

To Understand

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Yes, a machine can answer
before I have finished asking.

I no longer have to open a book
and search page after page
for the one sentence I need.
I can give it a math problem
I have tried three times to solve,
and it will return the number
in less time than it takes me
to admit I am stuck.

I am grateful for that.

There are nights when I do not have
another hour to search,
when I have read the same page
until the words stop holding still.
There are mornings when an answer
is the small thing that lets me begin.

But can it give the answer meaning?
Does it know why I needed it
so desperately
that I could not wait
to find it for myself?

The answer to How long?
might be forty minutes.
Only I know whether I asked
because I am eager to arrive
or afraid I will be too late.

The answer to How much?
might fit neatly on a line.
Only I know what I hoped
would still be left over
after the bills were paid.

I once looked up the distance
between two cities
and stared at the number
as if enough miles
could explain why I left home.

I have searched for the meaning
of a word I already knew
because someone I loved had used it
in a way I had never heard before.

I have asked a simple question
while trying to keep my hands steady.
The answer appeared on the screen,
clear and complete.

Then I had to close the screen
and decide whether to call,
whether to go,
whether to say aloud
what I had been practicing in my head.

A machine can show its work,
trace the path from A to B,
find the missing number.

It can help me get there.

But it does not know
which part of the journey
I am trying to survive.

I am the one
who has to live with the answer,
who has to decide what it changes,
who has to remember
the question beneath the question.

I asked for a number.
I needed to know
whether there was still time

To say goodbye.