HOME

More

Mountain Men

Shann Ray

In Montana the rocky mountain front runs like a huge spine through the state. Often the mountains hold a brooding temperament, filled with ferocity and storm. The eastern side of the state is massive and largely empty, a land of grass, horses, deer, and antelope. A silent, contemplative landscape. A state nearly 700 miles across that takes 10 hours to drive, Montana is gigantic, haunting in splendor. The state contains no less than 100 mountain ranges: the Beartooths, the Crazies, the Absarokas, the Sapphires, the Beaverheads, the Sawtooths, and many more. Much of the landscape is made up of crags and ridges, cirques, spurs, and escarpments that touch the sky at 8,000 to 13,000 feet. All of Pennsylvania and much of the eastern seaboard of the United States can fit within Montana. Montana is home to elk, deer, antelope, bighorn sheep, wolves, wolverines, grizzlies, black bear, mountain lions, mountain goats, meadowlarks, red-winged blackbirds, redtailed hawks, blue-capped tree swallows, gray owls, golden eagles. A mountain lion gratitude, affection, and humility. Yet distance as dignity and desire.



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I grew up fishing, climbing the mountains, walking the rivers, playing basketball year round, jumping off bridges and diving into cold clear water. And hunting as well. A man has rifles, his favorite rifles. For me, my father's old .22, the stock worn and darkened, good feel of wood in the hand, and a true line from gun to bird. Grouse, pheasants, sage hens, and wild turkeys end up fried hot or in a bubbling stew with potatoes and carrots and celery. For bigger animals, the Remington .243, again a gun of my father's, one he's had for 40 years, lighter than most and with good range. Atop the rifle a wide angle Redfield four-plex scope with a 2 to 7 power variable. The bullet travels 2900 to 3000 feet per second. Dinners of deer or elk steak, deer or elk hamburger, sausage made from the meat of the animal, along with excellent deer or elk jerky. Recently my father switched to a Smith and Wesson .22-250. The gun is lighter than the .243 but fires farther and faster, the bullet at 4000 feet per second. The gun is mounted with a Simmons 50 millimeter 3 to 9 power open face scope for wider field of vision. We shoot at 4 power. The mind and ear experience a reverse echo. You see the animal go down before you hear the report. The hide and rack of an elk are often sold to a fur buyer: the hide for 15 or 20 dollars, the complete skull and rack, raw, uncleaned, and frozen, for 60 or 70 dollars a nair

The dark intensity and resplendence of the wilderness frames my life.

I went to high school in Livingston, Montana between the Crazy Mountains and the Beartooths near the old entrance to Yellowstone National Park, an area that boasts peaks and valleys in abundance, the Yellowstone River, a frontier of wildness and animals and relatively few people. Legend has it the Crazies are named for an insane woman who lived and died there. The Beartooths are upraised like teeth, and Beartooth Peak with its sharp predatory line defines the mountains. We didn't field dress the animals, we mainly boned them out, which is more efficient for packing meat out of the high country. This involves leaving the bones and taking all the main areas for eating such as the backstraps and all four quarters, filets and cuts of meat from the neck and ribs, the elements that will feed you for the year. We skinned the animal and bagged the hide to trade it for money or a pair of leather gloves at the local hide and fur station. To quarter the animal, we cut through the shoulder and hip joints with a bone saw. We also sawed off the hooves. We placed the quarters, the rest of the meat, and the hide in plastic black Hefty garbage bags, and tied the bags off and put them in our packs. If it was a trophy animal and we wanted to take it to the taxidermist, we were careful to cape it out. We took the hide from the upper body, the area from the lower chest behind the front legs and up through the shoulders, neck, and head. We removed the head from the neck so head, horns, and cape could be packed out intact. If we didn't want to cape the animal but wanted the horns we simply sawed off the base of the horns connected to the skull plate over the brain. For a European mount the horns and whole skull are needed. The skull is bleached white, the horns touched to natural brown, the skull and horns set on a wood backdrop. The look is stark and skeletal, and with the wide-tined tilt of the rack of a bull elk, beautiful, and shocking.

Our tools: a sharp hunting knife, 6 to 10 inches long and a sharpening stone or sharpening tool that is generally thin and circular like a pencil, a small bone saw, and your own quickness and muscle. The body is fresh and hot so the skin comes off neatly as we turn the animal and move the knife along the skin-line where the white inner lining separates from the fat and muscle of the body. If we are in bear country we work fast in order to limit the amount of time the scent of fresh meat is in the air. In our absence the remains of the animal feeds bears, wolves, and hawks, as well as coyotes, crows and other scavengers. In the end the body is picked clean by animals and insects and the bones go dry and white from exposure to sun, wind, rain, and snow. For years when I walk in that high country, I see those bones. And I remember.

As a high school teacher in Montana, my dad had a very low salary so we lived on deer and elk every year. Birds, some antelope. With the big animals, we brought the meat back home and cut it into steaks, which we wrapped in butcher paper and marked and put in the freezer. The rest we took to a local shop to be made into hamburger, sausage, and jerky. With birds, we snapped the neck, then cut and peeled back the skin. Then bagged them and took them home.

Though we lived in town, the towns were small. My mom grew up in a town of eight people, a tiny place on the eastern high plains, called Cohagen, Montana. Literally in the middle of nowhere. The town had a post office, located in the back of her house. My grandma was the postmaster. My grandpa had a ranch and also drove wheat or livestock for other ranches. In that wide empty landscape the town also had a community school, a small store, and two bars. My father grew up in Circle, Montana, a town of 300 people, also on the eastern side of the state. His father sheared sheep and worked various odd jobs. His mother waitressed at the local diner. Growing up we lived first on the plains, then in the southern Montana mountains around Livingston and Bozeman.

Marvels of landscape. Marvels with regard to people. My mother raised a grand prize winning heifer. My father tried bull riding once just to say he did. My grandma loved watching a good cutting horse, light in the foot, horse and rider in a unified dance. Ranching, hunting, livestock, horses, cutting horses, rodeos, bronc riding, team roping, steer wrestling. Wilderness. Home.

On the Niitsitapi (Blackfeet) reservation in Browning on the northern highline just off the east side of Glacier, almost everyone has horses. When I was there not long ago, a couple of high school students rode their horses down the town's single main street. I watched as they took the horses through the Subway drive-through, picked up lunch, and rode on. The small towns, and every Montana reservation town is a small town, are known for isolation, love, and loneliness, people at times fully alive or sold to pain, a lot of drinking, high rates of unemployment, economic and emotional despair, suicide, and violence, as well as strong families, humility, humor, respect, and courage.

In eastern Montana my dad grew up poor, lanky, and in love with basketball. He escaped high school with poor grades, grew six inches as he worked on road crews for a couple of years, and paid attention when the old laborers said, "You don't want to do this your whole life. You can play ball. Get outta here. Go to college." When he mustered up the pluck, he walked into the gym at Miles City Community College. He was 6 feet 4 inches tall. He found the coach's office in the back, and asked tentatively, "You got a scholarship?" The man looked up, saw his height, didn't know him from Adam, and said, "Yes, I do."

Two years in Miles City, two more on a basketball scholarship at Rocky Mountain College. Then on to teaching and coaching high school teams. In those years, my dad's closest friend was Cleveland Highwalker. "One of the very best people," my dad said, "and a great athlete." They played ball, hunted, and fished like Montana was their jewel. Cleveland was young, a kind of champion of the Cheyenne, and the people loved him. He and my dad won independent basketball tournaments all over the state. I picture Cleveland long-legged with a tall broad shoulder, sharp face, kind eyes. My dad tells of a time he and Cleveland made the trek to Cleveland's grandma's house, a remote distance over fields of snow. She spoke only Cheyenne. My dad brought her two deer, a gopher, and a magpie, and she traced his footprints on leather she later chewed to soften, leather that became two pair of intricately beaded moccasins my dad cherished. Cleveland wasn't a drinker. My father was, as was his father before him. My father's father died of alcoholism. But Cleveland was different. He had a good job. His family loved him. He was athletic, smart, on the rise. People held such hope for him.

Before he was 30, Cleveland took his own life.

Some years after Cleveland's death, my father scrambled out of the spiral of alcohol. Over the years I grew up in a couple of different trailers and one mobile home. Huge animal heads lined the walls and took up half the open space. You'd have to walk around those animals with their large shoulders and narrow heads that bore huge racks of horns. They were all mounted on the walls, nosing their way into the living room.

Now my parents have a house that overlooks the gap toward Livingston, the Bridgers and the Spanish Peaks. When you come into the great room, high walls lead to a ship's prow of 20-foot windows. Those heads still stare you down. To the right as you enter you see a pair of mountain goats as well as a stone sheep and a dahl sheep with horns on a full curl. Above your head behind you is the head of a bear, with wide mouth bearing teeth. To the left you find the head of a caribou, two antelope, a very large elk, a whitetail buck, a mule deer buck, and down on the floor a full-length mountain lion. All this put terror in me as a child whenever I walked through the trailer at night. The wonder of it still strikes me.

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Home, or the loss of it, reverberates in the people and the literature of the American West. Sometimes downplayed or subdued, most often revealed as fractured or shattered or wrecked, the sense of subliminal grief is pervasive and painful and raises questions about the wilderness we call family, about women, and, especially, about men.

My father turned 70 this year. "I guess the Lord saw fit to bless me," he said, and it wasn't the 70 years he was talking about. It was the wilderness. This season my father brought home two turkeys, an elk, two deer, two antelope, and a mountain goat, feeding a veritable passel of people including a family who advertised on Craig's List wanting venison. The mountain goat he found in the Crazies, a hunt he took alone in the high country, creating plateaus, rock walks, and lagged shale slides a thousand feet above the tree line. He want farther than expected

in order to approach the billy from above.

He shot the animal behind the shoulder on a steep slant from 300 feet. The mountain goat collapsed and slid down a narrow chute, and it took time and caution for my father to reach the place where the animal came to rest on a razor uplift of rock. There he straddled a rock spine, standing over an expanse of sky, and boned out the animal. He knew he would need to work fast. In a pathless place, being caught coming down the mountain after dark is not pleasant. In his precarious position above the clouds, a job that normally takes my father 45 minutes took over two hours. With his hunting knife and bone saw he quartered the animal, removed the meat, and took the cape, head, hide and horns. Finally, the sun leaning toward last light, the heavy pack was ready and he began his descent. Just after dusk my father emerged on the flat below the mountains, made his way to his truck, and returned home.

For years my father and I could not express our weaknesses to one another. Nor could we easily express our tenderness. I gained his love for basketball and went from battles against one of the all-time great Montana basketball players, Jonathan Takes Enemy, to battles on the streets of L.A., to battles in gyms all over the country on the road to March Madness. Playing pro ball in Germany I faced foes in Berlin, Wolfenbüttel, Bamberg, Leverkusen.

Home, I'd face my dad and wonder if we knew each other at all, wonder if the deep-seated anger that seemed to reside in me like a thorn could ever be removed. We didn't talk much. Or if we did, it seemed he yelled while I grew silent. We entered the East Gallatin and set down dry flies over clear water. We didn't speak our faults. Our great lacks, our separate hungers. We concealed them in our bodies. We released them on each other. Still, we lay on our backs beneath cottonwoods on the flats below the Crazies before dawn and waited for turkeys to come visible in the trees. And still, his hand on my shoulder steadied me before I focused the scope on a whitetail buck whose crown was barely visible above the grass.

In those years conflict could be hot and full of wrath and mostly irresolvable, but in later life, by subtle turns, love came to us, and taught us the nature of forgiveness. It started when my wife spoke quietly to me in bed after dark in my parents' house. "Tell him you love him," she said. "Don't wait. Put your arm around him. Touch him."

"Why?"

"Because," she said. "I want you to be a man who can touch. I want you to be a man who can give love to his father."

A burn entered my chest like a dry August fire, like kindling ravenously consumed.

"Go to him," she said

"And do what?" I questioned.

"Apologize. Ask his forgiveness."

"Definitely not," I said. "He's the one who needs to ask forgiveness of me."

She looked at me, closely. She waited, but over the years she won me over. I began to listen. What she asked I tried to do, haltingly for a very long time, before things opened up and kindness presented itself more readily between my father and me. The physical landscape of Montana as well as the interior landscapes of people give a small glimpse into the reality of how we ask for and receive forgiveness, and how we navigate the rugged trail of atonement. The land in its expressions of time and weather and seasons, mirrors how we change, and how we love.

In America there is presently so much grief and loss between races, between women and men, and specifically between men and men. In a harsh, long season of winter, spring can seem a distant dream. In the context of cold or hardened relationships, health or communion can be hard to fathom. Many men do not have words for their relationship to women or to other men. Here, when combined with a wordless or muted interior, the Montana landscape evokes an even more isolate and rugged exterior, often gesturing to the stylistic characteristics of each man's own physicality. A man's generational family line, his temperament, his response to abuse or violence or vacancy is embedded in a Western landscape as bleak as it is stunning, as fatal as it is filled with life. My father's hands, like my own, contain large crevices, dislocated joints, oversized knuckles, cuts, scars, spots, discolorations. They are familiar with wood and rock, metal and water. They contain great distances. They do not lend themselves naturally to softness.

For a man who cannot find words to express feelings the result is often a potent bend toward that which is distant and apathetic or harsh and desolate, violent, even deadly. Such men tend to live emotionally silent or physically loud and largely defunct familial lives. In a dense shadow of their true selves they shun relational engagement by living in apathy or aggression toward that which is lovely in others. They are empty and void, and they are experienced as meaningless or incapable of generating meaning. By violence or apathy, men cut off the feminine and succeed in harming their relationships with women and other men. Even if it is a known truism that all men benefit from a healthy balance of the feminine and the masculine, many men find it very difficult to hold respect for the feminine within their own masculinity. Interwoven dualities such as resolve and tenderness, love and power, justice and mercy, and transparency and boundary are necessary for the feminine and the masculine to relate on an in-depth level. To the meaningless man a healthy balance of such qualities is beyond him.

In the inner world the desolate man's impact is often graceless. Broken relationships, fractured families, the border of despondency, the fall from grace. Men who reject grace or lack grace can be stubborn, hard as flint. It is as if they have left a sense of home behind. At the same time a desire to return exists in the core of the masculine and in the men of the American West. My father, after all these years, rises from his chair when I make the seven hour journey to his house. "Welcome home," he says. He comes to me and holds me in his arms. He kisses my cheek. In my experience men yearn for oneness with others. Yet without atonement a life of unwieldy consequence tracks a man, often in predatory fashion.

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Consider the Sand Creek Massacre, where Cheyenne elders, women and children were massacred by U.S. Cavalry. Consider the Big Hole Massacre, where Nez Perce elders, women and children were massacred by U.S. Cavalry. Like individual men, dominant culture bears the wound of its own moral shadow—its own proclivity for evil—and from such wounding, collapses inward and destroys self and others. Without atonement, individual men never recover their humanity; they merely echo the desolate voice of the dominant culture that holds them captive.

Even so, the mystery of life and the hope for love is irrevocable, and felt even in men whose interiority can often appear more mountain-like than human. Cold, massive in darkness or density, far removed from the intimacies of daily life, such men suffer. The mountains are home to so much. I like to think men can give that sense of home to the loved ones around them. In fact, experiencing the mountains not as distant, but close to the heart, has shown me men crave something higher. If you have entered the wilderness, you know the awe and fear wilderness commands, and at the same time you know the intimacy wilderness imparts without measure. In a similar way, for men who desire a pathway home, when they find a way to set out on this path, they traverse the landscape bravely and with endurance.

Home is a place of peace reunion and reconciliation where love discernment and wisdom reside. Home rather than dislocation o

displacement. That home could be the sacredness of the Native American traditions in Montana such as those of the Tsitsistas (Northern Cheyenne) or the Niitsitapi (Blackfeet) or the Ochethi Sakowiŋ (Sioux), or it could be a sense of home that heralds from a far homeland such as my own Czech heritage. Home is found in America, in the blood of the America we hope in and for which we openly seek a healing that will reverse the descent of the present and lead us to the reality of a more responsible future. Home is acknowledged or embraced, challenged, attacked, or divided as a result of the level of privilege we have or the level of atrocity we have suffered in our families, nationally, or culturally.

Home is found in the wilderness that surrounds us and the wilderness within us

Notably, emotional and spiritual wilderness can be as treacherous as physical wilderness. In the mix of Native American and Euro-American culture in Montana and in the American West, imaginative and essential life comes of honoring cultures while also directly facing the atrocities of the present and the past. Of ultimate value is an authentic naming of the atrocities and massacres, the overt and covert harms, the pervasive human rights abuses as well as the reconciliations that have transpired in Montana history and in American history as a whole. In the concept of home and the lived experience of home, the nature of the masculine is often an unconscious weapon that is violently projected, rather than something that is contemplative, established in dignity and received with dignity. Listening is diminished or destroyed. The healing of the masculine involves receiving the influence of the feminine, of home, and of the will to be honorable, intimate, and life giving in the center of culture and country.

When I think of Montana, a place as fraught with race and gender discrimination as any place in America, I wonder what can lead us deep into the wilderness of atonement and return us to one another. I picture my father walking through dusk, the animal strapped to his back, the cape and horns of the animal catching the light.

I picture Cleveland Highwalker walking beside him.

When my father comes home from the mountains and gives to us from what he's been given, we receive him with open arms. We greet him with gratitude for how he went at 70 into the heights of a rough and relentless country. We eat well this year, and celebrate how good it is to be alive and wild.

We gaze with open eyes on the wilderness of this world.