2009 Second Place Personal Narrative/Essay

Herding Water

I smile down from the top of the cliff and I smile back up from the bottom. It is the boy that makes me smile. His hair is shaggy and windblown—though the warm air is still—and it is bleached golden by the sunshine of long Montana summer days. His arms and neck, tanned as dark as Swedish ancestry will allow, contrast starkly with the white of his shirtless shoulders and torso and his nose, red and peeling, tells of an unused tube of sunscreen. My smile widens, and I jump to join my reflection in the Sun River. Time stretches as I fall toward the water, each second a long, silent pulse of exhilaration. The cooling river enfolds me, tearing away my breath and pulling me into itself. And then struggling up and breaking the surface and gulping the first breath as the shattered water falls around me. I paddle slowly over to the island and stretch myself out on its warm sand and let the sun tingle across my wet skin. The river moves languidly by me and I listen to the liquid notes of a meadowlark somewhere on the shore.

But then I remember that I am not Huck Finn, and I hurry back to shore and climb up the cliff and pull on my jeans and hip waders and look out across my six hundred acres of green hay and barley, six hundred acres that will not stay green without my boots and shovel.

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6:30 A.M. I stumble down the stairs and into the shower. The hot water is supposed to wake me up, but as I climb into the front seat of the pick-up, my eye lids are still unwilling to stay open. The diesel engine roars to life and the radio comes on to some impossibly chipper woman spouting the latest gossip. But I don’t change the channel; it might be the only voice I will hear all day.
The gravel road crunches by slowly as I avoid looking at the clock. Looking at the clock before one in the afternoon makes for a long, long day. The speedometer reads twenty miles an hour. I laugh at myself as I speed up, thinking how I never forget to push on the accelerator in the evening when I am headed home.

As I descend into the valley, I can see the whole farm spread before me and I begin to go through the checklist in my mind. Change the long set in the middle pasture, it’ll run all day. Move the siphon tubes in the barley. Start the slow ditch in the west hay. Then short sets all day in the corner hay. I park the truck next to my little sleeper trailer. I sit for a minute and gather my resolve. Another day all alone. Don’t think about that, just think about what you have to do before you can go back home. Don’t look at the clock, and swallow that lump. I climb out of the Pick-up and grab my hip waders out of the back. For eighty years, this valley has depended on the sweat of men and boys. They stored the river’s water behind a dam in the Rocky Mountains so it could be released slowly during the hot, dry summer and spread across the parched prairie fields. Now, it is my turn to shepherd the water. The four-wheeler spits and sputters and comes to life, and I shiver as the chilly morning air blows through my hair.

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It must be ninety-degrees and the sweat runs down my face and back. The little bit of water that found its way over the top of my hip waders and into my socks must be close to the boiling point, but I zip up my jacket and pull my hood on over as much of my head and face as it will cover. I un-strap my shovel from the back of the four-wheeler and stride out into the tall alfalfa. A shrill whining cloud rises with each step, and I pull my hand into my sleeve and wave it back and forth in front of my face to keep from breathing in the mosquitoes. I move as quickly as I can, but the alfalfa is thick and my boots are awkward. I listen for the squelch that tells me I have found the edge of the water, and then follow it to the fence line. The set is finished, and I run back to the ditch and pull the dam out.

Where is the next dike? Here. Throw the board, spread the tarp out, let the water fill it. Two good shovels of mud will hold it. The water slowly backs up and I make four cuts in the side of the ditch and watch the water gush through. There is plenty of flow. I go back and fill the cuts from the last set, and then get out of the field.
I think how funny I would look, if somebody were watching, with my jacket and hood on, waving furiously at some invisible enemy. Maybe the heat is getting to me.

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The coyote follows a short ways behind me. Her perked ears rove back and forth as she trots along, looking for voles scared up by my tires. When I stop, she stops, waiting patiently for me to start doing her hunting for her again. I turn around and she tries to circle back behind me, but I follow her and she takes off at an easy lope towards a clump of bushes. She stops when they are between us. I go around the bushes and she moves back to the other side. She cocks her head and wags her tail in what is almost certainly a challenge. I smile and we play ring-around-the rosies. I can not turn sharp enough to keep up with her and she knows it. I give up and she sits on her haunches and laughs, her pink tongue hanging out of her mouth and one ear flopped over. I head back to the field and she falls in behind me again, ears perked.

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Under the eaves of the river bottom cottonwoods, a few old wooden railroad cars sit and disintegrate. They are filled with junk, old TV’s, toilets, ancient looking stoves. I was told that these cars used to house the German POW’s who did my job. They walked across every acre of my fields, and grew food for their enemies. Now one kid does the job. Mounted on my yellow four-wheeler was brand new the day I started; now the odometer reads 3300 miles. I could have driven across the country alone.

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The dam is washed out again. This ditch is too big to set tarp dams in, and now the water is running through the field and into the drain and I am a while day behind on my sets. I fetch the dam from the end of the ditch and begin setting it again. I brace it up with extra boards and watch as it fills with water. It starts to slip and I throw more dirt on it, but the water pushes through, sticks and all. I straddle the ditch and grab the dam and start over. I step into the water, forgetting how deep the ditch is, and my hip waders fill instantly. I feel frustration wrapping its self around my self-control and cinching down. And then adrenaline flushes through my veins. The searing buzz of a rattlesnake is coming from somewhere near my head in the long grass on the ditch bank. I can’t see the snake and I freeze for a moment. My boots are full of water, I can’t reach my shovel. I
throw myself sideways, away from the noise and haul my heavy legs out of the water. Shovel in hand, I take a deep breath and feel myself shaking with every heartbeat. I brush the shovel back and forth through the grass until I hear the buzzing again. I pin the snake’s head with the shovel and jump across the ditch, thrusting all of my startled energy downward as I land on the shovel, severing the head. The jaws open and close and the tail still buzzes and I breathe hard and ragged. Hours later my hands are still shaking.

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The slide will not budge; the pressure of the water behind it pinned it against its concrete slot. After I turn this field on and make the set, I am done for the day. I bend over, grasping the handle tightly with both hands, and pull again. The cold steel begins to cut into my skin and I let go, breathing hard with the effort and with frustration. I want to get out of here; to get home. I kick the handle a few times, trying to loosen it up, and then tug on it again. The slide holds, not a drop of water flows around or under it. I grab my shovel and stick the tip of the blade through the steel loop and pry up. The shovel’s wooden handle makes a cracking noise and I can feel that it is not going to take the strain. Letting out a yell of frustration, I hurl the shovel against the ground. I fight back the tears building behind my eyes. There has got to be a way to get this open, and then I can go home. I kick it again, but it is solid. I hop on the four-wheeler and drive back up the road where I saw a board laying earlier. It won’t fit through the handle. I can’t control my breathing. I don’t want to be here anymore. I just want to go home. I can’t hold back the tears anymore, why should I? Nobody can see me. I let out a sob. That is pathetic, how old are you? Just open that slide and then you can go home. But I can’t, it won’t open, I am not strong enough. Take a deep breath and call Spencer, tell him you can’t open it.

“Hello.”

“Hey, you know the slide for the top hay field you wanted started today?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s stuck; I can’t get it to open.”

“It’s stuck? Did you try prizing it with your shovel?”

“Yeah, the handle started breaking; it is not going to come open.”

“Ahh, well don’t break the shovel . . . is there anywhere else you can let that water run tonight?”
“I can put it on one of the pastures.”

“Alright, rob some dams from another field and start the upper pasture on the Westside.”

“Ok.”

It is getting dark as I pull up to the pick-up, exhausted and covered in mud and mad and still fighting back tears.

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I have one set to do before lunch and then I can relax and wait while the water runs. The sun glances of a big puddle at the end of the field and I know the set is ready to be changed. I drive through the clean clear water that soaks the pasture and makes the growing grass shine bright green in the sunlight. I ease the four-wheeler across the shallow ditch and come to stop. Bedraggled and exhausted, a young hawk is crouched in a puddle in front of me. Its soaked feathers cannot lift him into the air. But he is not cowed. I take a step towards him and he snaps his beak. I prod him gently with my shovel and he rises up on his legs and extends his wide wings. His round yellow eyes glare sharp and fearless, daring me to come closer. I know he is helpless, he is too tired to even try to fly, but those eyes don’t show it. I believe his eyes and back away. When I come back later, he is gone.

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Now my fields are brown and cut. Golden bails of straw dot the barley fields, and the black specks in the hay are cows, but they are supposed to be there now. I adjust my shoulder strap, moving the weight of my rifle from one shoulder to the other. The evening is coming fast; there is only an hour of daylight left. I know that the deer will be out feeding, but they are spooky this time of year. There, a few does and their yearling fawns moving across the hillside. I steady my rifle on a fence post and peer through the scope. It is a long shot, but it is getting late. I hear the bullet smack into her body, and she humps up slightly, but doesn’t run like the others. I watch her for a moment as she takes a staggering step, and then falls. I shoulder the rifle and walk up the hill. The sun, setting over the distant mountains, tints the landscape in blue orange shadows. The horizontal rays of light make the world a painting, every detail sharply contrasted, too perfect to be real. Lying there, she is beautiful, more beautiful than anything I have ever seen. Her long neck curves gracefully, blemished only by
the dark pool at her throat. *You should feel remorse, you have taken something wonderful.* But my feeling is something deeper; something older, I have not taken, I have given. Spread out below me I see the land I know, the land she knows. And we are a part together. Her fawn startles me; it is not ten feet away. It jumps back, and circles around and comes close again. It stares a moment longer, and then disappears into the dusk. *You’ll be okay; you have lost your spots. You’ve still have a ways to grow, but she gave you what you need to be on your own.*

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The fences are gone, the ditches have been filled in and plowed over, and the long silver arches of the center-pivot stretch one after the other across the green waves of barley. The girls in the back seat are laughing and talking as I bump the little car over the pot holes and large rocks.

“How high is this cliff?” one of them asks.

“Twenty feet or so,” I answered.

We stand on the cliff’s edge, looking down at the deep blue pool and the sandy little island.

“That looks like more than twenty feet to me.”

“Maybe, but it doesn’t hurt when you hit the water. I’ll go first.”

I leap and hang a moment with my wings spread wide, and then the river enwraps me, holding me in a cool caress till I pull myself onto the sand.

From the Island I can see up the river. I can see the white peaked mountains where it was born. I turn my head and look down the river, but it bends and disappears in the cottonwoods.