



en plein air

**Words and Pictures in the Outdoor Air
Eleanor and Richard Berry
Hood River, Oregon
August 26–30, 2010**



Introduction

Five days at the end of August. Five sites on the Columbia Gorge in the zone where the land shifts from the wet of the western gorge to the dry of the eastern.

Each day, a forecast of cloudy skies with a chance of rain. Each day, at least partially clear with plenty of sun. And everywhere wind.

We set ourselves to be fully attentive to what was before us, to register in words and photographs our time in each place. We had notebook and pen, camera and lenses, a laptop computer.

From day to day, place to place, the poems and pictures move sometimes together, sometimes apart. Converging and diverging, they weave a still dance, a celebration of late-summer light.

Eleanor & Richard Berry





Harvest Pastoral

26 August 2010
Gorge White House, Hood River

Wherever the artists set up their easels,
they lose most of the scene, which
is all around us, 360 degrees, is distant—
snow-etched Adams, northeast,
Hood, more jagged, southwest—and close—
this pear-tree, one among hundreds,
far older than its neighbors, thick-trunked,
its bark deep-split all over in scabs,
long limbs curved down from the weight
of its fruit, plump, just ready for harvest
(harvest beginning today, pickers filling
great plastic bins to their tops). It is
perspectives down rows upon rows
of flowers for cutting—each strip of grass
between adjacent rows of dahlias
an unrolled carpet spotted many hues
with discarded dead-head blooms. It is
the bees' view down the purple tunnel
of each blossom of lavender—so many
on a spike, a sea of spikes. It is
the round-shouldered hills, tawny as if
they'd been draped with pelts, above
the climbing rows of orchard,
green channels of firs, marking
channels of snowmelt. It is the huge flag
waving against those hills, flag that intrudes
on the scene of land and sky as much
as any billboard.

That was morning.

This is waning afternoon. Clouds have spread—
orographic Richard called them,
as we watched them stream
like scarves out from the slopes of Mt. Hood—
clouds shaped by the forms and conditions
of the land. Now cloud has covered
much of the sky, swathed
Adams and Hood completely. Where this morning
cloud shadows glided across sun-baked hillsides,
now the hills are all in shadow, save for shifting
splotches of sun from rents in the clouds.
The motion—of cloud shadows this morning,
sun patches now—bespeaks wind, and wind has been
the constant today, since it waked me
halfway through last night with the sound
of trees tossing outside the window by the bed,
of the curtains flapping at the window across--
wind sweeping out yesterday's heat,
sweeping in cool. The wind has been motion and sound
in our ears all day. But it is not the loudest sound
in this place so peaceful to the eye. Louder
are the cars speeding by on the highway, the oversize fans
venting exhaust from the processing plant next door,
the tractors heading off to the orchards,
returning with their loaded bins of pears. Too much
noise of machines to hear any birds, save
occasional scrub jays scolding, far too loud
to hear the bees, still feeding, though fewer now,
in the lavender, too loud even to hear the flag,
flapping against its pole.





Mountain Sun

27 August 2010
Timberline Lodge

*Green channels of firs, marking
channels of snowmelt:*

what I saw yesterday on the hills
above the pear orchards, I'm now
in the midst of, on the slopes of Mt. Hood.
The firs—probably not all firs—I can distinguish
at least three species of conifer, but I don't
know their names—gather in clusters
like nuclear families, one or two older trees
in each group providing shelter
for those sprouted later.

The flowers at their base grow in clumps,
spread out to absorb the most sunlight,
to hoard the most water. Nearly every kind
of flower growing here, half-familiar
from versions I've met in milder conditions
at lower elevations, here adapted to retard
evaporation in the mountain wind and sun.

Sun, breaking through scattered clouds,
is hot on my face, dazzlingly bright in my eyes.
Air, moving in wind through this shallow
gulch, is chill. Whenever the wind
stirs the boughs of the firs, they make
a soughing sound, the loudest sound
up here, where the huge speakers blasting
rock music and announcements for the teams
starting their marathon run to the coast
reach only faintly. The only other sounds, besides
voices and footsteps of occasional hikers, are bees,
abuzz in the asters and lupines, flies
whizzing from stone to stone, distant birds.

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Back down in the parking lot, music pounds,
interrupted only by announcers shouting out,
to answering cheers, the names of relay teams,
then counting down to their scheduled starts. The clouds
have mostly dispersed, leaving the rocky peak of Hood
all but clear. The light is painfully bright, the air
so transparent that I can pick out,
high on the mountain's flank, single trunks—
naked remains of firs at the ragged edge of timber.
To the east, in shades of blue
and paler blue, the serried hills step off
to the edge of the Cascades
and beyond.





Fire Season Haibun

28 August 2010
Springhouse Cellar Vineyard, Mosier

In this place on the south bank of the Columbia outside Mosier, the soil is a thin crumb crust over lava. But from it grows a profusion of grasses and flowers, most now gone to seed, covering the black rock with a pale gold pelage. From it grows a host of robust oaks and pines, some congregated in groves, some scattered singly, spotting and splashing the gold with their rich green.

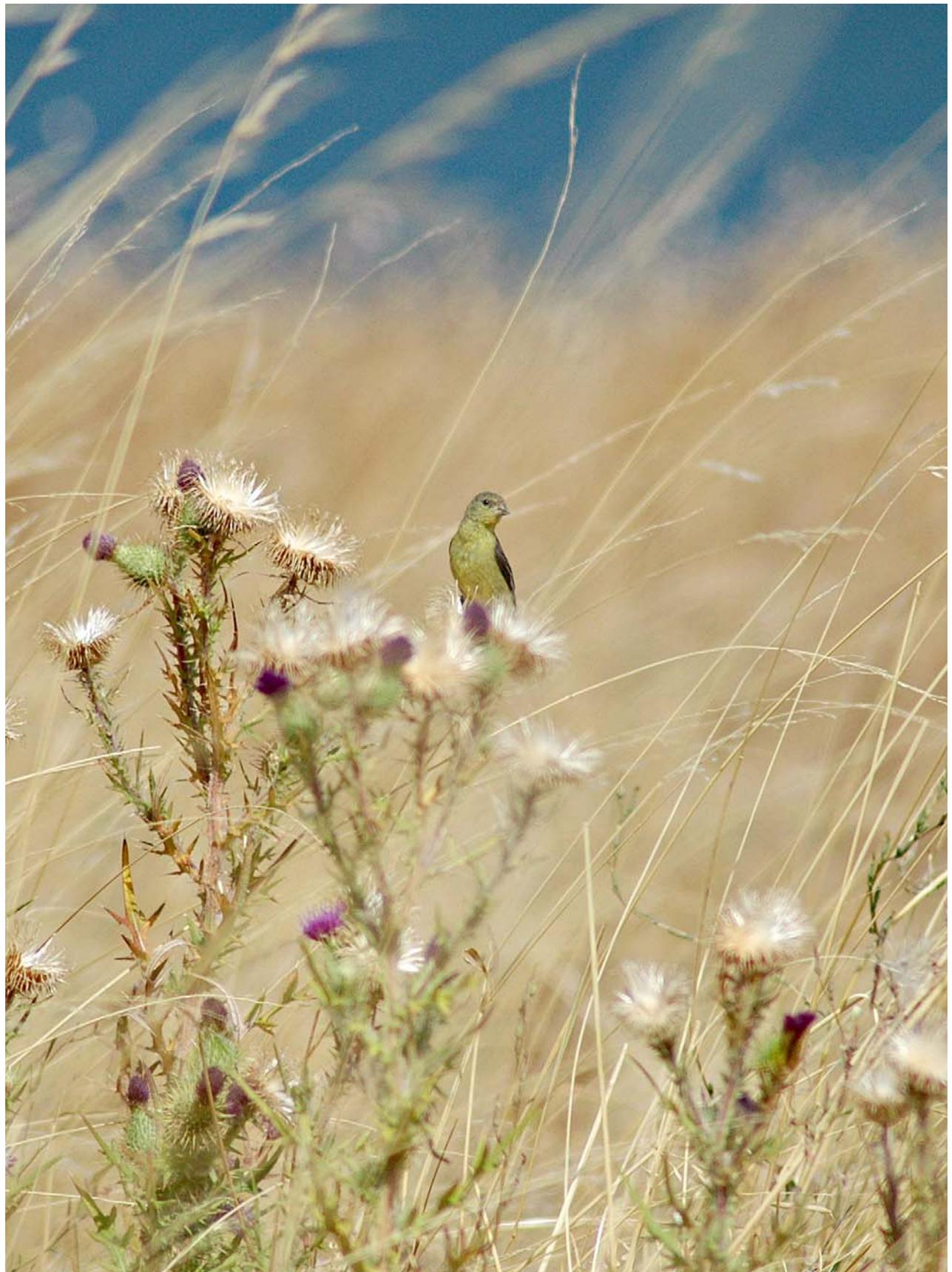
Before me and just back from the shore, the land is scooped out in a deep bowl, its sides basalt, its bottom, pale grass swirled with the green of oaks and pines, and with some brighter green, perhaps of willows. Swallows swoop over the bowl. Beyond its rim, a stretch of river—perfectly calm, steel blue.

Beyond the stretch of water, the opposite bank: railroad and highway hugging the shore, above them tiers of columnar basalt, aproned with talus. Amid the grass-clad and forested hills at the top of the cliff, scattered billows of smoke.

Helicopter dips
into the river to drink—
noisy dragonfly.

Back and forth the helicopter plies, between the river and the fires, where it releases, in a white, falling veil, each precious cargo of water. Beneath this midday sun, every stick and stalk in the dry forest, in the dry meadows, is tinder.

Clouds gather over the hilltops like a company of avenging or beneficent angels. Will they bring coolness and rain, multiplying a millionfold the helicopter's dowsing spills, or lightning, sparking the dry brush to burst anew into flame?



Exposures

28 August 2010
The Dalles Mountain Ranch

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“It’s exciting,” she says of the wind here,
and I remember how, in my teens, I spread
my arms, loosed my hair,
to the strongest winds that moved
through the woods of my family’s
Connecticut home. But I understand how
pioneer women in the west went mad
from the wind that never ceased.

Perched here on the brow
of a low hill, I’m crosswise to the wind,
just above eyelevel to the short grasses
and wildflowers, all bent, quivering,
parallel diagonals pointing southeast.
They must be tough-rooted to hold
their spots in the ground. I, too,
hunker, try to push forth bloom.
How can I make the likes
of their small yellow suns,
delicate magenta stars?

Chilled even in full sun by the wind that pierced
three layers as if they were bare skin,
I've found retreat, seat on a warm rock,
shelter behind the dense brush bordering a stream,
invisible but audible, burbling in its channel downhill.
This shelter belt of shrubs and vines is thick
with blackberries starting to ripen. Deer, too,
have found them, and left their scat.
Elk, perhaps, as well, though that's only a guess
what left these larger droppings.





“Bull snake. But I wouldn’t swear it’s not
a baby rattler. Be careful when you go back up.”
I’d thought a snake might share my liking
for these sun-warmed rocks, and I say so, keep
my cool just long enough
for my interlocutor to leave, then hastily
pack up and head downhill, away
from the reported snake, then back up
on the far side of the barn, even though
the detour means I have to shimmy under
rusty barbed wire to get back to the road.
Looking around to make sure no one
has witnessed my ignominious retreat, I walk
nonchalantly up the road, pretending to focus
only on the vistas unfolding below me.





Outlook

30 August 2010
Downtown Hood River

The clouds that brought a light rain during the night have mostly dispersed. The town, the river below it, and the Washington hills across the water bask in sunlight. I sit on a bench halfway up a terraced hill, Stoltz winery (**Stoltz** in black letter on the huge sign) at the top, brick library at this midway level. Below, along the main street, most shops and restaurants are open this Monday morning, with plenty of traffic, car and pedestrian, moving among them.

This hillside is a sort of pocket park. Just a couple of days ago, over lunch at Bette's Place, diagonally across, I watched wistfully out the window as people and dogs climbed nimbly up it, lounged and romped on its grass. I didn't think my bad knee could manage its steepness. But today, after walking the steadily sloping gravel road at the Dalles Mountain Ranch yesterday and hiking the steep grade above Timberline Lodge the day before, I'm already ensconced on its height when a fit young woman mounts the steps with a brace of eager dogs. The dogs strain after a chickaree scampering under the thick-trunked, full-crowned old trees shading the lower slope. The woman is all business, heads them straight up to the top of the hill and out of my sight. Now another woman has come, with a toy-size, mopsy dog. She loiters briefly, till joined by a man. Then the three head up the hill, past my bench—the dog, of course, sniffing at my feet.

A foursome of what I took for preteens was here earlier—two girls and two boys, clad in scanty tops and shorts despite the cool breeze. Chattering loudly, they clambered up the grass in front of me shortly after I arrived, then climbed a maple tree off to my left, balancing on its sturdy, generously horizontal limbs. Now they've gone, and all the activity is on the streets and sidewalks below. Cars pulling in and out of parking spaces. A man ferrying two pick-up loads of bulky furniture to the shop in a brightly painted house straight down from here. Only the brick building beside me is silent and dark—the library, closed, I know from reading the sign posted on its door, indefinitely for lack of funds.



