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## PICTURE SEAM

Picture a swamp. A hot, steamy, bug-infested, salt-water, tropical swamp. [. . .] Now picture this swamp in southwestern Ontario [. . .] It is in this swamp where dying plant and animal life will fall, be covered in muck, and eventually, mysteriously, turned into a dark, thick substance that will someday make our society run the way it does.

—Gary May, *Hard Oiler!* (1998)

### I. PICTURE TREE

Picture a tree climbing out of a well:  
yearn sumac, hush willow, cant sycamore,  
map maples' laughter in windows of pain.

There is a rumour: when they brought in the  
jerker lines, speculators kept sheep  
in the fields to trim grass between rigs.

Picture a cauldron made of trees, watch lightning  
shred its guts, bore the belly of the vat, loose  
an ocean of pitch to glow the fields for a month or more.

The sniffer crabwalks the snow-rugged north wood,  
dowsing rod in mouth, hawthorn berries spilled  
in the fluff. He scents cold earth, announces:

Picture the tale of a lizard, a tree  
of tombs and rumours, hewn and wrought into  
the road teamsters rode from Petrolia.

Does he wear a bearskin cloak? Does he laugh  
with his mouth closed? Did he hear the nitro  
shudder, watch the conspiracy alight?

Witness a man slither into a well,  
a man made of mirrors, eyes peeled  
lidless, drunk on churning unseen:  
picture a sea climbing out of a stream.

## II. PICTURE SEA

Picture a sea climbing out of a seam:  
coven of polyps, sneering xiphactinus,  
anemones luffing the silken reef.

In the beginning, a dank thatch of willow  
roaring with mosquitoes. No lumber,  
no mill. Swamp, sugar bush, swamp.

Picture seas gushing through colanders.  
Picture whales made of mirrors, drifting  
cankered caverns, roofs molared with salt.

Mosquitoes buzzed “uninhabitable” until  
guides took settlers to stand hip-deep in pitch.  
Plot by plot: sugar bush, then swamp.

The theory is rot. The theory is everything  
decomposes and there is making in decay.  
The theory is a coyote with human hands.

Drillers sank their boots in the bones of  
the reef, brows smeared black against the bugs.  
Currents whispered, “shale, limestone, shale.”

Black ash stripped, hewn, gutted. Giants turned  
three-pole derrick, wigwam mockery,  
tree-bone forests blooming wasted fields.

When lightning bit the still its iron belly  
gaped, sent viscera hissing over the fields.  
No hook and ladder company, rainwater

selling for a dollar a barrel so the oil burned  
for a month, lit the skirts of the sky  
while jerker lines mourned and moaned.

The wells all parched, now, save for a dribble.  
Each spring the creek floods its banks. In the  
reservoir, salt crystals yearn for a gasp of sunlight,  
picture a gash in the gut of the world.

### III. PICTURE GASH

Picture a gash in the gut of the world  
while the driller leaps and stomps a treadle,  
springpole woodpeckering shale.

“If you wanted to bury Jimmy Hoffa,”  
the descendent says, opening the tank,  
“no one would ever find him here.”

Twenty-five thousand barrels a day,  
how could they have known the flood  
would come rank and black?

He has built a replicant empire of little oil.  
“Do I wonder what it’s like down there?”  
He chin-jabs the earth. “Sure, we all do.”

No ark so they made black ash muckpoles,  
vaulted between stumps. Staunched the flow  
when a driller suggested flax and catskin.

A driller stumbling among the creaking lines  
at night, knowing the danger of kerosene  
but still tossing light on that throat.

Museums, fossils, fools. There are stories,  
he explains, of a crude angel, a man who'd  
drooled pitch, phoenixed over the fields.

A hundred feet, two. Shale, limestone, shale,  
Shaw's black beard turning torch as he peers  
through a seam in an ocean of stone to  
picture a gush in the gut of the world.