

JOHANNA

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I

the hill
three hundred forty steps in sand
going down to meadowgrass
beside the Snake River
that curves slowly like a crescent moon
about a sagebrush hill
where Johanna planted her tree

they say she wept
when the call came
wept girlhood away and the woman
sober-eyed and quiet
looked eastward
where the Wasatch bound up the sky
to their greening barley
their sparsely blooming orchard
promising first fruits
then turned to look at him this stranger at her side
who stern and silent bore her tears
accepted
served his mission
served it with his bride

II

so she sacked the wheat
burlapped seedlings
tarred water-barrels
gathered slips of Wandering Jew
Widow's Tears, Mint
to remember neighbors by
boxed baked packed sewed prayed
homesickness already a vine around her heart
when she emptied her bridechest
wall-built
she knew really knew
we each have our plains to cross

on her last Cache Valley day
wet with May rain
she watched dry-eyed as dripping men moved iron
stove to wagon box
bolted it down
bound her rocker quiet
carried out the stores of food
packed them carefully away

when meadowlark song
died into twilight above the water-pearled hay
before damp darkness filled the valley
they wept their kin goodbyes
then she swept and scrubbed the almost
empty house before the someday folk
to turn at last to bed to sleep tear-spent in the shelter
of her husband's arms within the white-washed walls
of this her first home

III

they woke dressed and prayed
long before the sun was up
she washed her face bound her hair
folded the quilts
stowed them under the wagonseat in their canvas jacks
he crated the still roosting hens
milked the cows gave milk to the pigs
drove the old sow into the rolling pen beneath the rick
grained the horses harnessed the teams
she fixed a meal cold
set a night meal in the iron oven packed the travel dishes
filled the great water barrels on the rick
turned out the lamps recanned the kerosene
cleaned their glass chimneys packed all away in an ancient grub box
filled the wash-pan with the last water in the teakettle set it on
the wagonseat to clean their hands
walked in silent dawn from house to barn
to help him turn out the stock before them

walked back one last time from barn to house
to watch him turn the key on youth

at the setting of that day's sun
she still sat high atop the swaying wagon
driving the bay team
face toward the sagebrush flats of Idaho
a tomcat reluctant in her lap

IV

when twenty years had marked
this journey she would write
"How I wish I could come home even for a visit."
she never did
what of the journey? what remains?
on the Snake River forgotten
lichen-covered age-graying
a wagon wheel on a broken axle
slants into the stream
no footprints mark the sandy path
down to the bottoms
where she carried thirty years of spring water
for washday's steaming boilers
a Balm of Gilead's thirsty roots
to fill Saturday's tub and Sunday's glasses
living water

no monument but children
children of their children's children
faces full of light mark their passage
yet the hill remains
three hundred forty steps in sand
going down to wild plum trees
growing in meadowgrass
beside the Snake River
curving slowly like a crescent moon
about a sagebrush hill
where Johanna planted her tree