Partner

Paul Zarzyski

PARTNER

As you hit ground off Ol' Staircase
at the State Fair Rodeo
in Great Falls, it was hard
to hear vertebrae cracking
above the murmur of ten thousand
hometown hearts. You cowboyed-up
and hid your grimace deep,
walked out of the arena,
stubborn, on sheer pain
and took the ambulance, like a cab,
front seat to emergency.

Tonight, on Tanqueray, good English
gin, we vow never again
to mention "broken neck." Instead
we talk tough broncs, big shows
we'll hit down South, and hunting ducks
come fall. We straggle home,
moon-struck, to the squawk of geese –
a V of snows crisscrossing
and circling the city – screwed-up,
you say, when streetlight glimmer
throws them off plumb.

When my bronc stomped
down the alleyway that night,
I knew down deep our bones and hearts
were made to break a lot
easier than we'd believe. I felt
your arm go numb in mine,
took the gate, weak-kneed, and rode
with only half the try. It's bad
and good some cowboys don't know tears
from sweat. I folded both
between fringes of your chaps,

packed your gearbag neat
as you would, and wandered
punch-drunk lost, afraid
into the maze of parking lot.

What's done is done, I know,
but once I killed
at least a dozen singles
in a season, without thinking
how they partner-up for life
and death, how the odd ones
flocking South
survive that first long go alone.

       For Kim Zupan