

CutBank

Volume 1
Issue 19 *CutBank* 19

Article 4

Fall 1982

The Way Home

Laurel Bricher

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Bricher, Laurel (1982) "The Way Home," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 19 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss19/4>

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

THE WAY HOME

WARM, rugged, survivalist man (32)—enjoys skiing, sailing, nature, good books—longs to share rustic mountain home with slender, loving, earthy lady. Joe, Box 10, Casper, Wyoming.

My friend, Louise, says, “You haven’t got the brains of a bird, Ivy Mae,” when I tell her I’m going to Wyoming to meet Joe-the-Survivalist. “For Pete’s sake, you didn’t really send that letter, did you?” she asks. Louise is the only person besides my great-aunt Dora who says that. “For Pete’s sake, Ivy Mae, when are you ever going to learn there’s more to life than a man.”

“Maybe he’s a cowboy,” I say as I toss my jeans and pajamas into the red-flowered suitcase Mama gave me last year when I graduated from the Algona School of Beauty. “We’ll live under the pine trees and ski to town for groceries,” I say.

“You’re something else.”

Louise is my best friend, but there’s some things she just doesn’t understand. I’ve lived in West Bend forever. The houses, and the people who live in them, are as familiar to me as the taste of apple pie. Every year Mrs. Purdy plants three rows of crackerjack marigolds along the front of her house. Elmer Stryker has sold stamps behind the grilled window in Daly’s Grocery Store since I was five years old. I’ve gone up to the counter with a dozen eggs and said, “I need ten stamps, too, Elmer,” and he frowns and thrusts out his lower lip. “You know stamps come from the *post office*, Ivy Mae.” Then he goes to the other end of the counter, where the window is, pulls on this yellow visor, and says, “May I help you?”

Years ago all of us kids would go in one at a time, pick out our jawbreakers and licorice, then ask Elmer for a stamp. And he would go back and forth, pulling his visor on and off like a blinking neon sign, while we laughed and thought we were smart.

It’s the sameness that gets me. Just once I’d like to hear Mama say, “No Sunday dinner today. You kids get what you want when you’re hungry.” But we always have roast beef, mashed potatoes, green beans, and carrot cake. Always.

So that’s why I want to go to Wyoming. It’ll be nice to wake up on Sunday and say to Joe, “Let’s have tacos for dinner.”

“What’s your Mama think about all this?” Louise asks.

“Well, she doesn’t exactly know. And if you *tell* her. . .”

“Then. . .”

“I told her I’m going to a workshop. ‘Color Me Right.’ When I get back I’ll be able to tell Edith Landryville that she should wear blue silk blouses to compliment her platinum hair, and peach foundation will make her look warmer.”

Louise laughs. “For Pete’s sake, Ivy Mae, where did you think that up?”

As the bus pulls out, I wave to Mama and Louise, glad that Clive Junior is still on the road. He drives for Garrett Freight in the summers. Clive plans to be an orthodontist in two years. We’ll get married (he thinks) and move to Mason City and I’ll be Clive’s first patient. He says he can’t wait to get me in braces. “Won’t it be nice to have straight teeth, Ivy Mae. Then you’ll be just as pretty as . . . as anybody,” he said to me once.

At least I’m the only passenger. I don’t have to sit and listen politely or explain to anyone why I’m going all the way to Wyoming to learn about make-up. LeeRoy drives the bus and I sit in the very last seat so I don’t have to talk to him. In the eighth grade, every time I walked past him, he’d ask me, “What planet did you come from?” Just once I wish I had said, “Saturn. And how about you, LeeRoy? What galaxy kicked you out?” But I never did.

I’ve been teased to death about my vampire teeth, my hair—dry and frazzled as a haystack—my thick glasses. It finally doesn’t matter anymore. I’m me and there’s no escaping it.

As the sun drops behind the fields at the horizon’s edge, I wonder how Columbus ever thought the earth was round. If he had lived here, the idea of roundness would never have entered his head. This place is as flat as a dinner plate. Surrounding the white houses are huge fields of young corn. Houses and fields—as far as you can see, that’s all there is.

At least the sky changes. The cloud shows are better than movies. In June thunderheads pile up like giant mushrooms and I see it raining somewhere else. One time my brother Sam and I drove the backroads watching tornados. Funnel-shaped clouds were spinning high above the cornfields. But before they touched down, those black clouds dissolved and floated away. The sun came out, leaving Sam

and me to wonder if we had made up the whole scene. What's the sky like in Wyoming? Surely the stars shine there, too. Does Joe notice them?

I know it's strange to set all my sights on a man I've never met. What does he look like? Will he be funny or serious as Sunday Mass? I don't let myself think what will happen if Joe doesn't like me. He has to. I'll get a job in a beauty shop, fixing up ranchers' wives' hair, and at night Joe and I will sit in front of a roaring fire and read books.

LeeRoy hollers, "How come you're acting so stuck up? Get on up here and talk to me."

"LeeRoy, you just don't order people around like that," I say as I move to the front seat.

"How's Clive these days?"

"The same."

What is there to say? And why is LeeRoy talking so nice to me anyway? Clive and LeeRoy and I practically grew up together. In junior high school Clive and LeeRoy poured gas on stray cats and lit them on fire. Once we concocted a mixture with Clive's chemistry set and gave it to old man Riley's chickens. They flapped their clipped wings and cackled for hours until Mrs. Riley called the sheriff.

We know too much about each other, that's the trouble. I'm sure LeeRoy knows Clive and I have made love twice. They both remember the day I came to school in my first bra. I want to live in a place where the mailman won't recognize me, where my neighbors won't recall that time I let all of Pop's rabbits loose, where I can have a secret or two.

At Ruthven I say good-bye to LeeRoy, change to the Greyhound express, which will take me across South Dakota with only two stops. A night journey with the blackness pressing in so that all I can see is my face reflected in the window.

Two ladies sit across from me discussing Amelia and Stephen. "Isn't it too bad everyone knows about it," one of them says.

"Stephen deserves more. He's given Amelia everything and look how she thanks him," her friend replies.

I realize they are talking about Mama's favorite tv program. They both remind me of Grandma Cutler with their soft sagging arms, flower print dresses, thick black shoes.

"How far are you going, dear?"

"To Wyoming," I reply.

"My. You watch out now. I've heard those westerners are a wild bunch."

Tiny globes over the seats give off just enough light for them to crochet. From the last row of seats comes the loud raspy sound of someone snoring.

We pass through Rock Valley, a town which seems deserted. The winking glow of neon signs lights the main streets, and the power company's window displays two quilts, pillows, a butter churn. Beneath them a sign says, "In Celebration of Rock Valley's 100th Year."

At Sioux Falls the driver shouts back at us, "There's time for a cup of coffee if you want it."

A woman with two young children and a baby in her arms steps aboard. As they walk down the aisle, I notice the string around each child's wrist and then the end of it looped around the woman's belt. The little boy drags a tote bag with yellow ducks sequined on the side, and the girl holds a greasy brown paper sack in one hand and a Raggedy Ann doll in the other. The smell of French fries invades the bus. They settle in front of the grandmothers.

"Now, Mama?" asks the girl.

"I want catsup on mine. Not salt," the boy says. He puts the packet between his teeth and yanks it; catsup splatters to the floor.

"Charlie! Be careful," says his mother. She sits in front of me and I see only the top of her head.

Soon we are on our way. The two old ladies have put away their crochet, the person still snores from the back, the little boy's head rests on his sister's shoulder.

I can't sleep, but sit with my nose pressed against the window wishing I could see something besides fluorescent-tipped posts flashing by. I try not to think about what I'm doing. Of course, I'm going to miss Clive. He fits me like my ratty old bathrobe with the hole under the right sleeve. Comfortable, easy, he's more like a brother than a boyfriend. He comes over for Sunday dinner sometimes and has two pieces of Mama's carrot cake.

I remember when Clive first moved to West Bend. His mother had her very own electric organ. She hung lace curtains and made us use the back door so we wouldn't ruin her Persian carpets. Clive was an only child who had a room all to himself. He built model rockets and when he finished them, we all went out to the empty lot behind Daly's and watched as he lit the fuse and the red-and-white spaceships shot up into the bright blue sky. Most of the time the parachutes that were supposed to open didn't and the rockets crashed. How could Clive

spend so much time on something, knowing it was going to be wrecked, I used to wonder.

As the sky lightens to a pale lemon color, I see red hills, miles of sagebrush, and grazing cattle. Near a fence swallows turn in circles, the undersides of their wings catching the sunlight.

The boy stands in the aisle shaking his mother. "I have to pee," he says.

"Charlie! You have to use the restroom."

"I know, Mama."

The woman sighs. "Annabelle, come and sit here. Don't let your brother fall off."

Where is she going with her children? Where is their father? As she passes me, her jacket catches on the seat and I notice she is pregnant. For a second I see my mother, how she must have looked years ago when I came along, then Sam, then Alice and Andy, and Paul, and David, and, finally, Judy.

I remember a story Mama told me. She picked an ivy leaf off her mother's plant, put it in her pocket, believing the first man who spoke to her would be her future husband. All the girls did that. Mama said she was walking home when a car with Tennessee license plates stopped and a young man rolled down the window and asked her the way to the old Cutler homestead. That young man is my father and when I was born ten months later, Mama named me Ivy.

Annabelle turns around, giving me a wide grin, a black hole where her top front teeth should be. Her sandy hair is parted in the middle and tightly braided. "Where you goin'?" she asks.

"To Casper."

"What for?"

"To meet Joe."

"What for?"

"Annabelle. Sit down and stop pestering the lady," her mother says. "Go back over to your own seat." To me the woman says, "She asks that nine thousand times a day, I swear."

"She's just like my youngest sister, Judy," I say.

"They ought to make the Pope listen to a roomful of three-year-olds for a day. Then I bet we'd hear a different tune," she says. Her baby starts crying and she turns away before I can reply. I've heard Mama say that, too.

At Rapid City we all get off for breakfast. The snorer from the back of the bus is a man with bushy white hair and a face peppered with

whiskers. He slumps over the counter and pulls a whiskey bottle from his jacket pocket and mixes it with his coffee. The woman and her children wave good-bye to me, and as the grandmothers gather their bags, they warn me not to talk to strangers.

Eating scrambled eggs, I almost cry. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. Everyone I see reminds me of who I'm leaving behind. Judy is over the "what for" stage. Now she sings "Jingle Bells" and colors on the walls.

I get off the bus in Casper, stiff from sitting so long. Of course, Joe is not here to pick me up. His postcard gave me a number to call. The pay phone takes two dimes. The phone rings and someone says, "Star Lounge." I'm surprised and can't reply. "Say, I haven't got all day," the voice says.

"Oh. Uh, is Joe there?"

"Lady, it's nine a.m. If this Joe wasn't with you last night, that's your problem." He hangs up. I drop in two more dimes.

"Listen," I say quickly, "Joe gave me this number and told me to call when I got in town. Wait. It says here to ask for ZB."

I hear a snort of laughter. "Well, why didn't you say so. ZB's at work, I imagine. He comes in around five."

"Does he live there?"

"What? This is a bar, lady. He comes in to drink beer. Look, I got work to do. Call back later."

I go over to the wooden benches in the waiting room and sit down. Something is wrong here. I thought ZB was Joe's friend, but Joe is ZB. I read the postcard slowly. *Can't wait to see you. Call 267-9191 and ask for ZB.* But the ad was signed *Joe*. Doesn't he want me to know who he is?

I can't sit in the bus depot all day. Maybe I can walk to the Star Lounge and meet Joe, I mean ZB, when he gets off work. The boy behind the counter draws a map for me. I check my bag in a locker and set off.

Casper isn't West Bend, that's for sure. The cars are backed up for blocks, a few inching through the stoplights which stand on every corner. The people walking are in a hurry; they don't look at me when I smile hello, but stare at some point in the distance. It hits me that here are the strangers I've been wanting, the unfamiliar faces, and it's not at all how I thought it would be. These people frown and rush.

They don't stop to chat about baseball and gardens, blocking the doorway to the Rexall Drug.

I pass a cafe with the words "The Cheese Barrel" carved on a big wooden sign. There are round wooden tables and black iron chairs on the sidewalk under an awning; marigolds bloom in apple baskets. The place looks so homey, so inviting, I sit down. After all, I have seven hours to fill.

At the table next to mine a couple weave their fingers together and I think of Clive's strong, work-hardened hands, his gentle touch that could soothe a skittish colt, that could ease me into stillness. Whenever I felt sad, Clive would take me over to watch Nickel's latest batch of puppies and it wouldn't be long before I started smiling again. What am I doing here? Louise was right: I haven't got the brains of a bird. But I can't go back, not yet.

"Aren't there any waitresses in this place?" I ask the couple.

"Oh. You have to go inside and order. They bring it to you when it's ready," says the girl.

Inside a blackboard covers one wall, the menu printed with pink and blue chalk. The rest of the walls are covered with a pattern of chickens and baskets of eggs. A dairy case overflows with cheese. I order and go back outside. Watching the constant stream of cars, I am overwhelmed by the motion. How can there be so many cars and people in one place? Where are they all going? In the distance, sirens wail.

The waitress slams the plate on my table and flips the bill down. "Thanks. Have a nice day," she says, not seeing me, not smiling. She doesn't know me the way Irene does at West Bend's Corner Cafe. If she's not busy, Irene will pour herself a cup of coffee and sit with her customers, filling them in on her grandchildren's latest accidents. This girl seems stiff and mechanical, like my brother's GI Joe doll.

I spend the rest of the afternoon drinking beer in the Star Lounge, so that by the time they walk in I am quietly drunk, totally off-balance. I hear one of them slap a burly guy on the back and say, "You're crazy, ZB. You know that?"

He's not what I anticipated. But then, what did I expect? Red-brown curly hair, bearded, it is hard to see his face. I think of a massive bear as I see his barrel-shaped chest tapering to slim hips and thighs. He wears glasses which hide the color and shape of his eyes.

Watching him with his friends, I feel myself drawn toward him. I am struck by his hearty laugh and the way he is the focal point of the

group. His voice is loud and he speaks with a fast, clipped pace, cracking jokes. He says, "Things are tough when you're a kid," as he downs a Miller in one clean swallow.

I take five deep breaths and walk deliberately into their midst. "Hello, Joe. How's the rustic mountain home these days?"

They are as still as the air in West Bend before a tornado strikes. Then ZB laughs. "I'll be damned. You really came."

Perched on the bar stool, I am entertained by four fascinating men. Louise would just die if she saw me now. I've never been with anyone so funny. His name is Zacharias Bartholomew Kovnesky—ZB—and he's Irish. Winking at ZB, his friends leave. The two of us share a pizza and another pitcher of beer while he tells me crazy stories.

Why does most of this trip happen at night? As we go up Casper Mountain in his jeep, wind swooping in the windows that won't close, I can only sense what a mountain looks like. The bottoms of pine trees flash in the headlights' beam and the air smells cold and fresh. For a second my head feels full of water, and ZB asks, "Did your ears pop yet?" Right then, they do, and I laugh. ZB carries on an endless monologue, talking so fast that I lose the thread of meaning that must lie behind his words.

We stop and I see the darkened shape of a cabin nestled against fir trees. ZB comes around to let me out, but before I step down, he picks me up like I'm a new bride. "Hey! I can walk."

"The wolves might get you if we don't hurry."

In the morning, clear green eyes look back at me. We lie under a heavy quilt in a big wooden bed under the eaves.

"What happened?" I ask.

"You fell asleep on the couch. So I took certain liberties with your body," he says and grins. And before I can move or say anything, he rolls over onto me and I want to cry. What did I think would happen? Did I really believe he would be a gallant knight and rescue me from West Bend's monotony or that he would propose and I would wear a lacy white veil before we climbed these stairs to this bed?

He leaps up and pulls on his jeans. "I've got to get to work."

"What about me?" I ask.

“Just make yourself at home. I’ll be back when I get off. There’s a party on at Suzanne’s.” And then he’s gone.

In the refrigerator is an opened Miller bottle and in a Kentucky Fried Chicken box, congealed gravy and one half-eaten wing. Rummaging through cupboards, I find some instant coffee.

I discover that I take things too literally. This cabin is not rustic (there’s a shower, electric heaters along the baseboards, even a built-in dishwasher), ZB does not read (*The Martian Chronicles* and a magazine “Alternative Lifestyles” the only evidence of his literary pursuits), and I wonder if he wants to share his mountain home with me, permanently, the way it matters.

On a balcony outside the kitchen, I sit with my coffee. There is nothing to see but towering trees and a small blue patch of sky directly overhead. Not like home, where my vision is free to rove to the horizon and back, where I can watch the clouds march across the wide arc of the sky.

Perhaps when ZB comes home we can start over. I can explain that I was tired and drunk, that I don’t hop in just anyone’s bed. I feel cheated. Love is not supposed to be abrupt like a door banging open and shut.

Flipping through the magazine I see the letter I wrote in response to Joe’s ad. I am startled by its frankness as I reread the lines: *As to loving, I love many things—cats, wild sunflowers, the way the sky becomes mysterious when it is filled with clouds and a full moon. Loving people has been harder.* What did ZB think when he read that?

That night ZB brings in three friends and they wear smug grins, as if they know something I don’t. ZB wouldn’t tell them about last night, or this morning, would he?

“How’s my Nebraska farm girl? Come on. We’ll eat and go to Suzanne’s.”

“ZB, I’m from Iowa. West Bend, Iowa.” It is suddenly important that he understand.

“Iowa, Nebraska, whatever. They’re all the same, aren’t they?”

We go down the mountain, again in darkness, around and around the hairpin curves, while ZB keeps us laughing the whole way.

“Do you know all these people?” I ask ZB at Suzanne’s as we thread our way through the crowded room to the keg in the bathroom.

"I've met Sonny before. Suzanne's current boyfriend. Some of the others I've seen around," he says. He wanders off and I stand on the edge listening in.

"Man, he hit that ball over the fence like there was no tomorrow."

"You know, she'd be great if she just didn't bitch all the time."

Their words graze the surface, the way a dragonfly skitters over a creek. They don't know each other but stop here in Casper on their way to somewhere else. I meet people from Wisconsin and Vermont and California, people with no ties, out to make a fast buck and split to finer places.

The next day is Saturday and ZB shows me his town. For awhile I am bewitched by his charm, his exuberance, his whimsical sense of humor. He is like a big delightful child. We wander through a shopping mall, eat corndogs and popcorn, drive through fancy neighborhoods with backyard swimming pools, and go to the tenth floor of a hotel where the flashing strobe lights turn the dancers into jerking puppets.

The week passes and we get to know each other better. ZB tells me stories about the people he met at Woodstock, the time he sailed his boat down the Atlantic coast to Florida. He sold the boat to buy acres of timber behind Casper Mountain so he can build a cabin and spend his life skiing and partying.

"Why do you want to build another cabin? This one seems nice enough," I say.

"Yeah. But it's not mine. I rent it and I have to move in a month anyway. The owners sold the place."

"Is your other place ready then?"

"Are you kidding? I haven't even bought a saw. One of these days. . ."

"But what about your furniture? Where will you live?" I ask.

"The furniture goes with this place. I've got a suitcase of clothes. And that's the way I like it."

Finally I see Casper Mountain, which is not a mountain, but a pine-covered ridge jutting up in a barren prairie. Looking down from Lookout Point, the town spreads east and west, the Platte River meanders in a lazy S-curve, and the refinery sends up plumes of smoke. Huge tanks filled with oil cluster on the outskirts of town, beyond which is a desolate wasteland. There is the effect of earth and

sky, of space and openness, but here the land is stark, empty, bleak. West Bend's plains are tamed and fertile, a place where dairy cows graze and corn grows.

In spite of everything, I still feel drawn to ZB's lighthearted approach to life, his irresponsible ways. Then he shares his ultimate goal—to be like two old men he met one time at Muscongus Bay, off the coast of Maine.

“Eighty years old, but they looked fifty. Here they were, sitting on the deck of this big yacht, sipping bourbon. They were in great physical shape, you know, and all they did was sail. Winters they went down to the Caribbean and did some deep-sea fishing. No women, no kids, no ties,” he says.

“That sounds nice, ZB. But don't you think they had families and jobs before?”

“God. You're missing the point. I want that sort of life. Now.”

Then one night he doesn't come back up the mountain until very late. The cheese sauce for the cauliflower sticks to the pan, the baked chicken is cold.

ZB tells me he was at Suzanne's. He looks at the ruined food and pulls me down to the couch.

“Look, Ivy. We've got to get something straight here. I don't want a cozy little domestic scene with you. Or anybody, for that matter. It's been a nice two weeks, but you're cutting into my life. OK? Do you get my meaning?”

“But you said you wanted to share your . . .”

“Damn it! That whole thing was a joke. We were bored one Sunday and wrote that ad during half-time. Bryan mailed it in just to see what would happen.”

His words knock my breath away. I can see them, sitting around with their beer, laughing. “Put in loving. You want a *loving* woman,” one of them would have said.

“What gives you the right to trample on people's feelings? So that's why all your friends have been grinning like monkeys. How could you? God, how could you?” I scream.

Rushing around the room like a windstorm, I gather my clothes, jam them in my suitcase.

“Where are you going?” ZB asks, blocking the doorway.

“To the bus depot.”

“You can't walk down the mountain in the middle of the night. Wait. Let's both calm down.”

“If you don’t drive me to the bus depot this very second. . .”

After the long silent ride down the mountain, he says, “Look, Ivy. . .”

“Don’t say anything. I feel sorry for you, ZB. You don’t know what loving means. You’re going to wake up some morning and find the party’s over and everybody’s gone home.”

ZB cups my chin in his hand and says, “Maybe I will. Till then—we had a good time, Ivy, didn’t we?”

I have to drop my eyes. I don’t know what it is we’ve had.

“Remember that, OK?” he says. I get my suitcase, and he drives away.

The boy tells me the bus won’t be in for three hours. I ask him if we’ll cross South Dakota at night. “The sun comes up at five and the bus leaves at six. What do you think?” he asks in a sarcastic tone.

So I sit on the hard wooden bench, close my eyes, and imagine thunderheads that foam above the fields south of the Cutler place, while Mama pulls clothes off the line and Judy shoos the chickens into the shed. “For Pete’s sake, Ivy Mae, you always have to learn the hard way,” Louise will say as her pink Rambler bounces over the ruts in the road on the way home.