

So why are we here?

I don't know about you, but that question engaged every one
of my brain cells when Jan Clinard called and told me this would
take place ~~at an elevation of 7500 feet in~~ Montana in mid-April.

What leapt to my mind was "lambing time!" and just as quickly,
the word association that automatically races through the sheep-
raising blood-routes of my lineage: "Spring blizzard!"

We seem to have been spared ~~a malicious~~ turn of weather--
~~a moment of dispensation by courtesy of global warming--~~ but the
memory of a couple of feet of wet, heavy, bread-dough snow

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plopping atop a couple of thousand mother ewes and their new
→ lambs merged in my mind with the scenario of all of you as
impromptu lambing crew, ~~had~~^{IF} a big snow^{HAD} hit us as in the old days.

There you each are, in this vision of the NCTE of the west, in
rancher overshoes with four buckles, and plaid sheepherder caps
with the earflaps down, [↑]rising to the emergency. The snow of
course seals off the new green grass, and so the sheep must be fed
hay, and some of you pitch in to load the hay sled with sixty-
pound bales, and others harness the team of horses, because the
snow is too deep for farm vehicles, and out you go to the sheep
at the lambing shed and the bunch pens and feed them the flakes

of hay--/the deconstructionists get to yank the baling wire off/-and³
then because the waterholes are frozen over you carry buckets of
water to the freshly-birthed mother ewes. And naturally the shed
needs cleaning, and you pitch in on that--literally, the manure-
caked straw needing to be pitchforked outside and fresh straw
bedding spread. Then you start in on the real work: spooning cod-
liver oil into those sunshine-vitamin deprived lambs who by the
hundreds around you are shivering and threatening to die--in the
ranch way of things, taking your tenure and pension plans with
them. But don't worry, you prove equal to this ranching task, in
this blizzard dream, each of you cradling lamb after lamb in your

aching arms through the days of storm, living up to the noble
picture which a sheep rancher in one of my novels put this way:

“Whenever you see a picture of Jesus Christ, which is it he’s
holding in his arms? Always a lamb, never a goddamn calf.”

(Pause)

But the sheep are gone from these mountains, aren’t they.

That high tide of wool on the slopes of this mountain range, and
Montana’s others, such as the Big Belt Mountains and the Bridger
Mountains just out over the northern horizon from here, where my
parents spent their years in what proved to be, for them, the life-
and-death occupation of transhumance--the dictionary definition,

“transhumance: the movement of livestock and herders to
different grazing grounds with the changing of the seasons”; the
way of life through which the historian Emmanuel Le Roy
Ladurie was able to penetrate the cosmos of the 14th-century
French village of Montaillou, in his ethnographic masterpiece by
that name--”the world of the shepherds,” as ^{LE ROY LADURIE} ~~he~~ pinpointed it, “the
ecology and chronology of transhumance” before feudalism and
the Inquisition closed in; the way of life, even further back, of
Abel, that first keeper of sheep who came to grief--that way of
life, of shepherd and ranch hand Charlie Doig, and of ranch
cook and shepherd Berneta Ringer Doig, and of the five-year-

old who was me on the saddlehorse between theirs on slopes such
 as these, all that is of the relic world now.

The sheep, and the majority of the cattle, are gone from these
 national forest lands **AROUND HERE,** and Big Sky--along with dozens of other ski
 and residential resorts on the higher slopes of the West--have
 come in their place, since World War Two. That's one reason we
 are specifically here, at a once-fought-over site **- ONLY 30 YEARS AGO -** that in its
 environmental way is as consequential and emblematic as a Civil
 War battlefield. We should keep in mind in any millennial
 reckoning of ourselves and our West that, even here as we go
 about our business of pondering where we've been and where we

might head, we're camped along a once-sharp salient⁷ of the battle of the wilderness.

So why are you here, listening to somebody who ordinarily spends his time trying to get words to come out the ends of his fingers instead of out of his mouth? I presume you're here because somewhere along the way you heard a story call your name. Whatever book you dallied with, back there, and lost your heart to, it must have given you the curriculum of mission to pass along the beguilement of language by teaching it to others, and that's a wondrous thing in itself.

I figure I'm here, as a story ⁸ practitioner, to say a few things about the nature of stories, and, because we are at this place where the echoes are historically pretty recent, about nature **in** stories and in ourselves. And to take less than the next millennium to do it. So, now, the first of three tales of "listening to the land."

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,⁹ 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 the Bay Area (where he

lived the later part of his life) ^{the BAY AREA} 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 he shot when he went back to his

home places in Nebraska in 1940 reads this way:

“There is a kith and kinship between your House of Sky and these earthly unearthy 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 speak once, in a voice so eminent and deeply resonant that 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 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. 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)

LOREN

VELT-SHMERTS

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 could write like an angel. Here are the opening sentences of his 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 realized when he had inserted himself into it, “was a perfect cross section through perhaps ten million

years of time.” An anthropologist¹⁵ ^{OF COURSE} 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.”

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.

There was more--a great deal more in the little book that became Eiseley's **Walden**. His poetic speculations about nature--our own and the infinite pageant of the cosmos we are part of--keep on resonating. You may have read about the deep-sea

discoveries of life-forms by scientists off the Galapagos Islands and more closely studied on the Juan de Fuca Ridge off the Oregon coast when a submersible observatory was developed--
tube worms, a previously unknown form of life, with no eyes, no mouths, that live in the boiling sulphurous volcanic vents on the ocean floor. These tube worms are, in essence, the kind of thing we have fantasized about finding in outer space--but they're in inner space, in the ocean deeps, right under our surface-dwelling noses all this time, and by one calculation, the mass of this wonderfully spooky goo on the seabeds may amount to more than

the mass of flora and fauna--that includes us--on the surface of the earth.

This is mind-bending, in its possible evolutionary implications, but Loren Eiseley was there first. In another of his little stories in **The Immense Journey**, he contemplates ocean life forms and their place in evolution, and quietly gives us the sentence:

“There are things down there still coming ashore.”

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 ear into that storytelling frame of mind that has been in us ever since art began to dance off the cave walls to us--literature REMEMBER, perhaps begins there, in the painted bison running in the tunnels of time, and the hunting escapades they represent being told around the fire. I think that's what we're still up to, in the white canyons of paper and now the nebulae of cyberspace... I

think stories still can be our way of sharing light--of sitting together around humanity's fire with the universal dark all around us. And I think Eiseley's words have lasted because he was willing to openly risk awe about nature, and to put it to use as a **LOCATING** ~~finding~~ device, for himself and us.

/Chapter two, now, in the annals of "land listening," and this takes us back, not all that long ago, to when people from elsewhere did the listening for us and told us what the West sounded like, whether or not they were tone-deaf to our chosen land.

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 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 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 last century with **The Virginian**,
Owen Wister’s famous novel. **The Virginian** began a lineage of
what might be called Wisterns. In a Wistern, a bad guy insults a
good guy--there in **The Virginian**, YOU’LL RECALL, the actual insult is “you son
of a blank--(shrug) 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.

Nonsensical as that sort of portrait of the western half of America is, it does have consequences: it fudges the terms of life in the actual American West--that this is a big, complicated, fragile, contentious part of the country which requires a lot of work to make a living from its land.

It also induces severe critical nearsightedness. When writers from Charles Dickens' London to Tom Wolfe's "Bonfire of the Vanities" New York fuel their creative processes with 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 similarly set out to write about the territory we know, it gets called "regional."

Back at the ranch at Yosnaya Polyana, I'm sure even 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 those later heftier cohorts of his, Louis L'Amour and John Wayne.

Bear in mind that it was only yesterday, historically, when the cultural images of the West were those two guys, with a pound of belt buckle trying to hold up ~~25~~⁴⁰ extra pounds of gut. / Something had to give way.

Blessedly, it has. In place of those Wisterns and Westerns, we have a number of recent books where, as the ^{OREGON} 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.

William Kittredge's memoir **Hole in the Sky**;

Refuge, by Terry Tempest Williams; **Rain or Shine**, by Cyra McFadden; Mary Clearman Blew's brilliant set of books, **Balsamroot** and **All but the Waltz**; Teresa Jordan's **Riding the White Horse Home**, and Kim Barnes' remembrance of coming-of-age in a logging family on the Clearwater River of Idaho, **In the Wilderness**.

These "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 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."

/Well, my third and final tale-telling had better be on myself--a kind of show-and-tell of how nature gets hold of me in my writing and how I try to get hold of it enough to put some of it onto the page. I thought I'd do two examples, one mostly of background--the process of gathering impressions and ideas--and one of the actual performance on the page. This first one, of nature making itself heard in the cave between my ears, is from my first novel, **The Sea Runners**, of nearly twenty years ago now, and the other will be from the most recent, **Mountain Time**.

This, I suppose, is the story of the two Januaries in one year.

In the January on the calendar, the model with the guarantee that it would last only 31 days, I flew to Alaska--Sitka first, then on to Juneau. I was carrying along my own storyline. It was of the other January, the one back in 1853: four men, Swedish workmen indentured for seven years to the Russian-American Company at New Archangel (the once-and-future Sitka), decide the hell with fetching fur for the Tsar; they steal a Tlingit canoe and aim downcoast for Astoria, twelve hundred miles. That plot existed as a five hundred-word newspaper account from the time.

Round it out with sixty, seventy thousand more words, I figured, and there's my novel.

Most of those words needed to be got, of course, from the source: the Northwest Coast, the surf-moat and timber palisade where the Pacific and the continent contend along Southeast Alaska and British Columbia and the state of Washington. Captain Cook's coast, and the Nootka Chief Maquinna's -- and imminently the Alpha Helix's, which was going to be my ticket to ride. An oceanographic ship of the University of Alaska's Institute of Marine Sciences, the Alpha Helix was 133 feet long, painted a winsome baby-blue, and bound to Puget Sound for a

winter of refitting. I was to go aboard at Juneau and coastwatch my way home to Seattle.

(THIS WAS 1980, INCIDENTALLY.)

Alaska seemed just the moody sort of place to begin a year. ✓

Both on this trip and in the time I had spent there the previous summer on the historical track of my Swedes, Alaska struck me as at once wonder-filled and edgy. Paul Bunyan, but with alimony and a hangover.

The send-off for the Alpha Helix was characteristically mixed that way: Juneau folk were celebrating the birthday of Robert Burns. Well, not the Scottish poet's 222nd natal day so much, as that somebody had come up with the idea that it would pass time

improvingly for Juneau to have a bagpipe band. I was blood-bound to attend. So a pipe band there was, and haggis, and a large ruddy kilted fellow pouring the lead piper a splash of the auld pure stuff and asking, "Piper, wha'll ye have in your whiskey?" and the piper giving proper Caledonian response, "More whiskey!" and probably the skirls of the pipes were still echoing through the mountains and terrifying the moose the next day when the Alpha Helix cast off.

I expected that shipboard life had to be calmer than Alaska ashore, and by and large this was so. Its Three Commandments proved to be the ones I'd learned ^{HERE} on Montana ranches:

--Say fewer words than anybody else on the crew.

--Work as long hours as anybody else and longer if you can.

--And never rile the cook.

But the coast: this long labyrinth of pastscape that my Swedish quartet -- Karlsson, Melander, Wennberg and Braaf I knew them as now -- need to paddle through, muddle through, winter day on winter day of that far January: the Northwest coast was agitation a thousand new ways. Arithmetic of the Alpha Helix's voyage was plain enough. Eight hundred and eighty miles, Juneau to Seattle, at about 10 1/2 knots. But arithmetic isn't always trustable dimension, so here was a kind of sovereign

galaxy of the coast; more moods of water than I had seen in 15 years of hiking Washington and Oregon shores, a brinking spruce forest so thick it seemed to be thatched, islands islands islands...a commotion of landscape which I strained to put down in my journal.

Nor did the coast let go of me, even once the Alpha Helix was berthed snug in the Duwamish waterway and I had traipsed off to my Seattle suburb. I walked into my house and found that the floor had caught the exact lurch-and-roll of the ship. Three days, it took to coax my inner ear out of that slosh.

But nature's Januaryness, the temblors from the coast, refused to leave at all. As soon as I sat down to resume day-to-day writing on **The Sea Runners**, I knew there had to be a fifth character: the Northwest Coast itself. From then on I quite purposely wove into a work of fiction the presence of the coast as a living thing. This often was feathered in with just a phrase or a few sentences, but I didn't hesitate to simply bring the coast and its mood to the foreground of the story every so often. I'll just read one of those passages:

“Sometime in these days the canoe had slid them out of winter into not-winter.

No calendar can quite catch the time, and the cluster of moments themselves is as little possible to single out as the family of atoms of air that pushes against the next and has begun a breeze. Yet the happening is unmissable. Out of their winter rust, ferns unroll green. Up from the low dampnesses of the forest the blooms of skunk cabbage lick, a butter-gold flame and scent like burnt sugar....Seals bob forth in the offshore swells. Salmon far out in the Pacific reverse compass, start their instinctual trace back from under-ocean pastures toward the rivers where they were spawned and must now seed spawn in turn.... Geese and ducks and whistling swans write first strokes of the calligraphy of flight

northward. To the north too, glaciers creak with the earliest of the strains which at last will calve icebergs into the azure bays.

Within the white rivers...currents begin to pry at their winter roofs of ice.

In stirrings tiny and mighty, the restive great coast was engendering spring.”

One of my favorite quotes about the West is from the early cattleman Charles Anceny, who in 1882 contemplated himself and his neighbors in Montana's briefly burgeoning livestock industry--the blizzard of '86 was just around the corner, remember--and Anceny concluded: “Our good luck consists more

in the natural advantages of our country than in the scale of our genius."

Certainly that was my situation, in meeting nature on the coast that January: its own thrilling force, not any great mental muscle in me, let it make its way into my book. I just had to listen.

/Now to my final dab of show-and-tell, or I hope, tell-and-show. We spring the clock ahead about twenty years from **The Sea Runners** to another book, **Mountain Time**, which came out last August. This little scene from it--⁸ ~~five~~ or ⁹ ~~six~~ minutes' worth--involves Mariah McCaskill, a highly intense photographer for a Montana newspaper. Mariah is newly back in the West,

having won a Fuji Fellowship--awarded to her by me--a Fuji Fellowship to travel the world and take pictures for a year.

Mariah is also licking her wounds from a failed love affair, with a New Zealand glacier guide named Colin. Colin, much **much** younger, wore his total philosophy of life on his Mount Cook Guide Service sweatshirt--"Glaciers are a kick in the ice."

As you'll hear, Mariah, now back home in the American West, is trying to shoot a feature photo--up along the Rocky Mountain Front in northern Montana--for her Sunday paper. And what I'm trying to do, with Mariah and the scene, 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-- the lasting power that Tolstoy gave to Anna Karenina's final instant of life, ready to throw herself under the train, asking "Lord, forgive me for everything!" while she "looked at the bottom of the freight cars, at the bolts and chains and at the great iron wheels of the first car that was slowly rolling by..."

Or the great rhythmic nexus of experience and feeling that Faulkner gave the fugitive Joe Christmas in "Light in August" when he flees from the beating he's been given, staggering bloody and drunk into a 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^{with} 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...”

To cut Faulkner short, which is always a shame, the point--I think--is to try to get the writing to the frontier, there on the page and in the reader's mind, where a character's predicament is both physical and metaphysical. So here is Mariah, and I'm trying to get her to that point, by using rocks and birds:

Stalking rocks, Mariah traipsed up yet
another hillside. This was one of those days
in a photographer's life when a desk job
didn't sound nearly so ridiculous.

She had been on her feet for hours out here,
trying for some semi-respectable shot to

send in for ^{the} ~~for~~ Sunday, ^{paper.} ~~but at the same time~~ →

She stopped and blew for breath. With
one thing and another, by now the best light
of the morning was gone, her camera bag
weighed on her like a mail pouch on
catalogue day, the wind was starting to
blow, and she discovered she had left her
close-up lens in the van. Nor were the
damn rocks cooperating.

She was in search of the right rockface.

Out in this lower end of the bench country

the glacier leavings were big lone stones

called erratic boulders, the size of

Volkswagen Beetles, deposited by the ice

sheet when it pushed out of the mountain

canyons. Such rough old displaced chunks

often were rouged with orange lichens, so
that they resembled decorated Gibraltars on
the prairie. Shoot the right one from up
close against the wavery horizon of grass,
and it would make an effect like crossing
Weegee with Van Gogh. She felt mildly
guilty resorting to this. But you could slap

anything inanimate on a Sunday page and
readers would think it had more than
everyday [→]meaning. She knew a passable
picture existed somewhere out here. She
just hadn't found it yet.

Two rocks later, a distant upright shape
caught her eye, off on one of the foothills to
the west. More curious than convinced, she

half-trotted back down to the van and drove
as close as she could get on a fenceline
road. Then she trudged up the hogback ~~hill~~,
skirting little stands of jackpine and
switchbacking against the steep incline.

She was going to be as ^{ticked}~~pissed~~ off as she was
↑

leg-weary if the thing up top wasn't what
she hoped.

Already camera to eye, ^{MARIAH} ~~she~~ was focusing in
on the headhigh sentinel mound.

/ It was a shee[↘]pherder's monument.

These stood on the ridgelines and the
shoulders of mountain pastures throughout
the Two Medicine country where she and

HER SISTER

✓ Lexa grew up, each stone stack the product

of boredom or mania or whimsy/or the need
for a landmark or a grazing allotment
boundary/or simply the urge to build
something well. Back in the times when
the McCaskill bands of sheep were part of
the wool tide on these slopes along the

Rockies, their sheepherder might build one
of these in a fevered afternoon to take his
mind off a sudden terrible thirst for the
attractions in the skid row bars in Great
Falls. Another might fiddle around all
summer erecting one or two, perhaps a
puzzle-piece layer a day, the monument
corners exquisitely joined (as on this one)

with proper fit as the only mortar. On one
of the camptending trips of their girlhood,
their father was inside the sheepwagon in
touchy diplomacy with the herder while she
and Lexa proudly tussled up a sizable rock
and crammed it onto the cairn the man had
underway nearby. The herder came out,
saw their achievement, and threw a fit.

“What’s that doing on there? That’s a bad
leave!”



After he quit raving and expelled
their rock in favor of a smaller one that
chinked into place more readily, the girls
grasped that whenever stones were forced to
fit together the way theirs was jammed in, it
left trouble when the next stone had to be
inserted. The 'leave' was what you left
yourself to start again.

MARIAH
SHE REALIZED.

I'm going to cry, I never cry.

There had been a cairn like this at
Taiaroa, on the South Island of New
Zealand.

Colin had taken her home to meet his
parents, it reached that stage. He and she
drove down from Mount Cook farther and
farther south into red fertile hills, every so

often Mariah dandling a hand over to his in
ratification of the scenery but also as if to
make sure of his wordless presence. Sheep
raisers evolving into bed-and-breakfast
providers, Colin's folks scrupulously put the
two of them in separate bedrooms but
adjoining.

→
Mariah entered into the occasion still

having hopes for something lasting, still

shoving the difference in their ages as far to
the back of her mind as she could.

Throughout her Fuji year of traveling, there

had been the embassy types hitting on her

with invitations to tennis and evening

functions.

The guides and taxi drivers in
twenty countries asking, "Your husband is
where?" (To which she would look them in
the eye and say, "He is in a business
meeting with your secret police.") Colin
with his mountaineer grooves and his god
bod was a more straightforward proposition
than any of those.

A home weekend with him, though,

except for his visit in the night, proved to be

quite a length of time. After it dawned on

COLIN

~~him~~ that Mariah had seen sheep before, and

the fields of giant turnips they fed on were

interesting for only so long, he took her to

the coast, to a nesting refuge of royal

albatrosses. To Taiaroa.

And there the stupendous birds, yachts
of their kind, came swooping in from
Antarctica, constant thousands of miles of
glide on the circular air currents to bring
food to their young. Those jumbo
youngsters perched on the cliff brinks, like
dodoes resolved to pass the evolution exam

this time around, lifting their wings over
and over again in the testing wind along the
New Zealand coast. And in would come
another parent albatross with its ten-foot
wingspread, sailing with the South Pole at
its back.

Mariah was enchanted, lit up

through and through with this spectacle of

wingspans beyond angels'. (If she was

remembering her Brit Lit course right,

Coleridge had to resort to serious drugs to

reach this point.)

To be out of the wind

while she got her camera into action, she

(SLOW)
tugged Colin down onto a grassy spot

behind the marker cairn of purplish stones

on the crest of ^{THAT} ~~the~~ headland. (Built ^{SHE WONDERED,} by some

fallen-to-the-bottom-of-the-world Scottish

shepherder[?])

Then she crawled out a little
way into the blowing grass and settled down
there in the tussocks, scoping the bearcub-
sized chicks through her long lens and
turning her head upward to catch each
whispered flight of the elder royals.

She

DELIBERATE

watched by the hour, Colin stoically bored

behind her, the wind ruffling no feathers of

aspiration on him.

I think, there--with a woman determined to soar in her work,
to glide this blue planet with those royal birds as they are forever
coming ashore--is as good a last chapter for today as any. Thanks/
for listening.