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"Being as it used to be long ago, may I walk"| Stories on relationships to animals, to self

Gabriela Barrett
The University of Montana

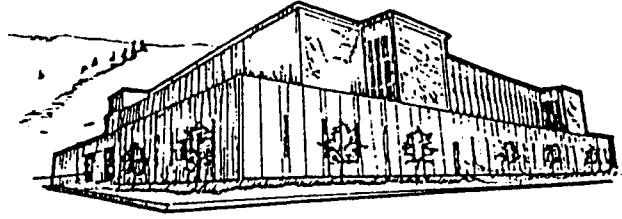
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"Being As It Used To Be Long Ago, May I Walk"
Stories on Relationship to Animals, to Self

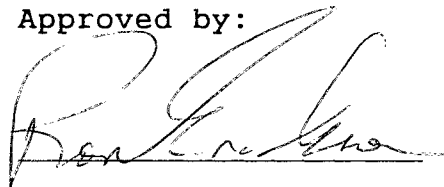
by

Gabriela Barrett

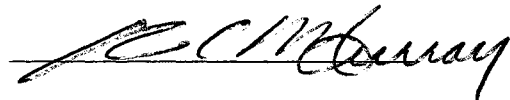
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Approved by:



Chairperson



Dean, Graduate School

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Preface

If my heart were a garden, these stories are what I would construct if all I could find there were rocks, rusty nails, and termite-traced^{*} boards. I would build a birdhouse with tin roof siding that sang in the rain, a whirligig held down by stones, or an asymmetrical box with knotholes placed just so, so that the squirrels could cache their cones there if they wanted to. And while I worked to clear the soil, to see the sun hit the ground again at that particular spot, I could look up and laugh at these odd creations. Someday I would smile with satisfaction at my hand-hewn windmill, pitched and squealing, but wheeling above the newly burst sunflowers.

Even if these stories never appeal to anyone, even if the squirrels themselves set about sabotaging these sculptures, I believe that I have done good work. And that I can do better. I have learned from my advisors, from the world around me, that what I truly want to cultivate is the heart of compassion. But I am a beginner. If these stories do not yet reflect that desire, they reveal to me the need to clear that ground, to till the soil of understanding, acceptance, and belief.

I would like to thank Ron Erikson, for believing that I might make something useful with these muddy paws; Bill

Kittredge, for showing me that I had to "bloody my nose" if I wanted to learn anything about the world of writing; and Debra Earling for her fascinating and inspiring presence. I would also like to thank, most emphatically, the great firs and ponderosas that surround my home, and the squirrels they shelter-- for keeping me laughing and in awe. Finally, I would like to thank Rick Hildebrand for his unflagging belief in me, his unfailing support.

Tracking Bear

Perhaps you remember her. Not so long ago she was entranced by a strong, handsome warrior with vermilion-painted skin. Maybe if he had not had been so damned good-looking, his thick coat hanging loose like that over his lean bronzed limbs, his topaz eyes sparking and setting her cedarbark skirt to smoking... maybe things would have turned out different. But as it was, she did not even shriek, or strike out. She stood transfixed. His breath tumbled down on her like a warm chinook, and he moved towards her slowly, an arc of sunlight across the path. He struck her down; he drew a circle sunwise around her head. Then he whispered to her, and she heard branches snapping; she smelled freshly dug earth, felt fire warm and true upon her face.

He did know where the sweetest blackest berries were. She followed him. She pulled herself over ragged reaches of granite, painting the rock with her berry-stained fingers and leaving scarlet half-moons where her torn palms touched. She crawled through thickets of dense and aromatic cedar, the branches slapping her face until she had to follow by listening. She listened and followed the breaths that came steady and slow, the pulse of the earth itself.

His home was high in some craggy rocks. His bed was piled with sweet-scented boughs and spring moss, and was

verdant with dreams that lay like late afternoon sun on long needles of pine. They feasted on wild onions and fire-roasted marmot, and when the snows came and covered the entrance to the lodge, the woman bore twins.

But none of this lasted very long. Soon the woman heard voices drifting up the canyon, and she was overcome by a sense of longing and loneliness. She stepped outside, and where the snow had melted she gathered sand and scoured her body with it, then rubbed her scent against the trunk of the tree whose roots held their home. She rolled a snowball the size of her head down the mountain, hoping that her brothers below would recognize what it meant.

It meant bad news for the bear husband. Up the mountain the brothers came, while the husband raged in his sleep, swearing to slay the men with his long knives. No, the woman pleaded until she broke his heart, and he relented and chose death. The brothers came and killed the bear husband, and it was she who presided over the fire that burned his bones, she that stirred the ashes and threw them to the winds that wailed and crashed through the trees with loss and forgiveness.

The woman returned to the village with her children, but already her hair was growing longer, her teeth sharper. Her brothers tormented her, trying to get her to reveal her secrets. One day they tricked her and threw the skin of her killed lover over her back.

But they didn't laugh long. Their sister became a bear.

She killed them all, except the youngest brother. With her two small cubs bounding beside her, she climbed back over the mountain, never once looking back.

I tell myself this story from the Northwest tribes often. I look up at the crest of the Rattlesnakes and imagine the den of the woman in a handful of rocks still covered with snow. I dream of dreaming of bears. With mugwort beneath my pillow, with rosemary, rosehips and chrysanthemum flower tea, I beg my dreams to inhabit me. There is a bear tooth talisman I sometimes wear that I run through my fingers, the enamel cool and smooth as river stone, my thumb attached to a certain chip behind the blunted half moon that once tore flesh. And I wonder if I am worthy of it; I wonder if there is not someone somewhere who misses this worn crescent bone, who calls it back to some stretch of wood where it must tear itself away, from substance into soil.

A bear came wandering through our yard last fall. I sat in my house of glass and watched her with something like wonder, with longing. She placed her thick heavy paws on the porch, nose to the woodpile, then to the window screen. She must not have seen or sensed me; she stared clear through me. She stepped off the porch, and walked easily, toes inward; she lifted her back foot in midstride and paused to test the air. With the same lifted hind foot she

pawed an ear, then sat relaxed on her haunches. She strode, a rolling dark river; she stretched her full length up along the trunk of a large willow, the leaves gold and spinning around her like light dispersed.

(Another time I startled the bear as she stood crunching grasshoppers that snapped in the garden clover. She gathered herself up, the very element of instinct and action, and slid shimmering through the weary slats of the wooden fence).

Always I wanted to follow her, always I felt left behind. She seemed so utterly at ease in her dense animal self. She was perfection and grace, as fluid as the flaxen grass that bent beneath her big paws.

I trace the trunk of a young douglas fir, I smell the rain-scented bark where she has scratched herself, hoping to gather something left behind. I'm seeking something to weave into my own cloak, this coat that protects me, that I want to wear laughing and winking in the wind.

This coat reminds me of who I am. I shake it out in the snow, on crystalline nights, to keep it thick. But there are times, I confess, when I get confused. Under flourescent lights, the glare of headlights, the dull glow of a television, in line at the supermarket, the coat gets heavier. I begin to sweat, to look for something lighter perhaps, a little cooler. Something that won't make me stand out so much on the street, or say the wrong things at family gatherings. But nothing else fits right. It is this

self that smells a little like reedy river mud, that keeps ravens braying in her hair, that I am drawn to. She keeps walking into dark thickets, and I want to follow.

So why, then, don't I just climb off into the hills and beg the forest beings to let me in? Why do I struggle with alienation and loss? Why don't I let the bear grub roots and ramble within me at will? I suppose I'm still seeking her, I suppose I doubt myself. What if she doesn't want me? What if she's not there?

We used to live on a wide green river, my lover and I, where huge alabaster fish pondered the depths and the geese came trailing like ribbons to nest on the far shore. In the cool evenings of fall, we walked beneath the warm lit ponderosas and the cries of jubilant osprey to a field where gnarled and knotted trees stood like old friends bearing gifts. It was a good thing, to walk a path to pick apples in the late autumn light, to feel utterly at home in the world, fine and quiet and alive.

Beneath the trees, the orchard floor was a carpet of bearshit-- there were piles, big red clumps of bearchawed appleshit. Rick and I tilted our heads to the lavender sky and marveled at the half-bitten globes left hanging like lanterns from the branches. Deep slashes were worn into the twisted trunks, describing a long history, an enduring embrace of tree by bear. I traced the marks with my fingers like I knew them, like they were as necessary and

inconsequential to me as my own footprints in riversand. I hung tight climbing the limbs, tossing apples down to Rick, who caught them in a brown paper bag. And all the while I looked for possible bear signs in myself. For bears rustling in the rosebriar, waiting, watching us pilfer their apple patch.

As it turns out, the bears were watching us. After several evenings of apples baked into pies in cast-iron on coals, and stories spun with smoke and sparks drifting skyward, the bears came looking for us. For pies. We came home one evening to a tipi torn to shreds.

Again I held my hand up to clawmarks, this time perfectly triangular and distinct in the rain-stained canvas; again I felt that sense of pure and direct passion, or dispassion-- of sure ownership of intent, motion, and action. The bear had entered the lodge, rifled through our books, and drank our canola oil. She danced round the fire, marked the four directions, and took off.

As we sat gazing at the green river through our new picture window, a slim, ruby-throated snake came spiraling down the center rope. The rope swayed and danced with her muscular strength; she held her head up, tongue flicking like fire, and swung the rope like a pendulum until she removed herself onto a smooth lodge pole. It all returns, I thought to myself, as she wound and rewound herself, catching our scent on her tongue. It all returns, and we left that lodge to the wind, soil and stars.

I dream I am walking in a meadow at the edge of dark woods. I find a bear splayed, pegged by all fours into the dirt. The head is a rock, the eyes black, empty and null. And there is nothing left of the bear, she has been scraped clean, hollowed out of all her insides, scoured. Later I wish I had remembered the Galway Kinnell poem, and crawled inside the bear and continued on, huffing into life.

We have moved into a camper on the back of my truck, but the bears find us again. While we walk beneath luminous white pine and towering cedar, a bear dismantles our new digs. She peels back the tin, gnaws the plywood, maybe gets disgusted with the insulation, and gives up.

Rick has nailed the camper back together, and the tin is crumpled like foil over the frame where we sleep. We are working in bear country, revealing the secrets of the wood to federal agents for hard cash. I am heavy with guilt, and bears follow us. Footfalls snap branches or sink silently into duff, then go cascading in a reverse crescendo in the opposite direction. We follow bears. There are deep slashes in the porcelain trunks of alpine fir; the sap bleeds and beads like amber tears. The huckleberry is head high, with berries big as plums, and dark mounds of seedy shit everywhere. This is jagged dense country, where no human rightfully belongs (or where we should have stayed all along), and sometimes it takes all fours to crawl out.

On one of our trips to town, I pick up the Daily

Lam." It is a fascinating story, and the bear in it is myth in action, she is phenomenal. I find her in my prayers; I listen for any news of her, with hope. She becomes symbol to me, possibility. But I already know the end of the story. When I finally do hear it, I tell myself this story in the back of my truck, in the strange blue glow of the propane stove:

Not long ago, a bear was trapped on the west side of the Swan Mountains, at a dude ranch that clung to the edge of the Bob Marshall Wilderness. She and her brother were caught raiding barns, corn on their shining black nostrils, feathers stuck in their fierce huffing mouths, in territory traditionally known to them as spring range.

Her brother was unceremoniously shot and she was tranquilized and taken to Wildlife Images Game Farm in Grant's Pass, Oregon. The tan industrial van with emblems on the doors and tinted windows that took her there swerved and bucked as the captive bear hurled herself against the sides of the vehicle, roaring and clawing until the officials driving the vehicle had to pull off on a side road and jab her with a sedative on a stick.

Once installed, the wild grizzly would serve as a useful Endangered Species educational tool. But what the wildlife officials did not foresee was the ghosts of grizzlies coming in from the coast where they had been feeding on salmonberries and the ghost carcasses of whales.

They did not see the clouds of light that rolled in like fog in the night to surround the bear as she dug her teeth into the chainlink fence of the compound. While the night watchman slept, chin on his chest and crumpling the headline of the tabloid he was reading which proclaimed: "Giant Condor Attacks Airliner and Feeds Passengers to Baby Chicks," the shadowy hulking forms grunted low, bringing pinenuts and pitch in their salt-scented fur. The coastal cloud-bears scratched daybeds beneath the drifting needles of fir, lifted their noses to the air, and kept watch.

She tore at the wire, teeth gnashing and entangling in the mesh while the bears outside the compound pawed in circles, or sat holding their back paws in their long claws, rocking. Ruby beads pierced her long broad nose and ran in rivulets down her flared nostrils. She swatted the curling mesh like hot wasps, until she had made a pure circle of air. Into this jagged hole she pulled herself, a shimmering pool of night, and disappeared.

She was pacing along ancient lines of instinct, her ears always to the wind. She traced paths worn deep in her mind: claws scoring marsh mud, footprints filling with water where sharp-edged sedge and horsetail were bound tight and danced in the wind. In a high alpine meadow the late afternoon sun lay on frames of bleached and weathered bone, and new black dirt pushed up tender pods of glacier lilies that sang on lips of snowmelt even as she nipped them

clean. Light gleamed and rippled on her back like the honeyed sunbeams that finally filtered through the ice, and shattered, a thousand stars on the floor of her winterdark den.

Now, though, there was the clank and clamor of men, of machines. Noises collected in the valley below and were thrust along treetops and pitched against basalt to wail in her ears. She rolled her heavy head in kinnickkinnick, in princess pine, but there was no shaking to get it loose.

The silver bark of alder would hide her shine. There were long rolling hills of lodgepole pines, the trunks scorched and blackened by fire. She rubbed her massive bulk against the trees, which shook to their tips with the boulder force of her body. Then there was only shadow, and the great looming dusk rising on the drifting sky.

Back at the Wildlife Images Game Farm, state troopers sat sipping cokes, or leaning on the hot hoods of their rigs. "Lotttta brush in there." They leaned into the cool air of each other's car windows: "Hot enough for ya?" It was the hottest day on record for May, a scorcher for sure: "Too thick to go in after her afoot." There was a wild grizzly roaming the suburban woodlands of Grants Pass, Oregon, and the local residents were unnerved.

No one was jogging or strolling around "the loop" anymore; stress and anxiety were on the rise. Celeste Wilholler, in an interview with an AP reporter, said "Every

day when I wake up and go outside for my early morning smoke, my eyes are going back and forth, back and forth, like a tennis ball. That bear was Trouble from the get-go." A grizzly, she said, she didn't particularly want to see.

Elsewhere, an infrared tracking device was mounted on the wing of a plane, and government satellites bleeped red, white and blue across the sky. The satellites hovered and scanned above the earth, transmitting one-dimensional frames of bootprints, tire tracks torn into the earth, and the patchwork grid of parking lots.

A big wind was crashing through cedar tops like waves. In the quiet gap of tide, in the receding rush of countless voices and the old-bones creaking of boughs and branches, the sound of slow and heavy footfalls approached. The bear stood at the edge of the timber, the light from her body pouring through the trees onto the concrete. Smoke twined around the moon, and the breeze blew in clouds to cover her shining cloak. She tested the air-- there was the distinct smell of dried blood, of pulverized rock, and somewhere, the scent of green water running clear-- and crossed. Headlights flared fire-red in her eyes; she climbed the concrete divider, lumbered over the train tracks and headed for the river.

At the river, time turned and began to fold in upon itself. The ground trembled, though not with the rumbling of train or trucks. It shook with the roll of drumbeats,

with feet falling in rhythm on the earth. Sparks flew from lightning headresses and the air came alive, buzzing with the rattles of snakes.. there were voices singing the stars into the night sky, and as Ursus Arctos, the Great Bear, began to spiral around Polaris, the bear on the ground began as well. Circling, circling, she danced, always around the fire, her head hung low, her paws swinging. Then, in a perfect hurl of paw and claw, she struck the trunks of four great trees-- north, south, east and west-- and entered the river. Like a tremendous dark boulder she swam, upstream, powerfully, and emerged shining on the far bank. She shook herself, and as she did, a thousand gems fell, falling like stars on the shining river rocks below. The dark woods blanketed her and she drifted through the trees like smoke.

It had been days, weeks, months since the escape and people were barbecuing at will now in Grant's Pass, Oregon. The only visible difference in the town was the newly-equipped radio-tripped, triple-walled, searchlight-studded fence surrounding the new grizzly installed at the Wildlife Images Game Farm. Everything was quite secure.

Just forty miles north in Riddle, Oregon, however, curious things had begun to happen. Chickens and feed had disappeared from several barns, people had had the siding ripped off of their trailer homes, and neighborhood trash cans were being systematically dumped. Residents scanned

their yards nervously and worried that transients had moved in from Eugene or Medford and secreted themselves away in the woods.

Then Shirley Lawrence had a frightening encounter that confirmed the whole community's fears. Shirley had been sitting at her window early one morning when she noticed a dark figure skirting the trees at the back of her lot. Suddenly, the figure leapt into the yard, and lunged for the plastic deer family that Shirley had arranged (as landscape ornaments) on her lawn. Shirley watched in shock as the woman-- she was dark, dishevelled, with dirty bare feet and a long cloak-- tore into her deer. The woman knocked the doe over with a swift swing of her hand, pinned the spotted fawn down with her foot, then grabbed the antlers of the buck in her big bared teeth and began to thrash about. Shirley was not a timid woman; she ran out hollering and brandishing a kitchen knife, but the dark woman only seemed to get taller, bigger, as she glowered unflinching at Shirley. Shirley didn't dare move a muscle-- the woman was mean-looking, a long jagged scar running down her broad nose, and eyes as cavernous as caves. Finally, the woman slowly turned and walked stiff-legged into the trees, stopping to look at Shirley over her big rounded shoulders.

That very same evening Bob O'Leary heard a strange thumping and squealing out by his wallaby pens. Bob grabbed a flashlight and headed directly out to the barnyard. That

was all he needed at this time of year, trouble. He would tell whoever came to visit him to speak softly around the animals, because they were very sensitive. Take the Tibetan Yaks, for instance: "If you filled a paper bag full of air, then went POP! against the flat of your hand, you could ruin the reproductive capacity of a yak for life." Bob shined the light into the agitated eyes of the wallabies-- their ears were laid flat against their heads, their big feet still thumping in distress. Bob was irritated. He beamed the flashlight all around, and the darkness closed in like a fist around the small tunnel of light. It occurred to him to look for tracks, but the ground was packed hard, dry. He saw what may have been a scored pattern, or half a big foot in the wood shavings, but he couldn't tell for sure.

Three days later, Bob was out checking on his emu hatchlings when again he heard strange sounds, this time over by the llama pen. Bob hurried over just in time to see a large figure-- it had to be a bear-- disappearing into the brush. Bob liked animals, he truly did, but he was not about to let any critter endanger his fledgling exotic pet business. He went right in and called his neighbor Hagenbeck, whom he knew to be a good shot and an avid bear hunter. Although it was bear season, Bob asked Carl if he had a silencer, on account of the yaks.

Carl Hagenbeck was a committed bear hunter. Ever since the trip he had taken to the Rocky Mountain Front in

Montana to hunt bighorn sheep, Carl had been devoted to bears. Carl had lain on his belly on a high bench, watching through his scope as a grizzly came thundering down a talus slope to overcome and crush the head of a mountain goat with his massive paws. He had watched as the bear tore into the animal, a great mess of blood and tooth and bone. It was glorious. Right then and there Carl Hagenbeck decided the grizzly bear would be his personal totem. Hagenbeck saw in the animal an irrepressible independence, a wide-ranging intelligence, an unbelievable and almighty strength.

Hagenbeck remembered a story that had fascinated him when he was a boy at Cub Scout camp: something about an Indian who had fought a bear as an equal, as an enemy to be feared and respected. The bear killed the Indian, and consumed his spirit. (Did this mean the man didn't get to heaven? Is that why bears walk on two legs?). He remembered other stories about bears that summer: a ferocious sow challenged some cowboys, and they lassoed her and rode off in four different directions, until pieces of her bounced in the dust behind them. He had laughed at the story then, thinking it was a joke because the other boys were laughing, but Hagenbeck knew even then that that was no way to kill a bear. Later in his life he would read in Norse mythology that a bear could enter the soul of the hunter. If the bear was killed right, the hunter would become a warrior. As he watched the grizzly from his high outcrop,

Hagenbeck experienced a limitless sense of himself, he felt himself come full circle. If he could only eat the heart, the liver of the grizzly, he would realize himself. He could contain that animal knowledge, that skill of survival. He would become a warrior.

Shortly thereafter, however, the state of Montana was forced to shut down the spring grizzly hunt by an animal rights group in the East. Carl was disappointed, but he knew it was only a matter of time until the hunt was reinstated. Carl was of the mindset that if you could hunt an animal, you could save it. Look at Ducks Unlimited, he would say, or Trout Unlimited. Those people have all the animals they want, and they protect habitat too. What we need is Grizzlies Forever.

Carl took advantage of his free time. He read all he could about grizzly bears: their foraging, denning, breeding habits, their preferred habitats. He studied bear attack and survival statistics. And he practiced. He shot at cans, hay bales. He had his wife fashion for him a life-size dummy that he took to the fields near his home to use for target practice on the weekends. He made replicas of the signs he had seen on his trips to Montana that displayed the contrasts between the even-shouldered black and the hump-shouldered, dish-faced grizzly. He wanted to do it right. "This is Grizzly Country," Carl intoned in a low voice, always aiming for the crosshatched pattern directly below the thick neck that the books illustrated as

the surest spot to kill a grizzly bear. And always he was haunted by a cryptic quote he had read, a quote from a Mistassini Cree: "If we do not show respect for the Bear when we kill him... he will not return."

Carl hunted black bear, every year. He bought a pack of hounds specially trained in Tennessee for black bear hunting. So when Bob O'Leary called, he was ready. Carl loaded the dogs into the back of the truck, drove the half mile to O'Leary's, let the dogs out of the back of the truck, and pulled his gun from the rack. The dogs went yelping for the ninebark and snowberry at the back of the barnyard, and instantly the bushes began to thrash and shake, sending dry leaves cascading to the ground. Hagenbeck walked up calmly, readied himself, and when the bear boiled from the brush, he shot. A good one, he was sure of it, but the bear did not falter-- it wheeled and barrelled back into the shaking thicket. And as it did, Hagenbeck felt a strange surge of recognition; the glowing eyes, the hulking form. It was a grizzly. His grizzly.

But it couldn't be; he didn't want it this way. Still, his frenzied dogs were in there, battling the beast. He had to finish it off, he had to get the dogs. He grabbed his .44 Magnum from the truck and entered the tornado of branches, following the strangled cries and yelps of the hounds. From fifty feet, he fired. Five times, just to be sure. Finally the bear fell, toppling like a wall or a tree, all of a piece. A tremor shot through the ground and

shook Hagenbeck's cork-soled feet.

Hagenbeck approached slowly, until he saw the misshapen mass heaped on the dead branches and dried leaves scattered on the ground. The bear was much smaller than he had hoped; the shape was wrong. With the heel of his boot he pulled at the body, so that it came to rest with its face towards the sky.

Hagenbeck sucked in his breath. His bullets were perfectly placed-- there was the shattered forehead, the smashed cheekbone-- but the bullets had been slammed into the face of a young woman. Her face was disfigured, torn and bloody; her eyes hollow, endless, and staring into his own. He held his stomach as he counted the wounds: two in the head, one in the neck, one in the chest, womb, and groin. Hagenbeck stepped back, grasping for balance, as Bob called from the clearing. "Did you get 'er, Carl? Did you get 'er?"

Tonight, throughout the circumpolar regions of the earth, men and women and children will step from the warm glow of the hearth, the home, and cast their clear sparkling green, cloudy opal or polished black eyes to the shining cosmos. There they will watch the Great Bear wheel in the darkness, bringing the dawn. She lumbers along the lip of the chalice, circling the fire of Polaris, bringing renewal and light to the dark dome of sky. Some will point

and see a flock of birds following the bear to his den; grey jay carries a soup pot in which to cook his starry prey. Others will whisper words of recognition and awe as Mangi the bear leaves a brilliant blazing trail, his ski tracks the Milky Way, to hunt the elk who hides with her calf in a spray of stars. Finally, at the end of winter, Mangi will overtake the elk and bring brightness, the songs of waterbirds, and spring to the land.

A Short History of the Buffalo
from European Contact to the Present,

or

How the Buffalo Got the Best of Us, In the End.

It all started with Cabeza de Vaca. It was Cabeza de Vaca and his cows that changed the face of the continent forever. When Cabeza sailed for the New World, he was followed by a herd of rebel cows seeking freedom from the tyrannical grip of the Spaniards. The brave cattle hid in the bilges of the boat and bellered all the way across the ocean, their moans wailing with the wind through the tattered sails. When the ship wrecked off the coast of Florida in 1528, the surviving cows jumped ship and swam alongside the desperate rafts that the crewmen had rigged together with bootstraps and twine.

Few of the rebels survived the roiling sea, but a half dozen or so sodden beasts pulled alongshore Cabeza and his shipmates. Precisely as the hooves and hands of the castaways dug into the sandy shore, the soil of the New World shuddered and heaved. At that very same moment the great hulking gypsies that wandered the land snorted and stomped, as if struck by a sudden wind. The buffalo turned all at once, the upthrust of some dark cordillera, a great shifting sea, to face the storm that came beating down out of the southeast on the hooves of an old woman's warrior

cry.

The cows standing shaky with their sea legs felt the quake, and perhaps it was this sense of unease that they decided to stick with the surviving Spaniards. Whatever it was, they would come to regret it.

All through the southern half of the north American continent they wandered, through the desolate Rio Grande country and northern Mexico, where painted people persecuted them with darts that dinged off of their protruding ribs. As luck would have it, Cabeza de Vaca, Head of a Cow, proved worthy of his name. With the obscure gesticulations and occult Latin mutterings he used to heal the sick and raise the dead, Cabeza attracted many friendly natives who fed and sheltered the lost survivors... until it was time to resume the wanderings which Cabeza de Vaca, it appeared, actually seemed to enjoy.

At the same time it seemed the cows had surrendered complete control of their destiny; morale had completely disintegrated and they had fallen back into an old coping routine, enabling the Spaniards to feel superior in every way. But the bovines were sunblasted and beaten, half-starved, and had left several companions to the bickering of red-headed buzzards.

Finally, somewhere in Mexico, the party was rescued by Cabeza's countrymen, and the cows were given water, food and rest. But as soon as the bovines settled down under the cool palm fronds, Antonio de Mendoza, the Spanish viceroy,

cracked the whip. He ordered them to lead Coronado and several hundred soldiers, slaves, sheep and pigs in the search to find the Seven Golden Cities of Cibola.

Damn that de Vaca anyhow... was he naive, or what? He had told the conquistadores that he had seen shimmering cities of gold to the north, and now they would all pay for his poor judgement. Cabeza de Vaca's poetry was well known to his companions who suffered the man's endless sonnets sung to the sun-warmed granite and pink sandstone cliffs. But what Cabeza didn't seem to understand was that his countrymen had been blinded by the ingots in their eyes: they couldn't see the lights and symmetry and took his words literally. The bullwhip flared and bit: "To the Seven Cities of Cibola!"

As Coronado forged north towards the riches that awaited him, the sun shone so hot off the helmets of his men that small brush fires leapt to life at their feet and burnt holes in their soles and sent their muskets a-booming and banging. The cows trailed behind, their long horns clearing away the burning chamisa and sagebrush, their heads to the ground. All this sacrifice and suffering to find freedom, and here they were back in the hands of the Leyenda Negra, the Spaniards known as the Black Legend of the earth.

The cows trampled along, browsing away at the very seam of the universe, each step shredding the stitch that held the hem of the hemisphere together. Old Yellow Wolf of the

Cheyenne and Chief Plenty Coups of the Crow saw the strange creatures approach and warned their people that the buffalo would soon be gone. Drinks Water of the Sioux dreamed that all the fourleggeds were going back into the earth. Still, it was hard to believe that these sorry beasts who were driven by men who wore half a mountain of metal on their chests wouldn't just cave in and crumble from their own weight. Perhaps if the men could be persuaded to take off those clanking armadillo husks, they would feel the wind and rain and sun on their skin and find their way home.

Coronado, of course, was disappointed when all he found was corn and chilies and great Zuni houses of stone. He turned over every soup basket, scraped out every metate, and killed twelve warriors with an anguished cry. Francisco Vasquez de Coronado flourished the sign of the cross, wheeled his horse in the sand, and spurred his men sharply on.

While previously Cabeza de Vaca had walked the Texas coast to Culiacan praising the remarkable buffalo, Coronado's men could find no use for them. Coronado's bunch tried to persuade the beasts to reveal to them the secret route to the ancient city of Quivara, but the buffaloes' eyes only glowed a deeper red in their thick skulls. They shifted their rocky shoulders to the wind and would not relent, so the conquistadors killed them as enemies of Spain.

One day one hundred years later, the bones of Cabeza de Vaca rattled in their casket when he heard the blasts of sixteen Spanish guns go off four thousand and thirty times. Cabeza did some quick mental figuring and came up with approximately 251.14 buffalo per conquistador-- a record broken only by the stand of Tom Nixon, who in 1876 cut down one hundred twenty buffalo in forty minutes. Cabeza cried; like Plenty Coups and Yellow Wolf and Drinks Water he saw the end of a great many things. The long war against the buffalo had begun. In the rustling of the leaves in the cool evening breeze, Cabeza whispered to his countrymen who fell asleep longing for paella bubbling with saffron and rosemary over the fire, for chianti warmed rose-red in grateful hands. These same men dreamt that night of duststorms and locusts, and woke wondering if perhaps the whole notion of conquest was not such a good ideeer after all.

Durn right, said Charley M. Russell, one of the only for real and true cowboys of this country. Lookit what we got here now, he would say. Cows made by man that replaced the rangy longhorn that replaced the old-time true buffalo. This is what's called the devolution of mankind, he would say. Invention has made it easy for mankind but it has made him no better. Michinery has no branes!

When the Yaqui Indians of the Southwest first

encountered the Europeans, they called them the "gente de razones" because they were always explaining this, explaining that. They were a curious lot, these razonistas, and many people wondered if they were bewitched. Indeed, the razonista practiced a sorcery that the locals would not have believed if they had not seen it for themselves: they forced a global positioning system down the throat of an albatross; they flew a cow over Philadelphia, PA. just to see how well milk travelled. The natives painted the ground beneath them with clouds of the nutritionally-enriched flour they were given; they dipped the donated hats into springs and drank from them; they composed songs to sing the razonistas home.

Many a time-worn elder clicked his tongue and tried to warn the razonistas that "en la boca cerrada no entran moscas," but flies raced in and out of their open mouths anyhow, because the whites were too busy talking to pay attention. "The sun the darkness the winds," whispered Geronimo, "and all listening to what we say."

And so it came to be that the mouths of the razonistas filled up with alkali dust; whatever wind blew from their lips was sure to get grit in the eyes and ears and chip the teeth of the luckless listener. To escape the numbing spell that the razonista cast with equation and extrapolation, a person had to run quick and fetch charcoal from the fire to draw dark lines all along the cheekbones for protection. Other shapes and forms did exist in the world, and if a

person wanted to remain in the world where rocks rumbled and raged about the earth like the huge stone behemoths they were and trees shook their limbs in fear and fascination, one had to remember that Reason was illusion.

One had to recite little prayers under the breath just to overcome the constant chatter of voices that was broadcast from devices hidden behind every rock and bush. The disembodied words of economists, geneticists and specialists were disturbing, but "them that knew" took the proper precautions-- they kept right on humming and climbing trees and raiding barns and banging pots together in rhythm to the rain.

But it was precisely that broadcast news that drove more than half the world half crazy. A major revolt was being planned, on a massive scale. The natives of southern Mexico were the first to take up the old battle cry (although of course people had been fighting the system for centuries) and spearhead the campaign against the razonistas. The Vivatista rebels were an offshoot of the Zapatista movement, which resisted the European domination and exploitation of indigenous peoples.

The success of the Vivatista revolution depended largely on a loyal group of undercover informants which included the spores of the rainforest (who had heard all words ever spoken through time), and the lichen of the Mayan temples (who could accurately predict victory and defeat). Much to the dismay of the razonistas of the world,

the Vivatistas were gaining tremendous support. Supporters of the rebel movement adopted the black ski masks of the Zapatistas for their own purposes: to symbolize solidarity with all of life and to signify respect for the fertile earth, the dark Madonna who gave all and received all. The black ski masks were also practical: they concealed the identity and shielded the eyes from the glare of government spotlights that beamed down from the north.

Elsewhere in the Americas, people of heart ran for the hills, barefoot at sunrise. (At sunrise the sun greeted you and guided you with open arms of light, well before the razonistas had risen from their feather beds and blankets to drink the hot black water that helped them to think). The same people would then seek out an animal-- fox, marten, crow, coyote -- any creature that would agree to carry the person's soul in her coat or his gullet to some safe far away place on the earth. The top of a high mountain, perhaps, a verdant grotto deep in the wood, or far out on the scoured and windy plains-- anywhere a person's soul could be scattered like seed and allowed to take root in the earth.

It was difficult and dangerous work, as the live coal of the person's soul made the animal conspicuous, even in the dead of night when most creatures now traveled. And so the animals did not take the requests lightly; many would only consider the request if the individual had made a

serious offering of some sort, often at great risk to the person involved.

Of course there were many desperate people who never found their way out to the hills. Those seeking escape from the confusing maze of razonista rationale either went plumb loco or found some other way to cope. Calamity Jane Canary, for instance, handled herself perfectly well with a six gun and several bottles of whiskey.

This sort of renegade, wildly obstinate and carefree behavior made more than one stern and sober man mad. Especially men like Wild Bill Hickock. He wasn't always Wild, you know, and he wasn't always Bill. (It could be argued that he never was either). Most days he was just plain old Jim who tried to keep the blood off of his white buckskin and his curls in line. Women like Calamity Jane drove men like Bill nuts because they could hurl on you anytime, unloading their fireguns of frustration or whatever else they were hauling around in their female parts. And what's worse, women like Calamity Jane simply could not listen to reason. "They were like a mean old mama sow, only smellier."

Now Bill, he wore french cologne, and fine handtooled boots that had a heel one inch higher than Calamity's. He cut a fine figure on the coarse frontier-- hardedged, yet finally honed, like a good ripping knife. Of course, Bill never touched the knife, that was what skimmers were for; and actually, he'd take the saloon over smoky camp life any

day. And who can blame him? For it was in the glow of the lamplight that he really shone, the light cascading onto his shoulders and flickering in his eyes like lit matches beneath his broad-brimmed hat. Bill had a favorite table from which he could simultaneously study his cards and whoever happened to step through the swinging doors.

Wild Bill Hickock was, in essence, a nobleman, he affirmed to himself as he threw back the corner of his silk-lined cape. He really was not of that nit-infested crowd that called themselves hide hunters. Why, he could outshoot any of them, he was crawlin' on his belly and bringing down buffalo before any of these boys had cut their baby teeth, and he could bring any one of 'em down right here, right now, if he felt like it.

But his heart wasn't in it; he had killed enough men already. Besides, all he needed was a few more thousand hides and he could quit this country. He would buy back that diamond the size of Texas he had hocked and have it set back in his right front tooth, or better yet he would give it to that horsetrainer gal whose very name reminded him of willows dappling the surface of a lily-pad pond. They could settle down, play poker and train horses in the garden all day long. (He ought to have a little pity on the ladies, though, he chuckled to himself-- here they were flocked all around him like a coop full of lovely and delicate Russian hens, nevermind the hole in his tooth).

But then there would be some big commotion outside, a

screeching or hollerin' and hootin', and gunshots fired recklessly into the air. Bill would shake his handsome head, while the women-- who had gathered around him to savor the cool breeze that floated just at the surface of his skin-- rolled their blue-canopied eyes. In would bust Calamity Jane and her whole herd of bedeviled broncs, tossing tables and knocking over chairs and kicking up clouds of dust... drinking and carrying on like tomorrow was only a shadow on the tilted curving lip of time.

"Why WILD Bill HICKock," came the inevitable shriek (if he hadn't managed to escape by then). "Where you been, honey?" And Calamity, as she was so aptly called, would belly on up to Bill's altar, wielding her elbows sharp as a wedge into the corsets of the fluttering flock, and slap her big bronzed hands down hard on the table. She would stare straight into Wild Bill's shifty eyes, give him a slow knowing wink and a big grin, and then (she did this every time) she would step back and with a swift kick of her clodhoppers she would knock his perfectly balanced hat off of his careful coiffure. Affectionately she would reach out a big paw to tousle his lovely locks and pinch his hollow cheeks as if he were a small boy and not a hardened killer. "Bill darlin'," she would say (the entire crowd now holding their breath), "I know you was wantin' ta git hitched tomorra, but I gotta go out and git these greenhorns fixed up... they cain't rope a darn rock! Yull fergive me, wontcha?", and then, before he could come back

with some witty, scathing remark, Calamity would collapse with hilarity into the arms of the riotous crowd, her whiskey bottle flung and exploding in mid-air with a shot from her gun fired quicker'n you could slap a horsefly. GOD he hated that woman. Someday he would gut shoot her for sure.

Bill wouldn't wait for daylight to get out of Dodge or Deadwood or Abilene if Calamity had hit town; he would cut out for the herds at the mere mention of her name. He wasn't scared of her, he told himself as he fingered his ivory-handled, gold-plated pistol;; he was just afraid he might cut loose and kill the crazy woman once and fer all. Bill Hickock was a calculating man, a true razonista at heart... there was no need to get run out of town just yet. The big herds were moving in from Indian territory like a magnificent brown carpet, coming to whisk him away to the land of shaded verandahs and iced tea tinkling in tall glasses. If he was lucky he get a couple hundred hides a day.

This of course was when the war between the buffalo and the white man, foreseen by Cabeza and so many others, was well under way. Old Lady Horse of the Kiowa sat in the sun one afternoon and with a voice that stirred the stiff needles of ponderosa and sifted the dry winter grass, told this story: "The buffalo were everything to the people. The people made their tipis of buffalo hide. Their clothing,

their moccasins, also of hide. They ate buffalo meat. Their containers were made of hide, or of bladders or of stomachs. The buffalo were the life of the people."

"Most of all," she continued, "the buffalo were important to the people's religion. A white buffalo calf must be sacrificed at the Sun Dance of the Kiowa. The priests used parts of the buffalo to make prayers to heal people and to sing to the powers above."

"So, when the white man wanted to build railroads, or to farm or to raise cattle, the buffalo protected the people. They tore up the railroads and the gardens..."

"Yayayayaya," screeched a proud indigo-winged bluejay as he swept up his shining cloak to land on the old woman's shoulder. The jay chortled and chirped, nodding his black fez up and down, back and forth. Old Lady Horse continued: "they chased cattle off the ranges. The buffalo loved the people as much as the people loved them." The velveteen-breasted bluejay cocked his head and looked about with his glinty black eyes "...yayayayaya!" he screeched.

The bluejay, you see, considered the losses in the war somewhat of a personal failure. He himself had failed to reach the buffalo in time to warn them of the danger. Bluejay had heard strange musical blasts one morning-- not really music, more like air forced through a stiff reed-- and he had flown to the nearest mountaintop to have a look around. When he reached the long rocky ridge he found the bluebirds all a-flutter and twitter. Look! look! they

chattered in agitation. Far away across the rolling hills and hollows, beyond the pine and fir that reached out to the golden-lit lands, the bluejay heard the honking blast again. He saw the glint of a trumpet just as he had seen the glint of swords so many centuries before. The soldiers were already lined out and advancing all along the plains!

The bluejay had always been known as camp crier and he took his craft seriously. So the brave jay pulled his cap down tight and tore down the mountain, darting and whisking through the woods faster than a spark could fly from struck flint. He didn't stop at the edge of the woods as he usually did-- he knew in his heart that this time he would have to risk it all. "Tchitchitchichi! Tchitchitchichi!," cried Bluejay as he flew headlong into the pummeling wind.

Bluejay warned every creature he passed along the way, he sent word ahead that the razonistas were coming into the buffalo country. But he was too late. Bluejay arrived in time to see the soldiers already shooting the buffalo, as fast as they could. A few ravens and magpies helped him to make a surprise attack from above, and for a while the sky was a confounding mess of blue and green and white and black as the birds divebombed the soldiers. The bird bombardiers tried to peck out the eyes of the attackers, tried to push them back with small forceful explosions-- but soon the jay was a mass of torn and broken feathers, his beak bent and cap twisted.

It was a long and bloody struggle, and finally Bluejay

himself could only watch as the buffalo and the kin of Old Lady Horse and countless others were roped and fenced with wire. The captives were forced on to small squares of dirt that actually shrunk beneath their feet before their very eyes, a situation that made them all exceedingly uncomfortable. The buffalo and the people had to take turns holding each other up just to make enough room in the barbed compound.

The buffalo that remained free realized that they had to take the offensive, because the white razonistas had already begun to unpack their golf bags and polish their pointer sticks.

In response, the buffalo lifted their tails and dropped their regal dark heads to the ground so that their flowing beards left circular designs in the dust (this signaled the international sign for "bullshit"). The buffalo did not relent. Strands of rusted barbed steel began to show on the horns of elder warriors, and defiance fired their obsidian eyes.

They knocked over the telegraph poles that began to line up along the prairie like toothpicks poked into reuben sandwiches at the Western Cafe on a busy day. The poles made good backscratchers on the treeless plain-- especially after the razonistas drove big thick nails and hooks in them to discourage precisely that activity. While the razonistas were strategists, the buffalo were pure passion in war. In later years, the buffalo could be seen carousing

with their old friends Etta Place and Butch Cassidy-- Etta was a better shot than Butch and the two of them would race alongside the herds, plinking out glass insulators as the buffalo brought the poles down with thunks. It was good fun, even during a time of untold grief and loss.

The buffalo rammed into railroad cars-- virtual suicide. They ravaged the tidy croquet lawns of the Church Universal and Triumphant, their hooves hollow thunder over the heads of the bomb-sheltered believers below. And on a spontaneous day of protest, the brash young warriors of the buffalo tribe shocked the nation by defecating en masse on the John D. Rockefeller Jr. Memorial Parkway. Elsewhere, brave bison youth barricaded the hiways of National parks and preserves, unimpressed by the ho-hos, twinkies and frito-lays the tourists offered as tokens of peace. No, these tremendous buffalo, like the Spanish-tortured buffalo before them, had great perseverance and foresight. They knew that any plea bargain or treaty at this point was trickery, and they answered the park visitors with only an occasional huff, or a brief bellow. No hostages were taken, but one yearling bull did tear into the seat of a man's khaki pants, tossing him and his expensive Japanese camera several feet into the air.

It was at this point that the razonista generals decided to hire hunters to do nothing but kill the buffalo. The cavalry men told these makeshift soldiers that there would be no sitting in smoky saloons, no parleying with the

ladies, no tomfoolery gold-digging in the hills. This was war. The nation needed hardy men willing to test their strength, endurance and skill. There must be vigilance, discipline, solidarity within them. The vast plains were crying out for freedom from the pounding hooves of the primitive beasts.

Wild Bill Hickock, of course, signed right up. He didn't get in as good a take as he would have liked, though. His eyesight was failing (perhaps from constantly looking over his shoulder into dark alleyways?) and his counts had faltered, especially after the trouble he had had with the Cheyenne peace chief, Whistler. (Was it the shadow of Whistler that filled each print of his horse's hooves, was it remorse?) Yes, its true, Whistler had once saved his life-- but for him to come unannounced into Hickock's camp and beg a cup of coffee-- well, that was downright rude and any man would have shot him dead on the spot. This was the West, remember; it was dangerous.

It was about that time that Hickock decided he'd hook up with Buffalo Bill. Buffalo Bill had recognized Wild Bill's talent, even if Buffalo Bill was a big talker. He'd show those city boys what the West was all about. Let these prarie swine plunk away, he laughed, haha! as he swung onto his saddle with what really was an honest-to-God grace and charm. And Wild Bill Hickock rode off into the sunset, his back forwards and his front backwards, so that he could see whatever ghostly apparitions followed him. (They say he ran

clear off the face of the earth, utterly destroyed by the news from Copernicus that he was not the center of the Universe. "Let that dirty devil go," said Frank Linderman. "I've never been so glad to see the southwest end of a horse going northeast in my life").

For the most part, however, the hide hunters experienced great success. Behind the hunters came the skimmers in their wagons and trucks, and together the hide men and the skimmers loaded the hides into their four-wheel drive vehicles and took them to the train stations and auction markets where they sold for sixty-five or ninety cents a piece. With a stroke of luck a guy could land a white buffalo, in which case he might get two hundred dollars-- or how about Prarie Dog Dave, who sold his white buffalo hide to the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition commission for one thousand dollars?

The buffalo, of course, suffered apocalyptic loss. The sky at sunset has been red with mourning ever since. The big bluestem and switchgrass soaked up the blood of their relations, bowing their lofty seedheads to the ground and crying into the empty dust of the old buffalo wallows. The meadowlarks and bobolinks came, nary a lark or bobble in them, to drink and wash themselves in the shining dewdrops that hung like tears from the leaves and reflected their gently tilted heads in tiny prisms. The grasses set about rustling and keening in the wind, swearing among themselves that they would never grow up among the beloved trails of

the buffalo; the paths would serve as monument to the hooves they had known through time and hazard to the relentless wheels of razonista wagons.

When the bone pickers came 'round they hauled away a hundred buffalo worth of bones for eight dollars a ton to the Kansas Pacific, the Northern Pacific, the Santa Fe. The prairie dropseed and pasque flowers pleaded with them in soft voices to leave the bones so that the minerals could be properly recieved, so that they could send the buffalo home with blessings and prayer. But the bone men couldn't hear the whispering and shifting sounds over the clank and clatter of their work, and cursed the dirt that clung to the bones. Finally, the speckled sunburst of wood lilies and the starry array of prairie phlox and winking black-eyed susans simply did not have the heart to look upon the world overrun by wheel and plow. They hid themselves in the dark clutches of the soil, only daring to greet the sun and wind and rain on rare and propitious occasions.

From every direction, then, a sound gathered like storm. It was the breath of the buffalo, rolling and rumbling across the sky like a hot tsunami wind. For in every corner of the country, from Allards Trading Post (Candy pop cigarettes authentic Indian jewelry junk food live bison exhibit clean restrooms) to Canada's Wood Buffalo Park to the restless boneyards of Buffalo, NY (where spirits had been confusing the local populace by

turning over cadillacs and leaving huge unexplained wallows on suburban lawns), the buffalo were moving. Soon the earth began to heave and shudder, and pale sleepless men locked their doors against the rumblings of the night.

The buffalo kept coming on, coming on. They rolled across mountains like dark sea clouds cascading over the endless gold expanse of grass, they pounded through the fields of corn and soybean and alfalfa, their ancestral soil. They blasted through barbed wire and knocked over grain silos to the cheering multitudes of songbirds who sang their welcome songs of joy. And as the heavy thundering hooves passed, the downy gentian and the fringed orchid rose up from the dark churned earth and rejoiced, while thousands of amber-winged butterflies flew spiraling from the beebalm and milkweed.

The buffalo began to gather in woolly throngs along the banks of the Madison for the great buffalo council. There, at a winter camp that spread to the shores of Hebgen Lake, the buffalo sang and stomped, and performed the sacred rites and secret preparations necessary for a great raid on the whites.

Early one dawn, a dark and anvil cloud was seen to seethe on the horizon of West Yellowstone. Plumes of snow and torrents of dirt hurled from its mass. And suddenly the town was struck, a hurricane of hooves bearing down, churning concrete, shattering storefront windows where

flyfishing dummies in mosquito-netting hats sat astride Husky Husqvarnas, poised at the ready.

The thundering herd of roiling beasts bent parking meters like paper clips. It collapsed, in one victorious surge, the town's Pride O' The West landmark-- a twenty-four foot pole suspending an enormous white buffalo, the sister of Big Medicine, enshrined in plexiglass between earth and sky. Finally free, the stuffed one felt her blood flare and with one deep and furious bellow, shattered the beams of the Stockman's Bar.

Down at the Western Cafe, big-hatted and big-belted men sat, with chairs chattering and mouths agape as forkfuls of food-- ham 'n eggs, bacon 'n eggs, Jimmy Dean Pure Pork Sausage 'n eggs-- hit the cracked linoleum floor. "Call 9-1-1! Call 9-1-1!" shrieked the waitress as she flung herself, spatula akimbo, atop the counter. But it was no use. The phone lines were down. And the only movement from the men was that of an inadvertant burp in the acrid air.

Small fires broke out due to electrical upset. Ravens began circling the sky above West Yellowstone, blue-black and brazen in their coarse laughter as the victorious buffalo swung northward to feast and sing and dance their victory songs.

Naturally, when the news hit the national media, all hell broke loose. The CIA organized a covert meeting of razonista generals to plan a counter attack. While there was general unspoken sentiment that the town of West

Yellowstone had it coming, with its incessant snowmobile whine, the rasonistas in charge raised a royal ruckus.

And from behind the padlocked door of a room that held several small creatures captive in a formaldehyde and sugar solution on top of a long aluminum steel table, from behind this same door that opened up onto one of several long white corridors on one of several floors of one of several brick buildings on the campus of a large and prestigious university, men in white coats emerged with syringe and needle in gloved hands. "The solution," they smiled to each other, shaking hands and slapping each other on the back in a hardy fraternal manner. Then the heels of their polished black shoes went click clicking down the halls in opposite directions, until they blended into the white walls and eventually disappeared.

Brucellosis! clamored the next mornings headlines. It was reported that "the North American Bison, or Buffalo, carries the predatory bacteria Brucellosis, which consumes the fetuses of cows from within. A team of the nation's top scientists proved that Brucellosis causes mini-explosions in the brain and the proliferation of subversive microflora in the gastro-intestinal tract of women and children if the meat of carriers (such as exposed beef) is consumed. Government biologists concurred with local health and safety officials that most wild animals carry the lethal bacteria." It was advised that the public stay away from unidentified creatures of any sort.

And Charlie Russell, who had been busy sneaking into grocery stores to paint the new biotechnology "flavor-saver" tomatoes in gaudy outlandish colors, hollered out from his place of hiding. "If these smart fellers don't quit foolin' with things tryin' to beat God Almighty at his own game," he declared bitterly, "we'll all be trying to eat each other one of these days just like a damned incubator hen!"

The razonista harnessed his firepower while the last herd of buffalo gathered on the shores of Hebgen Lake to sing their death songs. Shoulder to shoulder they stood, frozen breath collecting on their great granite heads. As the whine of approaching snowmobiles pitched higher, each buffalo warrior turned, muscles drawn tight as a bow, to face the morning slaughter.

Among these whites that came to slaughter, the buffalo recognized by scent several old foes who now wore clear plastic bubbles over their heads and padded orange bodysuits-- whether for camouflauge or protection or as some symbolic accoutrement of war, the buffalo could not say. There was gimpy old Phil Sheridan, still playing that worn out battle cry like a broken record: "for the sake of a lasting peace! Let them kill, skin and sell until the buffaloes are exterminated!" And there were the cavalrymen, the biologists, the businessmen and the hide hunters who came in buzzing hordes, their snowmobiles criss-crossing

the snowy hills like a crazy cloud of insects (that made the mosquitoes, slumbering away with sheathes of thorn to protect their proboscises, suffer sad nightmares of shame).

Along came Buffalo Bill, still in his fringed britches and broadcasting the Wild West Show over his red, white and blue beaded bullhorn-- "JE VIENE! JE VIENE!" he cried, heels dug deep into the stirrups of a shiny white Arctic Cat. Behind Buffalo Bill plodded an entourage of ridiculous-looking but protesting people-- among them several "Indians" colored with paint and pasted with chickenfeathers, and Calamity Jane herself. Calamity Jane was kicking and screaming all kinds of bloody obscenities, but she was secured to her proud horse Satan with silver strapping tape, and was thus rendered helpless. The lot of them had been poisoned with a mild concoction of MJB, bug-juice, cayenne pepper and sugar-- an evil mixture that Buffalo Bill had cajoled them into drinking so that he could pull off just one more show, this last for the benefit of the Grand Duke of Russia, Prince Alexis. Prince Alexis himself rode in the royal sidecar with white wolf pelts warming his knees, reflecting on a certain Siberian winter in which the trunks of all the trees in the ancient fir forest cracked in the cold.

As the front lines of the regiment approached, however, the razonistas realized that the buffalo had taken refuge behind a thick grove of trees. The generals pulled out

their high-powered scopes and sent out scouts. Calamity Jane gave an outrageous holler, a hoot of joy when she realized that the group lined out in front of the spires and peaks of horns were her long lost, very own people. Reinforcements!

There stood Cabeza de Vaca, gaunt and naked, barefoot in the snow and raging like a mad man, his head upthrust and fists pulled down so that the tendons of his neck and arms resonated and vibrated with the music of violins. De Vaca was surrounded by a thousand million stars, the diamonds that glinted from the eyes of a prickly bunch of Texas longhorns, who were headed for Europe to take back the homeland. There was Charley M. Russell, reloading his paintbrushes and polishing his paintbox with spit while a few black-masked women with machetes admired his Mexican red sash. Charley was telling them, "If I was painting frute flowers automobiles and flying machines this would be a good country... but Nature ain't lived here for a long time, and that's the old lady I'm looking for..." and the strong-boned women enjoined him with spicy exclamations and heated exhortations. And Calamity felt a stirring of hope in her calcified heart, some spark within her was struck from stones ringing with memory and fire. It was this spark that smoldered into a small flame and melted the tape that bound her; although her arms were scorched, she did not cry out-- she whispered into black Satan's satin ear and bolted amid cries of treachery and whistling missiles, straight to

the cheering enemy lines.

And then the final battle began. Amidst the blood and the fury the buffalo witnessed people standing peacefully before the big guns in protest, while the words of the prophet Wovoka danced in the singed and smoking air. The buffalo watched as several people attempted guerrilla tactics led by Emiliano Zapata, Tecumseh and Cochise. W.T Hornaday, the curator from the National Museum, ran from rock to rock dinging the enemy with buffalo nickles and other small projectiles while Calamity ran straight into showers of bullets, slinging her sixshooter back and forth, her laughter forming an impenetrable barrier around her.

But the battle was short-lived, for the razonistas were resolute. And the buffalo could not stand to live in a world dominated by disrespect and savagery, by such steely and crushing conviction. The buffalo saw that their day was over. They could protect the people no longer. For one last time the buffalo stood together on the land, then turned.

An old woman walked along the broken trail of bloodied snow. Her heart was on the ground as she reached for fragments of shorn hide and hair snagged on sharp branches along the way. She sang in a low voice that stirred the stiff needles of ponderosa and sifted the dry winter grass, while an indigo-winged bird flew in broad arcs about her head, crying "tchitchitchichi! tchitchitchichi!" As she sang and walked, the woman looked slowly across the water, peering through the haze of heating ice. And there she saw

the last wild buffalo herd appear like a spirit dream. The herd was led by a tremendous white buffalo cow, her powerful shoulders plunged forward, her spine rolling like gleaming water over unknown depths, her glittering hooves striking the earth and sending ice crystals showering in the still air. The herd was running, running, past the men slicing heaps of flesh, past the onlooking whites, past the people with their hearts scattered like frozen petals on the snow.

And as they ran, green shoots shot up behind them. They ran with vigor. Straight to Blue Mountain they ran, cows and calves, young males, old bulls. And as the woman watched, the face of the mountain opened.

"Inside the mountain, the world was green and fresh, as it had been when her grandmother was a small girl. The rivers ran clear, not red. The wild plums were in blossom, chasing the red buds up the inside slopes. Into this world of beauty the buffalo walked, never to be seen again." And the woman followed.

Another Pleasant Valley Sunday

Welcome songs of redwing and whistling swan, faint trails of Joni Mitchell and Costa Rican coffee on the air-- I open the back of the camper to let it all in. Stretching out of my sleeping bag and climbing over the tailgate, I turn towards the day. Still frosty.

There's something familiar about this place. Maybe it's the birdsong, the gentle hum of the world warming up. Then again, there's an odd phenomenon that treeplanters of the Kootenai National Forest experience-- a sort of projected amnesia. You wake up every morning absolutely certain that you just planted the clearcut that lies scorched and barren before you. But then a green rig shows up laden with boxes packed with little trees just waiting for you to send them home. You will sigh, and acknowledge that in this dead-end career track of treeplanter, your job is never done. The realization of this fact may be good for the cash flow, but it's hard on the bones, the (prematurely-curved) spine, the wrists, elbows, knees, optimism, worldview, and the blood pressure of parents who paid for your college education.

Today, however, is going to be a good day; today I am a proud and strong treeplanter. The valley below lies open and long, set with sparkling lakes, long reeds and lowing cows. Steve, I say, as he hands me a steaming mug of morning brew-- doesn't this place feel familiar? The warmth

begins to seep into my chill, my joints begin to move and creak; I'm feeling good. Sure, he smiles, cynicism nipping his goodnatured laugh. He looks at me ravenlike through his horned-rims. Sure, pulling at his hasidic beard: Pleasant Valley.

Pleasant Valley? Nah. Can't be. Pleasant Valley? No way. I look out over the pastoral scene again, tentative, and feel the inside of my head slowly constrict, my guts begin to tangle. Shit, Steve, you're right. Jesus. I heave a sigh into the steam of my coffee. Let it go, I say to myself, let this go. Feel the sun.

It wasn't until later that day, as I was stumbling over deadfall and trying to sink my hoedad into rock, that the feelings flooded me. Our crew, a small cooperative, was working on contract for the US Forest Service, which had cut the existing mixed pine forest to convert the land to a more desirable doug-fir and larch timber crop. None of the felled trees had been used, and diesel cats had plowed the unit, churning up soil, stone and wood so that you couldn't tell where the earth lay. Rainbows lay in viscous pools of turgid water, and the lowing cows had obliterated the morning thrush melodies. I trodded along, unable to get a single tree in the ground. Finally I fell onto a bleached muddy log, incapable. My whole body ached. I thought of a creature seeking shelter, and wept.

A year earlier, some friends and I (Steve included) had set up camp in Pleasant Valley to try to keep the US Fish and Wildlife Service from killing a lone wolf pup. As I sat there on the clearcut, all the frustration and anger of that attempt, combined with the ghost-like atmosphere surrounding me now, produced a watershed of despair. No matter how many seedlings I put in the ground with a prayer, no matter how often I felt I had tried to intercede on the side of life-- wild life, native life-- I was always as guilty as the rest.

Even as a treeplanter I acquiesced to the severe land management practices of the Forest Service; quite tangibly I was helping big industry continue cut-and-run logging in the West. It was a standard joke among our crewmembers that we were keeping the loggers employed-- and, of course, that the loggers were keeping us employed. But how could we possibly replace the diverse native forests (and all they contained), which had gained purchase in sheer rock through will or mystery, with two or three types of engineered crop trees? How could I plant spruce seedlings on a hot dry slope, with goodwill and a clear conscience, and expect them to survive? I could not afford to be so naive as to believe that, in my small attempts at restoration, I was making much of a difference. Naivete causes heartbreak, and I felt broken.

Neither could I afford to become a cynic, though. I had seen righteousness work on me before; I had felt it turn to

condemnation and try to devour me from the within. As I see myself now, from the vantage point of experience and time, I am sitting on that clearcut, weeping dramatically as clouds churn around me. I am immobilized by loss. I do not know it yet, but I am in the rainshadow of some small epiphany, I am moving towards the light. To get there, however, I have to tell a story.

Nancy and I got out of the Comet and pulled on our camo caps. Hers was emblazoned with an olive green heifer and the words 4-G Land and Cattle Co.-- much preferable to my not entirely appropriate red plastic Cenex baseball hat. Somehow we thought an easy gait and such apparel would save us from the subversive nature of the many stickers plastered to the back of her rig. Slogans such as "Love Your Mother-- Don't Become One," (with a blue-green earth emblazoned in the center), or "I'll Take My Beef -- Poached, Thanks" would not be appreciated here, and we backed quickly into the parking space. Thus we sauntered, inwardly apprehensive, feigning familiarity, into the Kalispell Livestock Auction Barn.

A few old men watched us pass as they sat drinking coffee from styrofoam cups at long formica fold-up tables. They hunched over their cups or leaned back casually in their fold-up chairs, eyes laughing and wrinkled with the weather beneath the brims of their sweatstained feedcaps and crushed cowboy hats. A middle-aged woman, her hair

neatly styled, paused at her post in the corner at the aluminum coffee percolater but we continued on, whether we passed muster or not. Oddly enough (contrary to my self-image as infiltrator, that is), I felt quite comfortable there. I think I would have enjoyed sitting down with those rangy men for a cup of lukewarm MJB. The easy way they held themselves, the comfort with which they talked and laughed-- they reminded me of my mother's family in Froid, Montana, where the people plow into the wind at a forty-five degree angle to the earth, where my grandparents pulled at the hard highline ground to pile and chink against the wind.

But there was no time to ponder, or reminisce: Nancy and I had work to do. We needed information, and we needed it fast. We found our way into the dim stadium, where dust rose and hung in the air to surround a man in a big hat. The man stood in the center of the arena, flaying the butt of a big pink pig who ran in circles around him. The sow ran as far from the snap of the man's whip and as close to the corral fence as she could get, her sharp hooves pocking the dirt and setting off small explosions of straw and manure. "Ain't she a Beaut," the man said, owner and price rattled together with other incomprehensibles only auctioneers can understand. More men in hats worked the corrals behind the main arena, lining out goats and sheep and pigs, and Nancy and I scanned the billboards. We were looking for a sign, for any clue that might channel our

anxious energy in a clear direction.

We knew that there was a rancher near Marion, Montana, that had received monetary compensation from Defenders of Wildlife for an alleged wolf depredation of livestock. We also knew that federal officials were now trying to trap a wolf seen in the area, a lone pup left the previous year when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had trapped and relocated, and consequently destroyed, the remainder of the Marion wolf pack.

At the time, Nancy and I moved on the principle of justice: killing a wolf, of which there are few, for the sake of a cow, of which there are many, was simply not fair. We were tired of the sociological, sociopolitical rationalizations for wolf control a la "redirecting the rancher's shoot-shovel-and-shut-up syndrome." There had been too many dead "relocated" wolves. Ed Bangs, project leader for the federal wolf recovery program, had commented in the Missoulian that "... this isn't the time to watch the losses mount... this (losing livestock business) needs to be resolved in an efficient manner if wolf recovery is to go forward."

Nancy and I agreed with Bangs on one point: this was not the time to watch the losses-- of wolves-- mount. As Nancy exited to put film in her camera, my eyes fell on the painted outline of a cow fenced in by the words "Peebles Bar-P. Polled heifers. Pleasant Valley, MT." Nancy emerged up the aisle, looking directly at the very same sign. Our

eyes locked-- it was the only ad we had seen for a ranch near Marion. "Let's go," she said.

Off we rocketed in the Comet, careening onto county roads to try to thwart would-be wolf killers. We drove down the Pleasant Valley road, looking at cows, looking at ranches, looking like idiots, I am sure, with our binocs and shades. Luckily we were in very good humor, driving top speed through mud traps in the valiant green lowrider (later referred to lovingly as the Vomet), Dragnet done all over. "Do you think that's it?," Nancy asked. She was squinting towards a low barn near a lake, trilling and buzzing with blackbirds.

Aspen and cottonwood made their way into cattail and sedge, a few outbuildings trailing here and there into a rolling pasture blooming in cowpie. "HHMMuaaouuooo," I groaned, as four ear tags flopped in my general direction. "I don't know," I responded, dejected at the lack of obvious clues. "You'd think there'd be big government rigs or something." "Yeah, or big bloody traps, or men with guns," Nancy cackled demonically, in mock dementia. We laughed uneasily at ourselves. It was, after all, not that funny.

Two women driving around Pleasant Valley on a nice day seemed innocuous enough: for a moment I might have even felt foolish. But I could not escape the sour fear in my belly: it rose into my throat, rusted into barbs at the back of my mouth. There was a slow surreality to the whole

scene that melted the air on the hood, warbled the whitewashed farmhouses. I felt my vision shifting and breaking: behind this sleepy backdrop of platonic Americana snapped nasty jawed steel, the shriek of the wild, the death of wolves.

A year earlier, federal trappers had captured a female wolf, her mate and two pups which had been drawn to a boneyard of winterkilled cattle somewhere in Pleasant Valley. The wolves were snared in leghold traps, sedated with Telazol, and hauled to Ashley Creek Veterinary Clinic in Kalispell. There the creatures lay, immobile but mentally aware, as reporters, cameramen, veterinarians, biologists, and other various and sundry officials stepped over and around the wolves deadened on the floor between the white man's walls. The four wolves were then helicoptered to the southern boundary of Glacier National Park, whereupon the pack dispersed and disintegrated. The female took off to the south. The male, his left paw gnawed and maimed from the maws of a trap, was shot near a cattle herd, for "humanitarian" reasons. The two pups died of starvation. Another pup, a black female, still ran free in Pleasant Valley.

I suppose I half expected to see her, coal-eyed and shadowy on the fringe of a draw. Tracks, maybe, or scat. Scent. But no, we were 20th century humans encased in a green metal box on wheels. Circling this valley, seeking

furtively the Bar-P. Burned into the rear of that bull there? Check out that mailbox. Anything on the door of that pickup?

Well shit, no wonder these people don't want their name thrown around. Engaged in illegal and inhumane activities with endangered species and all. We contemplated inquiring about the Peebles at a nearby house, but couldn't work up a good enough story. It was sunset by then; we bumped back out to the highway to find beer.

Was it the Peebles ranch we were looking for, or not? We felt dusty, failed and frustrated. Had we misread our intuition and instinct at the Auction Barn? The tavern we sat in, Moose's, was not the most enlightening or empowering place for two worn out women. Bigbreasted and skin-glistened blondes embraced Coors bottles (the Silver Bullet), and winked at us from their tacks on the walls. Gals on the Moose's softball team ganged in, kicking up sawdust that lay scattered over the barroom floor and exuberant in their white tight-hipped uniforms. A guy across the bar repeatedly gave us the peace sign. It was happy hour. We ate peanuts.

And there we stayed, until somewhere in the course of the evening, Nancy met a roundish, pleasant fellow who said he worked with the Fish and Wildlife Service. He sat on the other side of Nancy, so that I couldn't hear their conversation, but I could see that he spoke softly, drank

Coors, and gave an occasional tug to the spare brown beard that fringed his face. Some sort of contest, conducted by the rugby-sized bartender and involving peanuts, a glass urn and free beers, was going on, so I focused my attention on that-- until Nancy's friend excused himself and she turned to me, eyes flashing. "Did you hear that? He traps coyotes for a living." When the man--Paul-- returned, I edged closer and heard Nancy say, very cool: "But I thought that Animal Damage Control took care of coyotes." "Well, yeah," said the guy, "but we work with the ADC sometimes." He seemed nice enough. "...Isn't there a wolf out there by Marion eating cattle?" The guy eyeballed us. We were still wearing our hats, and had had a few beers by then, so we knew we looked okay.

Well, sure enough. Right on. Paul had confirmed our suspicions-- that low barn buzzing by the lake. Always trust your intuition, we said to ourselves. The shaggy-haired man across the bar still flashed us the occasional peace sign, and when he saw our change of heart, he sent us congratulatory beers. But he and the rest of the crowd faded into the background of our bravado as Nancy and I began to argue with the bartender over private property rights and the near-naked ladies on the wall. Our evening abruptly ended when he kicked us out for throwing pizza instead of peanuts.

The next day we stopped by the Flathead County

Courthouse to look at land ownership maps, and orient ourselves with property boundaries. "Interested in a piece out there," I offered, more comfortable now in my alias. As luck would have, public land lay directly adjacent to the Peebles Bar-P. This was good; it would minimize getting tangled in illegal trespass.

We also paid a visit to the state Fish and Game office, to see if we could get any news of the ongoing wolf hunt. Entering the building, we were greeted by the snarl of a huge, alpha white male wolf, stuffed and showcased in plexiglass at the center of the room. My heart dropped to the floor. Those marbled eyes glued into space stared clear through me, a shard, empty and hard. In sad disbelief I turned to Nancy, who grinned, hands and pockets jammed full of complimentary "Ask First to Hunt and Fish on Private Land" and "Take Pride in America" stickers.

Two days later a group of us were gathered on a Forest Service road overlooking Loon Lake in Pleasant Valley. We had plans to smell up the place, to make our presence intolerable to the wolf, to walk and piss and talk all along the government-rigged trapline. Perhaps in this way we could disgust and enervate the wolf to such a degree that she would leave the valley, foil the feds, and seek a more quiet, suitable place to inhabit.

Not that this wasn't a fine place for a wolf. As I stood on a high rock outcrop at the south end of the

valley, the open expanse rolled and shimmered before me. A ridge of lodgepole and old larch embraced the basin, running deep into draws and creekbeds, pooling into graceful groups of aspen and birch. Easy vistas offered themselves from anywhere along the edge of the forest. Great lunchtime scenics, I thought. Especially for a large toothy carnivore. A she-wolf ran dark and quick through my mind, skirting the fringe, racing over the soft give of peat, an intent lope over bunchgrass. Whitetails collected and scattered, elk startled elegantly, a moose lowered its head in hard-eyed defiance.

The sun glared into my vision, and then it was only cows, and there they sat. Stood. Shat. Still, a sturdy meal for a meat-needing, bone-gnashing fourlegged. A strange, plaintive cry echoed from the woods behind me, sifting with the wind through the treetops. I knit my brow, strained my ear, off-balance.

But it was only Becky. Her beat-up rusty saxophone and the new untried version of the "aversive wolf conditioning" blues. If anything, I think, this oughtta work. I smiled to myself and headed back to camp.

We, friends and acquaintances now bound tight by common cause, have come fully prepared. Steve, a treeplanting friend, has brought a floursack full of donated bagels and bad cookies, good coffee, and two twelve packs of Schmidt. We have wirecutters and cameras, canteens and a pocket-

sized tape recorder; batteries, binocs, and two fairly reliable four wheel drive vehicles. No walkie-talkies, though.

We are an interesting mix of folks, to be sure. Billbob, the quiet diligent sort, drives a jeep with a winch and provides calm coherency. Perry is very logical, knows his constellations well, is facile and intrepid in public relations. Becky, of course, is simply great, a highly prized gem of a friend. Elfin-like, congenial, goofy, she plays oboe in the Great Falls Symphony with stand-up hair and is, in her gentle way, a ferocious animal rights activist. That leaves Chris, a woman with a loud and rampant distaste for authority, especially male, and me.

We have discovered, through Joe Fontaine, the USFWS field official in Pleasant Valley, that the Fish and Wildlife Service has no intention of relocating the female pup, but has obtained a kill order from the regional office in Denver. In reality, then, the practice of the trapline is an exercise in formality. Looks good to the public, assuaged in the belief that the wolf recovery team now employs new and improved leghold traps, specifically designed not to chop off paws.

This image of a kinder and gentler agency, of a more compassionate approach to animal "control" cracks when I come across an old trap, soldered with rust. The trap is attached to a chain that has clawed its way into the earth, full circle around a bowed sapling. A stump, six inches in

diameter, stands gnawed and shorn, just outside the beaten arc. There is a depression in the scraped dirt, an empty hollow the size of a small child. I cover the ground, dust at each step; I hold my sickened center. Chris trails out past the area into the forest cover, finding scat, some prints. Coyote.

Each morning we arise and head off, different directions into the fog. This morning I walk, comforted by sheltering larch, standing strong for the wings and crescendo call of the pileated woodpecker. It is damp and the roadcuts run thick with mud, but there is a pervasive feel of continuance here. Through the mist I can hear waterbirds and the sound of the day waking. I open my mind to this moment of solace with full attention; we must continually cleanse our wounds as we walk.

Inevitably I begin to think of the unfolding drama. Our presence is most surely known to the Fish and Wildlife Service and to Animal Damage Control by now. (The ADC is the CIA of the wildlife world, flushing and stamping out subterfuge by dangerous creatures like coyotes, blackbirds, wolves, and often housecats). Yesterday Becky discovered a coyote, tongue hanging in the heat, leg locked and bloody to the bone in one of the more "humane" tools of capture. "He must have been there all day, he had dragged that thing to exhaustion," she said, low and sad, still in shock. I can imagine her, trying to talk in slow even tones, trying

to redeem with her eyes the harm of her race. She said it took more strength than she had to unhinge the trap, that it was a miracle she had, that she knew the meaning of a steel jaw now. "I don't know if he'll make it," she stirred into her coffee.

The terrain flattens and widens and I know I am near the Bar P fenceline. I walk with care, never certain, never knowing when wide maws might snap at me, unearthing leaves, moss, rock. I come across the road bordering the ranch, hear a truck, and duck quickly behind some deadfall. Nothing, really. And besides, what's to hide? Righteousness swells within me: I defy secrecy. This is public land, and I am here to protect an endangered species. What could be more legal?

As the sun soaks up fragments of mist in the cattails, it becomes clear and hot. I walk along the ranch road, leaving intermittent scuff marks and pee trails. The low hills of the valley force the road to dip and sway and curve, something I always enjoy on a stroll. It is becoming quite a pleasant day.

I hear another vehicle, however, and am unsure. Again, suprised at the force of my instinct, I run up a knoll and hide behind a downed birch. This sound is different; my fear intensifies. Across the valley, suspended in the late morning haze, reverberates a chop-chop-chop-chop. It is a white, thing, moving slowly, with ponderous intent. I step out from the log, and walk out onto the road in disbelief.

So they figure they got us covered, I guess. It takes a big manly helicopter with war guns to polish off one measly wolf and a pack of nonviolent activists. The chopper makes its way over to my side of the valley; I watch.

Deliberately it moves, up draws, over ridges, disappearing into back canyons and emerging unscathed, relentless as the Terminator. As it hovers closer, my head begins to pound and chop with the deep rumble of air chewed and spat with tremendous force. I feel puny and scared, looking up at the beast churning above me; two pair of mirrored sunglasses glint down, and I raise my middle finger to the sky. To you and your kind, I sputter, fuming and violated. To you and your death-wielding ways and your black holes of hearts. You are nothing.

Almost too soon, I hear another vehicle, this time it is a government rig, and coming down this very road. I continue walking. Joe Fontaine pulls up beside me. Joe and I know each other from an earlier visit, at which time he had reassured me that this surviving wolf-- of the pack he himself had helped to destroy, a misfortune which he did "feel real bad about-- "would either be relocated or captured and taken to Wolf Haven, a home for bad wolves. He had also told me at the time that only the newly devised, more "humane" leghold traps would be used on this project. Joe had lied.

Behind the wheel in dark glasses, Joe appears serious, concerned. He is a burl of a man, close-shaven, belted in,

always articulate and highly rational. I accept his offer for a ride, why not? "It's not so much I mind you all being here," he begins, "I understand your position. But you people let that coyote out of the trap." Joe is angry. We have tampered with government property, and we may be fined. As I interpret it, listening from my side of the truck and noting the ordered cleanliness of green plastic seats, dashboard, A.M. radio, metal-enclosed clipboard, and coveted walkie-talkie, we are interfering in the campaign to help ranchers feel safe in the world, we are endangering the lives of the wolves of the future. Joe speaks in confiding tones to me of his personal sentiments, his resonance with my motives. And I almost, for a second, believe him; I almost slip into the mire of my own need to believe.

But something in his voice changes and he becomes conspiratorial. A slight edge of condescension cuts into his chuckle: "Did you give those guys the bird?" The sound of his laugh makes me sick. I force myself out of my numbness and I see that this man is hunting down strategies: I am part of his private game and he is gambling for war clues. Right then I realize that he really is perturbed by our presence and I feel gratified. I smile, thank him for the ride, and get out.

Two more days of helicopter flights, morning and eve. Might as well talk to the agency men. Four of us drive down

in Billbob's landcruiser to the Bar P, where two government rigs rest by the lake. I was nervous, but I had the mini-recorder in my pocket. If they lied to us again, we would have it on tape.

Pulling up, I realized it was Sunday. It must be, because there sat Joe, a huge blonde mustached man, and a woman, all slung lazily on the ground around a half-empty bottle of Carlo Rossi rose. The monolith I recognized as Carter Niemeyer of the ADC. He had on mirrored aviator sunglasses. We were apparently dampening their day off, as the laughter hung suppressed just at the surface of their mouths. Mock seriousness weighted the air as the four of us settled down next to the three of them; I noticed the woman's red painted toenails as she petted a husky (wolf-like) canine pup.

"Sic 'er," Joe said playfully to the dog, directed at me. Wasn't this fun.

"Just wanted to check up on the situation," I said, distant and official, pretending friendliness.

Long silences. Some small talk. Finally, "she's left the area."

Really. Well. Thanks for telling us. I disgusted myself by saying, "Have a good day." This politeness towards "authority" I have not respect for really has got to go. We leave, driving up the road to the ranch gate, unsure of how we should feel. Relieved, for certain, but the fact that it's "over," that she is actually gone, seems unreal.

No helicopters this afternoon though, so it must be true. Billbob and I drive out along the east edge of the valley, heading south through a clearcut canyon that empties into Freezeout Lake near Marion. At the bar on the highway, Billbob calls Nancy in Missoula, to see if she can verify the news with the feds in Helena. I stand, kicking the back tire of the landcruiser, hands in pockets and tentative, scared to feel relief.

I can't see Billbob's face as he talks to Nancy, so I wait for him by the truck, looking into the evening light. Clear, calm. I begin to feel good. Perhaps our presence, our prayers, have been enough.

Billbob walks back from the booth in his slow, precise way, watching his feet. I look in his eyes for Nancy's good words, her praise.

"They shot her," he said.

No, I whispered. No no no no no. No.

It was a year later that I sat sodden and spiritless on the clearcut overlooking Pleasant Valley. I like to believe I was humbler; wiser I hope. I would still walk a trapline, though. I would still feel so much heat over wolves that I wondered if I would die-- or kill for-- the live of one.

But even now I wonder how much I am willing to sacrifice; how narrow I can afford to keep my views. Because with grief comes acceptance, and a radiating compassion that connects us to the greater world--

including humans in their various constructs and contexts. The world of despair, languor, riotous bliss; the world whose arms hold us as lover. The world that reminds us that being whole is being broken, in infinitely small parts that come together with the mortar of time.

I am glad I haven't lost this story; I don't suppose I could have, even if I had torched it to cinders within me. Feelings lurk-- rage, remorse, shame and fear-- but these feelings are tempered by a pure and perfect sadness. A sadness that is, in itself, restorative.

There are more questions now, fewer proclamations. How can I help somehow, how can I be worthy? How do I learn to believe, to weave brightness-- blue-eyed marys, flicker feathers, big dandelion beads-- into the garments of death? What are the secret steps, the holy songs? What, in God's name, can I do?