This Isn't a Homestead

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THIS ISN'T

A HOMESTEAD

By

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1. NOT DEAD YET
THE THIEF'S DREAM

Everything is frozen. Get the ax. Climb the stairs the way you felt December.

Listen Baby, she's dreaming of her mother,
but you're so fat, can't bleed, get drunk.

The air won't speak. It's carbon.

Call your brother. Let him know you're still in jail. Crawl out in the snow and tell us --

hair stiff, eyes puffed. He won't let you die.

Warm bed, wife, children -- God hanging from a wire. Jesus start the car.

Ram it through the door.

Will the doctors say you ask for death:
syringes full of soap, bottles upside down to save the wine? Amputated fingers,

Cripple jump the crack or mother dies.

Kiss the sheets. Out-talk the mirrors.

Father won't get up. The poem's inside a mattress.

Count them dead, hobbled in their freightcars.

Messenger, mailman -- if you're not,

listen Baby Boy, I'm talking:

life is sweet, sweet, sweet.
This is the place where you drown,
where the joints in your hands swell up
with anger -- and even this play
of the fog which streaks on your glasses
seems like a river of luminous curtains
leading you on to a woman in another town.

The knife you keep in your pocket
and the gun you hide in a holster will never
defend you. The throb of these engines
echoes the hooves of your father, and their
tail-lights are blinking you home. You stare
at the windows. A bloodhound sniffs at your groin.

It will not rest until the deadweight of its bones
can lie down next to your skin on the carpet.
You're just like the man with the bristling whiskers.
The tongue in your mouth will never be quiet.
But why are you singing? This river runs backwards
with a tail so long you can't hide it.
BEHIND BARS

Jesus never loved your serpent eyes --
why should he love your dragon soul?

Though you were nursed on mother's milk
you always galled the ram. If women card
their wooly days, they feed your aching horns.
If tits that light your blood can drive you
into folds -- what matters? A spirit,
like a condor, preys upon the small and dead.
And God, your father, cannot send you any cash
or waste his breath on prodigals. The sun,
in Phoenix, will soon be setting further west.

Driving to the Coast you ran into a tree
and wrecked his car. And drinking in L.A.
they threw you into jail for cursing cops
and being broke. Which way? Which road?
What skyway in the spiraled air could make you lose?
They'll cock each word and frisk your soul
til every move you make is like a death.

Grandma carved her name upon a tree.
Your mother wore a skin-tight dress.
Each town you leave keeps dancing on a map.

Every bedroom where you sleep

throbs with nagging trains.
SAN FRANCISCO NIGHTWATCH

Gravely as the day dissolves
these petulant drops
one by one break off to join
the gutter starfish.
Trolley wires strung for pigeons.
Spiked shadows at the corner bar.
A skirt hiked up when you come in,
drenched, crazy for a drink,
just gray fog rolling through your bones.

Vesuvios erupts with laughter.
The Black Cat folds up its paws.
A blue horn must pay the waiter
and ladies dancing out their hairdos
at the Fairmont -- but you're alone
and cannot find that woman in the Fillmore
who kisses all the lights out
for a buck.
THE SEPARATION

You answer the dead phone.
Your wife's voice is winter.
She's spending the night with a mutual friend.
Your son is alone in the rowboat.
You swim out to save him before the winds rise.
You're packing your suitcase and stuffing the mailbox.
Confess that you've killed her.
Confess what your ear knows.
It's only the voice of your father
who says you'll survive if you go back to college.
The man at the door has a telegram.
A train's coming in at the station with women and flowers.
515 BAY STREET

Drive past this house into your slum day --
the bars, the girls you'd like to amaze
in a new car. Take a train and forget your son
clinging to his mother's arm. Forget the tracks
you'll cross. This freight follows the slow route
and breaks up in Ogden. This is your timid time,
and the moon doesn't shine on an old man,
ot in a freightyard where your life unhooks
like an air hose. Lanterns blink but will not wave
you home. And the gondolas loaded with scrap iron
are heading for Pittsburg. Talk to the Santa Rosa
brakeman. He'll help you survive in the slag.

The yardmaster high in a tower pushes a button
and writes down numbers til they blur. Something
inside you uncouples and rolls out of memory.
Click of a flat wheel, dead conversations,
another train coming, another crew ready --
you're touching the telegraph key. This is the year
you learn anger. The moon sleeps in the switches.
Diesels roar like demons. On the Main Line
the signals go crazy. Where is your son now?
And where is his mother who dreamed of a strongman?

Two years of college, room with a broken window,
working the graveshift — a part of your life
slams into the other.
DEAR DR. STARK

about that job in Fairbanks,
as I see it -- invisible clothes
and how to pretend I don't know
I'm seeing an inkblot. Lunchbucket
pay -- but any boss, what would he find
in my ear bones? Girls in cafes?
A man drifts with the icebergs.

Gut ache. Some friend punching a clock.
This is the reason I ask. Including
a face for your file, a strand
of pubic hair, experience with fire,
two books about fish. A reference
explaining my health: see how I walk,
a tongue licking your hand, and these
are the eyes that will watch you.
NOT DEAD YET

You'll chew ropes to survive. Nail skin to bone
and hug yourself forever. Last spring another man
left for the mountains and the trees bloomed.
Cliffs opened and fell to the rivers. Now you sit
by a stump in Missoula and five grizzlies die
at Bond Lake because you are married. An elk herd
tried to break into a cabin. You hid in the closet.
A sailboat capsized on Flathead and that sawmill
at Sommers cut off more than you'll ever imagine.
A speedboat races to save her. It's full of professors.
They'll make you the waterski champion of Polson
and tie your hand to the towline. Only a loon walks water.
A new generation of eagles wants to nest in your bedroom.
Only a beautiful woman can save you.
II. THIS ISN'T A HOMESTEAD
LETTER TO A STEPFATHER

When the Yacht Club let you in
to paint the roof, its members paid you off
with cruises through the Golden Gate.

But no oil wells or jetset blondes
were riding on that tide. Your paycheck
never stretched beyond a woman's joke
and Alcatraz was always yawning in the fog.

Though we have called you father
for a dozen years, we no longer fear
your calloused hand. That morning when you said
you'd go to Vietnam and make us rich,
Mother's cries were mortars in our ears.

And if they find you somewhere
in a crackup, with motorboats or racing cars,
and flames are licking at your eyes --
what ambulance will come, great tinkerer,
polyhanded man? Why should you escape?

From shore to shore those credit cards
which seemed so friendly, now want their juggler.

And if we're forced to trace your steps,
we'll not be fitters where the freighters dock --
and masters of expansion joints and gauges
whistle like a bomb. The water in the bilge
is up and Crusoe never had a crew so tired.
MY VETERAN UNCLE

Where you live, others die.

Cartoon tattoos of Saipan
and ancient ships about to sink
the pulsing muscle in your arm —
now you drift from job to job.

Your poor wife Olga's flesh
has peeled away. The only things you kill
are women at the Veteran's Bar.

And when they clap you in their arms

I watch -- astonished
at the underhanded way
a man must crawl from cargo nets
to a lifeboat in the blistering stars.
STORM

The bruise in his eyes shone like ice
when he fell -- and drunk as the air
he seemed to float down as soft as a leaf
until his head hit the edge of the bed.
The great birds of his hands arose
on frantic clamoring wings, driving
a wedge to the south.
When that sudden storm broke, no one
more eloquently spoke the cold mystery
of Montana -- my father's wound.
THE GIRL EAST OF THE ROCKIES

On the Great Plains she wanted an ocean
not this melancholy farm anchored in wheatfields.
Ranchers who paid for her drinks
knew nothing of bonefish at mudbottom.
She danced for the sharks, waving the rescuers
back. Her silk dress ruined their crops and the mouth
of the muscular Yellowstone dammed by a swan's wing.

Under a bridge a fat catfish pouted.
She tried to catch him with Mayflies, blue feathers,
disdain. A girl from a farm east of the Rockies
can be cold as a blizzard
but under this bridge her breasts wanted music.
This isn't a homestead my brother.
The house we lived in sags with packrats
and belongs to the dead like Jack Danens
who built it and plumbed it for two hundred dollars;
to Spider who fished off the dock with an Indian's eye;
to Frank Bosworth who logged in this valley
before there were roads; and to Major Martin,
a gentleman soldier, until he was treed by a grizzly.
But we have no home. Five summers and three cold winters
sent us to college. Now we're as strange and exotic
as the new cars that flash on the highway
heading toward Glacier -- as printers of postcards
or out-of-state loggers rutting the hillsides.

The dock ruined by ice, the flooded boathouse,
campfire tourists and muskrats swimming in moonlight
do not make us native. The town five miles south
does not love us. No one remembers two boys
with their thumbs on the highway.
Pine, tamarack, and fir did not seed us
when we chainsawed their snags in the valley.
You went to Detroit to make money and I moved south
and survived as a teacher. But nothing remains
of two children who rode an orange bus into Bigfork.

I hear you came back last summer,
rented a string of packhorses and climbed
the trail to Trinkus to hunt and fish
with strangers. Were you lured by a dream
of your boyhood — a girl you never could marry?
We both know the business of cities
but this is a place we'll never inherit.
Lost in a maze of dead branches
we stumble on needles and pine cones
and peer from bewildering boulders.
Can you bargain with black bears for berries?
Can I teach school to the trout in the rivers?
III. THE GOOD MORNING
THE POET AND HIS STUDENTS

I cannot find the green air, the ramshackle
heart, the brass bed of a dream. It flows
in a lung, in air I can't breathe.
I'm wed to a place foreign to all but fish
in a stream who do not live in ink.
For taverns and chums I've neither the grace
nor the wit. My words do not brawl
like the land in his face, do not plow
like the ships in his eyes heavy with freight.
He'd be happy to die with a beer in his hand
and a poem on his tongue.

But we are not large when we enter this room
like sheep with our fleece in a bag.
He looms like a great moody lens among chairs
and fixes the air, tacks it on walls
to make it bend. I don't want to survive
in this fold, but put cups on my words --
make them spin like a vane. But his are unhinged.
His fist slams on a desk, splits it in two,
or his hands circle the air like crows
plucking crumbs off the snow that lead us somewhere.

A blizzard of words -- and trees in white coats keep moving in. He'd be happy to die where the snow's drifted deep.

Graveyards and poems are two of his sins.
CONSTRUCTION SITE ON MT. SUTRO

Here's a lord's house ruined by the fog
but good enough to tear down for the TV
fans. Not much foundation, a bunch of logs,
not for earthquakes, not for TV tripod towers --
we'll have to sink some caissons deep
and pour the concrete. God, this world
is full of broken rock, picks and shovels,
and aching backs, and after three hours
this jackhammer weighs a ton.
When is lunch? Earth is boring when
you lift it stone by stone.

The sun burns through the mists
and makes the sweat run down our backs.
I wish I had more meat on my thin bones.
I wish the heat would melt this day into a mass
then I could shape it with my hands.
Instead I chip it piece by piece --
paycheck after paycheck, nothing to look back.
Backhoes dig square holes as much as fifteen
feet and I don't know if I'm a man
or slave. I only know that all these trenches
remind me more of graves than any living thing
with roots -- a mass of wire and a web in air,
and bawling kids and a car that creeps in traffic
to a house somewhere. I take a hot bath
after work and drink some beer before I sleep.
I should not question what my hands must do.
If they are traitors I don't want to know.
I cannot turn the world around or make it smooth.
DWELLING

(For Madeline)

Inside my house, inside an eggshell
Sister, this reverie breaks
into coughs, the hacking of angels with beaks.
Blood on their wings
they reign in the air and the stars.

In this negative space I've put a cross,
mistletoe, the green moss of the ear,
the drumming of water.
LANDLORD

what can I do

but sing to a river

or rage

on the mountain, your face

like a god who knows nothing?

Explorer, who knows nothing,
tell me what you do

when the gloom of starlight reflects your face

in a window, a river

of uncertain rage --

the uncertain wind

dead when the instruments wind

to the rhythm of nothing

but rage

not in a calculation, due

at the mouth of a river

hating its face?
FOR ROETHKE

When he sang his song
he did not count the stones.
They did not freeze in light
or settle on some shore,
but liquid to the ear
they drew us toward some throbbing
throated cave.

That undertow of sound
is the perpetual repetition of our world.
It cradles pregnant stars.
Makes the planets hum.
And the blue sky squawk with birds.
FOR GEORGE AT THE SHACK

Your luck's a rich vein. The barmaid
knows -- watched it grow inside her
until you disappeared. Coins old miners
can't forget in uranium weather --
but you've come back and it's still lush,
coral snakes within you.
Pills won't stop the pain or fill that marsh
where gators glide. The cost is nickels.
Another dreamer shoots a pinball to the moon.
AN INDEPENDENT STUDY

Lonesome joy crawls out of metal cabinets.

Let a man earn his dollar.

What the eye sees, the ear devours.

We're enthralled by voices

in the vegetable day -- fish swimming

toward summer.

Mother's children had no common father

but poets have a rich day playing

on that keyboard.

We sat silent in the story:

how the hand found fire

and women sailed away like icebergs.

Sirens' lull or name the cutthroat,

hook it on the barb of glory.

Though winter has a salmon's desperate color

every mother's son has language

and a red heart banging in the closet.

Let others do the sweeping.
Spring will babble into flowers.
Tomorrow has the promise of good fishing.
Tomorrow's silver dollar spawns with minnows

til then the mailbox hangs out its tongue.
THE GOOD MORNING

Let me crawl under the eyelid of this morning
into the electrical storm of the brain,
inside the calcium skull
and into that veritable dark cell
where lightning strikes.

And I will be that new man
who lives in the eye of a storm.
I'll take a bath in the rain
and dry in a field of weeds
where ants and crickets thrive.

The sands of sleep.
The dunes of dreams.
The dromedary's slow walk
in the terrible heat.
My dreams were gasps for breath,
tight leather knots in the hands of the dead.

But only the glistening claws of the sun
could pry open my somnambulant eyes
to the free fall of this day
as it slides on its back
through the slippery stones of the air.

And only this world spun round in its light
makes me feel so suddenly free
as I pour into this day
like a swarm of bees after a rain
or like a child
bursting through the doors of a school.