

For the first time in half a year, Berneta's letters seem to catch their breath.

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June 8, 15, and 19, 1945. Her glad reports begin with what neighbored our meadow cabin on the face of Hatfield Mountain, a nice stream. Where my father, getting caught up on his fishing, made its waters our supperland of rainbow trout. Almost as softly as if talking to herself, she puts to the pages the three of us starting up our spiral staircase of summer.

We aren't working very hard at present. Were out for a horseback
ride this afternoon, first time I've been on a horse for ages. Ivan & I
rode Duffy, Charlie rode Sugar. That tandem ride likely was our last;
this was the getting-big-for-my-britches period when I took it into my
just about to be six-year-old head to require not only a horse all my own
but the ruggedest possible saddle, a sawbuck packframe, for myself.

Received our band of sheep last Mon. Nice bunch of lambs, 1230
of them. Sure hope they weigh good this fall and we can keep the loss
down....

We have a herder for now, but when the sheep go on the Forest Reserve
the 1st of July or about, Charlie, Ivan & I may herd them. We aren't
sure yet. Charlie is going up to look at the Reserve range & see how
tough it is....

Don't know just yet when we will shear. I shouldn't have a lot of
work to do after shearing, and that should only last one day unless a
rainstorm catches us....

Ivan is busy drawing pictures. Does pretty good. He'll soon have
a birthday, doesn't seem possible he'll be six....

~~are on. He'll probably have a million questions to ask you when you~~
get back.

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When my father shouldered open the door of that cabin of then,
packhorses and wife and child and twenty-two hundred sheep at his back,
a mouse nest fell down onto the brim of his Stetson. Ceiling paper
drooped in shreds. The greenblinds on the windows were speckled with
mashed flies, the floor was soiled with mouse droppings and pack rat
leavings.

The place was a sty, but not for long. The floor of a housing
project cubicle on the factory outskirts of Phoenix, maybe Berneta would
wash with tears. But this cabin on the summer mountain she launched into
with soapy water. Led by the hurricane broom of my father, who cocked
a look out every window he swept past to check on the behavior of the
sheep.

To dream us this last time, into the twists of June, I harbor there
at the very first hours of the swabbed cabin.

And watch Berneta as she gives her mop a conclusive wring. On the go,

beds and plenty else to be seen to, she brushes by the foot of the scant cot beneath the southmost window and sings out, "Ivan, look how you'll just fit." I inspect, solemnly bob my head, and claim the bunk with my tarp-wrapped bedroll. A corner of my own, all I ask. My parents will share the plank-sided bed in the opposite corner, snug for two but they do not seem to mind the prospect. No pillows to this sheepcamp existence, so Berneta mounds our three mackinaw jackets at the head of her side of the bed to prop herself against asthma in the night.

Bleary windowpanes to be washed next. Berneta debates to herself whether to do away with the nasty greenblinds--nobody for five miles around to see in on us--but ends up scouring the fly matter off them. Blank windows have never seemed right to her.

Even though the morning outside is wearing its summer best--hasn't rained the last 2 or 3 days, really seems good to see some sunshine--I tag after Berneta there in the cabin. Follow her eyes while she inventories this domestic side of the sheep deal, the three-month ^{one-room} future. The cookstove is frankly puny, a midget two-lid job not much more than kneehigh even on her, but it will fire up fast and then not hold hot through these summer days.

The elderly table, scarred and stained from extra duty as a butcher block, at least presides at the proper window, the west one which lets in a good view of the willow course of the creek. Across the room, the canned-goods cupboard for once is huge enough, homemade logic of someone who, like her, has needed to store away most of a season of groceries at a time. And she is glad of the smaller cool cupboard, the outside cabinet of shelves handy beside the door and tinued against rodents; leftovers will keep^{for} a day or so in there, and for longer term, butter and cheese and any grouse my father manages to hunt can be sealed in jars and coldstored in the creek. Could be worse, her kitchen veteran's appraisal and our recent history of the drab White Sulphur Springs house and drabber Alzona Park both say. At the other end of the cabin's single room hunkers a heating stove big as a blast furnace, so close to the main bed that it seems to be trying to sneak under the covers. Winter here halfway up a Montana alp must be icily beyond even what we were accustomed to at the Faulkner Creek ranch, according to the double set of stoves only a dozen feet apart and the triplicate cabin walls--broad rough boards undermost, then clapboard siding nailed to their outside, and a surprisingly cozy interior of short boards pieced together

bricklike--and the roof of corrugated tin sheeting for snow to slide off.

We are summering here, not wintering. Could be worse.

My father tromps in with a heaping armload of firewood, goes to dump it in the woodbox, cusses and lets the wood thunder down next to the box instead of into it. "We're going to have to get after the pack rats, first thing," he declares as he scoops out of the woodbox yet another junk trove accumulated by them. Marauders so quizzical, swiping a torn handkerchief one night, a thimble the next, you had to wonder if they did it from sense of humor.

The trapper Berneta kids him, "So if I catch them, think that'll make them easy enough for you to shoot?" (Two scabbards are slung on my father's saddlehorse. In one, the .22 rifle that is the shooting machine for pack rats and grouse. In the other, his .30-06 coyote artillery.)

"Other way around, any I shoot first ye can sneak up and clamp a trap on, can't ye," he gives her back and starts lugging in the contents of the packs.

Groceries to the big cupboard. Our change of shirts and pants onto tenpenny nails spiked in a row on the wall next to the door. Washbasin,

floursack towel. Frying pan and tin plates and pair of cooking pots and a dishpan. Utensils and box of wooden matches and lantern. Luxury item, a flashlight. Habitation is 95% habitation, so the cabin begins to seem familiar as soon as our own clutter is in place. ^{drugstore} Rexall calendar to keep track of the days. Small pane of mirror on the washstand for my father to shave by, Berneta to groom by. Our own galvanized bucket for our drinking water, because there's no telling what has visited any bucket you find in a disused cabin.

My father, everywhere today, is at the barn unsaddling the horses. I hesitate. But Berneta too has reached a last chore, stretching to arrange her writing materials on the top shelf of the tin-lined cool cupboard, the only place where stationery and black little bottle of ink and her inscribed fountain pen can be safe until the pack rats are dealt with. I unmoor from the completed cabin and speed out toward the saddle side of things.

Outdoors here is more elaborate than in. The cabin site is cuddled against the girth of the Bridger Mountains like a tyke on a giant lap. All directions from this perched place, you see to forest-tipped peaks of Bridgers or Big Belts and grassed ridgebacks of fetching green; view,

view, view, gangs of views. Nearly three twisty miles by horseback down the gulch is the Maudlow road, where the Ford sits stashed behind chokecherry bushes. The timberline of the Gallatin National Forest, with its Reserve range where the sheep can graze come July, stands in back of the cabin another couple of miles, mainly up. High country and higher, this nestled but abandoned homestead, even by Doig and Ringer standards. The place has the feel of getting away with something, pulling a trick at odds with the surrounding geography. The ever so level deck of meadow; how in the world did that slip in here between convulsive gulches that nearly stand on end? Then the cabin knoll, just enough of an ascension to lord it over the meadow; terrace in the wilderness, no less? And the water helling off down the gulch is a surprising amount of creek, yet its flow is disguised away, hidden beneath steep banks until you peek straight down into the disturbed glass of its riffles.

Barn smells never masquerade, though. Musty hay and leathery harness and almost neutral old manure tinge the air as I clock in on my father and the saddle stock. Unexpected as a chateau, the steep-peaked barn holds stalls for all four horses and there even are enough fenceposts

around it, askew but still standing, to resurrect a pasture. Liberated from the chore of picketing Sugar and Duffy and Tony and Star on thirty-foot ropes, Dad moves through the unsaddlings whistling the same chorus over and over in pleasure.

He and I emerge to the cabin knoll again, and the next unexpected construction.



"Daddy, the outy is logs!"

"That's a new one on me," he has to admit. So overbuilt is the immovable log outhouse that it's more like a blockhouse, hefty to the point of ponderous.

"He must've wanted to make sure it wouldn't pick up and run away," my father says as if he knew such cases. An earlier Charlie had striven on this mountain shelf of earth. Bachelor homesteader Charles Rung who applied himself enough to assemble the cabin and the barn and the preposterously redoubtable toilet, but his intended two-story house was still stacked as lumber, a mighty pile of weathered boards sitting neatly amid the weeds.

The Morgans, maybe halfway meaning it, had joked to us that they bought old Rung out for that stack of lumber, with the rest of the place thrown in.

Not much known about Rung, said the Morgans. He filed his homestead claim ~~here~~^g back in the time of World War One, slaved away at the place except to get a little money ahead as a fieldhand in the Gallatin Valley grain harvest some years; wintered all by his lonesome in here. Whoever he'd been, Charlie Rung had the knack of putting up with his own company in style. In the timber of the gulch a little way from the cabin was his cache-hole where he stashed homebrewed wine and the venison he shot out of season, which was to say virtually all the time.

On our way across the knoll from the barn to the cabin, my father can't help but stop for a minute and palm his hands into his hip pockets, happily proprietary as he scans the gray grazing band. The sheep can't believe their good luck. They stand in their tracks gobbling the lush meadow grass like a serving of hay, then plunge ahead three quick steps to gorge the same way, time and again. By noon they are so roly-poly they don't even head for the brush to shade up, simply flump down in the open meadow.

Our own meal, this first cabin lunchtime, is Spam sandwiches, drawing the accusation from my father that it's a plot to send him directly out fishing. Berneta teases back that that sounds to her like the right idea.

But both stay sat, in the beginning of the afternoon, and quietly take in the cabin, the country outside, this first stairstep of summer. Our reward to ourselves after the Spam is Koolade, the family passion for lime-flavor glinting green in our three tin cups. As if he's just thought of something, my father leans across the table toward the window to check the position of the sun, then compares the alignment of the cabin. "At least the place sits straight with the world," he verifies. What is it

that arranged us this way in our thinking: the squares of a mile each that the land in the West was surveyed into, the section-line roads that ruled us wherever we drove in that country, the boxlike rural rooms fitting no other logic? Whatever ingrained edge it is, to this day I have some of the family unease with any house whose axis angles off from a compass reading of absolute north-south or east-west.

The cabin wasn't through with my father. He tips his chair back and aims his most studying look at where the door stands open, pleasant cool of noon breezing in. "But what the hell was he thinking of with a north door?" North is storm country, snow and blow waiting to swarm in any time you ~~reach for~~ ^{reach for} the doorknob between November and April.

Berneta sends her gaze out the rickety screen door, down the lunge of gulch toward the Maudlow road. "Bet you a milkshake I can guess why," she mischievously arrives at. "He wanted a good long look at who was coming."

My father chuckles at her point about that other Charlie, the in-season-and-out homesteader Rung. "Like maybe a game warden, could be."

So, straight with the world or not, we've come to rest in notorious territory. Not simply in terms of the comatose old homestead's history of

contraband venison, either. Where we are, this start of June, is the extremity of the Sixteen country. Under those horizon-bumping views from this meadow, Sixteenmile Creek scampers through the confused geography from every direction, the main channel twisting down from the Wall Mountain ~~area~~ ^{area} ~~country~~ in the north and skewing west to its eventual union with the Missouri River, joined midway by the Middle Fork sailing in from the east and the Ringling country through a sharp canyon. Then there is a last, orphan section of the creek springing from entirely different drainage. The stream streaking down our gulch is that offshoot, the South Fork of Sixteenmile Creek, the sly tether of the Big Belt Mountains to the Bridger Mountains. We are where, from countless spots in my parents' past, there was that eye-taking rough horizon of the Big Belts and the Bridgers butting up against each other. Behind us, Hatfield Mountain of the Bridgers sits like a mile-tall apartment building facing down on the savage rock alleys of the Big Belts. The Big Belts, though, have a last laugh in the isolation they inflict over the entire neighborhood. A forest ranger somewhere up toward the South Fork's headwaters and the Morgans' sheepherder some miles in to the west of us, and the cabined three of us, are Hatfield's only

dwellers. Life here is going to take some acrobatics. We are in for a climbing summer, the saddlehorses huffing constantly on the slopes behind the cabin, we know that much. But the meadows of the back of the lofty Bridgers are going to be worth it--such grass, this rain-fed early summer, that the sheep will fatten on it as if it were candied.

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Dogs, we're rife with dogs again.

Sheepdogs, at least in theory; Flop with a wonderful half-mast ear that begs affection and Jack with the pale eyes, barely blue, of a born chaser.

Even my father can find no grounds to object to their instant conversion by Berneta into housedogs, because it just as fast became plain that only one or the other can be used on the sheep each day. When the two dogs are worked together, they add up to less than one. Jack sulks whenever Flop is sent around the sheep with him, Flop takes a yipping fit any time he is held back from a mission with Jack.

"Whoever invented dogs," my father appraised^d this nerved-up pair, "has a hell of a lot to answer for."

But perhaps our prima donna canines figured they were putting in

their shifts just as much as anybody else. Charlie has been watching
the sheep early in the morns. & late in the eves. while the herder gets
his meals, ran Berneta's latest report to the Ault. The sheep deal had
advanced to a phase known as tepee herding. Day-and-night sentry duty
with the band of sheep because of coyotes and the tough terrain, it amounted
to. Occupied enough with settling us in at the Rung place and trying
to gauge Berneta's hardiness and readying for shearing and thinking over
a big haying contract that was being dangled (Walter Donahoe wants us to
put up the hay on the Loophole--back in the White Sulphur Springs country--
again, but don't know whether we will be able to take that on), even my
father couldn't find a second twenty-four hours in the day to spend with
the sheep and was resorting to a hired herder. The one who came recommended
didn't seem to be any whiz--"I wouldn't call him the greatest," Dad left
it at--but he trooped through the day with the sheep as required and bedded
down on the mountain with them every night without complaints. Except for
those turns at sheepwatching while the herder fed himself, we had only
to move the herder's tepee to a new bedground for each night and generally
supervise.

"Pretty easy living," Dad has to admit as he and I bounce back into the cabin, day of our own yet ahead, after a morning shift with the sheep.

"About time you tried some," Berneta ratifies with a pleased look up from the letter she is writing.

This lasted an entire week and a half, until the morning my father and I found a lamb gut-eaten by a coyote practically at the doorflap of the herder's tepee.

The instant the sheep shaded up at mid-day my father was sifting his way into them on a walkthrough count of the lambs. Tricky to do, step by ever so slow step, negotiating a route without roiling the sheep. Low at his hip, his right hand flicks its little stroke of arithmetic at each lamb he tallies, and every time a hundred is reached his left thumbnail gouges a mark in the soft wood of his pocket pencil. His walkthrough marks out at twelve hundred lambs, thirty short of what we had handed over to the tepee herder just ten days ago. (At that rate we'd have to buy him another band of lambs...) This herder is a scenery inspector, idling away under tree or tepee while the coyotes have been using the band as a meat market.

My father wheeled, strode over to the herder and snapped, "Roll
your damned bed."

The next herder, escorted in by the Morgan camp tender, my parents immediately dub Prince Al for his rapidfire consumption of Prince Albert tobacco. When he isn't smoking the twisty shreds from the red can, he ^{the stuff.} chews ~~the~~ Brown parentheses of snoosejuice, apparently permanent, hang at the corners of his mouth, but what really catches attention are the tracks of his roll-your-own habit down the front of his shirt, the burn specks where dribbles of ash fall from his handmade cigarettes. My father is heard to mutter we'll be lucky if this one doesn't burn down the mountain and the sheep with it.

Dad and I are barely back from moving the herder's tepee the first morning when rifleshots break out on the mountain behind us. KuhWOW!

KuhWOW-kuhWOW-kuhWOW.

^{I was all}
Naturally ~~the~~ in favor of any form of bombardment, but my father the coyote marksman listens skeptically to the herder's fusillade. If you don't knock over a coyote with your first shot you're probably wasting your lead.

Berneta comes out of the cabin to cock an ear at the uproar. "Makes you wonder if the coyotes are shooting back at him, doesn't it."

When the three of us ride up that evening, the sheep and Jack the dog are as jittery as if they, not the coyotes, have been under barrage all day. Not that any casualties can be counted among the coyotes. Prince Al, it develops, has the philosophy of touching off a shot whenever a stump or a shadow looks as if it conceivably might be a coyote. My father tells him that's an interesting theory, but how about saving his ammunition unless he's goddamn-good-and-sure about the target.

The next morning, Dad and I just reach the cabin when a new salvo of kuhWOWs thunder from the mountainside.

Very soon the Jack dog comes arcing across the meadow in a neurotic slink, belly to the ground as if begging us please don't blame me please I simply can't take any more of that commotion until ending up, inevitably, under Berneta's merciful petting hand.

She and I watch my father with apprehension. He, though, seems downright gratified to see the deserter dog. "We'll just let Mister Prince Al have a day of handling those sheep without a dog. See if that slows

him up on the shooting."

By that evening, having chased sheep over half the Bridger Mountains, the herder was the frazzled one and the cannonading was cured.

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But a few more days into Prince Al's term of herding, on the fifteenth morning of June, my father comes into the cabin disgusted. Right there with him as usual, I'm excited, a bit traitorously, by this latest bulletin.

"Can ye believe it," he lays it out for Berneta, "that scissorbill of herder has to have a trip to town already. Compensation papers of some damn kind he needs to fix up."

She too is getting her fill of wartime sheep help. "Quite an imposition on these herders, isn't it, to ask them to actually herd."

My father steams out the choices. Deny Prince Al the trip and he'll most likely quit the job. Or much worse, sulk for several days of misbehavior with the sheep and then quit. Hang onto Prince Al until shearing if we can, is the least nasty conclusion. The only virtue evident in him is the one that counts, he isn't losing lambs left and right.

"I better take the sheep tomorrow," my father brings himself around to the necessary, "while you run him in to Bozeman, how about." She has

done this endless times before, ferrying a hired man so that a toothache or a case of boils or, as now, a pesky piece of government paper could be taken care of; for any ranch wife, as usual as a can of coffee on a grocery list. A day away from the place, medicine against monotony, it provides too. My father is going on, "It'll give you your chance at the mail and some fresh goods, and while you're in there do something nice for yourself and shop for--"

He stops. Berneta is shaking her head.

I'll play sheepherder tomorrow.

"What, instead of making a trip to town? How'd ye get that in your head?"

I'd rather herd than to take him in. The roads in this country get my goat.

My father rethinks. A possibly slippery drive through the Maudlow mudholes, ~~country~~, versus a horseback day with the sheep for her. "That's what you'd really rather, is it." Then the central concern: "You're sure ye feel up to that?"

"I can get by with the herding," she reassures him. "The horse and the dog will do most of it. Don't worry none, I'm not about to walk myself to death chasing after fool sheep." She cheerfully turns to the matter of me. "Which do you want, Ivan? Playing sheepherder or into town?" I blink.

~~It~~ Had not occurred to me the town trip might not include me. By now I am practically the child gazeteer of towns, Phoenix to Maudlow. It later ~~have been~~ dawns on me, too late, that going herding with her would ~~be~~ an entire

dreamday aboard my own horse. But instead I choose horsepower, the Ford,
habit of journey and whatever obtains: "Town, I guess."

—————
The next morning my father and I and Prince Al ^{slewed} ~~slew~~ our way first
of all toward Maudlow. Maudlow gumbo: a bum go, Maudlow. Whipping the
Ford's steering wheel this way and that, my father comes up with the
sarcastic theory that the only reason the railroad was routed through
this country was because the mud is thick enough to float a train. Prince
Al, chawing away, mutely doesn't get it.

Six miles of slip and slide, and we ^{tromp into} ~~are at~~ the tiny Maudlow post office
to collect ~~our~~ our backed-up mail. Wally is heard from, Winona, Anna and Joe,
my grandmother (three of those envelopes), four or five other friends or
relatives, the weekly paper from White Sulphur Springs and a batch of my
comic books which I would have read before we were out of the post office
if Dad had let me. Berneta has hungered for these letters: haven't had
the mail for 2 wks. Went down to get it Tues. but the road was washed out
this side of Maudlow. Her letters in turn cascade into the Maudlow mail
slot, away to the Ault goes her report of us written just yesterday. We
are all pretty well. Some days I don't feel too good but can't complain

most of the time.

More mire, between us and Bozeman. The windshield keeps threatening to go blind from mudspots, so whenever my father guns the car through ruts of standing water he flips the wipers on after the splash. Dirty water to wash dirtier. The slap of the wipers sounds frantic, as if the Ford is trying to bat away the accumulating muck.

We smear our way past ranches now, fundamental sets of buildings, then the Morgans' workstained sheepshed. The arched backs of the Bridger Mountains ~~on so~~ slowly file along beside us.

Eventually the road drops, and drops some more, into an eyelet of gap between farmed ridges, and the Gallatin Valley ^{opens} ~~opened~~ up for twenty miles ahead.

Downhill now, glide all the way to the long main street of Bozeman. My father points out a fine field where as a young man he worked he worked in an oat harvest. (Land that later grew four lanes of freeway and a Holiday Inn.) Downtown in Bozeman, we let Prince Al out at the government office and tackle our own chores. First thing, fill the Ford with gas; rationing still rules. Then something I was distinctly not keen on; under orders from my mother, what my father calls getting our ears lowered.

Normally our haircuts were homemade, which was to say by my mother,
and a barbershop's fliss and
strangenesses spooked me. Green eyeshade worn by the hovering barber;
why put ~~grass~~^{lime} color atop the eyes, why not skyblue? The barber chair
with those corrugated arm-ends as if the chair was enough of a participant
to tense its own knuckles. The mirrors on the walls both in front and
back of the haircut victim, I actually could see the use of; ease of
glance for the barber so that he wouldn't snip you lopsided, but the
surplus of reflections echoing away, where do those bounces ever stop
and why don't they?

Even my hair seemed to know it was in odd circumstances. The barber
tucked the whispery cloth in around my collar and critically combed my
flop of red shag across my head. Then asks, as though it might matter
in how he proceeds: "Where you fellows from?"

Where indeed, given our road record since the Ford was loaded and
aimed to Arizona last November. But my father flaps a wrinkle out of
the newspaper he is reading and encompasses everything from the root years
of the Doig homestead to the Morgan summer range of the moment. "We're
out here on Sixteen--"

————— Sixteen kinds of weather a day this year, Berneta is saying to

herself as she unties the yellow slicker from behind the saddle and slips it on. Knots the saddlestrings firmly down on the mackinaw jacket she'd been wearing since she left the cabin. and climbs back on Duffy to ride through the sun shower, freshet of rain about the size of a sprinkling can but thoroughly damp. Makes you wonder why June days ^{need} ~~have~~ to be so unpredictable. Hour to hour there's the sense that summer is being over again, invented ^{one} sky after another.

Ahead of her the trail zigs and zags up the mountain like a carpenter's rule unfolding. A quarter of the way up the mountainside, no, already more like a third of the way up, a mob of wool is expanding in many too many directions at once, helter-skelter. Say for Prince Al that he started the sheep out onto the big slope decently enough ^{this morning,} but their behavior is disintegrating in a hurry, and she and the horse and dog ^{have} ~~need~~ to get right at it to head them off. She'd decided first thing to leave Jack leashed at the cabin and use Flop for the day, eagerness over temperament, and the bent-eared dog ^{flirts} ~~flirts~~ sideways at her in gratitude as they travel the trail.

Ten minutes' hard climb by the saddlehorse carries Berneta through the rain climate--off with the slicker, back into the mackinaw--and up to

where she feels she can start dealing with the herd situation. The sheep are full of run this morning. Every second minute, the lead ewes have to be turned, bent back from ~~a sudden~~ ^{their abrupt} mania to quit the country, stream out across the mountain just to be traveling. You'd think the fools had appointments somewhere. Here and there a bunchbreaker erupts, a solo sheep dithering off toward the ^{tall} ~~the~~ timber with forty lambs following like a tail on a kite. The worst vagabond, a haughty high-headed ewe determined to stomp off back to the bedground, Berneta slings the ring of cans at and has the satisfaction of clouting her in the rump and causing a panicked veer back to the protection of the herd. Don't dare do much of that, as it means the exertion of climbing off and on the horse to retrieve your ring of cans, but it shows the old biddies you mean business.

She uses the dog to take the run out of them, directing him with backhand sweeps of her arm as if clearing away a curtain of air. "Go around them, Flop. Around them, boy." The dog races ~~ahead~~ of the sheep in short arcs, stopping every fifty yards or so to give her an enough? look. Ewes ~~Sheep~~ still are stubbornly squirting off in tangents of their own on

the other side of the band from the dog, so Berneta keeps sending him on his rainbow dashes until he's circled the whole bunch. Just as obstinately as they'd been scattering to the four winds, the sheep now keg up, huddle there in a two-acre knot of wool blinking at her and the dog.

She catches her breath and, ugly though ~~a non-eating~~ ^{self-respecting} band of sheep wrapped around itself is to any herder, she waits. ~~And waits~~ ^{And waits} some more, facing down the twenty-two hundred saturnine sheepheads. Let them get tired of being bunched up, the lunatics weren't gaining any grass into themselves anyway cantering off across creation the way they'd been.

The sheep mill a little in an unruly circle, eyeing the dog problem, ~~[That dog and his boss and her horse seem to mean it, planted~~ ^{planted} ~~spending time in~~ ^{their we-dare-you attitudes.} All at once the whole ~~sheep~~ bunch catches the inspiration to mother up with their lambs. The epidemic now is ewes sniffing furiously to make sure the offspring is their own, lambs diving to their knees to suckle. After the session of this, the band of sheep begins to graze up the slope as polite as you please.

Even when sheep are on their best behavior, you don't simply lollop across

the countryside with a band of them, especially if the country is as mountainy as this. Eight thousand eight hundred hooves to control, in a more or less simultaneous pursuit of grass, while avoiding coyotes and bear and deadfall snags and poisonous weeds and any other catastrophes that shadow the travels of sheep. Berneta sheds the mackinaw--coat on, coat off, weather that can't make up its mind--and takes stock. The day's grazing territory is from the gulch on up the flank of Hatfield Mountain toward the timberline, then down again. "Bring them into camp tonight, let's do," Charlie had formulated with her. "Halfway up along there is a great plenty for the day, then swing them back down." Which will mean making the band eat to the halfway point on the slope before shading up, then easing them in a half-circle turn back down the slope this afternoon, to the upper end of the cabin meadow for the night. Getting sheep to do anything by halves goes against their nature, but she hired out to herd for all she's worth, didn't she.

"That includes you, Duffy," she converses to the horse. "Let's go, boy."

As the horse answers that and the dig she gives him with her heels ~~grunting~~ by ~~walking~~ his way up the slope, Berneta is glad her body is becoming

accustomed to the saddle again. Getting toward toughened in, although
not entirely there yet; ^{, this early,} already she can notice that horsework is work for
the rider too. She always marvels at Charlie. Beat up as he is in various
parts of himself, he can climb on a horse and go at it all day without
ever feeling an effect.


^{fan out a little as she wants them to,}
The sheep ~~keep fanning out~~ their interest perfectly where it ought
to be, one clump of grass to the next. She reins up beside the hooved cloud,
her horse pointed upslope a certain neck-bowed way, herself posed attentive
to the moment a certain way, and it happens. The years peel away and she
is the photographed horsewoman again, arch of a mountain framing her. Some
differences; there always are. Here, she is dressed not for the camera lens
but for the job; workshirt, workpants, workshoes that she knows she must
be careful not to thrust through the stirrup when climbing on even tame
old Duffy--one of Charlie's worst poundings hit him when his horse shied
at a snake as he was mounting and the stirrup snared his foot through to
the ankle, dragging him like a gunnysack alongside the kicking hooves of
the runaway. Nor is she quite the hatbrim-shaded leather-chapped cowgirl
cometing against the stone sky of Wall Mountain, any more; no leg-swatting

sagebrush grows at this altitude, and the best that she could find for headgear to herd in is Charlie's winter cap. But in wanting to be herself on horseback; in the neighborhood of high eye-opening earth; in June dreamscape of her own; in the solitary essentials of her outline today, she is enough like that picture of girl-turning-woman again.

Dreams give us lift, she's ~~always~~ ^{ever since Moss Agate} known that ~~the~~ The trick is to bear up after the weight of life comes back. Slamjam it all into yourself at once



and what an avalanche everybody's circumstances make. Her father in his coughing old age, ancient choreboy stuck in an annex to a chickenhouse. You wouldn't think a life gone downhill from Moss Agate could go much more dismal, but his has. Her mother, tough as a grindstone against her father and yet putting up with all the allowances asked by the Norskie. And her mother and Charlie, scarcely able to be civil to each other. Berneta knows too well she is at the middle of that situation, daughter-wife tug of war, but can't see much of anything to be done about it. Charlie Doig and ~~B~~essie Ringer neither one is ever going to be quick to give in, and a person had better charge it off as one more price of family. You can pick your clothes/you can pick a rose/but kin and nose/you can't pick those. Includes brothers, who're somehow both easier and harder than parents. Paul, closest to her in age and outlook, but a distancer and being made more so by the war; there in the army in Australia, he has married an Australian nurse and gives every indication he may stay in Queensland after the war. Wally, out on the Ault. She thinks his is the unfairest story, in a way. The one of all the fate-begrudged Ringers who has his essentials intact, youth and health and a warmth toward life's pleasanter possibilities. Instead of the duty of war, he could be devising



a life with Winona. I don't think any of us have a good idea of what
you guys have to go through, Berneta has written him. Even when he isn't
in battle, it must be hard, penned up with so many people. How she'd hated
that herself at Alzona Park. Aboard ship must be a double confinement.
Wally lately wrote that he wonders sometimes if he is really informed
about how things are with the family, whether hard news of the never-easy
state of the Ringers is kept from him. Not knowing ^{can be} ~~is usually~~ worse than
knowing, Berneta has always savvied that ^{too,} and she has written back a line
that came out odd yet is in the pointblank attitude he seems to need from
somebody on the homefront. Don't worry, Wally--if there is anything very bad
happens here at home, I'll write and tell you.

— A few lines once again to let you know that I am fine, my grandmother
works away at her weekly letter to him from her Norskie kitchen captivity.
And I hope these find you the same, Wallace.

Her third-grade penmanship toils for whatever can be reported; another
hard rain slowing up the plowing but helping the hay, a fire in a neighbor's
chickenhouse, the chance of maybe going into town to a rodeo on the Fourth
of July.

Then, amid her account of rhubarb canning and doing a big load of wash, suddenly here is Winona being written off. She's a nice enough kid in a way. But Mama learned Winona's ways what little time I spent with her. I nearly got my head bit off several times over nothing. It kind of amuses me about these silly girls.

Wally's break-up loyally ratified, my grandmother makes the usual turn toward closing. Well, dear, there doesn't seem to be much of any thing more to write about...

She determinedly says nothing, yet, about Berneta out there farther than ever in the Sixteen country.

#

"Sixteen Creek. Sixteen Creek." The barber contemplates with his comb still trying to find some natural order to my hair. "Never been up into that country. Can a man catch a fish there if he holds his mouth right?"

"Oh-it's-so-so; the-water's-pretty-riley; ye've-got-to-fight-brush," my father guards the stream which is all but tossing trout into our frying pan.

The scissors are starting to operate around my ears. "Hold still, Sunny Jim," the barber warns me. To my father again: "Suppose we about have this war won? What do you think of this man Truman?"

Affairs of world and nation get pronounced on while I goggle out the barbershop window at all-business Bozeman. Women and more women beeline into the shops and stores. An occasional calcified male goes creaking past to a bar. (Anybody spry enough to conceivably qualify as a sheepherder, Dad tots up mentally.) ^{can} This is neither martial Phoenix nor windworn White Sulphur Springs, this is a sound-as-a-dollar little city catering to its plump valley.

Here comes the part of barbering I really hate, the hair tonic. This of course is a barber who likes to slosh on the pooh-pooh water, positively dousing a person's scalp with the smelly stuff and rubbing it in like analgesic. Gabbing a mile a minute while his fingers mess around up there: "This'll fix you up for the Fourth of July, got your firecrackers picked out yet?"

Now it's my father's turn under the scissors. You have to look at him twice to figure out that he only slimly has the majority of a head of

hair left. The sides from the temples back are perfectly full, and the stand of hair in the middle of his head is still holding strong; it's either side of the middle that has thinned away, widow's peaks that kept on going. He has had his glasses on for reading the Bozeman paper, and looks abruptly younger again with them off.

"Always have to have the noon news," the barber announces, and turns on the radio.

~~##~~ Broadcasting the sheep, Berneta's patient activity now is called, in the original sense of the word. Casting them broad across the range, in a scatter so that there is maximum grass for each.

"So far so good, Flopper," she says aside to her dog partner.

Their morning pandemonium forgotten, the ewes and their copying lambs have drifted comfortably up the mountain nearly to timberline; this far up, stray jackpines stand dark against the otherwise open slope, drifters from the belt of timber. A slow-motion gamble, letting the band scatter from hell-to-breakfast this way, but the best kind of herding if you can manage to do it. Doesn't take much tickle of the imagination to see the lambs putting on pounds as they nibble along. Keeps the herder and horse busy,

though, riding a community loop around the wide-spread band to watch ~~for~~ ^{against}

all the things that sheep can get into and that can get into them. Even prettiness serves as a poison to sheep, the standing white blossoms which Berneta charges into atop Duffy and hyaahs a bunch of lambs away from.

Fight them away from deathcamas in spring bloom, and away from lupine when it forms peas in autumn, you have to.

As broadcaster of sheep ~~broadcaster of the mountains~~ her mind is free to go while the rest of her has to ride the horse, and she dreams ahead now. Wouldn't know it to look at her this instant, but she is tired of being portable. She and Charlie have talked things through, the evenings in the cabin when dusk lasts in the air for hours, and reached their decision against contracting hay this summer. Stay here at the Rung place instead, is the impulse they both have. Take on the herding themselves, using the cabin as a camp; Charlie could stand a slow summer of mending his health some more and, truth is, so could she. ^{The rest of} June and July and August here, on their own in the mountains, will be a ~~rhythm~~ they have not had since Grass Mountain. Not easy traveling, this rifleshot country, but you can't beat it for grass, scenery, verve of the mountain air. Even the Maudlow

road can't stay muddy all summer.

Beyond, though. After August when the sheep deal is over, the lambs shipped and the ewes sold off, she and Charlie are going to have to quit thinking in seasons. Settle down and stay settled a good long ~~time~~ ^{while.} With Ivan starting school we are going to have to stay in one place, Wally has been confided in, the wish told to him more than once. Some place of our own.

Time of her own, how different that'll be too. Ivan out of her mid-day hours. She enjoys a sardonic moment thinking of that transfer, like handing along a clock that boings whenever it feels like doing so. Going to be a handful for the first-grade teacher, he is. Try start him out on c-a-t and first thing he'll show her he can read catalog and everything in it. There are times she has wondered whether it was such a smart idea to further him in the reading, this early; he's quite enough of a little old man, growing up around adults all the time instead of other children, and having his nose in a book all the time will make him more so. But she herself could not wait, could she, to quit being a kid. Extend yourveryself; if she has found anything to believe, it's that. It reached her to Charlie,

lyrical wire in the wind. It was what pushed her to the gamble of Ivan, chancy pregnancy atop her chancy health. No, the reading and the rest of it she would not change. She can't feel regret for how any child of hers ridge-runs the country of his head.

A deep sound suddenly announces itself at her, half-ow^lhoot half-airhorn. A grouse's cry. She is sure the alarm came from a big pine just up the slope from her, out by itself. She checks on the sheep, find no catastrophe in sight, and turns to the pine. Nudging Duffy slowly toward the tree, she tries to single out the bird. Grouse make a riddle for the eye. Camouflaged virtually to invisible, they can sit as motionless as the treelimb themselves. Berneta reins the horse to a quiet halt as close to the pine as she thinks she dares, and rests forward in the saddle. It takes her five minutes to discern the blend of feather pattern against the bark.

As if dislodged by her view of it, the grouse plunges out of the tree, wings set, sailing down the mountain. Quick and far; a hundred yards, two hundred, three hundred, the brilliant unflapping glide goes on. At last, still without the tremor of a wing, the grouse vanishes into another tree.

All as it was; mountainside of businesslike sheep, her horseback self,
tin roof of the Rung cabin far below. She notices the Flop dog straying
off in inveterate curiosity and calls him in, her voice drumming back from
the mountain. That air dance of echo allures her. The play of words
crisscrosses in her trial shout:

"Ringling, Ringer, Rung!"

—————
Charlie Rung teeters in the cabin doorway, a dozen summers before,
drawn by a disturbance in the air. The toot of a grouse, was that?

He squints at the meadow, quiet with hay and the blossoms of his
potato patch, then up the slope of Hatfield at his handful of cows, their
heads already dug into the grass again.

Not sure now he heard anything, he regrets the nips of his chokecherry
wine ~~at this time of day~~ Homebrew for lunch is not a sound idea.

He steadies himself to look around the place, sort out what wants
doing next. As ever, his eye can't get past it; the stack of house lumber,
no longer the fresh yellow of when he hauled it here three years ago, four?
Took receipt of it straight out of the boxcar at the Maudlow depot, borrowed
in
the Morgans' big wagon and labored the wood ~~up here~~ load by load, damn near

tipping over every time coming up that gulch. And there the pile sits,
board footage for four rooms not counting ^{attic and} ~~the~~ screen porch. Rafters and
~~Rafters~~ ^g studdings and gables and shingles, the whole shebang.

The thing of it is, the house exists in Charlie Rung's mind. The
only discrepancy is that it needs to be framed up and nailed together.
Time he did that. He can't fully fathom how it hasn't happened already.
Hadn't he done fine with the barn? And been triple careful with the walls
of the cabin, so as not to wake up some clear January morning frozen stiff?
But the carpentry of the house he has not quite attended to, ~~yet~~

Middle of June, already. Haying is about to need doing, and the barn
mucked out for winter, and then ^{sixty} ~~couple hundred~~ bushels of potatoes to be
dug and gunnysacked and stored in the root cellar for winter, and cord
after cord of firewood to be chopped for winter too, and he isn't a youngster
any more. All at once he knows he will never budge that lumber.

———
Blat is in the echoes now, the sheeps' medley of a thousand calls
of baa bouncing here to there on Hatfield Mountain as the ewes are mothering
up their lambs. They're ready to shade up, and Berneta too drops down for
a rest. Army of mothers, encampment of wool at the top of the mountainslope.

Berneta unwraps her sandwiches for lunch and gives Flop a share.

———
Out of the barbership Dad and I march, shining at the back of the neck, and hurry through egg salad sandwiches at the lunch counter of the drugstore. The day is going and, last bite down, so are we.

Onward to conspiracy. This is the part that is secret from Berneta. My father had confided it to me as soon as we turned Prince Al loose. I outright dance to the idea, and my father looks like he could spring down the street in a burst of jigsteps himself.

At our destination, though, two of the women shoppers who seem to be the occupying force of Bozeman are passing by, one shaking her head and telling the other: "You ought to just see the prices they've got in there."

"'spensive?"

"Awful. I walked in and walked out."

The Doigs are not daunted. In we plunge, my father's jaw geared forward into determination.

Shelves, counters, racks, boxes. Storeload of stuff, and the saleswoman is busy with a woman customer buying something whispery. We're on our own and glad of it.

"What's it a present for?" I'd asked my father when he unveiled this intrigue of his.

That threw him for a moment. Nearly three months yet to Berneta's birthday, and their wedding anniversary had been six, no, already seven weeks ago.

"The first day of summer," he resorted to. "Approximate."

This was good, though. My father feeling relieved enough, about the arc of the sheep deal so far, about cabin life and the summer range, to think in gift terms. Berneta has been through a lot, this hobo quintet of months since he fell sick in Alzona Park. Time for her to have a surprise of the decent sort.

My father zeroes in on the merchandise he has in mind. Picks one up ^{eyes} and ~~looks at~~ it as if trying to see through it.

"What color would ye say this is, Ivan?"

How to define that it has a kind of off-reddish tint, neither quite one color nor another, stumps me until I think to declare: "Hereford."

"That's no good to us then," he puts it sharply down. "We want straight brown, so it'll go with anything."

I manage to single out undiluted brown, my father decides on the fanciest style, and we're already halfway in business. Away we swagger to another section of the store, for the other ~~grand item~~ ^{item of splurge} to go with this one.

There, the saleswoman catches up with us. We feel we don't noticeably need her help, but she seems to think otherwise.

"This brown is close enough to the other one," she undertakes to show us, "to go together nicely."

"Close enough isn't what we're after," my father lets her know.

Down cascade more boxes of the item, the saleswoman displaying one after another until I exercise our proxy on the precise same color.

Dad names the size, and the saleswoman wonders if that doesn't sound too big. My father gives no ground. He knows the size of everything Berneta wears, and ~~just~~ ^g barely keeps from telling the snooty salesclerk it was all volunteer arithmetic, too.

The saleswoman wants to know what other assistance she can render us. ^{informs} My father ~~tells~~ her the spree is over, how much are the damages? She adds up the set of purchases, he flips his checkbook out and writes the

figure as if it was pocket change. Away, rich in gifts, we go again.

Groceries next, by the boxload. The trunk of the Ford swallows it all away and my father looks twice at his wristwatch. All we need now is Prince Al. Naturally he has not shown up, here at the hour Dad absolutely instructed him to.

My father starts to stew. The thirty-five-mile drive yet ahead, mudholes in ambush; a stop at the Morgans to tell them we've done our own camptending this week; tarping the groceries into slingpacks behind our saddles; the three-mile horseback ride from the mouth of the gulch up to the cabin--he doesn't want added into all that a door-to-door search of Bozeman for Prince goddamn Al.

"Daddy, are you going to can him?"

"To even do that we need to find the sonofabuck." As much to the lengthy main street of Bozeman as to himself or me, he addresses: "Where do ye suppose a bird like him would hang out?"

Choices are plenty, although all in one category. Just from where we stand I can read the twinkling signs of several nominees--the Crystal Bar, the Rocking R Bar, the Park Bar, the Stockman Bar.

My father casts another ~~look~~^{glance}, this time at the sun, midway down

the afternoon sky, and starts us toward the nearest of the bars at his

racing pace. "Bastard him anyway, we don't have the time--"

— Time to head down out of here, Berneta can tell from her glance at the sun; start the sheep moving down the mountain toward the place for night.

The sheep, contrary old sisters that ~~they've been all day long,~~^{they can be,} have forgotten their earlier affection for the bedground and want to keep on stuffing grass into themselves. Words fly out over the mountain:

"Around them, Flop. Way around them." While the dog makes his ~~route~~^{rounds,} Berneta adds whistling and a clatter chorus of cans. Grudgingly, the ewes shift around and mince slowly down the slope, their lambs skittery at their sides. It will be a push, to make them move down to the cabin meadow before dark. The horse and dog both are showing themselves tired and, message from her body, she is getting seriously that way, too.

Stay on the horse, she again reminds herself. Riding is work, but walking this vast sidehill is more so. She spurs Duffy closer to the herd,

— "Of-all-the-goddamn-times-to-have-to-herd-the-goddamn-her der," my

father tells the world. He and I ransack the drinkeries on the south side of the street first, Dad giving a description of Prince Al which grows more blazing with each bar. But the bartenders shake their heads, ^{laid eyes on} chorus that they sure haven't ~~seen~~ any such specimen. We even resort to the Oaks Cigar Store, on the chance he's in there stoking up on chaw.

No luck. "Worse mess, if we go back out without him," my father reminds himself by stating to me, and we begin canvassing the north side of the street.

Who would have thought it of ^{scruffy} ~~stagnant~~ gopher-cheeked Prince Al? He was ensconced in the cocktail lounge of the swanky Baxter Hotel, the absolute last place to look, pickling himself with mixed drinks called Brown Bombers.

"Got your compensation fixed up, it looks like," my father begins with mere sarcasm, then he really lights into him. Takes the hide off him for breaking his word about meeting us on time, for going off on a bender, for general misbehavior while a woman has to handle his sheep for him. Yet not quite firing him. We still desperately need a herder, even ^{one} of this ^{candlepower} ~~one~~, until shearing.

Without a word, Prince Al follows us out and folds himself into
the car.

—————
The route from the Maudlow road up to the cabin was beginning to
take on familiar features, like a caravan run. The creek dodged through
the thick brush, every ripple purring in hiding. Yellow shaley rock
cliffed out wherever the gulch broke at a bend. Ahead, overhead, Hatfield
Mountain topping out in its thatches of timber. At the halfway point,
the sudden stand of low-branched cottonwoods to watch out for or they
would slap you half off your horse.

I nod along in the dreamslow rhythm of the ride, perched, being
carried by event. But go to my father and he is remaking the day, casting
away the delay and lateness, churning worry into reassurance: if it would
only stay churned. Holy-J.-Christ, his mood runs, how-can-ye-ever-figure-
it-all? Prince Al possibly would've behaved himself, not gone off and
got plastered, if Berneta had been the one to take him to town. Yet,
couldn't really blame her for not wanting to fight the Maudlow road;
lucky enough that my father didn't get us stuck himself, in those mudholes
that would swallow a person's shadow. Besides, maybe Prince Al would've

fallen off the wagon even if a dozen Bernetas had taken him to town, maybe he was just that kind. But oh damn the weather that we were always having to try to sneak past, outguess, make muddy choices. If it'll just let us settle in; the Rung place is restful when it's not a day of commotion like this. The sheep deal will pay off in just a couple more weeks, at shearing. Then there'll be the lamb money this fall, and even a bit of profit at selling the ewes too; money enough to set us up for a good long time. We can see if Berneta will try Arizona again, that country around Prescott. Or if she can get by in Montana as well as she has this spring, maybe that's as much as can be asked. Ivan in school this fall, we'll need to place ourselves and we will.

Not far now to the cabin. Damn-it-all-to-hell-anyway, how late in the day it's gotten to be. But her stint with the sheep ought to have gone well, browsing them a little way up the mountain like he had laid out for her. And the weather hadn't been terrible, which qualified it as good. And she is veteran at all this, after all. Knows the country, Berneta does. Knows herself, better even than he's ever managed to. What was it she'd said? "Don't worry none, I'm not about to walk myself to--"

—————
Dearth of activity at the meadow, the cabin, as we file up out of the tangly gulch.

It is nearing dark. The sheep are bedded at the upper end of

the meadow, where my father had conveniently sited the herder's tepee that morning. Prince Al, sobering up grumpy, heads his horse toward the tepee.

Duffy, still saddled, is grazing in the high grass alongside the barn. Berneta is nowhere in sight.

My father stands in his stirrups, suddenly tiptoe with the strain of trying to see behind the cabin windows slurred with dusk. "Berneta, we're home," he shouts almost as if it were a question.

The cabin.

The barn.

The bedded sheep.

Nothing answers him except echo.

#

Then in the frame of the cabin doorway, just distinct. Wiping her hands with a sack towel, she calls out:

"Back the same day, are you."

The sheepdogs appear, one on either side of her, yawning from their cozy cabin stay.

Burden of worry off him now, my father clucks his horse into faster

pace across the meadow. I bounce on the back of Star, trying to keep up. They've all kissed and gone on to generalities about the day by the time I slide down from my horse. My mother hugs me and calls me her Bozeman Ivan, laughs that Dad and I don't seem to be cut out for town barbering, we've come home looking like a couple of scared preachers.

My father does a necessary asking. "How'd ye do with the sheep?"

Her day on the mountain revolves again. The sheep when they were pigheaded, the sheep when they were perfect. Varieties of weather. Taste of the sandwich lunch, sound of the grouse. Exasperation, exaltation, sufficiency of each. Common day in the week of life.

She sums it as she will for Wally, in transoceanic ink, in the morning:

I got along okay.

The mail and groceries have to wait. First out of the pack are the conspiratorial boxes for her. This, my father the cowboy suitor could perform blind. "We happened to bring ye a couple little somethings, dear," he pronounces and flourishes the first box to her, then with a grin hands me the other one to hand to her.

"What have you two been up to?" She gazes, as captured with surprise as we could wish, back and forth at my identically grinning father and me.

"Try 'em on," my father says with acey-deucey confidence.

Publicly done, as everything is in the single ~~chamber~~^{room} of the cabin.

She slips the first item on, exclaims to us about the perfect fit, which of course we knew. She peeks in the second box.

Lifts out the other half of the outfit with an "Oh, I should send you two to town all the time." Puts it on by ducking down to adjust just-so, it ~~in~~ Dad's shaving mirror.

Turns to us, rigged out new from head to toe.

Charlie and Ivan brought me the nicest pair of brown boots and a big hat.

So I am a combination cowgirl sheepherder now.

—————

Away to the Ault flowed that third June letter of hers, full of her herding triumph and the summer to be ridden into with newly given garb. Somewhere it crossed mailpaths with the only letter from Wally that has come to light.

All his others, nearly a steady year's worth from such war addresses as Pearl Harbor and Eniwetok and Leyte and Okinawa and Tokyo Bay, went the way of discard and loss. But this ~~single~~ one hid in plain sight, in print.

Proudly sent to the editor of the White Sulphur Springs weekly newspaper

by my grandmother, it appears in full on the front page of July 4, 1945.

Now don't think that this is all that could be said, Wally tags on an

immediate warning. It is what they will let past the censors.

. . . Many exciting encounters. . . helping to make history each day. . .

bringing the end of the war nearer. . . Greatly beyond the dehydrated handout

to send to the folks at home, the Ault was wending its own route through

the last of the Pacific war. The ship is in Samuel Eliot Morison's naval

history of World War Two, a photograph of the destroyer taking on fuel in

heavy seas, white water smashing over its every deck. The Ault and Wally

ultimately would make it into Tokyo Bay for the surrender of Japan: the

admiral from the battleship Wisconsin was determined to attend the ceremony,

the Ault was chosen to transport him. A night soon after, something Wally

and the other young sailors had never seen, their ship's running lights;

[Log of the Ault:]

By order of Commander Task Group, all ships turned on navigational lights

for the first time since December 7, 1941.] Three hundred forty-five men

cocooned in a skinny vessel three hundred sixty-five feet long, the Ault

crew survived to do its own telling of the war.

Don't think that this is all that could be said. What was slighted worst of all in the officially prepared letter home for Wally and the other Ault men was the actual business of war, taking toll. Nowhere the sense that this promised to be the to-the-death summer when lone B-29s sent down a new manner of bomb which torched the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in white-hot radiation. Deliberate amnesia of hurt and death is the order of the day. The destroyer's sailors had watched planes burst into fireballs over them, had plucked survivors and bodies from the ocean when the carriers Wasp and Franklin and Hancock and Bunker Hill were aflame, had felt the close pass of kamikaze attacks, had fed ammunition into hypnotic gunchambers through eighty straight days of Okinawa combat. But the warworld of the Ault is rounded off to: We have our less happy times...

start to sound like
Only the letter's closing lines seem not canned, ~~true~~ Wally again.

The Wally who can't bring himself to stay listless even in censored circumstances. Some of it is not as bad as it sounds, the feel of his war comes out on paper, Some of it was worse. He leaves off in a dreamtime of his own, sailor Montanan trying to deploy himself into a future. This is just about our last operation....Maybe next spring we will get to see

each other again.

In the column exactly beside Wally's letter was printed my mother's obituary.

—————

Word came aboard the Ault in the worst possible way, in a p.s.

miserably penciled onto one of my grandmother's weekly letters to Wally.

Dearest Wallace, some awful sad news to tell you since I wrote your letter.

Berneta passed away last nite. That's all the word I've gotten so far.

I don't know where they're at or where she died at.

She didn't suffer any at the last, Wally--the pencilscript now my father's shaken hand in an ensuing letter--for which I am thankful.

She was feeling extra good all evening and we talked until eleven that

night. She passed away at 2:30 A.M. on the 27th of June, Ivan's birthday.

I didn't even have time to awaken Ivan, she went so fast.

Swift, then, the attack by which she died. Not the customary siege of short breath, the jolting coughs and lung convulsions, the air-short fatigue, that she had ridden out so many times before. Not the open mayhem of asthma. Instead on her death certificate, immediate cause is given as an overstretching of the cardiac muscle--which was to say, a heart

condition. Nowhere ever written, then or since, was the simultaneous fact of earth: the acrobat heights of Montana earth that kept her so alive, until they killed her.

#

Nobody got over her. Doig or Ringer, those around me in my growing up stayed hit, pierced, by my mother's death in the mountain cabin.

My father was wrenched back and forth by how ~~the~~ ^{welcome} the return to Montana had been for Berneta, and how ~~treacherously~~ ^{treacherously} it struck her down; how risky the one last mountain summer turned out to be, how unsaveable his wife's health ultimately was.

To my grandmother, her suspicion of "out there" was horridly proven, Berneta taken from her in some remote visitless place. Having had to toughen herself against so much, Bessie Ringer now faced what would never go away, death of a daughter.

For Wally, the reaction was a lifelong clutch at his sister's last letters, the keeping of news which shot in just when it had become clear that he himself would survive the war.

Always after, for all of them, it was not simply that Berneta had died young. There was always the echo-plus of "out there in the Sixteen

country," "up there on the mountain," "on Ivan's sixth birthday." A private family dialect of magnitude and conjunction and consequence.

The Sixteen country held that magnified proportion for my mother; her manner of death held it for those who most loved her.

On through that summer of 1945, the last of the letters in Wally's packet were written and sent out in ^{misery}~~grief~~ and confusion, several by my grandmother and a pair by my father. Brittle and cracking a bit more each time I unfold them, they still manage to stab. So blue, my grandmother lets down onto the page, seems all I do is cry & cry some more. My father tries to convey the ^{deadweight}~~ghostly drag~~ of time on him now. No one can understand it that hasn't been through it. The days are weeks and the weeks are months for me. Then, sad dream going into nightmare, their lines turn and spit sour toward each other.

—————
I haven't seen your mother for a long time, Wally.

—————
Wallace dearest, I haven't seen Charlie or Ivan since we laid Berneta
away.

—————
She never comes around to see Ivan.

—————

I've got no way to go see them. Then I haven't the heart to go where

Charlie is anyway.

#

She could have come nearer giving Ivan mother love than any other

person in the world.

#

Got a letter from Charlie yesterday in answer to the one I wrote

and asked him if I could help them in any way. But he gave me to understand

that I wasn't fit to help take care of Ivan. The only way he can think

of me is with pity and regret.

#

I feel bad to think she and I can't get along.

#

He knows he can hurt me through Ivan.

#

I shall try so hard to bring Ivan up to be the kind of son his

mother would wish.

#

I'll write Ivan but I'll not write him.

#

It took my father and my grandmother five more years to quit their
grievous scrap, but that was a lot better than never.

In the last twist of all, they turned together to raise me. When my father faced himself in the glass door of a phone booth in White Sulphur Springs a night in 1950 and went through with the long-distance call to the Norskie country, he closed down the war that had begun over Berneta and continued over Berneta's child. As my grandmother managed to swallow away as much grudge as she heard being swallowed at the other end of the line, she volunteered herself yet another time into a shortsided situation, never to be a wife nor even a lover, not the mother of me yet something beyond parent. From then on, the cook during haying or calving or lambing at the ranches where my father worked was Bessie instead of Berneta, the couple who would throw themselves and their muscles into sheep deals were Charlie and his mother-in-law instead of his young wife. I grew up amid their storms, for neither of these two was ever going to know the meaning of pallid. But as their truce swung and swayed and held, my growing-up felt not motherless but tribal, keenly dimensional, full of alliances untranslatable but ultimately gallant (no, she's not my mother, she's...no, he's my father, not my grand-) and loyalties deep as they were complex. So many chambers, of those two and of myself, I otherwise would

have never known.

In the eventual, when I had grown and gone, my grandmother and father stayed together to see each other on through life. April 6, 1971: his time came first, from emphysema which was the cruel lung reprise of my mother's fate. October 24, 1974: my grandmother remained sturdy to her final instant--one mercy at last on these people, her death moment occurred in the middle of a chuckle as she joked with a friend driving her to a card party at the Senior Citizens Club.

Their twenty-one years together, a surprising second life for each, I've long known I was the beneficiary of. The letters teach me now, though, how desperately far they had to cross from that summer of grief. Theirs was maybe the most durable dreaming of all, that not-easy pair; my father and my grandmother, and their boundaryless memory of my mother.

#

And I see at last, past the curtain of time which fell prematurely between us, that I am another one for whom my mother's existence did not end when her life happened to. Summoning myself--summing myself--is no less complicated, past fifty, than it was in the young-eyed blur at those howling Montana gravesides. Doig, Ivan, writer: independent as a

mule, bleeder for the West's lost chances, exile in the Montana diaspora
from the land, second-generation practical thrower of flings, emotionally
skittish of opening himself up like a suitcase, delver into details to the
point of pedantry, dreamweaver on a professional basis--some of me is
indisputably my father and my grandmother, and some I picked up along the
way. But another main side of myself I recognize with wonder in the
reflection of my mother's letters. It turns out that the chosen world
where I strive to live full slam--earth of alphabet, the Twenty-Six country--
had this earlier family inhabitant who wordworked, played ^{seriously} at phrase, cast
a sly eye at the human ^{herd} ~~parade~~; said onto paper her loves and her fears
and her endurance in between; most of all, from somewhere drew up out of
herself the half hunch, half habit--the have-to--of eternally keeping score
on life, trying to coax out its patterns in regular report, making her words
persevere for her. Berneta Augusta Maggie Ringer Doig, as distinct as
the clashes of her name. Ivan is fine, growing like a weed, her pen
closes off its last letter ever, June 19, 1945. You don't need to worry
about him forgetting you, he remembers his Uncle Wally and knows what ship
you are on. He'll probably have a million questions to ask when you get back.

A million minus one, now. The lettered answer of origins, of who
first began on our family oceans of asking. As I put words to pages,
I voyage on her ink.

#