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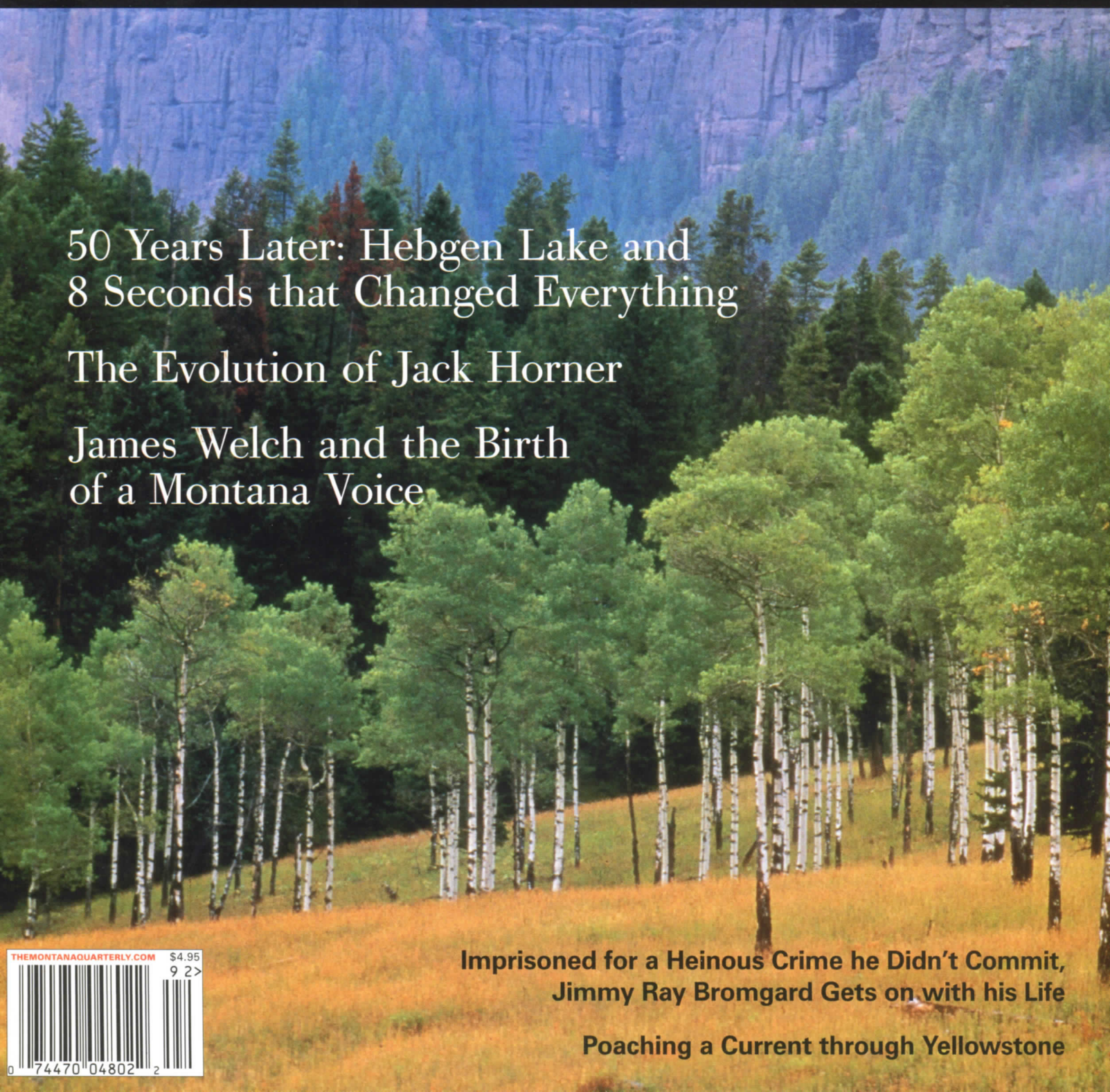

50 Years Later: Hebgen Lake and 8 Seconds that Changed Everything

The Evolution of Jack Horner

James Welch and the Birth of a Montana Voice

Imprisoned for a Heinous Crime he Didn't Commit, Jimmy Ray Bromgard Gets on with his Life

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JAMES WELCH:
THE BIRTH OF MONTANA'S CONTEMPORARY NATIVE VOICE

AN ESSAY BY ALLEN MORRIS JONES
PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS LEE

SOME YEARS AGO, THERE WAS A STORY FLOATING AROUND ABOUT James Welch. I may have heard it in Bill Bevis's class on Montana writers. Anyway, as the story goes, back in the late '60s at the University of Montana, Richard Hugo's walking down the hall holding a student's poem. This would have been in the Liberal Arts building, which has a cold, industrial feel to it. Conveyor belt classrooms, education as engineered by Henry Ford. And here's Hugo, the big man himself, probably hungover, and he's got this poem. He would have been holding it like a religious artifact, like you hold a flashlight in a cave. If you're a teacher, this is what you've been waiting for. Hugo grabbed a warm body, anybody, maybe it was Kittredge, and made him read the poem. Then said, in all seriousness, "The question is, how do we get this kid out of here without messing him up?"

When a writer of real talent comes into the world, there's an urge to add a new appendix to *Bulfinch*. The myth makes itself. In the case of James Welch, his story seemed ready-made for a certain kind of fame. A Blackfeet and Gros Ventre Indian out of Browning, a product of the Rez and everything that the word implies, he came to us out of the blue. An essential, unexpected addition to western letters, an expansion into a previous vacuum. Before Jim Welch, where was a post-modernist vision of Native Americans in Montana? He was one of the first, one of the finest, still one of the few writers to take the magic and misery of his Indian past – the rich, exotic traditions, the love for language, the ethos and mythos – and subvert it, redefine it, show it to us in a contemporary context. His subject (not unlike other canon-worthy literary figures – Bellow and Roth, Morrison and Ellison) was his ethnicity, his cultural identity. But also like these writers, he was beyond certain labels, unless that label was capital L literature. You read his poems, his novels, it's not too much to think that maybe indeed he was birthed from a grease-painted forehead, that the swan got it on with a dark-eyed, dusky-skinned Leda.

The few times I met Jim Welch (I did not know him well; there are others who knew him much better), I was struck by the juxtaposition. Personality against his work, the voice against his voice. He was a small man. Maybe not that small, but something about him made you think you were looming. The best word is perhaps self-effacing. He had a small voice. A hesitant, nearly effeminate trill. Odd to hear him read his gritty, masculine prose out loud. It was like getting punched in the face with a feather duster. He wore glasses that were slightly too large for his face. He was acne scarred. And he was always, always smiling. Or getting ready to smile. Friend and literary compatriot, Ralph Beer, author of the Spur Award winning novel *The Blind Corral* (which was heavily influenced by Welch) wrote to me, "At his core, Jim Welch was a kind man. I think he was kind-hearted through and through. But he was a strong man, too. You know he was on the Montana State Parole Board for years, and that must have been hard on him, with the large Native American population in Deer Lodge to have to sit and pass judgement on those inmates."

His output during his too-short life was relatively sparse. His first book, a slim collection of poetry, *Riding the Earthboy 40*, was published in 1971. It's still in print, which, in today's climate, is as strong a testament to its strength as any specific praise. (Although, indeed, Sherman Alexie has called it, "the most important book of poetry in all of Native American literature.") A few years later he published *Winter in the Blood*. An enormous novel in every way but page count, it's a book that

The Marias River winds past a stand of cottonwoods near the site of the Bear River Massacre of Heavy Runner's band of Blackfeet Indians.

sticks with you, it's popcorn in your teeth. The imagery, the portrait of a rarefied place and its people. You can't get rid of it. Superficially, a bleak look at Indian life on the Hi Line, full of "wind and bones," underneath it's stitched through with wry humor, redemption, a reconciliation of pasts and cultures. Other novels followed (*The Death of Jim Loney*, the magisterial *Fool's Crow*, *The Indian Lawyer*, *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*) as well as a nonfiction, revisionist look at Custer. Taken together this body of work elevates this shy man from Montana into the most rarefied kind of literary air. If Browning hasn't named a city street after him, they should.

Montana literature saw its apogee in the late '70s and early '80s. In Missoula, Richard Hugo was still roadtripping around the state with a beer between his legs and Kittredge was just starting to hit his stride. In Livingston, McGuane was

a hippyish, mandolin-playing literary rockstar and Brautigan hadn't yet tipped over the edge. And off at the vanguard of the Native American renaissance, Jim Welch was quietly typing up a world all his own. Sentence to sentence, page to page, like stacking logs he gave us people we never could have imagined, presented them with his shy compliments. Characters with names like First Raise and Yellow Calf and Lame Bull. White Man's Dog and Yellow Kidney. Talking crows and butterflies, a parallel world of dream visions, magical realism as informed by cultural tradition. He wrote for 30 years, and his influence in that time would be hard to measure. Debra Magpie Earling, creative writing teacher and acclaimed novelist, wrote, "If it had not been for James Welch I would have never been a writer. He gave the world a real vision of Indian life — not always beautiful, but real. Perhaps James Welch was the first Indian to show the humor and sadness of Indians, the suffering, the joy. This is how I saw and see him."

"The next morning was cold, and a light rain ticked off the lodge skins. Beneath the roiled clouds the prairies looked as green as the waters of the Two Medicine River, and the first flowers had opened up."

— FOOL'S CROW

When a writer of great talent leaves the world — someone with chops enough, gravitas enough to pull the satellites around him — it leaves a gap. Lung cancer took Jim Welch in August of 2003, in his early 60s. Much too young. The puzzle of the world that was his specific purview — the intersection of ancient tradition and new obligations, the attempt to understand a culture that's left most of us behind, regardless of ethnicity — was left with a ragged hole torn from the center. In writing this, I find myself considering all the things about Jim I didn't know. The books he read, the films he watched, his work habits. In thinking about his passing, though, I regret most of all the things he didn't have time to show me.