Rhythm, and other stories

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Rhythm, and Other Stories

by

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B.A. Pennsylvania State University 1984

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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Master of Fine Arts

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Wyman knows the girl is awake because he hears her fingernails clicking on the passenger's side window, keeping measures of the music that comes through the radio. He wants to glance at her, but is nervous about taking his eyes off the road in the dark. Audra Barranco, she said her name is. He loves it. Audra Barranco. He thinks it sounds Portuguese, although he knows nothing about Portuguese names. It just sounds that way.

Wyman is driving fast, too fast. He hears the tires rumble over patches of hard slick snow on the highway. He feels the cold through the window by his cheek. He is having trouble seeing beyond the bright glare of his headlights into the dark of the valley. Wyman figures this is at least partly because of all the beer and the two shots at Al's back in Missoula--three shots, Del the bartender bought a round. Still, he does not slow down. He has to beat daybreak.

Wyman has a beer in his hand, so he lifts it to drink. Instead of risking a glance at the girl, he remembers how she looked in the bar. Long hair the color of deeply stained cherry wood, loose curls unrolling down her back.
Her breasts were pinpoints in a white turtleneck. She held her chest out to make them that way. She drank dangling the rim of the glass in her fingertips from above. She tilted the glass under her nose. He loves her nose. Smooth cheeks and a Roman nose. He thinks it adds to her Portuguese-ness. He likes this, whereas he realizes all along that she's not from Portugal. She's from Big Timber, he thinks she said in Al's. Her eyes are auburn, like her hair. He wonders if she is really married.

"I think, it looks like we'll beat the light," he says to her.

"I hope so," says Audra Barranco. He has the sense that she turns on a smile as she says this. He hears it in her voice.

Wyman wedges the beer can into his crotch, then reaches over to pat her thigh, a gentle, friendly pat. Eventually he feels like to keep patting her would be awkward, but he doesn't feel like losing the contact. He likes the way her thigh feels, solid, unflinching beneath his hand. So he rubs it, up and down with the muscle.

"We should be there just in time," Wyman says. The problem, though, is that he's not so sure. They have to be there before sunlight—sunlight, not just sunrise. He wants to be there before the gradual grey seeps into the landscape, before any visibility. But he's not sure how much
time he has to play with.

"If it's anything like you say it is, I sure hope we are," she says.

Wyman nods. He has to wonder about the way he is feeling. He keeps telling himself that he does not pick up women in bars, not anymore. He hasn't picked up a woman in a bar in years, since he was young. Since long before his heartbreak. And then Wyman is onto his heartbreak again. He doesn't imagine his heartbreak is much different than anybody else's. It's only a woman he loved, a girl really, who turned into a woman while he was loving her, and then a divorce he neither wanted nor saw coming. But it is his and he lets himself feel it profoundly every chance he gets. Because there was once a time when he thought this part of his life would be the happy part, the good times. This is what is perhaps most heartbreaking to Wyman: now he no longer believes there will ever be a happy part or good times.

So Wyman does no go to bars to meet women. Wyman goes to bars to drink. He goes to Al's to talk to Del the bartender. Mostly they talk about people they know and golf. Wyman like's Al's because it is a bar for serious drinkers. You can feel sorry for yourself there and nobody's going to make you feel guilty about it.

Audra Barranco, on the other hand, does not go to Al's, not regularly. Wyman has never seen her in Al's before.
Wyman has never seen an attractive woman in Al's. He has seen a few who might have been attractive one day long ago, but the women who come to Al are stained by booze. He thinks Audra Barranco has the look, like she might get ruined too, someday. She could be. She has the kind of look that makes you think she might purposely not avoid trouble, just to see how bad could it possibly get. She's not ruined yet, though.

"Sorry this part's so boring," he says.

He feels her touch his arm, then, and hears the springs of the seat relax as she lifts to scoot herself to sit closer beside him.

"It's not boring," Audra Barranco says. He feels her fingers reach up and comb through the back of his hair, tugging lightly. On the radio the new Garth Brooks song starts, the one about rodeos. Wyman doesn't know much about rodeos. The boots on his feet are, he must admit to himself, costume on a certain scale. "God I hate this song," Wyman says.

"You don't like rodeos?" Audra asks. She doesn't seem to like this detail of him.

"I had a good time at the one in Missoula," he says.

"That's not a good one. You have to hit Augusta. Or Ennis on the Fourth of July. Or the Bucking Horse Sale in Miles City."
Wyman doesn't want to say any more about rodeos. Audra doesn't look like a horse girl, or dress like one, but she does look like she could be a lot of different things, Wyman thinks. He thinks she probably changes the way she dresses in different crowds. Maybe she's run around with some bronc riders. Maybe she's a rodeo groupie. Wyman doesn't like to think that about her.

Audra says, "They're just overplaying this one, is all. On the radio, all the good songs get overplayed." She reaches forward and punches a new radio station into the truck. They get news.

"You didn't have to do that," he says.

"No it's O.K.," she says. "You should change it when a song like that comes on, before it gets ruined."

Although he cannot see it, Wyman knows that up ahead the valley narrows and the road will turn to wind through it. He sees the bright blinking of a line of lights on the dark mountainsides. The flashing lights mark high-tension wires. They are warnings to pilots, who like to fly their small planes low in the valleys where there are fewer disturbances. The lights fire in a sequence, up from the valley floor. Wyman likes this sudden flashing in what is otherwise absolute darkness. It seems to come out of nowhere. He thinks it adds to the air. Wyman is trying to maintain some air of mystery. He has not yet told Audra
where he is taking her, only that it is a magical sight. He wants her to think there is a reason to hang around him, something to him beyond what she has seen so far, more to come.

Beside him, Wyman hears tiny electronic chirping and bonks. It is, he realizes, Audra Barranco's Game Boy. She is playing again. When they left the bar, after she had agreed to go with him, Audra had gone to her car, a boxy red Geo, and opened the door and leaned in. For a second Wyman thought she was leaving him, that she had been playing him all along. He thought then that she really was married. But she hadn't left. She backed out of the car. "If it's gonna be a long drive," she said and she held up her Game Boy and wiggled it.

Wyman drives, feels a landscape he cannot see swish past him. He drives and he hears the faint tic-a-tic-a-tic-a-tac-a-tic-a-tac-tic-a-tic-a-tac of Audra Barranco's fingers working the buttons on the Game Boy. He is comforted by the sound. It means she is there and not sleeping. He drinks from his beer again. The beer from the can tastes watery after so many from bottles.

He cannot risk looking over at Audra for as long as he wants to because of the dark and the ice and how fast he is driving so he tries again to remember her in Al's. She came in with a girlfriend. There were only two other people
in Al's, two old ladies sitting at the end of the bar drinking Manhattans. When Audra Barranco and her friend came in, they sat midway down the empty line of chrome stools, between Wyman and the old ladies. She had on a white turtleneck and boot-cut jeans, but she wore pointy-toed granny boots instead of cowboy boots. Immediately after she ordered she slipped off the stool and headed towards him.

Her feet crossed over in front of her as she walked, and it made her hips swing out to each side. He dropped his eyes when she walked past him to the jukebox. She stood in front of the jukebox for a long time, reading all the titles. Then she started punching songs. Her long hair unrolled over her shoulders and the green and red jukebox lights polished the skin of her cheeks. Before she punched her last song she looked up and caught Wyman watching her. She smiled and pointed at him and he looked back at the bar, but he heard her say, "What song is it you want to hear?" As he remembers it now, in the truck racing to beat the daybreak, Wyman realizes how smart she must be, or intuitive. Anyway, she knew that he would know what songs were on the jukebox in Al's.

A strange squawk warbles from the Game Boy and then there is silence. Wyman hears Audra sigh into a chuckle.
He can imagine her shaking her head a little at the end of it.

"This may be weird," Audra says, "but do you ever want to just call people up, people you used to know, and say, you know, 'What happened in your life?' You know, 'What do you think of everything?'"

"Where'd that come from?" Wyman asks.

"I don't know. I guess I was just thinking about this Game Boy and I remember the first game like this I played was when I was a little kid, they had these games called Merlin? Do you remember those?"

"I don't think I ever saw one," Wyman says.

"Well they were little machines and they played a bunch of beeps in different tones and then you had to remember the right tones and punch them back in."

"What, it had keys?"

"Well, yeah. It was a memory game. Merlin would play a sequence of tones and then you would have to punch it back in the right sequence. The better you got the longer the sequences got."

"I see," Wyman says.

"Anyway, it's nothing," Audra says. "My high school boyfriend gave me one for Christmas one year, is all. I just wonder where people like that go, high school boyfriends. What they'd think now about everything."
Where people like that have gone is the last thing Wyman wants to think about right now. Wyman wants to know that, by the way the road is turning they should be almost to Ravalli. He wants to know there is a mountain dead ahead. He turns the truck as the highway bends hard to the east and climbs in a gulley between hills. Wyman wants to know things like Audra Barranco is with him in his truck. These are the parts of his life he can manage.

From the top of the long steep, he sees the yellow lights of St. Ignatius speckling the dark valley below. Although they are swallowed by the dark, Wyman knows the Missions rise abruptly from the plain to the east. He knows how they jump up from the flats, soar really, and march away to the north in one long front.

"Just a little while longer," Wyman says. His hand has fallen back to Audra's thigh. He squeezes the loose muscle.

"Great," she says. He feels her fingers pressing into his bicep. "I can't wait. This is so great. It's like an adventure. I'm so glad I came with you."

Wyman wonders if she means that, or what she means by it. She's still a little drunk. He sneaks a glance and she smiles with drunk, tired-angel eyes. He knows that had he said it, he would have meant all of it. Because it's true. He is still drunk, too, but he is having a wonderful time driving the night highway and feeling her beside him. He
loves the idea of taking her to Ninepipe. He doesn't know if this is a beginning, but figures if it is, why not have a little magic along?

He knows it's ridiculous, but already he is envisioning other things they will do together. He pictures them camping out come spring. He sees a lake in the Missions, or a stream in the Bob Marshall with a tent beside it and he and Audra cooking over a fire. He has not even kissed her yet, but he knows there will be no game-playing when that time comes.

Wyman also knows now that they will be at Ninepipe long before sunrise. It's O.K. It's better that way, in fact. They'll have time to talk. Maybe they will kiss then. He's dying to kiss her and maybe rub his palm across her nipples. Wyman sees guardrails suddenly on both sides of the highway and lifts his foot from the gas pedal. Going slower, he can gauge the road better. He sees the guardrails bend back to the earth, sees the green county road sign, Gunlock Road. He takes a left, driving towards the center of the broad basin that is the Mission valley.

The headlights bounce over brush and tall grasses on the fringe of the road. Patches of cattails mark the ponds. He drives much slower. Audra leans forward, elbows on the dash, peering out the windshield. Then she sits up straight, close to her window, one hand cupped to the glass
near her eyes. Wyman pays attention to the way the truck slides on the road. He drives and watches the road to see if he can spot a pheasant maybe, running along the edge of the brush up ahead, or a coyote. He argues with himself over what he is about to say. He says it anyway. "So tell me about this marriage of yours."

"I can tell I should have never said that. I just should have never said it." She is talking to the glass of the window and her window fogs with her breath. She drops back against the seat. Wyman sees that she is staring at the Game Boy in her hand, and that she is maybe regretting something. He feels like he has taken things wrong. That is the way her look makes him feel, like she is regretting the way he is acting. It's like he didn't get the joke and she's tired of it.

"Well, I think it's something I have a right to know," he says, hearing the tone of justification in his voice, at the same time wondering what it is that makes him feel the need to justify his asking. "Don't you?"

"Am I acting happily married right now? Is this something you think a happily married woman would do?" Audra asks. She looks at him to ask it, and he flicks his eyes between her and the road, doing his best to meet her. What he sees is the kind of sadness people have when you don't believe them.
Wyman wants to push farther. He wants to know goddamnit yes or no, is she married? It's that simple. But he is feeling that something is going on here beyond his capacity to understand. He has never been involved with a married woman. He could never imagine condoning an adultery, let alone participating in one. Wyman has done questionable things all his life, but there are islands of integrity he can cling to and this is one. With Audra he is feeling that there are new elements he had never before considered.

He senses a consistent level of truth in the way she is acting this out. He imagines that Audra is married, but that it is an unfortunate circumstance for her, unhappy and beyond her control. He wonders if this could possibly be her one night of happiness and freedom, her one night to feel the wind in her hair. Maybe she would never know this kind of silly joy again. Of course, maybe she screws around on her husband all the time. Or maybe she is making it all up as she goes along, trying to create a little mystery, herself. In Al's he tried to check out her ring finger. There was no ring, no mark where a ring would have been. But it is late December and nobody in Missoula has tan lines in late December.

Wyman slows the truck. He waits for the crossroads and when the headlights strike it, he turns right. They drive
over a small rise and then the Ninepipe light appears. The light is always on. It illuminates the small clearing where hunters park their trucks. It shines on a small one-room shack. The shack is white with an angled grey roof and the ground is covered with snow but tufts of weeds mottle it. Wyman turns into the grass and stops the truck. He says, "We're really early."

"This is it?" Audra asks. He does not think she intends to sound disappointed.

"Yeah, well, we're going to go out into this field a ways. There's these pits dug along this dike and we're going get in one of them."

"What's in there?" Audra asks, pointing at the shack. "It's where you sign in for the pits," Wyman says. "Can we go in?"

"Yeah. There's some chairs in there," Wyman says. "And a cot."

Wyman opens his door and the dome light comes on. The cold makes the skin of his cheeks feel raw and tight, as if he has just shaved. Audra slips down out of the truck on her side. She walks around the bed and then starts to skip sideways. She is skipping as he walks along, swinging her arms. She has her chin up, as if she is sallying forth.

"Lots of energy all of a sudden," Wyman says.
"Just feeling frisky I guess," Audra says. She tucks her chin to smile.

Wyman twists the latch on the shack door and reaches around to switch the light on. The shack has one window, facing east, toward Ninepipe reservoir. Beneath the window stands a table where hunters sign in for the pits. A double row of plastic tabs with numbers corresponding to certain pits hang from chrome hooks mounted on the wall. The floor is powdered with old mud, and poster of protected birds regulations tatter the walls. Across the room from the door rests an old recliner. The recliner had once been imitation leather, but the leather has cracked and peeled and clings only in crumbs. Directly to the right of the doorway a low cot kneels snug against the wall. A wood stove fills the far corner. Wyman steps up into the shack.

Audra follows. He finds himself standing close to her. He finds himself kissing her. Audra presses against him. Her hands grip his coat up near the shoulders. He kisses her. He feels like he can taste every gin and tonic she drank in Al’s in the moistness beneath her tongue. Wyman thinks how wonderful this is. He is lost in the feeling that something wonderful and new is happening to him. He thinks of how thrilling it is that they will share this and then he will share the geese with her. Audra breaks off. Her lips drop away from the formation of her last kiss and
her eyes open slowly. Her eyes are close together, close to
the bridge of her nose, looking up from beneath her
eyebrows. Audra says, "Let's be bad."

What happens next is Wyman feels himself being backed
onto the cot and then they are making a kind of love that is
over at exactly the moment Wyman starts to hope it can go
on. And then Wyman is wondering what happened. He is lying
on his back on the cot with his jeans and shorts coiled
around his ankles, staring at the ceiling. His shirt is
unbuttoned but not off. Audra Barranco lies on top of him.
She is naked from the waist down. Her turtleneck is pulled
up so that her nipples can press into the flesh of his
chest. Wyman remembers how strange and tiny her breasts
look, just poky nipples on tugs of flesh. Without looking
that is all he remembers of her body.

Wyman feels the rough wool blanket on the cot
scratching the bare skin on the backs of his thighs. He
wonders if there are ticks in the cot, or lice. He lies
quietly, motionless, cold where her body is not touching
his. He does not know if she is awake. He does not know
if, right afterwards, he had fallen asleep for a few
moments. Now he waits for the sunlight and tries not to
shiver. He rolls his eyes to the one window in the shack,
looking for signs of morning. It will be coming soon.

Wyman thinks of the life he used to have with his young
wife and the love they used to make and he almost cries. It never goes away for good, this sadness he feels. He feels the heaviness of tears in his eyes, the clutch in his heart. He thinks it is too early in the morning. He thinks he has been drinking too much. There is a combination of factors. He lays beneath Audra, feeling her weight press onto him.

Wyman waits for morning and knows it must be coming soon. He feels the cold on his naked legs, knows that the hair on his legs is standing up straight, that he has goose pimples. He wants to turn the light off in the shack so that he can see out the window, watch the sky for signs of light, but he doesn't want to wake Audra. He doesn't know what he wants to say to Audra. He already knows that Audra is not going to be the girl in his fantasies of a few hours before. He is beginning already to see Audra Barranco as a woman who, if he thinks of her at all in the future, he will despise a little. He doesn't like that. It makes him sadder. But he feels it. Wyman wonders if he can reach the light switch without rising. He stretches his arm up over his head. He cranes his neck to see where his hand is on the wall. Audra's head stirs on his chest, then lifts. He can feel where she has left a few droplets of saliva on his chest, the moisture cold in the chill air.

"Hi handsome," she says.

He lifts a hand and absently rubs her back. He asks,
"You still want to see the geese?"

He watches her face change, watches her disappointment grow to the point that she could turn mean. She says, "Don't be a jerk. Please tell me you're not another jerk."

"I just wanted to make sure you weren't done with me," he says and he knows that already he is being more defensive than he wants to.

"You are going to be a jerk."

"No I'm not," he says. "But, I mean, is this all?"

Audra's face tips up into a wicked leer and she lifts her hips off him and reaches between his legs and she says, "That's up to you." But when she sees his expression hasn't changed, she settles back down on him and sighs. He is surprised when he feels her arms squeeze his shoulders. "Hey, it's o.k.," she says, "We're big people, right?" Then she sits up. Her hand flops around at the foot of the bed, gathering pieces of her clothing. When she is dressed she says, "I still want to see your geese. I think it's really special of you to bring me here to show me them."

Wyman pulls his pants up and buttons them. He gets up off the cot and tucks his shirt. He pulls the light switch down and looks out through the window. The white peaks of the Missions appear ghostly in the pale light. Even in little light they fill the eastern sky and end the broad valley. Wyman shrugs into his coat. He looks at Audra, but
her back is towards him and all he sees is her hair. He opens the door to the shack and steps down out of it. He steps back in and says, "Hey you know what? Grab that sheet."

Audra whirls around and points at the cot. She frowns. "What, do you want a trophy?"

"Cute," Wyman says. He comes back into the shack, steps in front of Audra and lifts the thin mattress, yanks the sheet from the cot. It is so threadbare it looks greasy. Wyman balls the sheet up and steps out of the shack again, down into the snow and grass. He checks if Audra is coming behind him and, when he sees that she is, he starts walking down the path mown through the field of high grasses and weeds. The sky has a slight silver cast, now like a blank movie screen. The mountains are full and soft, dark around the edges, a closer part of the sky.

Vaguely Wyman sees the low dike bank up ahead. The dike has been snowed on but much of the snow has melted and dry brown wisps of knapweed jut through. As the morning begins the dike is only tawny mixed with long slivers of white, only a piece of the wide flat fields lifted a few feet against the backdrop of the mountains. The dike runs parallel to the mountains, and where it ends to his right, Wyman knows the dike turns east, towards the peaks. Willow trees bunch along that part of the dike, beside and raised
slightly above the earth bank, fuzzy and blood red. Those are the only features Wyman sees: the dike, the willows, the Missions.

"Do you wish things were different?" he asks Audra.

"Sshhhheee," Audra says, "Every day, baby." Wyman had meant between the two of them, but he realizes she is talking about her life. He wants to ask how, but knows she won't answer with specifics.

As they walk, pheasants take off from the thick weeds about forty yards out in front of them. The birds fly in twos and threes, the flights near, then further then further. It is as if they are lined up prepared for takeoff. When one flight gets so far away, another bounces up to follow them. The pheasants are small and dark in such little light, shooting out and whirring away over the silvery snow. Their wings buzz then suddenly set for a short glide. Wyman can see that all the pheasants are hens. He watches about thirty birds get up and none are cocks. All the pheasants drop over the dike bank.

"Why did we do this to each other," Wyman says.

Audra swats him on the ass. It starts him, but when he looks at her he sees she is smiling. "You know," she says, "you are such a great guy. You really are. But I get the feeling that for some reason you want me to feel bad about what happened, and I don't get that. I think you feel bad
about it, which I don't understand but I guess is your business. But I don't want to feel bad about it. I knew exactly all along what I was doing and I don't think I should have to feel guilty or ashamed. Frankly I don't see why you'd want me to." By the end she's not smiling anymore, but instead is looking to him to understand.

Wyman says nothing, only nods as if he gets it. It's a valid point and it hits him hard. He walks, nods some more to let her know that he's thinking about it. Wyman and Audra turn right and follow the dike for about a hundred yards. His cowboy boots are not good for walking in the snow and the frozen mud beneath it. Audra holds her arms across her chest. Her steps are long and uneven, adjusting for deeper patches of snow and the clumps of knapweed. Her feet still cross over each other in the front but the longer steps exaggerate the swing of her hips to the point that Wyman thinks she looks ridiculous. Every thirty yards or so they pass where a pit has been dug in the ground and a wooden framework built down into the earth. The pits are littered inside with spent shotgun shells and plastic jerky wrappers and an occasional beer can. In some, feathers are plastered into the mud floor. The pits have numbers on wooden markers beside them. When they get to pit number fifteen Wyman stops.

"Let's get down in here," Wyman says. The pit is the
shape of a short coffin. It is sunk about five feet into the ground. A narrow bench lines the back. Wyman holds Audra's hand while she steps down onto the bench, then onto the pit floor. He does not follow immediately but pauses, points his ear towards the reservoir and listens. Far on the other side of the dike, the geese are starting to talk, a few at a time. Wyman stands in the cold morning air, feeling like a part of the distance between the woman and the geese. He jumps down into the pit with both feet. He stands with only his head and shoulder above ground level.

"They'll be coming soon," he says. He wonders if Audra cares anymore. He thinks he could make it easy for her and just drive her home, spare her going through the motions, if that's the case. He's not as fragile as all that. The air begins to fill with the two-toned calls of Canadian geese. Although they are quite a distance beyond the dike, the air is calm and the calls come clearly, sharply. There is a great rabble of noise. Wyman knows that hundreds, maybe thousands of geese are rafted up over in the reservoir, and the ringing collection of sharp calls they put together is tremendously exciting to him. He no longer cares if Audra is in the pit with him or not.

"This is great," Audra says. "It's like listening to the orchestra tune before they start playing. You know that kind of big weird sound that all those sounds make? It's
like if you could just listen to the reed instruments tuning."

Wyman glances at Audra. Orchestra? he thinks. He wonders what she knows about reed instruments. He thinks about the surge of an orchestra warming up. He has only heard it on TV. He has never thought of the geese this way.

Audra, he sees, is keyed in on the geese. She is looking off towards the mountains, her ear pointed towards the dike and the calls. It seems to him as if she is lost in it too, as if she could care less if he is in the pit. Wyman nudges her with his elbow. He holds out the balled up sheet and grabs a corner of it, letting the rest drop.

"Take this," he says to Audra, "Spread it out."

They each hold opposite ends of the sheet and stretch it across the pit longways. Wyman starts scooping snow onto the sheet so that it is anchored along the back of the pit. Audra watches, then does the same at her end.

"Just gather it around you so we can pull it over when they come," Wyman says.

When they are done arranging the sheet over their shoulder, the air is still. The geese have fallen silent.

"What happened?" Audra asks. "Are they gone?"

But Wyman knows what's up: they'll fly soon. "When they come," he says, "duck down and pull the sheet over. You can leave yourself a place to peek through. But don't
move your head, follow them with your eyes."

Both Wyman and Audra stand head and shoulder above the ground. The immediate foreground is clustered with weeds. Through the weeds Wyman can see the bank. Mostly, though, what Wyman sees from his vantage point so low to the ground is sky. It is all around silver-white, a blank high overcast, no sun. The white hurts his eyes. It hurts way back in the backs of his eyes. He has been awake too long, he knows. He feels tired now, and his eyes are drying. His head aches in a band, as if he were wearing a hat. He wonders how Audra feels. She is watching him, waiting for him to explain what is happening with the geese, but he's not going to say a word.

"Everything's just like you said it was with you, isn't it?" Wyman asks. "Married and all."

Audra shrugs, Wyman thinks, apologetically. She says, "You had to know that."

"I suppose I didn't want to."

He stares at the sky over the dike and squints. Wyman knows all about the silence between when the geese start talking and when they start flying.

"Answer me this," he says, "What is it that happens?"

Audra doesn't say anything for a while. He wonders if she understands the question, exactly what he is asking. He is thinking about asking it a different way, but he doesn't
know how to form a direct question any more discreetly. Then Audra says, "I don't know. I don't think it was a mistake. I still don't think that. It was right at the time. Something just changed somewhere along the line and now it's different. It's completely different than it was when we started out. Nothing about it is the same."

Wyman nods. This he understands. He's thought about it many times: it's not the misjudgements that hurt you, but the things you did right that didn't work.

For the moment, because she is talking about the kind of loss that often strikes him, Wyman feels very close to Audra, far more intimate than he had in the shack. Even if there are things he still cannot simplify, he feels glad to have her beside him for at least a little while longer.

Audra's eyes are fixed on the distance, the north. The morning has dawned enough to show Wyman's mascara caking under her lower lashes. He knows this happens. Audra's Roman nose is now huge in profile, but he still can't help finding it an attractive part of her.

Beyond the dike, the geese begin calling again. This sound is more coherent. Individual voices are more distinct. It's as if at first they were arguing about where they're going, but now they talk about how they're going to get there. Who's going first, second, third. What to do to avoid collisions in flight. Wyman feels Audra's hand find
his and squeeze it.

"I'm really glad I got to know you," she says. She adds, "Like this."

There is a clear change in tone when the geese get airborne. The calls are fewer, more exact and even easier to hear individually. The low sound of the call is so quick as to be almost unnoticed. It is the beginning movement of air through the long throat. The distinctive sound of the call is made in the break, when the geese clench the low tone and break it into a higher octave.

Wyman waits, hearing the birds come closer. He knows they will fly directly overhead unless they spot something on the ground and flare. Wyman ducks down in the blind and signals for Audra to do the same. They pull the sheet over their heads. Wyman and Audra crouch beneath the sheet, listening to the air ringing with geese above them. The light of the sky makes the sheet transluscent. Wyman sneaks a glance at Audra and is struck by the humor of the situation. They are in a hole in a field waiting for birds to fly over, and they are hiding under a sheet. Audra is crouched, hand on the edge of the pit, sheet balled in her fist, peering out a tiny gap between the sheet edge and the mud.

By the time Wyman sees them, the geese are close. The birds come in long wavering lines. The first echelon is off
to the left of the pit. Wyman can see the effort of their wingbeats wag their heads on the end of long necks. Then three geese, their own small formation, seem to rise from the weeds in front of the pit, seem to tower over Wyman. They are close enough for him to see the white bootstrap run from under their chins up their cheeks. A longer line follows them, huge birds with wings threshing the sky. Wyman hears feathers rattle, the wind whistling through wings. He hears the low moaning wheeze of the birds talking to each other, not calling now, just keeping time. Wyman is looking to the sky, not at Audra.

"And you want to kill them all?" Audra says. He knows she's talking to the sky, too.

"Only two a day, during the regular season."

"That seems strange," Audra says. "They're so beautiful."

Wyman says, "Hey, it's an obsession. Nobody's going to make it easy." He likes what he has said. He feels the light touch in it. There are hundreds of birds in the air now, thirty geese here, twenty over there, fifty behind them. Singles, doubles and triples in the gaps. Wyman throws the sheet back from the blind. He stands with his head craned back on top of his neck, watching the birds fly over. To the right and left the birds fly in segments of formations, crests that reshape but never break.
Still more geese lift over the dike in front of them. The moment they clear the dike they are huge. They climb as they approach and, now that the sheet is thrown back and the birds can spot Wyman and Audra, they flare and wheel left and right away from the pit. Wyman watches Audra watch the geese. He sees that her reaction is everything he hoped it would be the night before. Now he remembers what he had been feeling in Al’s. He remembers what he was anticipating. Wyman is startled by how clearly the sensation comes back. He had wanted to bring a little bit of awe to this woman. He had wanted to show her something devout from the world. He wants to breathe more and more of this air that is so filled with honking geese.

He turns back to the dike. In broad daylight, he thinks, it is hard to ignore the world around you. The snow whitens the subtle landscape of the farrow fields. Tawny brown weeds seem to gather in a low, flat haze over them. The dike’s slight tilt sets the rich red whorl of willows branches against the silver screen of sky. Another flock of geese break in scattered motion over the lip of the dike. Wyman sees them flare and is amazed at how far away from him they are able to veer by the time their flight carries them past the pit. He watches these geese over his shoulder. As the birds float towards the low mountains of the horizon, Wyman has no sense that they may someday be coming back.
Kicking Horse

David Hayden stood on the slightly mounded point, looking at the mountains across the reservoir, and wondered how long it had been this way. From the north, over by the Job Corps Center building, he could see a man walking the gravel road towards them. He couldn't tell anything about the man--his age, even--only that he was wearing jeans and a plaid cowboy shirt. What actually went on at the Job Corps Center, Dave did not know. Driving in Dave and Alden had passed an Indian couple loitering against the cinder block wall of the building, but he didn't know what they might be doing there.

Behind Dave, the grass rolled in low knobs and knolls, sliding easily down to the water and forming a shoreline of small points and pockets. In the water before him, a few yards off the point where Dave stood, a grassy hump rolled from the water's surface as if the land were coming up for one last breath before going down for good. The water itself lay still, patches of breezes riffling the mirror image of the Mission Mountains. Beyond that the actual mountains--moraine grey, fingered with snow in deeper
ravines--towered suddenly in one broad front. It was late spring, the wettest spring anybody could remember, and along the shores of Kicking Horse Reservoir the grass grew plush, spongy. The air was so clear it nearly rang and the water held a deep vibrant blue.

On the bank, across the small pocket, Alden stood rod in hand, also staring down into the water. "I think," Alden said, "that we might do it today."

"Do what?" Dave asked. He had to speak slightly louder than normal to be heard across the pocket.

"Break the Relentless Curse of Dave," Alden said.

Dave looked at Alden, tall and handsome, and smiled. "What I don't understand is, why's it me?" he asked.

"I'm a fishing wizard, Dave. Everybody knows that," Alden said. He looked at Dave, broke into a winsome smile and shrugged as if to suggest, What'd you think I was going to say?

Beyond Alden, down the road, the only road to the reservoir, Dave saw again the man walking towards them and saw that it was a heavyset young man or an older boy, and that he wore high-top tennis shoes, and that he walked by flipping his feet along before him and then stomping on them. An Indian boy.

The way he walked, the Indian reminded Dave of a bear, a grizzly. There were grizzlies in the mountains reflected
in Kicking Horse Reservoir. Alden and Dave had hiked into a high mountain lake in that area to fish a few weeks before, and Dave had suffered very real fear of a bear encounter. He had whistled steadily, the whole time he fished. Later Alden said that he could hear Dave's whistling from across the small lake, but that it was strange and swirling with the wind, sometimes sounding very nearby and sometimes sounding as if it were far behind him and sometimes as if it were coming exactly from where Dave was.

Dave had never actually seen a grizzly in the wild, only on T.V. and the movies, but the Indian boy at Kicking Horse reminded him of one, the way he plodded along. The Indian was a kid, really, sixteen maybe, but a big kid. His hair was buzz cut, flat on top, then hung in long straggles down the back. Dave saw this as the boy drew closer; then he watched the Indian boy leave the dirt road and head over the green ground swells toward them.

Dave tried not to watch his approach too obviously. He walked back to the water's edge and reached to unhook a treble from one of his guides. Standing on the rolling point, he could see beneath the surface the whole floorplan of the shallow pocket, where fingerlings flitted beneath a floating branch, where the groove deepened with weeds. He could see a decent size bass hovering around a rock. From time to time this bass would dart from its rock after other
fish entering the territory, sometimes charging into the shallows so high that its humped back bulged the water before it.

He clicked back the bail of his reel, cocked his wrist and flipped his lure across the pocket of water just in front of Alden on the other bank. He reeled quickly, watching the purple-tailed Mepps wiggle through the water past the bass on guard at its rock. The fish did not flinch. Alden’s lure plunked into the water and Dave watched how Alden reeled, saw that he, too, had spotted the bass. But Dave’s eye was on the Indian boy, because the boy had walked up to a tall, table-topped rock, upon which Dave’s tackle box sat and against which Dave had leaned his fly-rod. There the boy paused to look first at the tackle box, then at the rod. But the pause was momentary. The boy came on, walked right up to Dave and stood directly behind him. Dave cast again over the bass guarding its rock. He reeled.

The Indian stepped closer until Dave could feel his presence on the back of his neck. Dave watched the purple-tailed lure flash beneath the water past the bass. Nothing. The Indian said nothing. When Dave cast again he was able to sneak a glance at the ground behind him and see that the Indian kid stood just over his left shoulder. Dave looked over that shoulder. The Indian had a broad fat face, with
eyes pinched in it. His eyebrows, thin slants, started from the outside and lifted up away from his eyes towards each other in the middle. He said nothing. Dave took a few steps closer to the water, then edged along it towards the inner edge of the pocket. He could feel the Indian follow.

"Trying to catch this bugger," Dave said. "See him?" He pointed with the rod tip. Dave watched as the Indian boy looked into the water. His eyes, small and dull, rolled from the fish to Dave. The Indian kid nodded one time.

Dave wondered if he was slow. He seemed slow, the way his reactions took so long. Plus the steady dull gleam in his eyes. He stood with thumbs hooked into his front pockets, hips rolling forward under a bulging belly, and stared at Dave. It looked for a minute like he might smile, but then ... nothing.

On the way to Kicking Horse that morning, Dave and Alden had stopped at Arlee and bought a permit at a convenience store. Earlier that spring, the one other time Dave and Alden had tried fishing the Reservation, at Lonepine, they had been nervous because neither of them had a Tribal permit. They were afraid they would be checked by a Tribal Fish and Game Officer. Alden had said he didn't want to go to an Indian jail. Dave had told him it would probably just be a fine, but Alden said he heard bad things happened to white people in reservation jails.
They had left Lonespine without fishing. So this time they stopped at Little Joe's Gas'n'Go to buy a permit. There had been a man in front of them at the check-out register, an Indian, who was so drunk that, although it was only ten in the morning, already he couldn't tell if he had pumped the gas he was paying for or if he was about to. Out at the pump, Dave could see two other Indians in a long, low car. It was easy to assume they were drunk, too. A pregnant Indian woman smoked cigarettes and played the Keno machine in the convenience store. She told the drunk man to go home.

"Shut your fat face," he said.

She said, "Go home Jim. It's late."

The drunk man stood and stared at her for a long time, like he was wondering if she knew what he thought about her. Alden filled out the permit information and paid the check-out girl. On the way out of the store, they passed the drunk man, still standing heavy on his heels and staring.

Alden said to Dave, "Jesus Christ, huh?"

Dave said, "Tough life."

"Unbelievable," Alden had said.

Dave thought he caught the same dead empty echo in the boy's eye that he had seen in that man's. But the more the image came to him, the more he thought it might be what he was looking for. He cast again. He turned his face so he
could flick his glance back and forth between the Indian kid and the bass while he reeled. "You fish here a lot?" he asked.

"No," the boy said, his voice deep in timbre but still strained by adolescence, "I don't fish here."

Dave frowned and nodded as if he understood where his assumption had gone wrong. He turned back towards the reservoir and checked Alden across the small pocket of water. He could see that Alden's face tilted towards the bass on its rock, but his eyes lifted to watch the Indian boy. Dave cast again and reeled. He watched his Mepps spinner whir underwater past the rock. The bass' tail fanned rhythmically without a hitch.

"Hey, lookee what I found," the boy said behind him. Dave twisted to see that the boy held a partly unfolded Buck knife. He held the knife handle firmly in one hand, as if he were about to continue unfolding the blade. But he didn't, and he didn't look at Dave. He gazed at the knife.

Dave stepped one foot around behind the other, turning his back away from the Indian kid. He tried to think of the right thing to say and came up with, "It's not mine."

"It was just laying here," the kid said. He continued to stare at the knife, as if it were about to tell him something. But what Dave was thinking was that he had only moments before been standing where the Indian was now, and
he had not seen the knife on the ground. It was a fairly big Buck knife. Dave thought he would have noticed it on the ground. Looking at it now, he could see that the knife was clean, was not caked with earth, as it would have been had it lain pressed down into the bank and out of plain sight.

Dave said across the small pocket of water to Alden, "Well, Alden, this isn't looking too good."

"Looks like your curse might just hang on," Alden said. Dave caught him watching closely and frowned extra hard.

"I think it's you," Dave said. He let Alden see that he was watching the kid, who was staring at the knife blade. The kid reached out and touched the blade with his free hand, pinched it between his fingers as if he were about to fan it all the way open. Dave made an effort to keep casting and reeling, but he paid no real attention to that.

"Joel and I went trout fishing last weekend and I caught eleven," Alden said. "I caught nine at Rock Creek Thursday."

"Which ones?" Alden asked.

"What do you mean, which ones?"

"I have most of those Rock Creek fish named."

"Jesus," Dave said.

"Anybody see you catch them?"

Dave tried to laugh him off, but it sounded too loud.
Even though his back now quartered away from the Indian kid, he felt his shoulder blades involuntarily pinching together. He took a long peer into the water, then deliberately checked a spot a few feet down the bank. He reeled in and stepped as casually as he could to the spot he had checked. Now, though, he felt himself obliged to cast naturally, turning his back once again to the boy. He whipped his lure across the water, reeled, did not budge the fish. Behind him, he could feel that the boy had drifted in and again stood less than an arm's length behind his back. Dave twisted to look over his shoulder. He saw the boy pull the blade open to a right angle and turn the knife in his hand, rinsing it with his gaze.

"Looks like it's yours now," Dave said.

The boy shrugged, pressed the back of the blade against his thigh to snap it closed and reached around his hip to jam the knife in his back pocket. Then he stepped up until his chest was almost touching Dave's right shoulder. The boy asked, "Can you catch him yet?"

Dave immediately shifted down the bank a few steps. "Let's try this," he said, and cast again to the bass. Underwater, the fish finned in place, tail waving lazily. Every once in a while the bass jerked suddenly towards an intruding fish, but Dave and Alden's constant casting seemed to have rooted him to his rock.
The Indian kid walked up the bank to the tall, flat rock where Dave had unfolded the terraced shelves of his tackle box. He began going through the lures, lifting one at a time. His head slumped between his shoulders while he watched lures dangle, then dropped each for another. Once he held a lure flat in the palm of his hand, flipped it over with the tip of his finger, and scowled at it. Dave watched as the boy turned his attention to the new Loomis fly rod Dave had leaned against the rock. He watched the boy run his fingers up and down the slender carbon-fiber rod. The boy seemed to understand its value, brushed his fingers along it lightly.

Dave tried not to stare. Then the boy was back, standing directly behind his left shoulder. The boy said, "Try this?"

He held an old rubber worm, one missing nicks of rubber and decaying so that it had lost the ridges of its finish.

"I didn't try that," Dave said.

Across the pocket, Alden said, "Let's just go." He began to walked up to the flat rock.

"Try this," the boy said.

"I don't think so," Dave said. He pivoted and walked around the boy, toward Alden and the rock. He felt the boy following him. When he reached the rock, Dave closed the lid on the tackle box and buckled the latch in place. He
reached for his fly rod. With the two rods in one hand, he
picked the tackle box in the other.

"I bet you'd catch him with this," the boy said.
"Tell you what, you keep that and try it."

The boy's eyes lifted his slitted lids. His dish-shaped face swung up. "Give me your rod?"

Dave felt the roots of his throat throb, pulsing deep into his chest. He checked with Alden, who sat in the cab with the passenger door open and his feet sticking out. Alden said, "Let's get out of here." He pivoted his legs into the truck and slammed the door shut. Dave stood staring at the boy, who held his flat palm out with the worm in it. Then he said, "You just keep that."

Dave circled behind the pick-up to the driver's side. He opened the door and, with one hand still holding the top of the door, he said to the boy, "Take it easy."

The boy frowned. "Take it easy," he said.

"See you," Alden said through the rolled down window.

The boy said, "See you."

Dave sat down into the truck. At least, he thought, I gave him the worm. Then he thought that was chickenshit.

"That kid spooked me," Dave said.

"I didn't know what was going on," Alden said.

"Did it spook you?"

"Well, I just didn't know what was going on."
Dave drove the truck in a wide circle through the green grass, then back up onto the road. Crackling and popping down the gravel road, they passed the boy begin his plod back towards the Job Service buildings. Dave touched the horn and raised his palm then, curious, ducked to see in the rearview mirror, shrouded by the dust of the pickup, the boy lift his hand.

"Just spooked me," Dave said.

"Well, I think any bored Indian kid with a knife is reason for concern," Alden said.

At the north end of the reservoir, they passed an Indian couple sitting on a plank over a drainage ditch, dangling their feet so that their toes trailed in the water. The woman was bigger than the man, pot-bellied, and she wore a purple terrycloth chemise. The man wore jeans and a dirty white T-shirt. Through the thin trunks of lodgepole pine trees stretched the low brick walls of the Job Corps Center.

On the plank bridge, the Indian man had looped his arm behind the woman and was jerking her forward, playing like he was going to push her in the water. The woman was laughing, her arms drawn to her chest in recoil. David saw this and wondered about them, if they were in love or just screwing around. He thought it would be nice, at least, if they had known each other for a long time.

The Missions loomed high overhead, the high afternoon
sun falling onto the peaks and crashing down the bright scree slopes into the broad, darkly-wooded shoulders of grizzly country. Dave touched the horn, heard it toot. First the woman looked, then the man. The woman looked at the man as if she was not sure if Dave was honking at her, or why. Both their smiles had flattened.

Driving out off the gravel and onto the paved road, Dave found the Indian couple in the rearview. It would have been nice, he thought, if they could have smiled at him. But thinking of the boy made him understand why they hidn't, just as he understood that what he had seen this day was history.
March 12, 1990
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SPEARING CARP

In early spring the marshes flooded and muddy water stood way up into the cattails. We would wade through the cattails and spear big buffalo carp. There were so many carp, every step you took cattails shivered and rattled in front of you from the fish bumping against the stalks under the water, trying to escape.

Sometimes there were so many fish they would foam the water, all trying to escape at once. The water, which was thick with mud, would suddenly boil and long backs armored with scales the color of toenails would rise, then slither back beneath the surface. V's wiggled away on the water and the cattails shuddered. The four of us would wade through the moil and stab carp with spears.

We wore old jeans and flannel shirts, and we tied worn-out tennis shoes tightly to our feet so we wouldn't lose them in the sucking mud. Usually Fritz and Hotzie would walk through the center of a cattail stand while Bobby and I waded near the edge of open water. Whoever waded through
the cattails speared more fish, because the carp got confused in there and churn, but Bobby and I liked spotting a V streak across the surface, then trying to head it off. When the carp streaked out, we'd stab right in front of the V. I remember Bobby one time dove headfirst at a fish, trying to spear it. Bobby was a good athlete for a little guy.

Me and Bobby and Hotzie all had spears from Upton's, regular three-pronged tips with barbs like the devil's spear. Hotzie filed the points of his every time before we went out. He carried a mill bastard file and sharpened his spear in the back seat of the car on the way out to the marsh.

Hotzie also wrapped his handle with duct tape so his hands wouldn't slip. Fritz used a spear Hotzie had made before he bought the Upton's one. The spear Fritz used was made by sharpening two pieces of tie-rod, then welding them to a small section of pipe, which was drilled and nailed to a broom handle.

Its points were long enough Fritz could spear clean through a ten-pound carp, but they had no barbs, so it was a challenge to pry big fish out of the water and lever them up without the fish slipping off.

You could always hear the spear points crunch through the thick scales and then there was a squee-gee sound to let
you know you were into the guts. We never did anything with these carp. I guess it was about spearing the biggest one—we'd hold them up and show them to each other. Although, overall, we never kept the fish. We just speared carp, then smacked them against the water or a mounded muskrat den to knock them off our spears.

You can change what happened if you remember it just however you want, I've been trying that. But you can change it for keeps when you remember things honestly, even the things that happened when you were still young. So I'll say this: some fish that were almost dead and not able to swim away we would try to spear in the eye, just to see what it looked like.

One day we were driving out to the marsh in Fritz's car and Hotzie was sitting in the back with me, filing his spear points. Bobby was sitting up front. Fritz drove a beat-up old Buick Skylark and when he stepped on the gas to get around a car in front of him, we could hear the four-barrel kick in. Hotzie said something like, "Aw Fritzie, now you're going to have to stop and re-wind the rubber band." We all laughed. We were always insulting each other's cars.

"Hear that power?" Fritz said, "Make your little piece of shit tremble just hearin' that. Your car'd forget how to start, if it heard this power beast."

"Yeah, right."
"Your car'd start crying," Fritz said. "It'd be saying 'Hotzie, why can't I be a big power beast like Fritz's car? Why do I have to be such a pussy car?'"

"Junk car," Hotzie said. "Look at that junk stereo."

That was funny in two ways, because the stereo had been in Bobby's car for a long time, until Bobby got another one.

"Yeah, take a look at those piece of shit speakers back there," Fritz said. Hotzie had made the speakers in shop class, not the electronics, just the oak housings. They were big square speakers, made for bookshelves, but Hotzie had given them to Fritz when he installed new speakers in his own car. "Look at those pieces of shit," Fritz said.

"Oh yeah, well fuck you," Hotzie said. He and I were sitting in the back seat so the speakers were right behind our heads. Hotzie twisted in the seat and reached back and yanked a big wooden speaker off its wire. He rolled down the back window and hurled the speaker out. We were going about seventy. Hotzie leaned over and reached behind my head and grabbed the other speaker and dashed it out his window, too.

I started laughing and Bobby was whooping in the front seat. Fritz kept chucking glances into the rearview mirror and yelling, "Cut it out Hotzie."

"I made the fucking things."
In the front seat, Bobby lifted his foot and smashed his heel into the cassette deck. Fritz leaned over and punched at his leg, hacking downward with a fist. "What are you doing?" Bobby kicked out the cassette deck.

"It's my cassette deck," Bobby said, "I gave it to you."

"Man this is some bold shit," Fritz said. "This is bold."

"Piece of shit car," Hotzie said from the back seat. He pulled out a hunting knife. We all carried them when we went spearing. Sometimes we used them to cut carp open, or just to hack at them. Hotzie used his to open a long gash in the overhead upholstery of Fritz's car. Fritz tried to drive and grab back at Hotzie's wrist at the same time. The car swerved all over the road.

Fritz would not let up on the gas. The four-barrel still roared. The car kept accelerating. Fritz was standing on the gas pedal to get leverage to reach around and grab at Hotzie's wrist. In the front seat, Bobby reached over and wrenched the cassette deck from the dashboard. He threw it out the window. Then he took his hunting knife and started gouging plastic and foam chunks from the dash.

We were flying down the middle of the road, Fritz still stood on the gas. I had my knife out and slashed the back
of the front seat, right behind Fritz. I don't know why, I just started slashing. Hotzie kept slashing at the roof interior over Fritz's head, and Fritz tried to drive and snatch at his wrist but Hotzie was too quick and he laughed and laughed after each slash. We all laughed and slashed away at Fritz's car. I laughed as much as anybody, it seemed funny.

It seemed like a great way to dick on Fritz. Fritz of course was upset. His teeth clenched tight so he slobbered when he breathed. Fritz never let up on the gas until Bobby leaned over, bumped the transmission up into neutral and clicked the key off in the ignition. At the same time, Hotzie lay down on his back across the back seat, head on my lap, and booted out the passenger side back window.

When we heard that baby shatter, we all stopped laughing. It was the kind of sound that makes you stop laughing. With its engine shut down, the car coasted silently down the road. You could hear the tires droning on the pavement, constantly slowing down. Until Fritz screamed, "FUCKERS!"

He let the car coast, steering it gradually over towards the berm, then slammed the brakes. The car fishtailed and skidded to a stop. A dust cloud rushed past us from behind. Everything was real quiet, then. "You assholes," Fritz said. That was the worst thing you could
call somebody in those days. It meant you were dead damn serious.

"Don't be a girl," Hotzie said, "it was a piece of shit anyway."

"Shut up, asshole," Fritz said.

"We'll pay for it, Fritz."

"Get out of my car."

"It was an accident," Hotzie said. "Come on, we'll pay for it. It'll be nicer than this car ever was."

"Get out of my car."

"Come on. We'll all pitch in," Hotzie said. He dug around in his wallet, then reached to wave a bill over the front seat, "Here, here's five bucks, that ought to just about cover it."

We all wanted to start laughing again but choked it back quickly, because Fritz looked like he was about to cry.

"Get out of my car, Hotz," Fritz said. He said it more calmly and quietly, so we knew that he was serious. Then Bobby and I started to say things like, "Aw, man, cool out," and "Relax, we'll pay for it." We all started to say, "Just relax, man."

Hotzie said, "Fritz, you know we didn't mean nothin' by it."

"That was not cool," Fritz said. I was sure he was going to cry.
Bobby said, "It was a mistake. We're sorry, man, it just got out of hand is all." He talked like it was just he and Fritz in the car, like Hotzie and I weren't there, or wouldn't understand. "You know we'll pay for it. Come on, let's go spear some carp."

"It just wasn't cool. I can't believe you guys would do that shit. Look at this car." The interior was pretty much torn out. Fritz started the car and started driving slowly down the berm. We could tell he still hadn't made up his mind about making Hotzie get out of the car, because he only drove about ten miles an hour. Fritz was watching Hotzie in the rearview mirror. Fritz said, "I'd tell your mother, Hotzie, but she wouldn't be able to say anything about it because her mouth is probably still full of my sperm."

Up front Bobby said, "Oh, man," to let Fritz know that was a good one. Me and Hotzie sat in the back seat and I looked at him and shook my head, Don't even say anything, man. I could see he really wanted to say something back. His eyes were huge. I just shook my head, Don't even. Fritz watched Hotzie in the rearview. Hotzie looked into the mirror and smiled. He said:

"Let's go nail some fucking CARP!"

Fritz looked down the road and eased onto the accelerator. Bobby said, "Stop at the County Line Store and
get some beer. I'll buy."

We went on out to the marshes and speared carp, maybe a hundred of them. Hotzie brought along a pack of firecrackers and when we speared a really big fish, we'd hold it up on the end of the spear and Hotzie stuffed a firecracker into the carp's mouth and lit it. Out of the water, the carp's mouth would make a sucking motion, even after the explosion. Sometimes the fish blew smoke rings. Hotzie got no end of glee from this.

But Fritz wasn't into it. He speared a few fish, then waded over to the dike and sat on the bank and smoked cigarettes and drank beer all afternoon. Later on I saw him on his back, staring up at the sky with a cigarette in his mouth. I yelled to him, but he didn't move. Overhead huge clouds, white on top, slate grey on the bottom, moved across the sky, flashing come and go springtime sunlight on the muddy marsh. Fritzie just laid there up on the yellow grass like you could stop the world on him.

This was just one day in our life, and we would forget it soon enough. We were learning about power, learning by exercising it on the things we could. Soon enough it would seem like the mean things we did to the fish and to each other were nothing compared to the things that happens the hands of people you don't even know.

That would be enough to keep us all friends. And of
course we would all grow up and grow more civil, although that would not make us better people. When Bill Hotz married a girl we all had bad feelings about, Fritzie would stand just as silent and handsome in his groomsman's tux as Bobby and I were in ours. Later we would all watch as Hotz ruined his life with booze and began adultery, us friends standing as silent as we had at the altar.

The meanness in us was right on the surface when we speared carp and tore up Fritzie's car, and maybe as it sank beneath the layers of time and age and maturity and responsibility and weariness it dulled, diluted. That would mean it's still there. And that would mean that we were never so close to knowing everything there was to know about ourselves as we were those days in the marsh, never so close to living.
We had a spot, a slow pool in an elbow of a brush-choked feeder creek. It was not far from County Road Seventeen, only a short ways through the woods. People on the road could probably glimpse the colors of our clothing in gaps through the trees, if they looked. At our spot, deadwood had fallen across the creek and backed flat, muddy water behind it in the bend.

Brush crowded the banks and tree trunks stood behind the brush and exploded overhead, a continuous unraveling of leaves that shaded on each day the feel of twilight. It was difficult to cast, but we didn't really need to cast. We called this place the Combat Zone and in early May the white bass were in there so thick you could ladle them out with a bucket. Johnny Bird and Digger Lytle and I would go down there right after school and by twilight we could catch 150 white bass.

We were simple midwestern boys, all the standard stuff. We wore sneakers and white tube socks with purple stripes--
school colors--around the calf. I think maybe tube socks had just come out, but maybe not. Maybe I'm wrong and tube socks had been around for a lot longer only we didn't know about it until we reached that age.

Digger drove a dented and wrinkled Skylark and Johnny had a blue Chevy Nova with mags. Digger and I both had blonde hair, parted in the middle. We both stood tall and rangy, although Digger was much taller, and when Digger stood in front of you his hips buckled forward slightly, so his head seemed tilted far away. Johnny Bird was smaller and had hair that was stiff, the color of a rusted wire brush.

We were rural boys, not farm boys, but boys from a farm town, squirrel hunters and bullhead fishermen. We knew the outdoors, knew the woods and the lake and the river and the nature of quarry and killing in the way that you know things before you stop to think about them, the way you feel things and know them. And yet every time we fished in the Combat Zone we were astounded by the apparent endlessness of the fish.

In our corner of northwest Ohio the rivers and creeks were silted, torpid with mud, fudgy. In the shadows of the Combat Zone, we pulled so many fish from the brown water that we could not believe such extreme numbers existed in one place. We could take a hundred fish, come back the next
day and take a hundred more. It was as if the bass sprang from an underground source, some endlessly surging spring.

For the white bass this was their spawning run. The fish gathered in Lake Erie in great schools, then surged across the mudflats of Sandusky Bay, injected themselves upstream into the Sandusky River and pulsed into the tiny feeder creeks to reproduce. For the bass it was about procreation.

The fish crowded into the pool at the bend of the creek to rest on their way to and from their spawning beds. In the shadow dappled light of the woods, deep beneath the flat tea surface of the water, the fish we hooked flashed frantically, flipping and twisting. I remember watching Johnny hooking fish, watching the bass flashing in the deep water, its flight traceable like the path of a dying sparkler on the night sky. And when Johnny pulled the fish from the water, twirling from the blueish monofilament thread that connected it to the bowed rod tip, the fish clamped its jaws firmly shut and pinched out long last streams of pure semen.

Johnny was disappointed when that happened because he and Digger fished side by side on a mud spit and Johnny liked to milk fish semen onto Digger's leg every chance he got. Digger got even in different ways. We insulted each other and laughed about it and it was fine because this was
the time in our lives when we first began to suspect that self doubt is something you could live with, was perhaps even a part of everybody's life.

By the springs of high school years, though, this fishing was not about goofing off so much as it was about booze. Booze and sex—we had stumbled across the connections. We were not rich kids. We worked during summers, mowing weeds or painting fire hydrants or fences, or driving delivery trucks. The summer before my senior year I dug a ditch all June and July and filled it up for August. We did whatever was available for cash for car payments and car insurance payments and gas cash and a cache of spending money designed to last throughout the school year which, by spring, had nearly always run out.

So we caught fish, white bass from the Combat Zone, and we sold them. We sold them so that we could buy booze, booze which could lead to sex in some form and that was the driving interest in our lives. We all had felt sex at least once and were committed to it. Digger Lytle screwed many girls—any girls, as it were. Johnny and I had girlfriends with whom we had sex. Mine was a brown-haired girl with smiles that told you even she thought she was silly. She had a big nose and I loved her.

Today you could say almost anything you want about it, but those two things were absolutely true—I wasn't very
good at love, but I loved her; and she had a big nose. She was cute in the way sixteen year old girls can be cute when they're not beautiful or terrifically smart. And she was as prone as any of them to show up wearing a pony tail sticking out of the side of her head.

When we first were together, in the spring, in the evening, my girlfriend and I used to drive down to the marshes of Sandusky Bay, only a mile or two from the Combat Zone. I would drive her in in my dad's station wagon to the edge of the marsh, drive up onto a brush-banked dike. The dike elevated us so that the half-harvested cornfield on the other side opened like a little theatre. Beyond it stood the groves of naked hardwoods and behind them the cattails of the marsh, stiff as brushstrokes. I would stop the station wagon and we would get out and climb up onto the hood. We scooted so we could lean back onto the windshield. Our arms floated around each other and fit. We'd kiss or not.

Because the earth was so flat, night came as an indigo cap on a dome of cool air, dropping in from above. A deer would step into the stubble of the cleared cornfield, then another and another. We could hear the papery rasp of corn sheaves scraping against each other, but not the steps of the deer. Stars appeared faintly and few at first.

We would sit on the hood of my father's station wagon,
fit against each other and in the middle of conversation she would say, "I love you boy."

And I would say, "I love you girl," and mean it in the most simple, unfinessed form, a way you can't mean after the first time you say it.

Then the geese came, first their voices, floating above us, snatched away by the wind. The sharp calls grew full-throated. High in the night sky we saw the silhouettes of geese in loose, liquid V's sailing amongst the stars. I lay with her head in the pocket of my shoulder, her fine hair on my cheek, and watched the rafts of geese float through the night, their honking strong but distant. Between flocks we talked about how we had to live where we could hear the geese, how someday we would have a house where geese flew overhead.

Only a year later I bought a used Chevy Blazer and my girlfriend and I had sex. It was that coincidental. On Fridays we drove, silently, under the last stoplight in town and on into the country night. Lights fell away from the roadside until only pinpoints in the distance marked the broad, full darkness. We rode down a county two-lane, through flat fields in the night, smelling the musk of spring beans and cabbage pushing up through mocha soil. I took her to a forgotten covered bridge over a trickling creek in the middle of nowhere. The covered bridge was no
longer open to traffic, but a rutted lane led from the county road through a field to it. The lane was lined on both sides by tall weeping willows with their new leaves bright in the night, as if the trees glowed from within.

Now and then headlights would swath through the dark like paper cut-out cones, cars on the county road. She always clenched. When the headlights passed the bridge to become increasingly dimmer in the spring mist, she relaxed again.

We made love panting in the back seat of the Blazer and every time we did I wanted immediately—even if my body wasn't ready—to do it again. What we had then were the purest moments we would ever have in our lives—not because we were in love, although that helped, but because we were young bodies learning by feel, feeling for what felt right. And neither of us planned or contrived to take advantage of the other any further than what we needed for release.

Booze would make a difference. She had not been drinking the first few times, nor had I, but later when we were drinking the things we said and did to each other went reckless and we treated each other to wild, shivering responses, and she became beautifully urgent. So I wanted booze, and my friends wanted booze for the same reasons—Johnny so he and his girl could be wild, Digger so he could persuade some girl to be wild with him—and for booze we
needed money, so when the sun set and bats flitted crazily over the twilit pool and it was too dark to fish in the Combat Zone any longer, Johnny and Digger and I took our stringers and buckets packed full of white bass, fish frozen in stiff dead curves, and we drove to the sand docks.

The sand docks were low gravel banks along the Sandusky River on the downstream edge of town. They were unofficial garbage dumps, wide open public dumpsters. Refuse littered the banks. Rats flitted between brush piles. Compost rotted underfoot. In the spring, the sand docks were crowded with dented and rusted El Caminos and low slung El Dorados and cars not terribly unlike the ones we rode around in, only mostly longer and lower to the ground.

The sand docks were flat, oil-grime gravel and the banks were on almost the same level as the river rushing by. People sat on upside-down ten gallon buckets at the river's edge, fishing. Almost to a man the fishermen on the sand docks were black. They drove down from Detroit to fish the great white bass run on the Sandusky River.

We parked along the sand docks after dark, and wandered in amongst them, hands in our pockets, trying not to appear either smug or vulnerable. We walked amongst the small camps the fishermen had divided themselves into, fires, cars--the sand dock fishermen often slept in their cars--or drag-along campers, and we found the fishermen who seemed to
not be doing so well. We looked for the booze, spotted heaps of fresh empties, or the scantier slivers of light glinting from empty whiskey bottles in the dark. These belonged to the men who would tell their wives they were going away to fish, but mostly they went sheerly because it was the act of going somewhere else, and they drank.

We found a bleary man in the dark—he was sprawled out in the back seat of his car, with the door open, or leaning against a battered camper with green trim. An older man, older than he ought to be, with red wet in the sag of his lower eyelids and grey smoking the edges of his kinky curls.

"Want some fish," Digger said.

"Whatchyou got?" the man would say. He wore a grey hooded sweatshirt with the sleeves ripped off. Work pants, cured with motor oil, and a plaid shirt, and a cap.

"We got fish."

"Where they at. I don't see no fish."

We motioned for him to follow, walked him back to our car. Digger opened the trunk and Johnny and I held up fish, stringers like long bunches of bananas, only slimy and silver in the night. More fish—heaped in buckets, piled on newspapers—glistened in the trunk.

"How much you want?" the man asked.

"Want 'em all?"

"I don't know if I want 'em all, now."
"How many you want," Digger asked. Digger always did the bargaining.

"How many you got there? How many is that?" the man asked, peering into the trunk, his head bobbing to see all the fish.

"We'll give you fifty for twenty bucks," Digger said, and we all knew that was too much, knew that fifteen we'd be happy with. At this point the man produced from somewhere in his clothing a small bottle. It was MD 20/20. Or Boone's Farm. Or a flat pint of Wild Turkey. He offered it to us, Digger first, who gave it to Johnny, who passed it to me. The gesture was sincere. The black men at the sand docks always treated us like adults.

"How much for forty?" the man would ask.

"Ain't selling forty," Digger said.

"I don't want no fifty."

"We'll give 'em to you for fifteen," Digger said, and the deal was cut. We could drift back onto the sand docks, searching for other men, more cash for the rest of our fish.

We could have told these men—they often asked. We could have said, "Follow us," and we could have led them in our car the few miles to the creek, showed them where to park beside the little bridge where the creek flowed through the culvert under the road, pointed out the path through the woods to the bend in the water and the deep pool of the
Combat Zone. We could have let these men haul white bass from our spot, let them see the flashing in the muddy water, feel it tug and jerk on the rod in their hands, let them watch the semen squirt from between their fingers as they handled the fish, feel it running opalescent and tacky on the skin between their fingers. We could have let them fill stringers and buckets with their catch—it was not much harder work than drinking heavily.

But we had found the place, and we wanted to be the ones astonished by the sheer numbers of fish in the creek bend. It made us think we had something to do with the stream and the fish and those extraordinary catches, that our powers of discovery had led to this bonanza.

That there was money in it was crucial because ours was gone and we wouldn't have to ask our parents for more. Our parents would never understand why we needed to drink beer or wine at our age—and it always came down to that whenever we were caught: Why do you think you need to drink beer? How could you explain to your parents that you needed to drink beer and give it to your girl so that you could taste its sweetness on her breath, feel its softening her lips, hear it escape in her throat, touch release in the giddy press of her body and yours?

You could never explain, either, that you had to do it now—right at this moment—because it might be your only
chance. Who knew? Who knew when the fish would stop coming into the Combat Zone? We were stunned that they were there in the first place, stunned again by their ridiculous numbers. It would never have surprised us had the white bass suddenly stopped coming, simply disappeared, because their presence had been unreal to begin with. If one spring there were no fish in the Combat Zone we would have figured, well, that's just the way she goes.

I would suspect that the fish still come and that somebody else knows about the Combat Zone now, because the creek was not difficult to find at all. Maybe white bass teem in the pool unmolested, more fish than ever. Who knows? It occurs to me that I might not know much at all anymore about that bend in the creek. We never really tried to know it, any more than we ever talked to the men on the sand docks about anything other than money and dead fish. Knowing is what we missed.

There was a time when I went to the Combat Zone and found no fish there. This was at night and we went knowing that the fish were not supposed to be in the elbow. It was not spring. This was the fall. We were driving country roads at night, late October, four of us in the car, Digger driving and me and girls. But the girl I was with was not my girlfriend. My girlfriend was babysitting. I was in Digger's back seat with a girl named Monica Albright, and I
remember for much of the evening, off and on asking myself what I was doing there. Monica Albright was a sophomore girl who ran cross-country. When she ran she had a long stride, each foot reaching way out in front of her, and she ran with her hips tucked under her. I had started to give her rides home after practice.

In Digger's car we were drinking from quart bottles of Little Kings, just driving—and I told myself that, too; we're just driving. The girls wanted to drink beer and we had it. No harm there. Digger slowed and pulled over onto the gravel berm. It wasn't until Digger jerked the car into park that I looked out the window and saw the culvert, recognized the place.

Digger twisted, peered into the back seat. He said, "Let's go see if there's anything in the Combat Zone."

The the smell of breathed beer filled the car, the engine ticked beneath the hood, and fingers touched the ticklish webs between my own fingers. A thumb burned circles in the thin skin of my palm. I knew Digger didn't want to go look for fish. The girls said nothing, each knowing as well as we did who wanted what. "Go ahead," I said, "We'll wait here."

Digger and his girl left the car, trotted down the trail and into the leafless trees. When they turned to head away, then disappeared into the darkness along the wooded
trail I had nothing to look at but Monica Albright. As I stared at her and saw her more clearly, over and over I kept seeing a face of the girl I always said I loved.

I could see Monica Albright in her blue sweats, baggy on her frame when she ran so that they drew attention to the skinny hard muscle underneath. I saw those sweats gathered in her crotch when I gave her rides home from practice, gathered where the seam of her jeans filled my imagination now. Her breasts were small, tiny really, but I remembered how once when I had given her a ride home her nipples had stayed erect for the whole trip.

The urges I felt in the back of Digger's car were fundamentally no different than the impulses that provoked the bass to gather and run inland across the mud flats and into creeks to spawn each spring. The difference is this: in the human imagination any time can be spring. I know how lovely Monica Albright looked to me at that moment, what the warm flex of Monica Albright's tongue against mine did and what it made me crazy to do. I did it. I drove myself into that girl. I heard our skin creak against the vinyl interior of Digger Lytle's car and I heard the seat springs wheeze from the bouncing of our bodies and Monica sucking breath through her teeth.

The white bass I think of mostly because of their pearly streams of semen. Hanging from our lines those
streams were single arcs. In the creek, I imagine milky clouds mixing with the water to saturate a wider area. But there is no justifying my ejaculation that night with fish spawn. Nor is there any point in trying to lump my friends and I in a class of predators with the men on the sand docks. Those men stayed for a week, drank, smoked dope and fished all night. They fished with treble hooks, casting far out into the river, then retrieving in short jerks, hoping to snag bass in the the belly. We knew something they didn't and we exploited that.

There is a simplicity of intent in the motions of the natural world that imagination betrays to suit itself. This, sadly, is what makes us men. No betrayal was more sincerely received than the one I perpetrated against the young girl who loved me then. When she heard about Monica Albright, she made me drive her out to the marsh where we had watched the geese. She wanted to be somewhere away from anybody else, she said, somewhere she could let herself go.

We did not climb up on the hood, but stood on the dike and she cried. She refused to let me touch her but stood there with the marsh behind her and made me watch her cry, made me watch her face curl and clench with tears. She did this, she told me, because she wanted me to see how badly I had hurt her. I saw something that would last longer than hurt. I saw that what I had ruined was her ability to love
simply and without question, to feel for what felt right, to purely love. That would last a lifetime.
The sign flashed in the dark, there in the headlights, brighter, bigger, and then by, visible for only as long as it took Theodore Croise to read:

Entering Fort Phil Kearny Indian Reservation.

Croise pulled his vehicle to the side of the road. The steering wheel jerked in his hand when the tires slipped from the pavement to the berm gravel. Croise braked his Suburban to a halt and shut down the engine, left the headlights burning. He stepped out, walked around the back of his rig, unsipped his fly. His legs tingled. The night was dead silent, a broad absence of sound so complete that it seemed to suck at his ears.

Then Croise began to urinate and heard his stream splat against the dry, grainy earth. Hot steam wisped upwards and Croise noticed in it the smell of coffee and a tart, rich trace of acidic decay -- ketone, he knew, because he had not eaten much since he had begun driving, three days before.

Croise could feel his bladder deflating in his abdomen. To his left, across the road, the black silhouette of a
large hill humped against the starlight. To Croise's right, the land fell away slightly from the road, sparsely whiskered with timothy spears, ending abruptly in a dark tangle of willows and box alder. Croise zipped his fly. He walked around the back of his rig to the driver's side. In the farthest reaches of the Suburban's headlights he saw standing a man.

Croise stepped to the door of his rig, reached a hand to the handle. The man's face and the front of his body glowed pale in the headlights. The back of his body was not there at all, as if he existed only where the lights washed him.

Croise said, "Hello?"

The man stood still, straight up and down, staring at Croise. He was an old Indian and he wore no shirt and his belly bulged over the wide leather of a belt. He stood perfectly straight. Croise leaned forward, peering. "Can I help you?" he asked. The man said nothing.

Croise thought: Am I hallucinating this? It's been a long goddamned trip, it's not entirely impossible you could be imagining this. You haven't eaten very much, your protein levels are down, sugar, too, and you've had a lot of caffeine. Jesus Christ, your eyes, looking into this dark after staring at the road for so long, they're flashing anyway.
Croise opened his door quickly, slipped up onto the seat. He fumbled with the keys, started the engine and shifted into drive looking again into the headlights, but the man was no longer there. With his foot on the brake, Croise flashed his brights. He found in them nothing. He let the vehicle creep slowly forward, thought he caught movement at the fringes of the darkness. Stared.

The Suburban rolled down the road. A fat man with two long braids swishing against his bare back walked quickly down the side of the road, the same direction Croise was going. Croise slowed, searched closely as he passed. That was definitely a man and he stumbled along and he did not look up as the Suburban rolled by. The man appeared in the rearview, and then was lost in the darkness.

Croise thought: Drunk. It's too early in the game to be unnerved by drunks. I wonder how Armstrong dealt with this. No, you know exactly how Armstrong would deal with this. He would buy the guy another drink.

Red neon and iodide purple wafted in ribbons, stained on the smoked dark like blankets waving slowly in the wind. It was impossible to see clearly the people at the table in the back. They were shadows, and they were not moving.

Closer, on the left side of the bar a man sat on a
stool, staring at the screen of a Keno machine. The screen was a bright hole in the dark, flooding the man's face with light. His hands rested on the control panel and, as his fingers drifted over the buttons, the plodding sounds from the Keno machine were continuous: boop, boop, boop, boop, BEEP, boop, boop BEEP, boop ... it was nearly impossible to tell when games began and ended, and the man at the machine, a small, thin man, gave no indication. His fingers worked and he stared at the screen as if it were oblivion, win, lose or draw.

There were two Indians at the bar. One sat on a bar stool with his legs spread wide. He sat back on his stool, spine piled on itself, head bent back, asleep. The other wore a black nylon jacket with white letters fading on the back. The lettering was bent in a circle, the top half of which said Grizzly. The bottom half said: Saloon. This man was huge. He stood, leaned on the bar with crossed forearms. One black cowboy boot rested on the bar's foot rail. It was easy to see his size, the breadth of his shoulders, the thickness in the back of his arms, the girth of his thighs, and also the padding of his belly. He wore his hair in a single braid straight down his back.

A long winding row of red vinyl splotches led like a blood trail from the door to the two Indians at the end of the bar. Chrome glistened in the dark below the stool tops.
Croise walked halfway down the row and stopped, boosted his buttocks onto a stool and sat waiting for a bartender. The Indian in the black nylon jacket looked over his shoulder, cigarette visible in one hand. The man was ugly, his face misshapen, swollen as if his cheekbones had been shattered, injected with silicon, then allowed to heal. His skin was ravaged by pockmarks.

"You want somethin?" the big Indian in the black jacket asked Croise over his shoulder. The man's eyes were wide fleshy slices, but in the middle of them Croise caught a liquid glaze.

"Just waiting for the bartender," Croise said.

"Thanks."

"You'll be waitin a long time," the Indian said.

"Thanks," Croise said.

"Hah hah. Go ahead and wait. You'll be waitin a long time."

Croise looked away, stared directly across the bar at the bottles rowed there, pressed his lips together and bobbed a gentle nod as if to say, Yep, that's O.K. He tapped his knuckles lightly on the bar. At the back table, low laughter smouldered amongst the shadows. Croise looked at the man passed out seated straight up on his bar stool and thought: You, of all people, should know better.

The big Indian turned to face Croise. Croise could see
how truly powerfully the man was built. The Indian swung a few steps forward.

"Listen," he said, "what are you looking for?"

"Just a beer," Croise said.

"Just a beer." The Indian moved closer, stopped in front of Croise. He reached out a hand and rested it on the bar. A cigarette jutted from between the knuckles on that hand. The Keno machine's electric cadence kept plodding time ... boop boop boop BEEP BEEP boop BEEP boop boop boop boop ... Croise watched the man's pocked, bloated face. The face said, "Just a beer. You're not gonna try kiddin me now. Or else I see a man who is in the wrong place."

Croise thought: Bad bar, bad night, same as on the outside, but different too. Here it's always blood simple to tell the outsider.

When Croise spoke to the Indian, he tried to hold the timbre in his voice, like a man who has seen it before, sees everything happening in front of him now, will provoke no interest with his reaction. He stated, "I only wanted a beer. No trouble."

But he was not sure it worked because Croise was a little scared now. The big Indian twisted his head.

"Johnathan," the Indian said over his shoulder. "Johnathan, this man wants just a beer. What do you think about that?"
Croise heard the Keno count go boop boop BEEP boop ... and stop. Croise saw the man at the Keno machine tilt back away from the screen, saw his head turn, his eyes wide. He could see by the glow of the Keno screen half of this Johnathan's face, one wide stony eye, half of the slicing curve of an emaciated grin. "Hey fellas ..." Croise said. He shifted forward on the stool so his feet touched the floor and then farther until he had some weight on them. "... I'm on the reservation to do some work and I thought I'd get a beer. I can go, no problem. No trouble."

"Sit back down," the big man told him.

Johnathan said from his stool in front of the Keno machine. "Sit down."

"I am looking for somebody," Croise admitted. He felt he had to give up something. He saw the big Indian's face loosen --maybe it meant to smile, but with so much flesh to move around, the face seemed to fall away from its center, relax towards its jowels. Croise immediately felt that he had done the right thing, had eased tensions by letting them think they were right all along. He said, "I'm looking for a man named Victor Little Hawk. Do you know where I can find him?"

"Fucking piece of shit, Victor Little Hawk," the big man said. "Find him back of the room, second door on the left." He laughed, a high taunt, like a man making fun of
someone he is beating up. "That's the shitter, in case you're too stupid to figure it out. Piece of shit Little Hawk."

From the Keno machine an edgy snivel floated towards Croise, and the thin Indian Johnathan slid himself from the stool and followed it. His face disappeared from the light of the Keno screen and he moved through darkness towards Croise. Croise could see only the narrow movement of the man's shape kiting in.

"Some other white bastard came looking for Victor Little Hawk a while back," the big Indian said. "You know what happened to him?"

Croise thought: Armstrong. In many ways, it is the most important thing to know what happened to Armstrong, exactly what happened. He asked, "What happened?"

"A little accident," Johnathan said. The gaunt man had entered Croise's immediate field of vision and continued approaching, and Croise was struck by this Johnathan's hideous grin, thought of it as the smile of an electrocuted man. Croise noticed how close together Johnathan's eyes were, how that closeness seemed to hook the corners of his grin up tighter.

"A little accident," Johnathan repeated, "A little bad fucking accident." His face drew very near Croise, eyes right on top of each other over a long, sharp nose, and then
he backed off, quartered away and stood just over Croise's left shoulder. Croise thought: I'm in big fucking trouble.

He asked, "Did this other white man talk to Little Hawk?"

The big Indian in the black jacket said, "He had an accident and then he didn't talk to anybody anymore. This other white guy, he wasn't talking when he left."

Johnathan said, "He wasn't fucking talking to nobody!"

"He a friend of yours, this white guy?" the big one asked.

"I think I know who he was," Croise said. "Not a friend, though. He stole something of mine."

"Well we killed him," Johnathan hissed from over Croise's shoulder.

"We cut his fucking balls off," said the big Indian. He laughed, loudly, from his chest, then let it fade, let the silence hang and fill. Croise sat perfectly still; he no longer had any idea how to act.

Then the big Indian said, "What do you want, or should I guess? Let me guess. You're looking for an old dead Indian."

Croise felt the concussion of the man's laugh booming in his face, flecked with spittle. He heard a high, hysterical giggle behind him -- Johnathan's. Croise couldn't think straight any more while the laughter swarmed
and then he heard Crazy Horse! We'll show you Crazy Horse, purple and red bands swirled through the smoke. The laughter rang around him: deep, basso profundo rhythmically rolling from the front; a high, jerky, grating behind, Fucker's dead, man. The huge dish face in front of him split and the top half folded back and laughter buffeted him. Croise felt as if fingernails were scraping the naked bone of his spine. You want to see Crazy Horse? I'll take you to Crazy Horse. And Croise ran.

Crazy Horse was born on Rapid Creek, in the Black Hills of what is now South Dakota and what was then the Pa Sapa, the spiritual center of the universe to the Sioux, the geographical center of the great circle of the Sioux nation. Crazy Horse was born of an Oglalla father and a Brule mother, of the Lakota Sioux. It is said that Crazy Horse was born in 1842. It is also said he was born in 1840, and in 1845.

There are no photos of Crazy Horse. There is a photo that often carries his name, but this is a brave named Kicking Bear. Crazy Horse would not allow the white man's shadow stealer to capture his shadow because he believed that within his shadow was his soul. Crazy Horse was a fair-skinned child, his hair light, streaked with yellow, and wavy. In his youth, Crazy Horse was called Curly, for
his hair, and also the Light-Haired Boy, and he was teased for his differences.

By the time he was twelve, young Curly had his first encounter with white violence. He watched white soldiers shoot a chief of his people, Conquering Bear, in a dispute over a cow stolen from a Mormon on the Holy Road. Soldiers had surrounded the village, opened fire when the chief could not produce the stolen cow -- a Lakota chief had no right to demand any action from his people. Enraged, the Lakotas rose and slaughtered the troops. This was the beginning of the wars between Plains Indians and the whites and that evening, young Curly was visited by a dream.

Three years later, on a bluff near the place of his birth, Curly's father built a medicine lodge and together father and son purified themselves. Whites had firmly intruded on the landscape of the Lakota world. Curly's father spoke to him of the needs of the people, their need, more than ever, for a strong man who could bring them together and lead them. Curly said, "It is true that it will take a great man to save the people now, a very great man, and many will hate him and many try to get him killed ..." 

And Curly dreamed again the dream he had inhabited after the death of Chief Conquering Bear. On the bluff above Rapid Creek, he dreamed of a man on a horse and while
he dreamed the horse changed colors, first roan, then bay, then black, then spotted yellow. The rider floated atop his mount. He was dressed plainly in light blue leggings and a buckskin shirt, his hair long and loose, unbraided, hanging heavy and free to his waist. The man wore a single eagle feather in his hair, no paint on his face. A small brown stone dangled behind his ear.

A black cloud rolled all along the horizon and thunder boomed and lightening streaked the sky, then the man's cheek. And then the man was naked and big blue hail spots marked his chest. Enemy shadows attacked the rider, but he charged through them, the air around his head and body streaked grey with arrows, balls. People rode behind him, his people, and they would slow him, reach out and hold his arms, and for a moment it would seem that an arrow, a bullet, a grey streak, all of which moved so slowly yet so unavoidably, for a moment it would seem that a grey streak would surely strike this man, but he would pull free from the hands that held him back and escape.

And then the storm faded, all faded, the man's blue spots, his lightening cheek, all background faded to white, only to be crowded from behind as people closed in, his people and they closed over the rider, milling and grabbing, hundreds of people now, more and more all closing in. In front, a small red-tailed hawk screamed.
Croise bolted awake, on his back, staring wildly across the ceiling. He felt overcome by a horrible fear of looking around the room, as if he were lying in a shallow pool of water and dare not raise his head above the surface. He fully expected to find a faceless figure waiting beside his bed. Or maybe standing by the door. Croise lifted his head slowly from the pillow, painfully slowly because he expected at any minute for his head to be struck viciously back.

The knock that had awakened him repeated itself on the hollow metal door of his hotel room. Croise lifted his legs, rolled, dropped his feet to the floor and stood. As it had on the road earlier, his vision seemed marked by amorphous light fills, visibly quavering, like a TV turned off in a dark room. Croise looked at the TV, where it hung from the ceiling by chains. His glance swung around the room, at the heavy plastic curtains, the spindly table, the deep pile of the carpet that even in the dark showed its orange. He shuffled towards the door, opened it until it jerked against the chain.

The crack of the door filled with the crazy face of another Indian. Croise could make no sense of the face, saw only what the space in the crack of the doorway would let him see, features that swooped, stopped, peered in, swept back suddenly in telescopic fashion. But Croise did not
leave his own face in the crack of the doorway for very long, slid instead behind the solid, dark orange shadow of the door. Croise thought: I am losing my mind or this is just too weird.

"I have a gun," Croise said. In fact, he did not.

"You lookin for Victor Little Hawk?" he heard. He could smell booze, soured by the man's breath.

"I am looking for Victor Little Hawk," Croise said, "and I do have a gun."

"Come on out here. I'm Victor Little Hawk."

Croise peered around the door, into the crack. He said, "You are not Victor Little Hawk." He knew this because Victor Little Hawk, according to his calculations, should be close to eighty years old, and this man outside his hotel room might have been in his mid-thirties.

"Sure I am."

"Listen," Croise said, "I know you're not, O.K.? So cut the shit."

"O.K. I'm a friend of Little Hawk. He sent me. Come out here and talk to me."

Croise said, "If you know Little Hawk, tell him I'd like to see him. It's worth his while."

"Wait, don't close the door."

"Get away from my room," Croise said from behind the door.
"He wants to know what you want."

"Tell him Mary Black Shawl."

"What?"

"Little Hawk would know," Croise said, and he slammed the door shut and cranked the lock bolt into its socket. He heard the man pounding from the other side, heard the lock bolt rattle in its catch, the loop of the chain chinking as the impact jiggled it, heard the deep, door-muffled voice of a man saying, "Open up the door mister."

But Croise didn't open up the door. He sat on the edge of his bed and listened to the stolid pounding and thought: I am actually scared. How could this come to a point where I am so scared?

But then he thought: What you are doing is a great thing, and maybe you have to go through some tough before you can do great things.

Croise had not come to this, rather it had come to him. One spring evening when he was much younger, in the midst of his undergraduate years, while he sat in a flourescent classroom in a night lecture, Croise heard drums.

The classroom's exterior wall lifted its small windows high, holding them near the ceiling; Croise could see nothing through the windows but the liquid dark of a clear
night and disembodied branches of a white ash. But through these square tunnels from the night, into the room drumbeats pranced and behind them, faintly, Croise heard the rise and fall of strange singing. The professor of the class, a bright man, a quipper, stood in the front of the room and continued his History of Democracy lecture, but Croise was locked onto the perfectly round moment of each drumbeat. He was mystified by their presence. Why was this happening? He could feel each beat pulsing between the bones of his feet.

Halfway through the class there was a short break and Croise left the room, left the building, walked out into the night, beneath the branches, across the quad. In the dark, on the grass, encircled by the watery glow of a ring of white candles, Croise saw four men and a woman singing. Others circled them in step. The voices floated on the night air, each voice swooping, soaring then falling away to leave notes tamped by drums. Then the chants, like water pouring over, under, around, a bed of cobblestones, weaved back in.

Sandy shuffles of moccasins on pavement scored each movement. Some of the dancers seemed adroit in their steps, while others clearly had no idea what they were doing. There were spectators, too, more and more arriving as Croise stood watching. The dancers invited watchers to join in
their slow whirl; some did. Croise asked somebody standing beside him what was going on and learned that this was a dance of spirits, a local voicing of support for a Native American conflict in upstate New York.

The rhythms of the songs pulled Croise closer even as he stood so near -- he hadn't imagined them stronger than when they drew him from the classroom. A dancer reached out a hand towards him. Croise shook his head, raised his palm. He felt thin skin vibrating, resonating against the cup of hollowed wood, and he felt a light triphammer ticking high beneath his sternum, and he found himself wondering if the crescendos of the music were real or of his own desire.

There was a woman, Black Buffalo Woman, the niece of Red Cloud, and Crazy Horse knew of her. Shortly after his vision on Cedar Ridge, young Curly fought in a battle and his bravery was noticed by many, he was unharmed although he had repeatedly charged through the enemy lines, and afterwards, Curly's father sang his name, and it was then the name of both the father and the son -- Crazy Horse. And Crazy Horse knew of this Black Buffalo Woman, had known of her throughout his life, had sneaked along the river to watch her bathe as an adolescent, had tried to speak with her under his blanket outside her lodge as a young man. He
had waited for a very long time for her, but she was married to another, a man named No Water.

But Crazy Horse came to Black Buffalo Woman and took her on a raiding party with him. He came to her lodge in the broad daylight, and she went with him, in the way that Lakota women were allowed to, as long as they did so openly. Among the Lakota people did what they wanted and were not told by others where they could or could not go. Chiefs ruled not by force, not by persuasion, but by example. When Crazy Horse came to Black Buffalo Woman she was married to another and he was a great warrior and a young chief, a shirt-wearer, which meant only that the tribe held him in special respect. When he spoke he would be listened to. If he decided to go somewhere, the people might follow.

Except Crazy Horse, already in his young life, was notably different. He was silent, never speaking his opinion like the great orators of the tribe, never telling people what to do. He did. Others could follow if they chose. The people saw that this silent one had powerful medicine. His exploits on the war fields were unparalleled and his enemies could not harm him. But he did not sing in victory feasts and the people did not know what to make of such silence and they began to call him Our Strange Man.

Crazy Horse came to the lodge of No Water, husband of Black Buffalo Woman, in the mid-morning, leading a horse.
No Water was not in the camp, but all of the other people saw Black Buffalo Woman climb onto the fine sorrel Crazy Horse offered, which he had stolen from the Snakes. Although it is often noted in the white histories that Indian men cut off the noses of their unfaithful women, amongst the Lakota, a man only had that right if his woman had deceived him.

Black Buffalo Woman did no such thing. On the morning that Crazy Horse came for her, she wore her finest buckskin dress, rows of elk teeth that Crazy Horse had given lining her breast. Her hair had been braided by the man on the horse beside her, and on her cheeks shined two great circles of vermillion, the sign of one who greatly loves another. She rode beside Crazy Horse and rode tall through camp, with many others, friends of Crazy Horse and together they all left camp and went out to raid against the Crows in the Yellowstone country.

On the second night, the small party chanced across other Lakota and they joined in the warmth of the lodge circle. Crazy Horse and Black Buffalo Woman joined their old friends He Dog and Little Big Man for a feast at the lodge of Little Shield.

And then the lodge flaps were torn aside and through the opening stepped Black Buffalo Woman's husband, No Water. He held a revolver in his hand. Crazy Horse rose to protect
himself, reached for his knife, but his friend, Little Big Man caught his arm. No Water fired his revolver into the face of Crazy Horse and the great warrior crumpled into the fire.

In the morning Croise walked to the Five Spot cafe. He sat in a booth and drank coffee and ate toast, toast soggy and limp with butter. Wind rattled the cafe's front window in its frame and gusted through the room each time the door was opened. Croise spread the local paper on the table of the booth and pored over it, reading the first paragraph of each article carefully, even though most of them were wire service stories. And then he read the obituaries.

Croise was not morbid; he did not always read the obituaries. But he knew how things happened on the reservations, how people lived long slow lives and then quickly died: frozen to death, drowned, shot, crushed in an auto accident, unable to continue living without a liver or lungs or a heart. In most cases, nobody would come looking for their grave.

Crazy Horse was a different story. His grave remained undiscovered, and Croise knew where it was. Or he thought he did. He thought he knew what this meant, too. Croise was already regarded amongst his peers as a brilliant young
academician, a rising star, so there was the obvious -- a shelf reserved in the pantheon of anthropology, tenure at Cornell.

He honestly believed, though, that the discovery would be good for others as well -- very good for the Lakota, something to be proud of. He thought that any share of the national media spotlight, any illumination thrown their way would be beneficial to others working for Native American causes. He knew that the attention Crazy Horse would bring could only be positive because Crazy Horse was a great man.

For four years, Croise's search had been operational. Now he thought he knew a set of bluffs and a tiny valley in which to center it. This he had learned from an old woman in a green cinderblock house on another dry, arid reservation, an old woman who seemed as barren as the world around her seemed and who nobody else had thought to ask. He had found her name, a name which appeared only twice in thousands of pages of interviews, and he had followed the name, traced its weave amongst countless other names stacked in myriad obituaries, marriage licenses, land deeds, vehicle registration, credit records, wills, divorce papers, birth certificates -- until he found her.

Croise pinched a wedge from his egg with the edge of his fork. He stabbed the rubbery white membrane and dipped it into the center of rich red-yellow yolk and wondered
about what the two men had said to him in the bar. Had they really killed Armstrong?

Had they really castrated him?

Croise had last seen Armstrong five days before, in Ithaca, at a faculty reception. Armstrong had been there when he arrived, had hailed Croise as he entered the room, full of false generosity. Croise had had the distinct and immediate impression he was being laughed at. Armstrong had fetched him a drink, not bothering to ask what he wanted, simply foisting a scotch and soda on him. Armstrong was a much bigger man than Croise -- swarthy, Croise thought.

At the party, Armstrong had slapped Croise on the back and smiled down a smile which stretched broad across his lips, as broad as the balding pate of his forehead. Croise had begun to understand that smile the following morning, when he had gone into his office to begin preparing groundwork for his first visit to the Fort Phil Kearny reservation. Holding the file unfolded in his hands he could see the disarray, papers out of order, askew, paper clips missing.

Croise looked up from the newspaper to catch the attention of the young boy who had served him breakfast. He held one finger in the air when the boy looked, and the boy brought him the coffee pot. The boy was small, skinny. He wore black corduroys and a black shirt festooned with
drawings of men with long hair and pouting, evil faces. Over the faces was printed the word "Poison." One of the shirt sleeves had ripped at the seam in back.

Croise returned to reading the paper while the boy filled his cup. He had begun to sense impending doom, a tangible looming that things were not going to go well. He wondered by how much time Armstrong had beaten him through the reservation, if perhaps Armstrong had eaten breakfast in this very same cafe perhaps the morning before. Maybe Armstrong knew already. Maybe he had found Little Hawk and then Crazy Horse and Croise was wasting his time and his cholesterol levels on butter-sopped toast.

Croise looked up from his paper at a man sitting in the booth with him. He was startled, jerked the paper closed too quickly. The man was simply ... there. Croise wondered if the eerie sensation he had felt a few moments before had not in fact merely been the presence of someone approaching or standing beside him. The man was old, his hair white where it cascaded from beneath the dusty brim of a black cowboy hat. He wore a white shirt and a black vest.

"Little Hawk?" Croise asked.

"No," the man said. He looked delighted, as if they were playing a guessing game and the younger man had seemed to come remarkably close, but in reality was a long way off. "My name is Matthew Little Bull."
Croise was touched by the beauty of his voice, the deep true tones, as if each word was struck on a tympani. Croise wanted to again accuse him of being Little Hawk, but did not. He said instead, "You know something I want to know. It's a very important thing, one that could help your people."

The old man stared directly into Croise's gaze. The skin of his face, the area around his eyes, struck Croise as remarkably smooth. Slightly wrinkled, yes, but nowhere near as marked and worn as he would have expected of a man after so many years of wind and sun and reservation life. The wide eyes themselves were those of a child. He said, as if it were all this simple: "My people don't need help. They need to be left alone by all you white fuckers," and smiled kindly.

"Have you met a fellow named Mr. Armstrong?" Croise asked.

"Now I heard there was a fellow by that name through here a few days ago. He left."

"Did you meet him?"

"He left."

"I know more than him," Croise said. "He steals from his colleagues. I'm the one who found you. I'm the one who found Mary Black Shawl. And I talked to her before she died, Armstrong didn't."
"I don't know any Mary Black Shawl," the man said. While he spoke, the fingers of one hand reached to touch a small caramel colored stone which hung from a leather thong around his neck. His fingers quivered with palsy. Croise noticed that the man seemed to make this motion towards the stone involuntarily, and Croise did not stare, did not want to draw attention to his observation.

"I'll go myself. I know where to start. I'll dig around and find him eventually," Croise tried. He leaned into the booth. "But I want your help. I want your people to be there."

"This digging and finding, and all this talk about people's people -- I don't know what you mean," the old man said, "All I wanted was to borrow your newspaper, if you were through." The old man slid to the edge of the booth and swung his feet out from under the table.

Croise stared, slowly nodded. "Sure." Croise pushed the paper across the table towards him. The man made a few quick folds, just enough so that he could carry the entire bundle in one hand, and stood. He winked at Croise and walked to another table. Croise watched him, noticed the rhythmic shuffle of his feet, and even though it was obscured by baggy brown trousers Croise could see the faint spring in the old man's knees. The man turned and tipped the brim of his black hat to Croise.
Croise had never been to Phil Kearny before and he knew was not doing well. These were delicate arrivals. He knew that by now word would have spread of his presence, his show at the bar the night before, running out the door. Normally Croise would have arranged connections, arranged appointments, interviews -- also arranged for maps, aerial photos, arranged for a documentary crew -- in fact he had done this for a planned trip later in the month. But the very same day he found his archives defiled, Croise had rented a Suburban and headed west early.

That was four days ago. On site, he was uncertain how best to proceed or, more to the point, what to do not to further screw up. He decided to survey the area, locate Bear Butte perhaps, and establish its distance from town. Neither the maps he had brought with him nor those he found in Phil Kearny named any nearby formation Bear Butte. He assumed it must be traditional nomenclature and decided to drive. Although the outlying terrain was primarily flat, distinguishing features few, Croise hoped he could make an educated guess.

He drove all day, first north and east, the direction in which his intuition told him he would most likely find the gravesite -- it was in that direction that Fort Robinson stood. He saw a few rises and one series of escarpments
jutting dramatically from the plains floor, but could only hazard guesses and this frustrated him, so he turned west.

Croise drove across gravel roads, down corridors of barbed wire which marked off vast expanses of grasslands. He was amazed to find no river in the vicinity. Croise thought: Where does the water come from? Rivers are the life arteries of the plains. He could not believe people would live where there was no river. He suspected a nearby lake, or perhaps aquifer supply. Now and again the road twisted and the berm slanted steeply into a glade of bunched willow bushes, choking the rill of what must be a creek. Croise knew water was there, could follow the red-purple willow vein as it wound away along the streamcourse, but he never actually saw water.

Towards evening the light shot flat from the horizon and glanced sharply off rises. Shadows ran long and as the land darkened, at the intersection of one such willow-walled creekbed and the road, in the ditch stood three doe whitetails clustered so that each looked over the shoulders of the one before her. Croise saw the deer, saw in front of them, planted in the berm, a tall yellow sign which said: Caution Deer X-ing.

He chuckled aloud at the irony but then found himself hauling his steering wheel to the left. One of the does bolted up from the ditch and onto the road, not crossing
directly, running rather at an angle oblique to Croise's Suburban as if she were planning to intercept him down the road. As Croise veered left, the doe angled further onto the pavement.

Croise stepped on the gas, heard, felt, his left wheel dive onto the berm on the opposite side of the road, struggled against the steering wheel as it bobbed in his grip. The doe was at his fender, then the passenger door, and then he was past her. He eased the vehicle back onto the road and slowed, sighting the deer -- the other two crossing the blacktop now -- fading with twilight shadows in his rearview mirror.

Back in the parking lot to his motel, he heard the phone ringing in his room before he reached the door. He stuffed his hand up to his wrist in one front pocket of his Levis, then the other, trying to find the door key. Fumbling, then finding the keyhole, Croise twisted the key, threw the door open and hurried to the phone.

"Hello?" he asked, then aware of the depth in his breaths.

"You the one looking for Victor Little Hawk?" a voice asked. Croise was sure the voice belonged to the man in the cafe, was certain he recognized the music in it, but it seemed to Croise as though the caller spoke through something to disguise his voice.
Croise took a steady breath, then answered, "I am looking for a man by that name, yes. Is this Mr. Little Hawk I'm speaking to?"

"No."

"Well, then I'm not really sure you can be of much help," Croise said, "Thank you for calling."

"What you want him for?" the voice asked. Croise could clearly hear the ruffling of fabric moving over the mouthpiece and he thought: How silly. Why is this man trying to disguise his voice? How absolutely, ridiculously silly.

Croise said, "Mr. Little Hawk, let's be frank with each other. I'm here looking for something. Frankly, I think you know that already. I know what Mr. Armstrong knew, except I know more. I spent two months worth of mornings drinking coffee with Mary Black Shawl and talking to her about this before she died. She trusted me enough to give me your name. I would appreciate it if we could get together. I'm sure I could assuage any doubts you may have about my intentions."

"Maybe this is something you should just leave alone," the man on the phone said.

"I'd like to talk to you about that," Croise said. "I talked to Mary about it at length."

Croise thought: It's starting the same way. Mary
Black Shawl had said exactly, This grave is not for you. And I told her Finding this grave is not for me, it is for you and your people. The grave will focus attention. Attention is good.

Every morning he had spoken with her -- of many things: the problem with gophers, hummingbirds, the Only Ones society, water, a dance she knew -- but every morning he circled back to this: finding Crazy Horse would be good for her people; would focus attention of something they could be proud of; she could do a very good thing. These things he spent his summer telling Mary Black Shawl, morning after morning, drinking coffee, until finally she saw that he would not quit and she told him about a place and a person.

Into the phone, Croise said, "Mrs. Black Shawl seemed to agree with me in the end, at least she gave me your name and told me you would take me where I needed to go."

The caller hung up.

In the middle of the following afternoon, Croise cloistered himself in his dank hotel room, away from the constant push of the wind. He had spoken that morning to three members of the tribal historical society, but none knew of a Victor Little Hawk. Croise worked through the phone book. The name Matthew Little Bull caught his eye.
He thought about calling it, noted the residence address, skipped on.

And again the knock on the door spooked Croise into a jolt. He went to the window, peered around the curtain, could see nothing, only an old, high-riding Ford pick-up. The truck was green, except for the crowned hood, which was rust red. Dust swept around it. Croise opened the door as far as the chain and saw Matthew Little Bull, black hat held onto his head with one hand, and Croise knew immediately that this was Victor Little Hawk.

"Let's go," the man said.

"Let me get some things."

"No. If we go, we go now. You won't need any things yet."

Croise tilted the door in, slipped the chain off the lock and stepped into the doorway. Before him, on the sidewalk between the room and the faded black asphalt of the motel parking lot, framed by the overhang of the second floor, this man looked incredibly small, but again Croise noticed his poise. Victor Little Hawk stood over the balls of his feet, legs bowed, hips tucked under his waist.

"Not even a camera?" Croise asked.

"No."

"A notebook?"

"A notebook? To write things down? Why not trust
yourself, Croise," the old man said, and he chuckled and, turning towards the pick-up truck, he stumbled, pitched his hip against the truck's high fender, tip-toed lightly back onto his balance. Little Hawk opened his door, climbed in his truck, smiled broadly, a warm, benevolent smile, and waved at Croise to come along.

Croise grabbed his coat from the chairback near the door, shut the door behind him, and joined Little Hawk in the truck. A battered and scuffed orange cooler, one corner of its lid broken off, sat on the floor at Croise's feet. The cooler had no ice in it, only yellow cans of Coors. Little Hawk reached through the broken corner of the cooler and pulled out a beer. "Have one," he told Croise. Croise felt it was important to do just that, to not destroy whatever tenuous connection had been established.

The beer popped then hissed when it was opened, and Croise slurped warm foam off the top of the can. "We have to make a stop," Little Hawk said, as they bounced over the edge of the motel parking lot and onto the street. He drove south through Phil Kearny, along streets as wide as rivers. It was a town built by wind, squat buildings, brick, church with broad slant to its roofpeak and a short steeple, houses sprawled low and wide, the town's fingertips gripped to the edge of the tablelands.

Little Hawk stopped the truck at a small house on
cinderblock risers, a shotgun shack with broken yellow shingles and a sagging windowframe and no grass in the dirt of the front plot. Two concrete steps, separate from the house, unaccompanied by railings, led to the door. Victor Little Hawk walked up both while Croise waited in the truck.

Little Hawk returned holding the hand of a young girl, perhaps ten. She wore only a T-shirt and pink sweat pants. The girl's hair was raven black and remarkably long; it flowed from her head in an angle with the wind. Little Hawk led her to the passenger side of his truck and Croise opened the door.

"She should see this," Little Hawk said. "She is the granddaughter of Mary Black Shawl. Her name is Maggie Arnaud, but her real name is Maggie They Are Afraid of Her."

Little Hawk lifted the girl onto Croise's lap, and Croise felt her shiver. Croise lifted her over his lap, placed her on the broad bench seat between himself and the driver. He had forgotten to put his jacket on in the first place and now he held it out for the girl. It was a field jacket with green corduroy around the collar. When the girl made no move, Croise wrapped her in it.

Victor Little Hawk drove his truck back through town, and then out of it to the north. He said nothing, sipped his beer and peered just over the steering wheel at the road. Croise held his end of the silence. Out of town, he
stared at the wide plains, at the thin distant line of cottonwoods staking out an invisible watercourse. Closer, sharply squared haybales glistened in sunlight so hard it made the bales seem wet. As they drove, gusts of wind rocked the truck, shoved its nose towards the side of the road, but Little Hawk swung back onto the highway each time.

"What are you?" Little Hawk asked.

"An ethnographer."

"What's that, an ethnographer?"

"It's like an anthropologist," Croise said.

Little Hawk stared through the broad curve of the windshield.

"I study cultures," Croise said.

Little Hawk continued staring at the road. He drank from his beer. He adjusted the tilt of his hat, pushing it further back on his head. The girl said nothing. Her hair eddied in a glossy curl where the collar of Croise's jacket doubled it out. Now and then Little Hawk would reach over and touch the top of her head with his fingers.

In the distance, along the road, Croise caught a dazzling flash in the sunlight, a bright slab of light flashing like a cipher. As they drew closer he saw that it was the glint of a roadsign being waggled back and forth by the wind. In the sky a hawk tried to soar but was tossed by the wind.
"What happened with Armstrong?" Croise asked.

"He got in trouble," Little Hawk said.

"They didn't kill him, did they?"

"They might as well have," Little Hawk said. "Mr. Armstrong went to the Grizzly Saloon and had too much to drink. He tried to meet an Indian girl. First he tried to buy everybody drinks and make them think he was a good guy. Then he got into trouble with this girl. They beat him up pretty good, I hear. They took a knife and cut off his ..." Little Hawk glanced beside him at the girl on the seat. "He had to go away. I heard he was not a very good person."

"There were no arrests?"

"Sometimes things happen around here that other people don't hear about. That Johnathan Brosseau and that Luke Bird and all of those guys, they may get arrested but it doesn't matter. They'll go to jail, what do they care?"

Croise looked off over the wide yellow range. A telephone line headed off into the distance, the tall poles marching endlessly across the dry land like a thousand towering crosses, a slightly serpentine bend to their line where the terrain dipped. Croise thought about finding Crazy Horse. He was settled now that he knew Armstrong had not beaten him, but he was not as excited as he thought he would be now that it was happening. Croise thought: I wonder if I should just keep it to myself, not tell anybody.
I would be the only member of my race to see Crazy Horse, to know where he is. But no, I'll be that anyway, for a short time. No, I have to tell. I will tell. I want to tell.

Crazy Horse was a powerful and misunderstood figure, even amongst the Lakota. His exploits on the battlefield were well-documented, but after he recovered from the wounds inflicted by No Water, at the time when his people most needed a leader to hold together the great circle, the sacred hoop of the Sioux, in face of the white man's whithering encroachment and attacks, Crazy Horse withdrew even more into silence and solitude. Still he led only by action. When Custer attacked the Little Big Horn camp, warriors milled and circled, waiting for the great Crazy Horse to lead them into the battle.

Crazy Horse shied away from whites whenever possible, and his people followed. In the months after the Little Big Horn, Crazy Horse and his band fled across the Rosebud, avoiding contact, trying to locate meat for the winter. But Crazy Horse realized that the time had come when the nomadic life of his people could no longer exist. Even his own people, No Water's band of Bad Faces -- agency Indians now -- served as scouts to run Crazy Horse down.

Lured by promises of warm clothing and full rations, and the guarantee that he could remain in his homeland, Crazy Horse led his people to Fort Robinson at the end of
summer, 1877. There were rumors and intrigue and Crazy Horse was lied to by his own people and by the U.S. government troops. The agency chiefs were afraid Crazy Horse would get to go to Washington, to see the Great Father, and that he would become the most important amongst the Lakota. It was something that would never have happened in the old way, but now the white soldiers decided who was important.

The agency Indians whispered to soldiers that Crazy Horse was making war talk even as he brought his people in, that he would only take the clothes and rations and then flee again into the wilderness. Crazy Horse was camped near Fort Robinson, awaiting Generals Crook and Bradley, with whom he would negotiate peace. But the negotiations never happened. The Nez Perce trouble had broken out, and the government wanted Crazy Horse and his men to fight against the Nez Perce. At first, Crazy Horse said he would not, but he was finally convinced to fight, and when he told this, an interpreter twisted his words to say that he would fight against and kill all the whites, rub out Crook as he had rubbed out Custer.

So instead of a council meeting between the camp and the fort, as had been planned, Crazy Horse was asked to come into Fort Robinson. His own people, now agency police, formed an escort to come and get him. When he entered the
fort, Crazy Horse was led towards the stockade by his old friend Little Big Man, now an agency policeman. When Crazy Horse saw the bars on the window of the stockade, he realized the trap and reared back. Little Big Man held onto his arms, but Crazy Horse managed to pull a knife he had hidden in his clothing. He slashed and lunged, but other agency police held him now and the soldiers joined the struggle.

A soldier ran his bayonet twice through Crazy Horse's back, just below the rib cage. After the second wound, the Strange Man stood quietly and said, "Let me go my friends. You have got me hurt enough." The Lakotas let go his arms. Crazy Horse died in the night. His body was taken away by his father, who had changed his name to Worm.

Croise wondered if people would one day come to find his gravesite, come to see the man who found Crazy Horse. Not to dig him up, of course, but to lay a hand on the headstone, read the epitaph, the way they did Jim Morrison's or Hemingway's -- not to that degree perhaps but it was not inconceivable to think that there would be admirers in his field, followers generations later, even.

In the distance the horizon crimped, tilted up in a low line of mountains, and as they drew closer the land began to tumble and the road wound through slight rises until they grew steep. On the hillsides, the wind swept over range
grass like herds of small animals on the run. They had been
driving for hours. Beside him on the seat, the little girl
pushed back the sleeve of his jacket from her wrist and
reached through the broken corner of the cooler and took out
a Coors. She cracked the top open and drank.

Croise asked, "Where are we going?"

"Have another beer," Little Hawk told him.

Croise thought: I was ready for anything, but this
seems like a long way away. Much, much too long a way.

"You don't know so much as you think you do," Little
Hawk said. "Have another beer."

"Well, I must admit, this is surprising." Croise had
been thinking for the last few hours that they were awfully
far from where he thought they should be, but he felt
himself getting drunk and wondered if he shouldn't just keep
his mouth shut, wondered if he would sound foolish
questioning Little Hawk. He took another beer from the
cooler. Victor Little Hawk's driving had slowed to a crawl
and when the wind pushed the nose of his truck, it took
longer to correct the course. A sunset gathered force
above, and the vicious slant of the sun blasted upturned
surfaces and slashed the land all around them. Long pools
of shadow gathered in the rolls of the earth, while the
rounded crests glowed golden.

"I thought the grave was on Bear Butte."
"Did you read that in a book? You white people and your written down books. Is that where you read that?"

"No," Croise said, momentarily again proud of himself for his discoveries, "Mary Black Shawl told me."

"That so," Little Hawk said, and Croise could not decide whether the man seemed surprised and trying to mask it, or if he thought that was typical of what a foolish old woman might do. "O.K., white man, I will tell you this. O.K. Worm built a burial scaffold and it stayed there for a long time. This was no secret to the people, or even to the whites. Everybody knew where the grave was. And then the people were moved and before they were moved Worm and Touch the Clouds went away they took Crazy Horse to another place. So that's why you think it should be back there. But Worm and Touch the Clouds went fast and far. That's why none of your damned white history books tell where he is."

Little Hawk reached to touch the hair of the girl between them. "Excuse my bad words. You remember this though, Maggie. Remember all of the things that get said here for a long time." To Croise he added, "She is a direct descendant of this man who's grave you want to rob."

Croise sighed. He was well-versed in the grave-robbing issue and had thrashed himself around on it until he stood firmly on the side of science. Still he was not unsympathetic to the views of other people. "I'm not
robbing the grave," Croise said. "I only want people to know. This was a great man. Your people should know about this man."

"He can do nothing for us now. This is for you."

"Knowledge is for everybody," Croise said. He was drunk and wanted to make sure he said what he meant, so he added, "Knowledge is good for everybody."

"Your knowledge is no good for me," Little Hawk said. "Your knowledge isn't knowing."

Croise sipped from his beer, then leaned forward and placed it on the flat of the dashboard. He held onto it there, looked intently at the beer he held on the dash of the truck. His focus blurred and he found himself seeing clearly further into his field of vision, out the windshield of the truck, past the gravel-edged asphalt track of the highway rushing along the outsides of his eyes, farther into the golden rolling knolls.

"I know how hard it is for you to trust me. I understand that and I don't blame you for it," Croise said, thinking: it is the same everywhere, because I am white. "But I believe in my heart that this is a good thing."

"Don't talk to me about beliefs," Little Hawk said. "My people once believed that a shirt made of deerskin and painted a certain way would turn back bullets. They believed that if they danced all night, the buffalo would
come back, and all their ancestors. Did you ever believe anything that way? I doubt it."

"I know that," Croise said.

"You don't have to be condescending."

"I'm not condescending. But I know your people. I know everything I can know."

"And that's what makes you think you have the right to dig up a man, because you read some books."

Croise turned to Little Hawk. The older man stared out the windshield. Croise's glance flickered to the little girl beside him. She watched him openly. He tried to smile. She watched.

Croise focused again on Little Hawk. The old man's eyes were as wide as the windshield. Croise thought for a moment he understood what was happening--not a replay of the same old thing, the instinctual resistance, but something new. He said, "So why are you taking me?"

"That Armstrong's not dead. He'll be back. You're not dead. That's the way it is with you people. I figure this might as well be done with some fucking dignity."

Little Hawk drove the truck along a wide curve banding a hillside. A coulee branched through the earth below them, gouging and falling away into the crinkled breaks of a distant creek bed. Buckbrush thickened the crotch of the coulee, and further towards the mouth, willows. Little Hawk
pulled the truck onto the side of the road and shut it down.

"I'm tired," he said. "I'm sleepin."

Croise thought: Does this guy really know what he's talking about, or am I on a wild goose chase? Crazy Horse died at Fort Robinson, South Dakota. We have to be in south central Montana by now. But Croise was drunk, something he was wholly unaccustomed to. Intending to think things through until Little Hawk awoke, Croise rested his cheek against the glass of the truck window. He felt the wind suck away all heat from inside the cab through the cold glass. He felt the young girl's small head on his thigh and heard her breathe, smelled the sweet beer ... but that could have been Little Hawk or even himself. And then Croise passed out.

And then he was awake and alone in the truck and it was dark. Croise stretched, got out of the truck and stood on the gravel of the berm. It was the middle of the night and the stars crowded the sky so that, when Croise looked up into them, when he switched his focus from star to star, it seemed as if his eyes forced stars to collide and a settling occurred throughout his field of vision. But that could have been the effects of the alcohol. He was still dizzy from it. The wind continued to push cold against him, flatten his shirt to his chest.

Croise looked down the slope away from the road and saw
flickering in the mouth of the coulee a fire. He stood for a moment, feeling the wind and watching the fire quiver through the brush in the darkness below. He wondered if they were where they were going, if this was known as Bear Butte. Looking over his shoulder he saw a rise looming, darker than the night sky. Croise stood staring straight out before him, above the fire in the coulee, and he thought: I wonder what Crazy Horse would think of me. Probably hate me. Didn't like whites much. Or would he understand? He was first and foremost interested in the good of his people. So would he think this was good for his people? Actually, if Crazy Horse were born into his tribe today, who's to say he wouldn't be that poor skinny bastard at the Keno machine in the Grizzly Saloon?

Croise started sidestepping down the loamy slope, stumbling as his boots caught on wiry brush, his progress churning up the smell of sage and trickling dirt down the hill before him. Birds burst from the brush in the darkness beside him, a siren of squacks, pinfeathers whistling, and Croise fell back on his butt, forearms shielding his forehead. Croise thought: pheasants.

He breathed deeply, stood, continued.

At the bottom of the slope, Croise made his way through buckbrush and then thick willows, blood red shoots in the dark. He came upon the fire and saw the little girl huddled
in his coat, squatting by the fire, staring into the flames. Behind her the flamelight licked from the dark glimpses of Victor Little Hawk. He was holding an open-sighted rifle leveled at Croise.

Little Hawk lifted his head from the gun and said, "For as long as you live, remember this." He could have been talking to either of them. The girl watched Croise, her eyes wide, but not in surprise or anticipation -- in an effort to see everything.

"What the hell are you doing?" Croise asked.

"Little Hawk said, "He wanted to take something that belongs to you," and it was apparent that he was talking to the girl. "I don't want to kill this man, but I will. I want you to see that."

Croise watched the image of the old man flicker in the night with the breath of the flames, the white hair and smooth face, the black hat, the rifle. In the immediate blaze of the fire, he saw the girl, eyes open to see all she could. Standing in her wide vision, Croise knew exactly where he had gone wrong: he should have asked the girl.

Croise felt the pulse of his blood -- ko-THICK, ko-THICK -- in his neck and upper chest. Victor Little Hawk sang something in Lakota. Croise recognized the dialect, but could not hear the words of the song, just the low moan of its meaning.
"What?" Croise said. He smiled. "What, it's a good day to die?"

Finished singing, Little Hawk told him, "There aren't any good days to die anymore." He took away even that little romance before he laid his cheek on the stock of the rifle and shot Croise through the crown of his smooth, handsome forehead.
This is a story my father told me:

We had horses. My dad believed that caring for horses taught lessons about responsibility and life. As soon as I was old enough, I had a pony and started learning to take care of him, to make sure his life was comfortable and pleasant. This became a daily part of my life.

My dad had a favorite horse, a big bay mare named Rhythm. She was bay with four blacks. Her coat shined and so did her mane. She was a huge horse. They always talk about what a big horse Secretariat was; Rhythm was exactly his size -- seventeen and a half hands.

I never got to ride Rhythm much as a child because she was so big, but sometimes my dad would pull me up on the saddle behind him, and I remember thinking then that I was on the tallest horse there ever was in any story or anywhere. I used to think that horse was legendary. And Dad, he seemed to tower mounted on Rhythm.

They were both true giants to me. My dad had straight
pure silver hair, even when I was young. Although he'd never admit it, he was enough of a dandy to allow himself the lead-in to a ducktail. My mother used to tease him about it. But we didn't tease my father much. He could be severe. He was a lawyer in a farm town and he had a very real and immediate sense of country justice. He was fair — even today if you ask around town, people who knew him will tell you that my father was one of the fairest men alive.

But there's really no other way to describe him than severe, or stern. One day I came home after messing around with Danny Wasserman and I walked in the house and my dad said, "Come with me, young man." My dad said that, it just meant trouble.

"Come with me, young man." I walked with him outside.

Dad walked through the back yard and I followed. We walked past the tool shed and the rusted and blackened burn barrel. I had no idea where we were going. He kept walking, across the back pasture, through the far gate. Bugs filled the air. My father shut the pasture gate behind us, even though the horses were in the paddock for the night.

We walked into the woods, along a path through the brush. Then the woods opened and a short, steep bank dropped to the river. The river was wide and flat, brown with mud. My father reached around and grabbed me by the
back of the collar and a belt loop on my trousers and threw me in the river.

That son of a bitch threw me in the river four times. I kept wading back to the bank and when I got close enough he'd grab my arm up high, slap a hand on my thigh and heave me again. As soon as I saw him move I went limp, I let him throw me. The last thing you could do with my dad was put up a fight. So I let him throw me and I sat in the water until I got too cold.

Then I flicked the mud off my hands and waded in. Four times. By the end I was crying. I was cold and shivering, soaking wet with muddy water. It was nearly dark. I said, "Dad, I'm getting cold." I had no idea why he was doing this but I knew he would be doing it until he was done.

I said, "All right, I'll stay in. Is that what you want?"

He said nothing, he just stood on the bank.

I said, "Tell me what you want, Dad. How am I supposed to know what to do unless you tell me what you want?"

Then he turned and tried to climb up the bank. His feet slipped and he almost fell, but he put his hands out.

He climbed up the bank and disappeared into the woods. I sat in the river and cried until I couldn't hear him anymore before I got up and followed. At dinner that night my father said, "Do you know why you were punished?"
I said, "No sir."

He said, "Tell your mother what you did to the Wasserman's cats."

I had no choice but to tell my mother, "We did like Dad did to the kittens."

What happened was Danny Wasserman and I had caught his family's two cats and carried them to the river in a burlap sack. It was a rough time, much different than when my father had done the same with a stray litter of kittens he found in our stable. The Wasserman's cats were full-grown and clawed me and Danny through the burlap. We took turns carrying them, each of us holding the bag with both hands at arm's length. We added stones and dirt to the sack and threw it in the river.

My mother asked why. I told her Danny said they didn't want the cats anymore. I said, "We did the same thing Dad did with those kittens we didn't want down in the barn."

My father said, "That was different."

And I said, "How come?"

My father dropped his fork, pointed at me and said, "Don't you question me."

My father was like that about everything, black and white. He showed Rhythm at the county fair and they won showmanship-at-halter every year. He wouldn't braid Rhythm's mane or tie her tail, either, he brushed the mane
all onto the left side of her neck and let her tail flow. Rhythm's tail was full and jet black and glossy and it looked a hundred times better than the fake tails other show people stuck up their horses' asses.

That big bay mare followed Dad around the ring like a dancer. He clucked and Rhythm switched her lead. My father didn't have to so much as lift his chin to stop her in her tracks, flat on all hooves. He loved that horse, but by God she did what he told her. The two of them glided around the dusty ring, the tall horse's copper coat and black mane and my father with his silver, they were grand champions every year until a young girl named Jenny Birdlow beat him.

The Birdlow girl showed a stallion which was high-strung and spirited, and her breasts stretched her shirt at the buttons. I thought she was really something -- I wasn't quite sure what -- until she won the grand champion ribbon. Dad never showed Rhythm again. He accepted the sherbert green reserve champion ribbon and pinned it to Rhythm's halter and led her from the ring. He never said a word about it. In fact, the following spring he paid Mr. Birdlow to bring the stallion to our place for a few days to breed with Rhythm.

Mr. Birdlow came back for the foaling too, and he brought his daughter. I was there and my father and Mr. Birdlow and my mother even came down to the stables for a
little while, but she didn't stay for all of it. Jenny Birdlow wore a red and white checked shirt with the tails untucked and tied so her belly showed. Mr. Birdlow leaned with his forearms on the bottom half of the stall door and I tried to do the same but ended up with the wood in my armpits. Birdlow smoked a cigarette, too, and I thought, What a stupid thing to do in a stables.

But nobody said anything to him about it. Jenny Birdlow stood beside her father. We were all anxious and we huddled and watched. My father knelt on the hay in the stall with his shirt rolled up over his elbows and stroked Rhythm's sides. He patted her rump. The horse lay on her side, her body bulged in a long copper mound. She made my father look small crouched at her hindquarters, but on her side, stretched and so swollen, Rhythm looked delicate and weak.

She didn't even look much like a horse anymore, but like an entirely different kind of animal. Every time my father or Rhythm moved I could hear it in the rustle of the hay. At one point I pretended to wander over to say something to my mother. All I said was something like, "Do you think it will happen soon?"

I mumbled it, because everybody spoke in hushed voices while we waited. My mother said, "Soon."

But then I was standing right beside Jenny Birdlow and
sneaking glances at the bare skin around her waist. She had jeans on and they were tight across her rear, but the waist floated loosely above her hips. When she turned her head I was quick enough to flick my eyes up to her face. Very quietly, so our parents would not hear, Jenny Birdlow said, "Have you ever seen this?"

I said, "No."

She whispered, "I have. It's beautiful."

She seemed very sure of herself. But when things went bad, her father made her leave. It went bad quickly. My father and Mr. Birdlow recognized it at about the same time, when Rhythm worked and worked and nothing happened. Rhythm blew so hard I thought she would bleed through the nose. Her eyes bulged until they didn't look real anymore, but like gigantic brown marbles.

My father went in up to his elbows, trying to straighten things out. That was when my mother left. Mr. Birdlow sent Jenny with her. When Jenny tried to argue, her father said, "Goddamnit don't you sass me. Now get up there."

My father didn't make me leave. Mr. Birdlow asked my father if he thought he could save it. My father, who was on his knees and bent behind Rhythm with most of one arm up inside her, turned his head to look over his shoulder and said, "I'm worried about my horse now."
He scared me, because he seemed desparate and I could not imagine why. I realized something was happening that should frighten me, too, so then it did. There was black blood glistening on the hay. The whole stables smelled sticky with blood. Rhythm's breath wheezed deep in her throat. My father worked his arm inside her. Blood squirted over his elbow. His eyes were pressed shut and his face sweated and his silver hair went straight even at the tips. He looked small compared to the bulk of the horse.

Mr. Birdlow asked, "You wanna just drag it on out?"

My father's arm slid from Rhythm and dropped to the hay. He rocked back on his heels. He said, "Her hip's broke."

My father put both hands on his knees and leaned on them. Rhythm's eyes still bulged. She was frantic, but frozen by it, motionless, except that her nostrils shuddered.

My father shuffled on his knees to the head of his horse. He gathered her ear gently in his fist, leaned over and put his mouth near it. I don't know if he said anything. He scratched the flat bone of her forehead with the fingertips of his other hand. Then he leaned back, patted her twice on the flat of her long neck and the second time he pushed himself away and up.

He asked Mr. Birdlow, "Do this for me? I've had the
horse a long time."

My father headed for the stable door, scooped his hand to move me out in front of him. We all walked up to the house. My father stopped outside the back door to rinse his arm off at the spigot. At the house, Jenny Birdlow was in the kitchen with my mother. Jenny dried our dishes. My father gave his shotgun and some slugs to Mr. Birdlow. Then my father went into the parlor and sat on the davenport.

Mr. Birdlow went out the back door. My mother stopped me from going into the parlor, said she needed help in the kitchen. Jenny dried the dishes and I put them away. My mother finished with the washing and left. She went upstairs, she went I don't know where, she left. Jenny and I worked in the kitchen and my father sat in the parlor. He was out of sight and silent, but I could feel him, like he was standing right behind me. Jenny Birdlow said to me, "What happened?"

I said, "Hip's broke."

I heard a shot. It was muffled by the buildings, but clearly a shot. The screams ran right on top of the shot. They shrieked like vocal chords laid bare. Later I found out that Rhythm jerked her head and Birdlow shot her nose and mouth off. The screams were hysterical, just raw vocal chords with the mouth shot off.

They came right on top of one another, the horse barely
catching enough breath to scream again. Another shot popped in the barn, tiny, harmless, a firecracker under a cardboard box, but afterwards everything was quiet except for vibrations of my father's footsteps on the floorboards.

It was so quiet I could feel his steps in the arches of my feet. Eventually I heard the springing screech of the screen door pulled open. I heard Mr. Birdlow say, "Jesus, Russ, I'm sorry."

I heard my father say, "I appreciate it."

Mr. Birdlow said, "Jenny, honey, come out here and wait in the truck now." Quieter, I heard him say, "Mind if I use your spigot?"

And I heard my father say, "Go ahead."

I heard the screen door slam shut. Then my father moving back into the parlor. I stood alone in the kitchen. I knew what had happened to Rhythm. I realized she was gone and I was heartbroken. I wanted to go to my father, and I wanted him to explain.

She was a gentle horse. I wanted to know why they had to make her scream like that. I went to the parlor as quietly as I could without sneaking. My father sat on the davenport. The shotgun lay across his knees. The fingertips of both hands touched the shotgun. His head bent back back, but his eyes dropped to me. He looked right at me and tears ran all over his face.
I had never seen my father cry before. It was a thing that I had never thought possible. He looked right at me and wept. I could not imagine talking to him like this. He was different, I thought; as if he couldn't help me with water on his face. I backed away, and went out the screen door.

At the end of the drive I could see the red tail lights of Birdlow's pick-up as they pulled onto the road, then those were gone and it was dark. I looked down towards the stables. Thinking about the horse let me finally let go. I stood in the driveway in the dark, tasting dust I couldn't see that Birdlow's truck had left in the air, and I cried too. I stood in the dark and cried until I got angry.

I got angry and I decided that what I was going to do about it was be a man. I was going to go down to the stables and start cleaning up the mess like a man would. I started towards the stables, deciding at every step to be a man about this. Crickets chirped all around me, some close and then others in the middle distance and even farther away.

The crickets seemed, to me, to be chirping in rhythm and their rhythm echoed and rolled away, far into the night as if it never ended. I was halfway to the stables when I heard the back door. My father called out my name. I didn't stop walking. I tried to hold my voice together and
answered, Yes.

"What are you doing?" he asked. His voice moved nearer.

"Stables."

"Why don't you wait right there for a minute."

I wanted to stop and I wanted to go on, to go to the stables on my own. But I stopped and saw a glimpse of his shirt rippling in the dark, then his silver hair, and I wanted to go on to the stable by myself, but then he was there. He touched my shoulder with his hand. He said, "You don't have to go down there, you know."

I was still crying but I wasn't going to anymore. I wasn't going to wipe away the tears already on my face, but I wasn't going to cry any more new ones while my father stood in front of me like this. Every single tear was going to be the last. My father's hand tightened on my shoulder, pulled me closer, but I didn't move my feet. I let him twist my upper body. My father told me, "It was the right thing but you don't have to do it."

I don't know if it was the right thing or not. The important thing was that he told me it was. And he didn't stop there, he kept talking instead of letting the silence build again. We walked down to the paddock and leaned against the fence rails and his voice came steadily through the night. We both stared over the empty paddock and he
started telling stories, quietly. He told stories about when he was young, what it was like growing up for him.

He told me a story about his father.