So, it all began there, 15 years ago, in the title section of _TODAY_ my first book. Tonight is actually a double celebration for me. Of

THIS HOUSE OF SKY being re-published in hardback—which pleases me so much that I almost forgive the publisher for not keeping hardback copies available all these years of the book's robust career with readers; almost.

And of finishing the manuscript of my next book, the sister book to THIS HOUSE OF SKY, to be called HEART EARTH. I'd like to read you a bit from both, because while they are different stories, different kinds of book, they both do dance along those brainwalls between memory and dream.

First, then, from THIS HOUSE OF SKY, the opening of the third chapter, called LADY—the beginning of my grandmother's story in the American West.
Sitting up in a railroad coach seat for a day, a night, and another day, Bessie Ringer is jostled westward in the springtime of 1914. The Mississippi River lay several hundreds of miles behind, vaulted by a slim bridge which had made her flick scared glances down to the water all the long way over. Minnesota had been crossed, and the Dakotas, where homesteads of an earlier generation of journeyers nested in fat patches of turned earth. Rivers new to her—the Little Missouri, the Powder, the Yellowstone—came looping widely beneath the roadbed, and now when the train made its wheezy stops in the middle of nowhere, the men who clomped aboard wore hats with swooping curled brims, and their women, she could not help
but notice, leathered from the sun and wind. Where they stepped from, the arc of prairie flung straight and empty to the horizon, nothing could be imagined which might rule their lives except that sun, that wind. By the time, then, that her train was pushing out of the townless distances of eastern
Montana, Bessie had come a world away from the pinched midwestern background she had been born into twenty years before. Come, what's more, for forever and with no regret ever said aloud. Her people were German stock, abrupt and gloomy as their family name—Glun. In the memories which stretched back along the rails to the farmstead life in central Wisconsin's cut-over pine country, that name mocked itself into queer rhyme. It had happened because school was caught whispering dismayed Bessie, and in her unhappiness one day whispered to the girl seated beside her. The teacher thundered it then. Picking up his pointer to threaten her, he brayed: Glun, Glun, don't have so much fun, or you'll have a swat of Jack Hickory's son! At home, life was no less startling and strict under her
burly mustached father: I always remember my pa so stern. I was always scared of him. Now train tracks, hour upon hour, where leaving always to the past, to the land falling away behind the West.

On Bessie's lap a daughter dozes in the train's cradling motion--my mother, Berneta, waking now and again to see the land flying and flying past her six-month-old eyes. She is plump and pretty, and with her full dark hair looks like a small jolly version of a much older girl. A version that would be, of Bessie herself not long before. On the wall by the age of me is a studio portrait of Bessie when she had reached sixteen or so, posed with the two Krebs sisters who were her best of friends. Out the oval window of photo, the sisters stare down
the camera and any lookers beyond it, mouths straight as Bible lines. You would not tease with this pair, nor dare their wrath without an open door behind you. They are iron and granite side by side, and are going to leave some bruises on the world. Beside them, Bessie's look is all the softer, the eyes more open and asking, her face wondering at the work instead of taking it on chin-first. She must have had so much to wonder at, raised as an apron-stringed girl, snugged all the more firmly into the family by the one lapse in her father's strictness. John Glun had brooded against a way of schooling which even for an instant could taunt a daughter of his, and after her third year, Bessie was not made to attend again. She spent the rest of her growing years entirely at home.
That upbringing of choring for her mother and edging past her father's temper left her unsure of herself, but guessing that the world must have something else to offer. So that's the how of it, she would say whenever some new turn of life had shown itself, and she seems about to say it now to the camera eye. It is, all in all, an offering glance for the world, of which she might yet have had a strong gleam four years later as she held her daughter and watched the western Montana mountains begin to stand high ahead of the train.

Alongside Bessie, the train window shadowing his face close in beside hers, sits Thomas Abraham Ringer. Housepainter, handyman, wiry Irishman with a hatchet nose and a chin like an axe—last and least, husband. All three Glun children flew
as quickly as they could from that narrow home, but Bessie went with one last disfavor from her father. He singled out for her this seldom-do-well Tom Ringer and bent her, at the age of 18, into marrying the man. *Gee gosh, a girl like I was who didn't know her own mind*—I done it because my pa said it was my way to get by in the world. Tom was twice her age, nearly as old as her father himself, and the one thing he had done exactly right in all his life until then had been not to take on a wife and a family. In utmost charity—and half of those who speak of Tom Ringer do give a rough affectionate forgiveness, while the other half call him a sour-minded reprobate—the knack of caring steadily for anyone beyond himself did not seem to be in this man. Alone, fussing a
floorboard into place or stroking a paintbrush peevishly along a ceiling, that sharp face could simply prod all into tidiness and spear away whatever of life he did not want to see or hear. But being married was nothing like being alone, and there came the consequence which Bessie declared in the shortest and angriest of her verdicts on this husband. Tom drank.

It made a dubious marriage worse. The temper tamped inside Tom which he seemed to need to propel himself through life would turn ugly when whiskey touched it. Darn his hide. He'd be going along perfectly fine, then there'd be a big blow-up. This, too: even when his wages didn't trickle away in saloons, they shrank and vanished some other way. All their married life, Tom and Bessie Ringer would live close to predicament.
The one feat of finance they ever managed was this train trip, uprooting themselves half a continent westward to where a relative had homesteaded—a blind jump to the strange high country of sage and silence.

At the town of Three Forks, they left the train. There the tilts of this new country suddenly tumbled three idling rivers into one another to broaden and go on, to go on and go on, to the headwaters of the Missouri, and in every direction around ranges of mountains hazed to a thin blue, as if behind smoke. Mountains and mountains and mountains, Bessie would remember. The promise of a housepainter job awaited Tom in this first town of the new life. But that job, or any other, wasn't to be had. What did present itself was the rumor of work at a small logging camp eastward in the
Crazy Mountains. See, Tom had been in the woods some back in Wisconsin. We went off up there near Porcupine Creek in the Crazies, and Tom cut in the timber until winter come. Then, into the teeth of the mountain weather, Tom and Bessie and their tiny daughter climbed higher into the to spend the winter cutting small trees for fence posts. Some thousands of feet higher than they had ever been in their Wisconsin lives, they set up a peaked photographer's tent in the dark pitch of forest, banked the outside walls with snow for warmth, fired up a long box stove which would be kept blazing all winter long, and whacked down timber from first light to last. No, it wasn't so bad of a winter. We got by good, there was lots of firewood.
Through that timberland and winter, isolated and snowbound, Bessie and Tom felled and unlimbed trees, then snaked the wood to a snow-packed skidway. She would clamber down the slope as Tom hitched their workhorse to the first pile of logs and looped the reins to the harness. The horse would plod down to her, the logs sledding long soft troughs behind in the snow. When she unhitched the load, the horse would turn and head itself back up the mountain for the next load of work. That pattern of trudge was much like what lay ahead for Bessie herself, for if I am to read beginnings in these lives which twine behind my own, my grandmother's knack for ploughing head-down through all hardship surely begins here at the very first of these lean Montana years.
Then the kid's dad—she banished him to that in later times, his name never crossing her tongue if she could help it—the kid's dad got us on at Moss Agate. The rancher ran a herd of cull milk cows there, and we milked all those cows and put up the hay on the place. We lived there, oh, a lot of years.

Moss Agate was a small ranch at the southern reach of the Smith River valley, on an empty flat furred with sage and a few hackles of brush along the south fork of the river, and walled in at every point of the horizon by buttes and mountains. The single vivid thing about the place lay in its name. The rock called moss agate is a daydreamer's stone, a smokey hardness with its trapped black shadow of fossil inside like a tree.
dancing to the wind or a sailing ship defying fog or whatever else you could imagine from it. Later, after my father had begun to court my mother, someone who saw him saddling for his weekly ride to Moss Agate asked if he was finding any prize specimens in the hills there. One, he grinned. She's about five feet tall, with black hair and blue eyes.

On that ranch where dreams were trapped in rock, Bessie and Tom milked cows year after year, toiled to keep the few sun-browned ranch buildings from yawning into collapse, and plodded out their marriage. There was a new child now every few years---three boys in a row. Each summer, Bessie held the latest baby in her lap as she drove a team of horses hitched to the sulky-seated hay rake. I wore bib overalls then in
haying time. But silly thing, I'd run and put a dress on if I seen anybody coming. Throughout the seasons, she rode horseback after strayed calves, fed hogs, raised chickens, gardened and canned, burned out the sage ticks which pincered onto the children, mucked out the tidal flow of manure-and-urine after the eternal cows. And all of it in a growing simmer against Tom.

I can see her, in those Moss Agate years, being made over from almost all that she had been before: toughening the salt of sweat going into her mind and heart. Even her body now defied the harsh life; the single luxury of that milking herd was dairy produce, and as her cooking feasted on the unending butter and cream, she broadened and squared. But it
Now, to HEART EARTH.

It is the spring of 1945, the last spring of World War Two, and the child on the train has become 31 years old, and the mother of me. A few quick pieces of backdrop you need--

--The reason my grandparents made that move to Montana was because of my mother's asthma. She led a vigorous, almost daring life when the asthma wasn't bothering her, but whenever an attack did hit, she had it terribly. This scene takes place just after my family had tried Arizona for a winter, to see how much that would help her.

--My grandmother by this time had left my grandfather, and is cooking on a ranch near the Crazy Mountains in Montana, for an old Norwegian widower, who is referred to here as "the Norskie."

--The section begins with a short line from one of my mother's letters to her sailor brother--my uncle Wally, who is on a destroyer off Okinawa at this point of the war. And my other uncle, Paul, is briefly mentioned--he's in the army in Australia. It's these letters to my uncle on the destroyer, that at last found their way to me a few years ago, which
made this new book possible. The only letters of my mother's I've ever had—giving a look at my family at its pivotal point just before THIS HOUSE OF SKY begins—and so it is these lines from her that have given me a way to imagine back into that time. This first "deliberate dream" from HEART EARTH:
Dear Wally—
Winona and I spent Saturday making formals and catching mice.
I can hear that day of mice and thread.

The needle of Winona’s portable sewing machine sings over the material to the treadlebeat of her foot, our kitchen table is gownned with the chiffon she is coaxing to behave into hem. This way and that and the other, she jigsaws the pattern pieces she and my mother have scissored out. My mother is no bigger than a minute in build and Winona minuter yet, so they are resorting to a lot in these prom dresses. The latest nomination has been ruffles.

“I think ruffles would go okay, Nonie, don’t you? Give us a little something to sashay?”

“What the hey, we’ll ruffle a bunch up and see,” pronounces Winona. Her voice is bigger than she is, deep, next thing to gruff. “If I can find my cussed ruffler.” The sewing machine treadle halts while Winona conducts a clinking search through her attachments box. “Did you have the radio on, Bernetta, the other day? I didn’t know a thing about it until the kiddos told me the next morning. I about dropped my teeth.”

“I wish to Halifax I hadn’t heard, but I did. I had it on while I was in here trying to scrub down that old—”

Where I am holed up behind the couch in the living
room, as usual overhearing for all I am worth, comes the
somersault snap of another mousetrap going off.

"My turn at the little devils?" Winona volunteers.
"I'll fling this one," says my mother, "you're doing so
good on the dresses."

"I thought Ringling has mice something fierce," Wi-
nona gives out with. "But cripes, this place!"

"We tried a cat, did I tell you?" An old marmalade
stray one, half its tail gone, whom my mother nonetheless
cooed kitten-kitten to. "He only lasted two days. Charlie
swears the mice ran the cat out of town."

Both women laugh, until I hear my mother putting
on overshoes to take the expired mouse out to the garbage
barrel, feel the wind make its presence all through the
house when she opens the back door. Blowy April, a
thousand and fifty miles north of our Arizona try. We
have reverted to Montana, pulling out of Wickenburg
at the end of March (Kind of anxious to get home, see
everybody, find out how I'm going to feel, figure out what we
are going to do this summer, my mother's last words to
Wally from the desert cabin) to climb back up the conti-
nent through Flagstaff and Kanab and Provo and Salt
Lake City and Pocatello and Dillon and Twin Bridges—
and after all that, we still are nowhere much. This rented
house on a side street in White Sulphur Springs is as
dreary as it is drafty, its only companionable feature the
mob of mice.

Busy busy busy, Winona's Singer goes again. I laze
in my own territory, the triangle cave of couchback and
room corner it angles across. My books, my trucks, my
tubby Ault, are cached in here with me out of the prevailing
weather. The wind steadily tries to pry out the nearest
windowpane. Seems as though it blows & storms all the
time, my mother has reported this polar Montana spring

to Wally, we’re having our March weather in April. We
are having gabstorms and earquakes, if I know anything
about it. Since Thursday I’ve nearly listened myself in-
side out. This is a job with work to it, this spying on
history. Who can tell what will distill next out of the
actual air, after Thursday afternoon when my mother had
her programs on, Ma Perkins or some such, I wasn’t
much listening until the news voice cut in: “We interrupt
this program to bring you a special bulletin . . .”

When the bulletin was over, I came out from behind
the couch on all fours, then stood up curious into another
age.

In the kitchen, stock-still, scrubbing brush still in her
hand where she had been slaving away at the rust stains
on the ancient sink drainboard, my mother stood staring
at the radio as though trying to see the words just said.

“Mama? When Daddy gets home, are we going to
wash the car in the creek?”

“I . . . I don’t think so, dear. President Roosevelt’s
funeral isn’t going to be here.”

Everything rattles on in the kitchen now, full days
later; the dressmaking, the chitchat, their medical opin-
ions on my father who, sore side or not, goes winging
out of the house every day to put in twelve hours in a
lambing shed (he really shouldn’t be working but then you
know Charlie), rosters of who’s home on leave from the
war and apt to be met up with at the prom (the White
Sulphur Springs high school spring formal amounts to a
community dance, as any dance in that lonely Big Belt-
edged country tends to), denunciations of this wintry
spring, you name it and the smart cookies in the kitchen
will do you a two-woman chorus of it. This peppy visit
from Winona amounts to a special bulletin itself. Cute yet industrious, Winona looks like a half-pint version of Rosie the Riveter except that, slang and gravelly in-this-for-the-duration voice and all, she is a schoolteacher. Winona I suppose I am a bit shy of, her firecracker energy, her sassy eyes. Kiddo, she calls me. But really, kiddo is a hundred times better than the excruciating Pinky which some of White Sulphur’s downtown denizens call me because of my red mop of hair, and in the right tone of voice I think it also makes an improvement over Ivan.

Now Winona is off on hats. She’s seen a zippy spring number in the Monkey Ward catalogue she is sure she could make for my mother. Living out of suitcases as we have been for the past half year my mother’s wardrobe can stand any first aid it can get, so the women talk headgear until the next mousetrap springs. This time Winona, insisting she wouldn’t want to get out of practice, takes a turn at disposing of the deceased mouse. Quick as she scoots back in from the garbage barrel, the conversation again becomes fabric and color and whether to veil or not, yet how much more than hat chat is going on.

Wally, you asked me my opinion of you and Winona.

“Going together” was the description for Wally and Winona, fine fudge of a phrase. Did it mean merely fooling around with one another while the good time lasted or drawing toward each other into inevitable destiny of matrimony? Evitable or in, that is the question for Wally out there on the Ault with an ocean of time to think. He has put in about a thousand days in the navy by now, and Winona even more in the teacherage at Ringling, and across such a space of young life maybe a
sag sets in. Her V-mail to him stays bright and kidding, but as she points out, there is only so much of yourself you can provide in 25 words or so.

Nonie has a good education . . .

Tricky duty for Berneta's pen here. Close chum to Winona, but also Wally's older and married sister being asked for advice.

My mother ends up doing them a tick-tack-toe for going beyond going together.

... is a good cook, a fair housekeeper, and a real seamstress as well as a good sport. She has her faults, so do we all. But I think she is the kind that if she loves a guy she'll stick with him through Hell & high water. So if you think you two can make a go of life together I'm certainly for you. But it is up to you to know what you feel in your heart.

Now she pauses over the factor that has winked between Wally and Winona since their first moment and is neither X nor O.

There is a few years difference in your age . . .

Quite the picture of a strapping young beau, the pre-war Wally amounted to. Abundant black teenage hair in the long-may-it-wave 1940s style; that ever likable face, ready for anything; muscular frame you could pick out clear across town when the town happened to be Ringling.

Decades later when he had become royally bellied, amid one of our trout excursions I came up on him dabbling over his tackle box as he sweetly crooned, "I just want a Paper Doll, to call my own . . . but those flirty-flirty guys, with their flirty-flirty eyes . . ."

Which way the flirting originally ran between Wally and Winona would be instructive to know, as it would clarify whose waiting out the war was the more serious: the durational teacher holding the fort at the Ringling
schoolhouse or the shipboard combatant seven years younger than her.

... but I can't see where that should make much differ-
ence. It hasn't in my marriage, I know, and there are more
years difference between us than there are you kids. If a
couple loves one another enough they can overcome most
anything that happens to come along.

Those four words were the only ones my mother
underlined, ever, in her entire set of letters to Wally.

September 6, 1990. Winona sits at the table in the
double-wide mobile home, thirty-five atrocious miles
from the nearest paved road. Her face is beyond wrin-
kled, rivuleted, but her eyes still are glamour girl. I
flinch at her chronic ripping cough, brutal echo of my
mother's lungs. I, though, must be even more alarming
to Winona: freckleface redheaded kiddo of forty-plus
years ago now silvering like a tree snag. If my mother's
face or Wally's reside anywhere beneath the gray storm-
mask of beard on me, Winona can't seem to find them.

Nonetheless I have been coffeeed, fed, welcomed in out
of a past, half a Montana away, where so much happened
and just as much didn't. Whichever of them first tapered
the enthusiasm for going together by V-mail, Wally and
Winona were over with before World War Two was.

Not long after, she traded in schoolteaching for a return
to this—a remote, almost reckless reach of land which
had been her parents', homesteaded by them, clung to
somehow through the Depression, through any number
of years even more arid than usual in this dry heart of the
state. Winona has been married, "since coming home," to
a wiry ranchman who patiently installed twelve miles of pipe to furnish reliable water to their cattle. Evidently a matched set in all ways, Winona and her husband both are pared down to life in this short-grass country, not a gram of excess on them or their ground. I figured I had seen every kind of Montana endurance, but the ranching done here by this weatherstroppped pair, now into their seventies, is very nearly Australian-outback in its austerity, a scant herd of cattle specked across twenty entire miles of rangeland. "It's all like this," Winona's husband gives up-and-down motions of his hand to show how their land stands on end in a welter of abrupt buttes and clay cliffs. Their mobile home he catshkin in by tractor, no trailer-truck able to fit around the hairpin curves of the dirt track into here.

From here Ringling seems as distant as Agincourt, but Wally even yet is a chancy topic for Winona. After the war, which is to say after they had gone separate paths to the altar, she met up with him only once, at a rodeo. Neither of them, she tells me carefully, had much to say to the other. Bare word did reach her of his death; but until now she has not heard of his second and third marriages, two wives out of three at his funeral.

After a long moment she says in a voice dry as dust: "Nice to be so loved."

Winona speaks more gladly of my mother and my father. She remembers regularly mailing cartons of cigarettes to Arizona for my father that war-rationed winter. My mother she paints without surprise as "a real good conversationalist"—then Winona breaks into another terrible coughing spasm, terribly reminiscent. When her breath returns, Winona suddenly switches memory to me
when I was a tyke falling in love with words: “You knew a lot of things. I remember you going through your books, telling me all the things in them.”

Smoke interrupts the afternoon. Winona’s husband catches the whiff first, she about one sniff later. I still don’t, having inherited the useless Ringer nose—substantial in every way except the capacity to smell—but when they pile out of the mobile home and start scanning upwind, I certainly do, too. A prairie fire would burn through this country until the moon was cooked. So I am relieved when Winona and her husband categorize the smoke as general, a haze from far-off forest fires.

Unincinerated one more time, the ranch couple take it for granted that I’ll follow back inside for further gab and caffeine, although I tag behind to keep peering around at this backland enterprise of theirs. In one direction the giant bald ridge which the road kinks down from, in two others sharp slopes eroded at the top into chopped-up formations of pale ash clay, and for a finale the distant river badlands which aren’t much worse than any other of the country crumpled all around here. Every horizon ruptured and stark. Liver-Eating Johnson supposedly lurched through this neck of the weeds, hunting Indians like they were partridges, in the previous mad century. Since then, this stretch of land has been occupied by people willing to give it the benefit of the doubt for forty or fifty years at a time. I struggle to imagine Wally here, superimpose him as the husband coping with this dryland dowry, so far away from his fishing holes and elk meadows. Never.

Back in the kitchen arsenal of 1945, my mother and Winona wage on against chiffon, mice, life and fate and budget.
“Before I forget. How much did the material set us back?”

“All of $4.63.”

“Then your time. Nonie, I have to give you something for all your sewing.”

“Like fun you will. You came all the way to Ringling and got me, so you're out the cost of your gas, let's just—"

“No, now, that's not the same as—" Another mortal whack of a mousetrap cuts off both voices.

“Hit 'im again, McGinty!” Winona whoops.

“Berneta, how in the world many is that, just since noon?”

“Twelve, this'll make. Keeps a person busy just keep-
ing count.” This must be the trap in the grocery cup-
board, from the sound of my mother's voice going
enclosed. “How many more jillion dozen do you sup-
pose—” Then she exclaims: "Nonie, talk about mouse
trappers, we're it! Ivan! Come see!”

Already I am out of my couch cave, scrambling in
from the living room. A lilac cloud of chiffon smother
half the kitchen, but over at the cupboard Winona is on
the floor, beside my mother peering in at their catch. I hop
up on a chair to see.

Double bull's-eye! Two dead mice in one trap, clamped
together in their permanent race for the bait of
cheese.

The victorious trappers are already at the next stage,
how to hang on to credit for their feat. “Charlie will
never believe we're in here catching them two at a time.”

“I know what. We'll just save the trap for him the
way it is, for proof.”

Winona and my mother ruthlessly giggle.

What can account for my mother's high spirits at being
back in that drafty mousy attic of Montana, the mile-up-
and-then-some Big Belt country where sour winter stayed
on past the spring dance?

I have stared holes into those mountains, those sage-
scruffed flats and bald Sixteen hills, trying to savvy their
hold on her and thus on us, particularly there in severe
1945. The village of Ringling, its railroad future already
behind it, was waning into whatever is less than a village.
The town of White Sulphur Springs had been handled
roughly by the Depression and the war, sagging ever
farther from its original dream of becoming a thermal-
spring resort. Out around the Smith River Valley, the
big ownerships still owned. Moss Agate was being borne
down by time to that sole leaning barn of today. All the
members of the Ringer family besides my mother were
struggling with the armed forces of Japan or with them-
selves. My father's arena, the Doig homestead and the
Wall Mountain rangeland, had fallen from family hands
long ago. Looked at clinically, there was not much to
come back to, after half a century of Doigs and Ringers
hurling themselves at those hills.

But earth and heart don't have much of a membrane
between them. Sometimes decided on grounds as elusive
as that single transposable $h$, this matter of siting our-
selves. Of a place mysteriously insisting itself into us.
The saying in our family for possessing plenty of some-
ting was that we had oceans of it, and in her final report
from the desert to her silent listener on the Ault, my
mother provided oceans of reasons why we were strug-
gling back north to precisely what we had abandoned.
One adios to Arizona she spoke was economic. So few
possibilities for people with a limited supply of money like
ourselves to get anywhere in any kind of business. She saw
corporate Phoenix and landvending Wickenburg plain:
Heart Earth

It might be better after the war but I think it will be worse.
And the contours of community were beckoning us. We
don't just like the idea of being way down here and all our
folks in Montana. Valid enough in itself, that need for
people and places, friends and family, with well-trodden
routes of behavior; home is where, when you gossip
there, any hearer knows the who what why.

Yet, yet... there was unwordable territory, too, in
our return to what my mother's letters as early as Phoenix
began to mention as home. Refusal to become new atom-
ized Americans, Sun Belt suburbanites, and instead going
back to Montana's season-cogged life is one thing. Going
back specifically to the roughcut Big Belts, the snakey
Sixteen country, the Smith River Valley where we Doigs
and Ringers could never quite dodge our own dust, all
that is quite another. My parents can only have made
such a choice from their bottommost natures, moods deep
and inscrutable as the keels of icebergs.

Ivan and I were over to see Mom.

My grandmother could hmpf like a member of roy-
alty. She is hmpfing in a major way to my mother,
although not at my mother; Grandma's range of fire
simply tends to take in the entire vicinity.

"At least I got letters from you, dear. I haven't heard
from Wallace and Paul in ages, darn their hides."

Like her, I can't imagine why a mere war keeps them
from writing. Here I am at not quite six, same age as
the war, and already I am matchless on this matter of
correspondence. Isn't my Christmas greeting of merry
dive-bombers here on Grandma's kitchen wall as though
it were by Michelangelo? How natural it comes,
hmpfproof artistry, when you are the first grandchild and so far the only.

My mother has been shrewd enough to bring me along handy at her side on this diplomatic mission to her own mother. This is not as supple a scene for her as exterminating with Winona. Our first after-Arizona visit to Grandma carries complications that extend back to the Moss Agate years, where this gray-haired much-done-to woman provided my mother with that peculiar girlhood, threadbare and coddled, and now there's a deal more to come which my mother dreads to have to tell.

Say this for the situation, my grandmother never takes long to sort out to you what's on her mind. Rapidfire, she deems our visit tardy (we have been back from Arizona whole weeks) and assigns the logical reason (my father). She is also snorty that this call of ours is going to be so abbreviated (overnight). Her points made, she proceeds to flood us in fresh-baked cinnamon rolls, oatmeal cookies, and all other kinds of doting.

Between pastry feasts we each furnish Grandma our versions of Arizona. Mine is heavier on cactus than my mother's. Both women are tanking up on coffee, and I am intrigued that Grandma cuts hers with cold water dipped from the sink bucket. I negotiate for a sip—a sip, Grandma's way of saying it—just to confirm that coffee in this diluted fashion is as awful as it figures to be. It is.

Maybe watered coffee sums up my grandmother's lot. Compared with even my parents, who were not exactly at the head of the caste parade, my grandmother's existence was just this side of the poorhouse. It had been that way from Moss Agate where, with at least a roof over their heads, the Ringers maybe had not been penniless
but there were plenty of times when they were dollarless. My grandmother ever after referred to any item that reminded her of Moss Agate as "old junk," which in fact was pretty much what the life there had consisted of—junk cows, a junk ranch. It wouldn't have taken much for society to consider the Ringer family itself junk. True, this grandmother of mine and even my grandfather had fended greatly better as community members than their economics suggested. My grandmother, only a third-grade education to her name, served on the school board so that the Moss Agate country could have a one-room school, and somehow raised the Ringer kids as though their home life wasn't as patchy as it was. My grandfather Tom at least toughed out their marriage until the four children were grown and gone, and brought in whatever he could from second jobs of carpentry and general craftwork. He, I now realize, may have been deviled by a different damage within him than he was ever ascribed; a house painter in his younger life, his mood and health may have fallen prey to the lead used in paint at the time. By whatever shaping, to the end of their separate existences my grandparents, Tom Ringer choring on ranches, Bessie Ringer cooking on ranches, perpetually shifted around under mid-Montana's mountain horizon but could never rise.

Now that she had left him, she has taken shelter here in the Shields River country in another lopsided situation, as cook for a Norwegian widower. Living like nun and monk as far as anybody can tell, the pair of them operate the old Norskie's tidy little outfit, part farm and part cow ranch, here under the long slopes on the west side of the Crazy Mountains. I would bet hard money that the old Norskie never saw fit to break his creamy silence and say
so, but the place could not have been run without my
indefatigable grandmother: she even did the plowing,
with a team of horses. My father or any other veteran
ranchman would have shouldered labor like this only on
shares. For doing much the same work, and the cooking
and housekeeping besides, she eked out a wage from
month to month and beyond that she literally had noth-
ing—what we call benefits were nowhere in the picture
because even Social Security then was regarded as too
great a paperwork burden on owners of farms and
ranches, and "agricultural employees" such as my grand-
mother were specifically excluded from its coverage.

Instead, she had what she was. The only thing about
my grandmother that ever went gray was her hair. All
else stayed brisk, immutable; the pleasant enough procla-
mation of face where the origin of my mother's and for
that matter mine is instantly read, the body of German
sturdiness. The hands and arms of Bessie Ringer were
scarred from every kind of barbwire and yet there she
sat hooking away at the most intricate of crochetwork,
snowflaking the rough rooms of her existence with doily
upon doily. After a schooling that petered out so early,
she couldn't much more than handle 1 and 2 for you, but
anything you could hum she could sit down to a piano
and faithfully play. "The baby is born and his name is
Dennis," she would rattle off as her proverb of complet-
ing anything, fingerlace or ear-taught tune or the perpet-
ual twice a day milking of cows in that bent-pail life at
Moss Agate. There at Moss Agate too, she had been the
parent who somewhere always found time to pull on
boxing gloves when her sons went through a pugilism
phase. And to pamper an asthmatic daughter. Situations
she hadn't the foggiest notion of how to handle, she
handled. The chicken chapter: softhearted as she was
toward all creatures except the human, she could never
bear to chop the head off a chicken. Early in her Montana
life, when my mother was still a toddler, there came a
Sunday when chicken was the only available meal and
nobody else was around to do the chopping. My grand-
mother caught the chicken, tied its legs, put it in the
baby buggy with my mother, and trundled down the road
a couple of miles to the next ranch to have a neighbor do
the neck deed.

Grandma’s straight-ahead set of mind came useful for
her here in the Norskie situation, too. On no known
social scale ought she have been able to fit into the stolid
local women’s club—merely an itinerant cook, and be-

dyond that, married to somebody she wasn’t living with
but who definitely was not the Norwegian widower she
was under the same roof with—but she impressed those
farm wives and ranchwomen with her own stiff-backed
rectitude and was brought in. Annually the women drew
“secret pal” names out of a hat and each sent whomever
they drew little surprise gifts and cards throughout the
year. My grandmother undoubtedly was the only peasant
plow-woman who was also a secret pal, but she had a
saying ready for the way life revealed its surprises, too.
“So that’s the how of it.”

So that was the how of her, my stormfront grand-
mother. Wide-grained and with hard knots of stubborn-
ness, risome and quick to judge and long to hold a
grudge. And in the turbulent time to come, I learned to
love her for even the magnificence of her shortcomings.

Back there in our visit it is Grandma, you can bet your
boots, who comes out with it about my grandfather. Have
we seen the old-good-for-nothing?
Dreadfully, we have. Tom Ringer is living in one room of a shanty, the rest of which is used as a chick- enhouse. The alfalfa chaff scratched up by the baby chicks got him down, my mother has passed the word to Wally from our visit; one of those short-winded spells... a bad one.

Gnarled and bent as a Knockadoon walking stick, my grandfather; my grandmother, on the other hand, so sturdy she could carry the rest of us over the Crazy Mountains on her back.

My mother, the product of the extremes, tries to give an unfavorable report.

"Hmph," she receives for her trouble. "I just wish to gosh he'd behaved himself when we were—"

By now I pretty well know where Grandma is going with this, and out I whip to explore the Norskie country.

As ever, Grandma has a panting overfed dog around like an old lodger. Shep instantly wants to go helling off with me in every direction at once. Him aside, though, this ranch is disappointingly kempt and quiet. No suicide slope for me to roar down as in my Faulkner Creek daredevilry days. Next I thrash around in vain for the shop, as a blacksmithery is called on a ranch; no alluring rusty nests of iron, no forge with a fanwheel to turn faster and faster into a wondrous straining screech. Nor, can you believe, is there even a bunkhouse, let alone a mussy crew of ranch hands with names like Zoot and Diamond Tony; the Norskie's son from up the creek and the Norskie—and Grandma—handle the calving by themselves.

I have been shortchanged. I know to the snick of his jackknife being opened what my father is doing exactly now, fifty miles north of here in his lambing shed king- dom, jacketing a bum lamb with the hide of a dead one.
and enforcing the suspicious ewe to adopt the newcomer:

"That's right, ye old sister, this is your new one. Get under there, Jakey, and get yourself a meal before she catches on to you." I am missing out on that, for this becalmed mission to Grandma?

Gone goofy with the thrill of having someone to romp with, Shep keeps giving me baths with his old tongue.

Dog slobber is limited fun. I evacuate from the ranch yard to the kitchen congress again.

"Sit you down, dear," Grandma welcomes me back to the table as if the sun rises and sets in me, and then their talk buzzes on. At last my mother and her mother have got going on the populace beyond the family. Other people's doings, blessed relief. I nibble the one-more-cookie-but-that's-all which my mother decrees to me while news of this one and that is ruthlessly swapped. So and so is just as much of a scatterbrain as ever and of course thinks she was terribly abused in the service. Had to work a little, something she isn't used to. Thus and such are going to have an increase in the family. Have to feel sorry for any kid with them as parents.

Never more than a sentence away in any of their gossip is the war. The war has consumed Montana. Not in the roaring geared-up military factory fashion of Arizona, but in a kind of mortal evaporation. Young men, and no few women, have been gone for years and in their place the ghostly clink of dogtags from the charnel corners of the world; striplings who have eaten plateloads at the ranch tables of my grandmother and square-danced with my mother and pranced me on a knee are wasting away in prisoner-of-war camps in Germany, have perished in the Bataan death march, been wounded at Palau, fought in the Aleutians and the Marianas and Normandy.
My ears all but turn inside out when Grandma frets to my mother about Wally, where his ship might be, what's happening there in the Pacific. She is mighty right to do so.

Logbook of the Ault, May 11, 1945:

1010 SIGHTED ENEMY PLANE (ZEKE) WHICH CAME OUT OF LOW CLOUD ASTERN AND DIVED INTO THE AFTER FLIGHT DECK OF USS BUNKER HILL. OBSERVED ANOTHER ENEMY PLANE TO COME FROM ASTERN. OPENED FIRE. PLANE CRASHED INTO BUNKER HILL FLIGHT DECK AMID- SHIPS. MANEUVERING AT EMERGENCY TURNS AND SPEEDS. BUNKER HILL WAS BURNING FURIOUSLY.

1023 OBSERVED TWO ENEMY PLANES SHOT DOWN IN DOGFIGHT. A THIRD BEGAN A RUN IN TOWARDS FORMA- TION AT LOW ALTITUDE WITH A FRIENDLY FIGHTER ON HIS TAIL. OPENED FIRE WITH ALL GUNS AS PLANE PASSED STARBOARD QUARTER . . . PLANE ATTEMPTED TO MAKE SUICIDE DIVE ON THIS VESSEL AND WAS SHOT DOWN BY THIS SHIP, FALLING CLOSE ABOARD THE PORT QUARTER.

And only days ago, the war ate down into my own age bracket. This had happened a block or so away from us in White Sulphur, during a collection drive of waste paper for the war effort. Schoolchildren darting from house to house, carrying the scrap to the truck, hopping onto the truckbed to ride to the next houses, the truck driver thinking everyone was aboard and starting ahead: crushing under the rear wheels his own seven-year-old son.
Heart Earth

Such a death of a child, even these life-calloused Ringer women do not talk over. What happened to that boy has been my interior topic, the imagining of how the wheels couldn't/wouldn't have made their fatal claim if it had been me. The not-quite-six-year-old's dream insulation from the world, quite convinced I am deathproof.

Out of nowhere, which is to say everywhere, I abruptly am hearing:

"...afraid you'd gone to old Arizona for good," my grandmother to my mother. My mother back to her, "Charlie figured—we figured we had to give it a try there."

Grandma manages not to say anything to that, but her silence about my father is as starchy as her apron.

I did not know so until the letters, but the vendetta between my father and my grandmother was already raging. The message inevitably has gone out to Wally from Grandma: Charlie doesn't have much to say to me but I'm used to that now. All the later years of my growing up, trying to solve the world of consequences brought on by this pernicious feud, I hunted wildly in the two of them for the reason. Did our Arizona trip itself set things off, Bessie Ringer with two sons gone to the war simply finding it the last straw that my mother was moving so far away? My grandmother had endured beyond other last straws. No, my in-the-dark guess was that the mysterious matter of family itself, its specific weight and gravity, brought on their wrangle. In the Faulkner Creek ranch years, there had chronically been a cluster of Ringers around, one or two and often all three of my mother's brothers working seasonal jobs for my father, and Grandma visiting every instant she could pry loose from the Norskie's chores. I figured my father then and there...
wore out on in-laws. But to my grandmother, after Moss
Agate—because of Moss Agate?—family was the true
tribe, she and the four kids bound together forever by
having survived the utmost that my grandfather and the
cow ghetto could bring down on them. If a Doig clan
buckaroo married into the family, then he had simply
been lucky enough to gain himself some family, by her
notion of it.

So, the motives I found in those factions that I grew
up between still howl true. As far as they go. What I was
too near to my father and my grandmother to see was
their greater ground of dispute, beyond a winter of veer
to Arizona, beyond the ornery jousts of being in-laws.
Their deadly tussle was over my mother.

"... Not another cookie. Honest to Eleanor, Mom,
you'll have him so spoiled ...
"... Growing boy needs a little something to grow
on, don't you, Ivan, yes ..."

All said and done, although for an iron eon yet it would
not be, the contest of spite between my grandmother and
my father was about treatment of my mother. Nothing
to do with medical terms, nor in any physical or even
emotional sense; one thing neither could ever accuse the
other of was lack of pure devotion to the girl and woman
Berneta. Call it the geography of risk, of how best to
situate my mother. My grandmother desperately wished
that my parents (my father) would simply choose some-
place in Montana—right about across the road from her
would be ideal—and hunker in there at whatever the job
happened to be and hope for the best. Surely-for-gosh-
sakes it couldn't be good for Berneta to be living here,
there, and everywhere, could it? To my father, just as
desperately trying out footings until one felt secure for
us, the worse risk was to sink so economically low we
couldn't afford my mother's medical costs and whatever
ever might help her. He saw permanent ranch wagework
as more of the mire of Moss Agate for her, and surely-
to-Jesus-H.-Christ that can't be the best anybody can do,
can it?
"... sure awful glad, dear, to have you back where"
"...
"... couldn't tell beforehand how Phoenix . . ."
Now comes the moment my mother has been bracing
toward ever since we arrived on this visit. My grand-
mother wants to know where next; where my mother and
my father and I will spend the summer.
"Gee gosh, Berneta!" Grandma lets out when told,
which from her is high-octane blue language. "I dread
to think of you out there!"
"We don't know for absolute sure we're going," is
resorted to by my mother the daughter. "Maybe some-
thing closer will turn up."
"You just get back from old Arizona and then you're
gone to out there." It is the mark of my grandmother
that she can blurt this and yet not have it scald out as
complaint or blame or pain or plea, but simply her
thought of the moment. The headturn of her endurance
toward what needed to be faced next.
I help myself to the cookie plate, in child's sly wisdom
that another oatmeal cookie or two won't even weigh in
the scale of what's occurring around me just now. My
mother is busy telling my grandmother whatever good
sides she can of our next notional move. My grandmother
would dearly like to be reassured but, with a catch in her
throat, at last can't help but sound her worst warning:
"You be careful with yourself, dear."
To that my mother utters nothing, for answer is none.
If careful could make a great enough difference in the
chokehold in her lungs, then that most enormous leap of
care, my father's uprooting of us to the lenient altitude
and climate of Arizona, ought to have done it. What
Berneta Ringer, now Berneta Doig, has grasped out of
the discard of her Moss Agate girlhood is the conviction
that she all too easily could careful herself into being an
invalid; that the triple pillows of asthma could coax away
her days as well as her nights if she didn't adamantly
stay upright on the ground, heart-chosen ground. If this
constituted reckless, this seemed what she still wanted to
be.

"Careful as I can be, Mom," she sizes it down for my
grandmother. "Anyway, we'll write," she announces as
if letters will be the reward packets for our vanishing
over one more horizon. Suddenly my mother gathers me
away from the cookie plate in a big tickling hug, laugh-
ing, holding hard to me.

"Ivan and I will write you, won't we, kiddo."