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from Eating Air

Deirdre McNamer

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Deirdre McNamer

from *Eating Air*

Sky High

Bluebunch wheatgrass, Indian ricegrass, tufted hairgrass, slender wheatgrass, blue grama.

Junegrass, squirrel tail, foxtail barley, prairie cordreed, sand dropseed, rough fescue, little bluestem.

The grass in 1910. It wasn't high everywhere. People like to say that, but it isn't true. It was deep in places, though, and it had a silvery sheen to it. The texture was different than it is today—very smooth and dense; not bunchy and harsh. You could walk it barefoot.

The buffalo, of course, had been gone for thirty years. Entirely. The last of the unshot were traveling the country, mangy and punch-drunk, in Wild West shows. But you could still see their wallows in the grass that spring, caves in the grass, big as rooms. And their big white bones too.

Somewhere in eastern Montana, passengers in a westward train huddled at the windows to watch two children ride a sled down a hill of that grass. The sky had no ceiling.

A solitary homestead shack, the sledding children, the hard clean sunlight, nothing else.

They rode the tawny grass slowly to the flatness, their small backs very straight. Then one of them waved a brown arm at the train and it was as if the wave sent something to the people in heavy clothes who crowded around the windows, and the ones who stood smoking at the rail of the caboose, because they all

laughed happily and at the same time. *This is how we are now. This is how we get to be.*

They came in droves that year. Some of the freight cars contained entire transported farms, minus only the land. Bundled and stacked fence posts, a flanky milk cow, a dismantled house. Stoves, dogs, washbasins, children. And soon, very soon, land to put it on—three hundred and twenty acres of it for the asking, the taking.

Other train cars held other kinds of homesteaders, the ones in city suits and hats. Young men, young women, from Minnesota, Illinois, Wisconsin. Teachers, clerks, realtors, maiden ladies who had decided to be farmers now because the railroad had told them they could. The only illness in Montana comes from overeating, the railroad said in the brochures it sent to Europe. Bumper crops, year after year. Land for the asking.

There is a list of the previous occupations of fifty-nine homesteaders in a northern Montana township. Twenty-three had been farmers. The rest included two physicians, three maiden ladies, two butchers, two deep-sea divers and six musicians.

Which one is a deep-sea diver? The ruddy drunk one with the dirty shirt?

Six musicians.

These were second sons and second daughters, the ones with dimmer prospects, more to prove. More than a few had spent the Sundays of their childhoods in lace-doiled parlors with heavy dark furniture, growing up during those musty decades that flanked the year 1900 like large, black-skirted aunts.

Now they had brilliant brochures in their vest pockets and

valises. A smiling farmer glided his plough through loamy soil, turning up gold pieces the size of fists. The farmer's house on the edge of the field had a picket fence and bushes and a garden. Everything was unblown, well-watered.

Get it now before it's gone; your own free home! They came in waves. Olly olly oxen, all home free!

And the big aunts speaking too: Child, improve yourself.

Jerome changed his name to Jerry the day he stepped on the train. He rolled up his long white sleeves and made notations in a small leather notebook with his new fountain pen, looking up from time to time to watch the grasslands flying past.

On that day in 1910, he wrote a sentence about the weather. *Fair and warm.* A sentence about the terrain. *Much land for the having and the grass appears to thrive.* He was, after all, from a generation that logged the days in dry, one-sentence reports. It was as if they recorded some ideal emotionless self; a self not subject to despair or transport. Maybe they thought if you could write it neutrally, you could keep living it, keep stacking the days.

Sometimes, though, a small cry broke through, and it all seemed to tumble. On September 11, 1959: *Vivian slipped away today, 4:15 p.m.* On Christmas, 1959: *One long day since September 11.* And then he would put down the pen and try to make his own body go as quiet as hers.

What must they have felt when they looked back on those dry little sentences piled up for the big fall? When they saw the entries on the days *before* unexpected disaster. *Bought two dozen chickens at Halvorson's. Strong wind from the east.* Did they read it later and feel tricked?

A young man in a dirty black suit began to play "Red Wing" on a mouth harp. He had colorless patches on his skin, dark girl's eyes and filthy hair. He was slumped in the corner of his train seat, one thin leg crossed over the other, his entire upper body a tent over his harmonica. Still learning the tune, he played it over and over, repeating phrases, stopping, starting again.

Jerry knew the melody and it gave him a queasy feeling that he tried to shrug off. The other passengers seemed to like the sound of it. One man whistled quietly along. A mother with a child in a blanket hummed it to her baby's head.

The Reverend Franklin Malone and his wife Hattie gave a tea for their son before he ventured West. The deacon's twin daughters—teenagers with orange hair in ringlets—sang "Red Wing." They sang without harmonizing, so they sounded like one person with a very loud voice. It was raining. His kindly Calvinist father presented Jerry with the fountain pen, telling him proudly what it had cost. Mrs. Shea passed a plate of her famous Lemon Swirls. All the women commented on the Lemon Swirls. All the men and children chewed quietly. He could have wept for the deadness of it.

Everyone at the tea was careful with him because of the problems he had developed the last time he left St. Paul—a bad dark time that brought him home from college weeping, and then silent, and then refusing for a few weeks to come out from his room because he had, in every way, come to a halt.

He doesn't know, as we see him on the train, precisely what went wrong, what shut him down. It had to do with tall doors opening wide on a cosmos that was not being made; it was finished. Fixed and airless for all time.

A membrane away from horror, that thought. What was the

point of doing anything? What protection did a person have from the most terrible of fates, or the most mundane?

Hints of those flung doors had come upon him early, which may be why he developed a habit of refusing, in the small choices of childhood, to do what seemed to be expected. He resisted. He bent his response.

But the world began to fill up with people who expected things of him—first family, but then teachers, coaches, friends, girls—and to refuse to cooperate became an increasingly vast and complicated undertaking.

By the time he went to college, the expectations of the entire world seemed laid at his feet and all he could do, finally, was stay in his room. He could not move an inch without cooperating. And he could not cooperate with a plan that wasn't his.

Sometime during the third week in his room at home, he had a thought: If I can feel myself to be at real risk, that may be evidence that free will exists. If I can feel myself chancing something, perhaps that means the outcome was not fixed, after all. Perhaps that is a pale clue.

And so he decided to behave *as though* he were making real choices, and he would measure the success of the effort by feelings of being in danger. It didn't feel authentic at first, this pretending. It felt like putting on a costume to see if you could fool yourself in the mirror.

But, for much of his long life, he would continue to do it. He would pretend he was a gambler, an adventurer, a person given to hazard. He would pretend that life was not accomplished, that it could still be made. It was the only way to feel hope.

And so, naturally, when a friend handed him five pamphlets from the Great Northern Railroad—get it now!—Jerry Malone was on that train.

As a young man he had reddish unruly hair, pale blue eyes, a full mouth; an unconscious glower to his eyes and forehead, which perhaps made others more brusque with him than they might have been otherwise. The brusqueness stung him and deepened the glower he didn't know about, and so it circles.

He was still new to his life, though, and the guarded, pained expression wasn't constant. Sometimes he looked soft and hopeful, as he does now, resting his head against the chair seat while the train pounds west, the thin sound of a sentimental song from the previous century wafting from its open windows.

The harmonica player raised his head to look carefully at the tawny, unpeopled, unfenced place they were, pushing through. A place that seemed to own itself.

By now, he had been playing "Red Wing" for hours; starting and stopping and starting again; ignoring requests for something new or for silence. Whenever the train stopped, everyone in the car looked at him hopefully. He didn't leave.

In a twangy Appalachian accent, he spoke his first words of the trip. "This?" he barked, amazed. "Why *this* ain't nothin' to be *satisfied* with!"

They looked around them.

Somewhere, the train had pulled away from towns, from roads, from rivers, hedges and people until it reached a point—at night perhaps, when no one really saw—where it had catapulted onto this taller place that was scoured and glowing and as ferociously innocent as a new-laid egg.

They passed through Shelby almost four days after leaving St. Paul. Clouds had moved in and given the sky a ceiling. It was late afternoon and drizzling.

Almost the end. Sixty miles to the fence that began the Blackfeet reservation. Then the Rockies. This was it. Jerry got off in Shelby, thinking he might get located there. Then he thought, I choose to go on. He felt the verifying trickle of fear as he stepped back on the train and went another twenty-five miles west to Cut Bank, to the very edge of the available plains.

Shelby looked too provisional and unlit. The previous evening, a large fire had started in the outhouse behind a barbershop and spread to the warehouse and mercantile of one James A. Johnson. Johnson's store was destroyed, though the contents were saved. It would have been worse, far worse, without a snappy bucket brigade and the beginnings of a soaking rain. As it was, Johnson lost thousands.

Smoke mingled with drizzle in the flat afternoon light, giving little Shelby the look of a kicked-out campfire.

It did not look like a place that would be famous throughout the entire country in thirteen years. And James A. Johnson, resilient and flamboyant as he was, did not seem like a man who would be on the front page of the *New York Times*.

These are some of the names they would give their twelve by sixteen foot shacks and their 160 or 320 acres: Kubla Khan, Scenic Heights Farm, Peace Valley Ranch, Dulce Comun, Experimental Farm. The publisher of the *Cut Bank Pioneer Press* asked them to name their new homes and send the names to the paper for the record. Clonmel Ranch, Meadowbrook Heights, Boomer's Retreat, they would write. Only a few seemed to guess what might be coming: Grasshopper Ranch, Locust Hell, The Bluff Arcade.

The shacks had tarpaper roofs, most of them, and you could buy the pieces pre-cut at the lumberyard in Cut Bank—homestead prefabs for all those young people, men and women, mar-

ried and single, who didn't know the first thing about building a building, farming a farm. So many of them had never set plough to earth at all, much less earth that had never been turned.

How was it possible for them to look around at where they were—treeless wind-strafted prairie—and call a shack Kubla Khan? Maybe they were wittier than we give them credit for.

The walls of the shacks were papered with newspapers. You could read your walls for recent news. The Unitarian Church Quartet, a day away in Great Falls, had performed "In a Persian Garden" by Liza Lehmann. A man who claimed to be a dentist from Bozeman had been arrested for joyriding. Peruna was the medicine of the day for puny girls, Clemo for arthritis, 'Electric Bitters' for female troubles and Dr. King's New Life Pills for those times when a lazy liver and sluggish bowels made a man so despondent he wanted to die.

In San Francisco, Jack Johnson, the Negro with gold teeth and a scarlet racing car and white women, trained for his Independence Day prizefight with James Jeffries. Poor Jeffries had been coaxed out of retirement to pound his 320-pound body into something white that could silence the yappity, cuckolding black man, but it wouldn't work. He would lie bruised and bleeding at the end, and white men would race out, all over the country, to redress the insult by spilling blood.

In Colorado, a fifteen-year-old white brawler named William Harrison Dempsey was bathing his face and hands in a secret putrid brine, making them into leather for the days ahead. This wasn't in the paper.

When Jerry stepped off the huffing train in Cut Bank, the first

person he spoke to was Vivian McQuarry, the woman he would live with for forty-seven years.

She stood near a tall democrat wagon, the locator's wagon, in a white shirtwaist and long slim skirt. Her chocolate-colored hair was in a puffy chignon and she had a flat straw hat perched atop it. She held the hat against a stiff little breeze. A slim-shouldered man wearing wire-rimmed spectacles bent with her over a map.

"Are you here to be located?" Jerry asked them. They looked up. The man nodded. The woman gave a happy ironic smile. "I'd give a lot to be located," she said.

They laughed together at the strange new word, made introductions all around. Vivian McQuarry and her brother George, from Cleveland. Jerry Malone, from St. Paul.

The locator was a rabby man with a big official plat book. He wore a suit and gumbo-crusted work boots. He collected their twenty dollars, made pencil notations, explained that today's trip would be north of town, prime country closer to the border.

A decade later, during the bad time, Jerry and Vivian would both wonder if they would have been so instantly alert to each other if they had not been new people in a new place.

Vivian would think that perhaps she would not have noticed this Jerry Malone had she seen him first on a trolley in Cleveland, say, sitting with his legs crossed, reading a newspaper, dressed exactly the same. They would both think that perhaps they had been predisposed to be exhilarated by each other because they were still travelers then and were seeing everything with the seizing eyes of adventurers.

Jerry became, the moment Vivian saw him, as enchanted and clear to her as her engraved dream of her long-dead father, which

was actually just two impeccable images: One of him lifting her laughing, aproned mother a few inches off the floor. The other of his strong young hand on a straight razor, drawing the edge along his stretched jawline.

Vivian struck Jerry, the first day he knew her, as the very antithesis of the ordinary, a ravishingly odd woman who could keep him surprised the rest of his life.

It would occur to both of them later that the whole clue to the kind of love that beats the heart is to somehow keep yourself, in your mind, a traveler. That way, you don't make the mistake of wishing for an earlier version of your husband or wife, when what you really want is yourself when you moved.

In creaking voices, homesteaders tell their stories to earnest young people with tape recorders. Sometimes you will hear in the background, as they pause to pick their words, the restless whine of someone down the carpetless hall.

Most of them had arrived with travelers' eyes, in that charged-up state when other people have particular power to alter the course of your life.

Will they tell you what the countryside looked like, or the train station, or how many people were at the train station, or what the weather was? No. That is for us to imagine. They will tell you instead about the smell of a neighbor woman's perfume at a country dance, about a Gros Ventre man in braids and a Stetson at the Havre station, or the smell of burning cow chips on a fall day. They will remember the glowing newness of a neighbor's hand pump, the pretty pink gums of their young dog, a copper wash boiler filled with the bread they had baked in Minnesota. And a hot plate wrapped in woolen underwear for a father's rheu-

matism, the way a cook spit on a restaurant stove to test it, oil of cloves on a wound, strung cranberries on a Christmas bush, thousands of tiny red bugs in a pail of reservoir water, the taste of a rabbit pie.

They might write in their logbooks: *Planted twenty acres of flax with help of Johnson boys. Or, Copper wash kettle arrived today.* But a woman might remember the way a neighbor kissed her before he went back East to retrieve a young wife. A man might remember digging a well and going so deep that stars appeared in the tiny circle of daylit sky above.

The sound of a wolf. The uncanny greenish color of oncoming hail. The smells: raw lumber, tarpaper, cut flax, the exhaust of the store owner's automobile, the wet scent of a warm chinook emerging from an arch of dark clouds in the west.

For Vivian and Jerry, that first day, it was bare ground that finally stood still, a wide vault of sky, some small new buildings with large spaces between them, the smell of raw lumber, and a cartoonish high wagon with two long, wobbly benches.

The locator pointed north toward the line that separated vast ground from vast sky.

"I'm here to locate you," he promised.

The locator's horse nudged Jerry hard in the back as they all huddled over a map, and knocked him against Vivian and George. Jostled them all for a minute. The map crackled. Jerry smiled and gently pushed the horse's head back. "Beasts," he said gallantly. "Brain the size of a gopher's."

They ate at the Beanery, a long raw building near the station. Long-cooked, stringy beef, mashed potatoes, beets from jars,

bread, pie. Jerry and George bent their heads over the maps again. George's face was flushed with excitement.

Vivian and George took rooms at the raw-boarded Metropolitan Hotel, where they put all their boxes and crates, and then, in the late afternoon, they met Jerry again and the three of them rode north in the high-seated wagon with its wheels that were almost as tall as they were and its two long seats, high up there overhead, spectator seats constructed for the long view.

The cart lurched and moved, and the horses quickly fell into a brisk walk that kept everything bobbing and moving. They headed north, leaving the scramble of Cut Bank's buildings behind. North and north in the bleached light for six miles. They kept to the grass along rutted wagon tracks. Occasionally they passed or caught sight of a shack out there on the grass. Occasionally they passed a field of blue flax. But mostly they saw prairie, prairie, tinged green, moving blankly in the breeze.

Jerry told the others about the children he had seen sledding down a long slope of grass.

They stopped, and the locator affixed some stakes to the ground and made a notation in his book. And they moved farther east and he affixed some more. One half section for Vivian. One half for George. One half for Jerry. They looked at each other and burst into full laughs.

Jerry had brought a picnic hamper, and they had dinner in the growing dark in the grass. The wind had stopped, a moon would be out, there were lanterns for the buggy, there seemed no huge hurry. They were located.

They returned in the silver-lined dark to the tiny winking gaslights of town. Not a dense line of them. Just there, there, there.

The homes of their childhood were planted and close. Old brick and painted wood. Shade trees. Cats like small pieces of furniture instead of flickers in the corner of your eye. Here, the moon rode the sky, the stars shivered, Halley's leapt across the horizon.

The wind bent the tops of the grass, the clouds moved in small, liquid herds, breaking and reforming. All of it was light and silver and moving.

They trapped rainwater and bought the rest in Cut Bank for fifty cents a barrel. George hauled it out once a week in the wagon. It was straight from the Cut Bank river and the color of pale rust by midsummer. A Russian thistle grew by the back door of Vivian's shack. She thought it was handsome so she drew a cupful of her precious water every day and watered it—the tall spiky, purple-topped thistle that would make all the farmers so miserable in another few years.

Looking back, Vivian would see that she had been a fool about a simple weed. But at the time, the thistle was a discovery. Bending to trickle copper-colored water over it, she thought to herself, I shall make the desert bloom!

George got a typesetting job at the *Pioneer Press* and spent weeknights in town at the Metropolitan. He brought Vivian a cat she named Manx. Manx had begun his life as a cat named Cotton, with a tail. A year earlier, Cotton's nine-year-old mistress had cut off the cat's tail with her mother's butcher knife. Not all at once, either. In inches. He left the house shortly after that and hung around the Beanery where they fed him, and then he went to live with Vivian in her little ship on the grass.

She strained her fifty-cent water, boiled it, boiled her clothes

and rinsed them and blued them and wrung them and hung them to dry. The boards of her shack began to shrink and she stuffed the cracks with catalogs and rags against the winter. She cut up the rabbits George brought her, cooked some of them and canned the rest. She made soap in the early mornings when it was still cool.

She helped Mattie Newcombe, three miles north, thrash her crop of navy beans. They stood on the roof of the chicken coop, two women in their twenties, and poured the beans into a tub on the ground below so the wind could comb the chaff away.

She named her homestead Flax View because Jerry Malone had planted a huge field of flax and she liked to watch it waving blue in the sun.

They didn't know anything then—had no idea what the soil and the weather and the fates had in store for them. They lived in their shacks on the edges of great patches of soft blue flax, a shade of blue that remained, for Vivian and for many others, the color of possibility.

On the last weekend in August, George and Vivian McQuarry, Jerry Malone, and scores of other homesteaders and townspeople drove their buckboards and wagons to Round Lake, fourteen miles northeast of Cut Bank, for a big picnic. The lake was the only substantial body of water for many miles in any direction. It was perfectly round, about a quarter-mile across, without a bush or tree on its banks. It glimmered blankly, naked and prehistoric.

These were the kinds of people who looked at such blankness and saw something green, planted, producing. There was talk of building a pavilion for shade, and it wasn't hard to imagine that pavilion on a summer night not so many years hence, when the

sky would be the color of lilacs and the band would be playing and the sound would carry through air made windless and soft for the occasion. They would have earned something like that; music on a soft summer night.

The air held the smoke of burning pine trees a hundred, two hundred miles west in the mountains, and of the grass fires in the eastern part of the state. The fires would burn themselves out, out of sight somewhere. No one was panicked. Today was a picnic. It had been a good summer for those who planted crops, and the crowd was buoyant.

Look at them. How young they are! How rosy and cheerful. The men still have their city slouches. They wear the suits they wore on the train west. They don't know how to handle their horses or their farm equipment. Everything is still an experiment. Some of them politely scan the crowd for possible wives; for someone's sister who may have come out on the train. Everyone, man and woman, wears a hat.

Ten miles to the west, a fence runs along the Blackfeet reservation. The Indians have been put behind it somewhere.

A few children duck between the adults, ice cream smeared on their faces. A six-piece band sets itself up. Blankets are spread on the slick grass, the corners anchored with hampers and rocks. The women carry parasols. Their hands are still smooth.

Roderick McAdam has brought a couple of cases of his home-made beer, and some of the men are drinking it. One of them climbs into the wagon of a buckboard and offers a toast to the first summer in God's country.

The band is a little rusty at first, but smooths out. It's the first music most of the crowd has heard in months. They play all the familiar tunes.

When they start "Red Wing," a few people raise their heads quizzically, trying to think why it makes them pause. Then someone mentions the boy on the train and his infernal harmonica and a small cry goes up. Stop! they plead with the band, laughing. We've heard enough "Red Wings" to last us the rest of our earthly lives. The sun is red.

Jerry Malone stands with two other men smoking. Vivian watches him. He lifts his head to watch her too, and they wait a few moments to turn their heads away.

They look around at the crowd and all the space stretching beyond them, the wind-ruffled lake and the children wading at its edge. They keep their eyes away from the sun, which looks like a wound through the smoke, and concentrate on the people around them. On how happy everyone is.