

About 7730 words

1/27/12
— f r e e — p 16 — 377
Core of February is a house that fits in, 2/15/93
* till keep us make 2 open comfortable. Should I omit?
Improve? Shorten? all 3.

Eagle
FEBRUARY

[picture: house or hearth.]

FLYING LESSONS
THE GOPHER HATCH
HOMECOMING
FITTING IN
THE TRIAL SCENE
MIDDLE-LAND
LIGHT
HEAT
ESCAPING GRAVITY

Feb was a
Hard read
like Gertrude
said "there is no
there there" —

" a falcon soaring
under pride of place
W.S.

FLYING LESSONS

why she?

An eagle is betting her life on spring. There is no sign yet of the February thaw but she is in our biggest cottonwood anyhow, perched at the top of her food chain, head shiny as the snow and body black against sky -- not asking for notice but not bothering to hide, either. She does not know that she has been saved from extinction.

Your reporter is in the sunroom, which provides a panorama, and off to the east another bald eagle is skimming a field of barley stubble. His adult plumage tells me that he has been on tour before, so perhaps he knows that this valley will soon offer a feast of ground squirrels.

For a mature eagle, the hunter looks small -- thus the male pronoun -- while the bird in the tree is too husky to be anything but female. I relay this intelligence to Anna in the kitchen, who is smaller than me but working while I am perched in the sunroom with binoculars.

Sun slants through the southeast window and casts a rhomboid of light on brick-red tiles at my feet. The bright patch changes shape as it creeps across the floor in a sequence that

will not be repeated for a year, when the sun will come through the same window from the same direction, (unless there is a cloud.) A person of the right bent might see eternity moving over my shoes.

A person of devious bent might stage a coup. He could say that the moving finger writes and having writ, moves on. He might call it a fiery finger, considering the source of the light, and conclude that the shapes are hieroglyphs. With a creative interpretation, he could read King Belshazzar out of office, if this were Babylon and he were Daniel.

I might stage a coup too. I might point out that the sun is coming in through windows we built for it, brightening our kitchen, and rippling over the pillar of stones that holds our house up. I might translate the moving finger as telling Anna to stop reorganizing cupboards long enough to join me for breakfast.

IS+I

It wouldn't be me if I were somebody else. *I like it*

Anna Collins-Proper

Anna is not ready for my pancakes yet. While in town yesterday, she happened to spot two old cast-iron pans at a price she could not pass up and, in order to make room for them, she must now move every bottle of oil, vinegar, marmalade and more from the cupboard by the sink to the cupboard by the refrigerator, then scrub the vacant cupboard and move into it

some (but not all) of the flours and grains from the shelves under the peninsula where the new old pans will go. Next, the kitchen's other nineteen cupboards and seven drawers will have to be reorganized to make room for the overflow. *Datus has the plane* And Anna will wonder aloud, when I need buckwheat for the pancake mix, why men can't ever find anything.

She may point out, moreover, that the kitchen at least stays in the same room while my place of work moves around -- to the double glass doors by the stream, for example, or to the bedroom windows by the mountains. Just now I'm looking east from the sunroom, watching an eagle soaring on wings wide as mine, tilt of the fingers banking me blue between white peaks.

*great + appropriate
quote*

More than ninety percent of us live in cities these days. Most of us are at least two generations removed from the farm and perhaps four hundred generations from the time when men left home in the morning with spears in their hands.... What we may still fail to appreciate is the place wildness occupies in the human spirit.

Chris Madson¹

The hungry male bald eagle, having failed to find ground squirrels, heads for mallards gleaning wheat on the field to our north. He makes a high swing to size up the flock, perhaps intimidate it, and calculate his angle of attack. He must single out his quarry and intersect its flight, gaining speed as he slopes down. He cannot stoop like a peregrine. He cannot catch a duck on the level. But he can hope to find, among two hundred

mallards, one that is weak or foolish.

The ducks have a just-in-time escape policy. They keep feeding as they watch the eagle's approach, then rise in a rush of wings and voices. I must imagine the noise from within these walls, but I can see the fluster of birds, myriad mallards swirling, weaving, shining in the winter sun, every one gloriously competent. The eagle veers toward another flock of ducks on the ground, and those in the air settle back in stubble.

The eagle's chase has a cost in energy for him and his prey, multiplied on their side by hundreds of individuals that must be tested before one is found vulnerable. But there is plenty of spilled grain to fuel the hunt, and it is good for the mallard population. The raptor knows nothing of the rules of fair chase, of course, but observes them perforce, hunting under the sun and giving healthy prey a chance to escape. He may even help by intimidating the great horned owls, which are more effective predators of ducks.

This is the great game. Nature has larger spectacles -- a waterfall, say, but it is bloodless. Predator and prey are betting on life. They give him his eagle eye; he gives them their headlong glittering flight.

I would join the chase. I do join it, and fly on eagle's wings, though I hunger for pancakes. You're a better man than I, raptor -- but you don't eat as often. In the times I have watched, you have caught just one teal, and that because she panicked and dove into the spring creek. You followed her in the

to
harsh sound?

clear water and got her when she came up for air.

Easier prey will be here soon. At this season of optimism, I can believe that our largest birds of prey will be with us forever, surviving their immediate enemies and the distant affections of their friends.

Every sudden heightening of intensity brought you into a god's sphere of influence.... every encounter occurred in parallel, in two places.

Roberto Calasso, The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony²

Yesterday afternoon, dogs and I crossed the stream. They searched a field on the far side. I watched an eagle soaring, saw it drop a pinion feather, and ran to the quill as it swirled down the sky.

My mother had a sleepy song, when I was just old enough to know that it was in parallel language. Donnez-moi ta plume, she would sing, pour écrire un mot. I remembered her voice yesterday, and found the eagle's quill.

Huckleberry came to me kneeling in the grass. He did not know why I would want a feather, but he saw that I saw something in it.

I see the intensity when it comes to Huck, too. It is purely predatory, in his case -- the heightened awareness of a wolf before the pounce. He feels the rush at no other time but I do, and mostly in nature, where his consciousness and mine evolved.

The epiphanies are risky. Do they work?

It must have taken genius to find epiphanies on city streets. People still follow James Joyce's path through Dublin, but his sensibility came from an older sphere of influence.

All that we did, all that we said or sang
Must come from contact with the soil, from that
Contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong.

William Butler Yeats³

The feather is on our mantel now between the antlers of a ~~bleached~~ deer's skull. I found the skull half-buried, and Anna put it with the eagle's quill.

Hard times taught me to value things that came free -- not that I understood what was happening. Mom just hugged me for saving pennies and I'm still doing it.

Thank goodness for baby-boomers. They have built a lavish economy despite the best efforts of Depression babies like me, who pick up coins from sidewalks and feathers from fields. In fat times like these, a skinflint can ~~pick up~~ enough pennies to ransom himself.

THE GOPHER HATCH

What we call gophers are really squirrels living underground, where the progenitors of all squirrels evolved. And of course, being mammals, they do not hatch. Ground squirrels do, however, overwhelm predators by emerging in numbers that remind us humans of mayfly hatches. This gopher, this bleeding excessive rodent, this is what feeds the eagle's sublime flight.

The ground squirrel has relatives in Asia, so it would have been familiar fare to the first human migrants from that continent when they ran out of innocent American big game. The rodent survived by staying underground as much as possible, but active at the one thing mammals do abundantly when the lights are out. The offspring are charming or at least cute, in modest quantities. And yet they are not welcome on Montana farms. The ground squirrel is too successful, like us recently-imported Americans. It is The Bison's Revenge -- native animal turned weed species. In this valley, no other mammal so clearly shows the earth's fertility.

From here in it gets deep. There is a certain attitude toward rodents among peoples exposed to the Black Death or New York subways. In the American south, on the other hand, and in parts of the Midwest, tree-squirrels are known to be delicious.

They led our forefathers to develop accurate, small-caliber rifles which, in turn, had something to do with events beginning in 1776.

In matters of diet, however, Americans have never declared independence. This is a pity, because Richardson's ground squirrels are delicious, when young -- and few get old enough to be tough. Were they a French species, Brillat-Savarin would have done a study on wines to accompany the dish and Californians would be paying fifty dollars each for a lightly braised écureuil de terre with radicchio and chipotles.

The ground-squirrel's own diet must, logically, include some vegetable matter, because pyramid schemes do not work. What one actually sees our local gophers eating, however, is siblings. Farmers trying to reduce the population learn to work in a slow circle, chumming for live rodents with those shot earlier. And at peak season, cars passing our local airport swerve to avoid hitting a gopher dining on another gopher who had in turn ventured onto the road to recycle his littermate. This is why you see whole families of pressed rodent. Protein is of great value, in the natural world.

Good pizza

I may have missed your personal ground-squirrel problem, if you are from Montana. Livestock do step in the holes and get hurt. I step in gopher holes, for that matter, and especially in the holes that badgers dig to catch gophers. But the excavations are most abundant on cattle pastures, which we do not have on the home acres, and in hayfields that are left in production for

several years. We rotate the hay with barley, which involves plowing, which in turn disrupts the ground squirrels. I can afford to be lazy about them -- except when they come near our three apple trees.

is unrelated to me no flow

As orchards go, our isn't much but a farm ought to provide one bucolic treat and the apples do have a delicious, stress-induced tang -- when they survive. One of the trees was girdled last year by a miserable mouselike vole with a short tail and no ambition at all. Ground squirrels are big, by comparison -- big enough for Pasture Stew, so-called because it mixes rabbits (known to be edible even among Anglo-Saxons) and the occasional muskrat with ground squirrels, which are the best-tasting of the bunch.

All of the above is true, but the gopher's larger purpose in this chapter is hortatory. You there, cowboy: Eat up. Does the thought of pasture stew turn your stomach? Don't fuss or you will be exiled to Portugal, where you will be fed on, say, lampreys stewed in their blood.

You're next, high-rise environmentalist. Enough of causes without consequences. March yourself Chez François and demand a dinner of ground squirrel. The chief ingredient is organically produced in great quantities, and a chef de cuisine who deserves the name will know how to cook his raw material when he gets it. Should that first bite meet psychic resistance, however, consider that you are making an environmental impact statement. Vast tracts of land could be returned to their original ecology -- and

still produce surpluses for the market -- if native American ground squirrels were as popular as Eurasian chickens. Indian nations could revive their traditional economy, too, lessening dependence on gambling casinos and German tourists. And here on the home place, we could retire the tractor.

HOMECOMING

When last I worked in Washington, D.C., technicians in the basement controlled my air while I concerned myself with the lives of people on other continents. And then one spring morning, when air on the sixth floor was stale to desperation, I jimmied open my window, took a breath, and heard over the noise of traffic a slight, deep tune. A snipe was winnowing the wind over Foggy Bottom, claiming territory on a marsh paved over.

I was looking behind me when I fled. I wanted a land soft enough for the snipe's bill and a sky quiet enough for mating music, and I thought that if I could just fill my lungs with clean air, the rest would follow. Building a house had to be easier than saving the world for democracy.

Advice: Before you plan an escape, know yourself -- by consulting someone else. Carl Jung is no longer available, but his students have found a way to classify human personalities. I did not take the idea seriously. But then the Meyers-Briggs test was offered free, and it taught me what I should have paid to learn years earlier, before irritating all those solid citizens who just didn't get it. My pattern of thinking turned out to be intuitive -- by a score of fifteen to zero.

Intuitives see the big picture. We can explain the meaning

of life, whether it has one or not, and write speeches for you with the thoughts you would have had, if you had found time to think. This gift makes us useful in the towers of government. When an intuitive comes down to earth, however, he is likely to land in a slough.

I might have noted the absence of houses in our bottomland and guessed that people had reasons for not building here.

- The water-table was high, as would be expected from land near a spring creek, but did not change much from year to year. We could adapt by raising the foundation of our house.
- Floods, on the contrary, came seldom but might be catastrophic.

House plans concentrate the mind. You pledge your fortunes and your sacred honor to a bank. You study the flood plain and try to make sure that some fine, warm spring when the snowpack melts suddenly and a lake again covers the valley, your house will be on one of the islands.

Enter George Mattson. He was, and is, an architect -- lean, quiet, and weathered, like our roof of cedar shakes. George would be called a pondered man, if he lived in Portugal. (Architecture promotes pondering: There are so many things to go wrong and you are always dealing with people who have never built a house before, will never do it again, and are full of romantic ideas they cannot afford.)

George loaned Anna and me a surveyor's level to take

elevations on our land. And then George came out ~~himself~~ and did the whole thing over, just to make sure. He was still the boy who went to school with me in Yellowstone Park, and he never did like mistakes, even in sixth grade.

FITTING IN

At a certain season of our life, we are accustomed to consider every spot as the possible site of a house.

Thoreau, Walden

We looked at four possible sites.

1. In the Woods. We could have spared the landscape from an intrusive presence by hiding our house in the old-growth trees and brush. But: What might look good to humans would disrupt our best wildlife habitat. (There was a clue to the dichotomy in that word "landscape." A landscape is nature as seen by people, not wildlife.)
2. Across the creek. There are attractive spots near the middle of our land, far from roads. But: I'd rather walk in open space than build on it.
3. Into the contours. On another place, we might have built in a south-facing draw, which would conceal our house and shelter it from winter winds. But: The low spots on our land were subject to flooding.
4. Edge of the property. Most farmers build near the road, and so did we. But: What intrudes least on wildness

line
mimic

what?

The site we picked left fifty-nine acres untouched. On the sixtieth, at our northeast corner, we had to move dirt to raise the house's foundation above the flood plain and blend into a landscape of gentle curves. George Mattson proposed to make a virtue of necessity, leaving a pond at the spot from which we took the fill.

I was enthusiastic. Our sixtieth acre would still be a constructed landscape, pond no less than house, but the trout's part would be bigger than the humans' and each would reflect on the other. To us, the trout's place would be part of the land, and to them, our place would be part of the sky.

Leave it to a biologist to spoil the fun. A shallow reflecting-pool might look nice at first, he said, but would grow weeds, fill in, and become better habitat for mosquitoes than trout. He recommended an excavation at least fifteen feet deep, with sides as steep as the soil would hold.

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly....

Shakespeare, Macbeth

The dragline's operator left after digging to what was, he guessed, fifteen feet. I paddled out in a float-tube and took readings with a plumb. Seven feet. The dragline came back and kept working, for dollars per minute, till we had a pond big as several houses turned upside-down. We had wanted to fit into the

landscape, but not quite so deeply.

I can't say that Gallatin Lake had been yearning to breathe free. The excavation did, however, provide a home for huddled masses of aquatic insects, and when the muddy work was done, the water that had made building difficult also made healing quick. Sun and moisture pulled up vegetation, which decomposed to fertile muck, which grew more plants, and bare earth turned to sod. Within two years of building, our muddy home-acre had become turf with a maze of vole tunnels.

John Wesley Powell advocated a change in the land laws that would limit irrigated farms to eighty acres -- all a man needed and all he could work -- and enlarge stock farms to four full sections, needed for a small farmer's herd in the way of range.

William Stegner⁴

Stegner explains that Congress "might have spared the dust bowls of the 1890s, 1930s, and 1950s" by listening to John Wesley Powell. With four sections, a homesteading rancher would not have had to plow dry land. Powell's recommendation for well-watered land would have been reasonable too, in the days before mechanized agriculture. Eighty acres would have been almost too much for a team of mules to plow.

Of course Powell's recommendations were rejected. Politics aside, Congressmen from humid country could not have comprehended that one family should get eighty acres while another got

forty-two times as much. Water falls from the sky back East, and land can be measured by its area.

Most of the homesteader's houses are tumbledown now, eroded by blowing soil, or carried off to mend somebody's barn. But farmers succeeded in valleys like this one.

What strikes the eye here is not aridity but diversity. Through my window I can see a wet meadow where trout feed on nymphs, a steppe where gyrfalcons hunt partridges, a forest where elk spend winter days, and a crag where not even the eagle ventures in February. All of these places are ecosystems -- I guess -- but the term suggests more than I know. I can see things from bears down to midges, but (lacking a microscope) I can't see what's in a cup of mud from the stream's bed. How many variables are interacting? How much in the ecosystem is systematic, and how much a jumble of coincidences? Does any kind of order emerge from the constant changes? I would like big answers but must be guided by small observations.

Not long ago another piece of heavy machinery crawled onto our place. This one was a backhoe with wide, tank-like treads that left no permanent scar on our soil but turned a mud flat into the Home Pool -- restoring in hours a piece of spring creek that had been destroyed over decades. (More on this in March.) That monster, at least, was on the side of the angels.

This is completely ridiculous.
Don't know if it's also funny

THE TRIAL SCENE

St. Peter: What is the charge?

Avening Angel: Breach of sanctity, Your Holiness. This sinner violated the sacred earth.

Angel for the Defense: Objection, Your Holiness. My client restored to health a land that had been used by humans for more than a century.

Avening Angel to Defendant: How is this? You expect to enter heaven by disturbing the earth?

Defendant: Yes sir. I had to move a lot of mud to get the stream back in shape.

Avening Angel, severely: You are on trial for the house, not the stream!

Defendant: Uh, yes sir. But they're connected. I mean, I fussed over the stream because I lived there.

Avening Angel: You were selfish, then.

Defendant: Yes sir.

Avening Angel: And you failed to restore the land to its original ecology.

Defendant. Yes sir. But I left it better than I found it.

Avenging Angel to St. Peter: Your Holiness, this man built where no human had ever built before. He should be condemned to watch network television till the millennial flood erases his blot on the landscape.

Angel for the Defense: Your Holiness, my client broke no law.

Avenging Angel: Not breaking laws won't get him into Heaven.

Angel for the Defense: My client wishes to speak.

Defendant: Please, sir, may I ask you to inspect the place while I call some witnesses?

St. Peter (frowning): The trial will resume on site.

I fear that the Avenging Angel will call humans as witnesses. Those who have gained from my management of this place -- fishing friends and downstream neighbors -- would testify on my behalf. But they would be outnumbered by those who have lost a precious thing: freedom to roam where they please. And the freedom-lovers might be persuasive. I might even agree with them. My house stakes a claim that frustrates other claims. I am a love-child of the great public lands, and now look what I've done.

Inspiration: I will ask to resume this trial in July, when there are mayflies on the stream. My strategy is to get the Great Fisherman into some rising trout while his bailiff rounds up sora rails to testify that grass is now hanging into the stream from

banks that used to be raw. As to pheasants, they won't trust even Saint Peter, but the sharptailed grouse will fly in on my behalf, and of course the snipe.

By then the teal will have hatched too, and I will recruit dozens and dozens of downy ducklings. I will say begging pardon, Your Holiness, but may I put these witnesses in your personal care where they won't get stepped on? And he will have peeping, waddling, bouncing balls of fluff all over his holy vestments, and the trial will dissolve in giggles.

Baby ducks are a sure cure for sanctity.

MIDDLE-LAND

I am nervous about going into debt to show how well-heeled I am.

Russell Baker, New York Times

Anna's house started with its contents. She wanted room for the creaky chairs from Ireland and the elm chest with 1774 carved on it. She needed closets and cupboards, an open floor somewhere for dance-workouts, and a rack over the peninsula for old copper pots and pans. As to new items, however, she had Old-World reservations, and she had shivered in enough big, drafty rooms back home.

My house started with its surroundings. I wanted it to blend into the vegetation like a duck-blind, escaping the attention of bankers and wildlife alike. Nature would be there for the looking, and *soyle* [if it looked good enough --] if, say, the kingbird alerted me to a hatch of mayflies -- then I could open a glass door and walk out, with scarcely a transition between indoors and out.

If the finished house needed a name (as houses do in Ireland), we would call it Middle-Land. We lie between city and wilderness, what she wants and what he fancies. Our nature abhors a vacuum. We fill our nest like a pair of whiskey jacks, with feathers and fishhooks, buttons and bright bits of cloth. She is the small person at the bird-feeder and I am the face at the

window, glancing back and forth between work and world.

Now that the house is built, Anna and I still like it, and still for different reasons. She has rosemary, basil, and thyme in the sunroom, ivy and spider-plants hanging from gray beams that hold up the ceiling. I have a refuge. That snow-squall the other day was not really so bad, no matter what Anna says, but Huckleberry barked to guide me, she turned on the lights, and I was glad that there was no great distance from field to hearth.

The sky is round, and.... The wind in its greatest power whirls. Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours.... Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing.

Black Elk⁵

Right angles are scarce in nature. Water coils like a basking snake around patches of willow and alder. Even our cottonwoods lean one way or another, and the mountains are (in perception) a ring. None of this has changed since Black Elk's time.

Technology, on the other hand, has changed beyond recognition. Nomads moved with the seasons once, but now move to escape the seasons, from trailer court in Montana to another in Arizona. To live on the land now you must now dig in. In older cultures, there would be models, but in Montana we took our cues from the landscape, which has not changed much.

We built low, like a thicket of buffaloberries. For a shape,

we chose an octagon, which was as close as we could come to the eternal circle with straight boards. The octagon would also give us unobstructed views in all directions -- something a rectangle could not quite manage.

Nature oblige an octagon

[Elsewhere we might have built a full octagon, but in this climate we did not want a big window to the north. It had the coldest winds, the least sun, and the view of least interest, so we put the garage there and our rooms of passage. Anna won't let me call the entrance a mudroom, but you take off your shoes there. For the living area, you then walk straight ahead; for the bedrooms, you turn left.

The dark north side of the house became a museum. On its walls, we hung my mother's picture and a few others from our past. We sold most of the rest of the paintings. They were family things too, but they helped to pay for the house, and it was a good swap.

Emmie

Of builders who bid on the house, only Jeff Aldworth seemed interested in a project that was not square. He looked like a tightrope walker -- young, lean, and able to carry on his shoulders two nervous people, all that wood, and tons of gravel for the footing. Jeff cut no corners.

]

LIGHT

Again the sun!
anew each day; and new and new and new,
that comes into and steadies my soul.

Marianne Moore

Outdoors, it is February. Indoors, it feels like June.
Sunlight comes in low from the southeast and spotlights a
woodstove at the core of our house, where I am lighting a fire
under the griddle. I am lit already, sun on my shoulders.

There have always been dwellings oriented to the sun: Black
Elk's teepee, for example, and the house where I was born. It was
a big old place with other good things too -- a banister, and a
pantry with plum puddings -- but my deepest memory is of light,

Light clear as my mother's voice,
Light blond on the floor where children played,
Light with a silence too bright to face.

We get more light in Montana -- partly because the air is
clear and partly because George Mattson gave us big windows. And
the light becomes heat when it hits tile floor, stone pillar, or
human body. The place would, in fact, get too hot in summer if
south-facing windows were exposed to the sun, so George designed

eight-foot eaves, which let low winter light enter the living area but block high summer sun.

Sun, then, controls the shape of the house. Sun controls me, too. I am a solar collector. I follow bright patches around the floor from bedroom, which catches first light; to sunroom, which warms the breakfast table; to noon's comfort at the big south window; and on to double glass doors by stream and sunset.

It wouldn't be so bad, Anna says, except that the furniture moves around with me. (My couch is mounted on casters.) Her stuff, at least, can be hidden in cabinets. (I want sun.) Here's a cup of tea for your sins, Anna says, and sits back against the other end of the couch. (Her feet are warm against mine.)

You might conclude that we think often about light, but we don't. George made the sun a fixture, moving as imperceptibly as Sir Laurence Olivier. (Once I watched a film of Sir Laurence deciding whether to be or not to be, and he was slow as sun-glyphs on the floor.)

Send in Charlie Chaplin. Imagine him stalking a picnic basket, one step at a time, head moving in time with his feet. Now imagine an old hen partridge creeping toward my window, and nine more following with cartoon caution. The house covey is sneaking toward our south wall, where the first green grass of spring is sprouting in heat reflected from the sun.

The partridges are betting their lives on this performance. They are ten sleek balls with beaks moving at about three nips per second, and through all that reciprocating motion they are

alert for fox or falcon. The covey is betting its life on our house, which worries predators more than prey.

Farther from the solar gain, snow resumes abruptly in a cliff six inches high. Two voles venture from holes at the base, nibble green shoots, dash for shelter, dash back to nibble more. The voles are fluffed out like the partridges. There is this satisfying roundness to wild things in winter.

Suppose I could meet an ancestor of mine from four-hundred generations back. Would he be hairy as a vole for European winters? (I'll settle for a house with eight inches of foam insulation.) And would my forebear be graceful as a partridge compared to me, the barnyard fowl? (I'm no flaccid factory broiler, though. I'm a free-range rooster.)

Now suppose we had built a marble palace. Walls of any kind are foreign to voles and partridges, but perhaps they would pay no more attention to shiny stone than to our rough gray boards. Partridges look on any structure as an occasion for ambush. Voles live in tunnels and fear the sky. At the least, though, a house that fits into the landscape makes us humans feel good.

By the vernal equinox, partridges will be pairing off to look for nesting sites, and any voles surviving the spring thaw will have moved to taller grass. We will still have firewood stacked underneath the eaves, but the pile will sink as the sun climbs higher.

By the summer solstice, firewood will be a memory. Long rods will hang from pine posts at the edge of the porch and wading

X boots will sprawl on the deck, perhaps with anglers inside. There will be mayflies on the windows, bats weaving through the posts, and perhaps a rabbit running over your legs, if you hold very still. The porch will be a transition zone then, shading human into nature.

HEAT

How cold your little hand is!

Rodolfo to Mimi in La Bohème

This is no climate for celibacy. You need tangible warmth and marriage offers an elegant solution, if you can get your hands under her sweater.

Anna and I live in a small house with multiple redundant sources of heat -- including our tile floor, which maintains about the same temperature as her back, and with an analogous network of veins and arteries. The circulatory system is made up of plastic tubes containing fluid pushed by the heart of the system: a heat pump.

You have a heat pump in your place too. You bring home a liter of mineral water and put it in the refrigerator, which transfers heat from the water into your kitchen. You may not be aware of the transfer because the bottle is small, but every calorie removed from it goes into your house.

Now think big. Our house stands over an immense reservoir of mineral water from which the heat pump withdraws calories and transfers them to the floor. We come in from winter, take off our boots, and stand there grinning. Radiant heat comforts the sole.

O, to have a little house!
To own the hearth and stool and all!
The heap'd-up sods upon the fire,
The pile of turf against the wall!

To have a clock with weights and chains
And pendulum swinging up and down!
A dresser filled with shining delph,
Speckled with white and blue and brown!

Och! but I'm weary of mist and dark,
And roads where there's never a house or bush,
And tired I am of bog and road
And the crying wind and the lonesome hush!

Padraic Colum, An Old Woman of the Roads

What Anna knew of bogs came from the last act of Swan Lake -- but as to pendulums and dressers and glazed earthenware, she grew up with them. The Collinses lived in a Victorian house overlooking Cork city. Artists painted the neighborhood. Tourists photographed it. And yet Anna grew up hearing much of Padraic Colum's mournful doggerel, and wondering what her mother was on about.

I could hazard a guess. The house had six fireplaces, all of them in walls of brick and stucco, built for eternity -- and just as cold. You would naturally sympathize with an Old Woman of the Roads when you felt the lonesome chill in your parlor.

It was a nice house, mind you, and that was its purpose. Victorian gentlefolk had built it to keep up appearances for all successors forever, whether they liked it or not. The neat parlor and dining room took up most of the ground floor. They were neat because they were at the right temperature for a bottle of stout.

You could take a sip in that parlor, but then if there was blood in your veins you would join the crowd around the cooker in the kitchen, burning with an eternal anthracite flame.

Padraic Colum's old woman of the roads would have been warmer in the country house she yearned for. It would have been literally part of the land -- cave-thick with stones picked from the field and covered with lime plaster. The kitchen and living area would have been one room, heated by a serious peat-burning fireplace.

First thing on my first rough Montana floor-plan was an attempt to conjugate hearth and people. No use trying to fake it. Put a fireplace in an outside wall and we would light up a few times a year for parties and guests would stand around the hearth wondering why they were still chilly. The chimney that should have warmed the house would be losing its heat to the great outdoors.

We took a lesson from the Irish farmhouse, instead of the Victorian parlor, and let our house gather around its true hearth. The details, however, evolved in a coincidence of enthusiasms. Eric Hougard, the mason, looked stone-built himself and knew where to find river-bottom boulders. He also knew how to make three kinds of fireplaces, with three functions, which would fit in the same stone core but warm the whole octagon.

1. The Russian Fireplace is low in charisma and high in efficiency. A small cast-iron door in the office hides a long, narrow fire-box for wood scraps -- blown-down branches or

trimmings from a lumber mill. The fire does not waste warm air by using it for combustion. Instead, air comes from outside the house through a large duct under the floor. The flames leave most of their heat in flues that zigzag through the stones, warming office, kitchen, dining room, and living room.

2. A Wood Range faces the kitchen from the same stone pillar, and this alcove has become our morning hearth. I start with kindling and, by the time I have mixed batter, the cast-iron cook-top is hot enough to make pancakes sputter.


3. The Living-room Hearth looks conventional and burns big logs but, like the Russian fireplace, directs outside air at the base of the fire. You don't need kindling with this natural bellows. Just crumple some newspaper under the wood, strike a match, and close the doors.

Fireplace doors go against common sense. If it's warmth you want, why would you put a barrier between fire and people? But in fact glass lets through more heat than the traditional screen, yet prevents warm room air from being sucked up the chimney. And if you want to grill a duck, you can always open up. (Jim Soares, who lives up Dry Creek Road a bit, welded the doors. The Titanic would still be floating if Jim had built it.)

That's not quite all. Air circulates naturally behind the living-room fireplace, entering holes underneath the hearth, convecting upward around the hot fire-box, and coming out August at the top. You don't notice the holes -- Eric hid them between stones -- but you can stand in front of them and get yourself

blow-dried when you come in from a blizzard.

An odd thing about cold and heat is that you don't remember them. You recall being chilly, but not what it felt like. Stop and think, though, about the fires that have warmed you. You will see red coals, hear friends' voices, and burn your tongue on coffee. Flames make sense of your senses.



ESCAPING GRAVITY

Anna warms our plates on the hearth and I wheel the couch close, denning the family. Our canine members have eaten already and Tess, who had her turn in the field today, is twitching and whimpering, chasing something in her sleep. I will tell you what Tessie is dreaming. The fire will bring out a story that makes sense of the day.

Al Gadoury and I took our pups for a run this afternoon -- his two white setters and my brown shorthair, all bouncy and female and shiny of eye, more enthusiasm among the three of them than any dozen rodeo cowgirls and less mass than one Labrador retriever. To these pups, life was not a weighty matter.

Al and I enjoy house dogs (even lap dogs on a winter's night) but the pampering has not confused them as to life's larger purpose. All three like hunting more than eating and we'd rather chase around with them than do anything else that's legal in February. One alternative would be dibbling nymphs along the bottom of a stream and hooking a few trout, but no-kill hunting

is a faster sport by some thirty miles per hour.

We released the pups on an empty section (which is a square mile, for those of you who are spatially deprived) and there we humans hiked along earthbound, conversing. Al would ask me if I'd seen his Peach or Thumper lately, and I would ask him if he'd spotted my Tess on her last fly-by.

The land we circumnavigated did not have much cover -- just enough grass over near the stubble to hold one covey of partridges. Peach picked up their scent from fifty yards, slowed, stopped, and raised her tail decisively. Tess came in at an angle and pointed without seeing Peach. Thumper, age five months, saw Peach and backed. (Al actually trains his pups instead of just turning them loose and hoping for the best, like some of his friends.)

When Tess realized that this was not really her covey, she sneaked in and flushed it. I picked her up, stood her on point again, and gave her a lecture on stealing another dog's find, which may account for what happened next.

*"took her legs away" says Delfat
Finielle
dog
framer*

Tess made a long cast. A rigorously impartial observer might have called it running off, but I think she just wanted to prove that she too could produce game and, for all I know, she might even have tried to point that fox. Besides, how was she to know that she wasn't a whippet? Puppies can't read pedigrees.

If you have visited the site of Custer's last stand, you will have some idea of the terrain -- ragged draws and gentle bowls and steep rounded ridges. (Whoever called this landscape

"plains" was plainly daft.) I ran up the highest knob and tootled my whistle, to which Tess reacted as if I were shouting tallyho! Her blur and that of her quarry nearly merged, sepia streak chasing ruddy stripe. He was a big, speedy, dog-fox, accustomed to running from coyotes (which treat foxes as Crazy Horse treated Custer).

In principle, Tessie's high spirits did not bother me. Any pointer pup worth its salt will chase anything that will run, and any owner of such a pup will have to help it kick the habit. I knew how to do that. The problem was that Tess was winning the race and might get torn up by her fox, who certainly knew more than she did about fighting. Speed was the only violence in her, anyhow. She yipped like the puppy she was, wanting a romp, not a kill.

... in order to experience the epiphany, the object you behold but do not want to possess must be beautiful in some way.

Joseph Campbell⁶

Nothing you have seen on the ground approaches the fluidity of this chase. No human runner is so fast, no skater so agile. To picture Tess and Fox, you must go airborne. You must imagine a Cooper's hawk at inhuman speed, twisting hot after a ruffed grouse.

Al and I had a private exhibition as our streakers used up a

few minutes and a great deal of space. They would emerge on a ridge, vanish down the far side, course up the bottom of a draw, and reappear in seconds on a distant hill. Tess avoided the prickly-pear cactus as easily as Fox. He doubled around a tall sagebrush that interrupted her line of sight, but his scent was head-high and easy enough to follow.

The crisis came when Fox's lungs began to let him down. Taking me as the lesser risk, he ran across a flat, open field in front of me, heading for the road and hoping to time his crossing so that a car would hit the nemesis closing in on him. (I don't know that, but Foxes in tales are always sly.)

Tess stopped -- not because of an attack of conscience but because she could no longer pretend her duty away, not with me standing right there tweeting at her, so instead she pretended to be contrite and I pretended to be angry and neither of us believed a bit of it.

The chase ran again in my sleep last night, little brown dog winding over endless pale contours with perfect grace, but this time I saw the whole show with no ridges in the way. Tess and I had both escaped gravity.

≈

FEBRUARY

- (1) The Nature Conservancy annual report, 1990. pp. 20/21.
- (2) NY: Knopf, 1993. p.95.
- (3) "The Municipal Gallery Revisited"
- (4) Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs. NY: Penguin, 1992. p.50. Powell's report was submitted to Congress in 1878.
- (5) Oglala Sioux, as recorded by John G. Neihardt in 1931.
- (6) The Power of Myth (with Bill Moyers). NY: Doubleday, 1988. p.221.

was Feb

Annan house

PADRAIC COLUM

950

An Old Woman of the Roads

b. 1881

O, TO have a little house!
To own the hearth and stool and all!
The heap'd-up sods upon the fire,
The pile of turf against the wall!

To have a clock with weights and chains
And pendulum swinging up and down!
A dresser filled with shining delph,
Speckled with white and blue and brown!

I could be busy all the day
Clearing and sweeping hearth and floor;
And fixing on their shelf again
My white and blue and speckled store!

I could be quiet there at night
Beside the fire and by myself,
Sure of a bed and loth to leave
The ticking clock and the shining delph!

Och! but I'm weary of mist and dark,
And roads where there's never a house or bush,
And tired I am of bog and road
And the crying wind and the lonesome hush!

And I am praying to God on high,
And I am praying Him night and day,
For a little house—a house of my own—
Out of the wind's and the rain's way.

1126

JAMES JOYCE

951

Bid adieu to Maidenhood

b. 1882

BID adieu, adieu, adieu,
Bid adieu to girlish days,
Happy Love is come to woo
Thee and woo thy girlish ways—
The zone that doth become thee fair,
The snood upon thy yellow hair,

When thou hast heard his name upon
The bugles of the cherubim
Begin thou softly to unzone
Thy girlish bosom unto him
And softly to undo the snood
That is the sign of maidenhood.

JAMES STEPHENS

952

The Watcher

b. 1882

A ROSE for a young head,
A ring for a bride,
Joy for the homestead
Clean and wide—
Who's that waiting
In the rain outside?

A heart for an old friend,
A hand for the new:
Love can to earth lend
Heaven's hue—

Who's that standing
In the silver dew?

1127

[Feb leftovers]

(I mix dubbing, tie it on a hook, wet the fly, and hold it against the sky.)

[move to later chapter?] Farming today is a high-risk, low-return activity even for real farmers, and I'm not one of them. To make a living from agricultural crops you have to inherit hundreds or thousands of acres of good soil and the means to farm them. You have to fix old machinery and watch your expenses as if you were still in a depression -- because you are, in the farm economy.]

last year's solar energy expressed in ground squirrels.

The importance of being earnest about details.

Want a spit for roasting a carp like Izaak Walton.

[consequences from jan.lft]

Foreword: This is not a lament for wilderness lost, though much of it has been, but an attempt to do what can be done with a piece of what's left.

Something is going right around here.

[The great horned owls do not share this enthusiasm. They go somewhere else, or perhaps just hide more thoroughly, when the eagles are around. It is hard to be sure, with owls, but we seem to find fewer wings of ducks and pheasants now.]

[Nature-management, however, is ... well, it is a long string of howevers.]

[incentives: we see what we have a reason to see.]

[Incentives work. We humans not only do what we are rewarded for doing but see what we are rewarded for seeing. As consumers, we see the wool that makes the fashions that make us look good.]

We are accustomed to building bluebird houses because bluebirds are scarce, and indeed they are. Beavers were scarce too, for a few decades, and now they aren't. We are learning the consequences of success.

It has been argued that beavers were here once, and so they belong here now. The argument is incontrovertible, if you assume that people are willing to move out. Give the beavers a few centuries and they might elevate this valley to something like its condition when Captain Clark came splashing through.

[I still admire their work, so long as it is on someone else's turf. As to that particular beaver downstream from the house, however, I was rooting for the trapper. Those teeth look different close-up.]

Slide off this elevated plane, however, and you land with a thump. Yellowstone Park has tried to follow Nature's Way, and today Yellowstone

Nature has lovers aplenty. She could use more workers.

When you play a part in the process, however, you must be guided by what is happening, and not what you wish were happening.

You must be guided by observation, though you cannot observe everything at once. You need target species -- those you can watch, measure, and begin to understand.

[Ending] Should any of the San tribesmen care to visit Montana, I hereby offer to return the hospitality they extended to me in Africa. Wait till August, though, maybe September. By then our days will be hot and nights chilly, like those in the

African highlands. There are prairies that will feel like home too, and rivers like the Cunene, [] take away a few crocodiles.

Come November, the Bushmen will want to be back home but the Eskimos would feel comfortable till March.

In April nobody visits us, though the weather is at its most stimulating. You can be cold, hot, dry, and wind-blown in the same day, if not the same hour.

One more month and you can hang your hammock on the porch and soak up the sun, between thundershowers. Then comes summer and the outdoor barbecues, which Anna loves because of the fauna nesting on our porch, and on this subject we have reached an understanding. Paper wasps do not bite, I remind her, unless one is afraid of them, and she reminds me that she is not at all afraid when she is on her side of the glass, cheering me on.

Anna would like to vacation in some town with great restaurants. I would like to hike around in, say, the Sonora desert. We wind up staying here, even in February. It is a compromise. She likes her house and I, Scrooge, reckon that it's already paid for.

the high west is mostly too dry for houses -- except where it is too wet.

[You are obliged to go nympling in February and catch some whitefish for the smoker. You know how to put them out of their misery but your fingers turn from white to pink and back to white again, and by then you should be hiking home.]

[Fifty-nine acres of this farm are in better condition now than they were I first saw them. As to the sixtieth acre, I don't know. It has more wildlife (native and exotic) than was present

originally. But the natural life is drawn by the unnatural conjunction of pond, lawn, and house.]

Only on the north side, where winter sun cannot reach, did George draw in windowless walls: those of the garage, front entrance, pantry, and long closet.

Our Montana house bears little resemblance to our house near Washington, which used more energy for cooling than heating. In Montana, energy costs are lower because we need no air-conditioning, and we get heat from sun, electricity, and firewood.]

In the living room, at the heart of the house, is the hearth of boulders and big logs.

Still water is the original mirror -- human face looking back at itself. You have been that face. What you might not have realized is that much of the surface of the pond is a mirror for the trout too. It can see you, from the right angle, and you can see the trout, but neither sees the other's reality.

The mass of men lead lives of noisy acquisition, and the mass of women have, if anything, even sharper elbows at the sale counter. Their houses become storage facilities for things that will be stored till they overflow.

Somebody will buy jeans for you, wash them, find out that the buttons won't close, and drop them off at the thrift shop. And they will look swell on you. Or at least they look swell on Anna. She is going out now in a pair of designer jeans bought for \$2.75 and a fluffy fake-fur that cost \$3.50, marked down from \$200. And now that you mention it, I might not need six [] pairs of hiking boots and six [] of waders, most of which are worn out

anyhow, nor the camphor-wood chest stuffed with rare fly-tying materials that never get used. I might not even need quite as many books.

Stuff expands to fill the available space. We built shelves and cupboards to keep the place neat, but it would be just as neat with half the storage space and we would have only half as many doodads hiding the ones we actually use.

I still don't want stuff. And we don't need a sound-system anyhow because it would sound puny out here, nor a video camera because why would we take a picture of a crane that will dance again tomorrow?

Young Tess is using my feet for wrestling, writhing, and chewing. She has one of my shoes chewed till the stuffing leaks out.

Our woodstove is hot now, and its oven warms our plates. I'll be cooking pancakes of coarse grains to keep me warm outside. Roman legions marched on the same principle and they did not even have Anna's topping of rhubarb purée, wild huckleberries, and chopped walnuts, with just enough sugar to remove the pucker.

Their warmth is also a scent of resin, a crackle of coals, and a time to remember.

Anna and I were lucky not to know that we were getting in too deep. We just moved back home. The pieces fit together, in the end, because we were countercyclical, selling our little house in the Washington suburbs when the economy there was booming and hardly anyone wanted to get freeze-dried in Montana.

So far times have been good and the hearths have made them

better.

Our wood fires are redundant -- which was my excuse for wanting them. Electricity for the heat pump might fail, after all, and the sun is a fair-weather friend. But with a cord of fir logs and a hearth to burn them, we could survive bad times.

Anna and I came to this land from opposite directions. She came from an old culture and I was just weather-beaten. Her house began inside while I was out there wandering under morning light. (It just happened that my poet was Irish. Yeats was born on a different tectonic plate in another century, but curlews are curlews.)

How can we distinguish between what is happening in nature and what is happening in ourselves?

[Fitting into the landscape is easy in town. A town is a group of houses, and you have only to build one coherent with the rest.

Fitting in would have been easy in Ireland, too, because the land is man-made -- even where it is wild. Those lonely heights had trees till men cut them down, and the bogs had more snipe before men scalped the turf. But the houses evolved with their landscape. You can just build as the old people built and you'll be right.

Teepees did not have septic tanks.

[(Time out. We are dealing with the esthetic here: Not the ecologic, not the economic, and not what an American is by God entitled to do on his own land. And let's not get mixed up.)]

[A house here must be a pivot, not an anchor.]

Nothing would look more out-of-place here than a gigantic

imitation teepee (except maybe a gigantic geodesic dome).

[House as thermal stabilizer.]

I knew that we (and she in particular) would want a garage connected to the house. But nobody makes octagonal cars and tractors, so we built a rectangular garage and, to balance it, a rectangular master bedroom/workout area. The two rectangles joined the living area on its north side.

It's something to have a view you want to be part of.