“Lightning streaked crooked through the light, down through the evaporating virga, and struck a tree straight across the lake.”

— page 11
The Teller Issue
Fall 2000
Volume 4 Number 2

Features

Between the Lines
Rick Bass introduces our Teller essays. page 14

The Point
Steve Weathers blurs the line between fiction and non-fiction with this account of one boy's life fishing with his estranged uncle on the Gulf Coast of Florida. page 16

Life with Meadowlarks
The story of the Western Meadowlark, as Cynthia Melcher has so eloquently shown us here, is tightly woven into the fabric of this writer's life. page 22

Departments

First Person ... Dan Berger       page 2
Huckleberry Wine ... News and Ideas page 4
Perspectives ... Clara Sophia Weygandt page 6
Snapshot ... Heather Sarantis      page 8
Poetry ... Nathan McKeen
      ... Dave Tirrell
      ... Clara Sophia Weygandt
      page 9
      page 30
      page 34
Interview ... Lolo Hotshot Chad Howard
      by David Freiberg
      page 28
Bifurcations ... Meagan Boltwood
      ... David Freiberg
      page 10
      page 11
Book Reviews ... A Journey North
      ... Living in the Runaway West
      page 32
      page 33
Famous Last Words ... Sue Samson
      page 37

ISSN 1092-5198
I've only been in two fights in my life. Both happened during my tenure as a fifth grader at Jenkintown Elementary School. Neither lasted past a single punch and each took place near the swing set. Although I forgot the “who” and the “why” of the second scrap—I just remember the kid doubled over after I sucker-punched him in the belly—my head still rings from the first.

Adrien Benchees. At age 12, Adrien was already an angry hippie. He had long hair and a beaded necklace, and he didn’t like me. One afternoon, Adrien pinned me against the wall below a rainbow of construction-paper butterflies taped to the kindergarten window. I stared past Adrien at the slide as he prodded and poked at my frail psyche. When the bell rang signifying that recess was over, he decked me: a clean right hook smack on the kisser. Warm blood spilled from a tooth puncture in my lip as my head rolled onto my right shoulder and slapped the brick wall behind me. I shoved back, hoping to at least get a piece of him, but by the time I thrust my arms forward, the little Charles Manson was gone.

Since those days, I’ve quit fighting. No fisticuffs at a bar, no shoving matches at protests, and no verbal sparring of any kind. Instead, I became a journalist. My job now is to relate stories—science stories and cultural stories—which, more often than not, involve conflict between others. But becoming a journalist hasn’t cleared me from my own conflict. In fact, it is what I do as a journalist in relation to my other job, writing and editing creative nonfiction, that has kept inner conflict as basic a part of my everyday life as eating.

As a journalist, I have been trained to take. I take the stories of other people and places and expose their hardships or exploit their achievements. I report on how some small part of the world is, reconstructing it by interpreting information and recreating events. My quest for accuracy and balance, to the point of obsession, is a canon of good journalism.

Journalism excels at illuminating both the wrenches and the grease in the gears driving our culture. But what it fails to do is to report on our primal instincts to prey and to reproduce, and our ability to find beauty or dread within existence. This is what attracts me to creative nonfiction. Here’s a style that uses contemplative storytelling to convey an idea or feeling and allows me to step away from some unbiased middle ground to write
from my small part of the world. I can take sides and I can delve emotionally. As a creative nonfiction writer, I give: I give myself, my stories, my misgivings and failures, my contradictions, inconsistencies, successes and loves. I become the authority in a world where accuracy is arbitrary and balance is a hindrance.

One part of me strives to stay out of my writing. The other part of me is my writing. One part of me seeks balance; the other part tips scales. Author David James Duncan apparently feels similarly. He writes nonfiction, too, but is also a novelist and short story writer.

“How does it feel,” Duncan asks in his forthcoming book *My Story as Told by Water*, “to have two demanding literary personae crammed into my one head and body, fighting for possession of my pen? Gnarly!”

Gnarly is right. For me, sometimes these parts don’t seem to like each other.

Why?

Writing, regardless of what kind, takes everything the writer’s got: time, money, energy (writing gives me energy, too), and any semblance of a social life. Writers all feed from the same garden of words, usages, and meanings. And when two writers coexist in one body, they also share emotions and experiences. This means one set of resources for two hungry mouths. I haven’t given up journalism because it keeps me connected and grounded. Without my accounting for the goings-on around me, I’d float, lost in the ether of consecutive days. But journalism doesn’t sustain my animalistic essence; I need to boundlessly create to do that. So I eat for two and I live with the conflict.

What we are all trying to do, regardless of who we are, is to write—to communicate with language—and to do that well. Good writing closes in on perfect truth, whether it is about an ecosystem in peril or recovery, a candidate’s education agenda, or what happens to us when we fall in or out of love. We have a toolbox of techniques we employ to make our job easier, and those techniques are another part of what differentiates us into the various “ists”: journalists, essayists, novelists. The best writers employ some or all of these techniques to slam home their truth, like Adrien slammed his in my face. That was his best way to tell me his truth—he didn’t like me. How primal! That’s not a technique I’m fond of, but... I got the message.

With this Fall’s Teller issue, *Camas* continues to honor the good writer by exposing a spectrum of techniques as broad as that of writing itself. This issue of *Camas* also features a new staff of eager and talented editors and writers, whose work and energy on this first issue of the year has been exemplary; I am gratefully in their debt for their hard work. And without picking a fight, we invite comments from you, our readers.

—Dan Berger
Huckleberry Wine
(a gill's worth)

editor's note: Camas has resurrected the Huckleberry Wine (originally spelled Whine) section, this time bringing it back as a place for an exchange of ideas and news from the West. We welcome your letters, comments, and insights.

Correspondence
For the first time in a while, Camas received some mail. This one comes from Mark Fiege, an assistant professor at Colorado State University. Mr. Fiege writes:

“I just received and read the Fall/Winter 1999 issue of Camas. This is a wonderful journal. The essays are beautifully written and informative. I especially liked Clara Weygandt’s “Doing the Honey Lake,” a piece highly evocative of similar places that I know in the great basin.” (see another of Clara’s pieces on page 6).

“Keep up the good work. This is really good Western and nature writing.”

Thanks, Mark. Since Huckleberry Wine started as a forum for letters, we invite and encourage you, our readers, to send us a note with your thoughts.

Congratulations
On June 24, 2000, former Camas editor Tara Gunter married her college sweetheart Ethan Hasenstein on the Tyee Winery just south of Corvallis, Oregon. Tara and Ethan met as undergraduates in the honors program at the University of Oregon over eight years ago.

The ceremony took place under a 400-year-old Live Oak and was followed by a reception in the barn with a honky tonk swing band. Both are now finishing their theses for EVST and Tara is currently the managing editor of Chronicle of Community. Congratulations again Tara and Ethan; Camas wishes you a great life together!

The long road celebrated
Not that it matters after a close second place finish, but our pick for Montana’s next governor, and former EVSTer, Mark O’Keefe spoke about his days as a graduate student to a crowded room of current and former Environmental Studies students at the program’s 30th anniversary cocktail party on September 29th, 2000.

The program was started back in 1970 by botanist Clancy Gorden and chemist Ron Erickson. Its mission was “to fight the other war that was happening at the time: the war on our planet.” Erickson told a smaller crowd the next morning at a panel discussion on the current state of the environmental movement.

Later that night, and well into the next morning at the annual Blackfoot Boogie campfire and kegger, the crowd swelled even as Lubrecht forest was getting soaked by rain. Long-time EVST legend Green Elvis made a surprise appearance during a performance by the eco-punk-polka band, the Velcro Sheep. Green Elvis hit the stage just after a group of tai chiers performed the slowest dance of the evening to Gut Shoot Somoza. Unfortunately, alum Woody Beardsley, who now works for the Trust for Public Land in Denver, once again missed the whole thing. “I can’t understand why, as soon as I take off for five minutes, Green Elvis appears. And then when I come back, he’s gone.” Hmmm, maybe you should ask Clark Kent.

Grassroots roundup
Given the times and current cultural movements, grassroots journals spring up and die out like fireweed after a good burn. The good ones, or at least the important ones, remain, while others silently fade away. Many continue on, long past their prime, growing older, wiser, and too often, more obscure.

The Earth First! Journal, along with the group, turned 20 this fall, and they are celebrating. The journal, which is moving to Tucson, Arizona this spring, just published a special commemorative issue highlighting the past two decades of the Earth First! movement and radical environmentalism. The issue is jam-packed with stories, histories, profiles, pictures, and poems and was compiled by past editors and writers as well as the current crew. Look for it now on newsstands, or contact the journal at earth-first@igc.org.

The Aug./Sept. 2000 issue of that journal gave birth to another new rag called Green Anarchy. Their inaugural issue states: “In Green Anarchy, we hope to reflect and debate the various trends in Green Anarchy.”
Anarchist philosophy. Though these philosophies often differ, we want to give them an airing. Our philosophies are varied and include primitivism, diggers, social ecology, deep ecology, situationism and insurrectionary anarchy." The paper will leave the protective shell of the EFl journal and will be published quarterly. For more info, email greenanarchy@tao.ca.

The Drake, a small fly fishing publication started in 1998 in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and now based in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, is going to see a bit of a face-lift this spring. The journal was picked up by Paddlesport Publishing Inc., a small step up from the beloved duct tape, brew pub, and iMac publisher of its past, and will switch to a glossy stock. No worries though, this literary sporting journal's raison d'être—to celebrate the why of fishing, not the how—remains at its heart. The web page, www.drakemag.com, may or may not work, but the magazine does. Look for it next spring.

Camas has a quasi-sister publication in Utah. Petroglyph, started by a graduate student at Utah State University in 1988, has actually been around for four years longer than we have, but disappeared for a bit back in the late-'90s. (Lack of funds, surprise, surprise.) The biannual publication, subtitled a "Journal of Creative Nature Writing," is published solely by USU's English Department. Their newest issue was just published. For more info or to get a copy, see their website english.usu.edu/petroglyph.

So where's the entrance station
Thirteen-thousand years ago, an ice dam holding Glacial Lake Missoula, which spanned from Drummond, Montana to Newport, Washington, cracked, sending 500 cubic miles of water rushing at speeds of up to 65 miles an hour towards the Pacific Ocean. This lake, North America's largest freshwater inland sea, was said to have flooded and filled anywhere between 37 and 100 times, each break releasing eight times the current total flow of all of Earth's rivers. These cataclysmic floods carried log cabin-sized ice chunks, boulders, and trees that carved canyons, created channeled scablands and dry coulees, and, in eastern Washington and Oregon, washed away the soft, fleshy earth right down to the bare basalt. The torrents finally funneled into Wallula Gap and tore through the Columbia River Gorge.

Whether or not anyone was there to bear witness to this Biblical event is moot; the lake and its subsequent breaches were unlike anything that has happened since. The National Park Service and the Forest Service have joined with the nonprofit Ice Age Floods Institute and a host of scientists and local chambers of commerce to document the lake and flood's imprints. In a study of alternatives and environmental assessments released this fall, the Park Service proposed four options for a four-state, borderless park to celebrate the events that would include roadside information kiosks and interpretive sites and centers telling the story of the glacial lake and dam. Flood scars can be seen on the Clark Fork and Umpqua rivers, on the channeled scablands in Oregon and Washington and in other places like the Camas Prairie in Montana. (We like that site the best.) For more information or to comment, check out www.nps.gov/iceagefloods.

A Final Note
The environmental world lost a great friend and a terrific fighter in early November when David Brower died at the age of 88. Brower had a long and impressive list of accomplishments, which include starting Friends of the Earth and the Earth Island Institute, stapping with top Water Buffaloes Floyd Dominy and Wayne Aspinal to successfully keep dams off of the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon, and serving on the Sierra Club's board of Directors from 1952 to 1969. The environmental crusader was also a gifted writer, editor, and mountaineer with 70 first ascents in the Sierra Nevada alone.

Brower's success came from his ability to work a crowd, his flair for publicity, and his vision for the movement. That vision took exceptional flight during his time with the Sierra Club when, under his leadership, membership grew from 7,000 to 70,000. Brower, however, was never known as the easiest man with whom to work. And while he had only adversaries, not enemies, he sometimes got too big for the good of the organization that employed him, bringing on his own resignation. Throughout his career, he fought compassionately for the natural world, and he left this planet a better place. Huckleberry Wine leaves you with this piece from David Brower's Credo for the Earth:

We may see that progress is not the accelerating speed with which we multiply and subdue the Earth nor the growing number of things we possess and cling to. It is a way along which to search for truth, to find serenity and love, and reverence for life, to be a part of an enduring harmony, trying hard not to sing out of tune.

—compiled by Dan Berger
It started during nights in a tent pitched on top of a ridge. I’d be tucked into my bag, head-lamp on, reading something to put me to sleep, relieved to be horizontal and out of the wind, and a beetle would wander into the circle of light reflecting off the nylon walls. A little one, about one centimeter, and slender, not round. Its wing-covers were gray and the rest of its body orange, a rather raffish combination of colors. It walked with calm purpose up the nylon. Its antennae were jointed, and occasionally it would pause and wave them, and then march on, over the wall, up over the roof, to vanish behind the riot of gear by the door. Sometimes my headlamp would catch the beetle’s eyes directly and they would glow green. Later I read that the ancient Egyptians believed that their sun god Ra was a beetle that pushed the orb of the sun across the sky. The beetles in my tent were nothing like a scarab, but their traverse of the arc of my tent was comforting.

That summer three of us were reintroducing peregrine falcons to the cliffs south of Muir Beach, California. I had no experience with birds, and I felt unsettled and unsure. We lived on site, surrounded by chilly summer fog and constant anxiety about the falcons; we were surrogate parents without wings.

So it was reassuring to share my privacy with insects for which I had no use. I had no responsibilities toward them: they were self-sufficient, enclosed. When I left Muir Beach I had no idea that, in my mind, the beetles would come, too.

Personal iconography is a strange thing. I only recently began to realize that I have individual icons, that my psyche has for some time engaged in its sometimes direct, sometimes more obscure representations of reality. Since that year, seeing beetles has always brought me a secret, private joy.

This is nothing new. Humans and beetles have a rich history together. Jung has written about beetles in relation to psychology, and Sue Hubbell writes in Broadsides from the Other Orders that “Something rather beetelike has been scuttling about for more than 225 million years…” She points out that there is evidence that predaceous feeding by beetles on early plants may have triggered an “evolutionary response … [of enclosing] the flowering parts, giving … plants that protected their seed in this way such a reproductive advantage that, botanically, they quickly took over the planet. Today these are what we call Angiosperms, the flowering plants.” I am amazed by the possibility that most of the plants that grace our lives may have come about because of a multitude of tiny appetites. This penchant for eating is reflected in the word “beetle.” According to Glynn Evans in An Inordinate Fondness for Beetles, it comes from the Old English bitula, meaning “little biter.”

Still, there is the question of why the peregrines did not become an icon for me. Why, against the landscape of sky and spectacular raptors, did the random visits of beetles in my tent make such an impression? I think it has something to do with their movement.

Peregrines are renowned for their breathtaking flight. This cannot be said of beetles. Breathtaking could describe their coloration, but their movements are not stunning. When they fly, many beetles appear to be aerodynamically challenged, sometimes moving vertically rather than horizontally, flying a short distance then landing with a thump and trundling around. This rather lackadaisical aspect is reflected in the terminology used when referring to beetle pollination. They are known as “soil and mess” pollinators because they land on or crawl to a flower, eat the pollen, defecate, perhaps mate if another beetle shows up, and generally behave in a rather casual
manner. Not awe-inspiring, perhaps, but successful.

*Coleoptera* is the Latin name for beetle, and it comes from the beetle’s unique wings. Hubbell explains that “*Coleoptera* ... means sheath-winged, from the Greek *koleon*, a sheath.” This sheath, also known as the elytra, serves to protect the delicate wings, enabling beetles to radiate into a remarkably wide array of habitats. According to Evans, the beetles’ sometimes abrupt flight is thought to protect them from predators, to help them find mates, and to contribute to finding food. Graceful flight doesn’t matter in the world of earth, water, plants, and nectar that the beetles inhabit. Nor in the world of dung and pollen and sand and wood. What matters is being able to climb or dig and remain somewhat impervious. The exoskeletons of many beetles have a waxy coating, or setae, a spiny or hairlike structure, which may serve as protection against the elements.

These modifications contribute to Coleopteran ubiquity. They occupy many habitats and often seem to be everywhere. This is not to say endangered beetles do not exist: they do. But beetles are “ordinary,” everyday creatures. This is precisely why they are endearing. They are not peregrines. They are not thought of as sleek predators, charismatic megafauna, or the sort of animal that is “sexy.” They are not the kind of animal that everyone equates himself or herself to, like tigers or grizzlies.

One night in Arizona, my partner and I stumbled back from a Mexican spotted owl survey, tired and hungry. We turned the light on in the back of the Game and Fish camper while we dug through our cooler and boxes for some sort of a quick dinner. The light was tremendously attractive to all sorts of beetles, and suddenly they were flying in and landing on the ground, on cans, on boxes, and in our bowls, where they would attempt to crawl up the sides. They were glorious: large, metallic, golden-green or silver, flying scarabs. And June bugs, with those improbable antennae, ornate caramel-colored fans on top of their lowered heads. As I looked at them in my bowl, I felt like an acolyte with an offering to some god, perhaps the god of heat or the god of rare animals, at the impromptu temple of the Game and Fish truck. I had no idea there were beetles like this in Arizona. Hubbell relates that “South American Indian myth makers ... neatly put mankind in its proper place according to beetles. According to their stories the Creator was a very large beetle, who made men and women from the grains of earth left over after he had constructed the rest of the world.”

I could almost see it. The beetles were elegant, dazzling, but no, their scrabbling at the smooth sides of the bowl was hapless, their flight too clumsy and bumbling to be divine. A June bug flew into the side of my head, and as I reached up to disentangle it from my hair, I heard the soft hiss they make when disturbed, faint but ominous. When I held it in my hand, I watched as it contracted its body, and I heard the hiss again. The frilly antennae unfurled and trembled, and I let it slide off my hand onto the top of a can.

Perhaps I need to change my definition of divine. Perhaps the blessed has a more earthy aspect. Two lines in William Stafford’s poem “Ultimate Problems” say God is everywhere/but hard to see. Like the beetle that appeared last night on my kitchen floor, a dingy snippet of dark. Rationally, I know it got there somehow, yet it just seemed to appear. The beetle world is so unbelievably different from mine, much of it beyond what I can conceive. But that world is integral, old, continuing. This is what is behind my joy in beetles. That they are ordinary, improbably everywhere. A crawling deity, an earnest reminder of purpose and mystery.

*Clara Sophia is a graduate student in the Environmental Studies Program at the University of Montana. She likes little bugs and things that crawl around. It's cold here in Montana though, and we don't have that many crawly things this time of year.*

*photos by Mark Oatney*  
*www.oatney.com*
There’s been a load of compromisin’ on the road to my horizon. But I’m gonna be where the lights are shining on me! Everybody now: Like a rhinestone cowboy....

I know you know this song. As a young girl in New England, I belted these words whenever they came on the radio. I had never seen a cowgirl, but by golly I wanted to be one. Then I could bat my eyelashes at Glen Campbell and ride my horse into the distance to go lasso me up some dogies. I was so excited about what lay ahead in my blossoming life.

Predictably, not all my childhood fantasies came true. I never became a cowgirl, never got that coveted role on Hee-Haw, haven’t eaten beef for ten years, and am dreadfully allergic to horses. Somehow, I managed to eke out a rich life nonetheless. But as the big three-oh loomed on the horizon, I knew that I had to devise a bridge between that childhood fantasy and present-day reality. Against any form of logic and my personal code of ethics, I came up with a plan: buy a truck and move to Montana.

I packed my new purchase, a 1984 Nissan king cab 4x4, with my meager belongings, threw on a cowboy hat, and waved good-bye to my beloved San Francisco. There were only two major mountain ranges and 1,100 miles between me and my dream. I headed east into the wild, wild West. Yee Haw! As the miles ticked away I saw my urban life fade into a world alien to me: 2Pac was replaced with two step, tofu with chicken fried steak, rainbow bumper stickers with “Jesus Saves” billboards. And did you know that men actually wear pants under their chaps?

I started to sweat. At some point I knew that I was actually going to have to talk to people. Feeling different than the average American citizen—if there is such a thing—was nothing new to me. After seven years in San Francisco, however, I had become accustomed to assuming other people had similar left-leaning political views and lifestyles. San Francisco is safe that way. When I crossed that California border I immediately knew I was outside of my comfort zone. And I wasn’t going back.

After several days of travel I arrived with my sweetheart, Mark, at his grandfather’s cattle ranch in southern Idaho. I was simultaneously excited about being in the land of real cowboys and intimidated by the thought of conversations about being an activist. I assumed that my type of people are not always highly regarded in that neck of the woods. I anticipated telling the family about my work and that I was moving to Montana to study environmental issues. When I told Mark’s uncle about what I planned to do, however, he replied: “Oh that’s good, there’s lots of work for folks like you.” The subject passed like a conversation about the weather. I was not sure if he meant it or if he was being polite. Possibly both. I was relieved and reminded of the danger of making assumptions about people that I do not know.

He continued on with the conversation: “That’s a nice rig you got there.” Rig? What’s a rig? “Oh, my truck. Yeah, it’s great.” The conversation began to flow. We talked about my truck, about his trucks, about other people’s trucks. Suddenly the butterflies in my stomach took flight and I had a moment of insight: a truck can be an easy entry point for conversation with strangers. Regardless of how either of us felt about logging in the national forests or grazing on public lands, we were having a pleasant conversation about trucks. I was ecstatic.

Upon arriving in my new home, Missoula, I decided to take full advantage of my recent wisdom. I started to read Auto Repair For Dummies the way one would learn a new language to travel to a foreign country. I quickly realized, however, that the real benefit of this undertaking was that I would be able to connect with men. More accurately, I could actively bridge the gender gap by creating situations where I could talk to men and I could successfully understand each other. For example, I had to take the truck in to a mechanic because it had barely enough power to make it up hills. I explained my concerns and he did a thorough examination. There was no miscommunication when he said: “You need a new catalytic converter.” I said: “Okay,” and forked over next month’s rent. We parted knowing nothing of each other’s hopes and dreams but both benefiting from the experience: he enjoyed working on a great old truck; I enjoyed riding off into the sunset feeling like a cowgirl.

I have also built a relationship with my neighbor, in part, through tinkering with the truck. Recently, he overheard the dreaded click-click-click of a failed ignition. Within moments he excitedly showed me his portable jump-starter toy. He said, “Your battery is dead.” I said, “Okay, let’s jump start it.” We poked around under the hood and discussed the merits of women learning to fix their own “rigs.” We got the truck up and running quickly, and I was off to the local auto supply store to buy a new battery. Days later when I discovered that they sold me an uncharged battery, my neighbor and I had a similar interaction. I gave him some beer in return for his help.

Several months after leaving San Francisco I heard that song: There’s a load of compromisin’ on the road to my horizon. I reflected on compromise as a process of giving up something to get something. I realized that I gave up a home that I loved to experience the natural beauty of the West; the comfort of a like-minded community to get the opportunity to meet people from other walks of life; and an urban hipster identity to, at least in my mind, be a rhinestone cowgirl.

I was once again excited by what lay ahead in my blossoming life.

Heather Sarantis
CEDAR RIVER

Thick black green still river
Catfish lines stringing
Silver, white moonsliver

Against deep blue, arcing
Bone dry gash
Aching

Water, rippling sash
River bent and dimpled glass
Fish mouths flash

Nibbles of moon, cast
In mirrored sky, night
Mosquito hum, high, fast

Sense beyond sight
Trot lines bucking catfish bites

Nathan McKeen
Heroes of the West?

by Meagan Boltwood

The first time I met a red-carded hero I was sitting on one of Boulder's well-worn bar stools. My friend nudged me and said "Hotshot" as the mythic figure moved toward us. Bright fingers of flame and the words "Wildlands Hotshot Team" spread across his bulging black tee shirt. I was immediately impressed. He belonged to a strange breed of men that unflinchingly worked from dawn to dusk in obscene temperatures and conditions.

He introduced himself. I'm sure he had a solid name like Jack or Buck, but I don't remember it. He explained the anticipated dangers of the worst fire season in fifty years. But we didn't need to worry because he was ready. He and the rest of the Hotshots had spent the spring running up hills with 45-pound packs.

I wasn't sure what to say so I said "thank you." He seemed to like the praise and gave me a Superman smile with the confidence of someone leading a life of danger. My admiration peaked when he told me about the Storm King Mountain "blowup" in Grand Junction that had killed a group of Hotshots and firefighters. Using a square white napkin, he drew frantic swipes of blue to illustrate the routes of failed escape. He finished the story with the words "nobody saw it coming." That spring, after a mild winter, we all saw the coming fires. The clouds swelled, threw lightning into the mountain sides and moved on.

That summer I lived in a combustible landscape, with a ghost for a creek and the rumor of rain. The fire danger index at the entrance to Sunshine Canyon was draped in fluorescent orange streamers and never strayed from "EXTREME." We listened to the Red One dispatch channel on the radio that sat ever-vigilant on our kitchen counter. We thought about our less-than-guaranteed escape routes: the eight mile switchback descent into town or the four-foot wide cliffed fire road that led into Lefthand Canyon. We'd watch the dry winds pull smoke from nearby fires across the horizon, fearing the challenges of escape.

I was working for the Conservation Corps, an environmental education program for 14- to 17-year-olds in the Flatirons of Colorado. We spent our days hiking, working on service projects, and studying ecology. The majority of our work consisted of installing check dams to keep water from ruining the trails. In mid-July, at the peak of our disillusionment with water diversion tactics, we were given the chance to do something different: the Hotshots had a control burn project for us.

Surrounded by our Pulaskis and handsaws, we sat on the flammable pine needle duff and waited for instructions. When a Hotshot arrived, my group's obnoxious behavior disappeared as they silently watched him. For three weeks I had attempted to establish the respect that this man had gained in approximately twenty seconds. The benefits of wielding a weapon and saving the world from destruction became strikingly obvious. Bracing a black boot against the stump of a Ponderosa pine, he explained that after the trees were thinned, they would light a spring ground fire to clear out the brush. Our job was to clean up the pre-burn mess by dragging the felled trees into piles that would be cut into eight-foot logs and sold as timber. I watched the group's honorary cynics Joshua and Trevor very closely, ready to counteract any of their rude remarks, but they said nothing.

He summed up the process with the words: "Measure, stack, de-limb, and clear." These words didn't match up with the Hotshot stories from the bar. Those stories were crafted around words like "emergency shelter" and "blowup," words that implied immediate danger. At the end of his robotic commands, the project held continued on page 12.
Growing up in Iowa, my father used to stand with me in the driveway as dark, pendulous thunderstorms swept low over cornfields. I watched microbursts tear the limbs off farmstead windbreaks. Lightning de-barked tall poplars before ripping into the sod on its way to ground. Sometimes it rained two inches in a single hour while lightning lit the sky a thousand times in one minute. Thunderstorms seemed more powerful and awe-worthy than any other interest or childish pursuit in my tiny life. Destructive, dangerous, uncontrollable, unpredictable, and as ephemeral and beautiful as the inevitable evening rainbow in the east. I couldn’t help but learn to love these powerful forces in nature.

That feeling kept building as I grew older, and it eventually came to encompass not only storms and weather, but “natural disasters” in general. I followed the news on volcanoes, earthquakes, monsoons, floods, solar flares, and anything else the universe had to show us humans that we were very small.

And fires! I built enormous bonfires on the banks of the Cedar River back in Iowa. I would compete with the weather-grizzled catfisherman on the far shore to see who could build the largest conflagration from deadfalls lodged in sand.

When I was old enough to drive and travel alone I chased storms in the summer, drove through floods in the springtime, and flew to erupting volcanoes in the winter. Could it be my luck that I would be in Montana in time for the biggest outbreak of forest fires in fifty years? Maybe ever?

Working as an interpreter for the Forest Service this summer, I was the guy in the green pickle suit with a badge who gave talks and shows on natural history to travelers and locals. I invented most of my own programs, which included titles such as “Volcanoes of Hawaii,” “Great Floods of Glacial Lake Missoula,” “How to Survive a Grizzly Attack,” and many other incongruous and melodramatic presentations about uncontrollable natural phenomena.

This year the fire warnings went out early. Low snow-pack, the eight-year cycle, ultra-dry forest conditions, uncompromising rainless skies, and constant low relative humidity had banded together to create conditions ideal for an Armageddon fire season. So at my talks, what folks really wanted to learn was everything they possibly could about fire. What I saw and learned about fire this summer was perhaps not enough, maybe a dram’s worth from a huge jug. But that one drink was as delicious as any cold Old Milwaukee drained on the banks of a rising river in the green-lit wake of an enormous thunderstorm.

Thursday, July 13, 2000. I was pacing the floor of the Seeley Lake Ranger Station mentally preparing a fireside chat on the fantastic cataclysm of the Mount St. Helens eruption. I was planning to talk about Plinian eruptions, the catastrophic escape of dissolved gasses from magma, cubic kilometers of ejecta and glowing pyroclastic flows. I would terrify children and mesmerize adults.

My office was located just behind the timber room of the Seeley Lake Ranger Station of the Lolo National Forest, where the firefighters dwelt, plotting strategy and safety as the radio crackled. There was an anticipation setting in among the fire crew that was as sharp as a jagged stob on a shinbone.

Finally, a thunderstorm. The radio told of new ground-strike fires just to the southwest. Initial attack crews at Ninemile were off and running, chasing smoke through the witch’s beard, deadfall, and duff of the Lolo. The storm was headed right up the Seeley-Swan valley, right up the lake, right through our district’s area of protection.

We stood in back of the station, gazing over the lake as storm clouds rolled through and thunder echoed from the walls of the Swan Range over the lake and back. Virga draped from the clouds as the storm advanced. At five o’clock, the fire continued.
no excitement. Joshua and Trevor leaned into each other, preparing themselves for the release of sarcasm. Before I could interrupt, the Hotshot asked for questions. Joshua, ever sensitive to excessive displays of machismo, asked “Can you fly?”

The group nervously laughed, aware of the large black boot resting at eye level. The fire guy locked his jaw and said, “Does anyone have a real question?” And then it was Trevor’s turn. “So you can’t fly?” I wished for a duct tape device that shot patches of silver at open mouths. As I was drawing up some mental sketches of the sure-to-be-a-hit product, the Hotshot pushed in his neon orange ear plugs and disappeared.

The project was impossibly tedious. The burn plot was poorly marked. The scattered trees blocked each other and made it nearly impossible to free any one of them. The kids quickly lost interest as they dragged increasingly heavy logs and stacked skin-slaying branches.

Once in a while, I would catch a glimpse of the fire guys in action. This seemed to consist of firing up a chain saw to cut down and delimb a dwarfish tree. The process was less than adventurous and bore no resemblance to the Hotshot’s alleged life of danger. They would cut down a few small trees, drink a Sprite, and then cut down more small trees. Occasionally the radios flared, and there would be a momentary surge of excitement until the words “structure fire” cleared out any hope of adventure.

Three hours later, it became clear that our group was confused. Our crew was moving in swerving lines, missing entire sections of the plot. We heard a fuel bottle clanking against the belt of the robotic fire guy as he approached us. Less than pleased with our performance as Hotshot slaves, he told us to “work as a team, suck it up, get the job done.” Instead of responding, we stared at the enormous camera in his hands. The camera and the men belonged to a CBS crew, on location to shoot a documentary called “Heroes of the West.” The crew walked right through us and headed toward the fire guys, who were subtly readjusting their belt buckles.

The rest of the fire guys emerged from the forest. We watched them chat with the CBS men for a while, standing in a scalloped circle molded around stumps and branches. I can only imagine what they talked about, but I am fairly certain that they didn’t use the words “cut a tree, drink a Sprite” to explain their duties. When the camera flipped on its bright light, we moved closer to watch. One of the guys revved up his chain saw and took out a six-inch tree like it was an old growth beast.

A week later, I watched the CBS special “Heroes of the West.” The anchor extolled the virtues of heroism as a wall of fire and burning trees flashed across the screen. Then, between shots of fire fighters enclosed in flames and an exploding ridge line, came the image of the fallen skinny tree. When removed from the uneventful days that surrounded his bouts of heroism, the fire guy looked capable and tough. The resounding voice spoke of fire fighters’ commitment and courage, but my deflated admiration led me to think “work as team, suck it up, get the job done.”

That same evening, flames climbed a pine tree in Sunshine Canyon. The radio came alive, signaling the arrival of wildfire. My roommates and I watched the growing plume of smoke from the deck of our house. The Sunshine Rural Fire Crew mobilized, but it would be at least thirty minutes before additional crews could reach the top of the canyon. We paced the deck’s wooden planks, watching for an intensity of smoke that would convince us to pack our trucks. I scanned the trees surrounding the house. They looked like extended matches, waiting for the first hint of flame. The roar of a 3500 diesel Chevy tore up the canyon road toward our house. We ran out to meet Bruce, our closest neighbor, as he turned our deeply rutted driveway into a rising plume of dirt. Before he could even quiet the engine, I yelled, “What’s happening?”

“Don’t worry,” he told us. “Sunshine Rural and the Hotshots are both on the scene.”

“How did they get here so fast?” I asked.

“I have no idea,” Bruce replied.

Microbrews in hand, we returned to the deck to continue our watch. Within an hour, the smoke disappeared. Comfortable in the knowledge that the fire no longer posed a risk, I told the story of life as a Hotshot slave. I explained the weeks I spent hauling pre-burn slash, carefully outlining every unexciting detail to bore everyone into my skepticism; but as I attempted to convey the Hotshots’ attitude problems and lack of humor, I found myself secretly thankful for men who can sometimes fly.

Meagan Boltwood, like so many others, is an EVST student at the University of Montana. But unlike her colleagues, she now lives in an all-brick house.
lake looked like some satanic cauldron, with pale filtered orange light pouring in from the same sun that had been relentlessly drying the fuels of the forest for months.

Lightning streaked crooked through the light, down through the evaporating virga and struck a tree straight across the lake. To my astonishment, the tree began to smoke and then it torched into a tall orange flame, its flickering reflection dancing on the unstable surface of the lake. Needles and twigs became firebrands and rained into the duff beneath the tree. After the thunder, I yelled into the timber room to Becky that there was a fire across the lake. But my words were drowned by the radio wheezing out the azimuth of the fire, called in by the lookout fifteen miles away and six thousand feet above.

A moment later a second bolt slammed into another tree, maybe a half mile from the first, which immediately began to smoke and then burn. The radio crackled again. By now the fire crews were in their engines, grinding gears and gravel on their way out of the compound and into the forest, chasing the smoke and flame, trying to get to the fire before the fire got away.

With conditions this dry, the firefighters told me, a tiny spark could run to a half-acre blaze with six-foot flames in fifteen minutes. If the fire crews were quick and effective, by morning they would name the fire Incident 23—Dead Out. If the forest and the fire had their way, it would end up with a name like Crooked Fire, Upper Monture, or even Canyon Creek.

The storm cell passed and a post-apocalyptic half-light set in. I witnessed five strikes hit trees on the west side of Seeley Lake. There were now five fires burning within my field of view. Not one drop of rain ever made it to the ground.

Standards of Survival was the subject two weeks before in the conference room at the Seeley Lake Ranger Station. That day I devoured information and learned how to bivouac in an aluminum sack just before a three hundred foot course of unimaginable flame ripped though the canopy overhead. It’s so crispy out there, the instructor warned, I am afraid you’re all going to see some real overtime this year. In the time-test, I lost one of my feet to the overburn. I was lucky to be here, lucky to have a job as a Forest Service interpreter, and as it turned out, lucky that my own forest was about to go up in flames.

I immediately bagged the notion of talking about St. Helens at my fireside chat that night and instead gave a half-crazed, arm-waving rant about the new fires. My crowd of Junior Chipmunks and their parents was both excited and fearful. I pointed out the new smoke columns rising from the shores and flanks of Seeley Lake and explained how an initial attack worked. I told them how there were now dozens of firefighters on the move. We listened to helicopters choppering along with sling-loads and water buckets dipping into the lake. A few locals quietly slipped away, afraid for their homes or the homes of their friends.

That lightning storm started over fifty fires on our district alone, signifying the start of the Montana fire season. Two of them eventually escaped initial attack and for the next six weeks just about all I could talk about were the Upper Monture and Spread Ridge fires. They consumed twenty-five thousand acres in steep and dangerous terrain, burning virtually uncontrolled until the end of September.

As I drove back to Missoula that night, I thought about Vesuvius—Pompeii and Herculaneum, fire-fountains on the Big Island—Kalapana Gardens, and tornadoes trailing off gigantic thunderheads near trailer parks. I wondered about the people whose homes in the forest would burn and all the creatures and trees living before the fanning flames.

That evening a dim rainbow formed in the east and I could see flames creeping up the west side of Morrell Mountain toward the lookout. I pulled into the driveway of some lakeside lodge and sat on the tailgate with my camera. The adrenaline was still pumping in my heated blood as I poured in a cold can of Old Milwaukee. Nothing can put this fire out, I thought, and I steered for home.

David Freiberg is exactly like he sounds in this piece. When not writing, drinking Old Milwaukee’s, or chasing or creating disasters, he studies Environmental Education.
Rick Bass, author and leader of the 2000 Environmental Writing Institute, introduces two of this year’s Teller essays

What a peach of a job it was hanging out on the Teller Wildlife Refuge in Bitterroot sunlight and May birdsong while the northern Yaak slept brown and still beneath its breaking-apart shields of ice. This year’s crop of students was characterized, as usual, by the presence, even abundance, of talent, but also by an utter congeniality and courtesy: not a malcontent in the bunch. I realize such a description can be read as a criticism or negative observation, that amongst these mild-mannered students neither was there the seething passion for art and the natural world, for fantastically beautiful sentences and a life’s commitment to wild country, and wilderness—but fortunately this was not the case. Behind and beneath each of the cases of mildness, there burned a full cauldron of enthusiasms. In fact, the material within those cauldrons transcended need or commitment and went all the way over into full obsession. These were students who had, who have, decided not to turn back from their goals. Their demeanors were mild not because they weren’t serious or passionate, but because they were. They were each as calm as a sniper. They were easy to speak to.

The two stories chosen for this issue are certainly wonderful, as were all of the stories in the class. I’m pleased to be able to introduce them and pleased too by the fact, or so it seems to me, that they are as different as night and day. Still, it is often an artist’s instinct to seek similarities—to reach for themes and metaphors. And it occurs to me that despite the differences between “Life with Meadowlarks” and “The Point”—one as cheery as the song of a lark, the other as oppressive and frightening as a long-running war—the two stories still possess in common a deep-seated sense of loss and a narrative that is cemented with anxiety. They possess—even in their careful and crafted and measured telling—an urgency and the promise that something is at stake.

Present also in both stories, even if only between the lines, is the solace to be found in nature: in the rhythm of one season’s end and another’s beginning, or the song of a meadowlark, or the stirring of wind across the gulf, or a sunset over the Point.

What I find most praiseworthy about “The Point” is its astonishingly hard-edged, precise and powerful and gripping and beautiful language. Look where, thrashing around in the depths of a cast net, “Yellow-finned choafers and brindled bull minnows vibrate.” I have no real idea what either of these creatures are, but I don’t need to, in order to recognize this as a beautiful sentence—not even, in my fevered reader’s mind, to be able to imagine that I can see those choafers and bull minnows. And here, also, from just below that: “Baitfish boil up out of...
the dark grasses, flecks of silver whirling on some underwater wind.” This, to me, is mythic stuff, seeming somehow Biblical.

And in “Life with Meadowlarks,” while language again is one of the generative forces (in a really fine story, how can it not be?)—“Senescent side-oats grammas, Western wheat-grasses, and buffalo grasses glinted softly with coppery-red to platinum-gold tones, while stringers of cottonwoods glowed yellow against a sapphire sky”—the strength I come away with from this story is that of a clarity of voice, a wholehearted giving-over of the self to one’s subject: a giving-over that is engaging, infectious, convincing. By story’s end, one of the great transformations of art has been achieved: it’s unlikely we’ll hear a meadowlark’s trill quite the same way again, without thinking of some of the larger issues presented in this essay and of the narrator’s love for this bird. And this miraculous transformation has been achieved not through any ranting or haranguing but through the author’s own steady and unique calm (but impassioned) voice and observations.

I’m an old-fashioned reader, desiring for the most part such time-honored and tested and orthodox structures such as Beginning, Middle, and End, and, nearly always, the presence or promise or at least hint of resolution and change. As well, I find myself paradoxically both comforted and made anticipatory by stories in which the germ or seed of the story is present in the very first sentence, or somewhere within that first paragraph, or, at the very latest, on the first page. In both of these stories, that desire is met.

With “The Point,” the heart, or essence, of the story is revealed to us at the end of the first paragraph: “I try to imagine myself elsewhere, far away, out of reach.” What follows hews true and elegant to this yearning: the narrator struggles to get out from under his maniacal uncle’s influence.

And in “Life with Meadowlarks,” the story’s truth and direction comes also in the last sentence of the first paragraph, even if indirectly, and symbolically: “The forecast had to be wrong.” Here the narrator is speaking at first simply of the weather—autumn’s end—but gradually we will see that fitting into the framework of this initial utterance will come her hopes, too, that the forecast for the downward trend of meadowlark habitat will also be incorrect.

In closing, I’d like to point out again that while these two stories are certainly most excellent, and excellent among the excellent, so too were all the stories in the workshop fine and strong and, best of all, important, which is to say, powerful. They touched us as readers. Why else read, or write, if not to touch?

Rick Bass began writing during lunch breaks on his job as a petroleum geologist. His latest works are a novel, Where the Sea Used to Be (1998), and a collection of essays, The Brown Dog of the Yaak (1999). Besides his fiction and nonfiction, Rick churns out a torrent of editorials and letters to congressmen in an attempt to preserve wild places. He lives in northwestern Montana’s Yaak Valley with his wife, Elizabeth, and their two daughters.
“IT MATTERS ABOUT THE AFTERBIRTH.”

Out of an untroubled summer sky, this. As always, there is no warning, no premonition, to prepare me for his words. I try to imagine myself elsewhere, far away, out of reach.

“There’s a whole lot in life that don’t matter.” He slaps both chest pockets. “Marjorie don’t matter. The first litter of girls don’t matter.” He shakes a filtered tip from the crushed pack. “Even Angie and this second bunch don’t matter a whole lot anymore.” The silver lighter clicks closed in confirmation. It is an ancient Zippo, overhauled and re-overhauled, his last adamant stand against the new plastic throw-aways. “But wherever that black blood’s poured, believe me, that matters.” He talks smoke, squinting against it. “Wherever the sack’s dropped....” Here my uncle’s voice congeals and he looks away. “Well, it matters, that’s all.”

He gets like this fishing and drinking.

I’m cradling the cold damp of a castnet, standing on his dock. Under bare fifteen-year-old feet, the planks toast at midday. To avoid his peripheral glance, my eyes burrow back into the seaweed. At intervals, baitfish boil up out of the dark grasses, flecks of silver whirling on some underwater wind. The net flies, cartwheels, slaps hard, and I begin reading the bottom through the weighted hem, gathered back in by slow tugs of my fist.

“Still not throwin’ a full spread.” he criticizes.

Yellow-finned choafer and brindled bull minnows vibrate in the wet heap I drop at his feet. The net has picked up more sand, I know, than it would have if I’d been more careful. I acknowledge as much to save him the trouble of saying it. He grunts his agreement. James’s tar-and-nicotined fingers rove knowingly, pitching good bait into the dirty white plastic pail and flinging bad bait sideways, off the dock.

“There’s where mine lays.” He pivots his squat to look across the dark crumpled green of the bay to Redfish Point. He momentarily loses his balance, almost falls, but stabilizes on his fingertips. “Your mama’s, too. You knew she was born there, didn’t you?”

He gets like this drinking and fishing.

INSIDE THE HOUSE, WHILE THE CAKE IS
baking, Angie and the girls are stringing ribbons and crepe for the party. A song of celebration, a keen, trembling Asian whine, gliding on the machete edge of pain and joy, comes to us during wind lulls.

Tonight, I know, James’s head will glow conspicuously white among the blue-black hair of his in-laws. Something invisible and airborne will pass, I know, between him and Angie’s oldest brother; the talk will first meander indifferently over mullet limits and net laws till it finds the sure, beaten path back to the war and the State’s concessions to immigrant Vietnamese fishermen—and my mother’s eye will flash me an urgent signal. Before we make it to our car, however, there will be straight-armed shoving, back and forth, and Dung Van Le’s cursing stutter (“You got-dan-muh-fuh! Eee shi, you son ’bish!”) and James thrusting the younger man backwards through the screen door, roaring over him, “Cuss me in good English or get the hell out of this house!” He will then evict them all, with Angie wailing in a back room. Their gifts will be kicked into the

https://scholarworks.umt.edu/camas/vol4/iss2/1

Camas Fall 2000 18
front yard, one by one, with James pausing occasionally to read a name tag, snorting, so he knows whose kindness he’s punting out into the dark. Angie will be forbidden to touch them, and rains will finally melt the wrapping and bloat the boxes and fray the ribbons, leaving socks and underwear and pinned-up polo shirts exposed for my uncle to back over in his Bronco. But all this is for later tonight.

Right now he wants me over on the point with him. We step into the Whaler. His tanned forearm, a tawny blur, jerks a growl from the motor. With little prelude, he twists the stiff throttle till the Evinrude screams, driving most bath-warm, I push along behind him. He holds his snake popper, a .25 Colt semi, above the salt spray.

On the beach, unmarked sand crunches underfoot. We slip behind a lone bayshore pine, sunk solid as a piling at the highest tidal line, its flaky brick-red root system exposed by surf. Past maroon mounds of beached, bleaching seaweed, among thick trees now, we find a suffocating blanket of heat draping our necks. Cicadas wind up and lazily wind down. There is a well-maintained sign prohibiting our presence. It drones on about Air Force regulations—cites the article and section number—and about restricted areas and visitor’s permits and the base commander’s written permission and fines or imprisonment for ignoring it. My uncle slaps the metal with an open palm and leaves it quivering.

A half-circle of oaks draws him. Shoulder-high stalks of bright green dog fennel mark a clearing, a perimeter of some kind. We step into dead center. James moves close behind me. I smell the outboard fuel on his arm and the Camels lacing his fruity breath, now reverent in the hush of the woods. He swivels me around, aiming instructively over my shoulder with his pistol. I fill in a house-shaped rectangle. There are foundational supports, giant gray Cypress slabs, each the circumference of a patio table.

James bends alongside me to pick up a shard of blue glass. He cups it loosely in hand, shakes it like dice: “Right here,” he says softly.
Then in a louder, tour-guide voice: “Down there’s where the Johnsons lived. Colored. But not blue-gums. No, good people, every last one. Rosco Johnson helped my daddy butcher a hawksbill turtle.” He pauses and again watches the scene, sees a gaff in the eye socket stretch the elastic neck till the ax hacks twice. Brown scaly head big as a schoolboy’s. The flippers, massive and horny, flailing long after death. A shell like a Viking warrior’s shield. Turtle steaks—breakfast, dinner, and supper—for a week. He has told me.

“And past that split pine was the Jennings’ place. Their oldest girl, name of Janie Pearl, went off to learn the every Christmas. And she always brought play-pretties to involuntarily and relaxes. “She visited her folks faithful every Christmas. And she always brought play-pretties to all the kids on the Point.”

Together, we dog-squat on this patch of land where, fifty-two years ago today, James Eugene King was born. He has told me. He must tell me again. I will myself away, far away, to a place where people read books and obey the law and resist the tyranny of blood.

A LULL IN THE ENDLESS MONOLOGUE catches me off guard and pins me to the present. Still we are dog-squatting on this patch of ground, his point of origin. James rises to see through the trees better and looks across the bay to the spot we stood on an hour earlier. I straighten my back to look with him. His pier is distant sticks now.

It occurs to me for the first time that his dock is a man-made structure, not a natural growth of the earth. From here the pilings and crossplanks seem an unfinished bridge. A quarter mile south, Dung Van Le’s boat is docked. He has stayed in harbor for Angie’s sake—for James’s birthday party. But all that is for later tonight.

James got Angie when her father died. Marjorie, my original aunt, had baked a pineapple upside-down cake, and my uncle had walked the bay front to old Vu’s pier and delivered it to the bereaved family. Their house was unairconditioned. It was July. Warmed by rings of candles unairconditioned. It was July. Warmed by rings of candles and garnished with herbs like a stringy brown turkey, old Vu had been laid out in the stifling living room on a hollow core door set on sawhorses. James had noticed Vu’s decorative shirtfront swelling and had tried to talk with some family members about calling in a funeral home for proper embalming. No one seemed to understand, though they nodded affirmatively and appreciatively. Angie was summoned. Angie was their only U.S. born, the only one who spoke anything like English. She tried to explain. She said her father had to stay that way until he opened, until he rup­
tured, until the soul was released. That way, he would remain in their house to guide them. Out of respect, my uncle had stayed on, eating funeral food, until Vu opened late on the night of the next day.

How things happened after that, he has never told me. I know that James paid to have all Angie’s teeth fixed and that my Aunt Marjorie pitched a big kitchen-knife-throwing fit about it. Soon after, I know, my aunt snatched her three daughters out of their summer waitressing jobs and moved back to Pennsylvania—an event my uncle always refers to as “the day the devil’s wife found her way home.” Not long afterwards, James had packed up Angie’s stuff and transferred it to his house. He officially withdrew her from high school. He sold his machine shop, paid off the house, and took early retirement.

That’s how he came to have Angie. That’s all I know. But I force myself to believe that, however it looks, my uncle did nothing wrong. His personal covenant against local meanness is my guarantee.

Far across the water, James’s two Amerasian girls are dragging the reluctant Airedale, legs stiff, all paws braked, out onto the pier. As they push him off the end, James takes a breath to shout something but reconsiders the distance.

“I bought that land there when I heard the government was movin’ in over here. I know the government.” He says this in the same way he talks about the Vietnam­ese, with the intimacy of a longtime enemy. “Once the government gets hold of somethin’, you ain’t never gettin’ it back—unless you take it by force.” He snorts: ‘More’n likely, they’ll turn around someday and give it to somebody else anyway. Like as not, to foreigners. For free.”

He is sounding out themes for tonight, testing their appeal, tuning up for when Dung Van Le boasts about his latest catch. James will sit silent for an instant with a slant appeal, tuning up for when Dung Van Le boasts about his latest catch. James will sit silent for an instant with a slant look. He will clear this throat and say to an empty room corner, “I reckon I’d come home with fish, too, if there was somebody in the State legislature to buy me a boat and take me by the hand and show me the right reefs.” This will be the negligible tinder he’ll start with, I now see. But he’s a master fire builder, my uncle. He’ll add dry shavings and straw, moving up to larger sticks of kindling, piece by piece, with deceptively soft breaths bringing Dung Van Le to a cozy blaze by which he can warm himself.

“I bought that land so I’d be close,” he explains to me. “So I could come over here anytime I like,” he goes on. “Sometimes…” He studies my face to see if I can be trusted. I try to look like a bad credit risk.

“Sometimes I come over at night. Angie thinks I’m out flounderin’ and I do gig one if I happen to run up on one.” The hand opens; he smiles down conspiratorially at the chip of blue glass he’s still holding.

“But I’m not fishin’. Not really. I tie off and come ashore and just sit on the ground.” His head wheels as if to another to see how it looks on the face of someone who might understand. “To tell you God’s truth, I guess I come over here to talk with the dead.”

He laughs like he’s heard a good joke. He has never told me this part before. But I know it will now become a permanent part of these talks, to be repeated with uncanny uniformity. Exhausted by catechisms, I dismiss my soul,
"YELLOW-FINNED CHOAFERS AND BRINDLED BULL MINNOWS VIBRATE IN THE WET HEAP I DROP AT MY UNCLE'S FEET."
urge it to wander, to find a world free of the overpowering pull of amniotic fluid and the despotism of place.

**My uncle is asking me about metal detectors**—do they really work—but something vaguely bothersome has become a grinding backdrop to his words.

James says he once buried an orange road grader, a toy that Janie Pearl, that ever-benevolent tattooed circus girl, had given him, under the old pier-and-beam house. But when he tried to dig it up again he couldn’t find it. It bothers him that I’m unimpressed. It had an adjustable blade, he stresses. He wonders if some of the tin frame might still be intact. They made toys to last back then. I’m opening my mouth to yawn an answer when that grinding background noise is spontaneously assigned a name: truck.

I stand in increments to see a windshield flash three hundred yards distant on a winding two-rut trail through the shadows. James rises to a wobbly half crouch alongside. Where the ruts emerge from a ti-ti thicket, a well-waxed patch of military blue, an Air Force vehicle with blocked, uniform yellow print on the side door panel, is lumbering, bumping, squeaking, surmounting the pine roots that break the surface of the twin white strips of sand. At a hundred yards, two pink faces beneath slanted berets materialize.

I begin a backwards, bent-at-the-waist retreat, but the metallic click of James’s Colt as he chambers a round freezes me.

I stand in increments to see a windshield flash three hundred yards distant on a winding two-rut trail through the shadows. James rises to a wobbly half crouch alongside. Where the ruts emerge from a ti-ti thicket, a well-waxed patch of military blue, an Air Force vehicle with blocked, uniform yellow print on the side door panel, is lumbering, bumping, squeaking, surmounting the pine roots that break the surface of the twin white strips of sand. At a hundred yards, two pink faces beneath slanted berets materialize.

I begin a backwards, bent-at-the-waist retreat, but the metallic click of James’s Colt as he chambers a round freezes me. He has risen to full height—exaggerated, heart-stopping height. The .25 is leveled over palmetto tips at the approaching truck. He steps sideways for a less obstructed aim and enters a sun patch. Prisms play over the pistol’s blued body, well-oiled with Three-in-One.

I watch, dumbly and passively accepting, as I will watch tonight at the party when James stands equally erect in the ruins of his screen door, holding back the limp, splintered wreckage for his guests to exit. My mother will reconfigure the overturned furniture by guesswork, since Angie will still be sealed away in the bedroom, crying. My mother will, with pencil-lined lips but with no upbraiding, dump the ashtrays, scrape away the half-consumed slices of birthday cake, and then wash the plates, coffee cups, and saucers. But maybe not, it now occurs to me. Maybe not if this shot is fired.

The butt is couched on the pad of his opened left palm. The two-handed grip on the snubby Colt is steady and unwavering. I am tensed for its tenor crack. The distance is now reasonable—maybe fifty yards—and the vehicle keeps coming. Clearly, we have not been seen despite James’s partial exposure. Involuntarily, I scan the occupants, examine the mustached faces with moving mouths, note the government-issue sunglasses, and anticipate with some dark inner stirring where the shot will strike. Later, I will be troubled, perhaps frightened, at how badly I want to see a frost patch instantly appear on that windshield. But the pistol’s snout lifts, almost in disdain.

“God bless America,” James says cheerily, apropos of nothing. Then, from some darker, fiercer current, “God damn the government.”

There’s hot broth in the pail when we’ve waded back and bellied over into the skiff. A swaying layer of minnows floats on top. He’s irritated about the dead bait, about why I didn’t know to sack a chunk of ice in plastic and drop it in the bucket before I left. The minnows’ eyes are fixed and milky. “My daddy would’a whipped me for a lot less,” he remarks with obvious enthusiasm. I do not respond.

James runs us to some grass flats where, standing on the bow, toes tensed for traction, he unfurls the castnet in perfect lariats. He will always throw better than I will. He has told me. He tells me again now.

Restocked, we anchor near a drop-off. There’s a
disintegrating shrimper here that James finds by lining up with distant transmission towers. Slipleads take our two treble-hooked choafers down deep. When I lift my rod tip, the struggle in the darkness below is telegraphed up to me. I take in one spool of line and the bale on my open-faced reel snaps closed.

The silence is all too brief before he starts again.

"You don’t understand me, do you?" my uncle asks. I want to answer—I feel, in fact, that I have an answer slowly rising within me—but the words lie stillborn on the back of my tongue.

"You can’t understand," he finally continues, "because they sent your afterbirth up the hospital incinerator. Your dust may be scattered over three states." He is studying my profile, awaiting signs of comprehension. "Or maybe they shipped it off as medical waste. How could you understand?" He looks away, irritable in his aloneness. "Might have been dumped at sea off a trash barge." He goes quiet. This prospect seems more disturbing to him than the other. He sulks, examining the winding on his rod eyelets.

All this, too, I suspect, will somehow figure in the birthday party. When, uncannily accenting all the wrong syllables, Dung Van Le protests tonight that he never wanted to come to America, that he was just a kid and was more or less forced by the war to emigrate, James will rise, move too close, insert a finger in the boy’s air-space, and probe for the quick: "But you’re all grown up now, ain’t you? So why don’t you just follow your um-belly-cord back home?" This, I now see, is where the first shove will come tonight.

Hours later, when we’ve iced two good grouper and a smaller, illegal one, when the sun is smeared red behind the Point, when he has chewed on this thing and come up with something he feels a fifteen-year-old can maybe digest, he makes a concession.

"Course, I ‘speck you’ll be freer than me. And that’s worth a lot." He seems genuinely conciliatory. "You won’t care where you come from—just where you’re headed." I glance at him. "On to better things," he adds, with a flourish of his hand and a mock theatrical tone. He waits for my look of gratitude. "You won’t have to sit over yonder in the woods at night babblin’ to the dead and wonderin’ why the hell you keep comin’ when nobody talks back."

Something is prowling my bait; I feel the minnow’s sudden panic at the end of its tether. I tense and sit up. My uncle grins at me, expecting appreciation.

"That’s worth a lot, ain’t it?" The relief in his voice is evident. "Well, ain’t it?"

I’m alive only to monofilament now. I will tell him one day when I can.

Steve Weathers is a native of northern Florida, the regional setting of this piece of short fiction. He holds a Ph.D. in Creative Writing from Florida State University (1999) and currently teaches English at Abilene Christian University in West Texas.
by
Cynthia Porter Melcher
Life with Meadowlarks

Autumn Affairs

October on the shortgrass prairie charms away my guard and massages my senses. I feel that summer glare finally relax to an amber warmth, which lingers across the landscape all morning like the afterglow of a pleasant dream. The light glints off senescent grasses in coppery-red to platinum tones, and it teases the rabbitbrush flowers into pulsing like saffron stars in a sapphire sky. Even at noon, the sun’s low angle exaggerates every fall color and complicates the terrain with long shadows. Despite the chilly nights, temperatures recover quickly, restoring the air’s redolence. Scarcely a breeze rises to stir the grasses or tickle the hairs on my skin.

The 12-acre fragment of prairie that we call home lies along Rocky Ridge—a lumpy seam between northern Colorado’s High Plains and the Rocky Mountains. We leave most of our land to the grassland creatures, but right around the house we cultivate a few small gardens, enough to yield bushels of grasshoppers each summer. The gardens are just our excuse to be out on the land. So this morning we wander out to our veggie plot where I bend to pull tomato plants—stripped in August by hornworms, blackened by frost in September, then toasted in the hot weeks that followed. I carry their skeletons to the compost bin while my husband, Ken, turns the soil.

As we putter, prairie music shimmers like heat waves above the bobbing spikes of blue grama grass. The crickets have long since quit their nighttime serenades, but the radiant warmth of October days seduces them into persisting with lively, diurnal chirpings. Great-daddy grasshoppers snap their wings in territorial dances, and I can hear the momma hoppers—bulging abdomens urging them on—scrambling through the grasses as they seek the perfect places to stash their eggs. Now and then, Western Meadowlarks absent-mindedly leak out a few songs, like someone quietly humming as she gardens. We’re all busy ignoring the frosty nights, forgetting the dense-gray bundles that rolled through in September spitting flurries of warning.

Rocky Ridge is really more a gentle rise than a ridge, but it gives us spacious views in every direction. To the southwest, we can peer down to a broad floodplain—the footprint of torrents that once drained away a wetter, colder climate. Now, like tears dribbling down a cheek, the Cache la Poudre River barely threads together a few shallow pools across that floodplain. Gazing to the east and north, we see the land slope away toward Nebraska and the Laramie Plain of Wyoming. Naturally, the Rockies dominate our western view, but we feel their effects more than we see them. In fact, the shortgrass prairie owes its existence to those mountains. They snatch from the clouds almost every drop of moisture that escapes inland from the Pacific, casting a monolithic rain shadow eastward to the Missouri River. They’re also notorious for accelerating our westerly breezes to hurricane force. In effect, the Rockies necessitate a spare, shortgrass way of life on the plains.

Despite this region’s natural history as a semiarid desert, our views also fill with sprawling green from spring through fall. We see ditches, outlined with trees, diverting water everywhere. North of our house, in a basin where bison might have wallowed not long ago, sits Kluver Reservoir in its own ring of green. Kluver draws from the Poudre via Larimer County Ditch. It exists only to fill center-pivot irrigators that rain on water-loving crops forced to grow here. We also see green where the native shortgrasses—dormant-yellow most of the year—have been scraped away and replaced by exotic sods that cannot be weaned from the Poudre. Amidst the largest patch of green grows Fort Collins, where people now swarm under an expanding pall of smog, where prairie dogs are shoved out by the blade of development. Outside Fort Collins, we see the winds of industrial agriculture eroding the High Plains. And, in my core, rage, guilt, and hopelessness are building a landscape of anxiety and loss. Sometimes the only things that can calm me down and restore my spirit are the light of prairie music and the life-rhythms of grassland birds.

Autumn in northeastern Colorado continues unfolding as a dishonest affair between Summer and Winter. At first they flirted, modestly, then they recoiled and stabbed at each other with cold stares. Finally, they gave in to a prolonged, torrid roll in the grass. But yesterday at dusk, winter put an end to it with a muscular wind that blew over the mountains and out across the plains. It roared all night, and as we look out this morning, we see the grassland’s patchwork of texture and color transformed to a white barren. Clumps of
rabbitbrush still peak above the monotony like islands in a frozen sea, but their clusters of late-blooming gold now lie toppled under burdens of snow.

As the wind pushes harder, I see drifts of snow deepen and sharpen in the lee of everything not yet buried—the house too. It trembles as another gust howls at us, sending a loose gutter into reedy vibrations and tugging creaks from the roof joists. In the brief respite when the wind slows to inhale again, I can hear backwashings of snow hiss as they slide along the outside walls. I stand on the inside, tucked safely behind two layers of glass, but as this window protects me from the blizzard, it also insulates me from the land I love. I can’t believe that just yesterday I reveled out there in its basket of ripe gold.

By late October, most of our migratory birds have left Rocky Ridge. So I don’t know why the Western Meadowlarks tarry so long. They’re not adapted to hibernate beneath winter. They have poor equipment for chiseling insects from frozen ground or cracking open hard little seeds. And although their prairie-colored plumage hides them well in summer, they cannot dissolve against backgrounds of snow. So even they must finally seek alternative places to wait out the winter. But what if this blizzard has caught them off guard, leaving them to stare hungrily across the pallid emptiness? I scan the space that had been defined since April by a throng of prairie beings, but I see no signs of life.

As the snow burns a hole in my sight, I turn my gaze inward and wonder about Lewis and Clark. When they explored the West and described for science all the new bird species they encountered, how could they have failed to include the Western Meadowlark? Lewis only noted in his journal that he often observed “a kind of larke,” which “much resembled” *Sturnella magna*—the Eastern Meadowlark he knew from tallgrass lands east of the Missouri River. While I agree that the extra brush of yellow on the Western’s cheek and the Eastern’s slightly darker tail make them almost impossible to differentiate on plumage alone, their voices are as distinct as the arid West and the humid East. Lewis did acknowledge that the western bird’s “note” sounded “considerably” different, but apparently he passed it off as a mere colloquialism of *Sturnella magna*.

Forty years passed before John Audubon retraced Lewis and Clark’s route and finally raised the Western Meadowlark from obscurity. To John Bell, Audubon’s expedition naturalist, the vocal differences between Western and Eastern meadowlarks were so significant he never imagined that they represented one species. When Audubon published his scientific account of the Western Meadowlark, he commemorated Lewis and Clark’s oversight by giving it the name *Sturnella neglecta*.

Ironically, *Sturnella neglecta* soon perched high on a center pivot of dispute. Apparently, a handful of ornithologists objected to classifying the western-ranging meadowlark as a full-fledged species, thus dubbing it *Sturnella magna neglecta*. But *Sturnella neglecta* had the majority vote and held fast to the status it deserved. Today, field guides give both meadowlark species their own entries, and six western states have selected the Western Meadowlark as their state bird. In fact, Arthur Bent, who authored accounts of all North America’s grassland birds, described the Western Meadowlark’s song as “the very spirit of the boundless prairie.” As my gaze turns outward again across Rocky Ridge, I try to imagine what it was like to know a boundless prairie, teeming with Western Meadowlarks.

**Winter Strategies**

The meadowlarks are gone, and I have to trust that they were more prepared for winter than I was. Throughout the fall, I had seen their urges to claim rights over this land and raise young slowly give way to Zugdisposition—the compulsion to lay on fat for lean times ahead. Instead of swelling their sunflower-yellow breasts and broadcasting lust, they had stripped down to the gaunt, cryptic ways required for winter survival. They crept along the ground, exposing only their dorsal streaks of brown, white, and black. They muted their voices, and I have no doubt that their wings already hummed with Zugaktivität—the directional restlessness that would induce migration and guide them to their wintering grounds. The October blizzard must finally have sent them on their way.

I try whittling away at this dark season by indulging my questions about meadowlark life. Where do they go to wait out the winter? Do they make a straight shot for it or do they dilly-dally along the way? They follow them without maps? If they rest en route, which stops do they use? Do they migrate the next spring along different paths? How many times will they return to nest in one lifetime, and how are they likely to die?

Wings and distance. They conspire to make Aves one of the greatest classes of biological mystery. Often, what little we learn comes from bits of data scavenged from banded birds. Once, as a bander’s assistant, I untangled birds from the mist nets used to capture them, then moistened and parted their head feathers to reveal the translucent skin and underlying bone. In young birds,
Then, if a bird is “recaptured” (alive) or “recovered” (dead), the new data are assimilated, and there we have a story. Thinking that such stories might answer my questions, I request from Patuxent any band-return data they have for Western Meadowlarks. From the printout I receive, I learn that, in mid-August 1942, a meadowlark banded two summers earlier near Wainwright, Alberta, turned up dead in northern Texas. A meadowlark banded one January in southwestern British Columbia survived the winter there, only to succumb the following June in the same area. One banded in eastern Colorado lived at least five years until it died there of unknown causes. And a fourth meadowlark, banded during winter in Arizona, met its demise five months later under the wheels of a car in Wyoming.

The data only fuel more questions. Even if Alberta winters cannot be survived, why migrate all the way to Texas, where death simply takes another shape? Would the Alberta bird have beaten mortality longer by seeking winter quarters here? And what drove it to leave Canada long before the autumn equinox? If Alberta meadowlarks flee from winter, I wonder why British Columbian meadowlarks stick it out. In eastern Colorado, where winter’s progress stalls repeatedly, is it better to sit tight, gambling on a non-stop migration. It was the master-bander’s job to fasten a numbered ID band around each right leg, but the pleasure of releasing those birds was mine.

All statistics—the birds’ ages, condition, measurements, and band IDs—go to Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Maryland.

That farmers suspect them of stealing recently planted crop seeds. But if the ground is soft enough to dig for seed, wouldn’t it also yield crop-loving insects, by far the meadowlark’s preferred food? Perhaps some people simply seek easy yellow targets for shooting practice. Although no meadowlark shootings have been reported since 1956, I’m not sure why. Few meadowlarks have been banded in recent decades, which means fewer bands are out there to recover. But I try to imagine that the shooters have learned something about meadowlarks, and now aim to protect their avian friends.

To find prey, meadowlarks walk along the ground of open areas, snatching beetles from the soil and plucking flies from the undersides of leaves. They yank spiders from their webs and work the egg-beds of crickets. I know they will deviate from this diet to forage on soft-hulled seeds, but only when faced with few other choices. And if winter snows bury even the alternatives, meadowlarks must move on. But where?

The first place I search is the published data of Christmas Bird Counts (CBCs). In 1900, ornithologist Frank Chapman introduced the CBC idea to protest a popular tradition that entailed people competing on Christmas day to see who could shoot the most birds. Instead, Chapman gathered 27 conservation-minded souls to spend Christmas day counting every live bird they could find. Soon, Chapman’s celebration of birds displaced the old tradition of slaughter entirely, and now every Christmas season about 50 thousand birdwatchers participate in more than 1,800 CBCs across the Americas. The CBC data now arm us with additional knowledge about birds, such as which of their winter retreats are most important, how their populations are faring, and where they may be gaining—or losing—ground. In fact, rates of decline calculated from CBC and other long-term data tell me that some grassland species may go the way of bison and black-footed ferrets in my lifetime.

I discover from the CBC data that participants tally the greatest number of Western Meadowlarks in Texas, Oklahoma, western Kansas, and central California. In those places—grasslands abundant with weeds and stubble fields—meadowlarks apparently find bounties of soft-hulled seeds and waste grains, which can sustain them when prey disappear. The data also implicate cold as an ecological wall that limits their winter distribution. They simply do not stay where temperatures loiter below 10 degrees Fahrenheit. That would explain why few, if any, winter in the northern prairies, and I surmise that Pacific-warmed air buffers winter in southern British Columbia.

But even far south of the 10-degree line, life becomes precarious if big snowstorms wander off course, burying all food supplies in their wakes. On December 17, 1967, the Hubbards (two devoted ornithologists)
were traveling along Highway 26 in southwestern New Mexico when they witnessed meadowlarks driven to the edge. Near-blizzard conditions had persisted for three days, covering the ground with about eight inches of snow and dangling temperatures cruelly just above the teens. As the Hubbards plowed along, they saw many dead birds on the road—ducks, larks, buntings, and meadowlarks. Presumably, these ground-feeders had sought any bare area in hopes of finding food. The Hubbards also found live meadowlarks feeding on the carcasses. They had collected and examined a few of the dead meadowlarks and found in their crops the remains of Mourning Doves.

By January, the panacea of snooping through data wears off, and the angst of my own Zugaktivität makes me edgy. I decide to gather a group of people that share the sensibilities of Frank Chapman, and migrate south to find grassland birds. We knew that many meadowlarks overwinter in northern Mexico, where they may face additional threats not yet understood. We go to act out against the wind. Why some meadowlarks winter there when others come to Mexico mystifies me as much as their ability to return—months later—to the same spots where they hatched into this world. Maybe the winter-hardy birds in Colorado had come from the Canadian prairies, migrating over the 10-degree hurdle to find little meadowlark refuges replete with what they needed to get through to spring. Or maybe they were year-round residents, betting on a mild winter. Knowing that the birds figure it out should be all the reassurance I need to see me through, but I worry that a time will come when no meadowlarks return to our grassland.

Back home again, this unyellow season. The land waits. I watch, hoping to see a meadowlark that seems to know Rocky Ridge as no refugee could know it. Except for the wind, nothing breathes out there. The meadowlarks' singing posts are vacant and the embers of their songs lie dormant under the matted grasses. My ears lapse into a fitful hibernation, and I drift in and out of prairie-summer dreams, where the familiar voices of Rocky Ridge's meadowlarks waft over me.

Tentatively into Spring

I'm sitting in front of my computer, wrapped in a blanket of thought, when something arouses my groggy ears. Could it be? It's still late February, and I just read in a thesis by Shirley Creighton that local Western Meadowlarks begin returning to their territories in early March. But I crank open a window anyway, and then hear him for sure. I quickly scan the fenceline, and there he is, on the very post where meadowlarks perch all summer. He rambles on tentatively, apparently lacking the confidence of an experienced songster. Or is he just warming up, one note at a time, like a maestro-pianist playing scales? In the same way I knew how to find him, I also sense he knows this place, has staked time between work, family, and all the other responsibilities of their breeding season. The first thing she discovered was that the
males do a bit of commuting in early spring before insect populations recover. During the mornings, she found them jousting for turf, but then they vanished until late afternoon. To determine where they went, Creighton followed a few of them to nearby stockyards, where they fed peacefully among other males on half-digested grains. She surmised that off-territory truces allowed them to avoid starvation, and her discovery helps me to picture the bird I heard this morning making the most of neighboring feedlots.

Spring finally stumbles in, wobbly as a newborn lamb, and with it comes flocks of female meadowlarks. Where have they been? And why do they segregate themselves from the males? I sift through what I learned during my own graduate studies in ornithology, and I’m tempted to hypothesize: the females trek further to find more food, which, in turn, stokes them into better breeding condition than they could achieve on the local food supplies. But the males—are they more likely to pass on their genes by wintering nearby and being on hand to chase off the early rivals appearing from elsewhere? If so, maybe the roost of meadowlarks I once found on that local CBC represented the male contingent of Rocky Ridge’s breeders.

In eastern Colorado, most of our snow comes in early spring, verifying the truth of T.S. Eliot’s poem that declares, “April is the cruellest month.” Birds flocking from their winter havens to the growing warmth may be snuffed by a giant, spring “upslope.” As these storms churn counterclockwise over the Southwest, they scoop loads of moisture from the Gulf of Mexico and then fling it at the eastern flanks of the Southern Rockies. If the Gulf air collides with a mass of Arctic air, it may dump feet of snow on us. So of course, an upslope prowls in on April Fool’s Day and threatens the birds already here. I know that some might perish—Nature’s trick for keeping populations even. But as the snow falls, I worry that it will crush populations of birds already hit by the cyclone of human enterprise.

Fortunately, the snowstorm does not amount to much and passes quickly. But on its heels comes a brutal windstorm. One hundred mile-per-hour gusts tear at the landscape. The few inches of snow sublime in no time, and soil parched by winter drought, then tilled for planting, swirls up and away from local farm fields in great sepia-colored sheets. As the wind wails on, I see no meadowlarks at all. Where have they gone to wait this one out? (Probably not a denuded stockyard.) Perhaps they’re hunkered among the bunch grasses or in the mitigating lee of a shrub, waiting for the reprieve that finally comes late this afternoon. As soon as the wind subsides, a meadowlark pops onto a fencepost and sings with all he has. I also celebrated the end of that one.

So once again, the meadowlarks have defied the odds and continue reclaiming the remnants of their breeding range. In a detailed account, meadowlark expert Wesley Lanyon explained that Western Meadowlarks avoid nesting where annual rainfall exceeds 24 inches and supplants the shortgrasses with tall ones. Therefore, they range from the Mexican Plateau to the Canadian prairies, from the Mississippi to the Pacific, and even in the alpine of western mountains. But as I study the range maps for both meadowlark species, I see that they overlap considerably in a zone of mid-height grasses. I also note that Westerns insinuate themselves among Easterns in southern Ontario, and in northern Mexico I know Easterns juxtapose themselves with Westerns.

But no matter where they settle, the meadowlarks nonetheless sort themselves out. Westerns go for drier sites, leaving the mesic areas to their eastern cousins. And where they come in contact, the males will defend their territories against either species. Due to their differences, Westerns and Easterns apparently interbreed only in desperation—when the females find a shortage of males among their own kind. Even then, the rare hybrid cannot produce fertile young, thus preserving the distinct lineages that separate the species. Here on Rocky Ridge, the interbreeding issue is probably moot, because Eastern Meadowlarks at this latitude limit their westward distribution to the Colorado/Nebraska border... except for the odd two or three that occasionally nest four miles west of here!

The Gifts of Summer

May 12. My birthday, and I cherish the gift of birdsong that rekindles life on the prairie. All around Rocky Ridge, the male meadowlarks are defining space and initiating their breeding rituals. They’re driven to defend acres of land and pour energy into chasing away intruder males. And all this aggression is as much about lust as it is about securing resources for future offspring. When I see a female meadowlark finally arrive on the territory outside my study window, the resident attempts to win her over by popping right in front of her, then strutting around with his bill pointed straight up and his chest puffed out. This posturing shows off the black V that adorns his handsome yellow breast. To show off even more of his credentials, the male flicks his wings and tail and calls one chert after another. Then he leaps into the air and beats his wings in a little spasm of macho behavior known as the “jump-flight.”

The female appears unimpressed with all this wooing; and embarks on a sort of inspection tour by eating her way through the male’s territory. As she feeds, he follows, nonchalantly pretending to eat as if his pantry had no limits. Their so-called “courtship feeding” is a sort of dinner date, during which she also checks out his offering of nest sites. The accompanying discussion entails her rattle responses to his constant cherts. Eventually, she nears the territory boundary, and the male zooms up to a fencepost, where he sings vigorously and displays more of his magnificence, hoping that she will stay. (I can’t help but imagine him promising to call her in the morning.)

Because she still hasn’t responded, he finally unveils an aerial dance and his most complex song.
Hangin' with a Hot Shot

an interview with Chad Howard, member of the Lolo National Forest Hotshots Wildland Firefighting Crew

interview by David Freiberg

D.F. Tell me about your crew.

C.H. I work for the U.S. Forest Service, Lolo National Forest as a member of the Lolo Hotshots Wildland Firefighting Crew. My crew calls me “Spaz” because I like to maintain a high level of energy ... it makes the job easier. Most of my time on the Hotshot crew has been as a digger. I am usually in the digging line with a small shovel and a picking tool called a combie pounding fireline up mountains. I am also fourth saw, which means I am a staff sawyer. There are usually four saw teams within a Hotshot crew, two people to a team.

D.F. How many fires was your crew on this year?

C.H. We were on 30-plus fires this year. Amazing numbers. A lot of them were small ones that we corralled before they got big, but we were on a fair number of big ones, too, much more than a typical year.

D.F. Is anything still burning around Montana?

C.H. Nothing is burning any more. Right now we are doing directional falling for rehab purposes. It’s like creating little dams to help stop erosion in burned out areas. There is nothing left but ash, nothing to stop rain from washing it into stream systems and killing fish. We’re dropping trees for trout and salmon.

D.F. How is a Hotshot crew organized?

C.H. Type-1 crews are Smokejumpers, helitack, rappel crews and Hotshots. Type 1 crews get more training, more classes. There are 20 firefighters on a Hotshot crew. At least 17 people on a crew have to have two years firefighting experience in order for it to be called a Hotshot crew. The further up you get in the hierarchy of a Hotshot crew, the more you get away from swinging a tool. The higher-ups are looking at fire, looking at weather and what was going on the day before and what has happened in the past in this area. Relative humidities, weather reports ... and they’re watching mainly what the fire is doing. Is it torching? Was it torching at this time yesterday?

D.F. How important is safety in firefighting?

C.H. I don’t like to go into an unsafe environment. We never get into a situation if we don’t have an escape route. If it is not safe, we’re not going. Every individual on the team has the right to say, “No. I am not going in.” We always establish safety zones and escape routes. Sometimes you just have to fall back and watch a fire for a day.

D.F. Were you in any dangerous or exciting situations this summer?

C.H. One day we were digging line trying to tie into this ridge. We never made it there. At 3 o’clock in the afternoon the fire activity really started picking up. It started spotting across the fireline and it kept getting worse. Besides the main fire, there was fire below us as well as above us. All of a sudden there was this big wind shift. The whole smoke column drifted over the top of us, and debris and burned material started raining on us. Right after that happened we got the call to go to our escape routes and safety zones. I saw three team members below, so I yelled, “Hey, what’s up?” They shouted back, “Move it! Move it now! The fire is parallel with us and we are hauling out of here. Get the fuck down here right now!” As a crew, we moved together out of...
there. The whole fire was spotting and running toward where
we just were standing.

D.F. Were there any other extraordinary events this season?

C.H. Yes, we were in Superior [Montana] on a crazy
day. Our assignment was to dig line a long way. We were
digging horizontal to the fire, putting in what is called an
underslung line. It didn’t hold because rolling material from
the fire above kept crossing over the line. Then it started a
fire below and began to burn up toward us.

Later on that day a falling snag hit me. The fire had
burned the understory off and all the root structures had been
burned out. One of the crew leaned against the tree and it
began to fall. I was standing below it when it came down and
it clocked me in the head. The next thing I knew I
was sitting in the duff. I guess it was like taking a
really good punch in the head. It could have been
a lot worse: there were two firefighters seriously
injured by falling snags on the Monture/Spread
Ridge fire.

D.F. Why did you
decide to become a
firefighter?

C.H. For me, it is
about having respect and
trust in your supervisors and your teammates. A lot of it is
also about endurance. It’s about the ability to do the job and
complete the mission. And it is about being ready when it’s
time to go. It is a mental and physical challenge when you
are on a real fire and it’s moving. Fire, in itself, is what attrac-
ts me ... the sound it makes, what it does and the way it
reacts ... it is like a living thing, like a beast. It gets very
intense at times.

D.F. How would you characterize this year’s fire sea-
son in comparison to others?

C.H. This was the worst fire season since maybe 1910.
Any forested area that hadn’t burned in a long time and needed
to burn, given a source of ignition, just went up. Often, by
the time resources could get to the fire, it was already really
going. The fuels have just been growing and growing. We
have been actively suppressing fires now for about 90 years.
Since we started this, all the fuels that carry big fires have
been growing. The more we take away from natural fire, the
more outrageous these fires are going to be. There is so much
more out there in Montana that hasn’t burned, that wants to
burn, that needs to burn. A healthy forest is clear of all that
understory. It should be open in the forest but when it gets
that overgrown with shrubs and other understory, of course
the fires are going to rip like they did. If you build your house
in those areas, we may not be able to protect it.

D.F. Any predictions about next year?

C.H. I think we are going to see the same thing next
year. The fuels are still out there. If we have an average win-
ter, relative humidities are still going to be low in the heavy
fuel types. Unfortunately, there is going to be enough fire in
the future to keep us go-
ing for a long time. Our
services will be needed
and we are going to be
here to do the job as best
we can. This job is truly
one of the most difficult
things I have ever done
both mentally and physi-
cally. There are so many
factors in firefighting,
including dealing with
twenty other people all
the time. We get to know
everything about each
other. All we do is camp
and work and eat and
sleep and shit, and
sometimes laugh. We do that too. And we do it over and over
and over until we get into a mindframe where it is just beau-
tiful. It makes us strong to know that we go into places other
people can’t. We are very confident as a team.

Join Scott Russell Sanders and 14 other writers
for a nationally acclaimed writing workshop.

Environmental
Writing
May 30 - June 4, 2001
Institute
At the Flett Wildlife Refuge in Western Montana’s
Bitterroot Valley.

For application and manuscript information,
please contact Don Snow:
The University of Montana EVST Missoula, MT 59812
(406) 243-2904 dsnow@bigsky.net
www.umt.edu/ewi/EWIPAGE.HTM
Our Garden

I tear through old roots
as I do every year. I lift up
the wilted vines and want them to live.
I think of my wife and her red bandanna,
the salted sweat rings around her armpits.
The compost is heavy this year
as I heft it over autumn bulbs.

Once, last week, I reached backwards
for her hand with the root.
Not looking, but feeling her. I was surprised
at the hardness of the ground as I fell.

There were late blooms on our porch
earlier this summer. One bouquet for each year
of our life together. The cells were weeds
in her stomach. The more love I gave,
the more she withered in their thick shadow.
Her chore was planting
borders of marigolds and snow peas.
Her trowel has worn to her left hand.
When she succumbed to her stomach
I found phantom pain in my chest—
Her gloves are tight on my wrists.

The smell of steaks, potatoes with butter,
carrots and boiled cabbage linger long in each row.
I know this garden. I know her in every row.
The blade of the hoe cuts deep and I’ve stared long
at the bits of eggshell and garbage, missing her.

I know her in detail.
Each tuber knows the life that courses
from soil to water. My wife knew
that the work was hard and her knees bent
under her. Her hair dragged in the mud
and swayed black arcs on her cheeks.

When I am penitent under the slated light
of sun and pine, I look for her gold studs
she lost twelve years ago. I find only weak stalks
of our son’s winter wheat. No one can mine
the tears that dredge this years crop.

When the cancer spread to her hips
she smiled and felt worth the pain. Every year
until the end, I knew the contours
that faded under her dress, the disappearing curves,
the fidgety movements as she busied over her seeds.
I know every inch of this garden, the balsamroot
on the hills, the crows on our porch, that I love her;
I didn’t know how to help her pain.

When I turn now and look at the piled rows of dirt,
there are the marks of two ancient lovers
struggling over mountains of frozen soil.
I have worked hard today. I know
because earth is stuck in my nails.
Tomorrow I will take these old hands and work more.
I will turn this soil,
I will rake our garden,
I will love my wife.

*Dave Tirrell*
A Journey North
One Woman’s Story of Hiking the Appalachian Trail
by Adrienne Hall, Appalachian Mountain Club Books, 2000

A Journey North is Adrienne Hall’s third book. As is evident from the other books she has written, Backpacking: A Woman’s Guide and The Essential Backpacker, Hall has spent a significant amount of time walking with heavy things on her back. Pretend that this book has a backbone. Not a spine—all her books have those. This book’s backbone is Adrienne and her boyfriend Craig’s six-month hike from Georgia to Maine. Now pretend that this book has ribs. The ribs are all the things that are attached to the backbone but have nothing to do with hiking north. This book’s ribs include the story of how the Appalachian Trail came into being; accounts of the work being done to protect and maintain the trail; technology, wilderness, and outdoor recreation; and ruminations on a failed attempt to reintroduce wolves to Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

A book that has a backbone and ribs is pretty much a torso. And in most every living torso, there is a heart. At the heart of this book is a love story about two people who go for a walk and get engaged, a walk that happens to include 2,159 miles, 13 states, snow, mountains, mosquitoes and lots of Pop Tarts.

A Journey North is at its best when Hall writes about her relationship with Craig leading up to the engagement. “Craig and I went about our business as if we were living in our own little through-hiking bubble. We laughed at our inside jokes, laughed at the unique private language we had developed on the trail, and continued our bizarre rituals like talking for our sleeping mattresses and spoons.” She goes on: “One of our more serious rituals, though, was swapping journals before bed. Somewhere in Virginia we got in the habit of writing little notes to each other at the end of our entries. We’d write things like, ‘I love you,’ or ‘Good night,’ or ‘Craig has the nicest smile I’ve ever seen; sometimes it’s all that keeps me going.’” It was at the end of one of her journal entries that Craig wrote, “I want to spend the rest of my life with Raindrop” (When you hike the Appalachian Trail, you are supposed to assume a trail name. Craig’s was “Hibird”). Two days later, he proposed to her at the top of Saddleback Mountain in Maine. “We kissed up there and did a couple of horrahs,” she writes, “but then we kept walking, with enormous smiles, of course, but it was the same as every day for the last 150 days. We looked at each other every now and then to make sure we understood what had just happened.” It’s the kind of stuff that just makes you feel good.

There is a part of me that wishes that the characters of Adrienne and Craig were featured even more prominently in the book because, while the portions that branch away from the trail—the “ribs”—are full of interesting detail, they do represent a certain lack of focus. I admire Hall’s impulse to not confine her subject to only the day-to-day details. But I miss Craig and Adrienne in the midst of sections on Fee-Demos or encroaching development. These are important issues to users of the Appalachian Trail, indeed to anyone who likes trees and rocks and other outside things, but they are presented in a somewhat incongruous and momentum-halting way. Part of this, I think, has to do with Hall’s diplomacy. For example, when she writes about the gift shopping, minivan-driving tourists with whom she and Craig are forced to share the summit of Mount Washington, she softens her indictment by ending the section with: “At least people were getting out and appreciating the land in their own capacity.” She uses a similar tone to report on other issues that she obviously cares deeply about, but she is unwilling, in this book at least, to come right out and say things like “Get off my mountain you bastards!”

I am about Adrienne’s age and I am recently married. People of our generation are at the point where the early batch is starting to get hitched. Last summer I went to California for two weddings, missed another, and will be heading back for one more this Christmas. Here is something I have noticed: As soon as you tell someone that you are newly engaged, they want to know “how it happened,” and it better be creative and romantic and unique, or whoever did the asking failed. This led to a certain amount of anxiety for me when I was to ask my then-girlfriend to marry me. I wasn’t worried that she’d say no, I was worried that whatever I did to ask wouldn’t make a good enough story. And while my proposal may not have been the ultimate in creativity or romance, it worked because I am now married. This book, though, is the epitome of “how we got engaged” stories.
**Living in the Runaway West:**
*Partisan Views from Writers on the Range*

Compiled by the editors of High Country News, Fulcrum Publishing, 2000

Those of us who live in and love the West take pride in our region’s patchwork of cultures and ideas. So when in his essay, “A Newcomer’s Old Story,” Coloradian Paul Larmer asks, “How can the West accommodate so many newcomers without losing its identity?” my first response was: When in the past 200 years has the American West ever had a stable identity? But Larmer, an editor of the environmental news journal High Country News, only affirms the fact that a growing diversity is what defines our region. It’s a reality that both challenges and inspires us.

The editors of High Country News selected the essays in this book from the journal’s syndicated column “Writers on the Range,” which gives voice to regional concerns through brief, personal narratives. *Living in the Runaway West* includes the views of more than 50 environmentalists, ranchers, scholars, politicians, and journalists. Among the contributors, readers will recognize the names of a few of our better-known spokespersons, and possibly a friend or neighbor who lives up the road. The views expressed are not unanimous; they convey the complexity of current regional issues. Within this polyphony of opinions, histories, and unabashed polemics lies the charm of *Living in the Runaway West*.

The authors explore topics that reflect their diversity. However, they share a common concern for what can be termed the “Western identity crisis.” Contradictions abound in the modern-day American West, and the compelling mythologies on which so many of us were raised now ring hollow. Gone are the wide-ranging cowboys, the boundless herds of bison, the purple sagebrush steppes. In today’s wiser West, we learn about an “Iron Horse Rodeo” from John Clayton, in which “outlaw bikers” are welcomed as economic development by a small mountain town. We read river guide Brad Dimock’s account of how Grand Canyon river runs have evolved into “the predictable and comfortable ‘wilderness experience’” for a new breed of courageous tourist. Their essays remind us that today’s Western American Dream consists, more often than not, of capitalizing on those malleable mythologies so that they may best serve the almighty American dollar.

The honesty of these reflections is tempered by the authors’ sense of humor. But the humor is tinged with irony and a pervading wistfulness. These writers love their land, and they are well aware of the profound changes to which their very presence has contributed. Susan Ewing attempts to explain some of these motives; she goes so far as to venture a tentative apology for the modern blight of Montanan suburban sprawl in “My Beautiful Ranchette.” Stephen Lyons, in “Lost in God’s Country,” offers up a more direct indictment: his effort to pinpoint the “dysfunctional” qualities of his home state of Idaho calls to the carpet the state decision-makers, with whom he charges a failure to embrace America’s healthy, growing multiculturalism. Readers who might take exception with his view are still left with much to ponder. *Living in the Runaway West* includes such a broad spectrum of views that it can hardly be accused of having an agenda, unless that agenda is to cause its readers to rethink their comfortable, knee-jerk prejudices and assumptions. As Susan Zakin muses in “Grazing: The Hard Facts,” “Who’s the David and who’s the Goliath? Sometimes it’s confusing out here in the New West.”

These essays are quick reads. But they raise challenging questions that preclude simple answers. Some of the more thought-provoking pieces in the collection were, God help me, written by politicians. Dan Kemmis, former mayor of Missoula, Montana and now director of the Center for the Rocky Mountain West in that same town, observes the alienation of Western voters by Washington, D.C. democrats, who believe that national environmental politicking is worth supporting at the expense of Western residents’ votes and respect. Another Montana good old boy, former House representative Pat Williams, delivers as persuasive an argument on the merits of federalism as I’ve ever read. Williams reads just like he speaks, and his reminiscences of his “college days at the University of Montana” made me feel like he was here in the room with me, his silver bolo riding neatly just beneath his chin.

Overall, these essays left me with a sense of admiration. Not towards our Western celebrities, our high-profile smooth-talkers, but towards our everyman. Today’s West has witnessed unimaginable changes. Some of these changes are taking place over the course of our own lifetimes, before our eyes. The authors of these essays nevertheless face their uncertain futures with a humor, a creativity, and a grace that seem to offer hope for the future of our wide-open, beautiful, solitary region. *Living in the Runaway West* makes you realize just how many stories the West has yet to tell.
CALLING STRIX OCCIDENTALIS LINAUS

Temperature means something here
how much you can do in a day
how much you can sleep in a night

I have northern blood
In this heat
I drowse during the day
and come awake at night
like a bat
or an owl

at each call point I look up
see the warm
dark sky filled with
stars that curl in
concentric circles
that spiral in to a deeper
source

lying on my back on a warm red rock
at the base of a cliff
in the middle of sandstone, pinyon pine and juniper
it seems the time to ask
for release
from being human
and just accept
this confusion
this winding path
this heat

all night crickets sing
and as I return
the beam of my head lamp
catches them on the trail
black, shining, singing.

Clara Sophia Weygandt
July 1994
of all. In the seconds before his show, he whistles a rapid \textit{whurr whurr whurr}, then launches into a fluttering flight while spewing an aria of fluted notes heavily overlaid with a rich assortment of twittering harmonics, gurglings, and nasal \textit{weedle-yous}. When Arthur Bent described the Western Meadowlark's song as the prairie spirit, he also wrote that, "His sweet voice fairly thrilled us, \textit{combining} the flutelike quality of the wood thrush and the rich melody of the Baltimore Oriole." But this time I believe that Bent held back—perhaps only because he was not a female. I say, "The Western Meadowlark's flight-song makes me want to sprout wings and fly off into ecstasy with him!"

Male meadowlarks endowed with optimal territories have been known to attract more than one female. But a more likely scenario is this: one female arrives on a territory and draws a convergence of every local male. Her presence sends them into states of such frenzy that they forget all about hard-won boundaries I've witnessed a few dramas like that. The first time, I was out on our deck when I suddenly heard a quadraphonic commotion. Then, four highly agitated males and one astonished female crash-landed in the grass 15 feet away. Immediately the males formed a tight circle around the female and engaged in a contest of rapid-fire \textit{chertz}, mad flickings, and adamant posturings. Seconds later, the female fixed her eyes on a likely escape route and took off, the males in white-hot pursuit.

One day during a similar ruckus, a distracted male banged into our bay window. I raced outside to make sure he was okay, but as I scooped him up, his reactions indicated a possible head injury. My heart sank, and I cursed our intrusion here. Not sure what to do, I simply cradled him in my hand, where his heft surprised me. I knew well that meadowlarks are built like cargo planes—heavy-bodied and stubby-tailed—but I marveled that he could take flight without a runway. He also dazzled me with his yellow, and the length of his toes, which slowly curled around my finger. My heart leapt back. He perched there a bit—still stunned. And then he ducked as another male spotted him in my hand and landed right in front of us, flicking, \textit{cherting}, and strutting. Well, that was the medicine my patient needed. He came to and flew off.

After hearing dozens of auditions, the female meadowlark I've kept my eye on makes her choice. She slips away to find a small depression in the ground—I don't know where—and starts construction. I picture her crafting a domed nest with stems of grass, leaving one side open, and securing it to surrounding structures. As a final touch, she may add a cozy lining of animal hair. Then she uses great precaution to avoid giving away its location, because she faces enormous odds of later losing eggs or nestlings to snakes, skunks, magpies, cats. In fact, Shirley Creighton found that each of "her" meadowlarks' first-nesting attempts ended with predation. Whether or not her nest visits somehow exacerbated the situation, I resist urges to find "my" meadowlark's nest. The scientific jury is still out on whether people encourage predation when they examine a nest, inadvertently leaving behind scents or trails that may guide predators to that nest. So I will await their second gift of the season—broods of hungry meadowlark fledglings escorted by my study window.

At last it's time to conceive more meadowlarks. For days, the female solicits copulation, disappearing every day or two to lay an egg until her clutch of four or five is complete. After that, I hardly see her as she undertakes a two-week bout of incubation. When she emerges briefly to feed, she skulks from the nest via little pathways through the grass, popping out only some distance away and fooling me entirely about where she's nesting. While away, she risks the nest to egg-eaters. But the white, slightly glossy surfaces of her precious ova are well-camouflaged with random splatters of brownish-purple, which break up the eggs' tell-tale outlines. And when she returns to her nest, again she uses her "skulkways."

Once the eggs hatch, both the female and her mate further protect their investment by attacking almost any creature that comes near the nest. In fact, meadowlarks have been known to seek and destroy the eggs of neighboring birds, Horned Larks and Lark Buntings in particular. They also attack ground squirrels and magpies, and I heard about a pair of meadowlarks that even escorted a rattlesnake away from their nest. For a distance of more than 65 yards, those birds marched about a foot behind its head—one bird on each side—until the serpent left their territory.
After the nestlings’ first 12 days of life, they have grown huge and spill from their nest. At this point, the male would have taken over their care while the female immediately began a second clutch, but he got lucky enough to attract a second female. Thus, “my” female must continue to care for the brood herself. In fact, when Creighton clocked the breeding activities of male meadowlarks, she found that their mate-chasing, broadcasting, primping, and resting were nonnegotiable activities, because the more time they engaged in them the less they pitched in to help with the young. Creighton discovered, however, that the males would give up feeding time to pursue a second mate. In fact, they broke the all-time record among songbird species spent on such pursuits!

In theory, bigamy among songbirds can occur where food and other essentials are distributed evenly and generously across a male’s territory. Creighton was unsure whether this would hold true for “her” meadowlarks, so imagine her surprise when she discovered that some were trigamists! When I discovered that polygamy had been going on here, I was pleased that Ken and I had opted for insects instead of insecticides on our land—better odds for making a vital meadowlark habitat rather than a death trap. As high-quality habitat becomes harder to find, meadowlarks often settle for hayfields and other substandard environments. I don’t know whether they succeed at bringing off their young in those artificial habitats, but I’d hazard a professional guess that the meadowlark’s blind, naked hatchlings are no match for a tractor.

Because the female has retained custody of the fledglings, it is she who leads them about for several weeks of intensive education. This is when I get to see them marching by my study window. They’re out there learning where to find food and what is good to eat. Their mother disciplines them to freeze if a hawk floats above, or flee if a terrestrial mammal—like me—lurks about. They find where to shade themselves at midday and which shrubs provide safe nighttime roosts. Their mother also allows some play—the jousting and chasing that will prepare them for adulthood. And of course, hours and hours of singing practice are mandatory. The young meadowlarks have but a few months beyond fledging to “crystallize” their songs, after which their voices will be set—hard and inert as diamonds. So they must get it right early on. Without that language, the excited static, gibberings, and songs that tell other meadowlarks their fears and intentions, they are merely feathers adrift.

Their voices had developed first as guttural sounds, which the hatchlings used to rivet their parents’ attention and accelerate the deliveries of insects. But as their bottomless hunger grew, they began to imitate their mother’s whispered chewink or trash calls when she approached with food. Once they fledged and embarked on their field trips, they volleyed with their mother other querulous chewink sounds that said, “I’m here, where are you?” (Later, they will chewink when migrating to keep the flock together.) Within a month or so, the young meadowlarks assimilated additional sounds, including the chert or chupp calls that they overheard their parents blurt when alarmed or irritated. Another important call they mastered is the whistled whurr, which they will eventually use during intense excitement—after copulation or before an aerial dance.

When the young males hit avian puberty, they begin to develop their “primary” song. Unless they nail that one, they might as well give up hopes of ever winning over a female or excluding contenders from their territories. As summer whirls toward fall, I regularly hear a neophyte concocting his “subsong,” a random collection of gurgles and warbles. Each day he adds more to it.

I recognize fragments of song basics—including that peculiar local lilt—that he snatches from his mentors, including dad and all the adult males in the neighborhood. He also incorporates some of his own special notes and cadences, which will give away his identity to me if he returns here next spring. In fact, his vernacular is so distinct that if I heard him in Saskatchewan I would know he’s from Rocky Ridge.

Gradually, he begins to recycle certain arrangements, and his whispered attempts yield to volumes of growing confidence. He’s developed a certainty that his syrinx—the Greek word for “double-flute” used to describe a songbird’s “voice box”—is forming the right combinations of muscular contractions and tympanic vibrations. Finally, after his weeks of rehearsal, I receive my final gift of the summer as he debuts his primary song for all the world to hear. He finds his own fencepost upon which to perch, and from there casts his intonations with windy accents and sunny liltts, infusing the prairie sky with silvery, slurred melodies that send pure pleasure right through me. As I sit outside my study window and listen, he sings:


Cynthia Melcher is a wildlife biologist currently studying the effects of wildfire and prescription burning on avian communities in the coniferous forests of the Rockies. She also writes and edits various materials through her business, Birds & Words. Cynthia and her husband live on 12 acres of shortgrass habitat north of Fort Collins, Colorado.
Autumn as Epiphany

I would like to remember this:
driving down into the Big Hole Valley,
a faint echo of fog
lifting the peaks,
down through the foothills
into a distance
of harvest fields
like russet quilts,

down into the arms
of its river weaving
an elegant pattern
of ochre cottonwoods,
where vacant teepees
sit mauve in late sun,
a history shadowed
by Bitterroots,

into this decrescendo
of bruised sky, stark mountains,
and aged river bottom
like an autumn heart yielding
all that lies beyond
the ends of roads.

Sue Samson