

Spring 1993

## Letter to CutBank from Kalispell

David Long

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

---

### Recommended Citation

Long, David (1993) "Letter to CutBank from Kalispell," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 40 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss40/6>

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@mso.umt.edu](mailto:scholarworks@mso.umt.edu).

## Introduction

### *Letter to CutBank from Kalispell*

It was late fall of 1972, and we were convened around the table in the front room of that funky turquoise house Susy and I were renting near the fairgrounds. Bill Kittredge, Gary Thompson, Steve Christenson, and some others—the proto-editorial board. We were brainstorming names. (Kittredge had made us aware of H. G. Merriam's ground-breaking *Frontier* magazine—later *Frontier and Midland*—defunct since 1939, but we had no notion of resuscitating it.) We wanted something identifiably Western—muscular and resonant, non-hokey. We had the map spread out, I think. “Bitterroot?” somebody said. Nope, already was one of those.

“Face it, you guys were *flailing*,” is my wife's recollection. Understand, she's not the least bit fuzzy about this. She walked through from another room, frowned indulgently at us, said “Cut Bank,” and walked out.

So much for that problem. (What exactly was a cut bank, I wondered, but kept my mouth shut; I looked it up in a book.)

It's hard to remember these things without remembering how gloriously unreal my life seemed to me then. Susy and I had only been in town a matter of weeks. I'd grown up in Massachusetts, but more recently had done a stretch of time in southern Michigan. Missoula felt like a long airy dive into cool water. Susy and I cruised around in our Jeep, gawking and delighting, amazed that our flimsy hunch had come out so right.

Meantime, at *CutBank*, we launched into the preliminary busy work—got the word out, had the stationery printed up, dunned our writer friends and former teachers for their very finest stuff.

Before long we'd stumbled onto the First Law of Magazine Editing: *Many wish to publish*. And its discouraging corollary: *Nearly everything goes back*. We vowed to show a higher quality of mercy than we'd gotten from the misanthropes we'd submitted our own work to. We'd be timely and good-hearted and wise. (Here's a nightmare: all the rejection slips I authored come parading back in all their appalling earnestness.) Abruptly, that lovely, liberating autumn gave way to a ferocious winter. The first week of December the temperature barely broke above twenty below; pipes burst, everyone's rig quit. Down on Higgins Avenue, an old flophouse burned, taking with it an elderly gent named Longabaugh, said to be the son of the Sundance Kid.

Gradually, like crystals in a jar of sugar water, the first issue began to assert itself. It finally appeared in the spring of 1973. Across the cover stretched a line of old-timey cowboys, all horse-back except for one taciturn youth on crutches (the original photo had hung on the wall of Eddie's Club downtown, one of the editorial board's branch offices). *CutBank 1* it declared. The paper stock was five shades more *orange* than I'd expected. Inside was an amiable hodge-podge, hard to classify. If you weren't a reader of contemporary poetry, some of it must have sounded head-poundingly bizarre. A few years later, Kittredge would write in an essay, "The art of a region begins to come mature when it is no longer what we think it should be." I'd like to think we were part of that foiling of expectation. How many subscribers were there, how many copies did we pass out to chum the waters, or actually sell? I have no idea—but the second issue announces in minuscule print: *Copies of CutBank 1 still available*.

For all our relief at having gotten *CutBank* out, we didn't know what we had exactly, or where it should go. We gave thought,

briefly, to unmooring it from the University. We could see the perils of having to justify its existence to new batches of student representatives every year. One night we brought our heavy artillery with us to the ASUM budget hearing in the person of Dick Hugo. Dick was our hero, our laureate, He'd survived some rough water in his life a short while before this, and was an odd mix of comic bluster and self-effacement and tender-heartedness. His collection *The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir* had just been nominated for the National Book Award. We sat, we waited. It was readily apparent that no one in the room had the least idea who Hugo was.

"Who's the fat guy?" someone was heard to ask. Dick stood up, rocked on his bad hip and spoke his piece; then we hauled him out of there as fast as humanly possible.

We survived that particular funding crisis, and decided to roll the editorship over to the next crew of MFAs. I'm happy it worked out that way. Editing's a great crash course for writers on the cusp of going professional—the whole business suddenly stops being so theoretical. You see how damn much less-than-urgent writing there is; you get so you can put your finger on where pretty good stories or poems go dead; and you learn how it feels to champion those rare pieces you're crazy about.

After that first issue, the second and third were more designed, not so randomly stuffed. Considering the times, I'm sure we debated about whether to be a smart little boat or a big gregarious pleasure craft, but I don't recall much rancor among the editors. The fiction seems flavored by Tom Robbins and Garcia Marquez; the poetry reminds me how in thrall we were to the "deep image." I remember Gary Thompson reading aloud lines of Rex Burwell's poem that opened *CutBank* 2, charmed by its inef-

fable logic: "Nothing expires except the light like a spoon/ that falls onto the dish of evening nouns...."

Keeping company with these issues again after twenty years is a pleasure spiked with recognitions, names and faces that had slipped away—Jane Bailey, Quinton Duval, Milo Miles, Ann Weisman, Andy Grossbardt. And pieces of writing I once loved—for instance, the gentle goofiness of Ed Harkness's "Are You Thinking?" After I left *CutBank* for a stint of Poets in the Schools, I would rattle it off from memory in dozens of classrooms. This afternoon I close my eyes and find I still can:

Are you thinking, as you read this, that poetry  
has gone straight to the dogs, the cats, the terrible  
apples that drop year after year to rot near  
the tires and molding heaps of newspaper in  
Mrs. Roat's orchard, Mrs. Roat, who never let you  
throw bricks in her goldfish pond because she  
was a witch whose charred face nobody quite  
saw, not even Ronnie Triplett, the strongest kid on  
our dead-end road, who actually pried up a  
manhole cover one time in the grass behind  
the bowling alley and fell to the bottom  
of a cold sewer pipe and just stayed down there kissing  
the cold slime, who was singing The Star Spangled  
Banner in a voice delicate as a bat's eyelash when the cops  
pulled him out, is that what you're thinking?

Friends, what I'm thinking is I wish you the absolute best. See you in another twenty.

—David Long