you'd have shot blindfold.

Now, shuffling through a haze
Denser than that in Scotty's
Those hot, long Saturdays
You worry you've forgotten
There by your river,
Where duller
Colors carom from bank
To bank across
The fading felt, the rankest

Double-cross, you play
Again. You're under the gun
Again and bound to stay,
As always, till you've won—
Or followed though
On one last stroke and seen
That the sun has spun
Home under darkening green.

From The Fire in All Things

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