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### This Isn't a Homestead

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THIS ISN'T  
A HOMESTEAD

By

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B.A., California State University at Hayward, 1970

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1973

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I. 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.

## ORANGE STREET BRIDGE

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

Gravelly 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,  
not 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

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.