

EUGENE H. PETERSON

*Translator of* THE MESSAGE

SNEAK  
PEEK



SAMPLE  
ONLY

UNCORRECTED  
PROOF

A  
BURNING  
IN MY  
BONES

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WINN COLLIER

# A BURNING IN MY BONES

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

# A BURNING IN MY BONES



The Authorized Biography  
of Eugene Peterson

WINN COLLIER



WATERBROOK

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To John Collier, my dad.

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The words are fire in my belly,  
a burning in my bones.

—Jeremiah 20:9, MSG

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## Preface

On the flight home from Montana in October 2016, I assumed I'd seen Eugene and Jan for the last time. He was drawing his circle close, severely limiting any commitments so he could devote his diminishing energy to Jan and the family. I began to ponder how one day Eugene's story would be told, reflecting on how I hoped the telling would do more than outline the facts and highlights but would give a sense of the man, a personal encounter, even if only through ink and paper. At the encouragement of a friend, I wrote Eugene, telling him my thoughts. A couple of weeks later, I picked up the phone and heard Eugene's soft, raspy voice on the line. There was nothing Eugene was less interested in than a biography ("The thought of it makes me tired," he said at first), but the more we talked, the more I heard energy rising in his voice. "Okay," he said after fifteen or twenty minutes. "I think you should do this, Winn. I'll help you." And he did. Eugene gave me complete access to himself, his family, and eight decades of papers and journals and manuscripts and letters. And for three and a half years, I've known the joy (and the trepidation) of researching and writing Eugene's story. I am so very grateful.

This story leans heavily on Eugene's papers and journals, as well as scores of personal interviews. Whenever I cite a published work, you will find it in the notes section, which is organized by chapter at the back of the book (to keep the narrative flow intact

and to honor Eugene's aversion to chopping up literary beauty with clunky notation). For the most part, Eugene's unpublished written words (journal entries and letters) will appear in italics and without quotation marks. The many quotations from Eugene that are not cited in endnotes are taken from oral interviews I had with him (and all other interviews are offered in the same way).



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# Introduction

They become what they behold.

—William Blake, *Jerusalem: The Emanation  
of the Giant Albion*

A few minutes after 7:00 a.m., with sun streaming through her kitchen windows on a fresh Maryland day, Jan Peterson scooped hot eggs onto five plates, next to scrapple and fried apple rings. “Eric,” she called, “go tell Dad breakfast is ready.”

“Yes ma’am,” Eric answered. The oldest Peterson boy ran to the top of the stairs that led down to his father’s home study and stopped short. His dad would be intensely focused and immersed in quiet. With a nine-year-old’s mischief, Eric tiptoed down. The basement smelled of must and old print. He stepped onto the chilly tiled floor and cat-walked, with a burglar’s stealth, to his dad’s study door.

Most days, Eugene spent an hour before daybreak reading Scripture and a second hour reading commentaries. A hand-me-down desk sat under a single window, beside a long bookshelf, packed to the ceiling. Its books were arranged mostly by author: Barth, Dostoevsky, Newman, Teresa of Avila. A rocking chair, the favorite seat for reading, sat in the corner. Fluorescent lights hung from the ceiling, but Eugene rarely flipped on the cold bulbs—a lamp on the desk shed a warmer glow. The old communion table

from their church, Christ Our King, sat against the wall, holding a pottery chalice and paten ready for wine and bread. Alongside the Eucharist dishes sat an Italian fiasco, long emptied of Chianti, holding a single white candle, with a year's worth of wax splattered over the straw basket covering the dark glass. A monk's cell. Dad's space—Gene's space—Pastor Pete's space.

Eric turned the knob slowly, silently. He peered through the crack. And even now, Eric's eyes turn moist as he tells me the memory while we sit together. A small woven rug lay on the tile floor before his dad's desk. Candlelight flickered from the wine bottle. Eugene rested on his knees with a tallit—the tasseled Jewish prayer shawl—wrapped around his shoulders, a Hebrew Psalter splayed in front of him. He rocked gently, engrossed in the world of the Scriptures, surrendering to ancient prayers.

Eric watched, hushed. He slowly closed the door and crept back upstairs, to the clink of forks against plates.

Only a boy, but he knew he'd witnessed something holy.

# PART ONE



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## Montana

There was nothing but a mercantile and a saloon, one building on either side of the street, and a slow winding river working through the valley (a cow moose and her calf standing in the river behind the mercantile)—and still no sign of life, no people. . . . We knew immediately that this was where we wanted to live, where we had always wanted to live.

We had never felt such magic.

—Rick Bass, *Winter: Notes from Montana*

In 1902, Andre and Juditta Odegard Hoiland loaded their pots and pans, a bundle of clothes, and a few family heirlooms into a trunk and a couple of canvas bags. After wrapping their nine children in heavy coats to shield them from Atlantic winds and the spray of icy salt water, they boarded a steamer in Stavanger, Norway, and watched the coastland cliffs fade to mist. Andre had made this voyage once before, working in the steel mills in Pittsburgh two years earlier to save enough money to move his family. Eugene's maternal grandparents sailed, perhaps on the *Norge* or the *Thingvalla*, to Ellis Island and entered the harbor under the welcome gaze of Lady Liberty. New York City pulsed with the mass of humanity, and the family was immediately exhilarated and unnerved. Pulled by the westward migration, they cobbled



together train passage from New York to Saint Paul, Minnesota, maneuvering multiple connections. Finally, they boarded the Great Northern Railway, that massive feat willed into existence by James Hill, “the Empire Builder.” Crammed into their tight compartment, the eleven Hoilands churned past the lakes of Minnesota, across the plains, and then through the badlands of North Dakota before they finally stopped fifty miles from the Canadian border in Kalispell, Montana.

Only a decade old, young Kalispell boasted a train depot for the Saint Paul, Minneapolis, and Manitoba Railway, the Mill Creek sawmill, the West Hotel (rooms for two dollars per night), a livery, and the Conrad National Bank. Harry Stanford, Kalispell’s first chief of police, listed “23 saloons, half a dozen gambling joints and a like number of honky-tonks, two Chinese laundries and the same number of Chinese restaurants, and four general stores.” Early one Fourth of July morning, George Stannard, a local gunsmith, rolled a 220-pound cannon lifted from Fort Benton into the thoroughfare and lit the fuse, causing panicked neighbors to run out of their houses in their bathrobes. However, the allure for the Hoilands was primal, with the granite mountains’ jagged spires piercing the skies, the winter white clinging to the frozen earth, the summer’s verdant forests and azure lake. It was as if they’d come home. Andre, a cement worker, poured Kalispell’s first sidewalks and also served as a pastor, helping form Kalispell’s first Assemblies of God church. In addition, he was a writer, penning pastoral articles for Norwegian newspapers in Norway, Montana, and Seattle.

When Andre and Juditta Hoiland first cast their eyes on the vast and magnificent Flathead Valley, however, they couldn’t have imagined how this place would shape the generations to follow, how this ground would form their grandson Eugene. This wild country—with craggy, impenetrable terrain and a history of vigilante justice, raucous mining camps, and violence

between encroaching settlers and indigenous nations (Bitterroot Salish, Kootenai, and Pend d'Oreilles)—buried many settlers.

Kalispell was still a tough frontier outpost, with all the hard, sordid characters you'd imagine. Several years after the Hoilands arrived, Fred LeBeau held up William Yoakum and his son Riley on their homestead, intending to loot their guns and provisions. However, when the Yoakums didn't cooperate, he shot both men in the gut. After a guilty verdict, the sheriff hung LeBeau on a gallows outside the county jail, with the *Kalispell Bee* offering this headline: "Execution of Fred LeBeau Was Not at All Exciting—No Thrills and Mighty Few Kicks by the Victim of Law's Revenge."

A rough place. But the land's natural beauty overwhelmed the more sordid human elements. Flathead, a lake carved by a melting glacier and tucked into the Mission Range of the Rocky Mountains, cast an enchanting spell. The valley emanated stunning beauty. Early pioneers from the East wrote home describing Flathead Valley as "the Garden of Eden." In 1830, Joshua Pilcher, a frontiersman who walked alone across the expanse of western Canada through waist-high snowdrifts in the brutal winter, penned a letter that eventually landed on President Jackson's desk. Pilcher described the wonders: "The Flathead Lake and its rich and beautiful valley . . . vie in appearance with the beautiful lakes and valleys of Switzerland." The Hoilands considered Norway's magnificence the appropriate rival, but the effect was the same. This was a land expansive and hopeful, a land that matched their souls.



William Blake believed that we become what we behold. The words could not be truer than with Eugene. This Montana

landscape—the place Eugene loved, wandered in, and marveled at his entire life—fashioned him as surely as meltwater carved the basin between the mountains. The breathtaking beauty, immense solitude, and sheer physicality of the valley forged in Eugene a visceral sense of place. An *earthiness*, to use a word that would become one of his favorites.

He traversed deep into his surroundings, spending long days exploring. As a boy, he struck out on his own on Saturdays with boiled eggs, bacon, and an occasional biscuit in his pack, “looking for Indians and looking for arrowheads.” The splendid grandeur of this feral country, with all the wonder and holiness it evoked, nurtured a spiritual imagination in him that was every bit as formative as what he found in his childhood Pentecostal church. Maybe more. David McCullough, Harry Truman’s biographer, explained how “if you want to understand Harry Truman you’d better know a good deal about Jackson County, Missouri.” Likewise, if you want to understand Eugene Peterson, you’d better know a good deal about Montana’s Flathead Valley.

Late in his life, as I sat to hear Eugene describe how much time he spent wandering alone under that expansive sky, it became clear how the land’s stark, solitary beauty shaped him, grounding him in a rich silence of soul. As Eugene saw it, to be a boy of Montana stock—birthed out of such grand country and immersed in the lives and histories of ordinary, hardworking people who lived close to the land without pretense—was not a mere biographical detail but an elemental piece of his life.

Decades before he admired Gregory of Nyssa or Ephraim the Syrian or any of the other great Eastern fathers and mothers of Christianity, Eugene experienced what Russian Orthodox Paul Evdokimov called “the immanence of God at work in creation.”

Throughout his writings, Eugene belligerently resisted the common modern habit of severing earth from heaven, splitting the physical world from the spiritual. These convictions would come to be grounded in deep theology but were first felt as a boy as he feasted on the infinite Montana sky, inhaled the scent of aspen and Engelmann spruce, and drank crisp water from rushing streams. Montana was Eugene's birthplace. And it became his catechism.

In this way, Eugene began his life immersed in the reality of what he would one day call "the Presence." This sense of encounter had an epicenter: "two acres of holy ground" perched at the edge of Flathead Lake's "*sacred* waters." This place enveloped Eugene in the vibrant reality of a living, present God.

His dad had purchased these two acres, and this land and the cabin his dad built there rooted Eugene's young faith, baptizing him within a "sacred place where 'on earth as it is in heaven' could be prayed and practiced." And in the large view of his life, everything Eugene became flowed from that place. In his own words, this "Flathead Valley geography . . . became as important in orienting me . . . as theology and the Bible did. . . . This was the geography of my imagination." It was precisely this attention to particularity, to honoring the presence of God made visible in one place, that would later fuel his revulsion toward the commodification of church, the abstractions of impersonal life and worship, and the disembodied, mechanized approaches to the pastoral vocation.

In a meadow only a few hundred yards from his family's lakeside acres, early trappers discovered evidence of a Kootenai medicine site, "a place of visions and healings." Eugene had heard tales of supposed holy sites in the Christian tradition, "holy ground . . . soaked in the sacred where conditions were propitious for cultivating the presence of God." While Eugene didn't

know what to make of such stories, he always knew the area he grew up in pulsed with a sacred beauty. “In my adolescence,” Eugene wrote in his memoir, “I sometimes wondered if something like that could be going on in this place. I sometimes wonder still.”