CutBank 38

Poetry by James Galvin, Rodney Jones • Fiction by James Crumley • The Visual Arts in Montana: A Sampler • And more.

Summer 1992
CutBank 38

where the big fish lie

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CutBank

where the big fish lie

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CutBank  •  Department of English
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Coming down Sand Mountain, many things moved with me in the car, the anger jarred from you, A staticky Jonathan Winters tape, the Best of the Rolling Stones, And then I saw them, hatless, ungoverned, decamping from the church, a thread that flared to rope And sprawled across the little lawn and knotted under trees: bald and freshly permed, Many with dark coats and red ties or matching purses and shoes, Innocuous bigots with their retinues of fledgling weightlifters, maiden aunts of philosophy students, Ex-coaches of insurance salesmen and guidance counselors, Architects dreaming the aesthetics of Alabama Savings & Loans, great ponderous femme-fatales Trailing the mountainous sexual wonder of sixteen-year-old boys.

There was just that instant there, I boiled them in one glimpse and thought they’d maybe caucused For a wedding or a death, or did they love the Lord so much they’d come On Sunday, Wednesday, and now again on Friday afternoon, Perhaps to prove their faith with diamondbacks or strychnine? And some of these, too, I guessed, had formed the mob I’d seen Saturday two weeks ago that looked so magisterial, stentorian, Greek,
As it uncoiled in a stark festoon of white sheets and dunce's peaks
toward some vitriolic
Welder's speech against Earl Warren, Satan, the communists,
the niggers, and the Jews:
Distinguish them singly or mark them in the curve where they
began to blur
And fade along the piedmont of fescue, anguses, and machines.

Another mile of farms, the hills returned to hills, we passed
a sorghum mill, a spotted mule
And then, emblazoned on a barn, an advertisement for a waterfall
where, later, we would stop
And grip the rail and watch the violent, white, transfiguring
stalk of water
That seemed to rear as it drove down and shattered on the rocks
and clarified beyond
In many little streams that muddled on and vanished in the trees.
Revisions.
Whatever else, there was that world, and then the world
that was the world:
River of darkness, river of air. We stood there happy. A year
Before the marriage failed, the poem of that life already
detonating in my hands,
But it would take a long time to put the letter in the mail.
Eternity

Like plants in pots, they sit along the wall,
Breached at odd angles, wheelchairs locked,
Or drift in tortoise-calm ahead of doting sons;

Some are still continent and wink of others
Who seem to float in and out of being here;
And one has balked beside the check-in desk;

A glowing shred of carrot jaunty on one lip,
He fumbles a scary hug from each little girl
Among the carolers from the Methodist Church

Until two nurses shush him and move him on.
There is a snatch of sermon from the lounge,
And then my fourth-grade teacher washes up,

And someone else—who is it?—nodding the pale
Varicose bloom of his skull: the bald postman,
The butcher from our single grocery store?

Or is that me, graft on another forty years?
Will I become that lump, attached to tubes
That pump in mush and drain the family money?
Or will I be the one who stops it with a gun,
Or, more insensibily, with pills and alcohol?
And would it be so wrong to free this one

Who stretches toward me from his bed and moans
Above the constant chlorine of cleaning up
When from further down the hall I hear the first

Transmogrifying groans: the bestial O and O
Repeating like a mantra that travels long
Roads of nerves to move a sound that comes

And comes but won't come finally up to words—
Though this is the last school and passed test:
To outlive memory and then forgetfulness. Goodbye

And hello, grandfather, the rest of your life
Coiled around you like a rope, while one by
One, we strange relatives lean to be recognized.
The Wonder of Silver

At midnight lights from a stalled car flash under the viaduct
A heavy rusted chain by the tracks . . . a box of flares,
hammer, wrench and spud bar in the basement of an old house

Once a friend worked night-shift as a janitor in a hospital
When she opened the garbage chute, a bushel of paper dropped
with plastic cups, a blue apron spattered with blood, bed pads,
clumps of hair, a brand new roll of gauze, and like a spark
out of nowhere, a girl's silver bracelet  One Way, the street
sign reads  Stiff night stick, black boots . . . the shotgun

in a squad car can shred a telephone pole, or lift a man off
the street as if he were weightless  What woman feels safe
when a cop pulls her over . . . asks her to step out of her car . . .
demands that she open her trunk?
Seen Walking Between Here and Janesville

Ward hauls his belly from the fold in the earth a dozen ears of corn in a wet Red Owl bag. He eats it raw.
His clothes hang loose and the semis like to suck the shirt off his back and spit it out a mile down the road. He’s been seen walking baretop a mile outside Janesville tracking down that shirt.

He’s been seen barefoot sitting on the shoulder picking his toes. In a rainstorm. The Jackrabbit bus thumps on a patch of asphalt. On snowy days the driver sets the wipers on double-time and sings some kind of off-key lament for that poor soul until the road curves twice and Ward turns white in that general forgetfulness of everything we’ve seen out these fogged windows.
Godly Woman Go-Go

Her name was Joy and she spoke as if bleached white corn silks shuttled from her ankles to the corners of the stage. I was fifteen when I saw that, and knew it was Jesus in her. And she didn't like to cry, she said, in front of people, but some days she couldn't help it, did we know what she meant. I didn't, but the floral-skirted women around me nodded and murmured, so I smiled with the rest when she stood helpless in front of a demon-possessed overhead projector, weeping over a seminar pamphlet that said "Godly Woman Go" instead of "Godly Women Go," knocking her grammar off course. Even Christians are subject to typos, she laughed finally, and off we went, mapping out stores we could buy clothes in—those with underwear, not lingerie—making lists of restaurants where no liquor was served, and then the intangible travels, a clever transition, I thought, all the places where God wanted and did not want our hearts. Do go to the fortress of modesty, the small dark closet of prayer, the well-lighted brick house of marital love. Do not go to the alley of cigarette smoking, the smoky, dingy, neon-lined, rapist-filled bar of alcoholism, and no matter how tempted Godly women are to drive too fast, they never go cruising on the soul-killing freeway of free love. A good Baptist girl, I took her advice like a communion cracker, placed it carefully on my tongue without thinking saltine, sucked until it was
chewable, and I swear on a gym of Bibles I came close to swallowing, but when she raised her voice one last time it was the fluorescent office cubicles of lesbianism she warned us about, and the marijuana-filled libraries and dorms of communist girls’ schools on the East Coast, and finally it was authority Godly women never went to, deferring always decisions on meals and wallpaper and baby names and car purchases and every goddam everything. Godly women go to any adult male before they make up their biologically, spiritually, but gracefully inferior goddam Godly minds, she said, it’s God’s way to be Godly, and although I could not muster what I can now, “Godly woman go to hell,” I did stand and swagger out, “This Godly woman go home.”
Independence Day

Drunk on the blaze of my personal arson
and good Tennessee whiskey, I staggered
backwards twenty snaking yards
from my trailer to an oak with a view
of Kiwanis fireworks. Never mind the drought
Southern Illinois was in the middle of—lighter fluid arced
half a halo in front of me sending undergrowth
 crackling and hissing in ashes to heaven.
The blurred outline of my friends through the wall of flame
spurred me on. They were the wicked, quenching
my prophet’s fire with an earthly garden hose,
mortal buckets and tea kettles of unholy water.
It was vision I was after, miles of it,
punctuated by pink and green screaming meemies
and Roman candles. The bottle rockets we’d shot
at each other merely tickled and I wanted to scrape the sky
to yell at the Almighty. I scrambled up the tree
in time for the hollow finale, a giant dandelion
of Sousa flashes that sent me disappointed down
into the gentle arms of a blackout.
I woke unable to articulate
“hangover,” the wet-ash smell of war thick as ink,
the charred path behind my trailer still smoking,
beer cans and the pitiful skins of firecrackers
dotting the yard. I stayed in the shower forever grateful for fire that burned so far and no farther, but I could not cool the sting of vision limited by recklessness so easily halted: the blank slate of acres on acres of hardwood forest burned uselessly might have rendered more wisdom than my crooked destruction, meager in scope, unnamed ivies already rooting again.
In one of his poems, Czeslaw Milosz writes of a maral—a small Siberian deer—who bellows in the crisp air beneath an October moon. There you have it. That's why East and West don't understand one another.

In America our deer don't bellow. They snort and they grunt at mating season. They scare the fizz out of you if you surprise one while walking through the woods. They run perfectly, as luminous as... as... as running deer.

American deer can't even imagine their small, bellowing cousins. What would they bellow? ask bucks in Muskingum County. "Bambi, get out of that ivy. You'll get your fall coat all stained!" or "Put out that cigarette. Only you can prevent forest fires."

It doesn't compute. So the guys talk instead of important deer history. How the great deep hypnotist Antlarian would always use headlights in his act. What does a Siberian bellowing deer look like? Has he a froglike sac
engineered for bellowing, generations of genes selected for power projection: deer howls across the tundra? What does he bellow? Does he cry angst and loss like the great Russian poets?

"Wooden Russia, my childhood ran merry As a fawn near the Don through my sweetwater spring. Now I age; the fat peasant hunter has me wary. How we suffered the season when Ivan was king!"

So much melodrama! No wonder the practical does in Ohio don’t dwell on that rot. They’re too busy picking up after the guys’ fallen antlers, or drawing up forage lists or clearing the appointments with the hoof and cud specialists.

And some Soviet intellectuals idealize our country, a land where the deer keep their mouths shut. How pure! And when I ask my friends just what they have been thinking about the Siberian bellowing deer, they have little to say.

They’ve blocked it from their minds. This is what’s called “denial.” That’s why East and West don’t understand one another.
On the west side of Dallas my grandmother, no longer beautiful, sits in a wheelchair in a Catholic nursing home. Her room is across the hall from a bathroom and there is one old man—like her, a resident of the place—who forgets to shut the door when he goes to use the john. My grandmother shouts at him and he looks up, startled; the nurses come to clean his urine off the floor. In a rage he steps into my grandmother's room but before he can say anything she raises her voice. "What are you sleeping with that shanty woman for?" she yells. She's confused him with my grandfather Bill, who (family legend has it) ran off with a prostitute, an "oil field woman," in the thirties. "She teases me," my grandmother says to the old man. "She comes to me at night and tells me I won't ever sleep with you again. Then she ties my bed to a gelding and he runs me around a field, fast and dizzy, and the whole time she's laughing. In the mornings when the women here bathe me she's outside my window and I try to hide my body but they won't let me. They want to show her what I've become. Do you want her to laugh at me? Am I repulsive to you now?" The nurses smile because she's mistaken the man, but she has a story to understand and it's the same one I heard in my mother's kitchen twenty years ago. Lately, on these hot summer Friday afternoons, trying to convince Grandma June that her husband Bill is dead, I've remembered the story and learned new ways to tell it. When I'm older and not the same man, I know I'll find another way, then another, until I've resolved it for myself.
I stop in and see June, regular as a city bus, on Monday and Friday mornings, and stay most of the day. Sometimes she knows I'm here, sometimes she doesn't. I've been back in Dallas now, out of work, for eight and a half months, ever since Boeing's Seattle plant laid me off with ninety-nine other machinists. When I called last fall to tell my folks about the pink slip, my mom said I should head back south. "It'd be a blessing if you could ease June's final days," she said. "I can't go to Dallas each time she gets to feeling blue—Exxon's bringing in a new well near Oklahoma City, and they've got your father looking after it. Mother's asking for me but your daddy needs me here," she said. "Stay with her, Glen. We'll cover your expenses."

I thought it over for a day, then figured what the hell—beats hanging in the Seattle rain looking for jobs. Besides, though we'd never spent much time together, I'd always liked June. She was a straight talker. So I threw a pack of clothes into my Chevy and fastened a set of chains to my tires. I rumbled up the Rockies, dipped into the desert, and wound up in Texas again.

On Monday evenings now, when I leave June asleep, I hit the road and don't turn around until Friday. Six hundred, eight hundred miles a week just to get away from the sick rooms, the musty medicine smells of the Parkview Manor Nursing Home. Tumbleweeds blow across the highways, in all the little towns of West Texas. I remember these towns from my childhood, but I can't tell them apart anymore now that the damn franchises've moved in everywhere. Dairy Queens and Motel Sixes. HBO and Showtime blaring in people's houses, through the windows. On Friday afternoons, back in Dallas, I tell June I've sat with her all week. She doesn't know the difference if I'm here or away. "You remember yesterday?" I ask. "I read you the newspaper." She has
a favorite daily column, “The Winds of Time,” by this local hack historian, Larry Kircheval. His articles always start, “Whatever happened to—?” and tell the story of some boring old building or once-important citizen. He irritates the hell out of me, really bares his heart when he writes—“Look at me, how much I know, how much I feel about the past”—but June eats it up. I read her his stuff whenever I'm here. On Saturday mornings my folks call from Oklahoma City and say they’ve tried to reach me all week at my Dallas apartment—an efficiency with only a table and a single bed (“All we can afford for you right now,” Dad says). “We must’ve just missed each other,” I tell them. “I go out for ice cream a lot. It's turning hot here now. . . .”

This afternoon two irritable old men, bound to their wheelchairs with thick silk straps, sit in the Parkview Manor lobby in front of the big-screen TV. An old cop movie in black-and-white: leering killers, screaming women. The actors’ faces, flattened and pale against the lime-green wall behind the screen, remind me of old photographs I’ve seen in the memory books here, on night stands beside the beds.

A slow ceiling fan swirls dust motes across the lobby floor. Brown summer horseflies light on the old men’s cotton sleeves. They’re wearing yellow pajamas—standard Parkview dress—and leather slippers. They don’t like each other: I can see that. Both are new arrivals here, never met before today, but while the movie hums at high volume these two guys’re giving each other the glare. June’s asleep; I’ve stepped into the lobby to stretch my legs, to get a Coke from the patio machine out front. As I’m sorting dimes I hear one old bird rasp at the other, “You son of a bitch,” and suddenly they’re both throwing punches. The rubber wheels
of their chairs squeal against each other and scuff the red tile floor. These fellows’re too weak to really hurt each other, but the nurses panic and glide them toward separate corners of the room. “Mr. Davis! Mr. Edwards!” shouts one of the nurse’s aides. On the television screen, a masked burglar jimmys a window.

Good for you, I think, watching the old men grimace and cough. Don’t let the fire go out. (I swear I’ve heard—late at night, when only Nurse Simpson’s on duty, Nurse Simpson who lets me stay if June’s had a hard evening—I swear I’ve heard the sounds of sexual pleasure, whether from memory—a murmuring in sleep—or actual contact, I can’t tell.)

I go to check on June. She’s awake now, lying in bed, clutching her box of Kleenex. She’s nearly blind; if she pats around on the sheet and can’t find her Kleenex she cries. Her hands are tiny and claw-like, tight with arthritis. Sometimes, to exercise or just to pass the hours, she rolls and unrolls a ball of blue yarn.

I ask her if she wants some apple juice.

“Yes,” she says.

I turn the crank at the end of the bed to raise her up; hold the cup, guide the straw into her mouth. Her teeth are gone.

“You tell him to talk to me,” she says.

“Who?” I ask.

“Stubborn old man.” She waves at a chair by the wall. “He’s been sitting there all afternoon reading that damn paper and he won’t talk to me.” Her voice cracks. “Where’s your whore today, old man? Off with someone else?”

I stroke the papery skin of her arms, offer more juice. She’s ninety-two years old. Since Bill died she’s had two other husbands (divorced one, outlived the other), six grandkids and three careers (store owner, upholsterer, quilt-maker). But now, near the end of
her life, it’s this one incident—Bill and the oil field woman—that
clogs her mind. She’s been jealous for sixty years.

She sips her juice. Her head seems to clear. “Glen?” she says.
“I’m here.”
“Bill’s not really sitting in that chair, is he?”
“No, June.”
“He’s dead?”
“That’s right.”
“When?”
“When did he die? A long time ago—1962 or ’63, I think it
was.”
“I remember now. In a drunk tank.”
“Yes.”

Sunlight spreads, first bright then pale, through her peach-
colored curtains. An air-conditioning vent above her bed flutters
a poster taped loosely to the wall. Last week a Catholic church
group, on their regular visit, left these posters in all the rooms: a
little girl hugging a kitten. The caption reads, “I Know I’m Spe-
cial—God Don’t Make No Junk.”
“Can I get you something else, June?”
“French fries.”
“All that grease?”
“Get me some goddamn French fries!”

I don’t know how she chews the silly things with just her gums,
but she does. “All right,” I say. “I’ll be back.”

I drive a few blocks to a Burger King. The streets here on the
west side are lined with sexy new cigarette ads—enormous, roll-
ing breasts filling billboards. I lift my foot off the gas pedal and
coast in my lane, staring, more lonely than horny, at the huge
women floating like helium balloons over the start-stop traffic. By
the time I return to the rest home the sun's set. The red light from the Coke machine on the patio pours through June's window. She's sitting up in bed, in the near-dark, twining yarn. From the big-screen TV canned laughter echoes down the hall. The curtains rustle from the air vent. June's squinting, trying to catch the movement. I don't know how much she can see. She shushes me. "That whore is there at the window," she whispers. I dangle a French fry under her nose. "She's laughing," June says. "Listen."

Nurse Simpson pokes her head into the room, says, "How we doing?"

June says, "Bitch."

"We're fine," I tell the nurse. "But maybe I'd better stay here tonight."

She nods. "I'll bring the cot," she says.

I first heard about June's whore late one night in my mother's kitchen. I was twelve. Mother suspected my sixteen-year-old sister was in trouble, smoking dope, driving into dark fields with boys in dirty pants. "When I was her age I could've wound up that way," Mom said. "It would've been easy. Now your sister."

"What way do you mean?" I asked.

She told me the story then: "When she was young, your Grandma June was very beautiful. My father's a fortunate man to've touched her. He was an oil worker in the East Texas fields, and not too smart, not too good or bad. At Christmas he drove home to Dallas bringing us store-wrapped gifts, and slept with us in the house. Your grandmother kept him busy with the vegetables for dinner or the furnace or anything else that needed looking after. At night he combed her blonde hair and when he got through his hands seemed to take on her fair color and not the
deep black they always seemed to be. But that’s me, you know, because I know his hands weren’t black. He washed the oil off—I never even saw crude oil—but he worked in the fields and I see him now, dark, in my mind.

“The woman who took him from us wasn’t beautiful like your grandmother but she slept in the shanties by the fields and sooner or later he found her, like they all did I suppose, all the men who worked in the East Texas fields. It wasn’t uncommon to see women strapping on their shoes at night and heading for the fields because there was money to make and they knew it. So he found her sooner or later. If he came home at Christmas he didn’t work around the house anymore. Then he didn’t come at all and he was with her, we knew. My brother Bud was old enough to take care of us now so he said, ‘Don’t worry,’ but I knew he’d be lost, like Daddy. The fields were the only place for him to go.”

One night, driving home for the weekend, Bud ran his car off the road two miles south of a rig he’d been wildcatting. He never regained consciousness, Mother said.

“Did he ever see your father?” I asked her.

“No, and he didn’t meet a woman of his own. He wasn’t the type to take up with that sort, and anyway we’d heard the shanty woman was dead by now, killed by some old boy who didn’t want to pay for her. They found her half-burned in the Mayberry Field, dress off, doused with gas.”

“What happened to Grandfather Bill?” I asked.

“We heard about him, sick and dying, in a Kilgore clinic years later.” My mother rubbed her throat; she’d gone dry. As in many family stories, the initial point had been lost in the telling. I never understood her fear about becoming the kind of woman she’d described. Maybe she’d been tempted to follow the oil workers

_Daugherty_ 19
herself when she was young, to raise money for June who’d had to scramble for cash after Bill disappeared. In fact, my mother didn’t leave home until she met my father—who also eventually wound up in the fields. (My sister, more level-headed than Mother ever gave her credit for being, turned out fine. She’s married now and living in Houston.)

That night, twenty years ago, sitting with me in her kitchen, my mother laughed sadly. “I don’t know what’s so damned attractive about the oil fields, but every man in my life has been drawn to them.”

I remember thinking, Not me. I won’t be trapped by that hard-packed Texas ground.

“Bud was such a good kid,” she said. “There was no need for it, no need for it at all . . . when he ran his car off the road, people said the marks looked like he’d swerved to miss something, but there weren’t any tracks in the dirt.”

At twelve, I was already familiar enough with my mother’s grim tales to know they usually ended with guilt or remorse. I knew what Bud had swerved to miss on the road that night. I knew why Mother worried about my father when he worked late. The oil field woman would haunt my family from now on.

My father’s a quiet man, and shy, and even if the shanties still stood during his wildcatting days he wouldn’t have gone to them for the world. But the Mayberry Woman, as she was known in the fields, came to the oil workers now, the way she’d come to Bud and stood like fog in the middle of the road. She didn’t say why she came. Maybe she was looking for her money, though what could it mean to her now?

In 1963 my father moved up in the small oil company he worked for. He stopped going to the fields. He bought an air
conditioner and a new car for us, and paid off the mortgage on June’s Dallas home. In the evenings we watched television. Dad said the country would never recover from Oswald’s rifle in the window. No one told me stories at night to put me to bed. My mother fretted about my sister, my father read the paper. In time I began to realize it was up to me: I’d been given a version of a story, though I was too young to know how to tell it.

For a long time the story stayed inside me. When I was a little older (but still too young to know how to begin) I scared myself with it. Watching meteors one dusk in a mesquite-ridden field I had the sense that the Mayberry Woman was just behind a bush. I wouldn’t go to her. A few yards away, on the highway, diesel trucks signalled one another with their horns. I hoped she’d know the drivers were stronger men than I was, full of hard little pills to keep them awake. They’d give her more of whatever it was she was looking for than I could. Presently a jeep loaded with Mexican boys pulled up to the edge of the field. The sky had turned coal-black. A spotlight in the back of the jeep flashed on and the boys fired at cottontail rabbits cowering in the mesquite. I sank into myself. The shots didn’t come my way. As they hunted, the boys sang a story of their own:

La pena y la que no es pena; ay llorona
Todo es pena para mi.

The story was similar to mine: an airy woman, damp with sweat and talcum and cheap perfume, walked the streets of a Mexican town, touching the faces of children, seducing men from the taverns, lying with them in the back seats of rusted cars.

The hunters laughed and didn’t even want the dead rabbits. I imagined that, years from now, after they’d forgotten this night,
they’d remember the story they were singing. La Llorona was more embedded in their minds than the spotlight and the guns, and I felt a kind of kinship with them.

This morning I overhear two nurses in the hall, whispering about me. One says, “It’s awful the way he leaves his grandma each week, then comes back and tells her he’s been here the whole time.”

“She doesn’t know one way or the other. Her poor old noodle just comes and goes,” the second woman says.

“Still, he oughtn’t to lie to her that way.”

Last night a woman died in the room next to June’s. It was the first time I’d ever heard a death-rattle. Her last breaths came gurgling out of her throat like water draining in a sink. Nurse Simpson cleared her out of her bed, an ambulance pulled up outside the building’s back entrance, and that was it.

Now June’s clutching and unclutching a Kleenex in her hand. I open the curtains to let in the light. The two nurses who’ve been whispering enter the room with a pill cart. Tiny color snapshots of all the Parkview residents have been arranged in rows on the tray, next to little paper cups full of capsules and pills. Orange, red, yellow, green. One of the nurses finds June’s photo, picks up her cup. Her pills are gray. “Get those things away from me,” June says, covering her mouth with the Kleenex.

“Junie, now, be a good girl—"

“Trying to poison me with that crap.”

The nurse forces the pills into June’s mouth with quick sips of juice. “Ought to try to walk a little today,” she says, squeezing June’s feet. “Work your legs some.”

“I walked for ninety years. Leave me alone.”
The nurse’s white blouse is spotted with large yellow stains. Someone’s breakfast. She gives me a hurried look, and I know she’s the one who disapproves of me.

“Thank you,” I say as she replaces June’s cup on the tray.

The pills always knock June out. While she sleeps I flip through a stack of Kodak prints my mother sent us last week. Family snapshots. A picture of Mom in her high school cheerleading outfit; her graduation portrait. June pruning roses in her yard. There aren’t any pictures of Bill. June destroyed them all years ago, when he left.

An alarm bell rings in the lobby. I go to see what’s happened. Mr. Edwards has tried to escape. He’s rammed open the back door, the ambulance entrance, with his wheelchair. He has an old fedora on his head and a blue sweater draped across his shoulders; otherwise he’s naked. Briefly, I find myself rooting for him but the nurses catch him as he rounds the patio. “Sons of bitches!” he shouts, spurring his chair like a pony.

At lunch the Soup of the Day smells like Mercurochrome. June won’t eat it. I bring her a ham and cheese sandwich from Burger King. She’s lucid and calm. “Where’s your wife, Glen? Didn’t you get married?” she says.

The question catches me off guard. “No. Well, yes.”

“Shoot, boy.” She cackles then coughs. “Are you in or out?”

“We split up about a year ago,” I tell her. “She’s in New Mexico now.” Marge and I only lived together for a few months in a small apartment near Puget Sound. Mom had told June we were married; she wouldn’t have understood the kind of loose arrangement we had.

“What was the problem?” June asks.

“I don’t know. I didn’t make enough money to suit her.”

Daugherty 23
“What is it you do?”
“I’m a welder.”
“That’s right, that’s right. Making airplanes.”
“You want these fries?”
She holds out her hand. “I never understood why you moved way the hell up there anyway. What’s wrong with Texas?”
“Nothing’s wrong with Texas. I just didn’t want to work in the oil fields.” I brush a horsefly off the sandwich paper. “I heard it was pretty out west so I went.”
“There’s worse jobs than the oil fields,” June says.
I laugh. “Sure there are. It’s just—”
“What?”
“I don’t know, June, it seemed kind of aimless to me. Bill, Bud, even Dad. Moving around from patch to patch. . . .”
“Are you better off making airplanes?”
“No.” I squeeze her hand. “Not really. You want the rest of this?”
“Tastes like tar.” She says she’s tired. I tell her I’m going to run into town but I’ll be back this evening. I drive to my apartment and pack a handful of clothes.

The girls on Cedar Springs Boulevard don’t want to work for their money. I’ve asked before—every damn night when I first got to town and felt so low. Ten minutes, sixty bucks.

Before I hit the road I stop at Ojeda’s on Cedar Springs and order a taco. A pug-nosed girl, fourteen or fifteen, in red heels and a black jacket, taps the restaurant window. Long purple nails. I shake my head, ladle salsa onto my plate. “I love you,” she mouths through the glass. I hold up three fingers. “Thirty bucks,” I say. She laughs and moves down the walk, swaying like a dancer.
I've often wondered what caught Bill's eye in the oil field, when the shanty woman first showed up. A twist of hips, a toss of the head?

I eat and read the paper. Today Kircheval's column—June's favorite—starts, "Years ago, on a tall building in downtown Dallas, the Mobil Oil Company erected a revolving red Pegasus, rearing and about to take flight. The city's preservation committee protects the sign now because Mobil abandoned the flying horse as its trademark over a decade ago."

Kircheval's sad that few old Dallasites recall the name of the company that lifted the sign onto the building, and fewer still remember the original legend of Pegasus.

"So many losses," he goes on. "Like Jack Ruby's bar—can anyone find it now? A few people point out the grassy knoll, but that's all. No one talks about it. No one talks about the sky we can't see behind the streetlights." I imagine him, poor sentimental bastard, sitting at a scratched wooden desk in the newspaper office, surrounded by World War Two press photos of Ernie Pyle ("Now there was a journalist!").

"Have we forgotten about the Dipper scooping down out of the north?" he asks. "Have we forgotten falling stars and all the things that used to scare us?"

I-20 West through Ft. Worth, Abilene, Big Spring, Midland-Odessa, runs—a straight shot—past refineries and rigs. Flames breathe fiercely out of steel-plated towers and drums; around the processing plants the air smells flat, like warm asparagus.

Last month, on one of my escape-runs, I filled out job applications with Exxon and Arco. As much as I'd hate to give myself
to Oil, to fasten my gaze on the ground, I realize I'll need some­place to go when June passes on.

When I was a kid I wanted to ride the pumps in the fields. They bucked up and down like the wild-maned rodeo broncos I saw on TV, or like coin-operated horses in front of the dime stores Mama used to shop.

This afternoon thick blue thunderheads mass together in the east. A faint smell of rain mingles with sand in the air. I stop in Abilene for a D.Q. Dude and some onion rings. The Dairy Queen is overrun with high school majorettes. They’re wearing green and yellow uniforms and hats with plumes. Big, strapping Texas girls: I’m reminded of the picture of my mother when she was a cheer­leader.

Back on the highway I pass the ripped screens of drive-in movie theaters, closed for years. Actors’ faces, wide as John Deere tractors, used to kiss and sing here, floating above me like cloudbanks on the horizon.

The rain lets go as I pass the Big Spring cut-off. Semis swish by me, kicking up spray and dust. I stop for gas, a couple of cold Coors. At Midland I turn west toward New Mexico. Watching my blinker flash green, I realize what I’m doing. All these lonely trips I’ve taken, all the times I’ve strayed from Dallas—practice runs. For thousands of miles, back and forth through veils of Texas dust, I’ve been working up my nerve.

Marge and I haven’t spoken in nearly a year, since she took up with Calvin Reynolds. Cal’s an old Boeing buddy of mine, an engineer. After the big lay-offs in Seattle he got a job at one of the labs in Los Alamos and talked Marge into going with him. By then she and I were pretty well finished, anyway.
The beer's made me sleepy so I check into a cinder-block motel—The Rayola—just outside of Monahans. A rusty sign above the office door shows a cowboy in pajamas and a nightcap sitting up in bed, still wearing his boots, twirling a lariat.

For a while I sit smoking, staring at David Letterman and the tan brick wall of my room. I drop ashes into a motel glass. It was wrapped in clear plastic when I first picked it up, but now I notice a lipstick stain on its rim. A ghostly kiss. I lie awake, listening to rain wash the streets and tap my curtained window.

West of Odessa there used to be a meteor crater. I remember seeing it as a kid: a rock-bowl, perfectly smooth, carved deep into the planet. Now it's filled nearly to the lip with dirt and old hamburger wrappers. The oil boom's over in this part of Texas—the parks are overgrown, the rigs are left standing just for show. Ghost towns. Most of the fields are depleted. If you pump oil out of the ground too fast, my father told me once, the salt domes under the soil will collapse, and sinkholes open in the land, spreading through weeded lots, rippling under highways, shattering concrete. In the past, whole communities have disappeared, he said. Swing sets, dress shops, signs . . . .

Roswell, New Mexico. I push open the phone booth door, slip a quarter out of my pocket. Jet planes hurtle across the sky, into or out of a nearby Air Force base. From the booth I watch their vapor trails and wonder if I welded any of that sun-warmed metal.

For a moment, as I grip the receiver, I want to free myself like a hawk, like a flying horse, from the ground's heavy pull.

Cal answers the phone. I haven't thought of what to say to him so I just ask for Marge.
“Glen?” he says.
“Yeah. It’s me.”

He takes a breath. He doesn’t know what to say, either. “Hold on a minute,” he tells me. “I’ll see if she’s here.”

I watch a man in a car dealership across the street from me try to sell a young couple a used Toyota.

Marge comes on the line with a fake-cheery voice. “Glen! How the hell are you?”

“Okay.” I tell her about June. “I’m living in Dallas now.”

“So you’re sightseeing?”

“I thought I’d come see you. I miss you.”

“Oh,” she says. I can picture her lips—the way they pucker when she talks. I can picture the kind of dress she’s wearing, baggy and bright. Every day I’ve seen her in my mind the way June glimpses, everywhere she looks, the woman in the oil field. “I don’t know, Glen, it’s kind of a loopy time around here—Cal’s daughter Lynn is coming for a visit tomorrow. I’m kind of nervous, you know, we’ve never met before. There’s some good movies in town we can take her to. And we’ve stocked up on Spaghetti-Os. She loves Spaghetti-Os.”

The familiar ring of Marge’s voice makes me prickly and hot, but her cool tone—she’s closing me out even as she’s drawing me back in—infuriates. I rub the booth glass with the flat of my thumb, pressing harder with each long stroke.

Lenny, Jack, Cal: she sang the names like a nursery rhyme the night I heard I was fired. I came home weary from the plant, ready to pick a fight, got drunk, asked her who she’d been sleeping with since we’d moved in together. We both knew how matters stood. “What about you?” she said.

Shirley, Florence, Joy...
I thought I was ready for whatever hard things Marge had to tell me that night, but you’re never really prepared for the full, fat weight of jealousy.

“Anyway, I hope your grandma gets better,” she tells me now on the phone.

“She won’t get better. She’s old,” I say.

“Right.”

“You still don’t listen, baby.”

“Glen—”

“Did you keep that little T-shirt, the one I bought you on the coast? With the whales on it? I bet Cal likes it, right?”

“Glen, don’t start.”

“Okay. So . . . .”

“I better go. Cal’ll need his lunch.”

“Fuck him,” I say.

“I’m going to go now, Glen.”

“You too.” I hang up the phone. The sound barrier cracks. Jets thunder over the desert.

On Friday afternoon the rest home is quiet. Water trickles inside a brown plastic air conditioner wedged into a window by the back door where the ambulance came again this morning. Mr. Davis. The nurses play Hearts or Spades at the main desk in the lobby. June’s been sleeping. Now she blinks her eyes. “Glen?”

“I’m here, June.”

“Where’ve you been?”

“By your bed. All afternoon.”

“What about yesterday?”

“Don’t you remember?”

Daugherty 29
“No.” She sits up. I fluff her pillows. “Do you have the paper?” she asks. “Read me old what’s-his-name.”

Today Kircheval shares with his readers the complete history of Ft. Worth’s sewage system. I glance at the column, hesitate, then say, “He’s not in the paper today, June. Must be on vacation.”

“I need a story,” she says. “Expect me to lie here all day, just worrying and waiting for that woman to show, with nothing else on my mind—”

“I’ve got a story, June.” I pull my chair up close to the bed. “A better story than Kircheval could tell. Want to hear it?”

“What’s it about?”

“I think it’s about . . . .” I stare at the poster on her wall, the little girl hugging the kitten. I feel silly that a gooey scene like this can move me, the way Kircheval touches a nerve in June, but it does. “I think it’s about redemption.”

June licks her dry lips. “I don’t like religious stories.”

“No no, this isn’t like that.” I get her a glass of water. “This one’s about a woman in an oil field, but she was a good woman, June, not like the ladies you’ve heard of.”

“A good woman?”

“A very good woman. Men came to her—”

“Bet they did.”

“—and she’d turn them away. Said, ‘You got a wife and kids back home. Don’t mess with that.’ ”

“Who is this woman?”

“She’d bring folks together again, folks who’d lied to each other and said hurtful things. Told the ladies at home, ‘Your man’s brave in the fields, works hard all day, so don’t you bad-mouth him for not being around.’ And she’d tell the men stories of their women, how they sacrificed raising the children, but how nice

30 CutBank
and bright they all were, how much they all missed him, and the men’d smile and watch oil gush out of the ground—"

“Damned old oil, ruined *everybody*’s life . . . .” June says.

“No, June, the oil was good. Built factories and schools . . . this lady I’m telling you about, the Mayberry Woman they called her—”

“Mayberry? That ain’t the story.”

“It is, June.”

“She was a bad woman. Awful old bitch.”

“No, she was good. Listen. *Listen.* She used to bathe in oil, in a solid gold tub with these lion-claw feet made of brass, see? She rubbed thick crude on her arms like she was lathering herself in riches. Then she bottled up her fortune and shared it with everyone in Texas, men and women both.”

June’s breathing evenly now. Her hands lie still on her tissues.

“See, it’s all right, June,” I say. “It’s always been all right, if you remember it this way.”

The parking lot fills with noise. A Catholic youth group—eight ten-year-old girls with their mothers—bursts into the nursing home, giggling and shouting. The girls are carrying bunny rabbits—“fuzzy little friends for our friends here at the home,” one says. They dump the rabbits into the laps of three or four women in wheelchairs. “Is it Easter?” a deaf old woman asks.

“No,” the tallest mother says. She seems to be in charge. “We thought you’d like to pet them.”

“Is it Christmas?”

Mr. Edwards glares at the bunnies as though he’d like to kill them.

I offer to wheel June into the lobby so she can feel the soft fur, but she doesn’t want to. She smells like the sweet roll she had for
breakfast. The air from her window cools us, rattles the newspaper; its sections lie scattered in a chair.

Her eyes cloud up, like marbles. I can see her mind’s about to gallop off to the East Texas fields. She sleeps for a while. I sit and wonder where to head next Monday. New Mexico’s out. West Texas has changed. Kansas, maybe, up through Oklahoma. 

*Boomer Sooner.* . . .

When June wakes she tries to convince me that the shanty woman has murdered Bill and buried him here at the home.

“Where?” I say.

“On the patio. By the Coke machine.”

“Would you like Nurse Simpson to check for you?”

“Bitch won’t tell me.”

“Why not?”

“She was sleeping with him, too.”

“Nurse Simpson? I don’t think she’s Bill’s type.”

“Don’t kid yourself,” June says. “They’re all his type.”

She pounds around on the sheet for her Kleenex. When I give her the box she won’t let go of my hand. The room’s grown dark. Outside, sparrows squabble with a blue jay for space in a flowering plum tree.

“I should’ve killed him myself,” June mutters. “Day he told me he’s leaving. . . .”

Her hand begins to tremble in mine. “Shhh,” I say.

“Don’t shush me, old man. Just get out of this house.”

She tries to shove me away. In the shadows I watch her face and think none of us ever recovers from the first time we listen to someone else’s sadness. We spend our lives refuting or repeating, trying to come to terms with the tales we’ve heard.
June looks at me. She pulls a wad of Kleenex from her box. “She's out there,” she says, knotting the tissues. “She's out there waiting for me.”

I say, “I know, June. But we don't have to go to her just yet.” I smooth her hair and tell her again my story of the woman in the oil field.
Greg Glazner

Concentrating on Photographs: The Vatican

On folds of cloth, in sunlight,
I am alive, awaiting the miracle
of modern aspirin. I am remembering

the painless way daylight fell
for hours to a marble floor,
the way voices diffused and rang

inside the chambers. I can almost see
the Pieta. And though sponged with booze,
side splitting with vice, I don’t in the least

resemble the Christ of Michaelangelo,
though he has died and I have simply
failed to live, a cowering atheist among women,

a drone ten years at work, though it’s pitiful,
a child’s fantasy, I know how it would feel
to lie back in the Mother’s arms
to have those eyes look down so tenderly
all failure wouldn’t matter, as if mercy
poured forth from the chiseled rock,

white sky, round stars in a perfect
human face. But the pain is slowly
resurrecting, and the Italian crowd is shifting,
dredging up the burning issue of our time—
pleasure— and whatever vision might have sated me
decays into the luxurious flesh

of the figures, into rippling stone composed
in ordinary space. And with the click
of a camera’s shutter, it’s over,

a wishful, full-color myth recalled
from a sickbed, labeled with the year
of hostages, of failed international pacts,

the year our modern hero—
madman, deconstructionist—
took a hammer to the Virgin’s face.
Drinking the Farm

Never was a big-bellied river
turned on a town the way
they said: “Swallowed wagons,
horses still harnessed to the crazy
whiffletrees,” and “two goats
rode the shed roof down . . .”

“the railroad trestle buckled at the knees
and disappeared . . .”
with a sigh. No doubt with a sigh.

Picture the faces of the lost,
framed by windows of a train.
They lift their newspapers, their cups,
their children, soundlessly, behind
the glass—my father is there, making the journey
he never made, to war, to music school—rushing
toward a destination in a dream.

Miles south in a rocky glade
a cold stream unravels from a cave
like a tale retold on a summer night
under the chestnut tree in Grandma’s yard
of how a giant whirlpool
ate the farmer and the farmer's wife:
"he raised his axe as if to kill
the thing," and she, "she clutched
her apron, salvaging the morning pick
of eggs."

I have dreamed the river,
sliding underground along its secret
shelves of rock, passing slowly
under the graveyard leaning
in the shadow of the church,

licking the dear shoulderblades and feet
our grandmothers and their sisters washed
before they bade goodbye.
Paul McRay

Floaters

In seventh grade I played with my vitreous floater,

coaxing it to slide
away at the speed of sight.
Not quite dead ahead, in my right eye,
a star-train of sloughed-off cells,
a beauty the dead
might

understand—an atoll off the Malabar Coast.

*

As close to dance as we got on Vanderbilt Avenue,
in Brooklyn,
we’d crush the white pimpleball between tops
of two middle fingers
and flat underside of thumb
and float it toward the chalked box on the wall. All
timing. If the batter saw it coming
his broomhandle would slash it back at our eyes.
No wall to throw at on Gates,
the bounce made it another game.

English:
the fluke, something we learned later was also
a bottomfish
with a need for just a single eye—

or two migrated to one.

*

Down for 72 hours, the nitrogen formed, a body rises.

There's hardly an idea
here at all, except how our skin contains
everything we make,
even as apertures silt in and crabs eye us
with the patience
of scientists.

*I think there's a body in the water,*
my son says. An hour later the Coast Guardsman
tells us they get about fifty a year
in Gravesend Bay—

*floaters,* he calls them.
Ethan Gilsdorf

D NER

Pay the waitress for everything that's happened.
—David Clewell

Forty-five minutes north of Loomis,
an eager drive always worth the gas and time
winds you up that notch off 52.
Nights still like this, you try the dial
to distract the silence but every turn
is just the turn of the earth,
antennae grabbing at waves falling away dead.
This route eats stations all night.

Over that last rise and you know
you’re at that favorite here, blinking
in succession, knocked out, then together,
cherry red lined by lemon on an indigo sheet.
In the lot, rigs rest side by side,
parking lights on and off like eyes
in the uncertainty before sleep.
Before you pull in, another single father
cuts you off in an empty family wagon,
parks outside the lines. You find a slot,
lock what's not even valuable,
push your body way inside.

Entry way locks air, stirs the humid
with the cold blast within, holds you
like caesura . . . before throwing customers
from depression to polished chrome,
to light oozing from spheres with rainbow rings
like distant planets close enough to touch.
Grease: both smell and feel, sitting
thick on air, a regular.
Its waft from everywhere and nowhere
at once, wanting you, and you need
the thick, aqua-rimmed dinner plate
dripping with the nourishment
grease promises, the weight.

Tonight the waitress has everything
you want at three a.m. Water. Omelette.
Toasted cheese—American, what else
you think, since what country am I in?—
hot with mushrooms from a rift
in the kitchen floor straight to hell.
Shakes she broke the mixer for.
Fries, forget it. You've searched
this imperfect world for the perfect plate
and this one's in the running. Settled in, knife and fork in hand, you figure maybe this is everything for once. Going right, at least for the few minutes between ketchup thrusts and salt and fat swimming upstream in your blood. Like nothing that ever happens long enough, so short and rare you never notice you with yourself, holding a conversation and not on edge. You spin on the stool, once around, once around, fingers gripped tight to formica, turning with the world for a change. Faces not on you, but quiet and straight ahead. Cigarettes drag inside every body, without judgment, ashes smoldering from individual pyres. You with the rest of the flightless, poking at a last slice of cobbler. In your kitchen, each coffee sip sounds too loud, becomes the room, but here, you have a handful of loose change, the cook's sweating head hard on the wall, the waitress, arms akimbo, slumped at the register, wondering what schmuck will wander in, wanting something next. Against and with this mess, the sharp click
of your shaker on the counter, your mark and contribution to a dull, neon throb, a scrawl called ALWAYS OPEN, and bright letters spelling D NER, one space blown blank for your I.
Missy Marie Montgomery

Some Kind of Blues

It's true if I had it to do all over again
I'd marry a truckdriver who loved me insanely,
who painted my name on the cab of his truck.
And I swear to God I wouldn't try so hard to make things work.
We'd drink whiskey by the glassfuls on Friday nights,
and I'd just slide my ass right off that barstool
and dance indecent to the music until we'd had enough,
and we'd exit, wave, shake our heads and go home and make love
until the wall-to-wall carpets pulled away from the corners of the rooms
and the dog whined,
and some other drive, powerful, like sleep,
pulled us under.
Banging open
our bedroom door while Rosie and I engaged
in unholy acts, he shouted “Fornicators!
You will die a billion deaths on a bed of nails
in Satan’s big house!” He was seven years old.
Who knows where he got it. Rosie and I
gave our hearts to Jesus.
We’d named him Isaiah, cropped it to Ike.
We gave him back his full name
and drove him to the Mall.
Some kind of poetry had taken his tongue
and we meant to share it. In the bed
of my Ford F-150 he prowled, slapping
his oversized Bible, stomping and jumping,
leaning like a dog on a chain. “Beware
the evils of the flesh. The flesh is weak.
It craves, and when it craves,
Satan vaults into your chest.
He takes the controls. He gobbles your heart
which is an energy pill. He stands up
in your chest and looks out your eyes.
Friends, put away your credit cards and paychecks. Renounce your gold and silver, your halter tops. Let Jesus swing in the hammock of your heart.”

He fell weeping to his knees.

Rosie tossed a poncho over his back. He took an eight count like that—like a boy could make himself die if he wanted, or make himself live forever.

The small crowd of nondescript bag toters hushed, waiting to see which it’d be.

When Isaiah rose up quivering, stern of face and white as a cloud, I could see some folks had been reluctantly moved. He was seven years old. His teachers had said he was unable to read. But there he stood, smart as Jesus himself.

The beauty of it stung my eyes.

I could feel myself beaming like he’d just sunk a free throw with no time on the clock.

You lie down with your wife and this is what it comes to.

I climbed onto that truck, said things I never knew I could say.

I told the world I am a hollow man.
and sweet Jesus filled me up.
Rosie tried to call me down,
but my heart was abundant—
I could not move. Look, I
am nobody and my wife is nobody: Earl
and Rose Marie Jarvis. 820 Buttercup Lane.
Parents to Isaiah, named for a man we met
on a run to New Hampshire. The man
rode a Harley, weighed three hundred pounds,
ate mushrooms out of a bag like potato chips,
spouted a crazy philosophy. This was the sixties.
We thought he was a prophet
till he knocked off a Handi Stop,
got nailed by the local police.
You tell me:
Was it wrong to drive my son to school
in the back of the Ford? The principal
called him disruptive, crazy. How can you be crazy
and seven years old? He was tossed out of school.
Two weeks later we were hauled into court.
My tires were slashed; my toolshed burned.

Dear God, I prayed. If those be your words
in my boy's mouth, give us a sign.
He gave us a sign.
Isaiah came home from preaching one night
naked, spray-painted red, head to toe,
the single word SATAN scrawled in black on his chest. Rosie was shaken, but Isaiah was firm, a soldier of God. We drove him to the Mall that very night. He preached of a wrathful God. A fat woman waved her flabby arm, yelling, “God wants nothing to do with you, you dirty little boy.” That night, I thought to bathe him in turpentine. He refused. “These are my tribulations,” he said. “All to the greater glory of God.” We let it be. He preached next morning to the stubborn school children. We let it be. The boys who’d done the thing went woo woo woo, clapping their hands to their mouths, dancing circles ’round the truck. We let it be. After two weeks, Isaiah’s skin began to fester; he preached about Job. Another week and his eyes swelled shut. We set a chaise lounge in the truck and he preached about blindness, the enormity of light in God’s Holy City. “When you have seen God,” he said, “there’s no more to see.” A month later he was too weak to preach.
We propped a microphone on his chest, put speakers on the roof—to no avail. He croaked and sputtered. We sat in the cab and cried. For two months he lay in bed, holding his Bible on his chest. Rosie dragged her rocker into his room; I sat in the kitchen and prayed. One night I took Rosie in my arms—she was all heartbeat and bone—and I testified as to how we would meet again triumphant on that further shore. She looked at me like she'd slipped dicing carrots and sliced open her thumb. "Earl Jarvis," she said, one word at a time. "You don't know that's true. What if it ain't." "What if it ain't," she sobbed and went to the boy, to her rocker and her homemade prayers. I left then and walked the block until my anger turned to sadness and my sadness into what? I circled the Peter Paul candy factory through whose chain-link fence.
we have walked our lives
these twenty years. Finally
something settled inside me
like a steel ball dropping
into a felt-lined pocket.
I was standing outside our house,
looking through the window
as into a fishtank—my lighter,
my keys, my Bible on the table
like relics from an ancient civilization.
They meant less to me than a vase
with a bird on it made three thousand
years ago. One month from that night
Isaiah stopped eating. My Rosie convinced me
to haul him to St. Luke’s. This
was a mistake. A tempting of God’s will,
so God let him die. Three days
before his eighth birthday.
Dead by God’s hand.
Two years have passed; the authorities
and journalists will not let us be. To find
some peace, Rosie and I have bought a Harley.
A hog with saddlebags and fairing.
Rosie has painted it with scenes
from *Revelations*: the dead
rising incorruptible, drifting out
from the windows of office buildings
and tenements alike. She's painted them
like flames, like goldfish in a curved bowl.
A plane has crashed into a building
and, while the body parachutes down,
something else lifts up
towards the face of Jesus
which hovers in the clouds.
We like to ride fast in the hills
above this valley, leaning the turns
till our knees almost scrape. Lately,
we'll ride to Holy Land U.S.A.,
where a man has built an entire city
to honor the memory of God. But even that
has crumbled beyond belief. The state
has erected a fence to keep the malingerers out,
but we climb through a hole the vandals
and visionaries have clipped in that fence.
We walk out on those streets
 crunching glass with our boots
past buildings no taller than Rosie.
We sit on the houses and drink beer
from the paper cups we bring. We gaze
at the stars or down at the smog-blurred valley,
at the lights—the houses and factories,
the car lights streaming. Now that everything
is finished, who are we. The miniature holy men who walk these streets have chicken wire where their hearts used to be. They put me in mind of something Isaiah once said: “The truth is not pleasant. It sticks out in the world like a bone through flesh.” Someday soon, Rosie and I will stand trial. The lawyers assure us we will be jailed forever. We don’t care. We draw some comfort from the vision our Puerto Rican brothers saw right here in Holy Land—a silver Cadillac, filled with the faithful, skidded off the ridge and floated in the air, car and all called back to the Lord—though it is clear now that we will not be so fortunate. But if only Isaiah had been called. If only Isaiah had not become that bag of loosened bones I lifted and carried to St. Luke’s. But it is too late to question God’s plan. We stand at the foot of the huge, lighted cross that announces Holy Land to the world. A full-grown man with his arms spread would look like a boy up there, a boy would look like a doll. Once, we sat up here all night, hugging and rocking,
a hundred thousand people alive
in the valley below us—not one of them
meant anything to me. I felt the television
and radio waves passing through me like a wind.
I was unreachable as God until I saw
Rosie’s hand on my knee, clenched, the skin dry,
all the veins and tendons lit up,
and the moment collapsed, my heart
rent by circumstance. Rosie clings to me,
but it is Isaiah she reaches for. Maybe
we should have saved him. Maybe
he’d have grown into a hateful child,
flicking the television channels, shaking
the house with rock ’n roll music,
torturing squirrels with a .22, but
he’d be alive. And we wouldn’t be up here
with God’s silence, with His miserable
servants, in His shrunken city
where piety and sin kneel together
in the alleys, where God,
when he shows himself, lifts
the whole damn Cadillac,
but won’t raise an eight-year-old boy.
About the judges

Dana Boussard was born in Salem, Oregon, and raised in Choteau, Montana. She received a Montana Governor’s Award for the Arts in 1987, and a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1980. She has recently been commissioned to produce six large works for the state of Idaho.

Deborah Mitchell received her M.F.A. in printmaking from Utah State University, studying under master printer Moishe Smith. She lives in Missoula, Montana, where she is the curator of the Missoula Museum of the Arts.

Tom Rippon teaches at the University of Montana. He has lectured widely, and has been awarded two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts. His work is included in many private and public collections, including the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.
The Visual Arts in Montana:
A Sampler
Larry Pirnie

Nothin' Like a Good Ol' Western
Mixed media relief on wood. 50" × 60". 1991.
René Westbrook

Montana Odalisque
Multimedia
12" × 18" × 12". 1991.
Nancy N. Erickson

Bear Series #30: Summer Night Oil stick collage on paper. 26" x 40". 1991.
Nancy N. Erickson

Where'd the Savannah Go?
Fabric and paint. 79" × 68". 1986.
Ed McDonald

Black Vase/Barbed Wire
Blown glass. 12" high. 1990.
Richard Swanson

Organic Memory

Mixed media.

12" × 20" × 11". 1991.
Horse
Black-and-white photograph.  
7" × 10".  
Margaret S. Davis

County Fair
Black-and-white photograph.
10" x 14".
1987.
Cemetery Gate

Black-and-white photograph.

11" × 14". 1990.

Susan Thomas
Susan Thomas

Untitled
Leslie Van Stavern Millar

A Mermaid Dreams of Montana
The Dadaists and Surrealists Picnic on the Yellowstone River (Which They Have Mistaken for the Nile), ca. 1922

Doug Turman

Etching, 9 x 12. 1990.
The Artist Muses in His Studio in Helena, Montana (Attended by the Poet, Paul Klee’s Beneficent Ghost, and a Host of Necessary Images), ca. 1990

Etching, 9" x 12".

Almitra Von Willcox

Morning Round Up
Black-and-white photograph. 11" x 14". 1991.
Nicholas Bonner

Light Cistern

Brick pallets.
12' diameter,
7' high.
Paul D. Guillemette

Deviate Sexual

Wallpaper: The Girls

Clay, paint. 14" x 16"  x 2. 1991.
Monte Dolack
No Room to Roam
Dream of the New Messiah
Oil on canvas
16-1/4" x 19-3/4".
Carl Beery

Father and Son

Oil and acrylic on canvas.

John F. Patterson

III

Bear and Ruby on Ice

Cibachrome print.

8" × 12".

Grayce Holzheimer

Funeral for a Friend

Color photograph of performance sculpture.

14" × 16-1/2".

1985.
That woman still lives at the ranch. You can ask her. Maybe She knows. As near and far As the rest of us can tell The barn and sheds were built In the Great Depression. Someone Had money and a big idea. Far and away the biggest Idea I've ever seen.

Pat says there must've been A hundred men, shepherds, And shearers, working there.

It's one of those things That not only is, but seems, Larger inside than out, Like a planetarium or an orange, Even with Wyoming around it, And real stars flying away.
Just stick your head in there;
Its dark will make you dizzy.
It has an underneath

Too low to stand in unless
You are a sheep. The loft
Vaults like a dusky church.

2.
All that summer
I balanced water,

Coaxing the desert
Into pasture,

With eight cubic feet
Per second for two

Thousand acres.
Horseback, shovel

On my shoulder along
Miles of ditches:

Stalling here,
Releasing there,
Water over
The deepening green,

Keeping it living:
Herons and cranes

Regal in meadows,
Strings of ducklings

Frothing the ditch
To get away.

3.
One day riding ditches I saw Clay.
He was on the hill against the sky,
Flapping his arms at me.
They were going to bulldoze the corrals at the shearing sheds,
Intricate maze of gates and pens
Clay, as a kid, had built with his father,
Before they lost their ranch, before Frank died,
Before the family had to move away.

The new owner was razing everything.
I guess he had some kind of idea.
Clay didn’t need any gates, but, as Pat said,
That’s Clay.
I met them at the shearing sheds.
Pat held a wrecking bar like a steel snake.
I just can't stand tearin' apart all them guys's dreams,
He said, looking shy.
Hell is when you know where you are.

4.
On the barn roof a loose piece of tin
Flaps in the wind like a broken wing.
Wyoming whirls in the sun.

Up in the loft a pair of shears,
Oh, fifty or sixty years forgotten there,

Floats in noonlight, bearing up some dust,
Just a pair of spring-steel scissors,
Two knives joined at the hip, with smiling edges.

An owl the color of things left alone
Flaps out of the gable door.

Hell is when you know where you are:
Mazes of pens and gates dreaming sheep;
Miles of ditches dreaming green.
5.
No one living knows who built the shearing sheds,
Unless maybe that woman, and I'm not about to ask her,
Ever since she tried to stab her husband
With a pair of scissors. He was ninety-four
And barely held her off. Later she claimed she was
Trying to cut his heart medication out of his
Shirt pocket—dope, she called it, and Oscar
Had to leave the ranch, where he didn't last long.

They bulldozed the corrals.
We got forty gates.
We took them someplace safe.

6.
Now the vast, dim barn floats like an ocean liner
Whose doldrums are meadows spinning into brush,
And everywhere you look Wyoming hurries off.

All night the stars make their escape.
In the loft a pair of shears cuts woolly moonlight.
All day a piece of roofing flaps in the wind.

A startled owl flaps out of the gable.
Hell is when you know where you are and it's beautiful.
You save the gates for nothing.
You balance the water to keep the green from spinning
Away into sage, the same gray as the wing
That just now shaded your eyes.
Winter Road

The reasons the winter road acts so crazy
Are all invisible now.

The summer road persists
In reasoned argument,
Reducing terrain to topography,

Curving gracefully to the left,
Or bending gently to the right,

Gaining, falling, abstracting
Rises, draws, outcrops, woods.

The winter road is crazy.
This time of year it seems
To slam nihilistically

Against the ridgeside,
Sidle through unlikely groves,

Make esses where the summer road goes straight,
Crossing and recrossing,
It dodges to the left, leaps to the right,  
A road out of control.

In winter how a road should go  
Is told by contours of atmosphere.

The landscape is just a situation  
Of windbreaks and wind-permissions.

Heedlessly the summer road  
Dives into broad drifts.

It surfaces a couple of times  
Between white waves,  
Then goes down for good.

Now the winter road is smart to seek  
High ground, exposed to the wind,  
To thread the drifts  
Like big white corpses on a field.

Come winter this road proves amazing.  
All along it was  
In the right place,
Already leaping to the left,
Dodging to the right,

Sailing through contours of atmosphere,
Prophetic and dumb.
Small Potatoes

They're the ones we can't leave in the ground, the babies not to be abandoned, the next generation. Dirt clings to their inconsequential curves and I curse at the sink the scrubbing of these slippery, second-class, under-sized excuses for spuds. Every year it's the same. Waste-not-want-not was not wasted on me.

Every year the small thing matters more. Memory condenses and conforms us to its habit—a whole season in a single scent (wisteria, say, or sweet clover) or a year boiled down to the name of a disease. What remains is simply a sieve-full: a life sustained by a series of holes.

The candles we light, the rice we throw, the threads we pick, the hair that comes out in our brushes repeat us over and over. Like dots on dice and the useless luck that lives in them we turn up everywhere. We are snake-eyes. Small potatoes. We save ourselves for seed.
Intimations in Waterville

The maple is green when the Ghost arrives.
—Li Po

Last night, the air too close, too full of August for making love, we cooled ourselves with home videos of scintillating June, our daughter lifting pailfuls of her wading pool up to the sun, dousing herself in liquid silver until, sated, she suddenly rose, bearing a full pail to gift the green tomatoes, joy pouring from her as an unhaltered breeze limbered the finer branches of the mountain ash.

A mile away that day, the first red foxes appeared in the rough to watch golf balls arc through summer near their lairs—all eyes, vaulted to kinship with alien moments of grace.

This morning it dawns cool, the first foretaste. I read in the paper the foxes have been trapped, deported, for unnerving highstrung handicaps with stares, deadpan from the sweetgrass and the pines. It breaks on me again, like a remnant swell from an offshore storm, how my summers are
going, vanishing into the earth like rainfall,
rising from it in vapors invisible as
my daughter’s breath that day she lifted pailful
upon pailful from the pool, emptied it to feed
the young tomatoes, the ones that darkened last night
from orange to red, the ones we’ll eat today.
Blaze King of Montana

At four a.m. exhaust fans stir and roar
dust across shop floors. Dark
mornings are work hours but you slept
still when I left, scarcely rustling
sheets as I slipped warm into the cold calm air.

Leather jerkin, gloves and boots smell
not of calfskin but acetylene and metal smoke.
The Lincoln shudders power above my tilted helm.
In the machine's electric throb I hear your
breath heavy between sadness and sleep.
Two years and we can't get it right.

Through visored green-black light flares.
If you could only see me weld,
hear the wand in my hand hiss gas, sputter copper current,
watch me wire weave two three-eighths-inch steel slats
to leave a molten, bonded scar,
a red line fading. I sear across oil
and feel smoke touch your eyes and film your nostrils.

Even through leather heat burns,
and I want you tired from bed beside me.
I dream foolishly of you standing near,
measuring the pallet stack's growth—
parts bound for Boise, Butte, Spokane, Seattle—
admiring the smoothness of the beads,
those silver unions.
When the 3:12 through-freight to Spokane hit the East Meriwether crossing, the engineer touched his horn and released a long, mournful wail into the snowbound November night. It sounded like the first note of a lost Hank Snow ballad. I slipped the dolly from under the jukebox and plugged it into the extension cord. The bubbling neon glowed softly in the wet, snowy air. When I dropped a quarter into the slot, the large machine burbled and seemed to settle more solidly onto the railroad tracks.

“You sure you know what you’re doing, Sughrue?” Lawyer Rainbolt asked from his squatting position beside the roadbed.

“Hey, man, I don’t know who Boy George is and I don’t care if he sings like a girl,” I maintained, “but I’ve shaken hands with Hank Snow, by god.” I waved the damaged tequila bottle across the white space of the parking lot toward the back of the Hell Roaring Liquor Store and Lounge. “Right over there.”

Solly took the tequila, had a hit, then handed it back, and dumped a small but dangerous pile of crystal meth into the palm of his scarred hand. He glanced up, smiling, huge snowflakes melting in his shaggy blond hair. “Which one is he?” Solly asked. “All those country singers sound like girls to me.”

“Asshole.”

Solly grinned like the cat that fucked the canary before he ate it, very amused. Nothing amuses me less than an amused lawyer. He raised his hand, smiled again.

“Let’s do it before it blows away,” he suggested.
I make it a policy never to argue with drug lawyers: they have most of the drugs and all the best arguments. So we knelt together as the engine came around the curve at the base of Devil's Hump, its brilliant headlamp whipping through the snow-cursed night, knelt and snorted the speed off the circular cicatrix in Solly's palm. I stood up, shakily, stepped onto the tracks, and punched P-17 as Solly limped across the parking lot toward the shadowed rear of the bar, his brace clicking and grinding as the engineer hit his heavy note one more time.

The first time I saw Solomon Rainbolt, he was dead. Or we thought he was. The base camp CP bunker had taken at least three direct RPG hits, and after forty-eight hours under the monsoon rain, we couldn't tell the bodies from the sandbags. When one of the muddy lumps opened its red-rimmed eyes and grinned white-toothy and wild, one of my FNG's shit his pants and touched off an M-16 clip into the clotted Vietnamese sky. The head lifted, still grinning.

"Hey, sarge," it said in a deep Southern accent, "where the fuck you guys been?" Then he struggled out of the sucking mud, shifting aside the dead Nug mercenary who lay across his legs. Once his lanky frame stood upright, he held up his left hand and clenched his fist. Even in the rain, I could hear the bones grind against each other. A ribbony snake of blood drifted out of his muddy fingers and down his thick wrist. "Capt. Solomon Rainbolt, bound for the free world." Then he glanced around him at the remains of his command. Only he had survived. By playing dead, perfectly. Suddenly, Solly laughed, thunderous in the hammering rain, squeezed his fist again, and shouted, "Purple fucking heart bound for the free world!"

Crumley 99
Solly got that, and some other chicken-shit baubles, too, but he didn’t find his way back to the free world for a long time. He did one more tour for the green weenie, then another long one as one of those spooky hard-assed dudes dressed in tiger-striped tailored fatigues, SKS assault riles, and eyes from hell. But I was back in the States by then, busy with my own troubles.

Some years later, we were both in San Francisco at the same time. I was working runaways among the flower children and Solly was making a name for himself as a defense lawyer during the years of peace and love. I went to watch him work one afternoon. He was defending a rather famous biker against a murder-one charge. Solly was something to see: half-Jewish, half-peckerwood, half-crippled war hero. One of the courthouse buffs whispered to me that Solly could make a jury kiss his ass and convince them it was a rose. Whatever, he never lost a murder case that went to trial. And his plea bargains were famous in law schools all over the country.

I meant to call him, renew the brief friendship that had started on the four-day hump out of the bush. But he dropped out of the public view before I could call. There were rumors—there are always rumors—of an acrimonious divorce, a dead child, a missing ex-wife. Wherever Solly disappeared, when he came back, it was in Denver, and he specialized in defending heavy drug dealers, guys who moved serious weight. He seemed to have a real hard-on for the DEA, and he kicked the government’s ass with disturbing regularity. When he had taken whatever revenge he intended—I don’t know because he never talked about it—he moved his practice to Meriwether, Montana, a town I had called home for a while now, and we picked up that friendship we had
left in the bush. But I had never worked for him, no matter how bad things got.

And they got bad that year. The PI business died with a September blizzard that dumped sixteen inches of cold wet snow on Meriwether. People seemed to be able to divorce quite badly without my help during the cold snap and icy drizzle that followed the blizzard. Those local merchants who might have had repossession on their minds chose to be nasty to deadbeats personally.

I wouldn't have had time, anyway. The part-time bartending job at the Hell Roaring that kept me fairly solvent had degenerated into a full-time chore as the customers lurched madly toward the stone-cold heart of winter. The owner of the Hell Roaring, Leonard the Sly, a man whose heart usually only sang with the music of the cash register, suddenly fell in love with Betty Boobs, our prettiest cocktail waitress. They fled to Mexico before the first snowflake hit the ground. God knows what Leonard thought. Perhaps he thought his wife, Betty Books, who kept them, might not notice their absence. No such luck. A week later, she picked up the weekend cash-deposit bag and climbed on an airplane bound eventually for Fiji, muttering something about revenge fucking in the Third World. But she said quite plainly to me. "It's yours, C.W. Drink it up or burn it down—I just don't give a shit anymore."

I didn't have time to do either. The help, surly in the best of times, rankled quickly under my guidance. When Big Linda's check was short the second week in a row, she responded by drop-kicking a tray of drinks across a five-o'clock throng. One poor woman protested the death of her silk blouse, and Big Linda hit her so hard that half of her house plants died. Big Linda quit
on the spot, moved to Tucson the next day to follow her career as a professional mud wrestler. All the mud in Meriwether was frozen. Little Linda followed quickly, packing her three kids and two broken television sets from four marriages into her old Falcon station wagon, with a large sign SNOW painted on the back window. She planned to drive south until somebody asked her what that was, that snow thing. Then the cruelest blow of all: my best, most experienced most dependable bartender, the Original Linda, fell back in love with her second husband when he got out of Deer Lodge Prison, and they got married, joined AA, and Linda quit her job.

Bars can be nice places, comfortable, homes away from the loneliness or confusion of home, but nobody, not even the most confirmed degenerate drunk can spend eighty or ninety hours a week in one. I hired and fired so much help that I actually hired a woman so drunk she had forgotten that I had fired her the week before. I don't know what my excuse was. Something to do with my nose, I suspect. As far as I was concerned, the sun was something that happened in another country. I didn't care if it came out. Then it did just to prove me wrong.

The first day, the snow melted like sugar in the golden shower. On the second afternoon, it was all gone, and I had hammered my few customers with free drinks until they mostly sat still and silent, stunned in the flat rays of the lowering sun that flooded the front door of the Hell Roaring, an autumn light alive and full of hope and glory. I played every Hank Snow song on the jukebox ten times. Two of my semi-mobile customers—a gypo-logger with a broken leg and a real estate saleswoman with a broken arm—had fallen under the spell of the gravelly romantic voice.
They'd fallen in love; they danced with clumsy grace around the pool table. I could have danced myself.

A thousand years ago when I first came to Meriwether, the first time I set foot in the Hell Roaring when the sixties were dying into the seventies, I found that soft autumn light filling the magic afternoon easiness of the bar. I eased myself onto the stool next to the poor schmuck I had been chasing for six months. He looked so pitiful I nearly walked away, but drink in hand, I swiveled around and stopped in that light, that sun-filled silence.

I don't even remember his name. Just some wretch from Redwood City, a pale, wrinkled man, a pharmacist once, an unhappy man wedded to a woman hard with unhappy fat and a gut bucket for a mouth. The pharmacist read the wrong books, maybe, or watched the wrong television shows, whatever, he became convinced that the sexual revolution had taken place without him. So he faked a robbery, fled with the money and the drugs and a hippie chick with flowers in her hair, fled toward the peace and freedom of the Mountain West, Montana, the word like a benison on his trembling lips.

By the time I caught up with him, though, he had had enough of his dream. He should have been glad to go home. I bought him a drink and explained the hard and the easy ways back to California. He wept like a child, a man leaking everywhere, everything. He had a junkie's sniffles, oozing tracks inside his elbows, behind his knees, and between his toes. A revolutionary strain of gonorrhea had started a commune in his urinary tract and none of the miracles of modern pharmacy could dislodge it.

But it hadn't all leaked out. When I tried to console him with the information that his wife wanted him back, he shook his head,
murmured something about his additional curse of a weak bladder, then raised a flaky eyebrow and nodded toward the john.

Maybe if I hadn't turned my stool back to face that blessed light, I might have heard the muffled thumps from the bathroom.

Five minutes later when I decided that not even the most painful piss should take that long, I went to check. He really wanted to die. I found him on his knees in front of the urinal, hanging from his belt, leaning into the leather strap. This time everything had finally leaked out.

Almost twenty years later, I poured myself a healthy tot of single-malt scotch as Hank Snow, The Singing Ranger, chorded into "It Don't Hurt Anymore." I raised my glass to the autumnal light. "It don't hurt any less, either," I said to nobody in particular. Then I raised my glass again to the Leaking Man.

Actually, it was his fault I was here. His wife had hounded me with lawsuits until I had to give up California. Naturally, I came here. The scotch tasted as smooth as the smoky sunlight.

When I put my glass back on the bar and surveyed my domain, I noticed that Kathleen and Bill had managed to sprawl on the pool table. They writhed as if they could escape their casts. Kathleen had a history on the pool table.

"Goddammit," I suggested, "can't you two at least behave until dark?"

"Fuck you, C.W.,” Kathleen said smugly as she touched her nose. Then she grabbed Bill by his cast and towed him toward the men's room. I didn't care anymore. I thought about following them into the can, but just the thought of cocaine made my knees weak and my kidneys ache. I had another smoky scotch and forgot about them.
Forgot about them until they sidled out of the john toward the back door without bothering to dump their drinks into go-cups. When I checked the can, I found the toilet reduced to a heap of porcelain shards standing in frothy water. I shut off the valve, dashed outside with blood in my eyes, ready to do battle over a busted toilet. My patience seemed to be minimal these days.

The crippled lovers were giggling on the front seat of Kathleen’s Buick. When she saw my face, Kathleen sobered enough to try a drunken grin, then gave that up when it wasn’t returned. “God-dammit, C.W., I’m outa cash,” she whined.

“I’ll take a check,” I said.

“You’ll take shit,” Bill growled as he leaned over Kathleen, “you rotten bastard.” Bill didn’t like me, sometimes, and sometimes I returned the favor. “Son of a bitch.”

“Smile when you say that, motherfucker,” I said, then popped him on the nose with the heel of my hand. It opened up like the Red Sea.

“Jesus Christ,” Kathleen said as Bill scrambled around trying to staunch the flood and get out at the same time.

“Moses,” I said. “Gimme your car keys.”

Kathleen reached into her purse, then smiled. For an instant I thought she was going to bring out a piece. But her hand came out clutching a white bindle of cocaine. “Take this instead,” she said. “It’s almost an eighth.”

Then she started the Buick, dropped it into reverse, placating Bill with one hand and driving with the other. “Next time just chop up the fucking toilet!” I shouted as the star-cast lovers sped away, plaster of paris scraps drifting out of the Buick’s windows while I considered the bindle in my hand.
A better man, which I plan to become someday, would have thrown the blow away. Or at least sold it to pay for the broken plumbing. Or even saved it for a rainy day. I sensed clouds on the near horizon. So I just did a little.

Back in the bar, I found the mindless goons from Mountain States Vending servicing the jukebox and the gambling machines. One had been a ranked light-heavy once, the other a defensive tackle in the CFL. “New format,” the ex-pug explained, changing records. “Ain’t some of these Hank Snow records yours, C.W.?” the former tackle asked. I started to protest, but I would have had to kill them to stop them. I thought about it.

“New format,” I echoed, a coward in the face of necessity as they went about their business.

The sunshine didn’t even last until dark; it fell under the weight of another snowstorm. The new format and the cocaine lasted exactly ten hours. After Solly and I had a few post-closing drinks, I gave him some of the cocaine as a retainer, and when that ran out, he gave me some of his crystal, somebody else’s retainer, and I got the dolly and the extension cords out of the basement.

When the cowcatcher on the engine pulling the 3:12 fast freight to Spokane hit the jukebox, Boy George screamed one last empty wail that died quickly beneath the thundering steel wheels. The collision filled the snowy night with an explosive rainbow shower of plastic and pot-metal, worthless quarters and inflated dollar bills that covered the pale parking lot like some hard post-apocalyptic rain.

“Absolutely fucking perfect,” I said to Solly. “Hank Snow would be ecstatic.”
“What the hell, man, I suspect Boy George might have liked it, too.”
“I don’t care,” I said.
“I can tell you’re happy, Sughrue,” Solly said, “and I’m happy, too.”
“Yeah?”
“You may be happy playing the music critic from hell, Sonny, but I’m glad I don’t have to play your lawyer.”
“What are you gonna do, counselor? Sneeze my retainer all over the parking lot?”
Solly grabbed his nose as if he might consider just that, but he laughed as we climbed into my pickup, headed for the happy confusion of darkness and laughter.

We spent several days arranging various alibis, all of which involved acting as if nothing had happened. We spent some time in Butte, a perfect Montana place to hide—nobody would ever look for you in Butte—then even more time at Chico Hot Springs where Solly bathed his old wounds while I sought liver damage in the bar. Eventually, though, Thanksgiving was upon us, and we, or Solly to be more exact, decided that we, meaning me, had to return to Meriwether to face, as it were, the music.

They were playing our song, and this was my dance: civil suits had surrounded me like a tribe of Hollywood Indians. Leonard the Sly’s slick business lawyer, Betty Books from Fiji, the BN Railroad, and Meriwether Vending all had filed for damages to their property. Even the railroad engineer driving the train asked for psychic damages, claiming the collision with the jukebox had caused him to hear strange voices and to see lights in the dark—
ness. Criminal charges were forthcoming, the Meriwether County Attorney said, just as soon as he stopped laughing.

That was too much for Solly. He deigned to accept all my cases, and on his advice, I became as liquid as dirty dishwater. And about as useful. All my portable goods, including my old truck, were converted to cash, which somehow all landed in Solly's pocket. I gave up the apartment where I had lived forever and moved into the basement of Solly's law firm offices, a building that had served until recently as a mortuary. It wasn't too bad. I had an embalming table covered with a foam pad for a bed, a tiny hot plate on a baby refrigerator on a coffin stand, and a chance to spend the next ten or fifteen years listening to Solly's chuckles as I chipped away at my legal fees interviewing witnesses, transcribing depositions, and sweeping up, while we waited, as he said, for some real work, a job worthy of my talents, whatever and however odd they might be.

Survival, perhaps, an ability to withstand whatever vicissitudes life rolled my way, and certainly a willingness to be amazed. For instance, the wonders of Montana weather never cease to amaze me. The winter broke again, and we enjoyed a long fall into the middle of December. The snowstorm finally predicted arrived two days late and seemed more like the fulfillment of a weather forecast than a prophecy of icy doom. I even learned to sleep among the ghosts of the lately dead, knowing they rested warmly under a cold white mantle. But most amazing of all, Solly actually found me a real job.

I was doing something disgusting involving scrambled eggs and canned chili—I'm neither sensitive to women's needs nor do I cook, which explains why I've never married—over my hot plate
that morning when Solly creaked down the concrete stairs, his step light and jolly, his chuckle absolutely amused.

“Sughrue, my old friend, you’re going to just love this one,” he said, handing me a business card, “just absolutely love it.” He laughed all the way back up the stairs.

I glanced at the card. DALHGREN’S TROPICAL FISH AND PET PARADISE. I liked it already.

Dalhgren’s version of Paradise sat on the edge of a section of Meriwether, which in other towns would be called “across the tracks.” But since Meriwether, like most Western towns, had been developed with an eye to utility rather than aesthetics, everything was just across the tracks or beyond some mystic river or over some other arbitrary line just around the corner from space and time. So we just called it Felony Flats, as some wag had named it back in my days as a deputy sheriff. Cheap rents mean cheap locks, and felons don’t make the best of neighbors. Often it seemed that the entire neighborhood traded material goods and/or spouses every six or eight months, whether they wanted to or needed to or not.

From the look of Dalhgren’s building, though, I suspected they did most of their business in richer climes. The parking lot was littered with new foreign cars, and I pulled the Japanese pickup Solly had loaned me in beside the store’s van, a three-quarter ton Ford decked out in tropical seascapes. It looked a bit odd covered with six inches of fresh snow.

When I opened the front door and stepped into the soft bubbling light of the fishy section, a slight young woman with a large mouth and a small moustache darted swiftly through the sparkingly clean tanks. She stopped in front of me, her slim body still
trembling, and whispered, “Yes-s-s-s,” breathlessly, her pale eyes bulging with the effort. I handed her my last card, a tattered bit, and asked to see Mr. Dalhgren.

“Which one?” she murmured wetly. I lifted a shoulder as if I might break out in an Australian crawl or a butterfly. She understood, nodding. “I’ll get them,” she said, glancing at my card. “Mr. Soo-goo?” she ventured.

“‘Shoog’ as in sugar, honey,” I said, slipping my card out of her slick fingers and resisting a sudden urge to chuckle her behind the gills, “and ‘rue’ as in rue the fucking day.”

She smiled coldly, exposing an enormous number of very large white teeth, then turned, smoothing her shimmery blue skirt over her tiny hips, and wriggled toward the dark, watery recesses at the rear of the store.

As I waited, I watched some brightly designed fish wander from one end of a tank to another, a miniature school mindlessly following the lead of the alpha fish. They were nice to watch, but I couldn’t pronounce their name or afford their price. One of the last times my mad father came back to South Texas to visit, he showed up in front of my mother’s shotgun house in a rattletrap pickup. A dark woman with sharp features and quick hands sat in front, a bundle of snot-nosed kids beside her. Occasionally, her hands darted at the kids, sometimes cleaning their noses with a dirty thumb, sometimes delivering a sharp crack on the noggin. My father looked slightly embarrassed as he came around the truck, a plastic bag of goldfish in one hand, a bowl in the other.

“Better than a bunny rabbit,” he explained after he hugged me, “and more likely to survive than colored chicks.” He handed me the gifts. I gathered he thought it was somewhere near Easter.
time, which it wasn't, and I began to understand why my mother called him "a cheap-trick, white-trash mystic."

After he left in a cloud of slow dust, heading west one more time, seeking visions again, my mother came out of the house and collected my father's gifts. The fish bowl became her favorite ashtray, the grave of millions of Viceroy butts, and she dumped the goldfish into the algae-clotted horse trough behind the salt cedar windbreak where they grew large and ugly on a diet of mosquito larvae and dragonflies, where they might still be living now for all I knew, though my mother had been buried by the Viceroy butts.

As I peered back at the sweeping motions of the tiny fish, I suspected they survived on a more expensive, less useful diet, but before I had time to consider it, the sounds of soft confusion and muttered "excuse me's" came from the back of the store. I peeked around the corner. Two very large, fat men were stuck in the office doorway with the tiny woman lodged between them. Her eyes seemed ready to pop out of her head, but she slipped one slim hand out, then slithered from between them with an audible "plop" and rushed toward a nearby tank the size of a deep-freeze. I expected her to dive in, safe at last, but at the last moment she veered into a crowd of customers.

The two men lumbered toward me, their steps raising tiny waves in the tanks, dressed in matching polyester sport tents. They were a pair of giant twins, at least six-six and three hundred pounds, hugely fat but somehow willowy too, as if their massive flesh rode on green sticks instead of bones.

"I'm Joe," one said.
"I'm Frank," the other chimed.
“Dalhgren,” they sang, then giggled and offered me oddly delicate hands. Although the boys looked a great deal alike—so much alike, in fact, I could never tell them apart—they had difficulty doing things together. Like shaking hands. I think I shook Joe’s hand twice and Frank’s not at all, but I was never sure.

“I understand you gentlemen have a problem,” I said, and restrained myself from shouting weight! at the top of my lungs, “but Lawyer Rainbolt didn’t fill me in on the particulars.”

“Particulars,” they said in a jumble, then glanced at each other. After several moments of hesitation on both their parts, both reached into their plaid sport tents and withdrew folded sheets of paper. I took both just to be fair. They were copies of invoices, a long list of names I assumed to be various fish, tanks, and other equipment. The total price came to $5,354.76.

“Somebody’s mighty serious about their fish,” I said, trying to smile. The Dalhgren’s didn’t return it. In fact, they frowned so deeply I thought fat, greasy tears might slide down their rounded, downy cheeks. Then one of them handed me a yellow personal check covered with NSF and DO NOT REDEPOSIT stamps. “So what am I supposed to do,” I asked, “repossess a bunch of fish?”

“Please,” Joe said.

“Without violence,” Frank added.

Rue the fucking day, I thought, giant pacifist twins. Then I looked at the check, as if I knew what I was doing. It had been drawn on a small state-chartered bank one county west of Meriwether. The bank had been fleeced by a California resort developer, forced into receivership, absorbed by a Midwestern holding company, then closed. The account in the dead bank was in the name of one Norman Hazelbrook, a vaguely familiar name. Then the comment about no violence made sense.
“You guys took a check from Abnormal Norman? Are you bat-shit crazy?” I asked. The boys attempted to look at their feet as they blushed.

Abnormal Norman Hazelbrook was president and chief executive officer of a biker gang known as the Snowdrifters, a gang made up of misfits and rejects from gangs all over the country. If you couldn’t cut it with the Angels, or were just too fucking disgusting for the Banditos, Norman would take you in his merry band of miscreants. Their headquarters sat at the head of Clatterbuck Creek on the old Moondog mining claim. Norman had purchased the property after he got out of the Oregon state pen, where he was doing time for aggravated assault. The story was that Norman got in a scruffle with an Oregon state patrolman, and somehow managed to bite his nose off. Then the fool added grievous insult to massive injury when he chewed it up and swallowed it in front of the horrified officer.

“Didn’t his rather odd attire give you some idea that Norman might not be exactly an outstanding citizen?” I asked them.

“You know Mr. Hazelbrook, I take it?”

“I hate to admit it but I know Norman,” I said. Fun is where you find it, right, even if you have to follow your nose. “But I wouldn’t take a check from him.”

“He was very persuasive,” one offered shyly.

“Very,” the other added, glancing over his shoulder as if Norman might be lurking behind the gerbils.

“Ah, he ate our entire supply of African leaf fish,” the one I decided to call Joe said.

“Then he ate Li Po,” Frank whispered, “swallowed the old gentleman without a gulp. I hesitate to think about his last
moments, the horror of drowning in that, that monster's stomach acids.”

“I can understand,” I said, “even sympathize. But who's this Lee Poe fellow? Edgar's little brother?” I know I shouldn't have laughed, but I thought I caught it quite nicely with a coughing fit.

“One of our rarest and finest Siamese fighting fish,” Joe said. “We took the check before his, ah, friends joined in.”

“Norman never goes anywhere without his friends,” I said, “not even to sushi bars.” The boys were not amused. “But seriously, now, boys. Stop me if I'm wrong, okay? You want the fish back, is my guess, not the money.” They nodded ponderously, jowls trembling. “I might be able to get the money—with a tank—but I can't repossess ten tanks of tropical fish from one of the worst motorcycle gangs in America.”

“Actually, we have a tank,” Frank said softly.

“Right,” I said, smiling at his little joke, “lots of them. But we need more than that. I take it you took this to the sheriff over there?”

“He suggested that it was our fault for doing business with people of that ilk.”

“I wouldn't know where to begin,” I admitted.

“You know him,” Joe said, “you could at least talk to him. We would pay you five hundred dollars just to talk to him.”

“Cash?”

“Of course,” Frank said. “Just give us a moment, please, to get the money.” With that, they heaved about, ships spinning in the night, then made way for their office, their large buttocks rocking slowly like a gelatinous surf.

As I waited, I thought about it as I strolled over to a turtle tank. For old times' sake, Norman might talk to me, and if I came out
of it alive, the five hundred would make walking around Meriwether a lot more fun. Solly had deep pockets but he was reluctant to put his hands into them for my good times. I stared down at the little captive turtles, took a deep breath, thinking perhaps to sigh over my weary plight. Forget it. Never take a deep breath over a turtle tank. Live on fish heads and rice, suck on a wino’s sock, eat a rotten egg, but never take a deep breath over a turtle tank. By the time I stopped gagging, the Dalhgren boys had returned with the cash.

“I want to borrow your van this afternoon,” I said as I counted the bills, “and I want you to write a letter to Solly explaining that all I have to do is talk to Norman and that you promise to cover all my medical expenses as a result of this interview. Fair?”

“Fair,” they agreed as we shook hands, tiny tears of hope glimmering in their eyes.

The living quarters of the Snowdrifters had grown organically, in the same way a fungus grows on a loaf of bread. They had started with a couple of converted school-bus campers backed up to the old mine shacks. Then Norman got middle-class pretensions. He had a log house built into the hillside in front of the old Moon-dog shaft. Then bit by furry bit everything became connected, and whatever members of the gang were in residence at any one time seemed to live wherever it suited them. One big happy family. Some of them, more than you would think, had jobs. Some even had families and had built houses away from the main complex for their old ladies and children. The sixties seemed alive and well up Clatterbuck Creek, if a little gray and dull and semi-communal, but I knew that however much fun and polite these guys could play, they could also play rough given the slightest reason.

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I wouldn’t want to burn them on a drug deal, or try to enforce
the county zoning laws, and that’s for sure. But the county sher­
iff, who had been constantly elected since the early sixties, occa­
sionally made noises about cleaning up the mess up there, if only
the county attorney would give him the papers, but it was just
noise. I knew some DEA types and some state narco boys who
were convinced that the Snowdrifters ran an amphetamine factory
in the old mine shaft, but they were part of the same group of law
enforcement turkeys who promised to rid the county of drugs by
. . . well, by sometime . . . and who lied to the press about the
value of the few drug busts they made. Besides, Norman might
look funny, but he could count on his fingers and toes, and he
hadn’t taken anything but misdemeanor busts for fights and traf­
fic violations since his release from Salem. And if the truth be
known, I had worked for Norman a few times riding shotgun on
deals and runs. I remembered him as half-good company, the
times as half-fun. Except perhaps for the last time, when we went
off the top of Rogers Pass in a stolen green Saab with a trunkload
of AK-47’s. That’s another story, though.

Norman also had the best illegal satellite video system in west­
ern Montana, which I had occasion to watch, but Norman’s main
fault seemed to be the ease with which he got bored. After the
satellite dish came video games, which bothered me a little, and
after the video games came the white rats. They didn’t bother
me—they were oddly affectionate—but Norman took to getting
stoned and taking pot shots at them with a .44 magnum, and
rumor had it that he occasionally bit their heads off for effect. I
didn’t believe that, though. If I had, I might have been nervous.

When I called, Norman’s long-time old lady, Midget, shouted
at Norman. I heard him shout back, “Tell the old fart to come on
out. We'll twist one, have some fun like the old days.” Then I heard wild laughter, the ringing crash of gunfire, nameless squeals.

By the time I wrestled the Paradise van up to Norman's gate, I thought about being nervous, even thought about giving the money back. Some clients think private eyes have a code, something like never quit or seek justice whatever the cost or punish the guilty whomever they might be, but the code is probably more like never give the money back. So I leaned on the horn, the chain-link gate rolled back, and I drove toward the end of the canyon over the rough, snowy track. As I came around the last corner, I could see Norman sitting in the school bus that served as one of his front entrances. He had started without me. A cloud of smoke shrouded his head, he cradled an AK-47 in his arms, and he smiled brightly in the snowy light.

When I trudged up to the bus door, Norman levered open. “You got them fat boys stashed in that fish van, Sughrue?”

“They wouldn't fit,” I said, stepping into the moldering funk of the bus.

Norman leaned the rifle against the far window and asked, “So what the fuck you doin' here?”

“Just trying to make a living, Norman.”

“Bullshit, man,” he growled, then stretched and yawned, his wild eye roving in its socket. He took a hit off the remains of the doobie, then ate it, fire and all. His grimy hand rubbed at his bearded chin. The hand came back dirtier, if that was possible, without dislodging the pieces of what looked like last week's anchovy and jalapeno pizza. “You can't hardly make enough livin' to pay for your fun.” He laughed. “What was playing?”

_Crumley_ 117
“Boy George.”

“Figures,” he said, hugely amused with himself, “homophobic bastard.” Norman watched too many television talk shows on his dish, which might prove that the method of the education is more important than the information. Or might not. “Goddammit, Sughrue, not even in my wildest days, not even in my worst moments, did I ever consider somethin’ like that, somethin’ that—what can I say?—that fuckin’ abnormal,” he said with what seemed to be great admiration. “Wish to fuck I’d thought of it,” he added, then laughed so hard he seemed about to come apart.

Aside from looking even crazier than he was, Norman seemed to be the only survivor of a genetic disaster, a man of parts, and all the parts from totally unrelated people. His lank greasy hair draped thick and black around a long pale face with light gray eyes and a wispy, almost oriental moustache. His long skinny arms ended in tiny hands; his short legs tried to carry the torso of a large man on feet so tiny a Chinese prince might love them. Then of course there was the eye, always staring with deep interest just over your shoulder into some demented fourth dimension. And the smell, a mixture of stale urine, bad teeth, marijuana, and probably acid rain and crotch rot that followed him like bad karma.

Norman’s laughter ended in a terrific fit of dope coughing. He dragged something living from the gravel pit of his throat, then hawked it onto a side window where it quickly froze among others of its ilk. “Modern art is lovely,” Norman claimed, then thumbed toward the back of the bus where it connected through a cabin to his log house. “Let’s go twist one, man.”

I had an attack of fastidious hesitation, but moved quickly along when he raised his arm to throw it affectionately around my
shoulders. "Goddammit, Sughrue, it's a fuckin' kick in the ass to see you again, my man, remember that fuckin' time I stuffed that fuckin' Saab through that snowbank and we flew off Rogers Pass ..."

As he told the story that I remembered all too well, I worked my way through the debris of a particularly untidy life, managed to dodge the double sleeping bag on the bus floor where Norman's second-in-command, Beater Bob, reclined calm and supine. Bob was as large as both the Dalhgren twins, so heavy he hadn't straddled a hog in years, but rode with the gang on a specially sprung trike driven by a Volkswagen engine. Bob didn't seem to be in the bag alone. Someone or something bobbed at his crotch, low grunts slipping forth from the center of the bag.

"C.W.,” Bob said pleasantly.

"Bob,” I answered as I stepped aside and tried to hold my breath. Bob had his arms propped behind his head, and I could tell he hadn't been to the car wash since the cows came home at the beginning of winter.

The clutter faltered in the cabin behind the bus and died completely, thanks to Midget, in the large living room of Norman's house. Except for the rats. And the rat turds. The former were either coursing about the room in great cinematic stampedes rife with the pitter-patter of tiny feet on the oak flooring, or just hanging out in quivering bunches. The latter crunched under my boots. A large naked woman I didn't recognize snored in a hammock stretched in front of the stone fireplace across the room. At the far end, Norman's video equipment sat about like a showroom display, silent and gray. But the near wall, covered with the fish tanks in question, shimmered with movement and light. Midget, a small, hard woman dressed in a baby doll nightie,
sat on a ladder, a fish book in one hand and a box of something dried and disgusting in the other. She seemed to know what she was doing, though. The water in the tanks was as limpid and lively as that in Dalhgren's Paradise.

"Hey, C.W.," she said without looking up, then shook her head and glanced at Norman. "This fish shit is complex, man."

"Ain't that something," Norman said proudly. "Mary's my full-time fish-bitch."

"Norman," Midget scolded.

"Sorry," Norman apologized. Their relationship must have taken a turn. I'd never known Midget's given name and never known Norman to apologize for anything. "The royal keeper of the fish," he amended as he swept a cluster of sleeping rats off a tattered recliner. I perched on the front of an old couch, trying to take a seat that wasn't moving. Norman drew a packet of smoke out of his overalls pocket and quickly twisted a number the size of a mouse. "So what's up, Sughrue?" he asked after he lit it. "You come for the money?"

"The fish," I said as he handed me the joint. Norman looked as if I had hurt his feelings. "Hey, man, it's just a day's work for me, and I've already earned it. After me, though, comes the county sheriff and his minions."

"Fuck the sheriff and his fuckin' onions," Norman said calmly as he took the number from me. "That pussle-gutted piss-ant bastard shows up on my property, I'll have Bob squeeze shit-for-brains till his head pops like a pimple, then Mary can feed him to the fish."

"Now Norman, you know that's not right," Mary said, shaking her head fondly.
“You get the picture,” he said. Norman offered me the smoke but I waved it away. “I’m keepin’ the fuckin’ fish, man. I like ’em. A lot. I picked ’em up on orders.”

“Orders?”

“From my doc, man,” he explained. “He told me to get them, but I’m attached to the little fuckers now, Sughrue, you wouldn’t believe it—”

“Don’t believe it,” Mary interrupted. “Norman don’t even know their names, man. I’m the one’s attached. He’s just barely involved.”

I felt as if I had missed something very important, so I took the number back from Norman and had a healthy hit. I wanted to fit in with the weird. “Your doctor told you to get the fish?” Norman nodded. “What the fuck for?”

“Ah, shit, man,” he sighed. “I got this ah, you know, this fuckin’ blood pressure problem. Hypertension, you know. Stress related, they think.”

“Certainly lots of stress in your business, Norman.”

“Damn straight. You oughta try runnin’ a business, not a big business but a business, with the kinda creeps I got hangin’ around me. It ain’t easy, man. Somebody’s gotta be responsible, right. So I guess it’s gotta be me. I can’t depend on these other fuckin’ jerks.”

“Thanks, Norman,” Mary complained.

“Except for Mary, of course,” he continued, “and I’m sorry, man, we been friends a long time, but I’m keepin’ the fish. I guess that’s the bottom line, dude.”

I kept thinking that there must be some easy way out of this, but since I didn’t know what it might be, I said to Norman, “I
know I shouldn’t ask, man, but what the hell do the fish have to do with your blood pressure?”

“I always liked that about you, Sughrue. Even when you’re stoned senseless, man, you always ask the right question. You can go back to work for me anytime. Just ask. Where was I?”

“Fish tanks and blood pressure,” I said.

“Thanks, man. See, I had these headaches, and the doc said it was my blood pressure so he gave me these tiny little pills but they made my pretty little pecker absolutely fuckin’ useless.”

“Never was all that useful, anyway,” Mary giggled from the ladder. Then she took a hit off a roach, blew smoke across the water, and laughed again.

Instead of dragging one of the pistols off the end table and killing her, Norman joined her laughter fondly. I took another hit. Quickly. Norman took the number from me, then picked up a rat off the arm of the couch and sat it on his chest, where he stroked it gently and blew dope smoke softly into its tiny gaping nostrils.

“So he told me to try fish. I watch ’em two hours ever’ day. Works like a voodoo charm,” he said, then patted his crotch. “Watchin’ them little fucks eats up that stress, man, makes me mellow.”

As if the idea of mellow worked on him, Norman wriggled his ass, settled his bulk into the recliner, and tilted it back. A loud, painful squeal ripped from the recess of the Lazy Boy. “Oh, shit, man,” Norman groaned. He handed me the roach and the rat, which I took as calmly as if I had been just waiting for the chance to hold them, then he stood up, carefully turned over the chair, and gently dug a damaged rat from the springs. “Poor baby,” he crooned as he held it in his hand. The rat thrashed around its broken back, then sunk its teeth into Norman’s thumb. Norman
let it. After a moment, he quickly snapped its neck, stroked it with
his thumb once more, then tossed it toward the fireplace. It
bounced off the fat lady’s hip and into the fire. She neither woke
nor sang, but then it wasn’t time yet. “I fuckin’ hate that, man,”
Norman said as he righted the recliner.

“You don’t use them for target practice anymore?” I asked as I
handed him his pretties back. The rat had been sweetly affection­
ate as I held it, and I swear it gazed at me with longing as I gave
it back.

“No way, man,” he said. “I’m a changed man, Sughrue, mas­
sively mellow.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” I said.

Norman stopped petting the rat on his chest and gave me a
hard look. Not that mellow, I guess.

“So maybe we can work something out.”

“Don’t fuck with me, man.”

“Maybe if you’d just pay the Dalhgrens, Norman, and maybe
let them see what a good job Mary is doing with the fish, maybe
visitation rights,” I suggested, “maybe they could help Mary.”

“Mary don’t need any help, and I don’t want those fat fucks in
my house. Can you dig it?” Norman said, his good eye hard and
his bad one nearly focused, his voice bottomed out on the line.
Then his mood shifted again, quickly, and he mused, “You know
what, man? If those fat fucks hadn’t been so scared of me, I might
have given them a good check.”

“Norman, you ate their entire supply of African leap fish,” I
said.

“Leaf fish,” he corrected.

“And somebody who sounded like their grandfather.”

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"Li Po," he said. "A Siamese fighting fish. Shit, it was strange having those fish swimming around in my tummy, man."

"Norman!" Mary screeched from the tanks, but we both ignored her.

"So the boys were a little scared," I suggested.
"They shit their baggy pants."
"Well, what would you do if I came in here and bit the heads off your favorite rats?"

"I wouldn't be surprised. You always were crazier than me, Sughrue. And never scared of me or treated me like I was a freak," he said. "That's why I always liked you. And goddammit I hate it when some fuck treats me like I'm a freak. Hey, man, I'm a human being, you know, and I got fuckin' feelings like anybody else, so when people are afraid of me, unless I mean for them to be, it makes me weird. Okay?"

"Well, it's okay with me, but I think the boys will go to the law."

"What do you think I got lawyers for, man? Traffic tickets? It'll take 'em a year just to get through the gate. Maybe by then my blood pressure will be down."

"Fuck your blood pressure, Norman," I said. We were both sort of stunned, but I carried on in my foolishness. "You fucking criminals are the most self-centered assholes in the world. All you think about is yourself. Think about somebody else for a change. Just give the Dalhgrens their money and let them see that the fish are all right, and all this will go away."

"Maybe you should go away, asshole." Norman had feelings, and I had damaged them. "Out of my house." He stood up slowly.

"Norman," Mary said softly from the fish tanks.
"I'll be back," I said, standing too.
“Like I said, asshole, you always were crazy.”
“Keep that in mind.”
“Don’t get crossways with me and the brothers,” Norman said.
“Fuck you and the brothers,” I said as I walked toward the door, the skin crawling like rats across my exposed back. But Norman snorted, bitter and tough, and I knew I had walked out this time. Next time, well, who knows about next time.

As I drove away in the van, I found my hands trembling on the steering wheel. It didn’t feel like fear, though, but some sort of anger, maybe even rage. Norman was just Norman, and I didn’t think I was mad at him. It was just me, on the backside of forty, bedded down on a slab. Not even my own slab.

The snow-slick roads back to Meriwether gave me plenty of time to consider my life, but sometimes I simply wasn’t interested in my life. So I’d never married, hadn’t had a date in a year, hadn’t slept with a woman in so long I couldn’t remember it, I mean really slept with a woman, but I didn’t seem to care. I might think that the Dalhgrens were funny, but they really cared about their fish. I couldn’t fix my life, but I could get their fish back. Maybe that was my life, helping those who could still care, even if I couldn’t. At the moment it didn’t sound like such a bad life.
Look at them!
Look at her fingers scorched scarlet from cooking.
The unpainted fingernails that once fed bony chickens
fingers that milked goat teats for thicker milk
long fingers that burrowed in Gnjlan earth to pull milkweed roots.
Those muscled fingers that bore buckets of cold mountain cesma
water for everything.
The marble cobble Gnjlan knuckles kneading easy
ground beef, pork, veal.
Kneads diced onions into that meat.
Kneads half-cooked white rice, parsley, celery,
black pepper, white pepper, paprika.
Kneads this ball of meatrice spice at midnight.
Stuffs each red bell pepper,
the small scritch and sigh of her greasy hands squeezing meat,
that sighs scribbles of grease on the breadboard,
rattle sigh of her lungs sounding the last winter wind virus,
hiss of simmering lamb hock bones, fat emerald leeks.

She scribbles grease on yesterday's newsprint.
The dark shadows bloom across maps of Yugoslavia,
across the red geranium, sulfur chrysanthemum houseboats, their lace curtains that swell with the Danube breeze. Blooms dark over the liverish burlhands, scrag white hair of old men bent over playing chess forever on the banks of slow Nisava. This grease she smears on each pepper, gives each an eyelid of tomato skin to cover the glaring socket, to keep these peppers blind in 350 degrees. Familiar. The blindness, the heat, the black pepper not unlike his knife sharp words, the stiff silences, years of enduring. Tomorrow, we will open these peppers and eat, find small empty spaces, the dark greasy cooked air knifed open under yellow kitchen light. Her small caves she left at midnight, that she sprinkles salt over because they deserve more. This empty air and salt we eat together, hungry. Washed down with red wine. The shrapnel of crumbs she sweeps together, in silence, alone.
This is my language written in islands,  
the language of snakes.  
Over the broad view from the highest point  
a birch tree leans on a stem of ice,  
shaking its cymbals from the mounds.  
The slow barges arrive.  

If there is anyone to love  
the Mississippi will have loved before,  
moving south without leaving this place,  
sending up mists, flesh pink at dusk and dawn,  
that the town may shine through,  
small, celestial.  

This is my own spinal fluid and yours.  
Yes, it splits us. It joins us,  
making sense of its banks:  
Iowa, Wisconsin, North America.  
Lying awake, we hear coyotes.  
I remember the West, and am comforted  
while you imagine dismemberment.
But listen again: it’s the whistle of the train vanishing in the track between river and cliff.
Fontanel the size of a quarter
like the blow hole in a young porpoise.
The plates of his head
grow toward each other.
He is cut off from his squids and anemones.
When he eats, the intelligent jelly
throbs in the notch of his hardening scalp.
The shifts and buckling of this cartilage
allowed his passage to this side
and now his soft spot closes,
land masses that will merge
and form the island of this one boy.
SkyHouse Publishers has combined the winners of the Montana Arts Council's 1991-92 First Book Award Competition in a single book, which leaves the reader with a deeply stratified sense of place. Every valley, river, and sagging two-story rental house fits into its own groove of history and geography, each of which is intersected, and changed, by the people who pass through it. John Holbrook and Ron Fischer write about these stories, histories, and continuances in ways that reveal the possibility of seeing history and self in the West, and the range of expression that opens up when poetry and fiction work against each other.

The book opens with Missoula resident John Holbrook's title poem, "Clear Water on the Swan," and these first lines:

A man on the Swan takes trout
like himself—by the teeth.

We are at once grounded in place, our feet firm in the cold rush of river, and also in the mind of the poet, who is compelled to take himself "by the teeth" as part of the hard design of mountain and town. We are set up for strong language and image, and on this count Holbrook delivers.

In "Three Days on the Clark Fork River in View of the Hoerner Waldorf Mill," the poem begins, "I chip my way/through three inch ice/ with the blue-tipped blade/of an axe." The sense of vision and time promised by the title confronts us from the start, as we are left to feel the effect of the poem's images: ice chips flying in the chill of winter morning air, the echoing crack of axe on ice between the valley's snowy walls, the duration of the task as the hole is carved.
Later in the poem
... Sunlight floods
the riprap ridge
along the river's edge
that holds several
thousand acre
settling ponds in place.

The temporality of light and dams delivers a foreboding sense of change and time.

In “Petition to Common Sense,” a poem James Dickey chose as the winner of the 1990 Florida Poetry Contest, a woman stops her car on the side of the interstate after running over a box turtle. The poem moves from object, the dead turtle, to the woman's mind:

As she pulled at tufts of grass,
as flies began to hover the loss,
she could only guess
if wilderness ever listened.

This leap into mind is as characteristic of Holbrook's poems as the keenly seen reality of nature. But at times the jump seems elusive, too spare and undeveloped, especially when the language remains tough-edged.

Returning to the man in “Clear Water on the Swan,” the second stanza of the poem begins:

Other men come to an end.
Contemporary, like vegetables,
they have no flair for the sun
unless it meets them half way.

The language is raw and muscled, but what it's trying to say gets lost in the tight turns that work so successfully in other spots. The idea that men, like vegetables, need sunlight to thrive, as long as it's not too intense for too long, is well-taken and convincing. But the "contemporary" throws the reader off track, especially since the
greater idea of contemporaneity, the sense of being here now, in this particular time and place in the continuum of history, is one of Holbrook's best-earned achievements.

And the collection itself is an achievement; the turns of mind that elude are sophisticated considerations of life, nature, and place. The concluding poem, "Letter Back to Michigan," poses questions that define Holbrook's vision of his poetry and his search for meaning in the setting of his life. "Listen," the letter says, "you'd think as things happen, / scenery would be enough." It never is, but Holbrook boldly explores the territory of what might be.

The title of Anaconda native Ron Fischer's "Journeys Into Open Country" is deceptive, in that the stories are rooted in the mining towns of Anaconda and any openness of country is undercut by the boundaries of each character's life. Fischer offers a promise in the book's title that he knows each story longs for, but ultimately, by being so well-grounded in a lifetime of the author's observations and experiences, remains beyond reach.

We can't ask for better craft. Every story draws us into a scene, a family, a situation that is immediately compelling; something is at stake from the opening sentences. Consider the opening line of "Borders and Anaconda Streets," the collection's first story: "Mrs. Novich, the lady next door, is loading everything she owns into Roman Sand's truck." We know there's a story here.

The child narrator goes on to tell about restlessness, transience, mine strikes, religious conflict, hard times, and adolescence; and he's absolutely convincing. The prose is always interesting, with some passages standing out in the way they handle imagery and association. For example, when the narrator, a Jewish boy, is caught fighting in the Catholic schoolyard by Sister Ralph: "She looked old as the school, probably laid its bricks. Her hands were as big as bricks, and her voice sounded like a wall of them toppling." The movement from edifice and posterity to a cascade of those very same bricks, all
through sharp corporeal reference, is a good example of the kind of
writing that Fischer sustains throughout the collection's six stories.
By the time the story comes to its close, we're right back at the
opening scene with Mrs. Novich loading her possessions into Roman
Sands' truck, but now we know why.

"The Recital" works in the same way. It opens on a gray day in
Vienna with a pair of lovers on a courtyard bench. The narrator,
spying on them, is called back to his childhood in Montana by a
woman in the next apartment playing an etude by Debussy. After
exploring the narrator's broken relationship with his brother and a
failed music recital in grade school, we finally return to the opening
moment of the now-empty Vienna courtyard.

The collection closes with a powerful story which takes its title
from a veteran miner, Manus Dugan, who is caught below as a fire
burns deep within the mine. It's a story about the stand everyone in
Fischer's stories takes against the very source of their lives. Miners
are pitted against the labyrinth of the mine itself, workers fight
against themselves for survival, families face the reality of an always
lurking danger. In the miners we see the ethnic diversity that char­
acterizes the mainly European-based populations of the Butte and
Anaconda communities, while in "Badlands" Fischer writes about
the Mexican shacktowns and Black communities in a nameless
prairie town along the banks of the Yellowstone River.

Both Fischer and Holbrook know their territory, and handle
their craft well enough to create a lasting art. Sam Hamill (poetry),
editorial director of Copper Canyon Press, and Lynda Sexson (fic­tion), author of Margaret of the Imperfections and Ordinarily Sacred,
were the judges. They have selected two writers who explore rather
than stereotype the limits and truths of a place and its inhabitants
to share the First Book Award. Montanans have good reason to be
pleased with their choice.
Paul Bunyan's Bearskin
Patricia Goedicke
Minneapolis, Minnesota: Milkweed, 1992.
$11.00; paper.
Reviewed by Janet Homer

Paul Bunyan's Bearskin is Patricia Goedicke's first all-new book in a while. I suppose it's permissible in the career of a poet as hardworking as this one to spend some of one's seventh, all of one's eighth, and most of one's ninth books elegantly experimenting with juxtaposition and sequence of previously published poems. Publishers like that kind of thing, I'd guess—they get to reap the rewards of the slow spread of fame among the reading public (and so does the poet). Still, a body might get impatient and approach this tenth book with an arched eyebrow: what have we here? Well, growth, for one thing. And lots of it. Growth, juice, and jazz. In Bearskin, Goedicke really opens up in a lot of ways: there's quite an expansion in her personal view, as well as in poetic form and general scope.

To rework the old axiom: in her earlier work, Goedicke wrote of intensely personal experience, rendering it universal, allowing her audience to touch her; in this collection the universal is incorporated—intensely—into the personal, the poet reaching out to touch the audience. More simply put, the consciousness in her poetry has become global.

A trajectory is completed here that started in the next-to-last poem of her seventh book The Wind of Our Going (1985), "The Tongues We Speak." That poem works its way around to "The warm currents of the senses / Are a two-way street, my friends" but never entirely resolves its opening:

... In bars and at lecterns I have told the truth
Fairly often, but hardly ever to myself.
I have not cried out against the crimes of my country
... I was comparing lipsticks
The day Nagasaki vanished...
Bearskin is the poet's attempt to get past that earlier view ("What is a block vote against steam shovels?") and engage the important issues of the day. But these new poems are not diatribes, nor newsreels—Goedicke reserves her right to remain a thinking, feeling individual.

The book is in seven parts (she has gotten good at juxtaposition and sequencing), with the first being an overture (in the musical sense), seating the audience with a reminder of the poet's established accomplishments while laying out motifs for what follows. The second section opens with "American Exercises"—in the voice of a rather silly someone who is just waking up to the fact that not everybody has a wonderful life:

... my dear I don't understand it,
That nice yellowhaired girl, you and me,
Surely we mean no harm, if all we want is each other
And a little lean meat...

After the polished elegance of "The Goldberg Variations" (the overture), the risks Goedicke takes early in the sequence may jar a bit, but what seems at first like a light medley of current events and pop culture references—"Ms. Pacman" certainly jumps out in "On Second Thought"—are not at all inconsistent with the state of mind being portrayed and certainly not in the light of a world in which somehow we keep talking to each other right after 60 Minutes
with Eleanor Roosevelt and Qaddafi
with Superman and Derrida and Einstein
and Bruce Springsteen and the President of Coca Cola
and Ronald Reagan and Dr. Strangelove on a white horse.

The secondhand history of the "she-Nazi" stuck in the middle of "The Emperor's Nightingale" doesn't work for me, but it was the only real clanger I noticed. I was more impressed when the influence of the media was directly addressed, as, for example, in "The Story":

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I turned on the television
And suddenly the whole day turned into John Gielgud
In a concentration camp . . . yellow cadavers rolling
Right into the living room.

The emotional and intellectual development thus begun continues throughout the book. Take the pain of "Without Looking":
how
difficult it is to look
hard and head
on has not been said
often enough . . .

Or the confusion of "If There Were a Real Voice":
If this is all we have what is my real name
How can anyone stop searching
Everywhere, under the bitter garbage of stars
All I want is one clear thought that will stay.

Even in the middle of a poem about coming to terms with a sibling ("The Rain Between Us"), the world consciousness is there: "the animals are still at it, / snarling over the white body / of elegant Beirut this time."

"The Color of History" is a key poem, signaling the transformation is complete: a distraught friend demands "what have the most recent, even the most dangerous/ strategic missiles got to do with her." In the penultimate poem, "The Periscope of the Eye," there is acceptance—"As the underwater days rush by / Fists knock at my hull, political prisoners/ And South African refugees reach for me in the dark"—but not surrender: "how can I say what fish / are too big for our nets/ What immense songs may be moving / right now, out there beyond all instruments?" I think we will be seeing "Along The Street" anthologized as a single poem that powerfully expresses the blooming of this kind of consciousness—and conscience.
Another facet of this development is the poet's departure from a characteristic first-person point of view. Goedicke has included poems that take a step toward short-story conventions in using an omniscient narrator to explore the experiences of others. This can be chilling, as in “Coin of the Realm,” a scary little piece about an all-American gun freak; intimate and insightful, as in “The Charge,” about adult sons at their farmer father's deathbed; or dark and driving, as in “Frontier,” in which Goedicke does an amazing job of getting inside the head of a young man in Kansas. She ventures into broad political satire, with a little help from Jonathan Swift, in “Whenever She Speaks Up.”

Yet another manifestation of this broadening of scope, it seems to me, is the inclusion of several poems about the power of women together. There are, as before, poems about mother and sister, but there are also many women friends moving through the poems, as instigators of growth—the heroine of “Passports” and “Cathay,” for example. The dreamy “In These Soft Trinities” celebrates feminine archetypes and “crowned, constellated friends.” One of the poems I liked most was “Women's Workshop” which weaves together powerful stories and personalities (although I do wonder why there has to be a passing nod to men telling their stories, too, in the second section). All of these poems fall into the center (fourth) section of the book—suggesting, perhaps, that this collective feminine energy is a kind of fulcrum, if not an apex.

The context of this review doesn't really permit me to show what's going on with Goedicke's poetic form—you have to see the book. Some poems have such a completely different shape, it's hard to believe they're by the same writer from whom we've come to expect elegant, flowing lines with charming, controlled rhythms. A lot of that is still there—as lovely as ever—but her lines really open up and dance all over the page in “Now, This Morning, Beaming” or “Many Houses” or “Deer Crossing, Wild Horse Island” or “The Wind that
Swept Up Great Homer.” What she does for the reader with irregular patterns of indentation and some occasionally breathtaking lining is to impart that jazz I mentioned earlier, giving us an energy and sense of urgency to support the essential optimism of her world view. Or she might use short, spare lines, as she does in “Near Zero,” and let the imagery carry the poem along. Or she might go long, as in “The Story,” or she might dazzle us with a tightly crafted villanelle (“The Point of Emptiness”). Or she might just go straight up into the air, as she does in the final poem, “Paul Bunyan’s Bearskin,” sailing across America.
Hunger in America, David Cates' remarkable first novel about a single night on Kodiak Island, begins with a one-page description, a prologue that establishes mood and sets scene, and also makes a claim for the authorial voice.

When it's overcast, Kodiak is an island of ten thousand gray shades, and it's almost always overcast . . . out that way is the ocean and the ocean goes on forever. In back of us . . . is the wilderness . . . Resting on shore pilings and little hills, town is a relative megalopolis, a cluster of canneries, bars, shops, boats—humanity squeezed mercifully between the forevers. Built on a rock, of course, a bit of solidity, the present tense . . .

The last images go about as far as you can to describe the human condition. Between "the forevers" of ocean and wilderness, humanity is "squeezed," a verb suggesting pain, but pain eased somewhat by the adverb "mercifully." The next sentence expands on this authorial claim to wisdom with an image of man's work "built on rock," but rock cut down to "bit" size, then changed altogether into something less solid though perhaps more enduring: words, grammar, "the present tense." The author seems to be saying that he is the island and the mercy, and all questions implied in his survey-sounding title will be answered in the pages that follow.

So we begin the story of Jack Dempsey Cliff, a newcomer to Kodiak Island who's working as a cab driver and who is, as we quickly discover, undergoing actual, physical hunger. A complaining phone call from his hypochondriac mother in Wisconsin has caused him to miss his dinner and, in a moment, he will discover he's too late for a free spaghetti feed at a local bar. Jack's fruitless search for food will be a running joke throughout the long night of
his shift. But in a story that moves from random fare to random fare, Jack’s search for food is the only real plot we will get.

Yet there’s another kind of search going on, a search that got Jack to Kodiak Island in the first place. He’s trying to find out about his father, who he never knew. This search began when Jack first learned of his absent father’s death in a fishing accident fifteen years before, and is motivated by the question of why Kid Cliff walked out on his family. Was it in any way Jack’s fault or was it because the man had endured the nightmare of the Bataan death march? Jack knows it’s an impossible search, that the past is irredeemable, but he also knows he has to go on with it, if for no other reason than that it brings some meaning to his life.

He’s wondering if anybody truly mourned his father’s death . . . He knows this is a dangerous way to think, but he’s thinking this way anyway. Rationality is nice, but it can weaken the compulsion to make up stories about the stars. There are days, sometimes years, when wonder at the unknowable is all that feeds you.

Paradoxically, though Jack’s hunger is real, his “wonder at the unknowable” makes him seem less hungry than his fares. And Kodiak’s nightlife are a very hungry bunch. There’s Edna, the forty-year-old Aleut virgin, powerless in the real world but who, in her own mind, is able to change her shape at will. There’s Pretty Gertie, the mean drunk with the massive head who wants to become pregnant. There’s Donald Sutherland, Jack’s movie-star name for the coke-happy fisherman who keeps getting into his cab. And there are many others: prostitutes, bartenders, waitresses, Filipino cannery workers and Japanese sailors, two-hundred pages full of hungry people.

But no one is hungrier than Neil Pasternak, the Vietnam vet who blithely tells Jack that he sailed with Kid Cliff on his last voyage and that the man saved his life by making him get into a life raft. It seems
to Jack that his father has treated Neil Pasternak as a son, so Neil becomes, in Jack’s eyes, a kind of brother. But Neil is also the fare who, at the beginning of the novel, eats Jack’s dinner and who will be, in each subsequent section, the cause of Jack not getting anything to eat. Neil is Jack’s fate, an alter ego, a scavenger and waster who constantly courts disaster and who, through perverse luck, constantly escapes it.

As he walks towards town, Neil’s thinking of Susan out there somewhere with a gun; he’s hoping the Mecca has opened already for breakfast; he’s thinking of how the world seems to shrink whenever the fog blows down past the reservoir—even with that pretty spot of sun over there; he’s thinking of himself and Susan long ago, trying to remember a wonderful dream, yet all the time keeping his eyes on the skyline for signs of mutual destruction.

“Mutual destruction” is Neil Pasternak’s vision, and from his experience, it’s a valid one. In fact, most of the characters are given such insights, beautiful glimpses of the truth of their own experience.

And, when I finished reading, I found I was doing it too, interpreting my experience of the novel. Realism, I decided as I felt the pain of its people. But realism didn’t explain the almost ritualistic workings of fate in the story. And thinking about ritual led to allegory and Kodiak Island became a kind of purgatory for the testing of souls. But I couldn’t sit still with that. Allegory led to parable and the novel moved on to become a cautionary tale of wasted lives. Now, as I remember those first enthusiastic readings, I realize that what I was really doing was working off the excitement the book had generated in me.

I’m told David Cates spent over ten years writing Hunger in America and that the novel underwent three major revisions. Perhaps, for a talented writer, waiting for a publisher isn’t such a bad thing. It
explains how authors burst on the scene as overnight sensations with first books that have taken years to write. Think of Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* and its publication history. *Hunger in America*, though a very different novel, might well be in the same class as Heller's. It's not just a first book that shows great promise. It might have been that once. But the publishing powers-that-be gave David Cates time to write a first novel that will stand as a fine piece of work for any stage of his career. Deceptively simple, surprisingly taut, and quietly humane, *Hunger in America* is, in fact, one of the best novels I've read in a long time.
The poems in Greg Glazner's first collection, *From the Iron Chair*, do not step back from forms of violence such as bitterness, hate, television, deconstructionism or heroin. Nor do they plunge so headlong as to wipe out regret for the humanity that is inevitably lost. Rather, these poems approach the violence of their subjects with a steady, open-eyed awareness of what is shattered beyond recognition, sometimes risking that awareness in order to touch the open nerve, to follow, as Glazner puts it, "like a sleepwalker / deep in an instinctual violence, stalking / the white rush of my breath."

Glazner's poems are a white rush of breath, and the poet within them often finds himself walking the razor-sharp edge bounding contradictory conditions, between sleepwalking and stalking.

Chosen by Charles Wright as winner of the 1991 Walt Whitman Award, *From the Iron Chair* divides its material into four sections. The first gathers the collection's most personal poems, reflecting on the death of the poet's uncle in "New Stars," the opening poem, and in "The Seine." These two are the most successful of the section, finding and holding the taut lines between opposing impulses. In "New Stars," when the death was reported to the family, the poet understood for the first time:

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something was settling into us, a constant
silt in the veins my father couldn't stop,
and I knew we would be filled completely.
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Without lessening the bitterness and despair in this realization of death's inevitability, Glazner makes a song of strength and praise:

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Another voice seeps through me
steeped in bits of gnashed teeth and salt water,
... a voice useless to bring rain
or give the dead their old eyes back,
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and I sing with it often, bitter-tasting and strong,
and it wakes the sky. . .

The second section begins and ends with powerful extensions of Glazner’s “bitter-tasting and strong” voice to a vision of nature as a violent indifference that owns equally the souls of ants and humans, “something running loose out there, hunger / way past anybody’s knowing or control.” In “The Constant Upward Spiraling, The Cost,” the section’s final poem, Glazner takes the benign, meditative fishing poem and turns it on its head, gutting out all the lovely, delicate inspirations emanating from our muse, the Trout: “By half-light, even the last cutthroat’s / red-streaked thrashing didn’t rouse me.” This is difficult and complex honesty, that even in our most sublime pursuits and killings, an indifference lurks, reducing the frailty of thought and feeling to nothing but dumb gnawing, “butchered clean of value.” “The Constant Upward Spiraling, The Cost” is placed directly in the middle of the book, and rightly so, for its material is central to Glazner’s poetry.

In the last half of the book we find Glazner’s most ambitious, far-reaching pieces, “The Metaphysician’s Weekend” and the title poem, “From the Iron Chair.” As longer poems, they attempt to find and develop large themes striking at the heart of present-day experience of culture. At issue in both poems is the empty falsity of an abstracted, modern sensibility that can find no ground, no crucial reality for itself beyond the self-reflexive seeking of pleasure. In “Concentrating on Photographs: The Vatican,” a section of “The Metaphysician’s Weekend,” Glazner focuses overtly on this issue. The poem’s speaker, dazed in the head-splitting pain of a hangover, is allowed for a moment to recognize that his modern consciousness has been amputated from the genius of the past. While the past has died, the speaker has “simply failed to live.” For a split second, this disembodied speaker returns to the human form, pictures himself lying back “in the Mother’s arms.” But in Glazner’s world, and ours,
such returns can be only momentary before the pain of alienation swells back. The problem is finally one of vision—our age’s inability to hang on to one: “whatever vision might have sated me / decays.”

Less powerful poems in the collection occur, not so much because of flawed language or structure, but because their material is not fully charged with Glazner’s sharp probing, his sense of crisis. In a poem like “Fishing: The Late Wish” (from the first section), the language gives only sparks where later poems, like “The Constant Upward Spiraling, The Cost,” burn your eyes. A clue to the development of Glazner’s art is found in “The Valley,” written for the memory of Glazner’s teacher, Richard Hugo. The conscious influence of the late poet can be felt in Glazner’s lines, and one understands that the power of the book’s later poems comes from moving outside that influence. At one point in “The Metaphysician’s Weekend,” Glazner enters a conversation with his teacher, rhyming with a phrase on Hugo’s gravestone (“sing tiny and wise”). Glazner writes,

... Are we the heirs
the old ones built for, tiny and alive,
our breath rising into a hull

of symbols? Could mere presence
assure that, even in the casual
chattering of our awe and unbelief?

Glazner’s question conveys a doubt that we own any claim to the cathedral of hope built by people like Hugo—whether, in the stupefactions of contemporary unbelief, anyone can eat stone and go on.
"The Date," a story in Pete Fromm's new book, *The Tall Uncut*, is one of the best stories I've read in a long time. It is not a surprising story. Fromm does not radically reinvent the American short story. He will not change the course of contemporary literature. He doesn't even try. Fromm's style is admirably old-fashioned. He avoids shock effects. He develops character through small and surprising detail, writing with a sincere generosity of spirit about people who may be inarticulate, but are not dumb. These characters may have limited vocabularies, but not limited emotions. Fromm doesn't set limits for emotions or perceptions. This may not seem surprising or innovative, but it feels refreshing. It's always nice to see an author treating his characters with respect.

In "The Date," Fromm creates Jonathan and Marjorie, and lets the reader follow them on the title event. Fromm develops the pair with patience, with grace. When Fromm uses a worn-out device, Jonathan describing himself in the mirror, he revives the device by taking it one step above the cliche. When Jonathan looks at himself, he offers a bit of self-analysis along with the physical detail:

He brushed at the thin, black strands that would not cover his forehead—enough forehead, he thought, to land a 747 on. [He] pulled some of his hair down over his forehead but that looked even more ridiculous. He had never tricked himself into believing he was handsome.

The passage works because Fromm allows physical detail to reveal Jonathan's awkward self-consciousness. The mirror device may be tired, but the moment is small, simple and real.

It is this skill, the ability to make the traditional fresh, that makes Fromm an interesting writer. Fromm uses two structural formulas in his stories. The first type has two main characters, a limited space,
and a source of unexplained tension that is revealed in the last page of the story. The second features a single character, consciously isolating him- or herself, thinking about the reasons for this isolation. Fromm’s strength is in an almost perfect accumulation of detail, sometimes physical (like the description of a shot turkey in “Spring”), sometimes emotional (a grandson realizing the reasons behind his grandmother’s lies in “The Tall Uncut”), sometimes both (a husband’s sense of wonder at his wife in the shower, facing the water instead of turning her back to it in “Breathing on the Third Stroke”). Fromm finds the heart of his stories in the details, not in plot.

When this style works, when Fromm hits the details dead right, the stories transcend their formula constructions. The stakes on this type of story are set almost impossibly high. A single misstep, a single missed detail, and an entire story collapses. The collection’s opener, “Mighty Mouse and Blue Cheese from the Moon,” works for eighteen of its twenty pages. The story is built around formula one, the tense situation followed by the revelation. Fromm’s misstep is using a predictable detail as an ending. He deflates an entire story in under two pages. Fromm should realize that sometimes it’s better to leave some questions unanswered than to answer them in the wrong way.

If Fromm falters occasionally, it can be forgiven. It seems selfish to ask him to make his stories more ambiguous. Fromm’s intentions are consistently noble. He wants to give every detail. His generosity compels him to try answering every possible question. The effect may not work all the time, but the spirit is true. Fromm’s best stories leave the reader with the feeling of having seen or felt something real. At worst, the feeling is only of wanting a little more, or wishing a little less had been offered.
Contributors’ Notes

Carl Beery is an 18-year-old Missoula artist. He has done extensive illustration and cartooning for the award-winning high school newspaper, the *Sun Journal*, and for other local publications.

Marnie Bullock received her M.F.A. from the University of Montana and teaches in the University of Wisconsin Center System. She has poems forthcoming in *Prairie Schooner* and the *Laurel Review*.

Nicholas Bonner’s work explores the connection between place, process, idea, and material. Most of his recent work is larger than human scale and meant to be interacted with physically to create the sense of environment or architectural space.

Russell Chatham lives in Livingston, Montana. Recently the Museum of the Rockies in Bozeman presented a retrospective of his work, the largest one-man exhibition ever in the state.


James Crumley lives and writes in Missoula, Montana. His most recent book is *The Muddy Fork and Other Things* (Clark City Press), collected short fiction and nonfiction.

Mary Ann Daly is working on a volume of poems based on souvenir postcards, a study of apparitions of the Virgin Mary in the United States, a historic rose garden, book reviews for *Lambda Book Report*, and a computer manual for her employer in Washington, D.C.

Tracy Daugherty is the author of a novel, *Desire Provoked* (Random House), and of stories in *The New Yorker*, *Ontario Review*, *Southwest Review* and other magazines.
Jon Davis is a graduate of the University of Montana's M.F.A. program in creative writing. His first collection of poetry, Dangerous Amusements, was published by Ontario Review Press. He teaches at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe.

Margaret S. Davis has exhibited work at Montana's Hockaday Center for the Arts, Myrna Loy Center for the Performing Arts, Lewis and Clark County Library, and the Holter Museum of Art.

Monte Dolack's lithograph, "No Room to Roam," explores the decline of the earth's open and wild spaces and the plight of the Yellowstone Park bison, both free and confined at the same time.

Nancy Erickson's painted, quilted fabric works have been shown in the United States, Canada, Mexico, China, and Japan. She started a series of oil drawings of bears in 1991.

Joel Friederich is CutBank's poetry editor and has poems forthcoming in Cream City Review, The Seattle Review, and cold drill.

James Galvin teaches at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. His most recent work is a book of prose, The Meadow (Henry Holt).

Earl Ganz recently published a book of short stories, Animal Care, with Lynx House Press. He teaches in the University of Montana's creative writing program and is currently working on a novel entitled, "The History of the Jews in Montana."

Ethan Gilsdorf is poetry editor for New Delta Review and is completing his M.F.A. in poetry at Louisiana State University. Born in New Hampshire, he has lived in Baton Rouge for the past two years.
Greg Glazner's poems have appeared in *Poetry, Ironwood, New England Review, Pequod,* and *Southern Poetry Review.* His first book, *From the Iron Chair,* has just been published by W. W. Norton. His awards include the Bess Hokin Award from *Poetry* and the 1991 Walt Whitman Award. He lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Paul D. Guillemette's "Deviate Sexual Wallpaper: The Girls" is part of a series that deals with Montana Law 45-5-05: Deviate Sexual Conduct. This law essentially makes gay men and lesbians felons in Montana.

Bob Hackett is a graduate student in creative writing at the University of Montana.

Peter Harris teaches at Colby College, writes the "Poetry Chronicle" for *The Virginia Quarterly Review,* and has recently published poems in *The Hiram Poetry Review* and *The Literary Review.*

Robert W. Harrison has exhibited widely throughout North America. His large-scale architectural works have been constructed both indoors and out, with the notion of "site" being paramount prior to conception.

Grayce Holzheimer is a native of Great Falls, Montana. She received a B.F.A. in drawing and sculpture from Southern Illinois University (Carbondale), and is currently employed as a goldsmith.

Janet Homer has published in *CutBank, Passages North, Five Cincinnati Poets,* and *Westering.* She received an M.A. from the University of Cincinnati in 1980 and an M.F.A. from the University of Montana in 1992. She is currently in Zen practice.
Rodney Jones teaches graduate creative writing at Southern Illinois University (Carbondale). His collections of poetry are *The Story They Told Us of Light*, *The Unborn*, and most recently, *Transparent Gestures*, winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award.

Daniel Lusk teaches poetry writing at the Art Institute of Boston. He has received fellowships from the Pennsylvania Arts Council, the MacDowell Colony, and Yaddo. His poems have appeared in the *North American Review*, *Laurel Review*, and other magazines.

Ed McDonald lives in Somers, Montana. He says the roar of a hot shop is a hopeless addiction: heat, movement, design, danger, commitment—the vessel is only the beginning.

Paul McRay has a chapbook entitled *As Though Traveling Backwards Were Natural*, just out from Windfall Prophets Press at the University of Wisconsin. His poems have appeared in many magazines, including *Poetry*, *Poetry Northwest*, and *The Antioch Review*.

Leslie Van Stavern Millar received a B.A. in studio art and biology at Mount Holyoke College. “A Mermaid Dreams of Montana” is part of a recent series.

Missy Marie Montgomery received an M.F.A. from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, where she teaches writing, reading, and creative writing.

Mary Olsen lives with her husband, daughter, and son in Montana’s Flathead Valley. Her photographs have won numerous competitions and have been exhibited at the Yellowstone Art Center in Billings.
John Patterson is a second-year law student at the University of Montana. His photographs have appeared at the Western Montana Fair for over twenty years.

Robert Pesich lives in Sunnyvale, California, and works as a research technician at Stanford University Medical Center. He studied under Sandra McPherson and Gary Snyder at University of California, Davis.

Larry Pirnie earned a B.F.A. degree at the Pratt Institute in New York City. His earliest memory of making a picture is drawing the Lone Ranger when he was six years old.

David Reimer lives in Walla Walla, Washington, though he learned to weld in Bozeman, Montana. He teaches writing and literature at Walla Walla College.

Lynn Rigney Schott is a high school English teacher in Kettle Falls, Washington. She is married to Stephen Schott, a beekeeper, and they have two daughters, Maggie and Hopi. Her poetry has appeared in The New Yorker, Idaho English Journal, The Fireside Book of Baseball (Simon & Schuster), Artist Trust, and several anthologies.

Roger Sheffer teaches English at Mankato State University, where he edits the Mankato Poetry Review. He has published two collections of short fiction. His poetry has been published or is forthcoming in The Nebraska Review, The Laurel Review, Poet and Critic, Blueline, and others.

David Shevin is Associate Professor of English at Tiffin University (Ohio). His books include The Discovery of Fire (1988) and Growl (1990).
Peter Soliunas is a graduate student in creative writing at the University of Montana.

Richard Swanson is a self-taught ceramic artist and sculptor. His work has been exhibited nationally and is included in the permanent collections of the Archie Bray Foundation and the Montana State Historical Society.

Susan Thomas received a B.F.A. from the San Francisco Art Institute. She lives in Missoula, Montana, and puts her degree to good use while making sandwiches at a local deli.

Patrick Todd lives with his wife Katie and three of his four children in Spokane, Washington, where he teaches creative writing at Gonzaga University. His most recent book is A Fire by the Tracks (Ohio University Press).

Doug Turman’s etchings are from the suite, “Sobering Moments in Montana History: Actual Events, Genuine Characters,” with text by poet Rick Newby. The entire project was shown at the Holter Museum in Helena, Montana, and published in Kinesis.

Almitra Von Willcox has spent the past seven years traveling. Her work has won numerous photo contests, including grand prize from Islands International.

René Westbrook is artist-in-residence for the Great Falls, Montana, public schools and the Montana Arts Council. Working primarily with found objects and drawing heavily from art history, she believes that everyday objects can express contemporary concerns.

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