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 stipple 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.
And so, Richard Hugo, taken one day to Philipsburg on the inspired whim of Annick Smith, found for us in the degrees of gray there the brilliant instant of the waitress whose "red hair lights the wall."

And so, Norman Maclean, on one of those fishing trips when he is trying to understand his brother—and thereby much else—gives us the instant of a jackrabbit running in the headlights—"his eyes shone with whites and blues gathered up from the universe."
And so Dorothy Johnson

recalled when she was a young telephone operator in Whitefish "and a

charming fellow I had met while swimming over at Whitefish Lake once
called from a pay phone. Recognizing his voice, of course I kept the

key open"--when she put the call through. "He made an appointment with

a fallen woman over at the Red Flats"--and that, said Dorothy, ended

those swimming lessons he was offering her.
Those writers—Missoulians all, to one extent or another—remind us of how lucky Montana has been/in its wordsmiths. The luck that Richard Warren Carrier crossed paths with Jack Hugo in Italy and offered Hugo, who at age forty had never taught before, a job in the English department of this University. And in Norman Maclean's case, that—as he tells it in the foreword to A River Runs Through It—he saw a chance to escape from the "creative claustrophobia" he found himself in after retirement from the University of Chicago by writing a piece to read to a scholarly social group he belonged to there. And that Dorothy Johnson, with her
mix of journalistic skills and tabasco personality, could live a couple of lives simultaneously, by teaching journalism courses here at UM and writing Western fiction that turned into movies.

But maybe, as the baseball philosopher Branch Rickey maintained, "luck is the residue of design." Dick Hugo did muster himself up and take that teaching job as a forty-year-old rookie. Norman Maclean did sit down and write us A River Runs Through It after holding the story in his heart for forty years. Dorothy Johnson did cast away fifteen years of professional journalism in New York to come back to Montana.
Somewhere there, in the pivots of history, in the flyways of sparks from which lives are constellated, is my ostensible topic for tonight. I guess it's supposed to be tempting, on big occasions such as the centennial of this university, to come up with big pronouncements. History, a country I visit a lot in my writing, lends itself to big summaries. Rome fell. Robespierre made the kings of Europe know that they had necks. But I think, instead of some hundred-year package of encomiums to the University of Montana and its namesake state,
I'd do better to talk to you in the arithmetic of particulars. Of particles more than wave. Of what might be called the slow poetry of fact.

Facts live in a lot of different kinds of places in Montana, both above and below ground. I suppose for anybody who is not a researching writer to have to listen to enthusiasm about, say, archives is like somebody dubious about fish eggs having to hear caviar extolled. But 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. Archivally speaking, Montana has had both luck and good sense, which as Branch Rickey was pointing out, surprisingly often go together. The luck is a matter of proportion: Montana is young enough and small enough in population that it is not the historical and cultural labyrinth that, say, Texas or California is. And the archival efforts here at UM and over at the MSU, especially vigorous state historical society in Helena, the published collections of local history which even the smallest communities seem able to muster—Dupuyer's ran to 388 pages, I'll proudly point
out to you—the newspaper stashes in county and local libraries—
usually genuine newsprint instead of that boon to optometry, microfilm—
every whit of that, I call civic/good/sense.

Call it more than that, in fact. Go into French and call it Annal, the mosaic type of historiography that has brought forth masterworks such as Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's recreation of a fourteenth-century village, Montaillou.

Those of us who write, out here in the West, are blessed and cursed with scholarly questions about "the sense of place" in our work—as if character, dialogue, and plenty of literary devices weren't hallmark enough for us. If we need some literary stamp of approval to have Montaillou-like research behind our words, it was long ago provided by the poet William Carlos Williams, when he said—"The classic is the local fully realized, words marked by a place."
I'm on record as believing, and will reiterate right now, that given the American West's lengthening strands of cultural geography, folklore, literary narrative, archival enterprise, and historical insight, that we may yet see some kind of a Montana /Montaillou woven. Browning, Ekalaka, Two-Dot, Wisdom, we may not generally think of as candidates to become a classic. And yet, to put it in Montanan terms, just why the hell not?
To skip off briefly into international terms of fact and writing, I'd like to point out a couple of places—which have certain similarities with Montana—where some everyday practitioners of fact have caught fire literally. In Australia—like Montana, big; hearty; over-endowed with distance and climate—a journalist named Robert Drewe, who grew up in Western Australia, in Perth, twice won the Australian equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize for investigative reporting; working at a succession of newspapers across Australia, Drewe seems to have been the Down Under equivalent of Woodward and Bernstein by the time he was twenty-eight.
Then as he had always wanted to, he turned to fiction. Even from this distance, of course we know the dominant fact of Australia—the vast Outback, the interior desert, the great dry heart of that island continent where Burke and Wills—the camel-back equivalents of Lewis and Clark—died dusty deaths. But huh-uh, said Robert Drewe; take another look, try another fact: Australia's cities and nearly all its population perch on its seacoast not because Australians are spooked
by the Outback, but because the beach is fun. His collection of linked stories, The Body-Surfers, goes a long way in debunking the gloomy pre-eminence of the Outback. Maybe similarly, sometime, this state of mountains and plains could be looked at as an urban riverine society.

By and large, the cities of Australia hug the coastline except for mining-strike towns such as Kalgoorlie and the created capital of Canberra; Montana’s most sizable cities mostly are along river banks, except for Butte and Helena.
The other journalist-turned-fictionalist I'll mention to you is in Ireland—like Montana, small and tidy in population; hearty; over-endowed with the gift of gab and writers. Colm Toibin has been a leading newspaper journalist in Ireland, and it could be predicted that when he wrote a novel titled The Heather Blazing, it would be all about the Irish Troubles, religious sectarian strife. But no, it's mostly not—Toibin instead is looking at the ruptures between generations—within the family—in modern Ireland, and the chances of healing them or not. In Montana, I wonder if the ranchers' "junior syndrome"—
that frequent difficulty of a veteran rancher to bow out and turn
the place over to a younger member of the family; and within that,
the younger generation's willingness or not to put up with as much
work, weather, and travail as the parents may have—I wonder if that offers
literary exploration possibilities in a state that in a lot of ways
has been a child of, say, Anaconda Company or the federal government.

At least for a fiction writer, the poetry of fact goes beyond,
say, events and statistics in the usual sense, into the stories under
the dates and numbers.
The best description of stories as handled by writers—that ever been simply 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 threatened 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. (Hand gesture)

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 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 Beth McCaskill shows up almost immediately, and the book's opening sentence reads: "That month of June swam into the Two Medicine country."
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 an instance of facts adding up slowly and oddly across a span of time, in an unexpectedly vital way for Montana and Montanans and even those of us in the Montana diaspora from the land. This begins in 1924, in the state of Washington, at the Wind River branch of the Pacific Northwest Forest Experiment Station. Wind River was ruled by one of the old tuskers of Forest Service research, Leo Isaac, and that summer of 1924 Isaac was handed a kid from the East as his seasonal assistant.
Isaac found that the kid was as eager as he was green, but that he was also something of a hazard with tools. Part of the job was to thin out vine maple that was crowding their experimental Douglas fir seedlings, and, even after Isaac showed him how to hold a vine maple steady with one hand and give it a little cross-angled clip with an ax, the kid would blithely walk up to the next tree, whale into it in a big two-handed baseball swing—and the ax would bounce right back off. "He'd about belt his head off, but he'd never chop the tree off" that way, Isaac groused.
was one thing, but what really bothered Isaac was that the kid just seemed odd. Every day, Isaac would call a lunch break and lead the kid out of the hot dusty sample plots of seedlings and over to the bank of the Wind River. Isaac had a shady spot they always went to, near a low log dam where a curtain of water poured over into a great pool, and every few minutes, steelhead trout as long as your arm would jump, to make their way upstream past that curtain of water.

About the third day, the kid looked over at Isaac and asked, "And why do we come down here to eat?"
Isaac looked at him and said, "My God, man, doesn't this mean anything to you—that beautiful waterfall there and the fish coming up out of that white water? Where would you eat?"

"Oh, out there on the sample plots, I suppose," said the kid.

Isaac said, "Out there in the dust and dirt and sun, no shade even?"

"Well, I hadn't given it much thought," the kid said. "I guess I like it here."

Subsequently, the kid went on to make a career of being odd, but his natural clumsiness with tools didn't hamper him much—because
his name was Bob Marshall, and it turned out that the only tool that really counted was his mind. By 1925, Bob Marshall was here in Missoula, as a Forest Service researcher for the next three years, and he shows up in photo albums in the UM archives here—big-eared and grinning, he looks like a kid with a grown-up body. No matter how you consider him, the facts of Bob Marshall look odd: he was essentially a rich socialist, who grew up in New York City and played Lewis and Clark, in Central Park with his brothers. Out here, in a time and place and profession where guys weren't sure they wanted to go to heaven unless
they could do it on horseback, Marshall was a demon hiker—forty, fifty miles a day, sometimes; he'd run downhill to pick up mileage faster. And he had a personal affinity for odd facts. In his pocket notebooks—in the Bancroft Library at Berkeley—he's always counting things. In his notebook for 1924, for instance, is his numerical rating "of all male acquaintances made during summer"—Leo Isaac came in last. Elsewhere, he keeps track of the cussing he hears, out in lumber camps—a scrupulous count of how many times each word got used in a day.
And then, the most fortunate oddity about this Forest Service odd duck. Bob Marshall, by the time he had passed through Missoula and returned East to government jobs in the New Deal, plainly had given some thought to his outdoor surroundings, and ours. By 1937, when he had risen to become the Forest Service's chief of recreation and lands, and critics of his "regulations for primitive areas" would demand to know how many wilderness areas he thought this country needed--this obsessive counter of things knew to say, simply, "how many Brahms symphonies do we need?"
By 1939, Marshall was dead at the age of thirty-eight, possibly of his outdoor exertions, and in 1940, the Forest Service designated nearly a million acres of Montana, saddled across the Continental Divide, as a wilderness area and named it as a memorial to Bob Marshall.
For me, the cadence of fact now shifts ahead to 1977, when I was trying to find a reconciliation with the Montana I had left, 15 years before. I have told in print, the economic propulsion I felt, out of our three-room house in Ringling; and how, as my father's life dwindled into his long dying, Montana became for me a site of sickness, sadness, strain. In my mood then, Paradise itself would have been a hard place to come to terms with, under those conditions. But now I was back, trying to write about it—and determined, too, to do something none of us in our family had had time or freedom or
money to do—to go deep into the mountains behind Dupuyer. Some summers, as a teenage tractor driver in the grainfields around Dupuyer, I had watched that neighboring family of mountains from first light to last. They loomed near enough that I could always feel their breath, the wind. But then I glanced away toward college and career, and when I looked again I was twenty years older, although the mountains didn't seem to be.
My wife Carol and I backpacked into those mountains—into the Bob Marshall Wilderness, along a little-used northeastern pack trail, usually used by horseback hunting parties—which of course, spells unbridged streams. On our route up the South Fork of Birch Crick, there were three fordings in the first four hours, and even in the extreme drought of the summer of 1977, the water at one crossing came well up toward our waists. After we had earned our way onto some actual trail, there stood Mount Richmond looming west like a square pyramid; and other mountainsides, of colossal reefs and deeps like the ocean bottom tipped empty and left on its side. The next morning's
stint of trail took us across the Continental Divide at Gateway Pass in brilliant sun, perfect shirt-sleeve weather—with wind gusting hard enough to stagger us. At that night's campsite, on Strawberry Crick, we pitched our tent near a large tepee used by pack parties as a fishing camp, and mulled some graphic bear signs: muddy paw prints on the tepee canvas, and a slash where the visitor had made his own door. We took it to be his exit, and decided to stay. Although I regard fishing as simply work with hooks attached, I bounced a spinner off a log across Strawberry Crick and into a ringlet of shadowy water,
and another time slid a fly down a ripple beneath a snag; both times, the hooks plopped at once into the mouths of appreciative trout. We had fish for lunch, more fish for supper. The next morning, we had a sparkling frost inside our tent. By noon, on a section of trail where behind us, below us, lay the Continental Divide, we were having a sleet squall. When the squall cleared, the view was waiting: the Rockies blading up in all directions, peak upon peak upon peak, with a notch of view eastward to the patterned farmland of the plains.
Carol and I aimed ourselves for that notch, and after the next weather--

da day of rain--we hiked out from under the mountain clouds--wind

thumping a farewell against the backs of our packs--into bright sun.

As it had for five days, the trail remained empty except for us. We

had, in our time in that wilderness area, seen not a living soul.

Except, of course, Bob Marshall's and our own.
I've spent a lot of my life trying not to be surprised by Montana.

It never quite works. So, if it took about a fifty-year rhyming of circumstances—for Bob Marshall to grow up, in the one sense that was vital for the preservation of the country where I re-found Montana for myself—that's the slow poetry of how things go.
A last tangent: in this business of things adding up into stories, I want to commend to you the fluid spoken language which we writers spend a lot of time trying to convert into a fixed written one. I think it's part of the writer's job to make sound visible on the page, and so that means accuracy and vigor in catching how people talk. I'm writing a novel now, which takes place during the building of Fort Peck Dam, during the Depression, and while I knew there was quite a lot of paperwork to draw from, the bonanza to me so far has
been the set of about fifty oral histories done by a tireless crew of Montana Historical Society interviewers at the fiftieth anniversary of the dam in 1987. Out of such an interviewing blitz—which I hope somehow can be duplicated as Montana looks at itself on other occasions—comes otherwise irretrievable material such as William Fly remembering his journey as a young man, from Laurel to the Fort Peck project:
Interviewer Mary Murphy asks simply:

"So, how did you get up to Fort Peck?"

And William Fly brings out the memory:
"I come on the train. Boy, green as grass, I'll tell ya. I remember, my dad—he took me to Billings and I got on the train—of course, no sleep—I rented a pillow—All night, we got into Great Falls, and my dad had said, "You get a hotel"—for a buck, pretty nice hotel, the Rainbow—"and there's one thing I want you to do, you got all day there, I want you to go to the Mint Saloon and see Charlie Russell's pictures." So, I did. And I'd go look at those pictures, and I look, and I'd go out and I'd come back in, and it got to be a joke, they got to laughing, the bartender—a green kid. But those pictures—got me. I couldn't— they was originals, and they just... got me—the color... and... I don't know..."
Historians, those bounty-hunters of fact, warn themselves about
tales out of memory, with the story of the last surviving veteran of
the French defeat at Waterloo being interviewed. The old soldier was
perfect on the details of his regiment, and the role it played in the
battle, and now the moment had come to ask him, as the last eyewitness—
did he remember/seeing/Napoleon himself/on that day? "Of course," he
said, "how could I forget such a moment, such a man—he was very tall,
and had a long white beard."
But historians, those unrecovering co-dependents of fact, also thrive on the encapsulating incident. From the other side of Waterloo comes the story of London's Great Exhibition of 1851 and its wondrous Crystal Palace of glass. A problem developed—as the treasures of this early "world's fair" were being brought in and arranged, sparrows flew in by the hundreds and took up residence under the glass domes. The sparrow nuisance vexed everybody official up to and including Queen Victoria, but the Queen knew who to turn to. "Send for the Duke of Wellington," she ordered. Indeed, the Duke came—he saw—and he again conquered, with the one-word prescription: "Sparrowhawks."
Like light, time is both...particle and wave. Whether it is the efficacy of a well-chosen word, or a lifetime of trifling obsessions that mask a single inspired desire, an instant of crystalizing memory or a pattern of fact to be tracked through archive after archive, the slow poetry of actuality gives us a way to do that "unsuspected addition" which we call "story." A way...to sum us up.