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WHERE THE SEA USED TO BE

By Rick Bass

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Late master of the short story form Raymond Carver insists it more closely resembles in structure the lyric poem than it does the novel. The story and poem focus on few scenes, sometimes one, and neither has space for a wasted word.

To the writer, that means the story must imply a history while the novel affords world enough and time to create one. For Rick Bass, though, who's been among America's finest short story writers for the past decade, conceiving a first novel demands less of a leap than it would for most. Bass finds the transition easy because, like Alice Munro, there's long been a rich abundance to his stories which approaches novel mass.

Where the Sea Used to Be benefits most, however, from Bass's professional orientation. By education a petroleum geologist, Bass likes to bore deep, and his sense of time embraces eons.

When Old Dudley, who for decades showed an uncanny knack for finding billions of dollars worth of oil, sends new geologist proselyte Wallis from Houston to an almost tundra-like northwestern Montana valley on the Canadian border, Wallis soon finds himself deep in a wrenching conflict. In that remote frozen valley (which feels a lot like the Yaak Valley where Bass has lived for years, a half-hour from the nearest phone), Wallis rooms with Mel, Old Dudley's fortyish daughter.

Mel is vibrant, beautiful. She spends her days tracking wolves, recording their migration. For years she's been the intermittent lover of Matthew, Old Dudley's longstanding protégé, now more a brother to her, used up and burnt out, as everything becomes that Dudley touches. Mel has escaped Dudley's pernicious evisceration only because her gender made him think her not worth the effort. "If you'd been a boy," he tells her, "I wouldn't have let you go."

Torn between the virtuous Mel and her baneful father, Wallis should find his choice easy. Having come to love this pristine valley, and with little lust for wealth, Wallis should also find easy the decision not to gut this frosty paradise with oil rigs. But Wallis is no ordinary man; he's a petroleum geologist, a profession that itself is a conflicted paradox of parasite and august calling.

That conflict shows most clearly in Dudley himself. Repulsively crude, he reeks of hubris and egomania. Everything about him seems vulgar, yet Wallis finds Dudley's old journals filled with evidence of extraordinary learning and a philosophic mind. At

70, Dudley even impregnates a Montana woman in a conception that is a bizarre mix of salacious and immaculate.

Dudley has a necromantic hold on Wallis. For Dudley, "the absolute best was when the geologist, after a long time, came to understand Dudley for the monster he was—the manipulator, the domineer—but also understood that it was too late to turn back." Wallis, by profession, thinks like Dudley. When Mel tells him everything in the valley is ten thousand years old, formed by the last Ice Age, "it bothered Wallis that Mel thought ten thousand years was a long time." The Ice Age is a mere tick ago in geological time.

Slowly, however, there develops between Wallis and Mel the most fertile of all grounds for a healthy love: they bring out in each other the person each most wishes to be. Mel personifies a theme of increasing concern in Bass's recent fiction: the choice between intimacy and freedom. Before Wallis came, Mel was free but alone. Now, though, "she was honest enough with herself to realize the depth of her loneliness, and her homesickness for human company." She stops tracking wolves and begins teaching in the local school. With Wallis, she risks connection and shares with him her love for the land. From there love expands.

For Wallis, the conflict runs deeper, "twenty thousand feet and two hundred million years deep," when he thinks he's found a reserve containing 250 million barrels of oil: "He felt a kind of cleaving or splitting inside him when this happened: a kind of incandescence in which every fiber of him became part of something larger."

Both Mel and Wallis will move toward their choices, but, with one thinking in terms of thousands of years and the other in millions, their decisions evolve at a glacial pace.

Bass is in no hurry here. He clearly loves the land he writes of and fills the narrative with copious, closely observed detail. He pauses frequently to mine the nuanced interior reactions of both Mel and Wallis to their respective transformations. What most makes this novel swell far beyond the confines of story size, however, is its complex strata of metaphor. This rippling of poetic evocation reflects Bass's maturation, his power to see a multiplicity of connections among things and the patterns starting to clarify in the world around him.

When a moose passes by with a silver arrow poking through four years' worth of protective scar tissue in her side, Bass is preparing us to hear a few pages later about the scar tissue forming in Wallis over the recent death of his previous sweetheart. When a journal entry tells us an earthquake's origin "must exist at some considerable depth beneath the surface," it is to suggest that "all perturbation lies at depth." When Bass shows us deer whittled down to nothing by winter, starving to death only days before the new green shoots appear "right in front of the deer's unseeing, unmoving eyes," he echoes how we fall so tragically short of our own goals. When Dudley talks about wearing down and breaking an eagle, he's really describing how he breaks his geologists.

The most frequent subject of Bass's metaphors, another subject emerging as central in his recent work, is predation. We see the wolves and coyotes born in April so they'll be ready for the elk and fawns born in June. We track wolves laying trail to lure the deer, and at one point see the wolves even eat the raven "who was supposed to be their partner in the hunt." All these predators remind us here of the lycanthropic Dudley, capable of loving nothing but the quest for oil, who "had been eating the whole world for the seventy years of his life."

Rick Bass's first novel, therefore, becomes a luminously written journey toward the choice of three options: solitary freedom, participation in the human community, or surrender to the predator.