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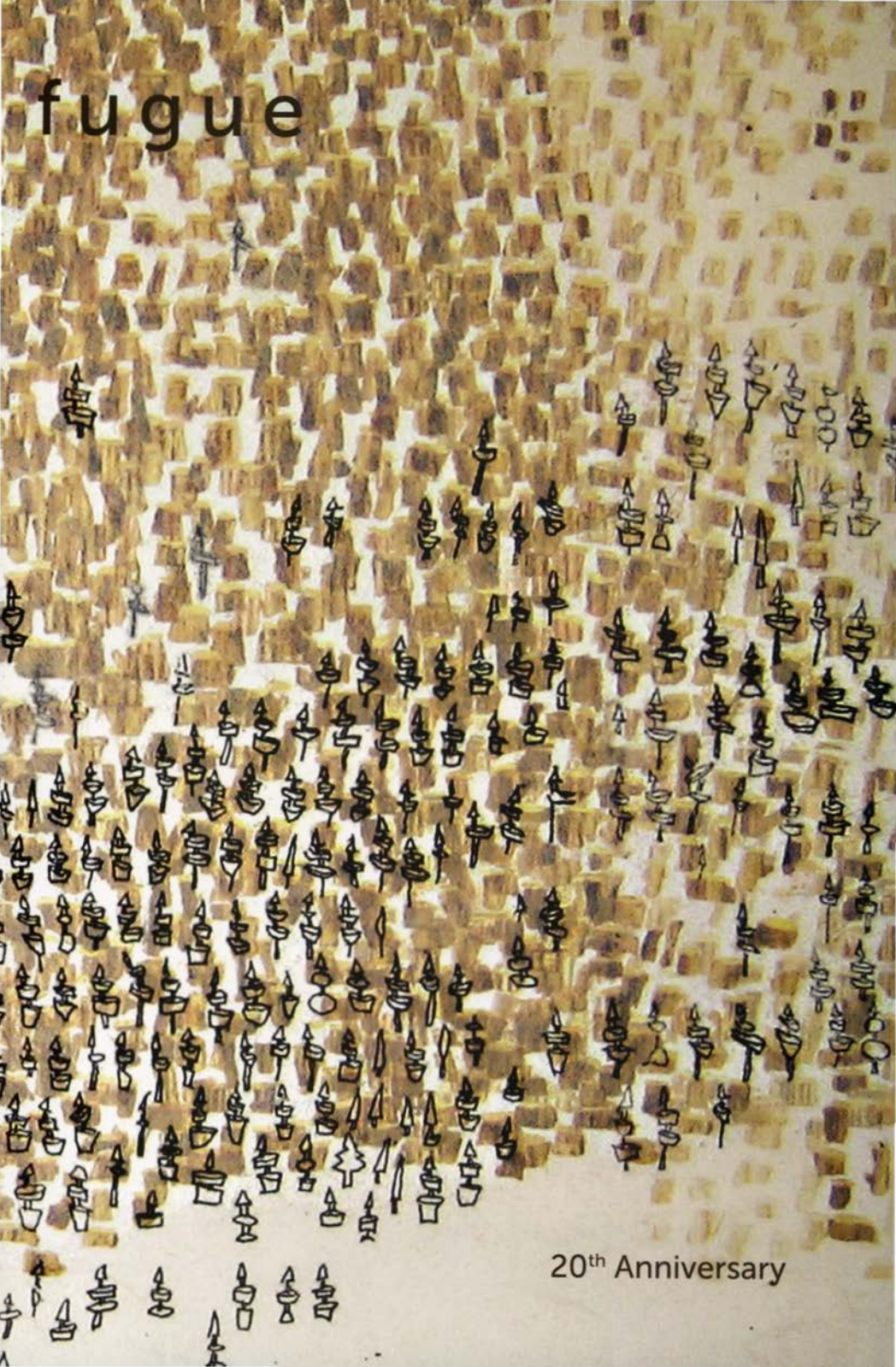

20th Anniversary

fugue

20th Anniversary Issue

About the issue

The 20th anniversary issue of *Fugue* has been designed to celebrate not only the writers of the West, but more specifically the insiders, the born, the original settlers versus the outsiders, the migrators, the transplants. We asked these writers what caused them as insiders to stay here and write about this place, and what caused the outsiders to come to this place to write.

Fugue (ISSN 1054-6014) is a journal of new literature edited by graduate students of the University of Idaho's English and Creative Writing programs. *Fugue* is made possible by funding from the University of Idaho English Department and Creative Writing Program and is published biannually in the winter and summer.

Subscriptions are $8 for a sample, individual copy, $14 for 1 year (2 issues), $25 for 2 years (4 issues), or $35 for 3 years (6 issues); institutional subscriptions are $22 for 1 year, $40 for 2 years, or $55 for 3 years. Add $4 per year for international subscriptions. To subscribe or to order back issues, visit http://uidaho.edu/fugue.

Fiction submissions are accepted September 1 through March 1, poetry and nonfiction submissions are accepted September 1 through May 1. All material received outside this period will be returned unread. Please visit http://uidaho.edu/fugue/for submission guidelines. All contributors receive payment and two complimentary copies of the journal. Please send no more than five poems, two short-shorts, one story, or one essay at a time. Submissions in more than one genre should be sent separately. We will consider simultaneous submissions (submissions that have been sent concurrently to another journal), but we will not consider multiple submissions. All multiple submissions will be returned unread. Once you have submitted a piece to us, wait for a response on this piece before submitting again.

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fugue

Winter-Spring, Vol. 38

AN INTRODUCTION

Twenty years ago *Fugue* flew up from the ashes of several former literary magazines here at the University of Idaho, so it could have been named "Phoenix," except that a rather sizable town in Arizona was already using that moniker. Back in the late 1940s the Associated Students of the University of Idaho published a "slick" called *The Blot*, which hailed itself in the March 1949 issue as "The Poor Man's *Esquire*." It included feature articles, short stories, and the occasional poem, mostly penned by UI undergraduates. The back cover was dominated by ads for Chesterfield cigarettes, and the inside front cover was generally sacred to Camels: "More doctors smoke Camels than any other cigarette." That's right, the ad assures us, "Doctors smoke for pleasure, too!"

By the time Milo Nelson, the UI humanities librarian, and I started up *Snapdragon* in the fall of 1977, the university had been without a literary magazine for years, and no one seemed to be the wiser, or perhaps to care one whit. Technically, *Snapdragon* was what is called a "little magazine": usually small and unpretentious in format (saddle-backed and stapled); often taken to be independent and avant-garde or at least a bit anti-establishment—"edgy," but we weren't all that edgy. The little magazine was something of a response to large commercial magazines like *Scribner's, The Saturday Evening Post, Cosmopolitan, Esquire,* and *Redbook* (the real slicks), which once published quite a lot of fiction and paid well for it (poetry was another matter). These magazines, which helped start and sustain the careers of writers like Hemingway and Scott Fitzgerald, are long gone. Today the little magazine tends to be defined against the more sophisticated, more consciously "literary," and more rigorously edited "literary magazine." Both types have in common, generally, a serious commitment to publishing poems.

After ten years of *Snapdragon*, each issue of which included a gallery of sorts (drawings by art professor George Wray, photographs by communication professor Philip Schofield—always black and

white—we even ran an original musical score from time to time), we decided to relax. I had seriously mixed emotions, because we had run work by some important writers, including such poets as William Stafford, David Wagoner, Robert Dana, Karen Swenson, Olga Broumas, Robert Bly, Rita Dove, Gary Snyder...the *Snapdragon* of thirty or so years ago featured some literary heavyweights.

But the idea of a little or literary magazine did not die; it just more-or-less hibernated. The first of *Snapdragon*'s successor was an undergraduate little magazine called the *Paradise Creek Journal*, which had a run of four or five issues in the late 1980s, and then came *Fugue*, a very low-budget little magazine under the founding editorship of John Hendee, who knew all there was to know about desktop publishing, PageMaker, that sort of thing. Before we knew it, or at least before I did, *Fugue* was appearing as an attractive perfect-bound "book," and we were in the "literary magazine" business, a "little mag" no longer.

Once the MFA program in creative writing got established here about ten years ago, the graduate students took over, and the quality of its contents and its appearance have improved with nearly every issue. I soon discovered that as faculty advisor I could best help the production of *Fugue* by the alacrity with which I got out of the way of its graduate student editors.

Snapdragon and *Fugue* both started out publishing the work of local writers. If you want to see what Joy Passanante was writing in 1977, check out *Snapdragon* #1. And *Fugue* sustained a rather regional image through most of its first ten years, but that has changed radically. Of the 46 writers featured in our two most recent issues, no more than four could be identified as writers from this region (the Northwest, or the inland Northwest, or the northern Rockies—think Washington and Oregon, Idaho and Montana...and then it gets a little iffy: Utah and Colorado maybe, and maybe Wyoming, and what about Alaska?). So this regional tribute to our first twenty years strikes me as quite appropriate; we are pretty much going back to our roots.

And what a remarkable issue this one is: four poems by our regional godfather, Richard Hugo, and three by our own Robert

Wrigley; interviews with Thom Jones (Seattle), William Kittredge (Missoula, Montana, by way of south-central Oregon), and Marilynne Robinson (Idaho, in exile to Iowa); and prose, both fiction and nonfiction, by Rick Bass, Pete Fromm, Debra Gwartney, Anthony Doerr, Christopher Howell, Kim Barnes, Buddy Levy, and Brandon Schrand, among others. These writers make great company.

RECESSION HITS CLEARWATER COUNTY

When the sawmill shut down last month
Kenny went and got himself engaged,
figured why the hell not,
nothing to lose,
anything to gain.
Punching numbers and pounding Pabst
down at Grumpy's Tavern,
the happiest place in town,
Kenny comes up lucky for once.
He was the town's best quarterback
ever, eight-man football,
finished second at state,
almost
got himself a college scholarship.
Damn grades. He's got these purely
great blue eyes. Called Mary Lynn
and sawed off the engagement
right at the stump.

Ron McFarland
Faculty Advisor

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Rick Bass

WRITING IN THE WEST

Nature—particularly in the West—inspires me as a writer (and as a person) in that it always possesses the dramatic elements of great story—conflict, tension, resolution. In nature, I am reminded of how there is meaning in every gesture, and of how hard-gotten and elegant these ancient, time-crafted processeses are. I am reminded too of how it does not really matter whether we perceive ourselves as insignificant in the universe, or powerful and magnificent: the exhilarating thing is that whatever our brief role, our temporary presence and participation in the spectacle, it is indisputably a role; and in nature, even the most megalomaniacal among our kind are capable of feeling humility and a puniness of scale when witnessing nature's furthest horizons.

What I mean is nature, especially in the open spaces of the West, inspires me with its capacities and capabilities that exceed my own limited ones. Nature's capacity to deliver awe, or peace, or calm, or wonder inspires me, as does nature's characteristic of always being more elegant and powerful, in all directions and amplitudes. In this manner I feel tucked beneath and within nature; in this manner, I feel protected. I can't imagine not living in the west, where so many spaces and ecosystems are still so fully or nearly-fully functioning, with so many of their original characters still present, not yet extinct.

In my mind, for a writer, nature is always a character, whether present or absent. We understand that literature is constructed of unseen or unheard presences. Think of how it is the things that are unsaid in a line of dialogue that often describe or deliver the most information. Similarly, even when nature is not explicitly represented

in a story or poem, it is the canvas upon which the artist works, for it is, if nothing else, the ground upon which the artist stands. You can't keep it out of your work, even if you seek not to describe it, for it determines or at least influences, and sets the boundaries of, everything. Nature determines what characters are wearing, and influences their physical actions and inner moods. It delivers their food and sustenance to them and is the underlying source of their community's economy. Nature composes the elements of their blood and organs and all the rest of their physical being. It is the substrate to which the ultimately frail and extremely temporary husks of their mortal bodies return. Even by not writing about nature in a story, it is still present, by illuminating the fact that those characters are seemingly not aware of nature: as another character, without it ever being stated explicitly, might be discerned to be godless, or a misogynist, or a fool, or cruel.

Nature need not always be a positive influence in a character's life. In some stories characters (and their readers) realize this, to varying degrees, and in others they do not. But nature—whether unbroken soil or paved-over concrete—is always the stage on which all labor and play, and the air breathed by all. Characters notice it, or do not notice it, and say much about themselves and the place in their world by whether they put up a wall against nature—whether they strive, through habit and detachment, to keep it at arm's length (or delude themselves into thinking they can keep it always at distance)—or whether they accept and even embrace nature's rhythms.

Implicitly or explicitly—and again, particularly in the West—nature is always the largest character in a story, as it is also the character within us. Some of us may be estranged or in the process of detaching from nature but we are still part of nature. The human character is nothing but nature sculpted, sometimes in conflict with the larger world and other times possessing an accommodated and hard-gotten temporary equilibrium with that larger world.

The decision a writer must make in any story is how to stage his or her characters—internally, according to their individual nature, as

well as externally: the settings and systems of logic they will inhabit. The writer's eye and instinct may be drawn to a certain character, and then the writer might next seek to place that character in a certain landscape or setting. Other times, the writer's eye and generative instincts might be drawn to a certain landscape or community first, into which a character then is introduced.

Nature in my writing plays both roles as described above. There is that outer or external nature, the other-nature, of which we are but one small part, and there is also the inner nature, which has over time been built, through the evolutionary processes and experiences wrought by the outer nature. For me, the conflict between these two—or between one character's inner nature and another's character—is definitely the essence of story.

The literary tradition in these matters is ancient. It has been said often that there are only two stories in the world: a man or woman goes on a journey, or a stranger rides into town. What else is this but the face of nature revealed, like the story of the first day of nature, whether in a Biblical garden of Eden, when life is first introduced to the fertile garden, or in the story of evolution, when seeds and organisms disperse and drift to new territories, and seek to establish themselves in "the new town"—and having gone on an often-picaresque journey to get there?

I think the physical and symbolic, or metaphysical, processes of nature are merging these days more than ever, whether one considers one's self a "nature writer" or not. In America, certainly, the literary tradition that began with philosophers such as Emerson, Thoreau, Emily Dickinson, Thomas Jefferson, and others, was briefly supplanted, for a century or so, by the confusion and freneticism of the industrial era. But nature certainly never went away during this time, and we are seeing its return in an ever-increasing number of our stories. This is neither a bad thing nor a good thing, but simply a response, I think, to the force of nature that is becoming more noticeable to all of us, as nature stirs and seeks to adjust itself to

our various and accumulating poisons, fragmentations, and general disrespect.

In the West, the list of literary traditions seems paradoxically at least as long as the entire country's, despite the region's shorter literary history. Formative works of nature-and-literature include, to name the shortest of lists, the work of Wallace Stegner, Terry Tempest Williams, Doug Peacock, James Welch, Mary Austin, Cormac McCarthy, Barry Lopez, David James Duncan, William Kittredge—well, any time such a list begins, there can be no end to the names that get left out, all as important as the names included—which is my point. For whatever reason—and it may be the scent of impending loss—there is a blossoming of nature-and-lit, landscape-and-lit, tradition, west of the Mississippi.

I think nature—not just in the West, but worldwide—is becoming more noticeable to us also as many of the bright treasures fade away. Things we once took for granted are vanishing. All literature is about loss, or the recognition of loss, and because all literature thrives on conflict, it is no surprise that a compromised natural world, and its heroic stories—the ceaseless desire for life to go on—are re-insinuating themselves into our collective consciousness, whether one considers one's self an urban writer or a nature writer or somewhere-in-between.

As with literature composed by authors in a country where there is a war going on, or a country under siege, I think almost all stories these days are somewhat about that war, whether the war is even mentioned or not.

Where does nature fit in today's world? It fits everywhere—it is the world, of which we are still, sometimes barely, a part—and in that fit, nature instructs us in grace and graciousness, in hunger and in compromise, in creativity and the passions that make us human: a brief and whirling part of nature. It is our foundation and our instructor; we are so new, while the world is so old. Any period in which we seek to oppress or avoid this knowledge will only cause this knowledge and awareness to rise more strongly in subsequent generations, though surely with a poignant and bittersweet awareness,

for the wild country available for such instruction and inspiration typically becomes smaller and tamer with each new generation, and with those lessons therefore at risk of becoming less embellished, less rich.

Still—especially today—nature fits everywhere, in every breath and pulse, and between every pore, animate or inanimate. A more appropriate question is whether we can notice this fit or not. The question to me seems not whether nature fits our world any more, but whether we do. **f**

HIGH GRASS PRAIRIE

Say something warm. Hello. The world
was full of harm until this wind
placated grass and put the fish to rest.
And wave hello. Someone may be out there
riding undulating light our way.
Wherever we live, we sleep here
where cattle sleep beside the full canal.
We slept here young in poems.
The canal runs on without us east
a long flow into Fairchild. The grass flows
ever to us, ever away, the way it did
that war we dreamed this land alive.
The man we hoped was out there
saw our signal and is on the way.
Say something warm. Hello. You can sleep
forever in this grass and not be cold.

TROUT

Quick and yet he moves like silt.
I envy dreams that see his curving
silver in the weeds. When stiff as snags
he blends with certain stones.
When evening pulls the ceiling tight
across his back he leaps for bugs.

I wedged hard water to validate his skin—
call it chrome, say red is on
his side like apples in a fog, gold
gills. Swirls always looked one way
until he carved the water into many
kinds of current with his nerve-edged nose.

And I have stared at steelhead teeth
to know him, savage in his sea-run growth,
to drug his facts, catalog his fins
with wings and arms, to bleach the black
back of the first I saw and frame the cries
that sent him snaking to oblivions of cress.

THE TOWNS WE KNOW AND LEAVE BEHIND, THE RIVERS WE CARRY WITH US

for James Wright

I forget the names of towns without rivers.
A town needs a river to forgive the town.
Whatever river, whatever town—
it is much the same.
The cruel things I did I took to the river.
I begged the current: make me better.

Your town, your river, or mine—
it is much the same.
A murdering man lives on the land
in a shack the river birds hate.
He rubs the red shriek of night from his eyes.
He prays to water: don't let me do that again.

Let's name your river: Ohio.
Let's name all rivers one in the blood,
red steam and debris in the blood.
Say George Doty had a wrong head.
Say the Ohio forgives what George did
and river birds loved his shack.
Let's name the birds: heron and sweat.
Let's get away from the mud.

The river is there to forgive the town
and without a river a town abuses the sky.

The river is there to forgive what I did.
Let's name my river: Duwamish.
And let's admit
the river birds don't hate my home.
That's a recent development, really
like mercury in the cod.

•

Without a river a town abuses the air.
The river is there to forgive what I did.
The river birds hate what I did
until I name them.
Your river or mine—
it is much the same.
A murdering man lived on the bank.

Here's the trick;
We had to stay drunk
to welcome the river
to live in a shack
to die on the bank
beneath the bigoted sky
under the river birds
day after day
to murder away
all water that might die.

A murdering man is dead on the bank
of your new river, The East,
on mine, The Clark Fork.
It is much the same.
Your river has gulls and tugs.
Mine has eagles and sky.

I rub last night from my eyes.
I ask bright water what's happened.

The river, I am not sure which one,
says water has no special power.
What should I do?
Or you?
Now water has no need to forgive
what shall become of murder?
How shall we live
when we killed, when we died by the word?

•

Whatever the name of the river,
we both had two women to love,
One to love us enough we left behind
a town that abuses the day.
The other to love the river we brought with us,
the shack we lived and still live in,
the birds, the towns that return to us for names
and we give them names knowing the river
murders them away.

Pete Fromm

FREEZEOUT

Every Sunday of our lives we drove to town for waffles and coffee. Dad acted like it was such a big treat. Strawberry waffles. With whipped cream. Dad and me and Mom. Dad and his girls.

It was his way of substituting for church, Mom tells me now. "After what he saw in the war, he just couldn't go back to that," she says. She looks out the window. "He was always very religious in his way, though. I know you know that."

War? I nearly blurt, Mom, what war? but the haunted vet line is a little too pat, a little too Mom, and I hold myself back from asking anything that could start her rolling. I never once heard Dad say a single thing about any war.

I reach across the table, tap Mom's hand with my finger. Draw her back from the window. "He didn't just take a powder, Mom," I tell her again. "He's gone. Probably a heart attack. Probably caught him searching for some bird or other." Tiny, hard flakes of snow flit against the window. "We'll have to wait till some hunter finds him now." It's not easy saying this, but Mom's got to come back around to the real world.

"I think, somehow, we're his religion," Mom says. "You and me. His family."

Mom keeps going, like I'm not there, which, in a way, is all right. There are holes in my story, too. Like, if he pitched over in some swamp, why hasn't anybody found his truck?

When I was a kid, Dad only ever diverted the Sunday waffle/coffee expedition when he came up with something better—one birdwatching trip or another. Cramping into a blind at four a.m. to

watch a bunch of grouse strut around looking for mates; cruising out to Freezeout Lake in a ground blizzard to watch about a billion snow geese turn the lake white, turn the water into a cesspool of goose crap.

For that he'd break up the whole ritual he built for us. Instead of getting a hot waffle, getting sandwiched between him and Mom and their steaming cups of thick coffee, the two of us would be out some place freezing and wind-blasted, watching birds. And though I realized the bird thing meant a lot to him, even more than the waffles, I never could stand it.

Waffles were the only time we really were a family, Dad taking charge, Mom not running us down with her disconnected notions and wild stories. She never went on the bird trips, so they weren't the same. They were like abandoning her, something neither of us could ever do for long.

I light a cigarette and take a long pull. Holding the smoke, I watch Mom, see her already settling in for the long haul, digging in to await his return. I let the smoke leak out and rub my eyes like I haven't slept in a month. Since the day he disappeared.

Though I talk hard, try to shock her into accepting something closer to some version of the truth, I don't have the guts to say my guess is that they won't find his cold fingers just clutching his chest. Even I have to shake away the picture when I figure it's as likely they'll find his fingers still holding some trigger or other, his head a sad, ruined mess. Birds can't carry you through your whole life. Even when you believe in them the way he did. Not when the real idea you're running from is as big as admitting you've spent your life hiding from Mom, ignoring that there might have been something we could have done for her, something that would have helped us all.

Finally I glance at my watch, tell Mom I've got to get to work, that I'll check back in on my way home. Odds are she'll have dinner waiting for me, me filling in for Dad now. And odds are I'll wind up spending the night again. Have another breakfast like this one tomorrow.

She says, "Maybe he'll be back by the time you get home."

I want to scream. But I say, "Sure, Mom," that worn out before the day's begun.

Maybe he drove his truck into Freezeout before pulling the trigger. Maybe this whole vanishing charade was his idea of leaving Mom with something to hold onto; a hope instead of a corpse. Like thinking you did something right by throwing a life ring to someone bobbing in the middle of the ocean, instead of stopping your pleasure cruise long enough to pick them up.

By the time I get home—Mom's house, I mean—I'm running on fumes. I kick off my orthopedics (twenty-six years old and I'm wearing shoes like my grandmother's) and slide into the chair across from Mom at the kitchen table. It's like she hasn't moved since I left.

I want to ask if he called, just so she could see how ridiculous she's acting, how pathetic, but I'm too tired to start with her.

She just smiles at me. "How'd things go at the hospital, Lyss?" she asks. "You look about done in."

It's exactly the kind of thing she was always asking Dad. "How'd things go at the mill?" Like if she didn't remind us, we might possibly forget where we worked.

"Same old," I say, realizing too late that that was Dad's answer.

"Same old."

She cracks us both a beer, like she always did with Dad, but then remembers to ask if I'd rather have wine.

I shake my head, though I barely take a sip of the beer. It'd just finish me off.

Mom's been baking all day, keeping busy, which is a good sign, I figure, and the dinner gives me a little bit of a second wind. As she slices pie for me, calories I need like a hole in the head, I see it's peach, with the crumbly cinnamon topping; Dad's favorite.

"Mom," I say, blowing out a sigh.

"I'm not waiting," she says, defensive right away.

It gives me a shock. It's the closest she's come to making sense in this long month. "Good," I say.

"But think how he'll like it if he does come back right now. Finding this hot peach pie."

"Oh, Mom, for Christ's sake."

She looks down, carefully lifting both our pieces from the tin. She slides mine in front of me, fidgets with her own. "Ice cream?" she asks.

"No, Mom," I say. "Just this is too much."

"Don't be silly," she answers. "You're as slim as a weasel."

A weasel? I stick my fork into the pie. I can't stand this.

But it's me, of all people, who suggests driving into town Sunday morning. It's usually a working day for me—sickness and accidents taking no vacations—but I'm at the end of a rotation, the days mixed up same as ever.

Mom looks over at me. She's been dusting.

"Why not?" I say. "Maybe get a waffle."

She's slipping into her coat, tugging her hat down over her ears before I can find my check book.

"I should have thought of this myself," she tells me.

In the car, she claps my thigh as I'm backing out. "It was this easy!" she says.

I shift into drive and look over at her, the familiar queasy feeling rising in my belly. "What, Mom? What have you got yourself thinking?"

"It's Sunday, Lyss. Of course that's where he'll be. He's probably been there every Sunday, wondering what's keeping us."

I start slowly down the road. "Mom," I say. "You got to stop. People will start wondering."

She gives her tiny laugh. "I'm used to that, honey. That doesn't bother me at all."

Well, couldn't it? I want to shout. I take a breath. "Mom," I say, "if he ran off, why would he be waiting there for us?" The one thing we always did was talk to Mom like she was no different than the rest of us. "If we start humoring her, who knows where she'll stop," Dad told me once, though it was always so tempting, just pretending along with her.

Mom keeps looking out the window, smiling. "I should have changed," she says. "Worn something a little nicer."

"Mom. Why do you think he ran away in the first place?" Dad had the most ironclad routines on the planet. If he didn't show up for dinner, you could count on it, he was dead.

"Honestly," Mom says. "I wore these same clothes yesterday. I've become some sort of hillbilly. He won't like that."

"Mom!" I shout.

She turns to me, almost as if surprised to find anyone driving the car at all.

"If he ran away from us, why would he be waiting to see us?"

"He didn't run away from us," she answers, as if it was as plain as the road before us.

I'm interested. She's never offered a theory. But when she doesn't go on, I have to prompt, "Why then?"

"You'll have to ask him, honey. He's a troubled man. Ever since the war."

This time I can't keep myself from asking, "What war?" but Mom's got the visor mirror down, pushing at her hair. Too young for Korea? Too old for Vietnam? I'd guess he slipped through the gap.

By the time we reach the coffee shop, I'm convinced I've made a huge mistake. Mom has her odd notions, but she's not out-and-out nuts. At least not till Dad left—this war thing. But as I trudge up the steps, hold the door for her, I'm afraid of what might happen once we're inside, only the two of us.

Nothing happens. Of course he's not there, but Mom acts like that's just what she expected.

"Let's sit by the window, Lyss," she says. "So we can see him coming."

I drop down beside her, wishing they had something stronger we could put in the coffee.

She keeps fiddling with herself, preening without a mirror, waiting on him. We drink gallons. She orders a waffle that sits cold and solid between us, neither of us able to muster the courage to take

a bite. Finally I have to say, "Look, Mom, I'm sorry I brought you down here, this was a world record bad idea."

"Oh, you know how he is," she says quick. "Always late."

Dad was never late in his life. Count on him like a clock.

"He forgot our very first date together," Mom says out of the blue. "Stood up! I've never been so angry."

This is another I've never heard before. "What happened?"

"He called the very next day. Saturday. Introduced himself and asked if I'd like to do something next Friday. `I don't know,' he said. `Maybe a movie.'

"`Erling Nilsen!' I hissed. `I'd rather date a snake!'" Mom giggles. "That's just what I told him."

"Really?"

"Completely forgot we had a date the night before. Oh, he could be so absentminded."

"I never saw that, Mom. Not once."

"There were years and years before you, Lyss. You haven't been with us long at all."

Twenty-six years, I think, rubbing at my temples. Poof. A little waffle-gobbling interruption.

It's almost noon before Mom lets me talk her out of the coffee shop. She says he must have gone out to the lake. "Sure," she says. "It's November, the last of the geese will still be there. I'm sure he's out there, saying goodbye."

If only he had said goodbye, I think. How much easier it would have been. But I don't think he ever got accused of gross bravery. Not Dad. Not our Birdman.

I say, "Sure, Mom, that's probably what's going on." I don't mention that it's fall, hunting season; that Dad couldn't stand being out there with the guns echoing off the hills, when every now and then you could see a piece of white separate itself from the flocks and plummet down, crashing into the weeds and the water. Seconds later you'd hear the shot, another harmless sounding boom, just like all the rest. The only time he took me out in the fall, it was all I looked for,

those staggering, collapsing geese. He caught me smiling as another goose crumpled, and he tugged me back to the car so fast I couldn't follow him from hummock to hummock and I wound up filling my boots with the rotting black water. I threw my ruined socks out the window on the way home.

Back in Mom's kitchen, I have to tell her I've got an afternoon shift. I can't stand being cooped up here with her all day.

Right away she says, "I thought you were off today? The end of your rotation?" sniffing out a lie the way she always could, no matter how far off you thought she'd wandered.

"I'm filling in for Annie," I say, just as quick, ready to spin out explanations that'd exhaust anybody before they could dig clear to the truth. "Her kid is sick."

"Which one?"

"Emmett," I answer. "Another ear infection. She's afraid they'll have to tube it."

We eye each other, both knowing the other's talents, seeing there'll be no winner here.

It's only lunch time, but I follow the river back into town to Joe's and sit at the bar and watch a couple of plays of a football game. Somebody against Denver. John Elway and his big white teeth. I order a beer, but the place is so full of men without women I wind up leaving before I'm done, before anything can happen. I don't even like beer.

Crossing the parking lot, the wind whistles through me like always, and I sit a second in the car, catching my breath, wondering what to do next. I wonder how many times Dad did this, escaping Mom. I rub my arms around myself, chilled to the bone. It's been a hard winter already, and it's not even Thanksgiving. The idea of the holidays, without the routine of Dad, gives me a whole new shiver.

I drive aimlessly at first, down by the tracks and the old brewery, the hardscrabble sections, paint-peeling shacks alternating with 1960's mobile homes, a few swayback horses penned in little squares of frozen mud. Country music strongholds.

You can only take so much of that, and before I know it I'm on the highway, driving fast enough I've got a fair chance of winding up in my own emergency room. The heater's blowing on high, the fan buzzing on the leaves caught in the vents, but I'm clear to Sun River before I quit shivering, before I take the turn to Freezeout.

Mom's right. If Dad was anyplace, it'd be out looking for the last of the year's birds. Maybe hunting season's over.

I drive through Fairfield, proudly the Malting Barley Capital of the World. What title could we claim, I wonder; what capital would our family be? The Missing Persons capital of the world? Maybe. Mom's been checked out for years. And me, I guess I've worked pretty hard at not leaving any tracks, hardly a shadow. If I vanished today, only Mom'd much care, and she'd just settle in that much deeper, waiting on the day Dad and I both returned, unbothered by any doubts of the outcome. Dad's the easy one in the family. He's just plain missing.

The lake, when I come around the turn and shoot over the railroad tracks, is stretched out below me. Though the day is low and steely, the surface of the lake is all glimmery white. For a second I think, Wow, they're all still here, every goose in the world. But then I realize it's ice, that the whole place is already frozen over. There isn't a hunter's trailer or tent to be seen. Not a living thing.

I slow to a crawl, then bump over a cattle guard and edge past the deserted headquarters building. The wind, twice as strong here as in town, rocks my car on its springs. If I hurt myself out here, I think, I wouldn't last long. They'd find me the same time as Dad, in the spring thaw. I'd leave a note, I think, a double-suicide I'd call it. Let Mom figure out a way to weave that into whatever goes on in her head.

I haven't stopped here since the day I smiled at the dying geese, half my life ago, but now it's like I've never been away. If Dad walked out of the clump of trees beside me, I wouldn't even flinch. Just throw the door open for him, crank the heater back to full blast, and ask him what he saw out there. What he thought about, so long away from us.

I inch down the rutted, frost-crusted road to the edge of the lake, a ramp where the hunters unload their boats, but there's no water to be seen. The lake is pewter gray in its dull armor of ice, broken near shore, jumbles of different blocks angling over each other. Chaos stilled. Wind eddies snatch wisps of snow out of the reeds, whirling them across the hard, slick top.

Dad could be under any of it. Surprised looking and stiff, fingers around what? Chest? Binoculars? Trigger?

For a while, at work, I kept expecting him to be trundled off the latest ambulance. Maybe even the helicopter. He'd like that, I'd think, a helicopter ride; finally getting a bird's eye view of everything that had surrounded him for so long. Now I think maybe it'd only remind him of Mom's war. Maybe he'd been in too many helicopters already. Either way, it was never him who came rolling in. Funny thing to hope, I guess, that your father will show up in emergency.

In the trunk I've got the standard Montana winter package: sand, shovel, chains, blankets, boots. I pull the release from inside, and after one last bracing breath, I dash out, snagging the boots and blankets, an extra wool cap, that, as soon as I'm back in the car, I see is one of Dad's. Like we've already divided his belongings among the survivors.

I leave the boots down by the heater, warming the felt liners before slipping my feet inside. I tug Dad's hat low around my head, then pull my collar above it, sealing out the wind. Finally I wrap the blankets around me, like some old picture of reservation Indians, huddling into themselves and their government blankets, everything around them so unknown.

When I step out, the wind flaps the blankets around me like wings; big, gray, goose wings; Canadas, not snows. I step onto the ice, where the water would only be inches deep anyway, and head into the wind. If I walk around the whole lake, it'll be at my back half the time anyway. Right?

It's not as if I expect to find anything. With the freezes and thaws we've already had, and the black water, and the snow, the ice is gray, not clear. It's like metal, not glass. I could walk right over him and

not know. He could be under there watching me, calling my name, and I'd walk right on, blinded by the ice, deafened by the wind. But somehow I think I'll know. If I find him, I'll know.

But just realizing what I'm thinking, how goofy it is, I have to raise a hand and wipe the tears from my cheeks. Maybe it's only the wind, but I'm suddenly so scared I'm my mother—my mind leaping-frogging and whirling that same way—I can barely see. I stagger on, holding my hand out to brush the reeds, keeping myself from wandering out too far, where the ice might not be solid, where I might vanish from the face of the earth.

Halfway around the lake, the wind's lashing the side of my face, my body stiff with its cold, my hearing numbed by the constant rattle and lash of the frozen reeds. The isolation is womblike somehow, but all wrong; the world nothing but white noise, dirty white sky, dirty white ice, no place where one ends and the other begins. Not a womb you'd ever want anything coming out of.

But as I wind through the turn, stumbling on the broken, lumpy ice, the wind begins to nudge me forward, pushing at me, urging me on. It's scary, and I don't want to find what it wants me to see.

I stop.

Shaking my head, I rub my mittens hard against my face. My nose is running, and I wipe at it like a kid, leaving a long silvery streak across the back of the wool. Now that I'm not moving, the wind pushes harder, more insistently.

What the wind wants me to see?, I think. Not wanting anything coming out of this womb? I've gone way past anywhere Mom ever thought of going. I could go back home and give her lessons on how to let her mind run away from her.

I rub my face even harder, and then lift my head and shout out my name, "Melissa!" just to let myself know I'm here, that I'm not completely gone.

"You're probably getting hypothermic," I say out loud to myself. "Your brain is freezing." Then, "I'm talking to myself, Mom. Aren't you proud?"

I let the wind shuffle me along again. But now I'm only heading back to the car, not looking for something I'll never find. I tell myself this, but not out loud. I'm not crazy, I say. This was worth a look.

I have to stop to climb over the leaning remains of a fence I find poking out of the reeds. The wind makes it hard to balance, to keep from snagging any of the nasty, rusted barbs, each one tetanus waiting to happen. With one leg over, my hands pressing the wires away from my legs, I notice the sign on the near post: Hunting Closure Area, No Hunting Beyond This Point.

This is where Dad'd be, I think. Hiding out here away from the guns. I wonder if I should break through the reeds, try to find some ground, some road, some dip that might have hidden his truck all this time. But somebody would have had to have seen it, right? Some airplane? Some game warden making a last sweep after the lake froze over?

I get my other leg over the wire and let the fence go, jerking my hands away before the barbs can snag the wool of my mittens. Snapping back, the wire makes a loud, whistling, twang, a ricochet kind of noise.

But even before the wind wisks away the wire's song, there's a new sound, a crackling, rushing commotion in the reeds, close, moving fast, breaking things. Scared senseless, I fall into a crouch, leaning back toward the fence for support, bringing my hands up to protect my face, though the only thing I imagine is that it must be Dad, rushing to scoop me into his arms as soon as he found me searching for him.

Then, before I realize it couldn't be Dad, before I can even take a breath, a snow goose breaks free of the reeds that have hidden it, sheltered it from the wind. Not ten feet away.

It thrashes away from me, one wing flapping hard while the other drags sloppily across the ice, catching on the last stalks of broken reeds poking through. It's the same dirty white of the sky and the ice, except for the startling black flashes of its wing tips, the open orange surprise of its bill as it honks and honks, left behind and doomed.

"Stop!" I shout, as if it will listen, as if it will let me take care of it, mend it as I would any broken person. It just keeps flailing across the lake, the wind drifting it sideways, finally blowing it back into a reaching finger of reeds a quarter mile in front of me. I can barely see it then, just the black tips of its wings as it tries to fold them back into place. The one still drags, and I see its black end bob as the goose crawls over the lumps of reeds and disappears again, hiding from what can't be much longer in coming.

I stand a minute more, the wind eddying around me, flapping my blankets, then I begin picking my way through the reeds, looking for land, for the roads I remember creeping down with my father, while I'd pictured Mom left at home, alone with her crazy ideas.

I'm not looking for Dad now, though. I'm only trying to circle the goose, not drive it out again, give it what peace it has left.

The road, somehow, is right where I pictured it being, a pair of ruts in the grass, smudged with what snow there is, caught in the depressions, falling out of the wind. I walk in the center hump, the short, brittle grass crackling under my feet. I keep myself from searching the snow for tracks. They'd be more than a month old. Long gone.

It takes almost another hour to reach my car, and by the time I turn the key, praying for the temperature needle to climb, my teeth are clattering against each other and I'm shivering as if I'll never stop. I don't back away from the lake until the engine's warm, till the blower's on high, once again rattling the old leaves.

On the drive home all I can think of is that goose, struggling to make it as long as it can. I can't picture Dad doing anything different, I realize. In fact, that's just what he did. Made it as long as he could. If he's not out there under the ice, victim of some coronary event, he's long gone himself, flown away, leaving us to cripple along without him.

I'm still frozen when I get back to Mom's, and I stand beside the wood stove she's kept stoked, ready for our returns. I listen as long

as I can to her chatter about the coffee shop and next week, before finally blurting, "Mom! He's not coming back! Okay? You got to start thinking that way."

"He'll be back, Lyss," she says right away, smiling.

"No, Mom," I answer, slower, mustering all my patience. "He won't."

I swallow, look down at my knees. "I didn't go to work this afternoon, Mom."

"I know that." Her smile only grows.

"I went to Freezeout." I look up, study her eyes, see if I'm reaching anything. "I found him, Mom. He's out there. He's under the ice." It's not something her thoughts will question; how I knew, why I haven't gotten help.

She keeps watching me, though I see her smile falter, the corners trembling, beginning to fall.

But they rise again, just like always, her lips parting so I can see her teeth. "No," she says, reaching out to pat my hand. "He's fine. I'd know if he wasn't."

"Mom," I say, then stop. I've come home convinced I'll take her with me to the hospital tomorrow, that at last I'll set her up with some doctor who might begin helping her. Even if I have to force her. I don't want to run out the way Dad did.

But finally I only whisper, "Okay, Mom." I try returning her smile. "He said to say hello," I say. "He said he'd be back sometime. Maybe when the geese come through."

"I know," she says. She keeps smiling. "It's just the war. He's got things he needs to work out."

What? I want so badly to ask, but she looks up at me suddenly and touches my hand.

"How'd things go at the hospital, Lyss?" she asks. "You look about done in."

I look away. "Same old," I whisper. "Same old." **f**

ON LANGUAGE: A SHORT MEDITATION

It's gone from my speech forever I fear. I don't remember the last time I said it, the last time it didn't feel odd in my mouth as though I were pretending to be someone I no longer am.

I'd known it no other way throughout my childhood. As a young man, my father had left Oklahoma for the logging camps of Idaho to make a new life for himself and my mother. He was eighteen, the son of a sharecropper killed in a drunken car accident; she was the daughter of a hard-drinking gambler who had abandoned her. My father's graduation from high school was a mistake, he once told me—he should never have passed his classes and wouldn't have if not for the basketball coach who refused to acknowledge his star player's failing grades. My mother quit school when, at seventeen and after a year of marriage, she became pregnant with me.

My earliest memories are of our small line shack—a one room wooden trailer built on wheels that could be hauled from one isolated logging camp to the next, no electricity, no plumbing, nothing but a wood stove for heat and a gas lamp for light. Always, our gyppo tribe—a few uncles, aunts, and cousins, one sawyer or another who was always named Swede—circled our wagons near the feeding streams of the North Fork of the Clearwater River, and nothing is more resonant and precious in my memory than the sound of moving water. We drank it, bathed in it, waded its shallows in the summer, fished its currents no matter the season. Deer, Elk, Orogrande, Reeds, Weitas, Mussellshell, Cayuse—all names of creeks I knew and can still recite like a nursery rhyme. Except I did not say creek. Like everyone else I knew—family, friends, teachers, preachers, the druggist we called Dr.

Kimball because he was an educated man—I said *crick*. Lick Crick. Quartz Crick. Split Crick. And it sounded right.

Only lately have I become aware of its absence from my speech, and I feel a kind of grief setting in. I'm a tenured college professor with three degrees in English, the author of several books, but it feels as though in attaining my education and career I've lost some essential part of who I am, some last connection to the forces that shaped me.

My people's language was crick and ain't and every g dropped from ing. We went huntin and fishin and shootin. We drug rather than dragged our deer out of the woods and said of new stomping grounds that we'd never went there before. My grandmother said her house was so small you couldn't cuss a cat without getting fur in your mouth. My father's speech was peppered with Old World sounds and conjugations: he retched for the plowers to tighten a nut, he clumb the tree to pick them plums. Certain words in my family seemed to necessitate added or deleted syllables and sounds—Mandarian oranges, Napoleon ice cream—and some took on onomatopoetic validity: wing in my mother's mouth is whing—a fitting combination of object and action. We did not differentiate between pen and pin, between sit and set, and we did not lose a whit of meaning. The men told stories of fighting the forest fires that ran and ridged and crowned and blew up; of nearly being smashed (like the potatoes we ate) by the wind-broken top of a widow-maker snag, of how my great uncle didn't hear the sawyer's call and was smashed by the felled white pine that drove his shinbones through the bottoms of his boots and still he lived a few hours; of the impatient mistake my grandfather made when he reached beneath to cable the load, how the stack gave way, crushing his head that swelled up like a melon and he was never right after that; of how the log my father had hooked to the boom swung crazy and hit the stump on which my young mother sat. "Bam!" my uncle would say and smack his hands together so hard that I jumped, then he'd pinch his fingers near-closed, "I'll be goll-darned if that ol' pole didn't miss her this much." Our stories of survival were alive with color and

sound, each word—quickway, flume, blazer, buck, swamper, grappler, gyppo—holding its own miniature drama.

No television, no radio, but we studied the King James Bible because we were Pentecostal fundamentalists, and the dark and chanting rhythms of the Old Testament remain with me. My father read every line of Louis L'Amour's métier, stacks of paperbacks in the outhouse, and when years later he told me I wrote almost as good as Zane Grey, I took it as the highest of compliments. I read all the novels the traveling Bookmobile allowed me to cart away, each volume of Classics for Children and the set of encyclopedias they accompanied, every juvenile book-of-the-month that came to our mailbox in town. I knew polysyllabic words by sight, heard them phonetically in my head, and developed an unlikely Victorian vocabulary sprinkled with the names of exotic plants and animals found in the diaries of castaways. I used the word cask to describe a barrel and got strange looks from my grade school classmates. It would be years before I heard many of the words I'd read spoken aloud, and the wrongness of my pronunciation would become a life-long affliction, like an accent I couldn't, and I'm not sure I want to, unlearn: drought will forever be *drot*; solder will never be *sodder* but a word that so obviously contains an l.

In 1970, we moved from the woods ninety miles southwest to the small city of Lewiston, where my father took a job as a truck driver and where I would become the first in my family to graduate from college. Even among the other Idaho students, many of them displaced homemakers and disabled millworkers, my words were strange. "You speak English like it's your second language," my literature professor once told me, and I didn't know enough to be ashamed. I'd visit my parents, and my father would scowl whenever our conversation bogged down with the niceties of grammar and diction: "Talk Okie to me," he'd demand, and I'd feel a different kind of shame. He meant don't you forget your place. He meant never think you're better than the people who brung you up. I became reluctant to speak during class discussion, hesitant to join in my family's vivid storytelling sessions. My life became bifurcated by language. Nothing I said sounded right.

Through the decades, my linguistic transgressions became fewer but have not disappeared. Like a person discomfited by a stutter, I've learned to rephrase a word whose pronunciation I am unsure of. Even now, there are words I've known only in print, heard only in my mind's ear, and have no idea how to pronounce without help from the dictionary. While giving readings, delivering a lecture to my class, presenting at an academic conference, I will suddenly stop and feel the old panic begin to rise: What if I pronounce bosom as my grandmother taught me—*boosum?* What if I regress, say *nekked* instead of naked? What if, like many Westerners, I say *warsh* instead of wash? How can I break the habit of beginning each sentence of intent with, "I've been meanin to...?" I've turned uncommonly fanatical about correct use of the subjunctive and the exquisite difference between to lay and to lie, as though by having a firm grip on such syntactical subtleties I am somehow proving my lexiconical authority. "Language is my life," I often say, but whose language do I mean?

Once, while on a book tour in a big American city my parents would never visit, I was interviewed by a radio talk show host who asked, "How did you get from *that place* to where you are today?" I sat stunned into silence, once again humiliated by the question I'm so often asked, as though I were a feral child raised by wolves, miraculously come out of the woods blessed with the gift of speech. I have a rehearsed answer—that I read voraciously and that even people raised in backwoods Idaho can live a life of the mind—but I've never gotten over the sense of freakishness and suspected fraudulence that comes with the query. It touches the core of my discomfort—that somehow I've forgotten my place, that I'm a pretender in both camps, unable to return to my roots along the banks of those cricks, undeserving of my success in arts and letters that I've worked so hard to attain.

And even as I dutifully deliver my answer, I realize something else: I'm bored—bored right out of my ever-lovin mind. The stilted language we're speaking bores me. Talking *about* story rather than *creating* story bores me. The sound studio bores me as does the loud

city and the staid, five-star hotel into which my publisher has me billeted. I'm bored by my nice black pants and Italian leather boots and the sameness of every interview I've ever been drug through.

"This just ain't real to me," I want to say. "I've been meanin to tell you about that time my uncle decided to bring down this schoolmarm bull pine. There he was in his Whites and stagged Filsons, notchin in a Dutchman, when that ol' ponderosa starts to pop, looks like it's goin to barber-chair, and you know that will sure-nuff kill ya. He starts to jump...but listen, let's you and me go down by the crick, eat us some slam sandwiches and MoonPies, maybe drop in a crawler or two, and I'll tell you the rest of the story."

Now we're talkin. **f**

Martin L. Peterson

AN INTRODUCTION TO ERNEST HEMINGWAY

One of the finest pieces of writing Ernest Hemingway did during his times in Idaho was the eulogy for a Ketchum friend.

Ernest Hemingway first visited Idaho in 1939. One of the first friendships he formed was with 34 year old Gene Van Guilder, a publicist for Sun Valley. Van Guilder grew up in Twin Falls, Idaho, and was an accomplished writer, artist and sportsman. On October 29, 1939, he went duck hunting with a group of friends in the Hagerman Valley. He was killed when one of his companions' shotguns accidentally discharged. His funeral was held on November 1 at the Ketchum cemetery where he was buried in a silver coffin with his saddle, bridle, blanket, hat and gun. His favorite horse, Sunday, stood to the side of the burial site during the 20 minute service.

Van Guilder's wife, Nin, asked Hemingway if he would write and deliver the eulogy. It is one of the finest pieces of writing Hemingway did during his times in Idaho. It is reprinted here from the November 2, 1939 *Idaho Daily Statesman*.

EULOGY TO GENE VAN GUILDER

"You all know Gene. Almost every one here is better equipped to speak about him and has more right to speak about him than I have. I have written down these thoughts about him because if you trusted yourself simply to speak about Gene there might be a time when you would be unable to go on.

You all know that he was a man of great talent. He had great talent for his work, for writing and for painting. But he had something more than that. He had a great talent for living and for communicating his love and enjoyment of life to others.

If it was a fine bright day and you were out in the hills with Gene, he made it a better day. If it was a dark gloomy day and you saw Gene, he made it a lot less gloomy. There weren't any bad days when Gene was around. He gave something of himself to all those who knew him or worked with him. And what he gave us all was very precious because it was compounded of the rarest elements. It was made up of true goodness, of kindliness, of fairness and generosity, of good humor, of tolerance and of the love of life. What he gave us he gave for good.

We have that from him always. When I heard that Gene had died I could not believe it. I cannot believe it now. Yes, technically he is dead. As we all must be. But the thing he gave to those who knew him was not a thing that ever perishes and the spirit of Gene Van Guilder is not a thing that will perish either.

Gene loved this country. He had a true feeling and understanding of it. He saw it with the eyes of a painter, the mind of a trained writer,

and the heart of a boy who had been brought up in the west, and the better he saw it and understood it, the more he loved it.

He loved the hills in the spring when the snow goes off and the first flowers come. He loved the warm sun of summer and the high mountain meadows, the trails through the timber and the sudden clear blue of the lakes. He loved the hills in the winter when the snow comes.

Best of all he loved the fall. He told me the other night riding home in the car from pheasant hunting, the fall with the tawny and grey, the leaves yellow on the cottonwoods, leaves floating on the trout streams and above the hills the high blue windless skies. He loved to shoot, he loved to ride and he loved to fish.

Now those are all finished. But the hills remain. Gene has gotten through with that thing we all have to do. His dying in his youth was a great injustice. There are no words to describe how unjust is the death of a young man. But he has finished something that we all must do.

And now he has come home to the hills. He has come back now to rest well in the country that he loved through all the seasons. He will be here in the winter and in the spring and in the summer, and in the fall. In all the seasons there will ever be. He has come back to the hills that he loved and now he will be a part of them forever." **f**

Mary Morgan

AN INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM KITTREDGE

December 10, 2009

William Kittredge's childhood was set on a ranch in the Warner Valley of Southeastern Oregon. Though he is nostalgic for the west of his childhood, he constantly challenges the meaning of the west, the people of the west, and the evolution of the west, which ultimately breeds much of its own destruction. Ownership begs many meanings, but it is the desire and the need for such status that created the legend in which William Kittredge lived and later wrote about.

"Our old pilgrims believed stories in which the west was a promise, a place where decent people could escape the wreckage of failed lives and start over. Come along, the dream whispers, and you can have another chance. We still listen to promises in the wind. This time, we think, we'll get it right."

Hole in the Sky: A Memoir, 1992

MARY MORGAN

Do you believe you are a writer of celebration or lament?

WILLIAM KITTREDGE

There are two kinds of stories—one of them concerns celebration and the other one focuses on cautionary tales. But the really good ones are mixed; they go both ways. Walt Whitman is a writer I love. His voice led me into literature. This was in my senior year of high school. I was not a kid who read books. I wanted to be a football coach. In college I majored in agriculture. The first thing we read in my first English literature class at Oregon State was Eudora Welty's

first published story, "Death of a Traveling Salesman." I could not make heads or tails of it so I dropped the class; the threads were too tangled for me. But, during my junior year I took an English Lit class from a man named Herbert Childs, who taught Whitman, Thoreau, Emerson, all those famous middle 19th century American writers, and he turned me on. So that spring I took another class from Childs. We read *The Republic* and *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* and Milton's prose—Child's taught a very liberal and political class, which was pretty revolutionary for Oregon State at that time.

And I read Hemingway on the advice of my future wife's father, Jack O'Connor. I wanted to write anecdotal celebrations of the life I'd grown up in. It was all I *would* write in a class I took from Bernard Malamud who'd just published *The Natural*. He wanted us to construct structured stories of the kind I advised my own students to write later on. I continued with the anecdotes and Malamud gave me red F after red F. Finally I gave in and wrote a story of the kind he wanted, and he gave me an A and a B in the class and I got out of there. What an arrogant young man I must have been.

The years went by, and I read *literature*, celebrations mixed with cautionary tales, and saw that first-rate storytelling involves both. In my own work I've tried to show a world in which hearts get broken but it's also possible to live in with reasonable happiness and assurance. Artists need to think about balance.

MORGAN

How do you think that role of being both a writer of celebration and of lament, or being one or the other, is tied to the myth of the west?

KITTREDGE

The west was a difficult place to live in for a long time. It can still be difficult, but in the early days it could often be enormously tough sledding. Folks who came out were really adventurers, even families that came on the wagon trains. They were game for anything.

Many would pick up and move at the drop of a hat while others were hell bent to find an opportunity to settle in a free-land paradise of opportunity. My great grandfather was an early day Methodist missionary in Oregon and Washington. I was deeply shocked to find that some of them advocated exterminating the Indians. Pretty heartless for religious folks—or for any folks. A wide variety of mind-sets came west. Bigotry is obviously very much alive, even now. Some things slowly change, some don't.

We tend to forget that the contemporary West is about eighty-five percent urban—Denver, SLC, Tucson, Phoenix, Boise, Las Vegas—that's most of the people living out here. And then there's the hide out culture—Santa Fe, Jackson Hole, Sonoma, Sun Valley, Aspen—citizens with wealth, barricaded in gated compounds.

And then the ranchers, and the cowhand culture. Friends in the cow business ask me why I'm so hard on cowboys—I'm not, at all. Mistaking cowboys for ruling-class ranchers is like mistaking miners for mine owners. A cowboy's relationship to the rancher who gives him work is much like a miner's relationship to a mine owner—cowhands work for wages, not great wages, and do as they're told or go down the road. The west was a place where many people made and lost fortunes, making up their rules as they went along, my family among them. Culture in the contemporary west seems a little more genteel in towns like Moscow or Missoula these days. But profiteering citizens still make up their own rules, and try to live by them.

MORGAN

Do you think loss is generally at the core of an insider's story? If it is the focus, is it accurate?

KITTREDGE

Stories set in the west tend to be about loss because things have changed very rapidly out here; it's a very fluid society. I was in Valentine, Nebraska, in a bookshop, and the owner was lamenting the regional culture—ranchers whose families have been living in the

Sand Hills for maybe a hundred years—"They think their rules are written in stone"—while the Indians had been there for thousands of years. Then there's the logging culture—a great lamentation ensued when it turned out most of the available timber had been cut. Now, timbering as a way of life is vanishing. Loggers are finding other ways of making a living but there's still a lot of genuine grief for the loss of their culture.

MORGAN

When you left your ranch when you were young, did you think of it as a moral act or were you just sort of ready for an adventure?

KITTREDGE

By the time I got out of college I was already in training to be a writer. But I had no idea how to pursue that ambition in the practical world. I spent years reading philosophy when I was 24, 23. I thought I ought to be an intellectual. But the west wanted no truck with self-educated on-the-ground intellectuals.

"I bet you wish you were back on that ranch." People say that, and I say, "Yeah, I'd love to live two hundred miles from a functional bookstore." By the late 1960s my family wanted to go different ways—we were all, in various ways, for various reasons, complexly delighted to find out that none of us wanted to hang on and manage the ranch—we all wanted to lead lives of our own choosing. I'd been at the same tasks for years, irrigating and plowing and seeding and harvesting, repetition after repetition, and saw that in forty years I would still be at those repeating those tasks. After six or seven years I was already bored with the drill.

MORGAN

So when you left that tradition, did you become an outsider, maybe not with your family, but with that culture, or the politics of that culture?

KITTREDGE

Yeah, to some degree. Well, I *know* that many people didn't take well what I wrote about the shortcomings of rural life. Many people can't accept the fact that the old life is not there for them any more. But, I find that many western people, not just young people, agree with me about the ways change transforms our lives and the need to transform western politics in response. Mind-sets are changing, however slowly.

Two of my best friends didn't want to ranch. One shot himself. The other guy...pretty much the same story. So there's...I didn't want to be one of the guys who thought about guns...because it could have been. If you think outside the norm in a conservative and restrictive culture, get ready to be censured.

MORGAN

Did any of your family or childhood friends see you as an outsider because you were pursuing a more aesthetic life?

KITTREDGE

On the ranch, I kept it pretty quiet. If you want to get crossways, parade around the notion that you're an intellectual—uppity and superior. I was a fellow who thought I'd up and buy the newspaper. I'd be working on the ranch but also running a local newspaper. That was pure daydream, a way of searching for a less one-dimensional world even though I didn't know anything about newspapers. Thank God I didn't try it seriously.

MORGAN

Is part of what you write driven by guilt for your part in the destruction of the west?

KITTREDGE

I don't feel guilty. For a while I loved farming. And did a pretty good job. There's aesthetic pleasure to be gotten from beautifully

cultivated fields. It can be an art. But *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson's environmental masterpiece, came out in '62, and influenced me a lot. By that time I was ordering books from San Francisco, and *Silent Spring* completely took the wheels out from under me. An early chapter of *Silent Spring* was focused on Tule Lake, detailing the ways good farmers were unintentionally destroying bird populations. More than ten million water birds migrated through Tule Lake a hundred years ago. The count was down to two or three million.

Agricultural practices in Tule Lake, including heavy use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, were exactly the same things we were doing in Warner Valley. We, also, had a lot less birds than twenty years before. But no, I don't feel any guilt for the run of mistakes that killed off those birds. We thought we were doing God's work, growing foodstuffs. And, after we got the very bad news from Rachel Carson, I advocated abandoning such practices no matter the cost to local agriculture.

MORGAN

What do you feel about that part of the west being lost, and how you saw the west being destructed?

KITTREDGE

Driving in France, I watched farmers as they plowed fields sloping down to a river in the Dordogne. They plowed parallel to the river, and when finished hauled the plowshare at the bottom, which might erode into the river, back up to the high side of the field. As a consequence of taking such care they've been farming there for two thousand years and haven't lost their soils. In Warner we lost more topsoil in thirty years than they did in two thousand. The deep peat soil in our fields was anywhere from a foot to eight feet deep when we first plowed. When I left, we had lost eighteen inches of top soil.

MORGAN

Did you feel compelled to write about that type of destruction?

KITTREDGE

Yeah, in *Owning It All* more than anywhere else. In the latest version of those essays, there's an essay "Who Owns the West"—it parallels the destruction of ecology and land and our use of people. We used people just as heedlessly as we used the countryside.

MORGAN

What are your personal feelings now on owning the west? Has it changed since you first set out to be a writer?

KITTREDGE

There's "owning," like with money and property, and there's emotional ownership. We live in two value systems. We have emotional relationships with mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, families, close friends. We're generous with them, we take care of them and they take care of us—that kind of relationship is expected. But, in our dealing with the rest of society another kind of relationship is expected—financial, commoditized, commercial, selfish.

So we live in two worlds—in one we're selfish, trying to accumulate money in the bank. In the other we're generous. We inhabit a classic double bind of the kind that makes people crazy, insane, and it resonates through our local and world societies, coloring private and political lives.

MORGAN

When you hear—in terms of land and in terms of home—the word "homestead," considering your past and your life now, what do you think of?

KITTREDGE

I think of Warner. Where I grew up. I was thirty-six years old by the time I got out of there. That's home in my mind's eye. I've got big pictures of Warner on the wall in the apartment I'm living in. My grandson went out there a few years ago and did some huge

panoramas. That's still with me—that whole life, that culture. I get sucked back into that world when I hear the names of places or people from back there that time. I love that world but thank god I don't live in it. It's a beloved story, of the kind a lot of us tell ourselves but can't go back to.

MORGAN

You've mentioned that you spend your winters in warmer climates, but you still have access to the west in Montana. I was wondering if it's possible that you were able to attain the best of the west in terms of Montana, but also in terms of the photos you have now of Warner.

KITTREDGE

Yeah, I have my cake and eat it too. There has been a lot of talk about insiders and outsiders. Richard Ford was in Montana just a few years when he wrote *Rock Springs*, probably the best book of stories ever written about the west. There was a lot of huffing and puffing amongst Montana literary people. "He's only been here three years. He can't possibly understand us." I read his stories to Montana kids in university classes, and asked, "What do you think? Did this guy miss the mark?" And those kids said, "No, he's dead on. He's got it perfect." Good artists pay close attention, they watch, they listen, they see, they intuit.

MORGAN

Do you think that you're able to leave the failures that are part of the western myth behind now? Or do you think that it will always be a part of you?

KITTREDGE

A lot of people still want to celebrate a mythology I've written about, the western, a conquest mythology that is racist, sexist and homophobic, a white patriarchal mythology I find frankly disgusting. But I don't run into it so often in Missoula. people are comfortable

with the fact that the west is changing rapidly, even once in a while for the better, maybe too slowly on issues like global warming but nevertheless changing. The west is much more tolerant and easygoing than it was fifty years ago.

MORGAN

Do you consider yourself a citizen of the west or do you feel like you are more a citizen of the world?

KITTREDGE

I'd like to think I'm a citizen of the world, but I'm mainly a citizen of the west. There are two kinds of regions—one is the physical region you live in, and the other one is kind of a mental place where you also live. Mentally, I'd like to think I'm a citizen of the world, but physically I'm really comfortable where I am, here in the west. I can do cities for about ten days, and then I start getting crazy. Too speedy, too loud? I don't know why. I just didn't grow up in that kind of place.

MORGAN

Do you think there is a difference for writers, either from the west or writing about the west, in regards to citizenship—does it relate to the meaning or the purpose of writing?

KITTREDGE

Oh boy. The medium we work in is the audience's imagination. That's true in any art. The artist tries to incite people to imagine a world of their own, not the same world the artist was imagining but one that was incited by his or her work of art.

Dick Hugo, in a book called *Triggering Town* tells of finding a person or place that can trigger the artist into imagining, seeing freshly. Aristotle wrote about "recognitions." In *The Poetics* he said that inciting recognitions is what makes art significant—inciting citizens to insight in which they re-imagine the world and relocate themselves emotionally and intellectually.

Writing about the west, my impetus has been to celebrate the old west. But we evolve and progress, we re-imagine, we experience recognitions. I've said that bad art is conservative, reinforcing our prejudices, and that good art is radical, and helps us see freshly and thus evolve both personally and as a society. I still think that's true. **f**

OKANAGAN

The kill-truck idles as the beasts are hooked, railed, ran to the cooler.
Gut-barrels skid from the truck-bed, drop, slopping mush over the
    hands that pull them in
Around the corner beyond the haw and grasp of gathering crows—
One barrel per heifer on the kill-list. Four today. Twenty for the week.
The high-pressure hose is uncoiled to peal clots from the truck-bed in
    great gouts to the gravel
As crows bear down, and the slaughtered hang dripping.

AFTERNOON LIGHT, PALESTRINA IN THE TREES

I hunch on a small chair in sun outside listening
Through sparrows, last night's storm dripping from eaves,
A stream overflowing, the change in pitch of its yearning,
This a world and what happens to it.
A pale spider weaves down the storm-pane, spins a sloppy net.
Who will freeze once more come nightfall.
But now pungent wafts of thaw-muck runnel a gentle slope,
Short stubbs of rape-field bristle through ice,
The ruined tunnels of brush-pile mice,
Wrecked possums slowly exhumed along the road.
The sun is bright, the simplest of needs.
From here, you cannot follow.

OUT OF BRIGHTNESS HAILSTONES, COALS OF FIRE

Consequence of the diurnal surge, shear-pin shorn in the hour
Where boundary lines have fallen against my lot—
Harvesters routed, furrows stomped bare so far from haven,
Crop-haulers paused in the lee of the barn to finish not the
gathering as rain beads up
On the greasy zerks, hydraulic hoses frayed and seeping.
Of all the harvest have I failed, for what moulders in the field is
without value,
The hot soil gumming feet, the tires, the insular faces of the brim-
tried—
For who knows the bore and stroke of each man's heart
As I lean against a combine, let rain runnel down in the place where
grandfather pleaded
And turned, and was struck by lightning.

Anthony Doerr

TWO NIGHTS

Winter in the mountains of central Idaho and the snow has let up. A slim horn of moon hangs in the gap between two peaks. I zip up my sleeping bag, pull on mittens.

It's maybe twenty degrees. The lake I'm camped beside is just beginning to freeze—paper-thin sheets of ice are interlocking above the shallows. The clouds have peeled away. The sky travels through a long spectrum of purples.

Everything seems poised to become something else. Silhouettes of trees on the ridgelines might become men; boulders might stand and stretch and slink away. I am at 7,800 feet, five miles from a road, forty miles from a town, and yet here come whispers, six or seven syllables, carrying across the water.

I blink into the dimness. My heart roars. The lake I'm camped beside is still. The mountains glow. Nothing. No one.

Welcome to Idaho. We have ten major rivers, eighteen ski resorts, and fifteen people per square mile. We have hidden valleys where the wind pours through seams of aspens and makes a sound in the leaves exactly like the sound of rain falling on a pond. We have forests where the growing season is so short that fifty-year old trees are only four feet tall, and get so rimed with ice in January that they look like gardens of oversized, glittering cauliflower. We also have an escalating methamphetamine crisis, looming water disputes, massive agribusiness feedlots, and hour-long lines to eat dinner at The Cheesecake Factory.

Forget tourist brochures, forget airbrushed photos of sunsets, forget travel magazine spreads of flyfishermen at dawn casting into a smoking bend of Silver Creek. Idaho is bigger than eighty Rhode Islands and most of its boundaries are entirely arbitrary. Some parts get hardly any snow and some get eight feet. Vast stretches of the state are arid and yet inside these borders are almost 116,000 miles of rivers.

In January you can stand in a polo shirt outside a Starbucks in Boise and call somebody in Madagascar on a cellular telephone while 150 miles away a mountain goat stands on a mountaintop in the River of No Return looking down over an unbroken desert of snow twenty feet deep. Nothing I will ever write could do this place justice.

Among the quantities of peoples and tribes who have traveled, slept, and died in the topographical anomaly that is presently called Idaho, among the 12,000 years of their successive, unknowable generations, the great bulk of them marking time in ways we would only vaguely understand, was a small group of people who lived in the sprawling mountains surrounding the Salmon River.

They've been known by lots of names: Tukudeka, Sheepeaters, Toyani, Snakes, Arrow Makers. There probably weren't ever more than a couple of thousand of them. They lived in caves, in clefts in the rocks, and in wickiups made of sticks. They wore snowshoes in winter, and their furs were expertly tanned. Sometimes, supposedly, they hunted while wearing the decapitated heads of animals. Their bows, painstakingly crafted by heating and laminating sections of sheep horn, were renowned: one witness describes one of these bows sending an obsidian-tipped arrow through a nine-inch pine tree at a distance of fifteen paces.

That any human beings raised children in this rugged, shattered country, so close to timberline, stupefies me. In winter, the temperature rarely climbs above freezing and it's not uncommon for trees to snap in the cold. Summer is no picnic, either: not with bears

and cougars, thunderstorms and forest fires; not with insects rising from the meadows in huge, throbbing clouds.

These people, these Tukudeka, have been called hermits, skulkers, and scavengers. A party of explorers who encountered them in 1819 described them as "truly wild men of the mountains... dressed in sheepskin garments, living among rocks in caves." The 1937 WPA guide to Idaho called them "wily and treacherous, though cowardly."

I'd call them old-school, bad-ass. Intrepid. Remarkable. I'd say they were more involved in the natural world than any of us could ever hope to be.

A whirlwind history: In 1805, when Sacagawea led Lewis and Clark into what is now called Idaho, the explorers found legions of beavers. Back in Europe, top hats made of felt were getting unreasonably popular. And guess which kind of animal fur makes the best hat felt?

For the next forty years, fur trappers slew Idaho's animals by the hundreds of thousands. In one season in the 1830s, the Hudson's Bay Company recorded taking 80,000 beavers from the Snake River.

On the heels of trappers were missionaries, and on the heels of missionaries were settlers. By the mid 1840s, by the time fashionable Europeans preferred hats made of silk, the Snake River had become a 'fur desert' and an east-west highway called the Oregon Trail had been established.

One by one, the people whose ancestors had been hunting, fishing, and digging up roots in this country for centuries were displaced, excluded, or eliminated. By the middle of the nineteenth century, of Idaho's original tribes, only the Tukudeka, with their hunting dogs and rabbit-skin blankets and year-round snows, could have remained fairly isolated.

But in 1862, prospectors found gold in the Boise Basin. Dozens of strikes were made. Boomtowns sprouted like mushrooms. Soon gold-seekers were working up every creek in every mountain range, no matter how inaccessible.

Meanwhile diseases carried by domestic sheep were decimating native herds of bighorn. Smallpox was doing the same to native humans. Survivors were being relocated systematically. When they resisted, they were forced off their land.

It's a familiar story: emigrants, eager to let livestock graze the camas meadows, depicted native people as bloodthirsty terrorists. Native people, hungry, desperate, watching cows and hogs chew up roots their families depended on for generations, said they were only protecting their way of life.

The summer of 1877 saw the Nez Perce War. The summer of 1878 saw the Bannock War. Subduing troublesome Indians became an American machinery unto itself. Military careers depended on it. Merchants in Boise were said to dread the prospects of a peaceful summer.

At the beginning of 1879, decimated by illness, their primary source of food vanishing, and their ancient hunting grounds invaded by armed prospectors, how many Tukudeka could have been left? Maybe thirty or forty families? They still dressed in hides, wove baskets, and cooked in clay pots. They still fitted their weapons with stone points. They were, perhaps, the last native Americans in the contiguous United States to live in a way their ancestors would immediately recognize.

And yet they had to know what was coming. In February of 1879, five Chinese miners were found murdered in an abandoned town twenty-three miles north of present-day Stanley. Not long afterward, two white ranchers were found dead on the south fork of the Salmon River. In both instances, the Tukudeka, accused of harboring renegades from previous Indian wars, were blamed. Settlers roared for protection.

So on the last day of May, Troop G, First Cavalry, soldiers of the United States Army, rode out from Boise to hunt down the last free-roaming native people in Idaho. The cavalcade did not have an easy time of it. Swollen creeks swept away mules and horses. They were assailed by lightning, snow, and hail; their animals were plagued by

wood ticks and mosquitoes. Seemingly every day a mule pitched off a precipice and tumbled hundreds of feet into a rocky drainage.

It wasn't until mid-August, seventy-nine days after leaving Boise, that the soldiers in Troop G saw any real traces of their quarry: several empty wickiups, one of which had some firewood stacked beside it.

Two days later, reinforced by several dozen mounted infantrymen, they climbed to a diamond-shaped expanse of sawgrass and sagebrush, hemmed in by mountains, that is now a backcountry airstrip called Soldier Bar. There, at the base of a rocky slope, their scouts found a hastily-evacuated camp. There were ten wickiups, buckskin, beads, blankets, pots and pans.

Among the cavalrymen of Troop G was a private named Edgar Hoffner, a novel-reading, pipe-smoking cavalryman who kept a daily diary. "We turned our horses out after getting to this camp, to await developments," he wrote. "Gathered up every thing that we could find and consigned to the flames."

So casual! So nonchalant! How do things get to the point where a person would think so little of burning the possessions of eight or nine families?

Any time you look for evil in an individual person, though, you'll almost never find it. In his diary, Hoffner is often funny, often wistful. He misses home; he gets in snowball fights with other soldiers; he pines "for a cottage by the sea, for a cabin in the wood." When he has no food, he says he eats "wind pudding" for supper. Indeed, when he's not burning the possessions of Tukudeka families, Private Hoffner behaves much as any of my friends might in similar circumstances, if my friends were better with horses and significantly tougher about missing meals. He is kind to his fellow soldiers; he manages to keep a sense of humor in any weather.

And what about the settlers who demanded the Tukudeka be brought in? Isn't it folly to judge them, too? They lived deep in snowed-in valleys in houses they had built by hand: purlin roofs, log walls, cold decanting through cracks and knotholes. The wind-

wracked faces of big mountains stared down at them all day. And maybe once a year some utterly foreign man emerged from the snows in animal furs with a few possessions tied to the back of a dog? Surely that'd be enough to make any of us sleep with a shotgun under the bed.

All their lives they'd pumped each other full of terrible stories: Indians were attacking wagon trains and burning children in front of their mothers; Indians were ruthless and inhuman assassins. By the late 19th century, the Tukudeka were probably more legend than reality, anyway; they were yetis, sylphs, bogeymen. Anything happened—a rancher was murdered, a horse was stolen, a pie disappeared off a windowsill—and who were you going to blame?

It's snowing; it's freezing cold; you wrap your sleeping children in blankets and listen to the wind pour off the mountains. You think: The winter, the darkness, the fastness beyond my front door—it's populated.

On the morning of August 20th, 1879, squads of cavalrymen started up the steep inclines surrounding Soldier Bar. Twenty men stayed behind with the pack train as a rear guard. By the time the riders were five miles away, they heard gunfire. They sprinted back, many on foot, as the slopes were too steep for horses. There had been an ambush. One of the men in the rear guard was shot through both legs and soon died.

That night the soldiers went to sleep in the grass at intervals of ten feet, clothes on, carbines loaded.

"The hostiles," wrote Private Hoffner, "have signal fires on the mountains on two sides of us."

That was August 20th, 1879. More and more lately, I am haunted by that night. Twin fires burn on the mountainsides. Six dozen cavalrymen—panicky, keyed-up, pissed-off—lay down to sleep in the grass. They had just buried a comrade and they were nearly out of food.

Above them on the rocky slopes, maybe forty or fifty Tukudeka—toddlers, adolescents, women, men—tried to keep the babies quiet. They were among the last of their people, among the last free native people in the entire United States. The Civil War was over, Edison had invented the phonograph, and these people were still living outside, still making their homes in what any of us would call the middle of nowhere.

Maybe they were scared; maybe they were furious; maybe they were resigned. Probably they were hungry. Probably there were some refugee Bannocks or Nez Perce with them, men who had so far avoided the reservation, men who had rifles, men who had known little in their lives besides deracination and subjugation.

It'd be another couple of hours until dawn. If the sky was clear, the Milky Way would have been huge and dazzling, a sleeve of light draped across the sky. And in all that immensity, there was *nowhere* for the Tukudeka to go, no retreat, no quarter, the world had left them behind, somehow they had become strange and wrong, scattered amongst the hills, and everything was on the line: their idioms, their legends, their ancestors, their kids.

Maybe they slept; maybe one or two managed to forget their situation long enough to whisper to each other and smile, before the crystalline night reasserted itself and their aches and injuries came back and they were reminded again of the soldiers camped in the field below, bent on chasing them down.

One hundred and twenty-eight years later, I'm camped beside an alpine lake in December, not terribly far from Soldier Bar. For me nothing is more compelling in this country than the night skies: on winter nights the stars flicker white and red and blue, twisting and glittering in their places. In the same moment they can seem both astonishingly close and impossibly far away. This is not typically comforting: you feel the size of the Earth beneath your back, which is massive enough to hold all of its cities and oceans and creatures in the sway of its gravity, and on the far side of the Earth is the sun, 300,000

times more massive than the Earth, and slowly your thoughts begin to bump up against the enormity of the Milky Way, in which our entire solar system is merely a mote.

I close my eyes; I think of the brook trout in the lake beside me, quick and sleek, little sleeves of muscle suspended in the black water, their fins and bellies fringed with orange, their backs aswarm with patterns. The snowy peaks gleam in the moonlight. In a few days this lake will be frozen over, and I wonder if the fish turn up their eyes, if they watch the lights traveling through the sky, if they sense that this could be the last time they will be able to see them.

There are claims the Tukudeka may have been a distinct cultural group for 1,000 years. Some of the sites they used suggest a cultural continuity that stretches back as far as 8,000 years. But by August 1879, there were only a few families left, trying to get some sleep among the rocks.

A December night in 2007. An August night in 1879. Between me and them stretches an abyss, the automobile and the airplane, penicillin and the microchip, plastic furniture and space travel. Did the Tukudeka understand how fragile memory can be? Did they bury their memories on the hillsides around them, hoping someday someone might return to dig them back up?

"The conquest of the earth," wrote Joseph Conrad, "which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much."

Territory and gold, civilization versus wilderness, Rome versus the barbarians. Out of the history of Idaho comes the whispers of the Tukudeka; comes Private Edgar Hoffner with his tobacco and rifle; comes the relentless brooms of progress.

Fifty-one native Americans from that area eventually surrendered to the United States Army in October of 1879. The following year, they were moved to the Fort Hall reservation, a good 200 miles from the Salmon River country. Whoever remained in the folds of the

mountains might have hidden there another ten years. But the Indian Wars were over, and the last of Idaho's tribes had been relocated.

The Northern Pacific laid rails across the panhandle in 1882 and the Union Pacific sewed up the southern part of the Territory in 1884. In 1890, Idaho became a state.

Even to neighboring tribes, some historians say, the Tukudeka had seemed like druids, gnomes, elves. They were blamed for bad luck and big storms and lost objects. They were the Old Way, the hard way, the unknowable. They lived a life that was hard to believe.

Sometimes, in the winter, I stop at an intersection in Boise and watch the sleet coming down in slow sheets, raking across the foothills, all browns and whites, the cars splashing past around me—even the trees looking miserable, dormant, waiting, uncomfortable—and I think: thank God I don't have to sleep outside tonight.

And Idaho? Many of the places the Tukudeka knew are still here: cold green forks of rivers and here-and-there copses of cottonwoods and great broken slopes of volcanic scree aglow with lichen, and clouds like vast men-of-war dragging tentacles of rain across the ridgelines. Idaho still has the most roadless land in the Lower 48 and the largest single designated wilderness area, too. We have two gorges deeper than the Grand Canyon. We have sagebrush prowled by skinny foxes with the pilfered eggs of songbirds clamped gingerly in their teeth, and whole hillsides skittering with grasshoppers the color of straw.

Every life here, no matter how sequestered, no matter how impounded, is still informed by the land, for better or worse. And that for me is what Idaho continues to be about, this territory, this state, this country, the stripe of the Milky Way printed across a velvet sky and the silhouettes of mountains strobing in and out of view during lightning storms.

I live here because, even if I only have one afternoon, a few hours between obligations, I can ride a bike up into the hills above Boise, into cooler, more watered places, where wildflowers color the hillsides and the remains of old burns are still plain—the great blackened skeletons of sentinel ponderosa, granite blocks half-tumbled on the

hillsides, spring creeks carving through the gulches. After twenty minutes of pedaling, the city of Boise will be far enough below that its features will have faded and become a wide green blur, bedded between mountain ranges, a haze over it, maybe the first evening lights winking on.

The history of our planet is one of absolutely relentless change. "There is nothing stable in the world," wrote Keats. "Uproar's your only music." Everything—mammoths, short-faced bears, western camels—eventually goes extinct. For about two million years, every August, tens of thousands of salmon poured into the rivers of Idaho. Redfish Lake, 900 miles from the Pacific, supposedly turned crimson with sockeyes. Last summer, only four fish made it back, and they were born in a hatchery. And there's no reason to think it won't happen to us, too; that, someday, some final band of humans will build signal fires among the rocks, and look down at who or whatever has come to finish us off.

The country the Tukudeka lived in, craggy, hazardous, hammered by snow, near-holy in its beauty, is still here. A person can go see the Sawtooth Mountains and the Salmon River and even hike to Soldier Bar, where Private Hoffner helped bury his comrade, and where some of the last free Tukudeka rested among the rocks; and there are even less-traveled places, like the Lost River Range, or the Lemhi Mountains, which are about as far as you can get nowadays, in the Lower 48, from anybody.

A person can still go into the country and find a few ghosts, some pictographs, a stone hunting blind, a stick or two from a forgotten sheep trap.

"You people of low lands," wrote Private Hoffner in 1878, "have no idea how loud thunder can roar or how bright flashing the lightning is on the mountain tops."

A person can still walk into the mountains and stare up at the welter of stars. **f**

Christopher Howell

THE CULTURE OF PLACELESSNESS

1.

What is culture? A huge question, a little like asking what is power. The answer is apt to be operational rather than Aristotelian. Still, as we could mention different sorts or sources of power, we may also note that in western societies, culture has been thought to include certain elements, among which are language, folkways, art, music, technologies, literature, law, learning, metaphysics (in which I include all manner of religious and philosophical practice and belief), and a body of reflexive assumption. Of these the most pervasive element is language, since it is necessary to have an appreciation for the others (as well as itself). You can't read the program without a program, and you can't have a program without the essential material of its construction.

But since language is both an aspect and an instrument of culture, and culture is comprised of the affective and observable, there has been a tendency to understand language as that which verifies the human godhead, which demonstrates our superiority to and separation from other life forms on the planet and from the planet itself. Ha ha, we can know about you but you can't know about us—though also, paradoxically, poor us, alone on the cold far side of the death of God, alas.

Even that is, of course, logiocentric. We are totally immersed in our context, are products of it, and are both agents and receptors of its ongoing change. Our language, thinking, suffering, and art are all entirely natural, as is all of our behavior. As much of western philosophy has concluded, it is not possible to be superior to,

therefore outside of, nature any more than it is possible to be outside the universe. Nevertheless, intuition (and language) suggests that somehow, as William Saroyan said on his deathbed, an exception will be made in our [his] case.

Prevailing notions of culture and the individual support this error. in post-industrial capitalist societies we are encouraged to believe that we are products of our own will, that identity and identification are the same thing, that life is the objective, affective world, that, therefore, longings and a sense of displacement and alienation are monstrous, private, and incurable matters to be examined and expressed only within the confines of conventional religious institutions or therapy.

This body of belief and practice makes for good consumers. One role of art, in many important ways not very consumable, is to counter this cultural model that leaves unremarked the inner life of the individual, without some sense of which we cannot have a whole and active culture, nor can either we or our institutions relate to the planet as something of which we are part.

Poetry in particular among the arts tends to give and to model language which, in context, does not come in from the so-called objective world with its definable elements but out from the subjective life of the person: language becoming an act of the individual inner life seeking collective acknowledgment. But this is an act of faith, really, faith that we are not alone in our separateness, a faith to which cynicism is anathema.

Unfortunately for us, much of the poetry of the early 21st century, when we really need it to stave off the deepening and ever more profoundly worshipped avalanche of information, the antithesis of knowledge, is increasingly cynical. This is understandable: we are bombarded with contradictory and outright specious assertions from the media, the internet, the political arena, the grape vine. Poets respond to this, and some increasingly wish to live in the material culture, like bankers and everyone else, "good gray poets." Increasingly there is more worry about publication, about matters of career, than joy in the spiritual inquiry that is writing. And this shows

in the writing of some of our most celebrated poets—and it is weird that they're so celebrated when they have so little to give but stuff, a language negotiable in a certain restricted area of the market culture, even when flauntingly painted as cutting edge experiment.

2.

Having read more, and more steadily, than the average person, and having lived most of my life in the west, I would say that, until quite recently, an absence of cynicism was notable in the literary work (especially poetry) of those who dwelt west of the Mississippi, particularly in the writing of those who lived west of the Rockies. I always saw this as an interplay between geography and language distinct from regionalism, since the writing itself did not *address* the region so much as proceed from it. In the writing of Theodore Roethke, William Stafford, Richard Hugo, Madeline DeFrees, Kenneth Hansen, Vern Rutsala, David Waggoner (particularly with Hugo) there is the clear assumption that the land transcends the considerations of sacred and profane space which so occupied the Puritan-descended poets of the New England tradition. The land is like the unconscious, like the holistic Self of Jungian psychology: an irreducible matrix of mysteries and powers for the sustenance of life.

The wave of immigration to the West (and to the NW in particular) which began in earnest at the beginning of the nineties has brought slews of literary practitioners from other parts. Nothing wrong with this, Roethke and Stafford were both born elsewhere, after all. But much of the work I read from "newcomers," if you like, has a different feel, has in it more of the anxiety and anger and cynical wit not so noticeable in these parts twenty years ago—though surely the increase in cynicism must be universal among Americans, regardless of regional affiliation. Nevertheless, I wonder: what does it mean to be a NW poet? What does it mean to be a Western poet? Is it now a matter of street address only? Or will geography have its way, eventually, with everyone, the immense scale of the West finally

imposing its character on even the most wise-assed refugee from the great urban welters east of here?

I think if the West were to remain as it was thirty years ago, very probably it would grind the urban cynicism off of almost anyone. But it cannot and it has not. The population of Oregon has tripled inside of fifteen years, Washington and Montana have undergone even more rapid growth. The so-called information revolution has risen up to taunt the saving balms of distance: everyplace now starts to resemble everyplace else, and the apostles of this revolution gleefully predict that soon it won't matter a bit either where we are or where we're from.

But it does matter. If we don't know where we are we cannot care for it and it can have no effect on us, there can be no relationship with the actual place where we have our being. If we don't know where we are, we have embraced that hypothetical separation which the material culture promotes. And we will in a way have spit in the eye of poetry, and on the life of the spirit, no matter how many poems we write and publish, no matter how many conferences we attend.

The answer to this dismal possibility, is some combination of increased contact between poets and more intense listening to the conversation (both inside the poems and elsewhere) going on around and among us. Pie-in-the-sky though it sounds, it may be the only way to preserve our authority to define the ways in which this conversation matters, rather than seeding cultural authority to *Poetry Magazine*, *The American Poetry Review*, or such projects as *Fence*. Not that the writing in these journals is bad, necessarily, but it is often writing within which considerations of "place" (even place as an intuitive and mysterious centering) have no application. As a trend (or perhaps, now, a mode) this is a mistake. As the engines of mass culture and globalization relentlessly blur local, regional, ethnic, linguistic, and geographical distinctions, we need more and more urgently to know where we are, in our persons, affections, and values. And we need to know, literally, where we write *from*, even if, God forbid, we are no longer actually there. **f**

Lisa Fay Coutley

WOMAN FROM WATER

I went west from water to learn drier states,
climb steeper grades and test those runaway
truck routes—all uphill, all gravel. Alone
was the way to what meant desert. There I was
digging in fire beds and rigging steel traps
beneath day-old coals, letting the mouth remain
open and silent. Be it bobcat or coyote I caught
so long as my eyes glowed in its eyes, wild.
Once, far clouds stilled to notice me floating
between sun and stone. Woman from water.
But once is a way to say something's been
lost. If every yesterday has a man in it, what
can I see in all this rock? Here are the steeples,
there are the thrones, nothing but girl-shaped
pillars, still as mortared doors. I cannot open
to the time before a house was carved down
around me, before I was an altar to a single grain
of sand. Who could help but look back? I didn't
know how to say that I wanted to be seen
heading west—a woman setting traps and still
starving. Hunger as a time I've misunderstood.
I am guilty of baiting mirage and leaving water,
for pretending what's reflected by wave is
distorted, as if I've ever really wanted to look.

THE NEW FRONTIER

Then I'm on my way to Vegas with my old friend Bobby Rausch. Bobby's an Air Force survival instructor in Spokane and he gets us two jump seats on a military transport, a flying boxcar that rumbles and groans and finally lifts off the ground.

It's the summer of 2003, six weeks after my divorce. Two weeks before Bobby leaves for Iraq. He's going to teach pilots how to survive on bugs and tree bark, how to withstand torture. Over the rumble of the plane I ask Bobby if he's scared.

"You know what scares me," he says. "Goin' my whole life without gettin' the chance to prove myself."

Two hours later our plane crests the pocked red and tan bluffs and we bank over the north end of Las Vegas, over a baked floodplain of shrimp-curled cul de sacs, a sprawl of earth-tone houses bleeding into desert.

We're here to save Bobby's sister.

True story.

"Some guy is whorin' her down there, Nick," Bobby said the day he called. I played high school football with Bobby back in Montana, but hadn't seen him in years. Then, a month ago, our mothers crashed carts at the Grocery Outlet in Great Falls and my mom stupidly bragged to Bobby's mom that I'd finished law school

"And I realized I might need a lawyer down there," Bobby said.

I explained to Bobby that I did graduate from law school—three years ago. That I failed the bar exam. Twice. That Amanda left me, in part, because I refused to take the test again. That I was working most recently for a beer distributor.

"A beer distributor?" he said. "Cool."

In Vegas we stay one step ahead of the wrecking ball—Sahara, Riviera, Imperial Palace, New Frontier—*Goin' old strip*, Bobby Rausch calls it.

We walk everywhere. Bobby takes huge strides and I have to throw in a skip now and then just to keep up. Bobby wanted to stay at the Sands and the Dunes, but those hotels have been torn down, replaced by themed mega-resorts: Paris and the Venetian. So we stay at whatever old strip hotels *haven't* been blown up yet, like the New Frontier, which—according to the brochure—opened as a roadhouse in '42, re-opened as the cowboy-themed "Last Frontier" in '55, became the space-themed "New Frontier" after Kennedy's 1960 convention speech (*"We stand at the edge of a New Frontier—the frontier of unfulfilled hopes and dreams"*), hosted Elvis's first Vegas performance in '66, and went back to being a cowboy place in the '70s.

The New Frontier is a paint-chipped, dirty old hull of a building that takes up an entire block. Its eighty-foot sign advertises *bikini bullriding, $8.75 steak and shrimp* and *mud wrestling* with *cold beer and dirty girls*. The hotel is scheduled to be demolished in two months, but the guests at the New Frontier don't look like they'll make it that long. Everywhere there are canes and walkers, oxygen machines and motorized wheelchairs. It's like staying in a VA hospital.

In the New Frontier bar, Bobby smashes his beer can and says—as he says every time he finishes a beer—"Let's ride partner."

I really should tell Bobby what I'm doing here.

Here's what Bobby is doing here:

Every night, thousands of illegal aliens stand along the Vegas strip, handing out little playing cards with pictures of naked women on them. They snap the cards to get your attention. If you were to call the phone number on the snapper card, a stripper would come "direct to your hotel room." Or a van would pick you up and take

you to a brothel in the desert. Alongside the sexy women the cards advertise: "Nothing BUTT the best for you" and "Why not CUM see me tonight"—nasty puns capitalized for morons.

Six weeks ago, one of Rausch's fellow Air Force instructors returned from Vegas with a handful of these cards; on one of them was a photo of Bobby's step-sister, Lisa.

I was dubious that it was Lisa until I saw the photo. It's her all right. In the picture, she wears a white thong and is bending forward, bare-chested, little stars covering her nipples. Her card reads: "Want me in your room in 30 minutes?" Like a pizza. Bobby called the number on the card, but it was disconnected.

In the picture, you can just see, on her hip, a little tattoo of a Bison, the Great Falls High School mascot. I remember when she got that tattoo. Rausch and I were seniors—she was a sophomore. Rausch punched his locker when he heard about it. Then he punched the poor kid who'd seen her hip tattoo.

I met Lisa one day when I went to pick Bobby up for football practice. They had a big blended family, two kids on each side when the parents got married, and a baby between them. That day Lisa was in a lawn chair on the porch, wearing the tiniest pair of shorts, reading a magazine and flipping a sandal up and down with her toe. "I sure like your Camaro, Nick," she said.

"It's a Cavalier," I said.

"Really? But it's so sporty."

Lisa was my first. We had to sneak around because she was so young and because she was my friend's step-sister. She'd leave the basement window open and I'd crawl in, lower myself onto the air-hockey table and tiptoe into her bedroom. She always kept her socks on for some reason. The sex only lasted a couple of weeks.

In Vegas, Rausch insists that we "stick and move, stick and move." When I ask why, he says, "Because when you're askin' the kinds of

questions we're askin', it's not long before the people you're lookin' for...start lookin' for you."

I can't imagine the questions we're asking causing anyone to look for us. In fact, we only ask the one question: "Have you seen this girl?" We stagger up and down the strip asking our one question, collecting nudie cards from snappers.

One night, out of nowhere, Rausch begins calling us the Dream Team.

The Dream Team's days began at 6 a.m. Doesn't matter what time we go to bed, Rausch wakes me at 6. We go to breakfast, gamble 'til noon, walk to a new hotel, take a nap, start drinking, gamble some more, eat at a buffet, and spend the night collecting snapper cards, looking through the pictures of strippers until, well after midnight, we stagger back to our room. This is when Rausch becomes philosophical. "Ain't no one I'd rather have at my side, little buddy. You and me, we're the last of the cowboys."

It's August. During the day the temperature hits 110; at night, it drops into the high 90s. We move in an endless stream of drunken losers from casino to casino, past the snappers wearing their day-glo T-shirts advertising *Girls Direct to Your Room* and *Two Girls for the Price of One*. Rausch takes a card from each one, and flips through them, looking for Lisa. Every once in a while he shows the snappers the old card with Lisa's picture on it. "You seen this girl?"

"Si," say the snappers. And they thumb through their own cards until they find a blonde girl they think looked like Rausch's sister.

"This one, she prettier, eh Boss?" says one snapper. He holds up a card showing another beautiful blonde.

"I don't want prettier," Rausch says. "I want my sister."

Sometimes, Rausch goes crazy bad-cop on the snappers. "I'm gonna give you the gist here, pal," he'll say, towering over some poor Salvadoran. Or "I don't think you're understanding my gravity." Or "We can go two versions here: number one, the INS runs you back to Tijuana, or B., you tell me who operates your little...operation."

But the snappers have no idea who operates their operation. They line up in a vacant lot somewhere and get their cards from some guy in a pickup truck. We might as well grab a migrant fruit picker out of a Florida peach field and demand the phone number of the CEO of Del Monte.

Amanda always wanted to have kids, but not until I was a lawyer. Then, last winter, we had a pregnancy scare. Afterward she asked if I'd ever been that close before and I told her about secretly sleeping with my friend's sister, and how, when I was 17, I heard a rumor that Lisa had gotten an abortion.

"What did you do?" she asked.

Nothing, I said. Even if it was true, I had no reason to believe the baby was mine, and anyway, what could I do after the fact?

"So you let that poor girl suffer by herself? God, that's sick."

It was always Amanda biggest complaint, that I was passive and incommunicative. She said I was content letting life happen to me. "He's just like his father was," my mother used to tell Amanda. "Higgins men are just stoic. Dan always said it was a Western thing."

A few weeks after the pregnancy scare, I got my bar exam results. The managing partner where I was clerking said I'd done good work but the firm had a strict "two-strike rule." I thought about saying that if they didn't allow a third strike they should use a different metaphor, but instead I just nodded and packed my things.

Two weeks later, Amanda left. I helped her move out. I probably should have said something but I didn't want to give her the satisfaction.

After days of questioning snappers and getting nothing but a stack of nudie cards, Bobby turns our attention to the strip clubs. He shows me a thick roll of singles. "This is the only currency these sleaze merchants understand."

Probably because it's the actual currency, I think.

At the clubs, he slides dollars one at a time into girls' G-strings. He shows the dancers the old card with Lisa's picture on it. "My partner and I are looking for this girl."

We're not...that kind of partners, I point out helpfully.

The strippers don't know Lisa, or they know a girl who looks like her, or sure, her name is Destiny or Tanya or Anisha and if we want a lap dance they can tell us more. Rausch gets several lap dances but he never seems to learn anything.

I think it takes away from our chivalry, seeing all these naked girls. And frankly, it's frustrating. It's been months since Amanda and I had sex, and in that time I haven't exactly been "active," unless I count myself. And I can't even do *that* on this trip.

But Rausch *can* do *that*. He goes into the bathroom and does *that* any time he pleases, even with me on the other side of the door. In fact, he rubs one off at least twice a day, quickly, efficiently, morning and night, like brushing his teeth.

I wonder if this is one of the advantages of military training.

After masturbating he always wants to talk. "Once we find Lisa and I get back from Iraq, you ought to come to Spokane. Good place for old cowboys like us. You and me, we're a dying breed, little buddy."

I breathe heavily, trying not to overdo it by fake-snoring.

My only respite is blackjack. Rausch hates the game; he prefers slots. At a worn $5 table, I ask the dealer what will replace the New Frontier. He shrugs, but another player, a woman with an eye patch, tells me, "The Montreux. Swiss-themed. With a 450-foot observation wheel, like in London." The woman is from Orem, Utah, where she says she left behind an abusive husband. She reflexively touches her eye patch. Then she busts a 14 and waves her hand away. "Crazy game."

She's right. It IS crazy. All of it. And when Bobby comes back from watching bikini bullriding, I tell him so. I say we're never gonna find Lisa this way.

"You read my mind, partner," he says.

When a casino like the New Frontier is set for demolition, they don't bother cleaning the carpets anymore. The array of stains is mindblowing. "Listen," Bobby says as we walk back to our room, "I know you're getting unpatient, but we're close. I can feel it. We're making some people very nervous here."

I can't imagine anyone getting nervous here, other than me, as back in the room Rausch finishes his pushups, grabs the lotion and heads for the bathroom. It sounds like someone plunging a toilet in there.

How well do you really know your old high school friends? Twice a day, right after his beat-off ritual, Rausch does eighty pushups and eighty situps. He wears extremely tight, silky T-shirts. He picks his teeth with a pocketknife after meals and cleans his toes while he watches TV. He never seems to fully exhale. I imagine he has oxygen in his lungs from 1990. He shaves his balding head, and constantly runs his hand over the ridge on top, which looks like the drive train of a pickup. He says he'll never get married because "I don't need no ring to get pussy." But he likes to sleep with married women because "they're used to being fucked bad." I don't know if this is preferable because he plans to have bad sex with them or because his superior sex impresses them.

He seems to like having a sidekick, but is entirely uninterested in my life. He only asks about my divorce once, as we lean out over the strip in the Margaritaville bar. I'm drunk and I tell him the whole boring story: how we got married, how she put me through law school, how I dropped my end of the bargain by failing the bar. When I finish, Bobby is quiet. He stares at the flow of drunks below us, and finally says, "Bitches."

I'd go home but the thing is: I'm winning. In fact, I can't seem to lose. Blackjack mostly. But also Let it Ride. And a Texas Hold 'Em Bonus game that offers the worst table odds in Vegas, but which I keep hitting like it's a gumball machine. In fact, I'm up six-grand.

Rausch won't take a dime from me, won't let me pay for our room...nothing. "Can't let you do that, little buddy," he says. "This here's my fight."

Finally I can't take it anymore. In our room at the New Frontier I tell him that I'm leaving the next day, that we're never gonna find Lisa this way.

Bobby's hurt. He's quiet for a moment, and then he sighs, climbs out of bed and begins getting dressed.

"Look," I say, "I'm sorry but it's true."

He walks out the door. And the next thing I know he's shaking me awake by the foot, telling me to get dressed. I sit up. The clock on the nightstand reads 3:15. I ask where we're going.

"Where we should've gone from day one," he says, "the belly of the viper."

I follow Bobby Rausch downstairs. In the cab turnout we climb aboard a mini-van driven by an Estonian in a sweat suit. There are six of us behind the driver in the van—two long-haired blond guys who look like the terrorist twins from *Die Hard* (Rausch watches them carefully) and two giggling-drunk businessmen in suits. The van heads out into the desert. Rausch is uncharacteristically quiet. He stares out his window. At four in the morning, there's nothing out here but our headlights.

The brothel is called the Pony Palace. There don't appear to be any Ponies. The Palace is a small metal building with four doublewides flanking it.

We open the door and a bell rings as we stepped inside a sad little bar. The bartender draws us ten-dollar beers. I pay for the beers, the least I can do. On the ride out I assumed that Rausch had some information that Lisa was at this particular brothel, but when the sad hookers come out—summoned by the bell—Lisa isn't among them. Rausch chooses a waif: pale with dark hair, a girl who either has her original breasts or a bad plastic surgeon. He pays two hundred dollars

for an hour of "questioning." I sit on a couch next to the taller of the two businessmen, who also has cold feet.

For some reason we feel the need to explain ourselves. The tall businessman says, "My daughter is twenty-six and I just keep thinking: these girls are *someone's daughters*."

I say that I'm not over my ex-wife. Only as I say it do I realize it's the truth.

At dawn we get back into the minivan: the one sated businessmen, the one who didn't want to sleep with someone's daughter, the two satisfied blond Fabio terrorists, both of whom chose black women, me, Rausch, and his waifish whore, whose name turns out to be Meilani. She has a backpack and a suitcase.

"Can she just leave like that?" I whisper to Rausch.

"I hope to shit someone tries to stop her," Rausch says loudly to the room.

Meilani explains to me that of course she can leave; the girls are independent contractors who pay a percentage to the house. After explaining other fascinating aspects of her business on the drive back to Vegas ("You have to pay for your own STD tests."), Meilani goes to sleep on Rausch's shoulder.

Back at the New Frontier, the air conditioning is out. It's 92 degrees in our room. Meilani curls up on top of Rausch's bed in a pair of panties, reading a menu.

I pack my things and tell Bobby, Best of luck, man. You keep your head down over there. Come back in one piece.

Rausch is stunned. "You're leaving? But we're getting so close."

"Hey," Meilani says from the bed. "Can we get some quesadillas?"

I can't get a flight out until the next day, so I book my own room at The New Frontier. I stretch out on the king-sized bed. There's a telephone book in the nightstand. On a whim, I open it. First I

try Lisa Rausch. Nothing. Then I remember Rausch's stepmother's maiden name was Heitmaker. So I look up Lisa Heitmaker.

I find a listing for Heitmaker Realty.

I call the number.

She answers on two rings. "This is Lisa."

I tell her it's Nick Higgins.

She's quiet for a second and then she laughs. "Come on." She laughs again. "Did you drive down here in your Cavalier, Nick?"

We meet at the food court of the Riviera. Lisa looks older than the photo on the card. Her hair is short now, brown with streaks of blond. She's incredibly tan, and wears a loose-fitting sundress. She's also six months pregnant. The father is her new boyfriend, a Vegas developer. "It's complicated," she says. "He's older. And sort of married."

I stare at her pregnant bump and think of Amanda.

That word stoic pops into my head again.

"Why are you here," Lisa asks.

I tell her that I came to find her. That I came with Bobby.

Her smile fades. "Wait. You're here with Bobby?"

Here's how Lisa ended up on a stripper card. Years ago, she dated a sleazy photographer who convinced her to model for some topless photos. After they broke up he sold the pictures without getting her to sign a release. "You do realize the women in the pictures are models. They aren't the actual girls who come to your room, right?"

I shrug as if to say, *Of course we knew that*, although it hadn't occurred to me.

Lisa was working for a real estate broker when her picture showed up on the snapper cards. At first she was devastated. But then, with the help of her new boyfriend's lawyer, she sued. The company that produced the cards, a big L.A. advertising firm, quickly settled and Lisa invested half of the money in the boyfriend's new development project—a neighborhood of Spanish stuccos abutting the desert. She invested the bulk of the proceeds from that project into two others. It turns out Lisa is doing quite well.

I ask if she'll call Bobby and tell him she's okay. That it would mean a lot to him.

"I can't do that, Nick," she says. Then she narrows her eyes. "Wait. You don't know why our parents split up, do you?" And then she tells me the rest of the story, the part I feel stupid for not knowing. There are apparently no limits to the delusions of old cowboys. We *are* a kind of Dream Team, Bobby and me.

She was twelve. Bobby was fifteen. They were home alone that summer. It might have been perfectly natural if their parents weren't married. But when Lisa's mom found out, she freaked out and got them all into family counseling. Lisa quickly got over it, but Bobby wouldn't leave her alone. For the next four years he sulked. Stalked. Beat up her boyfriends. Followed her. After their parents divorced, Lisa had to get a restraining order against Bobby.

When we're done with lunch Lisa gives me a polite hug. "I gotta tell you," she says, "I don't miss you Montana boys much. It's like you're all retarded or something."

I call Rausch's cell phone, hoping he won't pick up, so I can just leave a message. But he answers on the first ring.

"Meilani!" he says, his voice wavering, desperate.

I say it's Nick.

"Nick? Oh. Hey." His voice becomes sturdy again. "Shit, Nick. She cleaned out my wallet. I woke up from a nap and Meilani was gone."

I have this theory, that this will be the only city that future archaeologists find, Las Vegas. The dry climate will preserve it, and teams of scientists in the year 5000 will carefully sweep and scrape away the sand to find pyramids and castles and replicas of the Eiffel Tower and the New York skyline and statues of Siegfried and Roy and stripper polls and snapper cards and these future archaeologists will recreate our entire culture based solely on this one shithole. We can

complain all we want; I'm sure not all Romans watched torture-fests at the Colosseum either, but there it is.

I meet Bobby in front of the New Frontier and give him five hundred dollars. I offer to give him more, but he says it's all he needs. In fact, he tells me, he could've easily made it home without the loan. I don't doubt it. I imagine him walking across the desert, sucking water from cactus roots and cooking cockroaches in his boiling saliva.

I tell him that I found Lisa. That she's fine, that she isn't a prostitute, that the picture on the snapper card was a mistake. I also repeat what she asked me to tell him: under no circumstances should he try to contact her. I don't mention her pregnancy.

"Good, good. Very good." He acts as if he didn't hear the part about not contacting her. "How the hell did you find her, anyway?"

I tell him about the telephone book.

He shakes his head admiringly, as if I've just described some kind of global search involving advanced GPS and DNA databases. "See," he says, "that kind of smarts is exactly why I brung you." Then he asks, "how'd she look?"

Fat, I say.

He nods and looks off into the distance. He has six more days before he has to report. He flexes. Inhales. Wrinkles his brow. "There are certain people you feel like are supposed to be in your life forever, you know? Like, there's been some mistake ..." Then he sighs. "So what do you say we go get that wife of yours back?"

That's when I tell him that Lisa was the first girl I ever slept with. And that's why I agreed to come. Because I felt I owed her.

Bobby blinks twice. "When?"

Junior year, I say. And I tell him about the open basement window.

Bobby looks like he doesn't believe me. "Those weren't even egress windows."

I choose not to debate the size of the windows.

"Well, shit," he says finally, "was everyone fucking my sister?"

Bobby Rausch shakes his head, smiles and stares down the strip. We are standing outside the New Frontier, beneath that eighty-foot sign. The street shimmers. Sweat beads Rausch's head like a newly waxed car. He looks up at the sign. "They always tear down the good shit, don't they?" he says. "It's like the end of a legacy."

It is that, I say.

Rausch holds out his hand. I'm not thrilled to touch it after all the pleasure he's given himself, but I take it and he pulls me in for a hug. "We did it, man. They said the Dream Team couldn't do it, but hell if we didn't come down here and find her."

We say goodbye then and I start back down the strip. The snappers flick their cards at me: a girl in your room in 40 minutes!

God, I ache for those girls.

A long block away, I glance back. Bobby Rausch is still standing there, beneath the New Frontier sign. He is a head taller than the crowd around him, and for just a moment he is framed against the brash skyline, staring off, maybe at something beyond the strip, beyond bikini bull-riding and dirty-girl mud-wrestling, beyond stripper cards and stoic cowboys and our generation's war, beyond even the myth of a nine-dollar steak and shrimp dinner. And then, suddenly, Bobby Rausch is on the move again, not with our old meandering strip-stroll, but with real purpose, the stride of a changed man, a man headed for a new realm of honest insight and humility, a man finally making his way out of this stale frontier of delusions and dead dreams.

Either that or he's headed for The Flamingo. **f**

Ripley Hugo

VIEW FROM THE KITCHEN

The way I heard it from the kitchen stool,
my feet hooked over a rung,
the story that gave me a shiver,
took place without love
in that field. She, tired
of ranching, took off with the hymn
of the visiting preacher, lit out
on her husband and child.
And that wasn't the last of it.
She came back years later
to the same field, land
her married daughter ranched,
to park her pink trailer house
with a view of the mountains.
And maybe she sleeps without shame
in a herd of blue lupine,
humming hymns of the road.
A plains wind can turn us,
turn us all around.

BACK HERE

If I'd known from the start
I'd return to the river bank
every year of my breath,
I might have made plans,
said yes to my bones
and the heron stalking the reed.
I could have worn the same coat
all these years, whatever weave
was fashion. No move tentative.
Could have made myself clear
in every encounter,
in every important job
I've taken. Said, I'll stay
but I'm expected back.
Could have told all my lovers,
these are not my only rhythms.
Other weaknesses include
tears at noon, fish for supper,
this river.

Annick Smith

DIVIDE

Swooping down from the Continental Divide along Lewis and Clark's trail on highway 200, I leave the evergreen forests on the west side of Rogers Pass and descend to wind struck plains. The land opens to light and space, bringing memories of the poet Richard Hugo and of the film Beth Ferris and I made about him in the summer of 1977. It began with Dick driving these roller-coaster hills in his pine-green Buick convertible. The top was down. His balding head shone in the sun. He hummed to a Benny Goodman tune played loud on the tape deck.

Hugo was close as family to me and to my husband Dave Smith. We became friends in Seattle through a circle of writers and students who radiated around Ted Roethke's manic center. Drawn by Hugo's poems about the undersides of what seemed a bland middle class city, we applauded his irony and humor. More important, Dave and Dick shared nearly identical family histories. Both had grown up poor, fatherless, and left behind by young mothers to be raised by grandparents at the margins of society. Both were self-created men of letters. Although different in looks, personality, and habits of living, they recognized their brotherhood. For me, the attraction was more visceral. I loved Dick's voice, his warmth, his words, and his laugher. It was like sexual attraction without the sex.

Dick was the reason we moved to Montana. Just back from Italy, he sat across the desk from me at the University of Washington Press checking page proofs of his poems in *Five Poets of the Pacific Northwest.*

"I've quit my job at Boeing." Dick laughed. There would be no more technical writing for this poet. "I'm going to be a Professor!"

Hugo relished that word 'professor'– trying it out with glee. "There's a job for an English instructor. How 'bout Dave applying for it?"

Dave had finished his written exams for a Ph.D. and was ready to leave wet Seattle for a more bracing climate. He got the teaching job and I quit my editor's job and off we went to Missoula in the fall of 1964.

Montana would become Hugo's final home, and ours. But before Hugo's glory days as the state's star poet and teacher, Dave and I made a film about him–a black and white voice-over documentary of Dick reading his poems in the places that 'triggered' them (he would later write a fine book about writing called The Triggering Town). We filmed him bulked up in a parka among faded plastic bouquets and fallen crosses in the Indian cemetery at Jocko; and having beers with loggers and budding writers at the Milltown Bar in Bonner; and walking "streets laid out by the insane" in the falling down milltown of Philipsburg. Drinking heavily and abandoned by his first wife, Dick was often morose, but he discovered in Montana a landscape to match his intensity. He identified with forgotten towns and the people in them: reservation Indians; broke-down dirt farmers; barmaids and miners and reprobates. And he loved the land–its back street watering holes and open prairies and rivers filled with trout.

Happiness arrived ten years later. Dick had quit drinking. He'd married Ripley Schemm–a Montana plainswoman and poet–and thru her gained a son and a daughter, a dog, horses, and a house on Rattlesnake Creek. "I am good enough to own a home," he proclaimed in "At the Cabin," a poem celebrating his life with Ripley. Home was now a positive place–a tonic for the grim, loveless, shabby little house in White Center that had shaped both his interior and exterior lives.

By the late 1970's, Hugo had achieved national recognition and was writing and publishing as never before. "He's getting full of himself," said our mutual friend Bill Kittredge, perhaps mourning the bad-boy camaraderie they'd shared and wary of the limits of domestication as well as the dangers of self-satisfaction.

"What's wrong in being happy?" I countered, knowing full well that happiness comes and happiness goes.

I decided to continue the film portrait Dave and I had crafted a dozen years earlier, this time capturing in color Dick's turn of fortune. My plan was to intermix the dark early film with the bright new one, and to shoot another section ten years later, perhaps in sepia, creating a documentary of a poet's life from the start of his career to its nearend. But I never got the chance to complete the trilogy because Dick plunged back into his boozy habits and soon after—vulnerable from chemotherapy that had gotten him through lung cancer—was stricken with leukemia.

When I called him in his Seattle hospital room, we talked about the World Series and he joked about the color of his skin. "You know the purple cow?—I'd rather see than be one'—Well that's me. I'm that purple cow."

Dick died of leukemia on October 22 of 1982. He left us too soon, but at least he'd tasted that bite of contentment. He rides with me now, these cascading grasslands made personal by visions of his round head and furrowed brow, the sensuous mouth set somewhere between grimace and grin, the bear-like body at rest. If he were with me in the flesh we'd stop at the crossroads to Augusta and have a Beam ditch at the Bowman's Corners bar. Dave and I rarely drank in bars before we met Dick. He inducted us into the honky-tonk life. It was a life I never fully embraced—my nature is too controlling, my fears too deep, my responsibilities too many, and my metabolism wrong. But sitting with Hugo belly-up to those ramshackle Montana bars I understood why life gets wet in this dry region

Dick's voice has stayed with me—riveting, deep, rocketing—and today it seems to be coming from the grass. I think of Walt Whitman, whose Leaves of Grass in an illustrated Book of the Month Club edition entranced me for the first time when I was twelve. I read it cover to cover on my parents' bed in the glassed-in sun porch of our Chicago apartment, whispering the verses out loud. I did not realize that the spell of language would shape the rest of my life.

Now I open the car window to the prairie wind, reciting the words of "Driving Montana," as alive to me as Hugo's spirit.

> The day is a woman who loves you. Open.
> Deer drink close to the road and magpies
> Spray from your car.....

If the poem were mine, the enamored day would be a man. Perhaps a child or dog. "No matter," Dick would say, "It's being loved...Loving...That's what counts."

This afternoon is sun gold. The Rocky Mountain Front rears sharp as a pen-and-ink drawing on the horizon west. The pale grasslands are newly-risen. And, yes Dick, Open. I want to shout, "Goodbye life-as-usual, I'm truckin!" **f**

Terese Coe

APPROACHING THE END OF THE PRAIRIE FROM THE EAST, 1965

The road, the road, and going
through fields of yellow crowned

with haystacks, westward blowing,
and we were outward-bound.

In mysteries unmastered,
the surface fell away

from bluffs and broken pasture
to badlands' grizzled clay-

a mineral salt and mordant,
a phosphorescent hush

where nothing was discordant.
That streak of blue, that blush.

Craig E. Buchner

AN INTERVIEW WITH THOM JONES

JANUARY 7, 2010

Thom Jones was raised in Aurora, Illinois, and briefly attended the University of Hawaii and later the University of Washington, graduating in 1970. He received his MFA from the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop in 1973.

Jones served in the Marine Corps but was discharged before his unit was sent to Vietnam. His experiences, including the suicide of his father in a mental institution, were important sources of material in his fiction. After college, Jones worked as a copywriter for a Chicago advertising agency and later as a janitor. He was "discovered" at the age of 47 by the fiction editors of *The New Yorker*. The praise was immediate, as Thom Jones would become one of the masters of American short fiction.

His first collection of short stories, *The Pugilist at Rest*, published in 1993, was a National Book Award finalist. His other books include *Cold Snap* (1995) and *Sonny Liston Was a Friend of Mine* (1999). Recently Thom Jones has written scripts for feature films. He currently resides in Olympia, Washington.

CRAIG E. BUCHNER

First off, Thom, because we're doing our regional issue, I want to ask how you got to Washington, because you were born in Illinois, right?

THOM JONES

Born and raised in Aurora, Illinois with the assumption that every city in America was "exactly" the same as Aurora except for cities in Florida where there were palm trees. I think people go through this phase once they realize Santa Claus is a hoax. Maybe half the people I knew in school had made the 40-mile trip to Chicago. I was told there was a big lake in Chicago, like really huge but I didn't see it until I was in high school. I didn't leave the state until I joined the marines and went to boot camp. My best buddy there was from Seattle and after he died in Vietnam I established a pen pal relationship with his girlfriend. I stopped to see her in Seattle en route to the University of Hawaii. We continued to write one another and soon there were Honolulu-Seattle shuttle flights. We were married in Seattle, and I finished a degree in English lit at the University of Washington. There is a Vietnam War memorial in Olympia. I sometimes stop to read my friend's name there on dog walks. It's always very emotional.

BUCHNER

How do you think Seattle changed you as a person or more importantly, as a writer?

JONES

The people in Seattle were congenial. My wife, Sally, and I lived in the Capitol Hill neighborhood, and we took frequent walks to Volunteer Park with me yammering about the prize-winning masterpiece fiction I was going to write. We had cosmopolitan friends, and that was something new for me. It made me feel shy.

Seattle's such a beautiful city. We had a view of the Space Needle looking out the front window. I began to relax as much is possible for a live wire guy. The University of Washington has a first rate writing program. I studied playwriting under the poet, David Wagoner. Markham Harris taught a three quarter course in novel writing. When I signed up for it, I assumed that you actually had to finish a novel in that time, and in a fever of excitement I did. I was writing

short stories, plays, and taking a full load of academic courses. It was absolutely beautiful, a very a happy time for me. The hollow shell of my life began to fill with meaning. Oh boy, a novel, oh boy!

BUCHNER

Had you been writing much before you came to Washington State?

JONES

I started young drawing cartoons in grade school. They looked like the William Hogarth depiction of "Gin Alley." I wrote my first short story at twenty-one. I wrote "Wipe Out" a month later and several decades later it appeared in Esquire. I was at the University of Hawaii and was writing regularly. In Seattle I really cut loose. I put out a huge amount of stuff.

BUCHNER

I recently reread "I Love You, Sophie Western," and I'm curious how that story came to be?

JONES

Hubert Selby Jr. was a god to me. I wrote that story just after reading *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. I didn't "intend" to write a blowjob story, it just turned out that way. It almost got me tossed out of Iowa City. I was never a meticulous plotter, things just seemed to happen. I later met Selby in West Hollywood while they were filming *Requiem for a Dream*. Selby was the nicest guy in the world. I wrote a piece on him for *Men's Journal*.

BUCHNER

Your characters often talk very straightforwardly, sometimes brash and forceful, in a voice that seems both hardened yet poetic. There's also an authenticity in the voice, and I'm wondering where these characters come from or how they come to you?

JONES

My characters are composites of people I've known. My stories are fragments of the things I've done, witnessed, or heard. I write without conscious intent. I am often uncertain as to what surprising events might unfold. That's really fun until you turn 46 and still haven't sold anything. Only when I gave up thinking that anything I wrote would ever sell did I begin to write the sort of story that I—me personally—would most like to read. I began delivering stories straight from the heart. Put your characters in trouble on page one and don't give them time to find a soft spot on the canvas.

BUCHNER

You wrote six novels that you couldn't get published. Did you ever want to just give up?

JONES

There are scenes from Larry Brown's short story, "92 Days" where the alcoholic writer, Leon Barlow, retrieves rejected manuscripts from his huge backcountry mailbox, which is just chock full of them six days a week. Comic book armloads of rejections. It says everything you need to know about an unpublished writer's plight.

BUCHNER

Your works have been praised, yet you've stopped writing literature and have moved into screenplays. How come?

JONES

As a short story writer I got offers to write any number of things. Once I flew to Tasmania in quest of the Tasmanian tiger for *National Geographic Adventurer*. I had a great time, but then I was staring at a six-month term paper. You have to learn how to say no, but I started getting calls from movie stars. A half-hour on the phone you can talk me into doing anything. I remain a simpleton in that regard.

BUCHNER

Drugs, violence, womanizing, and fast cars seem staples in many of your stories. What draws you to write about these things specifically?

JONES

That's a tough question. I suppose I've seen enough of these things to write about them. I gravitate to the dark side of life. I am at the farthest reaches of that continuum. My characters seldom win their battles.

BUCHNER

Reviewers have praised your work as "extraordinary," "remarkable," as having "more juice, and more hard-won clarity, than a first-rate one by almost anybody else," and "genius served up in its purest form yet." How do you respond to that?

JONES

I've gotten good reviews. They don't seem altogether real to me, but the negative ones do. One critic, reviewing *Cold Snap* wrote, "Read this book and never have another happy thought for the rest of your life."

BUCHNER

Do you feel like your early praise has put a lot of pressure on you to create at the same level that you once had?

JONES

That shouldn't be too hard. I read my old stuff and see nothing but dark chasms and colossal blunders.

BUCHNER

Do you think that early success was luck?

JONES

My first published story appeared in *The New Yorker* and created a small sensation, launching an O.K. career. That I was a forty-seven year old janitor with no literary agent—just some guy who delivered an over-the-transom job to the illustrious magazine only added to the mystique. I won't deny it, I was pretty fucking lucky. **f**

INVASION

The soil in Central Oregon is acidic, sandy, coarse, high in pumice, low in humus. You would think nothing could grow here, nothing but cheat grass, sagebrush, rabbit brush, juniper trees, ponderosas, lodgepoles. But hundreds of miles of canals provide water for tens of thousands of acres. Boys in Wrangler jeans trudge through the fields all day, appearing like trapeze artists as they carry long wobbly irrigation pipes, locking them in place, sending silvery arcs of water through the air to keep the alfalfa green, to fight the blighted yellow found naturally here.

Other things grow, too, given the right conditions. Into this soil—this dry, unforgiving soil—the larvae of the Pandora moth drops like a seed. And begins to pupate.

In the late 1980's, the population of Bend was 18,000. There are now, in the metro area, more than 200,000 people. Some of them come from places like Portland and Seattle—but most of them come from California.

The men wear Izod golf shirts and Ecco leather shoes with no socks. They part their hair and stink of cologne and smile white toothy smiles when talking about how fast the greens are at Widgi Creek golf course. The women wear white pants and bright blouses and carry small black purses from which they are constantly withdrawing pink cell phones. Their brightly blond hair appears flattened out of gold. All of them drive Saabs, Audis, Volvos, BMWs, Land Rovers that have never left pavement.

Pandora epidemics occur every twenty to thirty years. Sometimes chipmunks dig up the pupae—sometimes the soil is too hot—sometimes birds and insects and parasites feast of the young larvae.

But sometimes the larvae grow undisturbed. Sometimes the Pandora break through the soil and probe the air and shake off the pumice that dusts their bodies and begin to feast.

My friends and I wore tight jeans, big belt buckles, sharp-pointed boots. We would tear around on dirt bikes, four-wheelers. We would listen to Alan Jackson and Garth Brooks and Tim McGraw. We would move irrigation pipe and clean out horse stalls and mend barbed-wire fences for money to go to the movies, buy Coca Cola and baseball cards. Our families drove pickups. Our fathers had skin as brown and creased as an old work-glove, and during hunting season, we would follow them into the woods—and we would emerge with bucks draped over our shoulders and bleeding down our backs. From the trees in our front yards we would hang the gutted carcasses to skin, and they would shift in the breeze like strange ornaments.

Our governor once said, "We welcome you to visit our state, but please don't plan to move here." Billboards along the Interstate said the same. Our parents didn't like the Californians, so we didn't either. Our clothes and our cars didn't match theirs. They brought with them wine shops, clothing boutiques, white-linen restaurants that served sushi and arugula salads that cost too much. Golf courses spread into the desert like green oil slicks. Expensive housing developments rose up overnight with names like Brasada Ranch and Broken Top.

The caterpillars—at first small and black-bodied and bristling with hairs—grow as fat and long as shotgun shells. Their color fades to a yellowish green and sharp spines rise along their backs. They gnaw the needles of pine trees down to stubble—chew the terminal buds off—so that great swaths of forest appear burned-out, skeletal.

They pulsed along trunks and branches, fell all around us like some poisonous fruit. Certain sections of road grew slick with their burst bodies and cars would lose their traction, spin out. I remember racing

along a bike path with a buddy, maneuvering the bike constantly, not to avoid the caterpillars that littered the asphalt, instead seeking them out, splattering them beneath my wheels so that their guts decorated my legs.

We shoved bananas up the tailpipes of Land Rovers. We dragged rocks along the side of BMWs. We used a metal saw to hack the hood ornaments off the noses of Mercedes. We hauled a port-a-potty three miles in the bed of a pickup and dropped it off on the porch of a sprawling hillside home.

We started with M80s—then upgraded to quarter-sticks of dynamite bought off the Warm Springs Indian Reservation. We would drive into the rich neighborhoods at night and we would light the quarter-stick fuses and shove them in mailboxes and sprint away and breathlessly watch the explosion, the twisted snarl of metal. And then we would go tearing off into the night, laughing.

One time we shoved a plastic mailbox full of paper and lit it on fire and stood around watching as it melted, as the mouth of it closed like a dying trout.

The caterpillars became moths, and the moths were wine-colored and as big as two hands brought together at the thumbs. They fluttered through forests, through city streets, thousands of them. We would chase them down with tennis rackets and swat them from the air. We would hit them with our cars, and their feathery antennae and powdery wings and yellowish guts would smear our grills and windshields.

One time, during one of my baseball games, a night game, the moths swarmed the spotlights and threw their black swirling color across the diamond. They lighted on our gloves and our helmets, flexing their wings. We couldn't see the ball—and when my friend was struck in the mouth by a pitch, the umpire called off the game on account of moths.

When I go back to Bend now, I don't recognize it. I get lost driving around. There are roads where there were none before. There are roundabouts where there were once intersections. Acres of sagebrush have given way to big box stores. The sawmill my grandfather designed is long-gone. So is a ratty baseball diamond I used to play on. Property values have skyrocketed—and the tax base has risen—and many have been forced to move, to make way for those who can afford to live here. The Old Mill district—once exactly that, a rotten collection of abandoned buildings—is now crowded with million-dollar condos, an REI, a sixteen-screen cineplex. The golf courses are legion.

The last time I was there, January, I trudged into a coffee shop to warm up. Ahead of me in line stood a teenager. He was wearing sunglasses, designer aviators. His hair was bleached, gelled up in a fauxhawk. His jeans looked European and his North Face parka might have cost as much as my monthly mortgage. He was part of the new Bend—he was the kind of guy my buddies and I might have shoved, tripped, yanked an ear, bloodied a lip.

He ordered a bubble tea. I do not know what bubble tea is, but that is what he ordered. The girl behind the counter said, "I'm so sorry—we're out of bubbles." He sighed heavily and then shoved his way out the door and into the cold.

Later, when I drove through downtown, I saw him crossing the road ahead of me. His parka was fat and segmented and the way he strolled along so lazily gave him the appearance of a caterpillar. For one wild moment, for old time's sake, I thought about slamming my boot on the accelerator, splattering him beneath my tires. Then I realized that this was no longer my town, but his. That I was in fact the intruder—that I no longer knew this place—a town founded by millers and ranchers, where coyotes howled all night and jacked-up pickup trucks growled all day. The mountains and the rivers were still here, but the very essence of the place had otherwise been smeared away as easily as the dust off a moth's wing. **f**

EVERLY'S FIRST WAVE

Everly Tillis had fallen in love twice.

The first time—he was twelve, only three months in California from Inkom, Idaho—was with the act of standing on a tapered length of polyurethane foam swathed in fiberglass and resin and moving along the face of an ocean wave, the fickle, haughty, beguiling, terrifying, heavenly, indifferent, ever-mutable ocean.

The never-ending ocean. As his uncle had once told him as they stood on its edge, looking west, "She's a big ol' thing. And we're not even seeing the half of it."

The brand-new-to-Everly ocean.

Everly, the dreamy boy, son of Fresco and Olive, owners of Inkom's finest restaurant, the Bar-B-Que Roundup. Though Inkom—Stinkum, his older sister called it—was dusty and hot and hazy in the summer and dusty and cold and hazy in the winter and ceaselessly windy, he didn't mind. Nor did he mind—as his sister did—the fact that they lived in a three-bedroom stucco ranch house at the end of an unpaved driveway with a scratchy lawn and neighbors' barking dogs. Nor did he find chainlink fences ugly or care in the least that they didn't have an Insinkerator.

Easy-going, even-tempered and content—his sister said he was a perfect Ida-idiot—he played catch and army man and, later, wandered the nearby hills with a slingshot, following older boys with their BB rifles, searching for varmints and small birds. He did his restaurant chores—stacking bucked wood for the ravenous pit fires, later, tending the fires, re-stocking and washing pots and pans—ably, with neither reluctance nor enthusiasm. He managed decent grades in school—

unlike his straight A sister—which he attended with a generally absent mind, no large ambitions, and only the rarest of complaints.

When Fresco and Olive inherited, from one of Fresco's old Navy buddies who died unexpectedly, another restaurant, twenty miles north of Los Angeles, Everly was neither pleased nor displeased, anxious or excited.

Everly and Fresco headed south, through skies thick with smoke from forest fires, in a rented truck, with Gen and Olive following in the station wagon, pulling a small trailer. Three days later, they dropped down El Cajon grade and entered the greater Los Angeles basin. The sky hung low and wide and hazy. Everly, who had never seen smog, wondered aloud if forest fires were burning nearby.

On the Christmas morning Everly fell in love the first time, a portly metal-sided Ford station wagon with the tail of a surfboard sticking out the rear window and "Pagan Lover" painted in wedding text on each front door, rolled into the dusty restaurant parking lot, jumped to a stop.

Everly's second cousin approached, told Everly to hop in.

Ernest Trayne, as a child, had had an extremely large head and a ferociously skinny body.

"Looks like a hippopotamus that forgot to swallow," Ernie's dad, a little drunk, had said at a family reunion, looking at his stick-ribbed six-year

old son.

The name stuck and, over the years, had received its share of mild laughs. Then, during his sophomore year of high school, still-skinny Hippo had begun growing. Daily, inexplicably, he became wider and wider.

By the age of 19, as he was that warm winter's day, Hippo had resigned himself to going through life as a round-faced, thin-haired, pear-shaped, inglorious-looking adult with a cruel and hideous boyhood tag attached to him firmly as an elbow.

Not least among his many sorrows was the conviction that his nickname was largely responsible for his ongoing failures with women.

Years later, Hippo, in his cups, would tell Everly that there had been times, during what he called his formative years—between sixteen and forty—that he would have given one of his limbs to be known as Ernie.

"Or at least a digit or two," he had said. "Though in the light of day I'd have probably drawn the line at a thumb."

Everly settled wordlessly in the spacious, pot-bellied vehicle. Out the lot they roared, onto the Pacific Coast Highway. Hippo placed a stack of .45s on the thick spindle of a record player sitting on a wooden platform in the middle of the floorboard. Quickly, the bottom disc fell to the turntable and the tone arm swung and gently dropped on the waiting vinyl surface. A song Everly had never heard before began playing: scratchy, loud, somehow stirring.

"Know that one?"

Everly shook his head.

"R & B. Rhythm and blues. No rock and roll, which is just another example of racial injustice—black genius ripped off by white sharpsters."

"You don't know what I'm talking about, do you?" Hippo said. "Your education, double-cousin, is about to begin."

Hippo told Everly he was halfway through freshman year at UCLA—he lived in the dorm for the time being, had spending money, excellent work habits. That's what would get him into and through law school—grades, and a can-do attitude. That was his goal, the law. Or something to do with helicopters. He liked helicopters. Helicopters were bitchen'. Chicks dug helicopters.

Everly watched the ocean out the window. He liked the billowy ride, the hugeness of the car. It was like traveling in a living room. Idaho, his uncle had told him, had once been ocean. The thought made his head spin.

He might hang his shingle in Ventura, Hippo went on, or maybe south, at a place called Dana Point. Had Everly heard of it? One of the best places for chicks on the coast.

Hippo stopped at a small market. Bought a six-pack of beer, a Coke for Everly, a couple of packets of Cornnuts. Hippo opened a bottle on an opener screwed into the underbelly of the dash. All the while they drove, records dropped, spun, skipped, wailed. When the stack had played, Hippo pulled over, turned it otherside up.

The highway ran hard by a wide flat beach. Scattered groups lay on blankets on the sand under the warm winter sun. Twice they stopped at a light, waited for pedestrians. Everly couldn't believe people were going to the ocean on Christmas Day. Two- and three- and foursomes of girls. Shave-and-a-haircut on the horn. Hippo leaning out the window, waving. HEY! IT'S ME, ERNIE! Quizzical looks, the occasional tentative wave. Laughter.

"They love it," Hippo said. "Take notes."

Hippo honked, waved whenever he saw someone walking along the highway with a surfboard. If he saw another car with surfboards—at a light, a cross street, he gave him a big thumb-up salute.

"Surfin' daddy," he said.

Hippo drank surreptitiously, steadily, pointed vaguely here and there, at driveways on the ocean side of the road, macadam strips that seemed to drop off into thin air. So and so's house.

"You don't know what I'm talking about, do you? Movie stars. The rich. The pie-owners. Communists realize that everyone wants a piece of the pie. But they also see the big problem: not everyone has the price of a plate—let alone what's on it."

Did Everly know what a communist was? Did he? Tell him?

Everly had a notion, something about Russia. Bongo drums. Castro. Tortured nuns.

"You've been talking to your old man. What I'm gonna say stays between us. You swear to God? Swear to God? Communists? You're looking at one."

Everly turned. Hippo's eyes were bright.

"Been one since mid-terms. UCLA is thick with us. Listen up. There are two kinds of people in this world. Communists believe

there is enough pie for everyone, you just need to slice it right, which is into more or less equal-sized pieces. Of course you might have to tighten your belt a little. Details are still being worked out.

"Then there are capitalists—that's your dad and mine and almost everyone in this country. They aren't evil, just misguided. They believe that some people should have bigger pieces than others. Entire pies in some cases. Well, there might be something to that. Emphasis on MIGHT. Maybe the people who bake the pies, running around in a hot kitchen on a nice day like this, say, maybe they should have bigger pieces. Or maybe the apple pickers. But capitalists believe THEY should get the biggest piece and all they've done is stand around watching every other poor son of a bitch do the baking. Sound fair?

"Of course it doesn't. I'm simplifying. Another thing—in this part of the world you MUST know Spanish. As soon as you get to junior high, sign up for Spanish. Can't start palabra-ing too soon.

"Vámonos, ya es tarde. Las clases comienzan en cinco minutos. Las olas no son grandes hoy. Or maybe that's no están grandes."

Hippo began pointing out surf spots: Hubcaps, County Line, Worm's, Zuma, Point Dume, Zero's, Big Rock, Mommy's Mystery, Latigo.

A white pier came in sight, a scimitar of sand. Hippo went a half-mile further, pulled into a gas station and headed back north, toward the pier.

"Malibu," he said. They weren't going to stop there. No way. Malibu was ruined.

"See those guys out there?" he said, pointing to some surfers. "They're runnin' idiots. Posers. Malibu is a summer spot. They're there for the reputation. Moondoggie my droopy ass. Gidget. Piss on her. Oh, she's a beautiful wave. But...everyone thinks they're gonna get in her britches—Sandra Dee's, Malibu's, but you can't even get her in a room by herself. She's been forced into white slavery. Ten million people in California, and eleven million of 'em surf. Most of 'em here. She's condemned to pulling a train for half of Los Angeles

County. Paddle out for a wave or two? You won't be getting sloppy seconds, you'll be getting sloppy twenty-second thousands."

The Latigo girls were bitchen', Everly learned. Not as bitchen' as the Santa Monica girls. Not as bitchen' as the Malibu girls—but at least Latigo girls didn't walk with their noses in the air.

Everly, Hippo told him, had to get down to Dana Point. The girls there were savage bitchen'. Bitchener than even Laguna girls. Hippo had heard San Diego girls were the bitchenest of all.

Despite the record player, and Hippo's excited voice, Everly fell asleep.

When he woke up Hippo was still talking.

"That's just how society is structured, Ev. Rich and poor. Poor don't have anything and want at least something. Rich have the rest and want more. You should have seen the chicks we just passed. Bitchenoso. WOOMAN WITH THE BOOZAM! Food is a metaphor. Rich people buy it, poor people make it. That's where your Spanish comes in.

They pulled off the highway in Ventura. Bumped over railroad tracks, past a collection of stables, a oval horse track and white grandstand, bigger and cleaner than the fairgrounds in Pocatello.

Hippo turned right onto a rutted dirt road, pulled over, ran behind the grandstand and pissed. He made a u-turn pulled into a haphazard line of cars nosed into a rise of sand banked by scattered bushes and driftwood. To their left, some shacks.

"You know how to swim?"

Everly nodded, wary.

"Shit. You didn't bring any trunks did you?"

Everly shook his head.

"Never go anywhere in California without your trunks. Give me your jeans."

Everly did, and sat shyly in the front seat, his tee-shirt pulled over his Penney's bluestripes, while Hippo rummaged around the back of the station wagon. He reached for Everly's jeans through the window,

then pressed them against a length of driftwood and cut through them at the knees with a large knife, threw them back through the window to Everly, and pulled the long, milky green surfboard from the car.

He laid it on the ground, returned to the tailgate, brought back a square of paraffin, got on his knees, rubbed it in furious circles the length of the lumpy, dusty deck, threw the wax back in the car, picked up the board, wedged it under his arm and began picking his way toward the ocean.

Everly followed.

The sand was yellow, large-grained, littered with cans. A dozen people—some in trunks, some in jeans and tee-shirts, some wearing black, tight-fitting skindiver wetsuit jackets with beavertails hanging in back—stood in small groups along the long curving stretch, marked by a spider-legged pier downcoast and nothing but sand and pebbly stones upcoast. In the water a loose group of twenty or so sat or lay on their surfboards, looking toward the horizon.

The wind blew softly toward land. The sky was bright blue. The water dazzling.

"It's probably better up north but Rincon is as crowded as Malibu. This'll do. You said you could swim, right?"

Everly nodded again, afraid to speak. He hoped what he thought was going to happen wasn't.

"I'd go out but my shoulder is completely screwed up." Hippo had mentioned this several times.

"Lie on the board. Put your head about here. Or kneel." He motioned a few feet back from one soft-pointed end of the board.

"Keep the skeg in back—that's the skeg—just like a boat rudder. Paddle like you're swimming. Angle south through the whitewater and then turn toward those other guys. Shit, you won't get past the whitewater. Just paddle out and turn the thing around. Look behind you. When you see the soup coming at you, start paddling. Watch out for other surfboards. Hold on."

Hippo took his tennis shoes off.

Soon they were standing knee-deep in cold, moving water.

"Get on."

Everly did. On his knees. The surfboard wobbled in the water like stiff jello.

"Ready?"

Everly felt the board move quickly over a wale of whitewater. He looked over his shoulder. Hippo, baggy corduroys wet to the knees, shooed him. Beer bubbles rose from the bottle he held in his right hand.

"Paddle!" Hippo shouted. "Breathe through your nose! Let the soup catch you! Let the ocean do the work! *Vaya con dios!*"

Years later, Hippo—rounder, sadder and richer, his hair, which refused to vanish completely, laying across his scalp in dispirited spirals, his populist instincts sputtering but never guttering, his heart broken dozens of times, always too anxious, too eager and clearly too desperate, too hungry, to ever, it seemed, attract a woman for long, and long after he had given up the fight to become Ernie—large-hearted, jolly-on-the-outside, loyal, honest, chronically masturbating Hippo, good old Hippo, would tell and retell the story of that December afternoon of unremarkable, wind-chopped waves.

In Hippo's retelling, he was no longer just a lonely guy who hadn't surfed for months, who carried his board in the car to attract girls, who had not minded at all taking a gangly, tow-headed youngster for a day's outing mainly because he was perving for chicks and he knew that chicks liked young, gangly, tow-headed kid cousins—it made the older guy seem somehow safe. It was like walking down the street with a puppy dog.

Nor was Hippo—in his retellings—a guy who after yet another futile trawl for women, had pushed that gangly youngster who had never surfed, let alone stepped into the ocean, out into the disorganized Ventura afternoon sea to get him out of his hair for a while, a guy who had grown tired of hearing himself talk, who had drunk too much beer, who needed a nap, whose only friend was a second cousin he barely knew.

He was instead, in these re-tellings, a pretty good surfer in his own right—nothing like Everly had become, of course—with a completely wrecked shoulder, product of a wipeout on a big day at Redondo Breakwater, who wasn't interested in going out anyway in that small stuff, who would have been bored out there in those shaggy, blown-out, flopsy-bunny waves, who had been astounded when he found out the tow-headed son of his father's cousin had never been in the ocean, even though he lived right across the highway from it.

No, he was someone who had sensed the kid's interest in the ocean. Just a hunch, of course. A guy who stood guard on the beach and watched in amazement as Everly managed to paddle to blue water like someone was guiding him, like he had been out there all his life—through line after line of foamy, broken waves, which pushed him downcoast and, once, off the deck of the surfboard and who, somehow—Hippo had never seen such a thing on someone's first days surfing—got back on the board, paddled toward the pack of waiting surfers, then—and how could he know when to swivel the board around?—paddled for a wave. Not a broken wave, but a humping one, bigger than other waves that day—for Everly was far outside the normal take-off area, fearful of being caught by another surge of whitewater but not wanting to disappoint his older cousin—though his paddling was more furious than effective and he threw great sprays of water aft instead of digging deep with each stroke, though all of this was against him, he, Hippo, was damned if his kid cousin hadn't caught that wave just like he knew what he was doing.

"My good looks and his dumb luck," he would joke.

Hippo, in the retelling, saw the youngster jerk with amazement after he caught the wave, after the wave caught him. Saw him stop paddling and grip the rails of the board. Saw him somehow push himself standing. Standing on a surfboard! Riding a wave! Screaming with such joy Hippo, standing far off on dirty sand, could hear him. Screaming and riding the surfboard toward shore and continuing to scream as the wave steepened and tippled over onto itself, dribbled foam down its face. Screaming and riding until the nose of the board

finally dipped under the water's surface and sent the boy flying forward.

Hippo watched as Everly broke through the surface with a splash and a splutter and stood in knee-deep water and turned to face the ocean over which he had just traveled. Everly picked up the surfboard, clumsily—it was pivoting on its fin, which had run aground—and dragged it, its tail leaving a skinny furrow in the sand, then scraping on the low round rocks, back toward the ocean.

The more Hippo told the story about his cousin, the famous surfer, the more he liked telling the story. He never told it the same way twice, but whenever he told the story—to the woman who looked interesting at this bar or that, or the client he was trying to impress at dinner or, more often than he realized, after too many drinks, to Everly himself—there was one constant: Hippo Trayne's steadfast modesty.

"I had no idea. I was just there," he would say. If it hadn't have been him, he said, it would have been someone else, somewhere else.

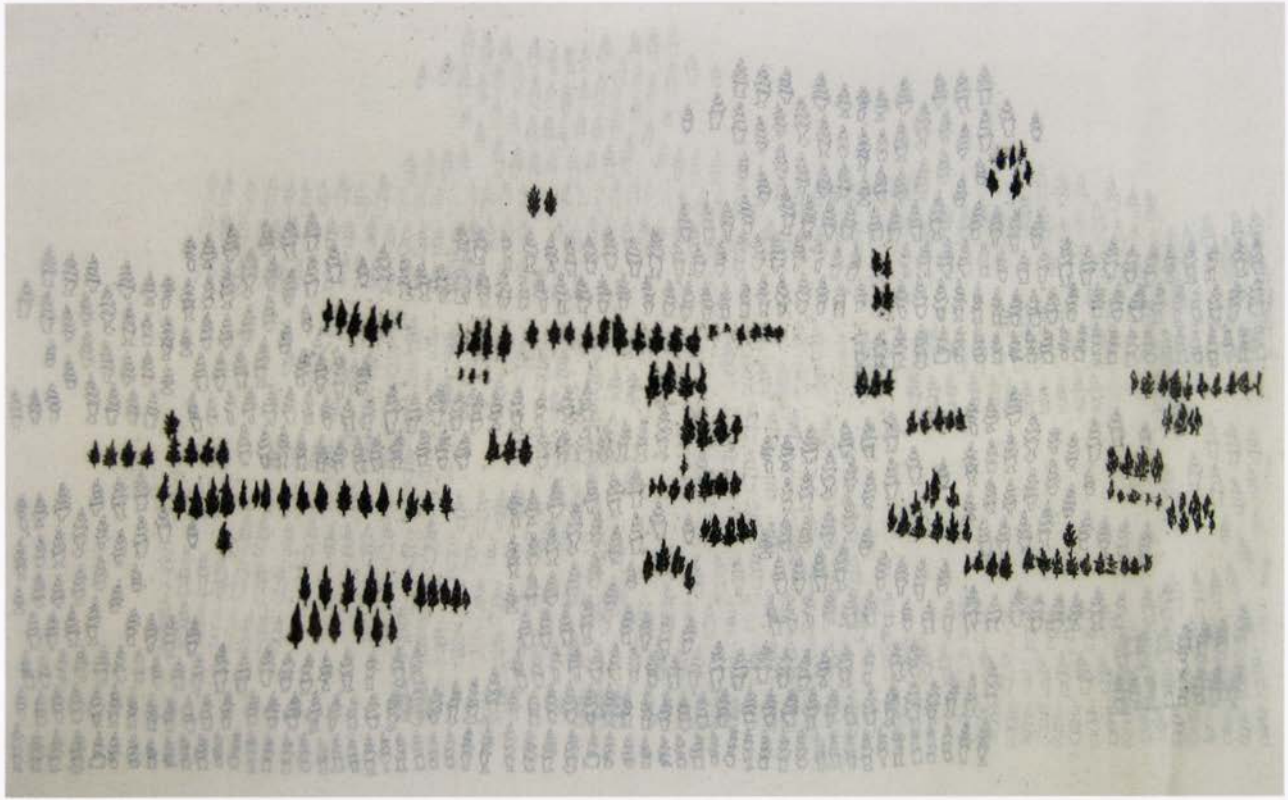
"Think of it: Mozart would have, sooner or later, sat down at a piano. He would have been walking down some European street and smelled a piano. Or maybe that was Beethoven."

Anyway, he, Hippo, just happened to be the guy who saw a piano and said, "Hey, give it a try, kid. Whattaya got to lose?"

Everly never contradicted his cousin, no matter how many times he heard him tell the story, even though he never considered himself a Beethoven or Mozart. Not even close. He was just a kid from Idaho with a knack for riding waves. Okay, a gift. Someone who would grow from being a gangly, tow-headed boy into a muscular, shockingly tow-headed man, whose pictures would appear in surfing magazines and who, one day, many years after that afternoon session in Ventura, which left him shaking with exhaustion and sunburned—for he went back in the water again and again with Hippo's prodding—and with bright angry rashes under his arms from paddling, and on his knees and on his chest from rubbing against the sandy wax, and a three-inch

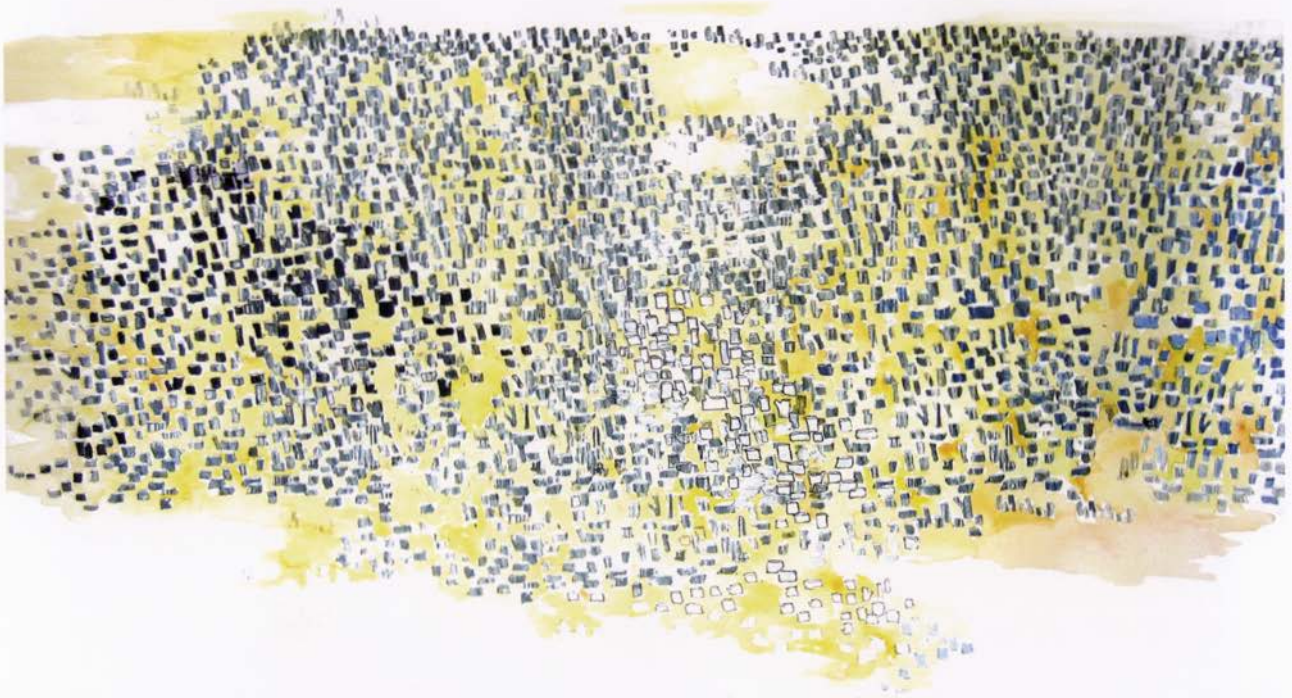
tear in his left calf when he tried to grab his runaway board with his legs, and a bad bump on the back of his head when his board hit him (these misadventures taking place while Hippo slept on the beach), would find himself at an obscure reef in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, falling in love for the second time in his life, this time with a jug-eared, long-legged smart skinny woman named Audrey Slaughter, who hailed from Idaho, of all the places. **f**

Catherine Chauvin, *Big Burn*, 2010



Catherine Chauvin, *Black Trees vs. Blue Topiaries*, 2009

Catherine Chauvin, *Untitled*, 2010



Catherine Chauvin, *Stump Battles (after Ucello)*, 2008

Buddy Levy

DEFENDING DRY FLY RANCH

One spring morning when I was a teen my father walked me across our Idaho ranch, out through barbed-wire fences and irrigation ditches, to the heron rookery at Silver Creek. We hid beneath towering cottonwoods watching the parent-birds sail from the nests seeking food for their young, their arched necks dipping with flight. When they returned, craws tight with meal, we could hear the keen chirps of the chicks go quiet as the parents fed them. From my earthen and sagebrush blind at the base of the tall cottonwoods the nests looked tiny and distant, just thatched saucer shapes against the skyline.

I told my father how high they appeared to me, and he paused, nodding. Then he said, "when she thinks they're ready, the mother coaxes them out of the nest—with her beak."

I pictured an innocent bird, frail and unsteady, plummeting to the ground beside me.

"What if they can't fly?" I asked.

He grinned, as if he'd expected such a question.

"They either learn in a hurry, or they don't," he said, and he turned, hoofing back toward the log cabin.

At the time I wasn't prepared to contemplate the rights of passage that parents impose upon their young, but in my later teens, at the onset of my father's retirement, I was for a short time handed the reins to the ranch. I know now that the responsibility he offered was to test me, to see whether I would learn to fly or not.

Then, almost as if by design, my first tough ranch decisions and duties unfolded before me. Duties carried out by my hands, hands directed by the will of an owner, the will of a father.

We had a henhouse, a converted outbuilding set up on a knoll above the old farmhouse. Far enough to wake you in the morning on your way to get eggs, scuffing along the dirt road, slapping skeeters. One morning I pushed the pine door open and as light spilled across the floor I sensed the sharpness of skunk and saw the hens huddled in a corner. A little skunk appeared, an adolescent, with whiskers like a kitten's and egg on its face.

"Get rid of it," my father said on the phone. "He'll eat every last egg."

We didn't really need the eggs, of course. My father was a retired physician now playing at rancher, and raising farm-fresh eggs was part of the game. It is true that we grew barley that we sold to Coors (perhaps sometimes even for a small profit), and moving miles of pipe through the dank, mosquito-infested grain was one of my jobs, but I always understood that our lives and livelihoods did not depend on the ranch. Reluctantly, I knelt on the feather-strewn wood slats and investigated. I discovered a family of skunks, five or six at least, under the floorboards.

If I even considered the idea of trying to relocate them, I quickly realized that was impractical. I was alone out there. I walked to the shed and saw the rusted iron muskrat traps hanging from sixteen-penny nails. I took one down, compressed the side springs, opened the jaws of the leg-hold trap and imagined the snap, then decided against it. What does one do with a trapped skunk spraying everywhere? Instead I grabbed the pellet rifle and headed back to the henhouse, pumping as I walked.

The little stinker was near the door, ducking underneath when the pellet struck him. He fell onto his hind legs and rolled over. The maimed animal clawed the dirt and I reloaded and pumped quickly, wanting to get it over with.

Cradling a skunk in a spade gives you time to see the beauty in the animal, white stripe painted down the back straight as a highway line. I walked to the clearing with my head low, wind brushing the skunk's hair. Spooning it onto the dirt I could not ignore the tiny black pads of its feet, the oily sheen of the coat in the morning light. The digging was easy and the hole kept growing and enlarging, becoming darker and deeper until I felt like I could have climbed in there myself.

One by one, five small skunks surfaced from beneath the henhouse. None ever sprayed me, though most squirted, their backs arched against the sting of the pellet. The hole I dug became a grave I marked with a railroad stake and a big flat piece of obsidian as black as a skunk's coat.

It had to do with ownership. Or the idea of ownership, anyway. This was his ranch, and these were his hens, and pests like skunks broke down the order he believed he had imposed on the place. Never mind the skunks' prior claim to the land: they weren't supposed to be there in the henhouse and I was charged with ridding the ranch of them. The skunks were to my father the animal equivalent of a weed—something growing where you do not want it. Such justifications did not make burying them any easier, did not ease the hurt of each shovelful of dirt tamped into the mound. For a long time, whenever I passed the skunk burial ground, I would nose the wind and try to catch a whiff of them. I can still smell them now, sweet and acrid at once. Long afterwards, I remember my father stopping what he was doing and looking up sharply, arrested by a breeze that carried skunk-scent.

"Thought ya got those skunks," was all he said.

My father's prize was not the log cabin we had built on the place, with its panoramic view of the Queen's Crown to the east, Timmerman Hill to the west. It was not the slough above the headgate, low, slow moving water where rainbows boiled in the evenings. It was not even the duck blinds we built along Loving Creek, tule and tumbleweed hideouts we worked on when the first frost came. No, my father's

favorite pet was his trout pond.

He had developed it from a spring fed by an artesian well. Watercress mulched the ground in bunches at its headwaters; that was how he got the idea. We were eating watercress salad one night, the crunchy greens topped with blood red Idaho beets, and he said, "I can build a pond below the spring." So he did. Built it with backhoe and dragline and dozer. Had me rototill the berm, turning up the loamy soil until twilight intensified instinct—mallards calling in spirals; owls blinking in the willows; cranes and herons winging silhouettes against the sky. I would stop tilling, plop down in the cool soil and just gaze in disbelief at where I was. Run the ripe ground through my fingers and listen to the talk of wild things.

So the berm was planted with groundcover that went wild, too, birdsfoot trefoil and cicer milkvetch and showy locoweed. The stuff climbed the banks like vine and soon my father had dammed it and brought in a truckload of lunker trout and dumped them in. We built an automatic feeder that sprayed food pellets in a fishy swath twice daily, causing a feeding frenzy that evoked Amazonian piranhas. These were actually Snake River hatchery trout and planting them was sanctioned by the Idaho Department of Fish & Game. My father liked to chum the big bruisers along the banks, tossing handfuls of the pellets like chicken feed and grinning as the hefty trout thrashed the surface, their silver sides flashing as they tore for the spoils. But it turned out he was also unintentionally chumming for herons.

"Come look at this," my father said one morning as he walked me to the pond. Four large trout, each two boots or better in length, lay dead on the banks, flies swirling around their eyes and vents. Each fish had an identical telltale harpoon mark through its side. Blood had dried to scales where the Great Blue Heron's spear-like bill had stabbed the skin of the fish. The heron had not eaten them. "Too big to swallow whole," my father grumbled as he tossed the trout into the willows for coyotes, trout meant to be caught by our visiting ranch guests.

Stealthy and patient, herons possess a perfect design: keen eyesight, a long, spear-thrower neck, and a dagger-bill that skewers fish in a swift and fatal blur-stroke. Sometimes I would see what looked like a tree stump and branches shifting slightly in the stream: a heron, fishing. Grey skeletons of birds, they stalk slowly, barely disturbing the water as they lift and place one stilt-like leg after another. Often they stand in place on one leg until a fish comes near. Then they dart, head and neck and bill in symphony, breaking the window of water like a diving kingfisher, faster than human eyes can see.

But this had to do with ownership. These were my father's fish, and a predator was violating the sanctity of his pond. "The Browning's in the gun case," he said as he steered away, dust curling behind the Suburban. Never mind the potential fine, this was private property and we were protecting our crop. I grabbed shells and loaded as I walked, knowing I would never get a jump shot. Herons are smart, and as wary as any bird.

The heron had been at the pond since daybreak. Before I got within a hundred yards the bird lifted, low at first, then clipping over the willows along the creek, sailing the meanders upstream to the big pond above the headgate. I crept under some brush and hid and watched the bird curve an arc and boomerang back, looking like some immense pterodactyl in the distance, its head and neck folded back, feet trailing behind. Unbelievably, perhaps overconfident from being so long unmolested on the ranch, the heron came right toward me from the slough, just above the line of willows, came the way ducks do during season, and I held the Browning tight, crouching. I heard the bird's wings flapping close overhead, saw its big shadow on the ground and as my father had taught me on ducks and geese I stood and swung and fired.

It was a single shot, one barrel of the 12-guage Browning reporting, and the instantaneous stoppage of wings, the awkward midair crumpling and the dull thud of the enormous bird's brunt beyond the willow belt. Then all was silent on the stream except my

breathing and the pulse in my temples. Wading the stream, I could smell the spent gunpowder, then caught the dry scent of sage.

The Great Blue Heron lay stone dead. The yellow, foot-long bill had snapped on impact and now jutted at a fractured, unnatural angle. Bigger than I had imagined, the bird sprawled a shotgun-length along the ground and I marveled at the blue-grey gloss of its feathers. My eyes moved up the neck, along the cinnamon-colored tendrils, to the head with its forked topknot. Set in the wide-open yellow eye was a dark and piercing pupil, wild and intelligent, and only moments before, alive. I knelt in the dirt next to the bird, then felt a rush of wind and looked away to see clouds forming in the east like clenched fists over the lava flows. I remained quiet, letting my body freeze to the spot, not moving for the longest time, staunch and silent as the heron would be, fishing a pond as if he owned it, searching for food to bring back to his young.

Eventually, empty and alone, I stood and lifted the slain heron by the neck and carried it back to cabin, staying near the thick willows along the stream and scanning for any unwelcome visitors. I slid the big bird in a black plastic garbage bag and called my father.

"Skin it like pheasant," he said. "Use a lot of Borax, and tack it out in the shed. I'll use the feathers for tying steelhead flies."

That afternoon, I did as he said, splaying the grey pelt out to cure on the table beneath the muskrat traps. I tossed the fishy entrails into the field for coyotes, the magnificent bird now carrion. Then I slathered myself with Deet, sprayed my greasy Stetson with Muskol, pulled on my hip boots and headed out to move the pipe. As I walked along the irrigation canal to the first handline, I glimpsed something in my periphery and looked up to see the unmistakable slow and rhythmical wing beats of a Great Blue Heron landing on the banks of our trout pond. The bird settled in to begin fishing, and I turned away, turned back to my duty of watering barley we did not need, barley destined to become someone else's cheap beer. **f**

Joy Passanante

RECALLING THE NIGHT YOU LEFT

Topping Whitebird Pass and the slide
into the Camas Prairie. Picture: fences with small barbs,
hawks, granite, a telephone line. Red barn, of course,
with sloping roof. Layered mountains. Poplars yellowing
at the outside, toward the tops raking the dry,
winking sky. Just a dip in the hills, fields tracked
from harvest, the stripes gone wild in a place or two.
Bales curled in pinwheels. We aim homeward
with a trunk of smuggled Little Salmon rocks,
quartzy pink and sleek, water-gashed and greyed.
All this serenity

only driving us deeper into autumn,
harder into 1981 and the November
midnight I swerved left
on an unmarked road,
the stench of skunk puffing up,
and lost myself among the dainty
late-night flakes, the first of the end
of the year, and as they vanished one by one
on my windshield,

I spoke to you from over a thousand miles, over
the dips and ripples of half a continent, over
the border of this life from what becomes
of it. And called out loud, out loud,

my voice vying with the thud of the tires
jostling into potholes the ditched logging
stretch. I called out loud to you and did not
stop to ask the way, or beg a map,
but wound below the pocked clouds,
along the shadowy edge of what directions
I could summon, and finally pulled in
from the lost night at the first turn to day, and the light
blinking on in the kitchen to a scrawled message
waiting on the table, words rushing
by like the drunk tractor driver who wore
wavy lines into the would-be grain, and I wanted
those words to wait for another generation,
or more, but I'd called you up and had no choice.

We've got to forgive each other our choices. And perhaps
another wheat field, a carload of river rocks, a generation
traveled by, and I will.

Jeff P. Jones

THE SCAFFOLD AND THE PALACE

The season's final blossoms bring
More dear delight than buds of spring.
They stir in us a live communion
Of sorrowfully poignant dreams.
Thus oft the hour of parting seems
More vivid than a sweet reunion.

– Pushkin, "Untitled," 1825
(translated by Walter Arndt)

Last night the earth tilted away from the sun. Like a child breaking the hold of its mother's hand it lurched toward the precipice, leaned toward a new axis: it turned its northern face from the light and gazed into the void. It became enraptured with what it found there. It lingered. From my back yard inside this country of rolling hills called the Palouse, from within the speck on the planet's iris that's northern Idaho, I looked with it into night's darkest shadow. By morning the earth had turned from its precarious dream toward the gray light of dawn. There was new snow. Outside the junipers had become bumpy cities.

It's mornings like this that remake the world and renew my love of this place and all things winter. How many more times will I wake to fresh snow? If I'm lucky I won't be able to count them. Then again it might only be a handful—or, of course, none at all. Please forgive such moribund thoughts: medical tests and an unknown prognosis affect my disposition.

Since adolescence I've struggled with what I've come to think of as the deadening force of days deep within the structure of existence, the way the familiar leads to loss of feeling[1]. Annie Dillard says, "We were born and bored at a stroke." In his short story, "Atomic Bar," Jon Billman's main character thinks, "A person can get lost in time in Wyoming, and before you know it, an entire life passes by."[2] Exactly, I thought, recalling Leo Tolstoy's diary entry of March 1, 1897: "If the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been."

For the past week it's not Tolstoy I've been reading but Dostoevsky. A high point came yesterday while perusing his reflections from his first trip abroad, in the summer of 1862. I came across this sentence: "I, a sick man suffering from a liver ailment, bounced along the railway for two days through rain and fog to Berlin," echoing as it does the opening to his novel *Notes from Underground*: "I am a sick man...I am a spiteful man. I am a most unpleasant man. I think my liver is diseased."

I think *my* liver is diseased and have for a month now, ever since a blood test revealed, for the second time in a year, results "off the charts" in two or three categories. They assure me that it's probably only a reaction to Tylenol or the result of an infection. They offer a host of other largely harmless explanations, but my mind, irreversibly apocalyptic when it comes to medical issues, will latch only onto worst-case scenarios. It doesn't help that last week a physician's assistant who's been following my case out of curiosity assured me that I have a rare genetic disease. I couldn't pronounce its name but knew as much about it within twelve hours as the layman's internet could produce. So, yes, the problem is the liver. I'm a sick, or at least delusional, man suffering from a liver ailment. I think my liver is diseased.

[1] The Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky called this phenomenon "habitualization" and argued that it "devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war." I've always lived west of the 104th meridian, which falls, generally, at the eastern edge of the high plains at the feet of the Rockies. Thus, a deep concern: How do I stay in the same region and avoid all that's familiar breeding both anesthesia and contempt?

[2] A line drawn from my present to my past, northern Idaho to northern Colorado, bisects Wyoming more or less diagonally.

Such thoughts spur me toward writing and thinking about writing. They bring sobriety and a motive fire. What if I've only got so much time left? (nonsensical, ultimately, since we all have *only got so much time left*). When I came down with pneumonia in 1997, as near to death by illness as I've been, I emerged with renewed vigor.[3] I redoubled work on a short story that I'd been drafting, and it became the first piece of writing that I believed in enough to see through to publication. During its production I goaded myself with the thought of reckless freedom, that I had nothing left to lose since I'd nearly lost it all.

These days my wife and I rent a house in this small college town that turns ghostly and grim when the students aren't here, which isn't as bad as it sounds. A few days ago, in an act of household ignorance, I shorted out the light socket in the room I use as an office. The bulb had been flickering, so I wrapped its metal base with tinfoil and started to screw it back in. Bad idea. Burst of sparks–fumbled bulb–burst of glass. So now I sit in the gray light of morning after the longest night of the year and feel very literary, what with the snow, the dimness, the coffee, the illness. The light that creeps in is too weak to cast shadows.[4] It's dispersed by an opaque layer of stratus clouds and hatched by the black bones of trees. It's the color of the light in which most of Dostoevsky's novels are bathed.

I.

Life is in ourselves and not in the external.
– Dostoevsky

The first work by him that I read was the novel by which most come to him. It was 1991, the second semester of my first year of college,

[3] The following summer my wife and I took a long-anticipated trip to Europe, and in Rome, in the crypt maintained by the Capuchin monks, we found lampshades, clocks, lanterns, whole walls and doorways made of human bones–funerary art–and a sign in the last room that read: "What you are now, we once were. What we are now, you soon will be."

[4] A gnomon, I learned recently, is the name for the stylus that casts a shadow on a sundial. It comes from ancient Greek and means "that which reveals." It's my central contention in this essay that from out of Dostoevsky's life extend two gnomonic moments that shed meaning like shadows and reveal how the deadening force of days might be counteracted.

and since having given up the adolescent dream of becoming a fighter pilot, I was at a loss for direction. I would tell people that I didn't know what to "do" with my life, as if it were a steak you put on the grill or a coat you shrouded around a hanger.[5] I settled on pursuing an education, living with my father in the house where I'd grown up in the low-income part of Aurora, Denver's eastern suburb, and busing downtown each day to attend the University of Colorado's extension campus on scholarship. If things went well, I'd be the first person in my family to earn a four-year degree.

In high school I'd studied the Russian language and visited the Soviet Union as an exchange student, so when I heard about a literature class being taught by a professor from Moscow State University, I signed up. Behind the lectern on the first day stood a robust young woman in an enormous white cotton dress embroidered with red and yellow flowers over the bosom. Her hair needed brushing and her face was flushed. She wafted fumes of bodily heat into the tiny classroom; we could smell Russia on her. She seemed nervous and struggled with English, complaining awkwardly about the strangeness of campus, but it was the strangeness of her that enraptured us. Then she assigned our first reading: *Crime and Punishment*.

The whole of that month I couldn't wait for the bus rides that framed my weekdays, when I would hunker down into a window seat and peel open the paperback's pages.[6] I was no longer an eighteen-year-old American on a bus rolling west into Denver; I was a Russian man named Raskolnikov who'd committed a double murder with an axe and was wandering the Petersburg streets with their insufferable heat, "dust, bricks and mortar, the stench from the shops and pot-houses, the drunken men, the Finnish pedlars and half-broken-down cabs." When I looked up and saw the Civic Center and the Brown Palace Hotel on Seventeenth and the window-lined sides of

[5] The best response to my complaint, from a beloved professor of Victorian literature, was still five long years away: "Life isn't what you do, it's who you are."

[6] The Bantam Classic edition sporting on the cover Vasily Perov's portrait of Dostoevsky with his soul-shadowed eyes, sitting in a room so dark that it looks never to have been touched by the sun.

skyscrapers, I was wrenched across time and oceans and released into a foreign body. It was like being awakened from slow-wave sleep. I had to remind myself who I was, where I was. No book had ever assimilated me so thoroughly.

Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky was born on October 30, 1821 in Moscow.[7] His mother died of consumption when he was sixteen. Two years later, his father, a doctor and land owner, was beaten to death by his own serfs. At twenty-seven, Dostoevsky, along with more than thirty others, was arrested in St. Petersburg for his involvement with a revolutionary group that was attempting to set up an illegal printing press. He supported the emancipation of the serfs, the Russian equivalent to the abolition of slavery, but it was 1849 and the brutish Czar Nicholas I had been frightened by the recent European revolutions. For eight months Dostoevsky was held in a dungeon cell inside the Petropavlovsky Fortress, awaiting sentence.

I've always loved this time period in Russia for the way it's portrayed with such harsh authenticity, such vivid grittiness. It's a place of damp mornings and cold nights, dark corridors and filthy staircases; miserly landlords and starving students, government lackeys and prostitutes; repression and suffering, belief and atheism. It only makes sense that this is where realism began.[8] How much more interesting to read about the downtrodden civil servant than the wealthy aristocrat—and how much more convincing are characters' lives when grounded in the concrete.[9]

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[7] I've always wanted to believe in the stark simplicity and moral and artistic rightness of the text-is-the-text-x2 school of thought and have secretly viewed author biography as a sort of guilty pleasure; but I can't deny the enormous unburdening I felt, an actual easing of tension in my levator scapulæ, coming across this statement by critic Paul Gray in The New York Times Book Review: "The messy truth, purists be damned, is that people who are interested in literature are incurably curious about the people who wrote it."

[8] The Russian language, too, must've played a part. It's stripped of articles and often prepositions and pronouns, and is much less ornate than English and thereby able to evoke freshness not through exuberant hyperbole (as occurs in the opening of this essay, for instance) but through calmness and economy, simply naming things, not necessarily decorating them.

[9] The progenitor of realism in literature is said to be Nikolai Gogol's short story, "The Overcoat," published in 1842, the story that led Nabokov to call its author "the greatest artist that

But I digress. The guards are here at Fyodor Mikhailovich's cell. Keys rattle, locks clang. The corridors through which they lead him are unlit and coated with a frozen patina of urine. His legs are heavy. It's December 22, 1849, and it's inhumanly cold, the kind of cold that incites aching deep inside the bones. Eight of Dostoevsky's cohorts join him (others had been released for lack of evidence, two had lost their minds, one had attempted suicide), and they trudge to carriages that drive them to the Semionovski Parade Grounds where they've been sentenced to be publicly executed. There, before a crowd of somber witnesses, stand three posts atop a scaffold. This is authoritarian spectacle of the most drastic kind, its public aim to instruct. The guards dress the condemned men in white death smocks. Priests approach and offer crosses for them to kiss. Swords are broken over their heads. Sheerly by virtue of his place in line, Dostoevsky isn't among the first trio led to the scaffold. He watches the guards bind the men to the posts then hood them so they can't see the rifles. In the distance the rising sun flashes on the golden roof of a church.

In his novel *The Idiot*, Dostoevsky describes the thoughts of the main character, Prince Myshkin, as he faces the same fate. What he feels most noticeably is time expanding: "Five minutes seemed like an endless stretch of time, an enormous wealth; he felt that during those five minutes he would live through so many lives that now there was as yet no need to think of the last instant"—and further, in the prince's direct thoughts: "What if I were not to die! What if I should return to life—what an eternity! And all this would be mine! I then would turn every minute into an entire age, would lose nothing, would take careful count of every minute, would no longer waste a single thing!" This compulsion is the opposite of an entire life passing

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Russia has yet produced." It's a tale that warns of the dangers of materialism when, ironically, what readers responded to most (and my literature students still do) was its visceral presentation of the physical world. For example, a set of stairs is "all so soaked with water and slops and saturated through and through with that smell of ammonia which makes the eyes smart." It's as if the author is saying, "Look at the intricate details of this world—really look!—these things are amazing in themselves." Dostoevsky adopted the realist technique, and it's not unthinkable to apply his oft-repeated comment about Russian authors of his time to contemporary prose writers: "We all crawled out from under Gogol's overcoat."

without notice; and it comes with the desire to take note of the world and its impressions in vivid detail. His fear of death makes him see the world anew, and he falls in love with it like a child feeling grass for the first time.[10] Dostoevsky, like Prince Myshkin, was saved. A messenger appeared on a foaming horse: the czar had granted a pardon.

The near-death experience (what's now believed to have been a mock execution, a revelation with its own implications) had lifelong effects on Dostoevsky. His epilepsy worsened, he abandoned his political idealism, and he became deeply introspective. Most significantly, it invigorated him to look afresh at the world and to question, relentlessly, life's meaning. The execution scene casts its shadow over many places in his work. In *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov, contemplating suicide, thinks: "Where is it I've read that someone condemned to death says or thinks, an hour before his death, that if he had to live on some high rock, on such a narrow ledge that he'd only room to stand, and the ocean, everlasting darkness, everlasting solitude, everlasting tempest around him, if he had to remain standing on a square yard of space all his life, a thousand years, eternity, it were better to live so than to die at once! Only to live, to live and live! Life, whatever it may be!"

This sentiment—"Life, whatever it may be!"—has haunted me for nearly twenty years. As is only fitting, memory hasn't kept the particulars of where I was when I first encountered the passage, but it must've been while riding the Number Six after a day of classes. I would've taken the sentences in and looked up for a moment of meditation. Perhaps the bus turned, just then, north onto Dayton or

[10] In 1996, I met for coffee with a depressed friend who I hoped wasn't contemplating suicide. I asked him whether he'd ever experienced instances (I had no term for them then) when life felt more exciting, more charged with meaning. He had. We talked about Dostoevsky and Raskolnikov's hypothetical ledge (to be considered in the next three paragraphs). Years later I discovered Virginia Woolf's testimony that it doesn't have to be imminent death bringing such intensity of awareness. Even mundane tasks like a walk in the country can incite what she called a "moment of being" in which a person feels, suddenly, the vividness of the experience, consciousness, and a connectedness to the world's larger patterns. Much more common, of course, are moments of non-being, the unconscious living of daily life—and it was the apparent meaninglessness of the majority of his experience (his habitualization to life), I can see now, that weighed so heavily on my friend. Update: he's still alive; I had coffee with him a few months ago.

Colorado Boulevard, and I gazed west. There would be the Denver skyline and behind it, a purple wall of mountains under a gold and orange sky.[11] I've stood atop Raskolnikov's ledge and watched the waves crash against the rocks many times since that first encounter. I internalized the scene so thoroughly that for a few years I forgot its source and believed it to be an image from my own imagination.

Would I choose death or life on the ledge? More to the point: do I love existence as much as I should? I can't help but picture the man who chooses the ledge, filled with such sublime hunger for life that what I feel when I look at my own life is the lack of such exuberant appreciation. Yes, there have been moments, as there must be in any life: close calls, loved ones in imagined or real accidents, funerals, insights—but nothing so profound or long-lasting as taking leave of the condemned men standing to either side, believing myself to be five minutes away from the great mystery.

I tend to be someone who operates mostly by inertia. I keep living in this town because it's what I know; I keep writing because it's what I do; I keep teaching for the same reason. Yet there sometimes arises a yearning to shove it over, to upend what is, after all, a comfortable life, to lean it on the precipice if only to find revitalized gratitude. It's not enough to have what is, against the backdrop of human history, a relatively good life; I want to feel the intensity of its goodness along the way—daily, if I'm honest.[12] I confess that such thoughts have something grasping and ineffectual about them, like trying to cup a triangle of sunlight in my hands. Still, I want to believe that there's something salvageable from within this desire to feel life more fully more often. Though light can't be held, it can be seen, it can be felt.

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[11] Almost always when looking at the mountains west of Denver I was drawn to the ledged outline of one fourteener in particular, Longs Peak. I'd been up there and camped in its shadow. Throughout college I kept a map of Rocky Mountain National Park taped to my bedroom door, highlighting each new backcountry trail and camping spot I'd visited. Back in the city, I loved looking at that blocky peak and experiencing the disjunction between distant observation and up-close knowledge. It looked so far away, yet I'd walked its slopes, seen its scree fields, had dunked my face in its waters, so cold that they erased every thought.

[12] Heartfelt whine: how unfair (and romantically poignant, of course; but most of all, somehow unjust) that true appreciation only comes with loss.

What I'm coming to believe is that the spectacle is here each day, it's just not always accessible. Perhaps the trick is knowing not where to look but how to look, how to align the internal gnomon so that it catches the light by locating the shadow it throws.[13]

II.

> *Can it be that there is in fact some kind of chemical bond between the human spirit and its native soil, so that you cannot tear yourself away from it and, even if you do tear yourself away, you nonetheless return?*
>
> – Dostoevsky

San Diego in December is different from San Diego in July. I discover this on my second visit to southern California in the same year, having accompanied my wife on trips for her work. Bicyclists and cars rip past on the coastal highway but in less shocking density in the late fall. I go for a two-mile run at Solana Beach. Well. I try the shore for a stretch, but it's high tide and I'm forced to sidestep palm-sized rocks, tan tangles of seaweed, and the dying waves as they grab for my running shoes. I've come to the beach with vague hopes of being revitalized by the ocean, and though my mind does seem more awake, something feels off. The sun isn't out; everywhere is just a gray wash. While watching a surfer get swallowed headfirst by a wave, I nearly twist an ankle, so I return to the highway's bike lane and try not to cringe each time a car that costs twice my annual salary whooshes past my shoulder.

I rehearse the banter overheard between two men at the bakery in Del Mar, of real estate and business deals and summer homes.

[13] Here, then, in a shady place, let me confess the stirrings of another thought. Might it be possible that energized life is available through unexpected encounters that have everything to do with one's relation to the native soil of a place? When I was twenty-five I moved to Seattle for grad school; seven years later I moved to the Palouse where I've now been for almost eight years. Though I'm a westerner by birth, I've never felt the attraction of "the West" like I have since coming here. Nor have I felt the land itself in its rugged state exerting such power over the people who live on it like it does here, and I think that this has to do at least partly with the proximity a person in this place feels to one thing in particular: wilderness.

A frightened miniature Mexican hairless dog runs past, neurotically glancing back at the other end of the leash where a muscle-bound guy jogs, cool and unconcerned. A kid grinds by on a skateboard, a look of royal impassivity on his face. Into a pile of dog crap has been inserted a toothpick with a tiny white tag that reads, "This is OBAMA's contribution to America." In a parking lot a middle-aged guy with a suntanned face takes leave of a teenager who's cleaning his surfboard. Instead of "See ya" he says "Good sesh" and drives off. In the distance there are exposed spots on the hills that gleam like bone. My ignorance slaps me across the face. There's so much I'm not understanding. I know nothing about the soil, the rocks, the people, the processes here. I don't even know the meaning of *camino*, a word I see everywhere. I'm a stranger, and above everything else, I feel a lack of having been enlivened. The morning offers only confusing and ugly signals, moments I'm not ready to assimilate.

Dostoevsky spent four years as a laborer in a Siberian prison then six as a common soldier in a remote town near the Mongolian border. His exile provided rich material for his later writings as well as the solitude necessary to contemplate how he would live if he survived. When he was finally allowed to return to St. Petersburg in 1859 by the new czar, Alexander II, he found a changed intellectual landscape. Science and rationality, via the Enlightenment, had arrived at Europe's backwater. Russia was fulfilling Peter the Great's dream of becoming a westward-leaning country.[14]

[14] There were two social currents in Russia at the time: Westernism, which looked to Europe as the model for progressive reform; and Slavophilism, a nationalist bent that wanted to use ancient Russian ideals as the new standards for reconstruction. In 1860, Dostoevsky helped found the literary journal Time in which he sought to establish a middle path that drew from both liberal and conservative extremes but was, above all, "rooted in the soil." This term "rooted in the soil" comes from the Russian word pochvennost and is so difficult to translate that it inspired Michael Minihan, one of Dostoevsky's biographers, to append a footnote about the word itself that reads, "It is a coinage from the Russian pochva (soil, earth). I have translated it '(being) rooted in the soil,' and its opposite, bespochvennost as 'uprooted from the soil.'" As a way of putting this into more concrete terms, it's said that during this time Dostoevsky wore a moustache and sustained himself almost entirely on tea. He had an enormous high forehead and small gray eyes that became silvery and flashed like sparks when he grew animated. He usually murmured or spoke in a whisper, but when inspired he would stride across the room and declaim his thoughts in a booming voice. He was fond of reading aloud poems by Pushkin, especially ones related to nature and, even more especially, this

In such a climate, in 1862, at the age of forty, Dostoevsky traveled abroad for the first time. For two and a half months he whipsawed across Europe, visiting Berlin, Dresden, Wiesbaden, Baden-Baden, Cologne, Paris, London, Lucerne, Geneva, and several Italian cities. It's his observations made during this trip, recorded in *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*, that I've been reading and rereading this week as I try not to think about the prognosis waiting like a sentence somewhere in my future and as the snow from three days ago melts away in patches, bringing thoughts of early summer and fast-flowing rivers.

Five years ago I took up fly fishing. Stood knee-deep in icy runoff and lost whole hatches of artificial flies to brush and rock and very few to fish. There's a freestone river not far from here. The first time that I camped beside it I recall the moment of crawling into my sleeping bag and feeling suddenly alive to the natural patterns: the river's conversation, the crisp air, the moonlit treetops inserting themselves into the sky. The closest town (and hardly big enough for such a label) was an hour by car; a mountain range walled off the nearest interstate; wilderness gaped to the south. Solitude and

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poem in particular (the translation is mine):
Still blow the chill winds
and bring forth morning frosts.
Just now on thawing spring patches
appeared the first flowers,
as from the wondrous kingdom of wax,
from a honey-fragranced cell,
burst the first little bee,
flying toward those budding blooms
to discover of this fair spring:
if soon he'll be a welcome guest,
if soon the meadows will turn green,
if soon the birch buds will open
into sticky little leaves,
the sweet-smelling cherry blossom.
The poem's significant because Dostoevsky took from it the image "sticky little leaves"—klyey-kiye listochki—as a favorite, using it as a symbol of divine beauty. In The Brothers Karamazov, Ivan Karamazov, who refuses to believe in God because of the depths of human suffering, tells his brother Alyosha: "I have a longing for life, and I go on living in spite of logic. Though I may not believe in the order of the universe, yet I love the sticky little leaves as they open in the spring. I love the blue sky." Here is nature-inspired emotion providing a life-giving counterpoint (note: not a refutal) to skepticism.

insignificance tided against me as a swell of blissful harmony carried me off to sleep.[15]

But I digress again. Here Dostoevsky stands in August, 1862, in the center of the Crystal Palace in London. Ten million feet of glass rise around him, lifted and held in place by elegant columns of cast iron. The glistening structure soars three stories high, its central transept peaking at ninety feet, its naves and galleries covering nineteen acres. There are no interior walls so that the rows of columns, girders, and trusses extend in mirrored repetition of themselves. It's like standing inside an enormous chandelier. It's a monument to British innovation, a marvel of efficiency and grace that was designed and built in less than a year when construction of stone buildings could take a decade or more. The difference? Machine manufacturing and a railway network: both results of Britain's relatively newfound reliance on scientific principles. The rational western world literally encases Dostoevsky as he stands there squinting into the light, his hands shoved deep into his pockets, a scowl hatching his face. He hates it. What the British Empire means for him to feel in this place he doesn't feel. Where there should be rapture at western civilization's superiority, there's rapture's opposite, declivity, claustrophobia, disillusionment, skepticism. He's scanning the ground for a fist-sized rock. He feels like breaking something.

Fyodor Mikhailovich had made up his mind about the West before he arrived, had already identified destructive elements in its influence

[15] Isn't this how wilderness, sometimes even just the memory of a wild place, renews the mind, reconnects the individual with larger natural processes, and stirs the primitive brain with sensations that are more powerful than language can express? In a New Yorker article, Bill Fraser, an ecologist and penguin expert, said of the Antarctic Peninsula: "It was completely remote and absolutely wild. The rawness and beauty of this place just cannot be described. It was a place where you could still feel inconsequential." Wilderness is especially good at inciting "moments of being" because undisturbed nature offers no refuge for the senses, which tend, in my experience, to be ineluctably drawn to modern distractions. Shklovsky claimed that the purpose of art is to counter the force of habitualization: "Art removes objects from the automatism of perception." Similarly, wilderness removes individuals from the deadening sense of daily life. It heightens awareness, brings details into focus, slows perception—and catalyzes introspection, even metaphysical rumination. If it's true that the typical person in modern life sees in a day as many images as a Victorian saw in a lifetime, then it's a cruel irony that, as we increase our level of artificial distraction, we decrease our exposure to the natural forces that help us negotiate more meaning from life.

on Russia, so it's not surprising that his attention during his travels focused on Europe's uglier sides. He saw the West as morally corrupt, materialistic, blinded by its worship of science and rationality. He believed Paris to be a self-deluded whore hiding behind a façade of bourgeois order; London was a chaotic capitalistic hell harboring great wealth propped up on great poverty: both Western centers were failed utopias that, among many evils, committed the worst imaginable: they quashed the individual will.

After his whirlwind European tour, Dostoevsky returned to Russia, where he found that his wife, Maria Dmitrievna, was in the end stages of consumption. At her bedside, morose and despairing, he began writing *Notes from Underground*. I kept a paperback copy of this novel[16] on my shelf for years before reading it. From time to time I would take it down but couldn't find an entrance. The book seemed to have no windows or doors; it was just a tin voice ranting behind a wall somewhere. Finally, while unemployed in Seattle and trying to make a go of it as a "writer," I gave the book another chance and discovered that the voice isn't tin at all: it's vulnerable, expressive—incredibly lifelike. The Underground Man says to his implied reader, "You believe in the crystal palace, eternally indestructible, that is, one at which you can never stick out your tongue furtively nor make a rude gesture, even with your fist hidden away. Well, perhaps I'm so afraid of this building precisely because it's made of crystal and it's eternally indestructible, and because it won't be possible to stick one's tongue out even furtively." The Underground Man's greatest fear is losing his free will, of having all his desires explained and thereby reduced to principles of rational self-interest—"organ stops" he calls them—of having humanity ordered as efficiently as an anthill based on such principles. Here, his is Dostoevsky's own fear.[17]

Last night the friend with whom I learned to fly fish called from his home in Wisconsin, where he took a job that took him from

[16] Signet Classic edition, 1961, $2.50.

[17] A dangerous one-to-one mapping of the author over his character, but a linkage upon which I insist precisely because I, too, wish to exert free will.

the Palouse two years ago. I was driving in town, so I pulled off into a campus parking lot. It was twilight and heavy purple clouds were shipping east. The big news was that he and his wife were already fed up with the Midwest despite being closer to both of their families.

"Everywhere you go here there's a small town," he said. "Every five miles, no matter where you drive. And we've been up to the Upper Peninsula, but it's just not...it's not..."

I held the phone to my ear to see what he would come up with. The sun's last effort colored the grain silos golden.

"It isn't *Idaho*," he finally said.

We spoke about wilderness, of what it means to be near wilderness even if you don't go into it very often. So here's where I confess that I'm not a wilderness guy. I don't pack my gear every weekend and head for the hills. Most years since moving here, I'll make it into the mountains, into the woods, onto the rivers only a handful of times. I usually opt instead for a short hike at the nearest trailhead on our local mountain. But it's enough. Most days, for me, knowing that wilderness is near is enough.

At twilight I often find myself looking west. Some genetic pull draws my gaze as if I might see the Rockies and the blocky ledge of Longs Peak. What I see instead are rolling denatured hills, but there are roads among those hills that lead to roads that climb away from civilization and end where raw nature begins. Dostoevsky's travels never brought him to America, let alone Idaho, but I like to think that if they had, he would've understood something of the vitality underlying the American West, that it doesn't derive from capitalist industry or obsessive agricultural practices or urbanization but from something that's been here all along, something that we've tried, in various ways at various times to destroy and preserve, something that still exists in a few places.[18]

[18] In the spirit of sunless rooms, trap doors that open onto falling dreams, and freewill digressions fitfully followed, here's a third moment from Dostoevsky's life. In 1854, at the military outpost where he was serving out his sentence, he was befriended by Baron Alexander Wrangel, who offers this glimpse:

> I can clearly remember the image of Fyodor Mikhailovich helping me water a young sprout, in the sweat of his brow, having taken off his soldier's greatcoat, in

What is it I'm trying to say? Language is failing me; or I'm failing it. Here, then: these two moments in Dostoevsky's life—the executioner's scaffold and the Crystal Palace—can be read as personality poles, both of which incite mental clarity and artistic inspiration. It's the disjunction between them[19] and the possibility of nurturing both extremes that's so compelling: the golden moments and the gray ones, childlike exuberance and aged wisdom; mindfulness and skepticism; intoxication and sobriety; innocence and experience; belief and doubt.[20]

The scaffold and the palace are stark dichotomies that (I want to believe) can exist within the same individual, different modes accessible at different times, both vital for energized responses to experience. Wilderness requires an open heart; civilization requires a fiercely skeptical brain: both ways of being generate clarity and inspiration. In the American West there's plenty of beautiful nature, but one doesn't have to look far to find decay and human meddling—disenfranchised native inhabitants, industrialized landscapes, anti-intellectualism, destructive practices. Inspiration is priceless whether

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a rose-colored chintz waistcoat that was faded from laundering.

Some days the men went fishing and Dostoevsky would bring along Sergei Aksakov's Notes on Angling Fish and read aloud from it as they sat on the river's bank. Evenings when it was warm they would recline on the grass and gaze at the star-salted sky. Wrangel writes, "Contemplating the grandeur of the Creator, the unknown, omnipotent Divine force produced upon us a kind of emotion, a consciousness of our nothingness, somehow humbled our spirit." Heady thoughts!—and I can't help but see in this phrase "consciousness of our nothingness" an enlivened sense of awareness, a childlike renewal, an identification with the nearby natural patterns.

[19] Not dialectical friction (too logical) but something more along the lines of Keats's notion of negative capability: "when man is capable of being in uncertainties, [m]ysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason."

[20] This last pairing reveals most clearly, to my mind, how one extreme fades without the other. Shortly after his release from prison, Dostoevsky wrote to a woman who had befriended him, "Besides, if anyone proved to me that Christ was outside the truth, and it really was so that the truth was outside Christ, then I would prefer to remain with Christ than with the truth." It's hard to imagine a statement of belief that would imply doubt more strongly. Ernest Simmons says that Dostoevsky "combined in his heart the most ardent faith with the greatest disbelief." If there was an American writer with the same soul, it would have to be Melville of whom Hawthorne wrote in his journal in 1856: "He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other."

its goad is a transcendent moment or the struggle against physical or social disease.[21]

So here we find Dostoevsky's greatcoat spread on the grassy bank of a freestone river in Idaho (the state was admitted to the union nine years after his death), and here he is reclining atop it, palms become a pillow, gazing into the evening sky from under a canopy of western white pine. The first stars shiver awake, pinpointed and sharp. Something elemental inside him responds. His heart opens. His eyes spark to life. **f**

[21] I can offer no resolution to the medical thread because I have none. My last blood test revealed better, though far from normal, results. Feel free, when we speak, to ask me, "So, how's the liver?" to which I hope to respond, "Fine," and if not that then perhaps, "Still keeping me writing."

Susanna Sonnenberg

MISSOULA, MISSOURI

In that a writer's career can be charted, mine had its formal start—a commitment and a tuition—at an MFA program in New York City. I was 22, had just published for pay a book review in The Nation, where I also worked as an intern. I was going to Be a Writer. Happy and so excited, I waited in the office Thursday night for the boxes to come in. I found Susanna Sonnenberg in the table of contents and flipped the newsprint pages. One-hundred-thousand subscribers, I thrilled. There. Running full length, alongside my single column of type, was an ad for Grand Street, the literary magazine published by my father. Maybe a grim coincidence of printing, but I deflated: My name—in person, in print—would always be his.

My father was a writer, and he knew lots of them. They wrote and published and came to dinner. My parents threw book parties. On Sunday mornings they read the Book Review, and in the afternoons they called the people in it. Being a Writer was a social grace and a competitive sport. After I graduated from college, a friend of my father's hired me at The Nation, and then I got into the program, where more people knew him. So what, I said, if that's how it works? Hadn't I attended the dinner parties all these years, too? I, too, called these writers by their first names. Finally grown, I would be writing in this New York City, writing among writers. My father's friends asked what I was doing, and I could say "The MFA program." At his parties I was the sole person not published, not yet.

In the program Paul Auster was one of my teachers. *Paul Auster.* Not just any writing teacher but a serious, mysterious god to us, and *so handsome.* I bought his books straight away and read one, and half of

another one. Auster's pen scraped across my own words in the stories he handed back to me. Once I walked with him twenty blocks down Broadway, listening. When I could, I tried to be memorable and funny. His ravishing eyes were already off me as he said goodbye and crossed the street. "Arrogant prick," my friends and I said, huddled in a bar below street-level, laughing at our bravery, how we could disdain celebrity. We ordered pitchers of pale beer and dissected the stories of other students unkindly. We dissected the boys unkindly. We flirted, we bitched, usually one equal to the other. The thing was, I wasn't actually writing.

I quit the program. In a year I had produced three labored, small stories, barely. Rehashed college work. Instead of creating, I went out and drank, took taxis, ran around my city, went to movies; with friends I crashed the *Paris Review* parties thrown for the newly minted hot writers, the under-thirties of success and promise. *Did you see the write-up he got in* Vanity Fair? *Did you read her piece in* The Atlantic? Our awe and envy drove us everywhere. After my *Nation* review, my father had asked me to write an essay for *Grand Street*, which was—everyone said so—absolutely beautiful and the model of last-century high literary taste. I'd worked hard, writing about Jessica Hahn and her cultural moment. The paragraphs jumped all over my screen in the final days of coaxing a big piece into a polished narrative. I turned it in, and he handed it back. "I think not, after all," he said. I never read it again, and I'm sure now it wasn't any good (I was 22), but I'd already *seen* Susanna Sonnenberg in my father's table of contents, between Alice Munro and James Salter, or between C.P. Cavafy and Rick Moody. That place was mine.

My father thinks I live in Minnesota. "Is there a difference?" he asks, slowly, snidely, when I correct him still, almost twenty years since leaving for Montana. This is our game now. Away I went from him, from other family, friends, from book signings, galleries, subways, away from the important trials of my teens and twenties, from Off-Broadway plays and big shows, from the restaurant sites of dates and

break-ups. I left those early jobs, costly sublets, all-night groceries, and struck out for the West.

Struck out. Really, there was no other way to put it, even though the cliché embarrassed me and so did the ersatz nostalgia of the gesture. Also, it was embarrassing not to actually care about the West. If you were going to do something like this, you had to act like you meant it, but I wasn't seeking it as a Mecca. I'd started work on a novel and fallen in love with a man who said he needed mountains and fishing. He proposed a list of states—Wyoming, Colorado, Montana, whatever. Is there a difference, I might have asked, my father's daughter; my father and I belonged to the same place, but it wasn't a place I could stay in.

My boyfriend and I chose Montana with an almost perverse lack of conviction. Its westness only meant a turn of the wheel one way instead of another. Never was the inescapable myth of the West more evident than in the moment I drove off to live in it. The full voice of that myth erupted from everyone I knew, *not one* of whom had ever been there, as they joked about Susanna the homestead bride, the pioneer woman. It was just a place, but not really a place.

Missoula, Montana, was a real place—right under my index finger, Exit 105 on I-90—where real people had jobs and real children, bought insurance, walked dogs. It was like anywhere, everywhere. Houses, apartments, malls, schools, street signs named for trees and presidents. I tried to accept everything yet in my first weeks the West's pervasive comic book kept revealing itself:

> a cabin an axe in the welt of a stump
> elk in a field at dusk
> a semi low with a cargo of chained-up logs
> a moose up to her knees in water
> rivers, rivers
> the county fair

The county fair. The day was all sun and hot, the fairgrounds thronged. I walked under the tin canopies shading the animals and thought,

"Animals, livestock," thinking about thinking those words, writing those words. I'd start with letters home. I stood and watched girls in outfits of spangled silver-and-blue curry their horses, whose names they'd scrawled in bright ink on poster board: Summer, Shasta, Spirit, Star. They mounted and checked their stirrups, then guided the horses into the crowds. In their white cowboy hats, or black, all the girls were sober with regulations and that purpose animals demand.

There was a rodeo. When it began, I climbed bleacher steps to find a seat. A voice boomed and curved around us all, speakers mounted high. "Number 34, folks, from Salmon, Idaho, –." We watched him, for there was no one else in the huge dirt ring. On horseback he chased a calf, swung his rope, yanked back and floored the animal. In a shot he was on it, and his legs, arms, elbows, torso, worked the calf's legs, and then the animal was tied. Another man trotted up and untied the rope and led the calf off. The rodeo confused me. Was this a stunt? Was it a game? Was it a called-for skill? How would I find out? Then the bull-riding, also quick—man, gate animal, dirt. The bull flicked its rider into the air and ran. "This cowboy's only thanks is your applause, folks," the speakers called as the busted rider ended his few seconds in the arena and walked away from us. I watched. I clapped for him and watched the seated people near me as they watched, clapping. This was theater, but not theater. This was real, but I was trying to write about it in my head. Real, but not real. Real, but a story.

I felt sweet on all of Missoula, paid attention. Each of my first few summers I went to the fair, marking my anniversaries. I liked the shiny flutter of prize ribbons attached to the dull green gates, where the 4-H teenagers squatted in the sawdust beside their pigs and goats. I liked the granite skies in brooding contrast to the dry hills lit up with sun. I described none of it to my father. (I need to explain here that he couldn't travel because of his MS.) I was reviewing movies for the *Missoulian*, so we talked about the movies, but I don't think he read my reviews. He directed me to study his friends, the critics published in *The New York Times, The Nation* and the *London Review of*

Books. I went fishing or helped a friend move or did whatever people do, and my father compared my reports to things he'd seen on "The Simpsons." "Is it like that? *American*?" he'd say, laughing at my cartoon remoteness. He was waiting for me to move back. One evening after fishing, my boyfriend and I pulled up at a highway bar and went inside, and I didn't even think of Richard Ford or Raymond Carver, the first time I didn't. Maybe we'd lived in Missoula two years. I ordered my shot and beer back and drank without irony, without narration.

I didn't write then, not the way I wanted to. The novel hadn't worked. We married and moved into a cabin, worked restaurants and offices. We took our dog to obedience classes. We skied cross-country on Forest Service land. Friends my age in New York were having their book parties now, their pieces in *The New Yorker*. Two or three of them visited me, once each, marveling at the landscape and sky and the paltry few downtown streets. My father gave us a subscription to *The New York Review of Books*, but our baby came and we read nothing, never finished a cup of coffee, didn't open mail for days at a time. My mind was small and shuttered, no room to think up fiction. We bought a house, we recycled, showed up at pot lucks. we called the man to blow out the sprinklers in the fall.

In New York I took my three-year-old to the Museum of Natural History. I hadn't been inside the gargantuan halls since the fourth grade. We entered on the eastern side, the side that faced Central Park. My son got out of the stroller and took my hand as we advanced across the vast floors, a prairie of marble in the cluttered city. The first diorama looked familiar. Of course it did. Behind the giant glass an Alaskan brown bear stood on its hind legs, snout to an imaginary wind. I was used to images of bears now, and I knew those grasses. In the bison diorama, the sky opened up and reached a disappearing infinity, the distant sunlit hills leading the eye along the horizon. Lifelike, but not life, my home confined, pinned carefully, an artist's flawless retelling of my own sky. "Where do you think that is?" I prompted my son, but he was pulling us deeper into the hall, towards veldt and everglade and savannah, other worlds just as exotic.

Since 1993 I've lived in the West, 2,400 miles from my home. I've lived here more than a third of my life. I gave birth here. Here, I taught my sons to return grocery carts from the parking lot, that earthworms do good in the dirt, how to ice gingerbread men (a Missoula friend taught me). In the flux and fever of parenthood, I managed to write a little, mostly short reviews of the mainstream movies that came to town, but I didn't need writing to make my friends or chart my education. I didn't need writing to make a self. When I wrote words came up out of me before they were fully formed, before they had anything to do with Susanna Sonnenberg. I had a nameless name. As the boys grew older, as the mother ways became pure habit, I wrote more, longer, publishing more widely, and then I published a book. In this place that is not a place I invented creative ambitions unique to me, and the self emerged. No one in Missoula asks about my father, or remembers his *Grand Street*, which he gave up in 1990.

This winter I received a card from an East Coast friend. On the envelope under "Susanna Sonnenberg" she'd written a street address I haven't inhabited for seven years and under that, both words spelled out, "Missoula, Missouri." Yet still the letter came to me. Not right, but right anyway. It doesn't matter, it seems, that Montana isn't Minnesota, that Missoula isn't in Missouri. What matters is that this place, this west, remains unseen to the people and family of my former life, beyond their reach or interest. In Missoula, Missouri, Minnesota, wherever it is I live, I have shaken off the legacies of name and home. The West is not home, and so it is. **f**

Kim Stafford

DO YOU NEED ANYTHING FROM THE MOUNTAIN?

Could you bring me a smudge of camas blue,
and the whisper whistle of that one pine
at the edge of the meadow at dusk, when day

gives a lost, last breath? Bring me the road
that becomes deep duff as it trails away
into the forest, young firs ten feet tall

along the hump between the old ruts.
Bring me a story you hear in dark silence
after the last light, the gone that gathers dew

in the fingers not to hold, carry away, but
only to feel. Bring me that skein of fire
that hangs in intimate eternity, after

the dark but before the thunder, when
the bounty of yearning in one cloud
reaches toward another, in each being's

endless, impossible desire to complete itself
before falling away.

FOR MY FRIENDS

When a river is a border on a map, and not a place to swim;
when a mountain is a postcard you could get;
when an otter is like music in a special on TV,
and not a whiskered stranger you have met;
when smoke from campfires is something known from books
and not a pungent remnant in your clothes;
when forests are but fables, and caves in fairy tales,
and deserts empty places no one knows;
when children learn from Mickey of the mouse,
and think they know the world but never leave the house;
when from busy cities the wilderness feels distant as a star—
then we have lost our treasure, and missed the means to measure
who we are.

Friends, our work is clear—
to hear the sound where water moves;
to measure mountains with our feet;
to seek the mouse in meadows when the dew is on;
to know each huckleberry with the tongue—
leave our blunders, seek new wonders,
entrust the tender world to the young.

Joshua Foster

INSIDE OUT

One Sunday morning in January, I overslept and my family left for church without me. Granted, the rest of those Fosters all had reasons to be at the chapel before service started—mom and my three little sisters practicing with the choir, my fourteen-year-old brother Joshua off to prepare the sacrament, my father Claxton gone since first light. Dad would be furious if I was late, so I stood in front of the bathroom mirror, trying for a suitable tie knot, hurrying towards perfection, when I heard someone knocking at the porch door. This was a year before I got married, or better, a year before I had to get married, and ended up leaving the ranch after my eighteenth birthday, just before grain harvest. By the time I got to the door, the knocking had become pounding, and I opened to find Jarrett Buckett—rubber overshoes unbuckled and manure-caked, coat unzipped, a cock-eyed fowler cap brushed with snow and hay sitting slanted on his head—waiting for me. Claxton had hired Jarrett to calve out the heifers on the weekends. Before this, though, I'd only seen Jarrett in town sitting on the tailgate of his jacked-up Dodge, smoking cigarettes and scamming on the trailer park girls. He was a few years older than me, a burnout from Twin Bridges.

"Hi-ya Jeremiah," Jarrett said. "Hoping to catch Claxton before he ran off to the big house." Then, my father was serving as bishop of our Mormon ward, and he spent most of every Sunday at the chapel.

"He's not around," I said. "Won't be until four or five."

Jarrett stepped back and leaned against the porch banister. He slipped off his hat, showing red hair askew and sweaty, and rubbed his head with the back of his hand.

"You know if he's got his cell?" Jarrett asked.

"Not in church," I said. "Maybe it's in his truck."

Jarrett slapped the hat against his knee and replaced it. "You wouldn't know if the Mexicans were done feeding?"

"I saw them leave," I said. "They usually go to town on Sundays."

"That's what I figured. Just thought I'd ask." Jarrett looked at me and stood up straight. "What about you? Off to church?"

"Planning to."

"What if I could talk you out of that?" he said.

"Something wrong?"

Jarrett hum-hawed around. I figured he probably wanted the morning off to go drink coffee in St. Basil or ride snowmachines in Kilgore. Maybe he'd fake sick, I thought, and half-expected a weak cough.

"Well, sort of." Jarrett said. "Yeah, you could say something's wrong. I got a little gal at Heise that don't want to go in the calving pen. Needing an extra hand for a bit."

"You call Andy?" I said. Andy was our head cowboy.

"He's in church too," Jarrett said. "Least I'm assuming. He didn't answer." Jarrett put his hands in his pockets.

Everyone was gone, unavailable, leaving me alone. I debated what would cause more trouble: missing church or letting Jarrett sweat it out on his own.

"Hold on," I said. "I'll meet you in the truck."

Jarrett nodded and walked across the backyard through his own snow tracks.

I pulled off my church slacks and white shirt and tossed them onto the bed and put on jeans and a hoodie. In the garage, I found my insulated boots, and grabbed a pair of feeding gloves and a stocking cap. Outside, Jarrett leaned against one of the white farm flatbeds and smoked. When he saw me, he flicked the cigarette into the snow and got into the truck.

I jumped in the passenger side, the door grinding shut on uneven hinges. The truck's transmission whirred beneath us and we reversed out of the driveway.

"You owe me a smoke," Jarrett said, arm propped on the seatback. He squinted out the back window. "I only had two puffs before you came running out."

The seat springs squeaked beneath me. I leaned over and adjusted the fan, changing the heat to the dash. Pieces of alfalfa flew out and smacked against the back window like dead flies, and stale air warmed my face. Jarrett turned the truck onto the highway and we accelerated. Between us, inside the truck, sat a small cooler full of cattle medicine. Jarrett fished out a serrated steak knife from under the cooler and stabbed it into the crack between the dash gauges and the air vents.

"Wouldn't wanna lose good Foster cutlery," Jarrett said.

I didn't respond. Outside, ice crept across the road in irregular formations. The morning air seemed brittle but invading, and we drove along in a pocket of our own lonely visibility.

Jarrett reached across the cooler and punched my shoulder. "Shit," he said. "You don't owe me no cigarette. I was just messing."

"You shouldn't smoke," I said.

"Correction," Jarrett said. "You shouldn't smoke. I do whatever I goddamn please."

"It'll kill you."

"So'll ranching," Jarrett said. "So'll pop. So'll TV. So'll driving this shit-box truck. Hell, the u-joints are thin as wire."

"Fix them then. It's your truck too. I mean, jeez, I don't want to die in here."

"We all gotta die somewhere. We all gotta die of something."

"Deep," I said, halfway quietly. This was not how I expected our first conversation to go.

"What was that?" Jarrett asked.

"Nothing," I said. The ranch hands had told me all this before. Pickup truck philosophers, horse-bound sages. Give a man a coffee thermos and he becomes a modern day Moses.

"If you got a problem with me, speak up."

"Forget it," I said, louder.

"Well, I don't care who you are, boss's son or not, I don't like my ideals being drug through the mud." Jarrett looked at me over the cooler.

"I didn't say anything," I said.

Jarrett punched me again. "Shit, man." He grinned and propped himself tall in the seat. "You seriously gotta ease up. You think I got anything figured out? Look at me. I'm just a harelip. I don't know no better. In fact, you're probably right. I ought to quit smoking. But I guarantee if everyone had a smoke a day, this world would be five degrees calmer."

We passed houses huddled among cottonwood trees, the smoke inching out from chimneys and hanging above the homesteads like shawls, and took the old state highway that split the snow-covered fields. Drifts had blown up near the road, rock-hard and tinged dirty, and bare spots of frozen field soil showed through. Jarrett searched around the seat of the pickup and found his pack of cigarettes and shook one out of the box. He held the cigarettes out to me, I waved him a no, and he cracked the window and lit up.

"Figured," Jarrett said, blowing a stream of smoke out the open window. "Just being cordial."

"Thanks."

"Let's get down to serious business here, Jeremiah," Jarrett said. "Tell me what it feels like knowing you're gonna be a prince of mostly eastern Jefferson County, Idaho someday."

"What?" I said.

Jarrett chuckled. "It's gotta feel good, I imagine, knowing one day all these trucks, all this land, all of it will be yours." He patted the pickup's dashboard emphatically.

"None of it's mine," I said.

"You're Claxton's kid, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Parents give presents to their kids, right?"

"Right."

"Then you stand to get all of this. You're the oldest."

"Never thought of it that way."

"Sassafras-and-kiss-my-ass you've never thought it. Shit, I figure you're jerking off to the thought on a nightly basis."

"Seriously," I said, lying, since I'd considered owning it all many, many times. "I'll go on a mission, then probably college. Maybe I'll be a dentist or something."

Jarrett snorted. "Listen, buddy, I like you. But you're not fooling no one. It's nothing to be ashamed of. If I had this spread, I'd give the mission double-birds, say fuckaroo to all that, and take over right outta high school. You seem like a smart kid."

We traveled in silence. Outside: ice blue, blanket white.

Jarrett turned up the country music and tapped on the steering wheel, glancing my direction. We crossed the Snake River and wound around the hot springs, passed the empty camper park, turned down the gravel road. Another slow mile across ruts and snow, and we arrived at the Heise ranch and drove to the yard. Jarrett parked the truck along the bunkhouse and got out. I followed him across the yard to a pole fence.

In the day lot, out beyond the pens, the pregnant cows lulled around the feeders. Trails traced the fence line. The government-leased land where we summered the cattle was white but splotched with the muted green of junipers and sage.

"There's that ornery bitch," Jarrett said. "In the corner." A lone cow paced along a jog in the fence.

Jarrett switched in the four-wheel drive on the pickup hubs, and we got back in and drove out into the day lot. Cows followed us for a time then broke back to the manger. We reached the cow, a small red and white heifer wet with sweat, and Jarrett stopped at a distance.

"I'm gonna go open up the corrals," Jarrett said. "You push her up the fence."

I thought about pulling rank, telling Jarrett I'd do the driving and he'd do the walking, but instead I bailed out and jogged through the snow. That cow, full of skitters and venom, bucked when she saw me and bolted down the fence line. Jarrett rodded the truck and cut her off from doubling back. The cow ran dead-force into the barn pen. Jarrett left the truck driving and jumped out for the gate. The truck puttered into a high drift and died trying to push itself through. We dug the truck out with a pitchfork and a board, sweating great clouds of steam, while the cow thrashed around inside the pen.

Once back in the yard, Jarrett and I leaned against the fence and watched the heifer, high-tailed and panicked, move from one corner of the pen to the next, sniffing for a way out.

"Guess you can take me back down now," I said. I figured I could still make most of the church meetings.

"Like hell," Jarrett said. "Gotta figure out what's going on. She's been acting like this all morning."

I shivered, compelled by cold. I had calved plenty, or should say, had been with many others who knew what they were doing. I had grown up on the farm assisting, running back and forth fetching tools and medicine, shoveling holes and pulling rye from wheat. It would be a stretch to say that I could diagnose, repair, or manage without help. I couldn't. I watched the cow bolt around the pen, eyeballing through the cracks in the panel fence. She held her tail high, and she was gelled-up and cat-backed. Trapped, she moved from corner to corner as if driven by some inexplicable tornado force.

"You want my coat or what?" Jarrett said.

"I'm fine." It was my mentality to never take something on the first offer, to let a person bargain and beg me into it. Truth was, that coat looked inviting.

"Suit yourself," Jarrett said, and left me. I heard the truck start, and turned to see Jarrett backing it up. I walked over to him.

"Where do you think you're going?" I asked.

"Get in and see," he said.

I walked around and got in. Jarrett maneuvered the pickup around and nosed it up to the fence, facing the cow. He shifted into park and turned the heater on high.

"May as well be warm," Jarrett said.

"Won't we waste a bunch of gas?" I said. The truck idled faster then dropped down to a normal rumble.

"Claxton would want you warm right now," Jarrett said. "Gallon of gas ain't nothing compared to no help at all."

We watched the cow through the window. She calmed some, which was good, and for a time stayed in the straw. Jarrett laughed, a sound like a hard hiccup.

"I ever tell you about the time I whupped on that St. Basil boy for calling my sister a whore?" he asked. "Best part, I ain't even got a sister."

"Jarrett," I said, "this is the first time we've ever hung out."

Jarrett said, "I know. Just wanted to see if you were asleep over there."

Jarrett told me his yarns: dirtbike rides, bar fights, and the Great Montana Bush Company, a strip club in Missoula, only pausing to light another smoke. The cab filled up with blue-gray haze. I felt warm within this cloud, dizzy, talking of things that would make my mother blush, topics that my father condemned in all his meetings.

Finally, I egged Jarrett on, saying, "You talk big, but I bet you're still a virgin."

Jarrett laughed so hard I thought he'd puke. "You shitting kidding me? You just wanna get your rocks off, hear about some real hot sex. Well, it's your lucky day, Jeremiah Foster, because I'm just the guy to indulge your dark side."

"I bet," I said.

"You're proving me right by the minute, Jeremiah. We're all just a bunch of animals."

"Thou sayest. But you still aren't talking."

"So here it is: my cousin and me, right, we got these girls from Archer who tell us—straight to our faces—that they're ready and willing, alls we gotta do is find a private place. So we had an idea in that my cuz's old man has a tree stand on the river bottoms he uses for deer hunting. We just have to class the joint up a bit. So we get some plywood for a roof and some walls, some camp mattresses and what not, and we call those girls and take them up there and—"

Mid-sentence, Jarrett plopped out of the truck and went over the fence, not bothering to shut the truck door. I saw the cow down on her side, her back legs rigid. Jarrett leaned down to her, the cigarette caught in the corner of his mouth. I shut the truck off, jumped out, and scaled the fence.

"Get that barn open," Jarrett yelled.

I ran across the pen and swung open the aluminum gate to the loading alley, unlatched the plywood door to the barn, and went inside and shut the newborn pens. I came back out and Jarrett was pushing against the red heifer, trying to make her stand.

"Get her on her feet," Jarrett said. We both pushed against the cow's haunches. She groaned. Jarrett knelt on her, wrapped her tail around his fist, and pried it over her tailbone. At the pressure, the cow stood quickly and bucked. The movement sent Jarrett off the cow's back in an arc, and Jarrett flew and thudded a few feet away. But he was up like a hare, and we chased the cow down the alley and inside the barn.

The cow thrashed through the moldy straw and crashed against the walls. She seemed gigantic and desperate in that small space, panicked and ready to eat us whole. At the head catch, I pulled the rope and snapped the gate shut behind the cow's ears. She yanked back hard, stressing the wooden joists, and then stepped forward to take the pressure from her throat.

Jarrett had his coat off. He'd sweated through his checkered shirt.

"Get her tail," Jarrett said. He rolled up his sleeve.

I grabbed the tail and pulled it out of the way. When Jarrett buried his hand inside the cow, her tail went rigid as a tree branch.

"The hell?" Jarrett mumbled, then slid in further. "Can't feel nothing." He closed his eyes, I imagined him visualizing what should be where.

"Not sure she's got anything," Jarrett said. He pulled out his arm and shucked off slime. "No face, no front hooves. Nothing." He picked up some straw and used it to clean his arm. "She ain't dry. She's got a bag full of milk."

"We should call someone," I said, growing worried.

"Hell no," Jarrett said. "This is our bad. We should have been paying better attention. Shit. Let me try one more time." He went bicep-deep again, eyes closed, talking to himself. His face lit. He propped his free arm against the barn wall and strained backwards. The cow contracted, and a tiny hoof emerged. Jarrett pulled again and this time the hoof came free and Jarrett fell back into the straw. Pale, Jarrett stood, holding the calf leg like a club, and looked down at it, perplexed and angry.

"That can't be good," I said, pointing to the leg. I'd seen calves come breech. I'd seen calves stillborn. But I'd never seen a calf in pieces.

"What the fu...." Jarrett trailed off, patting the front of his jeans and his shirt pocket. "Where's that phone?"

"That's just a leg," I said. Jarrett dropped the appendage and searched pockets with both hands. "That's not normal."

"Shit. Shit. Shit." Jarrett shuffled around the barn kicking wet straw. "Where's that goddamn cell? Go out and look in the truck."

I ran out and went through the jockey box and the door panel pockets and the crack of the bench seat and even looked inside the medicine cooler. I paused, stopped for a breather, and I looked down. There, on the seat, were Jarrett Buckett's cigarettes. I picked up the pack—sleek and bright, red and white—and pulled out one single smoke. It felt solid and sturdy, something I hadn't ever thought. Cigarettes had always seemed to me so delicate, feminine, like they should disintegrate upon touch. I replaced it in the box and then turned the truck inside out again.

I searched around the yard and re-walked our path to the barn. Finally, out in the pen where Jarrett had been bucked off, I found the cell, squashed in the snow, a crack down the screen. I took it to Jarrett, and he shook the phone a few times as if trying to revive it. We walked back to the pickup, Jarrett swearing all the way.

"You want I should go back down to church and get my dad?" I asked.

Jarrett took a small spiral notebook and half a pencil from the cooler. "No," Jarrett said. "I'm gonna get my ass canned over this. I know I am. Shit. It's closer to go to my house. I'm gonna draw you a map and you're gonna drive down and get my personal cell. Soon as you get it, call everybody you can think of and get us some help."

Jarrett moved so I could get into the truck. He shut the door and walked off towards the barn. He climbed the fence but waved me down before I could leave.

"And bring my calf puller. It's in the garage."

"Isn't there one in the barn?" I said.

"Yours," Jarrett said, "is a certified piece of crap. I got us one that worked."

Twenty minutes later, I pulled into the driveway at Jarrett's. Crystalline flakes fell from the gray sky. I went inside the kitchen and found the cell and flipped it open and dialed the house number. As the phone rang, although a twinge of nervousness invaded me, perhaps warned me, I walked down the narrow hallway of Jarrett's trailer. I examined the bathroom, the guest bedroom, Jarrett's own room. This invasion filled me with excitement. What did I expect to find? A tattooed woman asleep in his bed? Fleshy magazines of carnal positions? But all in all, it was clean and private but for a poster above Jarrett's bed of the Budweiser girls in red, high-cut bikinis. No one answered at my house. I walked out to the truck and called Claxton and Andy on their cells, but both went straight to voicemail. I called the house again as I walked to the garage for the calf puller. This time mom answered, home to put some water on the roast before church let out.

I explained the situation. She said she'd go find dad. I left the garage, puller in hand, and went back out into the bleak day.

A minivan sat behind the pickup, blocking its exit. An overweight man and woman took up the front seats. The woman in the passenger seat rolled down her window and I walked to her.

"Jarre..." the woman started. "You're not my son!"

Inside the van sat the whole family: Jarrett's father in slacks and white shirt and tie, his mother with her purple flower dress and ski coat, two young carrot-topped boys—miniatures of Jarrett himself—in the backseat, and an ancient and skeletal woman sitting straight-backed beside them.

The father leaned over his wife and grinned goofily. "Cold enough for you?"

"Pretty cold," I said.

"I was hoping," the woman said, "that Jarrett was home early so he could come for Sunday dinner. He's been working so much we never get to see him."

"You need a coat?" the father said before I could answer. "Got one in here somewhere." He turned to the backseat, huffing and shifting his weight, the van rocking with his movements.

"No, I'm fine," I said. I spoke to both of them. "Jarrett sent me down for his phone. We have a, uh, situation. On my way back now."

"Are you hungry?" the woman said. Before I could answer, she said, "There's a ham in the oven that I started before sacrament meeting. Should be perfect."

"No, no. I have to get back."

"Let me make you a few sandwiches. Done in a jiff." She nodded to her husband, who turned the van. They drove slowly down the road and pulled into the neighboring driveway, not two hundred feet from Jarrett's trailer. Jarrett's mother bustled up the steps and into the house, Jarrett's father helped the elderly woman across the snow, and the two brothers packing their bibles paused long enough to plaster one another with snowballs. Two heeler dogs rounded the corner and eyed me warily and disappeared under the porch.

Soon came the woman with a plastic grocery sack. "Tell Jarrett we missed him again," she said. "At church and at supper."

Back at the corrals, the barn was filled with a mish-mash of urgency and anger and overexertion and the hot foul smell of things gone wrong. Claxton had arrived and was standing behind the cow. He wore the mechanic coveralls that he carried in his pickup—a gray jumpsuit that had seen every job created by his farm and ranch. I could see my father still had on his white button-down shirt and tie and black slacks beneath his coveralls. His shiny dress-up church boots were splotched with excretion and blood.

"Let loose her head," my father was saying to Jarrett. "She's got to lay down."

Jarrett ran to the head catch and flipped free the catch pin and opened the beams. The cow stumbled back and flopped onto her side. I tried to give Jarrett his phone. He shooed me away, shaking his head, saying shit and hell alternately.

"Jeremiah, where's that puller?" Claxton snapped.

"In the truck," I said.

"What good is it to out there?" he said. "Go fetch it."

I went to the truck for it and when I returned, Jarrett had the cow by the tail and Claxton stood waiting for me. He took the puller and knelt in the straw.

"Calf's been rotting inside," my father said. "The vet'll be here soon but for now we're going to take out the pieces. She's pushing like she wants it out." Claxton sunk into the cow, chains in hand. "Think I got another hoof. Jeremiah, come work this." He motioned for me to take the calf puller.

I took the chains and hooked them to the sliding handle and then began to crank, hesitantly. The chains pulled taut. The cow moaned. I felt tearing on the other end, inside her, bone from socket, muscle from bone. I had pulled a calf once or twice before. Work with the cow. Pull the calf through the narrows. Then, in a release, in a wave of pink and gush, there comes the baby, alive. Break the sack, stick

some straw in its nose. Make it sneeze, breathe. There is the mother, warming its child, licking it clean.

"Faster," Claxton said. "Hurry. Work those contractions."

"Dad," I said. "Hold on." This was not the normal sensation. I cranked and—nothing. Nothing resisting, nothing waiting. I reeled in an empty line. The chains floated inside the cow, connected to void. And then I rocked backwards, past my balance point.

"You got to go faster," my father said.

I sat down in the straw and stopped cranking. "Give me a second," I said, dropping the puller. I propped my elbows on my knees, made fists, and rested my head on my knuckles.

"Dammit," Claxton said. "Jarrett, come run this thing."

Jarrett rushed over and took the puller. My father and Jarrett ignored me, focusing their attention on the metal and the flesh. I went outside, breathing in the freezing air, and leaned against the pole fence to watch the bovine movements out in the lot. So calm and predictable. Colored blobs chewing cuds in the great white cold.

A bright red diesel pickup arrived. It was the veterinarian, a big man with a gray moustache and knee-high boots that lived a few miles from our place.

"Hello Jerry-boy," he said. "Where's the action?"

I nodded to the plywood door, even though he was already headed that way, swinging his med box like a brown paper bag. I followed him inside, hoping my father wouldn't say anything to me in front of a stranger. Claxton conferred with the cow doctor.

The vet injected the heifer with painkillers. He made an incision, coated the innards with anesthesia, and reapplied the chains.

The vet held up his hands, which were coated in slick lubey goop, and said, "Jarrett, you need a vat of this for all that tail you're getting on the weekends?"

Jarrett smiled weakly, and my father knelt down and pinched open the heifer's eyelid and gazed at her eyeball for a time.

"Slicker than snot," the vet said, pulling out the dead calf in chunks and appendages. He flushed out the residual gunk, zipped

her back together, and dosed her with steroids and antibiotics. The mother cow, near death, lay in the straw.

"Good as new," the vet said, as he wiped his instruments clean on his pant leg.

Finally, the four of us left the barn. Jarrett, the veterinarian, and I all climbed over the fence, but my father, thin as he was, went horizontally between the poles, and then cleaned his hands in the snow. I carried the calf puller to the flatbed.

"Claxton," the vet said, "why don't you follow me down to the clinic and I'll get you the doses you'll need for next week."

My father got in his truck and rolled down the window. "You coming with me?"

I looked back at Jarrett, who leaned against the wall of the barn with one boot pressing against it, staring off into the hills.

"What are you doing?" I asked Jarrett.

"Push the herd to the night lot, then go home," Jarrett said.

"Mind if I stay?" I asked him.

"Why not?" Jarrett said. "Can't screw anything else up."

My father, who'd been listening, rolled up his window and followed the vet down the road before I could answer him. I walked over to Jarrett and gave him his phone.

"Sorry it took so long," I said, "but your mom and dad stopped me."

"Where'd you see them?" he asked, slipping the cell into his front pocket.

"They just got home from church," I said. "They sent up some food."

"Let me guess. Ham."

"Yep," I said.

"Fucking ham. You'd think that woman would throw in a roast every now and again."

We walked back to the truck. Jarrett took a soda and drank. I fished out a sandwich and handed it to him.

"I can't eat that today," Jarrett said. "You want it?"

"Not hungry," I said.

Jarrett took the sandwich and did some terrible looking baseball wind- up, kicking his lead leg high and pumping the sandwich behind his head, then hurled the dinner roll and meat as far as he could into the snow.

"Mind handing me my smokes?" Jarrett said.

I went to the truck and brought them to him.

He opened up the pack and then said, "Well, shit. Looks like we got us a damn rat, wouldn't you say, Jeremiah?"

"What do you mean?" I said.

Jarrett held out the pack. One cigarette was filter up, the brown end showing like some oil blotch in a field of paper white. "You tell me," Jarrett said.

"Well, I," I started. I took a deep breath. "I'm not going to lie."

Jarrett's face turned angry, and I thought he would hit me. I braced myself. Then he cracked up. "Shit," he said. "Think I care? Fact is, now that you touched it, it's gonna go stale unless you smoke it."

I stared into the pack. Sermons from my father and mother rattled around inside me. No, I thought. I'd prepared for this moment. Not even once; not even one.

I took the backwards cigarette and stuck it in my mouth. "Now what?" I asked.

"You shitting kidding?" Jarrett asked.

"Now what?" I repeated.

Jarrett rolled his lighter and held the flame out to me. "Now breathe," Jarrett said. "It ain't brain surgery."

I puffed in and ignited the end in embers and coals. It burned, and I coughed and coughed. Jarrett laughed and swore and slapped his tight jeans.

"Today's the day," Jarrett barked. "I can finally die peacefully. Jeremiah-mother-Foster, smoking like a chimney."

I inhaled again. Sweat beaded along my hairline. I exhaled at Jarrett, who waved through the smoke. I hacked some more, tried to laugh, my eyes tearing.

"Your old man," Jarrett said. "He can be a dick, can't he?"

"Your dad treat you like that?" I asked.

"Used to," Jarrett said. "But he's not too keen on it anymore."

"You know," I said, "I met your family, saw your place. Seemed nice. You and me, we aren't so different."

Jarrett tried to blow a ring into the shapeless sky, then flicked the spent butt into the snow. "You know what? My forearms are so tired feels like I spent all day whacking off a goddamn elephant."

We waited until dusk and then went out to the day lot with a broken bale of hay on the flatbed and drove around until the cows followed us into the night pen.

Jarrett turned on the floodlights while I double-checked the gates, then together we went into the barn and made sure the heifer still lived. She breathed shallowly in the shadows.

"She ain't three feet from death's doorstep," Jarrett said, nudging a hoof with his boot. "Come on, let's clean up this mess."

Jarrett took the ribs and leg and the hips, I gathered the backbone and ill-formed head, and we took it all to the burn barrel near the bunkhouse. Jarrett dumped in fuel from a gas jug, and then lit a handful of straw off his cigarette and dropped it in the barrel. Flames jumped out.

"I don't think it's going to burn," I said. "It's all wet."

"Well, what else is there to do with it?" Jarrett said as we walked back to the truck, "leave it for Andy or the Mexican boys? Forget that."

Jarrett drove the truck slowly back to the valley. We traveled mostly in silence. I thought about that cigarette, and even considered asking Jarrett to finish his tree stand story. But Jarrett looked tired and unhappy, annoyed, and I didn't push the subject. About a mile from

my house, Jarrett spoke up.

"I think it's time I uprooted," Jarrett announced. "I heard a guy can make a grip of cash roughnecking out in Wyoming."

"What about your family?" I said. "They seemed nice."

"They're all right," Jarrett said. "Just too close."

"You got to go someplace to eat Sunday dinner," I said. "That's what my dad always says."

"Your dad ever hear of ramen noodles?" Jarrett said. "Or Taco Bell?"

"That's not the point."

"Then what is?" Jarrett asked. We pulled into my driveway and Jarrett parked. "Listen, my family ain't going nowhere. I know where to find them if I need them."

"Do they feel the same way?"

"Look at me. I'm just a harelip. What would they miss if I hit the road?"

I nodded, then looked behind me to my house, making sure no one was outside. "Hey. Don't say anything to the other guys about me smoking, okay?"

Jarrett got into his own pickup and started it. "Jeremiah, I'm like a bear trap. Skull and crossbones and daggers and all that shit. I won't tell a soul." He grunted goodbye and left.

I walked towards the house. Below zero, for sure, by now. I bent down and took snow in my hands and scrubbed them together. Jarrett hit the highway, the exhaust pipes of his truck popping like gunshots.

In the garage, I stripped off my boots and jeans, caked with barn straw and manure and afterbirth, hung my sweatshirt on the pegs by the back door, and went inside. In the laundry room, I pulled on an old blue robe, then went into the kitchen. I heard mom somewhere in the back of the house, the other kids downstairs. Dad stood at the sink, a plate of food in his hands. He ate and looked out the window.

"Your mother saved you some dinner," my father said, nodding down to a plate covered with tin foil. Mom usually did this every Sunday for dad, who rarely made it home from his church meetings

to eat with us. She'd dish up a plate and mark the foil with a CLAX. The foil from dad's plate lay crumpled on the counter.

"How's she doing up there?" Claxton asked.

"She's breathing," I said.

"Cows go in okay?"

"Yes sir."

My father scraped clean his plate. "What do you think of that Jarrett Buckett?"

"I don't know," I said. "What do you think of him?"

Dad set his plate in the empty sink. "I wish he had a head on his shoulders, that's for sure. The plight of the cowboy, I guess."

"You're not going to fire him, are you?"

"Listen son," my father said. "The truth about people like Jarrett is that they don't last, wherever they go." He paused as if to say more, then walked out of the kitchen.

I unrolled the crinkled foil left from my father's plate and found that my mother had written JERRY-BOY across the top. Dad had eaten my food. I opened up his plate—CLAX as prominent and evident as a banner—and held it up to my face and sniffed. Mashed potatoes, corn, roast beef, all of it soaked in gravy. Our typical Sunday meal. But as I breathed, I smelled my hands, still covered with that wet dead stench from the calf, and a faint hint of blue tobacco smoke laced beneath. I couldn't eat this, not today, maybe not ever again. I scraped the food into the garbage can, washed and dried the plate, and went to the basement to shower.

In the stall, I turned on water as hot as I could stand. Why had dad eaten my food? Because of him, a fierce emptiness ached in my gut. I took the pumice stone and scrubbed my hands and forearms and ankles and thighs and the goop beneath my fingernails and the tops of my feet and my cigarette fingers until my body glowed pink and tender, until my skin looked like it belonged to someone else. **f**

Laura Christina Dunn

BRIDGE OF THE GODS BY CARLIGHT

Down the nightjars.
Blue fog at 4 AM
over the Columbia river,

steel beams, as fish nets,
knit across night,
headlights yellow the air.

The nightjar's silence,
as if encased in glass, is soundless feathers,
a moth in the mouth,

this damp winter. You pointed out fish scales,
I cannot see what the nightjars see,
down swinging claws

across water's surface. If you were
three hundred years old
again, you would remember

the river divided in half, earth fallen
from a mountain,
a dirt bridge

two hundred feet high,
and crossing to me
in sky-cold.

After rainshower, I am old
my bones untied by you
and the weight of wet clothing

pulling down on the skin.
And ash for the river, not enough from your body
to build a new bridge. Enough that if I drank

the water as it passed
I would lose my voice
for nine years. I remember you

feeding the birds that do not come,
you releasing a jar of gray moths
into a car's headlights. This is something

I would remind you
if I could see you again,
not just a body's char. Now

I must wade into oil spots in the river.
This silt is sunken land
that tried to connect two banks. Dark

now blends river with steel,
with bodies seeking to cross,
all whole with lightlessness.

My skirt mimics the movement of river
reaches into ash on the surface
for your wet hands. The water has given me

a fish's tail. Down the nightjars, somewhere,
and all we see,
and what we remember of seeing.

Marjorie Sandor

THRESHOLD

The shift toward fall in the Willamette Valley is so slight you can't mention it out loud—you'd sound like a two-bit psychic. Besides, knowledge is always more satisfying if kept to oneself. The true beginning of fall in western Oregon is so cleverly self-concealing and elusive it deserves a good solitary savoring in the dark fertile mind.

I kept it to myself as long as I could, but the fact is, this year it came tucked into a run of hot, early September days. I woke up one morning and saw, through the skylight over our bed, that the sky was a definitively darker blue than it had been the day before. The big elm that looms out of the back neighbors' courtyard, its branches waving like oracular wands, had achieved a new depth of green, ancient and sober and wise, with the gravitas of the last green of summer, weighty and full of shadows. On my morning walk I felt it again, barely, the intensified edge between two seasons.

I have been profligate, a glutton for real weather, hungry from childhood for the drama of seasonal change. Is it because I grew up in Southern California under a despotic sun? Cloud cover—let alone a serious rainstorm—felt downright subversive: to say out loud that you liked such a thing was a form of social transgression. But I remember such days with pleasure: they provided camouflage, a legitimate excuse to stay indoors, to read and dream under small lamplight. Autumn brought the faint clatter of the tiny claw-like leaves of the California live-oak underfoot, skittery, mournful, the next best thing to the elegiac swoosh of cars on wet pavement. More definitive—but still not quite speaking of the mortal truth I craved—was the arrival in late fall

of the Santa Ana winds. In my memory, these winds, reputed to break up marriages and send the crime rates soaring—are forever bound up with New Years' Day, when we'd awaken to find the smog of our valley blown out to sea, a reddish-brown rim in the distance, and our local mountains, the San Gabriels, briefly returned to us, purple-spotted by chaparral and dusted with snow, against an impossibly dark blue sky.

But some bright tang of the real still felt missing, and in late adolescence, I set out in search of it: first to Northern California, then to the Midwest, and from there to the East. A life that felt like my own, a weather to quicken my sluggish southern blood—who can say what it was? I only know that in Iowa, then Boston, I was, for a time, hypnotized by the apparent fulfillment of my childish wish: the violence of a short-course in cold-snap and mud season, in the tender brevity of spring, with its little snow of pale blossoms and sudden collapse into summer's damp and muscular embrace. Autumn seemed patently outrageous, with its in-your-face brilliance, the pungent scent of rotting fruit. I sat in my theatre-chair and took it all in; I believed myself saved at last from discontent.

But slowly it crept up on me, the old longing. Impossible—what could it be for this time? Why the siren song of the Pacific's briny tang, why the desire to tramp across some steppe of cropped grass barely covering a crust of redolent mud, why, on the tongue, the foretaste of mountain, ocean, estuary—absurd, this homesickness for a place that was, and was not, home.

But there it was, hinting of a West I'd missed in my adolescent leap from one form of overexposure to another, but have come slowly to recognize, to locate, in this threshold place. Here is the exact inexactitude I craved, in this valley made by the great Lake Missoula floods, flanked by coastal mountains on one side, and the volcanic Cascades on the other. Receiver of Pacific squalls that blow in, one after the other, speaking of dark gray oceans just beyond view. A place that asks you to be, as Henry James once said, the kind of person on whom nothing is lost.

This is true not only of the place, but of the seasons that inhabit it. For it is a peculiarity of this valley that while the last red leaves are on the maples, the azalea buds are beginning to open in anticipation of spring. And meanwhile, it's raining, off and on, off and on. The rain itself is of a special, elfin variety. In Scotland it has its own name: drowe, which signifies not only a cold wet mist, but a bout of illness, and a malignant spirit. Suffice it to say that the drowe in western Oregon is so light that you feel like an idiot if you get out your umbrella. Nevertheless, it soaks you through.

We are brought back to our mortal selves by the unpredictability of our seasons; by their refusal to conform to clichés. For in May, there comes a warm spell of such authority that everyone rushes out to buy tomato plants. Then the rains return, and chilly nights, and for a week, maybe two, the tomatoes sit tragically, turning silver at their tips. Then, too, the dahlias have gotten the green light, and up they come. At this point the rains return, and the dahlias' tender shoots are chewed down to their naked beginnings by starved slugs, those secretive habitués of true spring. What else to do but bow down before the utterly complex maybe of each season. To try, in some crackpot Jamesian way, to identify the little wendepunkt, that faint but inexorable turning point in its story.

So it was that a few days after that first faint September presentiment, the turn into autumn seemed undeniable. Corroboration came at the local farmer's market, early in the morning, where the farm-stand workers were all wearing big jackets and gloves, winter hats. They looked stunned and sleepy, their roughened hands cold, slow to pile up leeks and onions, the tomatoes that came so late this year. "It took me by surprise," said one farmer. "It seems too soon." He pointed over to another stand, piled high with Asian pears and Transparent apples, corn in mounds, dried fruits and honey and filberts, and gazed at them with a mixed expression of pleasure and worry: "Look at that—it's really harvest time." But fifteen minutes later, their gloves were off, jackets too, and the warm sunlight was back. There was no more talk, that day, of the coming rains. It was as if we'd all forgotten.

Still, like Eve having bit the apple, I knew now where we were headed. It took me a few days to absorb the truth that the fall was here, or more rightly, for the truth to absorb me. Soon enough I found myself squatting mercilessly beside the bolting arugula and the last of the tomatoes in our garden, pulling them out with a certain mournful violence, a form of acceptance, I suppose. But the next instant I found myself looking numbly at the great empty patches I'd created among the last—but still blooming—dahlias and delphinium and coreopsis and lavender, all in fine fettle and not suffering in the least. They had an attractive careless sensuality I admired. We're not done yet, they seemed to say. Nowhere near done.

The mixed feeling wouldn't go away. It craved resolution, or at least action. Trance-like, I made my way to various nurseries around the county, first to absolve myself of the arugula crime. I brought home starts of Bright Lights chard, mustard greens and more arugula, also two kinds of cabbage, the purple and the green. Another handful of saffron crocuses, fall-blooming, their little red tongues so alluring on the package label. The next day I planted, and was granted a few minutes of contentment.

But soon my restlessness was back. My mind raced past the anxious melancholy of fall, vaulted over hibernatory winter and the time of rain, rain, and more rain, leaped over this as over the February muds of our region to true early spring, for which we should be planting now. It is the right and natural thing to be doing, so why does it feel indecent?

Soon enough I succumbed to the next feeling. I went back to the nurseries and bought bulbs: narcissus and Dutch iris and tulips, and a Candytuft for that early look of white cascading snow in March, here in the Willamette Valley where our rare snows never last long. I went to the biggest nursery of all, Garland's, just outside of town. Once I got there, I was further seduced: over my head flapped special banners: Fall is Planting Time! Yet the place was suspiciously empty. The nursery employees pushed my cart roughly out of the path: it was their season now, and I'd intruded after-hours. Such desolation!

The little SALE! signs had fallen on their sides, and several yarrows were tipped over, as if after a wild midsummer debauch. And yet, the contradiction remained: the greenhouses were brimming with tulip bulbs, with special deals and vivid cardboard displays.

Where was everybody?

It dawned on me slowly, this truth I'd decided to embrace: maybe I'd been privileged to hear the sounding of the bell early. I held my little secret close, and gathered up my store of goods. The banners waved in the sharp new mountainy air, alive with a tang of distant snow. Behind me, a hundred wind chimes cried in magical lonely chorus—attend to me, attend to me—like the coming autumn itself. **f**

SALMON

On a mid-September day a few years ago, I stood next to the oldest of my four daughters on the banks of a mountain stream in western Oregon. The stench of dead flesh, of rot and mud, hung in the air—hardly redolent of motherhood, though motherhood was much on my mind. The snarl easy for mothers and daughters to get themselves into on my mind.

My daughter Amanda, who as a teenager was lanky and darkly mute, often sullen, had in recent years grown into a striking woman. But even though she was now twenty three years old, an adult, she and I sometimes found ourselves in a knot over what seemed to be small incidents, a tone of voice, a raised eyebrow at the wrong moment, minor but sticky confrontations that sent us fleeing, sore and angry—an old habit—to our own sad corners.

Here on the banks of the creek, far away from any such tension, I watched her, Amanda, a lovely mother: she held her swaddled three month old son in her arms, cupping the soft curve of her neck and chin over his head to keep the flies away. On the other side of her was my husband, Barry, who pointed out a small overgrown island in a side channel of this stream, perhaps thirty feet in the distance. This was an island he'd visited every fall for nearly forty years, climbing over fallen trees and other forest detritus to get to its center. That small patch of ground was one of the few places near our home to see chinook salmon that had made it to their natal waters to spawn. I'd climbed out there for the first time seven years earlier, when Barry, who I hardly knew then, had squatted next to me at the shallow water to take in the determined splash and churn of a handful of female

salmon near to death, each about to procreate. It was the place we'd have to go to now if we wanted to see this year's version of the same act, startlingly primal and consistent as rain.

I'd persuaded Amanda to bundle up her baby boy and come along this fall because I knew she wanted to see the astonishing presence of these just-returned animals. I also thought sunlight and bubbling water and the fish come to spawn would provide us a dimension of ease; a gentle repair after too many years of trouble that had begun in her early teenage years. It's not that we shouted at each other these days—no more slammed doors or harsh accusations or weeks-long silent punishments. Our squabbles were subtle now, though stung as much. Amanda and I also spent hours—days—in peace, cooking or walking, tending to the baby. Even so, I wanted more. More of that peace. More forgiveness. More putting the past in the past. I longed to put the residue of anger behind us for good. Now that she had her own child, I'd been waiting—anticipating, I'd say—for Amanda to tell me that she understood me in a different way.

"How do you get out there?" Amanda asked Barry in regard to the island in the distance. By way of an answer, my husband put one foot on the fallen log we'd used in past years as a part-way bridge, though this time he hit a slick spot and had to scramble to stay upright, reaching out to grab a cottonwood limb for ballast.

Amanda stepped back, alarmed. "I'll stay here," she said, hugging her boy closer, eyeing the pulsing log and Barry, who'd returned to the rocky bank. "You guys go ahead."

I raced to think how to change her mind. She had to see the salmon and she had to see them with me. Spring chinook once jammed this side channel, nearby creeks, and the river's main channel—tens of thousands of fish once returned to this area from the Pacific Ocean every September. Now only a few hundred came back. Maybe a few dozen. Chinook salmon was an endangered species across its western range, and I was certain she needed to witness their power in these waters before they disappeared forever.

While I thought of a way to reassure my daughter, Barry extended both of his arms toward Amanda. "Here, let me keep him," he said of her baby. "I'll be right here, never out of your sight." Amanda hesitated for a few seconds then, to my surprise, she rested the sleeping infant in Barry's arms.

Moments later, we were off, the two of us. Me pleased about this mother-daughter opportunity and Amanda happy but wary about being separated from her child. We got over the slippery log and other bridge-like flotsam on the water; once on the island, I scrambled over piles of rocks and branches, careful not to step on flyspecked, sun-swollen salmon parts hidden in the grass. All that remained of the dead was a disjointed head here, a bony tail there—salmon plucked by bears or otter from the river before they had a chance to spawn—though I spotted one whole and bleached-white skeleton nestled in a clump of grass, not a morsel of meat remaining on its bones. I called Amanda over so she, too, could see the perfectly formed white slivers; she snapped a photo with the camera she'd pulled from her pocket while I hovered near her, warm, vibrant, alive at standing with my child on the soggy ground with the musky creek bellowing past us.

Then the baby cried. Amanda jerked her head toward shore as he broke into a piercing wail. I couldn't see Barry from where I stood, but I imagined him stiff with the desire for one of us to stop the noise exploding from the infant in his arms. Amanda clicked the lens cap back onto her camera, the front of her blue t-shirt blooming in two dark circles. "I'm going back," she said. As if he'd heard that soft-spoken comment, the baby calmed right down and Barry called, "He's fine, don't worry!" Amanda looked at me, paused a moment, and decided to stay. I grinned and reached out to put my hand on her arm before she changed her mind. I was ready to lead her to the other side of the island so she wouldn't miss a moment of the live display of motherhood in the pool ahead.

The first time I saw salmon spawn in this river channel, those seven years earlier, I came without Amanda and without her younger sister

Stephanie because my older daughters had hit the road, they'd jumped a train; my teenage girls had disappeared in such a stunning manner that I feared they'd not reappear again. I didn't yet realize—wouldn't realize for years—my part in this disaster, which I'd have to face before we could forge a new relationship. The first weeks and months they were gone I allowed myself to be mired in self-pity, swimming in woe the day Barry led my two younger daughters and me to the island and up to the gravel bar where the female salmon dug and swept with their tails, building redds, and where the males waited in shadows for the moment they could disgorge milky sperm on top of freshly-laid eggs. While the fish tended to the job most fundamental to their existence, I stood raw in the breeze, trying to make sense of my blown-apart family.

I don't remember now how I told Barry, who'd soon become the person to whom I turned to talk out the worst of times, that my fourteen and sixteen year old daughters had left. I recall, vaguely, trying to pull off their leaving as a stunt. No big deal. Nothing to worry about. A phase that would pass in a matter of days. I didn't want him to know the extent of my despair, or to ask me much about what had happened, or why. I believed that our problems were too profound, too massive to try to explain. To ask me for a reason was like asking a passenger to say why his plane was crashing: nothing would make sense but the ground coming up fast.

But Barry was quite aware of what my daughters' disappearance to a drug and street life was doing to me. After an hour at the river channel that Sunday afternoon, he asked eleven-year-old Mary and nine-year-old Mollie if they wanted to hike a trail with him, to collect golden maple leaves as big as plates. The little girls had wearied of poking sticks at fish heads and rattling through bones on the shore, and they'd finished putting their fingers into thick bear paw prints in the mud and gathering pockets' worth of caddis fly-larvae shells. They'd seen the females fighting against the gentle creek current and males chased by other males, and were ready to go off in a different direction. I stood up, turned from the stream to accompany them to

the woods, when Barry said that maybe I'd like to stay by myself for a while. That was the surprise of the afternoon—that he'd noticed how keenly I needed time alone, even though my feet were cold and wet on the damp island, even though I was more tired than I ever remembered, and though the truth of what waited for me back in town—our house emptied of Amanda and Stephanie and no idea where in the world they were—was crowding my mind, my heart, this day.

Alone at the edge of the blue-green water I sat cross-legged on the bare bank. A female chinook, dullish silver, swam about three feet in front of me. Her tail waved back and forth, keeping her steady. Her eyes were chalky; a chunk of skin and meat a limp flag behind her dorsal fin. She seemed done in, completely beat. I watched her for about twenty minutes before Barry and the girls returned, and in that period the current swept her away four times. As if she'd suddenly lost her bearings, she was knocked sideways and propelled downstream, ten feet, twenty. As soon as she could get herself into a calmer pocket, she'd stay still for a minute or two, then she'd point her head upstream—the same direction she'd been aimed in for the weeks since she left the ocean—and swim back to the only hole in the world in which she could drop her eggs.

The first few recoveries, I rooted for her. I cheered the drive it took her to get to her nest, the instinct that wouldn't let her quit. The third time I was growing strangely agitated by her perseverance, my hands itchy now, and the fourth time the current got her—this one causing me to lean forward to check her gaping mouth, opening and closing as if she couldn't catch her breath, I thought: forget it. Stop struggling. The eggs may not, in the end, get fertilized by a male after all. Raccoons might dig them up and eat them; other animals or driftwood might scour them from the redd before they hatched. The fingerlings that did make it had only a slim chance of making it to the Columbia River and getting through their first year in the Pacific. This fish was working too hard for such a small chance of success. "Give it up," I said aloud.

But she swam back anyway to lay her eggs.

Seven years later at the island, Amanda and I soon heard the baby cry again. The crescendo of infant distress reached Amanda at a spot where she'd knelt at the edge of a pool in front of a fish—though not the pool or the fish I'd intended for her to see. The salmon she'd spotted was hiding under a mass of fallen twigs and branches, nearly camouflaged by detritus. I tugged at Amanda, trying to get her over to the other side, my side, where I'd seen the salmon years earlier. I was in love with the idea that the daughter of the fish I'd watched had returned to spawn, and I wanted Amanda to love that idea, too. But she pulled gently away from my hand and stayed settled on her knees at this other water, intrigued with the female that hid in a dark water cave under fallen Douglas fir limbs and thick moss for minutes at a time, breathing, resting– that then suddenly pushed her way out again to thrash at her redd with the last bit of strength in her battered body.

The baby wailed louder and Amanda got to her feet. "I should go," she said.

As she brushed the loose dirt from her pants, glancing back into the stream to keep track of the salmon she'd been watching, I realized how much she wanted to stay. I thought about how good it would be for her to sit there and begin to sort out the meaning of fortitude, as I had seven years earlier—I'd left the salmon island that earlier time with the tiniest speck of renewed hope and the faintest glimmer of faith in my own unwillingness to give up on my daughters. Now, I took her hand and said, "Stay here. I'll take care of him."

"Really?" she said. "Is that okay?"

I wanted her to beg me to stay; I wanted her to claim the experience wouldn't be right without me. I wanted her to wrap her arms around my shoulders and say she was sorry for every bit of hurt or fear she had inflicted on me those months she and Stephanie were away, and plead with me to not part from her now. But even then I understood that was my fantasy, not hers.

"It's okay," I said. "I've seen it before."

Amanda dropped on her knees again, and I climbed to the narrow bank. I gathered the baby into my arms and whispered to him while Barry made his way in the direction from which I'd come. I found a dry place to sit. I held my grandson to my chest, his milk-soft scent working its way up my neck and into my nose, his sobs moist and hot on my shirt. I rubbed his back under the blanket and hummed in his ear. Barry's voice mixed with Amanda's drifted over the gurgling creek. They were laughing, but I couldn't tell about what. When the baby fussed again, I stood up and rocked him. I sang, "you are my sunshine," as my grandmother had sung to me. In a few minutes, his eyes were closed and he was asleep.

Amanda and I left the salmon to their fate in the river and drove back down the gravel road late that September afternoon, Barry behind us in his own truck. Sun-drenched, tired. I was hungry and wanted my own kitchen, my own bed. Amanda, next to her son in the back seat, spoke quietly so not to disturb this latest nap. She talked about the fish that had drawn her in—the one she couldn't stop watching. The one that had rested in the branches then burst out again for the work it was most driven to do.

"It reminded me of labor," Amanda said, her voice thick. "It brought all of it back again."

If such a thing was possible, my heart both lifted and sank. Lifted because she was full of life and awareness and a desire to grapple with motherhood. Sank because her stir of emotion had nothing to do with our reconciliation, hers and mine. I watched in the rearview mirror and had my first jealous surge—strange as it sounds—of my own grandchild. He got to start clean with her. No history to contend with. No past. Nothing between them but possibility and love.

But then I glanced up again and saw Amanda gaze into her son's face with utter, complete adoration, just like a mother should look at her child, and was suddenly aware of the self-indulgence that had been at work in me all day. It was time for Amanda to have her own

life, and time for me to put the past behind us and stop believing that she owed me something for years that were gone, finished, done with. Anyone could see that—even, for at least that pulse of a moment, me.

I carried the diaper bag and a couple extra blankets to the porch of her house and handed them off to her husband when he opened the door. I kissed the sleeping baby in Amanda's arms; I kissed Amanda. I headed back to my car and settled again in my warm seat, realizing now the futility of driving my daughter up the river so nature's tropes could sweep away the last bit of anger and hurt between us. The anger and hurt still in me. With the afternoon sun streaming in my window, I understood what I had to do if the bad time with my daughters was to be ended. I had to live with everything that had happened just the way it happened. The fights, the running away, the fraught-with-fury returns, and all the days I believed I could not go on. I had to love what had happened, because it had led to this.

Amanda in her own home with her own family, figuring out how to be a mom to her son. Stephanie on the East Coast finishing college. The younger girls stumbling into the pleasures and troubles of the twenties. And me at home with Barry, who'd know just how to talk over the nuances of our day on the river while we washed the smell of fish and soil off our hands. I'd give myself the evening off from worrying about the next squabble with a daughter, sure to come in the days ahead. I'd let myself sit by the fire for a while, simply reveling in the knowledge that we would get through our troubles after all. **f**

Mary Clearman Blew

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARILYNNE ROBINSON

December 2009

Marilynne Robinson was born and grew up in Sandpoint, Idaho. Her novel *Housekeeping* (1980) won a Hemingway Foundation/Pen Award for best first novel and was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Her second novel, *Gilead* (2004), received the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, the 2004 National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction, and the 2005 Ambassador Book Award. Her third novel, *Home* (2008), was a finalist for the 2008 National Book Award and won the 2009 Orange Prize for Fiction. She is also the author of *Mother Country: Britain, the Welfare State, and Nuclear Pollution* (1989) and *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (1998). She is a member of the permanent faculty of the Iowa Writers Workshop and makes her home in Iowa City.

A reviewer for the *New York Times Book Review* called *Housekeeping* "So precise, so distilled, so beautiful that one doesn't want to miss any pleasure it might yield." Another reviewer for the *New York Times Book Review* called *Gilead* "a beautiful work—demanding, grave and lucid...Robinson's words have a spiritual force that's very rare in contemporary fiction."

MARY CLEARMAN BLEW

What was it like to be a teenager in Sandpoint, Idaho, in the 1950s? As I think of my own experience growing up in Lewistown, Montana, where it was distinctly déclassé to be caught listening to country music or wearing cowboy boots, I wonder how Sandpoint teenagers in your day regarded the timber industry. Was there a

glamour about the timberjack (a term I've never heard actually used), or was logging considered humdrum, or was there a defensiveness about logging? Were there signs in windows then, as there are in Moscow, Idaho, today, reading This Family Supported by Timber Dollars?

MARILYNNE ROBINSON

The fact is, I was a teenager in Coeur d'Alene. I went to junior high school and high school there. My parents' families lived in Sandpoint and Sagle, and that always seemed to me to be true home, even though I actually lived and went to school in Sandpoint only briefly on two occasions. I spent time at my grandparents' houses during summers and holidays. They were part of a very dense emotional terrain, and it seemed to me that everything that mattered had happened there. And the landscape itself, the bridge and the lake, were dazzling, numinous, perhaps more so because I saw them as a kind of outsider. I was born in Sandpoint, and I have always claimed it because it really formed my imagination in many ways. People there who think they must have known me try to place me, and they can't. My parents moved back to Sandpoint when I left for college, so there are people who remember them. This is all a little complex, and I rarely bother to explain it.

Of course the lumber industry was important in Coeur d'Alene also, and my father worked as a manager in a mill there. Frankly, I thought of myself as living a standard adolescent life. I didn't think of its miseries as having an especially regional character. Or its pleasures, which were largely associated with AM radio, Elvis, etc. I was a bookish type, less aware of my environment than most, I suppose. Certainly in Coeur d'Alene we did not consciously affect any regional traits or accoutrements. I don't remember the lumber industry as figuring otherwise than as something people did. It had not come under pressure yet as an environmental issue. I also have never used the word "timberjack." It sounds like a brand name for boots, or pancake mix.

BLEW

Were you eager to leave Sandpoint? Reluctant to leave? Do you ever go back to Sandpoint?

ROBINSON

Well, the fact is I left Coeur d'Alene. I went to Brown, where my brother had been for three years. He liked it, so I assumed I would. I think my life was already internal enough then that I didn't worry much about where I was or would be. That may sound strange, but my interests have always been my pleasures, and I have known for a very long time that the things essential to me would probably be ready to hand wherever I was.

BLEW

How did you come to choose Brown University (Pembroke College at that time, as I understand), which must have seemed as far from Sandpoint as the moon? Were your family and your teachers supportive of your choice? And what was it like to live in Providence, with its distinctive culture and seafaring heritage (and rich lore about vampires, one of my students tells me)?

ROBINSON

All our classes at Pembroke were co-educational except gym, and our degrees were from Brown. Pembroke was a sort of polite fiction that let the university maintain its character as a male institution—important at that time—and yet admitted women, though not too many of them. Brown then was rather modest and austere. There were plenty of students who came from privileged backgrounds and private schools, but the culture of the place discouraged ostentation—no telephones or television sets in the rooms, for example. No sororities. I found all this entirely congenial. I learned, as my brother had before me, that my Idaho education had equipped me to do very well in that environment, so any anxieties I might have felt about academics passed. In those days Providence was still down on its luck, still not

recovered from the Great Depression. It was a pretty rough town, and there were locals who found Brown students an irritant and a provocation. So we tended to stay on the hill. I remember days of radiant clarity, beautiful, sumptuous snowfalls. Providence is a lovely place now, all the wonderful old architecture they couldn't afford to tear down restored and wonderful again. Brown is utterly changed, Pembroke gone. I think I might find it less congenial now. This probably reflects badly on me.

BLEW

When you spoke at the Western Literature Association conference in Coeur d'Alene in 1989, I think I remember your saying that you couldn't write about Idaho while you were living in Idaho, and that in fact your first novel, Housekeeping, was written in Paris. Is my memory correct? If so, could you speculate on the reasons why such physical distance was necessary for you?

ROBINSON

I wrote a substantial part of Housekeeping in a village outside Rennes, in Bretagne, France Some of it in Seattle, some of it in Massachusetts. It comes down to a certain trust or dependency I feel toward my memory. I never keep a journal because I have learned that things of use to me stay in my mind, even though I am seemingly not aware of them at the time. And conversely, what strikes me at the time seems never to be useful. Distance throws me back on memory.

BLEW

The sense of an exact place is so strong in Housekeeping that a friend of mine who teaches at a university in Nebraska, reading that novel for the first time a few years ago, actually made a pilgrimage to Sandpoint so she could see the lake and the railroad bridge. I myself, every time I drive into Sandpoint, see an altered landscape because I have read Housekeeping. Could you tell us something about your

way of seeing that landscape? Do you agree with the idea that writing about a place alters that place?

ROBINSON

I do feel very strongly that a place is altered by the art that is associated with it. It is recommended to the attention even of those who know it very well. The entry into Sandpoint really is remarkable, and when I was a child I saw it just often enough, or seldom enough, never to become habituated to it. I saw it through stories I had heard—notably about a much loved uncle who died in a storm on the lake years before I was born. His sailboat capsized. I have never looked at the lake without thinking of him, though I never knew him. I'm sure this was important to Housekeeping, however indirectly. The lake was a huge presence in my family, as in most families there, I suppose.

BLEW

For all the sense that Housekeeping links us to an exact place, the episode in Chapter 8, in which Sylvie takes Ruth out into the lake in the stolen boat, has always seemed to me to transcend place. I remember, on first reading Chapter 8, thinking that I had never felt so cold in my life. Does, or did, the abandoned homestead really exist? Am I accurate to feel that it exists only in another realm, the one the grandmother leaped toward and the one Ruth (and I) approach?

ROBINSON

There really was a place like I described, cellar hole, dwarfed trees. I can't tell you where to look for it. I doubt it still exists. It did seem to belong to that other realm, and that may be where it is now. I am of the mind that experience, properly understood, exists also on another plane.

BLEW

When I read Gilead, I was immediately struck by the section, which begins, "When I was twelve years old, my father took me to the

grave of my grandfather." The trip that Ames and his father make into war-racked and poverty-stricken Kansas has for me the same feeling that I have when I read the stolen boat episode in Housekeeping, especially when the father and son finally locate the cemetery, of which Ames says, "That graveyard was about the loneliest place you could imagine." Just as Ruth sets to work to restore the abandoned house, so Ames and his father set to work to bring order to the graveyard, work that surely will be undone in time to come. And just as Ruth wishes to rescue the lost children, Ames remembers his pity and guilt at discovering the small graves of children. Would you talk about the way you see the parallels between these two scenes? The differences in the points of view of Ruth and Ames? Your purpose in describing the journey to the grandfather's grave so early in Gilead?

ROBINSON

This is the kind of question I really can't answer. Things come to me that the fiction seems to need, and I write them as well as I can. I see the parallel you point out, but I had never thought of it before.

BLEW

I was so impressed by Home on first reading that I immediately put it on the list of assigned reading for a class in the contemporary American novel that I taught during the fall of 2009. My other initial reaction to Home was to reread Gilead. I know that you've said elsewhere that you wanted the two novels to stand alone, but they seem so complementary and intertwined to me that I have a hard time imagining one without the other. My students, especially the creative writing majors, speculated that you began to write one novel but then saw that you really were writing two novels. I can see evidence for their views; I can also see evidence in the novels that they are mistaken. Please tell us about your writing process and how Gilead and Home came into being. (My students loved Home, by the way; I think it probably was their favorite novel of the semester.)

ROBINSON

While I wrote Gilead, and for some time afterward, I had no thought of writing a second book about the same place and people. But the Boughtons lingered in my mind, and finally I decided that they deserved their own book.

BLEW

I'm struck by the way domestic structures—houses—function in all three novels. The grandmother's house and the abandoned house in Housekeeping, old Ames' house in Gilead, the Boughton family house in Home, all seem to offer shelter even as they deny its permanence. But you also use internal space in arresting ways. I'm thinking of the shelter Jack Boughton creates for himself in the attic of the garage, which is a space within a space within a space. I'd like to know what these rooms, and rooms within rooms, mean to you.

ROBINSON

Again, I notice these parallels with a sort of objective interest—there it is again. I have never particularly wanted to repeat myself, but there are things so deeply in the mind that they are unconscious, and they will assert themselves. Houses have always seemed to me like worlds within the world, little habitable climates on a not altogether habitable planet. So they have a lot to do with the human situation, even above all they express of the histories, aspirations and so on of individual people and families.

BLEW

My students were fascinated by Jack Boughton and the unexplained mystery of much of his behavior. One student wrote about Jack's connection with the Reverend Ames, suggesting that Ames is Jack's true spiritual father. She also suggested that Jack is somehow linked back to Ames' grandfather, who also was a thief, although perhaps in the interests of better causes than Jack's. Do you agree with her analysis?

ROBINSON

My thoughts about Jack are hard to articulate. Quite a few people have written to tell me that he is like a brother or uncle or father of theirs, someone alienated and beloved. So I feel that my instincts about his character are vindicated to some degree. I guess I don't find people in general terribly explicable. He is simply more "mysterious" than most. And more aware, in a sense—more inclined to touch the nerves, test the boundaries, step over the lines that others observe without even being conscious of them. This is a kind of affliction. He does some real harm, to himself and to other people, notably to people whom he loves. He is inescapably himself. So his family yearns for him and grieves for him.

BLEW

I found myself drawn to Glory, her dismay at learning she was to inherit the Boughton family house, and her realization that she must abandon her dream of living in a very different kind of house along with her dream of the children who would live in that house. When Glory wonders to herself whoever thought of carving feet on the legs of furniture that resembles some "doily-infested species," I longed for the flood that washed Fingerbone clean of its needlepoint footstools. At the conclusion of the novel, what does Glory have to look forward to, other than years as caretaker of her brother's idea of home and her imagined meeting with Jack's grown son?

ROBINSON

Good question. She'll go back to teaching, I suppose. Her life had taken an unfortunate turn before Jack came back. Some lives are like that. And some of them may be deeper for lacking the distractions of "something to look forward to." She sees the house differently, now that she knows Jack has told his son about the place and invested it with the uniqueness and preciousness of family memory. This is a medium in which love is retained and communicated. What is life

about after all? I don't really think its about looking forward, so much as it is about feeling as richly as you can the reality of where you are.

BLEW

You have said elsewhere that teaching stimulates you. What do you particularly value in teaching, and how does your teaching further your writing?

ROBINSON

I have been fortunate to be able to work with very good students. Discussing the many aspects of writing fiction with them over the years has been a valuable learning experience for me.

BLEW

What advice do you have for young writers?

ROBINSON

Ignore everything you hear about what is publishable and write from the center of your own imagination. Discipline your prose to make it clear and strong. Do research—it will get you out of the narrow corridor of what has been your knowledge and experience. Expect difficulty, failure and rejection. They're just part of the life. **f**

Robert Wrigley

ARIDITY

Of all the blessings of the lack of rain,
the rarity of rust is among the best,
for it is why this windowless,
bullet-ridden '55 DeSoto
Fireflite is mostly sound and why, once the sagebrush
grown up through the chassis is cut away,
chains will be shackled at four points along
the frame, and the thing winched shrieking
up the steel ramps and onto a trailer,
then brought back to the lot near town,
where its kind, one by one, might be chosen
for reclamation, for restoration,
for the rebirth out of castoffedness
and heapdom, chosen from the dozen
that now doze one-eyed or blind in the corral
behind the shop, a ghostly motor pool
this still visibly three-toned hardtop
will be added to, like all the others faced north,
but with a snappy, devil may care tumbleweed
behind the wheel.

SWEEPING THE CHIMNEY IN A BLIZZARD

The chimney cap comes off with a twist,
but inside the stack it's a hive of scabby black
matter, crystallized carbolic brain lace
redolent of a deepfreeze packed with smoke.
Meanwhile the scent of bacon frying rises
from the fan at the kitchen range.
Late home from a week away, I regret
not having swept the flue I knew needed it.
The stove won't draw a lick, which is why
my wife both fries and basks before
the electric oven door, and why I'm here,
in the cold dark, in a headlamp, crotch deep
in snow and fumbling the long brush handles
together, my back to an arctic blast.

So, tell me, where does this odd sense of gladness
come from then? All the creosote I'll sweep
I'll sweep downward, and even after
I've descended the ladder I'll have to
go inside, unbolt the chimney bottom,
suck the dessicate slurry up
with the shop vac, and bolt it all back
before I can wad a single shred of newsprint
and nestle a grid of kindling over it.

And now, even the final, vital length
of brush handle won't, for some reason—
strippage or shivering, thick-gloved fingers—
thread, but I grow miraculously calm,
unnaturally at peace, and smile
into the lee of me, a snowless

tunnel illuminated by my headlamp,
the batteries of which, I am amused
to note, are failing, so that I will see,
very soon, almost nothing but snow
fallen and falling, which will require,
once I've replaced the chimney cap
and tossed the brush down onto the porch,

something close to a crawl along the eaves,
feeling my way to the ladder's two points
snow-swaddled but pointing unstarwardly still—
that's it: black stars. That's what it looks like,
the knit of flyash and creosote
that clogs the chimney's throat:

a billion glimmers on a field of black
the brush drives down into nothing but dust.
Farther up the mountain it's colder still,
and farther off the higher peaks must reel
before this wind, but even so, no more
than a half a mile upwind, some coyotes celebrate
a meal of snowshoe hare, and downwind
a ways, a bobcat catches not just my scent,
but the dark musk of char and cold fire;
the smell of my wife too, humming and warming;
and also creosote, and bacon, O bacon, as it fries.

BURGDORF SUTRA

1978

Rain on snow, and vast shelves and cornices
thundering down off the peaks to the east.
Icicles hanging from the flues of a moose.
Thumps and whumps everywhere: trees

shedding their burdens, limbs thrashing
as though in wind, though there is no wind at all.
Rain coursing down the ski tracks and sloshing
over boots. Cabin and hot springs nine more miles.

That recurring moment of wondering why,
typical. Heart pounding hard in the ears,
the body alive inside the pain of fatigue, the sky
a spectacular menace of grays, and at the pass

the rain changing back into snow,
ski wax fouling again. A stop to scrape,
pass the flask of icy rum, pass a smoke,
admire in happy misery even still the landscape—

high valley, chains of tabula rasa meadows long fled
by the lesser, smarter animals, a new cold coming down
with the snow, the returned invigorating glide,
left turn at the final two mile junction.

Four days from that point, the ski back home
no one thinks of. And at fifty yards, the airborne flavor
of sulphur, the pool's hot scent, and a woman
with a child waving, wearing nothing but steam.

Brandon R. Schrand

WHY I STAY

1.

Rick Bass's Winter: Notes from Montana is, for me, a keeper of a book, one of those you find yourself coming back to again and again. It's a slim, unassuming volume—almost apologetic—and chronicles Bass's first winter in the hinterlands of Montana's Yaak Valley. It is also a kind of treatise on why he chose the Yaak, and by extension, why he defends it from invaders, marauders, looters, and ignorance. The book first arrived in my mailbox on a spring afternoon in 2003. It was one of those books that float into your life at just the right time. I was then a full-time graduate student, father, and husband. I recall pulling the book from the packaging as I raced out the door to teach one of my freshman composition classes. While I crossed the quad on that spring day with robins pecking in the grass, I turned to the first page and read this:

> I'd been in the mountains before. I'd gone to a college built on the side of a mountain, Utah State University, and had never been so happy—not at being young or being in college or being free, but happy just at being on the landscape, moving across such a strange, wonderful land.

I stopped mid-stride and looked around. I, too, was at Utah State University, and had only then made the connection that Rick Bass had been there, on that very quad, no doubt, and had looked as I was then looking at Logan Canyon and the Bear River Mountains that towered over the campus. It was one of those moments we call the "shock of recognition," and I was sucked in from the get-go. For years,

I had had it in my head that I wanted to be a writer and this book fueled in no small way that daydream.

Later that same spring, and after I had burned through Bass's Winter, I finished my MA in American Studies at USU. Shortly before graduation, I learned that I had been accepted into the MFA program in creative writing at the University of Idaho. They gave me a teaching assistant gig, some scholarship money, and my wife, Kelli, and I said, "Well, that's that. We're going."

Although I am a fourth-generation Idahoan (born and reared in Soda Springs, a small town in the southern part of the state), I had never been to Moscow (pronounced Moss-Coe)—a funky, woodsy college town up in the panhandle, or, more specifically, on the Palouse—a verdant place of rolling hills and forest. It is collision of color and contour—all lentils, rapeseed, mustard, and dry peas. Electric yellows and burning greens.

So I was ecstatic.

I was ecstatic in part because, like Rick Bass, I also wanted to get into some remote swath of rural land and write. I was smart enough to see it as a Romantic notion, some Thoreauvian daydream, but I didn't care. Rick Bass moved to Montana's Yaak Valley and I would move to Idaho.

But amidst the ecstasy there were real concerns, too. Becoming a writer, for instance, is a crackpot notion. Something best left to madmen who are single, skinny, and who smoke a lot. Sane people don't prod their families into the woods so they can become a writer. Who was it that said, "I'm going to the woods with a typewriter and a gun, and it's going to be one or the other"? So there ensued a war between the concerns and the daydreams. The daydream itself would keep me from rooting around in parts of my head where logic took up residence and issued forth reprimands, reproaches, and recriminations. Logic said that it would be easier to become a pilot, surgeon, or astronaut than it would to be a writer. Logic said that I had a family to think about. Logic said just getting one thing published would be next to impossible let alone a book, or many books. Fools

gold, pie in the sky, pipe-dreams, the lot of it. Better to get a job and settle down. Then if the fancy strikes, sharpen the pencil and amuse yourself with the little stories you'd like to tell. Just don't make your family suffer while you chase rainbows. That's what logic said.

But the daydream arrives at night like a lover. Like a drug. Like hypnosis. Before you know it, you're afloat in its crystal waters and you can see yourself. Yes, you can see yourself writing in a studio tucked in a grove of ponderosa and throwing hunks of wood on the Bassian fire that fuels your wonder.

As it turns out, it was a good time for Kelli, Mason (our son who was not yet three), and I to take our leave of Utah. While part of me will always long for the Bear River mountains that tower on the east side of Cache Valley, or the dramatic Wellsville range that juts to dizzying heights on the west side, and all the canyons—my God, the canyons!—I felt that Logan was going the way of so many western towns. That is was becoming sprawly and big-boxy and obnoxious. Where alfalfa fields once raged, there stood parking lots and planned communities and car dealerships so large and illuminated you could, I swear, see them from space. But this complaint—that of the insider who feels he has been trampled by outsiders or the dynamo of consumerism—is not new. It is less swan song than it is gripe. If I were really affected by it all, I could, I suppose, get involved. Attend meetings. Deliver speeches. Pound podiums. Form coalitions. That would be the responsible thing to do. But I wanted to live in a place in which I felt driven, like Bass, to defend. A place like the Yaak Valley, for instance. And Logan, Utah wasn't it. So in the end, we sold our house, waved our flag of surrender, and turned north toward Idaho.

Part of Idaho's appeal, I think, is its inaccessibility. It is not an easy state to navigate even under the best driving conditions. For example, there exists no freeway that connects the panhandle with the rest of the state. In order to travel north to Moscow from the Idaho/Utah

border (where we were), you either have to light out northwest on I-84 toward Boise for six hours, and then cut north along a zigzagging highway for another six hours. Or, you can bear northeast on I-15, cross into Montana, veer northwest toward Missoula, taking I-90 to the top of Montana (hello Canada!), and hook due west into the Idaho panhandle, and then drive south for another two hours. Or, once you have reached Missoula, you can angle due west, crawl up the switchbacks of Lolo Pass, drop down into Lewiston, Idaho, and then shoot north for Moscow. Although this route is shorter by distance, the highway follows the Clearwater and Lochsa Rivers and is marked with signs like "Winding Road Next 99 Miles." You can average, if you are lucky, 50 miles per hour. But not much more. Nor would you want to. It's a drive to be taken in. Recall that this is where Lewis and Clark traversed over two hundred years ago. In *The Journals of Lewis & Clark*, you can almost hear their exhaustion, fatigue, and dismay: "The road through this hilley Countrey," they write, "is verry bad passing over hills & thro' Steep hollows, over falling timber &c. &c. continued on & passed Some most intolerable road on the Sides of the Steep Stoney mountains."

There's bad. And there's very bad. And then there is verry bad.

I can only imagine their stomping through this nearly impenetrable landscape. Two years ago, I had time on my hands, and took, for the first time, this route on my way south to visit family. Lewis & Clark nailed it. The mountains are massive and dark with pines. In the middle of the pass you actually feel like you could be in the center of a Bierstadt painting, a diminutive figure in his sublime vision. The river was low and slack in some places. It was late summer—September 12, to be exact. I remember the date for three reasons. It was the day after my son's birthday. It was the day that David Foster Wallace died. And it was the exact day that Lewis & Clark made their epic pass 203 years earlier.

It is a remote and wild and unpredictable landscape, all stone and water and trees. Some of the aspens were beginning to yellow and their leaves cart-wheeled alongside the road or floated the riffles

between ancient river rocks that looked like stone whales. The route is all hairpin and buttonhook turns, a road relegated to the contours of the rivers that have carved out this world.

Regardless of the route, you are looking at a solid twelve hours of driving. When I tell people this, they inevitably sigh, as if fatigued just by the thought of it.

"Isn't it great?" I say, because it is.

After opting for the mostly-freeway route that flings you up near the Canadian border, we settled in a two-story Victorian rental in Troy—a tiny logging town eleven miles east of Moscow. It had a terraced yard, an apple tree, room for a garden, wood burning stove, and a wide front porch that overlooked the town. Troy, population 700, huddled in a wooded gorge and was lined with steep streets, smelled of rip-sawed lumber, and you could hear the continual whine of the mill working day and night. At one edge of town, decks of logs rose up from the mill yard, and at the other, grain elevators towered over Main Street.

I spent those first autumn afternoons splitting and stacking the two cords of tamarack I had ordered. The labor had a rhythm to it, and the more I split and stacked, the more I came to know the axe handle and its sweet spot, how to avoid knots, and, finally, the art of adjusting the stove's damper. When I wasn't stacking wood, I was busy putting my office together. I built a set of bookshelves, arranged my books just-so, and set to work on some essays I wanted to write.

Kelli had lucked into a great job with the university, and Mason attended daycare on campus. Everything, it seemed, was right in the world, like all the sunshine fell just on us. On the weekends, Kelli and I canned tomatoes, green beans, and peaches. We baked bread and took Mason on hikes on Moscow Mountain. It's difficult for me not to romanticize that time in our life. But to crib Bass, I, too, had never been so happy before. I was young. I had a great family. I was writing and teaching. And we lived in this place—this wonderful place—and for the first time in a long time, perhaps in my entire life, I felt at home.

Troy, Idaho had everything we needed all within two blocks. A general market where you could buy a few groceries and household items like candles or fuses or pencils. You could buy wine, fishing tackle, rent movies, and try your luck on lottery tickets. We had a library, post office, city hall, barber, mechanic, three bars, and a liquor store. On the edge of town, between the mill and the city park, you could find a gas-station with a laundry, and the White Pine Cafe. Behind our house, a gravel road meandered into a grove scored by a brambly gulch and I would take morning walks through there after writing.

Of course not all of them were sunshine days, plucked from the hypnotic pages of some Wordsworthian ode. We were poor. Very poor. Even with Kelli's job we struggled. Summers were especially hard. No classes to teach meant no income on my part. Our bills would stack up on the counter unopened. We bought our clothes second-hand, and relied on—more so than we ever would have thought—the truck we grew in our garden. So it wasn't easy. Eventually, even the labor of chopping wood lost its dreamy luster. Funny how the Romantic notions of a writer's idyll can wither and deflate under the cruelties of the real world. There is nothing Romantic, for instance, about coming home after work in January to an ice-box of a house having to split kindling outside in the dark and light a fire while your wife and son hop from one foot to another to keep the blood flowing, their breath clouding the air in whitish plumes. There is nothing Romantic, for instance, about the constant burns on your fingers, hands, and wrists from all those quick fiery flesh-on-stove kisses, which is much more frequent than you could ever have imagined.

The daydream, in other words, was giving way to the reality.

Consider, too, our snake problem. The landlord omitted the part about the snake colonies that resided in the stony terraces of our yard. We're not talking rattlers or boas or cobras; just your average garter snake. But to me, a snake is a snake is a snake, and I squeal like a little kid every time I see one. My neighbors—some of them third and fourth-generation loggers—must have rolled their eyes and

clucked their tongues whenever they spied me bolting from a snake. On any given afternoon while tending my garden or splitting wood, I would see one in my periphery or one would slide by my boot, and I would squawk and fling whatever tool I had in hand—hatchet, hammer, hoe—and high-step it to the porch. Meanwhile, the neighbor kid—a red-headed seven-year-old boy with wide-set eyes who always ran around in his dirty, white underwear—would swing snakes over his head like a rodeo man and fling them one-by-one into the street or onto the roof of his house while I watched from my porch goggle-eyed in abject paralysis. Once, I broached the snake situation with a different neighbor who just laughed: "Wait 'til you hit one with the lawnmower." Jesus! I thought. I hadn't considered that! Then there hatched a new paranoia. I was petrified of hitting one with the mower and my mind would obsess over the sliding-thunk! sound it would make and the spangles of blood and snake-meat on my trousers and on and on.

Egad.

2.

One can go crazy with such thoughts, but such thoughts can be tamped down by distractions, by routines. Routines, by definition, are about the familiar. They take root in reality, not in daydreams. In the summer and on weekends, I would pull Mason in his wagon to the post office where I would drop off a bundle of manila envelopes containing my latest round of essays, my latest round of hopes dispatched to literary magazines nationwide. But just as I had sent hope out the door and into the world, I would check the mail and find my hopes dashed by the usual array of one-sentence rejection slips.

But if our days in Troy were marked equally by the good and the bad, the ups and the downs, by the daydreams and the realities, then so too is the state itself a potent admixture of oppositions: ranchers and hippies, reds and blues, wolf lovers and wolf killers, tree huggers and loggers, miners and back-to-earthers, northerners and southerners. The only commonality these disparate groups might

share is their fierce love for this place. If it is a collision ground of color and contours, then so too is it a collision ground of ideas. Of voices. Of people who see this place as sacred, and therefore worth defending.

It's no revelation to say that Idaho is among the reddest of the red states. Republicans have held court in Boise for as long as I can remember. Of course, for those who align themselves with the GOP, this distinction is a matter of pride, tradition even. But because I grew up in a house of Democrats (my dad is union electrician) in southern Idaho (the very reddest stretch of the state), and because I grew up more or less without religion (in a territory dominated by Latter-day Saints), and because my parents didn't work at Monsanto—the chief employer in the county—I know something about being an outsider in a decidedly insider state.

But if I am honest, I will admit that I never felt like an outsider while growing up. At least not in any consequential way. It was, however, when I left Soda Springs, when I left home, that I felt an unexpected chill. And each time I go back, I leave a little more broken. How could I have known then, as a young man, that you can never really go back and stay because to leave in the first place was itself a kind of betrayal? Leaving always relegates you to a duplicitous state: you are both insider and outsider. You are of that land, and foreign to it. You belong, and you don't. You can never return. Not really.

Yet in a sense, I do return, time and again. What I began writing in those early days when we lived in Troy, when I was indulging my Bassian daydreams, and when we were poor and happy, amounted to an attempt at reconciliation. No matter what subject was at hand, my background and my place crept in like unsettled business. And the more I wrote about my place, about my hometown, the more I became passionate about it. The more I felt connected. Yet, paradoxically, the more I felt estranged. You can't, for instance, write about the ills and evils of Monsanto (which I have done elsewhere and at length)—the very company your friends depend on for sustenance—without forsaking something.

Something is always lost in writing about one's place. It occurs to me, too, that the more you love a place and the more you write about it, the more there is to lose. This all runs counter to what we think when we set pen to paper. Writing about one's place doesn't seem complicated at first blush. What, in fact, could be easier? But complexities abound. My roots are in the southern part of Idaho, but I make my home in northern Idaho. They are different worlds to be sure.

Any time I drive the length of the state, I note the line where the sagebrush stops and camas begins. I note where the time-zone changes from Mountain to Pacific, and the dramatic drop in elevation the farther you go north. I note where irrigation dies out and dry-farming picks up. I can see where the juniper and cottonwoods give way to the evergreens. I note where the desert ends and the rivers begin. Where the Sawtooths vanish in the rearview and the undulating Palouse shimmers in the distance.

3.

One morning last summer, at an artist's colony in the east, I found myself at breakfast with a small group of fellow writers, all of whom were from either Manhattan or Brooklyn (mostly Brooklyn), and none of whom had ever been west of the Mississippi. "So you live in Boise," one said, more as a statement rather than a question.

"No—that's southern Idaho. I live up north in the panhandle, on the Idaho-Washington border." I sipped from my coffee, and quickly added, "I am *from* southern Idaho, but I prefer the northern part of the state so much more. I don't think I could live in southern Idaho again."

One woman with severe eyes and thick-framed glasses said, without missing a beat, "Why? Because it's trashier?"

Trashier. Translation: all of Idaho is trashy, but the southern part just happens to be more trashy than the north. Her comment was, of course, rude, thoughtless, and ultimately said more about its source than its subject, but it did speak, I think, to uninitiated perceptions

of Idaho. It's marginal. It's on the fray. It's feral. It's home to whackos and gun-toting loons. Still, the comment left me smarting, but instead of offering some kind of defense, I redirected the conversation.

"Southern Idaho," I said, "has been decimated by strip mining and taken over by corporations like Kerr-McGee, Simplot, and Monsanto."

Everyone nodded and the conversation moved toward Monsanto and GM foods and we were, thankfully, out of the wilderness of Idaho talk.

If I have lived half my life saying and writing things in just the way I wanted, I have spent the other half not saying the things I should have. What I should have said that morning at breakfast was that they would do well to take a drive through Lolo Pass. They should spend twelve hours driving in the same state and confront its dramatic changes.

What I should have said is this: drive across southern Idaho's great Snake River Plain where you can see for miles, hundreds of miles, in any direction on a cloudless day. See Craters of the Moon. Witness the great swags of sagebrush and massive shelves and kerfs of buckled and broken basalt abut bright-green alfalfa fields. Witness how the sun's blazing light puts rainbows on the irrigation mist. At harvest, see dozens of combines—custom cutters—mowing through the barley and sunlight and dust like enormous slow-moving bulldogs. See the swathers cutting the summer's last crop of hay. Notice how the bales dot the landscape in a fit of agrarian geometry. What I should have said was this: if you haven't smelled freshly mown hay in the high desert, haven't breathed in that sweet, dank, heavy-hearted smell of promise, then you haven't lived. Whenever I find myself in its midst, I feel intoxicated by the memories it rushes to my mind. When I moved sprinkler pipe as a bony teen, bucked fifty pound bales, or when I drank icy water straight from the farmyard spigot at day's end and ached for the towngirls, tanned and perfumed, like heartbreak waiting to happen.

Idaho's story, I might have said, is the story of the West. It is a story of paradox. It is both wasteland and arcadia. There are super-funds and national parks. It is pristine and ruined. There are family farms and corporate farms, organic farms and feedlots. It is complicated and wonderful because of its own oppositions. What better place to write about?

4.

Before Kelli, Mason, and I crossed the border from Utah to Idaho, people would ask why I was going to the University of Idaho (*of all places*, their tone suggested). "Because I want to be an Idaho writer," I'd say. Inevitably some wisecrack would follow along the lines of, "Way to set such a high bar for yourself!" And I would laugh. But I was serious too. There were, I would argue, untold stories in Idaho. Montana was filled with writers (Rick Bass among them), but Idaho seemed like fertile ground. So I always saw my daydream of an occupation rooted in a specific landscape.

Most days I am glad to be a borderlander—someone caught in that strange place between insider and outsider, between northerner and southerner, between daydreams and reality.

I recall my September trip through Lolo Pass two years ago. After spending hours on its looping roads, and after crossing into Montana (southbound), and then back into Idaho at Mon-Ida Pass, I saw the entire Snake River Plain before me. It was nearing dusk. To the west, the sun roared above the horizon, and to the east, I found its foil: the moon. A pale disk pasted to the clear blue sky, it was full and rising. And I drove between them, the sun and the moon. I recall, too, how my eyes swept from west to east, from sun to moon, and with my window down, I could smell the new-cut hay. My car threw its cinematic shadow over the alfalfa fields, and out of nowhere, I broke. I began to sob, but I didn't know why. Or maybe I did. Just maybe. **f**

CONTRIBUTORS

KIM BARNES was raised in the logging camps of the Clearwater National Forest of Idaho. She is the author of two memoirs and two novels, most recently *A Country Called Home,* which received the 2009 PEN Center USA Literary Award in Fiction. Her first memoir, *In the Wilderness*, was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. Her forthcoming novel, *American Mecca*, will be published by Knopf in 2011. Barnes, a former Idaho Writer-in-Residence, teaches writing at the University of Idaho and lives with her husband, the poet Robert Wrigley, on Moscow Mountain. "On Language: A Short Meditation" is forthcoming in the anthology, *The Manner of the County: Living and Writing the American West.*

RICK BASS is the author of 24 books of fiction and nonfiction. In September, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt will publish a novel, Nashville Chrome. He lives in Yaak and Missoula, Montana, and is a board member of the Yaak Valley Forest Council (www.yaakvalley.org), a community service organization working to help protect as wilderness the last roadless lands in the Yaak Valley.

CATHERINE CHAUVIN grew up in Kettering, Ohio and has lived in six states (consistently moving west). She currently lives in Colorado working as an assistant professor at the University of Denver. Catherine trained at the Tamarind Institute in Albuquerque, NM, after earning an MFA at Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY. Currently, Catherine uses her drawings and prints to examine what is done to the environment in the name of progress.

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TERESE COE'S poems and translations have recently appeared in *The Times Literary Supplement, Agenda, Orbis, Threepenny Review, Ploughshares, Poetry, New American Writing, 32 Poems,* and *Smartish Pace*, among numerous others, and her first collection of poems, *The Everyday Uncommon*, won a Word Press publication prize in 2005. She was awarded First Prize in the 2008 Helen Schaible Sonnet Award, was a finalist in the 2009 and 2004 Willis Barnstone Translation Prize, and has received two grants from Giorno Poetry Systems.

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PETE FROMM won a fourth Pacific Northwest Booksellers Literary Award for his latest novel, *As Cool As I Am*. Earlier winners were his novel *How All This Started*, story collection *Dry Rain*, and memoir *Indian Creek Chronicles*. Author of four other story collections, he also teaches in Oregon's Pacific University Low-Residency MFA Program. He lives with his family in Montana. "Freezeout" was originally included in the collection *Night Swimming*.

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Beginning in 1939 ERNEST HEMINGWAY visited and hunted and fished and loved Idaho, and he is buried here, but he wrote very little about the state. He is said to have written much of his novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, in Ketchum/Sun Valley partly because the terrain reminded him of the portions of Spain where the action was set.

CHRISTOPHER HOWELL, an Oregon native, has published eight collections of poems, most recently *Light's Ladder* (University of Washington Press). A New & Selected volume is forthcoming from UW, and another collection will appear in 2011 from Milkweed Editions. He has received three Pushcart Prizes, two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, and fellowships from the Washington Artist Trust, and the Oregon Arts Commission. He has been director and editor for Lynx House Press, The Bluestem Press (in Kansas), and Eastern Washington University Press. He teaches at EWU's Inland NW Center for Writers, in Spokane.

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RON MCFARLAND has taught literature and creative writing at the University of Idaho since 1970. He was named Idaho's first State Writer in Residence in 1984. He was "in on the founding" of *Fugue,* but accepts little credit for its evolution to its current stature.

JOY PASSANANTE is the Associate Director of Creative Writing at the University of Idaho and has published work in various literary journals including *The Georgia Review, The Gettysburg Review,* and *Shenandoah.* Both her collection of stories, *The Art of Absence,* and her novel, *My Mother's Lovers,* were finalists for national awards. She has received

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BENJAMIN PERCY is the author of a novel, *The Wilding* (forthcoming from Graywolf in the fall of 2010), and two books of stories, *Refresh, Refresh* (Graywolf, 2007) and *The Language of Elk* (Carnegie Mellon, 2006). His fiction and nonfiction appear in *Esquire, Men's Journal, The Paris Review, Orion, Glimmer Train* and many other magazines and journals. His honors include the Plimpton Prize, the Pushcart Prize, a Whiting Writers' Award, and inclusion in *Best American Short Stories*. He teaches in the MFA program at Iowa State University.

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ROBERT WRIGLEY'S books of poetry include *Earthly Meditations: New & Selected Poems* (Penguin, 2006); as well as *Lives of the Animals* (Penguin, 2003), winner of the 2005 Poet's Prize; and *Reign of Snakes* (Penguin, 1999), winner of the 2000 Kingsley Tufts Award. *Beautiful Country*, his eighth book, will appear, again from Penguin, in late 2010. A former Guggenheim and two-time NEA Fellow, he teaches in the graduate writing program at the University of Idaho.

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