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THE BREAKING EDGE

Poems by

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B.A., University of Montana, 1979

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Montana

1989

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Agency

As if a boy, caring about the power
of a curved stick to convert its flight
into return, every afternoon escaped
the schoolroom chat about what
some prescribed dream required. As if he
climbed a fence, borrowed a field to practice
hurling his hunting wood from a truant's hill
in variations of slant and force,
watching its trajectories approach
and depart, following wherever
he had to follow to retrieve it
from his thousand errors
to try again.

As if the trials
were his birthright, given instead
of happiness so that happiness,
if he could do it, would be his. Evening
after evening the white wood slashed
at the dusk in thorough obedience
near to mastery, all he learned and guessed
a language which he could not move
but by touching, around him
glimmering like a bubble exactly
the size of God.

The Breaking Edge

President Johnson's Men

I was sixteen in 1968. No sign of dawn at 5 a.m., the windows black and brittle, fragile barriers between me and the outside air, 125 degrees colder than my blood. I stirred warm oatmeal, dreaded the need to leave that wooden cocoon, warm and costly, its electric meter spinning, its furnace whirring, electronic sensors monitoring the temperature, controlling the oil to the flame that for half the year could never go out. Without that flame water would stop, turn hard, burst hidden pipes that connected us to pools two hundred feet down where water stayed liquid. The radio mentioned the latest deployment, Saturday's price of hogs.

Mom was still in bed, sick again. A year ago I'd found Dad after one of his seizures face down in the flooded basement, drowned in three inches of water. On the back porch I could see my breath as I pulled on a second pair of pants, more shirts, three pairs of wool socks. The too-large canvas coat (ballooning like a space suit), knee-high chore boots, and worn ski mask were enough, but somehow not nearly enough as I opened the door into air that would kill a naked man.

In a cratered desert of dirty snow, frozen hoofprints, steaming cow pies, my dark walk clumsy and slow, I herded a hundred holsteins into the holding pen, started the pumps. Doors at the south end opened to let cows in, at the north to let them out. The barn never got warm--eight stalls, each with an octopus milker, stainless steel and black rubber mouths, my hands freezing as I pulled a dripping sponge from the bucket of disinfectant and wiped each cow's teats, wriggled my toes to keep them from freezing. Milk flowed up clear pipes, pulsed to the rhythmic sucking, spilled into the strainer on the ten-foot bulk tank; a compressor cooled the white food, an agitator kept the cream from rising. I listened to all the machines, afraid something might break.

Showered and changed into town clothes, I caught the bus at eight. At eight-thirty, glad to be inside, I sat through first period history. The teacher, a man as fat as a baby

and with delicate hands told us we would never have good jobs if we fell asleep. Told us Thomas Jefferson had a black mistress. Told us the Japanese made cheap copies but couldn't invent. Told us Millard Fillmore was the thirteenth president, and the only thing women could do better than men was teach kindergarten. Physical labor, he told us, was punishment for failing to please him. "You'll have to dig ditches if you don't like school," he threatened. He told us we'd have a test on Friday and that President Johnson's men save us from those who hated freedom. The thermostat was set on 72, the fluorescent lights hummed, and outside the dead cold stayed. The cloud cover stayed, as it had month after month until the sun was one of those memories of somewhere so pleasant we doubt we were really there. He could not see me and taught what he could, afraid of the outdoors yet not knowing even how a furnace regulator worked. By noon I was restless, ready to join the real men, if I could only find them. I was sixteen. It was 1968.

The Breaking Edge

All day and all night F-4 Phantoms,
launched with cargoes of fire, roared over
louder than my power of thought, their black art
approaching the miraculous.

Every season villagers
below re-enacted the feeding of the multitude,
faithfully throwing rice into Earth that it might
return increased by a power management forgets
to fear. Children's games ended according
to protocol as every path and every hope
of a path was seared again and again in the mortal
fall of invented thunder and incandescent
rain.

Between memory and fantasy, what?
I didn't know what to hold on to or how,
I no longer knew how to reach you--

the story
in which you undressed beside a lake one summer
years ago to tell me if life were not magic
at times it was close enough.

I was gone too many
nights at the breaking edge of a new
world. Amiable killers each evening wrote
letters to imaginary homes, so lonely they
no longer knew what might come of making
love or who to tell their poems to.

Once
we were children, loose in acres of play,
leaping from trees against battalions of comic book
fiends, standing heroic on fences and gates,
friends of the beautiful, foes of the mean, giggling
champions ranting through twilight and warmth
into enchanted dark. We sang: No bears
are out tonight; Daddy shot them all
last night. . . . Our skin was hot. The stars
were bright, and we wanted never to surrender
to those we peeped at through one-way windows,
light-blind with their routine lives: Mom
at her dishes, Dad at the paper, Janice grooming
her mirror--who were we?

Villages exploded
on schedule at the breaking edge of a comfortable
linkage of pleasant people. I wanted to stop
it, began to hate the worship of circuitry
and steel, all the glories of darkness. I traced
evidence of a better story that accepted me
(the way surf accepts whatever is thrown in).
I sensed currents, swirling pockets of phosphorescence,
patterned moments like stepping stones in a dusky
bay, half-seen in my sluggish awakening, half-

guessed, the way a baby playing peek-a-boo begins to imagine coherent reality between miraculous going and return. Above me, the balanced burning of stars, a radiant though connecting our history of ways to darken the story of a god who lifted his body back from the grave for keeps, his central act of glory, saying it was because of love.

I deserted all narrow hope.
The homeland I made it back to was mostly empty. People crowded the coastal cities, but I followed a two-lane as it wound through nameless hills. Ravens attended mangled rabbits in the stillness between cars. Wild grapes slowly turned rain into wine, and I missed you. Passing ravines and wild trees, bunch grass and creeks--so many places that would be lovely if there were just a cafe, a school, some place at night warm and bright with people--

real people,
not pretenders ruining themselves with cold plots and lethargy, mingling wicked politics and sleepwalking, docilely crowding the malls, hunting some gadgetry to fix their lives.

Broken, a wagon wheel
from winter earth to winter earth arched,
a gray and frost rainbow, bleeding rust. Some going ended here, sank into weeds. I didn't know how to reach you, though I rose every morning as restless as a homing pigeon in some wrong county. Fog rolled in from the west in spite of better plans, and my white breath blended.

When I knew him,
my grandfather prayed with his body, feeding cattle or training a horse, holding to the promise that all this is momentary, a shred of the work and glory ahead: "Live difficult," he said, then laughed. "It won't last long." His faith glittered like salmon in a silted stream. He waited for decades in fields where labor was patience, one way of fighting the wars of want that warped the temporal sensorium where he was held like a falcon in a gunny sack--currents of sky, his blood told him, were out there.

He stood his distance from the world, as tired and virile as Moses, watching young children learn by touch the sharp edges. They wanted games with easier rules, planning fun till the fun ran out, then starting over, older, with less room. Each time with less room, a game they never chose getting tighter. They laughed at him, my grandfather and his peculiar gait,

his old way of being in no hurry, certain of infinity, living as he did amid life vaster than Earth, visions sheering through the brevity of flesh with unerring trajectories that spoke to him of Light the sun blocked with its puny burning.

Each night engines I hid from roared to shreds arguments I stood on, and in the after-silence where the first line of a better story should have stirred, I only heard professors rustling the robes of their false priesthood. Myself a derelict disguised in learning, I crossed the land slowly, looking in small towns for directions, thinking of Rilke thinking and of how beautiful the girls were, dressed against the chill, pretending all the while that love might happen like a log bursting into flames. Stalks dried golden in cold sun, cracked in the wind, fell into the edgeless black intercourse of living soil. An old gelding leaned into the final whiteness; scholars of technological foxery kept their temporary vigil: all winter the fire was their agenda.

I sat twisting a spoonful of sugar through black ripples in the only open cafe in town. The ceramic elk on the milk machine bellowed over a ceramic prospector sitting on a ceramic rock behind a bunch of bananas on the ice machine. The police scanner by the blender kept us posted: a white Buick was somewhere between Missoula and Seattle, with two kidnapers and a four-year-old boy and a possible .357 magnum; a fourteen-year-old girl, last seen about midnight wearing a black t-shirt was missing, maybe on LSD. I couldn't get away.

I knew how the story ends: we are disappointed: the weather changes and then the weather changes, as we thicken and age. But the inward rebel living his counter-life will not go to sleep.

I kept you like a secret in the quietest stretch of mind, remembering a summer village and trails through the Royal Woods where like peasant children we trespassed, our bodies tan and white in a clearing above the lake. Faraway the drone of a fishing boat assured me I was not lost. Tufts of peaceful lupines grew at every turn in every crooked path through summer heat that melted whole lifetimes in minutes. All mysteries were temporary, I swore, and I pretended the world was mine, pretended the King was dead.

I was partly right. In summer we see no use for God. The police radio mentioned a one-vehicle rollover on Mad Ghost Road. The glaciers were growing, the sun ringed with mist. On television I watched multitudes gathering on the White House lawn to shout for the Man to save them. In the Middle Ages, a plague moved by unknown means, leaped from victim to victim. The dead and dying lay everywhere, piled too deep for the living, who crowded into cathedrals to stare upward superstitious wish, inattentive to the carrier fleas leaping among them. Who could have thought an individual cleanliness, multiplied by millions, an athletic purity--

I wanted quiet talk, with you, wanted to run from this century, from chaos trapped in massive structures of distrust that no intelligence could loose, could order. But all backtrails ended in secrets we kept from ourselves, a darkness that flowed into us with mother's blood.

How do you remember midnight miles of mountain roads, winding quiet river banks, summer meadows, alpine lakes where during the war young men had you naked, had you touch them in ways you later said needn't mean a thing? You said it didn't matter if we groped through ghosts of them, trying to touch some original place that together we could hold, if you really wanted--only a ledge, maybe, but above the region where neither of us wanted to stay, where after the climb we could rest and see farther than ever and want more than ever to rest and to climb in that perfection of making that would not desire, would not imagine an end.

One town paid me to talk to their children, but mostly I listened: the graceful languor and violent want of those teenagers, like vikings, invaded the still academic quiet of classrooms, bright caves in the northern morning dark. At coffee, teachers paused, the laughter and chatter in halls at odds with serene notions of truth. To grow old in those hallways was to lose grip on all that's been agreed. It was death to think what could be taught: the obvious, the half. Twenty centuries no more durable than a wave's curl--

mornings
I walked past leaf piles burning, preoccupied with an argument outlining the avant garde's demise, the shadows it fires upon no longer the enemy. Between sorrow and self-pity, what was there but the same slight shifting we get

lost in between victory and defeat? The Scribes
 and Pharisees found themselves comfortable
 between Caesar and the masses, thought themselves
 profound in their subtle readings, full of
 posturing that paid well and cost them little.
 They had their careers to think of, and they
 had to hate Jesus, his refusal to be ashamed,
 the irresponsible way he kept his candor no matter
 what tribunal through what learned logic accused him
 of its greatest sins. Between innocence and guilt,
 what was their more than an inward surrender
 as brief and ineradicable as that flash
 at Hiroshima?

Your poets told you nothing, America,
 you could use in those, your failing hours.
 You knew your dreams were lies, but they were
 your dreams. You refused to decide what
 to want, and you did not know in what direction
 if there was to be a morning the sun would rise,
 because it was the job of poets to know the length
 and turn of night, but they belonged almost
 to silence, making small talk in the office
 upstairs. They published cautious insights
 in little magazines, arguing among themselves
 about organic linebreaks, trendy pronouns,
 peddling maps for which there was no country.
 And you listened to the jukebox (lust and infidelity),
 and you stared at the tube (programmed anxiety),
 and you asked the psychoanalyst (priestly babble
 of therapy) as your poets talked ordinarily
 about their fix, unable to help you think
 in the mornings, disturbed between the early edition
 of disaster and the routine route to work,
 unable to be heard above the grim and cheerful
 TV chatter at speed-of-light relayed around
 a version of the world, unable even to whisper
 any fundamental clue to that puzzle as every
 solution became a new and difficult piece.
 Since you craved things complex and easy (the morning
 crossword or this year's costly gadget) and since
 the truth was hard and simple, to claim the sinecure,
 your poets craftily angled away.

Trapped

like a student in the barren story of man's
 revelation to man, I sang a jigsaw song, unable
 to imagine stronger things to do.

In the dusk

in the Mission Mountains with you beside me
 riding the unearnable warmth of May, our horses
 eager after winter to go, your skin already tan
 under the scanty blouse, cool and not quite
 modest, your shoulders and arms strong, the geldings'

tremendous muscles quick to a light rein,
 in the fragrance of--I swear--lilacs, there was
 nowhere real to go.

At least in a fog in a jungle
 one has the comfort of knowing it is a fog,
 it is a jungle. I thought of a mild sea,
 a quiet plaza, insectless flowers hanging orange
 against blue water, yellow against violet
 sky, red against manicured green, and you,
 perfectly woman, comfortably walking
 the stone path up a gardened stretch
 from the sea to me, as inevitable
 as the tide.

You tell me lightly of other loves,
 laughing at the huge defeats now little far away.
 "Let's again be happy," you say, "Amazed at having
 made it this far, this high out of valley fogs
 where all was big and close."

The mind wants
 the body to be happy, a way the mind alone
 can never be, turning through its own confusions
 amid a kind of poetry almost visible in the night
 sky, the galactic swirl and fire of space, the might
 sometimes felt in magnets or storms--

we were lost
 to that life that led us, the way first love
 is lost the instant we make it real. A bird
 I could not name squawked, shadows grappled
 with shapes. Doubt returned like wind slipping
 through barbed wire and lodgepole, nudging
 and tugging at me as though I had a secret
 or some food.

Engines screaming in the night
 woke me, the world of your sleeping deep
 with tides of nothing quite seen, moving
 like ghosts of plants to a ghost of sun; I
 could not reach you, the hard grip of my palm
 upon your hip unable to anchor me like a root
 in promised land.

After you vanished
 from that child life, from our admission
 that we were never strong enough to live here,
 you went back to a dying world, the business
 of building cities that couldn't be born,
 and I went back to my life the way a man
 might go back to a house and leave the TV on
 all night because he needs the idle voices,
 needs the house not to be so quiet that he hears,
 breaking out like a war, the silence--

what harder
 laws, I wonder, might Peter have heard
 after the storm, if only for a moment, the night

he stood giddy as a child on stilled water?
The night he knew what to want.

I kept headphones on,
sad songs blasting, trying to drive my mind
away. But I went on thinking. We have to live.
Even as we sit here, a young soldier turns
in terror toward footsteps in the dark.
Should he shoot?

Somebody will.

A cruel man, stupid
in Detroit, bashed a baby's brains with a Thunderbird
bottle. He could have been taught kindness, just
as he could have been taught to read. But everyone
was busy, wanting the world so badly none of us
could reach it--wanting money or glory--

money, I found,
was only wind, movement of forces huger
than those who sail it, imprisoned in their
continuous response, and standing in the applause
I knew no one could see me, in all that clarity
of incandescent light, the proud invention
of a lost people, of whom I was one.

Of course,
all along I knew better and said better, thinking
that when the time came I would stand opposed
to unnecessary hurt, speaking strong words
as though I'd never wanted anything but the truth.
But the truth was that when it was time
no hurt remained unnecessary, because history,
you see, demands sacrifice before mercy.
We are as lost as the Pharoahs, presiding
over ghostly realms in the shadow of our monuments
to death. We pretend we are more rational,
but our sun gods also are only men. The doctor
issues a proclamation, an archbishop dissents,
and few imagine God has spoken. The Heavens
seem as silent as the skies.

It's been child's work,
playing at poems to save myself, trying to make
a counter-howl of struggle to earn back from hunger
for decency a decorum amid crushing risks,
unsmug and hurting while dawn spreads a charm
that cannot be held. I ached to play the revolutionary,
to scorn obstructions and dismiss as hypocrisy
every refusal to quit the difficult love
of a better life that day by day I failed
to live. But life has harder questions lately.
One really can say goodbye, take ten steps
and break through the edge of a universe grown
stranger than the nightmare I secretly arranged my life
against. A moment can sever a trust a decade
could not build. So I'm not surprised to see

armies moving, because I always knew they would,
just as secretly I knew I never loved enough,
always withheld enough I thought to survive
the storm that when it came I always knew
would come amid deceptions and rock rhythms,
a mock glory as intense, fulfilling
and treacherous as art.

I never told you
my theory: anywhere you go with pure intent
becomes a way out, a way home, a hard, wild
route you have to be awake to begin,
you have to be awake to go on, you have
to be awake--

You didn't hear me.
I never told you that beneath all the other
voices I think I heard while you were
with me, while we were children learning
our balance in new space, trying to believe,
a voice getting loose, beginning to answer--

Please, the earth keeps shifting. Please
help me want to stay.

After the Poetry

What kind of God, Jim asked me as we sat at the Apple Tree Restaurant on Higgins after the workshop, would tolerate it?

He'd turned to poetry because neither drink nor love had worked. After Vietnam he'd found nothing a good man could do that was enough while a child's body digested itself and men in shiny boots outlawed food to better afford a parade to celebrate the sleek and shiny hatred of their success. But poetry

didn't work, didn't stand a chance with the noisy crowd revelling in the silence of God. What kind of God would tell a story then leave, his prophets less clear than the average *New Yorker* author? Why, for example, doesn't the Bible make at least as much sense as *the Atlantic*, so all the preachers crooning like dogs on a swampy night would seem at least not to have broken different codes?

What do you want? I asked him, because I hoped it was something we shared. We looked out the window at Rattlesnake Creek slowly thawing in the earth's recurrent wobble toward the sun. We answered to ourselves.

Prove it, was what I thought the endless urging of the wind meant.

The Windward Sky

That Damned Flag

Dad was hardly ever home. But where he went, sometimes he took me. At 4 a.m. he'd wake me, cocoa in the kitchen beside his coffee. When we turned off the lights to go, Mom and my brothers still sleeping, I felt strong and big, heading out in grown-up dark.

We didn't talk, but I stayed awake 28 miles in his blue Mercury to the company shop where the fastest truck in the fleet, his yellow Peterbilt, was fueled and ready. He lifted me to the first step then slid in behind the wheel, grinned, at home, and flipped switches-- the long whine of the starter, the engine rumbling to life, all the guages quivering.

At the job he J-holed up a gravel ramp so the truck ahead could get past after it finished loading. He gave me a sandwich, explained the work: a young slinger, gracefully dragged the heavy tongs through brush, set them and scrambled clear. The shovel operator winched the log uphill till it lifted, one end caught on the boom, the other swinging wide as his steel and hydraulic dinosaur turned, carried the log over the half-loaded trailer. On the cab, the driver balanced, one foot on the headache rack, as the truck bounced.

At the mill in Kalispell, Dad turned grim, maneuvering through acres of stacked boards, forklifts loading flatbeds. He tripped his stakes, let the logs roll off, hoisted his trailer, lowered it piggy-back on the truck, rushed again to the mountains, swearing at drivers of inconvenient cars. Three loads in a good day, enough for all the payments with a little left for beer.

In the woods he was patient. I loved the smell of fresh sawdust and pitch, of grease and exhaust, the taste of baloney and mayonnaise in the wet pine morning. While he loaded, I explored the safe zone above the job where no sawyers worked. In the soft bank of a lake no larger than a ball diamond, I found tracks of bobcat, porcupine, deer and hare, listened to a woodpecker's machine gun rapping, to songs of birds I couldn't see, didn't know. This was a better world than town, Dad had taught me, where a good man didn't need a boss. I imagined myself free in a wild competence he might admire.

I slept through highway hours, the rough rhythms and loud drone of the diesel around me like a cocoon. In the dark near midnight, he drove into our yard. I woke a little as he carried me in. He was already gone in the morning when I came into kitchen, and I worried at how hard it seemed to fill a day from end to end the way he did, in America, in 1957.

* * * * *

I stepped from the Greyhound years later, my uniforms thrown away, unwanted connections to a deep mistake. He suspected some dishonor, a year of my enlistment left, but for months he didn't ask.

Then, relaxing in petunia scent on his front porch, he wondered out loud why I was back, the war unwon, my time not up. I stared at the northern August sky, traces of sunset near midnight, at black shapes of Montana mountains, said nothing about lifers stoned in Olongapo, covering their asses every day, naked drunk in every port we reached, or the little book by Thoreau I'd found, or Nixon promising cameras the war in Haiphong Harbor was over as air ops went on day and night, or the pubescent whores in a world run by men who did nothing to fix it, nothing courageous or wild, while boys were lost, struggling just to remember other places. All I said was the world was thick with idiots--some office dick could have a war in the name of some damned flag--people got aboard or marched away for nothing better than silly worship of some damned flag--

I was twenty-one. He was forty-five. He put his beer down, said with a waver I'd never heard that in England, dawn after dawn, he'd watched men fly off in B-17's and not come back, never, flying off to cold hard death for what I called "that damned flag." He put his beer down, unsteadily walked into his house, the white clapboard, fresh-trimmed lawn, tidy toolshed and only thirty-nine payments left; he walked inside and shut the door. That was all--our last talk.

I got in my Chevy, drove west along the Flathead River. Toward Seattle, maybe. I had gas and rage and money. I didn't need a father. This was in America, 1973.

After A Wasted Season

The long hours planting, getting wheat
into the ground, and then
the resignation:
 nothing but cheat grass.

Long shadows and cold air invigorate him,
but there's no work to do
in the dry useless fields.

He estimates his winter needs
against the chill and finds
survival here untenable.

 So. Plans
he had not wanted form in his mind
like clouds in the windward sky
off a coastal range:

 storms and rain,
ferns and vines, the cool fecundity
that must lie ahead. A swampy appetite
he'd tried to content among dry silos--
he slaps prairie dust from his hat,
turns away from his failure
the way a woman remembering her love
turns away from a mirror.

Solitude

Every argument now is wind against a net fence.
Everything slows: a ball thrown up,
urgent hips,
my steps.

From smoke of high trail campfire breakfast
till quiet of dusk and hot cider,
snow on remembered mountains
keeps falling.

We almost talked once, but trying now
is talking to oneself, trying to
forget the dangerous pulse
of wild faith.

Hell, we might have made it, rushing like young birds
at turbulent regions of cloud,
our hunger pure
as October.

You will not reach me. Snow is hip-deep, still falling.
The cold ridge leads only to other ridges,
but that warm valley leads only
to the sea.

Time Cells

He'd turned me down for a loan when I
 was twenty-two, talking in his
 cheerful way about realities
 I'd misconstrued. Round and tan,
 busy with demands and pleasantries,
 flirting and assigning blames, he strode
 through his town, sat at his desk,
 certain what he said shaped the world
 he knew--

 this world. The one
 where a decade later I was busy
 one Sunday afternoon annotating Emily Dickinson
 with half a mind, with half a mind plotting
 the next day (maybe some amorous distraction
 during an hour free at noon) when my pager
 squealed. The dispatcher's efficient voice:
 "Mission ambulance respond to medical emergency
 at. . ."

 While I drove, Carol hooked an O₂ line
 to the ambu bag, Sharon opened a suction catheter,
 put a CPR board on the cot--people stopped
 beside the road, yielding to drastic sirens,
 red lights pulsing--

 we knew the address,
 the small town talk that he was dying
 of cancer, but when we saw him, small
 as a child on the hospital bed in the living
 room, we turned to his wife, asked with our eyes
 if this were truly he--a third his former weight,
 nothing about him familiar, lying unable
 to talk, unable to say with his frantic stare
 what we were unready to hear. As distant
 and alien as a Biafran orphan, unable
 to lift even a hand, enormous-eyed
 and hurting, unable to escape the choking
 amid help too far away. . .

At the hospital I washed my hands,
 bled the O₂ lines, flushed his rusty fluid
 from a basin, filled half an hour with forms
 to document step by step our failure.
 His wife wailed the unspeakable at waiting room
 walls; his sons strode the corridors
 like businessmen, aware of their adulthood,
 toward some business with which, by god,
 they'd deal, not quite ready to look
 at what was dealt.

 Then, back to Emily.
 My Sunday afternoon. Her endless, earnest
 monologue about a willful dislocation

from this world. Her baffled inability
to be at home amid the bedlam of loans
denied, notes foreclosed, our wisdom
as counterfeit as our ease
in this world--
the one that comes to us in talk
that does not work. Finally, we do not
say, even to ourselves, what it's death
to leave unsaid--

Making Love

Stranded by science in an absurd circle
around a dying star made of crazy bits
of almost nothing, we think next is hypothetical
though we might be tickled senseless.

But something is going on.

We wander our invention of sky
(a mathematician's dream--pure space
explanations) now and then
entering with wits screaming
an event like a joke we pass through

where something is going on.

A school of sperm swims a warm place
between electrons and galaxies
where I want to say "I love you" so
I can glimpse why salmon leap from blue water
through moonlight into blue water--

I am trying to be here,
turning and flexing among quasars and quarks,
falling always back into the storied
pull of law. Something is happening.

And it is good.

Kicking Through The Wreckage

Along this canyon highway, the warm
cocoon of our new Subaru lies broken,
and we wait for help, wondering if the number
on our insurance card really works, the cold
night and winter fog no longer "out there"
like a movie we might ignore.

It is my fault.
Inattentive to patches of ice, I drove too fast
as though this trip (the same road I'd covered
a hundred times) were a story
already told.

Is this the climate of error,
a region we'll never leave, always looking
for things worth keeping--a favorite cassette tape
lying in the snow, a wallet crammed with addictions
on the shattered dash--recalculating
our means amid barren hills, inhuman
and wintry, distant sirens always
on their way?

How did we come to believe
so thoroughly in gravity, falling from our faith,
that satellite view that confirmed our hope
that all weather is briefer than we?
I wouldn't say exactly that this wreck
is another way of getting to sleep,
of letting that homing instinct
within us like a tenuous flame, that passion
for further wisdom go out.

But the horizon
around us like a collar angers me. I deny
the easier faith that this foggy world is holy
enough.

What if no help is really coming?
This story we've been telling ourselves--
it cannot end here. Surrounded
by impossible choices, think of how a mind grows
around certain words, how it reaches more
than any time or space we're dumped in.
Come closer. Let me share my coat.
Listen:

Since the night was full
of emptiness, they laughed. The instant
thrust home like a seed, a common
miracle, held them like an embrace.
Or held them like shackles.
They were free.

Now you.

Outside the Only Bar in Dixon

I think you almost tried to tell me
 where you live now, but we are interrupted
 by what we know must matter though in time
 we have too little attention and it doesn't
 matter though we have to say it does, have to
 remind ourselves of what surrounds us
 like books on shelves we'll die before we read.
 In the morning I wake up a stranger.

Crossing the highway, leaving the bar in Dixon
 no one we knew was hit. The truck did not stop
 but was imagined by the crime lab--its bumper-height
 and speed--and he lay from about two, bar-closing time,
 until dawn, alive, hypothermic, his brain bleeding.

When our ambulance got there, with one hand
 on his forehead, I pulled his eyelids open: the left
 pupil blown. Three white men who on their way
 to work found him stood off a few feet talking,
 a little glad at being in the scene, alive
 in the dull cold morning, at ease now in the slow pace
 of help. I radioed St. Pat's Hospital to get
 the helicopter in the air. We met them
 twenty miles south at the Arlee football field.

No poem is good enough to do love's work,
 to erode what holds that tangle rooted deeply
 as a moment of shame that ruins courage, stays us
 from entering each other. No therapist will ever
 find you because no physicist can discover
 heaven. Seven months of coma later he died.

At a reading in Missoula that night fifty miles south
 of the Reservation, as far away as an unrequited lover,
 a romantic poet blamed it on the Indian Wars
 as though the truck would have missed a white.
 And maybe it would have. Maybe the road
 he couldn't cross drunk didn't have to be there,
 the way the road you went away on wasn't.

The Language of Muskoxen

At the approach of arctic wolves
a herd of muskoxen becomes one flesh,
a many-hooved circle of beast around the calves.
I used to think I ended at my skin, though
for hours sometimes I was unaware of it.

The swimming sperm was not the man, relaxing
back into his half-life, becoming aware again
of his nakedness, pulling the sheet to his waist.
And the egg was not the woman, exactly, gazing
at the dance of shadows cast on the ceiling
by the apparently random lights of passing
traffic. Each was no longer itself:

the language of muskoxen contains neither "I"
nor "death." Hence muskoxen cannot sin,
choose to separate and die. The language
of muskoxen is passed through the glands.
Hence muskoxen cannot choose to join
their only chance.

The man gets out of bed and walks to the window.
The first purple shoots of tulips remind him
of cadaver fingers, escaping the ground.
The woman goes to the bathroom, turns on the faucet
to hide in the sound. The circle is broken
and they do not choose what came between them.
Arctic wolves with stomachs full trot
through centuries of trotting arctic wolves,
red blood cells living in their veins,
going nowhere.

Last Plea

Kierkegaard's leap would be saner than this:
 the television tells me there's a chance
 if we just keep moving, that the weight
 of what we are must not come to rest.

I don't believe we can, yet
 it isn't clear how we can't,
 living as we do forty years lost
 in a verbal wilderness--mad prophets
 on every channel. The future, they promise,
 will support thousands like us, but no one
 remembers it comes most often while we
 are looking some wrong direction.

They've made us a tidy little life
 of dribbled bits of science
 and TV advertisements and a God
 who never pushes us around.
 It's a fairy tale, they promise, that once
 He spoke in fierce light that turned
 a man hard, turned him to saying plain words--
 no footnotes, no Tradition--to cities
 that wanted to burn, citizens claiming
 their bodies entitled them.

Meanwhile we gather ourselves daily
 according to the daily profit explained
 through seven layers of deceit, stated
 firmly at seven levels of irresponsibility
 at the bottom of which is, remember, either
 you and I or nothing. We could relax,
 have another drink, and examine how the warm
 intoxication reminds us of love, amplifies
 the monologue till we think we're intimate.

But we don't need to. I'm sorry if too often
 I wandered instead of standing in the right
 lines, if I left some solemn congregation
 to take my shirt off in the rain. But you said
 you wouldn't conform to any forlorn cause,
 or imagine God wanted for us acres of formica
 counters and plenty of cupboard space.
 Don't fear the spokesmen's official nonsense:
 "By 2089, 47% of Americans will (according
 to our plans). . . ." Please, believe
 our future is not their colony, taxed
 by any law they suggest. Let them revel
 in their priesthood, akin to Caesar's priests
 poking around in the entrails of a goat.
 Laugh at how ineptly they've left out

of their calculations what you and I do
 next: let's climb alpine peaks to recite
 Ninth Century Chinese poems to fellow friends
 of altitude and wind. Or let's steal
 our children's childhood back from numbing
 schools, to talk and read and laugh
 with them in better hope.

Always out of sight, ancient children crumble
 horse dung searching for undigested
 grain, as around us charming functionaries
 chat about the quality of light
 in some childhood pantry and Grandma's
 fine writing on rows of preserves,
 muse about the way old people pry,
 what they want no longer, accept
 shadowy lovers passing to oblivion
 like the wrong ideas. Buildings down the hill
 huddle in dead tension like chessmen
 on an abandoned board. The wrath
 of the unimportant, tires screaming
 on the edge of town, is a hard prelude
 to wisdom:

Love, we are in danger.
 Count the sleepwalkers in the mall.
 Add up the gadgets you know don't work.
 Remember every lie you ever told. List them
 one by one by one till you reach
 the end. Promise. Save yourself.

Save me. Please, the stars move nightly
 and every map is wrong. Directions blur
 like a plucked string and you have to know
 the sound is not a song.

The Partial Quiet

Where We Must Live Now

In the heat between storms we wander
this port, sailors of the tropical belt
at the belly of Earth. Music from open
bar doors fills the streets where shreds
of mist and lightning move on, leaving

only the calm scent of morning. Together
we've lost every narcotic shelter we never
really had, and we make do in the open
homelessness past dreams that treacherously
came true. Blue sky holds us as a glorious

history is held in the head of one reeling
with age. Those years we searched foreign cities
for something to search for are gone.
Waves of forget recede through arriving
waves of getting told,

and at any tremor our feet
might let known beaches go. So we stroll
these sandy streets, sharing a crossed ocean--
like the trace of a flute we are here.

Chaperoning A Church Dance

As adults complain
about the loudness,
the darkness, the teenagers'
lack of grace,
the teenagers use
the loudness, the darkness
to hide their lack
of grace. People
are such awkward
things: their bodies
don't quite fit
so they shuffle and adjust,
trying to pull
together a moment--
just a moment!--
of seeming beautiful
with a beautiful other.

Sooner or later
it usually happens:
the warmth of bodies
is passed on and passed on
like a code.
While older people's
bodies cool,
they wince a little
watching how hard
it is for the young,
shy of such
moments, to live,
unable to relax
or to master the right
moves. Or,
as their bodies cool,
they feel the heat
is foolish. Broken,
the code is forgotten
instead of learned.
The God they imagine:
A Sexless Vagueness
That Dislikes. . .

Homestead

In better soil than I deserve
I set out tomato plants, glad
when I nick my hand: I let it bleed
and go on working, hungry to feed things
that grow after too long hanging on
to things that fall apart.
I came here years ago, to this valley
where winds have voices
like the last Indians singing
the mocked songs of their youth.

I needed to escape the cobalt mists
of that city where like a kitten
warm in a mother's milky curl, I'd nestled
with phantoms, almost sleeping, accustomed
to distant growls of machinery
I did not understand, untroubled
by cruelties my philosophy could not reach.
I did not hear in the next room
grim gentlemen crushing the genitals
of men too vague to scream. I only heard
their lie: "The peace," they said, "Must be kept."

It must be given. It must be taken.
Only birth is escape, but we are wedded
to barren comfort. Tonight in a rage of waking
I walk miraculous fields. Farmers' efforts
have stalled at dark under a disarray of stars
that rhymes with what grows in me:
rebellion against the comfortable lights
I return to.

Any Human Can Turn

any stone into an altar, or
vice versa. A doctor of human potential
 told me achieving orgasm could be
 the goal of life only for someone suffering
 from repression. He said his former
 wife taught him to relax in his
 sexuality. The biological thunder
 in his genes only prelude to this:
 shame thrown down like a boxer's robe,
 the lonely roar of a stadium
 on his side. He was my teacher.

School was all about facts, but the music
 we lived by was all about love. You sat
 on rocks drying above the Swan River and lied
 to me, claimed we'd reached the border
 and were safe. How could I think?
 Naked you were not yourself. "It shouldn't be
 any big deal," you said, leaving
 on weekends to hunt the world we'd agreed
 we'd lost--nothing could be better.

I give up again, just a peasant uninspired
 to say the right thing, maybe
 trying to tell the Lord the war
 at the border cannot be won, that the Lord
 must tell the Barbarians, that the Barbarians
 must tell their children: want only
 the possible: peace, with all its endless
 defeats and freedoms. Instead, my will
 as remote as the last grizzly hugging
 a slope so distant the evergreens
 are blue, poetry is impossible.

It's no big deal.

Watching Out

A puppy runs out of the yard into traffic
and laughing, the daughter who chases it
thinks of the lovely friend escaping
and not the quiet machinery rolling
over smooth asphalt with whirring wheels--

You say love is unconditional and therefore
whatever in me wants to stop you,
hold you, pleading its forlorn case
like a shabby salesman, isn't love.
I'm too possessive, you say.

So I pretend I don't know, care
where you are. But, Lord,
I am afraid.

Thoughts At the Faculty Meeting

Reality which remains speechless must drive man crazy.

Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy

Instead of work there's all this ceremony.
 Apostles of madness preach the abyss
 is interesting. The Organization of pleasant liars
 has a plan. Imagination rules
 in trifling virtuosity, and everyone pretends to have
 an official mind.

It's worse than boredom.

Last week on the supermarket produce scale
 Randy weighted Angie, his six-month-old
 daughter, and thought it over.
 On the way home he told me, "If
 she keeps growing at this rate
 when she's seventeen she'll weigh
 thirty-seven hundred and forty-two pounds."
 Randy's a CPA.

Machiavelli was an optimist. Maybe social
 security will collapse. Maybe Management
 will get us under control. Maybe
 a nuclear holocaust will equalize
 the tax. Maybe Jesus will just
 come back and say, "That's what happens
 when you do it your way." Or maybe
 it will rain:

a soft patter, slowly freezing
 and then hay bales we lifted
 in summer dusk to haul into the barn
 we'll lift at dawn and haul into the snow,
 surprising ourselves how ready we are
 for weather we thought obsolete.

Thursday

In that desert kingdom only lizards resist
the law, and the philosopher stands in evening
shadows, connecting the scene with cerebral
secretions he cannot help
but have, neither good nor bad, simply
existing like an ant. He has time
to contemplate, time to estimate any distance
from any point to any other in the blank
expanse he insists on as a prerequisite
to thought. He wakes up at his desk and looks
at the pile of facts he must sort through,
only a tired editor, no longer expecting the truth
to cross his desk. He goes to the coffee pot,
considers whether above the fold on page one
he should put the story of the Indians' latest
defeat, their success at quantifying the value
of trout to better take water from whiteman
farms, or the story of the school superintendent
caught lying who defends his job pointing out
the anger of those who oppose him is bad
for the kids, or the story of plans to move
the highway out of town, some talking about lost
business, some about the hit-and-run last week,
a fourteen-year-old dead on main street. Tomorrow's
editorial will be about what a long winter
it was. He drinks too much coffee. Forgets
to imagine defeating some dragon. These days
so many dragons survive, there are
no dragons, only the listless habit of fight.

Encouragement

All period Willie ignored me and the scraps
of learning I had to believe
would help him. Twisting in his seat
like a convict, he felt his muscles and felt

the hour as suffocating as a lie. I wanted him
free of the classroom illusion
of order, free of his first inheritance,

his place in a bad hierarchy badly imagined
by the managers of statistics and jobs
and the Plan. I tried to think of things to say
and what he might be hearing, waiting

in his Indian silence. We'd read a story
about a man trying to get free of the violent
quiet of distrust, but they

were bored, not ready to believe the world
was out of control, needed their attendance.
I'd read in an Auschwitz journal, the conclusion
of a man refusing to adjust, that

"Love, too, is a form of cognition."
At college, the Ed Profs, dozing
amid their alibis, far from the lines

of children trying to reach lives as real
as their hidden dreams, told me about behaviors--
never actions. But Willie, I knew, had to be
a hero to escape the dogma of the world he'd met

so far. And heros don't behave.
The Profs had a black box theory
of people: if they designed contingencies, monitored

in- and outputs, they might modify their subjects
without inexactly pondering what went on
inside. Would-be teachers chatted
about reinforcements and objectivity, not agreeing

so much as going along.
"Go to hell, suvapi." Willie told me
in the hall after the bell. I'd stopped him

for leaving before I dismissed class.
I knew his younger brother had been accidentally
killed by an unaimed bullet in a family
argument, I knew his father was in prison

for robbery, I knew his mother blamed
their poverty on whites like me, but I didn't
know how to share a huger past that was also

his. "Get off my life, suyapi," he swore
at me as I put my hand on him.
The kid's instincts are right, his attempt
far too weak. Tomorrow I'll try again

to further the rebellion that encourages
me, to show him enemies stronger
than sleep.

Going Home

All week I play with the players who run
the world. In our garden they have planted
stars, daring black holes to bloom. I print
what they say on page one
without believing it. We know

our jobs. None of us is surprised. Mine
is to keep the dead men talking.
But on Sunday the way Boo studies me
with her four-year-old eyes, her maskless
love too perfect for the world

I've brought her, I know in time
she'll see the root of all disguises.
She cannot gamble, imagine love as risk.
I want to hide, to keep her like a promise
more courageous than I am. She believes me.

I want to quit lying, thinking to own
a lottery ticket in Babylon.
On Monday all hell breaks routinely loose.
After the reactor fire or the prison riot
the engineer or warden says the usual things:

appropriate measures investigations and new
procedures to prevent the daily crisis
from happening ever again. No one is listening,
which is part of the plan. I put the paper
to bed, dream of deserving Boo,

awake with her taking my hand on an April
hill to show me the tulip afternoon
where none of the children pretend
they need reverse photosynthesis,
turning ferns into flashes of light.

The Big Trip

Because he cannot buy her an expensive shack
on that expensive coast, they are tourists
visiting the playgrounds of a world
that believes of them (if they really exist)
they are merely stupid. And if that world is real,
they are, because, after all, their car
is rusting yet they come, penuriously counting
their little dollars, to witness furious life
on the Golden Coast, obviously hungry
and hunting amid what they claim they scorn:
immersion in the spirit of soft hot cash.
And they've brought five children.

They've lived past the songs, the evocative
thunder of love in art, into the nuisanced entropy
of life in the flesh. They turn up the radio
and sail down Highway One, windows opened
to the summer they worked and saved for.

"Daddy, how far across is the ocean?"
 "It's my turn to sit by the window."
 "We're going to have to stop
 if you see a bathroom--"
 "She won't let me have a drink."
"Daddy, how far to the redwoods?"
 "How much will it cost?"
 "Is this the way to Disneyland?"
"Daddy, where are we now?"
The blueness of morning, juniper
and brown grass as a coyote disappears.

They won't deny they're happy.
Sticky in their boring clothes, sharing
a bag of dry cookies, drinking warm milk
from cardboard cartons, they pass
so many wonderful places they can't lose
hope that somewhere worth reaching
will be where they stop.

Night Response

He was thrown through the back window
of his new Honda when it hit an approach road
and flipped--43 payments to go,
the stereo playing Journey.
That much is fact.

The rest I do not know. Maybe a girl he loved
went as far as she wanted before words broke down
and left him alone, talking at a face
that offered nothing. Left him to drive the midnight
distance away from her.

Or maybe he'd found Jesus, a love so perfect
he was unafraid, knowing all others
were his fellows, temporarily estranged
on a dark planet with a cooling sun,
reeling toward an ecstasy of light.

But I know the car he hit held a father,
a mother, five children coming home
from their holiday.

I killed the siren, left the lights flashing,
moved the ambulance to block the northbound lane
where the family's trip was scattered.
My partner, Carol, was out with the jump kit
running through litter of broken luggage,
water, oil, glass and gravel before
I stopped.

Initial triage:

First driver: screaming, possible head injury, probable
leg and spine fractures, multiple lacerations (needs
to go soon);
Father: mortal wounds to head (forget him);
Mother: conscious, respirations rapid and shallow,
probable chest trauma, pneumothorax likely (hysterical,
might go bad quickly);
Girl, about 12: unresponsive, no respirations (do something
now!);
Girl, about 9: crying quietly, no apparent injuries
(beautiful cheekbones, long blond hair);
Boy, about 8: conscious with normal respirations, guarding
left arm (maybe broken collar bone, no immediate
problem);
Girl, about 5: unresponsive, respirations regular but
gurgling, blood in airway (needs suction);
Boy, about 2: unconscious and cyanotic, eviscerated bowels--

a bystander screamed and screamed and screamed
and screamed. If this is the world, she will not
have it, cannot escape it, so there she was,
unable to hear the partial quiet of all
that can be done--

the twelve-year-old, between
her parents, was crushed from mid-thigh down
beneath the dash. Carol pulled the father,
still twitching, out of the way onto frozen ground,
twisted the girl across the seat, cut
her blouse, her tiny bra, began CPR.

In the back, I slid a pediatric airway
into the five-year-old's mouth, worked it
down her throat, rolled her onto her side,

then lifted the baby's face to my mouth,
blew--

nothing went in. The useless bystander
screamed "No! No! No!" The baby's intestines
were soft and white, no bleeding. No injuries
apparent to his chest. With two fingers
between his nipples, I jabbed hard four times
and he choked. In his mouth I found
what looked like chewed-up hot dog.
He breathed deep!

The bystander shifted to a higher key,
began to wail. I glanced at her:
all dressed up for an evening of make-believe
(painted eyes and blue, seductive gown)
but standing on a real road
backlit by ambulance floodlights
trying to outscreech the night.