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### Suppose the Land You Own

Albert J. Garcia

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SUPPOSE THE LAND YOU OWN

By

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B.A., California State University, Chico, 1985

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Montana

1987

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ONE

The More You Think

Whether you die with an ax overhead  
in the act of splitting walnut,  
or whether you relax and smoke  
your pipe in the cool shade,  
closing your eyes, alone,  
knowing it's the last time--

your wife will find friends  
to haul in wood for winter.  
Watching them stack it neatly,  
the way you did, she'll invite them  
to rest, stay for lunch.  
If it's nice they'll drink iced tea  
in lawn chairs on the back porch.  
There might be apricot pie.

It's like you always said:  
the work must be done.  
So long as the lawn gets water  
and tomatoes grow fat  
in the sun, everything is fine.

And the more you think,  
the less you see yourself  
in the picture. Neighbor boys  
fight to hoe and weed  
your rose garden. Your wife  
pays them well to wash your car.

And if she's been baking,  
she'll serve something warm  
with melting ice cream  
where you often sit admiring  
the curling smoke your pipe makes.

What Should be Harvest

The rancher picks at dry knuckles,  
rubs in moisture from the window  
where he watches his crop of walnuts  
float in the puddled orchard.

His wife suggests he work  
in the barn, forget  
hulls splitting open.  
But at this late point  
only sweeping and picking remains.

Soon, mildew will set in,  
yellow as the wall hanging  
his wife works on,  
jabbing her crochet hook through  
the petal of a giant sunflower.

She's spent all day with laundry,  
vacuuming the drapes, rearranging  
the closet in the back bedroom.

He scratches his ankle,  
the back of his neck,  
looks to his wife's dustpan,  
to his trees in the storm,  
to the dimly-lit doorway  
where boots and gloves wait.

Discovery While Felling the Shade Tree

7 a.m. and the hole surrounding  
this mulberry trunk is deep enough  
to bury our three hounds,  
gawking into the pit,  
ears perked at the steady shoveling.

"A little deeper," Dad says  
just as his shovel clips off  
something harder than root,  
a jawbone, 2 or 3 teeth.

"Indian," he mumbles, and digs  
around the rest of the skull,  
the thin, mudcaked ribs.  
"Must be a child."  
The dogs peer in and drool.

I imagine a dead boy,  
maybe my age or younger.

"What's that shining?" I ask.  
Dad leans over and uncovers  
some small pieces of pearly shell,  
then tosses them back in the grave,  
covers the bones with new dirt.

They lie undisturbed as he begins  
his sawing--the tree  
ripped by metal teeth.  
And I keep seeing the blues and pinks  
of abalone buried  
two hundred miles from any ocean.

Something Important

Over there, against the branching orchard,  
my uncle's house rests  
in the huge loquat's shade. A skunk  
shifts small paws  
toward a sunspot on the lawn.

Nearby, a fourteen-year-old terrier  
moves amid scratching and clucking hens.  
The barn leans  
but is steady, willing  
and waiting for work.

From the highway  
you think it's quaint--  
seasons and harvests passing like minutes.

But I have been waiting a long time--  
as one waits for friendship  
or death--to see  
the baby coons clinging  
at my arms,  
making adult faces in jest.

### Family Dealings

At 4 a.m. Grandpa decided to hike  
back to the homeplace  
with its plum tree, its memories  
of twenty years ago.

Everyone thought it amazing  
that after being hit  
by an oil truck which broke  
half his bones, he lived at all.

After the funeral, we gathered at our house  
and chatted and ate and laughed,  
and talked about how it seemed  
almost a party with our family.

Later, each of us would isolate  
ourselves with a picture album,  
remember the truck driver stumbling along  
the road, the brash nurse,  
the crowded church, intensely hot,  
testing our strength.

At the Mailbox

My neighbor tells me the peaches  
she's entered at the fair  
could win this year's blue ribbon.  
Though she's never caught me,  
she knows I have eaten  
some of the fattest, a few  
hanging over my side of the fence.  
The letter in her hand, she explains,  
came from her daughter in Phoenix,  
the one who studied so much.  
The woman's shoulders, freckled brown,  
remind me of when I'd watch her daughter read  
by the pool, sunning her slight body,  
as I worked with a shovel or hoe.  
In my dented mailbox  
is a circular from the supermarket.  
The sun is strong  
and I would like to be in my house.  
But my neighbor keeps telling me  
how her darling will be visiting  
with her husband and new baby.  
Just in time for the fair, she exclaims,  
and goes on about her peaches.  
She says with a half smile that she's worked  
long and hard to raise them,  
that I really ought to try some.

Visitor

From the kitchen window Mom and I  
spot the lone roadrunner. He's been around  
the yard this week, pecking  
in the orchard, on the lawn.  
He sure is ugly, says Mom. She's fascinated,  
I can tell. Her face comes near the glass  
and she waits for him to strut  
from behind the roses. I saw him  
the other day with a mouse in his beak,  
she says. The lines on her face are beginning  
to show. But she doesn't care.  
Or maybe she does, but would rather concentrate  
on how I'm doing. I hear  
they kill rattlesnakes, I say, noticing  
she wants my opinion. She never speaks  
too long without an answer. Her eyes  
look at me like I'm twelve again,  
as though my hair isn't combed.  
For the first time in my life I see her  
longing for something she will never tell me.  
He's kind of an ugly-handsome, she says,  
I hope the dog doesn't scare him off.

Just About Gone

1

The obvious dream: I pull  
thirteen inches of slick rainbow  
and slap him in a waiting snowbank.  
The lake, of course, is dark blue  
and still. The air holds a chill  
from the surrounding mountains--forest  
frozen like my mustache. No trails  
come here. I have been flown in  
and landed on pontoons.

2

My wife: She pulls  
a chair around. What am I reading?  
Look at those pictures,  
she says. She pulls a cat  
onto her lap and rubs its fur  
the right way and then the wrong way.  
What kind of magazine is that? she asks,  
her head at a curious angle.  
What kind? I ask. What kind?

### Tribal Custom

At mid morning, and again  
 at mid afternoon,  
 two heavy Atsugewi sisters,  
 the last, chant seasonal hymns,  
 display arrow points  
 and baskets woven  
 one generation before.  
 They as helpers, giving  
 the secret manzanita berry recipe,  
 part of their National Park Service,  
 just-ask-a-ranger,  
 natural history program.

Imagine them beside the creek,  
 these squatting matrons,  
 or on the meadowside gathering grasses,  
 or in the bark house  
 stirring meal till it boils  
 and blisters like lava.  
Imagine, they ask a jogger  
 from Palo Alto, his cub  
 scout son whittling any shape  
 that happens to come.

The boy wonders if they ate  
 bear guts, why those people  
 give such names for lake,  
 deer, and sun. The man and wife  
 behind binoculars notice  
 the yellow fingernails  
 and cracked hands. They ask  
 if the sisters know  
 what kind of brown and white bird  
 just flew over.

Then, when everyone's sun has set,  
 the artifacts in padded boxes,  
 the boy and his parents drive off  
 in a panelled station wagon.  
Nice family, one sister whispers,  
 and they are quiet,  
 until they get home.

To the Fisherman on Lake Shasta

When you're trolling your Rapala,  
the lure just below the surface,  
keep the pole in your hands,  
feel a wobbling action, watch the tip  
bob rhythmically in the air.

Controlling your boat speed, focus  
on the way you imagine that lure  
flashing under the waves. It must  
resemble an injured minnow,  
a stray fingerling in deep water.

Remember, big brown trout don't run  
in schools, become wary of boats  
recrossing the same snags in a cove.

Just think a thick-slab body  
spilling from your ice chest, tail  
spotted black, the great hooked jaws  
opening and closing around air.

What you wouldn't give to feel  
those jaws, slip fingers through  
sharp red gills, heft him writhing  
in the air, his small glass teeth  
grating slightly at your knuckles.

At the I-5 Rest Stop

A woman scolds her daughter,  
tells her she's too old  
to be held. The husband,  
banging under the hood  
with a wrench, warns them both  
to shut up, let him think.

Overhead, a canopy of eucalyptus  
shades the picnic table  
where a young Chinese couple  
peer over their map. They share  
a sandwich and some chips.

Trucks storm in and are gone.

In front of the men's room,  
sparrows peck along the sidewalk,  
barely moving for passing feet.

The Chinese couple clean their table,  
kiss, drive off.

The man under the hood appears  
with a sweaty face. He grabs  
his daughter by one arm and throws  
her into the backseat. The wife  
sits silently on the passenger side.  
When they're gone, the sparrows  
rustle around in some loose leaves,  
away from the hot transmission fluid  
flowing toward the gutter.

Evening Run

Practice over, the high school track team trots off to the gym. Two shot putters lag behind, lobbing their steel ball between them. A man with thin white legs and a bare caved-in chest takes the track. He jogs slowly, strides feeble, knees buckling with each step. The two huge athletes decide they'll have some fun. They lumber onto the track with big smiles. Watcha doin', old man? they ask. Gettin' ready for the Olympics? He tries to veer around them, eyes fixed on the chalk lines. But they barge in front with their chests out. Here, catch, says the one with fatty white skin, tossing the twelve-pound shot to him. He jumps out of the way as a miniature crater is dented into the track. He can't believe they want to harm him. Aaaah, forget it, he's chicken, says the fat one's partner. And suddenly they pick up the shot and leave for the gym. Jogging again, the man doesn't notice his breathing is easier, his strides longer, his knees work smoothly without pain. He is only aware that his heart beats so hard and rapidly it hurts, that he'd better stop soon before something serious happens.

Robert Climbing Rope

Five-foot-five, 230 pounds,  
Robert jumps and clamps  
his hands, arms, and legs  
around the thick rope,  
fingers whitening, face bursting  
with sweat. Our whole PE class  
cheers as he inches up  
a few agonizing feet  
until he can pull  
no more, his body  
spent, suspended  
like a manatee  
floating in an aquarium.  
We remember Robert's father,  
the school janitor, pulling him  
behind the cafeteria,  
beating him,  
calling him "Fatty"  
for not making the varsity  
football squad.  
He's never climbed this far  
before. Twirling slowly  
on the rope,  
the flesh of his chest,  
thighs, and belly shivers  
like white pudding  
out of its bowl.  
He grits his teeth,  
as if willing himself  
the twenty remaining feet.  
And the class stares,  
quieting slowly, until silence  
envelops the gym,  
his few small grunts  
the only sound left.

Last Resort

1

Across the highway  
dented pickups turn  
and rattle fenders down  
Cone Grove Road. Boys  
tip farm-supply caps  
to sweating cattle. Girls  
tug halters, leaving  
just enough white.

2

They swim hard, pair up,  
drain the bottle, themselves,  
passing news  
of a newsless county:  
Man cracked his head  
upstream on the rocks, the mill  
laying off again,  
Molly from high school--  
messed up for good.

Fourth of July, Red Bluff City Park

Fireworks are only half  
the show. A blonde  
in cutoffs and halter  
kicks up one sandal,  
catches it, and slaps  
her boyfriend on the head,  
shouting, Goddam,  
didya see that big green  
and silver one, Tony?

Tony has his eye  
on the high school girls  
laughing by the dock.  
In the moonlight  
they kick water all over  
themselves, so that everything  
--the river, the sky, the beads  
of spray flying from their toes--  
reflects the show  
of fire in the night.

Tony's girl says, Look at 'em,  
God, they think they got the best  
damned bodies here.  
She decides it's time to leave.  
Tired of all these  
kids running around, she says.

\*

From her porch they watch  
the grand finale  
explode over the distant river.  
Giggling, she tugs  
at Tony's arm, leading him  
into the house. On the couch  
she says, Let's get married.  
Hell, why not?  
Tony looks around  
for where he put his beer.

\*

In early morning dark,  
Tony gone for hours,  
she paces room to room,  
then outside down whichever streets  
her feet will take her.  
She arrives  
at the empty park, walking  
slowly though the littered grass.  
At this hour the heat  
still makes her sweat.  
Stepping onto the dock,  
she glances around, strips,  
and dives into the cool river.

TWO

Tackle Box

I look for one lure  
among spinners, spilled leader,  
corks of hackled hooks,  
one with a lucky gold eye  
and action sure to produce.

It's like choosing a friend  
from a long and tattered life.  
She chooses you or you both choose  
each other. The weavings of past  
acquaintances somehow untangle  
and move, naturally, to the present.

The box is the key. It holds  
everything. Look here--a nightcrawler  
from Montana crusted on the bottom,  
matches in case of rain, and here,  
here, the rumpled address...

Current

Suppose the land you own  
borders the wrong side of the river.  
Each year your pasture crumbles  
into the mud current  
and mixes with your neighbor's soil.  
Your empty house looms closer  
toward scattered green willows  
crawling up the steep bank.  
The cottonwood you proposed under  
leans over and drags  
its leaves on the calm surface.

You dip in tired fingers  
and feel the river's cold.  
Even the sun's heat  
is stolen by careless water.  
Through the current's depth you stare  
at the dark backs of migrating shad.  
Years have passed  
since you cast for them,  
felt them pull your lean arms--  
the strongest fish you ever fought.

A River's Mood Changes

Alone, on the way to fishing  
my autumn riffle,  
I think last night,  
on your steps--you smiled. Maybe  
that steelie will chance it,  
go for the glow-  
bug, bend my morning in arcs  
with wild runs and leaps.

Like you, a river's mood changes  
as morning spreads color,  
bringing beauty in slowly.  
A man arrives in low light,  
eating little,  
finding shore and casting.

Anticipation comes with dark.  
Eyes adjust to the dim, words  
travelling one way.  
Patience is the key, you said,  
and I throw my line,  
your face glowing over the bank,  
your hair rippling like thoughts  
downstream to quieter water.



Pond Visit

I want to rest my body  
on the surface of this still,  
reflecting pond, until some  
girl stands, toes in the water,  
breaking her own new picture  
by lifting them. I'll see pure  
blue sky and cedars looming  
close up. I'll dip eye level  
to the stilling photograph  
in the water, of the girl.

Canyon Venture

Here's a creek and a canyon  
with boulders the size of houses.

They shine silvery granite  
and grow no moss. As I fish here,

twenty feet above the water,  
never catching a thing,

I tie a bare gleaming hook  
to my weighted leader, cast

into slamming white water.  
Latching into a rock crevice,

I pull without thought or care  
until the line snaps.

A release. The sun has come out  
and made the boulders warm.

I lie down, carve some cheese--  
fall asleep with a piece in my mouth.

Some sparrows come pecking around  
and wake me. The sky is glare.

A breeze brings the creek to my nose.  
A large bird's shadow sweeps

across the granite, circling,  
then drifting out of sight.

Moment of Cow

She lugs  
her cow body  
across the dusk pasture  
dragging  
her udder  
to the waterhole.

At the deertrail  
her huge brown eyes  
blink  
at a doe springing  
casually  
over the fence.

The Lure

Up ahead, a mother grouse  
clucks her chicks off the path  
and warns them to stay still.  
I veer around to observe  
from a stump, wait silently  
for spotted down to peep out  
from the bush.

The hen tries to lure me  
up the hill, fanning her gray tail  
in the open.

These things always happen  
when it's hot, when air rings with gnats  
and dry pines stand drooping  
under the weight of their cones.  
As I watch, I can't help  
feeling the danger I present,  
the hen's small heart fluttering  
in her eyes.

She wants me to follow her.

Everything quiets in the brush,  
but I know better.  
If I walk up and pull  
the branches apart, they'll be huddled  
in the dust, shivering,  
cowering away  
from the shadow of my hand.

Heron

On a sandbar downstream  
a great blue heron  
thrusts his slender neck and gawks  
his pointed head along the water.

Feeding, he turns  
and watches me lunch  
on the rocks. I chew my sandwich  
thinking his movements the same  
as Uncle Carl's, county game warden,  
who arrives at family gatherings  
showing pictures of deer carcasses  
missing one hind quarter.

Wading into a riffle, the heron  
spears a small perch.  
He throws his head back,  
swallowing in violent gulps,  
Has he tasted  
the two boys who drowned  
last week by Woodson Bridge?

With no warning, the bird  
slaps the water with giant wings,  
lifts, flies close overhead,  
squalling prehistoric sounds  
for the valley to hear.

Eagle Poem

It's hard to approach an eagle  
in a poem. I could say  
I saw one perched majestically  
above a river, preening himself.  
But you've seen him too,  
skimming the water with talons clenched  
around a small bass, beads of light  
dripping through the air. We've all  
experienced the young mouths gaping  
for regurgitation, wings beating  
the manured nest. It's a picture  
we carry around when we're burning  
for peace. Some of us anger  
if one is crippled in a zoo.  
But we forget the mouse  
who busies himself in a meadow.  
One day he carries blades of grass  
across the warm dust,  
and at the last moment sees  
the sky filling with huge claws.

The Porcupine

Passing on the highway I couldn't see  
his small black eyes, the placid expression  
of the rodent face I discovered  
after stopping. He didn't appear  
dead, quills on end,  
blooming in beige and black,  
until I lifted him with my boot,  
finding the gaping cavity  
in his coarse-furred underbelly.

It made my insides roll  
to think of his terror, his knowing  
running wouldn't help.  
His eyes showed that serenity  
my father's had by the river,  
talking cattle prices and erosion.

Behind us stood a small fir sapling  
stripped white, with neatly-gnawed edges.  
He'd just eaten, was probably searching  
for a hollow log to sleep in.

Or maybe he'd just waddled free  
from a bobcat. Maybe his senses  
faltered in the roar of traffic.  
Or the wind was wrong...

I kicked his body into the bushes.  
Maybe I was making excuses  
for an animal with too-short legs  
and a wise, familiar face.

### Animal Sense

Picking up deer antlers is one thing. Keeping them means a porcupine will go without minerals. They gnaw on them. And they'll chew the sides on your house too if you're gone for a week, if the paint or glue tastes salty.

The point being that safety is natural around huge, leaning firs and fog over water. Safety in the animal sense, that is. Black beady eyes seeing only shades of forest might mistake a tree for a tree, a rock for a rock, a rock for something to crush with.

Remains

Dad said a stump will keep sap  
for many years, waiting. A shoot  
will hide away, barely  
alive but ready.

You'll notice  
the clumped grass tries to disguise  
a stump, covering the saw  
wounds and flaking bark.

If you look right down  
its rings, you'll find valleys between  
sinking toward the soil and wanting  
a glimmer of light.

Laborer's Day

As you hurry down the trail, mountains  
jump from the lake's surface, reflections  
of trees growing sharper. Then your face.  
When your eyes blink away  
the last water, and the images still,  
little squirming grubs appear  
between broken sticks  
and pine needles on the bottom.

One fellow carries around his house  
of sand and mud,  
waiting for the hatch.  
He could be a little man  
just come in from the mill,  
tired of pulling greenchain  
for twenty years, and prices  
set down by the company store.

Your own set face  
rebounds from the surface.  
You know the story too well.  
The water here is always  
chilled. Old cedars peer down  
with beards of red bark. The sun  
begins watch at early morning,  
supervising the valley  
from one end to the other.

Glacial

Slowly, deliberately,  
he worked this range,  
carving, picking up, depositing  
himself evenly around him.

But years later someone notices:  
the gentle U-shape of the valley,  
the granite polished smooth and silent.

Watching the Whales

They swell huge and gray  
with water, rolling, giving  
glimpses of barnacled whale back--  
back up and back down and never  
near enough to see the source of spray.

Smarter  
than people they've become,  
and they'll know we're watching  
their herd for some nonwhale purpose,  
marveling with knowledge  
of their brain size.

Later,  
when gray turns black, we'll go  
down to the wharf to eat  
and drink in a family way.  
The conversation will turn the wine  
to waves.

We'll say we're brothers,  
and we'll go back tomorrow, early,  
to get in touch and feel  
our weight and power.

A Clear Night on Lassen Peak

We start in near dark and climb  
up the ashen path of black  
dacite lava. Lassen Peak eclipses  
the moon, lowers autumn stars  
we want to touch.

At the crater's rim  
imagined shadows shift:  
Buried alive in warm rubble  
a man was left for dead  
in the last eruption--then stood up  
to find his friends.

Our weak legs  
strain as we scale this barren dome,  
each step a Yana prayer to earth.  
Flashlights scan the trail  
switching back and up along the rim  
to the highest crag.

It's not active  
but not dead according to the guidebook.  
Dormant, waiting, the ranger's words.  
The stars are so big and close here  
they seem to swirl. The mountain  
almost moves.

Lava

We watch the evening newsclips  
of Kilauea's lava  
spilling into the Pacific:  
panoramic views with streams  
winding thin and orange  
through lush fields, closeups  
of molten paste below black crust,  
underwater shots of boulders  
glowing, crackling.

Amazing,  
she says, reaching for her wine.  
Like blood from a wound.

She's entranced, as if the flow  
in Hawaii were only for her.  
I can feel the way she'd love  
to be there, to warm her hands  
over a hissing fumerole.  
And the lava itself, something  
beckons us to dive  
into the flowing jelly, bathe  
in its inviting heat.

Outside

a slushy snow falls  
but we notice only the footage  
of men rushing to sandbag  
a gully, the lava  
breaking through and pouring over  
a hillside toward expensive homes.  
No stopping it, I say, feeling  
I must say something.

She stares  
as if the earth's opening  
were widening right before her.  
I imagine the heat blowing over us,  
creating a wind, breath  
from our own planet,  
a force like the sun  
flaring up from underground.