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.