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## **The Van Gogh Field**



**The Van Gogh Field**  
and other stories

William Kittredge

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for my mother and my father,  
my daughter and my son,  
Karen and Brad,  
and all those who helped me.

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Clyman Teal: swaying and resting his back against the clean-grain hopper, holding the header wheel of the Caterpillar-drawn John Deere 36 combine, a twenty-nine-year-old brazed and wired-together machine moving along its path around the seven-hundred-acre and perfectly rectangular field of barley with seemingly infinite slowness, traveling no more than two miles in an hour, harvest dust rising from the separating fans within the machine and hanging around him as he silently contemplates the acreage being reduced swath by swath, a pale yellow rectangle peeling toward the last narrow and irregular cut and the finished center, his eyes flat and gray, squinted against the sun.

Robert Onnter, standing before the self-portrait of van Gogh, had finally remembered Clyman Teal, his expression beneath that limp sweat-and-grease-stained hat, the long round chin and creased, sun and windburned cheeks and shaded eyes, a lump of tobacco wadded under his thin lower lip, sparse gray week-old whiskers, face of a man getting through not just the pain of his last illness and approaching death, but the glaring sameness of what he saw, at least trying to see through.

Changing position every few moments, as if from some not-yet-discovered perspective he would be

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able to see into an interior space he felt the picture must have, Robert Onnter faced the self-portrait of van Gogh on temporary display in the marble-floored main lower corridor of the Chicago Art Institute and felt the eyes in the portrait as those of a man looking into whatever Clyman Teal must have seen while watching the harvest fields that occupied the sun-colored impenetrable August days of his life, the sheen brilliant and unresolved as light glaring off buffed aluminum: eye of van Gogh.

In the same place the afternoon before, people dressed for winter occasionally passing, Robert had been distracted by the woman, her gloved hand on his sleeve, while trying to visualize something he could not imagine, what lay beneath and yet over the texture of thick blue paint, how the ridged strokes fixed there changed his memories of slick wheatfield prints under glass in frames on his mother's wall. This morning he had left the woman sleeping in her cluttered brown apartment . . . her fragility only appearance . . . curled like a small aging moth on her side of a too-wide bed in a building that overlooked the northern end of Michigan Boulevard and snow-covered ice of the lake, gone by taxi to his room in the Drake Hotel and showered and shaved and changed clothes, and feeling clean as when outdoors on a long-ago summer morning touched by dew which dampened the leather of his worn-toed childhood boots, caught another taxi and returned to stand again before the picture.

There was a sense in which he had come to Chicago to look the first time at real paintings because of van Gogh. Part of his reaction against the insubstantiality of his life had been founded on those flat wheatfield prints his mother cherished. Robert

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smoked a cigarette from a crumpled pack, wondered if he should have left a note for the woman, and thought, as when the woman interrupted him the afternoon before, about his mother's life in isolation and her idea of beauty, surely implied by her love of those prints, desolate small loves in the eastern Oregon valley that was his home, the transparently streaked sheen of yellow gold over the ripening barleyfields under summer twilight, views of that and level windblown snow no doubt having something to do with the way he had felt compelled to spend this winter and with what he saw in the eyes of van Gogh, remembered from the simple death of Clyman Teal, and what he thought of his mother's idea, not so much of beauty but of the reasons things were beautiful. The woman's appearance beside him the day before seemed inevitably part of the education he had planned for this winter, escaping stillness. Except for two and a half years at the University of Oregon in liberal arts, studying nothing, a course urged on him by his mother, four years in the air force, a year and a half of marriage to a girl from Vacaville, California, named Dennie Wilson . . . when he lived in Sacramento selling outboard motors . . . he had always lived in the valley. So there was need to travel.

Twenty-seven when he returned to the valley, he worked for his father as he had always known eventually he would, spending his time at chores and drinking in the town of Nyall at the north end of the valley, seeing whichever girl he happened to meet in the taverns. Lately the calm of that existence had fragmented, partly because of his mother's insistence he was wasting his life, more surely because of constant motionlessness, reflected in the

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eyes of Clyman Teal and now in the detached and burning eyes of van Gogh. Robert had been disconnected from even his parents since the divorce, and now it seemed there had been no one even then. The girl Dennie, addicted to huge dark glasses with shining amber lenses, so briefly his wife, now lived in Bakersfield with another man and a daughter named Felicity who was nearly six years old and ready for school. Robert could recall his wife's face . . . the girl he married . . . could not imagine her with a child, saw with absolute clarity the slender girl from Vacaville, eyes faintly owl-like in the evening because her suntan ended at the rim of her glasses. She had grown up while he had not. By missing knowledge of her strength in childbirth he had missed part of what he could have been. His sense of lost contact was constructed at least in part of that.

The previous year, early spring, before winter broke out of the valley, a morning he remembered perfectly, he called Dennie before daylight, a frantic and stupid mistake finally shattering any sort of relationship they might have carried past divorce. Robert had been reading a book pushed on him by his mother, *The Magic Mountain*, written by a German named Mann, which seemed a strange name for a German, his mother saying the book would tell him something about himself and that if he would only begin reading he would see why he must change. The day was a dead Sunday and he was a little hung over and somehow bored with the idea of another slow afternoon in the bars of Nyall, the blotched snow and peeling frame buildings and the same people as always, aimless Sunday drinkers. So he read because there was nothing else to do and



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then for reasons he did not understand became fascinated and began to struggle seriously with comprehending what the German meant by writing down his story of sickness and escape, seeing why his mother might imagine it applied to him, yet sure it meant something more.

He spent weeks at it, reading and rereading each page and paragraph, savoring the way it was to be German and writing about sickness, staying in his room and working at it each night, waking in the early morning before daylight and thinking about it again. Until at four o'clock the morning of the phone call he turned on his light and began reading about a beautiful epileptic woman and began to feel as if he were himself at the next breath going to descend into a spasm and ended terrified and unable to focus his eyes on the print, or even move, as if the merest responses of his body might cause the heavy and shrouding weight of stillness to settle like a cloud blotting away all connection, and finally he forced himself and called the girl who had been his wife, Dennie, who he sensed might understand, might not have completely deserted him. She told him he was drunk and hung up quickly, and Robert felt himself alone in his cloud and could think of nothing but awakening his mother, begging her to make it go away, ended going for weeks through the motions of days surrounded by terror of something simple as air.

Now the heavy and vivid symbolic color of the self-portrait seemed reality, the expression and agony of a man abruptly giving up, Clyman Teal who had been dying that last summer, a wandering harvest-following man who could have been van Gogh, who traveled north with the seasons along

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the West Coast in a succession of gray and rust-stained automobiles, always alone: hard streaked color of the painting ridged and unlike the wheat-field prints, actual as barley ripe before harvest, all bound into the stasis Robert was attempting to escape in this city, while traveling.

The woman's amber-colored hair was long and straight, over her shoulders, contrasting with the natural paleness of her clear oval face. She brushed her hair slowly. "I'd just finished washing it," she said, smiling, "when you called."

So casual she seemed younger, and small and full rather than tiny and drawn together by approaching age; she sat in a black velvet chair by a window overlooking the lake, lighted from behind by gray midwestern sunlight, wearing a deep-and-soft-blue gown which concealed all but her white shoulders and neck, bare feet curled beneath her. Worn embroidered slippers lay on the pale, almost-white carpet in the room cluttered with sofas covered by blankets and with tables whose surfaces reflected intricate porcelain figures. "I like nice things," she'd said the night before. "Most of these things were my mother's. Is there anything wrong with that?" Robert told her he imagined not, and she smiled. "Call me Goldie," she'd said. "Everyone does." He had read the card inserted in the small brass frame beneath the entry buzzer. *Mrs. Daniel (Ruth Ann) Brown*. Her husband, she explained, was away in Europe. "He's no threat," she'd said. "He's gone for the winter."

They'd come here in the evening at her insistence, sat in flickering near darkness before the artificial

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fire, and she changed into a dressing gown and served tiny glasses of a thick pale drink that tasted like burnt straw. Finally he kissed her, moving awkwardly across the sofa while she waited with an icelike smile. "He's away," she said, "to Greece, to the islands, to walk and think."

In the soft light of afternoon she was completely serene. Robert asked why her husband had gone. "Because of the clearness," she said. "The light . . . things have gone badly, with the unrest, and he wanted to think. . . ." Perhaps, Robert thought, he would follow, to the pale sunlight and dusty white islands and the water of the sea, New York and then London, Paris, Rome, at last to the islands off Greece, and see the water moving under the light, flow and continuity that might illuminate his vision of a desert stream low in a dry summer and water falling through crevices between boulders, always images of water, the cold Pacific gray beneath winter clouds, waves breaking in on barren sand and the heavy movement of the troopship just after leaving San Francisco for Guam, where he spent a year and a half of his air-force time.

In childhood he had imagined the barleyfields were water. After the last meal of the day, while dishes remained stacked in the sink to be washed later, they would all of them go out into the valley and look at the ripening crop, his mother and father, Robert, and his younger brother and even-younger sister all in the old dark-green Chevrolet pickup. Now his brother had been dead eleven years, killed in an automobile crash his second semester of college, and his sister, married directly out of high school, lived distantly with children in Amaril-

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lo, Texas. Then they had all been home, and his father had driven them out over the dusty canal-bank roads until east of the fields, looking toward the last sunlight glaring over the low rim; and those yellowing fields were luminous and transformed into a magic and perfect cloth for them to walk on, and Robert imagined them all hand in hand, walking toward the sun.

His mother had named the largest field on one of those trips, and because of the prints in the house it had seemed she was only silly. But surely she had been right, however inadvertently. The yellowish, rough sheen of bearded, separate, and sunlighted barley heads matched perfectly the reality of van Gogh, glowing paint, his eyes, texture. "The van Gogh field," she said, repeating it as if delighted. "It's so classic." She would often say that. "It's so classic." They stayed until the air began to cool and settle and then went slowly home, Robert and his brother in the back of the pickup, watching the dust rise soft and gray as flour behind them and hang in the air, streaked and filmy as an unlighted aura even after the pickup was parked beneath the cottonwood trees behind the house.

Robert wondered what those evening trips had meant to his father. Nearly sixty, silently beguiled by sentiment, his father wept openly for a month after Robert's brother was killed, sat abruptly upright drinking the coffee Robert's mother brought, never going outside until spring irrigation forced him to work, after that revealing emotion only with his hands, gesturing abruptly and reaching to pick up a clod of dry and grainy peat, crumbling it to dust between callused fingers. During planting the

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man would sometimes walk out over the damp tilled ground and kneel, sink his hands and churn up the undersoil, crouch lower like a trailing animal. "Seeing if it's right," he would say. "If it's ready."

The woman returned with drinks. "I didn't think you'd be back," she said. "I hoped, but. . . ." She smiled, perhaps wishing she were alone, the last night an incident scarcely remembered. "I went back to the painting," Robert said.

"What are you really doing? I don't think I believe what you told me." She continued smiling. He had lied, unable to admit he had borrowed ten thousand dollars from his father, feeling childish over his search for places and cities missed, and told her he was an insurance salesman. "Looking for islands," he said, wondering if she would take him seriously.

She glanced away, stopped smiling. "The wheat-fields," she said, "you should see them, the last particularly." Robert didn't answer. "Before he shot himself, I mean," she said, "when you think of what it meant to him . . . the yellow and that field pregnant, those birds . . . his idea of death, and remember it was there he killed himself, in that field, then you see."

"Yellow?"

"Simply love." The afternoon had settled, blue winter light darkening, her face isolated as if detached from her dark gown. "I don't think you can tell from prints," he said, "we had prints and there's nothing in them . . . my mother must have thought he was pretty and bright." Robert could not explain the insincerity of imitations, falsity.

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"So?" The woman leaned forward just slightly, perhaps interested and no longer getting politely through an afternoon with a man she'd slept with and would have preferred never seeing again. Her tone was sharper, quick, and she sipped her drink, turned the glass in her hands.

"The way she acted. . . ." Robert stalled.

"Your mother acted improperly." The woman's voice was impatient, dropping the *improperly* as if she had changed her mind while speaking, finishing awkwardly, perhaps not wanting to acknowledge the moral distance implied in her judgment of him and his judgment of his mother.

". . . as if it were an example of something."

"Are you so sure? Perhaps it was all a disguise."

"I don't think she. . . ." Robert hesitated. "A man died and she knew some pictures and so it was beautiful and emblematic of something." His mother had stirred her coffee and smiled with total self-possession. "He finished doing what he loved," she had said. "Until the job was over."

The woman rose from her chair and began walking slowly before the windows, carrying a half-empty glass. "Women see more than you imagine," she said. "Sometimes, perhaps everything."

His mother: Duluth Onnter, what did she see, having come west from Minnesota to marry his father out of college, so taken by color and names? Her parents had moved from Minneapolis to Tucson the year after Robert was born, and although he had visited them as a child, he could not imagine the long-dead people he remembered, a heavy white-haired man and woman, as having lived anywhere not snow covered half the year. His

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grandfather had been in Duluth the day Robert's mother was born, and because of that had insisted she be named after a cold lakeport city. "Papa always said it was beautiful that morning," his mother told him. "That I was his beauty."

"Maybe the pictures were only warm and nice," Robert said. "Maybe she did see."

"My husband is like that," the woman answered, "imagines he's going to find spirituality in Greece, in some island. I don't. I'm lucky." She continued walking before the windows, gown trailing the carpet, her thin figure silhouetted. "I have what seems necessary and it's not freedom. I'll go Friday and confess having slept with you. That's freedom."

"To a priest?" It seemed totally wrong, sleeping with him and then carrying the news to church, the kind of circularity he had been escaping. "I don't see that at all," he said. "Why do anything in the first place . . . and pretend you didn't?"

"It's not pretending," she said. "It's being forgiven. I go to look as you do, somehow for a moment you helped me see better, look at van Gogh, and even my need to see is a sin, a failure of belief. I sold myself for what you helped me see. If that sounds silly maybe it is, but it wasn't to me then and it's not now. It's my own freedom and I don't need to go anywhere to find it. And it has to be confessed."

Robert wondered if she found him foolish, in Chicago, planning on Europe, if she wished to be rid of him and would regard his going coldly, as his mother had taken the death of Clyman Teal, if for her anything existed but hope. "I must seem stupid," he said.

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"No . . . I just don't think there's anything like what you're looking for."

"Like what?"

"I don't know, but it isn't here . . . or Greece or anywhere."

"Perhaps I should stay." There was the easy possibility of a winter in Chicago, walking the street, looking at pictures, going from van Gogh to Gauguin, Seurat, seeing her occasionally, as often as she would permit.

"I wouldn't," she said. "If I were you." Feeling denied some complex understanding she could give if only she would, Robert knew she was right and trying to be kind. "I wouldn't bother you," he said. "Only once in a while, just to talk."

"No," the woman said. "I'll get your coat." Her face was hard and set and he thought how melodramatic she was with her insistence on futility. Standing in the hallway with her door closed behind he saw how much she believed she was right, her belief founded on quick sliding glances at whatever it was van Gogh and Clyman Teal had regarded steadily in their fields of grain.

The next morning he returned to the Art Institute, and she was there, standing quietly in a beige-wool suit with a camel's-hair coat thrown over her shoulders, a thin and stylish, nearly pretty woman who was aging. "You came back," he said. She turned as if surprised and then smiled. "Let's be quiet," she said, "the best part is silence, then we can talk."

Beside her, sensing she now wanted some word from him, Robert was drawn to the fierce and despairing painted face, memories of Clyman Teal in



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the days before he died. Summer had been humid, with storms in June and a week of soft rain in late July, and the crop the best in years, kernels filled without the slightest pinch and heavy by the time harvest started in August. Clyman Teal arrived the day it began, lean and thick shouldered, long arms seeming perpetually broken at the elbows, driving slowly across the field in the latest of his rusted secondhand automobiles, a gray two-door Pontiac. He rubbed his eyes and walked a little into the field with Robert and his father. Dew was just burning off. "Came last night from Arlington," he said. "Finished there yesterday." He'd been working the summer wheat harvest just south of the Columbia River, two hundred and fifty miles north, for twenty years, always coming when it finished to run combine for Robert's father. After this job ended he'd go south to the rice harvest in the Sacramento Valley. Thick heads of barley drooped around them, and Clyman Teal cracked kernels between his teeth and chewed and swallowed, squinting toward the sun. "Going to be fine," he said, "ain't it boy." Leaving the trunk lid open on the Pontiac, heedless of dust sifting over his bedroll and tin-covered suitcase, he dragged out his tools and spent the rest of the morning working quietly and steadily while the rest of them waited, regreasing bearings Robert had greased the afternoon before, tightening chains and belts, running the machine and tightening again, finishing just as the noon meal was hauled to the field in pots with their lids fastened down by rubber bands. They all squatted in the shade to eat, then flipped the scraps from their plates to the sea gulls, and the work began. With the combine motor running, Clyman Teal motioned for Robert to follow him and

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walked to where Robert's father stood cranking the old D7 Caterpillar, dust goggles already down over his eyes. "When there's time," he shouted, "I want this boy on the machine with me." Then he walked away, climbed the steel ladder to the platform where he stood while tending the header wheel, and waved for Robert's father to begin the first round.

So when there was time between loads, Robert rode the combine, learning to tend the header wheel, what amount of straw to take in so the machine would thrash properly and to set the concaves beneath the thrashing cylinder, adjust the speed of the cylinder according to the heaviness of the crop, regulate the fans that blew the chaff and dust from the heavier grain. "Whole thing works on gravity," the old man said. "Heavy falls and the light floats away."

Sometimes the old man would walk behind the machine in the fogging dust of chaff, his hat beneath the straw dump, catching the straw and chaff, then dumping the hatful of waste on the steel deck and slowly spreading it with thick fingers, kneeling and blowing away the chaff, checking to see if kernels of the heavy grain were being carried over. "You need care," the old man said. "Otherwise you're dumping money."

But most often he just rode with his back braced against the clean-grain hopper. The harvest lasted twenty-seven days, the last swath cut late in the afternoon while Robert was hauling his final truckload on the asphalt road up the west side of the valley to the elevator in Nyall. Returning to the field in time to see the other truck pulling out, a surplus GI six-by-six converted to ranch truck wallowing through the soft peaty soil in low gear, Robert

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waited at the gate. The other driver stopped. "Claims he's sick," the man said, leaning from the truck window. "Climbed down and curled up and claimed he was sick and said to leave him alone." The combine was parked in the exact center of the field, stopped after the last cut. Tin eyed and balding, the driver lived in the valley just south of Nyall on a sour alkali-infested 160 acres and now seemed impatient to get all this over and back to his quietude. "Your daddy wants you to bring out the pickup," he said.

Robert drove the new red three-quarter-ton International pickup, rough and heavy, out to the combine. Clyman Teal lay curled on the ground in the shade of the machine. Robert and his father loaded the old man into the pickup, and Robert drove slowly homeward over the rutted field while his father supported Clyman Teal with an arm around his shoulders. The old man grunted with pain, eyes closed tightly and arms folded over his belly. Parked at last before the whitewashed bunkhouse, they all sat quiet a moment, nothing in the oppressive empty valley moving but one fly in dust on the slanting windshield. "We'll take him inside," Robert's father said, and Robert was surprised how fragile and light the old man was, small inside his coveralls, like a child, diminished within the folds, his odor like that of a field fire, sharp and acrid. They left him passive and rigid on the bunk atop brown surplus GI blankets. He opened his eyes and grunted something that meant for them to leave him alone, then drew back into himself. The window shelf above the bed was lined with boxes and pills, baking soda and aspirin and home stomach remedies. Robert's mother carried down soup and toast that evening, and the

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old man lay immobile while Robert's father washed the dust from his face. They tucked him under the blankets and the next morning the meal was untouched. That afternoon Robert's father called a doctor, the only one in Nyall, and after probing at the curled figure the doctor called an ambulance from the larger town fifty miles west. It was evening when the ambulance arrived, a heavy Chrysler staffed by volunteers, red light flickering at the twilight while Robert helped load the old man on a stretcher. Clyman Teal was sealed inside without ever opening his eyes, and Robert never saw him again. During the brief funeral parlor ceremony six days later he didn't go up and look into the coffin, nor did anyone.

Operated on the night he was hauled away, Clyman died. "Eaten up," the doctor said, shaking his head: "Perforations all through his intestines." Robert remembered his mother's reddened hands gripping the tray she carried down the hill, his father's fumbling tenderness while washing the old man's face, the mostly silent actions. Three days after Clyman died the sheriff's office located a brother in Clovis, New Mexico, who said to go ahead and bury him. Six attended the funeral, Robert and his father and mother and the truck driver and his huge smiling wife and a drifter from one of the bars in Nyall. The brother was a grinning old man in a greenish black suit and showed up a week later. He silently loaded Clyman's possessions into the Pontiac and drove away, heading back to New Mexico. He hadn't seen Clyman, he said, in thirty-eight years, hadn't heard from him in all that time. "Just never got around to anything," he said. But the trip was worth his trouble, he said. He'd found hidden

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in the old man's tin suitcase a bankbook from Bakersfield showing total deposits of eight thousand some odd dollars. He said he thought he'd go home by way of Bakersfield.

The woman took Robert's arm. "I've had enough," she said. "Let's have a cup of coffee." Seated in the noisy cafeteria, she smiled. "I liked that," she said. "Standing there quietly together . . . that's what I first liked about you, that you knew how to be quiet." Robert wondered how often she did this, picked up some stray; what had driven away her husband. "Is that why?" he said, involved in a judgment of her that seemed finally unfair, perhaps because it came so close to being a judgment of himself.

"You could appreciate stillness . . . the moment I love in church is that of prayer, silence before the chant begins." Her hands moved slowly, touching her spoon, turning her cup. "I've changed my mind," she said. "I'd like you to stay the winter.

"You could go with me on Sundays," she said, "and see how the quiet and perfection . . . the loveliness on Easter."

But he couldn't. It was useless, for her perhaps all right, he couldn't know about that, but stillness would mount while they chanted, and not her church or any city in Europe, even clarity of water, would do more for him than going home to those cold wet mornings in early spring while they planted, the motionless afternoons of boredom while the harvest circled to where the combine parked. "Yes," he said, not wanting to hurt her, knowing he might even stay. "I could do that." Wheatfields reared toward the sky under circling birds, evening dust hung still behind his father's

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pickup, and his brother's childish face was staring ahead toward lights flickering through the poplar trees marking their home, the light yellow color of love, van Gogh dead soon after, nearby.

## Breaker of Horses

The vernal equinox of his eightieth year, calendar beginning of the spring he had been anticipating for no other reason than warmth . . . an end to his constant chores of wood splitting and fire building even though cloudless days could not be expected on that high desert country of southeastern Oregon for another month or maybe two . . . Jules Russel woke to immobility, muteness, blindness. He was awake without even the ability to see the outlines of his only window glimmering in darkness, alone in the single room of his cabin beneath the bare and leafless limbs of cottonwoods planted by unknown homesteaders just upstream from the break where Horn Creek fed through the shallow lava rim into the swampy meadows of the Black Flat. Listening to the hesitant rasping of his breath beneath the more insistent sound of spring wind moaning in the rusted pipe of his stove, which meant the fire had gone out and was no longer drawing, he imagined the shimmering desert to the west defined by shadows of summer clouds. Attempting to move, to turn off the hip that was paining him and must have awakened him, off the wadding of his stained and dirty gray blankets, he found the expected thing was at last happening; and although he had been for months preoccupied with the idea of death,

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anticipating it without regret, he now felt nothing but the cringing animal within himself, and yet he could not truly believe he was dying. Everything was the same, and he was imprisoned to await cessation like a living rodent within the darkness of a snake's digesting length, already engrossed in useless panic and wanting back his freedom to be always too old and cold and alone. He had desired death but this entombment was only that, his mind as it had been, granted nothing, no illumination or sight of shadowy pastures in which white-robed figures wandered, willows in the distance, no solace, only death. He wondered if this day was cold and overslung with gray and blank clouds, if the motionless sky to the east was occasionally inhabited by the quiet passage of ducks moving north, if it was daylight, morning. He had been imagining daylight without any way of knowing, just as he had imagined night without any way of knowing, the clock ticking on the table, on oilcloth whose pattern, so often traced when there was nothing else to do—faded orange roses with flecked green leaves which were perfect in his mind—the clock giving no indication of time, only ticking away its passage. It could be morning.

This isolation was more vivid and absolute than anything he had experienced in even the line camps, unpainted single rooms almost identical to this, near the springs on the desert to the south and west where he had spent so many of the later summers of his life with only the company of his horses and the mice. Terror came on him quickly and soundlessly as the motion of remembered dreams from childhood, while nothing changed. The sound of wind



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yielded to that of the swift clock and his mind spun on the center of pain in his hip.

Then as if falling through a barrier he became increasingly calm and began to think about being missed and discovered before death. Perhaps at the post office in Frenchglen when the check came. But that wouldn't be until he was dead and rotting and they would hate him more than they did. Maybe they would miss him anyway. Jules hoped for discovery so this isolation, while unbreakable, could be eased, so he could be moved off his hip and saved from dying in pain. So he could think clearly. There had to be another chance.

But that was hopeless. There was no one to come. People ignored him as he despised them. The men on the Black Flat were subjugated to their trucks and their grease and the cheapness of easy work, devoting their lives to pleasures he could not imagine, always the easiness. At least he had his disgust and willingness to be old and close to dying and ready to escape the sight of horses beaten by men forcing them into hollow aluminum trailers, everything smudged by the black grease from machines, impatient and rough men who lacked the nobility of their animals . . . and again as he had these winter months Jules remembered one of them, young, with a scarred face, his head strangely misshapen, who complained of aching dizziness before leaving a desert branding crew in the middle of a summer workday, whose saddled horse had come home trailing broken bridle reins, with its head cocked sideways. The young man's body had been found the next day, with open white eyes fixed on the sun, trousers down, dead of a stroke while defecating

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among clumps of tall sage along a dry gravel-strewn streambed. Jules had secretly found pleasure in thinking of that death, but now he envied the sudden closure of light and knew the rest of it meant nothing, all deaths being death, and wondered if that man had died in discomfort or relief from pain and what he would do himself when his bowels filled from the meal of stew and sourdough bread he had eaten the night before. And if his own eyes were open, staring sightlessly, fixed. He had no way of finding out.

But at least his mind was his own again, even though his finest discovery at this extremity seemed to be that death, when confronted as fulfilled expectation, could not stay long before the mind of an aged man accustomed to habitual concern with the minute functions of his body. His right hip ached, the wind blew, the clock untwisted its spring, the cabin creaked, something rattled. His right ear, beneath him on the pillow, itched. He wondered if death came like that, as an itch abruptly erased, and he concentrated on the broken man who died while squatting. That man had been a horse breaker, but rough and brought up on the idea of force, unable to sooth a colt even while alone in a corral. A man kicked too often by the animals he terrified. His skull, the doctors said, had been fractured four times. The horses, in the end, had killed him; and his brutality, however thoughtless, had come home, his quick and rude idea—modern and as worrisome as the idea of horses lugged out to work in trucks with their saddles on—of how the breaking should be done . . . slow afternoons just north of the Black Flat barns, in the round breaking corral built of willow thatch by the Indians from the shanties near the

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creek, once Jules had possessed those afternoons. There had been an endless future of them and he had been young and the work of the day completed, summer forever and sure around the valley, sheltering like a fine blue bowl. He smelled the sweating three-year-old gelding, almost full grown and shy, with the dry and hot odor of manure dust, and there had been only the animal and himself and the hours before supper, time in which a horse could be properly started without regard for the passage of days. The animal had to be gentled firmly and slowly, brought into the bridle so it would turn with a touch on the neck and work with tenacity while understanding the obligation of its intelligence. Through all his life Jules had thought it just and proper that there had once been a people, inhabitants of what must have been a more righteous age, among whom the breaker of horses was the proudest of all men. The poet of the *Iliad* had in the final line of that poem eulogized Hector of Troy not as a prince or a warrior or a husband . . . there would be no Andromache weeping on walls anywhere for this death . . . had remembered Hector as a breaker of horses. Jules labored through that book about conflict and pride while dust motes fell in the shafts of sunlight that patterned the oil-clean floors in the last schoolroom of his childhood. Each afternoon while other voices droned over fifth-grade fractions the tall and thin black-haired boy he had been spent an hour reading from the only printed book he could now remember, and when his father died that spring, drowning while trying to save the wagon bridge across the Mary's River south of Corvallis, his formal education and childhood ended and seemed even in the last years of his life to have given

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him only Hector as a model of conduct and manhood. Jules tried to tell Ambrose Vega, his boss at the Black Flat, about being remembered as a breaker of horses and could even now see the old Mexican's smile and wave of the hand, his indifference.

Vega: head man at the Black Flat Ranch before Jules was born, had come north from New Mexico with the first herds in the country. Jules saw him clearly in the breaking corral, his slow firm hands over the eyes of a black gelding, then walking away toward the cookhouse, tall with thin legs and a huge and cavernous chest from which the hollow and abrupt voice grated. "One at a time," he'd said. That chest was crushed when he died. His most trusted and experienced horse, a strong and delicate nine-year-old with a flowing long-legged stride had floundered and fallen backward while scrambling up a shale rockslide in the dry canyon above the Black Flat headquarters, and Vega had been caught between the descending tree of his saddle and a gnarled lava boulder. They sat in their own saddles and looked and waited for him to move while the frantic and ashamed horse scrambled away and the blood began to seep from Vega's mouth and nose. His stillness there on the moss-edged rock was impossible, incomprehensible. He had been old, but years from death, and they had been unable to believe he was dead or imagine the unnatural future that would follow.

At last it was Jules Russel, blind and locked into his solitary bed and cabin beneath leafless trees, young then and the educated son of a drowned veterinarian, who climbed down and saw that no one could be alive with his nose and mouth filled and

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bubbling with blood. For reasons he did not understand he touched his fingers to the blood and tasted the saltiness, then looked up to the figures above him on horseback and dark against the sun in the canyon stillness above the Black Flat while the body of Ambrose Vega lay on the volcanic boulder Jules was to pass innumerable times with the file of his own crew on the trail behind.

All death was no doubt quite equal, and he had been waiting for it all this last winter, really since becoming too old for horses, growing too fragile for his work. He tried to imagine the surging feel of a surefooted horse and only the clotted blanket was there, hurting his hip, and he wanted death, remembered returning for the body later that day with a yellow brown and dog-gentle Belgian workmare wearing blinders, hauling the body down out of the canyon with the help of the man who had remained behind to keep the already-circling vultures away, loading the stiffening and blood-crusting remains of the man who had been their boss, even while old, the surest roper, who carried the work plans secretly in his head and dribbled them out each morning as if his men were children and could not be expected to remember more. The other riders went carrying the news Ambrose Vega was dead and would be kept two days in the icehouse and then buried on the sand hill back of the house, just beneath the rim of the canyon where he died.

To his burial, Jules knew, no one would bring whiskey. A man had to die on horseback and working to inspire the fear that brought men to drink as they buried. Vega had been killed in the combat of his life, and Jules knew he himself had been too careful and had outlived that sort of ceremony, lived

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past the importance of his life and the kind of life in which burial given the dead mattered much to those left alive. He wanted only death, and the end of disgust.

They began coming the second day, in the middle of a hot and still afternoon while whirls of dust walked over the sand hills, wagons loaded with women in long dresses and their children, the men sitting a little drunk already on the swaying seats and dressed in newly clean, patched, and homemade clothing. Lone riders, silent bitter-faced men who lived by themselves in range camps or on some dusty 160 acres of hand-cleared homestead where they were attempting to grow winter rye—land soon to be abandoned and sealed back into the desert, leaving only an eroded sand-filled cabin—began to appear out on the flat to the west, specks of black against the distant alkali whiteness of Floating Dog Lake. Those men carried rolled blankets behind their saddles and the grease-blackened leather bags hanging by the flanks of their horses occasionally clanked as earthenware jugs of whiskey knocked together. Bought with the spring supplies, and hauled out with sacks of flour and sugar and jars of hard candy in wagons on roads cut through high brush along wet-weather creeks, the whiskey was now to be used as intended, as medicine.

Toward evening Eldridge Carrier arrived. Short and white headed and only a little past fifty, he was rich and seldom spoke. The son-in-law of a United States senator from California, he had bought three other ranches besides the Black Flat when he came north with the senator's money. His business office

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was in Prineville, over a hundred miles north and west in Crook County. No one knew how he learned of Ambrose Vega's death or how he came that distance so quickly. He brought his own Scotch whiskey and spread his bedroll on the sand hill behind the house, away from the mosquitoes that came off the meadows, near the place where Vega was to be buried.

A fire was built up and lighted in the courtyard before the stone and rough-plank house, really just a cookshack with a few bedrooms attached. Only Vega and the cook had slept in the house. The crew bunked on straw in a shack near the barns. The firelight burned at the eyes, and Jules sat back away from it with the other men and watched the women crowding the fire with their small children, their faces burnished and excited while they talked away months of isolation. Older children ran and shouted in the darkness, playing games of pursuit in the willows marking the meadow edge. The leaf-heavy lower branches of the trees crowding the courtyard were illuminated amid flickering shadows, and as he watched their movements Jules could not stop feeling the dried crust of blood on Ambrose Vega's clothing, or smelling the dim fecund odor of the body he had lifted onto the docile and blinkered Belgian mare, the lovelike odor of recent death and blood, feeling the destruction of the future . . . when a hand touched his shoulder. It was Eldridge Carrier, face unevenly lighted, hatless, and carrying a bottle of whiskey. His hair appeared yellow in the light and was surprisingly long.

Carrier uncorked the bottle. "Take a swallow," he said, and his voice was so faint it might almost have been imagined. Jules sipped and handed back

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the bottle. "Come over to the kitchen," Carrier said. "I want to talk."

The huge room was lighted by two oil lanterns and around its perimeter, like a frieze, women rested on stools and benches, voluminous in their dresses and their faces red and blank and mostly old. They rose and fled, gathering babies and thumb-sucking grandchildren. "You can read," Carrier said. He sat the bottle on the table and gold patterns shone on the oilcloth. "In this business . . ." Carrier said, speaking after what seemed an endless time of concentration, "you can drink whiskey.

"Nip on that bottle," he said. "Some men drink it all the time." Jules sipped again and knew Ambrose Vega, covered deep under damp sawdust with the stream-cut block ice preserved into summer, would have kept the bottle in his hand. "You're the one that can read," Carrier said. "So you're in charge."

Those unexpected words, uttered by a man Jules then saw to be drunk, granted Jules an idea of himself he had not until then imagined. Jules saw what his life could become if he would only plan. "You send me a case of that whiskey," he said. "Every month."

Carrier smiled. "That's good," he said. "I'm stuck with that." Gold teeth glittered far back in his mouth. "Now we'll see the books."

Ambrose Vega's room was stark and plain. Beneath the window was a heavy table, and on the left back corner sat a heavy strongbox, dented and showing signs of once having been painted green. Three books lay inside, bound in reddish leather worn smooth by handling. The first was titled Money, the second Numbers, and third Journal.



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The pages were covered with script and calculations in an elaborate hand which had no relationship to the man Jules remembered. The first book was a record of finance, the second an accounting primarily of livestock numbers, and the third a daybook recording events and accomplishments, private evaluations of men and their horses, prospects for feed and water on the desert, reasons for mistakes and their consequences. "But you can read," Carrier said. "You'll have no trouble." He stood with the bottle in his hand, slumped, his face red and greasy with sweat, and Jules understood he was to be alone and keep council only with these books. "I'll leave you the bottle," Carrier said, and he rushed from the room, slamming the door.

Jules sat leafing the pages of Ambrose Vega's private book, wondering if somewhere he would find written the secret of what he should do now. But the book revealed no private confessions. One line from the 14th of January had been crossed out with a heavy and wavering stroke of the pen. THE SNOW ALWAYS COMES FROM THE SOUTH.

Even the women were drunk at the burial. Children ran leading the procession following the board slab on which the body was carried, face exposed with dried and black rivulets of blood creasing the cheeks. The slab was too large and would not fit into the narrow, gravel-lined hole dug the evening before, and the crowd stood back from the grave and Jules was left alone in the center of their opening while they waited for someone to tip the slab and slide the body off. Then a crippled and middle-aged Indian man from the group at the back of the crowd, from the families who lived in the

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three shacks and beneath the willow *ramada* by the creek, came limping forward. His name was Davy Horse. He had been named after his right leg was crushed against a rock-solid juniper gatepost by a stampeding green colt he tried to ride one Sunday afternoon when he was drunk, showing off for women. Since that time he had never ridden again and vowed he never would, and his name had evolved out of that vow. He walked everywhere he went, moving slow and broken-legged like a crab. And now Davy Horse was drunk, carrying a half-full bottle of dollar whiskey that he set carefully in the sand. Then he bent over the body, encircling it with his arms, lifted it and staggered sideways and fell with it into the grave. Jules was saved from an act he could never have performed. The crowd was very quiet while Jules watched Davy Horse struggle from beneath the body and then stand with one foot on a stiffened thigh, raising himself until his shoulders were level with the ground, and silently lift his hand. Jules took the sweaty palm. Then Davy Horse stood above the grave and poured his whiskey over the body and into the sand, and the desert men and their women and those children who had come to the burial turned and went down the hill to their wagons and horses. The burial of Ambrose Vega was finished.

And now Jules lay alone and blind in his bed remembering the different man he had become. The wind had stopped, the clock was no longer ticking. He was warm and the pain in his hip was obscured by burning in his chest. He saw the blue bowl of summer sky and his mother weeping nights after his father drowned, remembered the laughter of the small Paiute woman named Martha who cooked for

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him one winter in the Black Flat house, her laughter in his bed, and as he died he was weeping for the loss of an unknown woman and the children he had never allowed himself to expect, hands never touched; he could feel the tears on his face as the silence began.

## Thirty-four Seasons of Winter

Ben Alton remembered years in terms of winter. Summers all ran together, each like the last, heat and baled hay and dust. "That was '59," he'd say. "The year I wintered in California." He'd be remembering manure-slick alleys of a feedlot outside Manteca, a flat horizon and constant rain.

Or flood years. "March of '64, when the levees went." Or open winters. "We fed cattle the whole of February in our shirt-sleeves. For old man Swarthout." And then he'd be sad. "One week Art helped. We was done every day by noon and drunk by three." Sad because Art was his stepbrother and dead, and because there'd been nothing but hate between them when Art was killed.

Ben and Art fought only once, when they were thirteen. Ben's father, Corrie Alton, moved in with Art's old lady on her dry-land place in the hills north of Davanero, and the boys bunked together in a back room. The house was yellow white, a frame building surrounded by a fenced dirt yard where turkeys picked, shaded by three withering peach trees, and the room they shared was furnished with two steel-frame cots and a row of nails where they hung what extra clothing they owned. The first night, while the old people were drinking in town, the boys fought. Ben took a flattened nose

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and chipped a tooth against one of the cot frames and was satisfied and didn't try again.

The next year Art's mother sold the place for money to drink on, and when that was gone Ben's old man pulled out, heading for Shafter, down out of Bakersfield, going to see friends and work a season in the spuds. Corrie never came back or sent word, so the next spring the boys took a job setting siphons for an onion farmer, doing the muddy and exhausting work of one man, supporting themselves and Art's mother. She died the spring they were seventeen; and Art began to talk about getting out of town, fighting in the ring, being somebody.

So he ran every night, and during the day he and Ben stacked alfalfa bales, always making their thousand a day, twenty bucks apiece, and then in the fall Art went to Portland and worked out in a gym each afternoon, learning to fight, and spent his evenings swimming at the YMCA or watching movies. Early in the winter he began to get some fights, and for at least the first year he didn't lose. People began to know his name in places like Salem and Yakima and Klamath Falls.

He fought at home only once, a January night in the Peterson barn on the edge of town, snow falling steadily. The barn warmed slowly, losing its odor of harness leather and rotting hay, and under the circle of lights which illuminated the fighters in a blue glare, country people smoked and bet and drank. Circling a sweating and tiring Mexican boy, Art seemed gray white against the darkness of the loft, tapped his gloves and brushed back his thin blond hair with a quick forearm, sure and quiet. Then he moved under an overhand right, ducking

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in a quick new way he must have learned in Portland, and he was inside, forcing, and flat on his feet, grunting as he followed each short chop with his body. The Mexican backed against one of the rough juniper posts supporting the ring, covered his face, gloves fumbling together as he began sinking and twisting, knees folding, and it ended with the Mexican sprawled and cut beneath one eye, bleeding from the nose, and Art in his corner, breathing easily while he flexed and shook his arms as if he weren't loose yet, and then Art spit the white mouthpiece onto the wet, gray canvas and ducked away under the ropes.

Ben sat that night in the top row of the little grandstand and watched two men drag the other fighter out of the ring and attempt to revive him by pouring water over his head, hugged his knees and watched the crowd settle and heard the silence while everybody watched. Finally, the Mexican boy shook his head and sat up, and the crowd moved in a great sigh.

The next summer Art showed up with Clara, brought her back with him from a string of fights in California. It was an August afternoon, dead hot in the valley hayfields, and dust rose in long spirals from the field ahead where five balers were circling slowly, eating windrows of loose hay and leaving endless and uniform strings of bales. Ben was working the stack, unloading trucks, sweating through his pants every day before noon, shirtless and peeling.

The lemon-colored Buick convertible came across the stubble, bouncing and wheeling hard, just

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ahead of its own dust, and stopped twenty or thirty yards from the stack, and Art jumped out holding a can of beer over his head. The girl stood beside the convertible in the dusty alfalfa stubble and squinted into the glaring light, moist and sleepy looking. She was maybe twenty, and her sleeveless white blouse was wrinkled from sleeping in the car and sweat-gray beneath the arms. But she was blond and tan and direct in the one-hundred-degree heat of the afternoon. "Ain't she something?" Art said. "She's a kind of prize I brought home." He laughed and slapped her on the butt.

"Hello, Ben," she said. "Art told me about you." They drank a can of beer, iced and metallic tasting, and Art talked about the fighting in California, Fresno, and Tracy, and while he talked he ran his fingers slowly up and down Clara's bare arm. Ben crouched in the shade of the convertible and tried not to watch the girl, and his stomach cramped. Later he lay awake and thought about her, and everything about that meeting seemed too large and real, like some memory of childhood.

Anyway, she was living and traveling with Art. Then the fall he was twenty-five, fighting in Seattle, Art broke his right hand in a way that couldn't be fixed and married Clara and came home to live, driving a logging truck in the summer and drinking in the bars and drawing his unemployment through the winters, letting Clara work as a barmaid when they were broke. The years got away until one afternoon in a tavern called The Tarpaper Shack, when both Ben and Art were thirty-one. Art was sitting with a girl named Marie, and when Ben came in and wandered over to the booth she surprised

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him by being quiet and nice, with brown eyes and dark hair, not the kind Art ran with on his drunks, and by the end of the summer Marie and Ben were engaged.

Which caused no trouble until Christmas. The stores were open late, but the streets with their decorations were deserted, looking like a carnival at four in the morning, lighted and ready to tear down and move.

"You gonna marry that pig?" Art was drunk. The night barkeeper, a woman called Virgie, was leaning on the counter.

"Yeah," Ben said. "But don't sweat it." Then he noticed Virgie looking past them to the far corner of the vaulted room. A worn row of booths ran there, beyond the lighted shuffleboard table and bowling machine. Above the last booth he saw the shadowed back of Clara's head. Just the yellow hair and yet certainly her. Art was grinning.

"You see her," he said, talking to Ben. "She's got a problem. She ain't getting any."

Ben finished the beer and eased the glass back to the wooden counter, swirling moisture into rings, wishing he could leave, wanting no more of their trouble. Clara was leaning back, eyes closed and the table in front of her empty except for her clasped hands. She didn't move or look as he approached.

"Hello, Kid," he said. And when she opened her eyes it was the same, like herons over the valley swamps, white against green. Even shadowed beneath the eyes and tired she looked good. "All right if I sit?" he asked. "You want a beer?"

She sipped his, taking the glass without speaking, touching his hand with hers, then smiling and lick-



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ing the froth from her lips. "Okay," she said, and he ordered another glass and sat beside her.

"How you been? All right?"

"You know," she said, looking sideways at him, never glancing toward Art. "You got a pretty good idea how I been." Then she smiled. "I hear you're getting married."

"Just because you're tied up," he said, and she grinned again, more like her old self. "I mean it," he said. "Guess I ought to tell you once."

"Don't," she said. "For Christ sake. Not with that bastard over there laughing." She drank a little more of the beer, twisting her mouth as if it were sour. "I mean it," she said, after a moment. "Leave me alone."

Ben picked up his empty glass and walked toward the bar, turning the glass in his hand and feeling how it fit his grasp, stood looking at the back of Art's head, the thin hair, fine and blond, and then he wrapped the glass in his fist and smashed it into the hollow of Art's neck, shattering the glass and driving Art's face into the counter. Then he ran, crashing out the door and onto the sidewalk.

His hand was cut and bleeding when he stopped, blocks away. He picked glass from his palm and wrapped his hand in his handkerchief and kept walking, looking in the store windows, bright and lighted for Christmas.

Clara left for Sacramento that night, lived there with her father, worked in a factory southeast of town, making airplane parts and taking care of the old man, not coming back until he died. Sometimes Ben wondered if she would have come back anyway, even if the old man hadn't died. Maybe she'd just been waiting for Art to come after her. And then

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one day on the street he asked, "You and Art going back together?" just hoping he could get her to talk awhile.

"I guess not," she said. "That's what he told me."

"I'm sorry," Ben said. And funny enough, he was.

"I came back because I wanted," she said. "Guess I lived here too long."

That spring Ben and Marie were married and began living out of town, on a place her father owned, and the next fall his father was killed, crushed under a hillside combine in Washington, just north of Walla Walla, drunk and asleep at the leveling wheel, dead when they dug him out. And then the summer Art and Ben turned thirty-four Marie got pregnant and that winter Art was killed, shot in the back of the head by a girl named Stefanie Rudd, a thin red-haired girl just out of high school and, so people said, knocked up a little. Art was on the end stool in The Tarpaper Shack, his usual place, when the girl entered quietly and shot before anyone noticed. He was dead when he hit the floor, face destroyed, blood splattered and clotting over the mirror and glasses behind the bar. And all the time music he'd punched was playing on the jukebox. Trailer for sale or rent, and I can't stop loving you, and time to bum again, and that's what you get for loving me: Roger Miller, Ray Charles, Waylon Jennings.

Ben awakened the night of the shooting and heard Marie on the phone, felt her shake him awake

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in the dim light of the bedroom. She seemed enormously frightened and continued grasping with her heavy soft hand, as if to awaken herself. She was eight months pregnant.

"He's dead." She spoke softly, seeming terrified, as if some idea she feared had been at last confirmed. "He never had a chance," she said.

"He had plenty." Ben sat up and put his arm around her, forced from his shock.

"They never gave him anything." She folded down and began to cry. Later, nearly morning, after coffee and stumped-out cigarettes, when Marie gave up and went to bed, Ben sat alone at the kitchen table. He felt sorry for her and wondered if he should. "Afraid of everything," Art had said. "That's how they are. Every stinking one."

Ben saw Art drunk and talking like he was ready for anything, actually involved with nothing but a string of girls like the one who shot him. And then, somehow, the idea of Art and Marie got hold of Ben. It came from the way she acted, her crying. There was something wrong. Ben knew, sitting there, feeling the knowledge seep around his defense, what it was.

She was in the bedroom, curled under the blankets, crying softly. "What is it?" he asked. "There's something going on." She didn't open her eyes, but the crying seemed to slow a little, hesitate. He waited, standing beside their bed, looking down, all the time wondering, as he became more sure, if it happened in this bed, and all the time knowing it made no difference where it happened. And her fault. Not any fault of Art's. Art was what he was. She could have stopped him. Ben's hands felt

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strange, as if there was something to be done he couldn't recognize. He asked again, hearing his voice harsh and strained. "What is it?"

She didn't answer. He forced her onto her back, where she couldn't avoid looking at him, held her there, waiting for her to open her eyes, and she struggled silently, twisting her upper body against his grip. His fingers sank into her shoulder and his wrist trembled. They remained like that, forcing against each other. Then she relaxed, turned, and opened her eyes. "What is it?" he asked again. "It was something between you and Art, wasn't it?" Her eyes were changed, shielded.

She shook her head. "No," she said. "No."

"He was screwing you, wasn't he? Is it his kid?"

"It was a long time ago," she said softly.

"My ass." He let go of her shoulder, saw the marks his fingers left. "That's why you're so tore up. Because you ain't getting any more." He walked around the bed, unable for some reason, because of what he was left with, to ask her if it happened here, in this bed. "Isn't that right?" he said.

"It was a long time ago."

"Did you both laugh?"

"It doesn't matter now."

"How come you married me? He turn you down?"

"Because I was afraid of him. I didn't want him. He was just fooling. I wanted you, not him."

Ben slapped her, and she curled quickly again, her hands pressed to her mouth, crying, her shoulders moving. He spun her to face him. "You ain't getting away," he said. "So I was a nice tame dog, and you took me."

"You'll hurt the baby."

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"His Goddamned baby."

"It all broke off when I met you," she said. "He told me to go ahead, that you'd be good to me." It had surprised him when they met that she was with Art, but somehow he'd never until now gotten the idea they had anything going on. "It was only a few times after I knew you," she said. "He begged me."

"So I got stuck with the leavings." He cursed her again, at the same time listening to at least a little of what she said. "He begged me." That was sad. Remembering Art those last years, after he came home to stay, Ben believed her.

"So he dumped you off onto me," Ben said. "I wish I could thank him."

"It wasn't like that. He loved you. He said for me to marry you and be happy."

"So you did. And I was stupid enough to go for it."

"He was a little boy. It was fun, but he was a little boy."

"I'm happy," he said. "Things worked out so nice for you." She shook her head and didn't answer. Ben wondered what he should do. It was as if he had never been married, right in always imagining his life as single. He'd watched his friends settle, seen their kids, and it had seemed those were things he was not entitled to, that he was going to grow old in a habit of taverns, rented rooms, separate from the married world. He was still there, outside. And she'd kept it all a secret. "You stinking pig," he said slowly.

"It was a long time ago."

He was tired and his work was waiting. Maybe it was a long time ago and maybe it wasn't. She lay crying while he dressed to go out and feed her fath-

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er's cattle, and in the afternoon she had the house picked up and a meal waiting. She watched while he ate, but they didn't talk. He asked if she wanted to go to the funeral and she said no and that was all. When he was drinking his coffee, calm and so tired his chest ached, he started thinking about Clara. He wondered if she'd known. Wouldn't have made any difference, he thought. Not after everything else.

Three days later, heading for the burial, he was alone, driving through new snow that softly drifted across the highway, hunched against the wheel, and his hands seemed swollen and dead, fingers thick and numb, the broken cracks in the rough calluses ingrained black. A tire chain ticked a fender, but he kept going. He'd gone out at daylight to feed, a mandatory job that had to be done every day of winter, regardless of other obligations. The rust-streaked Chevrolet swayed on the rutted ice beneath the snow, and the steady and lumbering gait of the team he fed with, two massive frost-coated Belgian geldings, the creaking oceanic motion of the hay wagon, was still with him, more real than this, closer to the speed he was going.

The Derrick County cemetery was just below the road, almost five miles short of town. They were going to bury Art in the open ground reserved for charity burials, away from the lanes of Lombardy poplars and old-time lilacs. By dark the grave would be filled and covered with snow. Ben parked and got out, stood beside the idling Chevrolet, tail pipe spitting fog, and looked down at the hole. The bells of the Catholic church, far away in town, were faintly tolling.

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The trail down toward the grave was tromped and hard, frozen into ice, and the first foot of the hole was chiseled and smooth where the frozen earth, embedded with ice, had been chipped out with a bar. Ben stood a moment, then started toward the warm Chevrolet, sat with his hands cupped in his crotch, warming them, then backed slowly out of the graveyard.

Davanero was on the east side of the valley, scattered houses hung with ice, windows sealed against wind by tacked-on plastic sheeting. Forested mountains were indistinguishable from the sky among clouds of storm. The still smoke of house fires rose in dark, slowly dispersing strings. Ben drove between lots heaped with snow-muffled junk, past shacks with open, hanging doors where drifters lived in summer, into the center blocks of town. The stores were open and a few people circulated toward the coffee shops. He felt deserted, cut away from everything, as if this were an island in the center of winter.

The Open sign hung crooked in the front window of The Tarpaper Shack. Ben wondered if Clara was tending bar, if she would go to the funeral. He parked and walked slowly through the snow to the door. The church bells were louder, close and direct. Inside, the tavern was dark and barnlike, empty except for Clara, who was washing glasses in a metal sink. Ben went to the far end, where Art always sat, and eased onto a stool. "I'd take a shot," he said. "A double. Take one yourself."

"I'm closing up," she said. "So there's no use hanging around." She stayed at the sink, hands washing mechanically.

"You going to the funeral? Like a church girl?"

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"I'm closing up." Her hands were quiet in the water. "I guess you need a drink," she said. "Go lock the door." She was sitting in one of the booths when he got there. "You ain't going to the funeral?" he asked again. Her face was hard and thin, a contrast to her thickening body.

"What good is that?"

"I guess you feel pretty bad."

"I guess." She drank quickly, like a bird dipping water. "I would have took anything off him. Any damned thing. And that stupid bitch kills him. I would have give anything for a kid."

Ben sipped the cheap, bitter whiskey. "I don't look at what that girl thought. I don't know."

"He never blamed you over that. Not ever. I seen him cry."

"When he was drunk."

"What the hell—when he was drunk?" She finished her drink.

Ben killed his double, and Clara went for another round. "To hell with their Goddamned funeral," he said. Clara played music, slow country stuff, on the machine, and they danced, staggering against the stools and the shuffleboard table, clutching at each other. She pushed him away after a few rounds. "If you ain't one hell of a dancer," she said. "Art was a pretty dancer." She sat at the booth and reached one arm flat along the table and lay her head beside it, facing the wall. "Goddamn," she said. "I could cry." The music continued.

"I ain't cried since I was a little girl," she said. "Not since then. Not since I was a little girl." Ben wandered through the music of the room, carrying his drink, called his wife on the telephone, fumbling the dial, finally hearing her voice. "You bet your



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sweet ass I'm drunk," he shouted, without introduction, then hung up.

"Ain't you some hero," Clara said. She drank what whiskey was left in her glass. "You're nothing," she said. "Absolutely nothing."

Outside, the bells had stopped. Nothing. That was what he felt like. Nothing. Like his hands were without strength to steer the car. He sat awhile, half drunk, then drove to the jail, a gray brick building with heavy black wire mesh over the windows. The deputy, a small bald man in military pinks, sat behind a wood desk in the center of the main room, coffee beside him. He smiled when he saw Ben, but didn't say anything. "How's chances of seeing that girl?" Ben asked. He didn't know why he'd come. It was just some idea that because she'd hated Art enough to kill him, because of that, maybe she understood and could tell him, Ben, why he wasn't nothing. He knew, even while he spoke, that it was a stupid, drunk idea.

"Okay," the deputy said, after a minute. "Come on. I guess you got a right."

They went through two heavy locked doors, back into a masonry room without windows, lighted by a long fluorescent tube. Two cells were separated by steel bars six inches apart. The room was warm and in the light seemed to flicker. The girl was sitting on a cot in the left-hand cell, cross-legged, with red hair straight down over her shoulders, wearing a wrinkled blue smock without pockets, looking at her hands, which were folded in her lap. Her eyes, when she looked up, were pale and very large, the whites totally clear. "What now?" she said. Her voice, which seemed forced, was surprisingly loud.

"Ben wanted to see you," the deputy said.

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"Like a zoo, ain't it." The girl grinned, gestured with her hands.

"And you're not one bit sorry?" Ben asked. "Just one bit sorry for what you did?"

"Not one bit," the girl echoed. "I've had plenty of time to think about that. I'm not. I'm happy. I feel good."

"He wasn't no bad man," Ben said. "Not really. He never really was."

"He sure as hell wasn't Winston Churchill. He never even tried to make me happy." She refolded her hands in her lap.

"I don't see it," Ben said. "No way I can see you're right. He wasn't that bad."

"The thing I liked about him," she said, "was that he was old enough. He was like you. He was old enough to do anything. He could have been nice if he'd wanted."

The deputy laughed.

"I felt so bad before," the girl said. "Killing him was so easy. The only thing I feel bad about is that I never got down into the center of him and made him crawl around. That's the only thing, I'm sorry about that, but that's all."

"He didn't owe you nothing," Ben said.

The girl looked at the deputy. "Make him leave," she said.

Snow fell again, large and single flakes that dropped straight and wavering through the gray afternoon, and Ben drove slowly home. He could only see the blurred outlines of the trees on either side of the lane toward the house. Marie was in the bedroom sleeping. The dim and wallpapered

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room was gray and cold, the bed a rumpled island. She was quiet, her shape a mound beneath the blankets, her mouth gaping a little, the pillow damp beside her lips.

After undressing, Ben sat on the edge of the bed. Marie sighed and moved, but didn't waken, and he reached to touch her and then stopped, hovered with his hand extended, his flesh ingrained with dirt and rough over her white skin. Her eyes flickered. "Come," she said, stretching. "Get under the covers."

"In a minute." He went back out and smoked a cigarette, then crawled in bed and put his hand on her belly, waiting to feel the baby flutter, remembering a warm, shirt-sleeve day in February, working with Art and hurrying while they fed a final load of bales to the trailing cattle, eager to get up-town and into the taverns, noontime sun glaring off wind-glazed fields of snow.

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Standing before the window we remember Venuto, who died, and hear the faint clamoring of childish voices. Juniper posts burn in the fireplace, and outside large flakes of snow are falling, obscuring the distances as evening comes. The snow turns blue, and we are alone with those voices, the complex echoing of laughter, which may be only the silence ringing as we remember Venuto.

Water piped from the hot springs steams in the bathhouse, and the light of a summer afternoon glows through dusty windows in stone walls encrusted with green moss. Venuto laughs and his voice echoes as the dark woman, so recently a girl, stands hesitant on the steps into the pool, arms shielding her breasts, black hair thin and silvery over her shoulders, and she shudders, and then splashes off into the pool and slips toward him, touching the hand he reaches out to her, allowing him to draw her against his chest, her fingers entangled in the streaked hair plastered over his shoulders.

They kiss quietly and gently. Floating on the water for that moment before lovemaking, her hair sinks as she rests suspended in his arms, and in that

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water begins the life of the boy named Bowman, who will reach manhood the year Venuto dies.

From far off in the early morning there is nothing but the depth of the sky, a few stars showing, beginning to fade. The horizon to the east, that geologic fault ridge known as the Chinese Wall, rising some two thousand feet above the valley, is a darker shade of purple, and then Bowman strikes stone with his shovel as the pace of sunrise accelerates, the sky yellowing; and later Bowman hears only the sound of his own breathing, heavy and rhythmic, as he works mindlessly.

Light touches the playa, the salt-white desert glaring far to the west, the line of distinction between shadow and morning sweeping toward Bowman over the ancient lake bed at frightening speed. Until at last the edge of the sun flowers over the Chinese Wall, which is, for just that moment, black.

Already sweating, Bowman is waist-deep in his immaculate trench, filling his wheelbarrow, working in the early morning because of the terrible heat that builds toward noontime, absorbed in creation of his ever-widening spiral, the task Venuto set for him; and already Bowman is thinking of sleep, smoking, and of the pure hollowness of sleep in the afternoon while feeling himself lost in this white distance as the ridges of muscle, burned dark by the sun and hard from his work, flex over his shoulders. His wheelbarrow filled, Bowman stops his work and examines the stone his shovel struck in the darkness, a marble figurine worked awkwardly into the shape of an enormously pregnant woman, breasts heavy alongside the belly, legs and arms and head

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almost not there, extremities of stone almost not worked. Reasons for this discovery are for Bowman unimaginable, and he wonders if Venuto is at last smiling, and walks slowly across the cracked and absolutely flat expanse of the alkaline playa toward the sand dunes and grassland and willow bordering Meter Creek. The mineral-banded rock face of the Chinese Wall rears above him in the shimmering light like a boundary.

Bowman crosses the stream on a mortared bridge Venuto claims to remember having built, although it seems worn by innumerable lifetimes, and he climbs down to the water, a pool where yellow glinting sand reflects through the ripples, water mirroring the green shadows of willow. He washes the figurine, touches the cool veined stone of the polished belly to his forehead while knowing he no longer yearns for sleep, and he wonders how Venuto knew this cure was possible, sure only that he has been waiting months for this moment.

Venuto sits on the porch and carves and smokes his cigars, and Bowman no longer works at his endless trench; he comes down the mountainside each morning to fish along Meter Creek, sometimes upstream to the pool beneath the waterfall, other times down from the bridge, almost to the marsh where the creek water seeps into sand near the edge of the playa, that salt-white remembrance of water.

"It was like silver," the girl says, "all day."

Bowman wonders if she is Indian, how long she has been watching. Her darkness is perhaps accentuated by the light, for the sun is low over the desert behind her and she is above him on the sodded bank

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of the stream, astride an aged white-and-black pinto mare.

"You know?" she says.

While she waters the mare, Bowman guts his fish, leaving the remains on the bank for raccoons, heads and entrails scattered in the grass.

True absence of desire, she tells him, lies in a whore's life. Bowman finds himself unable to talk about this easy inland silence surrounding them, the seacoast as far away as it could ever be beneath his pale sky. He remembers fog, which even in the light of early morning must be banking far out over the Pacific, fine mist obscuring the white horizon, and he wonders how he can recall a coastline he has never seen, imagines steam in the still air over melting snow, winter outside the cavern where the hot springs bubble, tiny blind fish swimming circularly in their darting schools, always seeking the cooler water. Outside the bathhouse the sky is turning blue, and butterflies dance in thousands through the warm light over the greasewood.

". . . not what you can see," Venuto says, "you can see anything." He is talking about the disparity between what can be seen and desire, the true foundations of craziness being useless sight. Bowman imagines an unpainted house and yellow leaves from a cottonwood tree, no mountains in sight anywhere, a small boy alone and chewing a hard clot of reddish venison jerky from the string drying on the fence of slacked barbed wire.

Walls in the room where Venuto sits are hung with tapestry depicting unicorns with long, twisting horns, those pale animals mounted on plump

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motherly women from the rear, the carnage of medieval warfare in the dim background. Venuto holds a heavy glass of cut crystal, the glass sparkling dully and his hair glowing, white on the left and gray on the right, the line of demarcation exactly down the center of his skull. When he smiles his teeth are perfect and white beneath his stained mustache.

Ambition, he says, is a disease of the spirit. "Don't make no sense," he says, picking at his teeth with a sharpened matchstick. "Running around . . ." His voice catches, he clears his throat, ". . . Just running away.

"Where would I be?" he says, "if I worried about what comes next?

"Nowhere," he says. "Plain nowhere."

At first distant as the sound of insects, the droning grows quickly louder. The Steerman biplane roars low overhead, heavy radial engine lifting a wake of dew from the grass. From the edge of the playa Bowman watches them land, trailing white dust across the smooth alkali, and the stench of weed poison, the chemical odor of 2-4-D Ethyl, seems deadly as that of hot exhaust. The dark-eyed pilot, a thin, flat-chested man with huge, scabbed hands, sits on the wing holding a half-empty bottle of beer, his mustache thick over his mouth and damp. The girl is Nordic, her smooth, tanned arms perfect as old marble against the folds of her lime-green dress, hair blonde and cropped into short curls, teeth white against the suntan.

"Never you mind," the pilot says, ignoring Bowman, and then he laughs, shakes his beer, and squirts the foam toward her, the liquid frothing over his hand and forearm, the spray fine and iridescent,



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splattering the green dress and dribbling down her legs. As Bowman and the girl turn away, the Chinese Wall seems as though it is falling toward them through the midsummer heat.

The girl, her name is Betsy, is crying as they walk slowly through the willow to the creek. "I'm sorry," she says at last. The droning sound of the Steerman has long since died off in the west.

"There's sometimes," she says, "when you think it won't matter."

A lean girl with long, ragged black hair in strands over her shoulders will not speak when Bowman discovers her stealing food—cool cans of whole tomatoes, sides of smoked salmon, dried mushrooms gathered in spring from the roots of cottonwoods near the creek, sprouting potatoes—from the damp underground storage room. She sleeps outside even as fall approaches, on boughs covered with canvas, under a woolen blanket Venuto has given her. No one knows how she came across the desert playa. Coming down over the Chinese Wall is not imaginable. Beyond the wall to the east there is only wilderness. She sleeps in the daytime, and Bowman wonders what she will do when winter comes, if she can live without houses.

Still wearing her lime-green dress, the girl named Betsy plays Bowman's records, sorting through the dusty pile and playing old-time hymns, huddling with her arms around her knees and never looking up while the music goes on, and then she smiles and asks Bowman to take off his boots. Her hands are quick and brown as she shuffles through the records. "What'd you like?" she asks.

"Anything," Bowman says.

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"They're going to put me in the movies," she sings. Another record ends. "Some kind of movies," she says.

Yellow flowers, another day, are embroidered on her thin blue dress. When he touches her waist Bowman can feel the warmth. "All right now," she says, and she kisses him, and later, as the sun lies near the shadowy mountains on the faint western horizon, Bowman sits outside wearing only his pants and sips a glass of cold water, and she kisses his back between the shoulder blades. "It's like light on the ocean," she says, "like out in the dunes, down where you can't see no water and they got no wind at all." When she stands, Bowman touches the firm back of her thigh, cups his hand around the soft hollow at the back of her knee. "You think it don't matter," she says.

Above her bed the girl named Betsy pins an imitation Chinese scroll, a delicate ink rendering of an ancient man with a wispy beard poling a high-prowed boat upstream, flowering vertical mountains in cloud behind, a hut with a sharp and elaborately peaked roof at the summit. Bowman sips his soup, which is sour and green, and listens to the fall of rain through the half-opened window. "If I was pregnant," she says, "way at the center of me there would be rice paddies and foaming water."

"For you," she says, when Bowman touches her breasts, "I'm being a mountain." She lies very still, and her voice is scarcely louder than the sound of rainfall. When they sleep, Bowman dreams of another existence in wine-growing hills with women who create the world's finest basketry. Later he imagines loneliness and riding a cold desert high-

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land, the sun already below the cloudless horizon, fires in the distance, and the air chilly after the burning heat of the day.

"Learn to be quiet," she says, "never moving."

Massaging his back, she sings him to sleep. "So soft, so quiet . . . so soft." Bowman descends toward memories of a woman's hair golden and lighted from beyond the doorway, an odor of stale roses in the room.

Venuto smiles. "Down there," he says. The women crowding the edge of the rock-walled and circular bear pit are quiet. "Those days . . ." Venuto sets his jaw and stares away. "Nobody laughed," he says.

Later he sits leafing through one of his yellow-backed magazines in the room where tapestries depict unicorns. His feet are bare, the nails black, and his teeth are yellowing. Thin, blue white old man's feet. Bowman dreams of those feet and the hands of a young girl as she pares the nails, the thin-bladed knife sharp and deadly in her strong fingers, the black nails and those feet and blood if the knife slipped, fragile white feet against the purple-velvet skirt.

"Dying," Venuto says, and his eyes shine, watery and pale blue. Bowman clasps his hands together. Venuto stares at a vividly colored picture in his yellow-backed magazine, natives in a jungle, plastered with white mud and dancing around an enormous bird roasting on a spit, banana trees in the background. "Stone looping crazy," Venuto says.

"Bored," Venuto says. "Bored to death. That's the worst thing . . . drowning in milk." He holds forward another picture, a single native in an almost

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featureless mask of white clay. "Crazy as hell," Venuto says, "but he ain't bored . . . imagines he's the Lord God of Creation."

Bowman wonders if he can sip Venuto's gin and be crazy but never bored, if even after envisioning the end he will continue. Later he wonders if he should weep for Venuto, whose breath has finally turned sour.

Somewhere there is a life Bowman knows he should remember, thick-walled and doorless adobe huts clustered along a dry stream course, dark rooms smelling of urine and animals and children where he might be welcome, his memory of it all returning as he enters. A narrow road twisting over barren hills and his real father watching from a doorway, naked children playing with insects on the baked white mud of the dooryard, a younger woman alive in place of his mother.

Instead, far back in the cavern where the hot springs bubble, he finds candles burning in the late fall. In silence and the looming darkness he discovers the altar, garish and luridly decorated with figures of divine children, and he thinks of his mother's laughter, her white throat as she turns in the glow from the candles, her dress long and white and her arms bare. As she sleeps, Bowman dreams of the odor of blossoming orange trees along the streets of a stone city, children playing games of pursuit in the nearby darkness.

Imagining the murmured chants of women in dark, voluminous dresses and black lace veils, Bowman is drawn into his own future—the blood on his hands, the green china basin where he washes them before a window opening onto an enclosed garden

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where rain falls on open flowers and freshly clipped grass, trees beginning to bud during days of storm. His mother laughs in this dream.

As his arm is touched.

"They are fools."

Whispered, these words startle him as the woman grasps at his elbow, the cold fingers clutching at the bare flesh below his rolled sleeve. Her shawl glows in the dimness of the cavern, framing her dark and hard globular face, the small knot of polished cyst that shines as though polished in the center of her forehead.

"We know," the old woman whispers, eyes smoothly opaque, breath smelling of wintergreen. "Look at her. Is she smiling?"

Only as the old woman gestures does Bowman realize her blindness. A tiny figure emerges from the shadows behind the altar, another woman with features too large for her skull, her face old and coarse and yet small as a baby's, withered beneath a bald pate no larger than a silver dollar and cone-like. "She is blameless," the blind woman says, "and yet she smiles. She would kiss you."

Her companion laughs, a gurgling sound, and the blind woman draws back, hand upraised as if to strike through what Bowman imagines as the milk-thick darkness of what she sees, and then she smiles, blind fingers reaching out to explore the rubbery grimace on that smaller face. "She is Victoria," the blind woman says, "and a great fool. There is no room in her head. Her smile is to be despised. Yet she is beautifully clean, even her flesh if you do not see it. In darkness she is marvelous.

"Think of her lips," the blind woman says, glaring away at darkness. "She is so lovely and she loves

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so easily. Think of the yellow flower outside her mother's window as she touches you, a yellow flower against a blue wall while she smiles and weeps." Bowman sees the hand reaching toward him, his mother's hand, white fingers, and the green soap slipping away into the steaming water like wet jade, hears Venuto, *not what you can see, you can see anything*, and knows that somewhere there is a life where adobe walls are painted shocking blue, as he turns away, abandoning kindness he knows could have absorbed the rest of his life.

Bowman is alone. The sky is overcast and winter is coming when he awakens to find they have all gone off, the women and Venuto, and the wind blows hard from the north as he stays indoors by windows reflecting the fire, and they are gone the next day and the next. Late in the afternoon of that day the clouds move off like a shelf, leaving the cold sky clear, and the wind stops. Bowman waits for the beginning of something unknown, expected.

The next morning they have returned. Bowman comes from sleep to the harsh roaring of some terrible and defeated animal. In the long-abandoned round stone pit there is a bear, an aging yellow-tip male, chained and slowly rousing itself, lifting its head to bellow, and then sinking back while thick saliva dribbles from those black lips. Bowman stands with the women, who are dirty and red eyed from their days in the brush, clothing torn, their thighs and hands and breasts scratched as by the claws of tiny animals, and he watches as the beast becomes aware of a studded leather collar thick as a man's wrist. For the first time Bowman is afraid, having never imagined this as an ending.

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It is winter and the lime-green dress has been torn into strips and bound as cord around the blind woman's wrists. The blonde girl named Betsy, showing sign of first pregnancy, is combing the old woman's stringy white hair until it flowers around those dark blind eyes. "Real pretty," Venuto says. "That's nice."

Bowman thinks of broken contact, a line of clean, scoured copper slipping from his grasp as Venuto coughs. When Bowman tells them of imagining himself as an actor with a collie dog, the old woman asks if he has no history of his own. "Not in overly noticeable ways," Venuto says, "but he ain't no child."

Later Bowman defines the death of the old woman as play, fantasy. The jaws of the beast close and the flesh is rent, torn. Blood drips from the jowls of the bear as he rears from the horror of his kill. The jaws work slowly; women crowd the edge of the pit; their aprons are damp. Venuto will not watch. But perhaps it was nothing like that. Bowman was not there. The woman was simply too old.

And her companion was too simple. The flower no longer blooms beside the blue wall. Bowman sees them warm in the enclosure of that expected surprise, which has always been remembered, deserved, and peaceful.

His mother will laugh as rain splatters the canopy overhead, and across the cultivated valley, with its thickness of hedgerows, the forests are heavy green. She will enter the elaborately carved door into the room where tables are mirrored on the hardwood flooring. In autumn the trees are gray with dust, and the leaves are freckled yellow by the burned im-

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print of the sun hanging always in the afternoon haze of forest fires. The walks are empty between rows of wilted bamboo, and the buildings white in a glare so exact the crushed grass is shadowy, like memories of sand seen through light on riffled water. Her fingernails will clutch the back of his neck, leaves stir above them, the sky is scattered with clouds. It will rain, and grass on the hillside breaks against their legs.

"There's no such woman," Venuto says. "Not that you would want to think about.

"Them women will break your heart," Venuto says.

"Every time," Venuto says, "they die. Keep that in mind . . . they die, every time."

Bowman remembers the terrible screaming dreams of a woman in the afternoon, her thin body struggling to escape his arms as he tries to awaken, sunlight on the dry leaves of potted flowers. "If she was looking for you she would have let you know," Venuto says, "if she was . . .

"You might as well be a baby," Venuto says, "for all the difference she makes." Venuto holds out his cut-crystal glass, and Bowman sees himself mirrored along with the firelight. "You see your face?" Venuto says. "That's what you know about her. About that much."

As Venuto sips from the glass, Bowman remembers his games in the abandoned bear pit, placing small stones carefully on lines so they delineated rooms in a house he could only imagine. From so long ago. "That woman," Venuto says, "she wasn't fit to see no one." Bowman turns his back. The old man in his illness has begun to have a stench like



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that of the bear. His teeth have gone gray in his mouth.

Riding a wind-broke gelding named Moon on the marshy slough-cut ground near Meter Creek, one vivid childhood morning in spring with geese flying north, the air sharp beneath their clear honking and filled with the odors of moist sage and manure, Bowman discovered the body of a bird, the skeleton of a sandhill crane resting on a clump of feathers moldering into the fine dust of a cave. The memory of that morning is as hard in Bowman's mind as an amber stone beneath spring water bubbling from the base of a mossed-over shelf of lava, a few aspen surviving alongside. He wonders if the bird was terrified in that cavern, if his sky is to become more and more cavernlike, eventually blackened by soot from cooking fires.

There comes a morning when the snow is deep and Venuto is gone, his body torn amid the bones, the crushed and marrow-sucked fragments in the pit. Bowman washes his hands in the green china basin and cleans the blood from beneath his fingernails with a sharpened matchstick, then burns the yellow-backed magazines while remembering the lightness of the old man's body, the mushy feel of his white flesh.

The women do not weep, but they stay indoors until Bowman at last fires the rifle, that enormous sound of the shot clanging as in a metal drum, continuing as it diminishes. And then Bowman carries the remains of Venuto up the hill and chips down through the frozen earth with a steel bar, this hole neat as his curving trench in the playa, clean and

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square. He buries Venuto there, close by the base of the Chinese Wall, as he continues to pray that all this is an accident. When he returns, the women are filling the bear pit with mud, carrying it in buckets from the open ground beside the hot flow of spring water, covering the frozen contorted remains of the animal Bowman has killed. So they settle in for winter.

In the bathhouse, from beside the pool of steaming water, Bowman watches the women as they swim and return to the sulfuric water as if within it lies something they must continue tasting. Their faces are pale in the reflecting light of candles, and they seem visitors from some transforming dream, dripping and swollen figures moving through shadows, and his losses are diminished, overshadowed, by events that will never occur. Until he remembers swimming with Venuto in the cold water of Meter Creek, the old man's red hands and neck and his hard white body lathered with soap. Bowman slides into the steaming water and swims lazily, the women moving around him like gleaming naked creatures intent on returning forever to a life in water, the lapping of their waves the only sounds.

It is another summer and again we hear the faint clamoring of childish voices while we watch Bowman chipping at stone and then climbing the scaffolding alongside the wall he is building. Soon he will build another adjoining wall and another, and then he will fell trees to be hewn into massive rafters for this house he is building, he will split red orange cedar shakes for the roof, gather mushrooms from the roots of cottonwoods along the creek, and he will

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sleep without ever dreaming of the sores on Venuto's white body, the clean slip of the knife into that old man's night. Bowman will wash away his sweat in the pool, float on soft waves in the steam, knowing he at last has a history of his own. The green china basin is always polished.

## The Stone Corral

*. . . after Alicia's chastity I cannot describe the warmth.*

Wild meadow grass is mowed short inside the circle of stone wall, around the trash barrels and picnic tables. Broken glass glitters under the dry sun. A Nevada State Historical Marker decorates the entrance, a brass plaque mounted in a chipped concrete block.

Late in June of 1892, the wagon party led by Jerome Bedderly, 137 persons, was without provocation wiped out while attempting to defend themselves within this corral. One Shoshone woman, a volunteer and guide, was also killed. Her infant child survived according to later stories. Indications of violence are clearly distinguishable on various stones. This was the "Sleeping Child Massacre." *God Rest You Pioneers.*

Jerome Bedderly stood on the sand hill to the east, among the sage clumps and bitter greasewood in the still warmth of June, contemplating his oncoming death, which he could anticipate so clearly. In his journal, which turned up in Virginia City almost a year later, finally making its way into the Bancroft Historical Collection at the University of California, Bedderly tells of standing transfixed while the people in his party walked in circles until a woman screamed, drawing his gaze to "the mis-

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erable children, lodged and staring eyes" while his hands trembled.

The frantic woman was his wife. "She signaled again from her madness our collective doom. Again I suffer fear and melancholia while knowing I must die, as in childhood I dreaded the futility of my prayer. My sin is doubt. Her voice was mine."

Paiute Creek runs below and to the west, named for Indians whose greater name was Shoshone, in a shallow valley of meadows and willow-lined sloughs, with rolling sage country beyond at the horizon. On clear days in June the DeFoe Mountains to the northwest stand unreal and close in noontime light, snow covered and dim against the pale sky, revealing dark and steep canyons gathering watercourses to form Paiute Creek. Bedderly writes of attempting to calm his panic by concentrating on three ponderosas in a triangular grouping just at the snow line. The grove is still there, oriental and impervious to history, silhouetted faintly against the white in late June.

*Her voice was mine.*

Alicia Bedderly had been shrieking occasionally for more than a week. As for reasons, we know only what Bedderly wrote. "Her madness causes the grievance, not the tribesman's innocence." Alicia had been touched on the arm by one of the Paiute men. "Those dark inquisitive fingers, the white flesh of her arm . . . she never claimed she was harmed."

He tells of the first shooting. "The terrible landscape erodes out our goodness, bleakness violating our souls this last week of unforgiving misfortune. We wrestled our fear and aimed always westward with our remaining resolve and energy, and it be-

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gan so gently. We were pleased to see the natives in this wilderness, anything human preferable to the unending desolation, greeted them in a wholesome and friendly way though they were the most uncouth we have seen, scarcely more than animals in their habits, with almost no charm, at the same moment clever and redeemable, like childish circus rope dancers, until Alicia's terror. The native attempted hiding in the brush but our young men dragged him to the rear of my wagon. Alicia would not be solaced, accepted no ministrations, not mine nor a woman's, and her eyes rolled and she frothed blood, having severely bitten her tongue and the insides of her cheeks, and she fell down and was mad, the affliction of women. To aid in her cure I shot the native. Not lethally, in the thigh only, a fleshly wound and warning to him and others, with hope that appreciation of her security within my power might bring Alicia to restoration. In turn his eyes rolled and he fell faint. *The native pleaded and was doglike but in my resolve I shot.* May God forgive me the possibility of error. . . . But Alicia was not restored and I console myself with the notion that she perhaps never truly believed, has always sinned in secret fear."

*". . . but it was my right to do so."* As a boy in Kansas, Bedderly witnessed the murder of his father by proslavery vigilantes during the six-year underground war known as "Bleeding Kansas." The late spring of 1857 his father was found to be harboring an escaped Mississippi slave and was shot down in the afternoon by seven hooded men, falling to bleed on the baked ground near his own doorway, where the turkeys scratched. "Onward from that day," Bedderly wrote, "I was unable to think, considered

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mad and kept from school and other children. Of that time I remember nothing. So I have always been alone." He recovered during the Kansas drought and famine of 1860, twelve years old at the time, by suffering a midnight vision. "I found myself beneath the moon and again aware of myself, unable to sleep, and I was relieved of my suffering by the justice of God while lying on the cool hard earth and feeling warmth from the depths to which my father's blood had soaked. I was human, and learned that goodness must be willing to injure as my father had been killed, risk deaths and force its own survival if needs be. From that moment I was restored and a model pupil, God's Hand."

Bedderly graduated from a ministerial college in Topeka and by the late 1880s had established a following of nearly three hundred hardworking "Hands of God" around the small western Kansas community of Divine Law, a townsite chosen by Bedderly and now vanished under cornfields, abandoned when his vision of purpose drove him west seeking new land, opportunity to work in the Lord's Way. "We will cultivate immaculate fields and gardens," he wrote. "Our seaward progress is divine. The shade beneath our trees will be perfect and cool on the Sabbath. We will force perfection."

But his first contact was with natives who had almost certainly already been forced, a group of "southwestern tribesmen" mingling with Shoshone of the Great Basin, who were a grandly poor, nomadic people who traveled the desert in small bands, always enroute to gather food, possessing only the crudest portable tools, living in temporary shelters constructed of brush and terribly afraid of white men. It is hard to understand the gathering of near-

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ly three hundred described by Bedderly unless they were together for some special and fated occasion which in turn kept them from fleeing before the squeaking and shiplike wagons, perhaps a final despairing vestige of the ghost dance, a revivalistic movement born at Walker Lake in western Nevada from the vision of a man named Jack Wilson, later known as the messiah Wovoka.

"The natives were encamped for a quarter mile around a small pool of greenish water, fresh though evil appearing, on the edge of a vastly arid and absolutely featureless alkaline expanse which reached beyond sight to the south and west. We were passing around the northern edge of that desert, seeking the water they occupied, when we discovered their makeshift shelters of brush. Mr. Slater was in favor of driving them off into the wastelands, knowing they could survive like animals, but I intervened, thinking we were all human and could exist together. We camped at the water's edge, displacing only a few of their huts, and they came seeking trinkets, and the rest ensued."

The leaders of the violence with which the natives answered the shooting were the so-called southwestern tribesmen. "More than thirty, Mr. Slater reports, are camped among the others, traveling west toward some pagan figure of prominence in their religion." One would like to think of these outsiders as some escaping remnant of the Comanche nation, greatest horsemen of the Americas running from the Oklahoma Territory where they had been surviving on dole meat. But it is more likely Mr. Slater was mistaken and they were not from the southwest at all. James R. Mooney, traveling in the west at the time while doing research for the



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Bureau of American Ethnology, reports that Sitting Bull and other Arapaho visited Jack Wilson at Walker Lake in the fall of 1892. Perhaps there is some connection. At any rate they were proud and carried good rifles, mostly Winchester Model 1873s, rode horses and reacted to Bedderly's shooting of the Shoshone man with a night of mournful singing and dancing. At daybreak they attacked the wagons, which had moved on during the night. The guide, Mr. Slater from Salt Lake City, was killed along with twelve other men. Bedderly was left alone in command, without knowledge of the country ahead, only the certainty he must continue. "Bad luck is the excuse we give," he wrote.

After the fourth night of travel they were attacked again at daybreak, this time leaving their wagons to defend themselves above a rimrock. "My error, my fatal mistake," Bedderly writes, "but I thought only of sailing west before the driving wind of our vision with all my people." None were killed but the wagons were burned, stock slaughtered. "Our possessions are gone, our condition impossible without prayer. We continue on foot. Alicia is the same." They were waterless, followed by the straggling band of Shoshone, scouted by the distant and implacable horsemen. "We rest, help one another, walk while prayer burns in the mouth. This desert is endless."

The woman and her child appeared the morning of the sixth day. According to Bedderly it was as if she simply materialized perhaps a thousand yards off in low brush, a small dark figure holding her swaddled child, seemingly unafraid as they approached. After gesturing she led and they followed. There seemed nothing else to do. That night

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they camped by a wide and swift-running stream which must have been Paiute Creek where it curls through the desert upstream and east of the meadows. "We gorged on water, burned willows, shot a deer, cooked. Men vomited during prayer and prayer ended. We are the creatures this desert makes us." They proceeded west in the morning, following the woman, arriving at noon on the hill-top from which they could see the whole of Paiute Creek Meadows. "The watery place which should seem a glorious refuge is now only a barrier to be waded, vile and boggy, desolate." There was no thin line of smoke lifting toward the sky, no sign of habitation or any sort of help, just isolation and the stone corral below, at the edge of the meadow.

Imagine five men and a string of packhorses in the cold early spring of 1890, mustangers, rain sleet-ing at them as they make camp near the creek. At the mouth of a stony dry wash they build the corral, prying rocks from lava outcroppings along the shallow rims, rolling boulders onto stoneboat sleds dragged by teams of mules with improvised harnesses, men sweating and lifting rocks into place, the corral slowly taking its circular shape. In late July it is finished and the men chop willows and build long wings outward from the single gate, the opening which faces up into the wash, waiting for wild horses, men running them in relays for nearly a week, always closer to the corral, the animals exhausted as they trot slowly down the dusty wash, crude willow fences forcing them onto the single path that leads through the gateway, into the corral. The stone wall is higher than a man's head, thicker than the body of a wrecked automobile. It is late afternoon, the horsemen are in the gate, fac-

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ing the sun, the west, brims of their hats pulled low. For this moment they have saved whiskey. They drink, one rubs the back of his hand across his mouth, smearing white alkali dust in his month-old growth of beard. The herd stand listlessly within the rock walls.

"The builders are unimaginable," Bedderly writes, "Divine Providence."

The woman led again and there was nothing to do but follow, so they went down from the sandy hill and entered the corral, which seemed a refuge, sign they would survive, a found fort. "Now it seems a trap we cannot escape," Bedderly wrote three days later. "The natives wait."

*Our seaward progress is divine. Who can imagine the true beginning. . .*

Perhaps it was believing the myth of California, heading directly across the desert to the coastal valley where they intended settling near the present-day flower-growing center of Lompoc, traveling by wagon in an age of railroad, so they could bring along huge cherry-wood tables and crated bluepoint China, forgetting that Kansas is as close as anywhere to the still center of belief. "*Who can imagine the true beginning?*" Surely it lay somewhere east of the turkey-packed earth where his father died.

"They are going to attack," he wrote. "We are terribly hungry. Some are eating cooked grass. We do have water. Since sunrise I have known. God's vengeance." Then he tells of the night and that sunrise. "By gestures the Indian woman attempted cursing Alicia. The screaming became constant and I held Alicia and after weeping she slept. The dark woman left her child and came to rest with us in the untrod grass near the wall and after Alicia's

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chastity I cannot describe the warmth. When I awoke the women were gone. It was not yet day-break and birds were calling in the blue light. Alicia and that dark woman were naked in the mouth of the corral, Alicia's body pale as the morning and seeming to quiver even as she stood without motion. A huge and filthy mass of natives clustered perhaps a hundred yards beyond, silent while Alicia and that carnal woman faced them with hands joined. The native woman at last spoke in a loud voice, in her primitive language, reached to lift her child from the grass, naked and white. The natives turned muttering away and left. I thought we were saved, approached and saw the child simply fair against her dark mother, with blue eyes and wilted reddish hair. Alicia screamed again. Something I did not understand had been refused."

*I console myself with the notion that she perhaps never truly believed, has always sinned in secret fear.*

The people within the corral waited as the Indians retreated and grouped silently in seeming conference, a diverse scattering of figures on the gray and brushy hillside above the corral. "My sin and carnality did cause this and I would die if I could with grace and honor. Alicia refuses clothing, tears it off when the women attempt dressing her. The day is warm and perfect and we are hopeless."

So Alicia Bedderly's nakedness, her offering, brought nothing in exchange but death. "Thy will is mine," read Bedderly's final journal entry. "I have refused prayer and learned the warmth of my father's blood in the earth was only carnality, which I cannot regret." The attack began later that morning and lasted until movement stopped, gestures hang-

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ing forever in silent motionlessness, expressions to be studied while the scream waits to proceed. A stone to examine. Lichen grows in the crevices. The shade is cool; clear water flows through an imagined countryside near Lompoc; the scream dies away as Jerome Bedderly, purged briefly of his need to continue, desire and belief lost in the body of that Shoshone woman, her small hands touching his back, fluttering, becomes martyr to hatred so justifiable it became love.

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Upstairs in the Hotel Estaline, so far from the western seacoast of Mexico where he wandered the beaches in warm winter rain with that tanned girl named Oralie York, Ringman stands with his shaving brush aimed at his chin in the mirror. He tries to recall the exact look of her white eyelashes, lashes like cuts over her dark eyes as she closed them. The reason why he left. One reason.

"This spider," she said, her eyes firmly closed. She'd been seeing spiders for weeks. Great-legged spiders large as a dinner plate, most of them iridescently silver. Ringman crouched before her, brushing the dry crust of sand from her thighs. They were back from a long walk in the afternoon rain. From making love on the beach. Her flesh was impossibly soft. Ringman was retelling his climactic story of warfare while they sucked at fat joints of cheap Mexican grass. His throat burned. He brushed sand from the edge of her navel. She raised her knees.

Out the open window rain continued to mist onto the muddy street. Ringman kissed her shinbones, both of them, went on with his story about four Laotian generals and three American bodyguards staggering down a wide path through the under-

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growth, brilliant shafts of sunlight striking at them through the lush canopy as they drank from bottles of yellow-labeled Cutty Sark. The Laotian generals, compact men with high hard cheekbones, wore huge pearl-handled .45 pistols. The Americans carried M-16 automatic rifles.

The girl named Oralie sat with her back against the green plaster wall, heels hooked into the frame of the narrow steel cot. Closing her eyes, she rubbed her palms over her small tight breasts. "They tickle," she said, biting at her lower lip. Ringman licked salt from her toes, going on about the clearing where three naked children and a young woman scrambled into a thatched hut. A Laotian peasant, an old man, sat sifting rice through a screen, wearing only jagged cutoff green pants, quiet as he watched the strangers come toward him, shaking his head when they offered him whiskey.

One of the Americans, a tall soft-faced boy wearing mirror-tinted Rallye glasses, straight blond hair to his shoulders, raised his automatic rifle directly to the squatting peasant's forehead. Smiling and drunk, the boy raised his eyeglasses, and beneath them his eyes were pale blue as he fired, the explosive sound like a faraway night-traveling freight in Ringman's memory, as the head of that Laotian peasant splattered apart and his body fell into the rice.

They all waited stupidly, transfixed by the silence of birds, and then they began to laugh and raised their bottles as if in toast and drank from them, all except Ringman, who raised his M-16 automatic rifle and killed them as they drank, bullets fluttering like moths through bodies which twisted

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as they fell, looks of fearless surprise on their faces. The blue white eyes of Ringman's friend were open and he was dead, the eyes darkening as he died.

"I ran," Ringman said, remembering the helicopter, rotors idling, blades whomping at the moist air, and the way he screamed, fucking ambush he screamed when he was inside the helicopter, as it raised, twisting and floating away while Ringman lay inside on the warm steel floor, so many times a killer.

Ringman opens his eyes. Oralie is in the A-frame barroom high on the ski hill north of Vancouver, overlooking the Lion's Gate Bridge across Burrord Inlet to the green of Stanley Park—where he went with her to watch the red-breasted Empress penguins—and English Bay beyond the towers of the city. At least she was when he left. Living in this only hotel in a town called Estaline, out on the western bluffs of the Missouri River, Ringman remembers the glittering blue of summertime seawater so far below. Standing alone on the porch in the early morning. Wanting to be near the center of the continent. Away from edges. So now he's in Estaline, and Ringman plans this to be the rest of his life. He drives the town's only garbage truck, a three-year-old cab-over International dumper painted yellow, and he's made friends with the workingmen who come evenings to the tavern downstairs, and, as he had hoped, nothing has happened for a long time. He loves the slow days of work, the bar in the evening. And, at least to the degree in which he does not love his idea of Oralie waiting for him in Vancouver, which is to say not a hell of a lot as he sees it, he loves a woman. He finishes shaving.



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Downstairs the bartender sips his morning gin. "Dwight," Ringman tells him, "you're close to lovely." The bartender don't even look up.

"One thing you should know," Ringman says as he steps behind the bar, their usual morning routine, "is that I'm stealing a shot of your whiskey."

"Peacock," the bartender says, whites of his eyes as yellow as the cream-filled coffee Ringman sips, "go to work."

Every morning Ringman wears clean white coveralls to work. Dwight calls him Peacock because of that. As if that were fancy. A simple life Ringman leads, as he had planned, where the jokes are not elaborate. With his day-old Chicago paper spread on the bar, Dwight reads Ringman's horoscope. A day late like the newspaper, it's a confirmation rather than a prediction. "According to this," Dwight says, "reading between the lines, you're going to lay off other people's wives." Then he reads the baseball statistics and bitches about Baltimore.

Ringman figures he's only guessing.

Until one night she comes into the tavern and she's halfway drunk. "Just some fatal attraction," she says. It's early spring and forsythia are blooming in great yellow clumps under the open windows. "Like honeybees," she says.

"Been playing golf?" Ringman asks. Her legs are burned, red against her white shorts, and she's wearing one of her husband's button-down shirts with the tails out, the collar frayed and unbuttoned. Ringman peels the label off his Coors.

"There's things you don't need to know," she says.

"Whatever," Ringman says, shaking his head at Dwight to show this is just some drunk lady he's

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never seen before, that he's just being conversational, that he's got more sense than to fool with a lawyer's wife.

"I left him cold steak in the refrigerator," she says. "Woody wants me home but that's his tough luck."

"So I'm staying," she says, looking about ready to cry.

"You got a room?" she says, knowing he does, leaning close and whispering, grasping at his shoulder. "What's it like?"

Behind the bar, Dwight is frowning. Over his head in the mirror along the back bar, above the bottles, Ringman sees her husband. He sees Woody Long smiling his bucktoothed smile and wearing a bleached-out University of South Dakota practice-football jersey. Walking on Sunday in the late fall, Ringman first saw Woody, and Woody was busily raking leaves from the expanse of his front lawn, wearing that same football jersey. Ringman sat on a bench in the park only a half-block away, and watched and was envious. Woody taps his wife on the shoulder.

"Who's your buddy?" he says nodding at Ringman.

"Suffering Jesus and God," she says. Ringman figures Woody is about to punch her. He closes his eyes and waits.

"Nobody you'd know," she says finally.

Dwight uncaps three more Coors. "On the house," he says. He mops the bar with his towel. "Woody," he says, "take your trouble home."

"You know what?" Woody says, after a time. "There's shit about three feet deep in this world."

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"You named it," Dwight says. He walks off down the bar.

Woody looks at Ringman. "You sure got some taste," he says to his wife.

She doesn't answer and they all drink their beer, and then without any word Woody and his wife leave, Woody leading the way. Married people, Ringman tells Dwight the next morning, have signals.

"Peacock," Dwight says, "I knew you was getting it somewheres, but Goddamn." He sips his gin while reading the comic strips and for the first time in months does not read Ringman's horoscope.

The great Pondicherry vulture dies over Bombay. Killed by a seizure in the heart, it falls endlessly, tumbling with folded wings through killing sadness Ringman knows to be only the color of the sky.

Having grown up on his father's cooking, dark hot chili mixed with scrambled eggs in the evening on the veranda, chilled applesauce on the side, while gray bats dove through the cooling air amid olive and almond trees, Ringman feels he knows the tedium of daytime in the Sacramento Valley securely enough to be sure dying of sadness in the air over Bombay is entirely possible. With the dishes stacked, Ringman and his father would listen to the radio, honky-tonk music cracking out of the night from stations near the far southern end of the San Joaquin Valley.

"Them people have got themselves crazy," his father would say, the deep-seated wicker chair creaking as he whittled another of his undulating serpents, rattlesnakes, with intricately carved rat-

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bles, perfectly realistic even to the baby buttons at the end. He carved them from soft pine sticks he got special from the lumberyard in Knight's Landing. The old man had always talked about the idea that someday he would retire and spend his last years carving a coiled rattler from a block of fine-grained hardwood, maybe ash. "Drinking and dancing," he would say. "Boiled in crazy," he would say.

In the kitchen Ringman's father pinned up a slick-surfaced color picture of an orange-headed Pondicherry vulture razored from an expensive book about birds of prey. He got it from the Woodland library. Thick with an eventual coat of cooking grease, the picture was always there.

"Buzzards," he said, stabbing a fingernail into the pink frosting on the cake Ringman brought him on his seventy-fifth birthday. He hadn't smiled, just sat looking at his picture. "Nobody gets to them bastards," he said. Six weeks later he died while shoveling irrigation dams in the orchard.

Now Ringman tries to imagine he's his father, that he's trying to be one of those invulnerable birds. It doesn't work. It never did.

Yet late in the night Ringman drives to the dumping ground where the long trailing slide of refuse slopes from the high bluffs, reaching almost to the river. The Missouri is wide and lighted by the moon, and Ringman parks near the edge of the bluff and smiles at this idea of himself as buzzard. Rusted hulking automobile bodies rear from the flow of trash like rocks in a motionless sea, and near the base small fires are burning. Ringman smokes and waits for daylight, the first light, when the seagulls and magpies begin circling and quarreling over the

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rubbish, and he can imagine himself naked and crazy, everything dancing as he crouches on the edge of this bluff, until he sees nothing that could not be seen through the black crazy eyes of a bird. Eventually it's daytime and there's nothing to do but go to work.

"Hell of a way to cure a bellyache," Dwight says, when Ringman tells him what he's doing out there at night.

"Peacock," Dwight says, folding his paper closed, "what you got is perfect ignorance."

That long-ago day in the jungle of central Laos, Ringman watched color darkening out from the center of his friend's blue white eyes as death came those last seconds after the breathing stopped. Seconds that Ringman imagines as forever, all of us eventually alive in that last moment, and that's what we call heaven. The moment the glass is broken, before it falls: no amount of ignorance will drive it away. So he goes to work.

Lilacs grow thick along the alleyways. A lovely town where Ringman works in the springtime, soft as a child sleeping in the afternoon. Branches scrape the truck and petals scatter behind, white and lavender on the grass.

Thursday afternoons Ringman gets his copy of the *Sporting News*. Downstairs in that pine-walled tavern with branding irons dangling from screw eyes in the ceiling, Bakersfield music about a distant world of hurt calling softly from the jukebox, they talk work and baseball. About self-propelled New Holland hay balers and lifetime averages. So every Thursday night Ringman sits on his bed and memorizes statistics.

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And driving the alleyways Thursday afternoons he wonders if the neighbors gossip, or if they care, remembering fondly days when the snow was thawing and he slipped off his boots in the mudroom inside the back door. Each time he enters her house Ringman feels not guilty but cautious, like he might be in danger of breaking a cut-crystal dish she inherited from her grandmother.

Shirley comes out on the lawn while he's dumping the cans, unsteady in her white high heels. She's carrying her husband's week-old copy of the *Sporting News*. "Coffee?" she says.

Sunlight glints off strands of gray in her auburn hair. There's a fifth of Wild Turkey on the drainboard. She pours a shot in his cup. "Woody and I did everything right," she begins, "all those years."

She talks and Ringman doesn't really listen, which he knows is not unkind. In that perfectly clean kitchen she doesn't need him to listen, she just has certain things to say. "A bitch," she says, talking about the weekends her mother vanished inside that resort hotel outside Colorado Springs.

"They used to invite her to parties up there," Shirley says, "so somebody could get her into one of those rooms." She pours coffee and more whiskey, talking while she wipes at the drainboard with a sponge. "So I ran away," she says, "so I wouldn't be like her, and now I am. Just like that." She shrugs helplessly, and smiles, an airline stewardess for Braniff out of Denver when she married.

"We had money," she says, "both of us. We'd saved.

"Not for ten years," she says, "I haven't been home, not since Daddy died. She's old now." Ringman understands about living alone in the house

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where you lived when you were married. His father did it, and before dying complained about dreams that carried over from night to night, his anticipation of them spoiling his sleep. Always the dream of standing barefoot on the back of a sweaty gray horse, as he told it, feeling the animal warmth and dampness underfoot while steers he rode after as a young man in Mexico, north of Hermisillo in Sonora, circled willow-thatch corrals thick with pumice dust, a few of the animals mottled white and the others splotched red and orange and even reptilian blue and green, the colors lying over their tight hides like rock moss. Miles in the distance were timbered blue mountains unlike any he'd seen in Mexico. The old man said that was all of it he cared to talk about. "But I'll tell you one thing," he said. "There wouldn't be no more of them dreams if I was to get away from this house."

Ringman has the same dream, of nothing he's ever seen, and off to the left there's a slow river flowing between gravel embankments, and the heavy darkness of edgewater trees on a midsummer evening. Sweating, Ringman awakens. There was no river near his home, and no trees like that, no heavy line of cottonwoods along the water. He wonders if dreams are continuous, passing from one person to another; smiling in the darkness because he does not want to take himself seriously, this idea of himself as vulture, Ringman imagines buzzards eating dreams, clawing and quarreling over remnants which resemble the carcasses of cats. Animals run down on a nighttime highway in Nevada.

"I could cry," Shirley says. "I should go home and see her." Shirley's fingers are strong and cold when she touches Ringman's hand. Wondering if

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she'll last like her mother, become one of those good lean old women who've cut their losses into jokes, Ringman imagines her mother coughing, stamping out a cigarette after laughing too hard while telling the story.

"One of these days," Shirley says, "I'm going to drive right out of here. Right over to Wyoming. Right to Yellowstone Park and be a barmaid."

While smiling at that she gasps as though surprised when Ringman touches her knee, even though he knows everything he'll discover, stockings rolled tight over her thighs, the flesh above them full and cool and smooth even though she's got that reddish skin that goes so quickly. With blue-eyed women Ringman always senses distance, as if beyond those eyes there was the sky and he could cut into it with his stropped gleaming razor and find himself falling into distances that would turn red eventually, closing behind like the end of a day spent flying over the Pacific at great altitude, able to see too far, falling west. Shirley shifts forward on her stool. Ringman hesitates. "I love you," she says.

In the bedroom where she sleeps with her husband there's one filter-tipped cigarette stubbed out in the eye of the dragon decorating the ceramic Chinese ashtray on the bed table. With her knees over his shoulders they work at love which Ringman later understands to have been too serious and troubled to have been truly sporting, and after resting she sits astride him, her turn on top, laboring, her eyes averted, and Ringman knows that if he were any sort of lover he would tell her of the delights he finds in her bed, catalogue for her the details of this slippery and secure craziness the world



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has never given him with such generosity before, not even with Oralie, and that he should tell her and praise her and make her laugh. But they only drink another cup of coffee. Then with his copy of the *Sporting News* on the seat beside him, Ringman goes on down the alleys, dumping the cans. Talking to an idea of Oralie, as if she were with him. "Crazy arms," he says, quoting that old song, the one he always plays, "crazy arms." He imagines Oralie staring at him, silent while he rants.

Feet on the warm linoleum, Ringman waits for morning to first touch the red-painted roofs of houses across the street, waits to watch the yellow cat stalk a bird in the first light. In his room on the second floor of the Hotel Estaline, tallest of the narrow frame buildings along Dunbar Street, a room partitioned off at the end of a hallway by green-painted three-quarter plywood, even a plywood door with Fire Escape printed on it in yellow. The room he chose because it seemed most temporary. Because he wanted to test his intention of staying forever.

Other nights he watches light from the open windows of the tavern glow steadily off glassy leaves of a Lombardy poplar. A door slams. Down the hallway the telephone rings. It's never anyone, just humming wire. Then one night it's Dwight.

"Peacock," he shouts, "get on down here." Behind his voice there's music roaring. He hangs up before Ringman can answer. The song was "Party Doll."

By the time Ringman is standing in the archway, Loretta Lynn is singing *at least I didn't beg him*. Shirley is hunched over a tall pale drink, soft in a white and green dress, and her husband Woody is beside her in a green white seersucker suit and

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tasseled white alligator loafers, his suitcoat over the back of a barstool and the sleeves of his lime-on-white striped shirt rolled over his biceps. He's tanned like Shirley and still trim as he must have been when he was playing college ball.

"Peacock," he shouts, "we been looking for you." On the bar there's a pile of greenbacks and change. "What we're doing, Peacock," he shouts, "is buying drinks for drunks." Looks to Ringman like he's right, they're all drunk, the eight or ten regulars and him and Shirley and even Dwight, who's staggering behind the bar, both hands on the spill trough to hold himself up. The only one who doesn't look drunk is Burton Jackson.

"Peacock," Woody says, "what we need is a strong man." He wants to shake hands and tries to grip Ringman down. His palm is sweaty and hard. Loretta Lynn finishes her song and Tom T. Hall is singing "Spokane Motel Blues."

"Peacock," Woody says, gripping hard at Ringman's shoulder, "where you from?"

"Cincinnati," Ringman says, "Big Red Machine."

"Peacock," Woody says, "come on now."

"I bet you're a college graduate," Woody says. "Bet you got us all in the shake. Laying back and laughing. A physics major." Woody smiles into Ringman's eyes like a blind dog smelling his way.

"I can sympathize," Ringman says. Woody has hold of his arm, trying to lead him over to the table where Burton Jackson is sitting.

"Peacock," Woody says, "this man took a hundred and twenty dollars off me, and he won't take a drink until somebody beats him."

What they had been doing is arm wrestling. Woody wants Ringman to arm wrestle Burton

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Jackson. Which is silly because Burton Jackson beats everybody. Everybody knows it. Taller than most, Burton is strong from feeding silage in the wintertime and piling bales in the summer, and he's got the leverage, the long arms and thick wrists. Ringman shakes his head.

"Tell you what," Woody says. "I'll buy you a drink." He's laughing and he slaps Ringman on the shoulder. "Get you started with a drink. Maybe you work best on a drink."

"Yeah," Ringman says, "that would be nice.

"Gin," Ringman says. "English gin. Double.

"On the rocks," Ringman says.

It's like he never said a thing. Woody doesn't even glance at him, just shakes his head and stands quiet, looking at the floor. "Boy," he says, "I can't understand you.

"You come in here," Woody says, "and you're in the wrong town, and then you mess around. It's hard to understand."

The music has stopped and Dwight is punching quarters into the jukebox, punching buttons at random.

"I guess you was in the war," Woody says, as the music starts. "I can understand that."

Woody has his face up close to Ringman and he's staring at Ringman's chin. "I know how that is," he says. "When I come back from Korea I didn't turn a tap for two years. Lived with my mother."

Haggard is singing "Sidewalks of Chicago." Nice soft music.

"Damn," Woody says, tugging on Ringman's arm. "You come here. I want to show you something." They walk to the open doorway. "You look out there," he says. Beyond rooftops and dark leafy

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trees, the stars of the Milky Way are thick, the night sky more substantial than Ringman has ever imagined it. "It's a fine place," Woody says.

"You know what?" he says, when they're standing out on the board sidewalk. "I like classic music. I like it altogether. Every damn kind of classic music. Tell you what else. That woman will be home with me at daylight. No matter what, we're going to Mitchell tomorrow. We're going first thing. You understand that?"

"Yeah," Ringman says.

"Well," Woody says, "just so you can. Just so you can.

"We've done it lots of times," Woody says. "Drove to Mitchell with no sleep. Just so you understand.

"You don't know anything about it," Woody says. "In the old days we'd go anywhere with no sleep. You got a cigarette?"

"No," Ringman says. "Never do."

"Right there," Woody says. "That's it. You know damn well she'll be there in the morning."

"Maybe we ought to get a cigarette," Ringman says.

"That's right," Woody says. "You tell me what to do.

"You know how many dead men I've seen?" Woody says. "I'm old enough my friends are dying. You know that?"

"Guess not," Ringman says. "I don't know that."

Their shadows lay away from the lighted doorway like pointers diffusing into the street. From inside there's the sound of Haggard singing. "Dead men," Woody says, staring at Ringman again, working his shoulders as though to loosen up.

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"All of us," Woody says.

"Horseshit," Ringman says, grinning at Woody.

"You damned old asshole."

"Yeah," Woody says, looking away. "Yeap."

"There was some friends of mine got killed," Ringman starts, willing to chance a talk with Woody, hoping to clear something up, at the same time wondering what he's into.

It was two days before they went back to that clearing to bury the dead. The thatched hut was burned and the dead Laotion peasant and his rice had been cleared away as if they'd never been.

"There was buzzards eating at their faces," Ringman says, "what was left of their faces." The birds refused to leave the bodies, and Ringman again swept the clearing with rounds from his automatic rifle, and then watched the great birds dying, flopping and dusting the ground with their frantic wings. Ringman tries to imagine the look of those white eyelashes over Oralie's dark eyes. Like blue white eyes cut with a razor.

"Yeah," Woody says, slapping him on the shoulder.

"Yeah," Woody says again, "bullshit."

"Sure," Ringman says, but Woody has already turned away and gone back inside. He's ordering drinks when Ringman steps through the doorway.

"Me and Peacock," Woody shouts, "is got to work together on these things."

He punches his wife on the shoulder, hard, and she spills her drink. "Ain't that right?" he shouts.

"Us college people got to hang together," he shouts.

Dwight pours Ringman his double gin, slopping it on the bar, and at last Shirley spins on her stool.

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"What he'd like is to dance," she says, weaving a little as she stands. "We ought to dance." This comes while there's a break in the music, and her voice is loud in the room. She slowly undoes a couple of the top buttons on Ringman's shirt, fumbling at it. "Dance," she whispers. "It don't matter."

"Ain't she a sweetheart?" Woody shouts.

"You know what?" Woody says. "She's one of them women who's been mean ever since the seventh grade." He laughs.

The music starts, and this time it's Linda Ronstadt on "Crazy Arms," and Shirley straddles up against Ringman, and with his arms around her, still holding the drink, Ringman dances, moving slowly around the rough floor with Shirley while everyone watches, smoke in the room burning his eyes while he's thinking to hell with it and about to slide his hand down over her ass and let the fight get started when behind him there's a crash and the music quits in a screeching wail.

Woody's bleeding from the mouth, half-in and half-out of the jukebox's sparking guts, the bright spangled glass from the machine crunching underfoot. What happened, Ringman found out later, was that Woody tried to drag Burton Jackson away from his table, telling him it was his turn to dance. "That woman's farming for hogs," Woody said, "so she might as well."

"Right there," Dwight says the next morning, "is where Burton laid it on him."

Woody stalked circles around the room, holding a wet paper towel to his mashed upper lip, trying to talk. "What I'm thinking," he finally shouted, "is that this is a ruined shirt." He squeezed the towel and reddish water dripped to the floor.

## The Man Who Loved Buzzards

Burton Jackson stood sucking a cut knuckle and shaking his head. "Boooshwaaaa," he said, and then with his arms hanging and shoulders hunched forward he started for Woody; it was Shirley who stopped him.

She just stood there, weaving a little and drunk. "I'll fuck your ears off," she said.

Burton Jackson straightened up and shook his head again.

"You hear me," she said, "I'll fuck you motherless."

Burton Jackson walked away, out the door.

"That goes for everybody," she said, and then she led Woody out and put him in their white Chrysler and left, tires spinning pea gravel through the open doorway.

In the morning Ringman sips his coffee. Dwight stands by the smashed jukebox with his glass of gin. "What you should have done," he says, "is drove those people to Mitchell. You ought to have yourself some fun.

"But since you never," Dwight says, "go to work."

"Shit," Ringman says, knowing it's his turn, thinking about the morning he left Oralie without even telling her he was going, just left her sleeping and rode down the chairlift and hitched away into the heartland, across the Lion's Gate Bridge to Stanley Park, where he stopped to see the penguins a last time as a kind of farewell, and then south and east to these flatlands. His turn to let someone else do the cleaning up.

"The pure item," Ringman says. Soon he'll be standing on the terrace with Oralie, looking out over seawater below, and over the city, and he hopes

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his eyes will taste of this salt when she kisses them. Birds will soar and turn over the edge of the land and never fall. The color of the air is only light.

"Shit," Dwight says.

Feeling the automatic rifle under his arm, Ringman knows it's his turn, that he could with perfect ease stand in the street and turn in circles while the firing continued, in the street of some city while the men in their gray hats and narrow-striped suits fell, while the ladies died with their furs on. And then walk away from such a mess.

"Owlshit," Dwight says, as Ringman stands terrified of white fragile bones encapsulated in those gray droppings, as gin gurgles from the plastic pourcap.



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Red Yount took his time. While the cold November wind was moving like distant water through the tops of yellow-barked ponderosas, Cleve recollected last night's dream, something dreamed so often: a long-haired and ragged old man on a lean gray horse galloping down an undulating grass-covered slope toward the straw-roofed buildings of a creekside village, willow-thatch houses behind yellowing grain patches, aspens and evergreens beyond the water. Soundless, framed by fir boughs, shotgun upraised in the man's right hand, forearm corded and hard, the horse galloping endlessly on, seemingly to attack.

"He never *was* sensible when he drank," the deputy said, in the midst of saying all the rest. He meant Lonnie; he wasn't talking about Indians in general. Cleve kept staring at his own feet, inch-deep in pumice dust as loose and yellow as corn flour.

The sheriff in Donan had sent Red Yount out here when the word came north from Red Bluff: Lonnie had died the night before in the Tehema County drunk tank, which meant he had managed to live 123 days since coming of legal age and collecting his share of the tribal money. "Leastwise," Red Yount said, "you can afford to bury him." Cleve

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nodded. The money had led to this: over forty-three thousand dollars which had been seven years drawing interest in a Portland bank. Cleve, who had been resisting two years, since his own twenty-first birthday, had given in to what seemed common sense and taken his own money at the same time, an identical \$43,639.42.

"What the hell," the deputy said. His car was a year-old black Plymouth Fury. "Wasn't like a surprise. What do you think? You don't say nothing."

"I was remembering how he acted in jail," Cleve said. "He stayed out a long time."

"He done good that way."

"Yeah," Cleve said. "He done all right. Lasted a number of years." The deputy said the coroner's verdict had been alcohol poisoning. Some balding, half-failed white physician had decided that and scribbled those words on a death certificate, which would later be retyped by some dreaming, erasing girl. "A number of years." Behind the wind's cold sound Cleve could sense the murmuring of the low, dead river below the cut sod bank just back of the house. Lately, since Lonnie left, he had been imagining the water's sound even when he wasn't hearing it. All his life he had gone to bed with that murmur, awakened with it, slept beneath it, lain sleepless listening to Lonnie's tubercular breath and the summer water. His father had built the four-room house in the spring and summer of 1947, when Cleve was two and Lonnie was on his way to being born, with planks and nails bought the fall of 1945 with army mustering-out pay, warped planks and rusted nails by 1947. The building seemed to contain what they were in the way it

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looked: peeling, never repainted, standing alone above the river in the eddying yellow dust.

"So he finally got away from here," the deputy said. "Anyway, that must have made him happy."

"Probably so."

"We'll get him home," the deputy said. "But you got to do something about having him buried."

"Give me a minute," Cleve said. "I want to get my coat and hook a ride with you"—which he knew was against the rules, probably illegal.

But the near-winter wind was burning from the clear and dry southern sky, and he figured Yount, who had been Indian deputy since before Cleve was born, wouldn't refuse him this time. Yount had come home to this job, a decorated ex-Marine returning from Okinawa in 1945. "Ain't supposed to be giving any rides," the deputy said. "You duck down if we meet somebody. I'll leave you off before we get into town."

"Come on in with me," Cleve said. He was surprised when Yount followed him toward the house, head turned from the wind. The coal-oil lantern on the table was flickering in the drafts, and on a white muslin cloth beside it lay the disassembled parts of a secondhand Remington .30-06 Cleve had been checking and oiling. He had bought the rifle in a Klamath Falls hockshop and wanted to be sure everything was perfect, that nothing was worn and that none of the springs were loose. Around the walls hung his traps and two other rifles in scabbards. Piled in one corner was his saddle and horse gear.

"Money was what did it," the deputy said. "Never was right, giving people all that money."

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Cleve dug for his coat in the pile of winter clothes behind the double bed where he slept alone.

"You get a deer?" the deputy asked.

"Yeah, I did." Cleve had killed thirteen, seven bucks and six does. He had sold the bucks to white hunters who had frozen at the moment of kill or had drunk through their sporting trip from Portland or Eugene or wherever it was, and one of the butchered does was hanging now in the back bedroom. The others were in a locker of the Donan cold-storage plant. The room stank of leather and grease and dried blood, of hunting. "I got him hung in the back room," Cleve said. "I'm eating on him."

"You get a tag?" the deputy asked. "You guys got the money now, you got to act like somebody."

"Yeah, I got a tag." Until the reservation dissolved, the tribes hunted freely. Now they were bound by state regulations. Only those who had refused the money had remained free. They could kill as many deer as they wanted without any sort of printed, paid-for permission. Cleve had killed thirteen deer and hadn't bought a tag, and the doe hanging in the back room was illegal. All because he had taken the money, because Lonnie had talked him into the money. He had spent almost none of it because that idea of giving it back had been with him since the beginning.

"I guess maybe you did," the deputy said. "I remember somebody saying you bought a tag." He walked the room slowly, looking at the gear. Cleve buttoned his blanket-lined Levi's jacket. The right sleeve was torn and the lining clotted with cheat-grass stickers. He'd worn it the winter before while feeding cattle, continuing to refuse the money. The front was frayed by alfalfa bales. Lately he had

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thought of buying a sheepskin-lined leather coat like the ones pictured in the slick-paged New York magazines on the stand in Prince's Tavern.

"You ready?" Cleve asked the deputy.

"I'm looking around. You got some good things. Let me look around." Dust was blowing past the Plymouth, and on the highway three empty cattle trucks passed, each close behind the other. Cleve wished the house was miles into the backwoods, where the river was alone and he wouldn't have to see anything but the water and tree shadows on the ripples and once in a while animals, snow in the winter, with porcupine and maybe traveling deer. He hated the barbed wire and the railroad I-beam cattle guard and the black car waiting for him in the dusty bowl before the house.

Red Yount was fingering the pieces of the 30-06 mechanism spread on the table. Cleve wondered why he had asked him inside. He should never have forgotten the other times, the single jail cell in the basement of the crumbling town hall in Donan. "You're used to it," Red Yount had said, bringing down the first meal, a hamburger and glass of milk from the lunch counter in Prince's. "Ought to be like coming home." Cleve had been in for six months that time, the last time. Car theft. One drunk night in a deer hunter's Jeep station wagon. The deputy laughed and shoved the tray under the bars of the door. Cleve had been there three times before, each time drunk and disorderly, but only for a week or two. Six months was different, sitting in the dampness and dim light, listening to mice and wasting out one of the summers of his life. So far he had never been back. He had run to the forest

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when they let him go, never drank again. And he wasn't going back.

He wondered how to get Yount away from the illegal doe hanging half dismembered in the back room, remembered listening for the whistle marking hours from the cupola atop the city hall, asking the deputy what day it was and Yount refusing to tell him, saying, "We'll let you know. Don't worry."

"Ain't no use hanging around here," Cleve said.

"They'll get him here," the deputy said, settling himself in the rocking chair and lighting a filter cigarette. "I give up rolling 'em," he said, dropping his kitchen match to the floor. "Them roll-your-owns was killing my wind; they do that." Yount began telling about Lonnie, and his speech came in gasps, the years of home-rolled cigarettes and beer fat over his beehive belly seeming to have indeed cost him. The Red Bluff city police found Lonnie passed out on the pedestrian walkway of the highway bridge over the Sacramento River, \$3,147 in his wallet and stuffed into his various pockets when they booked his body, alive but unconscious. "They could have pumped his stomach if they'd have knowed," the deputy said. "But you can't think of everything." After the death they found the rest of the money, \$27,292, in a box containing a never-worn pair of new Justin boots, the bills in a brown paper bag stuffed into one boot top. Yount ground his cigarette under his heel. "Now," he said. "Before we take off, you want to show me that carcass? I only want to look at the tag."

"No need," Cleve said. "I cut off the head. Buried it. Tag was with it."

"Maybe I'll just look at it anyway."

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"Maybe you won't. Lonnie's dead. I better get to town. I better see about all that."

Red Yount stood. "I'm going to see that deer," he said. "Then you and me are going to town." He unsnapped the leather cover over his .38 pistol. "You don't make me any trouble now," he said. "I don't want to have to take you in for resisting."

"Let's go," Cleve said. "Like we was friends. There won't be any trouble at all."

"But I ain't your friend. There's no way we're friends. Which door is that deer behind?"

"Why not just forget it? Go off and leave and forget I ever asked for a ride."

"Just show me that animal." The deputy lifted his .38 from his holster and turned it in his hand.

"I got to just take a look."

"OK," Cleve said. "I'll show you." His voice sounded heavy and strange, and he was quickly past the other man. As the deputy passed into the dark room where the carcass hung, Cleve opened his skinning knife.

"Doe," the deputy said. "I knew damned well." Then he cocked the pistol and began to turn, and Cleve slipped the knife just beneath his right ear, and as he did, unable to stop, he saw the puffed and forgotten white face of Red Yount's wife sadly examining a glass of beer on the counter in Prince's Tavern, and twisted the knife and felt the hot splash of blood over his hand and arm, and it was as if the knife were in the face of that stooped, beaten woman.

Red Yount was on the floor, twitching beneath the body of the doe. Wondering if he should be sorry and knowing only that he wasn't, hadn't been

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since the moment of killing, thinking of that woman, Cleve watched until he was sure it was over. It was only another death. Cleve washed his hands and went outside and drove the Plymouth behind the house, where it couldn't be seen from the road.

Everything was over. Lonnie was dead alone, naked, the crippled left side of his body, wreckage of childbirth, on exhibit: twisted and pretzellike left hand pulled against his chest like the wing of a dressed chicken, bowed left leg no longer covered by the clumping and built-up boot, that maimed side contrasting with the heavily corded right arm built up through years of chinning himself on door-frames and the strong right leg of a football kicker and the sullen and fine features of his face, which seemed shrunken and yet resembled the faces of Indians copied on money and stamps.

Cleve walked toward Donan. It was almost evening when he started down the hill behind town, following a logger's skid trail, the blood already stiffened on his coat sleeve. Below, through the tops of the scrub pine regrowth, he could see the tin-sheathed buildings, smoke trailing up from the brick chimney above the shop-built stove at the back of Decker and Preston's garage. Cleve wondered how many of them were gathered there and if someone had gone across to Prince's for a case of beer and if they knew about Lonnie. Wind was blowing down the dusk-filled empty street as he stepped in the back door of the garage and saw only three of them around the stove. Big Jimmy and his running pal, Clarence Dunes, and Lester, the mechanic. The only car inside was Big Jimmy's baby-blue convertible. An open case of Bud sat on the floor by the stove.



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Cleve walked slowly to the row where they stood, turned his back to the stove, and stood with them. Lester Braddock was older, around thirty-five, a small and bull-chested man wearing stiff new coveralls. He squatted and opened Cleve a beer. "Drink that," he said. "They're looking for you, man. They found old Yount."

Cleve stood with the cold bottle in his hand. The first sip seemed shockingly bitter and chilled him. "I guess they are," he said, his mind preoccupied with Lonnie. All the walk to town he had thought of the burial. "I'll take off in a minute," he said. "I just want to say how I want him buried."

A half mile below the house the river vanished. Cleve had dreamed of the river, and because of that dream, because Lonnie's death and the dream were all connected with the sound of water falling, he wanted to send Lonnie down through the boulders to the place where the water was sucked into the earth. The water fell between boulders in a long black lava rockslide to resurface at the bottom of the ridge, over a mile away, and the sound of the falling was hollow, as if the water dropped a great distance onto a deadened plate of steel. They had played there as children. Their father had set up a system of net-holding weirs among the boulders, and they had watched him scramble barefoot over the boulders, pulling trout from the nets, secured by a stranded rawhide riata he used for a safety line.

Just at the beginning of the war a child from some other family had fallen and been sucked underground, his body never recovered, and on the flat-surfaced boulders near the water's edge a dim cross had been smeared with greenish house paint, covering more-ancient signs and drawings, memorializ-

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ing that drowned, now-forgotten child. Cleve had dreamed of being that child, of falling.

He and Lonnie had never been allowed near the depressed, cup-shaped saucer of boulders where the water vanished, had played as children on the open ground beneath three huge pines where some rancher's misplaced salt trough had caused the cattle to hole up by the water, beating the pumice ground to dust. From there they threw rocks across toward the painted boulders—the one on which the modern cross dripped over the older marks of ancient tribes, and all of them covered with random-seeming yellow and green lichen-covered inscriptions: simply drawn round-headed snakes with wriggling bodies, and rippling water, and crooked marks that were mountain ranges and indicated days of travel, and the sun surrounded by straight childish rays.

The dream had begun with a thrown rock, a perfect flat skipping stone which fit exactly into his hand, and seemed to have something to do with the act of throwing. Men around him were seated with blankets over their shoulders, resembling school-book pictures, and the fire had burned very low, and their faces were aged, corded, and eroded to bone as he approached them, and they were looking at only him, their eyes hooded and gray. He ran to escape by open seawater which resembled pictures of British Columbia, mountains rising from a beach and forested, saw the rider galloping downhill toward the willow-decked village, and then he was on a rock washed by breaking waves and slippery, saw men coming over the sand toward his promontory, tried to run and was trapped.

Again it was night, and the old men were regard-

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ing him motionlessly before the same recognizable fire, and it was burning much higher, heaped with brush, and he was kneeling, his hands and feet bound by leather thongs and his face toward the warm flames. A naked cripple approached him from the fire, carrying a ragged stone ax and glistening with sweat—Lonnie, his right arm raised, and then the ax descending on Cleve's exposed neck, and Cleve was awake.

Big Jimmy and Clarence Dunes were looking at him. Lester was older and knew better. Cleve was grateful. They had all been friends, but Lester was the oldest and the only one who'd probably act like he had any sense of how it was to hear your brother was dead. Cleve finished the beer, drinking quickly in the long gulps, and threw the can into a rattling empty trash barrel. "Thanks," he said. "You do that for me." He looked at Lester, who was staring at the floor. "I'll see you around." He started to walk from the stove without any further idea of where he was going after the door that led outside, and Big Jimmy hooked him by the shoulder. Jimmy was tall, over six feet, and fat, his belly slouching until only the bottom tip of his silver buckle could be seen. His face was round, always seeming placid, untroubled, even when he was fighting. "They ain't going to go for that," he said. "Some crazy idea like that, no way." He kept his hand on Cleve's shoulder.

"You got to steal him," Cleve said, and he told them how they should put Lonnie on a raft with flowers and torches and send him down the river at night. Jimmy dropped his hand and began to talk like *he* was getting excited, like all he wanted was for somebody to tell him it was possible, that they could make it work. "We could take a case of whis-

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key and tell everybody and they'll all walk along with all those fires going." Cleve could never remember seeing Jimmy even look excited before.

Not even when Lonnie burned the slaughterhouse. Coming home from the All-Indian Rodeo in McDermit on the Fourth of July 1961, their parents had burned while parked and sleeping alongside the gravel road south of Denio in a six-year-old Chevrolet two-door. When the boys learned of those deaths, Lonnie began a three-day drunk which ended when he opened the door and witnessed the charred interior and fecal stench of the towed-home automobile. That night he carried a five-gallon can of kerosene to the slaughterhouse on the upper edge of the reservation town of Donan and ignited the buildings and hide pile. The next morning the odor of burnt hair and cooking flesh had been mixed with the smoke of blood-impregnated wood hanging in a gray haze. At daybreak Lonnie returned to the house and found police waiting. "How many things do you regret about your life?" The judge had asked him that. "Everything," Lonnie had answered. "Like everybody else, everything. Like you would, if you was anybody." Big Jimmy had sneered at it all. "Just drawed him more time," he had said. "Don't make sense." And now he seemed excited, now that it was too late. Cleve saw Lonnie, the sterile white room, walls, and floor of green ceramic tile, rubber garden hoses curled and hung above faucets, the stiffening body naked on a concrete drainage slab, and the man writing quickly—alcohol poisoning—then dropping the pencil, leaving, distracted by his distaste for the dead object.

Then it was decided, and Cleve was crouched in the trunk of Jimmy's baby-blue Buick convertible

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and they were heading south, toward Red Bluff. Cleve was curled on burlap sacks around a half-case cold-pack of Olympia, and Lester was driving because Jimmy said he was too stirred up. Cleve could feel each jar of the rough asphalt and at first tried to keep track of the curves, remember the road, and tell where they were. Now he could only tell they were moving fast. Already he had finished one beer and started on another, and he wondered a little about where he was going and really didn't care. He just felt happy and easy to be going. Then the car swerved heavily, throwing him against Jimmy's slick-worn spare, and he heard shouting from the inside and shots, and remembered the burned-out odor of his father's Chevrolet, imagined himself charred, his head filled with that stench while the shots stopped echoing, and then he was against the trunk lid and they were going over.

His head hurt when everything stopped, and he felt something running over the side of his face and wondered if it was blood or beer, and he saw lights through the crack of the now-gaping trunk lid and waited for fire while he heard Jimmy wailing. They were right side up, had rolled completely over, and then the lights were on him when the trunk lid was raised, and he felt himself cornered against a rock pile by dogs and lights and heard Jimmy again crying on and on—*he forced us, he had that gun, he would of killed us*—and then the voice changing, like Jimmy couldn't make up his mind—*they got Lester, he's dead, so get away, he's dead*—and on and on Jimmy wailing, voice changing. Cleve hoped Lester wasn't dead and remembered the .38 pistol and dug it from the pocket of his Levi's jacket, and just as it came free the first shot exploded in his right

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shoulder, spinning him back into the trunk, and then he had the pistol in his left hand as he fired without aim at the lights twice and dove from the stinking metal cage he was in and heard more shots as the lights scattered.

White-helmeted figures reached at him, belted and booted shadowy men, and then he was past and running toward the darkness hearing more shots, the whine of bullets passing, but at least free of fire, the possibility of fire. He dodged, tried to keep dodging like a coyote, then fell skidding on the asphalt and lay exploring with his fingers the cool granular surface, each embedded stone a mountain he must climb, and it seemed the highway was a river he was flowing down. Jimmy was screaming—*you killed him you sonsabitches*—and he knew he was killed and the wind had stopped and he was going down and down the river with Lonnie toward the place where hooded eyes were capable of infinite resistance.

## The Soap Bear

### 1

A new world every morning. Every night, Banta thought, every time the sun turns sideways. Rock of ages, nearer to thee, crooning through the static from the Hallicrafter radio, voices in rising harmony while the postcard scenes of his life hung on another slope, his bluebird mornings slipping down and away, backward into the white noise that scratched with the music.

So now Grace was dead, and Danzig was dead, and they all were dead. Someone would have to clean up the mess. But not now, Banta thought, not me. Banta stood with his hands on the cold enamel rim of yellowing kitchen sink, studying the elongated shadows of light cast out from the windows. They lay soft as reflections of a summer moon on the new snow, and on the falling snow as it fell.

Sparks from the exhaust of the pumping diesel-fueled Delco electric generator fanned away into the twilight like midwinter fireflies. Banta dug a lime-yellow stocking cap from the pocket of his sheepskin coat, and orange-tinted skier's goggles, went out into the cold and tightened the cinch around the belly of his black gelding, climbed up into the saddle, and rode away.

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How to stay alive in the snowy woods, old lessons. Avoid panic. Think of taking hostages. Virgil Banta rode an unplowed lane between bare-limbed cottonwoods and across the echoing bridge above Marshall Creek, down the canyon road turning through stands of cedar and larch and white-barked aspen, down toward the Clark Fork of the Columbia and the highway. The snow fell steadily, as it had since the third day after Christmas, large fragile flakes dropping through the windless cold.

Do not be afraid of telling lies. Remember that, remember this, remember every detail, every step of this way. In the snowy woods. Instructions from Danzig. But Danzig was dead.

Just down the hill from the fence corner where Danzig lay frozen under the snow, his body stiff like a falling-down statue by now, Virgil Banta climbed from the gelding. Banta thought of Danzig frozen, those strong white fingers stiff enough to break clean off like sticks if you hit them with a hammer. Danzig had been plowing the road in from the highway when he died. The angle-bladed cable-drum old D7 Caterpillar was a dark shadow up in the jack pine where it stalled after Danzig fell off dead. Banta opened the front of his Woolrich duck-hunter pants and stood smiling and pissing, his blood-stiff yellow buckskin gloves tucked under one arm. When he finished, standing over his steaming hole in the snow, he picked for a moment at the frozen clotted blood with a thumbnail, tossed the gloves into a thicket of buckbrush below the road, and climbed on the gelding, settling into the skiff of snow already feathering on the seat of his high-forked saddle.

When Virgil Banta reached the highway along



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the river, and night settled into the steep-walled canyon, two does and a forked-horn buck came to lick at the salty yellow stain where he had pissed. In the brushy thicket a porcupine gnawed at the bloody gloves.

Another slope of his life. The year Virgil was ten and his sister Grace was eight, that summer their friend Skinny Burton died of drowning, his sharp-ribbed body white and limp in red trunks on the grass between two black-barked willow stumps. A Sunday afternoon, and their father crouched over Skinny, pumping at his chest, and a thin dribble of water ran from Skinny's nose, and Skinny was dead.

Grace stayed to watch, and Virgil ran and hid in the cool meathouse where sawed blocks of creek-ice survived the summer under wet sawdust. Virgil chipped slivers off the ice and sucked them. The dim interior of that insulated building was very quiet. His only visitor was a calico mouse-hunting cat.

That night on the screened-in veranda overlooking the valley of the Bitterroot River, he asked his mother if dead people cry. "No," his mother said, her arm heavy around his shoulder, "your grandmother didn't cry when she was dying."

Virgil could remember the endless raspy voice of his grandmother singing unintelligible wheezing verses of some song from her childhood in the back bedroom before she died. Lights from the other ranches out in the shadowland of meadow and willow where Virgil was a child, those lights flickered as they shone through the screen around the porch. Virgil could make them flicker by moving his head. Their father came home from the funeral parlor in Hamilton, where Skinny Burton was being drained

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of creekwater and his blood, and dressed and lip-sticked to look the way he looked three days later in an open coffin. The dull red GMC pickup rattled over the cattle guard by the barn and stopped just short of the porch, nosing into the light, and their father looked old and tired as he stood in the kitchen, sipping coffee and smiling at their mother, and he smelled of whiskey.

"How could he cry?" Grace said later, sitting up on her bed in their attic bedroom where frost would form on the rafters in wintertime, a little girl with long braids, her face clean and gleaming and square under the single bulb dangling from the ridgepole. "He was under the water."

Under the water, Banta thought.

Virgil lay quiet that night after Grace was sleeping, and listened to her breathe, and wondered if he would be happy dying under the water, looking up to the light, if it would be like swimming underwater and you were happy. And now Grace was dead, and she had cried, there had been tears on her face when she was dead. Grace was dead, and Danzig was dead, up there in the house they were all dead, and they all should have cried.

Every drift of the tide. The storms came in from the Pacific, over the Cascades and the flatland wheatfields of eastern Washington, and all his life Shirley Holland had watched them come over the Bitterroot Mountains to play out and dump themselves in Montana, snow falling in the soft wind that blew flakes down the streets like dust. It was like the comings and goings of seawater.

In the kitchen, under the sink with bottles of

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bleach and ammonia, there was an unopened bottle of Sunnybrook. Shirley Holland bought Sunnybrook because he liked the name. Carefully he cut the plastic seal around the bottle top with the tip of his thin-bladed stockman's knife and poured himself a couple of inches in a water glass, the whiskey glowing amber like fishing water in the late days of fall. A new world every morning. He had been a young man then, the third year he was sheriff, when he hired a traveling sign painter to print those words in three-foot-high black letters across the outside wall of his cinder-block jailhouse. It was something he learned from his father. The old man had been talking about drunks locked in the tank to sober up overnight, and about himself when he got old and couldn't remember the seasons. In old age his father had lived by himself, and said he sometimes woke in the morning and looked out expecting to see snow and found himself surprised by blossoming lilac. You would think a man would know, his father said, just by the light. His voice trailed off before he got around to mentioning warmth, and he stared at the wall as if amazed to discover such a fool in himself. The old man hadn't any sympathy for drunks, even when he was drinking himself. Shirley Holland thought of those words every time he started at the whiskey. A NEW WORLD EVERY MORNING. Faded words lettered on the side of his jailhouse like a motto for his life.

Shirley Holland was at his kitchen table, sipping his second glass of the whiskey, when someone pounded at the living room door. "Doris," he said, "tell them to go across the street and see Billy."

But after she mumbled to whoever it was, Doris

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came scuffing down the hallway toward him in her beaded buckskin slippers. "Holland," she said, "you better come out here."

"Tell them I'm not in business," Shirley Holland said.

Doris was chewing at her thin upper lip, staring at her reflection in the dark window over the sink. "The thing is," she said, "he looks exactly like you." She glanced toward him, one of her quick old-time looks, partway grinning, that took him back to the barroom years when they courted and ran together before they were married. Maybe this was another shot at what she had taken to talking about as her joking. Just this last year she had gone distant and strange on him. Maybe she had been longer in the going, but after sixteen years, this woman with her same rimless schoolteacher eyeglasses and her blonde hair going thin and gray now, she had gone away. On Christmas day, spooning oyster dressing out of their turkey, just the two of them because there hadn't been any children, she didn't want children growing up in a sheriff's house was her excuse for having her tubes tied off, she started talking about a song she heard on the radio, a song called "Satan's Jewel Crown." Doris said it made her think about those people out there who were courting the devil by cutting the tongues and privates out of dead cows and leaving the rest. She said the song made her sad because no one ever offered to ruin her life, and she said she was thinking about spending the spring in San Francisco.

"Even Coit Tower," she said, "I never even been to Coit Tower. I would have gone with even a woman." Holland hadn't answered, just took himself a helping of string beans cooked with almonds and

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let it drop. That night, looking up from a fancy picture book about the lives of French kings, she said it was a joke. "That part about a woman in San Francisco, anyway," she said, "it was a joke."

"Funny as hell," Shirley Holland said, and she looked at him and shook her head. Now, with someone waiting at the front door, she was shaking her head again, like he was responsible for terrible sadness everywhere, like she could just cry.

"Looks the spitting image of you," she said.

"Only maybe," she said, and out of her sadness she all at once grinned, "he might be left-handed."

The kid didn't look anything like him, just some big-shouldered kid, maybe twenty years old, wearing a yellow knit skier's cap, with ice and snow in his long hair and beard, but a working kid from the looks of his hands. But then maybe Doris wasn't joking. The kid looked like the son of somebody Holland had known. Maybe Doris was remembering somebody else.

"There is trouble," the kid said in a flat voice, as though it was nothing of much consequence. "Out to that Danzig house up there on Marshall Creek."

"There ain't no Danzig house," Shirley Holland said, "you mean the Frantz place."

"The place that Danzig fellow leased," the kid said.

"There sure as hell is something wrong out there," Shirley Holland said. "You one of them?"

"My sister was, Grace. My name is Virgil Banta. You knew my father. He was Mac Banta."

"His hands," Doris said, "are smaller than yours."

The kid pulled off his yellow stocking cap. His eyes were dark brown in the dim entryway light.

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"There has been a crowd of people killed," the kid said.

"My sister," he said, "they killed Grace." Shirley Holland wondered what to do with this, as he watched the kid's eyes fill with tears. It was like watching an animal begin to weep.

The inside of the four-wheel-drive Chevrolet pickup cab was warm enough. The wipers were swiping and the heater was blowing hot air out the defroster vents and onto his hands, and the air smelled of tobacco and sweaty clothing. But every twenty or so minutes Shirley Holland would have to stop and let the deputy, Billy Kumar, get out and break the ice off the wipers, and then Holland would feel the brittle midnight cold. Billy would get back inside with snow on his red and black timbercruiser jacket and everything would stink a little worse of damp wool, like drowned sheep.

"It's the bombs," Billy Kumar said, talking about the weather, "every time they light off another of them atom bombs."

Shirley Holland chewed at a matchstick and his shoulder ached. The ruts in the road were frozen hard, and the pickup rocked and churned, the steering wheel twisting. Almost half a lifetime of herding drunks, watching while some mechanic with a cutting torch released the body of another drunk from the crushed interior of an old beater car, or maybe a woman shotgunned while she was sleeping in bed. One whiskey-stinking wreck or bedroom after another, and then a long afternoon in the office, typewriting the reports. And now this deputy, Billy Kumar, dumber than rocks and talking about bombs.

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"Never been the same," Billy Kumar said, gesturing quickly with the left hand where he wore a heavy silver ring with a setting of polished green opal. Billy held his stiff buff-colored 10x Stetson between his knees and fingered endlessly at the band, turning the hat counterclockwise as he did.

"Where did you get that ring?" Shirley Holland asked.

"Last year in Las Vegas."

"Makes you look like a queer."

Billy Kumar didn't answer. Maybe it *was* the bombs. Snow even before Thanksgiving, and then right before Christmas, days of thaw and flooding, bridges washing out, and now this week of blizzard. At least they were not out there horseback freezing their asses. They were only a little more than a mile from the house. In the old days the place had been run as a hunting camp, before Amos Frantz died and his property was sold. Hunting camp and part-time whorehouse. Since then there hadn't been any sort of hunting camp. In the old days there weren't any of these rich people playing at make-believe, dressing up in Indian costumes and riding snowmobiles. "There's gamblers in Las Vegas wearing rings like this," Billy Kumar said, "and nobody better call them queers."

They were right at the fence corner the kid talked about, where that D7 Cat was stalled up on the hillside in the jack pines. The canyon sloped up out of the headlights on that side, and to the right was the darkness that was the wash of Marshall Creek. From here the road wouldn't be even halfway plowed. "Billy," Holland said, "you take a rest. You wait for me right here."

After tying one of Doris's old nylon stockings

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over his ears like a headband and pulling his stockman's hat down, Holland stepped out into fluffy new snow that was thigh-deep over the old frozen crust, and started climbing toward the dark shadow of that D7 Caterpillar. The hillside was so steep it looked as if the machine might, if he only touched it, rock and turn slowly and come thundering down. But the main question was: what the hell was it doing there?

Holland was resting with his hands on his knees, out of wind, head down and dizzy, and thought maybe it was something he imagined when he heard Billy Kumar shout. Another shout, muffled and echoing, and frightened, and he knew it was Billy. The deputy had turned over the frozen, snowy body of a dead man. "You didn't see him, did you?" Billy said. "There was an arm sticking up. I saw it plain as hell."

The damned fool, Shirley Holland thought. Now we've got this, and he's got himself scared shitless. Billy had jerked on the arm and found he had hold of a frozen hand, and fallen backward. He stood there covered with snow and looking frightened enough to cry. Shirley Holland knelt beside the body and brushed the snow from the face.

"One of them kids," he said, but it wasn't a kid at all, and he knew it. This was Danzig, a fifty-year-old man, features distorted in the light from the pickup reflecting off the snow, just a thin face and long hair iced into thick brittle strands. Shirley Holland kept brushing away the snow and then stopped. This dead man, whose features he was polishing like stone, had been shot, the bullet entering a neat small high-velocity hole just in front of and above the right ear and passing out through



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the back of the neck, leaving a jagged frozen wound the size of a teacup. The hard flesh was rough as broken wood to the touch, the mouth gagging shut on a twisted upper plate and the eyes turned up, open and blank, frosted white.

There was nothing to say. Billy Kumar made a move like he was going to run, but held his ground. "Get hold of his feet," Holland said. "I'll take the head."

"You think so," Billy Kumar said, "you think we ought to move him right away?"

"Yeah," Shirley Holland said. "We ought to move him."

The body was frozen sprawled, arms and legs spread like a starfish. Holland dropped his head end twice before they reached the pickup. His chest ached, and his hands felt boneless. "You ain't even thirty years old," Shirley said, "so don't be looking at me. You just lift him over the tailgate, else we are going to be all night."

With his eyes closed, Billy got hold of the body, arms around the dead man's waist. The snow-covered steel flooring of the pickup bed echoed dully when he dropped the frozen body inside. They warmed themselves in the pickup cab, and Billy turned the radio to country music. Roger Miller singing trailer for sale or rent. Shirley wanted to laugh. How long since he had heard that song? There had been a night drinking and dancing with whatever women were around when they had played that song over and over. He never noticed when songs went off the jukebox. Back around 1965, at least that far back. "If I'm going to concentrate," Holland said, "you are going to shut that off."

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Why concentrate? The thing to do was go back for help. But that didn't feel right. The kid was there with Doris. "You don't leave town," he had told the kid. "He can stay here," Doris said. "I'll fix some bacon and some eggs. Just like home." The kid had wiped the tears out of his eyes and smiled at her.

"There is a ghost up here," Shirley Holland said. The pickup was plowing two or so feet of dry snow, but not lurching in the ruts the way it had. "There's a ghost of a dead Chinaman."

When he was eleven or twelve, the first of the hunting camp-outs his father had trusted him with, the men had told him a story about a Chinese camp cook who died and had been buried in the foundation of the house. "We rocked him up under the south corner," his father said, "so to keep the coyotes away. The next spring he was dried up and there was no smell at all."

"Under there," his father said, showing him the rock pile against the southeast corner of the house. "His bones are under there yet if his people ain't come for him. Them China people believe in things like that, ghosts coming for your bones so you can be dead at home."

Billy Kumar was fingering at his hatband again. "There ain't no ghosts," Shirley Holland said, "no more than there are ghosts of cows."

In an upstairs bedroom Amos Franz kept a whore from Butte whose name was Annie. She stayed most of one hunting season, and her feet had been caked with dirt as she cried and waved all the way across the bridge when Amos bunched her gear into his pickup and hauled her down the canyon and

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back to the Bluebird House in Butte. "Guess it makes sense," Shirley Holland said. Flakes of snow lifted in the headlights like floating goose down. No ghosts at all.

One drunken night he had pissed into the fireplace, onto the burning cedar coals, up there in that house. Holland had been sleeping in the living room, and the snapping coals had kept him awake, and he had been trying to put them out while listening to the mumbled cursing of the other men bedded in the room. The stink of that scorching urine was with him now. The sandstone mantel over the fireplace had been darkened by soot over the years, and the next morning they had all carved their initials into the soft rock. Shirley Holland had carved an SH inside a heart.

Out in the clouding snow the house hovered like some lighted craft coming toward them, the glow diffusing into lapping auras in the falling snow, silt stippling the darkness. Shirley Holland refused to take the pickup across the bridge above Marshall Creek. "We'll walk it," he said. "Slide a wheel off that thing, and there you'll be."

Billy Kumar reached to lift the sawed-off 12-gauge shotgun from the rack behind the pickup seat. "You ain't going to need that," Shirley Holland said. "There ain't going to be anybody up there. The kid said there was nobody alive in there, and if there is they will shoot us while we're walking.

"Or be glad to see us," he said, reaching under the pickup seat for his bottle of Sunnybrook. "There's some of them people would be glad to see anybody."

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Doris Holland was playing religious music from a Christmas album of four long-playing records, the only church music in the house. The *Messiah*. The long-haired boy, his name was Virgil Banta, he wanted to hear something good for the soul. That was what he said, good for the soul. He was sitting cross-legged on the floor beside the record player, wearing an old flannel shirt of Holland's that almost fit. Just a little short in the sleeves. Doris had given him the shirt when he came out of the shower. She knocked at the door of the steamy bathroom to tell him the omelet was ready, with warmed-over lima beans and remnants of ham hocks on the side, and he had come out with no shirt on, rubbing his long hair with a towel, and his chest at least as furry as Holland's. She turned away and got him the washed-out shirt from Holland's chest of drawers.

Poor child with his sister dead. Her brother was dead. Doris could still see her brother's painted face glaring shut-eyed at the whitewashed rafters of the Methodist Church in Elk River, Idaho. All the people who had been there she hadn't seen for a long time, Dora and Slipper Count, small as wrinkled children in their seventies, hands shaking because they lived every day but Sunday on wine, and Marly Prester and his new wife, and the others, old man Duncan Avery and those children.

The music stopped and the boy went on staring at his bare feet. Doris got up to turn the records and he stopped her. "That's not the music," he said.

"How come you want me to look like him?" the boy said.

"I don't want you to, you just do."

"That's your idea," he said. He only looked at

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her with sliding looks, but his eyes were gray, the same as Holland's. "You fit his shirt," she said.

"Well, that about gets it," he said. "That's about all of his I would fit." He looked up and smiled slowly, like he had forgotten his sister was dead.

"How do you know that?" she said.

"Your feet get cold," he said, "you put on your hat. There's a rule. Your head is like a refrigerator, so you have to turn it off to get your fingers and toes warm. So you put on your hat.

"That's rule number eleven," he said. "Danzig taught me that rule." He got up and went into the hallway where his lime-yellow stocking cap was stuffed into the pocket of his sheepskin coat, and pulled the cap down over his wet hair. "Now," he said, "I don't feel no pain, because my head is covered.

"You got to do lots of things this way," he said, "with your head turned off. Danzig taught me all that, how to stay alive." The boy laughed, and pulled off the stocking cap. "But now Danzig is dead," he said.

"You aren't like Holland at all," Doris said. "You only look like Holland, that's all."

"You'll get used to it," Virgil Banta said, on the floor again, this time right in front of where she sat on the couch. "Don't you think so?" he said. "I got used to Danzig. For a long time I was used to Danzig. But now Danzig is dead, and after a while they'll get me."

"I guess that doesn't make any sense," Doris said, holding herself very quiet because he was touching her foot, easing the slipper off her right foot and starting his fingers working softly between her

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toes. His gray eyes turned away, quick like the tongue of a lizard. There was nothing in him that was at all like Holland. Poor child with a dead sister. It was important to keep knowing he was a poor child with a dead sister, and nothing around him but this house.

## 2

Seven bright orange backpacks, fully loaded, even with tightly rolled sleeping bags, were lined precisely along the far wall. The orange contrasted vividly against the sea-green wallpaper, and splattered across the orange nylon there was a spray of blackish dried blood. But it wasn't the blood that surprised Shirley Holland, it was the warmth in the house, propane heat, and the neatness of everything but the bodies. Blown away, Shirley Holland thought, milk in the pudding. Words of a song he had known as a child. What could they mean now? The walls had been torn out so the ground floor was one room, including the kitchen, and there was the hardware: seven sets of binoculars on a dark table against the wall beside the packboards, seven leather cases that must contain binoculars. And the automatic rifles, Holland could recognize what they were from pictures, brochures, leaning one by one alongside the packboards. And above all that, a slogan painted in shimmering yellow, high on the green wall: THE SEVEN DWARFS. Each end of the room was decorated with a huge black-and-white poster picture, one of Hitler and one of the Chinaman named Mao. And there was the thing he most of all did not want to see, the television set silently playing what looked to be a snowmobile movie. The

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picture on the television set was the only thing moving. Shirley Holland turned away. "You best go wait in the pickup," he said to Billy Kumar, who was behind him on the entry porch.

"What if there is somebody?" Billy Kumar said.

"There ain't going to be nobody, at least nobody that ought to get us excited." Which was the old secret, do not get excited, look around and make sense of things, count the holes and think of reasons why. "There is not going to be a damned soul around here, soon as you go outside and I turn off that television set." Shirley Holland turned to find Billy Kumar's short-barreled Detective Special .38 automatic aimed dead into his back.

"Billy," Shirley Holland said, "you might shoot me, and then where would we be? You just go sit on the front steps." He figured Billy might drive off if he got near the pickup. "You just put that gun away and take a rest," Shirley Holland said. "All this is my problem, and none of yours."

On the television screen there was the dim luminous blue of early morning, and snow on low hills patched with evergreen. From far off a dark figure proceeded toward the camera, then the picture cut and the figure was closer, then a series of quick cuts until the man on snowshoes was close enough to recognize, and it was the dead man, the man Shirley Holland recognized as Danzig. Another thing to make sense of. Shirley Holland shut off the television while Danzig grinned into the camera and pulled off his lime-green stocking cap. The same sort of cap the kid had been wearing. Maybe they all wore caps. Holland touched the granular sandstone mantel above the ash-filled fireplace. Some one of these children had scrubbed the years of

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soot from the yellow stone that was rough as sandpaper under his fingertips, but his initials were still there, SH inside a heart, alongside the names and initials of the men who had been his friends in those days.

Now that he was around to looking at them, there were five of them dead in that room, hard to tell which were the boys and which were girls, all with long hair and the same kind of clothes, workshirts and raggedy Levi's and wooly socks, no shoes or boots on any of them, five dead children on that hardwood floor. Five was the right number. There was Danzig dead in the pickup, and there was the kid in town with Doris. That added up to seven. Seven backpacks and seven sets of binoculars and seven automatic rifles and the sign on the wall: THE SEVEN DWARFS. That made it perfect.

They must have sanded and varnished the floor because it shone like it never had in the old days. Holland wondered if they lived like Japanese and took off their shoes when they were indoors as if that was some kind of religion. The green wall was tattooed with bullet holes in two long undulating rows, holes that could only have been made by one of the automatic rifles leaning against the green wall by the backpacks. The weapons were Swedish BAR, M-37, and loaded. Shirley Holland lifted one and was surprised how heavy it was in his hands. As he held the automatic rifle he was seeing old television pictures of vague jungles in Vietnam, and they changed with the weight of that rifle in his hands; he could nearly taste the sour green of the swampy tropics as he held the rifle waist high and turned, imagining the heavy racketing sound the



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rifle would make, and the bullets fluttering around the room. If he went outside and fired a couple of rounds into the propane tank the place would burn. "Billy," he called, and when he looked out the open door there was Billy with flakes of snow melting on his plaid timbercruiser jacket, still holding the .38 Detective Special.

"Billy," Holland said, "you put the safety on, and you put that damned thing away. You make yourself a snowball or something. There is not going to be anybody here."

Then Holland turned away and did it, he touched the trigger and the rifle jumped in his hands, stronger and more forceful than he had imagined, the sound louder, battering and harsh inside that room, quicker than he had thought, and there was another short row of bullet holes in the green wall, and Holland thought, Billy, shit, there's Billy out on the porch, and he spun, ready to fall and roll if Billy should come in shooting and crazy, but only ended up standing there with the automatic rifle aimed at the open doorway.

Heading for the pickup, he thought, and he imagined Billy running down through the snow, toward the bridge. Should have got his keys away from him. "Billy," Holland said, "you all right?"

"Yeah." Billy stepped through the doorway. He was smiling, and the .38 was in his shoulder holster.

"What we are going to do," Shirley Holland said, surprised by the idea as he said it, "is stay the night, and see what is what around here." He waited for the insolence to slip out of Billy's eyes.

"There is food on the stove," Billy said. "They were cooking. Someone shut off the burners." Billy was shaking a pair of silver-mounted spurs with

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rowels big as cartwheel dollars, and the clinking sound was like someone slowly walking. "These spurs," Billy said, as if there was nothing to fear, "were on a nail out there. Whoever it was had to be horseback. There's no tracks otherwise."

"Yeah," Holland said, nothing more, because he was touching the trigger again, seeing Billy airborne with his innards splattering apart, blood and his intestines on the walls, and the black-and-red plaid of his jacket flying out in tatters. Just as his finger moved, Holland forced the weapon toward the floor, and in the brief hypnotic moment while the rifle racketed again Holland saw splinters flying against Billy's green-rubber pack boots. When it was over, Billy clinked the spurs again, his eyes almost vacantly intent, like the business of this night had seared over the soft place in his head that made him always afraid, as if the bullets chopping into the hardwood at his feet were only a cluster of the things that could not reach him anymore. Holland knew what it was, the overload from seeing too many bodies. Enough of that and the dead become different from you, no more important than broken chairs.

"Billy," Shirley Holland said, "we better have a drink. We better warm some of that stew and have a drink. What you do, you warm up whatever they were eating and I'll walk down to the pickup and get the bottle." His hands were shaking, and Holland knew he was not going to stay the night. He had long since stopped believing in his own immunity. The idea was have some hot food and a drink, and then leave. When he was outside, half-way down the lane toward the bridge, Holland realized he was still carrying the automatic rifle, and

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he laid it carefully in the snow, walked a few more feet, then went back and carried the rifle down to the bridge and dropped it off into the darkness where the small stream had cut away the drifted snow.

The stew was thick with chopped leeks. The girl dead on the floor just beyond the stove must have been a vegetarian, they must have all been vegetarians, because the only meat in the stew was bits of fish and shrimp and clams. With his belly filled, Shirley Holland was finally looking closely at one of the dead, the girl sprawled on the floor beyond the stove, near the long laboratory table where the elaborate Bausch and Lomb microscope, fitted out with camera attachments, sat like a huge gray metal manta hibernating toward spring. Between the stove and the microscope a worn oriental rug hung like a tapestry from the ceiling, forming a room divider. The side nearest the stove was slick with grease. It was then, touching the rug, his belly warm with stew and whiskey hot in his throat, that Shirley Holland thought about vegetarians and knew he was wrong. Somebody had been frying meat.

The girl, when he brushed her long reddish hair back off her face, this one was clearly a girl, heavy breasted in a white embroidered peasant's blouse, this girl's face was thin and almost foreign looking. Even with that nose she must have been close to beautiful before she fell and bit halfway through her tongue. "Maybe it's important," Holland said.

"What?" Billy Kumar was still carrying his spoon.

"That they turned off the stove." Whoever

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walked out of this alive had cared enough and been sensible enough to shut off the burners, which in turn meant not crazy. Or maybe it meant crazy enough, or nothing. Most likely it meant whoever it was had been used to taking care of things in this house. Which meant nothing again, because he knew the kid had been here. So maybe the kid had turned off the burners, even with his sister dead. Which one was the sister? Surely not this one, she couldn't be the sister, not with that nose.

"So maybe it's the kid," Billy Kumar said, "back there with Doris."

"Don't pay no attention about Doris," Shirley Holland said.

"That's Doris all right," Billy Kumar said.

"How's that?"

"Doris can do all right."

Shirley Holland grunted and turned on the light in the microscope and peered down through the eyepiece. The instrument was focused on what looked like a hair, thick and cellular in magnification against a glaring white background. Holland shut off the light. Looking through a thing like that was like driving through snow, it got you to seeing the wrong sides of complications where there was only this simple problem: what happened? And that was equally simple. Someone had sprayed these people with M-37 bullets, and the blood that had drooled over the fireplace hearth into the dry ashes and splattered everywhere in this room, the bullet holes in the green wall, that was what had been going on in here. It was time to go home. They ought to stop touching and moving things and send some fingerprint people to figure things out until the dark touch of a killer came clear.

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"What I am going to do," Holland said, "is leave you here to stand guard. I am going back to town and let you look after things here for the night. Maybe whoever it is will come back, and you can get him."

Billy Kumar smiled, like that was a good idea. "All right," Billy said, "you do that."

"Not really," Holland said. "Let's shut off the stove and close the door on this place."

"I mean it," Billy said. "It don't bother me a bit."

"It ought to," Holland said.

"Just so long as you see I ain't chickenshit," Billy said. "There's no way I am chickenshit on this. Just so you know that."

"I got that straight," Holland said. "You are not chickenshit. You are a hard man to frighten."

"That's good," Billy said. "There is nothing to worry about out here. He's back in town with Doris. Back there is where you got to start worrying."

It wasn't until then, watching Billy shut off the burners on the stove, the dying blue flicker of propane, that Holland knew which one was the sister. She was the one slumped at the foot of the stairway leading up to the second floor, the bedrooms. This was in some way her fault. Holland could see it, the kid standing near the doorway with the automatic rifle, the sister coming arrogantly down the stairs after the kid called her, his voice shrill and angry, some disdainful remark from the sister, dismissing his anger, and this touch of the finger, the hammering sound as the bullets traced their way back and forth across that green wall, and all of them dead. A quarrel from childhood finally resolved. But maybe it wasn't that way. Maybe Danzig had gone first, shot off that D-7 in the late

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afternoon, as the kid rode in; maybe all this was planned.

There was no telling, but for sure no one but the kid could have stood there with the M-37 while they all went on about the business of their cooking. Only the kid could have swept the room with that M-37 like he was blowing it clean with a hose.

The girl at the bottom of the stairs had a plain country face and short dark hair, and Holland knew he was right. She was the sister. Holland stepped over her and climbed the stairs toward the darkness up there, and when he switched on the light in the room directly across from the head of the stairway, he knew he was even more right. It was a bedroom, there was no door, not even a curtain hanging in the doorway, no privacy, but it was a room where people slept. There was a double-bed mattress on the floor, covered with a fake-looking oriental rug that had been splattered with yellow paint, and a long table and a chair under the dark window in the far wall, but furnishings were not what was important. What mattered was the dead man. A small dark man, maybe a Puerto Rican or a Cuban or Malaysian, one of the fine-boned dark people from some other continent, he was curled in the far corner of the room, and had been chopped apart with short crossing sweeps of the M-37, literally cut up in the work of the night. His face was torn apart, and his intestines spilled and burst, blood and greenish fecal matter pooled together and drying on the flooring. The man had been naked except for a pair of avocado-green nylon bikini shorts. You poor lonesome little bastard, Holland thought, he got you fine, didn't he. Which will teach you to trust in white girls.

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So this is the reason, Holland thought, the old reasons. Posters on the wall, and snowmobiles down in the barn where the teams of workmares once steamed on winter mornings while they snuffled at their oats, automatic rifles and whatever these kids thought they were going to force toward perfection, and now there is this same old trouble. Danzig first; Danzig was older, and had the money, and was just playing. Holland didn't blame the kid for getting Danzig first, making sure of that much.

The soap bear: the tiny precisely carved fangs.

The soap bear sat surrounded by whittled shards of the hard yellow laundry soap it had come from, alone on the table under the window except for the elaborately compartmented hardwood box of thin-bladed Exacto carving knives, chisels and tiny chrome-plated hammers, needles which might be used for etching. The girl had been starting herself a career in carving. Winter could loft you into seeing how you could be somebody else while you watched out a second-story window to where snowbirds were playing. Holland tested the blade of one of the Exacto knives against the back of his thumbnail. It was as factory sharp as any knife he had ever honed. Once in the lobby of the U.S. National Bank in Cody, Wyoming, waiting for a check to go through, Holland watched a man carve the head of an eagle from dark hardwood. That man had been using tools exactly like these. They looked like instruments that might belong to a dentist.

And how sure-handed she had been. Holland wondered if she had been at her carving just before she was called down the stairs to die. Holland could see it, the little dark man sleeping in his avocado-

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green undershorts, and the girl at her work, the call from downstairs, whatever tool she had been using placed neatly back into the compartmented box, and then the racketing of the automatic rifle when she reached the bottom of the stairway. Holland imagined the little dark man terrified and confused from his sleep as the killer came slowly up after him, the dark man cringing in the corner, and the unforgiving boyish smile of the gunman. Not even then will you believe it, Holland thought, not until you are dead will you know it has happened.

Holland picked up the soap bear. The body was only roughed-in behind the shoulders, but the head was carved in great detail, the ears, the fangs, and the ruffled hump of a grizzly by someone who knew what she was doing. It was nice work. Those years ago they carved their names roughly in the sandstone mantel over the fireplace, and that roughness had worked out better than this fine touch. But maybe not: there was always the scorching odor of piss in that memory. Holland shook his head and went down the stairs, left the lights burning and headed out into the snow. "Which one," Billy said, "do you figure was the sister?"

"I figure they all was," Holland said, waiting on the porch, "I figure they was all his sister. We might as well get down the road."

"Not me," Billy said. "I am staying here."

"You ain't hired to do what you want," Holland said.

"Fine," Billy said. "Then I quit. I'm staying here."

"I guess you are," Holland said. "You stay here. Never mind the quitting. You stay here and guard the evidence." Holland slipped the soap bear under



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his coat, where it would be out of the snow. The moisture might melt one of those fine touches. You stay here, he thought, and then you can figure on twenty years of not being upset by anything because you won't see anything but one detail at a time, and each cut throat and splattered brain will only seem more of this night. It will do you good.

When he reached the pickup, Holland shone his long-barreled flashlight into Danzig's iced-over face. He brushed the snow away. Private television, he thought. You must have been one fancy asshole to gather all this trouble into one household. Billy had followed him down from the house. "There ain't no good in it," Billy said, "in staying here. In town is where the killer is."

### 3

Frilled and embroidered, the nylon robe swept the carpet silently as Doris Holland came barefoot into the living room. Sitting herself on the floor before the fireplace, she drew open the brass-framed fire doors. Opening the leather-bound picture album she quickly snapped three of the photographs from the holders fastening them to the page, flicking each photo into the sooted fire pit with a quick motion of her wrist. Then she paused, reached in, and drew out the little pile of photographs, as if she must begin again, properly.

After switching on the small cut-glass chandelier in the room she took up the pictures again, this time examining each before dropping it into the firebox. Occasionally she would come across yellowing dim images of Holland, a long-haired

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ragged boy squinting into the sun from the bed of an old Ford V-8 truck, crouching with baby geese beside spring tules, pictures of old people she had never known, gone or dead before she ever saw Holland, a gray-haired woman, wearing a sagging flowered dress and a gambling-man sun visor, standing beside an ancient black automobile and scowling. These photos she set aside, intending them for Holland. Only when the pile for burning was bigger than she had imagined it could be—she never remembered posing for so many pictures—as she was heading down the hallway toward the kitchen for matches, did she think of how the fire would look, flame and then a curling mound of cellulose that would resemble the final moments of a doll burning, the yellow feathery hair and the little clothes gone, the plastic body curling into the insides of itself. She pulled a hair from her head and struck a match and lighted the hair and watched it burn before she left the pictures piled there in the firebox and went back up the stairs to where the boy was sleeping. So many pictures of herself; Doris in a yellow dress, down by the river on a Sunday, her face soft and drunk and her bright lipstick in that fuzzy old-time World War II color, smeary red. She couldn't bring herself to start the fire.

"They go strange on you," Holland said. "It's not like they are stupid. It's just that they never had any chances to learn anything." The night was turning gray toward daylight, and they were driving slowly along the muffled side streets, only a couple of blocks from his house and the jailhouse across the way. "What you have to remember,"

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Holland said, "with people who have gone crazy or wherever they have gone, is that they are like animals. There is nothing like a human being in there." At least the snow had stopped. His gray two-story house with the towering Colorado blue spruce in front looked like no one had ever come or gone from it in this night. The heavy snowfall had buried even his own tracks. All the windows were dark, there was that to think about. Doris always left a light on in the living room. An untouched world in the morning. Parked in the driveway alongside the blue spruce, Holland shut off the headlights, but left the pickup idling. His father had planted that spruce. Holland had pictures of himself standing alongside the tree when it was no taller than he was. He must have been about eleven years old when the picture was taken, because he was eleven when they moved into the house. The picture must have been taken in the early spring, because there was no snow, but he was wearing his pants tucked into his boots, and a billed cap with the earflaps turned down. Holland reached over and slapped Billy on the knee. "We are going to tell them stories," he said, "when this mud is settled."

Up there he had carved his name in the mantelpiece. "Funny how you would never do that in your own house," Holland said. Billy didn't answer. Holland could feel the rough carved sandstone under his fingertips, the heart and the initials, SH. He tried to think of something in this house, where he had lived since the year he was eleven, something that would seem as real to his memory as touching that sandstone. He slipped his hands around the slick steering wheel and shut off the idling pickup. How do you go to your own house when something

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has gone bad on the inside, when it doesn't seem like your place to live anymore, when you almost cannot recall living there although it was the place where you mostly ate and slept for all your grown-up life? Try to remember two or three things about living there. Try to remember cooking one meal.

"There is no use stalling on it," Billy said. "This time I am taking the shotgun. Whatever fort he is behind, we got to go in there after him.

"You take the front," Billy said. "They won't suspect you. I'll cover the back. You give me a key to the back door, and I'll come around on them."

"What?"

"I'll cover the getaway, in the back."

"You just sit quiet," Holland said. "You leave that shotgun where it is, and you sit here quiet. There is nothing wrong in there, and if there is, I am not having you and that shotgun in my house."

"Is that an order?"

"Yes," Holland said, "that is an order. You will sit here quiet and I will go inside and turn on the lights, and then I will wave to you from the door, and you will not bring the shotgun. That is an order."

So there it was. Doris and that kid, side by side and sleeping, like no one would ever come up the creaking stairs a step at a time with a pistol drawn, to shoot them in that bed where he had always slept until now. Sometimes there is no choice but to walk into your own house. Far away, you think, and you do not want to see. You come home and you say do not tell me, you say I have hunted the elk all over the snowfields of the Selway, and I do not want to

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know what happened here. And then there is a morning you walk in and take a look in your own house, like any traveler.

The .38 Detective Special was cold as a rock in his hand, and Holland thought: I could kill them, one and two and done with, except for being an old man alone down there in that living room, and the explanations.

"Are they there?" It was Billy, whispering loud from the bottom of the stairway. Billy with his own .38 Detective Special in his hand. You could walk away, down the stairs, and tell Billy no. You could tell Billy no and go across to the jail and start making telephone calls, to the coroner and the state police, and come back here later, and say you don't know how you missed them, you don't understand how they could have been here all the time in your own house, and overlooked.

"Yeah," Holland said, and his voice was loud and harsh. "Yeah, they are sure as hell here. You ought to see them here. You come on up and see them." Holland switched on the bedroom lights as they came fighting awake under the bedclothes to see him standing with that black pistol in his hand, the bearded kid and Doris, her face soft and old without the eyeglasses, Doris sitting up and her breasts flat and naked, hanging and empty in the way she never let him see. Holland just stood there, giving them some time to figure out who they were going to be this morning.

"If this ain't hell," Holland said, when Doris just went on sitting there uncovered, her eyes out of focus without the eyeglasses. "I always figured it would be me," Holland said. "Some one of these

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whiskey tramps would come in and find me shacking down with his lady, and I would be sitting there wondering if he would shoot, and when." He could hear Billy coming up the stairs, one step at a time.

"Billy," Holland said, "forget it. Go on back down. We will all be down in a minute. I'm coming down." Holland turned back to the bed.

"The two of you get dressed," Holland said, "and then you come down the stairs and we will have some coffee and talk about what is going to happen next." Holland went over and shook the kid's clothing to make sure there was no gun, and then he left them.

But that was a mistake, at the bottom of the stairs he knew it was a mistake. Racked in a corner of his closet there was the .30-30 his father had left, and the scope-sighted .30-06 he carried while hunting mule deer and elk, and the two shotguns, the 12-gauge for Canada geese and mallards, and the 20-gauge for brush birds, pheasant and quail and the chukars he had one time hunted down on the far desert rimrock country of southeastern Oregon, near the Nevada border on the bare sagebrush mountains. Down there on Steen's Mountain, that had been a trip, but he had never gone back. When everything was said, hunting alone was not like hunting. And there were stacks of boxed shells alongside the weapons.

With Billy hovering behind him while he made coffee in the kitchen, Holland knew he had made the bad mistake and tried to think about hunting. There was no use going back up the stairs, either the kid had one of the shotguns or he didn't. And

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sure enough, he did. When Holland turned from plugging in the coffee, the kid was standing there in the doorway to the kitchen, barefoot and naked except for his pants, holding the 12-gauge. Doris stood behind him, wrapped in a blanket. Billy had turned useless again, standing by the electric stove with his arms reaching upward, pointing the .38 at the ceiling. Holland raised his own hands. "You stay calm," Holland said, "and we will give up our weapons, and we will all have us a cup of coffee with sugar and cream to get us warm."

"Billy," Holland said, "bring down the weapon very slowly, aiming it toward the window, and drop it in the sink."

"And Doris," Holland said, "you come over here and you pick my weapon out of my holster, and you take both mine and Billy's and you throw them out the back door into the snow. Then we will be all right, and we will have some coffee."

Except for the gun, it was like a holiday, or one of those Sundays after a winter dance with people sleeping over, when everyone wakes up half drunk and that is fine because there is nothing to do but sit around the kitchen and nurse along with no thought that Monday is coming. Four cups of steaming coffee and the gray morning light through the windows, and only the kid cocked back in his chair with one of the .38 Police Special pistols in his hand to mar the scene. "If you wouldn't shoot," Holland said, "I would get a shot of whiskey from under the sink. There is another bottle under there." That would make it just like a Sunday.

"The whiskey is in the living room," Doris said,

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"on the mantel. We had some last night. He was shaking and dying."

"Well then, you get the bottle for me," Holland said. "Please, or he will shoot me if I try to get it for myself."

"What you might think," Doris said, "is not true. They need body warmth. He was dying of cold. You could just understand that."

"I understand that," Holland said. "Body warmth and dying of cold. Why don't you get me the whiskey, and we will all feel better in just a little while."

"No," the kid said, when Doris had gone for the whiskey, "we won't feel any better. My sister is dead, you saw them, they are all dead up there, and no whiskey is going to make us feel any better."

"We could have a drink in our coffee anyway," Holland said. "We have all been out in the cold, and the whiskey can't hurt."

"That's right," the kid said, and for the first time his eyes did not slide away from Holland's. "We all been out in the cold. There's a way you get sick when you been too long out in the cold, not so much freezing or anything as just shivering and you can't think. The part to notice first is that you can't think right. There is a name for it, Danzig knew the name, and you can die from it. Last night when I came in here I couldn't think right, and she took care of me. That's all there was. The cure is dry clothing and body warmth. There is a name for it."

"That woman," Holland said, "I don't know what she made of you, but you got to understand she is an old woman. Just yesterday she was not an old woman, but now she is. There is all kinds of



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ways to go sick. Just thinking about all those dead people can make you go strange."

"Danzig knew the name for it," the kid said.

"Danzig taught you plenty, didn't he?" Holland said.

"There was one thing that was good about Danzig," the kid said, tipping his chair forward, sitting with his elbows on his knees, the .38 Police Special aimed dead at Holland as Doris came back with the whiskey bottle, "and that was that he knew things."

"Go ahead," the kid said, motioning at the whiskey bottle with the pistol, "go ahead and pour. Some whiskey would be all right for you. You been out like I was. But you got to understand there was something wrong with Danzig. He wanted the right things, but there was something wrong."

"When I grew up," the kid said, "you knew my father, his name was Mac Banta down there in the Bitterroot."

"I never knew anybody named Banta," Holland said.

"Well, he was there anyway," the kid said, "and there was those spring mornings with the geese flying north and I would stand out on the lawn with the sun just coming up and the fence painted white around my mother's roses, and it would be what my father called a bluebird morning. That was what Danzig wanted, was bluebird mornings. My sister would be there, and my mother and my father, and the birds playing in the lilac. Comes down to a world of hurt was what my father would say, and he would laugh because nothing could hurt you on those bluebird mornings. And that is what Danzig wanted."

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Holland poured the whiskey and sat there in his kitchen, the four of them around the oak kitchen table while the kid talked and fondled the .38, all of them but the kid sipping at the coffee and whiskey and listening while the kid told them about Danzig and his money, and the way Danzig was going to stop everything with those automatic rifles and snowmobiles and closed-circuit television, seeing there was no need for anything but bluebird mornings. "But he lost interest," the kid said, "and after a while it was like he was just playing. After a while all any of them were doing up there was just smoking dope and fucking."

The kid named Banta turned to look at Doris. "I am sorry for saying that," he said, "but that is all any of them were doing up there, smoking dope and fucking. There is no other way to say it. That is when I left. My sister, Grace, she wouldn't go, she was worse than any of them, so I left her there.

"And now she is dead," Banta said, "and she cried, I could see the tears on her face, and it was Danzig should have cried."

"Boy," Holland said, "let me show you something. Out there on the seat of my pickup there is a carving. You let me show you that carving. You let Doris go out and get me that carving, and I will show you something."

They stood by the picture window in the living room and watched Doris go out barefoot in the snow and open the pickup with her blanket wrapped around her like some native woman and come back with the soap bear. In the kitchen they sat back around the oak table while the kid stared at the face of the carving, the intricate fangs of the soap bear, and the fine etched ruff of hair over the hump. "Now

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let me show you something," Holland said, and he took the carving from the boy and carried it to the sink. Holland turned on the hot water, and let it go until it was steaming, and held the head of the bear under the flow, and then with his hands burning he began to rub and wash at the slippery foaming soap until the tiny etched lines were gone and the carving was mostly gone, until there was nothing but the smooth wet surface of what had been as precise and as perfect as that girl could make it be. Holland held the dripping object out toward the boy. "Now you look at this," Holland said. "You have come in here and you have ruined some things of mine, and now I have ruined what your sister was doing that you did not know a thing about. Every mark your sister made is slicked away. So you lift up your head and shoot me if you think you can, but there is one thing about it, and that is that we are even right now. You have done me some damage, coming into my house like you have, and I have done you some damage, but maybe you have the best of it because some morning you might come to see that nobody ever did owe you any bluebirds, not ever. But maybe that same morning you might see that the best bluebird you ever had was that soap bear, and it washed away so easy. So we are even. You shoot me if you got the notion, but I am willing to call it even.

"Or what you could do," Holland said, "is get up and walk out of this kitchen and out of here. There is a chance you could go upstairs and get into your clothes while we all sit around this table, and you could leave. If you are smart at all, that is what you will do. If you didn't leave any absolutely fresh prints up with those dead people nobody will ever

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be able to pin you with all that mess, and you will get away free. If you shoot me you will have to shoot everyone here, and you are a dead man. You have wiped your sister clean, and you have got Danzig clean, but there is no way you can get everything to stay clean. Maybe you ought to just leave things go the way they are for a while, and walk out. People like you," Holland said, "are always forgetting the ghosts there are in this world."

"There is too much," the kid said. "You don't forget. In the end there is no possible way of getting out of what they were doing up there. You start letting those things go and you are not anybody. You got it painted on the outside of your jailhouse. When I was a kid in high school we laughed about that, and Danzig, he laughed about that. A new world every morning. Wake up and nothing counts from yesterday.

"And you know what?" the kid said. "That is bullshit. You know what they were doing up there? You know what my sister did for Christmas? She cooked three turkeys. And you know what she did? She painted them all three green with food coloring. Did you ever think about eating a green turkey? Did you ever see green stuffing? Green birds for a green world was what she said, like turkeys should be the color of grass. Springtime turkeys is what she called them. That is what you end up with. A new world every morning, and you got green turkeys." The kid went on tapping at the table with the pistol barrel, leaving tiny marks in the polished hardwood surface.

"It was a joke," Holland said. "The sign was a joke."

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"Well, the fun is over," the kid said.

"Not just yet." It was Billy Kumar, and he held a palm-sized one-shot gambler's gun of the kind Holland had seen only in Western movies. From somewhere in his clothing, while the kid preached at Holland, Billy had come out with that tiny weapon, with a chrome-plated barrel only about an inch and a half long, and he held it aimed straight at the side of the kid's head, dead on Virgil Banta from three or four feet. All this time, Holland thought, he has been packing that thing hidden.

"We got one more piece of fun," Billy Kumar said, and even though his hand was trembling just so slightly, Billy didn't look frightened, not even angry, but more like a great door had just swung wide and he was seeing the first thing he ever liked in his life, his eyes squinted and lips pulled back, and chewing at just the tip of his tongue. "You don't even turn your head," Billy said. "You drop that pistol. Just open your hand and let it drop."

"Billy," Holland said. "Wait a minute."

"I am going to kill the old man," Virgil Banta said, not moving. "On the count of three I am going to kill the old man."

Billy almost missed. His one shot struck Virgil Banta in the shoulder, but that was enough. The kid didn't even fire. Maybe that is to his credit, Holland thought later, maybe he didn't ever mean to fire, but at the time, as Holland rolled sideways out of his chair, knowing there would be a second explosion of fire in the room, directly in his face, the shot that never came, he was thinking he had killed himself. All my life, he was thinking, knowing Billy was beyond his control even before the

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shot. All my life, Holland was thinking, waiting for this, some cockeyed son of a bitch getting me killed. All my life getting myself killed.

"He thought you would understand," Doris said. "He was only a boy, and that was why he came here, he thought you would understand."

"What am I going to understand?" Holland said. "He is up there in my bedroom jackass naked, along with you, and I am supposed to make something wonderful out of that?"

"But then forget it," Holland said. "Which is what I mean, forget it. This is all something to forget." It was late darkening afternoon; and the blood had been scrubbed from the kitchen floor; and the Banta kid was safe in the county hospital with federal deputies guarding him; and Billy Kumar was gone home with his pearl-handled one-shot Las Vegas gambler gun, gone home to be a new man; and Shirley Holland was at his kitchen table again, picking at a bacon-and-mushroom omelet. Thick country bacon, and none of those canned mushrooms, the real mushrooms Doris gathered down on the sandy riverbanks of the Clark Fork in spring just as the cottonwoods were coming into fresh leaf. Real mushrooms frozen for winter. One cup of coffee, Holland thought, and I will go to sleep. Outside the window over the sink, snow was falling thick again. "What could I have understood?" Holland said, and he wondered what those children thought as they scrubbed the soot off a sandstone mantelpiece where someone had carved a heart with the letters SH inside. What did they understand?

"Nothing," Doris said. "It's just what he thought,

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he thought you would understand. Nothing happened up there."

"Fine," Holland said.

Except they always give you a chance to understand. "The first good spring day, a warm day," Holland said, "I am going to paint out that sign. You get to be my age, and a thing like that isn't anything you want to think about seriously." Doris didn't even look around from where she was rinsing the frying pan.

"Nothing happened," Doris said.

"It never does."















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