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Morning Aperture

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M. A., Purdue University, 1984

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Montana

1986

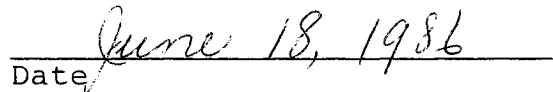
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Morning Aperture

Awake two hours early, you hear rain
beat gravel outside. It didn't wake you
but now it won't let you sleep.
You drink a Pepsi at your desk
and tie flies from rooster hackle and thread
so thin the fish won't know until it spits.

As a boy, you waited dressed under blankets
for your father's voice at your bed--
your gear careful in a row
and sandwiches hard in their sack.
You don't remember fish exactly,
just hours awake in the dark
anticipating the surface.

You wonder if there was a boy.
You want to feel your legs skinny
and deep in the cold water,
numbing insect bites and leaving
a tidemark across your thighs.
You want your hands small gripping
once more a river in suspense.

A picture hangs above your desk:

a boy poses outside a chicken coop
in sweatshirt and morning cowlick.
Palms extend--a brown egg cupped in each.
He is no longer you. He belongs in a frame
holding years up to a stranger
with hands steady as the rain.

.

On Your Birth

(For Katherine Olivia Sullivan)

Rich sediment

obscures your hair.

Your chest shines in oil.

A wide face

sponging color

beaks a nose out

like a wood chip.

Excavators have

tugged you loose

from dark folds fat

with time and moss

caving heavy

in on you and

in on you.

Your root coils

back to a spot

it can't quite hold.

Wet relic,

you are magic

from our own dark

warmth. You name us

family. And

we, Katherine
Olivia,
in this new air
and new light
hold you like a fat seed
taking pulse from our hands
and beginning
at once like your name
to branch out.

Spring Robin

Something had gotten to it--
a cat, a fall
into the sharp Caragana,
bad genes. Its breast
was bald,
nearly transparent,
pumped up like a champion
bullfrog's throat.
I filled a washtub
with water from the garden hose.
I took a milk carton,
cut holes the size of coins
in all sides,
put stones in the bottom.
I set the bird in
and closed the top.
I didn't know how long to wait
after the bubbles,
how perhaps amphibious
this bird was.
I knew it was in there
on its back,
that big breast

pressed high in the wax folds
with the last air.
I pulled the carton out
and water ran
as through a colander.
I looked for disks of grey
sinking down the sides.
Then I was afraid to look.
I knew already
something of sky
lay at the bottom
like coffee grounds.
I took the carton arm's length
to the alley
and set it in the trash.
Sweat broke in my face.
I had to bend over,
my blood loose,
floaty.
I put a hand to my throat.
Under my palm,
a hard head bobbing.

Hard Evidence

I had the best arm in my grade school. No kidding. But it never developed and even now I can still throw only just that far. I can't believe the places we played, how small they've become-- the cramped little boulevard where we played out games full-scale of Johnny U and Roman Gabriel. We played there until the city planted saplings and wires to prop them up. Today you couldn't get one pass through those branches.

Three of us were playing cutthroat football there one day when we saw a falling cloud of paper. We watched the litter fluttering for minutes down like wounded birds. Fliers, we thought, for some grand opening. They were way up there. As they grew, tumbled down, they began to spread until only one, big now as a swan, tumbled into our area. We ran underneath, drifting with it for three blocks as it turned like a loosed sail over and over, sometimes rising a bit. Then it snared itself in a maple.

I climbed that tree with branches shimmying red leaves loose around me, my friends beneath

like some safety net. I reached out to the sail and pulled in a strange map--all blue lines and numbers and, where a mountain should have been, a single patch of blood blossoming like a lake.

We heard later about the planes colliding, how any evidence should be turned in to the county courthouse.

I couldn't stop thinking how for minutes we watched it float without knowing. How fast hard evidence falls! Who saw the wings? A fuselage? The bodies?--four scattered through lumberyards, one dragged dead in her chute down the Clark Fork, another plopped onto the Catholic high school's football field. To be dead in midsentence or midthought then sucked from the scene so even boys wonder what even happened.

Evel Knievel was still something of a local phenomenon. Later that week he came over from Butte to jump fourteen pickups. He filled our biggest parking lot. He warmed up for half an hour circling around the lot and taking practice runs to the edge of the ramp. When he finally roared into the air over the trucks the crowd roared back. Then his bike did a little tail, started to come into the landing slightly sideways. He crashed. The crowd held a hush then worried itself in murmur as Knievel lay there. Another roar flew out as the man who had broken every bone in his body

at least once rose and waved a good arm.

I thought about that crash, too. How his bike touched, tumbled, and flung him free just like a motorcycle crashing a daredevil on a ramp. There was nothing else it could have looked like. And I saw this is how it is done then. We must create ourselves to be unmistakable. That night I went to bed and studied the map I would not turn in. I held the red blossom out in front of me and prepared for flight.

Homecoming

The parking lot you're lying in is quiet
except for tired music leaking note
by note from a window. Music
draws you away from the deep ache,
carries you two thousand miles
to Rock Springs, Wyoming, where you spent years
the only good girl a coal town could produce.
So good that the day you left for college
your high school principal drove you
to the train and gave you Roget's Thesaurus
hard-bound. You spent the rest of Wyoming
looking up all the words that meant fuck.
Through the Midwest you didn't need Roget's--
your first man, black as every coal car dragging
life through the veins of Rock Springs. An end
to those years in one rocking on rails cast.

Now you see the tracks to Rock Springs clearly
but the town as faint as the music above.
You feel the blood leaving you
as the music enters. Rock Springs
won't know you, won't see the city men
or the big smile on that porter's face
when he called you Firecat.
Rock Springs won't see the music cool

in your face, shining white against blacktop
like the hard heart of an onion.

The Second Chance

I'm back
and it feels like for good
this time. There's a night
usually in summer
when I tear at my clothes
and bring old debts to count
and all nights are arctic
dark as days--a bit of wolfing the sheep.
But this time I'm past July
and August
and all my clothes hang
except one scarf
to kill
the grey trying
always
to be pink.

A Silent Whistle

A wooden grain
runs through the face of night.
Willows scream solitude
in their beds.
One willow from my youth
is a whistle.
Its music:
a long funereal note
at such a pitch
only dogs long dead
can hear it.
I see them stir,
tilt their heads, and ask
if that's the same willow
you cut for me--
the one I held
in my miniature life's
miniature hands, treasured
because it came from you.
The dogs cringe as if a time
of life were beating on their bones
saying they could have lived.

You and I hear that whistle
but aren't telling.
Never tell.
The whistle is mine,
I have it.
Is yours because you carved it.
Listen.
Those willows scream
that dead dogs don't bark.

Tavern Literati

It began when we walked in
and I said
"Hemingway wrote this joint."
"No," you said,
"that's Kesey's moose
above the door,"--its baseball
cap tilting, an Oly can
jammed between its lips--"and
that's got to be a Kesey tomato
sitting at the end of the bar."

A one-eyed man walks in
but you say
two. I say
maybe one functional,
one useless,
but you say
two functional.
The left is withered
like a prune,
I say.
A function in similitude,
you say.

Two beers from now
I'm going to yell
"Hey prune eye," and
ask if he would squint
his similitude down the bar
at that Tiger Lily twitch.
But he gets up,
walks down to her, whispers
what must be a coital "Shazam"
and Lily & Prune Eye
leave together,
and I'm left with you
stilting your drink
through a straw.

The Free Enterprise Health Spa

That one over there has rosary beads
to count arthritis in knotted hands.
Our Fathers with an abacus for pain.
Her grandsons play down the hill
filling the sage with Batman and Robin
and piss they had to hold back in the Rambler.
The man who just came in wears a tan wrinkled
like winter branches.

A girl in the parking lot watches him.
She sits behind his Cadillac's windshield,
The Arizona plates lie.

Another man, dressed in the blackness
of his faith, eases out of an old Dodge.

His wife's fat legs follow and hit
the running board
like black porcine hooves.

He assists her to the office
where the owner registers them with deft
little hands and always a friend of a friend
from their hometown. His mongrel bitch
stands up in her groaning corner.

Eight fat pups drop and suck on air.

He knows them all by name.

Dream Assumptions

...and if I'm on a farm then it's with a hammer
in my hand, and if it's a hammer
then I'm on the roof
and somebody is on the other side,
and the bright sun blurs the grains of the planks,
the sun on his face on my back,
and the Powder River cuts its bank right behind me,
and the river and hammering on his side,
and mine, sound
like a huge clock ticking out:
"To compete. To compete. To compete...."

Fishing Rock Creek

(For Rod Heckaman)

The ponderosa hangs needled hands
over the bank, pitching away from willows
and stickerbushes
like a rich relative.
You sit in its lumpy shade.
Your tired eyes are upstream where pinched canyon
and water become cul-de-sac.

You told us over trout and canned chow mein
how night made the brush Vietnamese.
Vietnamese, and I see faces:
a girl screaming naked down a road,
a village in a ditch,
or that simple Saigon execution--sorry grimace,
black shocks rising, pistol smoking
in an ear. Vietnam
was never landscape.

You try to remember only the duck boys
riding herd with sticks. Or huge
water buffalo wading
into the Mekong,
just their nostrils breaking

the surface,
and the boys abroad,
gripping the rough heads
with bare soles, gliding
on the water,
standing perfectly,
like ornaments.

Last night canyon crowded
starlight sent before Christ,
just reaching us, outliving stars
now black as these basalt slides
tailing into the creek. Know stars
for their thin light. Know stars
are decoy, absorbed in this daylight
like guilt in church.
Starlight is not ours,
is rightfully some Cro-Magnon's or Hannibal's
or that Saigon suspect's, his head wincing
away like the past.

Fishing The Heart Of The River

I see creek written in reeds and willows
then creek the way rocks have seen it
for a thousand years. It has repeated
the thin sky, mirrored and held its banks.
I find our stretch--a decade old to us,
something we peeled away from a stream
to wrap stories in rainbow, cutthroat, brown.
I cast a benign fly to trout. A rainbow
takes out line, flashes color in every foot.
I see myself and sky stand over him with net.
I sweep him to the bank. I know his smile.
I cut him live and hold his guts like jewels
pounding to my chest.

Cold In The Wilderness

This winter night
cracks speech and burns
the throat back
to a spot you know
is lung. Sky is blackest
blue. Spokes of light
come straight from stars
or the moon fat
and sharp in this simple air.
Atmosphere is a sham.
Raise your arms
and touch space.
Feel them weightless.
How hands want
out. How tendons tear
for that darker blue.
Know the moon at night
is God and see his face
round over creeks
in shadows like knuckles
blackening salmon
to sleep.

Think of noon.
The sun cold,
shadow dark
and fine as blueprints.
Know the moon by day
is an eagle. See him
glide over snow
dragging his shape
beneath like a black blade
undulating.
Watch him drop
and splash a salmon
out of its depth.
Feel talons.
Shout to the ascent,
to the leaking away.
Raise your arms.
In just a spark
see sunlight bang
off belly.

Song

Grackles

tip notes.

Oaken

caskets

to acorns

marbling

the ground.

Cold

Thrushes

plait

meadow

bushes fast

in grey

fat

leaves.

Winter Poem

I threw the poem
on the fire
watching it
at last bouyant
lift white
then
with a hint
then burst
of sepia
drop
buck
catch blue
till yellow
punched through
flapping lariats
loud as surf
whipping
tormenting
leaving rumped satin
black
delicate
and forsaken
to bark.

Hosting The Beavers

From this clinic

I can see the huge chunks
of snow still melting in the mountains,
waiting like salmon
to make a run.

That is where it starts--
past the fat rivers and up canyons
where waters, crystal
on crystal, gather,
gush in chutes,
cut igneous tracks, fork
and unfork and are a creek
trotting itself through cottonwoods
and meadows like a green horse.

I hug a knee to my chest.
A finger as big as a scroll
is shoved up my ass,
clicking high in my head
the clear purpose
of their flat wide tails,
like stovelids, shielding
their inside world.

And a world it must be.
I have seen their work--
crazed water stilled and widened
into ponds like paw prints,
mammoth trees felled and kneeling
at stumps over mounds
of their own white tears,
gnawed concentrically
from their hearts.

Like wide, white teeth pinching
life from bark, things
tear in my stomach, splinter
my guts. Parasites, they think,
sent by beaver,
time-released, bobbing
microscopic from beaver shit
to my own chilled lips--
invisible,
until one day
they quicken
and ball me up like an egg.

I swallow four feet
of encapsulated
string, one end taped to my face.
I must wait like a cat

five hours, the string uncoiling
in my bowels, winding
itself into place.

They say the gag reflex
is the trick
when they pull it out
to check, finally,
their catch.

I think about beaver country,
how a life might pass now
without seeing that rippling
of back into water.

I think about a ranch
I worked hard on one summer.

The Resistol hat I bought
with my first wages
tipped back high
on my head for a week.

Then--one day the hot work
and my belly too young even for beer,
and my puke knitted bale by bale
into a looser and looser haystack.

The dark ride home on the Greyhound.

The stops in Absarokee and Columbus
and the crumpled hat--100% beaver--

spinning into the blackness
just outside Laurel.

The string pulls on my face,
biting into the corner of my mouth.
I pull up some slack
and with it a green bitter taste.
My insides are alive
with climbing this rope.
The string tugs.
I am pond.

On The Wing

A pheasant landed right
in front of my car--
no reason, no warning, no
business even flying in town.
Still, it lit, head high and neck
daring its curve at chrome.

I'd like to say it looked at me
in some way as if to say a thing,
but it didn't look at all,
as if to say, look, here's time
fat as a fluffed pillow
waiting the soft thud of a head.

I ran right over it.

Got out,
and frowned like Fatima
at the pheasant running,
its head way out front,
teetering its S-shape over legs,
looking like a well pump handle
on the lam.

An explosion of rust,
and the bird casual as a moonshot
rose, quitting asphalt forever.

A Lying Poem

Still it comes. Bars closed,
whore on the towel--thirty dollars
not enough to remake her bed.
The spread with hearts and cupids
mocking. Mocking her, you'd like to think.
Her name's not really Jerri
but she sells these lies. Thirty bucks
then let her lie. You'll know the feeling.
What if you thought every girl made monuments
of your lust but stole them
when she let you lie. Perhaps a friend
drowning in a fog but all your strength
invested in that lie.
Years ago with your first big trout
you shared truth. You whipped
and cracked its head on rock,
felt your knuckles lock a scaled
death in that vibrant bone. Death
slipped back and forth then fixed
itself behind dislodged eyes.
You used to keep miller moths
in Mason jars, wouldn't kill a firefly
even for the glow. Negroes were good

because once a black Chicago cop
gave you an ice cream bar. Girls
were other little people, not something
to do or a place you'd like to be.
But that's not yours anymore. You locked
that behind the lies of juke boxes,
stealing lyrics from bad songs, living
them as if to say "no" were to find yourself
alone. Alone: Thirst finds you drinking.
Whores say "no" and laugh.

Letter To Mary Ann From Indiana

I'm Hoosier now. I think in long, empty lines,
lines furrowed through corn, curved elliptically
over the few slopes the Midwest could hunch its back for--
the land spread so thin that a mountain in Tippecanoe
would starve the folks in Beanblossom or Bloomington.
I remember our backs hunching a bit last year
as we preened Derrida and Deconstruction
from under our skin and had cake and frosting
the day we knew for sure Wordsworth was dead.
This year we are poisoning dramatic modernists. They fight
hard as trout, especially absurdists, as if their lives
mean more than those afraid to give stage
to their obsessions. I find I am afraid to set out
in a boat. Hoosiers needn't practice to drown.

As I write, I see you at your kitchen table--
eight weeks of life spinning thought and guts
into half-focused vomit--reading this and, I hope, saying,
"Damian, you're stretching a thing or two, which is okay,
but you cannot, even for the sake of a poem, invade
my kitchen from a thousand miles away and spin my thoughts
with vomit. You only write three poems a year, choose
different goddamn material than me." You know I'd like to.

It scares me. We don't get much turbulence down here.
Things are smooth--no one really worth spinning with vomit.
Once in a while a tornado condescends to swath death
down the Wabash. Our state lottery. We wait
like aphids on flypaper to find our fortunes rise
above our planted lives.

Across curves, past mountains given of thicker soil,
you have hunched your freckled back and hiss
for your fetus. You know something that insistent,
that sure of its seed, will have its season.
So sure, it hammers always at you what life means.
Spreads your options wide as your belly for you to see.
Says choose. It knows most, knows its best days,
too, are already behind. You, in your kitchen
or under salty stars, have sprung tears from our cold
Indiana moon. Your body so quick into change, telling you
you were once somehow safe. I feel pain
but not your fever. I want the heat but the moon
says it is yours. At night I walk this gridded landscape,
long lines to you, Mary Ann, down rows of corn.
Stalks with ears poised like clubs cradle my shoulders.
Silk leaking out shines of the moon, and tassels
hiss at my back as I pass.

Depoe Bay, Oregon, 1976

(For John Blanchette and Michael Sullivan)

You and I walked the ridge to Seal Point.
Our trail broke into a small cove--round
rock walls spun with greys and greens
sprayed there by the sea.
The tide slapped hard at the sand,
made its run to tickle basking kelp,
lapped their bulbs, tugging them
into the bay. Teakwood ambled stair
by stair down the rock and poked
itself into the sand.

We saw her hunkering with her back to us.
Wide and bobbing on heels, her hips billowed
out like round denim sails, bulged her jeans
to a sexy bruise on the beach.
Those hips asked us to forget
our summer work in dusty foundries,
to forget teenage girls in L.A. suburbs
rubbing their sex on with oils,
to forget this trip up the coast,
the night drunk on Pismo Beach
where we stood before dark breadbox

houses and demanded women as so many slices,
and casual, as if the man with the rifle
came out to ask if we preferred rye
or whole wheat. We ran from him,
played combat in the dunes and passed out
thinking sand is nothing to die on.

Three days later and this different beach.
We were drawn down teakwood
by the motion of her hips. We saw
her hands moving in front of her
but still no face--just hair hanging
straight blinders. Then we saw.
At her feet: a dead gull weathered flat.
The woman stroked the bird, preening
its brokenness clean of dirt
and dislodged down.

We were a ring of fascination--our eyes
on her, hers never lifting from the grey bird,
and the bird's one free eye fixed beyond
the cove, out over the ocean.
We stared and would not forget.
We turned to Depoe Bay to watch taffy
fashioned in store windows and bloated seals
leaping for smelt in their tiny tubs.

The Ice Age

My first drink bowed to your older thirst.

Lucky Lager in short fat bottles.

Mornings we swamped a bar for a fin
apiece, beer nuts, and unwitting tips
stuck to linoleum. Arnold, our names
were mud before our own hands knew dirt.

Now our statute of limitations is miles.

Missoula sits between Hoosier cornfields
and your rock Depoe Bay like dusk settling
into night, closing the valley on our youth,
on the years before our drinking, on us sitting
in dumb rows of fifth graders, oddball ulcers

burning our bellies. The notes from our mothers.

I'll tell you now, the baby food tasted good.

Today, I smell it and the valley dilates,
grows big as Indian song pouring
legend over legend. Missoula
lost its lake in the Ice Age, spread

Flathead to Sweetgrass like alluvial
placenta. Winters, a light snowfall

licks old shorelines to life, raises bald
faces off mountains, Missoula
holds us, Arnold, as it never held a lake,
tracking us home with our own grey song.

What God Wants You To See

Tucker hadn't looked, but by the clomping of boots and jangling of spurs, he knew there'd be a cowboy hat. What kind of jerk wore spurs out in public, he wondered. He kept shuffling the cards, cut them, and looked up at a tall deeply tanned man, about sixty, wearing a straw hat--the cowboy's working model. The hat was grimy yellow with a brim vertical on the sides and curved down in the front and back. A sweat stain, three inches wide and looking like cowshit, obscured the band. He held a shot and beer in one hand and a twenty in the other.

"Stud poker. We've got two seats open, sir," Tucker said.

"Yeah, I'll take the one next to the soldier," the cowboy said, sitting to Al's right. Al was a regular. To most people he looked somewhat menacing. He always wore battle fatigues and always with his huge Oldtimer hunting knife strapped to his hip.

Tucker counted a stack down in front of the cowboy. The cowboy didn't look at the chips, just held a frown on Tucker. Tucker hadn't seen him before.

"Are you familiar with the rules, sir?" he asked.

"Hey, I've played before," the cowboy said.

Tucker dealt. Tucker always said as little as possible to the ones that might get mean, especially if they were

drinking. He hated to give them material. He always remembered what Bonnessy had told him years ago about assholes: the nice thing is they never try to hide it from you.

"Your bet, sir," Tucker said, leaning towards some old guy he'd also never seen in The Wire before.

"I'm high?" the old guy asked.

"Yessir, that's right." Tucker could see the old guy was going to make him play the hand for him. He was going to act dumb and old.

"How much are the reds?"

"A quarter," Tucker said. "Didn't they explain the game to you before you sat down, sir?" Tucker was trying to hold enough edge in his voice to let the regular players know he was not going to let the old guy slow down the game.

"Four bits," the old guy said, pushing in two red chips.

Tucker pulled in the bets of the other players. Tucker was tall, with arms long enough to reach any spot on the table. Most of the dealers sat down to deal, but Tucker stood. He dealt quickly and called out each hand. "King jack ten is high, sir, your bet."

"I'm still high?"

"Yup. What's the bet?" Tucker asked. The other players were all staring at him. The cowboy had never really stopped.

"How much are the blues?" the old guy asked.

"Oh for Christ's sake, hurry him up will ya? Some of us would like to play another hand." This came from Rita, an old fat woman with orange hair who groused from the minute she sat down.

"A dollar. If you don't hurry your play up, sir, I'll have to deal you out."

"Hey, get off his back and let him play," the cowboy said. He grinned at Tucker as if he'd just said, "Hey, let's be reasonable."

Tucker ignored him. Both his job and the house's profit depended on speed. He pointed the deck at the old guy's cards.

The old man reached for his stack and Tucker saw that the guy might be playing dumb but he wasn't playing old. His hands were that rumpled brown and blue of liver spots and puffy veins. The forearms were hairless and white and the flesh hung on the bones with a grayness near the surface like dumplings.

"Two bucks," the old guy said, his arm shaking more until the hand let two chips fall. Tucker noticed now that the hand was missing the ends of the two middle fingers from the first joint on. It looked like three pinky fingers with an index next to them a full nail longer.

"Cut," the old guy said.

But Tucker said, "There are no cuts," and spun out the cards. A slower dealer wouldn't have made it through the round, and even Tucker had two or three players yelling at him before he finished, then five or six. The cowboy, with two tens showing, said nothing, but the rest shouted, "No! He gets a cut!"

Rita leaned towards Tucker and said, "If you would learn the rules, maybe some of us could break even in here. Each player gets one cut per round."

"All right, everybody get a grip," Tucker said. "Sally!" he yelled down through the cafe at the cage. Sally, the floorman, came through the door, past the tables and booths and to his side.

"What's the problem, Tuck?"

"What's the rule on cuts?" he asked, with a frown and a sigh loaded and held in his chest.

"Oh, sorry, Tuck," she said. "New rule. Each player gets one cut per round." Tucker didn't look at Rita, he just hoped the other players saw it wasn't his fault. He pulled the trigger on the sigh.

"Okay, but I've got a round out after this gentleman--what's your name, sir?"

"Bill."

"--after Bill clearly called for a cut and I said no go." The players shifted on their stools and elbows.

"The cards are laid and should be played," the cowboy said.

"But I called for a cut," Bill said.

Sally looked at the cards and said, "Pick up the last round, shuffle, cut, and then give anyone a cut who wants one." She fired this out as if it were engraved in stone somewhere.

The cowboy said, "Piss, that ain't right," as Tucker pulled one of the tens from the cowboy's hand. He shuffled, cut, and, still under Sally's eye, asked, "Any cuts?"

"Yeah, cut 'em," old Bill said.

Tucker tried to show care dealing the last round. "Ace to the queen, two kings, two nines, deuce to the queen. Two kings is high, sir."

"How much can I bet?" Bill asked.

"Up to four dollars."

"Four bucks, then."

The others were already throwing their hands in the pot before the bet was in. "Fold in turn, folks. This gentleman hasn't acted on his hand yet," Tucker said. The cowboy called the bet.

"What have you got?" Bill asked.

"I called you." Bill showed him a third king in the hole, a king the cowboy had no chance of beating.

"Take it," the cowboy said. "Thanks for the cut, asshole," he said, and held his hole card up at Tucker, right in his face, as if Tucker were a vampire and the ten of spades the cross.

Tucker was at the bar. He was in a huff about Sally not telling him about the cuts. He believed what Bonnessy had taught him--that in a cardroom so much stands on ceremony. He remembered when Bonnessy owned the joint and he ran the game without Bonnessy even having to get involved and certainly without a floorman. "A poker game," Bonnessy once said, "is a compact between players, to follow the same rules, to leave other worlds outside." Bonnessy had three rules for dealers: control the game, deal fast, and get your rakeoff.

Now there were new owners and Tucker's station had become clearly defined. Tucker didn't blame Sally. She was good at her job. She was naturally warm and she used her warmth on dealers and players. She was everyone's 30-year-old mother and Tucker knew that it went a long way towards smoothness in The Barbed Wire.

Tucker took a drink of his orange juice and ran his finger through the wet ring the glass left on the bar. He watched the cook turn hash browns and squirt them with a turkey baster full of some sort of synthetic butter. A big red and white plastic menu, with Coca-Cola printed at the

top, hung above the grill. It was one of those signs with all the little ridges to hang black letters on. At the bottom of the menu were the words "We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone." Tucker smiled whenever he read those words. Earlier in the year the new owners fired Tucker's favorite cook from the morning shift because he rearranged the letters to read: "We reserve the right to serve refuse to anyone."

The wall next to the sign was covered with over 1200 different specimens of barbed wire cut into 18-inch strands and carefully labeled and mounted above the bar on Montana's finest roughhewn ponderosa pine. The wall represented over 20 years of Bonnessy's obsessive collecting. Tucker had hated to see such a careful collection fall so easily into the new owners' hands, but he figured Bonnessy would have wanted it to stay with the bar. Still, no one now knew how to deal with the people who still came year-round to buy, sell, or trade barbed wire. These days all they could do was look.

Rita yelled "Goddammit!" and Tucker turned to see Sally pushing a huge pot to old Bill. Tucker watched Bill's shoulders from the back go up and down, one at a time, like a teeter totter, as he stacked his chips in front of him. Before he could finish stacking, Sally already had the beginning of the next hand out.

Tucker watched Bill give a quick look--so quick he really couldn't have seen anything--left and then right and then hunch forward and bend his hole card up while he shaded it from everyone else's view with the hand with the three pinkies. Tucker had always wondered why so many card players, particularly older ones, were missing fingers. In the game today--and these afternoon games were almost always oldtimers' games--Bill was the third player missing at least part of a finger. When he'd first started dealing, he liked to think they were cheaters who had been caught and cut. Then he thought they had probably lost them in the railroad yards or in the mills. His latest theory, though, was that people everywhere lose fingers, and you don't notice. But here, in a poker game, you scrutinize hands, and they come up missing inventory. Otherwise, you'd see what you expect to see, what God wants you to see: hands whole and healthy.

As soon as Tucker was dealing again the cowboy started in, this time on Al.

"Kinda hairy for a soldier, aren't ya?"

"Maybe I'm not a soldier," Al said. Tucker was surprised Al bothered answering.

"Then what's the phony outfit for?"

Al ignored him now.

The cowboy looked sideways at Al, pushing his head farther and farther forward, trying to force eye contact.

This guy is really going after the wrong chump, Tucker thought.

"Or are you one of those fucking Vietnam crybabies?"

"All right, that's enough," Tucker said. "Knock that talk off right now." He'd been waiting. "See that? Rule eight." He pointed to the carefully painted sign behind him. "Watch the language or you're out of here."

The cowboy stared straight at Tucker. "Sorry," he said. "I was in a real war once where a little talk couldn't hurt no one."

"Well, this isn't a war, fella. It's a game, so act right or get out," Tucker said.

"Yeah, right. Well, maybe I'll go take me a piss while you folks trade war stories." He pushed away from the table, lifting his left shoulder a little high as he stood and walked through the cafe. Tucker could see he'd already made a big mistake about the cowboy. He wasn't wearing spurs. An uneven stride, and the jangling that came with each step of his left leg, made it obvious he had a prosthesis fit into his cowboy boot. Tucker watched him stride erect, his hat tipped back, and his shoulders stretching a huge blue workshirt across them.

"My kind of guy," Bill said. Tucker and the rest laughed a little, not knowing how much he meant it. Tucker looked again at the cowboy, turning past the cage and

disappearing into the back. He raised his eyebrows at Al, gave him a shrug, and said, "Sorry about that."

Al winked and shook his head. "Forget it," he said.

When the cowboy got back he had Tucker's pity on his side. It was something Tucker hadn't counted on. But he hadn't counted on the guy's missing leg, either. He didn't know why he should pity a guy he thought was a jerk, but he did and knew he couldn't show it.

Tucker hoped the cowboy would win a little money and cash in, or lose in a hurry and quit. He could see winning wasn't likely. The cowboy played as if the cards didn't matter, and to make things worse, he played every hand.

He spent two more twenties then bought chips with a five and three ones. "Cocksucker," he said with each pot he lost, and he'd throw his cards in high, getting closer to Tucker's chest. Tucker couldn't bring himself to throw the guy out. Somehow the mistake about the spurs made Tucker feel responsible for the one-leggedness, as if by seeing it gone he had taken it himself.

The players kept watching Tucker. They'd heard him warn the cowboy. Even old Bill leaned out now and then to catch Tucker's face, a face feeling hotter and cloudier all the time. Tucker knew he'd already let the situation get out of hand. He was mad at himself and he hated the cowboy.

The cowboy won a few hands on his eight-dollar buy-in, but finally lost the last of that. He picked up his cards

and threw them at Tucker's head. They turned and glided by like birds along a building.

"You're the shits," the cowboy said, standing.

"And you're out of here, right now," Tucker said, and now his anger was spilling out. He felt adrenalin move his blood. The guy had asked for it.

"I want to write a check." The cowboy pulled out his checkbook.

"You're not writing any check here."

The cowboy glared at Tucker and leaned towards him. "What's your name, boy?" His face had that frown and a snarl as if he'd smelled something. He wanted a fight.

"None of your business," Tucker said. He'd be damned if he'd give him anything.

"Well, it doesn't matter, because the world's still a little thing and I'll find you. I'll find you all by yourself."

Tucker leaned out until he could smell the booze on the cowboy's breath. He wants a fight, he's got it, Tucker thought. He stared hard at him and neither spoke. Tucker's ears burned. He became aware of his heart pounding the blood to his head. He felt it slow. He knew he had gone too far. He looked down at Al and over at Bill and Rita, and he stepped back.

But the cowboy still hung out there, chiseled in the air over the table. Jesus Christ, Tucker thought. This guy's

got one leg. I'm either going to beat up an old one-legged man or I'm going to get the shit kicked out of me by him. The cowboy's obvious attraction to those two options shook Tucker. He could see the cowboy didn't care, and he knew it was his own fault he had backed himself into this corner. Now Tucker's adrenalin was like sickness in his veins. He was unwilling to fight. And then, he realized, scared. The shift to fear confused him. He picked up the cards, trying to figure a way to save face with the players.

"You can't write a check at the table. Clear it at the office." Tucker saw scowls around the table. He knew he had to get him out of there.

"You'll take my check," the cowboy said.

"I can't and I won't. Now, we've got a game to play. If you want to cash a check, you'll have to see the floorman," Tucker said. Yeah, he thought, let her worry about this. That's what she gets paid for. "Sally!" he yelled.

Sally came up to his side. "What do you need?"

Tucker didn't bother whispering. "This guy wants to cash a check but I don't even want him in the game."

Sally knew what to do. She went around to the cowboy's side of the table. "Sir, if you'd like to come talk this over with me, I'd be happy to do it away from the table."

"I want to cash a check. Right here and right now."

"Well, we can't cash checks at the table."

"Look, sister, I lost all my money in this game and I'm going to get even."

"Sir, you'll have to come with me. I'm not going to argue with you here," and she reached for his elbow. Before she could touch him, the cowboy hit her hard in the face with the heel of his open hand. Tucker instinctively lurched forward, although he couldn't have reached that far. He ran around the table but Al was already up off his stool and under the cowboy's chest, pushing him backward toward the cafe. Al gave him one hard shove, and the cowboy went back onto and over a table, leaving it rocking on its round metal base.

Rita screamed. The cowboy had hooked his legs on the table and flipped over backward without the fake one. It lay there on the floor, white and shiny like a broken tusk. Metal bands and bolts ran the length of the bloodless flesh wearing a boot. Tucker felt sick for having seen it.

The cowboy reached up and grabbed the table top tightly, pulling himself up with one hand while balancing on the spread fingers of the other. He looked at no one. He gave a hop to his one leg, and he was up.

He bent over, eyeing the crowd and breathing heavily through wet, clenched teeth. Tucker remembered a fox he had found once caught in a trap, and how much the fox looked like this, waiting for the closing in. The cowboy picked the leg up by the thigh. Tucker found himself again hating

the man for his one-leggedness. Shit, he thought, he needs our help before we can even toss him out.

Tucker took a step. A growl, deep in the cowboy's chest, grew slowly into a long ferocious scream. Tucker froze. The cowboy, his scream still growing, swung the leg high over his head and slammed the boot down hard on the tiled floor. Tucker watched, amazed the cowboy had kept his balance.

The cowboy moved with a hop that coiled and uncoiled like a single spring. Swinging the leg again, the cowboy screamed and hammered. Tiny tiles buckled up from their settings and skittered across the floor with each deliberate stroke, and soon there was a patch breaking away.

I could grab him, Tucker thought. I could go out and grab him. But Tucker didn't want to touch him. He knew then that he wouldn't have touched him in a fight, either. The cowboy was like a gandy dancer gone mad. It was as if he reared back with the leg and hooked onto the scream and loosed it out into the bar with the booming of his boot. Tucker looked sideways at Sally and knew she couldn't stop him, and Al's face showed the shocked assurance that he had already done more than he had to. It's not my job either, Tucker thought.

The Cowboy turned and drilled down on the cafe counter. The blow squirted the salt shaker out like a bullet and shattered it on the grill, sending crystals of salt and

glass sizzling across the grease. He swung the leg like a baseball bat and glass bottles of ketchup and mustard exploded and splashed the wall red and yellow all the way into the barbed wire collection. Another baseball swing smashed a big sugar shaker off a table, spraying Tucker and the crowd with sugar and glass.

Tucker had given up any notion of stopping the cowboy. He watched the cowboy smashing plates and glasses and cracking formica away in chunks. Poker doesn't do this to people, Tucker thought. He looked back at his players. They had left their stools and had drifted towards the wall. Old Bill stood now behind the table, in Tucker's spot. Tucker looked at Bill's face. Control the game, Tucker thought. That's what rules are for. He licked his lips and tasted sugar.

The cowboy still swung and screamed, swung and screamed, turning and hopping in a small circle to keep his balance, pounding everything in his radius. Tucker thought of the fox again. When it was sure of no escape it had fought hardest at the trap, at the taut links of the chain, and at the form beyond moving in. The cowboy stopped and looked at the crowd. He bent low and sprang forward with an added kick--the sort of kick hurdlers use--and then a hop, and he was out of his radius and, with a retching gasp, towered over Sally.

He had raised the leg, his arms flexed fully over his head. He hooked his scream, had it halfway out, almost to its primal peak, when Tucker crushed his knee from the side with his foot.

The room filled with the pop and Tucker watched the cowboy drop without even a wave of an arm toward balance. The cowboy fell hard, his hat flopping away. A full head of silver hair surprised Tucker.

The cowboy moaned quietly, as if humming. He rolled over twice and tried to grab his knee, but he could not bring it up within reach. He lay beneath the lunchcounter stools, stared at the ceiling, and did not move. Tucker watched him a long time. He could no longer hate him. It was as if the cowboy's rage had dwarfed all other anger. Tucker heard sirens. There was movement in the bar and Tucker saw Sally trot past towards the cage. Then he stood over the cowboy.

Tucker watched him blink his eyes hard. He saw the tears being squeezed out the corners and into crow's feet and then back into his hair. He bent down closer to the cowboy. The cowboy's face had turned milky except for the dark lines of its creases, which shone like the webbing of cracked china.

Tucker remembered leaving the fox, the walk to the truck for the rifle. All the way back he had told himself he had done something right. Control the game. The cowboy

would not look at Tucker but he still held that frown. Maybe it isn't a frown, Tucker thought. Maybe his face is just like that.

Bending to one knee, Tucker pictured the whole scene again. The unavoidable end to something. It's not my fault, Tucker thought. It's what happens when worlds collide. "Are you ready to go?" he asked softly. The cowboy didn't understand. Then he nodded his head.

"Well, let's get you up, then," Tucker said. He swung a leg over and straddled the cowboy. He reached for his armpits. The cowboy shook his head.

"No," he said, biting his lip. But Tucker wanted him up.

Tucker grabbed the cowboy under the pits, sitting him up. "There you go," he said. He improved his grip. He knew all his strength would not be enough. He bent his knees and watched the cowboy struggle to control his face, the quivering of its pieces behind the webbing. Tucker lifted with a grunt. He felt the cowboy push himself off the floor. He was lighter than Tucker'd anticipated. Then Tucker felt the one leg sliding up between his own.

The cowboy screamed--a high scream, the sort Tucker expected from the start. Tucker lunged, pushing him backward onto a stool. He held the cowboy there by the shoulders while the cowboy grabbed his knee and made sucking noises. Then the cowboy leaned back on his hands.

Tucker picked up the cowboy's hat and then the leg, sprawled on the floor halfway to the poker table. Tucker held it in his open hands, feeling the weight of the thing. He set it down under the stools.

The sirens had grown louder and now stopped outside the bar. The cowboy looked towards the door. Tucker stood in front of him and watched closely as if he might fall. He wanted to say something to the cowboy. He wanted to tell him that there were times they all broke rules. But Tucker stepped away from the cowboy and watched paramedics stretch him out on his back. He walked alongside with the leg, then handed it to a policeman. In his palms he could still feel his own pulse beating against its whiteness.

Out on the street the sun was still strong and the air so clear Tucker could see the fireroads on Mount Bridger. He could see the pines bristling up to the white tit of snow still left on its peak, the two radio towers flashing red. Right now, Mount Bridger looked so clear and close Tucker thought he could walk there in twenty minutes. But he knew by nightfall he would only have just reached the foothills.

Where It All Gets Away

I was dealing on a Friday night. Skid and Beaumont closed up the bar at The Wire and waited about twenty minutes in the cafe behind two railroaders, talking and laughing with the other customers. When the railroaders got up two young guys slipped in and took the stools. One of them was big--well over six-foot and 200 pounds--and the other one was skinny.

"Hey, that's not the way it works pards." Beaumont said. Beaumont was a 55-year-old fireman, and tough for a drunk.

"Tough luck, old man," the skinny one said. I gathered the cards, shuffled and watched Skid.

"Yeah," said the big one, as if that and his size said it all. They were too dumb to know not to start a fight sitting down.

"Does that go for me, too, punk?" Skid asked.

"Fuck off old...." But Skid wasn't that old yet and he broke the big kid's sentence and nose with his right hand. Skid's left arm hooked like part of a machine again and again and the kid slumped before he had even lifted his arms. His friend must've never seen this before. He yelled and tried to jump on Skid but Beaumont wrestled him away.

The cafe clatter stopped. Everyone watched from their stools and tables.

All my players stopped in mid-hand to watch the fight. The only sounds were the turning of spectators' chairs and then just Skid's fists popping into the kid's face. The room was filled with that sound--the sound of flattening a hamburger patty--as it became louder and slowly more methodical.

Still nobody moved. Skid's friends and drinking buddies were there but no one stepped in. I couldn't believe it. We all knew what was at stake, even then. Finally, I dropped the deck of cards and ran over and grabbed Skid from behind. His elbow caught me on the cheekbone before I got both arms around his chest. But it took four of us--Beaumont, the skinny punk, one of the railroaders and me--to drag Skid off. The skinny punk didn't try to get in any cheap shots either, he just pushed with the rest of us to get Skid away. Skid had not said a word since the first punch.

The kid leaned back against the counter. His face was bruising up and beginning to re-form. Cheekbones were now wide lumps pushing up to meet his brow. His nose puffed off to one side and bled steadily. Lips were a bright wet red. He reached between them and pulled a tooth out and began to cry.

Skid was still in our grasp and had more or less relaxed. But now he shot an arm out at the kid. We tightened our grip as Skid pointed at his victim and shouted, "I'll give you something to cry about. I'll kill you. I'll kill you, you fuck. I'll kill you." His arm and voice shook and he screamed louder. Sweat and saliva shined in the big creases of his face.

"Come on, Skid," I said. The man was my friend and I couldn't see where this was coming from. I yelled at the skinny kid to get his friend out of there. Skid was still ranting "I'll kill you" when the cops walked in. "Jesus Christ, Skid," one of them said.

Skid grew up hoping it would be Schoolboy or Preacher, but Prester's Hotel saddled him with the only nickname that ever stuck. His real name was James Rowe. Prester's was a rundown hotel a block over from the firehouse and a block down from The Wire. Everyone talked about what an elegant hotel it had been, how its awnings and doormen had lured the good customers the extra block up from the depot, leaving the railroaders to haunt The Castle Hotel, a hundred feet from the tracks. But since I could remember, the awnings were just tattered tarp, and the doormen were exhausted winos who couldn't afford a room or couldn't make it to the one they had paid for.

Skid lived at Prester's ever since he'd made the fire department. He knew by name every wino, transient, and pensioner at Prester's, and by face every one downtown. No one really knew why Skid lived and drank with those guys (once he told me that that's where he would be if he weren't on the department. I told him that's where he was anyway) but it was obvious why they liked Skid. It was his generosity. Skid would drink with a stack of up to 30 or 40 Eisenhower dollars in front of him. If he got under 20 he'd get another roll. Winos would peer through the front window and then come sliding up to Skid for their dollar allowance. Sometimes Skid would talk or question them about some other bum, and sometimes he would just give them a buck without saying anything, just sort of stop them in their tracks on the way up to him. Most of them took the dollar and went down to Sam's, across from The Castle, where you could still get two good drinks for a buck.

Skid's room was on the first floor. He'd changed rooms a couple of times in twelve years but he always stayed on the first floor. He said it was so he could reach the firetruck in time as it rounded the block--the same reason he drank near the door at The Wire. Skid held the department record for answering off-duty calls. He'd also distinguished himself a number of other times, including a recent front-page picture of him carrying a little girl from a burning house.

But, in three or four months Skid got into about a dozen fights. They started out being quick two-punch fights --Skid was a big man--but then he began dragging them out. Most of this spree took place at Sam's, and most of his fights didn't involve the police. But twice he was brought before old pisspot Judge Lewis and twice the judge let Skid off with a speech about how even the right side of a barroom brawl was no place for a civil servant to be. The third time Skid faced Judge Lewis was after the fight in our cafe. Some couple pressed charges of lewd language and disturbing the peace, and this time Skid didn't get off.

About a month later a whoop went up at the end of the bar and I looked up to see Skid shouldering his way through the door and into the crowd. Some of the cafe crowd drifted down to greet him. The Barbed Wire was all smiles and glad hands. One of our own had come home.

"Hey Skid, welcome back," I said when he reached between two players to shake my hand.

"Thanks Sophie," he said, tipping an imaginary hat. "Thanks for the care packages. Mucho gracias." He released my hand from the huge spread of his and drank from a can of Burgie someone had pressed on him. "See ya when you're off, kid." Skid was back into the crowd, laughing and really home.

Just past noon the next day I was at Prester's looking for Skid. I had dealt past closing and past Skid's homecoming party. Skid answered his door on my second knock.

"Hey ya Tucker, how's it going, guy?" Skid called me by my real name when we were alone. He had more respect than to call a guy Sophie in private.

"Real good," I said, "considering I just got up."

"Yeah. Me too." He looked it. He was in his shorts and all his vitality seemed to be centered in his hair as it stood, dangled, and flopped down towards his blowsy face.

"I thought you might want to grab some lunch."

"Yeah great. Let me collect myself here first." He was still wheezing with sleep when he talked. He walked to the bathroom in the one corner of the room and yelled over his shoulder, "There's beer in the fridge." I heard the shower go on and I went to the little icebox. His room wasn't small for a hotel room but it was tiny for an apartment. There wasn't one surface that wasn't covered with newspapers, beer cans and clothes.

I noticed something on the wall next to his bed. I walked over to look at a patch of about a dozen holes the size of softballs popped in the plaster. In some of them I could see the naked laths still holding their antique grid, and the horse hair pricking out of the plaster. In the others, the laths had also been broken and all that

separated the room from the outside air was the dirty underside of the wooden siding. I scraped a brown dot of blood off the plaster with my thumbnail. There was more than one.

I had about three sips of my Burgie and Skid was out of the shower and dripping naked over to his dresser. The water never touched the floor. I could hear it falling onto newsprint as Skid pulled fresh clothes on. Sometimes it's awkward talking to guys when they're naked so I sipped my beer and Skid dressed and neither of us spoke. We were ready to leave before I finished my beer. I guzzled the last few swallows as Skid was going out the door and I turned and flipped the can into the middle of his room and closed the door behind me.

"So how you been, kid?" Skid asked when we hit the sidewalk.

"Same old thing. Can't rave, can't complain. Bonnessy's giving me plenty of work." I looked in his face.

"Yeah, sorry I couldn't wait around last night, but you were still going after breakfast."

"Just as well you didn't. Three guys stuck it out until six. Jesus, that drives me nuts." I was trying to figure out how much Skid wanted to talk and about what. The spring sun was strong and he was squinting up the street as we walked. "How's it feel to be out and about?" I asked.

"Great," Skid said. "I tell ya, when that skinny old judget told me he was giving me a month in the firehouse instead of jail, my heart almost burst in my shirt." Skid looked at me as we stopped on the corner across the street from The Wire. I could smell the burgers from the noon rush. "But that sucker knows more about punishment than I thought. I thought it would be a picnic--like sentencing John Wayne to a cattle drive. But when you're forced to do something you love...." I was surprised to hear him say as much as he had. We all thought Skid could live at the firehouse around the clock. When the engines rolled on his days off you couldn't keep him from running drunk out of The Wire or Prester's and hopping on the tailboard like some kid's fantasy. Now something was unraveling Skid and I didn't know how to help him. Hell, he was almost twice my age.

"Hey ya Bone, ya look like one of us smokies up there," Skid yelled as we walked in. Bonnessy was up on his ladder behind the bar taking part of his barbed wire collection down for a customer. He had over 1200 specimens mounted on the wall, and, from the looks of the strands in front of the customer, he was about to add to it.

"Hey ya Skid! Why don't you guys grab your own and I'll be with you in a minute."

I got two beers and ordered our cheeseburgers, then I waited on the other people at the bar while Bonnessy dabbled

in what he'd started to think was his main business--getting every type of barbed wire in the world up on his wall. He'd worked hard for thirty years but now his idea of work was keeping good help and farting around for two hours a day behind the bar.

He finally rolled his squat body down to our end of the bar. "How are ya Skid?" he rasped.

"Great. Just great. And how are you, you fat bastard?" and he shoved his hand at him. "I never thought I'd be glad to see your stingy ass." Seeing the two of them smiling made me feel silly for being worried.

"So did they learn ya your lesson over there in firehouse lockup, or are you back to bust up my joint and use that nasty language?" Bonnessy had been bitching about Judge Lewis for a month. He really liked Skid. Sometimes he'd have Skid put in a shift or open on weekends.

"No need to worry, they learned me good, Bone."

"Beaumont's been saying you spent the whole month on cat calls and stuff like that. Don't sound too bad."

"Well you try it for awhile big shot. I got so stir crazy I was answering every call we had. That's a real civic-minded judge we got."

"You must've gotten a little tired of it," Bonnessy said, "because Beaumont said you actually started to kill cats." I hadn't heard this. Bonnessy was looking closely

into Skid's face trying to see something. "Yeah, he told me you killed the cats but he didn't say how."

"Well it wasn't easy. Some little girl brought her cat to school and it ran up a tree." Skid took a big swallow of beer to put a little air in his story. "Hey, we need those cheeseburgers, too."

"Yeah, yeah. They'll be up." But Bonnessy was leaning forward with his forearms on the bar.

"Well, we get it out of the tree all right and easy and there's two or three classes of these first and second graders and their teachers, and I hand the cat to the little girl and hop on the tailboard like the Lone Ranger. Morrison is driving and he's pulling out and decides to give a big honk and zip the siren for the whole school--be a big shot like he is at assemblies. Anyway, the dumbshit scares the cat out of the girl's arms and right under the wheels, and the truck is really moving now and he gives it a big honk again. And I look down as I'm going over this completely smashed cat. And then I look out at all those faces and windows. And Morrison up there is still honking and zipping and thinks he's Captain Fucking Kangaroo. And I'm standing back there waving because I can't believe what has happened. Then I stop waving and by now I wish Morrison would just step on it and quit honking the goddamn horn."

"Jesus. Jesus Christ," Bonnessy said, and started laughing and coughing and hacking at the same time--an

emphysema cackle. His hand shot over his mouth while he convulsed and his other hand shot up flat at Skid's face as if to stop Skid from telling a story he had already finished. I smiled but I know my face hung open for a second like the children's must have at Skid on the back of the truck.

"Wait a minute," Bonnessy said and we watched him walk down to the grill, still coughing and wiping his mouth with a napkin.

Four hours later we were in the same spot and Skid had his stack of dollars. He had been in the firehouse since opening day so we were talking baseball. It's what I'd missed most. The judge had said no visitors, so the best I could do was send in a six-pack and my Sporting News with Beaumont. If you've got a guy you like to jaw baseball with, it's not easy to find a substitute. It's sort of like drinking coffee in the morning with strangers.

"All I'm saying is if the Reds had two good starters they might not lose a game all year," was all Skid was saying.

"And all I'm saying is Pittsburgh will still hammer their asses in the playoffs even if they do win every game till then."

"Shit, the Mets won that division with a .500 record. You know, I've told you before, when it comes to baseball you're better off thinking with your ass than your heart."

"And this coming from a Cleveland fan. Hey, if I had those guys in my blood, I'd get a transfusion." Beer had turned most of my argument to volume.

"Hey, I don't think they'll win it either, do I? I just now said it's the Reds. And maybe the Orioles. Either baseball's a great game of compromise or it breaks you. You pray for one team, you bet on another. And if you're one of the few lucky ones, your heart, head, ass, and money all fall on the same winner. You got lucky a few years ago. I got lucky 20 years ago. Bonnessy's still waiting out the Cubs."

Skid was right but I hated to admit that pure opinion, especially in affairs of the heart, was not as strong as the final standings. Skid liked his little baseball lectures and I guess I did, too.

When you start working at a place like The Barbed Wire you either become part of things or you're not going to make it. You don't know anyone so that first free beer from the bartender means something. And when you see the energy of the bar drawn to a guy who is laughing, drinking, and telling stories all the time--a guy big enough to soak all that energy up--then you want to know how to talk to that guy. Then one day he's wearing a Cleveland cap and a simple thing like that opens a door that never closes. Skid told me once that baseball was a religion like Christianity with different denominations. You might believe in the

Pittsburgh or Chicago sect and feel sorry for the misguided others, but a good fan, like a good Christian, respected free worship and always trusted the heart of any true believer.

We didn't talk for awhile before Skid turned on his stool and looked at me. He said quietly, "You ever get drunk with your old man?" I shook my head. He had his elbow on the bar and his head on that hand. His other hand held his beer can in his lap.

"You know," he said, "I only got drunk with my father once before he died." I didn't even know his father was dead.

"I was a kid a little younger than you and I'd hitched a ride over to Butte to see him after he and my mother split. Here's a guy who sold cars and boozed all his life and his own kid doesn't have a car and has never gotten drunk with him. That's neglect."

Skid wasn't looking at me now. He was looking just past my head down the bar and telling this story carefully, as if I had just shared a reminiscence about my father and now it was his turn and he had to get it right.

"Anyway, I found him in a bar like this one, and he was really looking old and not at all the roustabout I expected. He never even asked what I was up to or how my mother was. I had to volunteer all that. He picked up on my wanting to drink with him, though, and I guess I wanted to show him my

stuff pretty bad. We stood there sort of stupid and didn't say much after awhile and we just drank. The bartender was a buddy of his and he was bringing every one or two rounds free." Skid paused and I didn't know what to say at all. I just leaned on the bar and faced him and nodded a little at him.

"After hours of this my father turned from the bottles and mirror behind the bar and spread his hands out in front of the bar and said, 'You know, Jaimie, this is where it all gets away.'" Skid spread his hands.

"I didn't know what he meant. I was just a kid and this is where I was just finding it all, where I was collecting myself. So I just chalked it up to him having a bad drunk. I left town the next day."

I remember Skid saying that people go to bars for the same reason they go to church--to remind themselves that there's something they haven't been thinking about. I stared at Skid and thought about the fights he'd been in. Looking at him now, I wondered why it took more than one of us to break it up. He didn't look like he could lift a hand.

"His problem was his job," Skid continued. "A man's got to have the right job. He kicked around from lot to lot, and he treated his job like a whore. Each day was a weight until it just tipped him down the road."

"My job's got what he needed. If I fuck up bad on the job--you know, so the other guys can tell--if I let the guys down, I can atone." He looked right at me. "I will atone. This other city hall shit, I can't atone for. You know the next fight and I'm out, but the guys don't care what goes on out here. When we're on the line I'm the best there is, and if I'm not, even if I were the biggest piece of shit they ever saw, then, by God, in one swift move I can pull everyone's ass out next week and all is forgiven. All is forgotten. Gone. Perfect atonement. You can't find that on a car lot. You can't find that in church."

I could tell he'd been thinking about this. I wondered if this wasn't what had made him stir crazy in the firehouse. I thought about those holes in his room straining against the old siding to become public. Something made me want to ask him about the fights then, and I'll always wish I had. But I couldn't. Sometimes friends, or anybody--fathers or crazies on street corners--they wouldn't be who they are if we could start to ask certain questions.

I looked at Skid and I thought about him bursting out of a house bent over that little girl, the smoke rushing with him as if it were curling off of his back. That day my folks called me and said their Ohio paper had carried it from the wires. I remembered the impressed "ohh" I got when

I said the guy was a friend of mine. I knew him from work. That's the kind of people I work with, I said.

To Skid I said, "You're a lucky man." I didn't say much else. He was in the sort of mood I didn't want to break in on. Didn't know how. Later I left to get ready for work. As I went out the front door I brushed between two bums going in. I turned and watched through the glass door as they walked up to Skid, standing now, alone and tall, at the end of the bar.

When you're a big man in bad bars, punks and fights come to you like birds to a roadkill. Sam's was a bad bar. It was a square building across from The Castle Hotel and just big enough for a pool table and drinking. The only light came from the lamp hung long and low over the pool table. The front windows were covered on the inside by a thick purple plastic and some cheap blinds. Even at noon it was all a tinted darkness. The only times I ever went into Sam's were with Skid. I asked him once why he drank in there and he said, "The same reason dogs lick themselves: Because they can." The other side of the crowd was the rummies who could either keep to themselves or take an occasional smack in the face.

On a Saturday, a week after Skid got out, we were shooting pool at Sam's. I was drinking and watching Skid shoot with an Indian. Four young guys from the other end of

the bar came down and told Skid they wanted to play. "Well put your quarter up," Skid said, "but he's next," pointing at me.

"We want to play doubles," one of them said, stepping forward and pushing back a cap on his head that said "Peterbilt--How's Yours?"

"We'll play two of ya," Skid said.

"You don't seem to understand," the guy said. "We don't want to play you, or that punk, or this wagon burner here," he said, pointing to the Indian holding his cue off to one side like a golf caddy tending the pin.

The bartender looked up from his end of the bar, and the rest of the bar, except for a couple of really gone drunks, turned to the pool table. I stood up. The blood in my limbs felt cold and I had the immediate urge to piss. I didn't think about whether I wanted to fight, though. I knew I was in. The Indian, who didn't know Skid or me, wasn't going anywhere either.

Without looking at it, Skid slowly turned his cuestick so he had it gripped in the middle with both hands and the fat end up. He leaned out a little towards the group. His voice was still normal like he was giving genuine advice. "Look, if you want to play doubles, Sophie and I will play you now. But let's play by the rules."

I winced at the name, but they didn't bother with it.

"Listen, asshole," another one said, stepping forward. "Either give us the table and we'll have a little fun, or we'll flat kick the shit out of you and have a lot of fun."

"You listen, punk," Skid said through teeth clenching. "If you start this thing I've got nothing to lose," and he cocked the cue a little to his right like a batter in the box. He looked at one and then the other in front. "I might not kill you," Skid said, "but I will make a retard out of you. You'll never know your own name. You'll be a retard, your mother pushing you drooling down the street. And if you're not, it will only be because you're dead. So, come on." Then Skid raised his voice for the first time. "Come on!"

They stood and stared for awhile at Skid. Without a word or even a look to each other, they headed back to their stools, but the bartender thumbed them on towards the door and they left.

For years Skid had avoided fights, but I knew then that he had a fight in him for anyone who wanted it. And I knew I had just seen the closest Skid could come to side-stepping one--with a club in his hand threatening slaughter.

It didn't take long. Later that week--at Sam's--Skid was in a brawl answered by three squad cars. No one knew whose fault it was--there were eight or nine in it. But that had nothing to do with Skid. He was immediately

suspended while his case was reviewed at city hall by the fire chief, mayor, and Judge Lewis. He spent the first four days at The Wire, around the clock.

The first two days he shouted and heehawed about his little vacation. He stood at his spot at the end of the bar and drank all day and night and when the bar closed he got in the poker game until it broke. Then he sat in a booth drinking coffee until a half-hour before the bar opened. He'd go home and clean up and be back at opening.

After awhile he was too drunk to talk to even when I was drinking with him, which I tried for the first two days. But I had to sleep and work and it was too hard to mesh with his drunkenness. When he played cards he slowed the game down to a crawl. On the third night I told him he couldn't play.

He looked at me and then down at the wadded-up bills in his hand. "You think so, huh, kid?" he asked, still looking down.

"Yeah. Sorry Skid, but you're better off not playing, anyway." I got the cards out to the players and took a look up at Skid staring at me. I gave a half-smile and a shrug. I didn't feel quite right saying it.

"You're really something, kid. Really something."

"Go get some sleep, Skid."

"Yeah, right kid." And he left.

Skid came back the next day but was gone before I got there. Then we just didn't see him. The day Skid was officially fired Beaumont came in and I asked him where Skid was.

"I don't know," Beaumont said. He was standing at Skid's spot. "He won't answer his door but I heard him moving in there."

"Do you want to go try again?"

"No, I don't think I do, Tuck. He's got to burn this out of himself. I'll see him when he wants to see me." Beaumont drank from his beer. "The whole thing's a fucking shame. It's a shame on the community."

I didn't see Skid for over four weeks. Someone said that he was staying thirty miles away in a lodge off the old highway, and he wasn't looking too good. I thought about driving out to see him but I didn't like the idea that he might not want to see me. I missed him more now than when he was jailed in the firehouse. Now there were no Sporting News's, no six-packs, and no promise of return.

One day I walked into The Wire for lunch. Before I could sit down, Bonnessy leaned over the bar and said, "Did you hear about Skid?" My chest tightened and I waited for the word that he was dead. I didn't answer, just waited.

"He's back." Bonnessy didn't look happy. "I just heard that he's down at Sam's. Why don't you go down and bring him back up here?"

"You got it," I said.

Before I hit the door Bonnessy yelled "Hey Tuck!" and motioned me back. "He's been drinking for a month, you know."

As I walked down Main, I thought I'd just try to talk baseball. Here it was the end of June and the races were just heating up. Passing Prester's, I stopped and opened the door, as if I might hear him and save myself the trip to Sam's. I let the door close. Sunlight glanced brightly off the glass. I looked back up the street at The Wire on its corner and I tried to imagine the fire engines flying by, sirens knifing the air, and the door in front of me, or the one at The Wire, bursting open and some huge do-gooder rushing out, the engine gearing down its roar a bit as he hops on and is off to fight fire.

Leaning up against the wall outside Sam's door a bum was holding his jaw with both hands. He bobbed his head back and forth. He was one of the young ones--still in his 20's and not much stoop to him yet. His hair, beard, and face were dirty with a sort of oil and dust, and his oversized army jacket looked like a garage mechanic's rag. I'd seen him around before. His eyes were surprisingly alive as I passed and looked at me very directly. Then he spit.

He didn't spit explosively or even from five feet I'd've been covered. Deliberately, between pursed lips, he

squeezed out an arc of red whose one end seemed to be just reaching me while the other was still in his mouth. The stream hit the pavement and splattered into a shiny red star of blood and saliva. I had that cold feeling in my limbs. "Fuck you, buddy," I said as he walked away.

Into Sam's from the noon sun, I could have been stabbed, punched, or robbed and never have seen a thing. I waited and slowly my eyes allowed me into the purple murkiness. I went looking towards the back, where I knew he would be.

"Sophie! Sophie, you son of a bitch! Come on over here." Skid threw his arm around my neck, pulled my face down next to his and swiveled us around to face the bar. "A Burgie for my boy, barkeep!" Skid hooked an old rummy with his other arm and pulled our heads all in together.

"Benny, this is Sophie, the best friend a guy could ever have." Benny nodded his head at me with his mouth open, his tongue coming out over his brown teeth. His breath and Skid's collided in my face like boozy clouds.

Skid didn't look wrecked at all. He looked powerful and friendly. He had long ago passed some sort of saturation point and was now fueled by alcohol. The bartender brought my beer and Skid flicked a dollar from his stack.

"How are you, Skid?" I pulled myself out of his headlock.

"Never better, kid. Never better." He seemed sincere and almost euphoric.

"I'm just down here for a few days saying goodbye."

"Oh yeah? Where're you going?"

"Where there are fires, kid. Where there are fires."

For some reason I hadn't thought about that, that Skid might leave, that he'd be a fireman anywhere else.

"I'm going to miss you, Skid," and I held out my hand.

Skid waved it away. "Save that. I'm not gone yet."

He turned away and looked at Benny.

"Hey Skid," I said. "Let's go up to The Wire. Bone wants to see you. And the rest of the guys."

Skid turned and looked at me. "It's great seeing you Tucker, and I love the place. But I've left, and I'm not going back. I've moved on." I could make no sense of this.

"Get off your ass and let's go," I said, trying to tap into some of the euphoria I could feel evaporating.

"After awhile a man gets tired of the shit. And if you don't get tired of it, and you don't get up and fight the shit, then what are you?"

I was lost in all this. How did I think we might talk baseball? Skid turned to Benny again and I saw that I must have interrupted something. Benny reached for Skid's stack of silver.

"Not yet, now, Benny," Skid said. "How many do you want?"

"Two."

"All right." Skid reached for his hip pocket and pulled out a pair of pliers. It was an old pair with smudged green rubber grips.

"Open up," he said and carefully spread the grips a bit and slid the pliers into Benny's mouth. The grips looked like a pair of frog legs sticking out of Benny's mouth.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I asked.

"Just a sec," Skid said. "The light's not too good so I have to be careful." He wormed the pliers around slightly then stopped, squeezed, and gave a strong steady twist of his wrist. From Benny came a long nasal moan. The pliers pulled free with the sound of a kiss and Skid held them up with a brown molar caught like a nut between them. Skid patted Benny on the cheek.

"That's one, Benny," Skid said and flicked a dollar off of his stack. Benny hurried the coin into his pocket.

"These old guys I think I could do with my fingers. Those gums just give them up like pulling a plug," Skid stated flatly. "The younger ones are tougher, though. I just broke one in half a little while ago, so I gave him an extra buck."

I remembered the kid outside the bar. "Jesus," I said. "Skid, what the fuck is this?" My head got a little light. Skid seemed unreachable.

"Would you believe I'm a dentist?" he said, laughing. He swept his arm out over the bar and dropped the tooth into a glass I hadn't noticed. There must have been seven or eight teeth soaking in a milky orange water.

"Oh Jesus," I said and started to shake. "Fucking Jesus."

"Come on kid. I can't afford to be no philanthropist anymore. No free rides. Freeloaders only cheat themselves."

My chest felt like I had been holding my breath a long time, like I was smothering in the darkness and crying, but I wasn't. Who could? I pushed myself away from the bar. "Sophie!" Skid called. I didn't answer. I got to the door. Skid was standing huge now over Benny's mouth, open like a spring robin's, the pliers gently going in.

Outside I was weak. I bent over and put my hands on my knees. My foot was edged onto that flat red star, almost dry now in the sun. I tried to get a regular breath. My lungs felt like they were filled with sharp sand. I scraped my toe across the blood and walked to the corner. I began to run up Main Street. I ran past Prester's, past The Wire.

I stopped in front of a shoe store and leaned up against the glass. A young mother came out with a blond little boy. "How do they feel?" she asked.

"Okay," he said and hopped in place. His mother bent down on one knee to the shoes. She untied and tied the

string, pulled a red sock up and smoothed the cuff down over it. She started on the other foot and the boy smiled up at me so broadly it squinted his eyes.

"I got new shoes," he said.

"Who are you talking to?" his mother asked, looking for me over her shoulder as she smoothed the other pant leg.

"That man," he said behind me as I ran again up Main. I ran easy past the windows. I looked up at the buildings, the tallest in town, lining my path. His shoes were so small. Each stride became lighter. I felt summer burn in my face.

When It Deafens You

Snow continued to fall like shavings of coconut. Ross thought bigger snowflakes meant wetter snowflakes but this snow was dry and crunched under the tires. He took his foot off the gas and let the pickup coast into the parking lot of The Trough. He turned off his engine and watched snow fall and melt on his windshield. Pretty soon the glass would cool and the snow would stick and begin to pile up. Ross opened his door and swung out. He reached into the back of the pickup and grabbed his deer by the stiff front leg it seemed to be offering him. He had the same urge he'd had after the first time with his father 20 years ago--to push the tongue back in the mouth and close the eyes. But his father would never let him alter the picture. "What's dead is dead," he'd said. "That's no tongue and those aren't eyes. Now it's all just meat."

Ross flipped the tag up from the antler to make sure it was properly marked. He didn't want a warden pulling up and nailing him on some technicality. The tag was exactly right. Ross remembered having checked it twice already. He let the tag slip from his fingers.

Ross took a stool in the middle of the bar between a group of three hunters on one side and two stools draped with bright orange coats on the other. The Trough offered Ross its familiar comforts: The fireplace whirred and

cracked, pool balls clacked under cue sticks, and the grill sizzled like a showerhead with the steam of onions and three huge hamburgers. He'd always liked this place but it was strange today. He'd stopped here with his father after that first hunt, and they'd been back every outing since. To hell with it, Ross thought.

Ross checked the menu. A huge piece of pine the size of a table top hung on the wall behind the bar with this message torched and varnished on it: "The Trough: You're In Burger Heaven. Home of the Bull Burger. Death Before Dishonor--Sheep Dip Before French Dip." The menu, a small board hanging by hooks from the sign, read: "Bull Burger--\$3.50/ Cow Burger--\$2.50/ Calf Burger--\$1.50." There were no new items, and the prices had held for a year.

Ross watched Harley Gardner, with two bags of buns pinched at the neck in one hand and three Walla Walla Sweets curled up to his elbow in the other, roll his massive frame out of the kitchen and up behind the bar. Harley was a little over 60, a little over six-foot, and a little over 300 pounds.

"Be with you in a minute," he said to Ross as he flopped the buns and onions on the cutting board next to the grill. Harley scooped burgers onto plates and Ross watched the white shirt stick to his back and sweat run through the closely cropped bristle rolled up in neck fat above the collar. How had this man lived so long, Ross thought as

Harley picked up the burgers and shuffled down the space behind the bar, filling it like a guttered bowling ball. Ross could hear him breathing.

Harley returned to Ross. "Okay, what'll it be?" he asked. "Oh, say, it's the Anderson boy. How are you doing son?" And he shoved a hand at Ross.

"Just fine, Harley. Just fine." Ross shook the big paw. He could tell what was coming.

"Jesus, I was just sorry as hell about your father, boy. It's a bad thing when it starts taking men like that. He was a great one, son." Harley leaned forward on the bar on elbows like hindquarters.

"Yeah, thanks," Ross said.

"I tell ya," Harley said, "Ole was the best sawyer in this part of the country. I don't know how many top saws have come in here over the years who'd claim Ole had kept them out of soup lines with the moves he taught them."

"Yeah, I know," Ross said, "he ran most of those moves by me."

"Hell, I can't count the times he's been in here with a deer or elk out in the back of his rig, or has a cooler full of trout neither."

"He taught me a little about that, too," Ross said. The Trough had always been their private fish and game checkpoint. Ross suddenly felt a little awkward, as if the way they were talking had made his father too real or too

necessary to the surroundings. Maybe I shouldn't have stopped, he thought. Maybe I pushed the day an hour too far.

Ross had hurried through bucking up his last two trees of the day, dancing a chainsaw up and down those logs, cutting limbs almost on the run, trying to make sure he had done the work of the men on the crew.

The next day his father took him over to the truck. "You see those logs, Ross?" he asked, squinting at the load, his tanned face branching into deep wrinkles. "I know I didn't cut those ones with the pig ears. I wouldn't have let those on my rig." Ross looked at the sharp nubs poking out of the bark.

"Whatever they dock me at the mill is coming out of your pay. Next time you're off the crew." His father walked away and the other sawyers smiled.

Ross looked out the front window of the bar and saw the sky was getting dark with silvers and greys. The snow was clearly the whitest thing out there and even it was turning an evening blue. "You'd better get me a Bull Burger and a can of Bud, Harley. That road's going to be nasty." Ross thought his order came out of nowhere, or maybe it just sounded that way to him.

"You got it, son," Harley said and went up the bar. Ross wondered if he should tell Harley his name so he could

stop calling him "son." Harley'd recognized him as Ole's kid, he'd done well enough. Harley set the can of beer in front of Ross and turned to the grill. "Thanks," Ross said, and drank deeply.

"You betcha," Harley said without turning back. He reached into a plastic white bucket for a ball of ground beef the size of a grapefruit. Ross felt that in one anxious moment he'd turned Harley from a eulogizing host into a servant.

Harley mashed the meat between his huge hands trying to flatten it but it hit the grill mounded in the center. He opened a bun as big as a frisbee and tossed it face down next to the burger, fading away from it as if he'd shot a long jumper. He turned gracefully on a pivot and surprised Ross, leaning out at him again, grinning a little as if he'd made a real shot.

"Did ya get your deer?" Harley asked.

Ross was still marveling at the behemoth daintiness he'd just witnessed, and at Harley once again leaning on those enormous arms.

"Uh, yeah. Five point, out in the truck."

"Well I know Ole sure taught you to hunt. Come to think of it I'd have a hard time counting all the deer and elk you've had out front, Ross."

He didn't put any extra emphasis on the "Ross" but Ross knew that that was the real jump shot Harley'd scored. He was glad he'd remembered on his own.

"Dad would've liked it today," Ross said, quietly.

"Did you see lots of game?"

As remote as they were, Ross could feel the attention of the other hunters prick up. He spoke even softer.

"Not really. But that's not what Dad would've liked. He loved to hunt in this snow." Ross looked out the window at a now purple darkness. Snow shone only in the extreme foreground, just beyond the Pabst sign.

His father loved to hunt in falling snow, Ross remembered, because it isolated the hunter. "You can't see powerlines or jet trails or logging roads in the distance," he'd told him. "You can't hear traffic or sometimes even gunshots. It's your own breathing that deafens you, or maybe brush snapping up ahead. And if you can't track fast enough to keep up with a deer, if you miss your one good shot, then his tracks fill in, and he has won the day all for himself."

"Hey, son," Harley said softly, "do you want another beer?" Ross was still staring out the window.

"You bet, Harley," Ross said, even though he still had a half. He'd forgotten how much he liked Harley. He remembered that first hunting trip, his father making him eat a Bull Burger and Ross forcing it down. And he

remembered Harley reaching out over the bar and in two bites finishing the last third or so and winking.

Ross was working his way up a draw, with his father up above him towards the saddle, when he looked into a clearing and she was already looking at him. His heart jumped and he shot her. She let herself down as if into bed. But then the unexpected--what his father hadn't told him--happened. She didn't die, didn't give it up easily. He stood over her as she wheezed then flicked her legs as if to run. She made a gasping cry and another. Her eyes bulged at him, and he, too, began to cry.

He remembered his father crashing through the brush much too loudly to be his father. He remembered the pain of seeing that open face close up in red fury as it took in the scene. His father slapped him hard in the face.

"Quit crying," he said. "You're only blubbering for yourself. What this girl needs is for you to get her where she's going to." And he pulled her head back and cut her throat deep through her windpipe to the bone. "Son, if you're going to shoot an animal, you've got to do what's right by it."

Later, in The Trough, his father rubbed Ross's hair and bragged to everyone about the deer his nine-year-old boy had shot. He bought everyone a drink and Ross a root beer and Bull Burger.

"I'm sorry, son," his father said. "It shouldn't have been a bad day for either of you. We'll see that it's just a good hunt from here on out, okay?" After the afternoon, Ross remembered how much this felt like love washing over him. And he remembered holding the burger and watching his father drink beer and holler with friends. There was no way his two small hands could handle that burger, and meat and onions and pickles crumbled out of it.

Harley had already put the other can of beer in front of Ross and was asking about onions.

"Raw or grilled?" Harley asked.

"Grill 'em," Ross said. "Please."

He had thought about not going out at all. But, he had told himself, if I miss this year it will still be hanging over me next year. It's go or quit. He thought the hard part was behind him, out in the woods getting the deer, but the hunt had been easier than it felt now. Ross began to feel drained, as if a plug were pulled and he was spilling out into the room and could no more stop it than stop gravity.

Harley cut a radius in two thick onion slices and splashed the broken rings at Ross's burger. The steam and sizzling rushed up around it and Harley, suddenly careful, primped the onions in close with the spatula. Ross watched the huge man bent over the grill. The sweat had dried on

Harley's back and Ross had the strange desire to reach out and put his hand on it.

His father was driving. He reached into his Pendleton and handed Ross a brown pill bottle.

"What's this?" Ross asked.

His father looked straight down the road, his eyes squinting crow's feet back to his ears.

Ross opened the bottle and looked at five marijuana joints standing like capsules. He pulled one out and sat there holding it by its tip like a splinter he'd just pulled out of his hand.

"What's this?" he asked again.

"I thought you might use them better than me."

"He gave these to you?" Ross still looked at the joint.

"Yup. He said they'd help."

"Well, I think you should use them then," Ross said. He looked at his father. "I mean, why not?"

"I think it's a little late," his father said, eyes still on the road. "It's not a cure, you know."

Ross leaned his shoulder into his door, his cheekbone cold on the glass. "You might have to smoke it anyway," he said. "My old man said he'd kick the shit out of me if he caught me with this stuff again."

"Well, he must be an asshole." Ross heard the smile in his father's voice. "Who are you going to listen to, him or your friends?" Ross laughed. Why hadn't he just thrown them away, he wondered.

"Smoke one with me," Ross said, watching forms fly behind the steam his laughter had left on the window.

"I can't," his father said. "It's not that bad."

The door opened and out of the purple darkness a tall man in the requisite orange came in. "Hey, somebody got a nice buck out there."

"Yup," Harley said, thumbing at Ross, "it's his."

"Nice one," the man said, and took a stool.

"Thanks." Mine, Ross thought to himself. Mine because it's dead out in my truck.

"That there's the first buck I've seen since it went buck only," the man said. "I almost wish I'd taken a doe while I had the chance."

"Oh, yeah?" Ross asked. "Didn't anybody else out there get a buck?" He hadn't even noticed the other rigs.

Turning his head down the bar, Ross asked, louder, "None of you got your buck yet?"

The pool shooters shook their heads. One of the threesome at the bar said, "We been elk hunting."

"Well, I guess I owe you all a drink," Ross said, trying to sound jovial. "Harley, get a round on me."

"Hey, thanks, fella," the new hunter said, "mighty decent of you."

"It's just an old custom where I come from," Ross said. But it was the first time he had ever heard it. He looked at the can of beer he was softly turning in his two hands and felt a shaky wave of emotion rising from that drained feeling.

"Well, it's a damn fine one," the hunter said as he was getting a beer from Harley. He hoisted his bottle to Ross. "Here's to ya."

"Thanks," but Ross was afraid to look at the man. To make up for it he said, "Good luck with your hunting," holding the can up, then took a big swallow.

"Do you need one, too?" Harley asked him, as thanks drifted from down the bar and behind.

"No thanks," Ross said without looking up, "but get yourself one." This round of drinks was getting too involved. He raised his can to the room. I've got to get out of here, he thought.

"Hey, Harley," Ross said. This time Ross had to look him in the eye. "Put that burger in a bag, would ya? I gotta beat that ice home."

"Sure, Ross. It's done right now." Ross wondered if it seemed like he was rushing out. He downed what was left of his beer and stood, money in hand, waiting for Harley to

finish wrapping the burger. He shifted his weight on his feet and said, to himself, "Come on, come on, come on."

Harley handed him the bag and Ross passed him some bills and said, "Thanks, Harley. Keep it."

"Thank you," Harley said, and reached his hand out to Ross, who was already turning. "And, Ross," he said, "you take good care."

The night was purple black and thick with snowfall, far thicker than Ross would have guessed from inside. He leaned his back against the pickup and pulled the burger from its bag. He held it flat on one hand and unfolded the neat foil wrapper with his other. Steam billowed up out of the seam and passed his head. Ross looked up but it was gone.

Suddenly, standing in the night with snow falling in swatches, Ross was in no hurry to go anywhere. He held the burger with both hands and grinned at it with a dizziness he felt in his teeth. I have never been so hungry, he thought, never so deliciously hungry. Snow piled up in his hair and trickles ran into his eyes and off onto the bun. With a moan, Ross buried his face in a huge bite of his burger. He pulled away with onions hanging limp from his mouth and grease on his chin. He moaned again, louder, into another bite. He looked up into the snow and chewed with his mouth full and open and smiling. Ross imagined the flakes stationary with him rising through them.

"Here I come," he shouted. "You bastards stay off my hamburger," and he laughed and took another bite, this time with a groan that turned into a muffled whoop as his mouth filled.

"Jesus," he said, "I'm getting drunk on hamburger," and laughed again, and now the snow seemed to be water before it even touched him, and his hair and face and vest were shiny with it. He held the burger in one hand above his head and whooped again. He took another bite with another groan, and another, and another, until he was chewing and groaning steadily into his hands, and then he was crying.

Ross sat on the truck's step-up and cried and finished the burger. Then he balled the foil and bag up and wiped the crying out of his mouth and nose with the back of his sleeve.

"Woo-hee," he said, softly. He stood and shook water from his hair and the droplets flew like a meteor shower, briefly catching light and then gone. He threw the bag into the back of the pickup where the deer's hooves and antlers rose out of a thick bed of snow. Ross grabbed the deer by its rack and pulled. He could feel the neck, resistant and stiff, under his grip. He shook the deer hard until the snow broke up noiselessly and fell away and hide showed down to the tail.

Ross swept the snow off the deer's forehead and softly rubbed the flatness. "Don't worry," he said. He spread his

fingers and touched the eyes. They would not close. He remembered the rack branching into the trees. The turn of his head. The being together in the snow. And then himself, alone, with the falling.

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