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CutBank

Spring/Summer 1981

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is dedicated to
Western Poet
Richard Hugo
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Cover Photograph: “Father Serra’s Room,” by Wynn Bullock (1902-1975), loaned by his wife, Edna Bullock
EUGÈNE BOUDIN’S “THE GLEANOR”—1856

Downwind of summer, the season,
he said, didn’t work out right.
I gather my hoard anyway—
certain starlit conversations,
a wistful parting. Mostly
that hint on the wind
that this is all it is,
moments I’ve attended,
telling a story of kernel
from chaff. Old sweater drawn
across my shoulders, buttoned
wrong in morning haste.
Stubble cutting my bare feet,
rake handle silent under my hand,
a wand to my yearning
for better yield, nineteenth
or twentieth century. My friend
in the background rakes hard,
mindful of need, her back shaped
to the task. Let the artist
from Ecole St. Simeon mistake
my stance for indolence.
Desire in the wheatfield
has no title—even
under a gothic sky.
My dark eyes move through the hours
ahead, willing a change in scene: sheaves
piled in the moonlight, rakes stacked
in the barn, long skirt hiked
to the waist, bruised feet
eased in the stream. Place me
there, Eugene Boudin, winnowed
to the languid bone.
LOLLY DOO DUM DAY WITH MY DAUGHTER

Today you greeted the ground owl
guarding her nest in the cutbank.
This same morning you took the wheel
in your hands to learn the gravel
and its grades. Tomorrow you will be
sixteen, will forget you once rode
snug on my hip. The creek floods,
chokecherry buds widen, we sleep,
we wake, to the same pleasant air.

When we go home to rooms we know,
your on fire with fierce resolve,
mine a quiet of polished sun,
let corners of the kitchen fade,
bright Scotland flare. Give a little
in the knee, bend the elbow so.
Ah, my daughter, sing! If we twitch
a fine skirt slightly, let us.
Over and over saucepans scoured,
the treasured fork and knife laid
straight. Afterwards, loving will do.

For the season of love, of boys
from the plow, you know you're not
too young. A long field tossing birds
to the wind goes far. A song to try
again and once more. Better than
scolding a daughter fair, better
we both go, arm in arm,
to take the pleasant air.
VIEW FROM THE KITCHEN

The way I heard it
from the kitchen stool,
my feet hooked over a rung,
the story that gave me a shiver,
took place without love
in that field. She’d tired
of ranching, took off with the hymn
of the visiting preacher, lit out
on her husband and child.
But that wasn’t the last of it.
She came back years later
to the same field, land
her married daughter ranched,
to park her pink trailer house
with a view of the mountains.
And maybe she sleeps without shame
in a herd of blue lupine,
humming hymns of the road.
A plains wind can turn us,
turn us all around.
There was a roof over our heads
and that was at least something.
Then came dances.
The energy for them came from
childhood, or before, from the time
when only warmth was important.
We had come to the New World
and become part of it.
If the roof would shelter us,
we would keep it in repair.
Roof then could be roof,
solid, visible, recognizable,
and we could be whatever it was
that we were at this moment.
Having lost our previous names
somewhere in the rocks as we ran,
we could not yet describe ourselves.
For two days the rain had been
steady, and we left the trail
because one of us remembered
this place. Once when I was young
I had yielded to the temptation
of getting drunk, and parts of it
felt like this, wet and hot,
timeless, in the care of someone
else. After the dances we sat
like cubs, and cried for that
which in another world might be
milk, but none came.
We had only ourselves, side by side
and we began a wrestling
that comes, like dances, out of
nowhere and leaves into the night
like sophisticated daughters
painted and in plumes, but young,
a night darker than its name.
We gave ourselves over to adoration
of the moon, but we did not call it
moon, the words that came out
were instead noises as we tried
to coax it close enough
to where we might jump.
overpower it, and bring it to our
mouths, which is, after all,
the final test of all things.
But we could not, it only circled us,
calmly, and we wanted it more.
We called it Carlos, but it did not
come, we called it friend, comrade,
but nothing. We used every word
until we fell, exhausted, and slept
with our eyes open, not trusting
each other, dark pushing us even
farther into childhood, into liquid,
making us crave eyelessness,
craving so hard we understand
prayer without knowing its name.
At some point we failed
ourselves, and eyelids fell.
We dreamt dreams of even farther
worlds, so different they cannot
be remembered, cannot be remembered
because they cannot be described
or even imagined. We woke
and did not remember, and the night
before became part of those farther
worlds, and we did not remember
speaking to the moon.
We got up from the centuries
and centuries, and called
each other by name.
Honey, the one that was me said,
drying her tears that were
really the rain from the night
before, which had taken her
without me knowing, honey,
again, but she did not understand.
She wanted only the sun
because she was cold, she pulled out
hair to offer it, from her head
and her arms. She understood me
only when I held her, made her warm. She reached to her head
and offered now me more
of herself. I took it.
I put it to my mouth,
put it to a cupped tongue
and took it in. She moved
and I put my hands on her knees
which looked up at opposite ends
of the sky.
CONFESSIONS

Those roses. I stole them in broad daylight to prove I was mean. Other kids swore truer when they saw my hands bleed.

My father was quiet and sometimes unhappy. I wanted happy and thought he was mean. So did my mother. She sulked and picked raspberries, pulled beets. Dad mended our back fence and burned an acre of trash. Summers at dusk he'd call us home—*you kids* and we were his. Mom he called Josie and loved. She was pretty then and baked pies, lemon meringue and home-made apple that made Dad think he dreamed them in the war.

My mother grays, her face changing into her mother's. The sorrow of farms does not calm. I refuse my life like cream and even dead my father loves me.

I wept when others wept, buried the dead animals under lilacs when earwigs curled the leaves. Mother said it would stink.

Once I lied and Mr. Wilson knew. I played with his old plow and didn't ask. Something broke. *CarolAnn,* he said like my father in my dreams.
I was ashamed
and so I hated him
in his snuff-stained shirt.

He never told, though I stole
his flowers and his wife cried.
Behind his back I called him
old, making fun of his suspenders,
the way his shoes flopped open
like slippers in wet grass. He still jawed
with Dad and tipped a white hat
to Mom Saturdays. Just a farmer
from Missouri, come west.
I couldn't know he came to die,
his poppies bursting orange every spring.

I lied and lied. The Rialto,
black and white movie,
a blond woman in her slip
screaming you bastard, slapping
the man dead. Stealing money
and telling my friends I prayed.
If being beautiful was love
I wanted to be mugged. No,
I said until they let me be.
FOR ALL YOU KNOW

You choose a day and ride it close
as a daughter, loyal to invisible
hairs on the arm of a small-boned girl.
At home in the glitter
of a five and dime you are worth it
young again and freely stupid,
wearing white on a dark day
like a flag. This morning, your mother
mouthed love when she cooked your egg
sunnyside down. To go from here
means pain, your guard let down,
the childhood farm where all
the animals have been eaten or sold.
Grandpa never loved the barn
and Grandma gives her past
away like someone else's china.
Where you played house in the machine-shed
it was oil you smelled, not grain.
The queen, the king, you knew
the truth about the humpbacked
chicken-coop. From the doorway
you watched far stairs ripple in grass.

It seemed yellow horses galloped
the twister down Johnny's field, leaving
everything unchanged. Ten years your uncle
stalks that gray mouth in every bottle
rising and falling with the backbone
of his life. The perfectly ugly August
his dream touched down
high winds buckled the tracks, drove
straw through fence poles.
You might have surrendered
to learn it never leaves, the calm world riding the same twisted rail.

In the granite station blocked at the town's heart, you discover changing levels without moving. It was a stairway you stood still for. That wrestling before dawn to know the most honest thing you've ever done. You mother yourself at last. For all you know, the angel refused you like money.
THE MAN WHO WANTED TO GROW MUSHROOMS

It was something to do with the land in the basement, under a house he was hemmed into, his life overrun by women and gardens and green vegetables. Something in him grew where nothing else would. Something grew dark. Some dank husbandry gave him strength without light without roots—something could make its own life and make it his. His cattle ranch. His crimson clover. His secret field of mushrooms under the house in a light women couldn’t see by. All this was his until one afternoon too late for anything else he called his grandson aside. “We’ll make money at this,” he said. “We’ll get our land back again.” But inside two months he was dead, and the mushrooms still growing quietly under the floor under my bed.
PRAIRIE: GORDON, NEBRASKA, AUGUST 1916

1
Clouds out of Pine Ridge and bad memory, maybe full of hail. There was just enough room in the lizzies for a tripod, for the five poses there among the new ghosts of wheat, the Black Hills north beyond the shot. If these were the cameraman's friends, they didn't let on. The photographer: unidentified, probably some free-lance for the upstate *Bugle*. Probably out for the standard shot of crops, the people there props and scale for the square miles of tawny wave and weather.

2
Not so the stone camel Thomson studied at the Ming tombs, although the man, his flute, were certainly there for scale, but more than that. Every other beast goes down on its knees for the five hundred years behind it, and the sky—the sepia sky nothing in the shot's afraid to bear—suggests the first of hills beyond this field with its focused weeds.

The man is studying the path. On it lie the feet of pilgrims crossing scrapes the great blocks made. Beneath these, the first sea. Beneath the sea, the path.

3
And like a field of stone and men, that wheat went on. It hailed, but not that day. *Lunch was eaten, fun*
was had by all, the caption might have read. Someone turned around. Both cars turned and headed back to town and normal August afternoons. The photographer, unnamed, left town.

The Ghost Dance had ended. Gold had been discovered in Dakota. More history was somewhere, and he drove toward it: west to sunrise, south to Almen’s earth and sky. It would snow soon. He might get lost. But prairie knew his feet now, and he, the horizontal view. What does it matter, after years and miles, after clouds, the current blossom of the sea, I’ll never know his name? It doesn’t matter. It’s enough the wind was perfect.
MERIWETHER LEWIS: Co-commander of an expedition to the Pacific Ocean, 1804-6. Found dead under mysterious circumstances, either murdered or a suicide, in central Tennessee, Oct. 11, 1809.

THE LOST JOURNAL OF MERIWETHER LEWIS

Fort Clatsop, Feb. 20, 1806

Have I come all this way but to stare at grayness? (It was Gray, too, who first ran this bar, an apparition, sails so white shouting skipped the river like stones!) My maps mold and smear. Ants of rust crawl my rifle. Once I was proficient at aiming, measuring. Nothing escaped the ire of my rifle, my will. Days, I collected specimens and fossils for the President, nearly a father, who does not send a ship to retrieve me from the rain.

I encase myself in pelts of the Sea Otter, nights, and give off my derangement like breath, like steam from the skin of a water animal. I esteem other days, when encouraged by the season we departed Mandan Country. Then, as now, it was my legs—that rusted in Winter, that would madden me. I stretched them that Spring and found them sound, and full of the flesh of dogs, embarked, toward whatever Spring and West were.

Tattooed with the names of English traders, the squaws lie down one long last time in their blue beads, with ulcers and sores, with their seaborne venereal. Down our path of honours I see more traders, (neither tongues nor feet can outdistance them) weighed with baggage, and all honour ground down—one step in these bogs and land shakes for an acre! I am not a trader. I am an explorer, feverish with rain.
William Chamberlain

Clatsop. Killamook. Chinook. O! Rain-stained names speak more than I am able, as in this Western downpour I am compelled to be mute. I kneel in fir needles, and while buckskin rots vapouring from my back I pray trees catch storms like sails forever. From this outlook on Cape Disappointment I scan for a ship but there is no ship for father or son, and I steer—to camp by the one earthly rudder left, my own.

They think this is wilderness; visages of murderers wheeling closer in October leaves on the Natchez Trace. The pacing Meriwether Lewis halts, listening. Suddenly, his tongue is too big for his mouth, his mouth outsizes his head and his head is a wreath of smoke above the creatures that run for his money saying: this is wilderness. Cottonwood leaves are falling, over empty cartridges, over their spent hearts.
The Missions close down like a wall
hiding the backcountry. There must be secret
passages up there leading to peaks that stare blindly
at one another. Snow covers tamarack and bearberry
on the shaded north face and even bright days
freeze bare fingers to the transit.
Six hundred feet of backbone to run
and the ravens sail by like side-armed coins.

No town in Montana could ease this wind.
It blows all the way from Canada,
rounding snow into the soft curves
and bellies of winter. Pulling chain
down the line, it all comes clear: how you impose
order on a life where lovers walk out,
how you narrow the world to a few bald colors,
geometric lines, and a lasting desire to keep warm.

On the bay, storms polish the inner ice
mirror-smooth, til it shines back the midday moon.
Every boundary runs six feet above mean high water.
I've measured more than corners here.
I've measured the way my life backs up
when things go wrong, and I reach for simple
puzzles the brain can solve—the long leg
of a right triangle, the exact location
of original stones. Flathead Lake
shelters you from nothing at all.
In light this bitter, you can't hide your mistakes—
minutes missing in a full circle,
cold nights, the drifted footprints leading in.
Another time, another place, it might have been a lover’s moon, a silver coin in a star-studded reticule, but this is South Texas, summer, a hunter’s moon, and the small beasts of the night tread with care. In the low sand hills on the western verge of the Moody Ranch, a coyote howls at the moon as he waits for his mate to push the jackrabbit back through the long circle, and down along the bottoms of the Muddy Fork, an owl, banked on sibilant wings, hoots once, then cocks an eye toward the ground. Not even the snakes sleep in this hot night, and only the feral Durocs, who have no enemy but Pancho MacSwayne, root peacefully under the dying live oaks.

In the distance, the growl of a high-powered engine warms the night as Pancho’s black Ranchero roars down the county road toward home. A mile or so before the bridge, it stops, idles, the three-quarter-grind cam making the engine chortle like a contented beast. Pancho steps out, but before he can slam his door, a scrap of a Bach fugue escapes across a cotton field. From the tool box in the bed of the Ranchero, Pancho lifts a grubbing hoe, with which he quickly digs another pothole, his third of the night, in the thin, patched asphalt of the county road. If truth be known, Pancho thinks he owns the road, knows he would blow the bridge over the Muddy Fork if he thought the county would not build a better one to replace it, as the county had done when Mrs. Edna Moody took the old bridge out. He digs the pothole a little deeper, a bit wider, then presses on toward home, driving by moonlight alone down the narrow, flat road.

When the Ranchero drops off the shallow rise and hits the one lane bridge over the Muddy Fork, gravel scatters, planks rattle, the iron
girders squeal. Someday, he thinks, if he hits it fast enough, the bridge will simply give up and fall into the murky waters while he rides on air and momentum to the other side. But tonight the bridge holds one more time, and he has to punch the brakes so hard that the Ranchero fishtails into the turnoff, where he stops, where he always stops.

This time he kills the engine, pops out the tape, opens a fresh longneck Lone Star with his teeth, then steps easily out to stare at the gate. Two stone pillars flank the cattle guard, and between them rises a double arch of two and one half inch water pipe, the aluminum paint silvery in the moonlight. Between the arches, written in a script of welded chain, it says: MOODY. And from the center of the lower arch, dangling from a chain, hangs an old, worn out rotary bit. When he squints, through his sandy lashes, it could be the head of a deposed king, still crowned, too heavy to blow in the gentle Gulf breeze.

He stretches then walks to the nearest pillar, where he pees, marks his spot like a dog. Then he laughs — what the hell, it is his birthday. Up the rise, the white plaster walls of the Big House glisten like bone. The firepit is dug, the mesquite sawn, the steer dressed and resting in a trough of sauce — like his father, Dummy, before him, today Pancho will barbeque for the Company picnic. Everything is ready, waiting, but still he does not hurry.

As he shakes the last few drops off his pecker, his fingers feel the dried crust of the woman. He lifts them, sniffs, then grins. He could not pass the oatmeal test tonight, should Maudie take a mind to give it. Then he laughs at the idea of Maudie rushing to the kitchen for a handful of dried oatmeal, then throwing it on his dick to see if any sticks. He thinks again of the woman, then of his wife asleep in her father’s house. He has never been sure why he has to chase the strange but he knows that he takes it because it is there.

When he walks back to lean against the Ranchero, he listens, thinks he can hear the muffled snouts of the pigs rooting. Any other night but tonight, he would strip, butt-naked but for a jock, barefoot, carrying nothing but a sharpened persimmon spear, then smear himself with mud from a wallow, and crouch beside a trail, waiting. Sometimes he thinks he is crazy to hunt the pigs, but other times it seems the only fun he has in life. He tosses the empty bottle in the ditch, climbs back into the pickup, opens another, and searches through the tapes until he finds the Brandenburgs. He props his feet
in the notch of the open door, gives in to the music, remembers.

After three days out on the rig outside of Palacios, waiting while the crews fished in the hole for a ballpeen hammer one of the roughnecks had accidently kicked in the hole, Pancho was tired. And pissed at himself because he had fired the kid, so he stopped at a truck stop in Victoria on the way home.

The waitress was not much to look at — mostly bone and lank hair, scuffed flats and a sickly pink nylon uniform — but neither was Pancho. He was short, five-six, with bowed, runty legs trying to carry the chest and shoulders of a much larger man, and except for a close-cropped fringe of bright red hair from ear to ear, he was bald. His nose did not seem to point the same way his face did and his worn teeth were stained with snuff, but he was the head hog, the number one honcho of Moody Drilling and Production Company. Charlie Dunn up in Austin made his boots, at three hundred dollars a crack, and a Mexican tailor named Galindez down in Corpus made his western shirts, and he never left the house with less than a thousand cash in his Levis pocket. So when he looked at the waitress — Mona, her nametag said — she looked back.

Something about the way she worked caught his eye, the calm motion of her hips as she carried four plates of chicken fried steaks to a table of truckers, the smooth strength of her hand as she poured a steady, glittering stream of sugar from a bent can into a bowl. She carried herself like a much prettier woman, as if she knew her own secret value. And when he asked her what time she got off, she answered “ten” and looked him in the eye. He waited for her.

In the motel room, though, immersed in the sea-green street light seeping through the drapes, she seemed all knee and elbow, smelled stale and sour, and even her bush felt like steel wool. He could not get it up no matter how hard he tried.

“Guess you’re gonna have to go down on it, lady, just to get it up,” he said, and realized that these were the first words spoken in the room.

“Honey,” she said, “I don’t know you from Adam’s off ox.”
“Right,” he answered as she climbed out of bed to dress. “Sorry.” After they were dressed, he kissed her by way of apology, tender
and easy, and her mouth opened under his, and he was enveloped in
the flood of her breath, the smell of worn tile floors and old grease, of
bad teeth and long hours afoot, his hands clutched the tired stringy
muscles of her arms, worked at the knots in her back. Then he lay her
back down on the bed, took off her shoes, and softly rubbed her feet,
her aching calves, the backs of her knees, her skinny thighs, and when
he kissed her crotch, the hair was soft and wet, like burying his face in
warm, dewy Bermuda grass. They made love like old friends, then
talked until they went again.

Ah, he thought, resting in her arms, cuddled against her meagre
breasts, too often like this. He went looking for a piece of strange and
found some kind of love he could not name. To hell with it, he
thought, blessed are those night-time seekers in foreign beds, those
ricochet lovers. Poor Herman, the husband horned while he worked
morning tower on a drilling rig out by Mission Valley, poor Maudie
sleeping alone. Pancho pressed his lips into the stubble of her armpit,
then his tongue. She giggled. They shared a warm beer as they dressed
in the dim grotto of the room.

Outside the air conditioned room, the night struck them warm and
damp as a tired coonhound's breath, and they had to walk across a
carpet of suicidal crickets to get to his pickup. They held hands like
teenagers as Pancho drove her home to a clapboard house with
peeling paint hidden behind a forest of oleanders.

"Is it really your birthday?" she asked, one hand on the door
handle.

"Damn straight."

"I don't believe you," she said calmly. "Show me your driver's
license."

While she peered at it in the dash lights, Pancho lifted a hundred
dollar bill out of his billfold, and when she handed his license back, he
tried to slip her the folded bill.

"What's this?" she asked, confused, half-angry.

"Lemme give you a birthday present," he answered lamely,
knowing he had already ruined the moment.

"No thanks."

"Please."

She glanced at his face, her eyes damp and hurt.

"Why?"

"A hundred bucks don't mean shit to me," he said, "and I know you
can use it." Then he added, "Please. As a favor to me."

"You any kin to that MacSwayne who used to be married to Mary Helen Heard up here?" she asked, the money still held out in her hand.

"Some," he chuckled.

"You?"

"Me."

"I'll be damned," she said, curling her fingers partially around the money. "Me'n Mary Helen were in the same grade all the way through school. How come you got divorced?"

"She couldn't fuck for shit," Pancho said, and Mona laughed as she closed the bill in her fist.

"See you around," she said, smiling, then she slipped out of the pickup and skipped through the oleander hedge, her pink uniform glowing warmly against the night.

Pancho felt so good on the way home that he was five miles out of Vado on the county road before he remembered to stop to dig a pothole. When he did, the hole was as big around as a tire and six inches deep, a real spring breaker. That'll teach the bastards to use my road, he thought as he grinned across the wide, flat fields of milo and cotton toward the brushy smudge that marked the Muddy Fork.

Instead of parking in the driveway, Pancho eased the Ranchero around the rock fence and the curving line of salt cedars to the firepit behind the Big House. In the bright moonlight, he saw Mr. Vernon Moody — junior, though nobody had called him that in nearly sixty years — sleeping in a lawn chair beneath the huge old live oak, a tree so large that it took three men to reach around the trunk. An uncorked bottle of Jack Daniels, three-quarters empty, rested between the old man's legs.

"Off the wagon, huh?" Pancho muttered to himself as he stepped quietly out of the pickup.

Washed in the moonlight, the old man looked dead, but Pancho did not even bother to check. He was convinced that the old bastard would live to be a hundred. A hundred, hell, a thousand. The old man was a tall, rawboned piece of work, dressed as always in the summer in cavalry twill khaki pants, a white cotton long-sleeved shirt with a silk tie hanging loose at the neck, a Panama styled like a banker's
James Crumley

Stetson, and the only pair of lace-up cowboy boots Pancho had ever seen.

He glanced at the old man once more, then took off his shirt, and went to work at the pile of mesquite logs, dropping them into the pit with the same smooth, easy rhythm he had learned by watching his father, had had to learn watching because his father was deaf and dumb.

When he finished stacking the pit, Pancho paused to brush the drops of sweat off his hairy shoulders. As if to compensate for his bald pate, Pancho's chest, shoulders, and back were covered with a red furry pelt. It had been a long time since he had been ashamed of his hairy body, but he still remembered the shame occasionally, and before he opened another beer, he put his shirt back on. Then he dumped a gallon of gasoline on the hard wood, stepped back, popped a kitchen match with his thumbnail, and flipped it toward the pit.

The gasoline went off with a great, roaring whoosh, flames leaping twenty feet into the air, and it brought Mr. Vernon Moody right out of his slumbering chair. He caught the open bottle, though, before it hit the ground, and Pancho heard the gurgle and plop as the old man took a long hit of bourbon.

"Gonna kill yourself, old man," Pancho said.

"Fuck you, weevil," the old man answered, then hit the bottle again. "I'm celebrating."

"Thanks. I didn't know you cared."

"What?"

"Cared enough to celebrate my birthday."

"To hell with your birthday, boy," the old man growled, "Galen's coming home, my boy's coming home."

"Shit, he's been home for a month — where the hell have you been?"

"No — he's home to stay."

Pancho took a long pause to think about that while he dipped a new pinch of snuff into his lower lip, then he spit a sizzling splat of juice into the fire.

"We don't need no fuckin' hippies 'round here," he said finally.

"He's my son." the old man said, "he don't need no reason to be around here. This is his home, boy."

"He ain't no more blood kin than I am, you old bastard."

Mr. Moody tilted the brim of his hat back from his eyes and stared
across the fire at Pancho, shook his head, then said, "Someday, boy, you're going to remind me of that one time too many, and I'm going to run your ass off this place."

"You best bring a sack lunch, old man, and a dozen friends 'cause you'll be at it for a piece of time," Pancho said, then added, "No, I guess since you ain't got no friends, or if you do the old farts are either dead and buried or shitting in a bedpan, you best hire some help."

Mr. Moody sputtered, sipped at the whiskey, then grinned slyly. "Where the hell you been, boy? Maudie Mae cooked up a real big feed for you, boy, and you didn't show up. She is, to say the least, somewhat pissed."

"Don't make a gnat's ass difference to me," Pancho said, "Besides, she just fixed Mexican food to impress Galen and all his fucking hippie friends — I didn't want me no hair in my birthday taco ..."

"Hippie, hippie, hippie," the old man chortled. "Get off my ass. I saw you out by the pool smoking that marijuana cigarette with that big titted little girl — what the hell is her name anyway?"

"Her name is Purple."

"What?"

"You heard right, old man — Purple — and just 'cause I smoke a little dope with big titted little girls don't make me a hippie. You're just jealous, that's all."

Mr. Moody shifted in the lawn chair, his bulk making the dowel joints creak, then tilted his hat brim back over his eyes. Pancho tossed the empty bottle into the pit, waited until it popped softly, then went to the cooler for another bottle.

"Mind if I have one of your beers, boy, this expensive whiskey is about to give me the acid indigestion," the old man said quietly. Pancho got two beers, and when he opened them with his teeth, Mr. Moody complained, "Goddammit, boy, you're going to break off a tooth someday doing that."

"Well, don't matter. We got that new company dental insurance, so I'll be covered."

"You know, I'm not convinced we ought to be spending all that money we do on these insurance plans," the old man said, calm now, doing business. "The next time I'm down at the office, I'm going to look at the books on this."

"You ain't been to the office in three, maybe four months, you old bastard, and besides, all this insurance stuff works. Shit, we got a
better plan than Mobil or Exxon, and when we get a good hand, we can sometimes keep him even though we have to pay shit for wages.” Mr. Moody grumbled a bit, but finally stopped. Then Pancho said, “And speaking of hands — I had to fire that Hartsell boy you made Boomer hire.”

“You what?”
“I run the kid off the location.”
“Where the hell do you get off firing somebody I hired?”
“Anytime you wanna run this junkhouse motherfucker, old man, you just let me know.”
“You ought not fired him without asking me, boy, his Daddy and I go way back.”
“Listen, I been three days fightin’ mosquitoes up at Palacios while we were fishin’ for a goddamned ballpeen hammer that kid kicked in the hole,” Pancho said. “I was supposed to be one day while we ran a sidewall core, not three days fishin’ for a goddamned hammer.”

“Running whores in Nuevo sounds more like the truth,” the old man grunted.
“I figure that hammer only cost us about thirty thousand dollars, give or take a thousand, so I run the kid off.”
“Ought to run you off,” Mr. Moody said, then shook his head and raised his face into the firelight with a broad grin. “I called the tool pusher on the mobile phone, boy, and he said you left the location about eight o’clock. I’ve never known it to take you five hours from Palacios to the house, not the way you drive. Shit, you keep that one lawyer working full time on your speeding tickets.”
“Well, I did stop there in Victoria at the truck stop to talk to that waitress . . .”
“The one with that high, hard nigger ass?”
“Other one.”
“The skinny one.”
“How was it?” the old man asked, leaning forward in his chair so far that the whiskey flirted with the neck of the bottle.
“We just talked — that’s all.”
“Talked, my ass . . .” Then Mr. Moody jerked himself erect in the chair as if he had just remembered something very important. “Goddammit, boy, you are married to my only daughter. Seems to me that you could either keep your pecker in your pants or your mouth shut. I don’t know why Maudie Mae puts up with you — shit I
“Me’n Maudie been married less’n three years, old man, and you and me been runnin’ whores since I was a nubbin, and I done seen how you behaved both times you had wives around the house, and hell I seen you sneakin’ ’cross the river to shack up with Sonny’s Momma way back when, so don’t you give me no lectures, you old bastard ...”

“You think Sonny knows about that,” Mr. Moody interrupted seriously. “It sure makes me nervous having him around. What the hell’s he doing down here anyway?”

“Well, sure he knows. Hell, he knew at the time,” Pancho said, “we used to talk about it all the time — and I don’t have no idea what he’s doin’ down here, except I know that Galen’s payin’ him a thousand dollars a week just to be here ...”

“Well, I wouldn’t miss him if he was gone,” Mr. Moody huffed, then settled back into his chair and fell promptly asleep.

“Old farts need naps,” Pancho muttered.

Just outside the wash house, where the dressed steer lies in a trough constructed of two length-wise halves of an oil drum, Pancho MacSwayne struggles in the false dawn with a portable engine block hoist. The steer is already spitted on a piece of pipe, and the chain and hook already shoved through a split beside the backbone, but Pancho is drunk, and the hard rubber tires of the hoist seem to turn and lock no matter which way he tries to push across the sidewalk, like a petulant child with a grocery cart, even when the wheels flip sideways, he shoves harder. Finally, his shirt soaked, he steps back, then walks away. There is still no hurry. He goes back to his pickup for another beer, but instead his hand snakes into the glove box for the vial of crystal. He has managed to leave it alone for nearly a month in spite of the long hours he works, the pressures that come every summer when Galen comes home, but now he thinks he will not make the day unless he has a line. Very carefully on the small mirror, he chops a health-line, pausing often to glance at the old man. When he snorts it, the almost pure methamphetamine crystal fills his sinus cavities with fire, as if his face had been cut off with a sword then cauterized with a piece of white hot angle iron, but he dips a palm-ful of ice water from the beer cooler and snorts that too. Not that it puts the fire out, but
the water banks it for a bit, and after the pain comes the lovely clarity.

He gets another beer, stuffs it in his back pocket without opening it, then goes about his business. He does not fight the hard rubber tires but guides them to his will, hooks the steer to the hoist, then runs the endless chain until the dripping meat lifts clear of the trough. Even with the weight, he glides across the lawn toward the pit, slowly but surely, then positions the spit above the forked poles, and lowers it into place. The electric motor and the long chain are already waiting beside the pit, but after he unhooks the hoist, Pancho takes the spit handle in both hands, and turns and turns, like his father did, watching the sauce and the fat fall sizzling into the fire, little puffs of flame lifting off the coals. He turns and turns and watches the fire, remembering a time before he could remember, feeling his father's hands in the iron handle, turning and turning softly the meat against the fire.

It has been said that on the day he was born, Pancho's father kept turning the spit until the steer was ready to carve before he went down to the board-and-batten shack, down the hill from the Big House where Hannah had just given birth to a boy-child she had already named Francis Troy MacSwayne, after the romantic sergeant in Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd*: when Dummy went down, his job on the hill was done.

The birth had been hard, the labor long, and the veterinarian attending had long since shook his head and given both mother and child up for dead. But Hannah was tougher than that and with her own hands she positioned the child and forced it out. The left elbow, though, or the arm — something was dislocated or broken, and the screams of the child could be heard all the way up to the long tables where the employees of the Company sat over pitchers of warm beer waiting for the beef, was heard, that is, by all except the father.

When Dummy went down, he only knew the child was crying by the screaming 'O' of the mouth, the crooked arm, and those rough, horny hands that coaxed tomatoes the size of oranges and watermelons the size of pigs out of the Moody garden plot, those hands straightened the arm, gently as one might lure a bean vine around a string, and the child stopped crying. They said a hush fell over the tables, that lanky men with white circles from new haircuts above their ears, that pale wives, embarrassed under home-made marcells, they all fell silent with the knowledge that the child had died,
and even the happy booming of Dummy's fists against the shack walls seemed to them the cadence of grief.

When Dummy came back up the hill a few minutes later, his son cradled in his large, rough hands, it was told that all the folks stood and cheered. Everybody except Mr. Vernon Moody and his wife, Edna, victim of four miscarriages already. Mr. Moody sat heavily in his chair, Mrs. Moody took herself to her room, and two weeks later Mr. Vernon Moody went up to the Baptist Orphanage in Waco and brought back a son, whom they called Galen, named after Mrs. Moody's father up in El Dorado, Arkansas. For years it was rumored that Galen was a bastard issue of Mr. Moody's, and like rumors, it never completely died. And, as often happens after an adoption, Mrs. Edna Moody carried a baby to term, and eighteen months after Pancho, as Mr. Moody insisted on calling the child, here came Maudie Mae.

As Pancho turns the smoking steer, he understands, remembers, misunderstands, thinks this the beginning of the story.

After a bit, he nails the electric motor's base to the ground, hooks up the drive chain to the gear welded on the spit, re-greases the forks, checks everything twice, even the old man sleeping in the chair, then heads toward the Big House. For reasons he refuses to understand, he needs to hug his wife, to fall to his knees and beg her once again for a child. Perhaps he will confess the crystal and the Mexican girlfriend, Rachel, in Vado who supplies him the speed, perhaps he will finally confess to Maudie that he loves her more than he loves the ranch, perhaps — no, he will not confess the waitress in Victoria, whatever her name was.
My brother Jess was bound to get hurt on the saw sometime. At least that's what Joe, my other brother said. Jess was mad that night after dinner and went back to the garage to work on the chinchilla cages. "It was just an accident," Joe said later. I wasn't so sure.

It was right before dinner, before all that happened with Jess, when I first found out what Joe wanted to do. I was on the front porch drawing flakes like I usually did when I got home. Every day that summer I would cross the highway to the desert and spend my time sifting dirt through a screen of quarter inch mesh for Indian artifacts. Mostly I found flakes — the chips snapped off during tool making. I like the andesite ones the best. If you split them, they turn black, then the air dries them back to a deep blue-green color. When I'd come home, I'd see flake shapes all over the place — an upturned canoe in someone's yard, a guitar pick sticking in the carpet.

Joe walked out on the porch with his hands pushed down in the pockets of his corduroy shorts. He'd come home for a couple of days before the genetics conference in L.A. Joe was doing research on alcoholism at a university back East, using rats to find out if alcoholism can be passed on genetically. He got interested in that because of his problem and the Old Man's.

Joe leaned against the black railing and looked at the sprinkler clicking over the dicondra. I thought of Mama whispering to me in the kitchen earlier, "I can't talk to him. He's just sitting in the back bedroom with the door closed, reading and swallowing those antacid pills." She wanted him to talk about the time in March when he drank himself into a coma. "He cut me off, Virginia. Cut me right off." She wiped her eyes with a mint green kleenex. "Felt like a fool going back and forth to the bedroom trying to carry on a conversation with him. I can't force him to talk about it." I wondered when someone in the family would. "It's too late. Better to be mother to a cat for as much as he cares." She had joined a self-study group after Joe's "possible suicide attempt" and for the past few months had been talking about communicating and expressing feelings.

Joe came over and looked at what I was drawing. I showed him how you tell a flake by the fine edge on it and the slight bulb from the...
blow of a rock. He picked up some I had in the bucket of water and began to scrub them with the toothbrush, not saying anything.

I'd been thinking about going to live with Joe after I got out of high school. He needed someone. I wasn't sure if I was going to bring it up then, but he started to talk about Jess anyway. He asked me if I'd ever noticed how Jess's fingers were splayed out on the ends and the way the nails were real wide but short. "Look at his hands," he said. "Haven't you ever noticed them before?"

Jess's hands are big and freckled, with red hair on the backs and between the knuckles. One time we were fooling around on the patio with darts and I threw one at Jess that barely caught on the back of his hand. He didn't say anything, just pulled it out and threw it across the yard into the honeysuckle.

Joe asked if I ever heard of someone having a frayed gene. He said they'd be like Jess — with fingers like that, fat fingers, and that they'd be slow like him. Not exactly retarded. "A dull normal," he said, squatting down and placing the flakes he'd cleaned in a row on the cement to dry.

I told Joe I had wondered about Jess and that one time I'd told Mama how embarrassed I was of him — the way he talked like he was a kid when he was ten years older than me. I was in high school and somehow I'd grown up more than he had. "All you think about is yourself, Virginia," my mother had said, slamming the lid down on a skillet of frying hamburger. But she knew.

When Jess was in school, he'd sit at the kitchen table trying to do his homework and Mama would stand over him yelling, "Think. Why can't you think? What's wrong with you?" He'd press down hard on the paper so the print would go all the way through and make marks on the red plastic tablecloth underneath. His hand would be in a fist when he wrote — almost like he was hiding his fingers like he knew what they meant.

"I can find out," Joe said, "if he really does have a frayed gene. But I'd need a blood sample. He doesn't have to know why I want it. I don't have to tell him." Joe grabbed another handful of flakes. "I'll say it's for some experiment I'm doing."

I thought about him taking some of Jess' blood, spinning it out and looking at it under one of those high-powered microscopes in his lab. "I don't know," I said. "What difference does it make anyway?" His head was tilted down and I noticed his hair was beginning to thin. He
used to lie in bed reading and twist at strands of it.

“Don’t you think it’s important,” Joe looked at me, “to understand why he’s like he is?”

We could hear Jess out in the garage building cages for his chinchillas. I thought of his fingers wrapped around the hammer or holding a piece of wood he was cutting, and how his neck would look when he leaned forward. It’s thick too. Thick like a bull’s neck.

Jess spent all his time in the garage. Kept these records of exactly how many food pellets he gave each chinchilla, how much water, and the time of day he fed them. He’d put the numbers down slowly in each column. He made the columns by drawing lines that were exactly even. If they weren’t perfect, he’d rip the paper out of the book, tear it into tiny pieces, then take out another sheet to put the pieces in, wad that up as tight as he could, then throw it in the trash.

“There he is,” Joe said, and he turned to watch Jess walk over to the garbage cans in the alley. Joe bent down and tapped on the aluminum arm of my chair with the toothbrush. “Wouldn’t you be interested to know?” he said leaning closer. “I’m going to ask him for it at dinner.”

Joe stretched and rubbed his neck. He’s boyishly thin, not thick like Jess. I could almost lift him. At the hospital when he was in the coma, I imagined breathing into him, then raising him up out of the bed — his freckled arms dangling as I’d carry him out of there. I thought, then, of how I used to hold on to him when he’d ride me on his motor scooter through the desert. I was five. I’d try to breathe like Joe — exhale and inhale at the same time he did.

“You could help out if Jess doesn’t want to go along with it,” Joe said, picking up a quartz flake and bouncing it in his hand. “You know, act like it’s no big deal.”

I didn’t look up at him. I pretended to be flicking ants off the bottom of my foot.

At the dinner table, Jess had his fingers clenched so I couldn’t get a look at them. I thought about the words “dull normal” again. About Joe looking at his blood under the microscope, and how a frayed gene would look — maybe like the edge on a dish towel that’s ripped. It would seem harmless, just broken threads. I wondered if Joe would really try to get his blood.

I watched my father, waiting for him to bring up the suicide attempt. A vein by his temple moved as he chewed. I felt sorry for it
unraveling there on the side of his face. Once when I was six, I'd felt sorry for a pair of my father's bedroom slippers. He was in the hospital. We didn't talk about why he was there or why we came to look at him shaking with D.T.'s. I'd watched the floor and the way his bedroom slippers looked with him falling out of them, the toes bent up softly. He tried to kiss me when we were leaving. But he didn't know what I did. I looked away and rubbed his spit off, hard against my sleeve.

No one talked at the table until Joe asked Jess about his chinchillas and how the cages were coming along. He mentioned an experiment he was doing and that he wanted Jess to be a part of it. Joe told him he might even get his name written up in this scientific journal. That's when he asked Jess for the blood.

Jess got down on the floor to give the cat his steak scraps.

"Jess, what do you think?" Joe asked, turning around in his chair. Jess skimmed his hand over the avocado shag carpet, playing with the cat. He wouldn't say anything. "Jess, how about it?" Joe asked again.

"I don't think so," Jess said.

Joe asked him why he wouldn't, but Jess wouldn't answer him. "It's the needle," my mother said. "Jess doesn't like needles."

Joe told him it wouldn't hurt at all, and I told him it'd be okay and it wasn't any big thing.

"Then you do it," Jess said. "You go ahead and do it."

"Okay," I said. "I was thinking about it. I can do it first, then tell you what it's like. Maybe you'll think about it then?"

Jess didn't answer. He grabbed some foil from his baked potato and wadded it up to toss to the cat.

"Goddamnit, why do you have to be so stupid about this?" Joe said. Then he glanced over at me.

"I'm sick of talking about it. Leave me alone," Jess said, clenching his back teeth.

Then my mother said she'd be willing to give a sample of her blood.

"No," Joe said. "I want one from Jess. I don't need one from you, or you, or you." He nodded at all of us. "I want Jess to give me it."

"But why does it have to be Jess?" she asked.

Joe got up from the table. "Why Jess?" she asked again, looking up at Joe.

"It's too much to go into."

"What do you mean?" She straightened in her seat.
Joe cracked his knuckles against the back of the chair. “There are just some things I’d like to take a look at,” he said.

“What things?” my father asked.

“Shouldn’t you tell Jess about it? Shouldn’t he know?” my mother asked.

“I don’t know.” Joe looked at Jess on the floor. Jess had his head down. I thought of a picture that I’d seen in the newspaper. It was this retarded man at an Easter egg hunt. The man’s head was fat, and his hair shaved up the sides. He wore a kid’s cowboy hat and was looking down into an Easter basket grinning.

“Joe,” I said. “Stop it. It’s not important.”

“What’s going on here anyway?” my father asked.

“Joe, will you please tell us what this is all about?” my mother said.

Joe leaned into the table and looked past me. “He has some interesting characteristics. His fingers are unusual.”

My mother sat back in her chair. “Is that it? Is that what all this fuss is about?”

“It might mean something,” Joe said.

I gave him a dirty look so he’d shut up. He looked away. “You know how he had trouble in school,” Joe said. “How he’s always been slow? There might be a reason for it.” Then he told them about frayed genes and how it wasn’t like being retarded, but the person would just have some trouble.

Jess sat there and watched the cat bat the ball of foil around. His neck and face were turning red and his neck strained in his shirt.

“Well it’s a hell of a thing to say in front of Jess,” said my father. “There is nothing wrong with him. Nothing at all. We could have done without all this. Jess, he’s full of shit. Don’t listen to him.”

“What’s wrong with knowing?” said Joe. “I could find out for sure if he’d give me a blood sample.”

“What does it matter? What difference does it make now anyway?” My mother looked out the sliding glass door at the oleander alongside the patio.

“You think you can look at your brother’s hands and tell somethink like that?” My father tossed his napkin down and it dropped off the table. “It doesn’t mean a damn thing.”

Joe tensed up straight, then turned around towards Jess. He grabbed for his hand, but Jess pulled it away in fists like he would hit
him.

“Look.” Joe pointed down at him. “Look at his finger tips. Haven’t you ever noticed them?”

Jess scooted back and knocked over the potted fern behind him. “Get away,” he yelled and Joe moved over by the kitchen doorway.

“It could mean he was born with a frayed gene,” Joe went on. “And we could find out. You don’t have to hide from these things, you know.”

My mother got up to get the vacuum to clean the dirt up from the plant. No one spoke while we watched her pull the vacuum out of the closet and unwind the cord.

“You think you have all the answers?” My father started in. “You think you know it all?” He began to yell when the vacuum went on. “Well I’ll tell you something. At least Jess never tried to kill himself. At least he was smart enough not to try and kill himself. And don’t blame it on some gene I gave you. It wasn’t me who poured booze down you until you went under. Don’t blame it on me.” The vacuum motor was winding down, but he kept screaming.

“Jesus Christ.” Joe stood there with his arms crossed. “You don’t know what in the hell you’re talking about.”

Then my father went on saying he’d never do that to his family, no matter how bad it got. And that Jess wouldn’t be stupid enough to do that either.

“That’s enough of that,” my mother said, slamming the closet door. “I won’t have any more of it. That’s enough.” She told everyone to sit down in their chairs to finish dinner. Jess looked at me. I pretended I was trying to see the clock on the wall behind him.

“Now let’s talk about something else,” my mother said. “Forget this whole mess even happened. Erase. Erase.” She made like she was holding an eraser and wiping off a chalkboard. “Jess has joined a single’s club.” She smiled and looked over at him. “Meeting a lot of girls?”

“Leave me alone,” Jess yelled, as he went out the door to the garage.

“It was just an accident,” Joe told me when we stood in the driveway after my parents had driven off to the hospital with Jess.
"Jess just goofed up. He was upset, that's all."

I was in my room after dinner when it happened. I heard the saw going out in the garage, then Jess yelling and come running in the back porch. The first thing I saw when I went to the kitchen was Jess lying down on the floor with one of his tennis shoes half way off. It looked like he'd just fainted and had knocked over one of the kitchen chairs when he fell. My mother was stopped over him, tying her apron around the cut on his hand. Blood was on the floor. Someone brought in a stack of bath towels, and she began wrapping up his hand with a blue one. My father was trying to wipe the blood up with paper napkins. "For Christsake, stop it," Joe yelled. He jerked the wad of napkins out of his hand. "Just get out of here. I'll take care of it."

In the driveway, I noticed a streak of blood on Joe's sleeve. "Blood all over," I said. "Did you get a sample?" I wanted to tell him this was all his fault.

"You're going to start sounding like them." He looked down at Jess' tennis shoe he had carried out. "The hell with this family." He threw the shoe down in the ivy and went back in the house. I picked it up, twirled it by the worn shoe lace, watching it spin while I tried to decide what to do.

When I finally came inside, I walked past Joe's bedroom a couple of times before I looked in. The door was part way open. Joe was sitting at the desk with his back to me. He looked frail now like he used to in the morning when he'd sit hunched over the table shivering. His sweater would be too big on him.

"You know it's your fault. Why'd you have to say it in front of Jess? Didn't you even think about that?" Joe covered something on the desk and drew it in closer to him. He looked at me over his shoulder. "I didn't cause him to do that. You know it's a lot more complicated than that," he said.

"You never should have said anything in the first place," I said.

"I'm sorry it happened to him." He looked at the shoe in my hand. "But he shouldn't have gone out there and started working when he was so upset. Come over here. I want to show you something."

I stood in the doorway. "Come on, come on," he said, waving his hand. I kicked a shirt on the floor out of my way. He put his arm around my hip and brought me in closer.

"What?" I said.
He looked up at me. "I did get a sample."

For a second I didn't know what he meant. I saw the white slide wrapper crumpled on the desk. It didn't look like blood on the slide. The color was flattened out and you could only see a few pale streaks of red.

"I probably won't be able to tell anything from it anyway," he said tapping a slide cover into place.

"You wouldn't do that." I stepped back from the desk where I could see all of him, the way his lips opened and shut as he breathed through his mouth and how his knuckles looked big as he fingered the slide. "You wouldn't after what you did."

"It was all over the kitchen," he said. "Why not? Doesn't it make sense?"

"You make me sick," I said. "You had no right taking his blood. Not after what happened."

Joe leaned back in the chair. "No one has to know what I find out, not even you."

"Why do you have to know? What difference does it make? Mama was right — what the hell does it matter now about Jess?"

"I still think it's important to know," said Joe, looking down at the slide.

"I never should have gone along with you," I said. "Jess knows what I did to him too."

"Blame me if you want," he said. "You didn't do anything to Jess."

"I went along with you. Why'd you have to tell me about it anyway?"

He hit his knuckles against the desk. "I thought I could talk to you. You're smarter than they are. I didn't think you'd be afraid of finding out something like this."

"Why don't we just forget about it? Forget the whole thing," I said. "Fine," he said.

A piece of ore was sitting on the window ledge above Joe. I knew how easily the slide would smash into splinters under it, then into chalky fine powder as I ground it down.

"Let's just get rid of it," I said.

Joe looked out the window at the neighbors getting in their car. "Would you do it for me?" I said.

"I want to find out." Joe slipped the slide into a small wood box he had and put it in his brief case on the bed. "No reason to be ignorant."
The brief case snapped shut.

"That's it?" I said.

Joe sat down on the bed and pulled at one of the nubs on the pale yellow spread. The shadow of wisteria growing outside the window moved around on the gray brief case. "I'd never come and live with you," I said. "I don't know why I ever wanted to."

"You wanted to live with me?" he said.

"I was thinking about it."

He picked up the brief case and set it upright alongside the desk, then went over to his opened suitcase. "Why don't we talk about it?"

He started digging under some shirts and pulled out a little bottle of Dewars Scotch — like the kind you get on airplanes. "Would you like a drink while we talk?"

"I don't want to talk about it. I thought you weren't supposed to drink anymore," I said.

"I do just a little," he said walking in the bathroom. "Do you drink?" He came back with two yellow dixie cups.

"What do you think is going to happen with Jess?" I asked.

He poured the Scotch. "Try some." He handed it to me. "I'm sure he'll be okay. He'll be out working on those cages again in no time. Things will go back to normal."

"I don't think he's going to forget," I said.

"I'll tell him I was wrong, or something," he added, his voice too loud. "Don't worry about it." He went back in the bathroom. I took a sip of the Scotch, shivered at the taste and took another sip, then set it on the dresser.

"You don't care how anyone feels, do you?" I said when he came back in the room. "You don't care about what you did to Jess." It looked like he was about to say something. "Why did you try to kill yourself?"

Joe laughed. "I didn't try to kill myself."

"Did you think about me when you did it?"

"Why would I want to kill myself? It was an accident." He started going through his suitcase again.

"I don't believe you. You didn't care if you saw me again or not."

"You're sounding very silly and very young," he said.

"I thought coming to live with you would help you."

Joe stood up and twisted the cap off a bottle. He was watching my reflection in the dresser mirror as he dipped a finger into his drink. "I
Patricia MacInnes

could understand that," he said, watching the mirror until I turned to look. He walked over by me.

“What are you looking at?” I said.

“Look at your face.” He turned my head gently toward the mirror. “You’ve got a nice face. Did you know that?” He ran a finger down my cheek.

“Don’t.” I turned away.

“Relax,” he said, grabbing the back of my neck. “Why don’t you just relax about everything?”

“Don’t do that,” I said moving out of his reach. “I don’t want to be touched.”

“Have some of your drink. You’ll feel better. Believe me,” he said. “I don’t want the drink. I want to know why you wanted to kill yourself.”

“Don’t be asinine,” he said. I watched him in the mirror stretch out on the bed and shut his eyes. I thought of him in the coma. I had wanted to shake him, to snap the wires hooked to his arms. I would have run my fingernails deep into his skin until he’d hurt, until he could hear me calling for him. Even now, that wouldn’t be enough.

Joe lay there holding the cup of Scotch on his stomach. His eyes rolled under his pale lids. “You didn’t care how I felt,” I said. I waited for him to tell me again it was an accident what happened to him. And to Jess, just an accident. No one to blame. I waited. His face looked relaxed. His lips, soft, a little open as if he were about to sleep. I felt the slight weight of Jess’ shoe in my hand and suddenly wanted to throw it at him. I wanted to see Joe’s eyes open, the way he would look at me. I wanted to see blood come quick to his mouth from something more than just that shoe in my hand.

I ran out of the room. He didn’t look up. I left the house and went down to the garage where the table saw was still going. If Jess had lost a finger, I thought, I probably would find it right there in the sawdust.

I noticed the record book on the bench opened to a fresh page of even lines. Jess had dripped blood on it. Big splotches that wouldn’t soak into the slick paper. I ripped out the page and tore it up.

I wondered if Joe would walk in. He’d be leaving the next day. After he was gone, I’d still go in his room and look around for anything he had left.

I started thinking about when Joe and I used to ride on that motor scooter in the desert. Joe would wear his shirt that was light pink with
silvery threads — the kind Elvis Presley wore, he'd say. It would shimmer out there in the sun. I'd feel his back, hot, through the shirt. If I could breathe like Joe, I used to pretend, the ride would never be over. I could be with him and the desert would keep on going.

Goddamn Joe anyway. I stood there. Blood was on my feet and the wood shavings kept sticking.
SOUTH OF CASCADE

for Gayle & Scott & Gretchen

After the antelope buck stopped kicking, I thought, Scott, about your story, the one in which the bear swatted sheep for no reason. There it is, I thought, all neatly strewn behind us, the story of our fall, noise of a slit trachea sucking air. All important things are not good. Random elk trails weave up from Pole Creek, jump the divide at Sieben Mountain, then lace into dusk along the flank of East Hound. Hunched against the wind, I cupped my body around the rocks and peed. That was late Friday, the bull in Stickney bedded down for the night, his spine still intact. If he could think he would not have thought that night. He would have turned his muzzle toward that perfect wind, shut his eyes and breathed.

Suppose that were a man, next day, who stepped into the clearing when I shot. Or a bear shaped like a man or a deer shaped like bear. But no. That was a deer I killed and I was glad, and later, when the bull elk lay dead in the grass where he’d planned to sleep and sleep again, I ran down the ridge, grabbed his horns and cut his throat, laughing.

Our mistake lay in wedging pronghorns against a fence they would not jump. After four shots, we should have known. After eight, the herd drew up and milled around the thrashing buck. We didn’t speak and the antelope didn’t run. The wind preached...
about all the wrong acts we learn to live with and will, without fail, do again.
No. They stopped running (I was amazed). They studied their dead and us and walked behind the hill.
AN ELEGY FOR LEILA

Because family set the tone for your life, what else could they have named you but Leila? When the Pattersons found you slumped over the phone, number half-dialed, past forgetting, it was the day after Christmas, nineteen hundred and seventy-eight, your coat hung on the hall tree, warming after one last walk to the barn before lunch, the smell of detergent and tea fading even then into unbreathed air. Lord, let us retire that notion of good people we should have been. Let us close the door softly on that grief and go home. Already, Leila, hearing the news about you is memory. Your house rushes toward a date with anonymous fields. Every Sunday I watched you beside Will during church, middle section, right aisle, two rows from the back. I remember how your skin felt warm. After that time, I learned every day I do something my daughter will try soon to imagine me doing. For that record, I got up this morning, read the thermometer: Zero. I write these words from Montana. I force myself to believe you’re dead. On my wall, I have a picture of you young, and in my mind I keep a picture of the room they found you in, kitchen behind you, oak sideboard on the far wall. The phone spills from your hand. Ice hugs the ground you’re part of. Once, I stood in that cold north window and turned away. I looked past forty acres of stubble and saw the dirt road to your house, this house, the view unobstructed, sharp and complete.
A FAMILY PORTRAIT

Let's pose you all like this:
the two youngest, Yates
and Fern, you in the center,
flanked by Grace and Sarah.
Father and Mother (if I
may, Charles and Katherine),
you'll have your family near you
forever. For the back row
now, Laura and Leila,
Albert, Cora and Evanda.
The focus: Father's left eye—
where else? And shadows every
angle I care to look from.

When driving past a farm
someone I knew once worked,
I get the shivers.
Machines chew up the dirt.
In spring, blackbirds claw out
the seed, poisoned to help
it grow, and you find them
days later—those broken birds—
punctuating the straight
green rows. Here's another scene:
Fall: The family fanned out
across a pasture,
chasing cattle. For a
moment, I can see them all
in color, the girls awkward,
captured in long blue jumpers,
sticktight and milkweeds. Yates
and Albert drape themselves
with green. Katherine's absent.
Sky merely huge. And Charles,
his habit, decked out in black,
as though he knew I
would someday watch this drama.
The children don't see me.
They scream at the cows
who have ruined Sunday lunch.
I am older than they are
now in the portrait, this scene,
the air itself, and behind me...

Andrea, daughter, when you
are old, I want you to sit down
some night and listen to wind
humming perfect and sad under
the eaves. Allow your eyes
to think for your great
grandmother's portrait when
she was eight, the age you were
the night I wrote this. She wore
ribbons in her hair. Blue,
she told me one time long after.
This last step implores an ending. Every crevasse, every granule crushed is the desire to cross into a room. Here, the perfumed air suggests rest, a resignation: as if the mauve silk sheets of the bed, as if the lithe brown woman preparing them for your body, were themselves the final word. In this room, you are imagining silence and then: more of the same! You wait for worry. There is only peace, and your mind going on, felicitous, into the blue distance. However, this is only the last step, not imagination, nor love. It has only pretended to be sanctuary. Nothing more than sweat, a sweet ache in the thigh, an advance onto the day's last height. How it slips from the present without pronouncing the promised... You are taken
with depth,  
silence sucked into the vacuum

of the valley, *the incessant air!*  
If you fell, earth  
would enter your blood, and

you would sleep, the landed gentry.  
You name this mountain.
FROM THE SLIMER

After the factory clank shuts down to the hiss of steam pipes, Sammy scrapes another salmon. Knee-deep in the quicksilver curves of fish, galoshes scale-flecked and shining, he is young again, tramping the fields of Palawan to the Sulu Sea. Salt of his bones, how that ocean air lifted his head to the slash of sky where later ships sliced their bulk through a harbor charged with foreign colors.

Sammy bends over the slimer, pulls the chain on the lightbulb. He scans the pale green machinery, tiny brown man in a jungle of tin, and checks for the round-faced foreman. He cuts the firm flesh behind the tail, slips the knife to the glass-eyed head. Hands flashing in the slow light from long windows, he carries his bucket, heavy with dog salmon, down under the dock, splays the meat on a trembling string in the river's brackish rasp.

Walking carefully up the path to the bunkhouse he sees the windows washed with the glaze of faces. Roman flushes as he slams his cards on the table. Rice steams. Joey sucks on dried fish.

Tonight as he winds into sleep, Sammy grows smaller, churning through clouds over Naknek, the mist of Seattle, over the grey chop of ocean where thirty years ago he hunkered in the bow of a creaking junk, back now, floating over Palawan, a happy brown seed warming in the low-slung sun.
IN PRAISE OF FAMOUS MEN

I met my grandfather in the Smithsonian, American Art Archives — West. Framed, covered with dust, they had to set him upright. Like the Depression years, when Wurlitzer pianos didn’t need his commercial art. He grabbed the nearest job: Hamilton, Montana, painting ticks. For posterity: Paint the Flatheads. Show the folks back home how the last few buffalo skins are scraped, the berries crushed for pemican. How when life gets hard, you get up, say you are going to the store for bread. Years later, your family gets one postcard: hello, good-bye.

In this painting, Saturday Night Dance, the dancers strike up polkas, red swirls against the black Montana night. A woman’s skirt flies up, she turns around. Her partner watches the redhead in pink across the room. Their faces sweat, the music is getting louder. In the muddy background, a man leans up against the wall, stares at the dancers, his only hand in his pocket. That man is you, Tom Moore. The heavy wooden door opens into the smoky room, out to a night speckled with stars you could never paint.
A girl with long, black braids swings in, her dress brushes her bony knees. She is calling you home. You are already turning away.
DEAR JEFFERS

A Note From Sheridan To Carmel-By-The-Sea

It's a long way from the queer remote silence-making *quawk* of that heron
your words snagged on the wing as I
was being born, Jeffers,
decades ago, in a Minnesota blizzard. You were in a squall of rage
near Big Sur in the place no longer your place,
as you foresaw, dragging stone after stone to your tower nonetheless
from the live surf and froth of your own sweat. Edged-in now
by homes No-Man built to live in—high priced
suckertraps for men successful in that coming world you shunned and
decried
poem after bitter poem—your stone tower, Jeffers, even your stone
tower
raised by hand toward the high blue home
of your beloved hawks
toward whom you turned and turned your falcon of a face for
evidence
of worthiness, is gone into their hands, their pockets,
enhanced by your famous hatred, the prices rising
with your skydriven fistlike poems exactly
abhoring them.

Where I am, in Wyoming still magnificent with
wilderness
no sea has breathed on for millions of years, the old forces
finding a new grip soon will ream out
ranchers and farmers bewildered by profits sudden as true strokes,
making way
for holes into which men hungry for the good life will descend
innocent of your hawks, gulls, godlike stallions, and women
with wild eyes will tend them from prefabrications
as some die, most prosper in the ways men do these days, their
families
dulled by generations of decay
in hearts surrounded by the crown jewels of the age, appliances and gadgets designed to make life careless. And they work, dear Jeffers. They do work.
I'll tell you, tell you damn straight
—this whole notion of banks is sorry
as a sinner Sunday morning. I'd never
trust a man who scrubs his nails
with anything I grub for. And this business
of "donors" makes the whole affair ring
righteous as Christmas with a preacher.
Money's bad enough but now they're
setting up a whole new generation
to be strangers. It's sad all right.
Sadder than them phoney fires
they burn up iron logs with
in bars where youngsters sit
all night working up a sweat
to record music. Hot enough,
that fire, to brand a steer with,
but it leaves your cockles cold
and it don't fill up the air
with the right scent. You
read a good fire like a book,
eyes and ears, nose and skin
all working at the same time.
There's a deal of history in one,
and hints about the future. Lord,
I'd dread to look into the eyes
of any son of mine
my Missus had withdrawn
from some Nobel genius stranger
who wouldn't even leave his name.
You got to tend a fire once you set it
or it can run amok seeking you out.
The boy sat on a piece of canvas and added logs to the fire while his father drank coffee. Sparks rose on the heat and the boy watched them climb toward the cedar limbs and the black pools of sky.

"Do you remember your grandfather, David?"

"Yes," the boy said, and wished it were true. He remembered a funeral, when he was three.

"Your grandfather brought me up on this mountain when I was seventeen. That was the last year he hunted." Then silence, but the boy knew what sort of thoughts his father was having. He also knew that his own home was in Chicago now, and that he was another man's boy now, with another man's name.

"Why didn't he?" the boy said.

"Why didn't who what?"

"My grandfather. Why did he stop hunting?"

"He was sixty-seven years old," the father said. "But that wasn't the reason. Because he was still walking to work at the railroad office in Big Timber when he was seventy-five. I don't know. We took a bull elk and a goat that year, I remember. The goat was during spring season and every inch of its hide was covered with ticks. I carried it down whole and after a mile I was covered with ticks too. I never shot another goat. I don't know why he quit. He still went out after birds in the wheat stubble, by himself. So it's not true that he stopped hunting completely. He stopped hunting with me. And he stopped killing. Once in every five or six times he would bring back a pheasant, if it seemed like a particularly good autumn night to have pheasant for supper. Usually he just went out and missed every shot on purpose. There were plenty of birds in the fields where he was walking, and your grandmother or I would hear his gun fire, at least once. But I guess when a man feels himself getting old, almost as old as he thinks he will ever get, he doesn't much want to be killing things anymore. I guess you might have to kill one bird in every ten or twenty, or the pheasants might lose their respect for you. They might tame out. Your grandfather had no desire to live among tame pheasants, I'm
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sure. But I suppose you would get a little reluctant, when you came to be seventy, about doing your duty toward keeping them wild. And he would not hunt with me anymore then, not even pheasants, not even to miss them. He said it was because he didn’t trust himself with a partner, now that his hands were unsteady. But his hands were still steady. He said it was because I was too good. That he had taught me as well as he knew how, and that all I could learn from him now would be the bad habits of age, and those I would find for myself, in my turn. He never did tell me the real reason.”

“What did he die of?”

“He was eighty-seven then,” said the father. “Christ. He was tired.”

The boy’s question had been a disruption. Again his father went silent. Then he shook his head, and poured himself the remaining coffee. He did not like to think of the boy’s grandfather as an eighty-seven-year-old man, the boy understood. As long as his grandfather was dead anyway, his father preferred thinking of him younger.

“I remember when I got my first moose,” the father said. “I was thirteen. I had never shot anything bigger than an owl. And I caught holy hell for killing that owl. I had my Winchester .30-30, like the one you’re using. He gave it to me that year, at the start of the season. It was an old-looking gun even then. I don’t know where he got it. We had a moose that he had stalked the year before, in a long swampy cottonwood flat along the Yellowstone River. It was a big cow, and this year she had a calf.

“We went there on the first day of the season and every hunting day for a week, and hunted down the length of that river flat, spaced apart about twenty yards, and came out at the bottom end. We saw fresh tracks every day, but we never got a look at that moose and the calf. It was only a matter of time, my father told me, before we would jump her. Then that Sunday we drove out and before he had the truck parked my hands were shaking. I knew it was that day. There was no reason why, yet I had such a sure feeling it was that day, my hands had begun shaking. He noticed, and he said: ‘Don’t worry.’

“I said: ‘I’m fine.’ And my voice was steady. It was just my hands. “‘I can see that,’ he said. ‘But you’ll do what you need to do.’

“‘Yessir,’ I said. ‘Let’s go hunting.’

“That day he put me at the head end of our cottonwood flat and said he would walk down along the river bank to the bottom, and then turn in. We would come at the moose from both ends and meet
in the middle and I should please not shoot my father when he came in sight. I should try to remember, he said, that he was the uglier one, in the orange hat. The shaking had left me as soon as we started walking, holding our guns. I remember it all. Before he went off I said: ‘What does a moose look like?’

‘What the hell do you mean, what does a moose look like?’

‘Yes, I know,’ I said. ‘I mean, what is he gonna do when I see him? When he sees me. What color is he? What kind of thing is he gonna do?’

‘And he said:

‘All right. She will be black. She will be almost pitch black. She will not look to you very much bigger than our pickup. She is going to be stupid. She will let you get close. Slide right up to within thirty or forty yards if you can and set yourself up for a good shot. She will probably not see you, and if she does, she will probably not care. If you miss the first time, which you have every right to do, I don’t care how close you get, if you miss the first time, she may even give you another. If you catch her attention, she may bolt off to me or she may charge you. Watch out for the calf when you come up on her. Worry her over the calf, and she will be mad. If she charges you, stand where you are and squeeze off another and then jump the hell out of the way. We probably won’t even see her. All right?’

‘I had walked about three hundred yards before I saw what I thought was a Holstein. It was off to my left, away from the river, and I looked over there and saw black and white and kept walking till I was just about past it. There were cattle pastured along in that flat but they would have been beef cattle, Herefords, brown and white like a deer. I didn’t think about that. I went on looking everywhere else until I glanced over again when I was abreast and saw I was walking along sixty yards from a grazing moose. I stopped. My heart started pumping so hard it seemed like I might black out, and I didn’t know what was going to happen. I thought the moose would take care of that. Nothing happened.

‘Next thing I was running. Running flat out as fast as I could, bent over double like a soldier would do in the field, running as fast but as quietly as I could. Running right at that moose. I remember clearly that I was not thinking anything at all, not for those first seconds. My body just started to run. I never thought, Now I’ll scoot up to within thirty yards of her. I was just charging blind, like a moose or a sow
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grizzly is liable to charge you if you get her mad or confused. Who knows what I would have done. I wanted a moose pretty badly, I thought. I might have galloped right up to within five yards before I leveled, if it hadn't been for that spring creek.

"I didn't see it till I was in the air. I came up a little hillock and jumped, and then it was too late. The hillock turned out to be one bank of a spring-fed pasture seepage, about fifteen feet wide. I landed up to my thighs in mud. It was a prime cattle wallow, right where I had jumped. I must have spent five minutes sweating my legs out of that muck, I was furious with myself, and I was sure the moose would be gone. But the moose was still grazing the same three feet of grass. And by that time I had some of my sense back.

"I climbed the far bank of the mudhole and lay up along the rise where I could steady my aim on the ground. From there I had an open shot of less than forty yards, but the moose was now facing me head on, so I would probably either kill her clean or miss her altogether. My hands started shaking again. I tried to line up the bead and it was ridiculous. My rifle was waving all over that end of the woods. For ten minutes I lay there struggling to control my aim, squeezing the rifle tighter and tighter and taking deeper breaths and holding them longer. Finally I did a smart thing. I set the rifle down. I rolled over on my back and rubbed my eyes and discovered that I was exhausted. I got my breath settled back down in rhythm again. If I could just take that moose, I thought, I was not going to want anything else for a year. But I knew I was not going to do it unless I could get my hands to obey me, no matter how close I was. I tried it again. I remembered to keep breathing easy and low and it was a little better but the rifle was still moving everywhere. When it seemed like the trembling was about to start getting worse all over again I waited till the sights next crossed the moose and jerked off a shot. I missed. The moose didn't even look up.

"Now I was calmer. I had heard the gun fire once, and I knew my father had heard it, and I knew the moose would only give me one more. I realized that there was a good chance I would not get this moose at all, so I was more serious, and humble. This time I squeezed. I knocked a piece off her right antler and before I thought to wonder why a female should have antlers to get shot at she raised her head up and gave a honk like eleven elephants in a circus-train fire. She started to run.

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“I got off my belly and dropped the gun and turned around and jumped right back down into that mud. I was still stuck there when I heard her crash by on her way to the river, and then my father’s shot.

“But I had wallowed myself out again, and got my rifle up off the ground, by the time he found me, thank God. He took a look at my clothes and said:

‘Tried to burrow up under him, did you?’

‘No sir. I heard you fire once. Did you get her?’

‘Him. That was no cow and calf. That was a bull. No. No more than you.’

“He had been at the river edge about a hundred yards downstream from where the bull broke out. He took his shot while the bull was crossing the gravel bed and the shallows. The moose clambered right out into midstream of the Yellowstone and started swimming for his life. But the current along there was heavy. So the moose was swept down abreast with my father before he got halfway across toward the opposite shore. My father sighted on him as he rafted by, dog-paddling frantically and staying afloat and inching slowly away. The moose turned and looked at him, my father said. He had a chunk broken out of one antler and it was dangling down by a few fibers and he looked terrified. He was not more than twenty yards off shore by then and he could see my father and the raised rifle. My father said he had never seen more personality come into the face of a wild animal. All right, my father said the moose told him, Do what you will do. They both knew the moose was helpless. They both also knew this: my father could kill the moose, but he couldn’t have him. The Yellowstone River would have him. My father lowered the gun. When he did, my father claimed, the moose turned his head forward again and went on swimming harder than ever. So that wasn’t the day I shot mine.

“I shot mine the next Saturday. We went back to the cottonwood flat and split again and I walked up to within thirty yards of the cow and her calf. I made a standing shot, and killed the cow with one bullet breaking her spine. She was drinking, broadside to me. She dropped dead on the spot. The calf didn’t move. He stood over the dead cow, stupid, wondering what in the world to do.

“The calf was as big as a four-point buck. When my father came up, he found me with tears flooding all over my face, screaming at the calf and trying to shoo him away. I was pushing against his flanks and
swatting him and shouting at him to run off. At sight of my father, he finally bolted.

“I had shot down the cow while she stood in the same spring seep where I had been stuck. Her quarters weighed out to eight hundred pounds and we couldn’t budge her. We had to dress her and quarter her right there in the water and mud.”

And just that abruptly, silence again; the story finished. The boy’s father checked the tin pot, to be sure there was no more coffee.

“Why did you tell me about that?” the boy said. “Now I don’t want to shoot a moose either.”

But his father was staring into the darkness beyond the firelight. “He was only sixty-seven. He never told me the real reason.”
Our first National Park was created in part as a result of photographs made by W. H. Jackson in the late nineteenth century. The images of waterfalls and geysers presented a view of the West unknown to eastern legislators. As the story goes, they saw Jackson's large, glass plate photographs, went back into session, and created Yellowstone Park. Early photographers in the American West pulled whole darkrooms in horsedrawn trailers, and carried heavy view cameras, and heavier glass plates to make their prints. They followed the Civil War, and after that, the railroads, mining surveys and expeditions, and finally the homesteaders who settled out here. They recorded the western landscape in a direct and uncomplicated manner, often eloquent, always sharp.

The photographs we see here represent the American West from a number of graphic viewpoints. Ansel Adams and the late Wynn Bullock are recognized as masters at recording accurately the detail and full tonal quality of reflected light. Aaron Siskind and Oliver Gagliani compose natural and man-made objects as abstract forms and patterns. Arnold Gassan and Jerry Uelsmann carefully construct images from nature, recombining reality. Edna Bullock's work comes from the heart, and from a fine understanding of light and space. What makes this portfolio special is that more than half of these plates were made by using the same type of wood and metal view cameras that were used to document the West 120 years ago. Most of these photographs are not "cropped," but are printed exactly as the photographer saw them on the ground glass of the camera. In this day of Polaroids and Instamatics, Cut Bank is proud to reintroduce the tradition of fine photography and documentation, and we will continue to feature the work of distinguished photographers in future issues.

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A NASTY LAWYER TRICK

Robe'rt "Frenchy" Leveque scrubbed the last of the blue mold from the bacon slab and threw his abrasive sponge back into its greasy bucket near the garbage can. After wiping the scrubbed, fatty surface with his own mixture of Ole! Hickory Smoke Flavoring and formaldehyde, he thin-sliced the rancid pork, placed the tray in the big white coldbox closest to the cash register and turned on the red light installed above the ultraviolets in the case. "Don't he look natural," chuckled Frenchy as the tainted bacon took on a healthier look in the bulb's reddish glow. He added a "special today only — 79¢ a Lb." card to the slices, and closed the case as his buzzer heralded arrival of the first customer of this April Saturday, 1944. A rawboned rancher's wife, dressed in a homemade shift of floral design (its fabric once contained a hundredweight of Bak-Rite flour), included five pounds of the bacon in her provisions. While Frenchy watched, she loaded the boxes and sacks into her ancient truck, settled up, clattered across Route 200 and slowly disappeared down the 23-mile lane stretching across the scarred, monotonous prairie. It was a typical spring day in Garfield County, Montana—crisp air, light breeze, scud drifting above patches of snow in the shadowed gullies—and desolation overall. The County was ten days from its first real thaw, which would turn the unpaved roads into mud bogs as the moisture above frost line rose to the surface.

Rural traffic would cease for two to six weeks, and at the Milk Springs General Store and U.S. Post Office, Frenchy was pushing his perishables. Beer, too, would move, and salt, and rifle ammunition, as the coyotes would be out soon splashing after fieldmice deprived of their winter cover. Laveque was well-supplied with these simple commodities, all priced at top dollar. One of three far-flung stores in a county larger than Connecticut, Frenchy's General Store could afford some laxity in competitive pricing.

Resuming his chores, Laveque was halfway through covering partially-spoiled produce with fresh as the buzzer sounded. Into the dim store walked a slight, balding man, his forehead sweaty, his circa 1936 suit a size and one-half too large. Catching his breath at the counter, Elton Saunders, Esq., age 43, Chief (and only) Deputy
Stewart A. Pearce II

County Attorney, dropped four 1/150-grain nitroglycerine tablets beneath his tongue, weathered the hot flash and triphammer headache, then turned to Laveque, who was concealing a last shriveled orange beneath a layer of Sunkist navels.

Saunders shifted his gaze from the pile of oranges to Laveque and spoke softly to the storekeeper, breathing in shallow gasps, aware of each stroke of his enlarged heart. "Well, well," he said, "Frenchy is finally caught in the act. Pale by comparison, however, with the 23 school kids you sent home with salmonella from your Goddamn rotten lunchmeat yesterday. You've been warned enough. Here is a little Health Department 'punkin' for you that is a damn sight fresher than anything you ever sold." Saunders reached into a coat pocket, withdrew a folded white paper and thrust it into Frenchy's hand. "Best read it and heed it, Laveque, or a Deputy Sheriff will bring your stingy ass to town in irons. Not that I'd mind—if it had been left up to me, and not Judge Pattick, this would be a warrant instead of a summons." Pausing to gasp and wipe away the perspiration on his brow, Saunders watched Laveque turn from his normal ruddy countenance to a deep, suffused red. "Saunders," Laveque hissed, "you are a hack and a cheap one at that. The last time you pulled this kind of trick I warned you I'd have your job. Now, you piece of filth, I'll do it. I'll see you starve, you insolent bastard, and your family along with you. Out of my store! Get out!" Crushing the summons into a ball, Laveque hurled it into Saunders' delighted grin, knocking the lawyer's glasses to the floor. He shrieked "and take this with you!"

Saunders' grin widened, and he gave a slight nod toward the door, where Deputy Sheriff Jake Schofield was standing quietly. "Did you see him hit me, Jake?" he asked. Unsmiling, the Deputy nodded and reached into his jeans to withdraw a battered set of nickle-plated handcuffs. At the same time, his off hand slipped the thong off the hammer spur of the .45 Colt single-action which hung at mid-thigh. He advanced slowly toward Laveque, right hand poised lazily above the ivory stocks, cuffs a-dangle from his left. "Both hands on the counter, Laveque, wrists close together and don't even think about movin'. I seen you strike Mr. Saunders here who is a officer of the Court. I make it a third degree assault, Mr. Saunders, how about you?"

"Quite so, Deputy," said Saunders. "Arrest him and I'll file a complaint as soon as he is taken in. We'll lock the store and you take
him to jail. When booking is completed, Judge Pattick will arraign him. Probably about 4:30 this afternoon."

Purple with rage, Frenchy submitted to the manacles. His jaw moved and Jake said amiably, "No talkin', Laveque, save it for the Judge." Reaching across the counter, Jake slowly and firmly propelled the sputtering storekeeper out from behind the cashbox and towards the door, right hand on the butt of the Colt. "No trouble, Laveque, or you'll wear the shape of this here gun in your hairline for life. Just come along quiet and get in the back seat of my rig."

Frenchy was half in the Ford when Saunders stepped out on the porch, snapped the padlock on the front door and turned the hand-lettered sign to "Closed." Voice thick with a Montreal accent which returned under stress, Laveque shouted, "Saunders, for this indignity you will die by my hand, I swear to you." Saunders only grinned as Jake pushed the quivering merchant into the rear seat and locked the door. The deputy winked at Saunders, then drove away east on Highway 200 in a clatter of loose bearings. The lawyer watched the 1937 sedan disappear behind a rise, then slumped to the steps, prying the lid from the nitroglycerine bottle. He gulped four more of the tiny white pills and chewed them, rubbing their residue between tongue and palate. The rush subsided in a few minutes, and as the numbness extending from chest to left wrist dulled, he silently prayed, "Not yet, please Lord, not yet." It was 45 minutes and two Digitalis before he felt strong enough to drive into Jordan, type the complaint, and drag himself upstairs to Frenchy's arraignment in Justice Court.

At 74, the Honorable Luther Pattick, Justice of the Peace, was too old to give a hoot about his reputation, and he cared not at all that Laveque was reputed to be a mean rifle shot, particularly in the dark. "What the hell," the Judge thought, "I'm damn seldom out after dark anyway." He read Laveque his constitutional rights and rapped the gavel, setting $500 bond on Count One of the complaint: Knowingly Delivering Contaminated Foodstuffs. Proceeding to Count Two, Third Degree Assault on a Peace Officer, bond was fixed at $750. When Frenchy tried to argue, the Judge snapped, "Cash only," and rapped his Elkbone gavel, a gift from a grateful robbery victim many years before. Jake led Frenchy from the tiny courtroom, in irons, and Pattick addressed Saunders. "You go home, boy, and lay down. You're all in, and that ticker needs some rest. Frenchy won't make bond until Monday morning 'cause I sent my Clerk home more than
an hour ago.” He cackled in glee. “Now git, and it wouldn’t hurt you none to see Doc. Court’s closed for the weekend.” Saunders returned to his office to sleep, slumped over his desk like a deadman.

Frenchy was awakened by church bells. He was sleeping on a thin straw tick, none too clean, in the Garfield County Jail. He refused the breakfast, and spent the day alternately concocting his defense and dreaming of murdering Saunders with a boning knife. Toward dark he concluded that his honor was at stake, and he began to devise a scheme whereby he could publicly kill the lawyer and simultaneously remove the blemish on his pride. By midnight he was smiling in his sleep.

Monday morning, upon release by his lawyer (who only charged 10% for a cash bond loan, contrary to his oaths), Laveque drove straight to Malta, and spent the day selecting two used handguns—a government-issue Colt automatic .45 ACP, Model 1911, a Smith & Wesson 6-inch Model 20 .38 Special on a .44 frame—and several hundred rounds of ammunition for each. Returning to Milk Springs, he spent the two weeks before his trial over-charging ranchers for provisions and at pistol practice behind the store, firing both pistols at life-size silhouette targets sketched in grease pencil on butcher paper. By the end of the second week, he could reliably fire a six-shot group into the center of the target’s “chest” with either weapon in under ten seconds. Cleaning both carefully, he wrapped them and ten rounds of ammunition each in an old shirt.

Curiously, everyone in the pre-selected jury was from Frenchy’s end of the county, all customers. Three were independent ranchers, two hired hands, and one a pale and listless farm wife in faded floral cotton. The jurors listened raptly to testimony from Saunders, who was visibly ill; the Health Department physician, Deputy Jake Schofield; the principal of the high school; half-a-dozen afflicted children and their parents, and a fidgety young biologist from Helena who spoke briefly of salmonella and at length on the riddles of microbiology.

On the second day of trial they were less attentive to the testimony of Laveque, and they ignored the impassioned rhetoric of his counsel,
who had reduced two of the children to tears during cross-examination.

The jury's deliberation lasted through one short smoke and a pause on behalf of the farm wife, who still suffered from diarrhea. The verdict was guilty, both counts, with no request for leniency. Laveque's counsel sought—and received—a ten-day continuance prior to sentencing, tried unsuccessfully to recover his bond money, and raised his fee. Laveque waited two hours for Saunders to leave the courthouse, then accosted him in the dusty street, the shirt-wrapped bundle beneath his arm.

"Fine job, Mr. Saunders, sir, and one calculated to put me out of business. But no mind, and to the point—you have cost me far more than money. Your little set-up has cost me my honor, and I demand satisfaction." His backhand slap sent Saunders sprawling, bleeding through loose teeth. Laveque bent over the prostrate lawyer and snarled: "Knowing you are too cowardly to own a gun, I took the liberty. Now choose," and he placed the bundle at Saunders' feet. Saunders raised himself to a sitting position, wiped the blood onto his sleeve, and unwrapped the bundle. Hefting both pistols, he sighted down each, then examined the ammunition. Hesitating, he finally selected the Smith & Wesson, and handed it to Frenchy. "Show me how to load it, Laveque, and satisfaction you shall have, but not now. Tonight, 8:00, here in front of the Courthouse, with witnesses."

Laveque smiled grimly. "Pick me four bullets of the smaller, and you will see that I do not cheat, counsel." Saunders handed him four .38 rounds and Laveque slid them into the open cylinder, flipped it shut and blew most of the windows out of Saunders' car. "You see the effect. You could kill me. I suggest you try." He reloaded with six, and handed the big revolver to Saunders, who watched silently as Frenchy shoved six .45 rounds into the Colt's magazine. Laveque threw the four remaining over his shoulder, and hissed through clenched teeth, "8:00 o'clock, then, and bring whomever you like." Leaving Saunders with the loaded .38, he walked away, the .45 clasped stiffly at his side. Saunders sat staring at the revolver, got up, and walked painfully across the street to the office of his physician. It was not quite 6:00 p.m.

Alone in the livery near the edge of town, Frenchy spent the next hour wrapping his barrel chest with alternate layers of wet burlap and tinfoil to a thickness of four inches. Over this he buttoned a heavy
leather shirt and sheepskin vest, a small gold crucifix in his left shirt pocket. Lastly, he dropped to his knees, prayed fervently and long, and shoved a Latin testament between his vest and shirt on the left side.

Saunders, meanwhile, sat in his undershirt talking with his physician. At 7:40 the doctor shrugged and poured two generous shots of whiskey, and he and Saunders silently toasted each other. Doc then counted 25 drops of an amber fluid into Saunders' glass, and after it was tossed off, replenished the whiskey and raised another toast. Saunders followed with six of the little white pills, then buttoned on his coat. He handed his watch to Doc. He studied the big Smith & Wesson, hefting it on an open palm. He winked and smiled at his doctor, then walked into the street, which was lined with nearly a hundred silent people. The MD followed him out, black bag in hand, face set.

Laveque strode into the center of the street from the shadows, .45 in hand, sweating mightily in fear and under the weight of his armour. Saunders walked out to meet him, big revolver dangling from his small white hand. He was smiling, eyes glassy, and he swayed slightly as he turned his right shoulder to the larger man. Laveque fired first, wild, his shot smashing a courthouse window. Saunders fired, missing Laveque's shoulder. He fired again and Laveque staggered as the 158 grain bullet struck him beneath the knee, its shock absorbed by the bone, which did not break. Saunders got off a third shot past Frenchy's right thigh and the merchant dropped to his good knee, holding the Colt with both hands. As Saunders brought the wavering .38 back on target, Laveque fired four shots. The first struck Saunders in the pelvis, flinging him backwards. The second hit him high in the left chest, arcing him up and around. The third struck him in the right armpit, and as he spun, the fourth smashed through the left scapula, blowing his heart to jelly. Saunders was dead before he hit the ground. In the silence, only Jake moved, seizing the automatic and jerking it away as he kneed Frenchy to the street and held him there, hand poised just above his peacemaker. Doc examined Saunders, shook his head and pointed to his office. Jake and several other men, galvanized into action, assisted Frenchy to the examining table and stood without a word as the medical man discharged his duty without benefit of anesthesia. The bullet from the lower leg clanged into an enameled pan, the wound was cauterized and
bandaged. Doc opened the vest, cut through the wrappings, and examined the uninjured area beneath it. "You'll live, God damn you, but Saunders is dead. Now," and he turned to Jake, "get this asshole out of my office." As Frenchy was hustled out to spend the night in jail, the doctor reached for the whiskey. When the bottle was two-thirds gone he corked it up and began the nine-mile drive to Saunders' widow's home. She took the news silently, but the three daughters did not. Doc wished he had not left the bottle behind and wistfully thought of the heavy dose of opiate he had administered Saunders before the fight.

Judge Pattick approached the cell where Laveque lay on his straw tick, breathing deeply against the pain in his leg. "Frenchy, you awake? Thought you might like a little something to read. Young Elton copied it off for me today, before you killed him. Too bad he ain't here to read it to you, he sure would love it. Anyway, you enjoy." The old man tossed the folded mimeograph sheets through the bars, chuckled and hobbled to the door. Laveque retrieved the paper, and read as follows:

Section 86.97 Revised Codes of Montana 1935: Damages for injuries or death inflicted in a duel. If any person slays or permanently disables another person in a duel in this state, he must provide for the maintenance of the spouse and minor children of the person slain or permanently disabled in such manner and at such cost, either by aggregate compensation in damages to each or by a monthly, quarterly, or annual allowance, as is determined by the court and he is liable for and must pay all debts of the person slain or permanently disabled.


The second and third pages were a civil summons and complaint signed by Saunders' superior as Next Friend of Elton's Survivors. Included in the complaint was an inventory of Frenchy's property, down to the last dime. No one near the jail paid any heed to Laveque's curses, least of all Doc and the Judge, who had by that time finished a second bottle of whiskey beside the muslin draped corpse of Elton Saunders. Neither remembered to adjust Saunders' rigor-locked grin,
and he was buried with it.

Frenchy’s civil trial came nearly a full year later. Despite the efforts of his counsel, it lasted less than a day. In defeat, Frenchy returned to the store, and live-in partner Jake Schofield, who had retired from the Sheriff’s Office upon having been appointed conservator for the benefit of Saunders’ dependents. Jake tallied the books each evening, and having no family of his own, slept on a cot in the storeroom. Frenchy lived primarily on second-quality meat and shriveled produce, while Widow Saunders and the stairstep sisters prospered.

Nineteen months later a drunken Frenchy Laveque was pursuing a coyote across a muddy pasture when he tripped and fired the .45 through his lower abdomen. He was found four days later, after a casual search, having fed the hungry coyotes well. Through careful management, Jake and the Widow Saunders were, in time, able to acquire the other two stores in the County, all of which flourished under relaxed policies of fair trade. Upon Luther Pattick’s quiet demise in 1953, Doc sold his main street practice to a young GP from Portland, Oregon, and retired to Arizona to live with an elderly spinster daughter. The newcomer frequently advised old Jake Schofield, still never without his peacemaker, to stop drinking so much Rye whiskey—advice largely unheeded. And in spring, the purpling sage drove the snow from Garfield’s prairie.
EVERY MOTHER'S SON

Beyond that, what's a mother to do? Say? Say too much and he'll run from hearing like his father. For weeks you plan a meal and invite a nice girl, Ellie, who won't talk overly much, can be pleasant without being a nuisance. You wait, and wait, and she waits. Ask Ellie: "You want more tea?" She nods. The two of you wait. At ten o'clock in he and his cousin Orville stomp, smelling of woods and sweat and dragging their stink to the table like the mud off their boots that's tracked the length of the house.

"Damned if the potatoes aren't cold," Jim says.
"Damned if the steak isn't as tough as a boot," his cousin adds.
Damn their complaints.
To Ellie Jim says: "You sick?" Mooning the weather? Why-in-christ don't you talk?"
Ellie shriveled down in her chair and became no bigger than a pea.
Jim and Orville finished eating and charged back outside to work on their truck.

What's a mother to do? To have a giant for a son, that's the curse. Like his father he is, every inch a Davaz. That last summer Jim packed his father out every morning and sat him in his chair on the porch. "Want a beer old man?" And his father would pour beer down the front of his own shirt. "Want some sugared tea?" And his father would puddle tea in his lap. Jim took no notice. The morning we found the old man dead Jim packed him out to the station wagon, sat him in the front seat, plopped a hat on his head. Away that old man went on his next to last ride, looking ready for a night on the town.

But he's my son too. Twenty-six years old and he should know better. I listened that Saturday night and from my upstairs window I spied them. They never knew, they think a mother sleeps? They chased their sluts around the car, hugged and fondled them right out there in the yard. Jim wrestled with his chippie on the grass, her dress pulled up to her hips.

"He's not bringing her into my house," I said. And he didn't. The refrigerator door opened and closed, then he strutted back across the lawn with a half-case of beer. Off they drove and he and Orville never came back that night. I know what they do, but not in this house, my
house, he doesn’t. He knows that.

But does he know what every mother’s son should know? Important things left unsaid even in my house, things only a mother has learned, things that would take fifty years of living to tell. But what use is there in saying what I won’t and to what he’d never listen. It’s in his best interest I arrange what I do. I know the nice girls even if he doesn’t. I was his father’s wife and know how she should stand. A quiet girl to balance his loudness. A girl who won’t think too much of bed not to get up and make it. Fix, tend, help outside when there’s a need, a woman to stand as tall as him though she be not so tall. There was the Thompson girl and she had a brother, a high school athlete who wanted a job to work him into shape for football. The perfect opportunity to lead to an acquaintance, I saw it. I drove her brother to the woods.

“You want exercise?” Jim said. “See that hill?” The boy looked where Jim pointed, up to where Orville worked the Cat, a quarter-mile off and six hundred feet up. “Grab a dozen choker cables and run up that hill and hook them to logs. As soon as the Cat’s down here with another turn, you just grab those chokers and run right back up that hill.”

The kid looked up the mountain again, looked at Jim. “See you tomorrow,” the kid said, and that’s the last we saw of him.

But a wife she can be found. Our Priest was visited by his niece. She, to spend the fall with good folks living next to the church. She, out of school. She, encouraged to seek employment hereabouts. Again I fixed a special dinner, and again they made us wait. A good girl she struck me as, of course such were her credentials. Quiet, but unlike Ellie for she answered my questions with more than a nod. Half an hour late, Jim and Orville came.

Jim burst through the door first, yelled, “Get some newspaper on the floor. Get out the knives.”

Back out of the house he shot. I’d hardly risen to my feet before in they came dragging a freshly killed buck square into the center of the kitchen. “Where the hell’s the newspapers? How do you do?” he said in the same breath.

The niece smiled and continued to smile, left her chair to stand near and watch. I should’ve known then by that look, that grin of hers, like the blood in her veins had lain stagnant a lifetime and suddenly woke up to a world going on around her.
“Standing right out in the field as pretty as could be,” Jim said to her. “Where’s the knives?” he asked of me.

So the knives I brought out, knives I keep sharp for just such a purpose. They gutted the animal, peeled off its hide. After they had split it in half and hung it in the September air we sat down to dinner, but not before I said to Jim: “Tonight? How could you?”

“She don’t mind,” he said. “If I ever pass up a good shot, it won’t be to watch a priest’s niece fill her belly.”

The niece spoke a few words and Jim said little to her, as if he had to after his and Orville’s performance. Thank God they never offered her the testes of the animal, a big joke with them whenever someone new is around. Orville gabbed, and across the table I glimpsed that grin of hers. I wasn’t sure, in some ways I was glad that each had little to say to the other. Even when I met her again after Mass days later I wasn’t sure. That look of hers, maybe it was because her hair was cut much too short, that her cheekbones were uncommonly high, such things can distort true feeling. But I’ve seen that devilish little grin more than once, that child’s look upon greeting cake. Just maybe I’ve been guilty of it myself once or twice.

What’s a mother to do when a son runs off, leaves his work early twice or more times during the week, abandons his mother and even his cousin who’s almost a brother to drive off into the night. Should I tell him he doesn’t know where such things lead, when such things have been left unsaid now too many years? I started this. She’s related to the Church for christ’s-sake. Tonight I heard him stumble in after twelve, and hours later the report of his rifle blasted the night, ended all sleep. I heard her yell.

She, in my house.

I rose slowly after he’d charged down the stairs, her footsteps following upon his. After they’d dragged the animal inside I found my robe. I entered the kitchen to see the Priest’s niece and my son bent over a deer. Laughing kids. As she stooped to help Jim stretch the buck out straight the hem of her coat climbed up her bare rump.

“Get the knives,” he said to me.

“It stood in full profile for us right under the apple tree,” she said.

I stood ready to tell her to leave my house.

“Would you get the knives?”

The niece ran to my cupboard and brought out the knives, as if she’d placed them there herself. Jim grabbed a rear leg and she a
front, they rolled the animal onto its back and Jim sliced it open from lip to tail. As she worked beside him her lips parted to form that devilish little grin, one that promised tongue but gave way only to white shining teeth. What's a mother to do, to say, that this girl sees what I saw, she stands where I once stood. Like her father he is.

"We need a pail for the guts, unless you want them dumped on the floor."

I brought two buckets in from off the porch.

"This make enough meat to carry us the winter?" Jim asked.

"Depends on how many mouths there are to feed."

He laughed.

I climbed back up the stairs, leaving them to their butchering. To bed. This is my house, old as I am old, feeling its age in the hearts of its logs. Even in my house some things are best left unsaid. Yesterday no one talked about the deer killed here or the love made, tomorrow no one will either. And for her too it will seem as soon as tomorrow, she'll find she can't tell their son what every mother's son should know. The hunt is all of it.
I never wanted to buy the horse. My dad pushed me into it when he caught me putting one of his pack horses in the bucking chute. The big gelding was cranky and old but I had to get some practice in somehow.

“You leave that pack string the hell alone, understand? You want a bronc to ride, you go buy one.” He was a little hot. I didn’t want him to get violent, so the next Tuesday I’m at the sale ring.

The horse was sure ugly. What he had going for him was size; I guessed he’d go to 1,300 anyway. Probably just a big stout range colt nobody wanted to mess with long enough to make a saddle horse. The canner bid forty two cents a pound on him; I went forty three and saved his sorry life.

Right away I started wondering about him. His legs didn’t look like no horse legs I’d ever seen. Real thick and gnarled-looking. His head was a sight—roman nose, little pig eyes set close together, pony ears. And he was covered with about three inches of shaggy hair, so he looked like a damn buffalo. I’ll tell you, he was a sight. But all the time he was in the ring I could see he wasn’t scared out of his wits like the other green horses. Didn’t trot around trembling, showing the whites of his eyes. He just looked around like he was maybe sizing things up, and once he looked right directly at me. I think that’s why I bought him.

The old man was waiting when I got home with the truck. He comes out and shines a big flashlight through the rack to see my purchase. “You bought that?”

“No, I stole him when the brand inspector was takin’ a shit.” He can see I’m in a bad mood and don’t say anything else. It had taken me an hour to run the horse into the truck. Every time I’d get him going the right way he’d see what was up and stomp backwards down the loading chute. I had a hot-shot, but all that thick hair kept him from feeling it. Finally I got peeved and started laying a two-by-four all over his butt. He went crashing up into the truck then, but not before catching me on the leg with his left hind foot. He only grazed me, but it was so sore I could barely get down out of the truck.

The old man don’t say anything when I turn the horse out in the

Scott Hagel

OTHER MEN’S HORSES
pasture, but he shines the flashlight so I can see to get through the gate. Then he spits out a big wad of Copenhagen and goes up to the house.

He don't mind me rodeoing long as I stay around here. But I guess he can tell I'm not liable to be around much longer. That's what he don't like. He wants me to take over the outfit one of these days, but I guess I won't go it. The packing business is good during the summer and fall, but the rest of the year you're just barely making it.

Me and him; we've been on our own since the old lady run off with a wrangler when I was a little kid. One morning the old man just comes in and wakes me up and says, "We're doing for ourselves from now on." He never told me any details. And I always felt like I better not ask.

I guess he should get another wife, but there ain't that many women around here. Every so often he slips down to the Rainbow Bar and goes home with MariAnne, the barmaid, but it ain't nothing serious.

Next morning I look the horse over again. He looks sorrier than the day before. I had plenty of second thoughts about what I'd bought, but I decided to see about getting on him.

I was running him in from the pasture when Marty Coleman and Bob Norvell come driving up in Norvell's pickup. I guess the word must have gotten around town.

I get him loaded in the chute just as they stroll up, wearing big shit-eatin' grins and not saying anything. Coleman looks at the horse standing in the box and turns to me. Little flecks of chew are sprinkled in between his teeth. "Show horse, huh?"

"Well, sure. What you think of him?"

"He looks strong," Norvell says. "You going to get on him?"

He humped up his back when I put my foot on him, but other than that he was quiet. It was spooky the way this horse acted. No fear at all. He'd been gelded and branded sometime, you could see a big number 13 on his left hip, but other than that I don't think he'd been handled at all. I'm not good at thinking up names. I took to calling him Number 13.

I set the saddle down on his wide back. I was shaking a little, but the sun was getting warm and I felt good. The old saddle was my dad's; he'd won day money in it at Cheyenne in 1947. That was in the days when bronc saddles had horns on them. You could still see where he'd sawed it off before he gave it to me.

I dropped the flank strap down the horse's side; Coleman hooked it
and handed the end up to me. “Why don’t you try him with an empty saddle one time,” he said. “Then if he don’t throw himself, go ahead and get on him.”

Sounded like a plan. I opened up the gate and watched the horse buck slow and lazy across the little arena. We run him back into the chute and jerked the flank off him while the big bastard tried to kick everything to pieces.

“That didn’t look so bad,” I say, but I notice my hands are trembling some as I set the saddle well up on his withers and snugged it up. Pulling my chaps back out of the way, I slip down on him. He never tried to come up like a lot of them will, so I found the stirrups quickly, took hold of the rein where I’d marked it and asked Norvell for the gate.

I felt something real powerful heave up and turn out. Then I was going through the air and bouncing in the dirt. I opened my eyes in time to see a big jagged-edged hoof slam down right next to my nose. I shut my eyes again, just for a moment.

I was surprised. I been on some good horses and this one should have never done that. I got up and watched him pitch around the arena. His moves didn’t look that tough. The stirrups flopped loose, popping his belly every jump.

Well, to spare some details, I got on him again and got piled once more. Then Norvell, who fancies himself quite a bronc rider, tried him and he got fired off too. Coleman, who can’t ride anything, never even tried.

The old man had come down from the house and was sitting on the fence watching the show. I never heard him say anything, but he was watching, and once I looked over when I heard him laughing. He pulled out his snot rag and blew into it and didn’t laugh anymore.

When Norvell was on the horse I saw what I’d missed before. I guess you’d call it a kick and roll, with a little snap at the end. He’d go out, jump, kick, roll his back end up at the sky and snap his heels once more. All in the space of one jump. And he was quicker than he looked. I’d seen little bareback horses do that number, but never a heavy bronc like this.

I jerked the bob wire along through the sagebrush, unrolling it as I
went. The fence stretcher made the wires just like bango strings and the old man went along and popped in the staples. Pop pop pop. Three per staple, never any more.

He catches up to me at the corner. "That'll hold' em even if they got to workin' this section steady," he says. He pulls out his Copenhagen and stuffs in a wad. He offers me some and I turn him down, like always, since I got sick on it a long time ago.

"How you doing with that bronc of yours?"

"All right."

"You got him rode yet?"

"No."

He started picking up tools to carry back to the pickup. "Well, I'll tell you. I've seen a lot of good ones. This one's a good one. You get so you can ride him most of the time, you'll be a bronc rider."

I was surprised to hear him say that. It wasn't encouragement, but it was closer to it than anything else he'd ever said to me.

"And if you keep gettin' on him," he continued, "it'll be the dumbest damn thing you ever do. You'll get good enough to maybe go to the big shows. Fort Worth, Houston, Denver. I been to all of 'em. Didn't get me any place. Won't get you any place, either. And you'll spend your whole life riding other men's horses."

He turned away, but not before I saw his gray eyes starting to water from the wind that always blisters this section.

I got on that shaggy bastard over a hundred times that summer. And I wasn't the only one. Everybody who thought he was a cowboy started coming around and paying me five bucks a shot to try him. Nobody could ride him. One day we bucked him out fifteen times. The big horse was soaked with sweat and his legs were trembling. I was sure we'd wear him down, and you could see he was exhausted. But then we'd swing the gate and he'd go out and turn the crank just like always. I felt ashamed when I seen how much heart he had. After everybody'd left I fed him a gallon of oats, something I'd never done before.

I was getting better, though nobody knew it but me 'cause I was hitting the ground like everybody else. But I wasn't hitting it as hard
anymore. Sometimes I'd even land on my feet.

On a cold morning early in September, there was just me and Norvell and this Indian guy, T.J. It was almost cold enough for frost. We run Number 13 in and put my saddle on him; it was the new one I'd bought with what I'd charged everybody who'd rode him. He humped up his back when it touched him and kicked the back of the chute. His breath came out in twin clouds. He laid his head on the top rail of the gate and looked out in the arena. He was used to this.

I eased down and set my thighs against the swells, the rosin squeaking. I could smell him as I picked up the rein and asked for the gate.

He reared out of the box higher than usual, but I had a little adrenaline going and I was there, marking him out good and solid. He went three good high straight-away jumps, nothing trashy, then ducked to the right and started giving me the hot moves. Every time he'd hit the ground and bawl and beller, but I was lifting on that rein and beating him to the front end of every jump. All of a sudden I knew I was going to cover him and started getting wild with my spurring. I almost fell off. Then Norvell blew the whistle and I just relaxed everything and sailed off, going down on my knees. Just like that, after all those trips out of the gate, I'd gone the full eight on Number 13.

Norvell and T.J. were pretty excited. The old man was eating breakfast and he heard all the noise and came down. He tried to be a good guy and shook hands with me, but I could tell from his face he knew I was going to be heading south, soon as I got the chance.

Not too long after that I was setting in the house after dinner wondering where I was going to get some traveling money, when I got a phone call.

"Roy Easton?"

"That's me."

"Yeah, this is Jake Rossman. I hear you've got quite a saddle bronc. I'm going to be up that way next week, think I could see him buck?"

I told him yes and hung up the phone. So even the big boys had heard. Rossman had six saddle broncs in the National Finals last
year, more than any other contractor. I was surprised because I never did think about the horse being that good.

Rossman showed up in a stock truck, so I knew he was serious about the horse. He wasn’t dressed much different from the other people who’d come to watch my horse’s major league tryout, but he looked like money with his three diamond rings and those gold capped teeth. He hollered a lot in a high, squeaky voice.

We ran the horse in and I started putting on my chaps. But Rossman stopped me. “I’d like to see Terry get on him, if it’s all right.” He pointed to a guy stepping out of a pickup. I recognized the guy’s face from a magazine. Terry Hill, somewhere in the top fifteen in the world during the last few years. This was turning into something I didn’t like. All the tough guys coming around, ganging up on my ugly old pony. I didn’t want to let on what I thought so I walked across the arena and took a seat on the fence.

There must have been about fifty people there that day and they all saw it. I watched Rossman and Hill working over the horse, saddling him and buckling on the halter. They treated him respectfully, like they knew what they were doing.

They swung the gate and Number 13 came out jumping and kicking. Then he made a big move to the right and Terry Hill went left. He landed right on his head. He got up real slow; his hat was smashed and there was dirt all over his face.

I felt kind of light-headed and giddy, like all the blood was running out of my head. Probably it was.

Hill tried the horse again, but he never had a chance since he was still shook up from landing on his hat. I got to give him credit. He didn’t get all pissed off, and he tried to grin. But Rossman had a mean streak, and he was irritated because having a world-class bronc rider crash land like that was going to cost him more money when we talked about a price. He kept making a lot of wisecracks, asking Hill if he should buy him. Hill finally said, “Yeah, go ahead and buy him, if you’ve got enough money!” and put his gear back in his pickup and drove off.

And then Rossman had to walk all the way over to me. I was holding all the cards. And he didn’t like it, having to deal with a twenty-year-old kid who had a horse he wanted. But he pulled out his checkbook anyway.

Late that afternoon, all the people were gone and it was just me
standing by the corral in the faded light. I had a check for $4,000 in my shirt pocket and Rossman was on down the road with my horse. Number 13 was off to live the glamour life. Bright lights, loud speakers, crowds.

I should have been happy and I guess I was, as I needed the money to get south. I know a lot of people will probably think, “How can you sell off your horse like that, such a good one and all?” But that big animal was no pet dog, and I didn't have no love for him. Besides, he'd hurt me enough times I should have been glad to see him go.
LEAVING EMELIA

Two sons, her husband gone,
she shakes the seam of her dress
and lies down with the Bible, the comb,
the glass of water beside her.
If she searches the bed for hairpins,
for the lean man who braided her hair
in the dark, and the hands
that were both sides of her head,
both razor and soap at once, she holds
the burnt edge of her breath
and asks, where is he.

In the next room
you wake from the ten fingers of sleep
to the sound of a train
rocking through badlands, the sky,
an absence of cinders
already baked and eaten, a landscape
of stars and horses locked in your fist.
Remember the night in Chicago
she took you into her bed, crooning
the world like a bad map of your face?
You think there are hands
you have not praised enough,
behind you, distance you never touch.

Morning, the hoarse cry of quail,
an old dog's death nailing itself to the house.
Emelia brushes the hair from her neck
and calls for bread, pears,
for Joyce, for Lydia, for nothing of darkness
in the yard hammered with light,
for Joseph and the sons in Albany
who bow their heads, forgiving themselves
again and again.
This leaving, a denial
fixed in the heart's soft beat
and the blue flame of the stove, in her name,
Emelia Sophia, inventing a home
and the fear that was never a home.
Even now it passes between you
like salt shaken from hand to hand,
once for the sons and daughters
silent as guests, once for the odd bones
of your face, and the moon,
creeling with light,
counting itself among them.
Laurie Lamon

LAST GRAY SCENE

Didn’t the sky take all of it, the man
you’d slash your skirts for, night after night,
the room eating bowls of dust in a house
no bird needing a home would enter.
Someone was always leaving: father, husband,
the daughter with auburn hair
who’d brush and wind until the last pin flared
like a match striking the wall. In the papers
a woman confessed to stoning the face of her child,
the child, found beating her doll
with newspaper. For a moment it’s true,
the year a train slapped the life out of stone.
You helped your husband board,
measured your life by the straight cloth
of his back. You watched until his face dissolved
like soap and the tracks thinned to water,
the clear glass filled and emptied at breakfast.
You stayed on, at night slamming a window with two hands,
suddenly afraid to crawl the long corridor back
from window to bed. Dinners felt the cold
heart of an empty chair scrape the floor, the *amen*
lifting fork to mouth and all of you
tasting tiny explosions of meat.

Now a bird takes the empty house on its back
and you bless house, bird, the mattress dumped in the yard
refusing to burn. You rummage the porch
for a pirate’s dream of yellow brass,
gold sent home to a woman’s sunburned face, the parrot
mumbling in his cage. Ancestors gave you this
and you give it back, the scrub of rhododendrons
where, twenty-five years ago, a bloodied cat
stumbled into your arms. You give back the husband
wiping his hands in the kitchen, the great-aunt pitching
fruit trees and trunks of linen from a real train
in Custer, Wyoming. You give the horse traded for blankets and food, the leaf-mould scraped from his hooves with an iron spoon. Behind you a field coughs milkweed, stonecrop. Cattle drift toward a river pounded with snails and the river’s boom where you warm yourself in the foreign breath of animals. Close the gate. Ignore the boy leaning hard at the window as you drive away.
WHIPPING THE CACTUS

Back on the farm as I hoed and ditched
the cows watched me all day,
sly cowboys, one leg up on the fence
about to start cackling rays of grainy sunlight
that would burn into my back, or astronauts
happily returned from the trip of their lives
asking directions
to the nearest Air Force base. as I
scooped out oats, swept up around them at night
in the barn they eyed me like that. since then
things have changed. out here in the land of flying saucers
people write books about them, how
they’ve been taken in, mentally raped
and ever after fall down in the middle of parties
foaming and babbling like epileptics. one man
full of confidence and fun offered them whiskey
and in revenge they cut off his hand.
but what happens to others won’t happen to me
because I can imagine it, the defense
always with me out here on the ranch,
the cows that stumble around through the scrub brush,
girls mewing through their noses for lost love,
and the cactus that long ago ran in
from the range to stop stock-still,
shocked at the house,
deserting lieutenants, shamed idiots kicked out of school,
or those spacemen who long ago came down to earth
in disguise, but sucking their thumbs day after day
don’t know if they want to go back
as if they want me to whip them
out of their sadness of the past, their future.
HAYING

Before adobes can happen
someone has to dig a pit.
it goes straight down before the jogging shovels
stirring up the worst monsters,
    which whirl out, flume off
across the desert in a column
    of fire laced with crackling spit,
the kind that earnest Moses followed through the wilderness
seeing the cities in his head. the hands
however, being wiser, simply stand aside
and watch it roar out like a captured bear
too big and fierce for them to handle,
a drunken sailor released from the hole in search
of something intelligent to tear up.
then it's done, the green mud at its season
    and the couple is installed,
holding the little fluffy dog dressed
in paper clothes cut from magazines,
the man looking out the crooked windows
to see which directions the clouds will take,
the wife lifting up lids and peering down the stove,
bending to the hollow roots to listen
where that narrowing, those braids
and clash of whispers come from.
but already the hay is shooting up white,
and the men are out, earth come alive,
stern earth bent over earth cutting it
while the girls stand atop the stacks,
lifesavers shouting down at them.
but inside the family is so safe because
this is all around them, so busy
wondering at it, that the grass spears right up
through the dirt floor between their toes,
    a torture
so mild they hardly feel a thing.
CONJURING A BASQUE GHOST

for Jean Ospital

You died as I could—
snag on the mind. I’ve fallen enough
timber to know how easy it is not to hear
that slight deadly crack in the top.
I know you didn’t look up. The chainsaw roared
in your ears as you stood waiting like
a lamb while the widowmaker fell.

Three white horses graze your pasture now,
Jean Ospital. Your gates are locked, wife gone
to town, boys back in school two weeks after
the funeral. All your sheep are gone in steel
trucks. At your auction, everything sold high.
The realtor is out there now nailing up For Sale

Do you want me to show how you loved your dogs
or drank the brown goat’s milk? Should I say we
spoke in Espanol that day going down to buy
those five black fleeces still waiting here?
Should I say the ache in your eyes as you saw
the pasture dying in the heat, your ewes
grown thin? Should I put here your jeans
reeked with lanolin and sweat? Should I buy
your farm? I had no such money when the empty
trucks rolled in. What do you want from me?

Watching my wife spin the wool your dead hands
sheared, I make the little I know into this prayer
for you, Jean Ospital: Pyrenees, receive
this man. I send him home. Inside the mountain
that watched him being born, cover him
with wool and let him dream.
George Venn

This is all I can say for you. *Adios, pastor.*
Leave me now. I have wood to cut today.
"Tailor-made," we'd say
each time the chutegate cracked
and she'd buck honest—
a jump-and-kick, rocking chair
bronc, not a "dirty" in her,
not a single swoop
or duck: "no mallards,"
we'd laugh. This old campaigner
taught us heart, those moments
she'd hang high
enough for us to dream
fancy filagree and ruby
inlays on the sun—that gold
buckle to win Cheyenne, like heaven,
Daddy Of Them All.

Damnit, I'll always crave
her acrobatic kick
to kiss the earth—
the way she'd break in two,
come up again for air
and float: back to back
we'd take wing, my high
spurring stroke lifting
and lifting her, horizon
to horizon—an anxious bird
soaring to love
every inch of sky
and uproar of clouds
going stark-raving
wild in a crowd.
CHESTER, MONTANA: ALL THE WINDROWS
ONE WAY

Row after row along the road,
a steady blast at eighty,
a thought for you the sky at least
must ring a bell. It was much
to have learned from the depression
how to plant this wheat. I suppose
living Montana means you’d know
when you have had your fill.

I thought anywhere for news why not
call collect. Charge it, what the hell,
damn world’s out of step. Speak direct
you urged, clear, keep in touch.
Diversion’s the word: I stepped off
on sidewalk cracks here
hard, lost for the love of might.

It must be your world, vast exactly,
curves, slow, away, then round.
Mine’s blurred, slick or flawed,
suddenly steep with heights,
one smug continental view or another
packed up each peak. Wheat or snow
this land goes on and on. I try
and shake it shrugging earth.
You look up. Call it work.

Wind in my face, grain, cloud or haze,
I spoke today of love, poetry, the world
as if all were better only by the book.
The pin we all heard drop
snapped when your warm applause
broke my practiced smoke in half.
Taking me by arm, firm on my shoulder,
you showed me how so like fields we are, broken, tended, yielding—how lucky it is we are level, standing, ready now on any kind of ground.
OLD WOMAN TO THE RIVER

Am I a fool?
Old enough to say no
to blood that tells me I am young,
younger than the child whose passion
ran a hot straight line, barbed hook
set twenty years in veins of that
first flaxen boy.

Loyal beyond will
I ride your milk-blue rapids
fishing with glacier mothers—mothers
cold as knives, who cut a bed in liquid
stone those days when time was ice.
I love to raft this river.
Each rock is danger, and aspens
rattle silver from moss-covered banks.

At the end of my line
a rainbow leaps and plunges.
My hook will hold, even in winter,
coated with crystal, cracking and snapping
like a fine-tuned vessel, a Viking
ship of Cornish glass. He caught me then
and bound my waist with willow chains. A dream
fish larger than rivers, flying against the sun.
We built our cabin on the shore and studied
movement of stones. Now he swims in ancient
air and laughs at worms, my rainbow at
midnight, a dragonfly's wing.

I'm fishing once again,
dog-toothed violets at my feet
like migratory fowl. Birds of America,
we cleanse the sky of grief. I cast my fly
in mountain pools. Trumpets in the wind
guitars and tambourines! Songs of gypsy
grandmothers sing in my genes. It's
time to take up dancing.

Downstream the river breaks.
Speckled tails and sun-flecked
leaves and in the autumn cottonwoods
shadow lions are stalking.
We never change.
Blood runs the same dark line.
My heart’s a cave of mirrors.
WATCHING FALLING STARS AT THE RANCHO DE LUCKS

It was bare as snowlight
high at the Rancho De Lucks.
The sky glazed black and glassy
as igneous rock doming Ptarmigan Mountain.

We had come here with our last money
to be together and alone
while another year calculated its end.
We watched stars celebrate concave night,
traced each one as it bolted
over snow like the wild center of a horse’s eye,
each so naked and white and hot and hissing,
we could not sleep
even after the mica-faced stove failed
from red to black
warming only its small center.

Not the last time, we were
broke but not missing
any champagne,
so that years gone we wait up late
after spending our last money
to see the final star fall far from city light.
Then, teasing the cool
opening of night, we
lie coverless,
sunfishing like hot white horses in dreams.
It starts up in the Hyalites where elk dab their tongues and run quick on rocks down through farms sparse then thick to developments then town. All of this in ten miles packs history to an instant lesson where the pupils are awed by the teacher’s knowledge but never learn.

The fast water moves to undercut meadows to parks then beneath pavement, buildings, old houses, railroad tracks, then out to join the slower streams and rivers rip-rapped with broken concrete and old cars.

In town the law leaves fishing to the children, so they learn best. One might drift a worm under the tire store, the Eagles Bar, the bank parking lot, the old hotel and catch brook trout: pale, thin memories of cutthroats that lie upstream or prophesies of survival in rough German browns that burrow downstream in the carcasses of rusted out cars.

One spring the stream took two girls fresh from drink at the Eagles and pulled them under downtown Bozeman where they died.
in the range of those dim brook trout.

It is spring again and the water comes cold, hard and fast from where the elk dips to where these ghosts hold firm in the current under the old hotel waiting for the children.
FOUR LETTERS FROM THE END OF SUMMER

1.
That day I broke my camp
under Crooked Mountain, started walking
south up Birch Creek. Windy all night,
still blowing over wolf willow
on the clear morning of your birthday.
August first and I wanted
some other word for year, some long sound
about the way quick leaves throw light,
fade out with knapweed in the yellow dust.
A moan for ice, old drum for snow,
and whitewater yell of spring
returning into blood.

2.
I can see the Sweetgrass Hills
from here, the glowing place
where dawn has gathered cloud
like a hand does cloth.
Couldn't sleep, hard ground
told nothing but an endless
hunger, a long tunnel
of days and moons carved out
beyond my lifetime.
Red stems of aspen mourn
the short season,
the hard winter to come.

3.
Our friend wanted to call
jackspine a wisdom tree.
He ought to know better.
Clinging to rock
against a steady wind
won't make you wise,
just grey and lonely
in a twisted shape.

4.
The August moon sticks
behind Mount Jumbo. It rises late
and cold over the black hill.
You know I fumble my words.
I've tried letters, the telephone,
but it's no good. They won't carry
what I feel across Wyoming.
My verses used to be wild
about the moon and you.
Tonight, chainsaws cut past dark,
each car driving by
sounds like someone's lover
leaving for good.
BUFFALO KILLING #1

Four horses, the six tame buffalo tethered to the semi-trailer Mack truck they came in, each buffalo in a separate padded stall, their standard accommodations as they were hauled around to rodeos in the intermountain west, enormous baskets of flowers flown in from the flower-growing region around Lompoc on the south-central California coast, and the white Viking ship mounted on squealing rough-cut wooden wheels higher than a man’s head, with a great rope hawser for towing attached: these were the principle props for what proved to be the next to the last day of shooting, ever, on Trainer’s movie.

In the early morning, as Emmett watched the sun rise over the eastern mountains, the buffalo had not yet arrived, and after they had come, in the middle reaches of the afternoon, a vast thunderstorm mounted itself over the western horizon, with the slants of grayish rain opening and closing themselves like curtains over windows to the landscape beyond, and the lightning in flaring sheets decorating the oncoming darkness.

Trainer called the storm a piece of luck. “We’ll just wait a little,” he said, “until it’s right here.”

So they rested in the pickup trucks and Trainer’s black Lincoln Continental and the Dodge vans carrying the camera equipment, and waited until they could see the line of rain coming at them across the playa from west to east—much as the line of sunlight had moved across toward Emmett at daybreak. The four horses were saddled and ready, with long white Hudson Bay blankets strapped under the western saddles and trailing around the legs of the horses, so that in some idiot way they resembled the animals ridden in medieval storyteller tales of wandering adventurers. Just, as Trainer explained, for the visual effect.

“Flowers,” Trainer said, when one of the sound men asked him just precisely how authentic this enactment was supposed to be, “about as much as history has to do with flowers.” The sound man had grinned as he asked, and Trainer had not smiled in the slightest way as he answered.

So they waited while the darkness of the storm came at them, and
eventually there was a little gusty wind whipping streaks of alkaline dust across the flat. The Yarrow brothers in their rented buckskins were riding stick horses in galloping circles, firing back at the lightning with cap pistols.

Libby stood outside the Lincoln Continental, doing some kind of California dancing shuffle with her feet, like she was moving to private music. “Them boys,” she said, posing and twanging her voice into an imitation of Dolly Parton, “are one by one shooting out my lights.” She grinned down at Emmett, who sat with his arm out the open window of the automobile, as though her lights were some mercurial secret between them.

Whatever they were thinking out there as their cap pistols popped distantly in the wind, it was as far from anything Emmett could imagine as dim spots on charts of the known universe. Maybe constant happiness was possible in the coils of their invisible war, but whatever, they were not wrong in their excitement. All the beginnings were over, and the long tides of Trainer's vision were rolling now, surely as the turning of the earth.

Claudette Valdez sat in the back seat of the Lincoln, knitting a stocking cap, and as he turned in the seat to look back to her, Emmett was sure she must know. This must be the way it always is, he thought, when it begins to work, and he could see how this making-believe could be worth a lifetime.

Over there, where the horses were tethered, great wicker baskets of flowers were hanging from the forks of their saddles, bobbing slightly as the animals paced side to side in the wind. Soon now they would be horseback, and hunting the running bison, galloping down the stiffening wind and pelting the buffalo with blossom after blossom from the bushels of pink columbine and yellow daffodil and chrysanthemums with heads so heavy they could be thrown like stones, yellow and white and lavender chrysanthemum and yellow crocus and blue cornflowers and purple and white sweet william and lavender sedum and endless other variety of blossom in other colors, and in the process of their hunting with flowers for weaponry and ammunition they would be releasing America to become somewhere else. That was the idea, as Trainer explained it.

There would be galloping bison, and heedless riders in pursuit, the white blankets swinging around the hocks of their horses, and the cameras following as they all traveled out onto a vast white-land territory of endless hope.
“The way it is supposed to be,” Trainer had said the night before at dinner, looking across the table to Emmett and holding him with those hard yellowish eyes, sucking at his teeth and then looking away with his implacable seriousness, as if nothing anywhere here could be possibly imagined as ridiculous.

And this morning Trainer had worked at tucking a woven crown of blue cornflowers around his gray fringe of hair, so that he might resemble the six buffalo with their crowns of yellow and red and purple flowers woven into the matted shaggy manes around their horns.

Then it was time, according to Trainer’s notion of how the rain was coming, and someone clacked a clapboard before one of the cameras: BUFFALO KILLING #1.

They were all four of them uneasily horseback, Teddy and Sara and Emmett and Trainer, and the Yarrow boys were flashing their long chrome-plated imitation skinning knives, the blades so dull they would not slice bread, and dancing in anticipation of whatever it was they had come to imagine.

But the six broke-to-ride buffalo, two bulls and four cows, all of whom had smelled mainly old in their stalls, like clothing hung too long without being washed, when they were turned loose, for the most part would not run. They wanted to stand, in old instinctual ways, and drop their flowered heads, and face the storm.

The handler was a short barrel-chested man from Cody, Wyoming, and he came out and cut at them with a stock-driver’s whip, raising welts of dust from their hides, but not moving them at all until he jabbed at them with a red-handled battery powered electric hot-shot, and even when they did eventually step out they did not run, but rather shambled away across the dusty plain at a long diagonal to the line of the approaching storm, heading directly to the most distant reaches of the Black Rock as if drawn to emptiness, ignoring the shouts of the riders.

It was then that Teddy turned his black horse, and cantered back to his pickup and got down and dragged his .30-06 from the gun rack behind the seat, acting for all the world like he had just come to a fine new idea about making all this sensible. Teddy, with baskets of flowers hanging from the forks of his saddle.

Emmett turned in his saddle, and watched Teddy go, and was not much moved to wonder at what was coming next when he saw his
father climb back horseback with the rifle, maybe because the afternoon had gone beyond wonderment, but more likely, as he was to think later, because he already knew in some dim-minded way what was coming next, and thought Teddy was right.

So Emmett spurred his horse, and picked a thick-headed red chrysanthemum from the basket hanging to the right side of his saddle, and wished the buffalo would really run, so he could bring himself to throw it.

Just this morning Emmett had been thinking about loading one of these horses into a trailer and going away to the Salmon River country of Idaho, north of the Sawtooth Range and up into the Selway forests where there might still be lost bands of Sheepeater Indians living gypsy hideaway existences unknown to civilization, earth-diggers in canyons where no white man had ever come back from.

Emmett had told the idea to Libby as a joke, and she had told him he better watch out, because lately everybody was getting their wishes.

They had been sitting in the Lincoln Continental with Trainer, waiting for the semi-trailer with the buffalo, and Trainer had all at once started telling them about a time when he had tried going off to work on ranches in Nevada and Wyoming and Arizona and eastern New Mexico, a week or so here and another week or so there, when he was coming to be an old man and thought he was through with movies and making a try at living alone.

Trainer had listened to Emmett’s story about going away to Idaho, and sat a moment looking at his hands where they were splayed on the steering wheel. He told them his experiment with the working man’s life had only lasted a couple of months, and that he maybe had made a mistake giving it up so soon. “I didn’t know nothing,” he said, “and I didn’t learn nothing. Figured I was too old, and quit.”

“But after I was home in Los Angeles,” he said, “I found that I had worked up some calluses, and then there was nothing to do but watch my hands turn white and shrink.”

“What I did,” Trainer said, “was stay home and drink and watch the calluses peel.” He told them about standing out on his lawn above Malibu, drunk in the night and firing off a .38 pistol toward the lights of Malibu down below, and wondering if he was hitting anything.

“Pick up sticks,” Libby said, when her father had finished talking,
and she rolled her eyes at Emmett, and he looked away out the window to the dragon-headed Viking ship.

And now Teddy was back up on his black horse and galloping slowly toward them, carrying his old .30-06 rifle from the barroom, holding it out from his side like a present he was bringing them as he got there and slowed and the black horse sidewalked a little into the wind.

Trainer was turned in his saddle and grinning back to all of them like the alley-running child he might once have been, the blue cornflowers in his hair shuddering in the wind, and beyond him the driving edge of the rain was almost to them, and it was right then, in a stutter-step moment of time-out in these proceedings that Emmett saw clearly what was going to happen next.

There was Teddy coming to them straight-faced with that rifle, the cameras mounted on the Dodge vans following him as if this had been most closely planned . . . and in that hang of stillness for Emmett there was only the question of how long until the shooting.

There would be dead animals, and another impromptu triumph, all of it recorded on camera by the straggling assemblage of Hollywood technical people. Emmett found himself holding his breath, and the red chrysanthemum crushed to pulp in his right fist.

Teddy spurred his black horse, the white Hudson Bay blanket sweeping dust as he came, and he circled ahead of the buffalo, jerked up his horse, pumped the lever-action rifle, and in the longest of slow motions Emmett could ever recall, steadied himself, squeezed down on the trigger with his old-time steadiness, and fired his first killing shot of that afternoon hard into the massive dogged forehead of the old buffalo bull in the lead.

No sounds but mainly the wind, and the dim cracking of the rifle, and then a puff of dust from the head of that old animal, the sudden collapse into instant release, and the vague reflective kicking in the dirt after death.

One by one Teddy killed them all, sliding the clacking mechanism of the rifle, levering shells into the firing chamber, spent cartridges spilling out onto the alkali beside his stamping black horse. Teddy rode to each of the bewildered buffalo as they began milling around the fallen bull, and fired from a distance of never more than a dozen yards into each massive forehead, the beasts falling into that same instant collapse and then jerking and kicking their hind legs as they
began the stunned violent quivering which followed such death, the rolling hammer of each rifleshot reverberating distantly in the wind, enormous sounds trapped and diminished and blown away beneath the hard echoing clouds.

Poised, in the photographs they all saw later, they simply watched, looking unconscious of themselves until the last animal was down. While those twitching hooves traced arcs in the dust Teddy levered in a final shell, and sat gazing back to them, as if guarding his kill. Emmett wiped the paste of crushed chrysanthemum from his palm onto the withers of his horse.

Then Trainer kicked his gray horse into a walk toward Teddy, and Teddy fired one more round, into the alkali between him and Trainer, raising a little puff of dust which whipped away in the wind. Trainer circled away and upwind from Teddy, and held there, and began pitching flowers his direction, the blossoms riding away into the wind but his intention clear.

The Yarrow boys had moved to follow Trainer, and after the shot into the dust they stood awkwardly together for a moment, finally frightened, and then as Trainer began his act with the flowers, they ran to the first of the dead buffalo, the old bull, and climbed triumphantly astride, and sat there together, rocking and playing at riding, heading out on some make-believe voyage.

Teddy raised the rifle toward Trainer, and right then as Emmett watched he saw nothing he had ever suspected as Trainer held and waited.

But there was not another shot. The storm reached them, and Emmett felt the first cold misting of rain, one huge drop and then another onto his back, splattering off the new yellow buckskin, and then off the backs of his hands, and then the great hard rain came at them in a sheet, wind-driven and holding them as it blew across in waves.

Teddy lowered the rifle, and Trainer howled and began scooping great wads of the flowers from the baskets at his side, and throwing them up into the wind and rain, where they drifted and scattered across the alkali which was turning dark and muddy and slick underfoot.

Teddy rode slowly forward with the rifle down across the forks of his saddle, and stopped by the bull buffalo he had killed first, and began dumping the flowers from his own baskets, piling them down
on the animal from upwind as if joining Trainer in this ceremony of regret. When the baskets were empty Teddy spurred the black horse, and rode at a slow canter back toward the edge of the alkali where they had started, the hooves of the horse flinging clumps of mud behind while the woman named Norgene watched him pass, her mouth open in her slick rain-wet face as the cameras swung to focus on her, and then return to Teddy's back as he rode off toward the silver semi-truck trailer and the yellow and metallic blue and red-white and black vehicles gleaming there in the downpour.
Now on the heavy water great pans of ice are coming, breaking and reforming, drifting with the slowed current: shaggy donuts of ice, ragged squares and oblongs, turning and pushing against each other, islands of ice among lakes of dark blue water. Crowded shoreward by the current, they brush the shore ice with a steady "shss" as they catch and go by. And with each sheering contact a little of that freezing slush clings to the outer edge of the shore ice. The ice is building outward, ridged and whitened, thickening with each night of frost, with each wave of shallow water that washes it.

As I look intently into the shallows, I see that boulder ice, a soft, shapeless and gluey mass, is forming on some large, rounded stones not far below the surface; the river is freezing from the bottom also. Now and then a piece of that water-soaked ice dislodges and comes to the surface, bobbing in the moving current, turning over and over. It is dirty ice, grey and heavy with sand, small stones and debris.

Where it gathers speed in the rapids above, the sound of all this ice and water is loud, rough and vaguely menacing. As the cold gradually deepens and the sunlight departs in the days to come, the floating ice will become harder and thicker, and the sound of its movement in the water will change to a harsher grinding and crushing. Now in the slowed current before me it is mostly that steady and seething "shss" that I hear, and underneath it a softer clinking as of many small glasses breaking against each other.

Standing here, watching the ice come down, I recall past years when I came to a channel much like this one, in mid-October with only an inch or two of snow on the gravel bars, to fish for salmon. I had with me a long pole with a steel hook at one end. Standing very still and quiet where the current slackened against the ice, I watched for the glowing red and pink forms of salmon on their way upriver in the last run of the season. Sometimes I would catch sight of one toward mid-channel, beyond reach of my pole; but often they would travel slowly along the edge of the ice, finning and resting, at times nearly motionless in the current. And carefully I would extend my gaff-hook along the ice edge behind the fish, and with a sudden,
strong sweep and jerk I struck the fish through its body and flung it ashore.

The big hook made a nasty gash in the side of the salmon, and fish blood soon stained the snow where I piled them, one by one. If the fish were a female heavy with eggs, the eggs would sometimes spill through the torn side of the fish, to lie pink and golden in the shallow snow with the glazed, mottled bodies of the freezing salmon.

There was something grand and barbaric in that essential, repeated act. To stand there in the snow and cold air toward the end of the year, with a long hook poised above the ice-filled river, was to feel oneself part of something so old that its origin was lost in the sundown of many winters; a feeling intensified, made rich by the smell of ice and cold fish-slime, by the steely color of the winter sky, by the white snow stained with the redness of the salmon: the color of death and the color of winter. And to all this would be added the strong black of the ravens that gathered each evening as I was leaving the river, to clean the snow of the spilled eggs and blood.

I caught the big fish one at a time, watching and walking quietly along the edge of the ice, hour after hour. In a few days I would have two or three hundred salmon heaped in scattered mounds in the thin, dry snow of the sandbar, to be packed home a few at a time, heavy and frozen.

I see no salmon now as I stand here by this ice-filled channel, searching its green, bouldery shallows and bluer depths for a telltale flash of crimson. It may be that there is not a good run this fall, that I am too early or too late, or that the fish have taken another way upriver.

The sound of the water and the ice before me is one sound, familiar over the years. But there are other sounds of the ice, among them the strange and eerie moaning that comes from under the new ice of a pond when it is walked on, as if some sad spirit in the depth of the pond were trying to speak. In midwinter, a large sheet of ice will split with a rippling crack when the temperature suddenly changes or the ice bed shifts underneath, the ripple traveling fast with a winnowing sound at the end. And there are those small, ticking sounds of the ice in the evening when the cold slides toward its deepest zero, as if a thousand hidden insects were chirping bitterly in chorus under the ice and snow. And, finally, the thundering crack and plunge of the shelf ice breaking off in the spring as the rising water wears away its
support: a sound that can be heard for miles, like the detonation of a heavy building.

The ice sings, groans, howls and whistles, as if it were alive. Years ago, when I was hunting for caribou in the Alaska Range, I heard the oldest lament of the ice. It was early October, and the slow freeze was coming down over the empty land and its many lakes. As I stood alone by the roadside one afternoon, there came to me on the nearly windless air, as if it were coming from the earth itself, a muted and forsaken moaning from the lakes and ponds. It was a sound out of prehistory, of something deeply wounded and abandoned, slowly giving up its life to the cold. There were fleeting ghost-fires on the tundra, white-maned shadows from the bands of caribou fleeing before something I could not see. Then, distant shots, gunfire; the sound of a truck rattling by on the frozen road.
To one who lives in the snow and watches it day by day, it is a book to be read. The pages turn as the wind blows; the characters shift, and the images formed by their combinations change in meaning, but the language remains the same. It is a shadow language, spoken by things that have gone by and will come again. The same text has been written there for thousands of years, though I was not here, and will not be here in winters to come, to read it. These seemingly random ways, these paths, these beds, these footprints, these hard, round pellets in the snow: they all have meaning. Dark things may be written there, news of other lives, their sorties and excursions, their terrors and deaths. The tiny feet of a shrew or a vole make a brief, erratic pattern across the snow, and here is a hole down which the animal goes. And now the track of an ermine comes this way, swift and searching, and he too goes down that white shadow of a hole.

A wolverine, and the loping, toed-in track I followed uphill for two miles one spring morning, until it finally dropped away into another watershed and I gave up following it. I wanted to see where he would go and what he would do. But he just went on, certain of where he was going, and nothing came of it for me to see but that sure and steady track in the snowcrust, and the sunlight strong in my eyes.

Snow blows across the highway before me as I walk — little, wavering trails of it swept along like a people dispersed. The snow people — where are they going? Some great danger must pursue them. They hurry and fall; the wind gives them a push, they get up and go on again.

I was walking home from Redmond Creek one morning late in January. On a divide between two watersheds I came upon the scene of a battle between a moose and three wolves. The story was written plainly in the snow at my feet. The wolves had come in from the west, following an old trail from the Salcha River, and found the moose feeding in an open stretch of the overgrown road I was walking.

The sign was fresh, it must have happened the night before. The
snow was torn up, with chunks of frozen moss and broken sticks scattered about; here and there, swatches of moose hair. A confusion of tracks in the trampled snow — the splayed, stabbing feet of the moose, the big, furred pads and spread toenails of the wolves.

I walked on, watching the snow. The moose was large and alone, almost certainly a bull. In one place he backed himself into a low, brush-hung bank to protect his rear. The wolves moved away from him — those moose feet are dangerous. The moose turned, ran on for fifty yards, and the fight began again. It became a running, broken fight that went on for nearly half a mile in the changing, rutted terrain, the red morning light coming across the hills from the sun low in the south. A pattern shifting and uncertain; the wolves relenting, running out into the brush in a wide circle, and closing again: another patch of moose hair in the trodden snow.

I felt that I knew those wolves. I had seen their tracks several times before during that winter, and once they had taken a marten from one of my traps. I believed them to be a female and two nearly grown pups. If I was right, she may have been teaching them how to hunt, and all that turmoil in the snow may have been the serious play of things that must kill to live. But I saw no blood sign that morning, and the moose seemed to have gotten the better of the fight. At the end of it he plunged away into thick alder brush. I saw his tracks, moving more slowly now, as he climbed through a low saddle, going north in the shallow, unbroken snow. The three wolves trotted east toward Banner Creek.

What might have been silence, an unwritten page, an absence, spoke to me as clearly as if I had been there to see it. I have imagined a man who might live as the coldest scholar on earth, who followed each clue in the snow, writing a book as he went. It would be the history of snow, the book of winter. A thousand year text to be read by a people hunting these hills in a distant time. Who was here, and who has gone? What were their names? What did they kill and eat? Whom did they leave behind?
CONTRIBUTORS

ANSEL ADAMS has exhibited his photographs throughout the world, and has written extensively about photography. Recipient of three Guggenheim Fellowships and Yale's Chubb Fellowship, his latest book of photographs is entitled *Yosemite and the Range of Light* (1979).

JAMES BOND's fiction has appeared in the *Intro* series and in *Willow Springs Magazine*. He lives in Cusick, Washington.

HARRISON BRANCH studied photography at Yale with Walker Evans and Paul Caponigro. He is currently teaching photography at Oregon State University, and photographing the Northwest.

EDNA BULLOCK began making photographs eight years ago. She lives and works in Monterey, California.

WYNN BULLOCK's photographs can be seen in the major collections in the world. The most recent monographs on his work are *Wynn Bullock*, (1976) and *The Photograph as Symbol*, (1976).

WILLIAM CHAMBERLAIN has planted over 200,000 Douglas Fir trees, in the past three years, near Astoria, Oregon, where he lives.

KEVIN CLARK was poetry editor of *California Quarterly* for two years. He is presently writing, reading, running, and looking for a teaching job.


PAUL DIX lives in Emigrant, Montana. His photographs have appeared in *Esquire* and *Time*. Presently, he is documenting strip-mining in the West and working on a book, *Aging in America*.

OLIVER GAGLIANI leads the Virginia City Workshop in Virginia City, Nevada. A monograph of his photographs, *Oliver Gagliani*, was published in 1976.

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PATRICIA MACINNES is currently completing her MFA in fiction and poetry at the University of Montana.

PHILIP MAECHLING is a photographer and landscape architect in Florence, Montana. He has had one-man shows at the Museum of the New York Botanical Garden, Iowa State University, and the University of Montana.

DOUG MYERS has poems forthcoming in Intro 12. Doug is currently working on a MFA at the University of Montana.

CAROLINE PATTERSON works as a secretary in Missoula, her hometown, and takes workshops at night. Her work has been published in Bardic Echoes, Permafrost, and Harpoon.

STEWARD A. PEARCE describes himself as an “inveterate outdoorsman and weapons fancier” who enjoys the history, literature and life of the far West.

DAVID QUAMMEN makes his living as a writer and fishing guide in Ennis, Montana. “Orphan Calves” is an excerpt from his second novel, which is still in progress.

JOHN QUINN teaches English in Japan, and owns what remains of the house where Crumley lives.

ROBERT SIMS REID carries on in Missoula, Montana. He has poems in The Montana Poets Anthology, and a novel, The Max Holly Adventures, coming out soon from Seaview Books.
ALBERTO RIOS writes wonderful letters. He lives in Globe, Arizona and teaches for the Arizona Artists in the Schools Program.

RICHARD ROBBINS is a former editor of CutBank, who with Lex Runciman, edited the Where We Are: Montana Poets Anthology.

WILLIAM PITT ROOT has taught poetry across the country. He has three books coming out in 1981: Reasons for Going On Foot, In the World's Common Grasses, and Fireclock.

CAROL ANN RUSSELL lives in Missoula and edits The Gilt Edge, New Series.

RIPLEY SCHEMM teaches part-time in Missoula but would rather raise horses, like her little bay mare for example, who drinks beer, even with strangers.

AARON SISKIND has been exhibiting and publishing photographs for forty years. His work has been featured at the Museum of Modern Art, George Eastman House, and the Art Institute of Chicago. His latest monograph is entitled Spaces (1976).

ANNICK SMITH is a film-maker and writer who lives in a squared-log house beside a wild tributary of the lower Blackfoot River.

KENNETH SPECTOR is a graduate student in Fine Arts at the University of Montana. He was taught photography at the College of Great Falls, and recently had an exhibition of infrared photographs at the University of Montana.

JERRY UELSMANN is Professor of Art at the University of Florida. He is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, a National Endowment for the Arts grant, and numerous awards. Silver Meditations (1976) is a book of his photographs.

PAM USCHUCK travels, tends bar, and has work in Southwestern Review, Spore, Nimrod, Poetry Seattle, Yakima, and CutBank.

GEORGE VENN lives in La Grande, Oregon. His book, Off the Main Road, was published in 1978. George will teach next year in the People's Republic of China.

PETER WILD teaches at the University of Arizona. His last collection of poetry, Wilderness, and a book of prose, Pioneer Conservationists, are now out.

DEWAYNE WILLIAMS lives in Milltown, Montana, where he is a photographer and instructor. His work has been exhibited in Czechoslovakia, Panama, Nevada, Montana and Oregon.

PAUL ZARZYSKI rides broncs, teaches writing at the University of Montana, and pulls no punches in the poems he writes, "for the guys in the chutes."
BOOKS RECEIVED

A Lark and the Emperor, W. M. Aberg, poems, Bits Press, Case Western Reserve.
Always Autumn, Paul Shuttleworth, poems, Nebraska Review Chapbook, Southeast Community College, $1.00.
The Badminton at Great Barrington, Michael Benedikt, poems, University of Pittsburgh Press, $4.50.
Boardwalk, Elizabeth Spires, poems, Bits Press, Case Western Reserve.
Conversational Basketball, Mordecai Marcus, poetry, Nebraska Review Chapbook, Southeast Community College, $1.00.
Dante on Chartres, Florence Dyer, poetry, Nebraska Review Chapbook, $1.00.
Father is a Pillow Tied to a Broom, Gary Soto, poetry, Slow Loris Press, $4.95.
From Down to the Village, David Budbill, poems, The Ark #15, $4.00.
Gumbo, George Barlow, poetry, Doubleday, $6.95.
In Any Country’s Darkness, Jim Hubert, poems, Nebraska Review Chapbook, $1.00.
In a Pig’s Eye, Robert Siegel, poems, The University Presses of Florida, $6.95.
In Memory of My Third Decade, Niclas Kolumban, poems, Foot Print Press, $3.50.
In Shelley’s Leg, Sara Vogin, fiction, Knopf, $10.95.
In the Presence of Mothers, Judith Minty, poems, University of Pittsburgh Press, $4.50.
The Longest March, Norman H. Russel, poems, Nebraska Review Chapbook, $1.00.
More Palamino Please, More Fushia, Marilyn Krysl, poems, Cleveland State University Poetry Center, $4.00.
Northern Letter, Dave Kelly, poems, Nebraska Review Chapbook, $1.00.
Red Cats Climbing in the Apple Trees, Charles Gould, poems, Nebraska Review Chapbook, $1.00.
Santa Fe Ladies, Peggy S. Alberhasky, poems.
To Make a Life, Dan Stryk, poems, Confluence Press, $3.50.

MAGAZINES RECEIVED

Abraxas 21/22, Warren Woessner, David Hilton, eds., 2322 Rugby Row, Madison, Wisconsin 53705, $3.00/copy.
The Agni Review #13, Sharon Dunn, ed., P.O. Box 349, Cambridge, Massachussetts 02138, $3.00/copy.
The Beloit Poetry Journal (Fall/Winter 80-81), Robert Glauber, et. al., eds., Box 2, Beloit, Wisconsin 53511, $1.50/copy.
Beyond Baroque-Obras, Manuel Gamboa, 681 Venice Boulevard, Old Venice City Hall, P.O. Box 806, Venice, California 90291.
Bloodroot #8, Joan Eades, et. al., eds., P.O. Box 891, Grand Forks, North Dakota 58201, $2.00/copy.

The Chariton Review (volume 6, no. 2), Jim Barnes, ed., Northeast Missouri State University, Kirksville, Missouri 63501, $2.00/copy.

Colorado-North Review (volume XX, nos. 1 and 2), Catherine Hite, Debra Menken, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, Colorado 80631, $2.00/copy.

Columbia #5, Harvey Lillywhite, Eva Burch, eds., 404 Dodge, Columbia University, New York City 10027, $3.00/copy.

Corona #1, Lynda Sexson, Michael Sexson, eds., Montana State University, Bozeman, Montana 59717, $6.00/copy.

Dacotah Territory #17, Mark Vinz, Grayce Ray, Moorhead State University, Moorhead, Minnesota, $2.00/copy.

Footprint Magazine #5, Nicholas Kolumban, ed., 150 West Summit Street, Somerville, New Jersey 08876, $3.00/copy.

Gargoyle 15/16, Richard Peabody, ed., P.O. Box 57206, Washington, D.C. 20037, $3.50/copy.

Gilt Edge (volume 2), Madeline DeFrees, CarolAnn Russell, Elizabeth Weber, eds., P.O. Box 8081, Missoula, Montana 59807, $3.50/copy.


Hawaii Review #10, Anita Povich, ed., University of Hawaii, Department of English, 1733 Donaghho Road, Honolulu, Hawaii 96822, $5.00/copy.

Ironwood #16, Michael Cuddihy, ed., Box 40907, Tucson, Arizona 85717, $2.50/copy.

Kayak #55, George Hitchcock, ed., 325 Ocean View Avenue, Santa Cruz, California 95062, $1.00/copy.

Mississippi Mud (Fall, 1980), Joel Weinstein, ed., 3125 S.E. Van Water, Portland, Oregon 97222, $2.00/copy.

Montana Review #2, Rich Ives, Laurie Blauner, eds., 2220 Quail, Missoula, Montana 59801, $3.00/copy.


The North American Review (December, March, 1980), Robely Wilson, ed., University of Northern Iowa, 1222 West 27 Street, Cedar Falls, Iowa 50614, $2.00/copy.

The Ochlockonee Review #2, Steven Huss, ed., 3190 Whirlaway Trail, Tallahassee, Florida 32308, $2.00/copy.

Pequod 11, David Paradis, Mark Rudman, eds., 536 Hill Street, San Francisco, California 94114, $3.00/copy.

The Pikestaff Forum #3, James Scrimgeour, et. al., eds., P.O. Box 127, Normal, Illinois 61761, $2.00/copy.

poetry east #3, Richard Jones, Kate Daniels, eds., 1909 Jefferson Park Avenue, Charlottesville, Virginia 22903, $3.00/copy.

Poetry Now #28/29, E. V. Griffith, ed., 3118 K. Street, Eureka, California 95501, $1.50/copy.

Porch (volume III, no. 3), J. V. Cervantes, ed., Department of English, Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona 85281, $2.00/copy.

Quarterly West (Fall/Winter/80-81), Michael Dubberstein, 312 Olpin Union, University of utah, Salt Lake City, Utah 84112, $2.50/copy.
The Reaper #1, R. McDowell, M. Jarman, eds., 316 3rd Street, Evansville, Indiana 47713, $1.50/copy.

The Slackwater Review (volume 4, no. 1), Ron McFarland, University of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho 83843, $3.50/copy.

Slow Loris Reader #4, Patricia Petrosky, ed., 923 Highview Street, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15206, $3.00/copy.

Small Press Review, Len Fulton, ed., Dustbooks, P.O. Box 100, Paradise, California 95969, fifty cents/copy.

Stand (vol. 22, nos. 1 & 2), c/o Jim Kates, 16 Forest Street, Norwell, Massachusetts, $2.50/copy.

Tar River Poetry (volume 20, no. 1), Peter Makuck, ed., Austin Building, East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina 27834, $2.00/copy.

Three Rivers Poetry Journal 15/16, Gerald Costanzo, ed., P.O. Box 21, Carnegie-Mellon University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15213, $1.50/copy.

Western Humanities Review (Autumn, 1980), Jack Garlington, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah 84112, $2.50/copy.

Willow Springs #7, Bill O'Daly, ed., P.O. Box 1063, Eastern Washington University, Cheney, Washington 99004, $2.50/copy.
Back Issues


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