Like light, time is both wave and particle. Even as the big winter of our life, or some summer of dazzle and love, traces itself as a single amplitude of season along the collective dateline of memory, simultaneously it stipples all through us in instants distinct as the burn of sparks.

Writers, whether it is because we have a naturally Biblical inclination—the Book of Job: "Man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward"—or just because we like to play with fire, writers tend to be spark-catchers.
Somewhere there, then, in the private pivots of history, in the flyways of sparks from which lives are constellated, let me take you now.

The next words are from the spring of 1945, from a rooming house in Wickenburg, Arizona. My mother is writing to her brother on a destroyer in the South Pacific, that last spring of World War Two.

She and my father have spent that winter in Arizona, where my father worked in a Phoenix defense plant while they tried to see whether the Southwest climate might mitigate my mother's asthma, which had plagued her throughout the 31 years of her Montana life. I am on the scene now, at least marginally, as a five-year-old who has spent that Phoenix winter
digging a foxhole in the back yard that, in the words of my mother's letter,

"you could bury a cow in."

There in Wickenburg, where we had alit while my father recuperated from an appendicitis operation, Montana is on our minds. On the 18th of March, my mother writes: "We are getting kind of anxious to get home, see everybody, find out how I'm going to feel, figure out what we are going to do this summer."
Home. What can account for my mother's automatic use of that word for going back to that drafty northern attic of the West where we came from, Montana's Big Belt mountains, hardscrabble ranch country, where sour winter customarily stayed on past the high school spring prom?

I have stared holes into those Big Belt Mountains, those sage-scruffed flats and bald Sixteen Hills, trying to savvy their hold on her and thus on us, my father and me, particularly there in severe 1945. True, in Phoenix we had been war-loyally putting up with packing crate living conditions along with fifty-five hundred other people in a defense housing
project across the street from the Alcoa plant. But lately at Alcoa the management had realized how rare were undraftable colorblind 43-year-olds who knew how to run a crew, and my father came zinging home from the plant newly made a foreman. Not only that, but drawing hourly wages—hourly, for a guy who counted himself lucky to make any money by the month in Montana ranchwork. Surely this, the state of Arizona humming and buzzing with defense plants and military bases installed for the war, this must be the craved new world, the shores of Social Security and the sugar trees of overtime. Montana, meanwhile, was drained of people, into military
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My father's birthright, the Doig homestead, had fallen from family hands long ago. Looked at clinically, there was not much to come back to in Montana after half a century of my parents and their parents hurling themselves at those hills.
Nor, in fact, did that yearning "north toward home" end well, because when my parents returned to Montana and took a band of sheep into the mountains, that summer my mother died, of her asthma, there at the sheep camp.

And so/ I'm left to wonder. My parents—landless people, of the relic world of muscle-driven rural tasks, and both my mother and father in shaky health—they turned their back on Arizona and a Sunbelt life, there in that spring of 1945. Yet... why did they?
I can only think that it was because earth and heart don't have much of a membrane between them.

Sometimes decided on grounds as elusive as that single transposable h, this matter of sitting ourselves. Of a place mysteriously insisting itself into us. The saying in our family for possessing plenty of something was that we had oceans of it, and in her final report from the sailor brother in the Pacific, desert to her silent listener on the Ault, my mother provided oceans of reasons why we were struggling back north to precisely what we had abandoned.

One adios to Arizona she spoke was economic. So few possibilities for
people with a limited supply of money like ourselves to get anywhere in any kind of business. She saw corporate Phoenix and land vending Wickenburg plain: It might be better after the war but I think it will be worse. And the contours of community were beckoning us. We don't just like the idea of being way down here and all our folks in Montana.

Valid enough in itself, that heart-deep need for people and places, friends and family, with well-trodden routes of behavior; home is where when you gossip there, any hearer knows the who what why.

Yet, there was unwordable territory, too, in our return to
what my mother's letters all of that Arizona winter insist on as home.

Refusal to become new atomized Americans, Sun Belt suburbanites, and instead going back to a season-cogged ranch life is one thing. Going back specifically to the roughcut Big Belt Mountains, the tough Sixteen country, the Montana way of life where we could never quite dodge our own dust, all that is quite another. My parents can only have made such a choice from their bottommost natures, moods deep and inscrutable as the keels of icebergs.
That's the thing about writers, though—we can't help scrutinizing even the inscrutable.

So, as the product of people who, even when a war and bad health tried to make them move away, were permanently wed to their heartdeep version of the West—"married to the place," as my folks used to say of a ranch that was particularly hard to get away from—I'd like to give you, as keepers of the West's books, some idea of the makings of those books. Of how at least some of us as writers, Western-born—others, fervent adoptees of the region—try to get these mountains and plains and their stories and characters to speak up, in our pages.
"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."

(William Stafford, "Lake Chelan")
That poem—"Lake Chelan," by William Stafford—I think reminds us that the West is delineated by more than state lines and survey lines and property lines. Lines of 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, in the new book Heart Earth, I didn't know what to call except "the slow poetry of fact."
Writers get paid, at least once in a while, not to think in absolutely straight lines, so I'm going to argue to you that even when the best of today's American western writing happens to be prose and fiction, it still arises out of that "slow poetry of fact." Out of particles, more than wave. Out of the arithmetic of particulars, which creatively gets added up into story.
The best description of stories as handled by writers—that I've simply been able to come up with—is the one by the poet Randall Jarrell—whose poem, "The Woman at the Washington Zoo," where the women in SAHRees "go by me from the embassies—Cloth from the moon. Cloth from another planet."

They look back at the leopard like the leopard"—I think is itself a magnificently done story. Randall Jarrell said, "A story is a chain of events. Since the stories that we know are told by humans, the events of the story happen to human or anthropomorphic beings—gods, beasts, and
devils, and are related in such a way that the story seems to begin at one place and to end at a very different place, without any essential interruption to its progress. The poet or storyteller, so to speak, writes numbers on a blackboard, draws a line under them, and adds them into their true but unsuspected sum."
For the writer—and therefore, we hope, for the reader—an unsuspected sum—there's creative magic waiting within such actualities as James Welch's "fact" of the historic Blackfeet believing animals sometimes spoke to them—out of which Jim made perhaps the greatest leap any of us of this writing generation out here are going to make toward the soul of a people, when in his novel Fools Crow he has the nonhuman creatures of their cosmos speaking to his Blackfeet characters. Mary Clearman Blew, in her fine set of memoir essays All But the Waltz, captures for all of us who've ever had any strange "fact" in our family as we grew up, the powerful difficulty she had as a child trying to explain to her schoolmates the un-nuptialized presence of her grandmother's boyfriend.
Bill Kittredge has given us, in Hole in the Sky, the bravely illustrative fact of his baronial Oregon rising and falling in a classic three generations, trying "to manage our ranchlands with efficiency we thought of as scientific, but our actual model was industrial"—thereby killing the country they loved.

More prosaically, 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, threatened that old pun about newspapers before they were such a beleaguered species.

The accumulated 90 years of the weekly newspaper of Choteau, the Choteau Acantha, actually are in red protective binders in the public library there.

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 small mezzanine, going through old newsprint to try to hear into that area of Montana during the Depression years, the drought years. In mid-February of 1939, the
homespun local columnists 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, they might have just stepped
out of the pages of Tolstoy. I think of Paul Horgan who, when he got tired
of being called a Southwestern writer, said that artists in all forms have
always paid homage to their home territory. "Everybody is a regionalist,"
Horgan said. "Tolstoy is a regionalist." 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 her 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 of 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. A couple of years later when my novel about Montana during the Depression years—English Crick—is published, a forceful 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."
Fact, I'm glad to say, also goes out to eat and drink, and here in the West that sometimes can be especially slow and poetic. There is a delicious hunger of the ear behind stories, either the hearing of them or the telling of them, and I spend a lot of time simply following the sound of voices. It begins at breakfast, in Choteau, Montana, or Cortez, Colorado, or Richfield, Utah, when the guys in 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 afternoon 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, Maria Montana, overheard between two Oly drinkers in the Whoop-Up Bar in Shelby:
Activity picked up too at my ear nearest the beer pair. "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 elements of fact that weren't there for me simply as an eavesdropper, folklorist, oral historian, reporter, whatever—the echo of exodus, our incipient social worker's dream of "heading out to the Coast."
This is part of the job description of the fiction writer, I think—letting other voices speak the situation. Thus we get such accuracies as the line in Wallace Stegner's story, "Carrion Spring"—the young ranchman who modernly might be described as suffering a lack of communication with the young wife he has brought to the prairies of Saskatchewan, but who when they meet up with the hard-used son of the local wolf hunter can say to the boy the perfect-pitch sentence, "How've you been doing on wolves?" (Wolf Willow, p. 229)
To me, there is simply a perfectly written Western ethic, a rightness of sound—I can hear any number of Westerners I've known, coming out with this sentence—in the unbeatable line that Bill Kittredge wrote in his short story "Balancing the Water," when he had a ranch hand say, "All you can own is what you do."

(Michael Milken, Ivan Boesky, and many hundred savings-and-loan executives could have morally profited from reading that story of Bill's.)
By the same token of small talk with a lot big behind it, from Mari Sandoz early in Old Jules we take in a lasting intimation when a ranch cook cracks to the young Swiss homesteader about his chosen Nebraska earth, "Great farmin' country. Never get your crops wet there." (p. 18)
In these ways, the West as "heart earth" is given some of its existence by writers—the literary community, let's say—but it also exists in a community honeycombed in your libraries. The community of facts, waiting to give us their slow poetry. Like it or don't, the past, and the present that keeps enlisting in it, amounts to more than our personal sums. We have a collective memory, we really do. Sometimes in spite of ourselves.

And much of it, as you maybe too well know, ends up on your shelves.
I'm honestly not going to dwell on Doig's Law, to you—that the more obscure a holding seems to a librarian, the more valuable it is to me as a writer—but I do need to tell you that your stashes of old newspapers and dust-gathering volumes of local histories and other shelving headaches are part of the arithmetic of particulars, from which our stories get told.
Call it more than that, in fact. Go into French and call it Annales, the mosaic type of historiography that has brought forth masterworks such as Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's recreation of a fourteenth-century village, Montaillou. It is not inconceivable, given the American West's lengthening strands of cultural geography, folklore, literary narrative, archival enterprise, and historical insight, that we are going to see western Montaillous woven. Shelby, Montana, and Little America, Wyoming, and any number of our other western map dots, we may not generally think of as candidates to become a classic. And yet, to put it in one of the Montanan terms my tongue still has the habit of, just why the hell not?
Along these lines, we writers sometimes owe you keepers of the materials for some odd stanzas of library endeavor, as well as your usual rhyme and reason.
I like the heroic story of the WPA Federal Writers Project for Montana.

During the 1930's, as part of that New Deal project which also produced the famous state guidebooks, local people were put to work gathering local lore, often from their neighbors, sometimes even from themselves. In Montana that gathering was done in every county, the material accumulated, and files of it ended up at the state Historical Society in Helena. But a day in 1943, a history professor from Montana State College in Bozeman, Merrill Burlingame, decided to ride along with another faculty member on a trip to Butte, where the other faculty member needed to look at some sort of river-and-stream study that had ended up in the warehouse of the Works Progress Administration, the WPA, which was phasing out of existence.

As Merrill Burlingame told the story when I asked him for it:
"We found the files we wanted near the loading door. Even closer were six or eight file cases marked Writers' Project. I investigated ever so lightly and began to drool. At that moment the woman who appeared to be in charge appeared. We questioned her about the destination of these files, and she informed us that they would go to the Butte City Dump in the morning. We backed her into whatever corner was available and told her she could not do that. She assured us in unprintable but perfectly clear English that she could and would.

She told us that in an early stage of closing the records she had sent a portion of these Writers' Project records to the Montana Historical Society, which was the approved depository. There, numerous writers of sorts, largely of the newspaper variety, had used generous portions of the materials without giving WPA the least credit."
"She didn't approve of that, and she would make sure that the Historical Society did not get one more folder of those records." The dump loomed. Burlingame goes on:

"We assured the good lady that nothing of that kind would happen at Montana State College, and that we would take special care that WPA did get credit. About 4:30 we got her permission to take them, but we were sure that speed was of the essence. We telephoned the college physical plant office and pressured them to provide a truck and driver in Butte as early as possible the following morning. And at that back early hour, I came with the driver."
AS ANOTHER WRITER "OF SORTS"

Merrill Burlingame

I am eternally thankful that he did. Nearly forty years later, I was beginning
on that novel set in Montana in the 1930's, and in I came to the Special Collections
at the Montana State University library and merrily ransacked those
invaluable first-hand accounts of life during the Depression, that Merrill Burlingame
heroically saved from the Butte dump. The people of my novel English Creek dance to
a square dance call from out of those files, they remember great cattle roundups
recounted therein, they enjoy at their Fourth of July picnic the succulent small
spring frying chickens menueed there. And yes, in my acknowledgments, I sing out a
credit to the Montana Writers Project of the WPA era, and to Merrill Burlingame.
Speaking of speaking, last month I participated in the symposium in tribute to Wallace Stegner, at the University of Montana, up in Missoula.

Stegner's fatal car wreck in Santa Fe, as we all know, took from us the dean of American Western writers. It made me think back to last Christmas, when in my card to Stegner I reported that I had a national bestseller but it had taken Norman Maclean's fishing pole to do it—my reading of A River Runs through It, on the Audio Press cassette—and Stegner wrote back on his card, "Go on—keep on getting rich and famous—and vocal."
I suggested to the symposium gathering that maybe we can find a strength, in this loss. That instead of Wallace Stegner’s long-familiar and often lonely eloquence for the West, the rest of the country may now have to hear from us as a tribe of western writers, a swarm of us. An entire bunch of western wordsmiths, heart earthers—various in our poetry and even our facts, but consistent in our love and expression for this region, these mountains, these plains.
I'm reminded of what another writer, who lived and worked far from the supposed literary centers of the world, once said about what he hoped was the worth of his own writing. He was an African novelist, named Cámara Laye—born in Guinea, he lived the last part of his life in exile in Senegal, where he died in 1980.
Camara Laye once told an interviewer, who was asking how it was to work so far away from other writers, from the literary power centers, that he thought the cultures of the world, as expressed in their writers, were all participating in one vast dance, each with its own special movement, each contributing something significant to the total world rhythm.
I can hear that, in our own western pages. The jukebox saloon tunes in the background of the prose of William Kittredge, the kitchen-sung songs wafting out as the work of Barbara Kingsolver and Terry Tempest Williams, the anthems of small places and family niches in the writings of Mary Clearman Blew and Craig Lesley and Teresa Jordan, the tribal rhythms of the reservation behind the words of James Welch and Michael Dorris and Louise Erdrich, the poetic balladry under Rudolfo Anaya's words and Norman Maclean's words and Wallace Stegner's words and I hope maybe my own—if we are doing them right, they are something more than words, they are heartbeats of the West.
Like light, time is both wave and particle. Even as the big winter of our life, or some summer of dazzle and love, traces itself as a single amplitude of season along the collective dateline of memory, simultaneously it stipples all through us in instants distinct as the burn of sparks. Writers, whether it is because we have a naturally Biblical inclination--the Book of Job: "Man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward"--or just because we like to play with fire, writers tend to be spark-catchers.
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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, they might have just stepped out of the pages of Tolstoy. I think of Paul Horgan who, when he got tired of being called a Southwestern writer, said that artists in all forms have always paid homage to their home territory. "Everybody is a regionalist," Horgan said. "Tolstoy is a regionalist." 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 her 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 of 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. A couple of years later when my novel about Montana during the Depression years—English Crick—is published, a forceful woman named ranch-born Beth McCaskill shows up almost immediately, and the book's opening sentence reads: "That month of June swam into the Two Medicine country."
Fact, I'm glad to say, also goes out to eat and drink, and here in the West that sometimes can be especially slow and poetic. There is a delicious hunger of the ear behind stories, either the hearing of them or the telling of them, and I spend a lot of time simply following the sound of voices. It begins at breakfast, in Choteau, Montana, or Cortez, Colorado, or Richfield, Utah, when the guys in 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 afternoon 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, Maria Montana*, overheard between two Oly drinkers in the Whoop-Up Bar in Shelby:
Activity picked up too at my ear nearest the beer mat. "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 crapy. 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 crapy 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
elements of fact that weren't there for me simply as an eavesdropper,
folklorist, oral historian, reporter, whatever—the echo of exodus,
our incipient social worker's dream of "heading out to the Coast."
This is part of the job description of the fiction writer, I think--
letting other voices speak the situation. Thus we get such accuracies as
in Wallace Stegner's story, "Carrion Spring"--the young ranchman who modernly
might be described as suffering a lack of communication with the young wife
he has brought to the prairies of Saskatchewan, but who when they meet up with
the hard-used son of the local wolf hunter can say to the boy the perfect-pitch
sentence, "How've you been doing on wolves?" (Wolf Willow, p. 229)
By the same token of small talk with a lot big behind it, from Mari Sandoz early in Old Jules we take in a lasting intimation when a ranch cook cracks to the young Swiss homesteader about his chosen Nebraska earth, "Great farmin' country. Never get your crops wet there." (p. 18)
The West as "heart earth," then, is given some of its existence by poets and writers and other artists—the literary community, let's say—but it also exists in a community honeycombed in our head Memory.

Our memories are the stories our lives tell us, and the human impulse toward story seems to be a kind of social glue. One of the basics that make us turn our ears and eyes to one another. At least I believe stories can be our way of sharing light—of sitting together around humanity's fire with the universal dark all around us. Which may be how stories began in the first place—and then somebody went back in the cave
and drew on the wall the hunting escapade they had all just been talking about, and the written versions began.

Memories, then, are something like the version we each write to ourselves, on the cave walls between our ears. And even when they seem to be about people and incidents, our memories often are connected to place. I wrote about the way this works in me in the title section of my first book, This House of Sky:
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 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 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 shepherder's wagon, my father's voice 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.
Well, "they call it regional, this relevance" — as Bill Stafford so poetically said. But there's an element by which writers move the central power of literature to where they are in the world.

That element we can identify and name — by our own lights, here in the West, naturally — as the crocodile factor.
Then there's the crocodile factor.

Like so much else that has to do with the heart and soul of the American West, we owe this final bit of writerly psyche to Richard Hugo. (As I savvy it, it was Dick Hugo--through the medium of Bill Kittredge--who has given us the new emblematic phrase, The Last Best Place.) In teaching aspiring poets, Hugo used to advise: "When in doubt, throw in a crocodile." This 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 said the Haidas simply out-crazied everybody else. But I've always liked Hugo's crocodile prescription, and think it covers a lot of otherwise/unexplainable wonders of fiction--the elements that come right up off the page and get you.
William Faulkner's crocodile was simply that haunting fever-dream prose of his in which, as a critic (Anatole Broyard) has said, the sentences advance like armies. We know that James Joyce carried punning and other back-and-forth intricacies of language—its vice versa—to genius level in Ulysses and Finnegan's Wake, but I'm convinced he's giving us a little crocodile grin even in the famous epiphany of his short story, "The Dead"—that there in the last lines when "snow was general all over Ireland," he's telling us it was not only generalized, "falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen," but that it was indeed in command, even "farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves."
The late John Gardner was one of most industrious and eminent American novelists, but I never liked anything else of his nearly as much as when he retold the Beowulf legend from the monster's point of view in *Grendel*. There may be no more wonderfully crocodilian sentence after *Grendel* rampaged through a meadhall: "I silently sack up my dead." (p. 7)
Here closer to home, writers about the American West have done some inspired engineering on the crocodile factor. Louise Erdrich's kaleidoscopic shifts of points of view—and points of time—in her stories—which add up to—novels are Faulknerianly brilliant. James Welch made perhaps the greatest leap any of us of this writing generation out here are going to make toward the soul of a people when he had the nonhuman creatures of their cosmos speaking to his Blackfoot characters in Fools Crow. James Crumley unforgettable tossed us a crocodile in canine guise in the sweetheart opening sentence of The Last Good Kiss: "When I finally caught up with Abraham Trahearne, he was drinking beer with an alcoholic bulldog named Fireball Roberts in a ramshackle joint just outside of Sonoma, California, drinking the heart right out of a fine spring afternoon." Craig Lesley in Winterkill presented us with a character with the not particularly promising name of Ass-Out Jones, and proceeded to make him the cathartic figure in that affecting novel.
And Mary Clearman Blew, now of this university, in her new book Balsamroot has coaxed one of the fiercest of crocodiles—the mysteries of one's own family—into a brilliant narrative technique which makes a memoir read with the flow of a fast-paced novel.
For my part, to close this out with somebody whose motives I'm supposed to know something about, among the things I've tried to do in my latest book, *Bucking the Sun*, is to run a crocodile farm at night. See what happens when things are turned loose in the dark, hmm?
Back a bit ago, when I read you the House of Sky section about memory being the near-neighborhood of dream—well, what happens if you turn that around, tease the crocodile a little, and try to see what everybody is dreaming at once?
Well, it suppose that is what writers ultimately are up to — trying to find the heart of the matter.
the broad-beamed dun nag they had called "Hippo", back on the homestead—through the snowdrifts of the road between Fort Peck and Glasgow. Hugh thought it odd he was drawing wages for this, merely riding around in the snow, but who was he to complain. His wife of three decades, Meg, beside him in bed and not, was on the bandstand of the Blue Eagle saloon, where she could peer over the heads of the drinking crowd, watching and watching, until finally she saw him come in through the door, the tall familiar figure of Hugh.
I'm reminded of what another writer, who lived and worked far from the supposed literary centers of the world, once said about what he hoped was the worth of his own writing. He was an African novelist, named Camara Laye—born in Guinea, he lived the last part of his life in exile in Senegal, where he died in 1980.
Camara Laye once told an interviewer, who was asking how it was to work so far away from other writers, from the literary power centers, that he responded that he thought the cultures of the world, as expressed in their writers, were all participating in one vast dance, each with its own special movement, each contributing something significant to the total world rhythm.
I can hear that, in our own western pages. To me, that is the ultimate “region,” the true home for a writer—that vast silence. For if we dance them right, our words and stories—they are something more than words and stories about the West—they are heartbeats of the world.

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