When asked what he thought of today's centennial celebration,

89-year-old Garland Hebner, odds-on winner of the beard contest,

declared: "A time was had by all."

--Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner, November 8, 1989
A hundred hours later, which had seemed like a century, the Noon Creek road was a dike through the dark as I headed the Bago in from my ranch toward Gros Ventre and centennial morning.

The only other creature up this early was at the crest of the benchland, a jackrabbit that leapt in panic and ricocheted back and forth in the tunnel of light cut by the motorhome's bright beams. I switched onto dim and the skittering jack managed to dart free into the barrow pit.

Otherwise, nothing but before-dawn blackness on either side of
the gravel embankment of road until the gateframe at the turnoff into
the Double W, high and logthick, came into the headlights.

I flipped onto bright again, as if the increased wash of light
would bleach away TriGram's triumphal WW sign and the beneath cable-strung
cow skull swaying in the wind. Still no such luck. Nearer and nearer
the gateway drew, the motorhome's headlights leveled steady on it; my
trigger finger itching as ever here, both of my gripping hands feeling
the shotgun rise in aim at the hated goddamn fancy transom, my eyes
sighting in on the welcome vision of putting an end to that plaything skull
by blasting it to bits.

But by now other conclusions, this final nightfull of thinking them
through, shouldered that one away and I drove past.

#

Life was definitely awake when I reached town. The Medicine Lodge
was as lit up as boxed lightning. Switched on in more ways than one,
too, for music was blaring out of the radiant old saloon as I climbed down from the Bago. The civic serenade hit a crescendo that sounded like a truckload of steel guitars rolling over and over and then a woman's voice boomed in amplification: "That was a little tune we picked up
from a rock group called Drunks With Guns. So now you've had your wake-up music and can tackle the pancake breakfast these nice people have got ready for you, and we'll be back shortly."

Yeah, well, I guess there are all different ways of feeling gala and musical commotion of their sort must be one of them. I started to cross the street to the site of rumpus, not to mention breakfast, but had to wait for traffic, one lone van toodling through town from the south. I stood impatiently for it to pass, more than ready to scoot across and get myself in out of the chilly wind--November is not much of a pedestrian season in the Two Medicine country. The leisurely vehicle at last reached me and I started to get my thoroughly cooled heels into motion again. But right in front of me the van pulled up, blockading my path, and the driver tapped out on his horn _beep_ _beepitybeepbeep beep beep_!

I remained there with my jaw on my shoetops while geezers in dress-up stockman Stetsons, the dapper low-crowned kind you don't see often any more, came stiffly climbing out both sides of the van. "How you doing, Jick? All revved up to go through this again in 2089?" "Jick, you
Two Medicine people get up before God sends Peter out to the Gate. "Got your speechmaking pants on this morning, have you, Jick?"

The Baloney Express gang and I shook hands and slapped shoulders and conducted general hubbub there in the middle of the street until I managed to ask, "What, you mean to tell me you guys got up before the chickens and drove all the hell the way up here from Great Falls just for our ceremony?"

"How could we stay away?" Roger Tate responded from behind the steering wheel of the van. "Ain't we all been waiting most of a hundred years for this?"

"Besides, it's only ninety miles back to the Falls," Julius Walker chipped in. "The way Roger drives, it'll only take us half an hour to get home."

"Had to deliver this anyway," Dale Starr declared and presented me a five-dollar bill and four ones.

"What's this, you guys running a lottery now too?"

"Compliments of our Shoeless Joe from Fargo," explained Dale, about our broke-and-barefoot casualty in the rest area a couple of months ago.
"Wrote that things are still pretty tough with him, but he's trying to scout up enough odd jobs to get by on."

Then the other Walker, Jerome, had me by an elbow and was steering me back to the side of the street I'd started from. "We got something to show you over here, too. Don't look so alarmed, we didn't bring none of those used cars with us."

He headed me toward the rear of my Winnebago, where a couple of the more nimble members somehow had slipped away to and already were standing there with full moon grins. Gingerly I stepped around to peer at the back of the Bago, and there on the bumper blazed a sticker in Day-Glo orange:

Honorary Baloney Express Rider

"We had it made up special," announced Bill Bradley, rocking back on his tiny heels as if nearly bowled over with pride.

I didn't know whether to laugh or bawl, and likely did a mix of the two.

After I had thanked them sevenfold, the bunch said they realized
I needed to gather my mind toward the speech I was going to make—"Say what you're gonna say good and loud, or at least loud," ran the tenor of their advice—and off they hobbled toward the Medicine Lodge and pancakes and coffee.
A minute to compose myself was definitely required, and I moved to the side of the Bago that was out of the wind and stood looking at Gros Ventre. Like other Montana towns, no Easy Street anywhere in it.

Instead this highway main street, born wide because freight wagons and their spans of oxen or workhorses had needed maneuvering room, the twin processions of businesses, dead and alive, now aligned along that original route, the high lattice of cottonwood limbs above the sidewalks.

With all the cars and pickups parked downtown at this usually empty hour and only one building alight, Gros Ventre just now looked busy in an odd concentrated way, as if one behavior had entirely taken over and shoved all other concerns out of the way. Maybe that is what a holiday is. The dark up there beyond the cottonwoods was just beginning to soften, the first of the hourlong suggestion of light before actual sunrise. I gazed across the street at the crowd of heads behind the plate glass window on the cafe side of the Medicine Lodge. Bobbing amid them, in a rhythm of choosing and coaxing and focusing and clicking, was a fireball of hair deeper than red. Mariah riding the moments as they came. Riley was not in action yet. I could see him propped against the cafe wall, arms folded, not even wielding his notebook yet.
I squared myself, ready at last to go across and be part of the occasion. I wish you were here for this, Marcella. But you are not. And so I hope I bring to this day the strength of what we were together.

Gros Ventre entire seemed to be within the straining walls of the Medicine Lodge when I entered. Never in the field of human jubilee had so many so voluntarily got up so early. Some were history-costumed, here and there frock coats and Lillian Russell finery, elsewhere cowboy and horsewoman outfits complete with hats of maximum gallonage; even occasional fringed leather trapper getups. Others were in common clothes. In whatever mode, conversation was epidemic, people yakking and visiting back and forth in a mass from one end of the cafe to the other. The back wall was startlingly bare, the centennial flag down now and in folded repose across a number of long tables like a golden tarpaulin, ready to be taken out for hoisting when the time shortly came. All other tables of the Medicine Lodge and a borrowed bunch more had been pushed together in long spans devoted to pancake consumption.

But my policy had to be first things first, even ahead of breakfast,
so I made my way over to her. Naturally Mariah was in mid-shoot of Amber Finletter, who was wearing big goony glasses with blunked-out lenses like Orphan Annie's eyes and a housenumber "1" attached off the side to make the eyerig read as a 100. Such centennial embodiment notwithstanding, I got Mariah aside and had the talk with her I had to have.

To my news she simply gave me a ratifying buzz on the cheek and added: "What can I say? I was the one who kept at you to get yourself going again, wasn't I. You don't vegetate worth a damn, Jick." Then it was her turn, of telling me what she needed to.

Four months worth of words with this daughter of mine dwindled to basics. I only asked:

"You're sure?"

"I finally am," said Mariah.

Away she went, back to work, and myself to breakfast. Sleepy 4-H kids were ladling out the food. I negotiated a double platemload of pancakes
and swam them in syrup, further fortified myself with a cup of Nguyen's coffee, then went over and found a seat beside Fred Musgreave, who had surrendered his bar domain to the music posse.

Fred appraised my hotcake stack and asked, "Gonna build a windbreak inside yourself?"

"Uh huh," I acknowledged cheerfully and kept on forking.

A fresh gust rattled the plate glass window. "At least it isn't snowing," Fred granted.

"Shhh," I cautioned him against hexing the weather.

After pondering me and my steady progress through the pancakes, Fred concluded: "I gather you're saving up your inventory of words for your speech."

I suppose I was. But also, by now a lot of the essential had been said. Said and done. I forked on and watched Mariah aiming her camera at Bill Rides Proud, his Blackfeet braids spilling down his back.

When pats descended on my off arm, the non-eating one, I didn't even need to look. "Morning, Althea."

"Oh, Jick. It's so nice to see you back for good."
A Mariah-style "mmm" was all I was willing to give that until I had the last of the hotcakes inside me. In something close to alarm, Fred Musgrave abandoned the chair across from me to Althea and she took it like a throne. This morning her sense of occasion featured turn-of-the-century regalia, a sumptuous velvet bustle-dress with matching feathered hat; it broke my eating rhythm a moment to realize that, feathers excluded, the plum color of everything on Althea Frew exactly matched that of my Billings wedding motif.

"What a nice bolo tie," she found to compliment on me after considerable inspection. I only mmmmed that too, all the help really that Althea needed with a conversation. Pleasant as fudge, she proceeded to give me a blow-by-blow account of our centennial committee's doings in my lamented absence and then on into every jot and tittle of this dawn event and beyond. "Then we'll have more dancing, then when the bells ring all over the state at 10:41, we'll start our parade. Then--"

You could tell she could hardly wait to get going on the next hundred years; for that matter, Althea would be gladly available by seance when Montana had to gird up for its millenium.
Suddenly music met its makers in the bar half of the Medicine Lodge, the band tuning up thunderously cutting off Althea in mid-gush.

"Interesting chamber orchestra," I remarked for her benefit.

Althea flinched the least little bit as a new chorus of whangs and clangs ensued. "I put Kevin in charge of hiring the music. He told me they're a dance band."

"Depends on the dance, I guess."

Over the throb of the music she swung back onto that ever favorite topic of hers, me. "We're all so anxious to hear your speech."

I grinned, by far the fondest I'd ever given her, making her bat her eyes a little in surprise, before I said: "I kind of feel that way myself."
Mood music was not the term I ordinarily would have applied to whatever the band was performing, yet somewhere behind my grin was the amplified tune beating through my body in an oddly familiar way. Then the voice of the woman singer resounded:

"Somewhere south of Browning, along Highway Eighty-Nine!"

The singer interrupted herself to announce it was action time, everybody better find their feet and stomp a quick century's worth. Even without that I was already up, needing to go see, assuring Althea I'd connect with her at speech time. And yes, as I passed I gave her a pat.

"Just another roadkill, beside life's yellow line!"

National anthems I can take or leave, but the music put out by these Roadkill Angels now drew me as if it was the strongest song of the human clan. And was drawing everybody else in the Two Medicine country, according to how jampacked the bar side of the Medicine Lodge suddenly was with dancers and onlookers. The players in the band, mostly armed with guitars of colors I didn't even know they made them in, held forth on a temporary stage that had been carpentered across the
far end of the bar. Behind and a little higher sat a drummer in a black plug hat with an arrow through it. Amid this onstage aggregation the woman singer didn't look like much--chunky, in an old gray gabardine cattledealer suit, her blond hair cut in an approximate fringe--but her voice made maximum appearance, so to speak. She sang, my God, she sang with a power and a timbre that pulled at us just short of touch, as when static electricity makes the hair on an arm stand straight when a hand moves just above it. Holding the microphone like she was sipping from it, she sent that voice surging and tremoring, letting it ride and fall with the cascades of the instruments but always atop, always reaching the words out and out to the crowd of us. She activated the air of the Medicine Lodge: the floorful of soloes being danced in front of the Roadkill Angels band was magnificent, the 4-H kids especially shining at the quick-limbed undulations this music wanted.

Up near the bandstand I spotted Mariah and Riley in conference, I assumed about their coverage of this spree. But then he looked at her for a moment, smoothed his mustache before nodding, and put his notebook in his pocket while she went over along the wall to where Howard Stonesifer and his ancient mother were sitting, Howard watching the dancers and
his mother watching the dancers and Howard. To old Mrs. Stonessifer's astonishment and Howard's blushing agreement, Mariah with royal fuss hung her cameras one after another around Howard's neck for safekeeping.

He sat there proudly sashed and bandoliered with her photographic gear as she and Riley found space on the dance floor.

This was not the slow clinging spin in each other's arms as it had been at The Lass in a Glass. But even while dancing apart as they now were, the two of them responded to each other like partners who have heard all possible tunes together. Again, as that night in Chinook, their eyes steadily searched each other's.

When the song ended, they headed toward me.

I favored Riley with the question, "So how would you describe this band?" He responded, "It definitely isn't elevator music."

Mariah, though, was the one with something on her mind. She stood in front of me, a bit flushed from her round on the floor with Riley. "Dad," she said, "how about dancing with me?"

"Mariah, I can't dance to this stuff. Parts of my body would fall off."
She gave me a monumental grin and said, "I'll bet they can tone
the music
just enough to keep you in one piece," and she flashed away to
the bandstand to put in her request to the singer.

I started to take this chance to say to Riley what I needed to,
but he beat me to the draw by digging into the front pocket of his
pants. "Before I forget, here," and he handed me a folded wad of money.

Inquiry must have been written on me as large as the bankroll I
was gaping down at. "For Bago repairs, courtesy of the expense account,"
Riley droned in what was probably a bean counter voice.

At that, I rapidly performed fingerprint arithmetic on the currency and
sure enough, dented grill-lost hubcap-assorted ailing windows—and what
all, it was the whole damages. All this and the surprise remuneration
finally
delivered by Baloney Express. By God, business was definitely picking
up as Montana approached its second hundred years.

I had to ask. "What'd you make up to charge this much off to?"

"Helicopter rental," said the scribbler nonchalantly.

"Heli—? Christamighty, how are you ever going to get the BB
to believe that?"
"By the note I stuck on that says we also used the flight to spot mountain goats up behind your ranch."

After that, I almost hated to give him my news. And at first it did stupefy him. Riley was resilient, though, and by the time Mariah got back to tow me onto the dance floor, we left him looking only a little fogged over.

"So we've survived the nicks of time..."

The music still had enough steel in it to be sold by the metric ton, but the woman singer was almost gentle now.

"Done our best against the tricks of time..."

Whatever Mariah and I may have lacked in grace as a dance team we made up for in tall, our long McCaskill legs putting us at an eyelevel above almost all the other couples'. There was a privileged feeling in
this, like being swimmers through water controlling itself into small bobbing waves, hundreds of them but each one head-sized. I started to say something to Mariah about the specialness of this a.m. guitar cotillion scene, but saw she was immersed in it too, her eyes alight as our slow tour of the floor in each other's arms brought us past what seemed the entire community of the Two Medicine country.

"They'll say of us that
we had a past..."

Elbow to elbow, wall to wall, the Medicine Lodge was a rainbow swirl of twined couples. Dancers came in all varieties. A tall young woman with a ponytail stared soulfully over the hairline of her partner half a head shorter than her. Of the English Creek contingent, plaid-shirted Harold Busby, with an Abe Lincoln beard since I'd last seen him, twirled by with his wife Melody in a swishing black skirt with white fringe.

"But we know our way
to now at last..."

Althea Frew freighted me a chiding look as she steered an apprehensive Fred Musgrave by us. I felt a rump bumpt and glanced back to find it
was Kenny, his jeans tucked in the tops of his boots, earnestly waltzing
with his arms cocked wide and his behind canted out, as if about to
grapple with Darleen as she tried to match steps with him.

But of them all, people in costumes of the past century, people
dressed in everyday, people with generations behind them in the Two
country, people newer to its demanding rhythm of seasons--of them all,
I concentrated on Mariah, her lanky form perfectly following mine as
we danced, her face intent on mine, on this time together. I could not
but think to myself, how did Marce and I ever do it, give the world this
flameheaded woman?

After the music, we rejoined Riley. He and Mariah talked matters
over a last time as I just listened. Before any too much could be said,
though, marching orders for all of us came from Althea, commandeering
the singer's mike: "It's time, everyone! Out, out, out!"

True to her words, the crowd did begin to sluice out of the Medicine
Lodge into the street, Amber Finletter and Arlee Zane at the door
handing out to everybody, man woman child whatever, gold-colored ballcaps
with Dawn of Montana printed
on the front. Arlee and I somehow managed to thoroughly ignore each other even while he held out a cap which I took. Behind me Riley of course wanted to know if there were any with earflaps for the Two Medicine climate, but then clapped a cap onto his frizzhead insofar as it would go and trooped on out with the rest of us.

It was breezy and then some, I will say. Quite a swooshing overhead as the wind gusted around in the tops of the cottonwoods. But Two Medicine people are born recognizing the nearest windbreak, and the centennial crowd now divided almost exactly to bunch in front of either the Mercantile or the Gleaner office, the empty lot with the flagpole between them, in a way that reminded me of sheep on either side of a fast creek.

Meanwhile Riley for once had an idea that was useful as well as bright. I reluctantly loaned him the keys and he hustled off and moved the Bago around to the alley behind the Merc and the Gleaner, parking it broadside across the back of the flagpole lot to block at least a fraction of the wind.
Before I quite knew it, Althea had herself and me up into the back of Arlee Zane's auctioneering pickup, our vehicular speaking stand for the occasion. Above, the ropes still sang in their pulleys on the flagpole, but Althea seemed to regard it as the most refreshing weather of the entire century as she bustled forward to the microphone setup to introduce me.

I only half-heard her toasty testimonial to me, occupied as I was with my own words to come, the shapes and shadows of all I had to try to articulate. When is a person ever fit to speak for his native patch of ground? Old Churchill must have been something beyond a human being. Too quickly, Althea's pertinent part was ringing out--"and it's my deep personal pleasure to present to you our Dawn of Montana
speaker, Jick McCaskill!—and I was up there peering out over the loudspeaking apparatus atop the pickup cab and having the microphone
bestowed on me reverently by Althea.

There in the half-light, sunrise impending only a number of minutes away, I could make out individual faces of the crowd. I could see Mariah's Dawn of Montana cap, backward on her head to keep the bill out of the way of her camera. I could pick out the screen glow of Riley's word processor where he'd set it up on the pickup fender down in front of me.

For the first time, it struck me that words of mine here might pass into print via Riley. The Montanian's last centennial story, me at his laptop mercy. The thought of that once would have scared me spitless, but now I simply smiled at it as fact. Ink outlasts blood.

So I began.

"I don't really have the best feet for it, but I'm following in my mother's footsteps here. Hers was a Fourth of July speech, back when Montana was only half this old—and some of us were as young as it was possible to be, it seems now. The idea, there at that holiday gathering of the Two Medicine country in 1939, was for her to commemorate the pioneer Ben English and the creek that carries his name for us."

# Silent this morning within the greater rush of the wind, English
Creek flowed at the edge of the town, of the crowd, of the amplified reach of the speaker’s voice.

I held the pages of my speech firmly in both hands against the zephyrs both outside and within me. "Most of you knew my mother, at least in her last years, so you know that from Beth McCaskill you customarily got more of what was on her mind rather than less. I suppose it shouldn’t have been any surprise"—although it mightily had been; I could yet see my father in breathless freeze beside me on the picnic grass as we heard her multiply that occasion up from mere ritual—"when she began to speak not only about English Creek, where my father’s ranger station was at the time, but of Noon Creek, where she was born on the ranch I have operated for the past forty years."

I drew a breath and made it into those words of my mother’s:

"'Two creeks, two valleys, two claims on my heart,' she said on that day in 1939. And being Beth McCaskill she was not about to stop at that. No, she proceeded to call the roll of dead ranches along Noon Creek—of the families who had to leave those places during the Depression
with the auction hammer echoing in their ears. The Torrance place, the Emrich place, the Chute place, old Thad Wainwright's place. The Fain place, the Eiseley place, the Nansen place. Places, all, she knew as vacant and doomed; but where my hotblooded brother and the Leona of them found spring shelter for what their bodies wanted.

"Places that are still being added to, yet today, across the emptying parts of this state. A little while back you maybe read, as I did, how Riley Wright summed up a lot of this: 'Of all of Montana's hard weather, the reliably worst has been its economic climate.'"

Only the sound of the wind making the cottonwoods give followed into the pause of his words.

"There are goodbyes to be said today besides our farewell to Montana's original century," I spoke it out while watching the writing figure. "The person down here doing the story of our ceremony, the selfsame Riley Wright, is one of those who is leaving for a life elsewhere than Montana. What he's going to find to say about us this morning, heaven only knows and even it usually has to guess, where Riley is concerned." For that he cocked an applesauce eyebrow at me but kept scribbling. "Riley and I
have not always seen eye to eye. But I'll say this for him: life never looks quite the same after Riley Wright has shown it to you."

I paused and peeked down at him as the crowd clapped a sendoff for Riley. It was hard to be sure under partial light, but the sonofagun may have blushed.

I made myself resume.

"The other leave-taking, the one that makes today's goodbyes plural, is geographically closer to home. This one--no offense to Riley, but this other one knocks an even bigger hole in me. This other one is my--"

My throat caught, and I looked out at my daughter in the crowd, Mariah with her camera down, giving me her validating grin; I swallowed as hard as I ever have and finished the saying of it:

"--self."

There was a stir at that. Of all the honors there are, that moment of the Two country's twinge toward me is what I will take.

"My leaving is of my ranch," I went on. "The Reese place, as it began. Part of it also the Ramsay place, the homestead of my grandmother's side of the family. The McCaskill place, I guess since I had a moment
of sanity about forty years ago and came back to the Two country from other pursuits and married Marcella and we settled in to work the place, our place. Now, though. Now like so many others I've had to face the day when the land and the McCaskill family no longer match up. It is no easy thing to admit"--all of them within listening range knew so, yet I had to tell them the specific hardness of it--"because I have always believed, as the people before us did and as I'm sure you have, that he who owns the soil owns up to the sky."

His words climbed as he threw his head back to outspreak a gust that rattled his pages, to send his voice higher, stronger. Language is the light that comes out of us. Imagine the words as if they are our way of creating earthlight--as if what is being spoken by this man in a windswept dawn is going to carry everlastingly upward, the way starshine is pulsing constantly across the sky of time to us. Up through the black canyons of space, the sparks we utter; motes of wordfire that we glimpse leaving on their constellating flight, and call history.

"So, when you've got it to do," I resumed like a man resolved,
"you wrestle the question until you see where it falls. The automatic answer is to let my ranch follow all the others on Noon Creek. Go the way"--the Double W way, the TriGram way, I did not even need to say--

"that such places economically have to go, we all know."

I took an even firmer grip on the pages of my talk and headed into what I had to say next.

"However."

Funny, how that lone word made Shaun Finletter suddenly look as if his arithmetic had been smudged.

"The automatic way of doing things isn't necessarily mine, any more," I kept at the matter. "I've maybe learned a little something about being usefully ornery, from the company I've been keeping these past few months."

Mariah only paused for a half-second in biting off the leader of a
next roll of film in her lightning reload of the camera. Riley gave me a gaze of kitten innocence. "Anyway," I delivered the rest of it, "I'm leaving my ranch, yes. But leaving it to..."

The Nature Conservancy guy on the other end of the phone the night before had sounded simultaneously enthused and curious, as if he wished he could peer across the distance from Helena to Noon Creek and gauge me face to face.

"Naturally we're interested in a piece of country like yours, Mr. McCaskill. We try to keep real track of what's left of the original biology there along the Rocky Mountain Front, and those native grasses on the prairie part of your place qualify for the kind of preservation we want to do. We know how you've taken care of that land. What, ah, did you have in mind?"

When I told him for comparison what TriGram through Shaun was offering me, he responded: "We don't always have the dollars to pay market value like that, but there's a way of doing it called a bargain sale. What that is, the differential between the market value of a ranch such as yours and what the Conservancy can afford to pay qualifies as a charitable
gift—it comes off your income tax load, you net out on it. Let me run some numbers by you, okay?"

After that trot across the calculator, I said to him:

"Good enough. The outfit is yours, if you can do a couple of other things for me."

"And those are?"

I laid it on him that Kenny and Darleen had to be kept on for at least a year, given a chance to perform the upkeep or caretaking or whatever on the place. "They aren't either one exactly whiz kids, but they're hell for work." My figuring was that the two of them would be able to show their worth okay within a year, but also that it conceivably might take every minute of that span.

"We can stand them, it sounds like," the Conservancy director granted in a dry tone. "And the other thing?"

When I told him, his voice sat up straighter.

"Actually, we've been thinking about a preserve for those someplace on this side of the mountains, if we could manage to get enough land together out north from Pine Butte."
"It's got to be part of the deal," I made good and sure. "The name and everything."

Through the phone earpiece I could all but hear the land honcho thinking Holy smoke, we don't get many ranchers who are such a big buddy of... Then with determination he said: "We'll do it."

I took a pleasant moment to cast a gaze east from the ranch house, out across the moonlit hay meadows and grass country between there and my fenceline with the Double W. If Pine Butte could be kept a fen, this ranch could be kept a range. After all, TriGram wanted to see maximum animal units on this piece of land, didn't it? It was about to have them. Buffalo. A whole neighboring ranchful. Right in here next to TriGram's corporate cow pasture would now be the Toussaint Rennie Memorial Bison range, original inhabitants of this prairie, nice big rambunctious butt ing ones. Let the sonofabitching Double W tend its fences against those, for a change.

The Nature Conservancy headman, trying to keep delight out of his tone, carefully checked to see that we were really concluded.
"That's all the details of our transaction then, Mr. McCaskill? We sure appreciate your doing this."

"One more thing," I said into the phone. "Happy next hundred years."

"I guess I see this as giving back to the earth some of the footing it has given to me and mine," I told the intent crowd now. "If we McCaskills no longer will be on that particular ground, at least the family of existence will possess it. That kind of lineage needs fostering too, I've come to think—our kinship with the land."

Mariah, of course operating as if she and I and the camera were the only three for miles around, had come climbing up over the bumper onto front fender of the auctioneering pickup and was kneeling there for a closeup of me framed between the loudspeaker horns.

"Speaking of lineage..." I resorted to with a rueful glance down at this ambushing daughter.

When the audience had its laugh at that, I looked from the impervious lens of Mariah to them and back to her again before I could resume.
"Mariah here is going into the next hundred years in her own style, as you might expect. She begins it immediately after our ceremony today. With Riley leaving—our loss and California's gain, but they need all they can get—maybe the Montanian figured it might as well trade in Mariah's job too. In any case, her new arrangement is—

I don't know what something like this is actually called, but Mariah is being turned loose on this state as the Montanian's photographer at large."

When she and I came off the dance floor to him this morning, Riley looked at her as if he was seeing the last one of a kind. "I still think we could've made it work this time, Mariah Montana."

"I don't," Mariah said gently but firmly, "and that'd have been a fatal start right there."

"You know, that's the problem with reality checks," Riley said as if he'd been asked for a diagnosis. "They fuck up the possibilities of imagination."

"Better that than us," she gave him back, keeping her tone as
deliberately light as his. "Riley, you know what?"

"I hope you're not going to tell me this builds character," he said in the voice of a man somewhere between keeping his pride and facing loss.

"Huh uh, worse. What I finally figured out is that you and I love just some of each other--mostly the job parts. We collaborate like a house afire. If the centennial trip went on forever maybe we could too. But that's just it--beyond our work, we make trouble for each other. We didn't manage to wear any of the rough edges off each other in three years of being married, and trying it again would be just more of the same. New try, new place, new whatever, but we'd be the same." Mariah cocked her head as if it was her turn to diagnose. "We're each in our own way so ungodly focused."

"Spoken like a photographer," he couldn't resist intoning. "What it is, Riley," she said as quietly as before, "we can't keep up with each other. I don't know anything to be done about that and I think you don't either." Still looking at Riley, Mariah inclined her head toward me. "Jick McChurchill here would probably say we're geared
too different. You've got a definite direction of what you want to do, and it turns out I've got mine."

"I've got to point out, Mariah," Riley said with care, "staying put is a funny kind of direction."

"Mmm. I know. I'm maybe a funny kind." She looked at me in a way that made Riley do the same. "I come by it honestly, huh?" But then she turned to him again, her gray eyes delivering quietly but definitely to his gray and blue. "If I go to California because of your chance there, I'm tagging after. If you stay here in Montana because of me, you're tagging after. Riley, neither one of us is cut out for that, are we."

Riley had known ever since the motel in Ekalaka; Mariah was distinctive even in fashioning a goodbye. After that, the BB was undoubtedly the easier case, Mariah letting him blab on about how very unique her photowork in the centennial series had been until he found himself agreeing that her best use of talent would be to keep on picturing Montana as it struggled with Century Number Two, wouldn't it.

And so Riley for once didn't argue. There in the Medicine Lodge, waiting to do their last piece before it became Mariah's job to rove
and his to transplant himself to the Globe column, he managed at least a semblance of his sly look as he said to her: "You may be right—we're maybe a little advanced to be playing tag." But for half a moment I felt sorry for Riley, going off to California with just his mustache for company.
"The last some months," the microphone carried my words, "I've been on the go in parts of this state of ours that I'd scarcely even heard of. A lot of my daily reading since the Fourth of July has been roadmaps, and it eventually dawned on me that Montana is the only state of the continental forty-eight that is a full time zone wide. Where the Clark Fork River crosses into Idaho it gains into Pacific time, and when the Missouri River flows across into North Dakota an hour is adjusted onto life from there to the Great Lakes—while we here beside the Continental Divide that sends those rivers on their way exist on Mountain time. And I wonder whether Montana maybe fills a span of time all to itself in more than just that map sense.

"An awful amount of what I saw across this state, what Riley wrote of and Mariah caught in her pictures, does raise the question of what we've got to celebrate about. Montana has a tattered side. You look at the blowing away prairies that never should have been cut by a plow and the little towns they are taking with them, you look at the dump heaps and earth poisons left by mining, you look at so many defeated lives on the Indian reservations, you look at a bottom wage way of life that drives
our young people generation after generation to higher jobs elsewhere, you look at the big lording it over the little in so much of our politics and economy and land--you look at these warps in Montana and they add up in a hurry to a hundred years of pretty sad behavior. Then you draw a deep breath, get a little of this endemic fresh air sweeping through your brain"--the wind surged stronger than ever through the treetops, and members of the audience made sure they weren't under cottonwood limbs that could crash down--"and you look at the valleys that are the green muscles on the rock bones of this state, you look at the last great freeflowing river in the continental U.S., the Yellowstone; you look at people who've been perpetually game to outwork the levels of pay here because they can love a mountain with their eyes while doing it, you look at the unbeatable way the land latches into the sky here atop the Rocky Mountain Front or on the curve of the planet across the eastern Montana plains--and you end up calculating that our first hundred years could have been spent worse. So, what I've come to think is that Montana exists back and forth that way. That this wide state is a kind of teeter-totter of time. Maybe that expanse, and our born-into-us belief
here that life is an up and down proposition, are what give us so much room and inclination to do both our worst and our best."

Do they hear us yet, the far suns of the night? A hundred years may be only enough to start the waft of our words, the echo chorus of what we have been like. The voices wing up and up, trying to clock us into the waiting sum of time. A man on the roof of the Helena Herald that morning an exact century ago, shouting down into the streets the telegraph news: "Statehood!" The accented cluck of a Danish-born teamster reining his horses around as they
grade the roadbed of the Great Northern railway. A homestead
wife weeping alone in her first days of cabined isolation, saying
over and over "I will not cry, I will not" until at last she does
not. The potentates of Anaconda Copper calculating the profits
of extraction and the social costs of it not at all. Congresswoman
Jeannette Rankin's unique double "No!" in the stampede votes for
war, spaced apart by the years between World War One and World War
Two. Grudges and fears, our tellings carry starward. Doubts and
dreams and hopes. Eloquence of loss, a Montana specialty. Love's
whisperings . . .

Sounds of distance have changed with the years. I found so when
I placed the other call last night, after settling the ranch matter
with the Conservancy. No longer comes the silent stretch of time as
you wait for the other person to be summoned to the phone. The
phone miles now have a
kind of fizz to them, a restless current of connection as if the air is being held apart to make way for the words back and forth. I have made other calls in my life that I thought were vital—Christamighty, I had just done one—but what I said into the phone now pulsed out of me as if I had been rehearsing for it forever. Maybe a person at last knows when he is ready. Maybe he simply can't stand being unready any longer. Whichever, I spoke it all into the hummin listening miles.

"Jick, I didn't expect...isn't this sort of—quick?" Leona said at the other end.

"Not if you count from fifty years ago. I'd say we better get started and make up for lost time."

"Is this a proposal? Because you know I haven't been able to bring myself to remarry...and you said you aren't really sure either—"

"A kind of one. Enough of one to get us started, how about."

At that, she was nowhere near as overcome with surprise as a certain son of hers had been. This morning when Mariah had gone off to the bandstand to modulate the music and I'd used the opportunity to tell Riley what Leona and I intended, he looked at me like Wednesday
looks at Friday. Then asked in a stupefied way:

"Wait, wait, let me get this straight. Are you telling me you’re marrying my mother?"

I couldn't resist. Actually, I didn't try overly hard.

"Who said anything about marrying? We figure we’ll just see how things go."

Even over the phone I'd almost been able to feel the smile that came into Leona's tone after I suggested we simply try life together, preacherless. The two of us, spend some time here in Gros Ventre in the house I'd be buying with the ranch money, some time there on the Wright ranch if I solemnly promised to Morgan not to get in the way—or whenever we felt like it, do some Bago travel.

"Without being chaperoned by Riley and Mariah?" she came back at me with a laugh.

"We outlasted them fair and square, so here's our chance," I advocated.

She had to turn serious, though. We both did. Leona phrased it slowly, still more than a little afraid of it.
"Jick, is this because of Alec in some way?"

I wanted that said, I needed her to know the full terms. It freed me to state the new truth:

"No. Finally, it isn't because of that."

The rest of my phone performance tumbled out fast. I told my listener that the stirrings I felt were for her, Leona Wright as she now was, and not some vanished girl who never married my brother. That I knew we were both shaky about defining love at our age but I hoped she felt enough toward me to give this a try. That the time we had already spent together justified sharing some more, that we needed to see whether it could extend into years. Into lasting together. The gold ring kind of lasting if it developed that way, but any kind that proved enduring was worth a whirl. That--

Leona quit listening and spoke back across the miles. "Yes," she magically said. "Yes to it all. Let's be together, Jick, and see from there."

We spent a delicious excited minute working out how and when to
start, then each fell silent, not wanting the goodbye. After a bit
Leona said in that woodsmoke voice of hers:

"Jick?"

"Yeah?"

"You are a wonder."

All, all the spoken sparks we are capable of kindling, trying
to pattern us against the nightdrop. And reflecting back into us,
as this man is saying in the Gros Ventre near-dawn, as the afterglint
we know as memory.

"Memories are stories our lives tell us," I went to now, seeing
Althea check her watch meaningfully. "I believe that you can't come to a
day such as this one, a gathering such as we all are, without hearing
those murmurs from within ourselves. One such, in me this moment, is
of seeing Lila Sedgwick on these streets, when she was as old as I
was young. Lila's own mind by then had some better days than others,
but no days were clear, any more. Yet it was because of Lila, the
uncrowned Lila when she was young in 1889, that we are at this ceremony this dawn. When Lila's mind no longer could tell her the story of that morning a hundred years ago, it lived on in another memory. Toussaint Rennie told it to me, and I want to speak it now, to pass it into your memories."

The cadences of Toussaint, the rememberer of the earlier Two country, began in me now.

"Way before dawn. Out to the flagpole, everybody. It was still dark as cats, but Dantley from the livery stable had a lantern. Lila says, "This is the day of statehood. This is Montana's new day." Sedge puts up the new flag, there it was."

Then in my own refound voice:

"As those first Montanans did, let's now put up our flag and, for as long as our eyes or our memories hold out, see what we can make our days bring."

As the applause resounded the flag-raising team set to business, the furled cylinder of fabric being carried to them at the base of the pole by many arms..."
The next thing was, I was blindsided by Mariah, hugging and kissing me and declaring I had an entire new career ahead as a public spier. I told her I hoped to Christ not, then held her just far enough away to gauge as I said: "Petunia, I hope you're ending up out of all this okay. I mean, without any--company?"

Mariah performed the little sidetoss of her head, the proud cascade of hair clearing away from her gray eyes as if offering me the clearest possible look into them, into her.

"You know how Montana is," she stated with a grin. "Somebody interesting will come along." She swung her gaze just for a moment past me to the figure scrutinizing the flag ceremony and tapping steadily into his writing machine, soldiering on. "Riley did."

Now ready to hoist, four men take grips on the lariat-thick lanyard...

"So when do you have to head down the road?" Mariah issued next, her camera up and ready but not yet firing as we turned to watch the flag-raising.

"Right after this." By afternoon the Bago and I would be there at the other ceremony, when Leona and her women's club videoed
the Crazy Mountains country for their Sisters of Peace to see.

"Tell your sweetie for me I hope her Russian pronunciation knocks their garters off in Moscow," Mariah instructed.

"I surely will."

The flag-raisers had their hands full. Shaun Finletter and Joe Prentiss and Kevin Frew and Larry Van Der Wende, strong men all, were hefting down hard on the rope, but only slowly did the flag do any significant unfolding, the attached end streaming up in a draggy thin triangle as more and more of the tremendous bundle lifted out of the holders' arms. They were going to have to go some to get it all the way aloft by sunrise.

Then, though. Then the streamer was high enough to reach the full wind, funneling over the lattice trunks between the buildings, and the golden cloth caught at that force, bellying like a boatsail. The men pulled and pulled, the giant flag billowing out and out, writhing up through the air.

"Christamighty, listen to that!"

Why I let that out I don't know, for Mariah beside me plainly
was hearing the same astounding thing. Everybody in Gros Ventre was,
maybe everybody period. Now snugged against the top of the pole, up
in that storm of air the blowing flag was making a sound that filled
the sky, a roaring crackle like a vast fire burning. Blizzard, chinook,
squall, gale, I thought I had heard them all but never this. Ultimate
Montana wind and great field of cloth, they were creating thunderous melody
of flow over our heads.

The central emblem panel of The Two Medicine Country\[1889\][1989\]
Greets The Dawn of Montana shimmered, as if in emphasis, every time
the wind powerfully snapped the flag into another loud rumple. But
suddenly there was a new, quicker, dancier snap of rhythm within the
flag roar. The upper border of the flag, the sheep-cow-horse repeating
design, was flying on its own, as if the livestock were bucking free
of the heavier fabric beneath. Then the panel below that, with the
sewn-on representation of a Blackfeet chief's headdress, tore free and
similarly flew from the flag rope on its own.

The crowd, stunned, awed, whatever, gaped up in silence until there
came the vexed voice of Althea Frew:
"Oh, foo."

One by one the other sewn seams were freeing themselves there in the wild ride of the wind, the bottom border of forest and stream abruptly wing of a separate ribbed banner, next the stitchwork panel of Gros Ventre's buildings undulating independently as if the wind had lifted the entire town.

"Every piece up there's got a mind of its own!" a voice--odds were it was one of the Baloney Express bunch--called out, setting off laughter.

"By God, this'll give us something to remember!" someone else shouted, and the laughter grew.

"Yeah, hell, we're getting all different kinds of flags out of this, for the same price as one!" issued from someone else, which set the crowd to really cheering and clapping, waves of sound to match the flapping symphony above.

Mariah had been clicking the overhead parade of banners as if motorized, but she stopped now and jiggled me in the ribs.

"What a zammo morning. We're next, Jick," she announced as keenly as if she and I were ticketed on the next ascension of wind.
So to speak, so we were: the mountainline of the Two country
up over English Creek and Noon Creek that the two of us had stitched on
came flapping free, Roman Reef and Phantom Woman Mountain and Flume Gulch
and Jericho Reef dancing in the sky. I had to chuckle at that, the
geographical pennant of the McCaskills, as Mariah

swiftly moved low to one side of him and captured the picture
to go with these words, of Jick with his bearded head thrown back
as he laughed upward at the multiplying banners of the centennial.
As she clicked, day's arrival was definite, the sun articulating
its long light onto the land.