

Observing the New West

Letting Loose the Hounds. By Brady Udall (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1997).

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SINCE EASTERNERS FIRST INVENTED the West, the landscape and inhabitants have generally been viewed through the lens of a movie, television, or tourist camera. Everybody from eco-terrorists to wise-use ranchers, from politicians to military officers, have for so long incorporated the myths of freedom, unlimited resource, and violence that the stories of the West are often facile, ossified, or perverse. In *Letting Loose the Hounds*, Brady Udall faces the disintegration of the West with courage and an inventive vision. This collection of short fiction has power not only because of Udall's authority as a native but because of his particular, clear-headed, and affectionate portrayal of the people and the land.

In Udall's places—Scottsdale, Payson, Globe, Winslow, and Holbrook, Arizona; Tyler, Texas; Cedar City and Logan, Utah—broken-down myths dot the landscape like rusted-out cars. Marriage, manhood, family, religion, friendship, love, law, and religion have become unreliable. "I'm not an atheist," one character says after rejecting his sister's proposal that he be baptized, "I'm just not looking for any more burdens than I already have"

(39). The institution of marriage is like drowning—"being dragged down by an impossible weight, clawing for air, lungs filling with black water until they burst" (75). In the universe of these stories, it is a "childhood notion that it's possible for things to stay the same, that everything in this world does not have to become old and tired and undone" (18).

This collapse of the old myths is reflected in the characters. After his wife left, taking their son, an Apache Indian says that he "came unglued; there were pieces of me all over my suddenly too-large house" (19). Their lives are bizarre and fragmented: the Apache, literate and incapable of stealth, lugs his son's pet goat into his ex-wife's home at midnight; Goody Yates, minus his wisdom teeth and groggy from sodium pentobarbital, stands in a ditch on the verge of a highway until he is picked up by a man who looks like Custer wearing a Peterbilt cap; on the eve of his wedding a man is drowned after his car crashes in shallow water because his friends attached a ball and chain to his ankle as a joke; a bull moose humps a plastic deer until it collapses under his weight.

Especially the western stereotypes of cowboy and Indian are transformed. "Before I came to work here," says the protagonist of "I Become Deeply and Famously Drunk," "I had this idea that the A & C Ranch would

be this big beautiful spread, full of rivers and green rolling hills, like that TV show *Big Valley*" (191). He would be a television hero "riding around on a shiny roan, wearing a vest and a silk scarf, smoking a long cigarillo and shooting bad guys lurking in the bushes. ... The actual ranch, I was sorry to learn, is plain and relatively small: fifteen hundred acres of overgrazed scrub land that can't support more than two hundred head at any one time. ... The sad truth is we spend more time zipping around in our pickup trucks than we do on our good and noble horses" (191). Another character says of his home town: "Holbrook sits out on the high desert plateaus of northeastern Arizona and is the proud home of petrified wood and dinosaur bones. In movie towns they have wooden Indians in front of their drugstores. We have stoned Indians in front of ours" (79).

The misfit son of a wealthy father asks, "[Is] the world chock-full with the frustrated and betrayed?" (109). Of course it is, Udall seems to say, but he finds consolation, first, from the fact that somehow humanity endures. The stories vibrate with the possibility, as unlikely as a mirage, of the sweetness of human love and the durability of desire. Despite their despair, his characters find hope and love in the most unlikely places. The six-foot-three Apache steals his ex-wife's mutt, Roy, because "[w]e all need love and Roy is no different" (20). In "The Opposite of Loneliness," a care-giver of a senile woman holds her in his arms when she has nightmares. He says, "[W]hat a hypnotic feeling, holding another human being in your arms while they sleep, rocking them in the dark" (126). A wig found in the garbage reminds a man of his

dead wife and he hugs his child. "My son put his smooth arms around my neck and for maybe a few seconds we were together again, the three of us" (136). Many of the protagonists of Udall's *New West* are care-givers and fix-it men. Even if some are bumbler and destroyers, they still have good-hearted natures.

A second consolation for Udall's characters and for his readers arises from limiting hope in the mythic, trimming back true knowledge. In "Junk Court" the protagonist takes account of what he knows: "I know there are things waiting to be fixed. I know that Victoria will never know my name and that there will be a game at the Junk Court next week, same place, same time. As for things I know for sure, this is as far as it goes" (97).

The voice of "Ballad of the Ball and Chain" finds her man growing crazy after an accident which kills his best friend. She says, "I found out during those months after the accident—months of sick worry and heartache and crying alone in bed—that there is nothing more cruel than hope. I believed that if I simply loved Juan enough—no matter that he had become a whole different person, a shabby refugee from some unnameable place—he would come out of it, suddenly or gradually, and we would be able to start our perfect life all over again. I believed in this, clung to this hope, even while I held Juan down in the bath tub and scrubbed the grit off him, like a dog" (68). Sometimes giving up on unreasonable hope is the best option.

Another consolation, ingrained in every story, is simply the desert, which, despite humanity's will to adapt and destroy it, also endures.

The woman described above finally leaves her man: "As I got further from town, out into the sagebrush and piñon pine, even with my heart breaking I felt a sense of freedom I'd never felt before, like a great heaviness falling away, and it was as if I was rising above the road, into the white morning sky, floating" (76-77).

While wilderness generally offers freedom or escape in the stories, sometimes it also seduces, survives perniciously, or overwhelms. In "Beautiful Places," one of the characters, Green, has been unhappy traveling through Utah because it brings back memories of his wife and children, lost to him: "We get a ride with an old couple as far as Salt Lake and just before dawn we get on with a trucker headed for Phoenix. Once we're in the cab, the road moving away beneath us and the musty old guy next to us telling bad jokes one after the other, Green finally settles down a little. The wrinkles in his forehead smooth away and he puts his head against the window and closes his eyes. The light is just coming up, turning the snow on the mountains purple and orange. The sky is opening sharp and clear. I can't be sure, but I think a place like this is just a little too beautiful for Green to stand" (189).

Like Green, who is soothed by a human voice, all of Udall's characters find the best consolation in the telling and hearing of stories. In "The Opposite of Loneliness" a man talks to a woman friend about their ex-marriages. "With five to her credit, she can go on forever. ... Talking about it with Ansie, it seems I've squeezed just about all the juice out of it I can, but she wants more, every last detail. She says the mysteries behind a broken marriage can take years to compre-

hend" (123). Udall's characters wrestle with their lives by repeating stories of their exploits as hunters and ball players, of their broken relationships and their acts of sacrifice. But stories don't just console; they also disturb. Taking a break, players of junk-court basketball lie on the cement and tell stories: "Get this," says Pacer, describing how a woman overloaded with children falls apart on her front lawn (83). He steps in and helps her, taking them all to a video arcade. "The rug rats cost me forty-seven quarters ..." (84). When the tales turn to acts of violence, suddenly, they "get up and decide not to endure any more stories."

Udall learned his craft from people like his characters. The highest praise I can give is that his fiction is shaped more by the vitality of the western storytelling tradition than by the fastidiousness of the academic institutions he passed through (BYU, University of Iowa). The eleven stories in *Letting Loose* are good yarns; they spring forward, beautiful and frightening, like the hounds in the title story. Through them, Udall claims his place as an important observer and creator of the New West.

One character, who has just given up on a lifetime of lust for revenge, walks outside his cabin: "The sky has cleared and the stars are shining down and even though I'm ... exhausted and weak, there is still something inside me that needs to be released. ... I ... walk up the hill past the ranch house, which is glowing a faint, moonlit blue, all the way down to the mud pond where a few steers are standing around rubbing their heads together" (221). Next to his father's initials on a post, he leaves his own mark, the imprint of his teeth in