DOIG (Opening remarks)

It's my pleasure to hand out the goodies tonight. In this assignment, I promise to be on better behavior than twenty years ago when the New York Times travel section sent me down here to do a piece, and I told the nation that downtown Portland after dark was a medium thrill. Mea culpa, Portlandia..)

So, I'm here as a tourist again, although the Literary Arts folks have fancied up the job description to "master of ceremonies." I had better master time, first of all, and in my opening errand of standing up here and talking about writing for about fifteen minutes, I do know what a deadline is.

Let us begin at the beginning, when art began to dance off the cave walls to us. Literature perhaps begins there, in the painted bison running in the tunnels of time, and the hunting escapades they represent being told around the fire. I think that's what we're still up to, in the white canyons of paper and now the nebulae of cyberspace--I think stories still can be our way of sharing light, of sitting together around humanity's fire with the universal dark all around us.

Our work, our words, of course have to start on the cave walls between our own ears--the everyday life of the writer, if that's what you can call sitting around in your own head all the time. Herman Melville surely gave the creed of all us stay-at-homes, hunkered there trying to make books, when he let forth in Moby Dick his narrator's ever so literary yearning: "Oh, Time, Strength, Cash and Patience!"

The patience of one of the odd patron saints of our trade, the late Flannery O'Connor, has always guided me in the long devotion of the writer's backside to the seat of the chair where he or she sits and works. Flannery O'Connor was ill, most of her short writing life, but her collection of letters show her to have been a dedicated sardonic professional, as when she gave this unbeatable version of the experience of looking over one's own writing: "I have just corrected the page proofs and I spent a lot of time getting 'seems' and 'as if' constructions out of it. It was like getting ticks off a dog."

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

"I'm a full-time believer in writing habits, pedestrian as it all may sound. You may be able to do without them if you have genius but most of us only have talent and this is simply something that has to be assisted all the time by physical and mental habits or it dries up and blows away. I see it happen all the time. Of course you have to make your habits in this conform to what you can do. I write only about two hours every day because that's all the energy I have, but I don't let anything interfere with those two hours, at the same time and the same place. This doesn't mean I produce much out of the two hours. Sometimes I work for months and have to throw everything away, but I don't think any of that was time wasted. Something goes on that makes it easier when it does come well. And the fact is that if you don't sit there every day, the day it would come well, you won't be sitting there."

Ultimately, Flannery O'Connor's advice does add up. Tonight we have these honored books--days, nights, weeks, and years turned into words. Their authors now will forever face, at booksignings, readings, and other gatherings, that eternal audience question: "Where do you get your ideas?" Always a good question, but the answer is tough. It's not as if writers live in an aquarium. The writer floating dreamily all day long in the fluid of thought and word, and at suppertime the figure of God--in the unlikely disguise of a literary critic--drops in the fish food.

No, art comes by way of craft, of working and reworking those sounds that come off the page. The heart of the language must beat there. Three hearts, really. The rhythms and tides of the bloodstream we all share, words, constitute the first. The Pacific Northwest poet Richard Hugo once did a splendidbook on the craft of using words on paper--The Triggering Town, with alloys of common sense and revelation such as this paragraph:

"A student may love the sound of Yeats' 'Stumbling upon the blood dark track once more' and not know that the single-syllable word with a hard consonant ending is a unit of power in English, and that's one reason 'blood dark track' goes off like rifle shots.... The

young poet is too often paying attention to the big things and can't be bothered with little matters like that. But little matters like that are what make and break poems."

The second vital pulse on the page, I don't know what to call except the blood-sum of the writer. Magical, inexplicable, whatever it is, but the literary quality by which a writer writes better than he has any right to. By which Faulkner, who could barely rouse himself to sort mail in a somnolent post office, had somewhere in him the ambition as a writer "to put everything into one sentence--not only the present but the whole past on which it depends and which keeps overtaking the present, second by second." By which Yeats, his pince-nez eyeglasses perched on his uppercrust nose, somehow--somehow--could see deeply "to where all ladders start/ in the foul rag and bone shop of the heart."

The third heart of writing is geographical: where we speak from. "They call it regional," our late great friend Bill Stafford wrote in his telling poem, "Lake Chelan"--"They call it regional, this relevance: the deepest place we have." For my part, as someone who writes about both the Rocky Mountain slopes where I grew up and about the Pacific Northwest where I've spent the majority of my years, I've always believed that writers of caliber can ground their work in specific land and lingo and yet be writing of that larger country, life.

Now, to begin to turn to the night's main event--the writers of caliber being honored here--let me preach a quick paragraph of history. We're here celebrating the tenth anniversary of these Oregon Book Awards, created to acknowledge the outstanding writers of this state. The awards are given in five fields of writing--fiction, literary nonfiction, poetry, books for young readers, and drama--and each award has a nice round number to it, the sum of one thousand dollars. (Recall Moby Dick: "Time, Strength, CASH and Patience!") Like the plot of a good book, these awards have not been predictable, sometimes have been controversial in the selection of finalists and winners. Since I normally get to watch from relative safety north of the Columbia River, the Oregon Book

Awards remind me a bit of the literary equivalent of that journalistic axiom of what makes a good newspaper: being not afraid to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

Miraculous things, books. Every so often, I wish we could re-weave time and bring forth a writer from his own neighborhood of history to an era where we need his particular eye and skill. Shakespeare, for instance, to write about the massive murderous idiocy of the trench warfare of World War One. Joseph Conrad to be aboard a moon voyage and tell us of the cold ocean of space.

If I could shuffle time, tonight, there is a trio of historical figures whom I passionately wish could witness these Oregon Book Awards, so that they could know how far their imagination has led. Thomas Jefferson, that one-man academy of arts and sciences, who sent his explorers toward the mouth of Columbia River with instructions to write and write and write--to keep journals "with great pains and accuracy,to be entered distinctly and intelligibly for others as well as yourself; and those two superb diarists, that odd perfect couple Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. It was Clark who wrote a creed of simple pride in having stuck to the task, as the Corps of Discovery broke camp after the winter of rain at Fort Clatsop: "(We) have lived as well as we had any right to expect."

I believe that those three early figures who touched, with their pens, the land which would become Oregon, would grin astonished approval tonight as this state honors its makers of literature.

And now, those Oregon Book Awards for this year.

National Homestead Monument

When I began in the writing trade, as a young western workhorse harnessed to a newspaper job--as my family referred to it, "back east in Illinois"--I dreamed ahead from that daily newspaper wordage to somehow joining one or another of the literary lineages aboard Shakespeare's ark--the lions of narrative, the foxes of mystery, the griffins of science fiction and fantasy, the watchful herons of history, the gazelles and dolphins of poetry, the badgers of biography, the lop-eared leopards of memoir. Little did I imagine that going up that gangplank would

bring me a signal flag of my own, bannering in the breeze here at this national monument. It is a fine and unexpected honor, to be blowing in the wind with Willa Cather and Laura Ingalls Wilder in the Homestead Legacy set of banners at the Heritage Center.

What I'm to share with you--today--began to become words ~~some time~~ LONG ago: on June 16, 1903. That day, a bearded man--built about like me--filed with the U.S. Land Office his declaration of intention to homestead "the following described tract of land, viz: 160 acres of unsurveyed land in Meagher County, Montana..." Because it hadn't yet been surveyed, that land claim relied on landmarks, such as "the west branch of Spring Creek," in its

description, tracing around from one to another in a square until returning to the first spot, "the place of beginning."

Across the next fourteen years of paperwork concerning that homestead claim by Peter Scott Doig, my grandfather, the description of that land changed in some intriguing ways. Surveyors with their theodolites and jake staffs transformed that original paragraph of pacing off from this landmark to the next one, into simply "Northeast quarter, Section 8, Township 5 North, Range 5 East." (To give you a bit of a mental map of this, that homestead was southeast of Helena, Montana, about fifty miles, and considerably up into the Big Belt Mountains. It's locally

called the Sixteen country because its main creek flows into the Missouri River just sixteen miles below the headwaters of the Missouri.) But that oddly poetic little phrase from my grandfather's original paperwork stayed indelible in our family line--"the place of beginning."

My people did begin there, in our immense journey of becoming Americans after hundreds of years in Scotland, there at that homestead which was called "the Doig place." My father and four of his five brothers, and his sister, all were born on that homestead--~~the last of them in 1919~~--and being careful, slow-marrying Scots, most of them were around there, off and on,

through the late 1920s and even on into the 1930s, the decade when I was born. My parents came out of those years as full-fledged members of what I call in one of my books the lariat proletariat ~~of their time~~--tugging themselves by the ropes of their muscles and the pulleys of their mind into ranch jobs--cowboying, sheepherding, foremanning in my father's case, and my mother, when her frail health would allow her, working as a ranch cook. Tagging along at their sides in these seasonal jobs, much of my own boyhood on ranches was within a few miles of that original Doig homestead. So, in my growing up, what history the family had was mostly of that Doig place. By now, nobody has lived

So, in my growing up, what history the family had was mostly of that place. By now, nobody has lived there for sixty years or more--yet it perseveres in me--as my family's first step on the ladder called America.

there for sixty years or more--yet it perseveres in me--as my family's first step on the ladder called America. That homesteading experience, that particular American saga, shared by my family and hundreds of thousands of others in the West, have given me impetus for much of my writing.

To me, this is the story in the bloodline--the accumulating power of detail and speculation and wondering and questioning that pulsed in me from knowing of my own homesteading ancestors' hard work and harder knocks and those of that ghost population, all those other "places" where homestead families hung their names on the wind of time.

~~Well,~~ Where did it all lead, those homestead years? In my father's case, over the hill to a ranch where my newly-married parents soon began their years as the western equivalent of sharecroppers--we even called the arrangement by which my father would take charge of a herd of cattle or a band of sheep from their owner and graze them until shipping time for a portion of the profit, we called that doing it "on shares."

It was there that the homestead past first hit home to me, when I was about eight years old. Among his many distinctive western aspects, my father was a haymaker, a hay(ING) contractor, on ~~this~~ THAT ranch, and I have two distinct memories.

One is of the day a dump rake broke down, and my dad remembered there was a similar rake back at the Doig place where he could get the part he needed to fix it, in that backyard scatter of old equipment that used to accumulate on so many ~~western~~ ranches and farms for precisely that purpose--rustyparts.com, out there behind the barn.

Off we went, my father and I, to the Doig place for our rake part, and to this day, I remember my shock at what happened when we set foot into the weedy yard of the ~~Doig place~~ OLD HOMESTEAD. My father broke down. Broke down and wept. His tears, that day, must have come from the flood of memories. The stories, still

powerful to him, of all those lives around him in his younger years, in that mountain basin where his and mine were now the only human eyes, and the sockets of windowframes of the abandoned houses stared blind, all around us.

--My other homestead memory is luckily more cheerful. On the ranch where my dad was putting up the hay was another abandoned homestead, the Keith place, near enough for me to go and play in the old buildings. For whatever reason, among the delightful trash of the Keith place was that long-gone family's bank statements, which of course included canceled checks; sheafs of them, a Fort Knox of them. My imagination had just

come into a fortune! I pretended they were money, I riffled them as I'd seen the guy who ran the roulette wheel in town do, I fanned them out like playing cards, millionaire-like I made paper airplanes of them... The currency of history, waving in my ignorant eight-year-old hands, is my personal homestead portrait, I suppose.

Let me now read a sample of the first book that grew out of all this background, and some years of research and tape-recording people out of my family's past and, not least, that hefty paperwork file of Peter Doig's homestead claim with that inadvertant bit of poetry, "the place of beginning." This was,

8 min.
to here

incidentally, my first book--a memoir--and a few minutes from now I will shape-shift into a fiction writer and read a bit from my latest book; I promise to spare you swatches of the nine books in between.

So, from **This House of Sky,** here's a brief portrait of my homesteading forebears, starting with the first one to come to America--my great-uncle, David Lawson Doig, known as D.L.

"As promptly as he had enough offspring and income to keep the homestead going, D.L. devoted his own time to the hobby of raising brown leghorn chickens. He proved to be an entire genius at chicken growing. Before long, his bloodline of brown leghorns, with their sleek glosses of feather and comb, were renowned.

"He went to the big shows in California and all over the East," one of his sons remembered for me. "Beforehand he'd bring in his show cages into our front room and he'd have his chickens in there...I didn't like no part of 'em--we all had to pitch in to take care of these blasted chickens--but he was one of the best hands in the world with his birds." The trophies won at fairs and expositions covered most of one wall of the house, and D.L.'s wife sewed a quilt from the prize ribbons. Until the Depression and old age at last forced him out, D.L. could be found there at the homestead, a round deep-bearded muser fussing over his prize

chickens, sending someone down to the railroad tracks in the Sixteen canyon to fetch the jug of whiskey consigned for him each week, and asking not one thing more of the universe.

The other brother, Peter Doig, somehow made his way from Scotland in the spring of 1893, just after his nineteenth birthday. He had been a tailor's helper, and in the new land at once began a life as far away from needle and thread as he could get. For the first few years, he did the jobs on sheep ranches that his son would do a generation later, and which I would do, a generation after that, as his son's son--working in the lambing sheds, herding, and wrangling in the shearing pens.

There can't have been much money in the ranch jobs which drew my father's father in those first years. But what there would have been was all the chance in the world to learn about sheep--and sheep in their gray thousands were the wool-and-meat machines which had made fortunes for the lairds of the Scotland he arrived from. What was more, this high Montana grassland rimming the Big Belt Mountains had much of the look of the home country, and had drawn enough Scots onto ranches and homesteads that they counted up into something like a colony. The burr of their talk could be heard wherever the slow tides of sheep were flowing out onto the grass. Between the promise of

those grazing herds and that talk comfortable to the ear, Peter Doig found it a place for staying." (THE PLACE OF BEGINNING)

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The homestead story of my family, of course, has plenty of company on the bookshelf. A goodly number of writers have looked back and seen homesteads as literary makings. Wallace Stegner, in my favorite book of his, **Wolf Willow**, deals splendidly with his boyhood years on a Saskatchewan homestead. Mari Sandoz in the 1930's gave us what I think is another classic, **Old Jules**, a kind of composite memoir of homesteaders in the

Sand Hills here in your Nebraska. **Old Jules** contains one of my favorite lines in any book, when a ranch cook cracks to the young Swiss homesteader about his chosen land here, "Great farmin' country. Never get your crops wet there."

I put that token of small talk with a lot big behind it, right up there with the actual real-estate advertisement ~~that had been~~ aimed at luring dry-land homesteaders to the buffalo prairie of northern Montana: "Aridity is insurance against flood."

CUT

(I don't know about yours, but my dry-land ancestors lasted just long enough on their homesteads to question the wisdom in that.)

Back to the literary family tree that has grown up around the homestead experience, there's a fine book--**Letters of a Woman Homesteader**, by Elinore Pruitt Stewart--that also produced the equally fine movie about homesteading, Annick Smith and Bill Kittredge's movie SCRIPT of some years ago called **Heartland**. A work of fiction I've always liked is Molly Gloss's novel about a single woman homesteading in Oregon's Blue Mountains, **The Jump-Off Creek**. And in this Midwestern setting we are in, it's redundant to cite the great work of Willa Cather, and Laura Ingalls Wilder, and Hamlin Garland's **Boy Life on the Prairie,** and O.E. Rolvaag's Norwegian-American

epic, **Giants in the Earth,** AND SO ON. Crops may sometimes have been sparse in homesteading, but literary art has flourished pretty nicely out of it.

In my own case, in this strange literary business of trying to get at some truths by making stuff up, I've been drawn back to the biggest homestead boom of all, one which doesn't get the attention it deserves in frontier history because it occurred in the twentieth century. It's the land-rush my grandparents were in, although in my fiction I always WANT the setting to be different, more provocative to the imagination, from the ACTUAL one that had drawn the Doigs, ~~but~~ YET one I know something about from having spent my

high school years in it--the country in northern Montana near the Rocky Mountain Front, south of Glacier National Park if that helps to locate it for you. Into Montana in roughly the first twenty years of the twentieth century came a STAMPEDE quarter of a million people, many of them snapping up that homestead bet with the government, homesteading tooth and nail. The record of homestead entries, that start of paperwork such as my grandfather's, all of a sudden looked like land hunger on steroids: in 1905, there were not quite twenty-five hundred homestead claims entered in the state of Montana ~~that year~~, in the year 1910 there were twenty-two thousand--and the big numbers kept

pouring in until 1919. Montana's population tripled in eighteen years, a population explosion of a magnitude that it takes a Las Vegas to produce today.

So, for a moment think of that prairie as a vast tabletop, with these tiny figurines scattered on it by the tens of thousands--sodbusters, honyockers, pilgrims, dreamers, cranks, Jeffersonian yeoman agriculturists, greenhorns, most of them new to the land, perhaps as many as one in ten of them single women (schoolmarms, unmarried sisters or aunts or daughters), out there with their shanties, their breaking plows, their flax seeds, their Sears Roebuck catalogues, their buckboards and their Model A

Fords. There they all are, around roughly the time of World War I, on that thirty-million-acre table of earth, and a great many of them, we know now, sooner or later teeter at the edge of that weather-whipped and economically-tilted table: some will jump, some will fall, some are pushed. It is all, I am here to tell you, blood-ink for the writer.

Let's go now to that prairie archipelago of shanties, out there amid hard water and harder weather, all those theatrical stages 160 acres in size upon which lives were played out, under the spell of land-seeking. I've spent the last couple of years back there, at least in my imagination, and let me now take you along into the

pages of this newly-born novel that is the result, **The Whistling Season**. (I do mean new; the books had to be shipped straight from the bindery to reach here today. This is the world premiere.)

A brief bit of background: **The Whistling Season** takes place mostly in 1910 and 1957, a set of cosmic parentheses of time that quickly becomes clear in the book but not necessarily here today. The voice of the book, the narrator, is that of Paul Milliron, and here as the story begins he's a seventh-grader in a one-room school and somewhat brighter than he knows what to do with. The other characters in this opening scene are his brothers--Toby, a second-grader, and Damon, a sixth-grader--and their