

“Gold Rush”

Sixty miles north of Vegas, Dad crunches
desert dirt one night over to neighbor Ed's
whose ciggy smoke curls out the window.

He sees the city's lights even this far out
stroke gold atop the hills. A brazen moon
lays a lane across the man-made lake named

Mead. Such flat water a man could walk upon!
Uh-oh! Dad takes a tumble then, into a ditch
he forgot about. He laughs. How neat his

70-year-old spine fits snug in the gully.
Stars blink sweet as fireflies. He'd sleep,
except a scorpion above him on a ledge

snaps beats to a prospector's song. And so,
my dad arises, alkali dust pasting his face, just
eases out like a spook from a melting grave.

To Ed's house and whiskey, then! In the a.m.
load up your gear, go for the ore, what the hey.
A man and his dreams stay gold.

~

“Homecoming, West”

L.A. city girl comes to see a cowboy’s eyes
my mother wrote about. He’s in love with
your picture, she says. She’s off her whiskey,
and I want to dance. I drive six hours, go north
of Las Vegas, find the little cottage behind mesquite.

Prospector Daddy’s not digging or sifting today.
He killed two rattlers yesterday. Wrapped their skins
for a band on a blue-suede hat he presented to me.
He takes me on a tour of the neighborhood.
Over the yellow smear of sand, we dodge

saguaro, bounce to the roof of his beat-up truck.
A rock pops the windshield next to my knuckles,
my hands cramped hard on the dash. Dad doesn’t
blink an eye. I ask to stop so I can pee in the dust
by the tires. First I’ll check for wicked things.

Moving again, Dad points. Over there a miner,
he says, locked in his pickup truck exploded
a summer ago. Shows me another shaft for somebody
very white now. Dad points to a chancre rimmed
with red dirt, a miner’s stake where gold lies waiting.

Not his. Not yet. Someday. Then back to the house,
for Thanksgiving, this time no yelling, no cat-o-ten tails
drooling down the wall. When I was ten my brother
and I watched Mom burn the whip in the wood-stove.
The whole whip writhed like a ball of orange snakes.

One time when people were in our house, she lifted
me straight off the floor by the hair. Now that I am
grown, I ask myself, Was that a dream? I know I wet
my pants way up past seventeen. It’s been hard
to talk to her now, over the years. Their phone

rings. My mother gets it. That cowboy’s too shy
to come, he says. Dad invites two jack-Mormons
over from next door. Soon I’m ready to leave,
go back to L.A., rattlesnake hat for a prize.
Back to the city, become a tough stranger again.

But hey, the little fat lady cooked well today.

“Short Circuits”

My father, barefooted, Oklahoma
not far behind, hung velvet wallpaper well
in the best of California homes, a strap of
tools hanging from his belt like bullets.
He smelled of paste and whiskey,
happy in the eyes. I was five

when we swam in the Sacramento river.
Cows plugged in its muddy banks,
trailed their flies to our tribe. Daddy
perched me on a watermelon, set bucking
in the river – wet rodeo, you might say.
You can see now who I loved.

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He hung up his tools and followed the horses
to Hollywood Park, Mom’s beer-blown breath
in tow. A year, and then he split for the hills
for gold. Arizona air hung my mother out to dry,
and I, old and sassy by then, learned to spelunk
in my own in caves of civilized cities.

My father searched ten years for mines in heat
a scorpion disbelieves, water the richest find.
Then he traded a truck for a shack by a lake
with fish as common as beads, no trees
to stop his bald spot signaling to shore
for booze and a wife who cooked and waited.

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One son, a compulsive gambler, slept in cars
and wired home for money, stole meals from
bins behind grocery stores. Another lived by wit,
but twice as mean. My father loves them best
because I went astray to college, stayed in the city,
now have a big house exceedingly clean.

You’ve stolen a job from a man, he said one day,
still hooked to Depression years. I don’t tell him
how hard my life is (my willful wires still smoke),
that sometimes I dream his desert, long travels
after gold or horses, leaving a husband, swimming
a river, back to the fringes, journeying home.

~

“Louisiana Swimming Hole”

(as told to me by Brady Tress
regarding his childhood friend)

Ripe with early summer sweat, Rafer tore
a path ahead, the shorter boys pounding yards
behind. Rafer whooped from being first to leap

and see the green glass shatter. His ass-first
splash hit Tim and Obie Joe before they
shucked off shirts and heeled off stupid shoes.

Rafer rose with strings of algae in his hair,
yelling triumph, whoo-hoos of joy!
... until the loud sounds looped unholy,

and turned those tardy boys to stone.
Terror launches valor in few cases, yet
here young Rafer howled away his friends

from leaping, while slick black snakes entwined
his neck and licked his cheeks and hung from
lips and lobes. Arms outstretched, the wretched

zombie lumbered for the banks, while behind
him water writhed in congregating slithers.
Featherfoil’s white flowers fouled an exit,

’gator weed and mud embraced his shins as
cottonmouths and copperheads caught up.
Rafer simply kneeled and gargled “Jesus!”

Soon fathers came packing sacks of poison
and hoes and shovels for a ditch. Newer
boys stood by to watch the pond drain slow.

In dying light, on the muddy sheet of pond,
100 snakes stretched straight as nasty slivers
or coiled the way a child doodles 98 and 99.