

Michael McDowell

The 9-Point Earthquake and Tsunami

"I don't want to have to fly over this area and find that everyone's been killed." —Congressman Brian Baird, about tsunami preparations on the Long Beach Peninsula

There can't be a tsunami now—dinner's almost ready.
We've just had wireless installed.
The children are only in high school.
The family's vacationed here safely for a hundred years.

OK to the warning sirens,
OK to the hidden emergency caches,
OK to the evacuation route signs,
OK to the detailed elevation maps, the meetings and plans.

But if there's anything we've learned about how to live,
it's to live as if there will be no immediate death and disaster,
as if the seasons will cycle as always, equinox following solstice,
windstorm following rainstorm, snowstorm, flood.

If we've learned anything, it's to balance fear with "common sense"
and put what paralyzes us into the far-off future—
earthquake in the Cascadia subduction zone,
liquefaction of this sandy soil, hundred-foot-high tsunamis.

Yes, nature can work swiftly; life is fragile; towns and civilizations
rise and fall. Now, look at the sun sparkle on the foaming surf,
the wasp entering the purple foxglove—
and here's some garlic butter for tonight's grilled salmon.