

MAINTAINING

Don't think you know the fat woman
in charge of the dump, married
to the one laid up from the accident
two years ago at the pulp mill,
who wears the easygoing, happy
face when you drive in with your load
of trash, calling her name. That's not her.

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By the register at the store, truckers,
carpenters and mill workers
count their change while telling
the morning clerk how they are:
"Not too bad." "Could be worse."
"Maintaining."

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Billy Towle maintains. His mother,
he explains after bush-hogging my field,
has come down with All-timers
and begun calling him by his dead
father's name. He shakes his head:
a sad situation, but even so, you can see
he kind of likes it, perhaps because

in the All-time of her mind, his father,
whose death she grieved for years,
can still be alive. Also because now,
his dearest one will always love him.

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People here don't talk much
about love. Listen for it
in other words -- how old
Ethelyn Palmer lingers slightly
over the word "grandchildren,"
or describes her new neighbors
with what seems a fond
recollection of her own past
in this town: "They're a young
couple, just starting out."

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And just because they don't speak
of beauty doesn't mean they haven't
noticed it: the sunset's astonishment
of red on the horizon, tinting the town's
downhill windows, for instance,
or how at night, in your headlights
as you travel the last mile home,
the feathery pines alongside your car

seem to gather you up in the wings
of their dark flight. Beauty is wordless.

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But what of the stranger at town meeting
with the designer suit and perfect
manners, sympathetic to everyone's
questions about his proposal to turn
LaFlamme's back field into house lots
because he knows his audience can't refuse?
"I would urge you to consider the large
increase in your tax base," he says.

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Twelve years later his faded
sign with the lot map announces
MyPropertyForYou.com
to the ivy dangling from it
and the vestiges of a gravel road
curving alongside power poles.
In the enclosure of pines his men
planted around lot 3, indentations
on the grass show where
the deer slept. Swallows rest
on the unused electric wire
off lots 6 and 7. And deeper still,

by the culverts where my dogs run,
waves of daisies, buttercups,
Indian paintbrushes, and Queen
Anne's lace crest in the light wind,
more wildflowers than in any
year before, nature replenishing
nature. "Change doesn't have
to be a bad thing," he said.

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Established by vanished farmers,
the Grange Hall's now
a ceramics studio. The old school,
bought for one dollar, houses
the town office, zumba classes,
and Story Time for kids.
A single-door rescue trailer
with a giant American flag decal,
obtained after the scare of 9-11
by a grant from Homeland Security,
rusts in the back. Having survived
the Industrial Revolution,
the regional school movement
and the rise of global terrorism,
our town's still here.