Breaking edge| Poems

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THE BREAKING EDGE

Poems by

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Approved by

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Agency

As if a boy, caring about the power
of a curved stick to convert its flight
into return, every afternoon escaped
the schoolroom chat about what
some prescribed dream required. As if he
climbed a fence, borrowed a field to practice
hurling his hunting wood from a truant's hill
in variations of slant and force,
watching its trajectories approach
and depart, following wherever
he had to follow to retrieve it
from his thousand errors
to try again.

As if the trials
were his birthright, given instead
of happiness so that happiness,
if he could do it, would be his. Evening
after evening the white wood slashed
at the dusk in thorough obedience
near to mastery, all he learned and guessed
a language which he could not move
but by touching, around him
glimmering like a bubble exactly
the size of God.
The Breaking Edge
I was sixteen in 1968. No sign of dawn at 5 a.m., the windows black and brittle, fragile barriers between me and the outside air, 125 degrees colder than my blood. I stirred warm oatmeal, dreaded the need to leave that wooden cocoon, warm and costly, its electric meter spinning, its furnace whirring, electronic sensors monitoring the temperature, controlling the oil to the flame that for half the year could never go out. Without that flame water would stop, turn hard, burst hidden pipes that connected us to pools two hundred feet down where water stayed liquid. The radio mentioned the latest deployment, Saturday’s price of hogs.

Mom was still in bed, sick again. A year ago I’d found Dad after one of his seizures face down in the flooded basement, drowned in three inches of water. On the back porch I could see my breath as I pulled on a second pair of pants, more shirts, three pairs of wool socks. The too-large canvas coat (ballooning like a space suit), knee-high chore boots, and worn ski mask were enough, but somehow not nearly enough as I opened the door into air that would kill a naked man.

In a cratered desert of dirty snow, frozen hoofprints, steaming cow pies, my dark walk clumsy and slow, I herded a hundred holsteins into the holding pen, started the pumps. Doors at the south end opened to let cows in, at the north to let them out. The barn never got warm—eight stalls, each with an octopus milker, stainless steel and black rubber mouths, my hands freezing as I pulled a dripping sponge from the bucket of disinfectant and wiped each cow’s teats, wriggled my toes to keep them from freezing. Milk flowed up clear pipes, pulsed to the rhythmic sucking, spilled into the strainer on the ten-foot bulk tank; a compressor cooled the white food, an agitator kept the cream from rising. I listened to all the machines, afraid something might break.

Showered and changed into town clothes, I caught the bus at eight. At eight-thirty, glad to be inside, I sat through first period history. The teacher, a man as fat as a baby
and with delicate hands told us we would never have good jobs if we fell asleep. Told us Thomas Jefferson had a black mistress. Told us the Japanese made cheap copies but couldn't invent. Told us Millard Fillmore was the thirteenth president, and the only thing women could do better than men was teach kindergarten. Physical labor, he told us, was punishment for failing to please him. "You'll have to dig ditches if you don't like school," he threatened. He told us we'd have a test on Friday and that President Johnson's men save us from those who hated freedom. The thermostat was set on 72, the fluorescent lights hummed, and outside the dead cold stayed. The cloud cover stayed, as it had month after month until the sun was one of those memories of somewhere so pleasant we doubt we were really there. He could not see me and taught what he could, afraid of the outdoors yet not knowing even how a furnace regulator worked. By noon I was restless, ready to join the real men, if I could only find them. I was sixteen. It was 1968.
The Breaking Edge

All day and all night F-4 Phantoms, launched with cargoes of fire, roared over louder than my power of thought, their black art approaching the miraculous.

Every season villagers below re-enacted the feeding of the multitude, faithfully throwing rice into Earth that it might return increased by a power management forgets to fear. Children's games ended according to protocol as every path and every hope of a path was seared again and again in the mortal fall of invented thunder and incandescent rain.

Between memory and fantasy, what?
I didn't know what to hold on to or how,
I no longer knew how to reach you--

the story
in which you undressed beside a lake one summer years ago to tell me if life were not magic at times it was close enough.

I was gone too many nights at the breaking edge of a new world. Amiable killers each evening wrote letters to imaginary homes, so lonely they no longer knew what might come of making love or who to tell their poems to.

Once we were children, loose in acres of play, leaping from trees against battalions of comic book fiends, standing heroic on fences and gates, friends of the beautiful, foes of the mean, giggling champions ranting through twilight and warmth into enchanted dark. We sang: No bears are out tonight; Daddy shot them all last night. . . . Our skin was hot. The stars were bright, and we wanted never to surrender to those we peeped at through one-way windows, light-blind with their routine lives: Mom at her dishes, Dad at the paper, Janice grooming her mirror--who were we?

Villages exploded on schedule at the breaking edge of a comfortable linkage of pleasant people. I wanted to stop it, began to hate the worship of circuitry and steel, all the glories of darkness. I traced evidence of a better story that accepted me (the way surf accepts whatever is thrown in). I sensed currents, swirling pockets of phosphorescence, patterned moments like stepping stones in a dusky bay, half-seen in my sluggish awakening, half-
guessed, the way a baby playing peek-a-boo begins to imagine coherent reality between miraculous going and return. Above me, the balanced burning of stars, a radiant though connecting our history of ways to darken the story of a god who lifted his body back from the grave for keeps, his central act of glory, saying it was because of love.

I deserted all narrow hope.
The homeland I made it back to was mostly empty. People crowded the coastal cities, but I followed a two-lane as it wound through nameless hills. Ravens attended mangled rabbits in the stillness between cars. Wild grapes slowly turned rain into wine, and I missed you. Passing ravines and wild trees, bunch grass and creeks—so many places that would be lovely if there were just a cafe, a school, some place at night warm and bright with people—real people, not pretenders ruining themselves with cold plots and lethargy, mingling wicked politics and sleepwalking, docilely crowding the malls, hunting some gadgetry to fix their lives.

Broken, a wagon wheel from winter earth to winter earth arched, a gray and frost rainbow, bleeding rust. Some going ended here, sank into weeds. I didn’t know how to reach you, though I rose every morning as restless as a homing pigeon in some wrong county. Fog rolled in from the west in spite of better plans, and my white breath blended.

When I knew him, my grandfather prayed with his body, feeding cattle or training a horse, holding to the promise that all this is momentary, a shred of the work and glory ahead: "Live difficult," he said, then laughed. "It won’t last long." His faith glittered like salmon in a silted stream. He waited for decades in fields where labor was patience, one way of fighting the wars of want that warped the temporal sensorium where he was held like a falcon in a gunny sack—currents of sky, his blood told him, were out there.

He stood his distance from the world, as tired and virile as Moses, watching young children learn by touch the sharp edges. They wanted games with easier rules, planning fun till the fun ran out, then starting over, older, with less room. Each time with less room, a game they never chose getting tighter. They laughed at him, my grandfather and his peculiar gait,
his old way of being in no hurry, certain
of infinity, living as he did amid life vaster
than Earth, visions sheering through the brevity
of flesh with unerring trajectories that spoke
to him of Light the sun blocked with its puny
burning.

Each night engines I hid from
roared to shreds arguments I stood on, and in
the after-silence where the first line of a better
story should have stirred, I only heard professors
rustling the robes of their false priesthood.
Myself a derelict disguised in learning, I crossed
the land slowly, looking in small towns
for directions, thinking of Rilke thinking
and of how beautiful the girls were, dressed
against the chill, pretending all the while
that love might happen like a log bursting
into flames. Stalks dried golden in cold sun,
cracked in the wind, fell into the edgeless black
intercourse of living soil. An old gelding leaned
into the final whiteness; scholars of technological
foxery kept their temporary vigil: all winter
the fire was their agenda.

I sat twisting
a spoonful of sugar through black ripples
in the only open cafe in town. The ceramic elk
on the milk machine bellowed over a ceramic prospector
sitting on a ceramic rock behind a bunch of bananas
on the ice machine. The police scanner by the blender
kept us posted: a white Buick was somewhere
between Missoula and Seattle, with two kidnappers
and a four-year-old boy and a possible .357 magnum;
a fourteen-year-old girl, last seen about midnight
wearing a black t-shirt was missing, maybe on LSD.
I couldn’t get away.

I knew how the story ends:
we are disappointed: the weather changes and then
the weather changes, as we thicken and age. But
the inward rebel living his counter-life will not
go to sleep.

I kept you like a secret
in the quietest stretch of mind, remembering
a summer village and trails through the Royal
Woods where like peasant children we
trespassed, our bodies tan and white in a clearing
above the lake. Faraway the drone of a fishing boat
assured me I was not lost. Tufts of peaceful lupines
grew at every turn in every crooked path through
summer heat that melted whole lifetimes in minutes.
All mysteries were temporary, I swore, and I
pretended the world was mine, pretended the King
was dead.
I was partly right. In summer we see no use for God. The police radio mentioned a one-vehicle rollover on Mad Ghost Road. The glaciers where growing, the sun ringed with mist. On television I watched multitudes gathering on the White House lawn to shout for the Man to save them. In the Middle Ages, a plague moved by unknown means, leaped from victim to victim. The dead and dying lay everywhere, piled too deep for the living, who crowded into cathedrals to stare upward superstitious wish, inattentive to the carrier fleas leaping among them. Who could have thought an individual cleanliness, multiplied by millions, an athletic purity--

quiet talk, with you, wanted to run from this century, from chaos trapped in massive structures of distrust that no intelligence could loose, could order. But all backtrails ended in secrets we kept from ourselves, a darkness that flowed into us with mother's blood.

How do you remember midnight miles of mountain roads, winding quiet river banks, summer meadows, alpine lakes where during the war young men had you naked, had you touch them in ways you later said needn't mean a thing? You said it didn't matter if we groped through ghosts of them, trying to touch some original place that together we could hold, if you really wanted--only a ledge, maybe, but above the region where neither of us wanted to stay, where after the climb we could rest and see farther than ever and want more than ever to rest and to climb in that perfection of making that would not desire, would not imagine an end.

One town paid me to talk to their children, but mostly I listened: the graceful languor and violent want of those teenagers, like vikings, invaded the still academic quiet of classrooms, bright caves in the northern morning dark. At coffee, teachers paused, the laughter and chatter in halls at odds with serene notions of truth. To grow old in those hallways was to lose grip on all that's been agreed. It was death to think what could be taught: the obvious, the half. Twenty centuries no more durable than a wave's curl--

mornings

I walked past leaf piles burning, preoccupied with an argument outlining the avant garde's demise, the shadows it fires upon no longer the enemy. Between sorrow and self-pity, what was there but the same slight shifting we get
lost in between victory and defeat? The Scribes and Pharisees found themselves comfortable between Caesar and the masses, thought themselves profound in their subtle readings, full of posturing that paid well and cost them little. They had their careers to think of, and they had to hate Jesus, his refusal to be ashamed, the irresponsible way he kept his candor no matter what tribunal through what learned logic accused him of its greatest sins. Between innocence and guilt, what was their more than an inward surrender as brief and ineradicable as that flash at Hiroshima?

Your poets told you nothing, America, you could use in those, your failing hours. You knew your dreams were lies, but they were your dreams. You refused to decide what to want, and you did not know in what direction if there was to be a morning the sun would rise, because it was the job of poets to know the length and turn of night, but they belonged almost to silence, making small talk in the office upstairs. They published cautious insights in little magazines, arguing among themselves about organic linebreaks, trendy pronouns, peddling maps for which there was no country. And you listened to the jukebox (lust and infidelity), and you stared at the tube (programmed anxiety), and you asked the psychoanalyst (priestly babble of therapy) as your poets talked ordinarily about their fix, unable to help you think in the mornings, disturbed between the early edition of disaster and the routine route to work, unable to be heard above the grim and cheerful TV chatter at speed-of-light relayed around a version of the world, unable even to whisper any fundamental clue to that puzzle as every solution became a new and difficult piece. Since you craved things complex and easy (the morning crossword or this year’s costly gadget) and since the truth was hard and simple, to claim the sinecure, your poets craftily angled away.

Trapped like a student in the barren story of man’s revelation to man, I sang a jigsaw song, unable to imagine stronger things to do.

In the dusk in the Mission Mountains with you beside me riding the unearnable warmth of May, our horses eager after winter to go, your skin already tan under the scanty blouse, cool and not quite modest, your shoulders and arms strong, the geldings’
tremendous muscles quick to a light rein,
in the fragrance of—I swear—lilacs, there was nowhere real to go.

At least in a fog in a jungle
one has the comfort of knowing it is a fog,
it is a jungle. I thought of a mild sea,
a quiet plaza, insectless flowers hanging orange
against blue water, yellow against violet
sky, red against manicured green, and you,
perfectly woman, comfortably walking
the stone path up a gardened stretch
from the sea to me, as inevitable
as the tide.

You tell me lightly of other loves,
laughing at the huge defeats now little far away.
"Let's again be happy," you say, "Amazed at having
made it this far, this high out of valley fogs
where all was big and close."

The mind wants
the body to be happy, a way the mind alone
can never be, turning through its own confusions
amid a kind of poetry almost visible in the night
sky, the galactic swirl and fire of space, the might
sometimes felt in magnets or storms—
we were lost
to that life that led us, the way first love
is lost the instant we make it real. A bird
I could not name squawked, shadows grappled
with shapes. Doubt returned like wind slipping
through barbed wire and lodgepole, nudging
and tugging at me as though I had a secret
or some food.

Engines screaming in the night
woke me, the world of your sleeping deep
with tides of nothing quite seen, moving
like ghosts of plants to a ghost of sun; I
could not reach you, the hard grip of my palm
upon your hip unable to anchor me like a root
in promised land.

After you vanished
from that child life, from our admission
that we were never strong enough to live here,
you went back to a dying world, the business
of building cities that couldn't be born,
and I went back to my life the way a man
might go back to a house and leave the TV on
all night because he needs the idle voices,
needs the house not to be so quiet that he hears,
breaking out like a war, the silence—
what harder
laws, I wonder, might Peter have heard
after the storm, if only for a moment, the night
he stood giddy as a child on stilled water?
The night he knew what to want.

I kept headphones on,
sad songs blasting, trying to drive my mind
away. But I went on thinking. We have to live.

Even as we sit here, a young soldier turns
in terror toward footsteps in the dark.
Should he shoot?

Somebody will.

A cruel man, stupid
in Detroit, bashed a baby’s brains with a Thunderbird
bottle. He could have been taught kindness, just
as he could have been taught to read. But everyone
was busy, wanting the world so badly none of us
could reach it--wanting money or glory--
money, I found,

was only wind, movement of forces huger
than those who sail it, imprisoned in their
continuous response, and standing in the applause
I knew no one could see me, in all that clarity
of incandescent light, the proud invention
of a lost people, of whom I was one.

Of course,
all along I knew better and said better, thinking
that when the time came I would stand opposed
to unnecessary hurt, speaking strong words
as though I’d never wanted anything but the truth.
But the truth was that when it was time
no hurt remained unnecessary, because history,
you see, demands sacrifice before mercy.

We are as lost as the Pharaohs, presiding
over ghostly realms in the shadow of our monuments
to death. We pretend we are more rational,
but our sun gods also are only men. The doctor
issues a proclamation, an archbishop dissents,
and few imagine God has spoken. The Heavens
seem as silent as the skies.

It’s been child’s work,
playing at poems to save myself, trying to make
a counter-howl of struggle to earn back from hunger
for decency a decorum amid crushing risks,
unsmug and hurting while dawn spreads a charm
that cannot be held. I ached to play the revolutionary,
to scorn obstructions and dismiss as hypocrisy
every refusal to quit the difficult love
of a better life that day by day I failed
to live. But life has harder questions lately.
One really can say goodbye, take ten steps
and break through the edge of a universe grown
stranger than the nightmare I secretly arranged my life
against. A moment can sever a trust a decade
could not build. So I’m not surprised to see
armies moving, because I always knew they would, just as secretly I knew I never loved enough, always withheld enough I thought to survive the storm that when it came I always knew would come amid deceptions and rock rhythms, a mock glory as intense, fulfilling and treacherous as art.

I never told you my theory: anywhere you go with pure intent becomes a way out, a way home, a hard, wild route you have to be awake to begin, you have to be awake to go on, you have to be awake--

You didn’t hear me. I never told you that beneath all the other voices I think I heard while you were with me, while we were children learning our balance in new space, trying to believe, a voice getting loose, beginning to answer--

Please, the earth keeps shifting. Please help me want to stay.
After the Poetry

What kind of God, Jim asked me as we sat at the Apple Tree Restaurant on Higgins after the workshop, would tolerate it?

He'd turned to poetry because neither drink nor love had worked. After Vietnam he'd found nothing a good man could do that was enough while a child's body digested itself and men in shiny boots outlawed food to better afford a parade to celebrate the sleek and shiny hatred of their success. But poetry didn't work, didn't stand a chance with the noisy crowd revelling in the silence of God. What kind of God would tell a story then leave, his prophets less clear than the average New Yorker author? Why, for example, doesn't the Bible make at least as much sense as the Atlantic, so all the preachers crooning like dogs on a swampy night would seem at least not to have broken different codes?

What do you want? I asked him, because I hoped it was something we shared. We looked out the window at Rattlesnake Creek slowly thawing in the earth's recurrent wobble toward the sun. We answered to ourselves.

Prove it, was what I thought the endless urging of the wind meant.
The Windward Sky
That Damned Flag

Dad was hardly ever home. But where he went, sometimes he took me. At 4 a.m. he’d wake me, cocoa in the kitchen beside his coffee. When we turned off the lights to go, Mom and my brothers still sleeping, I felt strong and big, heading out in grown-up dark. We didn’t talk, but I stayed awake 28 miles in his blue Mercury to the company shop where the fastest truck in the fleet, his yellow Peterbilt, was fueled and ready. He lifted me to the first step then slid in behind the wheel, grinned, at home, and flipped switches—the long whine of the starter, the engine rumbling to life, all the guages quivering.

At the job he J-holed up a gravel ramp so the truck ahead could get past after it finished loading. He gave me a sandwich, explained the work: a young slinger, gracefully dragged the heavy tongs through brush, set them and scrambled clear. The shovel operator winched the log uphill till it lifted, one end caught on the boom, the other swinging wide as his steel and hydraulic dinosaur turned, carried the log over the half-loaded trailer. On the cab, the driver balanced, one foot on the headache rack, as the truck bounced.

At the mill in Kalispell, Dad turned grim, maneuvering through acres of stacked boards, forklifts loading flatbeds. He tripped his stakes, let the logs roll off, hoisted his trailer, lowered it piggy-back on the truck, rushed again to the mountains, swearing at drivers of inconvenient cars. Three loads in a good day, enough for all the payments with a little left for beer.

In the woods he was patient. I loved the smell of fresh sawdust and pitch, of grease and exhaust, the taste of baloney and mayonnaise in the wet pine morning. While he loaded, I explored the safe zone above the job where no sawyers worked. In the soft bank of a lake no larger than a ball diamond, I found tracks of bobcat, porcupine, deer and hare, listened to a woodpecker’s machine gun rapping, to songs of birds I couldn’t see, didn’t know. This was a better world than town, Dad had taught me, where a good man didn’t need a boss. I imagined myself free in a wild competence he might admire.
I slept through highway hours, the rough rhythms and loud drone of the diesel around me like a cocoon. In the dark near midnight, he drove into our yard. I woke a little as he carried me in. He was already gone in the morning when I came into kitchen, and I worried at how hard it seemed to fill a day from end to end the way he did, in America, in 1957.

* * * * * * * * * * *

I stepped from the Greyhound years later, my uniforms thrown away, unwanted connections to a deep mistake. He suspected some dishonor, a year of my enlistment left, but for months he didn’t ask.

Then, relaxing in petunia scent on his front porch, he wondered out loud why I was back, the war unwon, my time not up. I stared at the northern August sky, traces of sunset near midnight, at black shapes of Montana mountains, said nothing about lifers stoned in Olongapo, covering their asses every day, naked drunk in every port we reached, or the little book by Thoreau I’d found, or Nixon promising cameras the war in Haiphong Harbor was over as air ops went on day and night, or the pubescent whores in a world run by men who did nothing to fix it, nothing courageous or wild, while boys were lost, struggling just to remember other places. All I said was the world was thick with idiots--some office dick could have a war in the name of some damned flag--people got aboard or marched away for nothing better than silly worship of some damned flag--

I was twenty-one. He was forty-five. He put his beer down, said with a waver I’d never heard that in England, dawn after dawn, he’d watched men fly off in B-17’s and not come back, never, flying off to cold hard death for what I called “that damned flag.” He put his beer down, unsteadily walked into his house, the white clapboard, fresh-trimmed lawn, tidy toolshed and only thirty-nine payments left; he walked inside and shut the door. That was all--our last talk.

I got in my Chevy, drove west along the Flathead River. Toward Seattle, maybe. I had gas and rage and money. I didn’t need a father. This was in America, 1973.
After A Wasted Season

The long hours planting, getting wheat into the ground, and then the resignation: nothing but cheat grass.

Long shadows and cold air invigorate him, but there's no work to do in the dry useless fields.

He estimates his winter needs against the chill and finds survival here untenable.

So. Plans he had not wanted form in his mind like clouds in the windward sky off a coastal range: storms and rain, ferns and vines, the cool fecundity that must lie ahead. A swampy appetite he'd tried to content among dry silos—he slaps prairie dust from his hat, turns away from his failure the way a woman remembering her love turns away from a mirror.
Solitude

Every argument now is wind against a net fence. Everything slows: a ball thrown up, urgent hips, my steps.

From smoke of high trail campfire breakfast till quiet of dusk and hot cider, snow on remembered mountains keeps falling.

We almost talked once, but trying now is talking to oneself, trying to forget the dangerous pulse of wild faith.

Hell, we might have made it, rushing like young birds at turbulent regions of cloud, our hunger pure as October.

You will not reach me. Snow is hip-deep, still falling. The cold ridge leads only to other ridges, but that warm valley leads only to the sea.
Time Cells

He'd turned me down for a loan when I was twenty-two, talking in his cheerful way about realities I'd misconstrued. Round and tan, busy with demands and pleasantries, flirting and assigning blames, he strode through his town, sat at his desk, certain what he said shaped the world he knew--

this world. The one where a decade later I was busy one Sunday afternoon annotating Emily Dickinson with half a mind, with half a mind plotting the next day (maybe some amorous distraction during an hour free at noon) when my pager squealed. The dispatcher's efficient voice: "Mission ambulance respond to medical emergency at. . ."

While I drove, Carol hooked an O₂ line to the ambu bag, Sharon opened a suction catheter, put a CPR board on the cot--people stopped beside the road, yielding to drastic sirens, red lights pulsing--

we knew the address, the small town talk that he was dying of cancer, but when we saw him, small as a child on the hospital bed in the living room, we turned to his wife, asked with our eyes if this were truly he--a third his former weight, nothing about him familiar, lying unable to talk, unable to say with his frantic stare what we were unready to hear. As distant and alien as a Biafran orphan, unable to lift even a hand, enormous-eyed and hurting, unable to escape the choking amid help too far away. . .

At the hospital I washed my hands, bled the O₂ lines, flushed his rusty fluid from a basin, filled half an hour with forms to document step by step our failure. His wife wailed the unspeakable at waiting room walls; his sons strode the corridors like businessmen, aware of their adulthood, toward some business with which, by god, they'd deal, not quite ready to look at what was dealt.

Then, back to Emily.

My Sunday afternoon. Her endless, earnest monologue about a willful dislocation
from this world. Her baffled inability
to be at home amid the bedlam of loans
denied, notes foreclosed, our wisdom
as counterfeit as our ease

in this world--

the one that comes to us in talk
that does not work. Finally, we do not
say, even to ourselves, what it's death
to leave unsaid--
Making Love

Stranded by science in an absurd circle
around a dying star made of crazy bits
of almost nothing, we think next is hypothetical
though we might be tickled senseless.

But something is going on.

We wander our invention of sky
(a mathematician's dream--pure space
explanations) now and then
entering with wits screaming
an event like a joke we pass through

where something is going on.

A school of sperm swims a warm place
between electrons and galaxies
where I want to say "I love you" so
I can glimpse why salmon leap from blue water
through moonlight into blue water--

I am trying to be here,
turning and flexing among quasars and quarks,
falling always back into the storied
pull of law. Something is happening.

And it is good.
Kicking Through The Wreckage

Along this canyon highway, the warm cocoon of our new Subaru lies broken, and we wait for help, wondering if the number on our insurance card really works, the cold night and winter fog no longer "out there" like a movie we might ignore.

It is my fault. Inattentive to patches of ice, I drove too fast as though this trip (the same road I'd covered a hundred times) were a story already told.

Is this the climate of error, a region we'll never leave, always looking for things worth keeping--a favorite cassette tape lying in the snow, a wallet crammed with addictions on the shattered dash--recalculating our means amid barren hills, inhuman and wintry, distant sirens always on their way?

How did we come to believe so thoroughly in gravity, falling from our faith, that satellite view that confirmed our hope that all weather is briefer than we? I wouldn't say exactly that this wreck is another way of getting to sleep, of letting that homing instinct within us like a tenuous flame, that passion for further wisdom go out. But the horizon around us like a collar angers me. I deny the easier faith that this foggy world is holy enough.

What if no help is really coming? This story we've been telling ourselves--it cannot end here. Surrounded by impossible choices, think of how a mind grows around certain words, how it reaches more than any time or space we're dumped in. Come closer. Let me share my coat.

Listen:

Since the night was full of emptiness, they laughed. The instant thrust home like a seed, a common miracle, held them like an embrace. Or held them like shackles. They were free.

Now you.
Outside the Only Bar in Dixon

I think you almost tried to tell me
where you live now, but we are interrupted
by what we know must matter though in time
we have too little attention and it doesn’t
matter though we have to say it does, have to
remind ourselves of what surrounds us
like books on shelves we’ll die before we read.
In the morning I wake up a stranger.

Crossing the highway, leaving the bar in Dixon
no one we knew was hit. The truck did not stop
but was imagined by the crime lab--its bumper-height
and speed--and he lay from about two, bar-closing time,
until dawn, alive, hypothermic, his brain bleeding.

When our ambulance got there, with one hand
on his forehead, I pulled his eyelids open: the left
pupil blown. Three white men who on their way
to work found him stood off a few feet talking,
a little glad at being in the scene, alive
in the dull cold morning, at ease now in the slow pace
of help. I radioed St. Pat’s Hospital to get
the helicopter in the air. We met them
twenty miles south at the Arlee football field.

No poem is good enough to do love’s work,
to erode what holds that tangle rooted deeply
as a moment of shame that ruins courage, stays us
from entering each other. No therapist will ever
find you because no physicist can discover
heaven. Seven months of coma later he died.

At a reading in Missoula that night fifty miles south
of the Reservation, as far away as an unrequited lover,
a romantic poet blamed it on the Indian Wars
as though the truck would have missed a white.
And maybe it would have. Maybe the road
he couldn’t cross drunk didn’t have to be there,
the way the road you went away on wasn’t.
The Language of Muskoxen

At the approach of arctic wolves
a herd of muskoxen becomes one flesh,
a many-hooved circle of beast around the calves.
I used to think I ended at my skin, though
for hours sometimes I was unaware of it.

The swimming sperm was not the man, relaxing
back into his half-life, becoming aware again
of his nakedness, pulling the sheet to his waist.
And the egg was not the woman, exactly, gazing
at the dance of shadows cast on the ceiling
by the apparently random lights of passing
traffic. Each was no longer itself:

the language of muskoxen contains neither "I"
nor "death." Hence muskoxen cannot sin,
choose to separate and die. The language
of muskoxen is passed through the glands.
Hence muskoxen cannot choose to join
their only chance.

The man gets out of bed and walks to the window.
The first purple shoots of tulips remind him
of cadaver fingers, escaping the ground.
The woman goes to the bathroom, turns on the faucet
to hide in the sound. The circle is broken
and they do not choose what came between them.
Arctic wolves with stomachs full trot
through centuries of trotting arctic wolves,
red blood cells living in their veins,
going nowhere.
Kierkegaard's leap would be saner than this: the television tells me there's a chance if we just keep moving, that the weight of what we are must not come to rest.

I don't believe we can, yet it isn't clear how we can't, living as we do forty years lost in a verbal wilderness--mad prophets on every channel. The future, they promise, will support thousands like us, but no one remembers it comes most often while we are looking some wrong direction.

They've made us a tidy little life of dribbled bits of science and TV advertisements and a God who never pushes us around. It's a fairy tale, they promise, that once He spoke in fierce light that turned a man hard, turned him to saying plain words--no footnotes, no Tradition--to cities that wanted to burn, citizens claiming their bodies entitled them.

Meanwhile we gather ourselves daily according to the daily profit explained through seven layers of deceit, stated firmly at seven levels of irresponsibility at the bottom of which is, remember, either you and I or nothing. We could relax, have another drink, and examine how the warm intoxication reminds us of love, amplifies the monologue till we think we're intimate.

But we don't need to. I'm sorry if too often I wandered instead of standing in the right lines, if I left some solemn congregation to take my shirt off in the rain. But you said you wouldn't conform to any forlorn cause, or imagine God wanted for us acres of formica counters and plenty of cupboard space. Don't fear the spokesmen's official nonsense: "By 2089, 47% of Americans will (according to our plans). . . ." Please, believe our future is not their colony, taxed by any law they suggest. Let them revel in their priesthood, akin to Caesar's priests poking around in the entrails of a goat. Laugh at how ineptly they've left out
of their calculations what you and I do
next: let's climb alpine peaks to recite
Ninth Century Chinese poems to fellow friends
of altitude and wind. Or let's steal
our children's childhood back from numbing
schools, to talk and read and laugh
with them in better hope.

Always out of sight, ancient children crumble
horse dung searching for undigested
 grain, as around us charming functionaries
chat about the quality of light
in some childhood pantry and Grandma's
fine writing on rows of preserves,
muse about the way old people pry,
what they want no longer, accept
shadowy lovers passing to oblivion
like the wrong ideas. Buildings down the hill
huddle in dead tension like chessmen
on an abandoned board. The wrath
of the unimportant, tires screaming
on the edge of town, is a hard prelude
to wisdom:

    Love, we are in danger.
Count the sleepwalkers in the mall.
Add up the gadgets you know don't work.
Remember every lie you ever told. List them
one by one by one till you reach
the end. Promise. Save yourself.

Save me. Please, the stars move nightly
and every map is wrong. Directions blur
like a plucked string and you have to know
the sound is not a song.
The Partial Quiet
Where We Must Live Now

In the heat between storms we wander
this port, sailors of the tropical belt
at the belly of Earth. Music from open
bar doors fills the streets where shreds
of mist and lightning move on, leaving
only the calm scent of morning. Together
we've lost every narcotic shelter we never
really had, and we make do in the open
homelessness past dreams that treacherously
came true. Blue sky holds us as a glorious

history is held in the head of one reeling
with age. Those years we searched foreign cities
for something to search for are gone.
Waves of forget recede through arriving
waves of getting told,

and at any tremor our feet
might let known beaches go. So we stroll
these sandy streets, sharing a crossed ocean--
like the trace of a flute we are here.
As adults complain
about the loudness,
the darkness, the teenagers’
lack of grace,
the teenagers use
the loudness, the darkness
to hide their lack
of grace. People
are such awkward
things: their bodies
don’t quite fit
so they shuffle and adjust,
trying to pull
together a moment--
just a moment!--
of seeming beautiful
with a beautiful other.

Sooner or later
it usually happens:
the warmth of bodies
is passed on and passed on
like a code.
While older people’s
bodies cool,
they wince a little
watching how hard
it is for the young,
shy of such
moments, to live,
unable to relax
or to master the right
moves. Or,
as their bodies cool,
they feel the heat
is foolish. Broken,
the code is forgotten
instead of learned.
The God they imagine:
A Sexless Vagueness
That Dislikes...
Homestead

In better soil than I deserve
I set out tomato plants, glad
when I nick my hand: I let it bleed
and go on working, hungry to feed things
that grow after too long hanging on
to things that fall apart.
I came here years ago, to this valley
where winds have voices
like the last Indians singing
the mocked songs of their youth.

I needed to escape the cobalt mists
of that city where like a kitten
warm in a mother’s milky curl, I’d nestled
with phantoms, almost sleeping, accustomed
to distant growls of machinery
I did not understand, untroubled
by cruelties my philosophy could not reach.
I did not hear in the next room
grim gentlemen crushing the genitals
of men too vague to scream. I only heard
their lie: "The peace," they said, "Must be kept."

It must be given. It must be taken.
Only birth is escape, but we are wedded
to barren comfort. Tonight in a rage of waking
I walk miraculous fields. Farmers’ efforts
have stalled at dark under a disarray of stars
that rhymes with what grows in me:
rebellion against the comfortable lights
I return to.
Any Human Can Turn

Any stone into an altar, or
vice versa. A doctor of human potential
told me achieving orgasm could be
the goal of life only for someone suffering
from repression. He said his former
wife taught him to relax in his
sexuality. The biological thunder
in his genes only prelude to this:
shame thrown down like a boxer’s robe,
the lonely roar of a stadium
on his side. He was my teacher.

School was all about facts, but the music
we lived by was all about love. You sat
on rocks drying above the Swan River and lied
to me, claimed we’d reached the border
and were safe. How could I think?
Naked you were not yourself. "It shouldn’t be
any big deal," you said, leaving
on weekends to hunt the world we’d agreed
we’d lost--nothing could be better.

I give up again, just a peasant uninspired
to say the right thing, maybe
trying to tell the Lord the war
at the border cannot be won, that the Lord
must tell the Barbarians, that the Barbarians
must tell their children: want only
the possible: peace, with all its endless
defeats and freedoms. Instead, my will
as remote as the last grizzly hugging
a slope so distant the evergreens
are blue, poetry is impossible.

It’s no big deal.
Watching Out

A puppy runs out of the yard into traffic
and laughing, the daughter who chases it
thinks of the lovely friend escaping
and not the quiet machinery rolling
over smooth asphalt with whirring wheels--

You say love is unconditional and therefore
whatever in me wants to stop you,
hold you, pleading its forlorn case
like a shabby saleman, isn’t love.
I’m too possessive, you say.

So I pretend I don’t know, care
where you are. But, Lord,
I am afraid.
Thoughts At the Faculty Meeting

_Reality which remains speechless must drive man crazy._

Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy

Instead of work there's all this ceremony.
Apostles of madness preach the abyss
is interesting. The Organization of pleasant liars
has a plan. Imagination rules
in trifling virtuosity, and everyone pretends to have
an official mind.

It's worse than boredom.

Last week on the supermarket produce scale
Randy weighted Angie, his six-month-old
daughter, and thought it over.
On the way home he told me, "If
she keeps growing at this rate
when she's seventeen she'll weigh
thirty-seven hundred and forty-two pounds."
Randy's a CPA.

Machiavelli was an optimist. Maybe social
security will collapse. Maybe Management
will get us under control. Maybe
a nuclear holocaust will equalize
the tax. Maybe Jesus will just
come back and say, "That's what happens
when you do it _your_ way." Or maybe
it will rain:

a soft patter, slowly freezing
and then hay bales we lifted
in summer dusk to haul into the barn
we'll lift at dawn and haul into the snow,
surprising ourselves how ready we are
for weather we thought obsolete.
Thursday

In that desert kingdom only lizards resist the law, and the philosopher stands in evening shadows, connecting the scene with cerebral secretions he cannot help but have, neither good nor bad, simply existing like an ant. He has time to contemplate, time to estimate any distance from any point to any other in the blank expanse he insists on as a prerequisite to thought. He wakes up at his desk and looks at the pile of facts he must sort through, only a tired editor, no longer expecting the truth to cross his desk. He goes to the coffee pot, considers whether above the fold on page one he should put the story of the Indians' latest defeat, their success at quantifying the value of trout to better take water from whiteman farms, or the story of the school superintendent caught lying who defends his job pointing out the anger of those who oppose him is bad for the kids, or the story of plans to move the highway out of town, some talking about lost business, some about the hit-and-run last week, a fourteen-year-old dead on main street. Tomorrow's editorial will be about what a long winter it was. He drinks too much coffee. Forgets to imagine defeating some dragon. These days so many dragons survive, there are no dragons, only the listless habit of fight.
Encouragement

All period Willie ignored me and the scraps of learning I had to believe would help him. Twisting in his seat like a convict, he felt his muscles and felt the hour as suffocating as a lie. I wanted him free of the classroom illusion of order, free of his first inheritance, his place in a bad hierarchy badly imagined by the managers of statistics and jobs and the Plan. I tried to think of things to say and what he might be hearing, waiting in his Indian silence. We’d read a story about a man trying to get free of the violent quiet of distrust, but they were bored, not ready to believe the world was out of control, needed their attendance. I’d read in an Auschwitz Journal, the conclusion of a man refusing to adjust, that "Love, too, is a form of cognition." At college, the Ed Profs, dozing amid their alibis, far from the lines of children trying to reach lives as real as their hidden dreams, told me about behaviors—never actions. But Willie, I knew, had to be a hero to escape the dogma of the world he’d met so far. And heros don’t behave. The Profs had a black box theory of people: if they designed contingencies, monitored in- and outputs, they might modify their subjects without inexactely pondering what went on inside. Would-be teachers chatted about reinforcements and objectivity, not agreeing so much as going along. "Go to hell, suyapi." Willie told me in the hall after the bell. I’d stopped him for leaving before I dismissed class. I knew his younger brother had been accidentally killed by an unaimed bullet in a family argument, I knew his father was in prison
for robbery, I knew his mother blamed
their poverty on whites like me, but I didn't
know how to share a huger past that was also
his. "Get off my life, suyapi," he swore
at me as I put my hand on him.
The kid's instincts are right, his attempt
far too weak. Tomorrow I'll try again
to further the rebellion that encourages
me, to show him enemies stronger
than sleep.
Going Home

All week I play with the players who run
the world. In our garden they have planted
stars, daring black holes to bloom. I print
what they say on page one
without believing it. We know

our jobs. None of us is surprised. Mine
is to keep the dead men talking.
But on Sunday the way Boo studies me
with her four-year-old eyes, her maskless
love too perfect for the world

I’ve brought her. I know in time
she’ll see the root of all disguises.
She cannot gamble, imagine love as risk.
I want to hide, to keep her like a promise
more courageous than I am. She believes me.

I want to quit lying, thinking to own
a lottery ticket in Babylon.
On Monday all hell breaks routinely loose.
After the reactor fire or the prison riot
the engineer or warden says the usual things:

appropriate measures investigations and new
procedures to prevent the daily crisis
from happening ever again. No one is listening,
which is part of the plan. I put the paper
to bed, dream of deserving Boo,

awake with her taking my hand on an April
hill to show me the tulip afternoon
where none of the children pretend
they need reverse photosynthesis,
turning ferns into flashes of light.
The Big Trip

Because he cannot buy her an expensive shack on that expensive coast, they are tourists visiting the playgrounds of a world that believes of them (if they really exist) they are merely stupid. And if that world is real, they are, because, after all, their car is rusting yet they come, penuriously counting their little dollars, to witness furious life on the Golden Coast, obviously hungry and hunting amid what they claim they scorn: immersion in the spirit of soft hot cash. And they've brought five children.

They've lived past the songs, the evocative thunder of love in art, into the nuisanced entropy of life in the flesh. They turn up the radio and sail down Highway One, windows opened to the summer they worked and saved for.

"Daddy, how far across is the ocean?"
"It's my turn to sit by the window."
"We're going to have to stop if you see a bathroom--"
"She won't let me have a drink."
"Daddy, how far to the redwoods?"
"How much will it cost?"
"Is this the way to Disneyland?"
"Daddy, where are we now?"
The blueness of morning, juniper and brown grass as a coyote disappears.

They won't deny they're happy. Sticky in their boring clothes, sharing a bag of dry cookies, drinking warm milk from cardboard cartons, they pass so many wonderful places they can't lose hope that somewhere worth reaching will be where they stop.
He was thrown through the back window of his new Honda when it hit an approach road and flipped—43 payments to go, the stereo playing Journey. That much is fact.

The rest I do not know. Maybe a girl he loved went as far as she wanted before words broke down and left him alone, talking at a face that offered nothing. Left him to drive the midnight distance away from her.

Or maybe he'd found Jesus, a love so perfect he was unafraid, knowing all others were his fellows, temporarily estranged on a dark planet with a cooling sun, reeling toward an ecstasy of light.

But I know the car he hit held a father, a mother, five children coming home from their holiday.

I killed the siren, left the lights flashing, moved the ambulance to block the northbound lane where the family's trip was scattered. My partner, Carol, was out with the jump kit running through litter of broken luggage, water, oil, glass and gravel before I stopped.

Initial triage:

First driver: screaming, possible head injury, probable leg and spine fractures, multiple lacerations (needs to go soon);
Father: mortal wounds to head (forget him);
Mother: conscious, respirations rapid and shallow, probable chest trauma, pneumothorax likely (hysterical, might go bad quickly);
Girl, about 12: unresponsive, no respirations (do something now!);
Girl, about 9: crying quietly, no apparent injuries (beautiful cheekbones, long blond hair);
Boy, about 8: conscious with normal respirations, guarding left arm (maybe broken collar bone, no immediate problem);
Girl, about 5: unresponsive, respirations regular but gurgling, blood in airway (needs suction);
Boy, about 2: unconscious and cyanotic, eviscerated bowels--
a bystander screamed and screamed and screamed
and screamed. If this is the world, she will not
have it, cannot escape it, so there she was,
unable to hear the partial quiet of all
that can be done---

the twelve-year-old, between
her parents, was crushed from mid-thigh down
beneath the dash. Carol pulled the father,
still twitching, out of the way onto frozen ground,
twisted the girl across the seat, cut
her blouse, her tiny bra, began CPR.

In the back, I slid a pediatric airway
into the five-year-old's mouth, worked it
down her throat, rolled her onto her side,
then lifted the baby's face to my mouth,
blew---

nothing went in. The useless bystander
screamed "No! No! No!" The baby's intestines
were soft and white, no bleeding. No injuries
apparent to his chest. With two fingers
between his nipples, I jabbed hard four times
and he choked. In his mouth I found
what looked like chewed-up hot dog.
He breathed deep!

The bystander shifted to a higher key,
began to wail. I glanced at her:
all dressed up for an evening of make-believe
(painted eyes and blue, seductive gown)
but standing on a real road
backlit by ambulance floodlights
trying to outscreeam the night.