

TEN YEARS

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AN EXCERPT FROM 'AS COOL AS I AM,' PETE FROMM'S LATEST NOVEL
JACK RUSSELLS, RANCHES, SKUNKS AND ROMANCE FROM ANDREW SLOUGH

THE BIG DRY BY SID GUSTAFSON

NAKED SEASON: DEALING WITH A FATHER ON THE EDGE

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A Girl Rode Out on a Bear One Day

Jennifer Lowe is comfortable with her work and in it she's found her good, clear voice.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JANIE OSBORNE

A CATTLE MARKER LOOKS LIKE A BIG CRAYON, but greasier. You'll want to keep it away from your clothing and most people, if they use them at all, do what the name calls for: they mark cattle, smearing an oily mark or number on leather that's still alive. They spell out which bawling calf has been vaccinated, which cow goes back to the range for another season and which animal gets a one-way ticket to Safeway.

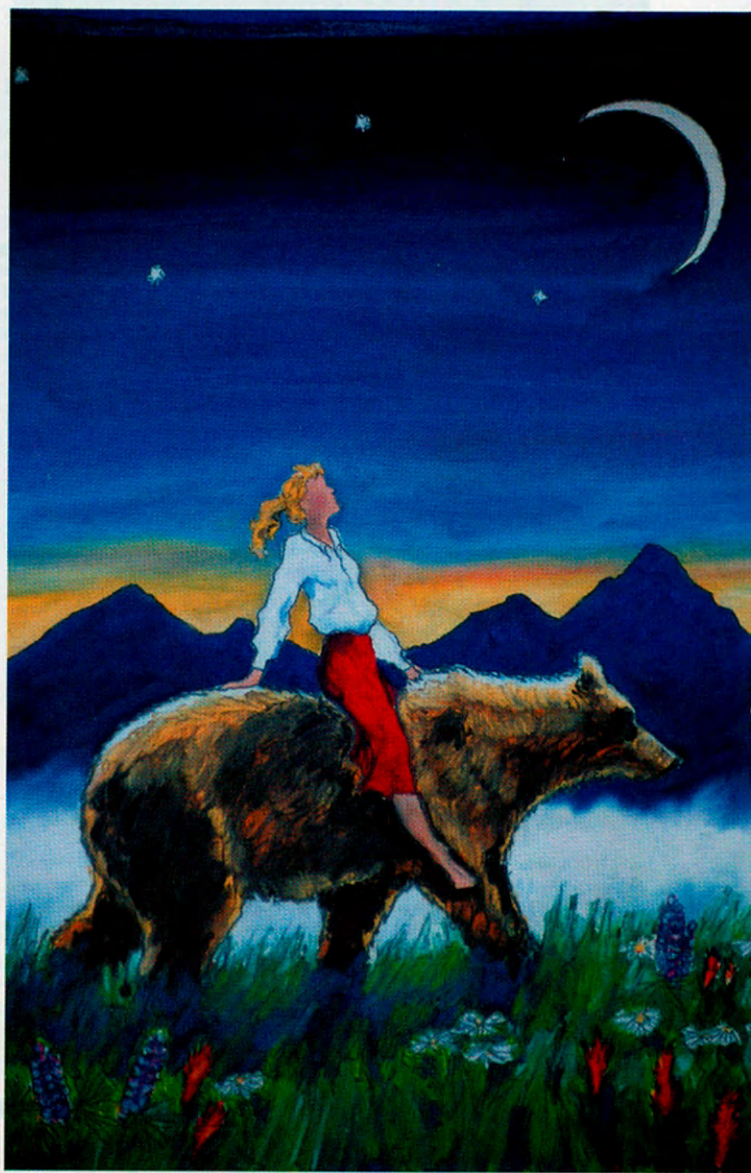
Manufactured as an object of ranch utility, these markers with big fat heads turn into something else in Jennifer Lowe's hands: vehicles for joy and whimsy, for poetry and delight. She's used them to make herself one of Montana's most popular artists, one whose work is collected by celebrities and scholars, mountain climbers and lawyers.

She first discovered them at art school at Montana State University in Bozeman in the 1980s. "I loved the bright colors and I loved experimenting with a medium that nobody really had any technique for," she says. "Plus, they were cheap. You can buy them out at Big R," the cowboy equivalent of a Kmart, where they sell everything from boots to longe lines, from feed sacks to chewing tobacco.

Lowe—her friends call her Jenny—continues to refine her technique, learning new ways to blend the hues, to pinpoint the details, to combine brush and palette knife and sometimes the entire palm of her hand to create what she wants.

Lowe, 48, grew up in Missoula, a town kid, but one who was crazy about horses and who spent summers in the Grasshopper Valley near Bannack, where her ancestors ranched. A "sort of a tomboy" who liked to fish and hike, she remembers hopping on her father's horses and riding bare-back all over the hills surrounding her hometown.

"It was a time of such freedom," she says of her youth. Most of us, at least the fortunate among us, can remember that feeling: long days with no adults, evenings that lasted forever, journeys that never ended because you never really had a destination anyway.

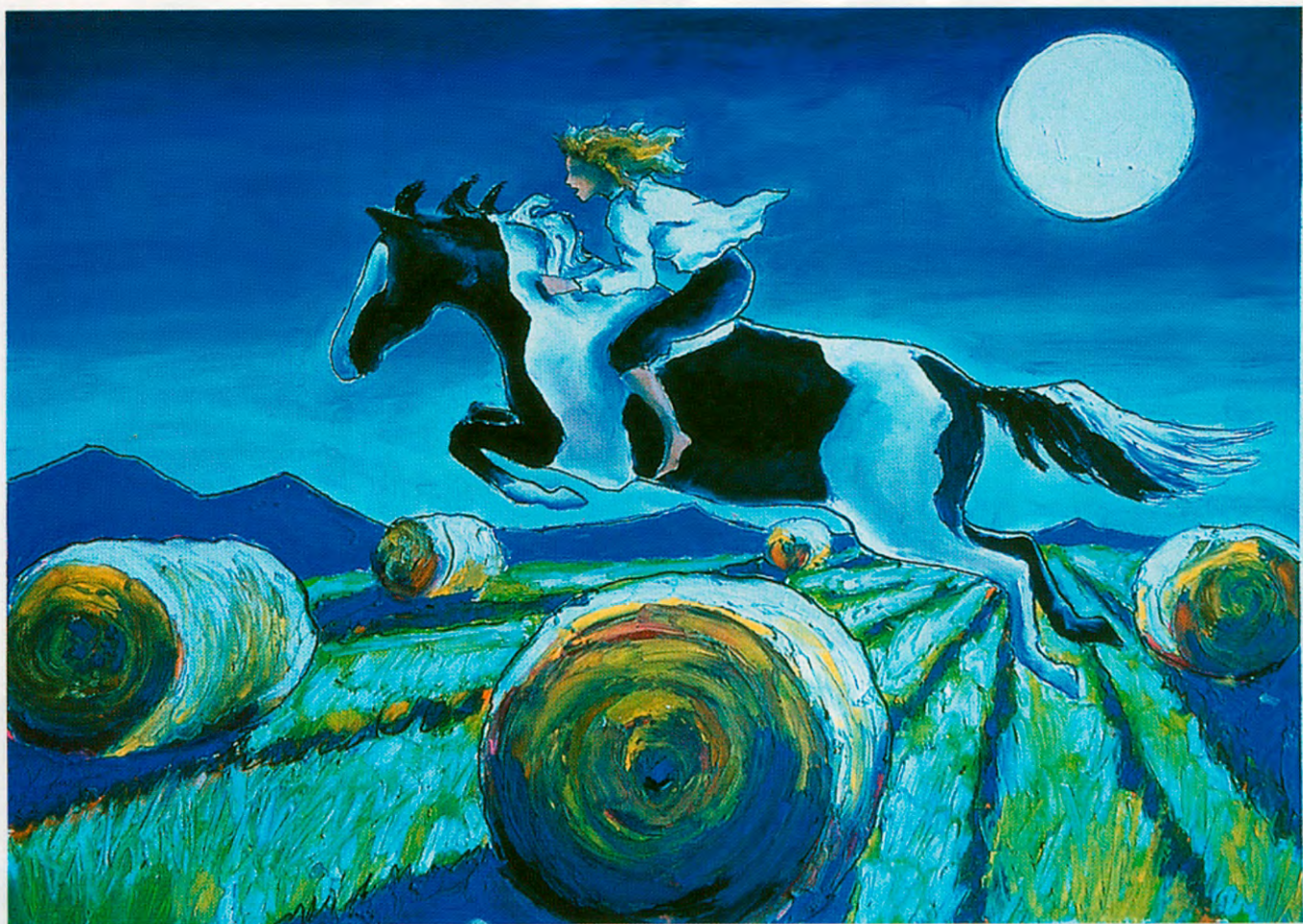


BEARBACK BY NIGHT

2002

LIVESTOCK MARKER ON RAG PAPER

30" x 22 1/2"



JUMPING BALE
2003
OIL ON CANVAS
30" x 22 1/2"

Dig into Lowe's paintings, and you might find it again, this thing you probably thought you'd lost.

Look at *Jumping Bale*, which shows a girl on a pinto pony, out having a whole bunch of fun. The pinto is black and white and the girl wears clothing to match her horse. They're a team, and she rides bareback, without a bridle or even a neck rope as they leap one-ton hay bales. The full moon aloft beams with enough wattage to throw inky shadows past the bales. The bales seem a little small but only because the horse and the girl seem so much bigger than life. You look at this painting and you know this kind of fun could carry on all night. But you also know it's a little bit illicit, that this is a stolen moment, an innocence that is all but forbidden. The girl is barefoot and jumping her horse, alone and at night, the kind of nonsense that could get you killed.

These two aren't just jumping bale. They're jumping bail. But don't tell. You'll spoil the fun.

And then there's *Hats Off*, a painting of three girls, bareback, barefoot and going fast. Their oversized hats fly from their heads and there's a storm out beyond but it's not here yet and until it arrives, these girls are gulping some breezes of



RAVENS AND ROSES
2003
LIVESTOCK MARKER ON RAG PAPER
18" x 22 1/2"



Jennifer Lowe

GIVE ME A HOME
2003
LIVESTOCK MARKER ON RAG PAPER
30" x 40"

their own making and who cares right now where the hats land? Pick them up later.

The painting is a salute to life and joy and to that thing that links women and horses, a thing quite different from the bond that men and horses share.

"It's very empowering," Lowe says, "to ride a horse, to have this animal trust you."

Women and horses are a frequent theme in Lowe's work, but so are beasts of all sorts, from grizzly bears to magpies to barnyard chickens. "I've never painted a landscape without an animal or a bird in it," she told me in her Bozeman home, in her second-story studio. "I just have an affinity to everything wild."

As often as not she'll put a female rider on one of those critters, as in the painting *Bearback by Night*, when a girl climbs on a grizzly for a twilight stroll through a meadow of flowers.

The painting is partly a lark, partly a painterly exercise in color and line, and partly a slice of a dreamworld she likes to talk about, something she calls a "peaceable kingdom," where people and animals just get along, a place we all know doesn't exist except in dreams.

She shamelessly, proudly anthropomorphizes animals, imbuing them with emotions and giving them odd tasks. Bison grab a fork and eat a pie, for instance. A rooster emulates Van Gogh's pose in his famous self-portrait. Girls and grizzlies do the jitterbug. Such views might chagrin an ecologist, but Lowe's work isn't about biology, the study of life. Rather, it's about life, the living of it. It's full of laughter and

tells a few bad jokes.

There is simple beauty and sometimes a tear or two. And the combination works. Lowe sells everything she creates for prices ranging upward from \$4,000. People like Tom Brokaw and Yvon Chouinard own her work, as do Michael Keaton and Jeff Bridges. She's in the enviable position of turning down galleries that want to show her work.

And Lowe's life is a full one even beyond her art. Her three sons, aged 7, 11 and 14, make sure of that. There's no TV watching in the house, but there are lots of animals—one son greeted me at the door with a rat on his shoulder—and all three boys play the fiddle. The family travels frequently and skis often.

"Our lives are pretty packed," she says. But four years ago, things nearly got derailed.

It was Oct. 6, 1999, when Lowe got the word that her husband, world famous mountain climber Alex Lowe, had been killed in an avalanche in Tibet the day before.

"It was the day of hell, when I found out," she says. The media circus fired up all three rings and the family felt besieged. For a while, Lowe found it hard to pick up a brush.

"My focus was so broken," she says.

Conrad Anker, Alex's best friend and also one of the world's best climbers, had somehow escaped the cascading wall of snow and ice that killed Alex and another man that day. He immediately stepped in to help the family. Lowe found her footing soon enough and decided to turn the tragedy on its head and build something positive: the Alex Lowe Charitable Foundation, a group that exists to help peo-

ple who live year-round in the hard places Americans and Europeans visit to test themselves in the thin air that houses little but rock and ice.

One of the first projects was to build a climbing wall in Ulan Bator, Mongolia, so young climbers there could practice. An upcoming project will establish a climbing school for Nepalese Sherpas, people who thrive at high altitudes but who frequently lack technical climbing skills that could save their lives. Historically, 30 percent of the deaths on Mount Everest have been Sherpas.

"It's really sad, because lots of them are only making about \$20 a day," Lowe says.

Anker helped get the foundation up and running and, as time passed, he and Lowe built another link. Eventually, they married.

"We decided we would try our luck at being a family," Lowe says simply.

When I met Anker, he smiled and apologized for the wetness of his big right hand. The man who is arguably the world's best mountain climber was home doing the supper dishes.

They have an unusual family, but who can claim a normal one?

"What I have is an exuberance for living," Lowe told me.

Indeed.

ALEX'S DEATH HAD DELIVERED A CRUSHING blow, but his own exuberance for living had inspired her to get serious about painting in the first place. While they were in their 20s she'd topped a couple 20,000 peaks with him in Peru and says she "can still drag my carcass up a few high things" but lacked the absolute drive for climbing that Alex and Conrad shared.

Rather, she puts her zeal for life into her family, her life, her art. "It's the same

sort of passion that climbers have for attaining their summits," she says.

Her career is a relatively short one: she sold a few items while a teenager, but didn't get serious about painting until she was in her 30s, living in Casper, Wyo., after college while Alex toiled at an incredibly unsatisfying and short-lived job as an engineer in the oilpatch.

It was there, on her kitchen table, a new baby at her feet, that she applied her vision and enthusiasm to the combination of cattle markers and rag paper. She started out focusing on abstract work but became more detailed as the years passed.

"I'm contemporary western, I guess. A little bit folksy. I'm not in your face. I'm not cutting edge."

Her work sometimes evokes environmental themes like the plight of Yellowstone National Park's buffalo or the similarity between a grizzly bear and a political pinball in these modern times. But it contains more caresses than cuts, more laughter than affrontery.

Lowe is comfortable with her work and in it she's

found her good, clear voice. She has no fear of putting herself in her paintings.

One painting she made after Alex died and she had begun dating Anker depicted a girl riding two galloping horses, making the transfer from one to another.

"They're a lot alike," she says of Alex and Anker. "They were the horses and I was the cowgirl."

That's a tough job, switching horses in that way. You need a lot of optimism and you need faith in yourself and in both horses. You're taking a risk.

But Lowe made the transfer, oily markers in hand, body and soul intact.

She landed safely.

She's still riding.

Jennifer Lowe's work is represented by:



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