Grand Junction, December, 1988

Frank T. Byrne

You came to me one night
in Junction.
You were upset.
The weather is always bigger
in Junction,
and the whole time we walked
it rained
and you didn't say a word.
Then at last you said the word
I didn't want to hear.

Summers in Junction are hard.
It's always 20 degrees hotter
as though the sun has a grudge
against us and
nothing will stand up to it.
So the city throws up U-Hauls
and Rent-to-Owns
and Taco Bells to serve as
terrain and fox-hole.

I am convinced
you switched the seasons that night
or we did together
Because my temperature rose
until the sheets of my twin bed
were heavy with sweat
and you had to put me in the tub
full of ice water
so my brains wouldn't cook.

The next morning
Junction was empty
The gas stations
and Christian bookshops
and train tracks
all quiet.
The sun came up slow and heavy
over Clifton
and it felt like peach season.

In that dry little waiting room
I tried to read
but there was no good air
and by the time you emerged from
your procedure,
face pinched,
jaw set,
I was soundly asleep.
Contributors

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Michelle Lanzoni comes to Montana from New England, but her heart resides in the desert Southwest. Before committing herself to writing, she made a decent living in Boston; she doesn’t expect to ever again. Her current interest and passion is water.

Mike Lommler is an itinerant photographer, writer and biologist. Much of his work is focussed on the American Southwest, which is not where he is from, but is where he feels at home.

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Jenae M. Zaharko is from Melstone, MT and is graduating from UM in May with a photojournalism degree. Her future plans are to continue freelance work and hopefully one day start her own photography business.
First Person

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

Non-Fiction

A Finger of Owls...................................... 6
Julia Corbett

The Man in the Zoo.................................. 13
Margo Whitmire

Another Wolf Story................................. 23
Bethany Taylor

Libby....................................................... 27
Michelle Lanzoni

Convergence.......................................... 32
Darren M. Edwards

Fiction

My Brother, The Swan............................... 9
Lily Bruzas

Dogs and Dogs........................................ 15
Phil Condon

Poetry

Grand Junction, December, 1988.................... 1
Frank T. Byrne

Now that the Brown Pelicans have Flown
Elsewhere.................................................. 11
Caleb Barber

Gunshots at Sweathouse Creek..................... 12
Laura Dunn

Old Manzanitas........................................ 22
Pepper Trail

Convection: Northern Nevada, mid-winter........ 26
Magda Sokolowska

Asbestos Mine.......................................... 30
Noelle Sullivan

Wheelchair Relationships.......................... 36
Nathaniel Mohatt

I Have Always Wanted to Live in the
Country..................................................... 37
Lucas Farrell

Front Cover: Bethany Schilling
Back Cover: Kristen Theiler
From the Editors
Tim Gibbins & Bryce Andrews

It's right there on the cover: “The Nature of the West.” It sounds straightforward enough, bringing to mind a region defined by bold, enduring images—cowboys, Indians, bison, wolves, and wilderness. For sixteen years now, we have attempted to capture the essential West. We've given you glimpses through the eyes of authors and artists who call it home, running stories from California, Alaska, the Rocky Mountains and points in between. We've covered a lot of ground over the last decade and a half, but it seems like a few significant stones have been left unturned. So, in putting together this issue of Camas, we allowed ourselves to be guided by the following question:

“What else do we mean by “the Nature of the West?”

Let's forget the big picture for a moment and focus on the place where we put Camas together—Missoula, Montana. People love to live here. They care deeply about the city and the landscape around it. Within the city limits you can find kayakers working the Clark Fork River, paragliders soaring from Mt. Sentinel, and people strolling along the riverfront. Trails lead from downtown into the wilderness, and here in western Montana we're entering the idyllic months. Now is the time when we get to camp, fish, walk in the mountains, and sit by bonfires with stars as the brightest lights above.

That's part of “The Nature of the West,” but not the whole thing. On the road above Mansion Heights in the South Hills there is a stone bench that offers another view. In the foreground are leveled home sites with “For Sale” signs swinging in the breeze. Further out the city expands toward the county line. A dense web of roads divides an increasingly urban valley, while the natural features that used to define this watershed fade into the background.

Through it all flows the Clark Fork River, an embattled body of water that once carried Lewis and Clark’s Corps of Discovery and now, after decades of mining, has been designated as a Superfund cleanup site. Walking just a few miles past the city limits can bring you to a charred forest on Blue Mountain, or to the snowcapped Stuart Peak in the heart of the Rattlesnake Wilderness. This landscape can seem broken or pristine, depending on your perspective. It can look like the Promised Land or a dried up husk, depending on the angle of the light. All this, remember, in one tiny corner of the West.

To do justice to this region, it is imperative to tell the truth. Those postcard views of luminous mountain sunsets are real. They happen, and we should celebrate them in life as well as art. But a complete understanding requires us to go further, to turn away from the horizon’s glow and see the toxic mines, the clear-cut forests, the roadside memorials, the transients, and the trailer parks. This interface between reality and myth, between wilderness and civilization, is what makes the West so complex and interesting.

In this issue of Camas, our contributors report from the boundaries of the Western stereotype, uncovering some of the darker corners of the West. Their subjects range from the legacy of vermiculite mining in Libby, Montana, to climate change shrinking the home range of the Great Gray Owl, to the life of a homeless man beneath the big sky, to an environmentalist seeking to understand the conflict between ranchers and wolves. These photographs, essays, and poems force you to reconsider the West as you know it, and to look beyond what you wish to see.

This issue of Camas is darker than a picture-perfect sunset. The hero doesn't always win. Justice isn't always done. But these works are united in containing essential glimmers of hope: In “My Brother the Swan,” one sibling rescues another. In “Dogs and Dogs,” a destitute man gives up his last precious possession to a stranger’s child. In “Gunshots at Sweathouse Creek,” a woman turns violence into elegy. These stories, photos and poems are proof that even the darkest places on the Western map are flecked with light, like a dome of midnight mountain sky.
THE NATURE OF THE WEST

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Jenae Zaharko
A Finger of Owls

I awoke in darkness to the smell of smoke blowing in through open windows. There is no smell as disconcerting and discomposing of sleep when you live in the woods in a wooden structure. Winter mountain snows were paltry and we pinned our hopes on raucous spring storms that never came. Now in June, a fire in full fury burns in record heat and rock-bottom humidity about fourteen miles south of my cabin. In what is typically the lushest month, the meadow grass is browning, holding on, quickly trying to make seed. The midday sun casts a rosy-orange glow on every surface. Smoky sunsets smolder across the horizon. Bits of ash float by the windows, resembling small gray bugs, flitting up, floating down, briefly up, then again down.

Officials tell us to get used to this – a warming, burning West. My neighbors and I realize that fires are an expected risk – though never a welcome one – for the privilege of living in the woods. But we never bargained for a drastically and abnormally warming planet. The warming temperatures, in addition to shrinking snow pack and soil moisture, have created severe stress for the trees and good homes for beetles – pine beetle, spruce beetle, fir beetle. They burrow through bark and lay eggs that feast when they hatch. Within a year, the needles start to turn red-brown, and by the next year, the entire tree is clothed in red, like a torch ready to burn. An added consequence of warming temps is that some beetle species now complete their life cycles in one year rather than two, essentially doubling their population.

Though I have lived here just six seasons, I know the symphony of Wyoming summer – when the aspen leaf out, when I spy the first western tanager, when the spring peepers fall silent, when the sandhill cranes fly south. It’s painful to imagine this music and its choreography changed. Already, pikas, those sweet-faced rodents who squeak from alpine rock-fields at
passing hikers, are on the brink of extinction: There is no cooler, higher elevation for them to seek.

Bweak! Bweak! The call came from the western edge of the meadow. Shortly, another call came from the south. Bweak! Bweak! A strange and enchanting call — a bit like a pika or an unfamiliar rodent, but far too loud. It was five years ago and I was eating lunch outside in the warm, angled sun of late September, aspen leaves of butterscotch falling, warming on the ground. The call from the meadow repeated, high-pitched, insistent, and strong. A large, dark form gracefully — and utterly silently — glided past me. Owl. Nothing flies without disturbing air, or feathers, like an owl. It landed on a bare branch in a fir. A second owl flew near and perched in sunlight. A third owl called behind me, and after several minutes of round-robin calling, it joined the other two.

The field markings said “great gray” — large body, no visible ear tufts, a lovely round facial pattern, a mix of brown and gray — but the strange call didn’t fit. I had heard great grays from the cabin during the black of night, the monotone hoo, hoo, hoo, low and deep. No embellishment, and certainly never at midday.

A CD of birdcalls solved the mystery: Bweak! Bweak! The calls came from a juvenile great gray owl, the tallest North American owl with the longest wingspan (almost five feet), though it weighs only half as much as a great horned. Lemon yellow eyes in a facial disk of concentric circles, a black and white bow tie beneath the chin; calls at night, but often hunts at dawn and dusk; young cared for by female until four or five months old, when they begin to disperse. I had witnessed the owl equivalent of teenagers cruising the ‘hood.’

The range map of great gray owls colors a large swath of Canada and other frozen lands. For the southernmost reaches of their range, a slender finger arcs down the spine of the Cascades and Sierra Nevadas, and a thumb curves down into western Wyoming, through Yellowstone and slightly beyond, pointing to exactly where I live each summer. Delicate fingers of owls.

I come from a family of owlers. In his youth in the Yakima valley of western Washington, my father had a saw-whet owl in addition to his trained falcons. One winter while tromping through the creek valley near our childhood home in Iowa, my older brother found a great horned owl frozen solid at the base of a tree, perhaps from starvation and frigid temperatures. He carried it home and convinced my parents to stuff it. It sat on top of the piano and became the silent critic when I practiced.

During graduate school, I volunteered as a naturalist for the Raptor Center at the University of Minnesota so I could see, hear, and best of all, touch owls. My charges couldn’t be rehabilitated and returned to the wilds, whether from tangles with cars and wires or injury from assailants of unknown origin. I held on my gloved fist diminutive screech owls, lighter than Nerf-balls, and the magnificent feathered spitfires, great horned owls. When I’d take an owl to a classroom or senior center, it didn’t feel like holding a bird, but a wild spirit, a personality. On my gloved fist, the great horned owls would clack their bills, hiss, rock from foot to foot, and occasionally, hoot. Their taloned grasp was intense; for added measure, they would nip at my glove with formidable beaks. It was as if my demands in broad daylight were an insult, an affront to their very owl-ness.

The barred owls — similar in size and markings to spotted owls, though far more common — were less intimidating and much lighter, though impressive in size. One barred would close his giant chocolate brown eyes when I smoothed the feathers on his crown, yet he too would hiss, clack, and promptly ignore me when returned to his flight pen. It was a gift to get close to these owls; it was another gift that the distance between us never closed. I never forgot they were owls.

At my cabin, I haven’t encountered juvenile great grays again in the five years since, just adults. Once or twice on a summer evening walk through the woods, I get a sense of one perched and watching, and turn to witness its silent swoop through the pines. Strix nebulosa, an owl named for the Latin word nebulosus, meaning misty or foggy. A phantom of the north that even experienced birders struggle to spot. At night, I fight sleep to listen to its somber lullaby, measured and unhurried, though sleep is the very entity it elicits. Once at sunrise, I watched one dive into the rodent-pocked meadow below the cabin, but come up empty-taloned. The owls seem unalarmed or at least mildly tolerant of my presence and conversations with them. On a cloudy morning in early fall, I crept fairly close to a great gray with my camera; it ruffled and roused its feathers, the sign of a relaxed bird, or at least a bird that thinks I merit little attention. All
the neighbors compare sightings, glad to hear of its presence somewhere near, announcing “I saw the owl yesterday,” as though there is just one species that really counts. I’ve searched the surrounding woods, looking up for a scraggly stick nest at the top of a broken snag, and looking down for large pellet castings, but have found neither.

For many people who live in the woods, it’s the large mammals that signify the place and whose images grace their cabin walls. Deer, elk, bear, moose. And I celebrate those encounters – a bull elk snorting across the meadow during mating season, a curious moose staring in the basement window and sending the cat hissing upstairs. But it’s the great gray owls that most thrill me, that embody wild enigma and elegant ferocity.

It’s my enchantment and love for these elusive winged creatures that makes the vision of the slender finger of owls pulling up, retreating north, all the more terrifying. Biologists have documented the fact that centuries-old patterns of migrations and bird habits are changing, morphing in response to a warming world, often moving north or upward in elevation and shifting their timing. Robins are returning to herald spring two weeks earlier. Many warbler species are flying an average of 65 miles farther north. And one of the most vulnerable ecosystems in a warming country is the alpine meadows of the Rocky Mountains.

If fire took my mountain cabin and woods, I would mourn profoundly, deeply. But compared to the owls, my options are many. Great gray owls don’t pack their feathered bags and migrate, moving little if at all between winter and summer. In a fairly contained hunting ground, they catch mice, gophers, voles, and rabbits year-round, locating prey under the snowpack using auditory clues alone. They are perfectly adapted to boreal forests near open meadows where they have a principal role in a chorus of players and seasons. Meadow and mouse, ground squirrel and grass, fir and aspen, snow and wind. Other worlds are not now in their genes.

The smoke was thick again today, harsh on the throat and eyes, obscuring everything beyond the bottom of the meadow. Like living in an ashtray. My neighbors have their escape-bags packed and placed at the door, along with car keys and pet carriers. I have resisted – either from denial or hope – for what I could grab wouldn’t be what’s really valuable.

I tried to bring sleep by listening for owls, but heard only the breeze’s crescendo, turning the aspen leaves on their stems. The dirge gathers momentum: the greenhouse gases that spurred the warming are worsening the fires that are contributing more and more gases, and the breezes carry gas and ash up and north, warming the sea ice. As sleep finally came, I envisioned wisps of wind, contrails of gas swirling over sagebrush plains, drawing up grouse feathers, tumbleweed seeds, and the dust of antelope dung. Ever northward they drifted, mingling ash with pine pollen, cottonwood fluff, and the down of new birds. Dancing north, ever north, ferrying owls on their wings, higher, higher, higher.
My Brother, the Swan

Lily Bruzas

My brother was only half a man; he hid a swan wing under his Carhartt jacket like an angel wing, with smooth white pinion feathers, and fluffy down soft as cotton in the warm closed center. The wing grew out of his left shoulder blade: a secret tattoo, a deformity, a wish.

My brother was a good man teetering on the edge of a limestone cliff. He'd clambered up the cliff face, backsliding; his work boots leaving black streaks of rubber on the porous rock.

The cliff was spare and white, made of the tiny bones of prehistoric sea life, eroded to smooth curves over the years, thrust from the earth into the bowing Montana sky, flipped sideways, hanging uncomfortably, majestically, off of the eastern slope of the Rockies.

It was one of those days when the world is a riot of sunlight. The wind tossed through aspen leaves, creating a curtain of shimmering green down in the gullies. Birds soared and dove, wings flashing, singing. The early spring sheen of green rose like a flood in the hills, a green that would last only a moment. Tiny yellow bells bowed their heads in the forest far below, hiding in the shade, and pink western shooting stars wove into the plains grass like the night sky come down and shining in the day, face up.

As always, on this day the wind blew rough from the east and slammed into the mountains, shooting straight up like a tidal wave. The kids in town knew the exact spot where the cliff and the wind broke against each other the hardest. They'd get drunk and tilt forward on their heels into the wind, let the wind take their weight completely. Usually someone stood behind them and grasped the soft fabric of their shirt, acting as a safety line, but it didn't amount to much. Letting the wind hold you up was an act of faith.

My brother took off his jacket and arched his wing up to the sky, just like a second crescent moon of bone and feathers; my brother, the graceful half moon, part swan, half man, an impotent, helpless combination; his right arm outstretched also, fingers grasping at a wind he couldn't hold. He tilted forward, letting his heels come off of the earth, swaying towards the sky and the hard ground below. My brother couldn't fly; he had only a half a set of wings.

When I was too young to know the difference, my brother was old enough to watch our father come home with lungs curling like stale orange peels from sweeping toxic dust in a factory up north. He wasted away in an easy chair on the back porch. After he was packed away into a coffin in the ground, my brother watched my mother bring home a man she barely knew, a customer from the bar. He had a pocket full of butterscotch candies for us kids, a meth lab in his double-wide, and a monk-like bald spot circling his crown. He was a monster man who made too many midnight visits to my brother's room. My brother hid me behind the coats in the hallway closet when we heard the monster man's footsteps on the linoleum. My brother the decoy.

My brother the hunter, he had strong forearms, brown-corded muscle under his skin from holding a heavy rifle against his shoulder. Filled our freezer with venison, wild turkey, antelope, pheasant, poached calves without tags. Legal or illegal, he knew just how to cook antelope so it wasn't too tough for my teeth.

My brother put food in the fridge and my mother and the monster ate it. Once, my mother put my brother out the door in the dead of January. It was ten below, a cold, starry night with no insulation from clouds. He was eight and he walked a long dark road to the neighbor's farm, his fingers, toes, and nose turned white with frostbite. Our mother was mad with meth, she picked at bugs that weren't there, and frantically reorganized the kitchen. The meth heightened her anger, made her emotions an illogical tangle, lashed out and wrapped around my brother. Pushed him into the snow. My brother, dumped over the porch with old yellow Tupperware and a broken toaster. My brother, the superfluous son.

Once, my mother the addict tried to commit suicide with a hair dryer in the bathtub, but my brother wouldn't let her. He called the cops. My brother was a good son, who always stepped between her and the monster man's backhand, kidney punch, the chemical laughter when she fell drunk to the floor. My brother who left me when he was sixteen. Who ran away to Missoula. Lived alone in an apartment with...
a bathroom down the hall. Lived with mice. Worked at K-mart in a red vest. Got his G.E.D., and started college part time. Lived.

My brother was a good brother who came back. He heard me crying in the dark, somehow he couldn’t block out the sirens, the sobs, the monster man panting at the door, even though he was a jagged mountain range away. Still heard the wind rushing around the sides of the trailer. He sued for custody when he was 18, took me from my mother and eked out a life for us both.

My brother was made of gold like the sun, and had river water for eyes, skin weathered from the lack of shade and the always-sun on the plains. He had laugh lines and frown lines and crows feet arching down his cheek, years before his time. A white strip on his forehead from his construction helmet, the job he got when he became my guardian. He had a sunburn on the back of his neck like a barcode, his most vulnerable spot. It spoke to the world without him ever opening his mouth, a redneck tattoo, saying he drove a used pick up and was always a month behind on payments, that he got bad grades on his papers in college because he used improper tenses, saying he never lived in a house with a foundation. That he destroyed his body everyday for nothing, for me, so he could get up before the sun rose and work some more. Saying he was a college dropout, no, he deferred college. His life was deferred.

My brother rarely spoke. He was like a darkened house with windows you couldn’t see through, windows that reflected the sky.

My brother was beautiful. He was born in mid March on a day just like that day, a high windy sunny day, when the earth seems to know something that you don’t and you go wandering and wondering what secret makes the day shine brighter than the day before. My brother was the secret on the day he was born. He was the beauty of the day distilled into a man.

My brother teetered on the edge of the cliff, with a life like a rope unwinding as it is woven. My brother with the half swan wing on his left shoulder. Not enough to fly, not enough to live, my brother, leaning leaning, leaning into the wind.
it's another season teaching children
how to hunt freshwater clams with their feet
and losing my best jewelry to the lake.

I have come to admit Alaska
will never be a future, just an escape.
That Great Northern Pike would've taken
half my fingers if I hadn't let it swim.

The women here only trouble my sleep.
I dream they live alone in my house,
while I watch them from outside the window
on all fours. Still, they wear negligees
like they expect me, leave jars of milk
aging unchecked on the counter.

I would like to remain on the delta
smelling forever what seals have killed.
I would also like very much
to stop poisoning their best meats.

When it's evening and the nets are in
and the cafes fill with conversation
I am not privy to, I think on how

things might have come out if the dog
hadn't warned me of that black bull
standing sideways on the highway,
with its color just another section
of night, and me powering toward it
dumb as he but with no horns.

I might never have gotten to taste
that bucket of restaurant-ready pickles
my friend got on the cheap after his boss
forgot to have them arrive pre-sliced.
They were the only food in the fridge
for weeks, and we fished deep into that brine
during darts and after drinking.
They were all we ate, all we could hold.

All the same it made our hands cold
to feel for the bottom that way.
Just like Brown Pelicans off course
and their posts, wandering in a region
more brutal than they are built for,
with their pouches hauling ice cannonballs
and their feathers useless for camouflage.
Gunshots at Sweathouse Creek

Laura Dunn

1.
Forgive yourself every mistake
but one, as you recite into your cigarette
the names of everyone
who’s ever touched your skin.
I prefer to scrape away the phone booth glass
with a receiver.
I’ve looked so long at your eyes
I don’t see them anymore. Just a drake
limping up the path. Just your eyelids
catching every word, as a stone’s plunge
into streaming water. Your name is Victor
when I know what I’ve done, and what I’ve done
to you, which is always the same—
when I type on your fingers
every new name
for deeds that cannot exit the skin
even with rivers of perspiration.
I looked so long at one burnt tree,
I remember only the gunshots and their echo
plunging into Sweathouse Creek.

there before. One night the whole town
burned their trees
so there was nothing left for that man to breathe,
nothing left to catch
sight of—just an oak’s empty black arms.
And I am the victor, because I can leave
this town, though I am blinded by the
windshield-glaring
east. Forgive me again, so that in the next
town there is no memory to look through—
a handprint streak on glass.

2.
I will fail to pay the check,
to write to you with a cigarette,
to see into your forearm without
breaking it. I will fail. One street
in Victor was built entirely by one man—
a boulevard of pastel western storefronts
painted to look old as the buildings that stood

in the creek’s shifting grays,
its wriggle through graffitied stones,
how long we would have stayed—
if there hadn’t been gunshots,
if we’d known what it was
in the black-dust-wind of the clear-cut canyon,
in the sturgeons’ tail-shiver exposed to sun,
in the creek’s limp-stream, slow as the exit of
sweat
from a pore, if we’d known
what it was he shot at.

3.
We got so lost there
was no one to ask directions
even if we had known
we were looking for something.
I can’t say how long we would have stayed
in the creek’s shifting grays,
in the sturgeons’ tail-shiver exposed to sun,
in the creek’s limp-stream, slow as the exit of
sweat
from a pore, if we’d known
what it was he shot at.
Kristen Theiler

The bus doors open and close, ushering the cold air inside. A man sits down across the aisle from me, propping his plastic Safeway bags on the seat beside him with a shiver. He is like any other commuter on the 51 route, all of us lugging our groceries and laptops home with the same indifferent stares. His profile, illuminated by the last dregs of the sun, blocks the light like a partial eclipse. He turns toward me and before our eyes meet I see the twin bones, the size of sparrow legs, roped through each nostril. His black hair, now streaked with grey, is braided into a knot atop his head. The kind lines, deeper now, around his mouth. Beaded rings, much like the ones he gave me, stacked in red, yellow and blue rows around each finger.

In high school I would sometimes sneak away from my team during cross country practices. Our coach favored the steep, concrete pathways that framed a small zoo in East Oakland. I'd run with the group until the trampled grass of a deer trail beckoned me toward the surrounding woodlands. As my muscles warmed and my breathing steadied, alone, the tips of the towering pines seemed to bob toward me in polite recognition. The faraway grunts and shrieks of the zoo echoed as lizards scampered behind rocks and Gold Green ferns.

We startled each other, the day we met. Me, in the bright blue neon of my practice jersey. This man, hair flowing about his shoulders, cheeks highlighted with sienna-colored smears, just a strip of material around his hips, intricate beadwork across his chest and wrists. The same twin bones in each nostril. Heavy loops of sharp-toothed dentalium shells swung wildly around his neck as he turned suddenly at my approach.

His reflection twinkled like a constellation as he stood ankle-deep in a stream with sunlight slanting through the canopy above. Bunched grasses and reeds nearby formed a conical formation tall enough to stand in with a garbage bag that improvised as a doorway. I remember this spot like a secret. We never spoke, even when I returned a few weeks later. Walking toward me on our second meeting, his outstretched palms were filled with beaded jewelry. I

The Man in the Zoo

Margo Whitmire

The bus doors open and close, ushering the cold air inside. A man sits down across the aisle from me, propping his plastic Safeway bags on the seat beside him with a shiver. He is like any other commuter on the 51 route, all of us lugging our groceries and laptops home with the same indifferent stares. His profile, illuminated by the last dregs of the sun, blocks the light like a partial eclipse. He turns toward me and before our eyes meet I see the twin bones, the size of sparrow legs, roped through each nostril. His black hair, now streaked with grey, is braided into a knot atop his head. The kind lines, deeper now, around his mouth. Beaded rings, much like the ones he gave me, stacked in red, yellow and blue rows around each finger.

In high school I would sometimes sneak away from my team during cross country practices. Our coach favored the steep, concrete pathways that framed a small zoo in East Oakland. I'd run with the group until the trampled grass of a deer trail beckoned me toward the surrounding woodlands. As my muscles warmed and my breathing steadied, alone, the tips of the towering pines seemed to bob toward me in polite recognition. The faraway grunts and shrieks of the zoo echoed as lizards scampered behind rocks and Gold Green ferns.

We startled each other, the day we met. Me, in the bright blue neon of my practice jersey. This man, hair flowing about his shoulders, cheeks highlighted with sienna-colored smears, just a strip of material around his hips, intricate beadwork across his chest and wrists. The same twin bones in each nostril. Heavy loops of sharp-toothed dentalium shells swung wildly around his neck as he turned suddenly at my approach.

His reflection twinkled like a constellation as he stood ankle-deep in a stream with sunlight slanting through the canopy above. Bunched grasses and reeds nearby formed a conical formation tall enough to stand in with a garbage bag that improvised as a doorway. I remember this spot like a secret. We never spoke, even when I returned a few weeks later. Walking toward me on our second meeting, his outstretched palms were filled with beaded jewelry. I
reached for a ring, a single strand of tiny plastic red beads. He pushed his palms toward me again and I took two more. A blue and a green.

My cross country teammates dismissed him as an especially eccentric bohemian type, common in the East Bay neighborhoods of California. “He’s totally on drugs,” they said when they saw the rings.

But.

What if, I’d thought then, he was something else. Someone like the lone descendant of a Native California tribe. The Mountain Miwoks, or the Maidu who hunted deer with obsidian arrowheads and caught plentiful salmon and steelhead by swirling poisonous crushed buckeyes into the stream. Who thanked the spirits for the first fruits of the season.

Their children watch the dream of gold turn into the dream of agriculture. Oranges and raisins are the new currency.

His presence on the bus today startles me. Shakes me out of a long-standing reverie. Not because he dresses like everyone else now, though that is part of it.

I’d always imagined this man with what Scott Russell Sanders describes as a third instinct. The instinct of staying put. His ancestors sitting still with such a reverence that discouraged even the most ruthless of Spanish missionaries. Perhaps they were forced to use a rake and a shovel, turning foreign seeds alongside plows pulled by oxen. But stashed out of sight, away from the adobe buildings, they keep their deer-head decoys, seed beaters and harpoons in woodland hiding places.

Their children are told of the plan. California becomes part of the United States and Gold Rush camps crop up around them with names like You-Bet, Hog-Eye and Pinchem-Tight. Mines and railroads are established. Oakland becomes an official town, and surrounding hillsides are leveled and dumped into the bay as foundations for more buildings. They watch this short-sighted progress, secret spot intact.

Their children watch the dream of gold turn into the dream of agriculture. Oranges and raisins are the new currency, but the heavy loops of acorns, red woodpecker scalp feathers and shells around their necks remain the only sign of physical wealth that matters to them.

And finally. This man as a child. The spot is endangered by affluent suburbs narrowing in on the surrounding East Oakland hillsides. Streams are bulldozed to make way for the Oakland Zoo. The startled look on his face as crates of exotic animals are carted by. A lion roaring toward the reeds from where he peeks out with wary eyes. Invasive rats, snails and ivy start to colonize his hiding place, and the once-abundant salmon and steelhead are now gone.

Still, “when the pain of leaving behind what we know outweighs the pain of embracing it, or when the power we face is overwhelming and neither fight nor flight will save us,” Sanders writes, “there may be salvation in sitting still.”

In his brief glance on the bus I can tell he doesn’t recognize me. It’s been 15 years and I want to tell him that I wore his rings for years, twirling them around my fingers, a nervous habit. And that long after I’d lost them, I still felt for the smooth phantom ridges. I wonder if my teammates were right, or if one night
Dogs and Dogs

Phil Condon

Shaded gray light on the dusty concrete underside of the Madison Street bridge. The splash and lap of the river, rushing with spring melt and the tide of night rain. Jen’s wet fur, damp and musty-smelling from the early mist. Apple.

Matt cracked his eyes open and squinted beyond Jen at the blossoms on an old half-wild apple tree near the riverbank. On the best mornings, it was like waking up on the first day of a family camping trip, even in the rain. On the worst mornings, it was like waking up on the same camping trip to find your family packed and gone.

Monday morning traffic rumbled over the bridge. Matt pulled his socks on and knelt while he rolled his faded flannel sleeping bag. He found Jen’s torn sack of food and tossed two handfuls on the ground, like a farmer scattering chicken feed. While she ate, licking the dusty ground in the rain shadow of the bridge, Matt squatted by the river and rinsed his face and arms and hands, the water cold everywhere but on the tattoos on his forearms, identical profiles of blue eagles. When he stood up again, he felt the nagging pain in his left leg, familiar as a kid brother.

Across the river he saw a Meadowgold dairy truck moving along Front Street. Matt had worked at Meadowgold during his week of on-call day labor two weeks back—loading trucks at the meatpackers for two days and then cleaning the parking lot at the milk plant for three more. His leg had bothered him bad toward that Friday, and the dairy dock foreman caught him sitting down with his boot off more than once. He sent him back to the Job Service office. They said they might have ranch work in the Bitterroot valley soon.

Jen trotted west from the bridge and Matt followed. In the opposite direction on the riverside path, two women in sweatsuits and walkmans ran side-by-side in an easy rhythm. Matt and Jen roamed from McCormick Park to Jacobs Island every day, bumming along the Clark Fork River, sometimes looping through Missoula’s small downtown. On an ordinary day, he bought microwave sandwiches and rolling tobacco at Super America on Fourth. On a lucky day, a six-pack of beer, dog food, and a few Lotto tickets at the Food Farm on Fifth.

Behind the locked-up ice skating shed at the kids’ lagoon in McCormick, Jen circled a dumpster and Matt retrieved half a burger from a sack near the top of the trash. A man about Matt’s age sauntered across the parking lot. Matt followed the man’s gaze upward and saw two ducks, beating through the low gray sky, their wingtips inches apart.
This guy looked good for a bill or two. His coat was old, but suede. He wore soft leather gloves and low rubber boots made for walking through water. The ducks disappeared behind a row of tall half-rotten cottonwoods. It looked like it could rain again.

“Say man, how you doing?” Matt shifted his pack and came to a stop with his weight on his good leg.

“Fine enough. It’s a beautiful April morning. And yourself?”

“Straight ahead and flat out.” Matt set his smile to something near a grimace, an expression he believed would match his slogan. “Say man, could I trade you for some change? Jen and me need a meal—post-pronto.” He laughed, motioning to the dog, the burger wrapper between her paws like treasure.

The man reached in his pocket and pulled out the first bill he touched in his wallet, a single. He looked at the dog and pulled out a second one. Matt pocketed the money. They shook hands and introduced themselves.

“Roman like the empire?” Matt asked.

“My grandfather’s name,” Roman said.

“Well, Roman, I’ve been hanging under the bridge too long,” Matt said, as if they had already been in the middle of a conversation before the money changed hands. “I had a day job week before last, but since then, nada. And then my gear gets ripped.” Matt shook himself sometimes when he heard the lies he told people who gave him money. Yet he liked the feeling, too. It couldn’t be that different from what a painter or songwriter must feel when they made up something brand new. “Lucky I had this old pack stashed. I felt it coming, one of those omen deals. I could trade you a blanket.”

“No, no. I have a blanket. I have several blankets. You get yourself something to eat.”

“It’s a drag being broke, you know? I’m thinking of heading out of town—this Misery-oula looks boarded-up to me.” Matt waited for Roman’s smile. “So far I’ve been in forty states. You ever been to Alaska?”

Roman nodded. Matt turned and gazed off to the north as if he could see that far.

“That’s where I’m headed. They still have the room for opportunity up there. Get on the right crew, I hear a man can really sock it away quick—a kiss or three, a night or two. But men always had to find ways of making out who was winner and loser first, before they found the room for friendship. Yet Matt had plenty of time to kill, too. He kept talking.

“Like the other week when I shacked up, see. I met this honey in Super America, renting movies and charging a six-pack on a Friday night, and I think to myself, this one could write the book on all-by-yourself. But there was no place for the dog, man. No dogs allowed in her apartment house. A guy down the hall shot her with a pellet gun just for barking. Look.”

Matt pointed out the scab on Jen’s muzzle. “She’s OK, but hell, I don’t know whether it’s worth getting laid if my dog gets shot.”

Roman laughed like it was just a story with a good punchline.

“She’s healing,” Matt said, “but the dog was shot, see for yourself.”

“No, I believe you. I can see it.” Roman stooped and patted Jen. “She’s a retriever, isn’t she? Pure?”

Matt stared at Roman’s gloved hands. “I don’t know for sure. She’s a good dog, though.”

“Retrieve is good dogs. She’d make an excellent hunter.”

“She sniffs the dumpsters like a pro,” Matt said. He laughed.

The man stood up, his eyes still on Jen. “That dog deserves better than running alleys and dodging cars,” he said. “She may have a bloodline.” He drew the word out slowly as if Matt might not understand it. “See how she breathes steady through her nose? That’s telltale.”

Matt studied Jen. She looked like a stranger’s dog. “I didn’t know about that.”

“And her eyes are smaller than most,” Roman said. “That’s another sign. You said you wanted to trade me something.” He pointed at Jen.

Matt stepped back and Jen did, too. “For two bucks? Not this year. Do you practice up on that sense of humor, or does it just roll out natural for you?”

Roman made as if to laugh again, but his eyes didn’t follow through. “It sounds like I’ve insulted you,” he said. “But I didn’t mean for two dollars.” He reached for his wallet again and held it in his hand.

“I’d give you more.”

This time Matt didn’t want to look. Wallets and purses, everywhere you looked they were opening and closing. Little leather mouths that did the real talking in the world.
“Just because I’m busted don’t mean my dog’s for sale, pal.”

“I was just offering.” Roman turned away. “But you know friend, there’s dogs and then there’s dogs.” He waved his arm toward the houses above the park. “Missoula’s thick with them. The paper has free ones every morning. And the shelter gives them away right and left.” He pointed west, downriver, the direction the ducks had flown.

“So how much more are we talking about?”

Roman brushed his gloved fingers around Jen’s mouth, exposing her gums from one side to the other. He raised her pads and looked at them. Matt didn’t like the way he touched her.

“Twenty dollars more?”

“Forget it. We’re not a walking yard sale here.” Matt flashed a glinty look and swallowed hard, a metallic, baking-soda taste way back in his throat. He sized Roman up, the placement of his feet, the bend of his knees. He gauged his reach and inched back till he was just beyond it.

Roman kept his eyes on Jen. “Okay.” He looked back in his wallet. “I’ll give you forty-eight dollars, fifty total, a good deal all around. I could use a retriever come fall. And she’d be a good dog with my daughter.”

Matt thought of his day wages—about forty dollars take-home. Fifty meant more than a full eight hours on his feet. He considered palming the money and splitting with Jen. But no, this Roman lived around here. He’d fetch the cops. One thing Matt prided himself on was staying clear of jail. He extended his hand, and Roman shook it again without taking off his glove.

“Thanks for both the Georges,” Matt said. “But Jen’s not for sale. Retriever or no.”

Roman dropped his hand. “I guess there’s no helping some people out,” he said, stepping away, shaking his head. “Even with the best intentions.”

They stood a few feet apart now—outside the circle Matt had imagined—there would be no fight. But Matt didn’t want to let him have the last word either.

“Yeah, and there’s a golden ladder leads right up out of hell, too,” he said. He wasn’t sure what it meant, but he’d known a bartender in Tulsa who always said it at exactly the right moment. It was the kind of idea that could mean lots of different things, and people didn’t usually have a comeback for it.

Roman took another step away. He pointed at the dog, circling Matt’s feet. “She’s likely past teaching anyway.”

Matt matched him with another step back. He tensed his leg to cover his limp. A guy like this you needed to keep up with or he’d find a way to take advantage.

“The best ones are,” he said. “That’s what you guys never know.”

Roman waved his hand as if he could push Matt away from a distance.

“C’mon, Jen,” Matt said, turning away, smiling as the dog fell in behind him, feeling as good about the forty-eight bucks he had refused as the two he’d taken. If you didn’t take the little victories to heart, you’d never know a big one when it came your way. He waited. Roman didn’t say anything else. One more for good measure. Matt yelled over his shoulder.

“See you at the hunt, man.”

By noon the sky cleared and the sun stood straight overhead like a yellow hole at the top of a big blue tent. The day was gathering heat for a run at the afternoon. Coming out of Super America, Matt stopped to small talk with a man gassing up a motorhome. A teenage boy watched from the passenger seat. The leather cover on the spare tire read The Getaway.

Before Matt finished his pitch, tires squealed on Fourth Street. Matt looked up just as a blue Tempo knocked Jen to the curb. He dropped his pack by the pumps and ran to her. She lay nestled in next to the curb, breathing heavy like she’d run a long way without water. There was no blood, but her eyes flickered from side to side without blinking.

“Easy, baby, easy.” Matt lifted her two front legs slowly, one at a time. They didn’t feel busted. A woman in fine summery clothes stepped out of the blue car. Matt saw a flash of thigh as quick as a promise, but she didn’t enjoy it the way he usually would. She hurried over to them.

“God, I’m so sorry. He ran in front of me. Is he all right?”

“She’s a she. I don’t know. She don’t look good.” The woman reached her hand out. Jen growled.

“Leave her be,” said Matt. “We’ll be OK. She...
may need some food though. You wouldn’t have an extra few, would you?”

The woman hesitated, shivering in light clothes. “My purse is in the car.” She pointed over her shoulder. “Her breathing’s rough. I’m worried about your dog.”

“So am I.”

The woman went toward her car. The Getaway man came out with Matt’s pack at arm’s length and set it down. He had a silver credit card between his fingers.

“I’ll call the Humane Society. We’ve got a phone in the rig.”

“No--don’t do that.”

“The dog needs help. It took a good shot.” The man’s trimmed salt-and-pepper hair ran flat and straight, close to his head. Even the creases in his slacks looked first-class. Matt felt messed-up. His life was junk in a world where all the rest was combed out smooth.

The trim man went back toward the pumps. Matt didn’t say anything else. As he watched the woman hurry back over with three dollar bills clutched in her hand, he saw Roman standing across the street, staring from the doorway to a used book store.

“I’m short of cash,” she said. “Should I call somebody?”

“What?” Matt looked up at the woman. He folded the bills with one hand and put them in his shirt pocket. He kept the other hand steady on Jen, stroking her head. “No need. Thanks.”

“Listen, I’m late for an appointment. Should I stop back afterward?”

“We’ll be gone by then.” Matt looked across the street, but he didn’t see Roman again.

They wouldn’t let Matt ride in the Humane Society van—insurance regulations, the driver said. The attendant said the dog would survive—the bumper had just tagged her on the shoulder and shaken her up good. They gave Matt the Animal Shelter phone number and address. It was four miles away. Matt sat on the curb, chewing a strip of beef jerky he had saved out for Jen.

On the way back down to the river, he stopped at the Job Service, a low brick building in an old residential neighborhood on Third Street. The man at the counter had sweat circles under the arms of his dress shirt. He told Matt they were still waiting on the call for ranch hands in the valley. He couldn’t talk because he had to give a typing test in a few minutes.

After sundown Matt built a small close fire in a low hidden spot among poplar trees and willow brush near the waterline. In the flickering light he stared at the eagles on his arm as if they might take off at any moment and listened to the river rush by like it had a certain place to go to. He tried not to worry about Jen. Instead he went over the only two other important things he could think of, his plan and his past.

The plan he could put in a single word. Alaska. He had been headed that way for two months, following the spring north and west from a tough, achy winter on a tree-planting crew in Alabama. In a month he would turn forty, and he had made it up in his mind to be in Alaska on that birthday.

As for the past, he was still hoping to get that back. He had lost his first thirty-five years, or all memory of them, which amounted to the same thing as far as Matt could tell. In the spring of ’97, he had appeared to himself in a St. Louis hospital mirror, a damaged man with eagle tattoos, a limp in his left leg, and a fresh white bandage wrapped around his head like a turban.

He had been found in the I-70 median with nothing but his clothes and one letter in his pocket--a Charlie Brown birthday card that said “Happy 35th to Matt--Love, Jenny.” Matt took his name from that card and his birthday from the day they said found him, May 11.

The police traced his fingerprints, but all anybody could tell him was that he didn’t have a police record and he had never been in the Service. Matt had hoped he was a veteran when he saw the tattoos. He thought he might have some government money coming, or maybe be some kind of hero who had lost his medals, along with his memories.

Jen had stumbled onto him while he slept under a roadside picnic bench outside of Guymon in the Oklahoma panhandle the summer before, and he named her for the mystery woman who gave him a name and an age. There had been enough real women since the birthday card though, starting with Liz Shelden, a barmaid he met the week he was discharged from the hospital. Thirty-five years old, and he couldn’t know whether he was a virgin or not, although Liz seemed to think not.

Matt believed his limp brought out the mother in women, and too, they always seemed to want to help him find out about the lost years. The woman he spent the longest time with, JJ Duncan, had promised him it would all come to him one night in her bed, right at the supreme moment of pleasure, she said. He stayed with her for over a year in Trinidad, Colorado, believing she might be right. She waited counters at a truck stop, but she said she had some gypsy in her, and Matt believed her about that, too. She told Matt she saw flashes about his life when they made love--she was sure it was pretty close to the surface. When she got near to her own moment, she would press her palms on either side of Matt’s head, as if she could
coax all those lost years out into her fingers, like an old-time poultice pulling on a wound.

It turned out when Matt came to know her well enough that she had an awful lot she needed to forget. Her old man had screwed her once every year on her birthday from when she was five until she ran away at fifteen. He told her that if she breathed a word to anyone he would stash her in an orphanage and no one would ever come see her. One night when Matt came in from his job on a sheep ranch outside Trinidad, he found JJ kneeling in a slump over the toilet. Red fingerprint smeared the flush handle, and a bloody wire cheese knife lay on the tile next to her. When Matt pulled JJ’s head up, her face was as white as mashed potatoes and her forearms disappeared into the scarlet water of the toilet bowl. Matt laid her down on the bathroom floor and folded her arms against her chest. He had covered her with two big towels and kissed her cold forehead before he packed and left.

Sometimes Matt thought he was actually the lucky one. A lot of the people he had known in the last five years were spending half their time trying to forget something. And it seemed just as hard for them to forget as it was for Matt to remember.

Matt walked along South Third Street toward the Animal Shelter. For three days straight, he had called from a pay phone to check on Jen, and now he was determined to get her back. They said the dog was all right, but they were concerned she had no record of shots or tags and they wanted to know Matt’s address. He told them she’d had her shots in Oklahoma, and all at once, like boulders settling in a creek bed.

As the houses thinned out and the yards grew bigger along River Road, Matt came up with a plan for getting Jen back. He would say the starter in his car had checked out and he had left his wallet in the glove box. No one would press it all that hard over a dog. The wheeler-dealer Roman had said the place damn near gave them away. Matt just needed to show up in person and make his claim.

He had missed Jen bad that morning when he woke up without her under the bridge, and what had awakened him hadn’t made it any better. It was a dream about the time in Denver when Jen had been lost for almost a week, the week the smog had been so bad Matt thought maybe the world was ending, the kind of dark, fearsome weather they talked about somewhere in the Bible. In the dream he didn’t find her again, though. Instead he met JJ, wandering the streets, looking for him. Her face and lips glowed pale white. She ran to Matt when she saw him and said she’d remembered his past, that she had it all in her head as real as a movie. Her hands stretched out to him like she was trying to clap. She had Matt’s eagle tattoos on the inside of both her wrists.

He heard barking before he even started up the long gravel drive that led to the Animal Shelter. An acre of lawn stretched beneath Chinese elm trees in front of the building. Matt nodded and smiled at a woman in white slacks walking a miniature collie.

Inside the office, it was too hot, and the woman at the counter wouldn’t budge on the proof of address. Plus she acted put out because he hadn’t come sooner. She told him they had already put the red dog—she wouldn’t call her Jen—up for adoption.

“That was a retriever, I believe?”

“One hundred per cent,” Matt said. The top button of the woman’s blouse was undone. Matt checked her out when she bent over to look up the file.

“In fact,” she said, straightening up and looking at him, an index card in her hand. Her fingers drifted to her open button. “In fact,” she repeated, “you’re too late. A family took her this morning. I just came on shift at noon.” Matt had looked away, but now he stared at the card in her hand. “They paid for her shots and license. A man with his daughter. A very nice home.”

“Nice or no, that’s pretty quick, isn’t it? Four days?”
“Quicker than usual, perhaps. But the dog had no license or records.” She looked at the card again. “Apparently this was someone who had seen her brought in.”

“Seen her? Who would that be?”

“We’re not allowed to give out any names.” She tapped the card against her fingernail. “That’s cool,” Matt said. “That’s fine. I was just surprised anybody but me knew she was here.” He hesitated for a moment. “You ever had a dog of your own, Miss?”

“Mrs.” she said. “Why?”

“I just wondered. Working around so many dogs. You must really love them.”

“I’m more of a cat person, actually. We have two at home.”

“Two keep each other company.”

“That’s true.” She smiled for the first time. Matt watched her slip the card back into the file. The corner edge stuck up just enough to see.

“Well, thanks anyway, I guess. If she’s out to a good home like you said, maybe it’s that much better.” He started for the door and then turned back. “Oh yeah, did you all keep my collar she was wearing?”

“She didn’t have any tags,” the woman said. “What collar?”

“It was braided leather. Just a plain braided collar, black and dark brown. But it was almost new. I’d like to have it back if it’s still around here.”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’ll check.”

She opened a door and disappeared down a long aisle between cages. Before she shut the door, the animal smells wafted into the office as thick as if they’d been bottled. Matt leaned over the counter and pulled out the index card on Jen. He read the name and address on the card: Roman Cleed, 223 Rollins. He shook his head as he slid the card back into the file box.

“Sneaky son of a bastard,” he said under his breath. He moved away from the counter, but the woman still didn’t return. Matt paced the length of the room, looking at pictures of pets on the wall, perfect Springer Spaniels on point and petite Siamese cats with mysterious eyes. A large glass donation jar with a slot cut in the lid stood on the counter, and Matt unscrewed the lid and counted eight ones. He thought of all the animals behind the door. Fifty-fifty felt fair. He pocketed four of the bills and replaced the lid. He stepped away again just as the woman came out from the back rooms.

“No one remembers seeing any kind of collar with the red dog,” she said.

“No big deal,” Matt said. “Thanks anyway.” He walked to the door quickly.

“I don’t think there was any collar,” the woman said to Matt’s back. “Mr. Bloodline probably stole that, too,” he said as he shut the door.

By the time Matt found the house on Rollins, he was short of breath and dragging his leg worse than usual. He limped up three steps and knocked loudly on the door and then pressed the bell twice. When Roman answered, Matt spoke first.

“I’m here for my dog.”

“She’s not your dog anymore,” Roman said. He stepped out on the porch. “You nearly got her killed anyway. It was just a matter of time. And how did you get my address?”

“There’s a way to every will, buddy. I don’t want any trouble. Just give me back my dog and I’m gone.”

He pointed into the house.

“First, I’m calling the Humane Society,” Roman said. “They need to hear about this. And then if you don’t get off my porch right now, I’ll call the police, too.”

Matt swallowed hard and stared straight in Roman’s eyes. “Lots of things can happen between the calling and the coming,” he said.

Roman’s face went rigid. He looked Matt over as if to see if he might have a knife or a gun. Matt wanted to play it right on the edge, just enough fear to get the dog and go but not enough to get the guy really worked up. He backed up a step and started whistling for Jen.

As Roman turned to latch the storm door, Jen pushed through it and ran out of the house. She barked twice and threaded between Roman’s legs and leapt up on Matt. He grabbed her behind the neck and rubbed her roughly, smiling.

“Hey, Jen, yeah, it’s me,” he said, “it’s me.”

The door opened again and a little girl stepped onto the porch. She wore a cone-shaped, foil-covered party hat with a thin elastic strap pulled around her chin.

“Who’s this, Dad? Is he a friend of Goldie?” Roman put his hands on his daughter’s shoulders and held her. Matt said “Down,” in a deep voice, and Jen sat at his side. The four of them looked at each other. The girl’s grin looked to Matt as if he had rung her doorbell right between the presents and the candles. He felt the hint of a memory, yet something close.

“Who’s this, Dad? Is he a friend of Goldie?”

“This is my girl, Beth,” Roman said. “You caught us at a bad time. We’re having a little party. It’s her half-birthday this Friday.” Beth laughed. “It’s not a bad time,” she said. “It’s
a good time. I have a dog. A dog of my own.” She grabbed Jen by the neck and put her arms around her. Matt stepped back to the edge of the steps and watched her.

“Happy birthday,” Matt said. “How old and a half are you?”

“Eight and a half,” Beth said. She looked up at Matt. “Did you know Dad in the war?” She pointed at her father, but didn’t pause for an answer. “Were you in the war in the desert with him?” She pointed up the street, as if the Middle East might start somewhere right in the next block. “Did you hurt your leg there with him?” She pointed at Matt’s leg, although he thought he’d been standing straight enough. “Do you know how old Goldie is? My dad says two.” Finally, she caught her breath.

Matt laughed out loud. “You got a whole barrel full of questions, don’t you?” He stroked Jen’s head.

“Two sounds about right,” Matt said. “You call her Goldie?”

“I named her,” Beth said. She looked at Jen and then back up to Matt. “Did she have another name?”

“Well, I called her—” Matt stopped. If he didn’t tell them her name, it would be like not really giving her up to them. They’d only get themselves a red dog, a retriever. “I called her all sorts of names.”

“C’mon, Bethie, let’s go in,” Roman said. “You don’t have a coat on.”

She grabbed Jen by her collar and pulled. They both moved toward the door and then inside. Matt and Roman stood motionless, both looking at the dog until she disappeared into the house. Beth turned around at the door.

“Do you want a piece of my half-birthday cake?” she asked.

“No, I’m going,” Matt said, “I’m gonna be going. I’m on my way to Alaska. I just stopped over to meet you and see how she’s doing.” He pointed in the house after Jen and smiled at Beth. He started down the steps, his pack on one shoulder.

“Bye,” Beth yelled. She went into the house, and Roman closed the door behind her. Matt heard Jen bark again.

“Thanks,” Roman said. “That was decent of you.”

Matt looked up from the bottom step.

“There’s people and there’s people,” he said. He turned away.

Roman shouted after him. “I could give you a lift somewhere.” He pointed at his van.

Matt looked at the van, then back at the house.

“I’ll walk.”

“Wait,” Roman said. “Hold on just a minute now.” He turned and went in the house. Jen came to the storm door and stared out.

Matt could see a little way into the house behind Jen. He couldn’t shake the excited look on the girl’s face, that birthday look. It almost felt like he remembered someone giving him a dog when he was a kid, but he couldn’t tell. It could have been from a dream or maybe just a TV show he’d seen and forgotten.

Roman came back. This time he stepped carefully through the door so Jen wouldn’t get out. He was carrying a piece of chocolate cake on a paper plate.

“She really wants you to have a piece of cake,” he said, holding it toward Matt. Roman handed him a napkin, too, and Matt saw a flash of green folded in it. With one hand he thumbed the bills, five tens. As he did, Roman walked quickly back up on the porch and stood beside the door. Beth and Jen were at the storm door again, too.

Matt watched the three of them watch him, all facing the same direction, the way a family would. Beth waved and Matt held up the plate with the cake and nodded toward her. He slipped the bills in his pocket and ate the cake in three big bites and wiped his mouth with the napkin. Roman had gone inside, but the girl and the dog stayed at the door, watching Matt, so he waved again, exaggerating, swinging the plate back and forth as if he was directing traffic or signaling someone far-off. He saw Beth laughing although he couldn’t hear her. The plate slipped out of his hand, and he bent to pick it up. When he looked up again, the inside door was closed.

There was no one in sight up and down the block. Matt folded the paper plate up small and stuffed it in his jacket pocket. He didn’t look back again until he had turned the corner behind a long row of thick lilac bushes in heavy bloom, and then when he did, he couldn’t see the house. The bushes next to him smelled sweet. He wanted to believe he could still hear the girl’s laughter, somewhere on the breeze, drifting.
Old Manzanitas

Pepper Trail

For their complications of the living and the dead
Their inner wood, breaking out on every twisting limb
The weathered grain exposed in long gray creases
Encrusted with lichen, pale green and ashen
And hung with the dank black tufts of witch’s beard
How that disagrees with the smooth and molded skin
Running in ribbons, color of ox-blood, of brick and deep red earth
The coin-shaped leaves, offered in trembling
Hands to the cold spring wind
The flowers, tiny shell-like urns
Rounded and pink as a sleeping baby’s toes
First food for the returning hummingbirds
Who feast upon the nectar, buzzing through the tangled groves
Flashing copper and gold
And most, perhaps, their shapes upon the mountainside
In stillness, crouching, spinning, reaching, sprawling, dancing
Their endurance, their squat and knotted selves
Their refusal to resemble one another, or any other living thing
I like that all food comes from dirt and sunlight and that there are people who work land that their families have known for generations. I do not hunt and have black thumbs. I am not trying to be ornery or going for the shock of being an environmentalist who wants to shoot wolves. But having never lived with wolves in my backyard, I can’t speak with any authority.

Where I grew up, the last wolves were exterminated in the 1800s, when the Connecticut River and Lake Champlain bordered unknown wilderness. The farmers in southern New Hampshire drove the wolves to the top of Mount Monadnock, and torched the entire mountain. The wolves were killed, the mountain scorched, and the farmers went home feeling safe. Horrific, yes, but it doesn’t keep me up at night. If there had been wolves, the Monadnock region might not have burgeoned the pastoral way it did. My favorite example: the MacDowell Colony, an artists’ colony, sits in the shadow of the mountain. I’ll take Aaron Copeland’s “Appalachian Spring,” composed there, over a clear lupine conscience. I am aware of my selfish anthropocentrism, not comfortable with it, but ruefully proud of some semblance of honesty.

I’m not completely heartless. The burning of the wolves and that the men our towns and counties are named for gave smallpox-infected blankets to the native residents, makes me hot and queasy, guilty for crimes I did not commit but from which I reap clear benefits. And I don’t know how to atone for these things, or if they can be. Shows of begging for forgiveness strike me as lip service, the assumption being that, once contritely requested, absolution will, naturally, be granted. There are some weights of guilt that shouldn’t be let go of, and forgiveness makes it easier to forget the crimes. The Monadnock fire damaged the thin soil and the mountain remains a vegetatively silent monument to the wolves.

I like wolves. A photo of a smiling wolf in a snowstorm faces my desk. But I am against The Wolf. Technically, I am for the reintroduction of wolves into ecosystems that can support a healthy population, provided that the wolves and people can keep out of each other’s way if contact would harm either party. Barring that, I support landowners’ rights to use lethal methods on wolves on their property.

I have little right to speak on this issue. I am neither a rancher nor a wildlife biologist. I eat meat with only slightly guilty thoughts about where it comes from. I like the thought of places where humans are content to leave wild animals alone. I go to these places and feel small amid the wildness, with the stars above and the wind whipping through the balsam firs.

In college, I spent a semester living in a yurt in New York’s Adirondack region. There were discussions over the dinner table about wolf reintroduction. Wolves were starting to come back in Ontario, and there was delight and concern that wolves would come across the St. Lawrence River and come into the Adirondacks. Moose I knew had come back; I had seen a perfect ice-blue hoof print in the snow of Mount Porter.

The idea of wolves coming to the woods around me struck me as magical and just. I still felt guilty, not for the Monadnock region particularly, but for the shame of having been afraid of wolves. My childhood fears were fed and stoked by storybooks and movies where the wolves were always evil incarnate. Gradually, I learned that I had little to fear and, by
the time I was nineteen and living in the woods, I had a romantic ideal of The Wolf, wandering free of barriers and free of stigma. “So what,” I probably said, “so what about the people living here who don’t want wolves. It was their choice to be here; it wasn’t the wolf’s choice to leave.”

I’ve never heard a wolf howl, and may never. But I know the razor’s edge between exhilaration and fear listening to coyotes and loons, or even crows above tree line, and the imagining of a wolf howl is all that with an added, aching, psalm of survival. Wolves, because they have been demonized and embraced for their feral grace, occupy a special niche in romantic imaginings of The Wild. Somehow, if I aligned myself with wolves, if I was squarely on their side, I would be wilder too, less a part of the trappings and traps of suburbia. Save The Wolf, save myself.

I’ve tamed since I lived in the woods, and I sometimes miss the savageness of my younger emotions. The reactive idealism has ebbed, replaced by hopes of passionate utility. I find myself speaking up for people far more than I would have thought. In Montana, where I am in graduate school, the debate around the reintroduction of wolves to habitats that fringe ranchland remains very much alive. In hopes that civil conversations in living rooms and fields will prevent legal cage matches down the road, my program sponsors a trip to eastern Montana every fall to have the graduate student environmentalists talk with ranchers and miners.

Again, I know very little about the reintroduction of wolves. And, what I do know has largely made me side with wolves, not with people. Never mind knowing nothing about wolves, I know nothing about people in the West; my ideas came loosely from James Michener, Annie Proulx, and Dick Cheney. I hadn’t realized that there were families ranching and fighting tooth and nail to stay afloat. What I learned from talking and listening to ranchers in eastern Montana, on fields backed up against the Crazy Mountains, is that it is damn hard for small farms to operate in a financially viable way. I know I am naïve, but knowing doesn’t change that truth.

When I combine what I heard the ranchers say with what I have read about the food industry, about land-use planning, and property taxes, I begin to feel that reintroducing wolves onto the borders of these lands adds insult to injury. Meeting with people who live on the lands that I read about, for whom subdivisions are real, not concepts in a classroom, was having a story come to life with savage reality. It’s a lot harder for me to talk about the corruption of the meat industry or the beauty of a wolf howl when I am looking at the photo album of a family that has lived and raised cattle on the same plot of land for five generations.

Annie Dillard writes about staring into the eyes of a weasel, and feeling her skull like to split, Aldo Leopold about the green light in a dying wolf’s eyes. What worries me is that in an attempt to atone for the egregious ways in which we humans have treated the land and the animals, we, environmentalists and businessmen alike, are now in danger of marginalizing humans in a similar manner. We have forgotten to look into the eyes of our own tribe, to recognize the common light pulsing through ourselves. I am not innocent, my accusatory tone is more a reflection of my own rage and frustration at having been so wrapped up in ecosystems and wilderness for so many years without ever realizing that humans are part of the ecosystem, and we need to take as much care with each other and ourselves as we do with wolves or spotted owls or the Amazonian rainforest.

Keith and Marie see wolves frequently on their ranch. A movie was shot on their property a few years back. It struck me as odd that a rancher would need to turn to Hollywood to pay the bills. One of the reasons that they, among many, are having trouble is that ranching is not cost effective on the scale a family can work. If a wolf pack comes out of the hills and kills a calf, it’s a loss that the Spartan economics cannot absorb. There are reimbursement programs, provided that the kill can be scientifically attributed to wolves, and that the rancher can wait a few months for the check. This is what the ranchers said.

Also, and I am a dramatic female with a sporadic maternal instinct, but the tempered rage and disgust on Marie’s face when she talked about the possibility of a child being snatched up by a wolf has stuck with me. I don’t think that an open season on wolves needs to be implemented. I do think that ranchers should be allowed to shoot with live bullets when there are wolves on their property—when the ranchers don’t feel safe on the land that grows the lawmakers’ hamburgers.

I don’t like that a large portion of what I put into my body is the product of an industry that ignores human and environmental concerns; you are what you eat, they say. I like the thought of eating locally and seasonally off the offerings of small, local farms and ranches. I want family farms and ranches to continue, and the reintroduction of the wolf abutting these properties doesn’t seem to take the whole ecosystem into account.

If I want a truly balanced global ecosystem, then wolves and other endangered animals need to be
brought back into their historic ranges, and humans need to be downsized to ours. We have outrun our carrying capacity as a species. Technically, limiting the food supply by squeezing out farmers in favor of the wolf is a good way to cut down on the human population—we’ll starve and die. It’s better than burning, I guess. Balance would then be restored, but it seems starkly heartless. I see the logic in this, in limiting population growth and consumption levels, but I chafe at the inherent charge to not reproduce and to limit my consumption. If I can’t commit to my own militant code of balance, how can I ask it of others? I love mangoes and avocados and grapefruits; these things are never local or seasonal where I live. I may want children someday. If so, I want them to be able to know and take pride in wild places and where their food comes from. As I ought to.

The solution, as I see it, is to be more aware of where food comes from, and try to support the local farms and farmers. This includes protecting landowners’ rights to protect against predators. In another few generations, perhaps there will be a better answer and we will all change our minds—ecosystems are dynamic. How then, should we proceed, in the face of certain change?

On our last visit of the field trip, with a rancher who cried, talking about how much he loved his dogs because they allowed him to continue raising sheep on his family land in coyote and wolf fringe habitat, one student asked, with a humble urgency: “What would you like to see the environmentalists—us—do to next in the wolf issue?”

After a momentary silence, he replied. “Just to listen.”
Like a jackrabbit the desert reared up
against the high-cold in green-grey clots.
The cheat of grass, the sheen of ice-ground,
dense & the dull straightaway of road,
the welcome turn—sudden & slow
to find them there.
Three of them: feral horses.
We stopped the car, out there, nowhere—
our stares met theirs—
at the side of the road. The frozen glow
of white around their mouths,
the slow blink of a single moment,
a smart brown eye,
& the freezing breath of all of us—
a coalescent heat-cloud.
Their family looked at ours &
then the shudder-start in the hind quarter
of what looked to be the weakest one,
the barbed-wire twitch of scars on its flank,
the lattice of fence around our shared life
& I knew right then that I wanted
you—the whole of it & then they ran.
When you only look at something under a microscope, it is beautiful. Microscopy is diving through a narrow tunnel, swimming past your own eyelashes, and gasping as the whole landscape blurs, shudders, and sharpens. Imagine the beauty of asbestos or arsenic or a living bacterium, its universe laid out before you.

The composition of amphibole asbestos from Libby, Montana, alters between winchite, richterite, and tremolite fibers. What appears in your hand like shiny mica, flakey and light, reveals a tangle of thin, fibrous rods of variable length under the lens of an electron microscope. They are stiff, white rods, like frozen strands of hair. The ends can be blunt or sharp. When the blunt rods break, they become sharp, microscopic spears.

From this isolated view, you might not recognize asbestos fibers wedge into the lining of animal lungs like thin, rock needles. They cause asbestosis, mesothelioma, cancer. They cause scarring in the lungs.

It may be difficult to imagine these fibers from Libby are responsible for the largest environmental and public health disaster in the United States. These fibers have caused hundreds of known deaths; they will cause thousands more.

The first time I looked at a mammal brain under a microscope, I didn’t understand what I was seeing. The cell shape is cartoonish, like a balloon animal with a solitary eye ball. I had been expecting the sleek, simple symmetry of a bacterium. I was so shocked at seeing the neuron, its image took a whole minute to register.

One of the most amazing things about asbestos is that it pops. When heated, it twists and expands into a fireproof, light-weight insulator. In 1916, Edgar Alley, a former Anaconda Copper miner who moved to Libby in search of fortune, discovered he owned a peculiar kind of vermiculite when he walked into a hand-dug mine shaft after dark. He held up a candle and saw what appeared to be shiny worms wriggling along the earthen walls.

The Zonolite Company exploited this natural resource beginning in 1921, then sold its operation to W. R. Grace in 1963. From 1963 to 1990 Grace mined vermiculite and invented new markets for its byproducts. During its peak decades, Grace produced 80% of the world’s vermiculite. Vermiculite from Libby, Montana, proved so useful, a microscope showed, because it contains a tangle of asbestos.

Asbestos is commonly used in water pipes and brake pad linings, attic insulation and garden mixing soil. It was used to pave roads, line beaches, construct berms. Asbestos was added to the talc in America’s favorite crayons. All three brands. Asbestos was used as a fire-retardant in the construction of New York City’s twin towers. In Libby, Montana, it was sprayed from a fire hose. Zonolite attic insulation, rife with tremolite asbestos, is thought to be in 35 million homes across America.
Libby, Montana, is a remote town with stunning natural beauty. The Kootenai River holds a green luster. Under sunlight, it turns brilliant, aquamarine. The hills and mountains surrounding Libby are rocky, full of crags—mountain goat and big horn sheep territory. At sunset, between snowcaps and tree line freckles, the rock faces bleed red. Libby’s Lincoln County Courthouse is on Route. 37 before it crosses the Kootenai River on its way to the vermiculite mine on Zonolite Mountain.

Asbestos scars the lungs and lung lining, making it difficult for a person to move oxygen and to clear mucus. Infections occur in lungs with excess mucus. This causes inflammation and swelling, which leads to more mucus. A person can drown in mucus.

With the right care, a person may live several, long years with asbestosis and other asbestos-related diseases. Bronchodilators are taken to expand air passages before attempting to clear them. In addition to coughing and huffing, there are medical devices that vibrate the chest and lungs and air pressure mouthpieces that help dislodge mucus. Antibiotic inhalants are taken to protect freshly cleared pathways. Most people harboring asbestos-related diseases require inhalers and oxygen tanks.

It can take twenty years for human lungs to wake up to these diseases.

The Center for Asbestos Related Disease, a nonprofit clinic that regularly sees 2,300 patients in Libby, distributes a two-page questionnaire to determine asbestos contact. The questionnaire asks if you or a relative ever worked for W. R. Grace or lived in Libby. It asks if you’ve gone fishing on the Kootenai River, gathered firewood, or gone hunting near vermiculite areas. Have you worked as a welder, miner, farmer, or plumber? Have you been exposed to moldy wheat or wheat dust? Have you worked in a naval shipyard, or foundry, or with insulated pipes? Did your children play ball, run on the high school track, join the Boy Scouts, or play in the vermiculite piles? Do you garden?

Tree bark under a microscope is difficult to identify as tree bark. Douglas fir at 3000x appears like lava flows. A single cluster of pollen stuck to the bark spikes out like a koosh ball toy. Even at 2000x, you can see the thousands of smaller asbestos fibers that escape current legal regulations. On Zonolite Mountain no trees grow, but chest-high bark samples taken from lodgepole pine in the forests surrounding the Libby mine site show 260 million amphibole fibers per cm². The tree bark samples from Libby Middle School and Fireman’s Public Park show 250,000 amphibole fibers per cm².

Now zoom out. Switch to a satellite lens. More than half of Libby residents use wood-burning stoves. It’s not only what you breathe, it’s what you carry. These fibers imbed in your clothing, your skin, your hair, and you carry them home. Once disturbed, asbestos fibers can remain airborne for days.

Criminal trials in American courts are heard before a judge, or before a judge and jury. The Grace Case will be tried in Missoula before twelve jurors and three alternates.

The Missoula Federal District Court issued a 29-page juror questionnaire when it began searching two years ago for its jury pool. The questionnaire asks potential jurors to be honest and candid. Remember, you’re under oath. Do not consult another person when filling out this form. You need no prior knowledge of anything. Sit back, relax: all applicable laws will be explained.

To start, tell us your name, your residence, your marital status. Do you have an alias? What are your feelings toward the federal government? Can you hold a job? Have you or a family member had any involvement in the mining industry? Have you or a family member had a serious chronic disease? Have you ever heard of Vermiculite; have you used it in your garden?

Have you read An Air that Kills or A Civil Action?

Pages 4-6 assess your allegiances; pages 7-11 assess your knowledge. Question 14: What are your feelings about companies that manage and operate mines concerning the safety of their employees?

Please circle any of the following in which you’ve been educated and explain: geology, forestry, ecology, hazardous waste, emissions, construction, agriculture, asbestos, mining, insulation, livestock chemistry, environmental sciences (or science — any field).


Fill out all of these questions completely and accurately. In this manner the court may whittle away anyone with too much knowledge, too much exposure, or any allegiance. Those selected await rigorous live questioning to excise any candidate showing strong opinions. Should you be chosen for this long and arduous trial, your compensation, as set forth by Congress, will be $40 a day.

2. Schneider and McCumber's An Air That Kills and Jonathan Harr's A Civil Action. Yes, both are about W.R. Grace.
Meet Gayla Benefield. Everyone in Libby knows Gayla. No, she’s not on the witness list – previous civil suit – but she’s a long-time advocate for victim rights. She lost seven in her family, including her parents, to lung cancer and asbestosis. After that, thirty of her family members were diagnosed with the disease.

Maybe you’ve seen an interview of Mike Noble, a previous Grace employee and asbestosis victim, in a student-made documentary. Regarding Grace’s responsibility he says, “They knew what was going on. They actually knew because there were studies that was done... And they have murdered us. They’ve done it in a very, very slow way, but they’ve murdered us.”

The study Mike Noble and many others refer to is a 1969 in-house study conducted by W. R. Grace. Using medical screenings and chest X-rays, the company compiled data on its employees. The results are displayed in a graph, like this: “Workers with Disease 1969.” On the X axis, plot years of exposure. On the Y axis, plot percentage of employees with lung disease. Now you have a sharply rising trend line. Not perfectly straight, but alarming. Grace found that after 21 years of exposure to Libby vermiculite, 92% of its employees would have fatal lung diseases.

Grace told no one.

But it’s not just Libby; it’s not only Grace. Most corporations know there are doctors and scientists and Congressmen for hire. There are always those looking for work.

While the Grace Case progressed in Missoula Federal District Court, I drove to a public hearing in Libby. Outside the town hall, a carefully white “L” on a nearby mountainside faced the Lucky Logger Casino and an Exxon Mobil. Inside the town hall, citizens spoke into a single microphone. Along the walls hung project proposals, maps, and descriptions of a new silver and copper mine.

“Tis town knows what can happen with mines. Boom and bust,” warned an outsider.

“Jobs,” spoke the people.

“The water in the long term is more valuable than any minerals we can get out of it now,” protested one.

“Jobs, jobs...” murmured the crowd.

“One third of those treated at my hospital can’t afford their bills,” “High unemployment rate,” “I’ve spent ten years underground,” and “Mining is our legacy.”

“Libby is indeed ‘rich, rare, and remote,’ but who gets rich?”

The United States versus W. R. Grace is called a landmark case because it’s one of the first times a corporation is tried in criminal court. It is the most complex reading of the Clean Air Act. This trial has been five years in the making.

The Missoula Federal District Courthouse is a simple brick building down the street from the more ornate, clock-towered civil county courthouse. The civil courthouse has a coffee shop; the criminal courthouse has a metal detector.

The hearing room on the second floor of the district courthouse is large and modern. By the judge’s view, the US will sit on the right, and W. R. Grace (five of its executives) will sit on the left. The teams of lawyers to the judge’s left will outnumber those to his right.

There is a ceiling-high US flag in the courtroom. Behind the judge seat, there is a large emblem of Montana. On the witness stand, there is a box of tissues.

Les Skramstad, the first Libby miner to take Grace to court and win, a man who wore cowboy boots to trial, was looking forward to hearing the Missoula criminal verdict. Les died Sunday, January 9th, at the age of 70. Les is quoted in An Air that Kills: “Grace should have been brought to trial on criminal charges. They did what Hitler did, they systematically killed us and they knew they were killing us and they did nothing to stop it. I’ll die without Grace ever saying they are sorry, and so will everyone else.”

The federal judge overseeing the U.S. versus W. R. Grace trial has a personal attorney. This attorney, Tyler Gilman, explains the courtroom this way. He says, “In here, everything has an element, and each of those elements must be proven. Otherwise, we don’t care. We’d let Adolf Hitler walk out those doors.”

Elements, isolated and perfect. Elements of the Grace Case will be fought through a series of words that seek to cut what can’t be cut. These words sound like “direct and proximate harm,” “knowing endangerment,” “asbestos,” and “ambient air.”

Evidence of wrongdoing in Libby is everywhere, but what’s allowed in the courtroom is minimal. The government has collected over three million documents of evidence against Grace showing they knew the dangers of asbestos yet exposed their workers and entire towns. Documents show Grace obstructed EPA investigations, then divested company funds to avoid payout. The statute of limitations, however, mandates this trial only hear evidence regarding the time period between November 3, 1999 and November 3, 2004. Grace closed the Libby mine in 1990.

Q: How many breaths can you complete between 1999 and 2004?

That depends where you stand, what air you breathe.
Asbestos Mine

Noelle Sullivan

Your fine-grained mind
is hot from burning turf;
I’m olivine with impurities,
cracking under pressure,
veiny green and cool
when you read my thoughts.

There’s so much to lose
if the rusted past entraps us.
Aspen paths here are paved
with gold dollars, vanished
domesticity. Step over
the mildewed debris.

The necessary is deadly:
first a catch in the throat,
then no more singing.
Metamorphosed air
becomes dire fire.

I inhale the balsam,
piss fir, and white barks through
autumn snows. We wander
with heavy guns between us.
The grouse refuse to show.

When I can’t walk faster
you say I’m holding you back.
We stop to stare at our future.
Below us the canyon turns blue
as the warmth sinks and fades.

Breathe deeply, test your lungs.
The water swept along its path, spurts and fumes forced by large grey stones as our Mountain Dew and Pepsi boats bounded down the irrigation ditch. Gripping a tree branch for balance I cheered my captainless vessel, shouting for it to avoid the ditch’s eddies and pools. Scott’s and my boats bobbed as they poured toward their end. Running along the gravel roadside parallel to the ditch we hoped to beat our ships to the corrugated steel tunnel where they would disappear forever. Filled with creeping, crawling, creatures the tunnel promised death to an imaginative twelve-year old. And though, more often than not, we missed the bottles, fingers fumbling along their tops like an awkward lumberjack trying to balance on a log, the losses never seemed to dim our day.

I’ve colored this memory in light, the freedom of youth stretched out in long brush strokes of bright blue and soft yellow. The summer of ninety-two is bound to that ditch in American Fork, Utah, that was somehow big enough to fill my world with imagination like some unknown god holding out the promise of life, and living.

* 

In 1850 it would have been more than a day’s ride from the Salt Lake Valley, where the Chipman and Adams families were temporarily located, to their
destination at Fort Provo. Breaking for the night, the group set up camp along American Fork Creek under the cottonwoods that line its banks. Fourteen-year old William Henry Chipman, taken aback by the beauty of the area and the stilling sense of the creek, looked at his father Stephen and said, “I think I would like to live here.”

In honesty, I can’t be sure it was the creek’s quiet words and the cool scent of cottonwoods and sagebrush that filled William Henry with a desire to live alongside the canyon stream; however, these are the things that often filled me with a sense of contentment and instilled within me a love of the creek and the canyon it births from.

I couldn’t have been more than nine or ten when, driving through American Fork on a Sunday afternoon, my dad pointed out a little white house on Fourth North. He explained that it was the home he had grown up in. He seemed happy thinking back upon his childhood in a house small enough to be an apartment. He didn’t tell me, at that time, when I was still a child, about his brother David and the horrible event that transpired there in 1952. Over a decade passed from the time he pointed out the house to the time I hesitantly asked him about his brother’s death.

“It’s not a happy memory.”

My father’s voice commands attention and respect, and it has often filled me with anxiety when its tone hinted at some mistake of mine. However, I had never heard his voice take on this tone, soft and cold, bruised in sadness. It filled me with fear and guilt.

In the summer of 1851, with ground that seemed more likely to yield stone than any crop, the early settlers of American Fork set to the task of creating ditches. Washburn Chipman, John Cole, and Solomon Thomas joined efforts to be among the first to break through the hard, dry land in hopes of bringing much needed water to the west side of American Fork.

Maybe it was Cole who, out in the wilderness, uprooted the tree stumps and gathered the large rocks to form the makeshift dam. His horses would have strained in the desert heat as they pulled at the stumps of trees cut down to make the frontier cabins. Did they stop in the shade after the initial furrow broke ground, watching the water run from the dam filling and softening the arid land? After the test run they dug additional furrows widening the ditch. These second and third furrows were a relief, coming easier now that the land was wet. As the sun made its way down, swallowed in the orange sky, Chipman, Cole, and Thomas sat along the dam, watching the water run in the vein they had created, water like blood mixing in dirt trying to bring life in the shadows of a desert.

Years after Scott and I have lost touch, I walk along the little ditch that consumed us. Trees have grown and been cut back, and work on the road has cleaned up the loose gravel sides we ran along. The tunnel remains jagged and dark. It’s cold. There are only traces of snow on the ground but we are still in the heart of a Utah winter. Robert Michael Pyle in his book The Thunder Tree wrote, “...a ditch
somewhere - or a creek, meadow, woodlot, or marsh... These are places of initiation... where the earth gets under our nails and a sense of place gets under our skin.” Do I have a sense of place for this place? It seems our summer changed the ditch, transformed it into something bigger.

Only a trickle runs through the ditch. Most of its base is covered in a netting of moss and leaves; green and brown work together to hide the ditch’s floor. What secret does it have to hide? Ambling down into the net of moss I lean, elbows on knees, inspecting the thin hairs. Is my life like the network of moss? I want to say this ditch is a part of me, one of thousands of little green hairs covering the whole of who I am. But is its only real power in my remembering? The life of this ditch is much broader than that summer from my youth. Can I be selective with the tones I use as I paint this place in my mind? Is it wrong to leave out the darker shades?

The little white house had a backyard about 30 feet deep with soft, green grass; 30 feet is a continent to children. The yard ran parallel to the irrigation ditch in the neighboring yard. They were a young family. My grandfather worked at the steel mill while Grandma Edwards took care of the house and watched their three kids.

I imagine Grandma in the kitchen preparing a Sunday lunch of pot roast and potatoes or, perhaps, still cleaning up from breakfast, the smell of pancakes and bacon hanging heavy in the air. My dad, with the pointy ears he’d not yet grown into and a gentle wave at the front of a head of dark hair, played in the backyard with Patsy and David. They romped in the fresh warmth that comes with the change of seasons, the transfer from April to May. Annie Dillard wrote, in her book Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, “An infant who has just learned to hold his head up has a frank and forthright way of gazing about him in bewilderment. He hasn’t the faintest clue where he is, and he aims to learn.” David, 14-months-old, still found himself filled with that infant bewilderment. While Dad and Patsy played, David explored.

Through my imagination, and with the assistance of George F. Shelley’s Early History of American Fork I crawl inside the small log cabin of an American Fork family, where children sit under the dining table. There are no shops or factories in the early days of American Fork, and the table is made of rough materials found in the surrounding area—I use warm, earthy tones as I draw out this recreation. Older family members sit at stools made from logs left over after the building of the cabin. Dinner cooks on a baking skillet hung over the fireplace. Humid, musty scent rolls off the skillet, filling the room and the family with the smell that, through time, they have come to recognize as dinner. Father and boys wear buckskin moccasins made dark from days working in the dust of the desert. Humble hand-made buckskin clothes are worn by the whole family, though only the men who work outside have moccasins, the women and children go barefoot.

Even with the new irrigation ditches, water has been scarce. A common sized family for their day, the parents and eight children wait for their meal of venison, sogoes, and thistle roots. Several of the children are pale with long faces, sick from eating too much fish and wild game. But the land allows them no more; they strive not for balanced meals, rather ones that will stifle the effects of an empty stomach. Water has failed the small town that will never become a thriving community of farmers, but will instead flower with the flowing influence of industry: logging, mining, and milling.

Somewhere in the confines of Geneva Steel, a phone rings. There is bad news. An accident at home. Back in American Fork, family and friends search the area surrounding the house, David can’t have gone far—small as he is—they search the house, neighboring yard, out into the street, across the street; then just before, or maybe just after my grandpa Edwards arrives from work, someone notices the ditch.

I can imagine the sudden, sweeping sense of horror that hit them once the fence and ditch became apparent. Did they know then, even before they found David’s body pinned to the grate, what had happened? American Fork’s obituary page explains that both my grandfather and the American Fork fire department tried CPR before David was pronounced dead. I don’t want to imagine my grandfather in the blue work coveralls I had always known him to wear, his dark tanned skin streaked with sweat and tears, bent over the infant, refusing what the laws of nature insist—David was already gone. But I can’t help it; the images develop despite my not wanting them to. T.S. Eliot said that “Human kind cannot bear very much reality” and this is where I’m at—leaning over the edge of my limit of reality. I want to turn now that I’m faced with the pain of that day.

Suddenly I find myself filled with anger, not at
God, not at anyone but myself. I hate the part of me that needed to know about that day because now I don't want to know, don't want to disturb the image of my grandfather I carry in my mind, the image of a strong, rough, and tested man, much like the pioneers who dug the ditches which bring and take life. Though, isn't this also a fitting memory of my grandfather: a man pulled to his knees by sorrow and love?

*I*

I have returned to the ditch to walk its borders once again. There is more water today than before and little patches of snow along its banks. A minnow splashing in the water catches me off guard as I head toward the tunnel. Another fish sashays to the water's surface as it passes the tunnel's entrance. There is life, wild and wiggling, that dares to enter the tunnel Scott and I were so sure held nothing but death. Slowly, with my left foot on the bank and balancing my right on a broken cinder block that sits four feet in front of the tunnel, I straddle half the ditch. Another fish swims between my legs into the tunnel, life into death.

As I sketch out the canvas of my life, isn't it worth the pains of reality to render things accurately? Can a person or place be done justice if I only use those lighter shades?
We rolled up to BB’s convenience store, halfway down Main Street in St. Francis, South Dakota, a town of President Johnson’s Sioux 400 homes half-eaten by field mice and cockroaches.

Ten minutes there were like all ten years of my life. I saw Aunt Hilda beaten with a bloody nose walk through dust devils, her wet face collecting sand on reddened bone, in her arms a baby ignored the faltering gait in a village too small to run from, behind them a drunk man stumbled. Aunt Tilly, our beaded savior, came then to warm her sister on the way to Grandmother’s, and Grandmother’s held Grandfather lying on rusty blankets, merged with cigarette smoke in the living room corner, watching TV and laughing with Uncle T.J. who tightened his grip on Jim Beam while constant cracks in their conversation came from grandchildren, nephews, and cousins moving the outdoor dust to indoor dirt, breezy bodies passing peeled paint, stacked dishes, cooking corn soup and fry bread dough dollops. My father went to kiss Grandmother, down the short hall scattered with blankets, quilts in plastic, plastic cups and plates, to her bedroom where I would go only when she was dying. He took his hands and pushed our Crane from her view of the sweat lodge to visit us kids. She rolled her silver-gray salvation wheelchair around the room.
I Have Always Wanted to Live in the Country
Lucas Farrell

Often I dream of encountering him, that littler me, on a country road with no one around but the dry grass and a cow or two, some birds, and I unleash verbal furies, tell him off, tell him how it really is in this world.

Always, I carry a plastic pouch filled with water in which a beta fish swims its quick, methodical circles. The water jostles making feverish waves. The fish weeps, the bag fills, growing larger. I imagine my littler self reaching into his pocket and retrieving a small knife, shiny blade. I start, remembering that blade, remembering not having in years thought about that blade, how I used to carry it wherever I went, slicing dandelion stems, whittling spruce. To forget its grip, so natural and becoming in one’s littler hand! And then, without taking his eyes off my eyes, without a word or second’s thought, the littler me thrusts, stabbing at my plastic pouch.

Always, the last drop of water emptying, the dusty road, the fish stuck to the side of the sagging plastic, and tall, dry grass as far as the eye can see.