Growing up in eastern Montana | The McKinley women and selected poetry

John W. Roberts

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Growing Up in Eastern Montana:

_The McKinley Women_ and Selected Poetry

by

John W. Roberts
B.S. Montana State University—Billings. 1980

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Approved by

Chair, Randy Bolton
Dean, Graduate School

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Growing up in Eastern Montana: The McKinley Women and Selected Poetry

Committee Chair: Randy Bolton

Abstract

Growing up in Eastern Montana: The McKinley Women and Selected Poetry is a collection of forty-three poems and a novella in two parts which depict life on the plains of Eastern Montana. Through the poetry and prose I try to reveal the world of Eastern Montana in word images through the eyes of those who lived their lives in this setting. The poetry represents individual moments and scenes, and the prose develops characters who are defined by the land. They both reveal the hardship, the challenges, the heartbreaks and the triumphs of growing up and surviving on the plains. Much of the information is autobiographical in nature and centers on the area of Miles City and the lower Yellowstone River.

This writing project helped me to realize the importance of place in my life and how my values and actions today were defined decades ago as I grew up on the banks of the Yellowstone River. This project helped me as a writer and as a teacher of creative writing to better understand the importance of process. I found the essence of each poetic image in the multiple re-writings of the poems, and I found within the images in the prose and the poetry, grains of truth that define the person I am today.
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Assessment

My first desire in the creation of this project was to produce a body of work that would mirror the challenges, problems, and issues involved in growing up and living in a rural setting in Eastern Montana. I wanted the work to be a series of word images of a worldview that lies on the border of being forgotten. The short grass plains do not lend themselves easily to description, especially in this day when everyone with any wealth wants to move to the mountains or the ocean, any place but Eastern Montana.

In this project I wanted to preserve a vision of Eastern Montana. This is an area of dwindling population and of little interest to a large part of the world, yet the social and physical milieu has much to say about our humanity.

As I worked on this project, I saw several changes in my perception of the work taking place. I wanted the word pictures and the spirit of Eastern Montana plus a development of the characterization of both the land and the people. Along with the images, I wanted to develop some characters beyond the limits of the poetry. I also sought to present “place” as character and to present a wide and inclusive picture of life on the high plains. While my original intentions for the project began as poetry only, I vacillated and thought that maybe I could best deal with the issues in prose. My final decision was that the overall effect could best be served as a combination of the two genres.

*The McKinley Women* is a novella in two parts that endeavors to present a realistic picture of a family living in isolation. In the process of presenting this story, I emphasize the problems that living in the kind of isolation that Montana rural life demands, and establish that existence as nearly cultic. Growing up on a ranch in rural Montana presents
physical issues that most people in our culture no longer encounter. These issues include
the physical challenges of travel on dirt or muddy roads for the purpose of providing
one’s family with survival supplies, the claustrophobic effects of several people living in
close proximity, the clannishness that encourages such family groups to stand against the
rest of the world and to conceal social issues within the clan at whatever the cost, and the
casual way people in such situations deal with death.

The societal issues are inseparable from “place,” in this case. Eastern Montana
along the banks of the Yellowstone River. A river, especially a river the size, scope, and
influence of the Yellowstone, becomes a character in its own right, having the power to
give and the power to take away, and even, in a symbolic baptismal sense, the power to
make holy.

The land also has its own personality as does the weather. Often, living in the
comparative comfort of suburban surroundings as most of the people of the United States
do here at the beginning of the 21st Century, we are not as affected by the shape of the
land and the weather as was the case fifty or a hundred years ago. Yet even in this age,
there are areas of this country, such as the high plains, that live and die by the shape of
these two powerful natural forces.

The weather and the land have much to say about what kinds of individuals will
be able to live within such natural constraints. The land doesn’t care if the crop is good or
bad, if the cattle are fat or thin, if the fence is strong or weak, if the barn is solid or
rotting, or if the people who live upon the land’s bounty are good or evil. In the end,
survival and any successes will depend on an individual’s ability to work within the

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guidelines of this natural world. We are but sojourners upon this land with only an illusion of ownership, and sometimes even the best we can do will not be enough.

The farmer or rancher pulling his life from the land looks to the sky each morning to see if there will be rain or sun, and he looks to the earth each day to see if it is dry or wet, but he cannot make either be other than it is. True, man developed irrigation so that he could bring water to dry regions and raise his crops where there was not enough natural rainfall. But if there is no water in the river, then there is no irrigation water for the crops; if the wind blows for weeks and months, then the moisture in the ground evaporates; if there is no rain at the right time, there is no grain. The fifty-bushel wheat crop, the fat calves, the three cuttings of alfalfa will have to wait until another year.

Add to this the element of a man's culturally-perceived role as the patriarch of his isolated family, the emperor of his little empire, which contrasts with the more subservient role of women as helpers, workers, and sometimes slaves if we are to be brutally honest, and we have even another complication in the day-to-day affairs of survival on the high plains. The plains were great for men and oxen, but hell for horses and women. Women had their own kind of power. true, but many often lived through their own kind of hell. It has been many a rancher who treated his family like the livestock he raised. He might start with kicking the dog and end with beating his wife.

In The McKinley Women two sisters, ten-year-old twins, defy the rules of their household and enter into an adventure along the Yellowstone River. As a result, they are severely punished by their father and the their mother finds it within herself to take a stand against him, resulting in his death and the subsequent cover-up. This incident.
coupled with the isolated environment, estrange the sisters until a reconciliation takes place many years later.

The novella, two years in the writing, began as four short stories which, through the re-writing process, evolved into the present form. My goal in *The McKinley Women*, in its two-part format, was to deal with the family's isolation, the character of "place" as represented by the Yellowstone River, the land and the weather, and character strengths and weaknesses as the family members inter-relate with one another and interact with the outside world.

Through the use of the prose form of the novella, I was able to take several characters, place them in Eastern Montana, and allow them to develop in ways that illustrate the issues involved in their survival (at least for most of them) as viable, productive human beings.

One challenge in writing this story was point of view. If I chose to write in first person the reader might become closely involved with the narrator but miss the importance of some of the other characters. I chose the third person coupled with the flashbacks for two reasons. First this approach allowed distance between the third person narrator and the primary characters and allowed some of the sympathy to wash over from Rowan to her twin sister and her mother. Secondly, the choice of a third person narrator allowed for a more extensive development of the setting which I felt was a primary element to the story.

Without the setting, there is no story. The weather, the river, the land all contribute to the personalities of the human characters and the interaction between the four is always present. In *The McKinley Women* and *Selected Poetry* there is a strong
connection between the poetry and the prose. The blizzard in the novella is the same as in the poem, “Blizzard,” and the people are the same kinds of people as those in the poems. The “place” is the place of my youth and is inescapable as a delineator of myself as an adult. Where are we as human beings without our “place,” our physical landscape, or our childhood playgrounds?

When I am writing of the river and the house and the weather and the livestock and the haying, I am writing of the childhood that has defined me as an adult. I felt through the writing of the novella that I was able to give depth and voice to many of the images I introduced in the poetry section, and thus The McKinley Women is an extension of the concepts developed in the poetry. In several cases, the novella developed some of the stories I was only able to hint at in the poems. The woman preparing the meal in “Breakfast” could be Connie McKinley, and the man raising the windmill could just as easily be her husband Wade.

In writing a long work of this nature, a major challenge is the number of writing decisions that need to be made, coupled with the necessity for each decision to focus on the thematic whole. However, in the process of writing I found that many of the decisions took care of themselves. The plot developed out of the characters and often had little to do with anything I had planned out ahead of time. I found much enjoyment in finding out where the words, the pages, and the characters would lead me. When putting together the final form of The McKinley Women, I was often as surprised as if I were reading someone else’s writing. At first I didn’t see the river ritual, the twins floating the body out into the river (with overtones of both a pagan sacrifice and a Christian baptism), as a turning point for the girls and the entire family (because it resulted in the death of
their father) nor did my connection of the two deaths (the father and the young boy) take place until I had written through the sequence several times.

One aspect I found surprising is that I felt so comfortable dealing with women as the primary narrative characters. I found them easy to sympathize with, contrasting with a total lack of sympathy for the father, a primitive character whose beating of his children is foreshadowed through the story of his casual killing of a horse.

The most important thing the writing taught me was that there is so little difference between poetry and prose and how work in one genre helped my work in the other. I chose to place both poetry and the prose together in the same volume because I felt that, though the poetry could stand alone, I wanted to reveal individual aspects of rural Eastern Montana life. Through my revisions, I saw the poetry evolve from the story I had in my mind to a single image that represented that story. However, if I limited myself to the poetry, the narrative often disappeared. My solution to this was to write a novella revealing the poetic characters in action, so to speak, living their lives, confronting their problems, and surviving (or not surviving) their tragedies.

In the beginning I wanted to create the image, and the let the image speak for the place. In the end the images I dealt with revealed much of my childhood that I had forgotten. I divided the poems into four sections: “The Land,” “The Work,” “The Life,” and “The People.” but in the end, there is only the poetry of place, the work as defined by place, the life as defined by place and the people as defined by place.

The “place” of the poetry and prose existed fifty years ago and, though many still exist today, some are filtered through fifty-year-old memories. The poems tell of family stories or family moments passed on from one generation to the next. Some are lies, but
true lies, the lies of literature that are truer than the truth. Many have complex back
stories that help explain the moment, and yet my desire has been for the moment, in the
poem itself, to stand alone.

In “The Land Poems” I have re-created images of the home ranch in Eastern
Montana, images so real to me that when I visit these places and see the changes the
years have wrought, I am afflicted with both sadness and unbelief. “The Work” poems
show the day-to-day labors that living in rural Montana demands. There are necessary
skills for living on the prairie that become an essential part of a person. Though I am
some distance from that kind of life now. I have found that my philosophy of life has
been irrevocably shaped by those childhood moments.

“The Life” poems are images that show how people respond to certain situations,
a letter, a death, or the raising of children. In the music poems, I try to show music as
both entertainment and as a way to distance one’s self from the harsher realities of living
on the prairie. “The People” poems are images of the people who taught me the values
that I live by today, values that, even if I wanted, I could not change.

Conclusion

The writing of this project, the poetry and the prose, has had a profound effect
upon me as a writer and a teacher. I have found that it is not the destination that is
important, but the journey. The process of the writing and re-writing means as much to
me as the final product and is in many ways more important.

For me, the most important part of the process was the beginning image. One of
the most enjoyable aspects of this project was allowing the writing to find its own way,
finding the kernel which might at first be invisible, but was finally made visible through
the re-writing. The stories in the prose helped define the moment in the poems, and the specifics in the poems enhanced the narrative in the prose. Both lent positive, creative pictures to a description of life in Eastern Montana as it exists in my memories.

The process of writing this work and the other writing I have done during the two years with The Creative Pulse program has changed the way I teach poetry, and literature in general. Now I work harder at encouraging a student’s personal involvement with a work. Without this involvement, the student feels no ownership of the literature. I want students to interact with literature; I don’t want students to write down what I say, memorize a few items, spit them back to me, and think they have achieved knowledge.

With students I now incorporate more class discussion in a search for a work’s meaning. As a teacher I give them the tools (definitions and examples of poetic devices such as metaphors and oxymorons) and encourage students to interact with one another and the literature, searching for a common ground. I focus more on getting the students beyond the mechanics of the literature and into a process of higher-level thinking. I guide the discussions so they don’t stray too far from the track, but my goal is for students to come to a piece of literature at their most meaningful levels.

Through this writing project I have become more focused in teaching creative writing, especially poetry, to my students. As I wrote and re-wrote the poetry, I realized that what I learned in the process was the same thing I should be teaching my students. I learned to concentrate on the process without worrying so much about the end result. I learned to enjoy my characters and images and let them speak for themselves. I learned that sometimes I try too hard to cram the images into a box, and that my results were better when I searched for the essence within each image without being distracted by
form. I learned that being a writer, at least for me, is not so much about the finished project as it is about the search for the idea.
Appendix A, Poetry
The Land
Choosing Land

In 1944, two men stood on
The Yellowstone. The river swept 'cross rocks
As old as dinosaurs, as old as a dawn
On wild waters. Like sailing men on decks

Of iron and wood, they watched the flowing stream.
Which would not slow until it reached the sea.
After the flat, volcanic plain of East
New Mexico, the cottonwoods, the breeze

Convinced the one. “Too small,” the other said,
And pointed to the west with shaded eyes.
“I need more room for cows.” The first now read
The river land. the singing. lapping waves,

The sighing trees. He was a simple man,
And he loved to roll the river dirt between his calloused hands.
Noon

At noon red-winged blackbirds flit and twitter
Through the full-leafed Chinese elms. Below they spread
The checkered, cotton cloth upon the grass
Next to the yellow Ford. The smell of new
Alfalfa hay, dry and crackling green in the noon-
Day sun mingles with the fried chicken, crisp

And brown. Approaching now, they hear the clatter
Of the rake against the ground. “It’s noon,” Dad says,
As the boy with a man’s veined hands gives a throttle blast
And kills the beast. The black exhaust shoots into
The liquid, crystal sky. They eat. The afternoon
Stretches out catlike, marked by the shadow wisp

Of Diesel smoke adrift above the trees
And field, and blackbirds whirl among the leaves.
When my grandfather died, the ranch was sold at auction. Thirty-five miles into the middle of nowhere—turn left at Angela—ten miles of gravel—turn left two miles—hot water well to the left and the old, two-story frame house to the right. Two fenced pastures of crested wheat grass and rolling prairie; the rock corral and the dust where we worked cattle.

The wind with a life of its own, whipped the tall grass into waves, like the sea. We sat on horses and watched the hills roll underneath. The old house, flaked and sagged in the summer heat, in winter snow, and the porch stretched all the way around. We stayed there once, just my grandfather and I, and slept under blankets that reeked of dust and mold.

He caked cows out of the trunk of his '59 Buick, and we ate bacon and eggs from out of a black, cast-iron skillet we never washed. He killed a rattlesnake in the corral and died in a truck wreck on an “S” curve between Angela and Miles City. I was playing in a seventh grade basketball game when we heard. Times later I would think of him, bowlegged with his cane and his hard voice.

My father once asked, “Are you all right?”
“Fine.” I said. “Some dust in my eye.”
Oil

Late in the fall of ’58, old John
Looked out across the flailing, wind-swept grass
And dreamed a dream that couldn’t come to pass.
What right did some old Texas cowman

Have to such a thought, that he could stand
Above a lake of gold? God knows the past
Had never been that kind. But here, at last,
The moment, as a bird, now came to hand,

A bird that whispered in his sun-burnt ear
That drilling here repays a life of toil
With wealth. He could not know what there would be
Waiting in the earth. But time made clear.
Two-thousand feet below there was no oil.
But only hot mineral water at 180 degrees.
Eastern Montana

God took a greasy, gumbo ball of dirt,
Rolled it in his hands, and added a drop
Or three of water to the mix. Won’t hurt.
He thought, as he packed the ball around and dropped

It on His counter top. The mud spread out
As he pushed it flat with His hands completely smeared
With thick and oily goo. He turned about
For His rolling pin, because, at heart, He feared

It wasn’t flat enough. The pin, damned close
To the size of Wyoming, rolled back and forth
Across the mud. Then, from storage, He chose
Some sage and cottonwood seeds, a horse.

A cow or two and propped them by the main
River he had drawn with his fingernail across the plain.
Eclipse

He feels the cold cut through his canvas coat
Like spinning, carbide blades cutting along
The grain of rotted, one-inch pine. The float
Of the blade pushes snow and forms icy canyons

Until only the road is left, narrow and clean,
Before the freezing wind. A bright, metallic sun
Glares down like mirrored steel, dull and winter mean.
Then the invisible moon creeps out of season

To spill its liquid black upon the snow.
The glitter turns to gray. Thus for a time,
The earth stands still. The stately, regal flow
Of hours finds a point of rest. The moon climbs

On. He sits on the Cat. The light returns again.
A moment’s edge that cuts his life in twain.
The Slough

The spring runs high 'tween willow-pressed
Mud banks, a primordial ooze, black and cold,
With the ten-thousand year stink of old
Fish rotted into a foul amalgam, grotesque,
And touching the beginnings of the flesh.
The river rides upon a bed that cannot hold
The rushing stream. I have heard a tale oft told
That underground, beneath the stones, a fresh

Stream flows as great or greater than the seen.
But in the slough the water quiet stands,
A sluggish murk plied by giant, sucking carp.
I care not about the stink or muck, and when
I dig deep in the mud with my arms and hands,
My fingers brush the pulse of the primal dark.
Wind

The wind blows long and snakes through the prairie grass
In search of a dry something it can grasp
In its feathered paws that flow like water round
The solids of the earth. The summer sound

Of its hot breath beneath the cloud-swept sky
Moans with the sun. The empty ground softly cries
For just a touch of rain to slake its thirst
But there is no rest. From the first

Hot summer day until September’s end
The air whispers and has her way. Then,
With fall and winter’s blast, another tune
She plays beneath a bleak and colder moon.

No mercy does she show at Summer’s death,
And now the snow rides swift on Winter’s breath.
The Cold

I'd like to say how cold it was in those days,
when all we had were extra pairs of pants
and socks, and extra shirts and wore
leather, pointed boots and rubber overshoes
that sucked in the cold. I’d like to say
how my toes froze into dead sticks inside my
boots, and how the cutting wind numbed
my hands inside of two pairs of yellow work gloves.
Sometimes, with propane torches, we lay
on the crunching snow, trying to heat the engines
to haul the hay to feed the calves that stood in
weary misery, back hunched against the wind.
There were days when we could step into a bright
sunshine so cold and still that our feet might be sifting
through the frozen, ancient dust of the moon.
Underneath our feet the snow cracked
like fire, and white smoke poured from our mouths
and hovered still upon the frozen air.
Some days we woke in darkness to fork loose hay
in a cold that set our hands ablaze, and the short time
we might stay indoors or in a heated cab only
made the cold burn like a witch’s death. There was
no place to hide from the icicle fingers that tugged
at our skin, like the red-hot pincers that plucked
the flesh of those medieval heretics of the inquisition.
I’d like to say how the bitter ice crawled through
the cracks of our clothes and the cracks of our
skin like tiny snakes eating away at our warmth,
leaving only the frozen shell of ourselves.
a thin, husk of crystal ice that might shatter with a single touch.
I’d like to say how unfair it was that others could
sit in comfort behind insulated walls and doors,
could lie in the sun upon clean white sand while we,
in this miserable winter corner of Southeastern
Montana rocked in the cradle of our Arctic cold.

And now, looking back forty years or more, I’d like to say
how certain I am that those hours spent working
in that winter frost have made me a better man today.
The Dust

Sometimes the dust was all there was.
Behind the tractor, pulling harrows
and shovels and balers and planes,
the pillar of dust rose through the heat
until the sky disappeared,
and the sun faded into a blistering point.
The dust filtered and sifted into clothes
and hair and the cracks and creases of skin,
and left only the gray. Breathing
carefully through a checkered cloth was not
enough. The taste is in you and through you,
gripping you, folding you like a lover in its arms.
The Yellowstone River

Tall cottonwoods grew in the river sand
When I was green and young. Their floating seeds
Drifted, rocking, slowly rocking on a breeze
That hailed the bitter winter gone. A band

Of willows clutched the river bank and ran
Along the water. drooping their sweet.
Long fronds into the gently tugging stream.
I stand there, that lonely child again,

Along the Yellowstone. I try to find
A gentle peace among these smooth, round stones.
At thigh depth the river’s current could tug
A boy into the cloudy deep to wind
Him round among the carp and weeds and bones
To sleep forever in the river mud.
Blizzard

He walks among his cows
in their cracked, gray mantles.
The flakes whirl about them
in albino leaves that tuck themselves
around the livestock like winter quilts. The slurry wind shivers across
the open prairie, and the snow’s feather touch changes to a cutting rasp of ice. The morning-bleak sky
dulls the hills’ edges until
the howling white swallows both
in a hungry, angry mouth. The cows
move slowly through the hay, wooly mammoths lumbering in vague, dark shapes into this moment of ice
and wind and white and cold.
Stars

Something there is to say to slit-eyed stars
That ply their sprightly dance in the winter’s sky.
Like ballerinas, lifting arms, first far,
Then wide, then sinking, wishing they could fly.

Instead, each night their wicker light is nailed
Onto a wider canvas stretching earth
To earth. Thus through each night we rightly hail
Each jewel in the black. In truth, their worth

Is that they cannot move but hover still
As the planet turns beneath. Like any gem,
The price is in the looking, for a touch will
Only tarnish the surface stone and dim

Its shine. How strange that we can somehow deem
This brilliant tapestry a chance’s dream.
Catfish

I caught a catfish once—
Or maybe it wasn’t catching—
There was a moment between us—
This huge fish and myself—
Three feet long with a two-foot head—
Caught on a set-line in the slough—
Not very romantic considering—
I used worms and a length of twine—
Tied to the box end of a one-inch wrench—
I’ll say my father never knew about that—
I just pulled him out with the line—
Chopped off its head with an axe—
Skinned it with a pair of pliers—
It tasted like good old Yellowstone River mud.
The Work
The Windmill

He measured four holes three feet deep and in a square. a hole for each of the earth's corners, a hole for each of the windmill's legs. The tower he built of rough-cut planks, criss-crossed, held together with bolts. painted a dark, earth red to match the red shale of the hills.

The mill he bolted to the tower as it lay, stretched on the ground, though the vanes already grasped at the sky. The tractor sputtered and growled in the tall grass as he tied the ropes to the drawbar. When it moved forward, the tower lifted, and we guided the legs into the holes. Slowly, slowly.

like a medieval siege engine, the tower rose. The shining metal blades cut into the clouds. The legs slipped neatly into the holes. Who was it that said we couldn't hold the wind?

We tamped the dirt around the legs; He bolted the lengths of two-by-two together and to the metal rod that reached down into the casing. He loosed the brake; the wind caught the vanes; for the first time The iron squealed and cried And pulled the water from the deep.
Working Cows in Winter

When I was young, the cold cut deeper through
My skin stretched thin o’er bending, tender bones.
Old men worked rangy cows and cursed them, too.
While I sat hunched and cold upon the roan

And wished for brighter days and a warmer sun.
My horse snorted with the cold and blew steam
From nostrils flared and wild. He, too, would rather run
Through prairie grass from rains of spring new green

And fresh and rippling in a sultry breeze.
The saddle, frozen leather hard, welded itself
Like old and rusted iron into my knees.
I seized my youthful misery and clutched

It to my breast. I cried inside despite
The older men who shouted at the night
Sheep

In summer rains their wool runs dull and brown,
Its greasy film rolling the water off
In sheets. In the dark and cold, they wallow down
In matted clumps, like dirty snow, rough

With mud and sand. On winter days they sprawl
Out twenty miles and follow blind, like mice,
With no place to go but where they will.
The herder plods behind as winter ice

Drifts out of the sky. In the summer heat
They crowd the shade, if only each to each,
And softly push their heads into a flank to beat
The withering sun. They wander with each breeze

With gasps at flaccid, tongue-lapped air.
Then stand like stones, wheezing in despair.
Haying

He rides the ship that rides the green-field waves,
Like a captain on the high seas of old.
He watches the land flow beneath the folds
Of hay that curl the field. The rows are slaves

To the width and breadth of this inland sea that gave
The land its form. With an iron grip, he holds
The wheel and guides his four-wheeled bark the whole
Day through, from dawn to evening sun. He braves

The heat and dust and Diesel growl to cut
And rake and bale the rank alfalfa hay
That first lies flat and then makes waves and then
Is pounded, whomp, whomp, whomp, whomp, whomp and shut

In squares with twine and taken from the field to raise
In stacks. He waits a month, then sails his sea again.
Pumping Water

A naked Lincoln eight sits under the trees
Sucking gas from a fifty gallon drum,
Sucking water from the slough. The hum
Of the spinning shaft cuts through the noon and greets

The engine’s pounding, exactly like the distant
Cannon fire that heralds soldiers’ deaths
On killing fields in foreign lands. Its breath,
Flame hot and wavering, rises blunt

And staggering above the black exhaust
Manifolds. Mosquitoes sing and swirl
Around the heat, like moths that curl
Around an open flame. The water, lost

To the river, shoots through the pipe onto the scree.
Man-bound that, moments ago, flowed free.
Corn

The August corn towers three feet over
His head; the heavy ears at eye level
Prove the summer hot and wet. Clover
Stands eyeball high along the field edge, reveling

In the humid heat that pulls the water from
The air like a magician pulls a hare
From a black hat rocking emptily upon
His table. This is the same with the bare

And dusty fields that grow into a forest of corn in
Two months. At night he shovels ditch and sets
The siphons scattered on the ditch’s banks, a string
Of glittering arcs in the moonlight net

That spreads across a star struck sky. The tall
Corn whispers in the dark and waits for fall.
Cutting Hay

He grips the swather sticks and nudes quick
The way, first left, then right, then straight away.
Adjust! Adjust! The hay. rank green and thick,
Falls into the singing, sickle blades.

Schick, schick, and then into the auger’s vanes
Of mist and light and dust. A rock! He hits
The rods and turns with his twelve-year hands, blue veined,
Calloused, and hard, just like his dad’s. They fit

The wheel and bar and shovel wood which wears
Like iron in the melting-liquid sun.
He wears his cloak of pollen dust and sweat
Like armor from ancient gods now gone

To quiet peace. Even the great Achilles
Would not refuse such clothes as these.
Barn Burning

In 1958 the barn burned to the ground.
Flames lit the night and spiraled high
Into the starlit sky. The cracking sound
Of the orange and scarlet fire echoed by

The quiet slough where carp sucked dirty foam
In the shallows. The pounding heat scorched hot
My father’s brow and beaded sweat fell from
His firelit face into the snow. It was not

His last dark, tragic hour, but there were none
Hotter, and when I pulled the rusty, warped
Tin from off the twenty-three sheep and one
Old cow and calf and hauled their crumbling corpses

Away. I dreamed of a wild, distant day
When I could turn my back and walk away.
The Life
"Here, let me show you how it’s done." He reached
And rattled iron scraps along the wall
Until he found a length of bar one inch
Across that fit into the chubby palm.

The child then swings the hammer fast and hot
And ringing through the gloom. “First heat; then strike,“
His father said and hit the iron. “Do not
Rush.” The smooth-faced boy in dusky light.

With grease-streaked, tender hands gloved leather black,
Now slips the bar’s fresh point just one time more.
Slowly into the water’s hiss. Tempered
Then, it takes the edge in glowing sparks.

He’s in the ground today. Still, to his son
He says. “Here, let me show you how it’s done.”
Star Quilt

Dry skin on dry bones in a dry land;
dry grass, crisp and brown, on a dry and nameless plain:
a young man sits on his pony and watches
the sun and then the stars and then the moon.

He listens to the night sky breathing,
sucking the heat out of the day.
He knows that the same stars will shine on
the sons of his sons; he knows
that he touches the same earth that
will touch the sons of his sons.

And one day a son will lay a quilted star
upon the grass of a football field
to be wrapped around a friend.
Upon this touch the star will travel backwards
to the father of his father.
and the young rider on his horse
on this timeless plain will feel its soft touch,
pull softly at the halter, and whisper to his mount,
"It is the wind."

37
Breakfast

There is a skill to breakfast
that sets each plate, each
silver tool into its proper place.
Heat rises from the bacon.

then the eggs over-easy, for some
can’t take the staring, yellow
eyes. Through the window
she sees them come, a troop

of three or five, depending on
the season or the year. The door
swings and the outdoor clothes
drop wearily into their separate

heaps. Their hands, cracked and hard,
break beneath the water’s blast;
this, too, did Abel.
coming from his fields. With eyes

half closed, against the kitchen
heat, they nod at her and slide
into their place. aching with
the work they’ve done since dawn.
Leaving Home

I looked around the listless motel room
In Ogallala, Nebraska, and thought,
We will not pass this way again. He consumed
Sunflower seeds like a machine and watched

A TV show where people laid out bodies to
Decay. They took photographs each day.
We started out of Montana two
Days ago. He’s nineteen, free, on his way,

Tomorrow bound. He drove and chewed a straw;
So tall: so young. I thought of Conrad’s yarn
Of “Youth,” two men bound for the East, and so
Are we, two men bound for the East, and one

Only to return. A last journey, then,
I thought. We will not pass this way again.
The Letter

He stood near the mailbox, an early morning shadow against the fluttering snow. He held her letter in an ungloved hand, not feeling the envelope’s sharp edge against his chilling flesh. “Dear John,” he read aloud; the syllabic sounds, like soft flakes, settled into one another in tiny cotton places. “Dear John,” he read again. For a long time he froze in the bleak minute, unwilling to read more. The rest could stay a mystery, an emptiness between the loving and the stopping. His throat caught, but there were no tears but kissing snow. This was the last thing he expected, this stand in the bitter cold.
Burial

The preacher stood beside the empty space.
the square door into the earth soon to be
filled. In blowing black he shivered slightly in the January
wind and tried to hold his features tight and
upward, facing God and not the slow march
of six men with cold fingers and a long box.

His words were brief, of someone he never knew.
but in the eye of my mind I saw her hand reaching
for my cheek, I felt the touch of her old hands.
warm and full of love against my eyes and lips.
I heard her breathing the same air I breathed
and heard the smile in her voice as she spoke.

An acid wind blew the snow in bitter ashes
as we lowered the coffin into the ground.
Those few of us gathered round in the darkness
of our lives, knew full well the day was not so distant
when we would join her there, in the coldness of
the earth, and so alone. we wrestled with our gods.
The Fiddle

He picked it up in '34 and tucked
The box beneath his chin. He plucked a string
Or two because he liked the sound. By luck
He heard a song, an age-old hymn, something

He’d heard his mother sing when she was young.
He sat down on the porch, his back against
An old oak chair his dad had brought among
Other tattered gear. The old man minced

No words. “I’m glad to see the last of that
Damned state,” he said. “Damned Iowa don’t mean
A thing to me.” He pulled a chair and sat
Down by his son, who plucked the string again.

Dry months they were, when '34 was gone,
Saved only by the fiddler’s scratching song.
The Fiddler’s Tune

He heard the song adrift on Summer’s day
A year before he pulled it from the string,
Much like the railroad spike a man might pry
Out of a railroad tie. The bar he’d bring

Against the iron and slowly pull the tune
Out of the wood. Now with the sound, out comes
The cricket’s song, the blazing sun of noon,
The clouds that sail the sky, the evening calm.

He felt the song within his hands and passed
It on to bow and wood and then into
The world. He said, “I now this song do cast
Into the Spiritus Mundi and throw

Upon the grassy plain. This is my choice,
To give this wood and gut and string my voice.
On Receiving a Letter in 1969

I steady myself in the stream of the letter. The stories were far too hard.
We waited for news,

Happy news, any news
A symphony of news.
I steady myself against the doorframe,
the letter proffered in rock steady

hands that have done this
thing, this terrible thing.
before. There are no words,
Only scratches black.

The yellow paper trembles in the afternoon light.
I cannot reach out;
I cannot touch the paper.

for if I do, the world vanishes
like fog beneath a hot, rising sun.
They are his tears. after all;
none are mine,

for why have I the need for tears.
The years have taken them all.
stolen them. and left me with yellow paper.
The envelope floats in the open air

between. This is not the first such,
but who can count
the awful invisibilities, when
those we love are gone.

those whose lips have
touched our cheek, whose fingertips
have rested feather-soft upon our skin.
are lost. Now. all that remains is

a letter held in bitter light.
midway between a stranger
and myself.
His eyes are blue:
his nails are trimmed and tight;  
his iron skin  
holds the paper in its grip.  
I cannot—  

I cannot touch this thing.  
Already I am an old man  
in a dry season.  
How can I let this stranger  

take apart my life? Only  
two pieces will be left—  
letter before;  
letter after.  

But I have no control;  
no doubt he grows bored.  
Perhaps his hand will tremble  
with exhaustion and let go.  

Then we will both watch these  
broken words take flight and  
flutter to the earth, and then,  
this man so straight and strange,  

will have nothing left to say;  
will turn and walk away.
The Fiddler

He touched the bow and lay out slow the wail
Of sound over the short grass plain,
Exactly like a blanket flipped, or a sail
Well caught and bellied out in a rising wind.

A fiddler's song can reach two-hundred years
Into the past to re-enact
A joy of love, a tragedy of tears
Shed in the wake of some wild, desperate act

Long since forgot. A circus tune outlives
The dancing clown, and even when the strong
Man's arms have turned to dust and men clasp wives
With weak and clinging, bony hands though long

Placed in the grave, the song will live on in
The wood and string that makes the violin.
History

A 1959 Chevy pickup truck sat in the yard. The starter was on the floor next to the gas pedal. To start the engine, push on the starter with the ball of your right foot and push in on the gas pedal with the heel. The transmission is a three on the floor and a slow reverse, which, over the years, operated only with a grating whine. A good mechanic could pull the transmission in an hour and a half as long as he had someone in the cab holding on to the gear shift and lowering the transmission to the ground once it was clear of the bell housing. Open the hood and find there’s lots of room to work. In fact you can crawl right in and sit on the fender and work on the two hundred and thirty five cubic inch, slant six engine. Change the plugs, set the points, and don’t forget the condenser. A pickup like that could very well last forever. About once a week Grandpa drove it to town. His wife didn’t have a license, but she could drive it fine when they fed the cows. Put three bales on edge long ways and two cross ways, and you could usually load twenty five or thirty without much trouble. Then she’d put it in low gear and he’d throw off the bales, a third or so at a time after cutting the strings. He was always careful with the string, coiled it up and hung it over a post. No sense in letting the livestock get all tangled up. One time the driver’s door broke a hinge and he welded the door shut so every time somebody drove the pickup they had to go in through the passenger’s side and slide across the seat. Right behind the seat was the gas tank, and the cab appeared too big for the box, unlike a Ford. An adopted grand son painted it red.
with spray paint, and it's still red today, though now it has moved from Southeastern Montana to North Central Montana where it sits across the street. The engine has been overhauled and a baseball cracked the front windshield during a game of catch between a great grandson and one of his friends.

Why is it the artifact outlives the man?
Why is it that when I place my hands around the black steering wheel, I ache inside?
He wasn’t good with letters. He knew his acres and his bushels, but reasons escaped him whenever he tried to lay them out on the page.

And this one time he couldn’t go to Connie—This, at least, was his alone. He went so far as to scratch a word or two, like “sorry.” and, “the kids,”

but in the end he scribbled them all out. What was there left to say? God knew there was little left to do; just this one thing.

Maybe then the world could breathe. He smelled the musty hay, the old wood, the harness, a hundred years of livestock, and the rough, hemp of the new rope in his hands.
The Dance

How can we dance the lonely night away?
How can we pull the sun out of the damp,
Decaying earth? How can we casually pay
The fiddler for his tune that turns and stamps
The floor in gouts of rising dust? The haze
That follows light and drifts in choking clouds
Will drown us all. We dance our days
And then we fall, exhausted from the loud

And wild and brassy sounds. We mix our sweat
With blood and mud and chaff, stirred by the song,
Then tamped into a mold. When dry, we’ll set
Our brick into a wall so straight and long

That later dancers touch and will pretend
There isn’t any distant, crumbling end.
The People
The Cowman

He stands, left hand on the
wooden brace of the windmill tower.
and watches the Herefords come to water.
He raises his right hand just so high,
and his fingertips brush
the bristly, red hair on a cow's back
as she saunters by.
Rancher Retired

He grips the walker and stares out the window at the cars rushing by.
He watches the afternoon sun slip into evening.
He watches the long shadows creep across the lawn.
He watches everyone else’s tomorrow.
My Father's Hands

The calluses stroked the handles of the shovel; they moved the earth; they wrestled the world. The fingers were thick and round with hard, patchwork lines that marked his days. With frightening power they gripped and grappled and molded and pushed and struck the earth that all of us might travel to where he could not. Slick with rain, they wrought a mighty work on the land. Cracked with sun, they grew the crops that kept us fed. Blue with cold they jerked and pulled our living from the dirt. Irrigation water and river mud, sand and gumbo clay, oozed, slipped, and trickled through his fingers until the days of my youth lengthened into years and were gone.
The Daughter

After three boys, who would have thought she’d be a girl? Inertia oughtn’t be conquered so easily. But there she was, a Christmas child, who, in a heartbeat or two, waved and slipped away. The music plucked at her sleeve; we blinked and nearly missed her going.

What a distance is wrought by two generations—from a grandmother who rode a horse to school as soon as she was tall enough to open a wire gate—to a granddaughter who plays the songs of angels and rides upon the waters of the world.
When I Was Young

When I was young, I loved the soil, the earth; its age and freshness filled me with its breath. The smell of dirt was on my hands, gritty, ruthless, harsh; Earth's sound was in my heart, a growling song trilling in the green chains of the child.

When I was young, I sought the sun; I yearned for the unleashed power that could scorch cold rain into blowing, churning, grinding dust. I could not turn my thoughts away; I could never see my path in the dark; I blindly leapt with little care.

And then it was gone. Your blue eyes cried so strident, so free, so absolutely clear, that I had to set aside my youth and take on the sober mantle of custody and age. Within the grail of real love, I did forsake the passions of those barren years that caged so completely my indifferent, carefree soul. Truth and love and you blazed bright among the sordid earthy stuff. Soundly vanquished was my youth, and great was my surprise: I was no longer young.
Winter Accident

They issued an emergency obituary
when, as still as death, they found her in the field.
the broken barbed wire curled around her
and the Ford like Christmas ribbon.

She’d been there since the morning dark,
and now the stone-bleak sun glared,
cold and wicked, off the February snow.

Even in the brittle cold she was not gone,
but only waiting. She walked home from the hospital,
in time to read of her own demise,
limping only slightly on frostbit toes.
Silence

*On the death of my grandfather, John Roberts, in a truck wreck in 1961.*

Archimedes said,
“Give me a fulcrum
And a lever long enough, and
I will move the world."

Upon this lever of silence I lean
The weight of myself.
The universe moves in a tectonic jerk.
A tower leans and bows.

*A basketball game*
*Seventh grade*
*Some are good; swish, run, swish*
*Screams echo*
*Some are lucky*

*Balls and hardwood thunder*
*The room breathes hot and wet*
*A speaking in the corner of his eye*
*A game stops*
*He hears even before he hears*
*He knows even before he knows*
*He cries even before the tears*

Silence waited in the darkness beyond the gym:
The game emptied out of him like sweat.
The leaning tower dropped its first stone
To roll off an iron roof.

*Black wheels spinning*
*Iron torn crushed*
*Wood splintered broken*
*Door open hanging*
*Body crooked lying*
*Worn boot on steel resting*
*All quiet*
*All still*

The lever flexed.
The world moved.
Thus fell the first stone,
But not the last.
Thus fell the first silence,
But not the last.

Archimedes said,
“Give me a fulcrum
And a lever long enough, and
I will move the world.”
The McKinley Women

Part I

The River

She woke gasping at three in the afternoon; her hands clutched the arms of the chair and an icy sweat beaded on her face. The smell permeated the room, her dream, and her bed clothing: the smell of grease and cows, of horses and hay. the smell that always accompanied the dream, the smell she would love to forget, but could not. She stood and threw open the curtains to let in the yellow, afternoon light.

She wished the trembling in her hands would stop. No such luck. Even her legs and arms shook with weak tremors, and the stale, acid taste in the back of her mouth told her that the fear had gone deep. The dreams didn’t come often, but when they did, they were unmerciful. God knew Montana was a continent away, and Mama was safe in her grave, but when she least expected, Rowan re-experienced a crisp vision of events that stripped away her carefully arranged robes of adulthood, and once again she was a child of ten.
She looked around her bedroom, decorated with a quaintness not particularly acceptable in these times or climes. Most of the people in her circle of friends were uncomfortable with anything below the water line, and so they, and she, floated through their lives, like icebergs, content with the seventh of themselves they allowed the rest of the world to see. But the hidden six-sevenths sometimes broke free, and on these occasions, the past threatened the ordered, safe world she had spent the last twenty-eight years creating.

The dreams, yoked with what she hid below the surface, fought for their share of her world, and Rowan found this more disturbing than the dreams themselves.

After all, they weren't really a nightmares—or day-mares in this case. They were only the truth, a pure truth impossible to ignore and impossible to sidestep. At unexpected moments this truth reared its death’s head, and she saw her past reflected in the black abyss of its eyes.

If only it were just a fading memory, she thought. She was an intelligent person. Hadn't she proved that a hundred, a thousand, times. What happened had so little to do with the here and now, separated, as it were, by the years and the distance—physical and rational. Still, when the dreams came, in the cold watches of the night or the sunshine of the day, she was doubly struck by the power of truth coupled with emotion as raw and bloody as any open wound.

When these dreams erupted through the surface of her consciousness, she thought of Regan, two hours younger and a thousand years older. They were once so close; they could read each other’s minds and think each other’s thoughts, and yet that night had cut Regan like a scalpel, leaving her open and helpless before the world, while Rowan, her
twin sister, antithetically closed herself off from humanity with a skin-thick wall as strong as steel.

* * * * * * * *

They knew they shouldn't have. After all, they had been told "a thousand times," and Rowan certainly knew. Though they were twins, Rowan sensed their differences from the moment she was cognizant of her sister as an alter-self. Rowan was the strongest and, at times, she had counted it a failing in Regan that from the first mutual recognition of their twin-ness, Regan hadn't always seemed aware of Rowan's strength, and consequently, her authority. As they grew older, however, Regan acquiesced more and more until they both became, if not comfortable, at least acceptant of their evolving relationship.

Rowan was the born instigator of their adventures—in later years she thought of them as kin to the forays of Don Quixote, going forth into a hostile world wearing the armor of childhood, which, she later learned, was the same as no armor at all.

Rowan knew intellectually that she was not really to blame, but her dreams belied her innocence. After all, she thought, isn't it the subconscious that tells us the real truth about ourselves. She was the strongest. She was the leader. That day had been her idea, and she could find no escape from so naked and pure a truth as that.

How different all of their lives might have been had she chosen another path, had she chosen to stay in the house and work on the rag rug her mother thought was a character-formation exercise, had she and her sister played their little house games in the shade of the porch while Mother worked mindlessly inside, had they chosen to play in the barn loft which she and Regan in a single, flashing synapse connecting two distinct brain
cells, could change into a different universe. Even now she wondered that events could arrange themselves in such a fashion, and, as is usual in such cases, there was no answer. She could count herself king of infinite space, were it not that she had bad dreams.

As a middle-aged woman, a moderately successful English professor who held the respect of her colleagues and her students, a woman only a few months free of her second marriage to a hopeless combination of romanticism and alcoholism, she looked back on that day and night and morning with only guilt and sorrow. Neither she nor Regan were ever the same, and their childhood closeness had slowly evaporated over the following years like morning dew in the Eastern Montana heat. Finally, neither knowing how it had happened, each other’s presence in the world diminished into a hazy non-awareness, so formless that Rowan could forget for months that she had a sister who had once been as much a part of her as the fingers on her hand.

But on that day, twenty-eight years ago, she and her sister were alive, vibrant, excited, smelling, touching, hearing, tasting, living the children’s moment as only children can. On that day they were whole and well, and little did they imagine that that wholeness and wellness could disappear like a vapor in the wind.

When she and Regan were ten years old, on a hot, July night in 1961, they spent a late night in the cottonwood trees, Russian Olives, willows, and brush below their house on the Yellowstone River. Normally they never went so far or stayed so late because of the “Rules.”

“Don’t play by the river.”

“People drown in the river.”

“We have ‘Rules’ in this house.”
But the river was the most adventurous, the most mysterious place in their world. and the “Rules” only served to make it more so. The physically exhausting labor of tending to four children, the demands of their father, and fending off the wolf in general distracted Mama quite completely, and so, a couple of times a week, especially in the summer, Rowan and Regan would find their way into the timber along the forbidden river. In the brush and isolation they found a peace they both desired. They loved the loneliness, the smells, the touch, the taste of the river frontage. A oneness was possible in the cool trees while impossible at the house where taut antagonism reigned. Thus it was that Rowan, who could force the rebellion at the house, melded with her sister when they embarked on their river quests. Even in middle age Rowan could not explain the paradox of her twin-ship—to be one with her sister and, at the same time, her master. of being both so close and inhabitants of separate universes.

The sin of the river drew them like magnets, and the electricity of adventure and deliberate disobedience refused to be denied. A forbidden adventure was a true adventure, and Rowan, especially, reveled in the freedom from the mundane, boring, and often shadowed household.

The walk into the timber was not far, a few hundred yards, and once there, they followed the old road into the trees. The river was actually some distance away, but nearer to the house a slough swung through the old riverbed and created an island during high water in the spring and fall and declined into a stagnant refuge for catfish, carp, and beaver when the water was low.
If they followed this slough far enough, they would reach the point where it flowed into the Yellowstone River, a fast moving freight train of a river that spanned the entire state of Montana before emptying into the Missouri River in North Dakota.

This place below the house among the cottonwoods had always been a place of mystery, both to herself and Regan. Relics of days long past had accumulated there over the last fifty or sixty years. At least five old cars parked and decayed under the trees. Several machines, huge, jumbled creations of some mad artist whose only building materials were large quantities of rusted angle iron, would remain mysteries to Rowan for the rest of her life. Rowan and her sister visited this insane landscape as often as possible, in spite of their mother’s desperate threats and dire warnings. They even made up names for some of the stranger, rusting creatures.

They called the old, belt driven threshing machine built of blue-white tin criss-crossed with angle iron The Gobbler. It rested its carcass on ponderous iron wheels that topped the twins by a good two feet. Sharp-edged teeth in iron jaws filled its elongated beak high overhead.

The Wrecker, short and squat, was made of long, wooden teeth tipped with iron and an amazing confusion of rusted pulleys and cables. At one end sat an engine, open to the weather, and at the other end lay long, iron-tipped teeth in a neat row, lined up about a foot apart.

Closer to the river lived The Fisherman, an old winch truck with an extension of two pipes in an inverted “V” that rose high into the air. A heavy pulley at the point of the “V” held a thick, steel cable with a hook dangling at the end.
A buzz-saw with a blade that turned at the slightest touch sat on four angle-iron legs next to The Fisherman. Sometimes the girls would spend minutes at a time spinning the blade and jamming a piece of wood into the buzzing, blurry teeth to watch the chips fly. They hadn't given the buzz-saw a name yet, but there were many possibilities, and one day a true name would reveal itself.

There were other creatures, too, as yet un-named, but just as interesting in the tales they might tell. For now they kept their secrets in small dark places, and rusted quietly into the sand.

Today began not so differently from previous days. The full heat of summer bore down on the farm and wilting plant and child alike. Mama hid herself in the house and moved zombie fashion from room to room. She performed tasks so exactly like the day, the month, the year before, that no thought existed between the desire and the doing. They had no idea where Father was. An invisible envoy between the house and the land, he divided his time between the physical slavery of the farm and the whiskey in the barn.

The girls shared a psychic look, checked their mother who, locked inside of her personal oblivion often forgot they even existed, and they were gone. First they ran quietly and then madly into the trees, enveloping themselves in the freedom of utter randomness.

The heat of the sun filtered down through the shade of the towering cottonwoods, and the cottonwood seeds rocked mystically in the afternoon breeze, so thick that at times, in order to keep from swallowing them, the girls had to keep their mouths closed. They ran and squealed and laughed through their tightly pressed lips. The noon meal long past and the heat lying heavy on the river, they opened the rear door of a squat.
green Buick with four flat tires and a front windshield made up of a crooked puzzle of broken safety glass. They pulled the door shut behind them and stretched back on the brown seat. They stared at the strange watermark on the ceiling of the car and kicked their legs back and forth over the front seat. They traced the patterns running aimlessly through the roof fabric and breathed the mousy, greasy smell the old Buick acquired after decades of seeping into the sandy loam. The girls would have rolled down the cracked glass of the door windows, but the handles had long since disappeared. Instead, with their fingers they drew pictures on the dirty glass.

Rowan crawled into the front seat and played with the knobs of the radio. She dug through the mouse droppings and fuzz in the glove box looking for any artifact to stimulate the story of the car. She slid behind the huge steering wheel, turned it back and forth as far as it would go, and imagined driving down an open road lined with tall, green pines, far away from the hot, Montana plain. Regan made engine, brake, and tire-squealing noises from the back seat.

The right radio knob moved a vertical line across the face of the radio as she twisted it one way and then the other. Rowan pretended to be a news announcer, “High water! High water!” and Regan stuttered and coughed an imitation of static. They drummed their chubby, child fingers and then beat their hands on the car’s seats. The dirt rose about them in a cloud.

Finished with the car, they moved farther into the trees. They spent some time in an old sheepherder’s wagon which still held an iron cook stove, an old mattress and bedspring against the back wall, and cupboards always bare, though each time they came, they expected to find something in them, canned food, matches, something. A
sheepherder had lived there when the McKinleys raised sheep, and then a succession of hired hands of various reputations. “Stay away from those fellows.” Mama said each time Father hired a new one, and they mostly did, though they knew each by their first names. Jimmy, Curly, Gary, Wally—and others with names ending in “y”—an endless succession of faceless men who held the world at bay with their whiskey and their curses.

No one had lived there for several years now because Father had built a bunkroom in the barn along with veterinary storage, and, like the old cars and other obsolete machinery along the river, the sheep wagon crumbled slowly into the earth.

Past the place where the road crossed the slough to the island, the brush was thicker and the trees darker. They were much closer to the main river, now, and could clearly hear the splash of water rushing over the round rocks of the riverbed. Near a giant cottonwood was the winch truck half buried in the sand. During a spring flood, the water had hollowed out a hole underneath The Fisherman that had never completely re-filled in with sand.

The girls chased each other around The Fisherman a couple of times and then, in exactly the same motion, they dove into the hole underneath the chassis and found, to their great surprise, the golden man.

In those days before air conditioners, an afternoon on the river had the stickiness of warm pineapple juice and the feel of sandpaper. During their play the sand crawled into their shoes and their clothing. Streaked with the dirt and sweat of hard playing, their hair hung across their brows in ragged snarls. They held their chubby fingers to their mouths and stared, open-mouthed. Looking at the ground, they saw the scrapes and
gouges in the sand where he had crawled into the hole under the truck. and there he lay.
golden and beautiful, a gift from another world.

"He's an angel," Regan whispered, wonder lifting in an aura around the words.
"He's a sleeping angel," and the words echoed an amazement and a truth bound only by
their imagination. Years later Rowan still re-called that hour with wonder. In 1959 a pair
of ten-year-old, rag-tag twins found an angel in a hole near the Yellowstone River, and
their life was forever changed.

He had blonde, almost white hair, a smooth brow, youthful, pale cheeks, and,
other than his ragged jeans, was naked, foot and chest. He couldn't have weighed more
than a hundred pounds, and his hands—Rowan always noticed people's hands—were soft
and pale, nothing like the calloused hands of her father or the cracked and red-lined hands
of her mother. He was the color of burnished brass. and there were no white lines that
spoke of part of him tanned by the sun and part of him not. His feet were dainty and
small, perfect except for the scratches from the brush and gravel and mud. He had
slender, golden ankles with carefully rounded nails.

A small cluster of morning glory vines lay across his chest at a diagonal, and
when Regan said, "He's an angel." Rowan had no trouble imagining broken wings
crushed beneath him. But there were no wings, only this perfect, golden man, so still. so
foreign, so like nothing that had ever crawled into either of the girls’ wildest dreams.

Rowan heard the cloud of tiny, black gnats that floated. humming in the humid,
river heat. Mosquitoes wallowed drunkenly in the muggy afternoon air.

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The moment in time was un-erasable. In the tree overhead a magpie chattered from a thick, stick nest. The chattering would stop then start then stop, finally swallowed by the rustling of the leaves and the soft rush of the water.

The fallen angel smelled of river mud, the loam of the river bed, dead leaves, soft asparagus ferns gone to seed, and morning glory vines. The oozy smell of river mud was in and around and through them, pushed at them by the sticky summer breeze that crept through the leaves of the cottonwood trees. The mud, leaves, and water smell crept into the pores of the sisters' skin and welded them together tighter than ever. Rowan felt a change within her; here, at this second, was a piece of wonderful, fantastic perfection.

The golden man lay with arms and legs at strange angles. Rowan felt a great sadness. He was not like them. His face was shorter and more rounded, and his eye sockets sank a little deeper into his skull with an odd tilt to them. His thin lips shown white in the shadow of the truck. He had no beard to speak of, a slight fuzz that felt like rough sandpaper when Rowan touched his cheek. and his brow was high and smooth. The mud and red scratches on his skin brought tears brimming to the cusps of her eyes, and only with a great effort did she hold back a sob.

Then in counterpoint the sadness disappeared as the full portent of what they saw overwhelmed her. The world around her wheeled in a dizzy arc, and Rowan laughed, a merry bell chime caught, lifted, and scattered by the breeze.

"Listen," Rowan said. "You can hear everything; you can hear the whole world." And it was true. Rowan thought that every smell, every sound came clearer, each a separate, perfect cut on a giant crystal.

They stared.
"He’s a fallen angel," Regan said.

"He has no wings."

"Not all angels have wings."

"Then how do you know they’re angels?"

Regan would not be un-convinced whatever Rowan’s response.

"You can just tell. You just look at them and you can tell. What else could he be?" Regan asked. "Look how he breathes so slowly; look at his skin. It's perfect."

And all she had said was true. His skin was shining gold; his lips were pale, white gold, his eyes a yellow gold. What could he be but an angel?

Rowan found the concept of an angel with no wings very agreeable, nor did it seem odd that an angel would be here in the trees. This was, out of all of their lives spent in this place, the single most strange, untoward, supernatural event. They must take out of it every possible goodness, like sucking an orange through a hole in the skin until every bit of coppery sweetness is gone and only the pith remains. This was their time. They would catalog their lives by this one event, what went before and what went after.

The sisters waited and the afternoon passed out of them like a runner’s spent breath. One twin always watched over him and observed his slow, uneven breathing. The other might go down to the water and skip rocks or take off her shoes and shuffle through the shallows of the slough crossing, but never for long. Soon they returned to gaze at this strange, golden creature, watching his breathing, watching the shadows of the trees and leaves trace moving outlines on his flesh as the sun slipped down the aqua-blue, inverted bowl of sky. The vision and the possible consequences so caught them, that the evening darkness was upon them before they noticed.
Always the darkness fell harder and faster in the trees than at the house, but the
girls continued to kneel next to him. They leaned on his chest and listening to his
breathing, so slow and quiet as to hardly be breathing at all. A three-quarter moon lifted
above the trees over the river, and its light filtered down and created a landscape of pale.
frozen creatures. The moonlight revealed the twins, bit by bit, inch by inch, around the
soft fluttering of the leaves.

Rowan and Regan huddled in the darkness underneath The Fisherman, and
Rowan could reach out, because she was on the outside next to the opening, and allow the
moonlight to touch her hand, turning it into a ghost-hand of blue-white. The disembodied
fingers curled and lifted like fat, floating worms, the ghost of an ancestor visiting two
small girls as they ministered to their angel, fallen from heaven, dying in a hole in the
ground.

“We can’t leave him.” Regan whispered so quietly that Rowan strained to hear
her words, leaning even farther over the angel’s chest. In the gathering darkness, they
could not see one another well, especially in the hole, though Rowan knew Regan could
see her silhouette against the moonlight.

Then they heard their father in the distance.

“Rowan? Regan?” he called with the same kind of patience he used when he
called the cows to their feed.

“Rowan? Regan?” he called again. Out of the blackness of the towering
cottonwood trees, his flashlight whipped its beam back and forth across the ground.

Rowan crawled around the fallen angel, and together, their faces to the opening
and their backs to the closed side of the hole, they huddled, gripping each other with
hands so tight that, if they had thought of their oneness at all, they would have had
difficulty deciding where one self ended and the other began. Rowan knew he would
never find them. not in this hole, not in this secret place, and of all the people in the
world, they did not want to be found by their father.

"Quiet," said Regan. Together, quietly, while he was still some distance away,
you pulled some of the fireweed behind them and pushed it into a little wall to shield
them from the outside and their father. Then, in the near dead blackness, they held each
other as before, ceased to breathe, and waited for him to pass.

The searching light came closer. They heard the scrape of his boots through the
dirt and the rustle of his pants through the taller weeds. He might have come as close as
ten feet. Rowan heard his breathing, smelled his whiskey breath carried by the breeze,
and saw in the pale light, the old, double-barreled, twelve-gauge shotgun he always
carried into the woods.

"Might see a skunk or porcupine or pheasant," he’d say and head off into the trees
during the evening, sometimes until dead dark.

He never failed to return with a grouse or duck or pheasant. unceremoniously
tossing the feathered carcass into the kitchen sink, sometimes on the top of un-rinsed
dishes. Then he’d emit a bubbly, growling sound he called a laugh, and say, “Fix those up
for me, will you Connie,” and take the twelve-gauge back out to the barn and hang it on
its pegs in the vet room.

Now he stood ten feet away. Rowan could not have breathed if she had wanted to,
and she felt the same iron tenseness in her sister. Rowan reached into their center and
held on so tight there could never be a separating.
There was no evidence of worry or desperation in their father's voice, only a calm, almost bored. "Rowan? Regan?" repeated over and over again in a monotonous liturgy. Both of the girls had heard that tone before, so quiet, and then the voice would explode into a terrible rage.

He moved again, away from them. The erratic flicking of his flashlight moved to the left, toward the river, and his boots made long, scraping sounds in the tall grass. He stopped. Then the sound repeated itself in an easy, brushing rhythm as he continued. He was soon out of sight, but his voice lingered, growing softer and softer until it blended into the rippling sound of the Yellowstone River a few hundred yards away.

When he was completely gone, the twins lay their ears against the angel's golden chest, listening for a sign of breath, but now they could find nothing. Rowan wanted her ears to feel the rise and fall of his slow breathing, but there was nothing. She listened carefully at his lips but failed to hear any expiration. Perhaps, Rowan thought, he had been holding his breath, too, just like them, afraid of their father, and maybe he had held it too long or just forgotten to start breathing again. A sadness arched in her and she bit her lower lip.

"He's dead," said Rowan. "He's gone back."

They stared in silence at the unmoving angel.

"What do we do now?" asked Regan.

They reached out with both hands and pressed their palms and fingers to his chest. They sensed the heat of his body release itself into the air. Rowan had no idea how long they knelt like that. hands on the angel, but not with their strongest will could they give back any of the heat. Finally Rowan lifted her hands and shook her head.
“There’s nothing we can do.”

Regan, too, lifted her hands from the body, now chilling quickly in the evening air.

“We can’t let Father find him,” said Regan. “We can’t let anyone find him.”

“Let me think,” said Rowan. “We have to do what is best for him. We have to be quiet and listen. Then we’ll know what to do.”

She crept out of their hiding place and looked around. A misty veil of cloud covered the moon, and the ethereal light lifted her into the air so that her feet barely skimmed the ground. A silken breeze caressed the leaves as the trees whispered to one another, singing with the river as the water washed over stones that had lain in their places since the beginning of the world.

Rowan lifted her hands high and turned slowly with upturned face, her grace belying her ten years. She turned. She stopped. She stood motionless, stilling her breathing, stilling all of her body’s senses, feeling, searching, listening for an answer.

Spellbound, Regan watched her mystical sister in the shadowy light. Rowan, with her arms up-stretched in a “V,” closed her eyes and let the answer creep into her through the rhythm of the water and the trees.

“I know,” she whispered, and knelt at the opening under The Fisherman. “We have to give him back.”

“Give him back,” said Regan. “What do you mean?”

“To the river. We have to give him back to the river.”

Rowan thought for a moment. “He’s not very big,” she said finally. “We will have to carry him.”
"Carry him! All that way?"

"We can. Help me." Rowan said and grabbed one of the arms. Already the cooling flesh had tightened in the rigor of death, a condition familiar to two girls growing up on a farm where death and life, birth and dying, and the arbitrary unfairness of it all were as common as the grass of the plain.

Together they pulled him from under The Fisherman, and had he not been so thin, so light, made as it were from the air of heaven, they could not have moved him an inch, much less the two-hundred-and-fifty yards to the river.

Foot by straining foot, they carried, pulled, and dragged him toward the river. They lost track of time. They only knew they had a labor that must be done, and this was the only way. They moved logs out of the way as best they could: they pushed their way through the tall grasses and willows and the heavy brush. Then they were out on the rocks and the sand dragging, pulling, and grateful that the river was so close and he was so slight, unaware that their work in the fields gave them the power to drag him through the brush foot by headlong foot.

The Yellowstone River was a rolling blackness, and their first step into the icy water surprised them both. By this time they were stumbling with weariness, and their feet slipped out from under them on the smooth, mud-covered rocks. They persevered. Without pause they pulled him into the water, and suddenly he was half his weight. As the water worked its way up their calves, taking their breath away with its cold fingers, the angel became weightless, a piece of driftwood. borne up on the River of the World.
Still they were not far enough. They continued to pull him through the water until it rose to their knees. The current pulled at them now and sucked away at their feet, threatening to draw them under the surface.

They had been warned against this a thousand times. "The Rules" should not be broken. "The Rules" kept them safe. But they had broken so many of the rules already that evening that the rule about wading into the river disappeared in the vast abyss that existed beyond the rules.

With the body out in deeper water, the current gripped it more forcefully. They struggled briefly to hold it against the pull of the water. Then they opened their hands and released him. For a moment he barely touched their open palms and the river seemed to have forgotten its desire. A long second, maybe two, and then, as an after-thought, the river remembered and pulled him from their hands. The angel drifted away effortlessly in the moonlight, face to the sky. effervescent radiance glowing from his water-beaded, golden skin. The girls bathed in the same radiance as they let him go. They gasped as they held hands in the searing cold water. They ignored the lost feeling in their legs and watched their angel, a gleaming, otherworldly shape, a vague smudge, and finally a hole of black as it disappeared into the dark.

They turned their backs and held hands as they walked out of the river. The most difficult part lay ahead. They, like the angel, had to return home. Mama would be crazy. Father would be angry, and Rowan could think of nothing to say to them but a truth they could never comprehend.

They returned toward the house, first through the willows and Russian Olives, past The Fisherman, and past the old threshing machine Gobbler. hulking in the
moonlight, no longer the friend it had been in the daylight. Between them the girls felt a new respect for these odd creatures that guarded their domain in both darkness and light. Rowan’s exultation dissipated her fear, for they had accomplished a great deed, a Godly deed, and she knew her sister felt the same by the grip of her hand. But they could not hold fear at bay for long. Like a cobra it slithered into them and whispered the truth they would have done anything to ignore.

“Father,” whispered Regan. “Will he kill us?”

“No,” said Rowan. “but he’s going to be really angry.”

“What are we going to say?”

“I don’t know,” said Rowan. “Maybe we can tell him the truth.” She paused. “But he won’t believe us,” she added.

“He’ll kill us,” Regan said.

Rowan shook her head, knowing that Regan could not see her clearly as they rushed side by side. Their exultation seeped away. The further away from the river, the more they lost the purpose of what they had done. The consequences loomed like a sinking moon, and their adrenaline bled out of them, leaving them empty and breathless.

“We need to hurry,” Rowan said. “The later it gets, the worse it will be.”

Rowan heard Regan’s breath catch and the opening of a sob. Regan’s hand chilled with the night air, and Rowan’s grip could not bring back the warmth because the chill did not come from the air but from panic.

They rushed through the darkness, and dread weighed upon them like lead. They held hands tighter and ran faster and tried with all of their wills not to think of their father’s anger.
He was still gone when they reached the house. They scurried inside and nearly didn’t notice their mother who stood beside the sink. Her stiff fingers gripped the edge of the counter, and she stared out the window toward the river. Clearly, she had watched them cross the yard in the moonlight.

“He’s not back, yet,” she said without looking around. “He’s been gone a long time looking for you. For several hours.” Her voice stretched and swam in the kitchen. Fear, like a yellow fog, wove a tapestry in the air.

“Are you all right?” Rowan asked.

“He’s really angry,” said Mother. “Where have you been?”

“We couldn’t come back,” said Regan in a rush. “We had to stay with him.”

Her mother turned, leaned against the counter, and said, “What on earth are you talking about, child? Both of you. What could you possibly think you were doing? Going off like that and not telling us and by the river, too. What did you think you were doing? It’s almost midnight. He is going to be so angry.”

“He didn’t sound angry when . . . “ Regan stopped mid sentence when Rowan kicked her foot. Too late.

“When what?” said mother.

Regan’s mis-spoken words struck her speechless. Regan knew no language capable of explaining the experience at the river.

Finally Rowan said, “We saw his flashlight when he was looking for us, but we couldn’t tell him where we were. We were afraid.”

Regan nodded.
Their mother’s mouth dropped open. She pushed her blonde hair up with both hands and wiped them over her too-thin face. Her eyes, gray-blue and blood-shot, closed, and she raised her face to the ceiling as if there might be help somewhere, but, as always in times like these, there was none. She pulled off her apron, laid it on the kitchen table, and walked into the living room.

“You two get ready for bed,” she said in passing. “Your father will be back soon, and when he’s done with you, you can go to bed.” She sat down at her sewing machine in the living room, an old pedal affair inherited from her mother. Absently she rocked her foot back and forth on the pedal. The machine clicked as the sewing needle rose and fell. She picked up a pair of Cahill’s jeans and plucked them back and forth in her hands, quite at a loss about what she should be doing with them. Her foot continued emptily rocking the sewing machine pedal. The clatter, like hard snow on cold window glass, filled the room, but she couldn’t bring herself to actually push the cloth under the needle. She stared as the two girls bustled past and hurried up the stairs.

“Get ready for bed, but don’t go to bed,” she called, still staring at Cahill’s pants. “Come back down when you’re done. Your father will be here any minute.” Rowan heard the hopelessness in her mother’s voice. and oddly, at that moment, she feared more for her mother than for herself.

Rowan shut the door to their room and the two girls looked at each other. Regan oozed desperation, a mirror of what Rowan felt in herself. She wanted to cry. Behind her eyelids she felt a familiar ache, and she blinked a couple of times to stop the tears. This was not the time for tears. Maybe later, when this was over, but now tears would be a
betrayal of all they had done. No tears for now. Regan, not so successful, sobbed and choked as her tears rolled down her cheeks.

"There is nothing we can do," said Rowan. "We have to tell the truth, and then we have to take our punishment." She fiddled with the buttons on her shirt. "He's going to hate us forever," she continued in a flat voice.

"He's going to kill us," said Regan. "We should have run away."

"We can't run away. We're too little. Besides, there's no place to run. He won't kill us, but we'll get the belt."

"Ohhhh," Regan moaned.

"Be quiet. That's not going to do any good." Rowan shucked out of her clothes and slipped her night gown over her head just as she heard Father's footsteps on the porch. "The quicker we get back down, the quicker this will be over. Now get your nightgown on and let's get downstairs before he comes up here after us. That will make him even madder." Rowan leaned her forehead into Regan's forehead, and together they literally willed a power from somewhere, anywhere, to protect them. "Oh, Jesus." she whispered with no real hope in a name she had only heard from a mythical distance. "Oh, Jesus, don't let him hurt us." Regan only sobbed.

Below them they heard their father's garbled words in the kitchen. Bitterness, pushed by a flood of indecipherable sounds, rolled through the house and formed a barrier that Rowan forced her way through as she rushed down the stairs, Regan at her heels. They reached the bottom and Papa stood in the kitchen doorway.

He was not a big man. No more than five foot nine, and the brown, sinewy muscles of his arms showed the railed spareness of a working man who defined himself
by the hours he could work and the whiskey he could drink. The touch of gray in his thick, black hair glittered in the kitchen light. Gray streaked a mustache that covered his mouth and hung over his lower lip. A long scar trailed up the side of his jaw and into his hairline, reminiscent of a tangle with an unbroken horse and a barbed wire fence. When he was angry, it glowed red. The scar was a blazing, red line.

Explain what you’ve been doing,” he growled. His voice suddenly dropped into a calm which frightened Rowan more than the shouting. “What have you been doing by the river until almost midnight?”

“...”Regan started, but Rowan raised her hand and touched Regan’s cheek with the tips of her fingers.

“We shouldn’t have gone to the river.” Rowan said loudly. forcing Regan’s tiny word into the background. “It’s my fault. We shouldn’t have gone to the river. We fell asleep and when we heard you calling we were afraid, and we hurried back, and I know we’re in a lot of trouble. I’m sorry. We’re sorry. It’s my fault. it was my idea. Regan just went along.” The wailing words ended in a high squeak that threatened to turn into a scream.

“Damn you.” her father said with such venom that both girls closed their eyes and shrank away. His scar blazed. Anger surrounded him, seeped from his pores with the sweat and the whiskey. Rowan knew there was no way through the anger, no way they could lessen their betrayal. no way she or Mama or anyone could stop the steel sword that fell between him and them.

“We had to take care...” Regan started, but Rowan shouted her down.

“That’s all, we just fell asleep, and we’re both really sorry.”
Rowan heard crying from Jesse’s room off to the right. Mama looked up from her sewing machine and scurried into his room. The door clicked behind her. Jesse’s crying stopped, and the two girls gazed in horror at this man whose face in a heartbeat had metamorphosed into a twisted, mask. They had seen rage in their father before, but not like this, at least not like this against them.

Once he killed a cow with a single swing of a steel fence post because it kept dodging around an open gate. Once Rowan watched as he swung a two-by-four two-handed and hit a full grown horse on the side of the head because the horse kept pulling away when Father tried to put on its bridle. The horse sank stunned into the ground as if an earthquake had opened up a hole in the earth to swallow the animal whole. The horse’s skin at his shoulder twitched, and he shook his head repeatedly while Father screamed at what a stupid son-of-a-bitch it was. A film covered the horse’s eyes as it tried to regain its feet, only to fall back again with each effort. Later that winter, Father had to shoot the horse because he kept running into things like buildings and gate posts.

Wade McKinley made both the twins and Cahill stand beside him when he took a long drink out of his bottle and pulled the trigger of the thirty-ought-six. They watched wide-eyed as he walked over and kicked the quivering corpse in the head. “God damned stupid son-of-a-bitch,” he said, drank the last of the whiskey, and threw the empty bottle at a corral post. Then he kicked the horse one more time for good measure. Rowan could not remember the name or color of the horse, but she always remembered the crack of the rifle and the animal’s black, dead eyes.

What Rowan saw in him now was that same cow-killing, horse-killing rage and the same blank look he had when he kicked the dead horse and swore.
His mustache quivered in conjunction with his upper lip. A bubble of spit oozed out of the left corner of his mouth as it opened and closed, opened and closed, like a carp lying on the river mud, gasping for air. He searched for words but could not find them because there were none which could adequately portray his wrath. His mop of hair fell crazily over his forehead, and his terrible eyes pierced the disheveled shock like steel needles.

"We’re really sorry," shouted the two girls in unison.

"If you’re not, you will be, by God," said Father, and pulled the belt from its pant loops, a thick leather belt with “Wade” emblazoned where it touched the small of his back. “I won’t tolerate this kind of irresponsibility.” he continued.

He paused. Rowan knew he was waiting for an answer, but she also knew that no answer would satisfy him. The whiskey on his breath rolled through the room, emphasized by the deepened breathing of his anger.

“You and your god-damned secrets,” he said. “Fine. you keep your secrets from me. I don’t care where you’ve been or what you’ve been doing,” and he leaned very close to them, “but you broke the rules.” The smell of his breath overwhelmed them. Rowan shrank away involuntarily.

“Rules are rules and if you have to have secrets, then you have to pay for them. and, by God, you’ll pay. I’ve been outside nearly four hours looking for the likes of you two, and that,” he said with a click of his tongue against the back of his teeth. “I don’t take lightly.” He leaned forward. His mouth gaped just inches from their face. Rowan steeled herself from turning aside at the stink of his breath.
Regan screamed and huddled against her sister. Rowan ran through the options, lie, tell the truth, say nothing, and she knew there was no answer, no appeasement, no mercy. Instead she knelt in the center of the hardwood living room floor and threw her arms around her sister as their father raised his handmade belt with the inlaid “Wade” and brought it down on their backs. He flailed wildly, hitting them sometimes on the back, sometimes on the legs and arms, sometimes, if they turned wrong, in the face. Rowan felt the cut of the leather less and less as her father screamed words that had long sense turned into meaningless echoes of sound.

Mentally she lifted out of herself, floating, floating and whatever violence there was in the room happened to someone else—someone close to her, with her thoughts and her feelings, but still someone else. From the outside she watched the event dispassionately, for it was only one episode in a long, dismal series of episodes, a violent scene, a violent rage, yes, a terrible sin against the innocent, yes, but having so little to do with her. That person in the middle of the living room floor gripping so tightly the other that resembled so closely the first was another her, and Rowan felt immensely sorry for that self-creature who used to be her, to have to deal with such an anger and to be so tiny in the face of such formidable force.

She could not account for the violences and the angers in this world. She accepted. Now, instead of the belt she lost herself in the embrace of the cold current of the Yellowstone River as it pulled the body of the angel out into the deep. His face, so peaceful, stared up at the spiral of stars that were his home, and she felt the great desire to accompany him into those heavens.
And this place, with the man cursing and swinging his brown leather strap, this other girl sobbing and screaming in turn how sorry she was; what had she to do with her?

Beyond the transparent walls in the other room, Mama huddled on the bed with a little boy, her face stricken with a wild grief. She gripped the headboard with a whitened hand. She threw the other arm over the child and held him deep in the pillow so that he could not hear the slap of the leather, the wild screaming, or Regan’s sobbing panic in the next room. What had she, Rowan, do with this mother or her child?

Another boy, who had once been her brother, but in this floating state was only another being tied to flesh and blood and bone, lay in the upstairs bedroom, eyes stretched as wide as the sky. He stared at a black ceiling. He listened to the terror and cries of rage throbbing from the downstairs room. What had she to do with him?

Then, as viciously as it all began, silence; a silence as deadly as the cursing anger, and Rowan found herself again within herself and remembered her sister’s words, “He’s going to kill us.”

She heard nothing beyond the clinched eyelids, clinched so tightly that strands of muscles reached up into her forehead and down through her cheekbones and into her jaw. If it were to happen, let it happen quickly. Let it take them both, like the river took the angel. Let it be over. Above all, let it be over.

A tiny sound from another dimension broke through the silence. She recognized her mother’s weeping in Jesse’s bedroom. She heard her father’s heavy breathing. The hoarse sound ripped from his throat to float on air already sodden with the destruction of an un-reclaimable innocence. She could hear, smell, feel with the same crystal clarity she had perceived at the river when they had finally released it into the current.
Nothing happened.

They did not die.

His boots clomped across the kitchen floor. The door slammed. The porch steps groaned under his weight. Rowan’s mental picture of him disappeared into the cool mist of early morning. He took with him his demon-cloud of twisted wrath and any smattering of the love a child unconditionally gives a parent.

Rowan’s bruises, like coiled snakes in her flesh, pressed hotly against her tightly stretched skin. Regan twitched in the tight circle of Rowan’s arms.

“Mama,” Rowan whispered, holding her sister tighter still.

“Mama,” she cried louder.

The door to Jesse’s room opened and her mother’s arms wrapped around them both. “I’m sorry, Mama,” she said, over and over into Regan’s sweaty hair. “I didn’t know. It’s all my fault. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

Her mother cried, and Rowan pulled the three of them tighter, pressing their flesh and their bones, into her flesh. She strove for an encompassing embrace, if not of love, then at least the warmth of a non-hostile other-person.

Never would she forget that moment. Never could she dispel the image of the three of them huddled together in the middle of the living room on the old hardwood floor. Never would she forget the sound of the fan that sang in the window and moved the air on hot nights. Never would she forget the unbearable hush that lay upon the universe as she put her childhood aside forever. Her own silence cried out just as fervently as her sister’s weeping. Thus did they empty their primeval sorrow into a new day. Thus did they pass from one world into another.
Later, and it could have been minutes or hours for all that time meant to Rowan, Mama moved them up to their bedroom and under their bed covers, turned off the light, and left them alone. For a long time Rowan stared at the ceiling and wondered if Cahill in the next room was doing the same or if he had, by now, drifted off to sleep.

Remotely, Rowan sensed Regan as she slipped from her bed into Rowan’s. Neither said a word, interested only in the heat of the other’s skin, knowing that within that skin was another human being who did not hate them, who loved them, who was part of them. They spent the remainder of the night in the same bed, Regan breathing softly and evenly in her sleep and Rowan embracing her and, without seeing, watching a darkness crawl through the room. Staring, staring, wondering where sleep had gone, wondering if she would ever be able to sleep again, and, finally, drifting into a light sleep at the instance of her wondering.

Several hours later as the morning light brightened the room. Rowan awoke and looked over the shoulder of her sister. There sat Mama, half-closed eyes flickering between her two daughters. Had she been there all night, Rowan marveled. Had she guarded them through the last hours of darkness to keep them safe?

Every molecule of Rowan’s body ached. Though in her sleep she hadn’t noticed, now that she was awake, her nerves squealed with the thought of moving. She shifted her position only slightly because she didn’t want to wake Regan. She did move her head enough to look her mother in the eyes.

Mama’s hair, always neat and clean, hung in ragged clumps, and her forehead glistened with sweat. Her gray-blue eyes were bloodshot, and only an act of sheer will kept her eyes open. Her face, thin in the best of times, was gaunt and tight, the hollows of
her cheeks sunk so deep that her cheekbones were sharp points beneath a translucent skin. Her nose, tiny and sharp with dark lines down each side, accentuated the thinness of her face and the weary blankness in her eyes. Her mouth, a horizontal slash around thin, bloodless lips, opened a crack to reveal a row of dull teeth. Hearing her short, rattling breath, Rowan thought of her asthma. Rowan wondered if she had been beaten, too, though she could see no marks.

Years later she discovered that there were beatings beyond the physical and worse in nature. Staring at her mother in the yellow light drifting reluctantly through the window. Rowan thought that nothing in the world revealed so much unhappiness and hopeless despair.

"Why?" Rowan whispered so quietly that she knew her mother would have to read her lips to understand, but she did understand for she could hardly hear herself. "Why would he do that to us?"

Her mother shook her head. Her hair flopped lifelessly across pale eyebrows and dead-white flesh. Her long fingers fluttered on the bed clothes like dying butterflies, possessed of their own kind of trembling grace. There was nothing Rowan could say. She studied her mother's hands, startlingly white against the dark green of the upper sheet.

She once heard that, as a child, her mother had played the piano, had taken many years of piano lessons in fact, and Rowan thought of those fingers pressing against, the stark white and black piano keys. She pondered the odd correlation, the pushing of the keys followed by a hammering of sound. Perhaps what she had heard about her mother was a desperate mythology. She had never heard her mother play the piano; there was no piano in the house. Sometimes she heard her mother hum a quiet sound which could have

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been a song, but she only made this sound when she was alone or thought so. The moment Rowan or anyone else approached, she returned to her stony self, doing her work with the same stolid inertia of every indentured servant in the history of world.

Rowan could get no real response from Mama, even now, though just being at their bedside was an act of something, recognition, fraternity, mutual misery and better than blank emptiness, better than the abyss.

Seeing Rowan awake, her mother stood slowly. “I don’t know where he is,” she said. “He never came back last night, and I don’t know where he is.” She covered her mouth with a handkerchief as she coughed.

Rowan slipped her arm from around Regan and rolled to her side of the bed. By the time she moved her aching body into an upright position, her mother had disappeared beyond the closed door.

Rowan stepped in front of her mirror, removed her nightgown, and looked at herself critically, noting the scrapes and cuts. Lying in bed, she had noticed a stiffness in her right eye, but the figure in the mirror was a revelation. The miracle was that through the black swelling she could see anything at all.

She dressed; Regan lay asleep. Her lips bubbled slightly with each breath. Rowan left her, a crumpled mirror of her battered self, and followed in the wake of her mother.

Her muscles and joints cried with each step as she descended the stairs. She saw her father’s hat on the floor next to the sofa, picked it up, and turned it over in her hands, examining in a disjointed way the hatband, dark brown with her father’s sweat, the sweat of the man who plowed the fields, man-handled the cows, dragged a few dollars from this wretched dirt, and beat his daughters. She kept the hat with her as she walked through the
kitchen and hardly noticed her mother at the stove scraping breakfast together in a frying pan. Rowan paused at the door. Her mother coughed. She hasn’t had an attack in months, Rowan thought. What a time for her asthma! Mama said nothing to her, and Rowan marched down the porch steps and toward the barn.

The sun barely topped the trees in the east, but she could already tell that this would be another hot day, maybe the hottest so far this summer. She stopped in front of the large sliding door of the barn. Were there secrets on the other side? Would they show themselves if she gaped long enough? Of course, there were no secrets, not from day to day. In her mind’s eye she could place every object inside the barn, and so her opening of the door would be no revelation.

Next to the sliding door was the single entry door, chipped and gouged by decades of being pushed open by sickle bars, pipes, long two-by-fours, and whatever would serve. Still she hesitated. There was a strangeness, enhanced by the aches and pains from the night before, and she still felt gritty from the river sand. She twisted the looped handle and pulled; the iron hinges squealed as they always did. She stepped, into the cool darkness, immediately re-assured by the smell of manure and hay and grease and livestock floating together in an aromatic fog.

The barn was huge. The rule was a barn can build a house, but a house can never build a barn. The hulking structure, in itself a symbol of power, bore well its half century of service. Close by, the chipped, drab house drooped in the summer heat, and hunkered gray and sterile in the winter snow. The years and the weather were not kind to houses in yards where barns and corrals were king.
She pulled her hand away from the door and the spring pulled it closed. She stood still for a moment and let her eyes adjust to the dark. To her left were the horse stalls and mangers with holes in the ceiling, which was really the floor of the hay loft. They threw hay down for the horses through these holes, but now there were no horses. They never kept horses in the barn this time of year. They were all out at pasture.

The larger, main area was used as a shop, and an enormous round, cast-iron, stove squatted like a rusty Buddha next to the south wall. The workbench stood on the other side of the stove under a row of filthy windows. A large, black vise clung to the edge of the bench at one end with its handle, silver with decades of use, hanging vertically. The workbench itself was made of rough-cut, two-inch planks stained black with a half century of gas, oil and grease, cut and gouged with the pounding, chiseling, and cursing, which was a natural part of farm machinery repair.

Scattered and piled in the working space were sickles, boxes of nails and staples and screws, several yellow-handled screwdrivers, chrome-plated wrenches, a water pump from an Allis-Chalmers tractor, assorted belts, an open cylinder head in front of neat rows of valves resting on their flat end, the stems sticking into the air, several large bolts whose shanks were the size of Rowan's wrist and seemed more like keepsakes than usable items—they had been on the bench for as long as Rowan could remember—a ball-peen hammer, a claw hammer. a red, Folgers coffee can full of crooked nails waiting to be straightened, and several jars of sorted nuts and washers. A string of machine gun shells whose story she would never know, hung from several large nails over the windows.
Beyond the bench was a two-foot-high block of concrete, threaded bolts protruding out the top, that had once held a diesel light plant. The REA brought in power lines six years ago, and her father sold the generator at auction. The concrete base remained.

She stood still in the quiet dark. She saw no sign of her father. She walked to the middle of the work area. She stared into the darkness at the far end of the barn that opened out into the corrals. Rowan knew she could turn on the lights, but the switch, by the work-bench, seemed miles away. Some light glimmered through the windows over the work-bench, but the pitted glass was so dirty that what filtered through was yellow and cast an ominous glow on the bench and almost no light at all beyond.

She smelled the hay in the loft, a hot, musty smell combining mold and the dust from dry alfalfa and grass hay. Her mother never came into the barn—she had asthma—and that was as good a reason as any for her not coming out here this morning, especially after listening to her coughing. The last time she had entered the barn, six or seven months ago, she had hacked and coughed for the most of a week.

“You stay out of that damned barn,” Father said after two days of listening to her cough. “A man could go crazy listening to that goddamned hacking.”

“It’s the dust,” Mama said. “Allergies. Starts up my asthma.”

“Damn your asthma,” he said unappeased. “Damn,” he said again. “Just stay out of there,” and he stomped out. Father, never sick himself, was not one to cater to anyone else’s maladies.

Every inch of Rowan’s skin was alive; the weight of her clothing pressed on her bruises, and the weight of the semi-darkness bore down on her consciousness. Behind her
she heard the slight tapping of the door bouncing against its frame in the morning breeze. At the other end of the barn, out the large double doors, she heard the muffled clunking of a cow bell on the single milk cow that was enough to keep them all in milk.

"One milk cow is enough for any family," her father had said more than once. "Especially when there's only one person to do the milking." Usually when he said this he looked directly at their mother, but, though she never responded, she held her own. Mother’s silence was the only weapon she had, and she used it well. Not even Father could break through her non-response that could wrap her family in steel fingers; even Father gave up when he hit that wall.

"Oh, I forgot. Your asthma," he’d say with a feeble whine, and trudge on with his own business, which included milking the cow. Milking the cow and Mama's asthma were battles Father never won. The woman hid iron within her that was beyond them all.

Rowan shuffled toward the back of the barn. Here, to the left. Father had partitioned a full quarter of the barn for grain, a bunkhouse, and veterinary supplies. This area was closed in and accessible only by a rough wooden door with a string latch that, when pulled, lifted up a small metal catch on the inside. Beyond the door were several small rooms, some holding bagged grain, some holding bulk rolled oats, and some empty.

About a third of the area held veterinary medicines in a refrigerator, home-made cabinets for the veterinary tools, and a bunk-bed. When hired help was needed, they lived here. The quarters were exceptionally uninviting, and nobody stayed long, but not necessarily because of the accommodations. Father liked help who didn’t stay long; he complained only nominally when they disappeared, and he didn’t complain at all when
they chose not to pick up their last paycheck. Usually the money wasn’t worth Father’s wicked tongue.

Father was a hard worker and he expected everybody to be a hard worker, no matter what they were paid. If they worked on his farm, that wasn’t much. He was a seven-day-a-week man, that was for sure. There might be some time off if it rained, but in Southeastern Montana, it didn’t not rain every week, not even close.

“What the hell they got to do with their time, anyway?” he’d say. “A man doesn’t know how to work, then he’s not good for a goddamned thing, and I don’t want him on the place.” Thus it was no great surprise when help never lasted long, and their leaving only served to bolster his opinion regarding all “sons-of-bitches” who had the unfortunate opportunity to make his working acquaintance.

Because the room was doubly insulated, a structure on the inside of a larger structure, the area could be kept comfortable with a small, electric heater, even on the coldest days. The last resident was a high school kid from town who “didn’t know his ass from a hole in the ground” and only lasted three days. He had walked away two weeks ago. The room was ready for the next sinner.

Sometimes Father would fall asleep in the bunk after a long night calving, after coming in at four in the morning from haying or riding or farming, or just because he felt like it. Mama would send one of the twins or Cahill out to find him, and that’s where he would be, fully dressed, his boots propped up on the bunk foot-board and his hat over his eyes. They never spoke to him unless he was awake and talked to them first. If he was asleep, they left him asleep. “Let sleeping dogs lie.” Mama said, and they did. “You just look in there, and then you get back here to the house.”
Today seemed different. Rowan thought it was probably her aches and bruises. No doubt her swelled eye made the inside of the barn a little darker than usual. No doubt the bruises on her legs made her move a little slower, and the cuts on her arms made her a little hesitant as she reached for the latch into the granary. The metal of the handle felt especially cold, and when she turned the handle, the latch snapped back with a disconcerting crack.

She stood for a long second, holding the handle turned and the latch open. She leaned a little against the door and tried to catch her breath which had become short and ragged. How strange of Mama, she thought, to talk about him not coming back and how she didn’t know where he was. How odd, as if he didn’t spend at least two nights a week out here in the barn.

A sickness spread through her rebellious stomach, and she tasted bile in her throat. She had eaten no breakfast that morning and no supper last night, but that could not dispel the sour taste in her mouth.

There was nothing for it but to open the door. She leaned back and pulled it open slowly: the hinges complained with a drawn out screech. The sound seemed louder here in sharp contrast with the quiet of the barn. When she stopped opening the door the sound continued in her mind mutating into a mindless wail. She could not tell where the screech of metal stopped and the wail in her mind began.

The door opened into a short hallway. The end of the hallway led into the granary area, and to the right, halfway down the hall, was a door that led into the makeshift living quarters and veterinary storage. The door to the granary was closed, but the door to the living quarters was open eight or ten inches. She stepped two steps forward to look
through the gap, forgetting about the door behind. The spring pulled the door closed with a resounding bang.

Rowan jumped and expected a shout from the vet room, but heard only a couple of crickets chirping and the creaking of the weather-worn boards as they flexed and sighed in the warming morning air. She looked toward the bed and saw her father's boots with their run-over heels, toes in the air and one boot canted slightly outward, heels resting on the foot-board. With fingers barely touching the rough boards of the door, she pushed it slowly inward, revealing, inch by inch, the form of her father on the bed. But she didn't see her father; she saw only the red of the blankets and the splotch of flat, red on the floor. She saw the shotgun, stock on the floor, double barrel leaning against the foot of the bed.

Rowan stared and unconsciously touched her swollen eye. She crossed the room, absently picked up the shotgun leaning so neatly and carefully against the side of the bed, and laid it across her father's still form. She stepped toward him in a trance, drawn by a magnetic force outside herself. Ignoring the massive wound in his chest where his shirt mingled inextricably with his flesh, she stared into his eyes, wide with some last vision, stared at his mouth, lips drawn up just a little to show his stained teeth and bloodless gums. What sight had he last seen before the darkness closed on those? What words had he said, floating now in the dry, oat-odored air of the barn? What world had he gone to that would accept a man who could beat his children like they were animals, who could grind his woman into the dust of a two-bit farm until there was nothing left but a silent shell.
She looked down, surprised to see his hat still in her hands. She gave it a little toss and it landed perfectly over his face.

Sheriff Agnew Johnson was kind. He was a big, heavy-set man with a soft, nasal voice. He turned his chair around backwards before he sat, straddled the seat, and leaned his forearms on the back. He held his gray hat in his hands and looked down into the crown as if he thought the answers to his questions might be hiding there. He peered at Rowan over the top of a nose that had been mashed too many times into the center of his face.

“'And you found him, just like you said, laying there on the bed?’”

“'Yes sir.'” said Rowan. All of them. Rowan. Regan, Cahill, even Jesse, were sitting around the kitchen table. Mama stood behind Jesse, right arm on his right shoulder.

“What about you, Connie. You go out to the barn?”

Rowan’s mother looked up and shook her head abruptly, a turn to one side, then to the other. Red veins crawled through the whites of her eyes, and her face was puffy and red. She wheezed slightly, covering her mouth, holding back her cough. Then her asthma hit her hard, and she bent over, holding her chest with one hand with the other over her mouth. Regan had nearly forgotten that dry, hard sound. She touched Mama’s forearm with her hand. Mama gained control of her breathing and straightened back up in the process.

“You feel all right, Connie?” asked the sheriff. “We can get you to town to a doctor.”

Mama shook her head. “Asthma, that’s all. I always get over it.”
“You’re sure.”
Mama nodded.

The sheriff glanced at his deputy, a scrawny little man whom Rowan had never
seen before. The deputy shrugged his shoulders, and the sheriff turned his attention back
to Rowan. Mama muffled another cough in the sleeve of her dress.

“And you didn’t try to move him or touch him?”
“No sir.”

“And you didn’t touch anything?”
“No sir.”

“The bedding?”
“No,”

“The shotgun?”
“No sir.”

“Did you touch your father in any way?”
“No.”

“And did you stand next to the bed?”
“Not very close.”

“But you stepped in the blood. There was part of a footprint in the blood.”
“I guess I stood that close.”

“You stepped in the blood, then?”
“Yeah, I stepped too close.”

“Got those shoes. do you?” he asked.

Rowan shook her head. “Threw them away. Had blood on them.”
"Now why would you do that?"

"Throw them away or step in the blood?"

"Throw them away."

"I didn’t want to upset Mama."

"Where’d you throw them?"

"Where we throw all the garbage, in the burn barrel."

"You want me to go out and get them?" asked the deputy. Any reason for getting out of that house was a good reason.

"You can look," the sheriff said, "but they ain’t going to be much good if they’ve been half burned."

The sheriff stared at Rowan, then Regan. Cahill rested the side of his head on the table, his red eyes staring at the sheriff without blinking. Recovered from her coughing attack, Mama looked down at the top of Jesse’s head as if counting every blonde hair on his skull.

The sheriff stood. "I’ll send Abe out for your husband," he said, stuffing his hat on his head, touching Rowan on the shoulder. With a great effort she did not flinch.

"What happened to your eye?"

"Fell down."

"What did you hit it on?"

"Regan and I were wrestling. I fell against the banister on the stairs."

"That so?" he asked, looking at Mother.

Mother’s nod was a barely perceptible dipping of her head. Her eyes glistened liquid and full from the coughing.
"Hmm."

He reached over and pushed back the shoulder of Rowan's blouse to reveal a series of dark bruises, and Rowan winced as he touched the blue flesh lightly with his huge fingers. "That what happened here?"

"Yes sir. Fell down the stairs. Hurt bad. Still does."

His eyes moved to Regan, sitting like a stone. staring at the blank wall. "What do you think, Regan?" He lowered his head close to her and ran a calloused finger along one of the long marks on the side of her face. "This happen on the stairs. too?"

Regan nodded, still looking at the wall.

"Just like Rowan said?"

She nodded again.

He cocked his head to one side, indicating to his deputy that he was done. "You got any questions for anybody?" he asked.

"Nope," the deputy said.

"Well, folks, I'm done. Unless anyone here has anything more to say about all this." It was more a statement than a question.

No one looked in his direction.

"You comfortable with this?"

She dropped her eyebrows a fraction of an inch.

"Wade killed himself?"

She opened her mouth, closed it, and nodded again, an infinitesimal drop of her chin. Silence was a tool Mama used well.
"Ok, then. enough said." He turned to his deputy. "We got a suicide," he said.

"Let’s get out of here. Tough business."

The deputy went out the door first. The sheriff shuffled half-heartedly behind them, and turned back at the doorway.

"Sorry, Connie," he said, "about Wade. Anything I can do, let me know."

Her blank eyes looked through him. The sheriff cleared his throat, as if he were embarrassed, and he wiped a hand through his thinning hair. Mama backed him out the door with her dead eyes and her silence.

Rowan read her father’s obituary in the paper three days later, the day of the funeral. Rowan’s aunt, her mother’s sister, arrived on the train the morning after Abe Fortis took the body to town for the funeral. She was a take-charge kind of lady who ran both the funeral and the burial like the businesses they were. Mama sat in front of her quiet sewing machine, stared out the window, and coughed, apparently happy to have her sister take care of all the details.

Rowan lay the paper open on the kitchen table, and she and Regan read through the obituary together. Rowan found no correlation between the words in the paper and her father. The obituary was a bland summary of the life of a hard-working man who killed himself with a shotgun in the barn, a not un-common ending to a common story.

Directly under her father’s obituary was another story about the body of a Chinese boy whose name Rowan could not pronounce. Somebody had fished him out of the Yellowstone River near Zero, twenty-five miles downstream. He had tried to escape from the reform school at Miles City by swimming the river, gotten caught in the current, and drowned.
Now, twenty-eight years later, with the afternoon light filtering through the half-closed blinds. Rowan lay out her father's obituary once more, a worn, yellowed cutting that she had covered solidly with clear tape as a preservation measure. She imagined Regan sitting beside her. Regan who had never truly recovered from their father's death, and who had never left that Montana farm.

Rowan read the obituary through slowly, though she could have recited the entire piece without a single mistake. Once again, as she had so many times before, she continued on to the article about the Chinese boy. She tried, unsuccessfully as always, to connect the man described in the obituary with her father, and just as unsuccessfully, she tried to connect the Chinese boy with what she and Regan had pushed into the river so long ago.

The two events intertwined so inextricably, the same night, the same expiring of breath, the same stiff, cold touch. Once again, she saw the current take the body, wet and shining in the moonlight, down river, away from her and Regan, away from the world. She heard the river sing as it washed over millennium-old stones.

But now there was something more. Now, after all these years, there was an uplifting. Suddenly she saw herself united to her mother by a band of steel that, until this moment, had been invisible. It was invisible no longer.

"We did it, Mama," she whispered with new understanding. "You and me. We did it. We set ourselves free."

She tilted her head back on the backrest of the sofa and stared at the ceiling. At this instant she saw, not the pitiful silent figure of her mother standing over her husband's
grave too broken to shed even a single tear, but an iron woman who, when the choice needed to be made, took the world in her hand and squeezed out a small drop of freedom for herself and her children.

Rowan hadn't known she could feel so good. She hadn't known that after all the failure, the guilt, the sorrow, and the mistakes, she could feel so strong. She stood and lifted her arms in the air, turning, turning in the afternoon light; once again dancing by the river on the moonlit grass.

"We did it, Mama," she said over and over, spinning slowly on the hardwood floor. "We did it, you and me."
Part II

Snow Falling

These days the stories came out of her like falling snow, in flurries, in blizzards, in settling puffs of breeze-blown flakes that fluttered, like brightly colored moths, out of summer trees. When she was younger, when she was in love, when the spring trees were replete with a multitude of warbling birds, she wrote her poetry and her stories the way she lived, with every breath, with every heartbeat that pushed the blood through her veins.

But that was long ago. Now she was not so brash to think she knew the meaning of the world. Now she wrote in flakes and drifts out of the leaden sieve of her consciousness. Now the stories came out of her like falling snow.

As her mother might say, the other shoe dropped when she turned sixty-one. Another woman would have shrugged and said, “Oh, well. One changes. One grows older. I guess I’m one. The years are nothing. Really, you’re only as young as you feel.”
She could have said that, but she didn’t, because she wasn’t one of those other women. She had always known her world was quite different than the worlds of others. Furnished souls were for others.

The afternoon following her birthday, she called the train station and bought a ticket for Montana. For the first time in years she did not write a single line of poetry or a single paragraph of prose. Instead, she walked quietly through her home, choosing the objects important enough to make this journey. She prepared herself for an indefinite stay. Even while packing, she could not sort out why she was doing this . . . this . . . thing that was so much unlike her. But she had learned long ago from her poetry that the idea was enough at first, and the end would find its way through the chaos in its own time.

Rowan McKinley could no more accept that strange number, sixty-one then she could accept another leg or a cigarette. She had turned sixty and she accepted sixty, like a neighbor stopping by the house for a quick chat, like a delivery-man dropping off a package at the front door on a Monday afternoon. No power on the planet, however, would allow her to accept the strangling sixty plus one. She refused to bow to such a number.

“A number.” she said to Andrea Martin over coffee. “And numbers are merely man’s puny attempt to put lives into boxes. I will not allow my life to be treated in such a manner.”

Andrea Martin nodded to her with sage eyes and sipped her coffee, wincing a little at its temperature. She said nothing which was no surprise to Rowan, because Andrea seldom said anything, content in being within the spheres of other human beings without actually becoming involved with them.
“I have to leave,” she told Marietta Lowenstein over tea. “And I’m not sure when I will return, or if I will. I have hardly been out of this town since Arthur died, and I see, now, though why I didn’t see it before is beyond me, that I have unfinished business. I leave next Thursday.” She cupped her teacup in brown, long-fingered, aristocratic hands. Her hands could have belonged to a duchess or a queen, but they didn’t, they belonged to her. The manner in which she lifted her cup to her lips revealed an innate grace, the way she held it away from her, her elbow barely brushing the table when she talked, the way she carefully returned the cup to its saucer as if the movement were really no movement at all but the journey of a fluttering feather drifting from air to rest.

If she had been wealthy, it might have been easier, but of course she wasn’t. Since when do wealthy people lead interesting lives? If she had been selfish, or unhappy, or unkind, or even weary, she could have relaxed and turned over the next year like turning a cribbage card to the top of the deck, like turning over in the bed she had slept in alone for over two decades.

“Forty-three years is a long time, even for an old bat like me,” she told Marietta who was younger than Rowan by at least twenty-five years. “Maybe it’s not too late. I’ve heard it said, ‘You can never go home,’ but maybe that’s not true just because they say so. Who is ‘they’ anyway?”

The intent set of Rowan’s clean and shining eyes emphasized the seriousness of this new thinking. Her eyelids blinked quickly, shutting out the gray and any apprehension that lay between the two women.

“What about your writing?” asked Marietta.

“I’m not.”
"The group will miss you. You’re our most published. How can you not write? What about your book of poetry and your collection of short stories? Can you finish them away from here?"

"I haven’t written in days. Something more than words on a page are forcing an issue I never wanted to touch again in this lifetime. However, it appears that I have no choice."

"We always have choices," said Marietta.

"I may be back. In fact, I may be back soon. Maybe when you are as old as I am, there won’t be so many choices."

"But you’re not old."

"Oh, yes I am. It’s not the years that make me old; they just dignify my age with a number. But I feel it in my flesh and in my bones and in every move I make. The structure of people is so strange, that one’s mind seems to stay forever young, even though one’s bodies are burning houses."

"You still look so young," said Marietta, shaking her head.

But Rowan didn’t. Aristocratic, yes; statuesque, perhaps in a casual sort of way, but she did not look young. Her high cheekbones poked sharply through her flesh, and her lips had long since parted with the red fullness of youth. The mirror had sucked away her bloom and left the lines, the crows-feet, the sagging flesh, the raised veins, the beating heart that whispered the stories of sixty years in monotonous repetition, like a lover, soft as a kiss on her cheek. No really objective person could say the years had been kind to her; they could only say the years had not destroyed her.
No, she was not young nor wealthy nor selfish. She was appalled, in the accounting of her life, of the peaks and the valleys, of the widens and the narrows. She was appalled that she had allowed the last few decades of her life to happen so slowly and carefully. Maybe life was what happens while you’re making other plans, but one shouldn’t forget to make plans.

Suddenly, she was terrified at all she had left undone—the actions, the excitements, and the many debts that time might now have moved into a far arena, unreachable and unknowable.

Two weeks after her birthday and one day before she boarded the train for Montana, snow fell for the first time that season. The day had felt like snow, with a slight breeze out of the northwest and a touch of the chill that always preceded winter weather. Rowan stood at the picture window and watched the bright down float sideways with a light breeze and downward with the thickness of gossamer. She unfocussed her eyes, and her thoughts followed the drifting flakes that obscured the street and hid the world beyond. Tomorrow she would be gone: tomorrow she would set foot on this virgin cloth, walk the five blocks to the railroad station, and begin an odyssey she had promised herself for decades she would not take. The thought of leaving made her stomach churn, but there was a peace, too, in a decision not to be undone.

Slowly she backed away from the window and sat down at her desk. She picked up one of the dozen pens that always lay helter-skelter on the desktop and wrote a small poem, only twelve lines, then re-wrote and re-wrote, and called the poem “Snow.” Two hours later she stood, re-read the poem one last time, and felt like Emily Dickinson. “It
drifts in leaden sieves," she thought, placed the paper carefully on the desk, and went upstairs to bed.

Marietta waited outside the next morning to help her with her luggage and Rowan didn’t have to walk after all. Three inches of snow covered the ground, but the air, far from cold, exuded a soft freshness that made her, for a second, wonder if all the white were really snow at all.

Rowan knew that the snow would be gone before noon: One more reason to get on the train; one more reason to say farewell to a portion of her life that, for some reason, she could not handily remember any longer.

The train station was lonely and bare so early in the morning. Not many rode the train anymore, thought Rowan, and placed her suitcase alongside the two bags that Marietta had carried for her.

“Don’t forget to write,” said Marietta.

“Don’t worry.” said Rowan. “I’m only going to Montana, not Mars. And I’m sure I’ll be back sooner or later. I have a house here and friends; now quit worrying.”

“I don’t mean that kind of write: I mean the writing. Don’t forget that you’re a writer.”

“How could I forget? If I did you would nag me to death. Here, I wrote this last night when I was watching the snow fall. It was so light and beautiful with the streetlights reflecting off the flakes I just couldn’t resist. Besides, it made me feel like Dickinson, sort of sensuous and wild and ephemeral at the same time.”

Rowan handed Marietta the carefully folded sheet of paper.

Marietta opened the paper and read.
“It’s not so perfect, you know,” said Rowan. I wrote it very quickly,” she continued, “and you must get over the idea that things will go so badly here without me. Just keep writing and thinking and thinking and writing, and soon you’ll forget I was ever around.”

“That’s not what I’m thinking, really,” said Marietta. “It’s just that because you’re published and famous in a quiet sort of way, we’ve all come to depend on you so much, and now we’re worried. You gave us legitimacy.

“But then, for the last couple of weeks, you just quit coming around, and you said you hadn’t written anything,” she paused. “Until this now,” she added. She looked closer at the paper. “Snow Falling,” she said. “Thank you,” she said, and gingerly placed her arms around the older woman. The conductor in charge of loading passengers standing sentinel at the open door of the train car was beginning to fidget.

“Oh, come on,” said Rowan. “I’m an old woman, now. I know, but I’m not going to break,” and she hugged Marietta fiercely so as to not forget the touch and the closeness of her friend. “And don’t you dare cry,” she whispered. “It’s only a journey.”

They released one another, and Rowan and the conductor managed to get the bags onto the train.

The rails clattered under the iron wheels. Rowan pulled Robert Browning out of her bag and slowly worked her way through “Fra Lippo Lippi.” Ah, those women, she thought, those women who leave their doors ajar.

The sound of the train and the murmur of the other passengers lulled her into a light slumber, the book spread out in her lap, and the years fluttered away like autumn leaves along the Yellowstone River.
Rowan fell in love when she was sixteen and a junior in high school. She didn’t want to. Up until that point, she had been about as interested in boys as she was in the carp that wallowed in the slough, but Jimmy paid so much attention to her, walking her to classes, talking to her in the kind of tone that was the exact opposite of her father’s. Rowan couldn’t help but feel a warm, aching feeling when he touched her arm, asked her how she was, asked her if she wanted to go for a ride in his cranked up Ford.

She met him in algebra. He sat one seat over, a tall, thin-hipped boy with lips pencil thin, a face composed of odd angles, and hands too large for his arms. He certainly wasn’t ugly, but, at first glance, one might have to look a little to find anything appealing. He had this way of sliding down in his chair, letting his shoulders rest against the chair back, and stretching his legs out to the floor so that his body made a long, wavy line from his temple to the heels of his boots. His blonde, close-cropped hair, carefully shaved around the ears, accented his deep-sunk, blue-green eyes liquidly deposited under bushy blonde eyebrows. He had long, bony fingers that masked, in their grace, the power created by hard, physical work. When he gripped her arm, though it didn’t hurt, she could sense the restless strength beneath the smooth, hairless skin.

He had a long, thin scar that meandered down from his hairline on the left side of his face and ended near the outside corner of his eye. “Fell out of a tree,” he said when she asked him about it, and it was many months later before she found out the truth, that his father had thrown him out of a truck and his face had bounced off of a barbed wire fence.
He wore working boots, the same as Rowan's father when he was alive, and they were marked from rocks, tools, implements, and Montana dirt. Run over at the heel, they were cut, scuffed, and stained with grease and oil. This drew her to him and made him acceptable and more understandable than other boys who had spent their lives walking the well-cleared sidewalks of the town. Later these same boys drove the asphalt streets the same way she drove the back roads of the farm, with a familiarity that made driving the land into an ownership of the land.

Rowan found these townspeople, these students, difficult to understand. They could reveal a great sophistication and a rollicking immaturity in their approach to life in the same moment. For a time after she first started high school, she couldn't understand their jokes. Why was it funny to talk about the misfortunes of others? Why was it funny to twist words in directions she had never imagined? Why was it funny to whisper lies about people amongst yourselves and then attack the unfortunate victims with superior laughter?

For a long time, these subjects were not funny, and for a short time they were, and if not funny, at least understandable in the sense that the irony and the cliquishness allowed these people to come to terms with their adolescence.

There were a few students like her, who had lived the isolation of rural Montana, and had been, often unwillingly, transplanted into this small town which to them was a bustling city.

Jimmy Hawkings was one of these, and though she knew little of his family, she did know they had a ranch to the north and that they spoke the same language. At this time and place, that was enough of a foundation for a relationship.
His voice and his smile were the snares that caught her in their grip. His voice was soft and modulated, unlike so many of his peers, and he evinced genuine interest in what she thought. When she told him she wanted to be a writer, he nodded thoughtfully.

“That’s a great idea,” he said. “No matter how difficult it might be, there’s always room in the world for good writers.”

Those seemed like wise words from a seventeen-year-old boy.

When she told him how she hated her summers on the farm, he nodded with the wisdom of adolescence

“It’s only for a short time longer,” he said, “and then you’ll be free from all that. There’s a big world out there.”

When she told him how she didn’t want to grow up like her mother, a slave to a farm and a house, he stared off at the distant buttes and shook his head in a kind of disbelief.

“You’re the kind of person who has a great future,” he said. “Nothing is worth that kind of slavery. Life is meant to lived, not endured. The act of enduring is like an unfilled grave that.”

“Where did you learn to talk like that?” she asked. “You’re the only person I know who speaks about these kind of ideas.”

“I read,” he said. “There’s not much else to do when the work’s done.”

She felt a warmth in her face, and turned away from him so he couldn’t see her blush. That’s when she knew she was in love.

They began meeting in the morning for the ten minutes between the time the bus arrived and the classes started. They sat in his pickup, a jacked up Ford with big tires, a
beat up box, and a busted out in-gate he had to slam over and over again for the latch to catch. Then it would sometimes fall open if he hit a bump in the road. The pickup bed hadn’t been seen in years, covered with a residue of hay or straw and manure. The crisp smell of the alfalfa hay reminded Rowan comfortably of home.

For the forty minutes of lunch, Rowan rode with him up and down Main Street and listened. Jimmy outlined his plans for owning large portions of real estate. In the background she listened to the snapping and growl of the pickup’s twin pipes singing their duet with the loping sound of the engine’s high lift cam.

“Jimmy Hawkings can start talking about that pickup and not finish in this lifetime,” Rowan told her twin sister, Regan, as they rode the yellow bus down the gravel road toward home.

Regan’s only response was a lift of her eyebrows.

The resemblance between the two was remarkable. There had been so little divergence in their development that, even at sixteen, they mirrored one another with an uncanny exactness. Blonde hair, blue-gray eyes with the same haunted look, full lips that would have overpowered their other facial features if ever turned out of the corral, slim willows of girls who had depended upon one another for so long and so completely that the outside world, even the world of such a small town, found them in awe of each new experience.

“He loves that pickup,” Rowan continued. “He built it himself, you know.” The truth was that Jimmy Hawkings had spent a great amount of time explaining in specific detail exactly what he had done to that pickup to make it one of a kind. Rowan could chronicle its history of oil leaks and flat tires, and could recite every step of adjusting the
points, every number that revealed the length and breadth, the tightness, the height of his pickup.

"He loves that pickup more than he loves his parents," Rowan said.

"That wouldn’t be hard," said Regan.

"What’s that supposed to mean?"

"If they are anything like our father was or our mother is, it wouldn’t be hard to love anything more," Regan said, despondence in her voice.

Rowan lapsed into silence. Truth and its betrayal, echoed so succinctly in Regan’s statement that she felt her elation evaporate. The words split the essence of goodness she found in the world into two pieces so cleanly that she could find no way, at least for the moment of continuing her verbose worship of Jimmy Hawkings.

Together they walked the mile and a half into the house where Mama waited, as she always waited, peering out the kitchen window.

Subdued, Rowan tossed her coat in a corner of the porch, and slipped past her without acknowledging her. Regan could take care of Mama, she thought. That’s what she did the best, anyway. Mama and the farm and telling the hired help what to do. And let’s not forget taking care of the livestock.

They had not spoken much these last two years since Cahill had gone. The four of them lived their lives bound together by the same values and ideas that separated them so cleanly. Jesse still did not speak and had long since ceased to go to school. Mama walked though the day like a zombie in a graveyard, looking neither to the right or the left, seeing nothing of herself and little of her children. Regan tended to the nuts and bolts of working the farm, as much as she could, anyway. She convinced Mama that the farmland should
be leased to Steve Morgan down the road, and she limited the livestock to two milk cows
and a couple of dozen chickens, not to mention a myriad of cats and Marnie, the old worn
out blue heeler who could hardly move from her place by the door because of her
arthritis. As far as Rowan could tell, Jessie was the only thing that kept Marnie alive.

Rowan reached down and touched Jesse’s head as she passed, a motley collection
of curls of uncertain length, and though he had never reached the emotional maturity of a
thirteen-year-old, his face was collecting the features that said he was entering into
adolescence. Sometimes, Rowan thought, Jesse’s silence overwhelmed her, screaming
through the house, the farm, and her life in a wail that some days kept her barricaded in
her room and curled on her bed. This was one of those days.

What would Jimmy think, she wondered, if he could see me now. She pushed her
face even deeper into her pillow. Like other days, she would drift off into the oblivion of
restless sleep, that border where one could sense and yet not sense the movements of the
world awake. She felt the activity of her mother in the kitchen, she felt the despondent
anger of her sister as her shoes clattered through the house, and sometimes, she even
thought she could feel the calm blankness of her brother, Jesse, as he sat in the corner
stroking Marnie, or as he slowly pushed the lawn mower in the summer time across a
lawn made up of more fireweed than grass.

And yet she could sleep on. There was such a short distance, at times, between the
conscious and the unconscious. Such a peaceful place here in Eliot’s shadow between the
desire and the action.

Most of Eliot was incomprehensible, even after Mr. Wyler’s explanations, but this
she could understand. Between the desire and the action lay the shadow. And here she
was, lying in the shadow between the conscious and the unconscious, between death and the strange life she lived. The shadow.

Love can be a harsh taskmaster. So it was for Rowan—the most difficult task being to keep it a secret from her mother who, though quiet, could exude the righteousness indignation of the betrayed. And if there was any area Mama was an expert in, it was betrayal. Mama did not need Rowan’s betrayal added to all the rest.

Rowan sensed this though she could not put it into logical thought. After Father’s death and Aunt Beverly’s abrupt departure, she watched her mother sink deeper and deeper into a swamp of non-life, moving between the work she must do and the work she chose to do ever more reluctantly.

Truly, her mother had never been a beautiful woman. Her nose, which she had donated to both of her daughters, was too wide and her lips were too full for the length and breadth of her face. She stood just a little over five feet. In the pictures of her and Wade McKinley that sat on the living room bookshelf, the top of her head barely reached his chest.

Even in this picture, when she was sixteen, younger than Rowan was now as a high school junior, Rowan could see the misty, thousand-yard-stare in her gray-green eyes. Vietnam wasn’t the only battlefield on the face of the earth.

Father had advertised for her and she showed up bought and paid for. At least that was what he often said and Mother never challenged him on the subject.

“Put an ad in about a dozen California papers,” he said in his whiney, high-pitched voice, talking to the latest hired man, Mama at the sink, preparing meals, washing dishes, never participating in the conversation. “Wanted, one good woman willing to
work like a son-of-a-bitch on beautiful Montana ranch. Looks don’t count. And Connie, here, is the one I chose.” He’d laugh a little in that high cackle of his.

Then, without fail, he would continue, “She don’t know how lucky she is to be here with me now. I could’ve picked any of a hundred others, but I picked her. She may be short, but she can work like a mule.”

That was Papa’s only commentary on his courtship, and years were to pass before any hint of the truth would reveal itself. If there was one thing Mama could do well, it was keep her mouth shut.

The hired man, whoever he might be, sober-for-a-week drunk from town, a down-on-his-luck-Indian from the reservation—whomever he was, he didn’t last long because nobody worked for Papa very long—would keep his head down, concentrating on his food. Rowan could never remember a single one responding to Father’s little diatribe on Mama. Usually they just ignored him or maybe nodded a little while stuffing Mama’s food in their mouths. They knew their place like everyone else in the family.

Years later Rowan realized that they may have been two-bit, no-account people who would never amount to anything or own anything in their life, but they had the good sense to be embarrassed when Papa talked about his wife. At the time, however, it seemed to be just the way things were. No doubt, all men talked about their wives in much the same way.

For all the years that Rowan had been home with her, she never thought she had been shorted in the area of motherhood. After all, what did Rowan, or any of the children for that matter, know of mothers or fathers except what was before them hour after hour, year after year.
As Rowan, in her teen-age years, met the parents of her peers, she also grew more protective, even secretive, about her own life. What could it be to the rest of the world that her mother lived a clouded, invisible existence?

And certainly, what could it matter to others that her father, years dead, was the kind of man he was? They could not know, they could never understand. Father she kept hidden, even from her sister and brothers, and often even from herself.

And so in her mind and in her life, she isolated her mother, her entire family into a compartment that only she could access. They seemed comfortable there, and she was comfortable leaving them there.

* * * * * * * *

“My god, what do you mean, you’re pregnant?” asked Rowan.

Regan’s sobs echoed through the room, and soon the sobs turned to wails.

“I don’t know how it happened.” howled Regan. “I don’t know how it happened.”

“Of course you know how it happened. You’re not an idiot. I take that back, you are an idiot to let something like this happen.”

“I’m an idiot. I’m an idiot. I’m a fool. You can’t believe what a fool I’ve been.”

“Be quiet.” said Rowan. She paced the room, the bedroom they had shared as small children, and now, the room she owned as an eighteen-year-old senior. “I have to think.”

“What do you think I should do?”

“What should you do? You’re asking me what you should do. You should go back in time and un-pregnant yourself. That’s what you should do.”

“I would if I could,” said Regan desperately. “If there were only a way.”
But there wasn't a way.

"Someone will have to tell Mama," said Rowan. "And who do you think that should be?"

"I don't know," howled Regan. "I don't know what to do. I am such a fool."

"Let's start at the beginning," said Rowan. "And then we'll decide what to do. We have to be logical about this. This isn't the first time in history that someone has had this problem, and it won't be the last.

"How long?"

"How long what?"

"How long have you been pregnant? How long have you known?" Rowan sat at her desk, took out a pencil and a blank sheet of paper from the top left drawer. Distractedly she drew a large box, a circle inside the box, and a box inside that circle. "Tell me," she said, and her voice allowed no argument.

Regan plopped herself down on Rowan's bed, kicked her shoes off, and lay back flat on her back. She took the corner of the yellow bedspread and wiped her eyes. The sobbing turned into a high mewling, and then burst into another fit of howling. "Rowan, you have to tell me what to do," she howled. "I don't know what to do."

"Answer some of my questions and we'll see if we can figure this thing out." said Rowan in a calm counterpoint to Regan's sobbing.

She thought of Mama, pregnant with Jesse. She and Regan had been only five, but in her mind she had a clear vision of her those last months before he was born. She saw Mama's long pale face, moving like a disembodied spirit above the floor. As she moved her face changed like plastic, sinking and expanding, and her mouth, wallowing and
vacuous. Especially memorable was her mother’s extended belly, protruding beyond her thin limbs, pushing her away from the sink where her hands were perennially immersed in dishwater, pushing her away from the stove where her hands were constantly preparing the meals.

“Three months,” said Regan. “I’m somewhere between three and four months. I wasn’t sure for a long time, and when I was sure, I pretended for a long time. Then I just ignored it. I can’t ignore it any longer. And I don’t know what to do.”

“So why come to me?”

“There’s no one else,” said Regan. “You’ve always been the strongest. I can’t go to Mama, I can’t go to anybody at school. You know what they would say. You’re the only one I can talk to.”

Rowan stood and crossed to the window. From her view out the second story, she looked across the wintry yard to the barn, the corrals, and the roof of the feed house. Every morning for the last seven years she had looked out this window at this scene, watched as it progressed through the cycle of seasons, as the rain fell, as the green grass grew, as the cottonwood leaves turned brown and spun from the tall trees in the autumn wind, and as the snow covered the earth, the roof tops, and the fence rails.

Every day, she looked out the window and saw the little girl that was once herself walk across the yard, open the barn door, and enter into the second half of her life.

There in the barn her childhood had ended. Even now, with Regan lying on her bed, mewling her high, uncontrolled sobs, bearing the child of another human being, Rowan could not remove from her mind the image of her father lying in his own blood on the bunk bed. Superimposed over that image was Mama, waiting for her to return.
And now another moment of decision had come, and she could see no way to lay it aside, no way to ignore her responsibility, no way to finish out her normal, senior-year-in-high-school, school-girl life and leave this miserable place forever. She had to take one more stand.

Why would the world not leave her alone? Why would her family not leave her be? How much, my God how much, would she be forced to bear?

She turned from the window.

“Let’s get out of here,” Rowan said. “Let’s take the pickup and get out of here for a little while. Some fresh air will clear our heads and help us decide what to do.”

Regan sat up slowly and bit her lip.

“Come on, let’s go. This whole house is a tomb and has been ever since I can remember. No one should have to make serious decisions in a place like this.”

Regan moved in half steps toward the door.

“And get your warm clothes on,” Rowan continued. “It’s ten below out there.”

Her mother was sitting in the living room watching television. Since its purchase last summer, the television occupied her time, even more than the kitchen. There were two channels and maybe half of a third on a clear day if the wind hadn’t twisted the antennae perched precariously on the highest peak of the house.

“We’re going out. Mama,” she said as she walked by. “Be back in a couple of hours?”

Mama nodded but didn’t look up from her snowy “I Love Lucy.”

“All right.”
On the porch Rowan shrugged into her work coat, pulled a hat down over her
ears, and stepped out onto the stoop. The cold hit like a sledgehammer, and Rowan
covered her mouth with her mitten
d hand as she sucked in her first breath of frost. A ten
mile an hour northwest breeze re-enforced the cold, and she turned her head away.

Saturday morning. January 17th She flicked the thermometer nailed to the pivot
post of the yard gate. Seventeen degrees below zero and probably dropping. The wind
chill from the breeze must knock the temperature down to thirty below, maybe more. She
unplugged the four-wheel-drive pickup. stepped up into the cab, and started the engine.
Sitting on the bench seat felt like sitting on a board. Even inside the pickup, her breath
came from her mouth in clouds of frosty white every time she exhaled.

Rowan turned on the reluctant heater which emitted a growling whine and a
stream of ice-cold air from the defrost ducts. Rowan reached up and pushed the various
tools and wrenches away from the ducts so the air would have clear access to the
windshield.

She took the scraper, stepped out, and began to clear the windshield, but the frost
had bitten deep into the glass. No matter, she thought. The defrost will clear the glass
shortly.

Rowan got back into the cab, lay back against the seat, both hands resting
horizontally on the steering wheel, and closed her eyes. The smell of the inside of the
pickup was a familiar mixture of grease and grass and prairie found nowhere else on
earth. In later years, if the opportunity arose to ride in a pickup, she unconsciously
expected that same, earthy smell, and was usually disappointed. It could not be found in a
vehicle that spent its life on the highways or in the city.
The defrosted area crept up from the bottom of the windshield, widening what she could see through the glass. She watched the door of the house, but Regan still had not emerged. Rowan pulled the loneliness of this place and this moment around her like a shroud and closed her eyes. She’d be out in minute. she thought.

What about Cahill’s loneliness in that far off place, that other world? Did he ever yearn for his lost childhood? Over the last couple of years she had come to realize that the childhood she remembered was not the kind of childhood remembered by the most of her peers. Until the death of her father, it had been a childhood of bone-breaking labor and fear. After his death it became a childhood of indifference and loneliness.

Adding it all up, there was no childhood at all.

Cahill was over there in that land of heat and mosquitoes and jungle rot and instant death, fighting a war no one could understand. The teachers at school didn’t understand it. The political commentators on the radio didn’t understand it. The singers, the college professors, and the young men who had slipped across the border into Canada didn’t understand it.

One could only take the word of the politicians.

Often she listened to the ten o’clock news and the nightly body count that proved that God and good were winning, but no amount of logic could help her understand how one could win anything when the only indication of success was a mounting number of corpses.

Rowan remembered Cahill that day in his confrontation with Aunt Beverly, long since gone, as he stood, slim, solid, uncertain and unmovable. and wondered, not for the first time, how twisted and unclean had been his relationship with their father. She
remembered so little: Cahill had been an invisible member of their family, never speaking
out, but the constant companion of a father who couldn’t say a kind word.

Like a kicked dog who always returns to lick the feet of its master, Cahill
followed his father around the farm, cleaning grain bins, forking manure out of corrals,
stacking hay, feeding cows, and he probably would have followed him, into the deepest
circle of hell.

And now, where were they? Father probably fried in the eternal hell he bought
and paid for. Mama suffered the hell that Father built for her when he was alive. Cahill
was in his own hell, in a foreign land of swamps and machine guns. still searching for the
ghost of his father in the dust.

The door of the house expelled a large cloud of white as Regan stepped out onto
the porch. She stood there for a moment and stared bleakly across the yard, her collar
lifted tightly around her neck, though Rowan knew from experience that the cold was
seeping through every possible crack in her clothing. She had a stocking cap pulled low
to her eyes and a long scarf wrapped twice around her neck. Even from this distance,
Rowan could see the small puffs of white as she breathed, her breath a stark contrast to
the gray, unpainted siding that rose two stories around her to the shallow roof eight
inches deep in snow.

Regan stepped stiffly down the three steps to the path and shuffled across the yard
where Rowan sat patiently in the pickup, listening to the hum of the heater and
wondering if she should try to find a radio station. There was only one station that came
in clearly from Miles City twenty-eight miles away. Their geographical position
precluded any other radio waves from making contact, the home place built, as it was, in
a steep draw close to the river. If they drove up into the hills, they would have a better chance of picking up a station, but there was little to hear but Vietnam, weather, and cowboy music, none of which appealed to Rowan. Better to leave the radio off.

Regan opened the driver side door with a snap and stepped in. Rowan gassed the engine slightly, put the stick shift into second gear and pulled away. The silence lay thick between. They drove down three-fourths of the lane, turned to the right through a side gate, and up the hill into the west pasture.

The snow thickened and swirled around the pickup, and Rowan kept the windshield wipers going to clear the windshield after the snow hit and melted from the now warm glass. She kept the pickup in high four wheel drive, and shifted into third. They plowed through the eight inch snow at fifteen miles-an-hour, following a road that Rowan knew was there from long experience, though now invisible under the snow.

When they reached the pipeline that came from the river, she turned right again, following the pipe down the field, and finally pulled to a stop on the bluff overlooking the Yellowstone. Across the river they could see, dimly through the increasing snow, a hint of the farms in the valley.

The river split the valley so thoroughly that neither of the twins had the faintest idea who might live directly across the river. The river was impassable at any time of year. The current was so fast that the river never froze solid enough to cross in the winter, and only the hardiest swimmer could make the passage in the summer because of the undertow.

The land across the river could have been another planet for all they knew or cared. They both stared in silence at the swirling snow and the icy, quarter mile wide
The ribbon below them. Even here, on the bluff above the river, even in its frozen state, they could both feel the power of that great volume of water.

The river has always been there, thought Rowan. Before we were born, after we’re gone, that river is still going to be doing the same thing it is doing now. Just rolling on down to the Missouri and the Mississippi and the Gulf of Mexico. That river doesn’t even know we exist.

Finally Rowan turned in her seat and looked at Regan who had yet to utter a word. Instead Regan, tight-lipped, looked straight ahead watching intently the flap, flap, flap of the windshield wipers.

“You’re going to have to say something,” Rowan said. “Ignoring this won’t make anything better, and it sure won’t make it go away.”

Regan turned with a look of unadulterated misery. “I can’t think of anything to say except how stupid I’ve been,” she said. “I can’t get past that. How stupid I’ve been. How naïve I have been. I can’t believe I’ve let this happen. For some reason I can’t get beyond that point.”

“Let’s look at the options,” said Rowan. “What can you do that you find acceptable?”

“I’ll tell you what I can’t do,” said Regan. “That would be easier. I can’t get married. That’s one thing I can’t do. I can’t have an abortion. I can’t have the baby. I can’t tell Mama. My God. I can’t do anything but sit here and stare out the window.”

“I don’t suppose this is any of my business,” said Rowan, “but who’s the father?”

“Not now. I can’t bring myself to tell you now. Maybe later. after we get some things sorted out. He wouldn’t be any help anyway.”
Rowan sighed. “All right,” she said. “We know a couple of things. You can’t hide this forever. You have no place to run off to. We have to tell Mama. She won’t like it.”

“She won’t like it all right. That’s an understatement.”

“But she won’t fall apart. If she were to fall apart, it wouldn’t be that big of a change anyway. She hasn’t been doing a whole lot for either of us these last few years. Anyway, she has to be told. You can do it or I can do it, but somebody has to.”

“You can do it. I can’t.”

“You can get pregnant, but you can’t tell your mother?”

“That’s right. There is no way I can tell her the truth, not because she will be angry, but because she will be hurt. I can’t hurt her any more.”

“How have you hurt her before this?”

“I haven’t. but others have. I won’t be one more person in the parade of people who have tried to destroy her.”

“She’s stronger than you imagine.” Rowan watched the snow as it increased in strength, swirling so thickly now that the river had disappeared behind the white curtain. She absently turned the headlights on and off, like a lighthouse, and watched the light’s reflection against the white of the snow. She did it in sequence now. three long, three short, three long. SOS. This was an occasion for an SOS if there ever was one.

Rowan turned in her seat, faced her sister, and rested her left arm on the steering wheel. “What you see in your mother is not a woman filled with despair,” she said. “She is a woman consumed by guilt. The guilt you carry over this child and this silly thing you have done is nothing next to the guilt our mother carries, will carry until she lies down in her grave.”
"What has she to be guilty of?"

"It's not what she's guilty of. It's what she thinks she's guilty of.

"I don't believe it."

"It's true."

"Nonsense!"

"You think if you tell Mama this thing, you will destroy her. I tell you that if she hasn't been destroyed by now, there is nothing you or I can do to hurt her."

"Look at her," Regan said. "She hardly ever speaks. She shuffles around all day doing her house work like it's the only thing left in life. She never tells us what to do. She never asks how we are, how school is going, what is important to us. Other kids have parents who speak to them. We have a mother who hardly knows we exist."

"You may not understand why she acts the way she does," said Rowan, "but don't make judgments about what you don't know. Maybe she's sacrificed enough."

"And you know more about her than I do?"

"I don't know if I do or not," said Rowan, "but I know that she will be more hurt by me telling her of your reproductive success than by you telling her. Just tell her. You've gone this far. You've gotten pregnant. You're going to have a child. Your child has a father, whoever he is. All of these things you cannot change. Control the things you can. Tell Mama. Let her help you. The worst she will do is ignore you. She certainly won't rant or rave or cry or wring her hands or tell you how unfair you're being or how unfair life is. Give her a chance."

Regan rolled down her window and let the cold and the snow into the stifling heat of the pickup cab.
“What do you think of our lives?” Regan asked. “Are we normal?”

Rowan sighed. “Of course we’re normal, as normal as we can be. Do you think you’re the first girl to get herself pregnant? The first thing you have to do is quit feeling sorry for yourself. This is your problem. You got yourself into it. You can’t blame it on anyone else. The human race goes on and, for the most part, our species doesn’t care if a child has a father or whether the mother is married. Don’t take more of the blame in this than you need to. After a while self blame becomes self righteousness, and then arrogance.”

“For some reason I don’t feel arrogant right now.”

“No, I don’t suppose you do.”

“The problem is, I haven’t told you everything.”

“You haven’t?”

“No, there’s something even worse about this than a baby.”

A light-bulb clicked in Rowan’s head.

“The father?”

Regan nodded mutely.

“To hell with the father. He doesn’t matter. Worry about yourself and what you have to do.”

“Why don’t we drive into town?” said Regan, abruptly changing the subject. “I could use a cup of cocoa in a place as far away from this farm as I can get, and right now that’s town.”

“All right.” Rowan shoved the pickup into reverse, backed away from the bluff overlooking the river they couldn’t see anymore, and started back the way they had come
along the pipeline. The snow had drifted into their tracks, but this didn’t bother Rowan.

She’d spent all her life driving this farm in all kinds of weather.

The four-wheel-drive whined, and the big tires dug into the snow without slipping. She shifted into second, then third, instinctively following the road. Visibility had fallen to only a few yards, and she felt like she was in a coffin, and that the rest of the world had disappeared. Nothing existed beyond the glass of the windshield; the only reality was the warmth of the pickup cab, the grinding heater, and the two of them, tied together in birth if not in spirit.

“So who is the father?” Rowan asked. “Mama will want to know. She has a right to know.”

“You’re the one who doesn’t want to know.” said Regan.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because when you find out, you’re going to hate me the rest of your life.”

Rowan laughed. “I doubt that. I can’t imagine why it would affect me in . . . .”

Her laughing stopped. “You can’t mean . . . .”

“That’s right. I do mean. It’s the worst thing I’ve ever done in my life.”

“Jimmy! Jimmy Hawkings is the father.”

Her breath left her involuntarily.

“My God, how on earth could such a thing have happened.”

She let the pickup roll to a stop, which wasn’t difficult with the snow over a foot and a half deep. Rowan saw in her mind’s eye the benign face of Jimmy Hawkings. Nowhere was there room for him to be the father of her sister’s child. She snorted a stupid, ugly sound.
“I guess that makes me a real fool,” Rowan said when she could catch her breath. An ache welled up in her breast that threatened to turn to pain.

“I suppose all that talk about pickups and all the rides up and down Main Street was just practice before he got to you.”

“He wasn’t ever interested in me.” Regan looked out the side window at the white wall of snow.

“What do you mean?”

“Just that he was interested in you,” Regan said to the window. “He thought I was you. It started out as a game. It wasn’t as much fun as I thought.”

“Fun? Game?”

“It was my fault. It started out in fun. That’s all.”

“A game! You can’t call this a game. You’re going to have a baby with someone I thought was my boy friend, and you’re calling it a game. Not only is this not a game. This is one of the most insane stories I have heard of in my life. You need to explain.”

“I dressed like you a few times, just to see if I could get away with it. You know, like we did when we were little and used to try to confuse Mama and Father. You know how we found that sometimes we could, and they would get all mixed up and treat one of us like the other.”

She was starting to babble, and Rowan did not want to have anything to do with her babbling.

“Those were kid games,” Rowan said, “and this is different. You dressed like me. You went out with my boy friend. You seduced my boy friend, who, by the way, is no
longer my boyfriend, and now you are pregnant and you’re going to tell me some stupid, damned story about it being a joke.”

“I didn’t seduce him. I wasn’t even really interested in him.”

Another light went on in Rowan’s head.

“So he seduced you and thought you were me. Is that it? That doesn’t sound any better.”

Rowan paused to take a breath, searching for the words, any words to make sense out what Regan was telling her.

“Whichever it was,” she continued, “you betrayed me in the worst way, and in the end you betrayed yourself. And to add to the insult you have the gall to come and ask me to help you find a way out of your mess, or through your mess, or whatever it is you’re asking me.” Her voice shook.

Regan cried. Large tears rolled onto her cheeks and dripped onto her heavy winter jacket. She kept wiping at them with her hands, but her jerking and sobbing made clearing them from her eyes and face impossible.

“I didn’t seduce him. He didn’t seduce me. It wasn’t like that at all. When it happened I wanted to tell somebody, I wanted to tell you, but I couldn’t because I had been so stupid.”

Regan’s blubbering was getting in the way of her words and they came out jerkily, as if she were trying to talk while they were driving down a bumpy road.

“Well, hell.” Rowan said sucking in a deep breath. “Somebody must have seduced somebody. What are you telling me?” The sentence that started out as a shout
slowly declined as the realization soaked through underneath the words. “What is it you’re telling me?” she asked again, much more quietly.

“That I was not seduced. I was raped. I had too much to drink. and then he raped me. I was only pretending. I was only playing a trick, having some fun, having a kind of adventure, and he and his friends had some beer, and I got too drunk because I don’t drink as a habit, you know, and I hardly know what happened after that. I only know that I am standing here pregnant and the father is Jimmy Hawkings.”

“He raped you.” Rowan could barely get the words out of her mouth. “He raped you. Honestly, you’re telling me he raped you.” She felt a pulse of vicious anger rock through her.

“Yes,” whimpered Regan. “I am so sorry. I am so sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you. I didn’t mean to hurt anyone. I am so sorry.” She sank deep into her winter clothes and brought the collar of her work coat up over the sides of her face so high that Rowan could only see the tip of her nose.

“He thought you were me,” said Rowan. The revelations were coming faster than she could logically deal with. “Let me get this straight. Let me work this through. He thought you were me. He took you out and he had some friends with him and they had some beer and they gave some to you. They gave a lot to you, and you drank the beer and got drunk and he raped you. Was he the only one?”

“Only him. He took me into some trees, away from the others. I could hear the others laughing and joking. They had a campfire. It was dark. Only him. But they were laughing, just sitting around a campfire laughing.”
Both of the girls stared out the window, now. Regan out her side window, Rowan out the front.

How could this have happened? Rowan thought. What could have prompted someone who she had considered a friend to do such a thing?

"You didn't lead him on?" she asked. "You didn't give him the idea that you were willing to go along with him?"

"I didn't think so, but maybe he just thought I did." Regan fumbled in the pocket of her work coat and came out with a crumpled pack of Marlboros. She pulled one from the pack and put it between her lips. Digging farther in the pockets she came up with a half-book of paper matches, dragged one across the rough spot on the match book four times before it lit, and fired up her cigarette with an unsteady hand.

"That's not going to do you any good," said Rowan.

"I know, I know. It just relaxes me a little, and this seems like as good an excuse to take up smoking seriously as any I can think of."

"That could have been me," said Rowan. "I could be where you are right now. That son-of-a-bitch." She tapped the heel of her hand on the steering wheel and stared out the window, trying to ignore the cigarette smoke. Regan rolled her window down an inch or so to allow the smoke to escape.

"That's probably bad for the baby," said Rowan.

"Bad for me, bad for the baby, bad, bad, bad," said Regan and the little girl voice she used startled Rowan. She glanced at her sister. Regan sucked deeply on the cigarette and the end glowed a fiery red. She sucked it deliberately down into her lungs as deep as
it would go, held it as long as she could, and let the smoke drift out through her mouth and nostrils.

"What are you doing?" asked Rowan. "You think you're going to become a professional smoker?"

"It calms me," said Regan.

"You promised you wouldn't smoke anymore. I hate the smell, and you look stupid."

"I can't look stupider than I feel." Regan said.

"Why didn't you tell me right after this happened?"

"I couldn't."

"Why the hell not?"

"I just couldn't. You know. I'd have to tell you about how I pretended to be you and then what we did. I just couldn't."

"So tell me this. If you hadn't gotten pregnant, would you have told me any of this at all?"

It took a long time for Regan to answer. She finished the cigarette, smoking it until the filter burned, then threw it out the two-inch crack in the window.

"I don't think so," she said finally. "The whole thing was just a joke that backfired. I wanted to see if I could really pass myself off as you." She sighed.

"It was all so stupid."

"You're right," said Rowan, "and I'll tell you something that is even more stupid. He knew it wasn't me right from the very beginning. He knew it was you, he knew what you were trying to do, and he took advantage of you for it. What do you think of that?"
“How do you know that?”

“Because I know. Jimmy is not an imbecile. Right now there is only one imbecile in this mess, and it isn’t Jimmy. He knew all right. That son-of-a-bitch.

“And you,” she continued, building up another head of steam. “If you paid any attention to anybody but yourself, you would have known. He knew I would never fall for the let’s go out with the guys and get drunk line because he tried it on me a couple of times, and I thought he was ok with my answer. That is obviously not the case. And now, as I think about this a little more,” she said speaking faster and faster as the answers became more obvious, “do you really want to know why he did this?”

Regan didn’t speak. She looked out the window in stony silence.

“Even if you don’t want to know. I’ll tell you. He did this to get back at me. That son-of-a-bitch. That’s exactly what he did.” By now she was pounding the steering wheel with both hands.

“That bastard will pay,” she said. “If it’s the last thing I do, he is going to pay. He doesn’t know who he is challenging, here. because if he did, he would never have done this.”

By now Rowan had forgotten her sister. Her eyes glazed over and she didn’t see the snow or the dash or the steering wheel or her hands slamming against it over and over. Instead she saw her father hitting her and hitting Regan and screaming his hatred at them. She felt the hard edge of his leather belt against her skin and her bruised and swelling eyes. She lived that night again, as she had lived those hours so many times before, in her dreams by night, in strange trances by day.
And now that same kind of violence was happening again. Who could think about Jimmy Hawkings when the picture before was her father lying in the bunk-bed in the barn with his chest shot out by a pair of twelve-gauge shotgun shells.

Rowan leaned the top of her head against the steering wheel and closed her eyes. “We’ll take care of this, Regan,” she said. “I’ll take care of this.” She blew air slowly through pursed lips. “In my own good time, I’ll make this right. But it’s the last time. It’s the last time.” The words repeated themselves in her mind and Rowan couldn’t tell when she stopped speaking them aloud and started repeating them in her brain. It didn’t matter. The purpose was there.

She took a deep breath and leaned back. With her right arm she reached over, tucked her hand around Regan’s neck, and pulled her next to her close and tight.

“We’ll stand together,” Rowan whispered, “just like we always have.” She wanted to cry, but she couldn’t. Rowan had not cried a single tear since the death of her father.

She held Regan tightly and they watched the snow whirl its white dance out the window and listened to the loping sound of the pickup engine and the clattering spin of the heater fan as it knocked against a bent section of the housing.

Finally she pushed herself away from Regan and said, “All right, here’s the plan. First you’re going to have the baby, and that’s going to be all right because we’re all going to help you take care of it, except for Cahill of course. I’ll help, Mama will help, and Jesse’s always good for a little entertainment. Maybe the baby will give him some kind of purpose in life considering Marnie is old enough to kick the bucket any day.
"Now school is a different story. You might as well quit school now as drag it out and give the whole town something to talk about. In fact you won't be going back to school at all. The best thing is just disappear. Later, if you want to go back after the baby is born, you can. But you're old enough and you can just not go, and there isn't anything they can do about it. Anyway you've probably learned about as much as you were ever going to from the damned place.

You can work here at the farm—that's what you want to do anyway—and take care of Mama and the livestock. As far as telling Mama, I'll tell her and you be there."

"I can tell her," said Regan. "I can tell her now."

"No, part of this is my fault. I should have been a better judge of character. Telling Mama can be part of my penance."

Regan gave a mute nod.

"And, another thing," Rowan continued, "we're not going to mention this baby to anyone except family. No one in town is going to know, not even the father. That bastard can rot in hell and will before I get done with him. For now, the less he knows the better. You'd think people would know enough to leave the McKinley women alone."

"What do you mean?" asked Regan.

Rowan laughed mirthlessly. "You know what I mean."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Well, look at Mama. She looks so helpless and ineffectual. and you wouldn't think she had it in her to stand up to anyone over anything. But she'll fool you. We owe her a lot, maybe even our lives. When she needed to, she could back Father down without saying a word. You remember how she used to do that?"
“Regan nodded.”

“Papa would be telling her something, yipping away in that mean way of his, and she would just look at him and never say a word. After awhile, he would just get tired of talking and walk out the door muttering. It was like he won and lost at the same time, and only Mama knew that she won, and she still wouldn’t say a word.

“And look at the way she worked that sheriff when Papa died. As far as I remember, she never answered a single question he or his deputy asked. She just looked at them until they went away. They knew what had happened just as sure as Mama knew they knew. She still has that in her today, too. Only a fool would underestimate her.”

As an afterthought, Rowan added, “We could easily owe her our lives. We shouldn’t ever forget that.”

“That’s the part I don’t understand.”

“Well, if you can’t understand it, I’m not going to be the one to explain it to you. When Father died, you just stuck your head in the sand and refused to see what was going on. But that doesn’t mean it didn’t happen or that Mama didn’t have a hand in it. It just means we’re not going to talk about it. And I’m not going to talk about it now. You just think about our lives, and it will all come to you. If it doesn’t, then it probably doesn’t matter.

Regan nodded as Rowan shoved the pickup into first and they started back to the house. The snow had piled up another couple of inches since they had stopped the pickup. This was turning into one of the biggest storms they’d had all winter, maybe even in the last couple of years. They slid a little as they crested the hill that would take them
back to the lane, but Rowan had been driving since she could see through the steering wheel and took the deep snow in stride.

She knew, if the snow kept coming down, they wouldn’t be going anywhere for a day or two. They wouldn’t shut down school, but they wouldn’t be running any buses for the country kids. That would give her a few days to think about Regan’s crisis and Jimmy Hawkings’ upcoming one. One thing was certain—Jimmy Hawkings had to be taken care of, and there was no one who was going to take care of him if she didn’t.

Rowan was right about the snow. She didn’t get back to school until Thursday, four days later, and Regan didn’t go back to school at all. Mama didn’t come unglued. She took it in stride, just like she took every bit of education that life gave her in stride.

“What is, is, and what was, was,” she said.

I guess that makes Mama a fatalist, Rowan thought when she learned what a fatalist was. And I guess that makes me a fatalist, too, though she didn’t think Regan was one. Regan just put herself through life by placing one foot in front of the other—though in that sense she was a bit like Mama, too.

The two of them walked into the kitchen after shedding their heavy clothes in the entryway.

“We have real weather out there,” she said.

Mama nodded and continued fixing supper. a combination of fried potatoes and hamburger. Jesse, fourteen now, played with the dog in the living room, though the dog didn’t seem that much interested in playing. Born in 1955 and now twelve years old, in dog years Marnie was eighty-four and no longer young; Jesse, of course, was forever young.
Marnie was Jesse’s one tried and true friend, together since their earliest years. The dog required nothing from him, only love. At fourteen, Mama and his twin sisters had long since given up on the possibility of him ever speaking, and his relationship with Marnie was the only real relationship he had. Lying next to the dog on the hardwood floor, he whispered nonsense in her ear. Marnie cocked her head and met Jesse’s eyes in a communication outside of what anyone else in the family could recognize.

Rowan hung up her clothes and turned to her mother. “Mama, can I get you to sit down for a minute. We need to talk.”

Over the last five years, their mother had become less and less communicative. Rowan sometimes found herself talking to her like a child, younger even than Jesse. Connie McKinley calmly placed her potholders on the stove, undid her apron, and sat down at the table in the old, straight-backed chair. forearms lying on the tabletop.

The table.

Rowan looked at the table and thought of the events that had taken place around its edges. How many actions had their beginnings in the thoughts of people sitting on these chairs? Here they had dealt with Jesse’s retardation, with Father’s anger, with his death, with the law, with hired men, with Aunt Beverly, with Cahill’s departure, and with each other all of their lives. And it was here that she would deal with Regan’s child.

“What?” asked Mama.

“Do you trust me?” asked Rowan.

Mama nodded and she wiped beneath her eyes with a white, muslin tea towel.

“Of course I do,” she said. “How could I not trust you?”
"I don’t know the right way to say this," said Rowan. "so I’m just going to get it out."

"Get what out?"

"Regan needs to quit school. She needs to come home."

Mama lifted her eyebrows and waited.

She’s not going to finish school in town. She won’t be going back to school this next week or whenever this weather decides to let up."

"Why?" Mama said in the voice that mother’s have when they already know the answer but need to have someone else put it into words.

"She’s going to have a baby."

Connie McKinley opened her mouth to respond, but thought better of it. She closed her mouth. She stood up from the table, walked to the outside door and placed her hand on the knob. then turned and walked back to the table.

"I won’t insult all of us by asking if you’re sure," said Mama looking at Regan. "Instead I will ask if this was a fair thing."

"That’s a fair question, Mama," said Rowan.

Mama waited.

"She doesn’t deserve to be in this condition. but she is."

Mama sat back down and give a short sound that might have been a laugh under other circumstances, but here was an expiration of breath that shot out accompanied by an explosive, primeval sound.

"My God," she said. "How can these things happen to us? What have we done to deserve them?"
"It may be for the better," said Rowan. "There's no way to tell. We have to accept it and move forward. She's not going back to school. She's going to help here with the livestock and the housework and any outside chores. She likes that better than going to school anyway."

Mama leaned her forehead on her hands. "I thought she could be better than this place," she said.

"There's nothing wrong with this place, Mama," Regan said in a croaking voice.

"She's always wanted to be here. That's the way she is," said Rowan. "This just means that she'll be helping out here sooner. I'll take care of the rest."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Mama said in a hopeless tone that Rowan had heard a thousand times before.

"Just what I said. I'll take care of the rest. I'll finish school. I'll make sure that there's enough money, and I'll take care of Regan and her baby and you and Jesse. There are no alternatives. We have to do what we have to do."

"You want to have the baby?" Mama said to Regan.

"She's going to have the baby whether she wants to or not," said Rowan. "Now the rest of us have to do our part."

"Part?" Mama's face transformed into a puzzled caricature. "Part," she repeated.

"That's what I said. It's time for us to do our part. This is too much for you here. You need help, and we need to work part of the place to bring in some money. Regan can help you with that. You also need someone to help take care of Jesse now that he's getting older. Regan can help with that, too. And we all know by now that Cahill is not coming back, or if he does, we don't know when, nor can I imagine that he'd want to..."
stay. We can't stand still. Mama. We have to move, get going, go forward. If we stay the way we've been for the last five years, we're going to rot into the manure of the corral. I don't want that."

"We've been getting along all right." Mama said.

"All right isn't good enough, not for anybody in this family. You're working and worrying yourself to death. If it's not one, then it's the other. You suffer from a guilt that ought not to even exist if you ask me, and you shouldn't have to work so hard. Regan and I can take care of you, in our own ways." She paused, a little surprised at her outburst and wondered that the next thought surfaced at all and that she was going to say it aloud after all these years.

"After all." she continued, "you risked everything for us."

Mama's eyes lifted from the palms of her hands and stared into Rowan's, and Rowan met her head on.

"Your silence doesn't work with me, Mama. You know that. We have been together too long; we have survived too long for you to be able to pretend what happened five years ago did not happen. And you should not feel guilty. I think about it every day, and I thank God you were strong enough to do what you did."

Mama's mouth dropped a little, and her eyes shifted from side to side. She tried to say something but only a tiny hiss of air escaped from between her lips. She stood up, looked abruptly toward the door and then toward the living room where Jesse lay on the floor with Marnie. She resembled a rabbit trying to escape from a dog and no place to run. At any moment, Rowan expected her to bolt from the room.
Rowan stood, stepped to her, and put her arms around her. "Mama," she said. "We can’t hide from what happened any longer. We have to stop ignoring the past. We have to deal with Father’s death, or we are going to be miserable as for the rest of our lives.

Mama looked at Rowan in the same way she would have looked at a three-eyed, walking guppy from Jupiter. She pushed Rowan away, stepped into the living room, and turned around. Her eyes glistened with sparse tears.

She stepped back to the doorway and spoke so quietly that Rowan could hardly make out the words.

"Those were terrible times," Mama said, "and we, you and I, did a terrible thing, but I did the worst. The only thing that protects us now is our silence. I will carry that silence into the next life and beyond if need be. I recommend that you do the same."

Connie McKinley stood in the doorway of her living room and tears flowed freely down her cheeks, soaked into her blouse, and splattered on the floor. Rowan stepped close and put her arms around her stiff form, walked her to the sofa, and sat her down. She sat down beside her, holding both of her arms in her hands.

"I understand, Mama," she said and lay her head alongside her neck. "I understand."

As far as Rowan could remember, Connie McKinley never again spoke of the death of her husband, never again spoke of the secret between them, and nine years later, lay down quite comfortably in her coffin without passing on the secret of her husband’s death to another soul. Rowan liked holding in her memory the picture of her mother in the coffin and the white snow falling; at least in death Mama found peace and rest.
Snow had fallen heavily that autumn after the baby was born. Hunters from all over the United States came and plowed over the prairie looking for their prey. And it had been snowing when she leaned over the fallen log in the Missouri Breaks where Jimmy Hawkings rested after climbing through the hills looking for a trophy deer.

How ironic, thought Rowan, as she leveled the rifle over the rotten log and slowly tightened her finger on the trigger of the old lever-action 25-35. After all, she truly was her mother’s daughter.

A hunting accident.

A tragedy.

Damned out-of-state hunters.

The light snow had turned into a regular fall blizzard by the time she got home. Quite a few hunters were stranded in the back country.

Rowan had returned from her first job as a journalist for the Albuquerque Standard for Mama’s funeral. Instead of Aunt Beverly, Rowan took care of the funeral, but she felt no sorrow, only relief. The January snow fluttered out of the sky in huge flakes, coming to rest on all eight of the people who attended the service and the burial at the cemetery. Rowan never went out to the farm and never set foot in the house. She only nodded at Regan’s nine-year-old son and briefly touched her sister cheek to cheek in passing. The distance between them had become too great, Rowan with college followed by a career, Regan with a farm and a son.

She flew out of Montana and never looked back. Mama’s funeral had been the last link, and now there was nothing left except a stranger who had once been her twin sister.
The sudden slowing of the train jounced Rowan out of her reverie. Amazing, she thought. Here I am, sitting on a train. Listening to iron wheels on an iron track. Going home.

Two days later Rowan exited through the same car door she had entered and stood on a railroad platform that looked no different than it did thirty-eight years before. There was still some traffic on the street across from the station, and one block away, across the tracks the hotel looked exactly as she remembered, a large “GN” for Great Northern garishly lit the nearly empty street. She was glad she had packed light. She worked her way slowly toward the hotel with her suitcase and two bags. She hadn’t gone more than twenty or thirty feet before she heard, “Need some help?” and turned to see a boy about fourteen propped up against a skateboard.

“Sure,” she said. “I just need to get over to the hotel. If you’d carry the suitcase, I’d be grateful.”

The boy tucked the skateboard under his arm and grabbed the suitcase and the largest bag. “No problem,” he said, and together they walked across the street a long way from any crosswalk, through the lobby door, and the boy placed the luggage against the wall under the real-estate-for-sale display.

“Thank you very much,” said Rowan and handed the boy five dollars. The boy grinned, tossed his head to get the hair out of his eyes, took the money, and slipped out the door. Through the plate glass window, she watched him skate by. She turned to the hotel clerk.
“Room for a week,” she said, “and if you’ve got one overlooking the street. I’d be grateful.”

“We’ve got several,” said the clerk and gave Rowan the check-in slip to sign.

In her room Rowan stood at the window for a long time and watched the traffic, a sparse stream of trucks, pickups, and teenagers making their nightly rounds. There was a slow stateliness about the procession of vehicles that reminded her of what she had long forgotten. There was a dignity even here in a town so small that it didn’t have a stoplight. Maybe this town was as important in the grand scheme of the world as any great, messy city.

Out the window to the left was the movie theater. If she hadn’t known better, she might have stepped backward in time. Nothing had changed. In a world where change was everything, here nothing had changed.

She would not have been surprised to see herself, sixteen and dressed in a white blouse and jeans, standing in front of the theater, waiting for a ride home. But there was no danger in a town like this. At sixteen there was only boredom and a terrible desire, burning like an ulcer, to get out of this town with no streetlight, to be gone, gone, gone.

Rowan smiled a little at the thought of her younger self. She thought of the “williwaws,” the terrible winds that blew off of the Antarctic ice cap, over the tops of mountains, creating dangerous blasts on water that would normally be protected by the peaks. She had been nearly undone by the “williwaws” blasting her out of the safety of this provincial town into the wild seas of the world. Oh, what a wild and wayward child she had been, and so foolish to burn the bridges.
Clouds had moved in and she watched the first flakes of snow. There was little in the world as strange as Montana weather. She watched it change in minutes before her eyes.

Rowan opened the curtains wide, and watched the flakes fall. She moved the sterile table in front of the window and sat in the sterile chair; with light strokes she drew wide ovals on a piece of hotel stationery. and as she wandered out into the air with her mind the ovals became words, and the word became paragraphs. As she wrote late into the night, the traffic disappeared and the snow fell.

The deep growl of a truck coming out of the underpass startled her awake the next morning, and she lay in her bed and re-read the twelve pages of close writing. She tucked it away in her folder.

Outside the snow had turned to brown slush and isn’t that the way of the world, she thought. The world looks beautiful, pristine, and virginal, and you turn your back for a few moments, you fall asleep, and the next thing you know it’s all brown slush and slop. All you have when its done are a dozen pages of brain fallout.

Well, her odyssey wasn’t over. not yet. She showered, dressed, packed a few necessities in a bag, and went down stairs to the lobby.

“Excuse me.” she said to the clerk who appeared so busy balancing a newspaper, a cigarette, and a cup of coffee that Rowan could have stolen the counter and he wouldn’t have noticed.

“Oh, yes.” he said looking up and quickly placing the cigarette in some secret recess under the counter. “How can I help you?”
“I need a little favor.” she said in the sweetest voice she could muster. “It’s not a favor, really, because I’m willing to pay for it. I need to find someone to give me a ride out of town a ways.”

“We don’t have any taxis here.” said the clerk.

He looks old enough to be about ten minutes out of high school, she thought. “I know,” she said. “I was just thinking that you might know someone whom I could pay to give me a ride.

“Eighteen miles east, down river, the old McKinley place.”

“Regan McKinley still lives there,” he said vaguely.

“I was sure that she did,” said Rowan, knowing full well that negotiations like this couldn’t be rushed. Besides she had all the time in the world.

“Why don’t you just give her a call. She’d come and get you.” Looking closer and a little startled, he repeated vaguely. “She’d come in and get you.”

“I know she would,” she said, but I don’t want to let her know I’m coming. Kind of a surprise visit, you see.”

The clerk’s eyes opened wide and he stared at Rowan. His mouth fell open as his jaw dropped an inch.

Ah, Rowan thought. the cognitive moment is such an interesting event. “Yes,” she said.

“Uh, what?”

“Yes, you’re right. Regan and I are related. We’re sisters.”

“How about that. I didn’t even know she had a sister. You look enough like her to be her twin.”
Rowan smiled. "That's because we are twins," she said. "I'm the oldest by four and a half minutes."

"Amazing," he said. "I can see it now. You look just exactly like her."

"But I still want my visit to be a surprise," Rowan said, "so I don't want you calling her or anything."

"Oh, I wouldn't do that. I don't even really know her that well. She comes in here now and then and has lunch, maybe buys a newspaper, says 'Hi.' That's it. She's too old to pay much attention to someone like me," he stopped confused. "I don't mean old, exactly, just she doesn't have much reason to speak to me, and I don't have much reason to talk to her. You know what I mean. Anyway, I wouldn't call her." By now his voice had trailed off to a low mutter.

"Of course I know what you mean," said Rowan still smiling. "What's your name anyway?"

"Chuck—Chuck Martin."

"Well, Chuck, it's kind of mushy out there," she said and nodded toward the window and the street. "Do you know anybody that can get me out to Regan's place?"

"What's it worth?"

"I'll pay twenty-five dollars for the ride. That seems more than fair," said Rowan.

Chuck looked at his watch. "I get off work at one, that's about an hour. If you can wait that long, I can take you out. I've got a four wheel drive pickup, and I've been out there hunting a couple of times. I know the way."
"I know the way, too," said Rowan, "and one o'clock will be just fine. I haven't had breakfast, and it's too late now for breakfast anyway, so I'll slip over to the café and have lunch. I'll meet you out front at one."

One o'clock, on the dot, Rowan parked herself in the lobby. Fifteen minutes later. Chuck pulled up in his green, 1968, four-wheel-drive Ford pickup. The smell inside was alfalfa and Copenhagen. In the gun rack was a 30-06.

"You hunt?" Chuck asked a little hesitantly.

Rowan pulled her eyes away. "Haven't touched a rifle in years," she said.

"Great sport," said Chuck. "Shooting a big buck can really get your adrenaline going."

"That's what I hear," said Rowan, letting her eyes rove over the interior.

This wasn't a pickup, nor a method of transportation. This was a time machine that took her back to an age she had thought she had put away forever. And every sloppy, mud-stained mile was a mile into another time and a mile closer to a self grounded in the earth and sky of Eastern Montana.

On the dash of the pickup were the accoutrements that defined rural Montana, pliers, wire, a can of Copenhagen, assorted nuts and bolts, washers and screws, a roll of electrical wire, a starter solenoid, triangular sickles, and other objects that she did not have or had forgotten the name for. She breathed deeply.

Chuck the truck driver, as opposed to Chuck the hotel desk clerk, gripped the oversized steering wheel with confidence, and in him Rowan saw her brother, a victim of Vietnam and a person she hadn't thought of seriously for a very long time. Chuck was the captain of his ship. The gravel road was his ocean.
The tires plowed through the slush of new snow without hesitation. Eighteen miles, twenty minutes on good days, an hour on bad. As each butte, hill, gully, and bridge appeared out of the prairie, Rowan felt the touch of her childhood. Fifty minutes later, the turnout appeared suddenly as they came out of a coulee. Nothing had changed here, either: oversized mailbox, "McKinley" painted on the side.

The ranch house stood a mile and a quarter toward the river.

"Let me off at the turnoff," Rowan said.

"Really," said Chuck. "I can take you on in."

"No, I want to walk in." She put two twenties on the seat as he came to a stop.

"That's more than twenty-five," he said. "I don't need that much."

"Give me your phone number. I might have to call you to come and get me." She took a pen and paper from her purse and he wrote down his number. "I don't think it will come to that, but one should be prepared for as many emergencies as possible in this life. Not to mention I'm too old to walk eighteen miles back to town."

"Thanks," he said. "If you need me, call."

She smiled at him as she slid out of the passenger door. "Use the money to buy yourself an extra tank of gas. You probably need it with this outfit."

She slammed the door and stepped back. Chuck spun all four wheels in the mud as he turned around and started back down the road. The four wheel drive whined and something mysterious rattled in the box.

She watched as he pulled over the hill and disappeared. Then she turned and looked down the long hill at the house and out-buildings.
Suddenly she was ten years old again, getting off the school bus, walking home. For an odd minute she wanted to sing; she wanted to click her heels; she wanted to shout at a sky that, in the space of a few minutes, had again turned a deadly, dreary, snowy gray.

She did none of these. She merely walked slowly down the road and wondered, absently, if Regan could see her coming, and if she would have any idea who this strange person was walking down her road in the middle of the afternoon in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of her life.

A cold breeze drifted off of the hills from the north; a few flakes of afternoon snow drifted out of the gray sky. How could so much time pass and so little change, she wondered. Mama could step out of the front door any second and call her sister and her in to supper; Papa could step out of the barn wearing his beat-up gray Stetson, a small, thin, but powerfully built man, a man built to work a hostile land. The land doesn't care. Rowan thought. The land has never cared.

Her feet were wet and cold, but she hardly noticed. Every few steps she shook each shoe to remove the snow.

The screen door of the farmhouse slammed, and Regan stood on the step. Behind her the bare spikes of the cottonwood trees reared high above the house, apparently not a bit taller than when she had left.

Regan put her hand over her eyes to get a better view.

"Rowan," she screamed. "I knew it was you," and suddenly two sixty-one year old sisters were running as fast toward one another as the years would allow. Just feet apart they both stopped, reading each other's mind. They were children again. The snow
fell heavier now with the possibility of several inches by dark. They stared at the change and lack of change that had taken place in the other’s features over the decades.

They could stand it no longer.

They grasped each other in their arms, they held one cheek against the other, they each reached with a desperate hand to touch the other’s graying hair.

“I am so sorry,” Rowan said.

The snow swirled around them in eddies of white, and they cried.