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# Frank poems and view from Union Peak | a collection of poetry and prose fiction

Leslie Denise Sennett  
*The University of Montana*

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FRANK POEMS  
and  
VIEW FROM UNION PEAK

By

Leslie Denise Sennett

B.A., University of Montana, 1974

A Collection of Poetry and Prose Fiction

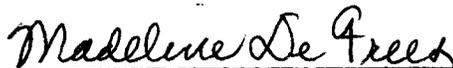
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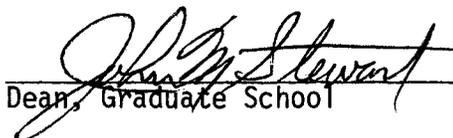
Master of Fine Arts

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1976

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For Frankie and Amy,  
With love.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:**

"Migraine" was published in Gilt Edge.

"Fable" was published in Cut Bank 4.



SECTION ONE: FRANK POEMS

FABLE

I stepped out of the house one morning  
returned to find it gone  
my husband, children gone.

I told the police my house is gone  
how can I get my work done?

Huddled in their blue like hunchbacks  
all day, such massive energy--  
(how proud to be a citizen)

They said:

accept your losses, burn your bridges  
call us anytime you need.

I did the modern thing; went back to school.

Afternoons like a child insignificant before  
an empty blackboard writing

YOU WERE NEVER HERE a thousand times.

## WHAT DO YOU DO AFTER YOU SAY HELLO

This odd scenario. Your hands in your pockets. My bare arms against the cold backdrop Montana winter turning spring, Perhaps it was the hands betrayed it first; nesting there among kleenex, or maybe my arms in their dress sleeves lacked spontaneity and wit.

What were we laughing at?

Something just out of focus; hilarious deer in the trees; pheasants standing on their heads.

Two kids without jackets in a frame of dirty snow. Downed fence. Telephone pole.

## THE LAST WINTER

This house has dropped  
below zero  
down to the last degree; colder.

All things grow harder, thicker,  
nearly frozen.

I wonder what he's thinking,  
Silence coats our walls like ice;  
rings like a negative alarm clock  
in my ear.

No use, I tell him, going down  
to the cellar for candles or blankets  
or wine,

Wrapped in ourselves, our parkas--  
noses and lumps of hand.

I have not seen his eyes  
a long time now.

## LILACS

I fill every vase with lilacs;  
coke bottles, mayonnaise jar, crisco can.  
There are lilacs everywhere.  
When my mother lost her husband in the war,  
she wanted to die. Said she nearly did.  
Now she calls long distance. Nuances  
of what went wrong. Subleties of chin up.  
I sit empty, cradling the phone like a disconnected  
seashell against my ear.  
This is the time for lilacs. The room  
is funeral purple with the smell;  
the long blue bruise of lilac fingers.

GOOD-BYE  
(for Frank)

This fine October morning family  
out to breakfast  
Indian summer Sunday--  
Four dissolve to mush on sticky plates.  
The man with potatoes slinging hash  
in the next room is not a priest, is not  
my mother warning eat  
your breadcrusts, eat your oatmeal, eat  
or something dreadful will be all your fault.  
You crack the silence like an egg  
on the edge of a pan;  
the voice not yours but someone else's;  
a diner across the room throwing his voice  
between us for a joke.  
My voice, everything in me fails me now.  
You shake your head.  
Silent in this communion finally  
we absolve each other into clean  
and welcome sorrow.

## BRIDGING THE GENERATION GAP

My pale teutonic children,  
angular chunks of body under the soft quilts,  
sleep; while I sit here dispatching poems  
to the late night radio blues.  
Their bodies jump, spastic when they dream.  
They mumble like little idiots,  
pee their beds, call out mama mama.  
Tomorrow their mother the poet will take them  
to the park, show them how to bait a hook,  
teach them diligence and patience.  
It's an old story.

## THE POEM OUT OF A HAT TRICK

Midnight lined with saffron  
rustle of scarves--  
double bill: magician and his lady.  
With delicate sleight of hand he gives her  
flowers from handkerchiefs: abracadabra  
rabbits!  
Backstage he was telling her lies. Even now  
there are cards up his sleeve as he whispers  
relax, relax.  
Stuffed in a trunk full of knives and swords,  
she wonders how he does it, trick  
photography or mirrors.  
The man with hypnotic eyes goes on and on.  
He has been in your bedroom before.  
He could be bored. He could be a lover  
from someone else's life.  
The lady wears sequins, wired.  
The magician wears gloves  
when he saws her in two.  
She looks like you, only braver,  
prettier, younger--prefers real lace to cotton.

It's part of the act--fool the eye.

Except for the spangles, she'd pass for her mother.

Her name is Miss April

and she is not afraid.

## THE MIRROR SELF

The mirror self hangs in gilt  
above the cabinet;  
here in the bathroom facing herself  
quite frankly,

No need to tell her why  
it doesn't matter.

The mirror self is the focus  
in a universe of jars.

Serene as a mercury bubble, ageless  
above the moony washbowl.

The mirror self is cunning.

She selects a tube,  
applies herself,

Is this a trick?

The mirror self intimates (come closer)  
She can tell you, if you listen  
how to fix it; what to do.

## INSOMNIA POEM

The plaster on my face  
is masks I made.

No princess in disguise, I've come  
too far from blue blood well spring sea.  
I am rooted in the moon and hanging  
upside down.

The full and lovely peacock colors fan  
before my hooded eyes.

Jealous of my own, I count them  
over like a broody hen.

I fly the night  
the worst blood sucker of the good red lining  
sleep.

I have plunged down all these years  
to lie against no side, no rib;  
to hear no proud heart tick.

NUN MUSIC  
(for Bill)

The wall is shadow there where Mary was.  
I chip her off  
like old blue paint; peeling after peeling  
down to where I am  
no virgin.

Already I am too far gone  
for grace. I cannot pray  
or genuflect; touch holy water in the bowl.  
The priest flaps open,  
empty, exits through his mouth,

My crucifix  
is hanging upside down. Dies Irae. Dies  
Illae. This hunger;  
this vocation is my own.

SLEEPING GIANT  
(for Helena)

Above this town the giant sleeps,  
Below him the gates  
of the mountains swing open and shut.  
Our lives take us mostly the other way  
along the crooked sidewalk.  
Another century took the gold  
from our main street,  
Last Chance. Hurry.  
Something urgent waits for us at home;  
a telegram, a letter, money from an unexpected source,  
It has been winter here a long, long time.  
Even our priests have scattered like leaves  
and we have forgotten him,  
the giant on our horizon--  
one mountain like a bulbous nose; one huge hump of belly;  
legs.  
Under his moss the sleeping giant turns.

## BLIZZARD

I read snow  
on the face of Minnesota,  
This is the blizzard they've had for years,  
Born to the knowledge of storms, these Swedes and Norwegians;  
people of the cold.  
Again, the cattle are dying.  
They are shoveling snow from the roof.  
The ropes stretch from house to barn;  
hand over hand to the chores,  
EMERGENCY TRAVEL ONLY  
Someone has lost the bearing;  
another, found in the nick of time.

THE NIGHT MISS NANCY ANN'S HOTEL FOR GIRLS BURNED DOWN  
(from a juke box in a bar in Lewistown, Montana)

They will never find

who set the fire.

The sheriff asks:

What were they doing here,

these maidens still unwed;

what would their moms have said?

The flames lick at their aureate hair;

flesh out their bodies with temporary light.

Miss Nancy Ann, left charred and lonely,

wanders the streets of Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Is there no one to take her in;

no gentleman rich and kind?

OWL

Your voice flattens to night  
like words to a page.  
You know there are mice  
beneath my house;  
a black snake in the wood pile;  
a ground hog who gobbles the food  
and chases the squirrels.  
Owl, as I lie here  
limp as a pillow, reading  
in yellow lantern light,  
I hear you  
above the rustle of pages  
and the creak of guy wires holding  
this house to mountain.

## SPIDER

Taking a bath  
in this scoured tub  
enough water for two baths,  
a load of laundry,  
this whole day's dishes,  
a medium size garden or  
one huge vat of soup; while  
from the ceiling  
a small brown spider dangling  
from its own sheer belly string  
takes one breathtaking nosedive  
downward through the steam

## MIGRAINE

With a head as big as a watermelon,  
bursing seeds;  
I lie on the couch and watch t.v.;  
the dumb placebo.  
Numb and dull,  
dizzy, queasy.  
I want a doctor.  
I want a lover to put me to bed with a codeine.  
The pain is a wall for climbing,  
High, high up here I see the stars,  
huge in their bellies,  
moving and still.

AGAIN

The old stride  
strong muscles of my thighs  
push you before me  
like a baby in a pram, or  
is it you on skates pulling me  
clack clack up the broken sidewalk?  
Leg over the side  
of this sarcophagus, I shed myself  
in layers.  
Dirty winding sheets; strips of old bed linen  
snap in the breeze behind me  
as I run.

## HOSPITAL POEM

Over the field a shadow  
of hospital;  
giant brick bird with unwieldy wings.  
Anything human lost  
behind acres of glass;  
those who believed in nurses,  
the knowledge of doctors,  
food trays, bed pans,  
lab reports, x-rays, miraculous recovery,  
the sustenance of bottles and jars.  
Clouds move on the wall of glass.  
No one enters or leaves on this green day.

## THE BRIDGE OF ICE

The bridge of ice grew  
crystal by crystal  
across the stream bed.

The last of December,  
near midnight.

No witness to tell of the tree uprooted  
or the gathering splendor.

Now it is here in the middle  
of our lives  
spanning the best of our houses  
and even from body to body.

Again, we attempt a crossing.  
Each night  
in the worst nightmare  
another hand lets go.

## STORM

Locked in our house when the storm came;  
safe as we ever were,  
under the saw-tooth quilt,  
But it came in anyway.  
Hailstones beat like fists  
on the windows.

The wind dies in the heart  
of the quarrel,  
Such is the nature of violent storms.  
Barbed wire rolled neat as a threadspool;  
somebody's car on your side of the bed.  
A woman,  
sucked up through the chimney, has landed  
hundreds of miles away.

SECTION TWO: VIEW FROM UNION PEAK

## THE MAN WHO WAS FAT

The man who was fat came to breakfast one morning and ordered his wife to make him some toast; one slice with butter only and some tomato juice. By this she would determine that he was still on his diet and therefore not to be tempted by some obscenely gooey concoction that she might have cooked up during the night. His wife had on her blue robe, blue slippers, and a blue ribbon in her hair. Blue was his favorite color. She looked at him through her blue eyes and nodded, comprehendingly.

He loosened the belt of his psyche a couple of notches and rocked

back on his chair. He had lost another pound. Yesterday he had played two sets of handball without missing a beat. His diet had paid off with a real waistline and it was being said at the office and at parties that he looked at least ten years younger.

His wife came in smiling, bearing the toast, neatly quartered and arranged, in one hand and the tomato juice in the other. The toast wasn't burned.

The man who was fat had always had a problem with his weight. His mother told him that once when he had become violently ill and had to be rushed to the doctor at age 1½, they were told that the cause of his acute distress was overeating. His baby pictures bore this out. Wrists, ankles, and knees looked like they had rubber bands around them. His parents had put honey on his pacifier in an effort to staunch his incessant demands for food.

He grew sturdily into childhood with his skinny brother, sisters, and friends who called him fatty fatty two by four, blubber tub, and every other name they could think of referring to his corpulence. His father called him Fatty Arbuckle. His mother patted him on the head and fed him cookies and milk. His grandmother said that he was husky, not fat. Just a big boy. He could always be counted on to finish his own supper and every scrap of food left by his sisters and brothers,

who jabbed him the ribs and kicked him under the table for being such a goody goody.

He suffered the agonies of adolescence in triplicate. He graduated from high school, thankful to leave the bad memories behind, went on to college and married the first girl who would accept him just as he was.

But he had won his life long battle. He had eliminated his major personal flaw. Only occasionally did it occur to him that this person in the 33-31 flare leg levi jeans and jacket to match was not really him. The waves of anxiety at such times left him feeling weak and sick in the pit of his stomach. His heart pounded. He felt dizzy. He could get the feelings under control by yelling at his wife over some little thing that she had done or not done.

Many times a day he would ask himself: What if it really isn't me? What if I'm still fat and don't know it? What if everyone is laughing at me behind my back?

Sometimes he was certain that the full-length bedroom mirror, of which he was particularly fond, was really a trick mirror. Perhaps his wife was jealous. That was it. She wanted him to be fat so that he would be unattractive to everyone else.

"Am I fat? Am I fat?" he asked her over and over.

"Of course you're not fat. How many times do I have to tell you?"

She was too casual. How could he be sure? What if she was lying?

"Why don't you believe me?" she would say over her knitting or her book. "You never believe me anymore. You used to believe me. Why don't you believe me anymore?"

"Of course I believe you," he would say, rushing to kiss her puckered forehead. Still, he wished he could be sure.

One night, as he was lying next to his wife who was fast asleep in her brushed nylon nightie, the problem came to a head. He had been lying there trying to get to sleep, but it was already past four. He listened to the blood pound in his ears. He was breathing faster and faster. His heart was skipping beats. His mind raced until he felt it would go right off the track.

I am fat.

I am FAT.

I AM FAT!

It rose to a chant inside his head; and then increased to a roar. He tried to calm the panic by nibbling the corner of the satin-bound blanket. It tasted good. He ate the blanket, pulling it from his wife who woke from sleep with an astonished O!.

His wife's hand fell across his mouth. He ate the hand. It was delicious. He ate the arm. His wife was too astounded to protest. He ate her entire body, lingering on breasts and things. He ate each blue eye.

He sprang from the room, eating as he went. Bits of mattress and hair clung to the corners of his mouth. On the way out the door, he ate the t.v., the siamese cat, and Andy, their toddler, who had toddled out of his room to see what was going on. He ate the door itself. He ran down the street, stuffing and gorging himself on everything in his path. The buttons on his pajamas popped. The seams split. Stretch marks streaked across belly and thigh. His chins grew chins and his jowls jumped. He was all flesh. He was the Man Who Was Fat; doubled and redoubled, ballooning into all the corners of his world.

### TURTLE BLUES

"I guess I'm just like a turtle  
hiding underneath this horny shell  
but you know I'm very well protected  
I know this goddamn life too well."  
from "Turtle Blues"  
by Janis Joplin

I sit in this kitchen nursing a sinus cold over a second cup of red zinger herb tea with honey. I have been reading the celestial seasonings philosophy on the package: "Within the physical body lives a part of the eternal and infinite source of life. In the midst of our dark times, this still small voice gives us light; in our times of fear it restores our faith; in times of joy and well-being it

teaches us love and compassion; in times of excellence, it shows us humility; and in times of crisis, this light of life gives us the courage and strength to push on." I wish fervently that this small warm cup of tea could indeed give me the courage to push on, but something in the back of my mind--a small niggling doubt--intrudes on my consciousness. What if my horoscope for the month which promises a new career opportunity by the 25th ( a job at long last) is a hoax. What if Sydney Omar and Santha Rama Rau do not actually know any more about my impending future than I do myself?

I have been thinking a lot lately about making a living; not having any income at this time other than AFDC which nets me \$20/month over living expenses to buy clothes, do the laundry, buy soap and toilet tissue. With the rest, I can do as I please.

I quit looking for reasonable employment three months ago. Now I am looking for a job. Every morning, out of morbid curiosity, I check the unemployment statistics and then the help wanted. The only cheerful voice I have heard on the subject all week was the voice of our president coming out of the radio assuring me that the recession is bottoming out. Yesterday I sold my cache of pop bottles; which brought in \$3.60. My best friend Barbara, who was perfectly sane and rational until

she found the Lord tells me that Jesus will provide, I keep telling her that the Lord does not send actual cash money through the U.S. mail. She says it's because I don't believe, I have no argument for that. I am a person of little faith; which is either a genetic defect or a stubborn overcompensation for 13 years of Lutheran Sunday School. The last religious event that I participated in was my confirmation. The day stands out in my mind because I cracked two of my father's ribs when he tried to spank me for sassing my mother who had just told me that I could not wear my bouffant slip under my blue chiffon dress under my confirmation robe because I would look like a white balloon. I told her that my blue dress would look stupid without the slip and I wasn't going to look dumb at the party afterwards. I told her that I didn't need to be confirmed anyway because I didn't believe in god. That's when my father grabbed me and gave me what was to be the last spanking of my life.

I wish for a job. I hope for a job. Except for a hatred of hypocrisy, I would pray for a job. The rational part of me asserts that something will turn up soon. The panicky part keeps asking when. I feel that there is a battle going on inside over which I have no control; although I have thusfar managed to keep it together in public.

Two days ago I received an upholstered warning from Mountain Bell Telephone, urging me to pay the amount outstanding. There was a number at the bottom for me to call should I wish to discuss financial arrangements. It was signed M.J. Chase.

I called the number and asked for M.J. Chase. A female voice put me through to another female voice. Ah, I thought to myself, M.J. Chase will understand. Perhaps M.J. Chase has had similar problems in her own life. I explained my situation evenly in a well modulated tone; highlighting the fact that the phone bill had been paid nearly on time for eight years and that surely my \$5 payment indicated continued good intentions on my part as far as the phone company was concerned.

M.J. Chase acknowledged this with: "Can we expect payment by the 15th?"

"You don't seem to understand," I said. "I don't have any money right now so it would be quite difficult to pay by the 15th."

"Well, then, could you pay part of the bill by the 15th and the remainder by the 27th?"

I did not have a ready answer, but M.J. Chase went right on as if we were having a reasonable conversation. "You see," she said, "should temporary disconnection occur, the amount due must be paid as well

as a deposit sufficient to guarantee the account,"

"How much of a deposit would be sufficient to guarantee the account?"

"\$70,"

I asked her if she enjoyed her work. She said, "Thank you for calling Mountain Bell." We hung up on that note; although I was about to ask her if her name weren't really Lily Tomlin.

In this week's t.y. section of the newspaper, there was a filler about an investment banker who was of the opinion that anyone can get rich. The trick, he said, is to keep income over outgo; and although the first million is the hardest to come by, the rest would follow along quite naturally. He cited the case of a postal clerk, who, using the principle of income over outgo, had amassed a fortune by the time he retired. I wondered why anyone who had amassed a fortune would remain a postal clerk until retirement; but the idea of income over outgo has stuck in my brain ever since. The thing is, I don't know how one keeps a very small income over a larger outgo; but obviously there are ways to do it. I can see the headlines: WOMAN BUILDS FINANCIAL EMPIRE ON AFDC. I have always wondered why some people manage to insert their entire bodies into the machinery of the world and come out rich and famous while others get irrevokably mashed in the process. I have

no concept of what it's like to be rich and famous; although breathing in a rarified atmosphere must seem as natural as breathing any other air.

I am on my third cup of red zinger tea. Pretty soon my kidneys will protest. I shouldn't drink so much tea, but it's a nervous habit that is also relatively cheap. I am thinking about taking Amy out for a walk. Every day after calling the state employment service to check out the new developments, I take Amy for a walk. The nervous energy drives me to walk until Amy bawls with fatigue and I have to alternately coax and carry her home. Two days ago, we found a puppy alone and whining in a vacant lot. Now we own a dog. Amy has named him Puppy and he eats too much already.

Amy is three. Imprinted on the back edge of my consciousness is a tunnel vision knowledge of what it's like to be three. My mother figures prominently in the dim scenes of my own threeness. At that time, she had no head. She was a gathered skirt with a voice floating on top. I remember her telling me that we had to clean all the woodwork every day. I remember looking at the vast expanse of varnished woodwork and wondering why in the world it had to be cleaned every day; except that my mother said so. Maybe that's the beginning of my feelings of being overwhelmed, engulfed, underqualified

to cope with the shiny mass of world that must be cleaned every day.

Yesterday I took Amy to the library, which is her favorite place. The added bonus is that ever since the mama gerbil had her latest batch of baby gerbils, Amy has been autonomous, self-actualizing, and actually quiet for up to an hour at a time; leaving me free to browse in the magazine section.

I love the magazine section. Where else can you find something for everyone, free for the asking? These are the experts of the world gathered together in one handy place. There is hope for the depressed, beauty secrets for the homely, advice for distraught parents of infants and teenagers, psychology for the do-it-yourself shrink, and sex therapy for nearly every problem in and out of bed.

While Amy talked to the gerbils, I took a nervous breakdown quiz, filling the answers lightly in pencil: Do you have a feeling of continuous anxiety and sometimes panic? Yes. Do you feel tired all the time and yet have trouble sleeping? Yes. Do you often feel depressed? Yes. Are you tense and restless and unable to relax? Yes. Are you afraid of being alone? Yes. Do you take other people's criticism as personal rejection? Yes. Do you find it hard to concentrate? Yes. Are you dependent on tranquilizers to carry you through the day? Not unless you count Red Zinger tea. If your answer was yes to three or four, there

is a chance that you may be in trouble; and may want to consult a doctor, minister, or psychiatrist. I followed this with a stress tolerance test. The score was over 300, indicative of a "major life crisis". Since I already knew about that, my reality testing seemed still intact. I made a list of the seven most absurd articles of all the magazines on the shelf: "Will Your Husband Leave You After 35?", "How to be optimistic Even Now!", "How to Tell if Your Child is Taking Drugs", "Champagne Living on a Beer Budget", "Frozen Bodies: Can You Live Again?", "Are We Trying to Solve Too Many Problems With Sex?", and "Mary Tyler Moore Talks About Open Marriage". After that I looked through "The Terrible Truth About Psychosurgery" and "160 Items to Knit and Crochet".

Amy and I had a coke on the way home. I can't believe that a measly can of coke costs thirty cents. It's the old story. Get you hooked and then jack the price. It has been a difficult and painful necessity at this time of stress and harassment to kick the cola habit. I was ashamed to find myself begrudging Amy her few small sips.

It has been another long day; no different and no better than any other day of the past few months. I have done nothing today to ease my passage through the world. Nothing of significance has happened since

yesterday. If anything, I'm more depressed. This evening I made a list of possible poems. The sky is humorously absurd today. Today the sky is humorously absurd. It is physically impossible to write a poem. There is sulphur in the air. I smell and taste it. It is a sickening taste that stays in your mouth like cheap perfume in a closed room. I close my eyes and pretend I'm somewhere else. The place I picture is a beach. It feels like Majorca. It's the off season. There is nothing on the beach but sunshine and sand. There is no truth more true than sunshine. Amy reminds me that she is hungry. I fix macaroni and cheese and salad. We go to bed early, but I can't sleep.

"In heaven there is no beer. That's why we drink it here."

It is running through my head so I try to get it out.

Scarlett O'Hara says: "Where should I go? What should I do?"

Cary Grant answers: "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

"In heaven there is no beer."

I am drifting off to sleep. I hear my father in his Marine Corps voice.

"When you're lost in the wild

and scared as a child

and death looks you bang in the eye..."

In the foggiest part of my brain, Janis Joplin is singing: "Oh Lord won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz." My friend Barbara replies, "Amen! Alleluia!" I'm settling easy into sleep as into a comforter on a cold night. Not thinking about coming down. Not thinking about anything at all.

## VIEW FROM UNION PEAK

Blue volkswagon camper bus loaded to the spring-groaning hilt with left-over bare essential might-come-in-handly debris of seven years of life in Helena, Montana; and we're on our way. It's a physical relief to be leaving Helena, a town with a hyped up over-lay of political intrigue and a heavy underbelly of boredom. The combination can be fatal.

Here's us, driving up McDonald Pass. Caught behind a trucker, barely moving. Losing power. Shit. Come on you mother, Do it. Do it. Do it. And rolling down the other side. Sighs of relief. I grin at Frank. He grins back. Kids at grandma's. Break out the beer and here we go.

The day is one of god's own. A real creme de la creme as days go. Skiff off the top. Pure foam. I've just been born. These are two new eyes I'm looking out of. Frank and I are giggling and laughing like our marital and separate selves weren't just yesterday coming apart at the seams. Nothing matters. It's an easy feeling. We roll along singing "She'll be coming round the mountain when she comes", making up the verses as we go. Stop at Elliston for a pit stop and more beer.

Neither of us has work in progress. We have no house, no lawn to water, no in-laws, no kids, no mail box, no barbeque grill. Nothing to pull us down. Our motto--that someday we'd fly off the edge of the world is no longer a dream. We're doing it. We make another pit stop at Garrison. Drummond goes by. Rock Creek Lodge. Before we can finish the beer, we're at Bonner. Hello Bonner. Hello Milltown. Hello East Missoula.

Frank yells: "Hey this old bus is doing eighty."

It's a good old bus after all. We take the Van Buren Street exit still doing eighty and come up hard behind a truck, gearing down. I pick up flotsam and jetsam dislodged from the pile behind us and cram it back into available chinks.

"Watch those trucks", I say. "They'd kill you just as soon as look at you."

"Right", he says, jamming it into first. The bus bumps and grinds to a stop. We turn left into Missoula, the place we left seven years ago to seek fortune and fame.

"Here we are Missoula!" he yells out the window.

"Yeah Missoula! Let's hear it for Missoula!"

An old man coming across Broadway from Buttreys with his shopping cart full of groceries stops and stares at us,

It's old home week.

"Why did we leave?" I ask.

"I don't remember."

We are suddenly solemn. Brought down by the thought of sweet times gone by.

Instinct has brought us like homing pigeons to the very spot where, as they say, it all began. We are walking on the campus of the University of Montana, holding hands. We pass the health service where we first met. He with his ulcer and I with ulcerative colitis--both on the verge of dropping out of school in abject misery. In an inspirational flash we decided to have ourselves a very good time instead. Since I was a journalism major aspiring to the first female editorship of the Kaimin; we decided to further my career with a well researched feature story. This would be the story of the year, a real scoop. "Suitable

Places on the U of M Campus for Freshman Denied Wheels by an In Loco Parentis Administration to Make it in Relative Privacy," Encouraged by "I can't Get No Satisfaction", "Louie, Louie", and "House of the Rising Sun", we began our research that week in the basement room in the Liberal Arts Building and proceeded through the following weeks to the Masquer Theater, several attic rooms of the art and religion departments, the oval, the little oval, a psychology testing room; and, our coup de grace, the bell tower. Before we had a chance to write up our findings, some overpowering impulse had us married and set up in a little apartment of our own. We had settled down to the serious business of getting on with it.

This was the it to which we had got by our diligence and perseverance; Frank on the verge of mental and physical exhaustion; me depressed; our marriage in a state of collapse. We clutched like seasick survivors to the nearest passing vessel--a job as fire look-outs on Union Peak in the Missoula fire district.

Seven o'clock. The alarm has just rung and it really is June 17. We are sleeping on the floor of a friend's living room. We have to be at the State Forester's Office on Spurgin Road by 8. I don't want to get up. If I go back to sleep, Frank probably won't wake up. I

shove on his arm. He wakes up and glides out of bed in one fluid motion. He makes me sick in the morning. Listen to him. Singing at the top of his lungs, running water, flushing the toilet, acting like it's been a fine day for hours already. I feel sick to my stomach. Nervous. Antsy. I don't want to be a fire look-out, I'll fuck it up. I'll never get the hang of it. I'll get jerked off the mountain in ceremonious disgrace before the month is out. Never to be written up in Ms Magazine. Never to tell my grandchildren about the time their very own grandmother was a look-out on Union Peak before forest fires became obsolete due to lack of trees.

Frank nags me out of bed. It is, he says, 7:25. I put on blue jeans and a blue work shirt; which is the way we've been instructed to dress in the letter. I am, once again, excited. I resume my air of nonchalance. Spit in my eye. Sure I can do it.

The traffic is bumper to bumper and hopelessly clogged on the underpass. We're ten minutes late by the time we arrive and can't find the right building. We finally locate the warehouse and merge with the limeau like we've been here all along.

By ten o'clock nothing is happening. I wonder what the hell we're supposed to do. People mill around drinking coffee, checking out the equipment and each other. There is an air of back slapping and greeting.

someone named Ron changes the sign that says 127 days without an accident to 0 days without an accident. The laughter is a catalyst to getting it together. We are sorted by job classification into different areas of the room. Frank and I are the only look-outs reporting for work today. Ray, who seems to be our immediate supervisor, grumbles: "Where the hell is Sue?"; Sue being the one year veteran look-out for Saddle Mountain.

Ray tells us that probably we will be able to break through to the look-out today. He shows us how to locate an area according to range, township, section, and quarter section on a smokechaser map. He assures us that even if we haven't had our actual training yet, we won't have any problems because there's not much likelihood of fires this early. I will remember those words. He says we can spend the two weeks before fire school getting used to living in the look-out, learning the land and how to relay on the radio. He gives us a ten-code sheet to memorize. Carefully lettered at the top in large block letters is DO NOT SWEAR ON THE RADIO. The most important messages are underlined: 10-4, o.k.; 10-23, wait a minute; 10-7, signing off; 10-8, signing on; 10-5, relay. The main base stations in the area are KTZ255, Missoula; KTZ257, Clearwater; and KTZ258, Garrison. My head is buzzing with strange numbers and terms. Alidade. Azimuth. Polaski. How to take care of the

radio. How to record and report the weather. How to relay. I wonder if Frank is as confused as I am, but don't want to ask in front of Ray. Ray says, "Don't worry. You'll get the hang of it."

A little man walks into the center of the room. I take it from the sudden silence that this is an authority figure. As a matter of fact, he looks like the Drill Instructor on the old Gomer Pile show. Honest to god he is wearing his knee-high black shiny boots over his pant legs. His name is Chuck. I will dislike Chuck with growing intensity as the summer wears on. He gives us a pep talk on the necessity of wearing our blue shirts and jeans and patches and hard hats at all times so we look like a unit. He says it's shaping up to be a good fire season and that we have a good group of men and ah ladies this year so lets get out there and do our job.

Chuck's thing, as I find out shortly, is harassment. He begrudges every roll of toilet paper that goes out of the warehouse. He especially abhors paper cup users. He questions every per diem report and every mile on every mileage report and every vehicle report so that getting his signature on per diem reports will sometimes prove more trouble than it's worth. He is not of the opinion that Union Peak needs to go for water twice a week, although I will struggle to convince him all summer that it is not unreasonable for a family of four and a look-out that is nearly

Seems like  
Red !

all glass which must be kept clean at all times to consume 3 cream cans of water twice a week. Sometimes three times, actually, although I never report more than twice. I do not know this yet, but I sense from the chill in the room that this man is not popular with his troops.

Chuck goes off to talk to the crew bosses, leaving the rest of us to collect our supplies. Ray and Art haul out two green wooden boxes which have Union Peak written on the side in white letters. We take our checklist to the supply shelves. This is fun. A free supermarket. Frank gets the stuff down and I check it off.

It's time to go. The supplies are loaded onto the Turkey, which is a big yellow army surplus truck. Every vehicle owned by the state forester's office is army surplus in various stages of falling apart. We follow the Turkey out of the yard. The driver gives the starting mileage and destination on the radio. He says "gobble gobble" and the dispatcher answers, "10-4".

The Union Peak turn-off is 30 miles out of Missoula on the Lincoln Ovando Highway. It's one of the prettiest drives in Montana, although the road itself is not the best. We drive along the Blackfoot; which is high. Both sides of the river are green. We spot the Lubrecht Forest sign on the right and then, set into the trees on the left, the tiny pink Greenough Post Office which also carries such necessities as bread, candy bars, pop, beer, and marshmallows. We have a letter already.

The drive from Greenough to Union Peak is 12 miles up a mountain road which gets narrower and steeper as we go. We hit patches of mud and gumbo, half way up. Snow drifts over the road in places. The Turkey breaks a path and we follow. The weather changes from June to March. We reach a sign that says Union Peak L.O. This last turn is something we've already heard about. I open my eyes in time to see the front of the bus leap over the last rise. We have landed in our front yard.

In the months of imagining what it would be like, we haven't even come close. This is the top of the world. We're looking into the Missions, the Bob Marshall, and the Pintler Area. This is our place. We live here. I can tell from his face that Frank is feeling it too.

Ray and Ron are eating lunch on the front step. K-rations. They offer us some. K-rations are a novelty to me now; but by the end of summer they won't be.

The cabin is small, like they said and one-room, like they said. It's nearly all glass. When the kids come, there will hardly be room to turn around. The roof is flat and made of aluminum. It looks fine for sunbathing. There is a storage shed and a refrigerator house. This year, for the first time ever, the refrigerator house will house a refrigerator. It is propane and it will be temperamental, but I am

not going to quibble, There is a large propane generator for the radio on the side of the house. I will get to love the gentle hum that means it's working, Down the hill is the outhouse; which is already full. We help unload the supply boxes and the two propane tanks and the refrigerator and the mattress and the cream cans which we've filled with water at Southern Cross Springs on the way up.

Ray checks the ground wires and points out the major landmarks, Hunter's Pint, 19-10 Ridge, Baldy Mountain, Sheep Flats, Copper Cliffs, Morell Peak, Saddle Mountain. They wish us good luck and head back down the mountain.

It is clear up here, and cold. We clean the cabin; which is no great feat except for the windows. We unpack the car. A lot of stuff winds up in the storage shed.

We put the supply boxes along one side of the room. Padded with sleeping bags and quilts, they make great window seats. There is a red checkered drop-leaf table between the two boxes on which we will write and eat and play cribbage. There is a dresser along another wall and a cupboard. On the opposite side is a long table with shelves underneath. There is a wood stove set kitty-corner to the room.

The next thing to do is set up the weather station. Instruments and parts of instruments and motors and buzzers and batteries are

spread out on the floor like a giant erector set. We identify which is what and which pieces go where and do what with the help of our weather manual. I weigh the fire sticks for the initial recording and find out that our scale is sprung. I put them in their basket and set them out in the bed anyway. We are already learning the most salient fact of life in working for the State Forest Service: Make Do. I tell Frank that if he'll put the anemometer on the roof, I'll change the chart in the hygro-thermograph. By 5 o'clock, we're tired and hungry; but Union Peak is open for business.

I am doing the 5 o'clock check in while Frank chops wood. I have the microphone in my hand, looking out over the peaceful countryside ready to report that there's minor lightening activity; but otherwise it's 10-4 up here when right in front of my eyes a bolt of lightning strikes a tree. Those are flames. That is smoke.

"Jesus Christ", I say, "a fire".

"What?" says Ken, the Missoula dispatcher who's as new to this as we are.

"A fire. You know. One of those things that won't happen for a couple of weeks yet."

Ray takes over from Ken and tells us to take our time and just do the best we can.

It's right below the look-out, I can tell that much. Our alidade and azimuth are sitting in pieces on the table, not yet assembled or calibrated. We're not even sure which way the map should point. We line it up as best we can with directions from Ray. I feel like I'm up in a plane with the pilot on the ground. Somehow, after a long 10-23 and some nasty exchanges between me and Frank, we get a legal on the fire. SW qtr Sec 29 Twn 13N Rng 14W; time 5:02 p.m. It's the first fire of the season, and it's my spot. Chalk one up for Union Peak. The fire is named Coyote Park Fire. By 7 o'clock it has lots of company: Hall's Bar Fire, Steve's Pass Fire, and Camas Creek Fire. A fire bust, our first night out. Frank and I are hollering at each other. I wonder if we'll be able to work together in this proximity. I tell him to get off my case and he tells me to shove it. We work in stony silence for awhile. Frank has spotted a fire that's clear off the map. Out of state jurisdiction. The Missoula office calls the Forest Service and it's confirmed by one of their spotter planes. Frank gets a commendation from Ray. "Fine eyes up there."

By nightfall, we're exhausted. Ray says we're doing a fine job and keep up the good work. We wonder if we're supposed to do anything in the dark, but it sounds like a stupid question to ask over the radio; so we decide to bag it and go to bed.

I'm lying here on this mattress and in spite of the sleeping bag and three quilts, it's cold. The fire in the stove has died to coals but I'm too cold and tired to get up and put some more wood on. The wind is whipping this house like it could pick it up and drop it over the cliff side anytime it wanted. Night has turned the glass cabin into an observatory. The sky is alternately crusted with stars and clouded over. On the ground, I hadn't realized how clouds wheel around the sky and how rapidly weather moves in and out. The sudden lightning storms are what I'll have to get used to. I am careful not to touch the metal alidade pole with my arm or leg. Frank is asleep. I marvel at his ability to sleep. The radio static indicates that it is still working which means the generator is on. I don't relish the thought of having to get up and light it in the dark. The ten code runs through my head. What I don't know right now is that this job will become as routine as any other; so that by August we'll be sneaking off the mountain to grab an honest to goodness greasy spoon drive-in hamburger and some magazines in Sealy. I don't know yet that the kids will have a better time catching bees in a jar or sliding down sliderock express than playing with Fisher Price in town. Or that Frankie will be a proficient tour guide or that Amy will toilet train just fine in an outhouse. Right now I hope that we will be able to do a good job and that

the guy wires are strong enough and that one of those bolts of lightning doesn't strike the propane.