

High Noon at Los Alamos

By Eleanor Wilner

To turn a stone
with its white squirming
underneath, to pry the disc
from the sun's eclipse—white heat
coiling in the blinded eye: to these malign
necessities we come
from the dim time of dinosaurs
who crawled like breathing lava
from the earth's cracked crust, and swung
their tiny heads above the lumbering tons
of flesh, brains no bigger than a fist
clenched to resist the white flash
in the sky the day the sun-flares
pared them down to relics for museums,
turned glaciers back, seared Sinai's
meadows black—the ferns withered, the swamps
were melted down to molten mud, the cells
uncoupled, recombined, and madly
multiplied, huge trees toppled to the ground,
the slow life there abandoned hope,
a caterpillar stiffened in the grass.
Two apes, caught in the act of coupling,
made a mutant child
who woke to sunlight wondering, his mother
torn by the huge new head
that forced the narrow birth canal.

As if compelled to repetition
and to unearth again
white fire at the heart of matter—fire
we sought and fire we spoke,
our thoughts, however elegant, were fire
from first to last—like sentries set to watch
at Argos for the signal fire
passed peak to peak from Troy
to Nagasaki, triumphant echo of the burning
city walls and prologue to the murders
yet to come—we scan the sky
for that bright flash,
our eyes stared white from watching
for the signal fire that ends
the epic—a cursed line
with its caesura, a pause
to signal peace, or a rehearsal
for the silence.

Source: *Reversing the Spell: New and Selected Poems* (Copper Canyon Press, 1998)



Poet, critic, and translator Eleanor Wilner was born in Ohio, and attended Goucher College and Johns Hopkins University. She was the editor of *The American Poetry Review*, and has taught at many universities, including Smith College and Warren Wilson College. In her poetry, she often writes of myth and memory, with what has been called a “mythical impulse.” She avoids confessional writing, choosing instead to invoke themes of mythology, and reinvigorate them in a modern context, especially with dense historical and contemporary allusions. Her poems reflect her wide-ranging intelligence and her commitment to peace and justice.