Bear Country

You were there, you remember
the toothmarks in the corner,
my father says. A grizzly grabs
the stiff, gray-green canvas,
shaking its head and tugging,
and the tent jerks, and stakes pull
loose—the past in the teeth
of a story told differently.
It was after bedtime and much
too dark for me to see.

Now trailhead and picnic tables
are marked with warnings,
paw tracks. My father leans back,
chews his lip, hands in his pockets.
At 73, he’s as slim and earnest
as a boy, and I can tell he’d like
for us to get back in his truck.
If we just keep talking,
The bears will hear us coming,
I say. Let’s hike to the lake.

So he recalls a shaggy Kodiak
we saw in a museum, Eleven feet tall,
standing, that brown bear, looking
out over our heads, stuffed but so
lifelike the blue horizon receded
to Alaska. Later I read about campers
killed on the north slope, a bear
staring down a passing canoe
from beside a heap of tent poles,
bones, tinned food, an unfired gun.

And I think of my father, peering
up the hillsides, down the trail. Maybe
imagining us gasping like fish
or gutted below the pines, while
I was whistling in the shade—for birds,
who’ll come because they’re curious.
He didn’t see the tanager flashing
ahead or singing from a branch,
yellow body rising like a flame,
trembling throat splashed red.

Dana Sonnenschein
Carol Barrett’s *Calling in the Bones* (2005) won the Snyder Prize from Ashland Poetry Press. Her poems have appeared in *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment, Poetry Northwest, JAMA,* and many other magazines. She is a professor and academic dean at Union Institute & University in Cincinnati.

Heather Cahoon is from the Flathead Indian Reservation in western Montana where she is an enrolled tribal member. She received her MFA in Poetry from the University of Montana in 2001 and an Interdisciplinary PhD in History, Anthropology and Native American Studies in 2005. Her poems have appeared in regional and national publications, including *Big Sky Journal* and *Hanging Loose.* She currently lives in Missoula with her husband, Jesse.

Sarah Marie Cook has been shooting photos for most of her life. An Oregonian since 1982, she currently resides in Bend, where there has been a recent explosion of development. She feels that Oregon’s scenic backyard must be protected, and to that end, she volunteers her time with the local group Oregon Natural Desert Association. When not behind the lens, she enjoys cooking, foreign films and playing the mandolin.

Samantha Epstein is a wilderness instructor in the high desert of Idaho. She hails from Chattanooga, Tennessee, but has landed here in Missoula to pursue a master’s degree in Environmental Studies from the University of Montana.

Gary Ferguson has written for dozens of national publications – including *Vanity Fair,* the *Los Angeles Times,* and *Outside Magazine* – and is also the author of sixteen books on nature and science. His recent title *Decade of the Wolf* was chosen as the 2006 Montana Book of the Year. *Hawks Rest: A Season in the Remote Heart of Yellowstone,* was the first nonfiction work to win both the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award and the Mountains and Plains Booksellers Award for Nonfiction. Gary is a regular presenter on nature and ecology issues, and has appeared on more than 200 television and radio programs from New York to Los Angeles; his nature-oriented essays can be heard on National Public Radio affiliates across the country. He is also a keynote speaker at universities and for conservation organizations across the country, focusing on such varied topics as wildlife, nature mythology, and the social and psychological value of wilderness.

Mike Fiebig grew up on the banks of Bear Creek, a tributary of the Grand River in Western Michigan. Over the past ten years he has lived and worked in Alaska, Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Texas, Utah and Wyoming as a river ranger, guide and outdoor educator. Mike and his wife now live in Missoula where he is pursuing a master’s degree in environmental policy and reflecting upon his “decade of the truck.”

Matthew Frank pedaled through Montana a few summers ago as part of a charity cross-country cycling trip and months later he came back to Missoula to set up shop. He’s a freshly-minted graduate of the University of Montana’s Environmental Studies Program, and now he’s cutting his teeth as a reporter and editor for the online magazine *New West.* Matt grew up in western New York and is a graduate of Allegheny College.

Erika Fredrickson grew up in Missoula and has left many times only to be lured back. When not writing about independent rock music for the *Missoula Independent* she spends her time in the Environmental Studies graduate program at University of Montana solving the world’s problems. Her past jobs have included building trails in the Bitterroot Wilderness and herding sheep in Italy.

Gary W. Hawk is an adjunct professor at the Davidson Honors College of the University of Montana and a furniture maker. His love of literature and concern for the environment have taken him on several occasions to the Island Institute’s Summer Symposium in Sitka, Alaska. His visits to that landscape have left him with indelible images and the music of true words.

Noah Jackson is a Missoula-based working photographer who focuses on capturing the edges of communities and forests both in the American West and the tropical South. Bodies of work include forest users in the Philippines and migrant farmers. In October, Noah will leave for Malaysia to work on a collaborative project with indigenous forest communities. Information and show schedule are available via email (jackson.noah@gmail.com.)

Former desert-dweller Rick Kempa currently lives in Rock Springs, Wyoming, where he teaches writing and philosophy at Western Wyoming College. His work has recently appeared in *Bellowing Ark,* *Mountain Gazette,* *Pilgrimage,* and *Matter,* and, some years ago, in the Sierra Club anthology *American Nature Writing* 1997.

Mike Lommler was born and raised in Illinois, but has spent the last several years bumming around the Southwest. Since first putting in on the water of the Colorado River eight years ago, Mike has been searching for exactly what it is about that place that owns him. He’s recently taken a small, but very pleasant, detour to Missoula. Mike wants to believe in reincarnation, and if given a choice would emerge into the next life as a wolf.

Dave Loos came to Missoula from Washington, D.C., where he spent six years as a journalist. He is originally from Massachusetts, where he grew up on Thoreau Way, two miles from Emerson Hospital and three miles from Walden Pond. He hopes some of that good karma has worn off.

Kylie Paul is an environmental studies graduate student focusing on wildlife and highway conflict and mitigation. Roadkill, habitat fragmentation, and invasive species fire her up. She spends her free time on bike, on ice, in cleats, or in the woods. Wherever she is, her camera seems to follow.

Rob Rich was an intern and editorial assistant for *Camas* during the Spring 2007 semester. His essay is the first in a regular series that introduces aspiring writers to the world of publishing, and gives them the opportunity to wrestle with (and write about) the issues facing the West.

An occupational therapist living in western North Dakota, Jonie Rider has two main hobbies: taking pictures and rescuing psycho farm cats. Jonie is sister of Kalie Rider and daughter of professional photographer, Terri Rider.

Kalie Rider, a nutritionist living, studying, and working in Missoula, recommends eating the beef, wheat, oilseeds, etc. from the High Plains. All are made by proud people who need and respect vast, open space. Also, she would like to see more people eating people (see essay if morbidly confused). She says, “Thanks to my grandparents and great-grandparent for teaching me intuitive things.”

Missoula-area photographer Michael Schweizer is a manager at the Dark Room in downtown Missoula and does freelance work on the side. Originally from Ohio, he holds a degree in Environmental Studies with a focus in photography from Allegheny College in Pennsylvania.

Dana Sonnenschein’s publications include *Corpus* (2003), *No Angels But These* (2005), and *Natural Forms* (2006). Recently, her work has appeared in *Black Warrior Review,* *The MacGuffin,* *Northwest Review,* *Sassafras Review,* and *Quarter After Eight.* She teaches literature and writing at Southern Connecticut State University.

Fred Swanson lives in Salt Lake City, Utah, where he writes about the forests, wilderness areas, and park lands of the West. He is a 1977 University of Montana environmental studies graduate, and for a time wrote environmental impact statements for the Montana Department of State Lands. He is currently researching the history of the Bitterroot National Forest.
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Cover photograph by Kylie Paul
From the Editors

First Person

There are days when I can’t help but feel that publishing an environmental journal is an incongruous endeavour, like driving your SUV to the monthly meeting of the Sierra Club in a neighboring town, or flying across the country to conduct research for an important essay about global warming. The means, it seems, sometimes undercut the ends, contributing to the problems they are meant to help solve. Like trying to drink yourself sober.

Despite the importance of our mission and the quality of our content, I can’t help but wince every time we send Camas off to the printer. The devil is in the paper. Making paper is extremely hard on the environment, and we writers and publishers (and readers, too) require an inordinate amount of it. Producing paper has traditionally required not only trees but whole forests, and the process of converting these complex ecosystems into the flat sheets of fibre with which we winnow our words comes, I’m sorry to say, at a significant ecological cost: the biodiversity loss that accompanies deforestation; toxic pollution of our air and water; the consumption of vast quantities of energy, usually generated by dams or coal-fired power plants; and the production of a large amount of solid waste, which clogs our landfills with crud.

Not surprisingly, Americans use more paper per capita than any other nation in the world – 700 pounds for every man, woman and child, more than 100 million tons of it each and every year. Camas contributes its share to that total, too: More than 100 pounds every time we print an issue.

All of which is a long-winded way to explain the new paper. For 15 years, Camas’s visual trademark has been its tan and textured paper, which gave it a rustic, rootsy feel. Although relatively inexpensive, this paper contains very little recycled content and no post-consumer waste, which means the environmental costs of using it were relatively high. We knew we could do better, and we knew that if we didn’t, who would?

The issue you now hold in your hands, Dear Reader, is the first-ever Camas printed on 100% forest-free paper. Forest-free? It’s Living Tree Paper’s “Vanguard Recycled Plus,” a paper that tries to tip the balance away from lowest possible cost and back toward the benefits of a healthy and intact environment.

This high-quality paper is made with 90 percent recycled post-consumer fiber, which comes mainly from municipal and office recycling programs, and 10 percent hemp/flax fiber, a rapidly-renewable resource farm-grown specifically for manufacturing purposes under environmentally responsible conditions. In the end, no new trees are cut or forests destroyed to produce Camas.

The fiber is turned into pulp (and eventually paper) without the use of chlorine or chlorine derivatives, which means a much less polluting paper-making process. As a result, we are helping to improve water quality and maintain healthy fisheries.

Now, every time Camas arrives in your mailbox, you can hold it comfortably in your hands and know (approximately) two fewer trees, 600 gallons less water, and 0.65 million BTUs less energy (enough energy to power an average American household for three days) were used in its production. More than 130 pounds of emissions, including climate-warming carbon dioxide, weren’t spewed into the air, and more than 70 pounds of solid waste wasn’t dumped in a landfill. Although it raises our production costs by 10 percent, it’s the cleanest and most responsible way to give you what you want, and we think that’s important.

To be fair, it’s far from perfect – we still use energy and water and other natural resources to produce Camas,
which undoubtedly comes with environmental costs not yet accounted for in the purchase price of our goods and services. But it's a far-cry better than it was, in a world that could sure use it. In fact, one of the greatest benefits may be to help create a market for certified, environmentally responsible paper. At a time when many paper companies are dropping forest-friendly paper products because they simply can't convince enough people to pay a small premium for big social and environmental benefits, it feels good to spend a little extra money to do the right thing.

Whether it's Frederick Swanson coming to terms with the impact of his bison-killing ancestors (page 8), Rob Rich wrestling with the meaning of the wolf (page 16), or Mike Fiebig comparing the removal of a toxic dam to his love affair with a truck (page 32), our lives are full of wants and desires, tradeoffs and compromises, each of which will help to determine the kind of world our children and grandchildren get to live in.

If we start to make every choice based not on the incremental cost to us as individuals, but on the benefits to the larger natural and human communities of which we are irrevocably a part, we will have taught the next generations the most important lesson of all – to leave behind a world that is healthier and more equitable than the one we inherited from our own parents.

We think it's worth it. Don't you?

Camas provides a forum for environmental issues and creative writing related to the nature and culture of the West.

We welcome your submissions of art, photography, current book reviews, poetry, fiction, and nonfiction.

www.umt.edu/camas
Death Snag in Potlatch

All the night wail and flash-flood the old burn
drowns Paintbrush, tumbles branch
and stinging nettles
pelts and softens the cindered bark
of a bug-bitten and hollowed tree
stooped but still looming,
buckled between root and gravity.
It groans with tin breath and keeps open
cavern chest, empty and gaping
a coroner’s window,
a charcoal skeleton with starry belly
cradling the sky for moon.
Frames the far off inky landscape:
bony crags, waterfalls falling
like unrolling yarn,
the evenings’ gleaming owls,
and a lookout dimmed —
a metal rod lit in gathered pummel.

Broken and breaking and cold
the weight of heartwood splintered and holed,
burned through by buried ember.
In last year’s hot breath of summer, the raging
windy weather sipped up the air,
parched the grainy trunk to bloodless orange,
turning bottled furnace to wild and murderous feast.
A leafy fist
burst into birth.

Erika Fredrickson
On the morning of September 10, 1882, three small wooden boats pulled over to the bank of the Missouri River as it flowed through the austere, eroded hills of eastern Montana. Seven men got out, raised their rifles, and began firing at a lone buffalo bull that had been grazing at the river’s edge. The old bull climbed the river bank to escape; one of the hunters, seeing they were about to lose their quarry, dropped to his knee and leveled two well-aimed shots that brought the beast down.

The marksman was J. W. Ellyson, my mother’s great-uncle; at his side was his brother, Allen Ellyson, who became my great-grandfather. J. W. recorded the event in the journal he kept of their voyage, the only written record of my family’s adventures in the waning days of the frontier West. He also chronicled (although this was certainly not his intent) a spendthrift attitude toward the resources of the West that has remained our legacy to this day.

Three weeks before their buffalo hunt, the Ellysons and a third companion had drawn their wages from the owner of a small sawmill near the Continental Divide in the headwaters of the Missouri, fifteen miles southwest of the mining camp of Butte. For nearly two years the men had sawn the spruce, pine, and fir of the Divide’s high-elevation forests into mine supports and housing lumber. Now they were headed downriver to take up homesteads in Nebraska, traveling in a skiff they had built at the lumber camp and hauled down to the nearby Big Hole River.

For two months the men lived a Mark Twain life on the river – fishing, running rapids, towing their skiff through shallows, and marveling at the cliffs and mountains rising against the sky. Other travelers joined them along the way, for in the years before the Northern Pacific Railroad, the Missouri was the state’s chief transportation corridor. They obtained meat by shooting ducks, geese, deer, and antelope; when the meat basket was full they continued to shoot, leaving animals where they fell – game, fowl, furbearers, and varmints alike. Gunning seemed to be their chief form of entertainment during the long days on the river.

While floating a slack stretch of water between Helena and Great Falls, J. W. took ill and “...told my friends to row me ashore where I could die under the shade of a tree. On getting ashore we saw two antelope, and my sickness vanished...we emptied our belts of cartridges, but did not harm the antelope.”

At the mouth of the Musselshell River they stopped at the outpost of a hunter who gave them
part of a buffalo he had just killed. J. W. noted stacks of dried meat awaiting sale as well as cordwood-sized piles of hides. This was a prime migration route between the Yellowstone River and the prairies extending into Canada. The men followed trails through the dried grass, enticed by buffalo droppings and other sign, but the animals had moved on.

Their sole bison kill two days later provided only sport, for as J. W. noted, “he was too old to eat and his hide not good.” They saw no more downriver; by the 1880s the last bison herds south of the Canadian border had taken refuge in the most remote drainage basins of eastern Montana. Few or none could be found farther east in the Dakotas. The Ellyson brothers arrived in Montana too late to witness the fabulous migratory herds that stretched for dozens of miles across the prairie—scenes that evoked amazement from military scouts and other explorers. In 1871 Richard Irving Dodge, an army colonel, saw one herd on the Arkansas River in the central plains that he estimated was 25 miles across and 50 miles deep, numbering nearly half a million animals. Historians have questioned such reports, but regardless of their accuracy, the upper Missouri Basin alone may have been home to seven or eight million bison well into the 1800s. As late as the 1870s travelers from the eastern states could thrill to the sight of almost unfathomable herds grazing in a primeval landscape. Here was one of the last messengers from the Pleistocene, an era when humans were surrounded by abundance beyond reckoning.

By 1882, though, the final decimation of the bison herds of the plains—principally for their hides but also for meat and sport—was underway. By the late 1880s market hunters, utilizing river boats and the railroads, had killed all but perhaps a thousand animals. In these days of enlightened game laws we look back on the carnage of the nineteenth century with amazement—the photographs of bison bones piled in great mountains, the tales of hunters gunning down the magnificent animals to take only their tongues. It seems incredible to us that these men could be so heedless of the future.

Today our big game, waterfowl, and most other wildlife have come under government protection, largely as a result of outcries by sportsmen and conservationists who witnessed the spectacular destructiveness of the market hunter. Enough bison were spared to form a limited breeding population, and they now number around 65,000—though wild populations exist only in Yellowstone and a few other isolated preserves. But these and other wildlife owe their existence to more than legislation and game limits; attitudes have changed, and few sportsmen today would kill so indiscriminately even if it were legal.

It seems to take the near-extinction of wildlife to get us to alter our behavior. Predictions of the bison’s fate came as early as 1844, when Josiah Gregg published his book *Commerce of the Prairies*; he warned that “...the continual, and wanton slaughter of them by travellers and hunters, and the still greater havoc made among them by the Indians...are fast reducing their numbers, and must ultimately effect their total annihilation from the continent.” In 1871 legislation to protect the bison was introduced in Congress, but it went nowhere. Even champions of the animal such as William T. Hornaday of the Smithsonian Institution continued to hunt them into the 1880s. Only the bison’s virtual disappearance forced our hand. The story was repeated with distressing regularity: the snowy egret, trumpeter swan, bighorn sheep, wolf, grizzly, peregrine falcon, and bald eagle all came close to oblivion. Many other species, notably those lacking spectacular antlers or feathers, were pushed over the threshold. Slaughter was the sport of many, if not most, of the plains travelers. The white culture of the nineteenth century didn’t just tolerate waste, it institutionalized it. Whether cutting timber, claiming land, breaking sod, or gunning down animals, to hold back was to be left behind.

My relations made only a minor contribution to this pillage, if that is any consolation. But reading this bit of family history naturally invited a look at the incongruities of our own time. I don’t hunt or fish, but in my everyday life I still dip from an immense pool of natural resources. I’m reminded of this every time I get in the car, take out the garbage, or dial up...
the thermostat. Individual choices add up. In 1952, the year I was born, the United States used about 15 quadrillion BTUs of petroleum, outstripping for the first time our consumption of coal. Today we use more than 40 “quads” of petroleum per year. According to the U.S. Department of Energy, total energy use during this period has more than doubled. We draw from a deep well, but not one without limit: increasing consumption must one day meet the curve of a declining resource.

My ancestors did not have biologists on hand to keep track of bison populations, but our current spree is well charted and publicized. The difficulty, as always, lies in understanding how our personal habits fit into the big picture, and here it helps to look back at another century’s customs. Did mountains of buffalo bones a century ago seem profligate? Consider rush hour on the freeway, or a mall parking lot on Saturday afternoon. Did shooting egrets for feathers to adorn ladies’ hats seem the pinnacle of preening? I offer the Escalade. My participation in the current-day plunder is less showy, but over the years I’ve run more than ten thousand gallons of gasoline through the cylinders of my various cars.

With some thought I can connect my everyday habits to the smog that envelops the city where I live, or to the more abstract buildup of carbon dioxide in the global atmosphere. Yet I drive on. This is normal behavior for the citizens of an industrialized country, just as it was perfectly acceptable in our agrarian past to hunt animals with abandon and cut forests indiscriminately. A few individuals forswear the use of personal cars or opt for biofuels or electric vehicles, but their good will is crushed in the overall stampede. Meanwhile, manufacturers oblige our every want, rolling out huge pickup trucks with 350-horsepower engines: giantism in its rawest expression.

On a recent night flight across Texas I looked down at the spread of our free-roaming culture – ghostly patterns of light reaching to the dark horizon, a glowing spider-web of cities, highways, strip malls, and distribution hubs. It appeared ethereal, even majestic. I wondered if the early-day travelers on these same plains weren’t similarly awestruck as they witnessed the infinitude of wildlife before them. What I could not see, of course, was the network of wells, pipelines, access roads, pumping stations, processing plants, transmission lines, generating stations, and coal mines that undergird the whole system.

Not too far in the future, fossil fuels may take on a value analogous to the importance we now place on rare wildlife. Even though we will still have personal vehicles, I suspect that motorists will not be so cavalier about their use. A trip to a national park will be a carefully planned and anticipated event, not a weekend whim. One’s commute will loom large in any decision about where to live and where to work. Other patterns of normality will change: jet travel will resume its former status as a rare luxury; enormous, energy-chewing homes will meet with as much approbation as did the extravagant costume balls of the Gilded Age.

My ancestor, sighting in on his buffalo on the Montana prairie, could have taken a deep breath and lowered his rifle. He did not, and perhaps he could not have indulged any such thought. We seem to have the option. If we make the change in time, the day may come when my children’s grandchildren, looking through the pages of our magazines, will marvel that the highways once held unending streams of powerful beasts, ceaselessly moving, uncomprehending of their future.
On the Edges of Baranof

We swim in agitated circles at the mouth of streams we seem to recall,

occasionally testing the height of pointed rocks that bar the way.

We are ready to advance, pool by pool until we can present our ripe

and swollen selves to riffles and runs where we hope to place the future

in the open hands of the present and then let ourselves dissolve

among the stones, or helpless with fatigue, be carried into the forest

by eagles and bears foraging along the banks. We want to make this passage now

but the way is not yet open to us; only a skin of shining water

runs over a crowned alluvial fan. We churn in the shallows waiting, waiting.

Meanwhile, out at sea the slack tide shifts and on a rising hand of deliverance

we are gradually lifted above every obstacle and with a few strokes pass into the way.

Rick Kempa
Bone weary in the wee hours, rolling west out of Colorado. I make it only as far as Green River before pulling off for a nap at the back of an abandoned gas station, easing past a sad toss of weeds and cracked concrete and rusted barrels. The rest of the night plays out to the whine of big trucks on Interstate 70: some running for Denver, others west to I-15 and then on to California. Every so often one slows and exits, rumbles past me here on the outskirts — pausing barely long enough for a tank of fuel, maybe a microwaved burrito at the Gas-N-Go on West Main. Nearly everyone, it seems, is just passing through.

Listening to the engines in the darkness, I’m reminded of the story of an anthropologist from Boston sent west to California in the 1920s, assigned the job of chronicling the language of the Pit River Indians, even then on the verge of extinction. At one point the young researcher asks the elders their word for newcomers - recent arrivals, European descendents like himself. The men get nervous, refuse to answer. Finally, after much cajoling, they give in. The word is *inalladui*, one old man explains. Tramp. We can’t understand how your people travel through without ever stopping long enough to learn something of the land; without ever binding a place to your heart. We think a part of you must be dead inside.

I’m up again at dawn, glad to trade the four-lane for Highway 95 – a sweet, lonely path along the San Rafael Swell. Beyond the road the land is dappled with locoweed and purple vetch, dropseed and cheatgrass and fescue, here and there the occasional huddle of juniper or cottonwood. This was Jane’s country. A wind-shorn mix of rock and wind and sky that changed her utterly, turning her at 18 from a Midwest farmer’s daughter into an outdoor educator. An Outward Bound instructor. A national park ranger. “You know if something ever happens to me,” she said shortly before she died, relighting a conversation we’d had years before, “I want my ashes scattered in my favorite places.” Five days later she was gone, lost in a canoeing accident on the Kopka River, in the dark woods of northern Ontario.
And so I travel. Journeying across the West with a small brown pottery jar of her ashes, ultimately bound for six perfect pieces of wilderness: Idaho’s Sawtooth Mountains, where 25 years ago I stood beside her in a field of camas lilies, me in my gray suit, she in her wedding dress; a certain little cabin in the pine-covered foothills of Wyoming’s Absaroka Range; the heartbreakingly beautiful northern range of Yellowstone, where on spring days she knelt beside 12-year old kids, hearing them catch their breath at the sight of wolves; a couple of alpine gardens near home, deep in the Beartooth Mountains of Montana. And today, Capitol Reef National Park, in southern Utah.

These were the essential landscapes of our lives. And though for me right now the joy is nearly gone from them, choked by this jagged pill of grief, Jane’s last wish means I cannot stay away. Later in the afternoon on the eastern edge of Capitol Reef, with the sun lighting clusters of rabbitbrush and Apache plume, I grab my pack and walk with tears streaming down my face toward the great maze of the Waterpocket Fold. Barren capes of slick rock. Slot canyons. A lone raven, his voice full of gravel. At one point a slight breeze from the east begins to rise, and that’s when I open the lid and release her, watching puffs of ash drift into the upturned fringes of the fold. Even these scant vestiges of her are not long for this world. Soon they’ll be disassembled into tiny jots of carbon; those, in turn, feeding the very web of life that so inspired her.

What the Pit River Indians understood that the young anthropologist from Boston likely did not, is that to stop moving, to rest on wild land, is to be nudged toward relationship. Or more specifically, toward an urge to weave the stories of relationship. Awaiting us on unfettered lands are exquisite metaphors — images to feed not so much our quest for meaning, as our hunger for place. Even for me, on this somber afternoon, there are notions of kinship. In the silence. In the faint scent of dust. In a frail and lovely patch of sumac withering in the hot sun, dropping leaves, desperate for rain.
Canvas You

Aren't you a picture
of vigor groping the ground for something to pull.
A blanket of raspberry petals
carpets our knees,
your laughter thunders through the tree limbs riddled with infestation.

And when you say racetrack
you mean the curves
spining their way through shoulder blades of green hills
and when you say it's like a car commercial you mean

the sunlight gleams through wavy wheat, the heat
is an ignited heart beating on the winking water,
the ivory trees hook roots into the cool earth and porous pasture, laced in lady slippers, warmed in the blue simmer of sky –

And when you say
pit of putrescence you misunderstand:
the marsh and dew milkweed, the thick decay of cedar.

An open mouth of spidery brush bares its daisy petals,
not a snarl
but a full glistening set of love me, love me nots. You are a portrait of indifference.

Still, torrents of rain won't be held back
from the cloud's bursting incisions.
Even stitches disappear.
Even the river blinks rapidly,
a speck of dirt caught
in a web of beaming shingles.

I will open your petal arms, pull crumpled leaves
over your middle, your cheeks
are Mars, blackbird hair, full lips of severed moss, pine needled fingers. Aren't you
a picture of stony resistance?
Mouth cave, beating heart wings, snow buried hands.

And there in the night sky your blank eyes
shooting across the horizon.
Elk Thirst

Yellow fields thirst. Dryness lifts the blues and greens from trees that grow in uneven rows along the Flathead's angry pace.

Heather Cahoon

Shallow water follows the route it has for centuries, wrapping around cliffs, rocks that climb into the sky, sharp edges softened by water that forever slides across these walls as it flows to urgent falls. Here it plummets and dives deep.

Rocks and sticks turn bleak eyes away. Brook trout swim fast and leave streaks. The sun reflects in silver scales by day, at night passion.

Strong colors eat the sky. One elk steps into blurred water and drinks. His thoughts, improbable, he looks and drinks the sky.
I gazed out the window at the untrammeled Alaskan landscape of Denali National Park. The sun and blue sky illuminated the full beauty of America’s highest peak, Denali – the Great One. The scene was a pure gift, my dreams of the wild matched by the view. But in all its glory, the wild scene somehow felt incomplete. Something was missing. Then the bus slowed again, just as it had for caribou, dall sheep, and moose. This stop drew extra excitement. People vacated their seats and squeezed towards the front, their cameras recording the existence of America’s premier wilderness icon. My wildest dreams came true.

The wolf’s slender, tawny-gray frame loped effortlessly across the road in front of us. He stopped at the roadside and glanced at us, his tongue hanging in the midsummer heat.

His eyes captured me. Authentic, endless, sublime, they were like windows into his soul. They brought me out of myself and into the wild. His returning gaze passed quickly through ours – and then he vanished into the brush.

I felt petty as the camera lenses clicked. It seemed the wolf sensed our attempt to capture a link with the villain of Little Red Riding Hood, the carnivorous canine with five-inch paws, the livestock assassin – those motley, biased assumptions held by our anthropocentric American culture. Compiled from cultural history and supported by scientific “fact,” these associations are only fragments of our collective knowledge. This disjointed way of knowing, however, only illuminates partial understanding of the wolf’s meaning and significance.

Modern Americans mostly know wolves as they do daily weather – a shifting body of assumptions informing specific decisions. We see wolves as sun or storm, founding our probabilities on polarities. These probabilities are often understood in a brief, isolated context. A more comprehensive understanding views wolves as climate – prevailing environmental conditions understood over greater space and time. When wolves are seen this way, individual associations are still present, but polarities dissolve, replaced by broader, more honest patterns.

Our current anthropocentrism sees the wolf, like weather, as “other,” an oppositional force outside our control. This division is illustrated by the maps narrating the story of the wolf in the United States over the last five centuries. The first map, from the pre-settlement era, is saturated with the shading of nationwide wolf inhabitation. Alongside people,
flora, and fauna indigenous to this continent, wolves occupied mountain, valley, forest, and prairie — an American range from sea to shining sea. The more recent, second map contrasts the first with a great, white void, both a real and a metaphorical symbol of the wolves' absence after only five hundred years of European expansion.

Where settlers entered, wolves were forced out. Wolves were stormy weather to new Americans — threats to agriculture, property, and the values of European inheritance. Do these maps show that wolves and Americans must be incompatible species destined by nature to be mutually exclusive?

Americans have only recently begun to know a map of coexistence with wolves. Over the last 30 years, wolves returned to ranges around the Great Lakes and in the U.S. Northern Rockies. More than one thousand wolves now share Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming with other wildlife and people. Many people resist the changing maps and interpret the wolves as enemies to the lifeway established in their absence. To some, coexistence with wolves means sacrifice, change, regulation — death to the comforts and conventions of our human-centered nation.

Clearly, we have not yet appreciated what the wolf can teach about living harmoniously on the land. The wolf kills for food and exhibits territorial behavior, two traits we have adopted well. Yet the wolf also exemplifies an ecosystem approach, emphasizing nature's interconnectedness, a notion we have been slow to grasp.

Twelve years after reintroduction, Yellowstone National Park scientists show evidence of the wolf's "trophic cascade" effect of increasing diversity and integrity in the ecosystem. The wolves' regulation of elk behavior enhances growth potential in riparian areas — causing regeneration of willows and other riparian species. This indicates the wolf is not a conquering usurper, but a complex creature that is both killer and creator of the landscape's potential.

The time has come for us to absorb the total ecological wisdom of this animal into American culture. Returning wolves offer a second chance for a new relationship with nature based on coexistence, not conflict. Returning shading of wolves in the map of the West signals a desire to collaborate and reunite.

The wolves' future depends on sharing the land. Human futures may also depend on our acceptance of wolves as natural teachers and fellow seekers of survival. We must find ourselves in the eyes of wolves and allow them to see more deeply into ours. The connection dwells among our shared wild strength to survive — the inheritance to live in a hopeful world. The wild strength of the wolf is adopting this promising ecological vision, and it is our time to follow.

Cut-off

This day too is passing as the sun arches over the greyness of a quiet sky.

Like a dancer's sleek arm in an overcurve of movement passing to the undercurve of night.

This is what repeats itself in the desert.
My Great Grandma, Alpha Dow, is dying. Her body has been degrading for quite some time, but her bite and wit are now, for the first time in 93 years, showing significant signs of degeneration. She is my Godmother and my mentor. I have visited her all throughout my life and feel as though I understand when older traditions speak of the wisdom of the elders. We write letters to each other, and although mental deterioration grows apparent in her recent writings, her mentality still fights through her hand into the shaky pen and into her almost indecipherable words. In those words is an intuition that has taken me years of studying nutrition and a childhood growing up on a modern-day farm to even begin to grasp.

Last September she wrote:

"Yes fast food will not get to far cause its Gods way we plant & grow our food, & fast food don't have what our bodys needs. We are to eat vegetables & all fruit we can to be Healthy. Theres food to heal all sickness if only the smart people will let it be none to us. Im 93 & heard this is truth lots of times. (We are what we eat)."

She lives, and dies, in Fairview, Montana, right on that eastern border. It doesn’t take long living in Western Montana to understand that the High Plains of Eastern Montana and Western North Dakota, my home, are perceived as an economic, ecologic, and social wasteland. In my Politics of Food class, I learned that the High Plains hold some of the poorest people of America. In my Montana Economy class, I learned that the economy is struggling on the High Plains because the land has been overgrazed and the beauty it once possessed (a vastly biodiverse landscape comparable to the Serengeti) is now lost. In my Building Effective Environmental Organizations class, I learned that environmentalists are making commendable efforts to understand the kind of people I grew up with. And finally, in my Greening of Religion class, I learned that the native spirituality
and culture of the High Plains was eradicated by the capitalistic white people, or “wasichus,” of my past and maybe even my ancestry. Native communities turned into farming communities, which turned into farming businesses, which now seem to be more and more dominated by Wal-Marts and oil wells.

The dying communities parallel Grandma Alpha’s dying state. She, a well-known strong woman of her time, worked hard to keep her community alive.

As it dies, she dies.
As she dies, it dies.

G

reat Grandma has always been religiously spiritual. During our consistent visits we would discuss our opposite lives. I would report on the many rambunctious and active things I was involved with and she would tell of her slow, daily life, as well as stories of being a midwife, a masseuse, a mother, a healer, and an old time dancer. Once in a while, however, it would seem as if she would break from her typical tone and facial expression. She would lean toward me in her favorite recliner and say, completely out of context and even seemingly out of herself, “Trust in God.” Such experiences made me doubt my doubts.

She believes in the power of prayer in a way that I revered as a Christian kid. She once spoke of a past cyst on her shoulder. “It was so hard and it had legs like an octopus. I would follow the legs with my fingers down my back and my chest and my arm. One stretched clear across this way.” She would then move her delicate, used, and shaky hand across her collarbone to where it met with the center of her chest. She didn’t like the cyst, so she prayed it away. She told me this with a mischievous smile, like she had gotten away with something. I could hear that smile say, “Don’t tell God, but I abused the power of prayer to make it go away!” And it did go away, twice.

Later, in my college years, I attended a lecture from a man who meditated for spiritual and religious purposes. He spoke of the physical anomalies that occur with devout and practiced meditation, such as controlling blood flow. The collective medical and spiritual sides of me wondered if Great Grandma, in a fight against the strangling octopus, cleansed herself of the invader by flooding it with excessive blood flow through faithful prayer and meditation. Apparently, I thought, an octopus can drown.

These days, I wonder what she prays about. I know she’s ready to die. I know she is confused as to why she is still living. I know this from one of my most vivid memories. We were walking down a church aisle together, she leaning on my arm, me carrying her oxygen. It was a funeral for a baby, her great-great-grandson. She turned to me and said with a face of exhaustion and utter confusion, “Why couldn’t it have been me?”

I’ve studied health and nutrition and have worked in the hospital enough to witness first-hand our complex competition with death. Death is to be avoided at all costs. Every single bit of technology — from the computerized charting to the stainless steel surgery scalpel — not only holds the price of a human life but also costs a hell of a lot of money. From a societal point of view, this seems like a silly race with the inevitable. No matter the amount of resources, technologies, and knowledge we use to help us run faster and farther, eventually we will run out of breath. On the other hand, from an individual point of view, I feel much more uncertain about the race because I, personally, have never had to make a decision between transplant, tube feeding, oxygen, chemotherapy, or dialysis versus death.

I can, however, bring up what happens when we lose that race. I can talk about the needles of the western larch. Fall is one of the most beautiful times of the year because of the beautiful death of these needles. In fact, the deciduous and cyclical death of the western larch needle is what makes this conifer stand apart from its evergreen counterparts. For the larch needle, its redness might as well be blood representing its impending inexistence. For those of us in Western Montana, larch needle death provides an annual visual splendor.

The larch needle consumes, grows, ages, dies,
falls, and soon becomes the ground it consumed. In
dominant Western culture, we consume, grow, age,
die, get put in a casket, into a vault, and then capped
with a granite tombstone to be forever removed from
the ground that composed us. The land becomes us
and we don't become the land. We read "ashes to
ashes" when it will take a millennia for that to take
place. Why do we feel like we need to be separate from
the earth spiritually and physically for an eternity?
Maybe it's because dominating religious tradition tells
us so, maybe it's because the casket, granite, and vault
industries tell us so, but sometimes I think it's just
something that we have stopped thinking about.

My sister, Jonie, thought about it. She called me
last summer while she was off on an errand
some might consider bizarre, yet I consider it
family. She had been living in Fargo, North
Dakota, that year, and rescued a very sick and
neglected cat named Lemmywinks in the dead
of winter. She nursed the decrepitly skinny cat
for two weeks until it finally died. Somewhat
like the Mother Theresa of tabbies, Jonie had
provided the Fargo cat with warmth and food
in its final days.

Since it was winter in North Dakota,
the proper burial met frozen land realities.
The solution? Postpone the burial and put
Lemmywinks in a plastic bag and into the
freezer until the land thawed. Jonie called
me when summer had come and therefore
the burial ceremony, which took place on our
brother and sister-in-law's fertile land of the
Red River Valley.

"Are you burying Lemmywinks in a box?"
I asked.

"Yeah, I'll just keep him in the plastic bag,
put him in the box, and bury him." I reacted
with an opinion that is often subconsciously
reserved, but not with Jonie. She understands
me.

"You can't leave him in that plastic bag! It
will take so long for Lemmywinks to return
to the earth!" I don't remember exactly how
she had replied to my reaction, and I don't
know why I had cared so much about anything
named "Lemmywinks," I just remember that I
did not expect her to take the frozen, sickly cat outside
the plastic bag because that was a little too gross and
leaving him in it was a little too easy.

Later, Jonie mentioned that she had taken him out
of the bag. I smiled in accomplishment. Apparently,
the thought of Lemmywinks suffocating in that plastic
bag affected her once she devoted some thought
to it. She had shown him so much care and respect
preceding his death, why not do the same upon his
death, the final gift? Does intuition tell us that our
physical matter should return to the earth? For us,
Lemmywinks, western larch needles, and the like?
I've never asked her, but I wonder if Grandma
Alpha cares what becomes of her body. She who
embody intuitive environmentalism, does she have a strong opinion about the resource which is herself? I wouldn’t think so. To her and her fruitful faith in God, her body is but a medium for her soul’s eternal happiness. Whatever happens to her body is a minute detail. I can’t say I blame her. She is so ready to dance with her long outlived husband versus being alone, hooked up to oxygen, captive to her house, 19 pills a day, octopus cysts, frequent pneumonia, anemia from blood loss, swollen legs, dry mouth, fear of falling, and so damn hard of hearing.

I cannot help but think, though, that perhaps the best way to respect the dead and all their mortal perils would be to allow them to become life. Great Grandma may not care about her body, but I do. Selfishly, I want Great Grandma Alpha to become something that I can tangibly understand. I want to say, “Do you see that tree? That sturdy, humble tree holds the spirit and body of someone who taught me how to crochet.”


I wouldn’t be surprised, however, if all she wants to do is melt into her house. Her husband, a carpenter, built the house back in the day for the two of them and their shared life. He custom-designed the kitchen to accommodate Great Grandma’s five-foot stature. Cupboards, the sink, and counters all are suitable for the vertically challenged. For the vertically endowed, however, such as my 5’10” self, the house is a source of a silly situation. Especially when my sister and I pay a special visit. Two 5’10” towers amid five-foot accommodations. We giggle at how much we hover when doing the dishes, or when we hit our heads on the light fixtures. Grandma Alpha loves that house, and, quite stubbornly, never wants to leave. As the nursing home creeps up on her degrading mind, I know she just wants to die in her house. All of us feel it.

In my imagination, I see my Grandma Ruth and Grandpa Don get into their car outside their home in Western North Dakota and make their way out to a card game at the house of pinochle-cutthroat Alpha Dow. They pick up some fried chicken at KFC, take the forty minute drive west towards Fairview with the Missouri River and its irrigated valley full of sugar beets to the left, and the rolling, rugged, badland-wannabe hills to the right.

“Welcome to Montana,” the sign reads as the car bumps over some railroad tracks and is consumed by the vast state. Grandpa Don’s sensitive back notices the unevenness of the tracks and the subsequent speed bumps through Fairview’s empty downtown. They take a right at Hotel Albert, where classic cutouts of cowboys and outlaws stare through the windows.

Four to five blocks bring them to the white corner house with a rotating star flying in the wind. They might not notice the star, but I, being the official hanger of the star, catch its violent rotation. The house, cute, quaint, and plain has a different glow about it. Great Grandma’s delicate tulips, especially, look full of life.

When they knock on the door, Great Grandma does not answer, as to be expected. Being hard of hearing and sitting in her easy chair on the other side of the house complicates such hostess responsibility. But she is not knitting “beanies” for the neighborhood kids nor is she cooking at her awkwardly jagged sit-down/stand-up pace. Alpha is gone.

The night before, she was standing in her living room when she let out a sigh of unforgivable readiness to pass on. A sigh shouting, “I’m ready to dance again.” Her request was heard by someone, something, and she thus became a part of her favorite, cherished place built by arguably her most cherished person. Great Grandma Alpha melted into her house.

Grandma and Grandpa frantically search around the house. Reason to panic reaches a maximum when her life-supporting oxygen sits to the right of her table full of Norwegian practical jokes and crochet needles. If she left, Great Grandma had not taken her oxygen. Grandpa Don starts making phone calls to the local hospital, neighbors, family, and police department. Grandma Ruth, a daughter/caretaker/avid worrier of Great Grandma, has tears rolling down her face. As the omniscient daydreamer, I feel sorry that they don’t know Great Grandma’s sacred secret.
Earlier, in Grandma Ruth’s frantic frenzy of scanning the house, she had set down the fried chicken on the counter. Now, opening the fridge to put it away she notices everything in its place, more than ever before. In fact, it reminds her of the fresh abundance of her childhood. Why is the milk separated and in that glass bottle? She continues to walk through the small house, paying more attention to detail with the constant sting of lazy tears in her eyes and Grandpa’s deep voice blurred behind her. A photo album is out and opened to the most frequented picture Great Grandma showed people: her masseuse class. The yarn is abundant and overflowing, with the perpetual “to do” list for beanies and scarves balanced out. The record player is ready for Frank Sinatra to sing old hymns. Ridiculously healthy houseplants pepper the household, the vines reaching corners and fixtures in an atypical and almost unnatural fashion. Where is her onslaught of pills?

In the kitchen, the pans are strategically stacked like Russian Babushka dolls to maximize space; the flour drawer is full; the fruit sits on the counter instead of the fridge to bring out its full, intense flavor; and the pantry is fully stocked with the widest assortment of canned goods Grandma Ruth has seen in a very, very long time.

She somehow finds a sense of peace during her slow and meditative inspection of the house. In this last, hazy moment of my daydream, Grandma Ruth internally understands that everything is in order according to her mother’s body and spirit.

What is Grandma Alpha’s spirit composed of?

Tenacity, taking care of her neighbor, infallible belief in healing through food, patience, and touch, delivering 23 babies as a mid-wife, driving around all of North America with her husband, Harold, to find him the right doctor, and making sure to stop at manufacturing plants when driving all around North America to understand how her things are made.

One of her favorite stories is about the manufacturing process of shirts. “The fabric is all piled on top of each other, and the big cookie cutter comes down upon the shirts. But it doesn’t make sense, because cloth doesn’t stay together, it shifts. So, the top shirt is the right cut, and the bottom shirt isn’t. That is why you should pay attention to your shirts and if they fit right.”

What is Grandma Alpha’s body composed of?

Green tea at ten and three, a habit from her time spent in Thailand as an eighty-year-old nanny, cookies from Grandma Ruth, thyme bread from my summer of growing herbs, intensely local home-cooked meals full of music, laughter, and hardship from her life on the homestead with nine brothers and sisters, a big glass of 2% milk with every meal, tomatoes and green beans, just for me.

She repeats that phrase over and over and over again in her letters, “We are what we eat.” In which case, Great Grandma Alpha is the High Plains. Her carbon, oxygen, hydrogen, and nitrogen came from her garden and her animals and all the living and non-living things that have cycled in that place before her, a cycle that once included humans. I asked Grandma Ruth about what she used to eat as the daughter of Alpha Dow. “We made a lot of our own food...Mom always had a big garden, milk cows, her own meat...we did a lot of canning...she put it in jars and cooked it in the oven to can it...we baked our own bread, too.”

Great Grandma Alpha has not yet melted into her house, decomposed into the ground, raised up to heaven, or become captive to a casket. She is alive, and probably right now sitting in her house alone and contented by the slightest notion of entertainment, like putting water on to boil for tea. She continues to pass on her intuitive wisdom to the fortunate student sitting in her presence or reading her words, or reading the words of her words.

She will die, soon, and when Alpha Dow finally melts into her house, I hope that Eastern Montana absorbs that spirit of hers, and that the dying communities, landscapes, and ecosystems will feel the slightest inspiration of life upon her death.

“Food is our life. We are what we eat so be careful & get the best of fruit & veg. that’s good living if you eat the right thing.

Love you

Gram Alpha”
Bathing at Harmony Falls

After the needled dust of the trail, Janet and I would undo our braids, then pitch head-first into Spirit Lake, so deep they haven’t found the bottom yet. We’d come up to mouth the green air, fir trees so thick you could see only the cap of St. Helen’s, that liquid emerald dissipated in the jeweled blue. A single dousing got you squeaky clean, mermaid among trout, the cold only skin-deep, the body lodge-warm, radiating the sudden pleasure of the plunge.

I wonder if beaver feel that way, toting their notched poles, glossy fur thick with the knowledge of snow-melt, clear, clean, deeper than a creature can dream. Maybe the lake climbs down forever, amassing its blueness to rival the sky. Maybe it sends little bubbles up, like pumice floating along the shore, reminders to all of us: dive deep in the well while still you can.

Carol Barrett
A Full-Moon Ride Up Going-to-the-Sun

by Matthew Frank

Photography by Michael Schweizer
When you look up to Glacier National Park’s Going-to-the-Sun Road from the road’s lower portions just beyond Avalanche Lake, it appears that it’s just a hand-hold high up on the mountainside. The road, and, well, you, seem even more insignificant when you’re actually up there. Peaks circle the sky, immense and immovable yet somehow sculpted, cradling winter remnants. They make you feel as important, but as fated, too, as any of the fallen rocks scattered about the road.

Then the sun goes down. The moon takes its place and casts ghostliness to those peaks. At night the mountains are like ghosts, I guess: they act differently than during the day. I had no idea. Last year when I heard that people ride their bikes up Going-to-the-Sun Road at night under full moons my eyes got about as round. The panorama that puts me in my place glows like it’s plugged in, I was told. I promised myself then that I would make the climb. I would do it next summer. July or August.
My good friend and photographer Michael came with me. We took off from Missoula in the late afternoon on Wednesday, August 9th, deciding on the way to begin our ascent at The Loop, the road's sharp switchback across from Heaven's Peak, where visitors begin to stick cameras out car windows in earnest. It would be about eight miles to the top of Logan Pass at 6,646 feet, the Continental Divide.

We pitched a tent at Avalanche Creek and then drove the car to The Loop. The sun long gone, we waited there and watched the sky. A cloudy day had half given way to a deep, clear blue that the brightest stars were beginning to permeate. As we prepared to ascend, a deer loped across the parking lot, thinking nothing of us at all.

With Michael on his mountain bike and me on my road bike, we pedaled side by side to a slow and steady cadence, heads looking up and around as night fell. Our headlamps were only a distraction, we found, and so we turned them off simultaneously without saying a word.

The wall of rock on our left hid the moon, but its light was there in the slow clouds and on Mt. Oberlin’s sloping side. A cool quietness settled in as we rode. Those peaks that usually shrink me down to size instead quieted and deferred. It felt as if we were sneaking around in our pajamas while the whole world slept. Or maybe that the world existed only of a dark bowl within a ring of silvery mountains with a single light perched above, and we had the run of it.

It was when we reached the basin that sits just below Logan Pass that the moon hit us like a spotlight, laying a white glow, casting our shadows to the pavement. We continued up, past an eerie yellow illuminating an empty construction site, and rolled into the Logan Pass parking lot. As we did, a pack of kids, one with
a small stereo blaring the opening notes of Pink Floyd’s “Dark Side of the Moon,” dropped down the mountain behind us in fits of laughter.

Michael and I pedaled up the boardwalk behind the visitor-free Logan Pass Visitors Center and rested our bikes beneath Clements Mountain. No more than 45 degrees, our sweat soon turned icy, but we sat there on the ground in our shorts each with a cold can of PBR looking up at the moon that had eluded us most of the climb. Wind whipped the quiet with a metronomic clank against the flag pole in the parking lot.

The ride down was quick and cold. The moon high in the sky, we sped down, the mountains growing taller as we coasted, our feet idle in our pedals and the center yellow line as our guide. Michael, with his thick, knobby tires and front shock went first yelping “Grate!” or “Bumps!” now and then so I could slow my rigid, thin-tired road bike in time. I gripped my brakes as if holding tight to the edge of a cliff. In a sense, I was. It was manic and dangerous and wonderful, and we were back to our car in 20 minutes. It was 1 a.m.

We awoke the next morning to daunting mountains with sunlit crags, back to their normal selves.
The calendar says early autumn, but here at the base of Mount Jumbo in Missoula, fall already feels like a distant memory. The colors peaked weeks ago. It’s been more than a month since the inaugural frost covered the valley. A thousand feet up the mountain, the season’s first snow gives notice to the terrain below that cold nights wait in anticipation to snuff out the last hints of comfortable weather.

No animals are visible, but I know they are somewhere on the hillside. Elk, sheep and black bears all use this mountain at some point during the year. Some of the bears will spend their autumn days darting into backyards at the base of Jumbo, gorging themselves on the fallen fruit of apple trees. In two months, most of the mountain will close to hikers in order to clear a path for the annual elk migration.

Fire sparked by careless Fourth of July revelers charred hundreds of acres on the eastern side of Jumbo earlier this year, and on this raw day, the snow and rain seep into the land like aloe on sunburned skin. The dusting of white flakes, however, does little to camouflage the most conspicuous of landmarks on the face of the mountain. This too is a product of humans. Like an episode of *Sesame Street*, Mount Jumbo is brought to you by the letter L.

There is no separating Mount Jumbo and its 100-foot monogram. It stares down at you from the base of the mountain; it looks over you from four, five, six miles away in the valley; it beams at you from the window seat on an airplane; and at night it surprises you with its dim, moon-lit glow.

Together with the M of Mount Sentinel, Missoula’s letters form an unusual tribute to the middle of the alphabet, a welcome mat of sorts to visitors entering and exiting Hellgate Canyon.

While the meaning of the M — which stands for the University of Montana — is at least somewhat obvious to newcomers, the meaning of its compatriot monogram to the north is not. What good is such a visible marker if there is mystery about what exactly is being marked? The L, as it turns out, stands for Loyola-Sacred Heart High School. Most longtime residents here in Missoula probably know this; others, including the thousands of annual tourists, probably do not.

Constructed by Loyola students 45 years ago, the L arrived more than half a century after Montana undergraduates hauled rocks up the face of Mount Sentinel to build their M. At the very least that makes the L unoriginal. Defenders of Jumbo’s brand — and there are many — would be hard-pressed to deny the lack of creativity and imagination that inspired Missoula’s second letter. That’s not exactly an endorsement of this city’s first letter; it’s just that I see two monograms and my mind becomes even more cluttered.

I look at this duo of synthetic additions to mountainsides and I ignore the mountainsides. Am I transfixed because there are two of these not-so-subtle landmarks within such a small area? Or do my eyes

Mountain Brands
Dave Loos
focus only on the M and the L because I have never seen letters on a mountain?

These are the questions a newcomer to Montana asks, and they are by no means irrelevant. There are at least 250 more of these monograms throughout the West. Two time zones of Americans think they’re important. Some call it a fad, a trend, an idiosyncrasy, but it is none of the above. When a trend lasts more than a century, it has become — for good or for bad, for school pride or for aesthetic tackiness — culture.

“They serve as conspicuous symbols of community and institutional identity, and they represent an idea, perhaps traceable to a single point of origin, that diffused quickly and widely early in this century.”

James J. Parsons, a longtime professor of geography at University of California’s Berkeley campus, wrote those words in 1988, nine years before his death. It’s no coincidence that Parsons chose to ruminate on the history of mountain monograms in this post-retirement essay; for Berkeley is where it all began.

In 1905, students there built what is generally considered to be the first mountainside letter when they affixed a 70-foot C into a hill near campus. It did not arrive without controversy. As Parsons noted, the announcement of the plan to build it incited community and faculty protest. “Opponents denounced it as unworthy of the university, claiming it would ‘for all time disfigure the sensuous beauty of the hills,’ and would ‘slide and become an eyesore.’”

Over the next twenty years — the golden age of mountain brands — students and residents constructed more than half of the 250-plus monograms that exist today. Nearly all are letters, usually standing for a high school or college, sometimes a city or town. In many cases, school and city share the same name, and hence the same monogram overlooking the municipality below.

As Parsons detailed in his essay, the task of maintaining and re-painting the letters usually falls on the students, and over the years many a monogram have disappeared beneath the underbrush and trees as a result. But just as others fade away, scores of new monograms have appeared.

The monograms are an identity marker almost unique to the West. Only two of the catalogued mountainside letters lie east of the Mississippi River, both in New York. The rest lie scattered like alphabet soup, almost always near a highway for prominence. Some say the letters are a necessity, an aid for pilots who need help distinguishing the hundreds of non-descript towns of the West. This may have been true 70 years ago in the days before reliable navigational equipment, but today that sounds like an unusual justification. I would hope that no pilot today requires giant letters stamped into the mountainside in order to gauge their location.

At its most basic level, the unsubtle tradition of carving up and cementing a hillside is no different than etching initials into the bark of a tree or branding cattle. Chisel your name (or the name of your town) onto a prominent trailside tree, and you are likely to receive icy glares or a verbal lashing. But affix 100-foot slabs of painted concrete onto a hillside and the community response is likely to be supportive, at the very least neutral. There’s something more going on here than proving one’s power over nature.

It might be easy, at first glance, to label the attitudes of those who live near Mount Jumbo and Sentinel as ambivalence. There is no outward exultation of the mountain monogram. And perhaps that’s because the L and M were long ago molded into their subconscious as ubiquitous fixtures — constant reminders of two schools and two traditions. But attachment to these odd cultural mainstays runs deeper than most in Missoula — and the West — are likely to acknowledge. And these feelings of reverence, often on display as passing nostalgic reflections by lifers but more often by the inaction of schools and communities who rarely make any effort to remove them, are an important part of this story.

Despite so many who share these strong sentiments, I have tried and so far failed to understand the point of the mountain monogram. Whenever a letter appears along the highway, my initial thought is to ask how these universities and towns fail to see the inherent absurdity of digging into the picturesque mountainsides in order to proclaim who they are. I’m convinced there is a measure of fear here. Fear of being passed by, of disappearing into the landscape
without being noticed. There is the insecurity of not mattering and of not believing that the rich landscape surrounding one's town is enough to turn heads.

But is it really insecurity?

The line between displaying pride and compensating for collective municipal doubt is a blurry one. And yet every time I see a monogram, I feel pangs of frustration that these towns do not believe the mountain itself is enough of a tribute to their place.

Of course, ask most lifelong Montanans about their unconventional brands and they are likely to tell that the opposite is true.

These monograms are part of community and landscape history. To some extent they reflect the spirit of the time when most were constructed, before environmental preservation and esthetics became concerns in our culture ... The letters remain a conspicuous and durable part of the identity of many communities, fortifying institutional allegiances and the sense of place. — James J. Parsons

In the mid-1990s, Missoula residents passed a bond issue to buy most of Jumbo's southwest face as public open space. The unintended consequence of opening up the mountain was the phenomenal new access to the monogram. Locals in Missoula recall one of the first extensions of the monogram - a message of support for a wounded police officer. Get Well HeinLe.

Teenagers, college students and assorted pranksters were quick to pounce on the opportunity after this. Before long, the face of Jumbo had become a revolving billboard, with the white stones rearranged with such frequency that it became a running joke in the valley.

| Lop.                  |
| Loop.                |
| fLewzy.              |
| I heart ALex.        |
| THL.                 |
| Legalize it.         |

In 2001, fed up with the vandalism, Loyola officials decided to take action. While the opportunity was there to erase the L for good, the school instead went the opposite direction and dug in. In April of that year, school officials recruited a dozen football players, who spent a day removing the white rocks in assembly-line fashion until the mountain was bare, returned to its original state. The following day, Loyola rented a helicopter and flew load after load of cement up the mountainside to construct a new, immovable letter.

"It was never a question of should the L stay," Loyola principal Patrick Haggarty told the Missoulian at the time. "The L is staying. We've worked long and hard to keep that baby in good shape."

In the years since, the cement has proven to be only a minor hindrance to the creative and persistent minds in Missoula. The L and its surrounding land continue to serve as a canvas for oversized art.

Several months ago, a cross appeared next to the L. In October, a peace sign was visible when the Rolling Stones rolled into town. Both were gone within a day. Other vandalism will reappear in the future, just as other monograms will appear throughout the West. I'm starting to get it; the L won't be going anywhere.

As a native easterner, I realize it's easy to make petty and patronizing comments about mountain brands, so long as my back is turned to the water towers of my home region that are monogrammed with far more than just one letter. Along the Atlantic seaboard, they make their own mountains, their own billboards to proclaim their identity. They do the same in the Midwest, where grain elevators are the canvas of choice. And in the western United States, they — we — use mountains. There is of course a difference between using manmade structures and mountainsides, but the action itself reflects human behavior that makes no distinction among landscapes. This is who we are.

Ultimately, it all comes down to tradition and identity, words loaded with passion and emotion no matter the surrounding geography. Perhaps mountain monograms are the epitome of overzealous school and municipal spirit. The extent to which a town or city or university will go to proclaim its pride and to foster tradition can appear silly at face value, but maybe it is a last gasp. How else to keep the immense landscape from eating the tiny towns of the west alive? For now I am sure that the L, like all mountain brands dotted across the landscape, will remain a beacon in the darkness for the Westerners who gaze upon them.
The Window

Ventana Canyon, Arizona

I can believe anything of water—
how the orange flood that peels away
the husks from the arroyo-banks
recreates the mysteries: galaxies
of gnats above the algae pond, frogs
in the crevasses ushering in the evening
with their bleating, hoofprints
blossoming in the mud—

But the sands

that rake the backbone of this ridge
where water never pools identified
a fault, hollowed it into a cup, a bowl,
a drum; trillions of tiny finger-rolls
beat the drum until it opened out upon
the other side, ten feet deep and
thirty high, a window overlooking
what everything blows into—

Where is the
secret niche of seed, the kernel of faith
secure enough that the wind with
all its ghastly length can’t strip
the earth from, grain by grain,
and desiccate?

Gary Hawk
The October wind roars out of the west in staccato gusts, across the Missoula Valley and east up the Clark Fork River Canyon. It hits me right where the canyon pinches down to one of its narrowest points: a perfect place for a dam. I am standing high upon a bluff overlooking the Clark Fork River and Milltown Dam, five miles upstream of my home in Missoula, Montana. From this vantage point I look down upon the drying acres of mud and weeds at the confluence of the Clark Fork and Blackfoot rivers, submerged for a century, until the reservoir was drawn down a few days ago in preparation for removal of the dam.

Three hundred feet below, a man the size of an ant rolls a large orange ball over the cracked silt recently exposed to the sun. This orange buoy once floated upon the reservoir, warning boaters of the spillway downstream. Large billows of arsenic-laden dust swirl around him as the wind gusts. Is he the same man who on a tour of the dam a few days ago said of the historic powerhouse, “I wish that they’d give this old building a chance — turn it into a nice Italian restaurant or a museum”?

The man hooks the immense buoy to a little red Chevy pickup with an unreadable insignia on the side, and hops into the cab. As he drives slowly toward the powerhouse, the old buoy bounces back and forth, swinging around to nearly hit the truck. Fed up, the man stops the pickup, unhooks the ball, and goes back to rolling it, ant-style, over to its new resting place next to the powerhouse.

I’m taken by how small this desiccated expanse of exposed sediment looks. Official reports state that this antique dam holds back 6.6 million cubic yards of sediment. I don’t really have a good idea of what 6.6 million cubic yards should look like, but this little mud flat doesn’t fit my preconceptions. The two powerful rivers, running shallow and clear in the early fall, already meet again like old friends in the exposed deposits about 50 yards upstream of the dam. There they pick up loose sediment, shoot down the spillway, and emerge below the dam as a composite river the color of weak coffee.

I sit down and watch the sunset glow settle upon this infamous Superfund site, turning the Upper Clark Fork Valley from greens and golds to shades of fire orange, pink and then, finally, purple. Just before
the sun dips for the day, an osprey glides across the depleted reservoir, over the dam and into the canyon below.

Despite being “pro-removal” for a number of years, I had never actually been to the Milltown dam site before today. Years ago, I came to the dam removal controversy with a bias: I am a lover of wild rivers. But now I’m starting to see things through the eyes of others, like the caretaker at the dam, or the people of the neighboring towns who waged a “Save the Historic Milltown Dam” campaign even as folks like myself put “Remove the Dam, Restore the River” bumper stickers on our vehicles. My attitude surprises me, for ostensibly the dam removal side won, and I hope that in the long run the neighboring communities as well as the Big Blackfoot and Clark Fork rivers will have won too.

I glance back down at what was once buried under hundreds of acre-feet of water. The ant-sized man steps outside again, shutting the powerhouse door, which makes no noise from way up here. He climbs into his truck, and, with tail-lights glowing red through the dust, drives away, taking the gusty wind with him. Through the failing light and the settling atmosphere, I gaze up the two river valleys, across a mosaic canopy of cottonwoods and into the Garnet Range beyond. This is a beautiful valley poised on the eve of change.

I try to peer out the foggy window of the claustrophobic 15-passenger van, even as the person next to me leans too close, talking with coffee-fueled breath. It’s too early, and I’m surrounded by too many people, bumping through unseen surroundings. I am on a tour of the restoration site above Milltown Dam with a group of scientists, academics, and restoration professionals attending a conference at the University of Montana focusing on the restoration of the Upper Clark Fork River. Finally we stop, and I leave the van like a person swimming for the surface of a lake after a deep dive. The crowd emerges from buses, and vans and trucks coalesce near the river. Frost coats the cobbles at the water’s edge, and savory morning air greets my nostrils.

The project manager from the Natural Resources Damage Program (NRDP), a fit fellow in his mid-fifties with graying hair and keen eyes, presents the group with the remediation and restoration plans for the Milltown Dam impoundment area. We are three miles above the dam and the main project area, known as “Reach 1,” and stand at the border between the secondary project areas, “Reach 2” and “Reach 3.” Reach 3 spreads upriver from us and won’t receive the same intensive treatment as the other two.

In 1908, two years after Milltown Dam was completed, the Upper Clark Fork River experienced a hundred-year flood event, sluicing massive amounts of toxic sediment downstream from mines located at its headwaters in the town of Butte. Almost destroying the dam in its race to the sea, the flood was slowed enough by the reservoir to drop most of its toxic sediment load. Containing high levels of arsenic, copper, cadmium and lead, this sediment is the main impetus behind the removal of the dam. The fact that the dam is often characterized as old and unstable only adds to the urgency.

I glance back down at what was once buried under hundreds of acre-feet of water.

There is no obvious line between Reach 2 and Reach 3. Very soon the area downstream of where we’re standing will be ripped apart by diesel machinery, first to remove the most contaminated 2.2 million cubic yards of heavy-metals-laden soil, then to restore the area to some semblance of a functioning river ecosystem. Yet looking at the lush riparian corridor around me, I feel a bit uncomfortable imagining it being bulldozed for a cause that I championed. I feel as though I am looking upon an outwardly healthy patient who is about to undergo major surgery to remove a cancer hidden within.

After an introduction, we climb back into the vans to head downstream, and I judiciously choose a seat closer to the front. As we drive farther into Reach 2 on the south side of the river, we bounce down a two-track lane at the edge of the floodplain. On our right, spread among three geriatric cottonwoods barely hanging onto their last leaves, is a great blue heron rookery. Tiers of nests made from interlocking sticks fan out across the cottonwoods to form a sort of bird...
condominium complex overlooking the bottomlands. Small wetlands can be seen among thickets of willow, cottonwood, and spruce. Just before our caravan stops, an osprey wheels over the river, catching the sun across the back of its wings before landing in a cottonwood crown.

Our large, noisy group wades through the frosty grass toward the river’s edge where we’ll continue our tour of the restoration site. I duck into some willows to relieve myself of the free coffee I’ve been consuming all morning, and nearly step in a pile of bear scat the size of a half-deflated football, speckled with berry pits and gray fur. It looks fresh too, almost steaming on this cool, frosty morning. After I rejoin the group, my mind still lingers on this scat, fondly imagining a large bear watching us through the underbrush.

At the edge of the river, explication of the restoration plans continues. The man from NRDP gestures upstream toward a large “slicken,” a deposit of polluted sediment that refuses to grow much vegetation. These are what are being targeted for removal. As my eyes follow his outstretched hand, they land instead on a flock of ducks in a virtual orgy of feeding from the bottom of a small pool — quacking and diving and thoroughly enjoying themselves. Our host continues to explain how this area will be excavated in order to restore its ecological integrity, pausing at one point as a bald eagle dips low over the river and our group.

I’m not prepared for what I see. I naively expected some sort of wasteland, rather than what appears to be a damaged though somewhat functioning riparian zone.

Our group is oddly silent until a woman with long gray hair, tied into a braid, asks a question. She motions toward the verdant bottomlands with her hand as she speaks. “Will there be any mitigation required for the wetlands destroyed during the remediation?”

“No,” says the man from NRDP. “We’re basically trading this created wetland habitat for a restored free-flowing river. We think that we’re getting is better than what we’re destroying.”

Those ducks will understand, I think. We’re trading swampy habitat created by the dam for restored free-flowing river habitat. I look back at the ducks, think about the rookery, and in spite of myself can’t help but feel a little sad.

I don’t want to wrestle with these emotions. Isn’t this what I’m supposed to want? The river is polluted – I’ve seen the data. An arsenic plume is poisoning the groundwater. Copper levels are killing fish. Pundits say the river wouldn’t heal itself for more than 2000 years.

It’s still hard to see. I think loosely of the euphemism “collateral damage,” so overused by the Bush Administration, and I begin to understand why some residents of the area have been skeptical.

I have come to accept that I am somewhat of a hypocrite. Among other things, I love my 14-year-old Toyota Truck with the topper on the back and the gear on the roof. Sure it gets poor gas mileage and puts out a fair amount of greenhouse gas through its 200,000-mile engine, but it’s seen too much love and too many memories over the years to get rid of. How many times have I woken to a crisp view of the Tetons piercing the sky above the forest canopy framed by the open bed of that truck? How much desert dust is embedded into its fabric and mine from cooking dinner on its tailgate, watching the sunset over the Sierra Del Carmen, or crawling along the bone-jarring 4x4 “roads” of the canyon country north of Mexican Hat? It has been wonderful to sit on the tailgate with my wife and watch the temperature drop with the sun after a day spent on the Flathead River. This truck has been a gateway to friendship, landscapes and love.

I think that I understand why some folks rebel against the restoration of the Clark Fork River Valley. I’m sure they know that their ecosystem needs help, but to so radically change a place that one loves is hard on the heart. Hypocrisy is doing one thing while saying another, but is it really so wrong in some cases? Can I work toward fighting global warming while still loving my truck? Can some residents of the Clark Fork
River Valley love the river, but be against restoration? Can we act on behalf of a watershed while destroying an ecosystem?

I realize that it's not even the truck, or just the truck, that makes me feel this way: We often try to do what we think is right, but sometimes what feels right and what we think is right do not match up. Which is correct?

My truck has only been part of my life for seven years, a good portion of which it has been my home. It's my history with this truck that's special, not the truck itself. And I imagine this history is nothing compared to the connection someone might have to a landscape that has been integral to their life. The Milltown dam, reservoir, and ecosystem have had over a century to work their way into people's hearts. I know that I can give up my truck, maybe even should give it up, but I don't want to.

"The Place of the Big Bull Trout" is what the Salish People called the confluence of the Big Blackfoot and Clark Fork rivers, where they visited to fish and to follow "The Road to the Buffalo." For the past 100 years, this reservoir could have been better called "The Place of the Northern Pike." Radically changed by the concrete plug at its terminus, it is now home to voracious, non-native lake fish. The damages wrought upon ecosystems by dams have been widely studied, and this one has taken its toll on the river.

Removal of the dam will change this. Glancing up the Big Blackfoot River from atop the buttress overlooking Milltown Dam, I see workers from the Army Corps of engineers already shoring up the five bridges across the Blackfoot to withstand moving water. Moving water! Since 1906 the Clark Fork and Big Blackfoot rivers have met an early end in the still waters of Milltown Reservoir, emerging below the dam as changed beasts: bisected, domesticated and diminished. Five bridges were built across this reservoir with only static forces in mind, either forgetting that it was once the mighty Blackfoot River, or assuming that the dam would stand forever. In contrast with my feelings about the riparian corridor, seeing this respect for the river's force gives me hope.

I want to believe that the history surrounding Milltown Dam, the traditions, the memories, and the ecosystem that has been grown in its place—all of these things will be worth sacrificing to restore the integrity, the power, and the health of the river.

I want to believe that with the removal of the dam, and with time, the knee-jerk reaction that often accompanies environmental initiatives in rural areas will diminish as people see that ecosystem health means human health.

I want to believe that the removal of a dam can be a metaphor for the removal of barriers within us as a culture.

I'm finding that this is more complicated than I had once thought, but I am still hopeful.

There are over 6,500 large dams in the United States and over 47,000 worldwide.

Very soon there will be one less.

My truck largely sits idle these days, holding down weeds next to my house.
Canyon Lake Dam

Born to a brick fireplace, a family.
I opened my quick and easy eyes to rain
falling in the darkened yard, a dewy wheelbarrow
tipped on its side and a large buck
lit by halogen, roped up beneath the eaves.

The air is strange and new: a minty secret,
an emerging planet pressed against the window.
It smells of something older than agriculture,
before garden dirt and gritty worm,
miles of unfolding fences and
before earthen dam.
This dam irrigates our valley, held back
water since the turn of century.
Rupture will send the boulders tumbling below –
disappear the lake, kill something.
Let me begin as a previous species ancient and feathered, 
rolled in mud and soaked in mountain lake. 
Make all our footprints mossy stones, 
the fresh cemetery its previous prairie, brimmed with roots. 
Make this cobbled well a rocky range, turn to termite mound 
this burning fire pit, and absent me 
my terrible prying hands.

I caught my first fish at this lake. Its guts smelled 
of rain and loam. I opened it, slid my fingers 
through its soggy bones digging 
for what it hid inside.

Erika Fredrickson
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