

The particular piece I'm going to read goes back almost all the way of the twenty-five years I was privileged to have Jim Welch as a friend.

In the spring of 1979, I was conscripted into a literary gathering in Missoula called the "Who Owns the West?" conference. I didn't want to do it--I was deep in the writing of this book, **Winter Brothers**--but Bill Kittredge said on the phone, "We insist that you come, everybody's gonna be here--we'll even pay Carol's way." So we went, and damned if everybody wasn't there--A.B. Guthrie and Norman Maclean and



Dorothy Johnson, and of course Jim, and Dick Hugo and the other wonderful poet Madeline DeFrees--and so I had the experience of conferencing tooth and nail on into the night, every night, then holing up the next morning in an upstairs bedroom close to Rattlesnake Creek to keep working on **Winter Brothers**. The book, as some of you may know, is a kind of meditation on the diaries of James Gilchrist Swan, a solitary pioneer--over on the Olympic Peninsula--who virtually every day between the Civil War and his death at the turn of the twentieth century wrote conscientiously of his life and those of the other white westcomers and the Northwest coastal Native Americans around him. The



community of time that I saw there in Swan and his forty years of diaries found some kind of an echo, for me, in that Missoula gathering, because when the book was published the next year my dedication in it reads: "This one is for the Missoula gang, when we owned the West."

Some of the 26 co-conspirators I listed beneath that are still conferencing tooth and nail, here tonight--Lois Welch and Ripley & Madeline DeFrees, Hugo, and Annick Smith and Bill Kittredge--and Carol Doig--and two others have been here all day long in our memories and utterances--Dick Hugo and Jim Welch.



So, one more time, for that gang. In this bit from **Winter Brothers**, James Swan has been collecting stories from the coastal Native Americans, as he loved to do, and he's been talking here to a young chieftain named Whalaltal-Asabuy, whose penchant for dressing up drew him, among the whites out at Cape Flattery, the nickname of Swell.



From Swell's tribe, the Makahs, Swan noted down that their version of the sun arrived robustly each morning by thrusting away the stars with his head and trampling night underfoot.

Rainbows, they considered, had claws at either end to seize the unwary. Comets and meteors were the luminous souls of dead

chiefs. As for the mysterious northern lights that sometimes webbed the sky beyond the Strait (of Juna de Fuca), Swell explained them astutely to Swan:

--Under that star, many snow's sail from here in a canoe, live a race of little men, very strong, who are dressed in skins. They



look like Indians, but they are not taller than half the length of my paddle. They can dive down into the sea and catch a seal or a fish with their hands. Their country is very cold, and they live on the ice where they build great fires, and that light is the fires of those little people...

Swell as tutor about Eskimo life puts light on something else as well. Along the wilderness that was the North Pacific coastland, more than five hundred miles of broken shore from Neah Bay even to southernmost Alaska and greater distances beyond that to the people of the ice, ideas of that sort must have traveled like thistledown on puffs of breeze: canoeing tribe in



wary touch with canoeing tribe, a seed of story deposited, to be borne along by the next barter-trip southward. By the time the Makahs received the story of the miniature ice-men of the north, lore had been nurtured into legend. I recognize such wafts of alchemy, for I live with them as well. A morning in the nineteen-twenties, a dozen riders are returning to their home ranches after a weekend rodeo. Whenever the horses' hoofs strike the dryness of a Montana country road, dust drifts up until from a distance the group looks like men of smoke. Most of the journey, however, cuts across open sageland, and the slap of the gray tassels of brush against leather shaps competes with their talk of the rodeo broncs.



Unexpectedly the loose troop reins to a halt. Across a stretch of pasture they have always ridden through, a fresh barbed-wire fence glints. The owner of the land emerges from a nearby cabin to explain that he intends to plow the ground, that they can no longer go across the field-to-be. A rider with a notch-scar in the center of his chin--he was my father--grins down at the man and says in his style of half-joke, half-declaration: "We never saw any place yet we couldn't go." Turning his horse to the fence, he touches spur to flank, and mount and man pass through the air above the blades of wire. One after another the others soar after him, like boys on great birds of sorrel, roan, dapple gray.



The story and its impromptu anthem of the West's last  
horseback generation have come down to me, on embellishing  
lips, very much as legends of the Eskimos must have arrived south  
to Swell. "The same winds blow spring on all men's dreams," I  
once read from a folklorist. Whether there were a dozen rodeoers  
or just four; whether they all lofted themselves in the barbed-wire  
steeplechase or just the rider with that starred chin: in the tale as it  
has whiffed to me, they are twelve and they soar.