First Days At Bear Creek Ranch

David Axelrod
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East across the cut hayfields,
Arabian mares were corralled
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
drunken 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.

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