

SERIALIZED

(in four parts)

PART TWO

“WHEN I MET HIM” (page 85 of the 2001 edition)
to “SMITH, LOGGER, FISHERMAN, WRITER” (page 125)

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UPRIVER, BEYOND THE BEND
with
AT ABBY CREEK

poetry

by
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(AT ABBY CREEK was nominated for a Pushcart Award by Rick Bass;
its first 24 stanzas appeared in *American Nature Writing 1998*
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WHEN I MET HIM

he was another drunk
one of those people
you just want out
of your way. Oh
he was friendly enough
if you gave him a dollar
or two, would work a bit
if you caught him early
in the morning. You know
the type, the derelicts
in every town—
they were around
when I was a boy;
they're still here
though faces have changed.

Don't remember his name
just his face as he sat
on the dock with the gulls.
He was once a highliner
or so I was told;
was just like the rest
of us before going down.
I decided to ask what happened—
he didn't remember much.
Seems he was first mate on a big boat
(I won't name it—
neighbors' boy went down with it)
when they had some trouble.
The owner had his crew don survival suits
told the first mate to care of his kid—
the crabber rolled, sank
before distress calls were sent...
the mate & the skipper's boy were alone
in the Bering somewhere in Compass Rose
with no raft
no expectations of help
just drifting in rough seas
two specks only God could see.

In a survival suit, you can't stay warm
stay afloat
forever
& you certainly can't be seen from far

so the mate's & the kid's chances were slim—
don't know what he thought:
he hasn't drank enough
to talk about those three
days when no one even knew
he was missing.

He & the kid drifted
by buoys of a crab pot—
if he hadn't grabbed hold
if he hadn't held on
he certainly wouldn't be here
sitting on a cable spool today.

By law, pots have to be checked every third day
but even with radio & satellite location
pots get lost.
Boats break down, go down
can't get around their strings
as fast as they should
so what were his thoughts
as he hoped for rescue.
None of us know:
he hasn't drank enough yet.

The kid was young enough
he seems to have accepted
what happened
has gotten on with life
but kids have a way of doing that
at least for a while.
But the mate lost faith
may have lost a lot more
none of us know
but all of that *more*
doesn't matter
for without faith
there is no celebration
there can be no celebration
of Today.

THE MISSION

Blue words on a hooded sweatshirt,
blue baseball cap, coffee
in a Styrofoam cup, a cigarette—
a man in a mission, one
I think about; a jungle camp
visited in 1964.

I squatted, nervous, alongside
tracks and felt the ground
rumble as my stomach rumbled.
Green as the dying brush growing
against the barbwire, I listened
to horror
stories told as if what happened
was nothing. Only seventeen, I too
trespassed between life
and death. I became a poacher,
married, opened a gunshop and
seldom thought about that man
alongside the tracks, a vet
that let go of his mission.

That man in the mission—unruly
black hair, curly gray beard,
cigarette hidden in his hand—
knows what it is to wonder,
then not to wonder.
He watches
men wait behind the red light
in idling cars, choked by emission
controls. He once held
a beating heart
in his hand, stumbled on a temple
step and struck his head on a stone.
I know, I was there.
So with my heart beating, I climb
northern mountains
where alders crack stones.

GUN BLUE CLOUDS GLOW

like hot iron over ridges of frost & birches
rifled by foraging moose & the white tanks
of war games played with rockets & radar
pitting friend against friend
red army against blue
as if the future depends upon tire tracks
across the tundra, silent as that soldier
from Georgia—and that soldier from Georgia.

The full moon bristles as a face with dogtags
& frozen feet huddles over a Sterno fire
& waits for a face with dogtags & frozen feet
to lay aside the canned heat burning hearts
& clouds far from balmy shores of home.

Both soldiers listen to a moose snap icy willows
by the river that groans as open leads steam
like hot springs, raising misty veils that tinkle
like sleigh bells at Christmas.

The cold sun rises & scatters rays like words
of peace across continents—men of good will
carve turkeys & nations
serve cranberries as bloody fangs slash hamstrings
warm flesh & words; a reich of wolves
gnaws dry bones & devours
red army & blue.

Resurrected from sleep that soldier from Georgia
& that soldier from Georgia reach across tussocks
share rations & howls & nametags on that ridge
of frost & birches under clouds like hot iron.

Section Two

TRANSITION

he called to give
a writer's name
who is *pretty good*
who writes about the same
land I do, but without
all that cold war junk
that is metaphor
for a different war
for a different evil empire
within each of us
but I wrote the name
on the envelope
of an unpaid power bill
filed it somewhere
& returned to this screen
while potatoes burn
on the electric range
setting off smoke alarms
& a sleeping wife
who doesn't understand
why I have such a problem
making the transition
from gas

the aerie—

following crossing trails
I climb
through breezes
that lift me to the ledge
the hen launches
circles
sails guttural screams
at me
as she swoops low overhead
her downdraft strong
I would join her
if she'd let me

atop her spire, two gray eaglets
with pin feathers pushing through down

her tiercel joins the circle
both now dive low
as I lie
in trampled grass footprints
twice the size of mine
I feel the dung
fresh
but cold
make certain a cartridge is chambered
then stand
feeling taller than I am
pushing the pair higher
till they're specks
against the sun.

W QUESTIONS—

beyond the river
a hooter owl
asks
who am I
as I, in predawn darkness
feed white kittens
that shine in shadows
like snowshoes
before snow flies
hares the owl remembers
in boreal forests
that I remember...

I stare
into northern darkness—

I had forgotten who I once was
& why I migrated south for a winter
& when I intended to return North
& where in Alaska home remains—
What am I doing here on the Clearwater
a question without an answer

so thank you, Owl
for asking.

PREDATOR—

the shadow
of the hunting hawk
passed across my path
I couldn't locate him
at first but my hens
all canted heads
to see if he passed on
I looked where they did
& sure enough I too saw
wings glide over crowns
of pines I plan to fall
next spring

WHO ARE YOU, KENNEWICK MAN—

an ancestor? a sojourner like me
who groaned when rising,
whose joints snapped loud
when dodging atlatl cast darts
one of which you didn't see—

were you a copper buyer,
a freetrader who crossed
inland seas to freight ore
back to a motherland never
again seen—
you left cairns,
mile markers that, yes,
can still be read;
even your delivery schedule
remains carved in stone...
it is yours, isn't it
or were you only one of many
prospectors seeking metal?

Pain shows in your face,
a face like my face.

Did you try to escape
into deep water—
was that how you had before?

The People have no stories of you;
for the Corps you are an embarrassment,
for scholars you remain an enigma.
Creationists dismiss you,
yet you were here, just as I am.

You are here as I will be.

HE SENT HIS BOOK

stories his dad told
in his dad's voice
lean as chaps
hard as rowels
tough as mustangs
his dad broke
to ground hitch
so ditch riders
could turn water
into life:
corn & cows & hardscrabble kids
on Colorado's eastern slopes.

His dad left breaking horses
for a wife & the high country
of New Mexico where his children
stung from taunts of being
Sabbath-keeping heretics
in a Catholic county.

So following a radio broadcast
his dad took a job in California
where one son became a minister
& I heard his stories in Alaska—
sound carries far on still
December nights when a son,
with northern lights flickering
like angels on bucking horses
each bending west
as if riding another go-around,
honors his father around a campfire
of alder & driftwood.

EQUILIBRIUM—

who are these kids
who don't understand
timber as a crop
who fed them
who housed them
who showed them Bambi
who taught them to be greenies
whose overzealousness pollutes their minds
I know who, unfortunately
it was me & my parents & their parents
we saw rivers that burned
rivers turned into sewers
rivers without fish
we saw overgrazed rangeland
paved over farmland
eroded fields & dust
we saw slash & burn clearcuts
& we in our goodness
pushed the pendulum
so far across plumb
it threatens to destroy us
as it swings back & forth

AGING

cordwood ricked between black locust,
leaves fallen,
dusted with snow
whiter than the peeling paint
of the tool shed, empty now,
like the Ohio fields
beyond limbs, corn stubble & the far railroad tracks—

I call from Alaska,
say I need a quiet place to finish
a novel, a mail order bride & an old fisherman
spend his last years together, happy, a fairy tale.

*My hens have quit laying—
There're termites in the attic—
And I need kitchen cabinets,*
she says, her hands dusted with flour whiter
than the tool shed,
her arms empty as echoes from Ohio.

AFTER DRIVING ALL NIGHT & ALL DAY

I'm now somewhere in Iowa, alone in a motel
on a snowy evening four days before Christmas.
On TV, two fellows talk of hogs: April futures
are too low. Commitment today means red sales
of two-fifty a head, and the late news
shows Chicago's gridlocked tollways
shimmering like tinsel trees.

Stay home, I'm told.

The camera pans the city: towers like
so many concrete angels look down on strings
of headlights & taillights driven into one another.
Cars hang from guardrails like imported glass
balls from frosted boughs.

The freezing rain's suppose to stop
by morning, but tonight trucks lie stunned
like sows on their sides, suckled
by blue & yellow strobes of patrol cars.

The Soviet Union is no more,
its empire crumbling as the Tsar's had.

The Cold War has been won the announcer declares,
but I'm too tired to care.

I still face another day of driving east—

I wonder what the freeway will be like tomorrow.

DOGWOODS

scattering pea screenings to whelping turkeys
I watched changed leaves flutter
from apples & aspens
while feeling in chilled aches another change
sure to happen—

my wife sleeps content
again a grandmother, her daughter bore
a little guy who'll not remember yesterday
or any of this century—

my task seems one of remembering
change
& changes
for him & others—

my sister told me Dad is for her
a fragment of memory—
fried baloney hats one Sunday morning—

my life ought to be more than that
now forty years since that heart attack ended
farmboy ambitions, I wonder if Dad
would be as quick to sell, to plant hybrid corn
as when he was first in Wells County—
would he be as quick to trade an oak kitchen table
for Formica & chrome—

after the War, his war
our future sparkled
could anyone then know how little we all knew
or still know—

I'm not in a struggle to overcome
but to construct from snippets of memory
a life like mine—

the early sun peeks over pines & warms
a circle under the dogwood
its leaves deep red
as if embarrassed
for me to remember
four-petal white
dogwoods were Dad's favorite

LOOKING AT APPLES IN NURSERY CATALOGUES

I found Winter Bananas,
apples I tried before
Dad died. In that first orchard
somewhere in Indiana, the fellow
picking apples was deaf & dumb, but
he wrote
the price for a bushel
on my yellow school tablet.
I didn't know then that
years earlier Dad & Dan Gintis
played mute
in a restaurant. The waitress believed
their act, joked about what she'd like to do
with them. It was a game.
I didn't understand
how the fellow picking apples could
tell customers which to eat,
which to store.
Dad just knew
like he knew where to find
words.

CRANES

Three in May, five now, sandhills in the field,
pecking fallen grain. I saw them again today—

I followed them north last spring,
Lakeview, Paisley, Kenai, Fairbanks,
listening as long V's crossed the moon
like bombers returning from Germany.

Heavy wings lumber southbound,
join migrating flocks...
I wonder what Dad thought as
he stood in German fields,
far from his home in Indiana,
or what he'd think of me,
alone in the Arctic
in an August rain.

FROSTED WINGS SHIMMER

over the gray Tanana as southbound
sandhills cross the crescent moon
like B-29s headed for the Rhine,
a river Dad crossed when twenty-nine

(when twenty-nine, I crossed the Yukon,
arrived in Kenai with four dollars and
the promise of work in a month). A farm
boy from Indiana, Dad's letters home

were published in his town newspaper.
Grandpa saved copies that I remember
seeing (I was too young to read) when
a boy on an Indiana farm—Dad wouldn't

talk about war; didn't live till memories,
like the warbles from high flying V's,
faded silent....I've now lived longer,
been published in the local newspaper,

have had a world record and have seen
my children mature. Although the sun
hasn't set, the new moon arcs over
the Tanana where willows and birches

will bud again when sandhills return.

FORTY BELOW

The headline reads

30, 40, 50 below . . . !

For the first time in two winters
Fairbanks' official temperature falls
40 below. The chill's lucky for three
who predicted the dip to occur at 11 p.m.
January 18th, 1989.

The date catches my attention:
Dad died January 18th, a Saturday.
He was 42; I'm 42...

this is the year I've waited for,
half fearing, half expecting
nothing. The oldest of three sons,
I was in fifth grade
when Dad died suddenly, a heart attack
in a dime store twenty miles from home.
Mom didn't drive so he sat in the car
waiting for her to finish shopping.
Perhaps he would've lived—
my brother Ken thinks so,
became a doctor
who works at not being like Dad.
But something happened at Anzio.
I never heard the full story;
I only know Dad didn't trust doctors.
He wouldn't talk about the war,
not even to Mom, but he must have known
he had problems.
He tried to quit smoking,
lost 70 pounds and got his waist
below 40.
He was buried in trousers
he hadn't been able to wear for years.

A WESTWARD WIND—

we were to wait at Grandma's for Dad to return—
he'd bought a moving van, a little one with bald tires,
had loaded it himself, making use of those years
he drove for Mayflower; so with the sunrise behind him
he left Indiana while neighbors watched groundhogs
& shadows

Uncle Nyle met Dad at Salt Lake—
I still don't know how Dad knew his brother-in-law
who lived in Reno & had never been east
but who took the van to Portland while Dad
took a bus to Fort Wayne where we weren't supposed
to be but were for reasons I never fully understood

our Packard had bald tires that nearly stopped us
in a Wyoming blizzard—
did cause us to spend a night at Little America
where Caroleah left the blanket we returned
two hundred miles to get, glare ice all of the way

when we reached Oregon it rained for six weeks—
Mom counted the gray wet days after the van
sold as if she were arguing for moving on—
she spent the War working in San Jose where she
remembered orange groves I went to see years later—
all I found were city signs, leaving & entering
on the same pole

we bought a house in Boring, five thousand
dollars & decay—added a living room, a dining room
bedrooms & I began hearing
whispers
about Alaska

if Dad would've lived, he would've been a '59er
one of those homesteaders that followed statehood—
I could hear him buying another moving van
in the way he listened

to *The Wayward Wind*

CURIOUS ABOUT GOOSEBERRIES

since Grandpa said he liked them
ripe, I finally asked Uncle Jerry
what variety grew on the farm, there
behind the machine shed, where thorns
stopped cousins, letting kittens
and chicks escape Sunday get-togethers.

He knew only they always had cream
on gooseberry pie, that Grandpa grafted
this to that, got starts from neighbors
or wherever he could...I didn't know
when sent to the barn for a spanking
(don't remember why, only that my cousin
Rusty was also there) that Grandpa had
so delicate a touch as to fit scion
to root, growing new an old variety.

Jerry said he helped drill the well
that watered Grandpa's gooseberries,
a two inch hole sixty feet deep...
I remember that well, its pump, and
having to prime it that day when
I had too much fun chasing chickens
in the hayloft to dread the promised
swats from a yardstick kept over
the kitchen door.

As I now near when my grandchildren
will chase my hens, my grafts fill
orchards, are sold, and I have
a dozen varieties of gooseberries:
Whitesmith, Poorman, Oregon Champion,
Achilles, Leepared, Catherina,
Sylvia, Hinomaki Yellow, Pixwell,
more. And if I am lucky,
my grandchildren will remember
the pies of Sabbath dinners
as I remember Grandma's Sunday dumplings.

charred—

the possibility is slim but real
I'll lose this foot
more cooked than a rare steak—
I feel the heavy throb
of blood pumped against char
and I wonder what Grandpa thought
as he lay in that steep ditch
caught by fire
while burning weeds—

he was still spry
so what happened
that he couldn't get away?
Was he, like me, performing
a task done too many times?

Gangrene took his leg
to his knee—
it, too, was his left leg.

His pain must've been horrific
as he lay hospitalized
while Dad & Uncle Jerry
(I stayed in the car)
searched by headlights
for his wallet
containing nine hundred
silver certificates;

so what did he feel
as flames licked life
until it melted
revealing a son
unable to visit him
in the hospital?

Dad helped scrape up pieces
of a German convoy—
twenty-miles of incinerated men
& horses seven days in the sun.
He never forgot the smell
of bones too charred
by jellied gasoline
for Allies to call together
in a dry valley some future day.

PETALS OF EARLY ROSES FALL

among fireweed spikes on fire in nights like day.
Under leaning birches, bearded heads of hair
grass bent by the wind nod as I pick trailing
crowberries & bearberries ripening along the scar
of a seis line that crawls across the Kenai.
A distant jake brake, a hooter owl, the chatter
of squirrels—no longer sure where north is, I
listen for directions, remembering a broken jar
left in a sagging cabin. Someone used the fruit
jar for the chimney of a lamp, its glass bowl
pale purple & empty. Its flickering once caught
the glitter of gold. I know for notes on a calendar
told the miner's story. Who he was, he never said.
But he noted when he ran out beans & pilot bread.

REUNION—

went to a family reunion
a park in Indiana
4th of July at Bluffton—
a sister & I rented a car
drove by the cemetery
Kizers & Runyons
was surprized to see so many
drove past Grandpa's farm
cornfields now
no sign there'd ever been a house
a barn, two generations of Kizers—
same for where I went to first grade
Dad attended that school
all twelve grades in one building
Uncle Jerry also had
said I was the size of Dad
same height
same short inseams
I didn't know

photos of cousins—
no one had met my daughters
all three were there
coming from Alaska
California
Illinois
the family had scattered
after the War:
Florida, Carolinas, Kentucky
Oregon, Washington, Idaho
truck drivers & teachers—
never have I seen so many
masters degrees with so few
doctorates—

neither of my brothers came
Ben wasn't interested
Ken was too busy in the Capitol
one sister couldn't afford the time
but for an afternoon I listened
to stories I would've heard
if Dad had reached my age

INVITED TO A VEGETARIAN POTLUCK

I searched cupboards for something to bring
all the while knowing we were short of everything
except meat & eggs—

on those empty shelves
in dark shadows a Mesopotamian farmer
thrashes emmer & einkorn
careful to save every winnowed kernel
while a woman shells pulses
into a potted jar—

I remember Dad hunting rabbits
on an Indiana farm
where every corn kernel
was sold
to make payments
on an endless mortgage—
I remember Oregon after Dad died
catching trout
hunting deer
when Social Security wasn't enough
when none of us five kids
were yet old enough to work—

I've grown old
on meat & little else

but for this potluck
I take from the garden
carrots intended for stew
& from the tree nearest the hen house
I pick a few apples
for a remembered casserole
Mom once made
a day I failed to kill dinner

RESPECTABLE PEOPLE DECRY

poor Dotty & Bob—
a county commissioner voices alarm
on the radio; the sheriff says
perhaps the county should shoot back;
signed petitions at the Big Store
insist that Ligertown be razed.

Lions & tigers shouldn't be kept,
let alone crossbred,
say shoppers waiting to pay.
They're dangerous & have you seen—
Yes, I have seen the cages, feces & gore,
but is the county's interest best served
when (*We've got them this time*, promises
the D.A.) 19 cats are shot where
yesterday they sunned themselves?

What we really wanted was for them to leave.
Their place, a disgrace, looks Third World.
And one by one officials file past that circle
of cameras, all recording today's proceedings
as if these proceedings were remembered
deeds written in sand.

What happened that September night:
were fences cut,
lions shot in their cages as claimed
by Dotty & Bob, both charged with cruelty
(surviving cats were certified healthy)?
Did escaping lions endanger Lava residents,
or were county officials merely afraid
of optimism runamuck?

ASHES—

the cat we call Ashes
caught another deer mouse
she made sure I saw it
when I gathered eggs

I worry some about her
deer mice carry hanta virus
don't know if she can
don't want to find out

she caught a bat awhile back
the one the cat in town caught
was rabid—they say it costs
a thousand dollars for shots

& they're still no fun
I took the bat from her
was pretty careful how
I handled it

but it's hanta virus
I'm most concerned about

Ashes likes her ears scratched
her belly rubbed
she's a good cat
but it's hard to hold her

knowing she's just eaten
another deer mouse

american falls—

before hard wheat, fences or furrows,
rye grass & camas swales flowered
beneath the feet of Bannock
horses, once free...

COVERED BRIDGES

A covered bridge picks up river sounds
deepens & softens them before storing
ripples among the rafters where round
mud nests of swallows & swifts hold fledglings
hungry as that horse heading home, shod hooves,
iron wheels, the wagon heavy with hay.
Timbers creak, echoes still as the shafts of
dusty light reflecting off the water, rays
long as I am tall, lean against rough sawn
boards as if they were old men on the porch
of the General Store, playing checkers on
tops of pickle barrels, their feet perched
a top the railing like swifts & swallows
on rafters above horses passing by slow.

LEWISTON—

across the Clearwater
the train groans
its loads of logs
downriver where barges
wait for pulp & lumber
but too often settle
for the logs.

Anchorage—

after a spent winter
in the city
looking at dirty snow
while stopped by traffic lights
I yearn for newgrowth
other than tract houses
& highrise apartments
& potholed asphalt

LADYBUGS—

on this foggy cold morning
in faded wingcases, ladybugs
millions & more
cling to split rail fencing
as chip trucks fly by
mere feet away

they're following the river
or the road
to some wintering grounds
but I only know of ladybugs
migrating
to California's Central Valley
an awfully long ways
from here on the Clearwater

don't know much about them
don't know what they think
as they huddle together
but in their minds' hardwiring
are inscribed maps & calendars
all too small for me to read
so I can only observe in wonder
their afternoon departure

FATE—

Swollen, dirty, the Snake floods
willows & rapids as the river sweeps
over the highway as days of rain rush
through turbines turning time into
aluminum cans & pans that might
or might not contribute to Alzheimer's
in politically correct professors
& patriotically correct loggers
who together will be,
by well-meaning sons & daughters,
warehoused in county nursing homes
to protect estates now under water.

A HOMESTEAD—

found a pitchfork
four rusty tines
behind the house
tumbled down now
a foundation
two-stories
pond
shade trees
orchard
all overgrown
by blackberries
& roses
visited rarely
by even bear
but once children played
on a mowed yard
& the smell of baking bread
drew men from plowed fields
& hymns were song on Sabbath
& a dog barked
at the minister paying
his monthly social call
but no one has asked a blessing
on this house for a long time

HERE & EVERYWHERE—

rain has beaten down weeds & blackberries,
leaving exposed
ten feet beyond where my wife's cat
was flattened by a chip truck,
the teeth & purple collar
of our Brittany missing three months—
I'd looked for her all one night,
had called & called,
had thought she'd chased a deer
too far to find her way home,
had hoped she found another home,
but it was only a car or a truck
that prevented her return—
hers & a fawn by the mailbox,
a raccoon & her litter,
our white tom cat,
a turkey,
more coons,
too many to keep count,
every day deer,
even two social workers
a couple of months ago,
someone just last weekend at Kamiah—
our highway carnage
must make even God cry.

GOBI LADY—

hallowed symbol
of the changed season,
her tall hat
black & ageless,
lies in her long tomb
mummified—
beauty dried by desert dust
blankly peers
across cluttered centuries
as disbelieving scholars
resurrect
her simple spells & potions
for immortality.

domestication—

fattened on star thistle
the wild turkeys
across the river
call to my turkeys
who are hard of hearing
when they see me
with a grain bucket

HARD EDGED

chisel chain
filed yesterday
bit bark,
growled,
pissed chips—

today, I would show
how to bed old-growth,
but a spotted owl
on down-soft wings
caught media headlines;

band headrigs rust quietly
beside stilled greenchains
while with idled saw,
I meander through firs
flagged with blood

red surveyors' ribbon,
blowdowns that had stood
as boundary trees
for what would have been
last year's clearcut.

SNAGGING EELS

Just another white kid
to the old man with pole poised over
the white water—
narrow & twisting Salmon
River roared through the chute
foaming white like a lamprey
heavy with spawn (eels used to leap
out of the boil like salmon, sometimes
clinging to slippery rocks, sometimes
wiggling over the top as men might scale
walls)—I, with a hook lashed to a pole,
joined Indians snagging eels when a Junior
in high school; I knew their eldest daughter.
She wouldn't look at me, wouldn't speak
till I stuck an eel on my arm.
Her sisters screamed, tried to pull it off,
but she said, *Leave it alone,*
eels turn loose when they feel warm
blood, and she held it till it did,
then tossed it in their half-full washtub
and offered me smoked eel, greasy in waxpaper.
I couldn't eat it, it wasn't clean.

Good Friday, 1964

now seems a long time ago—
most students had gone home for Easter
but I remained in the dorm
with no money and nowhere to go.
The proctor took pity
invited me
to see *The Great Escape*—

when we left the theater
news of the earthquake
had tunneled south:

I saw photos of the fissure
in Fourth Avenue, of fractured
buildings & floundered cars, but
I had no idea how hurt Alaska was till
I met the men who made millions
rebuilding docks & downtown
& town houses that had trespassed
across a fault line identified
forty years earlier.

Twenty years later, in Earthquake Park
where now-prohibited construction
lets birches swell and stretch,
I climbed down the cliff
(the tide was out)
& found where the tide washed
against sheared clay walls
mud stones like stones of riverbeds
hard, mostly round
but not yet quite stone
when I cracked one open—

holding a fragment of the still forming
rock, I stared at Anchorage's new skyline
soft pink in the alpenglow of an April sunrise.

[found poem]

BROTHER TO BROTHER

1.

Dec 14th, 1967—

Just a note as it's almost
too dark to see. Am still
on the road crew. It's not too bad
but gets a little hairy once in a while.
We had our first guy killed today,
another one of the wounded
isn't expected to live.
Will let you know if something real
exciting happens.
Love ya,
Ben

2.

Warwise this place comes & goes—
some days nothing at all,
others, the whole war seems right here.
I'll be glad to leave this damned country.
I've never been this jumpy before.
The worst part is I can't help it.

Ben

SMITH, LOGGER, FISHERMAN, WRITER

Spanner wound wheellocks, fenced pans, swan cocks,
plains style caplocks, each crafted by my hands.
Lemans, Hawkins, poorboys: I shot at buckskin rendezvous,
split balls on axes; threw knives & hawks,
sticking kings & queens of hearts
while she stayed home changing diapers, watching
The Days of Our Lives
and waiting for afternoon get-aways.
I turned patent breeches from steel shafting,
fitting hooked plugs to tangs sawn from angle iron,
stopping barrels
rifled by divorce.

I heard echoes, loud as rifle shots,
gossipy footsteps in the house
where my nail soles scar
once forbidden floors.
Dimpled prints
around the kitchen table,
greasy from chainsaw parts,
like the bed without sheets,
tell everyone that I am
divorced.

Baited longline skates
sink beneath two-faced waves
where the green Pacific meets
cold Bering currents.
Gaffed, slimed & iced 'buts
delivered to Aleutian ports,
graded by their bloodless sides
join me to other fishers,
each divorced,

Poetic catalogs for cells
pumped by three-chambered hearts
of what could've been, what was
and what will be irrigate
Homeric souls,
each myself (and others).
Alone with my characters,
some of steel, filed frizzens,
some fallers, some halibut heads,
I wonder if straying journeys

and failed justifications
can be made new when brides
won't forgive.