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A LITHO OF THE WIREWORKS

by

Arthur T. Homer

B.A. Portland State University, 1977

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for


the degree of

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1979

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Whetstone

I

A LITHO OF THE WIREWORKS

TOUR OF PITTOCK MANSION

Where dogwood blooms in the hills above Portland
the timber baron stretched his arms out
into blue valley air. A dozen young architects
began to sketch the house that stands here.
How many halls it has, how many rooms,
I can't guess. Read your brochure. A friend
of the family says they closed all but two
at the end, and deeded the place to the city.
If we forgive them back taxes, we may stand
on the lawn, see both rivers, the three
mountains that hold the town. Past those peaks,
madness, a way back more foreign than Nepal.
The only direction is river. Even east
is west, the sea to Boston for glass,
for silver or cast iron beds.

More likely the orient. Take the observatory.
In the red carpet's nap, the bay red calf,
prey to black cat, its hindquarters half eaten
by moths. And there, beneath stylized trees,
leopards lie, aspire to the branch where
lyrebirds roost. With such promise young lovers
stare down shelving cliffs to the sea.
Sheep graze fields at each face, moving like
the sun's rough figure on the carpet. If a man
brought his wife here, expecting the town
would always look up to the same stars as he
in his youth, what would he say when the oval
skylight fell, when crows circled overhead,
and hawks rode valley updrafts to the ridge.

Rain the birds promised came, and ships. Blue
clouds at sunset. The weak shine of traffic
on wet streets. Hills step back into fog bank, sky.
Weather runs east for those same mountains.
Tonight the storm will pass, the moon a cracked
fraction, bright in a young wife's eye. She turns
on her side and dreams. By moonset the next front
covers its prey. So easy and sure: always the dark
husband to turn toward, the old march of stars
to say it's good the way clouds braid this valley.
No one is watching her sleep.

FOLLOWING MORNING FROM THE WATERFRONT WEST

I take to early streets with ground fog,
 river mist. Nothing but morning left
 to go home on. Streetlights a blue string
 east to the Cascades. The west frog quiet
 where river backs trees, islands.
 Sign says beaver this close to town,
 back of the last trace of docks where railroads
 once met mills. Past reeds, black pilings,
 rusted rails, ties rotted out.

The fresh-spit smell of new cut logs
 keen on our streets at first light. Gold,
 the skinned edges fixed on water.
 At the brewery: morning shift. Hoppers
 bright off puddled rooftops. Steam
 from the cookers up behind grain elevators.
 A rush of stooped bundles gathers for work.

God, how good my home looks. Fireboats
 slit the waterline. Riverbanks
 draw back like horses' lips in fear.
 In all loud light the bass rise now.
 Mud ducks guard your young -- this day
 for a deep swim.

How the factory workers'
 dirty kids pile onto log rafts.
 see the tall one, graceful, balanced
 by his rifle like a tightrope walker
 with a parasol. The rifle snaps
 and fish turn up under the docks
 downstream, grain fat, stomachs
 mines of anything shiny:

#3 spoon,
 gum wrapper, beer top, coin, duckling.
 They swallow everything whole.

CRISTO REDEMPTOR

Tomorrow the sun comes back
for the weekend. Bicycles, brass
bands, a mid-morning glitter
on the street. Voices dodge through
the doorway. You're home.

Only the sky is vacant.
Storm drains backed up, sidewalks
spread with tender paper
from the parade you planned
so long ago. Sorry

no one came. We're booked up
clear through kingdom come
till new year. The baby's dog
is plowing up the gutters
with his nose. Old men
stutter above their canes.

Catch that uncle rooting
through your clothes and you
call the morals officer.
The doctor's out of town.
Your mother's a professional
sissy and your father hasn't been
in love since the last big war.

The whole family loves to gamble
better than fish. I'll give you
three to one my nymphs will catch
more than your divine coachmen.
If we die in conversation, damn us all.
We'd go broke in heaven. Television
reports high comedy in open grave.
Available as pity, your old job
waits in tomorrow's rain.

HELL

It's hell when you rock back
in your chair and remember,
three years since the monkey died.
Your friend says he has to be
drunk to touch his woman.

Your cousin's monkey, really,
and nothing to you.
She drowned it in the bath tub
because it made so much noise.
Monkeys are dirty too.

You could tip over the chair,
go to that friend's house
where he and his woman
drink wine in the kitchen
and giggle, begin to fondle
in the shadows under the table.
Still, it's hell and you
may as well stay home.
Tip your chair forward. Forget.

Hell, it's hard to sleep,
to have sweat grease your skin
all summer long. Even your friend
the grease monkey sweats.
He sweats all he drinks
on his woman.

Wasn't so bad, was it?
So what if you have to take it
drunk. It's better now --
quiet, and you shouldn't have to
drown the monkey twice tonight.

A LITHO OF THE WIREWORKS

The blue is sky and western.
It frames the wall, white,
the texture of paper --
sets up well against the tooth
of hills, black with fir
and now evening. Foreground
where the night shift strings out
for lunch, blue shadows hunker
against the dish of their backs.
The sidewalk where they sit,
gray, as if the stone itself
were just being pulled away.

The foreman's eyes are dark
as kitchen windows. Gold blinds
the empty panes above, sweat
on the arm of the crouched man
beside him. And he thinks
of his wife for a moment:
The small yellow flame between her fingers
when she ties back her hair --
morning, and I'm barely awake.

If the hill were no more
than a smear of green to figure
distance from, the louvered roof
and hunched trucks only cameos,
not yet laid in, they might all get up
and walk away. But in the proofs we see
their curled boots pointing heavenward,
lunchpails broken open in detail, even
the sharp outline of the doorway
leading back to rows of dumb machines
in perfect register.

INCENTIVES FOR NIGHT WORK

Where we drink they call the barmaid Forklift,
work a fucking shame. I like driving swing shift
down the corner pocket, chalking up to shoot again.

More often I miss. The foreman says two more
then home to give the old lady something
to live for. His moons rise hairy off the stool.

Better this, the jukebox begging us to stop
the world and let it off, than work, the steward
lost to reason. The Mafia is out to run us.

Corner the world market on widgets, he figures.
His finger tests the broken window pane. Bullet.
After closing Jean's, the last place we try

wants cover. The waitress never thinks it fair,
having to ask if we're looking for love. The dancer
still on duty doesn't care. Asks if I've seen Paris.

I've seen the old man come home late and Irish,
hating the fifty cents an hour that makes it
hard to wake up mornings, cursing the army.

Naples, 1946. The citizens line up to spit
on M.P.s at the embassy. Short-changed at a bar
he breaks, and every beer thereafter buys dishonor.

Maybe someone's out to corner the market on dreams.
Look at me, living it all different. I remember
his terrible fists, swinging back like a broken gate.

It's me now coming home, finding it funny
some mistaken skunk has drifted by to check
a gas leak at the reservoir two blocks away --

nose and tail aloft for love or war.

TEN A.M. HIGHWAY

This morning I start home failed.
My home town dances pale behind me
in early smoke. The blue Cascades
slip north like fish scales
tattooed on the snow piled sky.

Winners go on with their lives.
I want a ride out of town,
a radio announcer to guide me
through down and out hits
after each commercial break.

What were those highways that promised
to fade past Aberdeen, Lost Lake,
or the next Forest of Mystery --
last chance for food and gas
this side of Progress.

My home's across the freeway
where overpasses bend to earth.
Here's where I live, look forward
to sleep, the long float into cold
where words are fellow travelers.

I'll let my voice go off with swallows
to catch that bowed wind over Barlow Ridge.
They ride it till they're pitched
into the pass to slide hundreds of feet
down fir-blue walls. I want to go
under that dark forest for good.

AT THIS TIME

Who could have asked this evening light
cut low over southwest hills what power
it used to send those hills into a dark
pout with the hail-green sky? Solstice --
the shortest day of the year. Still
the dogwood sends its gray husked buds
out the tips of its branches like jets
from burning twigs. The flowering cherry
explodes in hail, goes crystal in the eye-
bright pools that stand with us on earth.

These faces, red as if wept through,
I call friends. No force could turn them
curious before they've gone full term
with winter. The trees are saints on end
to them, lives aflame like incense.
When they live they could not tell by wind;
it never blows them home. Yet orange trimmed
clouds in last light make moorage there
against a fast evening. A black phalange
of ducks wades past, a finger for direction.

Travel their way for a time. You'll come to a place
where houses thin to angles in plowed fields.
Water stands bright in black furrows, mirrors
torn outlines of hills, a fist of cloud that cleared
the coast range to hang like flak above the inland
valley. High bands of cirrus lie fallow and dark
in a white-faced sky. A barn, abandoned in its
field, collapses in a tangle of slats.

A FARM OUTSIDE PORTLAND

Tonight I'm thinking how sunset pushes
red arms down the canyons, into streets.
Hills southwest of town
are dark. Red beams
scissor across them like swords
in the tarot deck. I can't read
or believe. It's just that someone
showed me the cards and I remembered
a man I knew, the hills. Later
I heard a song. The roses' yellow
bloom outside my window meant
goodbye according to this song. Silly,
but the man had a farm, and a fear
of blood. The night his cow
calved, he ran to the light of his
garage, arms crossed, reaching
red for the barn. Calves don't wait
till they're born to stumble.
They tangle in the womb. The man's
mother-in-law ran to the barn. I don't
believe this has anything to do
with sunset. If I gave him the yellow
rose, we didn't say goodbye. I lied.
What I said there will never
be mine. Words I used won't
work for me again.

ANTHEM TO A LITTLE-KNOWN RIVER

Through central Oregon the Umpqua
 pushes west past a run of ridges.
 Bass-likely pools green to the edge
 of rapids flashing with rainbow.
 At the Elkton plywood mill, no jobs --
 only oregon grape working stiff
 up the backs of storage sheds.

We nose blunt and dusty down
 Route 38, my uncle at the wheel
 so dreamy he recites
 highway names from forty states
 in time to quiet light off mudflats,
 wide at midsummer.

When you're young enough those months
 turn dumb watching skiffs float away
 on a dry-rot wind. It gets in your eyes,
 and it's as well there's nothing to see
 or hear but the four-throated roar
 of the Buick and the sheen that rides
 from hood chrome to rapids and back.

A puff from under the firs
 hooks your neck. You shudder,
 slug the dash, start to learn the road
 all over: horses in the next field,
 bridge and the cutoff to Loon Lake.
 You've watched the namesake,
 ringed in ripples, dip great wings and lift.

Remember where you were, sunburn
 blooming out the window. Think of the woman
 you'll meet someday, so lovely
 you won't believe she wants you.
 How you'll drive along the Umpqua with her
 all the way to Reedsport on the coast.

COVERED BRIDGE AT ELK RUN CREEK

No one meant it to be lovely. You might mistake it for a barn, white, its black arch taking up road. Alders boil in wind above the cedar shakes. Driving out from Loon Lake, sun low in your mirror, you know the man who put it here wasn't thinking cattle in the fields, girl on horseback riding out of shadow. Timber was cheap, buckled in rain that weighed these ridges off their bedrock. Logging roads sweep hills of second growth like searchlights. A high rig passed this way, and in a lapse, the trimmer left one branch to take out slats.

The creek still passes anybody's door. Truck farms try and some produce. A few bright settlers brought cows, but most a habit for seasonal work and river. The only light is rain, trees shadowed dry to lee side. As long as upkeep is paint every other year, chainsaw for the rotten joist, the bridge can stay. Scenic guidebooks don't list it and weather never cared. At night, or years I've been away, something -- rain, economy -- may have taken it. History will still be gray, water-stained as photos in Coos Bay Museum. Oxen, fat as fog, drew water in the logs they hauled, and no one moves to the Coast Range hunting for love.

II

HOW MOON GETS INSIDE THE CLOUDS

NO MATTER WHAT ANYONE SAYS

--for Carol

Imagine us at the sea, surf crushing rocks
for miles of new beach, You lie in the sun
until you can't be touched. My hands
find caesuras around your shoulders too abrupt
and tap time in my lap. Oh, some men don't know
how to be greedy enough.

A friend says
everything that's precious -- a lovely stone
captured in the surf -- is doomed, and what's doomed
is precious. I'm glad this isn't the sea.

Last night, precious, the soft stocky mare
you think you could trust lay curled in snow
like a knot of charred wood. When she sighed deep
and stood, I thanked the common stars, for they
are doomed where they stand.

This afternoon
I was hoping you would notice I am painting you
in brown. Forgive the long silence as I mix colors.
This has taken some time. Only now the trees
of the creekbed catch sun, too lovely to touch.
The thin path of light across the white field
reaches the willows like spilled honey.

Let me stand
sideways to the sun like the horses, their eyes
closed in their dark faces. Teach me
to take and take.

WHAT WE DID AFTER RAIN

Nothing like today, poverty
 graced evenings with talk and wills
 quipped poor, poor to keep
 mosquitos at bay. Smudgepots
 went black, the air ozone
 and firefly. Hogs rooted and died
 because the adage was wrong.
 More prayer than supper
 a hobo would say. Foxfire
 marked our place too down
 to bother, the house so small
 we thought we heard Mother's
 heart at night, her singing
 it sadly to rest.

She called our drawing good --
 Mother in summer, Father
 in snow, deer tracks struck
 intaglio down to leaf mulch.
 Little sport in hunger, he'd
 never track them past the pond.
 If I picture him now, it's dumb
 amidst black oaks stenciled on
 white hills. The trail he's lost
 spills dark prints over ice.
 The hooves' brief stroke on water,
 smudged like the border
 of a valentine hand drawn.

Pictures were wrong, what we sang
 Baptist and out of key. Ideas
 were worse: boys driven epileptic
 with sin, the retarded niece
 a judgement on the preacher. Only
 what was simple -- talk, trees,
 a bass voice blocked in late but solid --
 these stand up today. Friends believe
 I've made this up. The grocery
 blesses my checks and doesn't ask.
 This evening after rain, my wife and I
 trust night hawks to come back low,
 sharp wings drawing them
 skyward over the clean streets.

NOT MY FATHER'S, MY HANDS

I look at them and my age means
to have done some things and not others.
The mounds and hollows come to fit
small things that tumble across them.
The matchbook resting there will work
till it's dropped. A lump on my ring finger
won't leave long after pliers have gone
back to the company locker. This callus
gives me more right than any union card.

Not my father's, my hands make music.
Waving them in front of my face
won't take apart men in bars.
Guitar strings bend to my fingers
like fishline gone underwater. The riffs
I like jump, mean hours in loud bars,
dance all in the throat, the guts jammed
and cooing like pigeons. Blues now
is mostly canned. The fingers say
OK, circle the shotglass.

Forgetting, I play line off the reel.
test the edge of my knife. My thumb,
tired lover, works down the trout's backbone,
comes away with a bit of air sac.
As I drive home, my two best fingers
stand in salute to aspen. It's fall.
Things come as they will, one at a time.
My hands could be working backwards
for all they care. I drove down
this road. Now I am driving back.

Hands never remember more than this --
no blame in my father's striking
love for his children. Mother's hands,
white gulls to cover my body,
fly away or catch in her hair. I let
them go. My own travel off together.
Home, near winter, near sleep, the hands
pull away after my wife, fresh cut
branches, divining her water's pull.

FOR MY DAUGHTER

There is rain in the sky, Willow,
also clouds and blue stuff we call...
just sky. No other name for
blue above and no other name
for Willow. Ah my little
tabula rasa, I'm afraid
what to write.

Let's steal
some old word and make it
sweet again because
you never heard it.

I say orange.
You, injury. Me,
soliloquy. We are
about to be lonely.

I mean lovely. Sure.
We can wipe the sky clean too.
You can tell me again
how the moon gets
inside the clouds.
"It blooms in!"
No other word for it.
Bloom.

A CHILD'S FEAR OF NUMBERS

To judge the height of trees, I'd find my own,
compare the length of shadows for a scale.
The way the missing piece fit what was known
was just the way light draws a triangle.

I don't know what it taught to pace the pear
tree off across the yard. I'd forget
more important things: the rule for square
roots or how the neighbor kids got beat.

When I was four foot eight, my favorite trees
were always over forty. Maybe I
learned something's not quite perfect. Even leaves
can't forget their origins. To try

this exercise yourself, think how rule one
says none of this will work without the sun.

A SUNDAY OUTING

New surface on the highway tempts us
 to drive on for the pass, lowland birch
 wagging like chicken necks in our tailwind.
 Poor nature, nothing without us. It's wet
 spring here, but when the truckers leave
 for Lewiston, how the larch must crowd
 around ... what?

the empty highway?

Along the railroad right-of-way, boxcars
 rot into the creek. Upon these hills,
 no jars. And in the corner of a working
 spread, all that marks the first homestead
 is a stand of fruit trees, caterpillars
 ajerk in their hammocks left to keep
 their own crazy time till ranch hands come,
 Zoroastrian with blowtorches and meaning.

The gravel road we take will dead end
 in the mountains. Here it snakes between
 open pasture and the creek. Groundwater
 rises in new ponds, in hoofprints where horses
 came to drink. When we drive off, the grass
 flags nothing down but dust, and wind drags
 willow blossoms to the pond. The flowers
 we name staminate; stifflegged spider
 rafting on them we compare to ready fingers
 on piano keys.

Up the slopes, alpine flowers
 are tremulous in half a wind, have delicate
 petals, and names like shooting star. The road
 cuts back to ranches past the turnout. Pale blue
 butterflies have come to sun in wheelruts.
 We understand the access road can't be maintained,
 the plaque that marks off wilderness, the last
 sign we can read.

COLLAGE NOT CULLED FROM THE PAGES
OF HISTORY BOOKS OR NEWSPAPERS

A black angus was not
Lt. Governor of Missouri
in 1861, nor did Howard
Reynolds die
of anthrax in the county
named for himself
in the summer of 1957.

You may have heard
how the Union Cavalry
--never mind which year --
rattled through the streets
of Jefferson City. They didn't
hear, above the volley
of slammed windows, a pistol-
shot in the governor's office,
where a cow was spared
for nearly a hundred years.

You were not
a small boy in Reynolds County
where hills curve off to flat
horizons, and cornfields
crack, afloat in heat.
The welfare man, named Butts,
might have died of anthrax
or suicide that year
for all you know,

but wasn't hauled, stiff
and dark as a German
woodcut, across the gravel
road at the end of a chain.

Never mind that, or the fawn
run to barb wire by dogs.
I will say this: it was
my father carried it
four miles in his shirt
and laid it in the woodshed.
Too late to save it

the game warden said.
We buried the little pile
of guts he left. Our dogs
spun hungry in the dirt.
He threw the carcass
in his truck and drove away.

Dogs aren't governors
of anything either,

and whitetails aren't much
smarter than a welfare man.
They only have one trick: tail up,
break to right or left; tail
down, turn and let the hunter's
eye be flagged into
the wrong stand of sumac.

FATBOY'S SONG

Who cares if the sheet of snow is torn
to brown religion on football fields?
I'm singing a song that goes:
if I loved her, her husband
would break my arms. I'll take
the Hellgate High girl's choir to heart.
They're singing trees in the street
dangerous as me, me on my face
like a pilgrim. She'd find my broken
nose an orthodox delight, the attraction
of the snake-eye nostrils fatal.

The Salish believed dreaming
of the dead meant marriage, or close relation.
I think of Abelard, running to fat, or how
she'd sneak into my ward in white
lab clothes. Just as the old scholastic
leads a hundred boys suddenly to song
I become her blackbird, rescued
from early cold. I trill like a meadow lark
through pounds of gauze, while she
nuzzles my plastered wrists with useless
lips, casting her signature
into tears. I know it's wrong

to be afraid, to pray like this.
Let me be. Let me carry someone
else's message. What if my
complacent pigeon is surprised
at the hawk, tearing little horses
from her breast in this
Guernica of love? Fuck it. Pablo
is painting her face in the window because
he loves her nose. Wasn't her name
Louise? Isn't the broken bridge
where points of view turn back?
Forgive me. I don't know. I do nothing.

THE CAT IN WINTER FOLIAGE

Quiero hacer contigo
lo que la primavera hace con los cerezos.

-- Pablo Neruda

Since four this snow has hidden one neighbor
after another behind its stitchery on trees.
Nothing recommends this wet snowfall like
what it does for aspen. These wild brides
have flowered at last. Oh, Pablo can do what
he likes. Spring's a present every birthday,
but the rare gifts come from bitchy winter.
My dear, I know this is dialectic, but it's
not cavalier. If I put your heart in my pocket,
my shirt's a shrine.

This business of snow lights up the night
and drives the cat wild for affection. He wants
touching, wants to dip his paws in the field
where horses stood, where Maggy the beautiful
mare rolled and coated her back. He climbs
the willow, and won't come down till I follow,
loose loads whispering down my neck. We run
for home, his claws locked like passion
in my shoulder.

III

GOING TO THE STORE

A BOOK ON TATTOOS

i

On the wrong library shelf, it's not
 anthropology -- cultural or general.
 What am I digging for? The fantasy sweetheart
 goes by no name. She may be changed, a rose
 slipped between her thighs, or her hair
 darkened to match the hair of the wife
 who follows her into the arms, across
 the blue waves of the stomach.
 The dream done, the girl may disappear
 forever behind the lowered tail,
 the thousand chaste eyes of a peacock.

ii

There are fourteen motives for tattooing...
one of them money. Someone should have
 called my uncle Prince, and paid
 to see the dancer scything across his arm.
 And her sister, blue as twenty miles of mountain
 on his chest -- was she with him when he jumped
 ship in Panama? a working girl who fed him
 and called him El Mariposa, the butterfly?

iii

The fairer sex, generally, is not prone
to acquiring tattoos. Even poor Nellie,
well paid by Barnum & Bailey, stood up
 poorly in photographs. She was too thin,
 seemed ready to weep, her breasts rising
 unmarked from the blue night of her body.

The first thing men want to do is kiss it.
 Go ahead. A bit of color beneath the shoulderblade,
El Mariposa won't bite back. When you've forgotten
the first thing you wanted, rest. Listen to the big
 rose of the lungs swell and fall away. Along the bent
 stem of the vertebrae, the wings scissor together.

iv

If you are not corporeal as Vienna's Constantine,
able to bear three hundred designs, Burmese elephants,
those original caryatids nosing your pectorals
long nights after their mahoots have deserted,
perhaps you'd prefer the famous fox hunt motif.
Starting always from the shoulder, the cortege
courses southeasterly, the hurdle of the spine
spanned by a stallion in fine lines. Across your
right buttock, eager whippets and beagles
chase the illusive tail into its hole.

VISION FOR A WRONG CENTURY

Autumn morning: trees turn wrist to sky, leaves
 water smooth to earth and cover. The thesis is
 1853 today. Birds and leaves lift off the ground
 in fives and sixes. Rivers early calm, sandpipers
 twist white to brown, work downstream into the first
 low swells, Under skies of such valuable glass
 each house stands ice in light, bricks frozen
 in air-white mortar, laced with window frames.
 The Italian brother, mission cook and painter,
 climbs his scaffold. At St. Ignatius, Salish boys
 whisper at the long necked women, robed men of Spanish
 vision circling the walls -- boards milled there
 while the complex still ran smooth as Voltaire's watch.
 Beyond all gardens, past outbuildings and corrals,
 wheelruts snake away into the wild world, neither
 best nor flat. The printing press, the mills, and schools
 for girls and boys are marked on photographs
 hung about log walls first raised for the sisters.
 Thus the people are preserved, come to believe
 in their hands, the new good rising before their eyes.

They are not alone. Brazilian forest chokes the roads.
 Charles Darwin stands unsteady in his carriage.
 Some bit of life has caught his eye. Black women
 village bound on feast day turn to face this
 foreign man. Dressed in excellent taste, dressed
 in white linen and bright shawls, they start to sing,
 to beat time on their thighs. They know what hands say.
 Charles throws vintems, laughs and sits. He vanishes
 behind green walls, leaves them stooped, redoubling
 their wild song... and it's on to the Pampas where
 lynx-eyed gauchos spy a cow. They kill, they smile
 and eat. Science isn't sure. Is it not true
 all heretics are Turks? Witness the beards of sailors
 aboard their ship. Not only do their bishops
 marry, but this one leaves his housekeeper
 (really a simple, candid girl) bad Spanish
 and instructions: Do you feed these caterpillars
every day that they might turn to butterflies.
Surely some great evil is abroad. The padres must
 meet with the governor, the man be arrested upon return.

I-80 WITH CHARLES DARWIN

Illness is just bad weather in my head, a snail's
 pace for dry climate where country people think
 they breed from dew. Land like this, and times,
 it's civil if a gentleman sells dirty straw for horses.
 Let Darwin do with bones. No bread, but mold
 and lichen on the skeletons of mules who carried
 ore and died along the road. Why Irish generals
 gave names to Spanish towns -- quien sabe? Something's
 wrong with everything or me. My watch is almost up.
 Ten till ten, the hands lean northwest, Plain
 to mountain, jackrabbit to pipestone, speedometer
 rages toward eighty, highway like a butchershop.
 The next town's a line drive for my stomach.

Good eye, Charles, for noticing there's hardly any
 hundred yards where nothing lives: brush, cactus.
 We are dormant seeds ourselves, explode in the first
 rainy weather. Jealousy is watching mountains
 for snowpack, envy of rain at Coquimbo. Here a dry
 mouth, reading the old boys. Sure as small towns
 it's earthquakes to rain, rain to abundance --
 some old affection between earth and sky.

One valley is sure some evil brings the mad dogs back.
 At the coast, jade swells knock cliffs back underfoot.
 Behind us, sheep turn face to turf like promises. It could
 be our dogs drive them off the rocks like fat, white
 swallows. Don't we like running too? Some folks will say ...
 You know what they say: oaks along the river are old
 women blown with goiters. Anything. If we take wind
 and speed, this inland road for miles, and an eye
 for what is right, we'll pick a farm near Pasco like a ball.
 As we connect, the farmwife strains over the pumphandle
 like a husband, shows how children are drawn
 from eighty feet and cold.

GOING TO THE STORE

Tonight I walk Lolo Avenue, the bridge
 where water knocks a black pit out
 from under my feet. Wooden houses behind
 windscreens of young fir are free of dogs,
 and the stars, emancipated from moonlight,
 bright above Mt. Jumbo. Little Bear, his snout
 just cresting the ridge, must find the man
 who carries garbage to the dark side of his hedge
 more interesting than me. We'll all be found
 asleep when city men come loud at dawn.

The interesting man asks how it's going,
 but I'm not sure. This is what I'm coming to,
 not the store where I buy cigarets, forego beer
 for softdrinks. Twenty minutes walk from home,
 and when I come to it I don't know the wood on my walls.
 Knotty pine? Home, my cat is draped beside my pants
 across the window seat. He is free
 of worms and metaphor, a mystic speaking true
 and foolish, snoring kissy sounds like a small
 gray flock of sparrows, a rumbling moth.

But this is winter. Birds are serious, moths dead,
 and I am writing without a moon, though stars
 are bright above the mountain slopes, the creek
 rilled black below. I am ashamed of my flashlight,
 but will talk about it. This is what
 I'm coming to, sometimes afraid. A horse trips
 over rocks in the field. Clumsy wood falls
 down in my stove. I make sayings:

Rotten wood is fuel twice burned --
 much smoke, little heat; or

Blowing coals is sacrilege, stoking ascetic.

One must be cautious, living with a little god
 or a big animal. Fire and horses, mornings
 I can measure snowfall on the broad tossing backs.
 Then they steam like burning haystacks. House and fire,
 horse and bear. I am not incautious. Doug Winters,
 kicked in the head by a horse, retarded,
 was never afraid when we were boys. Even our dog,
 part wolf someone said, named Shadow. "He bite me,
 that be last time he bite me," said Doug.
 And Shadow believed him.

Shadows don't care what I say. In the mountains,
where permanence is poor metaphor, roots come
black as bear, and sign is all around to scare me
off the trail. This isn't true, just what I saw.
You can't believe someone who'd swear
by the brown bag in his hand that he's still
Grandma's little man.

Look, he's going to the store, two dollars
pinned inside his shirtsleeve where
big kids will never find it. A girl's choir
starts to sing inside the highschool gym.
Two elms down the street in falling snow
curl one way from a blanked-out lawn, the old woman's
hands before she died, arthritic fingers branching
huge before the altar of some stranger's porch.
And if I'm late, or don't come home,
she's right. This is what I've come to.

HUNG OVER WITH SNOW CLOUDS

Trees wall the blue field, puzzled
as I am by fog and mountains, moon
and nimbus. The creek's deep vein
bells evening around the party
in the house with big windows. All day
Orion blocked by sky, long story
winding through the windrows of heaven.
Down here, see for yourself: nothing.
Elderberry hunkers in mist. What
cottonwoods balance on their fingertips,
like justice, is the sky. Dirty thing.
Where will this lead me?

Trees reach, the cottonwoods highest.
A small white oak, alone in the field,
circles the moon with its topmost branches,
plays catch while some bird mutters
from a lower limb. New moon grazes
the spine of the mountains: brittle
fidgeting of twigs as it leans against
one bough. That bird is driving me mad.
White light chitters along the twig ends,
curves like larvae from buds. Already
the oak spins a clear ball free,
standing like a bright goblet on its trunk.

Before I know it, Morning, violet
sectioning the windowsills. I've chased
my story off the edge of the world.
Behind my half-drawn curtains, a wineglass
bends first light across the tabletop.
Glad to be home, I watch the purpled bowl
spin smoothly on its stem, which turns too.
At last the base, the one sure foot, eddies
and begins, taking with it table and house,
field and the rim of mountains --
even my recent windfall of cloud.

WINTER AFTERNOON RAMBLE

In Hokusai's painting, the view
is landward. Waves reach with
many fingers for boat prow, Fuji
in the background. Here, in mountains,
it's trees, baroque against storm
slanting off Lolo Peak. Branches
claim: "We're ready for anything."
This haze, the weak sun --
these are nothing expected.
Permit me this: I'm like them,
unprepared for calm.
Think of the day
after a storm at sea,

little towns pearly in aftermath,
the morning fog. Some of this
winter light is pouring over
the waves, oily. Oh, whitecaps
lob the cutter around past the spit,
and stiff foam sails up the beach
to pile against logs and houses.
But breakers keep
hunkering into the sand
with the old dogs and gulls.

WAKING

A car whines in the frozen drive, finds me
 thinking something foolish about my genes.
 Where have they brought me? Between the star's
 last reach across the ridge and my cat's leap
 to the table top, I know too much to tell.
 In the flesh, history, my best chance, but more --
 everyone I've known all over. I have to pretend
 to make the old mistakes so friends will
 have me. I wish they'd go home.

Marriage isn't much. The J.P. shaves a man
 in his barbershop next door while we
 fill out the papers. He's no Walt Whitman.
 He's a smartass. "Some pay ten, some more. Depends
 how much you think it's worth." His cabins
 are quaint and for rent. They face the river
 east of Stevenson. I know what
 those stars are worth. We can't afford them.
 The damper claps in the fireplace. Her eyes
 skirt ceiling like smoke. I throw something
 big against the wall, walk grim for the bridge.
 Something will not break.

Sorry. I'm making my bed. Stars give up
 like that lover who will be cold, no matter
 how you straitjacket yourself in your sheets.
 Time now to help the kid, maddened by his father's
 slewing car, a bloody nose. I read in his face
 news of survivors -- in burning houses, hunters
 lost in the hills, even the kidnapped. Rescue
 is facile and false to the heart. You are like
a son to me, boy. Let me fix that. Look here --
come back. I can be tender as any father.

POSTURES IN SNOW

The toppled horse bares red
 hindquarters from the ditch. Where magpies
 quarried flesh the legs branch stiff
 toward westbound traffic. Photos of that day
 show me with Christmas tree, a fir
 gone final in the alley, dumpbox green.
 Light's the sun I love, the leaving one--
 south through elms that die for good
 to show death after death.

Up the canyon, trees white as Dore's
 angels. I keep them off with ski poles.
 Drier snow has experts talking
 five kinds of wax. Novices slide by
 on rented gear. I watch numbers on my
 daughter's heels, and all I know is how
 to fall when she does, how much more
 weight I carry.

Coincidence in gray:
 papers say stock dead in Kalispell
 not fed in weeks. The shot has them postured
 like soldiers, like tarps frozen in fields.
 Elsewhere birds in snow are clever clowns.
 I laugh at the man bound home below my window.
 He'll make his woman happy, conquering
 drifts as if his love were war, an expedition
 to the coast.

We both know the sea
 receded years ago, and miles. Every spring
 ice breaks for salt water. The planned
 community loses one home to the tide. Each dune
 we crest, the young girl dancing in surf
 races for her partner in the waves. Let dark
 bodies lift from foam, from drift, the ship
 that brought them founder, lost
 forever past the changing spit.

AUTUMNAL FOR A FRIEND IN THE DESERT

Trees mean business when they
say fall. Smoke is loitering
in my house. Outside, the sky
will not be serious. I've been
wrong about the clouds before.
Here it is, autumn. My small fire
prays for leaves and clouds.
They can't stay up there forever.

The leaves know that, moon
too yellow for this time of year.
Yes, now I'm sure. Clouds
are simple and do not care,
their affairs Platonic, ideal
in this respect. It would be wrong
of trees to want to be like clouds.
Yet they are.

Between trees, the field
is stuck in my window. A chestnut horse
grazes like a huge bassoon gulping air.
His perfect lips are luminous
with hair. He passes through
staves in the window frame. Not so,
the tall blond aspen blushing
against a flat blue patch.
The slightest breeze will set
the thin wrists flapping, leaves
waving all the way to earth.

NOTES

"A Book on Tattoos" : lines in italics taken from Art, Sex, and Symbol: the Mystery of Tattooing, by R.W.B. Scutt and Christopher Gotch. Pages 29-30.

"Vision for a Wrong Century" and "I-80 with Charles Darwin" : based on The Voyage of the Beagle, Journal by Charles Darwin. Pages 31 and 32.