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### From the land of shining mountains, a sonnet sequence

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FROM THE LAND OF SHINING MOUNTAINS

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a sonnet sequence

by

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B.A., William Jewell College, 1950

Presented in partial fulfillment of the  
requirement for the degree of Mas-  
ter of Arts.

Montana State University

1951

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This sonnet sequence is an attempt to tell, in a peculiarly appropriate verse-form, certain incidents in the history of Montana from 1750, when the first white men saw it, to the present day. Each poem deals with one of the events or people or places which, it has seemed to me, played a vital part in the highly individualistic development of this state.

Montana, only seventy years from the frontier, still feels the impact of its individualism, and knows that the frontier movement was not a collective thing, but the accumulation of individual motions - the mountain man heading for the creeks, the roadagent looking for someone else's gold, the cattleman heading for free range. Histories of the frontier West have always delighted in personal adventures like these; likewise Montana has come to take pride in maintaining the habit of frontier individualism.

These sonnets concern some of those personal incidents; they attempt to show history by the impact of individuals on it. More clearly, these poems are intended to show that many sorts of frontier individualists left a lasting

impression upon Montana. We, the heirs to their tradition, are as insistent upon our rights as individuals today as the frontiersman was before such things as social cooperation or social suspicion crossed the Mississippi.

This sequence grew first from a desire to describe some of the personal adventures I had found in history; but as I added sonnets to what was at that time only a miscellaneous and undirected collection of poems, I began to veer from using the sonnet to describe incident to using it as dramatic monologue. Individuals rather than their exploits began to fascinate me, and this, I came to realize, was good. History was all very well, but the impact its people and events had made on contemporary society, the thing which we had inherited from our frontier ancestors, was not the action resulting from individuality but the sense of individuality itself. People were more important than their actions, and their own comments on themselves or on their times more important than the times themselves.

So I began to construct a series of highly individualistic, highly personalized poems in the sonnet form. There remained finally several poems that were descriptive or were narration from the author's point of view; but I felt these had a special function which I shall describe later.

But now, as the framework took shape, I began

to be asked why I had used the sonnet in such an unusual way.

I had not thought of it as particularly unusual; but finally I began to realize that an attitude of mind had grown up around the sonnet which had - unreasonably, I thought - limited its use to a narrow field of ideas. Association had made it in many minds unsuitable to any other expression than the romantic conceits of its Renaissance enthusiasts. The sonnet had, after all, made its appearance as a love-lyric. Petrarch had developed it to celebrate his love for Laura; when it had moved across the English Channel, Sidney had crystallized the English or Shakespearian form (which I have used exclusively) in Astrophel and Stella, a sequence to unrequited--or at least platonic--love, and Spenser's Amoretti had recorded both the intellectual and emotional aspects of his affair with Elizabeth Boyle. Scholars are still puzzling over the identity of the darkly obscure lady in Shakespeare's cycle. In the 19th century Elizabeth Barrett had concealed her authorship of the Sonnets from the Portuguese until sure of Browning's love; Dante Gabriel Rossetti had described his tortured passion in The House of Life. Hundreds of other, lesser figures had used the sonnet to pour out their hearts - and all of them, great or small, had so associated the sonnet with love that they had assumed it to be unsuitable for any other subject. Somehow the idea that the sonnet could be used for dramatic monologue, or could speak of

bloody, uncouth things, was abhorrent. Yet I had read sonnets which were not only monologues but dealt with subjects as far from the love-motif as Milton's blindness and Balboa's discovery of the Pacific (though Keats had made an historical error and had given Cortez the credit). I had read Edwin Arlington Robinson's sharp delineations of character within the sonnet; I had seen John Masefield's Animula use it as a vehicle for continued narrative; I had read Laurence Pratt's Saga of a Paper Mill, which used the sonnet both as narrative and as character-monologue.

What was the connection? Why, if the sonnet was so peculiarly suited to the expression of love, was it also so peculiarly suited to these other purposes and to my own ideas?

The common bond, I came to believe, lay in the drama of each of these various usages. The sonnet, brief and self-searching, was an excellent vehicle for short, highly-focussed intense emotion - the kind of emotion love creates in momentary flashes, the same temporary excitement induced by brief adventure or sudden insight into character. It was this ability of the sonnet to portray dramatic intensity, I felt, which my sonnets held in common with others. Love was a secondary motif except that since it was the most common instance in which sudden intense emotion occurred, it became, perhaps, the most common motif for the sonnet. My sonnets were similar to those of



Petrarch or Sidney or Shakespeare, then, because they all held dramatic impact in common, though I was using the sonnet for historical narrative and the poets of the Renaissance were using it to celebrate their loves.

Eventually I came to feel that what I was doing with the sonnet was not so unusual as it had seemed on first impression; the area within which I worked - the frontier West - was distinctive, perhaps, but I saw many points of similarity between my developing sequence and those more famous sequences which I had read. Even the lyrical Renaissance love-cycles had some similarity to my rougher subjects: they, too, had a common idea - or ideal - binding each cycle together, though the common denominator of my poems was history and that of theirs was an inamorata. They, too, were narrative in a sense, for they dealt with the history of an affair or described an emotion<sup>1</sup> as my poems dealt with the chronological history of Montana or described the development of an individual. There was, perhaps, more similarity between these Renaissance cycles and my sequence than between a 19th century cycle like Rossetti's House of Life and my sequence. Though The House of Life is more actually narrative, it is much more subtly so, in a tortured,

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<sup>1</sup> I think particularly of Spenser's Amoretti, which describe almost diurnally his affair with Elizabeth Boyle.

self-analytical sort of way. The clarity of subject or emotion is often obscured by the romantic floridity of expression, the unrestrained profusion of metaphor. The sonnet of the Renaissance, on the other hand, is much more simple, direct, and explicit - three things which I have attempted to maintain throughout this

series. Too much is attempted in Rossetti; the sonnet, through its very brevity, must concern itself with a single emotion, no matter how involved it may be. There is no room for multiple relationships; the sonnet must maintain one direct, highly accentuated line of thought - all that can be compressed within its constricted space.

But there is actually, for all this speculation, little in common between my sonnets and those of any love-cycle, except dramatic impact. The immediate source from which these poems stem - if there is such a source, conscious or unconscious - is twentieth century. The beautifully pointed dramatic characterizations of Edwin Arlington Robinson are their closest relation. Their direct ancestors are "Cliff Klingshagen" and "Reuben Bright" though I recall no attempt at deliberate imitation. But Robinson is the only poet with whom I am familiar whose sonnets I recalled when I attempted to link these poems with established poetry in a similar vein. Though the Robinson sonnets are rarely dramatic monologues, they are the same kind

of characterization in miniature which many of my poems in time became. Perhaps the linkage is not direct; perhaps it comes through the sonnets of Mr Pratt's Saga of a Paper Mill, though these I had not read until I had well started on my own sequence. I do know that Jason Bolles's Maggie's Nest, a collection which, since it deals also with Montana, and is of local origin, made a profound impression upon me, without a doubt influenced these poems.

Yet while there is a similarity between each of these poets and myself, each is dissimilar also. Robinson deals not with historical characters nor with an historical frame of reference. With both of these I have been continually concerned, since each of my characters and each of my incidents must add something to the history which I am attempting to give. Mr Pratt was more concerned with social and moral conflict than I. Perhaps, finally, the only real kinship I could claim with any of these men was with Jason Bolles, who had been a Montanan, and had known and written of the West that I loved.

Neither are my sonnets narrative in the sense that those of John Masefield's Animula are. Where the sonnets in Animula carry the story from one poem to the next, often, even, running the narrative through a couplet into a beginning quatrain, each of my sonnets tells a complete story having nothing but a

chronological relation to the poem preceding or following it. To me the Shakespearian sonnet, in which the couplet deliberately stops and reverses the thought, was never intended to be used as mere stanza, even in the formal sequence where a common idea or purpose connects the series. Even in the continued narrative like Animula, I believe the sonnet must remain a unit; therefore, each of the poems in this series is a narrative in itself, self-contained and continuing no farther than the ending couplet.

In the last analysis the use of the sonnet as a vehicle for these ideas is in origin more accidental than deliberate. The similarities and purposes I have discussed were perceived after composition rather than before. I had been fiddling with all kinds of forms - everything from free verse to the triolet - in an attempt to find some effective medium for telling the short individual incidents of history which I had in mind, and I fiddled with the sonnet in the same way. But after I had justified to myself the dramatic value of the sonnet with the first poems in this series (notably those on Yellowstone Park and on John Bozeman), the accident became a happy and not unreasonable one. I found that not only could the sonnet express ideally the historical incident but that, used in a formal sequence, it could also reveal through

that formal structure the theme of individualism with which I was concerned. The ideal of every poet, whether it is conscious or not, is to find a form that expresses content - and these sonnets fitted the theme as well as they did the incidents.

All of these sonnets are in the Shakespearian form. I do not believe that any other variation would have been so admirably suited to the expression which I was attempting to achieve. I could not fit narrative, for instance, into the strict octave and sestet of the Italian sonnet. It seemed to me that there was simply not enough space to narrate an entire incident in eight lines; the resulting scarcity of information rendered impossible any reflection in the last six lines. The Shakespearian sonnet, on the other hand, allowed the use of twelve out of the fourteen lines to develop a single line of thought or exposition, since I did not follow the strict interpretation of formalists and insist that each quatrain must be a single development in thought within itself, restating or expanding the idea introduced in the first quatrain. Few Shakespearian sonnets, however, - including those of the Bard himself - adhere strictly to this pattern. The run-on line is too frequent an occurrence to allow the rule of quatrain-units to stand.

A second peculiar quality which supports my use of the Shakespearian sonnet in this context is, I think, in the similarity of the rhymed quatrains to ballad style. Though the meter is dissimilar, the rhyme-scheme (the quatrain's abab, the ballad's abcb) and the lilt are enough alike that through association, at least, if not through strict similarity, a feeling persists that this sonnet form suggests the ballad which has become so closely associated with the frontier West as to seem almost exclusively its property.

But perhaps the most important peculiarity of the Shakespearian sonnet for my purposes is its ending couplet, which, as I have pointed out, allows the preceding twelve lines to concern themselves only with expository narrative while the couplet carries the full weight of the sharp reflection or summation which deliberately turns the whole poem back on itself in search of a larger significance than mere event. The couplet affords a broad focus and a chance to make of narration or incident (with which this sequence is primarily concerned) something larger than itself - something highly individualistic and sharply significant to the theme. Through the couplet used as the trigger of dramatic impact, the sonnet - this peculiar kind of sonnet - achieves the first purpose for which, I think, it became the

ideal vehicle for this representation: it becomes an individual; it stands by itself. As I have said, each sonnet is a complete poem, magnified, enlarged by the discerning introversion of the ending couplet, needing no outside help to make itself understood or to complete its thought.

Yet as a part of a sequence the sonnet, an organic unity, becomes part of another whole. Like the individual in a crowd, it paradoxically adds its own impact to the entire collection of poems while remaining a totality in itself, just as the sum of individual events becomes the total picture of history though each event has no immediate connection with another. In this way this sequence of Shakespearian sonnets expresses the theme of individualism inherent in the historical idea, through the form of the verse itself.

So, at the end, I found that this sequence, originally intended to deal only descriptively with Montana as a frontier and as a state, had come to be, both in form and content, an expression of the motives and the aspirations and the dreams of many of the people who had stopped within her borders - a highly personalized, dramatic account of the history of a large corner of the Rocky Mountain Northwest. I found that the common expression of these poems was individuality, their common quest was that they, like the people with whom they

were concerned, be allowed to stand alone. Though eventually my selection has been highly personal, based on those incidents and characters which have particularly caught my eye, I think my choice has been justified. Each of these poems is representative of a particular facet of Montana history which illuminates my theme. Concerned as I have been with individuality, with its influence on the frontier past and present, I think these forty poems illustrate that influence typically and variedly. There are, certainly, people and happenings upon which I have not touched; but I do not think that additions would add particularly to my theme. There are certain broad areas in this history into which each of these poems falls: Indian history, exploration, missionaries, immigration, gold-strikes, exploitation, cattle, land - these are the things which have concerned themselves with Montana. Upon each of these I have touched in greater or less detail, according to the need I felt. Each poem has a definite place within these areas, and a definite purpose in the development of the larger theme, though the characters and incidents I have touched on are as much a result of my own personal fascination as they are of major purpose. Nevertheless, out of several years' interest in any detail of local history, I feel that personal curiosity has touched on a sufficient variety of things to give these



poems a comprehensive sweep in time, place, and character. In each of the areas mentioned reality and individuality have added their color.

For the Indian, that early, barbarous communist, I wrote "Early Red", for instance - in contrast to that rough individualism which the white pioneers brought to the land. The Indian had independence, but his individuality was subordinate to the tribe. This communistic independence, opposed to white imperialistic individualism, resulted inevitably in the Custer Massacre, the rebellion of Chief Joseph, and the eventual, if incongruous, sight of Sitting Bull in a sideshow - independence bounded by the reservation. Perhaps there should have been a poem on the Indian today - but somehow I felt his individualism would have to wait till tomorrow.

Upon the early explorers I have touched with fondness, for theirs are perhaps the epic names of western history. Verendrye, whether he actually saw the mountains of Montana or not, gave the title to these poems; and Lewis and Clark, with their cohorts, became the greatest single names and the strongest individuals ever to cross these plains. Lewis was the model of the visionary, the dreamer, the passionate idealist; Clark was the model of the leader, the hail-fellow-well-met, the man forever slapping

backs and leading on. Their sergeant, John Colter, was the first of the great mountain men, the violent individualists who refused both society and association with other men to find happiness in solitude and infinite danger. And it was from Colter that the first mention of Montana's scenic grandeurs came.

Beyond these men are the missionaries, the only individuals, perhaps, who entered the mountains without thought of personal gain or glory, but whose courage and whose prowess left both their names and their impact upon the state. Brother Van or Father DeSmet - Protestant or Catholic - they, too, were part of individualism. I have identified only one of them in a poem - DeSmet - but the anonymous Missionary is a part of all the other preachers, frocked or unfrocked, who gave life - and sometimes their lives - to the heathen.

Not all the individuals were heroic; not all of them were saints. A good number of them were heels - desperadoes, drunkards, roadagents, horsethieves. But these, too, left a deep impression on their time and ours. The legend of the badman is still strong among us, apocryphal or not. The glamor of the freebooter is a negative influence, but we must remember that the law came into this state in the form of the Vigilantes to suppress individualism in the guise of organized outlawry. If later, more respectable individuals attempted to practice

brigandage behind the skirts of the law, we can probably trace their attitude back to Henry Plummer through such a political highwayman as Thomas Francis Meagher. There is nothing in these poems which argues that individualism cannot be misused. Copper, wheat, and the railroads have taught Montanans the falsity of that attitude.

There were women, too, in this history. Sacajawea, whom Clark called Janey, was probably the first. Her I have given place with Clark, for the journals of the expedition hint at a strong relationship between them. I am sorry that the other women in this series do not, likewise, appear except in some sort of subservient relationship to their men. I did not intend to let the women take a back seat. There was a great deal of heroism in the honky-tonk girls, who were probably the first white women to enter the state; we must treat their memory with respect, remembering that many of the "first families" stem from these professional "girls." The courage they displayed in rising above their professions to marriage and respectability is no less deserving than that of those women who fought with their husbands for homesteads and farms against weather, speculation, and debt. And perhaps the one thing all of those who were defeated remembered was the sense of unutterable, awful space on the high plains country before the mountains thrust toward the sky.

Beyond the people were the towns and the businesses - the focal-points of individualism. Furs, mining, cattle, wheat, industry - each of these has its place on the frontier and in modern times. From each of these stemmed town or trading-post or mining-camp: Fort Benton, through which all the goods and a great many of the individuals passed, coming up the river; Miles City, the reckless cattle trail-town; Great Falls, planned city of a 19th century dreamer, Paris Gibson; Virginia City, boom-town of the goldstrikes, now restored, its ghosts haunted by the tourists who daily sightsee through its streets. Each of these has its place in the poems.

There is room, too, for the dreamers and the artists and the plain ordinary guys: Charley Russell, wry humorist and painter, who perhaps typifies Montana more than any other one individual; the wheat-truck driver; the old mountain rat; the airline pilot; the caretaker at Robber's Roost. All of these have their place in this sequence because they link the present with the past. They show a spirit and a tradition which eliminates any dividing line between John Colter lost and wandering in the hills and Al Mauland dragging his broken leg behind him in the snow. To them - to all the men and women who actually or in spirit move through the pages of this book - I dedicate these poems.

**FROM THE LAND OF SHINING MOUNTAINS**

## I.

## DIVINE RIGHT

"This is the Indian's land. Once a great sea  
Rolled over all the plains and touched the sky  
On either hand. But all the beasts that he  
Floated with Manitou safe and dry  
Upon a raft. He, knowing beasts must have  
Prairies to run on, grass to feed on, sent  
The Beaver down in search of mud. The brave  
Dam-builder dived three times, and then, near spent,  
Brought back a lump upon his tail. From this  
Great Spirit made the land and set with care  
The beasts upon it. But something was amiss:  
There was good hunting where no hunters were;  
And so from earth he made a man, and gave  
Those happy hunting grounds to that first brave."

## II.

## EARLY RED

I do not understand the white man's law;  
It is content to let a brave man rot  
Because he can not trade for food; yet, though  
He takes what he must have, he's caught  
And punished for his will to live. The Sioux,  
My fathers, would have no man steal to eat;  
Though food was often scarce in our towns too,  
The deer brought singly down was tribal meat,  
And none went hungry when one brave had killed -  
Not so with you. Each man must stand alone,  
Dares ask no aid to keep his belly filled,  
But starves or goes to jail for stealing bones.  
Barbarous we may have been, our ways of blood,  
Yet we let no man die for want of food.

## VERENDRYE\*

Picture the cavalier in coat of mail,  
 Cleaning his armor on the prairie grass,  
 Guiding his war-horse on the bison-trail,  
 A shining, courtly knight, who, short years past,  
 Had graced the French king's train: now facing west,  
 He sees from the badlands buttes the sparkling peaks,  
 Draws his long sword in wilderness unguessed  
 To trace a cross upon the air. He speaks:  
 "Truly, mes amis, out there lies the land  
 Of Shining Mountains, as the stories said,  
 And we the first to see it. Here I stand  
 And claim the land for Louis with my blade."  
 (Yet for his knighthood and his great king's reign,  
 Only his name for these tall peaks remains).

\* Francois and Louis Verendrye, sons of the Chevalier Pierre de la Verendrye, were possibly the first white men to see the mountains of the territory which is now Montana. These French fur-trader-explorers probably saw the Big Horn range of Wyoming and southern Montana on January 1, 1743. See, for instance, Burlingame: The Montana Frontier, pp 2-3.



## IV

## THE GREAT FALLS

The Indians said, "The true Missouri flows  
Over great falls, on to the west a way."  
So Lewis, ranging ahead for sign to show  
The western track, knew they'd not gone astray  
When thunder shook the river-bank ahead,  
And, coming to a bluff, he stood and gazed  
In wonder at raw beauty. Indians had fled  
In savage fear from the great roar. Amazed,  
The young explorer could not even write  
His thoughts - but Clark was coming up behind;  
So far their trail had been read aright -  
The task for days ahead would be to find  
A portage. Then - for he'd accept no less -  
On to the limits of the wilderness.

## V

## PATRICK GASS\*

I was a kid then, hankering to see  
 What-all there was beyond the hills that lay  
 Smoke-hazed beyond the river; so, for me,  
 The Captains' invite opened up the way,  
 For how was I to tell how far beyond  
 That first low range of hills we'd reach? I know;  
 You'd say I should be proud to have belonged  
 To that great trek. I am; but I'd not go  
 That way again, for twice the lousy fame.  
 God! Mountains and beasts and savage men,  
 Blizzards and heat and walking till you're lame,  
 Starving and ill, well-fed and ill again....  
 I've seen the hills beyond. Since I came home,  
 Up to the town's as far's I want to roam.

\* Patrick Gass was a sergeant on the Lewis and Clark expedition, 1804-06; on his return he settled permanently in Wellsburg, Ohio. See Wheeler: The Trail of Lewis and Clark, v. 1.

## VI.

## MERIWETHER LEWIS\*

Mine was the spark that drove us all the way,  
 The faith, the knowledge that we could succeed:  
 I drained a part of my own soul each day  
 To answer all the others' urgent need  
 For courage. They had no sure quest, no flame  
 Within, that led the way. Clods, tools, who knew  
 No more than hardship or their country's name -  
 Only my own sure dream could see them through.  
 Now it is done; so I, too, must be done;  
 Faith, hope, courage will not come again,  
 Given too freely that my goal be won;  
 So I have nothing left--no ease, no pain -  
 Caught by this obscure end, snuffed out alone,  
 Lost to myself, despondent and unknown.

\* Meriwether Lewis, first in command of the famous overland expedition to the Pacific of 1804-06, died under mysterious circumstances never fully determined to be either suicide or murder, at a tavern some seventy miles southwest of Nashville, Tennessee, while on his way to Washington to report to Thomas Jefferson on the success of the long journey. See Wheeler, v. 1.

## VII

## WILLIAM CLARK

Why was it William Clark, a lusty man  
Who loved a pretty breast, a rounded thigh  
As much as only men of boldness can  
Should then have been so strangely loth to try  
The easy Indian lasses whose dark charms  
The rest found warm to take, and twice as cheap  
As warm? Perhaps he thought it would be harm  
As leader so to sport. The lines that creep  
Over the journal's page give no sure clue,  
Except that sometimes, while they speak of her  
Simply as guide, a woman's shape shows through:  
Perhaps for Clark, a hero not quite pure,  
Sa-ka-ga-we-a might have soothed desire  
And pillowed on her breast that head of fire.

## VIII

## JOHN COLTER

John Colter, lost and wandering in the hills,  
 Dropped flat and stared to see the columned smoke  
 Rise like a spirit while the woods stood still,  
 Spat out his wad and thought, "Now here's no joke,  
 This child has stumbled careless on a poke  
 Of Injuns." So cautious on his gun he lay,  
 And looked around and saw another smoke  
 Behind. "Surrounded, by the 'tarnal! Say,  
 The ground's begun to shake!" He looked again,  
 And saw the meadows belch with steam. In awe  
 He felt the geyser's drifting spray, like rain  
 Upon his cheek. No Indians here, he saw -  
 In such a place? Good God, it looked like - "Well,  
 Injuns or no, guess it's my special Hell."

\* John Colter, who had been a member of the Lewis and Clark expedition, was the first man to see and describe the wonders of Yellowstone Park. So much disbelief met his tales of geysers and mudpots, however, that he was greeted with derision, and for many years the region was known as a mythical "Colter's Hell." See Thane: High Border Country, p. 29.

## IX

## COLTER'S RUN

Colter, naked, sprinting down the plain,  
Thought maybe Potts was better off. Alive  
He'd nothing but the certainty of pain -  
The cactus spines that pierced his feet, the knives  
Of Blackfoot women when his course was run -  
But Potts was lax and dead. No harm could come  
To him again, though Colter in the sun  
Must take his chance. If he could get his thumbs  
On one red neck - a buck came up behind,  
And Colter, dodging, leaped and caught his spear,  
Impaled him on it, ran, and found a blind  
Of river driftwood, hid, and so got clear,  
A long walk home - yet, considering their lots,  
He felt a kind of pity for poor Potts.

## X

## MOUNTAIN MAN

The broken shaft stood straight upon his chest;  
He lay knee-cocked upon the buffalo-robe  
While his partner's knife pierced down in quest  
Of the slim trader's-iron point. A Job  
In buckskins, matted hair and beard sweat-thick,  
He grimaced as the arrow worried clear  
And spoke between his teeth: "I found a crick  
Above the Bighorns, runnin' thick with fur.  
I could've trapped my winter's plew in two  
Good weeks, if them damn' Blackfeet hadn't found  
My camp." He glared and swore. "Ain't you 'most through?  
I got to get back 'fore snow comes around."  
He chuckled with a kind of careless cheer,  
"Beaver's 'bout due to rise ag'in this year."

XI

DE SMET

What these, my children, wanted of my creed  
 At first, I cannot say. God's gentle love  
 Was not the quest, the certain driving need  
 The Selish felt. I should not care to prove  
 Why their brave envoys made the long trip East  
 For fear you might incline to question grace  
 Sought as good medicine for war, the priest  
 Bought as a god of battle. I must face  
 The possibility, I know; and yet  
 I could not let them go their way unblessed  
 Because their reasons were not sure. I let  
 My will be theirs, and God's has been the rest -  
 He must have been the means; else would He bless  
 This frail mission in the wilderness?

\* Father Peter John DeSmet was the first Catholic  
 missionary to the Flathead (Selish) tribe in western  
 Montana. In 1841 he set up the mission of St. Mary's  
 on the present site of Stevensville, Montana. See  
Montana: A State Guide Book.



## XII

## MISSIONARY

I'm not the kind to preach to sleepyheads;  
There's no adventure where the Word has come,  
And folks can't stay awake to hear what's said  
Except so's they can carp when they get home -  
Not that for me. I guess I'm just not meek;  
I'm too much like that grandsire whose long gun  
Bought him a clearing on a western creek,  
Face set forever to the western sun  
And further mountains. I, too, must face west  
And seek adventure carrying the Book,  
My weapon; though a less material quest,  
It's still the same path that my grandsire took -  
Indians, at least, will listen to the Word,  
And there, perhaps, God too will not be bored.

## XIII

## FORT BENTON

The river was the swiftest way. The boats  
To Benton in the early years were tied  
Daily, almost, along the wharves. The notes  
Of whistles hailing journey's end implied  
One would find here the same exotic charm  
That once attracted men to Samarkand  
Or Ind, but here just up the river from  
Saint Louey. Greengawkers stared down at the band  
Of bearded trappers, gnarled scouts, and grave  
Robed Indians - natives down to greet the boat -  
And thought, here was the Fabled Land. The brave  
New Jasons trooped ashore. Their velvet coats  
Mixed with the buckskin shirts, and East met West  
Here at the gateway to the Wilderness.

## XIV

## CUSTER'S LAST STAND

God, what a stench there was when we rode down  
Upon the Little Horn that day. I'd been  
With Reno, trapped upon the bluff, ringed round  
With regiments of Sioux. I thought we'd seen  
In our own siege the Seventh's worst, but none  
Of us had dreamed of what we'd come on here.  
Custer among 'em (I thought how I'd been one  
Cursing the Major when they blew Retire)  
Here they lay, cut off from all retreat;  
And though we might have cut the camp in two  
Behind the Colonel, it was his defeat:  
Reno retreating brought some of us through,  
While those with Custer, for their early scorn,  
Stank on the bench above the Little Horn.

## XV

## THE LITTLE BIGHORN

The Little Bighorn is a peaceful stream;  
In summer mowers clack along its banks;  
Their drivers slouch beneath the sun and dream....  
It was not always so. Once conic ranks  
Of tipis filled the meadows here. The Sioux,  
The Cheyenne watched and waited. Painted scouts  
Had told of Custer's coming, and how few  
The troops were. Strange to think now that they fought  
Across these slopes. But Crazy Horse and Gall  
Lit the last flame of Indian glory here -  
Some say they had six thousand braves in all.  
God knows the truth. Nothing now is clear,  
But since that brief, raw, bloody day was done,  
The Little Bighorn sleeps beneath the sun.

## XVI

## SITTING BULL AT THE WILD WEST SHOW

The curious walked by in oxlike awe  
Resenting helplessly his warrior's eyes  
Reflecting back the battles he once saw,  
The unforgotten pride, the earlier prize  
Of victory. Here now he crouched, his face  
Masked, yet contemptuous as became a man  
Once the strategic mind of his whole race,  
Now an exhibit, in a year's short span,  
For Cody's show, so far down had the Sioux  
Come from their triumph on the Little horn.  
He sat defeated, yet there were but few  
Who dared to meet full-face his quiet scorn,  
And none of these was worth the cunning skill  
That once trapped Custer on a barren hill.

## XVII

## CHIEF JOSEPH\*

You who surround me here ask why I break  
 Your law, and jump the bounds which you have set  
 For my diminished people. You mistake  
 Law for the right, for your law would have let  
 The Nez Perce die, their bodies with their hearts,  
 Lost to the land, they loved, on barren plains.  
 Was I, their chief, then not to take their part  
 Because you said it so? If, at great pain,  
 We won so close to freedom, and then lost  
 Because we thought the river was our goal,  
 The blame is mine. But do not count the cost  
 Upon my people. They go back to your dole.  
 I am defeated. From where now stands the sun  
 I'll fight no more. My chieftain's work is done.

\* Joseph of the Nez Perce fought a long, running  
 battle with the U.S. Army in 1877, in an attempt  
 to lead his people from Washington, where they  
 had summarily been moved to a new and cheerless  
 reservation, to the freedom of Canada. Under the  
 impression that the Missouri River was the boundary  
 between Montana and Canada, he stopped on crossing  
 it, and here General Miles surrounded his men and  
 defeated him after a four-day battle. See Howard:  
Montana Margins.

## XVIII

## JACK SLADE AT THE GALLOWS

Only my wife could ever keep me sane;  
I am no lily-livered boy, who bows  
And holds to precious law's command, or gains  
Position licking other people's shoes -  
Jack Slade a servant? You had best be warned  
Who know what I once did with Jules's ears  
And could with yours again. My life, suborned  
Into deep failure by the stupid fears  
Of gutless men, who will not dress my dreams,  
Here in the gulches will lash out in rage  
Unchecked by my wife's love, to flame  
Destroying, as the tiger claws his cage.  
Hang me? You'll each rest easy with his life  
Except the man who goes to tell my wife.....

## XIX

## DEPOSITION OF A FRIEND\*

That Henry Plummer was a handsome man -  
 He'd stand there in my room and smooth his hair  
 For minutes at a time, he was so vain.  
 He wouldn't seem to know that I was there:  
 He'd talk of raids, the size of someone's poke  
 I'd hear next day was murdered. Oh, his lust  
 Was only after gold, that's sure. The joke  
 We thought was that he ever needed us,  
 The girls upstairs. I know he had a wife -  
 I hope she never knew. I was too afraid  
 Ever to breathe a word, for he held life  
 Less than the smallest haul he'd ever made....  
 And yet they do say, with the noose around his head,  
 He screamed for his own life till he was dead.

\* Henry Plummer was the chief of the band of roadagents which terrorized the goldrush area around Virginia City, Montana, in 1863. Secretly the robber chief, he possessed enough charm to get himself elected sheriff of Bannack and Virginia City, and practiced this deception almost to the time of his hanging. See Dimsdale: Vigilantes of Montana.



## XX

## MINER

I ain't stayed in a town for twenty years;  
I've got no use for people much, an' towns  
Is full of 'em. I like it better here;  
I've got my shack, a couple mangy hounds  
And that 'ere hardrock hole. It keeps me fed -  
Color enough for that, an' mebbe more -  
Some of that quartz weighs like a chunk of lead  
With shinin', virgin gold, laced through the ore  
Like the old Mother Lode. Sometimes I think -  
But shucks, we all dream of a lucky strike;  
Gold's nothing more to me than meat and drink;  
Riches can't buy me more of what I like.  
Besides, I couldn't spend it 'cept in town,  
A place where there's too many folks around.

## XXI

## JOHN BOZEMAN

John Bozeman, seeking for a western pass -  
Explorer no less than greater, earlier names -  
Was looking not for empire but for grass.  
The Texas longhorn, long of southern fame,  
Was pushing north. Bozeman went ahead  
To do the work that Chisholm had just done  
Upon the lower trail. It has been said  
He opened up the northern range, and won  
A million acres of free grass for beef  
Instead of buffalo. He found his pass,  
His lean wild men and animals the thief  
Of Indian freedom; but, avenged at last,  
Blackfeet found him camped within his pass  
And left his bloody corpse to feed the grass.

## XXIII

## MILES CITY

Miles City was a wild and lawless town  
When weary trailherds daily from the south  
Made it their stopping-place. Sometimes around  
The town lay twenty brands. The thirsty mouths  
Of ninety cowboys at a time drained off  
The town's hot liquor, and a puncher's purse  
In one wild night. A man must needs be tough  
To take old Miles. And yet old-timers curse  
The passing of the roaring, brutal nights  
And mourn the taming of the end-of-trail  
To milksop lawfulness. It isn't right -  
Why, even drink ain't worth the time in jail.  
Small wonder they raise most improper glee  
When someone steals the civic Christmas tree.

## XXIII

## COWPUNCHER

He squatted on his bootheels. Space had spun  
A hundred tiny wrinkles round his eyes.  
Long squinting through hot blinding days of sun  
Had turned his eyes to a chunk of prairie skies  
Laced to a rangeland face. He watched a colt  
Fight its tied head against a snubbing post,  
And lit a cigarette. "He'll take aolt  
And make a horse," he said. "What he wants most  
Is freedom. Takes a lot of sense to know  
Freedom is havin' pride in spite of ropes.  
Horse-sense? That's his. Too bad some folks don't show  
More of it. Looks like he's calmin' down - I hope."  
Standing - philosopher in jeans - he spat,  
And walked off, tipping his twenty-dollar hat.

## X-IV

CMR

Kid Russell, playing solitaire one day,  
Wished he could figure how to tell the boss  
The herd was in bad shape. He laid a trey  
Upon a four, then gave his cards a toss  
Across the room. If once the wind would stop,  
Or veer at least, become the warm chinook -  
He rummaged in his warbag, found on top  
(He could have picked them out without a look)  
His pens, a card, then, using his cocked boot  
For easel, swiftly sketched a starving cow,  
Her calf, the circling, hungry wolves, and wrote  
The caption: "Waiting for Chinook" below.  
Then, ignorant how that cow would rise to fame,  
He signed the card and went back to his game.

## XXV

## SONNET TO THE MOVERS

Sometimes, when rain has swept across the plains,  
The clouds are like the prairie-schooners' tops;  
They lurch, and shake, and then move on again  
Forever westward, never allowed to stop  
By the compelling wind which drives them on,  
As once the wagons sailed a sky of grass,  
Scattered sometimes and dropping one by one  
Into some valley's peace, to rest at last.  
And when the clouds have gone behind the rain,  
The prairie flower, as once did the towns  
Where wagons spilled their cargoes on the plain  
To nourish harvest in that fertile ground:  
And though the wind has died, the seeking pain,  
The grass still prophesies the fruit of rain.

## XXVI

## RAILROADS

The buffalo first marked the easy grades;  
Up the foothills' easiest slopes they walked,  
Cutting the winding paths with hooves like spades,  
Not deviating though the Indians stalked  
In easy ambush where their habit led.  
The movers' wagons followed; and at last,  
When all the buffalo were long since dead,  
The chairmen and the transit-bearers passed,  
Their grades surveyed by these brute engineers  
Long since. The rails followed ancient trails,  
Replaced the hoofbeats with the grind of gears,  
Ambush with block-lights and the whistle's wail;  
And on the flatcars of the first freight's run  
The buffalo bones lay piled up by the ton.

## XXVII

## HOMESTEADERS

Even my mother is uncertain now  
where, fields apart, the homestead shacks once stood;  
Not even cellar-holes are left to show  
The dreams of those first years, when crops were good,  
And with the man next door - my father - she  
Looked down upon them from some higher ground,  
Planning the way their future life would be  
when with their hearts they joined in common bond  
Their claims. Wind, sun, and storm have washed away  
Even the trace of furrows from the land,  
And, though she knows how once the section lay,  
The homestead, like fond hopes, was built on sand:  
When hopes collapsed with endless sun-parched days,  
It crumbled with them too, and blew away.



## LXVIII

## HONKY-TONK GIRL

We don't speak much of Grandma. What she was -  
Well, you can see yourself what she was like;  
What kind of woman would have any cause  
To hit the gold camps with Discovery Strike?  
I can't blame Grandpa too much. After all,  
The only other women were the squaws -  
And even if he met her at a gambling hall,  
Those days they had few scruples, and no laws.  
And yet she was a - well, you understand  
We have the name to think of. In this state  
It's one to reckon with. Some folks demand -  
Well, I've thought of the Governorship of late.  
She made a good wife, when all's said and done;  
Why bring it up, now that she's dead and gone?

## XXIX

## SPACE

O God, why does a man love distance so?  
I've seen him stand up on the nearest bench  
And stare down at the plains for hours, as though  
He'd seen some winkin', shameless, naked wench  
Entice him from the sun glare on the buttes,  
Or caught the glancing light the pot of gold  
At end of rainbow throws. Why, a man's boots  
May be worn full of holes, his pants so old  
The cloth won't hold a darn, and yet he'll stand  
Forgetting debts, his shrivelled crops - his wife -  
Just - looking at that cursed, endless land.  
I don't know what he sees; but sure as life,  
It ain't the things he must for certain know  
That make a man love empty distance so.

XXX

## WHEAT

Once from this land the dust blew in great clouds,  
Dimming the sky and choking in men's throats  
As if to reprimand their greed, which plowed  
The prairie willy-nilly, as it sought  
Quicker turnover than the furrow's fall  
In golden wheat. Though there had been good years,  
The bitter dust arose, the wind-borne gall  
Of years unbalanced, till in tardy fear  
Man sought to hold the ground to ground, and slow  
The terror of the earth's inchoate flight;  
At last they set direction to the plow  
And alternated fields, the dark to light:  
The strips that broke the wind lay firm and neat  
And dust was once more earth to grow ripe wheat.

## XXXI

## WHEAT TRUCKER

Sometimes I wonder why the wheat I've hauled  
Can't feed the world. I've driven back and forth  
Daylight to dusty daylight, till I've crawled  
Dead to my bunk to wonder what it's worth  
Until I dropped to sleep, and dreamed of wheat  
Bushel on bushel piled to the sky.....  
In harvest you don't even stop to eat  
Or catch a drink, the truck still rolling by  
The hungry combine, loading on the run  
And back to town, the only pause you know  
A tilted wait till the unloading's done  
Then back again. Where does it all go?  
I've hauled wheat for a million loaves of bread  
An' yet it ain't enough to keep folks fed.

## XXXII

## MUCK R

I've spent my life down in that stinkin' mine,  
Sweatin' my guts out for the thick green ore  
That copper's found in, working, rain or shine,  
Like some damn mole, and getting nothing more -  
Pay? Sure, we're making pretty money now,  
But what's a dollar when your lungs are gone?  
They've cleared the dust up some, but even so  
Plenty of us still get the miner's con,  
Or if we don't, there's sulfur fumes, or heat,  
Or cave-ins: yet we talk as if the pay  
was all we wanted - blow it on the Street  
And curse the mine, and then go back next day.  
What kind of fools are we, to go down  
And throw our lives away, there underground?

## XXXIII

## MARCUS DALY SPEAKS OF CLARK

He was a starched-up, wizened little cuss;  
You'd never take him for a fighting man,  
But, drunk-ambitious like the rest of us,  
He fought me, like those little fellows can  
With every dirty trick, with every rotten scheme  
You've ever seen invented, and some more.  
I'd not have cared a hoot for his big dream  
Of being senator, if 'tweren't for  
The threat of what his vicious spite might try  
With all that power - for he hated me.  
I couldn't take the chance he might slip by  
The voters to his seat, and so I paid a fee  
To certain public-minded, honest men  
To vote my way, and see he could not win.

XXXIV  
AIRBASE

Where the grey concrete meets the parking strip  
Old tracks come in. Across this naked grade  
The stagecoach scored, trip by slow patient trip  
Its track. The mile-long runways laid  
For later wheels now cross and hide the lines  
Where six-horse teams made the last thrilling dash  
Into the town. Now gleaming dural shines  
Where greater horsepower growls beneath the lash  
Of pushing throttles. Down the concrete trail  
Hurtles the fat shape of the '54,  
Sweeping the prairie with its manmade gale  
Where wind once plumed the coach's dust, no more.  
The tracks are gone, as useless signs must go,  
And even wind blows where man makes it blow.

## XXXV

## AL MAULAND

Al Mauland, riding after cows one day,  
Huddled within his coat against the storm,  
Left the snow-drifted trail, and lost his way.  
Searching, he swung his arms to keep them warm,  
And spooked his horse. The gelding shied and fell  
Upon him, snapped his leg and rolled away  
While he lay helpless, shouting curses till  
The horse ran off. Sober then, and grey  
With pain, he tried to think which way the ranch  
Might be, and though he had no hope, began  
To crawl, despair deferred within the chance  
That he could live while he could still feel pain.  
He should have died; yet when they picked him up,  
His will had crawled so long he could not stop.



## XXXVI

## ROBBERS' ROOST

Here's where the stages used to change their teams  
Before they made the final dashing run  
Into Virginia. Down there by the stream  
Once six roadagents fled before the gun  
Of my own grandpa, who rode shotgun guard  
Three years through here, and never lost a load....  
I used to think that it went kind of hard  
With him, to see them later close this road  
And build the highway up behind those trees  
So's people weren't forever coming by,  
But now I wonder. Though it wouldn't please  
Most folks to be alone, come time to die,  
They were the last, this old roadhouse and he;  
And it alone could keep him company.

## XXXVII

## VIRGINIA CITY PLAYERS

Once more at actor's wit the old gulch smiles;  
Once more the footlights shine, the stage is set;  
Though these have not endured the weary miles  
By coach up from the distant railhead, yet  
Something there is in them of elder years,  
Of long-dead, famous voices, that once spoke  
In mimic's tones of laughter and of tears  
Against the backdrop of these hills. No poke  
Of powder gold falls on this later stage -  
No nuggets shower with the miners' cheers;  
But these same streets led, in another age,  
Down to a showhouse door. The ghosts are here;  
And something in these shadows makes one pause  
To hear if ghostly hands give back applause.

## XXXVIII

## HUTTERITES

Here on the corner, center of Main Street,  
The dress of Middle Europe, dark and warm,  
Enfolds three girls, quiet and discreet,  
In for the market, from the great communal farm.  
Gravely they stand, obedient, but when  
No one is watching, glance with eager eyes  
That must not like, but can't help, now and then,  
Drifting to follow some bright form, to prize  
An instant's longing, but no more. They poise  
For apprehensive, fleeting moments by  
The shops and shows; their small and peasant joys  
Forbid all these. Yet if they sometimes sigh  
For brighter, softer things, or wish for curls,  
How can a tender God reprove these girls?

## XXXIX

## SPRING FEVER

Down from the melting peaks the spring chinook  
Brings moisture-laden air, to swell the trees  
And quench the dusty thirst of lawns; and look!  
The brawling creek has burst its banks in glee  
And spread its muddy freshness over fields  
New plowed. The april calves run races where  
The crocuses spring forth; a hillside yields  
Swift streaks of shooting stars. This time of year  
All things are born anew, and never yet  
Have young men failed to look upon the hills  
To think of strange horizons, and to set  
Their eyes upon new roads. The blue sky fills  
With north-bent geese, and I am like the rest;  
Now spring is here, the new roads are the best.

## XL

## HERITAGE

This much our fathers left: a great contempt  
For all but what a single man can do....  
We are the heirs of all the wild, unkempt  
Grace-hating stalwart pioneers, who through  
Dislike of cities set out all alone  
To make some sort of peace with space,  
Finding in hardship that they could atone  
The sin of flight from what they could not face,  
And gain full freedom from society.  
As they proved with success their way was good,  
So we convince ourselves we must be free,  
Filled as we are with their wild ways, their blood;  
And we still have contempt for herdlike fear,  
Though what they once escaped surrounds us here.

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