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Michael Umphrey

Summer Softball

Just before sunset the orange brick
of the Mission shines in the orange light
as the Jesuit priest might have seen it:
the summit of human escape rising
into the centuries above buffalo skin lodges,
gone now to tract housing. Gabrielle
plays shortstop with her back to the church.
The score is eleven to eight, her team
an inning from becoming valley champs.

She'll be fourteen in August, the granddaughter
of a Salish girl and a Scottish trader
who came here because he thought he might
do without city traffic and bosses. Some
Indians drank with him all night, aloof
from petty gods that chafed like collars.
Someday he'd go back to Missouri with enough
to buy the city. He saw himself in a dream
laying down terms, but stayed
with the woman who drank with him, who
rode her horse north from the Mission
to the next creek where he built his cabin
and almost understood how easily the little
that life offers could be had. Except

he could never figure the stars, all
intoxication less wild. It was too lonely
to see the edge of what he could never say.
Gabrielle drops a pop fly, recovers
and tags the runner at second. On her way
to the dugout she grins at three boys
in the bleachers behind me. Their adolescent
chatter gets louder. The priest moves
the sprinkler nearer the red petunias
surrounding the statue of Christ. She
is so lovely the first moves
of love might come too easily,
blinding her in the dark.

Last night tufts of hair
from the mule deer still floated in the air
when I made it back onto the road. The stars
surprised me—so bright that far from town.
I wondered where the deer had gone
and how to call a wrecker. A woman
I'd been able not to think of
for three years came to mind.
An owl moved through cottonwoods
into the open above me,
crossed the empty highway
into dark pine, without
a sound.

One thing I never
told her, or anyone, was that I'd found
a forest so deep I trusted
no edge to it: walking, praying
to be exhausted enough to sleep.

It was there that one summer a tree fell into another
and held. My brother began sawing the second,
a twenty-inch larch. His smooth engine
whined up to a roar and his sharp chain
showered fragrant chips in a gold heap
at his feet. He was eighteen,
his body lean and damp, his hard hat
holding long hair from his eyes, drops
of sweat tickling his face. His arms and chest
burned with the good hurt of good muscles.
He may have never seen the tree he forgot.
"Instantaneous," the coroner said.
It wouldn't have mattered. She didn't see it
as her job to hear from me. "It's late
and I just want to sleep."

And it was there that the priest who imagined
this town must have been. He got it all wrong.
He heard evil in the alien songs
the Indians sang to communal drumming at summer
fires by the creek. St. Louis was across

the divide, an impossible half-year's journey
back. He knew no way to join the dancers,
so he stayed up late, drew plans by candlelight.
They filled the smoky cabin where he hid.
Earth turned to brick and rose toward the stars.

Gabrielle hits a triple, beautifully moves
past third then hesitates, taunts the catcher
with the threat of coming home. She can't imagine
either building or fleeing cities, poised as she is
on the far side of freedom ringing like a scream.