

Dirty Old Town: Addiction and Betrayal in the Mining City

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Shortly after I moved back to Butte, I found myself in the Silver Dollar Bar, sipping bourbon with an old-timer named Dan Price. Dan liked to drink. Even more, he liked to talk. And unlike many of the strangers I meet in bars, he actually had something to say. I bought another round, and yet another, doing all I could to encourage him.

Dan had worked in the mines, at least a dozen of them, but he didn't consider himself a miner. He had wanted most to go to college and study language. But his father had fallen ill, and Dan, the oldest son, was needed at home. So he did the next best thing: he became a lifelong self-taught student. He devoured books, guided only by his obsessions, which were many and various and never flagged. Equally fervent was his desire to share his literary enthusiasms. Nothing pleased Dan more than to recite for friends his favorite passages of prose and poetry. And nothing surprised me more than to be sitting on a barstool in Butte listening to a seventy-eight-year-old miner reciting word for word the prologue to *Look Homeward, Angel*: “. . . a

stone, a leaf, an unfound door; of a stone, a leaf, a door. And of all the forgotten faces . . . Naked and alone we came into exile.”

Naked and alone, that is, until we discovered the comfort and company of the well-honed, well-timed word.

Dan lived in a rundown shotgun shack next to another equally rundown shack, home to his older sister, who in her eighties still subscribed to the *Daily Worker*, as well as the *New Yorker*, and smoked marijuana with young poets who attended her occasional literary gatherings. I visited Dan often, and throughout the year, but in my memory it's always winter. Always about midnight. We've already shared a few drinks, and the room glows. Dan sits in his ratty, overstuffed chair next to the gas furnace, while at his feet and entirely surrounding the chair are piles of books and magazines. I'm reading to him: Heaney, Milosz, Yeats, Joyce. Dan, of course, doesn't rely on a text, delivering Baudelaire from memory. Or his beloved Thomas Wolfe. My favorite occasions were when he recited one of his own poems, all of which were attempts to give voice to something essential about his hometown. My hometown, too. Which is why I listened closely.

Dan died a couple years ago. One of the last times I saw him was a few months after the attacks of September 11th. “What're ya reading these days, Dan?” He showed me a worn edition of the Koran

he'd found at the Goodwill Store, where he purchased most of his books, also the artwork that adorned his walls. This was not the first time he'd tackled the Koran, he explained, before reciting his favorite passage: "The measure of a man is the good that he does in this world." After a pause to let the line sink in, he added, "That's religion enough for me." As so often happened, the conversation eventually turned to Butte. What is it about the place? Why are we still puzzling over it, even now, in its decline? Dan looked at me and uttered what for him was as near to truth as utterance can get: "Butte's an addiction."

In the mid-sixties, when I was in my teens, Butte was no addiction. It was instead the source and locus of my alienation, my rebellion. I bridled against the Catholic Church, especially the arbitrary authority, small-mindedness, and petty vices of the priests and nuns, the full repugnancy of which was amply evident by the time I turned twelve. I also found oppressive the much-touted clannishness of my Irish relatives. Victims and perpetrators alike conspired in hypocritical tales about the importance of family loyalty and tradition, tales that masked generations of cruelty, alcoholism, sexual abuse and vindictiveness, ignorance and greed, a soul-deadening form of social conservatism.

Then there's the relentless self-mythologizing of Butte. The place that billed itself as wide open, tolerant,

welcoming has also been hopelessly corrupt, prejudiced, and deeply suspicious of outsiders. And I can't overlook the nondomestic violence, which was as much a part of life aboveground as was danger underground. Here's another form of homegrown ugliness (like prostitution, cronyism, and institutionalized extortion) that's been sanitized in what might be called the Romance of Butte. But there was nothing romantic—nor unusual, for that matter—about the Saturday night my older cousin was brought to my house after yet another drunken fight. Two brothers had jumped Danny, in revenge for Danny having beaten one of them the previous weekend. Their weapons were broken beer bottles. They wore steel-toed boots just for the occasion. And they were merciless. Covering most of the top of Danny's head, which had been shaved in the emergency room, was a T-shaped pattern of stitches. Maybe a hundred of them, probably more. His upper front teeth had been kicked out. His face and arms were badly bruised. And that was only the visible damage, which was more than enough for my young eyes.

Why was Danny sprawled out on my parents' bed, asleep but still bleeding through his bandages, instead of at home? To protect his mother, who went to her grave believing—well, more likely, pretending—that her son never touched a drop of whiskey, never raised his hand in anger.

By the way, Danny later died of gangrene, after

suffering frostbite but refusing treatment, and that after passing out in the alley behind the M&M on a frigid Christmas day, which had followed a long morning of drinking, and years and years of such mornings, the fearless young bar brawler having become in middle age a dull-witted, useless-to-anyone drunk. “Danny had one job,” quipped another cousin at Danny’s wake, “and he did it well.” Which, of course, got a big laugh, while helping keep alive the Romance of Butte.

Admittedly, what I’ve just said represents half a lifetime of surveying the past, distilling and recombining and reinterpreting what I could scarcely articulate while it was happening. Back then all I could say for sure was that I found Butte suffocating. So, at fourteen and fed up, I ran away from home. That much, at least, is indisputable. On Halloween night, a friend and I hopped a freight train bound for exotic, faraway Phoenix and the home of a former girlfriend, whom I’d neglected to tell about our plan. No matter. We were caught just as the train was about to leave the station in Dillon, one stop from the border. But the failed escape didn’t lessen my desire to put Butte as far behind me as possible, both emotionally and geographically, an experiment that began in earnest the day after I graduated high school, when I left town for good, and with the blessing—if not the full understanding—of my parents.

“Which of us is not forever a stranger and alone?” wrote Thomas Wolfe in the *Look Homeward* passage that Dan Price adopted as his personal prayer. My estrangement didn’t last forever but a paltry twenty-five years, almost to the day. To be sure, I’d gone back now and again, but never stayed long. In time the trips became less frequent, and during my stays I took less notice, especially after I moved back East. Also being something of a self-mythologizer, I used to say that the urge to return to Butte didn’t show itself until my last years in New York, when I retired for good from magazine editing and started writing full-time, and that when the urge did appear, it was sudden, irresistible—that I was seized by a desire to go home. But that’s malarkey. I wasn’t so much seized as gradually seduced, teased. More than that, I now see, I conspired in the seduction. All the time I was traveling ever farther away, I was looking over my shoulder, gazing homeward even as I renounced home, denying both my debt to Butte and its claim on me but never quite letting Butte out of sight, out of mind.

The last thing I wanted to admit, of course, was that by virtue of circumstance and character defect I’d been cast as yet another prodigal son who wakes up amidst his sorrowful wanderings only to realize that what he wants or needs most is what he left behind. Nothing so stereotypical or pedestrian would suit me. After all, since my teens I had been hard about the task of composing the Romance of Eddie, which in fact owed

much to the Romantic tradition itself, especially the primacy of the imagination and the glorification of the individual. I would be the center of my own universe. I would be the inventor of my own identity. Instead of finding meaning, I would make meaning—unbounded by social or religious convention, untamed by the strictures of family, neighborhood, community. If I had any forebears of note, they were forebears I chose—not my mother and father, surely, or their parents, an absurd notion, but instead Camus, Beckett, and Nietzsche, Rimbaud, Nikos Kazantzakis, William Blake, Wallace Stevens, Borges and Rilke, Godard, Fellini, Bergman. There I was, then, in Buffalo, New York, followed by Long Island, Brooklyn, Little Italy, Greenwich Village, living out the defining myth of the West. The very picture of unconscious irony and contradiction. A self-made caricature navigating the urban wilderness of Manhattan with the aid of a rearview mirror.

Head East, young man, that you may know the singular pleasure of discovering the West . . . on your own terms. And those are indeed the magic words: on my own terms.

Although in retrospect I realize that the accidental re-enchantment of the West in general, and Butte in particular, had been building almost imperceptibly from the moment I crossed the Mississippi River, there were clearly delineated moments when I was forced to remember and, more

important, reconsider what I was trying in vain to forget. One of them took place in Buffalo. At that time, the late seventies and early eighties, I was still striving to write for the theater. To support my doomed habit, I took jobs anywhere I could find them—factories, assembly lines, manufacturing plants. All blue collar, though unskilled. And all reminiscent of Butte. In the multiethnic, working-class soul of one of America's landmark industrial cities, I detected a familiar reflection. And maybe because it was only a reflection of the place, instead of the place itself, I was for the first time not repulsed. Quite the opposite. In Buffalo, twenty times larger than Butte and located two thousand miles away, but also struggling to survive the decline of its major industry, I felt very much at home—and precisely because it possessed so much of what was best about home.

Another moment—rather, series of moments—that's worth mentioning took place in what at the time was my favorite bar in the West Village, the Corner Bistro. The Bistro was one of those ideal New York bars that functioned as both neighborhood joint and word-of-mouth retreat for writers, musicians, artists, and intellectuals. A sublime, harmonious, and often entertaining confluence of low and high culture. In short, bohemia, the place that will always be for me The Old Country. Among the other charms of the Bistro was its jukebox, which featured everything from Robert

Johnson to Willie Nelson, Duke Ellington to Jimi Hendrix, Patsy Cline and Patti Smith, Frank Zappa and Frank Sinatra. In that eclectic collection, I also found several tunes by the Pogues, the drunken louts who invented Irish punk. One song in particular I played every time I visited the Bistro—"Dirty Old Town." It wasn't written by the Pogues, but they turned it into one of their signature numbers. (And if you've ever been to a Pogues concert, you know what I mean. Believe it or not, they're still doing reunion tours.) In "Dirty Old Town," Shane McGowan sings, "Kissed my girl by the factory wall." Hinting not at industry romanticized but at the possibility of romance in an industrial setting, which is a crucial distinction. No sentimentality. No pretensions. No excuses.

I listened to the Pogues' "Dirty Old Town" again and again because I increasingly enjoyed being taken back, if only in reverie, to my dirty old town. And that much at least I was sure I liked about Butte. The brute fact of dirt—allied with the equally brute fact that no one saw a need to cover up the dirt. For many Montanans in exile, the odor that usually conjures up images of home is sage, with pine a close second. And I'm as susceptible as the next person. But for me there's another odor that's equally evocative—sulfur. The sharp smell of mine dumps, where I played as a kid. That the dirty old town in the song was an unpretty place dominated by factories also struck a personal chord. I

hadn't grown up on a farm or ranch. Rural culture was foreign to me. Indeed, much of Montana as a whole was foreign to me. If at long last I was going to own up to the influence of the past, it had been a largely urban past, on an island, as someone once observed, completely surrounded by land. The West I was starting to long for was a West that had much in common with the East I had escaped to. At heart, I realized, I was a city kid. No wonder Manhattan felt like home the instant I arrived there. No wonder it still does.

Here's the last and most consequential moment: back before SoHo was transformed from an artist's colony into an outdoor shopping mall for the rich and beautiful, I often stopped to browse at a second-hand photography store on Mercer Street. One day I found myself thumbing through the pages of *The Americans*, Robert Frank's somber black-and-white portrait of the U.S. during the 1950s. Page 61 in particular caught my eye. The photograph depicts two diaphanous lace curtains draped before a concrete ledge beyond which rows of stark frame houses and brick duplexes recede into the distance—an unassuming town seen from a fourth-story window, seen a long time ago, all drab gray and dull black and presented in Frank's usual raw manner. I continued studying the melancholy picture, puzzled and slightly unsettled, trying to fathom its attraction.

Perhaps, I thought, it's the theatricality of the

image that claims my attention. The curtains are parted halfway, but while the right one hangs straight down, the left curves from top to bottom, as if someone had only recently pulled it aside to permit a wider view. A drama seems imminent, and that expectation is further reinforced by the ledge, which, running along the bottom of the frame, recalls the floorboards of a stage. If so, the action most likely will begin where, in the distance, the houses yield to a hill stripped of vegetation. Located just this side of that slope is the only hint of motion in the entire photograph. A meandering wood fence surrounds a similarly barren patch of land, at one end of which huddle several wood buildings and the towering headframe of an underground mine. From the shaft, or very near the shaft, steam rises in a column forty, maybe fifty, feet high, its shape vaguely human, vaguely sinister, an ascending apparition that engulfs the skeletal headframe and looms over the neighborhoods spread before it.

Loosely organized and seemingly uncontrived, Frank's photographs often contain details that can be easily overlooked or underappreciated but which once fully grasped are unforgettable. This was one of them, and more—for me, much more. This particular detail triggered a detonation whose aftereffects continue to this day. Headframe? Mine yard? I turned to the facing page and read the caption for the first time: "View from hotel window—Butte, Montana." Incredibly, I had been staring at a picture of my hometown, the place where

I passed the first eighteen years of my life, but without realizing it, not consciously, at any rate. Frank had stopped in Butte toward the end of his groundbreaking cross-country trip, and in that out-of-the-way place he found plenty of the postwar desolation he had encountered elsewhere—isolated billboards addressing nothing but night air; uneasy, distracted families in stalled cars; a vacant luncheonette; an idle post office; and this, the eastern, increasingly industrialized part of Butte as it once looked from a room in the Finlen Hotel.

Once looked. With that realization came a second, very different shock: the scene Frank's photograph depicted no longer existed. Streets and sidewalks, frame houses and brick buildings—most of the Eastside neighborhoods had been torn down or relocated to make room for the cavity known as the Berkeley Pit, the mammoth excavation that inaugurated the last stage of large-scale mineral extraction in Summit Valley.

That twofold sense of loss became the framework for my return: I was on a quest to reclaim the place that made me, a place that in some measure—the extent of which I was intent on finding out—no longer existed. And whatever I discovered would somehow find its way into my writing—articles and essays for periodicals, a book, a documentary film, notes for plays, scraps of novels. For the first time, my life and my life's work would merge; what I'd made of myself would be

reconciled with what made me. And since I was by then an independent writer, free to go anywhere I wish, why not live on the edge of the largest Superfund site in the country? Why not the rural Romanian village known as Walkerville, where now I've resided for fifteen years?

Albert Camus, a favorite among my many appropriated ancestors, wrote this: "A man's work is nothing but the slow trek to rediscover, through the detours of art, those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened." I agree. But there's more to it than that. The slow trek almost always transforms the traveler. He returns from exile to find that his long-lost Great and Simple Images may yet be great but perhaps not so simple. The trek that began with an open heart inevitably leads to heartbreak. He discovers that his home is both familiar and strange, that it's just as much elsewhere as any other elsewhere he's visited. And if he's an artist, he allows these tensions and contradictions to seep into his work, to shape its direction, making them a source of both delight and dismay. From my shanty on the Hill, I see a place that in many ways still repulses me. Suffocating, small-minded clannishness; a reputation for friendliness that masks hostility toward outsiders; a certain religious and social conservatism; ignorance and prejudice; mind-numbing self-mythologizing. It's all here. And I see nothing to be gained by pretending that the Dirty Old Town isn't dirty, including a history full

of ruthless gangsters, bloodthirsty murderers, rapacious thieves—and that's not counting the Anaconda Company.

What I'm calling the Romance of Butte is of a piece with a larger effort under way in the West, a sentimental exercise in collective grief and regret that goes by several names but always privileges the word *place*. I attended a literary conference in Missoula called "Sense of Place" thirty-five years ago. Since then, that same conference has been duplicated throughout the West too many times to keep track. I wouldn't be surprised if at this very moment someone were organizing yet another one. Here's one thing you can be sure of: so much impassioned talk by so many bright people about something everyone agrees is so valuable probably means that that something is already lost. Gone. Never to be recovered, at least not in the form it's been assigned in this new secular religion. What's more, to the extent that local history and culture are celebrated in the absence of a critical perspective, such endeavors, however well-intentioned, are sterile. Let's drug ourselves with nostalgia instead of facing the messy, provisional, ever-problematic reality at hand, the reality that refuses to fit neatly within the confines of conventional narrative.

One of the characteristics that distinguishes my dirty old town, and which I've come to appreciate almost above all

others, is that the dirt is on display. In the brute actuality of the mining landscape, the industrial ruins, I see a kind of beauty—the beauty of unashamed candor. No sentimentality. No pretensions. No excuses. Yes, many of my neighbors, godblessem, do a remarkably effective job of blinding themselves to aspects of the town that don't accord with the stories they tell themselves and others, the stories that, paradoxically, have contributed much to the Mining City's vitality and longevity. This is a place, we must remember, that's gone to hell and back. And more than once.

It's also true that, in the attempt to repair the ravaged land, the poisoned water—a noble and necessary task, certainly—we run the risk of burying or erasing and, therefore, systematically forgetting what we most need to remember. Reclamation as a kind of amnesia. As an inside-outsider, one foot in, one foot out, I intend to do everything in my power—in my roles as both writer and citizen—to make sure that doesn't happen. I view this as an act of love, the best way I know to pay respect to the place and people I long renounced, even, at times, ridiculed. But I'm keenly aware that some of my neighbors may see my twofold stance as an act of betrayal. And I take no comfort from the fact that after *Look Homeward, Angel* Wolfe wrote *You Can't Go Home Again*, the story of a writer whose novel about his hometown so angers his family and friends that he is forced to leave.

Going home, I've found, is easy. The hard part is staying home, writing and making a documentary film about my neighbors while living among them—and with every intention of being here afterward. How much easier it was when I could parachute into someone else's reality for a short time, then make pronouncements from a distance, waxing wise and arrogant with my drinking buddies at the Corner Bistro. Now, what I write matters. There are consequences. Consequences I cannot escape or ignore. Which, come to think of it, is a pretty good definition of community, the community I joined—voluntarily, for the first time—when I moved back home. I write with particular people in mind—including people who've died, like Dan Price, my parents and brother, characters who appear in my nonfiction work—not because I want to please them, although that's certainly part of it, but because I've grown so fond of them, so impressed by who they are and what they've made of their lives in this hard, often unforgiving place that I feel obliged to be straight with them.

My loyalty, in other words, sometimes takes a different form than theirs. Danny had one job. And he did it well. When my cousin said that, I not only laughed, I felt liberated. My load lightened a little. How could a mining town, where men, families, whole neighborhoods were routinely sacrificed, survive without black humor, without the extravagant and

rebellious urge to laugh in the face of death? But let's not forget that Danny was a monster, a man of violence, a selfish, ignorant drunkard who abandoned his children, along with everyone else who cared about him. Hold these two views in mind at the same time, and maybe you get a little closer to the truth of Butte.

What I've just described is, of course, the Mining City version of the modernist dilemma. Though it's been around for a long time, that dilemma still has profound implications for writers, filmmakers, and other artists, as well as historians, sociologists, anthropologists, industrial archaeologists—implications that have been explored by others but by none so provocatively as the efforts of Leslie Fiedler, the brilliant literary critic who taught at The University of Montana for a brief, scandalous spell. In an essay titled "Waiting for the End," Fiedler addressed the limitations of regional literature. His case study was Jewish American stories and poems, but his analysis applies to all localized forms of writing that are self-congratulatory, defensive, apologetic, its excesses and omissions pandering to the author's local audience.

Such literature becomes universal only when, as Fiedler wrote,

regional writers stop being apologists and become critics, abandon falsification and sentimentality in favor of treating not the

special virtues, be they real or fancied, but the weaknesses it shares with all men. Such writers seem often to their fellows, their very friends and parents, traitors—not only for the harsh things which they are led to say about those fellows, friends and parents in the pursuit of truth, but also because their desire for universality of theme and appeal leads them to begin tearing down from within the walls of a cultural ghetto, which, it turns out, has meant security as well as exclusion to the community that nurtured them.

So, to my fellow writers in Montana, I say: instead of composing odes to our cultural ghettos or, more likely, to the restoration of those ghettos, let's tear down what remains of the walls. Being seen by some as traitors is a small price to pay for such good and necessary work.

During the first few years after my return, I was often asked to explain the move. Lower Manhattan for East Walkerville? How come? Now the more likely question is whether I intend to stay.

Frankly, I don't believe I have a choice in the matter. It turns out that Dan Price was right about the magnetism of Butte. And in more ways than one. For starters, the sulfurous soil of home is laced with arsenic,

which is addictive. And I'm hooked again. Worse still, I like it. This too: I had naively assumed that the literary dimension of the quest would end with the completion of the film—a dramatic exclamation point. Then I'd be done with Butte, at least as a subject. But what I've realized of late is that the place will be with me, and me with it, for a long time to come.

Addict, traitor, native son.

This doesn't mean I won't run away from home again. I will. And often, if I have my way. Just as I'll return again and again. Because it is here, in Butte, that my heart first opened.