MONTANA

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ISSUE
CutBank 4
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Cutbank is published twice a year, fall & spring, funded by the Associated Students of the University of Montana. Subscriptions: $3/year. All correspondence should be sent to Cutbank, c/o English Department, University of Montana, Missoula, Mt 59801. Unsolicited manuscripts are encouraged but must include a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Copies of numbers 1—3 available at $2 each.

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COVER PHOTOGRAPH: Nick Baker/Warehouse
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THINKING MONTANA

Some days I celebrate space
the raw clash
of homesteader's shacks with my Buick
I sense
the madness that must have grown
all long winter long
and still grows in bars we call home
what does that cow know about me
the friendly people
victims of harsh demeaning days
with no reason
and too much need to be friends
sad Indians
with license to spit
when I drive through Browning
the thick despair
how in that spatial monotone
of plains
and power lines
bad things we ought to forget
compound themselves into storms
how one friend
turns snow gold
and how the names of rivers
grow inside us wild
as runoff in May
I feel like a child there
like America's back
in the '30's
the leisurely barbers
the aimless meaningless
all too vital chat
of clerks in stores
the unstated ideas
we used to accept
that every life's important
every death
even our boredom
that money will always be hard to get
and poverty's no crime
that we help each other
stay true to our lives
even the spring seems old
some former spring
the firm odor ground gives off
when it hardens
the high rivers defined in our blood
and it breaks wide in the mind
Montana
breaks like a lover's sky
warm blue and forever
I've died there often
my car
kisses the wide day ahead
CLOSING THE DISTANCE

It begins like this:
grey light, shadow
of wild plum, snow.
I have grown used to waiting
dark on the edge of sleep,
the river cracking
ice on the river,
clear smell of pine. All night
dreams unravel the breath,
the heart steady
as though passing through a tunnel,
a sure glow at the far end,
fish blood, fish head,
the long sad pull of the sea.

Driving, one hand
on the wheel asleep,
distance falling from the wrist,
through rain, fog,
the great vessels of the heart
and brain, transparent blue glass.
Ice on the windshield
through the pass, follows the scar
on the mountain
slowly down.

The house stands, weed
and fern lain flat
by the wind, mist
on the windows like steam
from the forest floor.
Pillage of fallen fruit,
small birds wing their way out
the salt of centuries on their tongues.
DAYS IN THE CAR

The flat road threatens
to whip me through the sky.
I remember a dying fog: it kissed
our bed and the right words
flew away.
I crouch against the muscle of the wind:
you, home, everything behind me
comforts,
bends like the trees.
I cry for you.
The radio wires you picture on a field.
I know you're getting up
to shovel the walk: it's your religion.
You'll swallow no one's lies.
You'll walk in the white city.

I wait for deer to cross.
You'll find me just below the rearview mirror.
See the other man; he runs behind
nervously, yelling this news:
your house leans toward the wide river,
the moon is balanced in your window frame
like a coin on edge,
the couple next door makes fierce love
on the smallest lawn in the city,
the night train is moaning
on its tracks in our sleep.
These details fit like wheels to axle,
door to jamb.
I carry a dream of wild ancestors.
The stray dog puts his eyes on me.
He sniffs and I follow
to this cold street, my river,
where we are touched by yellow light from windows.
Here sleepers journey,
talking with lifted hands,
the tops of chairs crushed against see-through curtains.
I look toward my neighbor
who sleeps with a future President; my father
who recites obituaries in the dark;
my lover in white
awake on her feet,
hers eyes moving between the beds of old people.
The dog's paws tap the sidewalk
like a stone skipping water.
Tonight it is just dog and man
sitting nobly on an ice floe.
Above, the half'moon
delicate as the tip of my thumb.
THE MAN IN THE CELLAR

With the honor of salt
and the complacency of lakes
my gray father in a jar
weathers the wind of the mausoleum.

The man in the cellar
seems to have been there for years,
a pale friend of coal dust, roots,
and the black mush of old potatoes.

Sometimes I rise to the rooms
that will not always be empty.
In the mouth of an imagined lover
a tooth winks, one eye laughing.
AMARILLO MAMA

Gut solid behind the wheel, you steer
your ratty Pontiac with Texas plates
through the grit that fences
the only musky trailer court. Roll in
packing your blonde long-legged jailbait
that makes men moan softly and beat
their hands against the bed. Your home
has secret passageways, halls
opening behind a bleached wood bookcase
in the sunny room. For putting away one man
with a rifle, you did time in Dakota.
The whole town reels
in your daughter's pungent lap. The barnburner
leans against the gas pump
while she walks to the blockhouse laundromat.
He yearns in his grease
to strike the light and hold her down.
THE MOUNTAIN HORSES

Along the stone wall,
up the steep of the gullies;
the grey trees,
a steaming herd climbed
the bracken and burning bush
... the smoke of the moon
and the ravens that rode
in their heavy, tangled manes.
THE ROWBOAT

"And so, when I come up on him, he had the buck mostly cleaned out. He looks up at me from under his orange California hunting hat . . . and I raise the barrel of my .270 just so far . . . uh, I didn’t point it straight at him; I'll never point a gun at a man . . . ’less I mean to use it . . . uh, and I say, ’Sir, that’s my buck,’ and I . . . and he gets up off his knees, soft-like, and just walks away down the trail."

The rowboat rocked as Frank leaned forward and watched for Maggie’s reaction. There was none. She was preoccupied and frowning, looking towards the white smoke rising from the sawmill on the eastern shore of the lake. Frank sat back on the rowing bench. He whispered, “That’s a fact,” and gave a quick nod to prove it.

Maggie turned to face him, but the scarred aluminum rowboat shifted awkwardly in the water. She lurched and grasped both gunwales.

“Hell, the boat’s O.K.,” Frank said, though he wasn’t sure it was. The old borrowed rowboat was battered and leaking along most of its seams; and a hole the size of a quarter had been punched through the hull just above waterline. “It’s O.K. Except for that hole there in the stern end. And that’s O.K. because you’re lighter than me . . . and the hole doesn’t get much below water."

She didn’t acknowledge the compliment; instead, she raised her eyebrows and took a glance around at Payette Lake, the forest, and the snowcapped Idaho mountains. So Frank took off his T-shirt. He had a working man’s tan: from his collar bones up his neck and from his biceps down the arms. Maggie didn’t notice; she was scowling, looking towards the mill smoke. Frank frowned too.

“Why did you shoot it for?” she asked.

He slapped his palm to his forehead. “Shit,” he muttered. “Not again.” It was always why this, why that. “Because, girl, maybe I wanted to eat it, understand? You’ve ate some of that buck yourself. You’ve cooked some of that buck.”

She wasn’t listening. She pointed at the mill. “Pollution,” she pronounced. Maggie changed subjects easily. “Man is destroying nature.” She was always talking pollution. Pollution or population.

“You mean population,” Frank said. “It’s those California hunters we got to keep an eye on. There’ll be no game left. Shit-oh-dear, California’s taking over. And jobs are tight: too many Californians. I
barely got on at the mill this year.”

“The mill? Franky, if you only knew what Boise-Cascade is doing to Idaho with their mills and condominums.” She pointed again to the mill smoke. “The people have a right to demand an end to that destruction.”

“The only people I know are my friends and they all work at the mill. Hell, you work at the mill yourself.”

“In wildness, Franky,” Maggie countered proudly, “is the preservation of the world.”

“Wildness?” Frank cried. “Wildness? My granddad and my dad fought the wildness all their lives. It was out to get ’em. Hell, the Indians’ wildness killed your great grandma. Just when we just about got it beat, everybody yells, ‘Save the wilderness! Save them stinking bears and those sheep-murdering coyotes. Help it, help the wilderness! Shit, we helped the Japs after the war and look where they are now. They’re buying us out. And the Californians come up here and say, ‘Oh, dear, look what we done to California. Don’t let it happen to Idaho. You got a real pretty state here.’ And then they move in. Five acre ‘Ranchettes’ on Jughandle Mountain. ‘Wilderlost Condominiums.’ Crap, everybody’s crazy. Stupid. And don’t call me Franky.”

He slid off the rowing bench and sat down on the boat’s cold aluminum floor. He’d gotten hot, talking like that. He rested his back against the styrofoam safety float that had come loose from its bolts. From the shade beneath the bench, he took a cold can of Coors and pulled open the pop top, letting the pull ring fall back into the can. He knew better than to throw the ring overboard with Maggie sitting right there, but he wouldn’t have done that anyway; the fish swallow those things and die. Still, it made him a little angry to think he was influenced by her talk, a little angry and hot.

But it was a hot day, hot for the last week of June, usually a rainy month for the mountain country. The sky was clear, except for Maggie’s mill smoke and the few clouds that had just poked up over the mountains to the west. The lake was calm and had that deep shade of blue it gets when a wind doesn’t darken it. And the summer people from Boise hadn’t yet moved up with their ski boats and racket. The tall ponderosa pine and Doug fir were dense and speckled with the light green of new growth. It had been a heavy snow year: six feet in McCall. Springs were wet here; it usually rained up until Independence Day. But this year, the wet had all come as snow.
Frank looked up at Maggie: she was sitting proper with a straight back, watching the smoke come out of the chip burner. She noticed he was watching her. “See how the smoke lays down so low?” she said. “A thing called an ‘incursion layer’ keeps it down in the valley. That adds to the pollution.”

“Yeah, sure,” he said, and finished his beer.

“Facts are facts,” she said.

“Maggie girl.” Frank opened another beer. “Never have you been so stupid and had so many facts to back it up. Ever since you went down to Boise State for a year and then came back and hung around those hippies that run the pizza parlor, you’ve had new opinions on everything. You’re worse than when you were in that church, spouting Bible talk and waiting for the Rapture. Which never came.”

Maggie set her lips and crossed her arms. She called it the Silent Treatment and she’d used it since high school. Underneath her blue workshirt, she was wearing no bra, and this was the first time Frank had seen her dressed in the newer style; her breasts were lower and seemed more real. She was pretty; and she wasn’t wearing make-up like she always had in high school. These were things that perhaps her association with the hippies had helped. Her eyes were green and wide and her hair was red. She wore it long and natural now, something many Valley County women had never learned to do. She was a good girl; he’d missed her that winter she’d gone down to Boise. She was one of the few high school girls, the only pretty one, who would go out with the mill workers. She’d even lived with Frank for awhile when he was working out of New Meadows, that is, until her dad came and took her back. She was strong too, and graceful; earlier that day, he had talked her into rowing for awhile and he’d watched her as she moved. Now, she sat stiff and straight. He saw a slight fuzz of perspiration on her forehead. It was getting hotter.

“Hey.” He smiled. “Drink a beer.”

She shrugged and took the can. “You’re such a hot shot,” she said.

“Yup, I am,” he said. “A hot shit. Come here. Lay down next to me here. It’s cool.”

She shrugged again like she wasn’t really giving in and lay beside him on the floor of the rocking boat. She rested her head on the styrofoam float. Frank began nuzzling her neck.

“Christ!” she said, turning away. “There you go sticking your nose in my ear again. Can’t you ever take it easy?”

“Sure,” he said. He had his hand on her thigh. He tried to wedge his
fingers up underneath her cutoff Levi's, but they were too tight. “Hey,” he said. “Let's go up to the Burgdorf hot springs and take it easy in the baths. Or . . . no, let's go to Last Chance, it's more private. We could go skinny dipping.”

“That sounds nice,” said Maggie. “But you'd always be poking at me.”

“Now, now,” Frank said. He swung one of his legs over and between hers.

“Cut it out,” she said. “It's too hot. Our skins just sweat when we touch. Why are you always like this?”

“Because I'm a man,” he said.

“Because you're a man,” Maggie said. “Drink your beer.” Evidently, she didn't think much of men anymore. She turned away from him and appeared to become interested in something towards the northwest, towards Brundage Mountain. Her face was flushed and a few strands of her hair were damp and they clung to her forehead. Her thighs were shiny where they pressed together. A drop of sweat ran down Frank’s chest. He was nervous. It was too hot.

The lake seemed flat. It didn't feel like they had been drifting, or even floating. He peeked over the gunwale; the mill smoke hung around the buildings of McCall like spun glass. Strange. The lake was a mirror reflecting a blue glass sky.

“Frank,” said Maggie. “Look at this.”

He turned over to her and saw her pointing to the northwest. “There. The sky,” she said. Frank looked. The horizon was a bright lime green.

“What?” Frank sat up on the bench. The sky was definitely green. It was hard to tell where the green changed to the blue of the late morning sky, but to the west, over Brundage, the sky was green.

After a pause, he said, “It's pollen.” He'd seen it once before. Maggie's eyes widened. “What?” she asked. Her gaze danced from the horizon to Frank and back to the horizon. Frank looked back towards the green sky. It had happened when he was living with his grandfather on the ranch. The pollen had risen on the winds of a storm; a storm was now bearing down on them, the lake, and the boat. He knew that the lake was big and rough in bad weather and, considering the boat they were in, he knew the safest course would be to row immediately for the south bank, the nearest shore. He could make it before the storm hit; but the outing would be over. He relaxed, slumping down against the safety float that had by now slid partially back under the bench.
"It's a pollen cloud," he said again. He spoke offhand, his words experienced. "The pollen stays up in the trees until the rain washes it off or the wind blows it away. We've had no rain this spring. When the pollen gets riled up \textit{that} bad, it means an old man storm's coming." The earlier storm had blown over a silo and lightning had set the hay stack afire.

"We oughta get this boat back," he said.

Maggie turned to him, excited. He didn't get to see her much anymore. "Then hadn't we gether go?" she asked. The top button of her workshirt had come undone and Frank could see some untanned skin.

He hesitated. "Yeah," he said. "I reckon we best." Slowly, he turned the boat around towards town and pulled at the oars. The blades feathered, then caught, and he felt the bow raise and the rowboat slide across the glassy green surface of the lake.

The noon whistle blew at the mill. The sun had been copper colored as it rose through the mill smoke earlier in the day. Now, it seemed a tarnished green doorknob, its light filtering down through the mist that had invaded to a point over their heads. Frank saw huge cumulus thunderheads building and towering up behind the pollen; the lightning would follow the first winds. Yet, the lake was as smooth and heavy as varnish and Frank rowed easily for shore. Except for the groan of the oarlocks and rush of water around the blades, there wasn't a sound.

Frank's shoulders soon ached and he stopped to check his course and to rest. They were a half mile from shore. Though the air around them was yet still, the greenish mass was already past them, and a marine-like glow filtered over the area.

"Wow," Maggie whispered. "It's like we're on the bottom of the ocean."

"I never been there," Frank said. The winds were now washing the tall pines at the north end of the lake; and the trees were waving like marsh weed before the current of the storm. The mountains were hidden behind the soft green curtain, and everything looked different in the green glow. That haystack had burned for three days, and every night golden sparks were carried off by the breeze.

"Do you want to go to Last Chance tonight?" he asked. "It'll be pretty . . . after the storm."

Maggie was watching the sky. "No," she said, absently, "I don't think so."
"But you said it sounded nice," he said, and let go of the oars. "You said it sounded real nice." The oars' blades sank deeper in the water and the arms waved between Frank and Maggie. They pointed crazily towards the sky as the boat turned in the water.

"It did," she said. "Come on. We'd better get ashore." She looked at the sky. Frank looked down at his feet and saw that the boat had been leaking. He pulled at the oars.

"Bail," he said, nodding towards the water in the boat.

His shoulders were heavy as he rowed through the thick water. He watched the oars make whirlpools in their wakes. For a few minutes now, small flurries of green-yellow pollen had been sifting down on the boat and the lake. The lake was soon covered with clumps and rafts of floating pollen. The whirlpools caught and took them under. He noticed the yellowish powder on the hair of his arms and looked at Maggie. Her red hair was softened by the golden green dust. She was trying to bail the boat by filling a beer can with water and then dumping it over the side. She had already dropped one can, and it bobbed in the wake amid the pollen. Frank pulled at the oars and the rowboat pushed through the spotted water.

A minute later, he heard a sound like that of swallows above them. During the other storm, two mules had gone berserk and yanked down a hundred yards of barbwire fence. Frank looked up, but saw nothing: green. It hit quickly; hard spray lashed his face and the rowboat pitched and spun as the first great gust of wind struck and thrashed the lake. It hit so hard he had to shut his eyes and duck his head between his knees. Maggie screamed and he heard the thud and slide as she hit the metal floor. The spray stopped as the gale subsided and Frank opened his eyes to see, a quarter mile away, a thousand whitecaps leaping out of the water and speeding towards them. They would be hit again. Maggie lay huddled, clutching the styrofoam float and looking up at him, her wide eyes begging reassurance. Her hair was a matted, knotted mass no longer red, but rather a drowned dark green like that of the lake moss on the pilings at the mill.

"Hey!" he yelled at her. He shook her shoulder. "What's your problem, kid? It's O.K."

She was huddled and shivering. She whimpered and hugged the safety float. As he stared at her, Frank noticed a clump of soggy pollen clinging to his nose. He wiped it off and rowed to force the bow to face the coming wind.

In that second it came and took one oar as it hit; and as Frank
wrenched himself around, grabbing for the other oar, he felt the boat be struck and buffeted, again and again, spinning and pitching crazily, tipping and splashing. Maggie screamed, over and over, and clutching the float beneath one arm, she grabbed at Frank's shoulder. He tried to push her back as he wrestled with the oar, but he quickly gave up and grasped both gunwales as he sat down on the flooded floor, trying to secure himself. The wind screeched through the hole in the stern. Maggie screamed shrilly in his face.

At that moment, the storm heightened to a single deafening roar and Frank felt the bow shudder, raise, and not come down. The rowboat stood up on end, staggered vertically along on its stern for a second, and crashed over. Frank saw the mottled water coming up to take him. His arm shot out instinctively to break his fall and his last glance saw Maggie hurtling past his head.

His body turned a slow somersault. After the buzzing shock of the icy water, all was silence except for the trinkle of air bubbles leaving his ears. The cold slowed everything. He hung in the downless void, feeling the weightlessness, the even pressure of the water. It felt good; his muscles numbed. He hung in the cold of the lake and made no movement.

But his lungs began to burn and his eyes opened; the spangled surface was about ten feet above him, black and shiny, like obsidian. He swam upwards and broke through it to the storm. The wind and spray tore at his face. He could only breathe facing away. The whitecaps rose and were smashed by the wind. He could barely get air. His body rose, fell, and was spun around. He tried to tread water and ride the waves, but the wind blew in sharp irregular gusts that made breathing nearly impossible.

As he again let go an exhausted breath, he saw through the storm something angular and white. It was the float. Maggie clung to it with both arms flung around it and her chin dug deep into the styrofoam. Frank found strength and swam to it; and Maggie, seeing him, gasped and let go of the float and grabbed his neck. Her face was a dirty white; her hair was soaked and tangled and yellow with pollen. It wrapped around her neck and caught in her mouth and eyes. Her shirt was full open and one breast exposed, scratched and red. Her arms were cold; they felt cold as they closed around his throat. He pressed his face against the float and he felt the cold weight of Maggie swing around against his back. She held to him by flinging her arms over his shoulders and grasping one wrist by the other hand.
Another squall of wind and rain crashed down on them and Frank squeezed the float so hard it snapped in half. The float began to sink and with each blast of wind the water poured over their heads. Frank felt panic stir inside him; the float wasn't holding them both. Maggie's arms tightened around his throat; she was trying to raise herself for air, pushing him down farther into the water. Frank gasped for breath but the morning's beer rushed up into his nose. He convulsed, retching. He kicked frantically to keep his mouth above water. Maggie now grabbed his hair and began to clamber up his back. The first bolt of lightning shot down from the black clouds and split into three fingers of an icy hand. Frank saw this and bowed his head. He bit into the hand of the weight hanging around his neck. He bit hard, until he felt the grip relax; and then he felt the weight slip from his shoulders.

He spun upon the new buoyancy of his plastic support and looked around for Maggie but she was gone. The water was very black and cold and it flashed with the lightning. The thunder was a constant roar. He bobbed easily now in the wind and rain, and his muscles set into a cold cramp he knew would last the storm. He held to the float and looked around for Maggie, but there was only water. Maggie. God, he thought, what a shitty thing to do.

Then a hand grabbed his ankle. Fingernails stabbed his calf. She was there; she was clawing her way to the surface. A wave of relief swept over him. He felt saved.

But as she pulled at his leg, he could feel the float again begin to go down. The fear came back. He was pulled under twice, choking and coughing. He was drowning. He closed his eyes as he went under again and he moved his numbed leg until his toes found her struggling breast. He readied himself to give her a strong shove...

Suddenly something cracked him across the bridge of his nose. He opened his eyes, but was immediately struck again; again and again he was beaten, thrashed, and finally thrust below the surface. He grabbed at what was beating him and caught hold of it. It was coarse and hard, but it quickly wrenched from his grasp. Out of breath, he swam to get away from it. He was vaguely aware of Maggie's arms around his waist. When he was clear, he turned and saw, swirling in front of him, limbs flailing the lake, a downed half-submerged pine spinning around and around in the wind. Frank grabbed a sturdy branch and the tree stopped tumbling.

It supported him easily in the water. Maggie was there, gasping
beside him, clutching again to his neck. He put his arm around and under her arms so that her head stayed above water. He felt her body relax. Their weight stabilized the tree. It ceased its spinning and the wet boughs acted as a sail. The wind pushed the pine through the water. The wind was still strong but steadier now. The storm was nearing its end. Frank saw the shoreline, close and clear.

The tree lurched and tore itself from Frank’s grip. He started to swim, but his feet hit the hard sand of the floor of the lake. Mechanically, he found his footing and stood up. It was very shallow. He lifted Maggie up out of the broken pine boughs and the yellow muck of the pollen. She opened her eyes and, seeing Frank, she almost violently shook herself free from his arms. Standing in the three feet of filthy water, he recognized where they were: between the main part of McCall and the mill, about a quarter mile down from where his cabin stood in the trees. He saw the mill had shut down; no smoke came up from the chip burner. Though Maggie seemed to realize where they were, her eyes showed no relief, only weariness. She flung her heavy hair back over her shoulder; it hung down her back, streaming water and clumps of pollen. She pulled her shirt around her, but it was badly torn. Her back and belly were blue white now and streaked with bleeding lines of red.

She started to tread through the mill waste and pollen to the shore. Frank followed. His body seemed a lump of wet snow, heavy and cold and dead. He followed her to the shore. They climbed the bank. The wind was down to almost nothing, the sky already clearing. The sun was still high. They came to the road and stood and looked down into town. The mill smoke was gone. A few trees had fallen on houses and across phone lines. Men were hurrying around, busily repairing the storm's damage. Maggie watched the work for a moment and said nothing. Frank stood behind her. His shoulders felt heavy. His tongue lay flat and heavy in his mouth.

Maggie sat down in the wet grass at the edge of the road. She seemed to relax. She turned and looked up at Frank with her watery green eyes. He looked down at the ground; he saw her feet were cut and bruised.

“Look,” she said. He looked up. She was holding out her hand. There was a deep, bleeding semicircle cut into it.

“I know,” he said, and turned and looked back at the lake. “I bit you.”

The sun was bright now; it was fierce and white, reflecting off the
lake that was littered with scores of fallen trees. The hot light caught in his eyes and he sneezed twice. A tearing shudder raced down his spine as the sneezing turned into slow, silent retching. He was sick until he had vomited most of the water he had swallowed during the storm. Then his head cleared a little. He looked up again at Maggie.

“You must have had to bite down hard,” she said. “I panicked. I’m sorry.” She looked down at her hand. The soaked skin was white and puckered around the teeth marks. “You bit me hard. You held onto me with your teeth and you saved me.”

Frank shook his head. Saved her. Saved her. He turned and watched the men working down the road. A tree against a house, he thought. And in the water. There were trees in the water.

“Frank,” Maggie said. “Let’s go up to your place.”

He turned to her; she was smiling weakly.

“. . . We could rest . . . sleep,” she said. She cradled her hand in her lap.

Frank shook his head. “I . . . oughta help them,” he said, motioning towards the men. He stood there for a moment. There were trees down everywhere. “Yeah,” he said. “I gotta help them.” He turned and walked away. Stumbling off the road to bypass an enormous rain pool, he broke through the wet grass and dying purple flowers. The long leaves of grass wrapped soddenly around his legs and resisted his progress.
COMING APART

Hawk-eyed wind the day she lets you die
your spine along the bed. Hawk
by sunset too. Hawk hanging from mountains south.
High in the trees, your final hour.
Pack the luggage and send it home. Empty
your pockets when evening winds blow pale
with heat. The running hills, that darker bush:
a confluence of green.

When she wonders why you’ve come so late
tell her you have no answers. Label the books
for father. Tell her you’re here
because you have to be. Demands
must be met. Leave the shoes for brother.
Make up a reason: hawk
on the mountain or June sun settles
with wings. Wipe from your neck
the dried slowed breath of anxious children.
Close your eyes and day falls ruined by shadow.

Like any good woman, she opens for you. Grows
at the mouth. Those huge thighs cold
when she finally brings you in, below
the bridge, to fern and mud, minnow
mad for your face. She tells
you hunger, biting rock, your unattended eyes.
She tells you she is kind. Her undercurrent blind.
Her darkened bed, an afterthought.
She tells you how you’ll come apart in every proper
place. She palms you to her breast.
Hawk eyes at the bottom. Smells of dispossession.
Belly up and belly up and up
and belly down.
Buckled. Broken on the bed.
NIGHTS OF FLINT AND SNOW

fill with your long absence, the wind
not bitter,
ice, an age to come. When sky lets go
it is warm work digging you out,
headlight cold in the socket,
one branch of the cedar
down.

The compost path
steepens on both sides of the summer-
house. I think of old mines
reopened: veins of chard,
sad pods in coal-dark seams, the golden load
unfolding in the buried ear. I ride the waves,
green, to the sea
warm rain.

Weathered beets. The seal-faced kelp
torn from its rank salt bed
and the puckered kiss
of anemone.

Water turns us back,
road and river curving under ice
to the deepening source. Home. Inside
your place is warm
plum and apple slowly turning wine.
THE SHELL

My sealed house winters in its triple shell—storm-windowed, weatherstripped and double-locked. I knock icicles from the low eaves and watch the cold come back cold air condensing under doors. Sculptured carpet snow below the cocomat. Once I wanted that blood too thick and hot for comfort, all breath closer than my own. Ice forms again on the lintel, hardens against the screen.

In your light sleep I pull back the drapes, let the cold light down, leave the flue open. Animal signs of a long siege. Later the barometer falls. Wind hollows a track through the chimney. Casings crack as they swell. The house settles into the frozen ground.
THE WOMAN WHO THOUGHT

her head was a teapot
brewed
and brooding on the leaves of fortune
thinly floating
over pale green waters,
shattered ritual teacups.

A wave of panic strewed the grey shelves' matter under the lavender hat arranged like a cozy flat with bric-a-brac inside the breakfront cabinet.

Past middle age steeped in delicate Limoges she took to reading palms and palmistry—those brave infusions bubbled over scones.
If laughter rippled back—

some weekend guest—
she heard the black leaves steam to harbor what the morning mist, the ghostly pilings covered and the woman thought.
I walk down the Spruce Street tracks. No lights line the rail and the miles roll back like stories from the Sohl Ranch bunk. Dad talks hard all night. Strange death flashes in the arc lamp—hucksters, H-bombs, girls. After six nights in Butte the lamp goes black. Dad I see you take your lover wading in the creek. The crow-black chicken pecks your heel and greenish flies are singing in my ears. No meaty hands have bruised me in Missoula. You burn the lawn, cursing my full-length name. The bare dirt road winds down to Harvet's barn. You sit alone,

the hidden worlds slammed behind the long stone hills. I think of the wicked gravestone sunk in a back lot and your deep voice like the North Wind roaring down the tracks.
THE BLACK FISH

Once more the body folds down its heavy skin
Sadness fills the houses like moss over stone
a thickness when people
feed their hearts nothing but old bread
Today I saw something new
There is anger in the faces of some women
As the wars deepen soft men weaken into mod
. . . bright ties and tiny whimperings
that would shame a child
These sweet merchants of death hunt the innocent
I saw a man strong-arm his sullen wife
as if he wrestled a deer into the trunk
A new nun in town keeps three
messenger boys on the run
And there are pimps who hold back their girls' money
for just one more exhausting trick
There are men who sleep in doorways out of the snow
And snow buries the soldier's face like a stump
The graves are filled with bright bones
Bones slip fifty feet thru coal drifts
for a three-second swim in molten lava
Bones swirl smoke in the cremator's ovens
There are bones thin enough to open every lock
And bones swivel water inside your grandmother's knee
Bones my friend sift flour
and spin tiny white whirls on the far hill
It's not the gold scorpion . . . blood kernel
The dark fish of Pisces dies
slumped over the world   Her giant bones glow
and hum two hundred years more
til the northern lights swing back
FARM

The sun hovers there
any afternoon.
A mean dry place
the farm I was born in,
acres of flat blown
land, silver granaries
plumb to the land, grey
sheds, shops, an
aluminum barn.

You are leaving after
the seeding
taking your anger
in the cups and bowls
your new wife finds.
No matter: the land
survives the hard round
stones, worms in the roots
of things, winds that turn
its wealth to dust, our
ancient quarrel.
QUITTING

You phoned me at the feeder on fifty-ninth street
There where the women with the faces of birds
were eating pocketbooks and ten-dollar pantyhose and
stuffing in Schiaparelli scarves
You told me to come licking my thighs through the
wires and pushing word after word between my legs
So I threw my flower in the aisle and rode my heat
through birdies pecking and flapping
I saw a pelican try to choke down a gold pendant four
times before I reached the door
DAKOTAH TIME

The clocks have gathered in my face, planted long sounds in my head. I hear women walk in low fields, break their hands, spread them dark and plain in level grass. They speak softly of their men who ride out summer on cold plows, open the ground, mount the sky, thick arms reaping the sun.

I hear their breasts calling in dull cotton dresses, low tones sowing rain, discontent, an early dusk to bring the men striding to the porch and finally to bed. Their solid bodies roll in the low fields, heavy with the smell of horses, new mown hay marking time, marking time between the long legs of their wives.
TREES ARE PEOPLE AND THE PEOPLE ARE TREES

The dreaming man sat at his table, listening in the forest of paper and shattering glass. Words were straws in the wind.

He thought hard of certain rocks, of water at the roots of things, and tree-mouths gummed with sap.

And there in the crowded commons three hundred striding people—gesturing, eating the air—halted around him, suddenly quiet:

They sprouted leaves and cones, they wore strange bark for clothing and gently lifted their arms.
ELIZABETH ON A HARD 14TH

This girl whose brown eyes
devour books,
thick hair
falls to woman's hips,
whose body grew inside my body awhile,
whose round face
is foreign and familiar,
who borrows my gestures,
lends me her clothes,
whose survival
from her first breath
has seemed crucial
to mine,
this girl
who's forgotten her
secret palace, her splendid
entries through magic portals
into amused grocery stores,
who doesn't remember
floating face down,
my futile resuscitation,
the uncle who squeezed her stomach
till she vomited water
and breathed, or how
I shook for weeks,
this girl
who sighs heavily
because the frosting
slid off her cake and
it seems a portent,
whose lip droops,
is hard to say
I love you to,
difficult to cheer.
It used to be easy—
clean diaper, tit
in the mouth,
tickle to the belly,
and you’d smile.
Now it’s an awkward hug,
adult conversation, and pain.
I wish for a minute
I could pick you up,
pat you, say there there,
make everything better
than it is.
TESTIMONY

I witness this at seven:
Two shots shatter the skull,
capped bottles exploding in dump fires.
I am camouflaged, crud-faced,
peeking from behind the burnt can pile.

The policeman thumbs the hammer
twice, the collie flinches.
Her tail is the first to die.
She wriggles in the ash,
the limp tongue spilling with her blood.

I witness this at seven,
quivering behind the burnt can pile,
arms locked around Smokey’s neck,
my eyes glowering wet
in the sun, two brass .38 hulls.

The policeman thumbs the hammer
twice, the collie flinches.
My dog licks her eyes shut,
and bluebottle flies buzz
like deaf women pray in church.

I witness this at seven,
in search of soapbox wheels.
I find instead this desire to kill,
and leave the bloated cop to rot
behind the burnt can pile.
THE PIG ROAST

There is something cold about the stench of slaughter even though the blood can burn your hands.

In Ronan, we buy the pig, a weaner, scalded pink skin, slick as the ball end of a hambone. So gross we take pictures, Quinton kissing it like a baby, and give it a name. But when the coals are white we slop his ass with sauce and lower him into the pit.

And there, in the glower of heat, I see that white horse again running the road to Ronan, a deep slit in his brisket opens and closes with each stride, like lips spewing blood, a fiery gash in the earth's chest fumes a dark red voice.

(For Tom, Maggie & Q)
The hills glowed golden from the moon. An eerie wind struck warm from the west, sounding cold. The poet watched the motel rooms of his neighbors from a balcony, the glow of televisions through identical drapes, listened to children being put to sleep, chloroformed by songs, by water, by shouts and rubdowns, by threats, watched and listened as he smoked. A small courtyard light which kept thieves away would give him enough light, after the others were asleep, and he would sit nude in the wind and write.

The college had brought him to speak as a poet but by the time he’d arrived two days ago, he’d already decided he was something else, sad to be limited to words. He had learned some piano by ear and thought he would read and play free-form music along with his poems. It was in his nature to resist the expectations of others, even if he had created them himself.

Twice on the tour he had showed up for his readings without his manuscript and demanded that the audience produce found poetry for him. They thought he was being eccentric, but word had gotten out and this college had provided a “guide” to keep him from changing formats. Still, he’d insisted on the grand piano, a nine foot piano which had to be hoisted onto the stage with two fork lifts. The guide carried his black folder with all the poetry stashed inside. They watched.

“If you think there’s any order in there, you’re out of your mind.” He played with the awed young college student. Once he snatched it from under his arm and went running behind one of the janitors where he asked for a match.

“Boo, you didn’t even chase me. No one is doing their job, why should I?” He sailed the manuscript through the air at the guide.

“When I believe,” he roared at the audience later that night, “everybody believes.”

“When I fear, everybody fears. Do you believe?” he’d screamed, thinking of Ray Charles.

“Yes,” they answered, but the rattling of their throats startled him. There seemed to be more in there and he considered asking them to scream together until he noticed his friend Bullfight standing in the wings holding his hands as if there was a book in them.
“This is like a tent meeting, a revival,” he said, tilting the mike to his mouth, “and I am just the excuse for your energy.” He walked around the piano improvising piano poems, simulating sex with the piano, until finally he sat down on the bench and opened his black folder.

“I wrote this poem thirty times,” he said, “it stinks, I’m going to burn it.” Out of the corner of his eye he could watch the faces of Bullfight’s colleagues and was tickled, encouraged by some real shock.

He pulled out three aborted letters to foundations, struck the long matches on his Levis and lit the pages. The audience gasped like a giant billows. Then he stood up: “You see how you need to believe? I’m testing you, goddam it, and you let me. Now I’ll stop and read you some poems.” What he had done made him tremble. There was no one to hold one but oneself. The possibilities seemed endless.

The aftermath cost him. He had to concentrate hard to overcome the fear of reprisal. Afterwards he went to the party given by Bullfight, a second rate writer who’d acquired a position at the college with one book written fifteen years ago, by showing bullfight movies and telling Hemingway stories. During the summer Bullfight lectured on vacation boats to Mexico to make alimony payments. His first wife had gored him in court.

“I admire your work,” Bullfight had said.

“Come on, play the piano. You thought I was going to humiliate you.”

...“You paid your two dollars to suspend your belief,” he’d told the audience, “suspend, suspend.”

“I’ll improvise a poem for you. Give me a word, a subject, a feeling. I’ll find the words to make you see what’s been lost.” ...

Voices beyond the balcony startled him. Four men in bermudas and tee-shirts held big flashlights on the golf course next to the motel. A ball squirted from the dark and stopped near the cup. Their Setter sniffed the uncut grass at the edge of the fairway, searching for rabbits. Downstairs a woman coughed and blew her nose.

He’d left the party after the spaghetti. “Too much Scotch, too much olive oil, one glass of cheap wine. I can’t get sick here, no one to take care of me. I blew it; I made them one body for two hours and now I’m alone.” The guide had left him once the poet had been delivered to the podium.

It galled him to be a man who had to decide to puke. Bullfight’s new wife had lain her thigh against his while he’d sat on their stairs,
wrestling with this decision. She was a strange, overweight woman who’d worn a brown, flowered muu-muu and thought he was being sensitive while he had only fought a stomach preparing to reverse itself.

She patted his leg when he got up to go outdoors. “Just a nice patch of lawn is all I need,” he thought. Several blocks away he lay down on the night grass in the neighborhood; lights of cars took him in briefly and let him go.

“If one person had come up out of the crowd, I wouldn’t have come to the party,” he thought. In his coat pocket was a vial with twenty-nine tabs of mild acid and one cyanide pill, all made to look alike. He fingered the slim container with its child-proof top. It seemed to feel good having the choice to continue or not. He was going to start taking them the next night in his motel room.

He got a finger down his throat. To his right was a small water main valve box. He lifted the top and covered the pipes with his cookies.

“Just not through the nose, god,” he’d prayed, then, “god spare me the physical pain, I’ll take care of the moral pain.” He got up and spotted a restaurant where he bought coffee and some Certs, careful not to breathe on the checker. He walked around Bullfight’s house several times, numb from the alcohol, his cheeks and extremities tingling in the night air.

... The golf course men talked and he could hear their words helped by the indiscriminate channel of the wind.

“Nice putt Char.”

“Didn’t I tell you it would work? You stop thinking about where the bunkers are. Like being blind.”

“No waiting in the clubhouse.”

“I miss driving, that’s what gets me off.”

A figure approached the phosphorescent golf ball on the green close to where the poet watched from his room. The flashlights turned on him and made a path to the hole. He heard the click of the putter and could trace the ball. The golfer missed, groaned, then sunk a two footer, his legs illuminated like a dance hall girl’s in a spotlight theatre.

“I miss the broads,” said the man plucking out the shining ball.

“Who knows what’ll turn up if we play at night?” said another in the foursome.

They all laughed and took their lights down the next fairway. He felt an envy for them, their simplicity, the knowledge of their limits. He opened his journal and put the pills on one of the blank pages.
“Pharmaceutical roulette,” he began to scribble, “it’s the only true form I’ve contributed to poetry, multi-media of course.”

Bullfight’s colleagues, startled at first, were impressed by the way his crowd responded. They offered him a teaching job. He wanted to call and accept but he was afraid the wife would answer instead, that she would force herself on him and ruin his plans.

“Plans,” he thought, “I might be dead!” For years he had been the enfant terrible, fighting schools, fighting foundations, fighting everything in the fear that relaxation would damage his writing.

“I just can’t see you grading papers, going to meetings,” Bullfight had said, “I just can’t see you taking any shit.”

No one saw him in need. That was how he played it, but he felt tired, ready to take his dose, to eat a little shit and be comfortable.

“Able to be comforted, I am not; this is mistaken as a sign of strength, of independence.”

... “What made you become a poet?” The woman who asked him the question would have gone home with him, he realized, remembering the look on her face. She didn’t want an answer.

“I have a need to be heard,” he said, “if no one has heard you, you have to say it better and better until no one can misunderstand. I am living the most hopeful life possible, that is, trying to make a living by writing about myself.” That’s not it, he thought, that’s after the fact. I want an answer, one I can accept, and I want it tonight. I should have told them my plans, it would have been more honest. My mother is why I write poetry. If I didn’t know better, I’d think this was a nervous breakdown.

He dumped the pills from journal to his bed, looking at the phone to save him, waited for a knock at the door to keep him from being alone and forcing himself to make this decision. This waiting, he knew, had always kept his work from being great; if one is distracted, one may have someone to blame.

... “Such punishment for escape,” he’d mumbled drunkenly to Bullfight’s Irish Setter. He stroked it on its haunches. It was a young dog with a brown-orange coat and seemed starved for affection. The petting aroused it and the dog grasped his leg for a hump before he beat it off. He felt disgusted by its need, by the feel of the animal’s member against his knee. Then he’d laughed and thought two things; misunderstood again! and, this could be funny if I had a sense of humor. He shut the door on the dog and returned to the party.

The bullfight movie was ending. The lights went up gradually as he
heard Bullfight say, "Hem was in the audience, he was present in the operating room and talked to the stricken youth. There were tears in his eyes when he came to me and said he'd never be friends with a matador again."

Another reel was put on, the short one where Bullfight gets in the ring himself. He looked tall and graceful then; the poet could trace the shy, almost effeminate way of walking, the cautious imitation of the strutting matadors which had sanction and place in the ring. Facing the bull, a little swish could be excused.

Bullfight joked, narrating the silent film; he made fun of himself and promised to show his scar when the movie was over. "They said I could've worn the suit," he interrupted, "but my first wife objected." The genteel group tittered. The poet had a momentary wish for some movies of his own, some proof that he had evolved, had contributed. There were only two small books, some tapes in university libraries, and moments of love with two or three people. "And the writing," he added, trying to be positive, "the writing..."

He lined the pills up in three rows of ten, closed his eyes and picked one. He had been promised, by his chemist friend in New York, that the acid would be mild. The chemist had a worried look as he handed them over. "I'm killing you, in effect," he said, "don't pin me if you snuff yourself."

"You have made this possible, it's true," the poet told him, "but it's my problem that I've chosen to try it." Blame it on anyone, he thought, blame it on the pusher. He picked number one, in the left, top row, scooped up the pills and put the cover on the bottle, sucking the pill from his flat palm like a horse eating sugar.

"Three point three percent chance of dying tonight," he thought, "and I don't feel a thing."

The phone rang. He listened to Bullfight's wife making her case, at the same time, he studied his body to see if he were about to die. What if I croaked on the phone? She would think I was really sensitive. Bullfight was gay, he was frozen, he was bitter, he was through. You have some life left, she said, I'm not ready to give up.

Could she come over?
No, he was still recovering.
Could they meet tomorrow?
Not if I'm dead, he thought, but said he would be writing.

He took his clothes off while she droned on. The story of unmet needs, hers, placed a knot in his back. I'm a poet, he wanted to say,
not a psychologist. People are supposed to listen to me. He grew conscious of his anger, thinking that. As much as he wrote, as many people who came to his readings, when someone got close, they never seemed to hear him, to be able to contend with his anger. His mother hated his work, said she was ashamed of the sex in it. The first wife had simply ignored the fact that he knew he would be poor, stopped taking her pills and had a child. He left a month after it was born. In lieu of making other mistakes, he kept on the go, had affairs, and never committed himself. A weight was on his work which hadn’t been there before his marriage; the pressure to succeed, to justify himself. Acquaintances thought he was a listener; like Bullfight’s wife, he thought, like my mother, and he expected them to know he wanted the same in return.

“If you’re unhappy, you should leave old Bullfight. Besides, you shouldn’t tell me, you should tell him.” Just like my mother! She had told him everything his own father should have heard, made him someone the father couldn’t be. He wrote in the journal, “Some footsteps are so large you don’t know you’re in them.”

What feels good after you’ve done it, was the favorite Hemingway quote of Bullfight; does death feel good? Was that what he was after?

...Students had gathered at his feet; what order he could make out of words would be destroyed if they had known the disorder of his life. That’s what made him sick to think about. The limit of words is your behavior. He couldn’t bear to write it down.

“What about Zen?” one asked. For Western Man only an escape.

“You believe, then, your ego, your poet’s ego is enough to get by on?”

“No, or I wouldn’t be here talking to you, would I? It is simply my job to make you see with words.” A laborer with words, bringing hope to the people. There was some reality to that one, he felt, it made him feel useful, masculine...so what followed? He got drunk, puked, covered up his pain and here he was waiting to die. He clocked his heartbeat, listening to the arid, parched voice of the senora, trying not to tell her he’d swallowed a pill.

A lucid twinge of mirth started in his lower bowel, followed by a succulent wave of release moving upwards into his belly and brain. The upper body joined to the lower as his room exploded into the present through the sound of the curtains giving way to a warm wind he felt washing over his skin. A thin membrane seemed to slide from his whole body and rested like an amnionic sac at his feet. A laugh,
like a child's after a pillow fight, after a tickle, ballooned in his torso, floated to tears several times and back to laughter again. Her words took on the quality of sensuous strokes on his eardrums and their content did not drain his energy.

"It's not my time," he yelled deliriously into the phone, "my time is not nigh!"

Now she was silent. "You see? You hear me now. To register I must scream. I'm going to give in to you on one condition," he whispered, "you have to take acid with me." She was afraid but she would come. She was ashamed of her body. He would make her feel unashamed but only after she had taken the risk.

He said goodbye to his work. "His work understands, it is a friend, it loves him." He walked to the edge of his balcony after turning off the lights in his room. Over in a corner apartment the drapes shifted in the open window. He stood proudly naked, staring out over the golf course, glancing sideways. Was someone watching? The curtain moved rhythmically—flap, flap, swish.

"The breath comes like the wind without thinking. The thinking should govern something else and I'll find it, what should be governed and what should not, and when I find it, I can tell them what I've found."

The curtain succumbed to his right and folded itself against the sliding glass door in the dark room. That disappointed him; he wanted to be watched, hoping someone was curious enough to look, to make his exposure worthwhile.

"I can't stay here with Bullfight," he thought, "this will change everything, this risk is my reality, that is the gift and the bomb."

He looked at the bottle on his dresser, his mood dipping in a shady place. The bottle seemed to have an aura. Light from the court yard over his shoulder made it a translucent yellow. "That's what I should govern," he said shocking the room with his own voice. He felt too good to die. He wanted her to feel good too, the way he imagined she would when she was finished with the test. "I'll rule these lights, this plumbing, I'll rule my mouth; I'll rule what stares back and says 'rule me'."
THE FOXES

—I saw the pair of them crouched heads into the wind, peer down from that ledge. There was nothing I could do, but grab cartridges and run. The chickens were out and I was alone.

Boots crackling in snow, I waited eye to sight, until one appeared, raced ahead of my rifle to grab one snoutful of feather and run tail bobbing over snow.

I aimed. Squeezing the trigger my eyes squeezed black, a love that throbbed so fast I could not see.

Minutes after, I loosed my clutch and looked for the mound of fox. It lay there, red on red, feathers flapping.

My bullet had entered the arse and I found a hole where blood trickled out the neck. To laugh, to cry, to bury this thing and run, I knew its five dollar worth, felt my veins surge the blood of woman and man hunter and fox, this fox and hen.
Your skin is the white
of old men, of every
vein visible. I am
dead with you. I take
the color of old sheets, cloth
worn at its center.
I am tired with you,
cold with blankets, tired
of kisses. The moons
of your nails spread
to a pale blue. I am tired
of the face.
Suppose we did bear
four more children, take them
each before the third month.
Then we could count the dyings,
mark them
on that frail flesh
which holds us.
Though I have no daughter,
I have a dog. He guards
this house. He too
is full up
with your honey cakes.
APPEARANCE OF A FORCE

Anything could rupture the skin of afternoon: a plane inscribes a scratch on blue porcelain; white hands flutter up from your plate. Who would not be frightened if it broke now: if one odd pain like a gaping fish broke surface at the pupil of your eye?

Flags of steam open and fade. Dressed in purple, you fade in the corner. Glass catches the blood-light: a globe of wine. What can I say? You are too far off—your face a pale smear on the wall, a small white pile of hands in your lap.

A hammer hurtles toward the membrane of the window. I fold my hands and wait; it is impossible to stop the meal.
AGE

A woman with a bundle
walks a rocking motion,
and tangles her fingers
in a knitting without yarn.

She will never pull
the cobwebs from her face,
never find the cottage
with its lighted window.

A worn path lies before her,
at the end is a chair
that moves and yet is empty.
LAST SUMMER IN OCTOBER

No winds tear
fifty miles an hour
through my hair,
and hers, and no elms plunge for hours
in electric air.
Lightning is my eyes,
a deep golden stare
brighter than King Midas
on the quick golden stair
to Olympus.
“Send no rare, metal rose
to your daughter, but your fair
and wizard self. Let your hidden
bolts charge her golden hair,
and gold.”
No thunder folds far
or near, and dark in cellar darkness
golden peaches my wife preserved
last summer
drip and burn on her pale, bald
knee.
“I am your father.
All is stillness
here.”
The rainspout rusts, and violets
gleam in the unattended garden
where gold beetles drag.
Pale butterflies, alchemized by sun,
no longer lift their wings, fold
or unfold, and everywhere—
on the shingles, fence posts,
thistles—rattle empty cocoons,
shells like fingers
of dead skin.
I remember, too, while we were walking one day on the Monchsberg—a smaller hill on the opposite side of the river—looking down on a green plain that stretched away to the foothills, and watching in the distance people moving along tiny roads. Why do such things seem enormously important to us? Why, when seen from a distance, do the casual journeys of men and women, perhaps going on some trivial errand, take on the character of a pilgrimage? I can only explain it by some deep archetypal image in our minds, of which we become conscious only at rare moments when we realize that our own life is a journey.

This passage from Edwin Muir's *Autobiography* seems like a good place to begin, not only for its essential truth, but because it awakens in me a whole train of images—images of the journey as I have come to understand it, moments and stages in existence. Many of these go back to the years I lived on my homestead in Alaska. That life itself, part of the soil and weather of the place, seemed to have about it much of the time an aura of deep and lasting significance. I wasn't always aware of this, of course. There were many things to be struggled with from day to day, tasks of one sort or another, things that had to be built, crops to be looked after, meat to kill and wood to cut—all of which took a kind of passionate attention. But often when I was able to pause and look up from what I was doing, I caught brief glimpses of a life much older than mine.

Some of these images stand out with great force from the continual coming and going of which they were part. Fred Campbell, the old hunter and miner I had come to know, that lean brown man of patches and strange fits. He and I and my wife, Peg, with seven dogs, five of them carrying packs: we all went over Buckeye Dome one day in the late summer of 1954. A clear hot day in mid-August, the whole troop of us strung out on the trail. Campbell and his best dog, a yellow bitch named Granny, were in the lead. We were in a hurry, or seemed to be, the dogs pulling us on, straining at their leashes for the first two or three miles, and then, turned loose, just panting along, anxious not to be left behind. We stopped only briefly that morning, to adjust a dogpack and to catch our wind. Out of the close timber with its hot shadows and swarms of mosquitoes, we came into the open sunlight of the Dome. The grass and low shrubs on the treeless
slopes moved gently in the warm air that came from somewhere south, out of the Gulf.

At mid-day we halted near the top of the Dome, to look for water among the rocks, and pick blueberries. The dogs, with their packs removed, lay down in the heat, snapping at flies. Buckeye Dome was the high place nearest to home, though it was nearly seven miles by trail from Richardson. It wasn't very high, either, only 3,000 feet, but it rose clear of the surrounding hills. From its summit you could see in any direction, as far as Fairbanks, if the air was clear enough. We saw landmarks in the distances, pointed out to us and named by Campbell: Banner Dome, Bull Dome, Cockscomb, and others I've forgotten. In the southeast, a dust cloud coming off the Delta River. Campbell talked to us of his camps and trails, of years made of such journeys as ours, a whole history told around the figure of one man. Peg and I were new to the north and eager to learn all we could. We listened, sucking blueberries from a tin cup.

And then we were on the move again. I can see Campbell in faded jeans and red felt hat, bending over one of the dogs as he tightened a strap, swearing and saying something about the weather, the distance, and his getting too old to make such a trip. We went off down the steep north slope of the Dome in a great rush, through miles of windfalls, following that twisting, rootgrown trail of his. Late in the evening, wading the shallows of a creek, we came tired and bitten to his small cabin on the shore of a lake he had named for himself.

This range of images closes with another of a later time. By then I had my own team, and Jo and I with four dogs were bound uphill one afternoon in the cool September sunlight to pick cranberries on the long ridge overlooking Redmond Creek. The tall yellow grass on the partly cleared ridge bent over in the wind that came easily from the west. I walked behind, and I could see, partly hidden by the grass, the figures of the others as they rounded the shoulder of a little hill and stopped to look back toward me. The single human figure there in the sunlight, under moving clouds, the dogs with their fur slightly ruffled, seemed the embodiment of an old story.

And somewhere in the great expanse of time that made life in the wilderness so open and unending, other seasons were stations on the journey. Coming across the Tanana River on the midwinter ice, we had three dogs in harness and one young female running loose beside us. We had been three days visiting a neighbor, a trapper living on the far side of the river, and were returning home. Halfway across the
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river we stopped to rest; the sled was heavy, the dogs were tired and lay down on the ice.

Standing there, leaning on the back of the sled, I knew a vague sense of remoteness and peril. The river ice always seemed a little dangerous, even when it was thick and solid. There were open stretches of clear blue water, and sometimes large deep cracks where the river could be heard running deep and steady. We were heading downriver into a cloudy December evening. Wind came across the ice, pushing a little dry snow, and no other sound. Only the vast presence of snow and ice, scattered islands, and the dark slope of Richardson Hill in the distance before us.

To live by a large river is to be kept in the heart of things. We are involved in its life, the heavy sound of it in the summer, wearing away silt and loose gravel from the cutbanks, and pushing this into sandbars that will be islands in another far-off year. Trees are forever tilting over the water and falling and drifting away, to lodge in a driftpile somewhere downriver. The grey water drags at the roots of willows, spruce and cottonwood; sometimes it brings up the trunk of a tree buried a thousand years before, or farther back than that, in the age of ice. The log comes loose from the fine sand, heavy and dripping, still bearing the tunnel marks made by the insects of that time. The salmon come in midsummer, and then whitefish, and salmon again in the fall, and are caught in my nets and are carried away, to be smoked and eaten, or dried for winter feed. As the summer wears away into the fall, the sound of the river changes, the water slowly clears and falls, and we begin to hear the swish of pan ice against the shore. One morning in early winter a great silence comes: the river is frozen.

We stood alone there on the ice that day, two people, four dogs and a loaded sled and nothing before us but land and water into Asia. It was time to move on again. I spoke to the dogs and gave the sled a push.

Other days. On a hard packed trail home from Cabin Creek I halted the dogs part way up a long hill in scattered spruce. It was a clear evening, not far below zero. Ahead of us, over an open ridge, a full moon stood clear of the land, enormous and yellow in the deep blue of the arctic evening. Billy Melvin, an old miner, had once described to me a moonrise he had seen, a moon coming up ahead of him on the trail, "big as a rainbarrel." And it was like that, like an enormous and rusty rainbarrel into which you could go on looking,
and the far end of the barrel was open. I stood there, thinking it was possible to go on forever into that snow and yellow light, with no sound but my own breathing, the padding of the dogs’ feet, and the occasional squeak of a sled runner. The moon whitened and grew smaller; twilight deepened, and we went on to the top of the hill.

What does it take to make a journey? A place to start from, something to leave behind. A road, a trail, or a river. Companions, and something like a destination: a camp, a house, an inn or another shore. We can imagine a journey with no destination, just the act of going, never to arrive anywhere. But I think we would always hope to find something, someone, however unexpected, unprepared for. Seen from a distance or taken part in, all journeys may be the same, and we arrive exactly where we are.

One late summer afternoon, near the road to McKinley Park, I watched the figures of three people slowly climb the slope of a mountain in the northeast. The upper part of the mountain was bare of trees, and the small alpine plants there were already red and gold from the early frost. Sunlight came through broken rainclouds and lit up the slope and the three figures. They were so far away I could not tell if they were men or women, but the red jacket worn by one of them stood out brightly in the sun. They climbed higher and higher, bound for a ridge where some large rocks broke through the thin soil. A shadow kept pace with them, slowly darkening the slope below them, as the sun sank behind another mountain in the southwest. I wondered where they were going. Perhaps to hunt mountain sheep, or to make ready a winter camp; or they were just climbing to a berry patch they knew of. It was late in the day, they would not get back by dark. I watched them as if they were the figures in a dream, and bore with them the destiny of the race. They stopped to rest for a while near the skyline, and then were gone over the ridge. The sunlight stayed briefly on the high rock summit, and then a raincloud moved in and hid the mountaintop.

When life is simplified its essence becomes clearer, and we can know our lives as part of some ancient human activity in a time not measured by clocks and calendars, but by the turning of a great wheel, the positions of which are not wage-hours, nor days and weeks, but immense stations called Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter. I suppose it will seem too obvious to say that this sense of things will be far less apparent to people closed off in the routine of a
modern city. I think people must now and then be aware of such images and moments as I have been telling of, but do not remember them, or attach no special significance to them. They are images that pass quickly out of sight because there is no place for them in our lives. And this says something about what happens to us when our lives become crowded and harried: there is no time allowed us in which to see and feel acutely any existence but the one handed us by society. We are swept along by events we cannot link together in a significant pattern, like a flood of refugees pushed on by the news of a remote disaster. It is the business of modern states and societies to do exactly this to people, as Ortega y Gasset once said, to keep them distracted and beside themselves, so that they cannot take a stand within themselves. A rush of conflicting impressions, such as occurs to nearly everyone these days, keeps away stillness, and it is in stillness that the images arise, as they will, fluently and naturally, when there is nothing to prevent them. And yet, out of the packed confusion of ordinary daily life, sometimes the right moment reveals itself:

One late afternoon, just before sunset, Blair was working at her loom, while I and two or three others in the family sat in the room and watched her. The sunlight came down through the window and shone, partly on her and on the floor, barred by the slats of a Venetian blind. It lighted part of the wall behind me, and the face of her mother sitting next to me. There was even a little sunlight in my wine glass. The whole room was steeped in a warmth, a redness or ruddiness about to settle into dusk. And for a moment or two there was a complete silence, except for the sound of her weaving. It was one of those moments in which it is possible to feel that something deep and essential in existence, eternal and unchanging, is somehow contained, illuminated, held briefly; an insight not to be explained or deciphered, a moment of pure being.²

There is the dream journey and the actual life. The two seem to touch now and then, and when men lived less complicated and distracted lives perhaps the two were never apart at all, but continually one thing. I have read somewhere that this was true of the Mohave Indians who once lived along the Colorado River. They could dream at will and moved without effort from waking into dreaming life. Life and dream were bound together. And within this must be a kind of radiance, a very old and deep assurance that life has continuity and meaning, that things are somehow in place. It is the journey resolved into one endless present.

And the stuff of this is all around us. I retain strong images from
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treks with my step-children: of a night four years ago when we camped on a mountaintop, a night lighted by snow patches and windy sparks from a fire going out. Sleeping on the frozen ground, we heard the sound of an owl from the cold, bare oak trees above us. Or a summer evening near Painted Rock in central California, with a small class of school-children. We had come to learn about Indians. The voices of the children carried over the burned fields under the red glare of that sky, and the rock gave back heat in the dusk like an immense oven. Of ships and trains that pull away, planes that fly into the night; or just the figure of one man crossing an otherwise empty lot. If such moments seem not as easily come by, as clear and as resonant as they were once in the wilderness, it may be because they are not so clearly linked to the life that surrounds them and of which they are part. But they are present, nonetheless, available to imagination, and of the same character.

Last December, on vacation in California, I went with my daughter and a friend to a place called Pool Rock. We drove for a long time over a mountain, through meadows touched by the first green of the winter rains, and saw few fences or other signs of people. Leaving our car in a small campground at the end of the road, we hiked four miles up a series of canyons and narrow gorges. We lost our way several times, but always found it again. A large covey of quail went up from the chaparral on a slope above us; deer and bobcat tracks showed now and then in the sand under our feet. An extraordinary number of coyote droppings scattered along the trail attracted our attention. I poked one of them with a stick, saw it contained much rabbit fur and bits of bone. We talked of Bigfoot, or Littlefoot, as we decided it had to be. There were patches of ice in the streambed and a few leaves still yellow on the sycamores.

We came to the rock in mid-afternoon, a great sandstone pile rising out of the foothills like a sanctuary, or a shrine to which one comes yearly on a pilgrimage. There are places that take on symbolic value to an individual or a tribe, “soul-resting places” a friend of mine has called them. Pool Rock has become that to me, symbol of that hidden, original life we have done so much to destroy. We spent an hour or two exploring the rock, a wind and rain-scoured honeycomb stained yellow and rose by the mineral in the sand. In a small cave near the base of the rock, strange figures of reptiles, insects and birdmen are painted on the smoke-blackened walls and ceiling. They, and the bearpaw impressions gouged into the rock, and a few rock mortars, are all that is left of a once flourishing people.
We climbed to the summit of the rock, using the worn hand and footholds made long ago by the Chumash. We drank water there from the pool that gives the rock its name, and ate our lunch, sitting in the cool sunlight. And then the wind came up, a storm moving in from the coast, whipping our lunchbag over the edge of the rock. We left the rock by the way we had come and hiked down the gorge in the windy, leaf-blown twilight. In the dark, just before the rain, we came to the campground, laughing, speaking of the things we had seen, and strangely happy.

In a way, it’s a radical idea: a poet (not dead) in the classroom, talking, listening, reading, applying jumpercables to some young school-crammed imaginations. There’s a directness, a lot less energy-loss; the potential is great. I’d like to see more of it seep into the system: a furniture-maker, a cook, a biologist, steeped in his or her own craft or discipline, holding up a handbuilt rocker or a lighter than air souffle or a frog’s heart, with such energy the room bristles; teaching by personal example, teaching not so much a subject as an enthusiasm for it. Unrealistic, perhaps.

With the Poets in the Schools Program during the past year and a half, I’ve met in the vicinity of 500 classes, first grade through seniors. I have to admit there are a few days when my journal reads like lousy existentialism, when I come out muttering the same grunts of frustration every new teacher (and the best old ones) does after a bad day in that landscape of boredom and sameness that too-often passes for education. Sure. But then there are the other times, when the rapport grows thick in the air, when you can hear chains dropping everywhere. What a joy to give people a thing that’s really already theirs: their own voices, a way of valuing their own experiences. How many times has every poet who’s ever worked in the schools heard: I hate poetry, but this stuff is great!

One recent incident sticks out: a sixteen year old girl brings me a poem in one of my conference periods. I read it. What do I think? This answer is tough. I reread it. It’s, well, airy, laboriously rhymed and metered, oddly vague. Whatever the real poem, it isn’t happening on the page. We set the poem aside for a moment and talk, narrowing in gingerly on the poem’s emotional reality. Finally, the scene, the story. It comes out freely now, in her own words, which are suddenly precise. It’s elegant, rich in image and in the ambivalence of teenage hassles. I suggest that’s the poem. She’s not sure—was she one of the legion who had to memorize “Hiawatha” in the seventh grade?—but after a minute, she’s beaming. Yes! Magic in every life!

As the poet Phillip Lopate says, a poem that doesn’t deliver the emotional goods is a waste of time. Getting the emotions out, letting them put the spark to one’s language is the goal, and it can be tough in school. Peer pressure and an environment that, despite softening,
remain formal can be pretty suffocating influences. And anyway, how many of the world's great poems got written in Miss Fly's senior English? Somehow, though, the drawbacks are overcome; the rewards are strong and mutual. Many times the most interesting writing comes from the least obvious corners: the heavy-weight wrestler, for instance, or the kid in the back of the room with the Bunker for President sweatshirt on. Sometimes you find students that everybody's kind of given up on suddenly writing their hearts out. We're all shy about showing our insides, our fears, dreams, cravings, but this barrier melts too. Soon it becomes apparent that this isn't just another subject, it's a way of seeing, a way of being.

Montana's Poets in the Schools Program is in its fifth year, administered by the Montana Arts Council under a matching grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. In one form or another, the program exists in every state. The approach varies: some states concentrate their poet residencies in and around the big cities, which allows for saturation at the expense of the rural areas. Montana's a different kind of state—for one thing you can be 600 miles from home and still be in it; so we travel and it's a virtue. This year alone, eight of us—Ann Weisman, John Holbrook (Missoula Elementary Schools), and myself, full-time—have been in 52 schools, from Great Falls and Billings, to Glendive, Baker, Opheim, to six reservations, to one and two-room schools in spots where there's only a grain elevator and some magpies.

Most of the work in the classroom involves starting poems, finding some ways to get that thing inside of you out. Sometimes, though, you find poets in the high school who have already made that connection, that commitment you have, whose writing is remarkably strong and real, whose lines you want to take home with you. I am honored to be able to present the work of two high school poets here. Knowing and working with Donna Swank (Billings) and Mary Anne Miller (Ronan) has been a true high for me. Though their poems differ in attitude and voice, they share an emotional energy and a freshness I admire.
BERTY

Through the alley
I heard the boys in dirty tennis shoes again
thought boy that Mrs. Ross sure has her hands full
Tommy throws straight & true
even with one hand
even with one eye shut
he sure is pretty
I saw Billie with cigarettes he ain't sposed to have
all the boys starry-eyed over tinfoil, cellophane
thought maybe he'd light a few, find me peekin on
even gimme one
he ain't got no matches
I heard voices callin supper
they liked to run me over
it got real cold that night
no wonder.
THE ARGUMENT

My head is blown off
hitting the wall like a melon
Anger kicks me in the stomach with pointed boots
again and again
I squirm
shaving cream slides down the sink
I scream
Still you do not see me
You hum little tunes
You shoot for the street
from the cannon of our bed
I rip the sun from the sky
and slap you across the face with it
but you don’t notice
disappear into the world, smoldering.

MIRRORS

Our love
was like a wild rocking thing
and I rode it out like a hard-nosed cowboy
to the last buzz.
your sun must have been bought
in the faded, cracked dime store around the corner
where the old men stand in front and smell their fingers
dreaming of wars they had fought
and medals they had won
made out of blood and bullets and moans of dying men
where the wooden indian stands dreaming
of buffalo bones and coyote howls that you shoot in the night
when the blood turns brave.
Your land is as barren as a grave
without mourning or tears or maggots
and the wind blows forever sucking oxygen
out of your breath until you feel like a piece of chalk
that has been in a drawer for 300 years
and you get all dry and pale like the only tree that grows there
and you know they'll chop you down some day
and let you blow away to be beaten into dust.
O Glasgow were your people grown out of this parched ground
or were they born without minds and souls
are they all just sagebrush with hearts made of sand
O Glasgow God is not hateful . . .
were your sins that great?
OLD

When I am old, about 200
and gout has me by the toes
and my eyes are as clear as milk,
don’t pick over my plate or feed
me corn with a rubber spoon,
and don’t leave me in a sheet-white room
with nothing for company but my bones
and dreams of the mountains,
and rather than tell me how handsome I look
today with my best death face,
take me to the woods and shoot me,
and I won’t have to be in Heaven
to be the luckiest man on earth.

“WHERE DIRT STICKS IN YOUR THROAT BUT FITS”

When it rains, farm people work
like dried straw and crippled ants,
land is only extra bones in your back
and cattle tend to have more sense
You could never breathe here
You would fall like flies in black heat
unless you know more secrets of the sun
than I do. . .
reviews
The central characteristic of art is its ability to synthesize diverse and chaotic materials with unstable forms. *Winter in the Blood* by James Welch not only maintains the form of the novel, already considered dead by a large portion of the literate, but also embodies all the European assumptions that have made the form possible. And Welch has done this in excellent fashion. But the consciousness here is thoroughly native to the plains of the American west and its heritage is remembered in mythologies nearly as old as the Ice Age. The nameless narrator is neither Christian nor warrior, neither baptised nor proven. He remembers the stories his grandmother told about the chief Standing Bear, the man who might have been his grandfather in a better age, who was killed in a hopeless raid for food on the neighboring Gros Ventre. Standing Bear's death echoes the last desperate years of what had once been a thriving Blackfeet culture. The dominant theme throughout the novel is the quest for an authentic geneology and pride in the narrator's ancestry. Then maybe the narrator can consider a name. The search involves winning sympathy from degraded women and the curious trust which develops with the airplane man, a white man, as nameless as the narrator, a fugitive from the F.B.I., as helpless as the accidents that killed the narrator's father and brother and later the magnificent old horse Bird. The synthesis achieved is as genuine as the beauty of the narrative prose. *Winter in the Blood* is a rare, energetic appearance of fictive skills that assures the reader the novel remains, surprisingly, a vital art form.

Bird, the old horse who "had seen most of everything," is as important as any character in the novel. Old Bird is retired, no longer a cow horse, he spends most of his days in the shade of the shed. Bird was there when they find First Raise frozen in the borrow pit and is innocently involved in the accident that killed Mose, the narrator's
only brother. For the next twenty years the narrator's severely injured knee would serve as a grim reminder of the senseless twist of events since the time of Standing Bear that have drained the family of its finest energies. It is like the ducks First Raise had won at the fair and the carelessness that drowned them all save Amos. With disturbing resignation, Teresa, the narrator's mother, says of Amos, “He was lucky. One duck can't be smarter than another. They're like Indians.” Obstinate in his old age, Bird is there to take the narrator to Yellow Calf, the mysterious old man who lives alone in a log and mud shack and is blind. The narrator remembers taking food to the old man with First Raise years before. Yellow Calf's only friends are the deer, and they are not happy. “This earth is cockeyed,” and men are the last to know. Even if the narrator dismisses Yellow Calf as a bit senile, he promises to return with a bottle of wine, and does so, again with Bird, shortly after the death of a grandmother so ancient she had forgotten how to talk and shortly before Bird, though old, would die as stupidly as all the fine blood had died since the coming of the white man.

“There are no fish in the river,” the narrator tells the airplane man when they first meet in the bar in Malta. “Not even a sucker.” The airplane disagrees and wants to take the narrator fishing to prove that there are fish in the river, or else buy him the biggest steak in town. The narrator may not be Christian, but his affection for the living, especially the luckless and downtrodden, is rooted in feelings that have inspired great religions to develop around values of trust and love. Later, quite by chance, the two meet in a cafe in Havre, and the narrator offers to help the airplane man escape pursuing F.B.I. agents without the slightest concern for the consequences to himself. It appears incidental. In both cases the narrator was looking for the Cree woman who had run off with his gun and electric razor, and the airplane man's desperate personality makes that appear in turn incidental. When the narrator finally finds the Cree woman at Gable's he tells her he didn't care for the gun, that he couldn't even find a plug for the razor. His reward is her warning, her brother Dougie was looking for him, and within the hour the narrator stumbles out of Gable's with a bloody broken nose only to find the airplane man handcuffed to a shiny suit, the F.B.I., and life is no worse than it was before: “Again I felt the helplessness of being in a world of stalking white men. But those Indians down at Gable's were no bargain either. I was a stranger to both and both had beaten me.”

The narrator is innocent and defeated, a nameless inheritor of
neolithic wisdom in the face of a cockeyed world crippled by spiritless machines. One senses the warrior deprived of the opportunity to earn his name by a society established on the plains by a peculiar people from another continent. Many of these are like the airplane man, maybe the most the natives have ever seen of the white man, as defeated and luckless as they are.

One of the admirable qualities of Winter in the Blood is the author’s persistence not to take the easy way out. We may never know why the narrator slaps Marleen, who had been rather good to him, when all she does is ask him to kiss her pussy. One accustomed to easier fiction might expect this to be a key moment which the narrator fails to measure up to. But knowing what has already happened, it is easy for sensitive readers to forgive this assault on a woman who is no more degraded than he is. After all, the assault is itself a sex act, and despite Marleen’s protests, she seems to have enjoyed it and asks the narrator to return. Part of the basis that gives Winter in the Blood its genuine synthesizing quality is its elimination of positive action as a means to asserting value and personal worth.

The victorious moment in the novel is the intuition that Yellow Calf is the narrator’s grandfather. Later, the narrator’s raw courage that commands Bird to save the cow from drowning in the mud is met with another typical defeat. All that is permitted the narrator is that rare moment of enlightenment wherein the pride and nobility of his ancestry is revealed. This enlightenment gives Winter in the Blood its essential native quality, and the whole moment assimilates a foreign language (English) and a literate art form from western Europe (the novel). The synthesis is so convincing that Lame Bull’s ridiculous eulogy of the grandmother in the closing scene is filled with the comic warmth that recalls the day when the Trickster stories (“Old Man” in English, “Napi” in Blackfeet—Siksika) entertained the narrator’s ancestors.

If this is an imaginative reading, which is what fine fiction desires and deserves, then the work must stand up to an evaluation of its language and technique. It would be foolish to find fault with the exciting yet simple language from which Welch composes the fine narrative passages, the heart of fiction and practically all forms of storytelling. Welch has already established himself as a fine poet and may help to prove that poets are making our best fiction writers, that quality fiction cannot be written without the sensitivity to language that mostly poets seem to have. Certainly there is nothing versy about
Winter in the Blood, how awful if there was. But everywhere Welch draws upon the same hard, concrete vocabulary from which he drew for the excellent poems of Riding the Earthboy 40:

The daughter sat in the backseat with me, a case of peaches separating us. She was a frail girl with skin as white as the man's ears. Her own ears were hidden beneath a flow of black frizzled hair contained by a blue-and-white beaded headband. She lolled back in the corner, sometimes looking at me, sometimes gazing blankly out the window at the unchanging country. At first, her grunts seemed to be in agreement with whatever her parents were talking about, but then she grunted twice during a lull in the conversation. She seemed to be in some kind of discomfort. Her eyes were dull, like those of a sick calf.

Certainly Winter in the Blood is not experimental fiction. There is nothing to be found in its technique that is especially innovative. The methods used have been tried, tested, proven. This puts Winter in the Blood in a puzzling context and finds itself trying to win an audience at a time when technical innovation does seem to be the fashionable stepping stone to fine fiction. The list of excellent innovators is an impressive one: Gass, Coover, Barthelme, Brautigan, Nabokov, Burroughs, Hawkes, and on. The desperation for new forms of fiction may reflect the spiritual bankruptcy of a contemporary America still shellshocked from involvement in a whole series of ugly, devastating wars and helplessly guilty over the cruel imbalances that plague its society. However the trend is explained, Winter in the Blood is rooted in circumstances that neither require nor would benefit from technical innovation. The narrator, still crying the wish of the poet, wants us to believe him, to accept every word as real, to be genuinely moved by the heartbreaking series of events that make the nameless narrator more helpless. Welch is returning to a simpler, more basic form of storytelling, and in so doing aligns himself more consciously to that barely remembered heritage before the white man swept over the plains. And this must be recognized as a technical achievement, the fusion of technique and content, of skills and intention. What is remembered is the story, the beautiful uplifting language, the pride that faces defeat like old Bird who knew the worthlessness of that stupid cow better than anyone.

Steven Christenson
Somewhere in this country, in a well-lit, well-financed laboratory, scientists are programming computers to write poems. It’s not surprising. In fact, I wouldn’t be shocked if it were suddenly revealed that a good percentage of contemporary works were so written. With a finely-tuned efficiency common to machines, a number of poets are now turning out whole volumes of extended invoice, payroll-check poems. The effect this kind of writing has on its readers is ultimately the same as a form letter or an overdue bill notice. We read and say: I am not dealing with a human being here. This poem has no poet! Then a book appears, so rich in humanity, so convincing in its voice and imagination that you read it again and again, like a letter from home, and celebrate its marvelous information, its good news for years to come. This year one of those books is Tess Gallagher’s Stepping Outside.

There are excursions here into that beautiful land between the poet’s life and imagination. And while one loses oneself easily in the poems, there is always the firm foundation of experience on the one hand and vision on the other. The dependence of poetry on these two elements is always desirable, but for Gallagher it is vital. In “Two Stories,” the most moving and perhaps the best poem in the collection, she calls down an author whose story “shaped for the market” the tale of her Uncle’s murder. The writer evidently did not believe the details of the crime deserved much care:

I say it matters
that the dog stays by the chimney
for months, and a rain
soft as the sleep of cats
enters the land, emptied
of its cows, its wire gates pulled down
by hands that never dug
the single well, this whitened field.

But facts do not dilute or dominate the poems. Reality and thought merge in a beautiful, leaderless dance.

Frequent comings and goings, arrivals and departures, fill Tess Gallagher’s poems. Fathers leave for work, daughters come home. . . . But it is an odd movement; one that implies a certain stasis and dependability. One always returns or, rather, one never leaves. You cannot leave behind the raw materials of your life:

How he always came back; the drinking,
the fishing all night, all
the ruthless ships he unloaded.
That was the miracle of our lives. Even now
he won’t stay out of what I have
to say to you.

(“Coming Home”)

From these raw materials come the poems. When the poet leaves the tangible world for the world of the poem, the stuff of experience is always taken along. She is bound by it. It is inescapable:

So I’m always coming back like tonight,
in a temper, brushing aside the azaleas
on the doorstep. What did you mean
by it, this tenderness
that is a whip, a longing?

(“Coming Home”)

It wants to crow, flaps
but will not fly. It struts
in a circle, looks twice
in the same direction, steps forward
to be on the edge.

(“Secret”)

Sometimes I think it is too much to demand of poets that they live so intensely in their work, but there always comes along a Tess Gallagher, someone who meets and surpasses all demands. Hers is by no means confessional or cryptically personal writing, it is honest and believable. It is total poetry and not mere word play. Stepping Outside changes a reader, and the excitement the change gives can never be weakened. It is part of the dance: the experience and the
imagination step outside and meet on the middle-ground of the poem.

I must mention that there is no price listed on this collection. It is a very limited edition, (I had to borrow a review copy), just 230 copies, numbered and beautifully printed on handmade rice paper. I can only suggest that we hope and watch for a collection of Tess Gallagher's poems from a major press. I'm sure one will be forthcoming. That way we can all get letters from home.

Robert Wrigley

THE GOOD OLE NOVEL

WALTZ ACROSS TEXAS
Max Crawford
Farrar Straus & Giroux, $8.95

Why did you want to kill somebody the last time you got the urge to flick the switchblade? Sex? Money? Revenge? None of the above? Some of the above are central to the plot of Max Crawford's Waltz Across Texas, in some combination.

Flash to "Sugar" Campbell, your basic good Joe, returning home to Flavannah, Texas from his collapsed business in California. His father is dead, the estate worthless, and this old pal "Son" Cunningham has offered Sugar a mysterious job. Bored, at loose ends, Sugar takes the job and finds loco weed growing right thick on the El Toro Ranch where Cunningham works. Old man Kitchens passed this faltering spread to his son "Tee" Kitchens (or "Tee" Texas or "Little Tee") hoping to run the place by proxy. But Tee seizes power spurred on by his city-bred wife, Adrienne ("A."). Tee's gigantic life insurance policy may play a sinister role in these
maneuvers. When Sugar gets to El Toro, two cowpokes have died suspiciously, Tee has employed Son Cunningham to get El Toro functional at any cost, oil barons like Dolph Gunther and his son “Gunner” keep cropping up, and Sugar has no idea what his four hundred a week job is. Weird vibes abound; somebody wants Tee Kitchens dead, Sugar was hired to kill Kitchens, or to be killed and look like Kitchens, or to protect Kitchens. Tee himself proves to be a wildman, unstable, drunken, crazed with the burden of responsibilities. El Toro itself seems chaotic with pointless parties, gunfights, revolts to Tee’s faction or to Old Man Kitchen’s.

Sugar begins to piece together his planned role, but the plans keep shifting. He falls hesitantly into a romance with Adrienne, suspecting this to be part of some plot. P. M. Eastep (“Pork Man” or “P. M.”), a squat West Coast Mafioso also hired by Son for a vague job, goes with Sugar down to Mexico, supposedly to retrieve Tee from a potent booze spree. In Mexico, Sugar loses Pork Man, stumbles into a hotel room with a corpse and gets grazed with a .45, then escapes in a fever back to El Toro. Right after this debacle, Tee returns and seems to clear his finances at a business conference. But after the slightly hysterical celebration that follows, Sugar finds Tee Kitchens with his face bashed in lying on the floor of the smaller ranch house. The focus of Waltz Across Texas shifts from What’s Up? to Who Dunnit? with Sugar conducting a personal investigation up one lie and down another. Eventually the persistent Sugar Campbell reaches some hard conclusions and wraps-things-up in general.

Seems clean. But I finished Waltz Across Texas sensing unanswered deserts, canyons, and prairies inside the book. Technical skill is not the problem—the writing is uniformly excellent. Take Tee Kitchens describing himself when he met Son Cunningham:

“Yessir, the kid was in bad shape, his hands was shaky, his eyes was not clear, his dreams was freakin’ out the help, there wasn’t no lead in his pencil. He had only one pal, old Jack Daniel’s, and he was out to git him. Still is, mebbe, but he’s been sent to the foot of the line. Then one night there I was chasin after some piss-aint loan like it was a soggy-drawered cheerleader, lickin that Sunday-school teacher’s boots, when I happened acrost your ole buddy here and he begun to tell me about the real world, laying on all them twenty-five-cent words; inflation, depression, consolidation, and all that other crap that I pay him to wade through. Ah fuck, you tell the rest of it, Cunningham, my tongue needs a nap.”

Passages with this spark are not uncommon and Crawford expertly
paces the tone of the prose to match the plot tempo. The novel is not hard to read, just unsatisfying, both in characterization and overall intent.

Son Cunningham functions as the mainspring of *Waltz Across Texas*. By the end of the book Son has become more important than El Toro, the murder, even Texas itself, since he has encompassed them all. Sugar describes Son's powerful presence:

Even in high school Son had been a big man, tall and raw-boned. The last time I had seen him, several years after graduation, he had been six two or three, a hundred and ninety pounds. True I wasn't looking for a man two inches taller, sixty pounds heavier, but it was his face I didn't know... that strange destroyed face. A face that was still handsome—the nose, the lips had once had delicate lines—but it was too big. There was too much flesh on the skull. It had the look of a body that had been ruined—bruised and swollen. The man's eyes were hidden.

Son progresses in the novel from puzzling to sinister to demonic. A failed sensitive, Cunningham has turned to lust for power, money and high-class pussy. A revealing exchange occurs near the end of the novel when Sugar confronts Son with the web of deceit and murder Sugar feels certain his old friend masterminded. Cunningham declares himself one of the "golden men" described in Plato's *Republic* and mentions *Crime and Punishment*; how the murder did not torture Raskolnikov enough. Sugar replies:

"That's bullshit, Son. You win and everybody knows it. You beat Tee, Adrienne, me, Dolly, everybody. You losing is bullshit, just like your cornball philosophy and your stories about our youth and your crime-and-punishment bullshit—it's all bullshit to cover up the fact that you know exactly what you're doing, you've known all along, every step."

Son Cunningham is the most fully realized character in *Waltz Across Texas*—he exposes more fantasies and feelings than anyone and yet they don't seem enough. Exactly how Son schemes or the nature of his madness or the fine tuning of his lust for Adrienne never quite reach the surface. What remains is that "one cold s.o.b." can get away with anything if he uses style and drive, especially in Texas. "'Crime and reward—ole Feodor would have shit a brick,'" says Son. He might have at that.

Son would come off better if his characterization didn't have to pull so much weight. Pork Man and Foose the detective are well developed, but Pork Man's role, particularly in relation to Sugar,
stays too hazy until the conclusion and Foose provides little more than comic relief and some slight sleuthing work.

The women in *Waltz Across Texas* are pretty much trapped in the Western Romance-Adventure slots and wield no real power. June, possessed with prophetic insanity, stands out but appears only briefly and irregularly. Adrienne is both *femme fatale* and *Macbeth*-style bitch, but she rarely rises above the level of chief sex object.

Adrienne didn't remove her sunglasses, so that I was acutely aware of the planned warmth of her smile, her easy sardonic attitude toward me. Each part of her I found soft, easy, yet somewhere she was cold and hard.

Much energy focuses on Adrienne and when Sugar announces near the end of the novel that she is the treasure, it goes over—but the rich princess never reveals enough interior to make her preciousness seem real or important.

A similar lack of definition surrounds Sugar. The incident with his father and the wasted farm drops out of sight—Sugar never evolves any resolution. Why does Sugar stick with Son so persistently, especially when he finds himself likely to be shamed, imprisoned, or killed? Sugar is labeled bored, homesick, a voyeur, but nothing develops enough to have any impact. The romance with Adrienne peters out. The revenge on Son for the murder ends frustrated. Sugar wanders out the door at the end of *Waltz Across Texas* and the meaning of his dance goes too.

If *Waltz Across Texas* is intended to be a heavily commercial book, a raw potboiler, then it's not crass enough. You can't make up glittery bunk about it ("Waltzing means never having to say you're guilty . . .?") There's not enough sex and the murder isn't Evel Knieveled. Besides, the strokes aren't broad and simplistic—Son, Sugar, Pork Man keep bursting from their boxes and puzzling the reader. Max Crawford doesn't want to be the new Earl Stanley Gardner anyway; *Waltz Across Texas* begs to be richer, more concentrated, not a bucks-and-murder-covered candy. Crawford's book hovers around the territory of the Good Ole Novel. The Good Ole Novel is a tale of brotherly guffaws and stock womenfolk intertwined with violence, lust, and lots of hooch—guys divergent as Ernest Hemingway and Zane Grey write Good Ole Novels. A distilled, pointed *Waltz Across Texas* would be a fine current example of this sensibility, but Crawford shies away from the path too often.

*Waltz Across Texas* stands now as a potentially probing novel
harnessed by fake schmaltz appeal. What drives men to kill for power in a world slithering with lies and faithless women? What part of evil do we share with one eye open? Monster questions, but the book never hogties one head-on. The plot rambles and seems to pointlessly repeat loops, such as the endless conflicting stories after Tee's murder—I mean, how much suspense can you cram into compulsive fibbers? Crawford seems to want to haul Dostoevski to Dallas and the result could be a bitchin' yarn. But *Waltz Across Texas*, written by a native, reads like a tourist.

*M. Miles*
NICK BAKER is associated with the Warehouse Artist Co-op and Gallery in Missoula.  
BOB BEHR is an MFA candidate at the University of Montana. His work has appeared previously in Montana Gothic.  
MICHELE BIRCH has had poems in recent issues of Poetry NOW, The Ohio Review and Ploughshares.  
BARBARA BRIANT teaches English and creative writing at College of Great Falls.  
JAMES CLAYBORN has a studio in the Warehouse.  
MAGGIE CRUMLEY once lived in Arkansas. She has been a previous contributor to CutBank.  
MADELINE DEFR EES has a new book of poems forthcoming from Braziller. She taught last fall in British Columbia.  
RAMONA DEGEORGIO is a student at the University of Montana in Missoula.  
MONTE DOLACK has recently returned from California. His drawings have also appeared in The Garret.  
STEVEN FLICK will receive his MFA from the University of Montana this spring. He's a former Stegner Fellow at Stanford and one of his stories appeared in the first issue of Montana Gothic.  
JOHN HAINES' latest book of poems is Leaves And Ashes from kayak Press. He has also published prose in Crazy Horse and Stinktree.  
LAURIE HAUGAN is a student at the University of Montana. This is her first published poem.  
RICHARD HUGO is on leave from the University of Montana and has been teaching in Colorado since last fall. A new collection of poems, What Thou Lovest Well, Remains American is due any day from Norton.  
RICH IVES is a graduate student at the University of Montana. His poems have previously appeared in The Iowa Review, Dacotah Territory and Poetry Northwest.  
LINDA KITTELL is a Greek scholar and MFA candidate. She dreams of Vermont and the sweet sap she left behind.  
CHRIS MCMONIGLE is from Anaconda. Of Italian-German-Irish descent, she is a senior philosophy major and has poems forthcoming in Intro 7.  
JOE MEYERS, a native of Billings, spends his time in writing classes illustrating his private book of universal esoterica.  
MILO MILES was born in Livingston, Montana. His grandfather once bought the Petrified Man.  
MARY ANNE MILLER is a senior at Ronan High School. Her poem "Glasgow" won second prize in the national Scholastic Magazine poetry contest.  
CLAY MORGAN is a Smokejumper and a native of Idaho.  
CAROLANN RUSSELL NORD is an MFA candidate at the University of Montana and a previous contributor to CutBank.  
JOCELYN SILER is from back East. She is an MFA candidate and has a novel-in-progress.  
DONNA SWANK is now a high school senior in White Sulphur Springs, Montana.
ROBERT TIMBERMAN comes from Roundup, Montana. An undergraduate in writing at UM, he is still looking for the library.
PAT TODD is a native of Great Falls. He's a friend of many poets.
LOWELL UDA teaches at U of M. His work has also appeared in the North American Review, the Hawaii Review and other journals.
CYNTHIA WHITE lives at Sweeney Creek. She has had poems in Montana Gothic and is coordinator of this year’s Missoula Literature Conference.
PAUL ZARZYSKI recently attended the College of Buckaroo Knowledge.
MAGAZINES RECEIVED

_Abraxas_ (No. 10), Warren Woessner, ed., 1831 S. Park St., No. 9, Madison, WI 53717. $2./two issues.

_Apple_ (No. 9), David Curry, ed., Box 2271, Springfield, IL 62705. $5./four issues.

_Austin Pulpwood_ (Winter 74-75), Jeff Woodruff, ed. 501 Park Blvd., Austin, TX 78751. $2./two issues.

_Carolina Quarterly_ (Winter 1975), Jeff Richards, ed., Box 1117, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC 27514. $4.50/year.


_Colorado-North Review_ (Winter 1975), Roger Dixon, ed., University Center, Univ. of Northern Colo., Greeley, Colo.

_Dacotah Territory_ (No. 8 & 9), Mark Vinz, ed., PO Box 775, Moorhead, MN 56560 $2.

_kayak_ (No. 37), George Hitchcock, ed., Bonny Doon Rd., Santa Cruz, CA 95060. $4./four issues.

_Montana Gothic_ (No. 1, Fall 1974) Peter Koch, ed., P.O. Box 756, Missoula, Montana 59801.

_Northwest Review_ (XIV-2), Michael Strelow, ed., University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403. $4./year.

_Ohio Review_ (XVI, No. 1), Ellis Hall, Ohio University, Athens, OH 45701. $5./year.

_Pebble_ (No. 11), Greg Kuzma, ed. 118 South Boswell Ave., Crete, NB 68333. $6./four issues.

_Scree_ (No. 2) Kirk Robertson, ed., Box 2307, Missoula, MT 59801.

_Sou'wester_ (Vol. III, No. 1), Terry Perkins, ed., English Department, Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, IL 62025. $3./year.
Inside cover drawings by Monte Dolack.

CutBank would like to thank the Associated Students of the University of Montana for their helpfulness and generosity.