

## IRON

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.



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.



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.



## SILT

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—  
oxygen and smoke, winter light, stench

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