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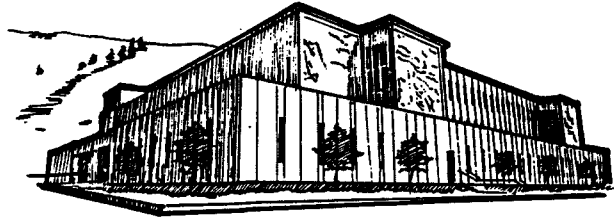
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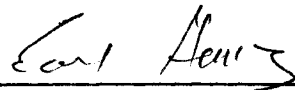
**CROW SONG**  
**NEW AND SELECTED STORIES**

by  
John Craig Baken

B.A., University of Montana, 1980

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

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Nov. 26, 1990  
Date

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**CROW SONG  
NEW AND SELECTED STORIES**

**CONTENTS**

Sylvan Lake	1
Etta	11
Shane Creek	20
Ice Caves	31
Dead On Arrival	48
The Wyoming Men	56
Barbecue	61
Guard Dogs	75
Tunnel Vision	95
Crow Song	117

## SYLVAN LAKE

Warner and Susan ducked their heads into the wind as they made their way up the trail. The stiff breeze continued pressing down on them. Warner kicked at the loose rocks on the trail and startled Susan when he came up beside her.

"Is it worth it?" he asked. His voice was raised against the swollen breeze.

"Damn it. You scared me to death!" Susan shouted and pulled her cap down so she had to raise her head to see Warner clearly. "It'll be worth it--if it's anything like last year."

Susan remembered the year before. Sylvan was high then. The fishing wasn't good but things with Warner had

been. It stopped there though. The year in Minneapolis had been difficult. Things weren't the same as they'd been at the lake.

"How much further?" she asked.

"Couple miles."

The trail levelled off. They walked into the glade of evergreens. The open space marked the vortex of the upward journey. All that remained was the two-mile jaunt to the edge of Sylvan.

"What's that?" Susan asked behind Warner. Warner slowed and then stopped, not answering her. Ahead, about fifty yards, sat a man beside the trail, knees propped up, his back against the trunk of a small aspen.

Warner and Susan stopped in the trail. They let their packs fall into the hooks of their arms. Set on the ground, the packs looked like giant sea turtles stranded on their backs.

"Let's rest," Warner said sitting awkwardly against a sharp pinkish outcrop.

"What do you suppose he's doing?"

"He appears to be resting, like us."

"But he doesn't have a pack." Then Susan spied his tent against the dense wall of trees and pointed.

"It's green."

"Camouflaged."



The wind rose again for an instant then died just as suddenly. The couple helped each other on with their packs and started out again. The man looked up as they approached.

"You okay?" Warner asked as he strode by, Susan a few feet behind.

"You okay?" the man on the ground mocked, then he stood and Susan could see his pants. He walked towards Warner with his hand extended.

Warner backed up then grabbed his hand to shake.

"Where ya headed?"

"Where ya headed?" the man mocked again, his voice quavering in a falsetto. Then he bore down with his grip, and Warner pulled back quickly.

"That's enough, mister," he said and turned his back to him. He marched quickly away with Susan following. The man was laughing at his back.

"Did you have to shake his hand?" Susan asked after they walked several hundred feet.

"Susan. Please!"

"Well, Jesus Christ, Warner."

"It's habit, okay. Is that what you want to hear?"

Warner kept his head down, pressing on.

Once they got to the lake, Susan looked back down the trail. Warner was still ahead of her. She stopped and

peered into the dark forms of the trees' shadows.

"Susan?"

"Coming," she said. Susan walked in front of Warner, off the trail then back on, as he stood waiting for her.

"Let's go to the other side this time," she suggested.

Warner continued to glance back until they were well out of sight of the man. Then the trail wound down closer to the lake. The sound of the mountain water lapping against the sandy shore intermingled with the steady sandy squash of their footsteps.

Warner and Susan set up camp on the opposite shore of the lake from where they had seen the man. Undulations of water lapped the granite rocks along the shoreline. The couple sat across from each other, a blazing campfire between them, the logs stacked like a funeral pyre.

"What a bastard," Warner said shaking his head. "Did you get a whiff of his breath?"

"No, but did you see his pants?"

"He wet himself," Warner laughed nervously. Susan detected his uneasiness. He fed the campfire more wood then stirred at the coals underneath the larger pine tree trunks he'd thrown on. Darkness came quickly, and they ate a cold supper from their backpacks in silence.

"Warner, why am I nervous about him?"

"C'mon, let's not talk about him."

"He scares me."

"Susan, we're here for us."

"But what if he..."

"Look. He was drunk. That's all."

"Did you have to shake his fucking hand?"

"Susan, stop! We're here for us."

Susan knew why they'd come. She also knew that simply recreating the scenario of a year ago wasn't the answer. She'd realized over the course of the past year that she really didn't know Warner. The past year had showed her his true colors. He wasn't married to her. He was married to the firm, replete with its myriad responsibilities, meetings, deadlines. It would have been okay if he'd had an affair with all that--an arcane affair which he left at the office, but it wasn't.

"What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing."

"You have to be thinking about something."

"I'm thinking I want to go to bed."

"We have to wait for the fire to burn down."

"Did you have to build it up so much?"

"What's the matter?"

"Just tired I guess."

Warner poked at the fire with the stick and stared into the flames.

"I'm going to the tent, Warner."

"Can't you wait?"

"I want to read."

In the tent, Susan tied the flashlight so it hung above her from the flap string which opened the mosquito netting air vent. She fluffed the bag, undressed, and crawled in. The bag was cold, but her body heat warmed it quickly. She opened the book but couldn't make herself read. She remembered back. Was he so driven then? She'd let the Sylvan Lake trip sweep her. He was driven all right, she decided, but now she pieced it together. A home support for his true ambition. Like his father. She shut the book without reading a word. She turned off the flashlight, leaving it dangling from the vent string.

"You asleep?" Warner whispered.

What?" Susan said, heavy-voiced.

"I thought so," Warner said and slipped in beside her. He undressed lying down.

"Fire out?" she asked clearing her throat.

"One of them is," he said, still whispering.

"What?"

"I said, 'one of them ..'"

"Okay, I get it."

Warner ran his hand along the length of her down bag. She felt his hand slide along her thigh, then up, until he felt the roundness of her breast. He stopped, caressing gently.

"Warner?"

"What?" He continued the soft squeezing, searching through the thickness of the down for her nipple.

"Tell me the truth. Do you love me?"

Warner found the nipple, a hard bump beneath the minus forty degree goose down bag they'd purchased together.

"Yes," he said. She lay still as he slowly unzipped the bag. It was as if he could see in the black darkness which enveloped them inside the tent. Susan kept her eyes closed as she felt his nakedness come against her. His chill made her nipples harden.

They skirted the edge of the lake on their way back. The water from the lake was still wet on their faces and hair, and Warner squeezed Susan's hand. The song birds were up early, like them, but none of it really mattered. For a while Susan thought it might. She played along. She was still playing along, holding her man's hand. Fine for the moment, but it wasn't true. Susan released her grip. They walked singularly over rocks, carefully

negotiating each step across West Branch Creek. The water was low. She remembered tracking well upstream last year to find a crossing place.

"Remember how high this creek was last year?" Warner said stepping cautiously from one boulder to the next. Susan stood on the bank, waiting.

"Yeah, I remember." It wasn't going to work though. Susan found herself criticizing his stiff walk, his queer mannerisms she'd never noticed before they were married. What a fool I've been.

The sun was well up when they came around the bend where they'd seen the man. Warner caught up to Susan.

"Do you think he'll still be here?"

"I don't know."

"Whatever you do, don't shake his hand."

"That's not fair, Susan."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"No you're not."

He was there. At least his camouflage tent was. Then they spotted him. He looked, at first, like he was washing himself in the lake. The water lapped up onto his shoulders--his head and arms covered by the deep-blue water of Sylvan.

"Warner, do you think.." But Warner was gone, that fast. He rushed upon the man pulling him from the lake.

The wrists had been cut, deep. Dark blue incisions marked the failing blood flow. Warner dragged the limp body onto the snake grass bank. He called for Susan. She stood watching from the trail, her hands still grasping at the air.

When Susan reached Warner, he was forcefully trying to revive the man. His hands, clenched together in a large singular fist, pressed the man's chest repeatedly. Susan stood by Warner, finally putting her hand on his shoulder. Warner continued his CPR efforts, but the man flopped about lifeless, the whites of his eyes staring from dead sockets.

"Warner, he's gone. Dead."

He didn't seem to hear her. He continued driving the man's chest into the ground.

"One, two, three," he chanted under his breath, "one, two, three," but the intended results would not come. Finally, he stopped, looking up at Susan. She had both hands on his shoulders, tugging at his denim shirt, crying.

"Stop, Warner. Stop. He's gone!"

"Okay," Warner said finally. He sat back on his haunches, and Susan knelt down hugging his back. Sweat drenched his shirt, and Susan dug her nose inbetween his shoulder blades. She hugged him tight until he reached behind and cradled her back with his trembling hand.

"It's okay, now," he said.

They reported the body to the Forest Service first. Then Warner deposited more coins and contacted the Sheriff's Department. Warner and Susan waited at the small-town bar until they arrived, then took them to the scene that afternoon. They reached the tarped body and Warner lifted the blue plastic for the authorities. After their statement, Warner and Susan hiked briskly back to the trailhead, using a flashlight the last mile to the vehicle.

In the Grizzly, Warner ordered another shot for both of them. His movements seemed forceful, self-assured, deft. Susan found herself strangely attracted to his zany affectations toward manliness. Somehow they were working.



## ETTA

Me and Benjamin Bruised Head were just leaving the Northern when we noticed her. I thought she was just another hooker, but Benjamin said to wait. He walked over to her, but she turned her back and started walking down 27th Street, toward the tracks. He yelled at her to wait, and she stopped. I figured she must have recognized us, and that was why she was going away so fast. It was Lester Yellow Kidney's little sister, Etta. She'd been missing a couple months, and I remembered when her mother, Iris, about went crazy when she first came up missing. She posted pieces of paper on all the light poles in Crow Agency and even went from door to door asking if anybody had seen her little girl.

Etta was just sixteen, but I have to admit she looked older. When I saw her up close, I hardly recognized her. She had her hair in little ringlets, hanging down on her

leather coat which was long and shiny. I couldn't tell what she had on under the coat, but it must have been a pretty short skirt cause most of her legs were showing.

Benjamin was cussing her out in Crow and had a hold of her arm. She just looked at the street and didn't say nothing. Her eyes were big and reminded me of a deer's eyes except that hers had purple eye shadow on them. Benjamin grew up next door to Etta and her family so he was like an older brother to her. I stepped in when he grabbed her with his other hand and started to shake her. He was about half in the bag anyway and didn't realize he was hurting her. He glared at me but then let her go. It was cold out, and I could see his breath when he spoke.

"Dirty filthy whore bitch," he said in English. All this time Etta hadn't said nothing and just looked down at the sidewalk. She tried to walk away from us when Benjamin let go of her arms, but I took her arm real easy like, and she didn't fight me.

"C'mon," I said, "we got to go talk." It was about seven in the evening, and me and Benjamin had just been in the Northern Hotel to take a piss and warm up. We'd been drinking in the Mint, across the street and were headed for the Gilded Lily. It must have been below zero cause we were just starting to warm up in front of a

heater next to the street entrance when a doorman in a little red coat with gold buttons told us we had to leave. Benjamin told him we were "paying customers," but when we saw a larger version of the doorman coming towards us from the restaurant, we left anyway. "We'll take our business elsewhere," Benjamin threatened as we hustled out into the cold.

The waitress stood at our table after she brought the coffee like she wanted the money right now. I dug in my front pocket and found a five dollar bill and gave it to her. While we were waiting for the change, Etta began to tell us her story. She explained how she had come to Billings one weekend with her friends Mona Little Bear and Louise Bull Child. They were out at the mall, just walking around, when a black man came up to them. His name was Rollie, and he told Etta how pretty she was and made her feel real good. Then he asked her if he could talk to her alone for a minute. Etta asked Mona and Louise to meet her at the Orange Julius stand in a few minutes. She told how at first she was afraid, but the more the man talked to her, the more she felt okay. He kept telling her how attractive she was and that he could help her out. Then he told her that she could make a lot of money just by going out with a couple friends of his.

Etta's voice got real soft then, and she took a couple sips from her hot coffee. Then she said how Rollie told her she wouldn't even have to do nothing but go to a party and make about a hundred dollars for each one she went to. He told her that he ran a "dating service" and that rich businessmen from out of town paid big bucks just to have someone pretty to go out with. He said there was no pressure to do nothing.

Etta put her hands over her face and began to cry, and Benjamin and I pretty much put two and two together. We both knew that Etta's father, Myron, pissed away all their money on booze. Lots of Indians did, even Benjamin Bruised Head and me, but at least we didn't have families to support. Etta was the second oldest, next to Lester, of about six or seven children. They never had nothing like good clothes to go to school in or money to buy stuff with.

She started to tell us the rest, but Benjamin stopped her. He poured us more coffee from the pitcher the waitress had brought us, and we drank in silence for a while. I could tell Benjamin was thinking cause he always got real quiet when he was thinking.

After a while, Benjamin came up with a plan. It wasn't much of one, just to return Etta to her family in Crow Agency, but Etta said it wasn't that simple. She said

that Rollie would come for her because he told her so. Once she found out what she was expected to do, she tried leaving she said. She had gone to all the bars on the South side, and when she finally found Charlie Running Wolf, she asked him for a ride home. But Rollie had caught her, helping Charlie out of the Wheel Inn, and he beat her up. That's when he told her if she ever tried leaving again, he'd kill her.

"Why did he do that?" I asked, "Don't he want you to see your family no more?"

"I don't know, Marvin," she told me and held her hands up to her face again. I put my hand on hers and brought them back to the table. I wiped a couple tears from her cheek with the back of my hand.

"He takes most of the money I make," she explained. Then she told us how he controls lots of girls. Most of the girls we see walking down Montana Avenue work for him, and he takes their money too.

"I'll kill the son of a bitch," Benjamin said finally. He'd been squeezing a napkin in his hand. He threw it onto the table and stood up.

"C'mon, let's go," he said, "we gotta get Etta back to Crow. Then," he emphasized, shaking his finger in the air, "then, we'll take care of this other guy." Etta continued to sit in the booth until I grabbed her arm and

helped her up. Then she just looked down and shook her head.

"It ain't gonna work, Marvin," she told me, but Benjamin was already across the street, and we had to hurry to catch up to him.

Benjamin had the Mercury all warmed up by the time we crossed the tracks and found the car behind the Tampico Café. He always parked there cause his plates were too old and weren't legal anymore. Etta was real nervous and mostly kept her head down, especially when a car drove by. But the way she was dressed, I didn't figure it would take a genius to figure out who or what she was.

It was pretty late by the time we got Etta home, and Iris was real happy to see her little girl. Lester was happy to see her too, but Etta wouldn't let herself be hugged. She just cried and ran into the back of the house where the bedrooms were. The other kids stood up and swarmed around Etta when we first got there, but once she ran back to her bedroom, they went back to the glare of the black and white TV set. I think Etta was ashamed to let her mother see her dressed like that because before Benjamin Bruised Head and me left, I saw her coming out from the back just wearing a tee shirt and a pair of jeans. Her hair was wet and straight again, and she had

washed the eye shadow off her eyes. She looked like the girl I used to know. She followed Benjamin and me out to the Mercury, and even though it was freezing cold, she stood out there and hugged both Benjamin and me before she would let us go. Benjamin told her not to worry about Rollie, but I know she was still afraid. She told us to be careful because Rollie was a dangerous man.

The wind off the prairie to the East had picked up, and before I got in, Etta came over to my side of the car. I thought she just wanted to hug me again, but when she did, she stood on her toes and whispered something in my ear. Her hair was frozen when I took my hand off her back, and she ran back to the house. As we pulled out, we saw Myron's blue Chevrolet coming down the lane towards us. We didn't stop to talk--we figured he was drunk anyway. Besides, Benjamin wanted to get back to Billings.

It was about two weeks later that I heard about it. I had just come out of Job Service where I was looking for day work. It had just snowed again, and I thought maybe somebody would need their driveway shoveled or something. There wasn't any work though so I was walking back towards the Oasis when I recognized Myron Yellow Kidney's blue Chevrolet pull up beside me. Inside was Lester and

Etta in the front seat and Louise Bull Child and Mona Little Bear in the back. I smiled and waved at them, but they didn't smile back, and I knew something was wrong.

They showed me the Billings Gazette article that said Benjamin Bruised Head was dead. He was killed when he ran from the police. The article said he was a "probable suspect" in the slaying of Rollie Smith who was found with his throat slit next to the tracks, but we all knew he did it.

Etta held my hand while I read the article, and I began squeezing it tight when I remembered what she'd whispered in my ear that night. I'd forgotten about it after we left her place, but now I remembered it exactly.

We drove around Billings, none of us saying much, and the more I thought about what Etta told me, the more I thought I couldn't have done nothing anyway. She told me that Benjamin was in love with her. He had been ever since she was a little girl, and she asked me to watch him to make sure he didn't do nothing stupid.

We drove around a while longer, and then Lester said he had to return the car to his father in the Gilded Lily. We all went in and sat at a big table with Myron Yellow Kidney and Charlie Running Wolf. Myron bought us all a beer, and we had a toast to Benjamin Bruised Head. The girls were given a beer too, even though they weren't old



enough, and when I clanked my bottle with Etta's, I saw the tears welling up in her eyes. Underneath the table, I squeezed her other hand and tried to smile at her.

## SHANE CREEK

Calhoun came to the Circle J several years before Richard. He knew the stuff on the ranch. The two men rode south. It was apparent they were in for some rain. Two heifers had jumped a fence so J.O. sent Calhoun and Richard out to put them back where they belonged. The two men loped up the sagebrush hillside directly to the south of the ranch. Once out of sight, Calhoun slowed to a trot until Richard caught up. He reined his horse over by Richard. They slowed to a walk, and Calhoun reached in his shirt pocket for a cigarette.

"Let's stop for a minute," Calhoun said and swung his right leg up over the saddle horn. He shifted his weight and got comfortable. He took a long drag from his cigarette and smiled at Richard. "No sense killing

ourselves if we don't have to," he said, then added, "that rain'll be on us within the hour. And with this sagebrush for cover it'll be like a cow pissin' on a flat rock." He laughed nervously and eyed the approaching clouds. Richard looked up at the impending storm.

"I don't know why J.O. would send us out on a wild goose chase with that front coming in. Heifers will be wild in the rain, won't they Calhoun?"

Calhoun nodded his head.

"That's just J.O." He took another long drag from the cigarette. "He likes to see you work your ass off. Never shut down. Days of the week don't matter. Weather don't matter. Holidays don't matter." He gazed off at the clouds again. "Nothin' matters to that son-of-a-bitch." He affected an animosity that Richard hadn't witnessed before. He never heard him bad-mouth J.O. before.

"He'd keep men longer if he treated them right," Richard agreed, spurring his horse to catch Calhoun who'd nudged his big bay up the coulee. The men rode steadily up the hills and down the coulees and finally up a big hog-back to a fence that bordered the neighbor's pasture. Calhoun stopped his horse at the fence and waited for Richard again. "Shit," Calhoun said as Richard came up beside him.

"What's the matter?" Richard asked.

"I think we're going to have to lay this fence down. The nearest gate is damn near a mile from here."

Calhoun got off his horse and from his saddlebag pulled out a pair of fencing pliers. He removed staples from about ten posts then uprooted a steel fence post that wasn't set deep. He set the post against the four loose strands of barbed wire and stood down hard against the fence. The wires nearly met the ground but were still too tight so Calhoun backed off the steel post and began to pull more staples. The clouds continued to bunch up and murmurs of thunder boiled down the canyon as the cloud bank broke through the mountains.

"Let me help you," Richard offered. He was holding the reins of Calhoun's horse, but he swung down from the black horse and tied them both to a big sprig of sagebrush. Then he walked over to Calhoun. Calhoun didn't look up. He continued to pull staples from the twisted cedar posts. Intermittent steel posts had wire brads to be removed, and Richard went to one and started to pry against the clip, working the heavy wire against his leather-gloved hand, then from the post.

"I'd rather you didn't do that," Calhoun said. He still didn't look up from his pliers. "There's just one pair of these things, and I got 'em. I'll be done in a minute so just hold your horses. Besides, if a bolt of

that lightning decides to hit this fence, I'd rather just one of us ends up fried."

Calhoun stood solidly on the wires of the fence, and it lay flat for about four feet to either side of his feet.

"Bring the horses now. Slow."

Richard walked the horses, leading them by their reins, over the laid-down wire. Once past, Calhoun quickly tacked the fence back together, leaving some of the strands unfastened but cattle-tight. The raindrops began to blow in, some as big as quarters, and he and Richard hurried on. They rode the backside of the big hill, and the rain began coming down harder. They unrolled their slickers on the lope and put them on as they panned the hillsides for the black cows.

They found the heifers in the coulee, two drainages south. Wild in the rain and thunder, they were as Richard guessed. Calhoun and Richard raced their horses up and down the gulleys, hollering and swinging their rolled-up lariats at the air.

The Angus yearlings ran like they were possessed. Richard continued to gallop his horse through the sagebrush to turn the heifers, only to have them leap a coulee like a goat or spin on their heels and high-tail it the other direction. He was about to give up when he

saw Calhoun riding towards him, the rain running down the crease of his sweat-stained hat. He had a strange grin on his leathery face.

"Let's go for cover over there." He pointed to a cluster of cottonwoods in the bottom of the ravine. Richard nodded, and they rode at a gallop for the trees. Underneath the heavy leaves was a clump of grass where the ground was somewhat dry. Calhoun eased himself off his horse and led the horse under the tree. He lit another cigarette and sat down with his back to the trunk. Richard stayed on his horse for a while under the large branches, looking out at the storm. The thunder cracked above them, and they both cringed at the suddenness of the loud clap.

"You going to stay on that horse with all this lightning popping?"

"Oh shit," Richard said. He quickly hopped down from his mount.

Richard pulled his black horse into the enclosure and tied him next to Calhoun's big bay. He left the reins slack so his horse could vie for what little grass there was between the big trunks of the cottonwoods. The horses seemed hungry and nervous, their ears pricked forward, their movements jerky and anxious.

Calhoun flicked his cigarette butt into the wind. It

blew another twelve feet and disappeared against the rain-splattered landscape. He lit another and hunkered down on the lee side of the largest trunk. He had come to Montana exactly ten years ago--to the day. He'd kept track. He got the job with the Circle J while sitting at the Rapelje Bar. J.O. bought Calhoun drinks, and they talked about horses then the job. If Calhoun had known how the Circle J went through men, he'd never have signed on. He was new and needed the job. At the time, eight hundred a month and all the beef he and his family could eat sounded good. What he hadn't figured on were the twelve or fifteen hour days. They worked Sundays and holidays too if they were calving, haying, or lambing. He remembered how kind J.O. seemed in the bar, remembering the feeling of ease he'd felt right away. It had been like a weight removed from his back. He felt free like the wind. He'd drunk too much that night, and once his family moved into the cramped quarters J.O. called the "lower ranch," he'd reconsidered, but then it was too late.

"How long you been with Jacoby?" Richard asked as if he read Calhoun's thoughts.

"Ten years now, this summer." He grinned a strange smile. The lines in his face seemed more pronounced. He squinted his eyes, looking towards the bruised sky. I

wouldn't if I had it to do over again," he added. The rain continued to fall, accompanied by deep rumbles of thunder directly overhead. A gulley wash of water had begun to boil down the canyon, and a small stream flowed noisily past the two men.

"We gonna get them heifers?" Another blast of lightning cracked in the trees right above them, and Calhoun's horse whinnied, pulling against the reins.

"Banker!" Calhoun yelled and rose to his feet. He jerked the reins and Banker settled down. He untied his horse and swung back up onto Banker. He stood up in his stirrups. He trotted out of the enclave of trees and looked into the heart of the storm. The Crazy Mountain range lay twenty miles to the west, and the black clouds hung so low Calhoun could see no sign of the storm letting up. With the wave of Calhoun's arm, Richard realized he meant to go back without the heifers. Richard sunk his chin into his chest and prodded Stoney in the ribs with his spurs. Stoney loped mechanically, and the next time Richard looked up he was even with Calhoun. The dark clouds pelted down rain. Richard could feel the water starting to puddle in the bottoms of his boots.

When they got to the county road on Shane Creek, they walked the horses. The rain let up some, and the horses



were well-lathered. They stopped in the middle of Shane Creek which was dark with silt and now flowing considerably higher. They let the horses drink. They drank deeply in long draughts. Richard and Calhoun sat holding onto the short ends of the reins and exchanged a look of weariness. Calhoun shook his head.

"Ain't it the shits?"

Richard nodded. He saw Calhoun shudder and look away. He kicked Stoney to try to catch Calhoun again who had unexpectedly urged Banker into a quick gallop towards the ranch.

Richard didn't catch him, but he got close when they were about a half mile from the ranch. Richard wondered why Calhoun was in such a hurry, then he noticed Calhoun slumping over Banker's neck. His shoulders were shaking. Richard wondered if he was crying. He finally rode up alongside him and looked under his hat and into Calhoun's face. Calhoun looked at Richard through glassy eyes.

"She left me, Rich." He managed to say. "Just this morning. Said she couldn't take these hours no more."

The storm began to pick up again, and Richard noticed the stream of water slowly dripping from Calhoun's creased cowboy hat.

"She said it don't matter. She was going to leave

anyway. She said she had to go. 'It's over,' was the way she said it. Said she just couldn't take it no more."

"What about Rebecca?" "

"Her too. They left just after six this morning. Packed up the car and just took off. Didn't even tell me where they was going." Calhoun continued to ride slumped over. Then he straightened himself and looked over the rain-washed country around him. "We better get back. J.O.'s going to be pissed we didn't get them heifers." He spurred Banker hard and rode off towards the house on a gallop. Richard followed on a lope, and within a few minutes they were trotting down the lane. For the first time since they had started, the rain suddenly quit, and the sun peeked out behind the dark cumulus clouds. Richard rode down the right side of the lane and felt the sun on his face. He squinted his eyes and looked over to Calhoun. Calhoun rode in the shadow of the house and trees. His back was hunched up again, and he kept his head down.

J.O. Jacoby was at the front door of the house when they turned the corner of the lane.

"Did you put them back with ours?" he yelled from the doorway. His large frame filled the door jamb, and his voice shattered the calm of the late afternoon.

"You bet, J.O., we got 'em back in with ours. They were a little hard to steer in the rain, but Richard and me got 'em in. Didn't we, Richard?"

"You bet," Richard lied, wondering what Calhoun was up to. "We got 'em in all right. But Calhoun's right, they were rangy as hell."

"Good," J.O. said, "now I got another project for you two. At six I got a new man and his wife moving into the lower ranch. You'll move into the bunkhouse out here, Calhoun. Why didn't you tell me she left, anyway? I found out in town this afternoon. Anyway, they've got a couple kids and need the room. I said you'd help them move in since you'll be there moving your stuff out anyway. Hope that's okay with you, Calhoun."

Calhoun nodded his head just sitting there on Banker's back in the flat light of late afternoon. J.O. went back in the house, and Calhoun continued to sit slumped in his saddle. Faint rumblings of thunder echoed down the canyon as the storm moved down the valley. Richard turned the truck and trailer around and stopped when he got up beside Calhoun.

"You gonna let Jacoby do you like that?" Richard asked.

"Do what?"

"You know. Take your place from you, just because your family left?"

"What can I do about it?" Calhoun said. He didn't look at Richard anymore but just slipped down from Banker and went to the back of the horse trailer. Richard got out of the pickup. He went back and opened the gate so Calhoun could lead Banker in. Richard led Stoney into the back then got in the passenger side of the pickup. Calhoun gassed the truck and peeled out onto the highway.

## ICE CAVES

"PRISONER FOUND HANGED IN JAIL CELL/CROW AGENCY/Robert James Big Arm, 36, of Pryor, was found hanging in his jail cell at Crow Agency Saturday morning and pronounced dead a short time later at the Public Health Service Indian Hospital, Big Horn County Coroner Wayne Jeffries said. He said the death was being investigated as a possible suicide by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Big Arm was jailed Friday night and was in a cell by himself, Jeffries said. After he was found, Big Arm was taken to the hospital where medical personnel attempted to revive him, the coroner said. The coroner said he did not know why Big Arm was in jail."

I knew why James was in jail. He had tried suicide before. The last time I had to cut him down in his bedroom before he was gone. He laid on the floor choking and crying. He had been drinking that night too, and I told him he should never drink alone. Then he came with me, and I took him for a ride into the Pryors. I had bought a six pack of Schlitz Malt Liquor, the big cans, and we sipped beer while we drove through the dry hills.

"We are nothing since the buffalo left," James said out of the blue. I remember he said it right after I passed the buffalo jump where our grandfathers once hunted.

"Is that why you try killing yourself, James? Because the buffalo are gone?" I asked. The road levelled out, and I looked in the rearview mirror at our dust plume rising into the air behind us. I looked at my face in the mirror. I had my hair cut short, and my skin was lighter than James's. My mixed blood angered me sometimes. I grew up hating the Lakota Sioux, and a quarter of me was their blood.

"Hey, watch the road. What're you trying to do, kill us?" The car just swerved onto the shoulder a little, and I brought it back to the center of the road. I slowed down and noticed the late afternoon sun hanging on the horizon like a ball waiting to roll down the mountain on top of us.

"Yes," James said. I had forgotten what I'd asked him. He took another sip from his can and looked out the window. The evergreen shrubs hugged the mountainside, thick like the fur of an animal. Below the trees, smooth undulations of prairie rose like huge ribs were pressing the ground underneath. The August sun lit the tall stand of timothy, and a harsh wind blew through the grass.

"You're a young man," I told James. "You got a lot to live for." I eased the car into a corner which rose ever so gently up the western slope of the mountain.

"Marvin, leave me alone about that. Okay? I am your friend. Please respect me."

Somehow, I knew that was what he was going to say. I decided not to lecture him anymore, and we popped another Schlitz and rode in silence. The sun moved past the horizon, and the summer sky was pink and red.

When we reached the Ice Caves, the sun was down. I shined the headlights of the car onto the entrance of the caves. You could see the boards across the opening and the signs put up by the Forest Service.

"Hey, don't do that."

"What?"

"That. With your lights."

I shut them off. We sat there in the flat evening light. James threw his second can on top of his first one on the floorboard.

"What's wrong with shining my lights?"

James opened up his third sixteen-ouncer.

"It'll melt the ice in the cave."

"I'm sure."

"No, really," James said, "you ever been in?"

"I'm not interested in taking the tour given by the Forest Service. I hear it's a piece of crap anyway, and all the Indians say they are desecrating sacred ground."

"I went in," James said, "but never with Smokey Bear. It's best to go in at night."

"You kidding me?" I asked.

"No, Marvin. I'm not kidding. You got a flashlight?"

"Let me look in my trunk."

The cave was dark once James and I pulled the nails out of three boards to get in. I had to catch up to him to see and when I did he was coming out again.

"What's the matter," I said, trying to focus on the cold walls around me. There were crystalline shapes reflecting the beam of the flashlight.

"We got to make a ceremony out of this, Marvin," he



said seriously. James had been my brother Melvin's friend. Him and Melvin found their animal helpers one night. It was a ceremony too, a vision quest. Melvin was killed in a car wreck about a year after that. I was glad he had his spiritual helper to assist him. His helper was one of the Little People. He described them to me one time. The heads were overgrown with eyes kind of close together. Their hair was cut uneven, choppy-like, and their features were fine. The bodies weren't like a small person as we know them. They were fine-boned and fragile looking. The eyes were the thing that he couldn't quit talking about. He said they penetrated his soul.

I forget what James's helper was, but it didn't help him much after the accident. He was close to Melvin, and his heart fell to the ground, just like the rest of him. That's when he started drinking so heavy. He couldn't ever get back up to where he was supposed to be.

I was sad too, but I didn't have time to grieve like that. I had to be strong. I felt somehow responsible for James once Melvin was gone. Melvin and James became blood brothers when they were in eighth grade. I watched them cut their fingers deep during recess then press them together, neither of them daring to utter a sound. They skipped the rest of the day of school, and I got

detention for not telling the principal where they went or why.

Once outside, James lit a cigarette behind my Impala. Then, with deliberateness, he puffed on it, and held it first to the East. He held the lit cigarette in each of the four directions. When he had prayed in each direction, he handed the cigarette to me. I puffed on it and surprised myself with my recollection of the ancient words. Then we re-entered the ice caves.

The cold cave was tall enough to walk in, and once my eyes adjusted, I saw the millions of ice crystals hanging like quills from the ceiling and walls. James led me through the corridor until we reached a small entrance about as tall as a dog.

"This one is best, Marvin," James told me. We got on our hands and knees, and I followed James's retreating form, and the light which moved rhythmically to James's slow on-hands-and-knees pace. Inside the tiny enclosure, we sat cross-legged on the cool cave floor. The ice crystals were smaller. Where James shined the light, to the back wall, you could see small shards of ice fall from the ceiling. Then we could hear a faint tinkling noise. He turned off the light.

"That's what I meant about your lights," he said. The noise stopped then, and I realized how fragile the environment really was in there.

"Our body heat will make them start falling after a while. Then we get out." We sat quiet for several minutes, and soon the tinkling noise started, ever so quietly, and we crawled out in the dark.

The flashlight burned my eyes when he finally turned it back on. Before we got to the main enclosure, James spoke solemnly.

"I got to tell you something, Marvin."

"What?"

"Your brother Melvin and I went to Crazy Mountain when we were Juniors."

"I remember. You climbed Crazy Peak and stayed for two days."

"Yeah well, I never found a helper that time."

"But you.."

"I know. I lied. I told people I did because I was ashamed. I don't know what was wrong, Marvin, but a helper never came to me. So I have to stay in here. I want to seek my vision tonight. I have to."

"Are you sure, James?"

"Yes, Marvin."

"I'll wait for you. Outside."

I lay in the backseat of the Impala looking through the

open window at the stars. A cool breeze passed through the car, and I pulled my jean jacket off the floor of the backseat over me. I remembered James's great-grandmother had been a medicine woman, sister to Pretty Shield. James's family held the ceremonies, and his father, brothers, and he wore traditional braids. After my brother died, James quit taking care of himself. He let his hair hang in his face. Sometimes, in the bar, a Crow woman would try to fix his braids, but he just brushed them away.

After a while I rolled up the windows of the car. I crawled over the front seat and turned the ignition on. I tuned in a faint country western station. I found the last Schlitz Malt Liquor in the seat beside me and opened it. It was warm, but I drank it anyway.

I woke up in a sitting position, and my neck was sore. The radio was still on, and Major Joe said it was 9:05 in the Magic City. I shut off the car and stretched my legs. I got out and looked for James, but I couldn't see him anywhere. I could hear a small creek so I walked up a slope and down to a clump of cottonwoods. I washed my face in the cold water. Then I took my t-shirt off and washed my chest and under my arms. The water felt good,

and I sat on the ground beside the stream thinking about James and the caves. I hoped everything would straighten out for him. It was cold in there. The sun peeked over the tops of the trees drying the beads of water on my face, hair, and chest.

It was later that afternoon when I heard a car coming up the road. It was Thursday, and the Forest Service wasn't giving tours or anything--the sign said they were closed on Wednesdays and Thursdays. There had been a few cars up to the parking lot, but mostly they just got out to use the public restroom and left. Some of the people walked up to the entrance to the ice caves, and I was afraid they would notice I had removed the nails from the three boards and just set them there, balancing on the others. Nobody noticed, and I was glad the Forest Service never came that day. At an angle to the boarded up part, there was a small door, padlocked shut. In the middle of the afternoon, a young couple and their kids walked over and read the signs. They must have expected to go in because the blond haired man started pulling at the big padlock and cussing. I didn't want him to disturb James so I got out of the car and walked over. I was also afraid he would knock the three boards down. I was just going to play like I was reading the signs, but as soon as he saw me coming, he gathered his wife and

kids and hurried back to his car. When he drove by, I saw he was from Billings. I waved at them, but they ignored me, and the car accelerated making a dust cloud which hung in the still air.

I checked the boards then walked back to the creek beside the cottonwoods to get another drink. I was getting hungry, but I wanted to keep vigil for James. I needed for him to get better.

It was after I got back to the car, in the quiet of that late afternoon that I heard Charlie Running Wolf coming. He was speeding up the road, and before he rose over the last crest, I had guessed it was him. He always drove fast, and I recognized the sound of his left front tire. He said it's going to fall off one of these days.

I rolled the windows up. He pulled his blue and white rattletrap up next to my Impala and cut the engine.

Once the dust cleared, I got out and walked up to his outfit. He had a cooler beside him on the seat, and I saw beer poking up through the ice.

"Anything wrong?" he asked. He pulled a cold beer from the ice and handed it to me. I took a long drink and shook my head.

"Nope, nothing's wrong. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. I just heard Etta Yellow Kidney say that

she saw Marvin Falls Down and Robert James Big Arm heading out of town toward the Pryors. Then you never came home so I came to make sure everything was all right."

It hit me then that I was the only one who knew James tried to kill himself. I hadn't thought of it that way until then, but I decided to keep that information to myself. Etta lives across the street from James, and she was who I was really going to see that night. She was who I bought the Schlitz Malt Liquor for. We often times would just drink a few beers from a six-pack and watch TV at her place. I care for Etta a lot, and ever since Benjamin Bruised Head got killed in Billings, I stay pretty close to her. I was just about at her front door, in fact, when something inside me told me to go to James's. That was when I found him and cut him down with a dirty steak knife I found on the kitchen counter. I don't know what it was that took me from Etta's front porch to James's bedroom, but whatever it was saved his life. I had forgotten about Etta after that, and now I felt bad, but I was glad that James was going to get his helper.

The beer was going to my head. I found myself wandering off, and when I came back to the here and now, Charlie had been talking to me.

"What?"

"I said, 'where's Big Arm?'"

"Oh. He's in the caves."

"What's he doing in there?"

"Vision quest."

"But I thought.."

"Yeah, me too, but he lied. He told me he never found a helper the time him and Melvin went before."

"So he's trying again?"

"Yes, he's been in since last night."

Just about the time we were talking about him, I heard the boards fall from the entrance, and James came crawling out.

Charlie got out of his station wagon, and we walked over. Before we got to him, I saw he was holding his hand. He was shaking from the cold. There was blood dripping from between his fingers, and he had dark red stains on the front of his shirt and Levis.

"What happened to your finger?" Charlie asked James.

"I cut it off," James said, pulling his hand away so we could see the bloody stump of his ring finger on his left hand. He had just cut off the last joint of the finger. The blood flowed from the wound, and James was still shaking from the cold even though it was warm outside. I noticed James's face was pale.

"I thought it would bring a helper to me," he said, his voice quavering.



"Did it?" I asked, but James shook his head before I could even get the question out. He just looked down at the ground and squeezed his hands around his shoulders. I took my t-shirt off and ripped off a strip to wrap the finger in.

"What are you doing here?" James asked Charlie after I had gotten my jean jacket for him to put on. Charlie had given him a cold beer, and James was half way through it. Charlie hesitated to answer him.

"Did you sweat first? You got to cleanse yourself, you know."

"We didn't ask for any help from you," James said, still looking at the ground.

"I was just concerned about you. I know your family."

"Fuck you," James said.

Charlie shook his head and walked away. He left his cooler of beer and wouldn't even stop when I ran after him. "Why do you have to show disrespect to your elders, James?" I asked when I got back to the car.

He told me to go fuck a dog in Crow, and I almost swung at him then remembered. I felt sorry for him. We got in the car and headed back to Pryor. I ignored what he said to me, and eventually he apologized. He told me how he had prayed inside the ice caves for a helper to come to him. After several hours, he was shaking from the cold

and still no spiritual helper. He said Charlie Running Wolf was probably right. He wasn't pure enough in his heart. He told me how after a long time seeing nothing and just feeling cold, he turned the flashlight back on and dug out his pocket knife. He cut off the last joint of his ring finger. He said at first the blood wouldn't flow because it was so cold, so he slapped his finger against some crystals on the wall until the blood came. But still no helper. James held the bandage tight against his finger stub. He shook with cold even with my jean jacket on. I had the windows up for his sake, and it seemed funny that he shook so bad from being cold because even without my shirt on, I was pouring off sweat. James drank two of Charlie's beers to my one, but I wasn't about to tell him to slow down. I knew he was mad that no helper came, and it frightened me to think what might become of him. The way he slugged down the beer from Charlie's cooler scared me. Before we got to the turnoff to Pryor, James asked me if I could run into Hardin to get a pint. I turned off at 313, and drove into Hardin, just off the reservation.

"Let me off here, Marvin," he said when we reached Main Street.

"I'm going to swing by the Indian Clinic first," I told him.

"My finger's fine. It don't even hurt now."

"Just sit tight. It won't take long."

"Then stop first so I can run in and get a pint," he said. I just shook my head.

"First things first, you dumb shit." I was trying to lighten him up, but he continued staring out the window, a sorry look in his eyes.

"Just stop," he told me, "I'll let you run in and get the pint. I need it to kill the pain."

"I thought you said it didn't hurt."

"I was lying, Marvin. Please." He dug in his front pocket with his good hand and produced a five dollar bill.

"Okay," I said finally, "but hold onto that finger. You got to apply pressure." When he'd reached into his pocket, he let go of the t-shirt bandage, and I saw the strip of cloth was soaked in blood, dripping onto the car seat. We were in front of the Mint, and I pulled my Impala up to the curb until I hit the cement. Before I went in, I leaned into the door and told James to stay put, that I'd be out in just a minute.

I guess it was more than just a minute though because James was gone by the time I got back to the car. I started down the street and even looked in the Stockman's, but he wasn't there, and by then I decided he wouldn't come with me anyway.

I went back to Pryor and Etta's. I ate a late supper. Then Les Bishop called me from the jail at Crow Agency. He said James had gotten into a fight at the Corner Bar. They'd doctored his finger, and he was sleeping it off. I could have bailed him out for a hundred dollars, but Les said they were just holding him for the night and that he'd be released the next morning. Etta wanted me to stay the night so I decided he'd be all right.

That all happened on Friday night, two days ago. It was Saturday morning when Etta and I were eating breakfast that Les called again and told me they'd found him hanging dead. He'd stripped long cords off the canvas slip-cover they'd given him for his mattress. Then he'd weaved them together to make a cord. He tied it through the vent on the ceiling. That's how Les found him.

I started to feel bad about not bailing James out until Etta told me he'd have done it sooner or later anyway. If I didn't have Etta, I'm afraid I would feel the same way as James.

James's mother, Irene Big Arm, wants me to write something to say over the grave. She just called a little while ago. She was crying and kept asking me why. I couldn't tell her nothing. Finally I just hung up. Someday I'll tell her why he killed himself. But not

now. I couldn't tell her nothing. Etta moved her hand, and I realized she was holding onto my shoulders. I looked out the window and saw Charlie Running Wolf gunning his car down the back street. He turned and came up the street toward Etta's house. I knew he wasn't coming to Etta's. He stopped his station wagon in front of James Big Arm's place. I stood up and saw him running into the house.

## DEAD ON ARRIVAL

Mrs. Moriarty was waiting for James when he got to work. "Got a D.O.A. for you to pick up before you do anything else," she said. She sipped from her styrofoam coffee cup and James looked up when Mr. Holt walked in the room behind her. He too held a cup of coffee in his hand. James shrugged and grabbed the three by five card from Mrs. Moriarty's hand. It used to be strictly Mr. Holt who gave James his orders but lately, James noticed, more and more authority was being given to Mrs. Moriarty. James shook off his umbrella and set it in the corner of the office.

"Port Orchard, huh?" James said glancing at the card.

"Port Orchard road," she emphasized, "we just got the call a little bit ago. The man was on his way to work and he thought it looked like a Great Dane."

"Okay," James said. Ever since Mr. Holt had moved Mrs. Moriarty up in rank she had taken on this new,

by-the-book personality. James remembered when he'd first started working there he had been friends with her. They used to hose down the kennels every morning and often joked with one another as they worked. James knew that Mr. Holt, a married man, had eyes for Mrs. Moriarty and he suspected that was why she advanced so quickly. He felt Mr. Holt had been jealous of their relationship and had moved her up so he could be closer to her. Now whenever she gave him orders Mr. Holt could be seen in the background grinning. James knew they were up to something and somehow he felt like he was catching the brunt of some weird relationship.

James headed for the back of the compound where the vans were parked. He grabbed a set of keys from the key rack on his way back.

"Take a cup of coffee with you if you want," Mr. Holt said after James was almost to the back door.

"No thanks," James said, "Maybe when I get back." Then James asked, "How far was that dog this side of Port Orchard, anyway? Did the guy say?"

"Read the card," Mrs. Moriarty said matter of factly, "on the bottom." James looked at the card again and saw where she had typed: "three miles south of JCT. on Highway 16."

"Okay, I see it. Later." In the van, while the engine

was warming up, he studied the card again. Mrs. Moriarty was a poor typist and she put things in different places than Mr. Holt had. She had the location under DESCRIPTION OF ANIMAL and had hurriedly typed "Great Dane" across from the DATE box.

James had worked for the Kitsap County Humane Society for close to a year and had witnessed lots of changes while he'd been there. This new role of Mrs. Moriarty's was the one change that bugged him the most. He revved the engine until the automatic choke disengaged then turned on the wipers. He backed out away from the compound and headed south towards Port Orchard.

When he reached the junction of Highways 3 and 16, he took note of the odometer and slowed down, scanning the sides of the road. The morning traffic had thinned out and when he saw the dead dog in the barrow pit he turned on his emergency flashers and pulled the van off the side of the roadway. He got out and slid the back door open and walked cautiously up to the huddled mass of contorted dog flesh.

Although it wasn't readily apparent, once he reached the large dog he saw that it wasn't dead. Both hind legs had been broken and it appeared the spine had snapped but the front part of the Great Dane was very much alive. The dog bared its teeth when James came near. His eyes



were wild and it became obvious that James couldn't simply grab the dog and heave it into the van.

James cursed to himself and walked back to the van. He wished he had a gun so he could put it out of its misery but firearms weren't allowed and he could see that he'd have to somehow get the animal into the van and back to the shelter before putting it under "humanely."

As James rummaged through the van, looking for the long piece of conduit with the rope looped through the end, he went back to Montana in his mind.

\* \* \* \* \*

He was working for the Circle T outside of Jordan. His boss and he came upon a deer, similarly injured, its front half standing at attention in the barrow pit while it tried in vain to pull the rest of its body along the bottom of the ditch. A large gaping hole revealed where a slug had torn its way through the hind quarters, severing the spine just above the rear flanks. Wally took the 30-30 from the gun rack and quickly walked over to the deer. He held the gun to the deer's head and pulled the trigger. One report from the rifle was all it took. "Fuckin' hunters," was all he said as he got back in the pickup and headed back up the road.

\* \* \* \* \*

James slipped the loop of rope around the snarling dog's head and when he had it cinched tightly he grabbed the dog's broken hind leg and tried hefting the broken mass towards the van. He heard the broken bones grate against each other and the big dog bit fiercely at the conduit leaving teeth marks in the pipe. Then when James stopped the dog howled in pain. James had moved the dog perhaps ten inches from where he'd been.

This is bullshit, James thought. He left the dog laying there, its hind legs splayed awkwardly at contorted angles. He went back to the van and grabbed the mike to the two-way radio.

"Officer 5203 calling Base one," he said. It took a while for base to respond. It was Mrs. Moriarty.

"Yeah, this is Base one," she said.

"Uh, yeah. This D.O.A. isn't quite down yet. I was sort of wondering if I couldn't locate a firearm to help things along here. He's all busted up, and..."

But before he could finish the other radio cut in on him. "...against regulations, Parker. You know the rules. Bring the animal back to the shelter.."

This time James keyed the mike before she was finished.

"Okay, will do.." he said angrily and hung the mike

up. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his jackknife. He opened the longest blade and walked quickly to the dog.

All at once James pushed hard against the conduit rope so the Great Dane's head was pushed back leaving its windpipe stretched tight. In one motion he buried the knife into the dog's throat and pulled hard against the windpipe and neck muscles. When he reached the jugular a deep-red cylinder of blood squirted once, twice, then a final third time and he heard the suck from the windpipe that fed oxygen to the lungs. The dog's body relaxed and James stood over the dead dog. His arms quivered as he cleaned off the knife against the dog's hide and closed it. When he stepped away from the dog he noticed the dark blood covering most of his front, including his badge which said Kitsap County Humane Society Officer. He threw the limp carcass into the back of the van and slid the door shut.

When he got back to the shelter Mr. Holt and Mrs. Moriarty were at the back with the door swung open. Just inside the door were the decompression chamber and the crematorium and when James opened the door of the van and dragged the carcass into the building Mr. Holt and Mrs. Moriarty stood back in disbelief. They couldn't help but see the blood soaked uniform first of all and then when

James pulled the dead dog, slit from ear to ear, into the building, it seemed more than either of them could handle.

They were still standing there when James came out unwinding the garden hose to rinse out the blood from the van. "That car hit that dog worse than I thought," he said smiling. "Really cut him up." He began spraying into the back of the van. Mrs. Moriarty started to say something to James but Mr. Holt cut her off. She was red-faced and glared at Mr. Holt when he held his hand up. Before he had a chance to say anything James said offhandedly, "Guess we'd better fire up the crematorium if we're going to burn today, huh?" Mr. Holt just nodded his head.

Then he helped James roll up the hose and backed the van over next to the other one. He watched approvingly as James fired up the crematorium and then the two of them stood in front of the big door and watched the flames lick the yellow fire bricks. The heat was enormous and when Mrs. Moriarty peeked her head around the big decompression chamber to ask Mr. Holt a question, he snapped at her.

"Don't you have kennels to hose down, Mrs. Moriarty?" Then he grinned at James and closed the door so the crematorium could heat up properly. James looked at the

stack of dead dogs and cats piled neatly between the decompression chamber and the crematorium.

He looked over to Mr. Holt and asked, "Mind if I run home and change into another uniform?" Both men stood there laughing and James noticed Mrs. Moriarty struggling with the coil of hose against the kennel wall.

## THE WYOMING MEN

Philip got on the Shetland next to the chicken coop so he could use the step to help himself up. He grabbed a handful of the pony's mane, swung over onto him then laid down flat against his neck. He felt a swelling in his chest from being on the pony. He always felt the same thing when he first got on. He kicked him gently in the flanks and the two of them raced towards the far end of the pasture.

The Shetland always took the same route--fast along the fenceline, close enough that Philip had to lift his right leg so he wouldn't catch his pants on the barbed wire then a sharp left at the far corner and slow again.

The Shetland walked nicely through the tall cottonwoods in the corner of the lot and Philip looked at the inside

of the woods with familiarity. He spied the hidden fort his brother and he built and knew that no one else could ever recognize it. He looked up to the tall tops of the cottonwoods where Jim and he climbed and grabbed the tops of the trunk like a thick rope and swung down to the ground. He noticed the broken top of the sapling where Jim had fallen two summers ago. The tree had broken just as he leaped away from the main trunk and Jim crashed through the remaining branches before landing with a dull thud. He still had the top of the tree in his hands but he'd lost his wind and swung at Philip when he tried mouth-to-mouth on him. Philip remembered his relief when Jim finally caught his breath then he quickly ducked to avoid his brother's wild punch.

The Shetland followed the path through the tall trees and came to the spring in the opposite corner of the lot by the county road. Philip ducked under the willow branches and raised his feet again. The nettles and poison ivy grew tall and he wanted nothing to do with them. They paused and the Shetland drank from a clear spot at the edge of the mire. Then he turned and walked his way back down the middle of the field toward the chicken coop. Philip nudged the pony's flanks with his heels and soon they galloped through the tall weeds in the direction of the buildings. Philip saw a red pickup

come around the corner of the house and pull up to the edge of the fenced pasture. He tightened his legs around the pony and squeezed hard and the pony slowed down to a trot. Then they were walking again but Philip's heart still raced with the exhilaration of the gallop. Philip could feel his heart pounding in his chest as he slipped down from the Shetland and patted him on the neck. He walked alongside the Shetland towards the men who had gotten out of the red pickup. One man was short and unshaven and didn't return Philip's quick wave. When Philip and the pony were just a short distance away, the unshaven man began yelling at him. The pony shied and ran back toward the cottonwoods.

"What you think you're doing riding my horse?" he said. "I ain't payin' yer parents so you can go riding all around this goddam pasture."

Philip knew that what he said wasn't true. He'd been in the kitchen when the deal had been made. He knew that the pony was just eating the grass and that no money was involved. The man had even agreed to let Philip ride him anytime he wanted. He began to cry and looked away from the man. He saw the pony skirting the cottonwoods walking back to the spring in the corner of the lot. Then he looked back at the man and yelled incoherently at him.



"But you said I could ride him any time I wanted to." But the sobs choked off the words and they didn't come out like he wanted them to. He looked over to the other man standing by the pickup. He was larger and wore a cowboy hat with a sharp crease in the front of it. He reminded Philip of the cowboy on the napkins at the Red Lodge Café. His expression was kinder than the other man's but he didn't speak.

When the little man saw Philip looking away he put his lips together like a kiss then blew the air towards the man with the sharp crease in his hat. Philip turned back and he was laughing but no sound was coming out.

"Okay sweetheart," the little man said, still laughing, "you can ride the son-of-a-bitch any time you want." Then the two men laughed together like they both knew the same joke and got back in the truck. The little man with whiskers drove and he backed away violently, spitting gravel at Philip's feet. Philip noticed the yellow Wyoming license plate on the bumper of the red pickup. The picture of the bronc rider next to the numbers stuck to his mind long after the pickup was gone.

Philip turned and walked out to the pony. The sky was gray and the clouds looked bruised. Wind whipped at the leaves in the tops of the cottonwoods. A few of the early cottonwood seeds fell like giant pea pods to the

ground. The Shetland stood still as Philip approached. He put his arms around the pony and cried against his neck. The tears on the pony's mane made a strong odor but Philip liked the smell. He kept hugging the pony and smelling the wet mane. He didn't want to let go of the pony. When he thought about the man who owned him it made him cry harder. He remembered how he and Jim and Donny Jones had gotten the Shetland into the chicken coop. The pony didn't like walking on the raised wooden floor and Philip had to duck to avoid the door jamb when the Shetland bolted back out into the lot. But after that the pony would go in and out of the chicken coop, from room to room even, with just the slightest urging.

Philip squeezed tighter on the pony's neck and looked up at the tops of the trees. Now the cottonwood pods looked like lizards jumping to their death on the hard pasture ground. He let go of the pony and wiped his eyes. He slowly walked back towards the house. He had decided two things before he left the Shetland. He was never going to ride the pony again and he would never tell anyone about how he cried in front of the two men from Wyoming.

## BARBECUE

"Goddamn thievin' teepee creepin' sons a bitches," the Texan said, loud enough everyone in the Oasis could hear plainly.

"Keep it down, Jake," the bartender said. Rick Mortledge was tending, and he knew the way the bar operated. He'd worked there only five months or so, but he'd been raised on the reservation and knew Indians. I liked Mortledge just fine, but I knew right away I didn't like the fat white man at the bar.

"Who is that dude, anyway?" Me and my cousin, Jewell Kills-on-top, were playing pool.

"What dude?" Jewell asked. Jewell was probably the only one in the bar who hadn't heard the Texan. Jewell's uncle Seth put a firecracker in the handlebars of his

tricycle when Jewell was just a little kid and told him to listen at the other end. He thought it would be funny, like on the cartoons, but Jewell's been deaf in that ear ever since. It affected his speech too, after that, and he still sounds like he's talking with a rock in his mouth. He was racking up the balls, dropping them onto the felt-covered slate as he brought them up from the belly of the pool table.

"Who's that cowboy who talks so loud?" I said. I was watching the new guy. He continued to drink shots of Calverts over ice, chasing it with beer.

"Just moved here from Texas," Jewell told me. "He bought out Kennedy and has lease land on the reservation." That explained it to me. All the ranchers, Indian and white, could expect a loss or two a year on the reservation. Our culture is like that, especially in the winter when it's cold and times are tough. I remember poaching cows myself but only when all us kids were still home, and we were dead broke.

I broke Jewell's rack hard. The cue ball bounced off the table and rolled under the bar stool beside where the Texan stood. He stood akimbo, like an overweight horse, one foot propped up on the railing beneath the bar. I picked up the ball, and the Texan never even moved.

"Fifty cents in the juke box," Mortledge said to me, wiping a bar glass with a white towel.

"In a pig's ass," I said and smiled in Mortledge's direction. The fat Texan glared at me as I stood off a few feet, and I held his stare. Nobody can stare down an Indian, they say, and this man was no exception.

"I gotta go," he said to Mortledge and drank off the rest of his glass, chasing it with the beer. "Just tell your buddies that when I find out who rustled that steer, I'm going to have his hide." He threw Jewell and me another scowl and hammered his boot heels against the pine floorboards on his way out.

"Asshole," I said looking at Mortledge.

"No shit," Mortledge said and continued wiping the wet spots off the glasses.

"That was a Dolly Parton break," Jewell said, marble-mouthed, when I dropped the ball in the kitchen of the pool table. He hadn't heard anything the white man had said. He grabbed the ball and moved it in front of a straight-in shot to the corner. "All bust and no balls." He cued low bringing the cue ball back as the orange five ball pounded the back of the pocket and dropped in. Jewell resumed his run of the table, finally missing an easy shot into the side. I was still brewing in the corner, sucking on a warm beer, not paying close attention to the game. I was still staring at the place in the door where I'd last seen the fat Texan.

"What'sa matter, Marvin?"

"I don't know," I said. Poor Jewell missed a lot not being able to hear very good, and I decided to play like I hadn't heard nothing either. I got my head back into the game, and Jewell ordered us another round of Lucky's.

After a while, Jason Pretty Weasel came into the bar. My mother used to tell me Jason was my cousin too, but him and me could never figure out how.

"Fight down the street," Jason told Jewell and me in Crow. Rick Mortledge understood that much Crow cause as soon as the words come out of Jason's mouth, he ran down the length of the bar and gawked out the window.

Jewell, Jason, and I walked out the back then we followed Jason as he ran behind the backs of the Main Street buildings until we came back onto the street in front of the Wrangler Bar. Most of the crowd was leaving when we got there, but old Charlie Running Wolf was lying on the sidewalk, out cold. A brand new Ford pickup was most of the way down the street, and several Indians were shouting obscenities in Crow, shaking their fists in the air. They stood in the middle of the street then slowly walked back to where Charlie Running Wolf lay. We had him propped up in a sitting position, and he was starting to come around. Mona Little Bear and Louise Bull Child had been standing in front of the Shoe Shop next to the Wrangler the whole time, and they told us what happened.

"Charlie was just asking him if he had any money for a beer," Mona told us. "He didn't do nothing to him. Then the bastard let him have it."

"Who done it?" Jewell asked her.

"A white guy with a big belly," Louise Bull Child said. "He was drunk and shouted something to Charlie about a steer. He didn't sound like he was from around here."

"Name is Jake something," I said. "He was bad-mouthing the Crow Nation in the Oasis."

"He was?" Jewell said, finally catching on.

"Bought the Kennedy place," Joe Bird-in-ground told the others. He had been standing in front of the Wrangler when Charlie got knocked down. "He said he was going to kill the next son of a bitchin' Indian he sees on his land."

Once Joe saw Charlie Running Wolf getting up, he laughed and looked to where we'd last seen the pickup tearing out of town. "That fat cowboy hasn't been around Indians before, I don't think."

Charlie didn't know what hit him. He had a cut lip, but other than that, he was just a little dazed. We took him back into the Wrangler and bought him a stiff drink. In a half hour, he'd forgotten that he'd been knocked down, and he bought the house a drink. His lip was swelled up like he had cotton stuffed in his mouth, but

he smiled at the barmaid as he peeled off a twenty to pay with.

In the corner, Joe Bird-in-ground, Jason Pretty Weasel, Jewell Kills-on-top, Mona Little Bear, Louise Bull Child, and I plotted revenge for Charlie Running Wolf. Charlie was an old man, and even though he was drunk most of the time, he commanded a lot of respect among us younger Crows.

"To the great state of Texas," Myron Big Head Man proclaimed, swilling the last swallow from a bottle of Old Crow. He passed the bottle to Jason Pretty Weasel who threw it onto the fire, breaking it, and everyone laughed when a blue flame rose like a spirit from the great bonfire.

About thirty people had showed up for the barbecue. Etta Yellow Kidney came, along with Louise Bull Child, Mona Little Bear and her brother Sean. Clayton Elk Shoulder had his car in the middle of the throng with both doors and the trunk wide open. He had the best car stereo, and country music poured from the speakers, blasting out tunes across the prairie flats. I noticed Rosina Sandcrane and John Three Fingers jitterbugging along with several other couples. Wyman Turns Plenty and Bradley Wooden Legs were in charge of the fire and had



just put a hind quarter on when Eldon Clubfoot accidentally fell onto the grill. He singed his hand pretty good on the hot metal, but Bradley pulled him off before he got hurt too bad. Jewell put some grease on it then gave him a brand new Handy Andy from his glove compartment to wear. He must not have been burned too bad cause Etta and I laughed when we saw him grab Majel Littlebird off a blanket and dance her into the shadows, away from the firelight.

Etta and I danced close to the slow songs, and we stayed relatively sober, just drinking from the half-case of Schlitz Malt Liquors I had stashed in my trunk.

We didn't have any plates or nothing, and everyone ate until they couldn't eat no more. Mona, Louise, and Etta had made fry bread, and there was even enough for everyone.

"Pretty good turn out, Marvin," Etta told me as we danced close to another slow song. It was Willy Nelson singing "Crazy." Both Etta and me really liked that one. There were still about twenty people there. It was close to midnight, and it was getting cold away from the fire.

"Even Charlie Running Wolf came," I said. Etta knew I was happy, and I pulled her in even closer. Jason Pretty Weasel, Joe Bird-in-ground, Jewell Kills-on-top and I had put the word out, and it didn't take much to get a crowd.

It was sweet revenge for Charlie, we figured, and even some of the tribal elders had shown up. Whiskey and beer flowed like it was going out of style. Etta and I finished the dance and walked over to the fire. Two quarters of the beef had been consumed, and now a front shoulder was sizzling on the hot grill. Nobody was going to eat it, but that was okay. Nobody cared. We got in close to the hot fire to warm ourselves. It was late summer, and the temperature was already resembling fall. There was no breeze, and a tiny slice of moon rested above the far Sarpy hills, lighting the golden prairie.

Some old Crow women, wrapped in blankets, shifted from one moccasined-foot to the other, trading stories in our language. Most of them had small glasses of whiskey or wine which passed from one to the other. The womens' voices and high-pitched giggles contrasted the low grumblings of the older Crow men, including Charlie Running Wolf, the eldest statesman of the powwow. His lip was still puffy, but he was coming out of it in better shape than he'd gone in. Everyone insisted he take a drink from their bottle, and as the night wore on, he was staggering around the circle of people, still getting congratulatory pats on the back.

About 1:30 or so, Etta and I gathered up our blankets where we'd been sitting listening. Before we left, I went over to Charlie and said good-bye.

"Good powwow, Marvin," was all Charlie could come up with, but he looked me in the eyes and smiled. His smile was distorted, but still my eyes were watering--not from the smoke which was billowing our direction, but from a deep respect borne through years of knowing the old man.

I suppose it was a week or so later when Jewell and I stopped into the Oasis for a beer and a game of eight ball. Rick Mortledge was tending, and as soon as we walked in, I saw the big grin on his face.

"Give us a couple Lucky Lagers, will ya, Rick?" I said, changing the subject before there even was one.

"Shake you for the music," Jewell put in, sucking on the words a bit before spitting them out. None of it phased Mortledge. He continued to smile, setting the cold bottles of beer on the long mahogany bar. It was just after noon on a weekday, and we were the only ones in there.

Jewell won shaking horses against the bar, and he was punching out the numbers on the juke box when Rick came back to his station in front of me. He had a white bar towel, and he was shining up the stack of beer glasses on the rubber mat in front of him and me.

"Get enough to eat the other night, Marvin?" Mortledge said, the broad grin indelibly printed across his wide face.

"You sure got pretty teeth," I told him, "be a shame to lose them."

His smile slackened when he saw I wasn't joking, and then Jewell came lumbering back to his stool.

"Can't you turn it up any?" he asked. Mortledge turned a big white button on the back bar, and the already loud music became even louder. Jewell shook his head to the music, probably still straining to hear what we heard all too clearly.

I could tell Mortledge was chomping at the bit to tell me what he knew, and he knew I wasn't going to implicate myself or anyone else for that matter.

"So what's new, Rick?" I asked, casually walking to the pool table and slipping a quarter into the coin slot. The guts of the machine rumbled, and fifteen balls fell into a recess within the table then rolled into the narrow slot beside the coin insert. Jewell had chosen his weapon, usually a twenty-one, the heavier the better. I grabbed an eighteen off the rack and walked back to my beer on the bar.

By this time Mortledge realized he wasn't going to get nothing out of Jewell or me. With the music going, Jewell wasn't catching much of the conversation anyway. He had broken the rack and was busy dropping the balls expertly into their respective pockets, carefully placing

the cue ball, with proper cuing, in position or his next shot.

"Oh, not much," Rick started out. "Talked to Jake Sanderson the other day."

"Who's he?" I feigned ignorance, and the smile came back to Mortledge's face.

"Try the guy who blasted Charlie Running Wolf in front of the Wrangler," he said.

"Oh, the fat guy?" I asked. "What did he have to say?"

Mortledge went on to tell how Sanderson came in a week or so ago, plumb defeated. He got on the Calverts and spilled his guts to Rick. Said he was going out to check some cows at Sarpy Creek, and he found the fence down for about fifty yards on either side of a cattle guard going into his lease land. He described how the cedar posts were placed underneath the cattle guard then set afire. One of his steers had been slaughtered with the gut pile not twenty yards from the fenceline. The steer had been quartered then barbecued on the cattle guard.

Jewell had finished his run of the table by this time and was sitting next to me, taking in what Mortledge was telling me.

"Yeah, I guess whiskey bottles and beer cans were strewn all around the fire pit. Somebody had one hell of a shindig there," Mortledge told us, the grin finally

chiseled down to a mere smirk. Jewell and me didn't give away nothing, and we had shook our heads in amazement at all the appropriate places.

We were in the middle of our second game, Jewell still dominating the table, when Jake Sanderson walked in. Mortledge glanced at us briefly, then walked down to Jake. He had moved the end stool at the bar aside and stood between the first two stools, his forearms resting against the bar. He wore a new straw hat with a small brim and a crisp Western shirt which strained against his enormous hanging belly. He surveyed the bar with tiny pig eyes. I watched closely as his eyes darted from one object in the bar to the other, never resting on any one thing.

Sanderson and Mortledge were far enough away, Jewell and me couldn't tell what they were saying, but about the time I expected Mortledge to go for the bottle of Calverts, Sanderson left. Then Mortledge sauntered back our direction, picking up two more bottles of Lucky on his way. Jewell and me were ready for another one, but we hadn't ordered nothing.

Jewell was kicking my butt at pool, and he just had to make the eight ball before it would be three games to zip.

"Go ahead," I told him, "let's get this over with."

"Eight ball in the corner pocket," he said, "One bank." He nailed the eight, which was against the rail on the far side of the table, and it came back at just the correct angle, dropping neatly into the corner pocket in front of where he stood.

"Three games to zip," Jewell said, "wanna play one more?"

"No thanks."

We went over to our respective spots at the bar and sat down. Mortledge stood there like a sentinel, guarding our precious liquid.

"These on the bar?" Jewell asked of the new beers beside our nearly-empty bottles.

He swilled the backwash from his first bottle and slid the empty to Mortledge. Rick took the bottle down and placed it in the case box on the floor beside the cooler. He came back, not saying anything, and I noticed the big grin had returned to his face.

"We didn't order these beers," I told Mortledge, "and we ain't paying for them."

"Wouldn't expect you to. These are on Jake, fellas," Mortledge said, still smiling. Just then Jason Pretty Weasel came into the bar.

"You guys better get up to the Wrangler," he said.

"Another fight?" Mortledge asked.

"No, the guy who hit Charlie Running Wolf was just in there. Joe Bird-in-ground was going to kick his ass until he found out what he did. He left a hundred dollar bill on the bar. He told Mary Reilly to keep the drinks flowing until it's gone."

Jewell, Jason, and I ran behind the backs of the Main Street buildings until we came back onto the street in front of the Wrangler.

"Charlie, me, and Mona were the only ones in here when I left," Jason told us as we fought our way up to the bar.



## GUARD DOGS

"Dad's impossible to work with," Boyd told Mason one night in Hampton. Boyd owned the Wheel Inn and was his own best customer. The bar was poorly lit, and a bluish haze hung over the pool table and balls. Mason sat at the end of a long line of local customers who looked more like bar fixtures than patrons. Most of them sat slumped over their drinks, talking as much to themselves as the men beside them. Boyd called them his "bread and butter" customers, but the way he slugged down his Beam ditches, Mason added whiskey to the list.

"He's just so damn stubborn," he said, fixing himself another. He came back to Mason's end of the bar and sat down on the stool across from him. Mason noticed he had

another drink and stool at the opposite end so he wouldn't have to move them to the conversation.

"Listen to this, Mason." Boyd said. "About three years ago we were combining wheat up on the Marino Bench. It was early for wheat, and Dad wouldn't let us check the moisture to see if it was ripe. He never trusted the new gauges. He kept saying, 'Daylight's burnin' boys. Let's get a move on.' Well, we went into it all right. I was runnin' combine and my brother drove truck. The damn wheat kept pluggin' up my header. Then I'd get mad and start cussin' and Pete and me would crawl inside the combine to unplug the sieves. Packed in there tighter'n a goddamn wedge."

At this point one of Boyd's bread and butters needed a refill so he went down the line replenishing his thirsty fold. He sat down at the other end long enough to take a long drink of his easterly ditch then head back west to his stool and drink across from Mason.

"Yep. Dad made us keep going like that all through the morning. Bet I plugged up fifteen or twenty times, and each time Pete would be there with the truck and Dad off in the distance with the pickup. He just sat there like a hawk watching a couple ground squirrels. And Pete and me would climb back into the ass-end of the New Holland."

"What's the matter with him?" Mason gestured for more beer.

"Oh he knew what he was doing. No question about it. He was just testing Pete and me. I told Pete that any minute he'd drive over and tell us to shut down, but he never did." He popped the top of Mason's beer after he set it in front of him. His thick fingers were pale, and his nails were clean but grown out and misshapen like a horse's hooves when he founders.

Boyd went on to tell how they worked that day--how the wheat ripened by noon and slid across the header the way it was supposed to. How after he tightened down the sieves at one o'clock they never plugged on him again. How they went all day without a meal and combined into the night with just water, cigarettes, and diesel fuel for power. He told Mason how he and Pete cussed the old man until they tired of it. Then they got a second wind, and with the sun still high in the sky, and under its glaring, they pushed the New Holland for all she was worth. They were the first done that year and that was what the old man had wanted.

"I don't remember that one," one of Boyd's regulars said as he performed the rodeo stroll on the way to the men's can. He took a couple short steps then a long fluid step placing his foot carefully on the other side of some invisible chasm. Once inside the door marked **BUCKS**, Mason heard a resonant thump and decided he must have fallen down.

Several weeks later Mason sat in the Basin Bar in Dover sipping a cold beer. It was a warm spring afternoon and an old man in bib overalls pulled up a stool next to Mason. The bar wasn't full, and there were plenty of available stools. Mason turned his way and nodded a greeting to him.

"You the new teacher in Hampton?" He asked. His voice was gravelly and a flap of skin hung from his neck like the dewlap of a Brahma bull. His brown face was large and wrinkled at the creases like worn leather.

"Yessir. Mason Wood," Mason said extending his hand.

"Glad to meet you, Mason. I seen you around. Aaro Koski." He grabbed Mason's hand hard. His hand was large but deformed with the ring finger and little finger laid flat against the palm but there was power in the other two fingers and thumb. He held the claw-like grip longer than Mason expected then sort of pulled it away without releasing the pressure. Mason wondered if he had full control over the hand.

In this thought, he followed his retreating form towards the back of the bar. Aaro walked hunched over, past the pool table to the left, the V-shaped shuffle board that sat off in the corner to the right, and into the hallway where the restrooms hid. The only light in

that recess of the bar came from the back door which was situated just to the right of the men's room, at the very end of the little hallway. That was the door Aaro went out. Mason turned back to the bar, and there stood Boyd.

"Hi Mason," he said squinting towards the back, "you know my old man?"

"No," Mason lied. He didn't know why, but somehow he felt right lying to Boyd.

"What's he look like?" Mason asked, digging deeper into the white lie.

"Oh, I don't know," Boyd said, distracted. He squinted again at the bright light that fell on the floor in front of the men's room.

"Who just left?" He asked.

"Just some old man," Mason told him. Boyd walked to the back of the bar. The heels of his boots resounded against the pine floorboards. An arc of light flashed across the bar then stayed in place as he stepped out, leaving the back door swung open. Mason peered into the lighted hallway. Boyd was coming back with Aaro.

"I was pissin' I told ya," Aaro said to his son. Then he added, "You born in a barn? Go shut the door." Boyd gritted his teeth in defiance but went back and shut the door. He caught up to his father again at mid-bar. Aaro resumed his drink and stool, and Boyd stood there looking like he needed one.

"You weren't pissin' back there, Dad. You seen me come in."

"Maybe I did and don't wanna talk to you." Boyd twisted his face again, like he was hurt then looked at Mason. His face went back to its child-like countenance.

"Dad, this is my friend Mason. He's the new teacher in Hampton."

"Glad to meet ya," Aaro feigned, "Aaro Koski." He extended the claw to Mason again.

"Mason Wood," he said smiling. Aaro winked when he bore down with the grip the second time.

"We going fishing tomorrow, Dad? Like you said?" Boyd asked.

"I guess we might as well."

"What time you wanna go?" Boyd asked excitedly.

"Just a minute here." Aaro said. "You think Mason here might wanna go?"

"Oh yeah. Sure. Want to come, Mason?"

"Yeah." Mason said considering momentarily. "I'll go."

Boyd grinned then told them about Gilder, Jones, and Eichler catching five-pound rainbows from the pond. He went on to tell what they used--mostly lures, but said they'd bite flies too. When neither of them offered to buy him a drink or prolong the conversation, Boyd

excused himself to go the fifteen miles back to Hampton and the business. Aaro and Mason decided to meet him up there at nine the next morning.

Johnny Bachelor lived at the Sisson Place, six miles south of Hampton. He came to Montana some thirty years ago Aaro told Mason on the way out that morning. He used to play cards, and that was Aaro's connection with him. Bachelor was a sheepherder for an outfit out of Wolf Creek that leased the Sisson Place. He watched over two thousand sheep, Aaro figured, that grazed on some five thousand acres. They got cheap grazing rights because of all the leafy spurge. The yellow-topped flowers looked innocent enough, as they drove past fields of them, but were so profuse they choked out the range grasses that typically grew there. Aaro explained that sheep were about the only livestock that eat spurge, and this was a first step towards its eradication.

Aaro slowed down as they gazed out past the yellow flowers to the ponds beyond, lined with cattails.

"There's five-pounders in those ponds," Aaro repeated as they slowly approached the lane. They pulled in, swerving to miss the bigger chuck holes, and up to a small faded house.

A little man opened the door before they could knock.

He held the door open and smiled when he recognized Aaro. His face looked tiny beneath the black framed glasses that perched on his nose. He wore clothes that were made for a much larger man.

"Wanna beer?" He asked in a flat monotone. He reached his hand out to shake and grinned at Mason.

"Mason Wood," he said, shaking his hand. Mason ignored the question. It was nine o'clock in the morning.

"Johnny Bachelor," then again, "wanna beer?"

"We come to fish, not drink beer," Aaro grumbled.

"The hell ya did." Johnny said and reached for Aaro's hand. "I don't mind if ya fish, long as you don't catch no ewes." His small face opened up as he shook Aaro's hand vigorously and a laugh and some Copenhagen juice spilled from the side of his mouth. Aaro chuckled with him, but as soon as Johnny began laughing he stopped and looked up at the empty road. Mason followed his eyes to the north and Johnny said, "Somethin's comin'." Then they could see the dust cloud from Boyd's car coming up the road.

Aaro told Johnny that Boyd thought he wanted to fish and Johnny nodded. The three of them stood watching Boyd rod the blue Rambler up the county road. He took the lane too fast bouncing through the chuck holes and up to where they stood.



Johnny waved as Boyd got out of the car. Boyd followed them inside. Under Johnny's jurisdiction, the house smelled clean but unlived in. Besides the kitchen table and four chairs, there were two easy chairs in the front room, a vinyl couch with spurs and a lariat stitched across its back, and a small wood stove in the center of the room. They sat at the table in the kitchen and were offered either coffee or beer. Aaro and Mason drank coffee.

Boyd was pale and a couple beads of sweat ran down his cheek. He drank a long draw from the beer and reached for a cigarette. His business in Hampton had caught up to him, and Mason wondered how he would be fishing. He reached his big hand up and ran it down his face. He wiped the sweat on his jeans.

"It's hot in here," he said when he saw Mason watching him. Mason nodded and watched Aaro sip his hot coffee. Aaro said nothing and Mason wondered if he was mad at Boyd for being hung-over. Boyd took another drink from his can of beer. He lowered it, squeezing the aluminum can in his big white hand. He looked narrowly at Aaro.

"I was tellin' Mason about our wheat harvest on the Bench." Boyd said, forcing his face into a rude smile. He looked over to Johnny who was digging in the refrigerator for more beer. Johnny set another can in front of Boyd.

"Let's see," mused Aaro, "I've cut the Bench now for about fifty years straight." Aaro sipped from his cup of coffee.

"You know what harvest I mean, old man." Boyd popped the top of his beer and sucked the foam from the top of the can. He looked at his father and pinched his eyebrows together in a scowl.

"You must mean the harvest of '71. We were the first done that year." Aaro seemed to be baiting Boyd.

"That's the one. The last summer I worked for you. Now it's all yours again and you can take it to the goddamn grave with you for all I care." Boyd's eyes were red, and swollen, and a tear sneaked down to join the sweat at the bottom of his stubbled chin.

Aaro laughed and got up for more coffee. Johnny just sat there, his head cocked to one side listening, apparently glad to have the company. Aaro poured Mason a cup before he returned the pot to the stove. Boyd waited for a response from Aaro but became too impatient.

"Goddamn it, you made us go into it too soon," he slurred in frustration. He wiped his face again with the back of his hand and pushed his eyebrows together fiercely.

"We got done first didn't we?" Aaro countered sipping the hot coffee.

"But it ain't a contest, Dad. We plugged up every fifty yards." Boyd seemed to be gaining control, but the scowl remained intact.

"The hell it ain't a contest," Aaro said. "What else we got to drive us?" Then he looked at Boyd closely. "You tell Mason what kind of shape I found you and your brother in the day before?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, old man." Boyd said and looked into his beer can.

"No, you probably don't remember. You probably don't remember how I come home from Wolf Creek and found your brother under the fuckin' combine."

"Dad, don't.." But Aaro continued, the gravel in his throat grinding more coarse with each word.

"Yeah, Mason. I don't suppose Boyd told you how he had a bottle hid in the shop. I had to go for parts and left Boyd and Pete to service the combine. I come home and.."

"Shut up, Dad. He don't wanna hear about it." Boyd began squeezing the aluminum can again.

"Yeah, Mason, I come home and there was Boyd passed out in his spit. The combine was running about thirty thousand RPM's, and Pete was underneath the header trying to grease a goddamn zerk. Grease was all over hell, and Pete was as rummy as a Sunday drunk."

"Under the header?" Johnny asked. "While it was runnin'?"

"Oh yeah. I couldn't believe it either. And these weren't boys mind you. These were big men--forty and forty five years old. I tell ya, I was a proud father that day. That's when I decided I was going to be first done that year."

"You just don't know how to handle help," Boyd said, but the conversation was over. Johnny had gotten up, and Aaro walked to the porch. He stood silent at the door looking out at the yellow fields of leafy spurge.

"Let's go fishing," Mason said and walked out the door. Aaro followed him to the pickup, and they got in. Johnny came over to the truck before they pulled away.

"I guess Boyd's going into town with me. I gotta get some things in Hampton. We'll be back to feed the dogs and check on the sheep."

Mason stood on the bank of the small moss-bottomed pond thinking about Johnny and his life in the hills. Spurge covered the expanse of land in front of Aaro and him. The scene in Johnny's house bothered Mason, and for a moment, he wished he hadn't come. Surprise Creek flowed gently down the coulee above them. Its course was clearly marked as the taller spurge skirted its banks alongside the hill. Behind the hills, the Little Belt Range, still veiled in shadow, loomed quietly above them.

Mason cast out a black Woolie Worm and a Joe's Hopper about fifteen inches apart from each other and slipped on his fishing glasses. He could see an open area in the middle where several fish lay. The fish didn't appear to be feeding, and the water was too calm to do any fooling. The line, the leader, the carefully tied bits of fur and feather--none of it worked. The water was simply too calm. They fished this way most of the morning. After a few hours Aaro came over and got Mason. They drove to the bigger pond, about a quarter mile back towards Bachelor's house. When they got there, they ate the sandwiches they'd brought and fished the second pond uneventfully through the rest of the afternoon.

After the long hours with no fish Mason's mind to wander. He thought about the story both Boyd and his father had related in his presence. He wondered why he would be privy to such a telling anecdote. He wondered what Boyd and Johnny were doing in town. Probably bellied up to the other side for a change at the Wheel Inn. When the breeze was right, Mason could hear sheep over the hills to the south. It was springtime, and the ewes were close to lambing.

Soon it became evening, and the sun was strong on the valley and ravine above them. The big pond seemed even more mossy than the smaller one, and Mason continued to

cast his line out, sometimes whipping it in the air a couple times to dry the flies, then set them gently on the water's surface. Another hour and it would be dark.

About three miles up Surprise Creek, Johnny and Boyd fed the guard dogs then slowly walked through the sheep. The large white dogs were new to the operation Aaro had explained to Phillip on the way out that morning. They paid five hundred bucks apiece for them, and they were imported from France. The past year the Great Pyrenees upped their lamb average two to one over years past. The neighbors lost fifteen to their three, and Johnny was sold on them. Coyotes were thick in that country, and the guard dogs had a good record against most predators.

As they walked through the sheep, Johnny looked for the tell-tale slime hanging from the back end of a ewe. He had a long sheep hook with him in case he spotted a ewe about to lamb. Between drinks, he told Boyd how last week he'd had to hog-tie three ewes with twine and heft them into the back of his pickup to take them to a jug in the lambing barn. He was going to take them down the next day, closer to the facilities. He took another pull from the bottle and handed it back to Boyd.

The sheep seemed nervous with Boyd traipsing amongst

them and when he lurched forward and fell, the pregnant ewes scattered, bleating frantically. Boyd got up and swore but continued his way through the sheep. Just ahead was the pickup, and Boyd was making a bee-line for it. In front of the truck, Johnny spotted something. It was a ewe on her side. She was stretched miserably, four legs pointing awkwardly towards the darkening sky. As he got closer, Johnny realized she was trying to have twins, both of them butt first.

He took his shirt off and reached his arm up into the ewe. The lining, that was usually smooth and wet with fetal membranes and placenta, was torn, and the ewe's intestines filled the small space in which the unborn lambs fought to get out. Johnny knew he should perform a Caesarean, but he balked at the idea. He was too drunk. Instead he tried working them out. Johnny struggled against too much matter inside the ewe. Every time he eased his arm up further, the ewe bleat loudly in pain. After about a half hour with the sheep, Boyd's arm felt like a weight. He couldn't get the lambs out.

Johnny was mad at Boyd for insisting on the bottle. They'd drunk too much, and Johnny had to pull Boyd by the arm to get him out of the Wheel. Finally he'd taken off, and Boyd had to run up the street to get back in the pickup.

Johnny wanted to go get the vet in Dover, but he knew that by the time he got back it would be too late. He reached for his pocket knife and felt nothing. Boyd kicked a rock as he stumbled up behind Johnny. Johnny jumped at the sound then turned angrily to Boyd.

"Got a knife on ya?" Johnny shouted. The bloated ewe continued to breath hard. Boyd shook his head after he carefully felt every pocket.

"Sorry," he said. Johnny went back to work, shoving his arm up the ewe again. He pushed hard enough to feel the skull of one of the lambs. He could tell it was still alive. The ewe bleat out in pain, her back legs kicking spastically, but Johnny grasped the tiny skull and gently began to pull the lamb through the intestines towards life. Sweat dripped into his eyes, stung them, and he threw his head back to fling the drops from his forehead and nose. The ewe cried out again, and Johnny raised up his head. He saw the guard dogs standing at the top of the hill to the north. Boyd had gone back to the pickup and was running towards him with a hay hook.

"I'll get the son-of-a-bitches out," Boyd said and dropped down roughly next to Johnny.

Back at the pond, Aaro and Mason were about to call it quits when Aaro got hold of a big one. "It's a rainbow,"



the old man yelled as he jerked at the rod skillfully. The big fish jumped and fought against the line, but Aaro played him out and pulled him slowly towards shore.

"Grab him, Mason," he instructed. Mason waded into the shallow water and reached down and grasped hold of the fish behind the gills. He dug his fingers into his firm body and pulled him out. He was heavy and thick through the middle. He writhed and fought Mason as he held him in the air trying to work the hook from his mouth. Finally, Mason was able to pull it out and went to a rock and smashed the back of his head. Aaro was pleased with the catch, and he marveled at the big rainbow trout.

"I told you there were five-pounders in here." The old man said smiling. It was nearly dark so they packed up their gear and went to the pickup. On the way to the truck Mason went by way of a small ditch that drained out of the pond where he had stashed a couple cans of beer from his creel. He got to the pickup and threw his gear into the back.

When they got ready to leave, he held up the beer and said, "Look, Aaro. Steelheads!" They cracked open the beers and took a long drink. On the way back they saw that Bachelor's pickup wasn't at the house so they decided to go look for him. Boyd's car was still sitting there so Aaro figured they must be with the sheep.

"Should have been back by now," Aaro said as he gunned the pickup and headed up the coulee in the direction they'd heard the sheep.

After a half mile or so Aaro pulled up to a gate, and Mason got out and opened it. Aaro pulled the pickup through, and Mason shut the gate behind him. When Mason got back in, Aaro pointed. "There's the sheep. Up there. But I don't see a pickup." In front of them, the flock spread out in a mass, and they skirted their dark forms with their windows down. The monosyllabic bleat filled the cab of Aaro's truck. Aaro pulled on the lights. He slowly swerved away from the sheep, and the noise lessened. Then Mason spotted the red pickup.

"There they are," he said. It was Johnny's Ford pickup. The door was open, and a pair of legs was sticking out.

"There's Boyd," Aaro said, emphasizing the word Boyd. He sounded irritated, but as they pulled closer, they saw the person sitting up with his head cocked to one side. It was Johnny. He didn't have a shirt on, and there was blood on his stomach and pants. He just sat and looked at them as they drove closer. Then Mason noticed something in front of the truck and pointed to it.

"Must have lost a ewe," Aaro observed. He shut off the engine, and they got out. They walked over to the dead ewe and saw the two dead lambs lying beside it.

"Lost a ewe and a set of twins, huh?" Aaro said as he walked towards Johnny. Johnny still had his head dropped to one side.

"That ain't all," he said in his flat monotone. "Look in the back." He slipped down from the seat of the pickup and handed Aaro a flashlight. Mason couldn't see what Aaro had the light on in the back, but he quickly backed away from the pickup and dropped the light at his feet.

"What ya got, Johnny? A dead coyote?" Mason asked. He looked for the flashlight in the weeds, following the beam to find it. Just as he picked it up, he looked to the end of the beam of light. There were two sets of eyes, and then he deciphered their large bodies, thick with white fur. They lay several yards away, and both of them were panting. Their red tongues hung out of their mouths, and they appeared to be smiling. Then Mason walked to the pickup and shined the light into the back.

"My God," he said. His stomach was about to go so he turned his back to Aaro and Johnny Bachelor. They were standing in front of the pickup, and Johnny had a tentative arm around Aaro's shoulder. Johnny tried to say something, but the words choked off. Then Aaro mumbled something Mason couldn't hear.

"What's that, Aaro?" Mason asked finally. His stomach

was queasy, and he felt light-headed. He thought he might black out.

"Guard dogs," he said. Aaro walked to the back of the pickup again. He grabbed the flashlight from his hand and held the beam of light on the body. It was as if he had to make sure. Then he switched the flashlight off and hunched up his shoulders. He shook involuntarily against the pickup.

Then the three of them stood silent in the dark. The wind blew up the coulee from the south. Mason looked up at the stars and noticed the moon was almost full. He thought he could hear a coyote in the distance.

## TUNNEL VISION

"What did you say," Jack shouted as he stood next to a large tree, trying to shield himself from the rainstorm. A dense layer of clouds was nearly on top of the two men and raindrops were beginning to fall. Large droplets angled down on the rising wind that shook violently at the larger branches of the tree.

"I said I want to take a picture next to the monument," Tom shouted pointing at the state line marker next to the road. A stone outline of Texas sat desolate against the gray sheet of driving rain.

Jack nodded his head but continued to dig in his right ear with his little finger. He had been doing this since they took cover behind the big tree.

"What are you doing? That's hard on ears, you know," Tom said loudly at the same time crowding his brother for room on the leeward side of the tree trunk.

"It's stuck!" Jack said, then removed his finger from the ear and said loudly, "Goddamn it, Tom. Help me."

Tom looked into the ear and said, "Jesus, Jack, you really shoved it back there, didn't you?" A mild look of exasperation came over his face. "Let's get in the pickup. I'm going to need some kind of instrument."

Jack had seen the look on Tom's face and realized just how far he'd shoved the cotton plug into his ear. Running through the rain to the truck he shouted at the sky, "GODDAMN COTTON EARPLUGS SONS A BITCHES!!"

Inside the truck Tom worked carefully with a makeshift tweezers--a pocket knife blade and a screwdriver--gently probing the cavity leading to the inner ear.

"Be careful," Jack cautioned, "don't poke my eardrum out."

"You mean your brains?" Tom replied sarcastically, then added, "How the hell did you get it way down there anyway?"

"By trying to get it out," Jack replied impatiently, angry at himself. The rain slowed down Jack noticed as he sat, dead-still for the operation, staring blankly at the windshield. Raindrops slowly journeyed down the

slope of glass gaining speed as they joined with others then trickled quickly towards the rubber wiper blades. Then Jack felt the release from within his head and heard more plainly the metallic sound as the last few raindrops pelted against the roof of the cab.

"There," his brother said, holding the yellowed wad of cotton in front of Jack's face. "Now, let's get that picture." The rain had stopped but everything was wet when Tom focused in on the outline of Texas. "Stand next to it, Jack," Tom instructed.

"I'll point to our location," Jack said and stood awkwardly, clowning, with his right index finger on the edge of the panhandle. Tom snapped the picture.

"Hey look, there's a rainbow," Jack said pointing to the dark mass of clouds that had just passed. A ray of sun shone from behind the dense roll of clouds throwing a colorful arc of light down to the moist Texas landscape. "I'll take one of you with that in the background," Jack offered. Tom climbed aboard the state line marker and acted as if he was riding the state like a bronc. He raised his heels up to Dallas and Fort Worth and hung onto the panhandle like a saddlehorn. "Catch 'em on the way out," Jack yelled and snapped the picture. He had to get on one knee and hold the camera sideways but he got his brother riding Texas and the rainbow and clouds in the background.

By the time they left the sky had darkened again and another volley of raindrops, big as quarters, slapped down on the barren flat land and Jack's three-quarter ton Ford. Jack drove while Tom propped his boots up on the dashboard and paged through the atlas. The brothers rode broncs and were traveling Highway 87, headed for a rodeo in Dalhart.

"How much further?" Jack asked, loudly because of the rain.

"Oh about thirty miles," Tom answered, "hope this rain lets up for tomorrow." As the two brothers drove on in the downpour, the traffic breezed by in a blur, the opaque lights flashing steadily against the fogged up windows. Another hour and they'd be at the motel, out of the rain and out of the noisy cab.

"The arena's covered you know," Jack said, flicking the defroster on. "Dalhart's got a nice arena."

"Oh yeah," Tom said and sat up and turned the defroster down, "I didn't know that." The windows were clear and the heavy traffic was easily seen now. The narrow road was rutted and in order to stay in his lane Jack was forced to drive through the channels of water. The passing cars, like bratty school children, continued to splash one another as they travelled at sixty plus across the bleak Texas panhandle.



"They really take their rodeo serious down here," Jack said, his hands fastened to the wheel. "I wish this rain would let up," he added then said, "Montana never gets rain like this."

It was Tom's first time on the circuit. He'd ridden back in Montana in the NRA among local ranchers and second-rate cowboys but never against the talent he would compete against in the PRCA. The day before, in Trinidad, Colorado, Jack had broken even with a fourth while Tom had bucked off just before the buzzer sounded. He'd been nervous before the rodeo and had wanted to make his first ride on the circuit a good one. His brother seemed to read his thoughts.

"You still sore from old Tunnel Vision?" he asked.

"Not bad," Tom muttered his eyes taking in the console of Jack's pickup.

"Can't be too bad the way you were riding Texas back there," Jack said and chuckled to himself. "You'll get the hang of it soon enough."

Tom turned the radio on and tuned in a country western station. Mel McDaniel was singing "Baby's Got Her Blue Jeans On" and Tom sang along. The song was about over when Jack saw the car turned over in the barrow pit. He slowed down quickly and pulled the pickup off the side of the road. The wheels of the overturned car were still spinning.

"Shit," Jack said as he brought the truck to a halt. "I guess we better see if anybody's hurt." He slid from the driver's seat and ran to the wrecked vehicle. The day was waning and rain continued to pour unmercifully on the gloomy scene. The barrow pit held close to four inches of water, and the roof of the Pinto was submerged. Just as Jack poked his head through one broken window to have a look, he heard a loud scream. Both brothers jumped back from the overturned car and Jack fell on his butt in the water. The scream continued and eventually a females's worst words were interjected between the hysterical shrieks.

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Son of a bitch. Fuck." And other expletives issued from the broken passenger window. Jack scrambled back to the window and, crawling through the water, peered through at the inverted female driver. The shoulder harness and belt held her in place and it appeared she was all right as she flailed her arms and whipped her head from side to side. Her long tresses of hair lapped at the water on the ceiling like a shallow tub of dirty bath water. When she saw Jack's upside down look of concern, she let out another high-pitched wail and Jack again reacted only this time he smashed the back of his head on the window and fragments of glass rained onto his neck and shoulders. This time Jack produced the expletives.

"Ow! Goddamn son of a bitch!" Then he said, "Don't worry lady. I think you're okay. Just don't scream anymore. Okay?"

"You think I'm okay? Don't scream? WHAT THE HELL WOULD YOU DO IF YOU WERE IN THIS SITUATION?" She hollered at the top of her lungs then began to cry.

By this time Tom had gotten down in the water and peered cautiously into the vehicle too. Other motorists had stopped as well and when Tom was satisfied that she was all right he told a fat man, one of the first to scramble down the small incline, to call an ambulance and Highway Patrol. The man had obediently waddled back to his car apparently glad to do his part.

"Are you hurt?" Jack asked her as he slid further into the car. He could almost reach the seat belt release button.

"I don't think so," she replied less frantic now, "but can you get me out of this seat belt? The blood's all rushing to my head."

Then Tom spoke up. "Maybe we'd better wait for the ambulance. It shouldn't be too long." Nobody said anything. Tom continued, "We could get in trouble if we moved her and she was hurt." He spoke as if she were unconscious or just an object in the car, like a steering wheel or a radio.

"GODDAMN IT," she screamed again, even louder this time, "I'M OKAY--JUST GET ME OUT OF THIS PIECE OF JUNK!!" Her high-pitched retort made Tom's head recoil this time and it was he who took a shot in the back of the head and his neck and shoulders that felt the broken glass, like rock salt, pour down on his neck.

"Shit," Tom yelled and felt for the trickle of blood he knew was there. His hand felt nothing but a wet bump because of the rain but a gash was there and it was warm to the touch.

"I think she's fine, Tom," Jack said and reached for the seat belt button to release her. Then he slid further in. "I'm going to get underneath you," he said, "to cushion your fall when I let you loose. Are you ready?"

"Ready when you are," she said, more calmly than before and Jack noticed a Southern twang in her voice. He also noticed while crawling beneath her, that she was younger than he first thought and attractive, except for her overly-red face and the blood vein that ran down the middle of her forehead.

"There," Jack said as he pushed the button and she fell on top of him. Her weight pressed him into the ceiling of the Pinto. He could feel the interior light in the small of his back. "You okay?" Jack asked

quietly holding his head up out of the water and looking her in the eyes.

"I think so," she answered and scooted a little so her belt buckle lined up with Jack's and her right knee fell between Jack's legs at the crotch. Then they held their position. "I could stay like this for a while," she said.

"Yeah, me too," Jack responded, wondering just what was happening. Then they heard the ambulance siren. It was getting louder but still sounding far away. Jack slowly slid out from beneath her and helped her to the broken passenger window where Tom was waiting to give them both a hand. Just before she slid out into the driving rain, she leaned over and kissed Jack on the cheek.

"Thanks," she said in the accent Jack noticed before. Then she was gone, whisked away by the ambulance crew who stood waiting. Gone, before Jack even got up out of the water after he slid on his stomach through the window. Gone, in a flash of lights and the scream of the siren.

After the ambulance left a few people came by to shake Jack and Tom's hand and there were a few kind words and pats on the back, but Jack seemed like he was someplace else. Tom snapped him from his reverie.

"Did you see those wet Wranglers hug her butt when they

walked her to the ambulance?" Tom's gaze was still on the spot he last saw the flashing lights. Speeding cars and trucks again filled the void of highway and rain continued to come down steadily. When Tom picked himself up from the dirty water, Jack was already in the pickup. Tom rubbed his chin and clambered into the cab. "What'd I say?" he yelled and scowled at his big brother. Jack just gave him a look and drove on through the channels of splashing water towards Dalhart.

In the motel they showered and put on dry clothes. The storm still raged outside and occasional thunder claps could be heard shaking the thin walls of the room.

"Let's go," Jack said, the first words he'd uttered since Tom's unfortunate choice of words.

"Go?" Tom said, surprised. "Hell, Jack, we just got here. Where do you want to go?"

"To the hospital. I gotta see if she's okay." Tom shook his head, felt his chin again, and followed his brother. They drove around Dalhart looking for the hospital. Finally they went out to the highway until they found the sign that said HOSPITAL--NEXT RIGHT. The Emergency Room attendant told them she had just left. They wanted to keep her for observation but she had gotten up as soon as she was unstrapped from the stretcher and high-tailed it out the door.

"She's a tough one," the attendant assured them, "she threw me against the wall on her way out." The attendant was not a small woman. "I think she'll be all right. I just hope I will."

Jack and Tom overtook her about halfway from Dalhart to her car. She wasn't hitchhiking, but they stopped when they came up beside her. At first she just looked their way and continued to walk but then she recognized the pickup and walked back towards them. She wasn't wearing a jacket and her white blouse clung to her like a piece of Saran Wrap. Her long brunette hair fell past her shoulders and was flat on her head and back. Tom had his window down but let his brother do the talking.

"Need a lift?"

"Oh, it's ya'all," she said and jumped in after Tom stepped out for her to take the middle. "I'm going to get ya'all wet."

"We've been wet before." Jack said looking her over, "Where you going? Back to your car?"

"Yeah, I have to get my suitcase and a few things. As soon as I got to the hospital I told them to call the wrecker off. I can't afford it, and I'm afraid the car's totaled anyway." She leaned her head over and twisted her hair into a wad and wrung it out like a washcloth over the rubber matting beside the gearshift. "I was on

my way to Amarillo to look for work," she explained. She wanted to talk and Tom and Jack let her ramble on. She continued to primp her lost-cause hair. "...then all of a sudden that rain started. I was going all over the road. I think I was hydroplaning. Anyway I tried to get on the high spots to drive but then somebody was always coming so I'd get back in my lane. Finally I was trying to get on the high ruts on the shoulder side of the road when I hydroplaned again and the car just flipped. I think I was out of it for a while because I don't remember anything until you stuck your head in the window." She looked at Jack and smiled.

"Then you screamed," Jack added, rubbing the back of his head.

"Yeah, I remember screaming." She seemed unaware that her scream had anything to do with the fact that Jack was fingering the bump at the back of his skull. She went on to tell the brothers of her past. Her name was Trudy. She had graduated from school a couple years ago and had tried college but quit because her "head wasn't into it." She worked training horses for a while in California but that wasn't what she wanted to spend the rest of her life doing either. She grew up in West Texas, on a large ranch outside of Odessa. She didn't do well in school because she didn't apply herself. She was always more interested in "outside things."



The rain continued to come down in torrents and her life story sort of came out with the same splash, the same pulsing rhythm as the rain. Her story seemed inevitable to Jack but somehow novel as well. It was almost as if he'd heard it before but not to the point to where he could predict what came next. What did come next surprised him.

"..anyway, after my parents were killed two years ago, I've had to sort of take responsibility for things. The inheritance tax killed us. We lost the ranch. Then Daddy hadn't taken any life insurance out. He was healthy as a horse, mind you, and never did believe in life insurance.."

Jack interrupted her. "We're here," and pulled to the opposite side of the road. The Pinto lay upside down in the same place as before. He headlights spotlighted it like a great defeated animal. Its brown and white side panel, rippled with dents, shone like the hard-run horse that it was. Trudy began to cry once they brought the pickup to a stop. She cried quietly into her hands and wouldn't look up at the wrecked car.

"Could you get my suitcase out of the trunk for me?" She whispered through her hands to Jack then looked at him with large brown eyes, averted from the shiny underside of her Pinto.

Jack nodded his head and slid down from the pickup into the moist Texas night. When both brothers came into the light and surveyed the damage it looked worse than either of them remembered. Tom walked to one of the tires that pointed awkwardly towards the sky.

"I thought maybe we could tow this to town for her," he offered, "but these two front wheels are too twisted. They'd never turn."

"No," Jack replied, "I think she was smart to save herself the bucks. She can probably get a hundred dollars for it as a junker. Get my flashlight out of the truck, will ya?" Tom walked to the pickup and opened the passenger door.

"You okay?" he asked. Trudy had composed herself and had raised her head so she was taking in the totality of her situation.

"Yeah," she replied calmly, "I'm okay." Her voice was hoarse after the ordeal and Tom felt like consoling her but decided to let his brother handle it.

"Anything you need, besides what's in the trunk?" he asked.

"No, I don't think so. You might look in the glove box, if you can."

Tom pulled the flashlight out from behind the seat and took it to Jack who stood waiting in the rain. The storm

hadn't let up any and both brothers were wet to the bone again.

"I'll get in there and get the keys," Tom volunteered and slid on his back through the passenger window as before. He held the flashlight up out of the water and carefully slid past the shards of glass that clung to the partial window. He entered the car and at once was engulfed in the "bathtub effect" of the ceiling. He saw the keys, still in the ignition, and pulled them from their lofty perch. "Here," he shouted to his brother and reached his arm back through the broken window. Jack took the keys and Tom began looking for other items and personal effects of Trudy's. He felt carefully on the ceiling, shifting his body to accommodate his hand, feeling all parts of the rain-encumbered roof. In the back portion of the car he found pair of boots, rain-soaked but still good. He tossed them from the car. He was ready to get out when he remembered the glove box. He punched the button and opened it carefully. A stack of papers, still dry, fell into his hand. Again he called for Jack's hand then slipped from the confines of the small inverted vehicle. Jack had managed to open the trunk and with some difficulty had pulled the suitcase from inside.

"We done?" Tom asked and looked off in the gloom towards Dalhart.

"Yeah," Jack said throwing the heavy suitcase into the back of his pickup. "Let's get back to the room. I'm ready to hit the hay."

"I bet you are," Tom said sarcastically and purposely avoided his brother's glare.

The three wet travellers drove fast back to town. The traffic had thinned out so Jack put the hammer down and rode the high ruts, avoiding the deep channels of water. Trudy was complacent and Jack and Tom let her have her time. It had been a long day and their collective thoughts revolved around dryness, a warm bed, and a pillow.

Jack and Tom slept together and gave Trudy the other double bed. All of them drifted off quickly and Tom dreamed that he was back in Cody at the Night Rodeo. It was the middle of the summer and he was behind the chutes adjusting his rigging. He sat in a dark corner contemplating his ride. He looked up and Tunnel Vision was slowly making his way towards him. Alarmed at first, then seeing that none of the other cowboys thought this strange, he relaxed and admired Tunnel Vision's easy gait as he coolly sauntered behind the chutes towards him. Dust clouds puffed noiselessly from beneath his huge unshorn hooves. When he got to Tom he lowered his head and nipped gingerly at the bottom of Tom's jeans. Tom

got up and grabbed the halter rope and led him easily down the alley behind the chutes to a gate man, a Hutterite dressed all in black, with a black beard and suspenders. The Hutterite said, "Tanks a lot," and led Tunnel Vision away to the proper pen. Then Tom was on the back of the chutes. He'd been helping other cowboys get set for their rides when Ed Miller said, "It's your turn to ride, Tom. You're on Tunnel Vision." Then Tom was on the horse adjusting his grip. He opened and closed his gloved fist, letting the rosin set up then grabbed the rope hard, turned his hand over and slugged it tighter with his right fist. The grip felt solid. He focused on the horse's ears which were lying flat against the back of his head, and without lifting his head he nodded. The gate swung open and his spurs were right on the horses's front flanks. Tom was in sync with Tunnel Vision and he knew it. Nothing could break his concentration. The horse swung left and lunged forward then crouched and flung himself back to the right while Tom deftly countered the horse's movements with his free arm at the same time raking the horses's front flanks and sides with his spurs.

While the covers of the bed the two brothers occupied were being tossed about by Tom's "raking spurs," Jack gathered up a separate blanket and rolled his body to the

far side of the bed. He had been dreaming of the ranch in Two Dot. Jack found himself driving the grain truck on Highway 87, hauling grain to the elevator in Moccasin. He was tarped up and it was cold so he decided it must be fall. Between Harlo and Judith Gap colorful branches squirted towards the sky. Willows were abnormally bright as he drove through them. Their tan-red hue sharply contrasted against the dismal landscape behind--wind-blown out buildings with flaps of corrugated tin fanning the sky. He turned a corner and was forced to slow down for a lethargic Angus, begging to be hit. A few fence posts later a broken wire and more Angus spilling from the pasture revealed the source. He drove on and finally just before Judith Gap it began to sprinkle. The drops became big and he worried about a hailstorm, but then he remembered that it was fall. All the crops were in. He continued to drive 87 and the rain came down harder. The road was rutted from too much traffic and too little maintenance. Channels of water filled the recesses and the narrow ruts became like ditches. Jack clutched tighter at the wheel of the big truck and bore to the right though there was little to no shoulder on which to bear. He hydroplaned as he crossed the ditches and water sprayed from his two front tires. He steered the load like a vessel across a huge body of water.

Trudy woke suddenly to Jack's loud groan. She could barely make out the two forms in the bed beside her swimming restlessly in the twisted covers and sheets. At first she hadn't remembered the accident. She had been dreaming of the store she stole the eggs from. They hadn't suspected a thing. Then the guy that picked her up. He hadn't been much but he cooked the entire dozen eggs in a piece of tin foil on his manifold while they made love in the back of his van. She remembered how good the eggs tasted that morning. She also dreamed about her father when he was healthy. He had worked for a while, at a service station, and those were her best and most memorable recollections of him. When he'd come home she remembered how she and her sister would sit behind the kitchen door when they heard the porch door open. He would push open the door and she and her sister would slide across the floor. She remembered he used to pull his shoulders back and say, "Yeah, I'm in the oil business. Why do you ask?" and she remembered his tone and how honest and rich it sounded. But then he got sick and one day he died. Trudy found him on the floor of the bathroom. She remembered how her mother sat quietly most of the time, in fear of his death or in fear of her own. She was never the same after that. Trudy awoke again and quickly glanced around the room. The rain has stopped

and it was quiet. Nobody was awake. She knew what she had to do.

Before walking out to the 4:00 morning rush of trucks on Highway 87, Trudy pulled \$358 out of the brothers' billfolds. She also grabbed two silver belt buckles, one that said "All-Around Cowboy--Cody Night Rodeo," and the other said something about the Calgary Stampede.

When Tom woke up he didn't notice at first that she was gone. He peed and was about to get back in bed beside his brother. He looked at the clock. It was six. Then he flashed back on the accident and why he was sleeping with Jack. He looked at her bed. First he thought she was under the covers but he didn't see any breathing. The longer he looked at the bed the more he knew she was gone. She wrapped the pillows in the covers and then molded the bedding to look like a body on its side. He felt the pillows and covers to make sure and confirmed his suspicion.

"Jack," he said loudly, then he noticed his pants on the floor and saw his wallet draped open and the loose flap of his belt still attached to his pants but with no buckle.

"Jack!" He yelled at his brother, "Goddamn it, she robbed us!"

At the arena, just before his gate opened, Tom had a



déjà vu. He had been there before. The horse had been Tunnel Vision though. This was a different horse. It wouldn't be, he thought. Then he remembered the gentleness that he saw in Tunnel Vision and he wondered where he had dreamed this. He shook his head and cleared his thoughts. The horse he was on was called "Smell The Coffee," and his ears were laying straight back against the back of his head. He adjusted his grip. He opened and closed his gloved fist, letting the rosin set up then grabbed the rope hard, turned his hand over and slugged it tighter with his right fist. The grip felt solid. He focused on the horse's ears and without lifting his head he nodded. The gate swung open and his spurs were right on the horse's front flanks. Tom was in sync with the horse and he knew it. Nothing could break his concentration. The horse swung left and lunged forward then crouched and flung himself back to the right while Tom deftly countered the horse's movements with his free arm at the same time raking the horse's front flanks and sides with his spurs. When the buzzer sounded he jumped alongside the hazer's horse and gently swung down to the soft dirt of the arena. He dusted himself off and vaguely looked for his hat among the gate men and stock contractor's crew. A man dressed in black with a black beard and suspenders had his hat. He carefully brushed

it off and handed it to Tom. As Tom walked from the arena the air was thick with applause. He faintly heard the loudspeaker announce his score, an even eighty. Then the crowd resounded again. Their applause and cheers filled the enclosed arena with a happy clamor. This public expression of approbation brought tears to Tom's eyes. He knew he broke the ice with that ride. When he finally reached the back chute area he was greeted by several cowboys wanting to give a congratulatory pat on the back or a handshake. Among them stood his brother. Jack had a smile across his face and shook Tom's hand hard.

"Good ride little brother," he said and then threw his arm around Tom's neck. "Now we won't have to go back to Montana."

"I know," Tom said slapping his brother's back until Jack released him from the friendly head lock. "I think we're going to make it."

## CROW SONG

The bus was crowded. I had to go all the way to the rear to find a place to sit. Then the seat didn't go all the way back. It was the seat that butted up against the bathroom, on the left as you got on and walked back, and once I sat down I recognized the putrid chemical smell of the toilet behind me.

I sat next to a girl who looked like she didn't want to be bothered. She wouldn't look me in the eyes, and she had little headphones on. She fondled a Black Sabbath tape case, and from the sounds of it, she had it cranked up almost full blast. I noticed a button on her jean

jacket which said, "I'm not experiencing P.M.S.--I'm always this bitchy."

I turned on the overhead light that pointed into my lap and stretched my legs into the aisle. First I put the heel of one of my boots on the arm rest of the seat diagonally in front of me, but I accidentally bumped a lady's arm and got a look that could kill so I just went for the floor with my oversized legs. I pulled Louis L'Amour from my back pocket and began to read.

At Butte we had an hour lay-over. I walked down to the M&M to have a couple drinks. I was tired and wanted the insurance of a nap as we drifted across the snowy Montana landscape. The sidewalks were slippery. A recent chinook had melted the snow just enough to put a glaze over everything when it got cold again. When I got there, it was warm inside. There were only a few people bellied up to the long mahogany bar. I ordered a shot of Ten High and a glass of beer.

At seven o'clock, seven-fifteen bar time, I threw down the third shot and guzzled the last glass of Rainier. I hurried the three blocks back to the bus. I fell once on the ice and jammed my wrist trying to catch myself, but I made it to the station before the bus left. The girl was still sitting against the window when I reached my seat. Her headphones were clamped loosely around her neck, and this time she looked at me when I sat down.

"Where you headed," I asked her.

"Roundup," she said.

"Oh, that's not far. You must have to transfer somewhere." She had black hair, and she almost looked Indian, but she was so pale I decided that she was either all white or just part Indian. Not many of us were all Indian anymore. I was three-quarters Crow and a quarter Sioux which made me one hundred percent Indian, but I wasn't a pure breed. The Sioux had always warred with the Crow, and when I was smaller I was teased by my Crow counterparts. Not so much any more, but I never really got over the teasing and insults I received. I always hated the Sioux in me and wished I could cut off a leg or an arm to make myself one hundred percent Crow. I'd rather go around without a limb than have that Sioux blood in me.

"I said where are you going?" The girl had been talking to me. I wasn't thinking straight.

"Crow Agency," I said. "How about you?"

"I told you--Roundup."

"Oh yeah. How many hours?"

"I think about three more. But five miles on one of these things feels like fifty."

"No kidding. I went to a bar back there in Butte instead of eating supper. You can probably smell it on me, but it's the only way I can stand riding on a bus."

I was going to my mother's funeral. She was sixty-one and had been sick just a couple weeks. The doctors in Billings had diagnosed her as having cancer, the same thing that killed my father a few years earlier. I wondered if it might have been contagious.

The girl was good looking. The more I looked at her, the more I thought she was part Indian. She was nice to me. That made me think she was part Indian at least. She had a gob of make-up on and lavender eye shadow thick over each eye. I looked her body over when she asked me to hold one sleeve for her as she pulled out of her jean jacket. She caught me staring at her breasts.

We continued down the road, eastbound. I found out the girl's name was Lisa. She said she wasn't Indian, but I think she might have been part and just didn't want to admit it. Lots of people don't want to admit that they're Indian when they really are. She helped me drink from the pint of Ten High I'd gotten at the last minute before I left the M&M. By the time we got to Livingston, for a 15-minute coffee break, Lisa and I were lit. We were giggling and had to watch ourselves because the lady in front of me, that I accidentally kicked, was trying to sleep. I told her, "go back to sleep, Grandma," and she really gave me a look. She didn't like Indians I could

tell, and after I said that, I really didn't blame her much. My mother was dead, and that meant I didn't have a place to go home to so I didn't care much about anything anymore.

Inside the café at Livingston the room was bright. I bought a can of Pepsi to drink part of when I was in the bathroom. I pulled the pint from my coat pocket and poured the rest in the can. The can started to spill so I drank off the top then poured the rest of the pint in the can. It was strong, but I wanted it that way. I took a long piss then headed back to the bus.

On the bus, I slept between Livingston and Big Timber. I dreamed that I came home, to my house in Crow Agency. When I walked in the back door, I heard the front door slam and felt the rush of air that occurs in that house when the front and back doors are open at the same time. There was a blond-haired man sitting on the back of our couch which had been moved into the kitchen from the living room. He looked surprised but smiled at me as he sat there on the back of the couch which was facing the big picture window. Normally the kitchen table and chairs sat there, and I looked into the living room, and they had been placed in front of the picture window in there. The man explained how he and his wife used to

live in the same house, years ago, in another town. He said they might get the house back, and that's what he was doing there.

He looked awkward sitting on the back of the couch like that. I looked out the kitchen window and saw my mother walking up to the front door.

I woke up before I found out if we kept the house or if the man ever left or what. Then I thought about my mother dying and that the house went to the government. I thought it was bad enough losing my mother but wondered why they had to take the house too. They said it was because she was "financially indebted to the B.I.A." All I knew was the funeral was tomorrow at 11:00 a.m., and I had to quit my job to go back to a house that didn't belong to me to get my family's belongings. I dug the obituary out of my billfold and read it again.

"Edna Falls Down/CROW AGENCY/Edna Falls Down, 61, of Crow Agency, died of cancer on Sunday, Dec. 3, at her home/Funeral arrangements will be handled by the Bureau of Indian Affairs/Memorial services will be 11:00 a.m. Wednesday, Dec. 6 at St. Mary's Cemetery, Lodge Grass."

"What'ya readin'?" Lisa was trying to focus on the little slip of paper I was holding. I stuffed it into my front pocket.

"Nothing," I said. I saw that she'd removed the Pepsi can from my hand while I was asleep.



"Is there any more of that left?" I asked.

"Another couple sips. Here."

In Missoula I'd quit drinking, and my mother had been proud when I held my job for so long. I finished off the can of Pepsi.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Marvin."

"Marvin what?"

"Falls Down." That reminded me, and I moved my wrist and felt the pain from when I jammed it in Butte. She laughed, but then realized I wasn't joking. I laughed along with her anyway. I think she was laughing because as soon as I said my name, I grabbed my swollen wrist.

"I'm a Crow," I told her, "that's why I'm going to Crow Agency." She smiled and didn't say anything else for a while. Her eyes were glassy from the Pepsi and bourbon. After a while she fell asleep with her head against my shoulder.

I thought about how I had quit the job it had taken me so long to get. Nobody wanted to hire an Indian, but when I had finally gotten on with Slag Construction, everyone was surprised that I stayed as long as I did. My mother told me she was proud of me, and I guess that's probably why I stayed on so long. Once my father passed away, she didn't have much to live for so I did it for

her. I was happier too, especially since I quit drinking so much. Before it was easy to go to Hardin or Billings and hit the bottle with all my pals, but it wasn't much of an existence. Then, when I did finally go to Missoula, I quit drinking altogether and held onto my job. I didn't feel like I had to tell my boss why I needed the time off. The fact that my mother died was my business alone, and I didn't want anyone asking me about it. The foreman seemed like he was looking for an excuse anyway so I just told him I would quit if I couldn't get a couple days off for some personal business. He never seemed to like me anyway.

We hit Reedpoint, and there was a big dip in the highway. Lisa flopped over and hit against the window.

"Whoa," she said too loudly, rubbing at her eyes with the backs of her knuckles.

"Just a bump," I assured her, "I think we're getting close to Billings. I'm gonna have a drink when I get there. You game?"

"Bummings, you mean." She was still rubbing her eyes.

"Huh?"

"Bummings not Billings." She said it like she was cranky and impatient with me.

"Oh yeah. I get it." I said, even though I didn't have the faintest what she was talking about.

"But we got to switch buses," she said.

"I know. They're always late. Besides I remember this bar real close to the bus station."

"Okay," she said.

"Good. You won't have any trouble. You can even get served if you're under age there."

"I got a fake I.D. anyway. How much further you think?" I didn't answer her because she got up and lurched back to the little compartment behind us. I could hear her raise the lid and her urine splash into the blue chemical water four feet below.

The Gilded Lily is just on the south side of the tracks, only about four blocks from the bus terminal. I saw some old friends of mine there--Elvis Old Horn and Duke Bird-in-ground from Lodge Grass where we all went to school. Duke used to go to college in Billings, at Rocky, but he never finished his freshman year. He was on a basketball scholarship, but he didn't like it so he quit. He said the coach didn't let him play "Indian ball," and besides, he was the only Indian on the team so he just quit. Said he made better money just being an Indian living on the reservation anyway, and he didn't have to do nothing.

We ran back to the bus station. Time had gotten away

from us and both our bus connections, hers northbound and mine south, had left quite a while ago. And besides, I didn't have enough money to afford a ticket to Crow Agency. I had a checkbook with money in it but taking an out of town check from an Indian, especially a drunk one, was next to impossible--even in the Indian bars, like the Gilded Lily.

Lisa was in no shape to get on a bus anyway so she decided to go with me until the next day. I told her I'd take care of her. We went back and found Elvis Old Horn and Duke Bird-in-ground. Elvis had a car, and when he found out Lisa needed to get home, he offered to take her.

"We played them in basketball," he said, "you know Ronny Fuller? He was a good shot." Elvis and Duke were almost as drunk as Lisa and me, but we headed north out of Billings anyway. When we were in the Heights, Elvis looked at the gas gauge and decided to put some fuel in the beast before heading out of town. Between us, we scraped up \$4.50, and Duke pumped it into Elvis' tank.

We stopped at the Roadside Inn on our way up and bought more beer, but Lisa didn't feel like drinking anymore. We got her home, but instead of being happy, her parents looked real sad for her and just hugged her and kept asking her over and over again where she'd been. Lisa

just cried and let herself be hugged. It didn't help that she was with three Indians, but I thought it was pretty nice of Elvis Old Horn to offer her the ride. They pulled her in the house before I could even say good-bye to her. Then they shut the door on Elvis' arm as he tried to shake Lisa's father's hand.

After seeing her parents, I could tell she wasn't Indian after all, but she sure was nice. And beautiful. I decided she must have been gone a good long time the way her parents made over her.

Before we left Roundup, we stopped and got more gas. Elvis told the gas station attendant that he knew Ronny Fuller and that he used to play basketball so he took my check. On the way back, we took the wrong road, and before we knew it we were in Lavina. But under his seat Elvis found a map of Montana, and while we were looking at it, Duke went into a bar and came out with half a case of Lucky. He said he got some strange looks from the cowboy bartender, but when he showed him the money, he went and got the beer. Duke had asked for Bud but didn't say anything when he brought him Lucky. He said he thought we must have been supposed to drink Lucky because we were so lucky to get my check cashed, and he even cashed it for twenty more than the amount. I tried to show him my balance, but he didn't want to see it. He

just acted like he wanted us out of there. I think he thought we were going to rob him or something. I don't think they get too many Indians in Roundup.

We saw by the map that we could go through Broadview back to Billings easier than turning back to Roundup so we drove on. It was getting pretty late by this time, and we were pretty high from the beer, but we stopped and got more at Broadview anyway. I went in this time, and there were just a couple people in there. I bought another half case of Lucky, and when I got in, Elvis and Duke had the dome light on and were looking at the map again.

"It's getting late and we're tired," Elvis said, "so we were thinking. Maybe we should camp out somewhere until morning."

"We found a lake that's just a few miles from here," Duke said. "It's even named after you, Marvin. It's called Halfbreed Lake." Both Duke and Elvis laughed and patted me on the back. I knew they were joking, but I didn't feel like laughing.

"What do you mean, camp out?" I said, "We're only about forty miles from Billings. Besides it's too cold to camp out. We'd freeze to death."

"Hey, man," Duke said, "we're Indians. Indians don't freeze."

"I don't care," I said, "it's December, and we're not camping out. Besides I have to get back to Crow Agency."

"What's the hurry?" Elvis said, but he started the engine and eased the big car back onto the road again.

Nobody said anything for a while, and I almost pulled the obituary out of my front pocket. I decided that Elvis and Duke must have just been hanging out in Billings since they hadn't heard about my mother. I wasn't going to spoil our reunion though so I just kept my mouth shut.

We got back to Billings at about one in the morning. Elvis had swerved a few times before entering the city limits, and I'd laid off the beer for the last few miles so I had him stop and let me drive. They had me take them to an old apartment house on South Avenue where they went in to sleep. It belonged to Charlie Running Wolf, another friend of ours from Lodge Grass. He wasn't home yet so Duke and Elvis found places on the bed and couch.

Elvis let me borrow his car when I told him I wanted to go on to Crow that night. I told him I'd have it back to him the next day, but he'd fallen asleep on a mattress with no sheets on it so I just left.

I was doing fine until just out of Hardin. I guess Elvis' old beast really drank up the gas because the motor began to chug and cough, and I looked at the fuel

gauge, and the needle was pointing to empty. I pulled the coasting car off the side of the Interstate and turned the key off to make the red lights on the dashboard go out.

All I had on was a jean jacket and, unlike Duke's theory that Indians didn't get cold, I was one cold Indian. The temperature had fallen, and it was spitting snow. The wind blew down from the sky and, when I looked up into the air, the snowflakes stung my eyes.

I tried hitchhiking for a while, but at two o'clock in the morning, all that was on the Interstate were big semis, and they never stopped at night. The trail wind was so strong from them that one of them knocked me down it was going so fast. I caught myself with the same hand I'd fallen on way back in Butte which seemed like days ago. My wrist was swollen when I pulled my sleeve up and looked at it, but it didn't hurt long because it was so cold.

I don't know how long I walked before I came to a big culvert. I knew it was just fourteen miles from Hardin to Crow Agency, but I figured I was only about halfway so I stopped and climbed down the hillside and through a tight barbed-wire fence into the protection of the culvert. I hadn't realized how cold I was until I got inside where the wind stopped pressing against my



face and hands. I could stand up it was so big, and a creek ran through it, but it was frozen so I walked across the ice down the length of the big tin pipe. There was a moon out, and I looked up at it from the other end of the culvert. I then walked back to the middle, where it was dark, and sat down. It was quiet there, except for an occasional semi going by, and I sat down and clenched my arms around my chest. I was shaking and my teeth were chattering.

I stayed in this position for a long time, and I felt my body slowly thawing out. My teeth continued to chatter. I felt tired and wanted to go to sleep. I wanted to dream again to see if I could bring back the dream I'd had on the bus to see if we kept the place or what. I began to chant an old song I remembered from my grandfather, my lower jaw providing the cadence. It felt good to sing, and the louder I sang, the warmer I became. I forgot that I knew this song, and the words came easily to me now. The syncopated rhythm and ancient words slid easily off my tongue and reverberated from the walls of the corrugated tin cave in which I lay.

Then I was dreaming, and I was warm again. The only pain I felt was in the tips of my fingers when I moved them so I tried to keep them still. The blond man had left the house in Crow Agency, and I was lying on the red

sofa in front of the big picture window in the kitchen. I saw two rangy longhorn bulls grazing in the front yard. My mother was walking up the sidewalk between the longhorns to the front door. The bulls backed away from her as she approached, and when she opened the front door, I heard the back door slam. There was the rush of air that occurs in that house when the front and back doors were open at the same time.

My mother sat next to me on the red sofa and ran her fingers through my long black hair. She talked to me as she stroked my hair. She talked about the old days when the buffalo were plenty and times were good. She told me about the excitement everyone felt when the warriors returned from a good hunt with meat and song. She talked about honor and passion. As she talked this to me, she continued running her fingers through my hair. Her fingernails felt good. Then I heard the whine of a semi's tires as they quickly receded into the distance.