

WAMI/5

7

X Aug 10

For better or worse, then,

~~So~~, there is in me this <sup>first</sup> sense of place--an awareness of that homestead,

that Doig place, as my family's first footprint in America--and that though it leads away from that snow-catching basin high in the Big Belt mountains, we've been busy ~~xxx~~ ever since with words and stories of it. (skip to p. 17)

12 min

(pause)

Another

~~A second~~ sense of place, this one from my own growing-up years in the West, ~~Montana~~ ~~set~~

rather than my family's. Which place is mine? Any of you who have worked on a ranch or farm crew may recognize this one. The first day on the job, the first meal you go to there, breakfast most likely, you are fifteen or sixteen or seventeen, plenty big enough to hire out to pile bales <sup>of hay</sup> ~~or pick rock or summer fallow~~, but awfully young socially, and you troop in with the rest of the crew, who begin seating themselves along the twenty-foot table, and you stand there

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(8)

ans  
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to a certain plate and set of utensils,  
 with your face hanging out, until the book or the boss's wife finally points  
 and says, "Why don't you take that place, there?" *you go ahead and sit down,*  
 the summer, unless somebody gets thirsty and quits, *his job* and you are moved up into *his* ~~that~~  
 place. The places of course get more and more permanent toward the head of the table.  
 The ~~spot's~~ *cook's* place, the choreboy's place--you would have to go to the Holy Land to find  
 more sacred ~~places~~ *spots* than those.

And then came the years when I was twenty and twenty-one, and coming home from  
 college to a ranch where I had a different place at the table every time. My father  
 and my grandmother were hired hands on that ranch--my grandmother was the cook, they  
 lived in half of the cookhouse--and so I would come to stay with them between  
 quarters at college, and work there in the summers. I never liked that ranch,  
~~didn't like the way it was run,~~ didn't like being around purplebred cattle that

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(9)

Hans  
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were worth more than my father and grandmother and I were being paid in a year, didn't even like that part of Montana after having lived my high school years <sup>up</sup> in ~~the Dupuyer and Browning country, farther north.~~ <sup>the</sup> better part. And as a summer hand there I was a bit of a perplexity. Whenever we were rained out of haying, for instance, I'd head on into the cookhouse and read a book, instead of standing around in ~~the machine~~ <sup>the machine shop</sup> watching it rain. <sup>I'd seen rain before.</sup> But the rancher put up with me, for the sake of my father and grandmother, and he granted that I did have enough common sense to be able to pile bales of hay.

Through all this, <sup>e</sup> ~~the~~ visits and the summer jobs, I was pretty much a floater at meal times. It was a kind of a hectic ranch, there seldom were the same number of people at any two meals--the rancher himself ate breakfast with us, maybe he and his wife would come down from the big house for supper or dinner and maybe they wouldn't, there might be truck drivers or cattle buyers or mechanics on hand.

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Ac Am 5

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And so it helped my grandmother to cope with all this by me fitting in at the table wherever there was a place left, after everybody else got sat. I didn't mind--I'd been to college, I knew what the word "peripatetic" meant. And I found it kind of interesting, to have so many different <sup>locations</sup> ~~places~~ at that table--to be ~~placed~~ <sup>switched around</sup> at random, that way. Wondering before each meal, which would be my place?

Then I was twenty-two, home from Northwestern University with my master's degree in journalism, with about a month to spend before going into six months' active duty in the Air Force. My folks were still working at that ranch, so there I lit once again, and this time there was a field of oats to bind. I was given the job of sitting ~~on~~ the binder and tripping a lever, to make the bundles fall in a decent row--the rancher himself was driving the tractor pulling the binder.

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And at one of the first mealtimes, somebody said to me, "Well, you're doing pretty good on the binder there with that master's degree of yours--maybe if you get a Ph.D., you can get to drive the tractor." At the time, I laughed with everybody else. But I know now what was happening, in those mealtimes at that ranch, with the constant question--which place is mine? I did get a Ph.D.--but I did not go back and ask to drive that tractor. Those places among the hired hands at that table, or at its equivalent, the desks of newspaper and magazine offices where I briefly held my later jobs--none of them were mine, or ever going to be, if I could possibly find any way to be on my own in life. To be, that is, the kind of strange economic creature a writer such as I am has to be--self-employed. <sup>or</sup> ~~More aptly~~, as a friend who has watched me at this so-called career of writing for almost twenty years <sup>more aptly</sup> puts it, self-unemployed.

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check the time;  
cut to 22?

(17)

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Now to the third and last sense of place I'm aware of in myself.

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 <sup>myself</sup> have to resort to often, "I remember your face but I can't place you."

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.

of my work, of writing. →  
This is the carpentry part, let me try to show how I built a town, for my novel which will be published this fall, English Creek.

The time of the novel is the late 1930's. My narrator is fourteen years old in the summer this took tells about, but it happens to be <sup>the</sup> a summer ~~before~~ I myself

①

~~I come from a place.~~ I originate, as an American, from a place in a specific Montana sense of the word--place, meaning an abandoned homestead. Small ranch or farm, either one, but abandoned, given up on, because of the <sup>killing</sup> winter of 1919 or the bank failures that rippled through Montana in the early 1920's or the Depression, or death or disgust or any other of a hundred reasons.

I tried to explain this locally prevalent use of <sup>the word</sup> place in <sup>a</sup> ~~this~~ passage of

<sup>This</sup> House of Sky:

"By the time I was a boy and Dad was trying in his own right to put together a life again, the doubt and defeat in the valley's history had tamped down into a single word. Anyone of Dad's generation always talked of a piece of land where some worn-out family eventually had lost to weather or market prices not as a farm or a ranch or even a homestead, but as a place. All those empty little clearings which ghosted that sage countryside--just the McLoughlin place there by that butte, the Vinton place over this ridge, ~~the Kuhnes place~~, the Catlin place, ~~the Winters place~~, the McReynolds place, all the tens of dozens of sites where families lit in <sup>Smith River</sup> the valley or its rimming foothills, couldn't hold on, and drifted off.

3

All of them epitaphed with that barest of words, place." (same) →

~~My hunch is~~ that I was invited here today, as I've been invited to other occasions where "a sense of place" is up on the marquee in brightest lights, largely because of my awareness of that kind of place in my background and in the lives of the people I've written about. The literature of place, I believe the notion is, about some of us who live at this end of the country and write about it. A little further along here, I do want to give that notion a kick in the shins with a frozen overshoe. But first, let me just point out that there are other senses of place than the merely geographic. A bunch of them.

The word place has so many meanings it takes up about three and a half pages in the Oxford English Dictionary--and in my own American Heritage dictionary that I instantly retreated to, thirteen different definitions of place as a noun, twelve usages as a verb. A word that sprawls all over the place--which a phrase I didn't find anywhere amid all those definitions.

So, yes, I have my own senses of place, as a writer with a Montana upbringing and whose books thus far are boundaried by Sitka and the North Dakota<sup>state</sup> line. Let me try to bring out three of them, and to think out loud at you about how they seem to affect me and my work.

The first of these is, indeed, my sense of that place where I come from.

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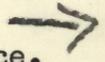
(4)

\* Am 5 /  
WAMI / 5

~~to All of them epitaphed with that barest of words, place."~~



The Doig place, in the Big Belt Mountains between Helena and Bozeman, is where my Scottish grandparents seeded <sup>our</sup> ~~this~~ family into America. My father and four of his five brothers, and his sister, all were born on that homestead--the last of them in 1910--and being careful, slow-marrying Scots, most of them were around ~~the place~~ <sup>there</sup>, off and on, through the late 1920's and <sup>even</sup> on into the 1930's.

Part of my own boyhood on ranches was within a few miles of that original Doig ~~place~~ <sup>homestead</sup>. So, in my growing up, what history the family had was mostly of that place. 

By now, nobody has lived there for 40 years or more--yet it perseveres in ~~the~~ <sup>the Doigs</sup> ~~the film-makers~~ <sup>Ferris</sup> ~~When Annick Smith and Beth Chadwick were looking for a place to film Heartland,~~ <sup>somewhere their movie of a woman homesteader</sup>

~~which I hope you'll all take the chance to see tomorrow night,~~ they phoned me

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in Seattle and asked if I thought the Doig place would be suitable. I told them I didn't know--the house was still standing, but the ~~place was~~ <sup>site is</sup> awful damn remote <sup>and high</sup> and winterish, and they were calling late in the year--but if they wanted to take a look, they should get in touch with my Dad's cousin, Walter Doig, who I knew still went fishing back in there. They did, and ~~Walter tried to take Annick~~ <sup>Walter tried to take Annick</sup> and Beth in there, but had to give up when their four-wheel-drive started bulldozing snow over the top of its radiator. A ~~place~~ <sup>homestead (Luluville) near</sup> <sup>Montana,</sup> ~~near Harlowtown~~ was chosen instead <sup>the movie</sup> for Heartland--the Doig place not for the first time missed its date with destiny--but as Beth ~~Chadwick~~ <sup>Ferris</sup> wrote me in a Christmas card, "I want to thank you for leading us to Walter Doig, who although he couldn't show us the old homestead, was full of wonderful words and stories, some of which I couldn't ~~not~~ <sup>resist</sup> sticking in the script."

A lot of my own words, about 150,000 of them, ended up going into a story of Montana homesteaders--the novel of mine which was published last fall, called Dancing at the Rascal Fair. You're entitled to be thinking right now, Well, sure, the guy's aware of his family's homestead background, figures he ought to write about homesteads, you bet he's going to. But I'm here to tell you, there was nothing sure about <sup>that</sup> ~~it~~. True, I had some notion of writing something about homesteads from early on in my career of making books--I know I mulled the idea at about the time I was finishing up either House of Sky or Winter Brothers. But I think it's not just incidental that my first two novels, The Sea Runners and English Creek, challenging as they were, were done before I could make myself face the writing of a homestead book. Mostly, it was dread of the research. As the historian Richard Roeder has pointed out, more land was homesteaded in Montana than in

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any other state--some 30 million acres, which in essence is a quilt of 160-acre patches equalling the size of Pennsylvania--much of it in a single population-doubling burst, around the time of World War I. The historical material, as best I could gauge it, remains in the same individuated multiplicity as those homesteads, in the form of <sup>some</sup> reminiscences and the original paperwork from when people filed their claims on the land.

Then too, for <sup>a</sup> ~~the~~ novelist there's the consideration that whatever the stories hidden in that paper forest of homesteading were revealed to be, they likely were to be melancholy or worse. Although the setting of Dancing at the Rascal Fair is in northern Montana, around Dupuyer, rather than my own family's chosen acres southeast of Helena, and the residents of the fictional valley I call Scotch Heaven

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are not my own forebears, the historical 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."

I recite all this, a bit of the dark side of how literary decisions get made, because I think an audience such as this one should be aware that a writer's familiarity with a topic doesn't automatically make it attractive to him. It may instead be <sup>e</sup>daunting. Daunting, but we hope, not defeating. Rascal Fair certainly has proved to be worth the perseverance and gritted teeth I spent on it, as it has sold more than twice as many hardback copies than any other book I've written, and the paperback edition this fall is getting the kind of push from the publisher than ~~the~~ the others never had.

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, a dozen years ago, to write something I called my Montana book, which turned out to be This House of Sky.

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The craft of it, I hope. I'm the first to admit I don't always know what I'm doing, but here are at least a few instances of what I think I'm up to, in these books of mine.

Every once in a while I've been gently chided by academic reviewers about the amount of history that ~~comes~~ keeps creeping into my novels. Interestingly, those reviewers I think invariably have been English professors--the history profs don't seem to mind it that much. Well, my history habit is even more serious than those reviewers thought, because it's deliberate. Although I've been writing fiction, in *The Sea Runners* and now in this Montana trilogy, I do want my characters' lives to respond to what might be called the historical laws of gravity. A quick example would be that one of the turns of plot in *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* involves ~~the~~ the influenza epidemic at the time of World War <sup>O</sup>ne.

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The historians Pierce Mullen and Michael Nelson, in studying Montana's experience with the flu epidemic of 1918 and 1919, found that Montana ranked as one of the four hardest hit states in its rate of infection, and that evidently about one per cent of Montana's population died in that epidemic--an approximate five thousand fatalities. That's a rate of death comparable, say, as if AIDS already had killed 2½ million people in this nation. I felt I had to try to portray, from sources of the time, what the flu epidemic seemed like to my created characters:

(this passage from  
Dancing at the  
Rascal Fair)

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You couldn't turn around without hearing of someone having lost an uncle in Chicago, a cousin in Butte, a sister on a homestead east of Conrad. Distant deaths were one thing. News of catastrophe almost next door was quite another. At a homestead on the prairie between Gros Ventre and Valier a Belgian family of six was found, the mother and four children dead in their beds, the father dead on the floor of the barn where he had tried to saddle a horse and go for help.

People were resorting to whatever they could think of against the epidemic. Out on the bare windy benchlands, 'steader families were sleeping in their dirt cellars, if they were lucky enough to have one, in hope of keeping warmer than they could in their drafty shacks. Mavis and George Frew became Bernarr Mcfadden believers, drinking hot water and forcing themselves into activity whenever they felt the least chill coming on. Others said onion syrup was the only influenza remedy. Mustard plasters, said others. Whiskey, said others. Asafetida sacks appeared at the necks of my schoolchildren that fall. When a newspaper story said masks must be worn to keep from breathing flu germs, the Gros Ventre mercantile sold out of gauze by noon of that day. The next newspaper story said masks were useless because a microbe could pass through gauze as easily as a mouse going through a barn door.

History there brought me to the topic of plot, and because plot is always on my mind as a writer let me try to put it on yours. Nick O'Connell, in interviewing me for the Seattle Review and his eventual book of conversations with Northwest authors, At the Field's End, got me on record more loudly on plot than anyone else has so far.

To wit:

I don't believe you have to be goosing the reader with outlandish surprises all the time, the notion that fiction has to be hyped up—Ho! Here comes an axe murderer! Huh! Here's a Russian submarine! Jesus! Here's the killer comet from outer space! Life is vivid enough in itself. Look what happens to people as they go through their years. Everybody's got a story, everybody's got drama, good times and bad. There's a lot of intrinsic drama, and I think it cheapens fiction by having artificial sweetener in the plot all the time.

21A

If an ax is wielded anywhere in my work, I prefer to swing it in the metaphorical way Franza Kafka said writing should affect the reader: "A book must be an ice-ax to break the sea frozen inside us."

(same)

That's the end of that particular blast into Nick's tape recorder, but I very much do believe that literature ought to try to be a medium of emotions and sensibilities, rather than a display of horrific special effects. <sup>insert 2/A</sup> In the world of the people I'm writing about, <sup>then,</sup> there aren't constant axe murders but there are constant dramas, say, of children trying to find their way in the world. And so, in English Creek, part of the plot is whether a kid will choose to go to college, because it's my conviction that, in life, a decision such as that does matter. And thus in the novel it matters so severely to Alec McCaskill in his stubborn refusal and to his parents in their pained determination to steer him that it breaks the family--

leading to another turn of the plot which I think has the force of actuality behind it, the younger brother, the narrator Jick McCaskill, in his 15th year wondering, what has happened to ~~my~~ <sup>the</sup> family of my first 14 years?

In Dancing at the Rascal Fair, again no icky invaders wuffling down out of the black canyons of space, but a plot that I think has some drama of another sort to it--a person, in this case the narrator Angus McCaskill, perpetually facing the question, why am I in love with someone who doesn't love me as much?

These people of my books, now. And here I'll keep it to just the population of my fiction, as I think the people of House of Sky and Winter Brothers were treated as fully in those books as I'm capable of. In trying to place characters into a story, I deliberately tend to take a look at what they do for a living, their work. Of course, I'm not the first guy with pen and ink to have thought of this.

Ronald Blythe, who in *Akenfield* achieved high literature by catching the voices of villagers

in East Anglia, cites the power of Thomas Hardy whenever Hardy got down to describing worklife in the west of England. The chapter in *Far From the Madding Crowd* when the sheep-shearing takes place in a splendid four-hundred-year-old barn, asserts Blythe, "directs us towards a vision of fundamental labor that contains within it satisfactions that are usually searched for in poetry and religion. Scenes such as this are the permanent cliffs in his writing, stalwart headlands against which melodrama and suspense can fret and dash without any danger of their becoming merely sensational movement. They steady his story-telling and fill it with meditation." Then this: "In such episodes we are made to share in [Hardy's] strangely divided intelligence, on the one hand seeing life as the countryman himself sees it and, on the other, through a private imagination which depends upon certain basic everyday matters to fuel it for his flights."<sup>10</sup>

(quote from Blythe)

(from Blythe)

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A

~~Concurrent~~ Montana's basic everyday matters  
 — i.e., work—seem to me to be perpetual fuel  
 for a writer. James Welch's description of the  
 lackadaisical bale piler, 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. . . ." <sup>19</sup> Mildred Walker's terse and  
 eloquent scene of a family pausing for lunch in  
 the field during wheat harvest: "We stopped at  
 noon and ate by the combine that gave the only  
 shade in all that blazing sun. Mom had a ther-  
 mos of cold milk that tasted best of all. And then  
 we were back at it." <sup>20</sup> I like such instances of  
 characterization intelligently brought forth from  
 western task. (Truth be told, I like them better  
 than Hardy's Wessex efforts.) And they instruct  
 me, whenever I start to assemble a cast of  
 characters, to get out into the workaday world  
 and recruit some shepherders, ditch riders,  
 forest rangers, bartenders, hay hands . . . and

in his novel of  
 Reservation life,  
 Winter in the Blood

in her 1940's  
 novel Winter Wheat

and so on.

(20)

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and

I try, with all the craft in me, to make the minor characters of my books vivid. To make them behave as memorably in my pages as Laurence Olivier has said each actor in a play must contribute to the play as a whole--"the third spear carrier on the left should believe that the play is all about the third spear carrier on the left."

To give you a few quick small specifics, of how I try to place these minor characters into the reader's awareness and I hope his memory--it's often a matter of <sup>word</sup> carpentry such as the haying scene in English Creek, where, as each member of the haying crew arrives for the summer, he <sup>meets</sup> ~~greet~~s Jick McCaskill not with some general greeting such as "Howdy" or "How you doing?" but with some specific set of words common to the place where he's from--the mower man from Anaconda saying,

"How's she going, Jick?"--which I came across in a file of Anaconda smelter slang compiled in the 1930's under the WPA Federal Writers Project--and the bony old dump raker from Texas <sup>arrives</sup> saying, "How do, Jick"--derived from a bony old dump raker from Texas I once knew.

Or it can be a matter--again, from English Creek--of having the characters differ in <sup>how</sup> ~~the way~~ they say, just by way of elevated example <sup>here,</sup> ~~the~~ "sonofabitch." Some say it <sup>in English Creek</sup> with an "f" in the middle, some with a "v", some say the plural as "sonsabitches," some say it as "sonofabitches"--my idea here being to differentiate the speakers somewhat according to their nationality, Scottish, French-Canadian, or Missourian. All in all, I think there are five deliberately different spellings of ~~"sonofabitch"~~ <sup>it</sup>, ~~and~~ single or plural, in English Creek. I might add that

part of the literary carpenter's chore in achieving something like this, is having  
to go back through the whole ~~the~~ manuscript after <sup>an over-</sup> ~~A~~ scrupulous copyeditor  
standardized the spellings and restore the five different kinds of ~~"confabulations."~~

27.  
men.  
to  
here

I'm going to leave aside the major characters of my books now, because I think they do get their innings in ~~my~~ reviews and critical studies. But this matter of character is where I want to bark the shins of the notion of the literature of place.

At least

The theory behind such conferences  
seems to be

I have the impression, underscored by symposiums such as this one, that today's writing about the west of America is ~~sometimes thought of~~ as a focus on the land, rather than on people. Often the book titles themselves have seemed to say so: The Big Sky...Wolf Willow...Winds of Morning...A River Runs Through It. (Put them together right, you could make a kind of sagebrush haiku just out of these titles of western literature.) The critical notion, I suppose, is that the immensities of the <sup>American</sup> West, its extremes of landform and its powerful weather and the distances which flabbergast travelers from elsewhere ~~in this country~~—these immensities overwhelm the fact of the people thinly salt-and-peppered across the expanse.

size of population of Montana

— which are actually pretty puny in mensural compared to W in Asia  
— all the rest of the world, I dare say

14

"Place," in terms of landscape, backdrop of mountain and ~~of~~ plain and of hard weather, does figure large in the work of a lot of us. But I don't particularly think ~~it's~~ <sup>it has to be</sup> at the neglect of the people, the human stories, the characters who carry on their lives against the big bold landscapes of those books. →

~~Norman Maclean's~~ flyfishing brother of A River Runs 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. Elbridge Trask and Charlie Kehwa on the Clatsop plain in the middle of the last century, in Don Berry's fine novel Trask. Ken Kesey's Stamper family of loggers, never giving an inch. Jim Welch's men of the Montana reservations, Jim Loney and Myron Pretty Weasel and Lame Bull, and the nameless narrator of Winter in the Blood.

Ruth and Lucille and Sylvie, of Marilynne Robinson's haunting Housekeeping.  
Danny and Jack Kachiah of Craig Leslie's <sup>excellent</sup> Winterkill. I hope, maybe also on  
the list somewhere, Charlie Doig and Bessie Ringer of This House of Sky and some  
of my McCaskill generations in this Two Medicine trilogy--all of them characters  
of modern western literature who seem to have found a continuing life in the  
minds of readers.

*read to  
here*  
In short, a geographic sense of place is a flavorful ingredient in books  
such as these, but let's don't think it's the whole supper.

In my own writing, I know that I work hardest, longest, on language. The novelist Thomas Flanagan said it best: "Fiction lives by the energy of its prose." I hope I'm trying to practice what Flanagan preaches. Here is a paragraph, again from the hay field of English Creek, about the start of haying--the first day of stacking--in a Montana summer in the 1930's:

"So hay was being sent up, and as this first haystack and the day's temperature both began to rise, Wisdom Johnson--(the guy on the haystack)--Wisdom Johnson suffered. This too was part of haying: Wisdom sweating the commerce of Great Falls saloons out of himself. Soaking himself sober, lathering into the day's labor. We all knew by heart what the scene would be this initial morning, Wisdom lurching around up there atop the mound of hay as if he had a log chained to each leg. It was a little painful even to watch."

(19)

Well, cast your ear back over "soaking himself sober, lathering into the labor"--  
the so sounds echoing against each other, then the <sup>l-a</sup>~~la~~ of lathering and labor.  
Don't let me disillusion anybody about how writing flows straight from the writer's  
psyche onto the page, but those coincidences of sound on that page are not  
accidental. A little further along, "a log chained to each leg," again words  
deliberately trying to talk to each other as linguistic kin. There is, I hope,  
plenty of place in that paragraph--the hayfield under the hot sun--but it's meant  
to be the language that pulses in the reader's mind.

and "sober" and "labor" speaking  
to each other

And it seems to me that each book creates its own task of language, has its own requirements of putting words in to place, making them be what they ought to be. A writer can never know how exact his intentions are going to turn out, but I do find this diary entry to myself, in mid-January of 1975, after I'd spent half a day reworking the opening lines of This House of Sky yet another time: "It would be magnificent to do the entire book with this slow care, writing it all as highly charged as poetry." Then came Winter Brothers, in a similar language, I suppose, except that in that book about a pioneer diarist the entries are shorter, written in the form of my own winter's diary--evidently I heard somewhere, sometime, that form ought to fit content. Then The Sea Runners, set in the mid-19th century and told in a language of 19th-centuryish quirks.

Now this trio of Montana novels, English Creek, Dancing at the Rascal Fair and the one in the typewriter at the moment, each being done in the vernacular of different Montana generation, on the faith--choosing to spend eight years of my supposed prime of life on the language of this trilogy, it <sup>is a text to</sup> ~~must~~ be faith--that there is a poetry of everyday <sup>lingo</sup> ~~language~~. A homeland of language, <sup>#?</sup> as I think the poet Thomas McGrath has phrased it.

cut? I have thought considerably, across some years now of being asked to talk about what I do as a writer, ~~show~~ how to say what I'm trying to do with language. What comes to mind is something that happened several years ago when a Chinese delegation headed by Dung Shou Ping visited here. The Chinese came to look over Boeing, and once they'd seen the airliner assembly lines, they were scheduled

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to ride the hydrofoil which Boeing just then was testing in the waters of Puget Sound. The merge which that event represented seemed to me ~~as~~ complex and wondrous as ~~a Haida carving of some sort--~~Dung Shou Ping, a man of Mao Tse Tung's long march; Boeing, which has filled the skies of the world with airplanes; the two coming together, with television cameras in full attendance, on water out here in sight of where Captain Vancouver and young Lt. Puget anchored in 1792.

I wondered if I was the only one who thought this smacked of the fantastic-- of the interplay and giddy mix such as Northwest coastal Indian carvings have. Then the next day, in the Seattle Times--Brian Bassett drew an editorial cartoon commemorating it all. He showed the hydrofoil, poised to cut the waters of Puget Sound as 40 knots an hour; then a caption balloon of Chinese language--

beside it, the caption balloon <sup>ostensibly</sup> from Dung Shou Ping's interpreter, this one reading--  
 "Honorable Chairman say: Okay, turkey, let's see you make this baby dance."

If nothing else, the lure of language says something like that to me as a  
 writer--go ahead and dare, try it--see if you can make ~~that~~ <sup>this</sup> baby dance.

To finish this up in <sup>at least slightly</sup> ~~a bit more~~ scholarly fashion, let me cite somebody besides  
 myself and a cartoonist, and refer you to Russell Martin, who was the editor of the  
 anthology of current Western prose, a few years ago, wretchedly titled Writers of  
 the Purple Sage. Martin pointed out that what he called "native" writers--writers  
 born and raised in the neighborhoods of the West they write about--tend to have a  
 rich, elegaic quality to their prose; he thought it was more than coincidence that  
 the three Indian novelists in the anthology--N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko,

and James Welch--were successful poets as well as prose writers. Martin went on to say that other native-born types among Western writers--he specifically cited Norman Maclean, Bill Kittredge, and yours truly--share this attention to language:

*Martin says,*  
X

"Each of the native writers seems intent on creating a simple, lyric, and elegaic prose, a self-conscious writing that is meant to be heard while it tells its story." I can't speak for the other writers, but yeah, I figure I'm writing to be heard. (*I figure Shakespeare was, too.*)

Specific geographies, but galaxies of imaginative expression--we've seen both such places exist in William Faulkner's postage-stamp size Yoknapatawpha County, and in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's nowhere village of Macondo, dreaming in its Hundred Years of Solitude, *4 now in Tim Winton's home called Cloudstreet in Perth.*

Those are territories of inspiration to the rest of us, for it is my utter belief  
that writers of caliber can ground their work in specific land and <sup>language</sup> lingo and yet <sup>also</sup> be  
writing of that larger country, life.

(37 min.)

Word must have got around town about my technological abilities, huh?--this many of you, coming out tonight to watch me try to run a slide projector.

On the basis of past performances, I can tell you we've got about a fifty-fifty chance things are going to work okay here. Years ago, in Billings, I got it all set up so I could stop in the middle of a speech and play a few tape-recorded excerpts of people I'd interviewed while writing This House of Sky. Up there at the podium next to the tape recorder I could hear just dandy, and only afterward did I learn that none of the other four hundred people in the room could hear the stuff at all. That's the bad fifty.

What Richard Gercken and I hope is going to be the better omen, is that this talk, which eventually uses a slide projector, did work okay a few years ago

in Lewistown, when I did a version of this for the Montana Historical Society conference. Also, we rehearsed the bejesus out of it this afternoon.

So, the notion here is for me to describe, with the eventual help of a couple dozen slides, the creation of a fictional Montana town as I've been doing for the trilogy of novels I've been writing--English Crick, Dancing at the Rascal Fair, and the one still in the typewriter, which will take place out here during the state's centennial hoopla, next year. I'll try talk about the Montana-ness of this literary town, at least as I see it.

P. 24 follows →

My name for the place is GROVE on. (spell out Gros Ventre.) As you know, the name of an Indian tribe. And as the encyclopedia tries to tell me, the name is from the French and properly is something like <sup>ʀ</sup>g<sup>o</sup> VAHN treh. Right here, I think the Montana background in me begins to come out, and the characters in my books pronounce it GROVE on, in that Montana style of improving on the French which gives us the front-end-loaded pronunciations of Choteau, Havre, and Wibaux.

I knew the setting I wanted to use, the actual site of Dupuyer, where I lived during high school. But I wanted NOT to use Dupuyer itself. I'm writing fiction these days, the people are made up, as the saying goes, out of my head; so I wanted to make up a town--using Dupuyer's geography, mostly, and just its origin as an overnight stop for freight wagons heading for Canada--a town with a population of about a thousand. The title of this talk supposedly is "Welcome to Gros Ventre, popl 1001"--that excess person being me, the writer, the observer of this make-believe community. That population title also reflects the fact ~~not here tonight~~ ~~Actually I titled that before I knew that my wife Carol could be here today, so that~~ ~~population figure needs to have her added~~ ~~even though~~ the photos we're going to see ~~today~~ are Carol's, taken as we've wandered around northern Montana the past several summers. (Somebody in this family has to stay home and make a living.)  
Insofar as I know what I was doing in trying to carpenter together a Montana town--and a writer doesn't always know--I think I've merely mixed some very basic

scholarship with some common sense, or intuition, or experience or whatever you want to call it. "Assense of where you are," as the basketball player Bill Bradley told John McPhee when McPhee asked him how he could shoot baskets without <sup>even</sup> glancing toward the hoop. I try not to shoot blind, but something does have to take over at the ends of the fingers, for a writer as well as for a basketball player.

First of all, though, the scholarship, or at least the scholarly notions of other people behind my version of the town of Gros Ventre. I've always been impressed with the work of John W. Reps, of Cornell University, who for his books on urban planning and town planning in America keeps digging out the original plans and artist's conceptions of frontier communities. I would look over the maps and plats John Reps reproduces in his books, to see what ideas town builders had about parks, and how

to marry a grid street system with a wandering river as it passed through town, and so on. One specific idea that came to me out of Reps' maps is from a town that was never built, St. John's City <sup>planned for</sup> ~~in~~ Nebraska Territory in 1857, where all of the east-west streets--every one of them--was going to be named after a saint. In looking at this, I noticed that the abbreviation for "saint" is the same as for "street"; which gave me the idea to have in Gros Ventre a neighborhood with streets named after the first missions in Montana. A neighborhood the local postmaster calls "the repeater ~~part~~ part of town," because the address, say, of St. Mary St. is written S-T-. Mary S-T.

A maybe less quirky use of scholarship is that <sup>I've been getting</sup> ~~I'm getting~~ <sup>what's called</sup> interested in cultural geography--which I don't yet know that much about, but of what I've managed to read so far it does seem that geographers and literary types are trying

worthwhile

to say things to each other. The geographers C.L. Salter and W.J. Lloyd, in their work titled Landscape in Literature, approvingly quote from Lawrence Durrell in ~~his~~ the first novel of his Alexandria Quartet--Durrell wrote, "We are the children of our landscape; it dictates behavior and even thought ~~in the same way that the landscape~~...I can think of no better identification."  
The geographers in this instance mean, when they say "landscape," "not the raw forces of the physical environment, but...people's institutions, taboos, design preferences, systems of spatial order--such as the township and range survey system--assemblages of cultural features which comprise our cultural landscape...One of the goals of cultural geography is learning to read these cultural landscapes, a goal which may be reached in part through reading the creative language of fiction." And this pair of cultural geographers ~~goes~~ goes on to quote Willa Cather's description of her town of Hanover

in O Pioneers!, Sherwood Anderson's description of Winesburg, Ohio, amid its  
 farmland, and some other fiction writers. This is flattering, for novelists, and I  
 think it also makes some sense--these cultural geographers are searching for  
 descriptions and what business are novelists in, but describing? And from the writer's  
 point of view, or at least this writer's, here's a field of research where the <sup>cultural geographers</sup> ~~guy~~  
 are trying to explain and define the elements that we use in writing about places.  
 It's like being a jazz musician and having the musicologists come along and tell you  
 what you've been doing--oh yeah, is that what I been doing? A specific example I've  
 picked up from the cultural geographers for use on this town of Gros Ventre <sup>is</sup> ~~and will~~  
~~use even more in my next novel, which starts some Scotch homesteaders off for Montana~~  
~~from a town in Scotland--I'm trying to use what the <sup>50</sup> cultural geographers ~~guy~~ call~~

a signature: They define it as "a distinctive image created by an individual or a group in the act of modifying the landscape." Some examples they offer: the groves of the tree of heaven in California's Mother Lode country, a landscape signature of the Chinese settlers who planted them in the mid-19th century; corporation signatures on modern skylines such as the pyramidal Transamerica building in San Francisco. They don't mention, but I certainly would, the Great Falls smelter stack <sup>Stack</sup> ~~that has now~~ <sup>here</sup> ~~vanished~~. So these signatures--"comments in space"--give us insights, say Salter and Lloyd, "into the nature of the creators of these cultural landscape features."

I still miss that thing, whenever I'm driving to here--particularly coming in from Cascade, where the freeway kind of quietly changes direction on you every so often; the smelter stack was always there on the horizon, reassuring a person the road would finally get to it.

I'll get back to this notion of looking for a signature on my fictional landscape in a few minutes. Let me just add, before getting to the show-and-tell part of this ~~evening~~ ~~breakfast~~, a paragraph or so about the common sense part of research that went into the creation of Gros Ventre. Insofar as possible, when I'm attempting to write about something, I try to go out and take a look at it. This, I guess, is my Scotch kind of imagination: stare at something for a while, then say, yeah, well, that's what it looks like, doesn't it, then go home and try describe it in words. As I mentioned, Carol and I drove around to various towns, looking for buildings that were there in the so that I could put them into English Crick 1930's, then she'd take their picture and I'd write notes about them. But the willingness to go take a look at something doesn't make you an expert about it, and I'm certainly no expert on the architecture of Montana small towns.

What I do try to be expert at, is recognizing my own ignorance of a topic--and going and asking somebody who does know something about it. Patricia Bick, of the Historic Preservation Office of the <sup>Montana</sup> Historical Society <sup>in Helena,</sup> sat down with Carol and me and told us what features popped to mind in her, in thinking of how a Montana town of the 1930's looked. I gratefully wrote it all down on a legal pad--points from Pat Bick such as, big glass plate windows in the newspaper offices of the time; drugstores with art deco style, and marbled ~~at~~ counter tops; WPA projects, bringing to towns cement sidewalks, or a new post office or courthouse; a couple of dozen very useful suggestions from her expertise.

Okay; enough gab about background, it's technology time. Somebody shoot out the lights, please.

p. 10A follows →

G+PL  
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First, let's have a look at the country the town is set in. The area around Dupuyer, with the Rocky Mountain Front all along the western skyline--none of this is going to be news to you Great Falls folks, but just for reminder's sake. (pic 1, horses)

~~First, let's have a look at the country the town is set in. The area around Dupuyer, with the Rocky Mountain Front all along the western skyline (pic 1, horses).~~

It's about a dozen miles from the town of Gros Ventre to the ranch farthest in under the mountains, which might ~~like~~ look like this: (pic 2, Salansky ranch)

*corner of book*

Then back off onto some of the benchland, out from the mountains, and the townsite there ~~at the left of the picture~~, with the grove of trees and the rooftops showing through, would be this: (pic 3, Dupuyer from the north)

*about the middle of this next*

↑

Now to look around in town, in the makings of Gros Ventre. (pic 4, trees along Choteau street) I've always liked Choteau's trees. I like the greenery of them, the sound of wind rattling through those cottonwood leaves; I even like the cotton that comes down so thick by about the Fourth of July that it looks like slush there in the street gutters. So, being in and out of Choteau each summer, and spending some time in <sup>here</sup> Great Falls--where Carol and I would stroll the old neighborhoods of houses near downtown, close to the river--I wanted my town to have plentiful trees, deliberately planted along the streets, in fact planted colonnade-style as they are in parts of <sup>here</sup> ~~Great Falls~~ <sup>town</sup>, a double row of trees with the sidewalk between them, ~~here's~~  the file card I made after one of those Great Falls strolls, drawing out those twin rows of trees for the neighborhoods of Gros Ventre. ~~\_\_\_\_\_~~

Just a quick run now through some of the houses that might be in this tree-lined town--I want to concentrate on the downtown, which we're about to get to, but first the towns of this part of Montana a few of these houses that caught Carol's camera eye as we looked around:

--(pic 5, Klatte house, Ft. Benton) in Fort Benton;

--(pic 6, blue house, Whitefish) <sup>over</sup> in Whitefish; notice the tin roof; we were impressed with that front porch

--(pic 7, front view, Conrad) ~~is~~ this one in Conrad;

--(pic 8, tree and front porch, Conrad) and another one from Conrad.

(go to blank pic) (~~light up?~~)

Now, downtown Gros Ventre. What did I know about it, in trying to think it onto the pages of a book. Not all that much, I suppose--the time of ~~the novel~~ <sup>English Creek</sup> is the late 1930's, my narrator is fourteen years old in the summer the book takes place, the town is where he goes to school, his family does their buying--the narrator's father is the ranger on a nearby national forest, in there under the Rocky Mountain Front--it's the town where the boy's best friend lives, where the 4th of July rodeo is held, and so on. The town, in all the meanings of the rural phrase, I've got to go to town.

<sup>as I say,</sup>  
 X The only way I knew to create this was to draw on actuality, and ~~since I'm a pretty literal person, that meant~~ going around looking at towns, trying to find buildings that would fit the 1930's and earlier. Here are some of the results in Carol's photos, first of all stores:

(Some of you recognize this one?)

--(pic 9, Augusta merc) this in Augusta; you go inside, some of those windows have the old wavy glass, that ripple the passing scene outside;

--(pic 10, Hirshberger's in Choteau) ~~this store in Choteau;~~ and

--(pic 11, McGraw's in Ft. Benton) this one in Fort Benton; I like terra cotta, it caught my eye at both these.

--(pic 12, tinfront, Augusta) Augusta again, but I thought this one could be found in almost any Montana town--we even had places kind of like it in Ringling--a little old store which <sup>always housed</sup> ~~had~~ some business that's falling behind the times; maybe a tailor shop when readymade clothes began appearing, It's a little place that's always there, available, nobody quite knows what to do with it; during the Depression it might have been a food kitchen or the office of one of the New Deal emergency agencies or the WPA sewing room; more recent times, it might be the temporary senior citizens' center, something like that.

~~One~~  
~~Something~~ I didn't expect--(pic 13, Choteau saloon)--it was hard to find the bars I wanted for my town. A good deal of the fun is in looking for them, of course. But it may be that I kind of played out on describing bars, in that tour of White Sulphur <sup>Springs</sup> bars early in This House of Sky. Also, I guess just to be perverse, I wanted to create a Montana town without a Mint or a Stockman in it. Anyway, I ended up putting three bars in Gros Ventre--very moderate--calling one of them the Pastime; another of them Spenger's, supposedly named after its original owner <sup>Dolph</sup> Spenger, but it also happens to be the name of a <sup>terrific</sup> ~~wonderful~~ seafood restaurant in Berkeley, California; and the third <sup>bar</sup> ~~one~~, which does get some description in the book that I won't repeat here, to save time-- Gros Ventre's third saloon, with a name I picked up I think out of the history of Fort Benton, is called the Medicine Lodge. And it probably has the general lines of a saloon like this one.

Quickly, glimpses of a few other businesses I thought Gros Ventre should have:

--(pic/4, gas station, Augusta) a garage and gas station, this nice old one from Augusta;

--(pic, 15 creamery, Conrad) a creamery; for some reason, I'm fond of creameries; this one from Conrad;

--(pic/6, Roxy, Choteau) a movie theatre, with a neon sign; it had to be this one from Choteau, out of my own high school past; many's the evening Tom Chadwick and I drove down the 33 miles from Dupuyer, in Tom's fat old green Mercury with Hank Williams singing on the radio, to go to the show here. Not all ~~substance~~ research takes place in libraries and archives. (go to blank pic)

17A follows

Now to come to the signature on this town, in a cultural geographer's terms. I'm going to spend a few slides taking us back before the beginning. Since having written English Crick, I've also written Dancing at the Rascal Fair, which takes the family line of my fictional McCaskills back to Scotland--and here are some of the signatures, the human-built landmarks, that the McCaskills saw every day in their lives in their fictitious town of Nethermuir--actually a place called Brechin, a little north of Dundee.

--(pic 7, cathedral and round tower) the cathedral.

--(pic 8, mill tower) the tower on the local linen mill.

--(pic 9, Mechanics Institute) this is a place called the Mechanic's Institute, a kind of night school and social center; the Paris Gibson Square of its day.

--(pic 20, closeup of Mech. Inst.) a closer view of that Mechanics Institute, its entrance.

17B follows

Take a look at that coat of arms for a minute, there at the bottom of the picture-- the greyhounds prancing on top of the Latin words. ~~From the coat of arms~~ I think that's the family crest of Lord Panmure, the local rich guy who gave some of his paintings to this Mechanics Institute in Brechin, ~~and~~ plus an endowment of a thousand pounds. Poking around in Scottish history as I was, I kept coming across these fancy family crests, of the local nobility--and here, Lord Panmure gets his on the most prominent public building in town, even though the endowment wasn't that generous. It all struck me as kind of high-toned, and so if you ever wonder where writers get their ideas, it was my digging around amid these <sup>Scottish</sup> family crests that led to these lines, spoken by Angus McCaskill in *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*:

(Angus is ~~is~~ out looking for land to homestead, and he sees the big Double W ranch which already owns half the country.)

"I'd only glimpsed Williamson--the Double W owner--when he stepped into the Medicine Lodge saloon to summon a couple of his riders, a thickset impatient man several shades paler than his weather-browned cowboys. Evidently those white-handed men of money were here as in Scotland, those whose gilt family crests properly translated would read something like, Formerly robbers, now thieves."

Well, moving right along here...^

--(pic 2/ , Brechin Town House) This is the Town House in that Scottish town, sort of the equivalent of city hall.

All in all, these signature buildings in that Scottish town led to this passage in the book, in the remembering mind of Angus McCaskill.

Old grayrock town Nethermuir, with its High Street wandering down the hill the way a drowsy cow would, to come to the River Carrou. Be what it may, a fence, a house, a street, the accusing spire of a church, Nethermuir fashioned it of stone, and from below along River Street the town looked as though it had been chiseled out complete rather than erected. Each of the thousand mornings that I did my route to open the wheelwright shop, Nethermuir was as asleep as its stones. In the dark—out went the streetlights at midnight; a Scottish town sees no need to illumine its empty hours—in the dark before each dawn I walked up River Street from our narrow-windowed tenements past the clock tower of the linen mill and the silent frontages of the dye works and the paper mill and other shrines of toil.

And a final signature from Scotland, one of the last things emigrants saw as their ships left the dock at Greenock, at the mouth of the River Clyde, for America-- the then-new municipal tower of Greenock. <sup>(pic 22)</sup> My characters in the book saw it this way:

"...High, high above all the municipal tower of crisp new stone the color of pie crust."

(go to blank pic) (lights up ✱)

Okay, time now to get to the American point of all this, the signature on my town of Gros Ventre, in a cultural geographer's terms. Its hotel, I chose it to be.

Now, the signature on this town, in a cultural geographer's terms. Its hotel.

This I took some special pains with, not just because it's the biggest and tallest thing in town--I could have used, instead, a water tower, or a court house, or somebody's mansion--but, <sup>probably</sup> because the hotel was the signature in both of the Montana towns where I went to school. In White Sulphur, there was that big old brick hotel that sat part of the way out into Main Street, so that cars had to ~~swerve~~ <sup>swerve</sup> around it; according to local lore, that hotel was emblematic, a signature, of a dispute over platting the neighborhoods of White Sulphur. Of entrepreneurial rivalry, two different <sup>each</sup> guys determined that ~~that~~ <sup>his</sup> particular real estate venture, on this site with its promising hot mineral water, was going to go ahead as it was, and to hell with civic cooperation. If traffic had to ~~swerve~~ <sup>swerve</sup> around that hotel for the next 70 or 80 years, so be it.

And the <sup>old</sup> ~~three-story~~ brick and stone hotel in Valier, that dominated the little downtown when I went to high school there. That hotel, at least as I read it, must have been the signature of the irrigation ~~project~~ <sup>company</sup> that developed Valier--the developers saying with this outsize hotel, this is going to be a substantial community. In a photo of the Valier townsite in 1909, there stands the hotel, looming over what they hope is going to be the main corner of town, and all around it flat prairie, and drabs and drabs of homesteader shacks, as far as the eye can see. <sup>in that old photo,</sup> It doesn't really look anything like a town yet, but by god they've got a three-story hotel.

Well, what did I want my hotel, the cultural geography signature, to say about my fictional town of Gros Ventre? <sup>(light out)</sup> You may have noticed by now that I'm a pretty much a literal thinker; why not have the hotel literally say something, like this one?

(pic 23, Ingomar hotel)

This example was at Ingomar, and one I liked even better--which I don't have a photo of--was the old Windsor Hotel over at Troy. It had a sign all across the top of its false front, which I adapted a bit to my hotel. Here, straight from the page in English ~~Creek~~<sup>Creek</sup>, is the sign on my ~~original~~<sup>original</sup> created hotel in Gros Ventre. (Pic 24 Northern Hotel.)

So far so good, I thought: a hotel built in the early years of this century, catering to newly arrived homesteaders, freight wagonmasters, a real come-and-go place of its era, meals any time of the day and night there. But then I kept thinking, actually I'm building a more substantial town than that, it's lasted into the Depression, some of my characters have lived there a couple of generations. So I burned down the Northern Hotel--in the great dry forest-fire summer of 1910; burned it down this way in the book:

"According to old-timers, 'burned' doesn't begin to say it. Incinerated, maybe, or conflagrated. The Northern blaze took the rest of the block with it and threatened that whole end of town; if there had been a whisper of wind, half of Gros Ventre would have become ash and a memory."

The Northern Hotel is gone, its make-do, frontierish era is passing, too; what comes in its place? (Pic 25, Valier grade school) Actually, not this building itself, which is the old Valier grade school--but a big hotel built of ~~its~~ its stone. (Pic 26, me and stone wall) Stone cut along the cliffs of the local creek--Dupuyer <sup>creek</sup> Creek in actuality, English <sup>creek</sup> Creek in my novel. C.E. Sedgwick, <sup>my fictional character</sup> who built the original wooden Northern Hotel, by god is not going to be whipped a fire; he rebuilds for the ages, puts up ~~this~~ a three-storied towered stone hotel which dominates its end of town--

strangers who don't know better think it must be the Pondera County court house-- and in contrast to the old days of painting ballyhoo all across a wooden false front, Sedgwick this time has a stone mason inscribe the name of his new hotel over its front door: (Pic, 27 Sedgwick House)

If that's not a signature, I don't know what is. (go to blank pic) (~~light up?~~)

Banks, without which I guess a town cannot be a town. A couple of things interested me here. In the upper corner of my notes from that talk with Pat Bick<sup>of the Historical Society,</sup> there's a small sketch of a right angle with the corner cut out, and the jotting "bank entrance often on corner, with steps." She was pointing out something I had looked at all my life, and never noticed-- that style<sub>^</sub> (pic 28, Wallace bldg) of having the front door into the corner. This building actually is in Wallace, Idaho;

but I've been driving past it the past <sup>20</sup>~~25~~ years on trips back and forth to Montana, and thought I could make it a kind of honorary Montana bank. And here is a Montana example of what Pat was talking about--~~this building~~ (pic 29, Chester) this building up on the High Line, in Chester. Notice if you can on the right hand pillar at that entrance--you can dimly see a barber pole was painted there. Another bonus for a writer; you'll hear in a few minutes what that faded barber pole paint triggered in me.  
 (go to blank pic) (~~lights up?~~)

--given where we are gathered here tonight, it had better have one--

24

Just one more building. The town has more, as you're about to hear in my reading of it, but these are plenty to give you an idea, I hope. But this last one is something I wanted ~~the town~~ <sup>my fictional</sup> town to have, a library. Strangely enough, for all the time I have spent in libraries in this state over the past dozen years, no specific one popped to mind as being just right for Gros Ventre. So, in a hurry to finish the writing of <sup>English Creek</sup> ~~Gros Ventre~~, I described a little Carnegie Library I knew of in Seattle; kind of a caboose-shaped building, it looked to me like. Well, when I asked Pat Bick of the Historic Preservation Office to read over my fictitious town, that <sup>caboose</sup> library was the one thing that didn't strike her right, and she sent me from the Historical Society photo files of three or four actual Montana libraries. I wrote back to Pat saying she was absolutely right, I'd gotten lazy and hasty in my first try at a Gros Ventre

(pic30, Lewistown library)

library, and that I really liked one of those she had sent me. So, with apologies to ~~our host city of~~ Lewistown for the theft, here is the Gros Ventre public library.

*(go to blank pic - project off light up.)*

That's some of the carpentry that went into this fictional town. What does the place finally look like, in print? Here it is, as seen by my <sup>English Creek</sup> ~~English Creek~~ narrator, coming into town, horseback, on the Fourth of July when he is fourteen years old:

~~At least I hope it's not so. Thanks for getting up so early to listen; I'll be glad to take any questions.~~

From there a mile or so outside, Gros Ventre looked like a green cloudbank: cottonwood trees billowing so thick that it took some inspection to find traces of houses among them. Gros Ventre's neighborhoods were planted double with cottonwoods, a line of trees along the front yards and another between sidewalk and street. Then the same colonnade again on the other side of the street. All of this of course had been done fifty or more years before, a period of time that grows you a hell of a big cottonwood. Together with the original groves that already rose old and tall along English Creek before Gros Ventre was ever thought of, the streetside plantation produced almost a roof over the town. This cottonwood canopy was particularly wonderful just before a rain, when the leaves began to shiver, rattle in their papery way. The whole town seemed to tingle then, and the sound

picked up when a gust of wind from the west ushered in the rain, and next the air was filled with the seethe of water onto all that foliage. In Gros Ventre even a dust-settler sounded like a real weather event.

The English Creek road entered town past the high school, one of those tan-brick two-story crates that seemed to be the only way they knew how to build high schools in those days, and I nudged Mouse into an even quicker pace so as not to dwell on that topic any longer than necessary. We were aiming ourselves across town, to the northeast end where the Heaneys' house stood.

Mouse and I met Main Street at the bank corner, alongside the First National, and here I can't help but pause for a look around Gros Ventre of that Fourth of July day, just as I did then before reining Mouse north along the street.

Helwig's grocery and merc, with its old-style wooden square front and the Eddy's bread sign in its window.

The Toggery clothing store, terra cotta along its top like cake frosting.

Musgreave's drugstore, with the mirror behind the soda fountain so that a person could sit there over a milkshake—assuming a person had the price of a milkshake, not always the case in those times—and keep track of the town traffic.

Grady Tilton's garage.

Dale Quint's saddlery and leather repair shop. Maybe a decent description of Gros Ventre of that time was that it still had a leather man but not yet a dentist. A person went to Conrad for tooth work.

Saloons, the Pastime and Spenger's, although Dolph Spenger was a dozen or more years dead.

The Odeon movie theater, the one place in town with its name in neon script. The other modern touch lent by the Odeon was its recent policy of showing the movie twice on Saturday night; first at seven-thirty, then the "owl show" at nine.

The post office, the only new building in Gros Ventre since I was old enough to remember. A New Deal project, this had been, complete with a mural of the Lewis and Clark expedition portaging around the Great Falls of the Missouri River in 1805. Lewis and Clark maybe were not news to postal customers of the Two country, but York, Clark's Negro slave standing out amid the portagers like a black panther in a snowfield, definitely was.

The little stucco-sided Carnegie library, with its flight of steps and

*ENGLISH CREEK*

ornamented portico as if a temple had been intended but the money gave out.

The sidestreet businesses, Tracy's creamery and Ed Heaney's lumber yard and hardware and Adam Kerz's coal and trucking enterprise.

The set of bank buildings, marking what might be called the down of downtown: the First National Bank of Gros Ventre in tan brick, and catty-corner from it the red brick of what had been the English Creek Valley Stockmen's Bank. The Valley Stockmen's went under in the early 1920s when half of all the banks in Montana failed, and the site now was inhabited, if not exactly occupied, by Sandy Staub's one-chair barber shop. The style in banks in those times was to have a fancy doorway set into the corner nearest the street intersection—Gros Ventre's pair of bank buildings stared down each other's throats in exactly this fashion—and when Sandy took over the Valley Stockmen's building he simply painted barber-pole stripes on one of the fat granite pillars supporting the doorway.

## ENGLISH CREEK

What have I missed? Of course; also there on the Valley Stockmen's block the newspaper office, proclaiming on a plate-glass window in the same typeface as its masthead: GLEANER. Next to that a more recent enterprise, Pauline Shaw's Moderne Beauty Shoppe. The story was that when Bill Reinking first saw his new neighboring sign, he stuck his head in the shop to ask Pauline if she was sure she hadn't left an "e" off Beauty.

I heard somebody say once that the business section of every Western town he'd ever seen looked as if it originated by falling out the back end of a truck. Not so with Gros Ventre.

At least I hope it's not so. Thanks for coming out tonight to listen.

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pp. 16-20 of WAMI speech, abt tolls of WWI and flu epidemic, transferred to  
Billings Sept. '87 speech, "Browning, Conrad and other World Centers."

On our drive here yesterday from Seattle, coming across Route 26 from Vantage, my wife and I came through some new places. Such as Royal City and Dusty--places I'd never heard of, or thought I'd heard wrong when I did hear of them. They made me think of Montana places where I lived as a kid-- Ringling and Dupuyer. And I suppose being reminded of those old little places was appropriate for tonight. Because place is in fact what I want to talk about here--a Western writer's sense of place, in the literary currents of the world; and my own sense of place from having been born and raised in the Dustys and Royal Citys of the west of America.

There is a problem with place, as there tends to be with lively evocative words, that the word itself has so many dimensions. About three and a half pages of them in the Oxford English Dictionary--and in my own American Heritage Dictionary that I promptly retreated to, thirteen different definitions of place as a noun, twelve usages as a verb. A word that sprawls all over the place--

I take it that the only conceivable reason for asking a writer to talk out loud is to try find out what he's ~~been~~ up to. In-so-far as I know what ~~I've been~~<sup>I'm</sup> up to, I'll concentrate here for the next quarter of an hour or so, on some of the ingredients of my work--how a writer, or at least this writer, tried to draw on "the West," tries to search out elements to make books out of.

The makings of a book--and so far I have made five and one-half books, which are set either here in the mountain West or out along the coast where I now live--the makings of a book can be mystifying in more ways than one.

*Northwest*

~~I'd say the region is from the western city limits of Peer, South Dakota--  
up at least to Juneau in Alaska--and down the coast no farther than the first  
hot tub in Marin County, California. (We Northwesterners are known to like  
elbow room to work in.)~~

→ ~~Actually,~~ if I <sup>*im*</sup> <sup>*ing*</sup> read my own books right, <sup>*though,*</sup> it is the working <sup>*Northwest*</sup> west that first  
of all interests me. ~~People who are full-time on the land.~~

Not only as a writer but as a reader, I'm transfixed by the everyday craft  
of making a living out here. In the course of <sup>*my first*</sup> the novel <sup>*The Sea Runners,*</sup> I've been working on  
~~for the past couple of years,~~ I got in touch with a park ranger up at Sitka,  
who's an expert on the carpentry and shipbuilding that went on there when  
Alaska still was Russian America.

The great silver bird ~~that~~ of Northwest Airlines that brought me from Seattle today stopped at a lot of places on the way. I got tired of seeing airport runways, but I suppose landing at all the places I did was appropriate for tonight. Because place is in fact what I want to talk about here--a Western writer's sense of place, in the literary currents of the world; and my own sense of place from having been born and raised here in Montana.

There is the problem with place, as there ~~is with~~ tends to be with lively evocative words, that the word itself has so many dimensions. About three and a half pages of them in the Oxford English Dictionary--and in my own American Heritage Dictionary that I instantly retreated to, thirteen different definitions of place as a noun, twelve usages as a verb. A word that sprawls all over the place--

which a phrase I didn't find anywhere amid all those definitions.

Before I try to stop it from sprawling uncontrollably through this talk-- that's pretty much what a writer does, nag at his language to behave itself; to sit up straight and stop sharing its corn flakes with the dog--before I get going on my own department, I want to give <sup>Dave Barber</sup> ~~Donna Forbes~~ and the other responsible folks <sup>in this "sense of the land" ~~course~~ institute</sup> here ~~at the Art Center~~ a little heart murmur apiece, by saying that I think a sense of place is often over-rated in work such as my own.

Did they all survive that? If so, let me go on to say I think it's over-rated in this way--in that because a <sup>geographic</sup> sense of place constitutes quite a lot in the work of today's serious western writers, it's sometimes thought to constitute damn near every thing.

## THE WESTERN DAYS OF CONTEMPORARY WRITING AND THE

Every so often these days, contemporary writing about the west of America is called a literature of place. A literature, I suppose that means, which focuses

on the land, rather than on people. Often the book titles themselves have seemed to say so: The Big Sky...Wolf Willow...Winds of Morning...A River Runs Through It. (Put them together right, you could make a kind of sagebrush haiku out of the titles of western literature.) The critical notion, as I savvy it, is that the immensities of the West, its extremes of landform and its powerful weather and the distances which flabbergast travelers from elsewhere in this country--these immensities overwhelm the fact of the people thinly salt-and-peppered across the expanse.

"Place," in terms of landscape, backdrop of mountain and of plain and of hard weather, does figure large in the work of a lot of us who are trying to write about the West. But I don't particularly think it's at the neglect of the people, the human stories, the westerners who carry on their lives against the big bold landscapes of those books.

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Norman Maclean's flyfishing brother of A River Runs 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 beautiful cast. ~~Ellen Webb of Mildred Walker's novel Winter Wheat, stepping straight from a Montana wheatfield to a university campus.~~ Jim Welch's men of the ~~Montana~~ reservations, Jim Loney and Myron Pretty Weasel, and Lame Bull, and the never-named narrator of Winter in the Blood. I hope, maybe also on the list, Charlie Doig and Bessie Ringer of This House of Sky--all of them, characters of modern western literature who seem to have found a continuing life in the minds of readers.

In short, a geographic sense of place is a flavorful ingredient in western literature, but let's don't think it's the whole supper.

In my own writing, I know that I work hardest, longest, on language. The novelist Thomas Flanagan said it best recently: "Fiction lives by the energy of its language." I hope I'm trying to practice what Flanagan preaches. Here is a paragraph from my book of last fall, English Creek, about the start of haying--the first day of stacking--in a <sup>Montana</sup> summer in the 1930's: "So hay was being sent up, and as this first haystack and the day's temperature both began to rise, Wisdom Johnson--(the guy on the stack)--Wisdom Johnson suffered. This too was part of the start of haying: Wisdom sweating the commerce of Great Falls saloons out of himself. Soaking himself sober, lathering into the day's labor. We all knew by heart what the scene would be

this initial morning, Wisdom lurching around up there atop the mound of hay as if he had a log chained to each leg. It was a little painful even to watch."

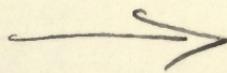
Well, listen to "soaking himself sober, lathering into the labor"-- the so sounds echoing against each other, then the la of lathering and labor. <sup>The ending sounds of sober & labor</sup> ~~Another sound~~ deliberately A little further along, "a log ~~stuck~~ chained to each leg", again words trying to talk to each other as linguistic kin. There is, I hope, plenty of place in that paragraph--the hayfield under the hot sun--but it's meant to be the language that pulses in the reader's mind.

Don't let me disillusion anybody about how writing happens, but those coincidences of sound <sup>are</sup> ~~were~~ not accidental.

p. 9 follows →

~~One of~~ the advantage of not being an English major in college is that you haven't been force-fed on major writers, and you can happily gulp them down as you want, when you're a grownup--and <sup>Joseph</sup> Conrad, ~~the one named Joseph~~, showed me by example a couple of things I thought were centrally important. What impressed me about Conrad's fiction wasn't really what was supposed to impress me. In Heart of Darkness, for instance, I can pretty much take or leave the symbolic character Kurtz and the nameless <sup>horror</sup> ~~horror~~ he found in the dark heart of Africa.

horror



But what I thought was a terrific bit of writing was the native who sticks his head through the doorway and says contemptuously, "Mistah Kurtz--he dead." Then in Conrad's great storm-at-sea story, <sup>(Typhoon,)</sup> which features the most literal-minded phlegmatic character in literary history, Captain MacWhirr, there's the one-sentence summary of the captain's wife: "The only secret of her life was her abject terror of the time when her husband would come home to stay for good."

So. What the work of Joseph Conrad gave me--one of those pivot points for me to center the world of my writing on--was the example of making the minor characters of a book vivid. To make them behave as importantly in my pages as Laurence Olivier has said each actor in a play must contribute to the play as a whole--"the third spear carrier on the left should believe that the play is all about the third spear carrier on the left."

skip? <sup>brief</sup>

Before departing Conrad--~~the literary one~~--I also need to testify that his behavior as a writer has been a valuable example to me. Part of Conrad's genius as a writer was that he sat down and wrote. Ill, worried, disgusted, whatever, he sat there and wrote. He wrote "Heart of Darkness" as a serial for Blackwood's Magazine in Edinburgh--its first installment appeared in the February 1899 issue while Conrad was still writing the last installment. Just as soon as "Heart of Darkness" was done, Conrad started another serial for Blackwoods, and <sup>by God,</sup> that one proved to be "Lord Jim," which began in the October 1899 issue, and was still showing up in installment after installment when Conrad had already finished his next piece of work, which was "Typhoon." Doing my damndest, I can't write more than half as fast as Joseph Conrad, who was writing not in his second language but his third--he had learned French after his native Polish and before the English he wrote in--but I at least can use him as a reminder that, top speed maybe isn't a bad gear for a writer.

People don't just happen onto pages.

And besides language, character is something I consciously work at. I admire the thrift with which Jim Welch can characterize ~~people~~ -- in *Winter in the Blood*, the narrator piles bales with a man named Raymond Long Knife-- "Long Knife had learned to give the illusion of work, even to the point of sweating as soon as he ~~put his gloves on...~~"

Then too, although it's not much noticed--I like to think that's maybe because it's working--I pay considerable attention to form in my books. *House of Sky*, a book about memory--italic musings about memory between the chapters. *Winter Brothers*, a book about a pioneer diarist--written in the form of a winter's diary. *The Sea Runners*, the novel of a long canoe journey--written in brief scenes as if looking in on that journey day by day.

English Creek, the ~~Montana~~ novel I'm now going to be talking about, takes place mostly in <sup>Montana</sup> one <sup>major</sup> summer--it has three sections, each ~~one~~ keyed to a month of that summer.

All right, that was my grumble--<sup>remember,</sup> ~~we ain't just writing travelogues~~ <sup>about these places</sup>--and now to try see where place, western senses of place, do come into my work.

Begin with the beginning. I come from a place. I originate, as an American, from a place in a specific <sup>Western, or at least.</sup> Montana sense of the word--~~maybe it's a Wyoming sense~~ ~~as well,~~ though this usage doesn't seem to have reached the dictionary-makers at Oxford and Boston. Place, meaning an abandoned homestead. ~~But~~ Small ranch or farm, either one, but abandoned, given up on, because of the winter of 1919 or the bank failures <sup>in Montana</sup> ~~in Montana~~ in the early 1920's or the Depression, or death or disgust or any other of a hundred reasons.