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R. L. Scholl

*The University of Montana*

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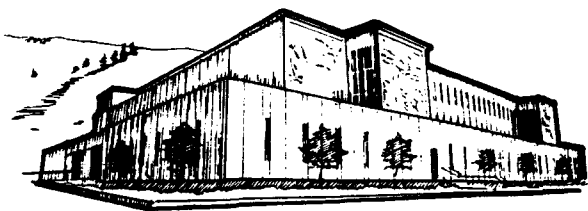
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University of  
**Montana**



MONTANA GOLD  
(A collection of short stories)

by  
R.L. Scholl  
B.S. Baldwin-Wallace College, 1982

Offered in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts  
University of Montana  
1990

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MONTANA GOLD

by R.L. Scholl

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Dedicated for:

The lumber, meat, muscles, and minerals  
of Montana, spiritually known as trees,  
animals, peoples, and mountains. For the  
beauty in them all which remains; for  
the gold forever gone.

## Birds

Three weeks to the night after Suzanne left, her dog George throws up eleven times in Dewey Carson's apartment: three small lakes in the dinette, eight in the living room. That morning he gave George a butcher's knucklebone, a special treat.

"Son-of-a-bitch," Dewey gasps again and again, pulling the neck of his shirt up like a mask as he surveys the room in disbelief. Eight hours pulling green chain at the mill, barely wetting his throat at Harold's Club so he can hurry let the dog out, and the mutt chucks his bile on Dewey's rental deposit. Not a drop on linoleum.

The slight English setter trembles in the kitchen, watching with soulful eyes as Dewey's fist clenches and reddens.

"Okay. All right. But you ever do this again," Dewey says dispassionately, "I'll kill you."

George wiggles his butt and thumps his tail, and as Dewey punches the screen door with his palm and sucks in the night air, George's hip hammers the rebounding aluminum and he disappears.



Grocery bag and spatula in hand, Dewey gingerly scoops the carpet, fiercely concentrating not to gag. The sourness in his T-shirt and yet another sacrifice from the bar--for the sake of her dog, her damn dumped puking dog--meld purely into each crouch. He shovels not dog vomit, but the very stuff of his life.

The phone rings and he swears. Almost midnight.

"Well," she says, "you're home. How's George?"

Dewey slumps into the dinette chair and cradles the phone to his face like a hand. Her voice. Three silent weeks. He stares at a stained circle.

"Screw you," he says, and hangs up.

The phone rings and he lets several chirps sing.

"I'm watching T.V., Suzanne." He twiddles the spatula. "I'm making pancakes."

"Look, Dewey," Suzanne sighs. "I just got in tonight. I figured you be in by now if you weren't out shooting pool."

"I'm glad you called."

"Yeah, so how ya doing?"

"Pretty good. Hanging in there."

"Super, Dewey. I'd like to pick up George."

She's back. She wants something. He enjoys the stall.

"I was sort of thinking to use him as a bird dog this fall. Me and Cal are going Sunday for geese."

True, except he only planned on taking George along

as a plain old dog. George--

"George doesn't know how to chase tail, for Chris'-sakes."

Dewey screws his little finger into a coil of the phone cord.

"What do you care. You dumped him."

"Oh! I thought he wasn't your idea of a real Montanan dog. I'm sorry. It's just that I had a long ride tonight, it's late, I'm pooped...And I know you've taken care of him. Dew-ey," she sings.

"Yeah, okay."

"I miss George. I do, Dew."

"Okay," he laughs. "I'm working overtime tomorrow, swing, so--"

"Just leave him tied outside. And leave out his dish, okay? That's perfect, because I'll be busy in the morning anyway."

The apartment they shared no longer makes him feel half crazy.

"Please, okay? 'Cause I'm only here for the weekend. Thanks a bunch."

Dewey stares at the grocery bags he's lined up, waiting to be carried to the trash.

He squats in a cold marsh behind a slash blind, George by his side, and thinks how he'll bring home Suzanne a nice

fat bird. George trembles. Then it's his father beside him and a deer browses among the misty reeds, water staining its legs. Dewey looks to his father with fear, flooded with memory.

His father gave in and took him hunting with him in the Bitterroots the last fall before they moved to California. Dewey spotted the lifting head through the pines, but scanning up the ridge he couldn't see his father. His chest tightened. Be sure of your shot. Just be damn sure of your shot. You don't see eyeball, you don't shoot. His father said so.

Through the shadows and green the deer turned its head and looked straight at him. All he saw was that eyeball. For father: and Dewey raised his father's rifle, which he'd never before aimed at a living thing, and he sighted and shot.

They trailed the blood a half mile, found the animal buckled to its knees, panting. Gut-shot, a goddam doe out of goddam doe season. Slob hunting! You think you're plinking at cans? Now do it. Dewey couldn't. Shit, girl, you begged to come along. You think it's shopping? You think it's re-creation? That's what your ma knows. He put the gun in Dewey's hands. It's time you popped the cherry. His finger over Dewey's. Why? Dewey screamed, and with the explosion glimpsed the collapse, a puppet with severed strings. Crow food, he father said over it. Benediction.

Dewey squats holding his father's rifle and silently cries. Another doe. Shoot! his father mouths, and dark streaks of water ribbon towards them. Can't you see? Can't you see? Dewey whispers frantically. You dirty dead bastard. As his father's hands crush his Dewey jerks the barrel up.

The bolting deer leaps into the air and breaks into a scatter of plump, wild geese, whirring away to the steel sky. Dewey turns to smile at George huddling again close beside, trembling. Bloody vomit steams in the grass. I know, I know, Dewey says, caressing George's neck. You couldn't help it, pup.

First thing Saturday morning, Dewey calls in sick. He collects the beer cans rimmed with fungus. Spends an hour rubbing baking soda and cleanser into the carpet spots, vaccums every white George hair he can find, even the ones woven into the fabric of the couch.

It's two o'clock, and the apartment he's rented nearly a year, though cluttered with the same second hand furniture, the same three dusty, freshly watered, plants, the same tired whir of the ancient fridgedaire--the apartment radiates cheery order.

He polishes his shotgun, his birder. His father's, also used, but with a little light oil glistens in the living room corner like a magic staff guaranteeing wild meat for the dining room table. Bounty.

At least he hopes it will. The gun's a disappointment. After telling Cal at the mill how he'd like to try deer hunting with him but hadn't a gun, Dewey wrote his mother in Oakland asking her to send out his father's rifle. But a week ago the old Stevens double barrel shotgun arrived instead, all she could find among the clutter of his late father's things.

Dewey figured the old man probably sold it. Nothing to pop in Oakland, nothing legal, the old man always said. Cal said, it's a damn fine birder, he and Dewey would bag some fat fowl. Geese, red-headed duck, a parrot, anything, and this cheered Dewey; it was new. Not deer, but he would do it right and it would belong to him.

A staff of life, not a botched mutilator.

Only one item remains in Dewey's critical eye.

"You really make it a whole week without rolling in crap?"

One time George showed up in the morning with coffee grains sprinkled on his back, slime of egg, shell and all, smeared to his ribs. Why not just jump in the goddam trash truck, Dewey yelled.

He can't always be taking George on long walks, but he can't leave him tied either; he cries like a tortured s.o.b. and the landlord was rankled enough when a dog moved in without his approval. A fifty dollar deposit of Dewey's smoothed that one over. So he lets him run, like Suzanne

did. The dog goes crazy while he's at the mill.

Dewey's hands drip dishwater on the kitchen floor.

"Sit."

George watches with lost brown eyes. Dewey takes up a red Nibble and immediately George sits down, one side of his upper lip curled in.

"She's right. You are a social cripple."

He throws an easy toss and George lunges, bouncing the bisquit back off Dewey's leg, then snapping successfully for the rebound but tripping himself on Dewey's foot and knocking against Dewey's shin with his jaw. Dewey curses and rubs his leg.

In the laundry basement Dewey draws warm water in a basin, gathers up George and sets him inside. George takes an alarmed, splashing step, and settles still under Dewey's firm hand.

They used to give George a bath together.

Four months ago when she moved in, Suzanne surprised him with George, as if the dog were a present, a little cake marking their living together.

"It'll be fun," she said.

George spent the first year of his life in her friend's kennel, a semi-heated cement **stall**. George knew nothing.

On a Saturday afternoon while Dewey lay watching baseball, he greeted Suzanne who had just finished moving her things that morning, and had left to "get something." Some-

thing paralyzed against her leg like a stiff clump of mud, and yet the dog had beauty--droopy ears, buff in a cream coat, long sweepy fringe hairs. George? Someday, something wolflike would be his, a generous-sized guardian to accompany his someday spread among the pines. Not a pretty George.

Then George thrust his head between Dewey's calf and the couch, and Dewey, the sucker, pulled him up and George didn't budge for the rest of the afternoon. Dewey had to carry him outside for relief.

George knew nothing. Like brothers, Dewey thinks, soaping George's paws. He had his cage in Oakland. His father's choice; better money, better times. The dream croaked long before he did. Ten years, and the only place Dewey really cared for was the beach, but even there he was a sunglassed rat pushed to the edge with no escape. Four years out of high school and his latest sleepwalk<sup>was</sup> taking money from people who pumped their own gas, bought candy bars and beer. Seven months he did that. At the ocean lip he'd stare out, not knowing what he wanted. Then one day he turned around, began looking differently, beyond the city, beyond the years. There were deep interiors he'd once come from, deep and high.

The week before he left, still undecided, he went out with his friend Reggie to fish Lake Merrit in the center of downtown Oakland. At night to hide from the cops.

"Why do you wanna leave here?" Reggie asked. "You had your formative years here. First the Raiders, now you. Fishing? I'll show you fishing."

After a few beers they parked and walked across the park grass to the lake and threw a couple lines in with anchovies on the hooks--peeled from a pizza--and Dewey got a bite, to his amazement, something big. In the middle of downtown! He reeled in somebody's foot, hacked above the ankle, still in the shoe. High top basketball.

When Dewey crossed the Idaho border into Montana he felt like a goddam rare eagle, flying down the hump of Lolo Pass into the Bitterroot valley. Drifting back, now that it was safe.

Mournfully, he lather's George's chest. He did that much. Didn't he save himself? He thought someday, once he got the money together, he'd get his own place in the mountains, or a little horse ranch in a small valley. Pine trees and rock and good black soil, and a stream nearby for fishing. Deer, elk, bear, coyote, even wolf. They were making a comeback too. And all the crows that could fit. The old man used to pot shoot the crows while sitting on the hood of his pickup.

"Gotta hang optimistic," he says to George. After all, it took most of his savings and four weeks before he hitched on at the mill pulling greenchain, heavy wet veneer for plywood, and he felt lucky, even at journeyman's wages, because



jobs were scarce. All he had to do was survive thirty days trial while he gained muscle and quickness, then it was his. It beat McDonald's pay by a mile, and was, after all, lumber--pure Montana. Lucky, even while dragging butt home every morning after graveyard shift with his arms sore to the bone.

All he has to do now is survive every frigging day. Not exactly a cabin spread--a low rent apartment in East Missoula, pinched off from the main valley by the narrow throat of Hellgate Canyon. An old Ford pickup. No horses, no llamas yet, he jokes, writing his mother. Sounds like California, she writes back. What did his old man expect--oranges and gold? A palm tree in the lawn?

The worse was being lonely. Until he met Suzanne.

"My job sucks, my girl leaves, and now she wants my dog!" he yucks, affecting a drawl.

Some mornings it takes half an hour to open wide his hand. At least he got swing shift. In time he can bid for another job, if they don't lay him off first. Modern efficient machinery. Running out of logs.

Dewey rinses soap out of George's eye. He tried to show George the ropes, help him make it too. George winks and blinks, looking bewildered. Wet, George is even smaller.

Dewey has the oddest sensation he's bathing his own child.

"She's coming back, little buddy!" he cries, startling

George. God, he sounds like the skipper talking to Gilligan.

Dewey rinses him, kisses the top of his wet head, and carries him out of the tub. George shakes before Dewey can grab the towel. After a rub down, Dewey chases him upstairs, tries to wrestle him in the living room, but George hasn't a clue. He tries to hump Dewey's leg.

At a quarter to three Dewey ties George, slightly damp and smelling of aloe, outside to the step rail. A peace offering. He snorts. Bait. He sits on the stoop by George.

Hello, he'll say, and they'll fall into each other's arms. Well, first she might awkwardly pet George, say something to Dewey while she coos at George. I hoped you'd come back, he'll say. And then what? How to make her stay?

Here he sits, a raggedy-assed man. Who'd think he's someone to keep hope? A thing you have to hide deep inside; the least little glint of reality can shrivel it.

I'm sorry--and then he'll hold her. I am sorry.

Yet he had no clear idea what for. There was no bad scene to apologize for. She just cleared her things out, the lot. Except George. Not even a scrap pf paper saying words. He had to call around to find out she'd really gone to Billings, decided to take that modeling job right away.

Out of the dead of blue, just like she popped into his life. Dewey stares at the bent aerial of his pickup. Traded his Buick and five hundred dollars down after three months

at the mill. Everyone had them. Four wheel drive for snow and mountain roads, and he might get into firewood. And there was always hunting.

Three weeks later the engine gagged on the interstate in a cold March drizzle. Dewey was on his way to shop and stock. A minute after he popped the hood a red Nissan pulled alongside and she called out.

"Your pickup poop out?"

A wonderful perfume road the warmth from inside her car. She was checking him out.

"Well, hop in. You look like a drowned puppy."

He tried not to drip everywhere. Yes, he was from the mill. She thought so, he had that frazzled look.

"Want some grass?"

It wasn't til they got to town and she asked which service station he preferred that he told her, truthfully, he could fix the problem himself with a screwdriver in his glove compartment.

That night he blew the better part of two weeks grocery money on dinner, dancing, and drinks.

Suzanne lived to ski, so they spent the remaining snowy weekends up at the lodge. Dewey recognised immediately the sensation during his first wild run down a slope: this was his new life. The icy slide took his breath away, shocked his nerve endings into frozen grins, and he didn't even mind much his sprained ankle.

He wondered if it might mean he was soon to die. He

wasn't sure anyone with a whole lifetime ahead had the right to so much happiness, so much lovemaking, so much life crushed into so small a time the pleasures bumped into one another like boxcars. Maybe he also imagined death at hand because day after night of hard work and continuous play pushed him close to total exhaustion. One evening at the mill in late May, Dewey fell asleep in the restroom sitting on the toilet.

That weekend he took Suzanne to a hot springs back in the forest. Though it threatened rain he made her a hot spaghetti dinner on a camp stove and poured from two bottles of champagne. He waited until it began to rain, until they were both drunk and kneeling, sunk to their chins in the warm water.

"Marry me."

"Seriously, Dewey," she laughed, "when are you going to ask me to move in with you?" She reached her fingertips out to him.

It was probably for the best--his mother always said put your foot in the water before you throw yourself in.

Dewey runs his hand across George, who shivers a little in the fractured October sunlight.

All he wanted after she moved in was to slow down a little. And he began thinking of Suzanne sharing his dream, maybe starting a family someday. But she wanted to move to Billings. Better yet, Denver.

"I won't b.s. you, Dewey," she said straight out one day as he loaded his truck for a weekend of fishing. She wouldn't come along. "There's no future here. I don't want to rot in some hick wilderness." She feared that.

She wanted to be a successful model, and that meant a big market, real culture, the real world. Dewey could sometimes see it in her face, that the next day would be another year to her, the next year an eternity. She would die, or at least experience the first moult of her youthful beauty, without having been discovered. Dewey could come with her. Like, why'd he even come back?

This was the best he'd ever done, he told her. It had found him her. Except he knew he stopped reaching. Sometimes it was enough to sit with the t.v. and a beer. He let slide his occasional checks in the paper for property--he couldn't afford good acreage yet, much less build on it.

"Think big, Dewey. They'll let you strike before they give you another dollar an hour."

They'll shut it down. They're like trees, cut and go, use them up as fast as they can swing the ax, leave stumps and slash. Sell the forests and their jobs overseas. Think they care back east? This whole state's a deadend. A colony. Third world.

"Christ, I wish they'd strike oil or something. That'd be something. You could make some quick money there."

She didn't mean to be cruel. They were just a different

breed. But it didn't make sense because he loved her and what the hell difference should anything else make?

She surprised him that last morning, reaching for him tenderly, quiet and gentle again, in the early light before dawn.

And now Dewey remembers, she stood at the door, stared past him as he left for the mill. Another shift. She didn't raise her hand or wave back.

Dewey clicks off the t.v. It's late, George is hungry by now.

The air outside smells like a sewer. Somedays it was the mill, today it blew from the inversion trapped over the main valley. East Missoula, stuck out here like a poor relation. Dewey considers the heavy dark belly of the sky. If it snows the geese might sit, Cal said. It was colder already.

After George eats, Dewey brings him in, and while he sits again watching t.v. and drinking a beer, Suzanne calls.

"Damn you, Dewey, I drove by twice--I thought you were working?"

"I'm sorry."

"Look," she sighs, her voice growing soft, "just leave him out tomorrow morning, okay? You said you're going hunting?"

"You could pick him up tonight. I'll leave him out."

I'll go to the store."

"I'm going to a party now and I'm late as is."

"I'll drop him off."

"No! Look, I'm leaving tomorrow for Billings. I have to--I'm moving again. I'm taking a job in Denver."

"I'll be off early, before light. You're right. He'd make a lousy birder."

"I think so. You're sweet. Thanks. I won't bother you again." Suzanne paused.

"There was just one last thing, George, to take care of. I couldn't take him before. I didn't know where I'd be. I gotta go now, I'm late."

Suzanne hangs up without saying goodbye.

"Hold your horses."

He made it just in time. The sun has disappeared behind the looming mountains. After a long drive on gravel he comes upon a comfortable looking A-frame house. A lot of open land dotted with pine, nestled right up to the foothills of the Bitterroots. A bit close to the main pathway of the busy highway. Wood stove--need a lot of firewood. The well...he heard they were going dry out here. An old corral wobbles adjacent to a barn.

Five hundred a month. For rent.

George whines and squirms. Dewey hasn't cut the engine yet. A weathered fence lines the drive. Someone used to

have horses. Pastures. A garden. Someone's curtains still hang in the windows.

George's saliva spatters the glass.

The truck spins around back down the drive and George does a one-eighty twist in the seat, frantic.

He won't sleep in his bed that night. He wants the couch. The unwashed seats still hold a decaying trace of perfume, like earth. The body.

Sunday morning in the dark, Dewey rises and lets George out on to an inch of fresh snow. He dresses in new camouflage pants and a wool shirt. At the dining room table he spoons up cereal, and when he's done laces his boots.

Lunch. He'll need a lunch.

Wordlessly, he packs a small lunch and puts it beside the gun in the dinette. He checks his watch and goes out to call George. He doesn't know what Cal will say--he never mentioned to him bringing George along. They'll probably have to leave him tied in the truck or he'll scare all the birds away. If they don't scare him first.

He calls again. This would ruin everything. His own clean, emphatic getaway. He calls. No George.

After a long, shrill whistle George shoots out from around the corner of the neighbor's house, skidding through the arc, and Dewey laughs when he overshoots the porch



in an aborted braking. George scrambles back to the steps and Dewey's mouth falls open.

In the thrown light of the kitchen, George's white coat is smeared across his back and neck with shit matching the color of his patches. The long hairs behind his ears are clotted.

Dewey backs away and listens a moment to the stillness. No snow falls, and in the cold pre-morning air he feels he is only just awakened. George's tongue pulses expectantly.

Dewey slaps the dog hard across the face with his open hand, spinning him away. George cowers on the snowy pavement, sits, crouches to take a step toward Dewey, sits, his head down, and lifts once a paw. Dewey slams the door shut.

In the kitchen he grabs a roll of paper towels, only to throw them unraveling across the room. He laughs and goes back outside.

"C'mere, jerk," but Dewey has to step down and drag George to the railing where he ties him up.

Dewey phones Cal and catches him just as he's leaving. Slipping into his hunting coat, he goes out to start up his pickup and moves it into the back alley.

With his coat still on, he lets himself slump to the floor beneath the dinette window. He can't see them in the dark, but he knows they are there. Those spots will never go away.

His hand throbs. Reaching over to his pack, he takes out a container of ibuprofen and pops two pills in his mouth.. While carefully shifting back his weight with his hands, the wrist buckles.

"Jesus!"

He reaches for the shotgun and squeezes the barrel until his face turns red, and when he lets go the release sends him slumping against the wall.

He never thought he would not see her again. Not that.

He slides a finger up the barrels. Cal laughed when Dewey first showed it to him. He wasn't sure of anything anymore. Anyone.

Dewey juggles some shell casings in the pocket of his hunting coat. Guns. Everybody has them. Everybody here takes off and goes hunting, a weekend, the week. The whole mill. It's a goddam paid holiday, the Monday after opening day. He smiles--the whole show shut down by collective bargaining agreement, employees and foremen, emptying out, everyone shouldering a rifle, a pistol or two. Off to the wilderness, prelude to Thanksgiving. Thank you, God, for letting me slit the throat, for letting me pull the trigger.

Dewey imagines the wooden decoys bobbing as Cal'd described them. Their unblinking eyes. In the dark he cradles the gun and listens to the slosh of water, sees the big birds coming in, pass, circle, pass again, finally tumbling

down and feeling for the water.

He's behind a blind, waiting for Suzanne. George is propped up in the grass out in the open, flat and wooden with painted eyes.

Greenchain. All alone he flanks the conveyor. Whole, unbarked logs roll down the chain, and Dewey has to grab hold of the end of each one and heave it off on to a neat pile behind him. The chain kicks to high gear, the logs come faster, immense, and he groans and pulls. They come thick as a man, two, bunching closer, with a roar like an army of buzz saws, and the next log he bears on to his shoulder staggers him, his muscles clench, sweat fills his mouth, but he can't buck it. The tail end of the log swings down the line, but he can't, and more come, piling up, immense. He's behind....

He has cried out and knows he's awake, sweat under his coat, but Dewey doesn't know where he is. It's not just the dark--he doesn't know where, who, he is, filled with the wash of the impossible. He's afraid. He is grabbing a shotgun, and then he knows.

"Goddam Jesus Christ goddam dreams!"

Pictures and sounds, pictures and sounds, but it doesn't matter, just like life, it doesn't matter, because you can't get away, can't--was he talking?

Ah, that dopehound. George is barking. That idiot.

He's never done that before. Never hit George. He wants to hug him. The old man did it with words, never hit him, but he always felt like he'd been, real good.

He cracks the shotgun and puts a yellow shell into each side of the gaping breech. He snaps the gun stiff and switches off the safety. Turning the gun over end, the butt of the stock between his feet, he looks down the unfathomable holes. Dad's gun. His throat tightens. His fingertips brush the triggers.

Taking control.

Dewey laughs. Imagine a chimp blowing its own head off, playing around with its big toe. Now, there's the way-- but a man wouldn't do it. Has to be smart and rig a string. Has to die with his boots on. His head bounces against the wall.

Hope. He let it out and felt its air-thin wings be crushed. He blinks.

George's bark pitches higher.

George.

He grabs a chair to pull himself up, but the shock in his wrist slumps him.

"George!"

He slaps the gunstock hard against his thigh, then hears the muffled thump of a door. Carefully fingering the curtains, he sees Suzanne standing by her car, the engine running.

The pale twilight blots her face. Her hair is different, pinned up on top. Even her hair's climbing up. Something on her face catches light and sparkles. He stares so hard he doesn't realize she's looking right at him, then Dewey freezes. His fingers tremble against the drapes and he cradles his breath.

She looks away. Speaking sharply to George, who falls silent, she moves from the car, and Dewey's eyeballs strain til she passes from sight. He hears the dull ring of George yanking on the railing.

So take him and go.

He kneels hugging the shotgun between his chest and knees.

Can't take nothing else.

George gives a frantic yelp and Dewey's up, heart hammering. He hurries through the kitchen with the gun and at the door sees them both, Suzanne reaching to chuck under George's chin.

So, yeah, George is a birder.

Twisting, yanking, Dewey has the door open and pushes past the screen door onto the porch. Suzanne almost falls slipping back in the snow.

"Dewey!" She regains her footing. "I should'a known." She studies him in the pale dawn, a few snowflakes drifting.

"Awright--you're a hunter." She giggles oddly. "You look cute." She folds her arms against her chest.

"Where's your truck?"

"I've changed my mind."

Suzanne looks away.

"Gimme my dog."

He doesn't answer.

"So what's for today? Go out and blast a bunch of birdies? That the big plan?"

She stares at the shotgun.

"Bird gun?"

Dewey holds the gun with his right hand, his bad hand. She seems odd now, like some rare bird herself. Not plumaged for the cold. Thin suede jacket, tight skirt, high heels--snow melting on the toes. Little silver spoons dangle from her ears and her lips are unusually red.

Beautiful, but out of place. Like George. Like everything. She'll freeze to death if she doesn't get herself indoors.

"C'mon, Dewey." Her teeth chatter. "I gotta go."

"Go."

"You want to talk? What's new? Still pulling chain, or something new and exciting? Feeding dryers?"

He chuckles. Feeding dryers would be okay.

She crushes her foot into the snow as if she's stomping a cigarette, or a bug.

"He's mine," she says, but doesn't move. "Gimme my dog," and Suzanne comes quickly and undoes the top tie, but George yanks on the leash and she can't get slack on the

stiff leather.

"Dammit." She blows on her fingers and resumes clawing at the bottom tie, beginning to work it free. "Aww--" she says with disgust, stopping to examine a fingernail, and Dewey clamps his hand over the tie and the railing. Suzanne pummels it with her fists.

"You stupid jerk!"

He watches her beat his hand, his good hand. George wrenches within his collar.

"You moron!"

Dewey removes his hand and raises the shotgun opposite Suzanne's face. She stumbles slowly back, hands frozen into fists.

"You don't love him."

"What--?" she whispers.

"You didn't even say goodbye."

Her teeth show.

"Uhh--don't point a gun at me, don't--don't point a fucking gun at me!"

With his bad hand Dewey balances the shotgun, squeezing the stock until his arm trembles, until his whole arm shakes violently.

"Dewey!" she cries, her fists blossomed now into curls. "Don't point a fucking gun at me!"

Dewey struggles not to vomit, and then the gun is nosing down, loose in the crook of his arm. It must be over.

While ready to kill her, he realizes it must be over.

"You didn't say goodbye."

She wipes her nose with her thumb, tucks her hands underneath her arms.

"You don't love me," he adds, as if it were a new found fact. He almost drops the gun into the snow.

"I don't know," she moans. "God."

He shrugs. He lays the gun against the house.

"It's not loaded," he lies.

"Christ. I thought you'd flipped out." She turns her back on him, then spins around again. "You're so pathetic, you know that?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah," she says, as if he better know that. She hugs herself. Snowflakes stick to her hair. That's it--she frosted it, just lightly.

"You know, when I met you, it was like you were just playing Dewey Carson. Doing what you had to do, I don't know--to fit in. You used to laugh at yourself."

Dewey laughs now.

"Nope. It's really me. I just want what everyone wants, Suzanne. Look at it--!" He flings his arm at the mountains behind her rimming the canyon. She snorts.

"You're a millworker, Dewey. You're holding the gun."

He shakes his head and watches the mountains turn ghostly in the falling snow, then looks at George shivering.



"You can't rape your paradise. You can't point a gun at it and say 'Mine!'"

"It isn't easy," he forces out, "it isn't easy trying to do this, trying to figure this all out. Alone."

"Jesus, I'm sorry! I'm not part of your dream. I'm not. Nobody owes you them."

She turns toward the mountains.

"God, I hate this place." She shakes her head. "Oh, Dewey, I love you."

George looks so cold, but he shrinks away when Dewey lifts a hand. He stares at her back and lifts his face to the thickening snow. Maybe something between them could still live. Not dreams, but something. He could still ask to leave with her.

"Why do you want George. Really?"

She turns around. "I found out he's got papers."

"Papers."

"Yeah. He's a pedigree. I'm going to make him a stud."

He bursts with a laugh.

"It's worth money, Dewey. You'd just have him fetch feathers." Dewey begins untying the leash.

"C'mon, George," he says softly.

"Dewey!"

He holds the leash out to her.

"He belongs to you."

Suzanne accepts and George wriggles over to her. She

kneels and speaks to him, and Dewey wants to say something, remembers that this is part of what he imagined it would be. He has the power, he can find a new way, a new way to keep her in his heart.

"Holy cows!" She jumps up, holding her hands out as if wounded. "He's full of shit!" George pulls her toward the car. "Thanks, Dewey. Thanks a bunch. Couldn't you at least give him a bath?"

She pushes George away as she opens the door.

"God," she moans, pulling the seat forward. "Get in back!"

What are the words? He doesn't have the words. She's leaving, she's angry--he can't be left with nothing. He panics.

"Wait!" He knocks the snow from George's empty dish, holds it forth, but Suzanne pulls down the driveway. He jumps down the steps, "Wait!" She slows, and Dewey flings the dish like a frisbee, landing on the hood of her car in a non-skid thunk. That wasn't how.

Suzanne backs her car all the way to the street before getting out to retrieve the dish. As she shifts gears, grinds the clutch, Dewey helplessly watches her face, then George's. George watches back, tongue already to the air.

Knock 'em dead, Dewey thinks.

With grocery bag in hand he silently goes room to room.

He throws in a chipped cup, a hunk of whitened cheese, a carton of plain yogurt, a small spider plant, and one stocking. He stares at the bed.

He picks up a tennis ball on his way out the back door, and stuffs the bagful into the garbage can by the alley, standing awhile to listen to a racous, awakening crow. There's something about crows he remembers from his father. How a smart hunter can follow one to a fresh kill. But then, the old man was always shooting crows.

Dewey wildly strips the sheets and pillow cases from the bed, returns to the patio and lifts the snowy grill off the barbeque. After drenching the linen with lighter fluid he tosses a lit match.

That's good. Clearing deadwood.

He moves close as the heat subsides, fascinated at the revealed glowing shapes, the peels of red ash lifting skyward.

She's wrong. He turns toward the mountains. He'll find a way. He'll figure this out and he'll get along just fine with this godalmighty beautiful world.

The crow croaks deafeningly, and Dewey leaps to grab a rock.

### The Last Best Place

In my worst drunken dreams I made love to a witch. I was whole again, capable, and that's the most I ever remembered later, not the terrible details of what she was like, of what we did. Just the black feeling when I awoke that I'd done this unnatural thing. Worse yet, I'd be sober.

That was a bad year all around, the year I went to Warm Springs. Not only was the last major lumber mill in Montana threatening to call its final timber and put us beavers out of work, but the winter hit with unnatural bite.

It was the year I decided to become a Real Poet.

My nightmares ended one mean day, even for Montana, because early November don't usually turn like that anymore, don't sink its teeth in with no warning. A day in which I, Dewey Carson, despite my worldly pains was forced to come face to face with salvation. One of those crystal clear moments when you're sure something terrible is the right thing to do, yet unbelievable because it is happening to you.

I drink that night because I drank every night. I start with a few beers. I work then at the old Missoula Pine

mill, been there twenty years, an old, old hand--most everybody clears out first chance at a better job, or leaves the state. I'm forty-something, but that don't mean nothing. I lose time all the time. I make one dollar over the minimum wage and I need every cent since I lost my pension when the company sold.

I know wood. Wood Warriors is what Buzz used to call us, back when the pay made us the fatted calf. Now he calls us Just Some More Underpaid Geeks. I started out in plywood pulling greenchain, got laid off, cut in the woods awhile, did seasonal forest jobs for the government, then settled down at the Pine. Never cared for any of the technical stuff--I was a grunt. I whacked trees, lopped them, hauled them, planted seedlings, burnt slash, fought forest fires, I sawed logs, planed logs, ripped and cut boards, pulled and graded rough stock, carried and stacked stock, moved palletfuls with a jitney, fed it into double-end saws, tailed it, fed it into moulders, and finally tailed that, behold-ing in my hand a small, perfectly machined piece of window sash, polished smooth as bone and just as white. A tree bone. It fed so many people, and then some.

I got carpal tunnel syndrome, a rainbow of contusions, flappy cuts, a broken elbow, an individual cumulative trauma disorder, tendonitis, for each individual job--fingers, knuckles, wrists, biceps, shoulders--got bursitis, tore muscle in my back and legs, got burnt, a cordful of pus and

blood splinters, and still only pruned a bit of my little finger in the final talley, mashed at the top joint, hardly a twig's worth. I've heard terrible agony, seen two men die. At forty-something I'm a many growth-ring veteran, thick barked, gnarly, and alcohol is my sap. But then a tree is mostly dead, just a thin half dime's worth between the skin and the heartwood that says you're alive. For one more season.

Yeah, right. So I got a retirement job, something to coast into old age. I tend the log pond. With a barb-tipped aluminum pole I harpoon logs like whales, and they are like real whales, small and skinny, the big fat ones being an idea of the past. Extirpated, the Greenies would say. I stick the leader of a huge column I rope in between the end of the pier and the shore, guide it along the floating dock to the bull chain up to the sawyer, who we all call Buzz. Donavan, the kid, big and dumb, comes down every so often from splitting up bark to help me corral free floaters.

It's a cush job in decent weather, I get called Ahab, and there's lots of downtime--the machinery goes back over sixty years, maybe World War II. We sit out of the breeze in the dock shed and sneak beers till we're on line. The foreman, Red, a huge old paunch, pretends not to notice. He totes around his thermos of coffee and brandy.

For most of those years I felt I done good. I was happy. I used to have dreams, the waking kind, of doing a lot

better. But I got in a groove. I fit. Take the way I talk sometimes--I done good. I know better, but it don't matter. It fits. I'm comfortable. I got a roof, a t.v., and I eat three squares.

It's at the log pond I got my inspiration to write poetry.

Trees

People

logs

workers

It occurred to me one day after Donovan falls in the pond roping in a wayward log--dinked his hard hat on it, but he's fine--that if you stripped away the green leaves from people, lopped off the parts of no use, you'd have a people log. By then I've been flipping through poems for sometime while I tend my logs. I figured this much out: to be a Real Poet you had to understand pain, and find it beautiful. I had that much. I was a drunk. I lost my wife and child. And I was a paycheck suspended above destitution. I loved bars, so I had experience among the real people, the lost flock. And yes, I wallowed in it. It was, as they say, my own misery. I'd lived a full life. But to be a Real Poet you also had to need salvation, or believe there was such a thing, even if a wretch like yourself had little chance of attaining any. I lacked that. It's very much like religion.

Meanwhile, I started thinking about enrolling at the

State University in town, taking a night course in poetry writing.. Perhaps salvations could be taught, like part of the craft. I needed a mentor, a guru--I was afraid to put pen to paper without the proper learned guidance. I thought about the classes until it was just too late--the University was bought by the South Koreans, who dropped the creative writing program and concentrate on the basics: business, math, economics, and English as a foreign language.

This really pisses Buzz off. He's a xenophobe, hates them all--the Hmong, Chinese, Japanese. Of course, he particularly hates the Vietnamese, who bought the mill. I tell him, it's American easterners what sold it, practically the same thing. They whittled away at the old union, got our pension dumped.. What the Nam got is a mill that depends on finger joint for half its stock.

Me, I got mixed feelings. I don't like it when anybody tries to buy your heart and soul, the very land you grew up in, this New Imperialism people talk about, like it's got class. It's bad enough shipping half our forests overseas, they got to come over here and buy America. I'm American, I'm not used to that. Of course, I do as a Montanan feel brotherly understanding with our friends in the Third World. I'm used to outsiders coming in to suck resources out for the carrot of a job. And years ago when the Greenies in the 'developed' world were making a big stink before the last rain forests were cut, pleading for those governments



to exercise restraint to preserve the environment for the good of the whole world, I understood the laughs, because right here the Greenies were lobbying for more wilderness areas, and we said, Right--you got yours, and you chopped what you had to get it, New York, California, America. Screw you.

But along with those kind of foreigners--the real ones, not the American ones--you also got your immigrants coming over from Asia for so long. It's tradition--refugees, poor folk just trying to escape the cruel claw of this despot or that. For Chris'sakes that's what we've been, that's the stock. Me, I think there's real irony in the ancient Asian having crossed into this great temperate wilderness so long ago, flourishing, then invaded, conquered, repressed, and now the new savvy Asian reclaiming, and then some. But Jesus, I don't know. Whose world is it?

Buzz sums up his view succinctly with one of his bumper stickers: Native Montanan.

So with no hope of being in a real writing class, I just write, and begin leaving snatches of my poetry here and there in hope someone will read them and give me some feedback. I pin a dozen inside the dock shed but nobody seems to notice, or pretend not to. Then one day Donovan plucks one, an early piece about the logs:

Big sleek fish  
No salt in the soup

I start small, the images in my life. Donovan asks if it's a grocery list. Red calls him a dungheap and pins it back up.

"Dewey's writing is private," he says solemnly, cradling his thermos. That's not what I wanted either.

"It means he wants sex," Buzz says. He thinks all art means the artist wants sex, but can't, or won't, and has art instead.

After awhile I realize they're afraid for me. Donovan even asks, at Buzz's prodding, if this means I'm queer. "No," I assure, "you stupid motherhumping son-of-a-bitch!" just to let them know I'm still one of them.

If the inspiration was the log pond, the desire came from the tragedy of my life: the last strands of marriage finally unraveled, I lost the power of being a man, my drinking worsened, my wife left, oh--and I shot a dog.

Being impotent, that's something nobody's known except an odd woman since. I've no one. The guys, they no doubt assume I'm grieving over my matrimonial loss, except maybe Red. I know he's had experience himself with alcoholic limp.

So armed with this pain I write, and soon develop my theory of the Real Poet, with Life as my Teacher, and Hit and Miss the method for honing the nuances of creative craft. I would stumble through this thing and find my own natural channels for my creative juices.

## Currently dead

Buzz loves that one. I wrote it after the little dam upstream popped its pants and a billion tons of toxic mining tailing silt sterilized the Clark Fork River forever. Once, he stops on the Higgins Bridge when we come upon a white-haired tramp with pole and string cast down into the river. "Currently dead!" Buzz shouts, and the old guy drops his pole.

I live near the Clark Fork then in the Montana Apartments, an old pain-peeled(really) three story a stone's throw from the old Milwaukee Railroad depot, which used to be a fancy restaurant, and is now just an old gutted depot again. I can see the river clearly from my top floor studio, and the whole city on the far side, and I get inspiration.

If I don't think about the river being dead, but as just being a river, it soothes me. I imagine people near the dead seas feel the same way, or worse. Though it's the small dead things that always mean the most to us.

The other window in my room looks down across the alley at Button Bob's, a cheap gambling casino with middle-aged strippers. It makes me sick. It's a chain, the Button Bob's Cheap Gambling Casino With Middle-aged Strippers Franchise, owned by some putrid out-of-state hood and his partner, an out-of-state mad ex-orthodontist. Which is why, incidentally, I call all outside exploiters of Montana's indiginous wealth--the extraction industries--Mad Dentists. As the

trees went and pressure was put on what remained, what was legally protected, our eastern owned company cried, "Your paychecks!" never, "Our profits!" My friend Stick says the wolves never left Montana, they just got their jobs took.

In Button Bob's case, I guess what's been exploited is our native immorality. Open twenty-four hours. Inspiration point, then, is a mixed bag. Though Buzz says, thank God for the strips, casinos, and the Lotto, or the state's economy would surely go to hell.

So it's Friday night, my feet ache, and I'm downing Buds while I try to make poetry. I've got the shade pulled on the western alley window to Button Bob's, sacrificing the sweet bruise of after-sunset for a purer influence. I stare out at the river, the window cracked for fresh air, but the non-stop revving from the parking lot of the Butt--the common moniker--jars me, as does the empty laughter leaking out the door. Friday night is not the best possible time to create from where I sit.

It's a killing clock before I meet the guys downtown. It's payday. But I do want to write. I'm trying to whip up something about my wife, Susy. Perhaps it was an omen.

Don't get me wrong, she wasn't my salvation, the flip side of my Real Poet theory. There's got to be a point to life, but I know it's not love. I've had two loves leave me. I was a poet, but not a real poet, just aimlessly wan-

dering across the landscape of the page until that last summer when I had my personal epiphany, my vision, but real as a knock on wood. It was trees. Specifically, Save the Trees, which I had made into a T-shirt and proudly wore, at work and off, and which I'm wearing this very night. Red, he thinks I'm gone nuts. Of course, he grew up logging, back in the bounty--"Hauling logs before he could raise one of his own," Buzz would say--and Red was always terribly fond of saying how he hates to see waste--"Waste 'em and want not!" Buzz says. Red feels all our resources should be used as God intended. Of course, he's a bit out of touch. They're used.

It may strike one as paradoxical--not that I, a life-long survivor off trees, should extoll their preservation: that's typical enough change, psychologically, not that the guilt runs that deep, though, because God knows we've needed wood, it's the methods and greed, not the need, what's the crying shame--but that I should continue earning a living in the wood products industry even after my awakening, even when I see that my days on the job are as numbered as the trees. Well, I must survive, therefore I plunder. Hence, the pain and dilemma of the Real Poet--destroying that which you love, seeking salvation even as you desecrate, just as we do unto ourselves.

It was great. It fit! I was complete and whole.

The actual epiphany was simply, a tree. The Tree. A

huge, big old ponderosa--of the sweet smelling sort which used to inhabit the continent from the coast to the Black Hills before white feet tread the forests, growing naturally into massive old age with fire its main predator--came bubbling up from the depths of the log pond that summer after an aging jet fighter, a mere hundred feet above, passed at the speed of sound en route to terra firma a few miles downstream the valley. Ka-booma. It was enough to shatter what rotten gases that monster harboured and rise her to the top, and we were amazed--we had no idea any of these bonafide leviathons were left, all we'd seen for years were mere sticks by comparison. The only old growth we knew of anymore was the fuzz on Red's teeth. We couldn't hazard how old it was or where it came from. Red said it was as big as Big Pine, the largest pine in Montana, just up the road to Idaho, which disappeared years ago surreptitiously. Donovan thought maybe somebody swiped it, got scared, and dumped it in our pond; so he was afraid. Me, I knew it was the Mother Tree, the Father Tree. The Tree. Like the biblical tree of--what? Not knowledge, God knows. The Tree of Fatness. Of Plenty, before the Fell. It had a stub left from a branch sawed off big enough to hold anyone of the 'trees' we diced up now. The sort of fat arm limb I had ropes attached to holding a swing tire when I was a kid, the grandfather tree of the yard.

The tree, well we bulled it up to Buzz and cut huge

planks, but it was mostly rot and fed the hog, made steam and ash. Resurrectus corpus.

So Susy, no, she was not my salvation. I've never really written about her. Once, when I was drunk, I scrawled an obscenity to her with a nail in the concrete sidewalk in front of our old house. It rhymed. But I've never sat clearheaded and soberly put in to words what I'd lost. She was all I had.

The night she left was like any other night to me, but of course, to her sober point of view just another goddam night with me. I owed her so much. When she appeared to me it was a miracle, another chance, new lease on life--all that hogwash. Only it was true. She reminded me of an old, old love, Suzanne. I swore it all off, bars, pool, hashish, even hunting, and I thought about quitting the mill, except I didn't want to blow my pension. Suddenly I saw fifteen years of t.v., drinking, bloodletting, and wood beat flesh washed clean away. I awoke from a dream. I was in love.

We married, and soon there was little George. He'd be six now. Me, late in life, my life, with a family. But even with Susy working at Grizzly Diner we barely got by. Mortgage payments on that little house and my paycheck was shrinking. And though I'd sworn off all that stuff, I never actually stopped, just cut back a bit, because Susy didn't mind, she was tolerant. She accepted me, for me, unlike old Suzanne. But the worst side of me, like the natural inhabi-

tant to an occupied territory, like a pernicious weed in a tilled garden that crept back.

So she split, got sick of me. That last night I did something terrible to her. I can't even talk about that.

So I'm waiting for words to come with which to paint a quick memorable stroke of Susy, bring her back to me. Meanwhile darkness falls and there's a commotion in the Butt's polluted lot. I hear a gunshot and gravel spitting as a car shoots out. A police cruiser, which may just happen to be passing, begins hot pursuit, and at last something comes to me:

The squeal of  
the cop's tires

I give up and decide it's time to meet the guys. Play some pool, cards, socialize. In otherwords, just another night.

The first thing on my mind when I step into the hallway is to try not to look at anybody I might run into, because I'm never sure anymore who may be unreal. I mean ghosts. At first I didn't think they were ghosts--the town is stock full of vagrants, homeless, people quite out of their minds, you see, living on the streets. They pass you on the bridge, mumbling, going home to under the bridges and overpasses and their cardboard huts, or some woody spot near the river. Drunks sleeping in alleys, waking to bum for the day. I pity



them. It's more noticeable in summer, more transients passing through, and not just town, no--if you meet their eyes they pass right through you--but more striking in winter, if you should stop to think, because you know some of them are moving just to keep warm. Every so often one finally gets a little public recognition, a line or two in the newspaper about completely losing all that hoarded warmth in somebody's garage. Nobody too important or it won't make press. The next day someone else's stuffed that paper in their boots.

They themselves haunt me. My heart's not heartwood. I try telling Buzz, we're not becoming the Old West again, as he secretly relishes--he racks his guns in his pickup, has a bowie knife stuffed down his boot. The Old West was all hope, happy death, silver in your pocket. I tell him we're bust, The Dead West, a ghost state full of ghost people, haunted souls.

I didn't mean that literally, but then I'm not sure anymore.

I might see a wino slumped on a stoop, rage tonguing out of split shoes, bottle without the pretense of a paper bag, and the closer I get, the less determinate he is. He gets grayish, and I can see the wine spilling through his body, and when I get there--nothing. Just a stain on concrete. I'm hallucinating, right, no problem. But I can still smell him.

Then I see more of them, loitering, passing the time. Some of them dressed, well--like fifty years ago. Like a hundred and fifty years ago. As if all the down-and-outers that have ever been in these parts are re-materializing, coming back. Somehow, as today becomes less real, the past gets more real. It's frightening at first, but they don't bother me. They ignore me. Once I tossed a quarter to one, a test. He doesn't touch it. I half expect this old timer--like some miner, old floppy hat--to pick it up and bite it. When I come closer, peer into the shadows, there's the quarter all alone, no miner. I leave it just in case.

The clincher came not long ago when I see my first deer. In the city, I mean, at the intersection downtown of Broadway and Higgins, walking against the light.

I used to hunt. Venison my middle name. Buzz and me, during one stretch of about ten years, our prime time, we reckoned that between the two of us we legally and otherwise--Buzz calls it So What? hunting--cleaned out two hundred and fifty whitetail and mulies, sixty-one elk, a hundred twenty-two pronghorn, thirty coyotes, forty-two bear, three hundred sixty-two grouse, one hundred seventeen ducks and geese, eight hundred fourteen crows, for fun, and one dog. We used rifles, shotguns, pistols, a flare gun, and Buzz's Cherokee jeep. The flare set a bear on fire. Smokey.

Buzz took things to extremes. He dabbled in poaching, specifically, the selling of body parts from legally or

So What? bagged black bear, even after Montana finally outlawed it. Claws for jewelry, hides ofr rugs, heads for plaques--he'd sell his grandmother's own gall bladder to the Koreans. Indirectly. But then his Christian wife, Therese found out and threatened to poach his ass to the Fish and Wildlife Service.

When I first took up the sport again after moving back to Montana from California, I ate what I took, took what I needed. I guess it was the bottle. Little nips in camp became binges on the drive out. Ah, that's crap. I enjoyed dropping something with a pop, the sweet crack. But let me be a lesson to others--drinking and killing don't mix. I quit hunting around when Susy left, when I shot that dog thinking it was a coyote. Shot it twice. It didn't look much like a coyote, up close. Even had a red bright red collar. Buzz don't understand, holds it personally against that dog for him losing his old gaming partner. Things haven't been the same between us. It could have been worse for me--Harold Krickle up the Bitterroot gave up hunting only after mounting the heads of his immediate family down in the Krickle den. Well, gave it up when he was hauled away to Warm Springs.

So now, when I see this deer in town I'm alarmed for it, and I realize--it's the first time for me. Broadway and Higgins against the light. Later on I decide, it feels kind of nice. Anyway, it was just a ghost. A car drives right through it and he flips his white flag and hops down the

street like he owns it. Reclaiming old turf.

More recently I'm certain I saw an Indian. Reflected in the glass of an old abandoned department store, the Bon. I'm looking at the naked manikins left behind and suddenly he's behind me, a chief, he looks like, looking over my shoulder. He doesn't surprise me.

I have an Indian friend, Stick. His Christian name. He lives in town, though he grew up on the reservation. He used to be a high school teacher, then quit and decided to be a jack-of-all-trades, mostly carpentry and wood carving. He specializes in willow peace pipes. I tell him about the ghosts one night after some beers. Cautiously--I never took Stick for the superstitious type. I expect him to laugh. Instead he smiles and laughs.

Stick's changed. Starting to wear Salish beadwork, grow his hair long. Some people call him woman behind his back, but that's stupid--he's Indian, not some white punk.

I think of Stick as I leave the building. He's not superstitious, but he knows a lot about old things. He gave me the idea that Montana becoming a ghost state wasn't such a bad deal. One time we drove out together to look out at the Mission mountains in the spring time, awesome white-topped rock lunging out of the greening valley. He explains that if everyone were gone it wouldn't be as if nothing were left. That's the idea that gets a developer to salivating over a spot and saying, there's nothing, then set to making less of

it. Like beauty isn't deep enough. God, Himself--He's so undeveloped. Once everyone's gone the land will heal itself and truly once again be, Stick says. It needs a breather. The last best place, Montana used to proudly be called, though even then, defensively. Used to be pockets of them all over the world, those last best places. I guess there's still most of the moon. Stick says most of the ghosts aren't people at all, not even animals. But I haven't seen anything like that yet, not ghost beauty.

I have the feeling Stick is getting ready. And it's funny, it's not like there's a bomb about to be dropped or anything. I think it's his hope. Like the Jews in ancient Israel waiting for deliverance. But us, me--we weren't kicked out of Eden. We rezoned it.

So Stick's on my mind as I enter into a night gone suddenly cold, the mellow mid-fall plain gone. It's only after I pass the pawn shop next door that a bum catches my eye, and against my better judgement I'm so certain he's real I wave. He offers up a tin flask and I accept. Even when it's all you got just then you offer, because you got it. It's gin, real as gin gets, so I just accept he's real too.

I hand it back. "Thanks, friend." He grabs me by the wrist, grinning with broken brown teeth. I shout out, alarmed, but he won't let go. I wrench away, he tears at my pants cuff with his claws. He makes the sign of the cross as I stumble across the street toward the bridge. When I look back

he's gone.

For the first time I wonder, not if I'm losing my mind, but if I've gone and lost it. Yet, I think as I cross the bridge, Stick would say the ghosts are real. We just couldn't see them before.

By this time, I might add, I've long since given up hope of seeing Susy again, but I do allow myself the hope that I might 'see' her. But I'm not sure it works that way, I mean--she's not dead. Yet, I have seen someone from my past, my old, old love SUzanne, who as far as I know is still alive. She was eating alone by a restaurant window, carving a slice of something, chewing prettily, sipping from her glass. I waved right at her, amazed, eager, to talk. When I get inside, the table's empty. Now Susy, if I saw her ghost, I'd make her the cook, not a diner. Making my dinner, me and little George. Because she's goodness and baker. I'd invite my parents over, both definitely ghosts; they never met her or Suzanne. They'll see Susy's fine table, our cozy home. In reality, I've seen my father's ghost just once. He was driving by in a police cruiser, didn't see me waving in the rain. Splashed me pretty good.

It's raining now. I can't think and I need a drink. The gin is already faint in my mouth. I stop halfway across the bridge, look both ways, toward my studio and down into the city, a blur of broken red, yellow, and white light.

Directly below lies the river, silent, black as night,

somehow more sinister to me than in daylight, knowing it's dead. Wind and drizzle shot whip my face--weather lets you know you're alive, good or bad. The radio warned an arctic mass might be headed our way, and I laugh, picturing a fat man looking for a place to sit. All I've got is my pool playing jacket and cap, Cleveland Indians, which I always wear like a pair of glasses. But I'm not worried. Home is close.

East wind blows out of the canyon. Squinting, I make out the black mountains of Hellgate Canyon funneling the blow. I close my eyes, put my bare hands on the rail and listen, wet and blasted. I could stand here forever, forget time. But I perceive something in the wind, a voice from the canyon's mouth, a twisted dark throat. I shudder.

I'soula.

All this in-the-past stuff, it's not just reminiscing, not just rambling. The human fabric, Stick says, the human life, is already woven when we're stiched. Histories and legends, the stories, without knowing them we risk ripping ourselves apart. Everything human, apart. He says the same of the cloth of the land.

So I remember Stick's stories about the Hellgate, named by the French for all the skulls they found, evidence of the Blackfeet warpath into the Missoula valley where the Flatheads lived. I'soula, in Salish, means something like a horrible shriek. A cry of terror.

The wind does howl, sets my blood cold, and my exhilara-

tion vanishes. Suddenly I feel sorry for everything bad I've ever done, sorry that human desire and greed ever inhabited me, sorry I shot that dog. The cry becomes a harbinger of the end.

I look toward the city lights, a weepy and bleary make-up, and I run.

"The eagle shits, we're nigger rich," Buzz toasts in the alley behind Teddy Bar, and tosses Jack back. Donovan and Sid are with us.

It's payday, but I wish Buzz wouldn't brag it. Sid's been laid off six months from the mill. Buzz calls him a titsucker, living off dole to support his wife and three kids. Buzz hates him, because after Sid hired on over a year back, he stupidly let slip he'd once been a scab. But I like Sid. He's hanging on, like me, making it up as we go along.

"Night for snake bite," Buzz gasps. He hands me the bottle and I pass it to Sid. I sprung for it.

"Eagle shits right in your mouth, don't it, Shitappens?"

Sid smiles, passes Buzz the bottle, who makes a show of wiping the mouth. Shit Happens--that's another bumper sticker of Buzz's. He's run it together and given the name to Sid because Sid, whenever he drops a load of wood, gambles away his paycheck, or gets laid off, shrugs it off



good naturedly as beyond his control. It's a common expression around the mill. A bad accident due to company negligence--Ah, shit happens. The wasteland of the forests--The shit happens. And Susy. The shit--

"Donovan," I say--he isn't drinking much--"does that pretty bride of yours still have you on the short leash?"

"Short curlies," Buzz says. Donovan blushes. The lunk, he's newly married a month ago, an icon of domestic bliss.

"How 'bout you,?" Donovan gives Buzz a friendly poke. "How's Miss Gladbags?"

"Fuckin' bitch."

Therese, she's got dark pouches beneath her eyes, little wonder, and Buzz calls her Miss Gladbags. They're common law. They get along like wolverines.

"Tonight I'm trying to be nice, right?" He hands the bottle with its swallow or two of backwash to Sid and opens the door. It's mostly me and Buzz killed Jack.

"Geez it's cold," he interrupts himself.

"It's spooky," I blurt, remembering the bridge. Buzz throws me a funny look.

"I try teaching blackjack to the kids to keep them out of hair while she gets supper," he says as we pass through the back hall into the bar, smokey and bustling. We find a nice spot by the pool table, along the No Smoking sign beneath the antique velvet hanging of dogs playing poker.

"'Why don't you play one of their games, Buzz'" Buzz

squeaks. "Geez, I don't care, they get spit on the chips anyway. 'I'll show you the Price is Right,' I says to her, but she pulls her Miss Fridgidare on me."

Buzz glances at Sid, who's smiling. Me and Donovan know well the hot and cold faucets of Buzz's marriage. Even wolverines got passion. Buzz gives a bill to Sid and tells him to get the table a pitcher of beer. Buzz leans to us.

"I try cheering everybody up, let the kids watch t.v. while we eat. Therese just cuts her meat into these little pieces. I tell het to lighten up. 'Lighten up, Mom,' Bobby says, the scamp. She picks up a whole goddam plate of cherry jello--" Buzz picks up a full ashtray for illustration-- "and dumps it on the mashed potatoes." He flips over the ashtray, grim.

"Patty don't serve me that way," Donovan says.

"I grab my coat and take the fuck off. Tell her I'm leaving, for good. She's standing there in the door with the kids, and you know what she says? 'Swell, don't take the Buick.'"

I laugh. Buzz's love is his pickup anyway.

"I was this close," he says, his thumb and forefinger almost touching, "to punching her time clock."

My stomach burns, an ulcer. I never told anyone how Susy left. I fiddle in my shirt for a Tums while Buzz leans close to me.

"Calls me a fuckin' souse in front of 'em. So I had

a few. I'm their fuckin' father."

He instantly cheers up as Sid returns with the beer.

"Hey, listen to this one--you know why there's battered women shelters but no battered men shelters? Huh? 'Cause women, they just don't listen!"

I pop my Tums. Buzz rolls his eyes at two women at the bar.

"Fillies!"

"Take my word," Sid says, "they don't smell like no horses."

I wish Sid would just sit and enjoy his free beer, because I can see Buzz has tapped a nerve tonight. I'm hoping Buzz won't go too far with Sid. When he came to Missoula, Sid slept, ate--the wife and three kids--in their old station wagon two months until he landed the mill job.

"What they smell like?" Buzz has to ask. "Upholstery?" Buzz winks at me. "How about it? You're not getting into one of your long loner phases again? When's the last time me and you double dated?"

"The time your wife nearly killed you," Donovan says. She actually accidentally set him on fire. I never stepped out on Susy. Though since she left I'd gone out once. I try not to remember that.

"Hey, Sidney," Buzz drains his glass. "Know any horny babes?"

Sid, wisely, smiles and tends his beer. Then, for God

only knows what reason, turns to me and says, "Hey, Dewey, I hear the mill might be shutting down soon. That true?"

Buzz's fingernail taps his glass.

"You know," he says, tilting toward Donovan, "I like it as much as the next guy in the back seat--but with the kids up front, watching?"

Guys. Guys being guys. We're all fucking pigs and I say to myself, the hell with it, and gulp my beer.

Nothing happens, amazingly, Sid leaves, and Red shows up. I sit evaporating. Buzz and Donovan shoot the green, play rotation. I dare not watch the ball--the beer floats on the gin like a parfait. I look for more Tums and belch.

"That don't sound healthy," Red says.

"Cowpie!" Buzz groans.

A girl at the juke box slips it quarters, rocking her hips slowly. She looks familiar.

"Ten bucks I sink her!" Buzz yahoos. She watches them, the red light from the machine soaking her face. With her blonde hair, she remind me of Susy. Buzz thrusts and misses the green completely. She crosses back to the bar to sit with another girl, and I see her lips move to the song. They open and close like an angelfish's and I envision soft fish kisses on the skin inside my elbow, and I have a poem:

Angel fish kiss

Only when I try to tell it to Red it comes out, "Ankle

kiss fizz." He shakes his head at me, say, "Boy!"

The next thing I know Buzz is squeezing the two girls into seats between us, the blond closest to me. Red is shoved up against the wall.

"Lookee who's sporting a rug," Buzz says. "It's Dorothy."

"And Toto, too?" My smile freezes. I do recognize her.

"It's my sister's," she says, thumbing her dark-haired companion. Her name sounds like See-la.

"I'm visiting," Seela says. "Dorothy's showing me the town." Buzz introduces everybody.

"Hey, Dewey," Dorothy says. I grin at my beer.

Dorothy collects brand new shiny screws, buys them at the Coast-to-Coast. She drops them into a large, clear crystal vase she keeps on her dresser. I've seen it just once, after Susy left. It has an immense heft.

Buzz winks at me.

"I told Seela here you're a poet."

"I think that's so unusual," she gushes.

"He's sensitive," Buzz says. "He wants to move people."

"Busses do that," Dorothy says, sipping her drink through a tiny straw.

"Do you know what?" Seela says. "I'm getting a microchip implanted in my dog's ear. It's for I.D. purposes."

Red fails to cover a gusty belch.

"So, Buzz," Dorothy says. "We're making party in East

Missoula. What do you say?"

Buzz ponders this sudden option to going home to face Therese.

"Tomorrow we're going to the hot springs," Seela says.

"Bad storm coming," Red warns. "She'll blow for days."

Dorothy flashes a little vial from a chain bunched between her breasts.

"Speak of the devil," she says. Buzz is impressed.

"Jesus," Donovan gasps, catching on. He looks around the bar, paranoid. Ready to run to his happy home.

"What do you say, Dew?" Buzz says.

"Roads'll be dangerous." I picture the drive through the canyon's throat. "It's spooky."

"Spooky?" Dorothy repeats, amused. "It's perfectly safe as long as you've got the necessary equipment. Just in case."

Buzz snorts. It occurs to me that even if Buzz doesn't know about me and Dorothy, he likely will soon enough.

"I got a headache."

"Oh--" Dorothy takes an ice cube from her mouth and begins rubbing against my temple. She coos. She is quite mad. That it runs in the family is certain. Her brother got arrested for hanggliding naked off Mt. Sentinel, landing in a public park and scaring little children. Her grandmother, it was said, lost it sometimes and went around babbling. She proclaimed to be a Druid and ate pine cones.

Numbing water trickles down my jaw. Two muffled gunshots report from outside.

"Oh!" Seela cries, while I jump.

"Ah," Buzz sighs, massaging her shoulder. "Music to my ears. C'mon, Dewey--don't that get your blood going?"

"Yeah, right."

"Eh," Buzz waves his hand at me. "That damn dog."

"Listen, go on," I say. "I think I'll go home."

"Home?" Buzz groans. "The Montana Compartments. Too many years there, dude, now you're calling them home."

A new song bursts on, a golden oldie from way back, "Twisting by the Pool," by Dire Straits. Dorothy pops the cube in her mouth, cracks it, and jerks me by the arm to my feet.

"C'mon, Dew-ball, I'll get you in the mood."

And we're on the floor, dancing, or Dorothy is. I can hardly stand. I can't find my Tums.

Dorothy isn't a bad dancer, considering she once broke her kneecap. As the story goes, she was out one night and inadvertently backed into the arms of a statue by City Hall. She wheeled and kneed it.

She grabs me tight by the wrists and won't let go. At first I think she's just trying to help me keep to my feet. She pulls me close, She's strong. Buzz, the whole table, cheer us on. I feel like a rag doll. Dorothy brushes her thigh against my crotch, lingers, and I know she knows no-

thing is happening. I'm afraid to look over at the table.

My stomach lifts, full of log pond water I'm certain, black and bitter, woodchips. I will empty it in her bosom if she'll just hold still a moment. But she must see it in my face. She lets go of me and I'm down on the floor, bumping my head. Then Buzz is over me, trying to help me up.

"Leave me alone," I snap, slapping his hand away.

"Why don't you just go and cuckoo your wife?"

He looks at me blankly, then laughs.

"Ah, buddy. What the hell would you know about marriage. C'mon."

And he tries again to help me to my feet. I shove him with all my strength. "Or go home and slap her!" He stumbles back, furious.

Gunshot--again from outside. I clutch my hands to my ears, moaning.

"Eh," Buzz waves me off with disgust and grabs Dorothy by the arm. "That goddam dog."

"You!" I cry, startling Seela who gasps and puts a hand to her throat. "Whatever you do, don't name it Van Gogh!"

And I'm on all fours again, wretching.

Why wasn't love enough?

I ask myself that as I sit at the table, Tum-less, a glass of water in my hands. Red and Donovan have gone home, Buzz and the sisters, abandoned me.



I recall Buzz being very angry, having returned for the girls after warming up his truck.

Okay, I did used to think love was salvation. Long before I was a poet. Love meant happiness, whatever the burdens of life. And then Suzanne left. I had a second chance with Susy. I don't know where it came from, my hitting her. It's something I've done once in a blue moon throughout my life. Struck out. The face I hit just happens to belong to those I care most about, but really it's not them. They just happen to be wearing the face of my hopelessness. The ones closest to me were all I had left at the moment I couldn't take it no more.

We were so happy for awhile.

I know it was self-hatred building in me. I walloped her, once. Open hand. It fits the theory, I guess. Love and pain. God, what a mess.

Suzanne, she warned me. A long time ago, that all my life, all the last twenty years would come to pass. I became what she dreaded most, a fixture, an immovable stump; a tool to destroy what I loved, what others only coveted; a sponge, soaking up painkiller.

How could she have known. She was the one screwed up. She took our dog and left me. Left Montana. Jesus, I loved Montana.

Ah, but what sort of poet would I have been otherwise?

When I shot that dog a year ago it stirred me. I awoke as from a long dream, and Susy , my wife, left me. And took

little George. I named the child after the dog Suzanne and I had that long time ago. Little George was a lot like dog George. Susy was nothing like Suzanne. Susy loved Montana, took me as I was. I thought someday we might get us a little place up in the woods somewhere. Build me a cabin, a little spread, some horses. When I hit that dog she went away. Little George, he was a good boy. She made him hop in the back seat and I never saw them again. I only ever loved her.

I'm not alone anymore. Stick is seated beside me.

"Hey, Stick," I say, carefully, wondering how long he's been there. My head throbs.

"Someone shot up Buzz's truck," he says. "Blew out the rear window. A station wagon was seen in the vicinity."

Sid. I smile. Buzz has--had--a decal on his rear window: Flatdead(his 'd' scribbled over the 'h') Indian Museum, directly beneath an old Made in Montana sticker.

And Stick amazes me. I push back my chair to eyeball him. He's buckskinned from headband to toe. A robe lies around his shoulders, his hair beyond that, braided, with an eagle feather attached.

He has another feather in his hand and gives it to me. I accept, touched, but I'm puzzled.

"Go home," he says, as if that should explain everything. I look at the feather.

"Thanks, Stick."

He smiles, lays a fingertip to his chest.

"Sun Dog."

I feel good enough for a beer.

She beckons me, arms open, trailing her long tatters. She wants me--it's been too long. She wants a big kiss.

I jerk awake in a sweat, and it's Teddy shaking me, telling me it's close up time. Thank God for Teddy. She would have nailed me again.

It must be two, the bar's empty, and it's a changed world when I get out the door Teddy locks behind me. Streets deserted, yellow lit, the snow swirling crazy. Not even plows out and already a few inches down.

My pool playing jacket has a hood sewn to it and I tie it tight over my cap, jam my hands in my pockets and head for the bridge. I see no one, ghosts or otherwise. Emptiness, real emptiness, feels safe. The blizzard makes a fair white-out, I can't see fifty feet ahead. Crazy! At the Gas-n-Grub before the bridge I pause. They've left the red neon glowing:  
Beer      Wine      Ammo

That's when I turn and stumble into the stump, snow-covered and about knee high. Stumps, everywhere in the parking lot. I kick it. A good, hard stump.

In the middle of the bridge I stop, the river invisible as the canyon, pouring with the wind that fangs me. I'soula. I reach inside for Stick's feather--Sun Dog--but it's torn from my fingers. Helplessly, I watch it fly into white no-

thingness.

I'm afraid to go home. I know she'll force her way into my head. My drink-muffled sleep. It's her kind of night. And the thought of listening to the polluted rubble fall out of the Butt depresses me. Even tonight, I imagine, they'll stay open. Especially tonight.

I don't want to sit in my chair till morning fighting her off.

Being with someone would help, and I wish now I was at that party. I wish I could save Buzz. Because it's him, it's all of us, bringing this on. It's unnatural and somebody's got to do something. We got to wake up! A bright light shines in my face, and shielding my eyes I wait, shivering.

Police. He'll just assume I'm vagrant and let me be. Underdressed on a night like this. It occurs to me what this means, and I stare as the spotlight shuts off and the car rolls away, wanting to see the face of the man who would let me die. It's my father. In the back seat behind the cage, is that dog, the one with the red collar, the one I shot, grinning at me, and I'm thinking--why would my dad bust a dead dog?

It's about a three mile walk to East Missoula, including two miles through the Hellgate along the old stripped bed of the railroad line, and I hope it's good enough I've got that grizzly bear on the back of my jacket, that there is power enough in that now that I've lost my feather. Ah,

but those bears are extinct in Montana, so maybe I'm really screwed.

I jog to keep warm. All the houses sit dark, not a single warm light from within, until I pass one with a glow behind the drapes. It must be wonderful. I stand in the snow close to the window.

Ah, Buzz was right, I've never had a real home. But I've thought about it. Ah, Jesus, it's all dreams, isn't it? Don't we all make up our lives one way or another? We live the best life we can, our last best lives.

The last few years I started thinking about her again. Suzanne. It came on sudden, after so long. I started missing her again. So I thought about it.

Jesus I wish I had a bottle.

Just before entering the canyon I pass by a foot bridge and spot someone underneath on the embankment, curled in a blanket white with snow. He could be real. He could be asleep, or worse. Warily, I edge up to him, prepared for him to fade away, and when I'm just a foot apart I kick him. He's there. Then I give him a good boot in the rear. He slides downhill a little, his feet slipping out beneath the blanket, his face turned to the snow. I jump back, but then feel something underfoot. A bottle. Cheap gin and glassy cold, and I pour what's left into me, gasping, it's so damn good. It goes right through me, like there's nothing to me. It eats the snow. I turn and run into the Hellgate Canyon.

...ain't my fault. This isn't my fault! Storm, right. This is no storm. I've held the tree bone in my white hand, asked myself--which is bone? Which is wood? I was very careful with wood. I made sure every little piece was used, even the tiniest chunk for core block, not hogged--cull before mould, cull before mould--Big Pine, chewed and burned, the whole goddam--because if we're going to cut these trees, then we'll damn well use every bit, and not because of the value to the company, but because I've wanted to see every bit of that tree put into something, and that way it still has a life--it's not in vain we--be it not said we squandered your lives....

Between the river and the mountain the land is narrow, and in places the river bank drops straight from the path, jagged rock flush on the otherside. Both the river and the mountain are mere phantoms now. I stop running. The wind snatches the air away before I can draw it into my lungs, my head feels split and cracked, my throat raw. I scoop up snow and stuff it into my mouth.

....sucked dry, I've seen Montana sucked dry, her oily blood, her golden bones, I shot her life like parasites, helped shave her skin clean. I've held the bone while the foreman explains the thousands of dollars worth of satin smooth value coming through the mould every hour, and I'm wondering--who said they could sell it? Who? Who said they could cut it? Who said they could own the land that grew it?

Who said they could cut however and wherever and whatever they wanted? And I knew at the heart of it, past the layers of time, precedent, legality, ownership, sales, lay just one Original Truth. They took it. We took it. We said so.

And Montana is just small potatoes. Look at the Earth--sweet Jesus. But then it's the small potatoes what mean the most...

I ain't going to end up that dead man. I ain't going to end up no ghost!

I walk backwards into that wind, my face a stiff mask. The whole world's thrust into deep freeze, naked and astonished. The Flatheads--what sort of dread did they feel when death and darkness was on the warpath lurking between these walls? Bones. I stop in my tracks, aware of a glow just behind me near a recess in the rock where there's a spring and huge boulders. Three people under the overhang and they've got a fire going. Vagrants, they camp out in the canyon. Their trashlined sites are everywhere.

The one crouching beckons, and as I approach I see they're Indians, a man and two women, I think, bundled in skins and robes. They've got an animal on a spit over a fire, trying to protect it from the wind. The man says something I don't understand. I come closer. It's a skinned dog they got with a dripping red collar. Jesus, these dogs!

I run til my lungs burn, squinting through wind-teared eyes. It's getting worse, these dog signs. I promise my-

self if I see a real dog I'll feed it my next meal. I'm moving slower than the Second Coming and have to stop again, the air too solid to breath. I turn around and close my eyes.

All I wanted was the American Dream. The Dewey Dream. I guess there's the Mad Dentist Dream too. It's like sex--there's wham bam and there's love. Stick said, ecology is love of land, not screwing it over. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe love is my salvation. We could have gone on and on in an endless embrace, but chose the short spurt to obliteration. The pursuit of the selfish Log.

A corpse would shiver in its goddam grave, and I'm not sure I can continue on no more, and it's right then I get a clear and certain insight, concentrating on the howl:

I'm walking into the teeth of a polar storm, just a storm. The hell with company. I'm walking the wrong way.

Caught between taking another step on a course that's possessed me, or getting the hell out of there, letting the wind fly me home, and there is Suzanne, standing in front of me.

"Dewey, you gotta get out of here."

George beside her on a leash. The red collar--I'd forgot. George too had a red collar.

"Dewey--you gotta get out of here."

She lifts an arm. I take a frozen step toward her.

"Dewey--" She's pointing behind me. I spin around and



nearly pee my pants. Maybe ten yards away--a black scrap of rag flutters toward me. Arms lift, catching the wind. Or drawing it after. I'm a face with a hole in it. When I be- hind me, Süzanne and George are gone.

She grins with a few shattered teeth. She's got pet- ticoats, lots of them, flapping thickly in the wind, and a ragged black shawl beats around her head, little bits of white hair growing through its holes. She's tiny, moves in jerks, she could be running or swept by the wind. She comes directly for me holding forth gnarly fingers.

"Snow! Snow!" she cries. "Hee-hee-hee!"

Out of the blind white she cackles and flaps, fingers curled through the tears in the end of her shawl like the little claws of a dinosaur bird. I can't move. She hooks in to me.

"Hee-hee!"

Her breath reeks of rot and medicine which I gnash down with the wind, afraid my teeth might break. I grab hold of her, feel ice, feel nothing. I don't want to die.

I hold her off with my arms, feel her with my wrists. She's tiny, yet she's got power. I'm weak as a baby. She's bones, just rags and bones, and I shut my eyes from hers. Clouded slits, they're dragon's eggs eyes. We hug each other on the river bank's brink and I curse the ancient bitch, I can't feel nothing, not the cold, the snow, the howl. I'm pressed against her breast and I think--sweet Jesus, agate-

milk witch--she ain't got no heart!

And this is the crystalline moment when I know what's the right thing to do. I know she wants us all.

I strike the side of her head, and again, but her grip won't loose up. And then I get inspiration. What would the Real Poet do? Somehow, I manage to unzip my jacket while I fend her off, watching my fingers, making them do it, and rip open the buttons of my shirt, revealing my T-shirt. My Save-the-Trees T-shirt.

She stops cackling. Her mouth twists and her grip relaxes as she eyeballs my chest, and that's when I shove her good. Screaming, she tumbles down the bank, a mass of skirts, and that evil polar witch hits the cold river and sinks like a black stone. Only once, a hand bobs up, fingers curled, and that's all.

I tremble. I feel monumental. I am free.

As I stand in the wake of what I've done, I wonder how much like my own blood that river must feel, slush and slow. But I'm at peace.

I hear voices. Shouting. More ghosts? I don't care. I'm happy. I see lights and a policeman, then Buzz, and Dorothy. They look amazed. Dorothy, she's shouting, "Grandma! Grandma!" and I turn around, my eyes dancing with the white. I'm not sure where I am, that I'm anywhere. When I hold out my hand it fades into the snow.

\* \* \* \* \*

It wasn't such a bad winter after all. Spring gushed green per usual, spilling out of her remaining buds. I watched it from my window here at Warm Springs, satisfied. The mill closed. I can see the lonely, naked mountains.

The witch is dead. The land will heal itself in a long, long time. I'm keeping everything, the beauty, here in this room with me. I'm the guardian for future generations, re-generations. My room is a forest, full of trees, wonderful trees. Animals, too. A breathtaking wild garden which I wander in bare feet, and it goes on forever, always changing. Once in awhile I find myself back at the window, and I'm saddened, but gladdened at the hope that next time we'll be better lovers--there'll be no more Real Poetry, I think, when all is in perfect order--and I'll set it free, set nature's own poetry free to recolor the world. Because for now, at least, this is the only last best place.

Though sometimes I think--why should I? Why should I ever?

## Circles

Boom, and the bells jingle for an echo of a beat, then all the dancers trickle off the basketball court. Draped across two rows of benches in the upper deck, Roy Noggle throws his head back for another deep, sucking yawn. This little girl though, she's getting on his nerves. She lets fly with her flat, rubbery hand nearer his leg.

Splat! and he glares, but she pays no attention, merely pries off the fingers of the toy--a sort of elastic, human hand fly swatter--one at a time. Her whole extended family sit to the right of her, aren't lifting a finger to govern the brat, and in fact each time someone joins the group they collectively shift toward him like a clumsily executed Wave. It brings to his mind an elephant obviously sidling as it wends its crazy way.

The repulsive Hand, once flesh-colored, is grimy, darker than the child's own skin, Roy notes. Sighing audibly, he edges yet further to the aisle.

In his thirty-nine years in Montana Roy had never been to a powwow. Long ago he once was intrigued by the Indian girls, black hair to the waist, but in four years at the university he never ventured to the Field House to inves-

tigate the source of the May drums. The unsettling chanting. Years later, on Fourth of July weekends to Flathead lake, he'd see the sign for the outdoor powwow in Arlee on the reservation, but this was completely out of the question--to set foot like a common tourist on territory not his own. Only one thing induced him to accompany his sister and nephew to this silly event this year.

"First call! Fancy dancers! Girls twelve to eighteen!"

Roy notes the announcer's ponytail. The cowboy hat.

"And hey--we got a little lost girl, goes by the name Wilma." Ponytail lowers his voice and quivers melodramatically, "Will somebody puh-leeze claim this dear child."

Roy throws a meaningful look at the girl with the hand, who is momentarily transfixed at the announcement. He silently groans as somebody settles down behind him. He won't budge an elbow.

A warm box plops on his stomach, and Dee and his nephew sit down beside him. Baby Pie has arrived.

"Check it out, Uncle Roy." Dee's eight year old son Traver cups a bronze-hued belt buckle, engraved with a weary warrior slumped on his pony. Roy is immersed with the miniature pizza.

"Damn. Damn damn."

Dee and Traver stare wide-eyed in alarm.

"I told Robert not to let Cynthia put on the sauce. Look at that--" He pats his finger in a tiny puddle of to-

mato sauce.

"She never stirs it." Roy sucks his finger. "Goddam."

Dee throws him a For-Chris'sakes-Not-Around-Traver look.

"A lot of people were lined up at the counter, in case you're interested," she sighs.

"Great," he says, begrudgingly, but inwardly Roy's excited. If sales go well at the powwow, then maybe Carlise, the owner of the Pizzaland Roy manages, will be sold on his idea to sell the personal-sized pizzas at all Field House events, and next fall at the football games. Tiny pizzas, Carlise. Concessions. You gotta be at the vanguard in business matters.

"God, you buy him that crap?" Roy snorts at Traver's belt buckle. He jabs his thumb in the direction of the sellers' tables.

"Most of that stuff's as Indian as I am. Lookit that--"

A boy wildly waves a phosphorescent sabre, beating it on the railing.

"Their kids're climbing all over like monkeys!"

"They oughta learn them to sit still once in awhile, huh?" a man behind Roy says. Roy tentatively acknowledges this by turning his chin toward one shoulder.

"They shouldn't be on those rails," the man adds.

Roy nods, seeing some little children a ways over, their arms and legs pretzled above the long drop off to

the court below.

"Yeah," he agrees. "Did you see them during that last number? Crawling around on their hands and knees, for Chris'sakes."

"They're too young to walk, Roy," Dee says.

"That's an intertribal, thay call it. All the tribe members can dance. Even the little ones."

"Yeah?" Roy twists around to look this man in the face. The man sweeps his long black hair from one side and extends his hand.

"Luke," he says. "Luke Warmwater." Roy blinks. Dee says hello and Traver stares.

"Roy," Roy says finally, deciding to shake the hand. He turns right around, sitting straight up on the bench.

"Are you enjoying the powwow?" Luke asks Dee.

"Oh, yes, very much. Our first one. I always wanted to come and, I don't know. I never did."

"Here you are!"

"Yes!" she laughs.

Roy throws his sister a hopeless glance.

"Hey, folks," Ponytail bellows. "Hey, we got us a little girl down here whose parents are lost. Pretty little Wilma. Anybody see those parents, find them over here."

"Cute," Roy says.

"At least it's not the other way around," Dee says, mussing Traver's hair. "Are you going to eat that, or were

we just spying for you?"

"Have it."

"Would you like a piece, Luke?" And Dee pretends to whisper as Luke accepts--"It's not watery."

"Okay! Before we get on with the fancy dance, we're gonna have a little exhibition. Jingle dress dancers, one call only. Get out here!"

Six girls filter onto the court from behind the lawn chairs scattered among the singing and drumming groups. Their dresses are covered with shiny bits of metal swishing like pendulums as they dance, a thick sh-sh-sh.

"Don't like that new heavy metal stuff," Luke shouts over Roy's shoulder. Dee laughs.

"How's the product?" Roy asks, as Dee and Traver wolf Baby Pie.

"Great. Still one piece."

Roy pats his stomach in a gesture of self-denial.

"Your Uncle Roy eats pizza every night," Dee says.

Roy frowns and hunches, his hands dangling between knees.

"It's all the same. The music. Dad-da-da."

"I like the singing," Dee says.

"Can't understand a word of it."

"It's not words." Then up to Luke: "Is it words?"

"Sometimes. Indian. Sometimes just sounds."

Ponytail whoops. Traver stomps his feet as he munches



the last of the pizza.

"It looked a little burned."

"Roy, will you knock it off already? Robert's taking care of everything."

"I think I'll go down there."

"Why don't you go down there." She wasn't asking him a question. "Is anything going to make you happy tonight besides perfect pizza?"

"We've been here an hour."

Dee's lips purse and she makes meaningful eyes from Traver back to Roy. He knows--this isn't for her, it's for Traver, and would he please help him have a good time? Maybe once a month, since her divorce, Dee hits on him to play surrogate father. Big Buddy.

Roy sulks until the song ends on its three predictable drum beats.

"Last call, girls' fancy dance! Last call!"

"Are we staying for the fancy dance, Uncle Roy?"

Roy nods.

"Awright." Traver grins at his mother. Roy has half a feeling the kid only asked because he enjoys watching him suffer.

"So what's Coors beer got to do with this?" Roy asks. Each girl coming out to dance has a numbered tag with a "Coors" logo on it. Dee shrugs.

"It's a contest dance," Luke explains. "Coors is the

sponser. Some do the circuit all summer and make a pretty good living. Like the rodeo."

Dee and her naivety, telling Roy this would be 'cultural'.

Ponytail stands at the mike.

"Welcome, welcome, welcome to the Kyi-Yo powwow and Indian Youth Conference. Young and old, Indian and non-Indian, all the tribes. From the visions of our grandfathers we see the path for the future of our youth. This powwow is sponsored by the University Kyi-Yo Indian Club. We thank you."

"Brought to you by--" but Dee slaps Roy's knee.

"What's 'Kyi-Yo'?" Traver asks.

Roy shrugs. "Indian for something."

"The Blackfeet word for bear." Dee points to the program.

"Cool. Kyi-Yo!" Traver bares his teeth and makes finger claws.

"Grizzly bear," Luke snarls over Traver's head. Traver smiles shyly, and whispers to his mother.

"I don't know. Luke, what does 'powwow' mean?"

"From the French. What they thought the Algonquin dances were called, only it really means medicine man, spiritual leader. Another misunderstanding."

Roy sits staring at the court.

"Okay, fancy--" Ponytail jumps a little as a man taps

his shoulder. "Hell, no, you didn't surprise me, Karl." Ponytail laughs and says in a low voice, "The last time they did that was in 1492." He gets a big laugh.

The drums begin. The girls, each a different bloom of beads, feathers, turquoise, and bright dresses, dance under the watchful eyes of the positioned judges. A singer cries one note, joined by another singer, and another, overlapping til one rises above all and they die out, leaving the drums, the dancers jingling on. The singing wells again and again, the drum cadence picks up, the dancers answering with swirling arms, kicking heels, cutting steps faster. The sudden softening of the drums anticipates the final rock hard beats, but twice it's a bluff, returning the music to the tiring dancers, and then it's over.

Luke bursts into applause.

"Okay! Good job! Walk around, walk around a bit. We'll give these ladies a breather. And remember, people--" Ponytail breaks into an Irish brogue--"tomorrow we have a little thing we call a feed. Two p.m. at the center. Everybody's welcome. Okay, let's get ready--next song!"

The sound system is plugged into the next group's amplifiers, and people crowd chairs around for the singing. Roy stifles a yawn. An Indian boy walking along the front aisle below stops to spin the wheels of his toy car on the bench. The girl with the Hand clamours down and they exchange, elastic terror for car. He swats while she spins,

then they exchange again and the girl climbs back up to her family. Growling "Vroom!" the boy spots Traver. Inwardly Roy groans. Without hesitating, the boy climbs to the bench directly below and spins the car's wheels, glancing at Traver. Traver stares.

"Oh, look at his car," Dee says.

Traver looks away at the dance floor. After awhile the boy rises and flies his car down to the rail.

When the song ends, Luke applauds deafeningly. Roy cringes and notices a male fancy dancer nearby.

"That's so fake. Some of those guys look like day-glo peacocks."

"Cool," Traver says.

"There's traditional dancers too," Dee points out.

"They kinda mix things up here, don't they?" Luke says, rising.

"Yeah, well, no offense," Roy begins, a little alarmed at Luke standing over him in full height. "It's just that-"

Luke breaks away as a woman comes up the steps accompanying one of the young girls who just danced, and who carefully makes sure her bright red dress doesn't sweep any dirt.

"I'm in!" the girl squeals, and Luke hugs her. They all sit down, murmuring, and Luke and Dee exchange introductions. Shawn, the Warmwater's radiant daughter, has made it into the dance-off with another girl.

"God, I love your dress!" Dee says. "And your belt," which is intricately beaded blue and white.

"I made that," Mary Warmwater beams.

"Ooh," Ponytail groans, breathing into the mike.

"Somebody's dropped a fea--ther."

Traver looks to Roy.

"Ask the expert."

"What's the feather about?" Dee asks.

"Anybody drops an article of clothing, they're disqualified."

"Why?"

Luke shrugs. "It's a rule."

"C'mon," Ponytail chides. "Honor system. Pick up your feather."

Shawn kisses her parents.

"I'm going to tell some friends!"

"Hey, when's the dance-off?" Luke calls after.

"Later--bye!"

"God, she looks wonderful," Dee says.

Shawn is trying to win her first fancy dance, the Warmwater's try to get to a few powwows every year to see old friends, they're from Browning, and Roy loses interest as Dee falls into gabbing about the flowers of Glacier. Yet another hawker, this one a young Indian boy selling T-shirts, tries to meet all eyes as he slowly plies the aisle.

"Can I get a T-shirt, Uncle Roy?"

"Ugh. They're monstrous."

"Can I get a blueberry pop?"

Roy sees Traver's distracted look. The kid doesn't even expect him to say yes.

"They're monstrous too," he jokes, and pulls out a dollar. Traver takes straight off down the benches. An intertribal dance begins.

Dee finishes her conversation with Mary, shouting, "I practically had to put a gun to his head to take me here!" She scoots next to Roy. "So where's my darling son off to?"

"Blue pop." He scowls. "So tell the whole world why don't you?"

"Well it's true."

"I didn't have to come along at all, did I?"

"What? And have you miss the pizza?" She pats Roy on the arm. "Roy--" she smiles, and he knows what's coming. "You know Chuck doesn't bother anymore, and Traver needs that, you know. It's not good, just me all the time."

Roy nods. Dee smiles.

"Uncle Roy. And besides, older brother, you don't get out enough. You're married--"

"Don't start."

"Well, you are. You work six nights and pine for pizza the other."

"Don't start that," he snaps. Their mother's favorite nag. It isn't enough he's a hard worker, that he's never

been a drain on her resources--without marriage, without children, he's a failure. Dee, with her lousy slime of an ex, she's a success because she gave her a grandchild.

"You ought to visit Mama sometime."

He's got a life they don't even know about. They don't even know about the woman he could have easily married. They know nothing about him anymore.

Ponytail whoops.

"Hey, folks, please keep the little ones away from the rails. Our security people will be glad to make deliveries upon request."

A man in a T-shirt with Security Person blocked on back, bends to put an arm around a small boy woven around the rails in front.

"You should've gone with him." Dee scans the exits.

As the chanting swells, some of the fancy dancers spin into dirvishes, while older couples step side by side. A man lifts a blond toddler to his shoulders and holds onto his feet while the child grasps his hair.

"A lotta whites down there."

"Anybody who's a tribal member, Mary told me. All you need for dress is a shawl or blanket." Dee puts her arm around Roy. "You, too, can dance, Roy."

He makes an incredulous frown.

"The Round Dance. Everybody's welcome, tribe or not."

"Yeah, right. I'm dying to make a fool of myself. Like

that--look at that--"

A white girl on the court, without even a shawl, sporadically lifts a leg, stomps, staring wide-eyed as she throws random arm gestures, sometimes swimlike, as if she were parting a curtain. She lifts a hand high, pointing to the lights, and brings it wiggling back down.

Laughing, Roy turns to Luke and points her out.

"What planet's she from?"

"Roy!" Dee exclaims.

"She's not a tribal member," Mary explains, glancing at Luke.

"She shows up every year," Luke says soberly. "They let her join in." He shrugs. "I don't know. I guess she don't understand."

"Well," Roy says, studying Luke's face, "I guess we didn't conquer the country by dancing, huh?" He gives his best good-natured smile, but Luke is expressionless. Roy turns around.

"Well, it's funny."

Dee jabs his thigh with her elbow.

"She's weird. But it is interesting. Maybe they'll have to kick her out."

"Maybe we should go home. And where the hell's Traver?"

"Ah," Roy waves his hand, "He's been to a dozen ball games, he gets his own pop. What's the big deal?"

"What's the big deal?" Dee's voice pitches, drawing Roy



from the girl. "I guess you wouldn't know, would you Roy? Because you don't have any big deals, do you? Just you-- big little deal."

The chanting swells, the girl bends and dips, flutters her hands, scoops something from the air and for a moment freezes, staring straight up, Roy's certain, at him. He blinks, straining to see if she's really looking at him, when his view is blocked by a group of blue and black clad teens lounging against the rail.

"Down in front!" They ignore him, or can't hear him.

"Down in front!" he screams, and a security person nearby speaks to them. Langorously, they push themselves straight and move on. One of them meets Roy's eyes.

The girl--somebody's given her a shawl.

Dee jumps up. Roy catches her arm.

"All right. I'll get him."

Dee looks hard at him, then sits down.

The song climaxes while Roy makes his way toward the sellers' tables.

"Okay!" Ponytail cries. "We're going to take a little break. Get a little serious. In a moment, Fred is going to lead us all in a prayer. Where is Fred? We ask that you all please stand. A prayer for the future of our people. Of all people. And then we'll have the Indian National Anthem."

Roy can't stand it. Now it's church. Now it's a ball-game.

"And we're going to have a give-away, too. Somebody wants to have a little honor give-away."

He just wants to get away. He swarms through the clog of humanity at the tables, everything here but blacklight posters of pop stars, and then sees the velvet hangings, sees Elvis. Trinkets enough to buy Manhattan Island again.. Tape cassettes of powwow hits, oh spare him.

"O' Great Spirit..."

A bad mall--

A child pukes to the floor over its mother's shoulder in front of Roy, who almost slips in it.

A mad daycare--

"Bless the singers, bless the dancers, bless..."

--diet Cokes, rubber hands, lawnchairs on the basketball court--not the new one, they folded that up and left them the knotty, dark with age floor--plastic peacocks and Coors--

"Let me walk in beauty, make me wise..."

He meets the eyes of a weathered-face old woman sitting behind a fold-up table laid with beautiful turquoise rings and bracelets. She smiles at him, doesn't stir her rattlesnake skin hands from her lap.

Well then he just feels sorry for them. It's so mixed up. What does anybody know here?

"And now the Indian National Anthem. Please remain--..."  
C'mere, you." Roy looks down at Ponytail who's patting the little lost girl. "C'mere, honey. Little Wilma is going to

sing with me."

He's more than work. They don't know.

Roy bounces down the steps to the main floor of concessions. People throng, lined up buying under-dyed hot dogs, ketchup-drenched fries, pink snow cones, and he's seen it a million times, wads of kids, couples holding hands, women pushing baby carriages, men carrying kids, and he recognizes he's comfortable here, for the first time tonight he doesn't feel the strangeness, the strangeness. Clothes, hair, skin, it's still people he understands, doing what he understands. Behaving and spending their dough like the fair in the summer. We're all suckers for a cheap good time, a warmish, vanilla soft ice cream sort of time.

Roy smiles warmly. Business is good, very good. There, Dee--he smiles--and it's more than that. It's business of life, people together, having their vanilla good time. It's not just him--look at their faces.

There's another one with a Baby Pie, and Roy fights the urge to check on Robert. Everyone loves pizza. It's a common bond.

He'll find Traver first.

"Hey-a! Thank you Cathedral Lakes Singers!" Ponytail booms onto the concourse. "And translating for you not familiar with the Blackfoot tongue, it goes: 'Hold me with your bony arms, kiss me with your scabby lips.' Hey, I'm Salish."

Big laugh, and letting out a sigh, Roy too laughs. He scans the crowd. If the kid went outside he'll catch hell from his mother. Kick his butt good. He's never done that himself, never punished Traver. He can't remember Traver ever having done anything particularly worth punishment, but then he really isn't around the kid all that much. But he shouldn't worry his mother like this.

"Sister! Sister!"

A little girl runs past, crying out to catch up to someone ahead. Roy's noticed that, funny, how so many of their little children call other kids sister or brother. It-

"Sister!"

--reminds him of the Mormons.

"Seester-seester!" mocks another little voice, a boy imitating the girl. Three small boys pass Roy, laughing, and he's vaguely annoyed. The girl looks back once, quizzically, as she runs in and out through the crowd.

"Seee--ster!"

Roy clamps his hand down firmly on Traver's shoulder, stopping him cold. Traver spins around astonished with his laughing mouth still open.

"Say goodbye to your friends."

"I--hi! Uncle Roy--"

"Say goodbye, Traver."

Traver hesitates, trying to regain a look of confidence. Roy glares at the other boys.

"We'll see you, Trav," one says.

"C,mon," Roy says, guiding Traver toward the stairs. Traver is led for a few steps and jerks away.

"You're not my dad."

Roy looks at Traver, the defiance, and he doesn't know what to do. It's an accusation, a rejection, but he thinks too it's a plea. He doesn't know if he should smack his behind or hug him. He doesn't know what Traver needs.

"Go on," Roy says, but Traver is already backing up the stairs. "I'm going to check on Robert." Traver is running up the steps. "Go to your mother."

Roy shoves through the glass door, immersed in cool night air. Mountain air running down like water. People push past, wander the parking lot thick with pickups, buses, R.V.s, laughing and drinking their parking lot beers. No alcohol inside at a powwow. He presses at the bulge of vein swelling at his temple and finds himself staring at a girl in a red dress, all her beautiful feathers and beads, sitting on a stone ledge dragging on a cigarette. She returns his stare blankly, a challenge.

He wanders toward campus.

Everything whole is broken. Everything is degrees of solitary, and he knows flat solitary. He knows.

The belt! He turns, but she's gone.

He wants to run from here, but not like before. He's not bored. On the campus he feels an old security settling

over him.

Teenagers with a ghettoblaster cranked near distortion sit on the hood of a pickup in the dark outer fringe of the lot, passing around smokes and sipping beers, laughing as Roy passes. Another knot sits on the dimly lit steps of the far end of the Field House, stereo roaring, and as Roy passes under a lamp between these camps, the noises cut through each other like dogs fighting. He hurries onto the wet grass and the soothing dark. The second knot falls silent and unravels.

Something monstrous. Something monstrous about our children.

Beneath the tall trees among buildings he is free, and not near yet to any of the dorms. Perhaps he should make sure Traver made it straight back to Dee, but he can't just yet. Shadows rise along a wall. A young couple on their way to the Field House, holding hands across the green. Here in the dark, the cool night, business is bad. Just a few stragglers, no one interested. Roy hungrily sucks in the air.

The little girl, Wilma--God, how could they?

By rounding the next building he can circle back to the Field House. Or even go straight on home. As he cuts the corner and sees him, he knows he's been waiting.

"Down in front," the boy says quietly.

"You got a light, hey?" Another boy behind him says

this, breathing down Roy's neck. One other moves to Roy's side. The brick wall completes the cell.

"No," Roy says. "No."

The one in front, Long Hair, snaps his fingers, and Breather hands something over Roy's shoulder. Long Hair lights a cigarette cupped to his mouth, holds the flame a moment to illuminate his shirt with its absurdly grotesque logo: Mega Death.

"No," Roy says, but has to stifle an urge to laugh.

Long Hair snaps his fingers again and the third boy turns his back to Roy. The lighter reveals on the back of the boy's leather jacket a screaming hand-tooled skull with orange flames leaping from its top. Another secret, another inner glimpse of the society, like intimate parting knowledge, Roy thinks, when it's revealing doesn't matter anymore.

"We're the Burning Hairs, hey."

The light dies and Roy is backed up against the wall. The dark feels so pure.

The third boy locks his hand on Roy's shoulder. Breather fingers his hair, grabbing it just as Roy tries to flinch free. The three breath a wet, nicotine fog around him. Long Hair's lighter illuminates Roy's face.

"Short hairs," Long Hair elucidates, and Breather's fist twists tightly. Roy's about to huff at the light, ready to explode his fists, when Long Hair's hand is at Roy's

crotch yanking down the zipper. Gasping, Roy's hands jerk to his pants and the light goes out. He feels the lighter fall down the front of his shirt. The three back away.

"Stay cool, hey,"

"You got light now."

They walk away with low laughs, and Roy slumps against the wall, shaking. His zipper is stuck on his shirt tail.

Whoop! jing jing jing, the arena is a an ear pulsing with blood, a heart throbbing with bodies. A circle has formed, it began as a line of people moving side by side, stepping one-two sideways, and as they reached the first corner of the basketball court the line curved, growing until the first in line met where the line ended and people squeezed in tight to make room until the circle became a vortex spiraling in.

Jing jing, each body a drum, a blood coursing vessel throb jing jing, and the circle grew; each newcomer began at the head, mirroring the dancers in reverse in slightly faster step, going down the line shaking hands until reaching the end and becoming part of the circle; an expanding double helix in parts, as if one had to have certain knowledge transmitted before joining the whole.

Whoop!

The announcer leaves the microphone and joins the Round Dance leading little Wilma by the hand, and they shake



many hands, becoming with the circle. There are the fancy dancers, the traditional dancers, couples in street clothes, there is the blond child grabbing his father's hair, there are old men and old women straggling down from the stands. There's the strange white girl shaking hands, wriggling her hand. There is a man stumbling through the entrance by the announcer's table, standing a moment dazed, panting to catch his breath. Now he's in line, shaking hands.

Jing jing jing THROB THROB

He's waving. Come on down! He's dancing, waving. There are Dee and Traver, Dee's mouth open, Traver pointing. There is Luke, stunned. There is the girl with the Hand, she doesn't see him. She's put down the Hand and is laughing, standing on the bench above the dance. She is putting her two hands together.