



Happy Birthday! — Larry's Version

6.4.21

Lu's birthday, June 4, and after several days of the usual Western pattern — cold mornings, blazing hot midday — she wanted something indoors for a change. The Yellowstone County Art Museum in Billings fit the bill, and it's got an interesting history of its own — started life as the Yellowstone County Jail, converted to an art museum in 1964, with a modern addition built onto the front in 1998.

Ground floor featured four women artists who'd lived and worked in Montana — paintings, sculpture, ceramic tableware, a real range of styles. Lu's favorite was a painting called "Pepper By the Door," a Dalmatian giving the camera a look of pure reproach, waiting to be walked. She said it was the exact expression her sister's dog gives, and I could see why it got to her.

There was also a room of work by Will James, a real working cowboy who went on to write and illustrate his own fiction and nonfiction. He wrote women as full participants in ranch life, not just romantic interest — riding, roping, working cattle right alongside the men. Lu mentioned that growing up she wasn't sure cowgirls were a real thing outside of Dale Evans on TV; James apparently set her straight, decades late.

Upstairs held a large collection from the Santa Fe and Taos artist colonies, mostly 1920s through the '50s — landscapes, portraits of Native Americans both in ceremonial dress and going about ordinary life, some romanticized takes on what those artists saw as a simpler, nobler existence. Wood carvings too, and a hand-painted table and chair set. A lot to take in — we were both worn out by the time we got through the whole gallery.



Two pieces by a contemporary artist stood out as something closer to science than art, and I mean that as a compliment. One was a musical installation built from wind data collected out on the artist's own ranch, translated into an organ-like pipe system — there was a barcode you could scan to hear a specific day's wind as recorded music. Eerie and calming by turns, with the occasional sharp percussive burst where a gust must have hit hard.

The same artist had a companion piece in the lobby — an anemometer mounted in the courtyard feeding data to a shallow pool inside, maybe four feet across, where the readings triggered water drops and a baffle that flipped with wind direction changes to set off ripples. Some people would look at that and say it's not really art, more a recording of physical phenomena than a creation. I'll admit both pieces held my attention as much as any painting in the building.

Nice dinner out for her birthday — shrimp and salmon, good meal, though it got punctuated by thunder rolling in and the sky going dark early. We'd mentioned the incoming storm to a woman at the museum and she waved it off, said it was probably just noise and wind, might not even rain. She was right — by the time we got back to camp the sky looked plenty threatening, lightning and thunder going, but barely any actual rain fell.

The real storm didn't hit until the middle of the night, a lot of noise and wind, and even then not much came down.

Between the calls, texts, and emails coming in all day, it turned into a good birthday for her.