I was wrong about oblivion then,  
summer mornings we walked the logging roads   
north of Fairview, the gypo trucks leaving miles of gravel dust   
eddying around us. You were the Queen of Iron   
and I, the servant Barcelona. The slash pile   
we tunneled through was the Whale’s Mouth,   
our kingdom. Jake Brakes sounded the death cries   
of approaching armies as they screamed over the ridge   
where we held our little breaths and each other,   
passing the spell of invisibility between us.   
Five years later, you brought your father’s   
hunting knife to school and stabbed Danielle Carson   
in the hip and I never saw you again.   
I could say I left town for both of us, that I drove I-5 South   
until I reached the aqueducts of California,   
and for the first time felt illuminated before the sight   
of water as it rushed beneath the massive turbines   
spinning on the beige and dusty hills, powering a distant city   
that would set me free. I could say   
after your father covered the plastic bladder   
of his waterbed with baby oil and wrestled you to it,   
that in those days after your pregnancy I made plans   
to drive a claw hammer into his skull. But I never left,
and when I moved it was only as far as the county line.
If my life has been a series of inadequacies, at least I know
by these great whirls of dust how beauty
and oblivion never ask permission of anyone.

In the book I read before bed, God lowers himself
through the dark and funnels his blueprints into the ear
of a woman who asked for nothing. Tomorrow night
she’ll lead armies, in a few more she’ll burn at the stake
and silver birds will rise from her mouth. This is the book
of the universe, where iron is the last element
of a star’s collapse and the moon retreats each moment
into oblivion. My blood fills with so much iron I’m pulled
to a place in the hard earth where the wind
grinds over the ridge bearing the wheels of tanker trucks
oiling the access roads, where deer ruin the last of the plums,
where the sloughs shrink back to their deepest channels,
and I can turn away from nothing.
ASH AND SILT

Another Oregon November and I’m barreling down
Old Wagon Road again, the night waters of Isthmus Slough

winding through the dark. I gear down the three-on-the-tree Chevy
as Tonya’s leg pushes against me. She says, *Think you’ll leave this place

when you’re dead?* She’s come to believe we’ll return
as the stray dogs at the boat basin, screech owls, and dusty moths,

that we’ll be recycled from our wrong and horrible selves
into the lives of flight and flame.

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If you took this road twenty years ago
you’d have found my father and me at mile-marker four
bucking timber at a washed-out logging site,
the bone-picking privilege the companies grant to scavengers
to cut time with slash piles. That morning I stood
at the back of his room and asked him to sign my Cub Scout Handbook
next to the box *Does your father believe in the Bible
and the kingdom of God?* He was wet with bathwater,
blind without glasses, and told me he never read about anything
he couldn’t touch—which explained his stack of magazines:

*Popular Mechanics, Motor Trend, Car and Driver,*
J. C. Whitney’s newsprint catalog
filled with line drawings of knockoff auto parts.
He said, *Find your work gloves and get in the truck.*
Tonya wants to talk about reincarnation but I go on about the gravel quarry, the pallets I stole from the marina, the menthols we snatched from her mother's purse. The stars from east to west fail me tonight, and whatever she believes she can have. She can shed her husk and soar above everything with the red-shouldered hawks until all of Coos Bay reveals itself as a grid of service roads, a net stretched over thousands of acres of Douglas fir. From that height it must be clear our days ahead and behind are one, that everything we touch clings to its own ghost.
When my father kicked two cords of bucked timber
down the gully for me to stack

he meant *I'm the hands above, you're the hands below.*
There was no mystery: we collected enough wood
to heat the house for months. When we returned
we found our rooms filled with the same air

where God died for a pair of work gloves,
the smell of orange peels and cinnamon

risen from the iron kettle atop our Fisher stove
burning the ends of last year's firewood.

My father lathering my little head
with shortening to work out the pine pitch,

how he unthreaded a tick from my thigh
under the cold half-light of our pantry.

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On nights like this I close my eyes and feel
the Chevy’s radial tires hug the fog-line

when I drop below sea level
and the dike rises at my side. The slough swells

as the moon pulls salt into water. I hear the creek running
beside the road, the way it pours

under the logging bridge my grandfather built,
the muck emptying into a sinkhole filled with cow bones

and old tires. I feel the weight of log rafts at low tide
and think of the boy who lived on this corner,

how one night he shimmied raft to raft,
slipped between the logs and never came back.

Tomorrow I’ll wake in the back of the Chevy,
in Tonya’s arms, in my father’s bedroom,

to another voice begging for the light to return,
to the wail of a Homelite chainsaw, to my thieving hand.
I’ll wake to the story of my life and enter
this same God-dead town again and again until I vanish
inside my own voice, until my body is ash
and I’m taken away in the rising water table,
drift into the slough, and enter, as silt, whatever’s left
of that missing boy’s mouth.
I’ll stay with my own under that filthy water
that sucks light from all the stars.
Here comes the mineral strangle
of roots, clay bleeding down,
dead leaves, pine needles, fir logs rotten

and pumped full of centipedes—
what’s pulled to water becomes silt
the blind salamander burrows through,
silt like meat ground by a woman
whose eyes have taken the color
of basement cinders. The barometer drops

and she curses her immigrant’s curse
and thinks how a pond silted-in
becomes a field of skunk cabbage

until it turns to cracked, hard land to build upon
until someone sinks posts
ten feet down and a house is framed

until it stands tall in the sun
until the rains come again and the corner
of the bedroom is taken by silt.
How a house can act like livestock
struck by its own animal dumbness
as it panics and sinks, each year

taking a deeper bite from the foundation,
the plumbing, the siding—ghost-house
left to the silt, silt like the woman

who looks up in her last year
and swallows down as much as she can—
oxxygen and smoke, winter light, stench

of earth and garlic—,
grinding down fat and bone
and basil and whatever else it takes.