Camas, Winter 2009

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Faith in Lightning

Tim G. Gibbins

I live at the base of Thousand Lake Mountain in a one-room log cabin. The accommodations are spare, a rocking chair, a woodstove, a chest of drawers, a mattress on the floor, and a desert wilderness beyond the front porch. The landscape window now holds an approaching storm. Gray tendrils of rain hang from the dark belly of clouds and the last rays of sunlight slant through the cloudbank, golden brown like light filtered through an empty bottle. I open another beer and wonder, as I always do when drinking, if I can live with being such a hypocrite.

This is my first night off work in eight days. I had spent those days in the desert, working as a field instructor for a wilderness program for troubled youth. The trouble meant drugs, alcohol, theft, porn, and defiance – all of the common abuses that stem from detachment.

Our newest student, Zack, came from Houston, Texas. His father was in the oil business, and I never heard anything about his mother, but the intake forms said she died when he was young. Cancer I think it was. Zack had been expelled from school for fighting. He was addicted to meth and had what his therapist called Oppositional Defiance Disorder, which meant that he would not do anything you told him to. Since he was woken up in the night by bodyguards, muscled onto a plane and shipped to Utah against his will, he hated this desert, despised it more than anything. At first glance the sandstone canyons of Robbers Roost country are foreboding, a void expanse. It is a landscape defined by exposure, and each remaining piece of sandstone is a testament to the stubborn will against diminishment. Wallace Stegner once described it as, “A lovely and terrible wilderness, such a wilderness as Christ and the prophets went out into.”

The desert has always drawn such people, be them prophets, prospectors, or drug addicts. Anywhere you can get real lost I suppose, is a place where you can also be found. Reefs, buttes, canyons, and mountains form the rind husk of this planet. It is skeletal, elemental, a place to confront yourself.

On average it took a couple of weeks for an addict to admit their addiction. In the 12 steps to recovery, the second step asks you to come to a belief in a power greater than yourself to restore you to sanity. This single sentence, this one step, can take years or a lifetime to discover. It asks you to define your God. Some addicts choose religion, some choose nature, and both seem adequate because faith is an absolute fidelity to an unknown power.

My faith lies somewhere in the middle of religion and nature, if only for my view on lightning. I have always believed that if I were struck by lightning it would be the work of a higher power.

I do not mean to suggest that a vengeful God strikes non-believers dead with lightning bolts – if that were the case, lightning would kill more than one out of every two million people a year. A lightning strike, however, is more common than a freak accident. It strikes the earth roughly 100 times a second, but the odds of you standing in one of those places has to leave you wondering.

I wonder how Zack is faring in this storm. He is still out there.

Two days ago when I asked him to get out of his sleeping bag to start the morning, I heard him roll over in his bag and I thought he was getting up, and then he said, “Fuck you.”

Later that day a lightning storm rolled in and I noticed Zack’s movements quickened. I thought agitated. Clouds snuck over us, and the explosions of thunder came within a blink of the lightning. Five seconds between them means the storm is a mile away, and if within three miles, or fifteen seconds, the chances of being struck are dangerous enough that you ought to find something insulated on which to sit. This storm was directly overhead.

I instructed the group to assume the lightning position and Zack sat down with his butt on his pack, arms clutched around his knees just as I had instructed. He looked over at me and I did not know what to say. Rain pelted us sideways. Rivulets of water poured off his dark hair and down his face. He looked helpless, and there was nothing I could do to help him. Sitting exposed on that high plateau was akin to Russian Roulette. We were in the wrong place at the wrong time. There was nothing comforting I could have said, and besides, that is not what Zack needed.

He put his face into his hands. I heard him sobbing.

For a tough kid from Texas, this was as bad as it gets. I yelled into the wind that it would pass over quickly, but the wind caught those words and scattered them meaningless.

Out the window, I look at Thousand Lake Mountain in the darkness. It is a sandstone tower that
stands in defiance of the storm. Clouds roil above it. I watch it waiting for what is to come and sure enough a trident-forked lightning bolt strikes the mountain’s top and in the flash, it looks like an X-ray of the earth’s bone. Stark exposure, a negative, cold and uncompromised – I am glad for the roof over my head.

My lamp goes out. The power is down. In total darkness, I press my face to the window, to the storm. No moon, no stars, the storm blocks all light except for what it provides. I light a candle and the wind hisses through the logs and washes shadows around the room. Thunder rumbles like artillery rounds and bolts of lightning repeatedly strike the mountain. I cannot discern time between the flash and crack. It sounds like the sky is going to rip open. Bolts shock the windows white and with each one, my head jerks as if a pushpin entered the pulse behind my ear. Scars of lightning hang in the sky or on my eyelids, I cannot tell which. I draw the curtains. Another explosion and the thunder is in my toes against the floorboards.

I begin to doubt my cabin. There is no metal in the foundation, no antennae, no grounding, and I half expect the cabin to burst into flames. I assume the lightning position on my bed with my arms clasped around my legs. I invent a prayer and say it under my breath. In the dark, punctuated by blinding flashes, I cower, half-drunk, eyes wide with a beating heart.
Contributors

Grace Brogan is a writer, maker, and grower. Her passion for drawing attention toward one’s part in the complicated system of relationships in which we live has brought her into the employ of a natural arboretum, an organic farm, a Japanese high school, a traditional craft school, and a social justice driven human services organization. She hopes to handbuild a life of learning, sharing, and making change.

Talasi Brooks has been writing for most of her life, mostly as a Slam Poet. She is pleased to debut her foray into the world of creative nonfiction in Camas. She would like to dedicate this piece to the memory of her friend, Cameron Martinez.

Kathryn Bryan is a junior in the Photojournalism program at the University of Montana.

Emily Bulger holds an English degree from The University of Montana. A few of her interests include travel, good books, design, writing, typography, dance, and photography. She lives in Missoula.

Lori Dagley is a fine art photographer living in the mountains outside Boise, Idaho. She studied photography at Salzburg College and earned her BFA from the University of Arizona in 1993. The Boise Art Museum purchased "Farms on the Snake River" for their permanent collection in 2005. To view more of her work, please visit www.lordagley.com.

A contributing editor of Harper's Magazine, Edwin Dobb co-wrote and co-produced “Butte, America,” which aired on the PBS series "Independent Lens" in the fall of 2009. Dobb is an adjunct professor in the Environmental Studies Program, at The University of Montana, and a lecturer at the U.C. Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism.

Marie Garrison is a 2006 graduate of the University of Montana Environmental Studies Program and a previous contributor to Camas. She currently lives in Missoula but frequently travels across Western Montana for work and play. Her freelance photography includes travel, landscapes, wedding, and portraits.

Tim G. Gibbins lives in Montana and writes about the wilderness.

Beth Gibson is an environmental studies graduate student at the University of Montana.

Steve Himmer's work has appeared in Reed Magazine, Night Train, Pindeldyboz, Amokeag, and elsewhere. He edits the webjournal Necessary Fiction, and teaches at Emerson College in Boston.

Like many pilgrims before him, Alex Johnson set out on his life's expedition from St. Louis, Missouri. After earning a BA and an appreciation for subtle beauty from Northland College in Ashland, Wisconsin, he went west. He now studies the environment as a master's student at the University of Montana and calls Missoula home.

Annie Kuster is a 2009 graduate of the University of Montana's School of Journalism, focusing on Photography. A love of the outdoors has led to her extensive collection of nature photos. More of her work can be seen at www.anniekuster.com. Her photo was taken while working for the Watershed Education Network, a Missoula non-profit dedicated to watershed stewardship.

Z. Cody Lee is from the Midwest. He lives in Montana. He translates and writes and draws there.

Karen Lennon is a Natural Resource Manager, writer and 1983 graduate of UM with a BS in Wildlife Biology.

Christopher Linforth has worked published and forthcoming in Permafrost, Denver Quarterly, Touchstone, and Coal City Review.

Mike Lommler is a wildlife biology field grunt based in St. George, Utah, though he expects to return to Montana for good some day. In the meantime, he imports his beer from Arizona and wherever else his frequent travels take him. Mike enjoys backpacking, canoeing, canyoneering, climbing, howling like a wolf, and not getting kicked in the face by bighorn sheep. His photography can be found at http://www.flickr.com/photos/mike-lommler/.

Laura Pritchett is a freelance writer with essays and short stories in numerous magazines and newspapers, including The Sun, Orion, High Country News, High Desert Journal, Colorado Review, 5280 (Denver's Magazine). Her work has been anthologized in seven books.

Greta Rybus is a University of Montana photojournalism student and local freelance photographer. She first began making photographs at the age of 15 while living in Japan, though she calls the sagebrush hills of Idaho home. She has cultivated a love for nature’s offerings: a striped rock found on a hike, the vivid red of this season’s beets, and the warmth of sun on the skin. Contact Greta at gretarybus@gmail.com

Bethany Schilling is a photojournalist from Oregon, working at the YMCA and toward a degree in business in hopes of someday operating her own photography business.

After years of writing and painting, Peter Schwartz has moved to another medium: photography. In the past his work’s been featured in many prestigious print and online journals including: Existere, Failbetter, Hobart, International Poetry Review, Red Wheelbarrow, Reed, and Willard & Maple. Doing interviews, collaborating with other artists, and pushing the borders of creativity, his mission is to broaden the ways the world sees art. Visit his online gallery at: www.sitrahahra.com.

An English Literature graduate from Glasgow University, Juned Subhan has had work published in various journals including, The Ontario Review, Cimarron Review, North American Review, Louisiana Literature, Marginalia, Indiana Review, Bryant Literary Review and Relief: A Quarterly Christian Expression. He is currently working on his first novel as well as a volume of short fiction.


Maya Jewell Zeller’s poems appear most recently in High Desert Journal, New South, Cimarron Review, Bellingham Review, and Mississippi Review. She lives in Spokane, where she teaches English composition at Gonzaga University.

Karen Lennon is a Natural Resource Manager, writer and 1983 graduate of UM with a BS in Wildlife Biology.
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We began our stint as the editors of *Camas* by reviewing the back issues that gather dust on our shelves. We looked for the threads of continuity that run between issues, trying to define what the overarching theme of *Camas* really is. “The Nature of The West” feels pretty vague when August comes around and suddenly, you’ve got a magazine to pull together.

We found that over the years and issues, *Camas* has grown from a pure celebration of the natural environment of the West and storied mystery of the wilderness to a publication that grows increasingly comfortable in questioning the realities of these traditions. The challenge, as we see it, is to retain a respectful balance between the old romances of cowboys and wolves and wild open spaces, and the present realities of the American West, truths that are no less deserving of fierce love than those preceding myths.

The West, as presented in this issue of *Camas*, is a place of people and angles, contradictions and celebrations. Cowboys have iPhones. Butte, America, is a lovely, dirty, old town. It is possible to love the imperfections, and indeed, the struggle to do so makes the story worth the telling. The West charges us to carry the stories of the past forward towards a truer balance.

Even if you can’t always get your boots on the right feet.
Camas takes its name from the plant *camassia quamash*, which is celebrated as a stable of sustenance by Native American tribes from the Rocky Mountains to the Cascades. Care of the wild camas fields passed from generation to generation, even as the shape of the West changed with time and temperament.

Across the landscape of its pages, *Camas* the magazine cultivates new ideas and perspectives while remaining rooted in the inherited traditions of art and literature within the promise of the American West.
I must admit, I was skeptical. I’m a river-loving environmentalist, and the idea of two New York hoity-toity artists coming to cover seven miles of the Arkansas river with cloth didn’t really want to make me, shall we say, jump into the river for joy. It made me confused: why add something to an already-stunning river; what is to be gained by suspending 962 translucent fabric panels above the surface of the water?

On the other hand, maybe I was just being a jerk. After all, I’m a supporter of the arts, and I like to think I have an open mind. So I decided to reserve judgment until I met the artists in person, as well as the townsfolk of the nearest town, Salida, who would (besides the river) probably be most impacted.

Let’s just say I was in for a Blast-o-Rama of all my preconceived theories, worries, and opinions. In other words: boy, was I surprised.

But first, a little background: Christo and Jeanne-Claude are hailed by many as the greatest living artists of our time (think “The Gates” in New York City and “The Wall” in Germany). For years, they have wanted to come to Colorado for their project, “Over the River,” which will be exhibited for fourteen days over eight sections of the Arkansas River between Canon City and Salida, and will draw, by many estimates, about 250,000 people to the valley.

Picking this section of the Arkansas was no willy-nilly decision. In search of a site for the project, Christo and Jeanne-Claude traveled 14,000 miles in the Rocky Mountains in the United States. The team prospected eighty-nine rivers in the Rocky Mountains, in seven states, and six possible locations were found. After visiting the six sites again in the summer of 1996, the Arkansas River in Colorado won out.

And that’s when the debate started: was this good news or bad?

Okay, and there’s this: it’s just fun to look at them: With Jeanne-Claude’s flaming red hair, and Christo’s white-headed wise look, both artists seem a bit like art personified.

Still, I couldn’t make up my mind.

It wasn’t till I got to chat with them, alone, that I was won over. “You know,” Jeanne-Claude said, flicking her cigarette ash at my feet, “we always encounter opposition before a project. Never after. Because people see how beautiful it is. Besides, the opposition is part of the work of art. We create energy. People are for it. People are against it. That is the power. By the opposition, the project becomes more important. Contemporary art in general has always been controversial.” She sighed and looked around at the mountains, towering around us. “We wouldn’t want to hurt Mother Earth. We want to celebrate Her.”

Well. I was charmed, cigarette ash and all. But how about the public? After chatting with Jeanne-Claude (who did most the talking) and Christo (who smiled a lot), I went out to talk to people. What did they think? There were lots of yeses, and lots of nos, but the overriding sentiment that I got was this: At the very least, they have given the gift of re-remembrance. They have reminded people to see the river, to really see it. Whether the projects gets done or not, the artists have re-invigorated our appreciation for natural beauty.

It seemed to me, walking around after the pre-
sentation, that the initial local resistance to the project was quite quelled. Others were charmed, too. They captured many a Coloradan’s imagination.

Assuming that the Environmental Impact Statement and other bureaucratic loopholes are actually jumped, “Over The River” will be exhibited in summer 2012. In the meantime, we get to appreciate one of our most scenic rivers. As Jeanne-Claude told me, “My God, our project gives awareness to a place. We will have underlined the great beauty of the environment. We’re kind of proud of that. It’s all a matter of love. For art, and for each other.”
How My Name Came This Far West

Z. Cody Lee

As I, not yet a form as yet uncollected as atoms, whirred my parents’ great
grandparents ate the forest free of bird and moiled in new fear for the soils had turned
writing requiem after requiem nothing anymore would grow where we came from

So they took turns burying each other in their own land, disappearing into cloth
with a needle, into wood with an ax until enough ships were built to carry them here
this far west across the ocean with little more than some syllables in their lungs
which did little more than whirl in between their flesh and the air and lock into the lyrics of
folk songs and parables and stories their meanings crisp as foil language
the air around them swirled and parted around their bodies and patted down almost no
one knew where they were going their eyes hardening on deck the English
language back then told them nothing and no one ate dinner

And back then it didn’t matter what it was, it had to be loved lips of tungsten, tongue of
wicker what fit into pockets was taken the smaller stone the
trappings of a candle leather wraps, edible whisps of plants until new pockets were
sewn in what could be hauled was taken and no one complained and no one carried on
and so like weather we (those before me, I mean) broke upon the land and
scattered and began forgetting each other who were no poorer than birds following the rare
familiar sounds of chordophone instruments and accordions the light in our eyes was not
stained glass back then it was the opaque flash off nailheads
Three Field Studies

Sitting On a Rock in the Clark Fork
I grew up surrounded by dead rivers. Not dead, but that’s how we all thought about them anyway. The flood of ‘93. Sewage. Petroleum. Houses. All in those rivers.

What if life isn’t vibrant? What if it is resigned, waiting it out, as it always does? The bits of algae will wait. They will have their time again. To overtake the earth once more. It is our time, but soon it will be theirs.

The rivers will wait, too—as long as the rain still falls and the mass of the earth still pulls itself down, down, always toward the center. Maybe it is gravity. We’ve all got gravity. We help but pull itself together. We've all got gravity. We move. We pull ourselves together.


Waterworks Hill
Where do words live?
I am halfway through Norman Maclean’s A River Runs through It as I climb Waterworks Hill. The wind is blowing hard in the pines. The willows creak. Old fences of barbed wire croon. I hear the familiar rushing from the highway. The afternoon is loud and lonely up on the hill. The universe can’t help but pull itself together. We’ve all got gravity. We move. We pull ourselves together.

But life exists through the act of separation. Through incongruity. Nature is the division from. It is the pulling away. And so, as I drop a golden leaf into the flowing waters, I can’t help but feel responsible. And secretly envious.

Rivers bring everything down. Toward the center. Someday, we will all be one. Don’t we long for it in every atom of our beings? Together. Together. Together.

But it is the lure of death. Of end. Of bottom. Imagine the wild, lifeless orgy that is a black hole.

I like the mountains. I like to know I could fall three-thousand feet. I like reminders of the precariousness of my position. I prefer height.

Sentinel Ridge
A mass of warmth has swung across this mountain top from somewhere humid, somewhere tropical. Somewhere, very far away. An offering for the north. Is it the world wants? Is it entropy? If only we were a closed, dark, still system. Then we’d be at peace.

I did not plan on climbing today. But the mountains called. The sun called. Life must move, it must rebel, it must seek instability.

I seek home. Any creature small and naked seeks home. I have found this place, this land west. Here, I stand on western Montana, the lichen covered rock pressing up against the rough bare skin of my feet, the once islands that will be again. Today’s warm wind blows the dried grasses who have pulled their living parts down, together. But the grasses still play with the south’s senseless gift. Not too late, not too early. A gift for today, for this afternoon, for now. I had already forgotten how to breathe through my skin. I had already forgotten how to squint into the sun.

The pines grow here too. Today they inhale and exhale quietly, peacefully. I follow them, the pines.

I follow them, the words.

Alex Johnson

The words on our gravestones, they will lie on the floor of the sea. We have not considered the magnitude of their perpetuity. They will fossilize our words. Rock will flow over rock. Rock will melt away, replaced by rock. Our words will change, travel, transform for three billion, four billion years, until the earth is over. But those are only the words in rock. What about the words riding waves? They already live out beyond our reach. They will live between the stars for all of time. Long after our last satellites fall back and burn, bluebirds will ride our waves of words. Bunch grass will drown in them.

Life whittles in the cold, and it is cold today on top of this hill. Life is brown and dry. Water moves away, sinks down. Away. I’m not welcome here, and my words slip from me into the wind. Where do these words go? Where will they live?

I hike down the hill. I return to the others who busy themselves in the work that must be done before their burial. A week later I arrive at the last page of the book. I read the words that I had not read before, but that I had drunk from the dry, cold sea out beyond: “Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world’s great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs.

I am haunted by waters.”
The last time I saw Sinclair Newton he was on his way to the steel fence that surrounded Fort Royston. He didn’t wave or say goodbye, but just walked over to his '88 Buick with a clump of folded pamphlets in his hand. We both knew where he was going as he sped off along the dirt track and away from his house.

I had known him since the eighth grade, when he sat behind me in honors English. His family moved into Ramsburg — a block from my house — and was quick to integrate by attending yard sales, ice cream socials, and neighborhood barbeques. Sinclair and his mom brought the same over-seasoned potato salad every time. They had connections to the fort; his father was high up, something about intelligence gathering. I never met him, but each time I went to Walmart I stopped outside the fort and imagined what was inside. People said the base had hundreds of silos and a nuclear bunker for the President. I wasn’t sure, but either way the town seemed to depend on the place. The economy, as I saw it, revolved around the dive bars near the railroad tracks and the $20-a-night motel that had a sign in the window that read “No Checks, No Whores.”

There was no escaping that soldiers were part of the town. At the high school football games returning men would come and stand in the middle of the crabgrass field and we would clap, cheer, and shout. You couldn’t decipher what we were celebrating, what the point of all the noise was for. We only knew it was expected. This went on for years until the soldiers would no longer come and we would no longer cheer.

When the protests first started in the summer of our junior year I had started to date a girl, Annie, and my parents had bought me a blue Ford pick-up with a tape deck and AM radio. The day after July 4th Sinclair tagged along with me to the demonstration at the army recruitment office on the edge of downtown. Throughout the car ride he seemed subdued by the possibility that his family might find out. He said something about his dad, the “Colonel,” and wore his hood tight over his short brown hair and put on his aviators. Sinclair shouldn’t have worried, the turnout...
was only six students from some distant college in eastern Kansas; they held brightly-painted banners and occasionally shouted “Bring back the troops!” and “Stop the war!” as they motioned people towards their petition. From the pick-up, I noticed, Sinclair watched as the fan bunting and flags came down and were kicked into the road. I remember he just sat and smoked cigarettes through the open gap of the window.

The protests continued through the summer. They were attracting more people, families mostly, angry with the death toll. At each one, Sinclair refused to join me. Instead, he remained in the pickup and worked on a paper for history class. We were both taking it for college credit. We had learned that the bombers during the Second World War flew from the airstrips that peppered the Kansas grasslands to China, before refueling for Japan. The flat and hard prairie was well-suited to the heavy loads of the B29’s as they took off with their 250 pound bombs. Photographs in the textbook showed the chalked messages on the iron casings: For Freedom, Lady Liberty, and Eat This TNT. The targets were the cities and the munitions-producing factories in Japan. Thousands died in the firestorms that swept through the wooden houses of the suburbs.

In class, Sinclair never raised his hand or contributed any to the debates about the events and ethics of war. In fact, Sinclair hadn’t spoken since his family moved to a distant wheat farm on the other side of town. His mom told me Sinclair had seen several doctors, and counselors, but all failed to get a word from him. His vocal chords were intact and healthy. He’d simply stopped speaking. I figured it was due to his father leaving for his second tour of duty.

When the high school reopened in late August I didn’t see Sinclair. I heard rumors that he’d been sent to a sanatorium on the East Coast or that he’d signed up and was away fighting with his father. I thought I saw him a couple of times outside of the stadium, a pale figure drifting through the lot. I even called out once, but the man never looked around.

In early fall he showed up at my house, he was thin and his hair was thick and unkempt. He didn’t try to speak, but gestured for a drink of water. That evening he sat on my bed, flicking through some motorcycle magazines, until his mom took him away, cut his hair, and got him back at school the next day.

As Thanksgiving approached the protests intensified. They had moved to the front gates of the fort and were held daily, often attracting a crowd of fifty or so. Veterans from Vietnam, Korea, and the second World War came in their dry-cleaned uniforms and sat in deck chairs exchanging stories about their tours of duty. For hours I listened to them debate the effectiveness of small barrel howitzers and the power of the atom-bomb.

Later when Sinclair arrived I got him to follow me. We walked for half-a-mile through the dry scrub grass, a faded orange in the late afternoon light. From behind some creosote bushes we looked at the fence. The netted steel was held up by fifteen-foot steel poles and topped with razor wire. Sinclair barely reacted as I said: “If I climb over and tape our message to the tanks and the jeeps of the officers, it could bring home what this war is all about.” I watched the twenty or so soldiers jog in formation past the barracks and out to the firing range: “All I would need is a ladder and a blanket to push down the barbed wire.” Sinclair smiled and offered me a cigarette.

I had planned to go over the fence on Thanksgiving night. Most of the soldiers would be enjoying a three-course meal in the mess hall. The day before, though, Sinclair had called me about a fight he had with his mom. His voice sounded different from how I remembered it: weak and hoarse as though he’d been shouting for hours. That evening, I gave Sinclair’s mom a cooked turkey from my parents in hope of reconciliation between her and Sinclair. Her breath smelled of whiskey as she told me about a personal visit from the fort. A two-star general had read out a letter from military command: “It comes with the greatest of regret that...” She told me that Sinclair hadn’t flinched; at first he’d held the same wry smile on his face then he broke down, screaming and cursing.

Outside of her house, I saw him standing on the porch and smoking a Newport. He was looking at the fields covered in ice. I put my arm on his shoulder, but he shrugged it off and took the pamphlets from my hand. I almost shouted out his name, but I just watched as he drove out for the day’s protest at the fort, his Buick reaching sixty as he went through the open gate.

The following day the local newspaper reported how his body was found skewered on top of the fence, the steel spikes penetrating his lung, spleen, and liver. He had bled to death within a couple of hours; a random patrol found him — his skin drained of color — and called in the medics.

I never went to the funeral. Sinclair’s mom held it out-of-state before she moved away, leaving her farm in the hands of local realtors. I heard she went somewhere west.
I have very little to say about Los Angeles. Next to nothing, actually. I guess you could claim that makes me L.A.-illiterate. There's a nice ring to that though, and I don't feel as ashamed as perhaps I should, or ashamed as the person interviewed on the street when he doesn't know the name of our country's vice president, or the clerk is at the grocery store when he suddenly can't think of the code for bananas, when everyone who's ever checked knows it's 4011. Actually, there are a lot of things I don't know, or remember, like the calendar rule for Easter, or the Boot Scootin' Boogie, because when all the other girls in seventh grade stayed after school to learn line dancing from Mrs. Cartwright, I took the bus home. I've never seen the Angels play baseball, but once, while Tiffany and Amanda were bending their knees to Brooks & Dunn and slapping the heels of their feet with their palms, I read a book about a child with a spirit guide who used to play for the Angels. That was when baseball was still America's favorite sport, the kind of game a family could take a picnic to, where your mom and dad might hold hands and smile at each other in that holy way parents can smile about secret things they remember from before you were around. That was prior to NFL ticket, or whatever they call that Sunday football program you can buy in a cell phone-internet-cable bundle and watch all weekend with your mustard pretzels and beer on your lap, your dog on the arm of your chair, barking whenever you shout. I can remember wondering what it might be like to go to a baseball game with my parents. The girl in the story had lost someone, if I've got it right, and I'd look it up only I can't quite recall the title of the book, or the crisis she was facing, but for a long time after that I thought baseball was so beautiful, the way a person's smile can be when he admits to something he doesn't know. It's not quite shame, but that other thing, curiosity, which we have such a hard time finding anymore. It's the impulse now that makes me squint so tight the light comes in through my lashes, and all I see are the stripes that look like sun rays beaming down on a child stepping off the bus. She's happy to walk home alone down her driveway where the birds seem to think someone has hit a million home runs. They just can't stop singing about it, and the poplar leaves start the wave, sage at first until the whole circle of them flips to dark green. It's a little like a dance, isn't it, she thinks, the same way pages make a hushed crowd sound when they turn, as if the picnic is just one more inning away. I wish I could think of the name of the girl in the story, or even the reason she needed that angel. But it doesn't matter much now, since the Angels changed to Anaheim. Sometimes I think about taking a train to watch them.
At a Sleepover, She Goes Looking for Ice Cream

Maya Jewell Zeller

In the freezer, a whole cow. Skinned. The red gleam of meat against meat, white marble like a streak of dust, a valiant wallpaper. In the patterned carcass she imagines a scene, the way children might do with clouds: the heifer gallops, mouth foaming, glassy taste buds still wanting fresh green, not ready to die. But her friend’s father, his hay pants still crusted from the day’s work, follows with an axe held high. The girl knows that really a gun killed it, or a neighbor, a wolf, last spring’s flood—but in her picture, the mammal gets to run one last time, hooves cracking a code into the dark, something more than a frantic bird is allowed before its head hits the woodblock, something like will. Around the beast, a rim of ice. A bright coat for the whirring machine.
Dry Year

My dad and I are drinking beer, watching the storm clouds tumble like clowns over the Sangre de Cristos. Between us and the mountain peaks shimmers a thin blue quilt of rain, falling halfway down the sky and disappearing in wisps as fragile as ghosts.

“It’s called virga,” he tells me, “when the rain does that, evaporating on the way down, never reaching the field.”

“Dry year,” I say.

“Dry as bone,” he adds, clearing his throat, spitting.

The last few swallows of beer are warm, the glass of the bottle already dry to the touch. The hot wind blows in our faces. The distant thunder rolls.
Dirty Old Town

Edwin Dobb

Dan died a couple years ago. One of the last times I saw him was a few months after the attacks of September 11th. “What’re ya reading these days, Dan?” He showed me a worn edition of the Koran he’d found at the Goodwill Store, where he purchased most of his books, also the artwork that adorned his walls. This was not the first time he’d tackled the Koran, he explained, before reciting his favorite passage: “The measure of a man is the good that he does in this world.” After a pause to let the line sink in, he added, “That’s religion enough for me.” As so often happened, the conversation eventually turned to Butte. What is it about the place? Why are we still puzzling over it, even now, in its decline? Dan looked at me and uttered what for him was as near to truth as utterance can get: “Butte’s an addiction.”

In the mid-60s, when I was in my teens, Butte was no addiction. It was instead the source and locus of my alienation, my rebellion. I bridled against the Catholic Church, especially the arbitrary authority, small-mindedness, and petty vices of the priests and nuns, the full repugnancy of which was amply evident by the time I turned twelve. I also found oppressive the much-touted clannishness of my Irish relatives. Victims and perpetrators alike conspired in hypocritical tales about the importance of family loyalty and tradition, tales that masked generations of cruelty, alcoholism, sexual abuse and vindictiveness, ignorance and greed, a soul-deadening form of social conservatism.

Then there’s the relentless self-mythologizing of Butte. The place that billed itself as wide-open, tolerant, welcoming has also been hopelessly corrupt, prejudiced, and deeply suspicious of outsiders. And I can’t overlook the non-domestic violence, which was as much a part of life aboveground as was danger underground. Here’s another form of homegrown ugliness (like prostitution, cronyism, and institutionalized extortion) that’s been sanitized in what might be called the Romance of Butte. But there was nothing romantic—nor unusual, for that matter—about the Saturday night my older cousin was brought to my house after yet another drunken fight. Two brothers had jumped Bobby, in revenge for Bobby having beaten one of them the previous weekend. Their weapons were broken beer bottles. They wore steel-toed boots just for the occasion. And they were merciless. Covering most of the top of Bobby’s head, which had been shaved in the emergency room, was a T-shaped pattern of stitches. Maybe a hundred of them, probably more. His upper front teeth had been kicked out. His face and arms were badly bruised. And that was only the visible damage, which was more than enough for my young eyes.


Shortly after I moved back to Butte, I found myself in the Silver Dollar Bar, sipping bourbon with an oldtimer named Dan Price. Dan liked to drink. Even more, he liked to talk. And unlike many of the strangers I meet in bars, he actually had something to say. I bought another round, and yet another, doing all I could to encourage him.

Dan had worked in the mines, at least a dozen of them, but he didn’t consider himself a miner. He had wanted most to go to college and study language. But his father had fallen ill and Dan, the oldest son, was needed at home. So he did the next best thing: He became a lifelong self-taught student. He devoured books, guided only by his obsessions, which were many and various and never flagged. Equally fervent was his desire to share his literary enthusiasms. Nothing pleased Dan more than to recite for friends his favorite passages of prose and poetry. And nothing surprised me more than to be sitting on a barstool in Butte listening to a 78-year-old miner reciting word for word the prologue to Look Homeward, Angel: “…a stone, a leaf, an unfound door; of a stone, a leaf, a door. And of all the forgotten faces…Naked and alone we came into exile…”

Naked and alone, that is, until we discovered the comfort and company of the well-honed, well-timed word.

Dan lived in a rundown shotgun shack next to another equally rundown shack, home to his older sister, who in her 80s still subscribed to The Daily Worker, also The New Yorker, and smoked marijuana with young poets who attended her occasional literary gatherings. I visited Dan often, and throughout the year, but in my memory it’s always winter. Always about midnight. We’ve already shared a few drinks and the room glows. Dan sits in his ratty overstuffed chair next to the gas furnace, while at his feet and entirely surrounding the chair are piles of books and magazines. I’m reading to him: Heaney, Milosz, Yeats, Joyce. Dan, of course, doesn’t rely on a text, delivering Baudelaire from memory. Or his beloved Thomas Wolfe. My favorite occasions were when he recited one of his own poems, all of which were attempts to give voice to something essential about his hometown. My hometown, too. Which is why I listened closely.

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Why was Bobby sprawled out on my parents’ bed, asleep but still bleeding through his bandages, instead of home? To protect his mother, who went to her grave believing—well, more likely, pretending—that her son never touched a drop of whiskey, never raised his hand in anger.

By the way, Bobby later died of gangrene, after suffering frost-bite but refusing treatment, and that after passing out in the alley behind the M&M on a frigid Christmas day, which had followed a long morning of drinking, and years and years of such mornings, the fearless young bar brawler having become in middle age a dull-witted, useless-to-anyone drunk. “Bobby had one job,” quipped another cousin at Bobby’s wake, “and he did it well.” Which, of course, got a big laugh, while helping keep alive the Romance of Butte...

Admittedly, what I’ve just said represents half a lifetime of surveying the past, distilling and recombining and reinterpreting what I could scarcely articulate while it was happening. Back then all I could say for sure was that I found Butte suffocating. So, at 14 and fed up, I ran away from home. That much, at least, is indisputable. On Halloween night a friend and I hopped a freight train bound for exotic, faraway Phoenix and the home of a former girlfriend, whom I’d neglected to tell about our plan. No matter. We were caught just as the train was about to leave the station in Dillon, one stop from the border. But the failed escape didn’t lessen my desire to put Butte as far behind me as possible, both emotionally and geographically, an experiment that began in earnest the day after I graduated high school, when I left town for good, and with the blessing if not the full understanding of my parents.

“Which of us is not forever a stranger and alone?” wrote Thomas Wolfe in the Look Homeward passage that Dan Price adopted as his personal prayer. My estrangement didn’t last forever but a paltry 25 years, almost to the day. To be sure, I’d gone back now and again, but never stayed long. In time the trips became less frequent, and during my stays I took less notice, especially after I moved back East. Also being something of a self-mythologizer, I used to say that the urge to return to Butte didn’t show itself until my last years in New York, when I retired for good from magazine editing and started writing full-time, and that when the urge did appear, it was sudden, irresistible—that I was seized by a desire to go home. But that’s malarkey. I wasn’t so much seized as gradually seduced, teased. More than that, I now see, I conspired in the seduction. All the time I was traveling...
ever farther away, I was looking over my shoulder, gazing homeward even as I renounced home, denying both my debt to Butte and its claim on me but never quite letting Butte out of sight, out of mind.

The last thing I wanted to admit, of course, was that by virtue of circumstance and character defect I'd been cast as yet another prodigal son who wakes up amidst his sorrowful wanderings only to realize that what he wants or needs most is what he left behind. Nothing so stereotypical or pedestrian would suit me. After all, since wants or needs most is what he left behind. Nothing so debt to Butte and its claim on me but never quite letting homeward even as I renounced home, denying both my ever farther away, I was looking over my shoulder, gazing the Romantic tradition itself, especially the primacy of the Romance of Eddie, which in fact owed much to his sorrowful wanderings only to realize that what he cast as yet another prodigal son who wakes up amidst singular pleasure of discovering the West.

my teens I had been hard about the task of composing and contradiction. A self-made caricature navigating the myth of the West. The very picture of unconscious irony of note, they were forebears / chose—not my mother family, neighborhood, community. If I had any forebears were clearly delineated moments when I was forced particular, had been building almost imperceptibly to remember and, more important, reconsider what I was trying in vain to forget. One of them took place to the influence of the past, it had been a largely urban setting, which is a crucial distinction. No more reminiscent of Butte. In that eclectic collection I also found several tunes by the Pogues, the drunken louts who invented Irish punk. One song in particular I played every time I visited the Bistro—"Dirty Old Town." It wasn't written by the Pogues but they turned it into one of their signature numbers. (And if you've ever been to a Pogues concert, you know what I mean. Believe it or not, they're still doing reunion tours.) In "Dirty Old Town," Shane McGowan sings, "Kissed my girl by the factory wall." Hinting not at industry romanticized but the possibility of romance in an industrial setting, which is a crucial distinction. No sentimentality. No pretensions.

I listened to the Pogues' "Dirty Old Town" again and again because I increasingly enjoyed being taken back, if only in reverie, to my dirty old town. And that much at least I was sure I liked about Butte: the brute fact of dirt. For many Montanans in exile, the odor that usually conjures up images of home is sage, with pine a close second. And I'm as susceptible as the next person. But for me there's another odor that's equally evocative—sulfur. The sharp smell of mine dumps, where I played as a kid. That the dirty old town in the song was an unpretty place surrounded by land. The West I was starting to long for wasn't written by the Pogues but they turned it into one of their signature numbers. (And if you've ever been to a Pogues concert, you know what I mean. Believe it or not, they're still doing reunion tours.) In "Dirty Old Town," Shane McGowan sings, "Kissed my girl by the factory wall." Hinting not at industry romanticized but the possibility of romance in an industrial setting, which is a crucial distinction. No sentimentality. No pretensions.

Another moment—rather, series of moments—that's worth mentioning took place in what at the time was my favorite bar in the West Village, the Corner Bistro. The Bistro was one of those ideal New York bars that functioned as both neighborhood joint and word-of-mouth retreat for writers, musicians, artists, and intellectuals. A sublime, harmonious, and often entertaining confluence of low and high culture. In short, bohemia, the place that will always be for me The Old Country. Among the many charms of the Bistro was its jukebox, which featured everything from Robert Johnson to Willie Nelson, Duke Ellington to Jimi Hendrix, Patsy Cline and Patti Smith, Frank Zappa and Frank Sinatra. In that eclectic collection I also found several tunes by the Pogues, the drunken louts who invented Irish punk. One song in particular I played every time I visited the Bistro—"Dirty Old Town." It wasn't written by the Pogues but they turned it into one of their signature numbers. (And if you've ever been to a Pogues concert, you know what I mean. Believe it or not, they're still doing reunion tours.) In "Dirty Old Town," Shane McGowan sings, "Kissed my girl by the factory wall." Hinting not at industry romanticized but the possibility of romance in an industrial setting, which is a crucial distinction. No sentimentality. No pretensions.

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Here's the last and most consequential moment: Back before SoHo was transformed from an artist's colony into an outdoor shopping mall for the rich, I often stopped to browse at a second-hand photography store on Mercer Street. One day I found myself thumbing through the pages of The Americans, Robert Frank's somber black and white portrait of the U.S. during the 1950s. Page 61 in particular caught my eye. The photograph depicts two diaphanous lace curtains draped before a concrete
ledge beyond which rows of stark frame houses and brick
duplexes recede into the distance—an unassuming town
seen from a fourth story window, seen a long time ago,
all drab gray and dull black and presented in Frank's
usual raw manner. I continued studying the melancholy
picture, puzzled and slightly unsettled, trying to fathom
its attraction.

Perhaps, I thought, it's the theatricality of the image
that claims my attention. The curtains are parted halfway,
but while the right one hangs straight down the left curves
from top to bottom, as if someone had only recently
pulled it aside to permit a wider view. A drama seems
imminent, and that expectation is further reinforced by
the ledge, which, running along the bottom of the frame,
recalls the floorboards of a stage. If so, the action most
likely will begin where, in the distance, the houses yield to
a hill stripped of vegetation. Located just this side of that
slope is the only hint of motion in the entire photograph.
A meandering wood fence surrounds a similarly barren
patch of land, at one end of which huddle several wood
buildings and the towering headframe of an underground
mine. From the shaft, or very near the shaft, steam
rises in a column forty, maybe fifty feet high, its shape
vaguely human, vaguely sinister, an ascending apparition
that engulfs the skeletal headframe and looms over the
neighborhoods spread before it.

Loosely organized and seemingly uncontrived,
Frank's photographs often contain details that can be
easily overlooked or under-appreciated but which once
fully grasped are unforgettable. This was one of them,
and more—for me, much more. This particular detail
triggered a detonation whose aftereffects continue to this
day. Headframe? Mine yard? I turned to the facing page
and read the caption for the first time: "View from hotel
window—Butte, Montana." Incredibly, I had been staring
at a picture of my hometown, the place where I passed
the first eighteen years of my life, but without realizing it,
not consciously, at any rate. Frank had stopped in Butte
toward the end of his groundbreaking cross-country trip,
and in that out-of-the-way place he found plenty of the
post-war desolation he had encountered elsewhere—
isolated billboards addressing nothing but night air;
uneasy, distracted families in stalled cars; a vacant
luncheonette, an idle post office; and this, the eastern,
increasingly industrialized part of Butte as it once looked
from a room in the Finlen Hotel.

Once looked. With that realization came a second, very
different shock: The scene Frank's photograph depicted
no longer existed. Streets and sidewalks, frame houses and
brick buildings—most of the Eastside neighborhoods had
been torn down or relocated to make room for the cavity
known as the Berkeley Pit, the mammoth excavation that
inaugurated the last stage of large-scale mineral extraction
in Summit Valley.
That twofold sense of loss became the framework for my return: I was on a quest to reclaim the place that made me, a place that in some measure—the extent of which I was intent on finding out—no longer existed. And whatever I discovered would somehow find its way into my writing—articles and essays for periodicals, a book, a documentary film, notes for plays, scraps of novels. For the first time, my life and my life’s work would merge; what I’d made of myself would be reconciled with what made me. And since I was by then an independent writer, free to go anywhere I wish, why not live on the edge of the largest Superfund site in the country? Why not the rural Romanian village known as Walkerville, where now I’ve resided for 16 years?

Albert Camus, a favorite among my many appropriated ancestors, wrote this: “A man’s work is nothing but the slow trek to rediscover, through the detours of art, those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened.” I agree. But there’s more to it than that. The slow trek almost always transforms the traveler. He returns from exile to find that his long-lost Great and Simple Images may yet be great but perhaps not so simple. The trek that began with an open heart inevitably leads to heartbreak. He discovers that his home is both familiar and strange, that it’s just as much elsewhere as any other elsewhere he’s visited. And if he’s an artist, he allows these tensions and contradictions to seep into his work, to shape its direction, making them a source of both delight and dismay. From my shanty on the Hill, I see a place that in many ways still repulses me. Suffocating, small-minded clannishness; a reputation for friendliness that masks hostility toward outsiders; a certain religious and social conservatism; ignorance and prejudice; mind-numbing self-mythologizing. It’s all here. And I see nothing to be gained by pretending that the Dirty Old Town isn’t dirty, including a history full of ruthless gangsters, bloodthirsty murderers, rapacious thieves, and that’s not counting the Anaconda Company.

What I’m calling the Romance of Butte is of a piece with a larger effort under way in the West, a sentimental exercise in collective grief and regret that goes by several names but always privileges the word “place.” I attended a literary conference in Missoula called “Sense of Place” 35 years ago. Since then, that same conference has been duplicated throughout the West too many times to keep track. I wouldn’t be surprised if at this very moment someone were organizing yet another one. Here’s one thing you can be sure of: so much impassioned talk by so many bright people about something everyone agrees is so valuable probably means that that something is already lost. Gone. Never to be recovered, at least not in the form it’s been assigned in this new secular religion. What’s more, to the extent that local history and culture are celebrated in the absence of a critical perspective, such endeavors, however well-intentioned, are sterile. Let’s drug ourselves with nostalgia instead of facing the messy, provisional, ever-problematic reality at hand, the reality that refuses to fit neatly within the confines of soothing narratives.

One of the characteristics that distinguishes my dirty old town, and which I’ve come to appreciate almost
above all others, is that the dirt is on display. In the raw actuality of the mining landscape, the industrial ruins, I see a kind of beauty—the beauty of unashamed candor. No sentimentality. No pretensions. Yes, many of my neighbors, godblessem, do a remarkably effective job of blinding themselves to aspects of the town that don't accord with the stories they tell themselves and others, the stories that, paradoxically, have contributed much to Mining City's vitality and longevity. This is a place, we must remember, that's gone to hell and back. And more than once.

It's also true that, in the attempt to repair the ravaged land, the poisoned water—a noble and necessary task, certainly—we run the risk of burying or erasing and, therefore, systematically forgetting what we most need to remember. Reclamation as a kind of amnesia. As an inside-outsider, one foot in, one foot out, I intend to do everything in my power—in my roles as both writer and citizen—to make sure that doesn't happen. I view this as an act of love, the best way I know to pay respect to the place and people I long renounced, even, at times, ridiculed. But I'm keenly aware that some of my neighbors may see my twofold stance as an act of betrayal. And I take no comfort from the fact that after Look Homeward, Angel Wolfe wrote You Can't Go Home Again, the story of a writer whose novel about his hometown so angers his family and friends that he is forced to leave.

Going home, I've found, is easy. The hard part is staying home, writing and making a documentary film ("Butte, America") about my neighbors while living among them—and with every intention of being here afterward. How much easier it was when I could parachute into someone else's reality for a short time, then make pronouncements from a distance, waxing wise about the place.
Bean Lake

Karen Lennon

That night near Choteau
Cooler full of pike from Bean Lake
We watched the stars
Climbed through barbed wire
Dragging sleeping bags
On someone else’s land
We found the perfect knoll
Ate kippered snacks
Shared amazement
You were like my brother
Only he and I never did such things
Then we saw the flashing lights
I don’t know why we ran
Bunchgrass tripped us up
Fescues ripped our thighs
Too startled to stop
Somewhere near Choteau
We hid from our crime
And counted fifty six shooting stars.
You could hear his heart breaking like thunder. And I don’t mean “like thunder” the way a poet might mean it, no, I mean it actually sounded like thunder because he was just that damn big. And his heart was that much damn bigger. There’s nothing poetic about a man that size falling apart, not for the folks down below who may as well live in the shadow of a dam held together by cracks.

The vet spent all morning climbing up to his ear, and by the time he arrived with the bad news that the big ox was dying, the big ox was already dead. Those last breaths shuddered so hard from his body that windows shattered and houses shook free of foundations and a tree fell right over on somebody’s roof, but no one told him about that. Nobody asked him to pay for the damage because we could see he was already spent. He fell to his knees and we all saw it coming and held onto whatever we could—armloads of fine China, babies in their bassinets, vials of copperhead tears we’d paid too much for and kept in hope they had some longshot use—and we braced ourselves for the impact. His fall split a canyon straight through this land; it’s become famous in parts far from here where folks don’t recall how it happened and think it’s a beautiful thing, which is dumber than paying good money for copperhead tears.

He spent a long time on his knees, the best part of a year, and moss crept from his soles to his shoulders like a green blanket the earth had pulled over. He stretched his back once and its creaks and cracks echoed the length of the valley. Folks along the river thought winter’s ice broke up early and came rushing outside to celebrate spring, only to be buffeted by swirling sharp winds and blown back into their houses, buried by deep drifts of snow in their own living rooms.

In our logging camps and at the bar, under the safety of eaves after dodging his tears in the street, we asked each other what we could do. No one volunteered to climb up to his ear. No one offered to deliver kind words to the sky because we had no words to offer. What do we know about losses that big way down here on the ground, in this village raised up in the valley he cleared with a swipe of his axe just because we asked him to do it, along the river he carved with a boot heel when our crops began to dry out? We owed him something, but what? He can’t stub a toe without shaking the world, and none of us know about that.

He’s so tall women love him like ants love the sun. His whispers work up into gales and tornadoes before ever reaching their ears. When he sighs it blows the roofs off our houses, and when he coos the sweet sounds of love the town’s tenderest eardrums all rupture and rip. Only that ox was big enough to stand beside him, to rub his gnarled horns on the lumberjack’s leg and let those great trunks of finger scratch behind his blue ears—what woman could he touch with those fingers, who could he caress without breaking their bones?

When he finally stood up in the spring, he turned away from our town without saying a word and dragged his feet for the forest, leaving us acres of fresh ground cleared for farming. Now he stays out among the tall trees, the tallest of them only up to his waist, and figuring he wants to be left alone we go on as if we can’t see him towering over everything else in our world, as if we can’t hear the rumbling roll of his murmurs when he has a bad, lonely dream late at night. As if we don’t pretend that it’s only the river, roaring down over the falls, and go back to sleep side by side in our beds.
Crack The Egg

My brother Jim has reached out his hands to grab onto the door frame, so as to brace himself against our father, who is pushing Jim out the farmhouse with all the force he’s got. Every time my wiry, skinny father tries to loosen one of the hands, Jim re-grips. They’re red-faced and grappling, two grown men, occasionally throwing up a knee or a shoulder to buck the other one away.

“Get out of the house! I mean it, get out of the house right now!” my father yells.

Jim’s light blue eyes blaze brilliantly because of his deep tan from too many hours in the sunlight, and because he’s furious, and because, as I’ve noticed, crazy people’s eyes can be strangely shiny. “You get your hands off me dad it’s my ranch and don’t push me,” and he shoves himself forward, moving his body back into the house, and my father back along with him.

“Ah, come on, guys, cut it out,” I say. “Jim, come on, let’s go outside.”

They don’t pause in their battle at the door of this Colorado farmhouse, which in this reality belongs to my mom and dad. In Jim’s reality, things are different.

The house and ranch below the foothills of the Rocky Mountains belong to him, because God said so – and he’s maintained his ownership since moving in a few years ago after being diagnosed with schizophrenia.

I glance out the window, where, thankfully, my two young children are happy jumping on the trampoline. Ellie with her curls, Jake with his blond straight hair – they look exactly like Jim and me thirty years earlier, jumping on the exact same tramp. I turn back to my brother and father. “So, hey, now, stop. Stop it. Jim, let’s go for a walk.”

“Yeah, get outside!” My father pushes hard. He’s small, but full of sinewy strength from ranching, and he’s angry. He’s wearing one of his typical outfits – tan shorts, black socks that rise above old cowboy boots, and a western-style shirt that’s worn to see-through status. He’s in his mid-seventies, and besides having a grown son move home, he’s recently had heart surgery and diverticulitis.

“Well, I’m going because I want to,” Jim says, shrugging off my father, and then my hand that is pulling him outside.

Laura Pritchett
“Dad slams the door behind us, and Jim and I step toward the lawn, where a gaggle of dogs run up to us, scattering the chickens. I’d like to punch my brother myself, bring him down, punish him for everything he’s done to our family. Instead I breathe in and try to remain calm. “Jim, you shouldn’t be doing that to dad.”

“They’re greedy. They’re criminals,” Jim says.

“No they’re not, Jim—”

“They took all my money.”

“No, they did not. Mom invested some money for you. You’re living here, you’re eating their food, be nice to them.”

“I do all the work around here—”

“—No, actually, you don’t—”

I rub my eyes, which sting from exhaustion. I’ve spent too many nights up, worrying about my brother and my parents. “Oh, drop it. Just be nice to them.” There’s no point arguing. If he left, there’d be no place to go, except out on the streets. There’s a little park over in town where the homeless hang out, and I keep imagining him there. I could bring him little care packages and knives to stab would-be perverts. My little house has no extra room — my husband and I and two kids fill it up pretty snugly — and to be honest, I’m not sure I want him anyway. I’m not sure I can handle a 220-pound, 34-year-old brother with schizophrenia and all that he comes with. None of my other seven siblings probably want him either, at least permanently. Mom and Dad say they don’t mind him being here most of the time, really, except for times like this, when he’s angry and cussing and just plain mean.

“Let’s just go for a walk, Jim,” I say, pulling him toward the old road that leads across the ranch. My kids are still occupied, and they’ll find their grandparents if they need anything. Besides, they look happy playing “crack-the-egg,” which was the game Jim and I played when we were kids — where one kid sits cross-legged and the other jumps around, trying to break the “egg” apart. So Jim and I head west, past the horses, past the chicken house, past the corrals, and into fields. We walk down the old road, across the ranch we grew up on, towards the foothills and the Rocky Mountains that we love.

This ranch is what holds my brother together. When my brother went crazy a few years ago, on Christmas day, and started to talk about the FBI’s secret messages to him, a very long string of unhappy circumstances followed: doctor’s appointments, therapy appointments, court dates, divorce court, probation meetings, friends leaving, retraining orders, and discussions of finances, free will, and caretaking.

Meanwhile, Jim has irrigated, fixed fence, cleaned the barn, cared for the animals, adopted pigeons – all of it keeping him moving, keeping him as sane as a schizophrenic person can be.

Halfway across the farm, Jim and I walk through a gate that has a new sign attached to it, which was authored by my mother:

NO TRASSPASSING!
BUT IF YOU ARE, MAKE SURE YOU LOCK THE GATES!

That sounds like her – pragmatic – and I chuckle as we go through. As we head down toward the river, Jim speaks of messages from God, and I work hard to remain patient. I wish he’d quit fighting with my father, making my mother cry so often. I’m angry that he doesn’t seem to sense the stress that he causes. I’m angry that he can’t focus on this world.

Up ahead is the river, where we spent our childhood fishing and laughing and playing. I breathe in and out and remember us galloping on horses or feeding cattle. This always helps me accept the loss of the old brother he used to be, as well as such factors as genes and brain chemistry.

“Hey, Jim,” I say, as we stop to look at the river. “Remember how we used to play ‘crack-the-egg’? You were really good at it.”

“That was fun stuff,” he says, his eyes lit up from the memory.

I smile. I wish he’d never gotten broken, or that we could still take turns, or that it was as easy to heal a mind as an imaginary egg. But at least we have that memory to go by.

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“Are you feeling okay now?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“Then let’s go home and check on Mom and Dad.” I take his hand, like I did as a child. He nods and we turn back toward the farmhouse, ready to give this difficult sort of love another try. •
Sirens

Juned Subhan

Slut, they yelled: High

School girls draped in paisley-print skirts.

I was in a strappy dress, and flat mules.

They were lofty, local cheerleaders, youthful & sorbet-pink, girls that would fascinate, or enchant you if you gave them a quick glance.

I was scuttling down the street when three of them hopped in front of me. I kneeled on the craggy ground, and the sky shrugged like a mourning nun, a blanket of blunt oxygen, parcels of moss.

Autumn tightened my temples, but I could sniff winter on its way – all its flurry of prongs & cosmic-dust that turn metallic in mid-air.

We’ve got a gift for you Kitty, one of them grumbled, sleek tongued, hoisting up a plastic bag – black & creased.

I noticed that her knuckles were raw, hair sparser on the legs like fungus.

She spilled the bag open, and a tuft of dull pigeon drizzled on me – dewy & insipid – like a communion blessing.

I thought of silver wings, and a pondful of glassy lizards as they sniggered, hurtling away, seeing me drenched with bloody tails.

My mother would be waiting to get the Persil out, to scrub me crystal-clean, but that pigeon seemed to quiver like gloves. I didn’t want to gasp, but I did, watching it tremble back to life, & dispel its stars.
Connection

Winter came to Missoula this year in a rush, barely paying lip service to Fall. Its hanging grey mist mirrors my mood. There’s always this let down, coming back to the clinging grasp of civilization after a summer spent tromping through the Wilderness on trail crew; this year it has hung on, sucking the color from my life, making everything seem hollow. I think of my crew, still out there working, probably freezing at night, and I realize that part of this hollow feeling is loneliness, a loneliness that settles, that wafts in the cracks like a damp draft. I think of my grandmother, alone in her empty house, 2,000 miles away.

My grandmother told me that once when she was watching my sister and I, I woke up terrified after a nightmare. She said I dreamed that a huge bird had picked me up and carried me far away from my family. I remember this experience vaguely, and think that this dream I told her was some sort of fabrication, a ploy to evoke sympathy. I used to hate when my grandmother babysat for us; she would always place our hands in prayer position under our cheeks when we slept, possibly in the hopes that somehow a little positioning could make good Catholics out of us and save us from Hell.

My grandmother—Babci—was walking to church in Poland, where she was born, when she was 13 and got picked up by the Gestapo. They brought her to a labor camp in Germany. She never saw her mother again. The details are vague, but she tells me stories sometimes. When she got to the camp she had a beautiful, long braid of blonde hair as thick as her wrist. She couldn’t take care of it in the camp—there was no way to wash it or brush it—so one day she cut it off. When one of the officers at the camp saw her, he slapped her across the face. “What did you do to your beautiful hair?” He asked.

I shaved my long blonde hair off when I was 15. To me it represented a material attachment that contradicted the Buddhist teachings I was starting to discover, a sort of vanity. Newly initiated into the dating realm, I didn’t want boys to like me because I was beautiful, I wanted them to like me for who I was. Babci bemoaned my shorn head every time she saw me, until my mother made her stop.

I started working on trails when I was 23, shortly after graduating from college. When I told Babci I was headed into the woods to work, she shuddered and told me that I would get eaten by a bear. I explained to her that there aren’t many bears in the woods of Connecticut (a gentle bending of the truth) and that black bears don’t eat people anyway. Her blue eyes, the prototype for my own, shone with worry thinly veiled, and she told me to call her and write to her, which I rarely did. Every time I spoke to her she would tell me to come home and get a nice job at the post office, or the insurance company in Hartford. It was too late though—I took trail jobs working for a conservation corps in Seattle, Washington, and then in California’s Sierras, and fell in love with the American West.

When those jobs ended, as I plotted a more permanent escape from Connecticut, I took a temporary job working in New York State on an off-season trail project, starting in November. The previous year the snow had held off into December, and the accommodations my employer had secured for us were mouse-infested, uninsulated cabins with screen windows and holes in the walls. It was a summer camp located by a state park. We had electricity, but no running water or heat. Our camp was next to a pond, and we pumped our drinking water out of the pond, despite the thin sheen of oil floating on its surface, until the park people came by and told us to stop. Then we had to drive to the local Walmart every three or four days to fill five-gallon jugs with water to drink and cook with. As the season dragged on, and the snow started, these began to freeze overnight, so we had to stop at the Dunkin Donuts in the neighboring town each morning to fill our water bottles (I tried sleeping with a water bottle in my sleeping bag one night to keep it warm, and the ice around the threads melted, causing it to soak the bottom of my sleeping bag). Every day we worked with rock, in the cold, starting before first light and coming home after dark, too tired to get dry.

When the work finally ended and I landed back on my parents’ couch to contemplate my fate for the Winter, Babci made me a pan of gobki (stuffed cabbages—a delicious Polish food) and asked me to come to her house to get them. I drove over through the icy streets clandestinely smoking a cigarette—she can’t smell because she once mixed ammonia and bleach while doing the wash, since couldn’t read the labels in English. At the table, by the fake fruit she has on her window sill, and under the watchful gaze of the Pope, whose photo hangs on her wall, I drank tea with her and made sure not to tell her any details of my work, except that it was rock work, a fact of
which I was proud. Rock projects are some of the most physically strenuous trail projects there are, and this one was highly technical. As I told her what I had been doing, her brow creased again with worry.

At the German labor camp, they had to walk a long way to work, even in winter. It was hard, physical, punishing labor. They didn’t have proper shoes or warm clothing and they were often cold. Someone told Babci that if she peed in her clothes it would help her stay warm. One time she got in trouble for stealing cabbage from a neighboring farm to make soup. She met my grandfather in the camp and at the end of the War, they decided to come to America to make a new life for themselves here.

She told me this as we sat in her warm house, which she had paid for herself on a factory worker’s salary, drinking tea. I told her I wanted to leave and go to Montana, and she told me to stay in Connecticut with my family. I said I didn’t want an office job, that the lands and life I loved were in the West, far away. She shook her head, complaining that the “damn Chinese” were stealing all the jobs and that “damn Bush” was “goddamn no good.” I listened. The news blared on the old TV, and the house sparkled with cleanliness, but it still seemed empty. Babci offered me food, my uncle’s old clothes, ugly Christmas dish towels she’d bought on sale. I sat with her and talked, but my thoughts were elsewhere, far away from the gray slush on the street and the neat rows of orderly suburban houses. I imagined an endless stretch of sky blanketing waves of dry grass plains, Douglas fir trees and towering mountains. There was a life out there for me, somewhere, I knew it, I just had to go. I didn’t know how to explain to her the slow death of the soul that I knew awaited me, stuck here back at my parents’ house. She wouldn’t have understood. I sipped my tea.

She smiled at me, her blue eyes sparkling. “When you were little, you know, I used to watching you? One time you woke up and you tell me you dream that a big bird, he pick you up and carry you far, far away from your family. You was so worry, you cry and say ‘Babci, I don’t want to go away.’”

I smiled back. “That was a long time ago,” I said. “I can barely remember. I want to apply to graduate school in Montana.”

“Oh no, honey, don’t going so far away. Why don’t you stay in Connecticut with your family? We miss you. Your mommy miss you. Your aunt and uncle miss you. I miss you.”

“I don’t want to go to graduate school in Connecticut, Babci.” I said. “I like the program out there in Montana. And it’s so beautiful there.”

“How is the weather there?” Babci asked. “Is like Florida?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so,” I said. “But I want to go.”

Now I stand under this enormous sky and walk through those undulating plains. It’s beautiful, but sometimes I feel like the sky might swallow me, like I could disappear into those swaying grasses forever, without leaving a trace. I feel like a helium balloon, held to earth by the most tenuous of threads, being blown around by the wind. My old friends are scattered around the country, and when I talk to my sister on the phone, she tells me she wants to buy an SUV. I don’t even own a car. At times like this that 2,000-mile gulf seems so vast as to be unbridgeable. The imaginary connection of a phone line isn’t close to enough to stay connected. I sit quietly on my end of the line, and think of my grandmother, alone in her house. I finally understand her, I think, but I still don’t call. •