Vex & silence| Stories

Phil Condon

The University of Montana

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STORIES

PHIL CONDON

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for the degree of
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"A Day in Canada" is a shortened version of the novella, "Canada," which was one of three finalists in Quarterly West's fourth Biennial National Novella Competition, 1989, judged by Richard Ford.
"I get so tired of all this sex and violence, sex and violence," she said to him as she snapped the TV off so hard the knob broke away in her hand. The room went dark. "What's this frigging country coming to," he said from between the sheets in a voice like a news commentator. That was all he said. It occurred to her it was 1989. She undressed herself slowly in the dark, the loneliest thing in the world, cursing each button and each fingernail without making a sound. The broken knob was between her teeth. She hadn't decided where to put it yet. As her eyes adjusted, she saw the glow from the screen, hanging in the room, chest-high, almost friendly. Between that and the light from the numbers on the clock beside his head, three thin, bright twos, she found her way to the bed, setting the knob on the nightstand. The place where his eyes always were was so shadowed, she couldn't tell whether they were open or closed. It occurred to her that would be as he wished. As the third two on the clock changed to three, one of them was grinding her or his teeth. After that, because this is real life, it's anybody's guess.
Miller's nickname is Swarm because that's the way he thinks and talks and acts—in swarms. A lot of people think he's on something because he's kind of wild-eyed, but he never even drinks. Still, with the way he strokes his beard and talks real fast sometimes like he's coming at you from all directions, well, "Swarm" really does fit him. I've known him for two years; we play in a band in Springfield together; Swarm plays keyboards, and I play bass. It's just a weekend dance band, really, but we have fun with it.

Swarm's a lot older than me and Eddie, our lead guitarist and singer. Eddie and I both go to college, first time around, at Missouri State there in town, but Swarm is in his upper thirties. He's quite a character, a real sixties leftover or holdover or holdout, and yet he's still going strong.

Swarm and I are headed to see Bob Dylan and Tom Petty play in Kansas City tonight. He's asleep already, with his ticket pinned to his denim workshirt, and we're only an hour out of Springfield. The weather's hot, unbearable, over a hundred degrees—I keep expecting...
the asphalt to melt and suck us in just like the dinosaurs in the tar
pits.

Way off to the north I see dim thunderheads rising up like long,
gray horses. There's a low rumbling in the distance. Swarm wakes up.

"Hey, good morning in the afternoon, how far are we, man? Have
you got the mobile geiger counter working?" He points at the radar
detector that hangs under the dash. "You know this Highway 13 runs
right up to Whiteman Airforce Base, and it's one of the most radioac-
tive roads in all of Turtle Island. If you see any snow-white trucks
from Pantex, let's slipstream them all the way to heaven."

I just smile back. That's Swarm for you; he wakes up going a
mile a minute. He likes to call North America "Turtle Island"
because of some poetry book he read. He knows all kinds of obscure
stuff. He says it's not just coincidence that they make A-bomb
triggers up in KC at some plant practically on the exact spot where
Osage bands held councils, or that almost all the bombs are assembled
at the Pantex factory outside of Amarillo right where the Comanche
battle of Adobe Walls was fought.

"So how do you figure Dylan and Petty will play tonight?" I ask
him, finally, "Together? Or back to back sets? I heard Dylan's been
doing an acoustic set by himself some nights."

"Me too. I hope so. When I saw him in Long Beach in '66, he did
the first set with just guitar and harmonica. I swear he didn't open
his eyes once. It was eerie, like watching somebody invent their own
personal mass right in front of your eyes. I promised myself then
that I'd see him again, sooner or later. Twenty years definitely
feels like later."

I like to kid Swarm, so I start whistling *Yesterday* in my best syrupy McCartney style. He laughs, "Spare me, Davey, spare me, or I might have to give you all three verses of *Paint It Black*.

I'm trying to think of a comeback when the Blazer misses, once, twice, and then stalls. We're going uphill; it doesn't take long to stop. Huge tractor-trailers wail by as I try to start the engine again. The Blazer shakes each time one passes.

The heat is vicious, and when I open the hood, a wave of even hotter air hits us in the face like we've opened an oversize oven. I'm beginning to feel a little sick with the trucks passing like somebody is tearing gigantic pages of a book right in my ear and the sun hanging high and hot like an evil yellow eye in the sky. I hear Swarm talking.

"Christ, we better figure this quick before the heat plays tricks on us. Must be the fuel system—have we got gas?"

"The gauge hasn't hardly moved off full. What about the carburetor? Or the fuel pump?"

"We'll narrow it down." He goes for the tools in the back of the Blazer. I prop the hood up while he disconnects the line at the carb. "Turn it over one time while I watch this."

No gas is getting to the carb; the heat must have gotten to an old diaphragm in the pump. We decide to walk back to Collins, a mile or so. We cross the road and start walking into the heat. Swarm pulls his blue bandana out, swings it into a triangle, and ties it over his head in one motion. He puts his thumb out casually as he
walks with his back to traffic ahead of me. Just when I'm thinking he really does live in the past, an old Ford with a homemade camper and a railroad-tie bumper stops.

Inside sit a guy and a woman, both maybe forty-five, somewhere around my folks' age I figure, both with the same light-brown hair. Their windows are down.

The guy leans toward us. "Need a ride? Too hot to walk today."

Swarm is all smiles. "Sure do. That's our Blazer broke down back there." He points behind us. "We're trying to make it to KC to see the Dylan concert tonight.

The couple's smiles go totally blank, but they're still wearing them. She pops the door open and slides way over. "C'mon, we'll take you to Collins," he says across her.

They point out their place on the way, a little, boxy building set way back off Highway 13 with a hayfield in back of it and two tall oaks on either side. Neither of them is sweating a drop. They seem in a great mood. On the dash is a tiny Bible, smaller than any I've ever seen, maybe three inches tall; it's got a magnet holding it in place. We all introduce ourselves. Maxine works the floor shift while Roy clutches. They do it smooth like they've practiced. I keep wanting to look at the little Bible to see if it's real inside or just something to hold keys or change. Swarm and Roy are talking fuel pumps fast and furious when Roy pulls up into the Apcos station in Collins.

Five minutes later we're headed back out of town with a new fuel pump. Roy bought everyone a can of Coke. He keeps saying, "Chevy
parts are everywhere." He drinks half of his Coke at once and belches like a foghorn. Swarm starts laughing, and then me and Maxine. Roy decides to stop at their place to get a tow chain. He offers to tow us into the shade of a steep cut through so we can change the pump in the shade. At their place I go in to use the bathroom.

Turns out Maxine and Roy have a hobby: they collect Coca Cola paraphernalia. Their livingroom is littered with it. Coke trays and throw rugs and coasters. A big Coke pillow on the floor and a Coke bottle clock on the TV. There's Coke postcards plastered on the fridge and a Coke cover tied tightly over the toilet seat. Swarm is fascinated.

"Maxine, this is wild, have you seen The Gods Must Be Crazy?"

"No," she says, and her mouth tightens up a little like for the first time she's put off at us. "Is that blasphemous?"

I can see Swarm thinking this over carefully, and I hope he'll keep quiet for once, and he does. He says something about liking collections of all kinds as he strolls around the room while we wait on Roy. I follow Swarm's eyes, and I realize we're both looking for at least one thing in the room that's not from CocaCola land, and there on the mantel, we see it.

The only picture in the place—it's set up in a small glass frame standing at a jaunty angle, like a picture of a family member, but it's that real familiar picture of Jesus, with blue eyes the color of lakes on road maps, and chestnut hair, looking straight up—unnaturally, as if there's something up there only he can see, or like he's playing that old joke where you look up at the ceiling until somebody
else does too. Swarm stares at it until Roy comes out of the garage
with the chain.

When we get the Blazer started again, we check the map. Swarm
points out where the concert is, Sandstone Theater, about halfway
between two little towns, Bonner Springs and Leavenworth, Kansas, just
west of KC.

"Wanta cut over on 54? It's no further, and at least we'd get a
glimpse of some of the missile silos—see our tax dollars at work, like
the signs say. What do you think?"

"Not really, I'd go out of my way to miss those," I answer,
still checking out the map. "I saw The Day After; I know they're out
here, I don't need reminding." With a strange chill in the sweltering
heat, I realize how close we are to where that movie was set. I keep
seeing Jason Robard's face at the end of it. "Let's stay on 13; it's
just as short. Maybe we can come back the other way."

I fold the map, and we hit the road. Swarm starts talking about
the Osage Indians who lived around here. According to him, they were
the tallest tribe in Turtle Island, averaging over six feet. He tells
me about all the arrow points he's found down on his place. Even
though he's got an attic apartment in town, he's held on to twenty
acres out on Beaver Creek in Stone County.

"Why'd you ever move back to town anyway?"

"My wife left. It was too lonely, even in all that beauty. She
was from North California; that's a hard place to stay away from for
too long."

I get quiet for a while; I think about all that's out there.
ahead, waiting for me yet.

"But it wasn't lack of love between us, no, not a lack of love. More like just an excess of time. Anyway, hell, we're all just like birds; ever really watch a bird take off from a branch? Nobody asks why it decides to leap away; you just watch it fly."

I look out the window, imagining birds. I keep trying to see into Swarm, almost as if it would tell me something about myself. I remember talking to an old friend of Swarm's, McNace, who stopped in town last spring. He told me about Swarm leaving UC San Diego in '68 in his last quarter and never coming back. When I asked McNace why, he said I'd have to find that out from Swarm myself.

As we get into heavier traffic south of KC, Swarm is silent. Sometimes I wonder what makes him tick. He's not from the Ozarks originally, but I think he loves the land here as much as anybody I know. He's got a collection of photographs he took of small Ozark springs that are some of the most beautiful pictures I've ever seen. He plays with the band for fun, and he does small stonework jobs for cash, and he writes stories that never get published. They're all about some imaginary commune out in the Ozark woods. I've read a couple of them, and they're OK, but a little boring, really, kind of a soft sci-fi without much action.

Swarm says the commune is perfect, and that it is all he wants to write about because the one thing nobody can imagine is perfection; nobody can imagine what comes next, but that he's trying to train himself to imagine what comes next by writing the stories. He says we're all so used to blood and pain and rancor and hiding our eyes,
that we can't even fathom what we'd do with perfection. He says his fictional farm commune is a place where people learn to fathom perfection. He can go on and on, and when he talks that way, you know. I believe everything he says.

We make Sandstone just barely late; I hear music in the distance as we park. As we get close to the gate, we see a huge inflatable beer bottle marking the concession stands, and, beyond it, thousands of bobbing heads stretching down toward where the music's coming from. On the flat terraces that interrupt the sloping hillside, people dance and wave their hands in the air as if they could somehow catch the music between their fingers.

Petty and the Heartbreakers are just finishing You Don't Have to Live like a Refugee. We thread into the crowd, Swarm ahead and me following. Refugee fades out, and without warning, Dylan walks on.

I stare so hard I miss the first song. Before I realize it, he's into his second song, one I don't even recognize, but Swarm is singing along with it, a raspy, ironic ballad to somebody named Ramona.

As an intro to one number, A Simple Twist of Fate, I think, Dylan says something about how we're all "just down the road" from Leavenworth Federal Prison, and he dedicates the song to anybody who might be unjustly imprisoned up there. At that, Swarm is on his feet, fists clenched, yelling. "Free Leonard Peltier. Leonard Peltier is locked away in Leavenworth. Sing in the Spirit of Crazy Horse."

The song drowns Swarm out real quickly. Leonard Peltier is one
of Swarm's main causes. He's an Indian who got sentenced to life for killing two FBI agents in a gun battle at Wounded Knee in 1975. Swarm talked Eddie and me into playing a benefit concert one weekend last spring in St. Louis to raise money for a new trial for Peltier. Swarm gave me this book about three inches thick called *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse* to read about the whole deal. I never waded through it all, yet Swarm says Peltier is innocent and that he's been beaten and harassed in prison. But I always wonder how the hell Swarm knows what goes on in prisons.

Anyway, I miss most of the song, listening to Swarm who goes off on a tangent about how Crazy Horse was bayoneted in the back at Fort Robinson a hundred years ago. I stand there thinking about how everything is connected whether you see it or not. All these prisons and prisoners and protests and poets and songs written and forgotten and songs rewritten and resung, and everybody's lives tied together across time, and dead people and living people always still affecting each other.

She's dancing by herself, barefoot, and it seems like there's a spotlight playing over her, but that's impossible. Swarm dances right over to her while I watch. She's closer to my age than Swarm's, but beyond that it's hard to tell. She moves her hands over her head in sweeping, fluid motions and her long, thin, auburn hair trails slowly around behind her like an afterimage.

During the next break between songs, the three of us talk about Dylan and Petty. She's got embroidery all up and down her jeans. Her
eyes are a light blue shade that reminds me of the color of the sky on a cold, clear winter afternoon. I'm having trouble believing she's here alone.

Dylan starts another song, one I've never heard, and Swarm says he doesn't know it either. The tune is haunting, but the words aren't coming through at all, as if they're rising straight up above us. Then there's a chorus, and, as clear as anything, the first line stands out: "When you get to broken-promise land," and then the guitar overpowers it again. But Dylan keeps pouring that line into the mike over and over: it's hypnotic.

"Hey, this is our own song," Swarm says. "It's for all of us to finish—everybody knows about broken-promise land," he laughs, and when the chorus comes around again, he begins chanting, making up lines that end in rhymes—like sand and band—and the girl joins in with a line about stretching out your hands while she grabs me and Swarm. We dance then, holding hands, and sing our own words, almost as if that's what the song was for, and it's like our very own concert then, just for a minute, but then the song is over. And, soon, after a couple of more songs and a short encore, the concert is over, too.

We head for the big, plastic beer bottle and the main gate. I realize we're all holding hands still. There's the tired sounds of a crowd going home and no music and hundreds of cars beginning to fire up in the distance. Somewhere in the crowd we tell each other our names. Hers is Lily. Swarm introduces himself as Miller. When we get to the bottle, she says she's got to meet her friends from KC to get a ride back. People are rolling by on both sides, like a river
dividing around a sandbar.

Swarms says to Lily, "I've got two questions, and they're both important, OK?"

"Sure," she says, looking from him to me and back.

"Can you let us give you a ride back into town? And will you have your picture taken with us in front of this crazy bottle?" Swarm points at the camera I'm carrying.

She laughs for a second and then smiles. I look at my feet. This feels awkward.

"Yes and yes," she says. Nothing more.

"Well, all right, I'll take you two together," I say as I start fiddling with the Polaroid.

"No way, Davey, what we need is one of all three of us. Something to commemorate the trio who composed their way to broken-promise land and back. Photographs don't lie." Swarm stops some guy and convinces him to snap a couple photos of us clowning there.

We're waiting for the pictures to darken up when her friends appear, two guys and two girls. The guys look pretty stoned; they keep scratching their heads like Stan Laurel. They all talk for a minute while Swarm and I back off to one side. Then they leave, and the three of us head for the Blazer. The photos both come out good, and they darken up more and more as we walk. Somehow in the pictures it looks like we've been friends, all of us, for years, and we are all smiling.

Swarms drives, and we decide to head north and cross back into
Missouri at Leavenworth so we can avoid the traffic snarls on I-70.

"Did you hear Dylan mention Leavenworth? Do you know about Peltier?" Swarm asks Lily.

"I did. I do. He got transferred there from Marion in Illinois this summer, right?" She acts as if everyone should know about Peltier. "Have you heard about Big Mountain in Arizona? I may be heading out there soon. One of my friends in KC is working with the Navajo who are being evicted."

"Mr. Peabody's coaltrain has hauled it away." says Swarm.

I begin to wonder if they're talking in some kind of code.

"That's right," Lily says, "only now Peabody and the government are after uranium and coal."

Lily tells us she graduated from Reed College two years ago. They talk about Portland, and I'm quiet because I've never been there.

The road dips down, and the cooler air and thicker trees at the roadside let us know we're crossing a creek or a wash. Swarm steers carefully around two box turtles frozen in the headlights, but Lily asks him to stop. Before we can explain how common they are and how they are always crossing the highways, she hops out. She picks them up and carries them one at a time to the far side of the road. Swarm wanders off into the trees to take a leak. I watch Lily rescuing the turtles in the moonlight. The pavement is still warm from the day. When we get back into the truck, she kisses me very lightly and friendly on my cheek, almost on my ear. She says, "Swarm is lost," softly.
"No, he's just pissing," I start to explain, but she's looking right through me, and I know that isn't what she means.

In Leavenworth, we stop at a Git-n-Go for coffee and directions. Lily goes to the bathroom. Swarm asks the clerk, a teenage girl with punk hair, about the federal prison.

"This is right where it is, that's right." She pops her gum and wipes at the round nametag—Sherry—that's pinned to her orange employee vest. "In fact, there are four prison facilities within the city limits of Leavenworth." She sounds like she's memorized this spiel. "The famous federal prison, Kansas State Penitentiary, Leavenworth County Jail, and the NorthEast Kansas Correctional Unit. There's a higher prisoner to citizen ratio in this county than anywhere else in the U.S."

Swarm stares at her. He asks how far the federal prison is from here and if she doesn't get afraid living around all these prisoners. Then he asks her what a nice girl like her is doing in a place like this. She's laughing. He tells her about the Dylan concert at Sandstone.

"Oh, yeah, is he the guy playing with Tom Petty tonight?"

"Yeah, that's the one," answers Swarm, "that's the one. Do you have any spray paint for sale, Sherry?"

I've been around Swarm on and off for a while now, so I sense when trouble's coming, usually. I tell him that I need help carrying the coffee I'm pouring, but he says, "Hold on a minute," as he heads to the back of the store where Sherry points. He comes back with
three cans of black spray paint and three pairs of black cotton gloves.

"I want to reprimed that front fender before it rusts, Davey," he says to me, staring straight at the girl. She rings it up like it was so much Cola.

About four blocks down the road, Swarm turns off the highway. Lily asks him where he's going.

"Don't you think we should leave a message of support for Leonard Peltier?"

She doesn't answer, which he takes as yes, like always, and we go down three cul-de-sacs in a row in silence. We're in a subdivision without any trees, houses set in cornfields. It reminds me of the suburb where I grew up when we'd first moved there. Even the street signs look brand new, just erected. We turn off Leavenworth Ct. onto Leavenworth Drive.

Suddenly we go through a big open gate in a long chain-link fence. There's a sign on it, but it comes up too fast to read. More cornfield, and then off to the left stretches a long, low white block building.

"Looks like the back side of a long, long row of garages," I tell them, pointing out the window.

"Maybe this is where the prisoners park their cars when they do their time," says Lily with a light edge to her voice. She and I laugh, but then Swarm starts in on the history of Leavenworth.

"This place started as a U.S. Army fort in the Indian Wars. A Kiowa holy man died of a broken heart here. He died rather than be
relocated. And the Wobblies. This is where they sent the Wobblies in 1919, hundreds of labor organizers and free-speech advocates; some of them died in here."

Swarm pulls off the road and heads across a rough-cut lawn straight for the building. Before I know it, they're both out in the moonlight, waving the cans. Suddenly it feels like I'm the one they met at the concert. I'm expecting helicopters, or at least squad cars, any second. I watch Swarm paint in small, round sweeps—"All the criminals in their coats and ties."

I recognize this Dylan song, and I think, what the hell, and grab the last can and join them. I write, "are free to drink martinis and watch the sun rise." Lily's way down the wall from us, writing in big, square letters. Swarm starts another line below our first ones, "While LEO NARD sits like Buddha in a ten-foot cell." and I complete the verse: "an innocent man in a living hell." Our cans are almost empty; we run down to Lily. We help her finish, "FREE LEO NARD PELTIER IN THE SPIRIT OF CRAZY HORSE." We leave the cans and gloves by the wall.

Going back through the gate, we read the sign we missed: NORTHEAST KANSAS MINIMUM SECURITY FACILITY—GROUNDS CLOSED 8 PM TO 8 AM. Swarm shrugs, and Mily laughs, but I'm still expecting sirens or floodlights all the way back to the highway. I don't relax until we coast over the Missouri River bridge a few minutes later.

Over the river Swarm jokes about our painting on the wrong walls. "God, it felt good, didn't it, swinging your arms around, doing something wild and free in the moonlight, watching those black letters
flow across a white wall. Lily, you were great; you would've been
great in the '60s."

Lily is quiet for a minute, and then she says back to Swarm that
he would be great in the '80s. Right away I wish I'd said it, and at
the same time, I hope his feelings aren't hurt. That's the way it is
with Swarm and me; sometimes I want to tell him to shut up or grow up
or straighten up, but something real important to me would be missing
if he ever really did.

Swarm isn't bothered though. He laughs at Lily's comeback and
invites her to come visit the Ozarks before she heads out west. He
tells her about his twenty acres and how she could hang out there as
long as she needed. We all exchange addresses and phone numbers in
front of this tall, white frame house on 44th Street in KC.

While we're talking, saying goodbye, Lily pulls out this necklace
from underneath her blouse. It's a gold chain with fine links and a
small gold cross that hangs between her breasts. I can't help staring
as it hits me again how damn beautiful she is. I get real quiet, and
Lily is out of the car, waving, and I look at her one more time, and I
say the only thing I can think of, the obvious thing—"When you get to
broken-promise land," as a farewell, and I wave.

She puts her pack down and twirls one time like when she was
dancing and spins right back up to the Blazer, and she says, "Can you
two crazy people wait about half an hour while I pack my stuff and get
ready to head south?"

Swarm beams like a bright light went on behind his eyes, and I
think to myself that I'm going to remember this night for a long time.
"Does that sign ring a bell with you, Lily?" Swarm points at the sign just ahead—HARRISONVILLE MO CITY LIMITS. Lily thinks for a minute and then tells us about watching The Day After on TV in Portland. She remembers the flash of this same sign in the movie.

"So," says Swarm, "Do you want to see a missile installation? There's a whole field of silos between here and Springfield; it takes up a fourth of the state; we could go right by one. From the highway they're the most innocent looking places you could imagine."

"No thanks," says Lily. "I read in the KC Star about some priests and nuns who just got sentenced for tapping on the gates up around Whiteman with little ball peen hammers—they got ten to twenty years. The government doesn't fool around at all with those places; it's like they're some kind of holy shrine to them."

I get a funny, eerie picture in my head when she says this. All these intent, robed clerics lined up like penguins, tapping ceremoniously on the walls of the sacred military shrines. But I don't feel like laughing. I realize how tired I am and how far we have to go yet.

Pretty soon there's a sign for the Schell-Osage Wildlife Area. Lily wants to know if they have wild turkeys there; she says she's never seen one. Swarm says summer isn't the right time to sight one unless you get up at the crack of dawn. Lily wants to sleep at the wildlife refuge so she can look for turkeys at sunup. Anyway, like she says, we're too sleepy to drive all the way back tonight.
We head down the first gravel road we come to on the Refuge, and after a couple of dark, slow miles we cross a low-water bridge over a small creek. The Blazer lumbers up a steep section of the road and then through some thick woods. We finally stop at the edge of a field on higher ground.

Swarm figures that in the morning we can find our way out to the south edge of the refuge without backtracking. Lily asks again about turkeys. We get out sleeping bags and arrange ourselves like three spokes in a wheel, with our heads in the center, close together. The stars are brighter than ever, like somebody is dialing them up real gradually.

I doze on and off. Lily asks Swarm about UC San Diego in the '60s. I open my ears when she asks him why he dropped out. He tells her a long story about this friend he had at the time, David, his best friend then.

"David was a philosophy major, like me. The war just kept tearing him up inside. He really admired Asian cultures, especially the Buddhists. He had pictures up in his room of the monks in Saigon torching themselves. He had beautiful long black hair, down to the middle of his back.

"The first time either of us took LSD was together. We listened to The Rites of Spring four times in a row and walked all night in the eucalyptus groves behind campus without saying a word out loud. We were really close, but then he started withdrawing from everybody, finally, even me. He'd walk past me with his eyes down, or he'd do this odd little bow like I was some important stranger. He quit
answering his telephone. And then his door.

"I pretty much lost track of him, and then one day in February '68, Tet, I saw this crowd gathering down at the edge of the quad where the woods came almost onto the campus. I heard some girls screaming, and I started running. I was close enough to see the backs of people's heads clearly when I heard this hot, wild whoosh sound like some freak wind from nowhere, and I heard this short, high scream like somebody's soul had just evaporated, and I knew it was David.

"I remember the flames leaping straight up to the low branches of the eucalyptus, and all the low leaves curling up into black ash, and it got warm even back where I was. Two people in front of me fell down on their knees and began throwing up all over their hands and the grass. Then I could see David, burnt, burning, like a horrible charcoal effigy of himself, all bent over and flaming. He must've used gallons of gasoline. Somebody ran and tried to get a fire hose from a building about half a block away, but there was nothing left to put out. All I could smell was gasoline and burnt hair, David's beautiful, burnt hair. I passed out.

"A few days later I left; I headed north, north, and more north. When I got to the Monashee Mountains in British Columbia, I stopped for a couple of years. That's where I met Alicia, my wife. After '75 we came back down. Sometimes I still feel like I'm always going north. Like I have to find some Arctic place where the water is way below freezing but doesn't freeze, and everything, the whole damn landscape, is pure white."

I'm lying there, rigid as a board, with my fists tightened up.
After a long time, Lily says that the stars are white, pure white. I suddenly see them all, thousands of them, and I realize the moon has set. I look over at Lily. She's rubbing her temple like she's got a sharp pain there. Soon, I hear the crickets again, and I can feel Lily and Swarm in my circle, breathing slower and heavier. I figure I can sleep now, and I hope I don't dream of that other David. I close my eyes, but I still see white stars.

"Look, Davey, wake up. Look at the butterflies." Lily is tugging at my hand stretched out on the ground next to her. It's early; we can't have been asleep more than a few hours. A light fog drifts among the trees.

"What butterflies? Are you dreaming? Go back to sleep."

But she keeps talking at me, and she manages to wake up Swarm, too. Then I do see them. Hundreds of monarchs flitting over the top of the wet hay. They're floating along like somebody somewhere is slowly pouring them out of a big bottle, setting them free and letting them just tumble out in a ragged row over the dewy weeds.

Swarm and I are content to lie there propped up on our elbows, watching the monarchs drift by, but not Lily: she wants to follow them.

"Hey, what about the turkeys? You may miss the turkeys for the butterflies," Swarm says.

"Butterflies are better anyway." She's putting on her shoes and brushing her hair with her fingers. In the morning light, I notice a long, smooth scar between her eye and her hairline on the right side
of her face.

"If you guys want to sleep awhile, go ahead. I can find my way back. I'll just follow the butterfly droppings." She starts laughing.

"Are there butterfly dropping?" Swarm asks. I watch Lily disappear as she walks away trailing the butterflies. I don't want to sleep anymore.

Neither does Swarm, so we go after her. The monarchs have big gaps in their line, but just when you think it's the end of them, some more flit into view. The sun is reddening to the northeast, and the butterflies fan out into the field. The ones beyond the shadow line look like lacy, dancing mirrors when the sun hits their wings. Swarm wipes his eyes with his bandana while I yawn.

"Better watch it. One of those monarchs will fly right in your mouth." Swarm says. Then we hear Lily. "Swarm, Davey."

We start loping along and cut through some low brush toward the sound of her voice. All at once I see her, standing in front of a barbed-wire fence with large white signs every few yards. U.S. Government Military Installation Absolutely No Trespassing Deadly Force Authorized.

On the other side of the signs is a wide strip of black, smooth asphalt. Then there's a tall fence, made out of a kind of fine, shiny chain-link. More signs on it, but with only one word—DANGER—and a bright red insignia in the shape of a lightning bolt. I don't want any part of this place.

Lily's pointing with one hand and nervously rubbing her hair with
the other. "Look, the butterflies, they're hitting the fence."

I follow her finger with my eyes. I had already forgotten about the monarchs. But they are rolling up the rise behind us, floating out into the black no-man's land between the two fences without a flutter of apprehension. Most of them seem to be rising up over the tall fence as if possessed by a windless grace, but about every fifth or sixth one hits the fence and disappears. There's just a little, white vapor or smoke and the lightest little "past," maybe, but my heart's beating louder than that. Lily says we've got to stop them or divert them somehow.

She and Swarm limbo under the barbed wire and start waving their arms and jumping like they're doing calisthenics. I follow them out; to hell with the butterflies; I don't want Lily and Swarm to get near that tall fence. Almost before I can do or say anything, though, I hear an engine. A camouflage-green jeep appears, doing what looks like fifty, bearing down on us, parallel to the fence. The jeep skids to a stop.

Four men in uniforms that match the jeep are out, and they've got pistols aimed at us, and we've got our hands on our heads. We've only been over that barbed-wire for maybe a minute at the most.

One of the men wears dark shades. I think I see his eyes behind them, moving very quickly, back and forth. He speaks.

"You individuals are trespassing on U.S. Government property. I want your names and where you are from, slowly, one at a time. Now." He points his pistol at me.

"Altec. David Altec. I'm a senior, a college student at SMS.
In Springfield. I live on Florence Street." My voice cracks; I feel stupid because I can't remember my street address. No one has ever pointed a gun at me before.

Swarm and Lily follow suit; their voices aren't steady either. Then the man in shades wants our ID—again, it's slowly and one at a time, me first. I hand him my whole wallet. He hands it to the guy next to him, who looks through it piece by piece. They are in no hurry. Behind them I see a monarch puff against the fence, then another. They check Swarm's ID, but Lily tells them hers is in her pack in the truck.

"I'm glad you mentioned that, little lady," the man says, like he's mocking what somebody who had never known it might take for politeness, "because that's my next question. How the hell did you get here, and what the hell are you doing here?"

We all start talking at once, hesitate, and again, all start at once. I think of that kid's game—rock breaks scissors cuts paper covers rock. A monarch has landed on the windshield of the jeep, folding and unfolding its wings. Finally, the third time, Swarm speaks alone.

He's collected himself. He tells them where the Blazer is; he describes it and gives the license number; he explains about the Dylan-Petty Concert and says he has a ticket stub on the dash of the truck. He explains about coming to the refuge so Lily could maybe see a wild turkey and about waking up to the butterflies instead.

As he tells it, I realize it's exactly the truth, but it also sounds like the biggest bunch of bullshit I've ever heard. I can
imagine what the man in the shades thinks.

Swarm ends up pointing at the butterflies. It's like he's a defense attorney, resting his whole case on them. They've thinned out; maybe we have diverted them, after all, with this commotion. The man turns and looks to where Swarm is pointing.

Finally, the man clears his throat and spits away from us at the fence. It hisses loudly. He speaks slowly. "I think you individuals are assholes, but I think you are harmless assholes, so I think I'll give you about thirty seconds to disappear back to wherever you came from. Unless, of course, I reconsider." He pauses long enough for me to see he's enjoying our fear.

"Or maybe I should check out our fence here before you go, make sure your butterflies haven't screwed it up. What a damn shame it would be if one of you nature lovers fell into our fence. Do you know that fence has enough voltage in it to fry an individual up like a piece of burnt bacon. Can you imagine that? It'd sure be an ugly sight, now, wouldn't it?"

Nobody says a word. Next to me, Swarm starts to twitch. Suddenly I think of the story he told us last night.

"I asked you all a question. You, you with the big mouth, you've got all the answers for the group, don't you?" He stares at Swarm who's staring right back. "Or are you such a poor, scared faggot you've forgotten everything you ever thought?"

Swarm bites his words out, one after the other, all at the same angry pitch. "I'll tell you what I think. I think I don't need a goddamned, jackbooted weatherman to show me which way the
motherfucking, military wind blows. That's what I think. That's who I am. And what's more, I think you'd better show us your identification. I don't care if you're from Air Force One; you have to identify yourselves. We're still in America here."

The shaded man doesn't miss a beat. He soaks it all in and works his jaw. "Maybe I should clarify things here, because, mister, you are one confused, crazy man. You don't even know where you are or who you're talking to."

He waves his pistol, and two of the guys go around behind Swarm and me. The other pulls Lily away from us. I feel the barrel of a gun press right into the base of my spine.

The man puts his gun away and moves between us. With one unexpected motion, he grabs my earring. Out of the corner of my eye, I see he's got Swarm's earring with his other hand. So that's what the faggot talk is about. Mary Jo, Eddie's girlfriend, gave all three of us in the band gold earrings last Christmas. The man's finger works between my ear and the ring.

He begins talking again while they hold us like that. "So you think I need to identify myself. Very good. I'll tell you exactly what I need to do. My job. And part of my job is to keep wild-eyed creeps like you from trespassing at this site. Once you cross that barbed wire back there, you are standing in my land. You are illegal. In fact, you don't even exist. Are you hearing me real plain?" He twists my earring. The whole side of my face burns; it feels stretched tight.

"I think you are. And when you step back over that wire, I don't
exist. Go to the Cedrick County Sheriff; go to the State Patrol; tell them all about me and my friends. They already know we don't exist. Now, I want you assholes out of here right now. And I want you to remember one thing, especially you, you loudmouth prick." He yells right in Swarm's face. "You don't even exist. You may have your ticket stub to your rock concert, and you may even chase butterflies, but here in my country, you don't . . . even . . . exist."

Then he jerks his hand down hard, and the side of my head feels like somebody hit me with a stiff, hot, leather strap. I fall on my knees with both my hands on my ear, feeling the blood. Swarm is next to me, blood oozing between his fingers as he grips his ear. Lily runs over and kneels next to us. She screams something at the men, but I can't understand her.

The jeep pulls away. We get to our feet, helping each other. Swarm first, then Lily, then me. As soon as I stand, I feel dizzy, and I drop back to my knees. Swarm steadies my shoulder. Lily hugs my head to her as they help me back up. We start to walk away, but then Lily breaks free of my hand and runs back. She kneels down and picks up our earrings from the asphalt. I watch her grope for them like in a dream. Swarm is cursing under his breath, holding his ear. When Lily turns back toward us, I see spots of my blood on her shirt over her breast. We get under the barbed wire together, somehow. I don't see any more butterflies anywhere.

We find Highway 13 and head south. Nobody talks about going to the police. The man in shades was very convincing. My ear throbs
slowly like I've got a high toothache. I look at Swarm. Just for a second I feel like he caused the whole damn thing on purpose. Lily leans her head on his shoulder.

After about ten miles, I see a sign for Collins. I figure we'll pass our breakdown spot soon, but I miss seeing it, because the next thing I recognize is Roy and Maxine's house. I remember the tall oaks, and I see Roy's truck parked in the gravel circle in front of the barn. Without asking Lily or Swarm, I turn into the drive. There's something I have to know.

"Hey, what's going on. We need to get back," says Swarm.

"It won't take a minute." I pull up next to Roy's truck.

"A minute might just be too much. We sure don't need any more trouble." Swarm rolls up his window and leans back.

"It's kind of late to figure that out now, isn't it?" My voice rises in spite of myself. " Couldn't you have kept your mouth shut for once, Swarm? What the hell did all that prove?" I open the door and stand outside.

"Take it easy," says Lily, "it's nobody's fault. Why are we stopping here though? Do you know this place?"

I slam the door and stare at them both through the window.

"Davey doesn't understand what's at stake, what's been lost," Swarm says to Lily as he raises his hand like a visor to his closed eyes. "That's all."

"No, that's not all," I say, leaning in the window. "That's not all. This isn't some kind of a game—those guys back there weren't bluffing. We could've all been killed." They both stare at me;
their eyes look glassy and blank. I wonder if I look that way too. "Can't you see that, can't you, Lily? We can't save anything or anybody—not even ourselves."

She doesn't answer. Swarm closes his eyes again under his hand.

I step away from the truck. I don't even know what I'm trying to say. I just need not to look at them for a minute. I open Roy's truck and look for the little Bible. That's why I stopped; for some reason, it seems like the most important thing in the world to know if it's real or not. I grab it and pull it free. I fumble at it, expecting it to be a slide-open box with something useful in it, but it is real. All these tiny pages filled with tiny black words, the same words I remember.

I see Maxine crossing the yard toward the trucks. She waves when she recognizes me, but she looks at me intently. I step away from the truck and try to smile.

"Hi, Davey, you boys back from the concert? On your way home? We didn't figure we'd see you again so soon." She hasn't noticed the Bible or my ear yet. I smile a weak hello.

"Well, anyway, you're up and about early. Have you eaten breakfast? Yesterday, after you left, Roy remembered that Bob Dylan fellow you guys talked so much about. Roy's got one of his albums; he's a real nice gospel singer. What happened to your ear?"

"I snagged a fish hook in it," I lie to her. "Fishing in the Osage. Before dawn. I guess I shouldn't fish till it's light enough to see."

"It sure looks nasty. You oughta do something with it. Hey, did
you want one of those?" She's noticed her Bible in my hand. "You
should've spoke up. I've got plenty of 'em. Are you OK?"

She takes the little Bible out of my palm and magnets it back
into place on her dash. She opens the glove compartment, and she
picks an identical one out of a small box filled with them, neatly
stacked. "It's good luck, just like a St. Christopher for the
Catholics," she says as she hands it to me.

I mutter my thanks as she eyes Swarm through the closed window.
He looks asleep; his hurt ear is turned away from us. Just then Roy
bounds out of the house, chewing something. He's got two cans of Coke
and an album in his hands.

"What's up with you guys? Had breakfast?" he says, as he hands
me the Cokes. Suddenly I know I shouldn't have stopped, and yet I
almost want to stay, to let these people feed me and talk to me and
take care of me.

Roy is real proud. "Here, look, this is an album by your Bob
Dylan. I've had it for years, but I forgot it." He's waving a copy
of Saved, Dylan's born-again album from the late '70s, the one with
the cover painting of God's big finger reaching for Adam. It's the
only one Swarm and I haven't ever listened to. Roy wants me to have
it. I take it.

"Thanks," I say, feeling guilty. "My ear's killing me. I've gotta
go."

"You want some ice from the house? Here, put one of them Cokes up
against your ear; they're ice cold."

I back off, waiting for them to do the same. From the porch they
wave at us. I get in the truck and wave back. Lily's lying down; she raises her feet for me as I get in, and I put them on my lap. Swarm doesn't move.

I hang the Bible from the ash tray I never use. Lily and Swarm look very tired, as if they've aged years just since I stopped. Swarm stares at the big white finger on the album cover when I toss it on the dash.

"Can you believe that?" I try to smile at him as I nod toward the album. "I guess it's something to add to the collection, anyway, right?" I hand him a cold Coke with Roy's advice.

"Hell, you already know I like collections of any kind," he says. I know he's trying to be funny, but nobody laughs.

I roll out the driveway, slowly. I put the other Coke on the dash. I see one of the pictures from last night there. It's already fading in the sun; polaroids always do that. I stick it under Dylan's album and turn onto the highway again.

We pass Collins. The whole morning washes back over me, making me feel sick. I look at Lily lying between me and Swarm. She's put our two earrings on the little chain around her neck. One spot of blood must have set in her shirt; it's dried up over her nipple like a dark red dime. Swarm has the Coke can pressed against his ear, and he's rubbing Lily's hair softly. I touch her hand; she squeezes my fingers hard. I'm steering with the other hand.

Lily starts to cry, in low little sobs. She says, "Where are we going? Miller? Where are we going?" She waits, crying very quietly, her wet eyes closed. And for the first time when it really counts,
Swarm is silent, and it's me who speaks, even though it's only one word.

"Home," I say, too soft, and then louder, "home."

"Promise? Promise David?" I see the water bubbling up in her eyes like a tiny spring. Swarm's head swims back until his eyes are staring straight up at the ceiling of the cab inches above him. His eyes fill, too, and the tears run down the side of his cheek onto the Coke can.

Then I know I've got to be sure, and I'm not, not of me or them or anything, but it's my hand, there, on the wheel, and for the first time in my life I'm really driving somebody somewhere, and even though America never looked so endless, I squint out at it, squint out hard at the highway ahead of me, and I say just one more word. "Yes."

They both sleep all the way back.
Crush me. Borrow my heart. Break my name across your lap.

Make me child again. Call me from the edge I chase

    with your keening voice of apple-wise sorrow. Learn on me.

Rock to stillness my loud incessant spine. Be child. Walk me down

    dark halls with our fingers twined like vines at midnight.

Knead me with your supple fists. Find confusion I can learn to crave.

Wash the marrow I try to be from the bleached splinters I'll end up as.

Be still. Ease my simple heart with the wild waltz of your far mind.

Bend my eyes along the arc of your strong breasts. Erase me

    like warm chalk from the chilled blackboards of my history.

Leg me till I weep. Drink my tears because you wish to.

For no reason, like me. Crush me. Compress my silky memory

    to an ebony ball I can leave behind. Lean on me.

In the dark, without asking, know me. Anchor me fast

    with the unbreakable cables of your rusted mouth. Sing me

    with your curves of touch while the green dawn breaks and breaks.
Don't expect me. Make me child. Always discover your fingers

in the fertile lines of my palm. Force an endless scream

from the twin throats of my despair. Require me. Answer for me.

With your tall dance, grace me, here, on the steel floor of my cool loneliness. Teach me, slowly, nothing, until I learn by heart.

Discipline my beard into the depths of your own sweet story.

Or we could walk to the bus station as dawn reminds us. We could never talk about the narrow ash leaves falling at our feet in the gray light. We should choose not to remember the dark, windblown walnuts, crashing on the backporch roof, one by one, all night long. But we would know these things, know them without speech, as we trudge past Florence Street to Charles, as we cut across the bakery parking lot, sniffing the warm wheat air like children learning something unforgettable. Who would turn first? Who would speak? Past the abandoned, sloping church clutching to its chiseled cornerstone, so hard to read, step by step, as the breeze blows the fractured blue notes of the Greyhound loudspeaker down the length of Converse Street. A wind radio, drifting, calling the city's exiles home. Santa Fe, Flagstaff, Barstow, Points West. That's when I reach for your hand. We have four shoes on. None of them are tied. We have been up all night. When I drank coffee, you drank wine. When I tried beer, you switched to black tea. I won't count the years I've known you. We wait at a Don't Walk sign, our minds blinking in neon time at the edge of the steep morning curb. Is November a word or a taste to you? I tell you I picture years in circles, great round sweeps across the calendar's
calm face. Hoops of time, bracelets we wear and display. I am already missing you as the Santa Fe bus passes us at the corner of Red and Main. Don’t forget to kiss the world. Remember what the pavement is for. Send me your driver’s license. Send me something.

You wave as I sit down behind glass. The bus is the color of the flag. Your glasses are bigger than you as distance approaches. Is that what I will remember?

I wave as you sit down above luggage. The bus is beige, the color of calendars. I’ve never known whether to wave side-to-side or up-and-down. Is that what you will remember?

Or we could walk away, downtown alive with departure. Traffic would fade to music beneath our fine laughter. We would not wait for Walk signs anywhere. Not at Red or Converse or Charles. We stop at the bakery discount store, pretending that cold coffee and old donuts with only plate glass between us and the foggy dawn is enough. We talk about November. You tell me how it tastes, a burnt-persimmon memory. You keep using the word rehearsal. Then we touch hands above the table, our palms obscuring someone’s headlines. Your touch is an angelic rush, connection beyond denial or fog. We say nothing, over and over. We may wait until December, watching beige busses crawl by. We may learn until the New Year how wide
the calendar can be. A phalanx of flag-colored busses coasts by, engines
off, each driver smiling beneath destinations we can't read. With no
newspapers, we leave the bakery and follow the silent busses, coasting
downhill, home, where we began.

Spend the day with me. Put out the sun with your fingertips.
Loosen my grasp on the world. Be true. Depend on me for one moment.
Lead me to the valley of your shoulders. Show me flowers. Break my watch
with your teeth. Stay up with me for the rest of my life,
starting now. Press me. Don't answer the phone. Don't hear it.
Make me guess what I remind you of. Reason each soft hair
along the length of my forgetfulness. Make me better. Whisper me
against the afternoon. Turn aside if I speak my worthlessness.
Let the bus go by. Wait until you really need me. Kiss my eyelids once,
now, before I die. Poem me until I understand. Teach me
from your body, lessons, all morning long. Undress me from my past.
Let the entire world work and forget. Forgive me everything I've said.
Sense the things I should have meant. Let me grow important to you.
Forget me with the lined palms of your warm hands. Be here. Send me
one perfumed letter. Say some sweet thing, over and over. Never
imagine me dead. Be the one to say it's over.
Be the one to wave. Be the one to wave good-bye.
At The Pocket Inn on Detroit's North Side, the crowd thins out after midnight. Carroll Spark carries a five month old baby girl, his unnamed daughter, across the icy parking lot. She's wrapped in a little pink parka he scored at the GoodWill. The girl sleeps, a bottle nestled in the parka next to her. But if she wakes up, so much the better. The game is better if the baby cries.

It's smoky inside The Pocket. Carroll edges up to the bar, stands next to a platinum blonde in black jeans and high-heel boots. He orders a Screwdriver. When Carroll sets the baby on the counter, the blonde turns around. Her breasts are too small.

He eyes two gals across the room. A brunette with a big nose and chest and a pretty redhead with hoop earrings. He walks around the bar as if he's looking intently for someone, holding the baby in front of him like a shield or a badge.
Ignoring the women, he stations himself close enough for them not to be able to ignore him. He reaches into the parka, pinches the baby's bottom. Several people look over when she cries.

Carroll fidgets as if trying to calm the baby. Inside the parka he pinches her again.

It's the brunette who bites first. Carroll plays the bars like a fisherman working a stream.

"What a little sweetheart," she says. "What's the matter with you, honey?"

As the brunette reaches out, Carroll hands her the baby, as if that's what they both had intended. He catches the woman's eye and shows her a bland, even smile. Not even a hint of a threat.

Carroll knows his features are even; his brown hair full and fine. Even the deep lines across his forehead are smooth and symmetrical. But he worries that his ears and his lips are too big and too red.

The baby stops crying. The woman smiles. Carroll grins back, as if this sudden three-way happiness is a little trophy he's earned. Something to take home and keep.

The redhead goes home alone. Carroll and Joleen leave The Pocket in Carroll's van. Tonight he calls the baby Dianne.

Carroll stops at the NiteOwl-Package-Drive-Thru for a pint of vodka, a quart of orange juice, and a quart of whole milk. He gets on the Morton Expressway even though it's just for a mile. He likes to get above the city and see the rooftops and lights spread out in the
distance. In the van, on the road, the city can play tricks with your mind. Get close enough, down on the streets, it looks like a huge, silent wrestling match, all grimaces and tears. Back way off, up on the freeway, it's like a cold stone tableau, like one of those friezes on the old buildings downtown, all finished up and dignified. He exits on Eisenbach and drives to the double garage he rents off the alley behind Gannal Street. He drives down the alley for the last six blocks, easing the van over rough spots, steering around open dumpsters and abandoned cars.

Joleen doesn't seem to notice the freeway or the alley. She stares at the baby on her lap and talks about her job—factory work at Campbells, the Banquet division. She runs a machine that plops peas and potatoes into trays from 3 to 11, five days a week. She plays with the baby, saying "peas and potatoes, peas and potatoes," as she touches the little face. Carroll can already tell she's never had a kid. But wanted to.

The way Carroll tells it to Joleen, the baby's mother is a real scumbag. He's trying to get her back, he says, but she's strung out, and he only sees her by luck in the bars. He's waiting for her to come to her senses, come back to him and baby Dianne. It's almost beautiful what a crock of shit most people are dying to believe in. Almost beautiful.

In the garage, Carroll opens all the van's doors. He puts Eddie Money's first album in the van's cassette player, his only sound system. The room smells stale, like something dirty's been burning. Carroll twists open the round, orange air freshener stuck on the
refrigerator door. Joleen sits on the couch against the far wall while Carroll mixes Screwdrivers for both of them.

"Healthiest drink there is. Plenty of C. And no beer breath. Even baby Dianne likes em." He laughs like he's teasing. A sip or two really does quiet the kid down at night though.

"You're terrible. And she's such a cutie pie." Joleen juggles her Screwdriver in an oversize plastic Dixie cup while she holds the baby's bottle. "You're raising her all by yourself? Here?"

She looks around the garage. A big oil-drum wood stove stands in one corner with concrete blocks stacked up all around it that can hold the heat a long time. Carroll burns garbage from up and down the alley. He could buy firewood—he's got a decent job—but he likes to scavenge. He's a security guard downtown, same place for years. Routine's good for a person. And Carroll lives cheap. Some of his money he sends to southern California where his first child lives with his first and last ex-wife. The kid's in high school now. Damn expensive—that age—that place. Cars, clothes, CD's, drugs. Not like when they're babies. Milk and diapers are all they really need, long as they're healthy. The garage is well-insulated, not too cold in winter, not too hot in summer.

"I don't know what else to do. I'm so in debt from the drug clinic I sent her mama to." He points at the baby, still in Joleen's arms. "They want a small fortune for Treatment. And she was in there all day every day for 30 days. It's like a goddamn taxi meter clicking, that Treatment is. I went to 12-step meetings with her till
I saw those 12 steps in my dreams. I really felt we had it licked. Now look at me." Carroll waves an open palm slowly around the room.

There's a carpet on the floor on the half of the garage where the van doesn't park. It's rolled across the floor and then right up the wall behind them and nailed down near the ceiling. In one corner, there's a crib. Above it hangs a delicate mobile, little pastel balls so light they move when someone walks by the crib. Carroll conjures a tear. Joleen kisses it.

Carroll pulls away from Joleen and rolls over in the bed. He starts to move toward the crib. Joleen hugs him to her.

"Hope I didn't wake Dianne up with my hollering," she says with a new tone of intimacy to her voice. "Haven't you finished yet? Is there something wrong?"

"No, nothing wrong, baby, just something missing. You want to satisfy me, don't you?" He nuzzles his head between her breasts. The right one seems slightly smaller.

"Sure, Carroll, I'm just tired. You gotta give a gal some breathin' room. That's all. You need some special TLC from Joleen?"

"I need the baby." He moves to the crib in the half-dark room. "Feed us honey," he says as he gets back in bed. "Feed us both." The baby's mouth slides around her breast.

"I don't have what she needs," she starts to pull away from them. "really, Carroll, I don't."
"It don't matter," he mutters as he kisses at her other breast, "It don't matter. You both got what I need, you both got what the babyman needs."

Eddie Money begins Side 2 for the third time. Carroll watches the baby's lips work on Joleen like a fish mouth, feeding, trembling, at the bottom of a pool of clear water. He hopes Joleen doesn't say anything, doesn't wreck it with words, doesn't argue, or laugh. All of his own words slide out of his head until it's just him, him and the baby, alone together with this woman.

Then he hears Joleen. She does what most people would call crying, what Carroll would call crying at any other time and place. She does it quietly, holds two heads close to her, opens her legs again.

People do things. Things you'd never expect. That's what makes it interesting. Like a torture chamber. Like a symphony orchestra.

Carroll can get a woman pregnant, as long as certain conditions are met. Conditions like in the garage, the first night with Joleen, with the baby. And that's what he does. Gets her pregnant. Women are like jackpots, he figures. You play em. There's skill and there's luck.

Skill was getting her home, getting her bedded. Luck was getting her pregnant. More luck was that she's pro-life. One hundred per cent. Pregnant and pro-life. Bingo.

Skill will be getting the baby.
"Ever since I told you I'm PG you been actin' different to me," says Joleen. "I never should'a gotten mixed up with you and Dianne. If I hadn't been dog-tired that night and seen that sweet kid—you're fucking cuckoo. They'll take that kid away from you, Carroll. They will. Less you marry me." She says it like she's trying to be mean and sweet at the same time, like she's trying to match the way she thinks Carroll is.

Carroll laughs. What she doesn't know. He's traded babies since '81. Leon, a friend on the city police, has connections. Bought and sold and traded. Out of downtown, into the suburbs. Out of the suburbs, over to the coast. Leon likes it, Carroll likes it, people uptown like it, people on the coast like it. Even the babies like it. Dianne, this little girl, wasn't a trade though. But she could be. She sure could be.

"The day Reagan was shot," Carroll says.

"What the hell you talking about. I'm serious, damn you."

"So am I. That was the first one I bought. My grubstake. Little boy. Blue-eyed."

"I don't want to hear this crap. Where's Dianne's mother?"

"It ain't no Dianne, and there ain't no mother. Except maybe you." In spite of himself, he smirks at her like a boy who's played a clever trick. "Maybe I just called her that cause you said you had a niece named Dianne that night down at The Pocket, remember?"

"Carroll, listen to me, damnit. Don't tease me. I'm pregnant, grade-A pregnant, no ifs, ands, or buts—I been to the Clinic. We
could make out together—I just know we could. Between the both of us, we got two jobs and a van. And Dianne."

Carroll has started polishing the leather pistol holster he wears at work. He whistles low. Two Tickets to Paradise. Eddie Money.

"I said listen, you mother, I loved you and that little kid just how you wanted even if it is damn near sick the way you—the way you do things."

Carroll points the empty holster at her. His ears are bright red. He licks his lips.

"Please don't say sick, Joleen."

"Look, it's common sense. I can't raise no kid on my pay. Half my check'd go for day care. And you're gonna need help with Dianne before long."

Carroll puts his fat finger through the holster hole. Rubs it back and forth.

"Truth is," he says, pointing at her belly, "truth is, you're the one who's sick."

Watching a woman get desperate is its very own brand of fun. Like the old flicks with the villain who always has a railroad track handy and knows all the train schedules by heart. As long as you know you'll be there to untie the ropes before the train chugs through. To Carroll the trick is to be both the villain and the hero. Be your own damn movie. Hire your own actors.

Like Joleen.

She's over six months into it when baby Dianne disappears.
When she finds out, she throws a fit.

Dianne was getting too big to keep anyway, and Leon called in an IOU from a trade last year. That's what friends are for—especially downtown. Carroll knows in advance Joleen will freak. But without the baby, it means no real sex anyway. Carroll can go a long time between drinks of water. There'll always be another woman, as long as there's another baby. And vice versa. The game goes on and on.

At midnight he slips Dianne through the window of Leon's cruiser along with a little bag he's packed with some diapers and milk. Leon sets her carefully down on the passenger seat next to an upright double-barreled shotgun. He gives Carroll a thumbs-up and disappears down the alley.

Carroll waits till he's done missing baby Dianne himself before he sees Joleen again. Almost a month. Don't ever think Carroll don't care about the babies, too. He cares in the way they all just have to come and go, in the way there's so many of em and they're all so much alike. Almost a month. That's what makes him the babyman, deep down.

"Her mama took her back," Carroll says when Joleen asks about Dianne. "She moved to New York, they got better clinics there, she's gonna be a drug counselor while she keeps up with her own treatment. The drowning saving the drowning. That's the way things are, Joleen. The blind find the blind. Like you and me, honey, like you and me." He reaches toward her swollen belly. "Let me feel it kick again."
"Don't touch me or it. You told me so many stories I can't tell what to believe anymore. All I know is I can't stand up all day in that line much longer."

Carroll plays advocate for the devil.

"Is it too late for an operation, Joleen? I know you said you don't approve and all."

"It was too late one minute after you gave me this thing. I don't want it and you don't want it, but I sure as hell ain't gonna kill it. God moves in mysterious ways, Carroll."

"Damn if He don't. I gotta say I admire you there, Joleen, truly I do. Jesus, your breasts are gorgeous."

It takes him almost an hour to calm her down enough to touch one.

They lie in bed. He rubs her feet where they're sore.

"Honey Joleen, my baby. I didn't know this would happen. You working so hard every day. Damn that factory—no maternity leave until after three years. What a bitch."

He watches her. He waits till her face relaxes.

"We just gotta make a plan, baby. I'm gonna say it slow one time so you know I ain't kidding. I'm not gonna marry you sweetheart."

Joleen listens to the truth and the lies, all mixed up. Her eyes blur. Carroll sees she's learning. There's no good way to sort it out. You believe everything and get your heart broke time and again, or you believe nothing and your heart gets numb and sandy like a foot that's gone asleep. Carroll's proud of all he's figured for himself.

"I'm not marrying nobody, not ever again after the first time. I got a boy in high school I ain't seen for five years. Carroll Jr."
Carroll traces a finger around the hollows of his ear lobe. He can't remember if he's ever told Joleen about Carroll Jr.

"So that's that. But I respect that you got to be true to your feelings and have this baby, that's all there is to it. But then you get to start over." He pauses to let those words sink in.

"I'm past startin' over. I'm here in my niche. You know about niches?"

He waits for her to look in his eyes. "This city's got a million niches, and I'm in mine for the long haul. You just gotta find a niche for yourself. You got plenty of chances left. Look, here's what we'll do. You take leave without pay, and I pay the bills for the next month, including the hospital. And then we go our own separate ways, simple as that, two people, two ways. OK?"

Joleen is doing it again, what she's learned so well at Carroll's place, that unnamed kind of crying. She'd have learned it somewhere anyway, Carroll figures. Just a way of being voiceless in the dark, a way of praying and cursing all at once, a way of making do with it.

"And the kid? What about the kid, Carroll."

"Baby'll be OK. I promise. I'll take the baby."

Carroll stays in the slow lane on the Expressway. The van's out of alignment—it pulls off to the right. He thinks about Joleen. She's in labor. He dropped her off at St. Luke's this afternoon. This is the worst part of the game even though it's the best part.

She was on the verge of screaming in the van, sweat on her forehead as thick as honey. A baby's on the way for sure. Carroll
wonders where it will end up. Maybe in a plush living room in a house by the lakes, learning to walk on carpet as deep and thick as pelt. Two parents hovering around, loving it even more than usual because they had to buy it. That's real love.

He checks the gas gauge when he realizes he's on his third loop around the city. People are starting to switch their headlights on. On his way home Carroll drives by St. Luke's again. He remembers how mad his wife had been in West Covina when Carroll Jr. was coming and he'd taken off for two weeks. He double-parks in the hospital lot. He counts by heart the floors—one, two, three, four, five—fifth floor maternity. Room after room filled with women and babies, women with babies inside them, babies on top of them, girl babies who will have babies inside of them someday—Carroll thinks of those nesting egg toys that you just keep taking apart, one inside the other, each tinier than the one before.

And boy babies too—boys like Carroll Jr. and Carrol's little brother—the first baby he'd ever seen. When Carroll's father had brought him home from the hospital, the tiny red head poking out from the blanket, all wrinkled and indistinct, Carroll had thought it was a joke, as if somebody'd squeezed out the simplest features of a face in one of his dad's huge fists.

Somebody honks at Carroll and he looks away from the fifth floor windows. He puts the van in gear and says a private so long to Joleen, although he knows he'll see her at least one more time. One more time to get the baby.
On his police-band CB, he hears his friend Leon turn in a robbery call at a pharmacy a few blocks away. Carroll stops in his alley and collects some cardboard boxes out of a dumpster. Cardboard burns really hot.

Carroll goes to the passenger side of the van and lifts the baby boy he calls Joey out. It's a muggy summer night on the South side. He gets a bottle of formula from the glove compartment and heads into Marcie's, a small tavern near the Mid-town Glover Plant. His son cries all the time. It gets on Carroll's nerves.

He sets his face to look like a brand-new father—worried, distraught. What he doesn't know is that the expressions he tries for, ones he's gotten mostly off TV shows, aren't ever quite the ones he gets. What shows now is a boyish kind of fear, a desperate look, mostly around his pale eyes.

The bar's pretty empty. He sits in a corner and sips a Screwdriver beneath a neon electric guitar that says BUD. He gives Joey a bottle and waits for the swing-shift traffic.

A woman with no purse walks in and Carroll hears her ask the bartender if that little prick, Mickey, has been in. The bartender says no and gives her a can of seven-up before she asks. She's tall with thin, long legs and arms and neck, fine-boned, but with a bust like in the old days. She's got a light mustache or some sweat on her upper lip, but she looks like she doesn't care which or who wonders.

She looks over at Carroll and his kid in the corner. Joey starts
to fuss. As Carroll dabs at his face and picks him up, the woman comes over to them. It's sweat.

Her breasts are full and large beneath her cotton dress. Carroll shakes the hand she pokes in his face as she takes the baby. Her name is Dora Mattsen. Everybody just calls her Matty. Carroll tells her his name.

"Poor little kid, so hungry." Matty sniffs the bottle Carroll's been using and wrinkles her nose.

"You trying to kill the kid? Forget this sour stuff." She sets the plastic bottle on the table. "We know what this little fella needs, don't we." She's baring a swollen, golden nipple and pulling Joey down to it. "Same as all of em need, young or old, eh?" She winks at Carroll. He sits down in a sweat.

When they leave, Matty carries Joey, still attached to her, and Carroll follows.

Matty directs Carroll to her place, a run-down fourplex on McNain that she manages in return for half her rent. They park in the driveway between two bikes and an oversize skateboard as big as a small sled. As they go in, Carroll sees a hand-lettered sign in the window. Block Home.

"What's the block home business, Matty?" Carroll makes small talk. He can't get an angle on how to sweet-talk her.

"What? Oh, kids can come in here. I'm always at home in the daytime—I run a little day care—the Johnson twins upstairs in #4 and
a couple of others. I got a sign up over at the Grimebuster Laundry. You'd be surprised—I have to turn people away."

"Yeah, I know, before Joey’s mother ran out on us, she was having trouble even finding babysitters." He tries to look as if he's not really wanting sympathy.

"See if you can get a good picture," Matty says as she hands Carroll the remote control for the TV. You may have to fiddle with it. Are you any good with your hands?" She disappears down the hallway with Joey.

Carroll looks at the TV. The VHF knob is broken off, and a piece of curtain hanger is wired onto the rabbit ears. He goes to look for Matty. He didn't come here to play fix-it man.

He sneaks up behind her in the dark bedroom. He plans to show her just how good he is with his hands—that line was a come-on if he ever heard one. Just as he gets to her, she turns around, naked to the waist. Joey's on the bed behind her. She puts her arms around Carroll and kisses him and then pulls away and returns to Joey all in one continuous motion, all without a word. He watches her half-naked silhouette as she changes the baby's diaper and begins to nurse. But when Carroll shows her his hard-on, Matty tells him what he can do with it—for all she cares, she says—head for the bathroom.

Matty makes it sound simple. She says she loves babies, loves kids, but doesn't have much use anymore for men—and even less for sex. She's got four kids already. Her youngest, Dean, is 14 months. She lets Carroll watch her nurse Joey and Dean as much as he wants,
but whenever he asks for more, she just says "tough" to him. She says it a lot, that word. "Tough."

"You got a thing about tough, don't you, Matty." Carroll tries to bait her. "How'd you get these kids in the first place? Musta not been so tough somewhere along the line. Somebody opened the oven door sometime, didn't they?"

"How I got 'em is my business, Carroll. I don't ask you about Joey. What's the use of us telling each other a pack of lies. Just tell me that. It ain't questions that make this world go round."

The van is perfect for what Matty calls "outings." Matty drives it like a bus while Carroll reads city maps and the little brochures about local attractions that Matty's collected from the Detroit Tourist Bureau. She likes to take her family all over town, from the downtown to the suburbs. And back. Every weekend.

She tells Carroll you don't have to go a long way to have a good time—she says they could go someplace different every weekend of their lives and never get outside the Greater Detroit Area. When he tells her where he's from, California, she says she's never gone west of Iowa City, Iowa. And doesn't really care to.

Carroll keeps the garage and his job and his van, but his party money, his game money and baby money, all goes to Matty and the kids. He rolls up the carpet and tacks it down in Matty's TV room so the kids will be warmer. Mostly Carroll uses the garage to work on the van. He puts new brake shoes on and turns the drums. He puts a new clutch in. Matty rides the clutch real bad.
But she's a great cook and smart as a whip. That's what it really boils down to, smart. The way she don't even wait for Carroll to tell her a lie, the way she marches right on around the parts of life Carroll struggles to explain away—she's smarter than Carroll. And he's just smart enough to figure that out. They say grace before every meal.

"You're always telling me about your friends on the force," Matty says. "So go for it. God knows the City pays better than your rinky-dink company."

"Yeah, I've got just enough friends on the force to know better. Money's not everything. I like my job. I'm used to it."

"So you can get used to being a policeman. You can get used to anything, give it enough time. Here, I'll call for you." She dials the number in the City's newspaper ad for recruits and makes Carroll an appointment for next week.

Carroll slams down his pop and it fizzles over on the end table. "I'm too old anyway. I'll just be wasting my time."

Matty wipes up his spill and slides a cardboard coaster under it as she talks. "Too old," she repeats his words, "what's with you and too old? You're as old as you think you are." She flashes him a wide smile.

"Look here, there's ways and there's ways. You're not the only one with friends. You think there's nobody in this town don't owe me a favor or two?"
"Maybe everybody owes you a favor, Matty, but maybe not me, maybe it's time for me to go my own separate way here. You're getting too far into my shit, way too far." He rises from the vinyl recliner. It squeaks as it folds up behind him.

Matty pushes Carroll back into his chair with the tips of her long, fine, fingers, as if her movement were the shadow of a real gesture, as if he weighed nothing, as if she could not imagine resistance from him. "Stay put, you're not gonna go anywhere, Carroll. I've got your number. I got it the first night I met you."

She heads down the hall to the bedroom. "They'll be proud." she says, "a policeman right in the house. It'll be safer for everybody."

She comes out with the babies, Joey and Dean. She calls the other kids out of the TV room.

Carroll sits still as they assemble around him like silent little animals, their unflinching eyes on him, gazes as warm as sunlight, small hands all over his knees. Matty watches him like he's already safe behind bars. She gives him Joey to hold as she nurses Dean.

"Hold Joey while I feed baby Dean."

"Goddamn, his name ain't even Joey. That's just what I call him because his mother's name was Joleen. None of this is me, this ain't my niche. It's not my niche here at all."

"So we'll make it your niche. Hell, how does anybody get a name? How'd you get yours—was your mother's name Carol? Was it?"

Carroll winces. His ears go red.

"See, it goes right on, it might as well be here. I'll take care of you and your baby and you take care of us. We'll keep calling him
Joey—we'll keep calling you Carroll. There's nothing wrong with those names, nothing at all."

Carroll wonders what the night patrol shift will be like. He wonders if he could get Leon as a partner somehow. It'd be just like one of those old TV shows. He closes his eyes as he hears the baby sucking on Matty. It's like the wet, thick ticking of a moist, living clock across the room. He squeezes little Joey so tight up into his face he can't tell at all where he begins and the baby leaves off. One of them is crying.
The hands of the guitar player flew across the strings, and the guitar’s rosewood tones echoed along the red bricks of the square. Townspeople gathered around the guitar player, singing and clapping to the steady beat of his fingers. Above them the marvelous clouds paused, arranging themselves into the shape of the town’s name, just as they did each day at dusk. The people read the soft word of the clouds silently, thankful for being so special to the sky on yet another day. A little fountain sprayed water into the twilight breeze.

One young couple, all in white, danced as the guitar player strummed a simple love-song. Across the plaza two small children, sister and brother, peeked from a narrow slit between two low, tan
buildings. An old woman, grandmother to the girl who danced in white, sat in a doorway down the street. She listened to the windblown notes, her memories drifting in the thin mist from the fountain.

The sun set like a blush behind the far rough peaks. Heat radiated from the sandy soil through the quiet air, shimmering the town into a sleepy submission. Covered candles were lit as the guitarist played on. His fingers, tiring of the songs of love, began to pick out the familiar tunes of justice long denied, the tunes whose words recalled the forgotten face of human misery. And the notes no longer blew away; they hovered in the air like warnings.

The girl in the white dress coaxed her young man home. Soon only a few young men remained, singing the forbidden songs to the chords the guitar player’s hands kept uncovering in the dusk. The children listened from their hiding place. Perched on the steps, the old woman listened to nothing and to everything. She kept braiding and unbraiding her long gray hair. Night rose.

A discordant sound cracked the veil of the peaceful summer night. A large truck droned and whined and backfired its way down the steep mountain road. The sound of its approaching came and went, each time louder than the last. Mixed with the truck’s rusted, driving noise was the sound of voices. The guitar player strummed harder and louder, vibrating the strings so the notes would quaver and haunt the square like the sound of a beautiful voice slowly breaking. The young men sang louder between the moonlit chords as if to build a wall of sound through which the truck could never pass.
The truck neared the town; the clacking of closing shutters heralded its advance. Fresh puffs of smoke rose from chimneys as new wood was banked in night fires against the approaching chill. Only the old woman, the two children, four young men, and the guitar player remained as the truck groaned across the hard red clay and stopped in the square. When the driver turned the engine off, there was one moment of perfect silence.

Half a dozen road-weary uniformed figures dropped from the tailgate one by one as if they were parachuting into foreign territory. The driver stayed behind the wheel, idly tinkling the ignition keys as they dangled from the dash. The colonel descended, the open door swinging behind him. The wind died down, and the fountain's water fell back on itself as if to staunch its own flow. The young men sang softer and softer, staring at the rifle barrels that opened before them like narrow black wombs of death.

The colonel parted his way through the young men without touching them. He stood above the guitar player who sat on the one wooden step. The guitar player did not look up to meet those eyes. His hands were like two children playing evening games, plucking flowers slowly and giving them to each other in an innocence only memory allows.

The colonel had heard this music before. He knew the song and the words were dangerous, however pantomimed or sweet-melodied. He knew they could cross the mountains faster than his truck, his men, his orders. He knew the guitar player was not from this town. He knew everything he knew he needed to know. His knowledge was like a
blade that divided the world from itself. He told the guitar player to be silent.

The guitar player's fingers rested on the strings, and the last note faded. The quiet was so deep that only the fountain falling on itself, the jangling keys, and the silky sound of the old woman's incessant braiding and unbraiding could be heard. The colonel smiled. He would allow the guitar player not to look up at him as long as he obeyed. He turned back towards the truck. This was a peaceful town in a peaceful valley—there was no need for ruin.

The young men looked from the blue steel barrels to the golden red guitar and back again. Then the guitar player's hands fluttered to life on the strings—one note, two, a chord, a melody. Now he was playing the harsh dance from the East, from far beyond the mountains and the sea; or perhaps it was only the town's own song, born this night from out of the red, rutted clay and the worn, wooden steps, born this night from the young men's chafed hands and the fountain's spray.

But the colonel could never dance, no matter what the tune or beat might be. His smile grew huge and menacing as if he had learned it in a nightmare. Twice more he told the guitar player to cease; twice more he was refused. The moon went behind a cloud as if ashamed. The old woman buried her face in her hair. Smoke poured from chimneys, signals for no one to see but the nightbirds far above among the clouds. Only the four young men and the brother and sister saw.
The colonel clarified his thought until it burned in his head like a flame. The guitar player's hands were his enemies; they sang like birds in a tree, songs of youth, of rebellion, of disavowal, songs of flight. His purpose rang as clear as the tinkling of the keys in the cab of the truck. He gestured; his soldiers responded. His soldiers were his arms and his legs. They were long arms and long legs for striding between remote villages and bending the recalcitrant to his strong and necessary will.

And now the guitar player was bending. Still reaching for the guitar that had been taken and was never again to be his to play, he was prostrate in the street with his beaten face on the one wooden step and his arms across the wooden porch. The young men, held by the cold, hypnotic touch of the barrels upon their foreheads, strained to look away from what they would never forget.

The sword, a weighted machete retrieved from behind the driver's seat, was not shiny. It did not reflect the candlelight as it rose and fell two times. But it was sharp and horrible, and it would not stop its cutting until it bit into the splintering oak of the porch. When its work was done, the colonel washed the blade in the fountain. Now there was a silence he could understand. Now the town was safe from anger and fear and love and hope.

He looked back at the hands lying on the porch before the mute guitar. Two soldiers bent to tie ropes around the boots of the guitar player. The young men ran away into the night. The colonel and the soldiers drove away, dragging the guitar player and two thin red streaks behind them.
The night had truly risen then, and in its dark, folded robes the
town and all the frightened people feigning sleep were wrapped. Only
the children know the rest of the night. They approached the wooden
steps and porch where the bodiless hands waited by the silent guitar.
They each gathered up one hand. The boy strapped the stained guitar
across his small shoulder.

As they turned to face the fountain, the moon reappeared, and
they followed the twin, glistening stripes. When they passed the old
grandmother, the boy handed her the guitar. She would keep it always
from the cold and yet not too near the fire. But first she cleaned
the tiny specks of spattered red from the rosewood, polishing the
ruddy wood with her braids and tears. The children watched her and
went on, each with a large hand between their small hands.

The children know that when you carry the guitar player's hands
down the winding road to the river, there is no distance to mark off,
no time to count; the moon itself stands still. They descended
beneath the crude bridge and cleansed the hands in the river's cool
water, a baptism only they could understand. The children watched
from the bushes as the soldiers buried the guitar player in a shallow
grave at the place where the shadows of two cactus cross. They waited
as the camp fell silent and the soldier's short hot fire flickered up
and quickly out.

Then when the camp slept and the nightbirds sailed, the children
placed the dead hands on the sandy grave and watched as the hands
hinged themselves seamlessly at the wrists like the wings of a pale
bird. The children saw these hands seek out the sleeping colonel to
wreak a measured vengeance. The colonel, drunk with wine and omnipotence, had only the briefest chance to struggle, one single gasp for the night breeze to blow away as if it had never been.

As in an act of awful prayer, the guitar player's hands scooped the sparkling sand into the colonel's mouth and nose and eyes. The fine and ancient sand, still dry and hot with the memory of the sun, choked and silenced him, but the hands would not be still until the colonel was buried from the inside out, until he breathed the sharp silica of revenge into the very bottom of his lungs so he might never rise again. Soundless and remorseless, the hands enacted miraculous murder as the children knelt in the shadow of the river.

The children saw and did not see. Now they are older; now they are filled with doubts. Sometimes they wonder if it was they themselves who smothered the colonel with the soft river sand, or if what they witnessed was only the inbred rancor of his own command, rising against him for only a changing of the guard. Now nothing remains by the river but two bleached sets of bones, one handless, and one with open jaws, filled with sand.

And what of those hands? Were they finally a midnight gift from the children to the river, floating away on its dark, shiny surface? Or is the old woman hiding them, too, along with the polished guitar? Surely, this the children will remember. How the hands of the guitar player, freed from their task of retribution, took flight, sailing low across the wide river that night. How the graceful ivory bird they became flew away above the valley and the moon, disappearing among the splendid clouds to find a place to rest and to wait.
For that bird wings yet, there, above the town and in the mountains beyond. Its wingbeats fan the wind like the sound of an old guitar, all filled with sand, strummed, lightly, by a man who has no hands. And travelers hear it, and children, and old women with nothing to do, hear it, on nights of full moon, cooing and crooning above the rosewood trees a sorrowful and recurring tune.
I like tanks. I always have. Although I've never seen a real one, not in motion. I've seen them stationary though, permanently stalled in front of Army bases, giant emblems of power, or squatting like stiff steel dinosaurs in front of obscure military museums, those tourist traps along dull highways. But a tank has to be moving to be beautiful. A still tank is like a dead body, not worth looking at, empty, boring.

For me, it goes back to high school. 1963 in Kansas City, Missouri. My sophomore year. I don't remember where, I read this glowing description of a modern Sherman tank. The state of the art. It was one of those bring-it-home-to-the-average-reader type descriptions, you know, like if all the books published in the world last year were stacked end to end, they'd reach from the Statue of Liberty to the St. Louis Arch. And back. Well, this one I never forgot, in fact. I built up an entire future for myself around it.
A Sherman tank of the times, it said, could maintain a consistent ground speed of twenty miles an hour, going the wrong way on a downtown one-way street at rush hour.

I used to ride the Number Nine bus home from Central High School, letting my gaze drift out over the rush-hour traffic on Sixteenth Street, envisioning that Sherman tank suddenly turning a corner, seeing it maintain that consistent ground speed as it chewed up three lanes of traffic. I'd picture its wake, shredded metal spewing out on all sides, gasoline and antifreeze and bodily fluids spraying away from the massive spiked treads in beautiful and repeated patterns, lug nuts and door handles ricocheting off store fronts, the aluminum and rubber residue of destruction folding in on itself behind the tank as neatly as a raised, green wake sealing itself behind a speeding boat.

So I guess I was antisocial even back then.

I ask myself, what is it about a tank? Besides the raw power, the thick implacable weight. Impersonality? Maybe. An armored tank is to the land what an invisible bomber is to the sky, what a hidden submarine is to the sea. All steel and no flesh, no face—and whatever dark intelligence it does represent has to be inferred, sketched in, after the fact, after the tank has passed through your town, your dreams, your rush hour, your imagination.

So what I started conjuring up back then, in my idle sophomore hours, was an entire future dedicated to building a tank and taking that one ultimate drive down Main Street, USA, at rush hour.

I'd reached the age when my parents and the counselor at school,
Mr. Kain were beginning to bug me about college. I had to take multiple-choice tests just to qualify to take more multiple-choice tests, and I was smart enough to see that was just the beginning; I was supposed to start mapping a strategy—where to go, what to study, who to be. I used to wander through downtown after school, watching the people pour out of office buildings at the end of their days, studying their faces, and I'd get this sinking feeling in my chest that it was going to be all downhill. I wasn't seeing that many smiles on those faces, and so often, the ones I did see scared the hell out of me: forced smiles, calculated and calculating smiles, smiles calculated to force calculating smiles in return, there seemed no end to it all. And there I was on the threshold, poised for what seemed like an irreversible dive into the heart of something suffocating and fake and endless.

So I built an alternate future.

In it, I'd go to work for one of the big companies in town, like Consolidated Mills or Union Pacific or Northern Natural Gas, someplace big enough for me to be nameless and unnoticed, stake out my position on one of the upper floors in one of those downtown towers—not so different from what a lot of my companions were planning, from what the high school counselors were pushing—but then, instead of a wife and kids and vacations and big occasions like Christmas and weddings and graduations, instead of all that, I'd buy a house, a big house with a walk-out basement and a yard on both sides, and I'd begin to build my own Sherman tank.

I was good with my hands; I'd helped my dad tear down and rebuild
more than one engine, and I knew how to find out about things in the library. I'd save my money and buy the parts piece by piece, adapt what I couldn't get legally, or steal what I couldn't adapt. It would take years, I knew, maybe even a lifetime, but it would be my life, my family, my statement, this tank.

Looking back now, I review all those years that alternate life might have eclipsed—if it ever could have been done, really—all those years at the U of Missouri, the war years with their dreary protests and dreary escalations; all my time at Armour's, first in accounting, and then in data processing; those first few decent married years with Pauline before the kids; those long years building to divorce when love vanished so gradually and so completely that finally I questioned whether it had ever been there in the first place; the kids growing up and leaving before I'd even realized they were meant to have lives of their own; losing the job at Armour's in '81 in the polite corporate chaos of vertical reorganization; and then coming here to Phoenix for sun and light and escape from allergies, living alone for the first time in my life; and this year, going to Maricopa Community College as earnestly as if it were a church, trying to do something I've always wanted, maybe the only thing, other than building the tank, that I ever wanted—just for me—to try writing. To try to be heard, to make a point, a difference, at least once in my life. And who do I get for my first teacher but Claude Simmon.

My entire damn life in one long sentence, and it could have all been eclipsed by a dream, had I only possessed the faith. Claude Simmon, MA, MFA, BFD—five years younger than me, smart as a whip,
with a forced smile you can see coming a mile away.

Claude Simmon advised me to concentrate on technical writing, to "utilize my background in the computer field," he said, "exploit the lucrative market in software manuals," he said. His dislike of me, his discounting of me, goes back, I'm sure, to the second class. Because I happened to mention my admiration for that old story, "The Lady and the Tiger," he immediately patronized me. He said those kind of either/or endings are passe, "part of the tradition," he said, "but not subtle enough for contemporary tastes." I don't think I forgot a single word he ever said. Claude could talk and talk.

When he asked for a writing sample, I made the mistake of showing him some of my letters to the editor that I'd had printed in the Kansas City Star and the Phoenix Sun over the years. He said they had an intense, desperate quality, but that it took much more than desperation to make art. I looked up one of his stories in a journal at the college library, and I don't think he's even got a notion of what desperation is all about. I don't think he has the slightest idea what being an artist, what finally getting a chance to say your story—without interruption, can mean to a man at a certain point in his life. And I don't think he knows a damn thing about tanks.

They called them Sherman because of the first General Sherman, the war-is-hell guy, the guy with the march to the sea, the guy with his own century-long wake. Today, of course, that Sherman tank of my memory and my dreams is obsolete, now they have tanks that dwarf it,
tanks that can travel a hundred miles an hour over any terrain—anytime anywhere—like a machine that, for all intents and purposes, paves the earth as it goes, lays down its own autobahn in front of itself in swamp or tundra, desert or mountain.

And it’s true, too, that tanks aren't really that important anymore—Viet Nam turned out to be the helicopter war, and the next war's supermachine is anybody's guess. There was that brief moment of glory for tanks in '67, seven short days of Israeli desert blitzkrieg, but now it's all cruise missiles and stealth bombers and star wars. I read somewhere the main reason they keep building tanks is to help the domestic auto manufacturers who make tank engines. But none of that matters to me, not the obsolescence or the uselessness or the politics of it, because my image of a tank and what a tank means is frozen in time, frozen forever in that bus-ride vision of rush-hour traffic flowing down Sixteenth Street and a homemade Sherman tank gliding over it with a never-wavering ground speed of twenty miles an hour, roaring upstream against the commuter current with a sound like the end of the world.

And it would be me inside, driving, guiding, directing, me there at the controls, all that inferred intelligence collected in my hands, reflected in my eyes.

That's the day I like most to imagine, the culminating day, the last day, the day I'd finally be finished building. I'd planned on having to disassemble the house from the inside out as I assembled the tank, tearing out floors and ceilings and walls as I needed more
space, building in new supports, long-span trusses and reinforced
joists, enlarging the house into a kind of construction hanger as the
tank grew and grew over the years, a giant iron secret. Even then I
knew it would take at least a decade, maybe most of a lifetime, making
midnight raids on distant armories for parts, ordering government
publications under assumed names and delivered to bogus post office
boxes, soundproofing the walls of the house, saving for an entire year
just to buy special tools needed for various stages of the project.
But that's what was magnificent about the idea, its scale, the
grandiose scope of it, the necessity of devoting a lifetime to it. A
lifetime without friends or family, of course, for no one could ever
come into the house, a lifetime of perfect public behavior so as to
draw not the least scrutiny from anyone, a lifetime rising to one
glorious afternoon when my true identity would be affirmed beyond
denial or belief. That one grand day when I would steer the tank out
of the house: the windowless double-garage doors exploding into the
driveway, the walls and picture window above them shattering, the
entire house collapsing behind me, because of course I would not be
coming back, not ever, flattening my own car in the driveway as I
rumbled away, chugging downtown at twenty miles an hour, turning
slowly onto Sixteenth Street at 5:15 PM on a hot summer day, showing
the smug, civilian world what a Sherman tank was all about, bringing
it all home to the average reader, the average person, crunching
wildly up the stream of middle America into an oblivion of shrapnel
and ground flesh. Perhaps they'd call in an air strike from SAC or a
SWAT team with no fear, but by that time I would have driven into
history, driven right into history at that consistent ground speed, driven into the very face of history with an implacable steel presence, wrong way on a one-way.

Truth to tell, even now, when my vision of that other life is coming back so strongly to me, I don't think I ever really wanted to hurt or kill anyone.

That was secondary to my plan; it was unavoidable in the same way that the world itself was unavoidable, the world I'd found myself poised on the edge of, the world where history had been built by Shermans of one sort or another, where there was a need for such abject, tawdry things as one-way streets, and downtowns, and calculated smiles, and multiple-choice tests. I was just imagining one way of fitting into a pattern that I'd discovered to be so firmly in place that it was fruitless to evade. A way of keeping myself and my dedication and my intelligence secret and inviolable until the last possible moment, and then revealing it all at once, encased in steel, enshrined in twenty tons of steel, almost as if I would become a tank—not so much build a tank—but actually grow into one, secrete one all around me with the strength of my intellect and my hard work, revealing my entire life in one violent afternoon, with no chance for mitigation or modification, one white-noise, shredded-steel statement of intent, devoid of either anger or rancor, but also, without mercy or regret.

You see, I have strong convictions on the subject of violence. I
think if you're going to be violent, be violent on your own, be independently violent, don't let somebody else tell you where to drop a bomb or defoliate a forest or pull a switch. That's my big beef with the military, they just take orders and give orders, violent orders, and their true violence is the violence wreaked on the will itself, an unnatural and repulsive organization of collective will in the service of violence, and I never wanted any part of that.

All during college I had the army and its war breathing down my neck, and I wasn't about to get involved with an organization like that. Truth is, that's why I got stuck in accounting. I had to stay "in phase" to keep my 2A College Deferment.

I remember my first quarter of junior year in University, I was thinking about changing majors. I had a friend who was an English major, and I read a couple of his books—Catch 22 and Cuckoo's Nest—and I was intrigued as hell. I couldn't believe how loud those people writing those books were talking, it was like they were screaming This Is Me Here. But when I checked into taking some English classes, I found I might take an extra semester to graduate—God knows what would happen if I'd have changed majors as a junior. And it wasn't worth risking going to Nam to find out. So I played it safe. I've always played it safe.

That's why I have no tank.

By the time I graduated, I was married, and then I worked up a 4F health deferment because of my severe hay fever. I guess they figured if my eyes swelled up and I couldn't breath in Missouri, in Southeast Asia I'd be a permanent basket case. So with my accounting, and my
wife, and my allergies, I avoided organized violence altogether.

Still, I ask myself, what's the difference between a guy who
builds a tank in the Army for somebody else to drive through some
rural village, confirming some peasants' lifelong religious
convictions about apocalypse, and that other guy, that quiet
unswerving mechanic with the lifelong secret, that I imagined in
highschool? None, except that the latter is independent. Original.
Responsible.

Undoubtedly, if Claude Simmon were reading this, which he won't,
because I dropped that class two weeks ago and I have no intention of
going back, he'd think that I—the narrator, he'd say—am losing
control of the narrative. I can hear him now. He'd probably
summarize my story as an idiosyncratic voice-piece which chronicles a
forty-four-year-old neurotic attempting to come to peace with the
adolescent daydream of his impotent youth. I know he'd complain about
the dearth of authenticating details in which the narrative could be
grounded. OK. It's pop quiz time, Claude. It's detail time. It's
time to test our cultural literacy. What do Charles Whitman and
Patrick Purdy have in common? 1966 and 1989? The University of Texas
bell tower and the Stockton, California, schoolyard?

Yesterday was an odd day for me, maybe the oddest day in my life.
I've been trying to write as much as I could these last two
weeks. I finished several stories. Even the one that Claude
commented on in class. Actually, he didn't hate it, he said if it
were polished, it might have a certain appeal. He called it "an acontemporary antidote to irony." That's how he talks, he makes up words on the spot— acontemporary. It was a simple story about a man who forgets the name of his children but is ashamed to tell them and keeps coming up with elaborate subterfuges to avoid letting them know that he’s forgotten. Finally he kills them so they don’t discover his sin. I think it’s my most finished story.

Yesterday I decided to eliminate everything in my life but the essentials. I woke up from a dream about building my tank, and I realized I could still reclaim some of the strength and purity of that vision. I could invoke it in my writing. I could put myself on an edge that would slice through all the superficialities of a lifetime.

By 9 A.M., I had everything out of my apartment and set up in the parking lot of the apartment complex, next to my car. I lined my possessions up along the yellow parking guides painted on the pavement. I put a sign up that said, Best Offer—Honor System, and beneath that, Pay What You’re Able To. I left an empty coffee can by the sign. My TV, microwave, floor lamp, popcorn popper, dishes, couch, chairs, everything, everything but my typewriter, my paper, my clothes. I spent the morning writing. At 1, I checked the sale. Everything was gone, even the sign. There was one hundred and ninety two dollars in the can, sitting on the hood of my car. People are more honest than we give them credit for.

I drove across town, to Ralph’s Pawn—they advertise in the paper under Guns & Jewelry. I bought a used AK-47 machine-gun for a hundred twenty-five, a carrying case for fifteen, eighty shells for forty
dollars, and a reprinted owner's manual for ten more. The salesman said I'd made a wise choice. He called my rifle a robust weapon. I drove back. At the park down the street, by the entrance ramp to the freeway, I left the car with the keys in the ignition. I hope whoever takes it needs it.

So now I'm down to essentials. Food in the refrigerator, two dollars on top of a stack of shirts, the machine gun and the shells, the typewriter and the paper. It feels clean. It feels simple. It feels like a secret.

I'm not into outcomes as much as watching things develop. I'm a person who values process over product. Even the Sherman tank of my dreams is meaningless without movement, the opposing traffic, the metaphor it swims in. So I make no predictions, not from hour to hour, nor day to day. It's the tension that's important, not the decision. I have checks coming in—Armour's bought me off pretty good with their early-retirement incentive plan. I think my boredom with them was exceeded only by their boredom with me. Phoenix is warm. I can hold out. I know—down deep—I really want to write, not shoot. And somehow, that deep blue rifle, the color of the sea at night, its dense weight as it lies across the room, cradled in my mound of laundry, helps me. For it's too late, much too late now, for me to go back and claim that other lifetime, demand my tank.

I bang at the keys, harder than I need to. I keep thinking of that Claude and his pompous proclamations. Titles should resonate but not set up a destructive echo capable of collapsing the fictional
artifice. Where does he get off.

I can still remember those old stories from junior high, all my favorites—"To Build a Fire," "The Gift of the Magi." But if Claude didn't like the one with the lady and the tiger, I'm sure O. Henry isn't to his taste. He had me so intimidated that I was afraid to ever mention in class how I'd based my whole first notions of true love on that simple O. Henry story—such sweet, sweet sacrifice.

One-dimensional endings, by their very unpredictability, become, in the most fundamental way, predictable. Crunch you, Claude.

I like a story as tough as steel tread, one that roars right down the reader's throat and leaves a wild, undeniable wake. I say, leave it all up to the reader.

That reminds me of the one thing Claude said that did make sense, and it was about the reader. He said you should always get a mental picture of your audience, imagine your ideal reader or readers, whether it be your mother or your children or your high school graduating class or all America, picture them as concretely as you can, and then talk to them. And for me, that's easy, that's a snap, for I see them always, a whole thoroughfare of them, as passive and vulnerable as tired commuters, obeying street-signs and digital clocks, just waiting, waiting for something loud and unpredictable, something convincingly painful, to finally head in their direction. To seek them out at last and surprise them on their weary way home.
Luther sees the shadow of the bear, a giant gray silhouette looming on the plate glass window, as he crosses River Street. He shifts his bedroll up tighter under his arm and taps the rear deck of an old Plymouth that crosses in front of him as he stands on the center line. He lets the cars come close to him, so close that he can feel the breezes they make and smell their rusted, oily smells. It makes him feel awake, wide awake and invincible. Luther likes to jaywalk and thread between traffic as if he's some vagrant matador teasing huge iron bulls. He has never been hit.

Luther noses up to the window and glares into the dim lobby of the motel. The stuffed bear dominates the room. It seems as big as an elephant. He turns and raises his eyes to the mountainous horizon ringing the town and imagines bears that big up there, pulling up trees by their roots.

He shudders. He's heard about grizzlies.

They tear vans apart in search of steaks; they rip open tents in the still of the night to get at women who are menstruating and eat
them alive while their terrified, helpless boyfriends die of heart attacks. He's glad now that he didn't get off the freight train in the dark when it stopped in the middle of nowhere.

Luther lowers his eyes to the motel parking lot. All the cars are old except one with a broken windshield and a crushed fender—they all have Montana license plates. Some of the motel room doors have little numbers above them. On others they're missing.

Luther stands still, figuring out all the missing numbers. He likes to find missing pieces, letters, numbers. It keeps him alert, in control, on top of things. There are fourteen doors.

When the train stopped in the night, the boxcar was at an angle. He realizes now it had been in the mountains, on a grade, maybe even in one of those long tunnels like the ones the locomotives were always emerging from on the pages of the calendars Luther's mother kept in her hallway. He'd been asleep, as sound asleep as he ever got riding the trains, sprawled across bundles of crushed cardboard cartons wrapped with black steel bands. The abrupt lack of motion woke him, and he peered out the open door of the boxcar into blackness.

Quickly Luther pivots back to squint at the bear. The bear's mouth is wide open as if it were screaming something no one would ever hear. Luther decides to go in. He pushes at the door twice before seeing the Pull sign.

The lobby of the motel is an animal mortuary, a frozen zoo. Dozens of glassy eyes stare out from the stuffed heads of deer, moose, elk, pheasant, cougar, sheep, ducks, and some animals Luther doesn't even know the names of. Above all of them towers the bear. Luther
walks up to it. His head comes to its chest. He figures for a minute. It must be over seven, maybe even eight feet tall.

He touches the bear's outstretched front claws; they feel like porcelain. He steadies himself on the bear, holding hands with it in a momentary terror. All the animals are screaming something. The train is stopped again. Luther can't remember where he is or what he's supposed to be doing. So he counts; it is an old trick, whenever he's in trouble or his head blurs like this, he counts or figures. Boxcars, phone poles, beercans, women he's laid, fights he's won or fights he's lost, car antennas, wallpaper roses in dim light when he's trying not to come before a woman, anything that can be numbered or rhythmmed out of chaos to a kind of clarity and order. Twenty-seven.

Twenty-seven stuffed animals in the lobby of the Restwell Motel that has fourteen doors, and he has eight bucks in his pocket, and the nine license plates all say Montana. The animals are beautiful to Luther then, numbered and secure, for just a moment.

He takes a deep breath through his nose, thinking he should be able to smell this much death, but all he smells is cigar smoke. A shiny standup ashtray overflowing with cigar stubs is wedged between two old leather chairs off to one side of the bear. Luther pulls a chair close to the bear and sits down with his bedroll in his lap. The door he just entered has a strip of little tarnished bells on a red Christmas sash hanging from the handle on the inside.

As Luther smokes, the manager comes out from the back room. He's gray-haired with clear blue eyes. His hair, like Luther's, is parted roughly in the middle, but it's much shorter. He wears gray work
pants and a gray work shirt, a uniform a mechanic or a milkman might wear. Above one shirt pocket the name "Roy" is embroidered in red thread in looping longhand style. The man pushes a bucket on wheels with a mop stuck in a wringer that hangs on the bucket's edge. Luther's cigar smoke rises in circles around the big bear's extended paws and exposed teeth.

"What the holy hell. Are you looking for something?"

Luther jumps up, sticks his hand out, smiles. He will charm Roy.

"Yes I am. I pushed the buzzer, but it must not work. I was wondering about a room, Roy. I need a place to sleep. Do you have anything cheap? Any day rates?"

"My name's not Roy. These were my brother's clothes—he's dead. The cheapest room I got is twelve dollars a night, sixty-five a week, no day rates. They don't pay." He pauses and ignores Luther's hand.

"That's a twin bed, black-and-white TV, and no phone. The buzzer does work, by the way, and I don't care for people moving my furniture around." He steps behind Luther and pushes the chair back to where it had been.

Luther stalls. "Sixty-five a week. That's reasonable. That might be just the ticket for me." In his head he subtracts eight from twelve and gets four. Four dollars shy of a place to hole up at least for a night. But then he'd be broke again. He hasn't had a room for over a week. "Are there any cafes close by? I'm thinking about looking for work."

Roy's brother is pushing the plunger on the ashtray up and down, stuffing the stubs out of sight. He says nothing.
Luther asks about the bear. "Is that a grizzly? I've never seen one before, but I've read all about 'em in the papers."

The man straightens up. "Good luck finding work here, pal. I need the money in advance, by the way. The place is rundown just now, as you might have noticed, and I can't be financing anybody's job search." He draws out these last two words and ends them with a kind of smirk. "Betty's grill is one block down, open at 5 A.M. everyday."

Luther smiles at him, thinking, waiting. "And the bear?"

"The bear is what I don't have time for, pal." He puffs his chest out at Luther. Luther suddenly realizes how he must look, fresh off the train and a four-day drunk in Caspar. He runs his hand through his hair.

The older man relents. "No, it's a Kodiak, out of North Canada. Only place you can get 'em. Biggest bear there is—they make two of Grizzlies. So do you want the room or not?"

"Well, yeah, I do. But I'm kinda short at the moment. I could give you five now and make some calls today and come up with something. Or wait." Luther remembers the broken doors, sees the mop and pail and dirty water. "Isn't there any work I could do for the room. I'm handy enough."

"Hells Bells, man, you don't need a motel. Look, the Open Door is downtown. They got beds there. I got a business to run here. OK?"

Luther imagines the Open Door. He knows he had best move on. He looks from the old man to the bear, wondering if there's a bullet hole in the bear somewhere. He pictures it in his back, one single hole where all the seams in the bear's empty skin meet and are sewed
together. He wishes he could freeze everything in the smokey dim lobby. The old man with his rolling bucket and the bear with his porcelain fingers and him with his foam bedroll. He imagines himself standing with his teeth bared and his arms outstretched like that, resting like that, screaming like that, maybe forever, maybe just for awhile.

He heads for the door. He pulls at the sash and jingles the bells on it and smiles at the man. "Jingle Bells, Merry Xmas."

"Not in July, my friend, not in July. Oh for chrissakes, look, I've got a real fucking mess down in Number Fourteen. If you want to clean it up, clean it good, you can spend a night and keep your five."

Luther knows how bad the room will be, but he doesn't care. "Thanks, yeah, you'll see, I know how to work. Do I need a key?"

"It's unlocked; in fact, the lock's busted. It's bad down there. Two guys and some broad really tore it up before they left yesterday, and I haven't had the stomach to do anything but look at it yet. You ever seen what some people'll do to motel rooms, the kinda mess they don't mind leaving? I'll take animals anytime, buddy." He waves his head around the circle of dead creatures.

"Anyway, look, throw all the crap into the haulaway out front. You can use this mop—have at it. Do a good job and you can stay till, say, two o'clock tomorrow. How's that?" He grins at Luther.

Luther smiles like the animals on the walls. "Yeah, I've seen dirty rooms before; I know all about it; it's nothing to surprise me. I'll get started right now."

"I'll bet you have, I'll bet you have." He smiles, sizing Luther
up. "My name's McInnes; people call me McInney. What's yours?"

"Brian," Luther lies quickly. His father's name. "So, McInney, how in hell do you get a bear like that anyway?"

McInney has already moved behind the counter. He turns his head back over his shoulder as he moves away from Luther. He smiles with his teeth and then looks away. "Go up and kill one."

A stale smell slaps into Luther's face when he opens the door to Number Fourteen as if a thick sour blanket had been thrown over his face. He finds a trash sack and stuffs it full of fast food trash—Colonel Sanders and Wendys and Taco Johns and two pizza boxes with soggy grease stains and uneaten crusts.

In the corner icebox are two opened cans of Pabst beer. Luther drinks them slowly as he works, conjuring up a meal at Betty's Grill as his reward for the cleaning, followed by a hot shower and a long nap. He wonders what kind of work he could find in the town, things he might say when asked about his work history, his job skills.

When he's sober, he can do a good job as a short-order cook. He likes the excitement sometimes of fixing four or five meals all at once, knowing there are people waiting for what he's doing.

A blood stain in the center of the bedsheets reminds Luther of one of those ink blots psychiatrists use in the movies, as if someone had folded the sheet and pressed it when the blood was fresh. Luther wads the sheets into the pillow case and puts them on the sidewalk in front of the door.

He props the door wide open with the only chair in the room, a
chrome chair with four chrome legs and a speckled vinyl seat that matches the pattern on the formica table. The room still stinks; Luther hasn't opened the door to the bathroom yet. He stands outside smoking one of the longest butts he can find, sipping beer, gazing at the brown and green mountains.

He remembers McInney's remark about the Open Door—another shelter for the homeless. Luther never thinks of himself as homeless though; he believes he's just between places. And although as he stands in the gray-green light of the motel room, he realizes he can't really remember a time when he felt at home or even clearly picture one anymore, he thinks this rootlessness, this stumbling downhill feeling that his life has become is only temporary, reversible, just a phase he must pass through.

When Luther goes back in the room, he notices the TV. The knobs are missing from both the volume and channel controls. He sees the linecord lying on the floor next to the fridge and bends to plug it in. Nothing happens for several seconds, then a small white dot appears in the center. Luther stares at it for a minute. He decides to look at the bathroom.

Someone has been using the shower stall for a trash can. Three used tampons lie in one corner; another is stuck on the shower wall a few inches from the bottom of the stall as if someone threw it there. A damp Trojan box is stuffed full of used rubbers. A TV guide and a garish, red and orange paperback, both soaked, lie side by side.

He grabs the shower curtain and discovers why the stall stinks so much. Food chunks are splattered on the inside of the curtain where
someone threw up. Luther has his hand on the curtain and jumps back.

He feels a sharp stab in his foot and clutches for it. There's a small puncture at the back of his heel. A few dark drops of blood well up from it. Luther stands on one leg, looking in the corner. A metal ice cube tray, a broken plastic glass, half of a rusty pair of pliers, and an old, worn, wooden-handled ice pick are piled there as if somebody had emptied out a kitchen drawer.

Luther sees red on the tip of the pick—he'd jammed it against the wall as he'd stepped back, driving it into his heel. He reaches for some TP, but the rack on the back of the door is empty. He hops out front and wipes his foot on the wadded-up sheet. A few more drops of blood squeeze out. The wound looks deep, but it won't bleed much. He puts his loafers on over his bare feet.

As Luther goes back to cleaning, he notices the TV has a picture now but no sound. A silent game show is playing; the picture keeps jumping back and forth between an earnest moderator and two anxious contestants. Luther finishes cleaning in his shoes.

In a brown blanket at the foot of the bed, there's a local newspaper, The Montana Tribune. It's unfolded and looks unread; Luther turns to the want-ads. Under the Help Wanted-General, he finds several delivery jobs that require a vehicle. There are some nurseaid jobs and several over-the-road truck ads that ask for two years experience. Luther skips over three apartment manager jobs offering rent reductions.

There are two ads for cooks; one of these is under a larger ad for Kenny's Keno Klub. It's advertising for dancers, a bouncer, a
dealer, and a cook. Luther folds the paper up neatly to pocket-size with the Kenny's ad in the center.

After he wakes up, Luther unties his bedroll and pulls out his only other clothes, a short-sleeve shirt and a pair of wrinkled cotton slacks that he smooths with his hands as he puts on.

His foot's begun to swell as if it's infected. He heads down River Street away from the Restwell, trying not to let the loafer rub the sore spot on his heel. The sun is low; it's after three.

Luther finds his way to Kenny's Klub, asking directions when he stops to buy a pack of Winstons. There's a huge sign mounted on the roof of the building that blinks back and forth from red to green—KKK. He goes into the club and orders a beer and asks the bartender about the jobs. The bartender sends him to talk to a Mr. Strint, the afternoon manager.

Strint is at his desk when Luther walks in. He's a thin man with a receding hair line and a crew cut. The short hairs along his hairline are set forward at a jaunty angle like the prow of a ship. Luther asks him about the dealer job. Strint tells him the job was filled last week when Luther shows him the paper. Strint unfolds it.

Strint laughs lightly. "Did you happen to notice the date on this paper, Mac? July 22—that's last Friday. You're a week late and a few dollars behind, heh, heh."

Luther slaps his forehead amiably. He figures he can still make Strint like him even though he's started out badly. "I'll be damned—I was so excited about the dealer position. I didn't even check the
date." He smiles blankly at Strint, letting his mock sincerity soak in. "I dealt in Reno one winter. Have you got anything else? How 'bout the cook job?"

Strint looks Luther over more closely. "Yeah, that's still open—it's kind of an all-around job, chief cook and bottlewasher, if you know what I mean. You cook, you stock, you clean up." He waits.

"There's some heavy work. Still interested?"

"Sure, I've got experience as a short-order man."

Strint opens a drawer and tears off an application form from a pad. "Fill this out, and we'll see what we can do."

Luther fills out the app slowly, not because it's difficult, but because he's trying to make up good lies about his past. When he gives it back though, Strint barely looks at it. He puts it face down on his desk. "C'mon, I want you to know what you're in for."

Luther follows him down a hallway. Strint holds open a swinging door and waves Luther in front of him. They go through part of the kitchen and into a stock room. "What's the matter with your leg? You don't have no disability or anything, do you?"

Luther's foot is killing him, and he's favoring it noticeably. "No, no way, it's just a blister on my foot, that's all." Strint and he are standing in front of the freezer locker door, across from stacks of crates filled with clean glasses.

"That's a good way to come up with a blister. Wearing shoes with no socks. You got socks, don't you?" Strint steps back from Luther; his expression changes—his smile gets bigger but less relaxed.

"Oh sure, it's just so hot out today. Yeah, I've got socks at
the motel."

Strint nods, then is silent. Luther tries to think up a question about the job. He wants another beer. He's beginning to dislike Strint.

"Look, tell you what—you go home, get off that bum foot and take care of it. I'll take a look at your application and give you a call if we can use you. OK? You got a number where you can be reached, right?"

Luther senses the job is gone. "Yeah, it's on the app. I think I'll have a beer and then go get my weight off my foot, like you said." Strint is moving past him already. Luther follows him back out into the club. Strint talks to the bartender a minute and then disappears. Luther orders a beer and takes it to the darkest booth in the room.

The crowd changes and grows as the afternoon wanes. Luther notices there's no light coming in the door now when people enter. Happy Hour is Two for One; he orders four beers and four shots just before Eight when it ends. He lines them up on the table along with his cigarettes and his last buck. He figures maybe tomorrow noon he will hit the Open Door; they can probably help him out of a jam. He alternates beers and shots; whenever somebody in the club laughs real loudly, Luther laughs too. He tells himself he's making the best of a bad situation. That's one of his mother's favorite sayings. Make the best of a bad situation.

He only talks to a few people that wander by his booth on their way to the johns. For awhile an Indian with waist-length hair joins
him. Luther and he talk about Custer's Last Stand. When the Indian tells him he's a direct descendant of a Northern Cheyenne warrior who fought at the Little Big Horn, Luther agrees wholeheartedly that Custer really was an asshole. The Indian calls himself Joe Just Joe several times like it might be dangerous for him to say more. Luther introduces himself as Roy, thinking of McInney's dead brother.

Joe talks about some secret negotiations between the FBI and the CIA and the Northern Cheyenne Tribal Council that he is privy to. He says it all has to do with titanium deposits on his tribe's Montana Reservation, a mineral needed for rockets that's found nowhere else in the States, according to Joe. Luther loses track of it all as he sips his beer. The next time he looks up, Joe is gone.

A huge man comes into Kenny's Klub about eleven. He is burly and tall with a full beard and a pot gut. He has big boots on with wafflestomper tread; Luther thinks of Paul Bunyan. For a minute he wants to yell out, "Hey Paul, where's your blue ox." He figures it might get a laugh with the drunks, but he thinks better of it.

The man's voice is loud; it reverberates across the room. Luther hears him ask the bartender about the bouncer's job. The bartender tells him all the positions are filled. Luther wonders if this guy's using a week-old paper, too.

The man stays at the bar, drinking vodka and telling the bartender loud stories about himself and women he's punched. Luther can't tell at first whether he means punched like hit or punched like screwed, but he figures out it's like screwed because the guy keeps saying things like "getting his nut off" and "ole Conrad slipping the
meat to her” and “getting good skull.” At one point the man looks over at Luther’s corner. His eyes are angry and wild; he looks unpredictable like an animal, like a dog straining against an invisible chain.

Luther starts to leave the Klub when he runs into Joe again. Joe asks him if he’s tried the housedrink yet—the Buzzsaw.

“No, what the hell’s that?”

“The Bitterroot Buzzsaw, man, part bourbon, part rum, and part pussyjuice—it’s guaranteed to make a Montana logger out of you. C’mon, have one with me.”

“How much are they? I’ve only got a buck left, Joe.”

“Two bucks a buzzsaw, but that’s cool, I’ll front you half of one—I had one of your shots, in case you don’t remember.”

Luther doesn’t remember, not exactly, but he joins Joe at the bar. Joe orders Two BB’s with a flourish. Luther drinks his while Joe tells him about William Casey, the CIA director, making secret trips to Montana right before he died.

“If people knew what I know about Casey and this whole titanium thing, it’d make that Iran-Contra deal look like small potatoes, Roy.”

Luther nods and drinks. The big man at the other end of the bar has run out of stories and is sitting by himself, spinning his vodka glass around and around. He grimaces as he cleans his teeth with a toothpick.

When Luther gets back to the Restwell, he finds the front door unlocked. He decides to make a phone call from the payphone on the
wall in McInney's lobby, but the Kodiak distracts him again. He wonders how long it takes the taxidermists to do a big job like that.

He pulls his money envelope from the pocket of the ragged corduroy sports coat he bought at the GoodWill in Rapid City. He'd run counters at a Sonic Drive-In there for two weeks. He looks at the check stub. He'd used a fake name and had trouble cashing the check. Now nothing is left.

As he jams the envelope back in his coat, he makes sure his two photos are still there, two little pictures, one of himself and his mother, and one of himself and his sister. Joan and little Joan. The photos have been relaminated several times in hardware stores. They have a gauzy, blurred look. Both of them were taken in a little photo booth in Chicago, where they'd gone on a three-day weekend in Luther's sophomore year in high school in 1978, the spring after Luther's father had choked to death trying to eat his favorite meal—steak and potatoes—at the end of a week-long drunk.

He loves those little booths—every now and then he takes his own picture and sends it back to Joan and Joan. Milwaukee, Kansas City, Topeka, Pueblo. He knows these places aren't really exotic or even that far away from his home in the Ozarks, but he likes to think of Joan and Joan imagining him roaming around the nation like this, free and wild. Luther wonders if they're still mad at him about the bond money, if they've saved the last picture he sent from Sioux Falls.

The only light in the room comes from the bright Vacancy sign burning in the window. Luther feels calm by the bear, calm and still. He stares over at the payphone on the wall, trying to compose some
McInney comes out from the back rooms, carrying a can of beer. He's wearing slippers and a bathrobe and glasses. He looks much older than before. Luther can't imagine him killing the Kodiak.

"What are you doing out here?" asks McInney, but the gruffness of the day is gone out of his voice. "You did a good job down in Fourteen." He swigs from his can.

"Thanks, you weren't lying about the mess, were you." Luther sighs, almost the kind of sigh people only do when they're with somebody they can trust. "I was gonna use the phone, if it's OK. I was gonna call home."

"Where's home?"

Luther begins to say Missouri, starts to change it to Mississippi, but then switches back. "Missouri." McInney doesn't press it.

"Well, go ahead and use it. I'll wait and lock up after you're finished."

As Luther goes to the phone, McInney switches on a wall light and begins polishing the brass ID plates beneath a row of mounted deer and elk heads on the far wall of the lobby.

He gets the operator and places a collect call to his mother's phone number. Station-to-station. He fidgets with the flap on his jacket pocket while the phone rings. His sister answers. The operator says she's got a collect call for anyone from Luther. Little Joan asks from who and the operator repeats herself. Little Joan says to the operator to wait just a minute and puts her hand over the
phone. All Luther can hear is a muted static.

Little Joan comes back on the line and tells the operator that she can’t accept the charges. The operator says she’s sorry but the party won’t accept the call. Luther’s straining to hear into the receiver; for a second it seems there’s a hollow black tunnel all the way from the Restwell to Sarcoxie and he’s falling down into it. He hears the dial tone again.

Luther looks over his shoulder at McInney at the far wall and the bear in the center of the room. "Hi Mom, it’s me. How’re you doing? How’s little Joan?" He pauses, counting seconds by one-thousands as if he’s hearing her reply. "Yeah, I know it’s late. I didn’t think about it til after the phone was already ringing. You know I never get these time changes straight. I was thinking it was earlier there." One. Two. Three. Four. "Right. Well, I didn’t have anything special, really, I just hadn’t called for awhile. I just wanted to check in and see how you all were. Is Sis there?" One. Two. Three. "Sure, I guess she would be asleep." One. "No, don’t wake her. Look, I’ll call tomorrow in the daytime, and we’ll have a good talk." One. Two. "OK, me too, love you too. Sorry I woke you up. Bye."

Luther hangs up the phone as if it were made from eggshells. He sets a careful smile on his face, a smile for the bear and McInney. But when he turns around, McInney is gone. He lights a cigarette and stands staring out the lobby window for a long time, thinking of nothing but smoke.

Luther’s still standing in the window when a yellow car pulls up.
A large man gets out and looks around the motel parking lot. Luther recognizes him from Kenney's Klub, the one who called himself Conrad; he looks just as large but maybe drunker. The man comes into the lobby. He looks at Luther. He doesn't seem to recognize him.

"Evening. I need a room. Whatcha got?" His eyes catch on the Kodiak as he speaks. "Brother, that sonofabitch's bigger than me. That's one hell of a lot of bear." He moves toward it.

Luther loses all sense of caution—an idea flashes in his head—a way to get some quick bread and get out of this town.

"It oughta be. It's a Kodiak, biggest bear there is." Luther tries to mimic McInney's confident tone. "I have one room left I could let you have. It's twenty bucks; check out time's normally noon, but since it's so late you can stay till two if you need to. Fair enough?" Luther holds his breath for a second as Conrad turns around from the bear.

"I guess so. I don't feel like looking around at this goddamn hour. I'll take it, yeah." He pulls his wallet out and grabs a twenty. Luther sees more bills.

"Number Fourteen. It's unlocked; the key broke in the lock, and I haven't got it fixed yet. Damn locksmiths want an arm and a leg. No need to register since you've got cash." Luther steps up near Conrad and takes the twenty without looking him in the eyes. As Conrad leaves, the little bells on the sash jingle. Luther hopes McInney stays asleep.

Luther watches from the lobby while Conrad moves his car down in front of Fourteen and goes inside. He figures he better hit the road
quick. His foot is beginning to hurt like crazy again. He unfolds the rag McInney left and puts it inside his shoe like a sock. He laughs to himself about his quick thinking—his scam. The big ladykiller and the big bearkiller.

By the time those two find out, Luther'll be long gone. He imagines the look on McInney's face if he goes down to Fourteen in the morning and finds Conrad. Luther's sure they would never get along, those two. Oh well, God helps those who help themselves, he thinks. It was one of his mother's favorite expressions. God helps those who help themselves. He closes the door carefully to keep the bells from ringing.

When he gets to the middle of the parking lot, right under the neon motel sign, Conrad comes out of door Fourteen and calls out to him. He sounds friendly enough. "Hey, buddy, you forgot to tell me something."

Luther considers running right now—that fat giant couldn't catch him, he's sure, but that would be playing his hand. He can carry this off.

"What? I'm just getting ready to turn off the sign for the night."

"The TV. The TV don't work. Will you take a look at it for me? I like to run the TV when I fall asleep."

Conrad has come closer—it might be chancey to run. Luther goes with him. He probably just hasn't plugged it in.

"Probably isn't plugged in," says Luther as he steps into the room ahead of Conrad. "There's really not much on now anyway I
imagine." He bends down and plugs in the cord. As he straightens up, Conrad grabs his arm and twists it up hard behind his shoulder blades in one motion.

"OK, you little asshole, what the hell's the deal here? I get down here, and all of a sudden I remember seeing you at Kenny's Klub tonight, borrowing money off a goddamned Indian no less, and now you're running a motel? You're not trying to fuck with me, are you?"

"No, noway man, not at all. I work here. I do."

Conrad twists Luther's arm up higher. "How bout you don't give me one more drop of bullshit boy or I'll pull your goddamned arm off—all right?" Luther tells Conrad the truth then, some of it anyway. He says that the room's twenty bucks anyhow and that the only one getting cheated is McInney.

"I don't give a shit about no McInney. I want my twenty back."

He reaches into Luther's jacket pocket and retrieves the dirty envelope with the pictures and the twenty. He throws Luther onto the kitchen chair. He puts his twenty back in his wallet.

"I can't believe a little shit like you fuckin with me. What a deal. Well, well, who are the bitches with Mr. LittleShit here, Cinderella's two ugly sisters?"

Luther lunges for the photos. Conrad shoves him back down.

"No, wait, these two look familiar. Maybe I seen them in the magazine there, eh?" He points to the naked crotches in a magazine he's opened on the table. As Luther turns to see it, his eye catches on the ice pick in the pile of junk in the corner against the wall. He pretends to be staring at the naked picture as he tenses up. He
grabs the pick and swings around.

"OK, let me the hell out of here. Just give me my pictures and get out of my way. We're all even. You got your money."

Conrad looks shocked, but he doesn't budge. His eyes are glued on the point of the pick. "Well, go on pal, do what comes natural. Or I will."

Luther has no idea what to do next. His bluff has failed. He hesitates for a second and tries to think. Conrad kicks him in the shin so hard Luther snaps back. Conrad squeezes his hand and grabs the pick.

"I think you're gonna wish you hadn't done that my friend. Let me think about this." He looks at Luther for a long moment. "Tell you what. See if this don't sound fair. You tried to fuck me, so now I fuck you. Tit for tat. You been on the inside. I can tell by looking. You know how it's done, don't you. You can give ole Conrad some skull, can't you."

Conrad unzips his pants. "Or would you rather I had you sit on this pick," he holds it in Luther's face, "and rotate some. What'll it be?"

Luther does know what will happen now; he has been on the inside. Conrad holds the pick in one hand right next to Luther's head while with the other he grabs his shoulder and pushes him down in front of the chrome chair. He sits down and rubs himself while he looks back and forth from the picture on the table to Luther's eyes. All the time he holds the pick an inch from Luther's ear. When he's hard, he pulls Luther to him. Luther closes his eyes. He begins to count.
The TV has come on.

Luther lurches away from Conrad's chair. He goes to the bathroom and spits into the white bowl he'd cleaned earlier in the day. Conrad moans, rubbing his fingers on the pictures in the magazine. He keeps saying, "Oh you sweet bitch." He grabs his bottle of vodka and follows Luther into the bathroom.

"Got indigestion, my little friend? Musta been something you ate." Conrad laughs and then offers Luther the last of the bottle. "Here, wash it down with a shot of white magic. You'll live."

Luther takes the bottle, staring at Conrad's huge boots.

"Go ahead, kill it." Conrad reaches in his pants pocket, gets his wallet, pulls out a dollar bill. He drops it at Luther. "Here you go. I don't usually pay to get my nut, but I don't like to think about anybody being completely busted. Not here in the good ole US of A. Look at it this way, now you got exactly one more dollar than when you tried to rip me off. Take it and get the hell outahere."

Luther clutches at the dollar and the vodka bottle. He doesn't say a word.

Conrad waits a minute for Luther to move. Then he says, "Suit yourself pal, but I gotta piss now." He hovers over the bowl next to Luther. Water splashes in Luther's face. He tries to raise his head back far enough to see all the way to Conrad's eyes. When he finally finds them, they're closed. He realizes how drunk Conrad is.

"Don't forget to flush, little buddy," Conrad finishes and closes the door behind him.
Luther gets cold sitting on the floor of the bathroom in the dark. He finishes off the vodka and feels warmer, stronger. He closes and opens his eyes, trying to see. It doesn't even occur to him that it is dark. This lack of vision must be his own.

He feels weighted down, and his eyes blur and burn, like he's underwater. Like he's swimming in the Sarcoxie municipal pool in the summer as a boy, holding his breath, trying to stay at the bottom of the pool, holding onto a drain grate, listening to the muffled sounds of the other kids at the surface. Finally he stands.

He listens for Conrad, hears deep, thick breathing, the beginnings of a slow snore. He waits in the dark with the dollar in his hand, listening to Conrad's stifled snore. He steps into the motel room. There has to be a way out, a door opening to somewhere.

Conrad is asleep at the formica table with the shiny, hollow, metal legs, his head bent forward over his forearms, the open magazine beneath them. The soundless TV flickers light across the room. Luther sees the door and heads toward it, feeling like he's rising to the surface of the pool, years before.

Outside, the outline of the mountains frames the distance. But it looks like high walls to Luther, painted with pleasant murals, yet dimensionless and impossible to penetrate. He looks down the row of identical numbered doors, across the hoods of the lookalike cars, to the bay windows of the lobby. The Vacancy sign illuminates the bear.

He takes one more deep slow breath, as if about to dive underwater. He goes back into the small room and closes the door.

Luther feels lucid now, even in only the faint flickering TV
light. All the real light in the room is coming out of his eyes, and he can make it brighter and brighter at will. The TV goes black for an instant between commercials, then one of those record ads comes on where the names of old standby tunes ride up the screen, one after another over a backdrop of teenage lovers strolling along a lakeside holding hands. *Teen Angel.*

The pictures are sweet; they could be advertising diamond engagement rings or long distance phone calls. *Two Hearts on Fire.*

He thinks of the couples in the mountains, safely in love, sleeping soundly in the woods before the moment of terror when the grizzly stalks into their campsites and ruins everything forever. The lobby bear looms in his mind, large as this whole day and night. Luther struggles to find a date, a number in his head for this different day. He rocks back and forth on his heels, reeling, reading the song titles as they glide by. *All in the Game. The Sea of Heartbreak.*

Luther tries for a moment to break the spell of darkness he feels surrounding him. He opens his eyes as wide as he possibly can, wider and wider to let out all the light that's shining through his head, that's hiding in his skull. He's a skull in a motel room peeling light from deep beneath his eyes.

The TV blacks out again. Luther sees the dollar still clutched in his fist and Conrad slumped at the table. Conrad's back is swirled with long fine hair, and the knobs of his spine roll up his back like the little coned symbols for mountain ranges on a map. Luther follows the line of knobs as it rises from Conrad's pants up to the hairless,
tanned, wrinkled spot at the base of his skull. And without knowing that he had even seen it lying on the floor by Conrad’s overturned boot, Luther reaches for the ice pick.

The room is filled, now, with a bluish pulsating light that keeps rhythm in Luther’s head with the screaming red noise of Conrad’s insatiable breathing. Luther moves like a hunter, like an animal, shifting his weight away from the sore spot on his foot and steadying himself. Luther puts the shaft of the icepick in his left hand like a drill bit in a boring guide—the point’s just flush with the edge of his curled little finger. He lowers his hand to the bare spot at the top of Conrad’s neck, tilting his hand and the pick around in small circles, projecting a perfect angle into Conrad’s sleeping brain. Luther puts the dollar bill between his teeth, gritting them into its inky bitter taste. He steadies his left hand and clasps the pick firmly. He feels as if he’s about to pry the lock of the world apart; he feels alert as a diamondcutter.

The commercials have ended on the silent screen above the fridge, and a late night rerun of a musical lipsync show from LA has come on. Two would-be country-western singers, a boy and a girl in fringe jackets, are mouthing secondhand lyrics while the studio audience applauds and waves wildly at the camera.

Luther compresses his right hand into a fist; he tightens his arm and wrist into a hammer. He waits while Conrad’s breath builds louder until it feels like a freight train is roaring into the room, and then he swings the hammer as hard as he can, driving the pick straight into the base of Conrad’s brain.
There is a sound like something brittle breaking underwater, like something murky and viscous giving way all at once. Conrad's arms shoot out across the table; he makes a gull-like squawk. Luther feels tiny hanging from the end of the pick as if Conrad is a gigantic, dragon-sized puppet that he must somehow control. Luther remembers pithing frogs in his high school biology class; he levers the pick back and forth and up and down. Conrad's arms and legs keep convulsing as Luther rotates the pick handle, and a dense acrid smell fills the room. Luther jumps back from his murder.

The pantomime of applause on the screen continues and the boy and girl bow with their guitars swung casually behind them. Luther feels as if they all have seen him. He yanks the cord from the wall.

Luther has torn the dollar bill with his teeth. He jams it into his pocket and feels himself on the train again, stopping with its cold metal crunch in the still night. He climbs into the the bed and pulls the brown blanket around him in one motion as he rolls to the wall. He lies there rolled up, face down, and tries to think of a word, any word. He can't. All he can see in his mind is McInney's bear, keeping watch in the lobby, and all he can hear is a small, steady dripping, something leaking, something pooling, as if the night itself were melting.

Above the eastern mountain rim, the sun rises in smog—sick, burnt orange, like a rotten eye someone forgot to close. Luther awakens in dim light and knows what he has done before he swivels his head around to see Conrad's body glued to the cheap metal furniture in
the motel room. He crawls to the window, peeks out at the street. A police car cruises down River Street. Luther sucks in his breath.

He pulls the blanket from the bed and throws it around the foot of Conrad's chair, covering the pool that's congealed there in the night. He slips Conrad's wallet out and takes all the money—a twenty, the same one he had earlier, and two fives. He replaces the wallet. He grabs Conrad's keys from the end table. When he picks them up, the map Conrad had folded under them opens. Luther accordions it out to full size. On one side is Idaho; he turns it over to Montana. Spaced out evenly all across the long dark line of Montana's northern border are the big green letters, CANADA. Luther stares at it. Canada looks roomy and blank, empty enough to hold him and hide him; even on the worn map, it looks free and fresh and open. Maybe he should go there. It's close—he could be there by tonight. Tomorrow could be his first day in Canada.

The pick protrudes like a handle from Conrad's neck. Luther shakes it, and the body moves. A small trail of blood, the only blood, runs straight down the bumps of his spine like a hardened stripe of red paint on the side of a paint can.

Seeing the shallow open eyes of the dead man spins Luther into a dream, a nightmare where every thought surfaces like the slow, emotionless voices on a record played at the wrong speed and every action slogs forward in syrup-thick air. Conrad's hands are clenched, one outstretched on the table, one in his lap. Luther grabs a coffee cup from the white metal cabinet below the fridge and puts it on the table, working Conrad's fingers around it as if he were about to take
a drink. He puts the ragged magazine in Conrad's other hand and folds a big worn thumb down around it.

Luther backs away toward the door. He wonders if this is how the undertakers feel as they manufacture calm expressions on the faces of the dead, if this is what the taxidermists think about as they seam their stiff, dried skins together.

He counts the money again, thirty-one dollars, wraps it around his pictures of Joan and Joan in the torn envelope, puts on his jacket.

He opens the door, and a strand of sunlight catches on Conrad's blank stare. Luther follows the empty gaze up toward the TV. He reaches down and plugs the cord in. A tiny dot appears, and as Luther watches, a pattern of horizontal lines widens out from the dot, like the eye of a computer opening after a long electronic sleep. Across the bottom of the screen is written Good Morning from KSPS. Our programming day begins at 7 A.M. with Action Local News, Sports, & Weather. July 29, 1987.

Now Luther has a number. He files it away amid all the numbers of the days, files it in his catalog of lost and counted details. He leaves the TV on, and as he closes the door with Conrad's map and car keys in his hand, he imagines the local newscaster coming on cheerily at 7 sharp, sending silent greetings into the dead space of the room—the urgent images of another day's sports and weather flickering dimly, as if across a great distance, into the vacant eyes of the large man in the chrome chair.
As far as I can figure, there's only two ways to be a circle. Either you curl into a ball with your back to the world, or you curl into a ball face out with your back to yourself. One way you've got to be very limber, and the other way very trusting, and I guess maybe I'm neither, but the point is, just trying is enough to break your back. Of course, that's not the only way to break a back, is it?

It's sure not the only way I've broken mine. But you know, I'm not going to feel so all alone in this anymore. I saw on TV where three-quarters of American adults suffer from back pain. It makes me feel maybe mine's not been in vain, after all.

If you only knew the times I've wondered if I should even go on with all the pain and immobility. But hey, I'm not alone; we're all learning to suffer—almost as if it's good practice for something or other. So many discs slipping away in the still of the night, so many vertebrae chipping and crumbling, all those muscles tearing and
pulling free from the rooted white bone. So many different ways to be
lonely, all together.

Speaking of together, you know I forgot a way. I mean another
way to be a circle—making love. Sure, that can be a circle
sometimes, but just like any other circle, it can sure play hell with
your back, don't you think?

I had me a real wonderful lover when I was young; I guess she was
the first one where we were both really in love at the same time; I
mean up-to-your-neck-in-it love, and those nights lasted for what
seemed like years. It was a real circle, too, better than any one by
yourself. It started down below when we'd hook up like crazy, but
that circle would close up in a bright arc running right between our
eyes.

I swear I could see all the way to the bottom of somebody's soul
those times, hers or maybe mine even, but, even so, that's where the
pain can begin, when somebody starts looking away and you know as
clear as anything they're seeing themselves somewhere down the road.
And it's a stifling, hot pain like something all slipped out at once,
and if you've got any experience with it at all, well, you know it's
broken pretty bad.

It makes me wonder why we don't come ready-made in a circle, I
mean fullblown born that way, instead of all these wild contortions
and desperate gestures trying to help, but really just putting more
and more pressure on until something inside just snaps. And that's
when you get the kind of tensed-up pain that affects every square inch
of you, even your eyes and ears. That's right, you don't even see or
hear things the same when it's working on you. And naturally, that just makes it easier to make a miscue the next time. It's a real insidious sort of thing we're up against, let me tell you.

Part of the problem is that you don't rebound so good after you break it a couple of times. You start walking a little stiff and watching curbs even. Did you know people crack vertebrae just stepping off curbs wrong? Like I said, that's the kind of thing we're dealing with here. Those nerves climb right up into your brain, and somewhere up there is a whole reservoir of fear just waiting to spill over.

Now me, personally, I've never broken it just stepping off a curb, but I believe it, because I can tell you things just as odd. Like sleeping, for instance. You think you can break your back just lying around sleeping?

Well, I'm living proof, and this wasn't even all that long ago. I was sleeping a whole lot, staying in bed way too much, I know. But sometimes everything gets way ahead of you, and you know you can't catch up to it, so you think maybe I'll just stay down until it all comes around again. A kind of lying low. Doesn't that sound familiar?

I guess maybe I made it worse with the pills, and I'll tell you, it was truly amazing what I was able to ignore. But all the time I was in bed, hiding, with the covers up, listening to the muffled world out there like it was all somebody else's quiet afternoon dream. I was getting heavier and heavier in the bones—that's how it works, I don't know why—and softer and softer everywhere else.
So anyway, I'm lying there after I don't know how many mornings, or maybe months, lying there at home, or maybe it was a hospital, and I notice people are getting kind of bitchy at me, you know, as if I was being intentionally evasive, or maybe they were jealous, who knows. So I thought maybe I'd just move my head a little, just turn it some so I would be looking out an open window whenever I really did decide to wake up and get back with it, and bango, there go a bunch of those lower lumbers, one after the other. Sharp, sick-sounding clicks. After that one I needed sandbags, therapy—the whole shebang.

Hey, as long as I'm telling about my back and my ideas on making circles, you might as well hear it all: memories and dreams. That's right, memories and dreams—they're not exempt. And they can both be backbreakers, no doubt about it.

Especially daydreams, you know, hoping-wishing type dreams, the ones where you sit around making up all those colorful, soft pictures of the future starring yourself, naturally, like a movie with all the edges blurred. That works on you two ways, first, with all the sitting around affecting your bones like I explained before about lying down, and, second, there's a real risky kind of reaching going on in those dreams, I think. You get that spine all extended and twisted and vulnerable while you're busy with those sweet pictures, and boy, that cartilage can give way real quick and real hard, and there you are, laid up again.

But wait a minute. I'm off the track, what I really meant to tell you about was night dreams. Night dreams and memories, that's what I had in mind. I've got one of each of those that can give you a good
idea just how careful you have to be. Maybe I should tell the memory one first. It's really special to me because it was my first time. It was at a funeral, see, and I cracked it real good and proper, not enough I couldn't walk away, but a hairline crack, just the same— enough to show up on a x-ray later. But what amazes me to this day is how I did it—just seeing somebody else break theirs.

Yes, that's how watchful you need to be, and when you're a kid, who's looking out for something like that? I was small, seven or eight, and the lady who broke hers was like a mother to me, maybe it was my mother, but that's not the point. Point is, she's out there burying her husband that day in the drizzle, and even though there's a lot of strong-looking men around, it was her that had to lower that shiny casket down in a sling.

I mean, nobody said as much, but it was clear nobody was going anywhere until she did, it was almost like that's what they'd come to see, if you know what I mean, and she was okay all the way down real slow until the rope goes slack. And then she starts to straighten up, and that's when you hear it snap. She stops like she's stuck fast, and I see this one heavy-looking tear, the color of the wet, gray tombstones all around, bending her down and down.

And that one gray tear is what did it, at least to my mind, because she really crumbled up, and you could see it was bad, and that she'd never walk quite straight again. And just watching her there like that, not lifting a thing of my own, mine went too, even though, like I say, I really didn't know it until later.
With the memories, like that one, you've even got to watch it just rethinking them, or that pain and stiffness can flare right up again on you. The old spinal cord, that slim, precious vine that grows gray feathery nerves all up and down that narrow hard row of bones—that's the way I picture it, like those ferns that grow right through solid rock—it's more sensitive than you could ever imagine.

It's all strange, I know, and to me, nothing is any stranger than the night dreams. I mean, how in the world could you break something hard and solid in the soft depths of a dream? Listen, one of the absolute worst times for me was a dream where I'm climbing a cliff. It looked like pictures I've seen of those crazy people threading up El Capitan in Yosemite, and I know one hundred percent it was a dream because in real life you'd never catch me hanging out there on a thin rope with all that sharp, steely rock and blank sky around.

But in the dream, there I am, and I feel all this weight gathering up on me slow but steady, and I look down, and there's these smiling kids hanging on my line as far below me as I can see, and they're all waving up at me, and I see right off not a one of them has a foothold anywhere. And just when I think I'm a goner, something pulls at me from above, and I look up, and here I had a sense of being real near the top, but instead, there's a row of craggily-faced, white-headed people tied to my line one after another as far up as I can see, and they're looking down at me with the same pained expression I just know I've got on. And what with them pulling up and the kids pulling down, and every single one of us being somewhere in between
somebody, I can hear bones cracking like crazy, and they echo until it feels like the whole damn mountain is breaking in two.

And that's the whole dream; it just ended there in space with the echo. But even though it's only a dream, who do you suppose has to live with all the remnants? That's right, me, me with the backbrace and the traction and the bills that never end. See, it's always like that because when it comes down to your back and your muscles and the breaking and tearing and the pain we all get, there aren't any dreams, really. No dreams and no imaginings that don't leave a trace. Just cold bone and warm nerves, and let me tell you, it's just us for it.

I guess I'm making it sound like we're all in this together, and maybe I am, although I know the risk, believe me. Because once you start to really feel somebody else's pain, well, you know two things right off. One, you got a chance at a circle, just maybe, and two, you're heading hellbent for your own broken back. Am I right?

Take us, for instance, you and me, both of us waiting like this, and it's just an accident we're both waiting in the same place. I could just as easy be you and vice versa, as far as I can tell. We all come from the same place; we all start out wet and warm and limber as a puppy, and if we're lucky and make it to the end, we get hunched up with crackly bones as dry as dust.

See, you've got to deal with it one way or another, whether you go in for circles or whatever; there's no getting away from the old backbone and its delicate treasures. I've been lucky for some time now, myself, no real bad breaks, but I tell you I can feel it going all the same. It's just quieter now, and you make your own special adjustments.
I know some people say a bone is stronger than anywhere else where it's been broken, and maybe so, but all the same, there's a settling comes on—a compressing down—and instead of all that quick, vivid pain, you start to shut some things down, you turn off some of those keen, slender nerves, you get it down to a distant ache. Sometimes you can almost feel those nubs wearing off, you know, the ones they call articulations, you can just feel them grinding right on down. Hell, that can happen anytime. You can be just talking to a person, anytime, anywhere, and there's a wearing down involved. Do you know what I mean?

Anyway, don't get me wrong. I'm all for going right ahead with it. Talking, I mean—and living, too, for that matter—because it's another kind of circle to me. Just look at you and me, both of us sitting here, waiting, and I've been doing all the talking, but I see your eyes working, and I see a fine kind of beauty in there mixed up with the pain. Sure, I can see the pain, anyway, it's in the way you move, and besides, what would you be doing in a place like this otherwise, waiting this long and all, listening to me, if you weren't hurting pretty bad? And just from the look of it, I'd say it's not your first time either. Am I right?

Hey, I'd like to hear all about it, that's one thing, no matter what else, a person can still talk, and it takes your mind away. C'mon. I'm all ears, I know you've got a story to tell. I'm sure I don't know every way there is to break a back. Here, let's scoot our chairs together, real close, into a circle, and then, you tell me all about it.