

**The First Two Pages: “A Bitter Wind” by Leslie Budewitz**  
From *All God’s Sparrows and Other Stories: A Stagecoach Mary Fields Collection*  
(Beyond the Page Publishing)

An Essay by Leslie Budewitz

The novella “A Bitter Wind” anchors my new story cycle, *All God’s Sparrows and Other Stories: A Stagecoach Mary Fields Collection*. The stories imagine the life and heart of Mary Fields (1832-1914), a real-life woman born into slavery who spent her last 30 years in Montana, where she found freedom and community, and her own place in the West. The collection includes three stories originally published in *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*, and a new novella, “A Bitter Wind,” set in 1897 and 1914, in which Mary helps a young picture bride solve the mystery of her fiancé’s death, his homesteading neighbors’ bitterness, and her own future.

I’d written the three stories a few years earlier and agreed to write something new to fill out the collection without actually having a clear idea for more Mary stories. Dangerous, but also freeing—an exercise in trusting the creative process, now that I think about it. It was extremely uncomfortable at times, but ultimately I think it paid off.

I started by rereading the published stories, and diving into the research on the Black experience in the American West after the Civil War, the missionary era, and the woman on her own in the West—the three aspects of a fascinating time and

place that intersect in Mary Fields. She has in many ways become a mythic figure, almost a caricature, and I knew I wanted to counter those myths, if I could, while also exploring why she is so intriguing.

Fiction is perfect for that. If only I had a story.

I'd long wanted to write about a single woman who came west as a teacher—a woman who wanted to create her own life or was forced to by circumstances; who didn't necessarily want to marry as soon as possible; who wanted to escape the strictures of life "Back East." I had done some of that with a secondary character in another historical novella, "An Unholy Death," a prequel to my Food Lovers' Village series set in fictional Jewel Bay, Montana, based on the town where we live in the NW corner of the state.

Apparently, I wasn't done with the topic.

I need to acknowledge two literary influences, stories I had read multiple times and kept thinking about: "Christians" by Tom Franklin (in *Murder Under the Oaks*, ed. by Art Taylor) and "A Christmas Journey" by Anne Perry, one of her Victorian Christmas novellas. The stories have little in common, except that both involve road trips, of sorts, and the desperate search for mercy in unlikely places. My life, perspective, and writing career are all deeply influenced by my native Montana, a vast space where daily life is a road trip for many. The quests for justice and mercy are deeply intertwined. Perry's novella also explores the extreme

restrictions on upper class English women in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; those strictures were looser in late 19<sup>th</sup> century America, but still very much present.

So I had my themes. But I still didn't have a story.

And then—I kid you not—I had a dream. I'd had a vague idea that the novella should involve two women, one a teacher and one a mail-order bride, whose lives overlapped and somehow connected to Mary. In the dream, I saw a book cover, and on it, the image of a late 19<sup>th</sup> century woman in profile, along with a photograph I'd taken years ago of a rime-covered rose, grown from a cutting I was given by a woman whose grandmother had carried a cutting in a coffee can when she came to Montana by train to marry a man she knew only through his letters.

The two women in my vague idea merged into one, a woman who carried a rose west in a can, although she had met the man she came to marry. Once. Not long after Amelia's arrival in May of 1897, her fiancé, George, dies in a fall from the roof of the cabin he is expanding on the land he bought from a homesteader, so that he could offer his future bride the home ground she so desperately wanted. She blames herself and asks Mary to help her find his brother, give him the news, and beg his forgiveness. Only then does she learn the truth, returning to yet another tragedy. She endures it with Mary's help, and that of Thomas Whitney, a young man who had worked with George. She enrolls in the new state teacher's college,

later returning to town to teach and to marry Thomas.

I don't remember consciously choosing the frame story structure, one I hadn't used before in a novel or short story. I do remember a brief hesitation. Some readers dislike frame stories, seeing them as gimmicks or tricks to get us into a story. But I knew the collection would begin with "All God's Sparrows," set in May 1885, not long after Mary's arrival in Montana to help nurse Mother Amadeus Dunne, Mary's dear friend and the Mother Superior of the Ursuline Convent at St. Peter's Mission to the Blackfeet Indians. The other stories continue through 1885. What next? By ending the collection with a story set in both 1897 and 1914, the year of Mary's death, I could give readers a sense of the fullness of her life.

A frame story should, I think, introduce theme, foreshadowing the tale to come with imagery and symbolism as well as hints of the events in the main story. The best framing serves as a crucial part of the story, not simply an old storyteller uttering some version of "I remember when . . .," spinning his tale, and ending up back at the modern-day hearth.

The opening frame is in Thomas's POV. The earlier stories are told primarily through Mary's 3d person POV, interspersed with sections told by a young Métis girl Mary rescues and a young nun, so I did not think readers would be jarred by opening with Thomas. (The novella switches to Mary on page 3 and

sticks with her until the final frame.) He turned out to be the perfect narrator because while he is part of the main story, it is never his story.

It wasn't until I realized Thomas would eventually marry Amelia that I knew he was the young boy, never named, at the lumber mill in "All God's Sparrows," and a member of the family that ran the general store, also a feature in the earlier stories. At that point, I began to fully grasp the way the stories and novella worked together, and I gave no more thought to reader reluctance at a frame story. A reader hooked by the earlier stories would not mind the device; a reader who wasn't hooked would not have read that far!

The frost on the rose in my dream (and in the actual photograph) suggested that winter be a part of the story. Either it would have to take place over months, as a bride-to-be was unlikely to arrive so late in year, or it could start in winter, moving back in time to the main action. I knew Mary had died in December 1914, after being found in a frozen field by two young boys. What if those boys were the sons of Thomas and Amelia? There was my ending. So the story begins a few weeks earlier, with Thomas and young Tommy coming to visit Mary. Tommy is astonished that the rose beside Mary's door is still in bloom, despite the bitter cold of November in central Montana. Thomas knows that rose too well, and the sight sends him back to 1897.

The rose hints at Amelia's trek west and the tragedy that befell George; any

flower, but particularly a rose, has a redemptive symbolism. That this one is still alive seventeen years later and blooming long past its season carries that sense—and also hints at Mary's approaching end.

As I've said, Mary Fields was a real woman, though the shortage of known facts about her life has led to a great deal of myth-making. She was known to love flowers and growing them. Who else would rescue the rose? It did not belong at the Mission, where the Jesuits were preparing to leave, although the Ursulines stayed until 1912. It did not belong at the homestead George bought or with the farm's neighbors. The rose belonged with Mary.

Use of winter also helps counter that the main action of all the stories occurs in summer, mainly a coincidence. Summer—in a state known for winter!

We see that Thomas has an injured hand and that he is now a grocer, a change in career plans caused by his injury. He is a man who provides for people. He and his son are bringing Mary soup, a subtle connection to the restaurant Mary once ran. Thomas's story thus mirrors Mary's and foretells Amelia's, in that all three experience self-discovery in the pursuit of something else.

Finally, a frame story needs to end with a resolution—one that ties together the questions asked in the opening and in the main action. So it was crucial that this section pose questions for the reader: What happens to Mary? What happened to Thomas? Who is his wife? What about this rose—how did it get here and what

does it mean to the major characters? And what happened that day at the homestead on the Mission Road, south of Fishback Butte? My hope is that the reader will be intrigued, and trust that those questions will be answered with the satisfaction every reader deserves.

### **The First Two Pages of “A Bitter Wind”**

November, 1914

Thomas Whitney flinched against the cold, sharp snow that bit his face and stung his eyes. Now that he was a grown man with a wife and children, he understood why folks in Montana complained about the weather. He supposed people elsewhere were just as preoccupied with it, especially men who worked the land or the rails. Women, too—the farm and ranch wives, and any woman who’d lost half her flock to a sudden freeze or seen a garden flattened by a late-afternoon hailstorm.

If you had people you worried about protecting, storms didn’t blow over quite so quick.

When it came to work, he’d been lucky, though keeping shop hadn’t been what he’d set out to do. He’d lived his whole life within thirty miles of Cascade, not counting a few months laying stone at mission schools around the state, but he sure wouldn’t mind if the fool wind took a liking to another clime now and then and moved on.

Ahead of him, young Thomas—Tommy—steered the wheelbarrow of firewood up the path. He’d overloaded it, despite his father’s caution, and keeping it moving forward took all the muscle the twelve-year-old had. He’d learn. The boy was smart, like his mother, and willing to work hard. Thomas gave himself some credit for that.

The neighbor’s small white house was not so tidy as usual, though the townspeople had repaired the damage caused by the fire in the laundry, and Mary had continued taking in wash until recently. Nothing was tidy, this time of year. The lace curtains were closed, a small blue jelly jar on the window sill. He caught no whiff of smoke and saw none rising from the chimney. They’d fix that soon enough,

getting a fire crackling in the cookstove hot enough to warm the two-room house. Then they'd heat up the kettle of soup nestled in the wooden bucket he carried in his good hand, to warm up his neighbor's old bones. Her favorite—split pea with leftover ham. The fragrance coming off the kettle made his mouth water, even though he'd already had a full meal.

“Pa, look.” The barrow staggered to a halt as Tommy pointed at a bush in the front garden, poking out of its bed of snow. Frost rimed the deep green leaves and the single rose, the pink-and-white petals almost striped. “How can it be blooming so late in the year, with the snow and all? Everything else is frozen dead.”

“Mary always did have a way with flowers,” Thomas told his son. Hollyhocks and delphinium, iris, phlox, and peonies. Mary rarely showed up for a gathering without a bouquet in hand, whether it was a birthday celebration or a wedding. Or a funeral.

But this rose. Still in bloom despite the wind, despite the cold. Despite the years and the hard way it had come to be here. He thought about that day out on the Mission Road, at the homestead south of Fishback Butte. When he'd seen Mary Fields size things up and do what was needed, even summoning help from a man who had no reason to want to give it. Mary was a woman you wanted to do things for.

“She's old,” the boy said. “Ain't nobody else as old as she is around here. Ain't nobody else Black.”

“Isn't,” Thomas corrected, the way his wife always did. Once a schoolteacher . . . “She is old and she's been good to us. Biggest heart I ever knew, but even a big heart gives out when the time comes. So you remember to keep an eye on her and make sure she's taken care of.”

“Like we're doing now.”

“That's right. Like my uncle used to say, when you run the general store, keeping an eye on folks is part of the job.” Thomas stepped onto the porch and raised his hand to knock. The left hand, the one that never had healed properly. Another gust struck his face. He glanced down at the rose one more time. It took him back, it did.

#

Leslie Budewitz tells stories about women's lives, seasoned with friendship, food, a love of history and the land, and a heaping measure of mystery. In addition to her historical short fiction, she writes the Spice Shop mysteries set in Seattle's Pike

Place Market and the Food Lovers' Village mysteries, set in NW Montana. As Alicia Beckman, she writes moody suspense. A past president of Sisters in Crime, she lives in NW Montana with her husband and a big gray tuxedo cat. Find out more about her, find buy links for her books, read excerpts, and join her newsletter community at her website, [www.LeslieBudewitz.com](http://www.LeslieBudewitz.com)