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Accidents

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ACCIDENTS

The silences which drifted in the linoleum-floored rooms where my grandparents lived in the whitepainted house which was headquarters for our ranch always left me ill at ease. Out on the lawn, under the Lombardy poplar, I would flip my jackknife to stick in the ground, over and over. Maybe I was just a sullen boy. Maybe I didn't want to be a useful man.

Years later, Annick and I packed in a few miles to Wall Lake in British Columbia, just out of Waterton Park, at the foot of a great vertical wall of stone with mid-summer ice at the top. The next morning we saw a creature which resembled a reddish dark badger: a wolverine. Implacable and almost feverish in the quick absolute way it went about foraging on a gravel bar near the water, it was there, then aware of us, and gone.

It was the only wolverine I ever expect to see. They have been almost exterminated from tame world. It was good for my soul to encounter such a creature so utterly unavailable to our agendas, to see that such a way of going at life was still possible.

These memories move in my brain like little fires, reigniting the knowledge that the electricities of this world are in fact always flowing through us like blood. We are inescapably like trout in the dazzling stream of what is.

Maybe we should disregard ideas of significance and go through life like that wolverine; the wolverine, I am willing to at least try believing, cannot be coerced or co-opted; they are as secretive as anyone could wish, insulated and invulnerable, emotionally untouchable, alone. Wolverine belong to no one but themselves.

Maybe we should feel capable of being loved without having to give anything back, like house cats, honoring only the most compelling agendas—joy and food, sex in the night and the hunt and the kill and a good night's sleep.

Or, maybe we shouldn't.

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Maybe we should put together a catalogue of revered places and people and the stories which make them invaluable, a listing of times and ways people have been driven to acknowledge their political obligations to things they refuse to do without, like each other, clean water in the tin bucket, a certain grove of great yellow pine on warm late summer afternoons before the rain, a living wage, and/or freedom.

This catalogue would be a mirror in which we might sometimes get to see how people come to inhabit the politics they act out. We could hold their experiences beside ours in hopes of getting closer to fathoming the reasons we come to recognize in what we take to be our own obligations.

I'd like, for instance, to understand the sequence of experiences which led Rachel Carson, the environmental activist, to identify her intentions toward the world (her politics), then the events both mental and physical which led to acknowledging an obligation to act on those intentions. I'd like to know about the same sort of sequences in the lives of many people I admire, to see if there's a pattern in such evolution, and if it could be taught, as a technique.

Rick Bass, in *Audobon Magazine* (October, 1995), says "I never set out to become a pagan. It just kind of happened. It's as if, rather than my moving toward it, a

whole lot of other things receded, leaving me stranded on some peninsula of paganism. More and more, it seemed, everything else around me looked dumb, or dishonest.” He goes on to talk of fires and trees and interconnected energies.

How to participate, how to proceed? Some of our most enduring stories involve divesting ourselves of the trappings of wealth or power, stripping the body, as in a robbery, as a start toward cleansing the self.

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From Oklahoma, haven't seen her in thirty years, Trudy Gunderson called me. When we both lived out in the logging truck and cowhand country of southeastern Oregon Trudy tended bar in a roadhouse we called “Hunter's Hot Lodge”—hot pools to bathe in and no questions asked about your companion (or companions) if you rented one of the rooms.

Trudy had her mind, like always, on the main sparrow.

“You must be getting old,” she said. “Do you miss it?” She was talking, of course, about the real world, where the score was a joke.

Paul Finnegan (a concocted name for a real man) was, as is said, a long Irish drink of water, but he was never interested in water. Paul drank gin all summer, scotch all winter. He was always sort of drunk but never too boring as he told laughing anecdotes about the drinking trade (none of which I can recall—except one about a man who bought a \$70,000 logging truck and never used it for anything but to drive into town and get the mail and maybe another couple cases of beer to ice down for the afternoon—the man I'm calling Paul Finnegan would act it out, doing the police, as Dickens

said, in different voices.)

We wasted long swales of time on stories like that, splendid hours. I had recently begun drifting toward the thought that there is no meaning to life but life, and I was in a state of shock; I had until that time thought of pleasure as doing God's (nature's) work, making the world habitable.

What I liked best, talking to Trudy Gunderson, was the way she seemed to still be enjoying her days, *sans* ambition.

Me, I went the other way. Breaks my heart.

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In first light over the roll of the Palouse wheatfield hills out south of Pullman, a white '69 Dodge van idles in the silence. Bob Helm is going to drive away, most often alone.

Every possible morning he goes for these drives, a way of inciting the imagination to awaken, going back into himself. It's a way to start being an artist for another day.

It's also very western. Helm reminds me of old blacksmith men I've known (my grandfather on my mother's side), who would go down to the shop before daylight, just to rap the hammer off the anvil, letting steel ring off steel as they took their first cup of coffee. It was a way to wake up. Later there would be the fire, and white hot metal to be worked and tempered.

Helm says he is particularly looking for beauty in the intricate and unnoticed, on the undersides of railway trestles in the wheatfields, places he returns to in various seasons, or just *in season* like the alleyway in Spokane where Concord grapes drape new growth over a fence in ways that seem striking.

“Too much artificiality makes people crazy.” Helm doesn’t think there’s much wilderness left. He was uneasy in the Ross Cedar Tree Grove, a gorgeous Montana State Park on the Bull River below the Cabinet Mountain Wilderness Area. “It’s like Disneyland,” he says. “All those boardwalks. It’s not wilderness, it’s a theme park.

“We need to find a fall-back position,” Helm says. “The few square feet under a railroad trestle can be wild and saving, a kind of micro-wilderness. Like Japanese gardens, which are a way of creating space through illusion. Neglected spaces where nobody has looked since they were built. Where nobody’s watching.

“I’m interested in places where people spent their energy, and the way those places are repossessed by nature.” He goes back to visit a 1930’s pickup truck, abandoned amid lilacs on a farmstead in Colton Canyon, by the Snake River. “It’s been shot so many times the steel looks like lace.” It’s both utterly of our habits of random violence, and abstractly lovely. It’s heartbreakingly funny, and simply heartbreaking.

“I go courting accidents,” Helm says. “I use a map, I pick a road, I pick a mileage, and set the speedometer. My mileage comes up and I stop. I get out and try to get some feel for a place picked at random. I get a chance to see things people don’t see so often. It’s like when your car breaks down, and you’re stuck in a piece of roadside world you didn’t pick.”

Accidents, he’s saying, trick us into seeing. So of course can art. Helm starts from ceremonies of precise seeing and ends with the exacting work, making things to see—pears in a melting snowbank, elegant dogs guarding the edge of eternity as we sneak glances over the precipice. We have no choice, Helm is saying, but to live without guardrails.

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How to plan for freedom, and consequent (oftentimes) joyousness? How do we persuade citizens to enjoy the pleasures of being generous, playing the world by ear, giving themselves away?

It's a tough sell to people who've spent their lives inhabiting a society like ours, so determinedly adversarial and committed to win-lose models of economic behavior and social justice, people who've all their lives been educated to think the world is made of "things" rather than interpenetrating energies, driven to believe in the virtues of ownership.

One of the reasons we're having such difficulty with our society lies in our inability to initiate citizens into any coherent sense of the uses of pleasure. Initiations imply a culture which is sure of its values and methods, but we live many-cultured lives and have no other choice in the system of interwoven societies we are inevitably creating; other models of the future are suicidal.

Following no plan that we can enunciate, allowing our bellies to lead us, what are we creating? We awaken, many of us, much of the time, with bitterness in our mouths. What do we say when love goes haywire? "The taste of ashes."

One antidote is frolic, the taste of possibility. Another, which works the same way, is striving. Down by his garden Bob Helm maintains a fermenting, rotting compost pile. "It's my friend," he says. "I think I'll go out and piss on it right now."