Riders

Ralph Beer

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RIDERS

By

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B.A., Montana State University, 1970

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[Signatures]

Chairman, Board of Examiners

Dean, Graduate School

5-14-81

Date
It ain't right and it ain't wrong
To hear a Cowboy sing an old-time song.

Arlo Guthrie

For

My grandfather who let me listen
and my father who made me see.
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RIDERS

Riders was first published in TriQuarterly 48 Western Stories, Spring 1980.
From the tarmac I could see my father through a plate glass window, standing big and raw-boned beside an airport security guard. He didn't look much changed. Nearer the window I noticed the security cop watching a red-haired girl who walked just ahead of me. I looked down at her legs; the tight little tendons behind her knees flexed against her nylons with each stride. My father grinned; he had been following her too, and his hazel eyes sparkled under the twisted brim of his hard hat. His teeth made a white line between his heavy black mustache and beard. He brushed wood chips from the sleeves of a wool shirt I recognized, put his hands in the pockets of his black logger jeans, and hiked them up. I took off my garrison cap and dropped it in a trash can beside the entrance door.

My father's face was serious as his club-like hand compressed mine. He reached over with his left and smacked me over the ear and asked quietly, "How you feel, kid?" Four days before, I'd been crew chief of a 105 howitzer, sandbagged in with the rest of a flat-tire battery along a ridgeline just below the DMZ. I was twenty-seven, thirty pounds underweight, and tired. Even at arm's length my
father smelled of horses, sawdust, machine grease. When he
turned to walk to the door I noticed that he had grown his
hair. It was tied in a short pony tail with a piece of
plastic baler twine. He walked loose and easy. The back
of the wool shirt was covered with bits of straw and dry
weeds. Outside, the redhead was holding hands with a guy
in a fawn colored overcoat. He had a briefcase in his
other hand. When he spoke to her she raised up on her toes
and the backs of her legs quivered.

As we walked toward a tired looking ton-and-a-half GMC
stocktruck, the sun eased down in a swale on the summit of
Mount Helena. The truck rocked slightly. A tall, strawberry
roan gelding with a dappled rump kicked the tailgate and
tried to shake off his halter.

"I just picked him up out at Chalmers'," my father
said. The horse watched us approach with his ears laid
down flat, jerked against the halter rope again and farted
in a quick series of short pops. "He'll give you something
to do while you get used to being around white men again."

While my father fished a can of Copenhagen from his
shirt pocket I listened to the horse breathe. "Had a saddle
on?" I asked, knowing by the way the roan watched us that
he'd never been ridden.

"No. Chalmers says he's a four year old, but he's five
or six. Chew?"
"I got my own," I said, touching the Camels resting against my belly under the uniform.

"Could be hard to get him started, old as he is, but he'll make you a good plug to hunt off'n." He put in the chew using two fingers and his thumb, moved it around with his tongue until it was right, then tapped the can. "He's sure big enough. Might even be able to rope off'n him. Just take him slow. He's got too much action to buck right out, anyway."

I walked around the truck to the passenger side and saw my father's saddle cinched down to the top of the stock rack. There was fresh manure in the outside stirrup. We got in and I put my AWOL bag between my knees on a pile of log chains and binders. The hood was smashed down flat and the window on my side was spider-webbed with broken slivers of glass. The truck lurched forward.

"Clutch's about gone," my father said. "Keep that rifle from banging into the shifters, will you?" I put the toe of the hard leather scabbard between my shoes and let the dark oiled butt of the .25-.35 Winchester rest against my thigh.

"That girl in Canada sent you down some of that fancy tobacco, you know, in the round yellow cans. She expecting you?" The gelding kicked and jumped around in the back of the truck.
"Not for a while yet."

"That fool horse has been stompin and kickin and rais­ing hell since this afternoon." He looked at me out of the corner of his eye. "Hope he's got sense enough not to knock down his hips on those sideboards."

We headed north across the Prickly Pear Valley. It was late September and it smelled of frost-killed hay and skunk. Rows of large, limbless cottonwood snags marked the old stream channel; a heron stood waiting in the shallow water running into the new one. I looked back at my father. Only the big work-hardened hands on the steering wheel, the oversized knuckles, weather checks, and cord-like veins told his years. Around Clancy he was known to be good with horses, as his father had been. Honest. And the best elk hunter in the area.

"Killed three seven-point Royals while you was gone," he said, splitting into fourth/over with the old vacuum shift. "One a year, and a couple of spikes for ranch meat. Headshot two of the Royals. Got some steaks from the last one out for supper tonight." About most other things he was modest.

He looked across the seat, face poker serious, his heavy brows highlighted by a passing pickup truck, and said, "The old man is real sick."

"You wrote that."
"Emphysema. Maybe cancer. He won't talk about coming into town to see a doctor." My father reached up with his index finger and removed a drop that had been hanging from the end of his nose for several miles. "Be a good idea for you to get up to the high ranch and see him right away."

I looked out the side window. It will frost sure as hell tonight, I thought, though I hadn't seen frost for a long time. The roan pitched around in the back of the truck. We crossed over the center line and swerved back. A yellow slice of moon showed over the Spokane Bench. With my fingers I traced out the deep, hand-carved initials HB in the rifle stock -- my grandfather's initials, carved, stamped or chiseled in everything he owned. This time of night he would be doing his supper dishes or sitting up close to the porcelain Aladdin, reading the Montana Farmer-Stockman. After my mother left, it was always just the three of us: my father, my grandfather, and me, evenings like this when I had been in grade school. We would go, I remembered, into the big log house, worked out, hungry, and chilled. After we finished eating, my grandfather always washed the dishes in big pans on the kitchen range while my father figured aloud the next day's work. I would take a mug of hot chocolate into the six-sided log front room, and sit beside the Windsor heater and wait for them -- wait for my grandfather to roll a cigarette, light the parlor lamp,
and begin the real talk. While I waited, I would look at the highbacked western stock saddle, hanging from one stirrup on a wooden peg fitted high in the wall, and the photographs and pictures around it.

"I will do that," I said, realizing that I had been cold since getting off the plane. We passed long stacks of baled hay and bunches of angus cattle grazing the dry fields -- steers, almost ready for fall slaughter. The moon was up when we hit the dirt road. My teeth began to chatter.

"There's a bottle in the glove box . . . left from when you were riding." Behind a snake-bite kit and a couple boxes of rifle shells, I found most of a pint of Jim Beam, carefully wrapped in a red long-load warning flag. It was probably the best-aged Beam in Montana and I took a big swallow, careful not to chip my teeth as the truck hammered over the corduroy road.

I took the first batch of whiskey I ever made to that Fourth of July rodeo at Montana City and it sure made a hit. More'n half the crowd went wild on it. After I drew Bill Chalmers' horse I didn't do any drinkin' though. Besides, your Grandma was there with her folks and I had my eye on her, wanting, you know, to make an impression.
I stayed close to my father's place in the valley the first few days I was back. The stone house and outbuildings were in the middle of his section of alfalfa and swamp hay. The third cutting had been finished while I was still in Nam. The days were crisp, and I didn't feel much like town, so each morning I caught the roan and worked him. The horse corral was round and solid, slightly outsloping at the top. Beside the corral, a shelter-belt of Russian olive trees grew in an old ditch that ran a quarter mile down the section line. Off south, in line with the belt, the smelter stack in East Helena stood centered in the blue of the Elkhorn Range beyond, like a gunsight. Magpies and Hungarian partridge lived in the shelter-belt. The magpies liked to keep company with the horse. When I tired of splitting and stacking the fir log butts that my father brought in each night, I would go sit on the corral and watch the horse move. We had six or seven farmers helping at the chute, puttin on riggin's and helping the riders get on. When they got that big red bastard in the chute he kept tryin to climb out, standing on his hind legs and pawin the planks. He scared most of the volunteer help off. I finally had to saddle him myself. Chalmers was there watchin, his leg in a cast from that time he got
piled above Rocker Gulch and laid up there three days till Babe found him. Bill always did have a bad bronc or two around, you know.

Each morning I worked the horse; sacked him until he was used to being touched, caned his legs until he led without hesitation, talked him into taking a bit in his mouth, and got him to stand still while the neck-strap bent his ears. I touched him and told him how things were. Magpies would settle down and walk the top corral rail, watching the roan follow me with a saddle blanket on his back. He'd fart like a 105 throwing high explosive rounds, and I'd tell him what a fine war horse he was. He listened and walked and I talked him tired.

Late in the mornings the wind would come out of the southwest rolling in breakers off the Divide, washing down the Ten-Mile into the Helena Valley. In the wind I walked the horse and told him everything I could remember about the girl in Canada. A girl who walked up behind me at dusk, right after I'd been eliminated from the money in saddle broncs, at the Williams Lake Stampede. She just walked up behind me as I was unlacing my chaps, put her hand on my arm, and said hello. I told the roan how she walked with a little limp, about her voice that was always almost a whisper, about the finger wide scars on her hip, and how she sent me tobacco. And I told the big roan that when we got
down to business, I'd bust his ass.

Across the valley to the north, the Big Belts folded and unfolded. On clear mornings sunlight glinted off the windows in the fire lookout on Hogback. Further west, rocky, timber-splashed hills shaped the outline of a man on his back, asleep or dead. I was surprised how fast the roan gentled. Nervy and independent, he was interested and friendly too, like a saddle tramp. Each day I finished the work with a couple of sugar lumps from my prairie jacket. Every time I reached into my pocket he'd try to bite me.

I didn't feel much like town, but after a few mornings of horsing the roan and afternoons splitting the thirty-inch wide log butts in the woodlot, I began to look at my '50 Ford pickup. One evening, when my father got in from the woods, he followed me out to the corral and we sat and watched the horse while I hand-rolled enough smokes for the next day. Chevrons of geese, coming off Lake Helena, went by close over our heads, going to feed in Hank Simpson's wheat fields. My father sat on a beer keg and spit and talked about the gyppo logging show he had going up Crystal Creek, in the Elkhorns.

"I told that kid he couldn't make wages with no Home-lite saw, but he's bound, determined to try. Funny to watch him run back and forth around one of them big swamp firs, like a dog that can't decide which leg to hike; try'n to
get his wedge sawed out, all the time that rig of his sounding like one of them wind-up toys from down at Gibsons."

He would pause, listen to the wing sounds of a passing flight of geese, inspect the fringe on the tongue-guard of his loggers, and go on. "He's a good kid. One of them part-time college students from Missoula. Wants to be a journalist or some morphadite thing . . . which is fine, cause he'll sure never make 'er in the woods." He talked on, slowly, quietly, considering what he said.

After a while my father looked from the horse to the cigarette I was rolling and asked, "What do you smoke them damned things for? Look what they did to my old man."

After I licked off the paper and studied the shape of the cigarette, I admitted that I hadn't been up to see my grandfather yet. The roan coughed on the far side of the corral; my father watched the geese and went silent. I had a lot of trouble sittin that horse in the chute. He'd rear and lunge and try'n scrape me off. I was ridin broncs here at the ranch most every day then because broke horses were in demand for the war and knew I could ride him if I could get out the gate in one piece. The long-cut Dominion tobacco worked easily off my fingers, straight and even and firm. Cigarettes that were lumpy or tapered at one end I took apart and rolled again. The roan would get curious, walk over and look through the rails and I'd feed him a smoke.
Within a week he had the habit too.

One morning after chores, I led the roan into the loading chute and eased my stock saddle down over the blanket. I reached between the rails with a piece of wire and hooked the cinch-ring. He stood still as I looped the wide leather cinch strap back and forth through the Canterbury buckle and eased it tight. The roan looked straight ahead, tensed like a choker cable under strain. I fed him a cigarette, folded the stirrups slowly down, and smoked one myself. I backed him out of the chute and he made a few half-hearted bucks on the end of the lead rope. He farted and crow-hopped around, then lost interest in the weight of the saddle and the flap of stirrups on his sides. He stood dead still, ears back and head high, then walked up to me, wanting sugar and tobacco.

Late in the second week I started tinkering with the truck. The oil in the crankcase was thick as asphalt. Spark plug electrodes were green, and the points were welded together. All the tires except the spare were flat and the battery was gone. I pumped up the tires with a compressor hose off a Ford 9-N tractor and then put the six-volt tractor battery in the truck. It started with a roar and a cloud of black smoke like a diesel. The flat-head V-8 sounded good, talking through nine feet of straight pipe. The transmission growled in neutral and ground on
every shift. I double-clutched into third, drifted onto the country road sideways, popped the stick down into fourth, and ran it up to seventy.

There was more traffic than I remembered on the old Great Falls highway. The orphanage at the city limits was deserted; with uplifted arms, the white stone Jesus out front blessed a dozer leveling dredge piles across the road.

Uptown, I looked at saddles in Devore's. Low-backed, full-rigged roping saddles cost four hundred dollars and up. The shop smelled of new tac and money. I picked up a dressy red nylon halter with gold colored side rings, a new bit, and a fancy bridle with braided snap-on reins. My pocket was full of Army back pay. I headed up Last Chance Gulch to see how far it could take me.

Above the Power Block the gulch looked like an impact area. Holes with foundation footings and open stone basements showed where buildings had stood. Some of the holes had been filled in and were parking lots. Most of the cheap hotels and derelict bars were gone too, and though Dorothy's cathouse was still there, business didn't look like it had been good lately. The buildings where I had watched shepherders and hard-luckers and bums and healing rodeo riders when I was a kid had been leveled, leaving once again the gravel that had held the gold that had made
"What's going on here?" I asked a white-whiskered old rounder standing next to his bedroll.

"Spare the price of some breakfast?" he answered, looking past me down the street. "I got to get back to the outfit at Augusta but I need to eat something first."

"What happened to the town?"

"What?" he asked, looking me in the eye for the first time.

"Where are all the damned buildings? The place looks like it blew up."

"That Model Cities bunch bought up the whole shiteree, closed all the joints and tore 'em down. Christ it got cold last night. Going to be a hard one the way the bees has been working."

The old-timer looked like he still worked for a living when he wasn't on a drunk. He smelled like a real sheep man. I gave him five dollars and watched him sure-foot it straight into O'Toole's bar to put off the coming winter a little longer.

At the south end of the gulch I pegged smooth rocks at a sign where Red Drennon's oil-soaked motorcycle shop had been. "Site of the New, Lewis and Clark," for Christ's sake, "Library." The building was gone but the oil was still there, a stain that reminded me of hot-heads and
Sunday racers taking slow beers in back while they considered the innards of their 500 Matchless and AJS singles, or tried a new Greeves-Villers on the hind wheel up the sidewalk, while Vic Zimmerman studied the upholstery in his patrol car. Next door to Drennon's had been the only bar in Helena patronized by Hutterites on their trips to town. It was gone too and I couldn't remember the name.

Below the Main News, where the Stockman's had been, was a new bar, one I hadn't seen before. Barn board and fancy script on the windows like you'd see in Calgary or Prince George. The script said, "Bert 'n Ernie's." I went in and walked through the delicatessen toward the bar in back. The walls and bar were all barn board and wagon wheels. Horse collars framed pictures of bighorn sheep and buffalo on the walls above the booths. The bartender had curly blond hair and round glasses. He watched as I neared the bar. He looked like a first-case lawyer when he smiled. To one side of him, on a chairbacked barstool, hung an overcoat with a half schooner of beer in front of it. In the light, the coat looked fawn colored. The barman straightened, spread his hands, opened his mouth.

"San Francisco," I said.

He raised his eyebrows. "Huh?"

"San Francisco," I repeated, feeling blood climb my neck, the backs of my arms tensing. "You should have
stayed there.” I held still a minute, looking at his upper lip, then turned around and walked back through the deli. The new halter and bridle swung, looped up in my right hand. Chalmers was a drunk as I was sober by then, and when he opened the gate he let out a big yell. That horse landed out in the middle of the arena and I got him right away, classy like, with both spurs at the base of his neck, and tried to pull his hide off. I was using that saddle right there. Just like sittin in a rocker. I had a cup of coffee at the L and M Cafe, then headed back up the street looking for the sheepherder.

The tac room smelled of neatsfoot oil and saddle blankets. I shaped the new halter and bridle to match the old ones I'd been using. Pack saddles and work harness, rifle scabbards, hames and coiled long-reach reins hung from wooden pegs. Hackamores, pairs of stirrups, and assorted horseshoes arranged by size and design lined the wall behind the saddle stands. Leather punches, brass rivets in jars, lengths of lacing and rolled sides of latigo leather were pigeonholed along the work bench. A calendar girl a yard long sat on a hay bale, smiling at me. I'd watched ten years for her shirt's bottom button to pop loose. Below the cowgirl it said: 19 Duncan and Sons Feed 59.
Mouse turds rolled on the bench as I saddle-soaped the new bridle. The girl in Canada thought I was still in Viet Nam. I looked at the calendar and wondered why I wouldn't call her. She'd written a couple of times a week, even after I extended the second time. On the wall in front of me, next to a reloading press, hung my father's dull iron-gray spurs. I took them down and slid them up my left arm, found a set of bucking rolls, and buckled them onto my saddle. I piled a blanket, bridle, halter, and a pair of stiff, leggin-type chaps on the saddle and took it all outside.

The roan had got used to being saddled in the last couple of weeks and only half tried to kick my arm as I reached under his belly for the cinch. I had his head tied to a post and kept him between me and the corral rails while I worked. He watched me with his head turned back as I laced the cinch and tried to bite my elbow when I pulled the air out of him. I shaped the heart-knot on the top cinch-ring, and he finally got hold of my Levi jacket and gave me a shake.

On the far side of the corral I kicked off my boots. The sole and upper on the right one had come unstitched and my sock was black along the inside. I studied the boot before stepping into the stove pipe scaps. After I had quit riding at Williams Lake, I'd gone to work haying. I
bought the boots in Vernon, B.C. with my wages when she took me home. The chaps were separate and laced together at the crotch, then buckled around belt-like in back. The corral was dry and manure soft but it never crossed my mind not to use the chaps. They were my father's; he wore them shiny at eighteen, making a living at what I was getting ready to try again. They were stiff with years of sweat. I pulled on my boots and buckled the spurs over them. I had trouble with my fingers. The rowels on the spurs were dime-sized and blunt. They made no sound as I walked. Then he come loose and started to spin. I had a hell of a time keepin my hand off the saddle. When he straightened out I was still there. He'd buck high and sunfish and sometimes I didn't figure he'd ever come down. Folks were waving and I wanted to get off. Then all sudden like he stands up and tries to climb over the corral. Felt just like Tom Mix on Tony with him standin up like that, except'n when he hit the fence and backed away he pulled off the top rail.

I lit a cigarette and pulled the felt hat down until my ears stuck out. Through the smoke I could see the roan relaxing on three legs, cocky, keeping company with the magpies, ignoring me. I walked around the circle of the corral, throwing boards and a few big rocks over the fence. My breath was short. My eyes fastened to things I'd never
noticed; the iron latch on the gate, a broken floor plank in the loading chute, bricks missing from the machine shop wall.

I led the roan once around the corral, twice, three times. Then I got him up against the fence where I'd saddled him. I knotted the halter rope and dropped it over the horn, stretched my bandanna over his eyes between the head-straps of the bridle. He lifted his tail. As I put my hip against his left shoulder and twisted the stirrup around, my stomach turned. What came up was bitter -- maybe a cupful. I tried to spit it clear but most of it ran down my chin onto my shirt. The big roan took a step. I held the stirrup and reached for the horn. He farted and backed up. I pulled myself on, hit my right foot against a corral rail and tried to push him away from the fence. He settled his weight and backed another step. I'd reach up with my hat and pound his head. I was dead sure he'd turn over backwards on me. But I couldn't get him away from that fence. Them rails were nailed on with spikes no longer than your finger and in a couple more jumps that big red bastard had another one knocked loose. Then, over the whole mess we went. Chalmers was there, right in the way, hoppin on his good leg and wavin his hat. The horse damn near ran him down. I wanted that right stirrup, but not bad enough to put my leg between him and the fence. The
The sky was very blue and there were geese headed north, toward Lake Helena. I reached down and pulled the bandanna away.

The sky was very blue and when I landed it fell on my chest. I tried to roll to the right toward the fence but a hind foot landed there beside my ear. I watched the roan twist away, reins going straight in the air each time he came down. I got to my knees and threw up, hard this time. The roan stopped bucking almost as sudden as he'd fired up. He looked back at me and held still. Standing, I saw tiny black dots that disappeared -- like watching departing projos when you stand behind a 105 and see them fired into a clear sky.

He met me halfway across the corral after I got up the second time. He held his head high. He enjoyed me, I could tell. The third try I didn't use the handkerchief and missed both stirrups. His head disappeared between my legs and I landed almost running. After that I lost count, but I remember lighting cigarettes and thinking about standing in the dusk at Williams Lake while the rodeo went on. He was easy to catch. I hoped he was wearing down. Then he'd take his head away from me, tuck it, and sunfish on the way up. The top half of my body would pull out of orbit; wait for my hips to follow, going further out as he turned away, getting heavier till I lost him. I felt like a squirrel trying to hump a pine cone, my thighs bruising
against the bucking rolls as the horse doubled back under my armpit. Those dry farmers were runnin in their best overalls, wavin their straw hats, trying to haze him back. But they scattered when they saw him comin over the top. I was getting tired but every third jump or so I'd hook him again with that big pair of spurs I got from George Carpentier. Out in the open he'd buck straight, then run, then start his whole show all over again. In all that time I never touched the saddle with my hand or left it long with my ass.

He was easy to catch and not mean, but once he kicked my hat while it was still in the air. I kept sliding up on him until he got lazy and bucked straight ahead and I was able to lean back, reach up with both boots and rake him full length. He panicked at the spurs, bucked straight again, and I took him from the front of his shoulders back to his belly. Suddenly he was walking -- bouncing like his legs were coil springs -- but walking. Round the circle we went. My shirt was covered with horseshit and smelled of vomit. I reached up slowly to wipe my chin. We began to work on manners.

After supper my father and I went out to sit by the corral, but wind out of the southwest moved us around to shelter behind the brick machine shop.
"I told that kid," my father began, "to wear his long woolies tomorrow. Weather's going to turn."

"I went into town the other day."

"Yes?"

"Couldn't even manage to get drunk."

"Uh huh."

"Town's changed a lot."

My father spat. He took out a small stone and the Case knife he'd carried since he was twelve and began to hone slowly. "Snow in a couple days, for sure," he said. "I can feel it in my legs." He was intent, drawing the knife slowly over the stone toward himself, seeing elk on the edge of the blade.

"A year ago tonight, my gun killed twenty-four NVA coming down a trail. Near dark, like it is now. The LURPs that checked them out said that some of them were nurses, women anyway. Eleven rounds. I pulled the lanyard on every one of them."

He looked up from the knife, his face hard, the skin pulled tight on the bones around his eyes. "Is that why you're going to screw around until the old man is dead before you get up to see him?" He folded the Case with a snap and put it away.

I didn't say anything about riding out the roan. At dark my father went to the house and in a few minutes the
lights went out. I rolled a cigarette, lit it, leaned forward slowly in the hayrake seat, and listened for the geese. They were late coming. I kept him off those dredge piles and gravel bars by the creek. Finally he just lined out.

Cars and buggies were parked all around. When we got to Clyde Burgess' Model-T he took off like Cromwell Dixon. Mrs. Schimp took that picture with her old box camera. Never touched that T at all, went right over the windshield.

That night I slept sitting up in an overstuffed chair beside the box stove and walked bent over when I got up to light the morning fires. By the time my father came out of his room I could almost stand straight, but had trouble tipping my head to drink coffee. At the door my father looked at me, said, "Your grandad," then changed his mind and said as he did every morning, "See you before dark."

There was ice in the water trough as I laced the chaps. I put on the spurs again too, and a broken-down brown Stetson, and my heavy sheepskin and canvas herder's coat.

The horse was stove up too, and cranky. When I got on he tried to rub me off on the gatepost. He was sore and tired of me, but I kept him moving. Finally I raised the gate latch with my toe, and we headed south over the frosted stubble in the hay field.

The wind came off Red Mountain, taking wisps of our breath with it. Too cold to snow, I thought. Seems that
some things you just can't ride, like Montana weather or the past. We crossed a summer-fallowed wheat field at daybreak and while I was lighting a smoke a jackrabbit came up, bouncing away. The roan was limbering, and when the jack took off he slammed sideways, almost out from under me. I caught the far side bucking roll to stay with him, but lost the cigarette. The twist and pull made the cords in my neck burn. I turned up the fleece collar and we kept on south, going up the Prickly Pear, past Klefner's big stone barn, and later, the new Kaiser cement plant.

At Montana City, the horse balked at the overpass above the interstate highway to Butte. I was afraid he'd buck into the guard-rails if I booted him, so I led him across. There was nothing left at Montana City except the school my father had attended for a few years. The corrals and rodeo stands were long gone. I bought that horse from Chalmers for two pint cream bottles of shine and ten dollars. Used to ride him clear up Warm Springs Creek to court your grandma, he was that special. Beyond the interstate stretched open range, bordered by Taylor grazing ground to the west and the Burnell Ranch to the south -- rolling miles of rocky grassland, scrub timber, and an old man.

Two sections of the Burnell home ranch had never been fenced. Shared with unfenced ground from neighboring
outfits, it served as a common summer range. I touched the roan in the ribs and headed him up a long, rocky, knife-edged ridge -- a landmark called Harris Hill by old-timers for a dirt farmer who, during the Depression, had turned his homestead into limework quarry.

On the north slope of the ridge I turned the horse so we followed the faint contour of a buffalo trail, gaining ground out of the wind. Just off the trail, a mound of rocks marked a quarter-section corner. I stopped the roan to let him breathe. A tall flat stone in the center of the mound had an X and a \( \frac{1}{4} \) carved on it. The writing had weathered faint since it was hammered there in 1868 by the original survey party. A yard or so west of the corner stone, a new wooden survey stake stood beside an iron peg with a bright yellow plastic cap. A couple hundred yards away another fresh cut stake held pink ribbons that snapped in the wind. I turned sideways in the saddle and looked north. Helena and East Helena were silent and gray. Smoke from the smelter stock drifted on the wind toward Canyon Ferry. Beyond a squall that moved over the Belts, slowly covering the Sleeping Giant, lay Canada. Cold seeped through the herders' jacket and my thighs went numb in the hard leather chaps. The ridge would make a good spot to dig in a battery of artillery.
In a stand of thick-butted bull pine I got down to open the red pole gate. On it, a weathered plank with a Lazy-H-Triangle brand chiseled in the center said: FIR RANCH. HOWARD BURNELL, OWNER. KEEP OUT. Beyond the gate stood wooden-wheeled wagons with sagging backs and dump rakes that rested on broken tongues. Across a small hayfield, nested in a clump of trees, the two-story log house overlooked the meadows. Where the meadows ran together, beside a low-built log barn, the biggest horse corral in Jefferson County leaned in different directions. The top rails bowed downward with dry rot.

In the distance, the Elkhorns were lost in storm. Scattered flakes of snow began to blow past, skimming above the ground. The last four miles of rough ground had taken the steam out of the big roan. When I got back on he danced, but didn't offer to buck. I knew my grandfather would be watching from the kitchen window, probably getting his hat, brushing crumbs off the table with it on his way to the door.

The lean white-haired man was framed in the plank doorway. From fifty yards away I could see he stood straight with effort. As I crossed the hayfield the roan walked sideways, shook his head, then straightened back out. The man at the door took off his hat and held it above his head. Behind him, hanging on the log wall,
beside a high-backed saddle suspended by one stirrup from a large wooden peg, was a picture. It was gray with age, but the frame and glass would be wiped clean. A horse and rider hung in midair over a new-looking Model-T Ford. The horse's head was twisted around to his right and his front legs were spread and stiff. His mouth was wide open. The rider faced the camera and you could tell who it was. He leaned back, holding his hat in one hand, looking off to his right, waiting for the horse to land. He was grinning. Grinning like from up there he could see it all; the blur of grassy ridges and timbered hills that made him what he was; friends running and waving; and among them the girl, one hand lifted to her mouth, her eyes for an instant meeting his before looking away, and smiling, like she saw something too.

* * *
If it wasn't the day before he died, then it was the
day before that, when he said, as I came in from the wood­
pile with the coal bucket full of pitch kindling: "Sit
down here a minute Mister. I want to talk to you."

He had dressed for the first time in several days,
putting on his black jeans and a plaid shirt he'd worn
through at the elbows. His long johns showed grey under
the shirt.

I put my kindling beside the kitchen range and sat
down facing him across the hardwood table. His neck and
cheeks were scabbed in places where I'd nicked him, trying
to help him shave. When he spoke, his voice was strong,
but now he stopped often to cough.

"Your dad tell you we had the lawyer out here last
week?"

"Yes he did," I said. "Just before the storm."

He nodded and laid one of his great hands on the
table, "I've had enough winter," he said, "to last me a
lifetime."

Although he'd lost almost half his normal weight, his
hands stayed the same: massive, sinuous, and crossed by
long hard veins that lately had turned a pale blue. They
were the kind of hands -- I'd heard it from enough people by then to believe -- that could lift a good-sized drunk off his feet and hold him helpless by the front of his coat.

"Winters," he said. "Since I was your age, I've seen fifty of 'em on this place. Some hard, like this one's goin to be, some open. But every one takes something out of you." He tried to clear his throat and gagged, bending further over as he coughed, until his head was between his knees. I looked away, watching snow spin in whorls against the half frosted windows. After the last few days, I'd look at almost anything rather than watch him cough. Even winter.

Gradually he got his throat clear, spit into a five gallon grease can at the foot of the bed we'd arranged for him beside the heater stove, and breathed hard.

"I been fifty years in harness up here since I come home from the army like you. And then I damn near got killed by an old man raving about wind. Darn near shot Slicker Reid and me both."

He drummed his fingers on the table. The middle finger was stiff, as it had been most of his life, since he'd stumbled, running a boyhood errand with a jar of mustard gripped in his gloveless hand. He broke his fall with that hand and the bottle had shattered into knives
needles. Now, on the table top, that finger hit harder than the rest, making a dull flat snap each time it came down on the polished oak.

"Me and Slicker took the county road contract that year. You know, to keep the snow plowed all the way from the head of Jackson to Montana City. We had wind that year. You never seen such wind . . . blow all day out of the west, then switch around and tear all night out of the north. We had Slicker's iron wheeled road patrol for a snowplow, and my four teams strung out, up to their cruppers in drifts."

He glanced up from his hand, and when our eyes met, he grinned. "We had to go right past Bill Hirsch's place back then, and usually we'd stop to rest the horses and thaw ourselves out. Old Bill lived off there by himself in the rocks, and he drank some. Go in spells, you know, sometimes worse than others. Well, this one morning we stopped, it was almost Christmas. Bill was at it. Had been for days. We went on in, stood around the stove and jawed for a while, and Slicker told Bill that if he'd sober up during the day, he could ride the plow back with us that evening to spend Christmas at Slicker's and have a few decent meals. Bill said sure, fine; he'd dry out."

The old man looked at me. His eyes watered from talking and coughing. I was sure he was going to die on me
before my father showed up to give me a breather. He probably knew that's what I was thinking. He didn't let on. Instead, he folded those big hands in his lap and looked past me at the snow coming down outside.

"We had a hell of a time," he said. "Slicker operated the patrol, and I handled the horses. Hitting those drifts was like trying to plow concrete. When the blade jammed, the wheelers and middle teams would lunge to keep up with the leaders, and that old iron-wheeled grader would ride right up on the drift and flip over. Got so bad I finally took to riding the left leader to stop 'em when Slicker got pitched off the platform. Even so, we tore hell out of my harness."

I took my cup to the kitchen range. The teakettle had boiled almost dry. The kettle had been my grandmother's; in the forty years since she died, iron in the water from the hand dug well had caked the inside with a heavy crust of sediment. I used what water there was to fix a cup of instant coffee. The two holes in the Carnation Milk can had crusted shut, so I skipped the cream. I could feel him watching as I moved, and I knew he watched without interest.

"It was damn near dusk by the time we got back up to Bill's," he said. "The horses were done in, we still had Cutler Grade to pull, and there was old Bill, drunker than
seven hundred dollars. Slicker told him that we weren't goin' to take him, seein' how we had enough trouble as it was. Slicker didn't smooth it over none either, and old Bill got mad."

I sipped at the sour coffee, and I waited. Not for him to continue, but for the next fit of coughing; coughing he would last through like a man taking a beating, hanging on like a man who doesn't believe in the end he can be beat. I began to sweat under my wool shirts. I kept the kitchen too warm, because he needed heat. But as I listened to him breathe, the warmth seemed heavy, still, humid as the triple-canopy jungle ridgelines I'd left six weeks before. Heat that I'd thought, as the Chinook lifted me away from the firebase, I would leave behind forever.

He steadied himself, leaning forward with a hand on each knee. "We got the horses lined out," he said, "but when I seen Bill clear the door with his rifle I bailed off the leader and yelled at Slicker to catch hold of something. I started pounding that lead horse on the ass with my open hand. He was a big cowy Percheron, and Christ could he pull. Slicker had just lowered the blade and a course it jammed on the first drift we hit. We ran along the off-side, hanging onto the hames, as far as the quarry, dragging the patrol on its side most of the way. When we stopped and looked back, old Bill was just standing in the
door of his shack, holding his .30-30 in one hand like he'd
forgot it."

The telephone dinged, as it always did, just before
the lines went down. I stood and took my herders coat off
the nail on the door, and listened to wind rattle the win­
dows; I listened to the telephone that had never worked
right, and to my Grandfather's breathing. "Be all right if
I use your rifle?" I asked.

"Help yourself," he said and stood. He walked into
the log parlor and sat in his leather chair beside the
Windsor Heater. He folded his hands. "Poor day to hunt
though," he said. "Too much wind."

As I buttoned on my coat, the rattle rose again in his
throat and he straightened in the chair to cough. When he
captured his breath, I pulled the broke-stock .30-40 Krag
carbine from behind the highback cupboard and tucked it
under my arm. I carried the heavy rifle on walks I took to
look at land that in a few days would be mine. I hadn't
bothered to load the Krag since I'd been home, but I knew
that if I went without it I'd somehow feel wrong . . . aim­
less maybe, or unbalanced. Each day before I went out, I
asked my grandfather first if I could take his rifle. And
every time I asked, he gave me a sober "help yourself" and
a piece of advice.
As I opened the door he said, "Try working north to south, across the wind, through the bluff there, where we used to feed. Hunt slow."

*

He was bedded there, in the rocks that climb terrace-like up the shoulder of the bluff, sheltered from the shifting west wind by barn-sized slabs of weathered granite and thick-butted, wind-twisted fir. In the stillness between us, snow fell quiet and heavy. I leaned against a lichen covered boulder and waited for the buck to look away. Whisps of bale twine, bleached and rotten, hung in trees along the sheltered trail where we had once fed cattle with a team and hayboat. The stock followed us there single file between where the buck now lay and where I stood. My grandfather drove the team, and I forked wafers of musty hay to the trailing cows. He spoke now and then to his horses, and called his cattle into a trot; I cut the frozen twine, forked the hay to his cows, and dreamed leaving. Each day we hung the twine from the bales in a different tree. I thought about owning cattle of my own, about feeding them here now, when storms came day after day out of the southwest.

I eased the glove off my right hand. The shell casings in my coat pocket were cold, even against my numb
fingers, and so was the rifle bolt, as I opened the sloppy Mauser action and thumbed two rounds into the magazine tray.

The buck turned his head, pointing his black tipped ears toward something I couldn't see. I slipped my left arm through the homemade harness-leather sling and brought the barrel slowly up. I knew I wasn't ready; that I hadn't had enough time; that there might never be enough time, to get ready for driving that team myself.

My father had replaced the Krag's military rear sight with a RedField peep. I put the bead on the end of the barrel between the buck's eye and his ear, then centered it in the window of the peep-sight. The rifle was older than my grandfather. I wondered if the loose bolt and rust pitted action would hold together one more time. The front bead weaved back and forth across the deer's head. I held my breath, saw him flick his ear, started to squeeze the trigger, and waited for the explosion.

*

He lived now on milk alone, and was annoyed at the fresh liver I fried for supper. He lit the Aladdin an hour before dark and watched me eat. When I'd finished, he said, "That old rifle really busts 'em, don't it?"

"Yes," I answered, looking at his temples, which in
the past couple of weeks had caved in, leaving palm-sized hollows, "it really busts 'em."

"Told you, didn't I? About hunting up through there."
"Yes sir, you did."

"I lost a little buck like that in there one time... years ago. Found him a week later, tangled in the fence down past the waterwheel."

"I damn near lost this one. Flinched."

"Shouldn't. Not with that gun." Then he added, narrowing his eyes against the lamplight between us, "You know that day I was telling you about, when Slicker and me left Bill at his place. You know what he done?"

"No," I answered and pushed my chair back from the table. I took out my pocketknife and began scraping at the dried blood caked around my fingernails. It seemed to me that I'd heard this story before, maybe when I was a kid, rummy with warmth from the stove after the long chill of pitching hay from the big sled, or worked out after rolling blocks of green wood all day while my father and grandfather bucked logs with the drag saw. But I couldn't remember what happened next in the story, and when I looked across the table at the spindle of drool that my grandfather was trying to spit clear of his chin into the grease can, I didn't care.

I waited for him to draw his breath before I breathed.
He looked up and something I'd never seen crossed his face. He motioned me for water and I got him a dipperful from the bucket beside the door. He drank and spit and worked at breathing. And I watched, breathing with him across the table, wishing my father would come, until he finally got his wind.

"Anyway," he said, and set the empty dipper on the table. "That night it went down to twenty below. Old Bill, God knows why, set out for Slicker's place on foot. He only got a couple miles before he laid down in a drift and went to sleep."

He began tapping his fingers again on the table. Slow, one after the other, again and again. "Jumbo Hartz found him the next morning and dug him out, figuring you know, that Bill was froze to death."

I scraped the black crusted blood from my thumbnail with my jackknife. I'd hit the little buck in the side of his jaw the first shot and ran him most of a mile before I got the second one off. As I dug at the blood, I saw the jaw, dangling on shards of torn muscle, and the stub too, of his exposed, shot away tongue.

"But Bill wasn't dead at all," my grandfather said. "He was hung over pretty bad, and his feet, sticking out in the open all night, had froze. Jumbo wanted to take him to town, to see a doctor, but old Bill make Jumbo take
him home instead.

Talking tired him fast now. His voice was running down. "How you feel?" I asked. But I knew about how he felt, and I hoped I'd never find out.

"Half dead," he answered, and spread his fingers again on the table, watching them now like they were part of something remembered and remote. "And Bill stayed home," he said, holding me with his eyes. "When his toes started to stink from the ganger in 'em, he took a rusty tri-corner file, and one by one, he sawed 'em off."

"Jesus God," I said.

"That's right. You ask your dad. He'll tell you. He seen 'em plenty of times. The toes. Bill kept 'em around there for years, in a mustard jar full of alcohol."

I felt something in my jeans, poking me in the leg where the cloth pulled tight against my hip bone. I dug down in my pocket and pulled out the two spent Krag casings. The brass had tarnished a dull crusty green.

"I better go jerk the hide off that deer before he sets up on me," I said. I wanted to get out into the cold, to breathe that cold deep, to relieve myself of the smell coming from the grease can at the foot of his bed.

"Hold on a minute," he said. "Bill Hirsch felt the same about doctors and hospitals and all that as I do. Now the lawyerin' is all done, and I want you to promise
But he broke off, bending again to cough, gathering the phlegm in his mouth like rage. "You promise me...

"That's up to you and dad," I said, "but nobody's going to take you to town until you're ready."

"You'll know when I'm ready, Mister," he said.

I pulled the heavy plank door closed behind me and felt the iron latch drop into place. I fumbled with the cord button loops on my mackinaw and tried to find, through the heavy falling snow, the outline of the homestead cabin, only a few feet away, that my grandfather had built on log runners to pull like a sled with his heavy teams from one square mile of sage and scrub to the next. And I listened. I listened a long time, for the deep familiar growl of my father's four-by, pulling hard against drifts; for the clank of his tire chains, which since I could first remember, always reminded me of distant horses pulling hard in harness. And gratefully, I listened last in the stillness, to the welcome absence of wind.

* * *
WINGS
Jeffery waved from the shack and I eased my driver wheels onto the metal scale plate. When he waved again, I pulled the truck ahead to center the trailer wheels. I didn't get out of my truck and go in, like the other drivers, for my weight print-out. It was the pictures of wrecked logging trucks on the walls -- especially Pa's -- that stopped me.

Behind the little office where Jeffery spent his days weighing trucks, a mountain of logs waited to be run through the screaming machinery in the mill. Every trip I took across those scales, I studied that log pile, and remembered the hundreds of nights I'd spent inside, running the head saw, saving wages to buy a truck. Looking back, the years at the mill seemed good. Sheila always had breakfast ready when I got home in the morning. When the weather was nice, we'd eat out on the back porch together and talk. She'd tell me about the correspondence course she had stayed up working on that night, while I was at work; her face would light up when she explained something she'd just learned. And when she talked about maybe going to college, her green eyes shined. She studied at night,
so we could sleep together in the afternoons. I never understood much of what she told me about the courses that came in the mail; sometimes I didn't really listen, just sat watching her, enjoying the way she talked, smiling because she smiled.

"That's the last one, Buster," Jeff said, walking up with my scale slip. He took the cigar out of his mouth, handed up the weight print-out, and scratched his beer-belly. "We're going to close her down, they say."

"The mill? Don't bullshit me."

"At the end of this shift," Jeff said, grinning like he meant no offense.

I thought for a second. "I'll take 'em to Silver then."

Jeffery's T-shirt had some holes in it; hair stuck out in little clumps, like dead moss. "They closed Silver yesterday, Buster. If you'd get yourself a CB, like everybody else, you'd know that."

I looked at the scale ticket. 54,303. Four ton short of legal; six ton short of wages.

"Belgrade's still runnin' though," Jeff said, turning away to piss off the edge of the scale ramp.

"I got a deadline. I can't haul no hundred miles. You know that."

"Can't help you there, partner. We went broke again.
Office boys all over the place with clipboards, white shirts, and new hard hats. They look real nervous."

"What you going to do?"

"Night watchman."

"Man."

"Listen, Buster," Jeff said, climbing up the steps in the saddle tank under my truck door until he was level with me, "if I was you, I'd cash in that scale ticket there and any others you been holding onto for a rainy day." Jeff hadn't shaved in a few days and he smelled sour. "This time I think maybe they really did go busted," he said. He stepped down, saw another truck pulling in behind me roiling dust, and angrily waved him onto the scales.

*

Far back as I can remember, kids in town have been giving my ma, Martha, a bad time. The older ones mostly; little kids are scared of her. But they call her the Bird Woman and the Road Runner and such behind her back. They imitate the way she walks: the big purse gripped tight over her belly, her back too straight, the white ankle socks a blur at the bottom of her skinny, hurrying legs. And they copy the expressions that flit across her face. She walks around town for hours every day, looking for her little girl, my kid sister, Jane.
Climbing down from the Autocar, I saw Martha a block up the street, walking past the courthouse, smiling and nodding, and talking to herself. Having her on the loose like that used to get me down. Folks in town think I'm simple too, but that's mostly because of my size. Nobody has come right out and pestered Martha in the open though, since Randy Jacobs started heckling her during the rodeo parade a couple years back, walking behind her with his arms folded back like wings, scratching at the ground with his boots, clucking and pecking like a chicken. I got scared. Then I got mad, jerked Randy off his feet, and put him through that big plate glass window in the Foodland store. He didn't weigh much, not near what I'd thought.

Martha used to get Sheila down too, acting like she does. Sheila helped keep Martha's place straightened up, and for a while she was the only person Martha would talk to, besides me. But sometimes Ma would call her Jane, and that scared her.

The bank was crowded. While I waited in line I dug the five mill checks I'd saved out of my wallet. Folded next to them was a worn, black-and-white picture -- creased down the middle, corners wore away -- of a little girl in a white dress, standing on the guardrail of the old bridge that had spanned the Missouri, before the Canyon Ferry Dam downstream was finished. Her dark hair is braided in
little circles on each side of her head. A man's arm on one side of the picture steadies her.

Jane used to walk with her arms out away from her body, moving side-to-side with each step, like a little bird. And like in the picture, she was almost always smiling. The arm that holds her belonged to Pa. As far as I know, that is the only part of him, in any picture, left. Off in the distance, behind Jane, you can see a corner of the old homestead house where we had lived, beside the river.

I cashed my mill checks and made the two truck payments I was behind on.

One of the loan officers, Andy Little, who had been president of the class I was in before I dropped out to work at the mill, walked over to me and asked, "How's the logging business going, Buster?" Then without waiting for an answer, he took me by the elbow and led me over to his cubical, the way a man leads a draft horse into a stall.

"We're very concerned about the mill closure," Andy said, one hand smoothing down his thin blond mustache.

"Sure. It's bad."

"I've been checking through our accounts this afternoon and," he thumbed through some little cards with tiny square holes punched in them, "I noticed that your payments have fallen behind, the last few months."
"I just caught up on the truck," I said, wiping my nose on my sleeve. "The house payments are square."

Andy figured on a scratch pad for a minute. "Still behind $3,150, roughly, on the Caterpillar?"

"That sounds right."

"Do you think you can do it, keep up that is, with our facilities here closed?" He thumbed the stack of cards, then put his hand back to petting his mustache.

"You mean the mill? Yeah, I guess I can. Don't have much choice, now do I?" My face started getting hot; Andy noticed, and put down the stack of stiff little cards.

"Buster, we'll back you all we can, but there may be limits to what we can do," Andy said, smiling and waving at someone behind me.

*

Bill Lewis dumped a gallon pour-can of oil into the old Cummins while I filled the saddle tanks. I dusted off my name, painted on the truck doors in yellow letters that were supposed to look like fire: BUSTER KIMBELL, INDEPENDENT LOGGING. Red and green flames burned around the letters.

"Guess you heard about the mill," Bill said.

"Right."

"What are you going to do?"
"Keep on cuttin' and square my tab before I go broke too," I answered, taking out my check book.

"Ah, don't worry about it Buster," Bill said. "You buy a lot of fuel here."

"Yeah, but I might not be buying it for long."

Bill looked up at me. "Might be closer to being right than you figure." He fished a wad of plug-cut out of his coveralls and bit off a chew. "Diesel shortage. The way things are runnin' now I won't get no fuel at all next week."

"Are you sure?" I asked, watching him work the tobacco around with his whole face going this way and that.

"Yeah," he said, following my checkbook with his eyes. Inside the station, Bill rang up my fuel slips on his old crank-handled adding machine.

"How about filling that tank at my place?"

"I don't know," Bill said, scratching his jaw.

"I've got to keep running to make my deadline and keep the bank off my back."

"All right," Bill said. "Tomorrow."

"That's five hundred gallons," I said.

"Buster, I'll do the best I can," he said.

*
The wind picked up as the sky darkened with a little squall that blew in out of the northwest, carrying dust down from the summerfallowed wheat fields on the Townsend Flat. Martha's laundry was scattered all over the yard behind her shack. When I pulled in, she was out on the porch, leaning into the wind, nodding to herself, and smiling.

I left her bag of groceries on the table, pumped her a bucket of water, and put some on the stove to heat for her dishes before I went back out on the porch to watch the dust blow by. The wind carried a couple of her pillow cases across a vacant lot and plastered them against the tall board fence around the wrecking yard.

Martha nodded but didn't change her smile. Her blue eyes were bright in the iron grey hair that folded around her face and fell uncombed over the collar of her mackinaw.

"Listen to me Ma. The mill closed today. I can't sell my logs there anymore."

Martha nodded in little jerks, her sharp eyes nailing me.

"I'm broke again Ma," I said, trying to get behind her smile. "Broke, Ma."

She saw that I was driving at something and switched expressions like changing channels. She started in like usual when something went wrong. "Nasty," she said, look-
ing toward the river. "Evil, muddy water!" Her eyes went flat and hard as mirrors.

"Damn it Ma," I said. Then I caught myself, and walked around back to pick up her sheets and towels that were whipping in the wind, stuck to the waist high tumbleweeds in her yard.

Before I left, I fixed her some supper and did her dishes. When I was ready to go I took her hands in mine, and said, "Ma, I'm going to stay up on the mountain for a few days and cut. Don't get worried, and don't forget to eat."

Martha brightened up, nodding her head, and pumping my hands up and down. "Jane is coming home," she told me. "And we're going to pick apples across the river."

*

I unlocked the fuel tank for Bill, and got some tubes of machine grease from my tool shed. The little yellow Vespa scooter I'd bought for Jane, before she ran off to California, lay on its side, covered with truck parts and dust.

The house had faded a lighter blue from when Sheila and I had painted it. I didn't stay here much anymore, but I kept up the payments. I opened the front door and looked
around. The furniture and floors were dusty. Mouse tracks skittered along the baseboards, and silver webs hung in the doorways. The shades were drawn; it was dim inside, like when I'd worked at the mill, when we'd slept seven years of afternoons.

Cobwebs swayed from the cedar posts on the over-sized bed I'd built for us; the room smelled of cedar, and so did Sheila's things, probably, that still hung in the closet, where I'd covered them with plastic.

A framed polaroid snapshot, taken at her high school graduation, stood on the night table. Sheila grinned in her black robe with the blue and gold honors lanyard around one sleeve. I stood with one arm down around her shoulders, smoking a cigar. The whole picture was a little out of focus. She had talked to me for years about going on to school, to college, but I knew about big towns. What could I do there? I'd asked her and told her no, until she finally didn't ask again, and just left. I looked around the room and wondered how she was; if she'd found what she had wanted at college; if she'd wear a robe like that one in the picture when she graduated; if we'd ever see each other again.

*
It was dark in there, under those fir trees. A little spring flowed out of the rocks up near the head of the draw, where it got steep, damp, and cool smelling. The trickle of water splashed along clear and free for a few hundred yards, and then disappeared back underground.

Working in there alone, in that dim, sun speckled light, knee deep in fern and moss and slash, I lost track of the days; of how far I was in debt; of where I was exactly. I'd remember Pa hand logging, and sometimes imagine he was there with me, running nimble down a log in his corks, his metal measuring tape flashing out behind him. And that little spring sparkled clear; so cold, the water burned when we drank it fast.

Each morning I shot two Blue Grouse while they were still roosted up, with the old .22 Special that had belonged to Pa. I soaked them in a mason jar of salt water all day in the spring, and had them for supper with hard boiled eggs and instant coffee.

To beat the afternoon heat, I cut from seven til noon, then fired up the Cat, bunked my logs, and dozed the slash into long piles. Sometimes, lost in the snarl of my big Husquavarna saw, I'd feel like I was with Pa again, watching him and a partner fall a tree. Sometimes he'd sing, his big hands wrapped around the hardwood handle on the crosscut saw that whispered back and forth through the hid-
den insides of the tree, curling out long shavelings and sweet smelling sawdust.

"In the pines, in the pines, where the sun never shines," he sang, his upper arms bulging and the cords in his neck standing out stiff as choker cables. "And you shiver, when that cold wind blows." Then he'd wink at me and look at his partner, who was grunting and sweating on the other end of the crosscut, and Pa'd ask him if maybe he didn't want a saddle, so he'd be more comfortable riding his end of that saw.

When Pa was logging for Nieford White, he could pull that eight foot, two-man saw all day. He'd kneel, braced with one leg stretched out, and listen to the soft sound the cutting teeth made when he'd filed them just right. And Martha ... Ma had been different then. She was good to us kids, always baking sweet bread in the old kitchen range, and joking with Pa. Sometimes the four of us would walk the banks of the river in the evenings. Jane could walk good by then, and she would laugh at the swallows and night hawks swooping low over the moving water.

I dozed back banks on the uphill side of the road, and decked my logs where I could reach them with the leaky old Cherry Picker mounted behind the cab on the Autocar. The weather held clear and I managed to cut and snake out better than a load a day.
Each evening I built a little fire somewhere near the spring, wrapped up the grouse in tin foil, and hid them in the coals. While I filed the six feet of Oregon chain on my saw, the birds baked a dry brown. Although the days were getting shorter, the evening light lasted longer in there beside the spring, let in by the trees I'd cut and cleared away.

Some nights were windy, like the weather might turn, but usually the evenings were still; only the sounds of pitch knots bursting in the embers of the fire, the drag of my saw file, and the scolding of the magpies that kept track of my little camps. Each night I slept where I could find a flat spot near where I'd be cutting in the morning. Sometimes, late at night, I'd hear mule deer moving toward water in the dark brush.

One night I dreamed about the old place, where we'd lived beside the river when Jane and I were kids: early spring, the morning air heavy with smells of sagebrush, prairie grass, and river; gophers whistling on the edge of their holes; the foothills to the west lit red by the rising sun.

I followed along behind Pa, breaking up clods with my feet, while he turned over the half acre garden patch with an old horse and walking plow. The Missouri ran full to its banks nearby; mallards and teals winged close over the
dark water.

Pa hit something that stopped the plow. When I caught up, he was digging at a big head with broad, curved horns that was buried in the black ground. He scraped the dirt from the eye sockets and nose. "Buffalo," he told me, "maybe come along to drink at the river. Take 'm up and show your Ma."

I could see the old house -- the one Ma's folks had built, where she had been born -- and it looked the same: squared log, sided with warped shiplap and tarpaper, the grey plank porch leaning off slantwise. But when I tried to drag the skull, I couldn't move it. It held me to that spot like an anchor.

When I woke up, there was a light rain falling and my face was wet. I built a little squaw fire and sat there in the rain, and tried to remember how it had been, living out there in that old house, before they had flooded the valley with the dam. And I was surprised to see Ma, in the hissing embers of my fire, crying in the lamplight, Pa holding her and telling her that moving to town wouldn't be so bad; that we had to leave, or somehow learn to live under water.

*

The Cherry Picker wouldn't lift any of the logs bigger than three feet at the butt. I had to build ramps out from
the bank and push six or seven of the big ones onto the truck with the Cat, and then top off the load with the Picker. I stacked them up above the headache rack till the tires started to give, and spliced my chains to make the extra reach.

I'd forgot how good it feels to pull big logs on open road. The old 335 Cummins had over four hundred thousand miles on it and needed new rings and injectors bad. It knocked when it idled, and rattled all the way up to eighteen hundred RPMs. But going down the interstate on-ramp at Three Forks, I reached through the steering wheel with my left arm anyway, skipped three gears, shifting both boxes together, and grinned as I watched the black smoke roll back over the logs in my side mirror. I leaned back into the wore out air-ride seat and drove, remembering Pa, jamming square-cut gears, smoking down switchbacks in the old single-axle Mack that finally killed him.

That first load I pulled to Belgrade earned me more wages than two trips back home. Rolling out of the mill, I kept glancing up at the check I'd stuck in behind the visor. In the distance, to the southeast, I could see the highrise buildings at the university in Bozeman. Sheila was there somewhere. I watched the buildings draw nearer, thought about driving on in, and maybe calling her. But when I got to the interstate, I headed for home instead.
Trucks lined both sides of 287 the full length of Townsend. Some drivers stood talking, bunched up in front of the Husky station. A couple of them waved me over. One man, off by himself next to the highway, held a sign that said: ON STRIKE. They were strangers, men who drove over-the-road type rigs.

I felt stove up, climbing down from my truck. A barrel-chested driver with a sunburned face leaned against the chromed bumper on a new Kenworth. He looked up at the torn crown of my straw hat. "How you doing, Tex?" he asked.

"Making wages all right, I guess," I answered, looking down at the kicked out toes of my loggers.

"Yeah? Is that right?" he said, just loud enough for all the other drivers to hear. "Well we sure ain't," he kept on, talking like a man who's just caught you with his wife. "Cause we ain't got fuel."

I remembered my mill check. More drivers walked over, taking in my double-kneed tin pants, braces, and straw hat.

"What you going to do about it?" I asked him.

He looked up at me, then turned and read my name on the truck door. When he was sure he had everybody's attention, he said, "Well, Buster, I'll tell you something. If we don't have fuel enough, in twenty-four hours, to get
us home, we're going to plug up this highway tighter than a bull's ass in fly time."

I noticed Bill Lewis, standing in the open double doors of the Husky station, watching the drivers bunch up around me.

"Yeah. That's right!" another driver said, looking around wild-eyed. "We got to stick together. We got to stop every cutthroat still running."

I played with some loose change in my pocket, and saw Martha breezing past the Dairy Bar down the street, talking up a storm to herself. I grinned.

Bill walked out of the station, wiping his hands on a shop rag.

"You think this is funny?" the man with the sign asked.

"Don't get me wrong," I said, taking my hands out of my pockets.

"Say Buster, could you put that motor on the stand for me?" Bill asked, pointing toward his shop. He looked around at the circle of faces. "It would save me going for a forklift."

"Sure," I said, and followed him to the open service door. Some of the drivers tagged along, talking among themselves.
It was Randy Jacob's Dodge 440. With all the plumbing taken off it didn't weigh much over three hundred pounds. I picked it up waist high, feeling the calluses on my fingers tear under the weight. I carried it to the rebuild stand and held it there while Bill bolted it down. By the time we were done, the strikers had gone back across the highway, and sat shaded up on the loading dock at the grain elevator. All except the one with the sunburn.

He pushed himself off the shiny bumper, rolled his big shoulders lazy-like, hustled his crotch, and spread his legs. "See how funny it is tomorrow, Cowboy," he said, and spit into the gravel between my boots.

I felt it then. Coming. Coming from a long way down. From as far down as blood. And the blood climbed my neck until my face tingled.

I cracked the knuckles on my right hand, and my fingers started to shake. "Come on," I said, and started for him. A step from him I tucked my chin and balled my skuffed up hands into fists.

He stepped back. "Hey, damn it," he said, his eyes going white around the edges.

I bent forward and moved in on him; my arms felt heavy, quick, alive. He turned and walked fast, keeping his eyes on me until he was across the highway with the others.
An old Pete rolled past, in between us, loaded with grain. The driver pulled air, waved, and kept right on going.

*

It was the last of the big timber, right at the head of the draw, where wind had leaned the trees uphill so bad I needed hardwood wedges to lift them back. I was driving the first wedge into the back-cut when I saw them climbing toward me.

"One coming down!" I yelled.

The Forest Service kid and the deputy stopped, leaned into the hill, and watched.

I had saved this draw for last, this steep, north-facing gulch with its heavy stand of slow-growth fir. Some trees, like the one I was working, went more than a hundred feet and had over four hundred rings at the butt. They were straight, and heavy as iron; the kind of timber that makes sawing worthwhile.

I set another wedge with the flat side of my Kelly and drove it deep. The tree moved with each blow, the top leaning over in quick little jerks, until she cracked in the undercut. With a squeal and a soft groan, she tipped slowly out into space, needles whistling as she gained momentum, until she landed sliding in a crash of
breaking limbs.

"Buster, this is Charley Atkins," the Forest Service kid said, breathing hard from the climb. He watched us shake hands, then hiked off up the hill to see what I had left to cut.

"Morning," I said, looking at the big grips on his .357. Atkins was about my age, wiry, a broken nose. We'd been waving at each other on the road for a couple of years, since he transferred to town from somewhere out of state. Still, we'd never talked before.

"Buster," he said, taking off his dark glasses, "it's your mother."

"Martha been snatching gew-gaws in the drugstore again?"

"No," he said, looking at the tree I'd just dropped. "She's in the hospital up in Helena. She got clipped by a car last night, walking the highway . . . out by the silos."

"How bad she hurt?"

"Real bad," he said, hitching his belt to take the weight off his hips. "If you want, you can ride in with me."

"If it's all the same with you, I'll take the truck. I can take the cut-off across the dam to town. I'll have my own outfit that way."
Atkins put his glasses back on and looked over the old tree. "I don't think the driver was at fault. She was walking right on the road, dressed in dark clothes."

"Yeah," I said. "Probably so."

He looked up at me and said, "Buster, I know your mother isn't right. But she was conscious last night when I got there. She kept talking about a little girl she'd locked up in a basement somewhere. Do you know anything about that?"

"It doesn't matter. That was a long time ago."

On the way to town, I stopped out in the middle of the Canyon Ferry Dam and tightened my chain binders. Water boiled out of the cement powerhouse below, churning the river white downstream. Clouds rolled in over the cliffs above, and I felt the dam moving, like it was giving away, right out from under me.

* 

Martha's hair seemed more white than I remembered, laid back on the hospital pillows in a frosty tangle. Tubes and needles were taped to both her arms, and from the shape of the sheet, I could tell that most of her was in plaster. Clear plastic tubes ran into her nose. They'd taken out her false teeth, and she looked awful old.
I leaned against the rail along the side of the bed and watched her sleep. I started remembering how she was before the water came . . . how her hair had been then, red, and blazing in the morning light. I remembered her beside Dalstrom's old International truck, when they helped us move our stuff to town right after Pa got killed. And I remembered it was then, that Ma had started getting different, wild.

After a while, I covered her hand with mine. Nurses kept coming in, checking the feed-flow and drip from the bottles that hung above the bed. Two doctors looked through the doorway together. One nodded, and they left without coming in.

I stood there -- trying to keep out of the nurses' way, as they drifted through the room -- until Martha opened her eyes. She ran her tongue around her dry lips and her eyes steadied on me. I could tell that she was full of dope, but I was sure she knew who I was.

"Ma," I said, and squeezed her hand.

Her eyes stayed on me and she started making a tired sing-song noise, kind of a wore out little tune, like a chant. With her hair brushed back like that, I could see how hollow her temples were; her lips, sunk in over her withered gums, were cracked by tiny dry wrinkles. She held me with her eyes, and I knew she was scared.
"Jane'll be coming home, Ma," I said.

She shook her head, slow, side to side, keeping her eyes locked on mine. "No," she mouthed, closing her eyes and drifting off.

It was almost morning, but I was still awake, when Ma woke up with a cry like a trapped animal. I stood up and took her hand again. "It's all right, Ma."

"Jane," she said, her eyes roaming around the ceiling.

"It's Buster, Ma."

"Home," I thought she said.

"That's right Ma."

She gave a dry sob like she was going to choke. I started to go for a nurse, but she gripped my hand. Her eyes settled on me and held me still.

Ma died before it got light, and she died without saying anything else.

Outside, in the pale morning sunshine, the old maroon Autocar looked out of place, parked by the nice houses across the street from the new hospital. The mossy logs, stacked up fourteen feet, didn't seem so big. And as I turned over the engine, and pulled the compression release, Pa's song came back into my mind, tired now, and slow.

*
Trucks and cars and campers were backed up two miles from where the semis were jack-knifed across the narrow cement bridge north of town. I pulled off the side of the highway and locked up the truck. The morning sun burned off the chill. As I walked toward town, past the single lane of waiting rigs, I looked out across the backwater of the lake, trying to fix the exact spot where the old house had been, where it still was, buried under thirty feet of muddy water.

Tractors and trailers were wedged so tight sideways on the bridge that I had to climb up and walk the concrete guardrail. On the town side of the bridge, Highway Patrolmen and striking drivers sat on wooden tables in the little riverside picnic area, talking.

I walked along the guardrail with my arms out for balance. Below me, the Missouri moved in brown, dangerous eddies that made me dizzy. I stopped. I closed my eyes and listened to the water. I wanted that arm, the one that steadied little Jane in the snapshot I carried, to steady me too. I understood Ma's aimless walking; I felt it too; I knew what it was.

Two big wreckers started untangling the crossways trucks on the Townsend side of the bridge. People stood shaded up behind campers and trucks, waving newspapers for fans, watching, and talking among themselves. A lanky old
man in bib overalls, his face and hands tanned dark as my rifle stock, stood on the side of a cattle truck, looking down into the beef packed in back. Rigs were parked behind him clear to town. He had a hot-shot and was poking and prodding at a downed animal, trying to get her on her feet before the others stomped and smothered her to death. He looked down at me as I walked past and said, "If I lose any of these heifers over this foolishness, there's going to be hell to pay."

I climbed up the truck beside him, then stepped over the side and went down into the press of cattle. I got the downed heifer by her tail, and managed to lift her enough that her hind quarters unfolded and she got her back legs under herself. Then I worked my way up to her head, got a handhold on the slack dewlap on each side of her brisket, and lifted her standing.

Working together, we got a lariat under her belly and made a couple passes back and forth through the slats in the Omaha bed, so she couldn't fold again. One of the other heifers squared off and kicked the sideboards beside my knee with a crack like a .30-30.

Cars and trucks started to move both ways across the bridge. "Where you headed?" I asked.

"Avon," he said, wiping sweat from his eyes with a blue bandana. Somebody behind us blew a horn. "Thanks,"
he said. "Need a lift?"

"Just back up to my truck," I answered.

We rode along quiet for a ways, but when he saw my truck, he said, "Listen, you want a job?"

"Thanks," I told him, "I already got a job."

He pulled a business card from the chest pocket of his bibs and handed it to me. "Okay. You need one, you come see me. I can keep you and that tractor busy."

I looked at the old man driving beside me, and at the card. "Maybe I will," I said.

*

The Autocar idled on the switchback below; the last four trees were chained down on the log dolly as a make-shift trailer for the Cat D-6. I was done, ready to pull out. I dug the cattle buyer's card from my jacket pocket.

In the snaky blue canyon below, a western red-tailed hawk was getting hammered by four magpies. He couldn't circle to climb, pinned in as he was by the steep limestone walls. One right after another, the magpies flew in and hit the hawk on his back, almost rolling him over. He flapped around, awkward-like, just trying to get away.

Clouds piling in over the Divide covered the patchwork of wheat fields in the Townsend valley with scattered shadows. Flat and grey, the backwater from the dam shined
like broken glass. I stepped up onto the stump I'd been cutting when Atkins came about Ma. It bled little drops of clear pitch that stuck to the soles of my boots.

I read over the buyer's card. It said: ROCK HAND ** Cattle and Horses ** Bought and Sold ** Bozeman, Montana. I tried to imagine hauling cattle for a while, sitting in on sales at Billings and Butte, Missoula and Bozeman, drinking coffee with the buyers.

The hawk pumped his wings, pulling himself up toward me. He let out a long screech, and the echoes bounced lonesome off the limestone walls. I thumbed the card and thought about maybe getting a new brown Stetson hat and some cowboy boots for nights in towns like Bozeman.

Across the valley, the Elkhorn range parted a bank of fast moving clouds. Up there, on those rockslide ridges that had been too rough for the old-time hand loggers, new timber sales were open for bid. Out in the open and above me now, the hawk climbed free of the canyon walls. The magpies kept after him, but gradually fell behind. I thought about those nights in towns, about the cafes and bars, the motels and crowded sidewalks, where I'd maybe see Sheila.

When the red-tail hit the wind he spread his wings. Circling up in that wind, that rolls rough-shod over the Divide, blowing down clear from Canada, he screamed one
last time. I tore the card in half and let the pieces blow away.

Then the hawk changed his mind, folded his rust-colored wings, and slid sideways out of the sky, falling back toward the canyon like an iron wedge. Just before he hit the magpie, I saw him stretch out his legs and spread his talons. And I could see the black and white feathers, so clear, drifting on the wind, that I could almost count them.

* * *
ON DANGEROUS WINGS
I had been the geologist on that rig for nine weeks straight. It was a tight hole -- a secret wildcat drilling operation -- in western Colorado, over what we hoped would prove to be the most dramatic oil strike in the Piceance Basin. Security was tight. No one came; no one left. Only the mud logger, the company superintendent, and I knew what was coming up from that drill bit, churning 12,800 feet below the derrick. Before we moved to this location, we'd drilled seven holes as deep. Four had been dry. Dusters. We all felt the pressure.

At five in the morning the tool pusher rattled the door on my Portacamp trailer and told me that we had to shut down, pull the two and a half miles of pipe, and change the wore out drill bit. I knew I wouldn't be needed, so I bent company policy to the breaking point, quietly borrowed the crew's jeep, and drove west, into the sandstone-littered hills. I needed to get away, even for a few hours, from the unceasing vibration and steady noise, and especially from the deadly sullenness of isolation that wore on us all.
The chill morning air washed around me in the open jeep, the furnace-like heat still hours away. Out of habit, my eyes moved over the familiar formations ahead, my mind automatically sorting ages and types of rock into convenient categories. At first the field work had been rewarding, and successful. But after two years, the money didn't seem so important. The scenic West was less romantic, the weeks of isolation longer, and the one-street country boomtowns increasingly crazy. Rifle was thirty miles away, but I needed something else, something new.

The timber-covered mesas gradually opened onto rolling grassy hills. The sun eased up, onto the horizon. In the mirror I watched a plume of dust rise slowly behind me, then hang motionless above the road. Ahead I noticed an even rougher, less traveled road, branching off to the east. I decided to follow it. Around me the hills were dotted with clumps of scrub timber -- Ponderosa and occasional Pinon Pine. The draws seemed lush in the coolness of morning. The old road was rutted and rough. I slowed down, and felt the tension begin to seep away.

I caught a movement out of the corner of my eye. Circling upward, just above a nearby grassy hummock, a Peregrine Falcon was ringing to his pitch -- hunting. I stopped the jeep. Through my binoculars I was surprised to see a leather strap dangling from each of his legs.
Jesses. Someone, out of sight, was falconing. I hadn't seen a live hunting falcon in years -- since that last summer with Rose -- although I'd developed an armchair enthusiasm for the ancient sport, and had read extensively about it in college.

Rose. While my parents had tramped across Europe in leather pants and heavy boots, photographed big game and mud-covered natives in Africa, and explored overgrown Burmese temple ruins, I was left from time to time to stay with her. She was my mother's youngest sister.

Rose lived on the remnants of the old family estate, supported by a trust left from her grandfather's once monumental manufacturing fortune -- a fortune made building massive mining machines, which, like the dinosaurs they resembled, had gradually become extinct.

I was thirteen when I had last been left to spend a summer with her, and although we sailed and swam and played tennis each day, I only remember one event that season with any clarity. In the neglected gardens behind the weathered Victorian house, Rose kept dozens of songbirds in an elaborate old aviary. One evening, at the end of the summer, the two of us wandered down to watch the birds settle in for the night. They paired off, preened each other, and gradually quieted on their perches.
Rose was in her late twenties, slender, pretty, and delicately precise in her movements; but even then, she impressed me as unconventional, almost odd, living by herself the way she did, in a kind of graceful isolation.

Later that evening we walked to a hidden corner of the garden, where, encircled by untrimmed hedges, she kept a large white falcon in a cage built of ornately twisted wrought iron. I stood beside her and watched as she gave him pieces of red meat, which he tore neatly with his scimitar-like beak. He swallowed each portion quickly, stooped with his wings slightly spread, as if he might suddenly attack us through the bars.

"At one time," Rose said, "he would have belonged to a king." She put her hand on my shoulder and squeezed gently. "White arctic Gyrfalcons were once owned only by royalty, who prized them for the way they killed." Rose touched my neck with her fingers, encircling the cords behind my skull, and sliding her hand slowly down to my collar.

"And he is still very much a killer," she murmured, moving the sharp edges of her fingernails slowly down the soft skin below my ear.

A charge like electric current ran up my back to where her curved fingers had stopped, her long nails biting gradually into my flesh. I was paralyzed.
"A terrible and perfect killer," she had said.

I could hear the falcon's bell ringing clearly in the still Colorado morning. He rose with steady, crisp wing beats, then held and surveyed a marshy meadow which lay between us. Not seeing what he was after, he suddenly broke his hold on the windless sky, and dropped out of sight behind a nearby hill.

My pulse hammered. I scanned the horizon, then fired up the jeep and shifted into four wheel drive.

I skirted the little meadow and raced for the ridge. The going was rough. Rocks the size of easy chairs littered the uneven ground. Gneiss, I thought. On top, I had to stop to locate him again, flying steadily south, jesses dangling separately out behind him.

When I caught up, he was holding at seven or eight hundred feet. I drove within a few hundred yards of him and stalled the jeep. Through my binoculars I could make out that he was a tiercel -- a young male -- by his size.

Again I heard the bell.

He descended gradually toward a patch of tall grass bordering a dry wash. Suddenly a half dozen English Pheasant broke cover, their wings hammering and their colors brilliant in the early light. I lowered the binoculars. The Peregrine dove in a blur of wing beats and a flash of grey speed, falling in an awesome and accurate trajectory.
An instant before the falcon struck, the pheasant screamed. A cloud of feathers exploded between them. The pheasant rolled. It fell tumbling, without moving its wings. The falcon circled up, scribed an Immelman turn, and glided back to where the pheasant lay motionless, caught in a small juniper bush.

I realized that for some time I had been holding my breath. The falcon landed beside his prey. He shook the pheasant from the juniper and pulled away some feathers on the neck and breast. Then he crouched beside his quarry for several minutes, watching me. He was well trained, disciplined against molesting his kill. He seemed to be waiting. I wondered if he was lost.

"Well," a voice a few paces behind the jeep said. "Good morning."

I spun around. Walking briskly toward me, a tall woman with long, raven black hair slapped her khaki pants with a heavy falconer's glove. Her pants were tucked into dusty knee-length boots. Over a long-sleeved suntan shirt she wore a tight, jerkin-like leather vest. In her other hand, she carried a braided hunting leash called a creance.

"Hello," I said, stepping out of the doorless jeep. She stopped directly in front of me and slapped her leg again with the glove. This time the glove struck the top of her boot with a crack. "I see you have been follow-
"Druid," she said with an edge on her slightly accented voice.

"Yes," I said. "He's really something." Then, in a rush, I added, "He has a pheasant."

"Of course he has," she replied coolly, looking at me with eyes which seemed peculiarly out of focus, slightly crossed, or strained -- as though she were seeing me from a great distance. But the effect of her eyes only heightened her beauty. She saw that I noticed, and turned away toward the falcon.

"Coming?" she said. It was not a question. I followed, watching her long legs stride aggressively through the high, tawny grass.

She drew the leather gauntlet onto her left hand and looped the braided creance over her lower three fingers. "Druid," she said sharply. The tiercel flew to her gloved hand, turned, and stared fixedly at his kill.

I retrieved the pheasant. It was a cock; the feathers on his head shined an iridescent, almost neon green. An unusual feeling crept over me, perhaps a sense of the surreal. As I returned, she attached the jesses to the creance and stroked the falcon's belly lightly with the backs of her fingers. She took the pheasant from me and allowed the predator to feed briefly on its neck and upper breast.
I studied her. She was tall, erect, and though trim, gave the unmistakable impression of being powerful. The jerkin she wore made her seem somehow dangerous, the way it strained against her breasts.

"Is your vehicle far?" I asked her.

"I'm afoot."

"Out here?" I asked, surprised.

"I live out here," she answered, accenting the last two words with what I took for disdain. "Alone."

I scanned the surrounding countryside, which was heating up quickly under the rising sun. Nothing. Only the rolling hills and the rutted road far below.

"There," she said, almost harshly, pointing at a jumble of upthrust red sandstone several miles away. "In that canyon."

I thought she was joking, and smiled with what I hoped looked like charming indulgence.

"I'm Justine," she said, smiling suddenly. "Shall we, say for coffee?" she asked, pointing vaguely in the direction of the canyon.

I nodded, bewildered. A miner's shack or abandoned range cabin? I wondered. But she was too well kempt to be living in a tarpaper line shack in this dry, hostile country.

At the jeep, she carelessly threw the bloody pheasant
onto the back seat, then hooded the falcon with a dexterous brutality.

"He's imprinted," she said, noticing my expression. "Kindness doesn't excite him."

I tried small talk about the geology of the area -- about how frequently I found ancient rocks bedded against others which were, geologically, mere infants. Justine rode beside me in silence, holding the hooded falcon on her gauntlet, looking off over the passing terrain as though she was bored . . . preoccupied.

I turned into the narrow canyon, entering immediately the cool darkness that fell from the towering buff colored walls. Pinks, ochres, and blood reds streaked down from the heights in violent clashes of light and shadow.

"Over there," she said, absently indicating some giant cottonwood trees that marked the mouth of a smaller side canyon. I stopped the jeep and she stepped lightly out. "Come," she said, walking away into the trees, leaving the pheasant for me to carry.

A stream appeared among the cottonwoods. It must go back underground before leaving the canyon, I realized. Justine led the way up a series of curved steps cut into the soft stone, past deep, clear pools of water, and finally under an arch, which had been cut neatly through a buttress-like stone fin.
There, in front of me, built into the side of a huge diagonally bedded block of red sandstone, that resembled the bow of a sinking ship, stood the most impressive house I'd ever seen. Sculptured to appear as part of the native rock, the stone structure stood under an overhanging ledge, massive and elegant.

"Sit down," Justine said, indicating a semicircular stone bench, beside a serpent-shaped fountain, cut from the vertical wall. "How do you take your coffee?"

"Black," I answered.

I stood with my hands in my pockets and watched her walk away. She walked like she knew I watched, straight and sure. Proud. Her boot heels snapped on the stone patio and echoed on the towering canyon walls.

The masonry of the building actually joined the living rock, fitting so neatly that it was hard to tell where one ended and the other began. I felt a vague sense of unease. Aside from the building, the flagstone patio, and the stone bench beside me, there was no trace of human activity. It looked like an immaculately preserved ruin. No car, no human litter, no wires, no antennae. Nothing to suggest modern habitation. Only a few darkly tinted green windows, set deep in the thick walls of the house, broke its formidable surface. Bunches of wild plants hung along the walls, drying in the sun. From somewhere on the far side of the
structure the falcon screamed.

I turned my attention to the pool below the S shaped sandstone fountain. Crystals of feldspar and grains of muscovite mica sparkled on the pond's bottom. I listened to the water splash down the shiny stones, and in the disturbance it made on the pond's surface, I saw Rose, standing taut that evening in front of the cage, holding me with her slender hand, sharing the white falcon's intensity; I remembered how her freckled arm had begun to tremble; I felt the excitement rising again that had raced so wildly through me then.

Rose had held me in her talon-like grip for perhaps a minute, before turning me slowly and gradually bearing me down with her to the uncut grass in front of the cage.

She covered my mouth with hers, slowly opening my lips with her tongue. As she unbuttoned my polo shirt, she relaxed her hold on me. Spasms of uncertainty, desire, and fear rippled through me. I felt her fingers fumbling with the metal clasp on my belt buckle. I struggled to sit up.

Rose made a noise in her throat, low, almost menacing. She slid her right thigh over my legs, climbed on top of me, and began to move her body slowly against mine. She moaned and pressed down on me, warm and urgent and supple, until finally she stiffened, arched her back, and gasped. After a few moments she rolled off me, stood, smoothed her
pleated skirt, and walked away into the dark garden.

"Here you are," Justine said, extending a mug of coffee.

I took a sip. The coffee was strong, aromatic. It left a peculiar but not unpleasant aftertaste which was almost metallic.

She sat down at the edge of the pool, crossed her legs, and anticipating my question, said: "I live here -- like this -- because I choose to. I have unusual tastes, and I can afford to satisfy them."

"It's magnificent."

"Yes," she agreed, "it is."

"But how . . . " I began, gesturing toward the house.

"It was difficult, and expensive, especially removing every trace of construction. But simplicity and privacy are vital to me."

"I see," I said, not sure that I did. Her accent was intriguing. I couldn't place it. Justine looked at me steadily. Again her eyes seemed slightly crossed, almost strained. I sipped the coffee and noted again its peculiar herbal quality.

"You're very good looking," she said, shaking her mane of black hair from one shoulder to the other, her mouth twisting into an odd expression.

Our eyes met.
"But you won't seduce me," she said, again with that cruel distortion of her lips. Rising, she said, "Come walk with me. Perhaps you'd like to see the house, and the rest of my hunters."

A cooper's hawk, and American kestrel, and a sharp-shinned hawk stood on ring perches, basking in the late sun beneath the overhanging ledge behind the house. Near the entrance, a large harpy eagle gripped a canvas covered wooden post. His jesses were tied to a leash which snapped into a ringbolt driven into the rock wall. He leaned forward, staring intently at me. I felt drawn to him, almost mesmerized. I moved toward him, fascinated. A few paces from him Justine said, "Careful. He's in yarak."

I stopped. Yarak . . . a falconer's expression for when a bird had been starved until it was keen to kill, until the bird will strike game even twice its size.

"He's the gentleman who took my eye," Justine said behind me. I turned and looked at her. Of course, I thought. A glass eye. That accounted for her peculiar expression. She smiled, but there was no more humor in the curve of her lips than sight in that colored porcelain globe.

The harpy ruffled, stretching the stiff feathers on his neck. He leaned toward me, his hand-sized, dagger-like talons as dangerous as his eyes were intense. I felt
slightly dizzy, remembered that I hadn't eaten, then found myself staring at the coffee cup which dangled from my right index finger.

"It is getting hot, come inside," Justine said, leading me by the arm through a heavy oak door and down a long cool corridor. We passed a series of rooms. In one, a wall-sized desk, typewriter, open books, and neat stack of typewritten pages suggested a manuscript of some sort in progress.

We entered a large grotto-like room decorated with stuffed birds, falconry equipment, and primitive weapons. Above a long black couch, which faced a massive fireplace, a Golden eagle hung suspended by invisible wires from the huge log vigas above. He was mounted in a strike position so life-like that I was startled. Christ, this whole place is crazy, I thought, staring up dully at the eagle's extended talons.

"You don't look well, Justine said. "Perhaps you should lie down." She eased me firmly down onto the couch. I kept my eyes on the eagle, soaring above me, staring at the flared wings, the heavily muscled legs, and the yellow glass eyes.

I lay there staring like that for a long time. Just how long I'm not sure. When I finally looked away from the eagle, Justine was standing beside me. The room was dark.
She wore only the loosely laced, black leather jerkin and her boots. She had replaced the glass eye with an eye patch. Crouched on a T-shaped perch beside the fireplace, the Harpy eagle watched, motionless.

"Jesus," I said.

"Don't speak," Justine said, her voice harsh, unnatural.

In a lithe movement, she was on me, straddling my waist with her long legs. I struggled to sit up. She grasped my wrists and forced my arms down.

"The coffee," I said.

"Quite harmless, my little rabbit," she breathed. "It will go away soon enough."

I was bathed in sweat. I tried to relax, to gather my strength. I had been out most of the day, I realized.

Above me Justine's face was drawn, tense; her rigid body trembled. Her breasts swelled against the slack leather cords that laced the jerkin. She slowly unbuttoned my shirt, holding me still with her single eye. She ran her nails down my ribs and across my belly, bent and kissed my chest, until with a shudder, she sank her teeth into the soft skin over my stomach. Hard. Her breath came in short gasps.

The harpy ruffled, spread his wings low in threat, and stared, his eyes bright in the darkening room.
Justine grunted and inched her upright body forward, pinning my arms with her knees. Slowly, hesitantly, she lowered herself over my mouth. Her musk was heavy. Dark. She touched my lips. I found her with my tongue. She crushed down harder on me, rocking and bucking. She writhed over me, pressing down more and more urgently.

I couldn't breathe. Panic rolled over me in waves, along with a growing desire to possess her. On my terms.

As she came, she stiffened, threw back her head, and howled. I turned my head to one side, buried my nose in her soft inner thigh and gasped for breath.

Justine slid back and looked down at me, her black tangle of hair falling like a net about my face. "You bastard," she said, and slapped my right cheek.

Even from on my back I managed to put some snap on it; a short right cross that caught her square on the point of her chin. It hurt far less than surprised her, but it was enough. I rolled from under her, got hold of the hair at the base of her neck, and pinned one of her arms behind her back.

Justine screamed.

I struggled with the dizziness that swept over me, fought the urge to quit, to rest. Instead, I wrapped her hair around my hand and pulled hard enough to force her, face down, onto the couch. I felt my strength ebbing back,
and with it a crazy, mindless passion, unlike anything I'd experienced since that night in the garden with Rose. I unfastened my belt and zipped down my pants. Kicking and struggling, Justine cursed beneath me.

I forced her firm legs apart, and with a thrust, entered her from behind. She twisted her head, gasped, and tried to bite my arm. With her free hand she groped for my eyes, her nails tearing into my face and scalp. I didn't care. I ground myself into her and felt her hard buttocks begin to squirm against me -- rising and falling with me.

The harpy flew screaming from the shadows, its talons extended. He hit the end of his short leash and slammed onto the floor, beating his wings and snapping his beak.

It was over in seconds; in a violent rush of gasps, cries, curses, and screams from the maddened eagle, we went rigid together and soared, for an instant, on dangerous wings.

For a long time we lay quietly together. The harpy leaned against his jesses, straining toward us, flexed.

I kissed her. Once, between her shoulder blades. Then I stood, pulled on my sweat stained clothes, looked around at the shields and spears that decorated the stone and timbered walls, and the golden eagle suspended in flight from the ceiling.
At the entrance to the room I turned. Justine lay on the couch, her face hidden under the tangle of hair. "Good hunting," I said softly, and walked quietly down the long corridor.

At the oak door I heard Justine say, "Come back."

As I walked to the jeep I thought again about Rose: of that evening when she pulled me down with her into the uncut grass and early manhood; of how for years after, I'd ached for her; of that Christmas vacation in college when I had driven my used Volvo twenty hours straight to see her . . . but that had been the sixties. Rose, like a lot of people, had gone out on a new edge. When I'd arrived, unannounced, at the old house, I found Rose with a lover . . . a fifteen year old girl named Mourning Dove. Rose had been mildly amused to see me; she hinted wickedly at a threesome; I left early the next morning.

It was twilight in the deep canyon. As I stepped into the jeep, an owl screeched high in the darkness of a canyon wall. The little stream gurgled under the cottonwoods.

As I drove the jeep out of the canyon, into the setting sun that streaked the distant mesas with fire, I realized that I might come back, as I had been drawn back to Rose, pulled by a craving for something I couldn't explain, yet knew I wanted. But I also knew that with the drill bit changed, the rig routine would resume. Days
would roll unbroken into weeks. If I came back, I figured, it probably wouldn't be for a while.

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