

Idaho Statesman reprint of speech moved to '05 Idaho Humanities speech file

When I was about as tall as my father's elbow as he judiciously bent it in the nine taverns of our town, I got to see a lot of makings of the American West. Among his own many Western aspects — he'd been a homestead kid, broncbuster, shepherd, short-order cook — my father was a haymaker: a haying contractor, a kind of free-lance foreman, who would hire his own crew and put up the hay for a rancher for so much per ton.

Those saloons, where I was lucky enough to tag along with him, were his hiring halls, and as he would sound out a hayhand on whether the guy had ever run a power buckrake and where, there would be the ritual of the men fumbling into their shirt pockets for the little white tobacco sack and book of "rolling" papers — Bull Durham and a Monkey Ward Catalog as they called the cigarette papers — the makings of the hand-rolled cigarettes they smoked as they talked of haystacks and summer wages.

Social ingredients are the butter, cookies of memory, and just as that famous nibble into a bit of French pastry set Proust off into volumes of intricate Remembrance of Things Past, we ought to in our own Remembrance of Things West try to see all of what's been made since back there at the makings.

That blue smoke of sociability as my father and his hayhands lit up in the Maverick Bar in White Sulphur Springs, Montana, I reported in "This House of Sky" this way: "Opening the door from the street was like finding yourself in a sudden roaring fog."

In the novel about today's West that I've just finished writing, (a book called "Mountain Time") the sulphur whiff of the past comes to my Baby Boomer protagonist — Mitch Rozier — when he returns to his hometown beneath the face of the Rocky Mountains:

As Mitch pulled into town, it seemed to him even more shabby than the last time he had been here, no more than half a year ago. A fast-food delivery truck was backed up to its first port of call, the Town Pump, Gas-Groceries-Videos-Electronic Poker on the pump-island sign and room for more. The aquamarine post office, Uncle Sam's cinder-block contribution, squatted next to the old community hall that was now the senior center, with a wheelchair ramp put on like a hasty patch. In the squeezetube line of enterprises that squibbed out toward visitors approaching any Ameri-

posed to start, at some kind of a beginning, let's take on the Big One, that eternal audience question: "Where do you get your ideas?" Always a good question, but the answer is always tough. It's not as if writers live in an aquarium — the writer floating dreamily all day long in the fluid of thought and word, and at supertime the figure of God — in the unlikely disguise of a literary critic — drops in the fish food.

No, art comes by way of craft, of working and reworking those sounds that come off the page. The heart of the language must beat there. Three hearts, really.

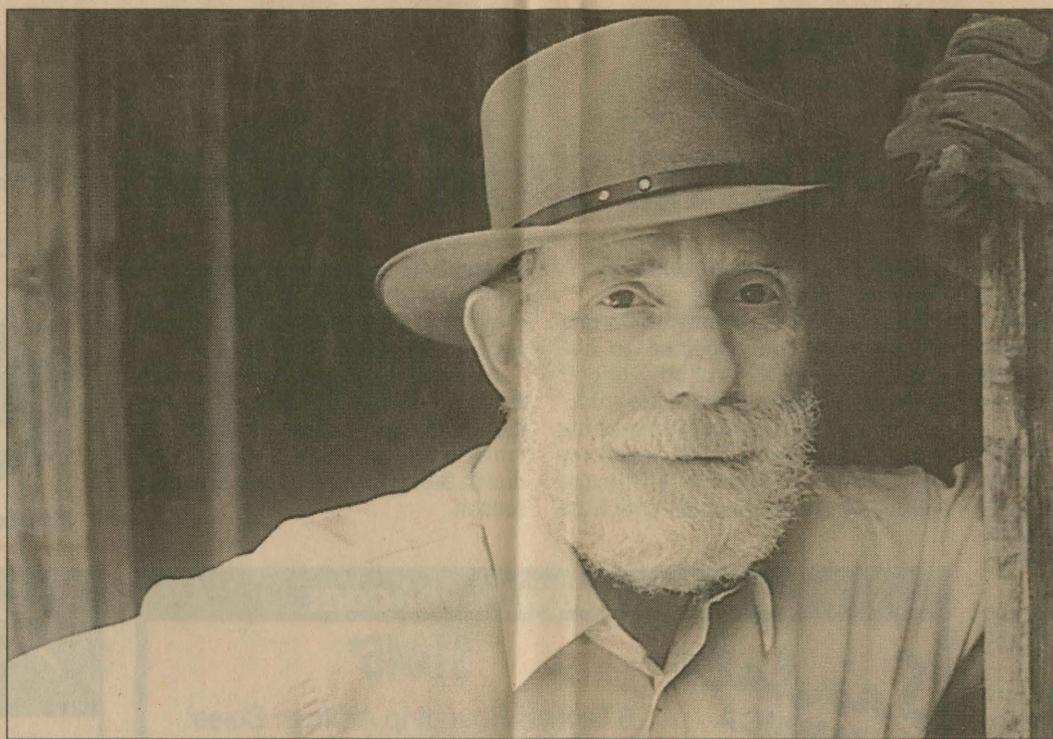
The rhythms and tides of the bloodstream we all share, words, constitute the first. The late Richard Hugo, the bigger-than-life poet of Washington and Montana, gave the world one of the canniest books on the craft of using words on paper — *The Triggering Town*, with alloys of common sense and revelation such as this paragraph:

"A student may love the sound of Yeats' line 'Stumbling upon the blood dark track once more' and not know that the single-syllable word with a hard consonant ending is a unit of power in English, and that's one reason 'blood dark track' goes off like rifle shots. ... The young poet is too often paying attention to the big things and can't be bothered with little matters like that. But little matters like that are what make and break poems."

Those "little matters" that are the tools poets work with greatly interest me, because that's the shop I've always liked to hang around in. As a fiction writer, which I mostly am, I don't seem to have come out from under Gogol's *Overcoat*, where Turgenev said all short-story writers popped out of. I've never written a short story, in about a million published words now, and don't show any signs of doing so. Instead, I seem to be from under the cloak of prose's singing teachers — our betters, the poets.

The poetic urge caught up with me in an unexpected place — while I was working on a Ph.D in history. What graduate school taught me, back there in the late '60s, was that I didn't want to be on a university faculty. I found myself free-lancing magazine articles during grad school and I also began, to my surprise, writing poetry, which I had never even thought of attempting before.

My eight or nine published poems showed me that I lacked the poet's final skill, the one Yeats called closing a poem with the click of a well-made box. But, still wanting to stretch the



Writer Ivan Doig

Author puts his heart into writing

Ivan Doig talks about the magic of his craft, the poetry of words, a sense of place

Writer Ivan Doig mesmerized an audience Sept. 25 with his musings on the writing life. He was the guest speaker for the Idaho Humanities Council's 25th anniversary fundraiser, which drew more than 500 people for dinner at the Boise Centre on The Grove.

The council chose Doig because he has a large following in the Northwest.

"He's such an amalgam of humanities disciplines: educated and experienced as a journalist, he completed a Ph.D in history, and became a writer of fiction," said Rick Aringer, executive director of the Idaho Humanities Council.

Doig, who lives in Seattle, writes fiction and non-fiction that traces ranching life. His

1978 book "This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind," is a memoir of his life in a sheep ranching family. It was nominated for a National Book Award and later won a Distinguished Achievement Award from the Western Literature Association.

He's gained much literary acclaim for his trilogy of Montana novels "English Creek," "Dancing at the Rascal Fair" and "Ride with Me, Mariah Montana."

His new book "Mountain Time," is scheduled for release in May 1999.

The following is the text of his speech from the Humanities Council dinner.

—Ellie Rodgers, features editor

The accumulated century of the weekly newspaper of Choteau, Montana, the grandly-named Choteau Acantha, actually is in red protective binders in the public library there in the small town of Choteau. And so, this becomes a Thursday, the evening the Choteau Public Library stays open past supertime, and I am sitting there, as I have sat in front of so many dusty troves of research, at the table on the library's little mezzanine, going through old newsprint to hear into that area of Montana during the Depression years, the drought years.

In mid-February of 1939, the homespun local columnist reports that there had been a heavy fog, unusual to that climate and time of year. A stirring begins on the library stairs, and up comes a group of women from a Hutterite colony near Choteau. In their long skirts and patterned aprons and kerchiefs, these religious communal dwellers might have just stepped out of the pages of Tolstoy.

I keep sitting there and open the next red binder, the columnist is saying in the issue of May 18, 1939, "if the adage of rain 90 days after a fog holds good," a heavy soaking rain will come on the 21st. Steps on the mezzanine stairs again, a ranch wife appears and begins browsing forcefully through the fiction shelves, no nonsense about it as she flips open novels and takes or rejects them on the basis of their opening sentence.

I re-open the red binder, to the next week's newspaper, May 25th, 1939, which reports that a downpour started in the early morning of the 22nd, it went all through the day and into the night, an inch and two-thirds of rain before it quit. "Opportune for the crops," the homespun columnist states with satisfaction about that fog-forecast goose-downer, and I sit thinking of all the rain that must have seemed like, after the years of drought, the land suddenly swimming with valuable moisture and more of it coming as May went off the calendar wetly.

Steps on the stairs, it is the volunteer evening librarian telling me apologetically that she has to close up now. I close the red binder on the 1939 newspapers, go out into the summer night, there under the northern Rockies. A couple of years later when my novel "English Creek" is published, there in my fictional version of the summer of 1939 a forceful ranch-born woman named Beth McCaskill shows up almost immediately, and the book's opening sentence reads "That month of June swam into the Two Medicine country."

ary under the heading, "Afloat with half the money in the known world." But the example I wanted to bring to you tonight is the heightening, the stretching, that a writer — I think — has to try to do when handed something like that.

Out of many, many scenes from the big Paul Allen floating party, let me give you just the final night potlatch, when the upper deck of one of the most posh cruise ships in the world was transformed into a mammoth replica of a costal Indian longhouse — with a rock band playing, and gorgeously caped performers of the Tsimshian tribe, dancing, and Hollywood starlets, slinking by in slinky gowns, it was like the Star Wars bar.

There at the edge of the dance floor sits Candace Bergen, being herself rather than Murphy Brown, watching in open utter fascination as the greatest artist of the Tsimshians, Nathan Jackson, performs his raven dance.

There is Jeff Goldblum, not in "Jurassic Park" or in "The Big Chill," but in the buffet line with roast buffalo on his plate.

And there on the rotunda next to the dance floor with the totem pole carved specially for this night is a man dancing alone — a man who in an earlier turn of his life had been a commercial fisherman in Alaska, and survived the sinking of a crab boat that plunged him into these exact cold northern waters now, cut by the keel of the cruise ship "Crystal Harmony." He dances and dances with the passion and privacy of a man who was handed his life back — and his movements on the rotunda set the thunderbird totem pole to nodding in rhythm with him.

And, over along the wall, unabashedly standing on top of a chair to see out into this scene, is a white-bearded writer, on a ladder of life where he surely has never been — but up there writing, writing, into that pocket notebook that he always carries next to his heart.

Before I leave the neighborhood of the heart in this talk, let me just say that the absolute blood-central reason why I am here tonight is contained in the word that pulses within the name of this organization. That distinguished middle name of the Idaho Humanities Council.

This state council and the others — and I have been around nearly all the Rocky Mountain ones by now — and their parent, the National Commission for the Humanities, have become a life force and a wallet, too, for the values which we should want to show forth in our literature, our arts, our educational system.

munally hall that was now the senior center, with a wheelchair ramp put on like a hasty patch. In the squeezetube line of enterprises that squibbed out toward visitors approaching any American municipality anymore, the only new business Mitch could spot was a small medical equipment supply store, there to supply oxygen for emphysema sufferers.

I see it as part of the writer's job to keep an eye on such makings of everyday life — to keep literary watch on how the things we grew up with endure, and drift — and change. I think quite a number of us out West are simply trying to do what writers have always done, and pay homage to our native place in our words. We're not the first to sit around insides our heads all the time and monkey away at that.

James Joyce evidently didn't stop being an Irishman when he moved to Paris — or we wouldn't have "Ulysses," the greatest novel of Dublin, and I've always liked Paul Horgan's retort whenever he'd get too tired of always getting called a Southwestern writer — "Everybody is a regionalist," Paul Horgan asserted. Tolstoy is a regionalist. Or, to put it more poetically, as the late, great Oregon poet William Stafford did in his jackknife-sharp little poem, "Lake Chelan."

They call it regional, this relevance — the deepest place we have in this pool forms the model of our land, a lonely one, responsive to the wind. Everything we own has brought us here; from here we speak."

Brought here tonight to speak a literary "Happy Birthday" to the Idaho Humanities Council and its quarter-century of good works for the mind and the soul, I've been asked to talk about some of my own makings as a writer born and brought up in the Mountain West, and I'll be salt-and-peppering some of that in with some of the other ingredients that I think gives literature its particular flavors.

To start, as writers are sup-

My eight or nine published poems showed me that I lacked the poet's final skill, the one Yeats called closing a poem with the click of a well-made box. But, still wanting to stretch the craft of writing toward the areas where it mysteriously starts to be art, I began working on what I later heard Normal Maclean call the poetry under the prose — in my case, a lyrical style, with what I call a poetry of the vernacular in how my characters speak on the page.

Whether it is the Depression crews "riding the tension spiders" of steelwork at Fort Peck Dam in my novel "Bucking the Sun," or the handless bartender Lucas Barclay — in "Dancing at the Rascal Fair" — hoisting his glass to the other America-comers of the homestead era and fearlessly toasting in his Scotch burr, "Broth to the ill, stilts to the lame!" — I've tried to give my characters that touch of the poet that working people so often have.

I'll get back to this a little further into this talk, but let me move now to the geography of the language — the "sense of place" that critics so often cite, in those of us who grew up in the sagebrush and somehow turned out to be writers.

This is the second heart of writing, the home heart — the one of that matchless Robert Louis Stevenson stanza: "Home is the sailor, home from the sea, And the hunter home from the hill." One of the ways a writer comes home from his hills where life has taken him is a process I like to call seeing with the ear and hearing with the eye.

The eye starts to "listen" and remember, to register for good how the way a rancher cocks his hat says something about that man. The ear starts to "see" and remember, how ordinary language can be made to glow, as if breathing on an ember, in a cold-morning cookstove.

A long time ago, in that galaxy far away called Ireland, my wife, Carol, and I were being shown around Yeats country — shown around so enthusiastically that

manities Council. Doig, who lives in Seattle, writes fiction and non-fiction that traces ranching life. His

mundane matters such as meal-times never came into the picture.

Aw, never mind, the Irish-woman who was doing the relentless showing told us, it'd taste all the better when we ever did eat — "Hunger is good sauce," she said.

I believe that if a writer is lucky, he or she early on gets afflicted with a hunger for detail and language, and that sauce never loses it flavor.

In my own case, when I was still down there in the vicinity of the elbow, a new experience — in Bill Stafford's term, a new relevance in my life — a kind of northern lights out loud, compared to the rambled-through West that was my father — began to speak to me.

"You're not sugar nor salt nor nobody's honey, so the rain will never hurt you," she crooned to me.

"That one goes around looking like she's been yanked through a knothole backwards," she huffed about our worst-dressed neighbor.

And, she confided about the couple dallying together in our wide-eyed little town, "Those two are as close as three in a bed with one kicked out."

Into my life had come that river of proverbs, my grandmother. I was 10 years of age, but my ears were as old as sin. All of a sudden I knew I was in new territory of life, something like honorary adulthood. Now, besides my Scots-burr/storytelling/widower/father, here was my mother's mother in this reluctant knot of bloodline the two of them had made, to raise me.

You bet, my ears were busy from then on, with the picture-play of words from my grandmother — whose formal education had broken off at the third grade — whenever the prairie wind would swirl up her dress and she would announce, "Bal-

loon ascension!" Or with the bloodstream music of rhyme when my father, from the heights of his eighth-grade education, would ask, "Have they taught ye this one yet" and begin reciting, to my dropped jaw, "Hiawatha."

It lasts.

We've known so ever since art began to dance off the cave walls to us — literature 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 and the play of words still can be our way of sharing light — sitting together around humanity's fire with the universal dark all around us.

Our work, our words, of course, have to start on the cave walls between our own ears.

One of the oddest aspects of being a writer is having to sit around in your own head all the time, watching things flit through the twilight of the mind as you try to figure out — was that a bat that just flew past? Or the whispering ghost of Plato. As a writer, you have to be able to stand your own company — and not need company from much of anybody else — long enough to figure out those shadowy patterns in the mental cave.

When I'm asked, at book signings and readings, what my working habits are, I hardly know what to say except "pathological diligence."

I began as a journalist and so don't believe in that malady called "writer's block" — I never did meet a newspaper or magazine editor who would say to me, "Oh, that's all right, we'll just run a blank space there where you can't think of anything to say." The point always is to get some-

thing down on paper: describe a character, make up dialogue, dig something out of your pocket notebook or laptop.

In my case, I sit there and write a given number of words a day on a manuscript, a given number of days a week, a given number of weeks a year. This varies from book to book — on novels such as "English Creek" it was a thousand words a day, on others it's been four hundred — so that the job isn't a permanent assembly line.

Do I actually keep track of this daily output? You bet. I have a work calendar — just a plain one with plenty of white space for each day; it used to be given out by our fuel oil company, but now I have to go out and buy some kind of Yuppie variety or make my own — and I mark my total of pages on it each day and write the running total at the end of each week. I once read a sneering comment by some critic about Hemingway, to the effect that Hemingway was so insecure that he actually counted every word he wrote every day. And I thought to myself, "Well, hey, that's the best thing I've ever heard about Hemingway."

I've always harkened to something Flannery O'Connor once said, about why she believed in the habit of sitting at her desk regularly even if the writing wasn't going well:

"If you don't sit there every day, the day it would come well, you won't be sitting there."

Let me take you briefly through this writerly process of creative sitting, using an example I know best, my own.

Among the countless colored coats that a story can wear, this particular time it was dressed old-fashioned — black and white and "red" (read) all over, that old pun about newspapers before they became such an endangered species.

forecar" taken-born" woman named Beth McCaskill shows up almost immediately, and the book's opening sentence reads "That month of June swam into the Two Medicine country."

And now, in this run of hearts, we come to the last vital pulse on the page, the one I don't know what to call except the blood-sum of the writer. Magical, inexplicable, whatever it is, but the literary quality by which a writer writes better than he has any right to. By which Faulkner, who could barely rouse himself to sort mail in a somnolent Mississippi post office, had somewhere in him the ambition as a writer "to put everything into one sentence — not only the present but the whole past on which it depends and which keeps overtaking the present, second by second." By which Yeats, his pince-nez eyeglasses perched on his uppercrust nose, somehow — somehow — could see deeply "to where all ladders start/in the foul rag and bone shop of the heart."

This matter of pushing yourself beyond your known boundaries is much on my mind, because a few weeks ago I was plucked out of my orderly, ordinary routine as a writer and wafted to Alaska on the wings and keels of money. Major money — the fortune of Paul Allen, the co-founder of an outfit called Microsoft.

Some of you may have seen in USA Today or other papers the speculation about that cruise-ship bash thrown by Allen, and the guest list of Robin Williams, Dan Aykroyd, Steven Spielberg, Carrie Fisher, Debbie Reynolds, Penny Marshall, Terry Gilliam, the musicians Lou Reed and Vernon Reid, George Lucas, Francis Ford Coppola, Dennis Hopper, Bill Gates, probably half a dozen future Nobel laureates of science and four hundred or so others. Through some toss of the godly dice I was one of two writers invited — sort of like winning a lottery you didn't know you had a ticket on.

The days Carol and I spent with that shipload are in my di-

ties by now — and then parent, the National Commission for the Humanities, have become a life force and a wallet, too, for the values which we should want to show forth in our literature, our arts, our educational system. They haven't had it easy. Year after year in the congressional reckoning of time which is called the budget process, the National Endowment for the Humanities — and the National Endowment for the Arts, and National Public Radio, and just about the national anything that isn't a military base in a Sunbelt state — have been under attack, budgetary and otherwise, by certain members of Congress.

Those members of Congress are lucky ignorance isn't painful.

The one big thing utterly evident on this blue marble of a planet is that the human mind has been something like a nuclear event amid the evolution of earth's living things; how can we possibly chart our proper place in what the writer William Kennedy has reminded us is "the only cosmos in town" except by humanity's collective intellectual conscience, the values that we call the humanities.

We come now, finally, to the phone-in request portion of our program. Don't reach for your cell phones, because the request has already come in, from Rick Ardinger when he first called me up and asked me here for this occasion. Rick told me about the Humanities Council's new awards to outstanding teachers, and he wondered if I'd be willing to share with you, as the finale tonight, some of myself that came right out of a walking gospel of the humanities — Frances Tidyman, my high school English teacher. It's a description of Mrs. Tidyman that I put in my very first book, "This House of Sky," and one which I am proud to say was picked for an anthology of remembrances of great teachers, titled "A Special Relationship — Our Teachers and How We Learned."

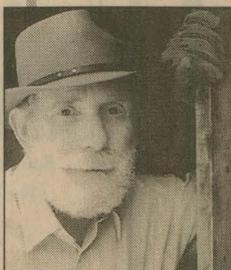
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See Doig / 7E

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DOIG

From 6E

tiny Valier, Montana, in the same pages with Eleanor Roosevelt's most influential teacher and Aaron Copland's best-remembered teacher tells us that the world's boundaries don't count for much there in the mind. And so here she comes:

Frances Carson Tidyman, who through a full generation had been scanning the students in her English classes as if they were muddy pebbles in a sluice box, had me under her steadiest focus.

What I already had begun to know about Mrs. Tidyman was as unsettling as her stare. She was the least likely presence to be found in a small farmtown school: a mysteriously spiced waft of booklore and speculative notions and astonishing languages and ... oddnesses. It was circulated that she cared almost nothing for money — that she habitually turned down the salary raises due her to forestall a day when the school could not afford her, and that she paid in stores by asking what amount was needed, scrawling the sum into whatever counter checkbook the clerk happened to hand her, and forgetting the matter forever. In Valier, this quick blink of a system worked well enough. But in

the county's main shopping town of Conrad, it left a patter of misbanked checks bouncing behind her, and her husband had at last to fund a bank account there solely to cover her offhand signatures.

As with finance, she seemed to declare, so with time and costume. They meant no more to her than that she eventually had to appear somewhere, with something on. This brought about her fame for occasionally gardening with her nightgown on, dark hair maned free and spilling to the waist — and of course her flowers and vegetables encouraged to ally into whatever clumps and jumbles they would.

At school, she would arrive in dark plain dresses so alike that it could hardly be traced when she changed one for another; bunned her hair into a great black burl at the back of her neck; clopped from class to class in the severest of shoes. She was buxom, much like my grandmother, with a half more plumped on all around; her mounding in front and behind was very nearly more than the lackadaisical dresses wanted to contain. Leaning forward from the waist as she hurried about, she flew among us like a schooner's lusty figurehead prowling over a lazy sea.

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“The mind of Mrs. Tidyman was somewhat like that jostling garden of hers — sprigged here with the Greek and Roman myths she knew so entirely that she recited them to her children for bedtime stories, sprouting somewhere else with blood-red bouquets from Shakespeare, twining now into a tale such as having seen the cowboy artist Charlie Russell when she attended the University of Missoula ...”



and Roman myths she knew so entirely that she recited them to her children for bedtime stories, sprouting somewhere else with blood-red bouquets from Shakespeare, twining now into a tale such as having seen the cowboy artist Charlie Russell when she attended the University of Missoula: In the midst of a sorority tea someone deposited him with us — dozens of fluffy girls, you understand, and he had been drinking for the ordeal — and then the utmost indignity, they took his hat from him and he had nothing to do

with his hands, and sat helpless, imprisoned ...

The foliage of her learning laced everywhere through the school. She taught all the English courses, first- and second-year Latin, occasionally a course in Spanish, directed the plays, advised for the yearbook and newspaper, and oversaw the library. It could not be imagined where she might exist except in the midst of all this. She had taken leave for enough years to have four sons, and afterward decided the absence had been a mistake. Chi-

nese peasant women did it properly, she reasoned, giving birth to their babies in the fields and going right on with their toil.

In the classroom, each hour with Mrs. Tidyman began like a conjuring, or a parody of one. She would clomp in and back herself onto a high stool behind a thin-legged lectern. At last secure in midair she would revolve toward the class, the entire billow of her far up over us, with the lectern-top before her as if commanded to hover there. Then her hand deep in her dress front, and out of that vault of bosom would come eyeglasses, tethered on a neck chain which still did not entirely stop her from losing them a number of times each day; a balled handkerchief; a fountain pen, likely leaking; perhaps a fat ring of keys, or a shredding blizzard of notes to herself. Up would come her head from an unperturbed inventory of this rummage. A mild glare or a stern look of fondness — her shadings of expression could be baffling — fastened onto the last of the class to go quiet. With it might fall the entire total of her irony, the query Do you mind if I begin now?

At last supplied and delivered, she set at us. The day's assigned reading might be thumped open and launched into sheerly for the entrancement

of hearing herself aloud. “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness” — oh, people, can you hear those phrases ring against one another? ... If there was agony and tragedy, so much the richer fancy: “As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods; they kill us for their sport.” When I read the headline of an airplane crash, people, first I wish that no one I know was killed. Then that no one from Montana was killed. Then that no one from this country. Then that no one at all would have been killed — oh people, the casual lightning bolts which come down on us. ... She would escort Richard Cory and Miniver Cheevy to their poetic dooms one instant, bring Ivanhoe galloping in to the bleats of chivalry's trumpets the next. Now Lady MacBeth in gore, now Portia pleading against blood. In Latin class, Mrs. Tidyman never could have us read in Caesar's Commentaries without declaiming on Caesar the man; could not declaim on Caesar without sketching Roman society; could not sketch the Romans without embracing all the Mediterranean, on and on in a widening spiral of lore and enthusiasm, glasses flying in her hand and bosom wheeling above the lectern like turrets searching for new fields of gunnery.

Like the hedgehog, Frances

Tidyman knew *One Big Thing*: that books can be miraculous in our lives.

Every so often, I wish we could re-weave time and bring forth a writer from his own neighborhood of history to an era where we need his particular eye and skill. Shakespeare, for instance; to write about the massive murderous idiocy of the trench warfare of World War I. Joseph Conrad to be aboard a moon voyage and tell us of the cold ocean of space.

Earthbound talents such as I am, though, can only keep trying to tell the stories of the land around us, in what William Carlos Williams called “words marked by a place.” Keep on playing with the ingredients of life, mixing up the makings as creatively as we can.

It's the spirit I tried to express in “Ride With Me, Mariah Montana,” where one of my characters is a writer, somewhat reluctantly incarcerated in a newspaper job, and when he pulls in to fuel up a Winnebago on one of the storied highways of the West, he sees beyond the gas pumps the usual sign, “AIR and WATER.”

Before he can stop himself, he's out of the motorhome and over at that sign — and in the ancient passionate compulsion to expand the story, he adds beneath in precise lettering: “EARTH and FIRE.”

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As with finance, she seemed to declare, so with time and costume. They meant no more to her than that she eventually had to appear somewhere, with something on. This brought about her fame for occasionally gardening

with her nightgown on, dark hair maned free and spilling to the waist—and of course, her flowers and vegetables encouraged to ally into whatever clumps and jumbles they would.

At school, she would arrive in dark plain dresses so alike that it could hardly be traced when she changed one for another; bunned her hair into a great black burl at the back of her neck; clopped from class to class in the severest of shoes. She was buxom, much like ^{MY GRANDMOTHER} ~~Grandma~~ with a half more plumped on all around; her mounding in front and behind was very nearly more than the lackadaisical dresses

wanted to contain. Leaning forward from the waist as she hurried about, she flew among us like a schooner's lusty figurehead prowling over a lazy sea.

The mind of Mrs. Tidyman was somewhat like that jostling garden of hers—sprigged here with the Greek and Roman myths she knew so entirely that she recited them to her children for bedtime stories, sprouting somewhere else with blood-red bouquets from Shakespeare, twining now into a tale such as having seen the cowboy artist Charlie Russell when she attended the university in Missoula: *In*

the midst of a sorority tea someone deposited him with us—dozens of flussy girls, you understand, and he had been drinking for the ordeal—and then the utmost indignity, they took his hat from him and he had nothing to do with his hands, and sat helpless, imprisoned. . . .

The foliage of her learning laced everywhere through the school. She taught all the English courses, first- and second-year Latin, occasionally a course in Spanish, directed the plays, advised for the yearbook and newspaper, and oversaw the library. It could not be imagined where she might exist except in the midst of all this. She had taken leave for enough years to have four sons, and afterward decided the absence had been a mistake. Chinese peasant

women did it properly, she reasoned, giving birth to their babies in the fields and going right on with their toil. →

~~That earliest watching I felt from this unprecedented woman, it turned out, was to see whether I was a thief. A few times a year, a school-wide set of vocabulary tests was given, every student then ranked against national statistics. The first test-time fell in the second week after I enrolled at Valier, and I attacked with joy. If there was one knack in me, it was to hold in mind any word I had ever seen, much the way Dad could identify any sheep from all others. When this first of the set of tests was scored, no one among~~

~~I gulped the relief of being out from under Mrs. Tidy-~~
~~man's suspicion, and sat back to see what the gale of her~~
~~approval would bring.~~ In the classroom, each hour with ~~her~~
began like a conjuring, or a parody of one. She would clomp
in and back herself onto a high stool behind a thin-legged
lectern. At last secure in midair she would revolve toward
the class, the entire billow of her far up over us, with the
lectern-top before her as if commanded to hover there. Then
her hand deep into her dress front, and out of that vault of
bosom would come eyeglasses, tethered on a neck chain

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which still did not entirely stop her from losing them a ^{NUMBER OF} ~~few~~ times each day; a balled handkerchief; a fountain pen, likely leaking; perhaps a fat ring of keys, or a shredding blizzard of notes to herself. Up would come her head from an unperturbed inventory of this rummage. A mild glare or a stern look of fondness—her shadings of expression could be baffling—fastened onto the last of the class to go quiet. With it might fall the entire total of her irony, the query *Do you mind if I begin now?* ||

At last supplied and delivered, she set at us. The day's assigned reading might be thumped open and launched into sheerly for the entrancement of hearing herself aloud: *'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness'*—oh, people, can you hear those phrases ring against one another? . . . If there was agony and tragedy, so much the richer fancy: *'As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods; they kill us for their sport.'* When I read the headline of an airplane crash, people, first I wish that no one I know was killed. Then that no one from Montana was killed. Then that no one from this country. Then that no one at all would have been killed

—oh, people, the casual lightning bolts which come down on us . . . She would escort Richard Cory and Miniver Cheevy to their poetic dooms one instant, bring Ivanhoe galloping in to the bleats of chivalry's trumpets the next. Now Lady Macbeth in gore, now Portia pleading against blood. In Latin class, Mrs. Tidyman never could have us read in *Caesar's Commentaries* without declaiming on Caesar the man; could not declaim on Caesar without sketching Roman society; could not sketch the Romans without embracing all the Mediterranean, on and on in a widening spiral of lore and enthusiasm, glasses flying in her hand and bosom wheeling above the lectern like turrets searching for new fields of gunnery.]

// Like the hedgehog, Frances Tidyman
knew One Big Thing: that books can be
miraculous in our lives.

~~Miraculous things, books.~~ Every so often, I wish we could re-weave time and bring forth a writer from his own neighborhood of history to an era where we need his particular eye and skill. Shakespeare, for instance, to write about the massive murderous idiocy of the trench warfare of World War One. Joseph Conrad to be aboard a moon voyage and tell us of the cold ocean of space.

Earthbound talents such as I am,
though, can only keep trying to tell the
stories of the land around us, in what
William Carlos Williams called “words
marked by a place.” Keep on playing with
the ingredients of life, mixing up the
makings as creatively as we can.

It's the spirit I tried to express in Ride With Me, Mariah Montana, where one of my characters is a writer, somewhat reluctantly incarcerated in a newspaper job, and when he pulls in to fuel up a Winnebago on one of the storied highways of the West, he sees beyond the gas pumps the usual sign, AIR and WATER.

Before he can stop himself, he's out of the
motorhome and over at that sign--and in the
ancient passionate compulsion to expand
the story, he adds beneath in precise
lettering: EARTH and FIRE.

#

THANK YOU.