Arrow Rock

They called it “the jumping-off place”—

*pierre des fleches*, chert nodules at river’s edge,

Where Becknell’s men slapped

the sweaty rumps of mules headed southwest.

Wagon tracks pointed to Santa Fe,

barrels filled with the last sweet water

before heading into the American desert,

a place so bleak, one early trader

said no one could ever settle there.

The jumping-off place. New Philadelphia.

Boonslick salt fortunes met the cotton south

on the limestone bluff where lowlands’ miasma

met Sappington’s pills. Freed of the fever

and pretentious Yankees, the town backslid

in great jubilation to rowdy Arrow Rock.

“Little Dixie, forever free,” came the call

as words turned to war. Gentlemen wore gray

as they rode away, following Clay Jackson

to victory in Texas. When smoke cleared,

freedmen came to town, eked a living while

their former masters, stuck in antebellum

delusion, lived inside the sun-faded frames

of vintage Bingham oils.

The railroad, like the river, jumped away

 from this old town, a dowager queen,

all rouge and powder puff, keeping up appearances.

Termites battled resurrection. Time wore down the rock.

People laughed at the power of old women

with their minds set on an agenda.

No one quite understood what happened

When the old restaurant went public:

that small leap becoming another jumping off

into a vision being envisioned yet,

saving places for hundred of years hence

where it is the nineteenth century forever,

that old tavern still serving apple cobbler

and chicken with biscuits of a Sunday.

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