Ivan Doig

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26 Aug. '92

Dear Marsh--

In your boundless capacity of shepherding the Doigs through the what-ifs of life, here's a copy of my Heart Earth manuscript for safekeeping until I deliver, and Macmillan contractually accepts, the utterly final draft in early '93.

There's a more up-to-date "working draft" of Heart Earth in the light-blue ring binder labeled simply HEART EARTH, standing at the end of my desk to the left of my typewriter. That version has my penciled-in rewrite intentions, some sheafs of pages to be considered for insertion, and so on. If something occurs so that I'm unable to continue the revising and polishing of the manuscript, and Carol similarly is unable to oversee the completion process, please arrange for the poet Linda Bierds to complete the work as she sees fit. Linda has read and commented on the first 4 chapters of the manuscript, and can divine my writing intentions probably better than anyone else could. She is to be free to use any of the material in the Heart Earth/to cull black ring binder, or from the letters of my mother, grandmother and father in the green ring binder, or from the 4 boxes of filecards labeled "Heart Earth"; in short, any of the material I'd use myself in making decisions during the final polishing of the manuscript. I'd like Linda to be compensated commensurately for such work; I suggest she receive the final $62,500 (less Liz Darhansoff's agent fee, of course) installment of the Heart Earth advance due from Macmillan for the completed manuscript.

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Should it come to all this, Linda's address and phone: 832 NE 127th, Seattle 98125. Phone 365-2052, or at the UW English dept., 543-9623.

Yours,

Ivan

HEART EARTH

by Ivan Doig

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 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. The extracurricular livewire relative we all need, somebody 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 family 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, impossible not to like and trust, 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 arrival anthem, "Here we are, entertain us!" If I could but choose, the go-anywhere-but-go streak in this 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 my grandmother, his mother, 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 loan money to anyone you're related to without expecting to be burned--and agree that I would 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.) I left from his graveside half-ashamed that I had not been able to forget our rift, the other half at Wally 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 ~~is~~ makes 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 ~~all~~ what 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 it down 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 B-29 bomber.

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 begins and does not stop 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

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 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 scarce were work-like-a-dog undraftable 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 Alzona 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.

#

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 in Ireland the families might have been cousins across the 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 ducal 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 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. It is not clear 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, 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.

~~propping her up, angle akin to a hospital bed, so that she could breathe past the asthma.~~

People still wince as they try to tell me of witnessing the savage spasms of my mother's asthma attacks. Most often a midnight disorder, sabotage of sleep and dream that had just decently begun, the asthma would choke her awake. At once she had to sit up and wheeze, her eyes large with concentration on the cost of air, hunching into herself to ride out the faltering lungwork, then a spell of coughing so hard it bruised you to hear. The insidious breath shortage could go on for hours. 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.

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 upsetting to her gave her not the willies but the jimjams, and she it was who coined for the family the wonderful eartrick merseys for Moss Agate's Jersey-cows-in-need-of-mercy. She upped the ante even on basics such as why; that question she always asked as why so?

And so I wonder. Do I meet my own mother, young, in the experiences of Western women who endured a land dry of everything but their own imaginations? 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, the dauntless 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 durable women are caryatids of so much of that hard Montana past, they carry the sky. Yet I find it not enough to simply think of her in their company. Too many pictures of her say she was dangerously more complicated than that, she cannot be

sculpted from sugar.

Instead: assemble Berneta Ringer face-on in photo after photo as she becomes a young woman and you find someone not growing out of childhood but simply flinging it off, refusing to lose time to the illness in her like an underground fire. This teenage Berneta 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 life breathes up from the album page not as Wally's romping ready-to-go? but the more urgent is-this-the-way-to-go? What comes out most of all, whether the camera catches her as a pixie in a peaked cap for a school play or gussied up as a very passable flapper, is that whenever she had enough oxygen, Berneta burned bright.

The most haunting photograph I have of my mother is a tableau of her on horseback, beneath a wall of rock across the entire sky behind

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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 came the laconic enumeration, "Mostly Scotch." The country out there toward Sixteenmile 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 ~~waggish~~ Dundee burr and behaved like test pilots.

A dance, of course, did the trick; began the blinding need of my mother and my 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

at Ringling or Sixteen or any of the rural schoolhouses between, the hall immediately colored up into a plaid of bandannaed gallantry and ~~hooty~~ mischief--wherever you looked, 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 ~~devilishly~~ 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 square-lined ~~jasper~~ guy 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, and Saturday night entitles him to cut loose on a hall floor with slickum on it. This time, this night, when the square dance caller called out to the gents dosiedoe, and a little more doe--well, there stood 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. But beyond the welcoming geography of the first touch of each other in the small of the back, as they danced together there 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 it, 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, ~~in~~ 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.) I overhear

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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 ~~divelish~~ 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. 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.

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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 goes west into ridges, then tumbles toward Sixteen Mile 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 nondescript timbered sameness. This Sixteen country is a cluttered back corner of mountains, where the quirky, canyoned Big Belt range slows to a halt before the more lofty and composed Bridger Mountains to the south. 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. According to our family diarist, the Brownie box camera, that set of months stayed with Charlie and Berneta Doig as a perpetually developing photograph, memory-composite of the album snapshots they clicked day by day of each other in that 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 to follow through life together in Montana, year to year.

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, usually summer. That 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. Inclusively called the Western Civil War of Incorporation, it pitted financial capital and government against those who occupied land or jobs in inconvenient unconsolidated fashion.* Indian tribes and Hispanos:

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*All of us trying to figure out the West that produced us owe historian Richard Maxwell Brown for his formulation of "what should at last be recognized as a civil war across the entire expanse of the West--one fought in many places and on many fronts in almost all the Western territories and states from the 1860s and beyond 1900 into the 1910s." He details his concept of "the Western Civil War of Incorporation" in No Duty to Retreat (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 44+.

defeated onto reservations and into poverty's enclaves. Miners, loggers and other industrial working stiffs: defeated in strikes and resistance to technological dangers. Homesteaders, small farmers, backpocket ranchers: defeated from insufficient acres. As the Doig homestead and all others 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 somebody and bring them into the shipping pen fat and profitable, or he could just as dependably ~~trustably~~ oversee other ranch hands as a camptender or foreman, or he could even hire a crew of his own to put up hay on contract for ranchers glad enough to pay him by the ton to take care of the whole long aggravating job of haying. There were summers when he did two out of the three, always on the go under his work-stained hat 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 and before spring managed to definitely

come around, too. For year-round ranching, even a go-getter needed a decent 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, was 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 Sixteen country, diminishes the relentless sage and the raw shale cutbanks and the hopeless gulches where failed homesteads are pocketed away, and takes the eye instead toward the handsome neighboring Bridger Mountains and the one cocky tilt in the pedestrian Big Belts, Wall Mountain. The imagination is easily led down past Wall Mountain's rimrock to the ~~goblin~~ canyon of Sixteen Mile Creek, as ornery for its size as any chasm anywhere. The first railroad that was squeezed through there required fifty-eight bridges. 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 tie, not a rail, 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 that feeling about the Sixteen country and the Big Belt Mountains generally: 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 supposed to get used to it, I suppose, as Scotch endurers, as cockleburr 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.

Passion on Grass Mountain that summer of 1934 led on into a skein of ranch jobs for the two of them together, my mother cooking for whatever crew my father was running. But ranch wages were always thin coin. Settled down now, comparatively, into marriage, and with me eventuating into the picture in the summer of 1939, 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 ~~on~~ the Faulkner Creek ranch on shares.

You followed a scrape of road through that sagebrush country toward rakish Wall Mountain until suddenly making a veer toward tamer Grassy, and the Faulkner Creek place. A tidy sum of rangeland without being elbowy about it, with plump hayfields and a ~~damp~~ creek almost at the front door: in a majority of ways the ~~Faulkner Creek~~ ranch represented what the Doig homestead could only ever be the kernel of or the Moss Agate tenancy a gaunt ghost of. But unmercifully remote.

From the air over the Big Belts, the nature of their oddly isolated sprawl becomes evident. Not particularly lofty (with the exception of the above-timberline bulk of Mount Baldy), not ~~particularly~~ especially treacherous in skyline, not much noticed by history except for the long-ago goldstrike at Confederate Gulch, this ~~patch~~ 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 the stubborn barrier of the Big Belts and down the 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. On the Smith River Valley side of the Big Belt range, the steady plains of mid-Montana receive a rude bump upward. Goblin canyons cut in and out of the Big Belts but only two give a route through: the Sixteen Canyon, eater of railroads, and Deep Creek Canyon where the highway has been threaded through. Not paying much attention to the rest of the world or each other, the Big Belts' mountains and creeks held pockets of ranchcraft for people as acquainted with work as my parents were. So, for better or worse, a place such as Faulkner Creek at least met them on its own clear terms. 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 it was a tough winter--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.

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 sieved 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 were the quarry, their pelts fetching a good price from ~~Northern Hide and Fur~~ Goldberg Fur and Wool in Helena. The weasels hunted along the creek in invisibility against the snow, terror to grouse and mice, or darted up to the ranch buildings, murder in the chickenhouse; their sylph bodies were ferocious little combustion tubes and they had to eat with feverish frequency to live.

Wherever the double dots of weasel tracks indicated, the trapper set a small contraption of jaws and trigger and neatly baited it with a bloody morsel of rabbit. Ritual as old as any tribe--though these traps were springsteel, bought from a catalogue--but every trapper has a trademark and this one takes the trouble to bend a bow of branch in attachment to each trap; when the animal sets off the trap, the branch yanks the whole apparatus up into the cold air and the weasel dies 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, you hate to quit on an odd number. ¶ Not nearly all the 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 was my mother.

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Her victories over asthma, an hour at a time there on her trapline, were one calendar of the Faulkner Creek years, and another was my father's rhythm of mastering the ranch. Faulkner Creek's isolation and bad road showed a bright side here; the ranch owner from Helena didn't come out very much, 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 that 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."

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The advent of the Ford marks this time and place, too. Our snappy 1940 sky blue coupe, long-hooded and fat-fendered, a good two-thirds of the car prowing ahead of us as we fought the Faulkner Creek road. A ritual that the four of us, my mother and father and I and the Ford, are remembered for is the 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 town, 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 valley who had worked with my father 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

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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, probably my mother 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.

#

Eden it was nowhere close to, but at Faulkner Creek my parents seemed to be in their element. Everything looked acey-deucey, my mother's saying for anything that went together well; as naturally as a deuce fits down onto an ace in solitaire and begins a winning game. Camera

shots again said 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 pose with the coyotes. My mother 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 or is on its way--a day to mark, truly.

#

My farthest sound of memory is the Faulkner Creek ranch's diesel generator--the light plant, we called the after-dark engine, throbbing factory of watts--as it hammered combustion into the glow of kitchen and living room bulbs. The light plant was sparingly used, like sparks put to tinder when the cave most needed light; when company came, say. And so the yammer of it in the night-edge of the 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 sough of wind in the restless tree that overleaned the ranch house, or a coyote aria?

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, that 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 of course 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.

Right on time the outside door rattles open, but my father's inevitable approximate whistling of "The Squaws Along the Yukon" doesn't follow on in. All of a sudden he is in the kitchen with my mother and me, checking us over with his sheep-counting look even though we 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 handle 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.) Zips ~~Comes~~ 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
~~news~~ arrives spectacularly fresh. Leave it to him, he has pried it out of a gate guard at the aluminum plant as the guards this holiday night gave everybody a ~~thorough~~ going-over at the change of shifts, making all the plant workers ~~people~~ shuffle through in single-file so their security badges can 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.

"Oh, Charlie, what next," 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. <u>A tunnel!</u> A foxhole is nothing compared to that, tomorrow will not be too soon for me to

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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, 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 help 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 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. "are you 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. "It's just--"

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 ~~Stewart~~ Faulkner Creek ranch, he flung the place away, piloted us out of Montana on war-bald tires and waning ration books, 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 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 is 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 gift prospects be readily dreamed? Tricycle? Toy truck? Wicked new shovel? No, beyond any of those.

Threadbare Alzona Park produced 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 Christmas 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 benevolent 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 Gibraltars 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 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. With my gift ship came his letter to my mother asking whether he would have any prospects where we are, after the war; are there flour mills and feed stores where he might get a trucking job? Through us, like a signal tremor along a web strand, Phoenix is making itself felt even into the far Pacific. You can feel the growth thrust gathering (it undoubtedly is what my mother has been feeling), the postwar landrush coming when you can throw a doorknob on ~~the~~ 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 brother wants to hear.

As she was with my father, she will be doggedly honest with Wally, writing 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 tens of thousands, ultimate millions, as Phoenix's population ~~has~~ greatened beyond those of Boston, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Milwaukee, as America's center of gravity ~~has~~ shifted 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 quiet 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 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. I tag along long-lipped at her side on the round of chores. First to the post office, with her letters ready to Wally (We packed up and came to Wickenburg Mon. afternoon. It is really beautiful out here, in the desert way. . .), to my grandmother, to Anna and Joe and others in Montana. As ever, we do not get quite as many as she sends.

No sooner are we onto the street 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 whole desert to do it in, although she looks as if she might like to. We quickmarch to the street intersection, where my mother scans unfamiliar downtown Wickenburg. The sign she seeks does not show a bucking horse on a rampage the way it would in Montana, but at least it states Budweiser. Into the saloon we troop. The bartender, sallow figure in sleeve garters, and my mother perched in the lastmost booth

pretend each other aren't there as I trek to the m-e-n door.

The drugstore next. Among the sundries there, my mother's triumph is a scarce roll of film for her camera. She eyes me, gauging how far down in the dumps I am. "We'd better have ice cream cones," she determines.

Ice cream helps; when did it ever not? But my basic snit was quickly back. I missed my father at every corner of the day, from his renegade pour of condensed milk into his breakfast coffee to turn it tan as his workshirt, until moonrise when he would burr his voice Scotcher than ever and tell me it was a braw bricht moonlicht nicht. My mother, all at once a single householder in a bareboard cabin ten miles out in the Sonoran desert, with everything there is on her mind, is doing her utmost to fill his absence, I know. But this situation of only one parent. . .

A carload of Phoenix people interrupts me in mid-mope by depositing themselves on the soda fountain stools with us. We learn from their jabbering ~~yakking~~ to each other that they have driven sixty miles to see the snow on Yarnell Hill, an excursion my blizzard-bred mother finds so comical that she sneaks a grin to me between licks on her ice cream. Maybe we can go into the snowman business, my mother and I. If people came from

far Phoenix just to look upon snow, what might they pay for genuine mitten-made statuary of the stuff, snow fatsos mocking the saguaros.

Onward to groceries and the mumbo-jumbo of ration stamps: Book Four reds, blue C2's, how many red points does butter take ~~now~~, good gosh, twenty-four?

Provisioned, more or less, we embark in the car again, my mother steering as if the traffic is a conspiracy concentrated against the Ford. Wickenburg is an intersection for everything--the Phoenix highway, the California highway, the highway north that we migrated down from Montana, that other earth. CabinsCafeCafeCabinsCafe I watch the chant in neon as my mother conquers the hazards of Wickenburg's main street. The Hassayampa riverbed arrives under us, witchy leafless cottonwood trees along its banks. Our errand next is to retrieve some clean clothing from suitcases stashed at the edge-of-town boarding house where we stayed for a few nights before the desert cabin hove into our existence. How do we do it? In Wickenburg less than a week and already our belongings straddle two places.

Now we face our last destination in town, the one I hate so. My

mother's expression is apprehensive, too, not to mention child-weary and chore-worn. (A day is shot before I realize it, she has confided to Wally of this go-it-alone treadmill.) As so often in the way she has had to live, this next chore of hers--ours--is medical.

Alongside her, up the dreaded steps I trudge, braw-bricht-moon-licht-nicht, the stairstep of chant does not work at all, I go from grumpy to downright cross. I was acquainted with hospitals, don't think I wasn't. In our Montana life my mother's worst asthma attacks meant pellmell dashes of the Ford through the night, my father rushing us through the black coil of Deep Creek Canyon to the hospital at Townsend, and then a day or two later, her breathing as regular as it ever got, my father and I would bring her home from the hospital. Hospitals were where parents got substituted into altogether different beings: people who were sick.

Hallway, perpetually a hallway smelling hideously clean. Our footsteps have the hospital sound, doom doom. Now the room with the number on it, worse even than the smellhall. . .

My father is sitting in a chair as far as he can get from the hospital bed, dressed and with his stockman Stetson in his lap.

"The medical Jesus says I can go," he tells the two of us in the painted and polished way that only he can. "He claims it'll be the healthiest thing for me and him both if I clear out of here."

#

The cure for what had been ailing in my father turned out to be the roulette grace of fate. Here at Wickenburg pop up friends of ours, my parents' nearest neighbors from Montana, an older couple from the ranch next to the Faulkner Creek place. Like us, Allen and Winnie Prescott figured they'd had their fair share of blizzards in the Sixteen country, but very much unlike us, they possessed the family money and genteel level of life to have adopted the habit of wintering warm in Wickenburg. When we made the drive from Alzona Park one Sunday to call on these veteran snowbirds, the Prescotts cast one look at my skin-and-bones father and urged him to do some doctoring with a whiz of a physician they knew there in Wickenburg, they'd help us get settled, be on hand for whatever ensued. As soon as we packed up and came to Wickenburg, the monthlong skewer of pain through the middle of my father proved to be not at all the chronic ulcer he'd been treated for in Phoenix, but an appendix seething toward rupture. The Wickenburg doctor put him in the hospital on a Tuesday night,

extracted the appendix the next morning, and now on Saturday was already turning the impatient patient loose to my mother and me. That's what I call fast work, her pen commends in relief.

That farfetched crossing of paths with the Prescotts probably saved my father's life and definitely it rescued my mother's mood about Arizona. At Wickenburg her ink brightens: Seems good to see somebody we know. The Prescotts were good to us, good for us. I wish I could do better justice of recollection to Winnie, who was as vague to me then as she is in memory; a ranch duchess who did not quite know how to connect with children. I remember only that she would stroll from room to room in their Battle Creek ranch house with her coffee cup in hand as if taking it for a walk. Allen, on the other hand, I see as if he has been next door for forty-five years. Round in the shoulder and middle, squarish of jaw and nose, he resembled a droll upright turtle. Where my father went at ranch tasks in a flurry, Allen entertained himself with them; he thought up a name for every cow he had and spent the time to teach each one to come running when summoned. My parents were not predisposed to like ritzy cow-naming neighbors, but Allen and for that matter Winnie were so puckish about

their own style that they were hard not to be fond of. A bit later there in Wickenburg it must have been a sharp loss of companionship for my folks when the Prescotts migrated back north to begin spring on their Battle Creek ranch. But they left us with all they could. It was the Prescotts who gave us the desert.

The cabin in the cactus-patch foothills belonged to some Wickenburg acquaintance of theirs who was willing to let us cubbyhole ourselves there while Dad recuperated.

Not hot and cold water and so on, but more the ranch style--2 rooms, but we are just going to use one, my mother described to Wally the bargain castle in the sand. The nice part is it costs no rent.

Fie upon Phoenix, auf wiedersehen to Alzona Park and specters of escaped Germans. Out there where we at first didn't know joshua from yucca from cholla from ocotillo, the trio of us got up each morning with nothing recognizable around except one another and the weary Ford. Neighbors now consisted of lizards and, for all we knew, rattlesnakes as long as lariats. The mountains wavering up from every horizon around Wickenburg looked ashen, dumpy. The highest lump anywhere around was, gruesomely,

Vulture Peak. No pelt of sagebrush to soften this country for us, either; saguaro cactuses stubbled the hills, spiky mittens out. Where the familiar black-green of Montana's jackpines would have shadowed, here the bare green blush of palo verde hardly inflected the gulches--arroyos--and under every other bristling contortion of vegetation, prickly pears crouched like shin-hunting pygmies in ambush. Even the desert birdsounds had a jab to them, the ha ha of a Gambel's quail invisibly derisive in the bush, the yap of a Gila woodpecker scolding us from his cactus penthouse.

I loved every fang and dagger of it.

#

Any bloodline is a carving river and parents are its nearest shores. At the Faulkner Creek ranch I had learned to try out my mother's limits by running as fast as I could down the steep shale slope of the ridge next to the ranch house. How I ever found it out without cartwheeling myself to multiple fractures is a mystery, but the ~~avalanche~~ avalanche angle of that slope was precisely as much plunge as I could handle as a headlong four- and five-year-old. The first time my visiting grandmother saw one of my races with the law of gravity, she refused ever to watch again. Even my father, with his survivor's-eye view from all the times life had banged

him up, even he was given pause by those vertical dashes of mine, tyke roaring drunk on momentum. But my mother let me risk. Watched out her kitchen window my every wild downhiller, hugged herself to bruises while doing so, but let me. Did she know something of what was ahead? Could she have? The way I would grow up, after, was contained in those freefall moments down that shale-bladed slope. In such plunge, if you use your ricochets right, you steal a kind of balance for yourself; you make equilibrium moment by moment because you have to. Amid the people and places I was to live with, I practiced that bouncing equilibrium and carried it on into a life of writing, freefalling through the language. My father's turn at seeing me toward gravitational independence would come. But my mother's came first and it came early, in her determination that I should fly free of the close coddling she'd had as an ill child. At the Faulkner Creek place she turned me loose in that downhill spree. Here in our second Arizona life, she daily set me free into the cactus jungle.

#

Where lessons were quick. One pant cuff instantaneously full of fiendish tiny needles and you don't brush by a prickly pear again.

The desert democracy of light. Morning shadows of cactus in

stretching dance toward Wickenburg, stubby clumps at noon, reversed elongation toward the Hieroglyphic Mountains in honor of evening. Here even I, according to the shadow possibilities of my prowling boy-body and its swoopbrimmed hat, was a hive of wizards. The feel of existence, too, seemed different here from the huge weathers of Montana, the desert temperature instead making itself registered degree by degree as if coats of my skin were constantly being added by day and subtracted by evening.

Even in this pottery landscape we were not as alone as we'd assumed. Regular as breakfast, desert cattle like bony Moss Agate cow ghosts plodded past the cabin. My parents kept trying to figure out how many acres, how many miles, of the Sonora each gaunt beef had to range across in a day; the things looked like they'd eat the eyebrows off you.

Hammers were in song in Wickenburg as they were in Phoenix, the subdividing of Arizona an idea that had occurred to every boomer at once. But except for Dad reporting in to the doctor once a week, we stick to cabin life. My father takes on his task of recuperation, I kite around among the cactuses, and the indigo of a desert night draws down into my mother's pen:

Everyone else is in bed but I'm not ready to go just yet, so will spend my time writing you. Pretty chilly tonight. Keeps me busy poking wood in the fire...Got 2 welcome letters from you yesterday. So glad to hear from you, Wally, and know you're O.K. Was surely too bad about your buddy being lost in that storm. I don't think any of us have a good idea of what you guys have to go through.

#:

Log of the Ault, March 19, off Okinawa:

0814 Sighted enemy plane (Judy) making suicide dive on formation. Plane was taken under fire and shot down by A.A. fire. Plane fell off port beam of USS ESSEX....Observed USS FRANKLIN and USS WASP burning at a distance.

1318 Sighted two enemy planes (Zekes) making attack on formation. Maneuvered at emergency turns and speeds. Combat air patrol shot down one distant 5 miles. Other plane made suicide dive on task group and was shot down by anti-aircraft fire.

2145. . . Covering the withdrawal of USS FRANKLIN, badly damaged and in tow to westward.

#

March, 1991. I am in Wickenburg again, to write this of us. Now as then, a war is on; this time American planes are bombing the boots off the Iraqis. Yellow ribbons of hasty patriotism blossom on every streetlight, flagpole, porchpost, in contrast to 1945's here and there glimpses of windows showing gold stars of the war dead. Compared with Phoenix where an Americanism of another kind, an arterial slum of the dark and poor and addicted, has consumed the Alzona Park housing project without a trace, this town as my mother and father and I met it in World War Two is surprisingly enterable again. Wickenburg then was still mostly burg, with the fancy houses and subdivisions just beginning to be poked onto the hills around, but then as now it banked on the one commodity it knew it had: sun.

Basking beside the Hassayampa River composing sonnets for itself--"the wine that is called air" was one trill tried out by the weekly paper while we were here--Wickenburg was likably frank about what it was up to; you didn't need to be the reincarnation of Marco Polo to recognize that the accommodations along the main street, Wickenburg Way, were there to sieve tourists through, while around the corner along Tegner Street ordinary town life was carried on. Guest ranches were a sideline

Wickenburg quickly tumbled to; in a historical blink, Apache territory had given way to Dudeland. Signs for trail rides and chuckwagon dining notwithstanding, my parents must have only ever semi-believed that there existed a class of people willing to pay to mimic, for a few tenderbottom hours at a time, the horseback mode that had governed life at Moss Agate and the Doig homestead and Faulkner Creek.

Maybe cryogenic moments of their existence, museum instances of how she sat small but vivid in the saddle beneath a mountain arch of stone and how he dependably performed in cattle corral and bronc arena, are the only currency by which Berneta and Charlie Doig mean anything to today's world. But coming again to Wickenburg, I find the inscribing shadows of the desert saying much more of them.

#

In the cabin of then, my father is mending from his surgery day by day. He also is getting jumpy, as he tends to do when he doesn't have any work in his hands.

While my mother clears up the supper dishes, he and I take his prescribed walk. "That doc's favorite medicine is shoe leather," my father has concluded.

Ever since Dad came out of the hospital I have stayed as close to him as a sidecar, because you never know. Now out we go as always along the road to the foot of the big hill and back, far enough to be dutiful without getting silly about it. Cactus garden to the right of us, to the left of us. Wicks of thorn stand especially sharp in the evening desert light, every saguaro spacing itself prudently away from its neighbors' prickles, all the ocotillos in surprise binge of leaves between their devilwhip barbs. The last of sunlight retreats from us up the foothills and then the ashy mountainslopes. The mountains I have understood to be the Higherglyphics, because obviously they are higher.

This evening we have barely turned around to start home to the cabin before the wind comes up, strong as soon as it arrives. Around us the entire desert gallops in the sudden blow, the tops of creosote bushes wobbling, the stiff palo verde and mesquite abruptly restless, dust haze mounting into the air between us and the mountains. Everything up and running except the trudging us. For the first time in my life I can walk as fast as my plunge-ahead father, slowed as he is by the incised soreness in his side.

"Wouldn't this just frost your ass," my father mutters as we hang onto our hats, although the wind doesn't seem to me that chilly.

Falling night, the wind, whatever is on my father's mind, all propel us into the cabin. My mother is not alone.

"Look who I found," she says in a loving tone.

The visitor skeptically sizes up my father and me to see whether we constitute fit company for the likes of himself and my mother, and at last gives us a medium welcome by licking his own nose.

There is a little white slickhaired dog strayed in here today, an old dog, hasn't been too well fed.

"More like, who found you," my father says in his driest manner. In his stockman life, dogs had been a natural necessity. Cowdogs, sheepdogs, dogs that were just dogs and barely even that, the Faulkner Creek ~~Stewart~~ ranch had boiled with dogs. So my father got along fine with dogs in their place, which was anywhere but in the house. Or as he had put it a million times in his years with my mother, not-in-the-damn-house.

Of course I let him in and fed him, you know me.

No neutrals among us, but I was closest. From the time I was big

enough to toddle, I possessed a dog of my own, a perfect German shepherd pup who grew up to be a kind of furry gendarme assigned to me as I caromed around next to Faulkner Creek. Pup had lasted until the summer before we came to Arizona, when we were living in White Sulphur Springs while my father ran a haying crew. The town had a dog poisoner, some strychninic fiend, and after Pup died in crawling agony before our eyes I was never the same about dogs again. Now I edge up and put in a minority share of petting, but this desert mutt is no Pup.

My father is on that same theme, pointing out that this specimen amounts to more mooch than pooch. My mother, though, is all but pedigreeing her guest on the spot.

"There you go, yes," as she scratches his mangy ears, "you just want to be petted and petted, don't you," proceeding to do so.

"Berneta," my father takes his stand. "You're not having that dog with us. We don't need a dog in Arizona."

"I know," says my mother as if she doesn't know any such thing. "But it's cold out there on that old desert tonight, isn't it, Mooch? Here, up on the chair, up, Mooch." Professional tramp that he is, the

mutt obligingly scrabbles onto the seat of a straightback chair and sits with his head turned toward my mother, who immediately pays off in cookies.

"He gets put back out in the morning," my father tries another declaration. "For good."

The dog looks at my father, gives a sniff, then arranges himself on the chair for a nap. My mother laughs and gets out her letter paper while my father and I settle at the other end of the kitchen table for our other routine of his recuperation. He and I are using his enforced leisure on a jigsaw puzzle of the Grand Canyon, yielded up by the cabin. (My mother wisely holds back on helping us except when a piece is so obvious she just can't resist.) Naturally we saw the actual colossus of canyon on our journey from Montana and were properly astonished that the Colorado River, responsible for it all, amounted to a mere brown string of water off in the distance. But whether our own assembling of the Grand Canyon is ever going to catch up with the Colorado's is an open question. The canyon's show of colors, layered as rainbows, lies like chopped up crayons all over our half of the table. This five-year-old me has the unholy patience of a glacier, which means that my father

must contend not only with five hundred puzzle pieces but with my method of torturously trying them one after another in a single amoebic opening. Also, I keep wanting to know how this piece or that looks in terms of his color-blindness:

"But Daddy, what color do you <u>think</u> it looks like?"

My father chews his lip a lot during our innings at the jigsaw, but he is determined we are going to finish the damned puzzle or know-the-reason-why.

The dog suddenly wakes up, sits up blinking at us as if indignant at the excessive noise of puzzle pieces being moved. My mother puts down her pen and gives his ears an encouraging scratching.

My father has been eyeing the dog as if pretty sure its next trick will be to pick our pockets. But now Dad cocks his head toward the kitchen wall. "Listen a bit."

<u>Grutch.</u>

The three of us and the dog listen, all right, the very knots in the wall seem to listen.

<u>Grutch grutch.</u>

The sound keeps stopping, then furtively grutching again. A scraping on the desert gravel, whatever it is. Working at--getting under the cabin?

By now my father absolutely knows what--who--this invasion is. And as quick as he knows, my mother knows. Prisoners of war! Those German submariners who'd tunneled out of the Papago Park camp through caliche that the U.S. Army figured was encasing them like vault steel. The SOBs were regular Teutonic badgers.

My father rises out of his chair into whispered action. "Berneta, get in the other room with Ivan and that--" The dog is already gone, scooted under the bed.

"No," my mother whispers back with utter firmness. "I'm coming with." The time in the Sixteen country when my father tangled with a bear that had been marauding nightly into the sheep, he looked up after having jammed the rifle in the bear's ribs for a desperate fatal shot and found my mother standing on the cutbank just above him, holding a lantern, watching the whole show. Now again, for better or worse, she is adding her ninety-five pounds against the submariners of the desert.

"Ivan, then, go in the other room," my father directs.

"But I want to fight the Ger--"

"I-tell-ye, get-in-that-other-room!"

I compromise as far as the doorway to the other room. My father grimly scans the cabin walls, trying to conjure a gunrack and .30-06 rifle out of bare board. GRUTCH, the in-tunneling all but grinds up through the floor.

My father grabs the only weapon at hand, which is the broom, and eases to the door, my mother closer behind him than his shadow.

In the lantern light the lone attacker blinks, as startled to see my father and mother as they are by its incursion.

Then the wandering cow gives a moo and a chew, and goes back to gobbling the potato peelings my mother had dumped in the garbage box, skidding the box bottom across the desert floor with another grutch.

#

My mother and father ribbed each other for days about the cow showdown. Cabin life seemed ready to bloom along with the desert.

We have learned to like Arizona, so far as the country is concerned, my mother at last is able to tell Wally. Probably not coincidentally, her report on my father is also sunny.

Charlie is improving every day. I do so hope he can feel good now.

(The issue of the slickhaired dog took care of itself. The next morning after breakfast, the tramp pooch demanded to be let out and kept on going.)

I still am scooting back and forth from the cabin to the cactus shadow show, fired by my latest chapter of imagination.

Ivan is busy looking for gold. Every rock he picks up he asks Charlie if it is gold.

Then the weather turned. That last of winter, late March of 1945, Wickenburg as the world's toasty oasis all of a sudden lacked the element of sunshine. Oh yes, the rains were tinting up the valley of the Hassayampa in rare fashion, as a matter of fact the lushest year since before the war. Everything so green, my mother's pen granted. It wasn't just our outlander imaginations that the saguaro cactuses looked more portly every day; they indeed were fattening on the rain, the precious moisture cameled up inside their accordion-style inner works. But gauge it as you will, such a spate of precipitation still amounts to, well, rainy days. The Wickenburg Sun, trying weekly to convince us its masthead name wasn't a fib, resorted to running the words of a faithful annual visitor who claimed that as chilly and rainy as this season was, he still would not trade the north half of Maricopa County (i.e., Phoenix pointedly excluded) for the whole blooming state of California.

Plainly this desert climate was more complicated proposition than we had thought. My mother and father started working at the weather in earnest, telling each other that a little cloud cover now maybe was no bad thing, shade in the bank, so to speak, for they'd also been hearing

about the local summer temperatures that would by-God-bake-your-eyeballs. Cross that stovetop if and when we came to it, they took turns maintaining, and in the meantime maybe a little cloud cover...

Then they woke up one morning to the desert under snow.

Sure been having the weather, my mother jabbed onto paper to Wally. Make you think you're in Montana.

Make you think your mental compass needle was off course for more than just that day, in fact. The snow vanished as spectrally as it arrived, but the climate we had come here for stayed elusive, chill and rain in its place. My father couldn't take life easy too much longer, particularly in this uneasy desert spring, and nights now, he and my mother talk things over. The possible end of the war. The ways Arizona sorts itself out to them and doesn't. The prospects for people like us in, well, say Wickenburg. The Grand Canyon puzzle more and more becomes my own enterprise as the two of them put up their pieces of I wonder if and What we maybe ought to into the air of our future.

Quite a gabfest, my mother puts down in her desert chronicle to Wally and ultimately to me, and I am surprised when I find she doesn't even

remotely mean hers and my father's. The old miner did all the talking, just about.

But yes, the miner. Guerrilla cattle aside, our only caller at the cabin.

Before realizing dudes and tourists were the real lode, Wickenburg had been a goldstrike town, and prospectors still were out in the hills trying to hit the yellow rainbow again. I dream our miner upward from his visit to my mother's recording pen on the twenty-second day of March, 1945. Story-become-person, he refuses to look like a desert oreseeker is expected to, other than missing a few finger joints. Instead of shag and beard he sports a precise white mustache like a sharp little awning over his mouth, and a snowy pompadour he keeps in place by lifting his hat straight up when he takes it off in highly reluctant acknowledgment of my mother, womankind. Or maybe he is simply uncorking everything stored up since he last kept company with anyone besides himself in his shaving mirror.

In windjammer style he sets us straight about the war (England is who we ought to be fighting) and about the President (Franklin The-Hell-No

Roosevelt, in the miner's indignant rendition of the person who took the nation off the gold standard). Wide-eyed I wait for the battle to erupt over President Roosevelt, great voice that ~~came~~ strode out of the radio with every word wearing epaulettes, President for perpetuity if the votes of my parents have anything to do with it. But skirmish is all anybody wants to risk here, my mother saying at least people ~~didn't~~ don't need to eat gophers any more as they did during Hoover's Depression and my father saying at least Roosevelt ~~was~~ is aware of the existence of the working man and the miner saying that when you come right down to it England and Roosevelt are pretty much the same blamed thing, you can hear it in how they both talk.

Politics settled, the miner ~~streaks~~ plunges on to his experiences in the desert generally and here in the Wickenburg country in particular, which is what my folks want to hear from him, local knowledge. With their experience at listening to sheepherders, my father and mother cross their arms and let him unravel while I restlessly wish he'd get going on how to tell gold from rock.

Then one particular squirm of mine seems to remind our monologuing

guest of something. Montana he is unacquainted with, he announces, but he has been to Dakota, practically the same.

"I was about the size of your fellow here," he indicates me, then squints as if making a vital adjustment. "Little bigger. Anyways, both my own folks had passed away with mountain fever and so my uncle tucked me into his family. This was when he was running a freight outfit into Deadwood, Dakota, the kind of mule train they called 'eight eights.' Eight teams of eight mules each, three wagons--no, I'm lying again--two wagons to each mule team. This one day my uncle came home and got us all, my aunt and his own kids and me, and said we better come down and see this. So we went down and here was a big freight jam, right in that one long street of Deadwood. What'd happened was, all these freight outfits had come in from Fort Pierre and Bismark and Sidney on one side of the gulch and from Cheyenne on the other, and now couldn't none of them get out

either way, frontwards or back. There was teams there of just all descriptions, eight-yoke ox teams pulling three wagons, little outfits with two horses or four horses, mostly mule teams like my uncle's on the Cheyenne end of the traffic. Everything jammed up so tight for about a mile, you could have run a dog on the backs of those freight teams from one end of Deadwood to the other. Everybody's standing around saying 'This is no good,' and finally the big freighters got together and talked it over, about eight or ten of them. One man in the bunch made a motion to appoint my uncle the captain of straightening this thing out. My uncle said, 'Well, boys, if you want me to, I'll take charge.' They said, 'We want you to take charge. Whatever you say is law and we'll back you.' My uncle said, 'Let's get a little more backing than that,' and he went over to his lead wagon and come back with two six-shooters in his belt. So him and the rest of the bunch started through town looking over the mess and my uncle said, 'We might as well start right here,' and he started them in on moving the little outfits to the sidestreets by hand. The little rigs of two horses, four horses, they put them up alleys and onto porches and just anywhere they could find, and that way

they'd get some room to bend out a big ox or mule team. It took my uncle and them all night and into the next morning, sorting all those outfits out. He did something in getting that jam cleared, my uncle did."

Magical uncles. Out there ropewalking the dream latitudes, Deadwood, Okinawa, sorting oxen and mules by hand, preserving the Ault from submarines below and dive bombers above. Uncle Sam even, always there in the cartoons kicking the behinds of Hitler and Tojo. Whatever ~~wonder~~ marvel needed doing, uncles were the key. Wait a minute, though. Wasn't this mustache-talker awful old to be in on knowledge about uncles? It was a new thought, that uncles were available to just anybody.

Abruptly the miner declares he needs to ~~get~~ scoot back to his claim, as if he has to collect the nuggets it's laid that afternoon. Dad and I ~~saunter~~ walk to the road with him while my mother makes a start on supper.

Still talking a streak, out of nowhere the miner breaks in on himself and asks what brings us to Arizona.

Dad could answer this in his sleep. "My wife's health--"

"Figured so. Could hear it in her." The miner knocks on his

own chest. "Got a chuteful of rocks, don't she, there in her lungs. She's young to have it like that."

My father looks as though he has been hit from a blind side. To him, my mother's breathing is not nearly the alarming wheezes of her Montana seizures, or for that matter of our first harrowing night in Arizona four months ago. North of here in the auto court at the town of Williams, high up on the Coconino Plateau, she had put in a horrendous night of gasping spasms. My father would swear on a stack of Bibles that she had improved every foot of the way down from nightmarish Williams to this desert floor. True, another severe spell hit her during our Phoenix try, but not nearly as bad as that Williams siege, as any of a dozen heart-hammering emergency runs from the Faulkner Creek ranch. Surely to God this desert air is making Berneta better, isn't it? Yet how much better, if an utter stranger can pick out the trouble in her lungs as casually as the tumult in a seashell.

My father stares at the miner. Finally he can say only: "She's thirty-one."