

PACE

One indelible dusk, I squinted across the land where I was growing up and saw that the prairie had turned into a seascape.

The wind was blowing, as it did day and night that summer, and the moving waves of rich-yellow wheat could just be seen in the settling dark. A harvesting combine cruised on the far side of the field. I had never been within a thousand miles of an ocean, but in the sudden shadow-play of my mind, I could see that the combine, with its running lights just flicked on, was a ship bound through the night. Bench hills rose to the north, surely a fair coastline. The expanse of it all, hills and fields and wind in the wheat, ran out far beyond--oceanic--to where the sky and the flat horizon fitted together.

/The magic of place is indelible. I was seventeen, a restless farmhand with my nose in a book whenever I wasn't atop a tractor or grain truck, there at that found sea which was both fictional and real, and now at sixty I still write about both the rim-of-the-prairie along the Rockies there where I grew up and the green jigsawed Pacific Northwest coastline where I live now.

Before I'm done today, you'll have a brief taste of my new novel, **Mountain Time**, which has settings in both of these literary homes of mine. But I'm up here at this microphone to try to think out loud to you about some of my own makings as a writer with dual citizenship in those two high, wide, and handsome territories, and I'll be salt-and-peppering that in with a few other ingredients that I think gives literature its particular flavors.

To start, as writers are supposed to start,
at some kind of a beginning: let's take on
the Big One,

(INSINUATING)

that eternal audience question: "Where do you get your ideas?" // Always a good question, / but the answer is ^{ALWAYS} tough. It's not as if writers live in / an / aquarium. — The writer floating dreamily all day long in the fluid of thought and word, and at suppertime the figure of God -- in the unlikely disguise of a literary critic -- drops in the fish food.

No, the writer has to get out and hunt, beyond the glass bowl of everyday.

/--The nine bars of a Montana town where my father judiciously bent his elbow as he hired his haying crews, while the boy that was me watched from the generous vicinity of that elbow...

--The diary of a ^{PIONEER} ~~man~~ who ~~was~~ came west with the California gold rush, found out that mining is sweaty work, and turned north to a life of oystering and roistering at Willapa Bay and farther up our Northwest Coast...

--an 1853 newspaper article, to the effect that, "Dear Editor, I thought you might like to know that last Sunday, as some of the settlers were crossing the bay, they found, drifting in a canoe,

men nearly starved to death...They have completed a journey of escape from New Archangel, more than a thousand miles, in winter..."

--The imagined voice of a shepherd saying to a teenage boy, "Don't just stand there in your tracks, kid--We've got all these dead sheep to skin."

--A valley of homesteader's cabins vest-pocketed in the Rockies, regularly put upon by tough weather barreling down out of those glorious mountains...

--A ^{NEWSPAPER-} woman with a camera and an attitude, and a pesty ex-husband working for the same newspaper she does...

--A packet of World War II letters, lost to sight for some 40 years... WHICH BROUGHT BACK A MOTHER CURTAINED AWAY IN FARTHEST MEMORIES...

--A chorus of voices, chiming out of years of tape recorded interviews, finding their common note in Depression-era jobs on the construction of the biggest earthen dam in the world: "When we got on at Fort Peck..."

--A "high lonesome"--a week of solitary backpacking into the wilderness area named for the bat-eared Mozart of the Forest Service who thought up the wilderness system, Bob Marshall...

It sounds like the list for a lifelong scavenger hunt, doesn't it.

It is. These nine items--some actual and some imagination-induced--are the first footsteps in the mind toward my now nine books. Then the clock takes over--twenty-five years' worth of crafting those pieces of idea into fullness of stories, dimensions of characters, and galaxies of language.

For me, art comes by way of craft, of working and reworking those sounds that come off the page. The heart of the language must beat there. [↗] Three hearts, really. [↗]

PACE
DELIBERATE

The rhythms and tides of the bloodstream we all share, words, constitute the first of those hearts.

Those of us who write in English have an ocean of language to work with. Its sur-
drum of music, its patterns of sound, go beyond its wealth of individual words. Let me give you the example I came up against when I had just finished my first book, and the editor and I suddenly realized we were going to have to do a lot better than the

manuscript's working title, which was--well, I'm not even going to tell you; you'll have to pry it out of me in the question session if you really want to know.

Now, usually I am more a re-writer than a writer, tinkering through a lot of versions to hit the right one. But this one time--in only about an hour of writing--the long devotion of the mind to the fingers put this onto the page for me:

PAGE

//



In the night, in mid-dream, people who are entire strangers to one another sometimes will congregate atop my pillow. They file into my sleeping skull

/in perplexing medleys. A face from grade school may be twinned with one met

/a week ago on a rain-forest trail in the Olympic Mountains. A pair of friends

I joked with yesterday/now drift in arguing with an editor I worked for/more than

~~~~~~~~~ a thousand miles from here. How thin the brainwalls must be, so easily can

acquaintanceships be struck up among these/random residents of the dark.

→  
Memory, the near-neighborhood of dream, is almost as casual in its hospitality.

When I fix my sandwich lunch, in a quiet noon, I may find myself sitting down

ALL THOSE

~~thirty~~ years ago in the company of the erect old cowboy from Texas, Walter Badgett. ↘

BREAD

Forever the same is the meal with Walter: fried mush with dark corn syrup, and X

which Walter first has toasted and then dried in the oven. When we bite,

it shatters and crashes in our mouths, and the more we eat, the fuller our plates

grow with the shrapnel of crumbs. After the last roaring bite, Walter sits back

IVAN,

tall as two of the ten-year-old me and asks down: "Well, Yreckon we can make it

→  
through till night now?"

I step to the stove for tea, and come instead onto the battered blue-enamel coffee pot in a shepherd's wagon, my father's voice <sup>Now,</sup> saying, "Ye could float your grandma's flat-iron on the Swede's coffee." I walk back toward my typewriter, past a window framing the backyard fir trees. They are replaced by the wind-leaning jackpines of one Montana ridgeline or another. I glance higher for some hint of the weather, and the square of air broadens and broadens to become the blue expanse over Montana rangeland, so vast and vaulting that it rears, from the foundation-line of the plains horizon, to form the walls and roof of all of life's experience that my younger self could imagine, a single/great house/of sky.

The late Richard Hugo, the bigger-than-life poet of Washington and Montana, gave the world one of the canniest books on the craft of



using words on paper--The Triggering  
Town, with alloys of common sense and  
revelation such as this paragraph:

“A student may love the sound of Yeats’<sup>line</sup>  
/‘Stumbling upon the blood dark track once  
more’/and not know that the single-syllable  
word with a hard consonant ending is a unit  
of power in English, and that’s one reason

'blood dark track' goes off like rifle  
shots.... The young poet <sup>is</sup> too often paying  
attention to the big things and can't be  
bothered with little matters like that. But  
little matters like that are what make and  
break poems."

Those “little matters” that are the tools poets work with/greatly interest me, because that’s the shop I’ve always liked to hang around in. As a fiction writer, which I mostly am, I don’t seem to have come out from under Gogol’s **Overcoat**, where Turgenev said all short-story writers popped out of. I’ve never written a short story, in about a million published words now, and don’t show any signs of doing so. Instead, I seem to be from under the cloak of prose’s singing teachers--our betters, the poets.

The poetic urge caught up with me in an unexpected place--while I was working on a Ph.D. in history. What graduate school taught me, back there in the late '60s, was that I didn't want to be on a university faculty. (WASN'T CUT OUT FOR IT.) I found myself freelancing magazine articles during grad school and I also began, to my surprise, writing poetry, which I had never even thought of attempting before.

My eight or nine published poems showed me that I lacked the poet's final skill, the one Yeats called closing a poem with the click of a well-made box. / But, still

wanting to stretch the craft of writing toward the areas where it mysteriously starts to be art, I began working on what I later heard Norman Maclean call the/poetry /under the prose--in my case, a lyrical style, with what I call a poetry of the vernacular in how my characters speak on the page. Whether it is the Depression crews “riding the tension spiders” of steelwork at Fort Peck Dam in my novel **Bucking the Sun**, or the handless bartender Lucas Barclay--in **Dancing at the Rascal**

(SLOW)

Fair-- hoisting his glass to the other America-comers of the homestead era ~~and~~ and fearlessly toasting in his Scotch burr, "Broth to the ill, stilts to the lame!"--I've tried to give my characters that touch of the poet that working people so often have.

I'll get back to this a little further into this talk, but let me move now <sup>to</sup> <sub>1</sub> the geography of the language--the "sense of place" that critics <sup>so</sup> <sub>1</sub> often cite, in those of us who grew up in the sagebrush and somehow turned out <sup>to</sup> <sub>1</sub> to be writers.

This is the second heart of writing, the home heart--  
the one of that matchless Robert Louis Stevenson  
stanza: "Home is the sailor, home from the sea, And the  
hunter home from the hill." / One of the ways a writer  
comes home from his hills where life has taken him / is a  
process I like to call seeing with the ear and hearing  
with the eye.

AND REMEMBER, FOR GOOD

The eye starts to "listen" to register how the way a rancher cocks his hat says something about that man. The ear starts to "see" AND REMEMBER, how ordinary language can be made to glow, as if breathing on an ember, <sup>IN</sup>

A COLD-MORNING COOKSTOVE.

In my own case, when I was still down there in the vicinity of the elbow, a kind of northern lights out loud began to speak to me.

/"You're not sugar nor salt/nor nobody's honey, so the rain will never hurt you," she crooned to me.

"That one/goes around looking like she's been yanked through a knothole backwards," she huffed about our worst-dressed neighbor.

And, she confided about the couple dallying together in our wide-eyed little town, "Those two are as close as three in a bed/with one kicked out."

Into my life had come that river of proverbs, my grandmother.

I was ten years of age, but my ears were as old as sin.

All of a sudden I knew I was in new territory of life,  
 something like honorary adulthood. Now, besides my Scots-  
 burr/storytelling/widower/father, here was my mother's mother  
 in this reluctant knot of bloodline <sup>TWO OF THEM</sup> they had made, to raise

me.

~~you~~ you bet, my ears were busy from then on, with the  
 picture-play of words from my grandmother <sup>(look up)</sup> whose formal  
 education had broken off at the third grade whenever

escapades they represent being told around the fire. I think that's what we're still <sup>↑</sup> <sup>↑</sup> up to, in the white canyons of paper and now the nebulae of cyberspace...

AND THE PLAY OF WORDS

I think stories <sup>→</sup> / still can be our

way of sharing light--of sitting together around humanity's fire with the universal dark all around us. <sup>→</sup>

// Our work, our words, of course <sup>have</sup> ~~has~~ <sup>→</sup> to start on the cave walls between our own ears.

Let me take you briefly through this writerly process of sitting around in your own head, trying to tell a truth by making things up--or as a classier writer, Shirley Hazzard, once defined the ~~value~~<sup>TASK</sup> of literature: to relieve the soul of incoherence--let me take you as coherently as I'm able through a bit of the process using an example I know best, my own.

## A STORY

Among the countless colored coats that ~~fact~~ can wear,  
 this particular time it was dressed old-fashioned--black  
 and white and "red" (read) all over, that old pun<sup>-REMEMBER?-</sup> about  
newspapers before they became such an endangered species.

The accumulated century of the weekly newspaper of Choteau,  
 Montana, the GRANDLY-NAMED Choteau Acantha, actually <sup>is</sup> ~~are~~ in red protective  
 binders in the public library there in the small town of  
 Choteau. And so, this becomes a Thursday, the evening the  
 Choteau Public Library stays open past suppertime, and

SITTING THERE, AS I HAVE SAT IN FRONT OF  
SO MANY DUSTY TROVES OF RESEARCH,

I am at a table on the library's little mezzanine, going  
through old newsprint to hear into that area of Montana during  
the Depression years, the drought years. In mid-February of  
1939, the homespun local columnist reports that there had been  
a heavy fog, unusual to that climate and time of year. A  
stirring begins on the library stairs, and up comes a group  
of women from a Hutterite colony near Choteau. In their long  
skirts and patterned aprons and kerchiefs, these religious  
communal dwellers might have just stepped out of the pages of

KEEP SITTING THERE AND

→  
Tolstoy.

/ I open the next red binder, the columnist is saying in the issue of May 18, 1939, "if the adage of/rain 90 days after a fog holds good," a heavy soaking rain will come on the 21st. Steps on the mezzanine stairs again, a ranch wife appears/and begins browsing forcefully through

the fiction shelves, no nonsense about it as she flips open novels and takes or rejects them on the basis of their opening sentence. / I re-open the red binder, to the next week's news-  
paper, May 25th, 1939, which reports that a downpour started in the early morning of the 22nd, it went on all through the day and into the night, an inch and two-thirds of rain before it quit. "Opportune for the crops," the homespun columnist states with satisfaction about that fog-forecast goose-drowner, and I sit thinking of all the rain that must have seemed like,

after the years of drought, the land suddenly swimming with valuable moisture and more of it coming as May went off the calendar wetly. / Steps on the stairs, it is the volunteer evening librarian telling me apologetically that she has to close up now. I close the red binder on the 1939 newspapers, go out into the summer night, there under the northern Rockies. A couple of years later when my novel English Creek is published there in my fictional version of the summer of 1939 a forceful ranch-born woman / named Beth McCaskill shows up almost

immediately, and the book's opening sentence reads:

“That month of June swam into the Two Medicine country.”

~~24~~

// And now, in this run of hearts, we come to the last vital pulse on the page, the one I don't

know what to call except the blood-sum of  
the writer. Magical, inexplicable, whatever  
it is, but the literary quality by which a  
writer writes better than he has any right to.  
By which Faulkner, who could barely rouse  
himself to sort mail in a somnolent <sup>MISSISSIPPI</sup> post  
office, had somewhere in him the ambition  
as a writer "to put everything into one

sentence--not only the present but the whole past on which it depends and which keeps overtaking the present, second by second." By which Yeats, his pince-nez eyeglasses perched on his uppercrust nose, somehow--somehow--could see deeply "to where all ladders start/ in the foul rag and bone shop of the heart."

To take a lesser example--again, my own--for the next six or eight minutes here, as a kind of finale in trying to tour you through the makings of books, I'm going to do a bit of show-and-tell. Tell you what I, as a professional writer, am trying to ~~do~~<sup>ACHIEVE</sup> in this stretch of writing, and then let you hear it. (LET YOU SEE IT WITH YOUR EARS, I HOPE.)

This little scene from "Mountain Time" involves Mariah

McCaskill, a highly intense photographer for a

Montana newspaper. Mariah is newly back in the

(-INVENTED BY ME-)

AMERICAN

West, having won a Fuji Fellowship to travel the

(BESTOWED UPON HER  
BY ME)

world and take pictures for a year. Mariah is also

licking her wounds from a failed love affair, with a

New Zealand glacier guide named Colin. Colin, much

younger than her, wore his total philosophy of life on

his Mount Cook Guide Service sweatshirt--"Glaciers

are a kick in the ice."

As you'll hear, Mariah, ~~now back home in the~~

~~American West~~, is trying to shoot a feature photo--up

along the Rocky Mountain Front in northern

Montana--for her Sunday paper. And what I'm trying to do, with  
 Mariah and the scene, is to bring the emotional and the physical  
 actuality together. The patron saints of writing have long shown  
 us that this is something worth doing--FOR EXAMPLE, the great rhythmic nexus of  
 experience and feeling that Faulkner gave the fugitive Joe  
 Christmas in "Light in August" when Joe Christmas flees from the  
 beating he's been given, staggering bloody and drunk into a  
 Mississippi street:

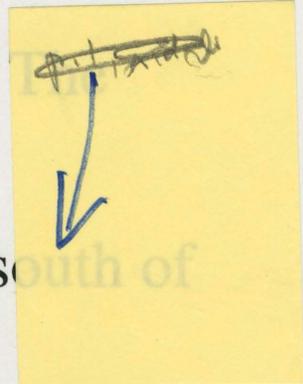
"The whiskey died away in time and was renewed and died  
 again, but the street ran on...The street ran into Oklahoma and  
 Missouri<sup>uh</sup> and as far south as Mexico and then back north to

Chicago and Detroit and then back<sup>2</sup> south again and at last to Mississippi. It was fifteen years long...”

To cut Faulkner short, which is always a shame, the point is to try to get the writing to the frontier, there on the page and in the reader’s mind, where a character’s predicament is both physical and metaphysical. So here is Mariah, and I’m trying to get her to that point, <sup>USING</sup>by rocks and birds:

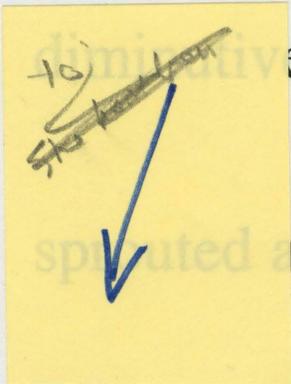
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Stalking rocks, Mariah traipsed up yet another hillside. This was one of those days in a photographer's life when a desk job didn't sound nearly so ridiculous.



slopes of these lesser benchlands south of

town were hummocky, covered with



diminutive mounds where tough wiry grass

sprouted and not much footing in between.

She had been on her feet for hours out here,

trying for some semi-respectable shot to

send in for <sup>the</sup> ~~Sunday~~ <sup>paper.</sup> ~~but at the same time~~ →

~~going back over Lyle. After every~~

~~assignment, every photo subject, she had to~~

~~shift gears and go on to the next. But the~~

~~browy old man was turning out to be~~

~~surprisingly hard to pull away from. Her set~~

~~of photos of him kept ramming into her~~

~~thinking even when she had plenty else to~~

~~Riley, who could get on her nerves just by walking into the room, but whose style when it came to turning out words, she lapped up. *Typical. The guy and I, the only language we both speak is job.*~~

She stopped and blew for breath. With one thing and another, by now the best light of the morning was gone, her camera bag weighed on her like a mail pouch on

catalogue day, the wind was starting to blow, and she discovered she had left her close-up lens in the van. Nor were the damn rocks cooperating.

She was in search of the right rockface.

Out in this lower end of the bench country the glacier leavings were big lone stones called erratic boulders, the size of Volkswagen Beetles, deposited by the ice

sheet when it pushed out of the mountain  
canyons. Such rough old displaced chunks  
often were rouged with orange lichens, so  
that they resembled decorated Gibaltars on  
the prairie. Shoot the right one from up  
close against the wavery horizon of grass,  
and it would make an effect like crossing  
Weegee with Van Gogh. She felt mildly  
guilty resorting to this. But you could slap

anything inanimate on a Sunday page and readers would think it had more than everyday meaning. She knew a passable picture existed somewhere out here. She just hadn't found it yet.

Two rocks later, a distant upright shape caught her eye, off on one of the foothills to the west. More curious than convinced, she half-trotted back down to the van and drove

as close as she could get on a fence line  
road. Then she trudged up the hogback ~~hill~~,  
skirting little stands of jackpine and  
switchbacking against the steep incline.

She was going to be as <sup>ticked</sup>~~pissed~~ off as she was  
↑

leg-weary if the thing up top wasn't what  
she hoped.

It was, though. Not one rock but many,  
a cairn; square-cornered, tapering as it rose,

fitted together like a stack of exceedingly  
thick jigsaw puzzles from the slate-like  
stones of a broken outcropping nearby.

Amateur dry-rock masonry, as all these  
were, but done with divine patience.

Already camera to eye, <sup>MARIAH</sup> ~~she~~ was focusing in  
on the headhigh sentinel mound.

/ It was a <sup>shepherd</sup> shepherd's monument.

These stood on the ridgelines and the

shoulders of mountain pastures throughout

the Two Medicine country where she and

HER SISTER

Lexa grew up, each stone stack the product

of boredom or mania or whimsy/or the need

for a landmark or a grazing allotment

boundary/or simply the urge to build

something well. Back in the times when

the McCaskill bands of sheep were part of

the wool tide on these slopes along the

Rockies, their shepherd might build one  
of these in a fevered  afternoon to take his  
mind off a sudden terrible thirst for the  
attractions in the skid row bars in Great  
Falls. Another might fiddle around all  
summer erecting one or two, perhaps a  
puzzle-piece layer a day, the monument  
corners exquisitely joined (as on this one)  
with proper  fit as the only  mortar. On one

of the camptending trips of their girlhood,  
their father was inside the sheepwagon in  
touchy diplomacy with the herder while she  
and Lexa proudly tussled up a sizable rock  
and crammed it onto the cairn the man had  
underway nearby. The herder came out,  
saw their achievement, and threw a fit.  
“What’s that doing on there? That’s a bad  
leave!” After he quit raving and expelled

their rock in favor of a smaller one that  
 chinked into place more readily, the girls  
 grasped that whenever stones were forced to  
 fit together the way theirs was jammed in, it  
 left trouble when the next stone had to be  
 inserted. The 'leave' was what you left  
 yourself to start again.

MARIAH  
 SHE REALIZED.

I'm going to cry, I never cry.

There had been a cairn like this at  
Taiaroa, on the South Island of New  
Zealand.

Colin had taken her home to meet his  
parents, it reached that stage. He and she  
drove down from Mount Cook farther and  
farther south into red fertile hills, every so  
often Mariah dandling a hand over to his in  
ratification of the scenery but also as if to

make sure of his wordless presence. Sheep  
raisers evolving into bed-and-breakfast  
providers, Colin's folks scrupulously put the  
two of them in separate bedrooms but  
adjoining.

→  
Mariah entered into the occasion still  
having hopes for something lasting, still  
shoving the difference in their ages as far to  
the back of her mind as she could.

Throughout her Fuji year of traveling, there had been the embassy types hitting on her with invitations to tennis and evening functions. The guides and taxi drivers in twenty countries asking, "Your husband is where?" (To which she would look them in the eye and say, "He is in a business meeting with your secret police.") Colin with his mountaineer grooves and his god

bod was a more straightforward proposition than any of those.

A home weekend with him, though, except for his visit in the night, proved to be quite a length of time. After it dawned on

COLIN ~~him~~ that Mariah had seen sheep before, and

the fields of giant turnips they fed on were interesting for only so long, he took her to

the coast, to a nesting refuge of royal  
albatrosses. To Taiaroa.

And there the stupendous birds, yachts  
of their kind, came swooping in from  
Antarctica, constant thousands of miles of  
glide on the circular air currents to bring  
food to their young. Those jumbo  
youngsters perched on the cliff brinks, like  
dodoes resolved to pass the evolution exam

this time around, lifting their wings over  
and over again in the testing wind along the  
New Zealand coast. And in would come  
another parent albatross with its ten-foot  
wingspread, sailing with the South Pole at  
its back. Mariah was enchanted, lit up  
through and through with this spectacle of  
wingspans beyond angels'. (If she was  
remembering her Brit Lit course right,

Coleridge had to resort to serious drugs to

reach this point.) To be out of the wind

while she got her camera into action, she

(slow) tugged Colin down onto a grassy spot

behind the marker cairn of purplish stones

on the crest of <sup>THAT</sup> the headland. (Built <sup>, SHE WONDERED,</sup> by some

fallen-to-the-bottom-of-the-world Scottish

~~, SHE WONDERED~~ shepherd?) Then she crawled out a little

way into the blowing grass and settled down

there in the tussocks, scoping the bearcub-  
 sized chicks through her long lens and  
 turning her head upward to catch each  
 whispered flight of the elder royals. She

DELIBERATE

watched by the hour, Colin stoically bored  
 behind her, the wind ruffling no feathers of  
 aspiration on him.

I think, there--with a woman determined to soar in her work, to glide this blue planet with those royal birds--is as good a last chapter of ~~tonight~~ <sup>TODAY</sup> as any.

In my own voyaging over the world of words, I keep coming back to those three main elements I've cited, those three hearts of writing--

--The dance of the language.

--The home country we speak from.

--And the day-by-day push into unexplored white space.

It's that last blood-central urge that keeps writers a living species, I believe.

The lions of narrative, the foxes of mystery,  
the griffins of sci fi, the watchful herons of  
history, the gazelles and dolphins of poetry,  
the badgers of biography, the lop-eared  
leopards of memoir--all of us creatures of  
Shakespeare's ark/must live by the energy  
of our imaginations.