

MONTANA
Winter Days

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Illustrations by Wayland Moore

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To Mumsie and Joseph

Contents

List of Illustrations	vii
Preface	ix
The Calendar of Days	3
January (January 17 - January 31)	3
February (February 1 - February 28)	29
March (March 1 – March 31)	103
Acknowledgements	179

List of Illustrations

Frozen Pond	4
White-Tailed Deer and Dragons	7
Cowboy Pastor	10
School Bus Stop	13
Skiing	19
Snowflakes	22
Snow-Laden Trees	26
The Big Little Player	30
Ice Skating	36
The Cabin on the Hill	42
Making a Joyful Noise	46
A Very Montana Establishment	51
Cowboy Chocolates	56
Rodeo in Kalispell	61
The Winter Birthday Camp	66
Women at the Post Office	74
The Vet and Her Best Friends	78
The Logging Road	82
Man in a Jar	85
The Piano Lesson	91
The School Chef's Healthy Meals	98
Melting Snow	104
The Kilroy Wind	107
The Ebullient Piano Tuner	111
The (Former) Health Clinic	119
The Writing Place	123
Dirt Bike Dreams	125
The Garbage Dump	131
Highway Elk	136
Restaurant Trophies	141
A Wild Walk through the Woolly Woods	145

On Your Mark	148
Burgers and Basketball in a Bar	162
The Wallow	170
Spring Grass	174
Southbound	178

Preface

Travel changes our perspectives. I suspect this is why it has frequently been a component of adolescent rituals across diverse cultures. From the aboriginal “walkabout” to the excessive European “Grand Tour,” sending young people abroad has often been seen as something edifying, purifying, and transformative. Yet the usefulness of travel, and by that I mean travel of substance – meaning, enough time to require you to get about the business of living in a different way, is even more beneficial as we age and consider our lives in their broadest arrays. Too often we accept the challenges of life as insurmountable hurdles and we stay in place, rooted. Yet change of place re-awakens the senses and the soul and opens new possibilities of living.

I am an anthropologist, and I have traveled widely over space and time, living years at a time in Peru and Argentina, studying things like religion, goat and sheep herding, and migration. I guess in a sense I got “broken in” right away, as I started traveling quite early in my life. But as I have aged and my family has grown now to include my son, a dog, and two cats, I have too quickly accepted that my traveling days are over. We take occasional weekend visits to interesting places and sometimes pack everyone into the car to go to Mumsie’s house for holiday, but, overall, it has seemed too complicated to really travel again. Schedules are complicated, finding rentals where multiple species are acceptable is complicated, and getting breathing space from any profession is exceedingly complicated. But this year I decided that we had to at least attempt to overcome that physical inertia of moving only in place with no advance, like gerbils on a wheel. I was allotted a long-sought and long-awaited sabbatical during which I had several articles to complete, each of them requiring additional

research, and I started making plans early. But while everything hinged on several axial points, an affordable rental in a place where I wanted to be was the most vexing. From May to October 2012, I searched fruitlessly. Mostly, people would simply not respond to my request for a rental for two adults, one child, two cats, and two dogs (including my mother's dog now). Then, in early November 2012, not more than eight weeks before the sabbatical would begin and thinking that this may not happen, I found a semi-rustic cabin, willing landlords, and an extraordinary town. We had been there before and knew some people, but we had not stayed there. Before, we had simply traveled through on weekends from time to time, heading to Missoula from a town further up the Valley. But I knew that this place was good enough for joy.

After securing the cabin, I began crafting a leave of absence for my son from his 5th grade class in Georgia. His teachers and principal quite literally rose to the occasion, intuitively aware that this opportunity was something valuable for everyone on both sides. Together, we arranged for him to be away for his third quarter, which meant he could leave and return as seamlessly as possible. We also arranged that he would be somewhat of a roving reporter, sending back comments and correspondences to his school, bridging places with words and stories. My mother traveled from her home in Virginia to Georgia to join up, and we left Carrollton, Georgia on January 12th, 2013 en route to Big Sky Country.

In anthropology we call the shift of perspective the "Rashomon Effect," based on the well-known Japanese movie *Rashomon* of Akira Kurosawa which tells about something violent that happened in a forest. Everyone who experienced this thing told a different version of what happened when they were later questioned, kind of like an Asian version of the "People's Court." As the film concludes, we are left very

muddled and confused about reality and truth. At first we think we can discern between the different people's stories, but, at last, we acknowledge that each one of the stories is believable and possible. In fact, essentially each story as it is told did occur from the perspective of the protagonist who tells it. It leaves the viewer unsettled.

So what does all this have to do with travel and Montana? Well, for me, the greatest value of travel is that it forces me to shift the way I see things. Sometimes that shift is exhilarating and sometimes it is devastating, but when away from my life's usual ballasts, I turn more towards those internal ones and I learn that they guide me more surely. Living in Montana for some three months forced me to become watchful, insightful, and both more outward- and inward-oriented. I found people around me interesting and places around me deeply compelling. It forced me to constantly shift perspective, but instead of finding confusion and befuddlement, I began to sense something deeply truthful about life and people and place, something that was less centered on me and on what I knew to be true and more on what is, how we are all so much alike, and that we matter greatly to each other. There I met characters, played in strange and lovely scenes, and felt alive and deeply joyful in the way that we all feel when our senses are fully awakened. Sights, smells, sounds, tastes, and even textures changed in my world as I knew it.

For many people, three months might sound like a wee bit of time. For a college student or professor, it is not even a full semester. But it is an allotment of time that requires adaptation, and when we adapt, we re-position ourselves. I have had long days of travel overseas, but what I found on this trip reminded me that travel is mostly in the heart and mind. It is a process of re-opening those vessels to let in something unanticipated and unplanned. In *Out of Africa* when Denys

Finch-Hatton asks Karen Blixen/Isak Dinesen, one of the greatest storytellers of all time, if she has traveled to all these places that she talks about in her stories, she replies, “No, but I have been a mental traveler.” Indeed, travel does not always mean physical movement, but true travel does always mean change. As people face hardships, daily challenges, and even joys in their lives, they travel. Travel is a condition of changing places, whether it is psychological, emotional, spiritual, or physical, and it signals that a shift is occurring. Sometimes sought after and sometimes thrust upon us, travel has deep and prolonged value for the human soul.

The more and the better we travel, the greater we go beyond perspective and into that place in our hearts and minds where truth abides and we know something about who we are as a person and as a species. We become a people more compassionate and empathetic towards the condition of our collective lives, poised with untapped potential. Through travel, I more poignantly sense that the loss of my neighbor is in essence the loss of some aspect of my own self as well. This binds us and weaves us together into something common, knowable, and valued. As Washington Irving said, "There is a certain relief in change, even though it be from bad to worse; as I have found in traveling in a stage-coach, that it is often a comfort to shift one's position and be bruised in a new place." In experiencing the commonalities of what it means to be human, we make contact with the seeds of the future. Good or bad, they bring us closer to knowing what is true about ourselves and others.

These reflections are simple and guttural by design, as I mostly wrote them in the mornings between 4:00-6:00 a.m. when the cabin was quiet (after I fed the cats, that is), when my worries were not yet awake, and my day's academic workload not yet on schedule. My chair faced East and looked out onto a

large frozen lake. I always kept the blinds up on the windows so that I could see the first light and there were mornings when I experienced breath-taking sunrises. Some days I would go out for a walk and find that I had something to say afterward. I took each of these prompts seriously and shared my ponderings aloud on paper, although I sometimes changed a reflection when another more interesting one asserted itself later in the day. Some reflections are like a daily journal, but others are full-blown stories, those more often written later in the afternoons. All I can say is that they mostly came out that way. I wrote this primarily as a way of remembering the place and the people whom I have come to love so much in such a short time.

In Quechua, the *lingua franca* of the central Andes of Peru and Bolivia, there is a little word of which I was constantly reminded during my time in Montana. It filters through each of these pages. The word is *yapa*. It is primarily used in the Andes during market transactions when the customer asks the vendor to sell some amount of produce to an exceeding amount of the request, brimming full and overflowing. In Psalm 23:5, there is the familiar refrain, “My cup runneth over.” When someone receives *yapa*, in essence they get just a little more than they asked for or deserved. Throughout our stay in this little valley in Montana, we received *yapa* on a daily basis.

Carrollton, Georgia

JANUARY

The Calendar of Days

Thursday, January 17: (20°F, low, cloudy; 40°F, high)

Winter is still time. Life is frozen, slowed down, waiting. Our pond is frozen. It does not shimmer, it does not reflect, it does not ripple. It sits in stagnant cold, caught in the act of movement, stilled. The trees stand as stately as ever, but they are now very patient sentinels, waiting, watching. Covered in “sprayed-on” globs of snow and gripping ice, they shimmer in the sun like a mirage, while remaining immobile and stark. The world is caught like a fish on the hook of winter. Only the sun defies time. It shines forth brilliantly and luxuriantly, throwing away warmth like potlatch coppers. It is frivolous and wasteful and arrogant. It breaks through the stillness and dares to move across the winter sky, threatening to melt away time, reminding us that it will win - eventually. Indoors, the cabin is cozy and creaks and moans in the burden of sheltering and providing. Inside, life prevails unafraid of the seriousness of time. It is almost a mockery of winter. But not quite, because around the door are the accoutrements...gloves, hats, scarves, wet socks and dripping boots, bulky coats that look like snowmen huddled expectantly to return outdoors. Winter is pressing all around.

Unlike the creatures of this place, I am an interloper who has come to engage with this harshness. I am not a Montanan by nature and I do not have past experiences to guide me through winter with sensibility and efficiency. I am not captive here by nature. Why, then, did winter draw me? Why did I seek self-imprisonment? Why does my heart quicken to breathe in this woody cold and this entrapment? Facing the frozen pond and merengue-covered lodgepole pines and the blinding sun, I cannot help but smile. Inside, I know this answer. I can feel it.

Frozen Pond



Friday, January 18: (14°F, low, cloudy; 40°F, high)

I have pondered this question about harshness: I come towards the harsh winter because there is something inside of me that recognizes it, something that knows life itself as a luxurious and fragile good - something fleeting and persistent to survive the onslaught of environment every day. But this winter state also reminds me of time and cyclical movements and the promise of renewal...soon, but *in its own time*. It is not helplessness but patience that sets the tone – waiting, expectant, trusting that something moves time outside of ourselves and we follow along. Whether we call it God or Natural Selection or Mother Nature, it decides and we conform. Perhaps it is the sense of joyful subordination and unburdening of responsibility? How can I plan and control my day if I am living at the behest of something else or some other sense of time? I become more watchful, more careful, more observant and more

Montana Winter Days

delicate. It is a very bearable lightness of being. It quiets the mind and body and awakens the soul and spirit to a state of responsive dependency. I am not used to this, but I recognize it.

This morning the cold is less biting at 14 degrees and the snow is now two days old. There is disregard in such snow, as it looks beguilingly white from afar, even while it is soiled by daily life: it accumulates deer droppings and urine stains, water drippings from trees that form into hard, translucent ground debris, little bits of green needles ripped apart by black squirrels frenzied to horde on sunny days. The dirty snow and warm days make me wish for more cold and a fresh coating of paint on the ground to make it look less dirtied than it really is - all the way down.

The clouds this morning are spurious – they are wisp-like, in slow motion, a reminder that the day is never as dormant as it seems. And the sun as it rises, casts color everywhere. This great ball of fire turns the world rosy, seducing us into seeing harshness as beauty, compelling us to look and sense awe. And yet it will soon withdraw the color and begin to cast shadows of darkness as well. I have been out in the world already to walk my dog and wait for the school bus to take my son away. The day is colder than it seems, but it allows us to be with it still. I embrace it and then turn back towards the cabin. I peek at it from inside, but I also re-set myself to go out again. Beauty is not only visual and presence is not only physical. It is also a relationship between things and the way they are connected. It is also dirty snow and cold winds.

Saturday, January 19: (11°F, low, sunny; 44°F, high)

I feel as if I have been cast back into an older world – one that has dense and layered connections with primordial nature. Yesterday seven deer came into the back area of the house and walked around impetuously, stopping periodically to turn their heads and glare at me, asking, “How dare you come into our territory, an uninvited and illegitimate guest?” Momentarily I felt unmasked, belittled, the true interloper that I am. I photographed them while they circled me and stared me down. I remained caught in the act as I temporarily shared their space without permission. At least they did not ask for identification – not yet anyway.

Then late in the afternoon as darkness fell, we became part of an ancient rite. A congregation began forming in the little town area – cars and people all drawn towards the center of the icy town as the sun retreated. We joined the vehicular procession and, like so many others, parked by backing into space that lined the small road downtown, narrowing that area into a small slushy track with eerie headlights all pointed into the space. In front of us and to the right, in the small parking lot of a little store, a hair salon, and a laundromat, there was a heaping mound of old Christmas trees almost 20 feet high surrounded by icy sculptures of dinosaurs, horses, dragons, and other creatures. And as the sun and cold descended, along the two-block route marched young schoolchildren carrying very colorful paper dragon heads with multicolored garland strips and adults peppered haphazardly among them holding aloft rag torches soaked in gasoline and flaming brilliantly against the forbidding dark and cold. As they passed, people pushed in closer to the streets and then followed behind the supplicants to the parking lot, where the torches were used to light the bonfire. At first it was silent, somber, sacred, but as the loud and intense flames leapt high into the black sky, spitting out orange sparks

Montana Winter Days

of resin and ash and roaring as they conjured forth light and heat, the small crowd of adults likewise shifted from solemnity to an outburst of cheerful conversation, while they huddled near the fiery mound. Children began racing each other and throwing snowballs, leaving their colorful dragon garlands crushed and bleeding amid the slush and milling feet. I was witness to an ancient pagan rite of transformation and found myself lightened in the midst of fire and laughter. They call it Winterfest, a celebration of all things cold and icy and threatening. Against this somber backdrop, there is joy and radiance.

White-Tailed Deer and Dragons



Sunday, January 20: (14°F, low, sunny; 38°F, high)

We live in a part of town called Dogtown. The sign on the road boldly announces this and then underneath, "Population: Increasing." The waitress at Pop's said she thought it was named this because "there used to be a lot of dogs down there," but I wonder about the metaphorical propensity of this word because what there is a lot of today are single-wide trailers, outbuildings, random fences, trucks and truck parts, and unidentified lumps everywhere, jewels hidden beneath the winter frosting. However, it is a very quiet place – there is little outside activity this time of the year and our cabin, made of huge, thick pines, sits like an anomaly in the very real neighborhood wilderness, neighbors on both sides - one with a Confederate flag in the window facing us. Everyone is nice when we see them, even the *Confederados*. On the other side of the street is a small frozen lake for sale, surrounded on all sides by lodgepole pines. But from the front windows, we are apparently alone in our wilderness valley. The only view we see ahead is the frozen lake.

Today we went to church and reunited with people we knew when we were last here seven years ago. We did not live in this area then, but we did come into this town every Sunday for church, the weekly mail, and perishable supplies. Friendly, caring, self-subsistent, and outgoing, everyone greeted us genuinely and made us again one of them. It is a true privilege to be taken in as a wayfarer by full-timers. Most church members are loggers of some sort, but they also serve as the town's volunteer firemen, EMTs, and social workers. Serving others is their definition of Christian love. So as we come through and sit quietly on a bench in their church, they see us as no different than any other neighbor. Men dressed in pressed and creased blue jeans, Western shirts, and shined leather cowboy boots and women in assorted pressed pants and snow boots, their welcoming smiles and communion are as real as the

Montana Winter Days

stunning mountain views all around us. Pastor had on a brown-checked Western shirt with snaps and ribbing, coordinated brown jeans and cowboy boots. His message was about life ministry and he defined it as service outside of the church. It was practical and fundamental to faith. And in looking on such unpretentious humility, he served aptly as the role model of his own sermon. In his final prayer, he confessed that he knew his sermon was not as good as it should have been and he prayed that God would give him better words to serve, and tears began wetting my cheeks. When we live in deep community, rising above and competing does not render success. Quiet service and humility do.

Cowboy Pastor



Monday, January 21: (20°F, low, partly cloudy; 35°F, high)

Montana Winter Days

Last night we went to the high school to hear a so-called West African drumming group from Missoula traveling through the rural valleys of Montana. They were performing and then working the following days with young people in the schools in percussion workshops. The lead percussionist was from a small town in the Flathead Valley area, across our Mission Mountain range, and he thanked everyone for coming to hear them. But as he talked about this town, he told them that he loved this whole area of Montana. He said he loved taking his sons out fishing on Flathead Lake and seeing the rugged wilderness and then, “Wow! How lucky we are to live in this cool place!” Everyone clapped. And I was struck by this different type of bonding with place. I don’t doubt that “home” is beautiful to all people everywhere and I don’t doubt that beautiful places are created in the mind’s eye, even in the darkness of urban alleyways, but how different it was to me to witness a town priding itself not on what it has done to “self-improve,” but on what Mother Earth has provided. What an oddity to witness people universally in agreement that they were luckier than anyone else in the country because they lived here. Even unemployed loggers struggling to feed their families clapped and smiled. At least they had this. And this was quite a lot to have from their point of view. It was more than enough, I agree.

When the group called for the intermission, some 75 people filed into the school’s lobby to view an exhibition of photographs that an artist had made of their town, their houses, and their mountains. Here place asserts itself as a primary agent. One person even found her home in a photograph. Is beauty when we see ourselves through others’ eyes or is it truly in the eye of the beholder? This is a hard thing to answer and conjures up many other thoughts. I wonder about those who first saw this

Valley and first lived here. Did they see what I see? Did it move them as much as it does me?

Tuesday, January 22: (4°F, low, sunny; 26°F, high)

Cold can be as enticing as warmth. From our cabin hilltop, the big sky view is tremendous. This morning the sun comes forth, hazed over by clouds and frigidness below, yet it proclaims itself boldly, convinced of its mission to take on today. Over the solid-surfaced lake in our front window, there are small, low-lying clouds of white. Is the surface warmer than the air or vice versa? They meet somewhere in the middle, very visible and not yet worked out.

My son and I waited for ten minutes this morning at the end of the drive, looking for the lighted yellow school bus rumbling over the icy road. The dog stood beside me on her leash. Stillness, biting cold around us, but we shared our hopes for the day with each other. Our small, tinny voices felt like little prayers. Beginnings are always hopeful, always a little thrilling. At last we saw the bus and waved goodbye, as each took the next step for today. We will meet again once the sun passes its mid-mark.

I walked with the dog up the long, icy driveway, the cabin lights seeming to wink at me that they had a warm commodity waiting. My mother and I would now be able to share a cup of coffee without watching the clock. Outward and inward times are not always the same. Each moves at its own pace. The school bus demands that we be waiting at the end of our drive between 7:20 and 7:30 every morning, but after we meet that demand, there is an allotted space before another demand asserts itself. That space opens to inward time. I often wonder which is better. Is it better to be attuned inward to outward time (or outward to inward time)? Or is the best life

Montana Winter Days

one in which we can alternate time zones at will to remind ourselves that time controls only a bit but need not take over? The cats meet me at the door. Ah, they are a tribute to alternative time. I smile. Another little whispered answer.

School Bus Stop

