Doug Davis

Twisted Music

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As the plane rose from Jackson Hole, we crossed the Snake River plaiting its blue-green braids below, then cleared the white crowns of the Wyoming Range. I opened my book. But when I took one last glance out the window, I saw the site of the proposed PXP gas field on a series of sage-green hills near the upper Hoback River. My cabin lay just eight miles east.

Gliding south past towns I recognized from driving on the highway below, I began to see well pads. Dust-colored access roads stretched ruler-straight over plains and buttes, then turned in sharp right-angles when they encountered unseen boundaries or obstacles. From each main road branched an assortment of short side roads. And from each side road, little stems led to roughly-drawn circles of well-pads, like quarter notes attached to a staff line. The notes lay in odd angles from each other like a sheet of twisted music.

I tried to count the pads, which was futile; there were too many, the plane too fast. Every time I leaned against my window, I saw another jumbled collection of notes, composed far below me. A blank stretch, then refrain, again and again, all the way to Denver.

Almost 26,000 natural gas wells operate in Wyoming, each producing 270 million cubic feet of methane daily. That's enough for each and every well to fill the Empire State Building seven times, each and

every day. My county of Sublette is the top gas producer in the state, a county without a single stop-light, and far more pronghorn and cattle than people. The handful of Pinedale citizens who speak up about the serious air pollution from the massive gas fields just outside of town not only face the usual regulatory obstacles, but also ostracism from fellow residents. "There are friends I can't talk to now," one woman told me, "and some of my neighbors fear retaliation from their employers if they speak up." The mantra of jobs-jobs-jobs is so strong, so powerful, that it's easier to charge that activists are "against progress" than to admit that the pollution is causing widespread respiratory ailments and three-day nose-bleeds.

What my aerial perspective made clear was how solidly this activity blankets the entire region. And how many of these wells lie just out of sight, out of earshot, like those along both banks of the Green River. When I drive along this river to reach my cabin, I see small clusters of condensate well-tanks from the road, painted mocha or Army green to blend in. I had been oblivious to what lay beyond the road until I passed over at thirty-something-thousand feet.

As the plane crossed the interstate at Green River, Wyoming, where the river slows and succumbs to Flaming Gorge Reservoir, I tried to imagine the distance from the plane to the brown-green crust replicated just as far below the surface, turned in on itself, through sandstone and shale, past aquifers, fissures, plates, past dark and silent subterranean layers of brown, gray, black. The deepest producing well in Wyoming is almost 25,000 feet deep, five times deeper than mile-high Denver.

They don't just drill for gas these days, they "frack" for it. Cement and steel are dropped mile after mile, and then tankers of water and vats of secret chemical slurry are pumped down each borehole, thousands of feet into the earth. Then, the ancient bedrock is exploded for every last bubble of gas. Fracking now thunders across thirty-four states, tattooing note after note on the earth's skin. If no one hears the explosions — driving the highway or from an airplane high above — do they make a sound?

THE SEATBELT SIGN WAS ILLMINATED FOR LANDING in Denver. The air was thick and tan, tinting the bright white snow on the Front Range. As we touched down, I saw three oil derricks just beyond the tarmac, their see-saw arms silent and motionless, finished with their part in the fossil fuel foot-race.

It's always seemed so easy and uncomplicated — jumping on an airplane, turning on the lights, driving in a car. Just sit back, relax, and know that someone is out there getting those fossil fuels for us. Just trust that it costs no more than what the ticket says, and that no animals (or humans) were injured in the making of this adventure.

Oil was once called Black Gold, a reference to the money made from it, and also to its rare and precious nature. But now? We want more, ever more; we want to pay less, ever less; we waste more, ever more. Gargantuan pickups are left idling in front of the Pinedale grocery while their owners shop. Doors are propped open (no matter the weather) in half the shops in Jackson – "so people know we're open," they say. Seven-thousand-square-foot vacation houses sprout from ridge-tops for mountain views.

A graduate student I advise recently asked people on the street where their electricity came from; they hadn't a clue, and they didn't associate it with fossil fuels, didn't think about it at all — until it wasn't there. Commodities so taken for granted, so seemingly cheap and benign, slip easily through the fingers.

As we taxied toward the terminal, I kept seeing the twisted notes on the earth's surface, kept hearing explosion upon explosion rise up from the dark rock like screams, kept feeling as though I had pushed the arms of the derrick and fracked the well myself.

The jet stopped at the gate. Time to claim the baggage.