

## Out West, By Joe Wilkins

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OUT ON THE BIG DRY we had to kill to live:

Come October, we'd herd a yearling lamb into the west pen, throw it some good flakes of alfalfa hay. It'd be grass-fat by then, nearly tame, just chewing, and looking around, and chewing. My father, his black hair bright and wild in the early winter light, would put the rifle barrel in its soft ear and pull the trigger. We were nearly two hours away from the nearest supermarket. And even if we were closer, we couldn't afford it. We ate lamb all winter — lamb chops and leg of lamb and lamb stew with garden peas my mother canned. All kinds of lamb.

But on Sunday, we almost always pulled a fryer out of the freezer for dinner. Butchering chickens was an all-day affair, a late-summer festival of sorts, a kind of prairie celebration. We put on our old jeans and stained snap shirts and ate a big breakfast of hamburger steak, eggs, and potatoes. My mother and grandmother set up aluminum basins of hot water for the plucking. My father and grandfather sharpened knives and hatchets. And when everything was finally ready, they sent us children into the coop.

A moment later we scrambled out slicked with shit and feathers, holding squawking hens to our heaving chests. We gave those orange and brown and piebald hens over to my father or my grandfather, whoever happened to be kneeling behind the pine stump that day, and one-by-one they stretched the hens out on the stump and stroked their necks until they calmed and brought the hatchet down hard. They gave them back to us — still flapping and jerking, blood suddenly everywhere — by their bony feet. There'd be a line of us then, happy children holding headless chickens upside down, blood running out and all over the dust.

BUT TO KILL is not necessarily to do violence:

I remember my grandfather standing above me, his breath steaming out of him. He was telling me to take my knife and cut the throat of the first antelope I had ever shot. I was twelve years old and confused. This thing laid out on the snow before me was so fine and beautiful; I had no idea it would be like this. I was looking to my grandfather for help, for release from this duty — but he shook his head. I turned back to the buck, took up my eight-inch, bone-handled knife, and eased the bright blade through the skin of the buck's neck and the hollow beneath. There is so much blood in a thing.

After I gutted him and packed him on my back up the ridge and loaded him into the bed of the pickup, I stood in the clear, cold light of the morning, marveling at my blood-crusting jeans, my still blood-wet hands. All winter, I knew, we'd eat breakfasts of antelope steak and fried eggs, earthy-tasting antelope sausage mixed into cream gravy and poured over toast come dinner. My father was years dead by then, and my mother came home from work each day tired in the dark. This blood, I thought, will get us through.

My grandfather broke my reverie. He took me by the shoulders, told me I had done a good, hard thing and done it well. He told me to be careful that it always remained a hard thing to do. "Easy isn't any good," he said. "If it ever gets easy — quit."

NOW YOU'RE THIRTEEN, old enough to hunt by yourself, so you load an old, bolt-action .22 with shells. You walk north. There is little wind, the sun a white hole in the sky. Beneath your boots the bones of dry grass bend and crack. You feel good about this. Prairie dogs are bad for the fields. They spread disease. A sheep will snap a front leg in a doghole. Your father is dead, your grandfather is old, and you tell yourself you are just doing what a man does. You are taking care of the fields, keeping the stock safe. You tell yourself all kinds of things.

You lay your skinny body down over a pile of rotten fence posts. The prairie dogs run and dash and scamper to their little mounds, now stand and chirp at one another. You close your left eye and snug the butt up against your shoulder, the polished wood cool and smooth on the warm skin of your cheek. There's a fat one not fifty yards away. You steady yourself. There is the smell of creosote, the taste of dust and rank weeds. You sight along the blue barrel and pull the trigger. There is a small pop. The prairie dog flops over and rolls down its mound and is dead.

You are pleased with yourself. You stand for a better look. A cottontail rabbit zigzags out from beneath the pile of old posts some twenty yards and stops. You step back with your right foot and swing the rifle butt up to your shoulder again. There's no need to shoot rabbits. You close your left eye. Rabbits are no good to eat, they don't do any damage to the fields. You drop the open sights over the rabbit's spine. Its long ears twitch one, two, three times. You squeeze the trigger.

The rabbit bucks and jumps, screams. You didn't know rabbits could scream. You shoot again. And again. It's still screaming, back legs kicking at the empty air. You shoot again. The body bucks and jumps and is still.

Your breath comes back to you. That wasn't so bad, you think. But you won't tell your grandfather. He wouldn't like you killing rabbits. He's old, though, and what does he know and who really cares about rabbits anyway? All the older boys you run around with at school shoot them.

IT'S SATURDAY NIGHT. You are fourteen now, nearly grown, you think — your grandfather older and older yet, his once board-straight shoulders beginning to buckle and slump, and your mother still tired, voiceless and sad-eyed as you slam the screen door and screech the truck's tires on your way out.

You drive on into Melstone and park down by the Sportsman Bar. You get in with that bunch of older boys. They've got cigarettes, beer in the backseat, a bottle of whiskey they're passing around. Boy, they drive fast. They take the corners at a gravelly skid, they raise dust right through the middle of town. Now they race on out to the river. You all pile out and run and yell and knock down the sign that says PRIMITIVE ROAD, now the one that says NARROW BRIDGE. Someone starts throwing beer bottles at the old homesteader's shack off in the willows. They crash and shatter, the glass lovely in the light of the moon. One boy runs up on the bridge and strips off his clothes and jumps. Everyone cheers and swears. From somewhere down in the watery dark, he swears back.

You don't like this. You know this isn't any good. You're all drunk. It's dark. The water's fast and cold this spring. And who knows how deep it is here, anyway? Doesn't anyone remember the Dejaher boy? You've seen him, slouched in his wheelchair, sucking can after can of 7Up through a straw. But all of a sudden — you don't quite know how it happens — you're there with the other boys, in line, laughing right there behind them. Each jumps in turn, and now it's your turn. You don't know what to do about all this. The other boys cheer and holler. Someone passes you the whiskey bottle. You take a big swig, wing off your t-shirt, edge your toes over the rusted iron — into the dark, you leap.

AND FOR A GOOD WHILE, that's how it goes: you drive fast and wild out into the dark, you coax girls down to your riverbottom bonfire parties, you stand on the beer cooler in the back of Adam's truck and flood the dark trees with a spotlight — your friend, Vinny, shoots and hits the coon between the eyes, hollers, sprays beer foam everywhere.

But then, late one night on your way back from Addie Mae's trailer, where you smoked Winstons and drank Bud Ice and laughed like you knew what you were doing, you come over Hougen's Hill out of Melstone headed west at about ninety miles an hour right down the middle of the road. As your headlights shift from sky to highway, there, straddling the double yellow line, is a big Angus. You're in the old Tercel; that cow's as big as you. You spin the wheel this way and that way and the night spins too around you.

You aren't scared. A little angry, maybe. But mostly it is like a thing coming down that you knew would always come down, the way you know your grandfather will soon die and that skinny sophomore you like will take up with some twenty-seven-year-old ranch hand and Adam will end up knocking over the liquor store in Roundup.

There goes basketball, you think. There goes just about everything.

AND THEN EVERYTHING IS STILL: and I am in the middle of the road, facing east instead of west, headlights veering off into the dark. I turn the car around and drive slowly toward home. I make it nearly to our turnoff before the shaking starts. I fall into bed with my jeans on, my arms and shoulders and face and heart jerking, banging like a screen door slapped about in the wind. My breath runs from me in the dark. I don't sleep until I see the sun. Then I dream. Then, miraculously, I wake.

TEN-ODD YEARS LATER the night is dark and shot with stars, the red tracers of lit cigarettes, a scattered rainbow of light from the dance hall.

It's a cover band, mostly George Strait numbers, some old Eric Clapton. And this is the All-School Reunion. Melstone is so small there are no individual class reunions; instead, every ten years or so, anyone who ever graduated from the local high school shows up for two days of handshakes and hellos, Main Street bonfires, beer gardens, and big stories. So that's where I am, at the All-School Reunion, drunk and leaning up against someone's pickup. It's very late. My wife, Liz, has been asking to go. And we should. But maybe just one more beer. A friend of mine from college, who didn't graduate from Melstone but happened to be passing through Montana when we were passing through Montana, is even drunker than I am. He's telling me something, something sad, I think, but I'm not really listening. I'm staring at the stars.

Now two older men are in front of my friend and me. I try to concentrate on them. One is Kevin Kincheloe. I know him. He's a good guy. I used to play with his oldest daughter, Janna, during the noon recess up at school. She was small and dark-haired, and I thought she was beautiful. But when I was in the third grade, just after my father died, they had to move away. The bank foreclosed, and they lost their ranch and everything else. I think Kevin works some kind of wage job up around Billings now.

Anyway, Kevin's a good guy. He says hello, shakes my hand, offers us a pull off his fifth of Southern Comfort. But now the other man shoulders his way up to us. He's big and fat, his face wide and whiskered. His untucked shirt waves over the bulk of his belly. Kevin starts to introduce him, but the fat man cuts him off and says something stupid. My friend says something stupid back. The fat man thumps my friend in the chest with his meaty finger — and the air around us goes glass.

Kevin slides back half a step and quits talking, his mouth dropping into a hard line. This man is a father of two daughters, I think, drunkenly surprised to find Kevin readying himself, to find that I too am straightening up, my arms loose, my hands curling into fists at my sides. My friend, stepping toward the fat man, sneering at the fat man, slowly raises the bottle of Southern Comfort and takes a long drink. Then he takes another. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, shoves the bottle hard into the fat man's chest, says, "I want to see you drink."

The fat man stands there for a moment. Then drinks — one, two, three, four swallows. My friend, still rigid and pissed and sneering at the fat man, nods with each swallow. The fat man lowers the bottle and hands it to Kevin, who drinks and then hands the bottle to me. So I drink, the syrupy bourbon coating my throat, and somehow, for no decent reason at all, this solves the whole mess: the fat man belches and turns away; my friend laughs and stumbles a bit, sits on his ass in the gravel; I breathe and let my shoulders go soft; Kevin smiles drunkenly and steps back toward me and starts in again on whatever story he was telling in the first place.

I lean back up against the hard, cool steel of the truck to watch the stars open and close their bright and tiny mouths. I am surprised at myself. Here I am: a college professor going soft in the middle thinking I'm going to get into a fistfight. I've never been in a fistfight. Even when I was an idiot-hearted boy, drinking too much and driving too fast and doing stupid things out there in the night, I always stopped before I stepped into that kind of violence. I always turned away. What would I have done tonight? What would have Kevin done? What might have happened?

I'm still idiot-hearted, I think, and then try very hard to quit thinking. Kevin's saying something about how much he misses the people out here, the Sportsman Bar, the good land along the river they used to own.

THE LAND OUT ON THE BIG DRY was bad, but we tried hard to make it good:

We drained the river for irrigation, we sprayed the fields for knapweed and foxtail, we set out tubs of used motor oil for grasshopper traps. We ran electric fence up the hillsides to make the sheep eat right, we stayed all night in the shed to pull breech lambs, we vaccinated and de-horned and fed tons and tons of corn. And when none of it worked, when the wheat still burned and the grasshoppers came like a plague and the sheep went bone skinny in the sun, when that bad land still beat us, we prayed. And when that didn't work, we cursed. And then we slung the bodies to the boneyard and tried again — harder this time, the wheels greased with another layer of our bile.

Even done well, you couldn't call it a living; it was all a kind of ritualized dying. And that's not to demean a way of life. It's simply to call it like it is. Living off the land, any land, is hard. Living off that bad land, part of that stretch of high plains along the eastern front of the Rockies they used to call the Great American Desert, was nearly impossible. Especially when the rules of agriculture changed under Reagan, which was about the same time the summers got longer

and the winters shorter and the creeks that once ran in all the coulees just dried up. And even then we didn't do anything different. We didn't advocate for ourselves or educate ourselves. We just doubled down and got tougher, worked harder — more loans from the bank, more acres grazed to the ground, more chemicals washed across the alfalfa.

We hurt the land, and it hurt us. Sometimes it hurt us physically: I didn't know a man in the valley who wasn't missing a couple of fingers, or maybe recovering from a broken leg after being thrown, again, by that ornery mare. There were boys in wheelchairs, girls with barbed-wire scars down their faces. Women who were forty looked sixty-five, and women who were sixty-five looked downright biblical. Clyde Brewer's heart blew up. Multiple sclerosis took hold of Butch Treible's straight spine and shook it crooked. And when I was nine, my father turned to the wall and died of cancer, probably exacerbated, they told us, by prolonged exposure to potent herbicides.

And sometimes it struck us in other, deeper ways: after my father died, my grandfather, who was one of the last of the old-time cowboys to ride the Comanche Flats before barbed wire, sold the family ranch. We were surprised and broken up about it — I remember my mother and my uncle Tom were especially questioning — but the important thing is my grandfather didn't go bankrupt. He had a choice. He was old but could have waited for me or for my brother, yet of his own will he sold, and then he told us boys a new story: he told us we would leave this place and go off to college. He only had an eighth-grade education, but that's the story he started telling, all about the things we could do if we only buckled down and kept at those books. It was a good story. So many of the other stories weren't working anymore, those ones other men told to their sons and grandsons, the ones about that good land along the river, about how some great-grandfather settled it way back when, about how it was hard going but they made it, about how even in the worst of times the land would see them through, about how the land was theirs and had been theirs and would always be theirs — but then when their boys got ready to start working that land, turned to that land, it was gone. Where'd it go? Ask the Crow, the Northern Cheyenne, the Sioux. See, out West all the old mistakes are new, and many men, good men like Kevin Kincheloe, had to sit at their kitchen tables and watch through the front window as the bank's auctioneer walked their acres, selling everything — from combines to skinny cattle, selling it all right down to the dry grass: imagine it for a moment. Imagine everything you love of the world taken from you. Now imagine it being taken from your child.

It was all about the land. We didn't do right by it. And we lost it: the phone rings, and my mother shakes her head, adds another name to the list of farm foreclosures. The neighbors, the few left, sit silently at the kitchen table, the clink of coffee cups saying all there is to say.

It was a slow, psychic violence. And many turned that violence inward: Over another shot of Rich & Rare at a roadside bar, men hatched a thousand plots for revenge. Boys drove hell-bent down gravel roads. Women left screen doors screeching on their hinges. Girls climbed in with whoever had a fast car headed somewhere else. That's mostly what folks did: they left. And they left like leaving is some kind of answer, like you're not carrying anyway your bad heart out into the hot night, loading into the one pickup the boss won't miss that much a saddle and some tack and that vodka box the kids packed lip-full of toys, and driving through the star-cut dark, trying to decide whether to try Harlowton or Big Timber or maybe up and do it, make for Spokane. On the television politicians talked about this program or that program to help rural America, but someone knew what it was really all about — they set up a suicide hotline strictly for farmers and ranchers who'd gone bankrupt and had to sell and found themselves stuck in a world they didn't recognize.

But too there were those who picked up their rifles and, instead of slipping the barrel under their own chins, shouldered them, drew a bead on that world. Like that bunch in Jordan, Montana, calling themselves The Freemen, barricading themselves in a place they dubbed Justus Township, and holding off the feds for weeks with a big arsenal and bigger threats. The press called them a militia group, a one-time thing, a bunch of crazies, but they were just ranchers who had lost their land, folks like so many who had fallen into reactionary politics. Others got fundamental, went back to the church in a big way, started thinking the books in the library or the new schoolteacher's ideas were to blame. And some just struck out at whoever or whatever happened to be in the way. When the bills piled up too high, my friend Justin's uncle used to take up a logging chain and beat whichever kid happened to be around.

It was historical: smallpox blankets and slaughtered buffalo gave our ancestors the land in the first place. Maybe more blood could get it back.

I WAS JUST SIXTEEN the first time I saw a person try to kill another person.

I had parked at the café and was riding around with some older boys in a pickup. One of them had just been dumped by his girlfriend. And he was angry, really angry — swearing and sucking warm beer right from the can and telling us again and again what he ought to do, what he would do. When he spotted her car pulling onto Main Street, he yelled at the boy driving to follow her. *Follow her!*

So we did. We tailed her through town. We yelled when we got close, swore and said all kinds of things. And when she took off down the highway, we came after her. We cranked it up to a hundred and pulled even with her and threw beer cans at her windshield. We followed her when she turned off onto a gravel road, when she turned off into a field of sagebrush, when she skidded to a dusty stop in the middle of nowhere. I was drunk and scared, but I piled out of the pickup like the other boys, ready to yell, ready to stomp around and act mad, ready to do something. And when that girl threw open her car door and shouldered a rifle and started shooting, like the other boys I took off across the prairie.

She was yelling and crying, shaking something terrible. Her father, I knew, was a bad drunk. He'd sold off, leased or lost of most their land and a few months back left the family for a cocktail waitress and an abandoned trailer over near Jordan. I'd still see him sometimes, at ball games or in the café. He'd stumble over to me and shake my hand and try to tell me funny stories about my father, though he couldn't ever remember how they ended and always got them twisted up. Anyway, she must have shot five or six times, maybe more. After a moment, the last report still clanging along the hills, she dropped the rifle and collapsed there beside it in the dust.

We all ran back to the pickup and got in and drove away.

AND I THOUGHT, as I left for college a few years later, I was getting clean away:

But when I start graduate school, instead of renting an apartment in town, we settle in a little white house down the highway near the crossroads of Bovill, Idaho. Out our backdoor the Bitterroot Mountains rise up with their blue faces of cedar and pine. In the mornings I run along the creek down to the log works, the smell of stone and water and sweet sap strong in the air. Liz brings home buckets of blackberries from the canyon. We make pancakes for dinner, cover them with berries and cream. We've been traveling for a few years, living here and there, and are happy to be back in the West, this place we feel we know, this wide open we both love.

Saturday night we head over to the Elk Bar. It's a one-room joint in the ground floor of the old Bovill Hotel, a pile of bricks that looks like it might collapse if you kicked it hard enough. I order two bottles of High Life and two shots of Jim Beam. We smile at one another, say, "Here's to the West!" Then clink our shot glasses and drink, seal our toast with a whiskey kiss. We take our beers and wander over to the jukebox and lean down to read the yellowing song titles. I pick a Hank Williams tune. Liz goes for Patsy Cline. I start to say something to her, but suddenly she turns and yells.

There are two men — shirtless, stains on their faces, one leaning on a pool cue, the other working a wad of snoose around his mouth. They seem built out of wires and boards, their stringy legs and thick chests and hands. Liz is yelling at them, stepping forward, pointing, her voice high and loud, her face hot. These men are half grinning, half pleading, saying they didn't know who she was, thought she was a girlfriend, a cousin. And suddenly, as the one with the snoose streak on his chin glances at me and wipes at his mouth, I get it. One of them has felt her up, grabbed her ass or something as we were bent over the jukebox. I feel my whole body go tight and ready. I step forward, in front of Liz, and say, "Leave my wife the fuck alone."

They grin at one another. They step forward too, their shoulders rolling back. The one wraps both hands around his pool stick. "Hey, man, I thought she was my girlfriend. She looks like my girlfriend. Honest mistake, right? No trouble, right? You don't want any trouble, do you?" It's an honest question. Because they do. They've forgotten Liz entirely. They're both staring right at me, the sweat shining on their bare chests. The stains, I see now, are blood bright on their faces. This is what they came for, this is what they wanted all along. And the rest of the bar knows this, too. They have quieted, hunkered down, turned ever so slightly our way. They're waiting, wondering. What will this man do, this skinny man who goes to the university, this man we don't know, this outsider? Will he do the right thing? Will he swing? He ought to swing. That's his wife there. He ought to bust that beer bottle right across that boy's face. He'll get the shit kicked out of him then. Those boys are twice as mean as he is. You can see that plain as day. But that doesn't matter. He ought to swing.

I don't swing. I say, again, "Leave my wife the fuck alone," and I take her arm, and we leave. We walk down the street to the other bar in town, Bailey's, where I drink shot after shot of bourbon, where someone follows us from the Elk and tells us that it's a good thing we left because those boys just got laid off by the local logging company and have been strung out on meth for days and getting meaner each hour. But neither booze nor commiseration helps. I'm in a bad way. I'm in a darkness I haven't ever known. This is as close as I've ever been, and I'm furious that I didn't, furious that in that moment they could have done whatever they wanted, taken what I love most.

Later, as Liz sleeps, I go to the shed behind the house and stand in front of the rough cut boards of the back wall. I swing and swing and my fists crack against the wood and soon the skin of my knuckles is shredded, my fingers swollen and bleeding. I beat the boards with my open hands, my elbows, my chest, my face. At some point, I fall to my knees. I breathe. I stand and walk back with my broken hands into the house.

GO OVER IT AGAIN: how it begins with the whims of wind and want, or maybe just some quick moment of stupidity; how failure and shame, even in an instant, become so impossibly heavy, a sack of stones you must shoulder; how this then is fear; and how fear someday detonates you — the slow implosion, the breakneck explosion.

But it doesn't have to be this way. We will fail, we will still act without good reason, we will always be burdened with failure and shame — but that, I think, is where things can change: There is a kind of awful and ready reverence that is some kin to fear but is not fear. It is when we understand the blood drying on our hands, the package of hand-wrapped meat we pull from the freezer. It is when we recognize how stories fail us and how stories save us. It is when we have heard them both and tell, in the moment of our greatest need, the story that will save us.

Like my grandfather. He knew and loved the way it had been, he saw the way it had to be. And always, even in the darkest of my days, my blood remembers his voice. I am here and mostly whole because of the stories he told me. We need to remember how it really was and is out West. And we need to tell those true, new stories.

Joe Wilkins is the author of a memoir, *The Mountain and the Fathers*, published in March 2012, and two collections of poems, *Notes from the Journey Westward* and *Killing the Murnion Dogs*. His essays, poems, and stories have appeared in many magazines and journals, including *The Georgia Review*, *The Southern Review*, *The Missouri Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Orion*, *The Sun*, *The Utne Reader*, and *Slate*. His piece "Out West," published in the September/October 2009 issue of *Orion*, was a National Magazine Award finalist. Wilkins lives with his wife, son, and daughter in western Oregon, where he teaches writing at Linfield College.