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Survey Chief at Bigfork

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The Missions close down like a wall
hiding the backcountry. There must be secret
passages up there leading to peaks that stare blindly
at one another. Snow covers tamarack and bearberry
on the shaded north face and even bright days
freeze bare fingers to the transit.
Six hundred feet of backbone to run
and the ravens sail by like side-armed coins.

No town in Montana could ease this wind.
It blows all the way from Canada,
rounding snow into the soft curves
and bellies of winter. Pulling chain
down the line, it all comes clear: how you impose
order on a life where lovers walk out,
how you narrow the world to a few bald colors,
geometric lines, and a lasting desire to keep warm.

On the bay, storms polish the inner ice
mirror-smooth, til it shines back the midday moon.
Every boundary runs six feet above mean high water.
I've measured more than corners here.
I've measured the way my life backs up
when things go wrong, and I reach for simple
puzzles the brain can solve—the long leg
of a right triangle, the exact location
of original stones. Flathead Lake
shelters you from nothing at all.
In light this bitter, you can't hide your mistakes—
minutes missing in a full circle,
cold nights, the drifted footprints leading in.