Gold Leaf on Granite

William Keener

Light
on this vast Sierra scarp
is an easy path to reverence.

Yes, the flat Punjabi plain
has its own holy shrine,
the gleaming Gurudwara,
that dazzles devotees
with walls of hand-struck gold.

And balanced on
a Burmese mountain top
is a great rock, held
by a strand of Buddha's hair.
Pilgrims climb for miles
to illuminate
their sacred boulder
in lavish golden paint.

We face east on Glacier Point.
The sun reaches out
with its last glinting hammer
to beat gold leaf on granite—
the incendiary mica,
the crystalline quartz, ablaze.
As far as our eyes can see,
the world gone gold.

How malleable our lives,
to let sight ordain the temples
we defend, true believers
reading from a gospel
of earthly light.
Contributors

Allen Braden has received fellowships from the NEA and Artist Trust of Washington State. His first book of poems is forthcoming in the VQR Poetry Series from the University of Georgia Press.

Chris Clarke is a natural history writer and environmental journalist. A Bay Area denizen for 25 years, he now lives in the Mojave Desert. Some of his writing may be seen on his website at faultline.org.

Matt Connolly, a recent graduate of the Rocky Mountain School of Photography in Missoula, developed his love of landscapes and the people they attract through his work as a professional guide in Glacier National Park. Matt was born in Dover, New Jersey, grew up in England and has traveled extensively. He currently resides in Kalispell, Montana, where through photography, he hopes to share his appreciation for the natural world by raising awareness for environmental preservation and recreation.

Elizabeth Grossman is the author, most recently, of High Tech Trash: Digital Devices, Hidden Toxics, and Human Health, and several previous books. Her new book, Redesigning the Future, will be published by Island Press in 2009. She writes from Portland, Oregon. She's contributed work to Mother Jones, The Nation, Orion, and many other journals and newspapers. Elizabeth will lead the 2009 Environmental Writing Institute in Missoula May 13-17, 2009 (for info on EWI '09, see www.umt.edu/ewi).

Zach Hessler images are a communion of two of nature's gifts, the beauty of the external world and the creativity that comes to me when I can make the space for it. It is my hope that these images encourage others to seek out and enjoy nature's great gifts by exploring, protecting, and cultivating both outdoors and within. For prints, notecards, postcards, stock, check www.naturesgiftphotography.com

Ben Johnson grew up in the Bitterroot Valley of Montana. After taking a brief hiatus from the area to attend college and explore the landscapes of the Southwest, he is back in western Montana pursuing a graduate degree and obscure mountain summits of the Bitterroot Range.

Scott Alexander Jones is a poet from Texas in the MFA program at UM. His poetic spacetime coordinates include past, present, and/or future incarnations of: Third Coast, Forklift Ohio, Bombay Gin, The Cape Rock, and Monkey Puzzle, as well as a travel article in Brave New Traveler. He is also nonfiction co-editor of CutBank, as well as co-founder and poetry editor of Zero Ducats, a free literary journal comprised entirely of salvaged materials. His first chapbook of poetry is forthcoming with Bedouin Books, spring 2009.

William Keener is an environmental lawyer born and raised in Northern California, where he was lucky enough to be introduced to the Yosemite Sierra at an early age. His collection of nature poems, Gold Leaf on Granite, recently won the Anabiosis Press prize and is scheduled for publication in 2009.

Stefanie Kilts grew up in Billings, Montana, exploring, photographing and writing about the open prairies of my country home. She has since been drawn to the mountains and forests of western Montana, where she studies photojournalism and wilderness studies at the University of Montana.

Katie Knight is a Helena artist who fuses art and activism while participating in the movement for earth justice. In collaboration with AERO, her current photodocumentary project focuses on Montana's grassroots leaders dedicated to sustainable agriculture and renewable energy. See samples of her work at www.katieknight.net.

Michael Lukas is a human animal, writer, poet, fly-fishing guide, eco-critic and philosopher of trout and wolves raised on the banks of a tributary of the Wisconsin River and currently residing in Missoula, Montana. He variously teaches composition, rhetoric, poetry, and literature at the University of Montana, from where he earned his M.A. in literature in English. He is currently working on a book-length series of essays entitled The Rhetoric of Wolves.

Brenna Moloney grew up in Northern Lower Michigan and studied Creative Writing at Western Michigan University. In addition to teaching English in Korea and Vietnam, Brenna also spent a summer working at the Sperry Chalet in Glacier National Park. She is currently working on a Masters in Historic Preservation.

Greg Peters grew up in Brunswick, Maine, and is currently seeking a masters degree at the University of Montana.

Kalie Rider is taking time off from her student life in Missoula and spending a stint back at home in North Dakota. In complete coincidence to her essay, she ended up being the assistant girls basketball coach at her hometown of Trenton. Now she's that grown-up who relives the basketball past, thinking about that one play during that one game that one time.

Kip Sikora is a first year photojournalism graduate student who came to Montana after several years of living in Costa Rica and Ecuador. He started shooting after a chance meeting with a blind Guatemalan, and has had a serious case of the travel bug ever since. Photographing Latin American culture continues to be his favorite of favorites, but searching for abstract forms and patterns in Montana with his dog “ain't too far behind.” Be sure to check him out on the web at www.kipsikora.com.

Katherine E. Standefer lives for Wyomatoes, fresh sourdough, and spinach. Wintering at the head of the Wyoming Range in a creaky little cabin full of mouse turds, she has more jobs than fingers. She was recently seen chopping up beefheart in Portland's courthouse square at 3am. Like everyone during this economic crisis, she is looking at grad schools.

Russ J. Van Paepegem lives and writes in Missoula.

Cathrine L. Walters is a photographer living in Missoula, MT. Since graduating from the Rocky Mountain School of Photography in 2007 she has pursued her passion by shooting and working as a travelling photo assistant. Her recent black and white portrait project, Faces of the Pov, provided a window into the lives of ten homeless people staying at the local shelter.
# Contents

First Person

Tim Gibbins & Bryce Andrews .................. 4

Non-Fiction

How to Hike the Grand Canyon ............... 6
Greg Peters

Discourse with a Lion .......................... 8
Michael Lukas

Fences ............................................. 18
Russ J. Van Paepegem

Snowpack ......................................... 24
Elizabeth Grossman

Out of Bounds ................................... 28
Kalie Rider

Poetry

Gold Leaf on Granite ................................. 1
William Keener

Trinity ............................................... 10
Chris Clarke

Alkali .............................................. 16
Allen Braden

Lightning Storm on Mt. Edwards .............. 22
Brenna Moloney

A Letter to Fire ................................. 23
Katherine Standefer

Hay Hooks ....................................... 27
Allen Braden

Fiction

The Route .......................................... 33
Scott Alexander Jones
Winter is settling into Missoula, and it finds us concerned about basic things, like whether there is enough meat in the freezer for the coming season, or how high the electricity bill will soar. It finds us full of questions about employment, direction, and other aspects of an uncertain future.

With two foreign wars, an economy in the toilet and global threats to the environment, there seems reason enough for concern. Closer to home, the subdivision and development of some of the West's finest land continues at breakneck speed. These times are serious enough to make a person stop and wonder if tomorrow might be fundamentally different from today, even unrecognizably so.

Increasingly, our days are spent in front of glowing screens in a shoebox office in the basement of Jeanette Rankin Hall, tweaking sentences and tinkering with layout. It is hard not to wonder if in these pressing times Camas was worth our effort to build, and yours to read.

Perhaps the numbers can provide a clue; for during this crisis, Camas has the largest subscription list in our history at 456. Though concentrated in Missoula, Camas subscribers hail from 44 states throughout the nation. They make homes in Manhattan, Los Angeles and a host of rural towns in between. Issues are even being mailed internationally.

This fall, Camas received submissions from nearly 100 different artists. Camas contributors are a diverse bunch, including lawyers, loggers, students, teachers, ranchers, farmers, and biologists. Most of them are lucky enough to live in the West, a region that looms large in our collective consciousness. But there is more going on here than regional interest. In the midst of crisis, it appears that stories about our people, our landscapes, our world, are becoming increasingly vital.

Camas provides another sort of news, one that cannot be delivered by television pundits or splashed across the daily headlines. This news is more like tracks in freshly fallen snow. Follow it to find a living piece of the West. Scan the poems for updates. Visit the black and white landscapes. Read the essays and stories, and you will hear familiar voices. When your mind is alive with their notions, take a walk to check on your own home place.

This issue of Camas contains notes from similar walks, created by a diverse body of artists from across and beyond the West. Page through it and you will find recollections from a prairie childhood, a family history defined by fence lines, and poems brought down from mountaintops. You will read about the consequences of a double-time recession of polar sea ice and the art of bucking hay bales. You will see landscapes through the eyes of people who call them home.

There is no denying that this is a big ol' homogenous world—one where a sweatshirt is usually better traveled than the person wearing it and all the hamburgers taste the same. We can't change that, at least not this winter. But we are confident that Camas and other publications like it serve as an antidote. Reading the stories and poems, and looking at the photographs on the following pages inspires hope. Each one is the artifact of a particular place, recorded by someone who had enough skill and care to get it right.

These stories are good news in a troubled time. So we invite you to settle into this issue of Camas in the heart of a Montana winter. Find a blanket, a sofa or a chair. Put the kettle on the stove and keep a view of the window. Let the mountains fill with snow. If you have a fireplace, stoke it. Turn the radio off and allow the ice to flow down the rivers through town. Welcome the short days and long nights—for winter is the time of the story.
Environmental Writing Institute:

Attend the 19th annual EWI: Wed May 13 -- Sun May 17 2009 in Missoula, Montana
Featuring as 2009 EWI Leader Elizabeth Grossman.

http://www.cas.umt.edu/evst/

Publish in Camas:

Submit your finest stories, essays, poems, photographs and art to camas@mso.umt.edu for publication in our summer issue.
Deadline: March 15

Permafrost
(a literary journal)

Permafrost—the farthest north literary journal in the world—is the literary journal of the University of Alaska Fairbanks. For 30 years Permafrost has been publishing fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, drama, interviews, and art. We accept general submissions in these areas from Sept. 1 – March 31. We also hold two annual contests, the Midnight Sun Chapbook Contest (formerly the Susan Blalock Chapbook Contest, renamed for 2008) and the Midnight Sun Fiction Contest.
How to Hike the Grand Canyon:
Boucher Creek

For this particular adventure, you’ll need to begin four months in advance by applying for a back-country permit from the National Park Service. While you can download the permit from nps.gov, it must be mailed or faxed to the Backcountry Permit Office on the first of the month, four months prior to your start month. Be sure to have alternative start dates and a flexible schedule for the nights you wish to camp may have already been reserved by someone else. Due to high demand for a true wilderness experience, the National Park Service carefully controls the number of hikers who may enter each section of the Grand Canyon at any one time.

Do not let the hyperbolic descriptions of danger plastered on every official NPS publication intimidate you: the National Park Service believes that frightening off ill-prepared hikers is easier than rescuing them. After spending some time at the South Rim, you will probably agree with them. So do not lose confidence. You’re tough. You’re experienced. But there are some things you will need to remember.

Shortly after your application is reviewed by the National Park Service, you will receive a letter instructing you to call a ranger. When speaking with the ranger, it is helpful to use as many hiking terms as possible — this shows the ranger that you are familiar with hiking and hiking culture. For this particular trip it is advisable to learn the proper pronunciation of “Boucher” before calling the backcountry office. Louis Boucher, the hermit of Hermit Creek, was French, and his last name is pronounced “Boo-Shay.” Knowing this will demonstrate the seriousness of your intentions.

It is wise to study the itinerary before your conversation with the ranger. The Boucher Hermit Loop travels through Threshold and Primitive areas, making it particularly strenuous. The Grand Canyon National Park backcountry is delineated by topographic features. These use areas are grouped into four categories: Corridor, Threshold, Primitive, and Wild. Threshold areas are recommended for experienced canyon hikers only. You will encounter unmaintained trails, scarce or no water supplies, few signs and limited sanitation facilities. Primitive areas are recommended for highly experienced canyon hikers only – virtually no water, unmaintained trails and
routes, no signs, no sanitation, and few people.

Officially approved, you will be required to pay a
ten dollar processing fee and five dollars per person,
per night for your itinerary so that you may reserve
this portion of the canyon for your party. In three to
six weeks, an envelope will arrive in the mail from the
Department of the Interior with an instructional DVD
and a letter congratulating you on your successful
application for a backcountry trip in the Grand
Canyon.

Next, you will need to find lodging both before
and after your hike. In an effort to streamline
consumer enjoyment of National Parks, reservations
for campgrounds on the rim and hotels are bookable
through separate businesses, both conveniently
different from those who processed your backcountry
permit. Tent sites and rooms book up early, so you
are encouraged to reserve yours as early as possible,
even if you may not know the
exact dates of
your hiking
trip. Faith,
hope, patience
and a credit
card number are
invaluable at this
point.

When you
arrive at the
Grand Canyon,
it is important
to double check
your supplies.
The grocery
store at the
South Rim closes at 8 pm, so if you determine that
you need additional provisions, you must purchase
them before 8 pm. You may also purchase key chains,
snow globes, postcards, books, stuffed animals, dream
catchers, cactus plants, polished rocks, cameras,
chocolates, beer cozies, hats, t-shirts, sweat-shirts,
shoes, flip-flops, ponchos, hiking boots, tents,
backpacks, camping stoves, trekking poles, Native arts
and crafts, Native music CDs, screen savers, picnic
supplies, make-up, medicines, and maps, should you
find that you are missing any of these items.

As you make the final preparations for your
hike, you would be wise to remember that the Grand
Canyon gets extremely hot during the day, and that
the temperature will rise as you descend into the
canyon. If you are hiking in the spring or summer,
by 11:00 a.m., the temperature will likely be ninety or
one hundred degrees. Still, as numerous placards and

informational brochures note, you should be prepared
for a sudden storm as well; it has been known to hail
in the Grand Canyon in May, and evening tempera-
tures may fall to 40 or 50 degrees. While hiking, or
shopping for that matter, you are encouraged to rest
frequently, to sip water continuously, and to eat salty
snacks. Courtesy of the placards and brochures, you
will soon learn if you do not know already, that it is
recommended to bring at least one gallon of water per
person, per day for hiking in a desert environment.
Water weighs nearly 8 pounds per gallon, so two
gallons is roughly 16 pounds. Your pack will be
extremely heavy. If you feel nauseous, or dizzy, or
have trouble urinating, it is recommended that you
stop hiking and find shade.

On the morning of your hike, you should rise early
and begin at first light. You will leave from Hermit’s
Rest, a
beautiful spot
on the South
Rim. There
are toilets
and vending
machines
here, should
you like to
purchase a
Gatorade or
Coca Cola.
Above you,
helicopters
soar
thousands of
feet over the
canyon and
their rhythmic

whump-whump-whump will accompany you on your
hike.

As you descend, the canyon opens before you, a
spectacular series of undulating cliffs, multi-colored
rock layers, and impenetrable side canyons. Due
North is the majestic Tower of Ra and the Osiris
Temple. Morning light plays on the faces of thousand
foot drops, and the air slowly warms. Grays, reds,
rusts, oranges, and browns are overlayed with the

green of gnarled piñon pines and junipers. Lizards
sun themselves on boulders, flexing in the soft light
of morning. From here, it’s pretty straightforward. If
you get tired, rest. If you get hot, rest in the shade.
The trail to Trout Lake climbs fifteen-hundred feet directly up a ridge. This ridge, and the fact the campsite at Trout Lake is still closed from the fatal bear mauling in the 1980’s known as “The Night of the Grizzlies,” discourages many hikers from entering the drainage. I was headed up the valley nine miles to Arrow Lake and then on to Lake Evangeline. Cresting the ridge, the trail switch-backed down through fir, aspen, and huckleberry bushes loaded with berries. Continuing past the log-jammed foot of Trout Lake, I followed the eastern shore under the punctuated shade of broken cliff faces and dense douglas fir stands.

I took a short break at the head of the lake and ate my lunch of crackers and gorp. Beyond the lake to the north, the trail kept tight to the cliff face. The tall grasses and tangled alders of the streambed gave way to steep sub-alpine forest slopes and rocky outcroppings. As the trail hugged the bench, twisting in and out of sunlight, the steady hum of silence awakened my senses. There was something somewhere above. All the animals knew it.

I waited until a slight rise in the trail, hair raised, ears pricked, nostrils flared, every inch of skin knowing. I spun around to face it. With right front paw raised in mid-step, the mountain lion froze. I gazed into steady amber eyes with twenty feet separating the tawny head from the toes of my boots. The tail danced in a swaying rhythm. The eyes inquired, and then waited for an answer.

I made myself big: raised my arms, beat my chest, huffed, growled and cursed in a primal, necessary display of false confidence in the face of the unknown. The lion cowered, dipped his shoulders and shrunk back like a house cat squirited with water. Near a bend in the trail below, it composed itself and leapt out of sight down-slope in a single bound. I listened. I used to envy those who had encountered lions, but this one was stalking me.

“He, he, he, he,” Ed chuckled. He jostled the ice in his bourbon and said, “You were a heartbeat away from being a meal.” Ed is a native Montanan rancher. In his opinion, I was food. He wouldn’t change his mind no matter what interpretation I offered, but I was convinced by my experience. “I don’t know Ed, it just wasn’t that simple. Maybe I was food, but something else was going on there.”

I fixed a couple more cocktails and followed Ed as he ambled on sore joints out to the deck to watch the moonlight on the west slope of the Mission Mountains. Ed broke the silence with a dead-pan tease, “It’d a been a shame if he’d got ya.”

“Yeah,” I replied, “but I caught him. He wouldn’t take the risk of getting hurt. I was armed with a fishing pole.”

Ed chuckled his smooth cowboy laugh: “I don’t know,” he paused, “I’ve seen you staple your finger, put on a tire backwards... But you probably had a shot.”

“Better off than your old ass would have been.”

Ed tipped his Stetson back on his forehead, slapped my shoulder with his leathered paw and chuckled, “You’re probably right.”

I’d spent free time in previous years near Boulder, Colorado, searching for mountain lions in a volunteer predator-tracking program to establish
lynx and mountain lion numbers in Eldorado Canyon State Park. My boss, Greg, faced a constant problem with the free-roaming, near-feral dogs some canyon inhabitants kept as pets—pets that sometimes packed up to eviscerate mule deer. Occasionally, someone would find one of these dogs torn open and Greg would be called in to clean up the mess, put it in a garbage bag, and find the owner. It’s part of living on the urban interface. Lion attacks and sightings are up, but so are our numbers and the encroachment into their territory. Lions are being lions, taking advantage of easy meat.

I saw the violence of a cougar kill once atop a ridge above that canyon. The fawn’s ribs were rent back from the sternum, as if parted with steel surgical spreaders. She was thoroughly devoured, picked clean by a host of local scavengers. My cheeks were flushed from the snowshoe up the slope, and they pulsed as I realized the cat’s precision, its certainty.

Attacks were up in the ‘90s in Colorado, as elsewhere across the West. The environmentally-conscious residents of Boulder County were torn, wanting to protect the cats but fearful of what seemed an invasion. It just didn’t seem normal for cats to be coming down into their yards. “If they want deer,” Greg once told me, “they’re gonna get lions too.”

In the 1950s, in a cave in South Africa, anatomy professor Raymond Dart uncovered what he believed to be a stockpile of early hominid weapons: A variety of weathered, broken animal bones. Among them were crushed and punctured Australopithecine skulls and skeletal remains. Dart believed these pre-hominid ancestors cached the bones as weapons and declared them the first hominid arsenal. His explanation for the punctured skulls? Trophies of warfare, murder or even cannibalism.

Anthropologist Bob Brain was skeptical; he doubted Dart’s assumptions, and looked for the animals in the landscape to piece the story back together. At a site called Swartkrans, he uncovered numerous bones, some of which came from Australopithecines. As he excavated the site and several similar cave sites, he noticed a correlation still typical in South Africa: open cave mouth, roots growing up from the saturated soil, a tree above a cave, a pile of bones accumulating below. He discovered an ancestral hominid skull with two prominent punctures in the back. Brain noted: “Interestingly enough, the spacing of those two holes is matched almost exactly by the spacing of the lower canines of a fossil leopard from the same part of the cave.”

The lion was still there. Not far. At a turn in the trail, the slope rose slightly up to a large chalky boulder above. I leaned over my hips, strode heel-to-toe up the rise and slid behind the rock, slipping out of my pack. Fumbling nervously, I retrieved my camera and waited. Peeking an eye around the boulder, I watched as the lion emerged and stepped casually around the turn with his chin turned up to the cliffs above. As he rounded the bend, I stepped out and revealed myself. He slowed to rest in the middle of the trail and looked up at me as I snapped the shutter.

Sweat trickled from my armpits, and my head and neck tingled. “Okay!” I yelled, turning toward it. The lion paced slowly to a stop, his long, black-tipped tail swaying to rest. He was farther down the trail this time, a hundred feet back.

“You can’t follow me like this all day!” He cowered and shrunk back a bit, then cocked his head. As we regarded each other, the idea of kinship weighed on me: I had opened myself to a relationship acknowledging thousands of years of co-existence, that somehow humans and lions have learned to respect each other. That long ago, somewhere, an understanding developed to minimize conflict, reflecting a necessary relationship we were obligated to negotiate. I wanted to believe I was tapping into that link once more, acknowledging a relationship we have with lions that is not of our choosing, not ours to define alone.

“I wanted to see you,” I continued, “but this has got to stop!”

The big tail swept the ground and twitched. The dark amber eyes blinked. He sat up on his haunches, a broad swath of white cresting up his elongated chest. There seemed to be no threat in him, just interest, and a demand for recognition, as if we were partners in a conversation left unfinished.

The moment was broken by twigs snapping above. I caught a glimpse of brown fur, then stillness: A deer? He reared up abruptly. I clicked the shutter and caught a last glimpse as the lion bounded up the slope into the woods.
I.

A thousand feet of gray. A thousand feet of pallid gray and mist. We watch the sky and fret. A minor squall or three-day-blow? No way to tell. If we could see beyond that northern range, if we could see beyond the shawl of cloud that languorously seeps along the ridges and declivities of that red northern range, we’d have a chance to learn how night will be, to learn how long we might stand watching here above the lake and under it. These gray vapors sublime and curl around the trees, these lichen-cloaked and lignin-twisted firs, these misty tongues encircle them, caress them, and recede.

II.

We watch the sky of pallid gray and mist that eases up the canyon, filling it, immense: an insubstantial glacier’s shade where once a tongue of ice flowed down and ground that far wall to an edge. The little lake, pellucid in the overcast of noon not hours ago, is dull. Around the trees, around uprooted, sunken trees, their limbs long-stripped, in depths of winter ice entombed till summer thaw bathes them in pale green light ten feet below the surface. Under them lithe forms six inches long swim silver-marked. An age ago the ospreys slept in them. Cold centuries in ice their wood preserved.
III.

Lithe forms six inches long swim silver-marked beneath the cold and undecaying wood.
A life ago I saw them. Lives ago
I dove into a canyon west of here,
still pools of silver ice, and held my breath,
the surface shining there above my head,
and summoned them to me. My hand outstretched
and so they skittered just beyond my reach,
a finger's size at best, parr-marked in rust
on silver sides. One came again to me
and settled in above my upraised palm,
a flick of fin to steady her. Besotted,
sodden, sadly, I besought her stay,
a glint of fire in ice to fill my lungs.

IV.

I dove into a canyon west of here
and rising hard, the current swept me out
among the dross and down. Which was the rill
and which the wrack? The torrent carried me
down to the confluence, the Trinity
in flood at Weitchpec, rivers new conjoined
and sea's salt craving in them, but in truth
I bore it as well, that torrent held
roil-rimmed in venous channels, scarcely low
enough to stay within the banks. Here now
a standing wave inside would drench me good,
moisten my face, encrust my pocket change
with silt, throw driftwood limbs against my ribs,
fill lungs and leave me gasping on the sand.
Here, now, enough to stay within the banks.
Above me, leavings of historic floods,
stout limbs wrapped into trees, paint-chipped porch rails
twelve feet above the ground, aluminum
and coils of red barbed wire — a nest for rocs —
that once lay closer to the sodden earth
until one soaking rain too many, then
another, blew over mountain passes;
filled up the tiny feeder runs with storm,
filled up the rills with storm, filled up the creeks
that gather up each rill’s augmented storm,
augment that then themselves, and dump it out
into the Klamath River’s angry brown;
whole forests tumble seaward after it.

I once lay closer to the sodden earth
and felt it breathing, long, slow draughts of breath,
an eon’s inspiration and release,
long exhalations, tule mists that rise
from cobble bars, that linger over pools
and dissipate when sun’s first beams at last
surmount the southward ridge, dissolve into
the sky to fall again as rain upstream.
The earth breathes still, it breathes: a labored rasp.
These river-strangling dams, these forests sheared
to loose their soil into the steelhead pools
with mercury from the abandoned mines,
they seize the lungs. They clasp the earth’s pale throat
and squeeze as if they stand to benefit.
VII.

The sky will fall again as rain, upstream
where we stand, watching mist obscure the lake
and thicken. Some of it will overtop
the lake, where Deadfall Creek will take it, mix
it with the ends of Chilcoot, Salt Lick, Bear
and High Camp creeks, each spilling what the storm
has given it, to form the Trinity.
A litany of further creeks, each with
their summer rain and snowmelt add themselves,
Cedar Creek, and Picayune, and Eagle,
Tangle Blue, Sunflower, all the vessels
of this million-fingered drainage, until just
at Coffee Creek: slack water. Twenty miles
of river drowned. The jet skis muddy it.

VIII.

A litany of further creeks, each with
its singular raw nature, each defiled,
truncated, water wrested from each bed
and flattened, throttled, rivers sent in chains
to water cotton farms, old cobble bars
left dry and caking where deft garter snakes
once raised their heads at me, where yellow-legged
frogs once slow regarded me from shaded
pools, where coho held their redds and flicked
thick meaty tails at me, where the chinook
splashed busily midstream and did not look
at me at all. Brown are the tules now,
alder grows crisp in summer heat and bands
of cat-tails edge into what were the depths.

IX.

Left dry and caking where deft garter snakes
escape upstream, a hundred thousand salmon.
A hundred thousand dead salmon, the knot
that ties the grizzly to the squid undone,
slack in the piss-warm river, flies around
them. Once the Pacific fed this lake,
rich soil off ocean's floor shaping itself,
engulfing and enveloping itself,
pulling itself up, the stream fighting it,
the base imperative of going home
to feed the roots of wizened foxtail pines,
wind-blasted, sere, serene. All severed now,
this chain from summit to the dim abyss.
Eyes turn to heaven, mist over, go dark.

X.

The base imperative of going home
is thwarted. Rivers run down to the sea
no more, and the sea boils up storms to melt
the mountains. I once walked a trail into
the wooded reaches of the Trinity’s
South Fork, cast hooks into still pools, waded
out where blue herons hunt steelhead, and slipped
myself into the rapid. I took in
the river, took the Trinity’s white foam
spirit boiling into myself, was cleansed
immaculate and whole, and the white-head
eagle stretched a solitary wing
in Douglas fir. Now eagles feed like crows
on windrows of dead coho and chinook.
XI.

I once walked a trail into the mountains
their proud cloud banners streaming east aloft
and on the third day rested, made a fire
in my little stove. The water boiled,
tea in the cup, my hands curled 'round for warmth,
the plated bark of Jeffrey pine against
my back, its resin sticking to my shirt
and watched. The sky vermilion, I watched.
The moon insensible, ascending over
sere Nevada hills, I watched. The stars
in their undying firmament, the hunter
and his dog, the sisters, Jove and Ares,
all the far and noble things not yet
within our growing power to rend I watched.

XII.

Jove and Ares, Canis, the Pleiades
above me as that sky turned indigo,
and mountains to the south in silhouette
dissolved slow into dusk, as many stars
above as those that filled my heart that night
furiously to burn, and yet remote
enough that their fire brought no warmth
save that which I imagined. Undying?
The stars die every night too far away
for us, our eyes e’er downward-cast, to see.
Their light has traveled long, for some of them
since we grew scales. They may be dead. If our
small sun had died that night, I’d not have known
there, on my rock, until my tea grew cold.
XIII.

Above me as that sky turned indigo
I dared not move, the broken ground
too treacherous, no moon to guide me through
the ankle-shattering scree. Last night the moon
rose late, not long ‘til dawn, but light poured off
the stars like riverfoam. Each stone illumined
above and underneath, each vein of leaf
stark lit, sharp shadows cast, each needle-tip
on every pine ablaze. When I walked down
along the lake’s near shore the wind had stilled,
the lake turned bottomless, and there within
a galaxy of stars burned furious
remote. In depths of winter ice scant-warmed,
their centuries’ cold fire lit up my heart.

XIV.

There, centuries-cold fire lit up my heart
And lifted it, though not without complaint
through moonrise, through the moonlight-driven wind
that made us shiver quiet as we slept,
through morning and the climb. The summit reached
fair easily, though not without complaint,
we saw the first gray rumblings of this storm,
descended to a knife-edge ridge, divide
between the Trinity’s long-furthest reach
and the Sacramento, my home’s native
river. From that far height no ashen marks
of commerce could we see. The headwaters
in us, we were the headwaters of all
below, sublimed and fallen on the Earth.
Alkali

Allen Braden

The muscular flank of winter drifts as white as saddle sweat, a lather worked from mile after free mile until only Laramie at twenty below can recall those bright slopes of alkali.

Acres were there for the taking, so we took them. Every rotten inch. But even scab prairie didn’t come easy. Locals gave in; frontier stood fast, choking out row after row of red potato.
That alkali, that friend to sage
and horsetail, jimson and pigweeds,
scalded all the nitrogen away
and did in its unfair share
of claims for a birthright.

We wagoned down and said home,
but that alkali did not budge one bit.
It cursed the West,
soured water in the well
and set the deed on fire.
This dream. I had this dream last night: my father made me a cup of coffee and poured it into a steaming mug and gave it to me. I took it. I saw that the coffee was green, that it had chunks of fiber floating in it, and I knew that it was unfit to drink. I remember feeling that I wanted to trust him. He must have seen me, because he or something else swiped the cup and with it, snuffed the ashes of a fire that, though right beside me, I didn’t know was burning. Then I woke up.

* 

The first time barbed wire pierced my hands was in a place called Round Valley, and I was too young to dig a post but old enough to pack wire in banded spools and haul pounds of two inch staples in Clorox jugs. My dad and brother carried yellow stretchers and claw hammers and Channellock fencing tools – pliers with three biting sections and the nose of a hardened steel raptor for culling staples from the nest of a post. Those blue-handled pliers seemed to grow like flowers in the back pockets of their jeans. Our work was silent and necessary and real. We used these tools like surgeons, and we repaired the scars of snowmobiles and of winter snows and of spring floods, as if all these things were against us and ours.

This work happened on the same paths that the yearlings walked. It was a strange border beside fences on leased grounds. Something of a trail, something of a prayer. One-year-old cattle walked those boundaries as if to say to them: you can’t hold me forever. They searched for breaks in the fence, for moments of escape. These same cows left in the morning and came back to barns and sheds and people at night, the same way we did. I guess it was fair to say that we were much like the cattle we were raising. Our footsteps burned into the dirt just as well as theirs. We took suck from the ground. We plodded along that fence line as if to say: you can’t hold me forever.

You got to Round Valley from Boise by first loading the truck – a four-door flatbed job that sometimes hauled hay, sometimes hauled burn barrels, sometimes us boys to school and all times burned quart after quart of 20w-50 Techron your old man charged at NAPA. You loaded it with coolers of food and sleeping bags for the old falling-in house you’d stay in up there and with yourself and your brother and sometimes your mother and then you’d gear up that pass called horseshoe bend double-clutching as if it
mattered and all four barrels of overgrown carburettor wide open to the wind. When that sad old Chevy melted down at 260 degrees, you’d pull over on a turnout and hide your face when your dad, who always drove, found a short-handled shovel and scraped the flat carcass of a porcupine and threw it in the back as if to soothe the gods that roiled under the hood. With the porcupine now twined to the flatbed, maybe hanging on the headache rack to dry, and with your head out the window you’d wind down the other side of the bend and past the rock dry, and with your head out the window you’d wind down the other side of the bend and past the rock that looked like a loaf of bread — something formed by lighting striking twice — and then you’d be at the river, the Payette. This blue ribbon you’d follow in its meanderings, that looked like a loaf of bread — something formed by lighting striking twice — and then you’d be at the river, the Payette. This blue ribbon you’d follow in its canyon past the flats at Gardena and into the notion of Banks and beyond the A-frame at Smith’s Ferry and through snakes and kinks of the road and its ponderosa pine and aeries of bald eagles and piles of garbage beside Cecil Andrus’ signs that said Idaho is too great to litter until you got to this big open space where the highway curved due north and it looked like the fences five wires high blended with infinity. Took two hours, always.

Round Valley was south of Long Valley and way way west of Sun Valley, thank god, which meant it was still a good valley where houses didn’t sprout forth like weeds. I should say too that to get to Round Valley, you also passed through this spot on a grade between Banks and the turn to Packer John where the ponderosa on the slope northwest of you stood out from the sage and, if you allowed, formed the outline of a bowlegged cowboy, tall Stetson to boot.

*There exists this shared belief, I think in the West, that any problem can be handled with a clean tool and enough effort.*

The sections that the fences bound in were named for their owners or former owners or something else that took that place of ownership. Strickland Place. Petersen Place. Herrick’s place. Ol’ Velveeta’s Place (a story which I’ve never heard). Skunk Creek. The Home Place. What a thing to call it? The Home Place. 640 acre parcels of coulee and curlew and young yellow pine and soil and water. Water sometimes so clear it seemed you could break light with it and in other places and times so brackish you couldn’t see through a quart. There were rights to it, but no one owned that water.

Perhaps that moment on the Petersen Place was the signal to my father that I wasn’t cut out for this life, that he should encourage me to do other things, away from cattle. Was it the grimace on my face? The cuts on my hands? The way my brother turned against him when it came to work? All I know is that some decision was made to elide me from the leases at Skunk Creek and Clear Creek, from the gathering at Cascade and Cambridge, from calving at Little Valley, from the feedlot in Star — from all of it. I was there, but I was a boy. It could have been that he wanted to leave himself out, that I was a consequence of that. Week after week of cows and then fixing fence for cows and then going back to cows. I would have left it too. Silence sometimes hung so heavily when we fixed fence that we would not talk for the entire day, except to grant each other a slug of water or a moment in the occasional oasis of shade. What my father truly lived for was to go fishing at Herrick Reservoir when the day was over.

But the days never ended.

I remember thinking one summer in an afternoon glow that someday I would live in this valley and I would take a wife and we would strike a living here and I would do it all when I was sixteen. I thought this while living in a camper for a week, taking wages from a man named Daryl for fixing his fence. I’d come up that summer and walked around the waist high grasses that the stock hadn’t been turned out on. I fished Herrick from the banks and from the canoe that I’d strapped to my Ford. I paddled out among the grey snags that stood upright that reminded me of the quiet valley that this water had flooded. I’d caught my first fish there, a rainbow. I had enough trust in the place that I would have done it — I’d of stayed — if my folly wouldn’t have precluded it: you can’t fix fence in the winter, boy.

*Camas Winter 2008*
Almost one-hundred years ago, my great grandfather Remie loaded himself in Antwerp into the angry innards of 560 feet of steel that steamed across the wrecking Atlantic. He was landed on Ellis, March 1, 1911. The manifest of that ship had him going to his brother in Boise, where he would find work or move toward it. In 1918, he likely traveled on toll road from Warm Springs, left the mesas of Boise, his brother Ben, and whatever he’d done there, and took work in the foothills of Long Valley. His brother Gus was already there. It was also where my great-grandmother, Susie, had been working since the age of twelve cleaning the houses of locals. At a Cascade dance they met. He was twenty seven; she was fifteen. They married in February in the home of friends.

In Round Valley he built a log cabin for his wife because that was the way of things. He splayed the earth with steel and bit and two draft horses and tried his hand at farming. This brought drought. Disease. “Remie went to logging to survive,” Susie said of the times. He spoke Flemish and maybe French; Susie, English. And so a Western silence was born in this crucible of my local history. I don’t know that there was anything to say.

Wherever that cabin was is now called the Home Place, and the man who should know its exact whereabouts, my grandfather, Remie Junior, doesn’t know where it is either. I’m not sure it ever mattered much to him. Because after two years of giving it a go in Round Valley, his father packed up and moved to the Boise valley – fooled by its alias, the Treasure Valley – and raised his six children one beef at a time until a stroke finally seized him in '59.

Junior’s C.B. handle is Beechnut, for the tobacco he once chewed bag after bag. (He still chews, Levi Garrett.) When he goes to church, he wears his Sunday western-cut suit, his white felt Stetson in the winter, straw in the summer. His boots are pointed and polished. At eighty-one his glasses are tri-focaled. He packs enough shit in the back of his suburban to survive nuclear holocaust, which may be why he packs it. From his shirt pocket sprout pens and notebooks and a bag of Rolaids. In those books, he used to record the weights of the knockers he’d buy out from the end of livestock sales – the runts and sicklings that no one else would take. For Junior, the home place doesn’t matter because his father made the decision to leave it and to live where they did and that was enough. This is religious too. You push and you petition and you push and you petition until the time comes when you are delivered to someplace where you no longer have to push.

Someone asked me: What does it mean to be a man in this new West? I asked in response: What does home have to do with it? I think I’ve always thought these questions were unfair because they were never asked around me. So I didn’t ask them. Wallace Stegner says, “The western culture and western character with which it is easiest to identify exist largely in the West of make-believe, where they can be kept simple.” Simple was the idea that, like his namesake, my father could marry and handle what was given to him. Simple, like before my parents divorced, I learned that my great grandfather had married a woman in Belgium and divorced her and came to America and remarried. Where was this simple, fiery knowledge when I fenced myself in a marriage on the wrong side of the Cascades, to a woman who could not love a man of this or any West? Sometimes I wanted those waters to flood those fencegrounds and just give everything a good soaking.

The fences of silence that bound us were fences we plotted and searched for breaks. Rote was the response that we fix that break, that we sew it up with that rusting chaos of wire and stretch it taut so as to hear it sing and fasten it to that wooden post made to be against its nature and then walk from it all assured.
that it would last another season. You can't hold me forever. What if we had just walked through that fence? What if we just beelined it for Herrick and instead of staples and wire we'd have had rods and creels? And what if we just spent the day saying to hell with it and fished and talked and caught a mess of keepers that we could take home and remember? Wasn't that just as urgent? Or what if we headed up can remember, though I imagine that it hung from two eyes that lagged into a spanning log that was fixed in some way to two uprights on opposite sides of his lane. The sign was high enough, I suppose, that cars and people could pass under. And we did. We went to that brick house on the river in Star that he'd built with money from selling out the feedlot, and we celebrated Thanksgiving and Christmas and birthdays.

**Rote was the response that we fix that break, that we sew it up with that rusting chaos of wire and stretch it taut so as to hear it sing**

into the hills with the Mausers and the mags or better yet with the .410 and looked for grouse after a clean rain? We could have bugled. We could have watched hummingbirds do work so articulate that we'd have fallen down for the awe of it. We could have sat in huckleberries and picked until purple. Could have made our lives there.

> On my grandfather's home is a thick wooden sign the size of a good table. It's hung there as long as I

The sign was then sort of bright and promising. Now, on the south side of their trailerhouse in Middleton, it is weathered and faded. The Lazy VP Cattle Co. Contradiction writ large. No Van was ever lazy; no partition of wood and steel could ever last as long as the promises it tried to border.

**Fences.**
Lightning Storm on Mount Edwards

Brenna Moloney

When my grandmother was a young mother to my child mother, she would turn off the lights in her daughter's room and sit at the edge of the bed and take down her long black-colored hair from its bun and brush it with deep, carrot-chop strokes to raise the electricity out of it.

Blueberry sparks in my mother's room, in the double-dark of my grandmother's hair.

Tonight, though I am alone, the rocks tall on Mount Edwards rake down the lightning from the blackness of a cloud-glutted sky.
A Letter to Fire

Katherine Standefer

Not too long ago,
mornings were crumpled and fetal.
This blood autumn pulled me
wet and twisted
from bedcovers
and left me in the reeds.

I didn’t know I still had a body
after all that.
I was walking in the silvered willows,
watching the sun slit downed clouds.
I was sleeping like a woman
who had not slept all her life.

Sometimes sleep breeds fire.
Sometimes, a man draws his hand long and slow
across the bridge of a back
and whispers.

As a hollow mountain echoes voice
so I came home. Now small white flesh,
given tinder,
sparks
and sparks,
and erupts.
It is mid-December, 2007 just north of 71° N. We are in the Amundsen Gulf in the Beaufort Sea, the westernmost reach of the Northwest Passage, some 90 miles south of the Polar Ice Cap. We have now left daylight behind. What light there is comes at midday when the sky heightens to a deep cobalt blue and the horizon is rimmed with prism-edge streaks of violet, vermillion and apricot. We are surrounded by ice as far as the eye can see. Our ship — the Canadian Coast Guard icebreaker, the CCGS Amundsen — is the only one at sea in the Arctic.

In the midday dark I am perched in a large box-like wooden sled that the Canadians leading this International Polar Year expedition call a komituk, after the Inuit word for a work sled. Ahead of me on a beefy snow machine pulling the sled is Matthew Asplin, a graduate student at the University of Manitoba, the home university for this year long research mission that involves about two hundred scientists from fifteen different countries. Riding in the komituk with me is Dustin Isleifson, also at the University of Manitoba. Dustin is working a small machine that looks like a vacuum cleaner. Dragged behind the sled on a handle like a pull-toy, Dustin and Matthew call this device, “the puppy.” As it skims the frozen sea, this puppy, which contains ground penetrating radar, gauges the thickness of the ice below. We ride in wide loops off the starboard side of the ship. The big spotlights on the bridge cast long blue shadows and bounce off the tiny crystalline surfaces in the thin crust of snow. This machine makes it possible to measure the thickness of a sizable area of ice — information that’s becoming increasingly important as sea ice wanes.

Called the Circumpolar Flaw Lead System Study, this expedition’s mission is to hug the lead of open water between the central sea ice pack — the ice that builds up and moves south from the Polar Ice Cap — and the coastal ice, a place particularly sensitive to environmental changes. Indicative of what will happen as temperatures
rise and sea ice disappears, this thread of open water, also called a polynya, is literally on the front line of climate change. This is the first time such an expedition has been undertaken. Ten or fifteen years ago, it would not have been possible. There was simply too much ice.

Being in the Arctic in winter, you learn quickly how ice rules. There is a whole world of ice, complete with nomenclature and identifying characteristics. The first few days I was on the Amundsen, we moved swiftly through newly forming ice — through scattered crystalline ice called frazil, through thin translucent sheets called nilas, through grease ice that rides the waves like an oily gray sheen, through round layered pancake ice, and through the small brine crystals called frost flowers that look like tiny bougainvillea blooms. When we moved through the same stretch of Beaufort Sea several weeks later, we were almost trapped by ice nearly three feet thick. To make headway, we had to advance, retreat and advance again.

But this was all what's called first year ice — ice formed that winter. What scientists are watching warily is the ratio between first year and multiyear ice — ice that has lasted through at least one summer melt season and is, on average, thirteen years old. Twenty years ago, multiyear ice made up about 60 percent of the Arctic sea ice cover. There is now only half that much. Multiyear ice is arguably the old growth of ice. Massive, hummocked, and imposing it is — like an ancient forest — an ecosystem anchor. What's happening now as temperatures warm is roughly analogous to what happens when an ancient forest becomes riddled with clear cuts. Amundsen Captain Stéphane Julien, who has over twenty years experience in the Arctic, calls multiyear ice “an endangered species.”

From where we were on the Amundsen, at the time of year when daylight wanes dramatically and ice builds, it became abundantly clear how sensitive that environment is to changes in temperature, sunlight, and wind, and how open water can change everything. There were times when it was possible to see heat steaming out of the water — water that was -1°C into air that was about -20°C. The stark contrast between the dusky white expanse of snow covered ice and intense indigo water illustrated how ice acts like a blanket, regulating heat transfer between ocean and atmosphere. Ice is the keystone feature of the system, I was told. Lose the ice and the system changes from white to dark.

With more ocean open to solar radiation, the surface layer of the Arctic Ocean becomes warmer all the way across to Siberia, accelerating the melting that's already begun. What happens then can prompt a chain of cyclic events cascading across the hemisphere that can affect everything on the planet, from weather circling the globe to the tiniest organisms on earth. What happens here at the top of the world also creates conditions that determine snowpack in the Cascades, Sierras and throughout the Rocky Mountain West.
“More and more open water changes surface temperature. This changes circulation and feeds the atmosphere with more energy, which influences Arctic storm systems,” Matthew tells me. To understand the forces driving these perturbing conditions, his research team is placing tracking beacons on multiyear ice floes. Data these devices collect – along with measurements from the ground penetrating radar and another instrument Dustin’s using to remotely sense ice surface texture – will help create models that predict how these storm systems influence weather patterns farther south.

A month later I check in to find out where this piece of ice has traveled. “The beacons we’ve planted on multiyear ice have flagged the fact that the ice is moving very quickly,” expedition leader Dave Barber tells me. “There are large fractures in the multiyear ice, moving it away from the first year ice in the Arctic Archipelago and towards Siberia. Eastern winds blow ice toward Siberia. When there is less multiyear ice it blows very fast,” he explains.

In 2007, the Bering Strait was open into early December and the south Beaufort Sea stayed relatively warm, dispersing and interspersing the multiyear pack ice with first year ice. “When multiyear ice congregates it protects itself. With thinner ice in between it accelerates the melting,” says Barber.

Is there anything we can do to halt this process now, I ask. “Ten years ago we could have but not now. There’s too much inertia in the system,” he says. “If we could slow this down it would halt the changes but we can’t do that.” We need, he says, to make choices that think not just four, eight or twelve years ahead, but even farther out. And I think of the snow I can see from my home in Portland, snowpack on the slopes of Mt. Hood, snowpack that feeds the mountain streams whose water comes coursing out my kitchen tap.
Hay Hooks

Allen Braden

It helps to consider these hooks
extensions of your own hands,
a means of unloading harrowbeds

as the wrists learn what angle
to curve each point in deep enough,
then what angle for release.

And your body must invent
certain tricks of weight and balance
to flick itself down and back,

the way a jackknife folds and unfolds,
in order to encourage the bales
up overhead where they belong.
Fifth Grade North Dakota Night:
Don't stop shooting. The gnats hit my face. Don't stop shooting. If I run faster the mosquitoes fly in my shadow, two steps behind my exercised blood vessels. I shoot, wait for the rebound, feel the swarm, and the second the ball forms my hands I run and shoot again. Dad pulls up in his dirty pickup truck, gives me his just-got-home-from-work hug, and makes a couple hoops in his work boots. “Try and get the ball,” he challenges. He holds the ball firmly between his grease-stained hands. I slap at it again and again, trying to spring it loose, but he moves his hands so I hit them instead of the ball. “Foul! Foul! Foul!” he teases, then finally releases the ball and moseys inside.

The sun sets and the gray haze of evening swallows the wheat field that swallows my house. My parents aren't the type that yell “Kalie, get inside!” when maybe they should. The choice is mine, so I play my game with the bugs and the ball until all of us are black. Always gotta make the last shot. Swish. Inside, Mom finds a bug in my hair and says I should probably take a shower. Hundreds of gnats line the bottom of the bathtub and I go to bed with a wet head to the sound of North Dakota wind.

Freshman Year Game Day:
Sugar beets, wheat, alfalfa, lentils, peas, barley. Acres and acres of the usual fields pass by as Dad drives me to school to meet the rest of the team. Seven out of the nine girls in my small town class — split between farm kids and “Indian” kids — shoot hoops year round and our town and country wait impatiently for us to dominate the high school scene. “Soon it will be our turn,” they think. Not yet. Tonight we suit up as the Junior Varsity Trenton Tigers and face the Williston Coyotes. When a town of 200 plays a town of 12,000, underdog is an understatement, and the country kid/city kid dynamic shows in a heightened level of feistiness.

The day passes quickly when laced with competitive anticipation and in no time I find myself in the fourth quarter with Lacey, Stacey, and Katie already fouled out and only four of us left on the court. The Coyotes up by two. On the next fast break Tanya’s strong farm kid figure takes out the city kid easy and we’re down to three. Too much irrigating for that girl. Kamie, Erin, and I run hard, but all the Coyotes have to do is sand bag on both ends of the court and throw long passes. Kamie gains her fifth and ridiculousness ensues as two Tigers struggle to

Out of Bounds
Kalie Ryder
fight five Coyotes. We giggle as they eat us alive and rack up points. On the opposite end of the court Erin tries to defend two players at once and the whistle blows. “Reach!” The ref yells. Five fouls, go figure. Just me now. Are they really going to make me keep playing? The refs look at each other, look at me, we all smile, and they call off the game. The crowd that fills the bleachers gives me a standing ovation and I walk off the court, beaming.

On the bus ride home the lights of Williston dissipate as we talk about losing the first game in years, and not minding one bit. The coach just shakes his head and smirks, knowing he had no control over a pack of girls thirsty for revenge on the city, if you can call Williston a city. Dad picks me up at school with a matching smirk and we follow the gravel road farther into the rural lightlessness of home.

Senior Year Post Basketball Season:

Pancake frying stinks up the house and snow covers the valley. Dad cooks me breakfast wearing flannel pajama pants and a faded Trenton Tiger t-shirt. This is his winter attire, a.k.a. non-farming attire. A big burly guy, they call him Paul Bunyan through the CB Radio. “How bout’cha Paul Bunyan?”

He still talks about the games. “Two state basketball tournaments,” he says to himself, shaking his head. Nobody had gone to state in any sport from our eighty kid high school for fifteen years and somehow the stars aligned. We did it. The right girls were born at the right time in this tiny place and we managed to get to that state tournament not once, but twice. Turns out Dad only kept renting land to farm so he could be his own boss and make it to every single one of his kids’ games. Now that all four of us are done he’s just going to work for one of the farmers who own the land out here, but not the guy who bought our farm during the farm crisis. It’s all the same to me. Owning, renting, farmhand-ing — he always comes home muddy and smelling of grease, empties his lunch cooler, and jumps in the shower.

Dad tosses another pancake on my plate. “Geez, six pancakes,” he says, “you must be hungry!” Distraacted, I daydream about the supposed “tree-hugging” college I’ve decided to attend and what life will be like without basketball and rural America. Grad School Spring Afternoon:

Dad visits me in Missoula, Montana, and I’m conniving the type of plan one connives after beginning to understand the past. “Do you want to sit in on my class, Dad? I think you’d like it, it’s called Culture and Agriculture.” If he saw farming in an academic setting, like I do all the time, it just might bring him a slice of the peace that comes with big picture understanding. Most families who went through the farm crisis blamed themselves for losing the farm. And Dad was no outlier.

“Sure, why not.” He says. He tends to go with the flow when he visits me, which makes my scheme too easy. This visit he plans to take his car back. I’ve been using it, but he needs it for his new job in town with the county. Better gas mileage than a pickup.

“Spirituality and the Land” is etched on the chalkboard as Dad and I walk into the classroom. Uff. A bit heavier of a topic than I was expecting, but I’m still committed to my plan. I listen as a variety of college kids dressed in urban farmer wear give their impression of what the land does for them spiritually. Dad, who worked the land his entire life, sits to my left wearing his Wranglers, a striped polo, and the typical farmer cap. He doesn’t say a word.

As we split into small groups I strategize my desk scoot according to who will get Dad talking. After a quick survey of the room I spot that hyper philosophy girl who’s constantly in state of inquiry. Perfect. “Mind if my dad sits in on this one?” The conversation begins and sure enough word spreads quickly that Dad’s a farmer who will stop farming this summer, “lose his identity,” and all that jazz.

Philosophy Girl’s eyebrows furrow with deep concern. She turns to Dad and asks, “How do you feel about leaving the land?” The question immediately makes me uncomfortable. A bit much it seems. My plan too effective. Unfazed, Dad shrugs his shoulders and matter-of-factly replies, “Oh, the land will always be me. I will always be there.” I’m not prepared for the response and stare at Dad, a bit perplexed and emotionally stunned for a couple of seconds. I never heard him talk about the land that way. He just did his farming thing, like they all do out there. “Farmers don’t think deep. They just do.” That’s what Mom always says.

After class, Dad and I saunter out of the classroom, our gait matching our moods. A couple of wide-eyed students stop him to say how much

Most families who went through the farm crisis blamed themselves for losing the farm. And Dad was no outlier.
they appreciated his “important” and “real” input in class, then we continue down the cobblestone campus sidewalks. I look at him to try and read any potential reaction. No reaction. He smiles back as if the class never happened. As if the farm crisis never happened. As if not farming for the first summer in his life will not happen.

* 

Dusk:
The giant Buddhist prayer flags on the south side of the six acre urban farm SNAP with each gust of wind. Drinking a Tallboy PBR in Montana’s summer heat only catalyzes the relaxation that comes from a weekend spent watering an organic vegetable farm. Seven years of school, first nutrition and now environmental studies, and I find myself studying in fields like the ones that formed the backdrop of my life in North Dakota.

I work on my only assignment for the summer – reflections on what it’s like to work the land. I look around grasping for inspiration when cliches like “touching the soil makes me feel more alive,” and “I love my farmer’s tan,” seem inevitable yet painfully true. Once again, I wonder what Dad would say. Talked to him on the phone today. Funny twist of fate. I’ve been all worried that not farming would be hard as hell, but he seems to be thriving with his new job with the county. He golfed all weekend as I irrigated. “Golfed the best game of my life!” he boasted.

The sprinklers look like they’re doing fine, but I’m getting antsy. Time to pass some time the old fashioned way. I saunter over to the basketball hoop near the tool shed (I’ve come to believe that basketball hoops are universally associated with farms) and pass rows of chard, kale, garlic, corn, onions, leeks, potatoes, carrots, and beets. No chemicals allowed, which indicates I’m a good 600 miles away from the pesticides of western North Dakota and officially hugging trees in Montana. Finding a ball that’s not flat poses the biggest challenge of a weekend of keeping an entire farm alive in ninety degree heat. Some things never change. A white one without grips will suffice. Dribble, dribble, dribble. The ball feels so natural in my hands. Organic.

“She’s got a shooter’s touch,” my farmer professor once said. Is that all I’ve got to show for being the token farm kid on this urban farm? Dribble, jump shot, brick. The court of my childhood was an island of cement in an ocean of endless fields, but I still never went far enough out of bounds to know jack shit about farming. Behind the back, off the backboard, rolls in.

It’s silly and over-dramatic to regret it. Being a baller in rural North Dakota often means less chance of getting into bored rural kid trouble. Pivot, cut, reverse lay-up. When a small town with small incomes and small expectations has a good basketball team, it trickles down into our grades, our priorities, and future. Like becoming an alternative agriculture enthusiast in Montana, which isn’t the future my conventional farming family had idealized for me but we all get a kick out of it. Dribble, dribble, deep breath. Swish.

The sun sets and I choose not to fight the light and quit shooting to join the farm caretaker on the porch. The girl from Jersey rolls a cigarette, leans back, and wears her dirty farm clothes with an indisputable confidence. We talk lazily, her with her cigarette and me with my second PBR, and find ourselves doing more staring at the farm and the mountains hugging it. Later, as Jersey Girl shuts up the greenhouse for the night, I hop on my bike and head home across the pavement of Missoula wondering if I’ll ever understand farming like that city kid.
The Route

Scott Alexander Jones

A good stretch of Great Plains between us, I suspected he was out riding at an hour not late enough to be morning and not early enough to be evening on account of he couldn’t sleep or cause the wind felt nice in his hair or to count constellations. Or like me, all these excuses. I had a lonely mind to point out to someone, anyone, all the gone and long forgotten constellations. Good horse-names like: Harvestkeeper, Sundial, Printshop. I’d grown tired of telling my horse, and he’d grown tired of listening, about how in China the Milky Way goes by the name of Star River. How they got an actual river called the Yankee River only they say Yang-see, and they think it flows on up heavenward from the horizon and into the sky and across the entire night sky to start all over again at the other end of the world.

Closer I got to the stranger, I figured he was slouched over the saddle like that on his way homeward from a long night of drinking in town. Maybe he’d have a nip of whiskey left and I’d wake his ass up and we’d invent new constellations and his wife would stay up biting her nails and chastise him at dawn and he’d wave her off with a burp then hit the hay and eat three servings of hashbrowns come noon. Then I heard some dull bells. And something wasn’t quite right in the gait of his Border collie.

What sheep the coyotes hadn’t got to followed closely behind him, damn near single file. A strange battalion of reluctant sleepwalkers spanning four species, if you count the stranger. You’d be surprised how far away you can tell a dead man from a sleeping one, even without the aid of the sun. Don’t need to see the silver in his hair, nor the blood like war paint long since dried up and fly-strewn around both ears. The doctor would say he’d expired three days ago. Old age, a broken heart, whatever.

Had the moon been hiding behind clouds, I’m certain that dead man would’ve sauntered unknown and unnoted like an aimless ghost on up that trail for as many days as a horse can go without water. Though I suppose a horse can find water easily as any upright primate. And I reckon they weren’t exactly aimless either. The horse, the collie, them sheep: been following his confident lead all these years and he hadn’t let them down, not once. I imagine another pack of coyotes would come creeping in and they’d all quicken their pace. But they never did turn back nor scatter separate ways. Might not have known where the hell they were going, but they knew what route to keep to.