

# El Monte, California

First Place, 1984-1985 Academy of American Poets Competition

*Wes Hempel*

At the Pentecostal church on Arden Drive  
my father moves through the sanctuary  
quietly arranging chairs while I lean  
on the green sill in the Sunday School room  
gaze across irises and tall grass  
to the parking lot of the Ball Canning Factory  
that mass of corrugated building  
I always thought was abandoned

That morning in our kitchen a milk bottle  
slipped from my mother's grasp  
and shattered on her foot  
a bright flood opened from her instep  
My father carried her to the bathroom  
cleaned and wrapped the cut

I am talking about my father  
the woman in his arms  
and twenty years in El Monte

Sometimes I think I could get in my car  
and go back to that town  
to the church my grandfather built  
our house on Allgeyer  
the alley behind the dairy  
where my brother and I played ball  
before he went away

I could drive across the railroad tracks  
by the Coffee Shop on Tyler  
next to Five Points Bowl  
the back to back phone booths  
in front of Arrow Auto Sales

where a girl in a white dress walks  
after class with her hand in mine  
When it begins to rain we dash  
into the booths, call each other up  
pretend we're secret lovers

I could follow the concrete curve of the wash  
north to the Palm View Trailer Court  
those sloping vacant fields  
where I walked alone the morning after graduation  
and found an abandoned desk on its back  
all the empty drawers stuck out  
among weeds and grass into the sky