

When I was about as tall as my father's elbow as he  
judiciously bent it in the nine taverns of our town, I <sup>GOT TO SEE</sup> ~~SAW~~  
a lot of the makings of <sup>PAGES OF ( American</sup> the West. Among his own many Western  
aspects--he'd been a homestead kid, broncbuster, sheepherder,  
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 "Bible," 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.

SOCIABILITY

That blue smoke of ~~socialness~~ as my father and his hay-  
IN WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS, MONTANA,  
 hands lit up in the Maverick Bar, 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  
(A BOOK CALLED "MOUNTAIN TIME")  
finished writing, the sulphur whiff of the past comes to

- Mitch Rozier -

my Baby Boomer protagonist when he returns to his

HARD-PRESSED LITTLE

hometown beneath the face of the Rocky Mountains:

5

" As <sup>Mitch</sup> ~~he~~ 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.* The

ON THE PUMP-ISLAND SIGN  
AND ROOM FOR MORE.

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 American municipality anymore, the only new business Mitch could spot was a small medical equipment supply store, there to supply oxygen for emphysema sufferers. <sup>٥</sup>

~~Any other change in a town like this was probably something vanishing.~~ →

I see it as part of the writer's job to keep an eye on

<sup>SUCH</sup>  
~~the~~ makings of everyday life ~~that way~~ --to keep literary watch on

how the things we grew up with endure, and drift--and

change. I think quite a number of us <sup>WRITING</sup> 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 inside our heads all the time

and monkey away at that. James Joyce evidently

didn't stop being an Irishman when he moved to

the book he WROTE THERE,

<sup>6</sup> the greatest NOVEL OF DUBLIN.

Paris--or we wouldn't have Ulysses, And I've always

liked Paul Horgan's <sup>RETORT</sup> ~~saying~~ whenever he'd get too tired

of always getting called a Southwestern writer--

Paul Horgan **ASSERTED.**  
 "Everybody is a regionalist," ~~he~~ wrote. "Tolstoy

(DEEP  
VOICE)

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."

I'm up here at this microphone tonight  
to try to think out loud to you about some **of**  
my own makings as a writer born and  
brought up in the 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 supposed to start,  
at some kind of a beginning: let's take on  
the Big One,

(INSINUATING)

that eternal audience question: "Where do you get your ideas?" // Always a good question, but the answer is <sup>ALWAYS</sup> 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 suppertime 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  
OF THOSE HEARTS.  
the first.

Those of us who write in English have an ocean of language to work with. Its surf-drum of music, its patterns of sound, go beyond its wealth of individual words. Let me give you the example I came up against when I had just finished my first book, and the editor and I suddenly realized we were going to have to do a lot better than the

manuscript's working title, which was--well, I'm not even going to tell you; you'll have to pry it out of me in the question session if you really want to know.

Now, usually I am more a re-writer than a writer, tinkering through a lot of versions to hit the right one. But this one time--in only about an hour of writing--the long devotion of the mind to the fingers put this onto the page for me:

PACE

17A

↓ ↓

In the night, in mid-dream, people who are entire strangers to one another sometimes will congregate atop my pillow. They file into my sleeping skull /in perplexing medleys. A face from grade school may be twinned with one met /a week ago on a rain-forest trail in the Olympic Mountains. A pair of friends I joked with yesterday /now drift in arguing with an editor I worked for /more than a thousand miles from here. How thin the brainwalls must be, so easily can acquaintanceships be struck up among these /random residents of the dark.

→  
Memory, the near-neighborhood of dream, is almost as casual in its hospitality.

When I fix my sandwich lunch, in a quiet noon, I may find myself sitting down

ALL THOSE

~~thirty~~ years ago in the company of the erect old cowboy from Texas, Walter Badgett. ↘

Forever the same is the meal with Walter: fried mush with dark corn syrup, and <sup>BREAD</sup> X

which Walter first has toasted and then dried in the oven. When we bite,

it shatters and crashes in our mouths, and the more we eat, the fuller our plates

grow with the shrapnel of crumbs. After the last roaring bite, Walter sits back

tall as two of the ten-year-old me and asks down: "Well, reckon we can make it

→  
through till night now?"

I step to the stove for tea, and come instead onto the battered blue-enamel  
 coffee pot in a shepherd's wagon, my father's voice <sup>Now,</sup> saying, "Ye could float  
 your grandma's flat-iron on the Swede's coffee." I walk back toward my typewriter,  
 past a window framing the backyard fir trees. They are replaced by the wind-leaning  
 jackpines of one Montana ridgeline or another. I glance higher for some hint of  
 the weather, and the square of air broadens and broadens to become the blue expanse  
 over Montana rangeland, so vast and vaulting that it rears, from the foundation-line  
 of the plains horizon, to form the walls and roof of all of life's experience that  
 my younger self could imagine, a single/great house/of sky.

As you can hear, there by the last few words of that passage, the rhythms of the language had delivered me the title, "This House of Sky."

That's the orchestral sweep of language, so to speak, and there's also glorious possibility ~~is~~ in its individual notes.

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’  
/‘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

line

'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 <sup>me</sup>, 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 <sup>singing</sup> <sup>teachers</sup>--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 freelancing 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 craft of writing toward the areas where it mysteriously starts to be art, I began working on what I later heard Norman 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**

(SLOW)

**Fair**-- hoisting his glass to the other America-comers of the homestead era ~~and~~ 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 <sup>to</sup> the geography of the language--the "sense of place" that critics <sup>so</sup> often cite, in those of us who grew up in the sagebrush and somehow turned out <sup>to be</sup> 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.

AND REMEMBER, FOR GOOD

The eye starts to "listen," to register how the way a rancher cocks his hat says something about that man.

AND REMEMBER,  
The ear starts to "see" how ordinary language can be made to glow, as if breathing on an ember, <sup>IN</sup>

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--<sup>SHOWN AROUND</sup>so enthusiastically that mundane matters  
 such as mealtimes never came into the picture.

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

I believe that if a writer is lucky, he or she early on  
 gets afflicted with a hunger for detail and language,  
 AND ~~LOSES~~ ~~THOSE~~ THAT SAUCE NEVER  
 LOSES ITS 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 ten 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 <sup>TWO OF THEM</sup> they had made, to raise

me.

~~you~~ you bet, my ears were busy from then on, with the  
 picture-play of words from my grandmother <sup>(look up)</sup> whose formal  
 education had broken off at the third grade whenever

the prairie wind would swirl up her dress and she would announce, "Balloon ascension!" Or with the bloodstream music of rhyme when my father, from the heights of his eight<sup>h</sup>-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

P. 41 follows →

escapades they represent being told around the fire. I think that's what we're still <sup>↑</sup> up <sup>↑</sup> to, in the white canyons of paper and now the nebulae of cyberspace...

AND THE PLAY OF WORDS

I think stories <sup>→</sup> still can be our way of sharing light--of sitting together around humanity's fire with the universal dark all around us.

// Our work, our words, of course <sup>have</sup> ~~has~~ 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? <sup>AS A WRITER</sup> You have to be able to stand your own company--and not need company from <sup>MUCH OF</sup> anybody else--long enough to figure out those <sup>SHADOWY</sup> patterns in the mental cave.

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



~~The patience of one of the odd patron saints of our trade, the late Flannery O'Connor, has always guided me in the long devotion of the writer's backside to the seat of the chair where he or she sits and works.~~ Flannery O'Connor was <sup>WRETCHEDLY</sup> ill,

~~In my case~~

I began as a journalist, and so <sup>I</sup> don't believe in that  
malady called "writer's block"--I never did meet a  
newspaper or magazine editor who would <sup>to me</sup> say, "Oh,  
that's all right, <sup>DOIT,</sup> we'll just run a blank space there where  
you can't think of anything to say." The point always is  
to get something down on paper: describe a character,

p. 46 follows →

make up dialogue, dig something out of your pocket  
notebook or <sup>LAPTOP</sup>~~PowerBook~~.

SIT THERE AND

In my case, I 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

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.

A STORY

Among the countless colored coats that ~~fact~~ can wear,  
 this particular time it was dressed old-fashioned--black  
 and white and "red" (read) all over, that old pun <sup>-REMEMBER?-</sup> about  
newspapers before they became such an endangered species.

The accumulated century of the weekly newspaper of Choteau,  
 Montana, the GRANDLY-NAMED Choteau Acantha, actually <sup>is</sup> ~~are~~ 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 suppertime, and

SITTING THERE, AS I HAVE SAT IN FRONT OF 53 ~~#~~  
SO MANY DUSTY TROVES OF RESEARCH,

I am <sup>at</sup> a table on the library's little mezzanine, going  
through old newsprint to hear <sup>into</sup> 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

KEEP SITTING THERE AND,

Tolstoy.

/ I 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 foreefully 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 news-  
paper, May 25th, 1939<sup>v</sup>, which reports that a downpour started in the early morning of the 22nd, it went on 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-drowner,  
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.”



P. 62 follows →

// 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 <sup>MISSISSIPPI</sup> 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."

65 ~~60~~

## AS A WRITER

This matter of pushing yourself beyond your known boundaries is much on my mind, because <sup>NOT LONG</sup> ~~a few weeks~~ ago I was plucked out of my orderly, ordinary routine <sup>OF</sup> ~~a~~ <sup>SITTING THERE PECKING OUT WORDS,</sup> ~~a~~ ~~writer~~ and wafted to Alaska on the wings and keels of money. Major money--the fortune of Paul Allen, the <sup>AN OUTFIT CALLED</sup> co-founder of 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 Ackroyd, Steven Spielberg, Carrie Fisher, Debbie Reynolds, Penny Marshall, Terry Gilliam, 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--

THE MUSICIANS  
LOU REED AND  
VERNON REID,

(CLYDE  
DREXLER)

sort of like winning a lottery you didn't know you had a ticket ~~to~~<sup>ON</sup>.

The days Carol and I spent with that shipload are in my diary 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, <sup>THE STRETCHING,</sup> that a writer--I think--has to try to do when handed something like that. FROM THE BIG PAUL ALLEN FLOATING PARTY, Out of many, many scenes, 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 coastal 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, watching in <sup>OPEN</sup> utter fascination as the greatest

BEING HERSELF RATHER  
THAN MURPHY BROWN,

artist of the Tsimshians, Nathan Jackson, performs his raven dance.

There is Jeff Goldblum, not in Jurassic Park or <sup>IN</sup>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 <sup>is</sup> a man dancing alone--a man who in an earlier turn of his <sup>life</sup> 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.

(INTENSE)

(NOD)

And, over along the wall, unabashedly standing on top of a chair to see out into this scene, is a white-

71 ~~72~~

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.

(show  
NOTEBOOK)

// When that self-same writer sits down for a couple of years to write a book, he has to do his best to make the mood of his language match the mood of his characters, or the mood of the situations they find themselves in.

For the next six or eight minutes here, as a kind of finale in trying to tour you through the makings of books, I'm going to do a bit of show-and-tell. Tell you what I, as a professional writer, am trying to do in this stretch of writing, and then let you hear it.

This little scene--again, from my next novel, "Mountain Time" (think of this as the Ginger Rogers Theatre world premiere of it)--involves Mariah

McCaskill, a highly intense photographer for a Montana newspaper. Mariah is newly back in the West, having won a Fuji Fellowship<sup>^</sup> 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 younger than her, wore his total philosophy of life on his Mount Cook Guide Service sweatshirt--"Glaciers are a kick in the ice."

(BESTOWED UPON HER BY ME)

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

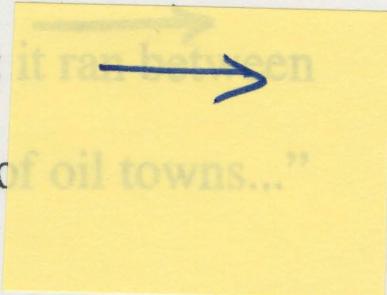
Montana--for her Sunday paper. And what I'm trying to do, with Mariah and the scene, is to bring the emotional and the physical actuality together.

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~~ <sup>THAT</sup> train, asking "Lord, forgive me for <sup>↑</sup>everything!" while she "looked at the bottom of the freight cars, at the bolts and chains and at the <sup>→</sup>great iron wheels ~~of the first car that was~~ slowly rolling by..."

INTENSE

/Or the great rhythmic nexus of experience and feeling that Faulkner gave the fugitive Joe Christmas in "Light in August" when <sup>Joe Christmas</sup> 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 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: the savage and spurious board fronts of oil towns..."



To cut Faulkner short, which is always a shame,  
 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 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:

~~ATN TIME, pp. 227~~  
 MARIAH NZ scene

I think, there--with a woman determined to soar in her work, to glide this blue planet with those royal birds--is as good a last chapter of tonight as any.

In my own voyaging over the world of words, I keep coming back to those three main elements I've cited, those three hearts of writing--

--The dance of the language.

--The home country we speak from.

--And the day-by-day push into unexplored white space.

It's that last blood-central urge that keeps writers a living species, I believe.

The lions of narrative, the foxes of mystery,  
the griffins of sci fi, the watchful herons of  
history, the gazelles and dolphins of poetry,  
the badgers of biography, the lop-eared  
leopards of memoir--all of us creatures of  
Shakespeare's ark  must live by the energy  
of our imaginations. 