

Fall 1986

## First Days At Bear Creek Ranch

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## *First Days at Bear Creek Ranch*

East across the cut hayfields,  
Arabian mares were corraled  
behind hawthorne and nailed boards.  
When the day dawned clear,  
steam rose from their backs  
and burr-tangled manes,  
the air around them sweet  
with the odor of damp burlap.  
Each seemed patient to stand  
where I saw them last  
at dusk the day before.  
At what hour in the dark  
did they kneel and fall  
asleep in the snow, or just  
before daybreak, jackknife  
onto their legs again?

The woman who chose me  
to love her, groaned awake  
in the loft, her weight shifting  
over the loose plank floor.  
Cedar shakes popped  
and ignited in the stove;  
a ray of sun lowered  
through the canyon below Olsen Peak;  
and I looked for the sway-backed  
colt who always stood at  
the middle of the crowded mares,  
answering to the others  
with a fidelity to habit or love.  
My life still answered to little.  
I spread my hands nervously  
over the belly of my swelling bride.  
Another pulse drummed deep  
in her syncopated blood;  
a single grain of sand  
spun into a living pearl.

Every afternoon that winter,  
as I drove to work, I watched  
families riding freights west  
to Seattle. One night, a man  
wandered from the railyard  
with a family following him  
and asked me for directions  
to the Poverello Center  
where I knew he'd be turned away,  
the beds full every night,  
the meals already eaten.  
I heard so many garbled voices.  
My own, the Salish braves  
drunk in parking lots, the President  
and his parochial connivers,  
the whole exhausted horde of us,  
giddy with our betrayals,  
laughing at the folly of love.

Once, while I sat looking  
at the fields, a yellow spider  
with eyes like rindy emeralds  
dropped from the ceiling  
and crawled across my wrist;  
I heard my love telling me  
to hurry, look quick—  
horses broke from their corral  
and bolted through drifted snow,  
but as they crested the hill,  
the mares stopped and waited  
for the sway-backed colt to cross  
the ridge, before they descended  
together with the sun  
into the hoar-covered canyon below.

*David Axelrod*