

Spring 1981

South of Cascade

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Recommended Citation

Reid, Robert Sims (1981) "South of Cascade," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 16 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss16/15>

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SOUTH OF CASCADE

for Gayle & Scott & Gretchen

After the antelope buck stopped kicking,
I thought, Scott, about your story, the one
in which the bear swatted sheep for no reason.
There it is, I thought, all neatly strewn
behind us, the story of our fall,
noise of a slit trachea sucking air.
All important things are not good.
Random elk trails weave up from Pole Creek,
jump the divide at Sieben Mountain,
then lace into dusk along the flank
of East Hound. Hunched against the wind,
I cupped my body around the rocks
and peed. That was late Friday, the bull
in Stickney bedded down for the night,
his spine still intact. If he could think
he would not have thought that night. He
would have turned his muzzle
toward that perfect wind, shut his eyes and breathed.

Suppose that were a man, next day, who
stepped into the clearing when I shot.
Or a bear shaped like a man or a deer
shaped like bear. But no.
That was a deer I killed and I
was glad, and later, when the bull elk
lay dead in the grass where he'd planned
to sleep and sleep again, I ran
down the ridge, grabbed his horns
and cut his throat, laughing.

Our mistake lay in wedging pronghorns
against a fence they would not jump.
After four shots, we should have known.
After eight, the herd drew up and milled around
the thrashing buck. We didn't speak
and the antelope didn't run. The wind preached

about all the wrong acts we learn to live with
and will, without fail, do again.

No. They stopped running (I was amazed).
They studied their dead and us and walked
behind the hill.