

BACK IN UTAH

Alison Booth

*My great uncle
herded sheep
before the great war*

*ate lamb and sourdough
in a tin campwagon
and gambled a thousand sheep
on the Uintahs
for \$35 per month*

*walked herd lightly
and lost a few
to unkindly beasts
to shirking rocks
that shook his faith
in the mountainside*

*Dear Mama,
You ask am I alone.
Yes, except a dog and
plentiful sheep. But
I won't get lonesum,
if that is what you was
afraid of, for I got
a camp full of books. I got
a Bible for 2.50,
but it's a good one and
I can lug it around
in my pocket.*

*If you send along a hymn book,
I'd sing to the sheep
for their improvement,
but they run like the devil
when I come near.
So I send Gracie to scare them
back, as I don't bite.
I keep an easy watch
with a sharp dog.*

*From late to early snows
not another soul but Mr. Swensen
up from below bearing last month's
letters, preserves, news,
and flour and salt for the next.
One canyon's as good as another
for water and shade and grass,
for snakes and nettles;*

*no signposts,
no castle, shrine, no school
of holy books
on the engraved slopes,
few books
and the pageturner steals his time
from the scanning of those
lifted heaps of crumbling
mine- and creek-stripped miles.*

*After great wars
I fly from eastern libraries
to hike a sheep trail
to a tableau of yucca,
sage and rusty cans,
old shepherds' and hunters' fires:*

*I read decades,
then aim for the rest,
down scree and thicket
to the inevitable valley.*

*My step bursts:
rocket searing fir tops—
a pheasant ambushed.
At my feet, flies spark,
calm among the weeds,
without first or final fire.*

*I spindle the hills
all the way to Wyoming
watching the Rockies turn,
summits aching,
shoulders bowed
to the angle of repose.
I am astray
with my history of discontent,
my pen and paper 2.50 in my pocket
and not even a dog,
but not lonesum in such a host.*

*At my age
Great Uncle Christopher,
to see the world,
jumped a freight to Idaho,
and Blackfoot appearing a likely place to start,
jumped off
and fell like a sleeper across the singing rail.*