

David Ackles

"Montana Song"

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I went out to Montana
with a bible on my arm,
Looking for my fathers
on a long-abandoned farm,
and I found what I came looking for.

I drove into a churchyard
of what used to be the town;
Walked along a cowpath
through the fences falling down,
'til I found what I came looking for.

Through the dust of summer noons,
over grass long dying,
To read the stone and lumber runes
where my past was lying.
High among hillsides and windmill bones,
soft among oak trees and chimney stones,
Blew the wind that I came looking for.

And the wind blew over the dry land,
and dusted my city soul clean,
To read in my great-grandfather's hand
from his bible newly seen :

Born James McKennon, 1862
Married Leantha, 1884
two sons born in Montana,
Praise the Lord !

The gentle wind
of passing time,
Closed the bible pages;
and took my hand
and had me climb
closer to the ages.

The picket fence, the lattice frame,
the garden gone to seed,
Leantha with the fragile name,
Defying place and need,
Declares this bit of prairie "tame",
and sees her fingers bleed,
and knows her sons won't live the same,
but she must live her creed.

The fallen barn, the broken plow,
the hoofprint-hardened clay;
where is the farmer, now,
who built his dream this way ?
Who felled the tree and cut the bough
and made the land obey,
who taught his sons as he knew how,
but could not make them stay.

Who watched until the darkness fell
To know the boys were gone, and never loved the land so well
from that day on.

"Father James," they wrote him,
each a letter once a year,
words of change that broke him
with the new age that was here,
and the new world they'd gone looking for.

The clouds arose
like phantom herds,
and by the dappled lighting
I read again
the last few words
in a woman's writing :
March 1st,1921
last night, Papa died.
Left one plow, a horse, his gun,
his bible, and his bride.

The long grass moved beside me
in the gentle summer rain,
and made a path to guide me
to a sudden mound of grain.

A man and wife are buried there,
children to the land;
with young green tendrils in her hair,
and seedlings in his hand.

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