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Trying to Think by a Steel Mill

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TRYING TO THINK BY A STEEL MILL

Facing this heavy industry, I try to name the substance
Of what's between us: the barbed wire crowning the gate
Was drawn from the heart of pig iron; men pass through smoke,
Smoking, in sheets of steel they pay for and pay for,
Toward blast furnaces and coke ovens, toward alloys boiling
Red and blue in the open hearth, to the jagged scrap heap.

Suddenly, it strikes me like a part flying out of a machine.
It hits me hard, like something I've heard shouted
To straighten me out: thinking is brittle as cast-iron.
You must cram oxygen through it to burn the impurities,
Then heap it downwind, smoke-stack it up and around
Till it falls on houses and trees in a corrosive dust,

But the trouble with thinking then is it won't stay home,
It walks around and stares at the gray case-hardened rivers,
It won't stay in school or in jail or the hospital, and it won't
Work, and it doesn't look or act like thinking:
It's strictly functional like drop-forged hardware,
But oxygen, breath by breath, comes rusting back at it.