Camas

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Kim Todd
looking for missing moas

James A. McLaughlin
learning to live on the edge

Featured Poets
Jeremy Pataky
Jeff Ross

Fiction by
Genevieve Marsh
Coming Out of the Country

Jeremy Pataky
Hours this far north
are sediment layered
into days that will be useable
later, when we flux south
toward threadbare skies
and tides that don’t strand boats, salmon,
whole trees.

Each breath here is caloric and we pack
them on like muscle and secrete them
as sweat, as hair, as a quiet we learn
from snow and long winter darknesses, a quiet
which conveys more than any sheaf
of sentences, a quiet
that will temper
the days into one
long day.

Like snow crushed under its own weight,
tensed into glacial ice that mills
mountains into graphite-colored flour,
our time here will absorb nearly all colors.

Our memories from some future vantage
will be blue-tinged, will be laced
with silty rivulets and veined with subsurface
tunnels, arteries of liquid ice. We will be the frayed
end of seasons bleeding into networks
of streams that run off all the way
to the ocean

where silt mingles with salt,
blue alchemizes to aquamarine
and tourmaline, a long walk stills
to slumberous ebb and flow, a wet
breath.
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Moa Hunting

“I don’t really hope to wrap my fingers around a living moa leg or startle the last remaining one as it broods its outsized eggs, but I must admit my fascination. The moa was just so large, so improbable.”

Jeremy Pataky
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First Person
By Robin Patten

Contributors

Left

“When the sun rested its belly against land, the gray of the slate and the green of the grass looked lit from the inside. It stood chest high to a man. She had found a spot with a few rocks sticking out for her to scramble up, walking down it like a path, leading her to her father.”

By Genevieve Jessop Marsh
The bitterroots are appearing on the brown hills that border Missoula. Just the leaves have poked out of the ground, brilliant green against the dark soil. In a few weeks, those leaves will support buds and soon after, those same leaves will wither almost to nothing as the flowers burst out. About now, when this issue of Camas has worked its way from rough draft to the post office to you, the bitterroots will be spreading their pink petals out across the slopes of Mt. Sentinel.

The bitterroot is Montana's state flower, a brilliant low-growing blossom in the Purslane family. Its Latin name is *Lewsia rediviva*, named after Meriwether Lewis, who found it blooming not too far from Missoula. Lewis noted that Indians ate the root of the bitterroot flower, and — given its name — one can only imagine how that root tastes. The great valley that sweeps south from the place where Lewis 'discovered' the pink flower is the Bitterroot Valley, a broad expanse of rich land bordered by sky-reaching mountains.

None of this comes to mind when I see the fresh new bitterroot leaves on Mt. Sentinel. No. What comes to mind are images of Grandpa strapping on his camera and saddling his dun horse for the annual search. When the bitterroots appear, so does the memory of early summer days on our family ranch not too far from the Missoula valley, when each year Grandpa would set off in search of those flowers that bloom on the flanks of the south-facing slopes across the river from the ranch. In some of those years, I accompanied him.

The flowers didn’t mean much to me as a young girl — they were a small part of a bigger landscape. Grandpa and I would ride together until he spotted a pink blossom and then, with a characteristic grunt of pleasure, he would dismount and spend what seemed like an inordinate amount of time taking pictures of that plant. I was young, impatient. But I sat my gray gelding in silence as Grandpa captured yet more images of the bitterroot, there in the mountains, under the broad sky, with the sound of the river and the chill wind dropping off distant snow banks to accompany us.

Decades later, bitterroots still bring the image of that proud man riding through a land where even the smallest blossom was a great treasure.

About the time the bitterroots are in full bloom on Sentinel, I will be moving away from Missoula, back closer to the ranch that is home. Now those pink blossoms will spark new memories: morning walks on south Sentinel with fresh rays of sun and expansive views over the Bitterroot Valley, the faces of people I have come to know here in Missoula, people that shared their thoughts and ideas, time and selves, and friendship. I will remember the golden evening light filtering through the ponderosa pine forests where the nuthatches call, and the town itself, wrapped around a river that flows through it like a living force.

I have not been in Missoula long — less than two years — and I didn’t know that it would be so hard to leave until the leaving looms so near. Bonds build subtly, like delicate spring leaves pushing through the hard soil of winter. We may not notice them until they are solid, connections that are overlooked until they have burst into brilliant blossoms that remain forever in memory and heart strings. And all that can be said is thank you to the places and people that created those connections. So thank you Mt. Sentinel, Pattee Canyon, Bitterroot Valley. But more important, thank you Phil, Dan, Ariel, Deborah and all of you who made this grand adventure that was my time in Missoula so meaningful. You know who you are. I suspect even the nuthatches in the pines know it.

Connections. The theme came up in a round-about way, a discussion about something to do with human relations to the land, the bridges between the “Nature of the West” and the rest
of the world. We hope this issue — and all issues — of Camas allows you to connect: with the land, with other ideas, with your own thoughts.

This spring, Camas brings you writer Kim Todd, author of *Tinkering with Eden*, and her thoughts on hunting for missing pieces. James McLaughlin considers living on the edge, while Teresa Ponikvar seeks a bond with family and place and Matthew Frank explores ties to family. Heather McKee discovers another person's connection, along with a valuable lesson. In fiction and in poetry, our writers express the strands that weave us together.

Our connections are many, and often are not recognized. We are woven into a web that is illuminated by the morning sun.

I hope you smile next time you see a bitterroot in full bloom. I will. I'll be thinking of Grandpa — and morning walks and friendly faces in Missoula, Montana.

ROBIN PATTEN, EDITOR
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Camas provides a forum for the discussion of environmental issues and a place for creative writing dedicated to the nature and culture of the West.

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Succession

The warm spring, vascular streams of sap are loosing
Cambium beneath poplar’s bark,
While sounds of the dry forest just tremolo,
The breeze trembling aspen leaves.
A tall stand of wood sits in a host of knee-high
Saplings – pioneer popples
That innervate the mounds of stubble and skidder’s
Tracks. Loggers tend to the elders.
Notched, back-cut, they yaw, percussive, with medullas
Rent, their elephantine fells
Boom the gnarled loam, crush the trailing arbutus,
Boom pipsissewa, bearberry,
Until aboriginal boys, sun-tinted like saplings,
Flay the bucked trunks, their spuds
Peeling curled pelts of bark from glistening phloem;
The forest muscle, bared to wind.

Jeff Ross
Moa Hunting

Kim Todd
In the Canterbury Museum, in Christchurch, New Zealand, three moa skeletons haunt a glass case near the entrance. The smallest reaches toward the ground, big as a goose, though with a sharp, down-curved beak. The largest, its ribcage high as my head, looms over viewers, mouth open, as if about to dispense a wicked peck. They all offer the impression of stout legs that support endless vertebrae strung together, a bone chain that formed the snaky neck. Unlike the ostrich, similar in shape, none has any trace of wings. The skeletons provide a rough outline of the birds, but another case contains more intimate evidence: a pile of sticks, labeled as a moa’s last meal, recovered from the swamp that sucked the bird in; bits of moa eggshell and gizzard stones, swallowed to help them grind their food. Feathers don’t seem like they would last 500 years, but there they are, delicate brown swirls, strands thin as hair.

The moa was New Zealand’s grand creation. In a country with no land mammals, birds ruled, and the moa was king. Unique to the islands, it couldn’t fly, but the possibly 11 different species – some as tall as 10 feet – dominated the countryside, from alpine areas above treeline to damp rimu forests. They paced hillsides and underbrush on large, three-toed feet, long necks wending down to grasp a tender twig.

Moas lasted scarcely a hundred years after the first humans arrived, according to some theories, making its extinction one of the most rapid on record. Undoubtedly in great demand by Maori hunters, the birds tasted better than Pacific rats and each one provided enough flesh for a feast. Haast’s eagles, giant raptors that fed on moa, disappeared not long after their prey. Bones sank to the bottom of caves and bogs, waiting to be unearthed, then pieced together by nineteenth-century scientists who hailed the bird as a natural wonder. In the 1830s, British paleontologist Richard Owen received a six-inch piece of moa femur, fresh enough that it hadn’t completely fossilized, and from that shard predicted that a behemoth race of birds had inhabited New Zealand. Owen also speculated they had gone extinct only recently and held out the tantalizing possibility that they might still exist. The odds of stumbling on some lonely, remnant moa are thin here in the early 21st century, but people just can’t let them go. The birds made an indelible impression. In 1880, a seven-year-old girl thought she saw one resting in the sand by the ocean. She crept up and grabbed its leg, hoping to capture the bird, but it chased her back to the house, leaving footprints almost a foot long. The feel of that green scaly skin against her palm remained vivid, even as she told the story to a historian years later. In the 1980s, a moa-hunting expedition set out from Japan. In 1993, hikers took an out-of-focus photograph of what they claimed was a moa, though the picture was no more convincing than blurry snapshots of UFOs. These faint hopes are nurtured by the discovery of the stubby-legged, bright blue takahe, another flightless bird thought extinct, found wandering the Murchison Mountains on the west side of the South Island in 1948.

I don’t really hope to wrap my fingers around a living moa leg or startle the last remaining one as it broods its outsized eggs, but I must admit my fascination. The moa was just so large, so improbable. Perhaps not as large and improbable as Owen thought; his first guess, reluctantly given up in the face of a new box of bones, was that it was 16-feet-tall. But still. It was a monster and we almost crossed paths. It’s like almost brushing up against a dinosaur, missing each other by a relatively small gap in time. My husband Jay, who would rather be spending our vacation in New Zealand investigating the unique attributes of the cafes or practicing his German with other travelers, humors me and the itinerary I chart through the past.
with good grace.

In downtown Christchurch, a few blocks from the museum, fat pigeons flutter around park benches, starlings whistle on telephone wires, and English sparrows hop into cafes and peck at the crumbs scattered near coffee cups. These imported, nonnative birds from the Old World thrive surrounded by people and have made themselves comfortable downtown. But the pigeons’ coo, the starlings’ squawk and the sparrows’ “cheep, cheep,” all say the same thing: “Europe.” I am itching to leave town and find convincing evidence that we really are on two remote Pacific islands, not that far from Antarctica. Later in the afternoon, we leave the city to wander along the Maori heritage trail along the curve of Banks Peninsula. It’s hot and the trail cuts between the steep hills on one side and the ice cream shops along the shore of Monck’s Bay. The cliffs are pitted with caves where Maori lived and left moa artifacts.

The mouth of Moa Bone Point Cave opens straight onto the sidewalk. Archaeologists uncovered moa bones and eggshells here, as well as tools made of Haast eagle leg, records of the brief crossing of humans and colossal birds. Layers of habitation are still present inside. Graffiti decorates the rock walls—chalk marks, the name “Laura,” a big blue circle of spray paint. Crumpled potato chip bags and cigarettes lie among the pebbles on the cave floor. Two children race around, raising clouds of dirt, their parents waiting in the car. Across the street, in the blinding sun, a man is selling raspberries out of his trunk.

At the far end of the cave, a small dent breaches the wall. Jay gets down on all fours and crawls forward, only his legs below the knees and sandals are visible behind the stone. With a twinge of regret for the headlamp left at the youth hostel, I creep in and rise, blackness all around. The noises of traffic, the scuffling children—completely gone. I can’t see a shoe, my hand, a face. Claustrophobia quickens my breath, but there is no way to gauge the size of the space we are in, though we climbed through the smallest crack. I reach my hand up over my head, expecting to brush a rock roof, and touch nothing.

For a moment we linger, robbed of all senses but the shaking of our heartbeats and the smell of dust. The imagination craves nothing more than a blank slate, needing not even a broken bone on which to build. Soon, at the edge of hearing, an archaeologist scrapes the floor, a Maori cracks open a clam and tosses the shell, an outsized eagle flaps its wing.

In a few days, we head to the west coast of the South Island where the mountains shield remnants of the country’s unique natural history and the rain is hard and constant. We take refuge in a youth hostel during the soaking storms. Jay befriends a honey-mooning couple from Colorado, and they teach us a pirate board game they brought with them. In their adaptation of the original, we each get to make up a rule. Jay dubs his vessel “the ship of love,” commandeers it in overblown French, and decrees that vessels coming within a certain radius would fall head over heels and give him all their gold. My ship operates more like a chess queen, reaching out over long trajectories and blasting fellow ships out of the water. I win, but Jay makes us laugh until we cry.

When the rain stops, we kayak the fjords, steep-sided bodies of water, walls running with waterfalls charged by the squall. Here flightless relics of the country’s bird world still hold on—stubby-legged kiwi and deep green kakapo, nocturnal parrots. On the way south, we seek out yellow-eyed penguins hopping out of the waves, and royal albatross riding on wind currents that pop them high over a ridge, as if shot from a canon. As we wake to the screeching of alpine parrots that fly over our fjord-side campsite, my
"The birds molded the landscape that molded them, leaving evolutionary scars, empty niches. And more than that, they left the steep arc of their decline, a meteor streak on the inside of the eyelid."

mental moa start to fade. Strange birds are all around us, skimming over the waves in the fiords, regurgitating food for their fish-smelling young. The moa trail grows cold among all these still very present riches.

But here, too, the moa aren’t entirely gone. Footprints are etched in riverbeds and some scientists think hillside trails too wide and shallow for sheep are moa paths to springs and nesting sites. In Fiordland National Park near Lake Te Anau, a ranger shows us the lancewood growing by the side of the trail. Evolved to thwart moa grazing, it puts out jagged, leathery leaves, unpalatable as hacksaw blades until it reaches past moa height, then begins to sprout more generous foliage, tender and tasty.

The birds molded the landscape that molded them, leaving evolutionary scars, empty niches. And more than that, they left the steep arc of their decline, a meteor streak on the inside of the eyelid, a reminder of our capacity for voraciousness and regret. To keep looking, to launch a moa-hunting expedition from Japan, to snap the fuzzy photograph, is to hope that we really can’t and won’t slay all of the dragons we discover. All these quixotic investigations, all this reflection on bones marked by the tools that carved them up, lead to a more personal archaeology. They ultimately reveal what inhabits our internal topography, the buried wonders, the hint of the monster.

As Jay and I drive to our next destination, in places where the gas stations thin out and the herds of sheep disappear behind a hill, in a spot that just looks likely, that shadow in my peripheral vision takes the shape of an improbable bird, clipping twigs from a bush with a razor beak. An eagle floats above, flexing long talons, then swoops down, sinking one claw into the pelvic bone and reaching the other around for the throat.

Looked at straight, they vanish. But no matter. Sometimes, you go to see what’s there. Sometimes, to see what’s missing. ♦
The year that I was nine years old, my dearest wish was to find a secret passage or hidden room somewhere in my house. I would make my way methodically around the perimeter of each room, rapping on the walls, pushing at bumps in the plaster, poking at the woodwork. I'd even venture to the scary back corner of the basement, behind the furnace, to look for a trap door or a hidden button. Even after I'd made the full circuit of the house and found nothing, a week or two later I would start again, praying that I'd missed something.

I did this even though I had seen the house in the final stages of construction, surrounded by a sea of mud, the walls and floors unfinished, putty smudges on the windows. I knew perfectly well that no one had lived in the house before my family, that it had not been a stop on the Underground Railroad, that the construction workers who built it would have had no motivation whatsoever to build a secret passage. I looked anyway.

I remember the utter certainty that somewhere, somehow, there had to be a secret in that house, even though I also knew there couldn’t be. I think I knew, deep inside, that there was some connection that was missing. Somehow, my body understood that I hadn’t come from nowhere, that there had to be something linking me to history, to my place, to what came before me. Looking for the hidden door that I knew I would never find was, perhaps, a veiled way of mourning the loss of something I had never had.

And at the age of nine, it didn’t occur to me to wonder what had preceded Canon Way and the ring of boxy houses, cream and blue or brown and tan or blue and brown, with their neat shutters that didn’t close, and the spindly baby trees that stood stranded in the swaths of green lawn. The development where I began to come to terms with my own losses as a child of the American suburbs had been someone else’s loss. A farmer, perhaps, too old to work the land, no children to work it for him, forced to sell off bits and pieces to survive. Before that, perhaps, a native village or favored hunting ground, sold or stolen or swindled away to be put under cultivation. Or a meadow, a hundred thousand plants and birds and insects, snakes and deer and spiders. Lost.

As a child, I was haunted by Scott...
O’Dell’s novel The Island of the Blue Dolphins, which tells the story of a young indigenous woman who lived alone on an island off the coast of California for 18 years. Karana, in the story, lost her whole family, her whole tribe. But when she paddled her canoe into caves, she saw the bones of ancestors. She knew which springs ran clear even in the driest months, she knew where to find herbs for medicine and roots for supper, she knew which color of mussel tasted sweetest. She knew stories that had been passed down since the time when the gods had walked upon the island. This book made me cry—partly for Karana, who had lost so much, but mostly for myself, and all I had never even had the chance to lose. Then I would go outside and ride my little purple bike around and around the development. The road went in a circle. It was impossible to get lost. I felt lost anyway.

My last name is somewhat unusual in the United States, and since practically the moment I could talk, someone has asked me at least once a month what nationality it is. I was the sort of child who always liked to have the right answers to questions, so I made it a point to find out that my name, Ponikvar, was Slovenian. I couldn’t have found Slovenia on a map to save my life, but the answer seemed to satisfy people.

Recently I poked around the library and the internet, in search of my Slovenian roots. According to one travel guide, Slovenians are boring but dependable, and those who live in other countries can be moved to tears by photos of the traditional Slovenian hay racks covered in snow. I tried pronouncing the phrases in the back of the book: good night, dobr noch. I looked at descriptions of national holidays and festivals. I waited for something to leap off the page, to speak to me the way the bones of Karana’s ancestors spoke to her when she paddled into the cave. I waited for a secret door to open, but none did. I decided that I could potentially be described as boring yet dependable, but the snow-covered hay rack, though pretty, did not tug at my heart. None of the phrases felt easy on my tongue, none of them sounded right to my ear. The festivals didn’t cry out for me to celebrate them.

Really, I knew that it wouldn’t be that easy. For one, I am only one quarter Slovenian, despite being saddled with a Slovenian name that most people will not even attempt to pronounce. I have no connection to that landscape or culture, nor does my father. My only memory of my Slovenian great-grandfather does not even physically include him: I am crouched on a shadowy staircase, dust motes are floating on amber light, and in another room, my great-grandfather is playing the accordion. Not much to go on.

My family’s history—Slovenian and otherwise—is, to me, a collage of stories that are sometimes funny, sometimes sad, sometimes trite, with lots of white space in between. I like knowing them, but I don’t feel connected to them. The landscapes where they took place are unfamiliar to me. Yet as I flip through
I think I knew, deep inside, that there was some connection that was missing. Somehow, my body understood that I hadn’t come from nowhere...

memories of the neighborhoods where I grew up, I find little to connect to there, either. My family history is divorced from my knowledge of the land, and my knowledge of the land was divorced from any history that might have connected it to me.

I used to sit on the school bus, on the way to elementary school, and daydream about running away into the woods, building a shelter, concocting stews of roots and berries. I wanted the land to mean something. I wanted its story to intertwine with my own; I sensed that the place I made my home should not be incidental or neutral. So I rode my bike in circles. I wrote letters to environmental organizations. I drew pictures of orphans in patched dresses, of dolphins and mermaids. I looked for secret passages. I moved, with my family, from one coast to the other. Waited for the time when I would be able to write my own history.

I don’t blame my parents for this lost connection. The chain was broken, for my family, a long time ago, and they too have had to find ways to make peace with it. In the end, I have no choice but to acknowledge it, mourn it, understand why it’s important, and begin to construct something that might, if not replace it, at least suffice. I made prayer flags last week, with cheap linen and watercolor paints, and hung them from the tree outside my window: one for everyone I’ve loved and hurt, one each for the earth, the sky, and the water, one for the poor and all those who must live far from their homes, one for my heart to be opened. When I walk in the snow in Montana this winter, my first winter in a place I have truly chosen, I open my mouth and the flakes taste like communion wafers. I make a ritual of slicing a kiwi each morning, honoring the fact that, like me, this piece of fruit is a long way from its roots. I love my friends, my community; at dinners and parties, their hope and laughter warm me as much as the wine. I know that there is no secret passage. Sometimes I still cry, and wish for one. And then I think about how, this spring, I’ll see camas and bitterroot in bloom for the first time. This summer I will plant carrots and beans and sweet peas in this soil. The mountains cradle this valley, all its stories, all the stories yet to be written. My prayer flags, as I write this, are flapping in a steady breeze from the west. It’s not all that it might have been. But it is enough.
Lolo Valley

Rushing the alluvial, headstrong,
Lolo Creek doesn't wander silt-soft and lazy
But rubs you cold, cobble-hard
past an orchard of new houses
secure on pads of sand
and round-pebbled, river-gizzard fills.

A ditch, humped on the down slope,
hugs the collar of low mountain,
travels the valley tilt—
a century impression, once guarded
now gnarled with vetch and wretched spurge,
its cheat grass chin stretching a mile
to the river, where a flat rusted wheel
waits the hands, and worm gears
wait the wheel—water tense against the gates.

Sluice open, the ditch
will crackle with cold fire, thumbing
down weeds, trembling grasses,
spinning fir needles, borne true to compass east.

Do me a favor, and call when the wheel is to turn.
I want to witness the hard Montana scour
the water crouch the depression,
the stone darken like sky,
the fossil ripples wave again across siltstone,
the storm markers—conglomerates, blow downs,
sunken settler plows—gleam wet, luminous.
Boil the lignin that cements
the land, deluding these new seekers.

Do us all a favor, turn the wheel
now—don't wait. Let an ancient
nervousness, again creep into the valley.

Jeff Ross
Even with a self-appointed tour guide I felt lost. I was one of ten Environmental Studies graduate students on a field trip heading east from Missoula, Montana, toward Big Timber, a small ranching town in the center of the state. For the past four hours, our boyish professor had displayed a natural aptitude for tour guiding, naming an impressive array of mountains, rivers, wilderness areas, historical points, and geological facts. Central Montana had become a blur of stories attached to attractive lumps of land with unpronounceable Native American and unmemorable Jefferson-era names. The aridity and vastness of the land was incredibly foreign to me compared to the wet and tree-crowded hills of the southeastern United States, from which I’d moved a few months before. I leaned my head against the window and watched the staccato tufts of golden hay blowing up along the hillsides and I wondered what Big Timber would be like.

Our professor had told us that Big Timber was a town with only several hundred residents. I reflected upon the name that implied big trees and maybe no trees. When we finally pulled off the highway at the Big Timber exit, at around 10:00 at night, we saw the familiar yellow electric glow of a Super 8, and a Conoco gas station harboring an Arby’s. I could have been anywhere off any exit off any highway in America. It was dark, and I couldn’t see beyond the Conoco station.

We pulled out of the bright dome of artificial light, into the darkness beyond Highway Big Timber, and after a few hundred yards, rolled into our destination of Original Big Timber - the one that I imagined grew up off of the exploitation of its namesake and a railroad, instead of the highway. We paused at the one set of four-way stop signs delineating the miniscule downtown. A small amount of light radiated from a neon pink and orange cowboy boot pointing out the bar. The rain fell in the street so slowly that there weren’t any puddles, and I couldn’t follow the direction it ran through the tiny cracks in the glistening asphalt.

As we passed through the moist orange streetlight haze, we could just make out silent dark houses with white pillars, screen doors, and wraparound porches. Five blocks from the neon cowboy boot, we sorted ourselves into bedrooms at the local bed and
breakfast. Sleep fell shortly after, punctuated only by the train whistle that seemed to follow us everywhere in Montana.

I woke in the morning to quiet — no cars, no planes, no jackhammers outside the window. It was a sharp and welcome contrast to Missoula, my recently new home, where it seemed the city would never rest in repairing the sidewalks, vacuuming streets, and answering fire alarms. This morning, I had to tune my ears to my surroundings to hear anything at all, but eventually I picked out small shufflings and sizzlings from the kitchen. In due course, students, professor, and bed and breakfast hostess sat and sipped coffee together in a Victorian dining room, and awaited the last in our party, a Republican Montana state senator from Big Timber, who had lived in this house with his family for the previous twenty years, restoring it to its early-1900s charm before moving out.

When he arrived, John Esp introduced himself with a shy, toothy smile that disappeared into his moustache as he accepted our compliments on his old home. He stuffed his hands into the front pockets of his dark blue Wrangler jeans, and listened to our backgrounds and introductions thoughtfully. He then outlined the schedule that he had arranged for us for the next few days.

On a dirt road somewhere in Sweetgrass County, we pulled over where a man was standing outside a red truck in huge, sloping fields of dry grass. Lorents Grosfield waited for us in his quilted denim get-up, with leather boots that had been worked until they were the color of drought. Other than his long silver hair, his boots were the first thing I noticed about him. For some reason, I wanted to rub my fingers over the dry, flaky leather. He had on a clean, striped shirt of sky blues, purples, greens, and white, with mother of pearl buttons pecking out from his collar and sleeve ends.

I thought it unusual at first that we were not all meeting him inside his house, or a structure of some sort. We settled down to talk in a field that I eventually came to realize better comprised his home - this one stretching all the way to the horizons, ending in the distance at the feet of crumpled mountains. Lorents was a friend of the senator’s, a rancher who had lived off and by this land for three generations. His s’s were soft at the ends, his i’s were clipped in short syllables, and his voice came from deeper in the throat than I was used to hearing. His Norwegian grand-parents still were alive in his language, though they had come to Big Timber and passed on many years ago. His speech blended into the grass shushing itself against the fences and the clackering of the red-shelled wings of insects bounding here and there. Intermittently, a gusty wind caught his speech, and I had to turn my ear into the wind and his voice, before it blew off into the sagebrush dotting the hills.

He talked about what it meant to be a rancher, how many hours a day he worked. How he did it because he loved the way of life. But also how hard it was to find help anymore, as he watched our generation, his children’s generation, gravitate to the cities to find better paying jobs. How even he once had left his ranch for Michigan, but he ended up coming right back to the same piece of land.

When the cows calved, even when he did have
Beyond the Highway Towns

help, he was the one who would stay up every night
with them for two months, no small part of which was
watching for predators. He reared his cattle gently,
varying their diets, painstakingly tending their crops.
He mended fences along the streams so the cattle
wouldn't muddy up their water source and erode
the banks. As he talked, I could hear them contentedly
lowing down near the shade of some cottonwoods,
and I felt it to be all true.

He explained that as a rancher, in a way, they
were really all just harvesting sunlight. So he was a
poet too. He was harvested sunlight himself, his hair
seasoned strands of winter wheat and dry grass. His
face was shadowed like the Crazy Mountains behind
him, with their slumping streaks of snow huddled in
the cracks and ravines. And his deep and genuine
smile was as white as the quick-flying scads of clouds
in the wide sky.

As he spoke, he surveyed his land. And for just
one moment, something in the awareness of his gaze
struck me - I found myself able to step into those
cracked boots; I looked out over the mountains, the
fields, and the streams, blessed with his sight. I felt
the land and sky as my only employers, religious
teachers, and companions, the fountains of my and my
family's existence and memories. I saw that there was
still a land where a simple rainfall or a late snow could
make or break my existence.

Memories of hometown landscapes from when I
was little sprung up like pins in my mind - the damp
stump in the yard where I could always find a toad;
the screened wall of our little picnic shack where my
pickling cucumbers whirled and grabbed their way up,
the field gone wild behind my house filled with the
lightning bugs I loved so much—all reminding me
bittersweetly of a time many years ago when my own
existence had been synonymous with my backyard,
my land. Memories from before I'd been able to pack
up and leave—before college in California, before the
research internship in Michigan, before classes in New
Mexico, before Oregon, before Georgia, and long
before I'd headed to graduate school here in Montana.

I gently set aside the memories from my mind,
and the rareness of the natural silence of Lorents' land
swept over me. I absorbed myself in listening to his
speech, and watching clouds detach themselves from
the Crazy Mountains behind him as the morning
warmed. I rolled tiny balls of grass stems into knots
and felt ants sensitively investigating my wrists and
fingers.

Lorent took our questions and discussion in turn,
and he listened as we spoke of our concerns
with preservation of ecosystems, of the rein-
troduction of the wolf, of watershed health, and of our own fear and hatred of
unchecked growth and ignorance. He was direct with
all of us, and expected the same from us.

In response to one of the questions, Lorents
said he didn't hate the wolf; he hated the politics
surrounding the wolf, and he hated that he hadn't
been consulted when the wolves were dumped into

Heather McKee

https://scholarworks.umt.edu/camas/vol9/iss2/1
Yellowstone. He knew that eventually they would find their way into his land and eat away at his livelihood, hundreds of dollars at a time – at a time when profit margins for family ranchers were good simply if they were in the black. He agreed that wolves should have their place on the planet; there just wasn’t a place for them on his land and in his way of life. He said that we weren’t going to change his mind about that.

And I can’t say that the opinions of all of the Environmental Studies graduate students about ranching were turned upon their heads, mine included. But at dinner that night, an hour away from Lorents’ ranch, in a dimly lit family restaurant, where the waitress knew Lorents and everybody stared, one of the vegetarians in our group quietly ate a cheeseburger made from Montana beef for the first time in four years.

A few days later, on the four hour drive back from Big Timber, instead of glazing over on the grey ribbon of highway in front of us, my eyes focused on the land beyond — following the long, narrow scars of cattle trails curving through the yellow hills, and playing over the muddy bodies of sheep grazing together with deer. I thought of Lorents.

I thought of how and why I’d been able to meet him at all. My professor, Tom Roy, had talked once about how the Big Timber field trip had started at a contentious meeting where he and John Esp, the senator from Big Timber, met for the first time.

This meeting, our professor recalled, was arranged in a response to better communicate with a group of Montanans who loudly called for the removal of the university’s Environmental Studies department, through budget cuts. It was a rancher from central Montana who was the first to suggest it. He and many others blamed the vocal and active department, at least in part, for their shrinking economies based in timber, ranching, and mining. Some people were irate, and spent much of this arranged meeting in a heated fashion, venting concerns with what they perceived as a department with unbalanced perspectives. Our professor, as the director of the department, bore the brunt of most of the onslaught, and he said that John was one of the only folks who remained gracious.

As a result, the two ended up striking up a conversation about how university students and faculty and rural Montanans might be able to learn about and from one another. And so this Big Timber trip was born, in which our professor and this senator, at all odds to any outside observer, worked closely together over these past few years to bring Environmental Studies graduate students and ranchers, miners, and loggers to the same table, or to the same field in our case, to open discussions, and maybe minds.

I was grateful simply to have met Lorents through their efforts. Lorents struck me because he is an uncommon person, a person with some living roots in the land yet. And speaking from the perspective of one who feels a deep love for all land, but does not really know a single piece of it as a reflection of myself anymore, I was humbled. No matter how much I moved around the country, seeking various persons and causes and things, I never really stuck my roots down. How impossible it would be to live on a piece of land as long as Lorents had, for as long as his family had, and not feel a kinship with it.

Winding our way back into Missoula that evening, watching the latest highway town streak by in brilliant primary colors, and awaiting the boxy subdivisions of urbanity to begin cutting away at the golden-green edges of alfalfa fields, I found myself, in some young and small way, wanting to share the burdens of being a small town rancher in rural Montana. ♦
The diesel smoke rose and shrouded the rafters of the sky-blue corrugated-metal barn. I pulled down the coat collar covering my mouth and nose, peered over the rim of the wobbling wooden crate, and shouted down to my grandfather, “A bit higher!”

My grandpa pulled a lever on the John Deere forklift. The motor whined, the crate creaked, and I inched closer to the two twelve-foot long and eighteen-inch wide white oak planks that had rested undisturbed high in the barn since my grandfather stashed them there about 20 years before. I jostled the boards, and dust fell through the thickening smoke. Moving quickly, I forced the stubborn planks farther down the rafters away from me. But before I could tip the ends of the planks into the crate, I had to motion to my grandfather — the smoke was too much. He lowered me to the dirt floor, and I ran outside to suck in the cold, clean air.

When he maneuvered the forklift out of the barn, its tires crunched through the snow. As we stood outside waiting for the barn to air out, my grandfather Wilbur assured me that “those oak planks are worth their weight in gold.” They were “brand new,” like everything else in the menagerie of rusted and worn tractors and forklifts and parts, a wooden Adirondack-style boat, dented containers of oil, gas and grease, boxes upon boxes of tools…white-oak planks. He never threw anything away. It all had value. My grandfather proudly shuffled among obsolescent objects piled on the ground and hanging from nails like tattered books on a dusty library shelf.

Wilbur Longrod (yes, Longrod) uncannily resembles Walter Matthau, the actor, in his physical appearance. He has a wide but drooping face and long ears, alert and probing blue eyes, slick gray hair with a cowlick in the back, and a sparse mustache above an effortless smile. He walks slowly and carefully as if he’s on thin ice (which my grandmother would attest to), and his back and shoulders bow forward like he’s carrying two heavy suitcases. And he’s mischievous, a benevolent prankster who would short-sheet your bed if he had the chance.

My grandfather reminds me of the bristlecone pines I once encountered in Great Basin National Park in Eastern Nevada. The bristlecone is old, resilient, and tough. Its stout gold-colored branches, refined by rain, wind, and ice, reach out gnarled and twisted, giving the appearance of constant motion, constant adaptation. But no tree moves slower: bristlecones often fail to add a ring of growth in a year. And, in the older ones, much of the bark is dead; only a fine strip of living tissue pumps water and nutrients from the roots to the live branches. They stand, silent, like mannequins with provocative expressions, preparing to stave off the wind.

Later in the week, when I walked in the door of my grandparents’ house, Grandpa was
sitting at the kitchen table in overalls reading the paper. He already had his black work boots on, and two pairs of yellow work gloves rested on the counter. His day-of-the-week medication dispenser was next to his cup of juice; Thursday was open and empty.

He looked up and adjusted his hearing aid.

“Morning!”

I smiled and took a slow sip from my coffee mug. He laughed. My eyes told him I was tired from working late at the pizza shop, where I worked my year at home between college and graduate school. My grandmother greeted me with a kiss and, like every morning when I came, a steaming plate of eggs. It was the least she could do, she told me, for helping Grandpa. I sat and ate across from my grandfather, and we talked over the morning news on the small, rabbit-eared television on the table. This was our routine, and having just that, simple as it was, made me realize that I was becoming closer to my grandparents than I had ever been before.

After breakfast Grandpa and I put on our coats and gloves and drove the old white GMC High Sierra pick-up to the barn. A dusting of snow had fallen to the stiff grass the night before. Our task that day, Grandpa explained as the truck jerked forward, was to fill the truck with scrap steel he had resigned to not needing anymore. For all of his belongings in the barn, this resignation did not come easy for my grandfather. But he was beginning to realize that if he didn’t deal with all of it now, then his daughters would have to later. It was difficult to hear my grandpa talk openly about his mortality, about later. In typical Wilbur fashion, though, he joked about it: “I’ve got one foot in the grave and one foot on a banana peel,” he would say with wide eyes and a chuckle. “All around me great men are dying, and I ain’t feeling so well myself.” I couldn’t shake the feeling that depriving my grandfather of the things he could putter around and tinker with — the things that told his story — would only hasten his decline.

There were two wooden crates in the back of the barn, one stacked on top of the other, full of rounded steel sheets, sturdy and perforated like fireplace shields or fifteen-pound cheese graters. It was some sort of farming implement, I thought, perhaps a grain sifter that my grandpa held onto — and he had dozens of them packed on top of each other, filling both crates. I climbed to the top crate, and one by one gently passed the heavy steel sheets down to Wilbur, who then placed them in the truck. His hands trembled and his shoulders sank lower with the weight of each one.

“Let’s take it slow,” he said.

“What in the world were these things used for?”

“I got a deal on these, oh boy. They’ve barely been used,” he said, examining the edges. “There’s a little rust, but jeez....” He never answered my question. I later found out they were filter strips for cow manure.

I then asked my grandpa about their farm. I had talked to my mother about it in the past, but I hadn’t brought it up with my grandpa until then. It had seemed a subject not to be broached at the dinner table on Thanksgiving or at a cousin’s birthday party, these family gatherings being the main chances I had had to get to know my grandfather — and for him to know me.

“We grew corn, grain, fruit and had chickens,” he said. “For a while we did an awful lot...
of eggs. I'm sure your mom can tell you about that.” She had: she and her sisters used to hop off the school bus in front of their house on Basket Road and, if they heard their dad holler “eggs!” from the barn, they were to immediately go and help candle — to see if the eggs had been fertilized by shining a light beneath them looking for blood.

“We did that for as long as we could,” he continued, “until the prices dropped too low. It was tough. We had to feed and clothe and educate seven girls.” My grandfather took a long pause and slowly shook his head. “I lived with eight women!” he suddenly exclaimed with a guilty grin. “Boy oh boy...But we did it. After a while we only did pig feed. It takes corn and molasses, mostly. There was a better market for pig feed at the time.”

While my grandfather was delivering “Tail Curler” pig feed all over Monroe, Wayne, and Ontario counties, he realized that area farmers were also in need of inexpensive barns; it cost too much to build the typical wooden ones. Certain he could make a better living, my grandfather got himself into the steel barn business.

“I had twenty-five men,” he said, “million dollar projects. That was about thirty years ago when a million dollars was a lot of money. I worked with corrugated steel, what this barn is made of. We built barns and warehouses all over town, dozens of them. I can show you ten just down the road.”

As Xerox grew rapidly in the area in the ‘60s, my grandfather thought it wise, too, to buy up land, including some land abutting the farm, two parcels. Envisioning an influx of people and hoping to one day develop for profit, he joined the zoning board. He also ventured into the cattle business.

But a steel barn my grandfather had raised in East Rochester was done so atop a landfill. A few years went by before the owner of the barn noticed it was sinking, that the walls were warping and cracking. So he sued my grandfather. The lawsuit itself didn’t do my grandfather in; he was done in because no one wanted to hire him after that. Highly leveraged, with money tied up in the farm and cattle, the construction business, and in the land he had acquired, my grandfather could no longer pay the bills. The bank foreclosed on the farm. He refused to go bankrupt.

My grandma and grandpa traded the land they had hoped to develop in exchange for a log home, and put it up on five acres given to them by my aunt and uncle, a short walk to the lake. My grandfather built his last barn there too, and packed it with all he could take with him. Now, forced to downsize again, most of it would be thrown away or sold at an auction.

When we had finished emptying out the crates, my grandpa, as he did many times, walked around the barn, looking from the ground to the walls and up to the rafters, taken aback by what he had accumulated, overwhelmed by the work he had before him. I took a seat on a bucket.

“What is it with you boys and the West?” he said. “I’m afraid once you move to Montana I’ll never see you again. And I’m finally getting to really know you. Your brother Jordan bought a one-way ticket when he left for Colorado. Boy oh boy, you two like your traveling.”

“You did too,” I said, trying for eye contact. “Going back to school is what I need to do right now.” “When I finished high school I never wanted to open a book again. I just about had it. But I like what you’re doing, I do. I respect it. You know, when I was younger no one worried about the environment. No one needed to.” He put his hand on the John Deere tractor for balance. “We used to bury tires in the ground, for Christ sakes.” He peered at me with a guilty smile, and I returned an incredulous shake of the head.

“You better come out to visit,” I said wryly, knowing he has trouble getting to the mailbox. My grandpa repositioned.

“It’s beautiful country. I used to drive the girls...
Twisted as a bristlecone, my grandfather looked at me and said, “Wildcat’s Revenge. Every battle, every mission, needs a name. This is Wildcat’s Revenge.”

to Yellowstone on the weekends, you know.” I knew. “We’d hop in the car — all of us — and go straight there, through the night. How close is Yellowstone to where you’ll be?”

“It’s probably four hours, a ways south.”

“I used to go on elk hunting trips near Yellowstone with an old friend. That’s where I found the Montana wonderstone.”

“Wonderstone, huh?”

“Northwest of Yellowstone we met this fella who was selling large pink and orange rocks, rocks that didn’t seem special until you split ‘em apart. Inside they were filled with lime green and gray circles. I asked the man where he got them and he wouldn’t tell me. He said they were being mined from a secret location in Montana. I traded for a few of the big stones and drove home with them.” A laugh sputtered from deep within his chest. “They’re still around here somewhere.”

Montana wonderstone is a type of rhyolite. It’s made of the same minerals as granite, that hard, black, crystalline rock, the stuff of buildings and monuments. But whereas granite is intrusive, formed by the solidification of magma deep within the earth, rhyolite is extrusive, formed from lava flowing on the surface, thick and slow moving. The bands of pink and orange, green and gray appear as the lava gradually rolls along on the ground, advancing slower and slower, becoming cooler and cooler, until, eventually, it stops.

The wonderstones my grandfather brought home from Montana probably erupted over 100,000 years ago from the Yellowstone caldera. They’re mined in Alder, Montana, nine miles from Virginia City, northwest of Yellowstone, near prime elk habitat. My grandfather traveled 2,200 miles with the rocks — the same 2,200 miles I travel through Montana, Wyoming, South Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York to go home. Now you can get wonderstone on the internet — three dollars per pound, ten pound minimum purchase.

Before my grandparents came to the realization that the time had come to move again, they sold off a chunk of their land — a small plot by the road, south of the barn and out of view — to a young family. The family was settling into their newly constructed home, a two-story square-log home with a wrap-around porch, during the spring I worked with my grandpa. Wilbur proved to be a difficult neighbor.

He became perturbed by the dirt and construction materials that made their way onto his property. Marking his territory, my grandpa and I pounded a steel fence post with a “posted” sign deep into the ground at the property line using what he calls a “Russian hammer,” a post-pounder. The next day, my grandpa found that the sign had been yanked out, lying on the ground. Insulted, we (yes, ashamedly, we) took the Russian hammer and pounded a dozen posted signs spaced ten yards apart along the entire L-shaped property line clearly demarcating, like young bothered children, between our space and theirs. A battle ensued.

“I have to educate this man. He doesn’t have any respect for property,” my grandpa said one morning during breakfast. “He doesn’t know who he’s dealing with.” My grandma sighed and put her hand to her forehead.

“Don’t let him get in trouble,” she whispered.

Twisted as a bristlecone, my grandfather looked at me and said, “Wildcat’s Revenge. Every battle, every mission, needs a name. This is Wildcat’s Revenge.”

The next day, the neighbor — not worthy of a name, just neighbor — took off the posted signs themselves, leaving innocuous green posts stuck in the cold ground. My grandpa and I put all the signs back on; this time we secured sturdy plastic ones with nuts and screws as opposed to metal twist-ties (all found in the barn, of course). And then, my grandfather got on his tractor and plowed all of the dirt that had been pushed on his property back onto the neighbors’. “No respect for property. You just can’t do things like this to people!”

The neighbor stopped responding, the worst insult of all. Days later Wildcat decided to lay scrap wooden
beams between each post. We were halfway through when the neighbor’s wife came outside. With a pained expression she said, “Wilbur, can we stop this please?”

“This is my property!” he exclaimed with eyebrows raised and a gaping mouth.

The woman started to cry. “The man from the county came and showed us exactly where the property line is, and we haven’t crossed it.”

“I went down to the county! This is where the property line is! But you insist on putting all your dirt and garbage on my land. And you’re adding a slope! All the water is going to run off onto my property, onto the driveway. Do you know how hard it is filling holes in the driveway with gravel?”

“Wilbur, why did you sell us your land? If you didn’t want neighbors, why did you let us move here?”

I was standing beside my grandfather, but the woman never looked at me.

I flew back home recently for my friends’ wedding. I visited my grandparents in their new home, a brick one-story in a cul-de-sac, eight miles from the log home and barn, and five miles from the farm on Basket Road. It’s close enough to the lake you can see gulls flying to the north. The third-of-an-acre property backs up to a popular park. On our way there, passing million dollar lake front properties and sterile office parks, I learned that my grandparents’ auction had been successful – they made $24,000. No one could believe the Adirondack boat, the one that used to hang from the rafters in the barn, went for $600.

My grandfather pulled me aside when I walked in. “I hope the groom didn’t get too drunk,” he said. “It’d be like shooting pool with a rope.”

We sat on the back porch – my mother and stepfather, sister, grandparents, and me – and I told them about working on a farm in Montana. “We’ve been picking carrots, winter squash, onions, garlic. There’s chickens, Grandpa.”

“Think you’ll stay there?”

“I don’t know. I think I just want to be in one place,” I said.

My grandfather sat back with his legs crossed, his elbow resting on the arm of the chair with his head in his hand, rubbing his temples. He spoke of going to the doctor’s for an MRI the week before. “It was like a crematory in there,” he said. “It got warm but there weren’t any flames.”

My grandma pointed when she saw a cardinal perched outside the window. “Wilbur, you need to fill the feeder soon.”

“I know it. Got lots to do.”

After long hugs and assurances that I’d be home again soon, we left for the airport. As we pulled out of the driveway, my grandfather slowly made his way across the trimmed lawn and dumped seed into the birdfeeder. Behind him on the ground, lining the mulch that framed green boxwoods against the house, were brittle fragments of rock, orange and pink, with lime green and gray circles.
We built a cabin in the outback of the mind, split birch and aspen, saved rain, burned oil lamps and decorated with the mossy bones of old dreams. We expected no visitors, though we found wolf and muskrat tracks by the river.

Out here we write nothing into the pages ahead. It is enough to leave them to their thoughts, their bed sheet cleanliness. The words we have for each other are recovered from the past, unearthed like the relics of an old mine.

There is grit in my mouth, still, salt from you or the water, a film of sun in my eyes which regard our histories, held together with an old rope.

The words we have for each other are not the written kind, are not the spoken kind. Just stones arranged on a beach, offered to the waves that claim them.

Jeremy Pataky
Rules for Living at the Urban-Wildland Interface
James A. McLaughlin

“The Urban-Wildland Interface Area is that geographical area where structures and other human developments meet or intermingle with wildland or vegetative fuels.” 2000 Urban Wildland Interface Code, International Fire Code Institute, Whittier, California.

Rule #1: We’re not supposed to live here.
My house is surrounded by Gambel oak, sagebrush, rabbitbrush, and big-toothed maple. The trees are small, and the dozen or so houses visible from my deck tend to stick out of the miniature forest like pieces in an out-of-scale diorama. The high-dollar views look across the canyon at the north slopes of 8,000-foot mountains forested with spruce and fir, draped white with snow in the winter. To the west, the canyon mouth forms a V-shaped notch that fills at night with the dense unbelievable lights of the city. Airliners traverse the notch in slow motion on their way to and from the airport. In the mornings, when the sun clears the mountains, it illuminates the mile-high overburden pile from the world’s largest open-pit mine, all the way across the valley on the far side of the city. At this distance, the pile looks like a natural geological feature.

I came here, I imagine, for the same reason my neighbors did. Instead of indulging in cable TV nature shows, an aquarium in an apartment, a cage of finches in the living room, or a little flower garden in the back yard, I would set myself down in the midst of nature. Glorious nature is what I see through the windows of my hermetically-sealed house, wherein I reside comfortable in all weathers, cooking with gas. In the car, it’s twenty-two minutes to downtown.

Here at the interface, mountain lions come to eat our dogs, and our housecats kill chipmunks and songbirds until they are eaten in turn by coyotes. We have urban amenities in a bucolic setting. We drive everywhere we go. We build our homes in the path of inevitable wildland fires and then expect firefight-
ers to risk their lives to protect our property. We drill wells to water lawns of Kentucky bluegrass in a desert climate. We are subsidized by hierarchical social structures and massive inputs of power and technology without which it wouldn't be comfortable or convenient to live here at all. In the old days, nobody would have lived on the side of a mountain like this. My house is exposed to the weather, there's no reliable source of surface water, there are no building materials at hand, the ground's not level, and there's no tillable soil where I might grow some food. We'd do well to remember that come the first significant disruption in the industrial complex we'll all be coasting down to the city in our empty SUVs with our hands out, looking for a place to stay.

Rule #2: Do not play with matches.

This scrub oak forest historically had been swept by fire every fifteen years, on average, but the fires have been suppressed ever since the houses were built. The last big fire was eighteen years ago, and people are nervous. Dead wood has accumulated, and everything is dry after years of drought. We all meet once a year on “Fire Day” and listen to the firefighters describe how to reduce the fuel load in the forest around the neighborhood, how to create defensible spaces around our homes. A real firestorm would incinerate us and our homes in minutes, reduced fuel load notwithstanding, but after Fire Day, people hire workers to thin their forest. I get out my chain saw and do it myself. The work is hard and hot and dirty, but it is good to feel busy. I am doing my part for civilization, chopping down trees, dragging them to the chipper.

Rule #3: Do not talk to the animals.

I have an office in the basement, and my hours are flexible, providing rather too much opportunity to sit alone outdoors on the deck, and stare, and think. I try not to become too isolated. I listen to the radio. Today I watch the big airplanes cross the notch of the canyon mouth one after another after another. A brown haze hangs over the city, obscuring the copper mine beyond. The slopes of the mountains in the middle distance are gradually losing their green as the skies refuse to rain. The oak leaves at the edge of the yard tremble in a hot canyon breeze. One day last month I was staring into those trees and something moving caught my eye. I walked in and found two slender, greenish snakes—r racers, I think—in the branches of an oak tree. They were twisted and twined together, rubbing their whole bodies against each other. “What are you doing?” I asked. They stopped and looked at me. I looked at them. Their forked tongues flicked out and in. I backed away. “Sorry,” I said. “Carry on.” Afterward, I went inside and stared at my face in the bathroom mirror.

Rule #4: Do not live alone.

Once a week I shower and drive to the city. I stalk the supermarket for milk, oatmeal, toilet paper. I think that the women talking into their cell-phone headsets are trying to strike up strange conversations with me. I don't know what to say. My heart trips and skitters.

Great horned owls and poor-wills and coyotes speak to me at night and their voices seep into my dreams, wild dreams that I can’t quite recall in the morning. All day I feel uneasy.

Rule #5: Do not mess with road kill.

Not everyone seems to appreciate the wildlife here. Moose wander through the neighborhood like stray horses during snowstorms, and some people slow their vehicles and gawk. Others are in a hurry, and they are tired of seeing moose, and they honk and race their engines, accelerating as soon as the moose are out of the way.

It’s late August now, and a gang of fifty magpies have descended on the neighborhood, adults and juveniles newly-fledged. They call back and forth with raucous sarcasm, swarming one house and then another as if they are surprised to find us here, these big boxes we live in, our green grass yards. They swoop at house pets and steal food from their bowls and walk around on our rooftops until, overcome with corvid ennui, they filter upcanyon into the wild. Sometimes the juvenile magpies just out of the nest are
Rules for Living

killed on the road by people who drive too fast. I stop when I see the broken birds on the pavement. I lift them by their strong horny feet, bright pied black and white wings stiff, askew. Apologizing for my neighbors’ thoughtlessness, I carry the dead magpies into the trees, wedge them in the crotches of small branches. I have no idea why I do this. More recently, I have begun to rage at fast drivers, swerving into their lane, shaking my fist and making physical threats. I’m big and ugly and people in this neighborhood aren’t used to having to deal with people like me. Yesterday, a man in a suit driving a Lexus threatened to call the county sheriff. I’m going to have to learn to control myself.

Rule #6: Do not lay idle.
You’re supposed to have a job, put on a suit, and drive your SUV down to the city. When you’re out here on the weekend, for Pete’s sake look busy! Build something, or find something to chop down.

Because if you’re not careful, if you hold still for too long, a funny kind of angst can sneak up on you at the interface. I sit on the deck early in the mornings and watch my neighbors’ garage doors open, the shiny SUVs spilling out and speeding toward the city. When they are gone, my mind wanders and I have trouble getting any work done. Red ants big as raspberries crawl over my bare feet. Black-chinned hummingbirds pass by like spirits in a hurry, trilling, too fast to see. A chocolate-colored red-tail hawk hangs in the wind overhead like a kite. When the neighbor’s air conditioning unit switches off, I can hear the wind hissing softly in the hawk’s wings. I watch through binoculars as he turns his head to look at me; I see him every morning and I am sure he knows my face. He holds himself still, slipping the wind from his wings expertly, standing in the air as surely as I stand on the deck.

I am beginning to blur at the peripheries, as if I might dissolve into the air.

Rule #7: Do not leave your windows open at night.
I quit mowing the lawn a long time ago, and now it has grown up impressively with thistle and goat’s beard and six-foot-tall bunchgrass that moves in the wind with a grace that is hard to describe. The neighbors are beginning to wonder about me. I see their pale white faces loom and flash and disappear in the glare of plate glass. I switched off the central AC and now I sleep with all the windows open. Great horned owls and poor-wills and coyotes speak to me at night and their voices seep into my dreams, wild dreams that I can’t quite recall in the morning. All day I feel uneasy.
Rule #8: Stay in the yard.

Lately I’ve been wandering in the canyon behind the house. There are no children from the neighborhood out there, just a few adults on mountain bikes, going fast, and I avoid the trails. I learned on the Internet that the berries I’ve been eating are serviceberries. The cherries that upset my stomach are chokecherries. In a thick spruce grove way up at the head of the canyon, the light is dim and green and the two great horned owls who hide there during the day aren’t afraid of me. I drank the water from the stream until I read about giardia, and now I carry water from home. Instead of an elder to teach me these things, I have the Internet.

These are the things I have learned on my own: an elk herd up close smells like horses, and when a great horned owl hoots she bends forward and sticks out her tail like a prairie chicken.

What is our cardinal sin here at the interface? The aesthete’s complacency behind the plate glass window? A life of picking and choosing, a mandarin existence bereft of awe and empathy? We look at the world and see nothing but distorted shapes of ourselves: it is not just one or another cultural lens through which we view the world, but rather in our cataclysmic neurosis, we have all been standing in a room of funhouse mirrors for ten thousand years. I have seen this myself, peeking between my fingers at the urban-wildland interface.

Rule #9: Do not fall in love.

As I write, a spotted towhee perched in an oak nearby is watching me with one wild red eye. The chocolate red-tail is circling overhead again, carrying in his talons the slim attenuated shape of a snake, probably another racer. He circles the house with his snake as if it’s something he wants to show me. The snake is still alive, kinking and relaxing its body, hanging down from the hawk like a tail. The hawk screams and circles my house. I’m surprised to find that I’m weeping. I don’t think I’m weeping for the snake.

If you fall in love with the world, the world will not love you back, not in any way you expect or desire or understand. If you value your complacency, keep your guard at the urban-wildland interface. Unless you are very sure of your ground, do not sit and stare at the sky laced with contrails, the forest filled with eyes, the invisible wind bending the tall grass. Do not watch the animals watching you. Do not listen. Do not open your heart. And do not fall in love. Do not fall in love. •
Spine bent under the weight of 96 years, Anne sat on the wall, writing the newest name, Peter. It was a wall her father built like a jigsaw puzzle, just to crack. Unfinished: he didn’t ever plan where it would start or end, just began in the middle. Every summer it grew until it stretched from the woods to the west side of their clapboard house, just yards from the porch. It didn’t really make much sense—it didn’t mark a property line, keep animals in, keep people out. S shaped, it cut through the meadow surrounding the house. When the sun rested its belly against land, the gray of the slate and the green of the grass looked lit from the inside. It stood chest high to a man. She had found a spot with a few rocks sticking out for her to scramble up, walking down it like a path, leading her to her father.

He rarely finished much of anything but bent low in a trance, fitting rock to rock, shutting out the rest. She would often watch, leaning into the groaning wheelbarrow as his long fingers felt along each surface, rejecting one, matching another. Without looking, he spoke. Go fetch me the flat one Annie—the one with that white line through the middle, kinda shaped like a cat’s back. She brought it to him, knowing exactly which one he wanted. That’s a good girl. He tousled her hair and fell back to work. She would finally give up her attention seeking, going down to the pine forest at the end of the field. She liked the soft thread of the fallen needles on her feet.

Her book was almost full, the paper curled, shaded with brown, each name slowly marked in fountain pen. She started the list in grade school
when grandmother died, Lucille. All that remained of grandmother was a pair of knitting needles, size 7 straight, and the slow way she eased out stories. Sometimes she drifted in on the scent of frying fish. She hung in the still air of old, deep closets and in the feel of a hand resting on the back of Anne’s neck.

Anne was on the last page of her book. A book full of friends, heroes, lovers. Each name written slowly under the weight of the pen. She remembered teacher leaning over her shoulder, as she practiced her penmanship. What a nice S, Anne, and your B is quite lovely.

Neither an S nor a B was in Peter’s name, but she loved him fearlessly. He often twirled her in the air at mid-Main Street and kissed her and didn’t care. He could make her breath grow deep with the touch of his muscled hand heavy on her thigh. Weekends they would ride up country through the sweet of summer’s honeysuckle and gardenia. They drove past tilting tobacco barns and gardens thick with fruit. He smelled of tilled soil and the evening sun warming a starched cotton shirt. Instinctively she went for the peach of his earlobe when the skin just above his hip or the hollow of his ankle was clothed. It was just three days since he died and her bones ached for him.

In the last week, his lungs sounded like the growl of an unmuffled diesel engine. Transformed into a grinding old pickup, he rattled, rusted holes showing the pavement, the loose tooth of a rear-view mirror dangling in his eyes. Looking back at the page, his name in fresh ink, and then the names just before him: Sam. Thomas. Sarah Jane. Elena. Two lumped with cancer, another forgot first his address, then his wife, and finally how to swallow. Anne was all that remained. In the final pages, her writing had grown thin, the pen lines toothed as a leaf. Her hand weak, paper skin draped on skeleton, looking strange against the smooth black and gold of the pen. Some of the names were water-spotted. Some that she had to retrace they had faded so. Emma. Sam.

She remembered the feel of Emma’s pregnant belly—so tight and firm with her and Sam’s first boy. She asked Anne to make a mold of her stomach with Paper Mache. Shy Emma. Her breasts so milk-full, still small when matched to the roundness below. Softly, as if she would wake the baby inside, she unbuttoned her blouse, slipped the two hooks from the eyeholes of her bra. The newspaper and paste were cold on her skin, she sucked in her breath a little at every strip. Before it was dry she could feel an ache of labor, it’s time. Anne pulled Emma’s hair back, clipping it in a tortoise-shell barrette and then lifted the mold from her skin. The center dimpled slightly under the wet of glue.

Getting up, she continued along the wall, her feet slapping against the slate. A crow flew toward her and then up, over her head, its shadow rowing along the curve of her backbone and then landing, scattered, leaning on one outstretched wing, then the other. A stab of beak reached for the ground. She whispered another name, her own, wrote it. The crow smelled her, cut grass and wheat, a hint of magnolia. It cocked its head to one side, peering. She looked up from her book to see another bird, a crescent of blue in a crag of the wall, dead. It was still full of muscle, tight, soft feathers in preened lines, each barbule zipped. A bluebird. She picked it up and cradled it with her claw, her whole body rocking. With her free hand she wrote: Sialia sialis, in her book—a triple S.

She walked with intention, the rocks cutting a bit more into her feet, or at least she noticed the pain now. At the border between forest and field, the day went from light to twilight and fireflies began to thicken in the shadows. The wall stopped just before the first tree, its roots already bumping up under the end rocks. The wall still looked like a work in progress, the first layers of rock extending several feet, another section of rock fit together on the ground, ready. A pile of rocks sat to the side, clumps of grass growing from the spaces between. R-ropes of ivy looped around the base of the wall. The mixture of rock and plant...
smelled cool. She
turned and bent down
on her hands and
knees, no longer able to
jump down. The sun and its trail of pink and red were
quickly disappearing behind the meadow and house.
Feeling the grit of the surface denting her skin, she
slid her foot along the wall until she felt the unfinished
ledge below. She left the book on the wall.

Speckling the dusk with
dots of light, the fireflies spread
thick all around her, dressing
her arms in light and pulling her
white hair from its bun.

She lay the bird down for composting. Feather by
wing by foot by scale it disappeared; from blue to red,
then bone white to peat black.

She reached for her dress, unbuttoning the front,
dropping it in a pool at her feet. Like steam the smell
of closets and cedar, of sun-warmed cotton, and the
sound of Emma’s voice—*it’s time*—surrounded her.
The fireflies unbuttoned her skin along the spine,
peeling it back, hanging it on a nearby branch. Light
spilled out, dropped like hot oil on the leaf-matted
ground. She had wings and she had water, she had
blood and wind and the smell of a cool pack of soil.
She curled around a fallen seed, all death and life and
what crawls between. ♦
Osmosis

Mud-slog all day through chill understory, soak sun shafting through the canopy. Lung-sponge the wet air.

Dank lichen haunts minutes unround as rain. Leaf undersides gaze at underbrush skies. Ferns sink roots in loam memory.

Slog through mud all day under overstory, let lungs and feet reconcile their duties. Walk the tightrope trail through the forest and stare hard at what you don’t touch:

A cobweb set to net the sun. Moss undoing a fallen spruce. Marmalade-shaded witch’s butter hard on a stump.

Green ferns emerge from memory folds, repetition of footsteps morphs the brain to moss. Synapses throb like frog croak or the glip glup drip of cave water. Thoughts creep through moist tissue. A newborn slug sleeps inside an old bone.

Jeremy Pataky
Contributors

Jacob Cowgill was born and raised in Montana. He is and continues to be shaped by the state’s geography and people. He currently resides in Missoula where he pursues a Master’s Degree.

Steven Gnam grew up in the Flathead Valley where his passions for the outdoors and photography grew. When not attending classes at the University of Montana, Steven can be found roaming the wild lands and wilderness areas around the state. During the summer, Steven works as a mountaineering guide at a Young Life camp, ‘Beyond Malibu,’ in British Columbia. “Photography is a great medium that allows me to share unique experiences and moments with others.”

Mike McDonald is an Oregonian living in Missoula, studying wildlife biology at the University of Montana.

Matthew Frank is originally from Rochester, New York, where he plans to return in the summer to put to paper his grandfather’s oft-told stories about farming, traveling, and mischief-making. He is currently pursuing a Master’s degree in Environmental Studies at the University of Montana in Missoula. He explores Montana by bike, snowboard, and inner tube.

Brice Jones is a third generation Montanan, who currently lives in East Missoula. He works as a firefighter for the Forest Service during the summer when he isn’t fishing, and when the seasons change he molts into a ski-guide. Photography is one of his many passions, others include sushi rolling, slack-lining, home improvement and talking in a Spanish accent to his feline “Boca” who thinks she’s a dog.

Genevieve Jessop Marsh grew up in North Carolina, raised by a not-so-absentminded-professor and a bird watching, gardening, shh-can-you-hear-the-owl writer. After bouncing from New York to Oregon to Vermont, she has stopped in Missoula for two years of graduate school. This past semester, she has been visiting, thinking, and writing about Sweet Grass County and a community of ranchers there. She enjoys having a good long stare at the ceiling to sort her thoughts, playing liars dice, and, like her grandfather, the feel of the sun warming her back. She has just adopted a sweet old gal of a kitty, Marie, who looks more like an ocelot than the cat that she is.

Heather McKee is a displaced naturalist fresh from the Blue Ridge Mountains. As a child, she hunted for feathers and interesting bugs. As an adult, she hunts for feathers, interesting bugs, and local businesses (and microbrews). She strives to understand and harmonize relations between human and non-human communities. Currently, she is exploring the new ecosystems around Missoula, while pursuing a graduate degree concentrating in Environmental Writing at the University of Montana.

James A. McLaughlin is a native of Virginia who moved west in 2000. He holds a law degree and an M.F.A. in creative writing, both from the University of Virginia. James and his wife live in a canyon near Salt Lake City, where he writes fiction and essays and maintains a day job in private land conservation. He has published work in various publications, including Camas, River Teeth, Clackamas Literary Review, and Portland Review.

Krista M. Miller is a Montana native soon to be a photojournalism student at the University of Montana. She enjoys photography, skiing, biking, learning, and timber-framing and doesn’t like waste, shopping, arrogant people, and when someone says you can’t do something. All she really wants is a home on the range (no, not the stove)...

Jeremy Pataky came to Missoula, his eastern-most home, by way of Idaho, Washington, and Alaska to pursue an MFA in poetry. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in The Southeast Review, Crab Creek Review, Square Lake, Jeopardy, Anchorage Press, Alaska Public Radio, and others.

Teresa Ponikvar has lived in the suburbs of San Diego, Philadelphia, San Jose, and the Mexican cities of Pachuca and Morelia. She currently lives in Missoula, Montana, where she writes, studies, teaches, dances badly but enthusiastically, and resolves at least once a week to quit drinking coffee.

Jeff Ross was raised in Madison, Wisconsin, and educated at Santa Barbara City College and the University of California, Davis. Currently he is an M.F.A. student in Creative Writing at the University of Montana.

Kim Todd is very encouraged by the recent sighting of the ivory-billed woodpecker and is keeping an eye out for Carolina parakeets. Her first book, Tinkering with Eden, A Natural History of Exotics in America, received the Sigurd Olson Nature Writing Award. Her second book, Chrysalis: Maria Sibylla Merian and the Secrets of Metamorphosis, is due out in early 2007. She lives in Missoula, Montana.
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Nature evolves into conscious metaphor –
Think omen: sign: uncanny crow call
outside the tent the second you awake,
ground print relieved into your back.

Phosphorescence time lapses stars,
gills suture in the neck of a human fetus,
thumb bones gesture inside the darkness of whale flukes.

Maps are painted in the caves of geese skulls.
An afternoon’s clouds mimic
the undersides of jellyfish. Castaways
dwell in every living being – worm, whale,
bacterium, beetle, woman.

Within houses piled on hollow foundations
lives transform into themselves. Outside, moss
and lichen begin the long process of reclamation,
aided by rain and sunlight. Hours silt the pores of our skin.

We stay busy becoming fruit, wine, vegetable, dirt,
symbol. Our ears are small beaches lapped by waves.
Our blood coagulates into sap, while the backs
of our eyelids absorb the stories
that let us believe our lives.

Jeremy Pataky
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