When I was about as tall as my father's elbow as he judiciously bent it in the nine taverns of our town, I saw a lot of the makings of PAGES OF American 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

(1)

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

where he and his estranged punk-haired 25-year-old daughter have been rollerblading, as people tend to do by the herd up there on Friday nights, in scenes something like this:

"In one single accelerating commotion the massed rollerbladers let themselves loose, each of them a polymer marble in the spill that rolled

toward Fisherman's Wharf. Tourists in rental cars wildly pulled over at the sight of this meteor shower of get-ups, the closets of San Francisco airborne on low-flying ~~naiads~~ NYADS and masquers, leftover Wavy Gravys and incipient Courtney Loves, retro flappers, bare-midriffed bodybuilders in stark Spandex, seasoned exhibitionists and heart-in-throat first-timers alike borne on boots speedy as runaway midget locomotives."

After my hero and his daughter careen through an evening of that, **she** lights up, shoos her smoke away from him and says she didn't mean to second-hand him, and he thinks to himself:

"~~My God,~~ it has come to this--people who will not give you the ice off their heart apologize for letting their cigarette smoke touch you."

I see it as part of the writer's job to keep an eye on the makings of everyday life--to keep literary watch on how the things we grew up with endure, and drift--and change. All the while, of course--at least in the case of a fiction writer, which I mostly am--making the stuff on the page as playful and hypnotic as possible. When Charlotte (BRAWN-tee) Bronte lifted her pen from **Jane Eyre** and bequeathed us that most intriguing of plot summaries--"Reader, I married him--" she also was saying what

writers always must to the eyes on our pages: "Reader, my story is flirting with you; please love it back."

Where, though, do these suitors in their printed jackets and composed sentences come from?

Not, in my case, out from under Gōgŏl's **Overcoat,** where Turgenev said all short-story writers popped ~~out of~~ FORTH FROM. 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 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**

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 often cite, in those of us who grew up in the sagebrush and somehow turned out to be writers.

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 inside 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 saying whenever he'd get ~~too tired~~ (sick) of always getting called a **South**western writer--

"Everybody is a regionalist," Horgan wrote. "Tolstoy is a regionalist."

Or, to put it more poetically, as the late great Oregon poet William Stafford did:

"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 think one of Stafford's most heart-felt, titled

That poem--"Lake Chelan," ~~by William Stafford, the late great Oregon poet--I think~~ reminds us that the West is delineated by more than state lines and survey lines and property lines. Lines of ~~literature~~ STORY ~~poetry, and lines of prose,~~ also mark out for us this "deepest place we have." The strongest of ~~poetry and~~ story-telling comes right up off the page into our lives, and I want to move--for the next several minutes--to some instances of what I never know what to call except "the slow poetry of fact."

"CRYSTALIZING Details," THEY'RE SOMETIMES CALLED.



the arithmetic of particulars--dabs of "makings"--which creatively get added up into story. Let me take you briefly through this writerly process of the poetry of fact accumulating itself--using an example I know best, my own.

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 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 ~~are~~ 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 suppertime, and

I am at a 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 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 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."

//

CUT to bottom of p. 28

and

and

sto

and

voices. It begins at breakfast, in Choteau, Montana, or ~~CRESCENT CITY, CALIFORNIA~~ Cortez, Colorado, or ~~Grangeville, Idaho~~, when the guys in ROOSEVELT, UTAH

tractor caps take over their usual table and start drinking coffee and solving the world's problems. Folklorists actually have a term for those caffeine circles--they call them "the big table." I've always just called them "the geezer table"--but in any case, those gatherings, over morning coffee, or Fourth of July rodeo picnic potato salad, or evening imbibings in bars usually called The Stockman or The Mint, are a rhythm of the West that I, at least, believe is worth some listening to. Something must account for this kind of example--

a bit of dialogue in my novel Ride with Me, Mariah Montana,
overheard between two ~~city~~ beer drinkers IN SHELBY, Montana.:

~~Activity picked up too at my car nearest the beer part.~~ "Tell you, Ron, I don't know what you got going with Barbara Jo, but don't let her get you in front of no minister. This marriage stuff is really crappy. You take, Jeannie's mom is always on my back about why don't we come over more. But we go over there and the stuff she cooks, she never salts anything or anything, and I don't eat that crap without no salt on it. ~~Last time she called up and asked Jeannie why we weren't coming over, I told Jeannie to tell her I had to lay down and rest.~~ Then there's Jeannie's dad, he just got dried out down at Great Falls. Cranky old sonofabitch, I think they ought to let him have a few beers so he wouldn't be so much of a craphead, is what I think. And you know what else, Jeannie's brother and sister-in-law had a Fourth of July picnic and didn't even invite us. That's the kind of people they are. Jeannie and I been talking a lot lately. I told her, I about had it with her crappy family. Soon as the first of the year and I get enough money ahead to buy my big bike, I'm heading out to the coast and go to school somewhere."

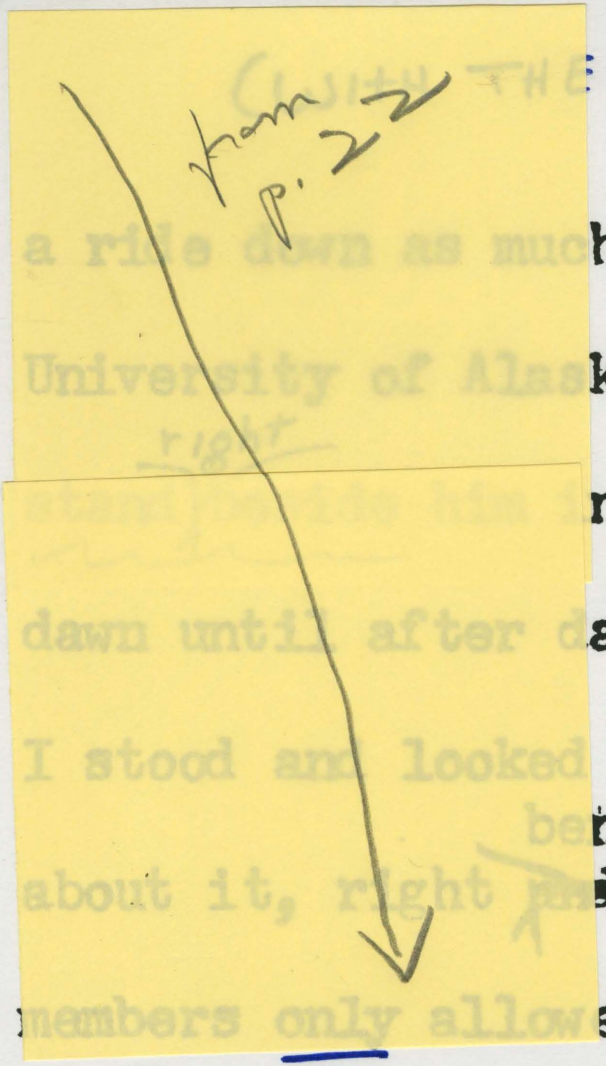
"Yeah?" Ron responded. "What in?"

"Social work."

In this particular case, that swatch of bar talk was about half-overheard--including, I swear on an oral history manual, that punchline--and half made up by me. The made-up half has in it the trace element of fact that wasn't there for me as an eavesdropper, folklorist, oral historian, researcher, whatever--the echo of exodus that sweeps back and forth in the West, this time our incipient social worker's dream of "heading out to the Coast."

So, creative listening is one thing a writer can use, in this process of trying to put things together, there on the page, and another main tool is eyesight. At least I've always found it a good idea when I'm attempting to write about something to do with the West, to go out and take a look at it. This is as true for fiction as it is for memoir or other non-fiction. For my first novel, The Sea Runners, the story of an escape by canoe from Alaska--Russian America, in the middle of the 19th century--to the Columbia River, I bummed

HELP OF A GOOD FRIEND WHO WAS AN OCEANOGRAPHER)



h of that coast as I could, aboard the

ka oceanography vessel. The captain let me

n the wheelhouse, and from an hour before

ark, from Juneau to Seattle, day after day

at that coast and water and made notes

heath
~~der~~ the big red sign that said "Crew

ed in the wheelhouse."

// You sometimes have to stand a long way back, historically, to see what

you're looking for as a writer, and in these ~~Attached~~ esteemed library surroundings, I perhaps should give you the example of going to the University of St. Andrews ~~archives~~ in Scotland, in search of letters of working class emigrants who left that region of Scotland in the late 1880's, as the main characters of the novel I had in mind were to do. Sure enough, the archivist produces the letter collections for

ON THIS AUSPICIOUS BIRTHDAY,

historic

LIBRARY

me, leads me into the reading room, and as
I begin to sit down at a capacious table
nicely lit by the window, he says, "Eh--
there's the matter of the air." (At least 4 rs in the word.)
The airrr, in his thick Fifeshire burr.
Does he mean "error", is this some Scotch
Calvinist probing of my scholarly soul?
Can he somehow mean the Scottish town of
Ayr, A-Y-R, that Robert Burns wrote of--

"Old Ayr, whom never a town surpasses/ for honest men and bonnie lasses"? That's cryptic, even from an archivist.

But no, the airrr proved to be the air conditioning, which was blowing a gale at the end of the room I had contemplated sitting at. I took the archivist's point and established myself at the opposite end of the room, noticing as I did that there was a

heavy tartan lap robe in the chair beside me. Within minutes I was using that lap robe, and at lunch time I went home and--despite the fact that Scotland was sweltering under its hottest summer in a century--put on a sweater under my sport jacket, came back and got under that lap robe again. All the while cursing the St. Andrews theory that the best method of preserving archives

is to refrigerate them.

But all the while, beginning to see and hear into the letters in front of me. "During the storm our ship swung like a cork. The screaming of the bosun"s whistle, the yells of women and children when she swung over on her side, and tins, trunks, barrels, everything movable flew from side to side...We poor human things held on to the

bedside like grim death." David McNeil, that voice, writing to his family about his voyage to America as a steerage passenger in 1889--

his description of the impromptu bazaar on deck when the steamship made its stop in the harbor of Cork, Ireland, with Irish women scrambling aboard to sell food and other wares and then when the whistle signaled departure "flying over the side like cats"--McNeil's material was so good

that it made me decide to put my own title material into that scene: "Dancing at the Rascal Fair," I MADE UP FOR a ditty my young goers-to-America sing. "Dancing at the rascal fair,/ devils and angels all were there,/ heel and toe, pair by pair,/ dancing at the rascal fair."

/AND, I could HAVE ADDED, ALL OF IT IN SPITE OF THE AIRR.

(~~THIS TIME NOT SCOTLAND BUT~~)

A long time ago, in ~~a~~ that galaxy far away called Ireland, my wife Carol and I were being shown around Yeats country--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 we 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.

In my own case, when I was still down there in the vicinity of the elbow, 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 the~~y~~ 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 (look up)

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 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 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 ~~need~~ have to start on the cave walls between our own ears.

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 ill, WRETCHEDLY

most of her short writing life, but her collection of letters show her to have been a dedicated sardonic professional, as when she gave this unbeatable version of the experience of looking over one's own writing: "I have just corrected the page proofs and I spent a lot of time getting 'seems' and 'as if' constructions out of it. It was like getting ticks off a dog."

This is what she had to say about a writer's necessary state of patience:

"I'm a full-time believer in writing habits, pedestrian as it all may sound. You may be able to do without them if you have genius but most of us only have talent and this is simply something that has to be assisted all the time by physical and mental habits or it dries up and blows away. I see

it happen all the time. Of course you have to make your habits in this conform to what you can do. I write only about two hours every day because that's all the energy I have, but I don't let anything interfere with those two hours, at the same time and the same place. This doesn't mean I produce much out of the two hours. Sometimes I work for months and have to throw

O'CONNOR CONTINUED,

everything away, but I don't think any of that was time wasted. Something goes on that makes it easier when it does come well. And the fact is that if you don't sit there every day, the day it would come well, you won't be sitting there."

Ultimately, Flannery O'Connor's advice does add up, I believe.

In my case,

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, "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 something down on paper: describe a character,

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

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

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--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, "Hell, that's the **best** thing I've ever heard about Hemingway."

Try as writers will, however, to turn the process into a recipe, there are always the unwritten-down ingredients--the pinch of this, the sift of that. One that particularly intrigues me in literary hash-slinging, let us call the crocodile factor.

Like so much else that has to do with the heart and soul of the American West, I owe this [redacted] bit of writerly psyche to the late Richard Hugo, the bigger-than-life poet of Washington and Montana. In teaching aspiring poets, AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA, Dick Hugo used to advise: "When in doubt, throw in a crocodile."

Among the [redacted] he meant by that bites of the imagination are a list of pretended assumptions that he would use when he set out to write a poem--as Hugo told it in his terrific book on writing, The Triggering Town, "Whenever I see a town that triggers

whatever it is inside me that wants to write a poem, I assume at least one of the following"--and I'll give you just a few from ~~his~~ HUGO'S long list:

"I am an outcast returned (TO THE TOWN). Years ago the police told me to never come back but after all this time I assume that either I'll be forgiven or I will not be recognized."

"On Saturday nights everyone (IN TOWN) has fun but me. I sit home alone and listen to the radio. I wish I could join the others though I enjoy feeling left out."

A couple more Hugo-isms that he used to inspire his town poems:

"The annual picnic is a failure. No one has a good time."

Or:

"The annual picnic is a huge success but it's the only fun people have all year."

And a last Hugoian crocodilean turn of thought:

"There is one prisoner in THE TOWN jail, always the same prisoner. No one is certain why he is there. He doesn't want to get out. People have forgotten his name."

That one, Richard Hugo used in perhaps the greatest poem we have about the mining towns, the ghost towns, that haunt our national past--~~his~~ DICK HUGO'S poem, **"Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg,"**--in that magnificently wild first stanza:

> "You might come here Sunday on a whim--
> Say your life broke down.
> The last good kiss you had was years ago.

You walk these streets laid out by the

insane,

past hotels that didn't last,

bars that did--the tortured try

of local drivers to accelerate their lives.

Only churches are kept up.

The jail turned 70 this year.

The only prisoner is always in,

not knowing what he's done."

Not "The prisoners are always in..

// Hugo's ~~This~~ kind of adjuration to the imagination is said many ways, probably in all forms of art--when the great carver Bill Reed was asked why his tribe, the Haidas, were the pre-eminent artists of the Northwest coastal tribes, ~~he~~ REED said the Haidas simply out-crazied everybody else.

But I've always liked Hugo's crocodile prescription, and think it ~~veers~~ covers a lot of otherwise unexplainable wonders of prose, too--the go-for-broke elements that come right up off the page and get you.

The /vital/pulse/ on the page 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 post office, ,AS HE [redacted], DESCRIBED IT, 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 upper-crust nose, somehow--somehow--could see deeply to/"where all ladders start/ in the foul rag and bone shop of the heart."

I tried to write about that hunger in the blood a bit in **Heart Earth**, the memoir about the short life of my mother, that brought my thinking back to the Southwest where my life turned when I was five years old. Here's the section of my father and my mother and ME, Montana ranch people to the bone, fetching up in the winter of 1944 in a borrowed cabin in the desert outside Wickenburg, Arizona:

"Neighbors now consisted of lizards and scorpions. The mountains wavering up from every horizon looked ashen, dumpy....No pelt of sagebrush to soften this country for us, either; saguaro cacti, with their spiky mittens out, stubbled the hills. Where the familiar black-green of Montana's jackpines would have shadowed, here the bare green blush of palo verde

scarcely inflected the gulches--arroyos--and under every other bristling contortion of vegetation, prickly pears crouched like shin-hunting pygmies in ambush. Even the desert birdsounds had a jab to them, the ha *ha* of a Gambel's quail invisibly derisive in the bush, the yap of a Gila woodpecker scolding us from his cactus penthouse.

//I loved/every fang and dagger of it.

// Any bloodline is a carving river and parents are its nearest shores. At the Faulkner Creek ranch (in Montana) I had learned to try out my mother's limits by running as fast as I could down the sharp shale slope of the ridge next to the ranch house. How I ever found it out without cartwheeling myself to multiple fractures is a mystery, but the avalanche angle of that

slope was precisely as much plunge as I could handle as a headlong four- and five-year-old. The first time my visiting grandmother saw one of my races with the law of gravity, she refused ever to watch again. Even my father, with his survivor's-eye view from all the times life had bunged him up, even he was given pause by those

vertical dashes of mine, tyke roaring drunk on momentum. But my mother let me risk. Watched out her kitchen window my every wild downhiller, hugged herself to bruises while doing so, but let me. Because she knew something of what was ahead? Can it have been that clear to her, that reasoned? The way I would grow up, after, was contained in those freefall moments down

that shale-bladed slope. In such plunge if you use your ricochets right, you steal a kind of balance for yourself; you make equilibrium moment by moment because you have to. Amid the people and places I was to live with, I practiced that bouncing equilibrium and carried it on into a life of writing, freefalling through the language."

SLOW

//It has brought me, among other places, here. And it had better take me, next, to an exit paragraph of these musings about makings:

Trying to take inventory of myself,

looking at the pantry shelf of my writing

life and my eight AND SOON TO BE NINE books and I hope more to

come, BEYOND THAT I find that--for all of my love of the

West, and my stories mostly about the

region and its people--I don't go around

thinking of myself as a "Western" writer.

The greater territory is still those cave walls

between the ears.

To me, language--the substance on the page, that poetry under the prose--is the ultimate 'region', the true home, for a writer. Specific geographies, but galaxies of imaginative expression--

we've seen them both exist in William Faulkner's postage stamp-size Yoknapatawpha County, in Ismail Kadare's "**Chronicle in Stone**" of a nowhere little Albanian city tossed back and forth with the dice of war, in Roddy Doyle's hilarious heartbreaking rough beasts of dialogue in his Barrytown trilogy of the Dublin slums, in Nadine Gordimer's fearlessly particularized stories from a land of "laws made of skin and hair", South Africa under the apartheid regime. If I have any

creed that I wish you as readers, necessary accomplices in this flirtatious ceremony of reading and writing, will take with you from my pages, it'd be this belief of mine that writers of calibre--the ones I admire--can ground their work in specific land and lingo and yet be writing of that larger country: life.

// THANK YOU.