

Transformational Grammars

by Ed Frankel

“Colorless Green Ideas Sleep Furiously”

--Noam Chomsky

I used to think I was just a half step behind
 When I believed in a lost language.
 I imagined people sang before they spoke,
 That song preceded logos and birdsong
 Preceded the language of men.
 Words meant exactly what they pointed to.
 I loved to watch the flocks of starlings in Echo Park
 Explode in unison from the bushes of daybreak
 And wheel across the sky.
 I imagined a lost language, some ur-lingua franca,
 That when found, it would repair us all.

I had read that Comanches were understood
 When they signed to deaf students at the Gauladette school;
 That the Iroquois could talk to the animals.
 Aborigines in Australia had songs that were maps
 Keyed to sacred landmarks in the wilderness;
 That the letters of the Hebrew alphabet
 Corresponded to the Tarot's twenty two Major Arcana.
 Each letter was a number, a concept, a story
 Aleph was an ox,
 just turn the letter upside down.
 Beth-le-hem, the house of bread.
 If we could just utter
 The perfect name and number of God...

After all--the Celts sailed up the Mississippi,
 Left their runes and occum writing on Pawnee war shields
 One hundred years before the current era.
 Lilly, floating in an isolation tank, dreamed
 dolphins with songs sewn shut in their throat.
 People talked to plants and flowers in Findhorn.
 Remember how big they would grow.

I knew if I could just create a space somewhere
 Between birdsong and the cry of an animal
 The night visitors would come and talk to me.
 Hush and listen, I would say to myself
 And the spellbound may finally speak,

Not in tongues, or the chill of foreign language,
Not in fragments but in complete sentences.
They would recite The Histories,
Animal, vegetable and mineral.

We would rescue ourselves from “cold hell and thicket,”
Learn to use our breath, to project our voice
And use it like an instrument, as all musicians
Are trying to duplicate the human voice.

But what if the histories are nothing
But second hand experience, what passes
Between people is smoke from different fires,
Rumors of dying suns shuffled and replaced?
If the Iroquois talked to the animals
It was only in Longfellow’s dreams.
And I know the Comanches broke their horses
In four feet of water and sometimes beat them.

If I used to be a half step behind
Now things have really gotten away from me.
I feel like a snake handler
Shaking my upraised arms and talking in tongues.

I wonder if the starlings are caught up
In the confusion of the bramble bushes
Or confounded by an excess of light that keeps them
From finding their way home by the stars.
What can you tell me, any little scrap will do?