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### The Salad Days

Evan Williams

*The University of Montana*

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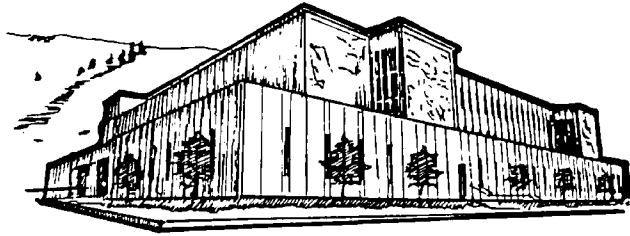
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THE SALAD DAYS

by

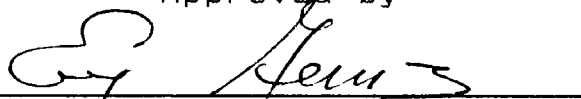
Evan Williams

B.A., The Colorado College, 1987

A professional paper  
presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts  
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JUNE 6, 1991

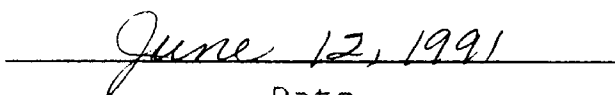
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Certain of these stories have appeared elsewhere: *Porch* (in a slightly different form), *The Reaching*, *The Woman Who Was Wakan*, and *A Story for Bighorn Basin* appeared in The Woman Who Was Wakan and Other Stories (February, 1991, Merriam Frontier Award chapbook, University of Montana); *Itsitsia* appeared in Kinnikinnik (July, 1990); *The Woman Who Was Wakan* also appeared (in a slightly different form) in North Country (Spring, 1991); and *A Story for Bighorn Basin* appeared (in a slightly different form and under the title Roadkill) in Eotu (February, 1991).

## PORCH

Winter and spring, east of the Rockies it was dry. What little snow fell blew like sand, drifted in gullies and along fences, and melted away. Summer, it was hot and dry, and the prairie faded to dark brown. The sky paled to yellow. Burned out from the heat, I sat on my porch in Crow Agency, Montana, and waited out each day, though I could not say what I waited for. In a way, this made the waiting painful.

The days were hot. Crow children with sticks played in the sun. Crow families came and went in beat up cars. Dinnertime, the air hung quiet while, farther off, trucks rumbled on the Interstate. I switched on my porchlight for the fine shadows of the cottonwoods around the yard. By evening I would have spoken to no one, though I may have had nothing I wanted to say.

In the Bighorns - a fire that summer - the wind rolled the smoke over the prairie. You could hardly breath. Nighttime, my porchlight thinned to a weak yellow glow, a murky cone of light I prefered to sit at the edge of.

I went to cafe, and a tall Crow waitress handed me a menu and said, "Hey, did you see there's a fire in the Bighorns?" I said, "Yes, there's a fire in the Bighorns." The waitress poured my water from a plastic pitcher, which she held with both hands. She took my order, and the rest of the meal passed without a word.



The fire was bad. There were not enough people to fight it. I doubted whether the fire fighters were doing any good. Still, the pay was considerable, so I went to the Forest Service in Sheridan and applied to work on the fire. With all the smoke, though, I failed the stamina test. I stopped mid-test and sat down, wheezing, and the examiner laughed. Later, leaning against my screen door, I decided I did not want to fight the fire anyhow. I looked down at my hands, though no one was watching me at the time.

Each evening, those of us who did not fight the fire met at a cafe down the road from Crow Agency. at the exit to the North Cheyenne Reservation. The evenings were hot, and the lights came on early because the sky was dark with smoke. Thundershowers started around seven. You sat on benches in front of the cafe and ate ice cream and watched the storm. Old tall Crow men sat too and waited for their families. Their thick dark hands rested on their knees.

There was the cafe, and a gas station, and gift shops where you bought beadwork if you had no Crow friends to make it for you. The tourists, who pulled off the Interstate during the day to visit the Custer Battlefield, had gone. The gift shops had closed. The cafe filled with smoke and the soft, lilting Crow language. In the booth next to ours, a young Crow man with new-smelling cowboy boots was teaching a trucker how to say "I love you" in Crow. The Crow language

was beautiful and vulnerable, but I may have been fooling myself to pretend to be so moved.

The waitress came to our table. She was tall, with long, shiny black hair. She looked twenty-four, like me. "Hey." she said, "how come you're not fighting the fire?"

I said, "They wouldn't let me."

She said, "I never heard that before. You must be messed up. Maybe they just didn't like you."

Across the table from me sat Monte. He was a musician from Sheridan, come up summers to work for the Park Service. He lit a cigarette, winked at me, and looked at the waitress. "What about me? Do you want to know why I am not fighting the fire?" When Monte was a young man he had sung in the chorus at the Metropolitan Opera.

The waitress looked down and handed us menus.

Monte exhaled. "Because I'm too old, that's why."

"You are not so old," she said. "I got an uncle, he's as old as you, and he smokes and everything, and he's out on that fire."

"So if I am not so old," Monte said, "why am I not fighting the fire?"

"Do you know what you'd like?" she asked.

"No."

When Monte's boss enlisted him to fight the fire, Monte had refused. "I didn't come here this summer to fight fires," he had said. He was too old. He was a musician. He earned

his living with his voice, his hands. The acrid smoke, the hard physical labor - no, he had said, he would not fight the fire. This refusal went in his personnel file, but in the end he was allowed not to fight the fire.

The waitress wrote down our orders and took the menus.

Monte spent his evenings in the cafe, reading the Billings Gazette and smoking Benson and Hedges. I did not see why he was excused from fighting the fire. The cigarette smoke must have been just as bad.

Sometimes, we were met by two Crow men my age. They had lost their jobs on the fire after a scrap with a firefighter from Gillette. They told me he was racist, and that fighting him was wrong, but they were glad they did it. They were brothers, and we sat together, and I listened to their good jokes and stories. They flirted with the waitress and told her to stay out of trouble. The flirting got so she wouldn't talk to the brothers. She would come to our table and hand us menus and say to me "What do you and your friends want?"

The brothers had a lot of relatives and mostly sat with them at another table. Really, the brothers did not come to the cafe much at all. It was only a few times. When they did come, they brought me food that their sisters and aunts had made - fry bread or tacos, or pie, or fresh cherries. I would take the food home and sit on my porch late at night and eat. I was always alone, and although the smokey night sky was beautiful and there was the soft hum of trucks on the

Interstate, as I peeled the foil from a piece of leftover cherry pie, I felt I had not lived.

I would meet Monte at the cafe, and maybe the Crow brothers would show, but likely not. We ate burgers and soup, and Monte told me about opera. He leaned forward, and his hands traced cracks in the formica table-top. "You know," he said, "in their own time Puccini's operas were not considered a high art form."

Monte had given me a cassette of Puccini arias, sung by Luciano Pavaroti, Kiri Te Kanawa, Renata Scotto, Placido Domingo. I had listened at night hard, my eyes closed, my hands touching my eyes.

"Yes," Monte mumbled, "the Puccini is good." Monte picked up the check and reached for his wallet. "This one is on me."

"You said that last time."

"No."

"Well, let me get the next one." I said. I was quite sure he would pay for the next one too.

Monte boarded in a run-down motel nearby. From the cafe you crossed the Interstate, crossed the road to Lodge Grass, and along the railroad track you came to the motel. Tall grass, cattails, and cottonwoods grew along the track. The motel - a row of cement-walled rooms with hollow metal doors - fronted the track. People lived here because they could afford to

live nowhere else. Halogen lights were strung through the cottonwoods, and the shadows of the branches played upon the dirt in front of the motel.

Next to the motel was an all-night laundromat and gas pumps and a store. The store had a small selection of groceries, set on a folding table as at a garage sale. Against the wall stood a rack of junk food - candy bars and potato chips and Dolly Madison treats - and a smaller rack of Christian pamphlets, and a freezer that hummed loud and never kept anything frozen. You reached in, and the ice cream bars felt limp and cold.

It was hot in that store. I touched the soap, the candy bars, the Christian pamphlets, warm. I bought a bag of Doritos, warm. Outside, I walked the row of numbered metal doors. The night sky glowed yellow.

Monte's door was open. I knocked on the door, and it swung wide. "Hey Monte, Doritos."

"I've already got us some."

Three of us, always three, met here: me, Monte, and a Crow woman named Lois. Lois was a Christian, but she liked to visit Monte and play cards and watch movies on Monte's VCR. She was big and tall, but her hands were small, like a child's. She brought beadwork to sew, which she held close to her face and sometimes used her teeth on. Her beadwork was pretty, and she never sold it to the giftshops across the highway.

The cement walls gave off the heat of the day. Monte had an air conditioner, but it rattled so loud you had to yell, so Monte kept the door open. The air felt cool flowing in the doorway, and the yellow of the night sky cast into the dark room.

I set my Doritos on the table, opened Monte's package, and poured some onto a paper plate.

Monte stood over the VCR, doing something. I sat next to Lois on the bed, and we ate Monte's Doritos, plus fresh grapes, warm, from a plastic bowl.

Monte returned to his chair. He aimed the remote control at the television and clicked it on. He turned to me and Lois. "You'll like this," he said.

We watched Luciano Pavarotti give a recital of Puccini's finest arias. We ate grapes and chips. Monte poured three paper cups of Black Velvet. "You'll like this," he said.

Pavarotti ended with an aria called *Nessun dorma*. He wept as he sang, he looked away from the audience, and then he closed his eyes.

I said something to Monte. His eyes were closed. He nodded and said, "You bet Pavarotti's into it. Those folks paid thirty bucks to see him."

I left Monte and Lois inside. I had a notion I wanted to meet somebody, as if stepping outside would solve that. I had no place to go just then, so I stood in front of the motel and watched the trucks come and go. I considered this a failure.

I heard Monte bang his fist on the table, and I turned. He was pointing at the television. "Did you see that? They started clapping, and he wasn't even done."

In the cafe I sat in a booth alone. I asked the tall waitress her name. Elizabeth. I asked her how to say "I love you" in Crow, but she said she could not speak Crow. "It is very beautiful, though," she said and handed me a menu. "I do not need the menu," I said. She took my order, and the night passed in the usual silent way.

Saturday afternoon, early September, the days had turned sunny and slightly cool. Maybe the yellow sky was clearing, I did not know. I had grown used to the way it was, or pretended I had, and so disguised the waiting.

I parked my car in front of Monte's motel room. "Come on in," he said.

Lois was sitting in the corner. She nodded. I sat in a folding chair next to the card table. A cheap lamp dimly lit the room. The curtains were drawn shut. A new bottle of Black Velvet waited on the table. The cigarette smoke was thicker than the smoke outside.

Monte sat down. "Look at this." He showed me his hand, bandaged in a splint. "Last week, I was visiting my wife in Sheridan, helping her in the garden. I ripped a god damn tendon, pulling carrots. It hurts like hell."

He handed me a cassette with his good hand. "Look at this. Puccini. Richard Tucker's on this. He sang at the Met when I was there."

I gave him back the tape, and he put it in the player. "I found this tape in the budget bin," he started to say, but then he dropped the case on the floor. "Dammit."

We listened to the tape. *Che gelida manina*. Monte waved his hand as if conducting an orchestra. He hummed to the music. Then he said, "He missed it."

"What?"

"Tucker missed the note. He was pretty old when he made this."

We listened further.

"A tenor loses it about fifty," Monte explained.

"How old are you?" I asked.

"Fifty-eight."

Monte went into the bathroom. I heard him say "God damn it," and something drop. Lois cracked the seal on the Black Velvet and filled three paper cups. She told me Monte had been to the doctor. At first they thought it was fine, but then the doctor said Monte's finger had healed badly.

Monte came back in, sat down, and laid his hand on the table. He had taken off the splint. His index finger lay pink and flat and limp and sort of apart from the others.

"I make my living with my hands," he said. "But this." He rotated his hand beneath the lamp.



"You could still sing."

"I can't earn any money singing. I have to earn money. I have to eat. I should have worked the fire, and now it won't make any difference."

We listened further to Puccini. Monte refilled the glasses, and we opened my bag of Doritos, but no one felt like eating. Lois bent over her beadwork.

Monte lit a cigarette. As he fumbled with the matches, his index finger got in the way. "God damn it," he said. Then he returned to the music. He was a long way off.

"Monte?"

"What." His eyes were closed, and his cigarette glowed orange before his face.

"I'm going to learn Crow."

"It won't make any difference. It won't make any difference."

When the tape ended I left, although I had been ready to leave for some time.

Late September, weary fire crews were passing through Crow Agency. They came in school buses and government vans. They stopped at the cafe and ate and laughed together. Monte still came too. He wore a brightly beaded belt buckle, purple and orange. Lois made it for him, he said. He lit his cigarette with a lighter, which he said was easier than striking a match. He bought me a hamburger and told me about opera, how

Pavarotti was getting older and singing at recitals where people clapped no matter how often his voice cracked, and how it was too bad the fire season was ending, because he really did need the money. We sat in a booth by the window and watched the backs of the old Crow men who sat on the benches outside. They talked softly in Crow and waited for their families, their thick dark hands gesturing in the air.

## ARROW MAKERS

There are about twenty men anymore who can make a good arrow. Arrow makers. Arrow making has been tagged a lost art, and arrow makers the keepers of an arcane tradition, a sort of covenant. Collectively, arrow makers are known as the Arrow Society. A misnomer. There's no such society at all. Simply, there are men who, for private reasons, have chosen to make arrows. Mostly they shy away from each other. They share a keen eye, a steady hand, and a way of holding an idea in their mind, and to this extent arrow makers are of a type. An arrow maker gnaws a shaft of willow to give it a pitted finish and a hardened core. He moistens catgut between his lips, and lashes a fluted point to the shaft. He licks the point's tip to test its sharpness. At night he puts a smooth, wetted stone in his mouth and sucks it dry. A balm stone. He soaks the stone in cottonseed oil during the day. Look at an arrow maker's yellowed teeth, if you can get him to smile. Look at the scars on his lips. An arrow maker believes what he does is necessary.

An arrow maker spends the early morning pounding scrap metal flat and filing it down, a shiny projectile point. An arrow maker might keep a small anvil, sturdy but light enough to lug about, and a kit of specialized hammers. Such an anvil is very old, and impossible to replace if lost or stolen. An arrow maker works with copper or iron, or bronze, or silver,

whatever suits his taste, and whatever in the way of cookware and utensils he can beg from a widow. If he is lucky, he will be out walking in a field and find a meteorite of pure nickel and iron, malleable but strong. An arrow maker hones a point so sharp, he cuts himself if careless. He knows how to suture a wound with catgut. He is a competent surgeon in an emergency, and no arrow maker has ever turned a patient away.

An arrow maker who doesn't own an anvil works a point from stone. He clamps a flake of obsidian in a wooden vise and taps away with a leather mallet and a tiny chisel. The finest point, as big as your hand, shaped like an alder leaf, and nearly as thin, has hundreds of delicate flutes. Another point is small and blunt, for stunning a songbird. The songbird, struck, falls from a tree like a ripe apple, and the hunter puts it in a cage with other birds, to sell. This songbird arrowhead is so tiny you could swallow one without difficulty. Someone has tried this, and claimed a limited tonic effect. An arrow maker who works with stone suffers eye strain, but he can grind and polish glass to make a lens. He has some skill as an optometrist. An arrow maker can start a fire with his lens.

Come morning, an arrow maker quits his tools and makes his way to the river. He combs the shallows for willow branches. He wades to his knees in the green muck behind an abandoned beaver damn. A faggot of sticks on his back, he trudges home. He places the sticks in a watertight basket to

soak. An arrow maker wiles away the hottest part of the day in the shade of an arbor, scrimshawing designs on gamepieces not unlike dominoes and dice.

The softened stick he cuts into a shaft. He rolls it across his anvil, and hones it up and down, till straight and smooth. The shaft is soaked and dried again, chewed, and rubbed with mink oil. The arrow maker sights down the shaft a hundred times. He brews colorful dyes, leached from berries and crushed stone, and paints the shaft in bands of green and red, and thinner bands of black. The bands form a pattern, a coded message, a blessing or prayer, a curse.

An arrow maker knows how to split a feather neatly down the quill. He is expert at concocting glues for affixing the feathers to the shaft. Owl feathers soft as felt: the arrow floats quietly and strikes an animal by surprise. Or goshawk feathers, stiff: the arrow hisses through the air. Merganser feathers: the arrow flies poorly, but the quills resist water, and the arrow is useful for hunting fish. To get hawk feathers, an arrow maker crouches in a baited pit for days. For mergansers and ducks, he waits in the reeds with a lasso in his hands. During the wait, a vision might come to him. Later, he scrimshaws details from the vision onto a gamepiece and gives it away, a charm.

An arrow maker can fashion an arrow strong enough to penetrate the trunk of a tree and pierce the bark on the far side. He makes spears, bolts for crossbows, blunt wobbly

arrows for hunting partridges and doves, arrows serated and tethered for fishermen. He makes harpoons, boomerangs, and throwing sticks. He makes bows. He works from a private vision, and his arrows carry a signature design. Perhaps he works not from willow but from yew. Perhaps his points are made of jasper and have a bulbous feel. If an arrow maker is lefthanded it will show. An skilled arrow thrower can tell an arrow's maker by the flight pattern alone.

An arrow maker does not hunt. He stalks a deer or elk, raises a clutch of arrows in his fist, and strikes the startled animal across the back. He wields a bow in this way too, as though it were a wand. Raise and strike. An arrow maker will meet a bear, strike him on the nose and walk away, laughing. If the arrow is true, and painted with a good prayer, the arrow maker comes away well. But this isn't hunting. At most he has played a joke on the bear, who is too surprised to know what to do. A hunter is awed by this and misses the joke.

An arrow maker who has not learned to grind a lens ignites a cookfire with his bow. He loops a stick through the bowstring, pins the stick to the ground with a special stone, and saws the bow back and forth, causing the stick to spin. He has placed a wad of straw beneath the stick, and the friction from the spinning stick heats the straw to burning. A fire. There is a more sophisticated way to go about this. An arrow maker could keep a pilot lamp of slow-burning oil,

scented like lilacs. A hunter comes up and says "I would like that fine bow for myself." An arrow maker craves appreciation, and he cannot refuse. He gives the bow to the hunter and eats his own supper cold.

An arrow maker, lacking interest in the practical use of arrows and bows, does not bother to make a quiver. The arrows lie strewn about his anvil, and he often cuts his feet. He jumbles his arrows in his arms and takes them to sell. He spills his arrows along the way, and some of the points break. Women with baskets trample by. At the roundhouse, men snatch up the arrows so quickly an arrow maker loses track of his sales.

An arrow maker goes at life askew. He makes a tool which, loosed from a bow, binds predator to prey, but he won't use it in this way. An arrow maker was once asked how to fire an arrow; he lobbed it by hand. The arrow floated a short way and settled lightly in the grass. Arrow throwing was recognized for its difficulty, and caught on among gamblers. Just so, arrow making serves no useful end. The Arrow Society is given exclusively to ritual and play. Arrow throwing is a popular game, and there are others: target shooting, and a contest to see how many arrows a man can release before his first one touches the ground. But almost no one packs a bow and arrow for hunting, anymore.

A few arrow makers are women. A women arrow maker makes a ceramic bolt for killing partridge and dove. She has a

crossbow that is light and powerful. And she likes to hunt. She comes back with her game net laden. This is missing the point. An arrow maker will tell you that is not arrow making.

In his distaste for hunting and his preference for ceremony and game, an arrow maker includes in the design of each arrow a damning flaw. An arrow flies crooked, it twists and curves, it knuckles weakly and bounces off the hide of an elk. Another is made to rifle, and whizzes so loud it frightens the game away. One arrow returns to the shooter, who must dodge out of its way. More than one hunter has been struck in the calf when his own arrow looped behind him. The most acrobatic arrows pose the greatest danger. An arrow thrower favors a special weighted arrow which sails far when thrown but sinks to the ground when fired from a bow. There is a bow so stiff you can't draw it back. A target shooter uses a flightworthy arrow, but the lethal tip has been removed. Only an arrow maker uses a perfect arrow, and then, only to strike an animal's back and laugh.

The arrow makers are the inventors of games and gamepieces: shell games, dominoes, dice, counter sticks and tokens, cribbage boards, draddles. He carves them from bone, antler, tooth, and tusk. These materials too he must beg from a widow, and it is utterly humiliating. An arrow maker keeps a poor account of his sales, he has no money, but a widow has even less. But the widow's husband was a hunter, and the



widow has ivory, so against his better virtue the arrow maker wheedles her ivory away.

Arrow makers make the fine abacuses cherished by the arithmetical society. They make the rosaries and prayer wheels for the priestly order. They are at odds with the farmers. An arrow maker plods home from the river, laden with willow, or he combs a fresh-plowed field for useful bits of stone, and a farmer looks up from her hoe and says "You are a waste of time. We are hoing potatoes and corn. A shovel breaks, you know, and it would be nice to get a new shaft. You are playing games." The taunts bite and hold, and an arrow maker skulks away.

An arrow maker might spend days polishing a domino or a die, though the beauty of a gamepiece makes no difference in the outcome of the game. Gaming is about relationships. What matters is the give and take of dice and tokens among the players. Serpents and roses patterned among the pips on a dominoe mean nothing. Some argue it is distracting. An arrow maker will agree, but will pull out a weighted die etched with talismans and ask you if you want to play, and so propagates a belief in the power of the designs. An arrow maker is said to be a good gamester, but rarely plays. When he does he cheats, and feels guilt-ridden. An arrow maker enjoys watching others play in the roundhouse. He never gambles. An outsider will tell an arrow maker, you have never won. The arrow maker will say he has never lost.

Some men demand new games, elaborate and impossible to win, so complex as to mimmick life itself. Arrow makers prefer the easier games, confined to a board of polished maple, played with tokens you can hold in your hand. Some of their games require but one die, or a draddle. There is a game where you flip a token for heads or tails. Arrow makers are the minters of money. The arrow makers conduct lotteries, call numbers for a kind of bingo, and deal cards. They freely dispense odds on a game. They are known to be trustworthy and forthright, but so eager to please that they will cheat for you if you ask. They are often taken advantage of.

None would admit so, but the men of the roundhouse tire of all the gaming. To pass the time they contrive imaginative ways to feed themselves. They drop grapes and bits of venison into each other's mouths. They pour wine over their shoulder into a cup held between their toes. They grow fat and wish their lives mattered more. To break the tedium, arrow makers devise new games, but even these grow stale. Once, an arrow maker invented a shell game at which it was possible to cheat. The men in the roundhouse quickly grasped how to cheat, and the game proved popular. Soon though, a man bitter at losing accused the winner of cheating. The loser may have been cheating too. A punch was thrown. An arrow maker was there to make book on the outcome of the fight. Arrow makers have evolved a ritual of dares, struts, and chest beating, called push-comes-to-shove. They carve an ivory gamepiece which you

rest on your shoulder and say "I dare you to knock this off." They make a thin clay cane, more like a stick, to draw a line in the sand. You can also brandish this cane in someone's face and say "Consider yourself struck." The challenge "Do you wanna bet?" is arrow maker jargon. To say "I'll bet" before a dubious claim gives an arrow maker a vericaty and authority he hasn't earned.

An arrow maker adores ritual and game, and demures from power. He waves a few arrows in the air, but that is all. His is an elegant way to live. He has become associated with all excess: body ornaments, perfumes, and hair braiding. An arrow maker will etch a tattoo on your cheek and oil your hair. He will have you believing you are beautiful. He reads your fortune in the draw of cards or the lay of sticks. His power has nothing to do with clarvoyance and much to do with informed analysis, the setting of odds, and saying "I'll bet." An arrow maker is a good magician, but he openly shows his sleight of hand.

Arrow makers are said to be happy, though an arrow maker might disagree. Arrows make prized gifts. He loves to give them away. He may spend days on a single arrow. The gesture is impossible to repay. It makes the arrow maker unkind. He says "Look at this beautiful arrow, I will give it to you." He loves gifts, wants to receive them in kind, but nothing fits, so he must go to a widow and beg for flowers and food.

Perhaps it is with dismay then, that at the end of his life an arrow maker turns to hoarding arrows. A bad time is coming, he says. On this he is adamant. It is in the cards. He will show you the odds.

It puts a dark cast to his life of ceremony and game, as though he were merely biding his time. It raises the question, too, what does he plan to do with his arrows? Will he fire them at an enemy? Or will he wield them like wands? Do these special arrows fly straight at all?

He is arming himself against death. A useless maneuver. He could do as well to stack them in a cage and hide inside. The last thing an arrow makes does, is make up about 100 sleek, long light arrows, as might be fired from a horse on the run. Arrows so strong that they could kill three men at once. Remarkably, these arrows are identical, as if made by machine. A stockpiling paranoia. Repetition. Embitterment at never being gifted. Loss for creativity. Each arrow maker goes about this with thier own colors, whatever, feathers, but they are all light, sleek, dark brown. Late in life, he has seen the futility of games. He reads with some accuracy (and it does not take much to see that they are correct, they'll die soon, though they'll show you the roll of the dice if you don't believe them), that there is death. And it will be good to build up a reserve. This is the first time they make arrows for a fight, but it is a battle their finest arrows cannot carry for them.

By the time the hopelessness sets in, this withdrawal into privacy and repetition, there's only enough time for a hundred, at most, and he stacks them around himself, a cage.

There is the feel of the preparing for a ritual. A girl sews a prom dress. An arrow maker hones an arrow.

If he stops, there's no saying he'll die. The more arrows he has, the more assuredly he has succeeded in staying death -- the more it shows he is alive -- or the closer he can be sure death is, depending on how you look at it. And if death is so close at last, he will need every arrow. After he makes another thirty or so arrows -- the work of a year -- he decides death wasn't so close afterall. But just so, it has surely drawn closer since then, and the need to make more arrows presses upon him more urgently than ever, and he sets to work again.

Death takes an arrow maker by surprise.

An arrow maker dies unhappy.

## THE REACHING

*...for Indians will rarely be found conversing audibly, even among themselves, when they can so conveniently make themselves understood through the language of signs.*

*JOE DeBARTHE, 1894*

The premise, it seemed, was simple. I would speak using signs. It would be far easier. Why, I asked myself, should I bother to talk when I could avail myself of the delicate locutions of my hands?

For so long I'd hated speaking aloud, stuttering, knotting my fingers, a keen tension around my eyes to distract me. I had heard my voice taped on an answering machine: I sounded ugly.

Speaking denoted lies. It set up distance. My awkward words imparted a subtle shade of meaning: *Listen, I am too anxious to speak openly.* By my deprecations I obscured my sacred message, as a child might stash a cherished toy, perhaps a hand puppet, when an adult approached to inquire. The others, they lost patience with this, they shrugged and shook their heads and walked away from me. Of course they walked away.

My speech was effective only when I was silent, when my silence said, *What I feel is too sacred to be spoken. Maybe we could try to touch.* A friend of mine who stayed behind, she smiled at this. In the reaching of my hands to hers, sign language emerged from the wreckage of dishonesty.

I learned it from a Crow man. The others had run off, I think to chase a porcupine. Sensing my helplessness, the old tall man had shuffled up to me and rested on his cane. He took my aside to a wooden bench. We sat, he rubbed his eyes, and he began to teach.

The man spoke English poorly. At a loss for words, he retreated to the eloquence of his practiced, arthritic hands. He spoke not at all, just motioned this way and that as trucks hummed past, and my friend brushed her hair quietly. and off a ways the others yelled as they whipped a porcupine with a towel.

The silence between the Crow man and myself lent an immediacy to my grasp of the signs. Like this sign: (watch my hands). He showed it to me. I never learned what it meant. I only knew how to use it, to face my friend and say, *There is something satisfying in seeing you, when I turn your way, or when you turn my way.* I was not sure which, but that's just it: I couldn't say what it meant. I only knew it was good.

The lesson complete, Crow man shook my hand, felt for his wallet, and walked towards town.

I trusted that the spirit of what was best in the words would be retained. I was not disappointed. The meanings took on what I had long ago dismissed as an impossible grace. This sign, for example: *trust (literally, the Great Spirit can see there is no blood on my hand).* That was a good sign. I could

use that anywhere, and they would know I was incapable of guile.

Some meanings took on the elaborateness of celebrations: *deep affirmation*. When, for example, I divined the graceful solution to a dilemma, my grasp of the elusive meaning was securely enunciated in the firm snatch of my hand, the affirmation plucked from the air like a tiny blue butterfly in the tall grass along the road, fluttering like a stray petal of lupine. My friend, she laughed and clapped as I opened my hand and let it go again.

Mostly, though, I delighted at how simply I could render meaning: *yes*. The motion was as delicate as the light descent of my index finger into a bowl of water. Plop! I had once seen two people communicating in the sign language of the deaf: how frantic they were, as if besieged by a swarm of mosquitoes. What the Crow man taught me was subtle, cryptic. The slightest turn of my hand conveyed the finest notions, as a simple ribbon might secure a gift, a small red box with something good inside. *Good*: (watch my hand: it means, *You and I know this gift is level with our hearts*). You see, you would not have guessed, but knowing now, it pleases you, just as it pleased me. It implied, more than anything, complicity, an intimate belonging I was keen to retain.

My friend sat down beside me. I touched her shoulder and expressed my regret at ever trying to speak at all. I took back my words, plucking them from where they hovered in the



air. This proved easier than I had imagined. I had only to turn, and there they were: indeed, my pain had stayed with me, as inseparable as a shadow. Just so, I dismantled my shame with only a few cursory motions of my hands, just one hand, it was so easy.

Before, words had been like bricks, a wall between her and me, in spite of our intentions. Now, with my hands, I was taking the wall down, gesture by gesture, each brick coming down. Across the wall I began to see her face, her eyes. I wondered why it had taken so long to come to this.

She watched as I carved the shapes of my feelings, describing them in arcs before her face. I moulded meaning with my hands, as a potter shapes a mound of clay into a bowl or cup, which I gave to her across the wall, a gift.

*It's neat*, she said, tracing the rim of the bowl with the tip of her index finger.

The others came back, gorged with laughter. They showed us a towel bristling with porcupine quills. They plucked the quills from the towel and brandished them in their hands, waving their hands in the air. Soon they bored with this, and anyway the quills hurt if you held them long, so they threw them in the grass. My friend retrieved the quills, one by one, and put them in her bowl.

"Come with us to the bars in town," they said.

I said nothing in reply.

They became concerned, but in a shallow, impatient way. They assumed something was wrong; they viewed my reticence with alarm, as though not of my choosing. "Are you sick? Have you lost your voice? Are you depressed? Come with us." They tugged my arm. Anticipating this, I left the spoken word gradually; I kept a useful word, as I turned my head away, "No."

I relished discarding the useless formalities they wanted from me. *Please, Thank you, You're welcome, Excuse me, Goodbye.* I let those words go, finding no equivalents for them. I couldn't translate them if I wanted to, and I didn't want to. "Please," they said, "explain what you're doing." I responded, "Please, don't ask me to do that." The symbols stumbled in my hands as if tangled in the strings of a marionette.

They complained about the loss of precision, the unsettling ambiguities I had introduced. They waved their hands wildly in the air, perhaps to impress me with the grandness of their ideas. They whispered to my friend and pointed at me, and it was hard for her. At last they marched towards town without us.

Ourselves, alone, our newfound openness ensured a crucial honesty, and our feelings flourished unencumbered. Before, we had crammed our feelings into prefabricated words, their words. The words had loomed over us like dialogue balloons in a comic strip, reducing the grace of our lives to silliness.

Not any more. We left the meanings open: *This could mean many things, and if we are truly friends we will already know what it means, exactly: embrace.* I gave the sign to her this way, bringing my hands to my chest, imagining how it would feel to hold her. It meant, *Listen, I want to hold you, let me draw you near.* This she understood. Thenafter the simplest gestures sufficed. We sat together without speaking. The silence between us became the sign, and the less we spoke the more articulate we became. She said, *It's nice to be with you because it's so quiet and I don't have to say anything.* In response - the most I dared to say - I told her I wanted to look into her eyes without looking away, and that this would be enough.

We called it gesture speech. It was the speech of gestures in the merest sense of physical motions (which, with an added increment of effort, would be dancing), but also in the higher sense of giving away a part of ourselves. The language assumed a touching vulnerability. I said to her, *I'm doing this for you. You know that.* I watched her reply, her index finger, poised, the delicate drop.

This was more or less the effect I was after.

"I'm leaving now," I said. I had trouble getting it out of my throat. I had come to the bar to say goodbye to the others, I don't know why.

The others, pausing over their beers, dared not look up. It undermined the power they had garnered for themselves. That was their one sign, *to garner, to take*, a kind of grab motion. You could imagine placing a ten dollar bill on the bar. You could say, "Take this," and before you had finished, they would have torn it in haste.

They replied, "Off to do the sign language? Oh, we know something about that." They told me this, but they didn't care; it was an excuse to draw attention to themselves. They said, "Watch us," and they raised their open palms. "How!" they said. "We saw an Indian do that in a movie." They laughed. (To hold the palm that way meant nothing. Well, it meant that the person was an idiot who saw too many movies).

In a corner of the bar, the old Crow man sat bent over a table, his head in his arms. His fine felt hat with the quillwork hatband rested on the floor. The others crowded around him and whispered to each other. They took the man's cane and made as if to smack his head, and at this they laughed even more. But they gave up; he wasn't any fun, and anyway there was a good game on the television and a pitcher of beer on the counter.

They should have been more cautious: I still knew how to extend my middle finger and say, *Fuck you, assholes*. But I was in a hurry; their self-absorbed revelry offered an ideal opportunity to slip past.

I saw that my life was different now. Words that before had come easily, in spite of my reluctance to use them, I had to discard. *Discard*: I waved the word away with my hand, as if I had been served a plate of unsavory food and fanned the odor from my nose. Or as when a yellow jacket lands on a tasty piece of chicken at a barbecue: *get it away*. All the words I thus abandoned. More precisely, I looked away from them.

Just so, reader, I'll know you understand when you offer the gestures appropriate to the forsaking of speech: when you probe the plaintive appeal in my eyes, and when you quietly let go, the text casually slipping from your relaxed hands, and then the reaching.

## THE WOMAN WHO WAS WAKAN

## I

In the spring of 1797 or 1798, somewhere in the upper Missouri River country, a band of hunters from the Lakota people were out on the prairie. The river was several days away, and the Lakota felt very much alone. They walked in a good silence, leading their horses by the reins. The land swelled gently before them, too little to notice, except coming over a rise in the prairie the Lakota saw in the distance a stranger, standing alone, hip-deep in the wet, heavy grass. The stranger faced away from the Lakota, who picketed their horses and crept near, leaving a swath of flattened grass behind them. The stranger might have been holy, or touched, or a brave enemy, so of course the Lakota were afraid.

As the Lakota drew close and stood, and one of them raised his sacred bow, the stranger turned, as if breaking from a prayer, and lowered her eyes to their feet. It was morning and very misty, and the Lakota's mocassins were soaked with dew. The Lakota lowered their eyes in turn, and the stranger and the Lakota watched each other this respectful way.

Amazingly, the stranger spoke the Lakota language. She said she was of the Hidatsa people. But she wore an unusual white cotton gown, wet to her hips, with a thin waist and a belt, such as the Lakota had never seen. They were afraid to touch her or even speak to her. There was this, too: the

woman said she was *Wakan*, a Lakota word meaning sacred, or holy, or blessed, or with God. The woman literally was saying that she was a godwoman. The Lakota had never heard the word used in that way. The woman was strange, and new, and beautiful, and sacred, and she must not be killed. Some of the the Lakota men knelt and cried or prayed, others trudged back to the horses.

They wrapped a red trade blanket around the woman's shoulders and took her with them. They fed her dried meat, crushed berries, and mashed roots. A few days later, they gave her gifts and let her go unharmed.

## II

The sun had scarcely risen. It filtered redish through the heavy blanket of mist so common that time of year. The air hissed and creaked with the slow warming of the day. A woman stood in the tall grass.

She was pleased to be alone that morning, and she liked the mist so close around her. But she was clad only in a thin gown, and she shivered from cold. She faced into the sun for its warmth and closed her eyes. She felt the sun burn weakly through her eyelids.

She did not see, behind her, the creeping shadows of the grass, nor her body's shadow, tall and thin and swaying. Nor did she see the Lakota men, who crawled through the grass on their elbows. Simply, she opened her eyes and turned, and

there they stood around her. They looked wet and cold. One of them held a bow, she noticed, and it swayed in his grip as if he were too weak to hold it aloft.

The woman said she was of the Assiniboine people. "Do not touch me," she said. "I am *Wakan*. Do not touch my radiant hair. I am thinking." She looked fiercely into their eyes. The Lakota looked away, not out of respect but self-deprecation.

They gave her a blanket and some crushed meat, and let her go. Afterwards, the Lakota cried and called themselves dogs.

### III

During the 1790's, the first missionaries were coming to the upper Missouri. They came in long flat boats, which they propelled with long poles, and stopped at trading posts along the way. Meeting the Yanktonai people, an eastern band of the Lakota, the missionaries borrowed the word *Wakan* as a translation for *Holy Spirit*. Armed with this word they went upriver.

A Hidatsa woman of seventeen had wandered away from her people. She was always doing this. She met the missionaries at a trading post built from rotten yellow timber, and they fed her sugar, which she liked, and other things she liked less well. The woman's people had warned her against going: the Hidatsa by this time understood the link between the



sickness that used them up and the white people who came to the upper Missouri.

Well, the young Hidatsa woman was very curious, so she stayed a few days and listened to what the missionaries had to say. They gave her a red blanket and an unusual long white dress with a slender waist. They asked whether she was married. Then they baptized her. She knelt with them and ate a bit of hard bread.

Later, when she stood in the wet grass and admired her new dress, and she watched the sun climb above the fringe of clouds, and the Lakota crept upon her like racoons, and she turned and announced she was *Wakan*, she meant that she had been baptized. She belonged to God now, and must not be touched in certain ways.

The Lakota hunters knew what this was about. They had seen the missionaries plying their boats up the river. Without a word they took the woman back to her people. They did this, riding without fear into the camp of their enemy. That was fine, though, as even the Hidatsa were sick about what the woman had done. The Hidatsa allowed the Lakota to leave unharmed.

#### IV

An Hidatsa woman was crouching in the grass and whimpering. She clawed at the soil and raked her fingers through the grass: a band of Lakota hunters crept close, not like racoons but like wolves.

She knew the trouble she was in. She was only seventeen, and she had wandered from her band. Her gown was soaked with dew, so running away was impossible. She searched the ground for a weapon - a stone or a stout rod - but she found only a flimsy stick of juniper which, clutching tightly, she bent into a bow and snapped, she was so scared.

The Lakota men formed a circle around her. One of them lifted her hair from her face and looked at her so close she felt his breath and smelled meat.

She would have said anything. She fumbled and looked down, a blackness narrowing her vision. She said *Wakan*, this sacred word in this new way: "Do not touch me. I am *Wakan*." It was the first thing that came to her mind.

The man let the woman's hair fall back around her face. The Lakota cried and prayed. It was all out of place, and they just walked away from her.

Alone at last, the Hidatsa woman lay on her side the rest of the morning, the damp earth grinding into her dress.

V

In the spring, in the morning, when snow still covered most of the prairie, an Hidatsa woman came in earnest to where the Lakota were camped in a river bottom. She looked tired from plodding through the snow, and her skin was cold with sweat - whether from exertion or from the dank mist was hard to say. The Lakota gave her a blanket and warm tea, which she spilled on her dress. Her hands shook from cold and fright.

She said she was seventeen, and she had had trouble with her parents.

Then she said she was unmarried, and the Lakota men became afraid to touch her. After a few days, a party of these men, with blankets draped over their heads, took the woman back to her people, making gifts to her parents. Her parents were glad to see her.

## VI

A woman of the Arikara people went out one morning alone. She wore a fine red gown sewn from a thick trade blanket, and she had braided her hair behind her ears and wrapped the braids in otter skins. She was going out to dig pomme-blanche, a white root similar to a turnip, and she carried a forked stick to pry the roots from the ground. Bent over her work, she was hard to spot in the tall grass, but a band of Lakota hunters came upon her trail, wet and matted like a deer's, and followed.

They passed clods of upturned earth here and there, where the woman had paused to gather roots.

When they at last came upon the woman, her back was turned. She knelt as if praying, and her arms lifted and rammed down, lifted and rammed down, as she worked her stick into the ground. The Lakota took the woman's stick and stabbed her with it.

## STORY FOR BIGHORN BASIN

*I gave him the lead gift in the twilight.*

ROBINSON JEFFERS

That winter, I was living in a beat-up trailer at the eastern edge of the desert, Bighorn Basin, Wyoming. There were other trailers too, and a gas station and grocery that was closed most of the time. If you stood in the cold and yelled, the owner might show in her pink bathrobe and open the store.

It was hard not to feel stranded. These trailers used to have wheels, but now they rested on cinder blocks. My car rested on blocks too.

With nothing to do, I walked roads. Walking was its own point, and thinking and remembering, and ramming my fists into my pockets. I never hitched rides. If a car or truck slowed beside me, I waved them on, unless I was too cold to make it on my own.

I saw a lot of hawks, and I got so I could pick out a red-tailed hawk by sight. I saw them perched on telephone poles along the road. Sometimes they were dark brown, other times light and pinkish. The tail was never actually red, but a color between pink and peach. Sometimes it wasn't even that. It was mottled grey.

I told each hawk, "How beautiful you are." I said it quietly, so as not to sound silly or scare the hawk away. Maybe I only thought it, and never said it aloud.

The hawks always found something to eat by the side of the road. That's why they came. Still, a hawk might get hit by a car. A hawk might get shot. A hawk might just lie down and die and its carcass freeze solid.

If a dead hawk was clean, I nudged it off the road with the tip of my boot. I should have let each hawk be. Touching hawks, I needed to talk about it, but I had no one to listen, and, talking to hawks, I felt terribly alone.

My nearest neighbor was a man named Daniel. He and his wife were Shoshone Indians. They lived in the trailer behind mine, across a small playground.

Daniel was an alcoholic. This had nothing to do with being an Indian. It had to do with this: Daniel's father used to visit from Wind River in his new pickup and talk Daniel down. Daniel was unemployed, while his wife drove each day to a good job as a secretary, over in Powell. Also, Daniel fought in Viet Nam for two and a half years, and he took a bad dose of Agent Orange. His wife told me that at night, with the tip of her index finger, she would scrawl her initials across his bare chest, and a rash would flare up for days. I heard that story, and I wondered how she could stand to touch him at all.

Daniel went on drunken binges. He'd be gone for days, sometimes for weeks. No one knew where he went. Maybe he went walking like me, I don't know. Then he'd come back. His

wife always took him back. Once, when he was gone, she said to me, "I deserve a better man." She was changing the oil in her car, and she was wiping oil from a wrench.

I said to her, "Yes, but you still love him." She said, "Yes." Then she threw the wrench in the frozen dirt and cried. Several days later, Daniel came back. She took him back.

She told me that Daniel had a rapport with animals. He could walk up to a dog, a wild horse, a rabbit, a deer, a skunk or porcupine, a coyote even, and the animal would not run away. Daniel would stroke the animal's fur. His favorite animal was the red-tailed hawk. It was his medicine, his *sacred helper*. He wore a red-tailed hawk feather, pink, in his cowboy hat.

On Thanksgiving, Daniel found a tiny injured owl out by the gas station sign and took it home. He rested the owl in his lap and fed it scraps of food. He and the owl watched football on television. On Sunday, the owl died. Daniel trudged towards the highway, carrying the dead owl in a plastic bag, and was gone. He didn't come back till around Christmas. There was a big snowstorm, and maybe that's what forced him to come in, wherever he was.

Christmas morning, I looked out my window and saw a Medicine Wheel etched in the snow between Daniel's trailer and mine. It must have measured fifty feet wide. Daniel's wife brought me some cookies and told me Daniel made the wheel.

She stood by my door and smiled proudly. I pictured Daniel plodding in the snow all night, scraping away the design, a circle and spokes, like a giant bicycle wheel.

He visited me that afternoon. "Hey," he said, "who put that Medicine Wheel out there? That sacred Medicine Wheel out there. Who did that? Did you see anybody?" Then I said, "I thought you did it." Daniel walked back to his trailer, laughing. He said, "Oh no, why would I do that stuff?"

I looked out later, and the Medicine Wheel had melted away.

On one of my walks, the wind stinging my face. I came upon dead owls.

They lay about three hundred feet apart, like ashen, burned-out flares where a car had crashed and been cleared away. Their orange wings spread in stiff fans and fluttered in the wind. They sprawled in the awkward poses of death you see in war photos - slain civilians crumpled on a sidewalk. One of the owls lay so far into the road it was squashed flat. It was hard to be sure it was an owl, but it was. I counted six owls in all and walked on.

Some people would shoot their old dogs and dump them out here, so I figured a man had shot the owls on his farm, stuffed them in a burlap sack, and brought them in his pickup. He flung them from the sack like throwing candy from a float in a parade.

I don't know. Maybe these owls were simply hunting for mice along the road when, confused in the glare of headlights, they rammed into a car.

I saw a seventh dead owl and stopped, despite the cold that cut into me. I kneeled and gathered the owl in my hands. The wings fell open, limp. I cradled the owl against my chest and went with the road. The wind tried to tug the owl from my hands. I stumbled and wished for a ride. The cold stung so bad, I had to throw the owl away.

Swish! It flopped in the dry frozen grass.

I lasted in the desert only so long. It had nothing to do with the cold. It had nothing to do with feeling stranded. It had to do with loneliness. It was as simple as this: I came upon a hawk tearing a mouse apart. On a clear night, I saw two full moons at opposite ends of the sky. Once, on a bright day before it snowed, I counted three suns. It was as simple as this: I saw these things and kept them to myself. I was left with nothing but a coppery taste in my mouth. I saw falcons cut sharp corners in the stiff desert breeze, and I looked away and thought, "That is not so special."

Well, I had a friend named Alice, from way back. I had met her working on a fire in the Black Hills. We had spent the next year together, cutting hay near Chadron, Nebraska, fixing cabins at a hot spring near Dolores, Colorado, and then working another fire season, near Prineville, Oregon. We



lived in her camper, and from place to place we found tall cottonwoods to park under. I used to bring Alice things I had found: flicker feathers, Indian paintbrush, tiny animal bones and shiny pebbles. Alice set them in a row on the dash. I thought that was enough, but I was wrong. In September, Alice hugged me, and we parted ways. She stowed my little gifts in a coffee can under the front seat.

I thought about Alice, and I thought about leaving the desert for good and getting to where she was. Kansas. It sounded warm. I started to tinker with my car, on days when the wind didn't blow too cold.

I wrote Alice a letter. I sent her some sprigs of fragrant sage, as much as I could stuff into an envelope. It wasn't fancy, but it was a good gift, as in the Little Drummer Boy story, the best kind of gift. She could hang the sage in her kitchen, or rub it on her skin after she bathed.

Alice wrote me back. With her letter she sent a feather from a red-tailed hawk.

She wrote that she liked to ride her bike along a deserted road near the farm she was on. She rode out to a spring that gurgled from a rusted pipe beside the road. There were hawks there, two of them, always two, always perched in a cottonwood next to the spring. One day, Alice rode out, and the tree was empty. One of the hawks lay dead on the road. The other hawk was gone. Alice plucked a feather from the dead one and sent it to me, a gift. The hawk didn't need it

anymore. It was good, she said, that somebody would have it, this unwanted feather.

As a postscript, she wrote that this was her final visit to the spring. She was moving to California to live with some guy.

I curled up in the corner of my trailer and turned the feather in my hand. It changed color in the light. Pink, to peach, to tan, to almost red.

By springtime, I was still stuck at the eastern edge of the desert. I could have left, sure, but with this hawk feather from Alice (I kept it above my sink, where I saw it every morning), where would I go?

The days turned bright and crisp, the desert, green and muddy. The cold wind was gone, and the air hung listless and quiet.

I spotted the first blossoms of a prickly pear. The petals had a thick, fleshy feel. If you picked the blossom, it bled and oozed raw, as when a child picks a scab on her knee. That night, I had a dream about picking these blossoms and stuffing the petals down a hole in the ground.

I walked and watched for red-tailed hawks. One day, I spied seven of them along the road, dark brown, perched on the poles, or broad-winged soaring low over the sagebrush. One of them perched on a fence post, close enough to touch, it

seemed. When I stepped near, it flew away. That peach-colored tail.

I was getting sloppy. On a warm sunny day, for no reason, I took a ride from a man named Charles and his wife, whose name I didn't learn. Charles had a gunrack in his truck, and it held a fancy rifle with a scope.

Charles and his wife were farmers, come down from Laurel. They were recovering alcoholics, they said. Charles was proud that he treated his wife well. "I never beat her," he said. "I never lay a hand on her." His wife nodded.

Charles talked most about guns. He got a poignant look in his eye. He loved to hunt. Deer, pheasants, elk, quail, ducks, geese, rabbits, coyotes, doves, beavers, others. "I'm only interested in animals I can kill," Charles said, gazing towards the horizon.

Charles' wife told me about a morning in July, when three wild horses got hit by a semi-truck outside of Pryor. The horses were alive and in pain when Charles and his wife came upon them around noon. Blood dripped from the horse's nostrils. They were neighing softly, and weeping. You could see their tears, she told me.

Their bladders had let go.

Charles had brought out his rifle. He pressed the barrel against a horse's temple and fired. The other two horses stirred after the blast, but when it came their turns they

calmed down. Charles shot the horses to end their pain. It was a blessing, Charles' wife said, looking at nothing in particular, her smooth pink hands folded in her lap.

I watched the white reflector posts whiz blankly past.

At a rest area where two highways crossed, Charles and his wife fed me lunch. They brought out potato salad and good German frankfurters. I guess they were nice people.

A red-tailed hawk flew by and pulled up on a fencepost down the road. It was the singular way a thing happened in the desert. You stopped, you watched, and you went back to what you were doing. In the quiet desert air, I heard water dripping, somewhere.

Charles pointed. "See that hawk? I shot twenty four of them last year. I get owls too. I put a steel trap on top of a fence post, and when the owl comes down - snap!" Charles gazed at the horizon.

He ambled over to his truck and gestured for me to follow. He reached in and lifted his rifle from the gunrack. He showed me how he aimed the gun, wedging the barrel between the open door and the cab for stability. He loaded a cartridge with a dimple in the end. "Does more damage; you want to kill him, not poke a hole in him."

Charles handed me the rifle. I aimed at the hawk on the fencepost. I wasn't going to shoot it. I was curious, that's all. Through the scope, the hawk looked as close as the end

of the barrel. I saw every detail on its mottled plumage. It cocked its head to one side and blinked. I blinked.

Charles grew impatient. I could hear him behind me, shifting his feet in the gravel. Then his voice, soft but urgent: "Aim just above their head, so when the bullet drops over the distance, it gets them full in the head." He was bent over me, whispering in my ear.

The hawk spread its wings, banked, and flew away, low to the ground. I gave the rifle back to Charles.

Ha ha ha.

Charles and his wife left me at the crossroad. We traded addresses.

I came to the end of my time in the desert. I knew it was the end, because I hated to think about the place any longer.

On my final walk I saw a falcon, dead by the side of the road. A coyote or a fox had been over the carcass, taking the head and part of a wing. There were wisps of grey-black down scattered over the road.

The falcon lay in a pool of blood, fresh, sticky, bright red. That is the difference between a fresh road kill and a rotten one, the color of the blood. I got red blood on my soles.

A car slowed beside me. "What's that?"

I told them. "It's a rare bird, and it's dead, and can you spare me a lift?" I wished I was a liar. It's a crow, and it got hit by a car, and leave me alone.

In the final days, I put new belts on my car. Daniel came out and stood around. He peeked inside the hood and handed me tools. He never said anything. Later, his wife came over and said goodbye. She said Daniel had been offered a job down on the reservation, in a home for messed up teenagers. He had a good rapport with them, and he could help them.

She told me that Daniel thought I was a good friend.

That night, I passed through Powell, Wyoming, shut down and dark. Later, apart from anything, I passed an oil refinery, lit up like a city. Farther on, at a flat place in the desert where the road gently curved for no reason, my headlights picked up an owl. The owl perched on an orange rubber post beside the road. When I came close, the owl lifted off and flew away. It was the color of ash, like a moth. To touch it, it would have left a dusty smear on my fingers.

The rubber post pitched back and forth in the glare of my headlights.

I passed another orange rubber post, still quivering with the alarm of an ashen owl already gone.

## LIGHTNING CREEK

In 1903, William Miller was not yet forty, and serving his second term as sheriff of Weston County, seated in Newcastle, eastern Wyoming. He lived with his wife and children in a cottage behind the little brick jail. His reputation was such that people with nothing to gain by saying he was a good man said so anyway. Miller, standing in front of his jail and straightening the badge on his lapel for a photograph, may have flattered himself with the seriousness of his elected office.

On October 23, following a report that Indians from Pine Ridge, South Dakota, were poaching game and livestock in his county, Miller got up a posse of six men and rode toward Little Thunder Creek, where the Indians were said to be. Next day, the posse found a band of Oglala Sioux along the Cheyenne River. The Indians had been visiting friends at Crow Agency, Montana, and were passing through Wyoming on their way home. Miller arrested the Indians, seized their wagons, teams, and rifles, and sent the Indians to Newcastle with a deputy. The Indians were mostly elders and went peacefully.

Twenty-five miles east of Pumpkin buttes, near the Church ranch, the posse learned of another band of Indians, said by local whites to be poaching antelope. The posse struck a trail on Porcupine Creek -- a broken wagon wheel had dragged a furrow plainly in the grass. They followed the trail over the divide to Little Thunder Creek and Converse County, but

lost it soon after and wandered ranch to ranch asking about the Indians. On the morning of October 30, they met a cowboy named Frank Zerbes, who took them to an Oglala camp of fifteen wagons on the Dry Fork of the Cheyenne River, not far from the 'Seventy-Four pens.

It is curious that Miller chased this second band. Just six days ago he had arrested enough Indians to fill the jail; the warrant, folded in his pocket, had been duly served. Still, he had heard talk of these second Indians, and as sheriff he felt a duty to take them. He had his reputation to worry about. His deputies, who had no stake in the investigation and were not worried, may have goaded him into going on. When the posse rode into the Indian camp, something of Miller's confidence withered.

The Indians saw the posse coming, and six or so met Miller and his deputies at a rise in the prairie. Miller asked for the chief. A man told Miller to talk to Charles Smith. Miller asked where Smith was; the man said Smith was hunting. Miller said he had a warrant for their arrest, which he began to read. The man broke in, saying he did not understand English well, and to wait for Smith. He and the other men spoke quietly in Lakota, turned their horses about, and drifted away.

The deputies rode into the camp and dispersed, only to find themselves ignored by the Indians. The women kept to their chores, while the men were nowhere to be seen, perhaps



lounging in their tents or gone. Some boys were shooting arrows for fun, and the white men helped them with their bows. An old man who stood apart from Miller said something in Lakota and pointed at him. The sheriff said, "You know me," and the old man said "Yes, I know you at Newcastle." A woman came up to Miller and invited the posse to her tent for dinner. She said her name was Brown, and that she knew who Miller was. The white men had grown restless waiting for Charles Smith and were glad for the meal.

When Smith rode into camp, a freshly killed antelope was lashed across his saddle. He was unlashng the antelope when Miller ambled over. Miller asked him his name. He took out the warrant, read it aloud, and then let Smith read it for himself. Smith handed back the paper and said flatly he had not been in Weston County, and hence he had killed no game there, and a sheriff of Weston County had no authority to serve a warrant in Converse County. He returned to his antelope carcass, but added that an Indian named William Brown was out herding horses; the sheriff was welcome to wait for Brown and discuss the matter with him.

It is only a guess what Miller must have felt when Smith gave back the warrant and set to skinning his antelope. Smith had flouted Miller's authority, and Miller didn't know what to do. He may have wondered, If Smith had shot no game, where had he gotten the antelope? And hadn't the Indians left a wagon trail from Miller's jurisdiction into this one? Miller

folded the warrant and walked over to his deputies, who by then had gathered at Smith's tent, had lit a fire, and had witnessed the exchange. Miller told the posse he didn't want to do anything rash and would wait for William Brown.

When it seemed that Brown would never show, the posse saddled up to leave. Miller wavered, and appealed to Smith again. The day was growing late, and a crowd of men gathered to listen. Miller explained the charge against the Indians. He asked what they were going to do.

None save Smith spoke English well. He again denied killing any game. He said he had traded moccasins to sheep herders for antelope and deer. The sheriff said if that were so, the Indians had nothing to fear and should come to Newcastle. He said that although no one had seen the Indians kill any game, they still had to come with him. He was duty-bound to serve the warrant in his hands.

Smith said he was no fool, that he knew the law. He didn't live in Newcastle, he wouldn't go, and Miller couldn't take him. Indians had been jailed and fined before, and he didn't want it to happen again. He said he would return to the reservation.

About this time, William Brown rode in. He spoke with Miller briefly. Miller said he had eaten dinner with Brown's wife, and added, "I am after you."

Brown said "Alright," and produced a safe-conduct pass, issued by the agent at Pine Ridge. He said he was willing to

surrender with those named on his pass if Smith surrendered too. He turned and talked in Lakota with some of the Indian men. Then he said, "All right, we will go." Sheriff Miller relaxed; they had decided to come along.

The Oglalas dropped their tents, loaded their wagons and hitched their teams, and started. The posse followed. They passed the Fiddleback Ranch and came to the Newcastle road. To Sheriff Miller's dismay, the Indians filed across the road and east onto the prairie. They were not coming to town.

It must have occurred to Miller that he had lost control. He rode alongside a deputy named Johnson and asked what to do. Johnson suggested he talk to Charles Smith. Miller rode up the line to Smith and said, "That is not the way to go; I want you to turn and go down this road to Newcastle."

Smith said, "By God, I don't live in Newcastle; I am not going there."

Miller rode back to Johnson -- the rest of the posse had lagged behind -- and said, "He won't go. What will we do?" Johnson suggested he talk to William Brown. The sheriff rode up to Brown's wagon and talked as the wagon creaked along. Brown told the sheriff he would go to Newcastle if Smith would. Miller tried Smith again. Smith refused.

In a panic, Miller again sought Johnson, who was becoming embarrassed for Miller. Johnson suggested he stop the guide. Miller rode ahead to where the guide was leading the wagons down a draw. He glanced over his shoulder at

Johnson, and Johnson brought the remainder of the posse to join him.

The Indian men followed the posse up. The riders all gathered around Miller, who was waving frantically at the guide to turn the wagontrain around. The wagons bunched and rolled to a stop. The guide, named Red Paint, spoke no English and had no idea what Miller wanted him to do.

Miller and Charles Smith had another talk. Smith insisted he wouldn't go to Newcastle, and yelled something in Lakota to Red Paint. The other Indians waved at Red Paint to go. Red Paint started, and the wagons fell in behind.

The posse didn't move. Some of the Indian men had drawn their guns and stood behind their ponies. A woman began a keening song. The wagons filed past the posse and down the draw, the woman's song floating off, and the Indians were gone.

This must have destroyed Miller. It was routine for the sheriff to meet resistance, but to meet such utter disregard drained Miller's authority in a way he could not have foreseen. The sheriff said to the deputies, "What will we do?" They replied, perhaps sarcastically, that he was the man running the outfit, and to use his own judgement.

Miller was afraid. He had not wanted this venture. In Newcastle there had been talk, and Miller was forced to defend his reputation as a brave and fearless man. Now, the Indians gone, Miller may have seen that although he liked being

sheriff with its unique status and good pay and nice cottage behind the jail, he wasn't very good at it -- or imaginative about it, if that is not the same.

This incident from 1903 would long have been forgotten, did Miller not decide to take the Indians by force. Seeing his posse had too few men, he retreated to the Fiddleback ranch. There he deputized two hands, Steve Franklin and Charley Harvey, who said the Indians would head down Lightning Creek. Next morning, October 31, the sheriff sent Jack Moore and the cowboy Zerbes after the Indians, to rendezvous at Jake Mills's cow camp on Lightning Creek. The rest of the posse rode down the Cheyenne River.

At Olson's ranch, Miller deputized an itinerant wolf trapper named Falkenberg, and later, two mule packers from Wessington, South Dakota. Eight or nine miles from the old Fiddleback ranch on the Cheyenne River, the posse added John Owens, a former sheriff. Owens was building a fence. Miller now commanded four section-crewmen from Newcastle, a retired lawman, a bartender named Oliver Johnson, and six men Miller hardly knew. He had only three tin badges to go around.

The posse came to Jake Mills's cow camp late in the afternoon. It had covered forty miles. The cabin was well-stocked, and the men grazed their horses and started dinner.

Half the men had eaten, and the others were sitting down to, when Jack Moore and Frank Zerst rushed in: the Indians

were a mile and a half up Lightning Creek, near the Four I's corral, and coming this way. Miller said, "We will arrest them if we can." He ordered the horses brought in. The white men checked their Winchesters, saddled up, and rode to meet the Indians.

The posse had gone through a half mile of trees, and were rounding a sharp bend, when they burst into a clearing and saw the Indians traveling towards them, across the creek, and only a hundred yards off.

The Indians probably had done nothing wrong. Certainly they had done nothing out of the ordinary. Miller, in his compulsion to enforce the game laws, was driving for a conclusion increasingly arbitrary and violent.

A catalytic event had taken place in 1901. On April 13 of that year, Miller arrested an Oglala Sioux named High Dog, and eight others, for poaching. About November 14, he again rounded up High Dog, and two other men, for shooting cattle. The Indians were brought to trial and fined ten dollars each plus court costs. Ninety dollars. High Dog had to sell his horses to meet payment. Miller wired the Agent at Pine Ridge to pay the balance of the fine, and to take the Indians home. It is worth noting that in neither arrest did High Dog or his friends put up any resistance. The Pine Ridge Indians came to eastern Wyoming every Fall to gather holly leaves and sunflowers, and roots to make a tea. They traded beadwork and

grain commodities to the ranchers and sheepmen in exchange for beef, mutton, venison, and hides. They passed through Newcastle a time or two. They knew this Miller well, and were friendly toward him.

There is also this: after the second arrest of High Dog, Miller got a letter from Governor Chatterton, praising him "for doing so well what no one else has shown any interest in doing." Miller enforced the law well, but arresting Indians for poaching was perhaps a job not worth doing.

Miller's confidence must have soared. He may have pondered re-election. Two years later, in 1903, he posed proudly in front of his jail for a photographer. So on October 30, when an Oglala Sioux named Charles Smith dismissed him with brazen disregard, Miller must have felt bewildered, and in such a mind contrived his ambush the following day.

The sun was setting when the posse and the Indians met on Lightning Creek. The posse scrambled into the creekbed, crawled beneath a wire fence, and huddled behind the bank. Miller and Owens climbed the bank, hollered at the Indians, and waved their pistols. Miller was frightened. He became faint, and bent over. The Indians, few of whom had reached the fence, were turning to flee. Someone fired a single blast.

The deputies, most of them reluctant to join the fray, clambered up the bank and hid where they could. A bullet struck Miller in the hip. He crumpled, crawled behind a

cottonwood, and fainted. The wolf trapper Falkenberg too crumpled, blood spurting from his neck, and shortly died.

The shoot-out lasted "four minutes at the outside" according to the bartender Johnson, the only deputy with a watch. The Indians had fled, except a boy and an old man killed outright, and Charles Smith, shot in the legs and bleeding. Miller lay drenched in blood, a neat hole above his pants pocket. The deputies carried him to Jake Mill's cabin and packed flour on the wound. He died within thirty minutes.

Not more than three or four people had fired from each side.

The next day, back at the site, two deputies found the dead boy, shot in the back of the head, and his dead horse, very nearly touching. Three Indian women had come back too. A girl walked up to the deputies and said her name was Hope Clear. They shook hands. She pointed to one of the women -- Susie Smith, shot in the shoulder. Hope Clear showed where the old man lay. His name was Black Kettle. She said her father, Clear, also had been shot, and had fled up the creek and died. She took the deputies to Charlie Smith, who was still alive. During the night he had wrapped his belt around his bleeding legs. When the women found him, he had been covered with frost, and they had built a fire to warm him up. Now he asked the deputies for water, and they gave it to him. They carried him to the cabin. He died that evening.



On November 2, the posse found the Indian wagons on the divide to Twenty-Mile Creek, four miles from the shooting. Clothing, plates, and antelope hides littered the ground. In the wagons they found more antelope hides, and steer hides, sheep hides, all-told perhaps one hundred. They found gunny sacks bulging with dried meat. They opened a sack and sniffed. Antelope.

The Indians, for their part, stole home as best they could. At the ZunBrunnel Ranch near Kirtley, South Dakota, a small party asked to camp, and was treated well by the whites there. On the morning of November 3, near the Lampkins Ranch on Hat Creek, South Dakota, a second party met a posse and, too hungry and tired to fight, surrendered. The officers shook hands with the Indians, took them to the ranch, bought a quarter of beef and cooked them dinner.

Nine of this party, the men, were taken by train to Douglas, Wyoming, and jailed. A hearing was set for November 14, on the charge of murdering the sheriff and his deputy. United States District Attorney, Timothy Burke, was called to defend the Indians. The case had caused a national stir.

The hearing took all day, recessed for supper, and convened again. Witnesses from the posse could pick out only Jesse Little War Bonnet from the nine defendants. One deputy remembered seeing Little War Bonnet fire a shot, but he was running away at the time. At eleven p.m., Judge H.R. Daniels

ruled the prisoners "Not guilty" and ordered them freed. A crowd had packed the courtroom that evening, and upon hearing the verdict people thronged the nine Indians, congratulated them, and shook their hands. The celebration spilled into the streets of Douglas. The men of the posse were said to be sour, and sulked to a bar across the street. The nine Indians were let to stay at the jail until Monday evening, when they got a train to Pine Ridge. The Agent came to pay their fares.

In December, the attorney. Burke visited Pine Ridge and spoke with fourteen Indians who had been at the shooting. He told them hunting and trafficking game in Wyoming was illegal without a permit. He said to tell their friends. A man named Fool Heart replied, "I always like to listen to the advice of the white men." Last Bear, shot in the back, was still lying in bed. He told Burke, "The wound in back is healing up, but the wound in front makes discharges." Burke said, "I hope you will get better."

## ISABELLE

Isabelle has a way of talking that hurts me. She has pretty black stone eyes that look away, as though she were waiting for someone. At times she is overcome with sadness, and she allows herself to look at her hands. That is all. She never looks at me.

Isabelle is thirty-six and divorced from a man named Yellowtail, who sat at home all day, she says, and smoked Pall Malls and blew the smoke in her face. Isabelle hates cigarettes. She has no children. Now she lives with a man named Lionshows, who is married but who kicked his wife and children out of the house and invited Isabelle in. This man, Lionshows, I think he smokes, because Isabelle has long black shiny hair, and it smells like an ashtray. She sits on my porch some evenings and tells me about him. She can't stand to use his first name. She says she wants to get out, but she looks away when she says this, and I suspect she is lying. I suspect that she is ashamed.

We sit on my porch, and I listen to as much as Isabelle can bear to tell me. It's never the whole story. She keeps the most sacred things unsaid.

"People talk about me, I know...."

"I have a brother in Sante Fe...."

"I want to start painting again...."

"Do you think I'm pretty?" She is inspecting her hands.

I want to touch her cheek and turn her face toward mine while she talks of Yellowtail and Lionshows, but I do not touch her in this way because I am afraid of her. I resent the distance she places between us. "You're a good listener," she says and pats me on the back.

Last week, as she was walking to her truck to leave, I caught up with her and squeezed her hand, maybe harder than I meant to. "You feel ashamed, but you don't have to," I told her.

Tonight is different. Isabelle steps out of her truck and she is wearing a yellow dress and make-up. She hugs me, and I can smell her shampoo. "I want to show you something," she says and takes my hand. We get into her truck and drive out of Crow.

Isabelle drives a brand-new Nissan pickup, which she bought in Billings. She likes the maroon color, she explains, and that this is a small pickup, two-wheel drive. "It's more feminine, don't you think?" she says.

She parks her new truck on a dirt road along the Little Bighorn River. "I inherited this land when my mother was killed."

I can see a long field of sagging green hay, cold-looking and soft with an almost mist welling in the grass. Beyond the field rise three hills, bright gold with the last sun of the day. The road follows the river along the edge of the field

until it meets the hills. Red-winged Blackbirds bob on the reeds, and swallows circle over the water.

Isabelle shuts off the engine. "I want to see something." She watches the river, then her hands. "There is something I want to see here." She tilts the rear-view mirror to herself and touches up her lipstick and rouge. She explains how she has rented out this field to a man named Dale Walks Far. Dale told her he was going to graze some horses up here. Now Isabelle wants to see if he's tried to sow any crops, because that's not what they agreed on, and she wants to get a fair rent.

"Well, someone has planted hay in your field, Isabelle."

"This is what I want to see. And I want to show you this place."

Isabelle brushes her hair, and the brushing motion swirls the flowery scent of her shampoo in the cab.

We sit in the cab and listen to the river. An uncomfortable quiet settles between us. Isabelle looks at me, and I can see that her looking at me is difficult, because of what she's about to give away. "My name is all wrong," she says. "People say Isabelle Black Feather, but it's supposed to be He Wears a Magpie Feather." She looks into my eyes very carefully and says "Isabelle He Wears A Magpie Feather. That was my mother's name too."

We walk up the road in the cool river air. I can feel Isabelle walking in the wheelrut next to me. Sometimes our

arms brush, and her skin feels warm, as if she has a fever. She pauses, holds my arm, and points to the field. "Dale has planted this hay." Her warm touch sticks to my skin long after her hand is gone. "I'm going to have to call him." Isabelle walks farther up the road in her yellow dress.

When I catch up with her, Isabelle is smoking a cigarette. This is different from her hate for Lionshows or Yellowtail. Isabelle has stopped and closed her eyes. This is a tobacco prayer, and when it's done Isabela grinds the cigarette out with her heel. The sun is going fast, and Isabelle and I are becoming dark shapes.

"One summer," she says, and her voice sounds different. She swallows hard. "We gave a picnic here. My cousin Danny had a horse, a pinto he'd just bought from someone. Well, he sprinted the pinto to the top of that hill. He came back to the picnic, and the pinto collapsed and died.

"When I was ten, my sisters and I were swimming in the river. My brother ran up to us and dived in. He swam beneath us, and we screamed and beat the water, like it was a game. When he surfaced he was dragging a snapping turtle out of the water.

"This is why I come up here," she says.

Now she is measuring her words very slowly. "My mother and I were driving to Lodge Grass. I was in high school. There was this deer, I didn't see it, but my mother swerved and we went off the road. The pickup flipped over. I awoke

in the hospital, and they said my mother was killed, and my neck was broken, but not to worry, it was going to be okay. I have a scar."

Isabelle tips her head forward. She lets me gather her hair into a pony tail and flip it over to one side. A thin white scar extends from her nape down her neck and into her dress. I trace the scar with my finger.

Isabelle is crying so quietly that a slight tremble in her voice is the only sign. "You think I have good posture. I have seen you looking at me. Well, it's because of my neck."

She steps away, swirls her dress, and faces me. She steps closer and watches me. "I am twenty-six," she says, and rests her hands on my shoulders. She kisses me. "Listen, my real name is Grass." Isabelle closes her eyes.

We both know how this will come out. Tomorrow she will be back with Lionshows. She will visit me on my porch. Her yellow dress will be wrinkled, her shiny hair gone dull. I'll smell cigarette smoke in her hair. Lionshows has kicked her out of the house, she'll say. She won't look at me.

"I'm going to Sante Fe next week, stay with my brother. I want to get away from Crow for awhile," Isabelle will say.

We know it will come out that way, and maybe that's why we pretend, tonight, that we are lovers. We are more like strangers. That is why Isabelle has brought me here. I wish there was love between us, and Isabelle does too, and she lets

me loosen her dress and bring our bodies together. But wherever there's love there's betrayal, while with me there is nothing. Maybe Isabelle is resigned to that. I know that I am. I believe Isabelle has opened something of her interior life to me, but it is so barren as to be worthless. I would do as well to get a stick and whack at the soft grass in the field.



## MEDICINE MAN FRED

Danny came back from Viet Nam with a Purple Heart, a knack for cooking good food and for fixing clutches, and a tale about carrying two wounded buddies across a field as bullets struck around him. He had been very scared, and may have sang a prayer for strength until his breath ran short and dry. I believe that on this occasion a bewilderment came to shroud Danny like a snug blanket, which he never shed, or cared to, as with that bewilderment came calm. A bullet smashed into his wristwatch, another shot off his medicine pouch - a gift from his grandmother - and a third bullet struck his dog tags and yanked them from his neck, burning where the chain touched his skin. He lay the two men in the helicopter, climbed aboard, and closed his eyes for the first nap of his newfound and unshirkable calm, and a medic kicked Danny awake and said, "These guys are dead."

Danny kept the remains of his wristwatch in a leather pouch in his shirtpocket. As we drove down the highway Danny emptied the pouch into his palm and sorted the little springs and cogs. His hands smelled of sweat and brass. He shook his head and said, "I paid forty bucks for this in Manilla."

They say you hit rock bottom. They say you break down, and then you weep, you bind your wounds. Danny, he waited out in the grass behind my house, I think studying the clouds. That could be a good thing, but Danny didn't know what to do with

what he saw. The rain would hit him in the evening, and he'd turn inside and watch through the window there.

It was not long - Danny was gone again. His departure came at a bad time for me. I had picked chokecherries along the creek, and I'd tripped and spilled them all. I was sorting them from the dust when I heard Danny drive away in my car.

But you know, I left that bowl of chokecherries right there, because I knew what mattered more. I was an old man. I was for Danny now. Of course I would help him, and it was with this - a sadness and weariness which tainted my compassion - that I walked and hitched down the highway, the rumble and rush of trucks in my face, till a car stopped to take me into town.

The city put me ill at ease - strangers elbowed my ribs and punched me with their stares. A gun, a knife, a fist, or Danny's hands could well have come at any time. A hurt swelled in my neck and around my eyes, my step faltered, and I leaned against a spindly tree.

I had come to pick up Danny. *Danny needed me*, I told myself. He would never make it alone among these clean people with their clean skin and their clean teeth and their bodies stiff with tension and clean pressed clothes. Smug in this wayward man's need for me, and strengthened so, I pushed from the tree and stalked down the street for Daniel.

I saw him down the block and hid myself in a doorway, unsure how I'd drag him home. He stood before a shop window, intent on a display of jewelry he could not afford. Now and then he turned to the traffic, or to the sky as if checking for rain. The breeze, clattering with leaves, parted around him the way white men - afraid to touch his smooth brown skin - stepped aside when he walked into a bar. He looked at the sky and back at the window.

I was not afraid to touch him. *Daniel, I have come to take you home.* I rehearsed it in my mind. I stepped up to his side and waited, but said nothing. The silence felt right for Danny and me.

After some minutes he said, "This is nice jewelry. I have been looking at some watches."

"Let's go, Danny. Come on."

We tried fishing. Danny showed me how. We stood on the bank of the creek, amid cattails and blackbirds and a weed that made me sneeze. We dangled our lines into the water and waited, quietly, for the catfish to bite. If a game warden were to come around, I would hand my pole to Danny, so only he would absorb the fine. That was Danny's plan. Danny wandered down the bank and peered into the water and said, "Hey, this is a good spot," and I would go to where he was. It went poorly, as I hated the way I stood with the line, the way he'd showed me. The line trailed off limp and still into the brown

water, and I thought, "I am an expert?" Danny said, "Hey, have you caught anything yet?" "Danny you are right here with me. You can see the line had not stirred. The water is so gross, the fish will taste like coffee grounds. Besides, the day is getting lost."

"Oh, hey, those catfish will taste real good." He was peering into the water for fish.

"Danny you need healing."

He put up no fight when I took his arm and lead him back to the car. He did not argue when I drove us to the mountain. In the silence as we drove, Danny knew what was called for. The steering wheel bucked in my ruined hands, and Danny touched my sleeve and offered to drive. We parked in a meadow beneath a black starless sky. I believed, though, and with dread, that if Danny did not break down and strike me as I slept in the backseat and he in the front, he was merely biding his time. In his heart he was hurting, and if his pain found no expression, if he wrapped himself in his lostness, if no anger gripped his hands just yet, so much worse it would be later.

Danny lay on the tailgate and dangled his hand in the wet, delicate grass. He was drinking orange soda through a straw. "Shit, man," he mumbled, "this is the end of the road." I attended to the tender mottled rash about his neck and face. "Danny, you're all messed up." His skin looked like

butterscotch pudding when you peel off the dried layer on top. I daubed at the scars with rags soaked in aching mountain water. From mud and boiled holly leaves I concocted a balm of sorts, and painted it onto his face with a stick. The soda slipped from Danny's hand and fizzed into the moss at my feet. From Danny's throat came a low moan, like singing, and I knew his spirit had made a critical turn. The healing had begun.

I don't know. I could not rid myself of the fear of him lashing out at me. Always it was his hands on my neck, wringing tight and hot. The release had to come, be it this hard, violent way - let him thrash my tired body - it would be for the best. But I prayed it would be singing or weeping or anything else. That night, alone in the woods, I wept and waited for the mud to harden on Danny's skin. Come morning I went to him and was pleased to see he had not moved. I peeled the dried mud away. It had hardened into a mask that shattered when I dropped it. Danny sat up on the tailgate, bewildered as before, and blinked as though given sight for the first time. My balm and ointments had failed.

We each proscribe the agenda for our spirit. Just so, no thanks to me, Danny found the strength one day to sing. It was a morning still unborn, when Danny climbed out of the car and waded a mile through a meadow of sage as tall as his hips and drenched and ripe with dew. He could well have drowned in the swollen, fragrant sage; awakened from the forest by his singing, I was witness to his baptism as if he waded in a holy

river. Well, they would kill deer by smothering their breath with pollen, and I hoped to be as lucky as I crawled from my camp in the trees and followed down the path that Danny'd made. I grew dizzy from the pollen that floated in Danny's wake. I wheezed for air. The branches raked my skin, and a burning swelled upon my legs and in my throat. I cried at the stiff ache in my knotted fingers. But I found my way to Danny's side, guided by the gravelly wail in his voice, first high then always coming down always coming down to an even pitch that sang *yes, yes, hey hey, yes*. I was on my hands and knees by the time I collapsed at Danny's side, and if I tried to sing with him, if I moaned however feebly into the dirt that ground into my face, the joy in my heart betokened more than the mere dawning of a crimson light and warmth and birdsong upon the meadow. His song done, Danny turned and climbed back through the sage and left me: he did not hear me crying, "Danny, tell me are you healed."

When I pushed Danny from the cliff, how could I tell him why? That his own betrayal would have come someday just as sure as mine? That at a place and time of his choosing, Daniel would smote me in his rage and deadly expertise? It would be over in a moment, and Danny'd drop my body from his hands. Still, as Danny jerked uncertainly in the air, and he cried "Hey" and plunged from view, I knew I hadn't meant to hurt him. The rock was only twenty feet high, and it had offered a good view

onto the plains, and Danny had taken to resting there. Certainly the fall was not enough to hurt him. The meadow was cushioned with moss as thick as your arm. Danny landed with a thud and didn't move. Perhaps my mistake was not going far enough. Betrayed by my utter sympathy for the man, I'd failed to strike a decisive blow. Danny was unhurt and strong as ever. I leapt to meet him.

"Danny, I'm coming too," I shouted and soared from the edge - dropped straight down, actually, and landed with the same thud Danny had. We lay in the brush and listened to the evening creep over the mountain, and failed to notice the numb sleep creep into our bodies.

"Hey," Danny said. His voice woke me into the cold clear night above my face. *He's going to hurt me now*, I knew, and closed my eyes.

"Hey," he said again. No, he had not moved, he lay beside me still.

"Danny."

He gave no response. I waited, it felt, for hours. Unable to stay awake for the crushing blow, sleep seemed too good, and I slipped into a cold dream.

Some hours later - we had settled deeper into the moss and the sky was far away, and Danny's voice was hard to hear - Danny spoke again.

"You pushed me off that rock."

A deer, who'd wandered into the meadow without knowing we were there, heard Danny's voice and bolted for the trees.

When the sky paled to a deathly gray, Danny arose, brushed off his clothes, and walked toward the sun. "I believe the day will come soon and be hot," he said.

The healing over, I sneaked to the car and drove down the mountain and left Danny up there. In the rear-view mirror I saw him running after me. Then he just sat down in the gravel. I imagine he swore revenge, though perhaps he'd sat to cry.

I got away, but it didn't ease things for me. The arthritis knots my hands into lumpy clods, fine and useless and hurting. Danny is coming for me, and it's for him I sit on the porch each morning, an empty rusted chair beside me, and listen to the blackbirds along the creek. Danny'll come with catfish strung on a line in one hand, and a six-pack of orange soda in the other. It will be the best he can offer, and more than I could repay in even the most abject humility. I'll let him place a cool dead fish in my burning hands. He'll carry me to the water and sing and pray, and I'll let him wash my face and neck. I'll be trembling at the touch of his hands, and I'll try not to scream when he folds me under the surface.



## ITSITSIA

## I

In the early days, around 1600, the Crow and the Hidatsa were the same people. They lived on the Missouri River. Well, a man was given the corn seeds, and his people became the Hidatsa. Another man was given the short-tobacco seeds (itsitsia), and he left with his people. They came to the Yellowstone River and planted the seeds in that country. The tobacco grew well, and these people became the Crow.

## II

There is a second part to the story. As long as the short-tobacco flourishes, the Crow people fare well. If the short-tobacco dies off, the Crow people fare poorly. It means that Caring for the short-tobacco seeds, and tending the garden plots in the backcountry, is more important than harvesting the crop itself. Just so, the Crow have a special ceremony for planting the short-tobacco seeds. These days only one person remembers how to do it. Her name is Wynona Plenty Hoops, and she hasn't planted the seeds for many years. Now the short-tobacco is almost gone. You go to a Sun Dance, and people smoke Camels and Pall Malls when they pray.

## III

In the Pryor Mountains, on Arrow Creek, there are places where the short-tobacco grows wild. I believe this, because Crow

were planting short-tobacco on Arrow Creek 150 years ago, and they often found abandoned short-tobacco gardens that were doing well. I went to Arrow Creek, but I found no short-tobacco, only cottonwoods filled with starlings - and I found chokecherries, and tiny yellow birds eating the chokecherries.

## THE REFLECTING POOLS

Lately I have been sick. During the afternoons and evenings my disorientation and weakness give way to delusion and - not a delusion - perfect apprehension of my loneliness. At no time am I of the strength to mourn my loneliness.

I have been playing a game. In this game I walk along a network of paths arranged in a grid pattern like city blocks. Between the paths are reflecting pools, as in a garden. The pools are rectangular, shallow. The clear water reflects perfectly the sky low with clouds, and at night the moon, the stars, the planets, and what-have-you in the way of airplanes meteors, comets, and other celestial phenomena.

No wind ripples the water in the pools. The surface shimmers with an almost shrill echo at the slightest scuff of a pebble on the path. I am careful to place my feet just so.

A flaw: the surface of each pool curves, the water necessarily conforming to the curve of the globe. The resulting reflection of the sky, therefore, is distorted, seeming wider than it ought to be. The water at the pool's cusp reflects my shoes, reflects even the curve of the pool across the path.

There is also what seems a flaw in the maintenance of the pools: the pools are filled nearly to brimming, and the surface of the water bulges at the edges, restrained only by its drumlike surface tension, as in a blister. If I were a vandal I would break the water's surface with my finger. The

top millimeter of water would wash onto the path. Perhaps to avoid this calamity I have never waded in the pools.

There is a woman here, walking the paths as I do. We meet at times and talk briefly. Lately I have discovered we are speaking esperanto. I ask, "Where will you live?"

So perfect are the reflections in the pools, I cannot tell which is the real sky, above me or below, and it fairly reels me to raise my eyes. The paths are suspended over nothing.

None of this is new to me. But lately. I am struck with a paradox: the reflection of the sky superimposes against the bottom of the pools. I could toss a stone into a pool, watch it sink to the bottom. The stone would seem to float in the sky. So, gazing into a pool, I am faced with competing realities.

Another paradox: a pond gives a perfect reading of the sky, and yet if I toss a stone into the pond it does not mean that a rock simultaneously hurtles through the sky above, merely the appearance of such a stone, which, as I say. is indistinguishable. A third paradox: I have attempted to experiment with throwing my stone directly into the sky. It falls, inevitably, into a nearby pool. The stone is in the sky (I have thrown it there). The stone is in the pool (it has landed there). But when I throw the stone into the sky it cannot be seen there for long, only in the pool, and then

after a kersplash, and I may as well have thrown it directly into the pool.

There is more than one way to resolve the paradoxes. I need simply refer to another pool wherein there rests no stone. I need only step back and look around: I am standing on the path, there is a pool at my feet, and stars above. I could kneel, roll up my sleeve, and fish around in the water until I found the stone. Of course there is no stone in the sky. I confirm reality by deft strokes. Of course there is no stone in the sky.

On the other hand, the paths are kept free from litter, and I am alone save the woman who comes and goes, so when I do find a stone on the path I can be certain it did in fact come from the sky, a meteorite. Nevertheless, this answer sidesteps the very paradox it purports to defend. I prefer to continue tossing stones into the pools.

There is more to this. I believe that in the stillness and calm of the garden pools my life is revealed, and I am not afraid. What I see reflected in neither good nor bad, and while it does not please me, neither does it terrify me. Preoccupied with this, it's hard to feel lonely. I feel dizzy and sick. I have wretched into more than one pool. But I am not frightened me with my loneliness.

The paradoxes redeem, for me, my delusion, that it's unique and mine and worthwhile, though it's killing me. Other times, when I am feeling stronger, I am not convinced the

paradoxes are no more than the poorest tautology. Here is the sky and here is the pool and the stone in my hand. Black equals black, and I hate myself. The diagrams I have attempted to reconstruct from my paradoxes do not strike me as beautiful. And I couldn't describe them if I could. I do not speak esperanto. I scrawl some words onto a paper napkin in a restaurant and leave it on the table for the waitress to crumple and throw away with bits of egg scraped from my plate.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

As a matter of propriety, I want to say that a project such as this - a collection of stories about natives, written by a non-native - is inherently suspect. I think of the film, *Dances with Wolves*: great movie, but who is that white guy anyway? And why is he there at all?

I hope that by keeping this issue foremost in my mind I avoid the worst kind of trespass.