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THE LAST JUMPING OFF

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[Signatures]

Chairman, Board of Examiners
Dean, Graduate School

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This is the country.

He is down there somewhere in the bewildering canyons, in the geographic confusion of the Salmon River Mountains. He wanders among granite and spruce, lava and sage, thunder and snow. He searches along this bloodline, this river that opens and empties the broken heart of a continent.

Emmett Stone stood in the doorway of the jump plane and watched for his grandfather. He is down there somewhere, crazy old galoot. Would he hide if he is alive? Yes, goddamn him. If he is dead, is he buried? Yes. The bastard would bury himself if he had to. Emmett leaned out the door and watched the great river. The Salmon
surged swollen through the narrow defile, boiled white over the Devil's Teeth rapids, and then slowed past the caves of the Indian's paintings to rekindle its power in a series of eddies and turns. Emmett watched it. This river. This goddamm Salmon. He checked for more landmarks but was lost again. The country was confusion to more than himself.

To his grandfather Jack, the Salmon had been a catastrophe, a permanent calamity of mile-deep canyon that would jerk a man halfway off just to lead him through a hundred miles of forest and rimrock, rapids and dare-nots, smack into his own ass-end. Oh glory. Ah, pilgrim! This was country with the hair still on. Wild and woolly, Jack had said, wicked and worried, she is a big horn ewe in season that will witch a man in two, turn him into a pair of mountain rams and leave him butting heads with himself for the rest of his life. She is a horny country, a very she-wolf; she is a coyote bitch in heat, howling, whining, wooing the old farm dog out to death and wild dreaming. She is trouble. Trouble. The Sheepeater Indians called her the big place of the last jumping off. To white men, she was the river of no return. That was the problem. Grandfather Jack had not returned.

The plane banked left and began to circle a forested knob that stood thousands of feet above the river. The pilot had spotted a fire. Emmett squinted against the eastern morning light. He watched a bear lumber over the ridgeline. He saw the fire, over the cliff, on the west side, and the plume of smoke rising from the blaze in a narrow column of dark gray. The smoke flattened, encountering the inversion
layer at the level of the ridgetop; it spread evenly against
the light blue morning air, mixing with the thin white haze
from other fires that were already socking in the canyon.
The fire was small. It burned in a patch of pine reproduction
near the top of the ridge and Emmett knew it was doomed to an
early death.

The patch of young pines continued up the slope above
the fire for another twenty yards before giving way to
bunchgrass and buckbrush. Above this, the solid wall of
lava rimrock crawled along the spine of the ridge and into
the subalpine forest of fir and engleman spruce. With the
cool weather and no wind, the fire would have crept through
the reproduction until late afternoon, occasionally flaring
as it crowned out in the top of a small tree. It would have
lain low, smoldering until it hit the grass, and then, finding
fuels, it would have flashed crackling up to the base of
the rimrock and been stopped cold, smoking quietly there in
the moss and lichen until the dew of the night put it out.
It was a doomed and harmless little fire, and of course they
would jump it.

Emmett checked his gear one more time. Capewells, har­
ness, chest pack, static line, what if I fall out of this
thing? Wrist-Rocket slingshot, fishing gear, cards, what
if my parachute disappears? Jack Daniel's, Copenhagen,
toilet paper, what if it's been attacked and feasted upon
by a colony of nylon hungry caterpillars and all that pops
out of my D-bag is a cloud of South American killer moths?

The smell of pine smoke and kerosene exhaust came in
through the open door of the plane as the pilot banked the DeHaviland TwinOtter up and over the rim of the canyon. Emmett was thrown off balance and he had to steady himself by grabbing onto Jorgensen's arm. Jorgensen pulled himself clumsily back through the doorway, his bright red beard sticking through the wire mesh of his face mask. He peered at Emmett.

"What?" he asked, but the roar of the propjets covered his voice and Emmett couldn't hear.

Emmett smiled at Jorgensen. "Pardon?" he said.

They stood in their bulky white jump suits and orange football helmets and smiled at each other. Jorgensen raised his face mask. His small eyes were blue and ice cold, his face flushed the color of his beard by the heat of his suit. "What'd you say?" he asked again.

"I asked you first," Emmett shouted, but Jorgensen only smiled at him blankly.

Christ and communication. "South American killer moths!" Emmett shouted. Revolutionaries! Anarchy!

Jorgensen nodded and pointed at the fire. "Are they attracted to the flames?" he asked, and turned back to the doorway.

Emmett checked his gear again. Shit, oh dear, yes, they're attracted to the flames. What do you expect of moths? He looked up towards the pilot's compartment. The pilot was looking back over his shoulder, face contorted in grinning insanity. Emmett shuddered. The pilot's gone mad. Emmett looked about himself for support, but it was no use. Smokejumpers number seven and eight, Uresti and Yonson, were
shooting craps against a five-gallon cubitainer of drinking water. Two five-dollar bills were pinned to the cubitainer by a knife. Jumper number six, Eldon Wells, was pretending not to notice jumper five as he searched the morning Idaho Statesman for news of Nepal. His girlfriend was there in the Peace Corps and the Yeti had been sighted again. Jumper five, Moses Rely, was quietly putting his breakfast into a discomfort bag. Discomfort was a touchy subject with Moses and people had to pretend they didn't see. Larson and Martinez, jumpers three and four, were sitting on elephant bags of food and fire gear, arguing with each other.

"That fire's a four-manner."

"What fire? I can't even see it anymore."

"But look at the potential."

"What potential? Rocks and rattlesnakes?"

"You don't think snakes will burn?"

Emmett looked down at the fire. It seemed to have gone out, but the plane was still circling and the spotter dropped the crepe paper streamers to gauge the wind drift. Emmett thought of all the possibilities, all the malfunctions, partial and total, public and private. He thought of the jumper who went out the door with the static line wrapped around his neck. Ah. The jumper who forgot to hook up. Yes. The jumper who disappeared down the mining shaft. He checked his gear again. Gramps always had his feet on the ground. Indians never jumped out of airplanes.

Jorgensen turned to him. "Fire's playing dead. The scalawag!"
Sweet Jesus. Emmett looked over Jorgensen's shoulder. The plume had folded itself up and disappeared, but bits of smoke still clung like cotton to the reproduction.

"Naw," he said. "There it is. Look there. See?"

"Oh, hey... Yeah, sure. There she is, all righty."

There she is. Emmett zipped up his protective collar and the compounded smell of a month's sweat curdled into his nostrils. Oh, my rank and bloody Mary.

"Come on," he shouted. "Let's go. Get out of here!"

The spotter pulled his head back in through the doorway. "What you say?"

Emmett smiled at him: never mind. The spotter smiled back. Emmett looked up towards the pilot. All the jumpers except for Moses were pleasantly smiling at him. Eldon waved the comics. We are all idiots.

"Is something wrong?" the spotter shouted at him.

"Yeah. I'm scared to death."

The spotter brightened. "Of course you are! Now, there don't seem to be any wind, but we'll let you out just west of the ridge anyway. Hold this way a bit until you're a good halfway down, then do whichever you want. Just stay away from the cliff."

"The cliff." Just stay away. Emmett hooked his static line up to the cable, securing it with a cotter pin he bent around tight so the spotter would have trouble getting it undone. Emmett felt he had an uncanny nose for sabotage. He made sure his arm was under the static line and out of the way, so he would arrive at the fire in one piece. He spit
out his snoose and lowered his face mask into place. The wire mesh divided reality into a geometric grid. Yes. Now everything is logical and safe. Safety First, the rule of the Forest Service. He remembered the poster: "Your Eyes are Important; Ask The Guy Who Has ONE." A fine poster. Reality is important; ask the guy who has one. And faith. Just find a guy who has some. And ask him what? Ask him for faith. The Indians had faith. Emmett waited for Jorgensen to seat himself in the doorway. Ah, the faithless Swede. He positioned his feet on the deck about two feet behind Jorgensen and grabbed hold of the bar across the top of the doorway. O.K. Kip out of the door, arch your back, and cross your arms over your reserve. Emmett suddenly remembered his insurance premiums were coming due and his driver's license had expired. There was something else, too, that he couldn't remember. The Zane Grey Book Club? Old West magazine subscription? Ah. A letter to his grandmother down in Boise. Dear Grandma. Haven't found Gramps yet, but will keep looking.

He leaned back, holding against the bar. The pilot cut the throttles and Emmett heard the stall buzzer sizzling up front as the Otter slowed and steadied in its approach. He looked out the door over Swede's helmet. They were heading west, across the ridge and into the wind. He flexed his knees. He saw the Loon Mountains in the distance, bent and purple, and the deep cut of the South Fork canyon. He leaned back against the bar. The Otter crossed the ridge, the spotter slapped Swede on the shoulder,
and Swede was out and gone. Oh, why. And Emmett went after him, swinging out through the doorway and trying to arch his back, but watching his feet float up past his face and the Otter fly away against the blue. The spotter waved from the doorway. He rolled a bit now, falling, and he saw Jorgensen's chute just below, opening up into a big orange blossom, and he saw he was falling right into it. Then his own chute caught air and jerked him up and back; mightily, his head slammed down against his chest, his risers twisting behind him. Then he was spinning rapidly and he saw the country five or six times before the rotation stopped. He looked up, grabbed his guideline toggles, and saw his canopy above him, full and beautiful. Christ, the trappers rode horses. The sun came through the nylon as through stained glass. Ah, Jesus.

He was facing south, towards the mining town of Warren out there somewhere. The miners rode mules. He remembered that during the gold rush, there had been over twenty thousand people there. He thought about how wild a town Warren must have been and he hoped he would make it back into McCall in time for the rodeo. He reefed down on his right guideline and swung around to the west. There was Jorgensen, forty yards ahead and twenty below him. Emmett looked down between his feet and saw that he was traveling slowly westward, no wind at all. He pulled in two yards of his left guideline, then reached up with his right hand and pulled in one more. This took him earthwards in a slow, peaceful spiral. The Nez Perce rode their appaloosas.
Halfway down, he let up on the guideline, steadied, and steered for a spot just south of the reproduction. Coming over it, he braked until he was thirty yards above the ground, and he let up on his left guideline, then his right, so that he would land following the contour of the slope. The homesteaders rode in wagons. As the brush and rocks rushed up at him, he bent his knees slightly, grabbed hold of his risers, and made sure his feet were together so he would execute the graceful Allen roll he'd been trained to perform. He hit the ground like a sack of potatoes.

Some folks just walked.

Emmett lay there, testing a few of his more important parts, until he figured he was all right. I've done it. I've done it again, again. I'll be home tomorrow night. He pulled the streamer out of his leg pocket and laid it out in the L, all-clear position. He took off his helmet, pinched a chew of snoose, and lay back. Some people stayed home.

Swede was already out of his jumpsuit. "I'm all right! I'm O.K.!” he danced wildly, waving his streamer at the Otter as the plane made another pass to drop supplies. "You bastards! I'm fine! I'm fine!” An elephant bag almost hit him.

He came over to Emmett. "Emmett old buddy, that was beautiful. That was all right. Yes. I'll make it to Mexico this winter for sure. I know I will. Sure. Are you O.K.?”

"A sack of spuds.”
"Mexico!" Swede shouted across the canyon. He turned back to Emmett. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah."

"Well, we'd better have us a power flip and get this fire taken care of."

They flipped coins and Emmett won. He was the fire boss now, and he sent Swede off to look for the fire as he set about building another one for coffee.

The sun had not hit the western slope of the ridge and the bunchgrass was still wet with dew. Emmett got down on his knees. He dug along the tunnel of a rockchuck's den until he came to the nest of dry straw: the leaves, twigs, and clumps of gray fur. He heard the faint squeaking of the pups farther back in the den. Taking a handful of tinder, he fluffed it up into a small pile there in the depression he had scooped in the sand. The nest smelled musky and good. There was some mountain maple nearby and Emmett broke off a branch and whittled spiral shavings onto the pile. He stacked the damp grass into a cone around it. It looked like a teepee.

The Nez Perce had lived in lodges. When they weren't on the buffalo road. Big, communal lodges. Emmett took his flint and steel out of his P.G. bag and began scraping sparks against the kindling. The sparks hit the tinder and died. He took a twig and loosened the pile even more. The Nez Perce built their lodges of mats and straw; some were as much as 150 feet long and 15 feet wide. Emmett put
down his steel as the fur began to smoke. He blew on it softly.

The kindling flared momentarily and went out. Emmett sat back and looked north across the canyon. The inversion was lifting and the canyon clearing. The Salmon River, shining now in the sun, flowed silent more than a mile below. To the north of the Salmon was the Nez Perce country, the Clearwater and the camas prairies. Lewis and Clark had camped with the Nez Perce while they were on their expedition. The tribe was the kindest and most generous they had met, giving them horses and food, quamash, cow's bread, and salmon. The country was beautiful and rich. Clark was amazed that he could leave deepest summer in the creek bottoms, ride through spring until he reached the breaks, and then track deer across the winter snow on the high prairies, all in a day.

All in a goddamned day. Emmett saw Swede coming up through the reproduction. He looked like a red headed giant, a head taller than the tallest tree. Emmett looked back over the Salmon. The Nez Perce must have come this far south on war parties against the Snakes. Or on their way to steal the Spaniards' horses in California.

"Stomped her dead." Swede squatted down beside Emmett and pretended to warm his hands. "Seeing as how you're fire boss, you'll have to walk down there and chain her off . . . See how many acres she gobbled." He took out his butane cigarette lighter and set fire to the kindling. "We can camp on the ridge tonight," he said. "They'll send
a chopper for us in the morning." He coughed and began rolling a joint.

Emmett refused a toke and threw a rock out into the canyon. This was Sheepeater country; the Nez Perce were farther north.

"You dreaming again?" Swede asked. "Well, I didn't see any sign of your grandpa down there. 'Course that doesn't mean much. Sheepeater Jack Stone was a very wily man . . . . Probably watching me the whole time."

"Get of my case."

Swede laughed. He studied the ash on his cigarette. "'Get off my case.' Now, there's a good line. The case of the missing grandfather. The mystery of the last mountain man."

"That's enough, Swede."

"The Sheepeater affair. The Salmon River connection. That's good. You know, I'd bet that old man isn't anywhere near these mountains. I bet he just snuck off from under grandma's skirts and he's down in California surfing right now." Jorgensen lay back against the hillside, cradling his head in his hands. "That's where Liver Eating Johnson went to. California. Land of golden honey. And now all his grandchildren are moving up here."

Emmett left him and walked up to the point of the knob. Across the canyon lay the broken plateau of the Nez Perce forest, and miles and miles of unbroken wilderness. Smoke from another fire was sneaking along the very bottom of the canyon. A faint mist, it followed the Salmon like a second
river. Emmett could hear the Otter as it searched for the fire. The sound, that persistent, hollow drone was the only man-made thing in the canyon and Emmett hated it. And what you going to ride in, his grandfather asked him, when the planes are all gone? Where you going to go when the places are all gone? Emmett rolled a boulder off the cliff. Where'd you go, Gramps? The boulder bounded silently into the canyon.
II.
A PROPOSITION

Two days after the non-fire on the South Fork of the Salmon River, Sheepeater Jack's only grandson, Emmett Stone, was back in McCall. He was getting ready for the rodeo, drinking in one of the bars along the highway through town. There was a new display of ball point pens on the counter of the bar in the Lightning Saloon. Emmett took up the display from its place between the beef jerky and pigs' feet and turned it upside down. The woman on each pen slowly lost her bathing suit. Now there were a dozen women there, naked.

"That's easy," Emmett said. "The stuff drains out."

The pens reminded him of an exhibit the water company had at the county fair when he was a kid. And that reminded him of the time he and Moses burned down the lambing sheds at
the fairgrounds. He laughed softly. That's all water over the bridge.

The fire had been monstrous, blazing far into the night and smoking for the next two days. The sheds were a total loss. So were some sheep; black and stinking, they huddled silently in bunches until the sheepman killed them with their 30-30's. Emmett and Moses hid out for two days until the guilt became too heavy and Emmett confessed to his grandfather. Old Jack made them split a cord of wood for punishment and then took the two of them for a week's fishing until the thing quieted down. Gramps was drunk and happy all that week. Jack Stone had always hated sheepmen.

Emmett bought another beer and turned around on the stool, leaning with his elbows against the bar. The pens also made him think of sex, but although it was rodeo weekend there were few women in the saloon. He hooked the toes of his boots under the rung at the bottom of the stool and began flexing his thigh muscles. They were sore and cramped; he had perched so long on that fence. He tipped his head so far back that his hat fell onto the bar and he drank his glass empty. Sheep sheds. Sheep so burned their assholes couldn't pucker. The sheep and cattle interests had nearly gone to war again over the incident. The sheepherders were riled. Why would anyone want to burn down the sheds if not run the sheepherders out of the country? If it had been the other way around - say, some cattle poisoned on the winter range - the cattlemen would be talking mob lynching. But sheepherders generally work alone. A bullet in the back seemed a certain
fate for some of the rougher cowboys in the area. Emmett
ordered another beer. He and Moses were trying to start a
small campfire with a flint and steel Emmett had stolen from
home. They finally resorted to matches and got a little
carried away.

O.K. Get serious now. Never rode bull before.
Tonight's my first crack. Oh, Ajax. Christ and my almighty
last, too. I just... I just have to try it one time,
understand, then I'll know something. What will I know?
Ah. I'll know I won't have to do it again. He had spent all
day at the fairgrounds, drinking Coors from cans and waiting
for the bulls to be trucked up from Caldwell. Finally, his
bull was brought in, Ajax. Carsick and angry, the brown
and black brangus lunged at the horses as the men maneuvered
him into his pen. The year before, Ajax had been a top bull
in Idaho rodeo and he guaranteed big points tonight if Emmett
could stay on top of him. Emmett didn't want big points. He
wanted an act of God to destroy that bull.

Emmett looked over at Butch Harmon and the deep purple
dent in his skull where a bull had stepped last year. Butch
leaned against the jukebox with his eyes closed, his scar like
a second smile. He was tapping his foot to the music and
sipping Dr. Pepper through a straw. O.K., now. Watch the
bull's head. Watch his head. Watch where his head goes and
throw yourself back the other way.

Harry Kendrick sat down next to Emmett at the bar. Kendrick
was a cat skinner for Boise-Cascade. He had a bad case of the
palsy and he trembled vigorously as he searched his pockets
for change. Finding none, he scrawled his name on the bartender's tab.

"There's quite a bit you're owing us, Harry," the bartender whispered."

"I'll pay after the rodeo. My steers are being used for the wrassling."

Emmett was staring at Butch. O.K. Watch his head. You watch his head. And when you fall, fall running

"Doin', Emmett?" Kendrick asked. He was excited and his hands shook badly. "Say, kid, did you hear about Gary Fellers?"

Emmett didn't look at him. "I don't even know Larry Fellers," he said. He looked towards the door. Doc Leland and his wife had come into the bar. Short, bald, and sweating into his hawaiian shirt, the doctor stood still a moment, adjusting to the dim light. His wife stood behind him, at least a head taller, her shoulders thrown back in display of her large breasts.

"Yessir, she's stacked," said Kendrick, trying to sip his beer without spilling. "Just stacked. And the doc can't leave her home alone." He grabbed Emmett's elbow. "But I'm talking about Gary. Gary Fellers. The skinner up on the Clear Creek timber sale."

The men at the card table in the center of the floor made room as the doctor sat down. He took up the deck and, licking his thumb, began shuffling the cards, diplomatically greeting each man in turn. It was the start of the Saturday game.

"Gary Fellers," Kendrick was saying. "He was killed Wednesday just before lunch. Poor old Fellers. They was
blasting out the road over the saddle to the sale when a rock
the size of your lunchbucket hit him square in the throat.
He was climbing off his cat when it happened. Just climbing
offen his cat. God in heaven." Kendrick tried to light his
pipe. "But the thing is, you see, he left behind him a wife
and three young. And, lucky strikes, they're better off now
than while he lived. They got both the government and the
company's insurance paying them now." He took a bottle of
pills out of his pocket. "Damn it, Emmett, they'll be all
right. And Gary won't have to worry about living the eight
more years to retirement." He swallowed three pills and
counted on his fingers. "Me, I've got five years yet."

Emmett wasn't listening. Ajax. Ajax. He was watching
the doc's wife. She sat alone at the table next to the
doctor's, showing her capped smile around the room. She wore
rodeo-cut Lee's, Tony Lama boots, and a flowered red western
blouse with mother of pearl snaps on the bulging pockets.
While the doctor slumped and sweated over his cards, she
sat with her head high and her long hair back over her shoulder.
Emmett whacked his glass down on the counter and she looked
over at him. She crinkled her nose to be cute, her upper
lip curling and showing shiny red gums.

All right. Watch the head, and set yourself according.
With his feet still braced beneath the rung, he reached down
and grabbed hold of the barstool's seat. Watch his head;
watch his head; get a tight hold on your riggins, but make
sure you don't get hung up. Spit out your snoose so it
doesn't go down the wrong pipe. Raise your hand to show
you're ready and when the gate opens, spur the living shit out of the bastard.

Kendrick let go of his elbow. "Yup. Fellers is dead, but you are right," he said. "She is a handsome heifer. And hot to trot, too, I tell ya. She's the reason why the doc don't make so many house calls anymore. That and that he's rich now." Kendrick dropped his pipe. He got down on his hands and knees to fetch it. "You're right," he said from the floor. "Me, the only time I'm right is when I shit. Which ain't too often."

Emmett tightened his grip on the barstool and drank more beer. His head was heavy. The doc's wife was watching him; she was smoking a cigarette, watching him through the smoke that enveloped her. Shaking her long black hair, she blew the smoke out through her nostrils like hot breath on a cold morning. Emmett clenched his fist. Hold on to your riggins with all your might. Hold on and dig your spurs in as deep as they'll go. Watch the head; kick him back for every jump. And stay on top until the whistle blows.

Kendrick's trembling hand grabbed Emmett by the sleeve. "A couple of loggers say they been in her pants," he said. "That was before the doc started bringing her to all the poker games. They say you gotta strap yourself on with a climbing belt, she bucks so bad."

Emmett's hand squeezed the stool seat between his thighs. Then your number's up next. Then you climb down into the chute onto the back of the bull and he's so broad and hard you swear he can't be alive except you can feel the anger moving down
deep inside him and he rolls his ugly eyes back to see who
the fuck's on top of him, snot spurting out his nose. You
check your riggins once more to see that it won't let loose,
and you scoot up so that your balls are sitting on your hand.
Then you raise your other hand to the judge.

The doc's wife bent over and said something to the doctor.
Not looking up from the game, he nodded. She got up from the
table and walked towards the bar.

"Yup." Kendrick said. "Yup. She's a doozy, all righty."

The gate opens and wham! Whop, your head slams against
the butt of the bull as he jumps out of the chute. He's
kicking and bucking and spinning around and around and your
head goes bop, bop, bop, bouncing on his ass. But you dip
your spurs into him deep and watch his head if you can, trying
to catch his rhythm and see which way he'll go.

The doc's wife reached between Emmett and Kendrick and
snuffed her cigarette in the ash tray. Kendrick tried to look
down her blouse.

"I came over to see if you gentlemen were voting for the
good doctor this Tuesday," she said. She was smiling at
Emmett.

"He's already got my money," Kendrick told her.

"And how about you, cowboy," she asked Emmett. "What
are your plans after the rodeo?"

"I guess I'm going to the dance."

"Well, then. While the doctor's seeing to the boys the
bulls tore up, maybe there'll be someone keeping me company."

"Sure."
Butch Harmon came over from his chair by the wall and laid a silver dollar on the bar. The bartender put a straw into a bottle of Dr. Pepper and set it up to him.

"Quarters or dimes for the jukebox, Butch?"

Butch nodded.

"That's right," said the bartender, winking at Emmett. "Quarters. Get your money's worth."

"Why, hello, Butch," the doc's wife said.

Butch turned around to her, his mouth clamped into a shy toothless grin, his bad eye staring off towards the ceiling.

"S'Leland," he said. He nodded to her, but the nod turned into a slow rolling of the head as if he were stretching a stiff neck. He stopped himself, frowning, and took a long draw on his Dr. Pepper.

The doc's wife smiled kindly at him. "We'll see you all tonight," she said, and walked back to her table.

"A handsome heifer," said Kendrick. "And I believe you got ahold of her attention. You're playing your cards right too. Emmett, letting her deal like that. Sometimes you've got to stay low-keyed. It's like choosing whether to piss down the sides of the toilet bowl or straight away into the water, depending on who's in the next room." Kendrick laughed. "But say, you're riding bull tonight too, ain't ya?"

"Yeah."

"That a boy! That a way to get after it." Kendrick began shaking again. "Did you hear that, Butch? This lad's on a bull tonight. He's going to get after her. Say, now. Say, hey. How about yourself? Did you draw for a bull this year?"
"No, snirr," Butch said, wagging his head. "No, snir," His head began to roll. "... N'learnged ..." he said. He had caught his spur in the flank strap as he fell into the inside of the bull's spin, crashing between the bull's hind hooves as it whirled faster and faster after him, a monster cat chasing its own tail. Butch had been the highlight of the evening, talked about for weeks after that rodeo and for days before this one.

"Reckon so," Kendrick giggled. "Learned a lesson that made you dumb."

Butch tucked his chin down so he could look at Kendrick with both eyes. "... Ng ... Nuff ..." he said.

Kendrick giggled, shaking. He reached into his shirt pocket and took out another capsule.

"N'Harry," Butch said, carefully "... N'are themg ...?" His head rolled again and he gave up. He took a long, loud draw on his Dr. Pepper.

Emmett turned around to the display on the counter. He was himself in the mirror behind the bar: short, blond hair and a high, clear forehead. If I just watch his head.

Butch looked at him from over his shoulder in the mirror. His scar had turned a deeper purple.

"What bull?" Kendrick asked.

"Ajax."

"Oh, yeah."

"N'ddd ... ddon't ..."

Emmett began to sweat. He felt hot and crowded there between Butch and Kendrick. He got down off the bar stool and
walked past Doc Leland and his wife and outside.

Emmett crossed the street and went down to the lake. A front had moved in while he had been in the bar. The sky was half covered with clouds and the lake was now as gray as pewter. He lay down in the grass at the lake's edge where things were cool and quiet. The 4:30 whistle blew at the mill. He watched the lake and hoped it would rain even though that would hurt the fire season. His grandfather had piloted a paddlewheel steamboat on this lake a long time ago. For awhile, anyway. And then he had gone mining on the South Fork and then logging west of Donnelly for awhile. He had married Emmett's grandmother for awhile, too. Long enough. And Emmett's mother had stayed alive long enough to give him birth. Emmett watched the whitecaps that were starting to rise on the lake. Yes. And my grandmother has stayed alive long enough to raise me. And every once in awhile gramps would show up to see how I was doing and tell me about the mountains. Your gramps, grandma had said. Blowing in like a Chinook. Why to warm things up? Why? Just to wash them away. Emmett watched the clouds gather. Gramps never had to stay for more than awhile, and I don't have to stay on that bull for very long.
III.
THE RIDE

In the area behind the judges' stand, it was cooler and less crowded. The heavy odors of manure and leather mixed in the night as the dust in the breeze muddied the sweat on his forehead. He shivered and, leaning against the hearse, he watched the cowboys practice their roping on bales of hay. There were fewer rodeo contestants behind the stands now that the bull riding had started; most of the men had climbed the fence to watch the event. Emmett felt better alone. He didn't have to talk to anyone. He stood in Butch Harmon's fancy chaps and watched the insects swirl around the arc lights above the arena. Heat lightning flashed among the mountaintops in the distance. His face flushed. He felt the tickle of sweat collecting at his temples. A shiver ran through him again.
Leaning against the shiny black Cadillac of the Sommers' Funeral Home Hearse or Ambulance Service, Emmett spit and swore as he struggled with the spurs.

The bright imaginings of the afternoon had set with the sun behind a mountain of dark worry. Here I am, afraid of horses but about to risk all daylight on the prayer that bull won't kill me. His name on the program right next to my own: Old Ajax-Emmett Stone. Ah, Lord. Comic relief for the crowd and the bull, shit in the pants for me. He wondered if the people of the hearse service made more money driving quickly to the hospital or slowly to the graveyard. He figured they were probably paid by the mile. He was small change either way. He remembered rowing out on the lake to work off the beer he had drunk that afternoon, the lake as gray and heavy as pewter, the forest black, the clouds reflecting the water, all color crammed into the single orange dot of the watertank on the hill above town. That reminded him of the winter night he walked out onto the frozen lake and lay down on what he considered to be the lake's exact center. The big crescent moon shone straight above him. Everything glowed in such phosphorescent shades of white that he could assign colors to the snow, the moon, the ice, the layers of frozen mist, the shadows beside the trees and houses. Only the flashing beacon atop the smokejumpers' loft maintained its own color, red, and soon the whole universe took on that color, an arctic, pulsating red. He knew that for every red star hanging above there were fish below, thousands of trout, red-meated kokanee, open-eyed, stark, motionless constellations
held in winter's craw, doing what they were supposed to be
doing, being fish, doing nothing in winter and doing it very
slowly. That made him wonder why he was lying on the ice.
Now he wondered what he was doing tonight.

He heard a cheer go up from the grandstands and he looked
towards to arena. No bell. No bell. He must've been
threwed.

The announcer's voice crackled down through the P.A.
system's feedback: "He's down!"

Threwed. Emmett tried to peer through the rails of the
fence. He could see that dust cloud rising, the flashes of the
black of the bull and the red of the clown, running. Emmett's
back crawled. His armpit itched. His bladder contracted.
"He's all right," the P.A. reported.

All right! With sudden energy, Emmett banged the spurs
against the hearse's fender. Damned spurs. Goddamned spurs.
"He's up now," the P.A. announced. "No time for that
ride, folks. But let's hear it for the cowboy, Charlie
There it is, just stomped on a bit . . . And let's hear it
for our clown, too. Did a job keeping Old '93 away . . .
What say? I just got me a note handed here, folks . . .
Would the owner of the blue '59 Dodge pickup, license number . . ."

Butch Harmon turned around from his place on the fence.
He shook his head. He was serious, his hat pulled down far
over his forehead. He shook his head again.

Emmett shivered again and wiped the slick sweat from
his brow. Listen to him, Emmett. Listen to Butch. He's
telling you not to go out there. He remembered his grandfather talking about riding a bear back in Chamberlain Basin. He didn't believe him. Emmett saw Harry Kendrick looking for him in the stock area. He moved around to the other side of the hearse. Get serious, man. Get serious. You'd better not ride. He jingled the spurs in his hand.

"... Could we have it quiet in the stands, folks? Our clown's trying to ask me an answer. Whatcha say, Bob? Speak up . . . 'What's sad about the hippie bus what fell into Snake River? . . .''

Kendrick came limping around the hearse. "So there y'are, Emmett."

The feedback screeled. "... Don't know, Bob. What's so sad about that? . . ."

Kendrick hurried over, quivering. "Thought you'd snuck off, kid."

The public address giggled. "Oh, you say the back two sweats were empty?"

Emmett heard the crowd laugh at the joke. Frantically, he tried to force Butch's spurs. Goddamned spurs won't spin!

"Rowels are locked," Kendrick said as he yanked the spurs away. "And the shafts are bent. On purpose. See, these spurs'll give y'a bite on that bull's slippery hide. Say, and that last bull rode real rank. Just rank. He was a spinner. And old Ajax is a spinner too, all right. Here, get your boot up here, kid. I'll put these spurs on for you."

Emmett swung his leg up onto a bale. His leg felt weak.
At least the chaps fit well. They were dyed red with a pattern of white roses at the bottom, circled by lariats, and across the top, the letters, "B.H.", stamped in red reflecting studs. But his boots are too big. And this damn snoose, too, makes me sick. He plunged his finger into his mouth to scrape out the gritty Copenhagen snuff that coated his teeth and gums.


The fire swept through his throat before he could swallow and it seared hot into his stomach. Emmett choked and burst into coughing, tears sliding down his cheeks. His face flamed. He looked around, coughing.

"I don't want to ride."

"Sure you don't. Your number's coming up. Say, then, where is your number?"

Emmett took a square of nylon from his pocket.

"Well, there y'are, Emmett. Turn around and I'll put it on for you. Say, hey, number 76. Rah! Score that, you win sure." Kendrick's hands trembled against Emmett's back.

Butch came over from the judges' stand. To Emmett, he looked too serious, his arms crossed in front of him and his wayward eye glaring fiercely.

Kendrick pounded Emmett on the back. "Prepared, kid?"

Emmett backed away. "I've been thinking." He noticed his knees were shaking. "I'm not going to ride tonight." His belly felt like a shopping bag full of water. Butch grabbed
his arm and steadied him.

"Sure you aren't!" Kendrick laughed. "And Old Ajax can be rode plumb easy. Sure he can."

Butch looked Emmett in the face. "Ffff . . . fffloat," he said.

"Yup. You ain't strong enough to just hold on," Kendrick said. "You gotta float. Watch his head and let him dance beneath you. Just let him do the leading."

Butch half smiled. He grabbed Emmett's hat and placed it on the hearse. He took off his own hat and crammed it down on Emmett's head. It bent Emmett's ears.

"... Luck," Butch said. His scar was a deep shadow.

"Yes, and good luck," added Kendrick.

As they marched Emmett over to the chutes, one of the fancy boots Butch had lent him started slipping off his foot.

"... Our next rider hails from McCall . . ."

These goddamned boots. Emmett stumbled on the first rail of the fence and a couple of stock hands had to help Butch and Kendrick push him up to the top of the chute.

The stock hands laughed. "Say you're tired of walking and want to ride, cowboy?"

"I'm not going to ride."

"... Emmett Stone will be coming out of the second chute on his first bull . . ."

Ajax. Standing stock still, black back filling the chute, head hanging low, waiting. Emmett watched him, waiting for him to move. That's the bull I'm not going to ride.

"... Some of you will remember Ajax from last
year . . ."

Butch and Kendrick climbed up on either side of Emmett. "They got the riggins on him," Kendrick said. "You can get on board."

"Ffff . . . float."

"... Thanks to our clowns for making rodeo a safer sport . . ."

I am not going to ride this bull.

"Get the lead out, kid. Saddle up."

Into the arena. Emmett stole a glance at the stands. There's Moses. The cowboy shirts and hats stood out brightly under the lights. He saw the clown waiting for him in the arena, face painted in a comic scowl. The barrel, the old tires, everything was clear under the lights. Gripping Butch's shoulder, he swung his leg over the bull and dropped down onto his back. Ajax shifted in place. The skin was so loose on the hard muscled back that it slipped easily and Butch had to grab hold of Emmett and steady him in the chute.

"You fall under him now, kid, and we can't get you out."

Ajax stood still, massive, quiet; he waited as Emmett scooted forward toward the swollen hump of muscle near the base of his neck and Butch helped Emmett wrap his hand in the riggins. Ajax was still and hard under him. Emmett began to smile. I'm holding my own.

"By God, boys," Kendrick said. "Old Ajax looks to be feeling a bit puny tonight. Hey there, hand me that hotshot.
We'll shock some life into this randy son of a bitch."

"... There appears to be a delay in the chute . . .
Someone told me tonight that young Stone never practiced
much at riding horses, let alone brangus bulls . . ."


Kendrick brought up the electric cattle prod. "Here
. . . we are . . . now."

Butch protested. "Harry!" He grabbed for Kendrick's arm.

"But yesiree!" Kendrick stuck the hotshot against the
bull's rump and tightened down the flank strap. The animal
bellowed at the 220 volts and crashed against the gate, pinning
Emmett's leg. He began pawing the earth and quaking mightily.
Emmett grabbed the top rail to keep from falling down under the
bull's hooves.

"Harry!" Butch cried, and grabbing a megaphone from a
stock hand, he cracked the bull between the eyes. Ajax snorted,
angry, and he smashed against the sides of the chute. "Harry!"
Butch screamed. "Harry!" and struck the animal again.

Emmett was holding onto the riggins with both hands now,
but his overlarge hat fell down over his eyes and he reached up
to take it off.

"... There's the signal! . . . ."

The gate flew open. Ajax launched out of the chute,
beginning his spin with the first leap. Emmett was slammed
back. He shut his eyes tight, still holding onto his hat,
waving it wildly, but losing his grip with his spurs. His
hand held on, wrapped tight into the riggins; his legs flew up,
twisted, over his head. He saw a bright sparkle of lights as the bull spun, flying faster, taking a jump and reversing direction. He heard a crackling shoot along his spine, felt his hand burning in the riggins. Emmett sailed off, flipped over once, and crashed into the packed dirt.

Emmett lay across his arm, his chin on the ground, watching the bucking, twirling bull spin madly around the arena. I can't move. He watched the clown taunt the bull and, as the animal charged him, dive headfirst into the barrel. I can't move. The bull lowered his head, watching the barrel. I can't move. The crowd cheered. But I'm all right.

"You all right, kid?"

I'm all right. He was set on his feet by Kendrick and Butch. He stood there facing the crowd.

"... He's up! He's all right. Let's hear it ..."

For Emmett Stone. Applause. He stared; there was Moses, and Swede; and then he grinned as Butch led him back to the fence. He was limping. But I'm all right. He pulled himself together and limped more proudly. Someone handed him his hat. Someone handed me my hat! It's over. This is over. A cowboy handed him a boot Goddamn. Butch's boot.

Kendrick was holding onto Emmett's sleeve, shaking it as they walked. "The way you laid there," he was saying "reminded me of the way Ed McClanahan looked after his fate-filled ride on old Rounder. This was years ago, over in Council. Old Ed just laid there on his face like you did. Said his arm was broke but he was all right. So, we stood him up and he died. Ha! His neck was broke too! His head
just hung there flapping against his titties."

Emmett shook away from Butch and Kendrick and made his own way over to the fence. Hell now, hell. With only one boot on, he walked lopsided. Although he was still out in the open, under the lights, he stopped and put the other one on. The Public Address laughed at him. Whatcha say, Bob? What? Emmett paid not attention and climbed over the fence. He relieved himself behind the hearse, his hands cold against him. He was warm and tight down there. Could we have it quiet? Quiet in the stands? His urine, gold in the arc lights, spattered heavily in the quiet and raised a pretty cloud of white dust. What? How can you tell a hippie's been sleeping in your back yard? Hippie? Shaking it out: he hadn't made the bell but all right. What? Your garbage is gone and your dog's pregnant? Ha! Buttoning up: that's funny. Climbing the fence, considering: I'm all right. He was content: his sleeve was ripped, his elbow bruised. But all right, by God, by God. He cradled his arm tenderly. By God, I'm just all right. And your dog's pregnant. Hell. Hell, that's rich. He rolled up his sleeve so his elbow showed, bruised and purpling. He checked to make sure his number was still pinned to his back. Yeah. Good.

The P.A. announced that someone had won the barrel races. "... Annalee Wester! Of McCall. Purty young . . ."

Someone had won the barrel races. In the arena in front of Emmett, a girl sat astride a speckle rumped appaloosa, waving to the crowd.

"... One of our Sweetheart contestants, Annalee is . . ."
Crying. Hell, she's crying. Annalee's cheeks shone wet with the tears the crowd expected with victory. She smiled and her braces flashed bright silver. Above her, the heat lightning flashed along the West Mountain ridge, above Burnt Wagon Basin.

Emmett watched the ridge.

Annalee's appaloosa pranced out of the arena and the last go-rounds of the saddle bronc competition began. Emmett watched the lightning. Burnt Wagon Basin. His grandmother had told him about the group of settlers, discouraged by the eastern Oregon desert, who had turned back into Idaho Territory and, after climbing the long western slope of West Mountain, had found themselves looking down into Long Valley. A shining river meandered through the meadows and ponderosa pine. A great blue lake sat back in the forest to the north. Herds of elk bedded down in tall grass. Streams backed up behind beaver dams. The settlers were glad, and they shouted out. They were anxious to get down into the valley, but the slope was steep and dangerous. Here the country stood on end. Cliffs and thick forests blocked their wagons. They were obliged to camp an entire month at the top of West Mountain, dismantle their wagons in order to build pack saddles, train their oxen as pack animals to carry their goods below. What was left of the wagons was burned in huge bonfire their last night on the mountain.

Emmett stood up on the fence. There was a commotion in the rodeo arena. A saddle bronc named Argument had thrown his rider and the flank strap had slipped back over his rump.
Hobbled now by the strap, the horse panicked and careened spasticly around the arena. The stock hands couldn't get near him; he kicked at their horses, bit at his own rump. Emmett stood and watched the bronc; he was beautiful. There was a girl with those settlers who looked just like that Annalee. Without the braces, of course, but pretty like Annalee, her cheeks shining in the sunlight when she saw this valley below her, all green and lovely, so long hidden and secret.

Argument came to a stop in front of Emmett, ears bent back, nostrils flared, sweat glistening along the black back that twitched and rippled in the night. Beautiful. A stock hand eased up on him, twirling his lariat, clucking his tongue, singing gently, "Hyah. Hyah, now. Horse!" Argument stood still, watching nothing, staring, until the cowboy flicked his flank with the coiled rope. Then Argument screamed and hurled himself into the cowboy's horse, knocked the cowboy to the ground, screamed, high and piercing. He spun back on his haunches, whirling over, and hammered his head against the fence. Emmett felt the shock coming along the rails. The horse's body shook twice, convulsing; his head lay still on the ground. Then all of Argument was still. And then the sphincter and bladder let loose, spraying the dust with urine and dung. Argument's eyes stared upwards. Veins gathered thick as branches below the jawline.

Some of the sweetheart contestants screamed and turned away their heads. Annalee was among those who watched. She put a hand to her lips and watched the dead horse.
Emmett looked up towards the basin. The lightning was gone. Burnt wagons. That was one story. His grandfather told of the massacre, the war party of Sheepeater Indians ambushing the settlers at the top of the ridge, killing everyone and then burning the bodies, still in their wagons, while the Sheepeaters drank their whiskey and screamed.

Someone got a rope around Argument's head and dragged him out of the arena. His neck was broken and it stretched a good foot before the body followed.
IV.
THE OMEGA GRANGE

Emmett drove south towards Salubria. The rodeo was over, the heat lightning gone, the night cool now and the stars hard points overhead. He cursed it all as he drove. It burned him that the Greeks were able to name the constellations, that forever after people looked to their own heavens but saw Greek dreams: Heracles, Orion, Andromeda. He would name them now for always if he could. There are Sitting Bull, Bridger, Colter, and Custer. There are Old Ajax and young Stone, rankest combination in space, eternally spinning in the Big Go-Around. There is Annalee, that Sweetheart of the Cosmos, silver buckled belt and bright tear of victory shining in the sky. And there is the martian eye of Argument, wildest bronc that ever galloped the stars. There, somewhere, is Sheepeater Jack, hiding in the wilderness of the Milky Way.
Emmett took another drink. Here's looking at you all, you unlucky stars. His headlamps picked out the bright glitter of broken beer bottles along the barrow pit. He turned off the lights and drove awhile by starlight. He felt much better. He slowed as the pavement ended and the road became worse. But that's better. That's been done now. The bull riding's been done. Now there's prospecting the South Fork, trapping the Hazard country, hunting Big Horn on Morgan Creek, and finally homesteading in Alaska. Maybe marry an Indian. Write a book, a trapper's journal with poor spelling and grammar. Emmett smiled; he'd worked hard on his poor spelling all through school. Takes by Griz to Day. Wuz I supprizd. Scarred a Way my Hors. He shifted down and took his pickup around the 90° turn at the section corner. Seen no Body in many Days. Loneliness and hardship. Triumph and death. No Color here. But panning gold bored him, and the long Yukon winter night, so long. Boredom and horniness, whacking off sleepless nights when there was Nuthn else to Do. But, hell now, you could fix those traps, press your plews, grease your leggins, write in your journal. Beet my Dog to Day. Shit. Best to marry an Indian right at first.

He parked the pickup just outside of town and walked in, coming along the edge of the field. The alfalfa was fresh cut and heavy smelling, the blue chicory in night bloom along the ditch. Across the road was all that was left of Salubria City: four old clapboard buildings and a crumbling silo, one streetlight and a broken up boardwalk, a billboard shouting the wages of sin is death. The last half of the Just
Good Friends Church stared across at him, dark and empty. The church was now used as a shed to store feed, seed, and Elephant Brand fertilizer, Gem State cement, fifty-five gallon drums of diesel and creosote. The sacks and barrels hunkered like drunks against the darkness. Emmett remembered the Reverend. Fifteen years before, the Reverend Clinton DeVal had torn the front wall off the church, with its stained VizQueen windows and arched double doors, and had hauled it to his house by the river when he built his wife her own bedroom. He'd said she had called her scrawny body a temple long enough. He built her the Just Good Friends bedroom and then he left her for good. Mrs. DeVal later taught young Emmett the New Testament in her new room. The Reverend was now selling car insurance in Fruitland.

Next to the church sat the Valley Mercantile, flat roofed and peeling. Only by trying the door could one tell if the store were open; only by opening the beer cooler could one awaken the owner. Flattened out Folger's Coffee cans took the place of window panes; rags stuffed cracks between boards; a rusted Eddy's bread sign served as the door. A derelict Sinclair gas pump stood like its own tombstone in front of the store. A newer pump, Serv-ur-self 'n' Sav, squatted beside it in red enamel and sparkling chrome. There were two notes taped to it. Emmett knew what they said: No Stamps On Credit! and, much larger, Notice to them stealing my gas!! I know who you ar! Try me agin at yor owen risk!! THIS MEANS YOU!!! The note was signed by Harley Stricken, the merc's owner. Emmett wondered if Stricken meant him. No. No way.
There were two vacant lots between the mercantile and the cafe and they were packed with the parked cars of people who had driven over after the rodeo. Three buildings had stood on these lots, and two had stood across the street, but they had been torn down the year before as "barn wood" for people's rec rooms down in Boise. Emmett walked along the road. It was pocked with frost heaves and chuck holes. It hadn't been paved in three years. Jesus, Jesus, the highway used to run through this town. Salubria was a stop on the Idaho and Pacific spur line coming up from Horseshoe Bend. The "Lion of the Legislature", Dub Horn, was born in Salubria. Glenn Godfrey, the state senator, was hanged here. Emmett's grandfather claimed he'd once screwed a negro woman in the stable behind the Sho-Sho-Nee Hotel. The first Black he'd ever seen. And he said the town had burned to the ground three different times. There was no water to fight the fires. The people hadn't built on the river because of the mosquitoes.

Jesus. And Packer John helped found this damn town. Packer John probably didn't like mosquitoes. Dint Sleep. Musquetors trubblsom. Emmett stood still a moment, pondering his insight. And Packer John probably didn't like Salubria or he wouldn't have moved down to Meadows.

The big twin doors of the Omega Grange Hall swung open and people poured out into the street. Small groups floated into the fields where their pickups were parked. Bottles came out of hiding from under seats and spare tires. Western music bawled out into the cool air. Emmett could pick out Merle, Tammy, Lynn, and Waylon, each singing about a lost love.
A couple drifted past him under the streetlight, a tall, skinny cowboy and a chunky, ratted blonde. The man pulled on a down vest and leaned against his rig. He set his hat back on his head and took a long, gurgling draw on his bottle. His arm closed around the woman; she leaned full length against him, reaching playfully for the whiskey.

"Save some for sweetie, Sweetie."

The man leaned farther back, the brown liquor bubbling in the bottle.

"Earl. That's enough."

The man brought down his bottle. "Go diddle yerself."

"Earl!"

"Shuddup."

Parties started up in the backs of camper pickups. Young boys stole each others' hats and wrestled to the ground, their faces bright and sweaty. Girls sat along the window-ledge of the cafe, chewing gum and watching.

Emmett stepped up onto the cement sidewalk in front of the Pinetopper Cafe and looked in the window between two tough looking cowgirls of about fifteen. The big window had been soaped over on the inside, but he looked through a spot someone had scraped clear to look out. The cafe was full. Waitresses in white skirts and red sweaters hurried around with trays crowded with glasses of ice water. Young men leaned against the walls with bottles of Coors in their hands. A woman was changing her baby's diapers on a table. High school boys looked over her shoulder. Old men sat reading
newspapers along the counter. There they were, Swede and Moses, at a table near the back. Moses was waving his arms and talking. Swede was pulling at his beard and shaking his head. Emmett decided to go on to the dance.

One of the girls on the windowledge pushed him to the side. He had been standing in their way.

"Whyn't you just go in?" she asked him. The two girls could have been sisters, they looked so much alike. They snapped their gum and stared at him.

Emmett looked back in through the window. It seemed as though everyone had two glasses of water. Swede and Moses were arguing now. Moses had one of his hands in the face of a fat woman sitting next to him. She grabbed his hand and bit it. Moses jumped up, holding onto his fingers and shouting at the woman.

"Hey, man," one of the girls said to Emmett, "the cafe's open."

"So's the door, man," said the other.

Their eyes were bored, their faces hard; their muscles worked in their temples as they chewed. They stared a challenge at him. Emmett stared back, but he was the first to blink. He spit his chew out onto the sidewalk and pushed through the door into the cafe. Shitheads. Find me an Indian woman, a quiet woman who smiles when she sees me.

There were signs taped to the mirror behind the counter. Holler for the dollar breakfast! 2 eggs, spuds, toast, cof. The silver formica of the counter and table tops matched the ice in the water glasses. Quilted, grease stained stainless
steel curved up over the grill. **Holler for the dollar dinner!** Meatloaf Special. M. Potatoes, vegs, Cof. & roll all extra. Emmett wound his way towards the back. Someone was drawing a face on a table with a plastic catsup bottle. Moses spotted him.

"Emmett! Emmett, git over here." He found Emmett a chair and brought it over to the table. "Sit down, sit down. Now. Moses looked over at Swede and smiled, the chrome bows of his eyeglasses shining in the fluorescent light. "Tell him, Emmett. Tell Swede that they've found Atlantis."

"They've found Atlantis."

"Have they?"

"I don't know."

Swede smirked. "They haven't found Atlantis."

"They have. They have! God damn but they've found her. God damn," Moses shouted. "Excuse me," he said to the fat woman next to him. "But . . . Atlantis."

Swede poured more whiskey into Moses' ice water. "There's your Atlantis," he said.

"Atlantis!"

"There ain't no Atlantis," the fat woman said.

"There is too," Swede told her.

"There is so," Moses said. "Miss! More ice water."

There were already seven glasses on the table.

"Emmett," Swede said, "you dumbass. Get that stupid number off your back or I'll pour you a drink."

"I forgot it was on there."

"Sure you did."
"Atlantis is a figment," the fat woman said.

"Figament my Atlantis," Moses told her.

"It's just all a big shuck," she said.

"Yeah," Swede said. "Shuck Atlantis. Ha! Miss! Where's my cheeseburger?"

The waitress turned to him. "The cook hasn't shown up yet," she said.

"But it's almost midnight," said the fat woman.

The waitress shrugged. She was a pretty Catholic girl with small gold cross hanging from a chain around her neck. She had check pads in the pockets of her red sweater. "Did you need more ice water?"

"I'll fix my own," Swede said. "Excuse me," he said to the fat woman, and got up from the table.

"It came over the radio this afternoon," Moses said. "They found Atlantis in seventy fathoms off the coast of Tripoli."

"Tunis," the fat woman said.

"Same difference. Same place. The Mediterranean Ocean."

Swede came back with a tray full of glasses. "Here y'are," he said. Don't worry. There's enough for everybody."

"The people of Atlantis," Moses was saying. "Scientists know now that they knew then more about us now than we know about them."

"Holy shit," said Swede. "What did they know about us that we don't know?"

"That's the point."

"Shit . . . Excuse me."
"For an example, they were one hundred years ahead of us in the field of brain surgery."

"How about cancer?" the fat woman asked.

"Yeah. They were a hundred years ahead of us in cancer."

"Imagine!"

"How about cheeseburgers?" Swede asked.

"Instantly."

"Radar-Ranges, I bet."

"You bet. Until the flood came. Or the earthquake. Or until it was sunk by the people from outer space."

"Shit can sink," Swede said. "Excuse me ... Emmett, have a drink. You got to catch up to us." Swede had a drink. "And say, boy, I've got to tell you that you surely looked stupid on that bull."

"You looked good, Emmett," Moses said.

"Thanks."

"You looked terrible. Why don't you just take a sledge hammer to your head? What are you trying to prove?"

"You looked real good, Emmett. Like the cowboy on the Wyoming license plate."

"More like just the license plate," Swede said.

"I din't get to see the rodeo," the fat woman said.

"My little girl is sick."

"Then why aren't you home with her now?" Moses asked.

"She's asleep."

"Then why not go to the rodeo?"

"It's over, silly."
"Ah, shit," Swede said. "Excuse me. Emmett, you looked bad. You nearly wrote your will out there. People had to pick you up off the ground."

"You looked good, Emmett."

"Thanks."

"Well," Swede said. "You're stupid, Emmett, but me and Mose are going down to Cascade for that science fiction flick. You coming?"

"I'm going to the dance."

"Yeah. Well, I want to get a bite before the show. See you around."

"See you later, Emmett. And remember . . . Atlantis!"


"My little girl's sick," she said, and smiled.

"I'm sorry," Emmett said. Roosevelt. He got up and walked out of the cafe. Most of the people had gone back into the dance. He leaned against the light pole and had a fresh chew before going in. On June 30th, 1909, a landslide blocked Monumental Creek a half mile downstream from the little mining town of Roosevelt in the Idaho backcountry. The creek backed up and within three days the town was under sixty feet of spring runoff. People saved only what they could carry up the mountainside above town. Roosevelt. Hell, that town is still at the bottom of Roosevelt Lake. Jesus, that town is the bottom of Roosevelt Lake. Sixty feet deep. I hav the robe &
Bible. Bras bed, lamp, stove, Accordia, all gon. Wif has the rifle. She is on the othr sid of the Watur. Joshua says we ott to use Dinamite. I giv up. The Lak will be prety once the Watur clers. My wife showts but I cant heer her.

There was no moon. There was no cloud cover; the night was becoming cold. Emmett could tell where the mountains were by where the stars weren't. The mountains were clear black, the stars a soft bright dust above them. Emmett shivered. It was cold. He remembered his grandfather telling him that an oldtimer had refused to leave Roosevelt when the creek backed up, an old Swede named Ronyon who had blown his brains out with one of Jake Hawkin's guns. Perhaps it was still there. Rusted though. Ruined. The skeleton would still be there; bones don't rust. Emmett spit into a tumbleweed by the streetlight. Maybe someone took the Hawkins. Ould Ronyon kild himself. His last Words were This is To Much. God Rest. Wif has the Riflle. She showts she has no Moccarsins. I hav no Hat. But I see one flots in the Lak.
V.

SWEETHEART OF THE RODEO

The sheriff's wife took her turn at the cashbox. Fanning her shiny cheeks with a rodeo program, she sat down at the table and loosened her blouse another button. Mustard spots garnished her bosom.

"Lands!" she said, and reaching back with both hands, she held her red ponytail away from her freckled neck. Her pink blouse showed muddy purple under the arms, the chiffon ruffle melted against the inside sleeves, the seams giving way along the sides.

"Lands. Oh, lands," she said.

Emmett paid his way in with a dollar and waved away his change. "The band's got to eat, too," he said.

The sheriff's wife laughed and covered her cleavage with her hand. "I haven't eaten since noon," she said. "All night long working in the auxillary's hotdog stand and never a bite."
Oh, we cleared eighty dollars . . . " She stamped a red star onto Emmett's hand. "But there was a few weiners left after the rodeo. Foot-long? But no buns. And the weiners were all split and soggy. Burst. Boiled all night and burst." She burped into her hand, spreading red ink onto her nose.

"We buy the buns by the dozen and the weiners by the pound. Lands, I'm full!"

The band started up again. That Annalee girl.

"Well, have fun," the sheriff's wife said. "But don't think I don't know I got mustard on me."

Emmett walked on in. Shirly the sheriff's wife. Shirly the short. Smothered in onions, mustard and musk, eau d'ammonia and juicy fruit. He sniffed the stale air. The grange hall smelled of sawdust and sweat, of breath of whiskey and beer, of cigarette smoke and soured cologne. Emmett was glad he hadn't worn after-shave. Old Spice. Old Horse. The manure on my boots will do. And the wintergreen chew. He leaned against a beampost. You don't smell like anything at a good dance. You just smell. He watched the crowd. She is in here somewhere.

The ceiling was low for such a long building and the floorlights around the bandstand were hidden by the crowd. The rest of the room was dark except for the lights over the restroom doors: red for the MAIDS, blue for the BUCKS. And the long meeting benches, shoved up against the far wall and piled with jackets, were crowded with sleeping children. The yellow bunting along the beams had begun to come loose, but the dancing was tight and still serious, the men yet
deferent to the women.

Emmett watched the crowd. It wasn't exactly Christmas in St. Louis, the rendezvous at Pierre's Hole, the felicidades in Taos. But it was sweet for the mountain man after the long season in the hills: the trapping, trading, prospecting, hunting, the looking around; the long autumn; the late winter falling like a wolf upon a hamstrung moose, like an eagle upon a kid goat, like a ferret upon a rat. A mountaineer will wonder as he rides down out of the Sawtooths for winter. He denies he is lonely, but admits he is curious. Ah? And the women of Taos? He dreads another winter at Fort Hall and he wonders about the happinesses. Will Winter this Yer down in Tows. The Espanish & Nueva Mejican Women ar Ther. Kit Carson & Bridger mebbe. Mebbe Smith. Nueva Mejican Beer. Navidad in Taos.

The dance band ended their number to a scattered applause. "Thank you. Thank you," said the band leader. "Thank you. We're the Trailenders here . . . as if you didn't know, ha ha. And we'd like to tell you that we got a banjo and fiddle for the happy tunes, a sit down steel for the sad tunes, and an electrical bass to tell you when to move your feet. Ha ha . . . We got some real midnight music for you too, yessir, but first the final score from the rodeo. It ended up with the Cowboys, 7, the Stock, 73. Ho!"

The pedal steel hit a sour note and the band leader shook his head. "I am sorry, Henry . . . Well now, grab y'a pardner . . ." and the Trailenders swung into 'Big Ball's in Cowtown'.
Gren Grow the Lilacs I lik that Tewn. Ther is a Pianna in Tows, so seys Minter. Smith plays Harmonnia. Gen'l Clark the Harp. Smit say the Senyorita Women of Tows play ther Hands in sech a Way. Musik warms the Heart. Sooths the Savags. Yet ther Hands ar soft to tuch?

The band was swinging now. "... Help me, Mama! The hogs have got me." And the crowd jammed itself in towards the music, their feet flying under the effect of alcohol and midnight. Something had let loose; or the right people had gone home. A woman vomited into a trash basket. A cowboy started laughing and fell to the floor. Children awoke on benches and sat up to watch their parents. Oldtimers winked at each other and switched wives, wives squealing with delight. All right! Emmett stood up on a folding chair to look through the crowd for Annalee. He saw Butch Harmon was with the school teacher. They danced modern, not touching each other, directly under the ultraviolet light. Butch's scar glowed like radium; her bouffant shone like porcelain. All right. And there is Annalee.

Who is she with? Emmett stood up on his toes. She wasn't with anybody. One of the Mink boys. Billy. They're all alike. Dumb. And lazy? I'll say. Emmett got down off the chair and began pushing his way through the crowd. Buck dancer's choice. He had to be right there by the time the song ended, or wait out another one. Sparkling sweat flew off a woman's elbow and hit him in the face. He wiped the salt taste off his lips and pushed through the dancers. Somebody shoved him back. Christ. And Billy Mink. The heat grew close.
Emmett had to bounce in time with the music and make his moves under swinging arms and through flared skirts; he had to circle with the grain of the dance, a sort of left-right-left and around two steps to the right. He hopped on one foot. A hole in the whirl opened and Emmett shot across it. There was Annalee. And that goddamn Billy. Dirty? Yeah, his eyes, nose, and mouth crammed down into the chin corner of his face, his shoulders slumped to make him look . . . cool? The bastard.

The music quickened.

I'll stay in cowtown. I'll dance around.

Board up your windows. The big ball's in town.

Big ball's in cowtown. We'll all go down.

Big ball's in cowtown. We'll dance around.

Billy Mink noticed that Emmett was watching and he slowly danced himself in between Emmett and Annalee. Emmett could now see Annalee from the front. She danced against the music. Her shoulders twitched just after the beat, took the edge off it, muted the banjo and drew out the steel into a soft wash her feet stepped through as if she were wading a small stream. Her expression denied the words. There was something serious in the song, or something not right. Emmett watched her. Annalee. She sees me. Does she? Here! She closed her eyes, but her expression changed, lightened. Her hips began ticking now, tac tac tac. The music tripped, stuttered, then conformed. Her small breasts lifted. She danced with her eyes closed. She began to smile, her head tilted a little to one side. She was wearing the buckle she had won at the rodeo. She had taken
off her hat. Emmett could see the impression the liner had made in her dark hair. The yoke of her blouse was bordered in black, making her hips look small, almost fragile, her hips pivoting there at the buckle. Sweetheart of the Rodeo. She was smiling now.

The dance ended. Emmett reached around Billy and tapped Annalee on the shoulder. She opened her eyes, still smiling.

"May I have the next dance?"

Billy flared his black eyes.

"Of course," Annalee said, and smiled at Billy.

A new song began, another fast one, and Annalee closed her eyes again. Emmett shut his. If she doesn't want to look at me. He had to watch her hips, though; they were so nervous and quick, just ahead of the music now. He watched Annalee. They were under the black light now and Annalee's braces were a dull gray against the glowing purple of her lower teeth. The makeup on her cheeks stood out in relief, dappled green. Her mascara sparkled. She reminded Emmett of one of those black felt paintings of Mexican senoritas he had seen in Juarez.

Annalee pursed her lips and snapped her fingers. Emmett danced. The Senyorita Women of Tows play their Hands in sech a Way as to Make Musick. Ther Lafter is lik Musick & they Adorn Thems'v's, ther Faces, & Bod's in sech a Way. Lik Starrs! Lik Planets and all Heaven. & soft to Tuch. Her hips hit a tight, nervous tick. She mouthed the words. Corrine, Corrina, where you been so long? Emmett moved in closer. He watched her dance in the light. I love Corrina,
tell the world I do. So close he could feel the heat of his face reflected off hers. Corrine, Corrina. He hunched his shoulders, shook his fists, nodded, slid with the music. Christ and Corrina, yes, I do. They touched cheeks, shaking, sweating, swaying; Corrina; the music ended.

Annalee was smiling, her eyes open. They were away from the black light, in shadow now, and the music renewed, slow. He pressed his fingertips into the small of her back and buried his face into the nape of her neck, under her long hair. It was hot and damp there, as sweet as stale beer, as dark as the granary - years ago! - jumping from the rafters, naked, rolling in the grain with his cousin, their bodies dusted with chaff. And the winter days, burrowing into the sugar beet piles and sweating away hours in the rotten heat, coming home stinking to a bath and stiff brush. Glory. Now Annalee moved her hips against him, against his belly, her mound against his thigh. Her nails dug into the back of his neck, plucked at his hair. Years ago. They danced slowly, in a circle. A female Woman of Tows She is & a Wunder. They danced slowly together, against "The San Antonio Rose". With Maners to Shame all Women of Boston. She does wash my Feets. Trim my Hair & Shav my Grizled Phiz. Glory! She lafs at my Onery Tricks. Emmett warmed against Annalee. B'fore I rise, She does Chew the Lethere of My Boots, so to mak them Soft & Fit. He pulled back and looked at her. & I bin a Lonly Man. She looked to be about seventeen: long dark hair, high cheek bones, long eyelashes, and braces. She couldn't quite close her lips. She opened her eyes and regarded him steadily,
challenging. Emmett remembered the two girls outside. He pulled Annalee closer and laid his head on her shoulder.

Butch and his girlfriend danced by. Butch was grinning. His lank frame hunched lamely over his partner as he swayed his butt from side to side, moving his feet, cracking his bad knee out of time to the music. The woman staggered under him, her arms up, her hands in his armpits as if she were supporting his entire weight. Her name was Tommie Coicachea. She was the school teacher from Spink and one of the few women wearing dresses to the dance. She stood a solid four-foot-eight and her calves rose like silos up into her skirt. She stood there on the bevel, her face stuck into Butch's chest, a brace against his tottered frame. Tommie had taken care of Butch since his accident.

The music faltered, then ceased. The bass guitarist leapt from the bandstand and sprinted out the door. The dancers swayed to a halt. Someone applauded politely, but most of the people just stood there, looking towards the door.

"Oh?" an old man squeaked. "... Oh? ... And there is a fire?"

The room broke into murmer. "My babies!" a woman cried. Emmett judged his chance for the door.

But a young girl ran into the hall. She skidded to a stop in the center of the floor. "Fight!" she screamed. "Fight! Fight! Fight!" And she dashed back outside.

With a great, "Aaahhh! A fight!" the crowd swelled towards the door. Emmett wondered if Moses had come back drunk. Annalee grabbed him by the wrist and dragged him
along, pushing her way through the mob. The people spilled out onto the street and around a small flurry that was whirling low on the broken pavement. Annalee shoved their way to the front rank. There were three people fighting. Screams and low growls rose from the fracas.

"Bitch!"

"Whore!"

"Cunt!"

Cunt? Emmett peered at the commotion. There were three girls.

Two of the girls were those of the pigtails and faded jean jackets. The third, the one on the bottom seemed to be dressed in a white skirt and red sweater.

"If I get my hands on you!" she was screaming. The two in pigtails weren't talking. They were on top, working her over. One of them sat straddled on her throat, rubbing dirt into her hair and face, stuffing pebbles into her mouth. "I'll kill . . ." The girl on the bottom choked; she thrashed at them, coughing. The second girl sat on her stomach, pinning her arms and doing something up under her sweater. The girl in the sweater spit out a rock. " . . . Bitches!"

Butch Harmon appeared across from Emmett, on the other side of the fight. Tommie was holding him back by his belt. " . . . NNN'Go!" he screamed. Two men grabbed him and three others stepped in to stop the fight.

"It's the Nichol sisters," Annalee said to Emmett. "Lor and Jeddie. And that's Marilyn Lemon."

Marilyn Lemon was fighting the man who held her. "Let
me go! I'll get them! I'll kill them!" The man slapped a full nelson and lifted her off her feet. She dangled in front of him now, kicking and wriggling, about a foot off the ground, her arms sticking out from her sides and her head twisted down toward her armpit. She glared at the sisters.

"You cracks," she threatened, "if I catch you again."

Lor and Jeddie Nichol stood across from her, their thumbs cocked in their belt loops. They were clearly amused.

"Tell us about it," one of them said.

"Yeah. Real coordinated," said the other.

People in the crowd were laughing, too.

"Where's their old man?" someone asked. "Where's Verman Nichol?"

"He's cooking in the cafe."

"No, he ain't. Nobody's cooking in the cafe."

"Ha! Then he's drinking again."

"But he don't drink anymore."

"No. Not hardly."

The people laughed. Marilyn Lemon was set down and then led to her car. The Nichol sisters went back to the cafe. The crowd thinned out as people strolled out to their rigs for more refreshments. Tommie Coicaheca pushed Butch back towards the grange hall. Butch was clapping his hands.

Emmett looked at Annalee. She stood with her hands in her pockets, shaking her head.

"Women shouldn't fight." he said.

"No," she said. "Not like that, they shouldn't. Sure,
Marilyn had it coming. She's a real kiss. But them Nichols... what show-offs. I would have waited at Marilyn's place. Then kicked her ass."

Emmett was quiet. He leaned on one leg. She is a tomboy, she is. And trouble? I don't know. Emmett's grandfather had told him not to worry about trouble. Trouble was free. And plentiful. If you're going to worry, worry about water thieves. Or Mormons. Or Republicans. But trouble and women... Emmett looked at Annalee. What do I say?

Annalee smiled. "Got a cigarette?" she asked.

"Naw, I don't smoke." And I won't offer her a chew. But what to say? Well, hell, "You're Annalee Wester," he said, "the rodeo queen."

Annalee brightened. "Right! Well, now. And you're Emmett Stone. Hey, I could teach you a few things about riding."

"You know me then."

"Yeah. I known you for a long time. Emmett Stone. You and Moses Rely were in on that gangbang on Lucille Barrett. She's my best friend, you know."

"I didn't. I mean I wasn't exactly."

"Sure you did. Lucille ought to know, huh? Told me all about it." She winked at him. "Doesn't matter. I just mean I know who you are. You and Moses burnt down the lambing sheds. You stole the keys out of Sheriff Short's car that day he got drunk. You were at the hot springs with Ron Goble's girlfriend that day he got mad and kidnapped her. That day
Short shot his own deputy in the manhunt." She paused. "I'm pretty smart, huh?"

"Yeah." Fine. Just fine.


"Yeah?" Fine. What do I say? "You go to school in Cascade?" he asked.

Annalee laughed. "O.K. Change the subject. I went to school," she said. "But I don't anymore. Nope. I quit. I'm seventeen, you know. Yeah, the principal and the girls' counselor called me in for conference one day. Mr. Fender said, 'Annalee', he said, 'We know you have your problems. We all have our problems. And Miss Peebles and I know that when you go through your puberty, you're apt to have your moods. We went through our puberties ourselves,' he said." She looked at Emmett slyly. "Then he goes, 'But what is highschool for, if not to learn to live and learn together?' Shit.

"And I go. 'Mr. Fender, sir, look. I don't see reality the way you do.'" Annalee snapped her fingers. "Just like that."

"Then Miss Peebles leaned forward and goes, 'Why, Annalee.' She was always being our friend. She goes, 'How do you define reality?' She was always defining things.

"So I say, 'O.K., Miss Peebles. Dee for dee, and fine for fine, De-fine.' How about that?"

"I know what's up. I won't graduate, but I can get an equivalent. I get a hundred dollar scholarship for being sweetheart."

"You're going to go to college?" Edjucat'd b'yond Words.

"Yup. Boise State. I got friends in the secretarial school. I can stay with them. Maybe I'll be a secretary after I spend my hundred dollars. Or a stewardess. I want to see the world."

"Where do you want to go?" & Head Strong.

"Portland. Seattle. All over. Yeah, I could join the army, but Lucille joined the army and they sent her to Texas. Besides the army's full of real lesbians . . . really."


She held up one hand. "The sign says, 'Guthrie' . . . 'Fisher' . . . and, tah dah, . . . 'Jack Stone'.

"Let's go, then."


Oh. That weaselhead. But they ar Fickle as the Wind.

Emmett let go of her arm. "Oh," he said.

"Yeah," she said. "I'm sorry?" She touched his hand.

'Tho They hav ther Resons. "Sure," he said.

She grinned at him. "I'll catch you later," she whispered,
and she ran off towards the cafe.

Emmett dipped some snoose. Women being Scarce, Men Plentyful. Like that Mink. That beefwitted, weaselheaded nonpareil. That macaroon. Christ. He spit a high arc toward the lightpole. But he's a rich logger. And he surely drives a nice rig. Emmett kicked dust over his spittle. I wil bring her Presents & I will win her Hand so sof to Tuch. 40 Plews. 10 Sacks Cofee. Sugar! 100 Nezpercee Ponys & Hair of Indins of All Nations. A hand Glass, a Ring & China Tea. Emmett looked up towards the mountains. I am not Lonly! Simply, I am of an Age. He turned and walked toward the grange hall. & being born of Woman, was I not weened so to Pursue Eve's sweet Breast my livlong Days?

The lights were on in the Omega Grange hall. The band was packing up to leave. Mothers roused their children to take them home. Emmett walked in and sat down on a bench along the back wall. His grandfather had told him he had met Emmett's grandmother when, he said, it came time. When it came time, there she was . . . with the waist of a China maid, the heart of a jenny mule, and a back like my own. She was soft under quilt and hard at the market; no Finnlander talked her around. And she could sing, too . . . and read out of books. I could sing and read then, too.

Emmett spit into the corner. He would probably jump again tomorrow. There were only twelve jumpers left in camp; the rest were in California. He and Moses were partners on the jumplist. That was lucky; Swede had been a pain. 'You looked terrible out there, Emmett. You almost wrote your will.
They had to pick you up off the ground.' Christ, Swede. 'Well, you're stupid, Emmett. We'll see you around.' The pin from the rodeo number stuck Emmett in the back. Damn it, I am trying, Jurgensen. There are things I have to do.

Butch Harmon walked up to Emmett. He stood in front of him, still sweating from the last dance. He was patting his scar with his handkerchief.

"Nnnn . . . Nnnemmett?" he was saying. "Nnnemmett?" He grinned and hitched up his pants.

"Yeah, Butch. What is it?"

Butch shook his head, blowing. "Whew! . . . Whew!" he said. " . . . S'Leland!"

Emmett slumped. The doc's wife. Oh, no. He looked around Butch. He could see the doctor's new powder blue, four by four Chevy automatic idling across the road. Crappers. Holy Mother, enough is enough.

"Listen, Butch. Listen. Go tell her I'm hurting. Tell her I'm wounded, O.K.? Tell her I'm in the john with my foot stuck between the toilet and the wall."


"Tell her I'm drunk . . . puking."

Butch thought a moment and then began to grin: again. "N'Yeah!" he said. He turned and strode out of the room.

Emmett had forgotten about Stella Leland. Hell. Why now? He sat against the wall, watching out of the corner of his eye. Butch was standing next to the pickup's cab, waving his arms in wild explanation. Emmett held his breath. Tell
her I'll be O.K. tomorrow, Butch. Tell her I'll be in town. He saw Butch nod, then walk around the front of the pickup and get in on the passenger's side. The truck drove off in a cloud of oily exhaust.

What? For the what? For the love of Christ, that silver tongued devil. Emmett started laughing. This was funny. This was all right.

Tommie Coicachea came up next to Emmett. He saw her and laughed all the harder. The school teacher crossed her arms behind her back and stood there tapping her foot, her mouth set. He bouffant had lost its rat. She looked much shorter.

"Well!" she said. "That Mr. Harmon takes the cake. I declare. He's not been the same since his misfortune. He's lost his discretion. He abuses himself and we who would help him." Tommie's voice rose in indignation. "Someday," she said. "Someday. I shall give that boy a taste of his own medicine." She looked sideways at Emmett. "I have my own way home, thank you."

She crossed the road to her car.

Emmett was alone now. Nobody lived in Salubria anymore. People just showed up for the good old times. The NiteGard yardlight would turn itself off at dawn. Emmett looked across to the mountains. & These Young Gerls of this Country. Such Wunders! They hav a Conscience across what no Thot or Deed can leave lasting Track.
VI.

SIX LAKES JUMP
(LIFE ON MARS)

The great she bear rolled down through the huckleberries, her crushed wake a dark swath in the moon silvered leaves. She tumbled out into the meadow and lay sprawled against the fanning roots of an windfallen spruce, barking, coughing, calling to her mate, to the moon, or to the great god bear, calling on everything to come out in the midnight and take part in her drunken dance of summer. Delirious, she rose to her hind legs, staggered there waving her paws, and stumbled backwards into the berry patch. Her indolent grunting resounded from the cliffs. All was well.

Emmett watched from farther up the mountainside. He was eating berries too, bending a branch towards his mouth and plucking the fruit with his teeth. The small, tart aching had already begun in his belly, but he ate more and more.
He could see three of the six lakes from where he sat. The moon shone in one, as still as a blind eye. The other two lay as patches of sky on earth, stars out and moon washed, pieces of fallen air. The black gash of the Deep Creek canyon divided his near and far vision and separated the basin from the rest of creation, which lay in shadow to the south. Out of the gorge rose the roaring of the wind and the waters of Deep Creek as they fell towards Hell's Canyon. This was a place central to the world and the old sow knew it. She lay on her back in the meadow now. Her belly towards the moon, she belched long airy bubblings. Emmett wished he could roll and wrestle with her, David Crockett style, love him a bar when he was twenty-three. He wiped his berry stained hands on his T-shirt. Ah. This country. This country.

They had jumped into Six Lakes Basin at two o'clock that afternoon. The flight from McCall was more peculiar than usual. Moses Rely reeled about the DC-3, fighting nausea and feigning intoxication.

"I am drunker than a shkunk," he said, wobbling around the cabin. "And I won't get schick. Cause I know. I know I can hold my liquor."

He puked into his face mask as he parachuted to earth.

Emmett and Bill Williams made the meadow; Moses and Swede landed in trees. By the time the other two had executed their let-downs and retrieved their chutes, Bill and Emmett had lined the fire and felled the two snags that lightning had zapped the night before. This was another good fire. Mineral soil lay an inch beneath the turf and the lakes nearby
provided the water for a thorough dousing.

They went exploring. They built a raft and poled across the largest lake. Bill Williams caught two cutthroat trout on flies. Emmett discovered an arrowhead on a spit of land beneath the cliffs. Moses found a rusted old trap with the leg bones of some animal still fast in the teeth. Emmett and Swede argued the species until Moses found the huckleberry patch. After gorging themselves, they built a hooch of viz-queen and fir boughs near the outlet of the big lake. A small doe wandered into camp. A mountain ram watched from the escarpment. Almost everything Emmett needed was there in that glacial cirque of the six lakes. This is paradise, he thought, a seventh heaven of the first degree.

There was even a peak, a mile to the west, named Emmett Mountain. Across the Deep Creek canyon, and across the White Monument ridge to the south, lay Indian Creek, the "River Scamnaugh" Alexander Ross wrote of in his Hudson Bay Company journals. Ross lodgepoled a group of Iriquois trappers at the mouth of the Scamnaugh on his way to explore the Salmon River country in 1832. He outfitted them with traps, provisions and trade articles to barter with the local Indians for the beaver that abounded in the country. When he returned at season's end, Ross found his same Iriquois lieutenants, near naked, provisionless, destitute, but each with four or five new squaws. The beaver were coming, they claimed, but Ross knew who was being buffaled.

Ah, for the life of the Iriquois.

A flash of light from a cluster of boulders caught
Emmett's attention. He watched the spot and presently the flash shone again. It was the moonlight reflecting off Moses' chrome spectacles. Emmett moved quietly around the berry patch to Moses' side.

"See the sow?" he asked.

"Yup," Moses said. He was watching the moon. "She'd make for pretty good shortening."

"Good meat."

"If you like bear."

Moses had his eyes on the stars.

"Alexander Ross was here in 1832," Emmett said.
"Neal Armstrong was on the moon in 1969."
"But that's a long ways off."

Moses shrugged. "At sub-light speeds," he said.
"At any rate. There's a long ways between there and here."

"But nothing in between."

"And too much of it."

Moses was a space nut. He knew the latest theories on black holes and super nova and he kept just ahead of human knowledge by reading all the science fiction magazines.

"With nothing to do." Emmett said. "Besides, how would you survive on a spaceship if you get sick on a DC-3?"

"We would negate gravity, too," he said. "It's the up and down, the on and off of gravity that gets to me. On a starship, we'd cruise at zero g's. Then I'd get by. I get by when I'm drunk, don't I?"

"Yeah, but you're always half loony."
"Wouldn't matter on a starship. The life forms in the galaxy operate on such different fundamentals that sticking to earth logic could spell doom. As it has. In a number of books I've read."

The moon was setting behind Emmett Mountain and the stars began to shine more clearly. As shadow moved across the basin, Emmett saw the she-bear get up and amble down the trail to Deep Creek. The features on earth dimmed to obscurity. The Milky Way appeared as a fine powder.

"There's Mars," Moses said. The planet had just cleared the western horizon at Joe's Gap and through the thick summer air it shimmered, red and dusty.

"Life on Mars would be loony," Moses said. "There are shadows where they aren't supposed to be, on the sunny side of mountains. The shadows could be life forms, though not as we know life. They mean no harm. They live on the iron oxide that covers the Martian plains." Moses stood and began waving his arms as he had in the Salubria cafe. "That's not to say they're not dangerous," he said. "A man's feet will stick to them like to a tarbaby. And these shadows are mostly made up of an opaque, three electron hydrogen which combines with the oxide to form an acid, which spells that doom for the man in the middle of it."

Moses thought a moment. "Yup," he said. "And the acid is hallucinogenic, so the shadow can appear to be anything, once the man gets some of it on him. He'll be standing there in shadow, screaming something like, 'Help! The jeebies have got me!' And you'll run to help him and say, 'Where?'"
but it's too late. **King Kong** has got you. Hell, shadows fool people right here on earth. Just imagine them on Mars. Real tricksters."

"You can see what you want in them," Emmett said.

"And a lot more."

Moses found his headlamp and turned it on. "I'm heading back to the fire," he said. "It's getting spooky out here. When light falls below the visible spectrum, anything can happen." Moses set out through the brush.

Emmett settled back against a boulder. Everything seemed colder, smaller and darker now the moon had gone down. He couldn't see where he was in the world, only in the universe. Nowhere. Nothing. The world was too small these days. One hundred thousand people lived in one place, Boise, only 100 miles away. McCall, with her 2,000 souls, lay forty miles east, but the flight from there that afternoon had taken twenty minutes. Emmett had watched country go beneath him that would take two good days on horseback, if he didn't stop to fish. Time wasn't giving space its due anymore. One had to place himself in time rather than in geography. And that placement was harder to maintain. At any moment, a century of solitude could be shattered by motorcycle or snowmachine. A bright red Ford stationwagon would pull up and three screaming children would run over to see what he was doing.

Emmett leaned against the granite. Mars rose to a single point of red. The stars slowly wheeled across its path. Emmett packed a wad of Copenhagen behind his lower lip. He sucked on the tobacco and swallowed the juice. Whew. Wah.
Glory. The nicotine buzz seemed to lift him off the boulder. The vertigo set him back down. Nega-light pods. Three electron hydrogen. Life on Mars. He spat towards the red planet. There is life on earth too, you know. There is life in the Rocky Mountains.

The Rocky Mountains is the Backbone of God’s Earth. Any curious thing imaginable can be found amongst their snowy peaks. There is a mile-high Mountain of Salt 100 miles in length. There is a Geyser what tells the Hour Night & Day. Bridger speaks of a Spring at the Summit of a Solitary Mountain. The Water what issues from this Source is as Cold as Winter Ice but as it foams down over the smooth Granit, it runs so fast that by the Bottom it has heated itself to a frenzied Steam the Natives use to cook their Salmon & to soften Eld hides & to torture Enemy Braves. There are Indian Nations what speak Welsh & others who speak the Tongue of the ancient Israelites. There are giant Badgers who wage War Underground. There are Fish that talk & Beaver Tribes so civilised they are governed by Generals & Kings with a complete system of Laws. There are Rivers of Mud Ash & Stone & Rivers so confined by Cannons they will run uphill to get away. Pilgrim. There are the wily Sheep-Eater Indians, the Cavers, who watch us all, all Ways, & know the Grottoes that lead to the UnderEarth. O Glory. What Wonders. What lovely Jesus Edens & burning Deserts where Satan holds sway.

Emmett thought of his grandfather, still wandering through the wonders.
VII.

THE BIG SCHEME OF SHEEPEATER JACK

Emmett's grandfather, Jack Odysseus Stone, or Sheepeater Jack as he came to be called, spent the last years of his life cultivating a grand scheme. Its roots lay in the first reports he had read of sightings of the Big Foot, or Sasquatch, in the Oregon mountains. He followed the growth of this mystery diligently and kept a scrapbook of newspaper clippings and pages torn from public library history books. He even saved reports of UFO's to add spice to his theory until the contemplation of such a possibility frightened him out of his giving their existence credit. He then limited himself to the Big Foot and at the time of his final disappearance (and Sheepeater Jack vanished quite regularly) his tattered oilcloth scrapbook was thick with published evidence and private surmise.
It wasn't that Jack believed in the Big Foot. If such a creature existed, he'd surely have seen one in the course of his ramblings through the mountain West. No, Jack Stone knew there was no Sasquatch. What the people were seeing, what those drunken, gun-crazy city hunters were shouting about wasn't some hairy seven foot monster, but a wild Sheepeater Indian, one of the few remaining native Americans who had escaped the bullets, diseases, and reservations of the ever encroaching European civilization.

Jack claimed he could produce amazing proof that these Sheepeaters were alive and thriving in the fastness of the Idaho wilderness. He'd had dealings with them himself and his memory took on an increasing clarity through the years. Of course, he didn't expect anyone to believe his stories, holy truths though they were, until he actually showed up in town one day with the evidence again in hand.

For he had brought a Sheepeater brave into McCall before, in the gruesome winter of 1918. But the residents of Valley County were at the time so besieged by the great influenza epidemic that they were hardpressed to bury their own dead, let alone chop a hole in the frozen earth to intern a frozen Indian. To Jack's potential discredit, the brave with whom he traveled with was stone dead and the white people of Idaho, now in their second generation, were just beginning to allow the Indian into the human category. The few who cared wondered whether Jack might have murdered the man, so Jack, worried about the draft and muttering quiet and Christian sentiments, claimed he'd found the body in a snowbank behind
the Payette Lakes Inn. Just froze there, he said, forked
der end upwards like he'd fallen from the sky. The Indian was
wrapped in a tarp and shipped north to Lapwai on the Nez Perce
reservation. The Nez Perce, in their turn, declared the
man to be Shoshoni and sent him south. Nothing further was
heard and the matter was quickly forgotten.

Jack Stone could have stayed in McCall to clear his name,
but was forced to take to the mountains again to keep from
being taken to war. He was stung, however, by the skepticism
of his fellow men. There were wild Indians still in the
wilds of Idaho. He knew this. And throughout the remainder
of his life, Jack made repeated forays into the back country
to gather evidence that would someday prove him right, an arrow-
head here, an otterskin quiver there, an arrow making kit
in a deerskin pouch. He kept these articles in a trunk in his
cabin along with his scrapbook. He knew these artifacts and
first-person accounts supported his basic premise to the
letter; he also knew they would not be believed. He must
produce the genuine article. This bothered him sometimes. He
wondered what he would do with such an Indian once he brought
him to town. He thought perhaps a college lecture circuit might
prove the proper solution.

The last official recognition the whites had given the
Sheepeaters occurred in 1879, during the famous Sheepeater
War. The Army lost hundreds of pack animals and one Private
Harry Eagen while chasing down the fifteen starving warriors
who later proved to be refugees from the Bannock War of the
previous year. The Army branded these Bannock braves as the
elusive Sheepeaters whom they were ostensibly pursuing and henceforth declared the campaign successfully ended and the Salmon River country free from Indian habitation. Jack Stone knew that nothing was further from the truth. The real Sheepeaters had watched the entire boondoggle from their hidden sanctuaries where they have remained to this day.

What a people these Sheepeaters are. The one or two dozen individuals who remain alive comprise the smallest and most independent nation on earth. The price they pay for their freedom is one of invisibility, the foregoing of any activity that might give their presence away. Yet this is a price they have paid for thousands of years. Before the coming of the white man, the powerful surrounding tribes, the Nez Perce, the Blackfeet, the Crow, and the Snake River Shoshoni regularly killed the poorer Sheepeaters on sight. So they learned early to keep out of sight and their life has always been one of artful deception and camouflage. Their apparent impossibility is their strength.

For the best picture of these people, of their especial crafts and way of life, one must go to the scrapbook of Sheepeater Jack:

Item. Notwithstanding the savage and almost inaccessible nature of these mountains, they have their inhabitants. As one of the party was out hunting, he came upon the track of a man, in a lonely valley. Following it up, he reached the brow of a cliff, whence he beheld three savages running across the valley below him. He fired his gun to call their attention, hoping to induce them to turn back. They only fled the faster, and disappeared among the rocks. The hunter returned and reported what he had seen. Captain Bonneville at once concluded that these belonged to a kind of
hermit race, scanty in number, that inhabit the highest and most inaccessible fastnesses. They speak the Shoshone language, and are probably offsets of that tribe, though they have peculiarities of their own which distinguish them from all other Indians. They are miserably poor, own no horses, and are destitute of every convenience to be derived from an intercourse with the whites. Their weapons are bows and stone-pointed arrows, with which they hunt the deer, the elk, and the mountain sheep. They are to be found scattered about the countries of the Shoshone, Flathead, Crow, and Blackfeet tribes; but their residences are always in lonely places, and the clefts of rocks.

Their footsteps are often seen by the trappers in the high and solitary valleys among the mountains, and the smokes of their fires descried among the precipices, but they themselves are rarely met with, and still more rarely brought to parley, so great is their dread of strangers.

As their poverty offers no temptation to the marauder, and as they are inoffensive in their habits, they are never the objects of warfare; should one of them, however, fall into the hands of a war party, he is sure to be made a sacrifice, for the sake of that savage trophy, a scalp, and that barbarous ceremony, a scalp dance. These forlorn beings, forming a mere link between human nature and the brute, have been looked down upon with pity and contempt by the creole trappers, who have given them the appellation of "les dignes de pitie," or "the objects of pity." They appear more worthy to be called the wild men of the mountains. (Captain Benjamin Bonneville--from The Adventures of Captain Bonneville, by Washington Irving, 1873)

Item. What we know as the Sheepeater country remains today as the most rugged and contradictory region in these United States. The lofty peaks of the snow-howdahed Rocky Mountains alternate with impassable canons miles in depth along whose boulder strewn bottoms the frothy waters of mountain cataracts cascade along in the wildest of imagineable furies.... The Tukarika Indians, the so-called Sheep Eaters, habit the very tiptop of these mountain summits, sleeping in caves whose openings even the best-trained eye cannot perceive. (Stephen Paulsen, 1856)

Item. Passing through the meadows and flats of long grass, they (the McKenzie Pary) would often perceive at a distance a person walking. On these occasions they ran to see who it was, but after reaching the place and looking for sometime around he (McKenzie) would perceive to his astonishment the object of his search, as far from him in the opposite
direction; not satisfied, he would start again; but to no purpose. The object would again and again show itself in another direction . . . In the art of instantaneous concealment and of changing places they are very remarkable. (Alexander Ross, 1840)

Item. (They are) complete masters of the cabalistic language of birds and beasts, and can imitate to the utmost perfection the singing of birds, the howling of wolves, and the neighing of horses, by which means they can approach, day or night, all travelers, rifle them and then fly to their hiding places among the rocks. They are not numerous, and are on the decline. Bows and arrows are their only weapons of defence. (Alexander Ross)

Item. Here we found a few (Sheepeater) Indians comprising 6 men 7 women and 8 or 10 children who were the only Inhabitants of this lonely and secluded spot. They were all neatly clothed in dressed deer and Sheep skins of the best quality and seemed to be perfectly contented and happy. They were rather surprised at our approach and retreated to the heights where they might have a view of us without apprehending any danger, but having persuaded them of our pacific intentions we then succeeded in getting them to encamp with us. Their personal property consisted of one old butcher Knife nearly worn to the back two old shattered fuses which had long since become useless for want of ammunition a Small Stone pot and about 30 dogs on which they carried their skins, clothing, provisions etc. on their hunting excursions. They were well armed with bows and arrows pointed with obsidian. The bows were beautifully wrought from Sheep, Buffalo and Elk horns secured with Deer and Elk sinews and ornamented with porcupine quills and generally about 3 feet long. We obtained a large number of Elk Deer and Sheep skins from them of the finest quality and three large neatly dressed Panther Skins in return for awls axes kettles tobacco ammunition etc. They would throw the skins at our feet and say "give us whatever you please for them and we are satisfied. We can get plenty of Skins but we do not often see the Tuboboes" (or People of the Sun) . . . They are never at a loss for fire which they produce by the friction of two pieces of wood which are rubbed together with a quick and steady motion. One of them drew a map of the country around us on a white Elk Skin with a piece of Charcoal . . . and for my own part I almost wished I could spend the remainder of my days in a place like this where happiness and contentment seemed to reign in wild romantic splendor surrounded by majestic battlements which seemed to support the heavens and shut out all hostile intruders . . . (Osborne Russell 1834-1843)
Original Range of the Sheepeater Indians
Item. No human eye ever beholds them, except now and then some lonely hunter, perhaps, prowling and crouching for days over the volcanic wastes and scraggy forests which they inhabit. Just at nightfall he may catch a glimpse of a faint campfire, with figures flitting about it; but before he can creep within rifle range of it the figures have disappeared, the flame wastes slowly out, and he arrives only to find that the objects of his search are gone. They cooked there their hasty evening repast, but they will sleep somewhere else, with no campfire to guide a lurking enemy within reach. For days and weeks together they never touch the earth, stepping always from one volcanic stone to another. They never leave a broken twig or a disturbed leaf behind them. Probably no day of the year ever passes over their heads but some one of their doomed nation sits crouching on a hillock or in a tree-top within easy eye-shot of his fellows; and not a hare can move upon the earth beneath without its motions being heeded and recorded in the watcher's eye. (Stephen Powers, 1877)

From during the Sheepeater War:

Item. Fortune smiled upon us, for, before noon the next day we came on a party of two squaws, a papoose and two boys about eight and seventeen years old. We took them in, except the older boy, who, though hotly pursued, made his escape. Farrow made a short stop, while I took ten scouts and, going forward, soon struck fresh signs in shape of two recently occupied camps and the trail of a hunting party of about eight men (four of them mounted) heading north. Farrow with the remainder of the command overtook us at sundown, just as we arrived at the north edge of the general plateau, overlooking the main Salmon, apparently about ten miles distant. About dark, leaving here our packs and horses, and each taking blanket or overcoat, we started on the trail afoot, losing it, as I had predicted, after going about two miles. We then made for a ridge about half a mile distant, and, on reaching it, heard a dog bark about three-quarters of a mile distant. Scouts were sent out to more definitely locate the camp, while we waited, suffering considerably from the cold. Starting again about 1:30 a.m., Farrow and I each took half our force and made our way stealthily to the camp, surrounding it at daylight. As we gradually closed in we could see four horses and the place where the camp ought to be, but no fires -- the Sheepeaters had escaped! . . . About two miles from camp the dog, whose barking had revealed to us their camp, was found hanged directly over the trail, where we would be sure to see it. (Colonel W.C. Brown 1890)
And from after the war:

Item. By April 24, 1880, according to one account, there were a dozen men and a few women and children left in the original habitat of the Sheepeaters. They were too poor to fight, having only two or three old guns, and too proud to go on the reservation. (Pioneer Days in Idaho County)

Item. A hunter while wandering in the depths of the Salmon River mountains far from the habitations of men, saw before him a beautiful lake, in the moss and towering columns of granite. A fair girl sprang from the water and disappeared in a black yawning cavern. The man of the chase was not romantic, and did not believe in ghosts. When he found his comrades by a log fire it was dark. They were old hunters and knew not fear. The next day the three hunters visited the lake and saw the same fair creature at the foot of the cliff beyond the water, clothed in the skins of wild animals.

They returned to the valley and their story was widely circulated. A newspaper correspondent accompanied by some daring cowboys, decided to trace the rumor to its fountain head. They found a beautiful, untrodden, grassy valley of an area of 100 acres around two sides of what is known on Surveyor's maps as Moose Lake. Few white men have ever passed through the dense forest to explore the sheltered valley. At length steps to the door of the subterranean home. They hallooed. An echo answered. There was a stir and a frightful visage was seen, with tangled strings of gray hair dangling with blinking, watery red eyes glaring as a feeble, trembling Indian tottered forward. His attitude was that of defiance as he placed himself in the door of his dungeon but the withered form and palsied arm were but a miserable caricature of the warrior of 50 years ago. He was pushed aside.

The reckless men rushed forward guided by a torch through a winding tunnel into a great cave with many angular recesses and uneven roof and walls. Corners and columns divided the vast interior into apartments. In one was a well developed maiden of twelve in convulsions of fright. The torch dazzled her sight. She turned her face from the intruders and sobbed pitifully. They did not approach her but turned away and passed from her presence filled with sorrow and moved with sympathy, which her intense emotion seemed to communicate to even these thoughtless young men of the plains. The withering old guardian was found to be dumb. (Major A.F. Parker 1887)

Item. They (the Sheepeaters) are seldom seen. They occasionally venture into a camp of Chinese miners,
and clean it up. When hunted by the military, they disappear, and are not heard of any more that season. (R.G. Bailey 1935)

Item. Far up on the Wyoming border long ago I once came upon evidences of the last contact between wild, free-living Indians and the people who were to replace them. Scattered in sand blowouts by the Union Pacific right of way, hidden in arroyos running out of mountain uplifts, were exposed chipped splinters which were not the flints of an earlier period, but instead were the products of stone-age techniques exerted upon the discards of white civilization. Trade hoes had been ground into iron arrowheads now slowly rusting away in disuse. Lying about in the sand were what at first glance appeared to be stones but on closer examination proved to be fragments of opaque glass containers of late-nineteenth-century salves and potions which had still been current in my childhood. Here, scavenged from military dumps, these broken remnants of the white man's world had been reworked by pressure flaking back into the hide scrapers and knives of the last bison hunters. Here under the timeless High Plains sunlight, the primitives had tried to reshape the new materials of another age than their own into forms they could comprehend. One could visualize, with only a slight effort, an impoverished dying band, crouched in a coulee turning their few gleanings over and over, trying hard to think how they might be readapted into the practical ways of the hunters. (Loren Eisely, All the Strange Hours, 1975; submitted by Emmett Stone)

J.O. Stone added to his collection for over forty years.
The evidence grew steadily in quantity and persuasiveness.
The reports of sightings of the huge and hairy Big Foot merely added to Jack's conviction that the Sheepeaters had retained their special talents. Most of the sightings, as everyone knew, were hoaxes, and those that seemed plausible were generally made at night. Some besotted deer hunter would look up from his campfire, see faintly the erect form of a fur covered creature, and in drunken panic, spatter the hillside with bullets and the news media with wild stories. These incidents could easily be explained. It was a fact
that the Sheepeaters dressed in robes made of the fur of rabbits and wolves. It was a fact that they, as any humans, stood erect. And, as Jack was convinced, it was most probable that the Sheepeaters had become of necessity a nocturnal people, for what white man ventures very far from his cabin or campfire in the middle of the wilderness night? And, as for the sasquatch's reputed gigantic size, did not the Shoshoni chief Nampuh of the Boise River region stand six foot, eight and one half inches tall, weigh over 300 pounds, and cover great distances on his feet that measured seventeen and one half inches from heel to toe? Did not the word "Nampuh" mean "Big Foot" in the Shoshoni language?

In 1962, Sheepeater Jack came into possession of the recently published book, *Ishi*, which dealt with the story of the last survivor of the last free tribe of California Indians. Broken hearted and starving, Ishi walked out of the Mt. Lassen foothills in 1911 and ended for ever the era of the Indian in California. In 1911, the white population of California numbered more than that of Idaho in 1962. And present day central Idaho compares more favorably with the California of the Forty-Niners than that of the settled and industrious state of 1911. In fact, the original habitat of the Sheepeater Indians remains today uninhabited by whites. Most of it is federally designated wilderness. From the Hell's Canyon of the Snake and the Seven Devils Mountains on the Oregon border, the Sheepeaters' domain stretches through the untouched vastness of the Salmon River Country into the Tetons and Wind River Mountains of Wyoming.
Without doubt, this comprises the single largest, most wild and inaccessible region in the United States.

The California Indian, Ishi, was the last of a tribe that through its thirty and more years of concealment had dwindled down to a dozen individuals, then five, then finally Ishi alone. The Salmon River Sheepeaters of 1962 were subject to the same dangers that had eventually destroyed Ishi's tribe. The dams of the lower Snake River had nearly ended the annual salmon run. The ever-increasing hordes of big game hunters were slaughtering and dispersing the once great herds of elk, deer, moose, antelope, mountain goat, and big horn sheep. Rafting the forks of the Salmon had become so popular a sport that every summer families such as the Kennedy's disrupted the roaring solitude of the abysmal canyons. In the 1960's, the same Salmon River that had turned back Lewis and Clark was being rediscovered by Americans. The last day of the Sheepeaters was fast approaching.

Jack Stone realized this. On August 10, 1962, he loaded up the two burros he'd been given by a local rancher and headed out over the Lick Creek Summit. He carried with him such items as he thought the Sheepeaters might be willing to barter for: blankets, beads, mirrors, tobacco, whiskey, fishing lures, camouflage netting, mosquito dope, sun glasses, candy bars, a hula hoop, and a yo-yo. Time was wasting. Very few members, perhaps less than a dozen, remained of the tribe and Jack had to find them. He also carried a Model 94 Winchester 30-30. He figured the Indians might still be hostiles. If they
wouldn't come along peaceable, he was to use a Westerner's perogative and kill them. Jack Odysseus Stone was 85 years old. He felt that this was to be his final summer. He was bound by an ancient code of the West. He could not allow the last of the wild Indians to outlive the last of the mountaineers.

A Forest Service trail crew reported seeing Jack in the Chamberlain Basin on August 22nd. The first snow of the winter fell on August 29th. Jack was never seen again.
VIII.

IN THE LIGHTNING BAR

At 10:30, the sun had been down an hour and the sky was still light. Under the low firs and around the houses of town, it was cool now and very dark; but the early summer sky held on, light green against the dark ridge of ponderosa to the west. Only the few cirrus clouds, high golden horse-tails in the south, remained after what had been a cloudy day. All the cumulus had gone with the sun.

It was still too early in summer to count on thunder-storms. The barn swallows slowly gave way to brown bats, silently crossing the darkening air. A cool wind began to blow in from the west. Emmett and Annalee walked down Highway 55, the main street of McCall. They were talking. She wouldn't hold hands with him - there was some reason - so he stuffed his into his pockets. She then placed her hand lightly on the inside of his elbow. Emmett pressed her
hand against his side.

"I give all the credit to my horse," Annalee was saying. "I couldn't have won without him."

"You would've had to run awfully fast," Emmett said. "The other girls deserved it as much as I did, I know. But my horse turned the trick. Old Scratch."

"That's some horse."

"Old Scratch. And I give him all the credit."

"You couldn't have won without him."

The evening turned suddenly cooler and Emmett hunched his shoulders, stopped walking, and turned to Annalee. He smiled and gently tugged at her pigtails. She quit talking and looked up and down the road. Emmett grinned. We are alone now.

"We'll go to the Lightning," she decided.

Alone. "All right." He put his arm around her shoulder, but she ducked out of it and ran across the street. She stood there on the corner, in her short cut-off Levi's and blue jacket, her knees pressed together against the cold. She had kept out of Emmett's reach all evening.

"Come on," she called. "I'm cold."

Emmett followed at a short distance. THE LIGHTNING, the sign read. Come On In and Get Grounded. She waited for him to open the door, hopping up and down and rubbing her palms together. She is cold. And he swung open the door. They walked through into the Lightning Bar, the place long and dimly lit by the beer signs along the walls: Coors, Hamms, Olympia. It was smokey and dark. A high oak bar crowded the
the length of one wall and tables of formica and chrome lined the other. Seven men were seated around the table nearest the door. Some played poker while the others drank and watched. Butch Harmon sucked on a Dr. Pepper. The bartender was picking up the empty beer cans, checking each man's hand as he moved around the table.

Harry Kendrick looked up at Emmett and Annalee.

"Well, well. The drugstore cowboy and the rodeo queen. Whatcha know, kid?"


A few of the men laughed. "Looks like you know what you want," Isaac said. He spat snoose into a beer can.

Annalee smiled. She made a pistol with her index finger and shot Isaac. She blew away the smoke.

"C'mon, Annalee," Emmett said.

The plug to the jukebox had been pulled out of its socket, making the end of the room darker than the rest. There was a half full pitcher of beer down at the far end of the bar. Taking Annalee by the elbow, Emmett tried to guide her towards the back. She shook herself free and walked on ahead of him. He watched the Levi's patch on her jeans bounce. There is some reason.

"Hey," Emmett said. "Maybe somebody left us that beer." They sat up on two stools near the pitcher. He called down to the bartender. "Hey, Willard. Somebody leave this beer?"

Willard was trying to pry a baked potato out of his
new microwave oven. "The dude's gone to the can. You'll have to buy your own... Spud!" he muttered. "Be with you in a minute."

"Bring two with you."

Emmett laid a dollar up on the bar. He put his arm around Annalee. "How about a kiss?" he asked.

Annalee smiled. "You sure have class," she said. "You showing off to your buddies?"

Who's showing off? "They aren't watching," he said.

He wanted to look into Annalee's eyes, but he couldn't. He was afraid she would ask him what he was staring at. He looked across the bar to the wall above the mirror where there hung a large painting entitled "Custer's Last Fight." A blue and red Olympia Beer clock illuminated the print. There stood General Custer, the last bluecoat alive on the flickering Little Big Horn as the neon Sioux closed in.

"I thought that was supposed to be Custer's last stand," he said.

"That's what it says."

"No. It doesn't. It says Custer's last fight, not stand."

Annalee looked at the title. "What difference does it make?"

Emmett thought a moment. "Yeah," he said. "Still, stand just sounds better."

Willard brought them their beers. He held Emmett's coin up to the light. "Damned iron dollars," he said.

Emmett held up his glass. "To Custer's Last Stand,"
he said.
"To all last stands." Willard said.
"To the Indians," Annalee said.
"Yeah," said Emmett, "to the goddamn Indians."
Willard went back to his oven. "To silver dollars," he chanted. "To nickel beers and lead balloons."
Annalee laughed. "Your grandpa was an Indian fighter, wasn't he? Didn't he get chased by Indians once?"
"Yeah. By the Sheepeaters."
"How many?"
"Twenty." Emmett took a drink. Thirty?
"Did they scalp him?"
"No. He got away. He got himself a scalp though."
"An Indian's scalp?"
"No. A white man's. He bought it from a Nez Perce in Lewiston who got it from a Blood in Calgary."
"What did it look like?"
"It was kind of black and gray."
"But what did it look like? A mule's tail? A goat's beard?"
"You couldn't really tell," Emmett said. "He had it held together with scotch tape."
Annalee giggled. "Your grandpa was a crazy old man."
He was tough. He knew who he was. "He was one of a kind," Emmett said.
"Yeah. Like you're one of a kind. You want to be just like your grandfather."
"Someday. Someday, I'd like to be a good old man."
Annalee poked him in the ribs. "You'd make a pretty good old man right now."

The door under the Hamm's Beer sign opened and Billy Mink walked into the bar room. He wore a cowboy hat and a soiled football jersey with the number 69 stenciled across its front. He came over to the bar and sat on the stool next to Annalee. Billy was drunk. His low slung eyes looked as if they were swollen with sleep. They were slightly crossed. Billy took up the pitcher and poured himself a beer, spilling half of it onto the bar.

"Fuck," he grunted, and he spread the spilled beer around with his palm.

"Such language," said Annalee.

Billy looked at her, surprised. "Annalee?" he asked.

"Billy?" Annalee mocked him, open mouthed. She turned to Emmett. "Emmett?" she said.

Billy began to smile. "Why, Annalee," he said.

"Why, Billy."

"Come on, Annalee," Emmett said. "Drink up. Let's go check out Lardo's."

"Why, Emmett."

"Come on now."

Billy grabbed his pitcher. "Hold on," he said. He splashed beer into their glasses.

"On me," he said.

"And on my arm," Annalee told him.

Emmett sat back down. What now? "Thanks," he said. "But then we'll have to be going."
Billy shook his head. "No," he said. "Name's William Mink . . . With a 'k'."

"We know who you are, Billy," Annalee said. "You're a creep."

Billy smiled drunkenly at Emmett. "Some people spell it with a 'g'," he said, shrugging.

Across the bar, Custer stood off the Sioux. Emmett smiled back at Billy. "I'm Emmett Stone," he said, finally. "With two 't's," Annalee added.

Ah, God.

"... And this is Annalee."

"It's Miss Wester." she said, "to both of you."

Billy accepted the comment pleasantly. "To both of you," he toasted.

Ah, diplomacy. Emmett offered Billy his hand to shake.

Billy set down his glass. He regarded Emmett slyly. It seemed he was having a good time, but he suspected they were making fun of him. He looked at Emmett's offered hand.

"Oh, no, you don't," he said, flexing his own right hand. "Just about busted mine in a fight last night in Nyssa."

"We can see you're all swole up." Annalee said.

Billy smiled at her for a second, considering, and then he looked back at Emmett. "You know, I love to fight," he said. "You're kind of a tough guy too, ain't ya?"

Emmett hesitated.

"You bet he's tough," Annalee said. "Someday he'll be his own grandpa."
... But I never saw anything in fighting."

Emmett swallowed. I said that wrong.

Billy nodded, smiling, his acne scars becoming deep shadows in the neon light. "I'm talking about that," he said, pointing to Emmett's belt. "What make of knife you got in that holster there?"

"Oh . . . It's a Buck. Got it for graduation."

"I never finished high school. Give me a look at it. What do you carry it into bars for? Protection? A hard guy sees that and you're asking for it."

"No. I need it for work. And I just . . . "What? I just what? " . . . uh, leave it on my belt the rest of the time."

"He's a smokejumper," Annalee said.

"You said he was tough." Billy held out his hand.

"Let me look at it."

"Smokejumpers don't lend their tools out," she said.

"We've got to be going," Emmett said.

"Hold on. You still got your beer to finish." Billy kept smiling. "And you're not planning on using your knife in the next few minutes, are you?"

Emmett shrugged. He handed him the knife. "It's a Buck. You've seen them before."

"A folding knife, hunh? And engraved with your name and address. That's nice. But you shouldn't put your name on a knife. Never know where you might leave it." Billy opened the blade. The stainless steel flashed, shining red and blue in the light from the beer sign. "Sharp, too." he
said. "You sharpen it yourself?"

"I take it to Eby's. They have a special machine."

Annalee whispered to Emmett. "Hey, stupid. You just gave him your knife."

Emmett couldn't look at her.

"Sharp," Billy said. "You can cut bone with a blade like this. You could kill with this." He felt the edge, smiling, friendly. "Here," he said. He put the knife down and poured Emmett and Annalee some more beer. "It's on me," he said.

"Give me his knife." Annalee said.

Billy frowned, but he ignored her. "I weigh 230," he said to Emmett. "Stripped. I used to weigh 260. But little guys kept picking on me. Little guys like you. You know, they wanted to say they beat up a big guy? So, I lost me thirty pounds and learned boxing and karate. I was going to take judo and kung fu, too, but the little guys don't bother me anymore. I mean, I still fight. I love to fight. I love it. But I don't fight the little guys. What's it prove?"

"Nothing," Emmett said.

Annalee grabbed for the knife, but Billy held it away from her.

"Nothing," he said. "Picking on little guys. That's like that crazy down in Boise who started stabbing that college girl. Just stabbing to kill her. I mean she was helpless. I wished I'd have been there. You know, I would have killed that guy. That's what he deserves. Instant
death. God. I wish I would have been there." He nodded.

"I'm glad I wasn't," Annalee said. "I wish you were there and that girl wasn't. Then you two killers could have fought it out."

Billy looked at her. He didn't understand.

"You know, Annalee?" he said. "Today I started loving you again." He finished his glass of beer. Tears came to his eyes as he wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

"Got to see a man about a horse," he said. He got down from his stool and walked off to the men's room.

Emmett and Annalee watched him push his way through the door.

"Billy has a small bladder," she said.

"And he's started loving you again," Emmett said. "He sounds serious. He's a spooky dude, is what he is."

"Love." Annalee laughed. "He wants to get married, move back to Parma, and kick his stepmother out of the house."

"Then why did you hang out with him?"

"Because he came to see me," she said. "And because he could sit on a hillside, howl like a coyote, and have the whole other hillside answer him back. I loved it when he did that." She looked up at the poster. "And that house in Parma is nice. Looking down onto Snake River?"

She poured herself another beer out of Billy's pitcher.

"Hey," Emmett said. "I thought we were going to leave."

"He's got your knife, doesn't he?" She raised her eyebrows and smiled at him over the rim of the glass.

Emmett looked up at the Last Fight. Custer wasn't the
last to fall. "You could stand living with that nut?" he asked.

"I put up with worse now."

Emmett gritted his teeth. I am being played with. "Just what do you put up with?" he asked. Me?

Annalee was smiling, like Billy: not friendly, but not exactly evil. "I put up with," she said. "And I do without."

"Thanks," Emmett said. "I understand now."

Games. The Sioux were running circles around General Custer. The Indians aren't evil, George. Find out the rules or go home. Or get scalped.

"You know he's got your knife," she said.

"Yeah. He's got my knife and I've got his girl. Is that a fair trade? I don't know. I think I want my knife back."

"I think I want to leave."

"Yeah."

"Well, why'd you give it to him?"

"He asked for it."

"You'd give anything to anyone who asked for it? You know Billy's weird. He's on probation now for breaking somebody's jaw."

Emmett leaned his forehead into his palm. But the rules aren't exactly clear. "And you hang out with him because he has a nice house?" Emmett watched the restroom door. Could I get my knife back tomorrow?

Annalee began buttoning her jacket. "I don't hang out
with him. I came here with you didn't I?"

"Sure." Emmett snapped down the flap on his empty knife holster. "What's wrong with Mink? He getting sick in there?"

"Christ. How should I know? I never went to the bathroom with him.

"I bet."

Annalee buttoned her jacket to her throat. "You're sure someone to talk," she said. She looked very young, flushed. The perspiration shone on her forehead as she stared ahead. Emmett watched her. She doesn't want to leave me. She is young. Seventeen? Eighteen? Emmett realized she was probably too young to be drinking.

"I guess I'll be going," she said. "This is certainly nowhere."

"Wait until I get my knife."

"Hah. Better buy yourself a new one."

"Well, what the hell's wrong with Mink?"

The pay phone rang. The bartender came around the bar and answered it.

"I'm ready to leave," Annalee said.

"O.K."

Willard cupped his hand over the phone. "Anybody know where Doc Leland is?" he called. "They've had a bad wreck in the Goose Creek canyon."

Harry Kendrick jumped up from the poker game.

"An accident!" he shouted. He shook so badly his feet shuffled. "Ah, that Goose Creek is a bad grade. One of the
worst in all Idaho." He pulled on his down vest and clapped his hands. "I'll go on down and check it out. Where's the doc?"

"I don't know," Willard said.

Kendrick bolted out the door. Butch Harmon moved into his chair at the table. Since his accident, Butch made most of his money playing poker. He had the perfect face for poker, always delighted and confused by each new hand. Butch bet big. And no one believed he knew what he was doing.

Emmett couldn't help looking again at the Custer massacre. There were a lot of people in that painting. If I were there I would be the first to fall.

"I can get my knife later," he told Annalee. "Let's go."

She didn't answer. She was tearing a paper coaster into little bits.

"Mink's just drunk. I'll talk to him when he's sober."

Annalee turned to him. "Elaine said you were number one and six on that train," she said.

Emmett looked for himself in the massacre. Elaine Barrett. Lying in the bed of Bill Moody's pickup, drunk on peppermint schnapps, Emmett's first and second dashes at manhood. Waiting with the others. Throwing rocks into the river. God, he had been numbers one and six. He remembered Elaine was humming the same tune both times. What was it? 'Going to The Chapel?' And Moses claimed to have been second and fifth, although there were only five boys in all.
He finished his stale beer. "She was pretty drunk," he said.

"Were you?"


"You know she joined the Air Force after that."

Billy Mink came back from the restroom. Emmett noticed a heavy odor of Brut. Billy had washed. His hair was wet and combed.

Annalee whistled. "Phew!"

Billy squinted at Emmett. A trickle of water ran from his head down his forehead and along his nose. "I've just been thinking," he said, slowly. "I'm not going to fight you. Women ain't worth it."

"That's right," Annalee said. "Let him have his knife."

"Not so fast. I got words to say. You know, I seen my dad yesterday."

Billy pulled Emmett's knife from his hip pocket, opened it, and rotated the blade in the light. "And you know, he says that as far as he's concerned, I'm dead. He says he doesn't want nothing to do with me because, as far as he is concerned, I am dead. His own son. Shit. He gives my sister money for college and doesn't expect none of it back. He gives my mom and my stepmom all the money they want. But me, I'm dead."

"That's too bad, Billy," Annalee said.

The last drink lay heavy in Emmett's stomach. He burped into his hand.

"Hey!" Billy said. "What's that? What you making a
fist for?"

"He was just burping," Annalee said. "You know . . . Belch?"

"Well, I don't like it. Could be getting ready to punch me." Billy narrowed his eyes at Annalee and snorted, a face quivering. "Women," he said. He shook his head and laughed softly, wheezing. "That's another thing. See? She's trying to get us to fight. Women will do that. Guys'11 fight over women. Does that prove anything?"

"No," Emmett said.

"No. How fucking stupid. They ain't worth it. Except maybe when a chick's getting hurt. Like that girl in Boise. But women are helpless, you know. I had to punch a guy out once because he had this chick by the neck. Like this . . . ." Looking at Emmett, he put his hands around Annalee's throat.

"Watch it, Billy," she said.

"Yeah. Come on. Cut it out."

Billy let go of Annalee and he eyed Emmett warily.

"Don't get shook," he said. "You're kind of jumpy, aren't you?" He thought a moment. "You know, I don't know. I don't fight little guys any more unless I think they can take me. Now, you, you might be able to take me."

"Let's go, Emmett."

"We're going. Come on. Let me have my knife."

"Sure thing," Billy said, but he kept the knife out of Emmett's reach. "You know, I wonder what kind of blade that crazy used on that girl down in Boise. Betcha it wasn't
a Buck." He threw a sidelong glance at Annalee. "He would've killed her with a Buck."

Annalee turned on her stool towards Emmett and took his hand. She was watching the knife. Her hand was cold, her face was partially turned towards Emmett, but her eyes were on the knife. He was afraid she would look at him and that would make him do something he didn't expect of himself. He tasted salt and wiped the sweat from his upper lip.

"Here," he said, and held out his hand for his knife.

"Just a minute," Billy said. He examined the knife again. "Emmett Stone," he read the inscription. "Smokejumpers, McCall, Idaho. You are tough one aren't you?"

Emmett glanced behind himself. The men were still at the table. They were matching dice with the bartender to see who would feed the jukebox. Butch had a large stack of chips in front of him. God. God. Emmett slid his change off the bar.

"My knife," he said.

Billy looked up. He had a question in his eyes. "You know that crazy?" he asked. "If he'd just done like this . . . ."

His left hand shot around and caught Annalee under the chin. She stiffened, coughing, arching her back. She clutched at his wrist.

"No!" Emmett yelled. He grabbed the knife and, twisting it, shoved it back. He felt the hardness of bones of his hand as the blade cut into his palm. He screamed and pushed harder. The move knocked Billy off balance and he let go of
Annalee and tried to catch the bar rail as he toppled over backwards. He grabbed the pitcher of beer instead and fell with it and his barstool to the floor.

He dropped the knife as he hit. Emmett jumped to his feet. He pulled Annalee off her stool and pushed her towards the door. "Let's go," he said. He turned to grab the knife, but Billy already held it in his hand.

He glared up at Emmett. "You sonabitch," he hissed. Emmett looked around for help. He picked up a stool. Billy scrambled up off his knees, but he slipped in the beer and crashed to the floor.

He started to get up again but fell back, heaving. "What?" he muttered. He spread the spilled beer around with his hand.

Everyone in the bar seemed to get there at that moment. Someone helped Willard lift Billy into a chair. The knife's wooden handle slanted out of the middle of his stomach, between the six and the nine on his jersey. The blood had already stained much of his shirt, shiny and black around the knife. Billy coughed and the blade slipped out of him, knife clattering to the floor. He stared at the blood. It was soaking into the crotch of his Levi's. He looked surprised.

"I've been shot!" he said.

"No. You been stabbed," Willard told him. He was stuffing his bar rag into the wound. "Somebody get on the phone there and call Doc Leland."

"Where is he?" someone asked.

"And we'll need a dime, Willard. The bar ought to pay."
Emmett clenched his fist to stop the bleeding. He saw Annalee run out the door and he started to go after her, but Butch stopped him. Butch handed him his Dr. Pepper. "Nngdamn!" he said. "nnnyou shot a mnman."

"No, I didn't. I stabbed him."

"Nnnyah?"

"No! I mean he stabbed himself."

"Nyeah?"

Butch winked at him.

The men laid Billy Mink down on a table. Emmett stood at the edge of the crowd, wondering if he shouldn't just leave.

"Holy God, I'm in trouble," Billy whimpered.

"Not too bad," Willard told him. "You just lost a little slice of your fat here." He showed the piece of pink flesh to the others. Willard had brought a bottle of Everclear over from under the bar. He poured some over the rag sticking from Billy's stomach.

Billy started crying. "You gotta let me go," he whined. "I'm on probation. They'll send me in for this for sure."

"That's a fact," someone said.

Emmett sat up on a stool at the bar. His forearm ached. He felt he had nothing really to do with the group centered around Billy. Their attention had turned inward, away from him. Billy Mink had been stabbed - or shot - and by whom had little to do with it. Emmett looked up at Custer's fight and at himself in the mirror. He looked scared. Custer looked brave. That is a painting, though.
This is a mirror. Grampa was attacked by Indians once. Sheepeaters. Somewhere between McCall and the Big Lost River. Once he said it was in the Big Horn Crags, once on the ridge above Cave Creek. I believe him to a point: there were Indians; there are wild Indians still. No more than a Dozen per haps. But as Savag & Wily as a Hundred Wofereen.


"He fell on the knife," Emmett said.

Butch winked again.

Billy lay on the table, whimpering.

"Best we get this matter straightened out," Willard was saying. "I don't want the sheriff watching my place. Let's see. We'll say this kid fell on his knife while no one was watching. That is, if anybody asks." He turned to Emmett. "How's that for a story, Stone?"

Let the Poltroon speke for Hisself.

"Let's say we all seen him do it," someone said. The men laughed. Everyone was winking at Emmett.

"But that's how it happened," Billy said. "Didn't it?"

Emmett nodded. Butch poked him in the ribs.

"Sure enough," Willard said. "Now you best get yourself over to the clinic. I'll spread some sawdust on the floor."

Doc Leland and his wife came into the bar. They were
dressed in look-alike corduroy outfits.

"Where's this kid who's been stabbed?" the doctor asked.

"Nobody's been stabbed," Willard said. "This kid just fell on his knife."

"That's what the girl said." Doc Leland set down his medical bag next to the table. "Let's take a look." He yanked the rag from Billy's stomach.

Billy cried out.

"Nasty," the doctor said. "We ought to take out some of this fat while you're opened up."

"Leave it in," Billy said. "I'm not fat."

"Well, you're too big to carry. Can you walk? We'll go over to the clinic and sew you up." He gave Billy a clean compress to hold against the wound. He turned to his wife. "You take the pickup on home, Stella. I'll be late."

"Do you know about the wreck on Goose Creek?" Willard asked.

The doctor nodded. "The ambulance is bringing them in."

Emmett resigned himself from the action. This is over. Why am I still here?

Two men helped Billy Mink out the door. The others went back to their table, calling for peanuts and more beer. Stella Leland came over to Emmett and Butch.

"Well, if it isn't the Gold Dust Twins," she said.

Her tight corduroy jacket was buttoned three up from the waist, her ruffled blouse three down from the top. She stood
looking from Emmett to Butch and back again. "Nice to see you all," she said.

Butch blushed and walked back to the poker table. Stella smiled after him.

"He's such a sweet boy," she said to Emmett. "Good Lord! What has happened to your hand?"

Emmett looked up at the clock. The blue and red neon rings kept it just out of focus. He squinted. The clock read 11:45.

But that's bar time: fifteen minutes short. As all time is short. Frozen into moments as thin and clear as autumn ice. General Custer still battles the Sioux. Gramps is still lost in the woods. And I am still in this bar.

"Open your hand, honey. Let me help you."

And when I open my hand? Will this all be over? O, Nothing Lasts. No Thing. Save jerkied Meat, Pemican, Pox & the Rocky Mountains. And Gramps. At least he lasted longer than most. Ah, you pilgrim. The free trapping days will last you twenty years, the open range, fifteen. Emmett watched the massacre on the wall. In three days, he would be a year older.

"Honey? Are you all right? Let me wrap this up and I'll take you home."

Emmett felt his heart beating in his hand. Stella Leland dressed the wound with iodine, closing his hand over a clean compress with a towel that advertised the Lightning Bar. "THE LIGHTNING," it said. "Happy Hour 5-6. Two stikes for the price of one."
IX.

COLTER'S LUCK
(part one)

& the Bar had gon Cold.

Emmett stood. Shivering. I am shivering.

It was on a cold night like this, cold and starlit and quiet as a cougar's dance. 1899. Sheepeater Jack crawled out of that bear den and stood shivering on the banks of Big Creek. A starlit night and he was cold, so cold he could hear his worn down bones knock about inside himself. A muffled chatter. He stood, considering it all. He was stark naked. The water trickled through the beaver dam. Snow fell from the boughs of a Doug fir. The wind was on the ridge. And the bear had gone cold.

Emmett unlaced his boots with his good hand. He heard the whush of nighthawks seining the air, the hum of semi's on the highway. The bandage on his cut hand was soaked now and
it had begun to unravel. Jesus. The bootlaces tied in wet squareknots and his good hand shaking and numb. Ah, pilgrim. But better cold and clattering than cold and dead, be sure of that. Be sure that in 1899 a dozen Sheepeater Indians had chased Jack Stone unknown miles through the snow and lodgepole until he dove into that hole in the ground and found sweet sanctuary in the musky den. Sweet God. Shar'd with me Ursa's Abode. Sweet Jesus. Emmett ached. I agued into my Bones. Please share with me. She is a strange woman.

Sheepeater Jack hid in the bear den while the Indians beat brush outside. Ah. And it was big bear, big medicine, and as big a story to tell as the one about the frothy boilings in the Yellowstone, the geyser that told time, the bubbling tar springs, the canyon that stank of giant wolverine. Ah. But no bigger than Bridger's stuffings of bloated glory or Colter's crazy run. Pilgrim! A sight truer, too: They had me by the ShortHars. I war in ther Cache to choose me a RamHorn Bow. When, suden, a Wisper & there they were. THER THEY WERE! Dresed in Fur Quilts & Goat Har Hats. The young braves called for killing Jack, an old man said eat him. Others would allow the old woman her way. But the headman stopped them. The Sheepeaters survived as peaceful nonexistants, by being the invisible, the Cavers, the wild men of the mountains. There would be no murder. Jack Stone was stripped, laughed at, and turned out of the thicket. Even white men could die without help. Jack Stone would die by himself. The Sheepeaters shimmered and vanished.
Lik a WaturDog! Like Smoke. Here They wer. Ther they wer not. & I left Nakd to find me a Maker. No Fofarraw. Bare & Clean. If I wer found, I wer found in Spring Dead. Bait for Crows. Bone & Har. Chipimons starring out of each Eyee Hole. There I wer. There I wer. Destituted. It is a Chore to Look Death in her Face when One is not Decent. Humorous almost.

Altho I wer as Good as Gon Beaver, the Indins still watched me I knew. The ShepEters ar Watchers. & I wud not die the Death they wanted. I wud die a Montan Man. So I resort to Inselt. To Sully & Slite. Shepeters are a Tuchy Clan they cannot stand a Rib. So I jibed out. Sioux Puppys!!!I screamed. I herd them mermer. Baby Ducks!!I screamed. An Arra clept my Ear. Ther! I had won me a Buck's anger. I wud hav my Wish, the Death of a Montaneer. GrasHopperEters!!!!I screamed & the bresh Burst with Savags & I was running. I was running yes dont ast me why. DONT AST ME WHY. If I wud laf Deth in her Face, it was over my Shoulder Running. Bolting, headlong, down the ridge and off the rimrock cliff. Jack fell, thirty feet, into a bank of fresh broken snow. He sank up to his neck and stopped. He was looking out across the canyon now. He saw an eagle riding a thermal. A young golden. A sight that Pluck'd the Strings of my Heart. Spring was on her way. He turned his head and saw the Indians clambering down the cliff. He was stuck. He looked back out over the canyon and listened to the footfalls behind him. His coup was close. & I wushed I wer the Egle. All tho I genrally favor Panthers.
But the snowbank began to quake. The canyon turned up at him, the snow gave way, letting loose from the mountain and dropping away. Jack with it, riding the avalanche like an Owyhee Islander riding a wave. Swimming, naked, head up and face downhill, Jack Stone rode the avalanche until it thundered to a stop in the ravine.

He dug his way out of the snow. His skin had been burned raw and bleeding by the friction. He turned and looked back upslope. The Sheepeater bucks were somewhere above him, picking their way through the cornices and lava. & this Pilgrims boudins wer surely strewn.

Jack headed for the Salmon, down Cave Creek. He slogged his way through drifts until he was clear of the deep snow, then he slid in a broken lope through the scree to the bottom. He sprinted across a beaver dam near the mouth of Cave Creek and came to the junction with Big Creek. The cliffs were sheer, the creek swollen. The only way out was up, and on up the Indians were on their way down. Jack looked around. As trapper, hunter, Indian fighter, and avalanche rider, Jack Stone believed in the almighty accident, in fair fortune, in keeping his nose to the wind and his hair on his head. Yet I also beleve in Fate. Thar ar things that just Happen.

Emmett Stone - smokejumper, bullrider, knife fighter, snooze juicer, ewe milker, and fancy dancer - leaned against the cornerjack and held his sopping pantlegs away from his skin. I am cold. He shivered. And miserable. And so confused he had to check the river's flow to tell
which way was town. The water was as dark as the night: no stars, no reflections. The place smelled of fish and sheep. It's either that way or that way. Jesus, this is some evening.

Emmett took off his clothes again. There was no breeze and he was warmer without them, Grandpa be damned. Only Emmett's socks had stayed dry during his time in the river. Good God, there ought to be a sign at both ends of that bridge. "Warning! Cross brige at yer owen risk. Singed Harley Stricken, Prop." Or a bigger hole to fall through. Emmett felt of his nose. He had barked it as he fell through the planking. God, it is a simple case of fate. He finished with his boots and gathered his clothes in his arms. When he got back to town, Emmett would have to take off his boots again to get his pants on. Fate again. Fate. Fate. He began walking down the road.

I shud not say Fate. It is doom that Shapes ar Lives. Doom & the Quist for Beaver. Doom & a Woman Eyees. Dooms & Indins & Goverments. There was a down timber up against the bank. Jack decided he would try to float to safety. He took hold of a branch and jerked the log free. There was a great hole behind it, the earth around it torn and disturbed. A bear's den. Occupied. Jack looked back up the canyon and saw the braves scrambling through the rocks. Their warsong fill the air. Jack eased his way into the bear den and pulled the timber back into place. I crept in ther with that Sow & her 2 Cubs & She Awoke. SHE AWOKE. I did not know wher She wud eat me or giv me her Hind Teat.
Emmett came to the town dump. He pulled out his grandfather's pocket watch and checked the time. The radium dial shone weakly through the fogged crystal. The time was stopped at 2:30.

Stella Leland had not driven him home. Instead, she turned the pickup left at the Warren Wagon Road and they headed south toward Big Meadow. She said she wanted to show him something. Emmett sat next to her in the cab of her Chevy pickup and listened to the stereo. Cold air rushed in through the window and Emmett opened the wing to direct more of it to his face. He could smell the heavy odor of sheep. She probably wants to show me the stars, he thought. The sky was now overcast and dark.

When Stella had turned off the main road, he told himself he should have expected it; tonight he was riding his fate. He looked around the cab. This fate was well appointed, the rig outfitted with air conditioner, CB radio, stereo tape deck, and a compass that glowed and floated in the dark. Behind him, two rifles were mounted on the window rack. It seemed they steered south by the compass, the night so dark and the rear end of the pickup jacked up so high that the headlights showed only a short area of gravel road. They turned around at the top of the hill and Stella killed the lights.

"See?" she asked.

Her face glowed blue in after-image from the dash lights, then turned gray against the blackness outside. The image faded, floating upwards.
Emmett peered into the darkness. "See what?"
"The sheep. There, across the meadow."

His night vision still saw white headlights on gravel, fence posts shooting by. He struggled to focus.
"By the campfire there. The sheep."

Emmett saw the fire, a spot of orange across the meadow, illuminating a sheepherder's tent. The sheep stood in blotches of gray nearby. "Yeah," he said. "I see them."

He heard the click of glass against the steering wheel, heard Stella taking a drink: a short, startled insuck of breath followed by a slow sigh. He felt a bottle press against his arm.

"Wild Turkey," Stella said. "My husband's on the board of controllers."

Emmett wiped the bottle's mouth with his forearm and took a good drink. The liquor made him realize how thirsty he was, the sides of his tongue sore against his teeth. He slouched down in the seat and noticed the seat covers were made of sheep skin. He drank again and passed back the bottle. Damned sheep, he thought, competing with game for forage.

"He's never been back to Kentucky," she was saying.
"We give away cases of the stuff at Christmas."

Emmett considered an entire case of Wild Turkey. Would that last until summer?

"That herd of sheep is ours, too. We bought the whole lot from Stringer." The bottle clicked against her teeth.

"Mmmm . . . There's a Basquo named Guillamo running them
for us, a very pretty man of about thirty. He doesn't speak English and hasn't seen his wife in three years."

Stella giggled. Emmett felt her turning towards him. "I bet sheep can't make up for that," she said, "but he doesn't seem to mind."

Emmett imagined himself explaining this all to Moses. We drove out to Big Meadow. She parked the pickup and turned out the lights. She got drunk. She joked about sheep. What'd you do next, Moses asked.

"Things are so free and easy. You just watch the sheep, shoot a few bears and coyotes - there's the excitement - and move the sheep from one meadow, one grassy hillside, to the next. And you know? I wouldn't even wear clothes. Except maybe a white slip and a straw hat. And while I sat watching over the sheep, I would embroider scenes on the slip, scenes from whatever happened that day, a bear coming into camp, blue jays fighting over food, thunderstorms, rainbows . . ." She took another drink. "You know, you're kind of good looking," she said.

Emmett felt the bottle, pressed hard against his stomach. She can't even see me. Her hand was at the base of his neck, pulling at his hair.

"You're a smokejumper, Emmett. How is that? Floating down out of the sky onto a mountain peak, the forest fire blazing, blazing beneath you, the sun setting over the canyons, the eagles, the elk. How is that?"

"That's what it's like."
She drew him forward in the darkness and kissed him wetly on the cheek, her open lips smearing down to his ear. Emmett shifted, trying to keep his hurt hand from being squeezed between them.

"Easy," he said. "I'm wounded."

"Oh, dear. He's hurt!" She held him more tightly. "Have another drink. My husband's a controller. You can have another drink."

Emmett felt the stiffness of her new corduroy against the softness of her breast. He smelled her woman scent and perfume. He thought of Annalee. Where is she now? Home? He felt a sudden full warmth in his loins. He took his drink.

"The smokejumper, alone in the wilderness," Stella said. "The fire is out. The job done. You take a walk by a mountain lake. The fish are rising like birds."

The warmth moved to his stomach with the whiskey. He drank again. Ah, pilgrim. A black cloud rises over the canyon rim. The mosquitoes come out. It begins to rain. You can't find any viz-queen to make a hooch. Yes. The fire is out and you forgot matches. Misery. Misery. Swede makes you try and use your flint. You forgot your booze.

"You catch four cutthroat trout," she said. "You cook three up for dinner, you are so hungry, but you save one for breakfast."

"That's just what it's like," Emmett said. Just like Hemingway. He lay his head on her lap and moved his hand inside her jacket. Her brassiere was heavily wired and
reinforced. Does Annalee wear a bra? He took back his hand. His eyes more adjusted to the dark, he lay and watched Stella drink. He could faintly see the bubbles rising in the bottle. She is getting herself ready. She is going to do this to herself and to me and probably blame me afterwards.

Stella Leland started crying.

Yes, she is getting herself ready.
Naked except for his boots, Emmett walked into town along the road that ran between the smokejumpers' parachute loft and the high school, passing the graveyard that held the tombstone and the empty plot that awaited the discovery and deliverance of his grandfather's bones. Bury me beneath a pine tree, Gramps had told him, where turpentine from the needles will keep much grass from growing over this pilgrim's head. Three hundred dollars of Emmett's last summer's earnings had gone into buying and inscribing the granite marker. Jack O. Stone, it read, 188? - 19??. Mountain Man and Adventurer Who Lived a Romantic Life Along the River of No Return.
His grandfather had wanted a much longer epitaph, a list of deeds and dreams left as a reminder to Emmett and his sons. Indian Fighter, Trapper, Hunter, Packer, Guide, Discoverer of Stone's Mountain, Stone Creek, Stone Canyon, Stone's Bluff... But Emmett had little money and he already chafed under his workmates' ridicule. Moses understood, and told him that if the cemetery wouldn't take the bigger, unabridged stone, they could erect it in Moses' front yard, which had highway frontage. But Swede would have laughed me out of the country.

Emmett stopped in the schoolyard and clumsily put back on his wet pants. He had lost his shirt along the way. Nighthawks buzzed above him for insects. God, she is a strange woman. There had been a moaning, a slow drunken moan, rising to a full throated wail. Stella Leland had thrown him bodily from her pickup. All men are alike, she'd cried, even the goddamned doctor and that stut-stuttering idiot, Butch Harmon.

"That's all a good girl can expect!" she screamed at him as she slammed the door. "Wham! Bam! Thank you, ma'am. And a mess in her pants." Emmett sat in the grass and watched her drive off through the meadow to the sheepherder's camp. The women in this country. He doubted if she spoke Basque.

Cursing and wondering aloud, Emmett groped and stumbled his way across fences and bogs to the derelict sheep bridge over the Payette River. Crossing the sheep spattered structure, he slipped on some manure and fell through into
the swollen stream. WUS I SURPRISED!! The river swept him along, limp and astonished, a hundred yards before jamming him like driftwood between the roots of a fallen tree.

Lost & Delivered! At once & at the same Time. No chance then to reflect, Yet looking back, an Occurrence fit for Colter. Looking back. Emmett remembered fumbling behind Stella's back for her bra clasp while she finished her bottle and wept. She had leaned forward to help him. It seemed she wanted him to. Then, the moaning, the rising scream, and Bam, he was sitting on the ground.

Emmett came around from behind the school and stood in the dark street. The aviation beacon at the top of the jumper loft flashed out the red seconds. In a young Life, Events go by like a Herd of Buffler. Ther ar Millions. THERE ARE MILLIONS. Pick you one out, Sight in on Her & let fly a Ball wher she Lives. Life & Dooms Events wil make a Riddle of a Man ere a Man maks some Sense of the Riddle.

He stood in the street and he thought of his grandfather: that pilgrim knew the difference between old bull and fat cow. He smiled thinking that and thinking of Annalee. He stood there smiling, wet and shivering, his hand itching as it swole. He remembered his near fight with Billy Mink, the near fight with Stella Leland, the fall through the bridge into the river. Ah, pilgrim. Suddenly, a night-hawk roared past his ear so closely the fright of it made him jump. He crouched in the gravel, stunned, as slowly,
with a profound awkwardness and power, it occurred to him that he was standing in the middle of the sleeping night, in the middle of McCall, in the center of Idaho, where no one knew or gave a good goddamn who he was, what he thought about, whether Sheepeater Jack or his wild Indians ever existed, and that possibly, yes, probably, Annalee didn't even care. Damn that girl, he thought, she's probably sleeping her damn brains out. Emmett turned, sand caking the seat of his pants, and he began walking back up the road, his boot laces trailing behind him.

Don't be denied. Don't you let yourself be denied. Annalee lived south of town in a double-wide mobile home with her father. Emmett increased his stride. I will cut through the sagebrush beyond the boneyard and come up on the trailer from behind. Depending upon how jumpy they are, his grandfather said, come up on everybody from behind. A rock in a sock works best, if you're not certain they're friendly. But if it's a woman you're after, best not to spook her. They are dangerous when startled. Depending upon how jumpy you are, she can have you disarmed in a flash. But don't be denied, Gramps said. Emmett was running, his loose boots slipping on his heels. Denied what? Your satisfaction, Gramps said.

Ah. Emmett slowed to a walk. My satisfaction? He was looking down on the airport now. The two jump planes, the DC-3 and the TwinOtter, sat waiting for dawn. Always know the difference, Gramps said, between a piece of ass and peace of mind. And always know when there's no difference.
It is one of the vagueries of life.

Now among the sagebrush, Emmett sat on a rock from where he could see Annalee's trailer. The night was clearing, the sky brightening. What do I do now? The sage grew in scattered clumps along the hillside. Sagebrush would grow anywhere nothing else would, he'd learned: south slopes, sandy basins, from Kamloops in Canada to as far south as you'd care to go. It makes good fuel for campfires and flash fuel for wildfires. If you pack your hunting clothes in it, sage will hide your scent from game. It works best on mulies and antelope and sometimes an elk will smell it on you and come over to find out what stinks. Emmett watched the trailer. He applied this knowledge to the situation. No. It didn't help.

He sneaked down towards the trailer and stood behind an out building at the edge of the property. Numb and cold, he stood in the clammy tubes of his pantlegs and peered around the shack's corner at the trailer. A light was burning in a window on the end. A stationwagon drove by. Emmett leaned against the shadow of the building, hand painfully in his pocket as he feigned a vagrant right to be there. The wagon drove on. The eastern horizon grayed into view, Nick Peak up like a gunsight against the sky. Emmett extricated his raging hand from his pocket and examined it in the dim light. It was puffed and ragged along the wound. He would have to go see Doc Leland. The doctor would joke. Cut yourself shaving, he asked, winking, just have to cat around, don't
you. Damn right. God damn right. Angry, Emmett looked again at the trailer. Maybe I should go in and scalp them both. Hah. They could blame it on the Indians. He trotted across the yard to one of the end windows where there was a garbage can he could stand on.

Inside, the room was dark. All he could see was a poster on the opposite wall. Two silhouettes walking hand in hand along a foggy beach. "To love love is to love love," the quotation told him. This had to be her room. He took his knife and tapped on the window glass, hoping she could see who it was, thinking don't scream, don't scream.

The window slid open. He fell backwards off the can. "Emmett?" she whispered. "Emmett? Is that you?"

No! He was up, crouching along the dewy aluminum siding. No. No, it's not me!

"Emmett. Come on through. I'll help you."

He checked over his shoulder. Pilgrim!

In through the window, trying not to kick the walls, she pulling him by the elbows, easy, easy, he fell through onto her water bed.

"What the . . ."

"Shhh . . . shhh . . . Daddy will hear you. You're wet! Where have you been?"

"Where have you been?"

"Shhh. Don't talk. How'd you get wet?"

"This bed . . ."

"Shhh! I'll talk. Is it raining?"

"No."
The water sloshed under him, a liquid rise and fall that made him feel adrift, no solidity to hold to. He struggled to his knees and balanced himself with a hand to the wall.

"When'd you get this bed?"

"Last week. It's what made the house crack." She pointed to the ceiling; along the wall over the poster, a space showed four inches of gathering dawn. "The bed's too heavy for the house. The weight made it split along the roof joints. That's why I asked you if it was raining. Dad says it'll rain sure, now we're split in half."

"He's right."

"He was going to fix it, but he's thinking of moving to Riggins. He'd just have to pull it apart again." She giggled. "You're in my bedroom," she said.

Except for the bed, the room was as Emmett had expected. He could have, and should have, stayed outside and imagined it: pale, veneered furniture of the type seen in motels, a saddle and some tack piled in a corner, books, posters, a cheap phonograph and, around an oval mirror, ticket stubs and clippings from the Valley County Star News.

"It's a bedroom," he said.

"Dad doesn't like it. He won't let my friends into it. He says I shouldn't have anything to say to them I couldn't say in our livingroom, where he is, most of the time. He doesn't like anything about me, my hair this long, my friends. He doesn't like my flannel nightgown because it gets caught in the crack of my ass." She squeezed his arm. "I shouldn't
say that. But he's the one who made me stop wearing baby dolls."

Emmett sat down and leaned his back against the wall, the water bed sloshing beneath him. The room was pink now with early morning light and he could see Annalee better. Her ankle-length nightgown was buttoned tight at the throat and in little blue designs, bears ate honey from hives as the bees swirled around them. She was smiling and excited, her hair down to her breasts. Emmett touched her arm. Throughout the room, a low resonant echo rumbled as through a giant coffee can.

"What's that noise?" he asked. "Your water pipes?"
"That's Daddy snoring."
"He's asleep then."
"No. He's awake. He can't sleep because he has this sty in his eye and he has to keep in open. He gets up early every morning and just sits, drinking coffee and watching the sun come up."
"But he's snoring."
"He's awake. He can snore reading the paper. So be quiet."

Her father's rumblings resonated through the room.
"It was worse before the house split," she said. She shrugged, smiling, and laid her hand on his knee. "You sure do look funny," she said. "How did you get so wet?"
"I fell in the river."
She laughed. "That was dumb."
"Well, there was a lot of dumb going around. Where did
you head off to?"

Annalee shrugged. "Home. Oh, I stopped by the lodge for the doctor."

"Anywhere else?"

"I'm too young. They don't let me in anywhere else."

Emmett heard the snoring get up and walk down the hall toward them. Annalee grabbed him, one arm around his shoulders and the other across his mouth. "Shhhhhhh," she whispered, squeezing him, her hand soft on his lip. the flannel of her nightgown feeling hot, smelling of sleep, her hair of shampoo. He settled in close against her; his numbness drew to her warmth. The snoring entered the room next to Annalee's and they heard the man making his morning toilet, the snoring drowned out by bovine groans.

"Kind of gross," she whispered in his ear. "I don't need an alarm clock with him around. It's five o'clock exactly."

The toilet flushed and the snoring shuffled away.

"My God," Annalee said. "You're as cold as a dead fish." Her warm breath in his ear shivered him, though he grew warm again inside.

She rose and took a towel from the closet, returned, and began rubbing his chest and shoulders with hard circling strokes.

"And your hand looks awful. Why didn't you just cold-cock him with the pitcher?"

"I didn't want you to get hurt."

"I was almost killed as it was."
He turned his head away.

"And you're pretty lucky yourself."

The Women of this Country. Contrary to a Depend-

ability. All your Strenth is Needed. But Emmett began to feel tired.

"I'd better be going," he said.

Her expression changed. She rubbed briskly bearing down with her palms, slapping and popping the towel across the back of his neck, boxing his ears, wiping his nose with a force that hurt. Unsmiling she ground the towel into his chest. The friction burned him.

"Hey! Take it easy."

"Nothing's easy," she said. She gave his stomach a final, furious rub. "There," she said. "You're as pink as a baby."

Emmett lay now on his back, she kneeling beside him, swaying with the roll of the water bed, her lips set and determined.

"Can't take it, can you," she said.

"I can take it."

I'm just tired. But Annalee was winning something, her eyes lit with a dim disapproving triumph. She thinks she's winning something. She thinks I'm giving up. Damn her. He looked up at her. She had beaten him and she was about to give him up. He had to stop her, to say something to turn it all around.

"My pants are wet, too." he said.

Annalee's eyes widened. She studies him, her eyebrows
"That's right," she said. "They are." She looked over her shoulder, considered, looked again, and then, leaning forward, she whispered into his ear, "What if Daddy heard?"

"We won't tell him."

She pinched his side. Her forehead lay now against his neck. He let her think it over a moment, then, taking her chin in his hand, he turned and looked at her profile. She wore no make-up now and her eyes seemed more open and even younger. He kissed her cheek.

That startled her. She rubbed off the kiss. "Quit," she said. "You think you're cute."

The water bed rose and fell. Swede was right. She was too young. Emmett took his hand away from her face and slumped against the wall, listening to her father's steady rumble. Fatigue crept into him; his shoulders shuddered with his breathing; his legs ached against the cold.

He sat thinking: now what am I thinking? Nothing, nothing, and she thinking nothing too. Damn her. We will sit until we feel fools and children and then I'll get up and crawl back out that window. Ah! You pilgrim. He turned to watch her, too young, too young. She was picking at the split ends of a strand of her brown hair, taking an end in each hand and pulling the hair in two. She caught him watching, pursed her lips in a second of shame, then sighed in defiant distraction and began searching out another damaged hair.

Damn you. I will think then, in spite of you: think
you are beautiful, too young, too rare, too innocent
even after whatever Billy Mink and . . . Damn! And I am
too tired, too cold; it's too early in the morning. Your
old man is too near.

She turned to him, still defiant.
"Kiss me again," she said.

And too unbelievable. Holding her in all her blue
flannel of bears stealing wild honey, all her dry warmth,
feeling all a man, all the son of a pioneer, he kissed her.

Hallelujah.
"But no funny stuff."
Ah, pilgrim.

Hours later, walking into his own cabin, standing by
the stove, Emmett watched through the window as a boat
pulled a slalom skier out of the water and across the
glassy surface of the lake. The outboard accelerated;
the skier gained his balance and cut suddenly for the out­
side, jumped the white water of the boatwake, and skittered
along sideways, against all impetus, throwing up a long,
sputtering, living arc of water. The skier fell. Emmett
could see the people in the boat laughing. He turned away,
into the main room, and sat in the rocking chair by the
fireplace. He could almost hear his grandmother call out in
her sleep as she had when he was still in highschool, coming
home late after a game.

women you been with tonight? Where you been all these months?"

"No, Grandma. It's me. Emmett."
"We're broke, Jack. You won't find any food."

"It's me. Emmett."

"Don't fool me, Jack."

I ain't fooling you, old woman! We're lucky I'm here. I have been chased after by savages, near eaten by a mother bear, and forced to brave the snows of the Profile to get me home tonight.

& the Bar Awoke. The old chair creaked as it rocked. Emmett felt glad he didn't have to go to work. The sun came through the window, warming. This cabin was his. Gramps' story of Jack among the Sheepeaters ran through his mind.

The Bar awoke as the wild Indans arrived at my Position, comenced to Beat'ng the Bresh & raising a WarWhoop to all Holy Heaven. Like the Woof & the Warp of my Life's dred Tapestry, this Bar & those Indians had me in their Net of Doom & I wud be eat by the Bar, eat by the Savags, or I coud dash from my Blind, div into the River & sink to my Last Rondeyvoo. Sech lofty Thots as a Man might hav whilst waiting for his God I had none. I hav never been Able to think to deeply on that Account as my Lif has been one of Deeds & Dooms rathr than high Thouts & Rustications.

For the Nonce, what Thots had this Grisly Bar wer most esily desry'd. She war both Hungary & Angry. She chomped my shoulder. & I could do anaught but Cry Out. The Savags of corse did hear my Protestations & quick they surounded the Pit. My loud Excamations of Fear & pained Anguish excited the Indians more plenty. How they howled! HOW THEY
HOWLED!! The swart Demons wer ready to take me to ther Tophet, rend open this Pilgrim, pluck mine Heart from my Breast & throw me to ther Calabash. O! O! So lost to ther Digestion for ever & for aye.

But wait. Ther Cheftain probed the Bar's Pit with his Spar & poked thet Mama Grisly wher she lived. She loosed her fearfull Death-Lok on my Sholdr & splintered his Javeline with one awfulld Clamp. She then sprung from her Den, smote the Head Man a horrable Trounce & chased the Sheepeters, scattering in wild Phrensies of Affright, away up the moutain & then she fell Dead. I emerged from my erstwil Toomb, stanched my wound with Snow & felt re-Borne & much better.

Sheepeater Jack then ate the bear's liver raw and retrieved his remaining burrow from where he had it picketed. He skinned the bear, wrapped in it the dead Indian, and with the strength men find only when they are alone and unwatched, he loaded the body upon the burro and began the long trek home. At Long Last, Having left my poor Buro founder'd in Snow, I gained the Profile Summit. Desending the long Slope, my gruesome Cargo became to heavy to restrain & boarding the Indin as a Boy mounts his Tobaggan, I rode it thro snow to the Bottom. In Truth, I admit to enjoying this curius Transport, the upwards Journy having been so tedius. & Little knew I then that after I reached the Wind-Rowed Snows of Long Valleys SpringTime, my fellow Citizens wud cause me to mistate, yea belie & deny my honest Saga. My lone comfort, wich I shall take to my Grave, is the Image
in my Minds Eyee of those Savags, bent so gladfully upon
my Destruction, seeing thet She-Bruin burst full furously
from the Pit, as if Shepeter Jack had been transformed
by Magick.
XI.

BACK COUNTRY FLIGHT

The patrol flight was long and rough. They had been in the air two hours now, covering first the west side of the Payette Forest -- Council Mountain, Cuddy Mountain, Hell's Canyon, Horse Mountain, and the southern Seven Devils -- and then following the main Salmon River up-canyon to the mouth of Chamberlain Creek. There, they turned south and climbed into the Chamberlain Basin, the huge expanse of elk meadow and virgin timber that marks the heart of the Idaho wilderness much as calm weather marks the eye of a hurricane. Surrounded by the geographic tempest of canyon and mountains, the Basin levels the country into a sanctuary for elk, moose, cougar, and spawning salmon. The basin's gentle contours, however, belie its accessibility. The deadfall of giant ponderosa pines, centuries old, limits travel to established and
elephant bags, parachutes, and each others legs. Moses Rely, who had vomited himself silly during the first ten minutes of the flight, lay swaddled in a mummy sleeping bag zipped up to his throat. His face was an exhausted green as he dreamed of Martians or Time Sickness or some other scourge of the 21st century.

Emmett lay down on the cargo chutes and closed his eyes to ease the vertigo that had moved from his head to his stomach. His hand itched along the sutured wound. God damn that Annalee. He'd seen her last week in Billy Mink's pickup. She smiled and waved at him as they passed by. The Doug crossed a ridgetop and bucked as it slid down the up-rush of wind. Emmett began to feel sick. God damn her giddy green eyes. She watched him through the rear window as the pickup turned the corner. The airplane pitched and rolled. God damn her. Emmett wrapped a seat belt around his arm for security.

He was almost asleep when he lifted off the floor and flew to the ceiling. The plane was stalling. The warning buzzer screamed and Emmett looked forward to see the others and all gear crammed against the ceiling. Seatbelts hung upward in air. A chainsaw floated past him and out the open door. Moses in his sleeping bag followed behind it. Moses yelled, "Emmett!" as he passed by and Emmett reached out but missed. The squirming bag sailed into the doorway face down just as the pilot pulled out of the stall. The bag folded around the safety belt like a wet rag and Emmett crashed headfirst into the floor.
maintained trails.

The level country made for smoother air and Emmett sat up from where he had been lying on some cargo chutes. He looked out the door of the DC-3. It is Hard to foller an Indin throu Chamberlins Basin. Jumping from downed tree to fallen Trunk, they can Ghost for miles withot touching the Ground. I hav Myself spent 2 Days 10 Feet off the Earth & becam mighty Thirsty as I cud hear the bubbling Watur of Springs below me.

Emmett slid his feet out the door and set them on the step. He leaned his forehead against the safety strap and felt the 100 mile an hour wind bend and ripple his face. As he flew over the meadowlands, he watched for his grandfather. The old man told too many tales. He had himself become a tale, a hard to believe story of an unbelievable country in times so free it hurt Emmett to think of them. But it comforted him, too, to hear the stories. They were true enough.

The Doug headed south again towards lower Big Creek where the Sheepeaters had ambushed the U.S. Army's mounted infantry, routed them in panic, and surrounded them at Vinegar Hill. There the terror-dumb soldiers drank kitchen vinegar to slake their thirsts. That was the Army's story; the Sheepeaters were never actually seen.

The turbulence increased as they crossed Acorn Butte, and Emmett pulled himself back inside the airplane. The seven other jumpers had fallen asleep to escape fatigue or air sickness. They lay in contorted configurations across
When he woke up, Emmett found that his nose had been broken again. He lay with his head crooked back over a cargo chute and a wad of cotton stuffed up under his upper lip. The cotton tasted of blood and old tobacco. He started to sit up, but someone was holding his head. It was Moses.

"You were bleeding like a pig, Emmett. Can you breathe?"
"Yuh."
"Good boy."
"How about you?"
Moses grinned. "I'm not sick anymore," he said. "First time in three years."

Emmett remembered Moses floating out the door. "You almost bought it," he said.

Moses laughed. "Yeah," he said. "I think I saw Death down there."

"What did it look like?"
"I couldn't really tell. It was a long ways down."

The DC-3 touched down at the McCall airport and taxied to a stop. The pilot walked back through the cabin to put out the ladder. He grinned sheepishly at Emmett.
XII.

ALL IN A DAY

All in a day. All in a day. From the white water through the sand, sage, and grasses; past rimrock and up through cottonwood and poison ivy; through the ponderosa and buck-brush in the coulees; up to the breaks and over into fir, huckleberry, and aspen; then the granite; then the snow, the ice, and sky. All in a day. Out of the steelhead and salmon, into rattlers, jacks and coyotes; up through the chukar and partridge to the deer, elk, and grouse; the bear; then past marmots to mountain goat and big horn; to the golden eagle; to the great spirit. All in a goddamned day.

Emmett watched her riding ahead of him, her shoulders steady, her waist flexing easily with the sway of her appaloosa's speckled rump. The silver dollars set into her
belt flashed against the sun. Her dark hair shone where it fell from under the shadow of her hat. Such Women! Experts with Hors, Lariat & Pistol. Pride of the Prairies and Mountains alike. Ah, Pilgrim! O Annalee. They were almost to the breaks. The morning's ride had been long and hot, he following her from switchback to switchback, catching her eye each time she doubled around on the trail and passed above him, she on her gelding, he on the swavback old mare.

Three days before, she was waiting for him at the jumper loft as he came into town after a long day of thinning trees. His had been the only chainsaw that ran steadily and he had cut his way from thicket to thicket, from tree to tree, back aching and bent over all day, ears ringing with the chainsaw's wail. The rest of the crew sat in the shade, chewed tobacco, told jump stories and tinkered with their saws. Emmett cursed his luck but went on working. As they drove the sixpack Dodge back into town, the small of his back throbbed with each rut the wheels fell into, each cattle guard they rumbled across. His wounded hand burned with sweat salt. At the Goose Creek Store, they flipped coins to see who would buy popsicles and Emmett lost. He had to borrow money from Moses to pay. He was broke again. It was only Wednesday, the weekend and the end of the pay period two days off. He knew he would be thinning trees tomorrow, and Friday, and the thought of the monotony depressed him. But here she was, waiting for him at the loft. She leaned against her bright green Datsun halfton and
waved at him twice as he waited for the mill's five o'clock whistle. Swede told him again she was too young.

The mare he now rode was a stumbler and he was afraid to give her the lead, worried she might walk off the mountain and roll with him clear to the river. He fought her with the reins, pulling her always to the hillside, reminding her when she reached a switchback. For all his interest in the Old West, Emmett Stone hated horses. He admitted he couldn't tell a horse from a horse. He would ride one only for a moment of bright fear in a rodeo or to follow Annalee to a picnic.

She turned around in the saddle, laying her hand on the bedroll behind her. "Almost there," she called back to him. She watched him for several seconds, letting her horse take the next switchback unguided. She laughed as he worried his mare around the corner. "You'll make a fine mountain man, Emmett. Wrestle your horse every step of the way, leave her unshod until her hooves are worn to the quick, then take her lameness for an excuse to shoot and eat her. Did your grandpa ever come home on the same mount he rode off on? I doubt it. Grandma said he was always walking into town."

Emmett relaxed his grip on the reins. I wouldn't eat this nag. But he remembered the rank meat Gramps was always bringing home, swelling bigger in his mouth with every chew. Gramps called it "tall bear".

The trail led into a deep V cut into the canyon wall and followed a dry creek bed through brush as high as Emmett's
shoulders. They ascended steeply for half a mile, left the creek, and headed away from the trail onto a grassy knob that was topped by a stand of tall ponderosa. They left the horses to graze in the deep yellow grass and, taking the saddlebags, walked up through the whirring grasshoppers to the rocky point of the knob. The hoppers sounded enough like rattlesnakes that Emmett kept his eyes on the ground before him. As they reached the rocks, a covey of chukars flew up from all around and startled Emmett into dropping his saddlebags.

Annalee laughed. "Careful, mountain man," she said. "You'll squash our sandwiches."

They sat on a flat rock just below the highest point. The Salmon River lay beneath them, hidden behind the muscled bulges of the golden mountainside. Across the canyon, they could see the thick, serrated woodlands of the Nez Perce Forest. The sun was high and hot. Emmett took off his shirt, checked behind himself for snakes, and lay back. He watched Annalee unsnap her blouse and hoped she hadn't worn a bra. She took off her blouse. Underneath she wore a scant blue halter top. She was very thin; her ribs showed through her tan.

She took a deep breath. "Well," she said. "It looks like I'll stay in this country forever. Unless I join the Navy."

"What?"

She turned her head, looking at him across her bare shoulder. "That scholarship I won for being Sweetheart?"
Well, I can't use it. I got my scores back yesterday from that A.C.T. test. I found out I was dumb. I couldn't go to college even if I graduated from highschool."

"That's stupid."

"That's what I said."

"No. I mean the test is stupid."

"I guess I wasn't smart enough to figure that out." She looked away from him. "Who was Steubenware anyway?"

"Ah, Annalee. Those tests don't mean anything. They're made up by clever, small minded people to find other clever people just like themselves. All they can show is that you're good at taking tests. It's a crime they count for so much nowadays. Cleverness seems to be the only thing that matters. When a woman talks about having a baby, does she say, 'I hope she grows up to be a good person'? Or, 'I hope he can dance'? No. She says, 'I hope he's smart.' All the clever people, because they're tricky enough to do it, have talked the rest of us into thinking cleverness is the most important thing in life. It's a conspiracy, a clever conspiracy to keep those people on top."

Emmett saw that his lecture amused her and he shook his head to excuse himself. He reached out and touched her side. He felt the tense muscles move beneath her skin. He rubbed his palm across her back.

"There are other things," he said, "a lot more important."

She laughed at him. "You're right," she said. "Let's eat."

The peanut butter sandwiches tasted of leather from the
saddlebags. The wine tasted of leather from the bota.
The apples were good. Emmett ate half a sandwich and forced
down some wine.

He handed the bota to Annalee. She took a quick gulp
and grimaced, the wine spilling onto her halter top. She
wiped her hand across her cleavage. "This stuff is too warm,"
she said.

Emmett nodded. "Drink it anyway. It'll make us both
feel better."

He wondered again about Billy Mink.
"Why do you go out with him?" he had asked her.
"He asks me."
"I ask you too."
"And I go out with you."
"I don't like him."
"He doesn't think you're so bad." She laughed. "He
still can't figure how you stabbed him."

Emmett shook his head. The Women . . . It confused him
to think about it. He took another drink and gritted his
teeth; this wine was cheap. He remembered his grandfather's
story of Koncinsky, the crazy Pole who lived up the South
Fork in an underground cabin that was little more than a hole
in the ground. Koncinsky earned his living trapping bobcats.
One winter, he got the notion to distill his huckleberry wine.
He rifled copper tubing from the abandoned mines near Mackay
Bar and, rigging a 55 gallon oil drum as a boiler, he set
up his still in a thicket across the river. They found him
dead the next spring in his self-dug grave. Scrawled in
charcoal across the table top he'd covered himself with, they found his last words, written in mysterious Polish. The sheriff copied down the works and sent them north to the state university in Moscow. Jack Stone and two other suspects were held in the Idaho Country jail until the translation arrived four months later. "I am blind," the message read. "Dear God, I am blind." The sheriff attributed Koncinsky's death to snow blindness. His pained expression was considered his reaction to his first view of Hell. The three suspects were released and even offered employment as compensation. Regardless, Emmett's grandfather felt he must hie off the hills for safe refuge. He had not hit it off with his fellow inmates. They told him that as soon as they were free they would murder him. Caught for four months between four walls and two Swedes, Gramps said, would make any man onery and ill mannered.

Emmett climbed to the top of the rock point and surveyed the country. There was something about it that made people odd. From where he stood, he could see the Seven Devils Mountains off to the west, their volcanic forms bent away from each other in violent postures of independence. Beyond them lay the Hell's Canyon of the Snake, a gorge deeper than the Grand Canyon yet still so isolated that a man had quite a walk before him if he really intended to view it. It's the lack of a level horizon, Gramps said; it gives a man ideas. You don't feel free in the way you do out on the plains. You know the country's got a lot to say about which way you're going to travel, that is, if it will let you travel at all.
There's compensation, of course, for the loss of personal liberty. At the least, you know it would mean a chore for the pilgrim who wanted to bother you.

Emmett watched Annalee below him. She had taken his advice to drink the wine and was now holding the bota at arms' length, squirting the red liquid into her mouth.

"Quit your dreaming and come on down," she called to him. "We got some drinking to do."

Emmett climbed down from his perch. 0, these Women of Taos. Such far Critters. To wake you from yr. rustick Slumbers & add Peppers to yor Wine.

He found the wine nearly gone.

"Don't you worry," she said. "I've got some Mr. Boston in the pouch. Oh, I know, 'Wine and whiskey are a bit risky'. But those sandwiches you built are worse."

She wished to toast her test scores.

"To the colleges' knowledges," she said. "To the universities' perversities. To academical fermentation in the silage pits of thought."

"That's a mouthful," he said. "You're smarter than they are."

"You bet I am." She shivered after a belt of Mr. Boston and then she winked at him. "I've been sitting here thinking just how much smarter I am. Twice, I figure. Those questions they asked were all below me."

"That's right. They were meant for book readers."

"Who says I don't read?"

"I didn't." He took the bottle from her.
"Yeah. Except I always read the last page first."

"You don't like to guess the ending?"

"Nope." She laughed merrily, licking the wine stains on her fingers. "I read the endings and guess the beginnings."

These Women. "And you're usually right?" Contrary. Against all Lines of Logick.

"No. But my beginnings are better."

Yet the Clerities of ther Thot do outrace the Fleetest of Men. Snap! Huzzah! The Tangent changeth. Emmett engaged in some whiskey. He wanted to kiss her, felt he ought to do something; they were out here alone. The sky, the mountain, the girl, this was so perfectly a place for something. But he was afraid she was too young, or would say she was too young, although he knew she wouldn't say that. She would probably say she was too old. He drank more of her whiskey.

The white afternoon sun shone down hot and direct. The hoppers buzzed in the burnt grass. The hard light shortened the shadow; it flattened all colors to yellow, brought the lower reaches of the canyon up towards them in a magnifying haze. The whiskey leveled Emmett's perception. He closed his eyes and dully listened to Annalee recreate the only plausible beginning to Macbeth: something about a bogus logging operation in the Birnham Woods.

Christmas trees. Grasshoppers. Rattlers. Sheepeaters. He dreamed he was being burned alive in the lambing sheds, or in an airplane crash, or in a forest fire, that he had been bitten on the tongue by a snake, or by himself, or Annalee. He was burning. And then she was shaking his shoulder. "Come
on, Emmett," she was saying. "You'd better walk it off."

He opened his eyes. Her face was a few inches from his, her green eyes flashing amusement.

"I was watching you sleep," she said. "You have a strange face if you look at it right. You've broken your nose before, haven't you."

He sat up, ignoring the comment. One day when he was a child of ten his grandfather's dog treed a raccoon. Emmett climbed after it and, pretending he was Davey Crockett, tried to grin the animal into submission. The cornered coon attacked. Emmett fell from the tree and landed on his face. He broke his nose and jaw.

"I don't mean you're not good looking," she said. "I think you look just right, from the right angle. I mean it. You're just right."

The day was nearing sundown. A warm wind carried the odors of sage and hot cheat grass up from the canyon. The canyon walls generated warm hues of vibrant purple. She took his hand and they wandered off through the tall yellow-pines. He wondered at her purpose, but followed her anyway, allowing his head to clear. His tongue still felt swollen, his face sunburned. Although he said nothing, she said, "Hush," and touched a finger to his lips. They circled the grove three times. Annalee walked solemnly as if following a ritual. The horses stopped their grazing to watch them. They circled through the woods again. This time she paused to put some wild rose blossoms in her hair. Once, she stopped and broke off a piece of bark from a ponderosa.
"Smell," she said, and held it to his nose. "What do you smell?"

He looked into her eyes for the answer.

She shook her head. "It smells like vanilla."

She smiled when he agreed. "You know we're not drunk," she told him. She led him to an opening in the midst of the grove and told him to sit down. She left him, walked to her horse, and returned with her bedroll.

"This is better," she said. "You won't be too cold or scared of my dad's snoring."

"I wasn't scared."

"Shhhh," she whispered.

The rich odor of horse. The salt taste of dried sweat. The pushing into warm earth of fingers. The rolling crumple of grass. The wind of breath past his ear, through the pine branches, into the darkening air. And all in a day. All in a day.

The ride down the mountain was made in moonlight. Annalee again led the way. The ghostly trail vanished as they passed beneath the lava outcroppings. Emmett's sunburned flesh tingled as he wedded his fate to the mare's. The canyon seemed bottomless. It worried him. She had spoken of leaving her father. "I'm out of school. I should be on my own," she said. "He's moving to Riggins and Riggins is a pit. Do you know a place I can rent?" The moon lighted only the upper flanks of the hillsides as they rode down towards the bottom. It bothered him. He kept his eyes on the shining silver dollars that brindled Annalee's waist.
XIII.

SUNFLOWER HOLE

The sun rose over the Big Horn Crags. Emmett sat in the doorway of the TwinOtter as it flew south along the Middle Fork of the Salmon River. He watched the show. The sunlight streaked through fissures in the Crags and revealed canyons and ridgetops one by one. He grinned. You're as happy as a gopher in loose dirt, his grandfather said to him. Yeah. Emmett laughed. I am.

This was one of those times that made him exult in his profession. The Thursday before, he had jumped a lovely little two-manner on top of Cuddy Mountain: a lone, lightning struck pine burning in the middle of a rain soaked meadow. There, he had all the time in the world. After felling the snag, he and Williams stood death watch over the steaming ashes as a new storm rolled in out of Oregon. When they returned to McCall
Friday evening, they found they were numbers one and two on the jump list, lined up perfectly for a weekend of big money overtime.

"Yes. Emmett pounded his feet on the doorstep. Number One. Here I am, watching the Saturday morning sun shine down through the great Crags, on my way to an easy landing on a grassy ridgetop, an easy fire, and easy money. Hoo! The phone call had come at four that morning.

"Do you feel like a fire?" the foreman had asked him.

Hoo! Like a fire. Like a holocaust. Like a great, barn burning conflagration. I feel like two days of long hours, hard labor, and loads of money. Hah! Jack Stone laughed within him. Yea! & Ther is Gold out there. Gold still. Weighty enuff to sink yr. Raft, break yr. Ponys back & hold you EarthBound whilst the Winds of Fate Wail around you.

And here was his grandfather's country, the Big Horn Crags, a last bastion of the Sheepeaters. Here the mountain sheep still roamed; here white men kept to the trails and campgrounds. Here in the rocky Crags were as many sanctuaries as waterfalls, as many warren-places as cliffs, as invisible caves. From his grandfather's journal, Emmett remembered the story of the Hudson Bay Company detachment that camped here while on an expedition for beaver. They had let down their guard, believing that the country was too rugged, too inaccessible even for Indians. But on their second night, they heard a brief flurry in the bushes and investigated to find a rabbit, killed by a Sheepeater arrow. These Cavers had the stealth to hunt unseen within twenty yards of a
trappers' encampment. It is God's own Truth. The Rascals
ar Sneeky. I hav my Self lost to them my Razor while
Shaving my Knif whil eating & my Cap off my Head while I
slept. WHILE I SLEPT. They blend to a Rock like a Horny
Tode. Never talk to yorself for you talk to Them. THEY AR
THER!

The Otter banked now and Emmett saw the fire.

Holy God.

It burned from the river to the first crest, fifteen
hundred feet of rise. The bottom was already black and cold,
but the upper burn hid behind a dense, white smoke that
rolled up the mountain like cream. Along the first ridgetops,
fingers of flame played across an ever widening front. Holy,
holy, Emmett's happiness left him. In a fit of nervousness, he
pulled himself back out of the doorway and began rechecking
his gear.

The spotter came back from the pilot's compartment. He
strapped on his chute, pulled on his helmet, and checked the
communications with the pilot. The intercom was out. He
grinned at Emmett. The Otter began making passes over a
ridge point that stuck out of the mountainside like a
rhinoceros horn. From the top of the horn, a tangled old
ponderosa snag reached out over the canyon. The early
morning winds blew strangely; five streamer runs were
necessary before the spotter was able to place a set in the
Drop Zone.

After the last set, the spotter shook his head and turned
to Emmett.
"I don't know," he said. "What do you think?"

Now Emmett shook his head.

The spotter shrugged.

"I don't want to jump," Emmett said, "but you're the spotter."

The spotter laughed. "I forgot! I'd better let you spot yourself."

"I'll spot and you jump," Emmett told him.

"Get in the doorway."

Emmett hooked his static line to the cable and put on his helmet. Williams hooked up behind him. Holy. Holy. Emmett sat in the doorway, positioned his feet on the step, and leaned his head and shoulders out into the wind. The gale sang through his face mask. The plane began its bank into the jump run. He saw the horn coming up. A few square yards of brush and grass sat in a small saddle between the old snag and the ridgeline. On either side, the slope fell away. Emmett realized if he missed by a little he missed by a lot. The thought of landing in the Salmon River flashed through his brain: the canopy filled with water and drug him towards the sea; each rock took a chunk of him; he passed Riggins, Lewiston, Portland; a Pacific octopus homesteaded his helmet; anemone filled his boots. Pilgrim! I could always turn and crash into the canyon wall. Always. Always? The Otter closed in on the horn. Emmett wondered if the spotter were joking about letting him spot himself. Nah. The horn passed below. Emmett turned and looked at the spotter. The man grinned. Emmett jumped.
Opening shock came almost immediately and Emmett saw that he had no twists. Somehow Williams was below him, although Emmett had jumped first. Hanging in harness was at least as secure a feeling as riding in the Otter, but the lack of wind, noise, vibration, and walls gave Emmett the sensations of being suspended somehow in time. At this altitude, depth perception was reduced and the ground came up so slowly it seemed he had plenty of opportunity to make his moves. But the Drop Zone was small and a miss was trouble, so Emmett determined that he should be directly over the D.Z. by the time he was halfway down. He began drifting towards the spot, crabbing at a right angle to the wind. This lined him up with the D.Z. but kept him slightly upwind. Pulling both guideline toggles, Emmett braked for a count and then held.

He looked over his shoulder to see where Williams was and saw him below and off to the left. Bill was heading for the same airspace.

"Back off!" Emmett shouted.

Williams came ahead.

"Back off! Hey!" That's my place. Find another mountain.... But Emmett saw that Bill was determined. They were closing fast now and Emmett reached up and pulled his right guideline. The chute began to turn but stuck. Emmett reached up for another handful of line as Williams drifted beneath him. He felt a drop as Williams' parachute stole the air below his own. Emmett fell through the nylon of the canopy, hissed down along Williams' suspension lines and came to a bouncing halt face to
face with Williams and four feet away.

"How now?" Emmett called.

He looked down. They seemed to be on course but they fell too rapidly. He looked up to see both canopies mostly inflated, but three of Williams' shroudlines were wrapped around his own. The rhinoceros horn rose up below them. Emmett unsheathed his knife and wondered which lines to cut, Bill's or his own. The ridges rose around them. Emmett reached out and cut Bill's lines.

He grabbed his right toggle and spun away, swinging within a foot of the ponderosa snag. There came a loud Pop! and Emmett stopped falling. The Salmon River Canyon still gaped below him, he still swung at the ends of his shroudlines, but the jump was over. Damn. He looked up to see his canopy draped like a flag over the point of the gnarled old tree. He slowly rotated to his right. A granite butt stuck out from the base of the tree. Emmett reached out gingerly with his foot even though he knew the rock was at least ten feet away.

Damn. The rotation brought him around to face the canyon again. Above him, the snag sounded another Pop and he dropped a foot. Fear rushed him. His pupils dilated so quickly his eyes hurt. The river and canyon paled into overexposure. Pilgrim. Pilgrim. Pilgrim.

Behind him he heard footsteps scrambling over the granite.

"Emmett?" It was Williams. "Emmett, are you all right?"

Emmett was afraid to answer. The tree cracked like a rusty hinge.
"Emmett," Williams said. "If you're hurt, wiggle a foot or something."

Emmett exploded. "This tree . . .!" The tree cracked and dropped him another two feet.

"Ho!" Williams said. "I get you." He laughed and then was silent for awhile. Emmett watched a hawk floating below him.

"You should've cut your own lines, Emmett," Williams said.

Emmett felt the fear pass out of him. What replaced it was a sense of realization. This wasn't the greatest job.

"I quit," he said back over his shoulder.

"You can do whatever you want," Williams said. "But this isn't going to be fun and you might as well get paid for it."

The slightest breeze would partially inflate Emmett's parachute and the old snag creaked as he was lifted and groaned as he dropped. The slope below him was such that if he fell he would strike the ground after falling some forty feet. He could see it would be a glancing blow. The question was whether he would stick where he hit or roll all the way to the river. He remembered his grandfather riding the avalanche, but there was neither snowbank nor imagination below him now and this was no story, at least not the kind he could alter until it was over. He hung in his harness and made no movement. He watched the other jumpers drifting over him on their way down. Apparently, someone missed the ridge as he could hear a despairing groan float up from below and behind him. Then laughter. Emmett hung in his harness. The
smell of smoke reminded him that there was a fire burning behind him. The creakings of the old tree were more regular now. It groaned in rhythm. Perhaps he wasn't going to break his back after all.

"Emmett," Williams called. "What's the matter? Did you forget how to make a let-down?"

"No."

"Good. Because I couldn't tell you."

Oh, the job had its compensations. Honest people to work with. A long, snowy winter with some money in the bank. A mistaken sense of personal glory. A chance to get away from automobiles, televisions, disc jockeys, and drive-ins. An opportunity to see country no white man had seen unless he was lost. And these new and exciting adventures.... The tree creaked above him.

"Emmett," Williams called.

The country in front of him looked the same as it had to his grandfather, the same as it had to Lewis and Clark. Emmett remembered that the Salmon River was the only part of American geography that made William Clark give up and turn back. And Clark hadn't seen it from a hanging tree.

"Hey, pussy."

This was a new voice. Swede's

"Hey, weak-tit, are you going to make a let-down or are we going to leave you to the crows?"

"Leave me alone."

"All right. All right. You've got a radio in your leg pocket. Call us if you get killed."

"Ten-four."
The situation became almost comfortable. He had a canteen of water in his leg pocket, too, and a can of Copenhagen in his shirt. There was some jerky somewhere. Emmett figured he could stay where he was for a day or two, spitting off into the abyss, getting to know the canyon. A Pilgrim can never watch for too Long. Ther ar Features what show themselves only when the Sun is at a certen Position & the Sun changes its Address Hour by Hour & Day by Day. Emmett realized that five white spots across the canyon were the tails of mule deer.

"Emmett." It was Williams' voice, plaintive. "I'm your jump partner, Emmett, and I can't leave you. Why don't you come on down?"

"I will."

Emmett scanned the other side of the canyon. If I watched for long enough, I would see him and I would see them.

"Emmett."

Watch with the Edge of yr. Vision. The Edge is Most Sharp. It can descry Light & small Movement.

"Emmett. There's a mountain burning."

Emmett carefully reached into his leg pocket and brought out the nylon let-down line. He twice threaded the line through his jumpsuit's friction rings and then tied it off to the parachute's risers. The old pine groaned. He dropped the rest of the line between his legs and tied a slip knot around his thigh with the slack. Pulling down on one riser to unweight himself, he unbuckled, held his breath, and slid out of his harness, rappelling to the ground.
When Emmett and Williams reached the fire, they found it had lapped over the crest of the first ridge and was slowly burning up the gentler second slope. The wind burbled over the crest, causing the dense smoke to eddy close to the ground. The other jumpers were taking turns charging into the smoke with wet gunny sacks. They beat at the flames in the sparse grass for a half minute before returning to the fresh air, staggering and gasping. When they saw the two coming, they all sat down and told them to eat the smoke for awhile.

Emmett wet his bandana and tied it across his mouth and nose. Taking a sack, he followed Williams into the smoke. They ran close to the earth, one hand skimming the slope above them. The other jumpers had beat out the fire to a point fifty yards in. There the fire surged in bright flashes. Clumps of grass a half yard beyond the front burst into flames like silent bombs. Before they reached the leading edge they stopped and bent closer to earth, breathing the cooler air as it came in to feed the flames. They held there a moment, waited for a slight shift in the wind. Then they sprinted to the front and began flailing at the fire. The heat pushed at them like a cornered bull. Emmett tried to hold his breath but the exertion and excitement forced the air from his lungs. He was shouting, cursing the fire, pounding the flames with the blackened bag. The fire disappeared where he struck, burst back, vanished again as he fought it. His skin raged along his brow, wherever it touched the hot fabric of his pants and shirt. He began to feel the weakness of
oxygen debt and the lactic build up in his arms and legs. He wanted to turn. But Williams still worked in front of him. Emmett pounded the fire, his consciousness narrowing, his heart beating dark rings around his vision. His sack caught fire. He turned and stumbled back through the smoke. He fell. Williams was there, picked him up, and together they ran for air.

They lay panting on the sunny hillside. The air tasted like cool water. Emmett looked over at Williams. His forehead was mottled down to the line left by his bandana. The tips of his eyebrows had turned to a fine gray ash.

"Hey," Williams said. "You should've stayed in the tree."

The fire was controlled in two hours. The sixteen jumpers dug line along the upper edge and cold-trailed the burn to the bottom, building berm trenches to catch any rolling debris. They ate a freeze-dried dinner along the river and fanned out to fish and explore. Near a sandy beach, Emmett found a rock shelter with Indian paintings of men on horses, antlered deer, and mysterious slashes and triangles. The red paint was still bright. Emmett told the others he thought it was fresh.

Swede discovered a hot springs where the water flowed over a small cliff, forming a natural shower. They built a rock and log dam around the pool at the base of the cliff. The steaming water rose to a depth of three feet. They all stripped down and bathed, periodically diving into the cold river. The water in the pool became soapy gray as the men washed and then it cleared. As night fell, they built a
small campfire near the springs and all but Emmett, Swede, Moses, and Williams dried themselves by the fire and retired. Moses expressed his intention of staying in the hotpot all night.

"This mineral water would soak into my consciousness," he said. "I might be able to make contact with another intelligence."

"What do you mean 'another'?' Swede asked him.

Moses paid him no attention. "I wish I had a snorkel," he said, quietly.

As the night advanced and languor set in, Swede began telling a series of tales about his sexual escapades. He called them fuck stories. The first had to do with what he termed "a California mother-daughter team" he'd met in the bar at the lodge.

"The mother was the good looker," he said. "Would you believe it, she was the 1952 Miss Fresno. I liked her best. But she kept talking up her daughter, you know, building her up. 'Tammy had so many boy friends in California. We just came up to Idaho for the fresh air.'" Swede affected a high, snide voice.

The story ended with all three in the same bed. This reminded Swede of another time. And so on. After every story, Moses belched and said, "Bullshit," and Swede began anew. Emmett and Williams soaked in the dark and said nothing.

All of the talk set Emmett to thinking of Annalee. He'd seen her again with Billy Mink. Emmett was at the fountain in the drug store when they had come in and bought something
at the prescription counter. What had they purchased? After the way she had been with Emmett, why did she hang out with Mink? Emmett sank lower into the sulphurous water. His body seemed to have melted out of existence, but his hair was wet and his ears and scalp were freezing. Swede finished a story about a nurse and fell silent. His stories were over. Emmett wanted to get out, but the fire had died down and he waited for someone else to stoke it up. The stars were clear above the canyon. The Salmon flowed by quietly. Emmett noticed that Moses had moved underneath the waterfall. His head was indistinguishable from the rocks. Perhaps he was conferring with the mineral realm. Perhaps he had drowned.

"Well," Williams said, and then he was quiet.

Time passed. Emmett decided he would have to be the first one to get out.

"Well," Williams said again.

Emmett slumped back in.

"Well, what?" Swede said.

Williams was quiet. Emmett began to gather himself.

"Well," Williams said. "I screwed a California girl once."

"So what," Swede said.

"So she was a trusty. One of those prison ladies that cooks for the big fires down there. It was in the back of a deuce-and-a-half."

"I bet she knew what she was doing."

"Well, maybe. I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't
know if I were supposed to kiss her or just how prison women expect you to go about it. So, I started by taking off my clothes. I got down to my skivvies and they were so black and torn after a week of fighting fire that I was ashamed."

"What did she think of your Mormon underwear?"

"Shut up, Swede." Moses spoke from the waterfall.

"Well, I looked over at her and she hadn't even begun to get undressed. I said, 'Aren't you even going to take your clothes off?', because I wondered if she meant to breed like those women in Viet Nam like Swede's always talking about. Standing up in the alley with your britches down to your knees."

"But she said, 'Won't you please help me, honey?', like she were a bride. And I helped her out of every stitch. She had on a green brassiere, like it was made by the Army. And when we were done with it . . ."

"Hey! You missed a part."

"Shut up, Swede."

Williams paused.

"And when we were done, she cried like a bride. Real quiet, just tears running mourning down her face. I was amazed. And though I couldn't understand it in a prison woman, I knew about girls crying after they lay for the first time with a man, so I asked her, 'Did I hurt you?', and she just shook her head. So I thought she might be worried about catching child and I said, 'Don't worry. You won't get pregnant.' And she laughed at me and said, 'Nope,' she
said, 'Nope. I sure won't.' Then she told me that before a woman could be a trusty, she had to volunteer to be made so she couldn't have babies. You didn't have to do it, she said, but if you want to get outside the prison, you got to volunteer."

"You mean she was spayed?" Swede asked.

"Her tubes were tied. It must be kind of like the Army. You volunteer for combat so you'll get discharged faster."

Williams paused again. When he began, it was in a different tone of voice.

"When I was about seven or eight, my dad gave me a calf."

Swede groaned. "Oh, my God . . ."

"It was my herd. I let it grow to be a young heifer and then we had her bred. She swole up right and all and she even once tried to granny another cow's calf. We waited the correct amount of time, but she never seemed to want to drop one of her own."

Williams spoke quietly now, as if to himself.

"Finally, one day my old man called me into the barn. He had my cow in a halter and she was tied to the trough. He said to me, 'Hold on to the ass-end of your cow, Billy. We gotta get the calf out of her'.

"So I grabbed onto her back leg and he reached into her womb with both his hands. The cow jumped sideways when he done this and she pinned me hard against a beam post. She knocked the wind out of me and pushed my face right up into the shit that her tail had splattered across her ass. I remember that. The old man started pulling then and a
stink worse than owl shit came out of that cow's hole. It
was like having your face pushed down into a dug up silage
pit. I was getting sick. And then Dad pulled the dead
calf out of the womb and right past my face. It was black
and slick and steaming and stinking worse every second."

"He reached into her hole again and worked around for
awhile, but then he cussed and gave up. 'There's another
calf in there, Billy,' he said, 'but my hands are too big
to get ahold of it and bring it around. You gotta do it.'
He pulled a bale of hay up behind the cow and picked me up
and set me on top. 'It's in cross-wise,' he said. 'You
gonna have to grab it by its hind legs, bring it around, and
then pull it out' . . .

"I stuck my hands up in there. They slid in easy into
that slick stink all the way up to my elbows. It was warm
and ripe. Oh. I grabbed onto what could have been a calf's
hind legs and I pulled. And what came out but this live
little calf, little and ugly but alive. It raised its head
up off the bale the old man set it on.

"'It's alive, Dad,' I said. 'It's alive.'

"But not for long. It was dead within the hour. But
I've been thinking about it just now. listening to Swede's
stories. And I have realized a fact. I have realized that
I could've never had that calf. It was the cow that could.
And same with babies. Women have the babies. Men don't.
Men just beget them."

"God alive," Swede said. "What kind of fuck story is that?"
XIV.

THE WEIGHT

Custer still prevailed against the Sioux as Emmett entered the Lightning Saloon. It was still that moment just before the battle turned; gallantry and romance held sway. The same poker game continued near the door, with the same players and distribution of chips. The same except for the absence of Harry Kendrick who had died in a one-car smashup on the Goose Creek grade. Harry had flashed out in a blaze of gasoline glory in a borrowed pickup the night he sent his wife and children over to visit his brother in Council. Sheriff Short deemed it an accident. Harry's family would receive the full benefits of his multiple insurance policies.

The bartender winked acknowledgement as Emmett passed him. They were there as Swede had told him, at the back table. Butch Harmon sat with them, his chair rocked back against
the wall, his hat thrown over the pointed toe of his oversized boot.

But God damn. This is the way. This is the way, though. Walk right in, up to them, have it out, have it over. Have it. Settled. Squared. Ah! The ugly turd. Emmett leaned forward as he walked, to keep from weaving. Swede had bought him three whiskeys before telling him the news.

Emmett saw Stella Leland at her station at the bar. Some older, handsome Marlboro type was standing her drinks. The doctor and she had agreed to disagree. She lived alone now in a condominium with false fireplaces one could move from room to room. She turned, her jewelry sparkling, as Emmett passed her by.

"Going to join the retinue?" she asked him.

Emmett nodded drunkenly and continued to the back table. "Well, here we are!" he said in a voice so loud it echoed from the walls. He straddled a chair and rested his chin on his crossed arms. Both Annalee and Butch smiled at him. Butch even gave a curt salute with his bottle of Dr. Pepper. Billy Mink, it appeared, had passed out. His huge head lay on the table, facing the other way. His hair was matted and greasy. One of his hands gripped a beer bottle like a club. The bottle tilted, a small puddle slowly forming under his mouth. Whoa now; Gramps said, we shouldn'a come. Emmett envied Billy his relaxation.

"Nnnnhere n'we n'are!" Butch agreed, waving his pop bottle. Emmett could see Butch had been flirting with Annalee....
He was leering at her now across the table.

Emmett kept his chin on his arms to calm his vision.
"Where's your school teacher, Butch?"
Annalee burst out laughing.
"What's tickling you?" Emmett asked.
Annalee laughed harder. "You," she managed. "Your head bounces when you talk like that."

Butch slapped his knee. "N'yah!"
Emmett sat up, enraged.
"Your tits bounce when you laugh," he told her.
She stopped laughing.
"And my ass aches when you show up," she said.
Whoa. This was a good beginning. He had meant to come in and demolish Mink, perhaps physically if the opportunity arose. But this woman...  
"I'm sorry," he said.
"No sorrier than I am."
"N'snorry! N'yah, snorry!"

Ah, pilgrim. Emmett remembered the picnic on the mountain...........
There she had loved him. Or liked him at least, liked him a lot. But here she was, with this unconscious Mink. There was no point to it; there couldn't be.

The beer bottle toppled out of Billy's hand. Annalee picked it up and set it out of the way. She smiled at Emmett. Billy's hand slid off the table.

"How long has he been out?" Emmett asked.
"About an hour. I think he's down for the night."
"Let's put him in his rig."
"He'd rather stay here."
"How do you know? He's out of it."
Annalee indelicately picked up Billy's head and turned it to face Emmett.
"He's into it now," she said.
"Christ, what an ugly mug."
"Yours is no prize."
"N'mine nneither," Butch said.
Butch and Annalee laughed.
"NnnnnI'm nnnugly," Butch said, brightly.
Ah. Ah. Emmett regarded Mink's hard features, the close, low-set eyes, the single brow. The man drooled on the table. Emmett looked at Annalee. She was dressed in a tight fitting pair of coveralls, her hair tied back in a ponytail. She was lovely, smiling now, relaxed. She and Butch smiled at each other. Ah! Emmett shook his head.
"You don't look too good, Emmett," she said. "Got troubles Emmett watched her. "I've got a lot of weight on my shoulders."
She laughed. "Sweetie. The only weight on your shoulders is your head."
She reached over and touched his arm.
"Cheer up, honey," she said. "We've all got to live."
Emmett let go a sigh.
"Why do you go out with Mink?"
"I told you. He asks me."
"I don't go out with others."
"Nobody asks you."
A small, tight heat took root inside him.

"You'd go out with whoever asked you?"

"Listen, man. I'm immature, I know." She laughed again.

"I'm going through my puberties."

"You're done with puberty, lady."

She winked at him. "And don't we know it."

This doused the heat like summer snow. Why? Why do I expect her? She smiled at him, all antagonism gone. Humorless Emmett smiled back. I don't know. But I do.

"Ask me out," she told him.

"We'll go hunting."

"Hunting what?"

"Pheasant."

"Where?"

"Near Parma."

"O.K.," she said. "We'll take my Datsun."

"My Ford will do."

"'Oh boy!" Butch clapped his hands. "'killing birnds. N'I'm going, ntoo."

Emmett drank until he passed out. Annalee took him home.
Emmett's 1954 Ford pickup popped out of gear as it rattled over the cattle guard.

"Hah!" Annalee shouted. "Again!"

Emmett swore and slammed it into first. The gears ground almost musically. The pickup gathered itself together, bucked twice, and died. Dust rose from the seats and dashboard. Emmett patted Annalee's knee and looked through the rear window to see if he'd lost the bumper.

"Try second gear," she told him.

"Thank you."

"Anytime."

Afraid now that he couldn't get the engine started, Emmett waited a moment, smiling at Annalee.

"Forget something?" she asked.
"No, thank you."
"Thank you."

He pushed the ignition button and the engine caught. She was laughing. He gunned the throttle until both sunvisors flapped down and then he eased up on the clutch. The Ford jerked into motion.

"That's the idea," she said.

Emmett hunched over the wheel, peering out through the patch the single wiper had streaked across the windshield. Fields of sugar beets alternated with corn and other row crops. The sun hung low in the October sky, red in the harvest haze. Emmett yanked on the wheel and bounced the truck out of the dried-mud ruts in the road. He managed to get the right wheels onto the concrete edge of the irrigation canal. The muddy water surged past them.

The three hour drive to the Boise Valley had been pleasant........ Annalee and Butch slept all the way. She sat next to Emmett, her head on his shoulder, her body radiating a clean warmth that kept him so aroused he snag Hank Williams songs and waved at cars coming the other way. He considered having her move in with him. His cabin had become a lonely place and, he figured, it would keep Billy Mink away. He was ready to discuss it with her, but when she woke she started in on him.

"Jee-ee-sust! It's cold in here. Where's your heater?"
"There's my poncho in the back."
"It's wet."
"But it's wool."
"But it smells."
And so on. In her usual high spirits, she took exception to everything he said. He finally mentioned to her his plan of cohabitation. She said there was a possibility, but he would have to spend part of his gigantic paycheck on an electric water heater and a shower for his cabin. For her part, Annalee said she'd like giving him baths in the big washtub, but the spilled water was rotting the kitchen floorboards. She could already see the ground. With regular bathing, she said, with a change in his diet and a more than occasional change of clothes, Emmett Stone would be a new man, presenting a fresh and modern appearance to the world. Just like the men in Boise, she said, groomed to zoom. Still, for all the soap and style, Emmett felt he would be betraying a way of life. Leathere long worn drinks the Skins Oils & Bufflers Greese. & provides a Portamanteau obliderous to the Elemets. Frequent bathing but causes the skin to chafe & givs Musquetors much Ease in ther Repast. He remembered his grandfather, home from the woods after a long summer's ramblings. Locked out of the cabin by his wife, the old man had Emmett follow him down to the lake to hold the towel while he divested himself of his gamey scent. Gramps washed himself slowly and thoroughly. Here go my last Souvenirs, he said, of the skunk fight on Lick Creek, the salmon catch at Big Creek, and that dead miner in Cold Meadows..... After a while, he said, things don't smell so good or bad. They just smell amusing.

Emmett thought it over. "I guess I'll work on it," he told her.
"I'm sure," she said.

They came to a better road and the pickup died again as he shifted into third.

"It's your carborator," Annalee said. "We should have walked."

"We'd never get here."

"We'll never get here as it is."

Such Women!

Emmett glanced past her to see how Butch reacted. He sat next to the window, holding his 12 guage shotgun between his knees. The ends of the barrels pressed into the purple scar in his forehead. His right eye watched out the window for pheasant; his left cast blindly down along the shotgun's barrels.

"That thing isn't loaded, is it?" Emmett asked.

Butch didn't answer. He hadn't spoken all day.

"You're going to break the scab open again if you keep scratching it like that."

Butch sighed and leaned the barrels across his shoulder.

"You're going to have to be more careful, Butch. You're not as smart as you used to be."

"Who is?" Annalee asked?

Butch took an old piece of chewing gum from the dash and began trying to unwrap it. His fingers fumbled and shook.

"Leave him be, Emmett," Annalee said.

Butch gave up on the gum and tossed it out the window.

Emmett pulled the pickup out onto Highway 20 and headed west. Some hunting trip, he thought. They had made it out of the
mountains by the time the shooting started at noon, but by four o'clock they had yet to find a farm where the owner would give them permission to hunt. Perhaps they were too scary looking: Emmett's crooked nose, Butch's scar and crazy eyes, Annalee's habit of aiming her shotgun at the farmers' dogs and saying "Ka-Boom! Click-click. Ka-BOOM! Click-click." And he wished she hadn't worn the fatigues.

The whump of a firing shotgun pushed in through the open window and Emmett saw hunters in almost every field. He eyed Butch again and saw that he was picking at his scar. That rodeo bull had turned Butch into an animal hater. The last winter, Butch had taken a job feeding cows by snowmobile. Although he rode out every morning with a load of hay on the sled, his 250 cattle were found dead the next spring, starved and frozen. When asked about it, Butch would snicker and roll his head. "N-n-n-n-n-n," he'd say. "N-n-n-n-n-n." Now he sat balefully watching the fields and carressing his shotgun. Emmett wondered if he could hit anything with his eyes so far out of line.

They drove through Parma and out a gravel road toward Snake River. There were beets and corn, some wheat, and Emmett could smell onion somewhere, but all the fields they passed were posted: No Trespassing; No Hunting Except By Permission; Absolutely No Hunting.

"Such friendly people down her in the valley," he remarked, looking over at Butch. Butch was putting a piece of scab in his mouth.

"You ought to chew gum," Emmett said. "Say, you are in a
Butch shook his head, chewing. "We can take it out on these ringly nicked pheasants," Annalee said. "Soon as we find some and somewhere to hunt."

They neared the sagebrush bluffs over the river. There were clouds in the west over Oregon.

"We'll try one more flatland farmer," Emmett said, "and then go hunt the sloughs by the river. They ought to be pretty fair, what with all the hunters pushing the birds out of the corn. Yes, and we've got a fresh dog, too. Has she died yet?"

Annalee looked out the rear window. Her black labrador lay in the bed of the pickup, looking more dead than asleep. The dog lay with one arthritic leg stuck rigidly up in the air. Annalee watched her for a moment and then turned around.

"Old Itch will do the job," she said.

Emmett laughed. "Speaking of jobs," he said. "How about your schoolteacher, Butch? Have you been seeing her lately?"

Butch's scar darkened.

"She moved to Grangeville," Annalee said.

"That's too bad. She sure was nice to him. He ought to take her a couple pheasants and trade some in."

"You ought to trade in this pickup." Annalee said.

Emmett turned the pickup onto a small private lane. It led to a white, square-framed home attached to a pink and gray trailer house. The trailer set on cinder blocks, the house jacked up on pilings. The whole affair appeared to be waiting
for a flood. There were a few cottonwoods in the yard, a
hay rack, a tractor shed, and a small leaning corn bin or
stock pen; Emmett couldn't tell which.

"We'll try here," he said, parking the truck near the
pen. "We can push through the corn into the beets. Butch,
see if you can wake up the dog." Emmett reached through his
window, felt for the handle, and opened the door.

Bringing her shotgun, Annalee followed him up the walk.
As they stepped onto the high porch, they heard angry shouts
coming from with the house.

"I'll kill him!" a low voice thundered. "I'll kill him
today!"

Cringing, Emmett began to turn away, but Annalee stepped
forward and knocked on the door.

"At least it's a 'him' they're going to kill," she said.
She cradled her shotgun in the crook of her arm. Emmett
stepped behind her.

"And that's that!" boomed the voice, and the door swung
inward, sucking with it a rush of air.

A huge woman in a print dress stood in the doorway. Bare----
foot, she towered over Emmett and Annalee. The swell of her
bosom and belly billowed the dress like a sail. The cluster
of grapes printed across the front ripened as she breathed.

"Hello, honey," she said to Annalee. Her voice was low
and powerful.

"Let me see! Let me see!" piped a voice from behind her.
The woman stepped back, revealing the interior of her home.
All the dividing walls were torn out. Different styles of
wallpaper marked where the various rooms had once been. There was a wall of grapes, a wall of raggedy Ann's, and a wall of faded roses. A sink and an old toilet hung from a short stretch of castles and kings. The pink and gray siding of the trailer served as the back wall. Magazine cut-outs of Japanese geisha girls adorned the dull metal. In the center of the floor, on a patch of buckling linoleum, stood a tall coal burning stove. Beside it was a high padded chair with its back flared like a clam shell. A tiny bald man sat sunk into the chair, a purple afghan across his lap.

"Oh," he said, surveying Annalee. "It's the National Guard."

"No, Toby," said the fat woman. "It's just some kids. Gals will wear anything nowadays. Won't you honey."

"Yes, ma'am," said Annalee. "Just about anything."

"Or just about nothing," laughed the woman. "Toby throws a fit if I don't cover up. Oh gracious, if I were you age."

Her bulk heaved.

Annalee laughed with her.

"Sometimes I wear nothing at all," she said. "I'm on my own now. Isn't that right, Emmett."

"Oh . . . and Emmett," the woman breathed, holding a puffy hand to her cheek. "And you two aren't married, are you?" she asked him. Her voice was so deep it sounded as if it came from her belly.

Emmett now stood directly behind Annalee, looking over her head. Annalee stepped away from him and regarded him proudly. He shifted from one foot to the other.
Annalee spoke for him. "No, we're not married. And he's not my only boyfriend."

"Of course not," the woman said. "Toby. Did you hear that?"

"I heard it," the little man said.

"This is a liberated woman. Aren't you, honey."

"Yes, ma'am." Annalee gave a little salute. "As free as the wind."

"Well now, won't you come in?"

"We'd love to," said Annalee. She winked at Emmett.

Emmett looked back for Butch. The man sat on the top rail of the stock pen, his shotgun across his knee. The sun was nearing the horizon. Butch perched there like a buzzard in silhouette, his back curved, his head low.

"There isn't much time," Emmett said to Annalee. "The sun's about down."

"Oh, shut your yap and come on in," the big woman said. She took Emmett by the forearm and pulled him through the doorway.

The house was uncomfortable. The coal stove baked Emmett's face and a draft from the trailer house chilled his back. The fat woman set out two ladderback chairs for Emmett and Annalee. Emmett's chair rocked on two legs. The woman saw this and clapped her hands, the backs of her arms swinging like cow waddles.

"Comfy?" she asked them. She turned and bent down towards the little man in the chair, her massive buttocks rising as she leaned. Her bare feet splayed across the floor.
Annalee reached over and pinched Emmett's arm. "Isn't his a kick?" she whispered, and winked at him.

The fat woman straightened and turned around. She bore the tiny man easily in her arms. His afghan fell away. Toby had no legs.

She sat down in the clam chair, filling the shell. Settling Toby into her lap like a ventriloquist's dummy, she smoothed the afghan around him.

"Combine accident," she said, patting Toby's head. "Oh, he's more there than you'd think."

Toby grunted.

Annalee giggled and winked again at Emmett. Emmett was afraid the woman would take offense and he looked down at his hands.

"Oh, it's comical, Emmett, I know," the woman said. "Go ahead and laugh."

Emmett looked up and smiled at her.

"Go ahead, honey. Laugh."

He smiled at her, frozen.

"Emmett's the serious type," Annalee said.

"Aren't they all," the woman said, squeezing Toby into her bosom. Toby pushed away, his hands sinking into the soft flesh.

Emmett stood and walked to the window. Butch still brooded on the stock pen railing. Behind him, the sun sat on a hilltop.

"And restless, too," the woman said. "If Toby had legs, he'd never sit down."
"Emmett is always leaving town," Annalee said.

"Men are like that," the woman said. "But honey, you are liberated. You can leave town, too."

"I know. But I don't have to."

"I bet you don't," the woman laughed. "Well, let me tell you a secret. Toby and me aren't married either."

"Isn't that wonderful."

Emmett turned back to the group.

"It's getting dark, Annalee," he said.

The woman clasped her hands. "So you are Annalee. My name is Melba."

"I'm pleased."

"Not half so much as me. I . . . ."

"If we're going to hunt . . . ."

The woman turned and stared at Emmett. Toby glared at him.

"Don't let Emmett upset you," Annalee said. "You see, we've come down to go pheasant hunting."

"Well, our fields are yours."

"We don't own any fields," said Toby.

"We do so. We own everything the eye can see."

"I'm sure you do," said Annalee.

"Sure we do. And you can hunt all you like." She smiled at Emmett and then her eyes widened as a new thought struck her. "And say, honey, would you mind doing us a favor?" She tightened her grip on Toby.

"Anything," Annalee told her.

"Well, there's this pony out in the stock pen . . . ."
"Agh!" screamed Toby.

The woman grabbed his head and pushed his face into her breast. Although he shook mightily, no sound arose from his struggles. Melba remained calm, like a mother long used to her child's tantrums.

"You see, the pony is Toby's daughter's," she said. "She's been married three times. To rich men, too. But how she winds up with ponies instead of automobiles I'll never know."

Toby stopped struggling. Melba let him up for a gulp of air and then pushed his face back against her.

"Then you want us to take the pony," Annalee said.

"I want you to shoot him," Melba said. The woman looked from Annalee to Emmett. "He's seventeen years old and eats more hay than we can afford."

"Sure we'll shoot him," Annalee said. "If you want us to."

Melba beamed. "You're so polite," she said. "Just leave him where he falls. We have a friend who will come and butcher him."

"You're going to eat a seventeen year old pony?" Emmett asked.

"Meat's meat," the woman said.

Walking out to the pickup, Annalee put her arm around Emmett's waist. "Weren't they something?" she said.

"I thought I was in a cartoon."

"And we're going to have some more fun," Annalee whispered. "Watch this."

The sun had set. Butch balanced on the top rail of the
stock pen, holding his double-barrel across his knees. He
glared into the pen.

"N-n-n-n-n-n-mission?" he asked, without looking up.

Emmett peered through the rails. The pen wasn't big
enough for one hog, but there was an old bald pony and a two-
year-old angus steer squeezed into it side by side, feeding
on a broken bale of hay.

"Nope," Annalee said. She cracked open her 20 guage
and chambered a shell. "No, Butch, these clodbusters are a
little too stingy, a little too proud of their land." She
slid the barrel of her shotgun in between the rails and placed
the muzzle between and above the pony's eyes.

When Emmett saw what she was about to do, he looked
up to watch Butch.

"We'll show them," Annalee said.

Ka-rang! Butch's mouth fell open. He pressed one palm
across his mouth and the other against his scar. His shotgun
teetered on his knees.

Emmett nodded. "How about that?" he asked.

Butch slowly turned his head and looked down at Emmett.
He nodded, too. "Oh, n'yeah," he said. "'N'yeah."

He shouldered his shotgun and pointed it down into the
pen. He touched off thunder from both barrels.

"No!" Emmett yelled. He danced around beside the pen,
trying to see between the rails and then he scrambled up
beside Butch. There was the pony, its blasted head pillowed
on the hay bale. The steer had bolted at Annalee's shot, but
there was nowhere to go; Butch caught it as it tried to back away. The doubled shot broke its neck and slammed its black head down into the mud. The hind legs were still standing. Its ass stuck up into the air.

Annalee climbed up beside Emmett. "Holy cow," she said, and started laughing.

Emmett looked back at the house. No one had come out. He turned to Butch.

Butch smiled. "N'na n'good n'day," he said.

Annalee was nearly in hysterics. "Let's get out of here," she managed to say, "before they find out we killed them both."

Butch and Annalee climbed down off the fence top. Emmett remained a moment, watching the murdered animals. At least it wasn't you who was shot, his grandfather said. Ponies are mean critters anyway. And as for the steer, well, meat's meat.

Annalee somehow got the engine started on the first crank. Emmett ran after the pickup as it bounced down the lane. He jumped into the bed and squatted beside Old Itch. The old dog spread her legs to have her belly scratched. Emmett looked back at the house. The woman stood on the porch, holding tiny Toby like a baby. Melba waved good-bye. Toby shook his fist.

Even though Emmett pounded on the roof of the cab, Annalee drove on. As he rode in the cold wind beside the dog, Emmett decided Annalee had to be slowed down. Isn't that wonderful that you're not married, Annalee had said to Melba. Emmett
decided that he would ask her to marry him.

Annalee finally pulled over to the side of the road and Emmett got in beside Butch. Butch put one arm around Annalee and the other around Emmett. He squeezed them both.

"Butch is taking me to the movies in Boise, tomorrow," Annalee said. "And a Chinese dinner afterwards."

"N'sweet and snour," Butch said.

She seemed to be able to coax more power out of the old Ford and they sped toward the mountains. A broken spring under Emmett's seat made him lean close to Butch all the way.
THE LAST RENDEZVOUS

The Snow in the Idaho is Dryest on Earth. A BucketFull wont fill yr. tea Cup with Watur. A Pilgrim wil sink to his Withers here. Here it is like wading throu a fine Mist. Wher it is packed the Cavers digs tunels beneath & carry on like Prarie Pups on the Plains. Befor yr. Eyees, they wil spring up lik Ghosts in a dusty Light & fill yr. Brisket with Arras. & FILL YR. BRISKET WIT ARRAS!

Emmett Stone shifted beneath his poncho and the snow fell from his shoulders. The brief flurry had left him and his world another three inches of powder, but the scene was the same: the flocked crowns of the ponderosa, the blue spruce and doug fir, the needle-free, moss-hung, black spires of the tamarack, the grove of naked aspen in the snowbound meadow. The cold was as real to Emmett’s ears and nose as
the hard image of his rifle was to his brain, but the heft in his hands had gone, had joined the cold weight of his shoulders and set into a leaden winter numbness. His eyes, at least, were still keen. That buck was still in the aspen somewhere, his antlers a part of the maze of branches, his eyes knots in the thicket. Emmett blinked, his eyes tearing. His breath frosted and dropped from the air. Damn her. I am still a hunter. I am still a smokejumper. I am still a part of this land and grandson of a mountaineer. Yup, you are the posterity of one of the wonders of the West, his grandfather told him, the progeny of a man who could make his own water to walk on. Emmett, you are the drift of a very old joke. See which way your stick floats, Gramps told him, it's time to pull stakes. During the snow, Emmett had decided on British Columbia, some fjord along the coast. It was wetter there than in Idaho, but as in Idaho, the weather protected the paradise. He would marry a fish eating Indian woman, one who sewed and smiled. Her teeth may not shine, but she would be warm under quilt and her oily skin would shed the rain. Emmett's breath turned to ice on his poncho. Annalee had moved in with Butch Harmon.

I'm immature, she told Emmett. It must be my hormones. They stood outside the hardware store. A logging truck roared by and chips of bark swirled around them. She smiled and kissed him. She was radiant; living with Butch agreed with her. Everything agreed with her, the leather ranch coat Butch had bought her in Boise, the crisp November breeze, even Butch across the road, who was nodding at Emmett happily. I
love his stutter, Annalee said. It makes him seem so serious. She pinched his arm. You'll come and see me, won't you. I'm as free as the wind. She winked at him and made him smile. Damn her.

Emmett's head sank under its own weight. He looked through his frosted eyebrows. The buck was in there somewhere. The cold made Emmett's eyes tear and as he blinked he knew the buck blinked too, as he breathed the deer breathed. Emmett knew the new snow was still on the animal's back, that the mulie would want to move lower. The winter was pushing him down. Emmett wondered if he could move his own fingers. He tried to smile, but his lips were too chapped. If he could move, he would shoot the buck through the neck at its first move, then clean it: core out the anus, snip the penis root from between the rump bulges, skin off the balls, work his blade up towards the brisket, spill the guts, warm his hands in the steaming mess at the blood turned to pudding and then to mud. Damn her. He would wipe out the carcass with clean, burning snow.

A chill of new numbness sank into Emmett's body. He blew. And as the white smoke of his breath spread and froze and then made crystaline the grove of aspen, the deer breathed, too. A white plume, a feather of air made visible, formed among the branches. A dark eye winked at him. A gray shadow began to drift through the white barked trees, preceded by small bursts of white steam. As Emmett strained to focus, the daylight dimmed. The sun set somewhere behind the clouds. The buck stepped clear of the stand, snow still falling in mists.
from his back. Glory. The small antlers, like hands reaching, rotated around each other as the animal eyed the forest. Emmett felt himself stand.

He raised his carbine. His thumb pulled back the hammer. The rifle's heft became confused with the numb weight of his arms, but the bead made a hard point against the graying background of mule deer and snow. Gray on gray, like an old tintype photograph, the scene aged and darkened. Emmett held his breath. The buck blew his, and bolted, snow swirling up with the dusty spots of night blindness. Emmett fired. And fired again. The cold air rang. The deer seemed a bright wave of noise splashing towards the ridge. Emmett chambered another shell. The buck gained the ridge and, as mules will, stopped to look over his shoulder. Emmett was ready. He stepped forward, aimed, and fell.

In darkness he walked home. When he slipped, he had cut his eyebrow on the hammer of his rifle. He wondered why he always wounded himself. Now, now, Gramps said, the foolishness of a young life will look like cheap tricks to an old failure. You got the h'ar of the b'ar in you, Emmett, your bark will toughen. Sheepeater Jack was some old failure, too. Emmett stamped his feet as he walked. Gramps. Gramps. You're probably titties up under some Salmon River cutbank now, your bones stacked and bleached with the driftwood, waiting for another spring fret. You're probably pushing up grass or keeping grass from growing. Your teeth decorate some packrat's den and your hair holds together a magpie's mess. Old pilgrim, you're probably still alive.
Probably, you've found you your Sheepeaters or at least on old squaw. You're eating greasy now and bewailing every minute.

Lord Jeesus deliver me She-wont let me go! I am kept Prissoner by an Indin Ishmaelite of the 1st Order. Also Crone.

Emmett laughed aloud. His chapped lips cracked and the snow and forest muffled the sound. He walked through the gloom with one hand before him. So that's the way it would be then, the saga of Jack among the Sheepeaters.

Discuraged.

Discuraged.

Having et my last Buro, the one I called Beest I cached my most Provison near Goat Crik & taking only my Possibles & what Doodads GewGaws & Foofuraw I cud string round my Neck. I clumb up high into the Big Horn Creets tho ther I was not sartain to find the Banditti, The Tu-Ku-Rika, them damn able Sheep Eating Indans who hav led me on sech a woe besmitten Chace.

Godaheaven I had hert my Self agin. Fell into the camping Fire & lost to a Spark the Site of my good Eyee. It wus Winter or near enow as the Snow was falling. Also my Speerits. My Lif dint hav no Shine. My Luck was Down. It was 1962 a very late yeer for a Montaneer & Indin Hunter. Later it seemed for Indians. They wer skeerced & Long Ago.

This Beaver was ready to go Under. I was Old Sick Worried & if I cud not hav an Indin Brave lift my Har I wud settle for a Last Shave & smoke my Pipe to the 4 Directions befor my
Soul went the 4 ways at once.

Lik a true Free Trappeur & Man of Humor I determined to make som Riddle of my Self & die Bound for Higher Ground. The Creegs ar Tall Country & curious. Comical almost. Bent & Juggled. Bridger knew them to confuse ea. Other tho Jim was known to tell Yarns.

What com to pass saved my Skin but lost forever my Way of Life. As I neered a Stony Summert I chanced to see som small Vapors steeling from a Chink in the Rocks. Boiling Springs ar common in this Country but rarly neer the snow HowDahed Crown of a Mitey Creeg. I had a LookSee & found the Vapors was Smoke! They was Smok & this was no Peru Volcano. No for I also smelt Meet.

& this raised the Hackles on my Spine for shorly I had found som HellHole & below me Belseebub was frying the Boudins of som poor Soul.

Also it raised my Apetite.

Devil or no I was Hungry & I serched for the Sorce of the Smoke. Below & away som 50 Yards above a Defile & acrost som Scree I uncovered a Dark Pasageway into the Creeg well hidden it was by brush. The Odor of Meat was Strong but Strange as I enterd the Cav. 20 Paces in I spied a Chamber HeadHigh & 10 Yards Deep & upon the Walls I saw the Speers Bows Arras & Instremets of Shepeter WarFare.

Pilgrim! I wud have dashed into that Chamber lik Livern Johnson & raised the Hair of evry Brave. Believe me. But I was near Blind Broke Down & Delirious in a Starvd State. I did what I cud. I threw my Self to ther Mercys &
Cralled in on my Hands & knees.  
Yes that was my Blunder.  I was captured ther not by a Cheef but by an Old Squaw AN OLD SQUAW the Last of her Race who keeps me now Prissoner for som Reson I dont know.
Uglier then I her head is but barely coverd with white Pin Fethers the 1st Bald Indian I ever saw.  Her Dugs hang down lik Powder Pouches & swing in her daily Ululations to the Dead.  She feeds me the stinkin RockRabbits what habit her Burrow what I cannot chewe with out my Teeth & must swallow in Strips.

This then is my Goin Under my Coming & Last Ronday Voo.  Tho I am Done she is a Wunder she wil liv for Ever her eyes stil Shine.

It began to snow again. Emmett reached the Warren Wagon Road and climbed over the snowbank left by the county plow. He was laughing. He fell again on the icy roadway and lay there on his back, tasting the falling snow.