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From the land of shining mountains, a sonnet sequence

John Barsness
The University of Montana

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FROM THE LAND OF SHINING MOUNTAINS

a sonnet sequence

by

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B.A., William Jewell College, 1950

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

Montana State University

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This sonnet sequence is an attempt to tell, in a peculiarly appropriate verse-form, certain incidents in the history of Montana from 1750, when the first white men saw it, to the present day. Each poem deals with one of the events or people or places which, it has seemed to me, played a vital part in the highly individualistic development of this state.

Montana, only seventy years from the frontier, still feels the impact of its individualism, and knows that the frontier movement was not a collective thing, but the accumulation of individual motions - the mountain man heading for the creeks, the roadagent looking for someone else's gold, the cattleman heading for free range. Histories of the frontier West have always delighted in personal adventures like these; likewise Montana has come to take pride in maintaining the habit of frontier individualism.

These sonnets concern some of those personal incidents; they attempt to show history by the impact of individuals on it. More clearly, these poems are intended to show that many sorts of frontier individualists left a lasting
impression upon Montana. We, the heirs to their tradition, are as insistent upon our rights as individuals today as the frontiersman was before such things as social cooperation or social suspicion crossed the Mississippi.

This sequence grew first from a desire to describe some of the personal adventures I had found in history; but as I added sonnets to what was at that time only a miscellaneous and undirected collection of poems, I began to veer from using the sonnet to describe incident to using it as dramatic monologue. Individuals rather than their exploits began to fascinate me, and this, I came to realize, was good. History was all very well, but the impact its people and events had made on contemporary society, the thing which we had inherited from our frontier ancestors, was not the action resulting from individuality but the sense of individuality itself. People were more important than their actions, and their own comments on themselves or on their times more important than the times themselves.

So I began to construct a series of highly individualistic, highly personalized poems in the sonnet form. There remained finally several poems that were descriptive or were narration from the author's point of view; but I felt these had a special function which I shall describe later.

But now, as the framework took shape, I began
to be asked why I had used the sonnet in such an unusual way.

I had not thought of it as particularly unusual; but finally I began to realize that an attitude of mind had grown up around the sonnet which had - unreasonably, I thought - limited its use to a narrow field of ideas. Association had made it in many minds unsuitable to any other expression than the romantic conceits of its Renaissance enthusiasts. The sonnet had, after all, made its appearance as a love-lyric. Petrarch had developed it to celebrate his love for Laura; when it had moved across the English Channel, Sidney had crystallized the English or Shakespearean form (which I have used exclusively) in Astrophel and Stella, a sequence to unrequited -- or at least platonic -- love, and Spenser's Amoretti had recorded both the intellectual and emotional aspects of his affair with Elizabeth Boswell. Scholars are still puzzling over the identity of the darkly obscure lady in Shakespeare's cycle. In the 19th century Elizabeth Barrett had concealed her authorship of the Sonnets from the Portuguese until sure of Browning's love; Dante Gabriel Rossetti had described his tortured passion in The House of Life. Hundreds of other, lesser figures had used the sonnet to pour out their hearts — and all of them, great or small, had so associated the sonnet with love that they had assumed it to be unsuitable for any other subject. Somehow the idea that the sonnet could be used for dramatic monologue, or could speak of
bloody, uncouth things, was abhorrent. Yet I had read sonnets which were not only monologues but dealt with subjects as far from the love-motif as Milton's blindness and Balboa's discovery of the Pacific (though Keats had made an historical error and had given Cortez the credit). I had read Edwin Arlington Robinson's sharp delineations of character within the sonnet; I had seen John Masefield's Animula use it as a vehicle for continued narrative; I had read Laurence Pratt's Saga of a Paper Mill, which used the sonnet both as narrative and as character-monologue.

What was the connection? Why, if the sonnet was so peculiarly suited to the expression of love, was it also so peculiarly suited to these other purposes and to my own ideas?

The common bond, I came to believe, lay in the drama of each of these various usages. The sonnet, brief and self-searching, was an excellent vehicle for short, highly-focused intense emotion - the kind of emotion love creates in momentary flashes, the same temporary excitement induced by brief adventure or sudden insight into character. It was this ability of the sonnet to portray dramatic intensity, I felt, which my sonnets held in common with others. Love was a secondary motif except that since it was the most common instance in which sudden intense emotion occurred, it became, perhaps, the most common motif for the sonnet. My sonnets were similar to those of
Petrarch or Sidney or Shakespeare, then, because they all held dramatic impact in common, though I was using the sonnet for historical narrative and the poets of the Renaissance were using it to celebrate their loves.

Eventually I came to feel that what I was doing with the sonnet was not so unusual as it had seemed on first impression; the area within which I worked - the frontier West - was distinctive, perhaps, but I saw many points of similarity between my developing sequence and those more famous sequences which I had read. Even the lyrical Renaissance love-cycles had some similarity to my rougher subjects; they, too, had a common idea - or ideal - binding each cycle together, though the common denominator of my poems was history and that of theirs was an inamorata. They, too, were narrative in a sense, for they dealt with the history of an affair or described an emotion as my poems dealt with the chronological history of Montana or described the development of an individual. There was, perhaps, more similarity between these Renaissance cycles and my sequence than between a 19th century cycle like Rossetti's House of Life and my sequence. Though The House of Life is more actually narrative, it is much more subtly so, in a tortured,

1 I think particularly of Spenser's Amoretti, which describe almost diurnally his affair with Elizabeth Boyle.
self-analytical sort of way. The clarity of subject or emotion is often obscured by the romantic floridity of expression, the unrestrained profusion of metaphor. The sonnet of the Renaissance, on the other hand, is much more simple, direct, and explicit - three things which I have attempted to maintain throughout this series. Too much is attempted in Rossetti; the sonnet, through its very brevity, must concern itself with a single emotion, no matter how involved it may be. There is no room for multiple relationships; the sonnet must maintain one direct, highly accentuated line of thought - all that can be compressed within its constricted space.

But there is actually, for all this speculation, little in common between my sonnets and those of any love-cycle, except dramatic impact. The immediate source from which these poems stem - if there is such a source, conscious or unconscious - is twentieth century. The beautifully pointed dramatic characterizations of Edwin Arlington Robinson are their closest relation. Their direct ancestors are "Cliff Klingenhagen" and "Reuben Bright" though I recall no attempt at deliberate imitation. But Robinson is the only poet with whom I am familiar whose sonnets I recalled when I attempted to link these poems with established poetry in a similar vein. Though the Robinson sonnets are rarely dramatic monologues, they are the same kind
of characterization in miniature which many of
my poems in time became. Perhaps the linkage is
not direct; perhaps it comes through the sonnets
of Mr Pratt's _Saga of a Paper Mill_, though
these I had not read until I had well started on my
own sequence. I do know that Jason Bolles's _Magpie's
Nest_, a collection which, since it deals also with
Montana, and is of local origin, made a profound
impression upon me, without a doubt influenced these
poems.

Yet while there is a similarity between each of
these poets and myself, each is dissimilar also.
Robinson deals not with historical characters nor
with an historical frame of reference. With both of
these I have been continually concerned, since each
of my characters and each of my incidents must
add something to the history which I am attempting to
give. Mr Pratt was more concerned with social and
moral conflict than I. Perhaps, finally, the only
real kinship I could claim with any of these men was
with Jason Bolles, who had been a Montanan, and had
known and written of the West that I loved.

Neither are my sonnets narrative in the sense
that those of John Masefield's _Animula_ are. Where
the sonnets in _Animula_ carry the story from one poem
to the next, often, even, running the narrative through
a couplet into a beginning quatrain, each of my
sonnets tells a complete story having nothing but a
chronological relation to the poem preceding or following it. To me the Shakespearean sonnet, in which the couplet deliberately stops and reverses the thought, was never intended to be used as mere stanza, even in the formal sequence where a common idea or purpose connects the series. Even in the continued narrative like Animula, I believe the sonnet must remain a unit; therefore, each of the poems in this series is a narrative in itself, self-contained and continuing no farther than the ending couplet.

In the last analysis the use of the sonnet as a vehicle for these ideas is in origin more accidental than deliberate. The similarities and purposes I have discussed were perceived after composition rather than before. I had been fiddling with all kinds of forms - everything from free verse to the triclet - in an attempt to find some effective medium for telling the short individual incidents of history which I had in mind, and I fiddled with the sonnet in the same way. But after I had justified to myself the dramatic value of the sonnet with the first poems in this series (notably those on Yellowstone Park and on John Bozeman), the accident became a happy and not unreasonable one. I found that not only could the sonnet express ideally the historical incident but that, used in a formal sequence, it could also reveal through
that formal structure the theme of individualism with
which I was concerned. The ideal of every
poet, whether it is conscious or not, is to find
a form that expresses content - and these
sonnets fitted the theme as well as they did
the incidents.

All of these sonnets are in the Shakespearean
form. I do not believe that any other variation
would have been so admirably suited to the expression
which I was attempting to achieve. I could not fit
narrative, for instance, into the strict octave and
sestet of the Italian sonnet. It seemed to me that
there was simply not enough space to narrate an
entire incident in eight lines; the resulting scarcity
of information rendered impossible any reflection
in the last six lines. The Shakespearean sonnet, on
the other hand, allowed the use of twelve out of the
fourteen lines to develop a single line of thought
or exposition, since I did not follow the strict
interpretation of formalists and insist that each
quatrain must be a single development in thought
within itself, restating or expanding the idea
introduced in the first quatrain. Few Shakespearean
sonnets, however, - including those of the Bard himself -
adhere strictly to this pattern. The run-on line is
too frequent an occurrence to allow the rule of
quatrain-units to stand.
A second peculiar quality which supports my use of the Shakespearean sonnet in this context is, I think, in the similarity of the rhymed quatrains to ballad style. Though the meter is dissimilar, the rhyme-scheme (the quatrains' abab, the ballad's abcb) and the lilt are enough alike that through association, at least, if not through strict similarity, a feeling persists that this sonnet form suggests the ballad which has become so closely associated with the frontier West as to seem almost exclusively its property.

But perhaps the most important peculiarity of the Shakespearean sonnet for my purposes is its ending couplet, which, as I have pointed out, allows the preceding twelve lines to concern themselves only with expository narrative while the couplet carries the full weight of the sharp reflection or summation which deliberately turns the whole poem back on itself in search of a larger significance than mere event. The couplet affords a broad focus and a chance to make of narration or incident (with which this sequence is primarily concerned) something larger than itself - something highly individualistic and sharply significant to the theme. Through the couplet used as the trigger of dramatic impact, the sonnet - this peculiar kind of sonnet - achieves the first purpose for which, I think, it became the
ideal vehicle for this representation: it becomes
an individual; it stands by itself. As I have
said, each sonnet is a complete poem, magnified,
enlarged by the discerning introversion of the
ending couplet, needing no outside help to
make itself understood or to complete its thought.

Yet as a part of a sequence the sonnet,
an organic unity, becomes part of another whole.
Like the individual in a crowd, it paradoxically
adds its own impact to the entire collection of
poems while remaining a totality in itself, just
as the sum of individual events becomes the total
picture of history though each event has no
immediate connection with another. In this way
this sequence of Shakespearian sonnets expresses
the theme of individualism inherent in the historical
idea, through the form of the verse itself.

So, at the end, I found that this sequence,
originally intended to deal only descriptively with
Montana, as a frontier and as a state, had come to
be, both in form and content, an expression of the
motives and the aspirations and the dreams of many
of the people who had stopped within her borders —
a highly personalized, dramatic account of the
history of a large corner of the Rocky Mountain
Northwest. I found that the common expression of
these poems was individuality, their common quest
was that they, like the people with whom they
were concerned, be allowed to stand alone. Though eventually my selection has been highly personal, based on those incidents and characters which have particularly caught my eye, I think my choice has been justified. Each of these poems is representative of a particular facet of Montana history which illuminates my theme. Concerned as I have been with individuality, with its influence on the frontier past and present, I think these forty poems illustrate that influence typically and variedly. There are, certainly, people and happenings upon which I have not touched; but I do not think that additions would add particularly to my theme. There are certain broad areas in this history into which each of these poems falls: Indian history, exploration, missionaries, immigration, gold-strikes, exploitation, cattle, land—these are the things which have concerned themselves with Montana. Upon each of these I have touched in greater or less detail, according to the need I felt. Each poem has a definite place within these areas, and a definite purpose in the development of the larger theme, though the characters and incidents I have touched on are as much a result of my own personal fascination as they are of major purpose. Nevertheless, out of several years' interest in any detail of local history, I feel that personal curiosity has touched on a sufficient variety of things to give these
poems a comprehensive sweep in time, place, and character. In each of the areas mentioned reality and individuality have added their color.

For the Indian, that early, barbarous communist, I wrote "Early Red", for instance - in contrast to that rough individualism which the white pioneers brought to the land. The Indian had independence, but his individuality was subordinate to the tribe. This communistic independence, opposed to white imperialistic individualism, resulted inevitably in the Custer Massacre, the rebellion of Chief Joseph, and the eventual, if incongruous, sight of Sitting Bull in a sideshow - independence bounded by the reservation. Perhaps there should have been a poem on the Indian today - but somehow I felt his individualism would have to wait till tomorrow.

Upon the early explorers I have touched with fondness, for theirs are perhaps the epic names of western history. Verendrye, whether he actually saw the mountains of Montana or not, gave the title to these poems; and Lewis and Clark, with their cohorts, became the greatest single names and the strongest individuals ever to cross these plains. Lewis was the model of the visionary, the dreamer, the passionate idealist; Clark was the model of the leader, the hail-fellow-well-met, the man forever slapping
backs and leading on. Their sergeant, John Colter, was the first of the great mountain men, the violent individualists who refused both society and association with other men to find happiness in solitude and infinite danger. And it was from Colter that the first mention of Montana's scenic grandeur came.

Beyond these men are the missionaries, the only individuals, perhaps, who entered the mountains without thought of personal gain or glory, but whose courage and whose prowess left both their names and their impact upon the state. Brother Van or Father Desmet - Protestant or Catholic - they, too, were part of individualism. I have identified only one of them in a poem - Desmet - but the anonymous Missionary is a part of all the other preachers, frocked or unfrocked, who gave life - and sometimes their lives - to the heathen.

Not all the individuals were heroic; not all of them were saints. A good number of them were heels - desperadoes, drunkards, roadagents, horsethieves. But these, too, left a deep impression on their time and ours. The legend of the badman is still strong among us, apocryphal or not. The glamor of the freebooter is a negative influence, but we must remember that the law came into this state in the form of the Vigilantes to suppress individualism in the guise of organized outlawry. If later, more respectable individuals attempted to practice
brigandage behind the skirts of the law, we can probably trace their attitude back to Henry Plummer through such a political highwayman as Thomas Francis Meagher. There is nothing in these poems which argues that individualism cannot be misused. Copper, wheat, and the railroads have taught Montanans the falsity of that attitude.

There were women, too, in this history. Sacajawea, whom Clark called Janey, was probably the first. Her I have given place with Clark, for the journals of the expedition hint at a strong relationship between them. I am sorry that the other women in this series do not, likewise, appear except in some sort of subservient relationship to their men. I did not intend to let the women take a back seat. There was a great deal of heroism in the honky-tonk girls, who were probably the first white women to enter the state; we must treat their memory with respect, remembering that many of the "first families" stem from these professional "girls." The courage they displayed in rising above their professions to marriage and respectability is no less deserving than that of those women who fought with their husbands for homesteads and farms against weather, speculation, and debt. And perhaps the one thing all of those who were defeated remembered was the sense of unutterable, awful space on the high plains country before the mountains thrust toward the sky.
Beyond the people were the towns and the businesses - the focal-points of individualism. Furs, mining, cattle, wheat, industry - each of these has its place on the frontier and in modern times. From each of these stemmed town or trading-post or mining-camp: Fort Benton, through which all the goods and a great many of the individuals passed, coming up the river; Miles City, the reckless cattle trail-town; Great Falls, planned city of a 19th century dreamer; Paris Gibson; Virginia City, boom-town of the goldstrikes, now restored, its ghosts haunted by the tourists who daily sightsee through its streets. Each of these has its place in the poems.

There is room, too, for the dreamers and the artists and the plain ordinary guys: Charley Russell, wry humorist and painter, who perhaps typifies Montana more than any other one individual; the wheat-truck driver; the old mountain rat; the airline pilot; the caretaker at Robber's Roost. All of these have their place in this sequence because they link the present with the past. They show a spirit and a tradition which eliminates any dividing line between John Colter lost and wandering in the hills and Al Mauland dragging his broken leg behind him in the snow. To them - to all the men and women who actually or in spirit move through the pages of this book - I dedicate these poems.
FROM THE LAND OF SHINING MOUNTAINS
1.

DIVERSE RIGHT

"This is the Indian's land. Once a great sea
Rolled over all the plains and touched the sky
On either hand. But all the beasts that be
Floated with Manitou safe and dry
Upon a raft. He, knowing, beasts must have
Prairies to run on, grass to feed on, sent
The Beaver down in search of mud. The brave
Dam-builder dived three times, and then, near spent,
Brought back a lump upon his tail. From this
Great Spirit made the land and set with care
The beasts upon it. But something was amiss;
There was good hunting where no hunters were;
And so from earth he made a man, and gave
Those happy hunting grounds to that first brave."
II.

EARLY RED

I do not understand the white man's law;
It is content to let a brave man rot
Because he can not trade for food; yet, though
He takes what he must have, he's caught
And punished for his will to live. The Sioux,
My fathers, would have no man steal to eat;
Though food was often scarce in our towns too,
The deer brought singly down was tribal meat,
And none went hungry when one brave had killed -
Not so with you. Each man must stand alone,
Dares ask no aid to keep his belly filled,
But starves or goes to jail for stealing bones.
Barbarous we may have been, our ways of blood,
Yet we let no man die for want of food.
Picture the cavalier in coat of mail,
Cleaning his armor on the prairie grass,
Guiding his war-horse on the bison-trail,
A shining, courtly knight, who, short years past,
Had graced the French king’s train: now facing west,
He sees from the badlands butes the sparkling peaks,
Draws his long sword in wilderness unguessed
To trace a cross upon the air. He speaks:
"Truly, mes amis, out there lies the land
Of Shining Mountains, as the stories said,
And we the first to see it. Here I stand
And claim the land for Louis with my blade."
(Yet for his knighthood and his great king’s reign,
Only his name for these tall peaks remains).

* Francois and Louis Verendrye, sons of the Chevalier Pierre de la Verendrye, were possibly the first white men to see the mountains of the territory which is now Montana. These French fur-trader-explorers probably saw the Big Horn range of Wyoming and southern Montana on January 1, 1743. See, for instance, Burlingame: The Montana Frontier, pp 2-3.
IV

THE GREAT FALLS

The Indians said, "The true Missouri flows
Over great falls, on to the West a way."
So Lewis, ranging ahead for sign to show
The western track, knew they'd not gone astray
When thunder shook the river-bank ahead,
And, coming to a bluff, he stood and gazed
In wonder at raw beauty. Indians had fled
In savage fear from the great roar. Amazed,
The young explorer could not even write
His thoughts - but Clark was coming up behind;
So far their trail had been read aright -
The task for days ahead would be to find
A portage. Then - for he'd accept no less -
On to the limits of the wilderness.
I was a kid then, hankering to see
what-all there was beyond the hills that lay
smoke-hazed beyond the river; so, for me,
The Captains' invite opened up the way,
for how was I to tell how far beyond
that first low range of hills we'd reach? I know;
you'd say I should be proud to have belonged
to that great trek. I am; but I'd not go
that way again, for twice the lousy fame.
god! Mountains and beasts and savage men,
blizzards and heat and walking till you're lame,
starving and ill, well-fed and ill again....
I've seen the hills beyond. Since I came home,
up to the town's as far's I want to roam.

* Patrick Gass was a sergeant on the Lewis and
Clark expedition, 1804-06; on his return he
settled permanently in Wellsburg, Ohio. See
Mine was the spark that drove us all the way.
The faith, the knowledge that we could succeed:
I drained a part of my own soul each day
To answer all the others' urgent need
For courage. They had no sure quest, no flame
Within, that led the way. Clods, tools, who knew
No more than hardship or their country's name —
Only my own sure dream could see them through.

Now it is done; so I, too, must be done;
Faith, hope, courage will not come again,
Given too freely that my goal be won;
So I have nothing left—no base, no pain —
Caught by this obscure end, snuffed out alone,
Lost to myself, despondent and unknown.

* Meriwether Lewis, first in command of the famous
overland expedition to the Pacific of 1804-06, died
under mysterious circumstances never fully determined
to be either suicide or murder, at a tavern some
seventy miles southwest of Nashville, Tennessee,
while on his way to Washington to report to Thomas
Jefferson on the success of the long journey. See
VII

WILLIAM CLARK

Why was it William Clark, a lusty man
Who loved a pretty breast, a rounded thigh
As much as only men of boldness can
Should then have been so strangely loth to try
The easy Indian lasses whose dark charms
The rest found warm to take, and twice as cheap
As warm? Perhaps he thought it would be harm
As leader so to sport. The lines that creep
Over the journal's page give no sure clue,
Except that sometimes, while they speak of her
Simply as guide, a woman's shape shows through:
Perhaps for Clark, a hero not quite pure,
Sa-ka-ga-we-a might have soothed desire
And pillowed on her breast that head of fire.
VIII

JOHN COLTER

John Colter, lost and wandering in the hills,
dropped flat and stared to see the columned smoke
rise like a spirit while the woods stood still,
spat out his wad and thought, "Now here's no joke,
this child has stumbled careless on a poke
of Injuns." So cautious on his gun he lay,
and looked around and saw another smoke
behind. "Surrounded, by the 'Tarnal! Say,
the ground's begun to shake!" He looked again,
and saw the meadows belch with steam. In awe
he felt the geyser's drifting spray, like rain
upon his cheek. No Indians here, he saw—
in such a place? Good God, it looked like—"Well,
Injuns or no, guess it's my special Hell."

* John Colter, who had been a member of the Lewis
and Clark expedition, was the first man to see and
describe the wonders of Yellowstone Park. So much
disbelief met his tales of geysers and mudpots,
however, that he was greeted with derision, and for
many years the region was known as a mythical
"Colter's Hell." See Thane: High Border Country,
p. 29.
IX

COLTER'S RUN

Colter, naked, sprinting down the plain,
Thought maybe Potts was better off. Alive
He'd nothing but the certainty of pain -
The cactus spines that pierced his feet, the knives
Of Blackfoot women when his course was run -
But Potts was lax and dead. No harm could come
To him again, though Colter in the sun
Must take his chance. If he could get his thumbs
On one red neck - a buck came up behind,
And Colter, dodging, leaped and caught his spear,
Impaled him on it, ran, and found a blind
Of river driftwood, hid, and so got clear,
A long walk home - yet, considering their lots,
He felt a kind of pity for poor Potts.
X

MOUNTAIN MAN

The broken shaft stood straight upon his chest;
He lay knee-cocked upon the buffalo-robe
While his partner's knife pierced down in quest
Of the slim trader's-iron point. A Job
In buckskins, matted hair and beard sweat-thick,
He grimaced as the arrow worried clear
And spoke between his teeth: "I found a crick
Above the Bighorns, runnin' thick with fur.
I could've trapped my winter's plew in two
Good weeks, if them damn' Blackfeet hadn't found
My camp." He glared and swore. "Ain't you 'most through?
I got to get back 'fore snow comes around."
He chuckled with a kind of careless cheer,
"Beaver's 'bout due to rise ag'in this year."
XI

What these, my children, wanted of my creed
At first, I cannot say. God's gentle love
was not the quest, the certain driving need
The Selish felt. I should not care to prove
why their brave envoys made the long trip east
for fear you might incline to question grace
sought as good medicine for war, the priest
bought as a god of battle. I must face
the possibility, I know; and yet
I could not let them go their way unblessed
because their reasons were not sure. I let
my will be theirs, and God's has been the rest —
He must have been the means; else would He bless
this frail mission in the wilderness?

* Father Peter John DeSmet was the first Catholic
missionary to the Flathead (Selish) tribe in western
Montana. In 1841 he set up the mission of St. Mary's
on the present site of Stevensville, Montana. See
XII

MISSIONARY

I'm not the kind to preach to sleepyheads;
There's no adventure where the Word has come,
And folks can't stay awake to hear what's said
Except so's they can carp when they get home —
Not that for me. I guess I'm just not meek;
I'm too much like that grandsire whose long gun
Bought him a clearing on a western creek,
Face set forever to the western sun
And further mountains. I, too, must face west
And seek adventure carrying the Book,
My weapon; though a less material quest,
It's still the same path that my grandsire took —
Indians, at least, will listen to the Word
And there, perhaps, God too will not be bored.
XIII

FORT BENTON

The river was the swiftest way. The boats to Benton in the early years were tied daily, almost, along the wharves. The notes of whistles hailing journey's end implied one would find here the same exotic charm that once attracted men to Samarkand or Ind, but here just up the river from Saint Louey. Greengawkers stared down at the band of bearded trappers, gnarled scouts, and grave robed Indians—natives down to greet the boat—and thought, here was the Fabled Land. The brave New Jasons trooped ashore. Their velvet coats mixed with the buckskin shirts, and east met west here at the gateway to the wilderness.
XIV

CUSTER'S LAST STAND

God, what a stench there was when we rode down
Upon the Little Horn that day. I'd been
With Reno, trapped upon the bluff, ringed round
With regiments of Sioux. I thought we'd seen
In our own siege the Seventh's worst, but none
Of us had dreamed of what we'd come on here.
Custer among 'em (I thought how I'd been one
cursing the Major when they blew retire)
Here they lay, cut off from all retreat;
And though we might have cut the camp in two
Behind the Colonel, it was his defeat:
Reno retreating brought some of us through,
While those with Custer, for their early scorn,
Stank on the bench above the Little Horn.
THE LITTLE BIGHORN

The Little Bighorn is a peaceful stream;
In summer mowers clack along its banks;
Their drivers slouch beneath the sun and drees....

It was not always so. Once conic ranks
Of tipis filled the meadows here. The Sioux,
The Cheyenne watched and waited. Painted scouts
Had told of Custer's coming, and how few
The troops were. Strange to think now that they fought
Across these slopes. But Crazy Horse and Gall
Lit the last flame of Indian glory here-
Some say they had six thousand braves in all.
God knows the truth. Nothing now is clear,
But since that brief, raw, bloody day was done,
The Little Bighorn sleeps beneath the sun.
SITTING BULL, AT THE WILD WEST SHOW

The curious walked by in oxlike awe
Resenting helplessly his warrior's eyes
Reflecting back the battles he once saw.
The unforgotten pride, the earlier prize
Of victory. Here now he crouched, his face
Masked, yet contemptuous as became a man
Once the strategic mind of his whole race.
Now an exhibit, in a year's short span,
For Cody's show, so far down had the Sioux
Come from their triumph on the Little horn.
He sat defeated, yet there were but few
Who dared to meet full-face his quiet scorn.
And none of these was worth the cunning skill
That once trapped Custer on a barren hill.
XVII

CHIEF JOSEPH.

You who surround me here ask why I break
Your law, and jump the bounds which you have set
For my diminished people. You mistake
Law for the right, for your law would have let
The Nez Perce die, their bodies with their hearts,
Lost to the land, they loved, on barren plains.
Was I, their chief, then not to take their part
Because you said it so? If, at great pain,
We won so close to freedom, and then lost
Because we thought the river was our goal,
The blame is mine. But do not count the cost
Upon my people. They go back to your dole.
I am defeated. From where now stands the sun
I'll fight no more. My chieftain's work is done.

*Joseph of the Nez Perce fought a long, running battle with the U.S. Army in 1877, in an attempt to lead his people from Washington, where they had summarily been moved to a new and cheerless reservation, to the freedom of Canada. Under the impression that the Missouri River was the boundary between Montana and Canada, he stopped on crossing it, and here General Miles surrounded his men and defeated him after a four-day battle. See Howard: Montana Margina.
XVIII

JACK SLADE AT THE GULCHES

Only my wife could ever keep me sane;
I am no lily-livered boy, who bows
And holds to precious law's command, or gains
Position licking other people's shoes —
Jack Slade a servant? You had best be warned
Who know what I once did with Jules's ears
And could with yours again. My life, suborned
Into deep failure by the stupid fears
Of gutless men, who will not dream my dreams,
Here in the gulches will lash out in rage
Unchecked by my wife's love, to flame
Destroying, as the tiger claws his cage.
Hang me? You'll each rest easy with his life
Except the man who goes to tell my wife.....
That Henry Plummer was a handsome man -
He'd stand there in my room and smooth his hair
For minutes at a time, he was so vain.
He wouldn't seem to know that I was there:
He'd talk of raids, the size of someone's poke
I'd hear next day was murdered. Oh, his lust
Was only after gold, that's sure. The joke
We thought was that he ever needed us,
The girls upstairs. I know he had a wife -
I hope she never knew. I was too afraid
Ever to breathe a word, for he held life
Less than the smallest haul he'd ever made....
And yet they do say, with the noise around his head,
He screamed for his own life till he was dead.

* Henry Plummer was the chief of the band of roadagents
which terrorized the goldrush area around Virginia City,
Montana, in 1863. Secretly the robber chief, he possessed
enough charm to get himself elected sheriff of Bannack
and Virginia City, and practiced this deception almost
to the time of his hanging. See Dimsdale: *Vigilantes
of Montana.*
I ain't stayed in a town for twenty years; I've got no use for people much, an' towns is full of 'em. I like it better here; I've got my shack, a couple mangy hounds and that 'ere hardrock hole. It keeps me fed — color enough for that, an' maybe more — some of that quartz weighs like a chunk of lead with shinin', virgin gold, laced through the ore like the old Mother Lode. Sometimes I think — but shucks, we all dream of a lucky strike; gold's nothing more to me than meat and drink; riches can't buy me more of what I like. Besides, I couldn't spend it 'cept in town, a place where there's too many folks around.
XXI

JOHN BOZEMAN

John Bozeman, seeking for a western pass -
Explorer no less than greater, earlier names -
Was looking not for empire but for grass.
The Texas longhorn, long of southern fame,
Was pushing north. Bozeman went ahead
To do the work that Chisholm had just done
Upon the lower trail. It has been said
He opened up the northern range, and won
A million acres of free grass for beef
Instead of buffalo. He found his pass,
His lean wild men and animals the thief
Of Indian freedom; but, avenged at last,
Blackfeet found him camped within his pass
And left his bloody corpse to feed the grass.
Miles City was a wild and lawless town
When weary trailherds daily from the south
Made it their stopping-place. Sometimes around
The town lay twenty brands. The thirsty mouths
Of ninety cowboys at a time drained off
The town's hot liquor, and a puncher's purse
In one wild night. A man must needs be tough
To take old Miles. And yet old-timers curse
The passing of the roaring, brutal nights
And mourn the taming of the end-of-trail
To milksop lawfulness. It isn't right —
Why, even drink ain't worth the time in jail.
Small wonder they raise most improper glee
When someone steals the civic Christmas tree.
XXIII

COWPUNCHER

He squatted on his bootheels. Space had spun
A hundred tiny wrinkles round his eyes.
Long squinting, through hot blinding days of sun
Had turned his eyes to a chunk of prairie skies
Laced to a rangeland face. He watched a colt
Fight its tied head against a snubbing post,
And lit a cigarette. "He'll take a shot
And make a horse," he said. "What he wants most
Is freedom. Takes a lot of sense to know
Freedom is havin' pride in spite of ropes.
Horse-sense? That's it. Too bad some folks don't show
More of it. Looks like he's calmin' down - I hope."
Standing - philosopher in jeans - he sat,
And walked off, tipping his twenty-dollar hat.
Kid Russell, playing solitaire one day,
Wished he could figure how to tell the boss
The herd was in bad shape. He laid a trey
Upon a four, then gave his cards a toss
Across the room. If once the wind would stop,
Or veer at least, become the warm chinook -
He rummaged in his warbag, found on top
(He could have picked them out without a look)
His pens, a card, then, using his cocked boot
For easel, swiftly sketched a starving cow,
Her calf, the circling, hungry wolves, and wrote
The caption: "Waiting for Chinook" below.
Then, ignorant how that cow would rise to fame,
He signed the card and went back to his game.
Sometimes, when rain has swept across the plains,
The clouds are like the prairie-schooners' tops;
They lurch, and shake, and then move on again
Forever westward, never allowed to stop
By the compelling wind which drives them on,
As once the wagons sailed a sky of grass,
Scattered sometimes and dropping one by one
Into some valley's peace, to rest at last.
And when the clouds have gone behind the rain,
The prairie flower, as once did the towns
Where wagons spilled their cargoes on the plain
To nourish harvest in that fertile ground;
And though the wind has died, the seeking pain,
The grass still prophesies the fruit of rain.
XXVI

RAILROADS

The buffalo first marked the easy grades;
Up the foothills' easiest slopes they walked,
Cutting the winding paths with hooves like spades,
Not deviating though the Indians stalked
In easy ambush where their habitation led.
The hunters' wagons followed; and at last,
When all the buffalo were long since dead,
The chainmen and the transit-bearers passed,
Their grades surveyed by these brute engineers
Long since. The rails followed ancient trails,
Replaced the hoofbeats with the grind of gears,
Ambush with block-lights and the whistle's wail;
And on the flatcars of the first freight's run
The buffalo bones lay piled up by the ton.
XXVII

HOMESTREADERS

Even my mother is uncertain now

where, fields apart, the homestead shacks once stood;
Not even cellar-holes are left to show

The dreams of those first years, when crops were good,

And with the man next door - my father - she

Looked down upon them from some higher ground,

Planning the way their future life would be

when with their hearts they joined in common bond

Their claims. Wind, sun, and storm have washed away

Even the trace of furrows from the land,

And, though she knows how once the section lay,

The homestead, like fond hopes, was built on sand;

when hopes collapsed with endless sun-parched days,

It crumbled with them too, and blew away.
We don't speak much of Grandma. What she was—
Well, you can see yourself what she was like;
What kind of woman would have any cause
To hit the gold camps with discovery strike?
I can't blame Grandpa too much. After all,
The only other women were the squaws—
And even if he met her at a gambling hall,
Those days they had few scruples, and no laws.
And yet she was a—well, you understand
We have the name to think of. In this state
It's one to reckon with. Some folks demand—
Well, I've thought of the Governorship of late.
She made a good wife, when all's said and done;
Why bring it up, now that she's dead and gone?
XXIX

SPACE

O God, why does a man love distance so?
I've seen him stand up on the nearest bench
And stare down at the plains for hours, as though
He'd seen some winkin', shameless, naked wench
Entice him from the sun glare on the buttes,
Or caught the glancing light the pot of gold
At end of rainbow throw. Why, a man's boots
May be worn full of holes, his pants so old
The cloth won't hold a darn, and yet he'll stand
Forgetting debts, his shrivelled crops - his wife -
Just - looking at that cursed, endless land.
I don't know what he sees; but sure as life,
It ain't the things he must for certain know
That make a man love empty distance so.
Once from this land the dust blew in great clouds,
Dimming the sky and choking in men's throats
As if to reprimand their greed, which plowed
The prairie willy-nilly, as it sought
Quicker turnover than the furrow's fall
In golden wheat. Though there had been good years,
The bitter dust arose, the wind-borne gall
Of years unbalanced, till in tardy fear
Man sought to hold the ground to ground, and slow
The terror of the earth's inchoate flight;
At last they set direction to the plow
And alternated fields, the dark to light:
The strips that broke the wind lay firm and neat
And dust was once more earth to grow ripe wheat.
XXXI

WHEAT TRUCKER

Sometimes I wonder why the wheat I've hauled
Can't feed the world. I've driven back and forth
Daylight to dusty daylight, till I've crawled
Dead to my bunk to wonder what it's worth
Until I dropped to sleep, and dreamed of wheat
Bushel on bushel piled to the sky.....
In harvest you don't even stop to eat
Or catch a drink, the truck still rolling by
The hungry combine, loading on the run
And back to town, the only pause you know
A tilted wait till the unloading's done
Then back again. Where does it all go?
I've hauled wheat for a million loaves of bread
An' yet it ain't enough to keep folks fed.
I've spent my life down in that stinkin' mine,  
Sweatin' my guts out for the thick green ore.  
That copper's found in, working, rain or shine,  
Like some damn mole, and getting nothing more —  
Pay? Sure, we're making pretty money now,  
But what's a dollar when your lungs are gone?  
They've cleared the dust up some, but even so  
Plenty of us still get the miner's con.  
Or if we don't, there's sulfur fumes, or heat,  
Or cave-ins; yet we talk as if the pay  
was all we wanted — blow it on the Street  
And curse the mine, and then go back next day.  
What kind of fools are we, to go down  
And throw our lives away, there underground?
XXXIII

MARCUS DALY SPEAKS OF CLARK

He was a starched-up, wizened little cuss;
You'd never take him for a fighting man.
But, drunk-ambitious like the rest of us,
He fought me, like those little fellows can
With every dirty trick, with every rotten scheme
You've ever seen invented, and some more.
I'd not have cared a hoot for his big dream
Of being senator, if 'tweren't for
The threat of what his vicious spite might try
With all that power - for he hated me.
I couldn't take the chance he might slip by
The voters to his seat, and so I paid a fee
To certain public-minded, honest men
To vote my way, and see he could not win.
XXXIV
AIRBASE

Where the grey concrete meets the parking strip
Old tracks come in. Across this naked grade
The stagecoach scored, trip by slow patient trip
Its track. The mile-long runways laid
For later wheels now cross and hide the lines
Where six-horse teams made the last thrilling dash
Into the town. Now gleaming dural shines
Where greater horsepower growls beneath the lash
Of pushing throttles. Down the concrete trail
Hurtles the fat shape of the '54,
Sweeping the prairie with its manmade gale
Where wind once plumed the coach's dust, no more.
The tracks are gone, as useless signs must go,
And even wind blows where man makes it blow.
XXXV

AL MAULAND

Al Mauland, riding after cows one day,
Huddled within his coat against the storm,
Left the snow-drifted trail, and lost his way.
Searching, he swung his arms to keep them warm,
And spooked his horse. The gelding shied and fell
Upon him, snapped his leg and rolled away
While he lay helpless, shouting curses till
The horse ran off. Sober then, and grey
With pain, he tried to think which way the ranch
Might be, and though he had no hope, began
To crawl, despair deferred within the chance
That he could live while he could still feel pain.
He should have died; yet when they picked him up,
His will had crawled so long he could not stop.
ROBBERS' ROOST

Here's where the stages used to change their teams
Before they made the final dashing run
Into Virginia. Down there by the stream
Once six roadagents fled before the gun
Of my own grandpa, who rode shotgun guard
Three years through here, and never lost a load....
I used to think that it went kind of hard
With him, to see them later close this road
And build the highway up behind those trees
So's people weren't forever coming by,
But now I wonder. Though it wouldn't please
Most folks to be alone, come time to die,
They were the last, this old roadhouse and he;
And it alone could keep him company.
XXXVII

VIRGINIA CITY PLAYERS

Once more at actor's wit the old gulch smiles;
Once more the footlights shine, the stage is set;
Though these have not endured the weary miles
By coach up from the distant railhead, yet
Something there is in them of elder years,
Of long-dead, famous voices, that once spoke
In mimic's tones of laughter and of tears.
Against the backdrop of these hills. No poke
Of powder gold falls on this later stage -
No nuggets shower with the miners' cheers;
But these same streets led, in another age,
Down to a showhouse door. The ghosts are here;
And something in these shadows makes one pause
To hear if ghostly hands give back applause.
XXXVIII

HUTTERITES

Here on the corner, center of Main Street,
The dress of Middle Europe, dark and warm,
Enfolds three girls, quiet and discreet,
In for the market, from the great communal farm.
Gravely they stand, obedient, but when
No one is watching, glance with eager eyes
That must not like, but can't help, now and then,
Drifting to follow some bright form, to prize
An instant's longing, but no more. They poise
For apprehensive, fleeting moments by
The shops and shows; their small and peasant joys
Forbid all these. Yet if they sometimes sigh
For brighter, softer things, or wish for curls,
How can a tender God reprove these girls?
XXXIX

SPRING FEVER

Down from the melting peaks the spring chinook
Brings moisture-laden air, to swell the trees
And quench the dusty thirst of lawns; and look!
The brawling creek has burst its banks in glee
And spread its muddy freshness over fields
New plowed. The April calves run races where
The crocuses spring forth; a hillside yields
Swift streaks of shooting stars. This time of year
All things are born anew, and never yet
Have young men failed to look upon the hills
To think of strange horizons, and to set
Their eyes upon new roads. The blue sky fills
With north-bent geese, and I am like the rest;
Now spring is here, the new roads are the best.
XL

HERITAGE

This much our fathers left: a great contempt
For all but what a single man can do....
We are the heirs of all the wild, unkempt
Grace-hating stalwart pioneers, who through
Dislike of cities set out all alone
To make some sort of peace with space,
Finding in hardship that they could atone
The sin of flight from what they could not face,
And gain full freedom from society.
As they proved with success their way was good,
So we convince ourselves we must be free,
Filled as we are with their wild ways, their blood;
And we still have contempt for herdlike fear,
Though what they once escaped surrounds us here.
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Sources for the Introduction.


