Captain Adam on Mars

 *Tribes Picked by U.S. to Fight Taliban, Get Tied Up in Own Feud;*

 *'If They Take Our Land, We'll Kill Them All.’*

 *Wall Street Journal*, 2011

Hot dust swirls off the hill

like an ambush, tribes on each side

each ready to kill the other over a patch

of arid scrub. The American, Adam,

sits between two turbaned chieftains

the Ali Sher Kel’s and the Sepai

keeping a flimsy trust, unclear

as the patches of olive green, desert

gray, blended beneath his stripes.

He must speak to them in parables:

*He who loves his fellow man loves*

*democracy*. Captain Adam refuses

to give guns to either side

in this mountain landscape that’s *like Mars*

*on a good day.* “Democrazy,”

his lieutenants joke off duty on the base.

Captain Adam opens his shirt.

They touch the bullet-proof

vest thinking it’s an air-conditioner.

They finger the black steel ammo clips

lined up in pockets across his chest,

and point at his perfect white teeth.

What century is it on Mars?

Portrait of My Mother in Winter

My saw slices through logs as she speaks

of the floods, smoke, and orange glowing

clouds of her childhood in the dark house

on Suisman Street. Her lawn chair sunk

in wet snow, she leans back in a white leather

jacket, a clear martini gleaming in her hand.

The saw’s teeth sing through bark

and a sweet sassafras smell rises. She escaped

Pittsburgh for D.C., the 1930’s, riding horses

with her friends on rolling Bethesda Hills

among clear skies and clean rivers.

The logs fall to the ground showing rings

of milky heartwood by the cabin

my father bought us years before he died.

She stares out into the late brightness

of afternoon through bare trees,

speaking not to me but to the blank dazzle

on the snow. In love with my father’s

navy whites, she left college, eloped to Florida.

Sawdust coats my boots. The blade’s raspy voice

asks no questions as logs pile up like money

in the bank. She saw him off to war

at Laguna Beach, then drove her mother

and his from California to Pittsburgh:

a punctured tire in Arizona, the clapboard

motels, *the God-cursed dust* of the flat

two-lane roads of Oklahoma.

I hang the saw on a nail in the shed,

stack the pile of logs in a half-chord

along the cabin wall. She can’t remember

why they settled back in Pittsburgh

among the mills and blast furnaces.

*We could have gone anywhere*, she says,

a wry smile on her lips, and sips the gin.

After an Argument, We Explore Pittsburgh

In the Diamond Market, white-coated men

dump pigs’ legs, turkey necks,

chicken hearts into cases. Munching faces

stare at us through sweating windows.

You wander away to the square

where pigeons peck brown grass

around a gaunt, bearded rag-picker

feeding them. All his possessions hang

in plastic bags from his crutches.

Clouds float close to the sidewalk

trapped in the huge window panels

of the Pittsburgh Plate Glass Building,

immoveable, locked in blue squares,

like a painting by Magritte.

By the Duquesne Club’s sandblasted pilasters

Cadillacs line the curb in front,

while bashed-in dumpsters on wheels

park in the alley waiting to be tipped.

At Water Street, the sky opens up

and sunlight flashes off the river.

Along the wharf, high-speed ramps

crisscross in front of buildings.

Walking under the roadway

between rows of cement pillars,

we breathe in a dank cave-smell.

Iron rings for tying up 10,000 ton barges

hang from the pillars that hold up the city.

Reflected light undulates

up and down their rounded lengths.

We lean against one and kiss,

your back against the scars

where the concrete’s crumbled away

and rusted tie-rods show through.

This is the first place in the city to flood.

Young kids sense something wild and fated

among the hundreds of columns.

They write their names on them:

*Serge, Lurk, Hick-dog, Captain Cock,*

as if claiming their futures.

Yet Another Unnecessary Poem about a Cat Dying

He collapses on his side in the living

room with a last instinctual

feeble bite on the coffee table leg.

His tongue droops to the floor

between fangs, glazed eyes open.

That night we place him in the mud

room in a cardboard coffin after

the pet hospital nurses put tubes

down his throat to drain his lungs

of blood when his enlarged heart

suddenly stopped. We touch him,

the body hard under white fur.

He practically lived in the mud

room: litter box, food bowls, the counter

perch to survey neighbor cats,

a half-way house between

our varnished wooden floors

and the Darwinian Cuisinart

of the back yard he hunted.

He came in once with a bloody green snake

in his mouth, dropped it on the mud

room floor. He once vomited

a headless mouse into his water bowl

turning the water pink as his tongue.

The next morning my shovel cracks

a rare Charlotte ice-glaze on the back

lawn. The blade gushes into the red

clay, moist below the freeze.

I see a writhing snake, its mouth open;

half its length ends in a bloody stump.

Disturbing his hibernation

with a January grave, I chop the body

to end its pain and dig deeper.

We say some words about the yard

he loved, how his life spanned our son’s

high school and college years, how

he died too soon. Then we lower

the coffin into its mud room.

Driving North Alone

I find you hiding in the blue. You

are the shadow of the mountain

climbing the opposite hill. Losing

day’s last glimmer, you leave

in a wink of green firmament,

and race west, riding the moon’s

crescent gondola. You arrive

by disappearing into winter

trees before I can see Cold Creek

at night. Not you, but your absence,

glows ghostly, white as ice

in darkness, and the black horizon

merges with a starless sky

like a wall between us.