

## The Exstasie

Reassured, I read that experts doubt  
 yesterday's prediction that an earthquake  
 will devastate our region late this fall  
 by the climatologist who warned against  
 the Oakland and the Mexico City quakes.  
 University seismologists agree  
 that even if the Mississippi river  
 submerges Memphis is a tidal wave  
 while Hoosier homes collapse three states away,  
 unless he tells us *why* these things will happen  
 December third, he's not a scientist.  
 "New Madrid fault's due for a major shock,  
 but when a Richter 7 hits is guesswork.  
 Put it this way: science tells us snowstorms  
 sweep through the Great Plains every year, not that  
 Nebraska will get whited-out this Christmas."

A flash of memory perverts  
 my reading of this analogous disaster  
 as, sweltering in New-Delhi-like fall heat,  
 sprawled in my sticky chair in shorts and T-shirt,  
 I see myself ride Greyhound through a blizzard  
 from Omaha towards Iowa on I-80  
 from my best friend's to my new lover's house  
 half my life ago, on New Year's Eve.  
 Kissed off in Wichita at five a.m.  
 still dizzy from a week of dry martinis,  
 heady talk, and all-night games of Risk,  
 I'd watched black eastern sky pale into gray  
 through the windshield of the Scenicruiser,  
 too full of remembered joy to concentrate  
 on the uncertain pleasures of arrival.

Then I pressed my forehead on the window  
 I was jammed against by a sleeping farmer,  
 and stared at silos as they rose and sank  
 along earth's curvature until they blurred  
 then disappeared behind a white wall  
 that looked to me like California fog.  
 But when it reached and swallowed up the bus,  
 wind-driven ice bounced with the sound of popcorn  
 off my pane. Then I could make out nothing  
 but shadows of the roadside power poles,  
 and when I glanced ahead I saw the driver  
 peering through the wedges cleared by wipers  
 at ghostly headlights of oncoming trucks.  
 How many hours would this storm delay us?  
 Or would we stall in drifts and freeze to death?  
 For the first time I thought of my waiting lover.  
 Sweeping tangled hair out of her eyes  
 she raised her bedroom's blind and stared at clouds  
 Midwesterners can read like weather maps.  
 "Uh-oh. Looks like snow, for sure," she said —  
 I read her lips three hundred miles away.  
 Later, in my arms, she said that she  
 saw me peer from the bus at that same instant.  
 "It's like Donne's poem 'The Exstasie,' I said,  
 "two lovers' souls meet in the air between  
 their practically unnecessary bodies."

Three months later, our affair  
 ended in emotional disaster  
 neither of us foresaw that snowy night.  
 One probing word revealed a rift between us  
 which opened to a chasm overnight.  
 I helped her pack her van for Oregon,  
 then waved her off in April Fool's Day rain.  
 The last I heard, she'd moved to San Francisco,  
 but I stayed on in the house that she abandoned  
 in the solid middle of the country, waiting  
 for a rescuer to drag me from my ruins.  
 She appeared — so many years ago  
 that I forgot my palace of happiness

rose out of rubble. Remembering makes me shake.  
"Could our two souls survive apart?" I wonder.  
"Let death decide that, please," my pulse replies,  
as I hear her car door slam and run to join her.