Suppose the Land You Own

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SUPPOSE THE LAND YOU OWN

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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, did ya 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.
There Comes a Meadow

In time the lake fills in. First the shallows then the cool dark places with smaller life. As if someone wise planned, long ago, the first curled grasses and thin red flowers.

The trees behind you still shadow one side or the other. Lighting damselflies know this. Deer step gently, as you should, nosing toward subtle water.

Understand this can't remain. Lazy sediments sift downstream. Tall pines creak, shiver, and settle. Eventually you must decide if you want this—then concede you are nothing to stop it.
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 newscasts 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.