

Summer 1991

## Incident on Hangman Creek Road

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### Recommended Citation

Wrigley, Robert (1991) "Incident on Hangman Creek Road," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 36 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss36/16>

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## **Incident on Hangman Creek Road**

The old man's car jerks to a stop  
in the middle of the crossing. No more trains  
should come along today, and I want to keep  
on going. But I can't, and what pains  
me most is that he doesn't wave or nod,  
doesn't even look my way, but holds on  
to the huge wheel as though he believes God  
Himself will spin the starter. I'd be gone  
already but now must stop  
and walk back. It looks like rain,  
or maybe snow, there are clouds at the top  
of the northern hills, and above, a plane  
drones out of sight. I tap at the window,  
bend to look, and see right away he's dead.

It's obvious, but I say "Hello?  
Hello? Hello, Sir?" and press my forehead  
to the glass. That the doors are locked  
does not surprise me, nor the windows  
rolled tightly up. And I'm not the least shocked  
to believe I hear the dull eerie blow

of a whistle. Who'd drive this road  
out of nowhere but me and an old man  
surprised by dying, though he might have showed  
the grace to die one car-length farther on.  
And it is a train whistle after all,  
distant but bearing down, that makes me strain  
against the back bumper, that makes me yell  
*Goddammit!* the minute it starts to rain.

In that sudden shower, I don't linger  
a moment but break the front window out  
with a rock and unbend each gnarled finger  
from the wheel and collect his knocked-off hat  
coming out the door and into the rain.  
Off the right-of-way, onto the shoulder,  
we're headed for my truck when the freight train  
rolls into sight and his old car, older  
than me, remains, doomed in a place no one  
but a fool would return to. Try to see,  
in your mind's eye, how I waited there one  
or two seconds, then ran, thinking *not me*,  
*not me*, drunk in the starter's queer  
grind, eyeing my ancient face in the mirror.