Range management: A collection of short stories

Horatio R. Potter
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RANGE MANAGEMENT
A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

by

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B.A. Vassar College, 1987

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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**RANGE MANAGEMENT**

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Sky

Beth was outside with the horses when the phone rang. The rusting bell rattled from beneath the eaves of the mudroom, disrupting the rhythm of their hooves that creaked upon the week old snow. A cold wind blew from the west, announcing the wide bank of gray clouds moving in from above the mountains obliterating the blue sky of the morning. She guessed the storm would come before nightfall, less than two hours away. Though she often turned her face to the sky during the work of the day, Beth understood the weather without the need of meteorologists. She knew the signs of a storm, the effect of those cold fingers prying into the closed doors of her life, the way if could push the simple tasks of the day into a series of crisis, a compounded set of problems. Snow and ice were the worst, the roads becoming flat veins of frozen water, arteries of some mysterious subterranean lake anchored into the coldness of the earth.

Sky was lame. Beth had noticed him limping when she went to feed in the morning, but was distracted by a raccoon that had chewed its way through the thin planking of the chicken house, the blood stained straw strewn about with the mangled carcasses, disconnected by how it stood on its hind legs there on the slope above the small ranch, defiantly watching as she went about the

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other morning chores on the small ranch her husband left her—starting the 4020 tractor with a can of ether, then letting the engine warm while breaking ice in the narrow creek so the livestock could drink, pitching hay, feeding a round bale to the eighty-five heifers. She had sold the cows three years ago, her first winter alone on the ranch. Calf prices were too low. Then, she thought, some money might be made in the feeder market. The cows, February calvers mostly, had been a burden that first winter. No matter how many times you checked on them, day and night, you always lost some calves, frozen in infancy.

Beth tied the tall bay horse to the gatepost. She patted him on the shoulder, speaking softly yet admonishing him for his injury, the chronic lameness that came on every winter. “There Sky. If I was smart I’d haul you off to the canner’s.”

She bent beside the still horse, his deep aroma soothing like the warm hair of his neck against her bare hand, the smell and the heavy sound of his breathing deeply comforting. She ran her hand the length of his left front leg, from shoulder to pastern feeling for distension, heat, the strange swelling of injured muscle, strained tendon, bruised bone. To her touch the fetlock felt hot.

“There now, Sky,” she said as the horse shifted its weight. “Not so good today, is that it?” Her questions, her speech, answered by another language. She expected no more.
He bent his neck so that his head came around to where Beth’s back curved, nuzzling her pocket as she held his hoof between her knees, cleaning the compacted snow and ice from around the frog. He lowered his head and worked his lips along the edges of her coat pocket. The grooved V under the hoof was fleshy with discharge where she exposed it beneath the manure and ice. Beth let go of the leg, stood and sighed, then patted the horse gently on the rounded shoulder, the air punctuated by the smell of dead flesh. She ran her fingers through the coarse black hair of his mane like a comb, calculating the amounts in her mind, the cost of a vet’s visit plus the cost of the medication subtracted from the ever dwindling rounded number of what the yearlings might bring in the fall, only to be signed over to the bank. Then a new loan, another rate of interest.

She untied the horse and removed his halter, patting the length of his body as he moved to rejoin the other three horses at the top of the pasture. She hung the halter on the gatepost and turned toward the house to call the vet.

Walking back over her tracks from the coral to the small house with the weather worn white paint the color of dust, Beth knew it was going to snow. There would be another layer in the mountains. Everyone in town said how they hoped it would be a real winter, lots of snow and cold temperatures to allow the layers of the different storms and showers and squalls to accumulate, geology-like, a stratified record of a record winter, something with the magnetic force of the mountains and valleys that were once the ocean floor, and infinite catalogue of extinct species and forgotten climates.
And from where Beth stopped and turned between the corral next to the sagging red barn and the length of snow covered road to the faded house she could see that sea floor of the past, dotted now the sagebrush in the rolling contours of the grassland. The falling barometric pressure swirled around her like the ancient ocean. She looked out to the ridge tops of bench land on either side of the coulee, the place where a family named Sarver had homesteaded in the eighteen nineties. They’d built a log cabin; now a ruined square of rotted logs overgrows with Hounds Tongue, Russian thistle and the new emergence of Spurge below the barn. They had done all of their work with draft horses. They’d chosen this place, Beth imagined, because the spring that fed the narrow creek had never run dry, and the south by southeast aspect was sheltered yet gained warmth from the course of the sun. They would plant and grow things here, and life would be better. And as she turned back again in the direction of the house, she imagined this sea floor now encompassed by the ocean, the fossils of millions of years of life now compressed in hardness like the frozen ground beneath her feet, and in everything there were layers of ice, layers of ice and frozen treacherous roads. But wasn’t that just the way of the past, she thought, to collapse into compressed layers beneath our feet. We simply try to keep walking.

Beth kicked the snow from her tall boots as she climbed the three wooden steps to the mudroom. “Shep,” she called opening the door. A brown mass shifted slightly from a pile coveralls and insulated work shirts on the floor against the far wall. “Shep, get up Shep. Come here, Shep!”
The fat corgi pulled itself to its feet and stretched stiffly, then limped to where Beth was unlacing her knee high snow boots. The dog yawned and wagged its tail, the clacking of its nails on the linoleum accompanying its stilted movement made Beth smile. She reached down and scratched him behind the ears.

Beth filled the kettle with cold spring water from the kitchen faucet, set it on the stove and lit the gas with a wooden match. Shep clicked across the dark wood planks of the floor, circled twice, and curled himself into a ball beneath the kitchen table, emitting a sigh. A whining whistle cut the air as a gust of wind forced itself through the leaky windows in the mudroom. Beth thought it sounded like a child’s moan deep in the night.

Beth picked up the cordless phone on the counter and dialed the Vet’s number from memory. The red light on the answering machine was flashing. The outside world could wait. Counting the number of rings she looked at the small woodstove in the corner by the table, the red embers glowing bright and then dimming, pulsing with the gusts of wind from the approaching storm. Holding the phone against her shoulder with her chin Beth opened the square steel door of the stove and pushed in a split half of a Cottonwood log. At the other end of the line the phone crackled. Then a voice.

“McCaffery’s.”

“Carl? It’s Beth.” Through the two windows, side by side, next to the side door that led into the yard Beth could see it had begun to snow, a sideways blowing snow. Soon it would be dark.
“Sky is lame again.”

The pause on the other end of the line made Beth wonder if Carl had heard her. She wondered if he was still there. “Sky,” she began to say it over again when he interrupted.

“When’d it start?”

“This morning. I think.”

Another pause. Beth wondered if Carl was reluctant. The storm would be here soon and Carl was almost sixty, eight years older then her husband. They had been friends fishing the river in winter time, Lodge brothers, both on the school board one year. Maybe he was about to have supper, or just didn’t want to drive the twelve miles with a storm coming. Or was it the vast emptiness that put him off, the space of darkness away from the close lights of town?

“I’ll be there in a bit.”

Beth felt the space between them. Since she’d been alone she’d seen little of Carl and his silent with, Anita, a back haired wraith too terrified to leave her house. It was some kind of mental disorder, afraid to leave you house. Now she rarely saw Carl. It had been different after the accident. Both had shared the sense of loss, had tried to make sense of it together, shut out in the cold from the world. A first they met for coffee in Billings, a city large enough they wouldn’t be noticed, a setting that matched their shared isolation. They shared meals, and once, in sallow dingy darkness, a motel in the downtown of wandering drunks and homelessness. Then Anita’s collapse, and Carl receded. A month later he called her. They agreed, and their connection
fell away into silence. Now the space between them, the passing of time without communication felt like a heavy layer of insulation things forgotten, cloud-layered in the past.

Beth went out to the enclosed porch that served as a mudroom. The thermometer screwed into the window jamb read just above ten degrees. She put on the tall boots, lacing them to just below her knees and then tucked the oversized bows of boot string into the uppers in the style of the men. An insulated workshirt, fleece jacket, insulated coveralls, hat, gloves, ski glasses, dressing for winter was a repeated ritual. Beth opened the door from the porch and steped out into the blowing wind. She turned expecting Shep to follow, but he wasn’t there. “Shep,” she called. “Shep” The clatter of toenails came over the hard surface of the floor like rain. The dog stood in the doorway to the porch, reluctant. Okay, Beth thought, it’s too cold for you. She closed the door of the mudroom, turned on the lights in the barn and went to get one of the old drafthourse stalls ready. Horses dead and gone.

After closing the door and stepping out into the lightly falling snow she heard the phone ring. Beth thought how she disliked the phone, its black body sat on the kitchen counter promising to interrupt her life, to weigh her down with the needs and desires of others-telemarketers, the surprised and indignant caller of a wrong number, some of her husband’s family, full of pity, attempting to regain there own sense of loss. It was something she wasn’t good at. She hated to use the phone but resented it more deeply when others called her. It was an intrusion, and invasion of her privacy, a break in the
skein of her world, penetrating her insulation, the layers of warm clothing, her idea of her self-containment. She felt this now walking away from the house into the blowing coldness, wrapped in her solitude, aware it was growing darker and knowing that soon the ringing would stop.

The road would be drifting. After so many winters, and the vacancy of the winters since they left her, Beth knew how the wind could blow in the road in less than an hour. It didn’t even have to snow. The wind was enough. Again the seafloor was shifting.

She went into the barn and turned on the lights. Then she went to one of the box stalls against the side of the barn where the homestead family had kept the draffhorses in the old days, and turned on a spigot that rose from the trampled fir plank floor like some unwieldy plant. She turned the spigot, the one she’d installed, trenching the water line herself from the spring above the house with the small tractor and backhoe attachment her husband had put together only weeks before he’d left for town in the storm. It was a final, completed act of labor, a gesture before driving away into the storm with their only child.

She turned on the faucet and directed the length of the short green hose into the stock tank in the corner of the stall. She watched the water slowly rise above the bubbling end of the hose, and then turned on the lights in the hayloft. She climbed halfway up the unevenly runged ladder, so that her chin was only inches above the floor of the loft littered with dust and flakes of hay and straw stems and pigeon shit. Layers and years. And there hanging on
several of the posts were the old harnesses for the teams the homestead family had kept, the Sarvers, driving the big Belgains or Percherons or Clydesdales out into the snow to feed or doctor sick calves or to break through the thick drifts walled across the road to get to town for supplies once every two weeks, or longer.

Beth wondered at the connection of these relics—their leather hard and cracked, the bits and buckles rusted—and the things her hands had touched in the barn, her works making it different, adding to what was there, all the strata of time, of change, layering now in this era of her solitude. Here was a layer of things unused, the detritus of an earlier time, now reverting to the simple organic matter that all was before.

While the stock tank in the stall filled she took a rope halter from a peg beside the door and went out into the wind and thin swirling flakes of snow. Somewhere behind the heavy clouds the sun was setting in orange and gold behind the hidden mountains. A snow devil danced its twirl toward the small house, the kitchen light shinning dimly though the window.

Small waves of crystal washed against her thick boots, some spinning beyond, the movement of her feet, turning into more snow devils that spiraled up the rounded slopes of the drainage. Sky limped toward her, nuzzling her gloved hand as she slid the loop of the halter over the soft hairs of his wet black nose and brought the braiding beneath his jaw, then tied it through the loop behind his ear.
“Sky,” she said. “What are you now, nine, ten?” Beth took a deep breath of sharp cold air, having taken herself by surprise. It was as if the world had existed only for the last three years—there was only the then and the now and the now stretching off into the future—the time before was closed, and empty expanse of water-covered land, uninhabitable. Yet something about Sky’s age challenged this, and seemed a dismantling of her temporal construction. To go back the nine or ten years was impossible. That was years before she met Darrell, years before even she’d contemplated having a family. Then it was only horses. I must have been years before. It dissipated into what should be forgotten, assimilated into geologic time. She led Sky into the clean stall, shut off the water, and brushed him, speaking in quite tones.

When Carl arrived in his pickup three inches of snow had fallen and the wind gusted the curling waves of whiteness, swirling silently, between the barn and the house. The sky was growing darker. Carl backed his pickup into the coral. The taillights flickered in the darkening air. The diesel engine sputtered until its sound too was carried away in the wind. A sense of intrusion filled her heart.

“Lo, Beth,” Carl said sliding from the cab of his pickup, and then pulling on the blue coveralls. “Your road’s getting bad.” She remembered his eyes, a very light blue and very wide like the eyes of a Lemur on the cover of a three-year-old *National Geographic* in the bathroom. He seemed larger then she remembered, fuller, but also worn, compressed by time. Carl raised the wide lid of the vet box mounted in the bed of the pickup, the small white light on
the underside glowing brightly, making them both realize how dark it had become.

Beth watched him choose various instruments from the box, feeling awkward again, the lone woman, then led him into the barn. Sky looked at them from the box stall, his black eyes gleaming, vacant orbs hanging in the lamplight. Beth held the halter rope while Carl took the horse’s temperature. She rubbed his withers the way she thought a mother would do, trying to replicate with the fingers of her left hand the heavy lips of a brood mare working the center of the animal’s soul, as if it came from within her. Carl put on his stethoscope and listened, his face clear not in the light, the lines worn into a certain fine featured rendition of his younger self, one she almost remembered from before, back in the wide space of an earlier time. Beth watched the vet wash the hoof in warm water, repeating her own efforts, surprised at his gentleness. Then he said what she knew.

“The infection’s moved up.”

“Up?” Beth asked against the deep dark of quiet of the barn.

“You’ll have to watch him,” Carl said, his eyes almost familiar now.

Beth felt the slow sinking of her heart, a pressing sense of futility. She thought of the money wasted. Slowly she scratched a descending series of nine circles into the dust-coated post of the stall with the chipped nail off her left index finger. A wave of despair washed against her soul. Strangely, she began to wonder what her life would become if she sold everything, paid off the mortgage and moved to a small city, someplace warm.
“He’s not an old horse, but you get some thoroughbred mixed into them and you get problems. Thoroughbreds weren’t meant for this country. It’s chronic.” Carl stepped close to her and placed his hand on hers where it rested on the horse’s shoulder. The gesture caused a sharp pain deep inside her. It was as if someone had pressed a finger into a raw wound. He turned his face to her gaze. Beth thought she had never really looked at his face until now. There were so many wrinkles, like cracks in the unstable rock formations away in the mountains.

Beth watched as Carl dressed the bad foot and gave the horse subcutaneous shot of antibiotic and painkiller. She counted the woven ribs of the halter rope with her cold bare fingers. Slowly he collected his instruments and bandages into plastic cases and returned them into the vet box in the back of his truck. He spoke as she watched him pack up from behind “I’d change the dressing twice a day. Pack it with Furacin. Here’s some extra syringes and some Banamine. Ten cc’s twice a day.”

“Would you like to come in for a cup of coffee? To warm up?”

Beth watched him pause in the falling snow, bare hands upon the open lid of the vet box. The small light beneath the lid filled Carl’s silhouette and the whiteness of his hands seemed to glow.

Carl followed her across the yard to the narrow steps of the mudroom and paused, watching Beth step out her insulated coveralls and unlace her boots. There was a sudden awkward familiarity, something near a sense of intimacy, and Carl hesitated.
“Coming in?” Beth asked. She moved toward the far end of the room, as if sensitive to the closeness of the space between them.

Carl stepped out of his coveralls and sat on a low bench that might have been made for a child. He worried it might break under his full weight. He unlaced his boots slowly in the dim room as Beth went into the kitchen. The wind whistled through the leaky window at this back.

He followed the sound of cupboards opening and closing and the ceramic clatter of mugs being placed on the kitchen counter. Above a single overhead hanging lamp created a dome of light encompassing the worn wooden table. Carl stepped into the circle of light and sat down. The microwave sounded, then Beth moved toward him carrying two steaming cups of coffee.

She sat down in the circle of light that covered the oblong kitchen table, outlining the shape on the linoleum floor, like a halo. Shep circled beneath the table, then sat away from the light, sitting and watching.

Shep curled beneath them beside the table.

“Hello old dog,” Carl said. “I remember you.” Beth watched the dog look up at the vet. She imagined an expression of recognition. A great gust of wind pushed against the house, making the timbers creak and the windows whistle.

“Does she still have the limp?” Carl asked raising the thick mug of coffee Beth had set before the empty place at the table to his chapped lips.

Beth nodded. That is how it had been, after the accident, sustained injury, a dog’s pain, to remember. Pain and two white crosses beside the road.
Carl sat back in the wooden chair, the spindles creaking. “To tell you the truth I never thought she’d walk, that she’d make it at all, sitting all those hours in below zero temperature. With the storm and all.”

Beth thought of the darkness, cold and lonesome and empty of all the warmth of human life whatsoever. He had been drinking, the Sheriff said, and there was a bottle in car broken beside him. Shards of glass strewn on the roof of the overturned car, as if she’d never seen the car before, mixed with the snow and ice filling in from the shattered windows. Wind and glass and ice. Black ice, the Sheriff had said.

But the worst was the discovery of their son, only six. The first people at the scene had thought the man was alone. He was found beneath several layers of snow and ice, thrown form the overturned car, through the windshield, and plunged into the frozen whiteness, maybe alive for a time. But no one had wanted to say this.

There had been water in the ditch at the time of the accident, snowmelt from the several early warms days. Ice melt from the nearby lake and been flooding the road. After the car had gone off the road a storm came up, the Sheriff said looking down at his boots, and with the storm ice had formed around their bodies.

The dog, the Sheriff said, the little dog had kept a band of coyotes from the boy’s body throughout the night. He could not have died quickly. The thought stopped her heart.
“Tell me again,” Beth said leaning forward into the light, her hands wrapped tightly around the white mug.

They had dug him out from beneath the layers of snow and ice, the waters of the frozen lake, only so that he could later be buried beside his dead father, her husband, beneath the dirt of the world.

“It’s not what you think,” Carl said suddenly standing. His knees struck the edge of the table and the entire movement of his large body rising upward—had he hit his head—shook the fixture that hung above the table so that the circle of light swayed back and forth as if they were on a ship. “It wasn’t that way at all!” Carl’s eyes seemed to flash in the swinging light. He stepped back from the table and looked down at the small dog that now stood alert with its ears up out from under the table. Carl looked as though he might kick it. “She didn’t save anybody!” Carl shouted now. “Nobody!”
It's been two years since she died, and still her ashes remain in the small plastic box on the shelf in the mudroom. It's not that I can't face it—the burial, the standing there with the blood thumping in my veins form the work of digging, staring up into the empty sky, not knowing what to say, burying forever the last physical remains of my friend. It's just that it's not on the top of my list right now. She was just a dog, a mutt from the shelter. Her name was Cassy.

I'd want to get another dog, but Marcy doesn't like animals. “What are you doing?” Marcy asks, and immediately I'm embarrassed. I'm standing barefoot in the mudroom, wearing a T-shirt and boxers and holding the strange plastic box. In the mirror over the sink I see the reflection of only
the bottom half of my body. The box is a sort of red, rust colored like dried blood with opaque swirls of a white-like brushstrokes mixed in.

Marcy steps up behind me and wraps her arms around my waist. She’s naked, as usual. I feel the warmth of her breath against my neck. I can smell the beer from the night before rising out of her. “What’s in the box?” I’m surprised that I don’t want to tell. I won’t. Her grip is strong. I don’t struggle, afraid maybe I can’t break away. Then she bites me, cutting through the T-shirt and into the flesh molded over my left shoulder blade. I jump away, her bite so fast, so deep. I touch the wound with my fingers. The red of my blood, diluted by her saliva, washes slowly down her front teeth as she smiles.

“I’m hungry,” she says.

“Ouch,” I say.

“Then, after, let’s go shoot some varmints.”

Marcy circles around me, staring, then steps behind and squeezes me. I can feel her cold lips against the back of my neck, her breasts compress against my back. She extends her fingers into the waistband of my shorts, reaching. I set the box back on the shelf. “I’m hungry. Let’s do some shooting,” she says. Marcy’s a little anxious these days. The annual Teslow Gopher Shoot is next weekend. This week I’m finishing a house remodel for two women from California. Today is the only time we have to practice together. She wants me to take her to the shoot next weekend. She says I bring her luck.

I don’t share Marcy’s taste for blood, the lost mindlessness of random killing. I do it to make her happy. I do it because I prefer Marcy to being alone. Now,
at ten-thirty or eleven in the morning, the clouds have lifted revealing a warm spring day. The sunshine will draw them out of their dens. The prospects are good for a high body count.

Marcy prefers an open sighted Remington A-bolt. She keeps her marksman trophies from her high school days in her U-haul boxes in the hall closet. She keeps everything in those boxes, ever since she moved in almost a year ago—clothes, shoes, hairbrush, tampons, a bible, and most important, her reloading gear. She’s the only woman that I’ve ever met, who reloads .22’s.

Marcy’s quite a bit younger than me. She says she’s twenty-two. I’m fifty-three. I’ve been accused of being her father. She’s average height, brunette with cheekbones—maybe in another life she’d have been a model—and thick eyebrows she keeps groomed with a child’s toothbrush. She wears blue contacts, masking her naturally brown eyes. Sometimes, usually when we’re drinking, or she feels like she’s in trouble, like when I first saw her sitting on the curb outside the Greyhound station, she’ll remove one contact and do her sled dog howl loud enough to wake up the drunks.

I prefer a semi-automatic Ruger 10/.22 with a Bushnell Banner scope. I use a fifty round banana clip. The extra bullets let me put them out of their misery fast. I don’t want them to know it’s me doing the killing. I squeeze off five or six rounds for her one, and she hates it. It’s the gun I pick up now from the rack beside the doorway of the trailer.

Marcy takes the gun from my hands slowly and hoists it on her shoulder. I think she’s going to do some military parade maneuvers. Something from her
majorette years in high school but with a commando edge to it. She always says she wishes she’d joined the army. She twirls it high over her head. Her eyes roll back into whiteness.

Marcy sets the rifle against the doorjamb and grabs my arm. “I’m hungry.” She grabs a fistful of my hair and pulls me into the trailer. With her other hand she reaches into my shorts, grabbing me. She pulls me into the kitchen end of the trailer, bending me, the two of us stumbling like clowns in a horse costume. She pushes me down onto the floor in the kitchen, forcing my head under the table. I see bits of food, dried like scabs, mouse shit, .22 casings, and a sock I’ve been missing as she rolls me over on my back, exposes me and gets on. Her movements slide my body under the dinette, so that only my mid-section and legs stick out. I have to hold the corners of the table above me to keep my head from banging on the metal leg of a chair. I don’t exist except for my legs and hips and all that’s enveloped by Marcy. I can see her fingers gripping the underside of the table, and as she gets closer I wonder if she’ll pull the table over when the time comes, cutting me in half.

When she’s done she gets up and goes to her U-Haul boxes in the hall closet. She puts on her clothes while I lay still reading some obscure writing on the underside of dinette table. Strange letters. I try to read the words out loud but they sound dark and chant-like. I’ve never seen this writing before.

“Let’s go shoot.”
I clear out my carpentry tools from the cab of the pickup. I set my rifle on the rack in the rear window and wait for Marcy. She doesn’t trust me with her gun. I’m not supposed to touch it. If I do she’ll punish me.

“Micky-D’s?” I ask, knowing she’s anxious to start her body count. It’s fast and cheap.

“McDonald’s is run by a bunch of retards. I’m hungry. Let’s eat, food, then shoot.”

We drive to the truck stop. I order a western sandwich and coffee. March orders coffee, orange juice, half a grapefruit, two eggs over easy, and a short stack of blueberry pancakes. Marcy doesn’t eat meat. She believes it takes away her killing power, dragging her down to the level of the animals, the gophers and other ground dwellers that eat their dead. “Vegetables are cleansing,” she says. It’s just one of her odd habits, I guess, like going naked in the trailer so as not to contaminate our den with microscopic particles of the artificial world. Artificial comes from the word for art, she says, from Middle English, French, and Latin, meaning to put together, to join. How does she know this, this woman child who doesn’t read?

“I’m going to fill the back of the pickup with those little fuckers,” she says, and then takes an enormous bite of layered pancake dripping with syrup and egg yolk. I watch her eat, blinking blue as she chews, eyes warily roving the room. She wipes her mouth with the sleeve of her denim shirt, takes out a cigarette and lights it. She puts the lighter away and takes out a .22 shell,
rolling it back and forth between her fingers like a gambler with a quarter. She stares at me and blows smoke through her pursed lips.

“Someday, Clay, you really ought to learn how to shoot.”

“I do know how to shoot,” I say.

She’s wearing her cowboy boots. Bull hide bottoms with emerald green uppers. She jambs a boot heel between my thighs from underneath the table.

“No, you don’t,” she says, and I know she means it.

I pay for breakfast because I’m the only one with a job and we drive out into the country. Marcy believes that because she’s young and good looking she doesn’t need permission to hunt on private land. Besides, she says, we’re doing them a favor. She recites the gopher shooter’s mantra: “All those little sons-of-bitches do is wreak havoc on crops and equipment. The dead feed birds of prey and, of course, coyotes.” She sits silent and still after saying this.

“We’re doing them a favor.” If some rancher or farmer does come up on us while we’re shooting Marcy just turns on the charm, flashing her blue eyes and unsnapping her western shirt a button or two.

We find the turnoff from the pavement where she likes to go and drive a half-mile in. The double track dead ends at a stock tank where she tells me to stop.

“Lock and load,” she says hopping out from the truck. Orange earplugs protrude from her ears. By the time I’m ready she’s already made two clean headshots.

Her system goes like this: A blown off limb or sizable piece counts for two points, a torso hit is a six if it’s kill, a four if the target squirms. An eight is a
clean kill. A perfect ten is a clean shot into the mouth, blowing out the back of the head. A twelve means there's some tooth left—trophy material. She refuses to use odd numbers.

At the end of the day, around three in the afternoon, the score is three hundred eighty to a hundred and twenty-two. Marcy walks back to the pickup first. She is down to her tank top and her tan arms sway with the rhythm of the dry timothy grass in the wind. A threaded string of gopher tails resembling a long uneven pelt dangles from her left shoulder. There are small blood prints like some strange writing or tattoo stamped on her shoulder.

I think about why I've given up on dogs. I should get another. I should bury Cassy, say goodbye however I can, and go down to the shelter and get another.

When I reach the pickup Marcy’s rifle is in the rack and her blue eyes are closed. We drive back to our den. I say out loud that I'm hungry, trying to suggest that maybe she's hungry too. It’s the kind of hunger that feels like something is trying to gnaw its way out of your gut. But all I get is silence. I can tell she’s disgusted with me. It’s like I’m driving alone. A dog could fill this kind of space. I see the golden arches on the strip leading into town. I change lanes and hit my blinker, but Marcy grabs my right hand off the wheel, almost swerving the pickup into the steel pillars holding the sign for the Pump N’ Pack, and bites deeply into the flesh of the base of my thumb. She sucks the blood, blue contacts flickering with the painted lines of the highway.
We arrive home in the dark. Holding her rifle with one hand and then the other Marcy strips in the mudroom, bundles her clothes and dumps them into one of the U-Haul boxes. We’ve been drinking beer on the ride home and she walks with certain clumsiness. She goes into the bathroom, turns on the sink and takes out her contacts. The string of gopher tails hangs over the doorway. I am stopped in the mudroom, staring at the string of gopher tails, fingering the last one in the chain, dangling from the doorframe. I’m unsure of how she’s done this, or at what point even in the afternoon. No string or thread or catgut is visible; instead each tail is woven into a knife cut down along the center of the one before, like the fur-covered tongues of some enemy tribe. The rust brown dried blood flakes from my fingers.

Through the window I see Marcy is sitting at the dinette table now, cleaning her rifle. She begins reloading rounds for the shoot next Saturday.

Before going to bed I walk over to the shelves in the mudroom and pick up Cassy’s ashes. Someone at the crematorium typed her name on a small piece of white paper and covered in with Scotch tape. It’s begun to yellow and fade at the edges.

II.

Saturday morning at seven-thirty we’re in the pickup heading to Teslow. In an odd outburst of domesticity Marcy has packed four sardine sandwiches and liter of tonic water.
The sky is clear, a blue that seems to wash out from Marcy’s eyes as the sun beats at us from its low seat in the east. We drive the straight line of paved highway due north, cutting flat through the rising and falling landscape of grass and sage and four strand barbed wire fences. Marcy fingers a .22 round along the back of her left hand.

We almost miss Teslow. The town sits at the bottom of a wide coulee. There’s mostly trailers and a few stick frame houses, today more people than buildings. There’s an abandoned church up on the hill behind it next to the green turnoff sign. We drive into the middle of the cluster of buildings. The dirt lanes between the buildings are clogged with pickups, 4-wheelers, 3-wheelers, rows of parked motorcycles, old cars, and a huge crowd of people milling back and forth, a human moving mass display of rifles and side arms, like magpies feeding on a carcass. Pickups cruise back and forth loaded with gun toting contestants, like some third world country uprising displaying its forces for CNN on the verge of riot.

I park my pickup next to a fire truck just off the paved highway. The size of the crowd makes me think of a fast escape. Before I can pull the key from the ignition Marcy reaches over and pulls my hair in a fit of excitement, scratching my neck with her long thumbnail she’s been grooming for the skinning contest at the end of the day. She smiles a huge grin revealing her small sharp teeth, eyes flashing sea blue. We take our rifles from the rack, fill our pockets with the bricks of ammunition and walk along one of the dirt tracks toward the middle of the cluster of buildings, and I realize that
everyone is armed for one or all of the advertised events listed on a billboard next to a post office building no larger than a tool shed. Everywhere pistols and rifles and shotguns, even shotgun pistols, rattle and glitter in the morning sun.

Six or seven large women in biker dress stand beneath the billboard laughing with loud voices and smoking cigarettes. Thick tattoo engraved arms protrude from their black leather vests. I walk up to the closest one, a short muscular woman wearing a Nazi Helmut and “Born to Shoot” stenciled across her chest just above the lacing of her vest front.

“Excuse me. Do you know where we sign in?”

She turns towards me with a pissed-off look, wrapping a small chain around her right fist as the cigarette end bobs between her lips, then laughs through her nose and spits in the dirt. I can tell she wants to say something hateful, wants maybe to fight. She starts to speak, but then glances at Marcy. Her eyes widen slightly, and one of the other bikers, a tall woman with red crew cut hair, whispers in her ear.

“You all need to talk to Virgil Heath. He’s running this deal. Up there.”

She jerks her thumb in the direction of the church on the hill, a diamond engagement ring flashing in the sunlight. Then she turns around and punches the tall woman in the side of her head with her chain wrapped fist. They all walk off toward a red pickup filled with ice and beer.

Marcy takes the lead as we thread through the throngs of gun wielding gopher hunters. Most are drinking beer or Schnapps or whiskey. I jump out of
the path of large 4-wheeler hauling a keg of beer chased by a gang of football players from the state college.

Two thirds of the way up the crowded road is booth advertising “Varmint Tattoos.” I stop to watch an old woman scratch some letters on a girl’s exposed neck with a small scalpel, drawing off the beading blood with a needleless syringe. She takes the syringe and squirts the girl’s blood into a second, larger syringe, then adds several drops of dark red solution from a small bottle she holds aloft and says “Gopher Blood.” She shakes the mixture, humming some dark noise, and then retraces the cuts made with the knife, filling the wound with the blood mixture and then pressing down with a flap of gauze. She mumbles some more with her eyes closed. When she lifts the bandage I realize these are the same letters I saw under my kitchen table.

When I turn around I can see Marcy has already reached the top of the hill and is standing before the closed double doors of the weathered old church.

I hurry to catch up. The sun is hot and I’m thirsty for beer, but I’m afraid if I stop I’ll lose her. People look at her standing there at the entrance, men I’d expect to approach her with the one-liners she already knows, but they leave her alone.

Marcy opens the door to the church and we stumble into the darkness. A bald man in a white leather jacket motions for us to come forward. He steps past and closes the door. Pigeons make cooing sounds high in the ceiling. My eyes adjust and I can see streaks of light streaming down from holes in the rood. Pigeon feathers float down from the upper reaches.
The bald man leads us down the nave to where the alter should be, but instead there is only a tall gray-bearded man reclined in a Lay-Z-Boy. His eyes look out from a mound of face hair and fur. His long frame is draped in a coarse fur cape that’s hard to make out in the darkness. He’s wearing a big brimmed Stetson and his feet are clad in black mule eared boots, crossed and resting on a tipped over refrigerator. He shucks peanuts in his left hand, feeding them one at a time into his chewing mouth with the only two fingers of his right hand. Shards of glass flash slices of sunlight from the broken window at the end of the east transept, I remember from somewhere this is the right hand of Christ.

“My name is Virgil Heath. Two?”

Marcy nods.

“Ten bucks times two.” Virgil stops his shucking and points with one of the two fingers of his right hand toward a dark corner of the church. Beside a broken baptismal lay a feather pen in an inkwell some papers on the overturned refrigerator.

Marcy fills out the forms, leaving the Contact in Case of an Emergency Lines blank.

“Take a number out back.” The bald man opens a door and we walk out blinking into the sunlight. Behind we can hear peanut shells fluttering to the floor like moths to lamplight.

Outside we take our numbers from a young blind man, drink beer and wait. Marcy smiles at me in a new way, her face radiant. She leans into me
and quickly bites my earlobe, sending a trickle of blood down my neck and onto my shirt collar. The talk of the people around us becomes garbled.

A half hour later we stand at the front of the crowd. The words are inaudible. Yet somehow I know they have something to do with the writing—they are the sounds of the strange letters. Virgil rises behind a wooden lectern, his face long and gaunt, and the symbol of the cross covered in a circle of gopher tails. He begins to chant. The words are strange, not really words at all. He removes his Stetson and pulls the cowl of his fur cape over his head. Now we see what it is. It is the flattened head of coyote, the blue of its glass eyes shining like two small suns. The crowd repeats the chant. Then there is an explosion, followed by shots. The people in the crowd are firing their guns into the air and shouting. They are shouting the word blood, over and over, but it doesn’t sound like the word blood, a strange word, somehow meaning more.

Marcy is gone. I want to look for her in the pressing crowd of people and guns, but the strange words hold me where I stand. I begin to recognize the pieces of words I know, chopped up and mixed with other words. I realize I’ve left my rifle somewhere but can’t remember.

Virgil holds the feather pen to the sky, chanting the sounds. He holds up the inkwell. It’s filled with blood. The crowd cheers a final roar, then breaks off into groups heading for the fields across the road, already running with the gray metal flash of their guns, set off by the sunlight. Already some people have crossed the road and are shooting wildly as the gophers run for their
holes. I see the group of biker women, the short muscular one leading the pack. I want to ask them if they’ve seen Marcy, but as I approach the leader stops, vomits in the dirt, and then points at me, laughing. “Virgil Heath,” she laughs, and then they are gone across the road with the others.

I walk back slowly to the pickup. The streets are almost empty but the air is full of the sound and smell of gunpowder. Someone has smashed the side view mirror of my pickup, and the pieces of glass flash sunlight in my face as I reach the truck. On the dashboard is a folded piece of paper. It’s a note from Marcy telling me to take her boxes to the Greyhound station. She had to have packed them this morning. On the dashboard lies a single blue contact lens.

I sit for a while on the tailgate of the pickup, looking down at the broken glass in the dirt, and then across the road. The crowd of hunters has spread out far into the sagebrush and weeds. I stare a while longer and realize they’re not taking their kills, only counting—which is the same as cheating—instead leaving countless carcasses lying in the sun, some still jerking and squirming in the dirt. Then there is more movement. The surviving gophers extend themselves from their dens, step after step, and then slowly, after surveying all 360 degrees, begin feasting on the remains of the dead and wounded.

I can’t watch any longer. I feel the crunch of broken glass through the soles of my boots and then climb into the pickup to begin the long drive back, knowing that tomorrow the animal shelter opens at twelve.
Pay the Rent

Through the snow squall across the bench we can see Ron and Sylvia’s lights. We punch a hole through the last big drift into the barnyard, snow devils swirling in the light. Ed’s green pickup is parked out front next to the house, like usual. Ed is visiting again. He leaves his wife and kids at home.

“It’s been a while,” I say.

“Let’s go,” Beth says.

I stop the pickup and look down the country road past their driveway. Waves of snow wash across the ground. “I’m a little worried about getting home if this wind keeps up.”

“We don’t have to stay long. Let’s just say hello.” Beth smiles, “Hell, Paw, you know we sure don’t get out much. Let’s visit.”
I smile back at her.

She slaps my shoulder with the open palm of her right hand.

“Oh quit being Mr. Serious all the time.”

I’m thinking about the twenty thousand dollars I’ve taken out of the ranch account, leaving only three thousand two hundred and seventy-four dollars and fifty-six cents. I don’t want to tell Beth. She’ll get mad. She wants to paint the house this summer, she wants to finish the playroom for Josh in the basement, maybe buy a newer used car. I’ve taken twenty thousand dollars and partnered with Ron on a hundred and twelve yearling heifers. This was the year we were going to hold back on buying cattle, lease our grass instead, try and turn a profit. Beth wants to paint the house.

I know she’ll find out, and I’m hoping the market will come up so when she does so I can say see, we have more than we started with, we’ve made money. I know she’ll find out, I just don’t want her to find out tonight.

Jake, their blue heeler cross, runs out barking at the front tires as we pull into the yard. He circles the pickup twice as we park alongside Ed’s outfit, then marks the left front tire. Joshua is sleeping in his car seat after the hour and a half trip from Bozeman. He is still wearing his blue fleece jacket. We leave the pickup running with the heater set on medium and scuff carefully across the icy walkway toward the house. Most of the clear Christmas lights strung beneath the gutter of the shop are on. The ice flickers.

“C’mon in. It’s storming’ out there,” Ron shouts through the small mudroom filled with dog beds, throw rugs, hunting rifles, deer trophies and a
mountain goat trophy—their racks hung with caps, straw Baileys, wide
brimmed 5x’s—boots, overshoes, a cabinet of supplies for doctoring cattle
and horses, overalls and bibs, reloading gear, and a brown plastic box on the
window sill containing the cremated remains of their greyhound. The house
smells of cigarette smoke and cats.

I close the storm door behind us, then the windowed wood door. The glass
rattles.

“Sorry to intrude. You left your lights on.”

“Don’t take your boots off!” Ron shouts, the last of his Camel Light
swirling from his nose, streaming out the cracked window behind him. His
eyes squint beneath bald sheen of his thinning scalp; he’s smiling.

The kitchen is warm. Ed stands up out of one of the six spindle-backed
chairs around the oblong oak table. “Hello, folks.” He’s dressed western. Ron
and Sylvia grin. There are better than two six-packs of empties on the table. I
hold up the twelve-pack of Coors we picked up in town.

We take our boots off. Beth gives my butt a sharp kick with the toe end of
her socked foot as I step through the doorway into the kitchen. “Excuse me,”
she says, and steps in front of me. They laugh.

“Hi, Ed.” I say. “How’s the ranch chopping business?” He is a small time
realtor and it’s become a running joke to blame him for the carving up of
Montana.

“Cutting edge. How’s Nate and Beth this evening?” Everyone knows these
are not real questions. What would we do with real answers? We just talk to

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fill the spaces between us, to close the gap between where we stand and the round warmth of the table.

“That’s a pretty sweater,” Sylvia says to Beth. “Is that from the Woolen Outlet in Bozeman?”

Beth nods.

“Who needs a beer? How about a scotch, Nate?” Ron asks standing in front of the open refrigerator at the end of the kitchen. He opens the freezer and pulls out an ice tray. We’re moving closer.

Soon we are all settled with fresh drinks around the oak kitchen table. Ron is telling us about the small sleigh out in the yard. During the afternoon he and Ed tried slipping the harness on Copper, Ron’s saddle horse. “He’s one quarter Percheron draft,” Ron says proudly.

They got the harness laid across Copper’s back. They fastened the chest collar. They were about to buckle the rear cinch and run the reigns through the guide holes in the front of the sleigh when he blew up. There was no warning, he just blew. He was two miles down the bench before they caught up with him in the pickup, reigns dragging in the road. Ron is laughing.

Sylvia rolls her eyes, leans forward in her chair and slaps down the fingers of her left hand on the edge of the table. She shakes her head. No one at the table wears a ring. Everyone has working hands. I think about the engagement ring I bought Beth seven years ago before we were married. She keeps it in a small enamel box on her bureau. The diamond is the size of a speck of dirt.
Later, I remember telling her then, later we can trade back from a bigger one, after we get on our feet, after we pay off our share of the place.

Ed is quiet. Slyvia likes to give him a hard time about his claims to being a cowboy—"a forty-eight year old cowboy with a real estate license and a part time job at the County Coroner's office? Give me a break, please!"—and it always makes us uncomfortable. It's worse when he's not there. Sylvia can get carried away.

Ed doesn't lie, but no one we know believes his stories. Like the one about riding on his place twenty years ago, gathering at dusk in a thunderstorm, the mother cows anxious, when there was a great flash of blue light, and St. Elmo's fire danced across the herd and played in between the ears and on the manes and tails of the saddle horses.

No one believes stories like that, but maybe none of us wants to think them impossible; none of us wants to deny the idea of magic—even if it is only one man's imagination. So we sit quietly when Ed stands up, twitching the toes of our stocking feet under the table.

Ed leans back in his chair. Slowly he turns the Bud Light can in front of him on the table. He clears his throat, winding up. "You know," his eyebrows arching up, imitating the crescent of his handlebar mustache—Beth says this makes him look like a bunch of bad luck horseshoes, upside down and empty. "We used to feed with a team back on the ranch. Poncho and Earl. Pure Clydesdales. Broke 'em myself. That's the trick, the getting to know them from their youth, then going with them, like the first time you hop on a green
colt; you’ve got to be honest. With draft horses it’s even more important. They’re kind of like elephants of the equine world, memory-wise.” He takes a sip of beer. “So, if you find yourself an old chassis, a car, a pickup, whatever, and you load her down with old tires, scrap metal, an engine block if you can find one—mind you make sure it’s secured to the bed, or the whole outfit is liable to…”

“Oh for Christ’s sakes, Ed,” Sylvia shouts, “not that one again!”

Ed gulps his beer.

Sylvia is from German stock, up north, near the Golden Triangle. They are solid people, Ron likes to say. She gets up and goes to the cabinet on the far end of the room. We can hear her laugh. She takes down a box of wheat crackers, grabs a handful and puts then on a white dinner plate, then sets a plastic container of cheese spread in the middle. She returns to the table, sets the crackers near Beth beside the array of empties.

“I’m going to check on Josh,” Beth says as she gets up.

“What do you think, Nate?” Ron asks scooping a hunk of cheese spread with a cracker like it’s a shovel. “You think the gap between steers and heifers is going to get any closer? Seems to me steers are getting to be in dammed short supply. They only had forty-two run through Billings yesterday.”

“Twenty point spread rule,” Ed says into his beer before taking a long swallow.
Looking out of the window past Ron’s head I see snowflakes flying in all directions like some swarm of insects attacking the lights. I wonder how the road’s drifting. I wonder if we’ll have to chain up. Ron gets up and throws another block into the woodstove. Beth comes back and nods, smiling slightly.

A flash of light bounces behind Ron’s head. It flickers, moving up the county road in jerking motions. It dims a little, then bounces into the yard, spilling up against the spitting snow. It shines into the kitchen, the image of the window thrown on the far wall like a movie screen.

“Oh shit!” says Ron. “It’s Carl!”

Carl is their tenant from the cottage next door. Carl is an out of work logger and has never spent much time around horses or cattle or people. He is a man used to doing things with his hands—sawing trees and moving the levers of diesel powered hydraulic equipment—used to working alone. Talking while working he thinks is a strange idea, and could be dangerous if your mind wandered off the job at hand. The problem with Carl is that when he isn’t working all he does is talk, and drink.

“Oh for Christ’s Sake!” says Sylvia. “Can’t he just leave us alone? Quick! Hide the beers or we’ll never get rid of him!”

Carl grew up in the Ozarks. He doesn’t remember much about it on account of the accident he had five years ago. A dead limb caught him across his head and right shoulder. He’s been talking about his lawsuit against the timber company since he moved in last July. He’s been having a hard time finding work.
Everyone stands up. We clear the empties from the table; Sylvia sticks the plate of food in the fridge. Ron turns off the mudroom light and grabs a coat and throws it over the twelve pack lying on the floor. Ed stands up, takes a pinch of snoose, and sits back down, looking uncomfortable.

We hear knocking on the glass of the storm door. We hear the storm door open.

“No one’s home!” Ron shouts.

The wooden door with the rattling glass opens. The storm door closes. The wooden door closes. The glass rattles.

Beth is smiling, looking around the room and trying not to laugh. I want to touch her. I want to get up out of the chair and respond to her reaction, with her—a mix of glee and excitement, rising like an instant reminiscence of a first meeting, a first spark.

“Gee, I was hoping a fellow could find some company and a beer. Aw, Ron, don’t be mad. I just stopped in for a minute.” He scratches the mop on top of his six foot two frame, hair almost reaching his shoulders, framing his small face with a scraggly beard below. He overflows from the doorway.

“You got a beer?” His eyes widen strange and blue.

“Oh, hell,” says Ron, throwing the coat off the cardboard twelve-pack and stuffing his thick hand into the hole, “here!”

Carl limps heavily to the table, taking the beer and popping the top in one motion. “Can I sit?” He stares at Ron who’s staring at Sylvia who’s staring at the floor off to her right. Slowly he pulls a chair up from behind his stooped
position with his free hand. “Can I have a cigarette?” His presence makes the circle feel uneven.

Ron looks incredulous. “Where in the hell is my rent, Carl? You owe me three months.”

Gee, Ron... Hey, guess what? I just got my settlement today!”

“What’d you get?”

“Seven hundred and fifty.”

“Seven hundred and fifty what?”

“Aw Ron. Seven hundred and fifty dollars—all mine!”

“Jesus H. Christ!” Ron blows smoke out the partially open window. ”I thought you said you were suing for fifteen thousand?”

“I was.”

“Well how much was your lawyer bill?”

“Eight hundred and some.”

Sylvia bursts out laughing. “You mean you went to court to sue somebody over an injury that disabled you and you ended up owing money?”

“I guess so.”

“Jesus H. Christ!” Ron Flicks the butt out the window. “So what about the rent? When’re you going to pay me what you owe me for the goddam rent?”

“Well, you got some timber over in that section north of here. Maybe I could work some of it off.”

“For Christ’s sake, I told you I’m not wanting to do that. I want cash, not work. I’ve got a ranch to run.”
“Hey, I could sure use another beer.” Carl looks down at his heavy soiled fingers angled up against the edge of the table. “What I really need is what you got,” he says looking at me. “I mean a family ranch and an easy-money-care taking-job and going to college in Missoula and a pretty wife and all. I need to be you.”

“Carl be quiet. You can have another beer if you promise me you’ll pay me all the back rent you owe and pay me one months deposit. If you can promise me all that, you can have this last beer.”

“Okay, I promise, cross my heart and hope to die on a stack of them Venetian Bibles!”

“Here’s the last beer. Drink up and then you gotta go.”

Ron lights another cigarette. “I’ve got some bulls to cut if the moon gets right. Got three in the last bunch of steers from over in Big Timber. Two are just one-nutters,” Ron says grinning, looking at Carl. “Maybe we’ll have some extra cuttin’ to do! That might even be enough to get some people around here to pay what they owe!”

Everyone laughs, except Carl.

“Maybe I should buy more lottery tickets. Then I’d have a better chance hitting it big. Maybe if I could borrow some money, borrow some from someone who can lend me money,” Carl stops and looks at me, “you know what I mean?”
Ron looks annoyed, but I can tell he’s feeling mischievous because he’s grinning with his bottom lip rolled in so that his front teeth stick out, like he’s about to bite someone. He’s trying to ignore Carl.

“When can you help me work them heifers, Nate?”

His eyes sparkle and I wonder if he’s all the way drunk now. Beth doesn’t seem to notice, she’s talking quilting with Sylvia. Somehow they get on the topic of the veterinarian’s son who committed suicide by hanging himself in his father’s clinic when the vet was at a convention up in Great Falls. But two days ago when Ron stopped up for coffee he carried on about how he was only going to buy steers this year. To hell with heifers.

I glance back at Ron. He’s still grinning. We are close, but I know he’s resentful that we have more money then they do—this year’s he’s even mortgaged his brand—that Beth’s family and mine all invested in our ranch, like it was gift from heaven, or worse in Ron’s eyes, like a handout from the government. He might resent it enough to blow my cover, just to watch me squirm as Beth realizes what I’ve done and then goes quiet. Her quiet can last for over a week until finally some object—a picture, a dish, a chair—is broken. Only then will we talk.

I’m starting to feel the beer kick in. I’m not so anxious anymore. Maybe I should just tell her, tonight on the way home. I did it for all three of us, to try and make our lives better. The thought that never occurs to you when you’re ranching is that you’re supposed to be making money. In the day-to-day work you never think about it until you need something—sections for the swather,
fuel filters for the tractor, baler twine, antibiotic. Never try and guess what
you make by the hour, someone at the café in town said a couple of weeks
ago: you’ll go out and shoot yourself in the head.

“I’m going to check on Josh,” I say getting up.

“You got any beer stashed away with them groceries you can bring it on in
here,” Carl says to my back as I pull on my boots. I turn closing the storm
door and see Beth’s face. She’s pissed. She wants to know what the hell Carl
was doing looking in our pickup. So do I. But instead of confronting him I
find myself thinking about the first time I saw Beth truly mad, deeply
disappointed in me, and go outside.

It feels good to be in the cold and snowy air, away from the smokey
kitchen. The gusting wind makes the snow swim lightly, blanketing our
running pickup except for two small half moons of wet glass on the
windshield from the defroster. I wipe away the snow from the passenger
window with my bare hand. Josh is sleeping soundly in his car seat, his head
slightly to one side, his lips working some dream nipple.

I take a leak on the far side of the shop, out of the wind. I don’t think Ron
will say anything tonight, at least not intentionally. He takes his Masonry
pretty seriously, all that organized good will of men toward men. I know it’s
important to Ron that we ride together, that I support his refusal to hop on a 4-
wheeler or dirt bike or chase the cattle in a pickup like the neighbors. Besides,
Ron likes to say, vehicles can’t jump ditches.
Our five years of working together has bonded us, sharing tools, machinery, labor, and secrets. There is trust. Secretly we schemed a surprise birthday party for Sylvia last August. I helped him decorate the house while Sylvia was working at the feed store in town. Beth baked a chocolate cake. We surprised her.

The snow floats like chaff form a combine behind the windbreak, this old shop filled mostly with broken things waiting to be fixed—a rototiller with no engine, a cracked trailer hitch needing welding, worn spikes from the toolbar, the metal stock tank they use for killing chickens.

I stand in the residue of wind. I am far from the warmth of the kitchen, the roundness of the table, and I know I should go in, but I feel immobilized by the nostalgia, the outside-looking-in, and I wonder if maybe it is too late, if Beth has lost her faith in me—I who am half in school and half trying to run a ranch, succeeding at neither. When she finds out about the money will it confirm what she’s already feeling, that I am lost? I know she is filled with the determination necessitated by motherhood, and if I should rise or fall it will always be secondary to her love of Josh.

I step back into the swirling night, the lights of the house like silent stars through the clouds. Snow has recovered the pickup window. Again I wipe it aside, compressing its coldness. Josh is still sleeping.

I move across the ice to the door and go in. The kitchen seems smaller, and shimmers with the blue haze of smoke. Carl is working on Ed now, asking for a loan, but all of us, even Carl, know he doesn’t have it. It’s as if Carl is
honing some obsolete skill. Ed ignores him, telling the one about why Indians ride appaloosas into battle: “So they’ll be good and mad when they get there!”

Beth laughs loudly, though she’s heard it before, eyes smiling.

Carl’s beer is empty. He turns to Ron. He wipes the stubble around his mouth with his shirtsleeve, and says, “Like I said. You got good timber out north. I can cut it and you skid it with your Cat. Good timber. I bet Johnson’s would buy it without the mileage charge. I seen one of their trucks running on some small job near White Sulpher.”

“No Carl! For the last time I just want you to pay the rent; I don’t want to work it out of you!” Ron’s face is red. “Now look, you’ve finished your beer and me and Nate here need to talk business, so you better head on home.”

“Go ahead and talk business, it don’t bother me.”

“Go home, Carl!”

Carl crushes the aluminum beer can in his right hand looks around the table. His left eye twitches. His mouth is tight. His breathing is deep and low. He stands up fast knocking his chair over. “You want to see my shoulder?”

“Go home!”

“Can I have one more cigarette, for the road?” He grins like a kid. He takes the cigarette, sticks it in his pocket and walks into the mudroom and picks his coat up off the floor, steps into his loosely laced workboats, turns and says, “you know, we ain’t all better then each other. We’re all the same.” He stands with his fists clenched. “There’s not a lot distance between you and me and he
and he and she. We’re all related.” His eyes widen. “It’s time to leave. It’s definitely time to leave.”

“That’s rights!” Ron shouts.

Carl steps quickly back into the room.

We all stand up.

“It’s not my shoulder,” Carl says deeply, his jaw muscles pulsing. Tears are pooling in his eyes, glistening gently with the reflection of the light above the table. “It’s not my head. It’s me. It’s me out of me.” The tears run down his tired pale checks.

We stand around him, enclosing him.

Suddenly Carl raises his fists, and then grabs his shirtfront, tearing it apart.

Buttons scatter across the table and onto the pine board floor. Folds of white flesh hang beneath the tail of a scar, a curved line like the trail of a comet. “It is me. Me. And you could be me. All of you.” He collapses into a chair, head between his legs, clutching at himself.

We stay standing until Ron says, “Carl, it’s time to leave.”

Silent, he stands and slowly, repeating, “It’s time to leave. It’s definitely time to leave,” and steps out of the house making his way to the cottage through the swirling snow.

“Goodnight,” Ron calls as we watch the blowing snow.

We finish our drinks and know its time to leave. It’s the first day of March and we’re anxious for spring, to get back to work, to be outside in the long light of the days.
Outside we hear muffled thunder and see flashes of light out toward the Bridgers. Josh is sleeping soundly. Ron has come out of the house with us and stands on the icy walkway smoking a cigarette in his bathrobe and slippers.

"Goddam crazy winter this has been. Probably end up fighting fire before the summer’s halfway through," he says. "You kids drive careful. Thanks for stopping." He smiles weakly. I know he doesn’t want to talk about what happened. Again he wishes us well.

It is still snowing and the wind is gusting, blasting the snow devils and creating mini-whiteouts across the road. We may not make it home; the drifts are worse up towards our place. But we have our winter gear-- extra layers, hats and gloves, blankets, a child backpack for Josh. And we know we can always go back.
I am swimming again. It is night, and the hazy yellow light of the flood lamps shines blue green beneath the chlorinated water. I rise and fall, blowing and breathing like some wounded mammal, the vapors of scotch and ale and red wine and white wine and cognac swirling inside my dull skull. My knee hurts. I'm half in the water and half out, the breaststroke, slow and clumsy, almost floundering each time I cross over the deep end, thinking now, if I stop, it will be like just another drink, only bigger.

It has been raining for five days, since we got here, and we still have five days to go. Christmas on Captiva—not even an island anymore, but anchored by a length of steel and concrete and asphalt—was the brainchild of Susan's
mother Patricia, a well intentioned plan to rent a five bedroom house on the beach for us to be together; myself the lowly teacher, Susan (to this day I’m astounded that I’m married), Susan’s sister Camilla (almost as hot as Susan, a little older), Camilla’s insurance selling husband Leonard (a flabby son of a bitch), their two kids, Patricia and her fourth husband, George, and Celeste, Patricia’s mother and family terror. Celeste watches me with an evil eye, and eye from the old country, like she can see into my imagination, all the dirty things I want to do to her granddaughter. Like so many well-intentioned plans this one caused suffering. How was Patricia to know that this Christmas week would be composed of record low temperatures, wind and rain?

The pool is heated. Outside the air temperature is in the low forties, maybe the high thirties. The darkness around the edges of the light is blurred by drizzle; this makes the air feel colder. I rise and fall, the pressure of the water’s containment pressing into my nostrils. Combined with the pressure of the vapors in my head I become a sort of equilibrium. I stop. I float. My body drifts downward, suspended by my bulbous head, a buoy. The water level, by draught, is a line somewhere above the bridge of my nose and somewhere below by eyes. I am like some diagram on the marker board in a high school physics class. There is a dotted line circumnavigating my head. “This line, children, therefore incorporates the mean of flammable vapor to the molecular structure of water to the gravitational pull at sea level. Write this in notation. You have five minutes.”
But I teach junior high, and the only physics I care about concern my already pregnant wife.

Soon I feel I'm really beginning to sink. I swim. I have to keep moving, shark-like, cutting through the dark warm water. I take a piss.

I rains off and on, more on than off, and the wind blows, and still, three days ago, drunk at five in the afternoon from the Bullshots and Bloody Mary's I began making at eleven for the brunch of cheddar-flavored scrambled eggs and the bright pink vaginal salmon on fat onion bagels with the slabs of herb cream cheese--fucking Americans are too much!-- I fell on the deck in front of the house before the great spitting waves, landing on my right knee, which is now swollen and must be kept straight. I truth I am a wounded mammal.

I'm getting good at changing directions by somersaulting at each end of the pool, then pushing off with my good leg, turning my spirited body from backstroke to breaststroke as I flail toward the opposite end. In the world of sperm analysis I'd be classified as having below normal mobility.

A door opens on the deck. Patricia's kept all the curtains drawn, and we've battled over the outside lights. She keeps then on to see approaching strangers—like the delivery boy from the liquor store—and I keep turning them off, hoping the girls might want to come skinny dipping. Now light washes out of the doorway across the deck and bounces on the water.
"Yoo-hoo. Come on in and warm up. Irish coffee."

They are all inside, stomachs full of mail-order goose and goose gravy, dressing, creamed pearl onions, sweet potatoes, boiled baby carrots, tomato aspic, arugula and romaine salad, sourdough rolls with butter, pumpkin pie with vanilla ice cream. I feel myself listing to port, or maybe a nice armagnac.

I want to know more about fat people, the truly obese. How do they do it? I see them in airports, getting off and on tour buses, trundling up and down this weary beach in layers of fucked-up ugly clothing, bigger than naked.
Thank god it’s cold. We don’t have to see the real. I don’t.

During the day the men watched football, the women cooked, served hors d’oeuvres, quieted the bored children. I sat on the sofa with my father-in-law and brother-in-law. I tried to understand the game, but remained clueless, embarrassed that I, a fatherless child, never had the game explained to me—or worse, never took the trouble to figure it out since labeled “adult,” so I watched Camilla and wondered what it would be like. At one point one of the women suggested we all take a walk on the beach (except Celeste, who remained in an armchair at the far end of the living room, knitting and
watching, her bird hands fingerling the dice with a thin skinned clicking—the
dice, her bones or the crackling of her heart— but it was too windy and cold
and everyone had brought summer clothes. This was Florida. I turned my
attention to the various brown and amber imported ales the brother-in-law had
brought from the mainland in his rented minivan. What I really wanted was a
six-pack of Coors. I settle for Famous Grouse.

Leonard wasn’t a bad shit for what he was because he wasn’t much. On a
humanity scale of one to ten I’d give him a three. He proved what I’d
suspected, that Camilla was truly dumb. (I won’t even touch the fact the idiot
sells insurance.)

Sometimes during the week we’d meet in lower Manhattan, at one of the
trendy yuppie bars downtown that pretends it’s somewhere it isn’t— Portabello
Road in London, a bait shop in Louisiana— for “a beer.” Lying about your
drinking is a marriage skill that follows directly after learning how to give
your wife and orgasm. Leonard liked these trendy bars where the waitresses
were really models, they just liked waiting tables. He probably should have
thought more about fucking his own wife, but she had her kids already, so
maybe he couldn’t get any at home.

I usually arrived at wherever we had decided to go before him. School
usually got out around three, unless the system wanted to develop us teachers
professionally, making us sit in some windowless room listening to some assholes—usually fat assholes—bore us to death with their handouts and war stories and newfound ability to walk upright. There were no babes in the Board of Education. Good-looking women were strictly an after school activity.

Usually I’d come to the training five minutes late, sign in, ask on the trainers a question—“and what about the special needs child?” so- they’d remember me, and then head out to go drinking.

Leonard would find me sitting at the bar, bullshitting waitress-models, somewhere around my fifth beer, coming up behind me with dumb line like, “How’s it hanging, Doodler?”

We would drink and bullshit and make eyes at the young tall women, imagining “what if?” Old Leonard didn’t have much to offer, he was just there, the bulk of him a fixture in the landscape of the bar. I could tell he was missing the ocean. “How about that one,” he might say. “Nothing wrong with that.” Nothing wrong with that, though I wondered if I became too drunk, wandered over there to the woman with impossible breasts and grabbed her, tearing away her mask, would I find live wires and blinking circuits an oh my god—she’s not real. They might take me away to be punished. Castrated probably.

Once he took me sailing. He owned his own boat. Susan and I went to stay with them for a weekend, a small suburban house in a town named after some Indains on Long Island.
We pulled up to the dock in his Volvo. He busied himself with boat things while I mixed the ice and beer we’d bought on the way in the cooler and tested the seal on the new bottle of Tequila.

We motored the whole way. The entire way. Once or twice he raised the jib, but it would puff in the head wind, flapping loudly like sarcastic applause. “Mainsail’s broken,” he said. “Jibing’s a pain the ass.” Down went the jib. Leonard wanted straight out and straight back. That’s the kind of guy he was. I wondered if this was why Camilla always seemed so bored, looking at other men.

“There,” he stood a little unsteadily, a beer in one hand and a sheet in the other, gripping a stile of the wheel with the crook of his right leg. “There. Fisher’s Island. Someday I’m going to own a house there. Right on the fucking beach. Hoo-yeah!” I watched as he tipped toward the ocean, realizing I had no idea how to run the boat if he went in the drink. Drink.

The diesel sputtered and we rode up and down the swells. Even I knew we’d never make it. You couldn’t even see the island, and Leonard had remarked how he’d forgotten to gas up before we’d left. According to the fuel gauge on the wheel housing we only had a third of a tank. I didn’t see any oars. I didn’t want to think about it.

But there, for that moment as we both sat drinking on the rocking deck of the boat, I thought I could see who he really was, the whatness of him, I recognized that his eyes were the exact same bright blue as the ocean.
But we were bound by sisters—brothers-in-law—and if we struck together so that the wives thought we were bonding, “having a beer,” or playing golf, we could repel a lot of the bullshit the women came up with like taking the kids so they could go shopping, only to buy things that needed to be returned later, therefore requiring us to take the kids again. Fuck no. If it were left up to wives all Saturdays would be pissed away into nothing, the great toilet bowl of time spent.

Susan is in the shower. We have the largest room—the master suite, complete with Cathedral ceiling and Jacuzzi tub—because Susan is eight months pregnant. It is a gesture of generosity we’re repeatedly reminded of. (“Dear, would you mind fetching another bottle of the organic Chardonnay; you do have the largest room.”) I am hung over, skull spinning.

Susan is the tall blond—so goddamn tall I never know if I should kiss her on the lips or just hug her—that makes my heart race, the kind of girl that made you interfere with yourself when you were in seventh grade. Even pregnant, with her long slender legs and full breasts, she is pornographic, and alien, looking like a snake that swallowed an egg. Her pregnancy has cramped our sex life, which has pretty much descended to the level of hand jobs. Most of the time she’s in a bathroom somewhere.

“I thought being pregnant made woman horny,” I said.
“Go get the lotion,” she said.

But now at least I can drink. I’m putting up with her family, I agreed to come to Florida, a state I consider as interesting as a class in Methods of Teaching, and because she’s knocked up, mixing poison with my sperm is no longer an issue.

I listen to the running water; imagine it glistening off her lump, running down between her legs. She got one of those ready-for-the-beach wax jobs that’s reduced her pubic hair to a small fist of fur. I glance wistfully across the room at the hand lotion on the bureau.

Susan comes out of the shower wearing three towels, one wrapped turban-like on her head, one under her arms around her swelling breasts, and one around the enormous bulge of her middle. She smiles one of the vacant smiles she gives since becoming pregnant. Rain beats sideways against the picture window behind her. I see a drop of water slide slowly down the back of her calf. I am overcome by a desire to reach out, to touch the firm roundness of what grows inside her, and then realize I want to cry.

I decide to go for a swim.

So I’m swimming again. Drizzle blows sideways. I’ve given up all thoughts of the rental bicycles—we hoarded the best of the rental shop on the morning of
our first day—or the running shoes stuffed in the bottom of my backpack. Besides, I’m wounded. My injured leg an obscene phallus, trailing behind my slow movement like a stillborn infant whale, never separating. All I know is I’m not at work but am lost in this pool—I don’t remember how long I’ve been in or know when I’ll get out—and that I’ve begun to smell the smells beneath the treatment of chorine and other chemicals that could preserve a body part in a glass jar for centuries, like my grandfather’s testicles that he showed me after his prostate operation.

I’m smelling this old water and the crotches—mammalian blowholes—armpits, foot rot, and the dirty scalps of years of renters floundering in this hole in the ground. Endless oriphie dripping with discharge. I’m part of the community of fat fucks with enough money to rent this shithole, and I’m at one with this waste cavity, a bacteria, growing and dying. I piss and fart and would even pull off my trunks and take a shit except that then I would have to skim it out in the morning when it floated to the surface like a poisoned fish.

I was on my seventh Wild Turkey. I was sitting close to her at the bar, close enough so that my wrinkled teacher’s pants, an old pair of khakis, touched her bare clean shaven thighs below the hem of her black miniskirt. She was pretty and blonde—though I could see brown roots when she turned her head to scan the room, her frozen hair like some revolving radar rig on a boat that just kept going around and around. I was watching her glossy lips move and fantasizing
about what could happen, what she might let me do, if she might be a whore, and if she was if it might not be okay anyway, when Leonard's voice broke into the moment like a mean fart in a psychiatrist's office (how do you feel about that?): “Hey, Studley, introduce me to your friend?”

A true pain in the ass has this sort of perfect timing. I pause. I close my eyes and imagine for the last time, what might have happened if Leonard hadn't shown up.

“Marcie, this fuckhead’s name is Leonard.”

The fake blonde wiped her tiny nose with a cocktail napkin “Sorry boys. I’m not like that.” Before I realized what was happening she was up and out of her stool, and smiling demurely, said to me, close so that in the sidelights from the neon beer signs behind the bar I could tell her blue eyes were really contacts, “Thanks, some other time.” She faded back through the happy hour of solemn suits with narrow neckties at the entrance, and then slid out the double glass doors and into the moving street.

I stare at Leonard, giving him one of those looks that say, “you really have no idea how fucking dumb you are, do you?”

Palms up, he shrugged. He bought me a beer and ordered two for himself. “Gotta catch up!”

By eight we were at Girlorama, Leonard negotiating with the hostess, trying to sleaze a bargain rate on the VIP lounge. We’d been there an hour, and had spotted the girls we wanted. Leonard was getting pretty drunk—he was starting in on the Jameson—and I was hoping he’d get loose with his gold
corporate AMEX card, talking about taking two apiece back through the beaded curtains to the crusty velour sofa.

I was beyond drunk, saturated. Time seemed to be moving slowly. It was getting hard to speak.

Leonard called Camilla to tell her he had to be at a client dinner, and that he’d invited me to come along. I didn’t bother calling Susan. Camilla hung up on him before he could say he’d be home late.

“Well, shit,” he said returning to our table close to the stage where a young black woman in a G-string was twirling between my legs. “No breaks tonight unless we want the fat and the ugly, and I don’t VIP with the fat and the ugly. Or the colored.”

The woman stuck her tongue out at him. It was pierced with a fake diamond stud.

“Sometimes I wonder what we’d do if our wives danced like this,” he said slowly. “Especially Susan. I’d like to see that!”

I stumble halfway to my feet and punch Leonard in his flabby gut, a sucker punch, fast and low.

I sit back and become absorbed within the realm of the blaring hip-hop and the flashing colored lights. I can hear a ringing sound, the same sound I remembered resonating in my skull when I was eleven, after I killed the neighbor’s orange cat with my mother’s putter, the pain following the beating I got from Mr. Marsfield, the neighbor.
“What you boys should do,” Patricia says bouncing into the living room wearing bright orange running shoes and a wide brimmed straw hat, “is rent one of those canoes over at the nature preserve. It looks like the Everglades over there—all kinds of canals and little streams you can go off to!” Death by water. George and Leonard and I are all sunk down deep in the twin couches facing the television. It’s the half-time show, and Patricia’s leading the rally. In response Leonard stares blankly at the TV, George raises his empty pint glass, and I look over my shoulder down the hall to the closed door of our bedroom behind which I know Susan and Camilla are talking, talking. Outside the children throw rocks into the wind.

“How about it?” Patricia asks taking George’s pint glass and turning toward the kitchen to get a refill. I wonder if the cold wind and rain would be good for my knee.

The sailor looks up from the screen. “Yeah. What the hell.” The step father-in-law shakes his head and points at the screen where men are falling on the ground.

I am unmoved until I hear a shriek, and then the opening of the doors. One of Camilla’s children has done something to the other with a rock. They crash into the living room splattered in sea spray, one screaming and the other shouting “It was an accident! It was an accident!” A split second later the sisters swell up to them, interrogating, consoling, chastising. Yet another door
opens in the long hall and Celeste appears in a white nightgown and robe, fingering the dice in the palm of her hand and chewing on a twig resembling a bird’s foot. She mumbles something in Italian and flashes a look of disgust in my direction.

Above the fray Patricia’s straw hat floats through the living room. “Cocktail Hour!”

Yesterday was Christmas Eve. We waited for a Santa Claus from the Chamber of Commerce to come and give prearranged gifts to Camilla’s kids. We sat in the living room with our drinks—I had ordered a delivery of several bottles of single malt scotch, a case of German beer, and two bottles of Marcel Ragnaud V.S.O.P. (my credit card maxed out)—and watch as, at a leisurely pace, a rat waddled from one side of room to the other, vanishing behind one of the hot baseboard heaters. George grabbed his gallon can of Williams-Sonoma reduced-fat peanuts, his eyes wide. Camilla, shrieking with her mother, the two of them some obscene chorus, grabbed at her children. I picked up my mug of stout from the glass and rattan coffee table, fearing it would spill in all the commotion and not wanting to waste it, not sure if I could stand to see the thick brown foam on the already stained aqua carpet.

“A rat, a rat!” my mother-in-law screamed.

“Jesus Chris!” Camilla cried. “I’m calling the rental company. That was a rat—it could bite the children!”
Soon furniture was moved away from the walls. A broom was held aloft.

Someone bumped the TV, changing the channel to a Spanish station, a man’s face talking, rolling his R’s, shrieks and curses.

That rat didn’t have a chance.

“I’m going for a swim,” I say. I get up to go and change into my trunks. I pass Susan in the doorway, but she doesn’t seem to notice me, not even the vacant smile; she walks into the hallway toward the orange-walled living room holding a clothing catalogue open in front of her.

I walk through our oversized bedroom into the master bedroom to look for my swim trunks and piss into one of the two sinks in the seashell plastered vanity beneath a huge mirror. There are round bulbs all around the glass like what I imagine a Hollywood dressing room looks like. I look over at the pink Jacuzzi tub—someone somewhere once called this color coral. Pubic hairs lie in small puddles deep in the bottom.

I remember thinking that the motion of the planet could go on without me, that I was not necessary in the equation of time and space, that I really didn’t want to be here but had no idea where it was I wanted to be. I remember thinking that there wasn’t supposed to be blood in my urine.

I swim for maybe half an hour. The deck lights flash off and on. Yoo-hoo.
I come in through the deck door off the kitchen, dripping wet with a towel draped over my shoulders. I grab an ale from the fridge. The cap doesn’t twist off. I realize my gut is hanging over the waistband of my trunks.

Leonard gets up off the couch during a commercial announcing he is going to take a piss and don’t we all need another beer. Celeste scolds one of Camilla’s children for picking her nose, and then says something in Italian and creeps to her room. I sit on the arm of the couch waiting for another glimpse of the bouncing cheerleaders. I think maybe I recognize one from Girlorama.

Leonard comes in from the oversized yellow kitchen holding a large whisk in his right hand. He farts loudly, and then hiccups. Everyone is quiet and looks at him in silence. We are frozen, just looking at him, still, and then, like the start of something—that moment before the flame ignites from its source, the split second before the finger pulls the trigger—Leonard’s fleshy mouth opens, and a great ball of yellow-brown bile shoots out into the air and lands on the aqua carpet, leaving a trail of stringy phlegm hanging down the front of his white alligator shirt from his chin like a tentacle.

“Disgusting!” cries Camilla.

Leonard blinks. His upper lip twitches, and then he grins and falls over backwards into the kitchen, the whisk held high in the air. A drunken sailor.

“Disgusting! You’re so disgusting!”

“Camilla, the children!” her mother shrieks.

I look over at George next to me on the couch; he has both arms tightly wrapped around his peanut can.
The children cry. Susan wobbles out of a bathroom. She’s wearing a purple smock that looks like a sack, expandable jeans with Velcro fasteners that make a scratching sound when she walks, and eyes that make me swallow.

“What’s going on?”

No one moves for a long time. Black guys and white guys are running around and jumping on each other. Maybe we are held back by Camilla standing in the middle of the room, the ball of bile slowly melting before her Belgian loafers, her hands on her hips, scowling.

“Oh no,” Susan says softly, seeing the soles of Leonard’s tasseled loafers protruding from the kitchen. She is barefoot. Get the hand cream.

Celeste appears, wearing a black dress with lace at the fringes. Her eyes gleam with hatred. She points a crooked finger at me, muttering Italian. With the other hand she fingers the dice.

I make for the door to the deck, and beyond it the pool. Hard chips of sleet tick against the glass. I hear Celeste’s voice rising against the storm, her staccato Italian breaking against the waves. My knee throbs.

Before I can escape Susan grabs my arm with her damp palm. She is smiling now. The look in her eyes is kind, motherly. “No more,” she says. She takes my drink from my hand and sets it on the counter. My fingers hang limply until she takes my hand and places it on the smooth warm roundness of our child, kicking now.
The Horse:

They went to pick up a horse. The horse had been bought over the telephone, sight unseen, by a man from California. Three-year-old sorrel gelding, Doc Bar breeding, good blood, the man said. The man had given Harlan the piece of paper with the phone number and address. It was early November and the roads weren’t bad yet, still the empty stock trailer swayed behind the pickup whenever the speedometer topped seventy. The check for $3,400 was in a small envelope snapped in the left breast pocket of Harlan’s blue western shirt. The dogs slept on the narrow bench seat in back.
Harlan stared through the stone chipped windshield at the oncoming interstate, glad to be with his son Toby who maneuvered the pickup and stock trailer around the swerving cars, but feeling that time was moving too fast now, coming at him like the speeding roadway. Since the accident last fall he had begun to worry, his fears sometimes overcoming his pain, often getting out of bed in the middle of the night to look out the window to make sure the barn wasn’t on fire or the cows weren’t out. The Californian had hired them to pick up the horse and deliver it to a ranch he’d recently purchased near Bozeman. Harlan felt the familiar unease of preparing to spend a large amount of money, an act he resented even if the money wasn’t his.

Harlan pointed to the exit sign. “Here,” he said. He looked at the crumpled piece of yellow paper in his creased hand. “They’re supposed to have him loaded in a trailer, parked over by the university.”

The pickup sputtered. Toby drove down along the ramp to the stop sign where a man stood with a tattered cardboard sign, smiling. The word “food” could be made out in awkward letters.

“Work,” Harlan said.

Toby pulled away from the light, turning left across the Clark Fork River. The old orange stock trailer rattled behind the pickup, scattering manure and yellowed hay onto the bright lines of the freshly painted street.

“Route twelve, right?”

“You want to be in the left hand lane now. Look for Cottonwood Avenue.”
Toby pulled back on the stick shift after the light turned green. He had to ease off the clutch to get the pickup into gear, causing a grinding sound that made Harlan turn his head.

“There,” Harlan almost shouted. “Over there. There’s the street.”

A blue Toyota pickup came up fast on the left, causing Toby to swerve to the right. One of the dogs farted.

“You’re missing the turn.”

“Shit.” Toby hit the brakes hard, the truck and trailer swaying like a snake.

“I think we’re headed to Hamilton.”

“Shit,” Toby said. “Let me take a left up here.” He swung the pickup wide, the rattling trailer tracking behind, making sure not to clip the white Subaru parked at the corner.

At the next light Toby slipped the clutch again, the pickup and trailer lurching forward, almost stalling.

“Quit grinding the gears.”

“I’m not. The clutch is shot.”

“Replaced the master cylinder myself, two weeks ago. Take it easy. I don’t want to get stuck in this zoo of a town if I can help it.”

The Accident:
Harlan had taken a fall in the hay coral. He’d hurt his back in a way the doctors couldn’t agree on, so he quit going to the clinic altogether. He fell off the top of a stack of square bales—idiot blocks, people with round balers called them-- while trying to tighten the top tier. He’d pulled the bales tight with the hay hooks his father had made when he was a boy, in the small shop on stormy days, their polished silver tips flashing in the sun. He remembered watching his father weld and fabricate, the blue shower of fire all around him. He had worked the edges of the haystack together, pulling up then pressing down with his knees, trying to close the gaps to keep the weather out. Then he stood up, wiped his brow with his shirtsleeve, and stepped backward out into the air.

Harlan looked over at his son. His face was quiet. There were no traces of the anger he’d shown when he returned from his year in the east, only the taut lines of his handsome twenty-three year old face. Harlan had asked him to come home in the spring. The irrigating and putting up the hay would have been too much for him alone, injured now. But Toby had answered with a letter. Harlan had been shocked. A letter! The work of lawyers, banks and farm credit agencies. Why would his own son, his only real family, write him a letter? There were phones everywhere!

In the letter Toby had told of a girlfriend. Evelyn was a student at Juliard, whose life, it seemed to Harlan, had been taken over by a rich divorced woman who supported aspiring musicians. A patron of the arts, Toby had called her. He told Harlan how he had met Evelyn at an art gallery in Chelsea.
They had admitted they both knew nothing about the artist; their invitations had been printed on postcards, delivered with the junk mail and the bills. But in the four months they were together Evelyn had faded like the stars at dawn, the distinct image melted away into a dark distance. The old woman invited her to live in her apartment on Park Avenue. She loaned her an antique violin. The last time Toby saw Evelyn they met at a Starbucks where she told him her music precluded their relationship. The first two times she said this Toby had thought he'd heard the word “prelude.” He had been inspired, as if he'd been made into someone entirely different, someone better. Then the same sense of loss, of falling away from life's center that had driven him from Montana descended like a darkening sky.

From the sound of her last name Harlan guessed she was Italian. From the way she'd behaved, opening a great wound of sadness in his son, he knew she was spoiled.

The only woman Harlan had known was Margaret, his wife, Toby's mother. Harlan felt as though Margaret still roamed the place. She flowed in the before-presence, that strange still space where one person recognizes another. What they had had together was entirely private, something never to be repeated or even hoped for the rest of the world.

Harlan loved his son. During the year he was away Harlan pretended to have conversations with him, again reliving an earlier time, as if Toby were him in the tractor farming, in the pickup feeding hay, fueling up the four wheeler to change the irrigating water. He would speak silently, as if they
were brothers working the place together. Though he wouldn’t admit it, he
hoped that this concentration could bend fate, that his wanting could become
reality if he lived it truly, if he wanted it badly enough.

Harlan sat forward to see the passenger side mirror, noticing the scene the
houses and yards made down along the tree-lined street. The houses seemed
so close together. He wondered if Toby would have liked to have grown up in
a neighborhood like this, to grow up close to other people, their dogs and cats,
to grow up with other children available at a moment’s notice, like an icebox
full of food, the availability of satisfaction before the hunger could grow too
large. What would that have been like compared to growing up on a ranch
nine miles from the nearest town, a mile and a half from their mailbox?

The Breakdown:

Harlan looked the out window as Toby slowed the pickup at the next
stoplight. He saw two young people, not really kids, not adults. They look like
they might be college students. College students, a town full of young people,
know-nothings, a sort of welfare thing, but with an attitude, this going to class
and good food and a place to live. Not real work. No sense at all.

Somewhere along the tree-lined avenue Harlan heard the loud noise that
rattled the pickup and they stopped. The slow ceasing movement of the truck
and trailer reminded Harlan of the last time he was in a boat, before Toby
went to New York for a year, a drift boat on the lower Madison. The boat had
belonged to one of Toby’s classmates during this senior year at MSU. The boy
was from the east, outside of Keene, and talked the entire time, from the morning when he arrived at the ranch with his new Toyota, boat and trailer, throughout the two hour drive to the river, and throughout the entire float, until they took out that evening near Norris, sunburned and skunked.

Even Harlan, who never had time to fish, knew that the lower Madison was too warm for fishing, its water cooked by the summer sun in Ennis Lake before merging slowly and somnolently with the Jefferson and the Gallatin to become the Missouri. But it was Toby’s birthday, a Sunday, and so Harlan agreed to go because his son had asked him to come.

They spent the day floating fruitlessly in the warm water, Toby piloting the drift boat around the ganging groups of drunken college students reclined on lashed-together inner tubes, like refugees washed out into a wasteland. Harlan fantasized he was in his living room with Toby watching them on TV. An open cooler of crushed and twisted beer cans floats by, the loose rope dangling behind like a tail. The New Hampshire boy capsizing, his body drifting far away downs the river. Quiet. Harlan felt the truck and trailer slide slowly to a stop, resting against the curb as if moored in a slip. He looked at the looming stone buildings of the University and felt the hollowness that rose within him whenever he was reminded of his one semester of college. He’d never gone back.

Toby held the wheel in both hands as he turned and grinned at his father.

Harlan shook his head. “Don’t know.” He smiled. “Maybe the differential. It has to be something, and it sure as hell isn’t the clutch.” He tried to think
back to the work he’d done on the clutch, like rewinding the home movies he’d transferred to VCR tapes of Toby’s playing point guard, a senior on the high school basketball team. Harlan tried to think back—was there something he’d left loose, was the plate alignment out of whack? --but he couldn’t. He wasn’t in charge. He didn’t have to be. Toby, his son, was the driver. Toby would do something, get them home. He could do that. Couldn’t he?

They must be college kids. Both wore old baggy clothes. Both had long blond knotted hair that bounced with their footsteps as they walked along the sidewalk. The boy wheeled a bicycle; the girl gripped the end of a wide striped black and green and gold leash, pulled tight by a big straining malamute cross. He noticed that the girl wasn’t wearing a bra, her breasts moving in counterpoint to her thick curls, rocking inside a mostly green tie-dyed T-shirt. The girl wore a silver ring in her nose. Harlan wanted to do something—save them if possible—and felt the well worn sense of outrage that there could be homelessness or that beef could be imported from Canada, Argentina, Australia, labelless, flooding US markets unbeknownst to the consumer.

“Look at them,” he said.

“What? What’s the problem with them?”

“It’s just…”

“Why do you have a problem with them? Because they’re different, maybe even vegetarians?”
Harlan realized he sounded like some old rancher, like a cartoon in one of the Ag Magazines. While he often thought of himself as an old rancher, he worried this might alienate Toby. His son acted differently since returning from the east. He read books for hours every night and had only ridden his horse, a tall cowy bay mare Harlan had kept through the winter even though the price of hay had gone over $150 a ton, only five times in the four months he’d been home, and only because Harlan had asked him to help move pairs. Harlan remembered his son and the mare as inseparable before he’s left for the east. Now he wouldn’t even wear his hat, the white felt Bailey Harlan had given him for his birthday.

The dogs sat up in the back seat. They were both boarder collies, mother and daughter, good with stock. Harlan took pride in the way he trained them, the way they listened at the critical moment to turn a cow or cut a calf.

Harlan felt Toby looking past him out the window. “Looks almost like a wolf, doesn’t it?” He was baiting his father. The wolf thing. Harlan wondered if his worried expression had begun to wear on him. Was he so predictable?

“Sure as hell does.” Harlan glanced quickly at the empty rifle rack against the rear window. He looked back at the couple walking the big dog. “Shit.”

“We need their help,” Toby said.

Harlan self-consciously wrinkled his brow. The cessation of forward movement relaxed him; he began to see his life with a new degree of objectivity. He worried more now, sessions of compressed stress, and periods of selfish miseries three or five times a day. The ranch was heavily in debt.
Two days ago he had met with his accountant in Bozeman, loaded down with letters from the loan department at the bank, the IRS, the FSA. They tried to figure a way to leave the ranch to Toby, some way to reduce the estate taxes Toby could never pay. It didn’t seem possible to pass it on, only maybe a chance if Toby too on the ranch and another job now, full time. It would be a fire sale.

If he should decide to sell, when it becomes his, Harlan wondered, would he give up his sister, only three when she died, buried on the knob overlooking the drainage with the house and the barn and outbuildings—the center of the ranch—her body asleep forever next to the piled rocks of an old sheepherder’s cairn? And what about the graves of dogs?

They watched the young couple approach. Not much younger than Toby, Harlan thought. The younger of the two dogs yawned, looked around, ears up, and lay back down next to his mother.

“Dad,” Toby asked, “do you ever feel alone? I mean like really alone, like in a foreign country or something, like you’re the only one who speaks and thinks like you do?”

Harlan felt unsure, like the dream he often had of entering his old high school homeroom, himself at his age now, the teacher handing out a test written in words he’s never seen before.

“Alone. I was alone, alone until you came back.”
Toby hit the steering wheel gently with his open palm. “That’s not what I mean. I mean, like, with mom basically gone. You know. Just by yourself. Like you’ll always be by yourself.”

When had the cracks in the windshield started? The first rock chip, nights far below 32° Fahrenheit, washboard roads and irrigating ditches to make it like this, a crazy map of cracked glass? Harlan wanted to answer, to give the right answer, he couldn’t.

“It’s not the same,” Toby said opening his door and sliding from the pickup. Both dogs followed his movement toward to young couple, bearing their teeth at the huge dog with murmured growls.

“Hey there. You two know if there’s a garage around here?”

The sound of Toby’s words distracted Harlan from trying to understand what his son had meant. A garage? He came back to himself. No garage. No way. He would fix it himself, like always.

Harlan heard a loud noise, a great cacophony of human voices—cheering. There were people out in the park. It was a celebration. They were marching a great circle around the university green holding banners and flags and pink placards like some plain-clothed marching band. They were all women. Some were singing and some played drums or small hollow instruments they hit with sticks. Toby smiled at this father.

A large banner stretched across the street in front of them read:
V-DAY: FOR LIFE

They got out of the pickup. “Look at that,” Toby said, but Harlan was already reading one of the wide pink flags held high on poles by the women at the head of the assembling crowd facing them, the large gold letters, all capitals:

VAGINA DAY: BEFORE, NOW AND FOREVER

There were other banners rising now, and slogans raised in the rallied voices from the crowd of women:

VAGINA: DON’T BE AFRAID TO SHOUT IT!
VAGINAS ARE EVERYWHERE

Harlan tried to think what this meant. He had spent so many years with the livestock and pets, a part of the births and deaths that while all female animals had vaginas he’d come to think of women as different, as having something else. Biologically he knew it was the same, but he didn’t think of women in
the same way, just as he didn’t think of animals in the same way he thought about women. He had heard stories beyond the common sheep and cow jokes.

The young women were closer now. The repeated word vagina conjured the memory of a prolapsed heifer he’d found last spring. She was out in the far pasture, beyond the corrals, a wild black baldy that had run loose on the Forest Service all summer. He’d called a neighbor to come help ride and get her in before the vet showed up. The prolapse hung below her anus, the inside-out flesh raw and bleeding and covered with shit, bobbing like the head of a dead child as they tried to run her in through the gate. The sunlight had caused it to blister. Harlan and his neighbor flanked her on their winter-worn horses, rapping their ropes on their thighs and the sides of their saddles, finally hazing her in on the third try.

When the vet arrived he was in a bad mood. They ran her in the chute, caught her head and tightened the squeeze. But the gate was in the way. “Raise it!” the vet shouted. Harlan raised the end gate and then slipped a pole behind her legs to keep her from backing. The vet climbed the fence and dropped down into the chute behind the heifer, suture thread and needle dangling from his mouth. With his gloved hands he grasped the distended anus, then leaned into the animal, pressing, pushing it in with his palms. The space seemed too small for the inverted vaginal wall to return, but the vet continued to press, the prolapsed hissing and spitting spurs of blood and fluid into the space between them. The heifer bawled loudly.
Suddenly she kicked backward, the vet enveloped up to his elbows in her vagina, and began to walk backward out of the chute. “Hold her, Goddamnit!” he shouted as he backpedaled down the chute, trying to keep his footing in the mud and shit and blood.

Harlan rang alongside, jabbing the animal’s ribs with the end of a sorting stick and shouting. Twice the vet stumbled, almost going down. The neighbor came up with a hotshot, and before anyone could say anything gave the heifer an electric jolt in the side. “Goddamnit!” the vet shouted. Harlan grabbed the tail, and by twisting forcefully managed to get her to move ahead and back into the chute. The vet followed, still holding the uterus inside the animal.

Slowly the vet began to let off the pressure, but the red ball of flesh began to emerge again like the head of a calf. The vet threw his body back against the animal, leaning in close. With another great push the anus prolapsed, the shit-smeared flesh flapping against the vet’s face with a loud slap. Harlan couldn’t help laughing as the vet jumped back and began spitting successively on the already saturated ground.

A young blond woman wearing hiking boots with thick green wool socks, shorts and a heavy flannel shirt walked up to them, smiling. “Hey, can you guys move this? We’re having a parade.”
Harlan noticed Toby’s face go quiet. It reminded him of when Toby was a
child, seeing something for the first time, a newborn calf, the carcass of the
coyote Harlan had shot when it skulked too close to the barn.

“I wish we could,” Toby said looking up from where he knelt at the front
of the truck, smiling now.

That heifer had born a calf, hadn’t it? thought Harlan. Big heavy calf, six
fifty, maybe six seventy-five that next fall.

The woman looked at Harlan. “Can you get it moving?”

A dark complexioned woman with short brown hair came up suddenly.

“What the fuck is going on here?” She was short and heavy and wore the
thickest soled fire boots Harlan had ever seen.

Harlan turned and started to walk to the cab to get the toolbox. He
wondered if the dogs would herd them away if he gave the command. The
association between women and cattle troubled his consciousness. When he
reached the pickup the short haired woman shouted, “Hey, Tex, get this piece
of shit out of here, now!”

Harlan could feel his anger rising. “I’m not from Texas.”

“We’re having a rally,” the blond woman said. She smiled at Toby.

“You’re parked in the staging area.”

“Well, that’s just…”

“C’mon, dad.”

“C’mon yourself! You think this is funny? I think it’s vulgar. Why the hell
aren’t these kids working, or going to school? That’s what you do in college,
isn’t it, school work?” Harlan felt like an outsider. He felt they knew each other, Toby and the blond woman, and Harlan knew he didn’t know her at all. But she knew Toby now, knew him better than Harlan did, the way only women know men and maybe not unlike Mararet had known him. Maybe that’s what happened to his son in New York. He felt betrayed. He glared at Toby. His son had changed.

“Look, young lady, I don’t know who you are or what all this is, whatever’s going on here.” He couldn’t say the word, the word that surrounded him like a cloud in the air, the banner and placards now fluttering and snapping in the breeze that chilled him. “I’m here to pick up a horse and our truck’s broke down. The sooner you leave us alone the sooner we’ll be on our way.”

“Don’t you patronize me.” The short woman stepped closer. She pointed at Harlan with her finger, a wide silver band above the knuckle flicking sparks of light at his eyes.

“I think if we uncouple the four wheel drive linkage she’ll go,” Toby said.

Harlan looked at his son, but Toby’s eyes were still focused on the young woman. He was as far away as home; farther than he’s ever been. Harlan went to the back of the pickup and got the toolbox. This was alone.

The women went back to their marching and slogan calling. Toby slid beneath the front end of the pickup while Harlan handed him tools- a bent screwdriver, hammer, rag, and socket wrench. The transfer case had thrown a gear. Toby disconnected the front drive shaft and wire-tied it to the front axle
to keep it from dragging on the ground. Then they drove off in search of a
garage and directions to the address on the piece of paper to pick up the horse.
Harlan needed to get home.

Remembering the left signal was broken; Toby stuck his arm out the
window, his raised open palm deflecting wind into the cab, raising dust and
candy wrappers and dog hair swirling in the air. Harlan cranked down his own
window, but this only made it worse. He picked up a clump of dog hair from
his lower lip. A bright red Range Rover came up alongside, blocking the left
lane. A young blond woman was singing along with the radio, silent behind
the rolled up windows for the air conditioning. Her silently moving mouth
made Harlan believe he would soon be deaf. Years of open cab machinery.
Gopher shooting as a young man. It would mean another doctor. The car sped
past. A series of bumper stickers pasted across the tailgate read Meat is
Murder/Keep It Wild/Bring Back Bison/Love Your Mother. Harlan shook his
head. It was true what they said about Missoula—more California than
Montana. It was all true.

By the time they would get back to the ranch the day help would be off
and it would be time to feed and bathe Margaret.
Epilouge:

A short letter was stapled to the Bill of Sale for the mare. It had taken him three tries to get it all down. Now it was done. She brought $2,900 in the ring, far less than she was worth. Harlan folded the check, not reading the letter, and forwarded it to his son’s new address in New York.

In a week, maybe less, the alfalfa would be ready for haying. Harlan took his cup of coffee out onto the front porch. He inhaled the morning air. It was better out here, sitting in Margaret’s old rocker. Besides, from here he could see the bunkhouse and the shop. From here he could watch the new hired couple, the young people with the long hair and wild clothes, the young woman going about the morning chores in a T-shirt and jeans, followed by the great strange dog.
I. In Punta Mita did Rison Corp.
A stately golf-resort decree:
Where Alpha, the sacred river, flows
Past fairways measureless to man
Down to a joyless sea.

INT. HOTEL BAR - AFTERNOON

Stately, plump Brain Mulrooney from Michigan rested against the bar
behind a tall glass of American beer, tailing at first about his home in
Michigan and then badgering the bartender and a younger couple from
Minnesota.

Jesus H. Christ! Jimmy my boy I kid you not. No shit. I saw it with my
own two eyes. Margie thought it was a stick—I’m waiting for her now, as
usual—a god damn log in fact. No sir. By god it wasn’t no god damn stick! It was him, and he’s still out there! Silent and still like he was dead. Sneaky sonofabitch. You watch your ass out there on the that thirteenth hole. Those goddam bunkers so deep—no approach shot. Either you’re dead on or go play in the sand—there could be a whole friggin’ family of them and you wouldn’t even see them from the green!

Shit! A ninety-five. Tomorrow, eight-twelve. Don’t be late, I’m going to break ninety before we leave. Need to work on my short game.


You gotta watch your ass these days, even on a golf course like this, hey? Hey, did you guys do the golf package, or just the meal plan? Who needs another logo shirt, right? Though I do know some guys collect them. Shit, yeah. You saved some money there!

Jesus H. Chirst. Imagine that! I can’t get over it. A goddam croc! Hey, hey Jimboy, look at that one. Vah-vah-voom! Nothing wrong with that, huh? Who’s the freaking baldy?

Them Mexican girls, though, all Catholics. Just about impossible, you know, they’d ever give you any. Sorry, Ma’am. No offence intended. It’s just that, you know? Anyway.

Hey, holy shit, is that Jim Baker? The guy in the blazer. Jim Baker, you know, Secretary of Whatever under—who was it?—Bush. No, the other one. Daddy Bush.
EXT. CADDY AREA – CLUBHOUSE – LATE MORNING

--Si, I mean yes, Senoir. Yes, yes, there is. Hole number thirteen. Uh, by
the...how do you say... along the fairway. There is a lake there. The green
also. In the lake. Big one he is. No, not dangerous. When the new houses
come he will move.

--Will your wife play golf today? Si. Nine or eighteen? Si.

-- Have a good round, Senior. You also, Senior.

-- Thank you, Senior. Mucho gracias.

EXT. HOTEL ENTRANCE

A very large Kansan woman in front of Hotel Entrance is talking at skinny
pale men.

Where’s that van? They said three. They said three o’ clock, right? I’m not a
late person. Three o’clock, I set my watch. I set my watch, you know, from
Minnesota time, and then reset my watch when they said on the plane that
Mexico and Minnesota are the same, time-wise. Did you sit on the left side?
Wasn’t that beautiful? Look, it’s three twenty-three. Is that what you have,
three twenty-three, wait, make that three twenty-four. Is that what you have?
Those jerks from SubTel will be gloating—“we’re first, look at us”—eating
up all the hor-derves. God, I need a glass of Chardonnay, from California, not too dry, or too sweet. What time did you say you have. No, that’s not right. I set my watch to the radio, KPRK, every morning after my preparations and meditation. You’re off by more than a minute! No excuse for tardiness. I bet there won’t be anything left when we get there. Excuse me. Yes. You. Excuse me. Do you know where the van is? The van? Van! The van for the communications report? Excuse me. Maria Boyle, Assistant Vice President, CellPow.com. DO YOU KNOW WHERE THE VAN IS? The van that’s supposed to take us up to the goddamn reception? THE VAN!

I had to hear all this. I had to listen. It had been so long, a length of time even from the first Spanish speakers—a million years since my ancestors perished? More. But this was now and they were here. A matter of time.

INT. 9TH HOLE CANTINA – AFTERNOON

Four large MEXICAN nationals from Alcopolco, Drug Lords, rounding the bend. The four men are sitting around one of five small tables conversing loudly. Enter two AMERICAN MEN and TWO BOYS, SEVEN and FIVE. The largest MEXICAN is wearing a blue golf shirt and smoking the largest cigar.

AMERICAN:
Maybe. But one coke is the only sugary until dinner.

_Buenos dias._

**MEXICAN:**

_Buenos dias. Como esta?_

**AMERICAN:**

Very well, thanks.

**THREE OTHER AMERICANS:**

_Buenos dias._

**AMERICAN:**

Uh, same to you.

**MEXICAN:**

And you, how about you, young man?

**MEXICAN points to SEVEN YEAR OLD BOY**

Hah! _El golfo, my amigo!_ Where do you come from?

**SEVEN YEAR OLD BOY looks down at floor**

These things I was hearing. I had to hear all this. And see it, too. Yes, I did sit and wait, the warm water recirculating around my body from the treatment
building—pipes in, pipes out. Their machines sent vibrations through my body like the way the buildings shook the earth.

MEXICAN:

Connecticut?!? Connecticut?!? United States of American... si! We, me and my compadres, we are from Acapulco!

MEXICAN shakes his meaty fist in the air, his enormous gold Rolex catches the light.

MEXICAN:

_Acapulco_

THREE OTHER MEXICANS:

_Acapulco_

AMERICAN:

Excuse me, but have you gentlemen heard anything regarding a crocodile somewhere near the thirteenth fairway. There’s a lake there, along the fairway I mean, isn’t there? This is our first day here.

MEXICAN:

_Si, Senior._ I have heard also of the Croc you are speaking of. El Croc. Yes, I have heard, but I do not believe this is so. Maybe just a story to scare the _touristas_, _eh, amigo_?

AMERICAN shakes his head and looks at the floor.

AMERICAN:
O, I don’t know. I’ve heard about it from lots of people at the hotel.

MEXICAN:

Ah, yes, well Senior. It is what they have called here a… how do you say? Of a traditional…a…legend it is. A diversion for the tourista, El Croc.

SEVEN YEAR OLD BOY:

Are you guys talking about the Alligator?

AMERICAN:

Crocodile, Henry. It’s a crocodile.

MEXICAN:

Alligator, crocodile, however you wish. And what is your name, young man?

The SEVEN YEAR OLD BOY looks down at the floor.

AMERICAN:

He’s a little shy. Henry, honey, tell the gentleman you name. Henry, come on, baby, your name. You can say your name.

MEXICAN:

Maybe, Senior, the boy is afraid. Maybe afraid of El Croc, no? Perhaps it is true?

AMERICAN:

Honey, go on…

SEVEN YEAR OLD BOY:

Hank. My name is Hank.

MEXICAN:
Hank! Very good. I will call you Enrico!

AMERICAN:

Well, okay.

The AMERICAN pays. AMERICAN and BOYS exit and 9th HOLE CANTINA.

These are the things I heard, things I bore on my back like a villager hauling firewood. If of course the village—or wherever he was going—was up hill. Overlooking the ocean, just like it said in the brochure. And there was golf. And tennis. And beach. And now the villagers are gone. Re-lo-cat-ed. The entire village.

INT. – DELUXE SUPERIOR TWO BEDROOM SUITE

SCENE: Altered BLOND WOMAN, a Hollywood sort, and BALD MAN NANNY, her childcare provider in a Superior Two Bedroom Oceanside Suite. Guests have referred to BALD MAN NANNY as “Dr. No” and “Mr. Clean.”

“Julio? Julio, where are you, Julio?”

The splash pool at the end of the covered Mexican tile patio gurgled.

“Julio? Julio, where the fu---, there you are. Jasper needs a diaper and Miranda wants to go to the beach. My nails won’t be dry for at least ten more
minutes, and I’ve got a two o’clock for a massage. And the tennis pro. Here, here’s Jasper.”

A child’s shrill cry stirred the birds in the trees along the beach.

“If Armond calls tell him I’m by the pool, will you. God knows when he’ll get here. The shoot’s taking forever. Have you seen my cell phone?”

A crash and then a thud. The glossy sounding flutter of pages of a magazine spins out through the open sliding glass door, landing on the freshly raked sand.

“It’s like, like I don’t want things to be so disorganized all the time!”

And so it went. She was a bombshell. A bombshell in a mine field. Soon it would have to happen. You should be mindful. It’s just that, I mean if you can say that, I was there against my will. They were really getting to me.

EXT. CADDY AREA – CLUBHOUSE – MID DAY

Hey, hey, Jose! Where the hell’s Hose B.? What’s going on, you got my clubs ready? In the cart. Fresh ice in the cooler. Mucho, mucho gracias! Here we go. I’m going to smack some serious whitey today, let me tell you. And if I see that goddamn lizard you all have been running on about I’m going to
kick his butt. So, in the words of the Great One, the Only One, the Immortal Jackie Gleason… Away We Gooo.

EXT. PRIVATE BEACH – AFTERNOON


“Please. Maybe you could just…”

EXT. CADDY AREA – CLUBHOUSE – LATE AFTERNOON

-Si. I mean no. A sand wedge? No. You think hole number seven? To the left of the green. Next to the bunker. I see. No. No one has come with the club here. What kind, Senior? Jack Nicholas Titanium Air Bear Super Max, Right Hand? Si. Si, Senior. I will keep my eyes wide open. Mucho gracias, Senior.

EXT. TREE LINED LAWN BEHIND TENNIS COURT – LATE AFTERNOON

A large white tent mills with people. A blue van pulls up to the edge of the lawn.
Excuse me. I said excuse me. I was the last one in, I had to wait for you all, I should be the first one out. So much for chivalry. Excuse me! See, look. I told you, look at them all, grazing like a herd of pigs, all ganged up at the table like that. SubTel pigs. Look, there’s Marty, Mid South Regional director, Ooo, potstickers! Here’s take two plates and go around that way. I’ll start with the shrimp. Someone get me a glass of Chardonnay. That means you. What do I pay you for? A full glass. God, look at them crowding around the bar. Better make it two.

Perhaps there was no way I was ever going to eat them. Not any of them.

Not ever.

EXT. – LAWN BEHIND HOTEL – EVENING

Hotel Manager’s Reception

A leg here, some feet, a fully resplendent mouthful of bountiful torso, the hip bone so soft.
They’re not very fast. Not even the young ones. The sweet young flesh of possibility, for they would be the same. Such screaming and carrying on.

So little time, so little time, so little time...