

Tolling the Future

I.

Back when Rome was America
I am willing to bet
that some could foresee the future,
but all the others said:
“If you don’t like it here
why don’t you go live someplace else?
This is the greatest city on earth.
Everyone wants to be
a citizen of Rome!”
And it seemed to be true—
except for Spartacus and his crew
whose opinions didn’t count
among people who
were thought to be any good.

II.

Today, when America is Rome,
one year after our world’s center fell
and all the flags rose in protest
you can see them still,
flapping in an arrogant breeze
comprehending no more
than the Romans did
except, I believe,
for one, which I spy
crumpled in the roadway
where my car rolled over it—
as if it were just another
former cat or raccoon—
white flesh streaked red
with stripes of its own blood.

III.

Ten or twenty centuries from now
(if our planet does not end up
like cosmic road-kill first)
when teachers in the schools tell
of how America’s empire rose
. . . and fell.
I wonder whether you
would like to be included
in the footnote
on one page of text,
where they will list the names
of those who understood?

September, 2002