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 drunk 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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