I'm up here at this microphone tonight to try to think out loud to you about some of my own makings as a writer born and brought up in the West, and I'll be salt-and-peppering some of that in with some of the other ingredients that I think gives literature its particular flavors.

To start, as writers are supposed to start, at some kind of a beginning: let's take on the Big One,

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.

And speaking of the heart, the absolute blood-central reason why I am here tonight is contained there in the middle name of the Idaho Humanities Council. This state council and the others--and I have been around nearly all the Rocky Mountain ones by now--and their parent, the National Commision for the Humanities, have become a life force and a wallet, too, for the values which we should want to show forth in our literature, our arts, our educational system. They haven't had it easy. Year after year in the congressional reckoning of time which is called the budget process, the National Endowment for the Humanities--and the National Endowment for the Arts, and National Public Radio, and just about the national anything that isn't a military base in a Sunbelt state--have been under attack, budgetary and otherwise, by certain members of Congress.

They're lucky ignorance isn't painful.

The one big thing utterly evident on this blue marble of a planet is that the human mind has been something like a nuclear event amid the evolution of earth's living things; how can we possibly chart our proper place in what the writer William Kennedy has reminded us is "the only cosmos in town" except by humanitiy's collective intellectual conscience, the values that we call the humanities.

We come now to the phone-in request portion of our program. Don't reach for your cell phones, because the request has already come in, from Rick Ardinger when he called me up and asked me here for this occasion. Rick told me about the Humanities Council's new awards to outstanding teachers, and he wondered if I'd be willing to share with you, as the finale of tonight, some of my own makings that came right out of a walking gospel of the humanities--Frances Tidyman, my high school English teacher. It's a description of Mrs. Tidyman that I put in my very first book, This House of Sky, and one which I am proud to say was picked for an anthology of remembrances of great teachers, titled "A Special Relationship--Our Teachers and How We Learned." My English teacher there in tiny Valier, Montana, in the same pages with Eleanor Roosevelt's most influential teacher and Aaron Copland's best-remembered teacher tells us that the world's boundaries don't count for much there in the mind. And so here she comes, Frances Carson Tidyman, on the page:

Like the hedgehog, Frances Tidyman knew One Big Thing: that books can be miraculous in our lives.

I suppose by now you know me too well for me to get by with saying I'm speechless, huh?

At the very least, I'd never be noteless, would I.

It's a particular pleasure for me, this time around, to be at this occasion when it's graced by my great friend Ruth Kirk, the heart and soul of professional wordworking at this corner of the country.

And speaking of heart and soul, along with the usual fidelity of the Washington State Library, the Washington Commision for the Humanities has become the life force and the wallet, too, for these awards, and I'd like to say a minute's worth about that. During the years that we were all writing these books that are honored here tonight, the National Endowment for the Humanities--and the National Endowment for the Arts, and National Public Radio, and just about the national anything that isn't a military base in a Sunbelt state--have been under attack, budgetary and otherwise, by certain members of Congress.

They're lucky ignorance isn't painful.

The one big thing utterly evident on this blue marble of a planet is that the human mind has been something like a nuclear event amid the evolution of earth's living things; how can we possibly chart our proper place in what the writer William Kennedy has reminded us is "the only cosmos in town" except by humanitiy's collective intellectual conscience, the values that we call the humanities.

On this night of collective affection for the written word, the quick section I 'll read from **Bucking the Sun** is about the delicious hunger that makes us write and read. Rosellen Duff, young and in over her head at Fort Peck Dam in the l930's, is sitting there trying to write:

She wished she knew how much the names mattered. It was a harder part than she had thought, making those up. But if she were to call the woman "Blondina" and him...

Call them Ishmael, Heathcliff, Hester Prynne, Swann and the Duchess de Guermantes, Huck and Tom, Antonia Shimerda, Molly Bloom, Puck, Hamlet, Goneril, Regan, Cordelia, Flem Snopes, Lord Jim, Anna Karenina, Eugene Gant, Mrs. Dalloway: they answer, faultlessly, each time by making us a gift of all their wordly possessions.

Flaubert sends notes tinkling from Emma Bovary's piano and at the other end of the village the bailiff's clerk, "passing along the highroad, bareheaded and in list slippers, stopped to listen, his sheet of paper in his hand" and we listen there with him ever after.

Cather prompts an anxious young Santa Fe seminarian to say, "One does not die of a cold," and the Archbishop in the winter of age responds, "I shall not die of a cold, my son. I shall die of having lived," and we accept that as true for us, too.

Mayakovsky, Russia's cloud in trousers, jots to Lili Brik from his Crimean tour, "Lilik, I go off in all the directions there are!" and from London she postcards to him, "Volosik, I kiss you right in the Parliament!" and we believe with them, there in those everlasting fevers of correspondence, their creed that love is the heart of everything.

Writers and the written, they haunt us as we most want to be haunted, in fogs of ink.

Again, I thank the state of Washington for counting me into its cosmos of writers.

This award honors not me so much as all those notecards of mine, from which--along with the scribbles of the mind--came the almost uncountable cast of characters in Bucking the Sun. As a writer of fiction and memoir, I work from the belief that every life, everyone's story, has vital content--that Proxy Shannon, the taxi-dancer and occasional prostitute whom I invented to help tell the story of what it was like in the New Deal boomtowns of the Fort Peck Dam project when there were ten thousand damworkers and about the same number of camp followers, that Proxy Shannon can be as complex and intriguing in her life as the grand and glorious Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his.

And speaking of heart and soul, along with the usual fidelity of the Washington State Library, the Washington Commision for the Humanities has become the life force and the wallet, too, for these awards, and I'd like to say a minute's worth about that. During the years that we were all writing these books that are honored here tonight, the National Endowment for the Humanities--and the National Endowment for the Arts, and National Public Radio, and just about the national anything that isn't a military base in a Sunbelt state--have been under attack, budgetary and otherwise, by certain members of Congress.

They're lucky ignorance isn't painful.

The one big thing utterly evident on this blue marble of a planet is that the human mind has been something like a nuclear event amid the evolution of earth's living things; how can we possibly chart our proper place in what the writer William Kennedy has reminded us is "the only cosmos in town" except by humanitiy's collective intellectual conscience, the values that we call the humanities.

On this night of collective affection for the written word,

Good to be here. Coming back to Montana, with this particular book in hand, brings around in me one of those circumferences of life that clasp together the way Yeats said a poem ought to end--with the click of a well-made box.

As a youngster, up in the Dupuyer country, one dusk I squinted across the land where I was growing up and saw that the prairie had changed into a seascape.

The wind was blowing, as it did day and night that summer, and the moving waves of rich-yellow wheat could just be seen in the settling dark. A harvesting combine cruised on the far side of the field. I had never been within a thousand miles of an ocean, but I knew that the combine, with its running lights just flicked on, was a freighter bound through the night for Singapore. Bench hills rose to the north, surely a fair coastline. The expanse of it all, hills and fields and wind in the wheat, ran out far beyond--oceanic--to where the sky and the flat horizon fitted together.

The magic of place is indelible. I was seventeen,a restless farmhand with my nose in a book whenever I wasn't atop a tractor or grain truck, there at that found sea which was both fictional and real, and now at sixty I still write about both the rim-of-the-prairie along the Rockies there where I grew up and the Pacific Northwest coastline where I have spent the majority of my years. I feel lucky to have dual citizenship in those two high, wide, and handsome territories, and I'm here tonight to talk a bit, and read quite a bit, about this new novel which has settings in both of these literary homes of mine.

The reading will concentrate on the Montana side of things, but before we get to that, I want to think out loud to you about the ingredients of my writing--some of the things about the northern West that I try to use in my writing,nine books' worth now.

To start with, if I read my own books right, it is the working west that first of all interests me. In some of the books that has been people who are full-time on the land, but the everyday craft of making a living in whatever field transfixes me--Mountain Time has in it my imagined version of Seattle's latest software bigfoot--a character I named Aaron Frelinghuysen--with this description:

"...The guy had more money than most nations. Frelinghuysen had piranhaed his way into the techieville food-chain with a bit of wonderware called ZYX, and from Silicon Valley to Silicon Alley, the deals had lined up for him."

The language of the West, I've also often cited as something I consciously draw on. I spent the l980's writing the Two Medicine trilogy, in which not only is a family followed through four generations but their language evolves, too, from their Scottish lowland origins to their late 20th century mouth music.

The landscape--of course, the landscape. My books have gone back and forth between those two polar pulls of my imagination, the Coast country where I live now and the Rockies where I grew up.

But I have argued--mildly, of course--that "the sense of place" which we writers in the West are always said to have, is a seasoning in our work, it isn't the whole recipe. Why not equally cite the spine of character in Western work? Norman Maclean's flyfishing brother of A River Rungs through It--no one who has read that story and has any imagination at all, can wet a line in a trout stream now without seeing, in the shadow on the water, Paul Maclean making his powerful cast. Jim Welch's men of the Reservations. Mary Clearman Blew's ranch women. I hope, maybe also on the list, the real people of This House of Sky, and the fictional ones of Dancing at the Rascal Fair, my two best-selling books because their characters seem to have found a continuing life in the minds of readers.

In short, on this matter of place, I would argue that we're not just writing travelogues out here, we're trying to use all the tools of our trade to live up to what William Carlos Williams observed:

"The classic is the local fully realized--words marked by a place."

To mention a few other makings that go into the stuff of stories: the weather of the West, always something to write about there,right? And another of the fuels of my writing is... food. It keeps showing up in my scenes, at a forest fire cook camp or among the Yuppie grazers of present-day Seattle; maybe implying something about a character--here in Mountain Time, one of my descriptions of the male protagonist is that he can put up with just about anything if food is attached.

The ingredients list probably could go on, but I think it's time to make the main regional point, at least in my case, that the tradition of Northwest coastal art has shown me the way in much of what I'm trying to do. I think quite a number of us out West are simply trying to do what writers have always done, and pay homage to our native place in our words.

Good to be here. The Nature Conservancy of Utah couldn't have known this, but tonight brings around in me one of those circumferences of life that clasp together the way Yeats said a poem ought to end--with the click of a well-made box.

Thirty-something years ago, I was a young magazine editor freshly married to a young magazine editor, named Carol--an inspired lack of imagination on both our parts: we're still together--and along with Carol 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 were back there in Evanston, Illinois, magazine-editing tooth and nail before we could get smart enough to light out for the West)...and Dr. Carlson and her companion, Kate Staley, 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 has that lasted, with Carol and me--it keeps spreading. The Conservancy up in the state of Washington where we live, the Montana Conservancy--and now the Dugout Ranch got us involved with this bunch. If I could stand on a passing comet and watch the clock of earth below, a moment I would choose is when Dr. Carlson and Kate Staley came into the lives of Ivan and Carol Doig, and brought this night with them. Tonight's reading is dedicated to those two long-gone but still persevering women.

Now, to get on with that business of words on paper. I thought I would read three pieces tonight--one not very long, one not terribly long, and one pretty damn short. The hope is that they'll average out, to about right. (Around half an hour's worth altogether, and then I'll be glad to take questions.)

This first piece, I want to try on you as a bit of show-and-tell. Tell you what I, as a professional writer, am trying to do in it, and then let you hear it. This is from the novel I am finishing up now, and which will be published by Scribner about a year from now. This little scene involves Mariah

McCaskill, a highly intense photographer for a Montana newspaper. Mariah is newly back in the West, having won a Fuji Fellowship to travel the world and take pictures for a year. Mariah is also licking her wounds from a failed love affair, with a New Zealand glacier guide named Colin. Colin, much younger than her, wore his total philosophy of life on his Mount Cook Guide Service sweatshirt--"Glaciers are a kick in the ice."

As you'll hear, Mariah, now back home in the American West, is trying to shoot a feature photo--up along the Rocky Mountain Front in northern

Montana--for her Sunday paper. And what I'm trying to do, with Mariah and the scene, is to bring the emotional and the physical actuality together. The patron saints of writing have long shown us that this is something worth doing--the lasting power that Tolstoy gave to Anna Karenina's final instant of life, ready to throw herself under the train, asking "Lord, forgive me for everything!" while she "looked at the bottom of the freight cars, at the bolts and chains and at the great iron wheels of the first car that was slowly rolling by..."

Or the great rhythmic nexus of experience and feeling that Faulkner gave the fugitive Joe Christmas in "Light in August" when he flees from the beating he's been given, staggering bloody and drunk into a Mississippi street:

"The whiskey died away in time and was renewed and died again, but the street ran on...The street ran into Oklahoma and Missouri and as far south as Mexico and then back north to Chicago and Detroit and then back south again and at last to Mississippi. It was fifteen years long: it ran between the savage and spurious board fronts of oil towns..."

To cut Faulkner short, which is always a shame, the point is to try to get the writing to the frontier, there on the page and in the reader's mind, where a character's predicament is both physical and metaphysical. So here is Mariah, and I'm trying to get her to that point, by using rocks and birds:

That's Mariah for you. Now to move along to a more extended piece of story. This is from the same book-in-progress, featuring the novel's other three main characters:

--Mariah's sister, Lexa McCaskill, who shows up only briefly here, but who is a former champion barrel-racer now running a catering service in Seattle;

--Lexa's "spousal equivalent," Mitch Rozier, the central figure of the book. Mitch is the environmental reporter for a Seattle newspaper called "Cascopia"--one of those urban weeklies for people concerned to know the difference between tofu and futon--and he writes a column called "Coastwatch," a kind of ecological watchdog column. Mitch is of the Baby Boom generation, and at age fifty is jelly-sandwiched between the grown children he lost in an early divorce and an aging parent back in his Rocky Mountain hometown.

The fourth and last character is that parent--Lyle Rozier--and I'll largely let Lyle introduce himself through this phone call:

Mitch now has gone back to Montana, to his hometown along the Rocky Mountain Front, where the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area sits along the skyline of the Rockies, and he's in his father's house waiting for him to show up from whatever small-time wheeling and dealing he's been up to, on this day:

To be continued, and as I say, to be published within a twelvemonth.

The last piece of work I'd like to read tonight has to do with memory, because I believe that, really, what the Nature Conservancy is doing to trying to preserve memory--the earth's own memory, the topographical testimony of the planet's processes. The long devotion of the seasons and the ground and the sky. The magic of memory is something which struck me this way, in the title section of my first book, This House of Sky:

I'm honored to be here on an evening when the State of Oregon becomes a state of literary exultation, a place where we celebrate that strange tapping behavior which somehow turns the keyboard's scrambled alphabet into a book, and a place where we declare ourselves a Northwest community with--in the wise counsel of one of our late great laureates, the poet William Stafford--"a one-word constitution: Patience."

As a resident of the state to the north of here, I particularly feel I and my chosen profession have come quite a ways since the bookly beginnings out here. It was in 1875 that the Washington Territory Board of Immigration put together a guidebook on Washington--"Its Soil, Climate, Productions and General Resources"--and included the warning:

"Literary men and loiterers are not wanted, and had better keep away."

I'm not the only one here tonight whose general reputation seems to be on the mend. It was in 1978 when a western history professor at Yale--that is not *necessarily* an oxymoron, incidentally--this professor of western history at the old frontier town of New Haven, let us say, put together the first edition of "The Reader's Encyclopedia of the American West." When a reporter from the New York Times went up to behold this book, the professor felt it necessary to apologize a bit for the lack of computers and other sophisticated techniques in Western history, compared to practicioners of colonial history and Civil War history, "where all the brains are." He then stepped in it deeper by saying to the busily jotting reporter: "Don't say that. All my friends are Western historians."

Well, some of my best friends are Western historians too, and I'm glad to say I didn't hear any similar complaint about your collective IQ when he brought out the second edition of "The Reader's Encyclopedia of the American West" recently.

The godfather of this conference, Bill Robbins, once wrote an article about me and the ingredients of my writing--talked to me, to actually see what I thought some of those ingredients were, of all things--and I have a hunch he asked me here tonight to see if I remember what those were. Mostly I want to read from new work--a novel called Mountain Time, which will be published this August by Scribner--and let you judge for yourselves how some flavors of the Northwest show up in it. But just in case Bill has a snap quiz lying in wait for me, let me just briefly remark on some of the things about the northern West that I try to use in my writing--eight books' worth now, soon to be nine.

To start with, if I read my own books right, it is the working west--and northwest--that first of all interests me. In some of the books that has been people who are full-time on the land, but the everyday craft of making a living in whatever field transfixes me--Mountain Time has in it my imagined version of Seattle's latest software bigfoot--a character I named Aaron Frelinghuysen--with this description:

"...The guy had more money than most nations. Frelinghuysen had piranhaed his way into the techieville food-chain with a bit of wonderware called ZYX, and from Silicon Valley to Silicon Alley, the deals had lined up for him."

The language of the West, I've also often cited as something I consciously draw on. I spent the l980's writing the Two Medicine trilogy, in which not only is a family followed through four generations but their language evolves, too, from their Scottish lowland origins to their late 20th century mouth music.

The landscape--of course, the landscape. My books have gone back and forth between the two polar pulls of my imagination, the Coast country where I live now and the Rockies where I grew up. I have argued--mildly, of course--that "the sense of place" which we writers in the West are always said to have, is a seasoning in our work, it isn't the whole recipe. Why not equally cite the spine of character in Western work? Norman Maclean's flyfishing brother of A River Rungs through It--no one who has read that story and has any imagination at all, can wet a line in a trout stream now without seeing, in the shadow on the water, Paul Maclean making his powerful cast. Ken Kesey's Stamper family of loggers, down here, never giving a inch. Jim Welch's men of the Reservations. Mary Clearman Blew's ranch women. Craig Lesley's gallantly patched-together family of Danny and Jack, in Winterkill. I hope, maybe also

on the list, the real people of This House of Sky, and the fictional ones of Dancing at the Rascal Fair, my two best-selling books because their characters seem to have found a continuing life in the minds of readers.

In short, on this matter of place, I would argue that we're not just writing travelogues out here, we're trying to use all the tools of our trade to live up to what William Carlos Williams observed:

"The classic is the local fully realized--words marked by a place."

To mention a few other makings that go into the stuff of stories: the weather of the West, always something to write about there. And another of the fuels of my writing is... food. It keeps showing up in my scenes, at a forest fire cook camp or, as you'll hear shortly, among the Yuppie grazers of present-day Seattle; maybe implying something about a character--here in Mountain Time, one of my descriptions of the male protagonist is that he can put up with just about anything if food is attached.

The ingredients list probably could go on, but I think it's time to make the main regional point, at least in my case, that the tradition of Northwest coastal art has shown me the way in much of what I'm trying to do.

In thinking about the power of the art of the Northwest coastal tribes, I've wished that writing could truly capture that transformative magic that the carvers of cedar are able to do visually. Every so often, wouldn't you just like to 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 ocean of space. Jonathan Swift, perhaps, to do satiric justice to this impeachment episode.

When I began working on "Winter Brothers," I at least had in the pioneer diarist James Swan a middleman of art, a translator between some of the cultures of this Coast. To try to savvy the art that Swan was doing some dealing in, when he was collecting pieces from out here for the Smithsonian Institution, I read Bill Holm's analysis of form in his book "Northwest Coast Indian Art," and got lessons there in the immense sophistication of that artwork. I learned that there was painstaking use of standard design elements in that coastal art, yet as Bill Holm put it, there was "easy transition from form to form" within an individual piece of art. There was flow,

connection, relation, double meaning, curvaceousness, in the work of those tribal carvers. Something was always happening in that art, any design element was on its way to add meaning to all the other elements.

And I came across sentences there from Bill Reid, himself a magnificent carver from the Haida of the Queen Charlotte Islands. (Bill Reid , who died last year, gave our part of the world at least two masterpieces--Raven Discovering Mankind in a Clam Shell, and the stunning canoeload of mythology called The Spirit of Haida Gwai.) These sentences from Bill Reid:

"In Northwest coast art, perhaps more than in any other art, there's an impulse to push things as far as possible."

And:

"Haida artists worked mostly within a rigid, formal system, but occasionally burst out and did crazy wild things which out-crazied the other people of the Coast."

And yet again from Bill Reid:

"They weren't bound by the silly feeling that it's impossible for two figures to occupy the same space at the same time."

For a writer trying to imagine himself back into the life of any character born before him, that last sentence is particularly the sort of thing you like to hear. I'd say, too, that the way my scenes sometimes switch back and forth in time--sometimes turning on a single word or its resonance--derives from that overlapping, sharing of space. And, who knows, maybe I've even tried to out-crazy, now and then.

What this all comes down to, I believe, is what I say over and over again on occasions such as this--that I'm convinced that writers of calibre can ground their work in specific land and lingo and yet be writing of that larger country: life.

Well, now let's see if my next piece of work has any of that life. I thought I would read three not very long pieces of Mountain Time, each starring one of the main characters, and so let us begin with this book, as they say, at the beginning. The opening scene of Mountain Time:

No, the writer has to get out and hunt, beyond the glass bowl of everyday.

--The nine bars of a Montana town where my father judiciously bent his elbow as he hired his haying crews, while the boy that was me watched from the generous vicinity of that elbow...

--The diary of a man who who came west with the California gold rush, found out that mining is sweaty work, and turned north to a life of oystering and roistering at Willapa Bay and farther up our Northwest Coast...

--an 1853 newspaper article, to the effect that, "Dear Editor, I thought you might like to know that last Sunday, as some of the settlers were crossing they bay, they found, drifting in a canoe, men nearly starved to death...They have completed a journey of escape from New Archangel, more than a thousand miles, in winter..."

--The imagined voice of a sheepherder saying to a teenage boy, "Don't just stand there in your tracks, kid--We've got all these dead sheep to skin."

--A valley of homesteader's cabins vest-pocketed in the Rockies, regularly put upon by tough weather barreling down out of those glorious mountains...

--A woman with a camera and an attitude, and a pesty ex-husband working for the same newspaper she does...

--A packet of World War II letters, lost to sight for some 40 years...

--A chorus of voices, chiming out of years of tape recorded interviews, finding their common note in Depression-era jobs on the construction of the biggest earthen dam in the world: “”When we got on at Fort Peck...”

--A “high lonesome”--a week of solitary backpacking into the wilderness area named for the bat-eared Mozart of the Forest Service who thought up the wilderness system, Bob Marshall...

It sounds like the list for a lifelong scavenger hunt, doesn’t it.

It is. These nine items--some actual and some imagination-induced--are the first footsteps in the mind toward my now nine books. Then the clock takes over--twenty-five years’ worth of crafting those pieces of idea into fullness of stories, dimensions of characters, and galaxies of language.

I have two stories to tell you. In one, art imitates nature, and I come out of it with the makings of a novel. In the other, nature imitates art--and let’s see, when we get there, what’s been gathered in by that second parenthesis of fate.

Tale number one begins at a campsite, as I say in the novel that eventually was made, “in a mountain valley as old as the visit of glaciers,” about 5:30 on the morning of the Fourth of July, 1977.

I say:

“Frost on the tent, huh?

My wife Carol, beside me in the sleeping bag, says:

"Nope. It's inside the tent."

That summer of 1977 I was trying to find a reconciliation with the high country I had left, 15 years before. Economic propulsion had sent me out of my home state of Montana, and then as my father's life dwindled into his long dying, Montana became for me a site of sickness, sadness, strain. 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 to do: to go deep into the Rocky Mountain Front, the neighboring family of mountains behind the little town of Dupuyer during our sheepherding years, my high-school years.

Carol and I backpacked into the Bob Marshall Wilderness, that start of July, along a little-used packhorse trail, which of course spells unbridged streams. Three fordings of Birch Creek in the first four hours, the water at the last crossing up toward our waists.

After we had earned our way onto some actual trail, everywhere around were the mountainsides, of colossal reefs and deeps like the ocean bottom tipped empty and left on its side. Day on day, dodging weather by the hour, we hiked, camped, fished, enjoyed--and I tucked away the "write stuff" in a pocket notebook.

The morning of that sparkling frost inside our tent, we started to hike out of the Bob with brilliant blue above. Before noon, on a section of trail where, behind us, below us, lay the Continental Divide, we were in 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.

There at noon on our Fourth of July high, Carol asked:

"So where does the map say we are?"

I traced the contour lines with my finger and told her:

"On a place named Family Peak."

We aimed ourselves for that notch between the peaks and hiked out of the Bob with the wind thumping a farewell against the backs of our packs. 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.

Something, though. By whatever token, the standard journalist that I was when I went into those mountains came out to not only complete the memoir **This House of Sky**, but to write novel after novel about a century of people on the hem of those mountains and those plains. The contemporary arc of this latest one, **Mountain Time**, takes place with a sense of the immense clock of earth--the patient witness of mountains as they look down at the briefer existences that are our human fate.

It's of course the writer's task to put metaphysical sensations of that sort into words that can be felt--to have art imitate nature, there in the printed reflection on the page. Here's a brief sample of my try at that, in this couple of passages portraying two of my characters--the sisters, Lexa and Mariah McCaskill--on the first day of their hike into the Bob:

Now to that other story I have for you. This one has to do with memory, because I believe that, really, conservancy groups such as yours--and the ones that I seem to belong to in almost every state in the West--what conservation groups are doing is trying to preserve memory: the earth's own memory, the topographical testimony of the planet's processes. I think it can be argued, even, 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 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.

At least, the nature of memory and the memory of nature came together once for me, right at the time I needed it most--when I had just finished that first book of mine, about my family and those lives led there at the hem of the mountains. A call came from my editor in New York, saying all was well with the manuscript except its title. Normally, as a writer I'm an editor, going over and over my words in the carpentry of sentences--the opening lines of that book I figure I had reworked some seventy-five times, across half a dozen years of working on the book--but for once, for the new title section that was needed, when the words came out the ends of my fingers, they were just the ones I had been seeking but hadn't known it. The magic of memory, and the magic of nature, mingled for me in the

unforgettable hour of that writing. Hoping that you will perpetually find similar life-support in your work for this conservancy group, here is that passage that nature, by way of art, passed along to me when I most needed it:

It also draws on the figure whose name has been passed along to that wilderness area--Bob Marshall. I came out of that hike determined to sometime, somehow, write about him as one of the holy ghosts of our mountains and wilderness.

Bob Marshall arrived out here as a young U.S.Forest Service forester--I once came upon an oral history with a Leo Isaac, the formidable old forest researcher at the Wind River Forest Experiment Station, south of Mt. St. Helens, who recalled that Marshall didn't know even how to use an axe properly when he got here.

But the attribute he did bring with him might be called a magnificent mania for the mountains--when he hiked, up here in the Cascades, and the Rockies, and the Sierra Nevada, and the Brooks Range in Alaska, he would average about 35 miles a day.

I became interested in Marshall when Carol and I backpacked into the Bob Marshall Wilderness in l977--an unforgettable set of days, utterly alone with ourselves and the Bob, as the Wilderness Area is called locally, which was the basis for the climactic journey my characters take in **Mountain Time,** and which you'll hear just a bit of, in this excerpt. I ultimately tracked down his notebooks in the Bancroft Library at the University of California at Berkeley, and was determined to use him in a book sometime, somehow--Marshall

was a weird and wonderful combination of geek and poet and overgrown boy and obsessive observer and overachiever on the trail and bureaucratic string-puller--I just find him a character nobody would believe if I made him up.

So, here's a swatch of fiction he and his library-held notebooks make a bit of an appearance in.

History Maker:

I'm living proof that a museum can have a sense of humor--choosing a person who sits around making things up, as a "History Maker." I know poets were once said to be "the unacknowledged legislators of the world," but we novelists never thought we'd be handed control of the official record.

I do have to admit that it crossed my mind when I was told of this award--do they **know** what I was up to, burrowing around down in the museum library for material for one book or another? When I was working on, say, **Winter Brothers** and trying to recreate the 19th Century world of pioneer diarist James G. Swan, all right, that's semi-respectable research, history of a sort. But for my six works of fiction, can they possibly know that I've been down here swiping faces--that my file folder of "faces and character information" is full of photocopies of people I came across in old photo files in the museum library? That the hair, say, of Miss Nellie Russell, a Seattle schoolteacher and eventual treasurer of the Daughters of the Pioneers, fit very nicely on my character Adair Barclay in **Dancing at the Rascal Fair?**

I like to think that the time and effort I've spent in pockets of the past add up to more than compiling a novelistic rogues' gallery. History, from such sources as the museum, provide me and my books with what I've never known what to call except "the slow poetry of fact." The arithmetic of particulars, of beguiling but valid historical detail, which creatively gets added up into story. At least from

this novelist's point of view, it's no coincidence that the wonderfully beckoning word "story" is contained within that most generous other word, "history."

Thank you very much, for this honor.

Reading here tonight, within a dissertation's throw of Suzzallo Library and the archives over there, all this brings around in me one of those circumferences of life that clasp together the way Yeats said a poem ought to end--with the click of a well-made box. It was in 1966 that I came to this campus, and within minutes of that, to the University Book Store, as a graduate student in history. In one of the very first seminars I took from Vernon Carstensen, in his field of history of the American West, Vernon sized me up--with my knockabout past of growing up as the offspring of ranch hands and ranch cooks in the sagebrush of Montana--and strongly advised me to take a look at a book written by his old college roomate--the title was **Wolf Willow**, and of course that roommate of his was Wallace Stegner. Ultimately, with some hauling and tugging and gritted teeth by both of us, Vernon Carstensen did manage to turn the restless young journalist that was me into a Ph.D.--only to see me promptly fall off the wagon again, to the writing life. Eventually, when I reached the stage of books, Vernon came to savor my doings, and ended up with one of my novels dedicated to him. But just recently came that cosmic click that I think would have particularly delighted Vernon. The San Francisco Chronicle, this spring, took notice of that Modern Library list of l00 "best books" written in English this century, and pointed out that the list looks as if America "ran westward from New York to the Rockies and then stopped, like a dog at the end of a leash." That East Coast-centric list would have been raw intellectual meat for Vernon Carstensen, as an example of--in one of those great antique words he so loved--"mumpsimus": an idea firmly and wrongly held. The San Francisco Chronicle, perhaps goaded by the ghost of Vernon, got up its own list of the l00 best books by writers in the western United States--and there among the top four vote-getters is the old Carstensen roommate, Stegner, and the old Carstensen student, yours truly. In all the echoes this campus holds for me, I now hear Vernon chortling that the San Francisco Chronicle produced a temporary cure for Eastern mumpsimus.

Well, now to the current word output of yours truly, and tonight I want to read you a pair of selections from **Mountain Time**. These two selections are held together by rocks. One of the angles of wordplay in the title of this novel is meant to invoke geological time, the clock of earth, and its manifestations to us in its most lasting forms of mountains and stone. In these two scenes, as you'll hear, the rocks take a particular familiar and evocative form to me and my characters--they stand in cairns, along the grazing-land shoulders of the Rockies, and on up into those mountains. They are sheepherders' monuments--and this first short scene I think will show what they are and how they came to be.

A few words about the characters:

This little scene involves Mariah McCaskill, a highly intense photographer for a Montana newspaper. Mariah is newly back in the West, having won a Fuji Fellowship to travel the world and take pictures for a year. Mariah is also licking her wounds from a failed love affair, with a New Zealand glacier guide named Colin. Colin, much younger than her, wore his total philosophy of life on his Mount Cook Guide Service sweatshirt--"Glaciers are a kick in the ice."

We meet Mariah here as she is trying to shoot a feature photo--up along the Rocky Mountain Front in northern Montana--for her Sunday paper. She's been trying to get an artistic shot of glacier leavings called "erratic boulders," which sometimes are wonderfully rouged with orange lichens--but so far, she has not found the right rock:

The second piece tonight occurs a little later in the book, and it takes Mariah and two of the other main characters up into the mountains, into the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area. You may need a bit of background first on Bob Marshall, the Forest Service figure who was one of the founders of our wilderness system, and a personality who has long intrigued me.

Born in New York City in 1901 to considerable wealth and privilege, Marshall first developed his passion for the outdoors as a grade-schooler when he and his brother played Lewis and Clark in their backyard, which was Central Park.

Bob Marshall arrived out here as a young forester--I once came upon an oral history with an old forester at the Wind River Forest Experiment Station who recalled that Marshall didn't know how to use an axe. But the attribute he did have might be called a glorious mania for the mountains--when he hiked in the Cascades, and the Rockies, and the Sierra Nevada, and the Brooks Range in Alaska, he would average about 35 miles a day. When he was assigned to Missoula, to the Northern Rocky Mountain Experiment Station from l925 to 1928, the Montanans found him such a demon hiker that they called him "the Rocky Mountain greyhound." There in Missoula he took a creative writing class at the University of Montana and began a career of eloquent articles that ultimately led to his famous wilderness credo: "How much wilderness do we need?--how many Brahms symphonies do we need?"

I became interested in Marshall when Carol and I backpacked into the Bob Marshall Wilderness in l977--an unforgettable set of days, utterly alone with ourselves and the Bob, which was the basis for the climactic journey my characters take, here in **Mountain Time**. I ultimately tracked down his notebooks at the Bancroft Library at the University of California at Berkeley, and was determined to use him in a book sometime, somehow**--**Marshall was a weird and wonderful combination of geek and poet and rich and socialist and overachiever on the trail and bureaucratic string-puller--I just find him a character nobody would believe if I made him up.

So, here's a swatch of fiction he makes a bit of an appearance in. The main characters, here, though, are:

Mitch Rozier, who is the environmental reporter for a Seattle newspaper called "Cascopia"--one of those urban weeklies for people concerned to know the difference between tofu and futon--and he writes a column called "Coastwatch," a kind of ecological watchdog column. Mitch at age fifty--when the book takes place in 1996--is jelly-sandwiched between the grown children he lost in an early divorce and an aging parent back in his hometown, back here. He is, in other words, that not unknown specimen in our land, a Baby Boomer beginning to feel the pressure of the years.

Mitch at this point in the book has been joined in his hometown--one I made up and put into the country between Choteau and Augusta, where it seemed to me there's plenty of room for a town--by the McCaskill sisters, who've been helping him in trying to fend

with his father's illness. Lexa McCaskill is Mitch's "spousal equivalent," as they regard living together, in Ballard. She's an ex-ranch kid, barrel racer, an Alaska burn-out... Through various twists and turns of life she's ended up running a catering service to the cyber-wealthy here in Seattle.

And the third member of this cast, Mariah, of course you've just heard about.

The three of them are in the midst of a weeklong hike into the Bob, for a reason I can't tell you without giving away the plot wholesale:

"Ledge Creek," Lexa announced off her map. More than evidently, she was on the ledge, a low smooth sedimentary span that led like a little dock to where the shallow stream could be crossed on other flat stones. She had close company there: a round mounded cairn, no taller than she was, had been built on the ledge near the water's edge. Standing there absorbing the glorious surroundings, she clapped her hat on top of the monument and ran her hands through her hair.

The other two trailed up onto the vantage point next to her and the compact tower of rocks.

"Why one here, I wonder?" Mariah kicked at the cairn's base a little, as if wanting it out of the way.

Absorbed elsewhere, Lexa simply gestured around. "Duh. Where the rocks are."

"Thank you for sharing that, Ms. Einstein," Mariah said none too mildly. "But you know what I mean. Up along the Divide or back at the Two boundary, sure, you expect these anywhere there. But not directing traffic at a creek crossing." She squeezed past the cairn, still seeming to take its presence personally.

"What, are you allergic to monuments all of a sudden?" Lexa said absently, still gazing around at the waterfall, the chorusing creek, the nimble grove of aspens. "It has some scenery," she said as if this spot on earth needed her defending. "Good looking campsite."

Good to back here in Bellingham and Village bookstore territory, as I've been multiple times with my books. Reading from the new one, **Mountain** Time, today, I figured I'd do a few pieces primarily from the coastal end of the book--although as you'll hear, it ultimately heads over the mountains to Montana, surprise, surprise--a few scenes, anyway, to introduce the central characters.

The first is Mitch Rozier, who is the environmental reporter for a Seattle newspaper called "Cascopia"--one of those urban weeklies for people concerned to know the difference between tofu and futon--and Mitch writes a column called "Coastwatch," a kind of ecological watchdog column. Mitch at age fifty--when the book takes place in 1996--is jelly-sandwiched between the grown children he lost in an early divorce and an aging parent back in his hometown, back here. He is, in other words, that not unknown specimen in our land, a Baby Boomer beginning to feel the pressure of the years.

Here's just a short taste of Mitch going back--you can't **not** go home again, sometimes, Mitch is finding out--going back to deal with a father he doesn't get along with.

Mitch watched his father step from the pickup cab as if measuring the distance down to earth from his preferred automotive eminence, then hold the door open for his passenger, his deaf border collie Rin. Next, a groove of behavior Mitch would have recognized from a dozen blocks away--Lyle turned, lifted his head a notch, and took a deep, deep sniff. So far as Mitch had ever known there was no physical reason for that habit, nothing wrong with his father's magisterial nose; he simply seemed to feel entitled to an extra share of the air every so often.

Looking around as if he had all the time in the world, Lyle eased back, propped himself against the fender, lit a cigarette and took a deep drag. Mitch realized his father was going to wait there for him.

As he stepped out the kitchen door, Lyle peered up from under his battered brown Stetson. "You made it."

"Looks that way, doesn't it. How you doing, Dad?"

"Not bad for the shape I'm in," the identical answer he had been giving for the half a century Mitch personally knew of.

They shook hands, still awkward at it as if they had mittens on.

Of Lyle Rozier, many would have said big-headed, but to put it as neutrally as possible, his hat had a great plenty to rest on. The Rozier box of face, as his son all too ruefully knew, could not be called distinguished, but certainly qualified as distinctive, full of surprising promontories. There was such a thing as a Rozier jaw, blunt and stubborn as the plows of the French peasants who passed it on; and definitely a Rozier nose; and cheekbones broad enough to substantiate the rest of the foursquare proportions. This one-man Mount Rushmore face had been Lyle's asset, if not yet his fortune. The worn lines even improved it, the way an Anasazi cliff dwelling seems more natural because it's ancient. (Not that his father was ancient, Mitch reminded himself. There could be an exhausting number of years of Lyle left to deal with.) The problem of the eyes, though. The bluesteel eyes which Mitch met again, now as always, with a stir of resentment at the weight of presumption under those Roman senatorial lids. His father's drill-bit way of looking at you as if he had seen you before you put your clothes on this morning and knew just what you were covering up.

In this book, I get Mitch--and for that matter, his father, there--tangled up with the McCaskill sisters, and the longer selection I want to read features those two women: Mariah, first known to some of you, perhaps, in my book about Montana's centennial, **Ride with Me, Mariah Montana**--and her younger sister, Lexa.

--Mariah is still an intense photographer for a Missoula newspaper. But lately she's had a Fuji Fellowship--bestowed upon her by me--to travel around and around the world shooting pictures.

--Lexa is an ex-ranch kid, barrel racer, an Alaska burn-out...Through various twists and turns of life she's ended up in Seattle, living with Mitch and running a catering service. Lexa is truly marked by Montana: one of her distinguishing features is wrist scars, white scars across both wrists where barbed wire slashed her when she was a teenager helping her father fix fence with a wire stretcher.

Here she's at the airport to meet Mariah coming back from that Fuji year.

Good to back here at Scotts, as I've been uncountable times with my books--they were on the other side of the freeway when I first started at this. Reading from the new book, **Mountain Time**, today, I figured I'd do a couple of pieces to introduce you to a pair of the central characters, the McCaskill sisters. One of the other characters says these two women have the kinds of mouths that need holsters, but I find them interesting to write, and create lives, and predicaments, for. Here's the first of these sisters, in the opening scene of **Mountain Time:**

Time zones from Scotland to Seattle balled up within them, the zombied passengers of flight 99 from Prestwick were being gradually disgorged from the Customs area, dragging baggage and an air of serious expenditure as they made their way toward the concourse exit where Lexa watched as keenly as though counting sheep through a gate.

Here came a milling Elderhostel tour group with fresh crushes on each other like eighth-graders, trudged after by ruddy Scotch-faced geezers who all looked like ex-Mounties, trailed by a cloned-looking Silicon Glen clan whose minds were plainly ahead on their software presentation in Redmond--

There. Announced by her hair.

"Mariah! Over here!" Lexa lifted her right hand from its pocket perch and wigwagged it as high as she could reach.

Mariah, all footwork and grin, cut a sharp angle through the concourse crowd. Bangles probably from Timbuktu flashing from her ears, and her gray eyes the quickest anywhere.

"Hey there, cowgirl. Aren't you the sight." They hugged the breath out of each other, *mmm mmm*ing in near-identical timbres.

The sisters pushed back to arm's-length, gazing with frank investigative smiles into the family mirror they provided each other. Mariah as ever wore her contradictions like a gorgeous breastplate: she was starting to look her years, but those were only forty-two and most of them devilishly flattering to her. Her narrow quick-fox face was tanner than tan from her year of summers in both hemispheres. The fetching mouth, between tiniest parentheses of wrinkles, was expressive in more ways than one. Nose, eyes, eyebrows were the

full set that had come down to her from their regal grandmother, Beth McCaskill, guaranteed to still hold beauty when Mariah was twice forty-two. Looks aren't everything, Lexa one more time tried on in self-defense. *They're a hell of a lot, though.* She would not have bet on how she herself was holding up, but knew for sure that she would have Mariah's reading on that soon enough. She felt the familiar stir, the forcefield of all the years of love and contention. Reuniting with Mariah always gave her a buzz on, a complicated one, heart and head kicking in at different times. There was nothing remotely like it, these first minutes back together with someone you have known as long and acutely as yourself.

"Brought you stuff," Mariah was already at. "Your little Norskie bungalow is going to look like the United Nations powder room before I'm done."

"Hey, all right. In that case I didn't absolutely waste the trip to the airport, did I." Lexa poked her sister's ribs as best she could through the protuberances of photographic gear slung on Mariah. "Come on, you walking camera shop, let's get you home. So how was the big silver bird?"

"Can you believe it?" Mariah's hair flung vividly. "We're flying over the North Pole, there's the ice cap and the sun out on the Arctic Ocean and every iceberg in the world, and what happens but those stews--"

"--flight attendants, Ms. Politically Uncorrectable."

"--those dumb-ass stews come around asking us all to pull down our shades to watch a rerun of some freaking television program. I wouldn't do it. Would. Not. Do. It. Told them that until television gets as rare as that ice cap, I'll look out the window I paid a junior fortune for."

"You didn't happen by any chance to be *shooting*, did you?" Lexa teased.

"Me? Shoot pictures in public? Which reminds me. Jesus, you look good, squirt. Your own catering must agree with you. I want to take a bunch of new shots of you while I'm here. You and Mitch looking domestic as canaries."

"No guy around the place at the moment," Lexa started to explain, "Mitch split--"

"The bastard!" Mariah's eyebrows were up like battle flags. "What, the curse of the McCaskill sisters strikes *again*?"

"No, no, no. He split for Montana for a few days of family stuff, that father of his, is all. He'll be back as soon as--"

"The *un*bastard!" Mariah momentarily dropped a couple pieces of baggage to make an erasing motion in the air. "St. Mitch! *Good* Mitch!"

"Damn your sweet hide though, Mariah," Lexa said, laughing but a little spooked at the Mitch sonata, "there's still no conclusion you can't broadjump to from a standing start, is there."

Mariah gave her younger sister a glance so affectionate it all but ruffled her hair. "Now you're sounding like our own wild card of a father."

"Listen, you're going to take the big bed, upstairs. With Mitch gone, there's no reason--"

"No, now, I'm not going to run you out of your bedroom and that's that. Tsk, Lexa, what would a shrink make of that?"

Arguing by rote until Mariah finally gratefully surrendered, the sisters then put their strenuous selves into wrestling her baggage collection up the stairs. As they clattered back down, Lexa asked over her shoulder: "So how long can you stay?"

"Couple days to shake the jet lag, if that's okay?"

"You bet. I can stand some company, mooch your absolute damnedest. The wonders of Ballard are at your service, Ms. Fujiship, ma'am."

The silence from Mariah caused Lexa look around at her.

She had followed Lexa to the kitchen and propped herself in the doorway, arms crossed, lanky but enough of her in all the right places, a figure pined at by half of Montana that Lexa knew of and probably now by a goodly proportion of the world. For once, she was not wielding a camera, and the absence showed. *Hey, what, she looks--distracted, abstracted, whichever word that is,* Lexa's mental antenna went up in surprise. Mariah always arrived anywhere like a cavalry charge, and to see her retreat into herself just like that was cause for concern. Watching her, those deft long fingers holding only herself in the arms-clasped pose, the alone look of someone outside her own country still on her, Lexa had to wonder what she ought to do next toward this particular out-of-kilter kin. Like all

families these days the McCaskills sometimes could get as various as trail mix--the last occasion that had brought Mariah and Lexa under the same roof was when their father was getting married to Mariah's ex-mother-in-law. But these two, growing up together in the peopleless miles of the ranch, had known each other like set habits. Now it was always a matter of trying to keep that going. Knitting her brow in what she hoped was a significantly sisterly way, Lexa probed:

"Sorry it's over?"

Mariah blinked and stirred. "It's not, by a long shot. My so-called job is sitting there, the paper wants me back doing it the minute I get unpacked. Then there's the photo show, the Missouri River Museum is already biting my rump about that schedule. I've got a gazillion prints I have to do. And then the--"

"Whoa there. The going-around-and-around-the-world part, I meant."

"Had my fill of airplanes, that's for sure. What's up here, you feeding one of your cash-flow multitudes tonight?"

"I'm going to feed *you*, " Lexa stipulated. "Just a little veggie stir-fry? And Dungeness crab? And sourdough bread?"

"Oh yes," Mariah for once sounded reverent.

"Here, earn your keep, peel some carrots."

Mariah picked up the peeler so that it balanced delicately between her thumb and forefinger like a compass needle. "Which end do I use, again?"

Lexa swatted at her with a stick of celery.

Whittling away at a carrot, Mariah mused: "Riley said once, we ate out oftener than long-haul truckdrivers. You suppose indigestion was the real reason we split?"

"What do you hear of Riles?"

"Still in California committing mayhem three times a week in that column of his. And wouldn't you know, he has a radio talk show now."

Lexa's eyes went mock wide. "Since when does Riley need radio for that?"

"And?" Mariah prodded, starting to destroy another carrot. "As long as we're doing The Exes' Files--"

"Yeah, well, old Travis," Lexa said reluctantly. A tender area, this. All the other McCaskills, Mariah and their father and mother, had been as fond of Travis as if he was the family mascot. All the other McCaskills hadn't had to look across the table at him at every meal and wonder when he was ever going to evolve beyond boyish charm. "He's sort of Travising through life. Been put in charge of another environmental assessment of Alaska, last I knew. You watch, he'll suck his way up to being Head Druid in Charge of Paperclips yet."

They left that and yakked on while Lexa cooked and Mariah kibitzed... then they ate lustily to the inescapable tune of family catching-up... and finished to Mariah's groans of satisfaction and Lexa's pleased glint.

"And you of course saved room for--"

"Hey, no. *Lexa.* You scamp. You didn't--

"Coming right up. Set your mouth for it." Lexa whisked to the kitchen and the refrigerator, to come back triumphantly bearing a glass bowl of black cherry Jell-O studded with tiny pink marshmallows.

Mariah giggled as if caught peeking in a Christmas stocking. "How'd you know I *dreamed* about this stuff, the whole time I was away?"

"Oh, just a shrewd guess based on the fact that we've been sisters for a combined total of eighty-two years, going on eighty-f--"

"Shush! I'm lifting my spoon."

"Not yet, you're not. Stand back from that Jell-O, lady." Reaching into her apron pocket, Lexa quick-drew a can of Redi-Whip, piling it atop the dessert dish like berserk cumulus clouds.

"Classic," proclaimed Mariah and dove her spoon in. "Ohh. Umm. Mmm *mmm*."

"Easy, girl." Lexa cocked an eyebrow at her. "The management takes no responsibility for runaway passion at the table."

"You know me, I can abstain but I can't be moderate." Mariah paused between iceberg-sized spoonfuls. "You're having some, of course."

"Sure."

"I was afraid of that."

They wiped out the dessert in no time, then flopped down in the living room for recuperation. Lexa watched Mariah without trying to make a point of it. *There's still something, she...*

"I'm going to crash pretty quick," Mariah announced, giving a lusty yawn.

Her eyes met Lexa's a moment, then went reflective again.

"The bod starts to go," she mused. "I can't pull the all-nighters doing my prints like I used to, and the eight-day weeks kept catching up with me on my trip--the International Dateline *means* it, did you know that?" She stretched her every inch, managing to look like a million damn dollars while doing it, her sister thought. "We're not bulletproof any more, Lexa."

Lexa sat bolt upright. "No kidding? Then thank God I'm the younger sister."

Another fetching yawn caught up with Mariah. "This feels like the cut-you-off-at-the-knees kind of jet lag coming. But it's not here yet. And until it is--" She rummaged in her camera bag until she found an airline mini-bottle of Lord Calvert. "I'm going to have a Lord ditch with my favorite and only sister, how about."

"Jell-O and alcohol both in one night? What's next, rolling naked on the lawn?"

Mariah didn't even have to stop to calculate before she said laughing, "Hey, kid, we've both done worse."

Lexa dramatically burred one of their grandfather's mock-preacher quotes: "'All the world's wayward except thee and me, and thee's a little wayward.'"

Ice and tapwater and the regal glug of Lord Calvert departing the midget plastic bottle, pop of wine cork and purl of pouring, then the McCaskill sisters clinked glasses and in one voice toasted: "Here's at you."

"Mariah? Meet anybody?"

"Mate anybody, you of course mean? You coupled-up types just can't get that off your mind, can you?"

"Yeah, well, that part too."

Mariah took a sip of her drink and then owned up:

"There was a New Zealander, when I was shooting on the South Island there. But nothing lasting."

"Some big something temporary, though? Mariah, I don't mean to pry, but you seem kind of--"

"Romantically exhausted?"

"--splattered against the bug screen."

Mariah stared over her motionless glass at Lexa. Finally she said: "Bingo, sweetie. It was not nice, calling it off with Colin, but I couldn't see us long-term. Met him when I was doing the Mount Cook shoot." An earring detached into her long slim hand, then the

other. She jiggled the bangles in her palm a moment, a little *chingchingching* sound, then dice-tossed them onto the coffee table in front of her. "He's a glacier guide, is he ever. More like a souped-up sherpa, really--carries people's gear up while keeping them from falling into humongous crevasses. Talks like Hillary on Everest--after every trip up and down the glacier he'll say, 'Knocked the bastard off again,' and that'll be it for about an hour. And talk about a god bod--one look at him and you want to start eating him with a sundae spoon."

Mariah paused in a major way.

"Lexa, he was twenty-four."

Lexa twirled her finger in a little water-down-the-bathtub motion: "I guess they don't count years counterclockwise or anything down there so you could kind of reverse toward Colin's age?"

Mariah tried with no luck at all to smother a convulsive laugh. "Girl, you are so full of sympathy."

"Serious a secundo, Mariah, are you sure you can't fudge the arithmetic there a little? I mean, guys seem to think they can flip back in the calendar and get themselves a Jennifer any frigging time they feel like--"

"Twenty-four and young for his age."

"Ow."

"Colin doesn't know diddly about anything except waltzing up and down glaciers. Doesn't care about getting anything done in life except that, either. I'd try show him what I was up to with my photo work, or talk to him about all that was involved in the museum show or doing the book, and any of that left him cold. Sub-zero on the ambition scale, that was Colin. But he was a beaut."

Lexa studied the sister who had told her to always let the world see those wrist scars, *They show you've been through some life.* Lately Mariah had been through some herself, had she not, leaving-Bambi-on-the-glacier.

"Book," Lexa thought to prompt. "What's the book? You've always been a shooter, not a scribbler."

Mariah swirled her drink, peering down into it as if taking a look at her hole card.

"Got a contract, honeybunch. It grew out of the print show. I'm doing a photo book of the stuff I've been racing around and around the world shooting this past year, which is to say everything."

"Oh, everything," Lexa echoed after a considerable moment. She couldn't help a bit of mischievous smile as she asked: "Gonna take up the shelf space, isn't it?"

Mariah set her drink down as if it had turned too fragile. "Okay, earthly resemblances, how about. That's what I'm up to. *Think* I'm up to. Hope to bejesus I'm up to, and can get into my shooting."

Now one of her hands worried around in her mane of hair for a moment while she looked over at Lexa. "Wasn't happy in my work, before I landed the chance to go artsy-fartsying around the world. The usual mid-life crapstorm, I suppose," she shrugged just

enough to punctuate that. "It's not all the *Montanian*'s fault--there Missoula is, growing like crazy, and not a damn one of the new folks seems to want to subscribe to a newspaper. So the management's got problems, but they've also got thumbs for brains. Their idea of a roving photographer is 'Here, Rover, go fetch us another picture of some politician cutting a ribbon.' One reason I went after the Fuji prize so hard."

Lexa listened as though there was going to be a snap quiz later on this.

"So there I am, the world to choose from." Mariah pantomimed deadly dart-throwing. "But guess what, Lexa. The more places I went, the more I kept having this sense that I'd sort of seen it before. Not like I'd been there in the vasty past, I haven't gone Shirley. But I'd be taking a picture and think, hmm, this is familiar. Desert dunes and ocean waves. How come they're alike in the shapes they take, when they're opposites in what they're made of, sand and water. Or places. There I'd be in Petra--"

"*That rose-red city* --" Lexa chimed in grade-school poem-memorizing rhythm.

"*--half as old as time*," Mariah joined her in the recitation, the two of them faking little high-fives at each other when done. But Mariah sobered again promptly. "And I'd shoot this old carved-marble building or that, and I'd think, 'God *damn*, I've had something pretty close to this in the camera before.' Mesa Verde. Totally different place, different civilization, different everything--but a certain cliff with a building tucked under, say, it could be the same cliff half a world away. Or a *sister* cliff, how about. So I started shooting pairings. How one thing goes with another. It's christly hard to do, Lexa, but it's even harder to explain. Let me think a minute."

When she had, she started:

"You remember what Jick"--their father--"used to say about the Hebners? 'All the faces in that family rhyme.' There were a bunch of families like that when you think of it. The Zanes, that long horsefaced look on every one of them? Or the way you could tell that bowlegged walk of any of the Frew family a mile off? That's what I'm after, the resemblances, the natural family of forms. I--" Mariah stopped and grinned. "What're *you* grinning at, shrimp?"

"You wouldn't just happen to have any of these so-called pictures, anywhere in your plunder?"

Mariah held out her arm, wrist bent. "Twist," she begged in a royally prim tone, then jumped to her feet and began digging out prints. "Stop me after a couple hundred, okay?"

Off Africa, waves trailing their spray like white shadows; in the Gobi, a settling sandstorm dusting oceanic dunes. The sky-cutting summit shard of the Matterhorn; within the cobalt-blue iceface of an Antarctuc glacier the same sharptipped pattern like the ghost of a mountain. Paired likeness by paired likeness, Lexa marveled, Mariah's photographs lived up to the contours of her mind. Now she heard her clearing her throat discreetly before saying, "Colin country."

A rampart of ice and snow on Mount Cook, milk-moon lending whiteness.

"Then this."

A rampart of stone, as if carved from the first azure of dusk.

Lexa drew in her breath. "Jericho Reef. Wooooh."

"Hey, who's letting herself run over in public now?" Pleased, Mariah told her there were going to be a batch of such pictures of the Rocky Mountain Front before she was done with the book. Lexa barely heard.

The remembered mountains. The month of June the greenest on the calendar of memory. Trailing the sheep up. The trails were carpets into the anteroom of the sky, up from Noon Creek and English Creek, past the falling-down homesteads, up across the foothills with their stands of spriggy timber, and then *up* that really meant it, the trails climbing the mountainsides, Jericho Reef and Roman Reef and the other stone shoulders of the Two Medicine country. She felt a catch at the back of her throat, time's reflex. They went horseback, she and her father, sometimes Mariah, tending the sheep camps in what they thought of as their family mountains...

Lexa reached again for the southern hemisphere moon-and-mountain picture, brought it up within inches of her eyes, compared it with the Jericho Reef shot, and made herself frown. "You're slipping, though. I knew you should have taken me along in your baggage."

"Slipping?" Mariah's voice rose. "You along, why? What for?"

Lexa turned the Mount Cook photo around and shook her head disparagingly. "No goats."

"You would bring those up."

The launch of Mariah's photography career had been from a point of rock on a mountain named Phantom Woman. She at thirteen and Lexa at eleven had lately graduated to separate horses--*Two is a lot of girls on one horse*, their father had admitted after their previous summer of arguing and elbowing while riding double on camptending trips to Phantom Woman--and they were making the most of their new saddle freedom by exploring off a little way along the mountainslope while their father dealt with the sheepherder. The birthday camera practically burned in Mariah's hands, she was so eager to start working it. But already she had enough of a shooting eye to know that the mountain goats grazing idly around below that rocky reach of Phantom Woman were prime picture material, if they would just show more of themselves than they ever did.

"What would be neat," Mariah mused, "is if they'd get up on that rock, the saps."

"Make them," Lexa surprised her with.

"Oh, sure, herd mountain goats? Ninny, you can't do with them like a band of sheep, they're wild anim--"

"You don't *know*?" Lexa was ecstatic with secret knowledge. "Nancy told me!"

What Nancy Buffalo Calf Speaks, old and blind and murmuring out of her Blackfoot past, had passed along to Lexa worked like a charm. That summer the promontory rock turned into Grand Central Station for mountain goats, goats sniffingly curious, goats

profoundly bemused, goats in winsome family groupings, goats in spectacular horned solo glory against the cliffline of the Rockies, roll after film roll of perfect posing goats. Mariah had pictures all summer long in the Gros Ventre *Gleaner*, the Hungry Horse *News*, the Choteau *Acantha*, and ultimately when the Associated Press picked one up, statewide.

The great goat success brought the girls attention from closer sources as well. Their father came home one day from paying a visit to the English Creek District ranger station and promptly paid them one.

Jick McCaskill looked down from under his everyday Stetson at his just-turned-teenage daughter Mariah and her probable accomplice Lexa. He said as if thinking out loud:

"Ranger McCaskill--your otherwise doting granddad--has the notion you young ladies are baiting his mountain goats." Jick studied from one picture-innocent daughter to the other. "Which upsets him all to hell. I am apt to get that way myself. Among other things, baiting goats is against about forty kinds of federal law."

Lexa could just feel the tug-of-war going on in Mariah, whether or not to make some smart crack about little sisters at least being good for goat bait. Loyalty, backed up by Lexa's warning stare, won. Mariah tossed her hair back over her shoulders to look up at their father and said:

"How would we? You mean, like with cheese?"

"That is what we don't know, Ranger McCaskill and myself." Jick inventoried them again. "Our best guess is rock salt. But how the two of you could lug a block of that up--"

Mariah and Lexa were shaking their heads in unison.

Oats? barley? cottonseed cake?--each commodity suggested by their father drew another synchronized headshake from the girls.

"Well, then, now," he said, at last out of list and patience both. "Lexa, whatever it is you've been up to, cut it out, hear? As for you, Mariah, you can figure that you've now got all the pictures of goats you're ever going to need in one lifetime, and it can remain a mystery why they like to prance right up and pose on that same one rock for you. Savvy?"

The girls did, although what their male forebears never did manage to savvy was that Lexa's formula for making mountain goats line up and sniff with curiosity consisted of squatting here and there on that particular rock and simply peeing.

To take a lesser example--again, my own--for the next six or eight minutes here, as a kind of finale in trying to tour you through the makings of books, I'm going to do a bit of show-and-tell. Tell you what I, as a professional writer, am trying to do in this stretch of writing, and then let you hear it.

This little scene from "Mountain Time" involves Mariah

Montana--for her Sunday paper. And what I'm trying to do, with Mariah and the scene, is to bring the emotional and the physical actuality together. The patron saints of writing have long shown us that this is something worth doing--the great rhythmic nexus of experience and feeling that Faulkner gave the fugitive Joe Christmas in "Light in August" when Joe Christmas flees from the beating he's been given, staggering bloody and drunk into a Mississippi street:

"The whiskey died away in time and was renewed and died again, but the street ran on...The street ran into Oklahoma and Missouri and as far south as Mexico and then back north to Chicago and Detroit and then back south again and at last to Mississippi. It was fifteen years long..."

To cut Faulkner short, which is always a shame, the point is to try to get the writing to the frontier, there on the page and in the reader's mind, where a character's predicament is both physical and metaphysical. So here is Mariah, and I'm trying to get her to that point, by rocks and birds:

For me, 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 of those hearts.

Good to be here. Coming back to Montana, with this particular book in hand, brings around in me one of those circumferences of life that clasp together the way Yeats said a poem ought to end--with the click of a well-made box.

As a youngster, up in the Dupuyer country, one dusk I squinted across the land where I was growing up and saw that the prairie had changed into a seascape.

The wind was blowing, as it did day and night that summer, and the moving waves of rich-yellow wheat could just be seen in the settling dark. A harvesting combine cruised on the far side of the field. I had never been within a thousand miles of an ocean, but I knew that the combine, with its running lights just flicked on, was a freighter bound through the night for Singapore. Bench hills rose to the north, surely a fair coastline. The expanse of it all, hills and fields and wind in the wheat, ran out far beyond--oceanic--to where the sky and the flat horizon fitted together.

The magic of place is indelible. I was seventeen,a restless farmhand with my nose in a book whenever I wasn't atop a tractor or grain truck, there at that found sea which was both fictional and real, and now at sixty I still write about both the rim-of-the-prairie along the Rockies there where I grew up and the Pacific Northwest coastline where I have spent the majority of my years. I feel lucky to have dual citizenship in those two high, wide, and handsome territories, and I'm here tonight to talk a bit, and read quite a bit, about this new novel which has settings in both of these literary homes of mine.

The reading will of course concentrate on the Montana side of things, but before we get to that, I've been asked to think out loud to you a little about the ingredients of my writing--some of the things about the northern West that I try to sprinkle into my pages, nine books' worth now.

To start with, if I read my own books right, it is the working west that first of all interests me. In some of the books that has been people who are full-time on the land, but the everyday craft of making a living in whatever field transfixes me--Mountain Time has in it my imagined version of Seattle's latest software bigfoot--a character I named Aaron Frelinghuysen--with this description:

"...The guy had more money than most nations. Frelinghuysen had piranhaed his way into the techieville food-chain with a bit of wonderware called ZYX, and from Silicon Valley to Silicon Alley, the deals had lined up for him."

Well, nice work if you can get it, I suppose. My more usual characters have been forest rangers, damworkers, cooks, ranchers, newspaper people--I find an oxygen, a breath of life for me as a writer, when I get involved in gathering lore about how jobs are done. When I was working on my very first novel, The Sea Runners, I got in touch with a park ranger up at Sitka, Alaska, who was an expert on the carpentry and shipbuilding that went on there when Alaska sstill was RussianAmerica. He gave me not only the working details I needed about wood, but also wrote out for me a quote from the English poet William Blake: "Art cannot exist but in minutely organized particulars."

When I'd finished blinking over the philosophical bent of park rangers, it occurred to me that the quote explains much of what I like about certain books set in the West.

There's the line in Jim Welch's immortal novel, **Winter in the Blood**--the description of a lazy bale piler the narrator is working with in a hay field:

"He had learned to give the illusion of work, even to the point of sweating as soon as he put his gloves on."

Now, I've worked with that guy, up on the High Line. Anybody who's ever been on a bale-piling job probably has. The artistic exactness in that--the minutely organized particulars, those unearned beads of sweat--radiates right out.

On this matter of workgloves, **Mountain Time** has in it considerable rockpicking--perhaps the only modern novel that can make that claim--and I found myself focusing first of all on the remembered hands of kids picking rocks in the fields of northern Montana:

"...Two boys on each side of the blue truck, ranging out to pick up rocks from the size of softballs on up. They began brighthanded, wearing cheap white cotton work gloves which by the end of the first day would be irredeemably soiled and by noon of

the second day would be worn out. Every farmer whose field they worked pointed out that leather gloves might cost more but would last longer, and every boy resented laying out his own money and went on buying the cheap ones."

The language of the West is also something I consciously draw on. I spent the l980's writing the Two Medicine trilogy, in which not only is a family followed through four generations but their language evolves, too, from their Scottish lowland origins to their late 20th century mouth music. Even what they say when they hoist a drink changes with the generations from Lucas Barclay in **Dancing at the Rascal Fair** proclaiming in his Scottish burr as he lifts a glass, "Broth to the ill, stilts to the lame," to Jick McCaskill in **Ride with Me, Mariah Montana** offhandedly ordering "another round of jelly sandwiches."

From my very start as a book writer with **This House of Sky**, I've always tried to attain a language which makes a shimmer behind the story--the appeal, the wonder, of the vernacular of peoples lives coming through. Any kind of work has its own vocabulary, and people are dauntingly good at making up a language about what they do.

Trying to learn the lingo of Fort Peck damworkers of the l930's when I was writing **Bucking the Sun**, I showed a guy who'd been on the dam crew a picture by Margaret Bourke-White in her famous photo-essay of Fort Peck and its boomtowns in that first issue of LIFE magazine--the photo showed one of the dam's tunnel liners, a steel culvert thirty feet in diameter, cobwebbed inside with crisscross support rods bolted to collars in the middle of this colossal tube, and a bunch of damworkers l5 feet in the air, in there, climbing on these skinny rods--and I asked, "What;s going on here?"

Well, he said, those rods and collars keep the tension on the shape of the tunnel liner until it can be put in place, so they're called "tension spiders"--and when you're up there in mid-air working on them, naturally that's called "riding the tension spiders."

If that's not poetry of the working class, I don't know what is.

Another ingredient for books such as mine, the landscape--of course, the landscape. My books have gone back and forth between those two polar pulls of my imagination, the Coast country where I live now and the Rockies where I grew up, and you'll hear in tonight's excerpt the use of a remembered spot on my horizon of memory, the Sweetgrass Hills.

But I have argued a number of times--mildly, of course--that "the sense of place" which we writers in the West are always said to have, is a seasoning in our work, it isn't the whole recipe. Why not equally cite the spine of character in Western work? Norman Maclean's flyfishing brother of A River Rungs through It--no one who has read that story and has any imagination at all, can wet a line in a trout stream now without seeing, in the shadow on the water, Paul Maclean making his powerful cast. Jim Welch's men of the Reservations. Mary Clearman Blew's ranch women. I hope, maybe also on the list, the real people of This House of Sky, and the fictional ones of Dancing at the Rascal Fair, my two best-selling books because their characters seem to have found a continuing life in the minds of readers.

In short, on this matter of place, I would argue that we're not just writing travelogues out here, we're trying to use all the tools of our trade to live up to what William Carlos Williams observed:

"The classic is the local fully realized--words marked by a place."

To mention a few other makings that go into the stuff of stories: the weather of the West, always something to write about there,right? And another of the fuels of my writing is... food. It keeps showing up in my scenes, at a forest fire cook camp or among the Yuppie grazers of present-day Seattle; maybe implying something about a character--here in Mountain Time, one of my descriptions of the male protagonist is that he can put up with just about anything if food is attached.

The ingredients list probably could go on, but I think it's time to make the main regional point, that I think quite a number of us writing here in the West are simply trying to do what writers have always done, and pay homage to our native place in our words. We're not the first to sit around inside our heads all the time

and monkey away at that. I've always liked Paul Horgan's saying whenever he'd get too tired of always getting called a **South**western writer--

"Everybody is a regionalist," he replied. "Tolstoy was a regionalist."

It's time now to let my written words speak,I think. This piece from **Mountain Time** involves Mitch Rozier, one of the four central figures of the book. Mitch is the environmental reporter for a Seattle newspaper called "Cascopia"--one of those urban weeklies for people concerned to know the difference between tofu and futon--and he writes a column called "Coastwatch," a kind of ecological watchdog column. Mitch at age fifty--when the book takes place in 1996--is jelly-sandwiched between the grown children he lost in an early divorce and an aging parent back in his Rocky Mountain hometown. He is, in other words, that not unknown specimen in our land, a Baby Boomer beginning to feel the pressure of the years.

At this point in the book his father--Lyle Rozier--has just died in Mitch's homestown, one I made up and put into the country between Choteau and Augusta, where it seemed to me there's plenty of room for a town. Briefly at the start of this scene you'll hear mention of the McCaskill sisters who've been with Mitch in trying to fend with Lyle's illness--Lexa McCaskill, Mitch's "spousal equivalent," with whom he has been living, out on the Coast; and Mariah McCaskill, still a highly intense photographer for a Montana newspaper.

One bit of background you need--Mitch is a big guy, a former athlete, played fullback in college, and now he has to exercise ruthlessly, or as he says, watch himself inflate enough to leave the earth. Out on the Coast, he's used to going to the gym and doing some weightlifting.

Or, to put it more poetically, as the late great Oregon poet William Stafford did:

"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."

It's time now to let my written words speak, and here's a piece from **Mountain Time** I want to try on you as a bit of show-and-tell. Tell you what I, as a professional writer, am trying to do in it, and then let you hear it. This scene involves Mitch Rozier, the central figure of the book. Mitch is the environmental reporter for a Seattle newspaper called "Cascopia"--one of those urban weeklies for people concerned to know the difference between tofu and futon--and he writes a column called "Coastwatch," a kind of ecological watchdog column. Mitch at age fifty--when the book takes place in 1996--is jelly-sandwiched between the grown children he lost in an early divorce and an aging parent back in his Rocky Mountain hometown. He is, in other words, that not unknown specimen in our land, a Baby Boomer beginning to feel the pressure of the years.

At this point in the book his father--Lyle Rozier--has just died. Briefly at the start of this scene you'll hear mention of the McCaskill sisters who've been with Mitch in trying to fend with Lyle's illness--Lexa McCaskill, Mitch's "spousal equivalent," with whom he has been living, out on the Coast; and Mariah
McCaskill, still a highly intense photographer for a Montana newspaper. And what I'm trying to do, with Mitch and the scene, is to bring the emotional and the physical actuality together. The patron saints of writing have long shown us that this is something worth doing--the lasting power that Tolstoy gave to Anna Karenina's final instant of life, ready to throw herself under the train, asking "Lord, forgive

me for everything!" while she "looked at the bottom of the freight cars, at the bolts and chains and at the great iron wheels of the first car that was slowly rolling by..."

Or the great rhythmic nexus of experience and feeling that Faulkner gave the fugitive Joe Christmas in "Light in August" when he flees from the beating he's been given, staggering bloody and drunk into a Mississippi street:

"The whiskey died away in time and was renewed and died again, but the street ran on...The street ran into Oklahoma and Missouri and as far south as Mexico and then back north to Chicago and Detroit and then back south again and at last to Mississippi. It was fifteen years long: it ran between the savage and spurious board fronts of oil towns..."

To cut Faulkner short, which is always a shame, the point is to try to get the writing to the frontier, there on the page and in the reader's mind, where a character's predicament is both physical and metaphysical. So here is Mitch, and I'm trying to get him to that point by using some familiar Montana ingredients, muscles and rocks:

When Thom Chambliss asked me here to join Jim and Eric in talking about the "write" stuff--the W-R-I-T-E stuff--he told me I should tell you about the evolution of my book; "Make it memorable," he said. "And be funny about it. Oh, and wake them up, while you're at it." I asked <u>him</u> how much time I had for all that, and he said, "Ten to fifteen minutes." Wake up in a hurry, or you're going to miss the rest of it.

I have two stories to tell you. In one, art imitates life, and I come out of it with the makings of a novel. In the other, life imitates art--and let's see, when we get there, what's been gathered in by that second parenthesis of fate.

Tale number one begins at a campsite, as I say in the book, "in a mountain valley as old as the visit of glaciers," about 5:30 on the morning of the Fourth of July, 1977.

I say:

"Frost on the tent, huh?

My wife Carol, beside me in the sleeping bag, says:

"Nope. It's inside the tent."

That summer of l977 I was trying to find a reconciliation with the Montana I had left, l5 years before. Economic propulsion had sent me out of the state, and then as my father's life dwindled into his long dying, Montana became for me a site of sickness, sadness, strain. 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 to do: to go deep into the Rocky Mountain Front, the neighboring family of mountains behind the little town of Dupuyer during our sheepherding years, my high-school years.

Carol and I backpacked into the Bob Marshall Wilderness, that start of July, along a little-used packhorse trail, which of course spells unbridged streams. Three fordings of Birch Creek in the first four hours, the water at the last crossing up toward our waists.

After we had earned our way onto some actual trail, everywhere around were the mountainsides, of colossal reefs and deeps like the ocean bottom tipped empty and left on its side. Day on day, dodging weather by the hour, we hiked, camped, fished, enjoyed--and I tucked away the "write stuff" in a pocket notebook.

The morning of that sparkling frost inside our tent, we started to hike out of the Bob with brilliant blue above. Before noon, on a section of trail where, behind us, below us, lay the Continental Divide, we were in 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.

There at noon on our Fourth of July high, Carol asked:

"So where does the map say we are?"

I traced the contour lines with my finger and told her:

"On a place named Family Peak."

We aimed ourselves for that notch between the peaks and hiked out of the Bob with the wind thumping a farewell against the backs of our packs. 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.

Something, though. By whatever token, the standard journalist that I was when I went into those mountains came out to not only complete the memoir **This House of Sky**, but to write novel after novel about a century of people on the hem of those mountains and those plains. The contemporary arc of this latest one, **Mountain Time**, takes place with a sense of the immense clock of earth--the patient witness of mountains as they look down as the briefer existences that are our human fate.

And I think it's more than a coincidence that the book's plot of family--of the Baby Boom generation reaching its time of reckoning, jelly-sandwiched between children who taking their own oft-times inexplicable routes in life and aging parents who are losing command over their lives--is keyed to the view, back there in '77, from a place called Family Peak.

It's a view, incidentally, that I tried to write of from the heart rather than the irony gland, as, say, you've seen happen in a recent millenium-centered bestseller-to-be that didn't manage to best-sell. Centuries have been turned before, without a novelistic curl of the lip. There's a lot of irony around in fiction today, and one reason is that it's easy. In the only sports-page analogy I hope ever to use, irony is the literary equivalent of a baseball player letting a pitch him in the butt. It gets you on base every time, no matter how ignominiously.

I think, though, that people's lives are ultimately lived in earnest, not in irony. I'm at best a distant cousin of the Baby Boomers, born as I was in the year World War Two began, but I've been fascinated with the mammoth behavioral bulge caused by that generation and I believe that the age group tempered by the l960s deserve more than ironic treatment as they move from rebellion to the oldest kind of family obligations.

Now to that other story I have for you. **Mountain Time** is about divides of various kinds, not simply the geographically unarguable Continental Divide but the territory between individuals and segments of society, and since I live in the Seattle of the l990's, one of those societal slices has money all over it. The latest cybernaire, as invented by me, is named Aaron Frelinghuysen and he's described this way:

"...The guy had more money than most nations. Frelinghuysen had piranhaed his way into the techieville food chain with a bit of wonderware called ZYX, and from Silicon Valley to Silicon Alley the deals had lined up for him."

No sooner had I finished having my characters encounter this latest computer bigfoot and sent the manuscript in to Scribner than life did a little imitation of art for me. I was plucked out of my orderly, ordinary routine of sitting there pecking out words and wafted to Alaska on the wings and keels of money. Major money--the fortune of Paul Allen. That cruise ship bash

One dusk, I squinted across the land where I was growing up and saw that the prairie had changed into a seascape.

The wind was blowing, as it did day and night that summer, and the moving waves of rich-yellow wheat could just be seen in the settling dark. A harvesting combine cruised on the far side of the field. I had never been within a thousand miles of an ocean, but I knew that the combine, with its running lights just flicked on, was a freighter bound through the night for Singapore. Bench hills rose to the north, surely a fair coastline. The expanse of it all, hills and fields and wind in the wheat, ran out far beyond--oceanic--to where the sky and the flat horizon fitted together.

The magic of place is indelible. I was seventeen,a restless farmhand with my nose in a book whenever I wasn't atop a tractor or grain truck, there at that found sea which was both fictional and real, and now at sixty I still write about both the rim-of-the-prairie along the Rockies there where I grew up and the Pacific Northwest coastline where I have spent the majority of my years. Perhaps because I'm thought to have dual citizenship in those two high, wide, and handsome territories, I've been freighted in here tonight to talk about "place"--a Western writer's "sense of place,"

a set of words which--if we don't watch out--will become as commonplace a term of geographic determinism as "damn Yankee" or "moved here from California."

No, I don't believe we want to let a map-oriented "sense of place" say it all for us, those of us who grew up in the sagebrush and somehow became writers. What's needed, in our sense of ourselves and what we can become, is a little pluralism, and for my time here tonight I'd like to think out loud at you about more than one sense of our part of the world, and for that matter, try to explore "place" in a few different directions than usual.

Annie Proulx's burrlike little bull-rider, Diamond Felts, in her recent collection of stories, **Close Range --**who in his every battered bone knows that when "you rodeo, you're a rooster on Tuesday, feather duster on Wednesday" and keeps on paying his entry fees.

James Welch's men of the reservations, Lame Bull and the never-named narrator of **Winter in the Blood** and the dumb shrewd hayhand they work with, Raymond Long Knife--"He had learned to give the illusion of work, even to the point of sweating as soon as he put his gloves on." I've worked with him, too.

I hope, maybe also on the list, Charlie Doig and Bessie Ringer of **This House of Sky** and Angus McCaskill and Anna Ramsay of **Dancing at the Rascal Fair**--all of them, characters of modern western literature who seem to have found a continuing life in the minds of readers.

The shorthand notion that merely where we happen to come from on the map accounts for books and characters such as those has sometimes made what hair I have left stand straight up--as in the television documentary "Westwords" when a reviewer noted that I seemed a little gruff when I pointed out that "we're not just sitting around out here writing travelogues--this stuff is hard."

To put it a little more judiciously, here in public:

So, you bet, when we start following the paths of words rather than contour lines of maps, I do have my own senses of place, both as a writer and as a Westerner, and let me now try to bring out a few of them.

--as my family's first step on the ladder called America. That homesteading experience, which did for the rural West what the tenements of the immigrant ghettoes did for city America--provided landing sites, quarters to hold people until they were able to scramble away to somewhere else--that particular American saga, shared by my family and hundreds of thousands of others in Montana alone, gave me the plot and impetus for my novel **Dancing at the Rascal Fair.** Early in that book, I tried to write of what that dream of coming to the great American land pantry to find your place must have been like to a pair of young men, Rob Barclay and Angus McCaskill, as they left from Scotland in l889:

"Like the duke of dukes, Rob patted the deck rail of the steamship and proclaimed to me: 'See now, Angus, this is proper style for going to America and Montana.'

America. Montana. Those words with their ends open. Those words that were ever in the four corners of my mind, and I am sure Rob's, too, all the minutes since we had left Nethermuir. I hear that set of words yet, through all the time since, the pronouncement Rob gave them that day....

For with the steamship underway out the Firth of Clyde we were threading our lives into the open beckon of those words. Now we were on our way to be Americabns. To be--what did people call themselves in that far place Montana? Montanese? Montanians? Montaniards? Whatever that denomination was, now the two of us were going to be its next members, with full feathers on."

No, for better or worse but certainly for good, those years of taking my place here and there in the seating hierarchy of the ranch social structure fed my ambition to be a writer. Yet, like that sly smile of the Cheshire cat that lingered after the cat had gone away, portions of me kept hanging around those tables of memory. My ears must have stayed there for passages such as this one, from the novel **English Creek,** where my l4-year-old narrator, Jick, has just taken his impromptu place at the supper table with the haying crew of the big Double W ranch:

"The cook came in from the kitchen with a bowl of gray gravy.... She was a gaunt woman, sharp cheekbones, beak of a nose. Her physiognomy was a matter of interest and apprehension to me. The general theory is that a thin cook is a poor idea.

Plain Mike--this haying crew has three guys named Mike, differentiated as Long Mike, Mike the Mower, and Plain Mike--Plain Mike was sittingat my left, and at my right was a scowling guy...As I have always liked to keep abreast of things culinary, I now asked Plain Mike in an undertone:

"Is this the new cook from Havre?"

"No, hell, she's long gone. This one's from up at Lethbridge."

The scowler at my right had overheard my question and muttered: "She ain't Canadian though, kid. She's a Hungrarian."

"She is?" To me, the cook didn't look conspicuously foreign.

"You bet. She leaves you hungrier than when you came to the table."

People who are poor in all else are often rich in language. The everyday dance and prance of the imaginative tongues I grew up around must have drilled that into me, because from my very start as a book writer with **This House of Sky,** I've always tried to attain a language which makes a shimmer behind the story--the appeal, the wonder, of the vernacular of people's lives--those lives around the table that I was not cut out to live but that I might be a translator of--their vernacular poetry, I hope, coming through behind my words.

As to the other end of the table, the owner's end, the end where the money always ends up, that stays interesting, too, to me. My latest book, **Mountain Time,** takes place partly in Seattle, as well as the northern Rockies, and so there is this passage about the latest cybernaire, Aaron Frelinghuysen, whom I made up--if you're writing current fiction in Seattle and doing your job at all, you probably can't help but make up a latest cybernaire--this way:

"The guy had more money than most nations. Frelinghuysen had piranhaed his way into the techieville food chain with a bit of wonderware called ZYX, and from Silicon Valley to Silicon Alley, the deals had lined up for him."

Frelinghuysen's idea of a good time, it turns out, is to take the stage at a party at his cyber mansion and plink out the **Chariots of Fire** theme on a synthesizer, producing this:

"The **Chariots of Fire** music suddenly conjured a wall of runners behind Frelinghuysen, the movie's familiar slow-motion frieze of British distance runners training on the beach for a flannel-era Olympics. Except, everyone in the room caught on within nanoseconds, these were not those ancient Brits in frumpy shorts; these were younger and Lycra-clad and led by a significantly familiar figure.

The guests roared and applauded as the golden head rhythmically bounded along at the front of the pack and its still-golden current version bobbed over the keyboard.

"Fre did cross-country at Lakeside," Mitch--my protagonist who is bartending for this cyber shindig--Mitch overheard. "High school state champion."

The theme music underwent another electronic metamorphosis and abruptly another wall turned into a stadium with a cinder track, this time a newsreel-gray figure striding and striding in gawky detachment. Roger Bannister at Oxford in '54, breaking the four-minute mile. But the runner at his shoulder nobly setting the pace for him was no longer Chris Chataway, it was Frelinghuysen.

Fascinated and appalled, Mitch suffered the realization that he was the only person in the room old enough to remember when Bannister's historic mile happened, rather than having it cooked into his mind by television's backward glances. He peered as hard as he could at the spectacle playing out over Frelinghuysen's fingering, but the simulation, the templates or whatever they were--the mask of Frelinghuysen shouldering history along before he was born--looked utterly seamless. Just as Bannister burst his historic tape, a mountain came into the room and two figures were loping its African slope, Kip Keino training with the playful and predatory cyber-Frelinghuysen shadowing him up through the thin air of Kilimanjaro."

The levers of wealth, and power, produce many things, but they have seldom produced memorable writing.

I had the great good luck, back when **Dancing at the Rascal Fair** was about to be published, to be interviewed by Wendy Smith when she was doing a profile of me for Publishers Weekly. Wendy is an acute social historian, the author of a very fine book about the Group Theater of the l930's which turned its talents to plays about the social and moral issues of the Depression... and in the course of the long interview, when she asked me some version of that question "Where do you get your stuff?" I said something about my vantage point down there toward the foot of those long supper tables. And Wendy said, "Hey, it was an **ad**vantage point, for you. The great work has always been done by outsiders. Shakespeare. Christopher Marlowe. Joseph Conrad from Poland. Tom Stoppard from Czechoslovakia. They weren't the guys born to the head of the table."

The company Wendy cited is too fast for me or nearly anybody else to keep up with, but it was a lasting reminder, if I needed any, that in asking "Which place is mine?" the answer had always better be: "There with the sharp end of the pencil pointed up the table."

Now to the third and last sense of place I'm aware of in myself, the one that has been making itself known to me ever since I sat down to write something which turned out to be **This House of Sky.**

Trying to place it. To place it, first in the sense of identifying--as my dictionary helps out here, "to recollect clearly the circumstances or context of." As in the phrase, one that I myself have to resort to dismayingly often, "I remember your face but I can't place you."

Time and again, as I worked to create a fictional ranching valley called English Creek, I've sat at a keyboard trying "to recollect clearly the circumstances of" portions of the western past that I'd personally been through. Some comes easily enough. I haven't been around sheep full-time for about forty years now and yet when I start to write about how sheep ranching was, I know at once--who can ever forget?--what a sheep rancher's mood was, late in lambing, when his feet were aching from all those weeks of living in overshoes.

But memory is not always enough. In fact, seldom is your own memory enough when you're trying to write accurately. I make it a habit to check details with people who know more about something than I do. Old forest rangers, for the scene of a forest fire blow-

up in **English Creek**. Damworkers and engineers, for details of working on the gigantic Fort Peck Dam, in **Bucking the Sun.** Hayhands and homesteaders, photographers and grizzly bear movers--and yes, a Webmaster for the scenes in **Mountain Time** where WebTV and the Internet make their pixellated appearance.

All this, I've never known what to call, except "the slow poetry of fact." The arithmetic of particulars, which creatively get added up into story.

That's the first side, of trying to place it. And then the next, trying to place it in the sense of putting something into place. Setting. Arranging. Making it be where it ought to be. This is the carpentry part of writing. Building a book the reader will want to live in. Hammering together a solid basic structure, then taking care with the finishing-work.

The rhythms, the verbs, the sentence patterns, the word choices, the adjectives, the adverbs, even the prepositions...

Remember that cunning one in Wallace Stegner's story "Carrion Spring" (part of his classic book **Wolf Willow**)--the young ranchman who modernly might be described as suffering a lack of communiction with the young wife he has brought to the 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?"

All those daubs of language--I believe storytellers have worked at making magic out of those from the very start, when art began to dance off the cave walls to us.

Literature perhaps begins there, with the painted bison running in the tunnels of time, and the hunting

And that's the spot, the home neighborhood, the address of the imagination, that ultimately shapes our books. The magic shop, call it, where a prairie turns into a seascape.

Let me give you one last example, of two quite different western "places" consciously put together there in the attic of the mind.

The first is San Francisco, on any Friday night of recent years when roller-bladers take to the streets on their weekly celebratory loop through the city:

"The horde on wheel kept thickening as more skaters pumped across the Embarcadero and glissaded onto the sidewalk in front of the Ferry Building. Several hundred, Friday-nighted to their pierced eyebrows and gaudy fingernails, already had congregated beneath the building's clock tower and were milling around in various states of balance. 'How rav!' and 'Dressed for excess!' sang this tribe of recreational outlaws.

"We rolling!" someone bellowed in echo of the tower clock's first deep note, and by its eighth chime, were they ever. In one single accelerating commotion the massed rollerbladers let themselves loose, each of them a polymer marble in the spill that rolled toward Fisherman's Wharf. Tourists in rental cars wildly pulled over at the sight of this meteor shower of get-ups, the closets of San Francisco airborne on low-flying nyads and masquers, leftover Wavy Gravys and incipient Courtney Loves, seasoned exhibitionists and heart-in-throat first-timers alike borne on boots as speedy as midget locomotives. Skating the rim of the city, the rolling multitude hung a left at Bay Street and aimed its thundering wheels toward Fort Mason."

Compare that with this next, which takes place in a western small town, where a man who left long ago has had to return to deal with a dying parent:

"The street was longer than the town, back to the fanciful days when Twin Sulphur Springs figured it was going to be a resort and warm the toes of the world, and he walked west now from the park to where the thin old asphalt gave way to a stub end of gravel in a block of vacant lots.

A solid snarl of tumbleweeds lay jammed against the barbwire fence of the nearest hay field. One geodesic weed evidently had skittered over the top of the others like an acrobat vaulting the backs of his cohorts, and it sat now against the gravel, rocking as it waited for the next ride from the wind. He went over and thoroughly tromped it into milk-colored straw."

Different as they are, both those evocations of place are mine, in **Mountain Time.** San Francisco, observed rather than lived--there isn't very much chance you'll see me out there on roller-blades. The you-**have**-to-go-home-again small-town experience, lived--of course, of course--rather than observed. But in both cases, "places" that were put together--put into place--detail by detail in the workshop above my keyboard.

So, if "a sense of place" is to be our hymn and marching song across this West, let's allow some jazz into it. "Place" as something to work from, sure, but also to work on, and work toward.

We diminish neither ourselves nor our old loved West by doing so. I'm reminded of what another writer, who lived and worked far from the supposed literary centers of the world, once said about what he hoped was the worth of his own writing. He was an African novelist, gone now some twenty years, named Camara Laye. Born in Guinea, he lived the last part of his life in exile in Senegal--a writer twice-removed from anyplace where the world's lenses of fame would have searched him out.

Camara Laye once told an interviewer, who was asking how it was to work so far away from other writers, from the literary power centers, the Parises and New Yorks and Londons--the usual insular suspects--and he responded that he thought the cultures of the

world, as expressed in their writers, were all participating in one vast dance, each with its own special movement, each contributing something significant to the total world rhythm.

I can hear that, in our own western pages. To me, that is the ultimate "place," the true home for a writer--that vast dance of language. For if we dance them right, our words and stories, they transform into something more than words and stories about the West--they become heartbeats of the world.

Specific geographies--but galaxies of imaginative expression. For it is my utter belief that writers of calibre can ground their work in specific land and lingo and yet be writing of that larger country, that most familiar and most mysterious place of all--life.

Later, as these two have taken up their land and in the work of making homesteads, there is this passage about how that dream is turning out:

"Here then is land. Just that, land, naked earthskin. And now the due sum: from this minute on, the next five years of your life, please, invested entirely into this chosen square of earth of yours.

Put upon it house, outbuildings, fences, garden, a well, livestock, haystacks, performingh every bit of this at once and irrespective of weather and wallet and whether you have ever laid hand to any of these tasks before. Build before you can plan, build in your sleep and through your mealtimes, but build, pilgrim, build, claimant of the earth, build, build, build. You are permitted to begin in the kind delusion that your utensils of homestead-making at least are the straightforward ones--axe, hammer, adze, pick, shovel, pitchfork. But your true tools are other. The nearest names that can be put to them are hope, muscle, and time."

And although the setting of **Dancing at the Rascal Fair** is in northern Montana, rather than my own family's chosen acres southeast of Helena, and residents of the fictional valley I call Scotch Heaven are not my own forebears, the historical hard truths that weather and economic climate brought down on the experience of homesteading I thought could be summed up in the book's epigraph from my own father:

"Scotchmen and coyotes was the only ones that could live in the Basin, and pretty damn soon the coyotes starved out."

To me, this is an instance of "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 families hung their names on the wind of time.

When writers from Charles Dickens' London to Tom Wolfe's "Bonfire of the Vanities" New York fuel their creative processes with such accumulated actualities, it is called drawing on what they know. When those of us with fencelines instead of Picadillies and Wall Streets as our boundaries write about the territory we know, it gets called "regional."

I've always liked Paul Horgan's saying whenever he got too tired of always getting called a **South**western writer--"Everybody is a regionalist," he wrote. "Tolstoy is a regionalist."

One of the challenges--one of the whetstones of creativity--for those of us writing "out here" is that the larger society has long had its own mythic notion of life "out West." Whether embedded in celluloid or paperback pulp, that myth has compressed a large and complicated chunk of America into what I call--as neutrally as I can put it--"guys and their horses."

This matter of pushing yourself beyond your known boundaries is much on my mind, because a few weeks a go I was plucked out of my orderly, ordinary routine as a writer and wafted to Alaska on the wings and keels of money. Major money--the fortune of Paul Allen, the co-founder of Microsoft.

Some of you may have seen in USA TODAY or other papers the speculation about that cruise-ship bash thrown by Allen, and the guest list of Robin Williams, Dan Ackroyd, Steven Spielberg, Carrie Fisher, Debbie Reynolds, Penny Marshall, Terry Gilliam, George

Lucas, Francis Ford Coppola, Dennis Hopper, Bill Gates, probably half a dozen future Nobel Laureates of sciences, and four hundred or so others. Through some toss of the godly dice I was one of two writers invited--sort of like winning a lottery you didn't know you had a ticket to.

The days Carol and I spent with that shipload are in my diary under the heading, "Afloat with half the money in the known world." But the example I wanted to bring to you tonight is the heightening that a writer--I think--has to try to do when handed something like that. Out of many, many scenes, let me give you just the final night potlatch, when the upper deck of one of the most posh cruise ships in the world was transformed into a mammoth replica of a coastal Indian longhouse--with a rock band playing, and gorgeously caped performers of the Tsimshian tribe dancing, and Hollywood starlets slinking by in slinky gowns, it was like the Star Wars bar.

There at the edge of the dance floor sits Candace Bergen watching in utter fascination as the greatest artist of the Tsimshians, Nathan Jackson, performs his raven dance.

There is Jeff Goldblum, not in Jurrasic Park or in The Big Chill, but in the buffet line with roast buffalo on his plate.

And there on the rotunda next to the dance floor with the totem pole carved specially for this night is a man dancing alone--a man who in an earlier turn of his life, he'd told me, had been a commercial fisherman in Alaska, and survived the sinking of a crab boat that plunged him into these exact cold northern waters now cut by the keel of the cruise ship "Crystal Harmony." He dances and dances with the passion and privacy of a man who was handed his life back--and his movements on the rotunda set the thunderbird totem pole to nodding in rhythm with him.

And, over along the wall, unabashedly standing on top of a chair to see out into this scene, is a white-bearded writer, on a ladder of life where he surely has never been--but up there writing, writing, into a pocket notebook, to tuck away that high moment inside the parentheses of fate.

I've always harkened to something Flannery O'Connor once said, about why she believed in the habit of sitting at her desk regularly even if the writing wasn't going well:

"If you don't sit there every day, the day it would come well, you won't be sitting there."

Let me take you briefly through this writerly process of creative sitting, using an example I know best, my own.

manuscript's working title, which was--well, I'm not even going to tell you; you'll have to pry it out of me in the question session if you really want to know.

Now, usually I am more a re-writer than a writer, tinkering through a lot of versions to hit the right one. But this one time--in only about an hour of writing--the long devotion of the mind to the fingers put this onto the page for me:

The eye starts to "listen," to register how the way a rancher cocks his hat says something about that man. The ear starts to "see" how ordinary language can be made to glow, as if breathing on an ember.

One of the oddest aspects of being a writer is having to sit around in your own head all the time, watching things flit through the twilight of the mind as you try to figure out--was that a bat that just flew past? Or the whispering ghost of Plato? You have to be able to stand your own company--and not need company from anybody else--long enough to figure out those patterns in the mental cave.

As I hope you will have begun to suspect by now, in tonight's fairly quick kaleidoscope of how this writer--at least--goes about his work, both fact and fancy inspire the words onto the printed page. Like twin magicians, each has some of the powers of the other.

There's the story that is told about Vladimir Nabokov when he was teaching his coure on the novel, at Cornell. (Incidentally, back there in the Eisenhower years, that course of Nabokov's was nicknamed "dirty lit"--Anna Karenina! Madame Bovary!)

Nabokov evidently was the Cyrillic-alphabet equivalent of a ring-tailed wonder in the classroom, one minute confiding to the class in heavy Russian accent, "By the way, Joyce made only one error in English usage in 'Ulysses,' the use of the word 'supine' when it should have been 'prone," and the next moment handing back, with evidently genuine horror, the test papers on which half the class blithely discussed somebody's "epidramatic" style when Nabokov all semester had actually been saying "epigrammatic."

And so comes the day when the author of "Lolita" and "Pale Fire" and "Speak, Memory" and other linguistically highly-honed books peers over the rims of his glasses at the class and cries out his summary of the writing life: "You must write with the passion of the scientist and the precision of the artist."

Pausing as if he hasn't heard himself quite right, Nabokov says in a baffled tone: "But wait--have I made a mistake? Don't I mean 'the passion of the artist and the precision of the scientist?'"

Then like the verbal acrobat he was, he gleefully completes his act: "No! I mean, you must write with the passion of the scientist and the precision of the artist."

I think, there--with a woman determined to soar in her work, to glide this blue planet with those royal birds--is as good a last chapter of tonight as any.

In my own voyaging over the world of words, I keep coming back to those three main elements I've cited, those three hearts of writing--

--The dance of the language.

--The home country we speak from.

--And the day-by-day push into unexplored white space.

It's that last blood-central urge that keeps writers a living species, I believe.

Those "little matters" that are the tools poets work with greatly interest me, because that's the shop I've always liked to hang around in. As a fiction writer, which I mostly am, I don't seem to have come out from under Gogol's **Overcoat,** where Turgenev said all short-story writers popped out of. I've never written a short story, in about a million published words now, and don't show any signs of doing so. Instead, I seem to be from under the cloak of prose's singing teachers--our betters, the poets.

The poetic urge caught up with me in an unexpected place--while I was working on a Ph.D. in history. What graduate school taught me, back there in the late '60s, was that I didn't want to be on a university faculty. I found myself freelancing magazine articles during grad school and I also began, to my surprise, writing poetry, which I had never even thought of attempting before.

My eight or nine published poems showed me that I lacked the poet's final skill, the one Yeats called closing a poem with the click of a well-made box. But still wanting to stretch the craft of writing toward the areas where it mysteriously starts to be art, I began working on what I later heard Norman Maclean call the poetry under the prose--in my case, a lyrical style, with what I call a poetry of the

vernacular in how my characters speak on the page. Whether it is the Depression crews "riding the tension spiders" of steelwork at Fort Peck Dam in my novel **Bucking the Sun,** or the handless bartender Lucas Barclay--in **Dancing at the Rascal Fair**-- hoisting his glass to the other America-comers of the homestead era by and fearlessly toasting in his Scotch burr, "Broth to the ill, stilts to the lame!"--I"ve tried to give my characters that touch of the poet that working people so often have.

I'll get back to this a little further into this talk, but let me move now the geography of the language--the "sense of place" that critics often cite, in those of us who grew up in the sagebrush and somehow turned out to be writers.

This is the second heart of writing, the home heart--the one of that matchless Robert Louis Stevenson stanza: "Home is the sailor, home from the sea, And the hunter home from the hill." One of the ways a writer comes home from his hills where life has taken him is a process I like to call seeing with the ear and hearing with the eye.

There are, I can report on the basis of a lot of research, places besides libraries where you can creatively sit. People here in the West have been known to go out to eat and drink, and I spend a lot of time simply following the sound of their voices into those places. It begins at breakfast, in Choteau, Montana, or Cortez, Colorado, or Baker City, Oregon, when the guys in

And now, in this run of hearts, we come to the last vital pulse on the page, the one I don't

When that self-same writer sits down for a couple of years to write a book, he has to do his best to make the mood of his language match the mood of his characters, or the mood of the situations they find themselves in. For the next six or eight minutes here,as a kind of finale in trying to tour you through the makings of books, I'm going to do a bit of show-and-tell. Tell you what I, as a professional writer, am trying to do in this stretch of writing, and then let you hear it.

This little scene--again, from my next novel, "Mountain Time" (think of this as the Ginger Rogers Theatre world premiere of it)--involves Mariah

I think quite a number of us out West are simply trying to do what writers have always done, and pay homage to our native place in our words. We're not the first to sit around inside our heads all the time and monkey away at that. James Joyce evidently didn't stop being an Irishman when he moved to
Paris--or we wouldn't have **Ulysses.** And I've always
liked Paul Horgan's saying whenever he'd get too tired
of always getting called a **South**western writer--

"Everybody is a regionalist," he wrote. "Tolstoy is a regionalist."

Back at the ranch at Yosnaya Polyana, I'm sure Tolstoy had his own uninvited ghosts to get past as he tried to write of his heartland. But those of us from the West of women homesteaders and male schoolmarms--the West of people who came to build rather than to gunsling, to work but to dance and laugh along with it--we've had to write our way past the Wisterns and then the Westerns--such stereotypes as "The Virginian" and those later heftier cohorts of his, Louis L'Amour and John Wayne.

Bear in mind that it was only yesterday, historically, when the cultural images of the West were those two guys, with a pound of belt buckle trying to hold up 25 extra pounds of gut. Something had to give way.

Blessedly, it has. In place of those Wisterns and Westerns, we have a number of recent books where, as the historian Richard Maxwell Brown puts it, "nemesis and tragedy, bitterness and beauty" and other "universals of human life" meet, out here in the sage and the section line roads and the windworn ranks of fenceposts.

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;** Teresa Jordan's **Riding the White Horse Home,** and Kim Barnes' remembrance of coming-of-age in a logging family on the Clearwater River of Idaho, **In the Wilderness.**

These "grassroots" works by born Westerners, Richard Maxwell Brown contends, constitute "a meeting ground of the literary talent and the social history of the West." So, I think that's where a lot of us are trying to get to, from those rural home "places" we've known ever since--as our literary godfather Wallace Stegner once put it--"our legs were long enough to reach the ground."

And it did, with a considerable artistic nudge from non-cowyboying, non-gunslinging Westerners. Instead of "bang bang bang bang," listen to this, from the late great Oregon poet, William Stafford, in his jackknife-sharp little poem, "Lake Chelan":

"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."

A long time ago, in that galaxy far away called Ireland, my wife Carol and I were being shown around Yeats country--so enthusiastically that mundane matters such as mealtimes never came into the picture.

Aw, never mind, the Irishwoman who was doing the relentless showing told us, it'd taste all the better when we did eat--"Hunger is good sauce," said she.

I believe that if a writer is lucky, he or she early on

gets afflicted with a hunger for detail and language.

In my own case, when I was still down there in the

vicinity of the elbow, a new experience--in Bill

Stafford's term, a new relevance in my life--

a kind of northern lights out loud, compared

to the rambled-through west that was my father--

began to speak to me.

It has brought me, among other places, here. And it had better take me, next, to an exit paragraph of these musings about makings:

For all of my love of the West, and my books mostly about the region and its people, I don't think of myself as a "Western" writer. To me, language--the substance on the page, that poetry under the prose--is the ultimate 'region', the true home, for a writer. Specific geographies, but galaxies of imaginative expression--we've seen them both exist in William Faulkner's postage stamp-size Yoknapatawpha County, in Ismail Kadare's "**Chronicle in Stone**" of a nowhere little Albanian city tossed back and forth with the dice of war, in Roddy Doyle's hilarious heartbreaking rough beasts of dialogue in his Barrytown trilogy of the Dublin slums, in Nadine Gordimer's fearlessly particularized stories from a land of "laws made of skin and hair", South Africa under the apartheid regime. If I have any creed that I wish you as readers, necessary accomplices in this flirtatious ceremony of reading and writing, will take with you from my pages, it'd be this belief of mine that writers of calibre--the ones I admire--can ground their work in specific land and lingo and yet be writing of that larger country: life.

And a last Hugoian crocodilean turn of thought:

That one, Richard Hugo used in perhaps the greatest poem we have about the mining towns, the ghost towns, that haunt our national past--his poem**, "Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg,"--**in that magnificently wild first stanza:

When I'm asked, at booksignings and readings, what my working habits are, I hardly know what to say except "pathological diligence."

I began as a journalist, and so don't believe in that malady called "writer's block"--I never did meet a newspaper or magazine editor who would say, "Oh, that's all right, we'll just run a blank space there where you can't think of anything to say." The point always is to get something down on paper: describe a character, make up dialogue, dig something out of your pocket notebook or PowerBook.

In my case, I write a given number of words a day on a manuscript, a given number of days a week, a given number of weeks a year. This varies from book to book--on novels such as **English Creek** it was a thousand words a day, on others it's been four hundred-- so that the job isn't a permanent assembly line.

Do I actually keep track of this daily output? You bet. I have a work calendar--just a plain one with plenty of white space for each day; it used to be given out by our fuel oil company, but now I have to go out and buy some kind of Yuppie variety--and I mark my total of pages on it each day and write the running total at the end of each week. I once read a sneering comment by some critic about Hemingway, to the effect that Hemingway was so insecure that he actually counted every word he wrote every day. And I thought to myself, "Hell, that's the **best** thing I've ever heard about Hemingway."

Try as writers will, however, to turn the process into a recipe, there are always the unwritten-down ingredients--the pinch of this, the sift of that. One that particularly intrigues me in literary hash-slinging, let us call the crocodile factor.