

High Desert Journal

WITNESS TO THE WEST



THE BEAVER

BY SEAN PATRICK HILL

As if quiet people had nothing to say. As if anyone couldn't tell the hero. He's the one who sleeps on the plank bed with the patience of avalanche lilies, watching them blossom like daughters. Such noticing takes time. Given the hour, you could watch the petals twist shut at night, tight as Chinese finger traps.

You had the time, enough to trade work for a cabin in the slim Whitney Valley, hollowed like a bed sheet between two hips, the kind of place a map kindly disregards. Your girls played in the dark loft of the barn. And when Laura washed clothes in the Burnt River, and pressed them with her misery iron, she was lonely sometimes, but she stayed.

I pictured you haying, running fence lines all day on a motorbike. The horses by then, little more than ornaments. It was cattle required such boundaries. Oh, I read those stories you wrote by little more than kerosene lamps. You could say a thing lightly: elk bugling in snow, glissades of sandhill cranes. When the owner died and you had to move on, those stories were all you were allowed.

When you were the caretaker of that camp in the Rockies, I imagined you walked your daughters to the school bus that fell each morning from the sky, then labored each afternoon to return to its nest in the clouds. Magic Sky Ranch, it was called. There's worse things you could do than work toward such heights. Problem is, the mountains develop a taste for silence. So when you took over the pump house on Bridge Creek, with its conveniences, little wonder you couldn't sleep at night. The rest of us had got used to things like refrigerator motors always trying to get in the last word.

The job, too, exhausted you, having to patrol the intake shed each time the alarm cried out, a sensitive daughter, jumpy in the night at the least sign of critters, so you got up a lot to settle the thing back to sleep. Once you met a bear, but you left each other alone.

In winter, the snowcat made poor time. In the intervals, you told your daughters about voles mining their little kingdoms. When the bridge was out, you carried groceries and children over the frozen creek like the good horse. After the accident—everything you'd imagine in a chance meeting of a blind drunk and a motorcycle—a chip in your skull allowed the infection that nearly killed you. You limped like my grandfather after the war. The hero is the one who returned to the woods, who'd notice how someone left the waterfall running all night.

for Jon Rementer

When I knew you, you lived in The Pines, the mobile home park south of Bend. Osprey sometimes circled the pond in the bay window. Of course we noticed how mallards huddled in the shadow of your loneliness. At best you could walk small trails. Often you'd be out on the desert, as if it were a desktop to spread your manuscripts.

I took you that winter to see a beaver lodge on Tumalo Creek. They are overly industrious, wouldn't you say, and don't know when enough's enough. Once, I found the wounds they had augered in bark six feet from the ground. It takes years to whittle down such riddles, and you had attention to spare.

Snow lies down under the firs each year (which is how beavers worked those heights, of course). I never did see voles but for their tracks over snow, but you knew what they tended under there, how slowly wind died into spring.

I went out to the ranch, once. The cabin bolted tight, but through the dust I saw the hand pump in the sink. Amanda showed me the barn, and we took a few rusted tools. I think she wanted to save something of you. Fort Collins I saw too, the Poudre—the old town largely gone. You wrote it all down. Imagine! A house built over a well. Now there are few coins to be had for such songs as ours, and even new washing machines have a way of up and quitting.

When I left for the city, I told you I'd miss most the rivers, the ridges. You told me I'd have a lifetime of landscapes to draw on for my poems, and Jon, you were right. If there are male bears under the snow, they are distant, alone. They brood in cold beds you've long since left in dens from other years, for the bear's is a tenderness quickly lost.

You storied your humility, more akin to the beavers, happy with only their ponds and the stars in their winter mirrors. They stay up all night, you know, and chatter. It's like you said, *Love becomes the environment*: rain, drift, sage. This is just to say that your daughters knew right: the world is worth saving.

The world is worth saving even for bears and the other large myths who don't want to be saved, or heroic, or even woken up for that matter, who prefer the sleep of mountains, or of the dead.

LODGE



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ISSUE 13, SPRING 2011

cover

Bobbie McKibbin
Steaming Pool #3, Yellowstone
Pastel. 25 × 35 inches
Private collection

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Mountain City, Nevada, June 7, 2009

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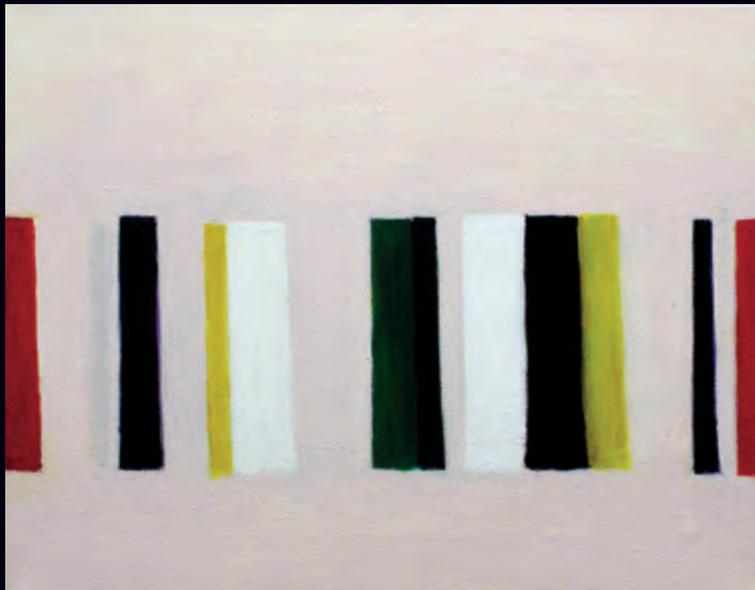
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BY HEIDE OBERHEIDE



Fluctuations
2010
acrylic on canvas
22 x 30 inches



Composed
2010
acrylic on canvas
16 x 20 inches



Orange
2010
acrylic on canvas
24 x 30 inches

PAINTINGS

COURTESY LINDA HODGES GALLERY, SEATTLE

BY JOE WILKINS

ENOUGH OF ME

THE SNOW IS GETTING IN.

Bishop and the new boy – he says to call him Wing, which fits his bony legs, his windy breath like tiny bells – found a mess of undelivered phone books and jammed them under the door. They tucked handfuls of crumpled mustard-colored pages into each gapped corner and around the half-hung drywall upstairs. They thought they had it, slapped each other on the back. I knew better. I see what there is to see. I stay up late, watch coyotes slink down from the hills and chatter in the shadows.

Some kind of cloth would work best to plug those holes, but this is Billings, Montana, where they believe in sugar beets and oil refineries and strip malls, where downtown's a pile of bones scraped clean by coyotes and left to carry whatever color the sky decides. No halfway houses here. No kitchens, no shelters. Here, cloth is currency, is sleep and toes, is a block of warm breath, is another breath. It is what we have now, what we hoard. We said what Bishop called a prayer and rolled old Jake out the backdoor naked into the drifts. It was dark, cold, the moon an odd eye watching a body buried fistful by fistful in the snow. Later, we threw Mama Betty's dice for his jacket, his scotch cap, that long scarf he said his third-wife knitted before she disappeared. I lost every throw.

I have five socks though. Blue mittens, a ski-coat with pink lightning flashes, a stocking cap, two thick sweaters, three white t-shirts, boots, a pair of jeans, a gauzy skirt the color of a wound. I wear most everything all the time. Socks one on top of the other under boots, skirt over jeans, sweater over sweater over t-shirt over skin – but two of the t-shirts I hide. They're the only things I change. Each day, even in this February that froze old Jake, I slip off my mittens, my stocking cap, my coat, my sweater, my sweater, my t-shirt – and suddenly I am the color of the snow come evening near the gutters: my thin and blotchy belly, my small breasts gone dull blue, scar still loud and white. I change in the bathroom upstairs because Bishop is afraid of stairs. I hide my t-shirts in the dry toilet tank because Mama Betty'd steal them if she could. I wonder about this Wing – crumbs sticking to his hairless, swept-back chin. I shut a sleeve of yesterday's shirt in the window's white mouth to hang outside. I lift another from the plastic Safeway bag in the tank, pull it across my shoulders, where it is cold against my belly. I tell myself I smell clean as new snow, though I know that it's not true.

My t-shirts were new not long ago. I got them west of here, in Missoula. The days back then were warm and enormous, light leaking down from the mountains, golden leaves adrift in the streets – a mess of beautiful university girls and boys stood behind a folding table, smiled as they handed out used sweaters, t-shirts and underwear still in plastic packages. The professor, her hair spiked, neck swathed in a filmy scarf, roamed behind them, saying things like Jesus was a radical and not some small town Republican. Later, there was a dinner, where we sat in chairs and the students served us, just like a restaurant. It was supposed to show that we were people, worthy of their service. At least that's what the assignment sheet one of them left on the table said. One sat down with me. His name was Tavin. He talked about himself, kept telling me he felt called to work with the homeless, what kind of law he was going to practice, how he was voting for the other guy. I didn't know the first guy.

I'd never met anyone like Tavin, anyone with plans farther out than Tuesday. He was an elephant, a giraffe, a unicorn – something out of



The accompanying story is *High Desert Journal's* winner of the 2011 Obsidian Prize in Fiction. Judged by Gretel Ehrlich, this year's \$1,000 award goes to Joe Wilkins for "Enough of Me," chosen from over 130 entries. Deadline for the \$1,000 2011 Obsidian Prize in Poetry is July 31 and will be judged by Oregon poet Iareate Paulann Petersen. For full submission details see our ad on page 47.

When I slipped down the stairs, she was on her knees. Swearing, grunting, stuffing strips of it into the crack beneath the back door. She'd done already the hole in the coat closet where a heating vent was supposed to go, the window Jake and Bishop broke wrestling over the last of the dark rum at Christmas. I noticed because I notice things. It's what I do. Mama Betty gets things, I notice things. Two strategies. So far, they've sometimes worked.

Mama Betty, I said, let me have your knife.

No, she said, still kneeling, grunting, swearing softly, taping and re-taping the upholstery into place.

There's a boy I need to kill.

No, she said again.

Okay, I said, resigned. I guess I'll have to strangle him.

Mama Betty looked right at me, her breath loud and snorty. Could get you a length of rope. Maybe a nylon cord. It'd cost you a good wool sock.

Okay, I said. But I need it right away.

WHEN I GOT TO SPOKANE I still had some money. I stayed in a Super 8 along the freeway, watched strung out days of MTV, bought a gauzy dress the color of a wound. In the mornings, at a truck stop café, I swam eggs and bacon in maple syrup. Then played the poker machines for hours. I lit cigarettes one after the other and scribbled poems on napkins. I hadn't been on my own that long, at least not in a city, and it was like a story about someone else – coins clinking, the stink of grease and diesel, me jittering from too much nicotine and sugar. Anyway, less than a week, and I was out of money.

A guy who sometimes cooked at the café let me stay in his apartment, a low-slung place near Kaiser Aluminum, the kind of place where each night the neighbors beat each other in a dozen different languages. That cook was an anarchist, and people were in and out all the time, people with ideas. All night talks of politics and collapse, knives and papers, handfuls of pretty pills, men grabbing at my elbow. I never saw the same face twice. Afternoons, I wandered back and forth across the footpath bridges in the park. Below me, the frothing river and the light-shot falls.

The bridges began to scare me. I spent more time there than anywhere, at least that's what I remember. The bridges and the remembering, that's why I left. No matter what, I told myself, I'd get in with whoever stopped. Of course it had to be a big blue pickup. The grinning cowboy behind the wheel said he was headed East. He looked and even smelled like all the cowtown boys I knew from home. But he didn't chew tobacco. I didn't see a jackknife strapped to his belt. So I climbed in. He tipped his hat, was kind and gentlemanly. He commented on the weather, asked me about the rings in my lips, the squiggle of scar beneath my chin. Later, he bought me dinner, a pack of Camels, though he pursed his lips and said I should really quit.

Mile after mile I felt more and more pathetic. Finally, I tried to put my hand down his pants. He caught me by the wrist. Said he was flattered but he'd better not since the man upstairs was watching. He was serious. He told me his church had a program for people like me. I couldn't stand it. I cursed and cursed him, began to cry. He thought I was coming down off something, that I might not make it. I could see it in his kind dark eyes – he thought I needed him. I don't know what I needed, what it is I need.

When he stopped in Missoula for directions to the hospital, I bolted. Found a drain pipe down by the university and crawled right in, splashed through stagnant water slicked with oily rainbows. Just like that I was back in Montana. I sat and hugged my knees, tried to laugh about the stupid way things kept going.

JAKE'S TOES SHOWED through the snow today.

It was bright, the windows wet with melt. I forget which month. Bishop called a meeting, said we had to do something about those toes. He's sort of like the leader. He's not quite 30 but his face is so ragged gray he looks at least a hundred. I'm scared to death of him. It's a good thing he's scared to death of stairs. At the meeting I tucked my hair up inside my stocking cap and sat by Mama Betty. Wing

a child's storybook where there are rainbows. We sat there in the park for hours. Leaves skittering in the wind. I watched his mouth move but didn't understand a word he was saying. It didn't matter. He fell in love with me because my looking at him said he was good. I loved him back as best I could – loved his Hardee's bags of hamburgers and fries, all the things baked with fresh berries he brought from the coffeehouse on campus. Later, after all the gifts, after walks along the river where he spilled his wishes, after hot showers that lasted soapy hours at his apartment and three nights sleep in a bed, I let him touch me where he wanted. Then I took his wallet. Left, I guess, because it's like lying without having to say a word.

And here I am in Billings. Here the bad river rose and flooded and the sugar beet crop rotted, here the refinery laid off half the town and all the new subdivisions across the freeway are empty – streets and streets of half-built houses no one can afford to buy or finish building. They butt up against the sagebrush hills. The hills blow a dusty wind back at them. It's not just the refinery, not just Billings but some kind of crisis all across the nation – at least that's what Mama Betty says. And she knows a thing or two. She has a way of getting what she needs. She got us this one, third from the left along the Paradise Flats cul-de-sac – two pillars and a brick facade, a chandelier in the entry, three bathrooms but no water, heat, electricity. And no paved roads. Which means no regular patrols. Which means we went ahead and moved right in. The realtor's key was even under the welcome mat. Mama Betty knew someone who knew someone at a discount supermarket, Bishop brought home rainbow baggies full of tiny pills, Jake chased me up and down the stairs but was so old he could never catch me. All together and alone, we slid each night on slicks of rum and moonlight. After the others fell asleep, in closets or simply on the floor – I stood at the picture window. The moon was there or not there. The sky black, the stars opening their bright and tiny mouths. I watched coyotes come slinking down the hills, wander the gravel cul-de-sac out front. They looked so soft and kind. I waited and waited and rushed out drunk to steal one. Like shadows in any kind of light, they scattered.

But then the wind went cold, ice and snow pinged against the windows. We ran clean out of pills. One morning, Old Jake just didn't wake. We were cold. We stripped him and rolled him out back into the drifts. Now I wake to frost along my lashes. The snow is getting in.

THIS MORNING Mama Betty tried a fuzzy swath of wine-red vinyl.

Before sunrise she'd torn it with her steak knife from the seat of someone's car. That's Mama Betty. She has a way of getting what she needs. A winter hat, good cigarettes. In her pockets she's got a steak knife, mismatched dice, duct tape, that picture of a little boy she says is some doctor's and she's going to steal him for the ransom. This morning she got upholstery, the fake-leather kind. The color of a spill of wine.

I.

Dim afternoons in mid-winter, we'd huddle together
 on Beth's livingroom floor near the bookshelf of atlases,
 searching for Lakeview. It always seemed like a fluke, our small dot
 at the edge of the Great Basin included
 at the expense of actual cities, places with restaurant chains,
 movie theatres open on weekdays.

Some days, Beth's father would let us at his Forest Service maps
 of the Fremont, bigger than the dining room table,
 and we'd spend hours over the pale green surface, turning
 coordinates, topography, property zones
 into our homes, the creeks we swam.
 It was practically our backyard, the Fremont.

Site ID: 601 Site Name: White King & Lucky Lass Uranium Mines (WK/LLUM)
 Approximately 140 acres affected by mining activities during the 1950s and 1960s, located roughly 17
 miles NW of Lakeview, Oregon, within the Fremont National Forest, at elevations of approximately 6,000
 and 6,150 feet respectively. CERCLIS No: 7122307658. The nearest residence is 12 miles away.

We even worked there, Beth and I,
 in rubber boots and fishing hats, summer before graduation,
 wading in streams for Collins Timber—
 measuring effects of grazing and fire control
 on their jigsawed acres of land.

We reported a rancher collapsing the cut banks at Cox Creek,
 photographed abandoned homesteads at Camp,
 picked giant lupins at Dead Horse
 and braided them into our hair.

...[1]evels of exposure considered 'hazardous' include (not limited to) contact with and/or ingestion of
 surface water, groundwater, soils, sediment from the 1.1 million cubic yards of waste material at site. (For
 projected run-off and leach patterns, see Appendix D.)

When water levels dropped, our boss sent us up
 to Auger, where beavers were forcing the water
 to abandon its usual courses and bury an old slough,
 a few pockets of quaking aspen
 by much as 10 feet.
*Stay south, he said, of the snags left
 from the blow-down of '62. You'll cross off our property
 and get off your map.* He pointed
 to a hump on the creek's northside, *you'll be near White King
 with this one,*
*but don't worry. Everything up there
 tapped out years ago. It's been underwater for decades,*

ARSENIC
 Groundwater
 RADIUM
 Groundwater
 15.37 pCi/L
 RADON
 Groundwater
 21,300 pCi/L
 URANIUM
 Groundwater
 43,600 pCi/L

E KING

BY ZAYNE TURNER

*and the water's being tended.
Just don't get tempted
to hop the fence
and go swimming.*

Memorandum, 27.10.98:

White King Pond (WKP) formed when water collected in the remanants of the open-pit areas of mining. It is approximately 13 acres wide at its surface and contains (at latest estimate) 80 million gallons of water.

Approximately 9,000 lbs of hydrated lime has been applied to WKP in an attempt to neutralize acidity.

Memorandum, 04.11.98:

Continued pH testing is recommended, in addition to continued applications of lime (as pH neutralizing agent). A permanent leach line for future treatment and injections of hydrolized slurry will be installed.

Memorandum, 25.09.99:

An additional 10 tons of hydrolized limestone applied to WKP.

We knew the White King, even if it wasn't on our map:
the site for high school parties
ever since the Sheriff started up traffic stops
off Alkali's south shore,
the part of 7th grade social studies
when we learned about 'first-strike targets,'
the reason for the piles kicking up dust north of town,
the empty plant by the cemetery, my father calling
all of Linda Lane a 'damned bunch of uranium houses.'

Executive Summary of Committee Action:

Initial investigations of WK/LLUM to determine whether action was needed for clean up began in 1989 (by the USFS), coinciding with official listing of WK/LLUM as an 'orphan site.' On April 25, 1995, EPA listed WK/LLUM on the National Priorities List (NPL) in order to further study the site. To date, WK/LLUM has progressed in the Superfund process to "Selection of Cleanup Remedy" entered in a Record of Decision.

We wondered if we would even see it,
the pen mark at the edge of our map.

II.

First, it was barbed wire,
a locked gate. Then the pond, opaque
and colored like antifreeze.
Radiation warnings at long intervals,
water-logged aspens and a few fires
scratched out along the fenceline.
Valley burnt through,
smashed-up and half-buried
like an empty beer can. Our shadows disappearing
beneath the corn lillies. No birds

Information pertaining to this site is housed at the following location(s):
Lake County Library (Administrative Record)
County Courthouse
513 Center Street
Lakeview, Oregon 97630

A well of silence.