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Western Civilization

James Galvin

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Western Civilization

1.

That woman still lives at the ranch.

You can ask her. Maybe

She knows. As near and far

As the rest of us can tell

The barn and sheds were built

In the Great Depression. Someone

Had money and a big idea.

Far and away the biggest

Idea I've ever seen.

Pat says there must've been

A hundred men, shepherds,

And shearers, working there.

It's one of those things

That not only is, but seems,

Larger inside than out,

Like a planetarium or an orange,

Even with Wyoming around it,

And real stars flying away.

Just stick your head in there;
Its dark will make you dizzy.
It has an underneath

Too low to stand in unless
You are a sheep. The loft
Vaults like a dusky church.

2.
All that summer
I balanced water,

Coaxing the desert
Into pasture,

With eight cubic feet
Per second for two

Thousand acres.
Horseback, shovel

On my shoulder along
Miles of ditches:

Stalling here,
Releasing there,

Water over
The deepening green,

Keeping it living:
Hérons and cranes

Regal in meadows,
Strings of ducklings

Frothing the ditch
To get away.

3.

One day riding ditches I saw Clay.
He was on the hill against the sky,
Flapping his arms at me.
They were going to bulldoze the corrals at the shearing sheds,
Intricate maze of gates and pens
Clay, as a kid, had built with his father,
Before they lost their ranch, before Frank died,
Before the family had to move away.

The new owner was razing everything.
I guess he had some kind of idea.
Clay didn't need any gates, but, as Pat said,
That's Clay.

I met them at the shearing sheds.
Pat held a wrecking bar like a steel snake.
I just can't stand tearin' apart all them guys's dreams,
He said, looking shy.
Hell is when you know where you are.

4.

On the barn roof a loose piece of tin
Flaps in the wind like a broken wing.
Wyoming whirls in the sun.

Up in the loft a pair of shears,
Oh, fifty or sixty years forgotten there,

Floats in noonlight, bearing up some dust,
Just a pair of spring-steel scissors,
Two knives joined at the hip, with smiling edges.

An owl the color of things left alone
Flaps out of the gable door.

Hell is when you know where you are:
Mazes of pens and gates dreaming sheep;
Miles of ditches dreaming green.

5.

No one living knows who built the shearing sheds,
Unless maybe that woman, and I'm not about to ask her,
Ever since she tried to stab her husband
With a pair of scissors. He was ninety-four
And barely held her off. Later she claimed she was
Trying to cut his heart medication out of his
Shirt pocket—dope, she called it, and Oscar
Had to leave the ranch, where he didn't last long.

They bulldozed the corrals.
We got forty gates.
We took them someplace safe.

6.

Now the vast, dim barn floats like an ocean liner
Whose doldrums are meadows spinning into brush,
And everywhere you look Wyoming hurries off.

All night the stars make their escape.
In the loft a pair of shears cuts woolly moonlight.
All day a piece of roofing flaps in the wind.

A startled owl flaps out of the gable.
Hell is when you know where you are and it's beautiful.
You save the gates for nothing.

You balance the water to keep the green from spinning
Away into sage, the same gray as the wing
That just now shaded your eyes.