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On the rim

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ON THE RIM

By

Edward T. Lahey

B.A. University of Montana 1959

Presented in partial fulfillment of the

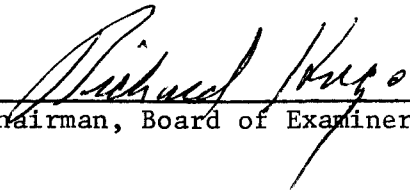
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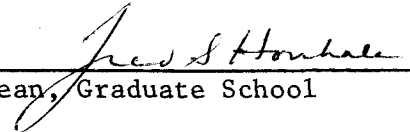
Master of Arts

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1967

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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 pirhouette
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.