Place of invention| Writing western women

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A PLACE OF INVENTION: WRITING WESTERN WOMEN

by

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B.A. Yale University, 1984

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Masters of Fine Arts

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A Place of Invention

“This is the west, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.”

– The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (from the film)

It starts, I think, with the horse.

Take a small girl child, with an affinity for animals and a cold and controlling father. Show her a huge creature and tell her that she can sit astride and direct it. Let her stroke the velvet place between equine nostrils; let her use every muscle in her body to reach up and curry out the dirt; let her lug a saddle weighing nearly as much as she and swing it gently onto the back of her waiting steed; finally let her sit way up there – where the world looks different, a new vista opens – and tell her that she is free to go.

In 1969, I was seven years old. It must have taken True Grit a few years to get to the Drive-In theaters, which is where my family went to see it. In the movie, fourteen year old Mattie Ross is out to avenge the death of her beloved father. She has the money and the power. She hires the toughest man around, a man she’s told has “true grit,” the old drunk, Rooster Cogburn (played, of course, by John Wayne), and off they go, into the West, on an adventure.
Mattie Ross had short hair, self-righteous piety and a horse named Little Blackie. She could ride and keep up with the men. Who, I grew up thinking, wouldn’t want to be Mattie Ross?

I want to believe in a place of invention, a workshop for the self. I can’t resist the call of Milton’s Satan, that “Space may produce new worlds”; I want to believe that an environment, magnificent, vast, but also hellish, desolate, difficult, may be fertile ground for creation, for a triumph of imagination set free from the fetters of convention and constraint. I want to believe that from beneath calluses earned with labor, skin toughened by weather, fingernails packed with dirt, there may arise the chrysalis of an identity that is the same but different – me, but better, stronger, more true. So I packed up the dream and moved west. To the northern Rockies, to Missoula, Montana.

The landscape is wide, the sky, yes, the sky is bigger. There is a settling quiet that allows the wind to sing. The greens are different from back east. At first I found them wanting – lacking the gaudy opulence of my accustomed hardwoods. But it is simply that the portrait of the seasons is less pornographic here, more subtle – autumns, except in town, are without the grief of dying leaves; winters without those sad, skeletal reminders of waiting again for the spring. The grasses are more brittle, stiffer. I am smaller here. And feel younger, away from the aged buildings of the eastern cities, the patina of grit and grime that rests on the edifices of the seaboard.

The West is a place of vistas, and when I look out, far, so far, I squint to see the vaporous shimmering of the evolutionary savannah, the time when we humans stood up, leaving behind our primate cousins, and looked around. Perhaps this is how we tap into
something in the collective soul. We stood up and became human. The West is a place that has been peopled and de-peopled for 10,000 years – there are ghosts, understood mostly as spirits we will never be able to conjure. I know that there are natives who have been here for millennia, centuries, and generations and that you are only the most recent traveler; it is this sense of both newness and belatedness that gives me hope. The light feels lighter here, different. I feel lighter, different. A pilgrim.

Or – does the aridity, the reluctant give of salty soil, the readiness of mountain peaks to shroud themselves in snow, the land swept barren by wind, present a challenge, an affront? Do I come and ask, as Satan did when he fell from the happy realms into a strange new world: “Is this the Region, this the Soil, the Clime…That we must change for Heav'n, this mournful gloom/ For that celestial light?” Is it that this place is so much less hospitable, less comfortable, than the cultivated parks and gardens of orderly eastern cities, that I seek out hardship, ask to be provoked by weather, to be confronted with rocky ridges, shrubby and sere lands, to prove my most rugged self, my mettle?

I find myself questioning: What is this place, the West, and what does it mean? West of where? Of what? East of California, south of the permafrost, north of the Sonora – when I say “Out West” I bring my Eastern sensibility, carrying with me the legacy of who gets to do the defining. Is it the place beyond the big river, past the 98th meridian? Is it where there’s no water, or where most of the land is publicly owned? The West has perhaps been too often described and defined by those from “Back East.”

Is it a characteristic of pilgrims, of those who seek something outside of themselves that will transform and transfigure their lives, that we follow the direction of the setting sun? Thoreau writes, “We go eastward to realize history, and study the works
of art and literature, retracing the steps of the race, -- we go westward as into the future, with a spirit of enterprise and adventure." A Harvard-educated Brahmin, Thoreau wrote with the echoes of other writers' sentences rattling in his head: "Than longen folk to gon on pilgrimages./And palmeres for to seken strange strondes."

A Midwesterner, not yet middle aged, Frederick Jackson Turner stood before a group of historians -- men -- in Chicago at the conclusion of a long day, toward the end of a century of "progress" and spoke of the frontier. Turner proffered an idea that has taken root as widely and wantonly as the noxious, imported weeds that are now choking out native Western wildflowers. The frontier has closed, he said, and we have closed it, we Americans; we the coarse and strong, the inquisitive, the inventive; we the clever, the adaptive, the exuberant; the pragmatic, the restless; we the people. The West was where the frontier ended. The legacy of conquest that made the romance possible is best left unmentioned, if we want to cling to the mythology. We are the West, or, the process of westering. The pioneers came to a rugged place, leaving behind the known world to push civilization against savagery; the frontier was vanquished and the American character defined.

It is kinder to speak of these events in the passive voice, a voice that explains without blame, that omits and elides. But, of course, that will not suffice. Those intrepid souls who ventured westward vanquished -- land, people, place -- and certain character traits flourished as they traversed the country. That seems true. It seems heroic, even, this belief. To what extent the process set a national characterological agenda seems less certain. A half-century of scholarly work has labored to conquer the notions that Turner
set forth in lyrical language that day in Chicago; his ideas, however, continue to echo through the landscape of imagination. When I think about the West – when I think about women in the West – I realize that I am not immune to this vision of a place of invention.

For refugees from the urban East, from the crop-fields of the Midwest, from the heavy, florid climes south of the line that defines the South, coming West offers the promise of delayering; we struggle to shed cloaks of pretension, seek to soften faces set in the anger of too much human proximity, relinquish the competition of accretion – the piling up of material goods – for cowboy boots and the chance to hike for miles in wilderness without seeing another person. We put on warm clothing and seek out physical challenges that reshape our bodies as we hope to remold ourselves.

Perhaps this is wrong. Perhaps this is not what others who come West are looking for, hoping for. I could be wrong. I know only why I came West. It is because I am a romantic, a reader of Milton; because I was raised in the East which has mythology of a different sort; because I am a searcher. It is because I want to believe in a place of invention.

There’s something they refer to here as “the Montana tax.” You pay it by simply choosing to live in this state, one of the poorest in the nation. We have the lowest standard of living in the country but we get to live here, the thinking goes. We accept lower salaries because we have mountains and plains and clear, gelid streams, and fish and wildlife. Because out here, the thinking goes, you get to be your own boss and have a lifestyle that everyone else in the country envies. We get to play cowboy.
There’s a pervasive story shared by many of the northern Plains Indian tribes. A young Indian boy is bored. “There’s nothing to do around here,” he complains to his Grandfather. “Look,” says the wise old man, “how far the eye can see. Look out on the land. That’s how far we can see into ourselves—we are the people of vision. Look into yourself.” The West is a place of vision.

The necessity for cowboys lasted only from 1873 until around 1884 when the land was vast and open and cattle had to be driven to market. But the railroad ended that. The open range was closed; barbed wire was invented. Cowboys turned into ranch hands, who logged, built stuff, played guitar, mended fence. But the cowboy became one of the West’s biggest exports. And the mythology of the West, now that the extractive industries have dried up, is perhaps its most profitable.

Artists sold the idea of the West—the Rockies are our Cathedrals; qualities of light give way to notions that out of the primeval environment we can see an epic struggle against darkness in the newness of the mountains: "The heavens of America appear infinitely higher—the sky is bluer—the air is fresher—the cold is intenser—the moon looks larger—the stars are brighter—the thunder is louder—the lightning is vivider—the wind is stronger—the rain is heavier—the mountains are higher—the rivers larger—the forests bigger—the plains broader." Here Thoreau is quoting Sir Francis Head, an English traveler, and a Governor-General of Canada. He is talking about the New World. But I know that what he means is the West.

When I was not yet thirty, I was an editor at the oldest, and one of the most prestigious, publishers in the world. I came to Oxford University Press directly from
Yale, with an ability to think critically and no real base of knowledge; I fell into scholarly publishing and embraced it with the eagerness of a student. I listened and learned, and in time, like my bosses, my teachers, I could offer criticism and encouragement, could rewrite and revise the work of the academics whose books I was publishing.

Without a background in history, I could see each monograph only in and of itself, could read only with an internal logic; I did not know the historiography. A project from a young scholar at the University of Utah landed on my desk and I went through the usual motions - skim, send out for review, run it by the press’s “surrogate delegate,” and then bring it before the editorial board. Since Oxford’s university is an ocean away, as is its board of academic advisors, the New York branch had individual scholars appointed for each discipline who served in a role of oversight. These men — there were men in every one of the advisory positions — shaped the lists. They had veto power, and could suggest — or approve — outside reviewers. They could also foster the work of their students, their chosen scholarly communities, their ideologies. Of course we did not talk about this. Their identities were not widely known.

When I sent out the manuscript, it came back with strong endorsements from the right people, and I put it to my advisor. He gave his approval, though with a kind of bitter delight. He said that it would be controversial — the book would stir things up. The feminists, he said, were going to be up in arms. *Up in arms* is what he said.

I sent the author a contract and told her that we were excited about the book; I said it would be interesting to see the ruckus it created. She asked why I thought a scholarly study like hers would create commotion. I had taken on faith the word of my advisor, an expert, who had never responded when I asked him that same question. So
when I was asked, I did as he did and chuckled, said something like, *Oh, you know. We’ll just have to see what happens.*

I had no idea why a monograph on western women’s history, a close and careful series of case studies that was written in lucid prose and researched with meticulous care, would generate controversy. The argument seemed compelling and convincing. It looked at middle-class women in Western cities, and about the ways in which they brought to bear notions of female moral authority when trying to help women of color, or of different social classes. True, I didn’t at the time think of the West as a place of cities, or of Victorian ideals, but ideas of social control, power structures among women of different classes and races, relationships with men – these all seemed fair game, appropriate interesting issues to study.

Peggy Pascoe’s book, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1974-1939* explores, in the author’s words, the “implications of the search for female moral authority for intercultural relations among women.” Pascoe finds that similar to contemporary cultural feminists, some missionaries expected that all women would share their values, regardless of culture or race. The book raises questions about how women of different social classes, from different regions, view one another and what that means for the personal, as well as the power, relations among them.

I liked the author. Peggy was smart and straight-forward and professional. She was an ideal author – doing what needed to be done, on time, without complaint. I left Oxford not long after *Relations of Rescue* was published. I never saw the fat file of glowing reviews that circulated among the editors; I stopped attending conferences where
conversations in the book expo and in hotel bars would let me know how the book I had published was doing.

Western history has been a relatively easy sell in the publishing world. Not quite as lucrative as, say, the Civil War, but, to be sure, it’s a region that arouses interest. It has buffs, who both read and write. Its representations abound – in painting, sculpture, movies, novels. The picture has been mostly grand, heroic. Turner’s thesis responded to and has been bolstered by the work of Albert Bierstadt, George Catlin, Frederic Remington, Howard Hawks, John Ford, Zane Grey, Louis L’Amour, and Jack Schaefer.

But then a new generation of historians started asking harder questions. Picking up on an earlier critique by Walter Prescott Webb that argued that the frontier was not a process but a place, a particularly dry and dusty place, historians began to interrogate the definitions. Is the frontier place or process? Where is the West? What are the issues that define it – geography, the lack of water, a hardiness of souls? And how did it come to be “The West?” The “New Western history,” as articulately by Patricia Nelson Limerick in her 1987 book, Legacy of Conquest, sees the West as a place of confrontation in a struggle over resources. Rather than heroic, the story she tells is in many ways shameful, and points out how earlier versions had long omitted and silenced different groups and peoples.

With incisive brutality, the New Western historians smashed cherished myths about the West. They have shown how racially and ethnically diverse the nineteenth century West was: at times thirty percent of the non-native population was not white; they have reminded us that most people in the West lived in cities, not on the ranches of
the celluloid range; that most men labored in the extractive industries, not in John
Wayne-ing activities; that the place was not a pristine wilderness waiting for civilizing
Easterners to come and tame it, but had, well before Columbus arrived, a long history of
civilization and population. And they have reminded us that the West was a place where
there were lots of women.

Turner’s thesis offers an appealing—perhaps irresistible—proposition: that the
West offered an opportunity for a new breed of woman to arise. The experience on the
overland trail could have been a crucible for new ideas about gender identity. The trip
did violence to nineteenth century ideas about femininity and domesticity. Women were
forced to take on new roles, just as, on the journey west, men did tasks like washing,
cooking, and caring for children. It would be lovely to believe that when they settled,
this new gender blurring would remain and create a different kind of society.

The women of the West were exceptional creatures, Dee Brown argued in his
1958 book, *The Gentle Tamers*, a work that first paid tribute to and defined the distaff
side of westering. He writes, “And whether she wore a sunbonnet or not, whatever her
mode of dress, the pioneer western female was certainly a woman of tenacity and quiet
force. She may have lived in dread of Indians and wild animals, she may have fled from
rattlesnakes and tarantulas, but she contrived to create a home for her family and
managed so that most of her brood survived without benefit of doctors or medicines.”

If the frontier was closed, if the wilds were civilized, Brown argues, it was
because of the influence of those who trailed behind the brave pioneers: “Women truly
are the most conservative of creatures, hating with a passion those three concomitants of
the western frontier – poverty, physical hardship, and danger. And to destroy those
traditional testers of human endurance was to destroy something male in the race.”
Women were the personal saviors of their men, and the annihilator of the frontier spirit.

A couple of decades later, in 1979, Julie Roy Jeffrey argued in her book, Frontier
Women, that in addition to the civilizing trinkets of culture, pioneer women toted with
them eastern values about home and place into the new landscape. While the journey
west may have toughened and challenged them, Jeffrey argues that the eastern values of
the cult of domesticity remained firmly in place. In their new arid space, pioneer women
cared for their homes, planted flowers, made lace doilies, and transplanted notions of
gentility onto the western soil.

A year later, two women, Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller, wrote an article
for the Pacific Historical Review titled “The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches
to the History of Women in the American West.” The piece won the award for the best
article published on the history of the West in 1980. Their goal, giving credit to Brown
for at least realizing – while Turner seemed not to – that there were in fact women in the
West, was to place the notion of “gentle tamers” in historiographical context and call for
new ways to look at women. They ask for a broader, more inclusive scope which would,
they say, “necessitate the rewriting of western history.”

In their survey of the literature, Jensen and Miller point out the ways women were
either rare, invisible or incidental, or, on the other hand, romanticized and
sentimentalized. In the few instances where historians treated women as a component of
the study of the frontier, they did so in neatly categorical, stereotyped ways: ladies who
came west as “gentle tamers” of the wilds; the help-mates, those women who could pull a
calf and then go inside and cook dinner. “Wild women” were not common, they say, but they were compelling: they could out-man the men, could ride, shoot, drink, and curse. And then there were the bad girls, the working girls, the hookers with hearts of gold. The task of western women’s history, then, is about debunking these limiting images. The scholarly gaze, they say, should be shifted away from white women and pulled back to include Hispanics, Asians, and black women. “There is no reason for historians to assume,” they write, “that the first Euro-American woman in an area was more important as a woman than the thousands of Native American women or Mexicanas who were already there.”

The essay proved foundational. Three years later, in Sun Valley, Idaho, a group of historians came together for the first Women’s West Conference, out of which emerged a permanent organization, the Coalition for Western Women’s History. The book that emerged out of the conference, *The Women’s West*, edited by Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson, argues against the search for exceptional women. The task at hand, they claim, is to fill in gaps, correct omissions, complicate the picture. Instead of looking at exceptional women, they are interested in the ordinary; if we see these pioneer women as heroic, they saw themselves as simply doing what needed to be done. In her introduction, Susan Armitage, a transplanted Brit, wrote: “The frontier *process* strikes a responsive chord in almost all of us, perhaps especially in those of us who are not native westerners. When we moved west we felt like different people, and we want to know if the pioneers felt the same.”

The last word — at the both conference and in the book – is from a Native American, Suzan Shown Harjo, who testifies to her tribal heritage, and says she speaks as
a poet and activist. “The challenge for the future of western women’s history,” Harjo argues, “is that, in attempting to uncover the truth of the past, we do not miss the essence of what is happening today and how it is happening.” She puts to the women historians, the historians of women, a litany of questions: “What are my personal and altruistic reasons for pursuing this research – that is, education, job, money, security, prestige, perhaps to change existing inequities, perhaps to preserve the present system? Do my motivations influence my methodology? Is my research related to living and evolving history? If not, why not? Is so, why? How integrated is my perspective? How much do I compartmentalize the subjects of my research? What are my own biases and how do they manifest themselves in my work? What is my ethical standard? Are my eyes open to the exciting changes that are taking place in the world around me?”

But the seductions of Turner held fast. Elliott West looked at children in his 1989 book, *Growing Up with the Country: Childhood on the Far Western Frontier*. In the pioneer West, girls grew up with boys, he said, doing men’s work. It gave them a kind of freedom, encouraged independence, self-confidence, strength. And then, when they matured, they were forced inside to do women’s work and experienced an emotional dislocation when confronted with traditional women’s roles. West claims that children were the people most influenced by the frontier. “In the particulars of pioneer childhood were grounded qualities commonly associated with the modern West,” he argues, “among them an openness toward strangers, a confidence in dealing with fresh challenges, a kinship with what remains of the natural setting, and a pride – albeit an often grudging pride – in its contrariness.”
Venturing farther into the realm of regional stereotype and generalities, away from history and more into essayistic observation, he says: “So westerners are fiercely loyal to their region and condescending toward outsiders who cannot understand and cope with the country; they are also excessively defensive about their lack of ‘culture’ - defined, of course, in eastern terms. They are inordinately fond of art and fiction that romanticize frontier experiences unique to the West, yet they obsessively imitate alien architectural forms, building Cape Cod cottages and plantation-style banks against backdrops of buttes and craggy mountains.”

The history of Western women’s history has been as much about struggle among contemporary women as it is about uncovering and understanding women of the past. The best of it is unabashed about this. Peggy Pascoe’s book is about the relations between women of different classes and races, about the complicated ways the power struggles played out between women, and also a cautionary tale about the limits of cultural feminism. This, I realize, a decade and a half later, is what so exercised my Oxford advisor. He believed that feminists could not, would not, hear critiques of feminism, or entertain thoughts of divisiveness among women. Asking contemporary women, as Pascoe does, to examine their own assumptions and cultural standpoints would be provoking to ideas of female solidarity. Of course it is not. But the project of examining one’s own assumptions, as both Harjo and Pascoe demand that women do, is not so easy.
It is always an interesting, and often an illuminating, exercise to ask an academic why she does the work she does. What is her personal stake in the subject? And what obvious – and not so obvious – biases does she bring to it?

I am interested in Western women, women I have lived among only briefly. But I am also interested in understanding myself; to do this, I look to people who are more like me than they are different. The unvarnished, uncomfortable truth is that I want to know about white middle class women – in the past and present – who were educated, actively engaging with ideas, perhaps critical of their society; women who wrote, talked, thought, acted and had access to the structures of power. Women whose voices were heard – or at least, who struggled to make themselves heard. Women, that is, like me.

I have come West looking for something, drawn by mythology, by images on a big outdoor screen, wanting to ride into the sunset and to become stronger and more powerful. More free. Like the dudes and greenhorns dismissed by John Wayne in his Westerns, I want to think that I’m a pilgrim. The baggage of expectation weighs heavily on me; I worry that I see what I want to see. I wear my upbringing, my education, my New York City shoes in a place that is not mine, nor will it ever be.
My Papa’s Waltz

The whisky on your breath
Could make a small boy dizzy;
But I hung on like death:
Such waltzing was not easy.

– Theodore Roethke

There’s a photograph I haven’t seen in a long time, but the image remains, a snapshot of memory. My father, brother, Barkus and I are lying crowded together on a narrow bed. We are all laughing. My brother and I are little kids, laughing like little kids, with our whole bodies. You can see Barkus’ laughter in her eyes; she has snaked herself alongside my father and in between my brother and me. Barkus was a dog full of music, and would sing, either to accompany the flute or violin, or on request. I can hear the sound of her singing. In the photograph my father is laughing. I do not know the sound of my father’s laughter. He’d allow only a grudging chuckle, a bitter bark, coming in response to the idiocy of another. Sometimes that idiot was me. My father laughs only at someone’s expense.

He’d grown up working-class, Jewish, in Brooklyn, the youngest son of a raging and angry father who worked as a printer by day and gambled away his earnings at night. My father was the first in his family to go to college, and then, amazingly, on to graduate school. He was the smart one – could do anything, fix anything, read anything. Though he never could do quite enough to please that angry and raging man, my grandfather.
We lived first in a place called Bellevue Gardens, a hotel-like row of apartments, inhabited by the kind of odd assortment of people you find mixed together in rural university towns: graduate students, young faculty, working class folk, religious zealots, and cranky old people.

The field and surrounding woods and creeks were filled with critters. We had living with us in the apartment a stray cat and a succession of pet garter snakes, captured nearby and incarcerated carelessly. Often the snakes would escape. Sometimes it was when my grandparents came to visit. This was generally not a good thing.

There was a grizzled man a few doors down who wouldn’t let us ride our bikes on the walkway in front of his apartment. There was a boy, Scott Bonney, who kidnapped my small, undeveloped heart. And there was Frankie Visco, a neighborhood bully of the usual sort: vicious, fat, scary. He’d order me and my little brother off the swing sets, terrorizing us for sport. The very sight of him would be enough to make me walk differently.

One day I came back home, in tears, weary of the travails of being a picked-on four-year old.

My father took the snake out of the glass terrarium and gave it to me. The snake coiled itself around my small wrist, an animate bracelet.

“Go outside now and show this to Frankie Visco,” said my father.

I wiped tears away with my non-serpentined hand, and did as told.

I found Frankie Visco easily. He wheeled around, ready to lay on some new horror. Then he saw the snake. Frankie Visco turned and ran.
My father was good at training. He believed in discipline and punish, reinforce and reward. He was an alpha male, and kept a tight rein on those in his charge. Control was his diet; his religion was a super-rationalist, Enlightenment-liberal view. Reason was king. Materialism ruled. “No ideas but in things,” he’d offer, quoting William Carlos Williams. He was tethered to the world, and fought like hell to control the patch circumscribed by the arc of his rope. His stated commitment was to the truth, at least as he saw it. He ruled supreme over animals, my mother, my brother, and me. He had less power over his own temper. His own frustrations, the zigs and zags of his unfulfilled dreams, would hiss and crack, like steam coming from a radiator.

My father was an academic. Not a high-powered fancy scholar; just a foot soldier in the battles of academe. He went into it, I suspect, because he’d always been told he was smart. He stayed in it because it meant fairly easy days, summers off, and an opportunity to be, or to appear, smarter than a lot of other people. For his students he had mostly contempt.

No matter where he was going or what he was doing, my father dressed like a janitor. He wore a uniform of navy work shirts and pants, and carried his keys in a big clump on a chain hooked to his belt. He would, however, always introduce himself as “Dr.” Toor and sprinkle arcane literary allusions and stilted quotations into every conversation. He looked working class, had a middle class income, and adopted the pretensions and affectations of the wealthy. He flitted through the class strata, comfortable nowhere.

He ran a poetry seminar. Some of the best poets of the latter part of the twentieth century have eaten my mother’s cooking. They’d come to our house for dinner, the night
before the reading, these strange men. They were mostly men in those days and were often strange. Often bearded, often smoking. I liked going to the readings because it was fun to be on campus. I liked the vending machines and the soft-serve ice cream in the student center. My brother and I played pinball. As I got older, I started paying attention at the readings, focusing, listening to the cadences of their voices as they read, the poetic intoning, the droning, the rhythm of it all. I watched as the students watched the poet, nodding in recognition, acknowledging the power of the odd man at the podium. Often I didn’t understand the poems, couldn’t make sense of the language, couldn’t follow the line of thought. But I’d sit and listen and nod, closing my eyes to better soak in the grace notes of the language. I decided that I would be a poet.

A poet I became. I wrote maniacally. My father was advisor to the college's poetry magazine, and once a week I would go with him to workshop. I listened but did not talk. The students were respectful of me, solicitous. Perhaps it was because they were afraid of him, waiting with trepidation for him to tell them what was wrong with their work. He had command over the language, over the discipline. He could take a good poem and make it better, make a good poet better. They sought him out, the students, seeking his approval. I thrilled to be his daughter on those evenings, a fourteen-year old prodigy, progeny of a genius. I was a poet, a young poet, and he helped me to be better. Those Tuesday night poetry workshops were one of the few things I ever did with my father; rare instances when I felt close to him.

I continued to write, and to read. He’d bring home reader’s copies of classic texts, complete with scholarly “apparatus,” critical essays and lots of notes. My favorite was *The Norton Anthology of American Poetry*. I received it as I would the Torah, and
went through it bibliically, memorizing chapter and verse. I read the biographies of the poets – paid attention to which colleges and universities they had attended, where they had published.

By the time I got to high school I had written a sheaf of poetry. Painstakingly I typed out my work on a rickety IBM Selectric, using Wite-Out liberally, as my typing was faster than it was accurate. Finally I had a collection of my work. I went to the stationery store and bought a big, heavy, black binder. It was solid and hard, and into it I sandwiched my poems. My delicate feelings, my fears, my expectations were bound between sturdy and protective boards.

I presented it to father.

"Here," I said, puffed up, "my opus."

He sniffed at it, leafed through the poems.

"It's corpus," he said, "not opus. The body of work."

I waited.

He looked up at me, pipe clamped between his teeth.

"That's a rather pretentious presentation, don't you think," knocking on the hard, heavy black binder.

Had I come to him, had I said to him, he had made me feel like nothing, I know him well enough to know what he would have said: "Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again."

When I announced to my father, the product and employee of public universities, my intention to apply to Yale he appeared unsurprised. When I told my guidance
counselor, she said to forget about it. No one from my high school had ever gone to Yale and I didn’t have a chance. Just apply to the New York State schools, she said, and don’t worry.

I worked on my college applications. I wrote and rewrote the essay. I showed my father draft after draft; each time he told me what was wrong, never mentioning if there was anything of merit in it. Finally he said he thought it was as good as it was going to get and I sent it off.

The thin envelopes arrived the day before I expected them. Princeton and Harvard said no. He was right, all along, my father was right. I wasn’t good enough. Chicago and Hopkins offered me money, lots of money. But I hadn’t noticed in the Norton Anthology any poets who had gone to Chicago or Hopkins. I wasn’t good enough.

The fat envelope came the next day. I had been admitted to Yale, my first choice.

I told my father.

He was uncharacteristically silent.

The family drove me to school the next fall. My father, always angrily and ideologically opposed to bumper stickers (I don’t need to advertise my beliefs) wanted to get a Yale sticker for the back window of the car. We found our way among the many one-way streets to my dorm room, small and a little cruddy. We found ourselves amid fancy cars and fancy people moving in fancy furniture and threadbare Oriental rugs. I was scared, but excited. I couldn’t believe that I was going to spend the next four years in a place like this, and knew that it would change, utterly, the course of my life. Scared, but excited, I arrived.
My father, I think, was merely scared; out of his element, out-classed, and, looking into the future, fearing the me that would be a product of this impressive place. He began making snide comments – about the rich, about my future fellow classmates, even about the architecture. As we walked around the campus, he became more and more agitated. We walked past a building that looked like a mausoleum. It turned out to be one of the secret societies, an older, clandestine Yale version of fraternities. An archaic idiocy. My father grabbed it.

“What kind of place would allow this to continue?” he railed.

“Elitist bullshit. Sexist crap,” he ranted.

“Assholes,” he muttered.

I fought back, defending. I began to argue a position I hadn’t thought through, and for which I had very little information. Who cares about the secret societies? was what I thought. I didn’t know who got in, or how, or what they did. Even four years later, I still cared little and knew only slightly more.

“What a place,” he railed. “Christ, what a place,” he said, as they drove away.

My father never came back to Yale. Not even for my graduation.

The sticker on the car stayed.

My father raised me to share his discomfort with place. He taught me to be a Shakespeare-quoting snob in a rural farming community, to feel different and out of place. He taught me that my Jewishness was something that could kill me, without giving me any notion of how it might help me to live. He railed against elitism and sent me to one of the best schools in the country, announcing his pride with a stubbornly-placed
sticker back of the car and balking when I came home wanting to talk about Milton and literary theories he hadn’t kept up with. I know that my father wanted the best for me, the things he hadn’t gotten; but his bitterness hardened me. Like a horse who fights too long against the bit, I no longer feel the tug of his constraints.

I want to feel at home in the world. I want to find a place that is mine. Jews have historically settled in places that were not theirs, created diasporas. The fantasy of the West calls to me. When I was a child we spent summers in a one-room cabin in rural Maine. There was nothing for me to do, and so my parents leased for me a horse each summer – a steed in the front yard. I’d saddle up and go, exploring the logging roads and trails. Just me and a horse and dreams of escape. It’s a hard fantasy to shake. When I graduated from Yale, I had a job offer, starting in the fall, to work on a dude ranch in Wyoming. Instead I began working at Oxford University Press.
“If I had my life to live over, I would do it all again, but this time I would be nastier.”

– Jeannette Rankin

There’s a river that runs through Missoula, Montana – the Clark Fork of the Columbia River. Crossing it from downtown to get to the University of Montana Campus, you negotiate around a little triangle of land created by the one-way streets leading off and onto the bridge. A sign labels the place: Jeannette Rankin Park. It’s not much of a park, not really. It’s a by-product of city planning with a name.

When I got to Montana I learned that the state was late (so say the Montanans) to give women the vote. Late for the West, that is. Wyoming was first, in 1869, followed by Colorado in 1893, and then a host of mostly Western states fell in. Montana was eleventh in 1914. The Nineteenth Amendment wasn’t ratified until 1920.

Jeannette Rankin was elected to the US Congress in 1916. Four days into her term, the House was asked to vote on a resolution to enter the First World War. Rankin voted No. She wasn’t elected for a second consecutive term, but in 1940, she ran again, on an anti-war campaign and won. She voted against entry into the Second World War, the only member of Congress to have voted No on both wars.
When I learned about Rankin I was surprised to find that there had been no major trade biography of her. I thought maybe I’d write one. I went to the archives and began to look through her papers; I started a conversation with the university archivist, who told me that she thought someone at the University of Montana had a biography of Jeannette in the hopper. Two days later she emailed me letting me know that a political scientist had a book coming out from the University of Colorado Press.

I called Jim Lopach, told him that I was a graduate student working on women in the West, and was interested in Jeannette. He said his book would be coming out in a few months. Graduate student-like, I asked him what his argument was; asked for a quick gloss on what he’d found. *You’ll have to wait and buy the book*, he told me. I thought this a peculiar professorial reaction to a student request.

A few months later I went to a reading by the authors – the political scientist and his social worker wife. I went because I was curious, and because I was friends with the bookstore owner, who had called to ask me to bring a corkscrew.

Bookstore readings don’t always draw a crowd. At this one there were the authors, the bookstore owner, and me. The lack of attendance was particularly notable given that The Jeannette Rankin Peace Center is three doors down the street.

Lopach perched authorially on a stool while his wife, Jean, hovered in the background. He confessed that he knew people were upset by his thesis: he had argued, I finally learned, that Rankin was a puppet of her brother Wellington. *Our research led us* to believe that he was the brains behind the whole operation, Lopach said. He had evidence that Jeannette was a predatory lesbian. She used people, he said. A politician who used people for her own gains. She wasn’t a very nice person, he said.
In 1988 I was four years out of college, publishing scholarly books in history. I was a devoted reader of my daily paper, The New York Times. There are pieces of journalism that, though the next day they may end up lining the kitty litter box, you never forget. For me, one such article was an essay by Joyce Carol Oates who, in the course of reviewing a biography of the writer Jean Stafford, defined a new genre: pathography. It was, Oates wrote, “Hagiography’s diminished and often prurient twin,” the dark underbelly of biography, where a writer focuses on the negative aspects of the subject’s life. Where the writer often comes to hate the subject she is writing about.

It took about five minutes of conversation with the authors of Jeannette Rankin: A Political Woman, for me to know the genre of their book. I decided not to buy it and to do my own research.

During her first term in Washington, DC, Rankin brought with her Belle Fligelman, a tiny, lively young woman from Helena, Montana. A suffragist, a writer, a delight, Belle didn’t much like Washington, and when she met a young, Yale-educated lawyer who was working for the Hoover Food Administration, she telegraphed her family: “Dear Father and Mother, Norman and I have decided to be married. Sorry you can’t be with us. Belle.” The response: “Dear Belle: Who is Norman?” Belle and Norman Winestine went to Europe to be writers but eventually they ended up back in Helena. Norman took over running Fligelman’s Department Store.

Belle’s sister, Frieda, was the first woman admitted to the PhD program in Political Science at Columbia University. She studied with Franz Boas before Margaret Mead did. She was interested in language not as the study of meaning and form, but as a
product of a particular environment, arising from a particular group. The Jewish woman from Montana worked on African languages, demonstrating their depth and richness through academic study. Her work pre-dated and anticipated the field of socio-linguistics.

But primacy has its consequences. The presiding powers at Columbia failed to recognize her work as coming out of an existing discipline and, in 1917, refused to award her a doctorate. This was a crushing blow. Frieda never stopped trying to elbow her way into the academic world, but she languished in the marginal role of the “independent scholar,” going to conferences and submitting journal articles without benefit of a university affiliation. She referred to her apartment in Helena as the “Institute of Social Logic.” Frieda Fligelman lived with her nose pressed against the windows of both academe and domestic comfort.

To her disappointment, she never married. From my readings — of her letters, of her work, of the accounts of her life and career — I began to form an impression of a woman who was frustrated at every turn. She was a Jew in Montana, a woman in academe, an old lady who ended up alone. I imagined her bitter, angry. I pictured her towering over her little sister Belle, who followed in her footsteps, but daintily, with a coquettish, warm and feminine manner; I pictured Frieda as a loud-mouth, pushy, and argumentative, a New York Jew. I thought about the fierce Jewish women I’d had to fend off when I was an editor — those who called daily to hector and harangue me, trying to get me to publish their books. Frieda was probably a pain in the ass. Then I realized that I was conflating my image of her with that of my maternal grandmother, Ruth, and that I might be in danger of committing pathography.
My older women relatives can be shoehorned into one of two categories: the fierce and the weak. My maternal grandmother Ruth’s personality became more aggressive, often nasty, as her body failed during the last decade of her life. She was quick and smart, funny in a bitter, biting way. And she was frustrated, never having found an outlet for her prodigious mental energy. What I saw was a woman whose desire to control her environment increased in inverse proportion to her physical health. I knew, even as a child, that this was a losing proposition.

On the paternal side, Grandma Eva was a shadowy figure, adumbrated by her large and angry husband. She didn’t want to cause a fuss. She offered sweets and treats and quietly asked my father to fix the electronic appliances that had broken since his last visit. She made herself easy to ignore. Like a dog that has too often been struck, she cowered in the corners of her own life.

Two models – the fierce and the weak. Neither appealed.

My two great-aunts switched sides. Related to my father, Aunt Helen traveled the world, married a few times, served in WWII as a WAC, was a Chief Petty Officer in the air force, had a job, lived for many years in San Francisco, a country away from her family, and then finally settled in Florida. Aunt Helen had a big, loud laugh.

Aunt Anne, my mother’s aunt, married Al, a mean man, and they lived with her mother. Both husband and mother bent Anne to their wills, which often conflicted. It was a house of conflict. She put her head down and worked as a seamstress. Al retired and the trio moved Florida. Anne’s mother died and she and Uncle Al took one of Barkus’s
puppies; Buffy became her life. Then both Uncle Al and Buffy died and Aunt Anne was alone.

All of my women relatives grew up in New York. I equated Jewishness with New York City. Even when my Aunts Helen and Anne left for other parts of the country, they retained their accents and ways of being – in the sticky Florida sun Helen continued to thrive, large and hearty, while Anne got smaller and smaller.

My father got along well with his aunt Helen and his mother-in-law Ruth. He seemed to appreciate tough, strong women. At least when they weren’t his daughter.

Often people back east will ask me, when they find out that I live in Montana, in Missoula, a town they may or may not have heard of, if I have to fly into Helena. Sometimes they pronounce it Hel-LEEN-a, perhaps unconsciously not wanting to connect anything west of the big river with the golden age of Greece. It’s the biggest city in Montana, right? They assert or ask. I shake my head. But it’s a city they know, they’ve heard of it. I tell them that Billings is the biggest, followed by Missoula, my city of 65,000. People know Helena, with a population less than 30,000, because, a long time ago, they learned the state capitols. They tend not to know what Helena is like now, or what it was.

In the later part of the nineteenth century Helena, like many cities of the West, was a thriving, urban and urbane place. By 1880, about fifty millionaires lived in the “Queen City of the Rockies,” snug against Mt. Helena. The stretch that became the main street was literally paved with gold; a group of men – the “Four Georgians” hit pay dirt in 1864 and were able to extract from “Last Chance Gulch” the equivalent of about 3.6
billion dollars of the ore. Montana voters, in an election five years after the territory gained statehood, chose Helena as the capitol.

Because there were so many wealthy families, and because many of them had an interest in living the kind of life they could have had in the cities of the East or the Midwest, they created a place of culture and sophistication. It is no surprise that both Myrna Loy and Gary Cooper are from Helena; the city had a thriving arts community – theatre, opera, music, dance.

In many ways, the mythology of the West never existed in Helena. If there were cowboys, they were Texas cowboys. The capitol city was filled with merchants and miners and business people and professionals. Helena is still a place where the governor’s phone number is listed and anyone can call him up.

These Western cities were – and are – places of confluence. In the 1870s, Indians were still free to come and go in towns, before they were forced onto reservations. People came and went – Chinese, blacks, Asians, Scandinavians, Irish – laborers of all sorts. But those who came to stay and settle replicated the class-based ideas of Anglo-American community. Types of government, courts, architecture were not indigenous to the West, but were transplanted, just as hardwood trees and the idea of lush, green lawns were. The preponderance of the population of the West since the late nineteenth century has been in urban areas.

I confess that I did not think of the West as a place of cities. Or as a place of culture. Even having worked on Peggy Pascoe’s book about the relations between women who came to the West and those who were already there, I didn’t stop to think
about how I had created in my mind a certain type of Western women and tried to shoehorn the figures I read about it into place. Into the place I wanted to believe in.

When I came across the letter in the archives, it infuriated me. It nearly made me cry. It’s from Belle to Frieda, December 15, 1936. Belle is in Helena; Frieda, living in Berkeley, is 46 years old. “I have been trying to write you ever since your flames of enthusiasm reached me last week,” Belle starts. “But at least here I am. In regard to the card from Boston, I feel I ought to be a little brutal so that you will not raise your hopes too high nor put too much confidence where it might sift through.” Frieda has sent on a card from a potential romantic prospect, asking for her sister’s help in deconstructing the meaning. Frieda thinks she has found a potential companion, a fellow “lonely scholar.”

Belle’s assessment is harsh: “Your task is not to find a lonely scholar, but to gird yourself into the shape of a gay young chippie, if you are looking for companionship. I really mean that to arouse a desire for companionship in a man, you must clothe your serious concern for the world in gaiety; you must let him have most of the time devoted to discussion; and you must wear clothes that he would like his men friends to see you in. He must be proud to show you off to his friends, even though he himself appreciates (or can overlook) your enjoyment of “beautiful old age” as you so often describe it, he wants you to look young and snappy and stylish for the world.”

It troubles me. How could Belle say this to her sister, a woman who was wont to walk around in the early part of the twentieth century proudly sans corset or heels? Frieda eschewed the fashions of the time, arguing that it “was more reasonable to wear sandals and more aesthetic, too, like the Greek statues.” She hewed to the gods of reason. Yet
Belle admonished her besotted sister: "These artistic things you so love are nice; but look around and see if all the people who indulge in them are not nice old maids who have been overlooked on the matrimonial shelves...I don't say that a husband is more worth while than your love for artistic and genuine old-age beauty – that is something you have to decide your self."

Belle does, of course, want the best for the sister she truly loves and finishes with solid, sibling advice: "But the main thing so far as I can see, is to have a routine of work that takes you out among a few people, at least, so that you come in to daily contact with stimulating people, and not get ingrown with ideas about lonely scholars." If you can't have both, she seems to intimate, at least there's always the work. Either/or, not both/and.

Herman Fligelman was born in Rumania and went, with a friend, to Boston in 1882. From there he traveled south to New York and worked first in the kitchen of an "elite" restaurant and then on the docks. Shortly thereafter he started his journey west, stopping in Minneapolis to lay street car tracks and begin to amass a collection of dry goods. He paid a tutor so he could learn to read and write English. And he took a trip to Billings, Montana. The place seemed to capture his imagination and tickle his entrepreneurial fancy. On returning to Minnesota he met a man named Robert Heller and the two of them set off for Helena in 1885, partnering with Henry Loble to open a store. Two years later Herman was buying supplies from New York dealers to be sent out West and in 1891 the men incorporated the New York Dry Goods Company with Herman Fligelman as president.
Herman married and had two daughters, Frieda was born in 1889; Belle in 1891. Their mother died shortly after Belle was born. Herman remarried in 1894, a German woman named Ghetty who became Mother to the girls. The Fligelman household was a place of intellectual exchange and lively debate. Of her tumultuous career Frieda once said, “I feel I got my start right here in Helena, because my father would say, ‘Let’s be reasonable. We are civilized people and civilized people don’t do this or that.’ I never considered myself a revolutionary. I felt it was simply a moral obligation to be reasonable.”

It was also a moral obligation to get facts right. In her later years Belle’s friends remembered how she marveled at those who did not keep reference books always at hand. “How do you settle arguments during dinner?” Belle had asked.

Frieda went first to the University of Minnesota and then joined her sister Belle, who had enrolled at the University of Wisconsin in 1909. In Madison the vivacious Belle was elected President of Women at the University. In this capacity she was asked to speak on suffrage to the Wisconsin state legislature. It was far from a personal cause and the request surprised her: “I had never thought about it at all. I just knew Frieda was in favor of it,” she said. “I know that it’s right for women to vote, but I didn’t know you had to have a reason to be right.” This sense of moral certitude was a characteristic of both sisters. Belle got herself done up in blue velvet dress and put ribbons in her hair. “I looked very feminine, I thought. When they saw me, they brought up a little box for me to stand on because I couldn’t see over the podium.” No doubt having a pretty young woman speak to an assembly of men made the unsavory nature of the argument easier to digest.
After graduating with a degree in philosophy in 1913 Belle did a short stint on *The Milwaukee Leader*, a socialist paper and then went home to Montana. She started freelancing as a journalist and had articles published in *The Helena Record*. Then she was offered a job at *The Helena Independent*, the paper's first woman reporter. Belle remained an active suffragist, speaking on street corners in her hometown. This did not please her mother, who wrote her: “If you speak again, you needn’t come home.” So Belle checked herself into the Placer Hotel and sent the bill to her parents.

I get Belle. I picture her as a young woman in her blue velvet dress with a bow in her hair, speaking to a bunch of Wisconsin legislators and charming them. I see her as a child. She sent her first poem to *Ladies Home Journal* at age nine; when she got back a form reject, she was excited to be called Madam. I see her as an old lady, serving tea and cookies and exclaiming, her hands like little birds. When I read about Frieda, I am confused.

Because Montana is in many ways a small town, I decided to find people who knew Frieda and Belle, who could tell me what they were like. I went, naturally, to my friend Nicholas Vrooman. Nicholas is a folklorist, a historian, a musician, an aging hippie; he’s a Forrest Gump kind of character when it comes to recent history. He’s been everywhere, met everyone and I am still amazed by the things he’s done. When I ask him about the Sun Dance ceremony in *A Man Called Horse* — a movie based on a story by Missoula writer Dorothy M. Johnson — he casually mentions that he had been through the ceremony himself five times. “I’m a Sun Dancer,” he says, as if he has just told me that he sometimes wears sandals or that he likes ice cream.
Nicholas moved to Helena in the seventies, part of the post-hippie movement. “We all had degrees, but we went back to the woods. We did our shtick and then we decided we needed to get jobs. We run state government now.” He tells me to get in touch with Alexandra Swaney. “She’s the state folklorist now,” he says. She has his former job. “Alex worked for Frieda for a while when she was young. You’ll like her,” he says. When Nicholas tells me things, I rarely doubt him.

We’d agreed to meet at little bistro, just off the walking mall – Helena still has a real downtown. I’m late. Alex Swaney is sitting at a table covered with papers, waiting. She’s small, with delicate features and bright red hair. She’s refers a number of times, over a slice of frittata and green salad, to being ready to retire. “I want to do a musical piece about Frieda,” she says. “A wild, post-modern kind of thing – with crazy music – Frieda loved avant-garde music.” I immediately like Alex Swaney.

Swaney’s a fourth-generation Montanan. Her father grew up in Kalispell and then traveled the world – he went to war with General Pershing, was sent to quell the bloody labor riots in nearby Butte, Montana, worked as vice counsel in Scotland, was in China in the twenties, and became deaf, probably, his daughter says, as a result of artillery. He settled in Helena and at the age of 48 married a North Dakota Lutheran who had gone to Concordia College. After studying for a law degree but never practicing, he worked as a land agent. He acquired a collection of acres on Mt. Helena where he and his small family – wife and Alexandra – would ride their horses. When Alex was three, she watched her mother die in a riding accident. It was, she says, the defining moment of her life.
Swaney was raised by her father, a freethinker, and her maternal grandmother, a schoolteacher. They were careful, she says, around their ideological differences. “I tried to create fights, as children will.” They never bit. In addition to being brought up with cordial respect for difference, Swaney became a young adult in a culturally rich environment. Because Helena was on the rail lines, there was a steady stream of artists coming through. When Marian Anderson arrived in Helena, she wasn’t allowed to stay at the Placer Hotel. Swaney saw Arthur Rubenstein when she was five years old. “But men don’t play the piano,” the daughter of a musical mother had told her father. “Yes, some do,” her father assured her.

One of the few instances of conflict between daughter and father was when Alex wanted to go out of state to college. “I wanted to go to Mills College.” When I asked her why, she answered quickly. “Because that’s where Judy and Minna went.” Though many years younger than the Winestine’s daughters, Alex followed them to California. After college she went to graduate school in anthropology at the University of Colorado and met a man, a New York Jew named Arnie Malina. “He looked like a gangster and was reading Latin,” she says, and adds, “I’ve always been drawn to Jews.”

There’s something in the West that allows for certain kinds of difference not to be threatening – especially when there’s no dispute over land or resources. Perhaps it’s the bigness of the place; that somehow the vastness of the space allows for interest and tolerance. Or for disinterest. Perhaps it’s that everything is still relatively new – it lacks some of the entrenched battlelines of the history of the East. Donna Maddux, a sixty-something former educator I know, thinks it has to do with the Civil War. She says the
Civil War is what made Montana; southerners came after the war to start over. California was too civilized – they took sides in the war – but out here, folks never asked about one’s background because you didn’t know – didn’t want to know – which side they were on. The West had a way of letting people reinvent themselves.

I like to think of Montana as a don’t ask/don’t tell kind of state, probably because of a story told to me by my friend Joe. Model-thin, over six-feet tall, Joe used to sashay around the University of Montana campus in a skirt, eyes made up. When he paused to think, he’d punctuate with yelps and barbaric yawps. He grew up on the eastern side of Montana – the plains, the sometimes dusty, often frozen portion of the state where there are more cows than people. Because he is so much who he is – all brains and fluttering eyelashes and gay pride – and because he is so young, only 23 when I met him, I couldn’t imagine him differently. And I couldn’t imagine him growing up in small town Montana. Finally I had to ask. Just one state line away from Matthew Shepherd, I wanted to know how he had survived high school.

“I’m a fourth generation rancher,” he said. “I can pull a calf, bale hay, mend fence. That’s what counts.” He told me that his high school history teacher – a man who had taught his father as well – had once found Joe kissing another boy behind the school. He said: “Can you guys take it somewhere else?” I’ve heard similar stories from other gay and lesbian people who grew up here. Nothing like the taunting and torture endured by those who were raised in the more “civilized” parts of the country.

It’s not always like that. Of course it’s not. The Matthew Shepard case showed us that tolerance has limits. But the response to Matthew Shepard’s death shows how that kind of thing isn’t supposed to happen here. I’ve grown accustomed to the curious
indifference to difference I’ve encountered. And since I’m always delighted by the delightful embrace of otherness, I’m not at all surprised to hear Alex Swaney profess her inexplicable attraction for Jews.

“Norman was an amazing-looking person,” Swaney says, “with very large, very dark brown eyes, which one felt were windows on a large quantity of wisdom and good will.” He had a presence, she says, and she was drawn to the trio – Norman, Belle, and Frieda, whom she knew, she says, were Jewish. “Maybe I was a Jew in a former life,” she says, and recalls that when her Lutheran grandmother read to her from the Bible, she wanted only to hear the stories of the Old Testament. I offer that it’s a better book – more colorful stories, more interesting characters, and she agrees.

Growing up in Helena, Swaney knew Jews and she knew gay people, though she didn’t know it. “My art teacher was gay, but no one ever said anything about it.” Her attraction to otherness led her, during graduate school, to do field work in Mexico on culture and the aging process, but she got ill, very ill, and came back to Helena. She was lonely – the people her age were moving on, and after Boulder, Helena felt like a backwater. Frieda got wind of it and invited Swaney to come and work for her, organizing her papers, helping her. “I’ll pay you twice what you’re making as a waitress,” she said. Swaney worked with her for a while, and then Frieda found her a job. She was like that, Swaney says. She would corner young people and ask: “And what are you interested in?” When they told her, Frieda would tell them who to see, what to do, where to go. She drew people to her with a generosity of spirit, a willingness to help out financially (she had a trust from her father), and an effervescent personality.
She’d parade around Helena in a purple beret and cape. Never afraid to stand out – or to stand up for what she believed – Frieda was an exemplar of charting her own course.

And she encouraged others to do the same. After going away to college and graduate school, Swaney came back to Helena. In 1976, Swaney, her then-husband Arnie Malina, and another friend formed a partnership to open "The Second Story Cinema" to show classic and foreign films. Malina eventually grew this venture into the Myrna Loy Center, which became nationally known for its adventuresome programming in a relatively small western town.

In 1977, Swaney tells me, Frieda gave a reading at the Second Story. She was accompanied with songs from Cheap Cologne, a band Swaney had formed with two other women. The house was packed, and Frieda charmed the audience, young and old. Swaney says that she followed in Frieda’s “quixotic” tradition by becoming a jazz pianist.

Montana, The Magazine of Western History, published a 1982 interview with Belle by Susan Leaphart titled “A Frontier Girlhood.” Belle said: “I always remember our bookcases at home, when we were children, were filled with Dickens, Scott, Victor Hugo, Shakespeare, books of history, political philosophy, ancient world geography, Ingersoll, Thomas Paine and Mark Twain.” It was from her father, Belle said, that the girls got their intellectual curiosity, and she describes her mother – her step-mother, Ghetty – being more interested in keeping house, though, Belle says, “we had live-in help.”
Belle, the younger sister, says "Frieda always had a mind of her own. She was very, very opinionated and reasonably so." She goes on to describe when Bryan ran against McKinley. The Democratic Bryan's headquarters gave out wonderful silver pencils and Belle says that the children were all for Bryan. "Frieda must have been seven and I must have been six. All of the children were about that age. And the day after the election, McKinley was elected and the children were so excited." There was to be a parade celebrating the new president. But Frieda wouldn't go. She said, according to her sister, "Why should I change when I am for Bryan? Why should I say I am for McKinley just because he got elected? I've been for Bryan and I am for Bryan."

At a time when the girls of their era and social standing went to finishing school, Frieda said that she and Belle would go to college. "Frieda said that if our parents wouldn't send us anywhere except to a finishing school, then she would earn the money and go where she wanted to go." Frieda tried to get a job, failed – because she was only fifteen – and protested and cried until her parents agreed to send her to college. "And of course," Belle says, "when she went, I would be the one to go too. I always did what Frieda had planned to be done."

Most parents are quick to point out that their children were born with personalities. Frieda's seemed to contain a pronounced commitment to social justice. When she got to Columbia, she wanted to take a course in constitutional law with the historian Charles Beard. Women were not allowed. She petitioned: "Dear Sirs, It seems indeed unnecessary for an American citizen to give reasons why she should wish to study the constitutional law of her country...since so many laws which are considered desirable by civic minded people have been declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, I have
a great desire to know why.” She was given neither an answer nor admittance to the

course.

After the Frieda’s death in 1978, Swaney went through her files and donated them
to the University of Montana. What I found there was a paper trail of frustration and
disappointment: Rejection letters from the *American Journal of Sociology* calling her
papers too speculative and vague; polite declines from *Social Forces* and the *American
Sociological Review*. Frieda was tireless and she was fierce. Despite being shut out of
the inner circles of academe, she lived a full and rich life: In Palestine before the war;
Paris in the twenties; Berkeley in the thirties and forties. She came home to Helena in
1948, to reign as the benign eccentric of her hometown.

These women, Belle and Frieda, do not fit with my stereotypes borne of Western
mythology. I can no more imagine one of them jumping on a horse and galloping after
Rooster Cogburn a la Mattie Ross than I can picture my Aunt Helen running a marathon.
But they were, of course, women of the West. Perhaps the Turnerian vista opened up
some possibilities. Jeannette Rankin was able to be elected because Western men saw
the work that women did and valued it. There may have been more gender equity,
developed on the overland trail where traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity fell
victim to the harsh conditions of the journey west – it’s hard to stay pretty and frilly when
you’re camping – but it only went so far.

I want to believe that the West allowed them opportunities that were denied to
women in other parts of the country. I’d like to think that my grandma Ruth, if she’d been
raised out here instead of in New York City, would have found a career and put her brain
to use, rather than using it against herself and others. California is not, in many ways, the West. But it does not surprise me that when Aunt Helen needed to get away from her family, she followed the course of the setting sun.

When Norman died at the age of 90, after being married to Belle for 67 years, his obituary called him "dean" of Helena’s Jewish community. The paper quoted him from an interview two months prior to his death as downplaying the warmth expressed by the community for him saying that “I think it’s because of my darling wife, some reflection and her popularity and the affection felt for her.” Belle had died some months before at age 94. Their marriage was a partnership, and Belle never took for granted that she had found a special man.

In Belle’s large collection of unpublished writings is a piece called “Graduating from Marriage.” The concluding paragraph reads: “I have been married sixty-two years to the same man. (Three years during World War II separated us.) And I have learned in all these years from the soured experiences of people I have known, and from the blessed years that have been my own life, that established acceptance of a wise procedure can greatly ease a needed change in life methods. And I have learned, too, that any happy marriage needs infinite patience, a magnificent sense of humor, and an enjoyment of challenge.” Belle was fortunate. And she knew it.

A story in the Helena Independent Record, describes the triumvirate: “It’s said that Frieda was a hot air balloon, capable of great thought but loving to flit from concept to concept, expounding one minute on her unique linguistic studies and the next on her
translation from the French and Spanish of Lope de Vega’s ‘The Discovery of the New World by Christopher Columbus.’

‘And that would drive Norman crazy,’ said Judge Gordon Bennett this week. ‘His intellectual curiosity was virtually unending. Once he got his teeth into something he never let go.

‘The three of them together were a circus, a very...interesting...triple. He wanted to stay with a subject until it was exhausted; Frieda wanted to flit. Belle would be the referee.”’

I think about Frieda’s life – rich in love, surrounded by people who respected, admired, and even adored her. Her work was finally recognized in a *festschrift* on sociolinguistics. She supported the arts in her hometown in ways that were real and tangible. She was also supported by her community – the family she was born into and the one she made, by dint of her strong personality and open heart.

I think about the cumulative view of Frieda I acquired by reading through her papers – of what was kept and the pieces of her life that were jettisoned. It’s too easy to fall into a stereotypical vision. It’s too easy to flatten the lives of people into the dimensions that are comfortable for us to handle. The middle road between pathography and hagiography – the genre of telling a person’s life – is a complicated and fraught business. Crafting an entry into Western women’s historiography requires a lot more than reading through dusty archival materials. It requires turning the vision inward.
“Let’s just say it’s on Frieda,” Alex Swaney says as we negotiate for the check.

“One of the things she loved most was taking young people to lunch or dinner.” The Frieda she has described is warm and generous, fun and adventuresome, her frustrations and disappointments invisible to those she fostered and nurtured.

The Frieda she describes is someone I wish I had known.
The Woman Who Created Liberty Valance

[Undated]

Dear Miss Fligelman:

I enjoyed getting acquainted with you and having lunch at the Montana Club, about which I had heard so much.

I got home in good order and at a comfortably early hour, with no remarkable experiences except sight of a big old Indian on the Flathead reservation who wore such bright yellow and green scarves that I couldn’t take my eyes off him.

The trip to Helena was a great pleasure. It was a treat to meet a lot of people who discuss ideas and events rather than the neighbors – though if the neighbors are up to anything, I don’t want to miss hearing about it.

Sincerely,
Dorothy M. Johnson

I bet it vexed her that she spent the first seven years of her life somewhere other than Montana, that she was not a native. Or maybe it merely served to make her more resolute, to work harder to tell the stories, to get it “right.” Dorothy M. Johnson was born in McGregor, Iowa, 1905, and moved to Whitefish with her family in 1913. She was raised by a widowed mother, married for about fifteen minutes to a rat, and spent most of her life as a character.

She started writing about her home state while working in publishing in New York City. She learned about the “frontier” West at the New York Public library,
researching the Plains Indians, trying to filter fact from pulp fiction as represented in the novels of the West.

As her stories were published and she became known as a chronicler of the West, she embraced the identities she had crafted for herself. I saw this as I pored over her papers in the archives at the University of Montana. I sift through iterations of her resume from various points in her life and see Dorothy Johnson embracing roles, reimagining herself, and always having fun:

1959 – Whitefish gave her a key to the city in 1959, and she is Honorary Police Chief. On visits she drops in to see how the boys are doing. She is an adopted member of the Blackfeet Tribe with the name Kills Both Places.

1969 – Belongs to three honorary societies whose names she can’t remember – they are not Phi Beta Kappa.

1972 – She has been through the peyote ceremony of the Native American Church on the Crow Reservation.

1974 – Her hobby is collecting small lethal weapons.

Dorothy Johnson got to play both cowboy and Indian.

Dorothy Johnson gave many speeches with the title “How to Get on a Horse” and sent out a Christmas card with a photograph of her attempting – unsuccessfully – to do just that.

Dorothy Johnson delighted in her celebrity and embraced her own wackiness. She sent another Christmas note with the heading: “Friend and Foe and Faithful Reader: I continue to play the role of Probably Lovable Old Eccentric.”
Dorothy Johnson’s story, “A Man Called Horse,” was turned into a major Hollywood film, and seared itself on my childhood memory.

Hollywood discovered Johnson. Her stories didn’t just get made into films; they were big films, with the imprimatur of the canon-makers of the genre: John Ford, John Wayne, Jimmy Stewart, Gary Cooper, Lee Marvin. But the stories she wrote and those that were filmed were not the same. This is not an unusual story for authors whose works are cannibalized for the big screen. But what is interesting here is that the movies seem to do exactly what Johnson was working against – to build up and on the myth of the West.

Johnson took pains to be authentic and correct in her portrayal of Indians, and was irritated that for the film version of Horse, the movie-makers changed the tribe from the Crow to the Sioux. One of the most riveting scenes in the movie – indeed, one of the scenes that impressed me the most when I was a child and loved Westerns – is a depiction of the Sun Dance Ceremony, where a man is hung from two slits cut into his chest. For me, seeing A Man Called Horse when I was a child was a horrifying and scarring experience. I went with expectations of another “oater” and was disappointed to be confronted by a movie not about horses but that wasn’t even in English. It had subtitles.

In the translation from story to film another important change was made. The main character was transformed from Johnson’s Bostonian to an Englishman. Dorothy Johnson’s story starts: “He was a young man of good family, as the phrase went in the New England of a hundred-odd years ago, and the reasons for his bitter discontent were
unclear, even to himself.” So, like Thoreau who would have been his contemporary, “He”—the man who is never named except by the name he takes for himself in captivity—goes West. His discontent has something to do with class. He goes seeking both the idea of equality and also following the notion that in Indian country, all men were kings. Naturally, he wanted to be a king. The first thing he runs up against is differences in the way social standing plays out: “He found, in the West as in Boston, that the men he respected were still his superiors, even if they could not read.” He bought companionship, though not friends. He found that Westerners were reserved, and not particularly friendly. The cultural difference between East and West is as vast as that separated by the Atlantic. But when you’re setting up conditions for a movie, making your stranger-in-a-strange-land come from another nation, rather than a distinct region, allows you to get to the captivity part more quickly.

And indeed, it is the captivity that is the focus of the film. The filmmakers, working during with the rise of the American Indian Movement, wanted to “get it right.” They showed native rituals and even used subtitled Sioux dialogue. They sought out advice on costumes, though perhaps not entirely successfully. From jacket of the videotape of A Man Called Horse: “To recreate authentic Indian costumes for the film’s accuracy, the production designer met with real American Indians only to discover their notion of Indian clothing was based on the costumes designed by Hollywood studios.”

It wasn’t the perspective of the Indians that most intrigued Johnson. She was interested in the myth-making, the narratives that come of captivity. Repeatedly during the course of the story her main character consoles himself by thinking of the tales he will have to tell when he gets home. Johnson points us toward his growing awareness of
cultural difference. The Indian ways, which at first feel exotic and ugly, are rituals that he comes to understand. The rules of courtship, marriage, polygamy, family structure, manhood, death and grieving he recognizes, ultimately, are untranslatable; he will not be able to come home and speak of them.

Like a Stockholm Syndrome hostage, he comes to identify with his captors. And at the end of the story, he gets what he was looking for: “He went home three years later. He explained no more than to say, ‘I lived with the Crows for a while. It was some time before I could leave. They called me Horse.’ He did not find it necessary either to apologize or to boast, because he was the equal of any man on earth.”

Even as Johnson’s focus is on the white man, her treatment of the Indians is different from the stuff of pulp fiction. She allows the Indians to be actors in their own stories. They get to be the subjects of their lives. This is a different version of the “frontier” West.

Another story of Johnson’s, “The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance,” was made into one of the canonical Westerns by John Ford. The movie contains one of the most famous lines from a Western, commenting on the genre: “This is the west, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.” The line does not appear in the book. Here too, the main character is, naturally, transformed. In the story Ransom Foster is the dude from back east, the educated lawyer, the greenhorn, the arrogant asshole. He comes back for a funeral, a conquering hero, a statesman, and when asked why he has returned, Johnson writes, “The Senator almost told the truth, but he caught himself in time.” Indeed, the West that Johnson creates is as much or more about reinventing the self, about the hopes and dreams – and sometimes craven actions – of those who turn away from books to
experience something bigger as it is about the showdown in the street: "Sometimes in later life Ranse Foster thought of the several men he had been through the years. He did not admire any of them very much. He was by no means ashamed of the man he finally became, except that he owed too much to other people."

It’s a Western notion, the fear of beholdeness. You need your neighbors, and that’s the secret of the West; the rugged individual can’t survive on his or her own. But it’s hard to ask for help and if you do, and you get it, you pay it back many times over to try to clear the debt.

Mary Clearman Blew grew up in the Judith Basin of Montana and wrote about it in a lauded memoir called All but the Waltz, an attempt to deconstruct the myths of Western womanhood. When my friend David, a smart and thoughtful guy, a historian of the West but one not accustomed to the genre of women’s memoir, read All but the Waltz, he said he thought she was making it up. She’s playing into the stereotypes of Western women – of course she has to have an aunt like that, of course she has to write about these things in these ways. He was referring, I think, to the legacy of pioneer life and the ways in which it has been kept alive out here.

In an essay entitled “Mother Lode” in her book, Bone Deep in Landscape, Blew looks at three Montana women writers: B. M. Bower, Dorothy Johnson, and Mildred Walker. “Like Dorothy Johnson,” she writes, “I enrolled in creative writing courses at the University of Montana well before the famous MFA in creative writing existed.”

Blew writes: “I thought that the reason why Montana women of my generation weren’t writing fiction was because they had been unable to find their own stories within
the dominating western mythology of solitude, questing, conflict, and destruction.” She continues: “And, unlike Dorothy Johnson a generation earlier, we weren’t interested in appropriating the western myth for ourselves.”

Blew quickly traces Johnson’s life: She attended school, worked, moved around, and married a gambler. “What is it about bookish girls and the wrong men?” Blew asks. Johnson’s wedding was her senior year in college; she was divorced by graduation. But Johnson spent her life writing. Prolifically and well. Poems, stories, letters to the editor. She never remarried. Blew says she “worked for the rest of her life as though she were being driven.”

About Johnson’s work Blew says that the novelist was interested in “valiant actions and sacrifice and lost causes” and she quotes Jack Schafer, the author of *Shane*, from the introduction to Johnson’s collection of stories, *Indian Country*: “Here is no glamorizing, no romantic gilding, of settlers or of Indians.” But that is not enough for Blew. She wonders about the choices Johnson made and asks “Why did she write within the conventions of genre fiction, why did she set such stern limitations upon herself? Why was courage, for her, a thing of the past?”

This irks me. I do not think of myself as an unduly generous reader, but I love nothing more than when a deft novelist works precisely in this manner. I adore genre fiction and I thrill when writers are able to work within in and subvert it at the same time. Like most people, I love the knowing wink. I love it when Agatha Christie breaks the most important rule of her genre in “The Murder of Roger Ackroyd” – and gives us a narrator who was the one whodunit. By doing this she points out to us the assumptions we make and how relying too heavily on what we think we know can lead us astray.
In “The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance” Johnson sets up the archetypal scene of the Old West – the two gunmen meeting on the street for a final moment of truth. “This was the classic situation, Ranse realized,” Johnson writes.

“Liberty Valance, burly and broad-shouldered, walked stiff-legged, elbows bent.” Three shots ring out. Ranse thinks: “Two shots to my one.”

He’s on the ground and hears Bert Barricune say, “He’s dead.”

“I am not,” says the greenhorn.

“I didn’t mean you,” says Barricune.

It was, of course, Bert Barricune who shot Liberty Valance. The episode on the street – the two gunfighters, with only one left standing, never played out in that canonical way. Ranse takes credit for the shooting and rides it to elected victory. And Dorothy Johnson gives her readers the knowing wink, with skill and grace, and best, of all, with wit.

In many ways, Western women seem to be able to live within the myths while also subverting them. That their realities sometimes coincide with stereotypic visions does not make their experiences less real, or important.

Perhaps, as is so often the case, Blew’s discomfort at the literary path Johnson chose has more to do with the constraints felt by Blew, rather than about her subject. At the end of the essay she describes the plot of Mildred Walker’s The Curlew’s Cry. And she engages with the character, Pamela, when she says that she is not afraid of the sound of the curlew bird: “Pamela, you’d better be afraid, I want to warn her as I reread The Curlew’s Cry today. You’re about to find out the kind of a life that is possible for a
young woman who has come of age on the last vestige of the frontier and who has absorbed its values as she has lived up to its harsh physical demands. You’re going to learn that such a young woman can never accept the constraints of a traditional female role, and yet she can never fully assume a male role. You’ll ask what space, then, you can claim, and what air is yours to breath? And what will you do for friends, companionship?"

Here it is laid bare. What indeed? I think about Elliott West’s argument on the impact of the frontier on children. The girl child who is allowed to ride with men like Rooster Cogburn eventually must hang up her spurs. Young women who learn to work outdoors must then go inside and cook dinner for the hands. And spend hours and hours alone – isolated from other women.

In the urban West, this was not so much the case. But the West of my dreams, the mythologized, celluloid West, is the ranches and the range – with space and land and place to invent and reinvent oneself. For the women who were living there, that reinvention was often to a more constrained version of themselves.

Blew knows as well as anyone about the trade offs and the choices of Western women.
The Feral Woman Writer from the Ranch

Judy Blunt is blunt. She’s also direct, guileless, and tall.

At the University of Montana, most of the humanities classrooms are crowded with those crazy chair/desk combinations – hard, plastic contraptions that require a leg-to-torso ratio that seems rarely to exist in the human species. Just before 7PM on a Monday night, at the beginning of the fall semester while the air still holds the promise of long nights, the chair/desks are arranged facing the front of the room. Graduate students of all ages slowly file into the room. A number of them are wearing sandals and carry glass jars of water, from which they swig greedy gulps. One woman wears tight, low-rise jeans rolled up to show high, chunky-heeled boots. Another sports a beret. There’s an older man with a baseball hat and a rodeo belt buckle. And a young, bouncy guy with a neatly-trimmed beard. And there’s me. Back at school after twenty years.

Blunt asks that we drag our desk/chairs into a circle. There is in the room one chair, a real chair, with a high back and no desk. Blunt nabs it, saying “Ah, the benefits of being the teacher.” As it turns out, she takes it not so much for comfort, but to avoid pain. Judy Blunt lives in pain. She’s suffered from degenerative disc disease since falling off a horse at age twelve. She tells us that she’s come directly from a yoga class and she feels, well, stretched.

It is the first meeting of our creative non-fiction workshop.

“Alrighty then,” Blunt says, and begins to set out clearly and comprehensively her expectations. She dispatches briskly with the housekeeping, giving dire warnings about
missing class, about promptness, and about the expectation that everyone have fifty pages of writing in his or her final portfolio.

Blunt tells the class that each week two students will be “workshopped.”

After matriculating but before I arrived at graduate school for a Masters of Fine Arts in creative nonfiction, having spent a lifetime in scholarly publishing, writing freelance articles and cranking out a couple of books, I told my friends that if they ever heard me use the word “workshop” as a verb just to go ahead and shoot me in the head. But for the next ten weeks, I will workshop and be workshopped by my fellow students and by Judy Blunt.

This is why I have come to graduate school. I was ready for change. When I cast around looking for writing programs, for places to live, Montana seemed about as foreign as I could find. So I started reading and found Judy Blunt’s memoir. It was reason enough to come.

This week, of course, there is nothing for us to workshop. She asks each of us to “freewrite” for five minutes about why we are here. Then we go around the room and read what we’ve written. Of the dozen of us, half are MFA students in Creative Writing. The University of Montana was home to Richard Hugo and William Kittredge who respectively built first-rate programs in poetry and prose. The rest of the group are in Environmental Studies, or EVST, as it’s called around these parts, doing a concentration in environmental writing. Many of them are recently back from trips in the field, living among wolves and grizzlies, hiking for miles and looking under rocks. There’s not much else for us to do at this point. Blunt ends the session and tells us that she’ll see us next week.

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This is the third time Judy Blunt has led a graduate level nonfiction workshop. At age 50 she has been on the faculty of the University of Montana for just three years. She had been working as an administrative assistant in the English department when, in 2002, her book was published. She kept having to leave work to be recorded on National Public Radio, accept prizes, and give readings. Eventually, the University made a faculty position for her.

Judy Blunt has told her own story, in pellucid, poetic and muscular prose. Her memoir, *Breaking Clean*, sold over 100,000 copies to land her on *The New York Times* bestseller list after garnering reviews that expressed awed astonishment at the beauty of her linguistic facilities and her clear-eyed treatment of the life of a ranching wife. She has toured the country, giving readings and doing signings, trotted out, she says, as “the feral woman writer from Montana.” That she has landed in Missoula, with a faculty position at the University of Montana is both shocking, given the trajectory of her life, and unsurprising, given her intellectual predilections and habits of mind.

It goes something like this: Born into the third generation of a ranching family in the high desert of Eastern Montana, Judy Blunt did all the right things. She worked hard on the ranch, learning as well how to mend fences and pull calves as she did bake pies and put up tomatoes. At eighteen she married a man not unlike her father, a rancher from a ranch family, twelve years her senior. A good ranch daughter, Blunt became a great ranch wife; she cooked for the men who worked the cattle and the fields – after helping with the work; birthed babies; and maintained a tidy household under the watchful eyes of her in-laws.
In high school — she had gone away for school, rooming with a widow woman in Malta, the nearest town, fifty miles from her family — she studied hard, did well, and read magazines that allowed her to peer into a world that was changing everywhere but here. She read women’s magazines, learned about the nascent feminist movement, and even got her paws on copies of *Ms.* magazine. When she moved to her husband’s family’s ranch, she collected boxes of hand-me-down books, reading omnivorously, indiscriminately. “I didn’t know what was a classic and what was pulp,” she says. “I read everything I could get my hands on.”

She began to write. In the original version of her memoir she told a story that has become known as the “typewriter incident.” With a poet’s attention to language and a novelist’s ability to set a scene, Blunt describes her father-in-law taking a sledgehammer to her typewriter. It is a powerful but short passage, a metaphorical smashing of hopes and dreams, a damaging blow to identity and independence. It was not, however, strictly speaking, true. What was struck, with force and anger and resentment, was more important that a piece of machinery — it was a blow to the soul. But you can’t write that, so it became, in an essay originally written for a course with the assignment, “My Montana Experience,” a typewriter.

When Blunt’s memoir was published, this essay, written by a neophyte with a talent for poetic prose, appeared essentially unchanged. No one thought to question it. After the book came out, Blunt’s father-in-law said that the incident had never happened. One line was omitted from the next printing of the book, but it still stings. “I use it in my nonfiction workshops as a teaching moment.”
But broken typewriter or no, Judy Blunt was able, at the age of thirty, to gather her three children and leave her husband and ranch life. She was able to reinvent herself and then craft that experience into an account that women all over the country could understand and find familiar, even if they’d never set foot on a ranch and couldn’t tell a heifer from a steer.

The first – and, as it turns out, one of the few – social gatherings of the students and faculty of the University of Montana Creative Writing program takes place at the comfortable home of the program’s director. It’s a warm night and the backyard is filled with people making the kind of cautious conversation of strangers who know they are about to spend a lot of time together. The kitchen table groans from a wide range of potluck dishes, mostly healthy, hearty fare. Outside, on the deck, are baskets of chips, bowls of salsa, glops of hummus, and a tray of carefully arranged deviled eggs – topped with a variety of delectables: caviar, smoked salmon and capers. On the edge of the tray sit three mice made of radishes – an insouciant, delightfully playful touch to this island of culinary elegance.

I wonder aloud who brought the mice and eggs. “Oh that’s mine,” says Judy Blunt.

There’s a moment of cognitive dissonance. I have not before seen this playful side of my professor. My own Montana experience has been a smashing not of typewriters but of expectation and assumption. I have had to make space to allow the people I’ve met, the women I’ve been working on, their own inconsistencies. To understand what I am seeing, and to really see – what is there, not just what I want to believe is there.
In 1985, at the age of thirty, Judy Blunt took her three children and moved to Malta. She got a job cooking, working in a local steakhouse until 11 PM and then coming home to bake. “I read The Joy of Cooking from cover to cover when I was ten,” Blunt says. Cooking champagne brunches was not a problem. Caring for her children as a working mother was. A young woman, divorced and pregnant, approached Blunt for help and it turned out to be a boon for everyone: “I took a wife!” Blunt says, joyful. “Missy kept the kids fed, shopped for all of us, and cleaned the house. I’d come home after my shift, and the house would smell of Pine Sol. My laundry would be neatly folded – but not put in the drawers. It was a sweet deal.”

The interdependence of the relationship was nothing new for someone who’d been raised on a ranch, where neighbors helped neighbors without having to be asked. “We had the baby together,” Blunt says. “We went to Lamaze.”

After a year, having gotten her legs sturdily beneath her, Blunt was ready to move on. What happened to Missy? A sigh. “Her weakness was cowboys.”

Blunt enrolled at the University of Montana and got work sanding floors. She was terrified of the city; Missoula, with a population of 65,000, is the second largest metropolitan area in the state. Even teaching her children how to cross the street was a challenge. But she put on a front of competence and confidence for the kids. With a map of Missoula rolled up into the visor of her car, she made a game out of directions, made jokes out of getting lost.

Her son James, now 28, says “What I remember most is the laughter. We were always laughing.”
It’s dark now, when class begins. Montana summer nights stretch out forever, but in the late fall leaves are on the ground and darkness comes too soon. Judy opens the discussion, in this case a chapter of a work-in-progress, a memoir of a difficult, painful childhood written as much for therapeutic reasons as for a desire to commit literature, by saying that since she’s already seen what comes before this part, she’d like the rest of the class to comment. The writer sits still, braced, head down.

No one says anything. The writing is raw; the emotions unreconstructed. Through the open windows comes the raucous laughter of undergraduates, sitting on the quad. Smoke from their cigarettes sneaks into the room.

“Okay,” says Blunt, when no one has offered an opinion. She goes to tackle a passage, giving specific, helpful comments on how to sharpen the focus. She is gentle and encouraging, without ever seeming to be pulling punches or condescending to the role of therapist. She focuses on the page, and on the words on the page. It is always about the words.

It is also about the act of translation. Taking the raw materials of life and shaping them, molding them into art, is hard enough to do in isolation. But to lay it out for strangers to flay; that often requires an act of courage. Blunt does not play therapist. She works with what the author has offered up and treads softly around the ragged edges of frayed feelings.

The rest of the class loosens up. “I like this part.” “You might want to consider adding....” “How about giving some background here?” For over an hour, the writing is parsed and picked apart. The “narrative arc” is dissected, with attempts to determine
what it is, what it might be. During the discussion, the writer, by mandate, remains silent, making notes without making eye contact.

“So,” says Blunt to the writer, folding her big arms across her chest and leaning back in her chair. “Questions for us?”

A red-faced shake of the head, a murmured “No,” a quiet “Thanks.”

“Oh, alrighty then,” says a hale Blunt. “A short break. And then, Joe’s up.”

There are, I’ve learned, Montana values. They go something like this: You get a fair day’s wage for fair day’s work, no more, no less. You have to be able to trust in a person’s word. There’s the “popsicle rule” – if you have enough for everyone, you can eat your popsicles in the front yard. Otherwise, do it in private. Montanans hew to the idea of wealth without conspicuous consumption; it’s what you’ve done that’s worthy, not what you have. Hard work, getting it “right,” doing a good job – that’s what counts. And you don’t talk about what you’ve done. No bragging, no whining.

There is also what feels to me a curious lack of interest in the lives of other people. It’s the flip side of allowing boys to kiss each other behind the gym. There seems to be what is perhaps a polite refusal to ask direct questions. Frieda Fligelman’s demanding of young people what they cared about, what they were up to, strikes me as not very Western in its sensibility. It’s the kind of question my Jewish relatives would ask, but I can’t imagine this kind of interrogation as from many of the reserved Western women I’ve met. I’m not sure if this is because of my own status as an outsider – that it takes time, perhaps generations, to be worthy of interest, or the practice of accepting that if someone wants to tell you something, you wait for them to say it rather than ask. You
don't tread on personal ground. In any case, what it does in me is to create a barrier against feeling known; it reminds me that I am not part of the community.

It is, of course, community that allows for the idea – the beloved myth – of the rugged individualism of the West. Once the extraction industries began to dry up, this notion has become perhaps the biggest export product of the state. The tough, self-sufficient cowboy/rancher ideal. But those who live it know that you can’t survive the harshness of the land, the brutality of the climate, without others. “Before I left the ranch I had no sense of self beyond the community,” Judy Blunt says. “I couldn't imagine myself beyond the community because I couldn't imagine any life beyond the community. I'd never seen it.”

When Judy Blunt was working on her book she had a post-it note stuck to her computer to remind her of her task: “De-mythify the West.”

“Place-based writing,” she says, which is what she feels she does, “is about knowing who you are by knowing where you come from. Not only who your people are, but the land.” Regardless of whether you own the land or lease it, there’s a custodial relationship. The West is peculiar in that it is a place where much of the land is in fact publicly owned. That doesn’t matter if you’re working it. You connect to the seasons; you do what needs to be done.

She continues, “My relationship to the landscape of Montana is visceral. My land defined my life for thirty years, and I find that it still defines my voice. It's hard to shake the dark humor, the inside jokes that are part of growing up at the mercy of harsh weather and hard soil.” Out of the sere plains of eastern Montana grew this authorial presence. Every sentence Blunt writes is steeped in her experience and she is aware of the
differences between how she lived, how she currently lives, and how different that is from what her readers – most whom are outside of her home state – know. “Living there is a defining process,” she says. “As a writer, I often have to be reminded by outside readers to describe the landscape as I go. It is such an intimate part of my story that I take it for granted.”

For the first time in her life, Judy Blunt owns her own land. After living for the last two decades in apartments and condos, last year she bought a house, a small, long, unassuming house, with small yards, front and back. It is hers, singularly and unequivocally hers. She has worked hard on it, putting on a new roof, ripping up carpets, and painting. For the exterior she chose a rich gray color, and then added a few thin lines of red.

“How do you like my pinstripes?” she asks, when I come over for the first time to see the new outside. The house sits singular on its block, a combination of elegant and playful. I notice that her garden hose is also bright red. “Not a coincidence, I’m sure,” I say.

“It was on sale at Lowe’s,” she says. “I couldn’t resist.”

We sit outside on the patio, drinking wine I’ve brought and eating chips. We are surrounded by color – the greenest grass you’ve seen east of the Mississippi, splashes of flowers. Judy has made a koi pond and has planted tomatoes.

“What’s that?” I ask, pointing to a little tree.

“Pie cherry tree,” she says.

“You can’t use regular cherries for pie?”
She looks at me, smiles, gently shakes her head and says, “No.”

A wasp comes buzzing by our glasses of wine.

“Where do you live, you little son of a bitch?” Judy muses.

Then she says to the critter, with a John Wayne swagger: “I’ve got a bottle of spray with your name on it – and I’m not afraid to use it.”

Blunt entered the University of Montana in 1986 and spent five years getting her undergraduate degrees. After she graduated at the top of her class in both English and journalism she received a Jacob Javits Fellowship to pay for graduate school. “My father’s comment was that he was very proud of me but he didn’t know about this writing stuff. ‘But at least she has a trade’ he said, picking up my hands – with half inch calluses on them from working floors. He was very proud of my calluses.”

But she continued with the “writing stuff,” enrolling for an MFA in poetry. The whole time she was in school she was sanding and finishing hardwood floors. “I had three kids – in high school, middle school and grade school. I had to stop going to classes the last year of my MFA because my son James got sick. I couldn’t qualify for a home loan because I had no employment history. I had scholarships, fellowships and a book contract, but no ‘real’ employment.” How many women, like Judy Blunt, like my mother, left marriages to find they had no separate identity or means.

I asked if she’d had a mentor while she was in school. She laughs. She laughs easily, even at memories that are tinged with pain. “If I did, it was Cliff Cain, my boss. When I needed money, he’d find jobs for me.”
In 1997 Blunt was hired as co-director of freshman comp. She managed the teaching assistants and taught as well. A year later she became Assistant to the Chair—or, as she says, a “glorified secretary.” “I went about making myself indispensable—that’s been my motif—take all the shifts, work weekends, do whatever it takes, whatever anyone else won’t do.”

And, during stolen hours, she worked on her book. “I have not often found time to write. Earning a living can get in the way of writing, unless they’re one and the same. My book was written over the course of ten years in a frustrating jumble of stolen hours and fragmented weeks. Some years when I was working six or seven days a week and running a household for three kids, I didn’t write at all. I had nothing left to spend. Other times, I managed to complete an essay by working from four a.m. until I had to stop to get ready for school or work.”

“I’m a slow writer,” I hear her say, not for the first time. “If I get a page a day that’s pretty good progress. You just can’t do it all—the bullshit about people who write their bestsellers on the subway—well, I don’t know shit from subways, but writing requires sustained periods of concentration, a mind freed up. To suggest that writing can be done in addition to other things—it’s as if it’s not a full time occupation.”

While she was working on the separate essays that comprise the book, Judy asked her graduate school friends to read drafts for her. “I had no sure sense of cliché—I didn’t have a good meter for it, I just knew how people talked.” Clare Davis, a novelist, was her best reader. “Mostly what I needed was affirmation. I was looking for permission to write,” she says.
Blunt made good friends in graduate school, and has a circle of women who come over to her house to sit in the hot tub, drink wine, and be together. Her life in Missoula is a far cry from the isolation of the ranch. Indeed, for Blunt, Missoula is a part of the urban West; what for me seems like a small town is, out here, a city. Blunt has been able to answer Mary Blew’s questions about how to live in the West by situating herself in a community of women.

Over the course of the semester the workshop becomes almost routine. By the second submissions, you know what to expect from each writer; you know their tics and their interests and generally, their style. People also begin to make predictable comments. One person will always want more extraneous details. Another will say, with feeling, that he’s just not feeling it. Someone else will find a way to use the piece being workshopped to talk about herself and her own experiences.

While she is blunt, Judy is never harsh. She can be socially awkward. Sometimes she will end a conversation without the obligatory and expected send offs; sometimes she mispronounces words in the way of people who read books more than they talk about them. Mostly though, she projects a confidence that is not always felt.

“A lot of what I’m uncertain about,” she says, “is that I don’t know what’s appropriate. Growing up I had no social mirror. I’m learning, but I know there are things I don’t know. I’ve learned to put on the show – doing the social thing, cocktail parties and book readings – but then I go back to my room and all I want to do is watch Animal Planet on the hotel’s cable TV.”
Judy Blunt has learned to teach such that no one would doubt she’s been in the business for years. But finding her way in the shrubbery groves of academe is more difficult than pulling a calf or fixing fence. She’s getting the hang of being in a place where the politics are so vicious, as Henry Kissinger famously remarked, because there is so little at stake, but it doesn’t sit well with her. In university life there is not much money, prestige or power; people are in it for something else. It’s less a job than a calling. Judy Blunt is used to working jobs. She resents being asked to work on weekends; she thinks of her summers off as vacations. She has not quite recovered from the notion of a fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work. And she expects people to do the right thing: “It is very difficult for me to advocate for myself. Where I came from, you simply didn’t do that. You expected people to notice.”

In academe, there are only blurry markers of success. And there are lots of committee meetings and group decisions. “I don’t play well with others,” Judy says. “My favorite job was when I was working on floors, because it was dusty and stinky and people left me alone.” “And,” she adds, “I could bring a wood floor close to perfection – outside of being a tree. What keeps me coming back to writing is that feeling that you’re getting it right.”

In reality, Judy Blunt is a peacemaker. She’s the one who’s called in to mediate departmental squabbles. She is unfailingly fair, straightforward but tactful, and a forceful advocate for everyone but, perhaps, herself.

It’s hard to say, really, if we ever know what our own stories are about. Judy Blunt is a master at deploying vivid, poetic details, into a carefully crafted narrative arc. But while she believes that she was writing about the West, it’s possible that she’s not
able, really, to see the meaning of the story. She has a deep fear of “pity me” tales. But she also has the strong need to tell the tales. You think of Primo Levi, years after being liberated from Auschwitz, needing to stop people on the street saying, “You cannot believe what I’ve seen.” The urge to bear witness can be unbearable. But the way you tell them, well, that’s what makes us want to read.

Judy Blunt’s story resonates precisely because it contains and goes beyond the specifics of the West. She likes to say that it’s only her particular story, from a particular place, but even this she finds problematic: “I’m called upon to be a spokesperson for eastern Montana and I have a hard time with that – and they, eastern Montanans, have a hard time knowing that. I get letters from women who say: ‘I was raised on a ranch and it was nothing like that.’” With prompting Judy points out that she’s gotten far more letters from women all over the country who weren’t raised on ranches saying: you remind me of me.

It is of course the chosen plight of memoirists to have their lives – their selves – become public property. Readers want to believe they know the authors of memoirs, especially if the art is seamless, the labor invisible. For Blunt this has been a particularly vexing issue – that those who know the character she created in her book believe they know this private person. Instead of focusing on the skill of the writer, readers hone in on the story.

It’s one we all know; a feminist chestnut. The subjugation of the self to the greater good of family. The ways in which women have learned to accommodate the men in their lives, able to subsist on stolen moments. And we understand, too, the need and importance of writing a woman’s life. It was not only “five hundred a year each of
us and rooms of our own” that Virginia Woolf thought was imperative for women to be able to create. The less frequently quoted continuation of that sentence, that explanation of what a life of Shakespeare’s imagined sister would be like goes on: “If we have the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think; if we escape a little from the common sitting-room and see human beings not always in their relation to each other but in relation to reality; and the sky, too, and the trees or whatever it may be in themselves” – then, she says, then, will come the opportunity.

Judy Blunt has mustered the courage and created her own opportunities. And it is this, the breaking clean – note the gerund; it is a process, an unfinished job – that allows her book about being a ranch wife in Montana to speak to the wives of lobstermen in Maine and editors on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. She has performed the trick of literature; she has used the particular to illustrate, vividly, wrenchingly, beautifully, a larger condition that transcends boundaries of time and space.

At the end of the semester, Judy has decided to hold the last class for the nonfiction workshop at her house. She gives directions and draws a map on the board. As a landmark, she uses The Good Food Store, an upscale kind of Whole Foods joint, a place to spend lots of extra dollars on organically coddled vegetables and meat that has been loved before slaughter. Judy shops at Costco. She writes her phone number in chalk for those who might get lost; at the end of the class, she remembers to erase it. She’s already canvassed the class to ascertain food preferences (in Missoula, Montana, there will always be at least one vegetarian and often a vegan) and cat allergies.
“The graduate school expects us to meet during finals week,” she tells us. “The time scheduled for our “final” is from 7-10PM on Monday. Does anyone object to having dinner earlier, at say, 6PM?” Judy does not break rules. She rarely even bends them. While there will be no final, there will be a final meeting, because that is what is required. Other faculty members are either ignorant of this necessity or choose not to heed it.

People arrive with bottles of wine and sit in the kitchen. We have learned all sorts of intimate, private things about one another – nonfiction writing often demands, or at least, elicits, heavy personal revelation – but we have rarely chatted as a group and this creates an odd dynamic. But Judy’s house is warm and comfortable and smells like good cooking. We settle in. Judy brings out a tray of appetizers. They are olives. But they aren’t just olives. They are penguins, with white cream cheese tuxedo shirts and tiny bits of carrot for feet. At this point, I am delighted by them, but not surprised.

Growing up, Judy tells me, when she read about Montana history there were only two notable women in the textbook. “I named my daughter after Jeannette Rankin.” And then she adds, “My husband never knew.”
Writing Western Women; Western Women's Writing

Reading about the history of the West I came on a book by Mark Spence called *Dispossessing the Wilderness*, about how the creation of three of our most impressive national parks – Glacier, Yellowstone, and Yosemite – relied on taking land away from the Indians who had for years inhabited or used it. He tells about the Yosemite Indians who were allowed to stay and become, in effect, a living exhibit for tourists. They were allowed to stay, that is, until their way of life was deemed not Indian enough and they were kicked out. These Indians, who for generations had lived in Yosemite, were kicked out for not being authentic enough for tourists.

When I first saw photos of ranch houses, like the one that Judy Blunt grew up in, they struck me as wrong. That’s not what ranches are supposed to look like; it’s the “amenity” ranches built by Californians, the Ralph Laurenification of the West, that plays to my ideas of authenticity. As is so often the case, the modeled, molded, mythic versions of our fantasies make the realities seem inauthentic.

The women I have been thinking and writing about, these Western women, are complex characters, refusing to be flattened into fewer dimensions than they deserve. As is so often the case, I have had to confront my own ignorance to be able to fully see them.

I think about the ways they fashioned themselves and their lives: Frieda and Belle using their Jewishness as a way to encapsulate a cultural identity and to set themselves off from the pioneer West; Dorothy taking part in the myth-making industry at the same time ridiculing her own connection to it; Judy using brutal stories from the ranch to
remind us of the softness of our urban lives. I can look at these women with no pretense of lucidity or objectivity; everything is filtered through my experience and my desire.

Did the West present a kind of Turnerian frontier for its women, a place where they could create a different character, establish different ways of being? That is, I'm sure, what I want to see, to believe; that a soil can nurture character. And if that is so, by coming here, by being in this place of self-invention, of inventiveness, of vast vistas where the eye is also encouraged to look inward, isn't it possible to start again? Hearing the stories of the women who have gone before gives hope and the promise of a future, the prospect of joining of a sorority of Western women who could ride and mend fence and write astonishingly beautiful sentences.

Judy Blunt, Mary Clearman Blew, and Dorothy Johnson write about a place that is theirs. Yet I wonder if they in some ways, the reason they are able to write about it — clear-eyed, unsentimental — is because they are not fully at home in their homes. In order to write about their places, they had to leave. When Gretel Ehrlich wrote about Wyoming in her 1985 book *The Solace of Open Spaces* from the perspective of an Easterner, she romanticized and made lyrical the hard lives of the people among whom she was living — like a tourist. Most Westerners know spit when they hear Ehrlich's name. She got it wrong, they claim. But when I ask them how, specifically, they just shake their heads. She got it wrong.

Judy Blunt and Mary Blew raised their children. And then they found the time to write. Belle raised children and wrote, but never managed to publish much. Frieda and Dorothy never had children and started writing at an earlier age. Virginia Woolf thought it was five hundred pounds a year and a room of one's own. How much easier to write
would it be if one had a wife? If there was someone to do the cooking and cleaning and
washing and daily duties? I think about Judy Blunt’s telling me that she “took a wife,”
when her friend Missy came to stay and to take care of the household duties while Judy
worked. “It was a sweet deal,” she said. I believe that.

I look at these strong, smart, productive Montana women and wonder about their
notions of romance. Whether or not Jeannette Rankin was a lesbian, as her most recent
biographer claims, interests me not at all. What I find compelling is the fact that she
found solace in other women. Or at least, certain kinds of women. Fiorello Laguardia, the
mayor of New York during the Great Depression, asked Jeannette to marry him. She said
no. She also said, “May I never, I say, become that abnormal, merciless animal, that
deformed monstrosity – a virtuous woman.”

Jeannette was harsh in her assessment of women. “We – women – should picket
everything,” she said in an interview during the Vietnam War. “Women remind me of the
cows on our ranch in Montana. A cow has a calf and after a while some man comes along
and takes the calf away. She bawls for a while, then goes on and has another calf. If we
had 10,000 women willing to go to prison that would end the war. We’ve had 10,000
women sit back and let their sons be killed.”

I’ve read enough women’s history to know that there are and always have been
strong women, that all over the country there were cliques of Jews like the Fligelman
sisters, eccentric old ladies like Dorothy Johnson, hard-working, discomfited wives like
Judy Blunt who were able to leave and hone their talents.
And yet. I want to believe in that Turnerian notion – that something about the West allowed for a different kind of female character to develop. I want to believe in a place of invention. But perhaps that is more about me than about these women, or the West. Maybe for many of us we need simply to become older, to allow age to let us cast away the things we used to care about but now see are unimportant and will impede us. Maybe that’s what I’ve been learning.

A few years ago I went with my mother and brother to move Aunt Anne into an assisted living facility. I didn’t know Aunt Anne well, but I’d heard from my mother that after about twenty years of living on her own after Uncle A1 died, she had hooked up with a man. Benno, who had survived concentration camp incarceration and the more recent death of his wife, spoke with a heavy German accent and adored Aunt Anne. Sometimes if my mother called on a weekend morning and Aunt Anne was curiously reticent my mother would ask if she was alone. Often she was not. Aunt Anne was embarrassed by Benno’s ardor, by his adoration. She wasn’t used to it.

They were together for about ten years, and then Aunt Anne did for Benno as she had for her mother and Uncle A1 – she nursed him through the end of his life. And now, here we were – my mother, brother and I – helping her pack up her life and move out of the house she owned into an apartment, moving her toward the inevitable, the inexorable.

We were going through her jewelry box and I found a diamond ring. She’d already shown me her wedding ring – she’d designed it herself.

“What’s this,” I asked, when I found the solitaire.

“Oh that,” she said. “That’s from Benno.”
“Were you engaged?”

“Oh no,” she said, and waved me off. “Oh no.”

“This looks like an engagement ring. Did he want to marry you?”

He did. When I asked her why she didn’t want to marry him she looked at me and asked, with real wonder, “Why would I want to do that?”

She is dead now, Aunt Anne. She lasted just a year after we moved her out of her own house. I wear that ring. I refer to it as the “hope diamond.” That Aunt Anne found someone who would adore her, found someone who wanted her after she had been ignored or worse for most of her life, gives me hope. But what I appreciate more is that when she finally found someone who loved her, needed her, wanted to marry her, she knew she didn’t need it. She had found her own place. She was at home by herself.

I find myself haunted by the questions asked by Suzan Shown Harjo, the Native American poet/activist at that first Western women’s history conference in Sun Valley: “What are my personal and altruistic reasons for pursing this research?” “How much do I compartmentalize the subjects of my research?” “What are my own biases and how do they manifest themselves in my work?”

These are good questions, important questions, and as relevant today as they were when Western women’s history was beginning to burgeon as a field of academic study. They are also my questions. My search for Western women, my interest in those who lived in and wrote – and write – about the West, is a personal quest. Like Thoreau, who went to the pond to figure out how to live but how came with entrenched ideas about
what nature was and could do for him, I too have been seeking something that is rooted in
a place, but not, perhaps, entirely about that place.

For me, as it has been for so many others, the West is an idea – a compelling, passionate, freedom-filled idea. But it is also a place. Wallace Stegner referred to the
“geography of hope” that is the West. Indeed. I came looking for the grown up, intellectual versions of Mattie Ross and got here to find that Western women think she was a wimp. They certainly didn’t want to be her.

The mind is its own place.
Coda: A Rare Traveler

We were making our way down the Bitterroot River. I said to Chinook: “I’ll be Lewis; you can be Clark.” Then I reconsidered. “We’ll both be Sacagawea.”

Chinook wasn’t listening. He was working hard to plow through water up to his belly and keeping an eye out for fish.

It was a sweaty August day and we looked more like an escaped circus act than intrepid explorers. I’d been running and was wearing only shorts and a jog bra. At least I’d changed into cowboy boots. Chinook had on a snaffle bit and the merest slip of an English saddle. I wanted to fancy myself a cowboy, but instead of a sensible, big-headed, muscle-butt quarter horse, I was riding a dish-faced, prance-y young Arabian gelding who shied at fish. And deer. And sometimes rocks.

We left the riverbed and continued along the bank. I was babbling away, talking about the mythology of the West, the comfort of being nestled between the Bitterroots and the Sapphires, what a good horse he was, when Chinook planted both forefeet and halted, nostrils flaring. His petite ears stopped swiveling and tuned in dead-ahead, trained on a big, rotting log and the thing that was on it.

It was a furry, squat something; the size of a large dog, bearish, dark brown, with short, almost silly, legs, a lush bushy tail, triangular head, and blond highlights along its back. I identified it immediately – as an enigma. I wanted to get a closer look. Chinook had seen enough and thought we should go back to the cottonwoods along the
river. But I urged him on, appealing to his spirit of adventure and exploration, reassuring him with my legs and seat, and promises of carrots.

We got closer. The animal didn’t bother to notice us. He continued ambling, off the log, heading out into the open field. We followed for a while, and then he lost us.

When I got back I described what I’d seen to my friend Dan, an environmental historian, resident of the Bitterroot, and a bit of an adventurer himself. “Sounds like a wolverine,” he said, though he added that you almost never see them. A wolverine? All I could think of was Michigan basketball. He took out a well-thumbed field guide and showed me a mug shot. Yep. Wolverine.

Wolverines are oversized members of the weasel family. They like to live in rugged, isolated places and as such are partial to Western Montana and Idaho. It’s not so much their scarcity but their habits that make them elusive. They’re travelers, explorers, covering up to 15 miles a day. A wildlife biologist told me that in the thirty years he’s studied them, he’s never seen a wolverine in the wild.

That summer day – me and Chinook playing in the Bitterroot – would have been perfect even if we hadn’t encountered the enigma. But how great is it when bumbling, untutored, half-dressed, high-strung, pretend-adventurers happen onto something special. And rare. It’s why we go outdoors. I’m convinced I’m going to see another wolverine. And even if I don’t, I won’t stop looking.
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