

Bill Siverly

Work

My father on the farm in Iowa knew hard work:
Family lore preserved his shirt and those of his brothers
Swaying on the clothesline like blue ghosts,
Stiff with dried sweat of labor in the fields,
Flags of pride in the countryside of honest toil.

In nineteen thirty-nine my father set out for Idaho,
Taking his fresh degree in forestry to where the forests were.
Late in the Great Depression, foresters grew common as trees,
So he hired on as “dozer pimp,” clearing brush for big machines
Cutting the roads that made clear-cutting possible.

At first he left the bride he brought from Iowa in Orofino
(And the rest of her days my mother detested Orofino).
Then they spent a couple of summers tenting in the woods,
Trout fishing and camping wherever my father was working—
The best days always the first to come and go.

They overwintered in logging camps, my father assigned
To shovel snow from roofs when snow piled up to the eaves.
In February of 'forty-three I was conceived
Under a blanket lined with ribbons of snow
Falling all night through broken shingles.

My father taught himself accounting by keeping books in camps.
Shortly before I was born, he followed the promise of money
To company headquarters in Lewiston's Breier Building.
He joined an office of deskbound men reconciling ledgers,
Index fingers darting over Monroe mechanical calculators.

The monthly, quarterly, yearly round of accounting,
The abstract procedures of profit, eternally starting over,
Did not suit my father well, nor did his habit of speaking his mind
Promote him to the corporate club of Weyerhaeuser men,
Generations removed from lives of honest toil.

My father complained to his wife, went fishing, worked
His garden, played cribbage with Clarence from company Sales,
And let the dream of forestry go by. Walking with me,
He would identify white pine, fir, spruce, cedar, tamarack, and yew
In forests that, like work itself, have long since dwindled away.



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River-Finders

Mother pops up in the doorway: "Are you hungry yet?"
"But Mom, we just ate breakfast!" I say, shelving the last clean plate.
"I'm *hungry!*" she whines in the voice of the little match girl.
Nothing seems to matter beyond this loopy home movie,
So it's time to find the River of Impermanence, time

To take the truck to places we have known and lived:
The wide Palouse of rolling hills ploughed for winter wheat.
She tells me, "Look at those puffy white clouds coming up ahead!"
On Blaine Ridge I stop to photograph the panoramic field.
"Be sure to get those dry weeds there by the road!"

Then we descend the sharp curves of Coyote Gulch to the river,
Pull over for rest stop at Slaterville, settlement long gone
Like the dream of easy gold. Mother looks cold in October,
So I drape her old coat over her shoulders, making her seem small,
Framed against the Clearwater canyon's red sumac and Big Eddy.

Along a quiet stretch, reflecting sky and shadowy pines,
I climb atop a boulder and, like her, become a part of things.
We laugh, finding Clearwater after Clearwater in our dreams,
And as we encounter the outskirts of Orofino, she exclaims,
"I never really liked this town, but now I've forgotten why!"

River-finders come to the edge of the stream but do not cross.
They know the river is empty, water and current long gone,
Like memory itself, leaving only the moment eternally hovering,
Ghostly thoughts they cannot let go. "Honey,"
Says mother, "Can we go home now? I'm hungry!"