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Giving up the Dodge | [Poems]

Scott L. Davidson
The University of Montana

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GIVING UP THE DODGE

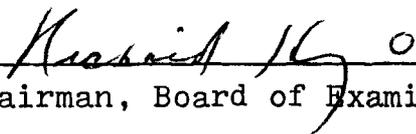
by

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of the requirements for the degree of
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GIVING UP THE DODGE

To my parents for putting up with
all those panicked and penniless
phone calls over the years.

To my grandmother, Florence Scott,
for teaching me the importance
of writing things down.

To David Long for being in Kalispell
at precisely the right time.

To Richard Hugo for helping me
rediscover my ears, and

To Sharon, who has made the last
ten years a joy, and my transition
to adulthood much smoother than
I could have hoped.

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DISCOVERING THE NEIGHBORHOOD

1

This morning, in the early sun,
I read a blurred letter from my brother
in Scotland. Sell everything, he says.
Nothing here but open arms.

I think of him warm and grinning in Dundee,
in my great-aunt's kitchen,
the single bulb nodding loose overhead.
I think of my neighbor who walks Third Street

dead center, past the black fist clenched
on the warehouse wall, past the alley
where she hears boots scrape in the gravel,
and relives the sudden breathing,

the greasy hand at her mouth. I want to tell her
this cold will pass. I watch the railroad
tower for pigeons, some sign of life,
their sudden wheeling to the bridge.

Power lines converge overhead, and
the trailer home, here since Truman, uproots
like a blasted larch at the back of our lot,
its thin excuse for a yard

littered with milk cartons, stiff
butcher wrap, two fat chihuahuas.
The old couple raving in their trailer
shake their heads at the sirens,

rehearse a gracious neighborhood
in snapshots over the fireplace:
a neighborhood sprawling with trim lawns
and blond children, a young couple

waving from their trailer. We learn
to accomodate the cold: me on the sidewalk
watching for birds, the neighbor woman dividing
the street, the old couple raving.

Writing to my brother, I say,
Open arms are rare.
I sold everything I could
and I made it two hundred miles.

After our long winter inside,
we stand watch in the barrow pit and gape
at the seamless horizon east of the divide.
Used to pavement and shabby tile, neither of us can explain
the ragged herb at our feet that has flowered
and frozen. Or how tonight it is enough
that the herb has flowered. Wind and the cloudless
open air steel the sky in place, the stream sluggish
and aimless through its ravine. Tonight our heads
reflect the gaze of grazing antelope, whose business
is the ground, who know the horizon
is never far enough away. No further than this ditch,
the lights of the car and the moon at our backs,
the ragged bloom we trust uproots in the standing grass.

for Leo M. Fitzpatrick

DRIVING LATE TO WORK, THE MOON OBSCURED

In the shotgun house
back of my uncle's garage
Walter Rocke smoked Cuban cigars
and swilled Kessler's bourbon
because it burned.
I sank into his busted arm chair
surrounded by dime-novel Westerns,
by antelope and musk ox
lunging from his wall,
while a doomed starling
collided with his picture window.
As I knelt in the yellow weeds
of his front yard and cupped
the twitching bird in my hands,
I heard his boots scrape
on the stoop.
Leave it he said.

Tonight my car idles
in the gravel at the road's edge.
Headlights ignite the rising dust
and the newest starling
twitches on the hood, eyes
snapping, its slack beak broken
against my windshield.

Twenty years after Walter Rocke
and I sink into the driver's seat,
same sadness in the bird's eyes,
same howl at the base of my skull.
He told me birds couldn't help
the **size** of their brains, or the urge

that sent them crashing into glass.
He said it was man's habit to rise
and disrupt their flight.
Tonight I rise at dusk
and drive the ten miles into town.
He never said, how at this moment,
I would know the antelope
on his wall never lunged, how I would feel
this strange absence of wings.

LOVE LETTER FROM YOUR CLOSET

That first week you were gone
I opened the bay window, evenings,
and let everything in.
The loud cars out in force,
all that steam and spore,
I could never be sure it was you.
Turning back to our cheerless walls,
convinced three more weeks
would erase any hint of you,
I followed your faded trail
from bed to kitchen to front door.
I was lost. My life belonged

to a man who had given in to solitude,
whose clothes hung like curtains
from his shoulders, who refused
to leave his bed. This morning
I woke in the closet,
curled in a pile of sheets
I never wanted to wash again.
I dreamed warm linen
gathered in the small of your back,
my finger probing the hollows
and curves of your ribs.

You were here all along,
all the time I sulked
and moaned, and the only voice
I could grasp echoed back at me
off the walls.

You were here

in floral skirts shipped years
from Denver, in fat woolen shawls
bulging from their hooks.
I gather what I can: thinnest leaf
of skin from your satin blouse,
your robe's startled perfume.
I take the hem of your nightgown
in my hand, and I bend
to the fragrant seams of your dresser.

for Sharon

WAITING FOR THE GUESTS TO ARRIVE

You stand at the open window with your husband,
counting jack-hammers and stray chunks of asphalt
two stories down. Behind you, the room holds
its breath, blue as cobalt in the last
angles of light. The table of cheese and tonic
dissolves to still-life against the wall. Your mind
travels south, along the spine of the Missions,
where you watch for us leaving the foothills, riding
the long curve to the lake.

We never guess how this whole afternoon
you wanted to nail your apologies to the door
and walk away. Now you sit at the furthest edge
of the window seat, brush the hair from your face
and wait for the first shoes to clatter on the stairs.

for Leslie Clayborn

HOME FOR MY REUNION

In the check-out line at Rosauer's
the cashier reads off my life
as if it were so many canned goods.
I want to tell her I have plans
for a promising future: weekends
in a bar reeking of astroturf,
summers on my jet-boat
towing radiant blonds in string bikinis.
She isn't fooled. She hasn't had a day off
in weeks, hasn't had a real vacation
in years. And here I am buying beer
on a Tuesday afternoon, which is just
what you'd expect from the aimless southside,
the young middle-class who would rather not
work, and no sense of shame. For a moment,
I wish I could say the right thing,
say I borrowed the money for the beer,
convince her the rest of us
aren't that happy. She looks toward the door,
and I am someone else walking away.
She hands me change as proof. There is
no right thing to say.
I leave her alone to steep in her joyless day.

MEDITATION AT CURBSIDE

Tonight, a block from our apartment,
I stand in the loose snow
near the curb and flatten
the radiant powder with my boot.

You would like it here. Winter carries
no grudge. Across the river, neon
stains the low clouds red;
the throb of good coals

the red of any town announcing itself
for miles. I think of you steeping
in your bath, alone and free
of my family for the first time in days.

Already, the icy reaches of our studio
warm to our return, your bathroom window
fragrant with steam. I watch the bright
cap of our neighbor nod

as he bends to his shovel.
Down the block, the giddy laughter
of a young woman caught
in the cross-fire of snowballs.

East of here, over these mountains,
winter kicks in the door like a jealous
husband: with boots, nails, the bare
frozen ground, snow drifted

to impossible stone. This
is the winter I wait for
as I steam my warm oasis
near the curb. I chart
the quiet eye of the storm,
where we live in all this dark and wind.

WATCHING THE RAFTERS DISEMBARK

By noon the snow-line fades up the hill.
Clear of ice, the Dearborn runs low
through its banks, leaving a stone tongue
exposed in the casual rapids. The man
in the rubber suit and mask, pouting
like a goldfish, holds tight to his stone,
his weekend a vigil for the brave souls
who test this April's first anxious water.

Retrieving the long home-run, I brave
the bank of loose shale and willow,
watch the six-man raft pass without a hitch.
Then it's the bright Coleman canoe broadside
in the rapids, the bearded man and the woman
dwarfed by her life-jacket steeling themselves
for the spill. The man in the rubber suit
waits, abandons his stone-solid perch
and dives upstream.

HAIRCUT

Saturdays, we huddled in turn
on the bathroom counter, the towel
at our necks tight as the dress shirts
we would curse the next morning.
Each of us stripped to his comical
white underwear, we were dandelions
gone to seed. My father shaved
each head to the skin.

Hugging myself in the cold
fluorescent light, I waited
for my father's steady hand
to slip, for the razor that droned
like a lawn mower to snag
my youngest brother's scalp
in its chattering blades
and hang on.

In the next room, Joe Feenie
sang his weekly Irish dirge,
and Lawrence Welk bobbed
like a buoy in the background.
It was over. My father gathered me
from my bath, pulled me to his chest
in a huge towel, and I was dizzy
from the rough clatter of his hands.

APPROACHING THE DIVIDE

We drive south from Great Falls
past the bare flanks of the Little Belts,
false spring beating in yellow fields.
Still groggy with wine and last night's
dream of yawning powder, I slump
in my seat like no parents' picture
of their eldest son. My mother's eyes,
first time she caught me smoking and knew
I was out of her hands, hover like coals
in the road. She knew young men needed
an example. For her sake, I say:
This is the way I see things. No exceptions.
Except that age never mattered with us. Advice
is badly received. Each of us, in his turn,
struggles toward his own life.

As we crest the long curve
up Monarch Ridge, the belly of the storm ahead
settles on the high peaks. From this
warmer climate, we begin our slow immersion
into white, the quiet clatter of our gear
as we honor this silence between us.

for Bruce and Craig

THE MAN FROM THE SHELTER HOME

The man from the shelter home circles the pond,
great coat beating like wings under glass.
Gulls in the tower applaud.

No rails groan like ice on the ridge, gone
the drumming engines he dreamed from tall grass.
The man from the shelter home circles the pond.

Once, steaming freighters docked
at the pier, steaming with nothing that smelled of the land,
and gulls in the tower would applaud.

Now it is children and lovers who gawk,
who toss him bread-crumbs and wave as they pass.
The man from the shelter home circles the pond.

He thinks of a son that he lost
to the world, the promise he made to keep better track.
Gulls in the tower applaud.

Hours at his oars, his swollen hands stall,
his great coat the weight of the sky on his back.
The man from the shelter home circles the pond.
Gulls in the tower applaud.

SONG OF THE IMAGINED WOMAN

She stands in a circle of polished stones,
shielding her crippled fire,
the fingers of a new storm brushing her cheeks.

She emerges stunned from the black
kitchen. White milk and blood
trace the edges of the broken glass she offers him.

She wakes empty and sobbing
in the tangled sheets. Soft fists pound
the rippled back of her husband.

Nights, she walks the damp acre of grass,
stares into bluffs that seem closer at night.
She believes in fearing the dark,

believes each day her grinning children
leave for a world
she can't begin to explain.

She breathes life to her fire, climbs
the granite ridge to meet the storm, strikes
its pouting eye like a fist of heaven.

FALLING ON MY ASS IN THE MIDDLE OF THE STREET

for Samuel Beckett

Midnight and my shoes desert me
in this intersection glazed the consistency
of wax. Victims of slow thaw and sudden freeze,
they dangle overhead like bricks on their way
to somewhere sane: the belly of a wood stove,
the gracious mantle of a suburban home.

Winter slips on its gray footings. Weeks
of sheer wind blur the pavement, drive
the last hardy transients indoors.
The stooped man who stood underneath my window
in his great coat, and rehearsed his introduction
to the queen, stands in the back corner of the pool
hall, slapping himself for warmth, waiting
for it to spread inside him like medicine.
No one else sees his buried eyes leap as he looks out
on this winter gone sour, and discovers his new
good fortune: shoes, my shoes, hovering like pigeons
in the street. Our eyes meet just before I land.
In that moment, we acknowledge the sure way this world
keeps its balance, how comedy is breaking even,
how my legs abandon me as his return.

TO THE OSAGE INDIAN ON DISPLAY AT BLANCHARD SPRINGS
CAVERNS, ARKANSAS

If this were Mexico before Cortez
or the high shrines of the Andes,
you would stare from the mouth of your cave
like a god toward the village,
your name a reverent whisper
passed from hand to torch.

This is Arkansas. 1980. The best you get
is a crude sketch in the tourist brochure.
In the display case next to the blind salamander,
you are barely here. All around you
Jimmy Driftwood, voice of the slide show, sings back
four million years of erosion.
Your eyes dwindle to nothing.

Blanchard, the man who is immortal in these caverns,
was years behind. One morning, his son's thin
reed boat ran aground near the mill wheel.
Two days it had been gone. Two days
to travel two hundred yards. You
already knew. Three centuries before

you faced this dark yawn in the hillside,
flame of reeds for light, urged on by legends
passed down from your father. August sags
at your back.

Descending, you watch spring grass
turn to moss, then wet stone at your feet.
I am with you as your torch loses the ceiling,
as the wall that guides you

falls away, and you glimpse the swell
of flowstone, the ribs of a right whale
curling overhead. You know the way back
could be anywhere; the swirl of wind, the last surge
of flame. You hear the explosion of water dripping
into pools. Your own breathing is thunder.

THE WRECKAGE OF DEER TRAIL, COLORADO

Whoever failed this town
left nothing behind. One night,
the moon obscured by summer clouds,
the maddening promise of rain,
Crowley packed, taking with him
the entire treasury in a stolen buckboard.
They all watched him go, knew
they were better off abandoned, no word
among them for bankrupt, giving in.
Last seen, Crowley floundered at **the** reins,
his shock of white hair reflecting the moon.

This morning, all that's left of Deer Trail
slips toward the Ponna River.
We approach from the north, our sleek import
dwarfed by the interstate. Inside,
my wife and her sister asleep, I tune in jazz
from Rapid City, watch the morning framed
in my windshield form on the horizon.
Saplings point the final direction of soil.
The lowest point of ground steams
the air rank with minerals.
What buildings remain turn shaggy with mold.

At the edge of town, red neon
shaped to a lariat flashes breakfast
and queen beds. Sodium vapor lights
loom over an acre of absolute black-top.
Porcelain gas pumps salute the highway.
What's the point? No exit
was ever planned for Deer Trail.

Crowley was right. This
is no town for monuments. Better the doomed
pilgrimage to Denver, the last look back
to a town swallowed by floodplain.

No floods. All spring the woman watched
the river rise. This morning, she steers
her rickety pick-up through dim roads
to scour the corroding coffee machine,
scrub the linoleum floor
and wait. In the diner's picture window,
she pats her tower of gray curls into place.
Smoke and kitchen steam swirl
above her. She watches our headlights
veer east. I watch her look away
from her ocean of parking,
the wasteland her life has become.
I watch her rise and consider her odds, watch her
begin the tedious unknotting of her legs.

THE VIEW FROM CATALDO MISSION

Stooped and sickened by the drive,
I leave you at the coffee shop
and climb the slick groomed lawn
to Cataldo Mission. After days
watching old friends dismantle
their marriage, I have run out
of steam. The steep hill
offers nothing to hold.

At night, the windows blazed
in our borrowed home. All weekend,
we climbed the flooded logging road
with wood that barely smoldered
warm enough. We looked on while friends
mapped the vacancy between them,
the civilized exchange of children.
I think of your hands curled,
coffee steaming from the chipped cup
between them. I climb to stay warm.

The mission is no help.
Maybe when priests had it built
and the town boomed, it meant
something to the miners to see the steeple,
here on its perfect knoll, first thing
out of the shaft. The mine shut down
last year. Vaulted windows blur
with dirt and constant rain, blank
as the eyes of stuffed owls.

Kellogg's ruin is clear in the clean wound

of Temple Peak, its bare abandoned ore,
in the empty rattle of houses,
in stunted birch scrawling like a deaf boy's
fingers in the air their pleas for soil.
Today the highest point in town
means distance. From here, the supermarket
full of pasty children is no threat;
children nodding weakly in carts
near the magazines, with the slow fire
of lead in their blood.

Maps mean nothing. Clouds stoop
so near the mission, I am sure
they will never lift. We were never
up to this. Our way home
is the fragile bridge we have built
between us. Our distance is no greater
than it was for the miners.
Someone is always leaving.
As we test the bridge we have promised
will stand, we hold to what we know must last.
The children in the supermarket
are not yet ours.

GIVING UP THE DODGE

Ignore the scavengers circling overhead.
 This restless clatter of wings
 is part of my plan: to pack everything wrong
 and rotten into the trunk of my Dodge
 and dump it at the edge of town. My new life
 starts then. Once it's yours, the crowd
 of wings dispersed, the Dodge
 runs certain and hopeful
 into the distance.

Who am I kidding? My only bird
 is a box-kite stranded in the power lines,
 tail snapping in the breeze.
 This is my failure with the modern world:
 the awesome clatter of tappets,
 the oil light's constant alarm,
 the shriek in third gear.
 You rest your palm on the hood,

worry

the spreading rust with your fingers,
 watchful. You know the look
 of second-hand suits you never fit,
 hung in a closet everyone ignored.
 You were right. I insisted
 this car be driven to its knees,
 knew you wouldn't refuse such a gift.
 I ignored the pride we shared
 in the good sense of engines.

I remember this much: autumn, the last

angles of sun, the wind a relentless gust.
For weeks, Sunday afternoons, your trail bike
scattered across the driveway,
we marveled at the possibility of one
right order. All that next summer, flush
and restless, loading semis by moonlight,
I waited for my life
to finally happen.

The shriek in third gear disappears at sixty,
the steering suddenly sure.
Aim north, away from town, streets filled
with sleek imports. This is a car
for midnights, the middle of nowhere.
Once out of town,
the Dodge and the road are yours.
Whatever landscape fills
your windshield belongs.

for my brother

WORDS TO SAY BEFORE LEAVING

More and more, harvest is a bad joke.
This summer the canal doesn't rise,
and your rice shivers in soil
blown bare of roots. The neighbors
who saw you through Ruben's death
still call, but you can expect only so much.
They have their own lives.

Your family worries
that you still cook all afternoon when they come.
Scattered toward the car, they tell you
slow down. The woman you raised,
because her feuding aunts
never heard her leave, says don't worry.
You have more than enough.
You don't tell her need is all you've known,
that you could live no other way.

One step down from the porch, I stay behind,
hold the papery hand you say weakens
each year, as if it has fallen to me,
your god-son by marriage, to make something
of this day. I stay because my family
has lost its old voices. That Christmas Eve
my grandmother finally tired of breathing,
I felt uprooted in my own house.
She was the last.

You and I know
these accidents of family are hard-won.
The hand that weakens each year still holds.
In this long moment on the porch,
the nothing we exchange between hands,

I promise you your god-daughter,
the woman I have loved these ten years,
will never leave so quiet
I don't hear.

for Lois Newton

HOW WE PRACTICED THE COLD WAR

Miss Biederman mapped our survival at the blackboard and no one listened. No one believed the godless Russians. . Our neighbors had dug up their lawn and filled the hole with concrete and canned goods. And Krushchev had nailed his shoe to the podium so we'd know how easily we could be crushed.

Miss Biederman had a list. We would be among the first, she said, because of the warheads. The rubber nose of her pointer took us north underground, to the Air Base, where I stared from the radar shack and watched silos flash in the tall weeds, where the officer in sunglasses, who'd been to war in a limousine, told us two minutes without air conditioning and we would fry in this place.

Jerry Schmidt wore his father's Civil Defense Helmet like a mixing bowl over his ears. Next to him, Karla Swenson's legs spun a black fishnet braid that hovered just above the floor. I was stricken. When it was time, sirens blasted in the corridor, and the bus-kids dove for cover. The rest of us left double-file for home, stiff yellow cards in our hands to explain.

Jerry and I took the lead. We imagined pylons in the hallway, carved turns Killy would die for. We hit the doors and Karla Swenson whispered those boys loud enough for everyone to hear. The bare hills behind the school stretched out like fur in front of us. Passing our window, we saw Miss Biederman scowl as she stooped under her desk.

We broke for open field, Jerry waving
Miss Biederman's pointer like a flag.
He reached the land-fill above the school
and let the pointer fly. As it turned its rubber nose
toward the ground, Jerry whistled it home,
disappearing over the nearest rise,
one hand raised, the dust
and the deep grass coming.

THE COLOSSUS

after an etching by Francisco Goya

Our descent out of oak
and red willow ends
in this open valley drowning
in tis own concessions. South,
the twin arcs of the cooling tower break
into seamless blossom. Under our wheels
the interstate veers away.

In your "Dream of Reason"
a man sleeps face down in his textbook,
bats loose overhead. He never sees
what will kill him.
Bats gave way to the brute giant towering
over a village barely there, turning back
to meet our gaze. You saw no recognition
in his eyes, no chance for reason.

As the valley widens and we circle
the tower, my wife, her sister and I
make our home in your pointless village.
We are accidents of color and light,
villagers who knew the ominous signs
and said nothing, no words
for how our world had fallen away.
The man on the Little Rock news
spoke our shred of perfect trust.
He said Everyone has a job.

When the tower is behind us, we aim our lives
forward and are quiet. I think of you
in the mountain villa where you went blind,

where you painted matadors instead of murderous
soldiers. I wonder what it meant to you, finally,
to leave everything behind;
the drowsy villagers yanked from their beds
by Napoleon's guards, the idiots in the palace
of Charles IV who surrendered
the lives of your people to butchers.

What now? Pointing back to the cooling tower,
I say Goya, you saw it coming. You
understood. The villagers yanked from their beds
were tied to posts and shot. Children died
because the new government trusted no one.
It is here, then, we must start: not with giants
that still our blood, or the hideous Saturn
devouring one of his sons. Here, where men hunger to build
and stand their ground against a heartless sky. Here,
where those same men dream themselves gods,
we must stop and say, This is enough.