

Palimpsests



At this Point, a Confluence

Less enterprising men would have left the beautiful ruin of a city to moulder away and decay, but the Sacramentans could not be induced to forego the work of a decade just for the disasters of a month.

Editorial, The Sacramento Bee, October 3, 1865

Before rousting the American from its bed,
a century before sobering the Sacramento's snowmelt
with a catch and release schedule,
they stood in the park to watch two rivers mix:
one ran muddy from paddlewheels and boilers,
the other spooned the city
like a lazy morning lover.

Citizens feared
that an inconsolable river
would stumble home angry and drunk,
bring everyone down to its banks
for a baptism, wash away

the sins and signs
of order, civility.

It took twelve years for a sidewalk of dismantled steamships,
fraying even before it was finished,
to float the city on stilts
the river thickening
with silt from the mines
the mines that pushed
the railroad to Promontory
the railroad that promised
a passage east by way of the west.

A streetside frescoed Virgin of Guadalupe
watched over flocks of families spilling
between pushcarts and Pullman coaches
where the docks met the tracks
that obliterated time, space.

ADLUH

A thin slice of cinderblock, seven stories high
squares against the sky, a downtown silo
with what is left of the working wage. Harvest
rains within windowless walls of whitewashed
ads, which flash neon on and off again
in an Amen cadence slowed to pace the rails
and Congaree canals that once mapped coastal plains.
Reapers' fruit goes crushing, grinding, gristing.
Who set it flowing, this nourishing dust
sitting in the middle of time, no plains, no past?
What talk was wrought in the wheat stalk fields?
And the dusk yields ADLUH ADLUH

Succession in Iowa

Contrails bend pink and north over Osceola,
hot trails dragging behind what makes them
roar, passing through other ragged clouds
tossed across the darkening sky.

A train whistle wails over rip rap
creek beds, calling to the grain towers
that huddle like rocket thrusters
on hills combed neat as heads of hair.

When those engines finish shouting hosanna,
echoing off the paved hills, their thunder
trickles through summer cottonwood branches,
where the noise could be mistaken for herds of buffalo.

Palimpsest

I.

Where black asphalt splits an ancient trail,
which fauna have not forgotten,
a tom fans royal feathers
for his brood,
who drip their gray drop bodies
from terra cotta roof tops
and swagger the asphalt's
addresses even to odd,
stopping traffic with red, round authority.

Sidelit by the low sun, the crossing guard
folds up crimson feathers and marches over
to where, in a panic of wings,
the flock takes to the sky,
trailing molt like the stains
of scraped away ink on a map's second draft.

II.

A hand-drawn map needs RE-visioning
when memory leaks through borders.
Black Mountain's first campus
now tithes for the Scots' god,
its Lee Hall rocking chairs answering
traditional on the valley-side porch.
The lower pasture of its second,
paradisaal Eden fell back to being
just another exit before Bat Cave.

To stand on the open field
with the old tobacco barn
that never dried leaves, only paint,
speaks the difference between rhododendron
and mountain laurel: one
should never build a campfire
without telling them apart.
Is an uncured branch still poisonous without geography?
Departure means a separation from vitality.

III.

Black ink traces a communicative edge.
It is right to resist declension narratives,
it is just that location is never where we left it.

IV.

What the map can't tell:

The time of year the night is as hot as the day.

That a bobcat's cry sounds like a human baby.

How mating love bugs resemble Chinook helicopters.

Why redbuds bloom before dogwoods, and which is prettier.

Which granite face eroded to make this creek sand.

How to pedal past a timber rattlesnake.

Why dance moves look like domestic chores.

That when getting off a plane in sandals, humidity affects the feet first.