

Heart Earth

by Ivan Doig

epigraph

Intervals of dreaming help us to stand up under days of work.

--Pablo Neruda, Memoirs



Dear Wally--

...I shouldn't even be writing you my troubles but I have  
to spill over to someone. I'd just like to have you around  
so I could put my head on your shoulder and cry.

...It is going on 1 and we haven't had dinner yet. Charlie  
is resting and I thought the rest would do him more good than  
eating. Ivan is out in the back yard building roads. He had  
a foxhole dug you could bury a cow in.

In that last winter of the war, she knew to use pointblank ink. Nothing is ever crossed out, never a p.s., the heartquick lines still as distinct as the day of the postmark, her fountain pen instinctively refusing the fade of time. Among the little I have had of her is that pen. Incised into the demure barrel of it--my father must have birthdayed her a couple of weeks' worth of his cowhand wages in this gesture--rests her maiden name. Readily enough, then, I can make out the hand at the page, the swift skritch of her letters racing down onto paper for Wally--



someone--to know. But all else of her, this woman there earmarking a warstriped air mail envelope with the return address of Mrs. Chas. Doig, has been only farthest childscapes, half-rememberings thinned by so many years since. I had given up ever trying to uncurtain my mother. Now her pages begin her: I have to spill over... Upward from her held pen, at last she is back again.

Aluminum and Arizona in their wartime tryst produced Alzona Park, the defense workers' housing project which had been feeling my shovel ever since my parents and I alit there. I knew, with the full mania of a five-year-old, that the project's barren back yards necessitated my toy-truck roads for strafing, bombing--World War Two had a lot of destruction to be played at yet. I was lonesome for my foxhole, though. By a turn of events you couldn't foresee in desert warfare it had been put out of service by rain, my mother making me fill the dirt back into the brimming crater lest somebody underestimate it as a puddle and go in up to the neck.

Spies, saboteurs, the kind of subversive traffic you get in back yards seemed to me to deserve precisely such a ducking, but my mother

stood firm on foxholelessness. I suppose she had in mind our standing with our Alzonan barracks neighbors, who, if she would just trust my reports, all the more justified a foxhole: hunker in there, peeking over the earthrim, and see what they turned into, housewife snipers in the 200 building to be fended off with a pretend rifle, pchoo pchoo, the long 300 building a sudden Japanese battleship, the foxhole now needing to be a gun battery on the destroyer USS Ault, blazing away at those fiends threatening our aircraft carriers, holding them at bay until down in the torpedo room Wally---

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Wally. February 17, 1986. Four fingers of flame thrust toward the snowfields of Mount Baldy and extinguish into echo. Stiffly working their rifle bolts to reload, the Veterans of Foreign Wars honor guard aims and lets fire again, the combined muzzleflash flexing bright another instant. Then a last volley, and the honor guard dissolves into World War Two oldsters clutching at their campaign caps in the cemetery wind.

Ceremonially Wally Ringer's chapter of life was over, that wind-ridden afternoon. But in the family plot of time, not nearly done with. Can this be what that brother of my mother had in mind with the letters, sensing

the carrying power of ink as a way to go on? By making me heir to the lost side of my past, to my mother's own communiques of time and place doing to her what they did, he would find a kind of lastingness too?

# At the moment I only knew I was the most grudging of pallbearers, gritting against the shiver--more than windborne--of having come back where I'd promised myself not to. To where all the compartments of my earliest self rode together on me, nephew, son, grandson, native of this valley, economic refugee from it, ranch kid, town nomad, only child awash in family attention, indrawn half-orphan. Chambered as a goddamn nautilus. Three times before I watched a saga of my family echo into the earth here, and in the glide of years since convinced myself I was safely done with Montana burials. Those earliest voices of the heart held no more to tell, I'd thought. Wally's in particular I no longer gave ear to, even though for most of my life--most of his, as we were only fifteen years apart in age--he was that perfect conspirator, a favorite uncle. That extracurricular relative we need, some close-but-not-immediate livewire in whom the family blood always hums, never drones. As pushful through life as the canyon snowplow he piloted over black ice, bull-chested, supremely bald, with

the inveterate overbite grin of my mother's people which brought the top teeth happily out on parade with the rest of him: as he'd have said it himself, quite the Wally. Here at his funeral were his first and third wives, both in utmost tears, and his second wife sent bereaved regrets from New Mexico.

In my own remembering he bursts home with that whopping grin on him, ever ready to fetch the boy me off to a trouty creek or up into the grass parks of the Castle Mountains to sight deer or elk, or to an away game of football or basketball, never failing to sing out his announcement of our arrival, "Here we are, entertain us!" If I could but choose, the go-anywhere-but-go streak in this likable uncle of mine I would hold in mind, together with my go-along soberside capacity to take everything in. Avid as the Montana seasons, the team we made.

But that all went, in our weedy argument over the expenses of a funeral, no less. By the time of the death of his mother, my grandmother, in 1973, Wally and I were the only ones in what was left of the family who could take on the burial costs. Easy to misstep when trying to shoulder a debt in tandem, and we faithfully fell flat. What got into me, to ignore



the first law of relatives--Thou shalt not tangle family and money-- and agree that I'd temporarily stand his half of the burial bill as well as my own? What got into Wally, to succumb to the snazzier fishing pole and high-powered new hunting scope he soon was showing off to me while letting the funeral reimbursement grow tardy and tardier? In the end he never quite forgave the insult of being asked to pony up, just as I never quite forgave the insult of having to ask. (At last it occurs to me, no longer the overproud struggling young freelance writer I was then: fishpole and riflescope were Wally's own tools of eloquence, weren't they.) I left from Wallace Ringer's graveside half-ashamed of myself that I had not been able to forget our rift, the other half at him for shirking that funeral deal; the sum of it a bone anger in me that we had ended up somewhere between quibble and quarrel forever, this quicksilver uncle and I.

With the packet of letters, then, each dutifully folded back into its envelope edged with World War Two airmail emblazonments, Wally reached out past what had come between us when he was alive.

Long before, when I began to relive on paper my family's ~~half-woeful~~

~~half-wonderful~~ saga of trying to right ourselves after the hole that was knocked in us that year of 1945, I ~~had~~ asked around for old letters, photos, anything, but Wally offered nothing. This House of Sky grew to be a book faceted with the three of us I had memory record of, my father, my grandmother, myself. Now, in the lee of my estranged uncle's funeral, his bequest. The only correspondence by my mother I'd ever seen, postmarks as direct as a line of black-on-white stepping stones toward that mid-1945 void.

I believe I know the change of heart in Wally. More than once as my writing of books went on, I would be back in Montana en route to lore or lingo along some weatherbeaten stretch of road, near Roundup or Ovando or somewhere equally far from his Deep Creek Canyon highway district, and ahead would materialize my uncle's unmistakable profile, two-thirds of him above his belt buckle, flagging me to a stop. The Montana highway department's annual desperate effort to catch up with maintenance, this was, with section men such as Wally temporarily assigned into hard hat and firebright safety vest to hold up traffic while heavy equipment labored on a piece of road. Betterments, such midsummer flurries of repairs were called. So, as wind

kept trying to swat his stop sign out of his grasp, my mother's brother and I would manage to kill time with car-window conversation, Wally gingerly asking how things were in Seattle, how my writing was going, my stiff reciprocal questions about his latest fishing luck, his hunting plans for that autumn. Old bandits gone civil. When dumptrucks and graders at last paused, he would declare, "Okay, she's a go" and flag me on through to the fresh-fixed patch of blacktop. And I can only believe this was how the dying Wally saw his mending action of willing the letters to me, a betterment.

But before any of this, before the gnarl in our family history that brought me back and back to that wintry cemetery, he was a sailor on the Ault.

#

I am feeling pretty good, much better than anytime so far since I've been down here. Charlie is the one that isn't well.

A few of the letters in the packet duffeled home from the Pacific are blurry from water stains, but this first one by my mother to her sailor brother <sup>makes</sup> ~~is~~ all too clear that we have traded predicament in Montana for predicament in Arizona.

My parents and my father's sister Anna and her husband Joe and the five-year-old dirtmover that was me had thrown <sup>what</sup> ~~all~~ we had into a Ford coupe and pinballed our way down through the West a thousand and fifty miles, ration books straining from gas station to gas station along U.S. 89, me most of the time intrepidly shelved crosswise in the coupe's rear window, until we rolled to a halt in Phoenix the night before Thanksgiving of 1944. The next Monday my father and Joe latched on as Aluminum Company of America factory hands and our great sunward swerve settled into Alzona Park orbit.

Unit 119B, where the five of us crammed in, consisted of a few cubicles of brown composition board, bare floors and windows howlingly curtainless until my mother could stand it no longer and hung some dimestore chintz; along with fifty-five hundred other Alzonans, we were war-loyally putting up with packing crate living conditions. But pulling in money hand over fist: my father and Joe drawing fat hourly wages at the aluminum plant--hourly, for guys who counted themselves lucky to make any money by the month in Montana ranchwork. Surely this, the state of Arizona humming and buzzing with defense plants and military bases installed for the war,



this must be the craved new world, the shores of Social Security and the sugar trees of overtime. True, the product of defense work wasn't as indubitable as a sheep or cow. Aluminum screeched through the cutting area where Dad and Joe worked and a half-mile of factory later was shunted out as bomber wings, but all in between was secret. For the 119B batch of us to try to figure out the alchemy, my father smuggled out down his pant leg a whatzit from the wing plant. I remember the thing as about the size of the business end of a branding iron, the approximate shape of a flying V, pale as ice and almost weightless, so light to hold it was a little spooky. "I'll bet ye can't tell me what this is," Dad challenged as he plunked down the contraband piece of metal to wow my mother and Anna and me and for that matter his brother-in-law Joe. Actually he had no more idea than any of the rest of us what the mystifying gizmo was, but it must have done something supportive in the wing of a bombing plane.

Like light, time is both particle and wave. Even as that far winter of our lives traced itself as a single Arizona amplitude of season along the collective date line of memory, simultaneously it was stippling all through us in instants distinct as the burn of sparks. The sunshiny

morning when suddenly the storm of hammering breaks out and does not quit for forty days, as a hundred more units of Alzona Park are flung up.

The time Anna tries to coax me into a trip to the project's store for an ice cream cone and, ice cream passion notwithstanding, I will not budge from my mother, some eddy of apprehension holding me to where I can see her, not lose her from my eyes even a moment. The night of downtown Phoenix after my father and mother have splurged on the double feature of I Love A Soldier and A Night of Adventure. Maybe we were letting our eyeball-loads of Paulette Goddard succumbing to Sonny Tufts settle a little, maybe we were merely gawking at a Phoenix of streets tightpacked with cars nose to tail like an endless elephant review and of sidewalks aswim with soldiers and fliers fifteen thousand strong from the twenty bases in the desert around; we had not seen much of cities, let alone a city in fever. Either case, here the three of us onlook, until my mother happens to send her eyes higher into the night. "Charlie, Ivan. Look how pretty, what they've put up." She points to the top of the Westward Ho Hotel. Dad and I are as dazzled as she at the sign on the peak of the tall building, stupendous jewelry of a quarter-moon with a bright star

up at the apparition,  
 caught on its horn. We peer ~~and peer~~, trying to fathom the perfectly  
 realistic silverghost illumination of the device, until my father ventures,  
 "Ye know, I think that's real." We forge a few feet ahead on the crammed  
 sidewalk to test this and sure enough, moon-and-star go trapezing upward  
 from the hotel roof to hang on sky--the planet Venus and the ripening moon  
 in rare conjunction.

On such a night, the fresh zodiac of Arizona must have seemed just  
 what my parents were looking for after their recent Montana struggles.  
 We all recalled Christmas as a rough spot on the calendar, but now it  
 was healful 1945, February in fact, next thing to high summer in this  
 palmy climate. Lately at Alcoa the management had realized how rare  
 were undraftable colorblind 43-year-olds who knew how to run a crew,  
 and my father came zinging home from the plant newly made a foreman.  
 Before my mother could assemble our promising news off to Wally on his  
 Pacific vessel, though, the ink turned to this:

His stomach bothers him all the time. He is so thin. I'm worried  
to death about Charlie.

Always before, it took something the calibre of getting tromped

beneath a bucking horse to lay Charlie Doig out. But this ulcer deal...  
 how could a gastric squall put my whangleather father on the couch,  
 sick as a poisoned pup?

My father being my father, he tensely urges my mother to relax, will  
 she, about the situation: "Oh-hell-Berneta-I'll-be-okay-in-just-a-little-  
 bit."

There that Sunday as my father tries to sleep away the volcano in  
 his middle, my mother all of a sudden is alone. Anna and Joe are newly  
 gone on their way back to Montana. Busy in the rear yard and childhood,  
 I am obliviously pushing my roads to the gates of Berlin and raining bombs  
 onto Tokyo. Beyond 119B's windows, Alzona Park is entirely what it is  
 built to be, war's warehouse of strangers. By instinct, not to say need,  
 my mother goes to her companion the ink.

Dear Wally--

...Somehow you seem to be a better pal than anyone else...

This first letter in the chain that Wally chose to save must have  
 come aboard the Ault to him like her voice thrown around the world.

Certainly that is what she is trying, quick as the pen will push through



such afraid words as worried to death, such Arizona aloneness that

I have to spill over to someone. Creed of all writers: I have to.

Noon wears past; a missed mealtime, unheard of in our family. Then the half hour and she still writes, does not awaken my father. Dares not. If Charlie doesn't improve... Yet the worst does not happen, the spell of ink wards it off: the cave-in that everyone fears will catch her when alone.

Well, I better calm down, the lines to Wally work themselves wry.

If a censor reads this, he probably won't even let you get it.

Taking to paper with that Sunday of worries about an abruptly ailing husband, my mother knowingly or not put her pen at the turning point in their marriage, their fates. The very reason we had catapulted ourselves to Arizona was because, always before, he was worried to death about her.

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What I know of her is heard in the slow poetry of fact.

The freight of name, Berneta Augusta Maggie Ringer, with its indicative family tension of starting off German and ending up Irish. Within the year after her birth in 1913 in Wisconsin, her parents made the one vaulting move they ever managed together and it was a whopper: in the earliest photo

I have of my mother Berneta after the westward train deposited them in Montana, she is a toddler in a sunbonnet posed with a dead bear.

Ringer family life kept that hue, always someplace rough. Up in the Crazy Mountains, the bear lair, where Tom and Bessie Ringer and this infant daughter somehow survived a first Montana winter in a snow-banked tent while they skidded out lodgepole logs as paltry as their shelter. Then other jounces of job and shanty which finally landed them near the railroad village of Ringling. Off and on for the next thirty years, some shred of the family was in that vicinity to joke about being the Ringers of Ringling. It says loads in the story of my mother that a single syllable was utterly all those coincidental names had in common, for Ringling was derived from the Ringlings of circus baronage.

Was it some obscure Wisconsin connection--the Ringlings of Baraboo origins, the Ringers most lately from Wisconsin Rapids--or just more fate-sly coincidence, that brought about my grandparents' employment by the Ringlings? Maybe Dick Ringling, the circus brothers' nephew who ran the Montana side of things, was entertained by the notion that a millenium ago the families might have been cousins across a European peat bog.

By whatever whim, hired they were, and the Ringers began their milky years at Moss Agate.

Not exactly a ranch, even less a farm, Moss Agate flapped on the map as a loose end of circusman John Ringling's ~~land~~<sup>g</sup> landholdings in the Smith River Valley of south-central Montana. Sagebrushy, high, dry, windy; except for fingernail-sized shards of cloudy agate, the place's only natural resource was railroad tracks. When he bought heavily into the Smith River country John Ringling had built a branch line railroad to the town of White Sulphur Springs and about midway along that twenty-mile set of tracks happened to be Moss Agate, although you would have to guess hard at any of that now. Except for a barn which tipsily refuses to give in to gravity, Moss Agate's buildings are vanished, as is John Ringling's railroad, as is the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul transcontinental railroad which Ringling's line branched onto. At the time, though, around the start of the nineteen twenties, John Ringling and his nephew Dick saw no reason why all those vacant acres shouldn't set them up as dairy kings. They built a vast barn at White Sulphur Springs, loaded up with milk cows, and stuck the leftovers in satellite herds at places



such as Moss Agate with hired milkers such as the Ringers.

There is one particular<sup>ly</sup> bitter refrain of how my mother's family fared at Moss Agate: the cow stanza. From Wisconsin arrived a trainload of the dairy cattle, making a stop at the Moss Agate siding en route to the ballyhooed new biggest-barn-west-of-the-Mississippi-River at White Sulphur Springs. Grandly the Ringers were told to select the excess herd they would run for the Ringlings. The cows turned out to be culls, the old and halt and lame from the dairylots of canny Wisconsin. My grandfather and grandmother tried to choose a boxcarload that looked like the least wretched, and the Ringling honchoes began unloading the new Moss Agate herd for them. Not clear is whether the cows were simply turned loose by the Ringling men or broke away, but in either case cows erupted everywhere, enormous bags and teats swinging from days of not having been milked, moo-moaning the pain of those overfull udders, misery on the hoof stampeding across the sage prairie while away chugged the train to White Sulphur to begin Dick Ringling's fame as a dairy entrepreneur. Even the frantic roundup that Tom and Bessie Ringer were left to perform was not the final indignity; Moss Agate at the time



did not yet provide that woozy barn or even any stanchions, so the herd had to be snubbed down by ~~ropes~~ <sup>lariats</sup>, cow after ornery kicky cow, for milking.

The Ringlings could afford Montana as a hobby; the Ringers were barely clinging to the planet. My grandfather Tom seems to have been one of those natural bachelors who waver into marriage at middle age and never quite catch up with their new condition. My grandmother Bessie, I know for sure, was a born endurer who would drop silently furious at having to take on responsibility beyond her own, then go ahead and shoulder every last least bit of it. Certainly over time their marriage became a bone-and-gristle affair that matched the Moss Agate country they were caught in. Nonetheless, child after child after child: Paul, then Bud, then Wally. My mother had reached five years old when the first of this brother pack came along, so she was steadily separate by a span or two of growing-up; veteran scholar at the one-room schoolhouse by the time the boys had to trudge into the first grade, willowing toward womanhood while they still mawked around flinging rocks at magpies. The shaping separateness of Berneta within the Ringer family, however, did not spring

simply from being the eldest child and the only daughter. No, nothing that mere. Another knotting rhythm of fact: she slept always with three pillows propping her up, angle akin to a hospital bed, so that she could breathe past the asthma.

To this day, people will wince when they try to tell me of asthma's torture of my mother. Most often a midnight disorder, sabotage of sleep and dream that had just decently begun, the attack would choke her awake, simultaneously the blue narcotic of carbon dioxide buildup bringing on faintness, a suffocating fatigue. At once she had to fight to sit up and wheeze, her eyes large with concentration on the cost of air, hunching into herself to ride out the faltering lungwork. In and out, the raw battlesound of debilitation and effort sawed away at her. Then worse: a marathon of coughing so hard it bruised you to hear. The insidious breath shortage could go on for hours. Medication, inhalers, alleviation of any true sort waited a generation or so into the future. When my grandparents stared down into a Wisconsin cradle and for once agreed with each other that they had to take this smothering child to the drier air of the West, they gave her survival but not ease.

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She first comes to me, naturally, by pen. There are many disadvantages to farming in some parts of Montana... The earliest item from her own hand is a grade school booklet she made about Montana, report of a forthright rural child. Some times there is alkali ground and in other places gumbo soil and then the chinook winds and grasshoppers and all different kinds of insects and some times not enough rainfall. Language is the treasury of the poor, and Berneta minted more than her share even in the busy-tongued Ringer family--fee-fee was her saying of barefoot, anything spooky brought on not the willies but the jimjams, and she it was who coined for the family the marvelous eartrick merseys for Moss Agate's Jersey-cows-in-need-of-mercy. Phrases were dressed up for fun, any dark cloud commencing to look like rain, any fancy angler categorized as having his face hung out as a fisherman. Emphasis had a vocabulary all its own in this youngster. Riding her horse as fast as it could be made to go was full slam. Her father patching the Moss Agate roof, which always needed it to the utmost, was Papa tarring the life out of it. When a chance at something, such as a trip to town, was seized upon,



it was glommed on to. Hard luck, though, was a bum go.

And so I wonder. Do I meet my own mother, young, in the experiences of Western women who endured a land short of everything but their own capacities? Is her favorite school subject of Latin--the gravitas of declensions as a refuge, as it was for me--prefigured in well-spoken Kathryn Donovan, teacher of all eight grades at the sagebrush-surrounded Moss Agate school? Did she take to heart, sometime when she visited the Norwegian family tucked over the hill from Moss Agate, gaunt Mary Brekke's immigrant anthem of "You better learn!" that marched Brekke child after child into educated good citizenship? Such civic women are caryatids of so much of that hard Montana past, they carry the sky. Yet I find it not enough to simply count her into their company. Too many pictures of this familiar-faced stranger say she was dangerously more complicated than that, she cannot be sculpted from sugar.

Instead: from photo after photo with shabby Moss Agate or marginal Ringling in the background, Berneta Ringer assembles herself as someone not growing out of childhood but simply flinging it off, refusing to lose time to the illness in herself. Sick of being sick, she'd surely have

said it, time and again she palls with a crowd of cowboy hats and Sunday frocks in the pose of a person out and launched in life--but when I interrogate time and place, I realize I am looking at five feet of uncorked teenager. Some dreams, mostly of the daylight sort, we are able to aim; the motion of Berneta's mind often was horseback, her saddle-straddling generation finding its freedom in the ride to Saturday night dances and two- or three-day Fourth of July rodeos. Right there, perhaps, is where the female youngsters of the Twenties parted from the generation of their mothers, in riding astride to those dances with a party dress tied behind the saddle; or as in Berneta's case in the photo taken when she can have been barely fifteen, mounting a rodeo cowboy's horse in her flapper dress and cloche hat, her high heels flagrantly snug in the stirrups.

This teenage Berneta, then, has the strange independence of a comet, a pushed pitch of existence that makes her seem always beyond her numerical age. In every camera-caught mood, wide-set eyes soft but with a minimum of illusions: on the verge of pretty but perfectly well aware she's never going to get there past the inherited broad nose. Wally's face was a borrowed coin of hers, with that enlivened best-friend quality from the

central slight overbite which parted the lips as if perpetually interested and about to ask. But her query ~~to live~~<sup>to</sup> breathes up from the album page not as Wally's romping ready to go? but the more urgent how do I keep life from being a bum go? What comes out most of all, whether the camera catches her as an inexplicable pixie in a peaked cap or gussied up as a very passable flapper, is that whenever she had enough oxygen, Berneta burned bright.

The most haunting photograph I possess of my mother is a tableau of her on horseback, beneath a wall of rock across the entire sky behind her. This is not Moss Agate but higher bolder country, and she has costumed herself up to it to the best of her capacity. She wears bib overalls, a high-crowned cowgirl hat, and leather chaps with MONTANA spelled out in fancy rivets down the leg-length and a riveted heart with initials in it putting period to the tidings. The mountain West as a stone rainbow, a girl-turning-woman poised beneath it.

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Enter the Doigs, at a gallop.

Once, on a government questionnaire which asked a listing of

"racial groups within community," back from the Doigs' end of the county sailed the laconic enumeration, "Mostly Scotch." The country out there toward Sixteemile Creek even looked that way, Highlandish, intemperate. Certainly the Doigs inhabited it in clan quantity: six brothers and a sister, with aunts and uncles and cousins and double cousins up every coulee. Above the basin in the Big Belt Mountains where the family homestead-stretched-into-a-ranch was located sat a tilted crown of rimrock called Wall Mountain, and my father and the other five Doig boys honed themselves slick against that hard horizon. A generation after the steamship crossed the Atlantic, they spoke with a Dundee burr and behaved like test pilots.

A dance, of course, did the trick; began the blinding need of my mother and <sup>my</sup> father for each other. When the Saturday night corps of Claude and Jim and Angus and Red and Ed and Charlie Doig hit a dance



more:  
dialogue  
asap



at the rail villages of Ringling or Sixteen or any of the rural schoolhouses between, the hall at once colored up into a plaid of bandannaed gallantry and hooty mischief--wherever you glanced, the Doig boys would be taking turns doing the schottische with their widowed mother and jigging up a storm with their girlfriends, not to mention wickedly auditing their sister Anna's potential beaus whether or not she wanted them audited. Amid this whirl of tartan cowboys, the one to watch is the shortest and dancingest, a goodlooking jigger of a man built on a taper down from a wide wedge of shoulders to wiry tireless legs. There at the bottom, newbought Levis are always a mile too long for Charlie Doig but he rolls them up into stovepipe cuffs, as if defiantly declaring he fills out a pair of pants in every way that really counts. The rhythm of his life is the chancy work of ranches, which began in bronc riding that left him half dead a couple of times and which he has persevered past to shoulder into respect as a foreman of crews, and Saturday night entitles him to cut loose on a hall floor with slickum on it. Charlie in his habits is the fundamental denominator of the Doig boys, these saddle scamps who also have a reputation for working like blazes. Customarily after these rural nightfuls of music

and other intoxicants, people wobble home for too few hours' sleep before groaning up to milk the cow or feed the ~~band of~~<sup>J</sup> sheep or other dismally looming chores. But the Doig boys, whatever their state, fly at the chores the minute they reach home and sleep uninterrupted after.

The double energy it takes to be a practical thrower of flings is concentrated here in Charlie, built like a brimming shotglass. This time, this Saturday night of fling, when the square-dance caller chants out to the gents dosiedoe, and a little more doe--well, there stands Berneta.

Promisingly full of bad intentions, my tuned-up father must have been just what my mother was trying to figure out how to order. Boundaries of dream take human shape, there when our bodies begin their warm imagining. But beyond the welcoming geography of the first touch of each other in the small of the back as the two of them danced together in that first night of promenade, stood twenty horseback miles between the Doig place and Moss Agate. My father being my father, he simply made up his mind to treat that as virtually next door. Berneta Ringer and her newly given fountain pen reciprocated. My grandmother would tell me decades later, still

more than a little exasperated at the fact, that she could never set foot off Moss Agate without having to mail another batch of Berneta's letters to Charlie Doig. "If that's who she wanted, I couldn't do any other."

So. There was ink, ink, ink then too, trying to speak the moments of my parents' earlier wartime, the battle toward marriage. (My mother's youngness and tricky health were in the way, my father's sense of obligation at the struggling Doig property was in the way, everybody's finances, or dearth of, were in the way.) The box curtains of the mind: we never fully imagine, let alone believe <sup>in,</sup> what was said to one another by those impossible beings, our parents before they were our parents. Yet I overhear enough in her later letters, Wally's packet, for an educated guess that those Moss Agate pages crackled with diagnosis of her and my father and those they knew. How soft-voiced she was, I am always told; so the snow angel outline everyone has given me of my mother luckily takes a devilish ~~livelier~~ edge when she puts on paper for Wally such gossip as the jam Ethel Mason Lowry got herself in. Married to 3 soldiers and no divorces, & getting allotments from all three. She was doing alright until the



F.B.I. caught up with her. Entire plot of a novel tattled there, I note with professional admiration. What Berneta found to say by mail to her cowboy suitor, my father, surely had similar salt in the tenderness.

He gave back the tense hum of a wire in the wind. Charlie Doig coming courting sang several lives at once, a number of them contradictions. In that dependable square-lined face it could be read that there was much inward about him, a tendency to muse, dwell on things; and yet as the saying was, you could tell a lot about a guy by the way he wore his hat and Charlie always wore his cocked. A delicious talker when he wasn't busy, but he was busy all the time too. Temper like a hot spur, yet with plenty of knack to laugh at himself. Bantam-legged as he was, he practically ran in search of work, forever whanging away at more than one job at a time, in lambing or calving or haying on the valley's big ranches and meanwhile pitching in with the other Doig brothers to try to make a go of the family livestock holdings at Wall Mountain, during Montana's preview of the Depression. Such exertions sometimes tripped across each other, as when Berneta threw a birthday party for him and he was detoured by a bronc that broke his collarbone. "I could've

sent the horse," she was notified by him from the hospital, "he was healthy enough." It didn't matter then to my adoring mother-to-be, but how could a man that whimsical be so high-strung, how could a man so high-strung be so full of laughing? In and out of his share of Saturday night flirtations, this lively veteran singleton might have been counted on to kiss and move on. But he contradicted contradictions. From that first night of dancing in Ringling, my father's attachment to the half-frail half-vital young woman at Moss Agate flamed so long and strong that in the end it must be asked if his, too, didn't constitute an incurable condition.

# —

The brusque sagebrush would slap at your stirrups, polishing the leather at the bottoms of your chaps, if you rode their country yet today.

Sage like a dwarf orchard, climbing with the land as the valley around Moss Agate swells west into ridges, then cascades toward Sixteenmile Creek in more and more hills, a siege of hills.

Except where dominated by Wall Mountain and Grass Mountain, the higher horizon now begins to repeat those tough anonymous foothills

in summits that bulge up one after another in timbered sameness.

This Sixteen country is a cluttered back corner of the West where the quirky Big Belt Mountains are overshadowed by the grander Bridger range immediately to the south. From the air over the Big Belts, the nature of their oddly isolated sprawl becomes evident. Not particularly lofty, not especially treacherous in skyline, not much noticed in history except for the long-ago goldstrike at Confederate Gulch, this wad of unfamous mountains nonetheless stands in the way of everything major around them. They haze the Missouri River unexpectedly northwest from its headwaters for about ninety miles before the flow can find a passage around their stubborn barrier and down the eastern slope of the continent. By one manner of geologic reckoning, the main range of the Rocky Mountains ends, a little ignominiously, east of Townsend where the mudstone and limestone perimeters of the Big Belts begin. Across on the Smith River Valley side of the Big Belt range, the steady plains of mid-Montana receive a rude bump upward to a valley-floor elevation of 5,280 feet. Goblin canyons chop in and out of the sixty-five-mile frontage of the



Big Belts, but a scant two give any route through: Deep Creek Canyon where the highway has been threaded between snowcatching cliffs, and the Sixteen Canyon, graveyard of railroad ventures.

Not immediately obvious territory to find delight in. Yet my parents' honeymoon summer on Grass Mountain wed them to this particular body of earth.

The two of them had decided to defy the Depression's laws of gravity, and in 1934, when she was twenty and he thirty-three, they married and went herding sheep on Grassy.

Again according to our family diarist, the Brownie box camera, that set of months agreed with Charlie and Berneta Doig, an uncomplicated shirtsleeves-rolled-up summertime of following the sheep--my mother slender as filament, my father jauntily at home at timberline. Grass Mountain itself, a pleasant upsidedownland with timber at its base and meadows across its summit, gave my parents elevation of more than one kind. Their summer on Grassy was a crest of the rising and falling seasonal rhythm that they were now to follow through life together in Montana.

By then my father had tugged himself up by the ropes of his muscles and the pulleys of his mind to where he could command a season, generally summer. This took some doing, given where he had to start from. Pieces of the past stay on as pieces of us, do they? My father came out of the candlelight of this century, born in the spring of 1901 back there on the homestead beneath Wall Mountain. More than that, born on the losing side of America's second civil war, the one out west where dollars were the big battalions. That Western Civil War of Incorporation, the businesslike name given it by its leading historian, powerfully pitted financial capital and government against those who occupied land or jobs in inconvenient unconsolidated fashion. Indian tribes and Hispanos: defeated onto reservations and into poverty's enclaves. Miners, loggers and other industrial working stiff: defeated in strikes and resistance to technological dangers. Homesteaders, small farmers, backpocket ranchers: defeated from insufficient acres. The lariat proletariat, where my grandparents and parents started out, was done in by mechanization, ending up in town jobs or none. As the Doig place and all other smallholdings in the Sixteen country gradually folded their colors, my father by necessity



worked his way out and while he was at it, up. In the June to September season that was the heart of Montana ranching, he could take a herd of cattle or a band of sheep into the mountains for their owner and bring them into the shipping pen fat and profitable, or he could just as ~~dependably~~ <sup>deftly</sup> oversee other ranch hands as a camp tender or foreman, or he could even hire a crew of his own on a haying contract ~~from~~ a rancher glad enough to pay him by the ton to take care of the whole long aggravating job of putting up hay. There were summers when he did two out of the three, always on the go under his work-stained Stetson and behind the jaw he jutted at the horizon.

Up only went so far, though. Montana's vast wheel of seasons always had a flat, skewed side--the biggest side--and that was winter. You could thud pretty hard in autumn <sup>, too,</sup> and before spring managed to definitely get on track ~~to~~ For year-round ranching, even a go-getter needed an extensive piece of inherited land or a hefty family wallet or a father-in-law with deep pockets. None of which Charlie Doig had been put on this earth with, and he well knew it. "As the fellow says," I hear his burr coming, "where's all the wherewithal?"

So, a summer on a mountain that shouted its name in grass, with a bride both new and long-awaited at his side, must have made a high season indeed for my father. No question about it for my mother, either. I know--have seen for myself in the years beyond hers--how the elevation there on Grassy opens up the view of the <sup>closed-away</sup> Sixteen country, diminishes the relentless sage and the raw shale cutbanks and the pinched gulches where failed homesteads are pocketed away, and takes the eye instead toward the neighboring and more generous Bridger Mountains; and just before the Bridgers, the one cocky tilt in the nondescript Big Belts, Wall Mountain. The imagination is easily led down past Wall Mountain's inclined rimrock to the canyon of Sixteenmile Creek, as ornery for its size as any chasm anywhere. The first railroad that was squeezed through there required fifty-eight bridges in eighteen miles. Enough floods and avalanches, plus an earthquake or two, and the Sixteen Canyon spat out both that first railroad and the subsequent Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul transcontinental line. Not a rail, not a tie, is left on the scar of roadbed, but the rattlesnakes that the railroad maintenance men hung on the right-of-way fence as sarcastic trophies are back in force. I always have a feeling,

along those lines, about this original America of the Doigs, this Sixteen country and these Big Belt Mountains: that in one moment the look of the land strongly stops you in your tracks, and in the next there is something ominous around your ankles. We were expected to grow used to it, I suppose, as Scotch endurers, as cocklebur American highlanders. But what am I to make of my mother's embrace of all this? Unlike me, unlike my father, she was not born into this chancy Sixteen country. She came as a convert. For, of course, that proudest photo of her, rhinestone cowgirl beneath the stone rainbow, that photo was taken at Wall Mountain, summit of the Sixteen country.

After their 1934 summer of herding, my parents went on into a skein of ranch jobs together, my mother cooking for whatever crew my father was running. But ranch wages were always thin coin. Settled down now, comparatively, into marriage, my father felt he had to turn his hand to operating a place "on shares," which was to say running somebody's ranch for them for a cut of each year's profit. The center years of my parents' story together come now at the hem of Grass Mountain, the first years of World



War Two when the pair of them took the Faulkner Creek ranch on shares.

#

A scrape of road pierced through that sagebrush of the Sixteen country toward Wall Mountain until suddenly making a veer toward Grassy, and the Faulkner Creek drainage.

Not paying much attention to the rest of the world or each other, the ornery mountains of the Big Belts did hold pockets of ranchcraft for people as acquainted with work as my parents were. For better or worse, a place such as Faulkner Creek met them on its own clear terms. A tidy sum of rangeland without being elbowy about it, with plump hayfields and the creek almost at the front door, <sup>that</sup> ~~the~~ ranch in a majority of ways represented what the Doig homestead could only ever be the kernel of or the Moss Agate tenancy a gaunt ghost of. A do-it-yourself expanse, the West was supposed to be and rarely is. The makings were there at Faulkner Creek, if you were nimble enough and canny enough and stubborn enough and enough other enoughts, to profitably handle a thousand sheep or a couple hundred cattle year in and year out. My parents <sup>filled</sup> ~~fit~~ the bill. The Sixteen country was their business address, they knew it like Baruch did Wall Street.



So they also knew about the isolation, the thirty miles to town and most of that simply to reach a paved road, which they were going to have to put up with at Faulkner Creek. Polarly remote a couple of seasons of the year, it was the kind of ranch, in my mother and father's saying for it, where you had to be married to the place. Two other ranches lay hidden even farther down the gulches of Sixteen Creek and Battle Creek, but otherwise weather was the only neighbor. Clouds walking the ridgelines, hurried by chilly wind. Rain, rare as it was, slickening the road as quick as it lit. And if the winter was a tough one--they always were--my father fed hay on the road so that as the sheep ate, they packed down the snow and improved the chance of getting out to the hospital at Townsend when one of my mother's hardest asthma attacks hit.

I will always have to wonder whether some of the distances in me come from starting life there beside Faulkner Creek. My parents had greatly hoped for twins, but instead got the mixture that was me. Maybe the medical stricture that one pregnancy was plenty for my mother to risk, that after I eventuated into the picture in the summer of 1939 there were going to be no sisters or brothers for me, made my parents allow me into the adult doings of the ranch. As far back as memory will take me,

I liked that; honorary membership with the grownups, admittance to their talk. It does give you the habit from early on, though, of standing back and prowling with your ears.

Definitely I was doted on. My mother's photo album contains a flurry of my uncles holding me atop horses until, probably when I was between three and four years old, there I sit in the worldly saddle by myself and handle the reins as if I know what I'm doing. By then <sup>↑</sup>too <sup>↑</sup>World War Two and its songs on the radio had come, and I was the combination of kid who could listen to <sup>doats</sup> mairzy ~~doat~~ and dozy doats, and little lambsie divy, and staidly tell you, sure, everybody knows mares eat oats and a doe could too, and lambs would take to ivy; then go outside and disappear into fathoms of imagination the rest of the day. Touchy and thorough, doctrinaire and dreamy, healthy as a moose calf, I seem to have sailed through the Faulkner Creek years with my adults giving to me generously from their days. Words on a page became clear to me there, long before school; somebody in the revolving cast of busy parents and young Ringer uncles hired to do the ranch chores and a visiting grandmother checking up on us from Moss Agate, one or another of those had to have been steadily reading to me. My immersion into print, the time indoors with books and a voice willing

to teach me all the words, surely I owe to that ranch's long winters.

Winter also brought out the trapper, to be watched from our kitchen window in the snow-roofed ranch house, tending the trapline on Faulkner Creek.

The bundled figure sieves in and out of the creekside willows, a dead jackrabbit in hand for bait. Gray to catch white, for weasels in their ~~prime~~ snowy winter coat are the quarry, their pelts fetching a fancy price from the fur buyer in Helena.

The weasels hunt along the creek in invisibility against the snow, terror to grouse and mice, or dart up to the ranch buildings, murder in the chickenhouse; their sylph bodies are such ferocious little combustion tubes that they have to eat with feverish frequency to live. Wherever the double dots of weasel tracks indicate, the trapper sets a small contraption of jaws and trigger and neatly baits it with a bloody morsel of rabbit. Ritual as old as any tribe--though these traps are springsteel, bought from a catalogue--but every trapper possesses a trademark and this one distinctively takes the trouble to bend a bow of branch in attachment to each trap. When the animal sets off the trap, the branch will yank the entire apparatus up into the cold air and the weasel will



die a quicker, less contorted death.

One after another the traps are attended to this way, an even dozen in all. The trapsetting impulse evidently is the same as in catching fish, the snarer hates to quit on an odd number.

Not nearly all the visited traps hold weasels this day but enough do, each frozen ermine form dropped in careful triumph into the gunnysack at the trapper's waist. At last, from the end of the trapline the figure turns back up the creek, again toward the ranch house with the meringue of snow on its roof. The trapper is my mother.

# —

Her sharp-aired victories over asthma, an hour at a time there on her trapline while my father sat sentinel at the kitchen window, were one calendar of the Faulkner Creek years. Another was my father's rhythm of mastering the ranch. The livestock in his canny rotation of pastures, the hayfields encouraged by his irrigating shovel, a ranch hand or two deployed at fence-fixing or other upkeep, all responded to the zip he brought to the place. Faulkner Creek's wicked road showed a bright side here; the ranch owner from Helena didn't chance out to the place very often, and good thing that he didn't. My father could run something as everyday



as a ranch fine and dandy. What he refused to regulate was his lifelong opinion of bosses. "Can ye imagine that Helena scissorbill wanting me to put the upper field into alfalfa? The sheep'd get into that and bloat to death until Hell couldn't hold them. A five-year-old kid--Ivan here-- knows better than that."

One more mark of my parents' aiming-upward-but-allegiant-in-other-directions was the Ford. Our snappy sky blue 1940 coupe, fat-fendered and long-hooded, a good two-thirds of the car prowling ahead of us as we fought the Faulkner Creek road. What the four of us, my mother and father and I and the Ford, are most remembered for is the ritual of washing before a funeral. Parked in the middle of a creek crossing, we would peel off our shoes and socks, my father and I would roll up our pants legs and my mother would safety-pin her dress into a culotte and out we would step into the pebbled water. I was given a rag and granted the hubcaps to wash, the steel circles like four cleansed moons rising from the creekwater. My father and mother went to work on the greater grit, mud caked on the fenders, bug splatters on the hood, the Ford gradually but dependably coming clean under tossed bucketsful of rinse. Ready now

for the drive behind the hearse, we headed on into White Sulphur Springs, where the deceased actually do go a last mile from town out to the cemetery. The men who were to be buried, for they almost always were men, were the hired hands of the Big Belt country who had worked with my parents at haying, lambing, calving--people who drew no cortege while they were alive. People with a wire down somewhere in their lives, a lack of capacity to work for themselves, an emigration into an America they never managed to savvy nor to let go of, many with a puppy-helplessness when it came to alcohol, some with sour tempers and bent minds; mateless. At any of these funerals, my mother most likely would be the only woman there. Neither my mother nor my father could have said so in words, but in that wiping away of the mud and dust from the Ford coupe's fenders and flanks--that handling of the country--was a last chore to mark those other chore-filled lives.

Faulkner Creek was no closer to Eden than it was anywhere else, but by every family fragment of that time and place my parents seemed to be in their element. Camera shots again say so, most of all in the trophy pictures from the war with the coyotes.

Sunny day, icicles starting to shrink upward to the log eaves of the ranch house. Everybody has paraded around the corner of the house to take a pose with the vanquished coyotes.

My mother, especially pert in one of her striped housedresses and only a short jacket.

My visiting grandmother even hardier, out there in apron and bare arms.

My mother's second youngest brother Bud on hand as our hired man, in dutiful earflap cap.

Then my father and his rifle and me.

Since I, little Mr. Personality in a brass-button snowsuit, appear to be not quite a three-year-old, the photo likely dates from near the end of the winter of 1941-42. This scene speaks in several ways. First of all, the extraordinary statement of the coyotes around and above my father and me as we pose, twenty-eight of them in simultaneous leap of death up the log wall where their pelts are strung. Winterlong they had been picked off, for the safety of the sheep and the sake of bounty, as they loped the open ridges above Faulkner Creek; ideal coyote country,

but unluckily for them, also ideal coyote-hunting country for somebody who could shoot like my father. Next, it always comes as a pleasant shock, how on top of life my father looks in this picture. Forty years and jobs after his start on the doomed Wall Mountain homestead, bounty of all kinds seems to be finding him at last. Posed there, he is in command not just of one season a year but a prospering ranch, he knows of at least twenty-eight coyotes who will give his sheep no further trouble, he has a son and heir, his coveted wife is taking the photo of this moment, a winter-ending chinook has arrived with this sun--a day of thaw, truly.

#

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My own farthest pattern of memory is the Faulkner Creek ranch's generator--the light plant, we called the after-dark engine, throbbing diesel factory of watts--as it hammered combustion into the glow of kitchen and living room bulbs. The light plant was used sparingly, like sparks put to tinder when the cave most needed dazzle; when company dropped in, say. And so the yammer of it in the night-edge of my mind must be from a few of my recalcitrant bedtimes, boy determined not to waste awakeness while luscious light was being made.



But why that diesel monotony of echo?

Why not the toss of wind in the restless pine that overleaned the ranch house, or a coyote's night-owning anthem?

Why persistently hear, even now in the rhythms of my writing keys working, the puh puh puh labor of that light plant?

Because in every way, this was the pulse of power coming into our rural existence. Not simply the tireless stutter of electrical generation but the sound of history turning. We had only a diesel tidbit of it there at Faulkner Creek and my parents were of the relic world of muscle-driven tasks, yet, like passersby magnetized out of our customary



path, power now made its pull on us. One of the great givens of World War Two manufacture was that power could kettle an ore called bauxite into bomberskin called aluminum.

#

Out of those particles, those waves, this first deliberate dream.

The heavy rain on Christmas Eve of 1944 is contradicting my mother's notion of what both Christmas and Phoenix ought to be. She is trying to work the mood to death, baking an army of cookies and rapidly wrapping Anna and Joe's presents (filmy kerchief for her, carton of cigarettes for him) while they're out visiting friends they know from Montana, and naturally the weather is keeping me inside, which is to say in her hair, until she puts me to crayoning a festive message to my grandmother. I come up with Merry Christmas Grandma in the countless fonts of my printed handwriting and devote the rest of the page to dive-bombers blowing up everything in sight.

The outside door rattles open, solving the whereabouts of my father, late from the aluminum plant this night of all nights. But his inevitable approximate whistling of "The Squaws Along the Yukon" doesn't follow on in to the front room. All of a sudden he is in the kitchen with my mother

and me, checking us over with his sheepcounting look even though we can only tally up to two. Puts his lunchbox down. Goes to the silverware drawer, takes out a tableknife, heads back to the front room where he jams the blade into the crack under the doorway casing so that the knife snugs the door unopenable. (Whatever this is about, Anna and Joe are in for a surprise when they come home and try to get in.) He zips back into the kitchen, pours himself a cup from the constant coffee pot and begins his news ever so casually, as he likes to do.

"Did ye happen to hear?"

I have only one fact in me--that it's about to be Christmas--and my mother but two--that it's about to be Christmas and we are an interplanetary distance from anybody and anywhere we know--and so my father's bulletin arrives spectacularly fresh. Leave it to him, he has pried it out of one of the aluminum plant gate guards who were giving everybody a going-over at <sup>tonight's</sup> ~~the~~ change of shifts, making the entire workgang shuffle through in single-file so their security badges could be hawkishly inspected.

"A whole hell of a bunch of German prisoners got away," is the

report my father brings. The great breakout at the Papago Park prisoner of war camp had been engineered by U-boat men, tunnel-visioned in the most effective sense: somehow they dug through a couple of feet of hardpan a day for the past three months, and tonight twenty-five of them have moled out to freedom, under the cover of ruckus set up by their comrades. "They're watching for the buggers everywhere."

Including, now, 119B.

"What's next in the stampede," murmurs my mother, simply in commentary of German POWs added to the rest of the deluge out there. Tonight she wouldn't be surprised if the moon itself came squashing down on Phoenix.

Meanwhile I am scared, flabbergasted, and inspired. A tunnel! A foxhole is nothing compared to that, tomorrow will not be too soon for me to start my sandhog future beneath Alzona Park.

Huns at the door of Phoenix don't faze my father, at least with a caseknife jamming that door. He kids my mother about the Gluns and Zettels on her side of the family, "Just remember, <sup>Berneta,</sup> if the MPs come around here you're not related to those sauerkraut cousins of yours back in Wisconsin."



What? What? I'd done my teething on the war, could never remember when the grown-ups were not inveighing against the Japs and the Krauts.

And now--

"Mama? Are we Germans?"

My mother shoots my father a now-look-what-you've-started look.

"We're pedigreed Scotch," he assures me, but can't resist adding: "Even you and Mama--ye both caught it from me."

I am determined to get this matter of breed straight. "How did we catch it?"

My father gives the handsome jaunty grin off the Grass Mountain photographs. "It got pretty contagious there for a while."

Naturally I want to follow up on that, but my mother, business to do with cookies and wrapping paper, pokes another look at my father.

"Do you figure you're about done stirring him up?"

"I guess maybe so," he acknowledges as he studies her. "Now what can I do about you?" All at once he says, so soberly it breaks on the air as a kind of plea:

"Merry damn Christmas, Berneta."

Realization lifts her upper lip in the middle, her index of surprise.

She honestly hasn't known how much her mood has been showing. She is at a loss. "Charlie, I only--"

She hunches her shoulders a little, smallest shrug, but on it ride all the distances of this Christmas. Not only is my mother ten hundred miles separate from her own mother and father, they have separated from each other--my grandmother is cooking on a ranch in another part of Montana from Moss Agate and my grandfather is in parts unknown. Bounced like dice against the war's longitudes and latitudes, Wally is somewhere in the Pacific, my Army uncle Paul is in Australia, here we are in aluminized Arizonan Alzona. This sunward leap of ours has been my father's doing, for my mother's sake. More and more spooked by her asthma battles in the isolation of the Faulkner Creek ranch, he flung the place away, piloted us out of Montana on war-bald tires and waning ration books, recast himself from ranchman into aluminum worker, he has desperately done what he thought there was to do, made the move to Arizona for the sake of health. For her sake. But he can see the <sup>immense</sup> ~~great~~ journey unraveling here on the snag of Christmas, homesickness, out-of-placeness, and now

he is looking the plea to her, everything gathered in his eyes pulling the square lines of his face tight.

Fuss about her health has always put a crowbar in my mother's spine and it does again now. She straightens up as if shedding this hard year. She tells my father all the truth she has at the moment.

"I'll try to get over this, Charlie."

She takes a breath as big as she is, not an asthma gasp but just fuel for what she needs to put across to him about her isolation amid a cityful of strangers, how she misses everything about Montana there is to miss.


"It's going to take some trying," she lets him know.

Invisible in plain sight at the kitchen table, crayoned combat forgotten on the tablet paper in front of me, I watch back and forth at these gods of my world in their confusion.

At last my father nods to my mother and says as though something has been settled: "That's all we can any of us do, Berneta, is try."

# —————

The escaped Germans do not devour us in our Christmas Eve beds---  
hightailing it to nonbelligerent Mexico seems more what they had in mind---

and so we climb out to the day itself and its presents. Up out of the  
fiber of that boy who became me, can't my Christmas gift prospects be  
readily dreamed? Tricycle? Toy truck? Wicked new shovel? No, beyond  
any of those. 



Threadbare Alzona Park presented an actual item more magical than imagined ones can ever be. From out beyond the world's possibilities, I have been given--

The Ault.

Blessed conspiracy of Wally and my mother, this; he by mailing it in time and she by sneaking the gift wrapping onto this toy replica of his ship. Replica does not say it, really, because my Ault was tubby, basic--a flatiron-sized vessel with a block of superstructure and a single droll dowel of cannon poking out, more like a Civil War ironclad than anything actually asteam in the United States Navy in 1944; but painted a perfect Navy gravy gray, and there on the bow in thrilling authentication, the black lettering SS Ault. Wally would have had to go to the dictionary for avuncular, but he managed to give me a most benevolently uncle-like warship.

Naturally the grownups have wasted Christmas on each other by giving dry old functional things back and forth, so while Anna and Joe and Dad and even my mother try to have what they think is a good time, my Ault and I voyage 119B all that day, past Gibaltars of chair legs, through

the straits of doorways to the bays of beds. (All December the logbook of the actual Ault has been repeating an endless intonation--0440 Commenced zigzagging. 0635 Ceased zigzagging. 0645 Resumed zigzagging--as the newly commissioned destroyer practiced the crazystitch that would advance day by day from Pearl Harbor to Tokyo Bay.) We make frequent weather reconnaissances to a window, for my mother has promised that if the rain ever stops we can breast the moistures of Arizona outside.

All the while, all this holiday, although I am not to know so until the letters return forty-two years later, my parents and I and Arizona are on Wally's mind. Along with my gift ship arrived his inquiry to my mother whether she thinks he would have any prospects where we are, after the war; are there flour mills and feed stores where he might <sup>land</sup> ~~get~~ a trucking job?

Through us, like a signal tremor along a web strand, Phoenix is making itself felt even into the most distant Pacific. You can feel the growth thrust gathering (it undoubtedly is what my mother has been feeling), the postwar land rush coming when you can throw a doorknob on this desert and a dozen houses will sprout.

Yet my mother, glad as she would have been to have him on hand in our future, does not sing back what her favorite brother wants to hear.

# As she was with my father, she will be doggedly honest with Wally, sending back to him that she really can't be sure how his prospects would be here where I am dreamily Aulting and where my father has brought our hopes.

# There is plenty of Phoenix I haven't seen, she will write with pointblank neutrality.

# ———

Our story, my mother's, my father's, mine, would seem to need no help from imagination to predict us onward from that 1944 Christmas. Americans of our time lived some version of it by the hundreds of thousands, ultimate millions, as Phoenix's population greatened beyond those of Boston, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Milwaukee, beyond that of entire states such as Montana, as America's center of gravity avalanched south to the Sunbelt. The picture of us-to-be is virtually automatic. My father doctors his way out of the ulcer siege, my mother's asthma stays subdued and her homesickness begins to ebb, we continue on as self-draftees in the sunward march of America. Sheepkeepers no more, now we be bombermakers.

Naturalized Alzonans, no more or less ill-fitted for project living and eventual suburbs than any other defense work importees. As this last war winter drew down toward all that was going to burgeon beyond, we were right there at hand, readymade, to install ourselves into the metropolis future that was Phoenix. Except we didn't.





Dear Wally--

I always thought a desert is just nothing, but have changed

my mind.

We two, my mother and I, navigate among the cacti. The road from the cabin threads in and out of any number of identical pale braids of wheel tracks, but we have memorized strategic saguaros, arms uplifted like green traffic policemen, at the turns we need to make. Behind the steering wheel of the Ford my mother keeps watch on the cloud-puffy March sky as much as she does our cactus landmarks. She hates bad roads (and has spent what seems like her whole life on them) but at least these of the desert are more sand than mud.

The odometer's little miles slowly go, three, seven, then ten and here is town, palm-sprigged Wickenburg. My mother believes she was not born to parallel-park, so she pulls around to a side street where the Ford can be nosed in and maybe escape notice.

On the round of town chores I tag along long-lipped at her side. First to the post office, with her letters ready to Wally (We packed up Anna and came to Wickenburg Mon. afternoon), to my grandmother, to ~~Ann~~ and Joe and others in Montana. As ever, we don't receive quite as many as she sends.

No sooner are we onto the street again than I halt her with my news.

"Can you wait," she hypothesizes as parents always strangely do in public, "or do you have to go real bad?"

Crucially bad, I assure her.

My mother does not point out that I could have taken care of this when I had the entire Arizona desert to do it in, although she looks as if she might like to. We quickmarch to the street intersection, where she scans unfamiliar downtown Wickenburg. The sign she seeks does not display a bucking horse on a rampage the way it would in Montana, but