

CHEIRON IN WOODSIDE, CALIFORNIA

The redwoods' tall-stance reach up
out of a canyon peaks just about even
with the live oaks' low crown
on high ground. They share, these trees,
simple gifts of fog, the high wind
off the sea. One's branches lie layered,
a bit apart like the lines of its cone.
The other's, in every turn and gnarl
a scar of infestation, drought, repair.
Climbing along the slope between them,
I see moss softening the oaks.
There was no moss below. Each tree
reigns its cluttered empire of beetles,
borers and symbiotes, the motley
niche-filler breed of a million years
of speciation. I'm bothered by all this
apartness, so much made of a hill,
a little drainage, a different soil.

I rub the oak bark, take my glasses off
to see the lichens, and that makes
me think of microscopes, to see, inside
and deep in there all the world' detail
alike. From the large cells in root tip
or leaf, in deeper, to grana, the stained
engines of photosynthesis, chloroplasts,
alike in redwood and oak, hidden convolutions
of cell membranes holding enzymes ganged
to push on electrons, chlorophyll's magnesium,
intricate cycles of sulfur, citrate, ATP.

This made me glad, all that emerging
cleverness in the building blocks.
But then I remembered the coded capsule
of the nucleus, those tightly paired
purines and pyrimidines, waiting to say:
you, you are oak, eucalyptus, madrone.
Then you've got us, I thought, able
to scramble up hills, so that no species
is safe, no tree secure. Masters of grafting,
breeding and genetic engineering, with
an immune system, the better way to mark
the intrusive stranger, one of our own.

So I left the oak grove and set on
up the slope, skirting the poison oak
where the cattle paths led. And
I was sore with myself for seeing
only splits and sunders. The way up
grew steep, I needed to go around
where no trail went, just long grass
and thistles. The wind took up, as
I looked back the clouds had massed,
back to the sea indistinct. The clouds
touched the hills, my green swaths of hills.
I heard my airplanes in the sky. So I
looked for the live oaks and redwoods
so different, but I had climbed far,
high, and they were one joined patch
of this abundant earth. With the moss,
the beetles and me. The rain never came;
still it was time to go home — far below
I heard the voices of my friends.