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 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
To see how the spirits we grew up with endure, and drift—and change.

Proust off into volumes of intricate Remembrance of Things Past, we ought to in our own Remembrance of Things West try to see all of what's been made since back there at the makings.

That blue smoke of sociability as my father and his hanyands 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'm working on now, it's noted that a familiar new store on western small-town streets is
the medical equipment dealer, with oxygen supplies for the emphysema sufferers.

And making hay? I incongruously was an eyewitness to the change of that, as a college kid. By then, the early 1960s, the days of the contractor were gone—at least in our part of Montana where stacks of loose hay like giant bread loaves on the prairie had long been the method—and ranchers had bought their own swathers and balers. But hay still was being stacked in bales, and crews still were
hired, of young summer muscle such as I was then, to do that bale-piling. The two other bale-pilers I worked with, and I, all caught a kind of fever of pride that summer, and we worked our proverbial tails off trying to build the tightest, prettiest bale stacks in the country. Our boss, the rancher, kept telling us that's what he wanted. On that same ranch the very next summer, I saw the arrival of a "self-piling" trailer which hitched behind the bailing machine. The cost of it no doubt would have paid a
piling crew's wages for many summers, and it dumped its accumulated bales into wobbly un-weatherproof heaps which would have got us mere mortals fired by noon of the first day. But here the contraption was, religiously being used because it eliminated hired men. That taught me a lot about what the mechanizing world thought of the human ingredient.

// The list is long. That's what history is for. An evening speaker's timespan is supposed to be finite, however,
and so I'm mostly going to talk as a working writer, someone who sits around in his own head all the time and fumbles with the makings.

*Dean Spear*

But I'm actually only a tourist in the stuff. (Just passing through, honest.) A fascinated tourist, I admit. And one with a funny straddle between hanging around with *Batty* and the other "New West" historians, as they get so sick of being called, and the prior generation who had Western history in
their custody when I was a student. As an undergraduate at Northwestern, I used to sit in occasionally on the Western history course taught by Ray Allen Billington, one of the traditionalists whose version of history Patricia Nelson Limerick, say, is an adversary of. (Patty takes on adversaries living and dead.) Ray Allen Billington wrote the textbook we used when I was in graduate school, so that we got to read about the construction of the transcontinental railroads this way:
"Nightly dissipation did not slow down the workers who, by the spring of 1868, realized they were not mere laborers on a railroad but participants in the greatest race in history. The Central Pacific was winging across the level deserts of Nevada. The Union Pacific was battling through South Pass."

"Now, a writer really ought to go for that. "Winging," "battling"--active verbs. But I remember even then being troubled by the fact that, battling or otherwise, the Union Pacific railroad never passed within a good many miles of
South Pass, Wyoming.

So, when the New West historians are accused of de-glamorizing the West, we do need to consider what version of the West they’re kicking the glamor out of. Remember, it’s fairly recent in our past that the cultural images of the West were guys like Louis L’Amour and John Wayne, with a pound of belt buckle trying to hold up 25 extra pounds of gut. Something had to give way.

//Well, writers—what are they up to.
Let me just give you some idea of the makings of books, of how at least some of us as writers, Western-born—others, fervent adoptees of the region—try to put the West together, make its stories and characters 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."
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 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."
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, it still arises out of that "slow poetry of fact." Out of 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 Choteau Acantha, actually 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
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 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 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. "Opportunity 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."

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 Grangeville, Idaho, 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 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 Oly beer drinkers:
“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.”

This is part of the job description of the writer,
I think—letting other voices speak the situation. Thus we get such accuracies as the line in Wallace Stegner's short 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 bald 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?"/(That "on" is one of the best prepositions ever.)
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 land in the sandhills of Nebraska, "Great farmin' country. Never get your crops wet there."
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
a ride down as much of that coast as I could, aboard the University of Alaska oceanography vessel. The captain let me stand beside him in the wheelhouse, and from an hour before dawn until after dark, from Juneau to Seattle, day after day I stood and looked at that coast and water and made notes beneath about it, right under the big red sign that said "Crew members only allowed in the wheelhouse."

You sometimes have to stand a long way back to see what you're looking for in the West, and I should give this
audience this particular example. When I wanted to write
a novel about the West's homesteaders, I went back to where
my own homesteading grandparents started from—Scotland. I
plundered various archives there, but a particular find was
at the University of Saint Andrews, which had a collection
of letters written home by emigrants who had made the ship
journey to America. I was looking for details of shipboard
life, and one letter-writer, David McNeil, was terrific at
it—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," 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."
As you may recognize, it's a traditional old Scottish song/that I made up. (We practitioners call this the "New Scotch" history.) David McNeil's usefulness to me as a describer didn't quit there, as he went on to tell about a storm at sea, which I also used, and his vividness didn't even quit when he reached shore—he came on West, to Colorado, and reported about Denver: "Denver looks as if it commenced last week and might be moved somewhere else next."

Perspective is everything, isn't it.
The writers whom I've been quoting wholesale here—Stafford, Stegner, Sandoz, yours truly and some yet to come—all have at least one thing in common, and that's having known the outdoors West, the rural West, as Stegner might put it "ever since their legs were long enough to reach the ground." (We do need, and I think we'll soon have, a generation of writers similarly savvy about the urban and suburban West. The West never likes to admit that its capital is maybe California, but that's going to have to be faced, in our literature.) There's another such
group since the passing of Stegner and company, a sort of writing generation of us out here now, who without consulting each other about it have decided to use our own Western lives and backgrounds—the stuff we ought to know best—as the raw material for our books. Of course, it took a historian to point out to us what we're doing. It was Richard Maxwell Brown, now professor emeritus of Pacific Northwest history at the University of Oregon, the only man I've ever known who somehow manages to read everything.
In his looking-over of Western writing, Richard Maxwell Brown cites me and This House of Sky and Heart Earth, so I will blushingly skip over that part, but he lists several recent books where "nemesis and tragedy, bitterness and beauty" and other "universals of human life" meet, and which add up to what he calls the West's grassroots autobiography and biography. William Kittredge's memoir/Hole in the Sky; Refuge, by Terry Tempest Williams; Rain or Shine, by Cyra McFadden; Mary Clearman Blew's brilliant set of books
Balsamroot, and All But the Waltz. I would add to his list Teresa Jordan's Riding the White Horse Home, and one that was published last spring, Kim Barnes' *Coming of Age of Coming-of-age in a logging family on the Clearwater River of Idaho--In the Wilderness.* (Talk about "makings"--Kim Barnes' parents and relatives were called "pole-makers", loggers who carefully felled trees that were the right thickness for telephone poles.

The characteristics of this literary grassroots trend, Brown says, include these:
"---the simple but powerful formula of the grassroots reality of our region: place, plus family... These biographies and autobiographies are unusually vivid in their evocation of both family and place."

---"The authors... are all extremely talented... and also notably reflective. Their books are implicitly conceptual... but not overtly so. They appeal to the mind by first reaching the emotions of the reader... The intellectual appeal of these books is subtle but strong. Their authors
are trained intellects--most of them have graduate degrees and support themselves by work in the realm of ideas.

--And finally, this "new grassroots" trend "is a meeting ground of the literary talent and the social history of the West."

That, then, is at least an early historical take, on where Western writing has been heading toward, lately.
William Faulkner’s crocodile was simply that haunting fever-dream prose of his in which, as a boggled critic said the sentences advance like armies.
eller in his time was one of the most industrious
and respected American novelists, but I never liked anything
else of his nearly as much as when he took a chance and retold
the Beowulf legend from the monster's point of view in his
novel Grendel. There may be no more wonderfully crocodilian
sentence than the one after Grendel the narrator has rampaged
through a meadball: "I silently sack up my dead."
Writers about the American West have done some inspired engineering on the crocodile factor, I'm happy to say. Louise Erdrich's kaleidoscopic shifts of points of view--and points of time--in her stories, which add up to novels, are often Faulknerianly brilliant. James Welch took the poetic fact that the historic Blackfeet believed sometimes spoke to them, and from there made perhaps the greatest leap any of us of this writing generation are going to make toward the soul of our people, when in his novel Fools Crow he has the nonhuman
creatures of their cosmos telling his Blackfeet characters in one of what's up. Mary Clearman Blew, from the grassroots memoirs Balsamroot, I mentioned, in her book 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 be sure of, among the things I've tried to do is show a community of time, as well as of people. (I realize
it's been said time was invented so that everything doesn't happen at once, but those of us trying to keep track of the West know that a lot of life does happen that way, don't we.) I knew when I set out to write Bucking the Sun that I wanted to deal with a big contentious family at one of history's turning points--the five couples in the Duff family I thought up, and plopped them into the Depression years--and the pint-size sheriff they bedevil, and the boomtown life and work-flavor of building the biggest dam in the world then,
Fort Peck Dam, on the upper Missouri River. As I worked away at what ultimately became 350-some scenes gliding in and out of the characters' lives, it dawned on me: these people have to sleep sometime. That was the making of this in Bucking the Sun:

"The dreamwork of Fort Peck built through the November nights, turbulent, drifting on the dark change of season and work and prospect, restless inside the bone hulls of fate, thousands of sleep-made privacies tossing and turning."
The boomtown of Wheeler, with its alcohol content, tended in its dreams toward inward uproar! showdowns, arguments won on a second try, woozy otherwise-unimaginable sexual situations. In the Corps of Engineers' townsite, along Officers' Row, the dreams held a tendency toward hierarchy, Colonel Parmenter's vision of a command post in the blissful sweltering Philippines and Mrs. Parmenter's nocturnal jaunt backward thirty years and thirty pounds to her cotillion debut both overriding, say, Captain Brascoe's delirious armwaving scene with garbagemen.
who were delivering garbage into his tidy streets instead of hauling it away. Across a few of those streets, in the workers' barrack, Darius Duff dreamt back to Scotland. One floor up from him, the cook Tim Jaarala was shaking dice in the saloons of Wheeler, and winning.

In both towns, in the course of any night, more than one man dreamt of the peroxide-blond taxi dancer, Proxy Shannon.

Within the walls of the Duffs, Hugh the family patriarch was on mental horseback, riding a workhorse—it seemed to be
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.
It was Hugh, wasn't it? Their son Bruce, the government diver, slept the sleep of the underwater walker, stupefied but unalarmed, while his wife Kate wanted out of the dream she was in, where she was trying to wait on her customers at the Rondola Cafe and feed her baby Jack on her breast at the same time and the smartasses along the counter kept saying, "I'll have what Jackie's having." Meanwhile her sister-in-law Rosellen, who had been sending off stories to magazines, was stalled in a reverie version of the Fort Peck post office,
waiting to hear from editors.

waiting for the mail, Every time she went up to the wicket window and asked, "Is there any for me?", the postmaster would say "Did you bring a gumnysack for it?", then laugh and turn away. Minutes before, Rosellen's husband Neil woke up on a rancher's approach road halfway between Fort Peck and the coal mine, having pulled over to doze when he thought he might fall asleep at the wheel on his trucking run, and now had climbed out and was walking around and around the truck to get himself warm and awake enough to drive home. Rosellen's sister
Charlene, by contrast, was steaming in her dream, trying to run a hairdresser shop the size of a department store, customers in chairs even up on the mezzanine, and the only help she had was her mother-in-law Meg who kept asking, "Charlene, tell me again what to do when they say they want 'the works'." And working at sleep next to Charlene, in sessions that were more like naps linked together, lay Owen Duff, engineer of this dam, perpetually trying to get in his dream somewhere on a train, but every single time the conductor
came by and demanded his ticket, Owen could not find the thing."

//That, I believe, is the note to end on. That not just in dream, but in art and history, we have to keep looking at our makings to find out where we and the West are going.