1979

Bird in the ceiling

Scott Goodsill Hibbard

The University of Montana

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THE BIRD IN THE CEILING

by

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B.A., Williams College, 1974

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA
1979

Approved by:

[Signatures]
Chairman, Board of Examiners

Date
July 24, 1979

Dean, Graduate School
For Chase,  
my brother  
who made this possible.
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THE FISHERMAN'S PERMISSION

You think it's a logger, then see the Chevrolet. Another shithead from town. No Tribune, Crown Royal. He walks like water surrounds him, leans on his heels as though he were there, tackle on water, ripples of his own. He says he belongs, has title to trout. He brought his dog, an aunt, kids busy with Fritos.

Tell him fish are not hitting. Say Go back, fish in the river. His mind is working. He thinks of lake on his legs, the insistent grip, gentle pressure. But listen, land is your pulse, knows what you'll do before you do it, like cowmen good with cattle. The lake is not its own. See that fish are worth their trouble.

Make him a deal. Let him in, demand half the trout. There's crew to feed, the pig and piglets wait for the cook and the end of his dream. Fish have ways of looking you over, a ghost that ruins you sure as any—rattles windows, fish-gill breath on your neck. Believe me, it isn't worth it.

Look, this fisherman isn't right. Fish make a difference, like moon, cloud cover, time of day. Watch the mechanic. Welders have maker's way with metal and melt steel to steel, like a lake fuses creeks, even lakes that keep to themselves. I'm here to tell you, fish the fisherman. His boots are new, brand new with neoprene soles.
CHANGING THE RAIN

Hound Creek broke in '53. Offered
its body then folded in, a bird
recalling its wings. Water left hands
in the field to carve little canyons,
take rain to its place. Like wind,
water goes east, a mind not its own.

A breeze from long ago unlocks
a dammed-up drainage where rain is the best
I've been. Where altos drone
bronze alters, mentions herons in flight.
The mind makes its herringbone climb
the attention of water and falters
at heart when water starts falling.
Green changes the patter of rain,
the drumming of beaks. I crumble
a pitcher of grain. Hands begin to fly.

The mind is full of canyons where rain hangs,
where homes hone into light. A candle
calls from an island and chisels find
the proper route, the isolated heart. I've heard
purpose in canyons. Rain
is better than anyone.
MARCH CALVING

Wind lives here, hunts here, throws everything down its throat. It stands on cattle, pulls hair with canines and tears into faces. Stone gives wind its footing, gives it teeth to attack again and another calf surrenders. Learn from wind and rage. Ice breaks ice you call your own, stone wears off and callous weakens. Far underfoot, snakes dream of still heat but the wind preys here without restraint, scavenger after death lining its teeth. What else is there? Brush and wind stand off and brush is dormant. You find another one dead and hear the creek carry screaming. This far from south, twins distance the rest of themselves. Deep in a den, snakes wind in a common ball. You think a snake more than age, back misaligned, half-life spent infecting mice. Out of his body, a snake dances wind in a coil, dreams of leaving another skin.
LITTLE PETE

Is body faith, a chair aging
each move? You knew the sentence
to lose yourself in pieces, live a step
by step death. How you quit--cold
turkey, nothing but panneled walls
to know the pain, words becoming whispers--
failed you and failed us. Little Pete,
master of showing we're alone,
you wanted nothing close, history
not to matter, but why the crime
against the given? We're not levers
on the D7, easily clutched
or repaired by mechanics. We're not
the Great Falls Select tattooed
and drunk a decade before, set down
out of your life. Marks remain
stretched on the barn wall, beaver pelts
from cold, clear morning trap lines,
the practiced edge of skinning knives,
hide neatly peeled from meat.
CASCADE

Our approach is the usual south. Where the road turns for your center, a farm strips a year at a time, a cemetery looks off to the Smith. We feel the weight of soil and see the Missouri breathe in winter, see it muddy summer.

Was a rock wrong on the butte? Did the road toss up its back? And wires, did wires name their targets? A hay rick splits another rung and a weir runs full. Targhees butt themselves numb, horns curl inside, this steady pulling apart.

I knew it would come. The gavel would find a way here, the way wind grovels up dirt, sees a coyote to killings. We're full of sweat, full of the West and patient, like bait. We know the pull of horses, the bite in our shoulders, collars that flare for the throat.

These tugs relax now, flags after a final wind. Cascade, your tongue gives up its muscle, a singer sings in my skin hindered by turns I haven't made. The question is breath moving off and land, where they go from here.

Direction is in the heart. Like you, I look for the Smith and go on like the Missouri. A road has taken me over. A road smothered in chert, grown out of fields choking with mustard. A road in timber that covers the hungry.
The hangar has burned. Our fingers
regain their bodies, build here and let
the river go. Our father is with us.
He said, Here is the favor of land,
where road will feather sunsets
and send itself to the field, lift
hearing of hawk. Here, where we feed
ourselves to weather, is more than home.

for Chase
LEGRANDE CANNON

This town of modest ash,
built by miners, South Main Chinamen
and soil's basic clay,
begin to live again.
Styled from inattention,
from recent hospice
where those who lived
left, the city calls in young.
Few are native, fewer farmer wise.

When the town was in its prime,
my father's grandfather shared in your wake.
Legrande, how was Paris,
Helena boom-town rich?
The West of the heart,
though anomaly, loved and country scorned,
brought back the granite, Adel
that holds us common, living sincere.

The land once loved
grew to a bent of its own
forgiving neglect. Schooled in absinthe,
fabled women, high-time Paris
mannered your laugh.
Life underdone survived you.
A dirt road remembers the name--
flume on grade flowing gold
now spreads dust in the valley.
MILES CITY MAIL TO NEW ORLEANS

Rain in the west, evening geese sound their way north, the way grandfathers go in summer. Winter was deep and waning then, the wait for longer light, clouds in the west with their funny ways. The Tongue is full now, muddy to the Gulf and fierce in pike, its hook in Miles a hawk's beak hooking through me. The Gulf, placid receiving rivers, buries delta brown. I send you my heart and its uneven texture, sky gray from rain in the west, stroke for distance. Paint a rainbow over plains, grain to break pastel. These colors, this coded music written to its own rhythm running muddy to clear, mull over chorus, sound-out inner ear. Lover, a cord deep in surface is surface we wear. You're here in canvas, I'm in plains waving from roots to whitecaps that flow to the sea.

for Gretchen
CALENDARS

One comes free every year, Burlington Northern PR. A photograph suns off east Wyoming, thirty-one prairies feed Whitetail, listen for April, Sister Mountain's break-up. Months move, prove themselves nervous marking time certain of history and history down the road. Time knows where it's going, runs out on us and can't be trusted, holds no better than water. If it doesn't run off we piss it away.

Dates, trains we pull behind us, give life to die for, times to treasure. They diffuse us, deaf to exorcism till walls drop and there it is, time at a full four beat stop. We're too much under trains. Do rails have reason, know what they lie for? Calendars measure, know the moment, the problem of three hundred sixty-five egos laying track where they travel. Rails sound off and trail ocean to shining sun.
DREAM ON THE NORTHERN PACIFIC

Rails had that easy pace.
Beds unfolded, unstrung
the night. I dreamed Wisconsin
lawn-green and shaking, nothing
in place. I saw Kewaunee,
its man of God who took
the river with him, shifted east
to car-deep soil, corn
full of moon. East where aunts
laced up shoes, those strutted heels.
Shoes on board collected porters.
My fingers polished, traced
NP on pewter and spilled, found me
at the river losing the river.
The preacher called us Water,
Catfish at bait.
I was Indian, and then an Indian
catching rivets, stringing steel
together. Switchmen traded trains,
gave them endless weight,
like sweat in Illinois.
A body was not around me.
Night cooled, cicadas filled
the dark, trains in a constant switchyard.
Lanterns walked off night.
A glow waivered through me,
found itself in lightning, hollowed pine.
St. Elmo's fire covered train cars,
called for lightning. I knew
the fright, wind that dropped its branches
and fled. Sleepers uncoupled, hid
sound in a tunnel--water is quiet
when falling. Eyes opened, scattered
cargo in Illinois.
SUNDAY

Day without a pace,
day of a door frame
shedding sunlight,
sits at a bench
and an empty surface,
blanket thrown on a sofa
waiting. Kansas flat,
grave of the week,
a solitary fly
buzzing, tapping a window.
REJECTION

Take no for an answer.
Think of it this way:
a glass left open empties
and fills again, finally
returns the sand it came from.
A sudden diamond finds you,
sloughs off the kept dead
inside too many years.
There is no answer.
There is only on.
WOODED TRACT, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE, ENGLAND, 1917

A limb blazes full of its length. Branches break out, deaden the downward side and learn an end of age. Another curves a lover's heart. The tree deepens its horizon, remembers forest that gave it heart, ancient forest dead with its time. Sawyers bared the arteries, a sheep without a flock that we see naked, wood when bark has worn away. No dying in secret, no company of brothers.

When beech timbered the landscape, woods had sheep for thought. Land no longer shelters and we see it pulsate, ocean rolling in. Like sheep, land surprises no one. It's gentle. No stumps remain, or depressions where stumps pulled up. The lone survivor reminds us of our place, remembers what was here. Trees feel earth and give it patience.

Sheep lie under the tree. Some remain on foot, heads down and dozing. Sheep know silence, thanksgiving, the need for comfort. A shadow finds the camera and poses. These hampshires, sheared for tunics a month ago, huddle from uncertain sun. Sky grays, holds off over-heating. Hampshires hide faces, keep sky from sight. They will not be its troubled companions. They know their place.

This tree enchants us. Merlins hunt here and so does air, aimless without wind its mentor. We see a grid, its plan woven underground. Trees love us, know us for what we are. Know grooming, loss of forest, methodical fall of axes falling across the Channel. The tree gathers its flock and puts them to sleep.
THE HAWK ON THE WALL

A hawk washed in water paint and weathered blend of light raises easy fire, neck left open. Talons curve the razor-raked perch, shimmer uncertain surface. Feathers turn under, turn another texture, no twitch in the eye, trick of shade but one pattern only.

This hawk hangs on the wall, reminder of phones going off in hand, life that is to kill. One day you pick up the phone and it's hawk alive--talons pierce ears, cut up heart. Remain the hawk, calm cleaning carrion, the dead who feed us.
THE BIRD IN THE CEILING

"The executions resumed today
after a one-day layoff
for the firing squads."
AP Bulletin, April 18, 1979, Tehran

Is the end a birdsong trapped
between here and upstairs music?
I heard it first in the kitchen
cabinet, then in the ceiling above the bed
lost across the floor plan.
There was chirping and scuffing
and now it is quiet,
light pinched off behind it.

The bird flew in
through a spoon sized hole
and the ceiling wedged him.
He worked away from the pin point,
found what I found. Here
in the room below, in the house
with a locked-in bird, windows
lay light on the table.

This bird is a worm caught crawling
unable to answer. Rain means
movement at full exposure,
to stay in soil, certain drowning.
Worms bare their backs, take the fall
of rain, birds who dive down
dying. Body is soil,
veins the drowned-out burrows.

Walls go to the heart, suffocate
songs. What do they
fall back on? Will they stand
for this, call birds harbingers
and chip from the inside?
A wall, a bullet backstop, stands up
to rifle sights, the close perimeter
at the end of a barrel.
THE HOURS OF CATHERINE OF CLEVES,
ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPT, circa 1440

"In the upper margin is the Latin legend which states
fear of the Lord is the beginning of all wisdom."

In the first level of detail, God
wears a tiara. Catherine admires
the Virgin and Child, later kneels,
has the framed and nailed Jesus give
God's hand her insidious manner.
Catherine, we've everything to be afraid of.
I know you by the same chatelaine, the sixth
gift of the Holy Ghost and self-made grace.
The artist, known as Master
of Catherine of Cleves, shows devotion
in death, light gone off in secret
of shadow. A saint opens a lamb's throat,
burns on a breast with no apology.
You've not borne insult, quit your children,
done more than role of apostle, but style
a mauve-rose houppelande, goffered veil and hope
forgiveness forgets. The Master has black
in the 14th flower, fright in porcine faces.
A halo, pierced in smaller art of life-size
still-life border, gives up its light.

This AP photo is the moment of fear
grown into, surrender of the one thing
believed in. No vanity, pious pose,
but crumbling in newspaper gray
a look of love, crime of the heart.
Catherine, you're the mercenary heir
sane as simple flowers. Not this man
who kidnapped his son, remembrance for what
went wrong, but the patron, legend of fright.
You gave to be given bishops
and the miniaturist. The son is puzzled,
unafraid handed over by law. This
is plea mispled. You suffer theft and diminish
vision, smile for the artist and his
fingers. Billings, North Dakota frame
this breakage, no phoenix landing in campfire
but the father, son, and deputy sheriff
shadowed prison gray. In the manuscript,
birds release their cages, farmers
carry the harvest on their backs.
DIGGING IN THE FROSTLINE
The house shuddered in the wind at 3 AM. Jamey looked at the digital numbers the clock projected on the ceiling. The pajama legs were wadded up to his knees and he smoothed them down to his ankles, turned onto his left side and snuggled up to Sally. Pete had a bunk house full of men, he thought, and he'd asked Pete before if he wanted his help at night. No, Pete said. You take care of the morning. That was before the cold weather, but it was Pete's last word. Jamey closed his eyes and tried not to think of the wind.

The alarm went off at 4:30. Jamey hit the button when the buzz started, and stepped onto the cold, varnished pine wood floor. He put on his thermal underwear and wool-lined slippers, went into the kitchen and plugged in the coffee pot. He got dressed, ran out and started the pickup. It started stiffly even though the tank heater had been plugged in all night. He kept it revved with the foot feed, let it warm till it would idle, and dashed back to the house. He hadn't bothered with his coat and the wind bit through his clothes.
The door slammed behind him. Toby, Sally's English Sheep Dog, stood and wagged his tail when Jamey walked back through the coat room. In the kitchen, he poured a cup of yesterday's coffee.

"Shit," he said.

Toby barked. Jamey let him outside. The clear, cold moon reflected off snow drifted in the borrow pit.

He sat at the table and drank his coffee. The thermometer outside the kitchen window read 15 below. With the cup finished, he put on his scarf, down vest and parka, scotch cap, and insulated gloves. He put a plastic bread sack over each boot before putting on the five buckle insulated overshoes. He turned out the light and went outside.

Toby wanted to play. Jamey called him, but Toby ran and barked. He called the dog again. Toby picked up a stick and jumped with it.

He's got a bunkhouse full of men, Jamey thought. He called Toby and Toby ran off barking. The light went on in the bedroom.

"You bastard," he said. Toby ran by with a stick and Jamey kicked him in the face. The dog yelped and lay down. Grabbing him by the collar, Jamey pulled him through the door into the coat room.
The wind nudged the pickup as Jamey drove up the road. The green light from the two-way radio was the only light in the cab. The dash lights hadn’t worked for three months. Neither had the AM radio. Jamey thought about the clear night and the wind. There had been too many nights like this. They'd lost twice as many calves as they had the year before. Last March had been mild but this one had been a killer. It put everyone on edge.

Jamey crossed the cattle guard into the calving pasture. He turned off the road and drove into the meadow, weaved and covered the cattle with his head lights. He plugged the spot light into the lighter and used it to cover the ditches and low spots, anything he could not see with the headlights.

There were 600 cows in the pasture. Seventy-five, maybe eighty had calved, and about a third of their calves had died, mostly on mornings like this. He didn't disturb the bunched-up cattle. If the groups were broken, calves were exposed to wind. He picked up two new calves at the edge of one bunch. Their ears and tails were frozen, but they'd live if they got warmed up. Jamey put them on the floor of the pickup and turned on the blower. He made a mental note of the cows that might be their mothers.

The lights caught a cow lying off by herself and he
drove over to her. She chewed her cud while her calf lay dead on the up wind side.

"Lousy fucking whore," Jamey said to her out the window. Her eyes flashed green in the spotlight.

A short way off, he found two more dead ones and one close to it, flat on his side, stirring his legs. Jamey put him in the pickup with the other calves and he kicked on the floor and bawled. The inside of his mouth was cold.

Jamey finished his round and took the three calves to the calving shed. He lifted the incubator door, an old chest style deep freeze fitted with heat lamps, and found it full with four calves. Calves bawled in the night room warmed by the small wood stove. He put his three by the stove, stoked up the fire and drove to the barn.

Jamey walked into the cookhouse ten minutes late, after catching, saddling, and graining Yeller, a company gelding.

"Where the hell you been?" Pete asked before Jamey could sit down.

Jamey sat down and turned his plate face up. Orin, who sat on Pete's right and was old enough to spend his winters in town, passed Jamey the hashbrowns.

"Three dead. Put another three in the night room."
Two'll be O.K. The other I don't know."

"I mean where the hell you been last night? Thirty below in the wind and we was all out there. Everybody but you."

Jamey glanced at the other men. Bubba, who sat across from Jamey, must have been in his early thirties but it was hard to tell with the tan and greasy skin. A dagger was tattooed on his right forearm and he smelled of gin, like any alcoholic drying out from a six month drunk. The ranch had been his home for two weeks. His eyes seldom left his plate when he ate. On Jamey's right were two kids out for the winter from Great Falls. They fed hay. One of them rode when Jamey and Pete needed help. All had their eyes on their food. Jamey took four link sausages and dropped them on his plate.

"Didn't you hear that wind last night?" Pete said.

Jamey took a bite from a sausage. "I thought it would blow the house down," he said.

"God damn right. What did you do about it?"

"Checked 'em on the way up like I always do."

"Your way up was three hours late."

Jamey heard one of the kids thank the cook for breakfast. "You said you'd take care of the nights."

"Can't you think when you hear a wind like that?" Pete
said.

Jamey saw the hashbrowns disappear from his plate. He noticed that he and Pete were the only ones left at the table. A yellow scarf was tied snug around Jamey's neck and his shirt sleeves were rolled up over his long underwear. His face was wind red. He looked at Pete and the two inch scar above his left eyebrow that reddened when he got mad.

Pete took his plate into the kitchen. Jamey heard him drop his utensils in the coffee can the cook kept by the sink, heard him set his plate on the other plates, noticed that nothing was said to the cook, and heard the footsteps come back through the dining room.

"Do I have to tell you everything to do?" Pete said, and slammed the door behind him.

Jamey poured another cup of coffee and cupped his hands around its warmth.

The mercury night light in the corral lit the horses soft blue as Jamey walked through the corral, stopped and petted Susy. Her whiskers were frosted. "How's my girl today," he said. He went into the barn and snapped on the lights. Yeller and Matt Dillon, Pete's bay gelding,
blinked their eyes, turned their heads and looked at Jamey. A string of 100 watt bare bulbs hung above the stalls. Jamey walked back to the tack room and put on chaps that were stiff with the cold. The zipper stuck. He took out his pocket knife, trimmed the fringe, and zipped up the shotgun chaps. The spurs fit snug on his overshoes. He picked out his green, nylon bridle with the Trammel Grazing Bit from a peg of one inch pipe sunk in the wall above the saddle rack. The bit warmed in his bare hands when he blew on it. His hands were cold, and he knew they'd be cold for the rest of the day. Mittens were warmer, but clumsy to rein a horse and rope with. Pete said if you can't keep your hands warm in gloves then get a job in town. Jamey put his gloves on, swung his arms and felt his fingers tingle when the blood came back. They don't tingle like this in Arizona, he thought.

Once a month or every six weeks, Jamey got a card from Paul, his father who wintered in Arizona with a woman Jamey's age. Paul had never brought her to the ranch. The ranch was Paul's, and had been his father's before that. The card this week said, "Pete says weather's been a bitch. Keep those calves alive." No Dear Jamey, no Love, Dad. Just Jamey Hale, c/o Hale Cattle Company, Cascade, Montana, and two sentences. The picture on the
postcard was of a Holiday Inn swimming pool, hot and sunny.

Jamey hadn't seen his father since October when they shipped the calves. After shipping they went elk hunting, shot and crippled a five point. They looked for two days but couldn't find the wounded bull. The day before Paul left for Arizona he took Jamey and Sally to dinner at the Country Club in Great Falls. He told Jamey to learn all he could from Pete, but the foreman's job was his as soon as he felt he was ready for it. Jamey said that he had been thinking about business school, that ramrodding a ranch was just too rough a way to go. Paul lifted his eyebrows and said nothing while he finished his steak. He lit a cigar, smoked with both elbows on the table, and said that running the outfit as foreman was the best training a ranch manager could have. "But you don't have to be a rancher to be happy," he said. A smile thinned his lips. "You could sell insurance."

Yeller put his head down when Jamey unhooked the halter from around his head and moved it to his neck. The horse smiled—he always did unless working cattle in a tight corral.

"How's the yella fella?" Jamey said, and slipped the bit into Yeller's mouth.
Pete walked into the barn, picked out his bridle with the high port Sleister and stepped into Matt Dillon's stall.

You asshole, Jamey thought. The wind began to pick up and he felt the cold move under his coat. He tightened the cinch, let the stirrup drop into place and led Yeller out of the stall. Pete followed with Matt Dillon and flipped out the light. The soft blue on the horses was fading in the dawn. They loaded the horses in the open four horse trailer and drove to the calving pasture.

Jamey looked at the snow drifted in the borrow pit. The AM radio was low, but Pete turned it up when the three note jingle signaled the weather report that said snow and colder, stockman's warning, high winds in the chinook zone. The ranch, sixty miles south of Great Falls, sat on the east slope of the Big Belts.

"Check the ridge. If you got one that's chilled get him down here."

"Yeller won't let a calf on his back."

"Come get me," Pete said.

Pete stopped the pickup, put on the emergency brake and let it idle so the heater would be ready for chilled calves. The fifth wheel trailer creaked with cold when the horses turned to unload.
"You should have that horse trained by now," Pete said.

Jamey swung onto Yeller and headed for the hill at a high trot. In the early light he could make out cows standing on the ridge top. He headed for them, hand held over his face to break the wind.

Two calves were dead on the ridge, born that night and frozen. One cow stood with her dead calf. The other had been abandoned. His matted hair lay flat, tongue frozen to the ground, eyes a blue-white. The smooth hooves showed he'd never stood. The other calf had been cleaned off, but not having sucked, wouldn't have lived for more than an hour.

Jamey found a calf lower down on the hill, sheltered by a rock outcropping. The cow stood off and the calf lay on his side, stirred his legs and bawled the low, drawn-out cry they make when they're about to freeze. Jamey got off and rubbed the calf with a gunny sack he carried on the saddle. A small white spot deepened the calf's pupils. When Jamey tried to stand him, the calf hung limp. He slapped the side of his head, shook him and slapped him again, harder.

The calf's head moved as though spastic swinging from shoulder to shoulder, bawling the long, drawn-out note.
Jamey wrapped the reins around his hand, picked up the calf and tried to walk slowly up to Yeller. Yeller flared his nostrils, jerked his ears forward and leaned back. He had a soft mouth and didn't pull the reins away, but Jamey could not get close.

"Ho, boy, ho now," he said.

Yeller snorted and kept the reins tight.

"Fuck," Jamey said. He put the calf down behind the rock outcropping. The cow stood a short way off, watching but calm. She grazed, and called to the calf.

Jamey got on his horse. "Take care of your calf," he said.

He found Pete trying to help a calf suck. The cow wouldn't stand. Pete talked easy to her, kept the calf between him and the cow, and steered the calf by pulling on his tail. He scratched the calf on the thigh.

"Whoa, bossy, easy now. Nobody'll hurt your calf."

Watching him, sniffing the calf, the cow started to settle down. The calf found an udder, Pete stepped away and the calf kept sucking.

"How you do that out here is something I'll never know."

"Can't very often. What's up there?"

"Two dead. One chilled."
"Where is he?" Pete stopped as he took the hobbles off his horse. "Can't you get a calf on that big bastard?"

"You put him in my string knowing damn well he'll never pack a calf."

Pete took the hobbles off and stuck them through the hobble ring on his saddle. "If you was a cowboy he'd pack one."

That afternoon, Jamey worked pairs from the calving pasture to the cow-calf pasture. The wind quit late that morning. It warmed up to twenty degrees, and he could keep his hands warm without too much trouble. He had twelve cows paired, and drifted them toward the gate. The first winter Pete had run the place, Jamey had taken the semester off from Southern Methodist University to work for the new foreman. He liked Pete from the start. Sally came up from SMU at the end of the semester and spent three weeks riding, helping them put the cattle out to summer pasture. They went to jackpot ropings. Pete and Jamey team roped and won money later in the summer. They cooked-out with Sally at the reservoir, and Pete taught her about working cattle and handling horses. Mickey gave her a western sweater at the going
away party they had for Sally.

Jamey turned the pairs onto the road for a straight walk to the gate. It began to cool, and the tired, young calves slowed down. Clouds moved in from the west. From the coast, Jamey thought, from Seattle where you don't have to wear chaps and overshoes and keep calves walking down the road, or worry about the weather, get up in the middle of the night to pick up freezing calves. In Seattle, he thought, you work inside and get weekends off. He thought about the sixteen Sundays he got off every year and the projects that always needed doing around the house.

Jamey trotted around the cattle and opened the gate. The twelve pair walked through and he pushed them to the creek. The smaller calves had to be shoved across. The hole in his overshoe let his boot get wet.

Jamey circled through the calving pasture at a trot to check the cows he knew would be calving. None were having trouble. At dusk he pulled his horse down to a walk and rode through the last of the cattle. The pasture lay in a crescent of mountains where the west broke into plains. He could feel the land, the plains and mountains, the wind and wintertime grass as though they were his. Weather slid off the mountains and funneled down through
the crescent, down into fields where the cattle stood. He stopped his horse, watched cows chew their cuds and listened to their jaws work. He felt the breeze curve around his face, and knew there'd be no storm that night.

When Jamey drove home to the weather beaten, company log house three miles from headquarters, Toby bounded up when he got out of the pickup. "How's the nose?" he said as he petted the dog. Toby jumped and barked when Jamey kicked off his overshoes. The house had no storm doors or storm windows. Jamey shook when he took his coat off.

Sally had taken a bath and her long black hair hadn't dried. The cotton Mexican dress neatly outlined her firm breasts. Jamey smiled and watched her through the glass in the coat room door. He went in and kissed her.

"Hel-lo," she said.

"I love you."

With his hand full of peanuts from the bowl she kept on the counter, he opened a beer, then opened one for Sally. "Do I have time for a bath?"

"Dinner's ready but it'll stay," she said. "It's all right."

The hot bath felt good after being cold all day. He
lay in the tub, drank his beer and waited for his feet to stop stinging. Soaking in the tub, he read Newsweek but his hands felt separate keeping them dry with the magazine. He set the magazine down, washed his hair, and felt his scalp grow cold as he soaked in the tub. He thought the water was dirty for his having had a bath the day before.

"Dinner's ready," Sally said.

Jamey pulled the plug and felt the water drain away. It was different now. There was no running to town Saturday nights with Pete and the bunk house crew, no drinking at the Sportsman's and dancing the jitterbug with Mickey to The Stardust Highway, the band that came to the Angus from Great Falls. For as fat as she was, Mickey was light on her feet. After a little Black Velvet, she joked about Pete's manly endowment. Jamey loved her when she warmed up like that. But now that Jamey was married and settled down, working for Pete bought time while Jamey decided to run it himself or leave. Pete and Mickey had been among the few invited to the wedding, but had not attended, or given him and Sally a wedding present, or had them to dinner.

"It's getting cold," Sally said, calling to him from the kitchen.
Except for his hair, Jamey was dry. He toweled and combed his hair, put on his bathrobe and slippers, went into the kitchen and sat down for dinner.

Sally picked through her salad, tomatoes first, then the celery. She gave her onions to Jamey, set her fork down and rubbed her forehead with her left hand. She shook her head.

"Jamey."

Jamey looked at her and stopped chewing.

"I've been knotted-up all day. I just can't help it." She put her hands in her lap. "Pete stopped by today and said I was feeding the pigs way too much, and he's never been around pigs in his life."

"He's the big boss," Jamey said. He swallowed and took another bite.

"I've hated him ever since he yelled at me," Sally said.

"He yells at everyone when we move cows and calves. Besides, a Texas Rose like you can't hate anyone." He smiled and stood up from the table, went into the pantry and came out with a can of sardines. He peeled the lid back, drained the oil into a bowl and put the bowl in the coat room for Toby. Toby looked at him when he shut the door.
"Want any?"

Sally shook her head. Jamey put some of the sardines in his salad. Sally looked at her salad and picked out a tomato. They were canned tomatoes and mushy, but looked good in the salad with the sliced hard boiled eggs. She watched Jamey eat. Her eyes had a wistful look they often had.

"It can't go on like this, Jamey. It's eating us alive."

Jamey picked out a sardine. "I'm not ready for that decision," he said. He felt his stomach begin to knot.

"For God's sake, when will you be? When will you realize it's your ranch?"

"So what if it is?" He stabbed a sardine, stuck it in his mouth and looked at Sally. Her cheeks were red.

"Then let's leave," she said.

"To where? To what?"

"Get an M.B.A. and you can go anywhere." Sally watched him eat a sardine. "We could go back to Texas," she said, "and get out of this God awful cold."

"You can have that buzzard country."

"Christ," Sally said. She put her left hand to her mouth and shook her head. A film in her eyes reflected the overhead light. Jamey took her into the living room,
they sat on the couch and she turned her face into his shoulder.

"Do you know what Mickey said today?"

"What did our foreman's fat wife say today?"

"She told me Pete's the only one who knows anything."

Jamey's face went tight.

"Can you imagine that? The gall that woman has."

Jamey got up and turned on the TV. A serial came on with canned laughter. He hadn't seen it before, and didn't think it funny. He thought about how he'd helped Pete, how he'd learned from him, and been his right hand man. That was three years ago.

A burst of laughter came from the TV and he heard Sally call him from the kitchen. She asked if he were through. He said he was.

The cow had strained till her uterus popped out. Hard and raw, it spilled a good two feet onto the ground. Dirt stuck to it. The cow couldn't get up and her calf shivered, newborn, wet beside her. He was big.

Jamey loped to the calving shed. No one was there, no one was at headquarters. The farmhand started and he drove it fast, first to the shop to pick up a log chain,
then to the foreman's house to pick up Pet's suture set. Mickey sat watching a game show, smoking Camels, when Jamey rapped on the door.

"Another cold day," he said.

Mickey looked at Jamey's hands when she gave him the set. The cigarette bobbed in her mouth when she sat down in the reclining rocker. She had her bathrobe on.

"If you can raise Pete on the radio, send him out to Spring Crick. I need him to stitch up a prolapse."

"O.K.," she said.

The TV showed a couple wandering through a maze. A buzzer sounded as Jamey closed the door.

He jumped on the farmhand, held the suture kit in his lap, and drove as fast as he dared. The farmhand steered from the rear wheels and shimmied at thirty. Thirty miles an hour at five above cut through any clothes Jamey had on.

He looked for a man on horseback and saw no one.

Jamey stopped with the bale fork over the cow's hind quarters. With the automatic in park, he ran the chain around the bale fork, hooked each end to a hind leg and hoisted her pelvis chest high. He rolled up his shirt sleeves, pushed his long underwear up to his elbows, and cleaned his hands, forearms, and the cow's uterus with
Lysol. The uterus hung over the cow's tail and swayed as she kicked against the chain.

Standing on the suture kit, Jamey gathered up the uterus in both arms and stuffed it back in the cow. The front of his shirt got bloody. He felt its warmth on his chest.

Breathing hard, he watched for Pete and shook tension from his arms. The blood on his hands froze, his fingers stiffened as he listened to the quiet idle of the farmhand.

He grabbed three boluses and reached them deep into the uterus. Blood oozed from the vaginal lips. Allowing two inches on each side of the opening, Jamey made five stitches with a heavy, curved needle with thread that seemed like lace for a tennis shoe. He used the sutures to poke the needle through the skin. After giving her 60cc's of penicillin, he let her down and unhooked the chain. She panted, and looked at nothing when Jamey tied her calf to the running board.

At the shed, Jamey beat a cow with a rubber hose to get her in the stanchion. Having recently lost her calf, she still had milk. After fifteen minutes of sitting on a five gallon bucket and holding the calf in his lap, the calf sucked on his own. Jamey carried him to a jug, stood him up, and sprinkled Magic Mother-Up on the calf's back.
Jamey smelled the Mother-Up and wondered why cows liked it. The cow ran back and milled in the jug when he let her out of the stanchion. She smelled the Mother-Up, stopped and licked the calf.

Jamey walked back to the front of the shed and saw Pete ride in on Matt Dillon.

"What's this about a prolapse?"

"Stitched her up," Jamey said. The scar reddened above Pete's eyebrow. "I've seen it done before."

"Since when are you a vet'narian?" Pete leaned forward on his saddle horn and looked into the shed.

"I grafted her calf on that hereford cow." Jamey felt the stiffness of the frozen blood on his shirt. "I didn't think a calf suckin' on her would help much."

"You take that calf away and she's got nothin' to live for," Pete said. "Between that and the fact you never stitched one sure as hell gonna kill her."

Jamey thought something snapped inside him. He heard himself say, "Next time I'll let her die. Maybe that'll make you feel better."

Pete flushed, got off his horse, and walked up to Jamey, bridle reins in his left hand. He stuck his finger in Jamey's chest and poked him as he spoke.

"You ain't worth nothin'," he said. "Not since you
married."

Jamey felt something rush through him. "Get your finger out of my chest. Before I break it."

Pete stepped to one side, looked back at Jamey with hot, certain eyes and said, "You're no threat to me." He put his hands in the small of his back and squared his shoulders. "All you Hale's want is good lookin' women."

"Sally's good on horseback and you know it."

"That bitch-in-heat Sally can hump my saddle horn."

Jamey's mouth quivered. "You're fired." He watched Pete's jaw clench and unclench. Pete's hands came back to his sides, and Jamey waited for him to move his fist.

"You don't sign my checks."

"I don't see your name on the front gate."

Pete lowered his cap bill. Jamey couldn't see his eyes. "Make that fat wife 'a yours clean the catshit outa the closet."

Pete turned his head and looked at the ground, then stepped to Matt Dillon and swung on. He sat in the saddle, mouth locked in a tight frown, and looked at Jamey. "Mickey's right," he said. "If we was machinery we'd get treated better." His eyes were red.

The bay gelding swished his tail as Pete rode off. The laughter, drinking at the Sportsman's and talk of
horses, cattle, irrigation and hay machinery, seemed a lifetime away. Jamey wanted to reach in deep where the ranch was, in where he felt the dry wind and the goodness of caring for animals and crops.

He urinated against the side of the shed. In the jug, the cow was kicking her graft calf as the calf tried to suck. With the two foot piece of hose, Jamey stepped into the jug and shut the gate behind him. He hit the cow with the hose and made her stand for the calf.

Sally was in the bath tub. Jamey closed the bathroom door behind him, pulled the lid down on the toilet and sat down. There must have been six inches of soap bubbles on the water. Sally's skin glistened wet coated with bath oil.

"What's wrong?" she said.

Jamey leaned forward, elbows on his knees, hands to his mouth, eyes on the bubbles and Sally's skin. He let out a deep breath.

"Forget about Texas," he said, "or any place else."

That afternoon, Jamey had walked across the corral pock-marked with frozen cattle tracks, eyes on the ground picking his steps and still he turned an ankle. No more
freeze between us, he thought, and thought then what he'd tell Sally, but it didn't seem real now. He'd gone over to talk to Orin and Bubba who, to hang a gate at the alley end of the corral, chipped at the frozen ground with a pick and bar. Orin watched Jamey walk over to them. Bubba swung the pick from his knees and chipped out a hole. He had his coat off.

"I wished I was a cowboy," Orin said. "Walk around with spurs and watch the work get done."

Jamey smiled. The sun sparkled on Orin's gold tooth. Bubba set the pick down.

"Mount the gate out of the post," Jamey said. "When you hang them this way they freeze down."

"Pete said do her this way."

"Pete doesn't work here anymore."

Orin's jaw went slack. Leaning forward on the pick handle, Bubba spit in the hole he'd chipped and moved his chew of Red Man from the left cheek to the right cheek with one sweep of the tongue. He kept his eyes on the hole. A smile spread over Orin's face.

Jamey showed them where he wanted the holes drilled. He told them to use the elbow hinges in the carpenter shop. Back in the shed, he drew a cup of coffee from the electric percolator in the night room. He sat on the cot,
looked at his coffee and watched the oil beads float on the surface. Rancid oil from the coffee bean, he'd heard once. Plugs up your liver. He sat on the cot with his coat zipped up and felt the cup get cool in his hands.

Sally had stopped bathing and was watching Jamey. "So it finally happened," she said.

"You're Mrs. Foreman now." Jamey put his face down and scratched his scalp. "Think about riding again," he said.

"I get so cold."

"I'll need your help."

Jamey let out another deep breath, kissed her and walked out of the bathroom. He opened a beer, sat on the couch and watched the wind scrape snow on the window.