Canids

Welcome to Canis #5. We’re writing this on the Winter Solstice, the sacred day when we celebrate the darkness as it begins to bring forth light. It seems fitting, then, that this issue offers so many complex meditations on darkness and light and the sacred. We also have in these pages ten writers and four artists whose work appears in Canis for the first time; for many of these, it is also their first appearance in print. We are pleased to present the work of so many emerging artists and writers.

We at Canis feel fortunate to be part of the environmental arts community here in the Northern Rockies, and as that community flourishes, we hope to continue to serve as a forum for the many voices and visions the bioregion inspires. This winter Canis Press will publish our first chapbook, Jenny Flynn’s Loss is the Great Lesson, Jenny’s essay, as we noted in this space in Canis #4, won the University of Montana’s Merriam-Frontier Award. We are honored to be part of this project, and we encourage you to seek out Loss is the Great Lesson this January at finer bookstores around Missoula.

Canis also continues as co-sponsor, with Freddy’s Feed and Read Bookstore, of the Writing Wild Reading Series. Writing Wild will expand this winter as we welcome the Environmental Writing Program’s “Writers in Residence”—Janine Benyus, Chris Offutt, and Robert Clark—for readings and book signings. Writing Wild will also sponsor a reading to celebrate the publication of Canis #5; on January 27 contributors to this issue will read from their work. And sometime around the Spring Equinox we’ll sponsor an open reading. All of these events will happen at Freddy’s, 1221 Helen Avenue in Missoula.

We are also pleased to note other ways that our community is growing. Canis is now available from independent booksellers throughout Montana. We’d like to welcome all those readers who are new to Canis, and we want to encourage artists of all persuasions—poets and comics, writers and cartoonists, painters and photographers—to send us your work. Canis is not a “professional” journal, it is a community journal, and we want it to represent the breadth and depth of our community.

And we have to make a shameless plea for money. We are committed to keeping Canis free, so that it can get into the hands of all people of all ages who want to see it. Your tax-deductible donation will help us continue to grow—but more importantly, it will help us continue to spread our message to all who want to hear it.

It’s time for us to hush now. Outside our office window, in the dimming golds and pinks of the Solstice dusk, the snow spreads like a broad palm of silence and grace. We hope the words and images in Canis #5 bring such rich gifts to you.

The Canis Editorial Board

Submissions

Canis seeks work that focuses on nature and the environment. We favor regional writers who have not published widely.

Prose and Poetry: double-spaced, clean copy. If your piece is selected for publication, we will ask you for a computer disk copy, if you have one. Because of space limitations, longer works are more likely to be published if they are no more than 25 double-spaced pages.

Photographs: black-and-white prints only (no slides, contact sheets, or color prints).

We also encourage submissions of cartoons, pen-and-ink drawings, or unconventional types of work that we can’t even think of.

SASE: Please enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope if you’d like your work returned. The deadline for our Spring 1995 issue is March 15.

Canis

c/o EVST

Jeanette Rankin Hall
University of Montana
Missoula, MT 59812

Camas Staff

Who we are and what we do:

Editorial Board: Barb Cesero, Beth Cogswell, Gilly Lyons, Phil Peabody, Jeffery Smith, Rick Stern

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Layout, Design & Production: Mike Kustudia, Phil Peabody & Rick Stern

Treasurers: John Dillon & Jennifer Mandel

Canis is a free publication and production costs are met solely by donations. The journal is organized as a non-profit group under the umbrella of the Associated Students of the University of Montana. If you would like to support this forum for new artists please send a check payable to Canis, John Dillon, Treasurer to the address listed above.

Cover Artwork: Suzanne Truman
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*Winter 1994-1995 - Camas - 1*
Elegy West

snow-capped mountain tops. killdeer circling the upward
breath of a forest.

the forest.

redwoods. black bears. blackbirds whitetails.
elk. beargrass.
cutthroat.
salmon.

no salmon. no elk. no blackbirds no redwoods.
no forest.

no forest no killdeer no breath.
no mountains.

only a reflection in the water.
no water.

Paul Michael Steven
Eyes from the Bush

The lion’s teeth were tucked away in a little drawer of my dad’s mammoth roll top desk, along with other articles from his young adulthood, his Canadian Cavalry pin, an old photo of him boxing in college, twenty or so pairs of old reading glasses, all broken in one place or another, tape holding the lenses in. But for me the lion’s teeth were the best. There were two of them, incisors, each about two inches long and curved into points as sharp as knitting needles. I would go to his desk, sit in his favorite swivel chair and swing circles as I held the teeth in my palms, dreaming of the creature to whom they once belonged. It wasn’t the teeth alone that fascinated me, but the knowledge that these teeth had years ago been firmly embedded in my father’s right thigh.

He has four holes to prove it, each a half an inch deep, two on the front of his leg, two on the back, like giant dimples. As a small child I’d stare at the holes, imagining him in the bush, the lion charging, my father covered in blood. Later, when I was old enough to understand, he told me the story over and over again as we sat in the bathtub. I ran my fingers in and out of the lion teeth holes, totally mesmerized by his story. And later, from some dusty crate came an old 16mm film which we watched as a family one evening after supper. It changed my vision of my father forever. I had known him only as a quiet intellectual — a genius many people called him — his head always in some report, his glasses getting thicker by the year. After that movie he became a sort of hero to my friends, the “outdoorsman” of that period, seeking adventure in wild places. Africa was a giant playing field where the young men of his generation would prove themselves by hunting big game. This is the story over and over again as we sat in the bathtub.

My father’s hair is red like I’ve never seen, and he has a matching beard that contrasts smartly with his safari khakis. He wears a khaki hat, one side flipped up and buttoned to the top, giving him a military look. He is tall, freckled, lean. At first I don’t recognize him — my eight year old mind can barely make the connection between the burliness of his past and the wrinkles of the present. He carries a rifle slung over his shoulder, and he tips his hat at the camera before stepping into the Land Rover and heading out across the veldt.

The film clacks on. My father bashes in a watering hole, wearing, of course, his hat. Gazelles bound in herds across the road. Baboons perch on the hood of the Rover staring in the window. Giraffes and elephants and zebras move over the screen, and I am awed by my father looking on as if the place were his.

“Where are the lions, Dad?” I ask. I have always been obsessed with cats. I want to see the lions, the leopards, the tigers (which I believed all lived in Africa).

“In a minute, son. Hold your horses,” he answers.

And I don’t have to wait long. Suddenly there one is, hanging from its rear paws, skin sagging downward, its golden mane dragging in blood and dirt. My father stands next to it, half the lion’s size, his rifle over his shoulder, a calm smile on his face, his posture relaxed. His first lion kill.

“Dad, did you really kill it, I mean shoot it? What did it do to you, I mean, did it try to kill you?” I was out of breath, trying to find the Red Chisholm in my aged father.

“Son,” he says, “it was different then. ‘We didn’t know....’ His voice wanders off, maybe realizing I will not understand, not yet.

There are more dead lions after that, in one scene my father’s friend standing over his kill, his foot braced on the lion’s chest, one hand around the barrel of his gun, the other on his hip. The lion’s tongue is pink, like our family cat’s, and it hangs loosely in the dirt. My father is quiet as the film sputters on, and the darkness in our family room seems filled with tension. We children are forbidden to kill anything; I was scolded once for killing a spider in the bathtub. It is strange to see my father killing. He shifts in his chair, breathing soft but fast. I am hot, watching.

Suddenly the camera is still, focused in on the bush. I can only see trees and thick leaves. The camera darts back and forth, as if searching for something, and passes a quick flash of yellow in the bush. The camera focuses. A male lion rushes from the bush, too close already. A rifle barrel jumps and smoke fills the air. I am awed by the lion’s speed, the power of three or four quick strides, the leap....another rifle shot explodes.

The screen is black.

Then I see my father on the ground, his leg covered in bloody gauze, a drugged smile on his face. Right up against him, as if searching for something, and passes a quick flash of yellow in the bush. The camera focuses. A male lion rushes from the bush, too close already. A rifle barrel jumps and smoke fills the air. I am awed by the lion’s speed, the power of three or four quick strides, the leap....another rifle shot explodes.

The screen is black.

Then I see my father on the ground, his leg covered in bloody gauze, a drugged smile on his face. Right up against him, as if they are the closest of friends, the lion is sprawled. It is still snarling, and I see the teeth I have worshipped all my life, the mouth from which they came dripping blood, the lips drawn tight. Next to them is the man who saved my father’s life, a tall African with large, nervous eyes, speaking quickly to the camera. He seems very happy. With a huge smile he bends down and shakes my father’s hand. It is the saddest sight I’ve ever seen, why I don’t know. In the silence that follows I feel no pity for my father. He is taken off on
a stretcher with a hero's grin, and the final scene is their airplane
taking off, bound for America.

For years after I questioned him about Africa, about the
lion's attack and the lion bite. It was as if I couldn't, or didn't want
to, believe the man in the film was my father. He spoke of it as if
it were in another lifetime, as if he were talking about someone else.

"So goddamned beautiful," he'd say as he looked past me
and through the wall. "Most beautiful place on earth...."

And then he'd put on his glasses, go back to his papers,
land upright. She almost always did. I liked to drop her from high
places, watch her tail arc wildly to maintain her balance in midair.
I stopped when I dropped her off our twelve foot deck and she
didn't come home for a week. I thought I'd killed her and that she'd
limped off into the bush to die.

I loved to watch her stalk the hummingbirds under the
aspen trees, her body sleek and low in the grass, muscles tense and
quivering, eyes as wide as sky and in them earth a hummingbird.
She slid jointless over ground, like water on rock. I discovered then,
and believe to this day, that cats are ever wild. I
knew she didn't need me. We could all pack up,
move away, and she would survive. The predator was in her.

Usually the hummingbirds were too quick
for her, and she'd slink back to the house, de­
jected. But many nights
I woke to her muffled
call at the door, her
mouth full with mouse
and bat. Or wild screams
in the night when other
cats would come around.
She'd come home with
terror in her eyes, her tail
puffed up like her dark
twin. She'd stare out the
window or look through
cells for the rest of the
night, hinting that all was
not well in the world.
She could never tell me
what she knew, but I knew, watching her, that I knew almost
nothing. She was a paradox to me — on one hand a purring warmth
at the foot of my bed, on the other a creature capable of wondrous
violence that shocked and thrilled me.

Like most cats, she was unpredictable. One moment she'd
roll over and purr as I scratched her belly, the next my arm,
scratched and bleeding, would look like something she'd dragged
in the night. She was beyond my control, and for that reason I've
always preferred cats to dogs.

Most of my friends were faithful to their hounds, as their
hounds were faithful to them. I've always been a little disgusted by
the sight of a dog trotting next to its owner, looking up at him as
if he were a god. Or even worse, the commanding voice of a dog
owner saying "Sit," "Lie down," or worst of all, "Shake." I've seen
nice people turned into tyrants when their dogs chance to disobey
a command and follow their instincts too far into the woods.

Tell a cat to "sit" and it will look at you as if you are mad.
For that reason many people hate cats. They don't fulfill the human
desire to command, to control, to dominate. Flora was fiercely independent, and I learned to equate that with wildness. She was absolutely never tamed, beyond coming for Tender Vittles once a day, and even then it was on her terms.

Twenty-four years later she died of liver failure. For the last ten years of her life she should have died ten times. She meowed like a courting frog. One of herfang teeth fell out and she walked around with a permanent snarl on her face, her pink tongue sticking halfway out of her mouth. Her green eyes turned almost completely black, and we wondered if she could see anymore. Her hearing was gone; bluejays would stand behind her and screech at the top of their lungs. Her claws fell out and never grew back. Her purr sounded like a sick engine. Her hair fell out in clumps.

But we loved her for all these things. My brother renamed her Timex; and we made bets on how long she would live. Friends would come over just to take a look at her. Even in her old age she’d still sit by the window and watch the hummingbirds, and as she watched, a moan seemed to build inside her until it climaxed in a high pitched whine, like a Volkswagon in reverse. That’s where she died one day, in her spot by the window, watching the birds outside. I was away at college, and until I came home months later it was impossible to believe she was gone. She came when I was a small child, she was there when the last child left for college. She outlived my mother. She outlived some of my friends. During her stay with us she outlived three generations of dog. For several years after her death people would walk into the house asking, “Where’s Timex?,” as if there were no question she was alive.

I still love cats, in all shapes and sizes. I’m not embarrassed to admit this, even to my most macho dog-loving friends. Cats thrill me. They remind me of where I touched the edge of wild, where I first looked in to the beautiful viciousness of the non-human world.

My father was educated as an engineer, but despite his terminally mathematical mind he was a wonderful, if not poetic, storyteller. He loved to sit back, take off his glasses, and tell us about the “old days,” when the world was full of magic. We lived near a wilderness area, in a small mountain town, and his stories were born of the natural world in which we lived. We learned about the Fairy Waterfall, where the Water Ouzel lived. We learned about the Owl Tree, and the Three Grey Ghosts that were dying old growth redwood trees. There was the Weasel Tree, home of the Long-tailed Weasel, and the Elf Forest, where ferns grew higher than my head. These stories defined my child’s world, and I used them like a map when I walked into the mountains behind my house.

But my favorite stories of all were ones about the Sabre-toothed Tiger, a series that began and ended in a bathtub with my brother and my father. My brother and I would yell and whine for him to come take a bath with us, not because we liked baths, but because we loved the stories. We never asked him to tell us a story; it was always the bath we asked for, knowing a story would emerge with the steam and my father’s toes treading hot water.

My father would undress as we watched him from the tub, bending over finally to take off his socks. He always took off his socks last, and I remember he seemed very old to me then, crouched over, grunting as if it were an unusual act to perform, his glasses teetering precariously on the end of his nose.

He’d step into the tub and stand above us for a few seconds, and I remember being in awe at how tall and big he looked from down below, his penis, arms, chest, neck, and cheeks falling downward, as if melting. His body was covered in a mix of thick red and grey hair, and he looked to me like a smoldering giant, a towering redwood tree about to fall in the forest. His legs were lean and muscled, his right thigh marked by the lion bite. He’d slide down underneath my brother and me, and we would prop ourselves up, one on each of his legs, picking and poking at his body. He’d suck in one deep breath, blow out a long, long sigh, and close his eyes with his head resting on the rim of the tub. It took him a while to get started, and we patiently entertained ourselves by pulling on his toes, poking his stomach, and stretching his earlobes. I especially loved his earlobes, long and elastic, and I couldn’t help laughing at the way they jiggled when I let go. He never said a word as we picked at him, and I think in our child’s minds he was a giant doll, a creature who felt no pain and told stories in the water.

The stories always began the same: “Once upon a time when animals talked....” My brother and I would sit back in the tub and listen intently for the giant cat to walk from the tip of my father’s tongue. The Sabre-toothed Tiger was a giant mountain lion with teeth like the tusks of an elephant. He lived up on the Granite Chief, in a cave that overlooked Squaw Valley. My brother and I spent many summer hours searching for that cave, both wanting and not wanting to actually find it. I guess we wondered what the Sabre-toothed Tiger would be like when we met him in real life, and we were afraid.

The stories varied in theme and length, but usually they involved the Sabre-toothed Tiger doing some good deed, saving a small child during a snowstorm, rescuing the Three Grey Ghosts from the evil Tree-Cutters, or saving the Water Ouzel from the Hunter. I didn’t know it then, but my father was trying to save the world through his stories, maybe trying to bring back to life at least one of the cats he had killed as a young man. The tiger became a symbol to me, one that later in my life emerged as some kind of environmental ethic.

To this day I can’t move in the mountains without an eye out for a lion.

There is one story I remember better than others. I asked for it again and again over the years; each time it came out a little bit different. It went something like this:

Once upon a time, when animals talked, a great cat lived in the mountains above Squaw Valley. He was striped orange and black, his teeth were as long as sabres and sharp as nails, his tail as long as any young boy, his claws like razors. He was as big as most
bears, and his coat was as bright as the sun. He lived in a cave on Granite Chief and came out only at night, when no humans were around.

Despite his fearsome appearance, this big cat was very nice. He was friends with all the creatures of the canyon — the owls, the trees, the big flat rocks, coyote, bluejay, marmot, pinecone. But more than anyone, he loved the water ouzel. They were best of friends and spent the early morning hours by the Fairy Waterfall, telling jokes and stories about their lives. The Sabre-tooth helped the water ouzel by protecting it from weasels, and the water ouzel returned this favor by picking lice from the Sabre-tooth’s fur and grooming his coat to a shine. If one was lucky he might see them at sunrise, the water ouzel hopping around on the Sabre-tooth’s giant shoulders, his coat catching the sun’s first soft light. All was peaceful in the canyon.

One day, late in the morning, the Sabre-tooth was brushing his long fangs and preparing himself for the first of his many daytime naps, when he heard a cry of help and something running up the hill. He came out of his cave just in time to meet squirrel, out of breath and screeching that the Hunter had come and taken the water ouzel away. The water ouzel was rare and considered valuable for its feathers which humans ground into dust and used for a love potion. “Just like the humans,” thought the tiger, “to take what we love to make love for themselves.”

Instantly the squirrel jumped on the Sabre-tooth’s back and they rushed down the mountain towards the human trail, where the Hunter was escaping with the water ouzel tucked tightly under his belt. Now tigers are fast, but nobody had ever seen a tiger run as fast as the Sabre-tooth ran that day. He ran through the Great Grey Desert, by the Owl Tree and Fairy Waterfall, and faster than lightning he caught the Hunter slinking like a snake down the trail. Before the Hunter could reach for his gun the tiger snatched it away and swallowed it whole.

“Hunter,” Tiger said, “if I were not so nice I would eat you this minute, for I am very hungry. Give me the water ouzel and I will let you go free.”

Without a second thought the Hunter relinquished the water ouzel, disheveled but unhurt, and he ran down the trail as fast as his legs would take him. Which, by the way, wasn’t very fast compared to even the slowest of tigers. The water ouzel hopped onto the Sabre-toothed Tiger’s back, and they ran back up the canyon at a full gallop just for fun, laughing all the way. The End.

By this time we were all white and wrinkled from the bath water. No matter how many times I’d heard the story before, I was mesmerized by the water ouzel on the tiger’s back. When I was too old to bathe with my father anymore the stories came to a close. Maybe he thought I was too old to hear them anymore. We never talked about it. But I kept looking, for the rest of my growing up, for a glimpse of that cat. I suppose I’m still looking.

There is another side to the Sabre-toothed Tiger story. When my parents came to Squaw Valley in 1955, there were still a decent population of mountain lions. My father even had the luck of stumbling across one once, up in Shirley Canyon. I try to imagine what that must have been like for him. Without a gun, I mean. I imagine him locked in his footsteps, staring at the cat’s yellow eyes, wondering if it is payback time. When he spoke of the incident it was with a certain reverence, and I think now that he must have made some kind of apology to that mountain lion, a prayer of forgiveness.

One thing I know for sure is the pelts of the African lions never showed up in our home. I asked him what happened to the furs, and he told me they had gotten lost in transit. I believed him then, but now I have a feeling there is another story there. I don’t think he wanted to live anymore with the deaths he made. As long as I’ve known him, I’ve never seen him hurt a fly.

By the time I was old enough to hike with my father the mountain lions were mostly gone. There was one left, people said, living up near Granite Chief above the water ouzel waterfall. Every once in a while someone would see it, and small dogs and house cats disappeared with regularity for a number of years. It became a mythical figure in our community, and we’d sit around campfires and speculate about where and when he’d show up next. I suppose that’s where my father got the fuel for his Sabre-tooth stories, though as a kid I never made that connection. I just felt surrounded by the mystery of cats; that was enough for me. To this day I can’t move in the mountains without an eye out for a lion.

And I think in this empty world there was room for me and a mountain lion.

And I think in the world beyond, how easily we might spare a million or two of humans and never miss them.

Yet what a gap in the world, the missing white frost-face of that slim yellow mountain lion.

-D.H. Lawrence

For the last few years I’ve worked as a mountaineering instructor and wilderness educator in Colorado and Utah. Mountain lion country. At least that’s what they say. I, for one, have still never seen one in real life. I’ve seen hundreds of paw prints, lion scat, fresh kills, even a claw once in Lavender Canyon. I’ve had the hair on my neck stand erect, known that I was being followed. I’ve done pirouettes on sandstone, almost panicked in my certainty that something powerful was watching me from not too far away. Once, going back the way I’d come, there were lion tracks covering my fresh foot prints. Maybe I’ve even been stalked. I’m always looking. Three summers ago I came close to seeing one.

It was in the La Sal mountains outside of Moab, Utah, and I was instructing a 23 day mountaineering course. We were camped...
at 9,000 feet in an aspen grove, looking down on the desert below, the Behind the Rocks area glowing red with the liquid light of sunset. We’d traveled ten miles that day, my ten students were exhausted, and we were climbing a peak the next morning. I was tending to my blisters while the students went for water and began preparing dinner. I was thinking about the lion tracks I’d seen in the mud by the creek.

The sun went behind the Henry Mountains to the west and I got up to get water from a small pond a few hundred yards from camp. As I crested a small rise, I saw one of my students, Bill, squatting dead-still, watching the other side of the pond with an intensity I’ll never forget. Just as I focused my eyes on the far bank the silence broke, and I heard something moving quickly through the brush beyond the water. It lasted only for a second and then Bill turned and ran up to me.

“Oh my God, did you see it? Unbelievable. A mountain lion. I was filling my water bottle and looked up and there it was. Staring at me. Like I was a pork chop. Oh my god, it was big. Did you see it?”

I had to admit no, that I hadn’t seen it, that, in fact, I’d probably scared it away. We went over to look for tracks and found them, right where he’d been looking, some of the largest tracks I’d ever seen. I was filled with an intense jealousy, that this rookie mountaineer student of mine should by chance walk into a creature that I’d been searching for my entire life. Then my jealousy was replaced by a sense of awe, grateful that the lion had let itself be seen by anyone, even if it wasn’t me. And seeing that mountain lion did something to Bill. Before he’d been a needy, loud, self-conscious nineteen year old fraternity boy. For the next week he rarely spoke, he looked around a lot, he took care with how he traveled in the mountains. He was always looking off into the distances, as if searching for an answer to some deeply hidden question about his life.

He was lucky to see one; most people will never get the chance. They are elusive creatures, and nobody really knows how many are left in North America. Estimates range between 2,000 to 7,000. Nearly all of these — official estimates suggest there are no more than 50 surviving in Florida — live in the western United States. There, they continue to be victims of the Teddy Roosevelt era, when mountain lions were viewed as vermin, threatening the hunter’s supply of elk, deer, and other game. “Lord of stealthy murder, facing his doom with a heart both craven and cruel,” wrote Roosevelt at the turn of the century. Between then and about 1972 mountain lions were brought to near endangered levels until federal laws restricted the use of poison in mountain lion eradication programs. The only Western state that doesn’t allow sport hunting of mountain lions is California, and that was a very recent and controversial victory.

It seems that lions are up against more than sport hunters, though. As Maurice Hornocker says, “Lions, however, are specialized killing machines... They are at the apex of the food chain, and thus they reflect the general health of the ecosystem. "Bears," he says, "are incompetent compared with lions." Humans don’t like not being at the top of the food chain. And so, like bears and wolves, they threaten the human ideology of dominance over nature. We don’t like to go out in the woods if it isn’t safe; we don’t like the thought of a creature who can rip us to shreds; we are threatened by anything higher on the food chain. Mountain lions, to some, represent evil in wilderness, and are seen in much the same light as they were in 1738:

The Catamount has a tail like a lion, his Legs like a bears, its Claws like an Eagle, its Eyes like a Tyger and its Countenance a mixture of everthing Fierce and Savage. He is exceeding ravenous & devours all sorts of Creatures that come near.

For many of the same reasons, cats all over the world are moving towards extinction — India’s and Russia’s tigers, Africa’s leopards, and smaller varieties of wild cats around the world — following in the paw prints of their now extinct ancestor, the great sabre-toothed cats.

I think of my father hunting in Africa, how much the times have and haven’t changed. I want to believe that he was a product of his time and that we are beyond those times when hunting lions for sport was as acceptable as it was considered “manly.” But then I think of Texas, where the mountain lion is still considered vermin and can be killed at any time for any reason using almost any method — poison, traps, dogs. Ethically is this any worse than the Big Game designation it has in many other states such as Montana or Colorado, where lions are hunted for sport? The point is, men are still filling their egos by using dogs, traps, and rifles with huge scopes to kill an animal as beautiful as it is rare. We are, I think, a long way from Edward Abbey’s desire to “shake hands with a mountain lion.”

Still, I find hope in my father’s ability to change, in his redemption through stories, in his transformation from a lion hunter to a man who can sit for hours watching the water ouzel. Maybe he saw something in the eye of the lion, something besides the “beast” he’d been raised to believe in. Whatever he saw, I forgive him.
The Desire for Stars

What if it were true
a cosmic beginning
that proceeds with particles
flaring, at just
fast enough and just slow
enough for
congregation.

Seventh grade science
supersaturated solutions
brilliant blue copper sulphate
suddenly a mote of dust or who knows
what improbable thing
began it, brought solid from that liquid
molecules arranging themselves in just
so lattice work, matter
changes matter.

Suppose the universe unfolds
with creativity at its heart.

Would we still and every day
forget, full of the measured
ridiculous importance
of K Mart, runny noses and
did you change the oil, or
would each breath
sparkle?

Marianne Spitzfom
When I had my feet in the creek where it funneled into a slick stone slide, I felt the Water behind that small flow, and it scared me. Water does not carry the same innocent flow, not since it pulled me down rock and under tow in that yellow river in the southern Sierras. Somehow, in a thigh deep river, I bobbed body-long in a green hole that had no bottom. I saw myself in the murk, going down each time the river pushed me under, and then I saw the rock where my fingers scrambled to pull me up, and then I saw the murk. I see now that the place I struggled to come up had no room for me; the rock I reached for could not support me with the water pouring down. When my limbs went limp and my throat cold pure sense. I had rummaged around in the under-log muck for the smells and the mystery of the place. And what appears behind all waters, though faucets make it easy to forget, but a painted home of someone gone. I turn it over in my hands, wondering about the life that lived there. I do not know what will come next.

I am in Montana now. I look back to that evening by the chalk creeks of Texas when I felt the bigness in the fire and the bigness of the water. This time in my mind I follow the creek further, beyond the cypress and the willow, to the light that fed the tunnel where I found the turtle's shell. In the opening, there is a pool. I sit beside it with feet bare, bones aware of the curves in the stones. At the bottom of this pool, I can see the sand sifting the current — quietly bringing flies to the web, fish to the heron, emptiness to the shell. I breathe. You breathe. Motion is exquisite.

It is easy to move slowly here. The white ankle-deep creek runs smooth and flat through fluted cypress and willow. It is not only my brain that slows to absorb the bounty of sight, smell, and sound; every cell in my body listens, and drinks. Motion is exquisite. I walk as a heron in the chase, one knobby leg lifting at a time. Spider webs stretch blue and pink and gold across this tunnel of light; we are suspended here, each available for the next gift to arrive, if it will. In the waiting, my breath is heavy and sweet.

When I turn from the creek, I find a turtle shell in the leaf decay of last fall. It is hard, hollow, and black as winter rain. I found it without thought, in the specific oblivion of pure sense. I had rummaged around in the under-log muck for the smells and the mystery of the place. And what appears a painted home of someone gone. I turn it over in my hands, wondering about the life that lived there. I do not know what will come next.

Sun moves on, gold disappears from the horizon, and breathing fires crackle and reach from their rings on the ground. I am watching the forest brighten as the darkness comes all around. I cannot look at fire the same now, not since I saw it pour upward in a hissing flood to devour a house in New Jersey. The campfire down the way is no longer an isolated fire to me, but a piece of that bigger monster, that Fire that throbs and moans behind all fires.

When I had my feet in the creek where it funneled into a slick stone slide, I felt the Water behind that small flow, and it scared me. Water does not carry the same innocent song, not since it pulled me down rock and under tow in that yellow river in the southern Sierras. Somehow, in a thigh deep river, I bobbed body-long in a green hole that had no bottom. I saw myself in the murk, going down each time the river pushed me under, and then I saw the rock where my fingers scrambled to pull me up, and then I saw the murk. I see now that the place I struggled to come up had no room for me; the rock I reached for could not support me with the water pouring down. When my limbs went limp and my throat cold pure sense. I had rummaged around in the under-log muck for the smells and the mystery of the place. And what appears behind all waters, though faucets make it easy to forget.
House of Wind

Once, my mother with her
child's jacket blue
veined hands and I stood
under chimes
hung from a cage of woven birds
until a wind came.
It was your room, it was a dream.
And we left
like joined columns
of opposing cliffs sailing
the prairie
is what was said.
But the wind stayed.

I am walking in these forbidden northern fields
looking for a stone
my brother, for your grave.
I am learning

that the wind is not different, anywhere
from itself, speaking
the same in the dream
as it does today.
It is teaching me

what I might have said.

I know these green wallows are where buffalo
died, and rotted.
That glaciers left these fieldstones
as prayer beads.

The wind comes among them like a snake
moving through grass
or skin sloughing. On its tongue
it carries a rain

that does not stop,
reaching its fingers for the land
as if something sure
is buried. Even now

as I speak,
it darkens these stone steps
and my heart of moss.

Alec Cargile
**Untitled**

In the long region
between the birthplace of Sun
and where she first spoke,
the earth is copper-red
colored with blood she spilt
on her journey.

Her sacrifices
emptied her soul of fear
so that she might, perpetually,
chase horizon's lucid hues
with blinding, white heat.

First warmth steals moisture -
she gives all she has
to the day.
Her energy is enough
to stop all motion.

wait.

In that long region
is great, empty patience.
It is the heat around me now;
flies,
birds that cannot
contain silence.
It is crocodile, turned tail
into a motionless, clear swamp.

*Katie Deuel*
June 12, 1993

The bush on the southwest corner of the house is in bloom, and such sweet smelling blossoms! Hamper (that is what Meg calls Eustace, our pet golden hamster) sniffed around in the grass while Meg and I looked on. I enjoyed trying to see life as he did.

Yesterday my jaw shivered as I rode in the rain to work on my bike. The office cooled me all day, and I had another cold ride home. I sat in front of the heater reading Tales of Power by Carlos Castaneda. I am also reading his A Separate Reality. I am trying to practice some of what I read there. I think of calling Tony, and asking him whether I could learn from him about the world of spirit, or whether it is forbidden, or whether a married man, and father, can safely pursue such things.

I am slow catching up with spring, and summer is a week or so away. I’m groggy from my winter sleep. The first blossoming pains me; I am guarded, and closed, and bruised.

The insects have returned. A whole slew of baby spiders hung like tiny and dry fish eggs from the branches of a bush at the top of our stairs. Worms have appeared at our doorstep, and beetles too. Usually — almost every time — when a beetle shows up outside, it is in the morning, and it is on its back, and it is moving its legs. Then it disappears by nighttime (hungry birds?).

The front door is a rather popular place for spiders to make their webs, and presents a nuisance when trying to get in without becoming entangled in them. I don’t want a spider in my hair. I have learned the source of my inner judgements, the voice that projects itself out as my world. I take its pronouncements at face value, and then simply respond, or think how to respond, or whether it is forbidden, or whether a married man, and father, can safely pursue such things.

I am trying to see life as it was for Laura, and to the front door without them hopping all over the place. And the spiders have been much fewer as well. Bigger though, I’ve noticed.

A warm summer evening in Missoula.

I found some references to the plant called kinnikinnik in several books in the bookstore today. It’s Latin name is Arctostaphylos uva-ursi, and commonly known as bearberry. In fact, the scientific name is Greek and Latin, the first part meaning bear grape in Greek, and the second part meaning bunch of grapes of bear. It has several medicinal applications, and is well known as a tobacco substitute, which is what I have used it for. In fact, I have loved it as a tobacco substitute: it doesn’t seem to stink up my clothes like tobacco, and it doesn’t make me dizzy or sick like tobacco. Best of all it smells and tastes exactly like marijuana.

I cut Laura’s hair today. She wanted it just to her shoulders. Pretty; very pretty.

June 23, 1993

Sometimes I picture the heat and traffic and bigness of Austin as if I am looking into the blue and white of the sky and clouds of Montana, the cool green slopes of Mt. Sentinel, and the blue of the further peaks. It all seems so lush here, in a cool, mountain way. It did so, when I first moved here, without the deliberate imaginative effort. Now, it takes the contrasting view to bring those details out.

Blue Mountain, Mount Dean Stone, and the ridge further into Pardee Canyon were sprinkled with snow this morning. When I got to the office, my hands stung, painfully, as they thawed from their cold ride on the bike. Owen Barfield spoke, in Poetic Diction, of a felt change of consciousness as the result of words, words in a poem, or words that are poetic because they induce that change. Well, what then do I say of the times I have looked on grey, cragged peaks and felt an ice age had only yesterday passed away, and left that range? No words are spoken, and yet I wasn’t feeling my ordinary consciousness. Anyway, again, that is how Montana looks to me, in the eyes of one in Austin: new, fresh, roamed over by mammals only newly born and created, humans not yet on the scene, but soon will be. Like one of those dioramas in a museum. But what does that have to do with poetic diction?

August 28, 1993

This past Wednesday was the first day of school for Laura, and it happened that it was the first morning that I could see my breath, it was that cool and frosty. So apropos. It seems the big wave of grasshoppers never came this summer as in past summers, where we couldn’t walk down the steps to the front door without them hopping all over the place. And the spiders have been much fewer as well. Bigger though, I’ve noticed.

In fact, Laura read some article in Reader’s Digest about a kind of spider called the brown recluse, whose bite can be rather nasty, and even fatal. So I’ve been choosing to kill some of the spiders that I see, rather than perhaps regarding the judgements themselves as needing closer scrutiny. That voice is quite obvious to me now, but I don’t know yet what to do with it, or how to talk, or whether I might stop it. Is it what don Juan called “internal dialogue”?

Amen for seasons, of whatever length
That is grace. With Christ came grace and truth. I read some prayers to Laura, for her fears to be put to rest, and her trust to be lighted. The next day she spoke of how blessed was the effect of those prayers on her, that maybe she could find goodness in Christianity again. That is grace, and in Christ is grace like nowhere else that I know of. Amen.

August 29, 1993

Very likely there is some new snow on the tops of the Missions; even the taller peaks around here might have a bit of snow, but they are all shrouded in clouds for the time being.

September 3, 1993

Some grasshoppers appeared on our stairs the last two days. I think it is the especially warm weather that has brought them out. This has not been a usual year weather wise. The winter was long and cold and snowy. The spring was as beautiful as ever, though short. And the summer has been cold and short. But amen for seasons, of whatever length. I need her assurances.

September 26, 1993

The autumnal equinox was three nights ago, and autumn colors the city like never before. The bare hills just north of town, as well as the south face of Mt. Jumbo, are rusted with some grass that is turning for the fall. And the trees in town are patching in yellow and red and orange. I have already scraped frost off of the car windows two mornings in the last week and a half, and the other morning rode my bike to work wearing an ear muff, mittens, long underwear, jeans, a turtleneck, sweater, and a windbreaker.

I planted about thirty sunflower seeds at the end of July or early August — which was about a month and a half late — and only a few of them have survived. These may not even mature, for the cold is setting in, and the sun is headed down south a little bit more each day.

October 25, 1993

Hunting season opened yesterday. That is, rifle hunting. Bow hunting opened several weeks ago, I think. Hunting is of course the woof to the warp of logging and mining here in Montana, and Missoula is no different. Only, here, the focality of hunting is not only due to the fact that lots of folks hunt — and have done so for years and years and generations and generations — but that lots of other folks talk about hunting, and not in order to exchange stories of "the big kill."

For instance, last week my daughter Meg and my wife Laura badgered me (a phrase especially apropos to discussion of anti-hunting advocates) when I told them that I was again considering killing a deer or elk this year. My second fall in Missoula I was invited out with friends on opening day. I wanted to know what it was like, and because I trusted and admired the two men who invited me, I went. I saw my friend shoot and kill an elk, and I watched and helped as he disemboweled and quartered it. The next time I went hunting I could smell deer and elk everywhere.

I like meat, and I love sausages and bacons; salty meats. Neither Laura nor Meg are voracious meat eaters, and neither like the meat of wild animals. A hunt cannot be justified on the basis of their appetites. But neither am I going to eat an entire deer or elk.

I could give some of it away; but then I am left asking myself, "Why am I doing this?" I think my most honest answer is that I want to get close to an animal like a deer or an elk. I want to touch it, and stroke it, and walk with it, and have it allow my touch. I want to be with it, and I want it to be with me. Not as a pet, but as a companion.

That is grace. With Christ came grace and truth. I read some prayers to Laura, for her fears to be put to rest, and her trust to be lighted. The next day she spoke of how blessed was the effect of those prayers on her, that maybe she could find goodness in Christianity again. That is grace, and in Christ is grace like nowhere else that I know of. Amen.
Killing an elk will not achieve this goal; going hunting might. That is, going out into the woods, way up, and listening and looking for signs: their tracks, and evidences of their bedding down, and finding their waste in the grass, on the snow, in the pine needles. Feeling the cold air that they feel, and walking the paths that they walk, and wandering around when they do, and resting when they rest, I might find a companion in one of these beasts. One of them may find a companion in me. I might find, in the very rhythms, a friend and companion. 

Maybe our fear would bring us together. Deer fear mountain lions, don’t they? I know that I am afraid in the woods alone; I’m for the excuse to carry a high-powered rifle on my shoulder.

Maybe our fear — mine for them, and theirs for me — will keep us apart. I know that my clumsiness in their world tends to make them invisible to me. “Where are all the deer around here?!” I curse to myself, as I huff and puff and crash through the brush, smelling of soap and peanut butter and jelly and bread and coffee and Albertson’s brand dryer sheets.

But then, that is what I mean about wanting to be with them, and how hunting, minus the killing, is one (literal) approach. I have to take into consideration all those obfuscating and separating details; I have to begin to think like an elk. I have to smell for them, and listen and look for them, as they do me. I have to follow their paths, and walk like them, and live like them, kinda, for a little bit. And that is worth the aching shoulder and the cold feet and the fear. As long as my gun is with me.

October 30, 1993

The snow came down the furthest yet this fall about two days ago. Because mountains completely surround us here in Missoula, we can see winter progress from on high, as snow first covers the very peaks, then lower and lower down the mountain slopes with each new shower. Up until this last shower, the snow has melted away in a day or so, leaving the peaks green and grey again. It is as if sister earth is slowing down her breathing, her warm exhalations less strong and voluminous, and a mantle of cold crystal air is able to form and descend softly onto her breast. She will sleep and dream, and meditate on the saps within, and her animals in their burrows and her fish in their mud.

November 16, 1993

O o...! What an evening hanging over town tonight. I rode north and scanned the horizon, I felt something; I don’t know what, but I said to myself out loud, “This is a night for ghosts, and fairies.” Some magic in the air.
I don’t know how I knew, but the clouds were thick and dark, and the snow on the peaks shone like dark silver, and the tree covered slopes below the snow looked even darker in contrast. The air was slightly humid and warm.

I was a couple of blocks west of Higgins, on Fourth Street, and I lost myself looking at the houses and the warm yellow-lit windows and smells of dinners cooking, and silhouettes of tired people just home from work. The houses all seemed to rise so tall, and eaves appeared so steep, and I could feel the clouds and mountains surrounding it all. Like an old black-and-white photograph of Missoula around the turn of the century, I could feel the closeness, the closed-in-ness, of the town as it might have been, when houses were much fewer but for that very reason more inviting, and warming, and more comforting on a dark early winter evening. I felt our town a hundred years ago.

I guess it was a night for ghosts.

November 27, 1993

I tried to spy out Jupiter, Mercury, and Venus on Thursday and Friday mornings. I set my alarm for 7:00 a.m. Thursday morning, and was dressed and out by 7:20 or so. It was still rather dark, with grey in the east. The temperature was probably around 10 degrees below zero. We are very near the mountains on the east side of town, so even though I knew sunrise was at 7:50 a.m. or so, I also knew it wouldn’t top Mt. Sentinel until around 8:30. Right away, from the alley I could see Jupiter, high above Sentinel. I knew they were all to rise out of the southeast, with Jupiter leading the way, followed by Mercury; Venus would bring up the rear. I also knew that they would rise very near the ecliptic — the path that the sun follows through the sky. Even if I didn’t know exactly where southeast was, I could look for the brightest area of the eastern horizon, and know that the three wanderers would be nearby. And Jupiter — what I supposed was Jupiter — was not only in the direction I took to be southeast, but was also above the so far brightest part of the eastern horizon.

So far, so good. I headed west, to hurry their rising by getting away from Sentinel’s bulk, and out of its shadow. As I headed west along Fourth Street I began too to meander south, seeing the gap in the peaks above Pattee Canyon, and trying to get to where I could see the sun rise through the gap.

Well, I meandered quite a way — maybe a mile or so from home. I found an empty, wide school playground, and, imagining that it was a sacred clearing akin to Stonehenge, I took my post in the middle of it. The eastern sky was quite bright by now, and Jupiter was dim and high; I lost it several times in the sun’s increasing glare. But I had not yet seen any other bright objects in that part of the sky. I had noticed what looked like a binary star, about as high as Jupiter, but more like due east, or even northeast, rather than southeast.

I waited and waited. My hands were cold. My toes were cold. Columns of steam rose from pipes of houses here and there. I heard a crow cawing. As I watched, crows appeared at various points to the east and southeast, converging as they flew northwest and over my head. I thought of the cruelly cold air that they cut through, and wondered how they survived it, and where they were going.

I left my post on the playground, but I had wondered if the astrologers and priests and priestesses of the past endured such hardships all year round, year after year, in order to watch the stars, and to read their portents. I think now of the Magi, and their wisdom, and their so confidently reading the announcement in the sky: A King Is Born! All Hail the King! That star came from the east, too.

I wandered a bit further west, my feet painfully cold now. I stopped and looked, then finally turned toward home. I was deeply disappointed though, because I hadn’t seen what I had wanted to see most: Mercury. It is always very close to the Sun, and rarely to be seen. I didn’t want to give up — the sun had not actually topped Sentinel yet — but I was beat. I took one last look from the playground on my way back by, and then stuck as much of my chin into my coat collar as possible, looking down at my feet the whole way home.

I got home and found it was 8:30. I went back out into the alley twice more, but still saw nothing.

The next morning I went out at 8:30 to begin with. I only went a few blocks west, and ended that sojourn at Second Thought, the coffee shop on Higgins and Fourth. I wanted to watch from the warmth of the inside. I got my coffee, and waited to ask for cream. By the time I sat down at a window table, the top of the sun had just peeked out over Mt. Sentinel. I had missed my chance.

Last night I noticed that the moon had risen quite a bit to the north of where the sun had risen — about in the area of the sky where I had seen the binary object the first morning. Doesn’t the moon follow the ecliptic? Is the ecliptic that wide? Had the binary object been Mercury and Venus?

I was totally confused now, and had lost most of my confidence that I knew anything about the night sky and the movement of the planets and stars. I thought of a friend or two whom I might consult. I might also try Skyglobe, an astronomical software program that a friend had given to me. I booted it up, and after a lot of fiddling around figured that, yes, all three — Jupiter, Mercury and Venus — rose right along the ecliptic, with the latter two rising just moments before sunrise (or Sentinel-rise in my case).

The Magi. Magic. Cold breath and hands and feet and crows. The Sun behind Mt. Sentinel. Steam rising from a house. Space opening up in my heart and soul, and in my chest. I am a bit confused and disappointed. But this is the season of Advent, and all waiting — for light, anyway, and the Sun — is good, and magic, and lovely. And I’m waiting for Mercury the Messenger to come, to show his face to me. I am waiting, with Melchior at Stonehenge, and the Oracle at Delphi — another cold and mountain place. I am watching, with Melchior and Balthasar and Gaspar, of Arabia, Saba, and Tharsis, for the star. Watching and waiting, and tingling and numb with cold.
Winter Clark Fork

The dark green plasma of slow flowing water moves beneath solid white ice breaking open a brief stretch between Higgins and Orange as feet slip on the snow packed bridge and breath frosts the edges of everything in sight.

Dave Thomas
There is light now in the mornings. I wake away from my dreams. It is snowing. Trees stand straight, colorless against the white sky.

I cannot seem to begin. Snow fills the corners of my house. Silent. Glistening. Ice on the mirrors.

I have been in winter forever. Frost blurs the pictures in their frames. I cannot see your face.

Sharon Brogan
Morgan Hite

Repeating What the Deer Have Said

Time was when a person could make poetry just by walking.

This sounds a little strange to us. We are seldom accustomed to thinking of our steps as words, or our tracks as statements. But the Ancient Greeks named the repeating syllabic patterns that made up their poetry “feet”. And animals, who through a mysterious mixed blessing of Nature are mute, seem well aware of the connection between movement and expression. No elaborate schooling is required to read the poetry of animals. Each species has, in its tracks, its own literary tradition that weaves and branches and rejoins itself all over the landscape. Consider the writing of deer. There are statements made by many: wide trails that lead across rock passes and down to water: (Passes and water are two of the basic and universal tenets of deer reality, and many of the things deer say involve them.) There are the more personal opinions of lesser-travelled paths, that lead to or from specific groves or thickets, which are different positions from which to view the world. And finally, there are the single tracks of statements made but once. Made but once as far as we can tell, for the landscape is an odd sort of library where the volumes are periodically erased by the blind editors of wind and rain. This inherent obsolescence affects the character of all animal literatures: there are no celebrated authors and instead we read only what can be easily generated and regenerated by the populace at large. Animal literatures thereby resemble more oral folk traditions than the great human classics.

I find myself musing over such ideas while walking on the rim of a canyon in Southeastern Utah. It is a place far from trails—at least far from trails made by man. The system of trails left by the deer, however, is intricate and thorough. I use them, and thereby find myself repeating what the deer have said. It is necessary to step as they have stepped, and walk as they have walked, over roots, around boulders, and in and out of the shade; although my two legs give me a slightly different voice than they have with their four.

Continuing on carefully, appreciating the balance and muscle cooperation which are the unique statements of this path, I see four or five deer start from a clump of trees just ahead. They bound and trot away, hooves making quiet popping sounds on the rocks. Their steps are efficient and bold statements, such as I myself might make if my life were in danger. And they say only enough to get the job done, pausing when I am safely distant but still in sight. They conserve their energy. They do not mince words.

We might do well to take a lesson from such behavior. Equipped with tongue and vocal cords, I find it all too easy to keep on talking long after what is necessary has been said. But I cannot imagine the deer heedlessly continuing to bound along for the sheer enjoyment of expressing themselves; they would clear the territory of one predator, only to babble into that of another. Such extraneous expression is a behavior without good survival value. It is a luxury.

But why should we not permit ourselves the luxury of unlimited expression? We have no predators, and our food supplies, at least in North America, are plentiful and unthreatened. Is there anything inherently wrong with profane expression?

I consider again the parallel between stepping and statements. Homo sapiens, as a species, is as liberal and unconscious with the production of its tracks as it is with the production of its words. Yet it is concise and accurate to say that the laying down of too many tracks upon the landscape is the primary crisis of our day. The daily footprint of American society may be said to be a new shopping mall, a new parking lot, a thousand new cars or a certain amount of new gasses in the atmosphere. Collectively we rejoice in using our energy to run riot over the earth. It is unquestionably more than is necessary “to get the job done.” But we enjoy our production of tracks and we enjoy our production of words. We are so pleased with most of our artifacts that we make them permanent and even the rain cannot wash them away.

If we are concerned about this crisis, we must realize that none of our forms of impact is unrelated to others. If we wish to scale back in industry, we must scale back in chatter. They arise from the same habit of unthinking self-expression. Though it may seem odd, the first step that one must take in respecting the planet is to learn how not to talk all the time.

As I discover that the words I speak are as deserving of attention as the steps I take, I will surely talk less, though perhaps I will say more.
one, would not like to see the remaining volumes of deer
poetry erased for the last time, and removed to make room for
the mindless doggerel of another supermarket.

The parallels between walking and talking are many.
As with words, I cannot hope to go back and erase unwise
tracks I have made. At best I can walk over the same place
again with a different emphasis, a different feel, or a different
intent. But once I enter the dialogue which is the surface of the
earth, some trace of my passing will always remain.

There are some footprints which, like some state­ments, are better left unsaid. In this desert there are areas of
algae-encrusted soil so fragile that a single track may remain
in the black, lumpy surface for years. Such dirt is akin to a state
of mind so tenuous that even to make a suggestion is to
destroy it. Yet given enough time, it may mature into a plant
community capable of better withstanding my foot, a more
resilient attitude. Such soils, I have heard, are ignored by
many as worthless. It seems very unlikely that a person who
does not value such terrain could ever value silence in his or
her day.

I was hasty in suggesting that the time for making
poetry by walking is past. It may lie just ahead of us, for any
person can experiment with aesthetic locomotion. A neces­
sary prerequisite is a distrust of the principle that to travel is
to go from point A to point B. The
tracks left in such a trail read like a
technical manual: efficient and cor­
rect, but not sustaining to the spirit.
In contrast, the tracks of the walking
poet take advantage of every possible
spatial relationship to the land. Some­
things beautiful is created: the specific
curve down across a hill, the angle
taken through a grove of trees, the
exact point chosen to leave a gully.
The way is rarely longer, but the act
is far more perfect.

As I discover that the words I speak
are as deserving of attention as the
steps I take, I will surely talk less,
though perhaps I will say more. And
the steps which I choose to forego
may give rise to silences in my speech.
And there are many things to be
listened to and observed when I am
no longer always walking or talking.

Now certainly all signs do not indi­
cate that we are about to enter an era
of elegant and aesthetic global terse­
ness. The joint assault upon both
ears and earth in fact increases
monthly. There has not been much
of a tendency to leave other than
fairly prosaic marks upon our lim­
ited, orbiting library. But I feel it is
fair to say this for myself: I have
recently heard some kind of call, to
forego the many mindless steps for a
few that are well-chosen.
February Blues Missoula

Days of fog flat
against valley floor
Evaro Hill
Or Clinton
it’s blue sky
and bright sun
counting pennies
in a rented room
words pack
together
like sludge
in a rusted pipe
street dust
and cooking grease
cloth
every thought
the weight
of disappointment hangs on every nerve
and the energy
of time hardened music cuts an edge
on barroom hearts.

Dave Thomas

Blackfoot Slumber

Tonight’s sky is varnished, black and sleek
chipped portals focus light in colorful winks
which only occasionally progress irreverent
long flashes into eternity.

Moon — true harvest amber sat
huge on the horizon, turned fleshless fields
full again with life. Stern watcher, he
juts enormous shadow into the chilly valley dark.

Moon — she conceives all that happens
events are birthed; settle
through dense autumn air, sink
into soils musty, welcoming world.

That dichotomous moon
alert like owl, head spinning, eyes
persistence; like planets
wobbling certain elliptic.

Seasons, woven with starlight,
older that patched granite boulders,
have always moved here.
time and Time, time to allow great valley heaves
thick blood, steady bones,
moon-illuminated life.

Katie Deuel
Songs of Praise

I.

The maples begin to turn. A few leaves speckle the blue sky or lay red and orange on wet streets. Brown trout slip out now from undercut banks to push upstream past weirs, nets, hooks. Full of milk and spawn, they roll and quiver and in the end let themselves go.

When I want love without loss, want little to be asked of me, I go up to the falls where old fish leap through the air, light flashing against their broad, slick sides, identity eroded and defined by resistance. They do not ask for an easier life, only depth enough against which they push toward home, their journey the praise of ascent.

II.

Two bison in bronze plow the prairie with pointed hooves, spin around the center of an invisible wheel. Trying to hook the other from below, they drag briskets in the dirt, sweat and heave with the labor of it, invite the other’s weight to meet each charge.

III.

In November I tunnel through the wet clay of memories, pull like a mole at rocks and roots of loss, the ground always in my face.

I emerge one afternoon in a gulch where alders rattle with disease and death, at the noise look up in time to see a ragged V of geese splayed out, torn, calling chaos back to the order of one long wing. They beat south, buffeted, in their minds an image of open water and golden corn left in the field.

Gary W. Hawk
**Warnings**

I mourn these hills, all these wildless acres
without a creature who can crunch my bones.

*Colin Chisholm*

**Offering**

Coyote blows snot from his nose
on the grass
A streak of blood in the snot he
offers to grandfather

*Tom Dailey*
When asked whether they want to be a cowboy or an Indian, young Indian children frequently opt for cowboy, because cowboys always win.

— Lee Little Soldier

I have met him before.

New Jersey grade school, November, 1972: We learn in school that the Leni Lenape were a handsome race of people who lived here before us but now they’re all dead, leaving us only a few bones and rocks. When the lesson’s over we work on our Thanksgiving costumes: cutting construction paper with blunt, pinching scissors into flat-brimmed black hats and large white collars for “Pilgrims,” and colored feathers for “Indians.” I prefer the bright paper.

Suddenly Mrs. Marky sighs down at me. My feathers, I see under the beam of her gaze, look a lot like flowers. “Come with me,” she says. I follow to her desk, where she pulls down a big book off a shelf. The binding cracks when she opens it. The smell of old ink rises. “Here,” she points. “You’re supposed to look like that—.” And there he is, drawn there on the page, menacing scowl, face paint, long braid.

Family living room, Sunday morning, 1976: Lying on the green couch with my stuffed duck, I watch Abbot and Costello on the TV. Horses flash across the screen. Costello’s mouth opens in fear, his eyelids spread comically wide. The camera cuts to their pursuers: men on horses, menacing scowls, face paint, long braids, lances and tomahawks raised above their mounts’ thundering flanks.

New Hope, Pennsylvania, 1980: In a quaint general store, an old refurbished barn, painted red, with a lovely abstract Pennsylvania Dutch hex sign above the door, I peruse the big barrels full of sticks of hard candy, colored stripes twisting up them like on barber-shop signs. Jars of expensive jams glow bluey on shelves. The place smells like hay. Tourists wander in, curious, exclaiming, opening wallets and purses. The owner smiles from behind the counter and cracks his knuckles.

Outside the front barn door, the figure waits in wood, his face more patient this time, placid even, but with the same paint and braids. Silently, he gives out wooden nickels, each stamped with a shaggy buffalo, in exchange for real ones. I walk away, sucking candy, a wooden nickel pressed into my palm.

Missoula, Montana, 1993: As my hand reaches through the brilliant sunshine to hang laundry on the backyard line, the grey-rose spectacle of a house finch blurs the air near my eye. I drop a clean sock. Stooping to retrieve it, I spy a little piece of yellow plastic, a discarded child’s toy, half hidden beneath a timber of the compost bin. I dig it from the dirt and begin to rub the edges clean. A figure emerges of a man, braided hair caught mid-swing, a plastic lance raised in one fist.

Early in this century, the government of Montana decided it needed a piece of art, defining the spirit and history of this great state, to hang in the Capitol building in Helena. Some official person asked Charlie Russell, whose reputation as a Western artist was already largely forged at the time, to submit a sketch.

The governor himself received Russell’s proposal, to paint “an attack by Indians upon a wagon train.” The sketch was rejected. Governor Norris wrote that Russell’s proposed scene did not “appeal” to the members of government as “a suitable decoration” to grace the walls of the House of Representatives. The governor suggested that Mr. Russell instead paint a more auspicious example of a native and non-native American encounter. “I have been reading the memoirs of Lewis and Clark,” the governor wrote the artist, “and find that there was a meeting between them and the Indians in Ross’ Hole, which is situated near the head of the Bitter Root River.” Russell agreed to the subject, painted the human figures at home, and then went to the Bitterroot Valley, south of Missoula in western Montana, with his half-finished canvas to fill in “the mountain background” on location. There, the work known as Russell’s masterpiece, Lewis and Clark Meeting the Indians, took its final shape.

The scene looks like this: In the foreground, seven Salish men on Appaloosas and white ponies thunder, directionless, in an excited throng. With one hand, each man rears up on his reins, pulling open his horse’s mouth; in the other fist, each clutches a long lance. One wears a headdress resembling a Viking hat with horns while another sports a buckskin cowl. The hair of the rest, black, fastened in tails or

In a world where warriors gallop across the valleys of Montana, there is no place for a Capitol Building.
braids, swings with the motion of the horses. The grass this group clusters upon spikes upward in rough, olive-green strokes rusting to red, violet, brown. A wolfy-looking dog bounds out of the way of the horses’ hooves. Another howls.

To the left, still in the foreground, the skull and horns (full curl) of a bighorn ram weathers in the grass, the only sign of death in a painting that celebrates life—life in the taut muscles of the horses’ legs, life in the swinging hair of the mounted men, life in the bounding and howling of the camp dogs. It is unclear what the skull means. Is it a ram hunted and killed by the Indians for food? A culture-story character, as the big-horn ram is to the Salish, defeated and dismembered? Or a figure of nature, of wildlife, of wilderness, dead and whitening at this moment when a new shape for the land begins to be decided?

The camp itself, where teepees stream smoke out of chimney holes from cooking fires, sits way off to the left, in the background. More warriors gallop in from that direction—small, frantic figures on horseback. In the “mountain backdrop,” plumes of cloud tinted yellow and red by the sun, which has already disappeared beyond the horizon, rise off and partially obscure the low hills where the Sapphire Mountains blend into the Continental Divide.

A casual viewer of this painting may not notice, if she does not read the title, how way off in the right-hand corner of the canvas a man spreads a buffalo robe on the ground. She may fail to note how the small figure of Chief Three Eagles, back turned, stiff in posture, dressed without any particular flair, listens to (or watches) a Shoshoni interpreter, whose hair is tinged white at the edges of his face, gesturing, as if he were about to clap.

She could easily miss, as well, the two white men, very small compared to the warriors in the foreground, who lean on their guns, relaxed, behind that conversing pair. The white men wear fur caps, cloaks fastened at the neck, and high boots. Their faces are too small to judge the color of their eyes. More than likely, the viewer will not see, either, the small form of Sacagawea, the only woman in the painting, sitting rigid and half hidden in the tall grasses. Her hands clutch at the blanket that holds her baby on her back.

And certainly, only the most careful of observers, only a true art or history buff, will take note of the tiny figure of York. The only black member of the expedition, he strokes the neck of Captain Clark’s grazing horse—nearly out of the picture’s frame. But if she does notice, she may find curious how York’s right hand lofts his gun to the level of his midriff, and how he looks prepared to raise it higher, if need be.

This is Russell’s view of the first white and black men to see the Bitterroot Valley, at least as far as history has recorded. Yet the center of activity in this scene, Russell seems to intimate, is not Lewis and Clark. On the contrary, Lewis and Clark appear as the only reposed figures, of many, in a picture full of rushing and galloping and howling and careful, rigid watching, as if the artist portrays two universes, operating on two different axes of time and space, “Indian” and “white.”

Lewis and Clark, standing at the axis of white-man’s time and space, don’t need to rush, or be wary, or stand out. All they need to do is relax, and wait, and the other world, the Indian world, the one coming forward, nearly bursting out of the canvas will swirl around them, around and around in a great whirl of activity, until it begins to evaporate, rising into the sky along with the mist off the mountains, rising, rising, fading right out of frame. As the sun sets and a dome of stars descends over the valley, that swirling world will flash across the sky like fireworks, lovely, brilliant, ephemeral. It will flash, and then it will go, leaving only ash upon the grass.

If this interpretation of the painting sounds far-fetched, I should say again that the canvas sits above the speaker’s chair in one of the houses of Montana’s legislature. Its placement presupposes that Lewis and Clark’s universe will engulf the other, indeed, that
the other will cease to be—at least as it is rendered here. In a world where warriors gallop across the valleys of Montana, there is no place for a Capitol Building. In a landscape crowded with the edifices of white culture, the imagined warrior shrinks to the size of a drawing, a statue, or a child’s toy.

And consider that my copy of the painting is housed at the front of a collection of pioneer memoirs called Bitterroot Trails, published by the Bitter Root Historical Society. The reader can pull her large, beautifully crafted reproduction out of the very front of the book and gaze at it while she thumbs through the memoirs. The Chronology of Events on the frontispiece begins with the entry “September 3, 1805 — Lewis & Clark Expedition of Discovery enter valley, meet Flathead Indians in Ross Hole.”

The message is clear: This is the moment when history begins.

There is little doubt that Russell regretted the passing of the Indian world he portrayed. In letters to friends, he calls “the white man” such names as “nature’s enemy” and “the greatest thief.” His view of “the red man” (his appellation, not mine) is much more sympathetic; he refers to Indians as “the true Americans” and claims that “if the buffalo came back tomorrow I wouldn’t be slow shedding to a brick clout [breech cloth].”

Still, the success of his art depends on the fact that the buffalo, and the buffalo-hunting lifestyle he so admired, are confined to the past. He portrays fantastic figures that will never take flesh, never reappear on the plains. During his lifetime, his work was often defined (and marketed) as “nostalgic.” The London exhibition that solidified his career begins with the entry “September 3, 1805 — Lewis & Clark Expedition of Discovery enter valley, meet Flathead Indians in Ross Hole.”

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The medium that might begin to link the opposed and mythic worlds portrayed on Russell’s canvas, one that might even begin to chip away at the hard stone or plastic of the icons to reveal the living flesh beneath, is language. Perhaps that is why Russell imagines those chiefly engaged in language in this story—Three Eagles, the Shoshoni interpreter, Sacagawea, and York—differently than the others. They wait, as the warriors thunder. They listen, as the Indian world he portrayed. In letters to friends, he calls “the white man” such names as “nature’s enemy” and “the greatest thief.” His view of “the red man” (his appellation, not mine) is much more sympathetic; he refers to Indians as “the true Americans” and claims that “if the buffalo came back tomorrow I wouldn’t be slow shedding to a brick clout [breech cloth].”

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The message is clear: This is the moment when history begins.
The Indians: the generic aborigines, misnamed by Columbus, to be further misnamed by the members of this expedition. In a world where Lewis and Clark meet the Indians, the captains need not be large, imposing figures in the painting. They can wait off to one side, unconcerned, because soon (they seem to know) all this whirling activity of the Indian universe, this smoke and mist and light, this galloping and taut horseflesh, will rise up into the atmosphere. Then they will stand alone in a great, grassy space that is the Bitterroot, that is Montana, that is the West, that is the New World, a place where “destiny” can begin, where hardy white farmers can plow soil, where civic leaders can erect capitol buildings, where men in black robes can cultivate souls, crushing them like grapes in their “reduction” or (as they also called their missions) the Vineyard of the Lord.

Russell’s painting, his view of the past, cost the state $5000. It is considered a great work of art, a fine piece of Western Americana. It is also a fiction, like all attempts at history: an imaginative representation flowing out of the traditions of a mythic culture of the American West, the writings of white men who explored it, and the artistic eye of Russell himself. This fiction carries history forward in reduced form, the flesh boiled off, the bones of it artificially whitened and hardened into shapes they never took in the creature as it lived and breathed. It’s no more limited, perhaps, than most fictions, but it’s a fiction nonetheless, not inevitable truth as so many of us were taught and continue to believe.

Now and then, I imagine, a young state legislator pauses near the Speaker’s desk to run her hands along its polished wood. Standing there, she wonders about her future and tastes her ambitions. Maybe she even glances up, into the frame the state has put around Russell’s masterpiece, and, with a start, sees the storybook images there. Perhaps—or perhaps not—she also considers what other views could hang there, equally fictions, but from other perspectives. Looking up at the two men in their fur caps reclining on the points of their guns, perhaps that young representative wonders in what other ways the past can be named.

Memorium

Adrift in the repetition
of lean, pale moons
that pendulum
above boreal winters cold.
Air holds nothing,
only distant sparks, buoyant on black.

Temperature concedes no movement
but the inexorable draw
white into black, earth
into sky.

Delicate crystalline hoar
- feathers ruffled -
protecting stellar down.
Deadly perfect, they shatter like expensive crystal
on a parquet floor
perpetrating immense motion.

Tonight is elusive,
even the call of great horned
tracks without resonance;
no difference is realized.

Pale yellow rent splits the tough, black
fabric of night
each day gathering;
is mended, expertly,
ragged edges finely contained
with patchwork progress of spring.

Katie Deuel
Lullaby

On my way home to sleep
I come by the two witches.
Their eyes are blind with distance
like a sunspot
and they sit by the road the one
with her weaving the other
with a tongue made of stories.

They tell me of my iron parents
and of my tracks of rust. They say
there is a black swan
on the white lake you come from.

The first says, twilight
is made of four stomachs. One
to birth witches. Two
for the flocks, meek and wild.

The other, she says
three for the hour when the dead will rise.
Four for the hillside
where after the deathwatch
the sun comes to shine.

As I hear them out
the day becomes a stone.
Then, it casts its shadow.

The weaving witch says night is the house
where all flocks come to sleep
with their ears pressed on the ground.
The light cuts it.
Dusk is the wound showing
after the day has gone.

The witch with the tongue made of stories says
there are wolves among sheep —
what hills expect.
There will be darkness
in each woven nest.

And if a fire is kindled
on that hill
water will burn.

Water is the shore by which I sleep.  

Alec Cargile
The visible congregation consists of six dogs, two cats, and twelve humans. In the huge oaks overshadowing our gathering, unseen birds raise their voices. The grass and brush fill with what Scripture calls “creeping things,” and all of this connects to the biotic community in the soil beneath our feet. All of this does not answer to our usual idea of congregation, but perhaps this is changing: today, we are here to bless the animals.

In Christianity, the ritual of blessing the animals comes from Saint Francis of Assisi, who befriended animals of all sorts, reconciled wild beasts with human communities, and preached to the birds. In recent years Saint Francis has been hailed as the “patron saint of ecology.” Surely he should be remembered as the patron saint of kindness to all creatures. A Fritz Eichenberg woodcut shows a strangely stern Francis, cowled and haloed, with his arms outstretched in imitation of the cross. All manner of birds—hawk and dove, owl and sparrow—perch on his arms. At his feet heron, wolf, fox, snake, turtle, and otter gather without fear of one another, regarding Francis attentively. Legend tells us that Francis would rise early to spend entire days out in the fields preaching to the birds.

Since my ability to captivate my audience is considerably less than Francis’s was, we keep our service brief. To begin we recite psalms that celebrate the beauty and diversity of Creation. We sing:

All things bright and beautiful,
all creatures great and small,
all things wise and wonderful:
the Lord God made them all.

Then I move around the circle, kneeling before each pet. Whenever possible I hold the animal. I look into its eyes, call it by name, and pronounce this blessing:

May the Lord who made you,
bless you and keep you. Amen.

When I have nearly completed the circle, I come to an older man who stands alone. His lip is slightly a tremble, and he withdraws from his jacket a small framed photograph. Tuffy was a little scrap of a dog who, after years of offering companionship to the man, died some months ago. As I touch the frame and repeat the blessing, I hear myself adding extra emphasis to the word “keep.”

Then I suggest that folks contact a local outreach called Pet Pals, which asks pet owners to take their pets to visit nursing homes. This gives the nursing home residents, who are no longer allowed to have pets, an opportunity to enjoy the presence of animals, to once again see and touch animals, in brief organized visits.

Then I pronounce the benediction:

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, and in the spirit of our brother Francis, may God bless you and keep you, may God bless and keep all of Creation.
Amen.

Usually celebrated on or near the Feast of Saint Francis (October 4), Blessing the Animals services are becoming more popular. My denomination, the United Methodists, includes a Blessing the Animals liturgy in its new book of worship. Sometimes these gatherings are large and festive: at New York’s Cathedral of Saint John the Divine this year, the procession included a chimpanzee, a llama, and an elephant.

But we must be mindful of the limitations of a Blessing the Animals service. Like much talk about Saint Francis himself, there is the risk of being merely sentimental rather than deeply felt and sacramental. So far, our services have focused on pets and left the rest of nature in the background. We have not addressed animal rights, resource conservation, or wilderness preservation. We have said nothing, in the service, about ecofeminism, deep ecology, or the Gaia hypothesis. We have not confronted the terrible reality of extinction.

Still, if it does nothing else, the Blessing the Animals Service takes us out of our buildings and, in so doing, out of ourselves. We are reminded: we are not alone. We share the earth with an astonishing diversity of creatures. For a moment we slow down enough to see the beauty of an ordinary churchyard. The Blessing the Animals Service acknowledges the real importance of animal companionship in our lives. It calls down the blessings of God on us and on all of Creation. And we should never underestimate the power of a blessing: this one seems to me a place for us to start, a place from which broader disciplines of care can spring forth.
**Fall**

I want you to know
the Chinese porcelain beast
grins. The glare
in the clouds
does not light my way.

The lavender candle burns.
I listen to the radio.
Rain. The year falls
toward the dark.
Gold on the mountain.

Alders turn brown.
Wet boards. I want
you to know, the baskets
weave together. The silk
rainbow fish

hangs on my wall.
I’ve moved my clothes
together in the closet.
There are no blank spots
here. Ask me. Ask me how

I’m doing. Ask me
where I am. The chickadees
are in the spruce,
I feed them your sugared
cereal. I want you to know

the water in the channel
is dark and flat.
The moon, the year,
wane; accelerate.
Leaves are down

in the forest.
The falls swell. I want
you to know,
the Japanese maple
is red. The cats

still purr. Birch trees
show their bones again.
Winter crouches, it waits
in the woods. Soon
it will brush my window.

Sharon Brogan

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**January Thaw**

After snowfall
a day
of breaking
weather
thick
rolling cloud
moments
of sun
slushy
streets
the air clear
if not the sky
Saturday
traffic
cuts the day
into patterns
I walk
back and forth
across Higgins bridge
somehow
a part
of it all.

Dave Thomas

Winter 1994-1995 - Camas - 29
Tommy Youngblood-Petersen

Crossing the Divide

We keep telling them, no, you don't get it, the whole area, the mountains themselves and all they contain is sacred; the animals that inhabit the mountains are sacred; the waters that arise in the mountains and flow to the far seas are sacred; the trees that grow upon the mountainsides are sacred; the air itself is sacred. They just don't get it.

Member of the Blackfeet Nation

The moment we arrived at the Medicine Wheel another snow squall swept over us. It seemed to be telling us that although we had arrived, we couldn't stay long. It was Independence Day in northeastern Wyoming, and four of us had hiked to 9,680 feet elevation through knee-high snow to get to the Wheel. We saw more black clouds quickly sweeping in from the west, so we took the bluegreen sage and bright yellow cornmeal we had brought with us as traditional offerings, and walked once around the Wheel. We moved into the stiff wind, clockwise, shuffling the deep white powder and sprinkling these tokens as we went. It is a communion, but instead of simply remembering spirit with bread and wine, this ceremony attempts to sustain the spirits themselves.

The snow obscured the twenty-eight stone spokes radiating from a central rock-piled hub of the Medicine Wheel. All we saw was the central hub which rose above the snow, and six rock cairns, small piles of limestone placed at intervals around the perimeter of the Wheel. I saw my nine-year-old son Evan pause at each one of these peripheral cairns and sprinkle the sage and cornmeal with his gloved hands. The tokens barely reached the ground. The wind stole his offerings and blew them across the face of the Wheel. It was as if the Wheel had not been built as an astronomical observatory, used as a calendar to mark the alignment of the sun, stars, and celestial bodies to the spokes of the Wheel. Others disagree, saying the construction of the circular Medicine Lodge of the Cheyenne and the Sun Dance enclosures of the Cheyenne, Sioux, and Crow. Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce is said to have fasted at the Wheel, after he had been imprisoned for attempting to lead his people to Canada in flight from US Army troops in the Nez Perce war of 1877. Crows still remember the vision quest of Red Plume, their early chief, when he received eagle feathers and medicine at the Wheel to protect his people from harm.

The Wheel is used ... as a site for the vision quest that has always been at the core of the Native American religious tradition.

I came to the Wheel that July day as an outsider, a white person at a sacred native site, seeking the spirit of that place. There is a wide chasm between the dry sermons I endured at the rigid brick and mortar Webster Groves Christian Church in St. Louis, and the subtle mysterious voices of the wind and snow at the Medicine Wheel. I was taught religion, not spirituality, and the combination of rote words and rituals within a church sanctuary told me that God resided within solid walls, on a particular day. My inner vision was focused to see Bible and building, spirit and structure, as one.

But my tradition—Northern European and Celtic—has not always been this way. The great cathedrals of Europe were built, purposely, on ancient pagan sacred sites, on soil and rock that was considered holy. Chartres Cathedral, for example, was built on the site that had been a Druid “sanctuary of sanctuaries”. The unmistakable spiritual energy of ancient Christian cathedrals must surely derive from such carefully chosen locations. In Crossing to Avalon, a study of these sites, Jean Shinoda Bolen writes, “The power of the place is in its location.” But these ancient European traditions of place, of holy ground, have been lost. A wall of Church doctrine, a divide, separates my contemporary culture from this sacred sense of the spiritual. Yet there are some who long to cross that divide.

We know only that the Medicine Wheel was built somewhere between 1200 AD and 1700 AD; its makers and purpose remain a mystery to us. Some scholars claim that it was built as an astronomical observatory, used as a calendar to mark the alignment of the sun, stars, and celestial bodies to the spokes of the Wheel. Others disagree, saying the early Plains tribes built the Wheel, its twenty-eight spokes being the exact number of poles or rafters used in the construction of the circular Medicine Lodge of the Cheyenne and the Sun Dance enclosures of the Cheyenne, Sioux, and Crow. Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce is said to have fasted at the Medicine Wheel, after he had been imprisoned for attempting to lead his people to Canada in flight from US Army troops in the Nez Perce war of 1877. Crows still remember the vision quest of Red Plume, their early chief, when he received eagle feathers and medicine at the Wheel to protect his people from harm.
Today, the Wheel is used by many native people as a site for the vision quest that has always been at the core of the Native American religious tradition.

In 1992, there were 70,000 visitors — most of them non-natives — to the Medicine Wheel National Historic Landmark. In 1988 there had been 10,000. These visitor counts are only made in the summer, during a short, high-altitude, three month season. Fred Chapman, archeologist and Native American liaison for the Wyoming State Historic Preservation offices, says “White Americans have consistently expressed fascination with the Medicine Wheel.” Chapman contends that since the late 1800’s when Euro-Americans first visited the site, this fascination was based more on attempts to understand when and why it was built, than on any spiritual significance. And non-native histories of the Wheel refer only briefly to religious practices: in the National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, under the category of “Significance”, there are seven pages citing archeological and scientific importance, and two sentences of religious significance.

In the past the Wheel had not been commonly known to the non-native world. Some of its recent popularity is due to an increased interest in native spirituality, and promotion of the National Historic Landmark as a tourist attraction by the Bighorn National Forest and Lovell, Wyoming, Chamber of Commerce. But a main reason for the increase of visitors is that driving access to the Wheel was made easier: a dangerous winding road was “improved”, allowing tourists to drive all the way up to the Wheel to a makeshift parking lot and Port-A-Potty just thirty feet away from the perimeter of the Wheel. The improved road ripped up part of the 10,000 year-old travois trail.

The effects of the increased visitor numbers have been devastating. Teepee rings in the area have been disturbed, vandalized, or stolen. A seven foot high barbed-wire fence, with a locked gate, had to be built around the Medicine Wheel to protect it from souvenir hunters. Thousands of tourists circle the fence for a view, and a six-inch deep eroded trench is the result. Direct access to the Wheel is restricted to native people who have to submit a written request for a key to the locked gate.

The day I visited the Wheel the fence was adorned with traditional native offerings of raptor feathers, sunbleached bone, and streaming bouquets of brilliant yellow, deep blue, and blood-red ribbons. But hanging limply next to these offerings I saw Big Gulp cups, cigarette lighters, and spent condoms, another kind of offering representing whatever a careless tourist could quickly grab from his or her nearby car.

Disturbed by these desecrations, native peoples asked the Forest Service to close the last mile and a half of the road to the Wheel, and let visitors approach the Wheel itself on foot. The hope was that this would deter casual visitors and therefore reduce the environmental and spiritual degradations to the Wheel.

This proved to be the case: after those 70,000 driveup visitors in 1992, the following year only 30,000 visitors chose to make the hike. In 1994, only 15,000 visitors made the trek. It seemed to be the easy vehicular access, not cultural interest or spiritual renewal, that drew so many non-natives to the Wheel.

Old Mouse, an Arikara leader, says, “Eventually one gets to the Medicine Wheel to fulfill one’s life.”

But Judeo-Christian religions see a human world as separate from, and above, the natural world. It is therefore difficult for most Euro-Americans to see an area, a specific natural place, as having spiritual and cultural significance. Many contemporary churches are built in urban areas—where the people are—where place is regarded only as the best vacant lot available for construction. Euro-Americans tend to view sacred places as tangible, concrete entities—structures like churches or synagogues—that can, like other real estate, be replaced. This concept of sacred place often contrasts with Native Americans’ view of sacred sites as irreplaceable, and sacred places permanently destroyed if they are torn up or covered over. To the Cheyenne, the Blackfeet, and many
other tribes, certain features of a specific natural landscape orient the people with their spiritual base, the earth and the cosmos.

There are some non-native people who value the religious significance of the Wheel and who come not to desecrate but to see and learn from those that have come before. There seems to be a small but growing movement among non-Indian people to integrate Native American perspectives with those from the earth-centered religions of Europe. Through the ages people of all cultures have gone to mountain tops seeking spiritual understanding.

That was what had drawn our group to gather at the Wheel. To get there, Evan and I drove from Missoula and rendezvoused with two women from back east at a campsite on Medicine Mountain. One of these women, Beverly—I hadn’t met her before—was a non-native woman who had been working with native elders in New York. She wanted to do a vision quest at the Wheel. The second woman, Ellenburg, was a friend of mine, part Cherokee, who came to build and maintain the fire for the quest, and pray for her friend’s safety and vision.

When we met them on Medicine Mountain, we were also met with high winds, blowing snow, and ten degree temperatures with wind chill. We helped them break camp to get off the snow-blown mountain, for the two women were not prepared for winter in July. I brushed the ice off their Fourth of July watermelon, and the green-striped globe was frozen rock-solid in the snow.

Just a half-hour away and three thousand feet lower in elevation lay the warm, dry, juniper and sage country of the Bighorn Basin. We set up camp down there, basking in the sun in T-shirts and shorts, in view of Medicine Mountain and the black clouds that hid its peak from us.

At night, Evan, in true nine-year-old spirit, set off bottle rockets to celebrate the Fourth of July, and they popped high above us, their sound mixing with the coyotes and the crackle of our bone-dry juniper campfire that had started in an instant. The sweet juniper smell enveloped us, and I silently proclaimed my thanks as a visitor of this ancient land.

After two unsuccessful attempts to get to the Wheel, we rose on the third day, reluctantly changing from our shorts and T-shirts into long underwear, sweaters, and winter coats. With gloves and hats by our sides, we made the drive up into the clouds of Medicine Mountain. Back up on the mountain, at the junction of the road that leads to the Wheel, we could actually see across the high meadows this time, and decided that the glimpses of azure sky breaking through the still swirling clouds was as good as it was going to get.

So the four of us began to quietly make the pilgrimage up the three mile road to the Wheel. The approach to the Wheel, usually a contemplative walk wrapped in silence and ceremonial robes, is considered to be of great significance. Native people say that the approach is to be made quietly, without unnatural aural or visual interruptions. But our attempt at a quiet walk was constantly interrupted by grazing cattle sounding their low, long call to one another. The cows were like rude visitors in a church, with a demanding bellowing that interrupted the Mountain’s Sermon of white, windy stillness.

When Evan and I finally reached the Wheel, we met up with Ellenburg and Beverly. Ellenburg was silently circling the Wheel, battling the high winds and blowing snow. Beverly was evidently preparing for her vision quest as she brought out the sage, cornmeal, and ceremonial shell offering bowls given to her by native elders. She filled these bowls with the cornmeal and set them at various points around the Wheel, and then disappeared. A few minutes later she came to the small pine tree just down from the Wheel that provided the only sheltered break from the winds and snow, holding a long walking stick covered with colored ribbons and feathers. “The weather is too fierce, I’m not going to do the quest,” she announced, and turned to start walking back down the ridge.

I asked her why she couldn’t stay a few more days in the area while this weather system moved out. Her schedule didn’t allow it, she said, she had to get back to New York. To be fair, maybe even the toughest person on a vision quest, native or non-native, would have also come down from the Wheel given the weather. I wondered, though, if her view of a vision quest was too thickly wrapped in her own, and not the Mountain’s, expectations.

Bill Tall Bull is a Northern Cheyenne elder and member of the Medicine Wheel Alliance. He is a spokesman for the tribe, representing his people’s use of the Wheel for vision quests and sacred ceremonies. Tall Bull, in his late-forties, short, and full-bodied, has been selected by President Clinton to be a part of the National Advisory...
Council On Historic Preservation for sacred sites. He is generally quiet and soft-spoken, but stirs with heightened energy when he speaks of the Wheel.

Tall Bull told me about the spirits that inhabit not just the Medicine Wheel, but all of Medicine Mountain: “All over Medicine Mountain,” he explained, “native people see the rock spirits move from one outcropping to another, they see the tree spirits dash from Douglas fir to Ponderosa pine. When collecting sage and other sacred materials for ceremonies and rituals, native people thank these plant spirits as they see the spirits move from plant to plant.”

Tall Bull paused, his coal black eyes narrowing, glistening. It was a far-away look, as if part of him saw the spirits, and felt their presence.

“We have been taught to see these spirits since we were young children,” Tall Bull continued, “And our elders were taught by their elders. This kind of seeing is a part of us. White people are not taught this way. No wonder that we see the spirits and whites don’t.”

Tall Bull said the spirits have been active around Medicine Mountain for thousands of years, and they are active today.

Tall Bull told me of a time when he was walking up to the Wheel for a vision quest, approaching quietly from the south along the same ridge Evan and I had walked up. A quarter-mile from the Wheel, he came to a flat stone wall twelve feet high. He stopped. There, a wolf—a blood-red wolf—manifested from the stone wall. It locked its fiery, amber-yellow eyes on Tall Bull, like two burning flames in a bright red lantern. Tall Bull stared back at the red wolf. It turned in a circle, once. Then, as suddenly as it appeared, the red wolf melted back into the flat wall.

“I don’t know what the wolf was saying to me,” Tall Bull reflected. “Maybe nothing. Maybe it was just the Mountain’s way of letting me know the spirits were with me, that they were joining me in my journey.”

Most of the time when Tall Bull speaks, he fixes his dark black eyes on the sky, the trees, the soil, as if it’s from these things that he receives his power and wisdom. Now he looked at me directly for the first time—it was a quick glance more than anything—and I now understand that in that glance he was offering his hand to help me cross the divide.

Other spiritual leaders have fed my spirit and shown me how to break through boundaries: a priest, a black Benedictine monk who practices Zen Buddhism, held oven-warm communion bread to my lips. The next night I saw him with bluejeans on, consoling drunks in a bar. And I have walked to the Medicine Wheel in deep snow and seen my son pulled to his knees.

To further cross, I venture back to the history of my ancestors—Northern European, Danish—and find that the Gauls talked about their spiritual faculties being awakened by the Wouivre: telluric (magnetic or cosmic) currents that move through the ground and are represented symbolically by serpents. In these places the ancients came to receive what the Earth could give them, literally “the Gift of the Earth”. They came to be not only affected by them, but to awaken the Earth’s dormant energies. It was not a one-way taking, but an exchange, a sacred dialogue. The Earth was seen as a living being of matter, and energy currents and interchange took place with human beings also possessing this spiritual energy. Dolmens or megaliths—large stones—were placed where these currents were particularly strong.

Large stones were gathered centuries ago at the top of Medicine Mountain, on a sacred place that had drawn sojourners there for millennium. The Wheel was formed, rock cairns built. A native elder says, “...the trees, the four-leggeds, the wingeds, the insects, even stones, all are alive and conscious.”

I think of these Celtic dolmens, and the currents that course the earth, as I remember Evan falling to his knees at the perimeter of the eighty foot diameter Wheel. His sky-blue rain jacket lit up the white landscape, a small blue beacon hunched in the snow. Our family rarely prays in the traditional manner—and never on our knees—and yet Evan was pulled down to the earth in the presence of something much greater than he consciously understood. In the blinding and blowing snow he remained kneeled, fixed.

I said my own prayer then: that I will learn to cross those divides, as Evan did, without even thinking of them. That I will step over these artificial boundaries not to make other spiritual values my own, but in order to understand and practice my own. Nelson Mandela says a place does riot favor anyone, over another, but will make herself available to those who love her. I seek that unconscious love of place that Evan has, and to feel Spirit-in-Motion, the turning of the wind and the Wheel.
When Hell Freezes Over

The folks at home
flea marketed my plea bargain. Now
I do time. It's o.k.
I'm shitting in high cotton. The Devil
is beating his wife the weather
chasing its own tail. I play cards
with my jailors. Win some.
On the big pot I hold a straight.
Except there's no queen
in between the one-eyed jack and the suicide king.
And the diamond of my birthstone that rock
turns into a vapor trail.
Which I of course follow
with a snail's faith
looking high and low. Like an albino
who follows his own blood up to a bucket of milk
and steals it. Checking
all my bases, trying to make it home
before the big storm hits. On roads
frozen solid as the end of time.

Alec Cargile