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Pro Tem

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Pro Tem

"The truth must dazzle gradually. . . ."
Emily Dickinson

Mike Vanden Bosch

While I string words in poems, dad ropes a
calf, plows black soil, plants flax, and buries
a dead dog. He cuts oats, weeds, and sloughs.
When he rests Sunday, he feeds horses, hogs,

and chickens. Without words he has taught me
to knot cords, split logs, and put up hay. So
on his ninetieth birthday, I don't try wry words
or windy sentiments. I say, "Happy birthday,"

adding thoughtlessly, "I wish you many more."
"At my age, not many more," he says. He's
not feeling well today, I think; he's telling me
he's going to die soon. But he didn't say *die*

or "You'll bury me before the first frost." Not
even, "I'm going to be with Jesus." as he no
doubt hoped. I'm about to say "Dad, you're
strong and healthy; you'll live to be a hundred,"

when this rangy old man still stingy with words
trades an image for candied cliches and says,
"Some day the silver cord will break." I see his
unraveling body, a frayed cord, braced for grace.

(This poem appeared in the 1999 edition of *Lyrical Iowa*.)