

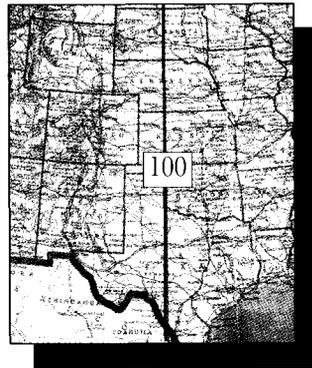
The Hundredth Meridian

by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

The Voice of the Turtle

“*Niuno è solo l’aprile!*” Mimì tells Rodolfo in Act Three of *La Bohème*. Mimì didn’t survive until April, and if she had she might have felt alone without Rodolfo anyway. Still, spring, like sex, is exuberant, irrational—rather, it’s suprarational. And unignorable, like a 70-mile-an-hour wind, which is what spring amounts to in most of the Rocky Mountain West. Wyoming has nothing properly describable as spring, only a prolonged battle to the death between the lengthening light and the Arctic air mass retreating grudgingly north, evocative of *Die Götterdämmerung* in a murky Bayreuth production by Wieland Wagner. To date, the power of light has prevailed eventually over that of darkness—sometimes not until the Fourth of July weekend or even later—but you never can tell. It gets wearisome now and then; still, the annual cancellation of springtime is just another of those blessings in disguise, like solitude and no state income tax, easily recognized as such by people who belong here. If nothing else, it acts as a means of population control, a seasonal prophylaxis discouraging immigration on the part of outsiders while depressing sex drive in the natives. Most years since 1995, the Wyoming census has duly recorded a decline of a few hundred, a few thousand souls—we’re the only state in the Union to be able to boast of that honor, though for some reason (progressive brainwashing by the ultramontane culture, perhaps) few of us do. Logically speaking, Ed Abbey should have made Wyoming, not the ever-expanding margins of Tucson, Arizona, home to his Wolf’s Hole retreat. Why didn’t he do it? Because he hated snow and cold weather, of course. (Sorry, Ed, wherever you are: We didn’t do it to exclude you.)

Following a mild winter, this year there are at least *signs* of spring, which is not always the case in Wyoming. Some mornings the water in the horse trough ripples smoothly in the early breeze, not so much as a skim of ice to remove with the shovel. My measure of winter’s severity is less the heating bills than how much



hay is left by Memorial Day; by early March of this year it was already apparent we were coming out ahead, with plenty of last year’s fodder going into next winter. The horses, barrel-bellied on just a third of a 110-pound bale a day, barely look up from grazing the brown grass to acknowledge the pickup as I turn into the ranch yard: When they come running at last with their manes and tails flowing, sunfishing and kicking their heels in the air, it’s more from habit, or curiosity, or affection—who knows the emotional life of horses?—than hunger.

The bird life in Laramie is still largely restricted to rock doves, sparrows, ravens and crows, and the five parrots I keep indoors, but in late February, on the way over to Kansas to visit the Detrixhes and again on the return trip, I saw waterfowl in numbers recalling the amazed reports of the early explorers and settlers on the High Plains: elongated V’s of north-flying geese and ducks, clouds of sandhill cranes glittering like locusts as the sun strikes their bellies and the undersides of their wings, funnels of snow geese spiraling from the sky to alight on the thin green fields of winter wheat, hundreds of thousands of them covering the swells and depressions like a localized snowstorm; every lake and water impoundment along Interstate 80 between Ogalala and York, Nebraska, black with resting birds—Canada geese, mallards, teal, and others I didn’t recognize from the highway at 70 miles an hour. *Niuno è solo l’aprile*.

If I were a bird I wouldn’t be returning to North Dakota or Manitoba just yet. Spring is the time to be in the Southwest, before the thermometer climbs above 100 but after the snowbirds have got into their Winniebagoes and gone home to the

“polises” (Minneapolis, Indianapolis, Abominapolis). Cabaret, the singer Andrea Marcovicci has written, is where you go for tenderness. And cabernet. And, in springtime, the civilized (meaning the least populated) regions of the American Southwest: southern Utah and Colorado, northern New Mexico and Arizona. What more tender than budded cottonwoods standing in swirls of foaming brown floodwater, prickly pear in red-and-yellow blossom on the warming pink sand, the song of tree frogs from the creek bottom, white clouds making up against a cyanic sky, snows melting out from the tawny foothills of blue distant mountains, the brilliance of Orion in the southwestern sky behind the ragged red flames of a campfire? Camped up a side canyon in Nine Mile Canyon, Utah, searching for petroglyphs among chunks of sandstone like broken red china and pygmy rattlesnakes emerging from hibernation, while men mounted on winter-fat quarterhorses ride at full gallop through the sagebrush, the tails of their yellow slickers flying. Backpacking off the north rim of the Grand Canyon with Tom Sheeley, family, and friends, among them his good buddy Maddy Albright (home from strong-arming Putin in Moscow) who gets to carry the heaviest pack. Defying the Forest Service by building an open fire in a restricted area and the surgeon general by getting drunk on Jim Beam. Or just sitting in the shade of a juniper tree reading a novel by Thomas McGuane, as I did the year I broke my leg skiing across the absolutely level surface between the parking lot and the Beaver Mountain ski lodge, while clutching a bottle of beer in each hand along with the ski pole.

What passes for springtime in the Northern Tier has its moments, of course. It’s pleasant, for instance, to imagine the million-plus inhabitants of Salt Lake City and vicinity playing golf and tennis and watching the crocuses and tulips come up around the Mormon Temple while you shovel out to the mailbox for your copy of a spring seed catalogue specializing in varieties (lettuces, radishes, cucumbers, and some types of

squash) that flourish in a ten-week growing season. Yard work is a rewarding sport that nevertheless cannot be practiced with two or three feet of snow on the ground; in Wyoming, it generally has to be postponed until Memorial Day, well before the lilacs are in bloom. And for the hardy and the young at heart, there are mud sports, the season beginning around the Ides of March, sometimes earlier. During my oilpatch days 20 years ago, Jack Mootz and I were dedicated mud bums, never missing an opportunity to discover some impacted backcountry or mountain trail slowly melting out from beneath five or six feet of snow and mire our four-wheel-drive vehicle there, 50 or 60 miles from the nearest town, 30 or 40 from the closest blacktop. The best location is on a sidehill, preferably becoming a cliff a few yards downslope, with trees growing close beside the trail to limit maneuverability and prevent an easy turnaround. Although we usually took Jack's truck, a mid-70's GMC Jimmy he'd bought for a crew car, at other times we took my '78 Toyota Landcruiser—a noble vehicle whose abilities Jack liked to accuse me of underexploiting. "G-damn it, Chipper—didn't nobody never show you how to rock a truck? I know how to make that little Ti-yota talk—let me get after her!" In circumstances like these, unsticking a truck requires a considerable outlay of expensive, high-tech gear—tire chains front and back, of course; a shepherd jack (famous for jumping out from under the vehicle and maiming innocent bystanders); a winch and come-along (optional); shovels; tar paper squares for traction beneath the tires; sagebrush and small logs (same purpose); a magnum rifle for poaching stray elk; sandwiches; beer. For extrication, plan at least three to four hours, with night beginning to fall and a spring blizzard on the horizon. On one of the few occasions when we made it out of the mountains *without* getting stuck, Jack left the blacktop—unexpectedly, at 30 miles an hour—in pursuit of a fleeing jackrabbit he'd tried to run down and sank the Jimmy to the frame in several feet of corn snow and bentonite mud. We spent only an hour on that job before thumbing a ride with a sheriff's deputy back to Kemmerer and returning after dark with the Landcruiser and a long tow chain.

Throughout the Rocky Mountain region, the winter of 1996-97 was dry until the end of February, when all hell broke loose with a major winter storm that de-

layed my return from Belen, New Mexico, where I'd spent a couple of months visiting Jim Rauen. During March and April, snowstorms followed one another like rollers breaking on the Pacific Coast. May was cold and wet, with more storms, and early in June I lost a yard tree to a wet, heavy snow that brought powerlines down across southwest Wyoming. Around the middle of the month, having found a buyer for the house, I flew to El Paso in search of a temporary rental in Las Cruces. The temperature was 103 degrees, the sun raging like an angry God in a porcelain sky. Life at womb temperature never has been my cup of tea, but southern New Mexico was going to be something new, an adventure. I wrote a check to the real estate office, explored the Organ Mountains while the evaporating sweat left a rime of salt on my skin, and bummed around over in Juárez, Mexico, before boarding a flight back to Salt Lake City. In Wyoming the weather appeared to have moderated: The snowdrift had melted from the north side of the house, the horses were slicking off finally, the last of their winter coats coming away in tufts, and the backcountry roads were drying out. By the second weekend in July, with the house packed up, the paperwork completed, the U-Haul van safely corralled (or so I thought, but that's another story), I had the time to pay my respects to the country I was leaving after 20 years and didn't expect to be seeing again any time soon.

Nothing in life is ever so beautiful as when it's over. In late afternoon of a perfect midsummer day the valley of the Hamsfork, its sagebrush floodplain narrowing to a willowy meander between dark timbered ridges, was heartbreakingly lovely. At the campground we took the middle fork in the road climbing to the east above Indian Creek and then north to Poker Hollow, where we stopped at an old sheep camp in the saddle of a crossover ridge and picketed the horses to graze on the new green grass growing lushly among arrowleaf balsam in yellow flower. While Norma built a fire ring, I pitched the tent in a grove of pine trees. It was early still when we had the camp ready, plenty of daylight left to burn. We brought the horses in, saddled them, and rode down across Poker Hollow and up to the old Commissary Commando camp above Little Indian Creek. In a high park overlooking the Hamsfork we sat the horses, looking north through slanting golden light to the crossways

confusion of ridges, Mt. Isabel, and Graham Peak.

"I don't want to leave this," I told Norma.

"You can always come back to it if you don't like New Mexico."

"Maybe I can, and maybe I can't," I said.

In camp we built up the fire, cooked our supper, and ate it. I brought the horses in and snubbed them to the trailer. The night was warm and clear. We spread our bags at the base of a tall pine and lay on our backs to watch the stars pricking through the branches. Two hours later, a light rain on my face woke me to the sound of distant thunder.

"Good thing I went ahead and put the tent up," I said.

"This isn't the way it's supposed to happen. It only rains if you *don't* put up the tent."

The rain sound on the nylon fly changed to the rattle of hail as we crawled deeper into the sleeping bags. At dawn the light through the tent wall was strangely pale. Norma put her hand through the door and felt about on the ground.

"It snowed six inches last night," she said, drawing the hand inside.

The snow persisted until noon, then turned to rain again. We'd planned on riding as far as Red Park, 15 miles on a northerly heading, a farewell to my old elk hunting country. Sh-- happens. Hanging about camp, we worked at keeping dry and finding dry wood to burn in the fire. The horses, restless and miserable, wandered through camp, thrusting their long noses over our shoulders as we sat on a log to eat supper and watch the dirt road turn to a slough of mud.

"If this rain keeps up all night," I said, "we're going to be stuck in here for the next two days."

It snowed again during the night. The morning was much colder, but clear. We saddled the horses and rode as far as Commissary Ridge above Fontenelle Basin, with a view of Wyoming Peak 20 miles north. In the early morning sun, its triangular form gleamed like an iceberg against a pale frozen sky.

I reined in the horse with stiffened hands.

"If this is Wyoming's goodbye to me, I'm glad to be saying goodbye to Wyoming," I said.

For one reason and another, it didn't exactly turn out that way.

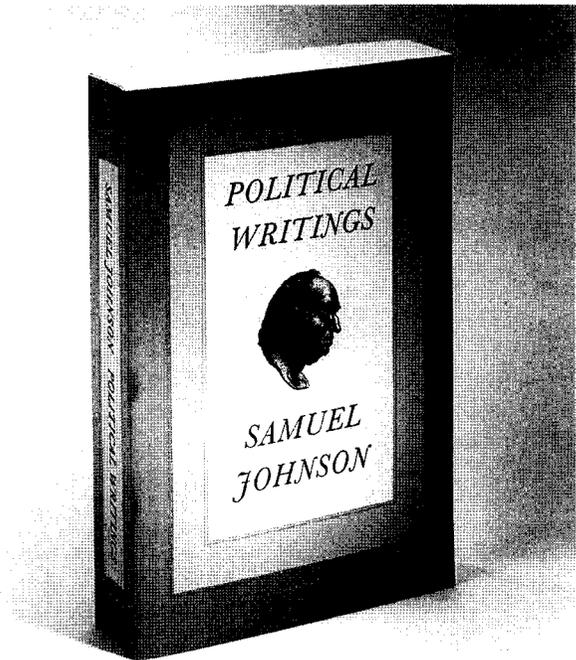
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