

Overdue Books:**The Meadow, by James Galvin (Henry Holt, 1992)**

(DoubleTake Magazine, 1996)

I first heard about James Galvin in somebody's livingroom in New York City. I remember the moment clearly, the way, years later, you might remember how it was you and your best friend were introduced by chance, in what city or in whose house, what the weather was like that day.

A group of us had been invited for dinner. It was afterward, sitting around drinking and talking, that I happened to overhear a conversation between two poets in the corner of the room. They were discussing the horrors of Los Angeles, when one of them suddenly interrupted the other and asked if he'd read Jim Galvin's The Meadow. The second poet shook his head. "What is it?" he asked. "A novel about a meadow in Wyoming," said the first poet. "It doesn't have much of a plot." His tone grew hushed and urgent. "It's beautiful. In its way, it's a perfect book."

This was in 1993. I had never heard of James Galvin or The Meadow. The book, I soon discovered, had been published by Henry Holt the previous year, a small printing with the usual brief lifespan of a literary hardcover. Now it was in paperback. It had received, along with Cormac McCarthy's All the Pretty Horses, the award for Best Novel about the West that year. But where McCarthy's novel was a huge bestseller (his first, after five novels) and could be found almost anywhere, The Meadow had suffered a very different publishing fate. None of the bookstores I went to carried it, or planned to; no one else I knew seemed even to have heard of Galvin, although he had already

published three books of poetry. It was not long before I grew frustrated by my search, and abandoned any thought of reading Galvin's novel.

Some months later, at a friend's house in Connecticut, I met a writer who asked me if I had read a book by James Galvin about the American West. Like the poet, he was clearly telling a privileged secret. I said no, not yet I hadn't, and he responded that I must, absolutely must, that it was beautiful, which is exactly what someone else--another writer, this time in California--said to me a few weeks after that.

I finally read the book, when I was away from New York City, sitting, most of the time, on a rocking chair on a porch by the ocean. I had never really been out West--to Wyoming, Colorado, Montana, Utah--but for two whole days then, every time I looked up from the book in my hands, I was surprised to see the ocean and not the meadow. When, recently, I traveled to Montana for the first time, I kept my face pressed to the plane window from Salt Lake City, through Kalispell and into Missoula. The country far below seemed to me at once new and familiar, and I was wide awake to it. It felt a little like being in love.

The Meadow is sitting on my desk as I write this. In places the cover is puckered from rain. Fine grains of sand lie hidden in its pages. I've read it three times. And I have become that friend (or the person you don't even know) who will come up to you at a party or in a bookstore, and talk to you, like a salesman or a fanatic, about this book I love. The Meadow, it's called. By James Galvin.

Galvin's meadow actually exists. It is called Sheep Creek and sits on the Wyoming/Colorado border, and Galvin knows it with an intimacy so deep it can only be imagined; he knows it like family, all of its buried pains and stories. Three hundred and twenty acres of arid mountain land, so remote and high-up it lies under snow nine months of the year. "By March, the drifts loom higher than the the roofs of houses," Galvin writes (p. 12). Not even the Indians wintered there.

Still, there is something about the meadow that exerts an unearthly pull. During the past hundred years, four successive men have given everything they have just to put their names on the property deed and call it their own. Like Sheep Creek itself, these men are part of the true history of a place. Galvin grew up listening to their stories and seeing how their lives were linked to the land and by it. In his eyes, this shared fate makes them tragic heroes of a sort, by turns wise, stubborn, foolish, brave, resilient, humorous, and necessarily spiritual.

App Worster is the second man to own the meadow. He first sees it as a boy, back around the turn of the century, on a hunting trip with his father: "App twisted back around on the bench again to see the manifold green of the valley one more time. The wooly morning air was still steaming out of it in places. App thought, *I want that*. He said nothing but turned forward again, the vision still behind his eyes as the wagon lurched forward and he felt the sun on his shoulders again." (p. 79)

App finally gets Sheep Creek, but he can't manage to keep it. Despite all of his efforts, it is too much for him. He builds house, barn and sheds with a double-bitted ax, only to see them burn down. He marries a woman only to see her die, her constitution broken by the toil of their life. Then he marries his wife's sister and she dies, too, leaving him with three boys and a ream of doctors' bills. In the end, he loses Sheep Creek and winds up living in a claim shack on a fifty-foot-wide strip of land that floats, unowned, between Wyoming and Colorado. What he bears with him is a legacy of a vision almost seen, of the meadow once gained then lost. App's son Ray is raised on it, forever "wondering if anything at all lasted, anything you could grab on to before it slipped past, beyond blame, beyond meaning." (p.84)

Ray eventually makes it back to the meadow to live, not as owner but as neighbor to Lyle Van Waning, its fourth owner. Not that Lyle sees it that way exactly. He has spent nearly fifty years of his life in Sheep Creek but still doesn't think of himself as owning anything. "If you want to know who really owns your land, don't pay the taxes for a while," says Lyle. "Then if you want

to know who owns it even more, just look out the window in a blizzard. That's the landlord's face looking in, snooping.'" (p.43)

Cowboy, artisan, wise man, hermit, literal and cosmic weatherman, Lyle is the soul of the book and one of the most quietly unforgettable characters in recent literature. He is sixty-three when we meet him, his body worn down by a lifetime of hard physical work, with eyes "such a cutting pale blue that when he looks at you, he makes you think of whatever it is you're ashamed of. It's like he can smell your soul's feet." (p.8) What family he had fell away long ago-- taken by war, accident, disease, suicide -- and he is used to being alone. It suits him. "The way people watch television while they eat--looking up to the TV and down to take a bite and back up--that's how Lyle watches the meadow out the south window while he eats his breakfast. He's hooked on the plot, doesn't want to miss anything. He looks out over the rim of his cup as he sips." (p.5)

The Meadow takes us right through this century and leaves us on the cusp of the present, yet the lives Galvin depicts with such compassion and humor are not in the least interior or contemporary. In Galvin's world, hard physical work and omnipotent weather tend to dwarf the man sitting inside his house, looking out at the world. The solitary man sees it happen, feels himself shrinking in importance and size until his place in the natural world is what it has to be, no more than that, and no less. This is cruel, sometimes, but it is also just. It is what animals in the wild are born knowing. As Lyle admiringly says of the coyotes who scrimp and scrape for food during the winter months around his house, "They sure never pity themselves."(p.14) It is the same for him.

In the meantime, there is work to be done. Few writers around can equal Galvin's poetic reverence for physical work, his exacting and lovely descriptions of it in all its manifestations, and the belief he stores by it. In App and Ray, and especially in Lyle, Galvin has found living embodiments of Emerson's words, "But do your work, and I shall know you." In the world of The Meadow, pure work--building, fixing, foraging, planting, figuring out, day after day--is the

essential counterpart to nature's relentless, hard-weather message to humankind. Lyle's entire life can be seen as the conjoining of his physical labor (and his ingenuity) with the seasonal predicaments hurled at him by the land he lives on and loves. His reward is absolute independence, and the occasional glimpse into something deeper:

"Lyle hoists the rafter to his shoulder and climbs the ladder with it and sets it in place, driving in one tenpenny nail to hold it. He climbs back down and sits on a sawhorse. He fishes out his tobacco. As he lights up, the sun is setting, turning the sky as many pastels as you see on the side of a rainbow trout. The reddest clouds are the fish cut open. Aspen trees are peaking with yellow. A wind comes up the draw, announced in advance by clapping aspen leaves, and then he can hear it take the pines around the house and he feels it on his cheek and it makes the end of his cigarette glow brighter. He takes a deep drag and looks down past the springhouse nested in orange willow branches. Up over the opposing hill he sees the snow on mountains west of Laramie. Another breath of wind comes up and starts the aspens chattering like nervous girls, and they catch the last low-angling rays of sun and flare. The dark tops of evergreens are red, almost bloody, and for a good thirty seconds he knows that the world is something altogether other than what it appears to be." (p. 122)

Despite such moments, Galvin is not the optimist Emerson was. His characters are realists, not dreamers, and their lives are working lives. Lyle has a chronic, untreated hernia and debilitating emphyzema. Increasingly, he relies on oxygen tanks to aid his breathing (no simple task, hauling those tanks up to the house, in ten feet of snow). Suffering and loss for him are not abstract ideas, but humble truths that come with the territory:

"Lyle knows the feeling well enough not to fight it. He gets out of bed, holding his hernia in with one finger. He opens the draft on the stove a finger's width. He sits down in the easy chair and turns on the radio. He listens to what's coming in, the all-night trucker's station, as he rolls a cigarette. It's a station out of Oklahoma City that lists the road conditions across the nation.

By determining what the interstates are like in California, Oregon, Nevada, and Utah, Lyle can get a better idea of what he's in for than he gets from the local weather predictions. Maybe if the roads are dry between here and the Sierras, and if it's not too cold on the northern border he can get some sleep." (p.183)

Clearly, Galvin's Wyoming is worlds away from the violence-ravaged, blood-cursed, dying West of Cormac McCarthy's brilliant last three novels. And yet both writers, in completely different ways, succeed in re-mapping, in literary terms, the country we live in. They have forged their own romanticism out of the arid West, built upon the stories of solitary individuals whose lives are lived close to the ground, with humility and compassion, and whose creed is a kind of spiritual asceticism that affords equal, if not greater, respect to the world of animals than to the world of men. In this sense, these characters are inherently anachronistic, and both McCarthy and Galvin, without ever giving in to sentimentalism or easy nostalgia, are elegiac. The Meadow is an extended ode to the everyday stoicism and mundane virtues of a small group of people (nearly always men) who reside in an American West that is by now largely gone. They are decent, generally laconic folk who may get drunk now and then but who still know what a good neighbor is and what the land is telling them.

"Lyle learned to pay attention," writes Galvin, "to think things through and not get ahead of himself, not to lapse into inattention ever. After a while he couldn't *not* pay attention, shaking a stranger's hand, tasting Mrs. So and So's pickles, setting fenceposts. It endowed all his actions with precision. It gave him total recall. It obliterated time." (p. 215)

The revelation for the reader lies in how deeply we come to care about these people and to mourn the loss of that way of life.

"Nowadays the meadow isn't considered worth haying," Galvin writes.

"Machinery is cost-prohibitive in relation to annual yield. No one will winter here anymore. We are a different breed of Westerners. Snow always looks good to skiers." (p.228)

Galvin was raised in northern Colorado, and has a house--a log cabin he built himself--in Tie Siding, Wyoming, not all that far from where Sheep Creek must be. He has published, in addition to The Meadow, four books of poetry, and in each one the topography and people and spirit of that particular region are not just alluded to, but palpable. Like his prose, like Lyle's talk, Galvin's poetry is direct and spare. In a poem called "Western Civilization" (dedicated, fittingly enough, to another of our best writers about the West, William Kittredge), he writes: "Now the vast, dim barn floats like an ocean liner/Whose doldrums are meadows spinning into brush,/And everywhere you look Wyoming hurries off."

The Meadow is a beautiful book. It honors, perhaps above everything else, the lost art of paying attention: to the meadows spinning into brush; to the land of our heritage and dreams fast disappearing; to the people who lived their lives there.

John Burnham Schwartz