

the night their stories ember through the decades.

41 "I'm Roger Tate. I seem to be the oldest of this gang,
if the truth be told. Maybe that's why they let me drive the van.

Or maybe it's the fact that it's my van. Anyway, what I'd tell

you about is my dad and those Model T's. We raised sheep out

a hell of a ways from town, west from Choteau there, and when my

dad bought his first Model T around about 1920 he figured it was

a wonderful advance, you know. Any time he wanted now he could

scoot in to town and get lit up. Only thing was, every time he

came home from a spree like that he'd never bother to open a gate.

Drive right through all the barbwire gates between town and our

place, ^{four}~~eight~~ of them. I was misfortunate enough to be the only

boy in the family, so the next day he'd send me out to fix those

doggone gates. I must have mended those ^{four}~~eight~~ gates ^{forty}~~fifty~~ times apiece.

That habit of his was kind of hard on cars, too, which was how

we ended up with five Model T's. Eventually my dad gave out before

the world supply of whiskey did, and it fell to me to build the

ranch back up. But I've often thought, you know, thank the Lord

that the old boy had gone into sheep instead of anything else.

Not even he could entirely drink up the wool money each year

before the lamb money came."

This spell of driving time alone with Mariah I figured I had better make use of. I started off conversationally, "These pictures you're breaking your fanny on, petunia--what is it you're trying to do in them, that inside-the-turtle kind of stuff Riley was talking about?"

From the corner of my eye I saw her give that little toss of head, her hair surging back over her shoulder. "Something like, I suppose. But the way I think of it is that I'm trying to do cave paintings."

I nodded and mmhmed. She'd taken the next summer after she and Riley split up, and gone to Europe to get over him. When her mother and I asked what she'd seen, her answer was caves. In France and Spain she had crouched



and crawled through tunnel after tunnel into the past to see those deep walls with their paintings of bison and horses and so on from Stone Age times. Maybe ten thousand years, she said, those bison had been grazing and those horses running there in the stone dark.

The warning wink of brake lights. Like a flexible creature of the night, the chain of cars compresses itself to a halt on the shoulder of the freeway, then moves on.

"Bill Bradley, I am. Not the long tall basketball senator, as you maybe already noticed. I guess I would want to tell about the grasshoppers. My folks and I was farming over towards Malta there in the Depression and just when we figured things couldn't get any worse, here came those 'hoppers and cleaned us out of our crop worse than any hail storm ever could of. An absolute cloud of grasshoppers--you just can't believe how those buggers were. They sounded bad enough in the air, that sort of whirring noise the way sage chickens make when they take off, only a thousand times louder. But on the ground was worse. You could actually hear those things eating. Millions of grasshoppers and every last one

of them chewing through a stem of wheat. I left my coat hanging
on the door handle of the pickup and they even ate that to shreds.
It still makes me about half sick to remember the sound of those
grasshoppers eating, eating, eating.

"Lascaux and Altamira," she spoke the cave names as if talking of friends we both knew. "That's what I want my work to be like." Her voice came low and lovely, remembered tone of another woman I had loved, her mother.

"Do you see what I mean, Jick?" This next part she seemed to want me to particularly understand. "Something people can look back at, whenever, and get a grasp of our time. Another hundred years from now, or a hundred thousand--the amount of time between shouldn't make any difference. If my pictures are done right, people whenever ought to be able to say, 'oh, that's what was on their minds then.'"

And I think I did savvy what she was getting at, that in a way--the waiting, the watching, the arrowing moment--she with her camera was in that cavewall lineage of portrait-painting hunters as patient as stone.

Down the long slope ahead of us, the car at the front of the
cavalcade delivered its brakelight signal of stopping, blink
blinketyblinkblink blink blink.

"My name is ~~Tony~~^{Nick} Russo. I came into this country after the
Second World War. Oh, I'd been west before, kind of. See, when
I went into the Civilian Conservation Corps in '34, just a punk kid
from an alley in Philadelphia, the next thing I knew I was on
a
the fireline in that big Selway forest fire in Idaho. Then I went
from the CCC straight into the Army, so I was already a sergeant
when the war hit. I saw Montana from a troop train and that was
it for me. Little towns with all that land and sky around them.
Right there I told myself that when my military time was in--if
I lived to get my time in--I'd come out here and see if I could
make something of myself."

On our minds. I could agree with ^{Mariah} ~~her~~ there. We wear what has happened to us like a helmet soldered on.

Off the freeway to our right, the lights of the town of Boulder, which signaled the caravan's next stop and swap of Riley.

4 The used cars, a used man in each, move on.

4 " My name is Bud Aronson and I was a packer until I got too stove up to do it any more. What you maybe want to hear from me happened when I was pretty much in the prime of life, back about 1955, and figured I could handle just about anything that came along, until this did. That ~~fall~~ ^{hunting season} I was running a pack string into the Bob Marshall Wilderness, so when there was a plane crash way back in there, I was the guy the search party sent for to bring the two bodies out. The plane had slammed into a mountain, pretty high up, and so the first thing I did was wrap the bodies in a
 ?
manti apiece just as they were and then we slid them on the snow

down the mountain to the trailhead where we had to camp that night.

See, my intention was to fold each body face-down across a pack

saddle the next morning. But that night turned clear and cold,

and in the morning we could not get those bodies to bend. Of all the

packing I had ever done, this was a new one on me, how to fit those

stiff bodies onto packhorses. What I finally did was take the

biggest packhorse I had and tie both bodies on it, one lengthwise

along each side for balance. But that was the worst I ever handled,

balancing that cargo of what had been men.



On a straight stretch where the Bago's headlights steadily fed the freeway into our wheels, I cast another quick glance over at Mariah.

The interiors of the two of us inside this chamber of vehicle; caves within the cave of night. What does it take to see the right colors of life? Whether or not that was on her mind as on mine, Mariah too was intent. She sat staring straight ahead through the windshield as though she could pierce the night to that frontmost car where Riley was listening and recording.

The night flew by the motorhome's windows as I thought over whether to say the turbulence in me or to keep on trying not to.

"I'm Julius Walker. This is tough to tell. But if you want to know the big things about each of our lives, this has got to be mine. Quite a number of people lost a son over there in Vietnam. But my wife and I lost our daughter Sharon. All through high school in Dutton, what she most wanted was to be a nurse.

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pick up from p. 128

She went on and took the nursing course at Columbus Hospital
there in Great Falls and then figured she'd get to see some of
the world by going into the Army. I kick myself every day of my
life since, that I didn't try to talk her out of that. She ended
up at the evacuation hospital at a place called Cu Chi. Sharon
was killed right there on the base, in a mortar attack. They
eventually found out there were tunnels everywhere under Cu Chi.
The Americans were right on top of a whole nest of Viet Cong.
Good God Almighty, what were those sonsabitches Johnson and Nixon
thinking about, getting us into something like that?

"Mariah," it broke out of me, "I don't think I can go on with this."

In the dimness of the Bago's cab her face whitely swung around to
me, surprise there I more could feel than see. ⁴¹ A minute of nothing said.

The pale glow of the dashlights seemed a kind of visible silence
between us.



Then she asked, her eyes still steady on me: "What brought this on?"

Here was opportunity served up under parsley, wasn't it. Why, then, didn't I speak the answer that would have included her situation with Riley and my own with the memory flood unloosed by the sight of Shirley in Missoula, the sound of Toussaint's voice ventriloquizing in me at the buffalo range, the war report of bald ghost warrior Ed Heaney, the return of Big Hole longings across fifty years, the ambush of Pat Hoy's lonesome death, the poised-beside-the-bar sensation again of Stanley Meixell and Velma Simms and the mystery of man and woman; the answer, simply but totally, "All this monkeying around with the past."



Instead I said, "I'm not sure I'm cut out for this rambling life, is all. With you newspaper people, it's long days and short nights."

"There's more to it than that, though, isn't there," she stated.

"Okay, so there is," I admitted, wondering how to go on with the confession that I was being spooked silly by things out of the past.

"It's--"

"--the ranch, isn't it," she helpfully spliced on for me. "You



worry about the place like you were a mother cat and it was your only kitten."

"Well, yeah, sure," I acknowledged. "I can't help but have the place on my mind some."

The caravan resumes speed, into a curve of the highway,
another bend toward the past.

"And I'm Jerome Walker. If there's one thing in my life
that surprises me, it's that I've ended up in a city. Yeah, yeah,
I know Great Falls isn't Los Angeles or New York. But pretty damn
near, compared to how Julius and I grew up out in the hills between
Cascade and Augusta on our folks' cow outfit. The home place there
had been our grandfather's homestead, and I suppose I grew up
thinking the Walkers were as natural to that country as the
jackrabbits. But I turned out to be the one who cashed it all in,
back in 1976, when the wife and I moved in to the Falls to live on
our rocking chair money. I suppose in earlier times we'd have just
moved to town, Cascade or Augusta either one--a lot of towns in
those days had streets of retired ranchers they'd call something

like Horse Thief Row, you know. But our kids were already in the
Falls, in their jobs there, and naturally the grandkids were an
attraction. So we went in, too. It's still kind of like being in
another country. I about fell over, the first time I went downtown
in the Falls and heard a grown man in a suit and tie say, 'Bye bye.'"

"I'll make you a deal," Mariah resorted to. "If you want to check on the place so bad, we'll all three go on up to the ranch after we're done in Helena ~~tomorrow~~. Riley and I have got to do some ~~stories~~ ^{pieces} along the High Line anyway, and there's no real reason why we can't go through the Two country getting there. How's that sound?"

~~Sweet enough to whistle to.~~
~~Too sweet to whistle to.~~ I kept my eyes on the dark unfolding road while I asked: "And then?"

"Then you decide. After you've looked things over at the ranch, if you still think you'd rather be on your lonesome than..." she let the rest drift.

I sat up straighter behind the steering wheel. Maybe I was going to be able to disengage from this traveling ruckus fairly simply after all. "You got yourself a deal," I told Mariah with fresh heartiness.

Ahead of us the signal of blinks danced out of the night one more time. As the entire series of cars pulled over to stop again, Roger Tate's van now had become the last in line in front of us. In our headlights the sticker on Roger's rear bumper declared: Dirty Old Man, Hell--I'm a Sexy Senior Citizen.

Mariah mused, "We ought to get a bumper sticker of some kind for the Bago."

Driver seven, the last who has become first.

"My name is Dale ^{Starr}~~Copenhagen~~. What I want to talk about is, am I losing my g.d. mind or are things repeating theirselves?

I've tried to do a little thinking about it. The way all the bad

I've seen in my lifetime and figured we'd put behind us seems to

be coming around again now. People losing their farms and ranches.

Stores out of business. All the country's money being thrown around

on Wall Street. How come we can't ever learn to do better than that?

Of course we know the weather has got some kind of a more or less

basis of repeating itself. Nature does have its son-of-a-bitch side

too, doesn't ^{it.} Like the big thirty-year winters, 1886 and 1919

and 1948 and 1978. And the drought just after the first world

war and again in the Thirties and again these past years now.

But I guess what I keep wondering is, shouldn't human beings have

a little more control over themselves than the weather does over

itself?"

As he finished, into view glow the lights of Helena, thousands

of gemmed fires, each a beacon of some life young or old.

—————

Dawn is when I have always liked life most, the forming hour or so

before true day, and that next morning at the Prickly Pear ^J Valley RV Park,



with Mariah up extra early to develop her shots of the Baloney Express contingent, I went out to sit on a picnic table and watch Helena softly show off its civic ornaments in the daybreak light. The dark copper dome of the state capitol. The Catholic Cathedral's set of identical twin steeples. The pale Arabian-like spire of the Civic Center. My favorite, though, stood perched on the high side of Last Chance Gulch, above the historic buildings downtown; the old fire watchtower up on four long legs of strutwork. Like a belltower carefully brought to where it could sound alarm into every street when needed. What a daystarting view it must be from there, out over the spread city and this broad shallow bowl of cultivated valley and the clasping ring of mountains all around.

In what seemed just another minute, the sun was up. That's the trouble with dawn, it doesn't last.

A joggedy-joggedy sound came into the quiet morning. Riley was out for his run. Mariah had already done her Jane exercises on the floor of the Bago. These two kept everything about themselves toned up except their heads. I watched as Riley rounded the endmost motorhome and cantered along the loop road toward the Bago and myself. He ran in

a quick pussyfoot style, up on his toes as if dancing across hot coals.

"Feel better?" I greeted him as he trudged into our site, gulping air into his heaving chest.

"There's nothing like it," he panted, "except maybe chasing cars."

For a change, I didn't feel on the outright warpath against the guy, pacified as I was with the prospect of getting home to Noon Creek later today and not budging from there when Mariah and him set out to invade the rest of Montana. Let history whistle through their ears all it wanted. Mine were ready for a rest. So it was without actual malice, just kind of clinically, that I pointed out the bare wheelhub where the hubcap had flown off after Riley's tire-changing job of last night, and he gave a wheezing sigh and a promise to add a new hubcap onto the expense account along with the buffalohead dent in the hood. He'd regained some oxygen by now and started to take himself into the Bago for a shower.

"Whup, off limits yet," I warned. "Mariah's souping ^{film."} ~~X~~

Riley nodded to save precious breath. As he dragged over and draped onto the picnic table beside me to wait, I ^{couldn't help but notice,} ~~studied~~ his running costume.

Skintight and shiny, it ^dmake him look like he'd had a coat of black paint

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applied from the waist down to just above his knees. I let my curiosity ask: "What 's that Spandex stuff made of?"

"Melted money," Riley formulated. "It'd be a whole lot cheaper to just do a Colter, I do admit."

As John Colter was the mountain man who was stripped naked and barefoot by the Blackfeet and given a few hundred yards headstart before they began chasing him with murderous intent for a couple of days--talk about a marathon--I pleasantly enough passed the time imagining Riley in nude version hotfooting it across this valley going oo! ow! on the prickly pear cactuses.

But shortly the side door of the Bago opened and Mariah poked her head out and gave the all clear. She studied Riley in his running getup. "Good morning, Thunder Thighs."

In actual fairness, Riley's legs were not truly scrawny; but sectioned as they were into the top portion of pore-hugging black fabric and the elongation of contrasting skinwhite below, they did kind of remind a person of the telescoped-out legs on Mariah's tripod. But she'd said what she said with a grin, and although Riley gave her a considerable look,

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he decided not to go into combat over his lower extremities and instead asked, "How'd your geezer shots come out?"

"Show you after breakfast," she said, and somewhat to my surprise they both kept to their best behavior through that meal. Oh, still several tastes short of being sweet to each other, but civil, ever so carefully civil. Who knows, maybe it was only the temporary influence of my cheffing of venison sausage patties and baking powder biscuits swimming in milk gravy, or that Riley still was feeling sunny due to his epic of the Baloney Expressers, but in any event he perused Mariah's exactly apt photographic print of those seven bent-over elderly behinds judiciously clustered around the flat tire, seats of wisdom if there ever were, then he actually said: "Helluva picture, shooter. How good are you going to get?"

The little toss of her head, which stayed cocked slightly sideways as she eyed back at him. "How good is there?"

I honestly figured I was contributing to the general civility with my question. True, there was the consideration that the sooner

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I could get these two budged from Helena, the quicker we could motate to the ranch and I could see what that situation was. In any case, I asked: "So what kind of piece are you two going to do here today?"

Mariah looked brightly across at Riley. "We were just about to talk about that, weren't we."

"Ready when you are," Mister Geniality confirmed.

Her gaze at him stayed determinedly unclouded. "Mmm hmm. Well, I wondered if you had anything for here squirreled away in your notes."

"Actually, I did jot down one idea," he granted, spearing another biscuit.



"Trot it on out."

"I just absolutely think it captures the essence of early Helena."

"Sounds good. What is it?"

"You maybe won't be real keen on it."

"Why won't I? Come on, let's hear it."

"Promise not to get sore?"

"Riley, will you quit dinking around and just tell me what the fuck it is? I promise I'm not going to get sore, cross-my-heart-and-hope-to-die, will that do? Now then. What's this great Helena idea of yours?"

"Whores."

"What?"

"See, you're sore. I knew you would be."

Mariah expended a breath that should have swayed the trees outside.

"I. Am. Not. Sore. But here we need some humongous idea for Helena and you come up with--"

"Pioneer businesswomen. Is that better?"

"Not hardly," she spoke the words like two cubes of ice. "Riley,

take a reality check on yourself,
~~get real,~~ will you? I am not going to do any picture for that old
 half-assed male fantasy of prostitutes who just happen to be selling
 their bodies so they can save up to go to ballet school."

"That's just it. The wh--prostitutes here in Helena weren't. They
 were hard-headed real estate investors."

without mercy,
 Mariah eyed Riley ~~hard,~~ trying to see if he was on the level.

I have got to say, from the expression on his face his motive seemed
 purely horizontal. After a long moment she told him: "Say more."

Boiled down, Riley's discourse was about how, for a while back
 in the last century, the really quite extensive red-light district of
 Helena generated the funds for its, uhmm, practitioners to buy their
 own places of enterprise and that, whether you approved of their
 profession or not, their sense of local investment made them civic
 mothers just as much as any downtown mercantilist was a civic father.
 It of course didn't last, he said; that self-owned tenderloin trade
 went the way of other small frontier capitalists, done in by bigger
 market forces. But why shouldn't he and Mariah tell the story of

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those women, who'd tried to hold onto some financial independence in their desperate lives, just as readily as they would the one of some pioneer conniver who'd made his pile selling dry goods? I had to admit, it was something to think about--who qualifies when it comes to history. Mariah too seemed to be mulling pretty hard by the time Riley got done dissertating.

From some distance off came the sound of someone opening the side door of a rig and announcing, "Going to be another hot one today, Hazel."



Mariah at last granted that Riley's idea was maybe worth a try
but-he'd-better-know-what-he's-talking-about-and-not-make-this-just-
some-dippy-piece-about-whores-with-hearts-of-gold etcetera and when
the newspaper aces

went up to the state historical society to search out old photos of that
domestically-owned red-light district, I decided to tag along. # I ought to have

known better than to hope that the two of them would get their photographic
digging over with in a hurry and we could head to the Two country while
the day was yet young, though. After some hours of killing time in
the historical society I had all

but memorized the countless exhibits about Montana's past. I had squinted
at every everloving piece of the cowboy art of Charley Russell, reminded
all the while of what Riley had said in one of his most notorious columns--



that Montanans were as proud of the guy as if he had been Bertrand or Jane. By then my feet were like walking on a pair of toothaches and so I ~~went~~ ^{trudged} upstairs one more time to check in the place's library, where Mariah and Riley had said they'd meet me as soon as they surfaced from the photograph archives. Naturally, no trace of either of them. But this time I decided I would just find a place to sit until they eventually presented themselves.

Yet sitting doing nothing is not my best pastime either. Particularly not in a library, for it brought to mind Marcella, the winter we started going together when she was the librarian in Gros Ventre and I was conspicuously her most frequent patron.

No, I told myself, don't let it happen, don't get yourself swept up in one of those memory storms. My mind determinedly in neutral, I watched the library traffic, so to speak. Over behind the librarian's desk was a distinguished guy wearing a man with a tie and a mustache both, and though he was no Marcella he ~~at least~~ looked more or less civil. People came up to ask him various things, but I could hear that about every second one of them was pursuing genealogy.

Which set me to thinking. Family tree is nothing it ever occurred to me to skinny up very far, but with time to spend anyhow, why shouldn't I? Maybe that was the way: see what our past looked like in an official place such as this, instead of letting it ambush me barehanded as it kept doing. Of course, not even try to trace back more than the two generations to the other side of the Atlantic, that risky hidden territory of distant ancestors; just to see what I could find of the Montana McCaskills and my mother's side of the family, the Reeses, by the time Mariah and Riley ever showed up.

I stepped over to the librarian, and in gentlemanly fashion he gave me what must have been his patented short course in ancestor-seeking, which card catalogue to use when looking for what, and so on.

"Any luck?" the library man asked on his next errand past me.

None. I told him I guessed I wasn't really surprised, as we're not particularly a famous family. Actually it is somewhat spooky to learn that so far as the world at large knows, your people are nonexistent.

"You might try over here." He ushered me to what he called the Small Collections shelf. "To be honest with you, this is stray material

we don't quite know what else to do with. Reminiscences people have written for their grandkids, and odd batches of letters, and so on."

It makes you wonder, whether you really want to find anything about your family in the stray stuff. But I plucked out the name index thick binder labeled Ma through Me and took a look. The volume listed a world of Mc's, but no McCaskills. Which again didn't overly surprise me. As far as I knew, the only real skein of writing either of my parents did was my father's forest ranger diary, and a lot of that I did for him, when I rode with him as a boy on our sheep-counting trips into the mountains of his Two Medicine National Forest. Now that would have been something: nose around here in search of the past and find my own words coming out at me.

R had a binder all its own and half a dozen Reeses had pages in it, all right, but none of them my mother's parents Isaac and Anna. So much for--

Then it came to me. The old family story of the immigration officer who decided to do some instant Americanizing on my Danish grandfather when he stepped off the boat. ~~I~~ I thumbed a little deeper into the Rs and just past Rigsby, would you believe, there was my mother's father in his original form, Riis, Isak.

"Noon Creek, Montana, rancher and horse dealer," the entry stated.

"Letters to his sister in Denmark, Karen Riis Jorgensen, 1886-1930.

the Danish Folklore Archives,
Originals at University of Copenhagen; translation by Centennial

Ethnicity Study Project, with funding from Montana Committee for the

Humanities. 27 items."

And so. When the library man brought the long thin box of them to me, the letters were the farthest thing from what I had expected.

Kaereste Søster Karen--

America og Montana er altid en spændende Oplevelse. . . . The

handwriting on the photocopied pages was slanting but smooth, no hesitation

to it. Isaac's penmanship in Danish, though, was not the real surprise.

The typed translation. The man of these words was the only one of my

grandparents I held any memory of, him sitting gray-mustached and bent

but still looking thoroughly entertained by life, there at the head of

flush left

if possible, set "ae" in Kaereste and spændende as in this Danish example--

kræsen

and the slashed o in Søster like this:

JØRGENSEN

our table some long ago Sunday dinner when I could barely peek over that table. Old Isaac's family fame was for chewing his way through English as if it was gristle. My father always told of the time Isaac was asked which of his roan saddlehorses was for sale, the one out in the pasture with a herd of other ponies or the one alone in the corral, and the old boy answered, "De vun in a bunch by hisself."

But the Isaac of these letters my eyes listened to in amazement, if it can be said that way.

8 November 1889

Dearest sister Karen--

America and Montana are ever an adventure. Today I journeyed

into the community of Gros Ventre for provisions and found there a proud
new municipal adornment--beside the dirt of the village's main and
only street, a flagpole of peeled pine with a fresh American flag
bucking in the wind. Pole and flag were but hours old, as was the
news that Montana has advanced from a type of colonial governance to
become a fully equal state of the United States. In all truth, the
celebratory merriment of Gros Ventre this day was so infectious it could
not be resisted; but your Montanian brother nonetheless was truly moved

do not indent this and subsequent letter excerpts, to differentiate from Riley's newspaper pieces

by this fledging of his adopted land. D.V., Montana and we in it shall
ride the future as staunchly as that flag in the wind. . . .

#

12 June 1892

...The time is not far, my Karen, when I will have crews of teamsters
at earnful labor throughout this Two Medicine country, and, D.V., I
shall be able to stand about with my hands on my back, looking on like
a baron. Streets, roads, reservoirs, all are to be built here in
young Montana and the demand for my workhorses is constant....

I carried these first few of the translated letters over to show
the librarian. "This D.V. he sticks in every so often--do you happen
to know where that comes from?"

"Deo Volente, that'd be," he provided at once.

My high school Latin was quite a ways behind me. Oh, sure, like
anybody I could dope out Deo as meaning God, deity, all that. But the
other word. . .

"'God willing,' it means," the librarian rescued me. "You find it
a lot in letters of people who had some education back then."

Huh. Another surprise out of my horsetrading grandfather: I hadn't known there was an ounce of religion anywhere in our family line.

I went back to the table and resumed reading.

#

30 September 1897

. . . No doubt, dearest sister, you will notice a shine in the ink of these words, for I write to you as a freshly married man. Before she took mine, her name was Anna Ramsay--a lovely, lively woman, Scotland-born, who arrived here last spring as the new teacher at our Noon Creek school. . . .

After that sunburst of marriage Isaac's pages breathed to life our much wished for child, Lisabeth--my mother, born in 1900 on the first of April, and although we kidded her about it nobody was ever less of an April fool--and a few years later her brother Peter, a fine squalling boy who seems determined to visit the neighbors all along Noon Creek with his voice. The early ups and downs of the ranch I now owned were traced here. The doings of neighbors were everlastingly colored in ink. The steady pen brought the familiar snow of Two Medicine winter, and transformed it into the green of spring. Letter

after letter I read as if old Isaac, strangled by spoken language
 but soliloquizing with the best of them here on paper, somehow had
 singled me out for these relived times.

#

25 June 1914

. . . I write you this from amid scenery that would put

Switzerland in the shade. Our work camp this summer is at St. Mary
Lake while my teamsters are building roads of the new Glacier National
Park. Towering over us are mountains like castles of gray and blue, as
if kings had come down from the sky to live even more royally at the
top of the earth. Quite to my surprise, I was visited here this past
week by Anna and the children; she took the impulse to come by wagon
even though it is a tedious three-day journey from Noon Creek. Ever
her own pilot through life, is my Anna....

You want not to count on history staying pleasant or even civil,
 though.

I have been so numb with grief, dearest Karen, that not until now
have I had the heart to write about... Anna. About her death, ten days
before, in the influenza epidemic of 1918.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and swallowed hard to go on from that aching message of the loss of a wife. Isaac's Anna. My Marcella. The longest epidemic of all, loss.

Isaac too now seemed to falter, the letters foreshortened after that, even the one the next year telling of the wedding of my mother and father there at the Noon Creek ranch. Nor were there any more invocations of D.V.

I was thumbing through the final little batch of translated pages, about to admit that Isaac and I both seemed to be out of steam for this correspondence, when my eye caught on the McC at the start of a name.

In the valley next over from this one, Lisabeth's father-in-law Angus McCaskill has died. The report is that he was fixing a fence after supper when his heart gave out. Such a passing I find less than surprising, for Angus was a man whose hands were full of work from daylight to last light. Still, although we know that all things find their end, it is sobering to me that he has gone from life at an age very like my own, neither a young man nor an old.

His leaving of life has brought various matters to the front of
my mind. At the funeral of Angus, when I went to speak consolation
to his wife and now widow Adair, I was much startled to learn that she
is removing herself to Scotland. "To visit, you surely mean." "No,
to stay," she had me know. She will wait to see Varick and Lisabeth's
child, soon due, into the world. But after greeting that grandchild
with her eyes, then she will go. I was, and am, deeply baffled that
a person would take such a step. You know that Denmark will never
leave my tongue, but this has become the land of my heart. Not so,
however, for Adair McCaskill. She has a singular fashion of referring
to herself by name, and thus her requiem for the life she is choosing
to depart from was spoken as: "Adair and Montana have never fitted
together."

Those two paragraphs held me. I re-read and re-reread. My rightful name is John Angus McCaskill. Christened so for this other grandfather who abruptly was appearing out of the pen of my grandfather Isaac. My father's father, so long gone, I had never really given any thought

to. A shadow in other time. My main information on him was the remark one or the other of my parents made every so often when Mariah was growing up, that her rich head of hair came from her great⁷grandfather Angus, of the deep shade the Scotch claim is the color of their fighting blood. Yet here in ink Angus McCaskill suddenly was, right out of nowhere, or at least the portion of him that echoes in my own birth certificate. And with him, but evidently on her own terms³ was my grandmother I knew even less of. So scant was any mention of Adair McCaskill by my parents that I sensed she and my mother had been in-laws at odds, but that was all. I'd always assumed the North Fork homestead claimed her as it did Angus. Willing reversal to Scotland was new lore to me.

I read on.



Until now I have forborne from any mention of Angus McCaskill
to you in my letters, dearest sister, because I believed the time would
come when I would need to tell you the all. You will see that while
my pen was quiet about Angus my mind rarely was, for his life made a
crossroad with my own almost from the first of our days here in the Two
Medicine country, some 35 years ago. He too was but young, new and
green to this America, this Montana, when I sold him the first substantial
horse he ever owned, a fine tall gelding of dark brown with the lively
name of Scorpion. In the years that came, Angus cut an admired figure
in the community, not only as an industrious homesteader and sheepman
but also as teacher at the South Fork school--a man with poetry on his
tongue and decent intentions in his heart, was Angus. The word "neighbor"
has no better definition than the life he led. To me, however, Angus
was more than simply a neighbor, more than a familiar face atop a strong
horse which I had provided him. Greatly more, for the matter is, Angus
was in love with my Anna all the years of our marriage.

He manfully tried not to show his ardor for my wife, and never did

I have cause to believe anything improper took place between the two

of them. But his glances from across the room at her during our
schoolhouse dances and other gatherings--how many glances that adds up
21
to in ~~22~~ years!--told me louder than words that he loved her from afar
in a helpless way. What must have been even worse a burden on the heart
of Angus was that he won Anna's affections before I did, or so he had
every cause to believe. He was the first to ask her to marry; Anna
being Anna, she delayed answer until after the ensuing summer; and that
was the summer of 1897 when I hired her to cook for my crew during the
plowing of fireguards along the Great Northern railway and her life and
mine were joined. After we were married that autumn, I tried never
to show Angus that I knew of Anna's spurning of him, believing that
when she chose me over him the bargain was struck and we all three
could but live by it. Yet, even after his own marriage, I could not
help but feel pity for Angus, unable to have Anna in his life.

Yet again--only now, dearest sister, and only to you on this
unjudging paper, can I bring myself to say this--I know with all that
is in me that if Anna had lived, she would have left me for Angus
McCaskill. I could see it coming in her. She had a nature all her

own, did my Anna--as measured as a judge in making her mind up, but
passionate in her decision once she had done so. And so the moment
merely waited, somewhere ahead in time, when Anna would have decided
that she and I had had all of life together we could, and then she
would have turned to Angus. I believe she was nearing that moment just
before she died--Lisabeth was grown by then, Peter nearly so; consequences
of ending our marriage no longer would fall directly on our children--
and I have spent endless nights wondering what would have ensued.
Surely, if her mother had gone with Angus, Lisabeth would not then have
married a McCaskill; strong-minded as she is, she would have spoken
her vow to the Devil first. From that it follows that Lisabeth and
Varick's little boy Alec, and the other child on the way, those existences
come undone, do they not? As the saying is, all the wool in the world
can be raveled sooner than the skein of a single life.

As for myself, my debate in the hours of night is whether it is
more bearable to have become a widower than a rejected husband. It
is a question, I am discovering, that does not want to answer itself.

By the time I was done reading this the first time, the backs of my hands were pouring sweat. Jesus H. Christ, what we don't know about how things were before they got to us.

Over and over I read that letter, but the meaning did not change in any way, the words would not budge from Isaac Reese's unsparing rendering of them. My father's father had been in love with my mother's mother. And she more or less with him. In love but married to others.

And not just that. August 12, 1924, the date on this letter in which Isaac told all; the other child on the way, less than a month from being born, the one whose existence would have been erased if Anna ~~Ramsay~~ Reese had not died before she could take her future to waiting Angus McCaskill. That child was precisely me.

As if that child was suddenly six years old and yearning for the teacher to call rest period so that he could put his head down on his school desk into the privacy of closed eyes, I right then laid forward into my arms on the library table and cradled my head. I did not know the tears were coming until I felt the ~~wet~~ seep off them at my eyelids, the wet paths being traced over my cheekbones.

That quiet crying: who did I weep for? For Anna Reese? Did that woman have to die for me to happen? Become in death my grandmother, as she never would have in life? Alec and I, and by way of me, Mariah and Lexa; we were freed into life when the epidemic took her, were we? Or were my tears Isaac's, for his having lost a wife? Or for Angus McCaskill for twice having lost love, once at the altar and once at the grave? Or for Adair McCaskill, second-choice wife in a land, too, that was never her own? Or was this again my grief for Marcella, my tears the tide of her passing into the past with the rest of these?

I wept for them all, us all.

A hand cupped my shoulder. "Sir? Are you all right?" The library ~~man~~^{man} was squatting down beside me, trying to peer in through my pillow of arms.

I lifted my head and wiped my eyes with both hands. Gaggles of genealogists around the room had put aside their volumes to watch me. "Uhm. I forgot. . . forgot where I was." Blew my nose. Tried to clear my throat. "Some things kind of got pent up in me. The stuff in these. . ."

I indicated Isaac's letters.

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157A

"At least they mean something to you," the librarian said ^{gently}~~softly~~.

"Yeah. Yeah, they do."



librarian

The ~~library man~~ having assured me that he'd tell my daughter and any tall yalhoo with her that I'd meet them outside, I snuffled my way out into the sunshine. Into noon hour for the state workers, for across the street from the Historical Society the capitol's copper dome was like a hive for busy humanity below, men and women in groups and pairs as they hurried off to restaurants or chose shaded spots on the capitol lawn for bag lunch on the ground.

I plugged along slowly through the blanketing heat toward the Bago, trying not to look like a guy who had just made a public spectacle of himself. Talk about self-pandemonium. This trip was doing it to me, something fierce. How the hell to ward it off, though? The past has a mind of its own, I was finding out. Maybe my weepy spell was over but I still felt flooded with those torrents of Isaac's ink.

"Hi, did you manage to keep yourself entertained this morning?"
Mariah's voice caught up with me from behind. Before I could manage a response to that, she was alongside me with her arm merrily hooked with mine and already was skipping on to "Ready for lunch, do I even need to ask?"

"Where's your partner in crime?" I inquired, glancing around for Riley.

"He's calling the BB to make sure our geezer piece got there okay. I missed a bet when we divorced--I should have sued the telephone for alienation of affection."

She, at least, seemed in an improved mood, which I verified by asking her how the red-light real estate piece was coming. "I think it's going to work," she conceded. "You never quite know with Riley when he reaches into that pantry of a brain of his. But his idea this time looks real zammo." Nor could you predict this newspaper pair. Less than twenty-four hours ago they could barely tolerate each other and here all of a sudden they were on their best productive behavior.



At the motorhome Mariah and I flung open all the doors and windows to let the heat out, but sultry as the weather was maybe a hotter amount flowed in. We moved off into the shade of a tree on the capitol lawn while waiting for Riley. Right next to us was a big oblong flowerbed in a blossom pattern forming the word Centennial; my God, ~~they were~~ even spelling it out in marigolds now.

The sky, though, had turned milky, soiled-looking. "What the hell's happened to our day?" I asked Mariah.

"Smog," she said, ^{critically} squinting at the murk; only the very nearest mountains around the city could be seen through the damn stuff. "Smoke from the forest fires in Idaho, I guess, and when it's this humid. . ."

Smog? Shit, what next. Even the air was getting me down now. I wished to Christ the scribbler would haul his butt out here and we could head for--

"Here you go," I heard next out of Mariah. The camera lifted to her eye and pointed at me. "A chance to pose with a general." Behind me stood the statue of General Meagher on horseback with sword uplifted

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like he was having it out with the pigeons. After the Civil War he'd been made territorial governor of Montana, but disappeared off a Missouri River steamboat during a night of drinking blackberry wine.

I suppose they couldn't show that in a statue so they put him horseback.

"Speaking of general," I tried on this daughter of ^{mine}~~mine~~ without real hope, "these pictures you perpetually want to take of me are a general nuisance, do you know that?"

"Thaaat's my guy, just be your natural self if you can stand to," she launched into her picture-taking spiel behind that damn camera, "and you--"

For once she brought the camera down without a click. "You look kind of under the weather, Jick." Mariah's gray eyes took stock of me. "Are you okay?"

"I been better," I admitted. The morning in the unexpected company of our own sources was more major than I could put into words for her right then. Nor were the tears very far behind my eyes. "Must be the

smog, is all." I tried to move my mind from the past toward some speck of the future. "So. We can hit on toward the ranch this afternoon, huh? Leave right after lunch and we ought to be able to get there by about--"

"Mmm, not quite," Mariah disposed of that hope in nothing flat. "We're going to have to hang on here until tomorrow. Riley and I still have a load of old pictures to go through in there. This has got to be the most photographed red-light district anywhere, you wonder if they were putting it on postcards."

Right then Riley emerged from the Historical Society building, a frown on him you could have plowed a field with.

"The BB wants to see us," he told Mariah of the phone call without any fooling around at all. "Right now. If not sooner."

What, a detour all the hell way back west to Missoula? At this rate the only chance I had of making a trip home to the ranch was to keep going in the opposite direction until I circled the globe to it.

"Why's he want to see us?" Mariah was asking warily.

"He wouldn't say," Riley reported. "He sounded like he was too busy concentrating on being mad."

"Oh, horse pucky," Mariah said in a ~~kind of~~ betrayed tone. She drew herself up even more erect than usual, as if having put on an armor breastplate to do battle. "Riley, you swore to me, you absofuckinglutely swore to me you weren't going to diddle around with the expense account this time! You know how pissed off--"

"Goddamn it, I haven't been!" Riley defended.

"--the BB gets when--" She halted and looked at him differently.

"You haven't been?"

"No, I have not," he maintained, pawing furiously at his cookie duster. "This whole frigging trip, the only invented arithmetic is going to be for those goddamn Bago repairs eventually. If the BB has been sniffing around in our expense account so far, all it'll tell him is that it's cheaper keeping us on the road than it is having us cause trouble around the office. Huh uh. It's got to be something else on his tiny mind."

—————

The office of Baxter Bolitho was in that turret of the Montanian building, with a spiffy outlook across the nice wide Clark Fork River to pleasant tree-lined Missoula streets.

The decoration of that round room, though, I would have done something drastic about. Currently the motif consisted of stuffed animal heads. They formed a staring circle around the room, their taxidermed eyes aimed inward at Mariah and Riley and me as we entered--an eight-point buck deer and an elk with antlers like tree limbs and a surprised-looking ^{elk} antelope and a moose and a bear and a bobcat and a number of African creatures I couldn't begin to name and, my God, even a buffalo.

Many bars in Montana used to have head collections on their walls and at first I figured the BB simply had bought one of those zoos of the dead when a bar was turned into a fern cafe. But then I noticed there was a gold nameplate under each head, such as:

] Bull Elk [

] shot by Baxter Bolitho [

] in the Castle Mountains [

] October 25, 1986 [

He was a pale ordinary enough guy sitting there behind a broad desk, but evidently he did his own killing.

As the three of us walked in, Bolitho plainly wondered who the dickens I was. Riley had just made that same point as we parked the Winnebago in the Montanian lot and I remarked that I'd be kind of interested to meet this famous boss of theirs. "Oh, just great," he'd grumbled, "your general enthusiasm will help us a whole fucking lot in handling the BB." But when Mariah introduced me, the editor automatically hopped up, gave me a pump-handle handshake--I suppose a person in his position gets paid by the handshake--and instructed, "Call me Bax."

Riley and Mariah both sat down looking exceedingly leery, as if the seats might be those joke cushions that go pththbfft! when sat on. I found a chair too and did what I could to make myself less than conspicuous.

The ^{--Bax--}BB sat with his hands folded atop a stack of letters on the desk in front of him and stared expressionlessly at Mariah and Riley for what he must have thought was the prescribed amount of bossly time. Then he intoned in a voice so deep it was almost subterranean:

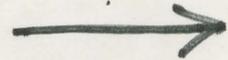
"Let me put it this way. There has been a very interesting response

to your centennial series. A record number of letters to the editor.

For instance." He plucked the top letter off the stack and held it

straight out to Mariah and Riley as if toasting a marshmallow on the

end of a stick. The two of them reached for the sheet of paper simultaneously



and ended up each holding a corner. I leaned over to peek along as they silently read:

Your so-called series on the centennial is downright disgusting.
If Riley Wright, whose name by rights ought to be Riley Wrong, can't
find anything better about Montana than the guff he has been handing us,
he should be put to writing about softball instead.

Also, the pictures in your paper are getting weird. Since when
is the Berkeley Pit art? I can go out to the nearest gravel pit with
my Instamatic and do just as good.

PO'd on Mullan Road

Mariah started to say something, which I knew would be relevant to the letter writer's photographic judgment and general ancestry, but then caught herself and just gritted. For his part, Riley was grinning down at the letter as if he'd just been awarded the world prize for smart aleckry. Eventually, though, he became aware of the BB's solid stare.

"Yeah, I see your point here, Bax," Riley announced thoughtfully, too thoughtfully it seemed to me. "Before you can print this one"-- he flapped the letter in a fond way--"we've got to solve the PO'd

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style question, don't we. Grammatically speaking, PO'd has to stand for Piss Offed. So you'd think Pissed Off ought to be P'd O, now wouldn't you? But nobody ever says it that way, so do we go with PO'd as common usage? Shame to lose that nice rhyme, too, 'PO'd on Mullan Road.'" Riley brightened like a kid remembering what 9 times 8 equals. "Here we go. If the guy would move across town to Idaho Street, we'd have it made--'P'd O on Idaho!' What do you think, Bax? You figure we can get him to agree to move if we promise to publish his dumbfuck letter?"

"Riley," Bolitho said in his deepest voice yet, "what are you talking about?"

Riley never got the chance to retort anything further smart, because Bolitho now started giving him and Mariah undiluted hell. How come Riley's pieces were all about slaughtered buffalo and coppered-out miners and, it was incredible but the fact of the matter was inescapable, the angelic qualities of bartenders? And where was Mariah getting picture ideas like the fannies of geezers and, it was incredible but the fact of the matter was inescapable again, Kimi the bartender seen woosily through the beer glass?

Wow, I thought to myself, and he doesn't even know yet about
the hardheaded whores of Helena.



Bolitho paused long enough in his bill of particulars to slap a hand down onto the stack of letters, thwap. Then he announced: "In other words, the two of you are outraging our readers."

^{tried to point}
~~Mariah pointed~~ out, "Bax, in Missoula people will write a sackful of letters to the editor if they think a stoplight is a couple of seconds slow."

The BB was less than persuaded. "This is very serious," he stated in a funeral tone and proceeded to elaborate all over again on how the expectations of the Montanian's readers, not to mention his own extreme forbearance, were being very abused by the way the pair of them were going about the centennial series.

I do have to admit, my feelings were radically more mixed than I expected, sitting there listening to Bolitho ream out Riley and Mariah. ^{was as gratified as I ought to have been}
~~Oh sure, I ought to have been gratified~~ by the perfectly evident oncoming fact that Bolitho was working around to the extermination of the centennial series and our Bago sojourn. And any time Riley got a tromping, it suited me fine. But I hated to see Mariah catch hell along with him. Then there was the, well, what might be called ^{this} ~~the~~ matter of office justice.

Put it this way: it ~~just~~ really kind of peed me off, too, that this yoyo of a BB could sit here in his round office and prescribe to Mariah, or for that matter even Riley, what they were supposed to be seeing, when they were the ones out there in the daylong world trying to do the actual work.

The beleaguered pair of them now were attempting to stick up for their series while Bolitho went on lambasting it and them. So while the three of them squawked at each other, I gandered around at the BB'S stuffed trophies. Massive moose. Small bobcat. African something or other. That big elk. Dead heads, I could just hear Mariah steaming to herself, symbolic.

"Excuse my asking, Bax," I broke in on the general ruckus, "but where's your mountain goat?"

Everything stopped.

Then Bolitho eyeballed me as steadily as if a taxidermist had worked on him too, while Riley, damn his hide, started gawking ostentatiously around the room as if the mentioned goat might be hiding behind a chair. For her part, Mariah was shaking her head a millimeter back and forth and imperatively mouthing No, not now! at me.

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Bolitho set to answering me in a frosty way, "If you do any hunting yourself, Jack--"

"Jick," I corrected generously.

"Whatever. If you do any hunting yourself--"



I shrugged and put in, "Not quite fifty years' worth yet."

The BB blinked a number of times, then amended his tone considerably.

"Then you will know it is very hard to achieve a mountain goat. I have never been privileged to shoot one."

"The hell!" I exclaimed as if he'd confessed he'd never tasted chocolate ice cream. "Christamighty, I got them hanging like flies on the mountains up behind my place."

"Your place?"

"My ranch, up along the Rocky Mountain Front. Yeah, I can sit in my living room with a half-decent pair of binoculars and watch goats till I get sick of them."

Bolitho steepled his fingers and peered at me over his half-prayerfulness. "That is very interesting, ah, Jick. But I would imagine that getting within range of them is another matter."

"No problem. Anybody who's serious about his hunting"--I nodded to the dead heads along the walls--"and I can see you definitely are, I usually let them onto the place, maybe even take them up one of the trails to those goats myself. Tell you what, whyn't you put in for a ~~to draw for a~~

permit, then come on up this fall and we'll find you a goat?" I gave the BB a look overflowing with nimrod enthusiasm. What fault was it of mine if the mountain goats in west of my ranch actually were unreachable on the other side of the sheer walls of Gut Plunge Canyon? The BB had only asked me whether it was possible to get within range of them, not whether it was feasible to fire off a shot.

I figured I'd better land him before my enthusiasm played out. "In fact, Bax, how about you coming on up to go goating right after these two"--I indicated Riley and Mariah with the same kind of nod I'd given the stuffed trophies--"get done with this centennial stuff of theirs in November?"

Bolitho kept gazing at me from behind his finger steeple for a while. Then he gazed a further while at Mariah and Riley. All three of us could see him working on the choice. Sacrificial sheep or mountain goat.

At last Baxter Bolitho announced, "That is a very, very interesting offer, Jick. I am going to take you up on that." He turned toward the other two. "Riley, as I was getting to, there has been some marked

reaction among our readers to your centennial pieces. Of course, one way of viewing it is that you are provoking people's attention. The exact same can be said of your photos, Mariah. So, speaking as your editor, I will tell you what." We waited for what. "As you continue the centennial series, I would expect that your topics will become somewhat more, shall we say, traditional. Perhaps I should phrase it this way: tone things down." The BB sent a final gaze around to Mariah, then to Riley, and even to me. He concluded: "Anyway, I thought you would want to know you are being read, out there in readerland."

I give Mariah and Riley due credit, they both managed not to look mock astonished that newspaper readers were reading newspapers. # No, instead Riley said in a hurry "You can't know what an inspiration that is to us, Bax," and stood, and Mariah was already up and saying brightly "Well, we'll go hit the road again then, Bax," and even I found my feet and joined the exodus while the BB shuffled the letters to the editor together, squaring them into a neat pile which he put in his OUT basket.

end of ch. 1

MOTATING THE HIGH LINE

Centennialitis will break out in Gros Ventre again on Thursday
night. A combined work party and meeting of the Dawn of Montana
steering committee will be held at the Medicine Lodge, beginning
at 8:30 p.m. "Everybody better come or they're going onto my
sweep-up-the-parade-route-after-the-horses list," stated committee
chairperson Althea Frew. Other members of the steering committee
are Amber
are ~~Janelle~~ Finletter, J.A. "Jick" McCaskill, Howard Stonesifer,
and Arlee Zane.

--Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner, August 1, 1989

Brrk brrk.

My waking thought was that the guy who invented the telephone ought to have been publicly boiled in his own brainwater. Outside the bedroom window, dawn was just barely making headway against dark. If ~~turned~~ manufactured noise at such an hour isn't an offense against human nature, I don't know what is.

Brrk brrk.

Christamighty, Mariah already, was my next realization. When I'd deposited her and Riley back in Helena the afternoon before to put the finishing touches on their masterpiece of mattress capitalism, that daughter

of mine had told me she'd call me at the ranch today and let me know what time to come back and get her and her haywire companion. But this time of day, before there even ^{properly} was a day yet?

Brrk brrk.

Maybe I would do that getting and maybe I just wouldn't. Late as I'd gotten in after the drive from Helena to Noon Creek, I hadn't even had a chance yet to see Kenny and Darleen and gather any report on the ranch. And even in so milky a start of the day, I couldn't help but wonder what order of fool I was for turning the BB around with goat bait the way I had. What got into me, there in Missoula, not to let His Exterminatorship go ahead and kill off the centennial series and my unwanted part in it?

Brrk br--

I helloed and braced.

"Oh, Jick, I'm so glad I caught you before you got out and around, I know what an early bird you are," a woman's voice arrived at full gallop. Never Mariah, expending words wholesale like that.

I elbow-propped myself a little higher in bed. "Uh, who--"

"Oh, you're funning me, aren't you, pretending not to know this is Althea. Next thing, you'll be claiming you forgot all about tonight."

"Forgot what?"

"Jick, our centennial committee meets tonight," the ^{phone} voice perceptibly stiffened into that of Althea Frew, chairperson. "We've missed you at the meetings lately."

"Yeah, well, I been away. Unavoidably so. And it mystified me as much as ever, how she and undoubtedly the whole Two Medicine country knew that in the dark of last night I had come back. Did bunny-slipper telegraph even need the existence of the telephone or did they simply emanate bulletins out through the connecting air?"

"All the nicer to have you home with us again, just in time for tonight," she informed me with conspicuous enthusiasm. "We have an agenda that I know you'll be interest--"

"Althea, I'm not real sure I'm going to be able to stick around until tonight. I--"

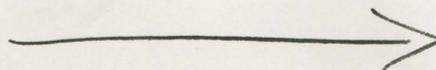
"You're turning into quite a goer, Jick. But I'm sure you can make time for one eensy committee meeting. Oh, and would you ask Mariah if she can come take pictures for our centennial album ^{sometime?} See you tonight," and Althea toddled off the line.

The ^{burden} ~~load~~ of conversation with Althea thus lifted, I sat up in the big double bed and by habit took a meteorological look out the window to the west. A moon new as an egg rested in the weatherless sky above the mountains. So far so good on that front, anyway.

I was at least out of bed and had my pants halfway on before the phone rang again. Typical Mariah. I grabbed the instrument up, doubly PO'd at her for calling before I even had any breakfast in me and for not calling before Althea did her crowbar work on me.

"Damn it, petunia, do you have some kind of sixth sense about doing things at exactly the wrong time?"

Silence, until eventually:



"Uhhh, Jick, was you going to line us out on haying the Ramsay place, before Darleen and me head up there?"

Kenny's voice, across the hundred feet between the old house and my and Marce's. Jesus, the day was getting away from me. Ordinarily I'd be over there by the time my hired couple finished up breakfast. Hurriedly I told Kenny, "Must've looked at the wrong side of the clock this morning. I'll be right over."

"Darleen's got the coffee pot on," he assured me as if that was foremost in my mind as well as his, and hung up.

Sometimes you eat the bear,

sometimes the bear eats you.

Sometimes you drink the flood,

sometimes you sip the dew.

Sometimes you both are one,

sometimes you break in two."

When I got there, Kenny was walking jerky little circles behind Darleen while she did the dishes, neither of them looking anywhere near

song
excerpt -
center of
tagger lines

at the other and the radio Roadkill bunch yowling right along with them.

I know there is no one style for mating, but the fact that these two ended up with each other still confounded me. While Kenny was forever performing his conversational perambulation or bringing a hand up to rub the back of his neck or swinging his arms or craning a look out the nearest window to get his eyes fidgeting along with the rest of him, Darleen sloped along with no excess motion, and often no motion at all. Or was theirs what was meant by an average marriage, the way they so radically averaged each other out.

Right off I noticed that Kenny now sported muttonchop sideburns-- they made him look like a shampooed lynx--for Gros Ventre's centennial beard contest. But the moment I stepped in the kitchen, it was my countenance that received a startled going-over from Kenny and Darleen both. I ~~uneasily~~ wondered what secret from myself was showing there, until I remembered my own accumulating snowy whiskers.

The two of them gave each other a side glance. Then Kenny felt

the abrupt need to know, "Jick, how you doing this morning?" while
Darleen matter of factly chipped in, "You must've seen a helluva ^{swath} ~~patch~~
of Montana by now."

"Okay" and "yeah" I recited to those and while we were getting
coffeed up for the day, Kenny filled me in on ranch matters. Rather,
he told me as much as he could think of and Darleen filled him in on
all he forgot to tell. Haying was



about a week behind because of breakdowns, but on the other hand Kenny did the repairing himself and avoided mechanics at multiple dollars per hour. For the first time in several summers Noon Creek was flowing a good head of water, but on the other hand the ~~upstream~~ beavers were gaily working overtime on damming. A considerable stretch of fence line had been mended, but on one more hand, the roof portions that blew off the lambing shed in the Alaskan Express storm of February hadn't been. ~~was~~^A last prodding glance from Darleen further reminded Kenny that, uhhh, well, actually he hadn't got around to tending the sheepherder yet this week, either. All in all, things were not really any worse than I expected, ~~nor~~ a damn bit better.

Now came Darleen's turn, to give a cook's-eye view of how grocery prices were rocketing. As she recited a blow-by-blow of her latest bout with Joe Prentiss at his cash register in the Gros Ventre Mercantile, I nursed away at a second cup of Darleen's muscular coffee and tried to ponder how long I could operate this ranch by remote control through Kenny and her. How long did I want to keep trying? You can't get decent help any more, ran any rancher's chronic complaint; probably it

went back to Abel's last recorded remark about Cain. But actually the pair here in this kitchen were as decent as I had any right to expect.

Take Darleen, yakking away at a rate that had me thankful I wasn't paying her by the word. She was made of tough stuff, I always had to grant her that. When a foot of heavy wet snow hit on Memorial Day of this year, wonderful moisture for the grass but hell on young lambs and spring-shorn ewes, Darleen slaved side by side with Kenny and me

through all that terrible day of fighting weakening sheep to shelter.

And Kenny, although he couldn't manage his time even if you hung a clock on his nose, would whale away at any given task until he eventually subdued it; all you could ask of a person on the wages a rancher can pay, really. No, another Kenny, a different Darleen, would not inch my ranch situation toward solution.

"...Joe Prentiss goes, 'What do you want me to do, give this stuff away?'" Darleen ~~was concluding~~ ^{at last was wrapping up} her grocery tale, "and I go, 'You bet that's what I want, but I sure don't see any sign of it happening.'" "

I did what I could to grin approval of Darleen's defense of our

kitchen budget, but my result was probably thin. All at once, the three of us seemed to be out of conversation. Kenny squirmed into a new configuration in his chair. Darleen appeared to have plenty more to say but instead was silently watching Kenny contort. I took sipping refuge behind my coffee cup and watched them both. What the hell now? Something was missing

from this morning's session about the ranchwork, something that wanted saying but was being held back, and the other two knew it just as well as I did. Whatever it was I was about to cover it over by supposing out

