

HOME

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

NEW ISSUE

IN THE TIME OF COVID

WHAT IS THE WEST?

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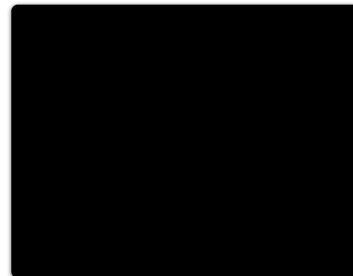
My Life in 12 Pickups

Fred Haefele

Kim Matthews Wheaton
The Idle Season

Flash

The car lot sits on the Ashville strip, between a Piggly Wiggly and my dad's favorite restaurant, a place called Mr. Steak. The salesman is a heavyset, dog-faced man in a flesh-colored rayon shirt. Flash is a 302 V-8, 1972 Ford "Wide-Side" F-100 with the complete Ranger XLT package: tinted glass, custom wheel covers, faux-walnut dash, faux-brocade upholstery, and a faux-wood strip of indeterminate species that runs the length of the truck, nose to tail. It isn't the Navaho turquoise paint or even the "high-five" cab lights that finally sell me. It's the brazen fourteen-inch chrome air horn, mounted on top of the roof. I wonder who might have specified this particular extra: a champion clog dancer? A taxidermist to the stars? Whoever it was, they sure smoked a lot of Kools. An air freshener strong as a urinal puck wouldn't mask that cigarette's unique stench.



On my test drive, I find the Ford I-beam suspension every bit as good as people say, while the front-wheel disk brakes are superb. An aftermarket hot-rod muffler produces a refined snarl. It's true this Ford maintains a kind of pampered vibe, but after five tough-love years with my stripped-down GMC, I believe I owe myself a little style.

I hand the man two thousand dollars cash, roll out onto the Ashville Tunnel road, and head for my parents' house in Swannanoa. Along the way, I'm bummed to discover the eight-track doesn't work and the air horn is also mute. On the other hand, the truck drives beautifully. But mostly, unlike my last truck, Flash carries with it no troubling memories at all.

I'd come to North Carolina to deal with the pine beetle epidemic that killed the stand of yellow pine that comprised my folk's woodlot. Working alone, it took three weeks of sustained felling and bucking to remove the infested trees. When I drive Flash back to my parent's, the final load of pulp sticks is being hauled away, and Mom and Dad's now pristine white gravel drive shimmers in the heat. Unblocked by the gloomy canopy of dead pine, the gracious Carolina twilight pours through the fresh understory of sassafras, ironwood, and rhododendron.

If I expect my folks to fuss over my latest truck, I have it all wrong. The new Ford is completely overshadowed by Mom's anxiety about my upcoming move. Since she had no faith in medicine, I was born at home, and the birth was particularly harrowing. In its course, an Rh factor provided a near-fatal complication. Strictly speaking, our blood types are allergic to each other, and my poor mom's feared for me ever since. Still, much as I love her, it's hard to forget that her blood cells once tried to kill me.

Additionally, no one in our family has ever moved west before. For that matter, no one, at

least on Dad's side, ever worked in the trades, and certainly not the riskier ones.

It's August 1977. The first intergalactic spacecraft, Voyager, is launched, and I allow myself a smidgen of affinity. In short order, I will be Colorado bound and on the route of the pioneers; I'll traverse the Great Plains with just my nimble wits, my arborist's trade, and my tricked-out F-100.

The day of my departure, Mom gives me a paperback King James Bible with a couple of highlighted Psalms. These are chosen, I imagine, to comfort clueless wanderers like me.

"Now, I know what you're thinking, Mom," I say, trying to jolly us through the goodbye.

"What?" she says, hugging me too much to ever keep things light. "What am I thinking?"

"That I'm like that prodigal dude, who 'flees where none doth pursue.'"

"That's not the 'prodigal dude,'" she says, curtly. "That's the wicked—'The wicked flee where none doth pursue.'"

It always cheers Mom up to correct my scripture, but I have to acknowledge, between my career in the trees and a ten-year relationship history of increasingly spectacular failure, I have a knack for causing her distress.

Anyway, the question of whether I am fleeing or following my star on this adventure is just a matter of how you look at it. Maybe I've simply taken to heart the uniquely American notion that there's nothing in your life so broken that a move west can't fix.

Colorado is pallid with dust and crawling with locusts. Three years into a drought cycle, the town of Boulder is plastered with conservation warnings about the perils of leaky plumbing and lawn watering. Taped to every Boulder toilet tank is some variation on the occasional verse: "If it's yellow, let it mellow. If it's brown, flush it down."

The high country is parched and blindingly bright. Regular as freight trains, afternoon thunderstorms roll off the massif, spitting hail and dry lightning. They kick up dust clouds that gather height and mass, then spin along the skyline like malevolent genies. In the water-starved forests, invasion-strength bark beetles swarm the stricken ponderosa pines, now dying by the thousands.

As it turns out, I know fewer people in Colorado than I'd thought. A friend from New England resettled in Gold Creek, five miles up Boulder Canyon. He's good for a short kip, but

I've overstayed my welcome in a week and have to move on. In two days, I find work for a hippy furniture outfit, making coffee tables from the now copious supply of blue-stained beetle pine. Eventually, I find a household of Tibetan Buddhists in need of a roommate. Perhaps they have reservations about an outsider like me, but the fact I'm a valuable source of firewood weighs heavily in my favor. The same day, I move into the spare room by the kitchen with my sleeping bag, duffle, and the copy of Ovid's *Metamorphosis* I've been packing around for years in an attempt to class up my life.

My new roomies prove a convivial bunch, unpossessed of any noticeable Buddhist fervor. There is Beth, a seamstress for an upscale camping gear outfit, and Rick, who works nights as a waiter. Then there is Samantha, an accountant for the Buddhist Naropa Institute and a professional masseuse on the side. One Saturday night with nothing else going on, Sam invites me to a Denver disco with a couple of her gay friends. We cram ourselves into Flash's faux-plush cab—three of us sitting upright, Sam on the horizontal. It's the kind of arrangement you read about in reports of horrific accidents. It isn't until we pull up in front of the disco club that I realize such a moment is exactly what Flash is all about: a great big glitzy low-rent entrance.

"Hit that air horn," says Sam. "Hit it now!"

"I can't," I tell her. "I mean, it doesn't actually work . . ."

I wake the next morning in Sam's bed, watch her in the morning light while she sleeps. She's a petite, lovely young woman who bears an unsettling resemblance to Peter Pan. I'm lying on my stomach when she rolls over, straddles my back and begins to probe a mass of petrified muscle in my shoulder. Someone turns on the radio. It's tuned to the Denver Hour of Gospel. The Swan Silvertones are singing "Working on a Building," and the reception is terrific. With her long, intelligent fingers, Sam deconstructs my aches and pains and I think: Okay. There's no way I haven't found religion here. It's just probably not the kind Mom had in mind.

From my roommates, I learn about Chogyam Trungpa, their spiritual leader. Exiled from Tibet in 1959, Trungpa and a small following made a daring trip across the Himalayas to India, one step ahead of the Chinese. Eventually, he found his way to the United Kingdom, where the freewheeling western culture of the 1960s nearly put an end to him. Stories involving sex, whiskey, and LSD proliferated, particularly the one about an Aston Martin that crashes into a liquor store. In another era, these exploits might have been scandalous, but in the sixties, they served to give Trungpa serious street cred.

It's apparent my roommates have no particular interest in "converting" me, and one of the few times the question of religion arises is when I ask Beth about the large block print of a

fearsome demon, tacked to the bathroom door.

"He's just one of the Mahakalas," she shrugs.

"Is he like, a devourer of souls?"

"Nah. He's more like a protector."

"Really?" I snort. "Protecting who? From what?"

She looks puzzled. "All of us need protecting, man. Good God. Are you kidding me?"

*

I live in Boulder for months before I ever meet a native Coloradan. The Front Range is historically a kind of east–west crossroad, attracting not just Trungpa but notable easterners like Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and W. S. Merwin. It also attracted Brady Pace, who, like me, is originally from Michigan. After graduating from Depauw University, Pace enlisted in the Air Force, served in Berlin as an MP. When he mustered out, he got an MBA from Phoenix University, moved to Colorado, and bought a minimalist tree service from his brother, Chris, a noted cocksman, wheeler-dealer, and bartender at the Hilton House. Chris Pace's equipment is comprised of a bald-tired Datsun pickup, a homemade climbing harness, a moribund Power Mac chainsaw, and a spiffy Radio Shack answering machine that, in 1977, is state of the art.

Anyone with a lick of sense would stay as far away from these guys as possible. For openers, Brady knows less than nothing about trees. But he is charming and insouciant. He has a knack for kicking up money, and he's so enthusiastic about my coming to work, he is impossible to resist. But more than that, the man intrigues me. While I'm the sort of person who tends to take most things to heart, nothing seems to faze Brady. It's a real survivor's outlook that I decide needs further study.

Since Brady's real business is selling cocaine, my job is to lend Pace Bros Tree Service some kind of legitimacy. In the seventies, many Boulder businesses are built along this model. Cocaine is everywhere, all the time. Arriving from the rural East Coast, I'm unfamiliar with the drug. I find I like it okay, but it has a distinct way of making everything look dingy and used up. It doesn't do that much for me and basically, I can take it or leave it, which sets me apart from the crowd. It's only a matter of constitution, but this trait fills Brady with such admiration that he proposes I become keeper of his stash. In this way, he explains, I can help

to monitor overuse. I tell him it's the worst idea I'd ever heard. He laughs and says, "Yeah. It is, isn't it?"

It's an unusual relationship, Brady's and mine. He's mostly a clown, but he has a childlike trust in me. He doesn't know a beetle from an aphid, can't tell one tree from another, and the cocaine runs his business like some Marx Brothers skit. And yet it somehow works! He hasn't the slightest fear of looking stupid, a trait that both repels and fascinates me. What is it about this partnership that keeps me coming back? Is it the ego-boost of being the guy with the answers? Is it some exercise in making order out of chaos? I can't figure it out.

Three out of four Pace Bros jobs involve pruning the species *Populus sargentii*. These huge spreading cottonwoods invariably challenge my abilities, and their broad upper story—more expansive than American elms—demands I hone my skills in aerial traverse. I quickly take to the rigors of them and decide to make these trees my specialty. Sometimes I have a helper to work the ground, but more often than not, I work alone. I rope my way up them, un-belayed, and I do it on arm strength alone. Clearing the basal crotch, I then free-climb to the top, where I finally tie in and get to work. These splendid trees are my game now. They are my haunt. They're what I do best, but they are also my secret. I may disappoint my family. I may habitually blow it with women. It's not impossible I'm a total jerk. But once aloft, I'm the high priest of hanging it out. Even if no one knows it but me. Especially if no one knows it but me. I take my life in my hands as few others can claim, and if I blow it, well Take Me Now, Jesus! In the pre-OSHA workplace, I routinely break every safety rule that eventually ends up in their book. The Pace brothers wouldn't know this if they were looking right at it, but no matter. The beauty of our arrangement is, we make it up as we go along.

I work these trees three months before winter finally sets in. When Pace Bros goes dormant, I look for other work and discover the Forest Service is launching a government-funded project to control the pine bark beetles in Boulder County. In the Boulder Daily Camera classifieds are ads for experienced sawyers, so I drive Flash the twelve miles to Nederland to see what it's all about.

The Colorado State Forest Service beetle mitigation crew is comprised of forty workers—fifteen sawyers, twenty brush handlers, and five overseers and mechanics. The test plot is along the Magnolia Road corridor, where expensive exurban real estate interfaces with wilderness access. The idea is to work through the winter when the fire hazard's low, felling infested trees and stacking the wood. In the spring a different crew will arrive to douse the decks with insecticide.

My saw team is a real bomber crew: The squad boss, Art, is a huge, poker-faced Apache. He hangs with a ranch-kid trapper everyone calls "Muskrat Dave." There is a long-haired,

nationally ranked motocross rider, and a between-jobs bartender named Rodney of such striking good looks we can only surmise he is slumming. There is a faculty wife named Hazel, who's in the middle of a divorce, and a married couple who swaps off piling brush and sawing. There is a down-on-his-luck CU footballer named Willis, who works the woods in street shoes, and Greg, a wiry, feral guy with a Jersey accent thick enough for parody. Greg turns out to be a fellow tree climber, just as desperate for winter work as me.

When we aren't in our sawyer's helmets, most guys favor Coors Lite caps. My own street cap is an oversized Donegal style, the type favored by inner-city conga drummers. At 9,000 feet, in the middle of climax forest, it's fair to say this is a ridiculous look. But, I reason, I'm good enough with a saw to bring some style to a jobsite, no matter how remote. You could say this kind of statement is in the spirit with which I bought Flash. The only problem there is, I'm having second thoughts about this truck.

Essentially, Flash is a flatlander's truck. If I'd bothered to tell anyone in Carolina I planned to drive it to the Rockies, they might have told me the engine was too small and the three-speed gearing was particularly ill-suited for the mountains. Granted, I can make a real entrance with Flash. On the other hand, it seems more and more the entrance of some blowhard loudmouth, exotic as a parrot in this front-range Rockies landscape. I understand now that what I need is a mountain truck, one suitable for a serious practitioner of the woodsman's trade.

By way of illustration, Flash cooks up on the way home from a Snowmass Jimmy Buffett concert. I pull off on the shoulder before the Eisenhower Tunnel and at 11,000 feet, Sam and I get out. While the wind skirls around us, we pop the hood, peer down at the engine through a cloud of antifreeze fumes. I can't believe Flash would embarrass me like this in front of my new girlfriend. We slam the hood, return to the cab, and huddle there for half an hour. Then I feed Flash a canteen of water and we limp back home to Boulder. I'd hoped to wait for spring to sell Flash, but the meltdown forces my hand. The 302 motor is now a smoker, and the truck develops a habit of popping out of second gear on the downhill. The question is, how to sell a moribund truck? The only way out is to fix it myself.

The Monkey Wrench is a co-op garage that rents you tools, space, and a genuine mechanic to lend advice. The mechanic tells me he doesn't work on transmissions, but that replacing the 302's valve seals would probably stop the smoking. The procedure, as he describes it, seems easy enough, so I slip him a rock of Peruvian for a Saturday at his garage. Unlike my experience wrenching on Jimmi, this time I'm on my own. And instead of blundering around with reefer and beer, I buy a Chilton's shop manual and set to taking apart the top end with a

sense of urgency; Flash will never make it in the mountain west, no matter how much bling it carries.

As these things go, my day at the Monkey Wrench is a success. When I close the hood and start it up, Flash barely smokes at all. The transmission issue is another matter, but if a prospective buyer isn't pulling hills, there's a sporting chance Flash won't pop out of gear. On the other hand, with a good wash and a bottle of Armor All, Flash cleans up beautifully. This is my ill-conceived pickup's only strength, and so I have to go with it.

I make up my mind that as soon as I get a bankroll together, I'll head up-range to Montana. My saw crew speaks of the place like it's Shangri-la, though none of them have actually been there. Meanwhile, Boulder is the most beautiful place I've lived, but it always feels so smug and crowded; it is impossible to settle into. Is it the town, or is it me? I never know. But back on High Street, things are restless. Sam is a lovely and good-hearted woman, and we have many good times. We go to movies like Derzu Uzala and Misty Beethoven. My hero, Ken Kesey himself, comes to read at the Kerouac Center for Disembodied Poetics, but I'm too much in awe to go shake his hand. I'm lucky to have a close friend like Sam, but our attachment to one another is unequal, and my continued muttering about what's wrong with Boulder is beginning to cast a shadow over things.

"Are you aware how much you complain about this place?" she finally asks.

It is embarrassingly clear that I'm not. And I finally understand that she is beginning to take it personally.

*

Fast upon the holidays, the arrival of a package of Black Beauties, the preferred pharmaceutical of long-haul truckers, puts us sawyers in a celebratory mood. Indeed, Black Beauties suit our lifestyle so well, the end of our working day becomes the beginning of our nightlife.

"Hey you guys, it's four o'clock," Art, the squad boss says. "Time to go berserk after work."

We stow our chainsaws, leave the Magnolia Road depot and start drinking at Friskies Bar in Nederland. Sometimes we go night skiing in our Carhartts at Lake El Dora, and from there, down canyon to the Bus Stop, Boulder's happening topless bar. Between the drugs, the work, and the altitude, I quickly drop twenty pounds. It strikes me that all I ever do is work my ass off and get high, but in that regard, I'm not alone: many venerable Buddhist teachers are also a-swim in the Boulder Bacchanalia. And much as I long to move on, with no roadworthy pickup, I'm stuck. I try not to hate Flash, but I start to blame that Ford for just about

everything.

The Friday before Christmas, the Colorado State Forest Service beetle-mitigation team is in a festive mood. We arrive at the Magnolia Road depot at eight o'clock as always, except everyone brings a pint. We suffer a pep talk from the district ranger, who reads an attaboy letter from the governor. Some of us get raises, and I'm up to a whopping five dollars an hour. Afterward, we do light chainsaw maintenance, pack our Huskies in their lockers, uncap our pints and pass them around, a kind of do-it-yourself Hairy Buffalo. The mood quickly grows hilarious, but it can't surmount the fact the sun shines very brightly, the snow has turned to slush, and at nine o'clock in the morning, we are ten thousand feet up the mountain, completely wasted. At some point, someone spots a porcupine overhead, vandalizing a ponderosa. In a minute, Muskrat Dave scrambles up the tree and sends the fated porky to the ground, where he is quickly dispatched, skinned, and roasted over a pinecone fire. It isn't all that bad, if you have a taste for grilled rodent. My friends Bryant and Greg decline to try it, and Greg actually falls into a funk. "The poor slob," he says, bitterly. "Up there, minding his own business and next thing you know, he's Indian jewelry."

We meditate on the lesson in this. The temperature rises to the fifties. In our wool pants and Sorrels, we all begin to sweat. There's talk of heading down canyon to the titty-bar, except it won't be open for another six hours. Meanwhile, Art shows up next to me and hands me a small package, carefully wrapped in shop rags.

I don't much like the looks of it. "What the hell is this?"

"It's porcupine nuts, of course," says Art. "Bigmedicine, Fred." He grins, "but then, you probably know that."

On this note, we take more amphetamines and try to get on with our lives.

By noon, we are already hung over. Still, the Black Beauties keep us circling, and we try valiantly to regroup. To go home in this state is a defeat. But as we are all in our work clothes, there are few places in Boulder that will have us.

We end up at Tom's Tavern, a kind of upscale workingman's bar. There are a few day drinkers—mostly seniors—nursing beers and watching game shows while the sun pours through the windows, resurrecting a collection of mummified flies. On the sidewalk, glamorous Boulderians model three hundred-dollar sunglasses and the latest mountaineer fashions. Ordinarily, we would goof on them, but we've entered a weird kind of trance. The same sunlight that brings dead insects to life has the opposite effect on us.

If it wasn't a ridiculous idea, we might consider going back up to Magnolia Road. Without

the rigors of our routine, all the wheels just might fall off. At this point, it begins to sink in just how long the coming holidays will be. Along these lines, Sam and I hit a bad patch. We have our fun, but I'm just not in love with her. In fact, I'm about as far from any kind of euphoria as I've ever been in my life. If I was a classier guy, I would pack up and leave. Sadly, I'm mechanically unable to, and it's starting to drive us both nuts.

Finally, after a couple hours in Tom's, I cut my losses, head back to High Street, where I'm pleased to find no one home. When I go to take a shower though, I swear the Mahakala protector gives me the stink-eye. By the time I towel off I feel exhausted. There's nothing left to do but repair to my Spartan bedroom. There, I pick up my Ovid, try to remember where I left off. With that particular book, it seems I'm always trying to remember that.

I spend Christmas morning with Greg and Sam, my two best friends in Boulder. It's not clear that they even like each other, but we we're all hoping for the best. Before he leaves town for a Hawaiian Christmas, Brady gives me a cocaine rock, big as a golf ball. Greg's sister gives him a liter of Johnny Walker Red, with the provision he leave the house for the day. This will clearly be a nontraditional Yule, and when I first ask her to join us, Sam is skeptical. The fact we all hoped for better is difficult to ignore, but mostly I'm deviled by the way my daring escape to the west has stalled out in this buzz-nutsy lifestyle resembling that of a lab rat. I try to believe that Flash, my all-show, no-go pickup, is the real problem, though in fairness, nobody ever made me buy a hillbilly truck. But what, then, accounts for the stench of futility filling this Christmas morning? Nobody is ill or dying, nobody is bankrupt or headed for jail or exile. Yet it's like we're all cast in a movie called "Christmas of the Damned."

We badly need cheering up. A bump and a nip of Walker Red seems as good a place to start as any. We do a line, then toast each other gamely. Then Sam gives me a curious look.

"So you really think Montana will solve your problems?

The question catches me off guard. Then I think it's some kind of Buddhist come-on.

"*Of course,*" I tell her finally. "*Hell,* yes. I'm betting the farm on it!"

It's a really unfortunate exchange, and I'm flustered that I can't let go of it. Between the top-shelf scotch and the primo Peruvian, my brain is like an elevator that can't tell Up from Down. I then succumb to a remorse so huge and dreary that John Milton on his best day couldn't do it justice. By three in the afternoon, the refreshments are gone, and conversation is rendered impossible.

In light of this, Sam suggests we could all use a soak. She knows a Tai Chi master named Manny who has a hot tub we could use. Like anyone sensible, Manny is gone for the holidays

too, but he's entrusted Sam with a key to the house.

We all climb in Flash and limp over to Manny's place, where we quickly discover something's amiss with the key. We all take turns trying it and fail. It's either the wrong key, or else her friend changed his lock. We retreat back to Flash's cab, where we sit on the chintzy brocade behind the chintzy tinted-glass windshield. I think there's a real chance we might all burst into tears. Meanwhile, something strange is happening to the light: the mellow midwinter mountain sun looks bilious, maybe unwholesome. It crosses my mind we've somehow broken it.

When Greg finally suggests we simply break in, everyone seems cheered. We set about searching Flash for burglary tools, but the items we come up with are not promising: a small Phillips screwdriver and a tire iron. Fortunately by this point, none of us is very particular.

The window we chose to break into is only five feet from the sidewalk. I imagine we might look suspicious, yet people pass by like we're nothing out of the ordinary: just some troubled-looking people, dismembering a jalousie with a tire iron on a bright Christmas Day.

Inside Manny's house, we find no succor. The hot tub is turned off and hours away from being usable. For all we know, it's turned off expressly to thwart this kind of excursion. Still, we're buoyed by the fact we manage to accomplish anything at all. And besides, later on, our fellow woods rat, Rodney, is having a Christmas party at his place with his glamorous friends.

We arrive there a little past five, but the party is already going full swing. The gathering is the cream of Boulder's cabaret scene. There isn't another working stiff in sight, so we bolt straight for the hard liquor. Rodney greets us warmly, tries to jolly us into his crowd, but I'm skeptical this will work. Besides the incipient class deal, the three of us are messed up light years beyond this crowd. Had anyone else here recently performed a recreational B&E while fucked up on Johnny Walker? I seriously doubt it.

Within minutes, Greg takes exception to something a natty waiter says. He makes a face like a petulant child, then nails the waiter with a left hook that spins him into the Christmas tree. I catch the tree before it falls over, but the punch bowl goes down, along with a plate of Russian wedding cookies. Rodney's wife, Christa, looks like she's been shot. Then she wades through the mess in her Pappagallos, shouting "WHAT the fuck! WHAT the fuck! Who ARE these assholes?"

I think this is not an unreasonable question, but I can't say I much like her tone.

“These are my goddamn FUCKING friends,” shouts Rodney, who thrusts out his chin in our defense. “What about it?”

Someone grabs the flailing waiter and I hang on to Greg’s arms, saying over and over, “Hey, this will pass. This will pass.”

“Yeah?” says Sam. “I wouldn’t be so sure.”

I could be wrong, but there’s now color in her cheeks and something like merriment in her voice.

“His earring,” Greg explains, earnestly. “His earring flat pissed me off.”

“And my Spode!” Christa rages, now in aftershock mode. “Who broke my FUCKING Spode?” as if there could be any question.

“We’re going to go look into that,” says Sam, and she grabs her coat and breaks for the door. As we leave Rodney’s and climb back into Flash, I think it’s really something, the way we’ve managed to cheer each other up.

The three of us scramble back into Flash’s opulent brocade cab, its implicit promise of stylish and high-functioning lifestyle still undelivered upon.



Fred Haefele has received literary fellowships from The Fine Arts Work Center, the National Endowment for the Arts, and Stanford University. He is author of the award-winning motorcycle memoir, *Rebuilding the Indian* (Riverhead Books, 1998) and the essay collection, *Extremophilia* (Bangtail Press, 2012). He lives in Missoula with his wife, the writer Caroline Patterson, and drives a '93 flatbed Ford F150

