

Idaho Humanities speech, Sept. 15, 2005

PACE

Once upon a time under a rising September moon, when I was
 a young hired hand on what passed for a farm in our rocky part of
 northern Montana, I squinted across the land where I was growing
 up and saw that the prairie had translated itself into a seascape.

The wind was blowing, as it did day and night that summer,
 and the moving waves of rich-yellow wheat could just be seen in
 the settling dark. A harvesting combine cruised on the far side of
 the field. I had never been within a thousand miles of an ocean,
 but in the sudden shadow-play of my mind, I could see that the

combine, with its running lights ² just flicked on, was a ship bound through the night. Bench hills rose to the north, surely a fair coastline. The expanse of it all, hills and fields and wind in the wheat, ran out far beyond--oceanic--to where the sky and the flat horizon fitted together.

The magic of such remembered moments is indelible. I was seventeen, a restless kid-farmhand with my nose in a book whenever I wasn't atop a tractor or grain truck, there at that found sea which was both fictional and real to me, and now with my whiskers gone white I still write about both the green jigsawed

Pacific Northwest coastline where I live now and the rim-of-the-
prairie along that great mountain chain of the Rockies where I
grew up.

Probably every one of you in this room has places ^{SUCH} as those,
mapped into the soul, that never leave you. If you are lucky and
can choose the "where" of your life, perhaps you do not ever
leave some such place, and particularly here in the West, you are
able to live within sight or reach of some piece of seductive
landscape that seems to you the way the world ought to be. It
sounds basic enough, doesn't it. The biologist E.O. Wilson
theorizes that we have within us a deep biological orientation

toward what he calls "the right place," a landscape, he says, that evokes the setting of human early evolution in the African savannah. Wilson describes it as "open, tree-studded land on prominences overlooking water"--and that certainly sounds like home to me.

(QUICK)

So, I don't have much doubt that there is within us, perhaps particularly within those of us who have turned our backs on opportunities elsewhere, and fashioned our lives to be in the American West, a longing for "the right place." What I would like to think out loud to you about, for the next little while, are some points of the human compass that are perhaps beyond the

true north or true west of behavioral biology. I have to offer myself and a few writing colleagues as ~~the~~ specimen^s in this--I suppose writers are always specimens of some kind--in a bit of exploration of the place we find ourselves in, here at the end of the country that is unmistakably not the Midwest, the South, nor back east.

Time after time, contemporary writing about the West of America is called a literature of place. A literature, that seems to mean, which focuses on a sense of the land, the overpowering geographic circumstances, rather than on the mysterious soul of a people--as, say, the magical realism of modern Latin American

fiction or the deeply interior novels and poetry of Eastern European writing before the fall of the great wall of Communism, tended to look inward while we of the West are peering outward.

Often ~~the~~ ^{OUR} book titles themselves have seemed to say so: **The Big Sky...Wolf Willow...A River Runs through It.** (Put them together right, you make a kind of sagebrush haiku out of titles of Western literature.) The critical notion, as I savvy ^t is, is that the immensities of the West, its extremes of landform and its powerful weather and the distances which flabbergast travelers from elsewhere in the world--these western immensities

overwhelm the fact of the people⁷ salt-and-peppered across the
expanse.

“Place,” in terms of landscape, backdrop of mountain and of
plain and of hard weather, does figure large in the work of a lot of
us who are trying to write about the west. But I don’t particularly
think it’s at the neglect of the people, the human stories, the
Westerners who carry on their lives against the big bold
landscapes of those books. Norman Maclean’s flyfishing brother
of **A River Runs through It**; no one who has read that story
and has any imagination ^{AT} all can wet a line in a trout stream

without seeing, in the shadow on the water, Paul Maclean making his powerful, beautiful cast.

James Welch's hard-used men of the reservations, Lame Bull and the never-named narrator of **Winter in the Blood** and the dumb shrewd hayhand they work with, Raymond Long Knife-- "He had learned to give the illusion of work, even to the point of sweating as soon as he put his gloves on." Some of us here tonight have worked with that guy, too, haven't we.

The women of her family whom Mary Clearman Blew¹⁵ writes of with such bone honesty in **Balsamroot** and other books; in their burdens they are like those weathered but sturdy columns of

Greek temples sculpted in the form of a woman--they carry the sky for the rest of us.

I'm going to come around again, a little while from now, to this matter of people we encounter in book pages leading everlasting lives in our imagination, because I happen to have a newcomer tailor-made for tonight I'd like you to meet.

First, though, I think we need to take a closer look at this concept of "place" in the literature that marks our western periphery of America. ^{AT} The shorthand notion ^{THAT} ~~is~~ merely where we happen to come from on the map accounts for books and characters such as those I've just mentioned, and some more to

come, that tends--as you can see--to make what hair I have left
stand straight up. As in the very fine public television
documentary "Westwords" a few years ago, when a reviewer
noted that during my interview there on the screen I seemed a
trifle gruff when I pointed out that "we're not justing sitting
around out here writing travelogues--this stuff is hard."

PACE To put it a little more judiciously, here ^{TONIGHT} ~~in public~~: a geographic
sense of place is a flavorful ingredient in Western literature, but
let's don't think it's the whole supper.

For there are other senses of place than the merely geographic.

A bunch of them. The word place has so many meanings it takes

up about three-and-a-half pages ¹¹ in the Oxford English dictionary--
and in my own desk dictionary that I instantly retreated to,
thirteen different definitions of place as a noun, a dozen usages as
a verb. A word that sprawls all over the place--which is a phrase I
didn't find anywhere amid all those definitions.

And so, if we must pick and choose, as a writer I favor the
phrase "trying to place it."

To place it, first in the sense of identifying--as my dictionary
helps out here, "to recollect clearly the circumstances or context
of." As in the phrase, one that I have been known to resort to, "I
remember your face but I can't place you."

That's the first side, of trying to place it, in the literature of
 our region. And the next, trying to place it in the sense of putting
 something into place. Setting. arranging. Making it be where it
 ought to be.

This is the carpentry part of writing, the craft. Building a
 book the reader will want to live in. Hammering together a solid
 basic structure, then taking care with the finishing-work, making
 sure you've got the details right.

So, you bet, when we start following the paths of experience
 and craft rather than the contour lines of maps, I do have my own

senses of place, both as a writer and as a Westerner, and let me now try to bring out just a few of them.

Begin with the beginning. I come from a place. I originate, as an American, from a place in a specific rural western sense of the word--another usage which doesn't seem to have reached the dictionary-makers of Oxford and Boston. Place, meaning an abandoned homestead. Small ranch or farm, either one, but abandoned, given up on, because of the killing winter of 1919 or the bank failures that rippled through Montana in the early 1920s or the Depression, or WORLD WAR TWO, OR death or disgust or any other of a hundred reasons.

I tried to explain this locally prevalent use in this passage of

This House of Sky:

“By the time I was a boy and Dad was trying in his own right to put together a life again, the doubt and defeat in the valley’s history had tamped down into a single word. Anyone of Dad’s generation always talked of a piece of land where some worn-out family eventually had lost to weather or market prices not as a farm or a ranch or even a homestead, but as a place. All those empty little clearings which ghosted that sage countryside--just the Mcloughlin place there by that butte, the Vinton place over this ridge, the Kuhnes place, the Catlin place, ~~the Winters place,~~ ➤

~~the McReynolds place~~, all the tens of dozens of sites where families lit in the valley or its rimming foothills, couldn't hold on, and drifted off. All of them epitaphed with that barest of words, place."

The Doig place, in the Big Belt mountains of south-central Montana, is where my Scottish grandparents seeded this family into America. My father and four of his five brothers, and his sister, all were born on that homestead--the last of them in 1910--and being careful, slow-marrying Scots, most of them were around there, off and on, through the late 1920s and even on into the 1930s, THE DECADE when I was born. Part of my own boyhood on ranches

was within a few miles of that original Doig homestead. So, in

my growing up, what history the family had was mostly of that
place. By now, nobody has lived there for ~~sixty years or more~~
THAN HALF A CENTURY

yet it perseveres in me--as my family's first step on the ladder

called America. That homesteading experience, which did for the

rural West what the tenements of the immigrant ghettos did for

city America--provided landing sites, quarters to hold people until

they were able to scramble away to somewhere else--that

particular American saga, shared by my family and hundreds of

thousands of others in the West, have given me impetus for much

of my writing.

To me, this is the story in the bloodline--the accumulating power of detail and speculation and wondering and questioning that pulsed in me from knowing of my own homesteading ancestors' hard work and harder knocks and those of that ghost population, all those other "places" where families hung their names on the wind of time.

You know,

When writers from Charles Dickens' London to Tom Wolfe's "Bonfire of the Vanities" New York fuel their creative processes with such accumulated actualities, it is called drawing on what they know. When those of us with fencelines instead of

Picadillies and Wall Streets as our boundaries write about the territory we know, it ^{TENDS TO} gets called "regional."

One of the challenges--one of the whetstones of creativity--for those of us writing "out here" is that the larger society has long had its own mythic notion of life "out West." Whether embedded in celluloid or paperback pulp, that myth has compressed a large and complicated chunk of America into what I call--as neutrally as I can put it--"guys and their horses."

Before the West began to hear from its first couple of generations of writers actually born and raised out here, literary tourists pretty much had their way with us. Books set out here on

the west side of America didn't give that much attention to the workaday life and the valid voices of our region. A romantic version that one scholar called "the cowboys without the cows" got underway at the start of the twentieth century with

The Virginian, Owen Wister's famous novel. **The Virginian**

began a lineage of books that might be called Wisterns. In a

Wistern, a bad guy insults a good guy--in **The Virginian**, the

actual insult is "you son of a ^(SHRUG) blank"--not much of an insult where

I come from--and the good guy dangerously drawls back, "When

you call me that, smile." But that's about all that does go on in a

Wistern. None of the guys, good or bad, seems ever to do a lick

of everyday work--milk a cow, churn butter, plant a potato. you
 get the impression that somewhere just out of sight, there must be
 a catering service--maybe someplace around Omaha--that comes
 out West and feeds everybody and does the chores.

/ Back at the ranch at Yosnaya Polyana, I'm sure Tolstoy had
 his own uninvited ghosts to get past as he tried to write of his
 heartland. But those of us from the West of women homesteaders
 and male schoolmarms--the West of people who came to build
 rather than to gunsling, to work but to dance and laugh along with
 it--we've had to write our way past the Wisterns and then the

Westerns--such stereotypes as **The Virginian** and then those later heftier cohorts of his, Louis L'Amour and John Wayne.

Bear in mind that it was only yesterday, historically, when cultural images of the West were those two guys, IN THEIR BIG HATS, with a pound of belt buckle trying to hold up 25 extra pounds of gut. Something had to give way.

Blessedly, it has. In place of those Wisterns and Westerns, we have GROWING a number of contemporary books where, as the historian Richard Maxwell Brown puts it, "nemesis and tragedy, bitterness and beauty" and other "universals of human life" meet, out here

in the sage and the section line roads and the windworn ranks of fenceposts.

Brown has singled out what he believes is an important “grassroots autobiography and biography” trend in contemporary western literature. In his compendium he discusses the role of **This House of Sky** and its companion **Heart Earth**, so I’ll blushingly skip over that part, but he lists several outstanding books of recent years that he thinks capture something distinctive about the West:

--William Kittredge's memoir, **Hole in the Sky**

--**Refuge**, by Terry Tempest Williams

--**Rain or Shine**, by Cyra McFadden

--Mary Clearman Blew's **Balsamroot** I've already

mentioned, and she has another equally brilliant one, **All but the Waltz**.

The list begun by Richard Maxwell Brown keeps lengthening itself--

--Teresa Jordan's **Riding the White Horse Home**

--Kim Barnes' remembrance of coming-of-age in a logging family on the Clearwater River of Idaho, **In the Wilderness**

--the latest voice out of Missoula, Judy Blunt's book from last year, **Breaking Clean**.

--and just now coming into the bookstores, a compelling memoir by the Oregon novelist Craig Lesley about trying to connect with his coyote-trapping poacher of a father, a book called **Burning Fence**.

Such "grassroots" works by born Westerners, Richard Maxwell Brown contends, constitute "a meeting ground of the literary talent and the social history of the West." So, I think that's where a lot of us are continually trying to get to, from those rural home "places" we've known ever since--as our literary

godfather Wallace Stegner once put it-- "our legs were long enough to reach the ground."

But writers of quality also try to reach beyond that ground that gives them their foundation--out there into the territory of "trying to place" the face of time and fate. To show us, through their words on the page, how our deep emotions connect with the map of nature, human and otherwise.

There is career risk in this. A New York Times book reviewer once said of me that as a novelist I wear my heart on my sleeve--I don't think he intended it as a compliment, although I took it as one. But let me step aside from my own work, and that of my

contemporaries, to try to illustrate what I mean about the great stakes involved in a writer "trying to place" something vital for us in the nature of things.

Once there were two writers under one roof. It was a duplex, luckily--the promising young novelist Wright Morris and his wife Mary Ellen on the ground floor, and the young anthropology professor Loren Eiseley and his wife Mabel directly above, there in a Philadelphia suburb in the last summer of World War II. The two couples clicked, sat on the porch in the evenings of that last pre-Hiroshima summer drinking and talking, and myself having known Wright Morris slightly, I'm sure the talking was nimble.

Most of my own conversations with Wright were of the written sort, but they were always barn-burners, from his end. If he hadn't sent me one of his scrawled postcards in a while, one would arrive with the explanation that ^{SAN FRANCISCO} the Bay Area (where he lived the later part of his life) was short on ink, "due to an epidemic of fingerprinting." And his inscription in my copy of

Photographs and Words, his remarkable photo-and-text book reprising the farmhouse scenes ^{WRIGHT} ~~he~~ shot when he went back to his home places in Nebraska in 1940 reads this way:

IVAN,

"There is a kith and kinship between your House of Sky and these earthly unearthly objects which this occasion moves me to

acknowledge. Can all this grandeur perish? No, no! I say, no, no!
Watch it drift out of sight, no, I (we) can't do it.--Fraternally,
Wright."

Loren Eiseley I never met, but I did hear him deliver a speech,
in a voice so eminent and deeply resonant he sounded like God's/
older/brother.

You have to wonder about the nature of fate--the dice of
chance--that ever threw these two together as inescapable
neighbors and fortunate friends. They were both Nebraskans,
from childhoods with hard corners--Wright Morris's father was a

drifter, Loren Eiseley's mother was deaf and tormented--but there
all resemblances ceased.

I can personally testify that Wright ^{MORRIS} was antic, quick-witted,
 mischievous, adventurous--he used every dab of his life and
 travels in his writing, and he wrote a lot: 33 books, among them 19
 novels and 3 memoirs. ^{LOREN} Eiseley by all accounts was melancholy,
 not particularly good with people, never went anywhere, a
 "bleeder" as a writer and evidently as a soul--Wright Morris
 nicknamed him "Schmerzie," short for "Weltschmerz," world
 pain as we all learned back there in Philosophy 101.

[↑]
 (SADNESS OVER THE EVILS OF THE WORLD)

Onward they went, in their careers, Wright Morris to literary prizes--the National Book Award in 1957 for **The Field of Vision**, a remarkable kaleidoscopic novel set in a bull ring in Mexico--and to the cusp of major literary reputation. With that quicksilver mind and a compositional hand almost as fleet, ~~Wright Morris~~ ^{HE} could write like an angel. Here are the opening sentences of ~~his~~ ^{WRIGHT'S} novel, **The Works of Love**:

“In the dry places, men begin to dream. Where the rivers run sand, there is something in man that begins to flow. West of the 98th Meridian--where it sometimes rains and it sometimes doesn't--towns, like weeds, spring up when it rains, dry up when

it stops. But in a dry climate the husk of the plant remains. The stranger might find, as if preserved in amber, something of the green life that once lived there, and the ghosts of men who have gone on to a better place.”

But Loren Eiseley, it turned out, Loren Eiseley could write like an archangel, the recording one.

This is the opening of the first story in Eiseley's best-known book, **The Immense Journey**:

“Some lands are flat and grass-covered, and smile so evenly up at the sun that they seem forever youthful, untouched by man or time. Some are torn, ravaged and convulsed like the features

of profane old age. Rocks are wrenched up and exposed to view; black pits receive the sun but give back no light.

“It was to such a land I rode, but I rode to it across a sunlit, timeless prairie over which nothing passed but antelope or a wandering bird.”

He goes on to tell of reaching the verge where that prairie “halted before a great wall of naked sandstone and clay,” and how, there on that day on the long-grass prairie of the middle of America he went down into a crack in the earth--a narrow limestone slit which, ~~he~~ ^{EISELEY} realized when he had inserted himself into it, “was a perfect cross section through perhaps ten million

years of time.” An anthropologist being an anthropologist, Eiseley writes next: “I hoped to find at least a bone.” What he found instead, he tells us, was a skull, embedded in the limestone. It was not human---some creature pre-human, Eiseley says, “a low, pinched brain case... and the face of a creature who had spent his days following his nose, and whose power of choice was very small. Though he was not a man, nor a direct human ancestor, there was yet about him some trace of that low, snuffling world out of which our forebears had so recently emerged.”

DELIBERATE
PACE

Under the prairie sky, Loren Eiseley stares down at that skull.

The skull stares, sightless, up at him. And Eiseley writes of that moment: "This creature had never lived to see a man—and I; what was it I was never going to see?"

// It is going to be hard for any of us, ever, to sum up the immense story of humankind better than Loren Eiseley managed to in that single sentence.

SO,

// Two writers, starting from roughly the same place, two careers of words for us to look back at. Wright Morris, whom I cherished personally, now looks like a cold distant star on the page. The technical brilliance, the sentences that one by one can

be luminous--his books still always hold me to their surface. But the nature beneath, human or planetary, never quite comes through. Wright seems to have been listening to himself.

Loren Eiseley, by contrast, broody and withdrawn as he was, put himself and his inmost nature into facing his own fate, in that place in the prairie. And I think Eiseley's words have lasted because he was willing to openly risk the feeling of mortality, the place in the heart that knows we are part of the long passage of things, there on the page, for himself and us.

/ If that little story shows what I think is the value of risk for a writer, of sometimes going beneath and beyond the landscape for

a sense of place, it's probably time I stick my neck out a bit and take you into the territory where the people of my imagination live. In my own work, when I counted up for a Washington Post article I was asked to write, a year or so ago, about creating fictional characters, I found that I'd employed 360 characters in seven works of fiction--all of them born and raised in the place between my ears. Since then, another fifty or so have formed up in my imagination and marched onto the pages of my next novel, **The Whistling Season**, and one of those, I'm going to briefly let loose from the pages into the room here--this will be an Idaho world premiere of a few lines of **The Whistling Season**, which

won't be published until next spring--because this character is
right up the alley of life that has brought us all here tonight.

When Rick Ardinger called me up and asked me to make this talk
on behalf of the Humanities Council, I should have just put this
invented person--Paul Milliron--on the phone with him. Because
Paul Milliron in my novel is a western kid interested in roots, all
right, but not simply the ones out in the root cellar of the
homestead or the ones his father has put down for the family in the
homestead soil of the west in 1910--Paul is passionately interested
in the roots of language. He starts being tutored in Latin, after
school in the one-room schoolhouse, by an imaginative teacher

whose lofty flights of thought Paul can only compare to balloon ascensions. Paul himself is drastically down to earth in his Latin translations; to him, *Noli excitare canes dormientes*, quite plainly means *Do not disturb the canines that are asleep*, until his teacher shrinks it to *Let sleeping dogs lie*.

Highly literal as this schoolboy character is, it gives him one great advantage in the exploration of language. Whenever he is stumped by some fresh swatch of vocabulary or labyrinthine conjugation, Paul hears the echo of that long-suffering patient teacher telling him, "Look to the root, you must always look to the root of the word." As Paul puts it:

PACE

“It caused me to see into two languages at once. *Fabula*, story; and I gaped at the birth of *fabulous* and *fable*. Similarly *school* from *schola*, *recess* from *recedere*--suddenly everything I read was wearing a toga.”

And so Paul, in my place here tonight, would have looked it up, wouldn't he. “Humanitas,” the root of our usage of “humanities”--in Paul's well-thumbed Latin-to-English dictionary, these several meanings of “humanitas” are given: “human nature; humanity; kindness, compassion, human feeling; courtesy; culture, refinement, civilization.”

(DELIBERATE)

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// Civilization. / Do you hear it with me, that echo that still rings
in those of us of a certain generation, the word spoken with a posh
accent which, when we got past that, was loaded with astonishing
learning? The BBC series on the history of art, majestically titled
with that single word "Civilization," was written and performed in
front of our amazed eyes all those years ago by the English art
critic, Kenneth Clark. Inevitably, ultimately, Sir Kenneth Clark,
Lord Clark. In its elegantly photographed journey through great
paintings and cathedrals, that series was one of television's
shining moments of the mind, and there have not been that many--
I've always figured television is

called a medium because it's neither rare nor well-done. But in
 Kenneth Clark, ^{TV} it found its Diogenes to take us through the world
 of art--and not incidentally, Clark's underlying strength was as a
writer. The man had style, as reflected on the opening page of the
 memoir he ultimately wrote:

“My parents belonged to a section of society known as ‘the
 idle rich’, and although, in that golden age, many people were
 richer, there can have been few who were idler.”

What, you may well ask, does someone like that have to say
 to a scribbler like me half a world away, in a legion of novelists
 and memoirists out here that the media back east get a kick out of

→ calling “writers of the purple sage”⁴²? → Quite a lot, actually,
because Clark had a keen eye for artists far away from the self-
appointed cultural capitals such as New York, London, Paris--the
usual old suspects--who had the nerve to draw on their own roots
and let their imaginations flower from that. Sir Kenneth was
himself as inbred, upper-crust, snobby a Londoner as ever existed,
but at the end of a centuries-spanning examination of great works
of art he concluded with characteristic lordly honesty:

“Artists on the periphery introduce simplicity and common
sense to a style that has become too embellished, too
sophisticated, too self-centered....And they have a visionary

intensity, which at times attains a lyrical quality, as they celebrate the world around them and strive to realize their fresh ambitions.”

The necessity of fresh ambitions. Kenneth Clark and I probably do not have a single thing in common other than that shared view of our respective fields. Of how vital it is for a people, a society, a region, to have art, literary or otherwise, always making its way into our lives from new and unexpected directions.

Which brings us back to Paul Milliron there at his dictionary, on his way to “civilization” by way of “humanitas.” I mentioned earlier the second side of “trying to place” it rightly for the reader,

the craft side of writing. Sometimes the crafty side. Writers aren't always up to all the tricks that critics think they're catching us at as we carpenter our books. Flannery O'Connor was asked once if she had put a black hat on a farmer in one of her Georgia stories to symbolize how mean ~~he~~ ^{THE MAN} was, and she said no, she did it because Georgia farmers wear black hats. Sometimes, though, in the making of a book, yes, the writer consciously resorts to some literary device or another that best seems to do the job for a particular scene, and for our last few minutes here I'm going to share with you a trade secret underlying a moment when my character Paul is trying to place himself in his surroundings.

It isn't much of a trade secret or I wouldn't be letting you in on it, would I. But here it is--one thing writers sometimes do, there on the page, is to bring the emotional and the physical actuality together. The patron saints of writing have long shown us that this is something worth doing. Think of the great rhythmic nexus of experience and feeling, that William Faulkner gave the fugitive Joe Christmas in "Light in August" when Faulkner presents Joe to us, stepping from a dark porch into the moonlight, to flee from the beating he's been given, staggering bloody and drunk into that Mississippi street:

“The whiskey died away in time and was renewed and died again, but the street ran on...The street ran into Oklahoma and Missouri and as far south as Mexico and then back north to Chicago and Detroit and then back south again and at last to Mississippi. It was fifteen years long: it ran between the savage and spurious board fronts of oil towns....It ran through yellow wheat fields...”

To cut Faulkner short, which is always a shame but often necessary, the point is to try to get the writing to the frontier, there on the page and in the reader's mind, where a character's circumstance is both physical and metaphysical.

How to do that with my character Paul Milliron, back there in 1910 looking for places his thirteen-year-old mind can go? Paul at the time has no idea that, by 1957--Sputnik's year--when he is telling this story to himself and us, he will be Montana's state superintendent of schools, with a thousand suddenly beleaguered one-room schools under his jurisdiction. At this point of the book, Paul is looking back to that magical school year when he is

a seventh-grader, and he and the other homestead kids daily ride horseback to the Marias Coulee school and picket their horses to graze during the schoolday. That lofty-thinking new teacher--a male schoolmarm--has just arrived, and Paul's family is pitching in to ready up the teacherage, out back of the school, for him to live in. Paul as always is assigned to pump and carry water, and here he has just been sent off to fill the mop bucket at the pump in the schoolyard.

“It was late in the day and the day was late in the season. The pewter cast of light that comes ahead of winter crept into the schoolground as I performed the last of my water errands,

shadows growing dusky instead of sharp almost as I watched.

From the feel of the air, night would bring our first hard frost.

The schoolyard seemed phenomenally empty as I crossed it this time. I could distinctly hear my lone soft footsteps on ground that was stamped across at each recess. Around at the front of the school where the pump stood next to the flagpole, I slung the mop bucket into place under the spout, but for some reason did not step to the pump handle just yet.

I suppose it was the point of life I was at, less than a man but starting to be something more than a boy, that set me aware of everything around, as though Marias Coulee school and its height

of flagpole and depth of well were the axis of all that was in sight.

I remember thinking if I wanted this moment for myself I had

better use my eyes for all they were worth. So, there in the

dwindling light of the afternoon I tried to take in that world

between the manageable horizons. The cutaway bluffs where the

Marias River lay low and hidden were the limit of field of vision

in one direction. In the other, the edge of the smooth-battered

plain leading to the town ^{OF} Westwater. Closer, though, was where I

found the longest look into things. Out beyond the play area,

there were round rims of shadow on the patch of prairie where the

horses we rode to school had eaten the grass down in circles

around their picket stakes. Perhaps that pattern drew my eye to the other, the one I had viewed every day of my school life but never until then truly registered: the trails in the grass that radiated in as many directions as there were homesteads with children, all converging to that schoolyard spot where I stood unnaturally alone."

I think perhaps there, with that inquisitive western kid reading the patterns in the prairie that lead to that solitary schoolhouse, where the book waiting for him inside on the dictionary stand surely has "humanitas" in it, is the right place to end up at, tonight.