WEST of Imagining

AN ANTHOLOGY EDITED BY

the WEST California

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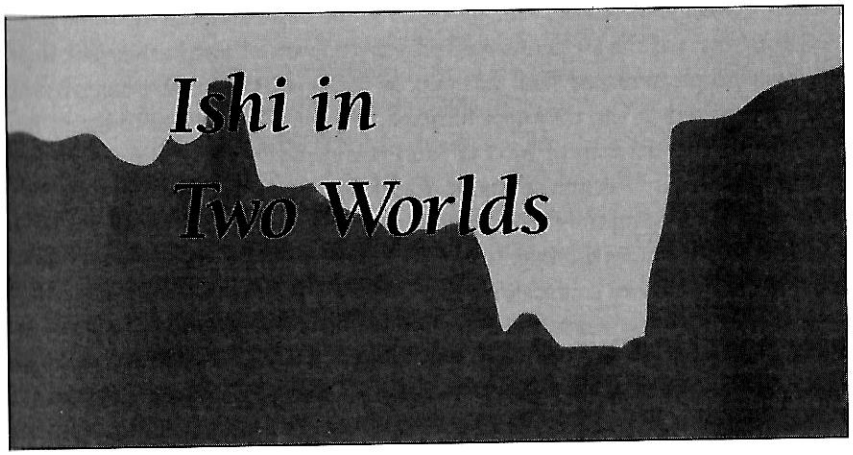
Rose from the neat arrangement of the cloth,
Where the connection between life and food
Had briefly seemed so obvious if so crude.
Our conversation circumspectly cheerful,
We had sat here like children good but fearful
Who think if they behave everything might
Still against likelihood come out all right.
But it would not, and we could not stay here:
Finishing up the Optimator beer,
I walked him home through the suburban cool
By dimming shape of church and Catholic school,
Only a few white teenagers about.
After the four blocks he would be tired out.
I'd leave him to the feverish sleep ahead,
Myself to ride through darkened yards instead
Back to my health. Of course I simplify.
Of course. It tears me still that he should die
As only an apprentice to his trade,
The ultimate engagements not yet made.
His gifts had been withdrawing one by one
Even before their usefulness was done:
This optic nerve would never be relit;
The other flickered, soon to be with it.
Unready, disappointed, unachieved,
He knew he would not write the much-conceived,
Much-hoped-for work now, nor yet help create
A love he might in full reciprocate.

Theodora Kroeber



The ordeal of civilization began for Ishi at the door of the Oroville jail. It was a sunny September morning less than a week after he had strayed out of his own Stone Age Yahi world into a twentieth-century world. This happened by chance, during an abulia induced by starvation and grief, and was out of character, either personal or tribal, except that another Indian than Ishi would have lain down in his home shelter, passively waited for death, and so died. Ishi was sick of life, but his tribal heritage opposed to Indian quietism and fatalism a stubborn will to fight to the end. This kept him on his feet and moving, even after he ceased to know or to wonder where his feet were carrying him. They carried him, in due course, outside the jail and onto Main Street; and whether his feet had served him well or ill Ishi could not then have said.

Fearful and preoccupied with the new reality, Ishi started down Main Street, a myth already beginning to weave itself around him. It was a personal myth, powerful enough to replace the old one of the Yahi people as plunderers, murderers, and savages. From the moment he was locked up, the new myth took over, wavering at first in its direction, playing with imagined dangers and excitements if the prisoner was to be freed. But Sheriff Webber pooh-poohed these as nonsense; reporters arrived from Sacramento; and telegrams poured in from the University and the Department of the Interior; from private citizens and

from newspapers all over the country. No one outside had paid Oroville any attention since the gold rush brought it into being, and left it a country town, where young orange groves braved the freezing tule fogs, and the sterile detritus of placer mining. Now it was a name on the lips of people across the land because of the naked old Indian locked up in jail downtown. He was spoken of as the Wild Man of Oroville. The professor who came on the train from San Francisco said he was a Stone Age Man, the last in America: the myth had found its permanent, romantic direction.

The jailors, and the Mexicans and Indians who were allowed to see Ishi, kept the townspeople informed of all that went on in the jail. When the women heard that Ishi refused to eat, they sent him specially prepared dishes to tempt his appetite. Clothes for him to wear to San Francisco were donated from private wardrobes, also a selection of shoes of different sizes. Ishi gratefully put on underwear, shirt, pants, and coat, but he shook his head to the shoes. He tried them on, but they were too large, too stiff; they tripped him, they kept him from the familiar, necessary contact with the earth by which he kept in balance and informed of what lay beneath each footfall and what might be expected ahead. Besides, the great toe must be free if it is to cling and grasp. His feet had carried him far, and must carry him farther. The shoes were returned to their owners.

Side by side, Ishi and Waterman walked from the jail to the railroad station. Women and children peered discreetly from windows or over picket fences to catch a glimpse of the Wild Man, and there were several men and older boys waiting on the platform to see him. They kept their distance, and they were quiet. There was probably a little fear mixed with curiosity in their quietness. Ishi was by way of becoming a hero to them, a man of myth and mystery to whom tales cling and grow. He remains so to this day.

The black face of the white man's Demon rushed toward the platform, pouring out clouds of sparks and smoke, and filling the ears with its hollow, moaning voice. Mill Creek and Deer Creek were within range of the sound of that voice; twice a day Ishi had heard it ever since he could remember, and he had watched the train hundreds of times as it snaked along below him, bellowing and belching. His mother had reassured him as a small boy when he was afraid of it, telling him that it was a Demon who followed white men wherever they went, but that Indians need have no fear of it; it never bothered them.

Today, Ishi wondered. He had not been so near it before; it was larger and noisier and speedier than he had realized. Would the Demon know that he was Indian? He was wearing white men's clothes, and his hair was cut short like theirs. It might be as well to watch from a little distance, from the shelter of a tree or bush, as he was accustomed to, at least until he made sure that his friend was correct in his assurance that the Demon always stayed in its own old tracks,

and that it carried people safely from place to place. He stepped behind a cottonwood tree alongside the platform. The Demon drew up beside the station and came to a halt. Ishi saw that it was as his friend had said—it did not leave its tracks. The white men who should have the most reason to be afraid, showed no signs of uneasiness, rather thay climbed in and out of it, and one of them sat in its head waving to those below. Ishi came back onto the platform, and made no objection to going aboard with Waterman. He had committed himself too far to turn back, nor did he wish to do so; where his new friend led he would follow.

During the trip, Ishi sat very quiet. He found the speed of the train exciting; also the view through the window of hills and fields and houses racing in and out of sight. He averted his eyes from the strangers in the car, blotting out their nearness by not looking directly at them. The Demon carried them rapidly down its old tracks and after some hours onto a ferry boat which took them, engine, cars, and passengers, across Carquinez Straits. Waterman pointed out to him that this was where the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers join, flow into the bay, and out the Golden Gate to the ocean. Like all inland Indians, Ishi knew that such was the destination of the creeks and rivers of his home, but, again like other inlanders, he was vague about how the river journey was actually accomplished, for his informants had known of it only traditionally and at many removes from any one who had seen either river mouth or ocean. He was sorry to leave the train at the Oakland Mole, but ahead lay further wonders—another ferry trip, this time across the bay to San Francisco; and after that, a long ride in a trolley car to the Museum of Anthropology.

Arrived at the museum, Ishi had gone a longer way than the miles which separated him from Deer Creek cañon. It was eleven o'clock in the evening of Labor Day, September 4, 1911, when Ishi the Yahi completed a trip out of the Stone Age into the clang and glare of the Iron Age—a place of clocks and hours and a calendar; of money and labor and pay; of government and authority; of newspapers and business. Now he, too, was a modern man, a city dweller with a street address.