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ON THE RIM

By

Edward T. Lahey

B.A. University of Montana 1959

Presented in partial fulfillment of the

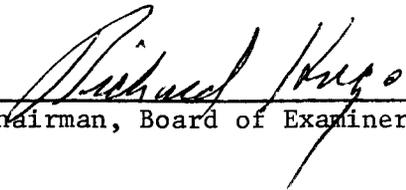
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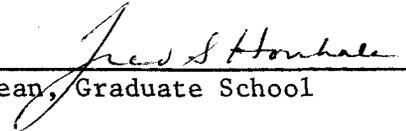
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"Elegy in a Mineyard" and "The Ballad of the  
Board of Trade Bar"

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CONTRACT MINERS  
(For Big Ed)

Underground we fought the earth together.  
For the hell of it, and Peacock copper.  
From the womb she was no tender lover.  
The stone-boat rocker wouldn't budge  
a crumb to a beggar's cup,  
or toss a meatless bone  
to a blind man's bitch. Until we made her.  
Compressor moan and drill chatter  
in her lamp-lit face  
forced surrender from the stone.

Midwife to the mine he taught me how  
to spit a round and slant a lifter.  
He grinned greenhorn at my back  
when I smelled fear curl thru the drift  
and cling to shaky fingers  
as each to each they lit spliced fuses  
one by one. And then we ran,  
down the cross-cut tunnel.  
Soon the shudder of ground  
brought us back to witness birth.

The mice sat in the corner of our eyes.  
They were wise. We watched them listen  
to the timber groan beneath  
gravid loins of working earth.  
With care and art, mindful of the mice,  
we imitated moles. We spiled thru mealy  
low grade zones to court her frigid heart,  
where once solutions boiled  
and, dying darkly, cooled.

A DIFFERENT PRICE

Topside,  
a bull gear caught Haggarty's hand.  
Slick iron on a wet day.  
I heard him speak to it.  
"Whoa," he said.  
It cut his hand off anyway.

To release the claim  
and settle the debt  
officials gave Haggarty  
a hoister's chair  
in the "Neversweat."

Last week his ghost hand  
missed a grip  
dropped six men  
a thousand feet.

The Company will pay for that  
I understand.

KELLEY SHAFT CEREMONY

In New York City  
fifty priests say mass  
for Cornelius Kelley,  
cartel king of copper.  
Ground wind in his copper camp  
howls winter requiem in Butte.

Half-mast hoist house flags  
whip attention.

Shifters cream lukewarm lies  
into bitter coffee cups.

Cold white skin men  
dress in Drys and prepare  
to descend in silent steam.

Shaft lights flicker, helmets click,  
as someone shuffles on the grate.

A lame Finn drops his bucket  
crowds a Mick.

Both men mutter in the cage  
at a company suck  
sent to ritual  
at the portal stage.

To honor Kelley  
he makes an inscribed  
copper plate  
fit screw holes  
in the gallus frame.

Now men slip down the throat  
of a dead man's monument.

CONTRIBUTOR'S NOTE

I rode a motor  
thru a tramway tunnel  
in the Mountain Con  
and listened to the brass  
bell clang as the skip  
hoist banged the bucket  
up the number two shaft.

The Kelly men worked  
in the open stope,  
barred down rock  
from a bald head raise  
to the gopher crews  
who muck around  
the goddamn clock.

They coughed up soot  
but silica stuck  
as widow-makers howled  
when the Ingersoll moaned  
as the starter steel struck  
the hornblende stone.

I burned images black  
on the hanging wall side  
with a spitter's lamp,  
drank brakish water  
from a tin can cup  
and grew hands hard  
with knotted knuckles.

And I cleaned track  
with a flat Finn hoe,  
Bird in an alligator's jaw,  
or scraped the turnsheet  
black with an idiot's claw.  
Grinning down a drift,  
I dreamed a lot.

## PROSPECTING

With the eyes of a cave born  
reptile I skin the drift  
for the giveaway sign  
of my shadow escaping  
the rib-timbered flesh  
of the mountain of words,  
the bone of the muse.

Gunning the engine  
I move past the heart  
into the cut of light.  
Moth-hungry for flame,  
the shape of carbon,  
I seek the vein--mother lode  
of a craft-ridden art.

## CONFEDERATE SHACKS

I snowshoed over wind falls,  
and watched hawks circle  
Confederate Gulch.

Now gray ghosts inhabit homesteads  
and the pain of Southern deserters  
dissolves into wood rust  
beneath hawk shadow and the ache  
of a hundred winters.

Each Northern drift crusts  
thicker than Sherman's rubble.

Spirits in battered hats  
haze whisker-frozen cattle  
into wind-break barns.

They ditched the glory of the myth  
and came from Southern hunger  
to meet wind and canyon  
far from managed battle.

Five miles up the gulch and tired,  
the snow starched shack,  
glazed remains of a weathered bunker  
far from Shiloh.

Ice jarred the door case  
but ricks of wood banked,  
rot around the walls  
to freeze in place.

What storm battalions could not do  
I did by lifting up the latch.  
Inside gone black in ash  
of a decomposing room,  
a shattered comb,  
a picture of a woman,  
yellow from back home,  
a letter.

"Dearest . . .

    Forgive me . . . Daddy says . . ."  
When I left I slammed the goddam door.

Hawks in sun sail  
echoes over monstrous tracks.  
It makes no difference.  
No smoke rises from dead shacks.

PORTRAIT OF A PHOTOGRAPHER  
to Lee Nye

In the midst of many  
at Eddie's Place  
in the glass  
below opaque foam  
the thin man  
sees a view  
stiff hedge over lip  
of his country-rock image,  
then tips with care  
the joint's cold work of grace  
the frosted brew.

In the midst of many  
(without haste)  
he rolls his own  
lets velvet fall  
seeks the edge  
enjoys the absurd game  
above the sinew  
above the bone  
beyond the taste of beer.

In the midst of many  
he kindles a match  
eyes alert to laugh  
above the flame  
to call the shot  
to carve the line  
to catch in a camera click  
a view that contains  
us all.

## THE CABIN

The cabin was simply built  
with walls hewn straight  
to fit the door. The roof  
sags now--arched by time--  
no longer squared,  
as when I crawled  
upon the floor in small  
and simple patterns.

Now the walls meet  
to slip to ground and form  
a smooth organic blur,  
no longer sharp,  
but crumbling round  
the foundation where  
distinctions don't occur.

In the soil, or rather sand  
sifting through the door  
no longer according to man-made  
plan a new shape attempts  
erasing sores--  
bans memory of order and simplicity  
to create a longing for blocks--  
something other than the feeling  
of an object's mystery.

LYRIC FOR O'LEARY

Out of range of the Minnie Jane fault  
past the lope of the big machine,  
the foot wall floats and head boards moan.  
"Thirty bucks a day to clear the stope."

What do we care if the hanging wall slips?  
What do we care if the timber's green  
and the coffin-hoist calls from the mouth  
of the shaft? We will drink bourbon and cream  
and laugh at O'Leary's wake, argue, and sing.

We will uncover the mucker's bones,  
gather them up for Mary.

And the company will pay us big money.

Goddamn it. Come on. Let's dig up O'Leary.

SHADOWS IN A SHAFT

The shiv wheel of the gallows frame  
rolls on its bearings of babbit  
a spool of steel-core cable  
down the well cribbed shaft.

A mile below we wait for the snake  
to uncoil expensively in the bowel  
of the shaft without dropping  
the depth charge of its weight.

Unreeling steel connects the copper sun  
to the Badger's Claw at the bottom  
of an engineer's dream--  
a nightmare of high grade ore.

Bats click past light to follow cable,  
gliding on velvet bellies and rat-bone  
wings softer than a toad's tongue  
licking the night for curious flies.

MUCKER'S LAMENT

In the Belmont shaft  
down thirteen levels  
Mike Quill's ghost presides.  
(Some say he was an Irish Mason.)  
The miners refuse  
to acknowledge heresy;  
they confound devils  
by tracing the sign of the cross  
before the underground station.

If the Masons don't get you  
the barleycorn will . . .

Last week Mucker Malone  
ignored the ritual,  
or so the nipper,  
One-Eyed Nelson, said.  
Nelson, a cousin-Jack,  
doesn't believe  
"in all that rot."

If the Masons don't get you  
the barleycorn will . . .

But Blonde Edna,  
the Mucker's whore,  
dreams him dead  
in a copper casket,  
and he's hitting the bottle  
a lot.

If the Masons don't get you  
the barleycorn will . . .

The shifter doesn't care.

So the Mucker,  
he takes the cage,  
goes down drunk  
thirteen levels  
to meet Mike Quill.

If the Masons don't get you  
the barleycorn will . . .

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Instead of "I like it"  
someone said  
the Chamber of Commerce slogan  
should have read,  
"Butte is my town,  
let's face it"  
which I couldn't.

Surface with will not  
damper a ghostly rattle.  
The cough of Miners' Con  
is heard hacking  
silicotic glitter.

How could I,  
whose grandfather kissed  
with flaky lips  
(evidence of ruined lungs)  
live with all that wit?

Should I ignore  
the brittle whore  
whose rotten-flower thighs  
smothered old Sean,  
while flat-hat Commercement  
chat about litterbugs.

"Filth in the street,  
debris, garbage cans,  
volunteers. . . "

the paper said.

I remember Sean  
sad out of a rustling card  
drunk and puking sharp death.  
"They're all skymers, Ed,  
every Mother one,  
and they hung Mucky Malone  
to the Rocker Bridge."

Papers came out as usual,  
Father Fitz said the last rites,  
and I bled salty love  
from the corner of wake eyes  
down generous legs  
of Sean's little girl.

So suck up your own litter,  
file it in your copper shaft,  
blow it down the Kelley,  
belch in a Mexican miner's face  
before he tastes  
your brand of chili.

STONE BEFORE THE CRUMPLED HORN

Indigo's brown eyes blurred, hot  
like the hurt eyes of a cornered fox  
when McGuire's trombone brogue  
shouted war, as he downed the double shot,  
cracked a bottle back across the bar  
and slammed that brass spittoon to gong  
against the smoked up wall.

Indigo was the darkest Mexican in town,  
a stropped razor buckled to his belt.  
McGuire knew that night he'd fought  
his last good fight fifteen years before  
he'd turned stone-slow, stiff by talk  
and muscled bluff, refuge of a dying king.

Listening to Indian blood roar  
Comanche through his swelling veins  
Indigo called him out  
to sack him on the sawdust floor,  
his blade the end of words,  
sharper than dramatic temper,  
or any other Irish act.

Silhouettes along the bar watched  
until a Spanish girl with no pants  
danced like black gun powder in a dream  
to the center of the scene to lift  
explosive skirts and silhouette  
naked before the tiger's teeth.

The bartender of the East Park Plaza  
rolls bone dice with juke box takers  
tells the tale with scorn,  
saved her pants, a trophy dropped,  
does not understand black powder  
as did the blasted men--  
stone before the crumpled horn.

POÈTE MAUDIT

I see him stagger in the rain  
hugging the brown paper sack,  
lurching toward the bed  
at the end of his vision.

I am not morally opposed,  
nor do I think he's talent wasted.  
He holds the bottle like a gun  
loaded with these sentiments.

Shot by shot he pulls the trigger,  
quoting Rimbaud as he goes,  
willing his failure to die  
in an undramatic manner.

ELEGY IN A MINE YARD

I passed the gate and skull  
that whistles in the wind--  
a hide, rag, bone-barrier  
that spooks cows and fascinates kids  
--and always did--  
the cattleguard entrance to the canyon,  
  
called Cataract. The trail is steep.  
From the view binoculars provide,  
gallus frames collide to shape  
designs of pain, and shacks  
dissolve in rock and dust  
  
on Taboo Hill where hoist drums  
rust and slant toward glory holes  
that gape like hungry mouths  
of stone giants banged wide  
by lust.

Every year from the town below  
volunteers come to hammer, nail,  
and board. Fathers and brothers  
or young men looking for free beer,  
plank some shafts with tamarack  
timber and curse the ones they can't.

Old men chaw tobacco and swap lies,  
and wag their heads and talk  
of me and Dave and Connie Joe,  
and of the weather in this canyon.  
Summer or winter, it damn near  
always threatens snow.

They're not there now, but I can  
see them just the same.  
I remember at the funeral,  
how they came--  
wearing stone faces true  
to our kind on such occasions.

Forgotten images return--  
the small white coffin,  
Dave, standing of all places,  
between Mrs. Murphy and a downtown cop,  
kicking the freshly turned earth  
with a curious polished shoe

the black Ford cars in solemn rows,  
the priest in worn clothes,  
who said the requiem and asked for grace,  
and coughed when Connie's sister came  
to sing a coranach  
before the casket and the grave,

the apple trees that moved in wind  
to shed moist bells of red upon the lawn.  
Those trees we stole from often,  
since they grew in sacred ground,  
and in a Catholic cemetery  
where a bishop disapproved.

Since I've come this far  
binoculars and memory will not do.  
I'll climb Taboo Hill to see  
just where he fell--  
walking as he always did,  
a skip or two in front of Dave and me.

I'll come down slower  
than on that day  
we ran a mile for men with rope,  
who shook their heads and knew,  
there wasn't any hope,  
if what we said in terror was true.

They've posted a cross  
on the gate before the shaft,  
and a sign where my apple stealing friend,  
Cornelius Joseph Daly died  
in the year of our Lord, 1938,  
as if to indicate,

the loss

is covered

by the date.

ON THE RIM

Deep in mined-out waste  
carbide lamps illuminate mold,  
black damp in a caved-in raise,  
Shattered quartzite seams  
crack inside the mountain  
where quick men move  
(in calculated haste)  
to fill pant-leg sample sacks  
with gob and crumb.

Ore sleeps in blankets,  
copper, gold, or silver lace.  
Visions in spring dreams  
drift like smoke from shacks  
where women read catalogues  
and put-up fruit--in case.

The heavy snow comes quick as rage.  
Some men whose wives grow grim  
as quartz, or jasper stone,  
leaved the worked-out stopes  
trudge back to safer jobs  
collect a union wage.

On the rim  
between the mountain  
and their hopes,  
other fools, maybe wise  
laugh and wait.

ELEGY IN A MILL

Birds wheel in dirty light.  
Pulleys sag from rusted beams  
in this mill my father worked.  
Quiet dissolves the wings.

Father Fitz, in his black coat,  
never saw a sample sheet,  
when he said politely to no  
inquiry, "The Church will not,  
can not, bury him. I'm sorry."

Crusted with low-grade ore  
the old man tried to ship,  
the gears won't turn again--  
a piston in the engine frozen.

The priest had his reasons,  
could hardly know how rooky  
birds and radar-clicking bats  
wing reports and roost on hearts.

Crows and starlings have no season  
to loot the nests below the roof.  
My eyes avoid the swallow  
in the silt and feathered dust.

A SHE-HAWK

A she-hawk swung heavy  
in the still grey sky  
and suddenly dropped  
wingless to the sound  
of broken air  
its mending cry.

She folded talons into prey  
and jerked aloft,  
no longer graceful,  
clutching a cargo  
of death.

Screwing through the grey  
she twisted desperately,  
wanting to live,  
her purpose to survive  
to perform again  
a

graceful

straight

line

dive.

THE BALLAD OF THE BOARD OF TRADE BAR

Coal Oil Belle  
was a red lamp legend  
in a brown town.  
She worked her trade  
behind a smelter stack  
in the echo  
of the night shift whistle.

Her polished symbol,  
the hurricane lamp  
red as a Black Widow's belly,  
swung in bronze relief  
--an evening star--  
above the dark oak door  
of the Board of Trade bar.

Belle's fame is now renown.  
In a town of misery  
one needs sentimental history.  
I've never heard it said  
that anyone thinks it strange  
so many neglect to tell  
of the Madam's final bed,  
a forty thousand dollar  
engraved coffin.

Lined with silver  
beneath a smoking torch  
ten pounds of bone.  
Her house is in the ground.  
Some men know  
when the whistles blow  
her earless sockets listen,  
as her hip bones move  
  
to the pocket sound  
of a lover's jingle.

## THE UPPER BUNK

From the high backed bunk above  
a thin girl urges obedience.  
The lively sister awake below  
spurns the honored word  
and longs for love.  
Who is to say which selfishness  
best serves the greater wisdom?  
One heart prefers to leap  
from law to love and touch.  
Another wants to make and climb  
the rungs to take the upper bunk.

WINTER RUN-OFF IN SKIMMET'S BAR

Skimmet's daughter plays the piano,  
everyone applauds. The bartender  
shakes round dice for drinks.  
(The juke box is silent,  
waiting out the final days of winter.)

The plank barsill is loaded  
with chunks of high grade ore:  
dark galena, peacock copper,  
pink mag and ruby silver,  
even tin molds along the mirror.

The double decker oil-drum stove  
glows with stolen company coal  
fed lump by lump with laughter,  
sighs of months gone by--  
talk of how to turn a dollar.

Men with gnarled and knotted  
hands clump arthritic knees,  
steam rises from bulky coats  
soaking in a pool of heat.

Outside a wet snow is falling  
from a sky too white to see,  
slushing off the corrugated roof  
trickling down the eaves.

Those old men against the wall  
are smiling once again to hear  
select and ancient drain pipes  
siphon off the water.

## THE HUNTER

A deserted shack Fall bees invade  
invites the moon by night.  
Pack rats fat over wormwood rafters  
loom above the breeze,  
cold thru plaster slats.

Leaves turn tin in trees.  
A coyote howls his land.  
Darkness aches in silent eyes.  
Whisky curdles in the coffee  
thick as solder wire.

The gutted stag hangs  
horns to ground,  
a shadow in the door,  
a king convinced.

An aught-six supports the hooded man  
crouched in a sheepskin coat  
hands to a singing fire.

GIMP O'LEARY'S IRON WORKS

You hear a lot of lies about O'Leary,  
but he could seal a crack in steel  
no matter what the size.  
His arc welder would strike  
white fire and a bead  
of blue-black rod would slide  
along between cherry streaks,  
and acrid smoke would curl away  
to leave clean married steel,  
not buttered up, or too frail,  
but straight and strong,  
hard as mill forged rail.

Of course you might say,  
"Don't use that example  
as a metaphor for poetry.  
Welding is a matter of utility."  
And you'd be right. Still,  
I remember the look in his face  
when he'd lift his great helmet  
and sneak up on the finished  
job with his unprotected eyes.  
It was always between him  
and the piece of steel--  
a struggle of molecules and will.

Often others would say to him,  
"Damn good job" or some such thing.  
If it was, he'd grin, and look again,  
as if he thought the natural light  
would show a flaw, or bridge,  
that didn't fuse--convinced, I guess,  
that in his struggle with the steel  
he could seldom really win.  
Like Yeats he knew perfection  
could conceal the wound beneath  
the arc of his art.  
I liked him for that.