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, until now 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 to someone. Upward from
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 Alzoran 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 the Iwo Jima beachhead, holding them at bay
until down in the torpedo room Wally--

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 now over, that
wind-ridden afternoon. But in the family plot of time, not nearly done
with. Can that be what this brother of my mother ultimately had in mind
with the letters, sensing the carrying power of that ink as a way to go on?
That 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 here 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, rich little poor boy, six-year-old going on thirty-five, sourpuss half-orphan, ecstatic 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. 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: any way you looked at him he was, 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. Impossible not to like and trust, Wally was that extracurricular livewire relative we all need, somebody in whom the family blood always hums, never drones.
In my own remembering he bursts home with that whopping grin on him,
ever ready to fetch the boy me off to a trouty creek or up into the grass
parks of the Castle Mountains to sight deer or elk, or to an away game
of football or basketball, never failing to sing out his arrival anthem,
"Here we are, entertain us!" If I could but choose, that 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 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 say
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 more
high-powered hunting scope he soon was showing off to me while letting
the funeral reimbursement he'd promised me 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 own 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 epic
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* became 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 chesty profile 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 repair 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 a few minutes of 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 ahead to the fresh-fixed path 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 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 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 dime store 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 had been 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 secrecy. 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 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 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 spectate, until my mother happens to glance 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 somebody had realized how scarce were work-like-a-dog undraftable 43-year-olds who knew how to run a crew, and my father came humming 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 tramped 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-Bernste-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

p. 13A follows
such afraid words as worried to death, such Alzona aloneness that I have
to spill over to someone. As though she knows she will fall soundlessly
in the desert but for this, these witnessing words sent into the Pacific
if there is nowhere else they will register. Creed of all writers: I
have to.

Noon wears past; a missed mealtime, unheard of in our family. Then

p. 14 follows
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 they detrained 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 that 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 that 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 millennium
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 mighty 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 that tipsily refuses to give in to gravity, Moss Agate's buildings are vanished, as is John Ringling's railroad, as the Milwaukee & St. Paul transcontinental railroad that Ringling's line branched into—like a toe and ankle and leg that dipped into Montana's economic waters and yanked back out. 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: call it 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 bad, and the Ringling honchos 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 sore-bagged kicky ornery 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 was 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 her 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.

People still wince as they try to tell me of witnessing the savage spasms of my mother's asthma attacks. The cost of air to her became an increasing wheeze, a hunching into herself to ride out the faltering lungwork, then a spell of coughing so hard it bruised you to hear. The pernicious 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 gabby 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 eartick merseys for Moss Agate's Jersey-cows-in-need-of-mercy. 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--**Latin**--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!" marching 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 abandoning it. No illusions about herself; on the verge of pretty but
perfectly well aware she's never going to get there past the inherited

broad nose. Wide-set eyes, soft but fully open in every camera-caught mood.

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? This young Berneta has the strange

independence of a comet, a pushed pitch of existence that makes her seem

always beyond her numerical age. What comes out most of all, whether

the camera catches her as a sprite in a peaked cap for a school play

or gussied up as a very passable flapper, is that whenever she had enough

air, 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

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.

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 cocky 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 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 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. Not that we can ever really see in on those impossible beings, our parents before they are our parents; but in the years after, I became a familiar bundle sleeping on a bench along the wall of the halls while these two danced, and like the nightpulse of music I can all but feel the small hand of my mother and the broad palm of my father find that first touch of each other in the small of the back, there that first night of promenade.

Trending into love still had a lot of unpromising geography to cross.

The Doig place was twenty horseback miles from 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, ink then too, trying to speak the moments of my parents' earlier wartime, the battle toward marriage. I overhear
enough in her later letters, Wally's packet, for an educated guess that those Moss Agate pages crackled with diagnosis of her and my father and those they knew. How soft-voiced she was, I am always told; so the snow-angel outline everyone has given me of my mother luckily takes livelier edge when she puts on paper for Wally such gossip as the jam Ethel Mason Lowry got herself in. Married to 3 soldiers and no divorces, & getting allotments from all three. She was doing alright until the F.B.I. caught up with her. Entire plot of a novel tattled there, I note with professional admiration. What Berneta found to say by mail to her cowboy suitor, my father, surely had similar salt in the tenderness.

He gave back the tense hum of a wire in the wind. Charlie Doig coming courting sang several lives at once, a number of them contradictions. 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. He forever was whanging away at more than one job at a time, working for wages on the valley's big ranches and pitching in with the other Doig brothers to try
to make a go of the family livestock deal 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 mother-to-be, but how
could a man so high-strung be that funny, how could a man that humorous
be so high-strung? In and out of his share of Saturday night flirtations,
this 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.

Their romance constantly had to work around more than the miles
between Moss Agate and Wall Mountain. My mother's youth (she still had
high school to finish, although she never did) and tricky health were
in the way, my father's sense of obligation at the struggling Doig ranch
was in the way, everybody's finances, or dearth of, were in the way.
Finally the two of them simply defied the Depression's laws of gravity and in 1934, when she was twenty and he thirty-three, they married and went herding sheep.

Their honeymoon summer on Grass Mountain also wed them to a particular body of earth. Not immediately obvious country to find delight in, this was a back corner of mountains--Grasy much the best of the bunch--
the way. Finally the two of them simply defied the Depression's laws of gravity and in 1934, when she was twenty and he thirty-three, they married and went herding sheep.

Their honeymoon summer on Grass Mountain also wed them to a particular body of earth. Not an immediately obvious choice to be beloved country, this was a back corner of mountains--Grassy much the best of the bunch--where the canyoned Big Belt range gives off to the higher grander Bridger Mountains. The Bridgers stand placid guard over the fertile Gallatin Valley and the city of Bozeman, while the Big Belts rumple a Scotland-sized area of sagebrush and jackpine. By whatever immigrant compass, the original Doigs and for that matter the Ringers chose the Big Belt side. Not much populated even yet, that roughcut set of horizons, Bridgers to the south and Big Belts to the west and north, held pockets of ranchcraft for people as acquainted with work as my parents were. Grass Mountain itself, a pleasant upsidedownland with timber at its base and summit meadows, seems to have stayed with my parents as a perpetually developing photograph, memory-composite of the album snapshots they clicked day by day of their tent camps,
mob of ewes and lambs, sheepdogs, saddlehorses, imperturbable pet cat
named Pete Olson, and most magic of all, each other in that shirtsleeves-
rolled-up summertime of herding—my mother slender as filament, my father
jauntily at home at timberline.

After the lambs were shipped that fall a skein of other ranch jobs followed,
Dad capable with sheep or cattle or haying or whatever, my mother cooking
for the crews he was on. But the center years of my parents' story together
were to take place at the hem of Grass Mountain, the first years of World
War Two when they were running the Stewart ranch.

The Stewart place. Handsomely neighbored by the landmark rim of
Wall Mountain, ramrod-d by my parents into a nicely profitable ranch,
and God, was it remote. Two other ranches lay hidden even farther down
Sixteen Creek, the gulches of Battle Creek, but otherwise weather was the only
company.

Besides what my folks could can or butcher, my mother would buy a
truckload of groceries before the Stewart place's first snowfall. 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 provided a better
chance of getting out to the hospital, when one of my mother's hardest

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asthma attacks hit. Winter and treacherous distances aside, in a lot of ways the Stewart ranch represented what the Doig homestead could only ever be the kernel of or the Moss Agate place a gaunt ghost of: a tidy sum of rangeland without being elbowy about it, with plump hayfields and a dancy creek almost at the front door. My parents seemed to be in their element those years of running the Stewart outfit for the ranch owner in Helena. Their Brownie box camera again said so, most of all in the trophy picture

date from the war with the coyotes. Since I, little Mr. Personality in a brass-button snowsuit, look to be about 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 my father and me as we pose, twenty-eight of them in simultaneous leap of death up the log wall where their pelts were strung. Winterlong they had been picked off, for the safety of livestock and the sake of bounty, as they loped the open ridges of the Stewart place; ideal coyote country, but unluckily for them, also ideal coyote-hunting country for guys who could shoot like my father and my uncle Bud, on hand as our hired man. Next, it always comes as a pleasant shock, how in charge of life my father looks. Posed there, he knows of at least twenty-eight coyotes who will give him no further trouble, a chinook either has arrived to his ranch or is on its way, he has a son and heir, his wife is taking the picture of this moment—a day to mark, truly.

My farthest sound of memory is the Stewart 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 most when the cave really 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 particularly recalcitrant bedtimes, boy determined not to waste awareness while
delicious light was being made. But why that diesel monotony of echo?

Why not the sough of wind in the big pine 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 the Stewart ranch 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 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.) 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 inter-
planetary distance from anybody and anywhere we know— and so my father's
bulletin

now 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 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," 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 crashing down on Phoenix. Meanwhile I am scared, flabbergasted, and inspired. A tunnel! A foxhole is nothing compared to that, tomorrow will not be too soon for me to start my sandhog future beneath Alzona Park.
Huns at the door of Phoenix don't faze my father, at least with a caseknife jamming that door. He kids my mother about the Gluns and Zettels on her side of the family, "Just remember, 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--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 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 Arizona. 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 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. She tells him
all the truth she has at the moment. "I'll try to get over this, Charlie."
She takes a breath, not an asthma gasp but just fuel for what she wants
to get 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; 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 this coming when you can throw a doorknob on the 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.