

## Montana Conservancy, Helena, Oct. 7 '12

First I want to thank Kat Imhoff and her crew, and Cher Justo and hers, for putting this occasion together, and the Montana Book Company for putting up with me not only today but in a downtown booksigning tomorrow at noon. It's not our fault if any of you don't get your early Christmas shopping done.

I'm wearing a couple of hats here today, as a writer and a Conservancy member, and before I read a couple of selections linked to the land here, I just want to say a little about what has brought Carol and me together with the Conservancy-- **The Landtender's Tale**, it might be called.

Once there were two young journalists in love. I know, because I was one-half of that combination--still am, for that matter. All those years ago, I was a young magazine editor freshly married to a young magazine editor, named Carol, who is right down here--we sometimes kid that our match is an inspired lack of imagination on both our parts: we're still together--and along with a terrific wife way back then in the 1960s, I gained a magical landlady.

Her name was Dr. Marjorie Carlson, a retired professor of biology at Northwestern University (where Carol and I had both gone through journalism school, and we were back there in Evanston, Illinois, magazine-editing tooth and nail before we could get smart enough to light out for the West) Carol was renting a third-story apartment in Dr.

Carlson's house when we were married, and I moved in as the lone male on the premises, the fortunate recipient of the attentions of not just one unforgettable woman but three. Dr. Carlson and her companion, Kate Staley, it turned out, were women of the land--women with the roots of their minds down into the planet. By then they were well up in their eighties, but they still headed for the outback in Mexico every winter to look at plants--they would hire guides to get behind them and push them up the hillsides they could no longer clamber up by themselves.

Needless to say, Dr. Carlson and Kate were Nature Conservancy members--Dr. Carlson ultimately preserved, through her efforts and contributions, a precious remnant of downstate Illinois prairie. And even

more needless to say, guess who else were promptly Conservancy members, on their little magazine editor salaries.

Not only did that Conservancy allegiance last, with Carol and me--it kept spreading. We're members and contributors not only here in Montana, but in the state of Washington where we live--and some years ago, the Dugout Ranch project down at Canyonlands got us involved with the Utah bunch.

All of that is quite a long ways from a newlywed couple's apartment in Evanston. If I could stand on a passing comet and watch the clock of earth below, one moment I would choose is when Dr. Carlson and Kate Staley came into the lives of Ivan and Carol Doig, and brought gatherings such as this with them. So in a sense, I am here to salute

those two long-gone but still persevering women, and their love of the basic earth.

My own philosophy on anything tends to run to book-length, but I can sum up for you that it seems to me a concern for nature simply has melded into, and all through, my other concerns as a writer, which are remembrance and cognizance. One of my novelist compatriots, Shirley Hazzard, once said that the articulation we know as art springs from the oldest, deepest, most memorious longing: to relieve the soul of incoherence. I come here today as a longtime self-unemployed practitioner of memory. Written pages--mine now add up to fourteen books and an appalling number of shorter pieces--written pages are a form of word-memory that we call "literature." And many of my pages

deal with what might be called <sup>6</sup>world-memory--the earth's own memory, the topographical testimony of the planet's processes. I think it can be argued that nature is an ultimate form of memory--different from our human sort; it's the universe's sort, the cells of memory ticking away in tree rings and geological strata and the beaks of finches and glaciated valleys--and that, left to itself as best we can manage to do that, nature the rememberer imitates art in finding ways to tell its story, again and again, over and over but never quite the same twice, in the long devotion of the seasons and the ground and the sky.

It's probably not news to this crowd that a number of my books, including this new one, **The Bartender's Tale**, take place up along some real basic earth, the Rocky Mountain Front. My folks and I knocked

7

around in the Dupuyer area for a half dozen years when I was in high school--in Valier--and just after, running sheep on shares or working on ranches. So before we have some questions and conversation, let me read just a pair of short segments which bring in that mountain skyline which means so much to so many of us.

This first excerpt is from my first book, **This House of Sky**, and it takes place when my dad and my grandmother and I landed at one of the worst ranches we'd ever seen, down in a coulee about ten miles from Dupuyer. We had come in at night, and daylight was a shock--the guy whose sheep we were running on shares had leased this place with the blase attitude that he didn't have to live there himself. First we discovered that we had only the three back rooms of the house--the

owners were storing their stuff in the locked-away better part of the house, which actually had windows where you could see something besides the bunkhouse and the outhouse--and then, that all the ranch buildings sat on a bit of a slope, so that no matter whether you were walking or standing you were always kind of dragging one foot lower than the other, which gets pretty tiring in lambing time when you've spent all day in mud-caked overshoes anyway.

We were, shall we say, not encouraged. As I put in the book, my father characteristically summed up our situation: "As the Irish fellow says, this place must be the back of the neck of the world." Then, though, there was this development:

(Sky excerpt, pp. 180-1)

a rusting windmill—was slightly aslant, as if the impact of the giant sheepshed at the bottom of the yard had teetered the entire ranch toward it.

It was when Dad noticed that he hadn't yet found a place on the ranch where he could stand without one foot lower than the other that he pronounced the Irish fellow's lament on our new home. Then: *Aw the hell, Skavinsky, we might as well go see what the grass looks like.* The two of us—neither willing to risk a peace gesture in Grandma's direction yet—drove back up the long snout of benchland in front of the house.

We came up over the crest and were walled to a stop. The western skyline before us was filled high with a steel-blue army of mountains, drawn in battalions of peaks and reefs and gorges and crags as far along the entire rim of the earth as could be seen. Summit after summit bladed up thousands of feet as if charging into the air to strike first at storm and lightning, valleys and clefts chasmed wide as if split and hollowed by thunderblast upon thunderblast. Across the clear gape of distance, we could read where black-quilled forest wove in beneath cliffs and back among the plummet of canyons, we could make out the beds of scree crumbled and scattered beneath the marching shields of rimrock. The Smith River Valley had had mountain ranges all around. This high-set horizon twenty miles to our west thrust itself as if all those past ranges and twice their number more had been tumbled together and then armored with rimrock and icefield.

Off this carom-line of summits, we knew, the Continental Divide tipped rivers away to both the Pacific and the Atlantic. The shouldering might of what Dad and I were looking at seemed as if it could send those entire oceans too sloshing along routes of flow if the notion struck. Then as the pair of us stared and cleared our throats to one another,

we began to see a thing more. Along these mastering mountains, all the hundred miles of gashing skyline in our sight, fresh snow was draping down.

Here was a thought. Dad and I had lived our lifetimes beneath weather-making mountains, none of which tusked up into storm clouds as mightily as this ~~Sawtooth~~ Range of the Rockies would. In front of us now loomed the reefline of the entire continent, where the surf of weather broke and came flooding across, and both of us knew what could be ahead when full winter poured down off these north peaks. Yet for the instant, to have come upon grandness anywhere near this spavined ranch, neither of us had the heart to care. ✓

Down from the mountains as well, it turned out, this north country stretched as a land of steady expanse, of crisp-margined distances set long and straight on the earth. All the obliques of our valley life seemed to have been erased and redrawn here as ruler-edged plateaus of grassland, furrowed panels of grainfield, arrowing roads, creeks nosing quick and bright from the Rockies. The clean lines of this fresh landscape everywhere declared purpose and capacity, seemed to trumpet: *Here are the far bounds, all the extent anyone could need. Now live up to them.*

Dad stepped from the pickup, slid his hands into his hip pockets and studied the shards and shields of the Sawtooth Mountains and then the bold-edged distances north and south and east. *Dandy country*, he said, and turned to grin wide at me. *As the fellow says, just dandy fine. Let's go tackle that Lady situation.*

Dad by now had learned a considerable trove about how to handle Grandma—the remainder of his problem being that there seemed to be some dozens of troves yet to be figured out about her—and he had hit on what was needed to get her mind off the alarming ranch. *We got to figure some place for Ivan to stay for school, Lady. These roads are gonna*

So that is my first exploration in prose of that mountain throng, that temperamental skyline where the weather is made. Right from my first novel, **The Sea Runners**, I've made the topography of the story practically a character in itself, and I'll conclude with the most recent example, in this new book.

The bartender, of the tale, is Tom Harry, the practically legendary saloonkeeper I put in the middle of the day-and-night carousing of ten thousand dam workers at Fort Peck in **Bucking the Sun**, and marginally more respectably in another barroom setting in **English Creek** and **The Eleventh Man**. The plot revolves around the question, what if that bachelor bartender and avowed foe of matrimony had a kid to bring up by himself? The story of an only child being raised by a challenged but

resourceful single father is one I hadn't summoned since my father's and my own in **This House of Sky**, and never in fiction, so this adventure in storytelling, tale-telling, I just could not pass up.

The book is from the perspective of the boy, as the character-- Russell, always known as Rusty--looks back from later in life. In this scene, Rusty at the age of six, about to start school, has just arrived in Montana and the Two Medicine country from Arizona, where he'd been parked with relatives all his life, and his father Tom--Pop--gives him his version of the welcoming treatment by telling him he'll take him fishing in the morning.

Tomorrow came all too soon. Pop must have believed fish got up before dawn. Cats were just then scooting home from their

nightly prowls, eyes glittering at us in the Hudson's headlights, as he drove out of town and onto a gravel road that seemed to go on and on. I was more asleep than awake when eventually he stopped the car. "Here it is. Set your mouth for catching fish."

Groggily I climbed out after him, and Montana opened my eyes for good.

The Rocky Mountains practically came down from the roof of the continent to meet us. The highest parts lived up to their name in solid rock, bluish gray cliffs like the mightiest castle walls imaginable, with timber thick and dark beneath and the morning sky boundless beyond. Canyons, mysterious by nature, led off between the awesome rims of stone. I know now that the clear air and time of

day made it all seem so wonderfully near and distinct; in the first morning of the world the light must have been like that.

Such was my introduction to the Two Medicine country, larger than some eastern states and fully as complicated. The Two, taking its name from the Two Medicine River in ancestral Blackfeet land some thirty miles north of town, was an extravagant piece of geography in all directions. The sizable canyon of the river cutting through the eastward plains was joined by a succession of fast-running creeks with generous valleys nicely spaced along the base of the mountains. Benchlands flat as anvils and dramatically tan as buckskin separated these green creek valleys, while to the west, the peaks and crags of the Rockies went up like the farthest rough edge



of everything. The Two Medicine National Forest began in the foothills and stretched up and over the Continental Divide, and that forest grazing land and the wild hay in the creek bottomlands had made the Two country a historical stronghold of sheep ranching, with one huge cattle ranch, the Double W, thrown in for contrast. That restless landscape working its way up to the summit of the continent seemed to me then a dramatic part of the earth, and still does.

Taking in the view between assembling our fishing poles, having a cigarette, and drinking coffee from a thermos, my father summed up the surroundings his own way. "Nature. Damn hard to beat."

On that note, let's hear from some of you, with questions or comments.