Fig. 5.4 *Cups*, by Robin Blaser, c.1960. Oil on canvas, 20 × 24″. Collection of Alan Franey. Photo by Alan Franey. Reproduced courtesy of Alan Franey and the Blaser estate

was enthused about the Gallery and broke with Spicer on this point. Buzz also served as a party space (gallons of red wine had to be served at openings) and a venue for readings. Richard Brautigan packed the place when he read *Watermelon Sugar* and LeRoi Jones fascinated when he arrived with body guards. One special event was the Poets' Show, featuring work by Helen Adam, Duncan, and Fran Herndon. Buzz and *Open Space* showed that despite the dissonance, the participants of this San Franciscan community of poets and artists remained deeply attentive to each other.

The Artist of the Beautiful: The First Serial Poems

Between 1960 and 1966, and despite the personal turmoil of that period, Blaser produced the foundation pieces of his *oeuvre*. Building on his work in Boston, he wrote *Cups*, *The Park*, *The Faerie Queene*, *The Moth Poem*, *Les Chimères*, and the first of the *Image-Nation* poems, all of them serials that would eventually go into the making of his lifelong poem, *The Holy Forest*. In "The Fire" (1967), Blaser writes retrospectively of his interest in "a particular

kind of narrative—what Jack Spicer and I agreed to call in our work the serial poem—this is a narrative which refuses to adopt an imposed story line, and completes itself only in the sequence of poems, if, in fact, a reader insists upon a definition of completion which is separate from the activity of the poems themselves" (*Fire*, 5). Spicer compared the serial to the kind of weekly narrative he found in cartoon series like *Dick Tracy* and Duncan had provided the initial performance of it back in the Berkeley days with *Medieval Scenes*.[8] Blaser's serials, like those of his companions, unfold over time as a record of the poet's attention to certain "persons, events, activities, [or] images" that "tell the tale of the spirit" (*Fire*, 5)—"a *carmen perpetuum*," Blaser calls it, "a continuous song" (*Fire*, 5). While he shares the form with Duncan and Spicer, his version of it is distinctive. Uniqueness, in fact, is simply built in to the method: as long as the poet stays with the "sequence of energies" (*Fire*, 5) recorded in the poem, the result will be true to his or her capacities and circumstances—a constant reversal of person and world into each other. No two poets can tell the truth about this process and write the same kind of poem.

Cups is the first of Blaser's serials, consisting of twelve poems that move between childhood landscapes of Idaho and those of 1960s San Francisco. On one level, it is an autobiographical poem about making poetry. In *Cups* 1, two poets sit in a tree—Spicer and Blaser—and the point "is to make others see / that two men in a tree is clearly / the same thing as poetry" (*HF*, 31). The easy rhymes in these lines and throughout the series recall the children's literature that Blaser was selling in the bookstore where he worked on first return to San Francisco. This explanation of *Cups*, however, does not account for images and references drawn from the high art of the classical–Christian tradition. A cup is a vessel to be given and received—hence an emblem of communion, with all attendant symbolic freighting. As such, it might evoke the Holy Grail or, back of that, emblems of female fertility. In the context of the *homoeros* that unfolds in these poems, it brings to mind the Platonic male womb of *The Symposium*—male fertility in the realm of art and ideas. "Cups" might also suggest the Cups suite of the Tarot cards, in which case the temptation is to read the poems as corresponding to the cards. At the literal level, a cup gives shape to the fluids it contains and these are of a different substance than the vessel itself; it is thus an apt metaphor for the way that language holds the world, and so makes an epistemological point. The problem is that the poems evoke, and then fail to confirm, all these readings and more. What distinguishes them from symbolist poems is that they do not refer to something beyond the page like the Grail but are rather *haunted* by cultural traditions embedded in the language, ghostly now, or present-as-absence, because they have fallen out of belief.

There are at least two outstanding precedents for the ghostly in Blaser's early works, beyond the early Catholicism. Hawthorne is one of them, a lifelong passion of Blaser's and beloved since boyhood. In a short prose piece titled "The Haunted Mind," Hawthorne conjures up an hour between waking and sleeping "when the mind has a passive sensibility, but no active strength; when the imagination is a mirror, imparting vividness to all ideas, without the

power of selecting or controlling them" (Hawthorne 1987, 57). In such a state, the artist is visited by memory in the form of a parade of personified "things of the mind" (Hawthorne 1987, 57). So in Hawthorne's tales and novels, the ghosts of Puritan New England rise again, filtered through the emotions of the characters and the imagination of the narrator. The stories are tense with an imagined Puritanism that has no correlate in living practice yet continues to haunt the living. In a notebook entry on Hawthorne, Blaser writes that "[h]is philosophy, point of view is broadly Christian – heaven, earth, and hell whether these are 'real' or subjective, psychological facts is one of 'Hawthorne's crucial ambiguit[ies]' – But for Hawthorne there would be no separation between the reality and the psychological fact" (Undated, "His philosophy").

A nearer and more narrowly focused source for the haunted mind in *Cups* is Mary Butts (1890–1937). Butts was an enthusiasm of Duncan's, shared with Spicer and Blaser at Berkeley. In *Armed with Madness*, there is a mysterious cup that may or may not be the Grail and a character, Picus, who may or may not be Zeus. Blaser knew Butts's work well; years later he would edit a reprint of her *Imaginary Letters* for Talonbooks in Vancouver and write an extended essay on *Armed with Madness* (see Chap. 7). In *Cups*, the narrative elements of the poem are fraught with a sense of immanence similar to that in Butts's novels.

The most important presence of *Cups*, however, is Amor, taken from Dante's *Vita Nuova*. Nine years after first seeing Beatrice, his Beloved, Dante receives a greeting from her that has the *gravitas* of a heavenly blessing. The poet is then visited in a vision by "a lordly man" who holds his (Dante's) flaming heart which he gives to Beatrice to eat. The man is Amor, and with the gift of the poet's heart to the Lady, he binds Dante to her service. Beatrice is the origin and end of the journey in *The Divine Comedy*; through her mediation, Dante receives the permission of heaven to make his way through hell and purgatory until he reaches paradise.

Amor comes to Blaser not only through his love of Dante and his Berkeley studies of the poet with Kantorowicz, but also Pound's fascination with the courtly love lyrics of medieval Provence. Blaser had been studying Pound for years by the time he came to write *Cups*. In "Psychology and Troubadours" from *The Spirit of Romance*, Pound compares Love in the troubadour tradition of the thirteenth century to Baruch Spinoza's understanding of it: "'the intellectual love of a thing consists in the understanding of its perfections … all creatures whatsoever desire this love,'" he says (Pound 1968, 91). Pound suggests that the Provençal poets leaned toward a view of the happy life as one in accord with nature's orders. The Lady who was the subject of their poems became a kind of shorthand for the perfections of such an accord ("a sort of *mantram*" (Pound 1968, 97)). So Amor, re-routed through a thirteenth century Florentine poet like Guido Cavalcanti and transported to the twentieth century, displaces religious mysticism with a feeling for nature's creative energy. Pound writes that there are only two kinds of religion—the exoteric kind that aims at social control through fear (God is a "disagreeable bogie") or the more

esoteric sort that aims at "a sort of confidence in the life-force," such that people of the right temperament might "live at greatest peace with 'the order,' with man and nature" (Pound 1968, 95). In my view, Blaser accepts these steps toward an Amor that is love of the world and intellectual attention to its particularities.

In *Cups* 3, Blaser rewrites the scene in the *Vita Nuova* where Amor appears to Dante and offers the poet's heart to Beatrice, combining it with Pound's god in the rock (the energy in matter):

> We opened the rock. This
> time I saw the god
> offer with out-stretched hand
> the heart to be devoured. The
> lake flowed into my hands.
> Dante would say the lake
> of the heart. (*HF*, 33)

"We have about us the universe of fluid force," Pound writes, "and below us the germinal universe of wood alive, of stone alive" (Pound 1968, 92). Given the new Einsteinian physics, Pound could plausibly suggest that noun is verb—matter is energy—but an Amor so embedded in the world would have to mean a love of life's processes rather than a completion of the world in paradise. This would then imply a tearing open of the detached mind—the mind understood as separate from the body and the human creature as standing apart from the physical universe.

Blaser had begun this mental work of decentering the cogito in Boston through his forays into surrealism; in *Cups*, as in many of the serials that follow, this work is enacted as dismemberment. When Amor gives the poet's heart to Beatrice in the *Vita Nuova*, the literal image is violent: Love rips the heart out of the poet, as the bees of Blaser's "A Preface" rip "the jaw of a snapdragon." Dante's cosmos had a *paradiso*, of course, and the poet's prospect at the end of life was reunion with the Beloved and the healing of his heart in a state of blessedness beyond loss and death. But the cosmos available to poets of Blaser's generation had already been riven by Nietzsche and Freud: one had declared the death of God; the other had attacked the transparency of consciousness to itself. And then James Joyce, as Blaser says on *Astonishments*, had written the ruin of the metaphysical tradition—"the death of the modern world, the death of God" (*AT*, 174). Without the Dantean hierarchy, the content of the Christian humanist tradition simply spills out in *Finnegans Wake*. Hence the need for "cups"—something to hold the spill, as the Grail once held Christ's blood.

Blaser's *Cups* holds these ambient ghosts of myth, literature, and religion in tension with a number of autobiographical stories. The landscape of Blaser's childhood Idaho appears in desert scenes, sage brush fires, and cameo appearances by family members such as Uncle Mitch[9] and Robert Blaser. These

homely images are then shadowed by those drawn from the high narratives of the western tradition. For example, in *Cups* 2, the Catholic world appears in an interdiction against masturbation ("If he does not masturbate, / the promise is a second chance" (*HF*, 32)). In *Cups* 7, however, the spilled seed evokes a Jewish creation story from the *Zohar* (the world of Merkabah mysticism): "in service to love, / your hands dip out of the water / the shell or sperm, dropped there in passing / by some *ashen likeness*" (*HF*, 37). The "shell," grammatically apposite to "sperm," recalls the rabbinical account of creation as an outflowing of God's creative power into a series of vessels (cups). These, on first receiving the divine energy, crack and the "shells" of the broken vessels make up the material world. This Hebraic creation story then bumps up against the Catholic *contra dictum* against spilling the seed; the spilling here, however, is transmuted into a world-making act. The "*ashen likeness*" of the above lines is a phrase Blaser takes from Pound's translation of Cavalcanti's Sonnet XXVI: "thou knowest well I am Amor / Who leave with thee mine ashen likeness here / And bear away from thee thine every thought" (Pound 1963, 77). In the Cavalcanti sonnet, Love stands before the poet like a ghost, an "ashen vision," asserting his authority. So in *Cups*, the ghost of Amor binds the poet to the world. Hence a marriage poem, but it is a marriage in which the poet weds the world-tree rather than the Lady:

> Upon that tree there was a ring.
> HI HO HUM
> The ring surrounded the darkest part.
> HA HA HA
> The ring imagined a marriage bout.
> FIRE FIRE FIRE. (*HF*, 40)

Of this marriage ceremony, anticipated in "A Preface" and repeated in "Image-Nation 6" (*HF*, 156) and "Image-Nation 11" (*HF*, 177), Blaser says that he had in mind a Coptic myth in which one actually marries the world when one marries a woman. In this ceremony, "you go up and put rings on the tree not on one another's hands" ("AT" 8.27, 20). In the context of the myth, Blaser's retelling of an old joke of his father's about sheepherders choosing the goat with the best pelt to make love to (*HF*, 37) takes on a new resonance. Marriage leads to consummation, but if the Beloved is the world and the Lover is the poet, then intercourse would mean spilling the seed on the ground or perhaps a coupling with the creaturely. Whether so precise a metaphorical spin can be put on the *homoeros* of the poem or not, *Cups* 10 records the springing up of new life, apparently in the middle of a desert:

> High on stilts, the black water tank
> leaks. A pond rises by the railbed.
> ....
> Willows, starwort,
> water striders appear in the desert. (*HF*, 41)

The water tank in Orchard, Idaho did literally leak and as Blaser remarks on *Astonishments*, he was perpetually amazed at the appearance of insects or even frogs on the pond and the mystery of where they might have come from in the middle of the desert (*AT*, 20). The striders in the above passage appear as if by magic—after the poets have fertilized the ground, perhaps—followed by Amor:

> Amor entered disguised as grass. You both
> hoped your seed would fall among the roots
> of this tree and there grow up a second tree
> and guardian.
>
> WHAT IS THAT WRINKLES UNDER THE ROOT?
>
> SKIN, SEMEN, AN ARM AND A FOOT. (*HF*, 41)

To put this series of images together, *Cups* offers a number of autobiographical memories that begin when the poet finds himself up a tree "where Amor sits" (*HF*, 33). This is a world tree/language tree in which constellations of literary and mythical images hover over the personal stories. These ghosts in the language attach to fertility emblems (the titular cup, the teeming puddle of *Cups* 10, the snakes of *Cups* 11), rituals (the marriage ceremony in *Cups* 6, the spell-like chant of *Cups* 8, the Dionysian rites in *Cups* 12), and creation stories. They are presided over by an Amor who leads the poet into a spiritual marriage as Amor led Dante to Beatrice, but for this poet, it is a marriage to the world rather than the Lady. Consummation takes the form of masturbation—the insemination of the ground—an act that secularizes and redirects the Catholic universe of Dante at the same time as it introduces a *homoeros* into the poem since the act appears to be shared with another male poet up the same tree ("Jack" is named in *Cups* 1). Instead of the censure that masturbation might invite in a heteronormative or Catholic context, *Cups* offers the fruits of the male womb. Adapted to poetry, male creativity rests on the poet's capacity for wedding the world—or, to carry forward the plot of the *Vita Nuova* and *Commedia*, for following his Love all the way to hell and back through the saying of the Cosmos. The marriage is inspired by passion (the flaming heart), Blaser's signature element for creative energy and an emotional tie-back to childhood when it was Ina Mae's schoolbooks, imprinted with the flaming heart of the Sacred Heart Academy, that inspired a feeling for the life of the spirit and the imagination.

In retrospect, then, the plot of *The Holy Forest* is there in *Cups*. The poem is to be a *Vita Nuova* and the aim is a holy forest. In Dante, that forest, as opposed to the dark wood of the *Inferno*, comes at the end of the *Purgatory*. The earthly paradise is a limit concept of human potentiality—it is what lies within the imaginative range of intellectual love. And so back to Amor and the commitment to his service. Hence the priestly tone at the end of *Cups* 12: the poets are "among the thyrsus bearers"; they are "initiates [of the Muse]"; "they stamp on the ground / where her skin has fallen" (*HF*, 45). The ritualistic passages of *Cups* that sound like spells carry this whiff of the priestly, which

is to say that the poetic venture was, for Blaser, a calling, a vocation, and a transmutation of his adolescent interest in the priesthood. And finally, haunting the broken order of the cosmos—the Joycean rubble of it—is Hawthorne's story, "The Artist of the Beautiful,"[10] a ghost image back of the whole of Blaser's *oeuvre*. The beautiful mechanical butterfly that Hawthorne's watchmaker–artist creates so laboriously, all for love, might have flown in a metaphysical tradition that hid its cunning device, but it had long shattered into small glittering pieces under the pressure of skepticisms that demanded that the illusion be unmasked and the magic debunked. Any artist post-the-modern would have to work with that skepticism of beauty and the perils of it. This would be Blaser's task throughout *The Holy Forest*.

The serials composed immediately after *Cups*—*The Park* (1960), *The Faerie Queene* (1961), and *The Moth Poem* (1962–1964)—extend and rework the territory of *Cups*. In fact, every serial reworks and modifies the poems that precede it, so that the scope and meaning of the whole evolves through difference-in-repetition. *The Park*, for example, unfolds in image-strings that have the same haunted quality as those in *Cups*. At the autobiographical level, Cleo Adams appears as a first Beloved and instance of the shared "male womb"; the magically multiplying desert rabbits of *The Park* are analogous to the water striders that materialize on the pond under the dripping water tower in *Cups*: "Cleo swears / the god-damned rabbits / mate with the sagebrush" (*HF*, 49). In both cases, creatures emerge from the desert without an evident source unless the reader remembers that the poet has married the world (tree) and that his spilling of the seed metaphorically inseminates the ground of poetry. In these early poems, Blaser *unnames* the old mythical powers because they have lost their force and credence in a secular time, even though they hover over the poems. In *The Park*, the alphabet burns (*HF*, 54); in *The Faerie Queene*, "the gods / [are] severed and loose / like architectural adornments" (*HF*, 61) and in the final poem ("For Gustave Moreau"), "the lips [twist] to allow / the tongue to play in / the broken mirror on the floor" (*HF*, 64). So the gods die and the poet must then re-articulate the relations they once named: the potencies of nature and the chronic human emotions.

One of Blaser's best-known serials, *The Moth Poem*, begins to put together some of the broken pieces of culture that litter the earlier poems. Stan Persky writes that it began "[o]ne day in 1962, in [the] Baker Street apartment":

> [Blaser] heard an eerie sound emanating from the baby grand piano, as if the instrument itself was playing. When he lifted the lid of the piano, he discovered the source of the sound, a moth trapped in the piano strings. The moth was duly rescued and the poem began. Once the first moth appeared, so did others, over a year or more, inexplicably turning up in the most unexpected ways, to provide the images or metaphors upon which successive poems in the serial were predicated. (Persky 2010, 13–14)