Four days in blue earth

David F. Johnson

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University of Montana
Four Days in Blue Earth

by

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the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

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Date
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The first thing would be her mother's hand, chapped and gentle, shaking her awake in time to a low and still young voice in song: Maria, Maria, rise and shine, last one up gets a paddled behind.

Maria's younger sisters Elsie and Alice stir slightly as Maria slides from under the quilt to the feel of the cool hardpacked floor underfoot, the swept dirt warmer than the air, to the weight of her everyday dress over her head and shoulders. She sees Jarred, the youngest, still in his crib. She sees her father in his bed at the far end of the cabin's single room. He is caught in lamplight, his mouth soft and open in the round astonishment of sleep.

Her mother would hand her the pail. Hot water wash for the rubbery fingers of the jersey's udder. Then the sound of steaming milk hitting the metal bucket. The smell of heat and fat in raw milk. The warm cowhide against Maria's forehead tempting sleep again. At the barn door the dawn the color of blood, as if day might come to the world heart first.
Later her father tries to sneak fresh top cream and foam into his bowl of coffee. Mother says without turning from the smoked smell of home-raised bacon and eggs: Eli Appleman, you'll leave some for my butter or pay a mean piper.

Look there, Maria says. Outside through the window the sky wakes rust colored to the east and cobalt in the west, and everywhere swallows dark and quick in silhouette.

Eighty years later Maria Appleman Rutledge opened her eyes and told herself, that's how light came to the Blue River country in those days. She looked to her window. That's the way light still comes. She sat up, and her bare feet brushed the worn wood floor. The world is an old place. She touched her face, which was softer now than on her wedding day. She turned to say something about the wedding to Abe, but his bed stood eleven years empty and dark in the corner.

Bowing her head she began her day then, praying for her sons and daughters and their sons and daughters, and theirs, present and future. She prayed for the souls of her dead husband, and father, and even her mother, though in her opinion her mother really needed no such intercession. She prayed most and hardest for the baby she'd lost, a baby born and dead without any name more than sixty years ago. Finally she prayed for this place and day and then was done.
She turned on the bedside light and took her prescriptions. There were five medicine pills, but two she threw out. She told that to the Health Service doctor, a young man obviously of good people and very polite to her until he sat down next to her in the otherwise empty waiting room and spoke slowly. "Mrs. Rutledge. You understand I wouldn't prescribe these if they weren't the best medicine to help you?"

"Help me what? Live longer?"

He blinked. "Yes ma'am."

"Well, you'll have to do better than that."

"You don't want to live longer?"

Mrs. Rutledge saw this was going to be more difficult than she'd thought. She waited a moment, watching her own hands still in her lap, then said, "No."

"Excuse me. No which?"

"Why?"

"Why what, Mrs. Rutledge?"

"Why d'ye ask, and no and why both."

The doctor looked at her eyes. "Follow my finger if you would for a second." He moved it back and forth. "Are you feeling okay?"

She slapped his hand away from her face. "Never better. Modern medicine has helped me so much."

The young man sighed. "That's our problem, Mrs. Rutledge. We can't help you if you don't take your medicine."
"You can't help me til you answer m'question. Why?"

"Mrs. Rutledge, if it's going to be like this, I don't see the point of continuing our discussion, do you? Should I call your son and talk with him instead?"

"Young man. You know very well we could keep talking just as we are."

"But it's not really getting us anywhere, is it?"

"You mean you choose to stop talking when talking isn't doing you any good?"

"Mrs. Rutledge--"

"Yes or no will do, Tommy Harmon."

"I'll call your son and have him pick you up."

"You'll do no such thing, young man. Never threaten a person with her own blood if ye ever hope t'live right. You expect me to answer to you but never you to me. We're not even talkin whether that's doctrin'. We're talkin' whether that's a right way t' be. What d'ye think?"

"All right. I choose not to carry on pointless conversations. Is that better?"

"You bet. Means you believe you have free will. Now then. You think it's just you, or everybody has free will?"

"Okay, but--"

"Mind the pan you're cookin in and not the ones on the wall. You believe other people have free will?"

"I guess."
"You guess. Listen doctor: I had a young man in 1917 and they took him in '18 and he died in France. For two months after I got letters from a dead man. So I married a better man I didn't at first love, for which I hope to be forgiven. Bore him children in 1921, '22, '24, and '25, the last born dead. Lost my oldest in '41, my husband in '77. I'm eighty-seven years old and on good days I can remember things. But on days I take your pills, I vomit instead. Now, I don't see as that does me any good. Memory is how you know you're not other people. I got no time and no reason and no desire or right, even, to lose myself in any way but by dying."

"All right." He was looking at his shoes. "But there are other treatments." He went to his desk and began to write a new prescription. "Why didn't you just tell me about the vomiting in the first place?"

"Maybe I'm senile."

He smiled and gave her the prescription. "Try this. If you have trouble with it, let me know. If I have reason to believe you don't voluntarily go through with treatment, it would be my duty to see that someone helped you remember. That's if I have reason to believe it. Okay?"

She got up to leave.

"If you haven't yet, Mrs. Rutledge, you ought to think about arranging things with your family."
"I expect." She reached out her hand and rolled it palm down so two of her pills dropped into her bedroom wastebasket. From the corner of the room came a loud snort, and Bones, Mrs. Rutledge's English Bulldog, stepped out of his cutaway cardboard box bed, stretched, and sat before her. She scratched his ears. Bones wasn't the only thing Abe had bought for her, and wasn't as bad as the underground sprinkler system or the trip to California or the time he got her shares in a fake beaver farm for Christmas. The dog weighed eighty-five pounds and his head was bigger around than his shoulder was high. He was fat and happy, two characteristics which rendered him worthless for any work or purpose Mrs. Rutledge could devise. She had an abiding mistrust of any thing or one who was always happy. Abe had died two months after he bought Bones.

She dressed without looking at herself in the mirror, shut off the light, and moved stiffly through the curtained doorway of the darkened bedroom to the hallway beyond, which was reduced to a narrow passage lined with everything she had managed to save out, all of it boxed in steamer crates and peach baskets and brown butcher paper. She stepped into one of the rooms that gave into the hall. Cautious of falling, she placed her hands upon Abe's chest of woodworking tools as she squeezed past shuffling sideways into the far corner where her mother's and mother's mother's things lay, and lifting and setting
aside a packet of dance cards and title deeds and letters
going to dust in age, reached into the dark under a cane
rocker and straightened, holding up a green glass canning
jar three-fourths full of dirt.

This she turned in her hands, watching the dry
powder inside cascade over itself. Then she put the jar
back and returned to the hallway.

Most mornings she looked over one or two of her
things. For she felt things live by their shapes, people
by their acts, and in the shapes and acts of the past the
future predicts itself, all the surface of mere event
stripped to deeper pattern. Overflowing out of the dead­
end trails to the children's old bedrooms and advancing
in time down the hallway toward her own room, the last of
her things were just outside her bedroom's doorway now.

She knew the name and history of all of it, or most
of it most of the time. Yet apart from her, no
remembrance moved any of it to order and already this
stuff she kept had become a testimony of meaninglessness,
or what people even of her own blood thought of as her
gathering senility or, if they inclined to be polite, her
packrattishness.

Just that spring, her grandson Marshal had re-set
some posts for her garden fence. He drove the first two
without speaking, holding the post plumb with one hand
and methodically swinging the maul with the other,
letting the weight in the head of it and the flat of its
steel face do the work. It was a dead spring afternoon, hot in a promise of a late thunderstorm, and before sinking the last post Marshall drank from the garden pump. After, straightening and bare shouldered, he looked like an enlarged version of Abe. Finally he said what she understood he had meant to say all along: "You know, gran’ma, you oughta go through and throw out some of that stuff upstairs."

"No."

"I’d help ya haul ’er out."

"’S not that."

"Well, it’s a fire hazard, gran’ma."

"Hazard’s worth the risk."

He drank again from the pump and picked up the maul, but did not move back to the fence.

"It’s my property. It’s what I have to show. You c’n tell your dad I said that. Tell him I said he can run my house, too, if I can run his ranch."

Marshall began to pound in the last post, the maul head smacking down flat on the post’s topwood, the echoed report doubling off Mrs. Tuggle’s hen house, even, repeated, like the sound of a machine running, and under the high sun directly overhead now Marshall sweat across his back and threw no discernible shadow.

And that had been the end of it, at least for now. Her son ran sheep on the old Ellsworth place east of town, in the outland range coutry once run to fine
Walkers. Now in the canyon and pine country both only 
Eli Branch still ran any stock at all full-year around. 
Everybody else ran it as summer range or went broke and 
left or left crazy or just left, so the land was emptier 
now than in 1890, let alone 1910, when a person there had 
neighbors and together raised the schoolhouse, building 
it into a hillside to last and for the windbreak, and the 
smell of it heavy as a draft horse. Walking to school 
over the rises in the rolled countryside of a cold 
morning after the second teacher came, you could mark it 
by the smoke of the chimney even before real light came 
from the Snake River country. Sometimes the snow had 
been pink in the afternoons. Some said from a kind of 
spider’s eggs, some said algae, some said mites, some 
said dust in light. The first teacher had been Miss 
Clark, hired and brought from Virginia, who some--mostly 
men--said was too good for this country, and who others-- 
mostly wives--said she only thought she was too good. 
She stayed with the families of her pupils, boarding free 
for six months each place as part of her pay. On 
afternoons sometimes straight and silent she would break 
and cry in class for no reason anybody knew. Then she 
got thrown out of the Jensen place in early spring and 
came to Maria’s family. That was a disgraceful piece of 
business, but Jensen was no saint, so they kept her on, 
no one else on such short notice wanting the work for the 
pay.
On June 21st that year Maria’s mother fixed no supper. That night Maria and her sisters and brother slept in the barn loft and Jarred cried so Maria held him past the rise of the moon and none of them said anything then or until much later, just listened to the yelling come clear out from the house. The next day Miss Clark was gone.

Maria never saw her again, because in August Miss Clark married the oldest Ellsworth boy, Harper, and in September she began to show her pregnancy, and he beat her to death and the men met and handed down judgment, there being in their estimation no other reliable law in the matter. Later it came out there was some problem about starting the horse, because Harper wasn’t about to, nor anybody else, until finally old man Ellsworth called them all sonsabitches and stepped up through the dry September grass and slapped the horse from under his own son and Harper swung clear with a jerk and spun in the dawn air.

At the top of the narrow staircase, Mrs. Rutledge hesitated, then led with her left foot, gripping the bannister rails her son and grandson had put in after she broke her hip ten years before. She had lain at the bottom of the stairs all day. The paperboy, taking collection, found her. Very mortifying, having to meet folks all sprawled out like that. The paperboy was Jenny Alrich Manning’s grandson. Name of Manning. Good
people. The boy's grandfather, Herman, put in the plumbing in 1934. Herman Manning took furniture Abe made for the work. That youngster had waited with her, his calm and politeness strange until she knew it to be fear and embarrassment. Last year at Herman Manning's funeral she had seen the boy, eighteen or so now, filing out past the open casket on a pale day, and she had seen the same calm in the face, this time mixed with anger as well as the expected sorrow. He'd stood there a long time, the last one to leave. No one in that family cried a drop, nobody keened, nobody even joked or spoke out of desperation, but kept that strange brittle calm instead, there and all through the lowering of the coffin into the ground, and that kept silence had grown worse than if they'd all been wailing.

The ambulance had taken her and the broken hip to St. Mary's in Premium. It was the only time she'd ever been a patient in a hospital, and she wasn't about to go again. She wanted to die at home, nobody prodding a person all the time. In hospitals they sent you to die a stranger to the strangers around you who called you by your broken parts when they thought you weren't in range to hear, to die away from where you lived as if living and dying were separate acts and dying must be hidden like something shameful.

On the landing at the turn in the stairs Mrs. Rutledge rested. From the window she could see her
garden, the Tuggles' barnlot, and Tom Chapman's pasture and dog kennel on the other side of that, in back of his house, which looked to be a junkyard shack from here. Chapman raised long-legged black and brown Dobermans. First he was going to sell them back East as attack dogs, but then he started running them on coyotes for the bounty. He'd bait at a sheep kill, wait in a blind with his dogs, and let them slip at dawn. Near as Mrs. Rutledge could tell, that was about all he did for a living, so there must have been something in it, but from the looks of his place, not much, either in money or edification.

Tuggle was a better man, but he was more stubborn than shrewd. Right now he was standing still and slackjawed amongst his aimless chickens, scrap bucket in hand. The chickens were looking at the scrap bucket and he was looking at the rising sun.

Downstairs Mrs. Rutledge brushed her teeth with baking soda and washed her hair in the sink. Her hair was white now, shoulder length. It would not grow any longer. At seventeen it grew waist length and jet black and she was all height and blue eyes, and she had fallen in love with the first boy who hadn't either talked to her like she was a hunting dog or been afraid of her.

His name was Billy Williams and he'd gone to school in town where his dad and he worked a smithy. She'd met him there, checking on a plow blade her father had left.
She came in out of the sun and white dust of the street into a closer heat and he'd been at it in the dim, beating cherried steel on a black iron anvil, outlined and nameless and bare chested in the light of an opposite shot window and every time he brought the hammer down the air rang to make her eyes blink and the anvil dance, and sparks shot across his legs toward the furnace, arching orange in flat angles and driving down into the black ground. He'd tonged the work back into the wavering coals lit all bright and been across the shop still with the hammer off the end of an arm off the steep slope of symmetrical shoulders, and before her, breathing from the labor, said, "You'll be wantin' a plow."

She turned from him, went to the door, and stopped, looking him over from over her shoulder. "I'll be wantin', Mr. Williams, if that's your name, to be seein' a written reckoning and the rightness of your work first, and if you can manage that, then--" she walked back to him watching his eyes until they blinked, "--we'll see about the plowing."

Mrs. Rutledge laughed. That had been shameful and bold and the best thing to do. She was standing in the kitchen, and her hair was dry. The time was 7:15 by the stove clock and the sunlight through the window struck low on the wall already. She held a carton of eggs in her hands. She heard the dog scratching at the porch door, and outside a yellow finch sat on the apple tree.
Mrs. Rutledge set the eggs down on the table. After
breakfast her mother handed her the slop bucket and she
fed the pigs out in the pen behind the barn and down wind
from the house. She'd trained them to sit down at the
trough. Pigs were smart. The dog was scratching at the
door. She puts her hands on his chest, and he no longer
smiles. His uniform, wool, feels coarse and heavy even
in the evening fog rising off the Blue River and
spreading up over the bank and onto the train platform.
"I'll come back," he says, and turns a fist over, opening
it so she can see a ring, gold in the shadow of his palm.
"Look."

She takes it and the metal is warm.
"Don't say no now. When I come back, you can say
no."

"I wasn't going to say no, Mr. Williams."

"Well, Miss Appleman."

Then after a minute he says, "Just keep it, and when
I come back--that way, if--"

"Just come back."

She hears the whistle and the wheels on rails and
sees the lights on behind and black smoke rolling from
the engine car, taking him away forever, then everyone on
the platform lowering their arms and not looking at each
other, but listening to the river, trying to make out the
far side in its darkness, and she feels the metal of the
ring still warm. There the sound of water. The faucet
was running in the sink. The uniform, dark and wool. She had gone to Hart's Mercantile on a shocking bright August day wearied with heat, and Jenny Alrich came over from dry goods and told her she was so sorry. Maria had watched Jenny coming, watched the sympathy on her face, heard the tongue-and-groove flooring creak under Jenny's black boots, and Maria had known what it meant and had not moved at all as it came. She had not moved. She had an egg carton in her hand. She set it on the kitchen table's cheesecloth cover. She almost cried out: she'd done that already and she couldn't remember coming downstairs or getting the eggs and she was alone and the ring on her hand was not Billy's and the hand was bigknuckled and brown spotted. She was being swallowed in vanishing time, and nobody here.

She opened the door to the enclosed back porch. Bones lifted one forepaw in the air by way of greeting. She did not remember letting him out.

But letting him and his gargoyle form and stupid good cheer in made her feel better. He followed her around the kitchen eating whatever she dropped as she made herself breakfast. She ate in silence watching the finches and robins out the window. Bones sat at her feet. The food--coffee, toast, and her sister's raspberry preserve--made her feel a little stronger and steadier. After eating, Mrs. Rutledge washed the dishes at the sink. In sixty-nine years of running her own
household she had never left dishes dirty from one meal to the next, or overnight. Even with the babies, her sisters had seen to it, as she had for them in their times. They were sisters, and kept each other. Alice's hand had rubbed her awake after the last one. Alice's fingers were warm, and at first Maria felt nothing but a lightness, then a terrible thirst and cold.

Alice leaned over her. "We was worried bout ye, sis."

Maria tried to sit up, and knew then she was hurt some way. Her mouth felt numb. All at once the kindness in Alice's touch scared her more than fire, blood, or falling seven days would have. "What is it? Where's my chap?" She was almost too hoarse to talk.

"Rest a minute now."

"I want to see my baby."

Alice shook her head slightly.

After a while Alice said, "Do you want me to fetch the doctor?"

"No. Not yet." Maria began to be able to breathe again. She could hear Abe talking to Dr. Wilcox in the dining room. Her arms moved, seeking something to hold or hit but there was nothing. She wanted to see everyone, to touch their faces, know they were alive. Alice helped her take a drink of water. Maria saw light edging the drawn gauze curtains at the window. She wanted to know if morning had come, but Alice was
watching the door to the dining room. The men's voices carried into the room, and Maria realized she could make out the words now: "Abe, you understand? That you cannot under any circumstance. If she carries another child you will lose her. Not ever. You understand what I mean?"

Alice looked away from the door and her sister both. Maria was twenty-six years old.

Now she dried and put away the breakfast ware according to her custom. With her kitchen clean and in order she felt more in control. Abe must have held it against her; after all, she held it against him. But he'd kept to his part of things, and she to hers in everything else. And when he had still come to her and still touched her neck her cheek her lips and when she held him. Dear God. In a hand upon a shoulder might be more love than suffering could ever earn you, more even than you'd have thought you could stand, like a light small as rain to see loss was not the real pattern of what happened ever, not for her and not for him.

Mrs. Rutledge fed Bones on the outside porch in the August summer slipping into September. The sun entered the apple trees and lifted the green leaves in light. Here the world was alive. Mrs. Rutledge carefully sat down on the steps and changed into her work shoes. This morning she would weed the garden. She walked through her yard. The house sat on an acre lot and in the spring
of 1920 Abe built a wagon for a man who paid cash for costs and apple seedlings and chickens for the labor. At a time when they had nothing to eat. She was angry at Abe for taking such work and told him so.

Abe came home every day with chickens or trees. "We could eat the chickens," he said.

Maria shook her head. "We eat the chickens and we got no eggs for breakfast."

Abe grinned. "Which do we eat first, the chicken or the egg?"

Maria did not laugh. Abe walked to the back porch and returned with a single-shot .22. They walked down the road across Elk Creek, then over the Hanford pasture following the creek in the afternoon into the woods and Abe shot a grouse and three robins, and Maria dressed and cooked them and they were good. Robins and blackbirds' breasts had a surprising amount of meat on them. You could fry them straight or make a pie. After that for the next two summers, and then again in the thirties, they often went to the woods for supper.

Mrs. Rutledge saw robins now in the apple trees, trees grown and lately going to ruin. She hadn't eaten robin or blackbird in fifty years. Sometimes she had gone out in the afternoon with the .22 by herself, and had gradually been stunned by the revealed profusion of life she had lived by but never had reason to see before: of the small game the black-striped pine squirrels, two
kinds of trout and a char, rabbit, ducks, grouse, and
turkeys; of plants wild onions, strawberries,
huckleberries, nettles, sorrel, soldier weed and radish
and dandelions and all manner of potherbs, watercress,
morels, camas, and more she never used, and though she
lived amongst it and knew why Abe carried no doubt in his
mind there would be food enough to eat, she never lost
the surprise of his first real gift to her, this finding
in what looked to be a barren place of naked grass a
field clothed in fruit and meat.

The branches of the apple tree she stood by were
bent to the ground in two places already. The tree
needed picking and the branches trimmed and wired fast to
the trunk or propped by poles. Some apples had fallen
off and lay scattered on the ground, rotting. She picked
up a dead branch and pointed them out to her dog. "Look
at that disgrace there, Bones. Good food wasting."

Bones shoveled up one of the apples in his mouth and
tried to give it to her.

"Come on, then." Mrs. Rutledge made a wandering way
to the burning pile, crossing the gentle dip of what used
to be a small ditch they'd used to flood irrigate the
back yard and chicken lot before the well was deepened.
Bones followed her around the yard, apple still in his
mouth. He sat when she stopped, and he gravely looked
out from under the heavy wrinkles on his forehead at
whatever she pointed to with her branch. Besides the
tree work, the grass needed mowing and the fence near the front of the house needed stretching and the grass needed trimming all along the fences and house, and the weeds needed chopping in the old chicken yard. She would have to hire it out or get Marshall to do it. It was almost harvest time and abundance threatened to give her as little rest as desolation would. She hadn't enough remnants for quilting or jars for canning or mouths to eat even a third part of the produce already on the ground. She and Bones were at the burning pile now, outside the fence surrounding her garden. She tapped the dog on the head. "Drop it."

Bones dropped the apple he had in his mouth and it rolled to the edge of the burning pile.

Mrs. Rutledge heard bleating. Some men, short and dark and alike as brothers in movement pushed a strung-out band of suffolks down the road before the house. She could see through the trees the sheep stretched along the road, and at the end of the band a line of cars idling forward.

The first time Maria had ever seen a car had been the end of a clear hot day the spring she turned fifteen. First came the sound of a regular, mechanical rattling, and her father slipped the sheep shearing cutters and combs he'd been sharpening back into their kit and stood, expressionless. "Go inside and tell your mother to set a place for supper."
When she came back out a car topped the last rise on the road where the high flats started, lifting dust as it got closer and louder, moving without a sign of animal motion, pulling into the lot, black and spidery in its smoothness and delicacy once it stopped next to the gray wood of their wagon.

The noise ended and a man in white suit got out. He carried a leather pouch with him. "Mr. Appleman."

"Mr. Moore." Her father did not shake the man's hand and the man did not offer.

Instead he took in Maria's father and the cabin and the collapsing barn and the dry grass growing in sparse clumps in the dirt and then Maria there barefoot and then Maria's father again. "May I see you in private a minute?"

"After ye take supper."

"I really haven't the--"

"You make time or come back another day."

"This is only a simple matter. Take three minutes at most."

"You eat with us first."

The land around the cabin ran flat and open under the sky and there was no sound anywhere. The man said, "I could law you into it."

"Or you could eat supper and we'll do your business after."
The man made his mouth a thin line and checked his pocket watch. "All right. If that's how you want it."

Maria's mother set out a meal of lamb and peppers and potatoes. Part way through she asked the man what he'd come out this way so far for.

Mr. Moore put down his fork. The cabin air was hot from the cook stove and the long day, and sweat glued the man's shirt to his arms. He looked like a painting of exhaustion. "Mr. Appleman hasn't told you about the foreclosure."

Maria's mother shook her head. "Eli..."

"Mother," he said.

She stood up abruptly. "My God."

The man stood up as well. He started to call to her, but she had gone out the door. The man leaned over the table toward Maria's father. "You sonofabitch."

Maria's father laughed a way she'd never heard him laugh before. "Now the pot's surprised the kettle's black."

"I'm doing my job, Appleman. If you'd stayed sober and done yours running this place I wouldn't be here."

Maria's father still laughed. "You enjoy your work, Mr. Moore?"

The man went out the door. After a minute the metal rattle started. Maria watched the car leave the way it had come. She stayed there at the window without looking at her father. Her mother was sitting on a stump near
the barn, so that she faced away from the house toward
the long roll of poor pasture to the east. Behind Maria,
her father began to cry. Maria's mother came back in and
got a green canning jar out from the pantry cabinet. She
took the jar outside and Maria watched her as she knelt
down to scrape it full of dirt from under the pump
faucet, the only dirt not dust soft enough to scrape by
hand on the place.

Mrs. Rutledge watched the herders with their staves
and poles working as the streaming, deep-voiced sheep
warped across the face of the road. She could hear the
split hooves striking pavement and the close sheep
calling and the bleating of those far down the road
sounding like the buzzing of flies. The dark shepherds
kneed their way back and forth amongst the heaving sheep
as the whole herd ran in a kind of slow and liquid
violence, sweeping the shepherds with them as much as
being guided. Mrs. Rutledge walked to the front yard. A
handsome herder leaned on his staff watching the sheep
move by and nodding his head as if they were legions
arranged in ordered phalanxes and he numbering and
calling them by name. Up close she could hear the
sheep's hooves clicking and the coughs of some moving in
the heat, and despite the dust, the dark and handsome man
stood there dressed in white and watched her as she came.

"What kinda dog is that?" the man asked.

"Day to ye."
"Yes, surely. He looks like a devil."

"Well, y’can be easy. He’s only a dog."

"I meant his face." The man bent to pet Bones and Bones stepped back and sniffed the man’s hand and moved between him and Mrs. Rutledge.

"Whoose sheep are these?"

"McCarthy’s. We’re takin’ ’em to auction."

"Well. Keep ’em outa my yard, if ye don’t mind."

"I’ll buy him."

"Who?"

"The dog. I’ll trade ten sheep for the dog." He laughed. "Ten devils for one."

"One thing I don’t need is sheep."

The shepherd lit a cigarette and began to smoke.

"Maybe we can make a deal."

"I don’t care to make deals."

"Everybody makes deals."

Sheep fanned out now onto and across the yard, trampling it. "Get on. I’m tellin’ you." Mrs. Rutledge stared at the man. He stared back and finally moved in front of the sheep, who looked poor in the heat. The man struck and turned them with his stave.

At last the flock thinned and then became straggled and then Mrs. Rutledge watched the cars inch along following slow, the drivers all eager and pressing forward.
Mrs. Rutledge walked along the side of her house to the backyard. She was angry about the sheep trampling her yard. She would give McCarthy a piece of her mind. And angry about having to look at the backyard again where the lawn needed trimming and the apples to be gathered off the ground and more had fallen. She'd call the Evans boy up and tell him this time to spend a morning at it if that's what it took for him to do a right job and not just spend an hour dragging the mower around, which was no way to do. But he was a good boy. His mother run off with a Boise Cascade timber buyer. Tammy Evans said Chuck Evans couldn't make her happy. He was worthless, all right, but he was that before she married him. None of that lay against the boy, though. She was willing to supply whatever grace to be got in the guidance of a firm hand, which was considerable in her estimation, at least as far as lawn mowing went.

Happiness had nothing to do with it, not in her life nor in her family's nor in anyone's she knew. Once she hadn't thought so. Once she thought it was something which either existed or didn't, independent of anything but presence or disaster. This a year after her family lost the homestead on the flat to Mr. Moore and the bank. The money from the auctioned movables and her father's sheep shearing had been spent in the next winter without work, and after the summer, with no place of their own or money left, her father had hired on to help raise a new
horse barn for old man Ellsworth, who also took on Maria and her mother to cook and clean for the temporary crew.

The work began when Abraham Rutledge came and in a week the barn was raised. Every dawn and noon and sundown the men would come in and commence to eat, quiet and inclined to joke about the work and each other in morning, their faces elongated and pale under summer burned cheekbones and leftover sleep and the morning light at breakfast, and Abe would outline the day's work and divide the jobs among the men as he ate. At noon the men would come in tired already and polite and intent on the food and Abe would report to old man Ellsworth about the work and a few questions would be asked and answered, but mostly they ate fast until Abe would stand up and leave, the others following in a sudden shifting of boots and the scrape of chairs across board flooring. At night the men would be washed up and laughing about this dropped hammer or that stupidity or some joke they didn't repeat at the table and Abe would eat and talk to Ellsworth and the first day he thanked Maria for the meal and her mother teased her about cooking the whole meal. The second morning Maria noticed that he, more awake than the others, watched her after running down the job list. The third day at supper he thanked her for a second helping of over-cooked potatoes and later, after dishes and clean up, when her father told her Abraham was a good
man who saved his wages and didn't drink, Maria became alarmed.

The next day Maria watched the barn raising as she hung wash on the line in the yard. The men worked barebacked and she saw that Abe's back was brown and tapering and in the high sun ran in manifold patterns of shadows when he moved. And she saw that he knew what he was about and even the older men worked for him as he wished because he himself would do all jobs and shirk none, and she saw that he worked steady and that probably her father was right about him and then she was even more alarmed.

The last day of work Abe asked if she would care for a stroll. In the sundown light they walked along the road and said almost nothing to each other. Maria hoped that was the end of it then; Billy had died only that summer.

But in December money began to run out again and Abe began to be invited to supper. Maria had told her mother: "He's nice enough. But I just don't love him."

"If you can learn to milk a cow you can learn to love a man."

"I know how to love, mother. The problem is I don't love him."

Her mother touched her cheek. "Maria, he'll be a man to feed his kids. You make a thing matter, and he'll break his back for it. He don't drink, won't beat you."
He'll be a kind man to you. That's it. There's nothing else that lasts."

Abe was quiet and polite and after suppers they would sit together and once Abe told her he could make things alive out of wood and she said nothing.

On the twelfth day of April nineteen hundred and eighteen Maria Angela Appleman and Abraham Malachi Rutledge married under the wings of a rising sun, and so Maria's mother let her enter it with her own hand in a book of remembrance sewn into their Bible.

Mrs. Rutledge discovered she had walked past the tool shed. The sun had already peeked and she measured it in the sky: 2pm. No birds sang now in the heat. The day half gone and all she remembered was Bones' waking, and herself standing in the kitchen, and the sheep. She'd done nothing so far and the day would be over next thing she knew with her standing there wondering and stupid about it, trying to remember where it got itself to and the whole time wasted and empty while she thought about how it was going by. Bones sat in the grass next to her, panting. "Bones."

He stood up and swung his head around.

"What d'you think? Time to get to it?"

Bones made no reply, which Mrs. Rutledge interpreted as a good sign, and she went back to the tool shed, twisted the piece of wood blocking the door shut on its nail pivot, swung the door open, and took out a hoe. The
handle of her weeding hoe had split beyond her ability to repair it, so she had to use the Warren instead. Everything started to fall apart after Abe died. Or more likely it fell apart at the same rate as before and he’d kept things fixed so as to make breakdown stay hidden. Her sister Alice claimed nothing really ever got any worse after Genesis 3:16, no matter what the short view looked like. Abe always laughed about Alice and her pessimism and sharpness and once he affixed to a broken-handled paring knife a handle with such outlandish carvings in the wood of it that--

Mrs. Rutledge stopped herself and picked up the Warren hoe. She would have to try harder to stay where she was. She lifted the latch of the iron gate that led into the garden. There were no flowers here. Maria had never planted for beauty, but for function. She saw the garden even without looking: all profusion in ordered rows, the weak weeded, the rest edible or absent. Thorns on the fluted raspberry splays, lace on the tapering and hidden carrots. The deep green of rhubarb’s poison leaves above, the fibred red of the tart stalk below. The black cherry fruit the color of dried blood, the dusted plums the color of her eyes. The thick wrinklepaper rustle of the corn. Now even now past season’s peak all ready, all ripe, all out of the black loam earth that she had worked, that she had made a noise in her throat as he comes running at her across the
backyard, yelling her name. A new spring day. She eighteen, two months married, barefoot, standing in the warm garden working the gray dirt of never-turned earth. He rushes around the corner of the house. He holds in his fingers, surprisingly delicate like his thin wrists, a wire-handled, five-gallon bucket. She stands up from her hoeing as he gathers speed. She stares at him, afraid of his sweat smell and bulk bearing down on her frightening and intense as he vaults the iron gate he'd put in for her and strides on through the spring half mud sinks into the earth a little as he comes to stop before her and above her saying look! And he holds out straightarmed five gallons of seething nightcrawlers from some riverbottom farm field and she almost screams she's never seen so many worms in all her life, and because he is there before her so much bigger than she is, and with his sweaty woodworking smell she is not yet accustomed to stronger and stronger, and the blue-black of his face hair, the utter alien nature of this man or any man like a sudden blow yes she almost screams, but then: notices the calluses on his thin fingers, and those delicate wrists, and thinks how hard it must be for him to work wood as he does to fine fit with such thin bones. She knows she never knew this thing, that when he has touched her when they are together in the quiet soft and fierce, holding and becoming each the other, she had never once felt or known he had calluses on his hands, and this,
then, she understands is love for her and what great good luck she never dared to hope, not even in her secret heart.

Mrs. Rutledge smiled at her dog, who was sitting beside her as usual. Memory is how you name and give voice and number to the loved, breath to dry bones. The dog sat a lot and the hair was worn off over his haunches. "I keep going all these places, Bones. I can't stop it and sometimes I even want to stay there."

At the last two words Bones picked a spot in the shade of the gooseberry bush and settled down. Mrs. Rutledge laughed and began her work at the carrots. Alerted by the chink chink chink of her hoe the Chapman Dobermans bolted to the end of their long wire runs closest to Mrs. Rutledge and began to bark savagely and continuously. As always they scared her first, then angered her for the noise in the mid-day calm. She quieted Bones, who growled low, lifting his flews to expose his remaining teeth.

She would have to speak to Thomas Chapman. She doubted he would do anything, since he'd trained them to be that way in the first place. And he was not exactly quality himself. But this was uncalled for. Once one of his dogs had broken loose and killed the sheep he ran to keep the pasture down. That dog would've got it in the neck right on the spot if she'd had a say in it. But she
didn't, and Chapman said they were his sheep and the dog was too valuable to shoot.

Mrs. Rutledge snorted out loud. There was something wrong with this half of the century if a sheep-killing dog was worth more than the sheep it was supposed to keep safe. She hoed faster. Pretty soon she had to rest. She knelt down and started to pull up the weeds among the vegetables where the hoe couldn't reach. Twice she stopped, motionless, the first time for two minutes and the second for twenty-six. Both times she started at the end and went back to pulling weeds where she'd left off.

She finished the carrots and cucumbers, and stood up. It was four-thirty by the sun. She would have to rest now. Abe worked at home when he made furniture on contract, and would take a break twice a day and have a cup of coffee with her and say, "It's a poor man, Maria, can't keep at a job for eight hours straight." Sometimes they had gone days seeing no one but themselves and were not lonely.

After he died people came visiting even less. She noticed but never complained; it was to be expected with widows. Besides, she had the house, her grandkids, kids, quilting, sewing, gardening, all in their seasons. This year she'd won the Grand prize ribbon at the county fair for her huckleberry pie. That Bernice Williams and Eppy Conners didn't dare give it to anybody else, the old biddies. Not very Christian, thinking like that, but
true. It really was the best pie. Mt. Adams huckleberries, plus her special crust. Only her and her sister Elsie left who knew how to make it. Maybe she'd enter again next year, if somebody asked. She wouldn’t mind beating Esther Coglin one more time. And be gracious and helpful to her afterwards. Her husband used to charge Abe way too much for the hardwood he bought for rocking chairs and china cabinets. Made her mad just to remember. Gooseberry pie next year.

Mrs. Rutledge realized she was staring stupidly at her hands while the hot water from the back porch faucet ran over them and down the drain. Her hands were old now, swollen at the knuckles. She shut off the water. In the mirror her havoced eyes and the patchwork skin their bed. She had no time. Not for revenge.

In the kitchen she poured herself some juice. Her hands were trembling a little. She lay down on the couch in the living room. His left hand was under her head, and his right hand embraced her until the day broke and the shadows flew, and she would not let him go, and this was the seal upon their hearts.

A knock on the door woke her. "Abe," she said, seeing him outside through slatted windows. "Someone’s at the door." Bones rolled out of the corner, muscles and fat swinging like on a bull, and he gave out two short, deep barks. She watched him do this and saw that he didn’t know what he was barking at. She looked around
for Abe, but couldn't see him. She sat up and the Bible slid from her lap. Bones barked again; Mrs. Rutledge told him to be still, and reached down and retrieved the Bible. Using her hands against the edge of the couch she stood. At the door nothing but heat and white, no neighbor or child or Abe or angel.

She closed the door and walked upstairs to take her medicine, stubbornly throwing two of the pills in the wastebasket. She sat in the dim light and upstairs heat and tried to think of what to do. Bones sat in his box, facing the door. Finally she got up. There was work to do. Idle hands go to evil acts. She could get the greens done before supper and that would be sufficient.

"Come on, Bones. Horses to break and salt to mine."

Again she made her way through the crowded hall past the full children's rooms, down the stairs, into her clean kitchen he stepped from the back porch sink where he shaved each day, and Maria at her range turned to him. The sound of the toaster's timer clicking, morning rain on roof shingles, water running in the porch sink. Smell of onions in the frying eggs. His eyes like beaten cold-forged steel. He had lather over one half of his face and on the left side a long cut at his cheek and he still held the razor and she not knowing the coming of death in this new form said old man you've cut yourself and he called her name as if to get everything into the rise and fall of three syllables then went down jaws clenched and
open eyes on her, but spoke no other word. All pain paled to the clatter of a razor on tile and slackening grip as they held hands waiting ambulance, and she on her knees there begging him and praying both but neither demand nor request nor any agony would serve. There on the floor of her kitchen she tried to tell him everything she’d never said but no words would come.

She looked down. Bones sat at her feet, head nodding in sleep. "Heart give out, Bones. You’d have thought that the last to go on such a man."

The dog stood up and together he and Mrs. Rutledge left the kitchen and went through the yard, the gate, her garden with its harvest wasting as it awaited harvester.

At the sound of the hoe striking earth Chapman’s dogs again charged in a ragged wave to the end of their runs and this time one didn’t get jerked off his feet but came on across the field, stretching into his stride and bright desire, intent on her and the gaining of speed, and she could see out behind the surge of the dog’s head and shoulders dirt clods kick up and turn over in the air too slowly to seem real. She raised her hoe and waited for it to come.

The dog leapt the fence and was met as his forepaws touched ground by the sudden torpedo shape of Bones. Mrs. Rutledge saw both dogs lose footing and roll together already drawing blood. Then she tried to run. She could hear the snarl of the dog fight behind her.
She could smell and feel the ground and knew if she fell she was too crippled in the hips to be sure of getting up. If she could get to the back porch. If she could get there. She crossed the old ditch and still heard the sound of the fight but none of the growling from Bones.

Then she was inside. In the corner the .22 stood upright on its butt, bolt open and back. The junk drawer in the kitchen fell out when she pulled at it and everything spilled across the floor tiles. She stooped for two shells and bits of string and dust came away with them and on the floor of the kitchen lay the straight razor. She reached for it, wiped it clean at the sink. She started to clean the shaving cream that had dried on the floor where Abe’s cheek had rested but at the first wipe her own blood streaked the tiles and she saw she had cut the pad of her thumb on the razor’s blade and everywhere her hand went blood would neither staunch nor worsen and nothing would clean up. She knelt upon the tilting floor and felt for the only time in her life a pain that made the world fall and fall beyond any whole repair or tender healing and she forgot any faith or God except to damn them and so she keened alone there, her forehead pressed against the cool of the floor. She straightened, swaying, the small shells but no blood on her hand. The casings were greasy. I must hurry.

At the top of the porch she could see her garden, and the Chapman dog gutting Bones in short vicious head
movements, the snap of white teeth and instant red muzzle, and the frantic scramble of Bones trying to right himself fading to faint jerks. Using the doorjamb to help hold the rifle, she drew breath and fired. The Doberman's hindquarters went out and it commenced screaming and biting at itself. Mrs. Rutledge walked across the backyard, reloading as she came, careful how she fit the shell and drove the bolt. The Doberman saw her coming and tried to drag itself away with its forepaws. It was still yelping. She cut off its escape twice and watched it watch her and she stopped when she got close and waited until its screaming went to whines and then at last when she knew it was reduced to terror of her and its own pain she shot it in the head.

She called Mr. Chapman on the phone in her house.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Chapman."

"Yes."

"Maria Rutledge. Just shot your dog. Come get him now, in my garden."

"You shot my--"

Mrs. Rutledge hung up, went back outside. She felt tight with anger. She was not crying. Mr. Chapman was running across his pasture. He saw her and began to yell. "Why the hell'd ya kill my dog? Goddamnit. Sonofabitch." He and Mrs. Rutledge reached the garden about the same time. Then he saw his dog and Bones and
the Warren hoe where she'd dropped it. He started to climb the fence.

Mrs. Rutledge spoke on reflex. "Not in the middle. Cross at the post there."

"Sorry." He climbed the fence at the anchor post, and picked up his dog. He was upset. "Mrs. Rutledge, if I could pay you for the damage in some--"

"You're standing on my onions."

He moved.

She realized she still had the rifle in her hands and he didn't know it wasn't loaded. "Now get out. If you ever come on my place or talk to me again I'll kill you."

Mr. Chapman left. Mrs. Rutledge crossed to the tool shed and got a spade. She looked at her trampled garden and Chapman packing his dog across the pasture. The dog's legs flopping like no living limbs would. Bones was too heavy for her to drag. She buried him right where he was.

After putting the tools and rifle and junk drawer odd-ends away, Mrs. Rutledge tried to read, but couldn't. She didn't want to eat, either, so she sat in the living room.

She thought of everything she could remember ever knowing that had died, then each thing as it was alive in its own motion and smell and face. She was terribly tired, and sometime around the setting of the sun outside
she decided to go to bed early. Upstairs she undressed, and slipped on her nightgown, arms and back and legs stiff and sore already from the things she had done that day. She was reaching for her nightstand lamp, after taking her medicine, when she noticed Bone's bed in the corner. She arose then, a pale form in flannel moving in the dark, and picked up Bones' bed, and making no noise found a place for it by memory as much as touch outside the bedroom along the wall of the hallway. The box fit only barely so the edge of it scraped against her bedroom's doorjamb. She tried but could arrange it no other way.

After a moment, she left it, passing away from that place into the night of her bedroom, the past like a lover upon her lips, her hands clasped as if in prayer, there is a light across the hills of her home in morning, her knees against the shiplap floor, her mind upon that light, Abe's chest against her breast, the creak of her bed, soft now he says, soft, an ease, she seeks her rest, he holds her with mere breath along the nape of her neck, the grass stem by stem in light a deeper green, dear Lord she cries dear Lord she cries out in the midst of this unbearable sweetness.
Earl Tuggle wakes crushed. "Mae Ola," he says. "Scoot over. You're squishin' me." Mae Ola's eyes open. She says, "You should fix this, Earl," as she rocks the bed moving her bulk from the sagging center of the mattress. In a minute they are slid together again and Earl smiling. "I don't know," he says. Mae Ola's laugh is big as herself and opens to Earl like a whole world and so it is.

Earl splits and Mae Ola stacks. Wood is their heat. When there's extra Earl loads it into his '63 International and tries to peddle it where Ruby Prairie Road hits Main, or sometimes up at the Elk Creek campground. But this year there has been no wood for market beyond saw and gas expenses. Earl and Mae Ola work with barely a word, and the October sun colors the quartered fir rounds lemon and peach.

Later in the morning sun Earl beats his mule. The mule stands lock legged in the lot, while Earl heaves on the bridle with one hand and tries to whip the animal's hindquarters with an alder switch held in the other. The
mule will not lead and will not lead. "Goddamn you," Earl says. The mule throws its head, yanking Earl off his feet. He cannot hang on and then he is sitting on the ground, leaning against a broken board in the chicken shed wall, feeling his forehead thump and nose swell, watching the mule stifftrot across the yard. "Glue pot for you," Earl says.

At noon two men in new plaid shirts and Levis step out of their pickup-camper onto the sidewalk in front of Ben's Hardware & Outdoor Supply Store. They stretch, and they look around themselves at the straightaway of a main street without traffic lights, the surface of it fissure-cracked from the winters' cold since the county or town or state or whoever is responsible for the repair of such things last paved it. The day is sunny and unseasonably warm. Down the street, outside Myrtle's Soda Fountain, two girls slim but for the suggestion of pre-adolescent fat stand swaying slightly in unconscious rhythm before two high school boys who have baseball caps tilted back on their heads. Farther down, across a side street, some women round and short in middle age come out of a whitewashed building that has on its side, in what had once been black paint, the faded word Mercantile. The women are carrying grocery bags and talking, the noise of their conversation but not the sense of the words filtering down the street. There are no buildings here
higher than two stories, and at the end of the street
cottonwood trees hang still along the back of the Blue
River where it curves against the edge of town.

Here comes Earl Tuggle, hands apocket, boots broken
in the heel and hasping the sidewalk. His joints knobby
and loose, a scrap of paper in his hand, he is his own
parade. He walks past the late model pickup-camper and
the strangers next to it, his crew-cut head pivoting like
a tank turret tracking targets. There he goes, into
Ben's Hardware.

Old man Robertson and his fat kid Wayne are at the
island counter buying elk tags and Earl comes near to
turning around and going out the door again but Ben's got
an old sleigh bell on a leather strap nailed to the door
and all three of the men look his way as the clapper ball
rattles in the bell metal. Earl has never and will not
now back down for the Robertsons. They don't even live
here no more, is what he thinks. The strangers come in
right behind him. He pretends to hunt through bins of
sleeve joints and wood cleats.

"Help with somethin, Earl?" says Ben across the
aisle, looking up from the paperwork he's doing on the
tags.

"I c'n wait." Earl feels the holes in his shirt
elbows and his forehead pounds.
Old man Robertson speaks to Earl for the first time in twenty-five years. "We're bout finished, Tuggle. Step on up."

So Earl's stuck now. He asks for a pen and makes as if to write something on the scrap of paper, but stops and says, "Damn rheumatism."

Robertson says, "I'll lend you a hand."

Earl looks at him. "Naw thanks."

Robertson squares himself. "Look here, Tuggle. There's no need for that."

"I think there is a by god need." Earl's finger on Robertson's chest now. The Robertson kid moves behind Earl.

"Well you're dead wrong. Then and now."

Ben says, "You boys must know each other."

Robertson says, "Earl was the union boss when my old mill closed."

"You never said anything about that, Earl."

"Before your time," Earl says, and he is thinking now about August 1964, tacks on the road, heads and hands broke at night in torchlight fights with the scabs and hired thugs the Robertsons brought in to screw their fellow man for a couple of bucks. Earl's thinking about that September and the sound of the mill dismantling and equipment leaving for Commerce on flatbeds, and Earl's men or the ones left not doing the dismantling watching the trucks go with gear and their own way of life and
turning to Earl hate in their faces, these men who once called him brother and boss, and by winter were gone to Commerce after the machines or to Portland or Boise or god knows where, Blue Earth behind them nearly a ghost town. Earl is almost the only union man who stayed.

The men who'd been standing next to the camper outside come in and try to get in a line that doesn't exist. The walls in here all hung with traps and tack and gold pans. Ben gives the Robertsons their elk tags.

They fold them and reach for their wallets and put the tags inside, each movement of father and son done in unison as if one or the other is a mirror. Robertson says, "I always figured you couldn't read nor write."

"And I always figured you didn't have heart nor soul for anything but money."

"Can I interest you two in some sidearms? Magnums, perhaps? You could settle all your problems once and for all." Earl and Robertson look at Ben, who is a mild man but who has not lasted in business across the street from the Grain Growers these last five years by accident.

Robertson finally smiles at Earl and claps him on the shoulder. "Earl. I don't give a shit how you feel about me. Doesn't matter either way. It never has."

"It did once."

"No. Not really. You only thought so. That mill was too old to run. Just flat too old. The strike was a convenience for me, since I had to shut it down anyway."
But it never could have changed things one way or another."

Earl opens his mouth but cannot speak he's so surprised. For twenty-five years he has thought he ruined the town and now he finds that he has not even done that. Robertson says to his kid let's go, and they are out the door.

Ben says, "You want some help on that, Earl?"

Robertson has to be a liar. Earl closes his mouth. He was a liar once, why not now? Earl says, "What? No, I'll do er."

Earl goes toward the bulletin board and pretends to begin to write on the piece of paper. He watches Ben grin in greeting the strangers. Ben himself is half stranger, having come only eight years ago from Seattle. He is still in business here partly because he can remember the name and face of everyone he's ever met, practically, even if he's just met a guy once, and he can be so polite to people he doesn't like that the only way you can tell he doesn't like some of them is that nobody could possibly like everybody. Earl shakes his head. He could never learn that. The other part is that Ben's daughter Crystal works afternoons after highschool lets out and Earl's noticed that the store gets pretty crowded with young fellows about then so it's not like she's driving off sales either. Earl watches Ben talk these men into shells, game bags, a compass, and one of those
sharpeners for idiots that's guaranteed to ruin the concave of any knife.

Earl looks down at his blank paper. He wants to put "Mule for Sale" on it. The mule and trailer to haul it by are all his inheritance from his stepfather Scrimson Thancer. Scrimson died that spring, tumor about as big as a baseball in his throat. The only favor Scrimson ever did Earl was to kick him out the day of Earl's sixteenth birthday. Best thing ever to happen to Earl, next of course to Mae Ola. Earl's sister Ruth got the farm, and Earl's half-brother Wilber, the town drunk, got the cash savings and some stocks, which he drank up or was swindled out of almost immediately by all accounts. Earl does not grudge Ruth or Wilber their shares, even if Wilber is a drunk, but all Scrimson left Earl was a mule and a trailer. The lawyer actually laughed out loud when he got to that part of the reading. Lawyers are assholes.

Earl has about decided to get Mae Ola to write out the for sale sign when he hears Ben call to him. "Earl. You got a minute?"

Earl thinks about it. He examines the two men on the opposite side of the counter from Ben. The men's boots have neither the flat sole of shop workboots nor the long top of proper boots for work in the woods. They're like somebody forgot to make a whole boot and they are new or nearly new. What sort of fools would buy
such shoes? "Maybe, maybe not," he says. Everybody just stands there for a second and Earl begins to think of Mae and what she'll have for supper. He thinks of her in the kitchen, he thinks of her across the table.

Ben's eyes move back and forth. He licks his lips and says, "Earl here knows more about where the best places to kill big elk are, in or out of season, than any man around, according to rumor."

Many poachers would get upset by this comment, but Earl draws himself up and says, "Cordin t'fact."

"These gentlemen are having trouble finding open land to hunt. I was thinking maybe you'd like to outfit em on a elk trip. If you're going yourself?"

Earl becomes alert and shrewd. He is aware of his short legged overalls and his dirty blue shirt. "You mean for money? Guidin?"

"Well, of course, it's up to these men and you, if you can reach a understanding."

Earl scratches his broken nose with a cracked fingernail. "Guidin, huh?"

Ben rubs the back of his neck. "Well, Earl, to actually guide you'd have to buy a license. Pass their test and what-all. But I believe you can take anyone you want anywhere you want into the mountains, if they're your friends--"

"Friends?" Earl glances back and forth between the men.
"And--listen, Earl--and if it happens to be hunting season and you happen to stumble on some elk and one or two of them happens to get a shot, well, a friend would naturally help his buddies dress out their elk and pack 'em out, seeing as how they'd paid the gas money so generously."

"I get ya." Earl says.

"You've got a pack animal, haven't you?"

Earl looks down at the scrap of paper in his hand. He folds the blank of it in half and puts it in his pocket. He nods. "Yep. Got me a mule that's a packin fool."

Ben smiles. "Well, gentlemen, this is the man for the job, if you want a gui--I mean, someone to pack your food."

Ralph turns to Tom, who shrugs. Earl holds out his hand, noticing too late that it is unclean. "Tuggle. Earl Tuggle."

"My name is--" The man seems about to break into laughter, though the only funny thing Earl can see is the man's boots, "--is Ralph Taylor. This is Tom Gaines."

"Glad t'meecha."

"Mr. Tuggle." Tom shakes with Earl.

Earl puts his hands in his pockets. He begins to think how he'd never run when the other union men did and though steady work is hard to come by, it'd been worth it. His father Elmer Tuggle ran off with a ex-bronc-
busting and bull-riding rodeo woman in 1934 when Earl was six, and ever since then he vowed he’d never run for nothin and had kept that vow so often it is now how he knows he is Earl.

Ralph clears his throat. "So. Mr. Tuggle, what is your price?"

"My price? Oh." Earl runs a hand over his two-day growth of silver beard. If he asks too much, he might lose the deal. But too little and he’ll screw himself. He scratches his head, looks at the two men’s new pants, their watches. "Twenty-five bucks a day, plus feed for m’mule. You buy the camp supplies."

"Twenty-five each? What do you think, Tom?"

"Okay, I guess."

Earl’s mind reels. Each?

"Okay, then, Mr. Tuggle, you’ve got our business."

They shake on it.

Earl’s boots crunch on the gravel at the edge of the road as he walks home in the low sun’s light and faint heat. He thinks yes, yes. Fifty bucks a day, clear flat profit. This is more than he has ever cleared for a day’s work and he hopes it’s set Scrimson spinning in his grave. All that time Scrimson thinking I’ve got Earl, I’ll screw him out of the farm and give him this stupid mule, which amounts to less than nothing. But now the tables have turned.
Earl has always enjoyed revenge.

Scurf was an asshole and now he is dead and Earl is going to become pretty damn well off using his mule. The thought makes Earl happy. Why hadn't he thought of guiding before? It's so simple. With Mae's canning and freezing, some luck hunting, and this new job, they could last for quite a while. He shakes his head and laughs.

A pair of cows in the field to his left, across the ditch, start at the sound.

Earl watches the Herefords run and turn and mill. Like elk will sometimes, only slower and dumber and happier it looks like. He thinks about tomorrow. He thinks about the high benches above the fir and spruce slopes leading down into the place called Lost Creek Meadows, four or five miles past the end of the road. He sees the sweep of land there as if before him now. As he walks the elk are moving in the timber, waiting dusk to slip from cover. At dawn they'll be in or around those benches and high parks, the benches and parks in the fog of low cold and clouds. He imagines himself pointing them out to Ralph and Tom. He imagines them shooting and missing, shooting and missing, the elk ghosting into the woods safe until another day. Every single one of them like fifty dollar bills, one after another, straight into Earl's pockets.

Earl begins to whistle.
"Mae Ola!" he yells when he arrives. "Where you at?"

"In here, Earl!" Her voice from the kitchen. "Is there somethin' wrong?" She appears at the kitchen doorway, wiping her hands on the apron she wears.

"Not so's you'd notice. Got me a job, Mae."

"You don't say!"

"Well you needn't look s'stonished."

"I'm just so happy, Earl. A real job?"

"Yep. Guidin' elk hunters. Don't last but a week, but she pays fifty bucks a day 'n' feed. How's that strike ya?"

Mae Ola Tuggle tries to work it out in her head. Fifty times--how long was elk season?--six days. Two was a hundred, four two, six--"Three hun'ert dollars, Earl? Really?"

"Well." Earl scratches his head. "Don't know. Could get elk the first day, y'know. But it'd still be fifty, an' maybe a tip. I hearda things like that. These guys're from Portland. Dint bat an eye at twenty-five bucks a head a day."

"I'm proud of you, Earl."

"Thank ya, Mrs. Tuggle. Same for me to you. But we gotta cook 'em supper. Whatd'ya got t'night?"

"Cook 'em supper? Where are they?"

"Buyin' stuff for camp up town."
"Well I don't know, Earl. I haven't got but last night's chicken thawed. I was going to make us greens and potato salad, and that, but it's no kinda guest food."

"Don't you worry. Fix all that up, I'll go down t' the creek an' get us some trout. They're the kind to be impressed with trout."

"Okay. Hurry."

It takes longer for Earl to walk the two hundred yards along the road to the bridge across Elk Creek, and to find some periwinkles under the rocks in the shallows, than it does to catch a supper's worth of trout. He just keeps flipping the line into the deep holes right downstream of the bridge, and they just keep taking the bait. Trout are like people, he thinks as he climbs up the creek bank onto the bridge, balancing himself with his pole in one hand, and the stick he'd used to run through the gills of the gutted fish in place of a stringer in the other. He gets to the top just in time to see Ralph and Tom drive by in their camper. Their brake lights brighten when they see him, then the camper stops and backs up.

"Earl. We must have missed a turn somewhere. We've been driving all over trying to find your house."

Earl wonders how dumb a person could get. They could have asked around anywhere. Everyone knows where he lives. Plus his directions had been perfectly clear.
in the first place. He might end up looking for them more than for the elk, they get lost that easy. Course he’s gettin paid by the day. Earl Tuggle smiles at his clients. "Well, sorry 'bout that. But all's well that ends well, as my gran'ma used t'say." Earl gets into the pick-up, letting the pole dangle out the window. "Right up ahead. That wood house there."

Tom says, "Nice fish, Earl."

"Look tasty, don't they?" He holds the trout up. Trails of slime leach from their tails.

"Do you think it might be possible for us to go fishing around here, if we get our elk early?"

Earl spits out the window. "Nope."

"We'd pay you your regular guiding fee."

"It's not that. Season closes t'day's all. At sunset. Fish and Game boys all over the place this time a year." He peers out the truck's windows suspiciously. "But next summer come on up. These're just pan fish here. Come up early July. Catch you s'many fish you'll have t'buy a new freezer t'hold 'em in."

They laugh and tell him they might just take him up on that. Earl is beginning to see the potentials of this guiding business. "Tell your friends," he says.

The truck stops in front of Earl's house, a small unpainted building with a foundation starting to rot and list to the north. It looks quite a bit like Earl's
head. They go through a small woven-wire gate, and over
the wooden planks spanning the road ditch.

"What're ye up to now, Tuggle?"

Earl halts in mid-stride, and Ralph and Tom behind
him accordion into him and step back. The three men
notice for the first time an old lady standing still and
thin and pale as driftwood with her hand on the top of a
fence post where Earl's yard abuts the next yard over.
"Mrs. Rutledge," Earl says. "Evenin. Care for some
tROUT?"

"Sat what those are? Thought maybe smelt'd come to
the Blue country."

Earl grins. "This here's Tom and Ralph. They're my
huntin partners this year."

"Proud," Mrs. Rutledge says, nodding. "I heard this
afternoon ye had some friends with ye this season. Well.
You don't mind if I mix business with social pleasure do
ye? Didn't think so. Mae still sellin eggs?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Whaddye chargin?"

"Special this week, now that you mention it. Six
bits a dozen."

"Uh-huh. Same price as last week, less you're
chargin short bits now."

"Ever week's special, Mrs. Rutledge."

"Fiddle. You tell your wife I might bargain with
her if she's a mind to."
"I'll do 'er."

"An say. You folks be careful huntin."

Tom says, "Yes ma'am."

"Cause deer season Al Abbot's grandson got in a argument with the Burke boy an' t'prove his gun wasn't loaded he shot his own foot off."

"Really?" Ralph is smiling now too.

"What I just said," says Mrs. Rutledge, turning and walking away from them. "Well. Some of us got work to do."

"Nice meeting you, Mrs. Rutledge."

She waves at them without altering her pace or looking back. "You mind now. Be a shame to put holes in boots like you folks got." Then she is gone shuffling around the corner of her house.

The men go on up the uneven porch steps, then through the sprung screen door into a small, dimly-lit front room. "What's wrong with our boots, Earl?"

Now Earl must think fast, and Earl is the kind of man who likes to take his time thinking. It won't do to insult his clients or their boots, but how to avoid it? Also he's a little disoriented because he's forgot which one is Tom and which one is Ralph. "Not a thing," he says. "Mrs. Rutledge's just old an hasn't accustomed herself t'all the advances of boot science and technology's all. Don't worry a bit. Them're full-stomp boots."
"Ah," says Ralph or Tom.

Mae Ola appears at the door frame separating the kitchen from the front room. She wears an off-white apron and an apologetic look of hospitality. "Earl never gave me much warnin about havin guests tonight. Fraid the place is--" she makes a gesture showing at once the state of the house and despair. "But sit yourselves down an take your ease. Supper'll be ready pretty quick."

Ralph and Tom sit carefully on the sofa like they expect it to break or fall through the floor under them.

Earl holds out the stick with the trout on it. "Here, Mae. I'll sit with the guests." She comes forward to take the stick and fish and as he hands it to her she leans toward him and he to her for just a second and they kiss each other, quick and shy before the men, and then Mae's hand comes away with the fish and Earl's falls and standing straight now they smile each to the other.

Earl sits in a green over-stuffed chair opposite Ralph and Tom. Ralph must be the tall one, he thinks. He does not move or speak. He considers the new camper outside, a vehicle worth more than his house. For these men a toy. Under his feet is a braided rag rug of many colors made by Mae and on the otherwise bare walls needle-points by the same hand. A magazine rack there, an old curve-top radio over there. Water damage stain in the ceiling corner. He sees his home as a place of
poverty for the first time. This pisses Earl off and he can’t speak to these men. From the kitchen comes the sound of grease stropped back and forth on the hot iron of a skillet.

Tom rubs his hands on his pants. "So, Earl," he says, but stops.

Mae Ola re-appears at the doorway. "Why don't ye turn on the radio, Earl?"

"That damn noise."

"Well maybe the guests would like it?" Mae Ola turns it on. "Takes a minute to warm up." She disappears again, her worry smile in Earl’s mind like a round thing about to break, like an egg. She is embarrassed, he can tell, and he wishes he’d not caused her this trouble.

The radio comes on with the Judds.

Tom says, "So, Earl. Where are we going to hunt tomorrow?"

The man’s looking right at Earl so Earl can’t pretend he doesn’t hear, but he also doesn’t want to say where they’re going in case these guys decide that the place is three-fourths of the guidin and none of the cost and skip out. Earl hasn’t actually seen any money change hands yet. But he’s got to say something. So he leans forward, looking at the kitchen doorway to make sure Mae isn’t in range to hear, and crooks a finger at the men. They lean forward toward him. Earl tilts his head at the
radio. "Hard t'tell if they're a singin about gettin
saved or screwed, innit? Well, my experience, if ye
can't tell it's probly humpin not heaven."

Toward the end of a mostly silent meal, Mae Ola
says, "Where d'you gentlemen live?"

Ralph says, "Portland, Mrs. Tuggle."

"Oh my. Come a long way then."

He laughs. "It's only a six-hour drive."

Mae Ola fiddles with her napkin, looks up, tries
again. "What do you do?"

Earl speaks up around a piece of fish. "Don't pry,
Mae. Where's your manners?"

"We don't mind, Earl. I'm an engineer."

"And I'm a dentist," says Ralph. He goes on to say
he met himself in college. Earl realizes that Tom is
really Ralph.

Mae Ola laughs like she does when she's nervous,
sort of sounds like a horse caught in a fire. A bird
lands on the sink window ledge. "Look," she says. "A
robin. They're guardian spirits is what. They keep the
kitchen and the hearth from harm."

The men watched the bird hop along the outer ledge.
"They what?" Ralph finally says.

After supper, Earl goes up town with his clients for
a drink. It's halloween night at the Crystal Palace bar.
Earl, Tom, and Ralph have several rounds of Bud at a table. Imps and vampires dance in dim orange light. Tom and Ralph scrape their chairs around to watch everybody, then they drink some more. Things get a little hazy for Earl. He stands up, makes his way to the bathroom. In the shock of the light from a bare bulb he squints.

"Ah," he tells a urinal. "This elk huntin's hard work."

On his way back he's coming up to the table from behind and can see the whole bar. A red-lipped woman long of leg and clad in green paint and cloth leaves and a half mask begins to gyrate alone in the relative darkness of the dance floor. Only she's moving like some other song's on the juke box. The song ends and she just keeps on dancing. Suddenly Earl can hear Tom and Ralph. Ralph's saying, "Wasn't dinner fucking weird?"

Earl halts. They do not know he's here. He can stop this if he takes one step more, but he doesn't.

"Oh god. I thought I was going to die when she poured the fish grease in that can and saved it."

"Saved it?"

"Yeah. I think she uses it over."

Ralph laughs and shakes his head. "Look at that."

Tom looks at the dancing green woman. "Yeah."

Earl steps up, sits down, methodically finishes off his old beer, then begins a new one.

Tom says, "You're okay, Earl."
The bartender returns without having to be asked. He makes a lot of money during elk season. Ralph makes eye contact with the green woman. Earl takes another drink. I don't have to like these guys, he tells himself. Nor they me. I'm just workin a job. It's strictly business.

Tom's mouth is moving.

"What?" Earl says. The table is next to the juke box, which is playing again.

"I said do you think we have a chance tomorrow?"

"You'll kill somethin if I have t'do er m'self."

The men seem to think he's joking. Tom says, "A toast here. Ralphy, a toast I say."

"By all means." They grow serious. "A toast to elks."

"Elk." Earl says.

"Right. And success to the hunters," Ralph adds, still trying to impress the dancer with the intensity of his gaze.

They clink bottles. Earl drains his. Another record comes on. To Earl it sounds as bad and loud as the rest.

"Bartender!" Tom shouts. "More of your finest, good man."

The good man has them with him.

They drink to mules, Earl's mule and then all mules and then the idea of mule. They drink to the mulality of
man's existence. Tom gets up for the bathroom. A hunchback leaves with a princess. Earl peels the label from his bottle. Tom is back, talking. He and Ralph get up, make juke box selections. They come back, laughing at something. Earl laughs too. They laugh harder. They say something. Earl, deafened by the juke box, grins. Earl thinks he should be more christian. These guy's are all right. They aren't country, but can't everybody be blessed the same, as Mae always says. What the hell.

"...Earl?"

"Huh?"

It is the bartender, Freddy. "Done with that?"

"Oh. You bet." He lets go of the labelless bottle.

"Here you go."

Earl gets hold of the new one. Ralph pulls out a twenty. Earl speaks up. "Here. I'll get thisn." He has no money but he starts to reach in his pockets.

"Naw, Earl. Camp supplies. I got it. Relax."

"Thanks. You boys oughta come up elk huntin more often."

The bouncer throws two guys out the door. Earl focuses, reaches out, and picks up his bottle. He can do that real good.

The green dancer and a witch are at Earl's table. Smiling, tilting their heads closer, then farther away. Tom and Ralph saying something. The green bush sits down
with Ralph, the witch with Tom, who waves for the bartender.

Earl leans on the table. He sets his bottle down without knocking it over. Nobody’s talking to him now. Tom and the witch are laughing. Ralph and the green woman begin to dance. He looks like a seal going up hill. She dances like a storm across green hay. Movement and disaster. Earl takes a drink.


Earl sees the door is open. In comes Earl’s half brother, Wilber. Earl thinks Jesus Christ.

The bartender takes the table’s old bottles, leaving new ones, and straightens. "Wilber! Come over here!"

Wilber shambles over. Some of him no longer functions, drunk or sober. His lips are drawn apart and up at the corners. His gums bleed. He stops next to the table. He begins to nod his head over and over on a neck of bone and scrawn.

Freddy says, "Wilber. How old are you?"

Wilber nods.

"Come on, Wilber, how old are you?" The bartender grins and winks at Ralph and Tom.

Earl tries not to get mad. Them making fun of Wilber is just a game. God knows Wilber doesn’t seem to mind, long as they give him drinks for it. Wilber’s eyes
shift around, stopping when he sees Earl. He winks in a gigantic and idiotic imitation of Freddy.

"How do I know you're not a minor, Wilber?"

One of Wilber's hands lifts, scratches silver whiskers. His face the permanent white-blue of lake ice. He takes off his black, broadbrim hat and holds it. He sees everyone is watching him. Then he laughs. He shows them his mouth wide open and they have to turn away.

"I'm afraid I'll have to check your I.D., Wilber."

Wilber's mouth rounded. He pulls up his shirt to his chest and the whole front of him is running scars like stretch marks from the throat down.

"Jesus." Ralph is leaning forward.

The bartender speaks confidentially to Wilber but so the whole place can hear as the last juke box song winds down. "You workin for the police, Wilber. Tryin to trick me?"

Wilber drops his shirt. Earl sits up. Wilber's hands are exactly the shape of the green dancer's.

Freddy says he can't serve anyone without I.D.


Earl's eyes squint at the green woman. Under the paint and half mask she is Jackie, his sister Ruth's girl. Woman, more like. He used to hold her in his arms when she was a baby. He has never felt himself to be an old man before this.
"Want a drink, Wilber?" Ralph speaks up.

Wilber swings around either to the sound of his name or the sound of the word drink. "Tell me your name, Wilber, and I'll give you a drink." Ralph is speaking loudly enough so everyone can hear.

Wilber looks down, rolls the rim of his black hat in his pale hand.

"What's your name, Wilber? Your name for a drink!"

Wilber shakes always. Earl tastes iron. He says in a voice as loud as any young man's, "his name's Wilber Thancer."

Ralph holds a finger to his lips. "Shh, Earl! Don't give it away!" More laughter. Earl thinks even from people living here, people who should know to humiliate a man's brother is to humiliate the man, every man.

"I'm Thancer. That's right."

"Bartender! Bring this man a beer!"

Wilber drinks half at once, some coming out around the corners of his mouth. He wipes his chin and licks his hand.

Tom grabs Wilber's hat.

Wilber, drink finished, holds out his hands. "Hey."

"Mmmm." Tom holds the hat away from Wilber. "Nice hat."

Ralph reaches for it. "You're right, Tom. Let me see that."
"Looks like a frisbee."
"yeah, yeah, try it."
"Go out for a pass, Wilber."
"Hey."

The hat sails across the bar. Back and forth it goes, Wilber scrambling after. Earl cannot breathe. Fifty dollars a day if you can stand not to move, he thinks. He sees Mae’s face the moment he told her he had a cash job. He takes a drink. Wilber hobbling from ghoul to imp after his hat. Ralph’s hand on Jackie’s knee, hers is on his thigh.

"What are you, anyway? A bush?" Ralph asks her.
"Nope. Wood nymph. You heard a wood nymphs?"
"Sure. I’m a engineer."
"Really."
"That’s right. In Portland."
"How exciting." Jackie turns from Ralph to her witch friend and rolls her eyes. Ralph doesn’t see this and says, "It has its rewards. And its punishments."

Earl thinks maybe it’s not too late to get out of here. "Hey. Let’s get on home, huh Tom?"

The hat lands on the table. Wilber is after it but Tom gets it first. "You thirsty, Wilber?"
"M’hat."
"Sure, sure. Remain calm. Here you are. Have a drink."
Wilber takes his hat and drinks the beer at once, standing beside the table.

"Wilber." It's Freddy again.

"Huh?"

"I'll give ya a free drink if you c'n stand on one foot 'n' touch your toe with your hand."

As everybody watches Wilber and laughs as he stands awobble on one leg, Earl puts his hands on the table. He understands now that staying can be just as much running as running. This he will not stand.

Wilber falls over.

"Almost, Wilber. Try 'er again."

Earl cannot speak and cannot stand. His hands slip on the table's top. "Goddamnit."

Wilber falls again, picks himself up. "Freddy," he says. "Give me a drink."

Tom picks up his hat from the floor. "I'll buy you two drinks for your hat, Wilber."

Wilber rubs his hands on his shiny pants. He smiles, licks his lips. Finally nods.

"Bartender! Two more for Mr. Thancer!" Tom puts the hat on the head of his witch. She laughs and says "Yuck, get it off me!"

Ralph and Jackie are gone. Earl is standing. Each hand buried in a wad of Tom's shirt front. He cannot hear what he himself is saying. He lets Tom go and spits in his face. Earl feels a hand on his shoulder and spins
around, but it is Wilber's eyes are like sand collapsing through the funnel of an hour glass. "Earl?" He says slowly.

"Yeah."

Then the bouncer is all over them.

As Earl and Wilber get up off the pavement outside the heat of the Crystal Palace bar, the cold hammers Earl's head into clarity. Only my body is drunk, he thinks. The sidewalk bucks without warning, heaving him into the arms of his brother. Wilber holds him up. "Earl."

Earl runs his hand over his face. It feels all saggy and numb. "Sorry."

"You takin me home or I takin you?"

Earl gets the sidewalk under control. "Me you."

A half a block down from the bar the street is quiet enough Earl can hear the sound the soles of their boots make sliding along the cement echo off the store fronts on the opposite side of Main. They cross the gravel of Applegate Street. Under the cone of light from the corner streetlamp stands Ralph and Tom's camper. It's rocking slightly and in time to these bird-like noises that get faster and faster until they're practically coming up underneath each other: uh, uh, uh uh.

Earl and Wilber stop. Wilber's smiling. "Reminds ya of the way water goes over falls, don't it?"
"Godamighty," Earl yells. He runs up next to the back bumper of the camper. "Stop that filthy noise!"

Wilber stands there blinking at the edge of the street light. "Uh, Earl--"

Earl pounds his fist into the camper's door three times hard. The noise and the rocking hold up.

Ralph's whisper comes clearly from the inside.

"What was that?"

Jackie's voice says, "Sounds like a knock t'me. You expectin comp'ny?" She is not whispering.

"Certainly not. Do you think they can hear us?"

Jackie and Wilber laugh.

"Be quiet," Ralph says. "Maybe they'll go away."

Earl pounds again, leaving three dents in the back of the camper shell. Wilber takes a step toward Earl.

"Say. Maybe i'd be better if--"

"Shut up, Wilber."

Jackie says, "I don't think they're plannin on goin away, Ralph."

"Don't worry. I'll handle this. You just stay out of sight."

Earl can hear the sound of movement, then Ralph wondering out loud where his pants are, Jackie's laugh again. Then the camper door opens. Ralph stoops shirtless there in the doorway. Relief and irritation run across his face in succession. "Earl. What do you want now?"
"You, ya sonofabitch."
"Look, Earl. I'm kind of busy here--"
"Ha, kinda," Jackie says.
Ralph lowers his voice. "Why don't I give you a twenty and you can go back to the bar--"
Earl drives his fist into the side of the camper one more time.
Ralph looks from Earl to the camper to Earl again.
"Damnit, Earl. You're denting the side of my truck!"
Earl shakes his head. "You listen to me, you asshole. That's my niece you got in there."
"She's your niece?" Ralph glances over his shoulder inside the camper, then at Earl, then, finally, at Wilber. "Oh my god."
"Damn straight she is. Get 'er the hell outta there and send 'er home and come down you own self too. I'm gonna personally whip your ass."
Jackie moves into the doorway, squeezing Ralph off the camper steps and onto the street. She is wearing his shirt and not much else. "Earl Tuggle now you listen t'me, or I'll whip your drunk ass." She starts down the steps, jabbing a green finger at Earl's chest. "You got no right to tell anybody anything anytime about where to go or what to do or who to do it with. Leasta all me. You don't own me or anybody. You never did, you don't now, and never goin to neither. That's always been your problem, Earl. You think you got a inside track on
what's right an it ruin the town an you still gotta tell
everone how t' live like God's elected you by yourself
keeper of everbody an their blue-eyed dogs too. Well I
got a bit a news for you, Earl Tuggle. He didn't. And
you ain't got anymore idea about what's right or wrong
than a fish does."

"Listen here young lady--"

"Goddamnit Earl Thomas Tuggle you fuckin listen.
Look't yourself. How do you live? You think me or
anybody's gonna live like you? Do what you done? Be who
your are? Not fuckin likely. You got no rights over me
or mine or this place. No rights't all. Mind your own
damn business an get to your own damn house." She stomps
the camper steps and slams the door.

Ralph's left standing alongside the the camper. He
coughs.

"Well, well," Wilber says.

Earl kicks the high curb with his heel, striking
backward. "Goddamnit. That just ain't right."

"Well, yes it is."

Earl walks up close to Wilber. "You think I'm
wrong?"

"I do."

Earl sees the street deserted up and down. He
doesn't know what to think anymore. Things are quiet and
at the northwest end of the street white fog in layers
reaches up from the riverbank for the town. Nobody's
seen anything, at least. There’s that to be thankful for.

"Wait." Ralph extends his hand to Earl. "No hard feelings, okay? You’re still our guide for tomorrow, right?"

Earl does not look at him. "C’me on," he says to Wilber. "Take ya home."

Off Main three blocks down on Wyeth Street the sidewalk and pavement both give out and the road turns to oiled gravel as it goes into the hills at the edge of town there. Earl and Wilber climb slowly toward Wilber’s cabin, Wilber laboring at the angle and his own broken-down self, and Earl feeling to himself like parts of himself have been burned away all day. All his life. First money and power and respect a long time ago, now his own blood and hope for anything better. He thinks of having to tell Mae, and he’s ashamed. And all of this has abandoned him slowly and with no noise whatsoever over his whole failed life. Now in the dark the pines are salted with road dust. Now the pale of the curve in the roadbed underfoot, the hardness of it under his heelbones. Every deal he’s ever made has failed and he’s sick of it. He goes on now eagerly, almost viciously. He wants to see what’s left now that he’s reached what must be the end of everything he believes in. He wants there to be no more choices and only one sign telling him
to do one thing and no more worry about good or bad or
compromise. A sign as sure as something you can hold in
your hand or taste in your mouth.

Finally out of the dark shapes of trees and the
silence he and Wilber keep the gray form of Wilber’s
shack appears. It has no foundation other than itself
settling into the thinness of the soil here. Wilber does
not own this place, but has squatted here since coming
back from Chosin Reservoir in 1951. Already then the
paint had been gone and now the hand-adzed posts and
beams, pretty much too heavy to warp or split, are white
and covered with a velvet of decay soft and dry to the
touch in the dark. The building had once been the stage
station into the Blue country, the first building in the
county with glass windows. Now the frames are boarded
with closed shot windows, and heaps of bottles and dead
tree branches litter the yard.

Earl and Wilber go in. The smell of sweat and rot
stop Earl two steps in the door. It is worse than even
he had imagined. Wilber crosses to a table and lights an
oil lamp by feel and practice. His hands shake and he
has to use both to get the glass chimney back on the rim
of it. The lamp’s bare light shows the table, a bench,
an iron framed bed and a fireplace of stone. Earl goes
outside into the open air and drags some dead wood out of
the yard into the shack. He makes a fire. In the light
of it he sees his breath come out white. Wilber drinks from a bottle at the table. He holds it out to Earl.

Earl sits down. "No." It is the first word either has spoken since town.

"You won't drink with y'r brother."

"Half brother," Earl says, taking the bottle. Vodka. "Why d'ya let those sonsabitches do that stuff, Wilber?"

"They don't do nothin."

Earl spits on the floor in disgust. "Are ya blind?"

"They're okay."

Earl drinks. "The hell."

"Earl, they can't even touch me no more."

Earl stands up. Everything jerks a quarter turn counterclockwise. "I'm goin."

Wilber touches Earl's arm. "Stay a minute."

Earl pulls away and goes outside and gets sick. He feels it coming again and waits, seeing himself far away from the nausea and cold, from his hands and knees on the damp pine-needled ground. He sits to recover a little. A small smoke barely leaks from the chimney. He gets up to leave. From the cracks around the door and the shot windows, he can tell that the lamp is still on inside. He thinks of how Wilber's hand felt on his arm. He remembers when Wilber got back from Korea he picked him up at the bus station in LaGrande and Wilber wouldn't say anything. Not a thing. He just sat in the front seat
and whistled softly. When they got home they were taking their shoes off on the back porch to go inside and the ends of Wilber's feet were gone and his socks had been wet and when he peeled them off the stubs of his feet had cracks in them and were bleeding. Earl'd come near to fainting, but Wilber just looked out the window and sat there. Finally he left off his whistling and asked about where his dog was. Earl couldn't even look him in the face. The dog had been dead a year and Mae had written to Wilber telling him about it and Wilber had even written back. Earl stood there, unable to speak. It was spring and raining and they listened to it fall. Earl reached over and put his hand on Wilber's shoulder. Wilber put his opposite hand on Earl's arm in turn, and nodded after a minute and started back to his whistling.

Now in the dark Earl lifts his hands and lets them fall against his thighs. When he is sure he is done being sick, he pulls another branch into the shack. Throwing up has made him almost too sweaty and weak for it. Wilber watches him struggle to break up the wood and get it on the fire. "Thought you left."

Earl kneels there, facing the fire. "Nope."

Wilber's bottle is empty. He speaks to Earl's back. "You guidin that guy t'marra?"

Earl hawks and spit into the fire. "He payin?"

"If we'd a done it."
"How much?"

"None a your damn business, Wilber."

Wilber laughs. "Look here. I got somethin t’show you." He goes to his bed and slides an iron box from under it. A peg-stick holds down the latch. He turns the box so Earl can see and opens the lid. The inside of the lid has medals taped to it with duct tape and the box itself is stuffed with a loose pile of twenty and hundred dollar bills.

Earl leans close despite himself. The bills look real. "What in hell’s that?"

"That 'n' me’s all’s left on the face of the entire Earth a Scrimson Tyronne Thancer." Wilber reaches into the cash and grabs a handful. "Here."

"What?"

"Take her."

Earl looked at his brother’s bloodless hand extended and full of crumpled twenties. "No."

Wilber did not withdraw his hand.

"I don’t want y’r money."

"You tried to do me a kindness. Should Mae be the one to suffer for it?"

Wilber’s hand feels dead cold as Earl takes the cash. "You okay, Wilber?"

Wilber closes the cash box and puts it back. "Tired’s all." He stretches out on the bed. "Wished I had a bit more t’drink."
Earl feeds the fire for a while. The room is smokey but warm now. After some time he says, "Everyone thought you'd a spent that up b'now."

Wilber has his face to the wall. "Bought house rounds at th' Crystal five nights runnin and let the rumors do the rest's all. I toldya. Nothin can touch me no more."

Earl thinks about it. He puts the last of the wood on the fire. "Can I ask y'somethin?"

Wilber says nothing.

"What're you savin that for?"

"Ah. Jackie."

"Jackie?"

"You got kids I don't know about?"

"You know I don't. But--"

"But what? You want it?"

"No."

"Well then."

Wilber runs the tips of his fingers against the smooth wood of the wall he faces. He is tracing the edge of the light the fire makes on the wall where it meets the shadow of his shoulder. "Alls I can tell you, Earl, is she's alive. She's still alive. I admire that in a person." His fingers come away from the wall and after a minute Earl can see from where he sits at the table Wilber's back rise slower and steadier in the firelight.
In the early morning, before the east sky divides itself from dark in a mountain broken line brightening with the speed and colors of a running horse on fire, Earl Tuggle wakes and comes to his feet with the aid of his hands against the wood of the table top.

He turns to ask Wilber something and by the light of the still-burning oil lamp it looks like Wilber's died in the night. Earl walks to the bed and bends close to make sure. He can't really tell. As his hand touches Wilber's neck Wilber groans in his sleep and says, "Mmmmshe's legs like hot silk."

Earl jumps. "Jesus Christ," he says. He rubs his eyes. The dry of a whole grain bin is stuffed in his mouth. Any second his eyes might squeeze out of his head. The shack is freezing. He moves to the front shot window and swings it out and gets it propped open. A wash of light is on the world but the sun's not up yet over the Seven Devil country in Idaho far to the east. In the yard a robin flies down out of the thin timber of jack pines to find perch on the pump handle in the yard. The bird's call comes in through the window.

Earl steps back. He thinks a minute about himself and he thinks about Jackie. On the table are the crumpled twenty dollar bills. Earl counts and straightens them. Two hundred and forty dollars. He takes them, kneels down by Wilber's bed, and pulls the cash box out. He opens it. There are thousands inside:
more money in one place than he's ever seen. He runs his hand across and into it. It occurs to him that not even Wilber would know. But he drops the money Wilber has given him back in with the rest. After a minute he fishes out two twenties, one for Mae and one for himself, then he closes and shoves the box to its place under the bed.

Wilber twitches in his sleep. Earl thinks he has not talked to Wilber in years. He thinks maybe they've never talked. Earl takes his jacket off and spreads it over his brother. He stands for a minute and then tucks the coat edges in a little.

Outside in the coatless cold the water from the pump nears ice and after his second drink Earl knows he isn't going to get sick again and takes his fill. The sun breaks as a curve that makes itself a whole thing as he watches, and rifle fire sounds the distant position of hunters to the north. Even with his head huge Earl sees the morning is sweet and welcome to him. He finds the road and begins walking it through the trees down to the Blue River and home below.
In the last place she and her mother had lived, Pia, at seventeen, had refused to go back to school, and instead got a truckstop waitress job, and began to hitchhike west to work on I84 out of Pendleton, a town of fourteen thousand souls from which in all directions except that the Umatilla River takes the land rises in flexions of cooled lava under empires of wheat and dust and railroad steel. To the east the Blue Mountains flattened by heat in day would seem to lift and focus in evening as the town went to dusk while the hills and sky were still in light. She would stand at the side of the road, the shadow of sunset rushing across grass and tumble weed with a whisper as if on harrier wings while dark itself stooped and mantled the land, the raptor eye of Venus bright and low in the cocked head of night.

A year later in a no-color dawn she arose from cool bedsheets and went to her window. Against the shadowy line of far trees along where Hurricane Creek ran behind the collapsing farm house she and her mother had rented since spring, the shapes of two ewes and a horned ram
moved slowly across pasture in the half-lit mist, August morning lending grace to them.

She arose and, stepping from the window, slipped from her nightshirt to stand in morning quiet before the mirror she'd borrowed from her mother. In this mirror the symmetrical curves of breasts and wingshaped collarbones, the narrows of her waist and swell of hips, the spread of tendon along the backs of her hands. Her body this last year more and more an unwelcome and even alien landscape: more and more in her mother's glass her mother from the bones outward.

Now she dresses in blue jeans and a loose sweatshirt, and walks from her room to the kitchen, where she looks over yesterday's dishes. She selects two cups whose handles haven't broken off yet, washes them and starts coffee. Everything in her bedroom but the secondhand mattress on the floor had come out of two cardboard boxes fit into her mother's Rambler the spring before when they moved from Pendleton. So it is with the kitchen things except the Goodwill table with its unsteady legs and scarred top ringed with clumsily painted flowers as if from some child's hand. A thing her mother would like and buy. On the table is a brand new men's cowboy hat. Pia picks it up, turns it over, puts it down again. She looks at the closed door of her mother's bedroom. Her mother had come home late from her closing shift the night before. With a cowboy it seems.
A cowboy with money for a two hundred dollar hat. That's a new one. Way to go mom.

She scrapes last night's chicken bones and Rice-a-Roni off the plates and fry pan into a pail from the back porch. Outside she beats on the the pail with a stick. Chickens come to the sound from all corners of the yard and barnlot as if drawn on reeled cables. They move around her, pecking at each other and the dirt. While they feed in their constant and hysterical present, Pia gathers their still-warm eggs. She would believe chickens mindless except sometimes they are vicious. She wonders if their viciousness is something she believes just so it's easier to gather and eat their eggs without feeling guilty. She wonders if wondering about why she thinks what she thinks about things that barely think doesn't do the same thing. She smiles to herself. She gathers their eggs.

The year we lived in Corvallis mother insisted we go to the Benton County Fair and there in the August flat of the Willamette Valley we wandered around sheep and goats in pens and weird fat people wearing pink and green polyester who'd come out of the hillbilly valleys and coastal hills west of Philomath and into the light of day to eat corndogs dark with grease. Mother, like she always, does looking here and there for something as if it existed or she'd know it if she saw it. All I can
think of is getting out of here. Outside the 4-H show near the pig races and frog jumping contest there are these half-booth half-machine things called Chicken-tac-toe. Are you smarter than a chicken it asks. You put a quarter in, which should be your first clue, and there’s a chicken inside who plays tic-tac-toe with you by pecking at the squares it has been trained to peck at and for this it gets grains of feed. At one of these booths a huge woman is smacking her kid on the head saying watch out, watch out! Not there, idiot! You’re going to lose again! I knew it! Dang you! Whack, Whack, she hits him on the head.

The coop smells of bird and shit and stale straw. The tin roof ticks as it begins to heat in the day. She moves her thumbs across the bumpy brown and white of the eggs. Outside in the good air, the shells, wrapped in her apron, smell of calcium and heat. Across the lot the feeding chickens move like a breaking film of themselves. They get louder as the food gets more scarce. Pia feels glad for the noise they make, no matter how stupid it is. Any is welcome here. She has never lived on a farm before this summer and always the place seems about to fall to a silence so complete the whole world will turn as thin and insubstantial as broken spider webs suspended in the evening air. Quiet like nothing, but a nothing to
shape and weigh you, to make you less even as you desire more.

The desire to leave, her mother's disease, guides their lives like some dark and retrograde compass star. Some places they've left were okay and some were something else. The sign at the edge of this town lists the number of horses and dogs along side the number of people. Not that Pia minds such idiot cuteness. On the contrary. Mild disgust is welcome as noise. It only hurts to leave the places that you love or hate.

On Tuesday before the Pendleton Round-up started, in the middle of the night, Barbara stuck an order on the wheel, turned to her and said Pia, check it out.

So she checked it out: two truckers, a thin neck and an thick neck, soft bellies both; a couple leaning toward each other across the red top of table eight, her lips compressed and head shaking, he in earnest edging anger, each holding coffee cups, his knuckles white; an ocean of folks trying to quiet their kids; at the corner stool of the counter an old Nez Perce man in a cowboy hat and a shirt with pearl snaps, his eyes are coal forever and his workman hands worry a wooden match; the sweep of window giving out on desert rock and sage transformed in dark to the mirrored images of booths and Barb and Pia herself and there in the direction of Barb's inclined head a man
in Levis and a black tee-shirt coming in the door
carrying with him the exhaustion of all day and night
driving and yet also with and in him the light of some
fine stone carved for grace and power too. As his head
turned to her and he started toward the counter she
watched him watch her. The muscles along the sides of
his chest spread up and out from his hips like a sunrise
of black light.

Barbara, working tables 1-8, was her mother's age
and said, just remember, in a landa ants, the dwarves
look tall.

Pia left off loading napkin holders. He came
through the crowd, moving past the Please-Wait-To-Be-
Seated sign.

Look, Barb said, leaning close. He can't read
either.

Pia with an effort looked at her. What?
He sat four stools away. Pia wiped her hands and
picked up a menu.

Well, Barbara whispered. At least close your mouth
when you look at him.

She stands in dawn, her apron full of eggs, even the
smooth stones of the barnlot still slick with dew in the
new sun. Under her bare feet the dampened dust turns to
a kind of cool glue. It is not disgust she truly feels
nor has felt since she and her mother arrived in Blue Earth with nothing but themselves and an over-heating '63 Rambler, but something else, something new to this house, this time. What she feels now, pinned in place by the day's first direct light, is a kind of slow terror.

His name was Trevor. He did something in the rodeo. He told her what it was as she brought him food, but she never could remember exactly what he said then except that he wanted to do what he did so well that the sun would stop an honest hour in the sky. The sound and texture of his voice kept welling up from under and covering over the meaning of his words.

When she got off shift he was there in the parking lot, sitting on the down tailgate of a pick-up truck, motionless except for the slow swing of his legs and his broadening smile. On his feet were boots and on the boots were spurs and on the spurs were bells that made small silver sounds in the September night's heat. He had his cowboy hat on, pulled low and the front rim bent down in the fashion of bullriders a generation ago, and from the Ranchero Motel and Cafe neon sign a slice of light ran off the rim of his hat and hit whitely across his near cheekbone and jaw. From out of the desert night bugs came to the sign's light and flew in oval patterns around it. Pia stopped a minute and watched them. The
light had that quality of starkness common to neon and
the moon in open darkness of seeming almost liquid as it
lit things.

It was not too late, and then it was. She walked
over to Trevor. When he stood and touched her she drew
breath as if stepping into a cold creek though his
fingers were warm and dry.

They did not speak much. They drove down a dirt
road into the desert until there were no lights but
stars. In the back of his truck, in his bedroll, she
smelled the nearly audible scent of sage and rabbit brush
and all across the enormous night the scrim of the Milky
Way shone from stars that ran together and later against
his chest she heard children screaming and he woke at her
fear and laughed and said that's just coyotes. That's
just the way they sound when they're laughin at
everything that's not them.

So they met after her shift each night of the Round-
Up. On the last night he did not come in to eat. After
work, in the parking lot, she found neither note nor
truck nor Trevor, just the hum of neon and the white of
it falling through flying bugs to strike on empty cars
and asphalt.

She thinks that if you are afraid of something
happening and at the same time are afraid it won't
happen, then your fear has very little to do with the thing itself. The thing is just an excuse. Besides, she knows what will happen. They will leave as they have always left: she comes home to see her mother sitting in a house each shabbier than the rest. Her mother is there in the kitchen, smoking and staring, long before her shift should end, a man's handkerchief in her hand, her hand in her lap. The half-day's tips line out on the table before her, like with like, nickle and copper and paper all ordered. Pia sits down, calculating the limits in the rows of coin. She sees her mother's name tag, the white letters R-O-S-E cut into a black plastic or fake wood background, still pinned to the white or gingham or red blouse where it has drawn a hundred truckstop eyes an hour breastward. All her life Rose has had the kinds of jobs where a thousand people have called her by her given name but she has known none of theirs.

Rose smiles, the effort of explaining failure around her eyes and mouth, and says, honey, look--

Mom.

No, listen.

Mother.

Listen. Pia. I have a plan this time.

Light from the fliespecked window indirect and thieflike. Pia thinks she must look to the yellow of the countertop. The inevitable brownstained sink. Anywhere but that smile.
No, really. This--Rose waves at the kitchen as if it's not the whole world, but does not go on at first. It is not Pia she must convince. She takes a breath. Was only temporary, she says.

Pia waits for the plan but no plan comes. This town is a shithole she says, touching her mother's shoulder.

Rose begins to cry and when she speaks her head is down she seems to address the pattern on the table and barely above the dripping of the faucet says when you were little, I wanted you to have nice things. I dreamed them for you. I kept thinking that if--but when Rose looks up Pia will not hear this again and is passing through the kitchen door frame cracked and untrue to lean against the hall wall, sliding down the plaster until she sits upon the floor. Each waits the comfort of the other but no one will speak.

Now the sun has burnt the morning cool. The sky's an empty mouth. Pia runs her tongue across her lips. The day is already dry and hot as the last forty. At the house Pia opens the screen and steps inside the kitchen, holding the eggs in her apron one-handed. Sunblinded in the relative dark she sees what had been the shape of her mother leaning against the stove across the room become the outline of a shirtless man holding a cup of coffee halfway to his lips. When the man speaks her name in
Trevor’s voice she lurches back into the screen frame and drops two of the eggs.

Trevor puts his cup down. A thick scar, red against the tan of his skin, encircles his left shoulder. All Pia can think at first is that this scar was not there last year. Pia and Trevor stare at each other. An outsized silver buckle, also new, hangs at the end of his unfastened belt. What is the same is smooth muscle everywhere from the bone.

He starts to justify himself, something Pia knows is hard enough even when you’re not an asshole, but he stops in mid-word when a moth flies between them. He follows it with his eyes. Then it’s gone from the air, Trevor’s arm returning to his side, fist closed, and it’s as if he never moved. He looks around for more. Pia hears herself laughing. Trevor says no it’s true. I always come back to thinking about you. Another moth comes through the air, and Trevor stops talking to track it, unable for a second to check himself. Then he picks up his coffee cup again. She tells him to go to hell, but he’s noticed her bare feet for the first time and is so intent upon them she’s not sure he’s heard her.

He tries again. He says, I didn’t even know you had a sister.

Her mother’s bedroom door opens and Rose comes out, tying a bathrobe before her as she shuffles into the middle of the kitchen. Her hair goes every which way.
Still half asleep she half smiles at Trevor. She sees the cup he holds and asks if there is coffee.

Pia wants to break something that will feel it. She says, mother.

Trevor repeats mother and follows Rose's profile as she searches for a clean cup. Trevor frowns and looks at Pia's feet again. Rose puts a hand on his arm. Do you like fresh eggs for breakfast? she asks, holding his arm and her empty cup.

He does not move his eyes from Pia's feet. He says he likes them better than old eggs.

That spring a plague of little toads had hopped out of the ditches and irrigated fields on either side of the road before the farmhouse to hug the roadbed at dusk and were pulped by the juggernaut tires of pick-up trucks driven by boys with no thought to the carnage they caused fresh off work at the outland family ranches and heading to town roostertailing gravel in their haste to get to main street and go slowly up and back looking at each other, everybody knowing everybody even to their make of cars and middle names. Pia had watched as Rose tried to remove the toads from harm's way but there were thousands too many to save and the ones Rose moved hopped back out again quick as they could to warm in the tracks of the last truck's tires and wait death in the next with upward
blinking half-closed eyes. As Rose stooped to her task, trying to work faster, rigs rattled by, the young men in them cheerfully calling out obnoxious suggestions to her bent-over form, and she had straightened up to watch the dust of their passing slip sidelong into the fields and reveal the soft dying sound in the flop of crippled toads diminishing to nothing in the trucks' wakes, and Pia watched as Rose was left at last to give up trying to save any of them.

Pia thinks Trevor might drive such a truck.

She makes breakfast while Trevor and Rose drink coffee and smoke at the kitchen table. From the stove Pia glances at the table, where there is no conversation. Rose's face is toward the window, stray strands of hair crazywoman style like wires of fire in the raw sun, but Trevor's eyes burn upon Pia at her work, his right arm slung along the chairback, hand dangling, the thick veins of it all ridged in high relief by light.

Pia breaks eggs and beats them until froth comes. She thinks damn him and her both. But when Rose finally breaks the sound of cooking omelets by trying to explain things, which she never does except when there is disaster, Pia knows the morning for Rose is beyond repair even if Trevor tells her nothing about Pendleton, that it was beyond fixing as soon as Trevor woke and went to the kitchen for coffee, going as he would go without speaking a word to Rose, who then would wake alone. Pia knows
Rose sees this and maybe even saw it last night at the same moment she saw Trevor for the first time. Rose starts to speak, trying to save a feeling not even already gone but never there in the first place, as if her will alone could be a tender stone to stand on. Pia thinks her mother is either brave or crazed.

Rose says they always wanted to live in Florida. That's were they were going when a mere two hours from Pendleton, their car broke down here in Blue Earth. But like a sign she got a job the first day, and then this house, and they'd stayed. Rose's theme is fortunate accidents. Pia thinks there are no accidents that could have caused this. Some things happen but this was done, the car the least of their breakdowns. But she is surprised how comical, even sort of normal, the disorder of their lives sounds when her mother tells it. Maybe this is the way Rose really sees things. A series of accidents that mean nothing about them.

Pia believes people want to believe a thing means nothing when it means too much, and when it means too little will take it for a signal that their fate is bent on revealing itself to them and them alone in special symbols. Pia thinks nothing means nothing and belief and fate are both more need than thing. While Rose talks Trevor leans back, sitting sideways to her, eyes fired and emerald under lids, listening or not listening, so still you wait and wait.
Pia sets the plates of omeletes on the table.
Trevor eats as if there were nothing anywhere, no object or past or action but himself and his next bite. Rose is still talking. She moves from the past of car trouble and her faith in the hand of a happy fate to how they should go to the Blue Earth Days Rodeo Parade due to start at 11 o'clock. Pia, straightening, notices the lines around her mother's eyes and mouth. How in different light they might be, beyond a surface of aging, part of a face stronger and more handsome than it would have been otherwise, but in this light become small gestures of exhaustion, still and quiet as a folded bat.

Pia says, I have to work after the parade.

Trevor, eating eggs, finally looks for the first time at Rose and squints. He says, why Florida?

Rose draws on her cigarette. After a few seconds Trevor begins to eat again. Trevor's here for the rodeo, Rose tells Pia. He rides bulls for a living.

Pia leans back against the kitchen counter. It is hard to tell if Trevor thinks at all except through his body, but this makes him more there rather than less. Pia wonders how it would be to live so. How anything but now could matter. He seems strung loose but when he moves his motion is so instant the air hums. A year ago he felt to her like a panther in his manner, a hawk in his hands and eyes. Now as she watches him eat he is pastless and focused and she does not think of big cats
or feeding birds of prey but the barnlot chickens. Nobody is saying anything. Rose is biting her lower lip and does not eat. Pia says to Trevor, do you like your job?

Beats workin.

Rose says, how's the retirement plan?

Now Trevor turns to her for only the second time that morning. Well it's not like where you're on TV and pitchin Wheaties and Rolex all the time like happens to ye if you're workin bar in Blue Earth, but it's okay.

Pia gives up trying to make things civil, and begins to wash dishes, moving by rote from sink and counter to stove and cupboards and refrigerator, hands and feet working through practiced acts almost on their own while she thinks about Trevor and Rose. They sit so Rose faces the window and Trevor Pia, and together now are worse than any strangers. And yet last night, Pia knows from memory the afternoon sun would have hung in the color of Trevor's face, his shoulders branched wide from his neck, his hands thick and hips thin and movements all in liquid grace and to Rose must have looked like something other than the boy before her now who it was easy to see was shocked at the age and wear in Rose's thirty-four year old face and hands, the wrinkles he hadn't noticed in the bar light and now seemed done with, being fucked and fed and having no interest in any woman beyond these two things. And yet he moves even this early in the
harshness of the midmorning sun like everything in this world might be fixed and made perfect, each lost thing regainable, as if the whole future were last night's friendly paint of moonlight hiding age and hesitation, and he there in it solid as heavy velvet over living hardwood, and Rose wanting to believe maybe something of all this would be left this time just this once beyond a hulk of meat and indifference who would not look at or touch her the next morning for any kind word but only if she humiliated herself by speaking out in anger or in insult.

Three days before my sixteenth birthday, mom and I walked through four blocks of Portland rain. On the gray corner of N.W. 12th and Burnside, amongst the panhandlers hugging building sides, and students going in and out of Powell’s bookstore, mom pulled up flat-footed before a couple who’d just come out of the doors. The man rapidly checked me out as he and the woman started to go around us, but stopped him and said, Frank.

The man paused. Yes?

The woman with him was holding a plastic-wrapped calendar over her hair. She shifted her weight from hip to hip.
Mom ran her hand through her own soaked hair. She tried to speak, then tried again, then said, I'm Rose. This is Pia.

Frank had salesman eyes. They went to me again. You're Pia, he said.

And you’re Frank, I said. I thought what a goon.

The man swayed a little. I feel like I should give you money.

Fuck you. Who is this guy, mom?

Mom said, do you want our number, Frank?

You got a nerve, the woman said.

Frank bent his head, frowning. Finally he told the sidewalk he would never use it.

Frank. We’ll be late. Come on.

Well. It is raining, he said.

Mom tapped the outside of her leg with her fingers. She'd given up trying to deal with her hair and water ran down the sides of her face. She said, right. Goodbye, Frank.

The man said goodbye. As they walked away, I could hear the blonde woman asking Frank who we were. There on the sidewalk I saw my mother cry. This is my only memory of my father.


Pia leans against the sink, wiping her hands on the sides of her Levis. Trevor sits sideways on his chair
and holds his hands out to the side, palms up, and shrugs. Pia shakes her head slightly once. What an asshole, she thinks. Rose, who has been dressing in the bedroom, comes out in time to hear Trevor tell Pia mighty fine as he pushes away the plate he has wiped dry with the last of their bread. He stands up, pressing the table with his hands. Even as Pia knows his heart is nearly nothing, she cannot help watching him move. He is a racehorse ready to run and you will watch in slow motion.

So, he says. Let's do it.

Do what, asks Rose.

What we've been talking about all this time. Go to the rodeo. Get this show on the road.

Mother's Rambler clanks down the pocked and dusty road to town. The outside of Trevor's leg bumps mine, the car jumps in and out of flat bottemed potholes again and again, mother managing to hit every other one, the dust we raise going out across fields of pale grain. Everywhere nothing but blank sky with its blue going white at the sun.

Sometimes after Trevor never called or wrote and I gave up on him, at first men kept getting the idea they were in love with me. This was before I learned to pick
them right. One guy let a reefer of Willamette valley strawberries due in Chicago sit for three days in the Pendleton sun and when he lost his job he cried all night and said he'd kill himself if I didn't come with him to his brother's farm in Fresno where life was going to be good, right, right, so I tried to make him go by offering to loan him six bucks for a box of shotgun shells, he was being such a dick. Barbara told me okay but you've got to be more careful cause sometimes it's not suicide they threaten. And sometimes it's not a threat.

It was best when they were quiet afterwards. I liked the weight of sleeping arms pulling me to sleep. I liked the way they came to me and told me I was something. I liked it that they wanted me since while they did I wasn't ugly or alone. Memory ruins things and talk is worse. In dark I'd dress and go before they woke.

In town they park on a sidestreet and begin to walk to the Little Elk Drive-In, where Pia works. They take a short cut through the school grounds where the crafts fair is set up. Outside the highschool gym women have laid out preserves and green beans and assorted other vegetables in clear Kerr and Mason jars and pies in tins and all manner of food and household gear on metal-legged cafeteria tables, the gross and fine together and most
for sale, and all along temporary racks hung silent and
trophylike bright and dark handsewn quilts made of odd
scraps stitched intricately into a warp and weft of
pattern and color passed down by grandmother's
grandmothers from the by now mythical places called
Kentucky and Missouri and West Virginia, the threads
worked by no man or machine, the patterns telling no
narrative of hunt or fight, but of the circles and
kalideoscopes of sisters and mothers and grandmothers, so
those who quilted here could tell from across the room by
style alone who'd worked which quilt even to who sat
where on the quilting frame, and as Pia comes closer she
can see in the worn strips of some coarse picnic quilts
the signs of the laboring the original owners of the
fabric had once done in the fields which would look like
the quilts from the air, and stepping closer she sees the
repetitions of the stitches worked through the separate
fabrics joining fragments together rough and lovely and
still closer she sees the cotton threads' stitches show
irregularities of spacing and length as if by will even
the disorder of things had been incorporated into order
and practical use in a thousand small articulations of
women's hands.

At the rodeo arena they come to a halt as if by
common agreement at a gravel corner. Rose asks Trevor
how he is doing so far in the rodeo but he seems to have
fallen away from them and into himself and does not reply. He wraps and unwraps his hand with a peg rope. I gotta get goin he says. Want to check the draw.

Around them tourist parents stand in shorts and sunglasses or sit on stadium seats and wait the parade and melanoma while their teenage offspring pretend not to be with them and hangout elaborately bored to death and slyly eyeing the opposite sex. Boys whose boney necks remind her of buzzards look openly at Pia’s ass one after another then take startled stock of Trevor’s arms and shoulders and look away again.

First come the martial strains of band music. Then old men on nervous hook-nosed appaloosas bearing the flag of the U.S. and the blue and gold of Oregon for which the local people stand, hats lowered and hands to hearts. While the crowd still stands this way come two adolescent girls from the junior high in Commerce. They wear white dance suits cut high up the hips and covered with fringe at the waist and tiny breasts and at the tops of their white boots, and lift their knees up in time to the music behind them and as they go as if to willing sacrifice they spin and catch and spin and catch silver battons with bulbous ends and hard chrome shafts, and the girls smile smiles that never vary and the crowd applauds this and Pia looks about her with disgust.

Trevor stands with a wolf grin as if everything were edible and he were very hungry.
A man calls from across the road to Rose. Rose says goddamnit quietly.

The man tries to cross the street but must wait for a weaving formation of clowns of all descriptions: circus like and rodeo like and mountain men in outrageous overalls and fake beards and who are covered in dirt and howl as they shoot the sun with doublebarreled blanks and stagger around waving moonshine jugs as if drunk and offer some to various community leaders and the Methodist Church's ladies choirmembers, then the old men Shriners in their red fezzes driving several miniature go carts and tricycles and one big scimitar-shaped car that has a crazy wheel in front and backfires constantly as it spins in wandering circles.

Finally the man gets a chance and crosses over.

Rose honey, he says. Darcy the little bitch quit me this morning, the place is jammed.

The man is bug-eyed, hatless, pale, and fat. Sweat subs out of the folds of his neck. Rose fishes around in her shoulder bag. First off, Freddy, I ain't your honey.

Come on, he says. Don't give me a hard time. Just get on over there.

I'm workin closin. That's it.

Freddy steps up to her. You're already that close, Rose. Just--

The Elgin Stampede and Pendleton Round-up and Blue Earth Days princesses and queens come riding in gold or
blue or red suits and sit quarterhorse geldings or in one case a sidestepping stallion with an enormously aroused cock rubberlike and swinging but carefully ignored by most of the crowd until some little boy points wildly and yells look dad that one’s a lot bigger than yours and Freddy leaves off what he’s saying to laugh at this and Pia wonders if the waving the princesses do, which looks like they’re wiping mud on windows to block out everyone’s eyes, is something they learned or if they had it bred into them like a dog’s instinct to retrieve or dig holes in the ground.

Rose has her cigarette lit and pokes it at Freddy’s face. Are you firing me, Freddy? You want to fire me now, that it? Either do or don’t but don’t waste my time.

Look. I’ll pay you time and a half the whole shift and one percent of the till cash. Or you are fired. Your choice.

For a second I think she’ll get fired or quit. Freddy’s such a slug and who knows self-destruction is so rampant round here it’s a wonder everyone isn’t just spontaneously bursting into flames. It’s not like I want her to work for him, but we have about ninety-two dollars to our name, not enough to pay rent let alone drive to Florida, where we, I guess, always wanted to be.
Freddy leaves and Trevor's like he's somewhere else.
I don't know. He touches you and it's as if you're pithed and going down a rollercoaster with earmuffs on your head. If his heart is nothing it's a nothing with arms at least to hold you as you fall and fall into the green eyes of Paradise, where there will be no need to speak or do or move, how could there be, in the very eye of desire, need or wanting, anything at all but self expanding to the outer edge of everything?

I don't know. There are no practical words for impractical disasters of the heart. He turns to me and he says, does the honey ever tire of attracting flies.

His eyes are like the mouths of beautiful green eels.

Trevor says, I wouldn't work a half day for the sonofabitch.

Rose says, you ain't me.

No.

Freddy puts the knuckle of his right index finger under Rose's chin. You be there in ten minutes, hear?

Rose turns away. Freddy laughs and walks off.

The three of them keep an awkward silence. Trevor says he has to go. Rose wants something, a word or gesture. The things she needs to live you can't ask for. She says goodbye and without touching her he nods and
walks away toward the smell and noise of loading shoots and beasts so big you can't make out the whole by the parts that show through the slatted rails of the holding pens. Even at a distance the women see his shoulders roll, strained against the stretch of his shirt. He waves once one uplifted hand but does not look back at them, and Pia sees Rose's face would have been blank but for her anger at him that he knew without turning that she was watching for his wave and her anger at herself that he was right.

At six I thought they existed once and might again, red and gold and woolen, and if you knew how you could find one and sitting crosslegged command by thought alone the height and speed of flight. In desert air I would go over whole cities whose buildings were the shapes of onion halves, their root ends skyward, and I would feel nothing but the undulations of the flying carpet and the cool wind in my motion to a better place. Below people in baggy pants and curled shoes and nobody I knew. They would be far away, and I would be safe from them all.

Rose begins to search her purse and to hand to Pia crumpled dollar bills from last night's tips. At twenty-one she slows and stops. I'm sorry she says.
Pia starts to ask for what, but sees Rose often says what she wishes someone would say to her. Pia says, Mom--

I can't ever seem, Rose says. You plan and stuff but, shit.

He's not worth--

Listen, in the end you end up stuck wanting whatever you never had. Good luck if you can’t get it or the whole world has none or you never can figure it out. But the worst is if you get what you want. That’s where hell starts. They should have a fucking sign to mark it.

Rose begins to laugh right there on the street, and it is so clearly not a laugh of pleasure that passersbys turn away and Pia is embarrassed to be with someone who is so poor that she cannot even afford private disasters.

I've always been afraid of being alone in the dark, but I've never been afraid of it at noon before, Rose says, and she is calm as the dead now.

Pia raises a hand as if to slap her mother but instead the tips of Pia's fingers wipe at Rose’s tears, which do not stop and do not stop. Rose gestures hopelessly with a hand at the road along the arena and the mountains lifting off the edge of the Blue River valley like teeth to scrape the sky. Pia involuntarily follows the direction of the gesture as if there really were something out there that would explain what was happening and always happened to her mother.
When Pia looks back Rose is already heading in the direction of the Crystal Palace bar. Pia calls out to her but only in a whisper and Rose is gone in the crowd. Pia wishes she herself were three greyhounds each faster than the others and all headed out of town.

Next to the road here runs a chainlink fence. Beyond the fence the underside of the rodeo bleachers, where littered all about are small piles of trash visible through the rough weeds growing in the grit and heat and filth. A man with a braincase so low he looks like a reptile approaches her. He is drunk and asks her if she is working today and proposes that she go with him and he'd show her some good times. He claims to have a new pick-up. Pia takes up a rock the size of a chicken's egg and throws it at him as if he were a dog and he calls her a bitch and leaves as a dog would, shuffling sideways with one eye on her, his teeth bared.

After her shift of making milkshakes for tourists, Pia goes to the rodeo arena. She would not even go in but it's almost over and nobody is even taking tickets anymore so she buys a coke and finds a seat in the shade. Gates at the end of the arena keep opening and men on animals keep coming out and riding them or falling off. Finally a gate kicks open and it's him. The bull is like a white flood of earth under him, his one free arm raised in a curve and itself hornlike. They fuse
together wuther and hip like a lesser god of fuck and then Trevor is over the head of the bull and being nuzzled it almost looks like at first. Trevor there in the dirt sits up between the horns, grabbing at the animal's head as you might play with a giant dog. The bull flicks his head, and with no apparent effort sends Trevor over and over into the air. Trevor lands on his side and comes to his hands and knees. The clowns run by the bull, slapping at its face but the piggish and enraged eyes have already fixed on Trevor.

People around Pia are yelling and Pia is screaming too but for beast or man she cannot truly say and the bull's head is tucking and swinging around toward Trevor, the rest of the body so big it must sidestep to get out of its own way. Trevor is trying to move. But far from stopping, the sun leaps forward in the sky and there is no time. He kneels like a man at prayer and raises arms to fend the horns. His lips have drawn back from his teeth as fear outruns itself in him and he has time to yell come on ya fuck get here loud enough the stands can hear and the bull is on him, the flat of the horn on Trevor's chest. Trevor, knocked on his back, kicks the bull full in the ribs with both feet as it runs over him. The bull spins to try again to hook him but mistakes a sudden clown for Trevor and is drawn away.

Trevor stands and picks up his hat from the dirt and slaps it against his leg to clear the dust. He takes a
step and with anger running out of his face his legs
cannot hold ground and he must go to one knee. He seems
small there. Pia watches clowns and cowboys help him off
the arena floor and she leaves her hands shaking and her
tongue like a chunk of salted dirt in her mouth.

It is a long walk home. She carries the shoes she
had to wear for work in her hands and goes along barefoot
in the middle of the road where the passing trucks and
cars have made the tracks a dust the texture of flour and
almost as white.

When she gets home his truck is parked in the front
yard. She thinks if she goes inside she might try to
kill him. Not even because he’s that important but just
handy. So she walks on by. The garden her mother had
been so excited about that spring is overgrown and choked
in the corner of the yard. Yet the smell of spices
scatters from it all around. A hoe leans against the
fence and pea plants have spiralled up the handle and
flowered and fruited long ago and now the plants are
blown yellowish green and the pods hang dry and lumpy.
Pia goes on. The trail across the lot to the barn shows
spots in the dirt so barren and hard they shine. These
places feel hot against her feet. The roof of the barn
swaybacks and parts are missing, so the rafters hatch the
sky like spidery lace.
The light of day begins to fail already and holds the long abandoned and useless building in a weirdly foregrounded way. It seems to Pia as if the barn were suspended always in the moment just after an echo dies. The hasps of the door hinges grind in their pivoting and will not open all the way.

Inside is a cool, still pocket of air soaked with the smell of old hay beyond curing and now crumbling dry and pale, and the rich scents of ancient harness and worn out saddle leather on racks. Horse blankets iron in their age drape across stalls and funk the air with the sweat of old rides and hair is still woven in them and yet the horses long dead and gone to dog food and glue. Hoofprints like plaster masks fossilized across the stall floors. In the corner of one stall a spiderweb holds a blue and gray bird’s feather. There a fly enormous in the silence. Old straw and shit long compacted to a hard crust covering the floor planks and through this weeds break out where the sun comes in the roof holes and arches its daily path. Something small and secret moves in the feed bins on tiny feet. She comes to an old unlevel watering trough even now containing a wedge of water tannic and dim and as she bends close despite herself she can see a world of bugs paddling on constant sea quests.

Slight movement draws her eye up. On the top of a stall divider sits a cat, tail flicking. A pigeon bursts
in through the roof hole, frightening Pia by its snapping wingbeats, and cooing fills the rafters. The cat's eyes turn a savage green.

Pia closes the door going out. The wood of the barn door is warm to the touch and smells of this warmth.

The things she's loved she's lost so often she has learned to fear growing fond of any thing or place or one. On her way back to the house in the setting sun she feels now at what cost comes having nothing to lose.

When she gets to the house she stops for some time in the kitchen and then her bedroom, all her motion shot with hesitation. She is falling behind and outside of her own self and everything is in the past and she watched herself. She went to her mother's bedroom.

The room was cool and dark. She heard him breathe. He woke and rose in single motion, spoke her name and came to her. He moved with ease. Pia's life condensed itself to sudden strokes of wings in enclosed space, a horn on skin, her bedroom mirror, and this man with eyes on fire. As if in memory she slowly lifted, then, arms so pale they traced across the dark and left desire. He touched her lips with fingertips. She brought her hand to his. All the windows of the world fell from them and they in common isolation caught themselves in arms and blood that rang at touch like bells. So time and season by fierce grace they kept at bay a while, til separate again they slept.
I think in dark you lose the power to divide, and it's this that terrifies you more than any monster or lack of light might. You think you use your mind to sort one from another, your self from everything else, for instance, but it's your eyes not your mind. The eye of your body. Love is blind and rage is blind. Thinking gets you nothing and nowhere. In my dreams is a nothing dark like maple syrup and other eyes that carry their own light sharp as a knife's edge and peel my eyes like oranges.

When I wake I see for a minute a thin acetylene flame run from under my skin as if my body can be beacon to see and so save itself. Then that's gone. I look to the window and the moon's a silver hook of light fishing in the dark.

Shortly after midnight Pia wakes and leaves the steady rise and fall of Trevor's chest with its horn bruise dark in darkness like an eyeburn from the sun. She goes to her room. There she packs her two thriftshop suitcases by moonlight. She finishes in less than ten minutes. The room, bare now, shows no signs of her. She holds in her hand all the money she has: sixty-two dollars. She returns to her mother's bedroom. Trevor opens his eyes. Pia standing naked near the window in a pale light that makes her just a set of silver planes and
curves watches him. He closes his eyes again without really having come awake.

Later still outside the house predawn runs along the range of eastern hills curved upon the curve of the horizon, the world like a living body, the body its own horse and plow and harvest all in one. Inside, Pia shakes Trevor awake.

What?

Get up. It's time for you to go.

Trevor sits on the edge of the bed, facing away from Pia. She can see the sweet angles of his back. He has a bag with him and takes out a jar of some sort of ointment and a piece of cotton and an Ace bandage. He smears the ointment on his bruise and covers it with the cotton and begins to try to wrap himself in the bandage. Pia helps him. When she touches the cotton the taste of garlic immediately fills her mouth. What is that stuff?

It stops swelling.

Careful where you put it.

It really hurts when I laugh, he says, and when he grins he almost looks like a good man.

You should see a doctor.

They dont do nothin for stoved ribs cept take your money, a cure I can do by myself in better ways, he says, finishing the wrap himself. He stops then and looks to her. You wouldn't want to come with me, would ya?
Pia hadn't expected him to ask. She thinks about it but all she can see is driving all night through exhausted dawns, brown beer bottles empty and abandoned in gray dirt, gear she would never want to understand rattling in the back of an old pick-up, dust rising in the afternoon, the smell and noise of large stock animals moving in stark hot sunlight, and in the evening garlic taste and taping him up by bare lightbulbs, broke, silent, sweat at his hairline. She says no thanks.

Trevor nods. He dresses stiffly and gathers his stuff. At the door he stops. I could wait for you to meet me somewhere.

No.

He exhales. Can you look me in the eye and tell me none of this or Pendleton meant anything to you?

She says, it didn't mean I'd follow you around wherever you go.

I'm not asking--

Trevor. Did you ask mother to go with you?

No.

Okay.

Okay what?

Okay now you know something.

Is that all you fucking me was about?

Only if you have to ask.

But--
No. Think about it, Trevor. You don’t want me, you want yesterday wanting me over again. And last night. But not me. You can’t cause you don’t even know me.

Trevor stands at the doorjamb a while. Then he’s gone. Pia hears his truck start and then the sound of it moving off. The sound gets very small until there is not even the smoke of it left. Pia makes the bed. Her mother’s room is almost as bare as hers.

Pia eats an apple on the front steps and tries to write a note to her mother as the sun comes up. Light seems to seep out of the ground as much as fall from the morning sky. Unseen birds call. Pia counts her sixty-two dollars. She has to make a plan. The long white road before the house reaches its vanishing point before it gets to town.

In all the places she’s been only the outside of things look different, the past receding always to grayness like the centering white dot in an old TV set just shut off, the future a past of left over mismatched dishes, broken cars, the dry stares of those in long lines who watch you pay in food stamps, a red vase that was the last of Rose’s mother’s things in bits across a dirty greentile floor, off-white walls pocked with the nail holes of other people’s pictures.

The paper in her hand explains nothing because there is no explanation nor any plan possible.
In her bedroom she tries to pick up her suitcases and go. She thinks she sees her mother by the door but it is herself in the dressing mirror. When she touches the suitcases it is to unpack them slowly in the lengthening morning. She watches her hands do this as if they belong to someone else.

Outside Pia feeds the chickens yesterday's omelet leftovers and crushed eggshells, then she gathers the new eggs. On her way back to the house Pia sees a car coming from way off. It makes almost no progress and by this as much as shape she knows the car is her mother's.

Pia meets Rose in the front yard. Rose's face shows the familiar signs of all-night standing and working drinks and drunk customers. Pia holds the eggs she has gathered in her apron before her. Rose's drawn face smiles. She is saying, look honey we're rich, and she is holding out her hands, full of dollars.

I'm glad you're home, Pia says. The world is wide and mostly blue and green before them and so opaque they can see and see forever. Together they turn for the offcenter house and together they go inside.
Now in the heat of August the face of the Blue River looks as thin and clear as the skin of an old woman. But like everything alive it gives birth to itself every minute. This swimming hole is almost the only place I can remember Sara's face anymore and people used to call us sisters we spent that much of our time together. And so we were, it turns out, in all but blood. No one is here now. Water clean and empty as fire. Last year on this day all of us came down to swim before the bonfire we have each year. Even Jerry, Sara's cousin, showed up. He's a Manning and they hardly ever even come to town, let alone swim. Everybody was tan but him and when he stripped off his shirt his shoulders were white as ash and his forearms and neck looked like they'd been dipped in walnut stain.

Later when Sara and I were tanning he came out of the river. Sara's eyes were closed and he walked out of the water like some porcelain animal and started past us. He nodded to me and looked at Sara, whose eyes were closed against the sun and he just stopped. He half turned and bent closer to Sara, staring at her and I started to tell him to keep his eyes to himself but he
pointed at her arm, his body an arc of immediate anger. I looked. Partly healed bruises faint as small shadows across them. These shadows the shapes of fingers.

When they leave I uncurl and turn onto my back without opening my eyes. I wait as the world re-assembles itself, bones, breath, and flesh. There the stones of the alley, there the summer night air cool across my knuckles and lips, there the blood on its rounds, there the sweet iron taste in my mouth, there a piece of tooth, there a grind of ribs at breathing. All this as if flesh were meat and meat wood. I smile. The body's far too practical to be wood. The heart's a different story. I hear and feel my cousin Jesse stooping over me in the dark, and know I've failed to get myself killed. That's twice and it's not the sort of thing you fail at if you really want to make it. Even before I open my eyes I figure this out. Even as

I remember that fall when I discovered my cousin Sara Sheene's cool fingers could be, in the dark even, the absence of ice in a moonlight the silver color of moth wings silent and circling

fire could not radiate more heat than the top of this barn does down on us as we top out this bent. I'm running the hay crew and my brother's
running the bale wagon. I’ve got Willy Stone up on the stack with me because he can throw an eighty-five pound bale fifteen feet and it’ll roll all the rest of the way across a five by seven bale stack and spin off the other side. If you don’t stop him. He’s seventeen, same as me. Someone will have to stop him soon or no one will be able.

I tell him, stackin lasts all day. Just pick em up. You do it your way, Manning, he says, eyes of pig above his dust mask.

I look out the end of the barn through the opening where they fifty years ago using draft horses used to hoist up nets of loose hay and swing them into the barn and down a pair of steel tracks that still run along the roofbeam, look out across the cut fields, the brush line at the creak, the hills rising sudden from the low and brown unbroken ground. The sky above is blanked out by thunderclouds. The balewagon, which distance has made a toy, has four tiers to go. I bang the curve of my hay hook against the elevator and motion through the screech of machine to Steve and Sara’s brother Jesse, who are loading the bales, to speed it up.

At the end of the load Jesse shuts down the elevator. I stack the load’s last bale next to my water jug. I watch Willy, who has to stack his bale and then look around to remember where he left his jug. I tell him, You’re goin to have to stack the last bale of the
next load over there, so if ye put your jug there ye’ll be right next to it at the end.

He just looks at me. You can’t tell that, he says.

I say, sure ye can. Look. Stackin’s the same song over and over always. Ring around butts out against it, double ring, ring around butts out against it, butts out for your tie tier and then we do it again. All layers come in that order and the order is always repeated and all the layers are the same. All stacks one stack. You can predict every bale. Or your other choice is to just remember where you put your jug and stack the last bale there. Some people do it that way.

But he’s crawling into the topped-out section of the next bent over even before I finish. He is yelling I hate birds. It’s hard to insult someone if they won’t pay any attention to anything. He’s fish-flopping his way between the hay and barn rafters, crawling way back there. He cannot believe anything exists that he cannot understand. He only sees what he looks at and he only looks at things for two seconds at a time. All around him wide open spaces of nothing.

Down below Jesse and Steve are not talking. We are all thinking about Jesse’s sister. My cousin, Sara. She ran away and nobody knows where she left to. Not Jesse. Not me. Not her best friend, Rebecca. Willy and Steve never talk to me or Jesse now. They don’t talk to me because they think I got her pregnant and that’s why she
left. That's a logical conclusion and maybe true but I don't think so. Why Willy and Steve should rely on logic to figure this out I don't know though because they never use logic for anything else far as I can tell. They think Jesse, being her brother, should kill me or at least mangle me up some. Instead he even works for my dad. They can't figure out why. Jesse knows why though. But he doesn't know I know.

The bale wagon has one tier to go. I pick up my hay hooks and re-stack Willy's last corner so it's right. This summer all the stacks must come out right. Because this year's it. I'm already gone from here. You can't live in this place.

Out the end of the barn now rain upon the hills edging the valley. Outside the wind begins. We'll get one more load stacked and one in on the bale wagon, maybe. Then the rain will come.

I turn for the flapping noise. Willy is backing out of the topped-out section with a baby pigsion in his gloved hands, and he is followed by a grey and hysterical flashing of feathers.

I know what's next, and I won't stand it. Willy picks up his hay hook and takes a swipe at the mother as she dives on him. I come on for him but I'm on the far side of the stack. I drop my left hay hook as I come and as he makes his second swipe, I have him by the back of the belt and give him a jerk. As he falls back, because
he falls back I figure later, he makes a wild swipe at
the bird and the hook hits her. Sounds like a fist
hitting a pillow. The bird yarrs and flaps and turns
dead on his hook.

Then everything has burned away in anger sudden as a
lightswitch and I'm dragging Willy backwards to the edge
of the stack just like I'd drag a bale, without looking
anywhere but where I'm going. First he's saying fuck off
then he's trying to pull away then he's beating my arm
with the flat steel of his hook then at the very edge of
the stack as we're already going over he looks down
twenty-three bales to the barn floor and seeing what's
happening now at last the last thing he does is try to
hook me in the face with the dead pigeon but we're over
the edge and he'll miss I don't even bother to duck nor
would I, and as we go over I sweep my right hand, which
still holds its hook, out and over my shoulder in a long
arc for power and speed for I want him to feel it hit his
face before we hit the ground, but as the hook pivots in
my hand it gives a loud bong and a wrench at my shoulder,
and we stop there, leaned out over the edge.

Willy hangs folded in half from the back of his
belt, where I've got him by my left hand. His arms and
legs make dangling motions. I look up. Blisters of
sweat across my arm. My right hand holds its hook. The
hook is hung up on the bent's cross beam, which I have
seen a thousand times a year since I was two and cannot
have forgotten about. I try to make myself let go. I fail.

Jesse and Steve below, their faces oval and pale in the barn dark. They stand uncertainly. I say, you boys want to get a ladder?

Finding one takes them a while. Now that Willy knows he's going to die if I drop him, he stops calling me a motherfucker and just hangs there. I say, Pigeons mate for life. Then I say, Willy?

What?

Bales got six sides, right?

So what?

Two butt ends, two flat sides, the cut side, and the side that's got no name.

He doesn't say anything, but I've got his attention all right. Well the point is that the last side exists anyway. You can tell it not by its name, but by it not having a name. By what it lacks.

He doesn't move at all. I begin to swing him a little. He tries to look at me. His paper dust mask goes in and out, in and out. As he looks at me I tell him, Rebecca won't let you fuck her either, no more than Sara did.

After that we just hang there together, waiting for the ladder.
In the morning, with the sun high but still rising, sawdust soaks up oil on the cement floor of Abbot's Garage, and around a Dodge pick-up truck overalled men standing or sitting, spit in the smell of metal, tools, and grease. On the wall an old calendar picture of Marilyn Monroe.

Lee's father leaves with the other men, telling his son oil and filter, sparks, rotor, cap, and time it too. Before I get back. Understand?

Lee walks to the chair next to the office door and sits down.

Hear me boy?
Yeah.
I can't hear ye.
I said yes. Lee wads Redman and sits. He watches his father's back, sag shouldered with fat pads wrapping the hips, receed into the heat and light amid the other men, all moving slowly, saving sweat, off to the dark and air-conditioned cool of the Crystal Palace bar. When he is sure they are out of range Lee says: lazy bastard.

I could hear her say daddy. Daddy. Later he'd come out the trailer, move like meat through the ghostworld moonlight across the bright and blistered palm of the yard makes Jesse's black eyes narrow. He is sitting on the
front porch steps in the enormous late August hush. He has been snakestill watching the birdform of his bike on its stand in the yard and seeing months ago.

Willy Stone—who once killed an eagle on the wing with a single-shot .22, a shot of legend already the way the bird unstiffened like a string toy when the tension's gone and wheeled down out of the sky all folded and flailing in its final dive and the way it compacted and bounced two feet at impact, the way even in death it looked built to seek and strike even with bright blood upon its tongue and open mouth so clear before Willy's friends it was as if they themselves had seen it and not just heard of it from Willy, who was born in this town and who lived here all of his eighteen years—notices for the first time that Mary Anne, cheerleading on the sidelines, has huge tits. She is jumping up and down, and it's only a scrimmage. Willy has to turn his whole head to see this clearly through his facemask.

While he watches he does not remember Candy four weeks ago, whose price at sixteen was three beers and that you said you loved her and who pretends not to know what is happening until it is almost over and will not move at all no matter how hard he goes at it until the end when her eyes peel open whitely to the dark and she clutches and makes a noise no innocent can make and turns
sloppy clinging just as he feels nothing tired and less for her than he would feel for a wornout pair of workboots, the leather of them rotted with use and dirty feet she says hold me hold me they call her Jiffy like the peanut butter because she spreads so easy he rolls off and she crying after a while that gets old he tells her to shut up Jesus Christ.

Now his weight's upon the knuckles of his right hand. Pressing the grass-covered earth until it yields gives him a pleasure he neither names nor makes mean.

Say it. Say it, he'd said the other time. Rebecca fought him silent and serious. Bitch. Say it. Say it. There was the smell of his chain saw and the steel of his truck bed. Her head banged softly against the wheel well. Again. Again. The more she fights. Say it, he says. Say it.

He is running but too late. The ball across his fingers and he is running after it, it scribbling along the ground before him. He runs into someone and someone else, smashes his elbow into them. They are gone and finally he has it then and is running. At the edge of the field invisible hits him sideways and he lifts and falls. The cheerleaders squeal as the whole backfield runs down on them. Dirt rides his facemask. He looks up. Mary Anne nearby is staring at his hips, the green of crushed grass caught in her eyes, but Willy does not
see this. He is not looking at her eyes, and not now nor later will he ever know their color.

At breakfast sister's lips swollen above the grainy white of Cream of Wheat. She refuses. Eat your cereal, honey, he says again, almost like a kindness. Sister looks blue eyes away. In the kitchen mother drops another plate. Eat your cereal he says. She looks him level. He wets his lips. Don't defy your daddy he says. Eat. Make me she says. Hate is like a hand upon their shoulders. Even as she throws the scalding bowl at his face, the white of it hung in the air, he is moving for her and I for him, reaching a hand out

Jesse picks up a screwdriver from the foot and tire beat-to-bareness ground. Maybe it's the carb, Jesse thinks, though he knows it's not. The Harley low and lean and body thrashed idles smoothly before him. Nothing is wrong with it. Yet he is oppressed with the idea something is about to go wrong with it. Soon. He does not believe in premonitions of disaster, but last time

in front of him as he rounds the bend the truckside, a wall of steel, seems to rise as it comes for him and he lays the bike down and rides atop it clear underneath the semi in a flash of dim shadow and a blood-and-sparks show out the other side
sliding and then tumbling it seems almost lightly across
the pavement until the notime this takes is over and he
feels the flat of his back and length of arms stretched
upon the road, and in the seconds before the pain starts
he wraps him in the deepest calm he's ever known and
takes in the sky above and fieldcrickets calling in the
otherwise and sudden quiet

he tosses down the screwdriver
and mounts the leather seat. He is thinking well.
There's no time like now. The Bike begins to roll. The
color of Jesse's eyes is the shape of a wing

beating out
of the hills and into the last hairpin turn, Rebecca
checks her wristwatch without taking her hand off the
wheel, downshifts to 3rd, and stabs at the gas hard out
of the turn. The gone shocks rock the bed and cab with
its broken seat springs until she shifts to 4th on the
straightaway where the ride smooths in the increasing
purity of speed to a steady rattle of the Handyman jack
in back jumping to the truck's vibration. Just before
the crossing of Ruby Prairie and Elk Creek Roads she
slams on the brakes, skidding the heavy F250 halfway
through the intersection. She stops there and checks the
watch again. She's missed her record by a good eight
seconds. The emotion of no emotion is hammered bronze
upon her face.
The road grit drifts around the truck and into the open driver's side window. Rebecca kills the engine. There is a collapse of sound to silence, drifting dust and waves of heat off the concrete in all four directions. There are no cars or people anywhere. The engine tinks as it cools. Everything stands bleached in the sunlight. She sits in the middle of the crossroads, waiting for another car to come so she will have to move. Her eyes are so alive in her maskface they seem surreal and are the color of the Blue River glitters to his left as he rides the county road out of the valley past the Manning place and into the canyon where the water sometimes whitens between deep troutpools, and the road makes tighter or more gradual curves each of which Jesse's body has memorized in its time and timing, angle of lean and tilt, even to the likelihood of loose gravel in the hollow of this corner which he ignores jawclenched and furious in this unwitnessed pointless risk which is the point and engine screams and he is thinking, faster and faster we go.

Lee unhooks the big key ring from his belt loop, pushes a small key into the lock on the pop machine, and opens the side panel. He reaches into sudden cold and steals a Coke from his father. He flips the bottle cap
off casually, as if it were easy to do, and snaps the key ring back in place, without having to look. He listens to the keys jingle like spurs on his way back to the easy chair. He sits, then props his feet on some 30 weight cases. His dad must have put them there. The bottle sweats now in the heat. If he would bother to look he could see, without moving from where he sits, most of the inside of the garage, the register in the office, the road past the pumps in front of the station, and the dust-covered leaves on the trees beyond next to the Blue River, but he looks instead at the olden-style picture of a naked woman lying on something red. She is a little fat, but has great tits and red, parted lips and looks like Madonna only she isn't. He spends a lot of his time staring at those lips while he runs his father's gas station on long summer afternoons.

The dry cottonwoods along the river had shifted in so many hot winds, and the snapping of the big dirt-grey grasshoppers as they flew on black and yellow cellophane wings had arisen from out the fans of heat upon the road so many times before they are blank to him now and he does not see them even when he looks away from the picture. He gets up and moves to the folding camp chair outside, hoping it will be cooler. The clock on the office wall says 4:15. He figures that gives him an hour and forty minutes or so before his dad shows up and bitches his ass out for not tuning up the Dodge. Lee
swigs some more Coke. He'd be goddamned if he'd tune it now. Fuck it, Lee thinks, I don't own this place. It isn't any cooler in the breeze than inside the garage.

A minute after the bike shuts off, the chickens return by ones and clumps to the brown, unmowed grass of the yard and begin to peck and scratch. Out the springless screen door and onto the unpainted porch comes Mrs. Olst, a turnip in her hand and men's boots on her feet. The boards creak under her trodding. Jesse walks to the bottom of the porch and rests one foot on the last step. I got two bucks only, he says.

Mrs. Olst wears the same print dress she always wears, the pattern vegetable, her own enormous bulk under it earthlike. Her face seems clay in slow landslide. She leaves. She comes back with a sack and hands it to Jesse as he hands over the two dollars.

She says say.

He faces her. She has never spoken to him before about anything but their trade.

How's your mother agettin on?

Mrs. Olst's barn has paint. But the house does not. He says, she's left. Said she can't live here no more.

The woman turns on the porch like a battleship maneuvered in narrow port by slow tugs. You need work,
she says, her back to him now, you come to Mrs. Olst. I work you. You bet.

Jesse straps the heavy sack to the back of his bike, the dull ring of the homemade beer in bottles a clink inside like bells underwater. He had not expected kindness from this place. She goes into the house without pause or any wait for reply.

Smooth brown glass goes wavy as it slips apart the surface of the clearwater spring creek running through the pasture back of Jesse’s house. Cold and quiet frost upon the aluminum skin of the trailer where his father took his sister
cold and quiet current rolls the bottles
round kissing them together in the muffle of the water like a pillow over lips, to hold them, to cool them
to make her and punish her.

Jesse is in the ice-ruined grass of late winter, shoeless. Already his fingers have worked the applewood limb free of bark. The moon is round and belly white. Jesse crouches, still in shadow and the air is wellwater cold upon him and he thinks the moon is sun and breathing needs no lungs nor can eyes close to greet sleep anymore and he living under
water will keep them and cool them all until the bonfire up Elk Creek tonight. He

the gigantic shadow of his father leaps from the open trailer door to join its similar nightdark. Metal clanks twice as his father steps the aluminum steps going down and Jesse struggles to rise in ambush but he cannot: his feet have gone dead like stones or glass cracking in the cold. He tries and cannot. The blood will not flow. Father has paused and is unbuttoning before the brush Jesse hides in not three feet away. His father pisses the frost off the leaves, his eyes closed and face lifted in peace and Jesse smells his sister and still cannot rise to strike he has no legs not from cold he knows but cold fear and then his father is gone and only rage and a terrible quiet stopping and starting from the trailer is caught in a light he cannot shield his eyes against as he straightens from the creekbank and makes his way toward the house.

Rebecca wants a rootbeer float at the Little Elk Drive-in, but she drives on by when she sees Willy's pick-up there. She parks her truck down by the river just out from under the thin leaves of a willow. A weeping willow she tries to laugh but she is shaking and
perfectly still and the cottonwood trees drop white down as if the sun were beating their stuffing out. She wishes she could see Sara for even five minutes. Sara would know how to help her. Not stuffing, seeds, she says out loud. They float to the Blue River's surface and are swallowed in dark like

Sara says I'd do it but I can't. I tried. I was going to use daddy’s shotgun put it in my mouth but I couldn't. The openings are black. The infinity sign Mr. Brant teaches was what I thought and I couldn't, Jesus, I just, I tried hard as I know.

The river flows before them. It is spring. Rebecca does not know what to say. Sara does not show yet. You would not know to look at her. Rebecca says we could drive my truck to Bend. You don't need parental consent and nobody knows you or need know. Or even Spokane.

Sara begins to cry.

Rebecca holds Sara, and thinks of something else: Jerry Manning, Sara's boyfriend. She says, what's Jerry say? Cause we can get him to pay, if it's money. He'd help. I'm sure he would.

Sara shakes her head. I dont want him involved with this.

Rebecca thinks it's a little late for that now. But she only asks how long?

Sara crying as if her crying were the last thing on an empty earth to call her own. Since I can remember.
That's why I wasn't worried, I thought there was something wrong with me, because since I was little--

Rebecca lifts her head. What?

Sara Sheene looks at her. You do not know?

For Rebecca it is as if Sara is standing on the other side of the river, walking, the only thing moving and the only thing mourning the coming of spring across the face of the fields and the barrier river rushing in runoff like the earth ripping in half. Rebecca says what? Know what?

Sara's eyes are the pure terror of a cat's face trapped in a crashing car. She says, he holds me and he hits me like

    driving a post, once they start. It is like some tiring work where you swing and swing until your breath comes fast but this post will neither drive nor split, and Jesse is afraid it will never sink down and lay quiet and finished ever at all and the four of them, Willy and Steve and Lee and Jesse, swinging and kicking, will be there forever, striking at this single post. He thinks this is what hell will be like. Willy is saying hit him goddamnit. Hit him. They are not working on a post. It is not a post.
I thought I'd come here. The river is low. When we were kids Sara and I would skip flat stones and make mud pies and have a tea as real to us as rocks.

Sometimes now I see the shape of Sara moving in the field across the river. The first time I called to her, when she didn't answer I knew it for what it was: a sign. And the sign means she is dead somewhere.

And it's not the same river anymore. It used to hold still. Now it wears a new face every minute and all the other rivers it was and will be stack upon this instant's river and signless will not show themselves but to how you feel so that last spring's flood is here always running feet above now and the color of coffee and cream as we sat there and I wished to trade anything to save her but there is no market for the things you want most, and we are there still, and somewhere I am already dead as Sara is dead somewhere and even now right now Willy is inside me erasing me from myself so I just watch from outside now everything each a hundred things and no faces left behind a changing wheel of disguises.

I cannot even get a simple rootbeer float. Every time I see another Willy I lose another self I cannot tell what terror this is to die each time each time wondering if this will be the last self and nothing left not dream not love not sleep not dirty not even this feeling I must carry a glass brimful of water everywhere
and walk so none spills as if all selves at stake while
every day a new Willy joins the rest to push me push me.

Lee watches Rebecca pull into the park down by the river. He hopes she's going swimming. He has seen her wet before and she is fine. He stands up. But she just sits in the cab, holding the steering wheel. She looks bored to him. Then he sees she is wiping her eyes. Her neck is long and white and he can see in profile the rise and curve of her white forehead running to straw-colored hair, and see the folded delicacy of her small ears in their secret places and the way she bends her head down in wiping her tears and the way her mouth does not open in her crying. He sees her naked and still and his hand moves up her ribs. The tears leave dust tracks on her cheeks. He dries them for her and she moves slow and snakelike. Her hair is dark now. She cannot stop herself. Her mouth is open now. Abruptly he stands. He calls her name but she does not even look. He waits but nothing. He turns and disappears into the dark of the garage. After a moment the sound of metal banging and beating on metal, an aimless and almost insane sound, repeated and repeated, rises from the back of the tool shop.
But it was not a post: he came to them when Willy called his name. Lee and Steve were there too. This was after we’d all quit the haycrew and he and his brother had to stack it themselves. He was passing across the far end of the otherwise empty street when Willy said there he is. Hey Manning.

Manning stopped. He must have seen who we were. He must have known our purpose. And yet he came on. All that lit us was the light from the carnival at the end of town. Blue Earth Days. There were no stars. Manning looked at us like he was judging calf weight at auction. He did not even say what when he got to us. Willy said, you fucked his sister. Jerry knew then what was coming. He knew before, but he knew then for sure. Willy said, she was your own cousin.

Jerry’s face flat in the red of that light. You could tell nothing about it. Just blank beyond the blank of a poker face even.

Say somethin dickhead.

Manning said, somethin dickhead.

Willy grabbed his shirt. You proud of yourself or somethin? You like proud of what you did to her?

Manning opened and closed his hand. She would never have slept with you. She thought you were stupid and vicious. She was right.

Willy shook him. You little prick, this ain’t about me. Who said I liked her?
You’re here. But I’m not sayin you liked her. I’m sayin you wanted to fuck her.

You think you’re so fuckin smart. Listen: everybody hates you for what you did. And you ain’t even ashamed.

You don’t hate me. You hate her.

You’re crazy. You think you can just fuck anybody and do nothing? Just walk and not pay? That ain’t how it works, asshole.

Nobody cares how you think things work, Willy.

Willy shoved him hard and he stepped back one step to catch himself. Willy was four inches and thirty pounds bigger than Jerry. Willy said you’re gonna care, dickhead.

Willy hit him then pretty good and Manning stood there. Then he smiled. It was like he wanted the shit beat out of him.

Except for Lee cursing, for a while nobody was saying anything. I couldn’t hit Jerry. At first he hit back and moved. Then for a long time he just stood. Willy and Steve hit him til they breathed hard. Finally he went down, a face of blood and anger and it was not like driving a post and Manning on the ground never spoke and Willy said to me come on Sheene. Hit him. Come on, fucker. She was your sister. Hit him. It’s safe now. Hit him.
Then they left. I went to check Jerry. He rolled onto his back. He opened his eyes and breathed there. Well cousin Sheene, he said.

You okay?

He smiled. They don’t know about your dad, do they?
No.
But you do.
I didn’t answer him.
Sheene.
Yeah.
You wear a dog mask long enough you turn into a dog.

The road is like a tunnel and the pavement runs and runs. Jesse thinks here I come and there I go. He can almost disappear. Because the faster he goes the cleaner he feels. Because the cleaner he feels the less of him. The less of him the less he feels. He can almost disappear.

At the Little Elk Drive-in Jesse can smell hamburgers thirty feet away from the window. Since his sister and then mother left he has not come to town. Three weeks. He almost goes on when he sees Willy’s truck, but he has not eaten in a day and a half and there is no more food at home. Willy and Steve and Mary Anne sit at the picnic table at the side of the building.
Willy is feeding a hot dog into Mary Anne's open mouth. They do not see him yet. Jesse orders a burger and fries and a 7-Up and a pack of Camels at the window. The owner, Bennett, tells him no credit. Jesse looks at him. You've always give credit.

Bennett shakes his head. Cash or nothin now. Jesse steps back from the window. Fine. Willy sees him then and says hey Sheene. Jesse concentrates on the ground between himself and the bike. Make it less, he thinks.

Hey Sheene.

What goddamnit. Jesse thinks I have nothing to lose and he is willing it on himself. It's like he's saying kill me kill me. It would be funny except Willy is too stupid to joke.

Where's your mother right now?

Mary Anne says something to Willy and he tells her to shut up. Sheene. You and your dad ever do things together?

Jesse turns to Willy. The edge of everything shakes. Jesse feels his feet lift and fall.

Ever have fun with him?

Lift and fall, lifting his hands he takes the pole his father has baited. Mist upon the lake. Water pats the wood of the boat.
Let out a goodly bit a line and just jig it. You know what jig means?

No.

Sun's arisin and father's voice is gentle in the dawn. Okay. Like this. See that?

Yeah.

Okay. You try 'er. That's it. Make a fisherman of ye yet, boy.

Lift settle lift settle. Father says good. Good. Okay let me rig up here too.

They do not talk much. Father tells a story about when he went fishing with his dad who while crossing the creek got hung up straddling a hot electric cow fence. Mist begins to snake into the air and thin to nothing. They name the shapes they see. That his father would do this surprises Jesse.

Jesse's pole pulls down.


And high out of the water comes net and spray and fish within it all father's hand hoisting it safe aboard it banging on the boat bottom electric and bright.
Father holds it up. Lookit that. Damn. Damn fine fish son. Look there.

Father's thumb is in its mouth, clamped tight. Fish eye rolls and a streak of black blood runs from gill plate down its rainbowed side. Father holds it close and tells Jesse good and Jesse sees then at the height of this new rush of self older and different blood in dried flakes at the base of father's index finger where he did not wash this morning. You don't have to worsh when ye go fishin boy why do ye think ye go in the first place & sister swollen faced making breakfast and father drawing the fish back what's wrong, Jesse? Jesse opens his mouth to answer and Jesus Christ boy, Jesus. His hand upon Jesse's neck leaning him over the boat edge over the black of the dark glass of water and Jesse vomits into it again until he is empty father saying Jesus Christ. The hand upon his neck still

his feet move though he is thinking not here he can only feel kill him. Kill him now. Even the light darkens for Jesse as the universe becomes Willy's teeth become his father's and kill kill and in a cloud of dust between them Rebecca's truck stops.

Jesse she says. For a second he can't tell how far away her face is. He sees her in sharp focus but the distance is strange. It is looking at a twisted telephone cord hanging in space you reach for but miss or
the surface of clear water in some slow moving place you step into thinking knee deep and hear sloop as the water closes over your head.

She laughs at him.

What's so funny?

You look like. I don't know. A two year old has a tantrum and you sneak up on him and throw water on him from behind.

Uh. I was going to kill Willy there.

Don't let me stop you.

Thought you liked him last I heard.

No. Jesse cannot see her face now. No she says. Not hardly.

Jesse still tries to see her. If he looks away he can see her better than if he looks right at her. It feels strange to see her without his sister sitting next to her in the pick-up. He says, you haven't heard from--

No. You?

Even the color of her eyebrows the color of corn kernels. He looks again. She has been crying. He's sure of it. Are you okay?

She lifts her head. Sure. She is looking away, at Willy, then back to Jesse. Why do you ask?

She is lying to him and waiting to see if he sees this but this is not so much a test as a mix of pain and plea and pride. Jesse says well. You goin to the bonfire tonight?
She looks in Willy's direction and back, again. Jesse has seen her expression before, but not on her. Then it hides. Why not she says. Maybe I'll see you. Okay. She is in profile and

Sara and Jesse and she skip rocks across the river down by the park, Rebecca's hair wet along her head from swimming and her long arm rushing forward and the way her wrist turns as she releases. The dark rock spinning through air and whitewater splashes like sparks

the trailer's skin in the softening light, the barnlot corral beyond empty now and quiet as if

a statue Rebecca stood, apple on upturned palm, arm resting on the rail fence. In her other hand the bridle. The horse, Thug was his name, showed the whites of his eyes. His neckskin twitched. Thug wanted the apple but the bridle was plain in the light and the horse hung there. Then she spoke low and soft and horse and Jesse both step forward. Thug lowered his head for her to reach. She half faces them and says to Sara go gentle cause they feel more than think about the trailer makes him sick and he remembers now where he has seen Rebecca's expression
at the supper table. It's just a
dance Sara says. And Jerry is reliable. Mother. He's a
Manning. He's your nephew.

No father says again. Another word and you stay
here every weekend til Easter.

Sara is thin and on her plate food is whole still
and cold. Eat your mother's meal now. She worked hard
on that.

Sara picks up her fork and cuts into a potato. She
begins to eat it in dry chunks, her mouth and eyes
Rebecca's one year later looking at Willy then Jesse.

He is so gentle I almost tell him. If he'd have put
a hand on my arm I would have. His eyes are dark like
Sara's were and like Sara's were like hands as if the
thoughts of people were skin and they touch along slowly.
He could be slowly. Maybe just maybe his weight soft,
even, warm. I say see you at the bonfire then.

Fuck you, asshole, Lee yells as his father drives
off. The pick-up gets smaller as it gains speed. Fuck
you he yells again. The setting sun off the cab's back
window blots his father's head and the glare is like a
needle in Lee's eyes.
Lee kicks hard at a rock. The whole country’s not for shit. He shifts his weight. He sticks his hands in his J. C. Penneys jeans’ pockets and goes back into the garage without noticing the sky coloring up as the sun falls toward the mountains. His father had refused to let him borrow the pick-up until old man Harrison's Dodge was tuned. It is 7:45. The evening up Elk Creek and all his secret chances for Rebecca are shot and he would like to drive a railroad spike through his father's head with an eighteen pound post maul for fucking up everything he’d ever wanted forever, practically, no matter how small. Lee looks around for something to break, but can’t decide what. He punches the Coke machine, which hurts his hand so much he calls the naked woman a bitch. He’d go to hell before he’d tune that Dodge now. He’d quit. He’d move out. He’d stop going to school and get a job at the mill, where a man could earn a decent wage and work decent hours and buy a car and have a drink with the other guys and no one would fuck with him, and he’d be free and live how he wanted to and call up his dad every morning and say fuck you old man, and hang up.

Rebecca pops the emergency brake and the truck, engine off, coasts down Main all the way through town on the gentle grade toward the river, and glides to a stop without Rebecca ever having to use the brakes as it loses
the last of its momentum on the slight rise of asphalt next to the pumps at Abbot’s garage. The rootbeer is sweet and cold.

As she comes down the road she watches Lee with his back to the station throwing rocks at his father’s pick-up, which is about a half a mile away and going. By the time she gets there he is in the garage kicking a case of motor oil.

Finally he leaves off that and notices her. He gimps over. Whaddyou need? he says.

Rebecca looks at the crack in her windshield. She has been buying gas here for three years and that is all she ever buys from Abbot’s. She says gas.

Oh sure. Fill ’er?
If you can.

He stands there with the nozzle in her truck. He is trying to look down her shirt. She props her elbows on the steering wheel and rubs her eye sockets with the heels of her palms. She is thinking that if she goes up Elk Creek and Jesse does not show up she will be alone before Willy even if everyone else is there. Just the thinking of this makes her all knot with fear and disgust and rage she knows makes no sense but she cannot help it. Mary Anne or no he would not leave her be. He is that kind of asshole. Yet running and running from not just him but the possibility of him for weeks has been worse than what he could ever do to her. She cannot allow it
any more than she could the other. She is thinking I will not. He might erase me but no way can I let anyone ever again make me erase myself.

She looks up. Lee.

What?

You goin up to the bonfire tonight?

Finally he stops trying to see her chest. My fuckin dad won't let me have the truck.

I'll give you a ride if you want.

Really? he says and gas backs up from the full tank and splashes over his head. Shit he says. Shit shit shit. He begins to wipe his hands off with a blue paper towel. Stupid gas pumps.

Lee?

Huh?

You want a ride up there or not?

With you? Alone?

She studies him. He is a piece of work.

You betcha. Hot damn he says. You'll have a good time with me.

She closes her eyes and starts the truck.

Uh that's 14.60 for the gass.

You want a ride or not, Lee?

You deaf? I just said I did.

Then you pay for the gas.

But, well, okay I guess.

Lee.
What.

Put the gas cap back on.

Jesse can hear Elk Creek. He is floating. Trees above him jump to the left over and over without getting anywhere. They darken against the darkening sky. He remembers Willy's pick-up beside him on the gravel road. He remembers saying pass goddamnit pass. Go on. The pick-up's door closer. Closer. Then a bang, the embankment, duststreams, a wall and rush of green.

Something is jabbing his back. He shifts weight and falls four feet through the brush that holds him up and he hits the ground. He vomits. The spinning stops. On hands and knees he seeks his bike. Nowhere. Finds it plowed through brush where it hit a real tree. He feels broken spokes and oil all over in the dark.

At the creek he rinses his mouth. His head aches but the water is sweet. His reflection is mere shadow in this lack of light. He squats on his heels thinking what to do, listening to the dark.

The beer on the back of his bike is still intact. He unties it and starts up the road toward the campground.
Lee keeps saying everything is great. Great fire, beer, night, hair legs hands. He is a pain in the ass. Also Mary Anne passes out after a drinking contest. Willy takes her shirt off and Jim takes Polaroids of her shirtless with Willy's hands on her and passes them out to the cheers of everyone, even or especially her cheerleader friends. I cover her with her coat and tell everyone to fuck off. Their eyes are like holes in deathheads where firelight reflects through. Welllll, someone says. But they've lost interest. I sit down on a log near the fire. Willy sits to my right, Lee to my left. Willy props his feet on Mary Anne like she's a footrest. He is talking and Lee is talking. Not to me but to their ideas of me and I stare into the fire. Lee goes off to get more beer from Willy's truck on the promise he gets to drink some.

Willy leans over and unties my shoe. I imagine an axe cutting his neck cords. You have small feet he says. Your hair looks nice.

Touch me again and I'll kick your teeth in, Stone.

Hey. What's your problem? Alls I said was your hair's nice. Can't a gentleman compliment a lady?

Maybe if some come by we can ask.

Lee re-appears. Hey he says. I need the keys.

Willy smiles. Catch he says. Lee drops them.

Lee I say.

What.
I want him to see Willy is just getting rid of him. It’s been going on all night, Willy sending Lee on missions. Lee thinks this means Willy is his buddy.

What he says. What?

What is exactly right: what was it I was thinking. I remember nothing. Not the summernight chill not freezing from the inside out not the uneven dirt of the schoolyard turned parking lot for the fair and carnival not the Ferris Wheel’s green and idiot turning not Willy’s pick-up behind me as I walked away afterwards not the dark in front not stumbling across the stretch of schoolyard dirt not crying finally in my truck not nearly being unable to make myself make the bridge corner over Elk Creek instead of just accelerating off the edge. Not thinking but blank before the blankest night. What is right. What had I hoped. I say: never mind.

So Lee leaves and Willy grabs my wrists. Small hands too he says. Look they fit in mine. I try to pull away. I try to speak, to keep myself. Everything about me is froze but my burning wrists. I watch all this. His breath. The smell of him. I cannot move. He wants to know if I’ll be nice. I see me get so small I don’t even need to breathe and then, and then am nothing for fear makes you bigger until you are everything but I am smaller and smaller, all gone and disappear. Smaller and smaller
the road narrows with the creek. Colors lose
distinction in the dark. Jesse keeps his way by the gash
of sky where stars shine through the trees above the
road.

When he arrives he watches from the dark for awhile. He
marks how they are around the fire. He moves then,
quiet between the pick-ups. He finds one—Steve’s—with
an open tool box. He reaches a hand in and picks out by
feel the shape of a Crescent wrench. Crawling under the
body of the truck—dry earth, pine needles, oily smell—he
removes the oil plug, letting the crankcase drain. He
moves to the next truck and the next. While under it, he
hears the stumbling of someone drunk in the dark. The
sound gets closer. Jesse grips the wrench and hopes it’s
Willy. But it’s Lee, talking to himself, saying
goddamnit, and going away.

Jesse is removing the oil plug on Willy’s rig when
Lee returns. Jesse freezes. His legs are sticking out
from under the truck. Lee is too drunk or stupid to
notice. He actually steps on Jesse’s leg. The truck
door opens. Lee says, there’s no beer in here. The door
slams. Jesse hears the words that bastard, then Lee goes
away again.

Jesse puts his beer in Rebecca’s truck. He throws
the oil plugs of the other trucks into the creek. At the
edge of the fire he picks up a thick tree branch.
He is in the light now and people look to him from Lee, who is rolling on the ground next to Mary Anne, who is out of it. Jesse says anybody got a beer?

Willy says thought you'd a figured out nobody wants sisterfuckers around here Sheene.

Jesse points the branch at Lee. You do that?

No. He tripped.

Jesse bends over Lee, who is saying he broke by dose, the fucker. He broke--

Let's see. Jesse pulls Lee's hands down. Stand up.

Lee stands.

It's not broken.

The hell it's dot.

Rebecca is pushing Willy away from her. Willy steps toward Jesse. You saw what happened to your cousin Manning.

I saw he'd a cleaned your clock in a fair fight.

Fuck fighting fair.

Jesse almost laughs. Then he hits Willy in the head with the branch as hard and fast as he can. Willy has no time to duck or fend it. The branch breaks off at Jesse's hands and spins into the night. Willy, without moving or even bringing a hand to his head, laughs.

Jesse's hands sting like hell.

Okay Sheene. Now you get what's comin. Now you get it. Willy takes a step forward with his left foot. He hears a pop and he reaches for Jesse's eyes with his
thumbs but instead hits the ground partly in the fire
facefirst so hard he cannot get breath and then something
like a shape, leathery and silent, rears up out of his
knee and for a minute it's so huge and filthy and
fantastic he does not recognize it, it is so unlike and
more than other pain.

Nobody moves.

Rebecca limps a step toward Jesse. Let's go.

Jesse nods. Okay. Everyone looks at Willy rolling
out of the fire and grabbing at his knee, his face
painted with a mask of ash. Jesse still sees Rebecca's
foot driving into the outside of Willy's knee and the
lower part of his leg flat against the ground as if Willy
were kneeling but the leg is not sticking out behind him
but off to the side.

Lee let's go.

They run to Rebecca's truck. I'll drive Jesse says.

Rebecca says no you wont.

Jesse can see Jim and Steve helping Willy. Willy
saying that bitch. That fucking bitch. The others crowd
around. Then they start for the parking lot. Jesse says
okay you drive.

Jesse braces a hand on the cab's roof to keep from
smashing his head as the truck slams down the road. He
watches the way she drives. Neither truck nor road is
built for comfort at high speed but she is and must get
such velocity by will as much as metal. He says you can slow down now.

They'll chase us clear to Lewiston.

I don't think so.

A minute passes. The truck is through the night like no tomorrow and in the dashlight Rebecca sees the grease and oil on Jesse's hands and that no headlights follow them. It takes her a minute but only a minute to realize these two facts are related. She slows and begins to laugh.

At the corner of Ruby Prairie and Elk Creeks roads, I say okay stop here a minute. She stops, which surprises me. I motion for Lee to get out. What's goin on he says. I say I've got to take a piss. He gets out. I close the door behind him. I am still in the truck. Hey he says. What the fuck?

I look at Rebecca. She begins to drive. Lee runs along side us saying she's my date she's mine fucker. Fucker. I roll up the window. He's falling behind. In the new risen moon he stops there on the nighthroad and throws rocks at us but we are long beyond his range.

The house is hot from left over day. There is nothing inside to offer her. They sit in the kitchen.
Jesse finds a cigarette and gets it lit. Finally her voice through the immobile air of the kitchen is like a stick on brick. Mother continues to do the dishes, as if nothing has happened. You have to talk louder, she says. I can't hear over the water.

At night, is all Sara says. Her throat working but no sound.

We let you move to the trailer because you wanted your privacy you said. You're not complaining about it now are you?

Sara shakes her head.

Mother still at the sink. What? Her voice is like a knife chopping words on a block. You're surely not afraid of the dark.

Sara staring at her, turning and past me out the door, silent

Jesse does not know what Rebecca has said but together they rise and move to the porch. He holds the screen door for her and as she passes him he smells her hair and he is touching the wood of the door frame for the first time for the first time feeling the grain of it he will be unable to forget.

There is the sound of a few crickets, but the bunching cool of evening has slowed them down already. Rebecca and Jesse drink the bootleg beer on the porch.
Jesse thinks they should talk but at this moment when they should more than any other time he has no words. They sit next to each other on the second step down. Her leg is against his, warm through the denim, and she does not move away. This is where I always sit, he begins. He has to look away from her. Away from her, over a wire fence and the barnlot, is the empty empty sky moonfull above the empty horse corral at dawn the morning after sister left, I run outside into the already hot day at the sound of the first gunshot. Sara's horse, which he bought her and which she never touched, screaming. Half its jaw gone it rears back against the hack and falls sideways jerking the reigns from father's hand. The living hooves strike up white dust from the dead powder of the corral as they lose grip then kick slower and slower the animal settling and shrinking on its back then side still screaming, my father barefoot shoots again and again into Thug and his eyewhites rolled in terror and pain the whump of the slugs like a football getting kicked but slower and slower the legs go to death and sudden nothing. Father turns the butt of the gun against the bed of dust. His toes lift for the trigger. Chin resting over the barrel openings. I am yelling do it you bastard do it. Do it. His eyes upon me and movements all gone jerky like a puppet or sister sometimes or a robot of pain in gradual breakdown. At
the last I run for him unable to say no no no and am into
the sound of the shot and then nothing

else she could have
done, Jesse. She wanted you to know.

What Jesse says, turning to me.

That nothing destroyed Sara I say, and I am not
lying exactly. It must have been like nothing. His face
changes and becomes him, as if a mask is dropping away,
and he is exactly his sister's shame and fear above pain.
I take his hand. This is not the best reason but this is
the only possible reason.

He hesitates at the steps of the trailer. I see him
saying no. I speak to him like to a terrified horse and
like a horse he gentles and like a horse his chest and
neck. Inside

the shape of her bare shoulders lifting from
collar bone to neck and throat in the moonlight is the
high sound of lone Canada geese riding nightfall.

Yet when I touch them they are skin

of him on me

skins me though I had expected, even wanted, nothing now
this like everything down there a flood I feel my breath
turn sound and spill out and out.

They lay together in the smell of sweat and sex and
she is amazed to find she is neither afraid of nor
indifferent to him, with him, even as he stares at the ceiling or past it as if to disappear. She grabs his shoulders and shakes him saying grrrrr.


Let's do something.

He looks down. He runs a fingernail along the inside of her arm from wrist to armpit, light and slow.

She has to pin his arms to stand it. No she says. Let's do something.

Like for instance.

Make some Cream of Wheat and eat it.

He moves her off his stomach gently. He is thinking that Steve and Jim and Lee might be here soon. He says not that. I have a better idea.

Jesse lights a matchbook. Rebecca watches in her pick-up across the street. When he throws it in nothing. He leans toward it. Then there is big noise and she should yell but out of the rush of fire nearly as big as the trailer itself he comes from flame as if just being born there and running.

They watch the trailer burn down.

He smells of singed hair. In that light his face a mask of hardness so alien she is afraid again but later she wakes to herself to see him driving through dawn on the Clearwater River, and with the trees turning yellow
in the window the sun makes his eyes almost green. She feels herself inside rising like a tide before the day and sun. He has sensed she is awake and his face moves from half to three quarters like his smile now. His lips open. He is about to speak but he's already spoken to ask where they are going, the trees have already rushed by in gold and rust above the river and she is leaning to hear what she already remembers. He is about to speak and then he is.