2008

Stray men

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Wood, Steven P., "Stray men" (2008). *Master's Theses*. 3722.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31979/etd.4n7v-xyye>
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STRAY MEN

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Steven P. Wood

December 2008

UMI Number: 1463398

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SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

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STRAY MEN

by

Steven P. Wood

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ABSTRACT

STRAY MEN

by Steven P. Wood

This creative thesis, a collection of short stories entitled *Stray Men*, deals primarily with exploring the themes of male violence and the consequences of human alienation. Acts of female violence occur in some of the stories, but when they do they function mostly as impetuses for the more devastating and irrevocable reactions of the male recipients. Relationships—whether between husband and wife, boyfriend and girlfriend, or father and son—hang frequently in various states of crisis and impending deterioration. Inevitable separation from a loved one or even merely an upheaval in the preexisting comforts of intimacy and connectedness, however tenuous, leads characters to overwhelming feelings of isolation, loneliness, melancholic confusion, and, ultimately, desperate courses of action. The protagonists in my book, often tough, uneducated, and suffering some sort of loss, confront their predicaments in blunt, primarily instinctive fashions, employing anger and violence as their sole sources of recourse. The settings for the stories are chiefly rural, with the natural world serving simultaneously as a place of magnificent beauty and permanence and also as a pitfall of unrelenting horrors, where characters are left exposed and vulnerable. Character interactions with animals and landscapes—both wild and domesticated—reveal the fundamental necessity for mankind to recognize its place on the planet and to understand its relationship with other mammals, insects, reptiles, birds, fish, woods, deserts, forests, streams, rivers, lakes, trees, rocks and mountains.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The stories included in this thesis could not have been written without the patience, love, support, and guidance of many people. I am forever grateful to all of my professors at San José State University who kindly shared with me their wisdom, their steadfast belief in the undying power of the written word, and who always managed to sacrifice time they had precious little of, to offer invaluable advice. Specifically, I would like to thank Dr. Samuel Maio, my advisor on this project. I could not have asked for a more professional and conscientious captain to navigate this ship. Without him, this book would not exist. Professor Alan Soldofsky and Dr. Susan Shillinglaw both provided me with an abundance of useful criticism and cogent suggestions by which to continually improve my stories. Whenever my confidence may have faltered, their faith in me, and their words of encouragement, would always prod me onward. I thank Mitch Berman for our countless spirited debates wherein neither of us ever capitulated easily. His contributions to this thesis remain considerable. Early on, the workshops of Robert Sweet and Chris Fink instilled in me important insights about the writing process I hold firm to this day. Ernest, thanks, my friend, for being a tough, honest reader, and a true kinsman. My brother Dave and my sisters Star and Katie know that without their inspiration and love my world would be a far sadder place.

Finally, I dedicate this thesis to my mom and dad, Evelyn and Bob Wood. Nothing I write can adequately express what they mean to me. Maybe that's what writing fiction is all about: expressing the inexpressible. Words do fail. But they know. They know.

The world is beautiful, but has a disease called man.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

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The Rate of Accretion

Sometimes Mackey sleeps with his nine-foot python curled up on the bedspread next to him. He only does this when Allison takes off for the night—sometimes, when it's real bad, more like three or four nights—to her girlfriend's house in Wyoming. Allison is Mackey's new wife. They've been married for almost sixteen months and the three of us, Allison, Mackey, and I live in Last Chance, Colorado. Behind their house, down in the woods a ways where some nights the air gets black enough so I can't see my hand in front of me, there's a small one bedroom cottage. I live there. I rent it from Mackey. Even now I can remember his brief, simple, yet confusing ad in the newspaper: *For Rent: One bedroom cabin with trees, quiet woodstove included. Negotiable.*

When I say *rent*, I mean I try to give him money, but he never takes it. He turns his head aside like it's some bad food on a plate, pushes my hands away. Actually, one time, maybe the fourth or fifth month in, he took the cash, probably just to shut me up. But ended up buying me gifts—all stuff I didn't have much use for: an official NFL

football, a Browning gut-hook hunting knife, and a pair of German binoculars with night vision. Probably this all cost more than the rent, so I just stopped trying.

There's a pond between our houses that'll freeze a ring around the shoreline an inch or two down from the fringe when winters set in—by January, on real cold winters, all the way out to the center. Mackey stocked it with bull trout and huge flat-headed catfish that bob in clusters just under the murky surface like whiskered Chinese men chatting. If I go to sleep early enough on summer nights the trout breach wide-mouthed out of the dark water, chasing moths, mosquitoes and fireflies, and before I drift off I hear the slaps when they fall back in. I've got a small wooden boat I paddle across the pond to get to Mackey's place, don't know whose it was first. Neither does Mackey. He rigged it with brackets on either side for me where I can snap a folding aluminum-framed canopy to keep rain or snow off. He bought me oversized rubber waders to keep my dress shoes and slacks dry in the wetland. My fastest time is three minutes and seven seconds. A lot depends on the direction of the wind, the temperature, too. Warmer days suit me better. Soon, I'm sure, I'll crack the three-minute barrier. Mackey doesn't know it, but I've started doing push-ups in my room to increase my upper-body strength. It could probably be swum faster, but I'm afraid of the trout. You can walk around it, but that sends you far into the dry hedges at either side, where I've seen foxes before. If it's frozen I will walk across, always looking down to where the ice is thickest. The only time Mackey's ever been to my place was when he showed it to me four and a half years ago. Even then it was just quick; I never even signed a deposit agreement or anything like that. If he wanted to, Mackey could swim it in under a minute. He could hold his

breath, duck under, and swim the entire length of it without coming up for air. He's strong. He calls his snake The Big Guy.

Never have I seen Mackey work at a real job with a time clock or office or a boss. Five years ago he inherited everything his father owned, including the house in Colorado and an apartment complex in Detroit. Near the end of each month, all these checks begin piling into the mailbox. Allison's a bank teller. She takes care of all their finances now. She told me when she first moved in she found drawers stuffed with checks, many more than four years old. Just sitting there in their envelopes, unopened. I guess she works because she wants to. For now, I'm working at a jewelry store, just until something better comes along. Sometimes, as I'm leaving for work in the morning, I meet up with Allison in the driveway and she lets me ride with her in her convertible. If it's warm, she clicks a dashboard button and the cloth top hums down into a groove above the trunk. Wind blows her long black hair back and swirls it around her face. She wears dark sunglasses I can't see her eyes through. What Mackey does all day I'm not entirely sure. I asked him once and he said, "Not much. You know, just hang out. Watch some TV." When I'd forgotten some papers once, and came home on my lunch hour to pick them up, I heard weights clanging from his upstairs gym when I walked by the house. Also, he spends time playing with The Big Guy on the front lawn, cleaning the cage, that sort of thing. That's all he told me.

For newlyweds, they don't get along so great. There's lots of fighting, and Allison can get mean about things; she's mistrustful and suspicious. Some crystal nights when the air is thin she screams loud enough so I can hear her from my room, clearly.

She curses with more vigor than most men I know, and the browbeatings skip across the pond. Sometimes I hear glasses or dishes breaking, chairs overturning, doors slamming, always followed by her skillful barrage of cussing. Familiar pattern. The front door crashes shut. Next, the door to her Mercedes. Finally, tires squall from the gravel driveway and the engine whines out of sound. Then, without fail, within minutes, my phone rings. Mackey's soft, deep voice on the other end. "Allison's took off again." I tell him I'll be right over. "Thanks, Wicks." He doesn't say anything more, until I'm about to hang up. "Bring your tape measure, okay? I think The Big Guy's grown since last time." He's got his own tape measure, a toolbox full of them, but I tell him sure. "Hey, and bring a six-pack." Mackey's getting excited. His voice is like a child's on Christmas Eve.

The Big Guy truly is a beautiful animal. Four years ago I went to the pet store with Mackey on the back of his Harley-Davidson. A sign hung in the window reads *African Rock Pythons \$249.95*. "I want that one right there," Mackey says, stabbing the glass of the cage with his thick, powerful finger. "No, no, that one, the big guy. I want the big guy." Green and yellow birds in a nearby cage start squawking.

The clerk glares, first at me, then at Mackey. He wipes Mackey's fingerprint off the glass with a handkerchief from his back pocket then reaches into his smock and pulls out a ring of keys. There are four snakes in the cage, three coiled on the floor in a clump, and one, clearly the largest, up higher, stretching out across some branches, moving. Its

skin is light tan, with darker brown spots the color of rich soil, outlined in black, along its back. The tongue is flat, black and forked, flicking in and out rapidly.

The clerk opens the lock, reaches into the cage, clinches the snake behind the ear membranes, and pulls out Mackey's choice. He turns it onto its back and examines the belly closely as it loops its tail end under his armpit and over his shoulder. The snake is about four feet long and glistening like it's wet. It's almost as big around as my wrist—the upturned belly scales silver and bluish pearly. "The big guy," the clerk states like he's some kind of hotshot zoologist, "is a girl." Mackey looks at me and laughs, throwing back his head. Birds' cries again, and the raspy flutter of wing flaps as they jockey for perches. A few shoppers stop to gawk at Mackey. He turns back to the clerk, who shrinks away a little, looking up into Mackey's eyes.

Mackey peels off three hundreds from a roll. "We'll take her."

On the ride home, I'm terrified. The Big Guy's on my lap in a thick cardboard box the size of a large shoebox—like one that a pair of cowboy boots might come in. Through the air holes I can see her shadowy form twisted around in a tight spring. Around every turn, Mackey lays the cycle so low our knees nearly scrape the pavement. I feel The Big Guy's bulk slide and thunk against the sides of the box. I'm slanting, and frightened the lid, though it's tied down with some butchers twine, will somehow pop off or I'll lose my grip and drop her off the mountainside. Up here, some of the always-shady patches of roadside still have coal-colored snow berms on them. "Jesus Christ, Mackey," I yell through the hurricane rush of wind. "Take it easy."

But it's no use talking to him when he's like this. When he gets his mind dead set on being wild, nothing can stop him. He turns and looks at me, casually, as if he's not aware we're on a motorcycle doing sixty-five through sharp-winding roads. "Don't be such a pussy. This isn't nothing." He smiles at me. His teeth are large straight and white against his sunburned cheeks. "Just relax and enjoy the view." He winks, cranks his wrist on the throttle, and the bike lunges forward after the lifting front wheel. Slowly he turns his head back to the road. Through the hammering of 900CCs, I hear him laugh; his blond, shoulder-length hair whips my face. I squeeze around his waist tighter with my right arm. It's like hugging the trunk of a tree. With my left arm, I keep the lid clamped over The Big Guy, and press the box harder to my lap. The wind tears my eyes. All I want now is to arrive home in one piece.

I grab my tape measure from my dresser and a six-pack of Coors from the refrigerator. It's the only kind of beer we'll drink. We put the bottles—always bottles—in his freezer, wait until the top quarters of the beers get icy, and then chug them down as quickly as possible. Usually it takes me about three goes at it, but Mackey puts a whole beer down in one swig. Of course, he's got over ninety pounds on me. Then we run around the kitchen clutching at our foreheads, rubbing the cold pain out of them.

Tonight, he'll want to drink, I'm sure. He'll want to drink a lot. When Allison leaves, that's what he does. That's what we do. We sit out on his back deck and look out across the pond. The moon shines on the water and we search for the shapes of things in its reflections before they wobble into the depths. If his pole's handy, Mackey will cast

his line out, hook unbaited, reel it back in, and cast again, restless. As we drink, we try to figure out ways to keep him and Allison from fighting so much. Of course, not every fight can be Mackey's fault, it's never that simple, but I can't tell him this, can't convince him. He's got it embedded in his head that he's to blame, that he's got to make some drastic change. Somewhere, deep down, I think he really believes this. As a result, all of our conversations center around how we can improve Mackey—make him a better person, a better husband. Yet, from what I see, he continues to live his life in the same way, keeps doing the same thing.

I load the six-pack into the boat and double check to make sure I have the tape measure secured in the pocket of my windbreaker when I shove off into the water. The night is clear and not a half hour darkened, but the moon and stars are brightening. Bats not much bigger than butterflies weave zigzags above my head against the gray dimming. I row, trying to get into a good rhythm, facing my cottage. In its lone window, I see I've left the light above the kitchen stove on. From here it seems not much larger than a postage stamp, a cutout candle flame scissored square. With my next stroke, black forms of trees shift and reroot in front of the cottage window; the stove light doesn't come back. Behind me, when I turn to check my course, Mackey's house looms like a sheer cliff side, close and towering. A cooler wind blows from the east, ripples the water, and shakes the hood on my jacket. Tonight, he's not there to greet me from the deck. I think of him casting out the empty hook, reeling, pulling up nothing, casting again.

When The Big Guy was littler, she lived in one of Mackey's spare bedrooms upstairs in a seventy-five gallon fish tank. She ate rats he bought for her from a dirty, wild-looking kid—known only as Gill's Boy—who lived down the road and trapped them in his father's machinery shed. This kid would pedal over on his landfill bicycle with a fresh-caught rat swinging from the handlebars in a pillow sack. A few times Mackey let the kid feel his muscles or hang off his bicep, but Gill's Boy possessed a natural nervousness and was usually too scared to be touched. He could never look directly into our eyes, stared downward instead, his head like a mud-crusted tumbleweed. Gill's Boy would slip the five-dollar bill Mackey gave him into his overalls pocket and roll his hybrid contraption off again, mismatched balloon tires bobbling around the missing spokes as if he were amusing a crowd of circus-goers.

If I weren't already there, Mackey would call me before he fed her. "Come on over. It's feeding time." She'd never taken to dead food, though it's a safer method. At the pet store they told Mackey he could keep rats in the freezer and thaw them out for her, but she just nudged them, wiggled her tongue, and left them alone. For some reason, I enjoyed watching her eat. What I hated were the terrible high-pitched squeals the rats made when The Big Guy wrapped around them. To hear them was far worse than seeing them, more than I could take. It made me queasy, a little, but, really, mostly sad. They sounded sort of like human cries. I'd go downstairs and wait in the living room until the constriction part was over. When Mackey called down, I'd run back in time to watch her swallow her prey. He'd always be there when I returned from the living room, fascinated by the whole ordeal. He'd stare with his nose pressed on the glass, unable to

look away. I really like to watch her work the big lump down the length of her body, though. It's like jamming an apple into a tube sock, trying to push it down to the toes. She unhinges her jaws, stretching out the ligaments. First the head of the rat disappears, then the body, and finally the pink, hairless tail. She doesn't have to eat again for a whole month. That always amazes me. One rat a month. Mackey likes to keep her hungry.

One morning, Mackey notices The Big Guy is getting too big for her fish tank. He's had her for a little over a year now, and she's five and a half feet long, thickening. I'm sitting on the couch in the spare bedroom reading an issue of *Muscle Builder Illustrated* which Mackey has lying on a coffee table along with *Muscle and Fitness* and *Ironman*. They're the only things I've ever seen him read. He's always trying to find tips to improve his bench press or make his back wider. He's at the aquarium watching The Big Guy shed her skin against a rock in the corner behind her water dish. "Hey, Wicks. Does it look like The Big Guy's starting to outgrow her cage?"

"She looks a little cramped."

"Oh, man." He walks toward me. "Call the pet store and ask them what we should do."

"She probably just needs a new home."

"Call them anyway. See what they say."

I find the number in the phonebook and dial. I think it's the same clerk who helped us when Mackey bought her. I recognize his scientist's, know-all textbook tone of

arrogance. "Snakes and other herpetiles are not like fish," he states. "Fish will not outgrow or exceed the amount of oxygen available to them in their environment. A fish will stop growing when it nears its oxygen limit. It will adapt to the size of its tank. Snakes, on the other hand, especially rock pythons, will continue growing as if they were in their natural habitat, until they die. Pent up like that, a snake could eventually suffocate."

"Suffocate?"

"You shouldn't worry yet. Just give it more space."

I say thanks, hang up. Mackey looks at me. "What'd they tell you? Why'd you say suffocate?"

"It's alright. They say you need a bigger cage. That's all."

Nine hours later, at about seven o'clock, he's sitting on the carpet in the living room, drinking ice water from a quart Mason jar. Before him, he's got a cage made nearly the size of a walk-in closet. All morning long we'd made trips to the hardware store, the lumberyard, the nursery, the rockery, and the pet store. From his place, most everything's inconvenient to get to, so in each parking lot we loaded his truck bed with supplies and hoped we'd forgotten nothing. Back at home, I mismeasured and made a wrong cut on a plywood board. Taking off his tool belt without a word, Mackey set off again by himself while I sanded and stained and scrubbed rocks with diluted bleach and a wire brush in the garage.

But what a cage. It's a remarkable sight, big enough so that even Mackey can stand up straight in it. Three of the sides are smoothed maple and the front is a quarter-

inch thick Plexiglas door, with a locking latch and brass handle. The top of the cage is chicken wire so the heat lamp can shine in and provide The Big Guy some warmth on the upper platform where the manzanita limbs reach. On the floor level, there's a grassy plot of land and a sand pit with a bathing pool in the back, near a ceramic heater, bordered by smooth pebbles.

"There," he says with a grunt, sliding the finished product next to his thirty-five inch television along the living room wall. "That ought to do it." His shirt's off, and his tanned arms are swelled and slick with sweat. They're streaked with ropy veins, like roadmap markings, from sawing, and pounding so many nails. After taking the stairs up two at a time, he comes back down with The Big Guy draped around his neck. He pats her softly on the head. Then he puts her in her new home and we sit back together on the sofa as she stretches out to her full length at the bottom of the cage on the soft peat moss. "Right on, man," Mackey says. "Would you look at that?" He leans back further into the sofa. "Would you look at that?"

After I nose the boat onto the shore and tug it into the knee-high reeds, I walk through Mackey's back door like I always do—without knocking. I've got the beer in my right hand and the tape measure is still in the breast pocket of my windbreaker, zippered closed. His kitchen's in the front of the house on the lower level, just through a hallway off the living room, and when I enter it, Mackey's facing the counter by the sink. He's wearing a red tank top stretched tightly across his massive back. The muscles and grooves in his shoulders pump and twitch wildly as he works a cleaver on a butcher

block, chopping fruit—limes, peaches, and bananas. A bottle of rum and a bottle of tequila sit on the counter to his right. The tequila's open and next to it there's a shot glass filled over the white marker line. When I see the blender, plugged in by the toaster, I know he's making Horizontal Screammers.

We invented these drinks a little over two years ago. No matter how often he makes them, they turn out different every time. Actually, Mackey invented them. I just named them. We were at Slips, a little nightclub in Denver that had a lot of good jazz bands on the weekends. Where there's jazz, there's girls, so Mackey and I used to go there quite a bit. I see Allison with another girl, stooing at the bar, so I point her out to him. Sitting down, she doesn't seem tall, but her left leg, brown and smooth, hanging out from the slit of her short skirt, reaches the floor. Light from a beer sign catches its every flexing. Mackey tries to whistle in appreciation, but it's mostly air and spit. "Damn. She's gorgeous." And she is. Even now, she is. This girl, Allison, pivots on her stool, watches Mackey coming toward her.

Slips is about eighty miles west of Last Chance, and on the ride back home it starts hailing. Little pellets stinging my face, sticking to the pavement in a thin, chalk dust veneer of two am. We're on Mackey's bike and he's in one of his wild, careless moods again, evacuating the city neon like something pursued. More than slightly drunk we ride. Streetlights vanish where trees flare up; the road springs into a tighter coil, and Mackey's chanting like some kind of primitive Indian chief. "Woo, Woo, Yip Yip Yeeoww." Though he's not even wearing gloves he seems oblivious to the cold, chanting. And then he starts wailing, "Aaal-lis-sonn, Aaal-lis-sonn, Aaal-lis-sonn," over

and over again, as we zip through the night. He's got her phone number on a cocktail napkin. He doesn't feel the cold.

By the time we get home I'm completely sobered from the ride, and wet, and the snow's over an inch thick already on Mackey's front lawn as we pull into the garage. More than anything else, I'm ready for sleep. It's almost three. Mackey's still hyper, ricocheting around the kitchen like a bounced super ball. There's no way he can still be drunk, not after that ride; he just can't settle down. Walking over to the refrigerator, he hangs Allison's number on the door with a magnet. Then he fishes through a drawer and pulls out a pad of paper and pen, writes himself a note, tears it off, and hangs it next to the number. The note says *CALL HER*, underlined.

"Let's celebrate." He pulls bottles of booze from the cupboard. Next, he goes to the refrigerator again and stares for a minute at Allison's number before opening the door. With a bunch of fruit cradled in his arms, he backheels closed the refrigerator door and unloads the fruit onto the butcher block. Grabbing the cleaver, he cuts up a peach and throws it in the blender. He does the same thing to a banana and then peels a lime, cuts it down the middle, and throws half of it in with the peach and banana. Next he fills the blender almost half full with rum.

What can I do except let him go. He can't know what he's doing, but it seems like he's having such a good time, singing some wacky tune I think he makes up as he goes along, struggling to make the words rhyme. Finally he drops in two big scoops of strawberry ice cream and fills the rest of the blender with ice cubes. He turns the blender

on its highest setting. I listen to the crunch and whirr as the colors swirl and mix together. When he clicks off the blender he says, “Let’s do a shot first.”

He pours out shots of tequila, slides one to me. Together we tip them back. Then he fills two huge mugs with the rum and fruit and ice cream drink. It’s a pale, pink color. We sit at the kitchen table and finish the blenderful in about half an hour. Neither of us can believe how good it tastes.

When the blender’s empty, Mackey bolts upright out of his seat, tears off through the entryway and out the front door, like an unleashed dog. I get up to watch him through the kitchen window. He’s out in the slow-falling snow in shirtsleeves, jumping up and down under the sprawl-limbed cottonwood. All of a sudden he stops, topples straight backward onto his back as if felled. He flaps his arms, making the snow fly. When I open the window to call him in, I can hear him yelling up to the moon. Most of it’s nonsense whooping again, but through it all, I can hear her name. His voice booms against the house, echoing away. Horizontal Screamers are born.

I rattle the six-pack of Coors so the bottles clang together to get Mackey’s attention. When he turns around, I nearly drop the beer. He’s wearing a Broncos baseball cap spun around backward on his head—catcher’s style. Though he knew I was coming over, clearly I’ve caught him off-guard. Maybe he doesn’t care, but I can see he’s been crying. The whites of his eyes are bloodshot, sunken in dark cavities, and his nose is rubbed red, chafed and raw-looking underneath. But the rest of his face fades out into paleness like a sun-bleached Angus skull. With that ball cap and tank top, he looks like a giant, childish

boy—a boy with leukemia. “Hey.” His voice is strained, dry, and choked. It’s as if he’s talking from the other side of a thick wall. “How’s it going?” If I turn away to put the beer in the freezer, it’ll give me a moment to gather myself. So I do.

After fumbling around for a while—shuffling ice trays, shifting butcher-wrapped packages of meat from place to place, putting the beer inside—I turn back to Mackey.

“I’m doing okay. How about you?”

He places the cleaver on the counter and walks a few steps toward me. “Oh, I’m good.” He stands there for a minute in the middle of the kitchen, looking down at the floor as if he’s considering something to add to this. Finally he looks up at me. “Yeah, you know. I’m alright.” This all feels so different. He’s stepping carefully around Allison’s name. Something serious has happened, I think. All of his previously customary honesty, his willingness for disclosure, has been stripped away.

One long stride fills the gap between us, and he grabs me by the shoulders. “But you, my friend, you look like you need a Screamer. Huh?” He rumples my hair with his calloused palm, then crouches into a boxer’s pose and left-jabs me in the ribs, three quick phony rabbit punches. As I double over, giggling and wincing, my glasses fall from my face to the linoleum. The left lens pops out of the frame. You’d think he wrecked my car the way he goes on about it. “Jesus, Wicks. I’m sorry.” He kneels and picks up the glasses along with the lens, starts studying them. “I’ll pay for them,” he tells me. “Man, I’m sorry.” After handing me the glasses, he takes out his wallet, pulls the entire sheaf of bills out. “Here. Take this, and I’ll get you the rest tomorrow.” I see at least two fifties and quite a few twenties.

I push his hand away. "Don't worry about it. This happens all the time." I line up the lens and push it snapped back in place. "Look. They're fine." I shake the glasses by their arm to prove to him they're fixed, then put them back on. "See." He comes even closer to get a better look, about a foot from me now, squinting into my eyes to see if I'm lying. Through the finger smudge on the glass, his face clouds, clears, and clouds again.

Finally he says, "All right. But if they ever break again, I want to pay for them. Okay?"

"They didn't break. And they won't break. Jeez."

"Don't just say that." He grabs me by the shoulders again, gentler. "I mean it. Please. Let me do this." For the first time, I notice his words are thick and slightly slurred.

"Fine," I tell him, and he lets me go at last. Now, a drink sounds good; I'm shaken up a little because Mackey's never shown fear before. It's in the room with us, seeping through his pores like a disease. "How about those Screamers?"

He claps his hands together once with a loud smack. "You got it." He turns back to the blender on the counter, which is only half concocted, and begins chopping again with the muscles jumping in the tan shoulders. "You want a shot?" he says, without turning around. "You know, to get warmed up a little?" As he says this, he drains the shot that had been sitting on the counter the whole time.

"No thanks. I'll just have a beer or two. And maybe a Screamer. I've got to work tomorrow."

"Saturday?"

“Yeah, Cheryl’s out of town. I have to cover for her”

“That’s a bummer.” When he goes for the ice and the strawberry ice cream, I can see some color has returned to his face. That fear that lingered in the air disappears, and I wonder if I’m only imagining it. “If you’re hungry, there’s a roast and some potatoes in the dining room. It’s probably still a little warm.”

“Yeah, sure. I could eat.”

He grabs a plate from a cupboard over the sink and hands it to me. “The carving knife’s already on the platter.”

The long dining room table is set for two, with a big pork roast and a bottle of Pinot Noir in the middle. There’s mashed potatoes and green beans spread out over a white lace tablecloth in matching China dishes. Since Allison doesn’t cook, at least nothing this nice, I know Mackey has prepared this for some special occasion, but it’s not her birthday, or their anniversary, or Valentines Day, or any such day I can think of. The plates are bare, the silverware shiny on cloth napkins. Both crystal wine glasses are empty. Above the table, gravy is splattered all over the wall. A hole punched in the sheetrock about the size of shoe centers the dripping brown stain, head-level off the hardwood floor. A silver gravy boat lies upside down on the rug under the table, with chunks of white plaster clinging around its lip.

“Jesus, Mackey.” I’m shouting to be heard over the blender’s drone. “What happened in here?” The blender clicks off.

“What?”

“What the hell happened here?”

“Nothing happened. Allison freaked out a little, that’s all.”

“Freaked out at what?”

“Forget it. She’ll be fine. Just have some dinner.”

He sent me in here because he wanted me to see this. He didn’t have to. He wanted me to know. Still, I don’t think he’s ready to talk about it yet. Or he would. I put my plate on the table and walk back to the kitchen where Mackey stands pouring a Horizontal Screamer into a huge glass for me, all the way to the top. “Here.” He hands me the drink. “Let’s go into the living room and measure The Big Guy.” He doesn’t mention the fact that I haven’t taken food. Whether he can’t or won’t, he’s not looking at me. Instead, he focuses somewhere, on something, by my feet. I accept the drink and take a few swallows so it won’t spill over when I walk. Frothy liquid leaves a cold mustache under my nose. I follow Mackey to the living room. He drinks his straight from the blender.

Everywhere is dark in the living room, except for the corner by the entertainment center with the television. Here, The Big Guy’s cage is lit up like a museum display. Running my hand up the wall, I find the switch, quickly turn on the light. Mackey puts his drink down, nearly sloshing it onto the coffee table. He walks over to the cage, opens it, and grabs The Big Guy from under a rock shelter. “Here. Grab her head and stretch her out on the carpet.”

I unzip the pocket and pull out the tape measure, put it down on the floor. “I’m not going to grab her head. You grab her head. I’ll take her tail.”

He looks at me, laughs, and shakes his head. “You wimp.”

We extend her on the carpet until she's her longest and hold her there. Then, we start rolling out the tape down her body.

The Big Guy eats rabbits now. When she got to be about eight feet long, the rats stopped filling her up. So Mackey jogs down to Gill's farm shack to buy rabbits from him. At any given time, Gill's got about a hundred and fifty rabbits crawling in a mildewed clapboard hutch. You get a hundred yards from Gill's and you can smell it. I went once, the first time. We three stand out in the yard while a furtive Gill's Boy peeks out the shack at us from behind a bed-sheet curtain the same color as his face. We shake our heads when Gill offers us stew. He knows about Mackey's snake, what the rabbit is for. He says, anyway, "Please don't tell me what you're gonna do with this one, Mr. Mackey. I don't wanna know." Taking off his crushed porkpie, Gill leans and spits a perfect stream of tobacco juice at a bluebelly lizard. It skitters off. Again, working the chew to his other cheek, he lowers his head, spits, toes dirt over the small puddle he's made, raising dust, smiles at us, mouth wet and stained at the corners, brown flecks on his lips, puts his hat back on. His few remaining teeth are tiny, blunted tombstones, gone, or going, gray. "I really do love my rabbits. Each one." Gill takes the twenty-dollar bill from Mackey, folds it, stoops over, and squishes it down into his unlaced boondocker with the waxy, nailless nub of his half-thumb. Then he hands Mackey the twitching grain sack. "Please don't tell me."

Now, I don't even watch The Big Guy swallow her prey anymore. I can't. There's something about the sheer size of her, the sheer size of her food, which repulses

me. Only once, I saw her take her first rabbit, and that was the last. Mackey talked me into it. He swings open the cage door and upturns the grain sack. An albino cottontail tumbles out. It jerks its head, runs, stops, and runs again, but walls are everywhere. The Big Guy smells it. She slings herself drooping down across the tree limbs, plummeting right on top of the rabbit. She coils around. Each time the rabbit sucks in a little air to breathe, The Big Guy tightens a little more. Tufts of white hair poke from between the dark scales. Its long hind feet kick in spastic convulsions—thudding against the Plexiglas door. Through my faint reflection, its red eyes stare, unblinking, marked with wonder, horror, or disbelief. I hear a bone snap. The big pink and white ears flop limply around its head. The Big Guy releases her prey, slides around, almost in slow motion, to get in front of the crushed white form. She opens her mouth unnaturally wide, exposing the pink pit and black tongue flitting inside. The Big Guy closes her mouth around the rabbit's head, thrusts her own head forward in chomping gulps. I turn around, walk to the kitchen. I never watch her eat again.

“A hundred and thirteen inches,” Mackey says. “How many feet is that again?” We’re on his deck, looking out over the pond, listening to bullfrogs croaking. A few nightbirds call from the woods. It’s pretty warm. I’m trying to find my cabin through the darkness, but it’s no use. Fog drifts, like woodsmoke from a doused log, rise out of the water and obscure my view. Mackey always shuts off every light in his house so we can see the stars better. Tonight, it’s cloudy, getting balmy. It feels like I imagine the tropics would, or some other place I’ve never been.

“Nine feet five inches.”

Mackey and I are sitting back in wicker chaise lounges. We’re on our second pitcher of Horizontal Screammers. The Coors is long gone, and he’s been taking swigs from the bottle of tequila at his feet. Every time I try to talk about the problem, about the fight with Allison, about the gravy boat hurling, he changes the subject, starts talking about sports or working out. If I don’t slow down his drinking, he’ll get sick. And I’m not rowing back tonight, not in this fog, in this state. He’s getting fed up with my questioning, and I think maybe tomorrow would be a better time, but something tells me he wants to, needs to, talk about it now, but can’t bring himself to do it. Another half hour and he’ll be too far away. I haven’t had a fifth as much as him, but I can feel sleep overtaking me. A last stab: “You think Allison will want to go to Slips tomorrow night?” I ask him. “Silverhorn’s playing at nine”

That’s it. Mackey jumps out of his lounge and kicks it aside with his cowboy boot. He’s got the blender pitcher in his fist. In the cast shadow it looks like a club on the redwood planks behind him. “Goddammit, Wicks. You just don’t get it, do you?” I’m half sitting now, half lying. He’s enormous, monstrous above me, a dark outline against the faint moonshine, shouting down at me with a wrath I almost can’t comprehend. “Will you forget Allison? She’s gone, okay? She’s fucking gone.” After he throws the pitcher into the pond, he turns to leave me. His first boot heel hits the wood with the splash.

After a while, I get up, walk through the sliding glass door at the back of the house, slightly dizzy. I find Mackey in the living room, sitting on the sofa in the dark. A

tiny red glow from The Big Guy's heater thermostat pulses on and off intermittently as the temperature regulates. Mackey's shape blooms reddish, wanes to nothing, blooms. I sit down next to him. Slivers of moonlight leak through the slider's vertical blinds. Our eyes adjust. "Are you alright?"

He turns and faces me. His voice is barely above a whisper. "Yeah. I'm okay. I'm sorry I yelled at you, man. I just..." But he trails off, collapses back into the cushions. Then, for a long spell, he says nothing. I think he's fallen asleep; his eyes are pinched shut. Then, just as I'm about to get up and find a place to sleep, he says, "Allison's left me. She's left me." I reach for the table lamp. "No. Leave it off." He's looking down at his lap, at his hands folded there—the baseball cap still smashed on his head backward.

"Of course she's left you. She always leaves you. But she'll be back in the morning to cook us a terrible breakfast like she always does." He doesn't laugh, doesn't even smile. I put my hand on his knee, clasp it, its flat woodenness, and I take my hand off immediately. "She just needs to cool down that hot head of hers. You know that." Like a struck match, the heater light ticks into luminance, reflects in his tired eyes filling slowly with tears. "Jesus. Tell me what's wrong." Now I'm the one shouting. "Allison will be back. You'll see. Tomorrow morning she'll be breaking our egg yolks, burning our bacon, scraping our toast, pouring rancid coffee. In her ratty house robe. Her ugly slippers."

He turns his head and stares to his right where a painting of a clipper ship hangs crookedly on the wall—one of Allison's. He rubs his eyes roughly with his fist. With his

back turned, I barely hear him say, “She thinks I’m cheating on her. She thinks I’m fucking someone else.”

I get up off the couch so I can stand in front of him. “You’re drunk. If you were sober, this all wouldn’t mean shit to you. Allison says things, when she’s angry, that she doesn’t mean.” I turn him by the shoulders and force him to look at me. I shake him, try to rattle some sense into him, but he’s dead weight—heavy and immovable. “Believe me. When the morning comes, things will look different. You’ll see.”

He stands up and starts walking away from me again, slowly. He goes over to The Big Guy’s cage and picks her up from where she’s sleeping in the black grass, leaves her door open. He drapes her across his shoulders, walking past me in the almost dark. I follow him to the base of the stairs, which tunnel up to the ladybug nightlight at the landing. He climbs the steps. The stairwell ceiling begins cropping in increments his upper half from my view. He stops. Only his thickly muscled legs and the head and tail of The Big Guy dangling on either side of them remain. “I don’t think so,” he says. “This time she’s right.”

When I wake up on the sofa, the living room is already filled with light—sunshine slitting the blinds in neat, dust mote rows. Getting to my elbow, I squint and shake my head, try to gather a sense of coherence. But my head feels heavy and over-dense, as if soil’s been poured into it, packed down, and more poured on top. My neck got slept on wrong, and it’s stiff. Something tells me I’ve overslept, missed even the later weekend opening hour at work. I’m having trouble piecing together what happened the night before. The last

thing I remember is telling Mackey that Allison would be back to cook us breakfast. After that, nothing.

And then I smell her perfume—roses, other flowers, vanilla, something else unmistakable I can't quite pinpoint. Her scent is in the house, almost cloying, faintly mingled with the smell of roast and the damp, earthy odor coming from the open door of The Big Guy's cage. So I get up off the sofa. My throat is hot, aches when I swallow. I walk up the stairs to Mackey and Allison's bedroom. The door is shut. I press my ear against it and listen. I hear only heavy breathing, almost snoring, and I know it's Mackey—still sleeping. That's the only breath; I don't hear Allison. I knock lightly on the door. No one answers. I knock again, a little harder. Still nothing. After one final try, I turn the doorknob, push open the door, and peek in. Mackey's on his back, still in his jeans and boots, but he's taken his tank top and hat off. They lay down by his feet, crumpled in a tangled ball with the sheet and bedspread. The Big Guy's not with him.

"Wake up. Wake up." I shake him so hard his jaws clack together like a plastic toy. He sits up and stares at me with wide, confused eyes as if he's not sure who I might be. "Where's The Big Guy?" I ask him. He looks down at the bed to his right. Then at the alarm clock on the nightstand. "Where is she?"

"I don't know. She was right here all night."

"Has your door been closed?"

"Yeah. Check the closet. Sometimes she'll move in there." He looks a second time at the clock. "Christ. Is that right? Is it really eleven-thirty?"

She's not in the closet. I step back to the bed, check my watch. "Yeah, that's right, but listen. Listen to me. I think Allison's here."

"God. Where is she? What?"

"Here. Downstairs." I try to pull him up from the bed, but he's too big, too heavy. "Come on, come on. Let's go."

He gets out of bed and follows me down the stairs, shouting, "Allison? Allison? Are you home, Allison?" We're heading through the hallway, which leads to the kitchen, when Mackey stops. "Look." He points to the coat tree. "Her jacket's here." We move fast.

I turn the corner to the kitchen ahead of Mackey and pass through the doorway. I slip and fall on something wet. The Big Guy is on the linoleum floor on her back, the creamy, pearled belly—exposed and vulnerable—turned upward at the slowly spinning ceiling fan. She's lying in a puddle of dark red blood—almost black against the yellow linoleum. There are drops of her blood splattered all over the place. It's as if someone took a paintbrush dipped in red paint and started swinging it around in wild fury. And then did it again. I hear Mackey sucking in air behind me in hissing, constricted gasps. "Oh my God. Oh my God."

On the butcher block, the cleaver is sunk half an inch into the oak. Next to it, The Big Guy's head—with its polished stony eyes still open—rests in a little, shallow, crimson spill. A lustrous chunk of cut diamond.

Lake

True morning seemed forever in coming. Close-by, the encirclement of trees remained in blackness, nascent figments in this frail cast of flamelight that had yet failed to attain their brooding arrangement. Verdin had already been awake for an hour or more close to two when the first light finally seeped through the loose-woven branches at his back. Then like a crude charcoal sketching on a playhouse backdrop the cordon of trees before him smudged into blooming forms he began to halfway recognize until the light came up stronger and for the first time he saw in full luminance where he was, but he still did not have a concise plan, a plan fully realized, sure, and absolute. He squatted before the small fire, sipping bitter coffee from a handleless tin cup, shifting the hot metal from hand to hand. He didn't like coffee much, never in his life had, but the hits of whiskey went down easier this way. Last night's drizzle thickened the air and the day would be humid and heavy again. The forest smelled good, of Earth. Again Verdin switched the metal cup from one hand to the other, but it was already near empty and cool now so he

set it on the ground and reached for the bottle, unscrewed the cap and tilted the neck back steep in his fist, watching amber fluid gurgle in the reflecting glass like melted copper. The last swallow went down and he stood and pitched away the empty bottle. It struck the base of a young pine and rainwater shook from the needles with a hiss. A blue jay flapped out from the tangle of limbs and swooped close over his head, screeching. It fluttered upward to a taller pine across the clearing and bent the thin branch it landed on, jerking and angling its head as if in seizure and fixing its beady black slate eyes at him through the gray dawn. The bird turned and hopped into the denser knot of boughs near the trunk and though the branch it had abandoned quavered Verdin couldn't see the jay anymore, but from within its newfound shelter the intermittent screams kept coming. Verdin flicked the bottle cap with his thumb, took up the tin coffee cup, drank a bit and stretched. With a whip of his arm he slung the sludge and grounds into the fire, sucked sediment from between his front teeth, spat and kicked dirt over the flames. Across the crude campsite the girl—wrapped in a thick woolen horse blanket—slept.

He packed the cup in his rucksack with the few items they toted. Something had been wrong with the girl from birth. He'd been wandering with little sleep in and out of the hospital for days, loitering to see his child, only to be sent away by the blunt requests of a doctor becoming more and more fed up with his presence. When two nurses had finally brought the newborn girl out to show Verdin—who slept in the waiting room across two shoved-together chairs—he felt it must have been nighttime, but he couldn't know for certain because the TV wasn't on. The baby was wearing a pink knit cap. He could see immediately the closed-lipped smiles on the nurses, those expressions of pity

he sees now and the largeness of the baby's head sticking out of the blankets. She was four days old already. They let Verdin hold her and rock her for a while, never straying from sight, while her mother recuperated down a corridor behind the walls.

Her eyes didn't quite line up the correct way. Her legs bowed out like they were scared of each other, keeping their distance as if to avoid a confrontation, but as the years passed they rapidly grew thick and well-muscled and now if Verdin strapped a bundle onto her broad back she never complained and she could just about haul a load equal her own weight for pretty fair distances, farther than most grown men Verdin knew could, without needing to rest. She'd become tired last night, however, just at dark and after barely straddling her way over a lightning-felled tree that cut across their path she started indicating to Verdin, with simian gestures and odd husky yelps, that her feet were sore. As she sat on the scorched timber bole she let the bottom of her pack rest on it to uphold some of its weight and Verdin shook his head. They had come far, with little rest and Verdin was weak, nearly exhausted, but he'd wanted to press onward, felt they had to. She couldn't. So they were forced to stop two miles early, only two miles from where Verdin wanted to be. She could talk a bit, but didn't always choose to. She was nine. She should have started at a school by now, but no one had sent her yet. Her name was Sarvah.

Lately, Sarvah's mother had kept her at home with the shutters drawn and the heat turned off by the gas company, shut off from the outside world in a dreary basement room that'd get cold come winter. She claimed Verdin wasn't the daddy, claimed she had proof. Blood proof. And if Verdin wanted to see the papers he could just come on

up and see them and get his balls blown off in the process of doing so. You can bank on it she ain't yours, she said. But this claim was only recent, some new development or a newly concocted piece of trickery he'd discovered from an out-of-town juke-joint phonebooth. She knew the cops wanted Verdin for armed robbery, maybe something more, and her evil joke now was that she had him handcuffed even before the police did. She said it like PO-lease and Verdin felt this was surely an indication of something sinister she'd just that second mixed in with her original scheme that Sarvah wasn't his, but why he felt this way he couldn't precisely say and her voice sounded like a poorly tape-recorded rendering through the phone line or someone imitating her and not getting it quite right inside the glass cube that let the fiddle notes and imbecilic laughter from the bar float in with it. Eddie Funt's stake-truck was parked crooked in the driveway when Verdin walked up the steps of their house to test the truthfulness of her ball-shooting threat. Something passed blurred in front of the ajar speakeasy door and the front door swung inward and split open from the jamb before he even got to it and the blunt barrel of his own sawed-off 12-gauge nosed out the crack at the header aiming skyward and slid down the dark seam of the non-light from inside into the colossally open daylight until it rested eye level with Verdin who'd frozen in mid-stride and back-tilted—left foot on the porch, right foot on the last step—with all his once bold resolve dissolving in an instant. It wasn't Eddie Funt from behind the door who said, "Get the fuck out of here, asshole;" and Verdin did. Sarvah's mother had always worked that way. She had a no-nonsense approach to dealing with life's obstacles (even obstacles of her own creation), a stoic hardheaded nature that she passed along to Sarvah. He knew by now the ruthlessness

Sarvah's mother was capable of, had seen, also felt, plenty of it firsthand, but this shotgun-brandishing murder threat put a dreadfully more unhumorous perspective on things entirely. Verdin also knew—as the sun, behind a curtain of clouds, dropped off the sky and he stooped to lift the heavy footsore girl onto his shoulders and began carrying her into the dense cropping of pines toward the flatter glade—that Sarvah's mother, after bringing down the oatmeal breakfast to the basement, had discovered her daughter missing and that by now she'd likely smashed some sheetrock with the baseball bat, gathered Eddie Funt and maybe even a few policemen she was friends with and set off after him into the mountains along that secret unmarked ascent she could distinguish and navigate nearly as well as Verdin. This much he knew.

They'd found this small hollow and set up for the night. When Verdin had gathered wood and made a fire he had taken off Sarvah's flap-soled shoes and wet socks. The surrounding timber was thick and kept the warmth and light and crackle of the fire in the clearing. Her twisted red feet were blistered and raw and wrinkled in the pale glow of curling flames and flaps of white skin hung from the heels and sprouted from the tops of her toes and only the arches of her feet were without blight. The girl saw them and turned her head away, looking off into the darkness. He spread the shoes and socks to dry before the fire and after opening a can of beans and setting it on the wire grill he tended to Sarvah's feet. He'd packed in haste and didn't have much for first aid, but he broke with his thumbnail the paper seal on the bottleneck, wetted his kerchief with a few splashes of whiskey and cleansed debris from her wounds as the girl lay perfectly still

and silent across his lap, still looking off into the black woods beyond. Verdin made a primitive salve out of mud and rubbed it on her feet. Reaching into his gear he found the oven mitt and lifted the beans from the grill and stirred them with a wooden spoon worn smooth like brown bone, took a few mouthfuls for himself and handed the can to the girl. “Careful. It’s hot.”

Sarvah slid her hand into the mitt too big for her and took the charred can; the blackened label had unraveled some, showing smudged silver underneath. Her voice croaked deeply from that large head. “Hot.”

He gave her a piece of hard black bread and she shoved it down into the can to sop the gravy. She ate slowly, with meticulous intensity. “Done,” she said and he took the can from her. Thick brown juice dribbled off her chin and a bean clung to the tip of her nose like a bug. Verdin plucked cobweb from her hair and wiped her face, both cheeks, licking his fingers clean each time and wiping gently again. Sarvah peered into the flames, her face flushed with light, but Verdin read nothing in the orange bovine face. Later, she wanted water.

He had to pry the canteen away from her or she would have drunk it all. “You got to go to sleep now,” he said.

Sarvah rose from her sitting position, head barely past his waist, looked at him with those flat offset eyes and then gazed blankly around the campsite. She cocked her head. He knew what she was looking for and told her they wouldn’t pitch the tent tonight. “If we’d a made it to the lake, then you could a slept in a tent.” Sarvah bit down on her lower lip and scrunched up her face, pretending she didn’t know what Verdin was

talking about. “Uh, uh,” he said. “Don’t give me that. You’re the one who wanted to stop. Not me.” She shrugged those wide shoulders and Verdin wrapped her in the coarse blanket. “Git,” he told her. She hobbled from the light to find a darker spot, with leaves and dead grasses and soggy brown pine needles sticking to the bottoms of her mudded feet going more gigantic with each excavating step. She was already on the ground kicking beneath the covers by the time Verdin turned for the coffeepot and when he’d filled it halfway with the rest of the canteen water and brought it back to place it on the fire the square-like shadow she formed under the quilt didn’t move anymore.

She said quietly, “Sleep.”

When the cookware and his own blanket had been stowed and readied for the rest of the hike he went to wake Sarvah. The soft forest bedding flexed under his boots. The twigs bent, but didn’t snap. Everything smelled green and young and ripe and musty. It wouldn’t rain today though. Verdin knew weather. Low-hanging clouds would smudge the sky all day, but they’d hold the rain until nightfall and by then it wouldn’t matter. They’d be done. One way or another it would all be over.

He stood over the girl. She had completely covered herself with the horse blanket that had dampened during the night and she seemed part of the earth itself, born swelling up from the ground as if formed long ago when the earth’s plates groaned and shifted and the glaciers carved their paths and she rose like a hillock from this little wild bed she’d made last night. The miniature beads of moisture on the fabric flickered with the fire with each rise and fall of her breathing. After he’d thrown a rock into the tree the jay

flew off, leaving only silence behind and Verdin almost hated to ruin it by rousing her; but last night's delay weighed heavily upon him. They had to move. He'd slept fitfully and drunk too much and as he looked down at Sarvah the bones and muscles in his legs felt old and stiff. He was weary. He turned, spat and cursed all at once. They should have already been out on the lake by this hour. Their tent would have been pitched in the right campsite and he might have slept better, might not have drained a whole bottle. Clear your head, he told himself. As hard as he tried Verdin couldn't determine yet what he meant to do, what the endpoint in this slipshod agenda might be. He trusted, though, that in time, when it mattered, it would come. Even the previous evening, after he'd crowbarred open the basement window and shook Sarvah awake from her narrow pallet bed on the cement floor, he hadn't constructed a blueprint, a line of points all interconnected to form a whole. Just get her out of here, he'd thought. He whispered to Sarvah they were going to the lake and that was all she needed to hear. Quickly she woke alert and rose from the thin ticking and shed her blanket. Sarvah seemed to know what to do even if Verdin hadn't yet. He could hear banjo music on the stereo and Eddie Funt's low moans from the upstairs bedroom—slow deep gruntings—then he heard her familiar squealings, rapid and successive and he contemplated killing both of them as they fucked, two swift passes of the blade. Sarvah braced herself, leaning against the dead dusty furnace with one steady arm and lifted those warped muscular legs one at a time to receive the pant legs as Verdin dressed her hurriedly in the half-dark dankness with any scrap clothing he could pick up from the floor. He hung her out the basement window by her wrists, let go and heard her muted gasp when she landed. She didn't

even bother to look up the foundation wall at him as he stuck his head through the window. As he watched her waddle quickly ahead of her shadow beneath the streetlight along the slick black pavement, she slowly became the plan. By the time he rounded the corner and reached his car she was already in the front seat, rolling down the window, her stunted legs jutting straight off the vinyl edge in a wishbone hook. The late summer mist blew into the car and settled on her arm. Verdin got in and started the engine. “Lake,” she said; and he gunned it.

He toed what he considered to be Sarvah’s backside, once, gently and then, when she failed to stir, again, harder. She poked her head out from under the blanket and squinted up. He must have looked awful, ugly and mean, but her expressionless eyes merely stared past him at the strands of smoke lifting from the little hill of dirt that covered the fire and drifted strings of haze across the morning air. She sat up, knuckled her eyes and scratched furiously in her messed hair. Verdin thumbbed drool from the corners of her mouth and wiped on his pant leg. “Come on,” he said, “we got to get going.” Sarvah would make poor time on her ruined feet.

The socks hadn’t dried completely, but after picking most of the brush from her hardened mud casts Verdin slipped them over her feet. He wound silver duct tape around her shoes to keep the soles from further pulling away and laced them as Sarvah watched. She stood and he looked for a grimace, but there wasn’t one. Hopefully the mud would protect the sores and keep that flayed skin from rubbing too much. He doubted it. A worst-case scenario was exactly that and nothing more, because he knew he wouldn’t be

able to carry her today as he'd done so many times before. Some solidity in his mind and body had spun away and left him fending the shakes. Everything taxed his nerves, sapped his body, as he strove to keep his actions true. He should have pushed Sarvah harder last night so this would have all been avoided. They would have been on the water right now, rocking on the current in his small wooden boat. He might have had a more efficient plan devised or some passable likeness of one. He might have known what to do. In his drink-muddled state he calculated poorly, but figured his pursuers—if they were able to continue hiking through the night with minimal rests and if Sarvah's mother hadn't often lost his trail—would only be five, maybe six hours behind them.

"It's just two more miles," he'd told Sarvah, "until we're at the lake," but if this was encouragement to her she seemed not to need it or recognize it as such, for she said nothing; her expression never changed though she appeared eager and vigilant. Verdin checked the time. His watch dial was shattered, the hands frozen bent and askew at an hour long past or an increment of time non-existent. He remembered dragging his body over the basement sill and hearing the dim pop and the crunch of the glass crystal under his belly as he shimmied through the window. *One-thirty?*

Sarvah shifted her weight from foot to foot as if she were nervous, but Verdin guessed the crusty feet felt funny to her and she simply needed to test her balance. He guessed wrongly. She looked at Verdin. "Pee?" she said.

"Well go, goddammit."

She limped off a few paces, dropped her trousers, squatted and pissed. When she came back he had the smaller pack waiting for her and she held up her arms while he

worked the load onto her shoulders and cinched the straps snug to the clank of tent spikes inside. She opened her mouth wide and pointed a grimy finger at it.

“Jesus Christ. If you want breakfast you got to get up in time.” He turned to his backpack on the ground, unzipped it and reached inside. He pulled out a yellow paper sack of jellybeans. “Here.” He tossed the bag and she caught it, undid the string tie and put a handful of the candies into her mouth, chewing noisily. Verdin shouldered his own pack, then picked up the two fishing rods from the dewy scrub grass.

The lakeside never had worms, so earlier that morning, while it was not yet light, he had taken the flashlight and gone off to the more thickly wooded outskirts while Sarvah slept. He’d filled the baked bean can a quarter full with moist rich soil and rolled logs over. The crawlers were pink and fat and lively here and he found several salamanders with sleek red bellies and tiny bulging eyes atop their heads, sleeping in shallow murky puddles under stones. He dropped them into the can and topped it with more cool soil and brought the can back to the campsite where sleeping Sarvah hadn’t moved and knelt again, threw another clutch of twigs onto the fire and drank whiskey some more while the coffee bubbled inside the pot and rattled the lid. He feared the bait can would tumble and spill in the packs so he kept it out. When he told Sarvah what was inside the can she put the bag of jellybeans in her jacket pocket and held out her hands. She loved snakes and lizards and anything that wiggled and loved to bait hooks and threw out her line better than most men could. She insisted on carrying the can. Verdin let her. He told her to be careful with it though knew he didn’t have to. He prodded her forward

with a nudge from the poles, stepped in front of her and led the way and she fell in behind as they trudged up into the timbered mountainside.

“Deer,” she said and when Verdin looked up he saw the white upturned tail bounding away.

The route was arduous, but they maintained a better pace than he could have ever anticipated and each time he looked back to Sarvah she—even on the steepest pitches and rockiest terrain—had that can held level before her and the sureness of her footing astounded him. No dust lifted underfoot, for the earth here was tamped with moisture. Several times he slipped and fell; the rods clattered from his grip. Sarvah stopped, waited for him to right himself and adjust his shifted pack and when he knocked the clumps of mud from his knees and pushed forward again she filed in behind him as if nothing had happened. Frequently his boot treads sent jagged fist-sized stones plummeting down the slope. She dodged some, but often Verdin could hear the stones strike her shins or ankles with quick hollow knocks. Her eyes seemed never to leave that can. Verdin never could tell how much or even what she knew behind that broad forehead, those unrevealing eyes. Her mother said once that since Sarvah couldn’t read or write or string more than a word or two together she didn’t know much at all except the most basic needs of the body like thirst, hunger or tiredness and that the higher developed emotions like fear or sadness or love didn’t afflict her. At times, when her smile almost came, when her eyes flickered brightly at a sunset, Verdin felt this was nonsense.

The duct tape must have worn through on both of her shoes and he heard the soles slapping each slick rock again and again on the downward stroke, pacing their climb with irregular beats. Sarvah never slowed and seem to pay it all no heed. He realized she knew where they were going in the same way her mother must have known, could even find the secluded lake without assistance if necessary. This was their place, or had been once. They'd fished the lake together, the three of them, for seven years. Like the force the moon has on the ocean's waters, the lake pulled him to it and Sarvah's mother knew this. Where else would he take her? Where else would Sarvah want to be? The nearer they drew to their destination, the quicker their gaits became. Sarvah never stepped ahead, but followed closely, almost as if she were harnessed to him. She held that baked bean can of worms and dirt and salamanders as if it were a golden chalice and if she felt pain at all in her tortured feet she never let him know. When they crested the final peak and paused to catch their breaths in the swirling warm wind on the ridgeline and looked down at the small desolate expanse of spangled pure blue water streaked with light and sunk into that vast green valley like a huge posthole punched into the planet, the first drops of rain began to fall and Sarvah, looking up at Verdin with those unmatched opaque eyes, blinked away the drops that fell upon her face and spoke again the word she hadn't uttered once since two nights ago in his car; "Lake," she said, as if to let Verdin know exactly what it was he looked at.

With a wordless throaty cry that echoed softly through the basin Sarvah burst past Verdin and beat him down the hill into the verdant cone of land that held the lake. By the time he got halfway down from the narrow plateau she had her shoes and socks off, had

rolled up her trousers and was wading past her knees in the water. Her backpack on the ground looked like a boulder that had toppled from the hilltops along with her and lodged at the shoreline. She'd balanced the baked bean bait can on a flat rock. From this distance Verdin cautioned her, because the lakeshore pitched downward almost immediately and in two steps out the water would cover a grown man's head. Sarvah had never swum, perhaps she couldn't, though she did not fear open water. A little cloud of muddy water and floating grasses eddied about her thighs as the caking on her feet disintegrated and she stood slanted toward Verdin to compensate for the severe grade. A lone osprey spiraled above the lake's dark circularity, its wings motionless and silent, banking in the sky's bleak currents. The lake itself was small and funnel-shaped, deep and narrowed in the depths at its center point. A few meager drops of rain reflected through the dull air and dotted the lake's veneer in tiny rings that stretched, held shape and then became unmade again. Sarvah reached down into the lake and lifted some water out of it and held it in the cup of her palm. When she spread her fingers apart the water sifted through like grains of light.

Verdin went up into the tangled copse where he hid his skiff. He had little left, either physically or mentally, and went about his tasks mechanically. An onlooker might be soundly fooled, but all Verdin did, he did ungoverned. Everything about him felt chafed and exposed, yet somehow numbed and he wished he'd saved some of the whiskey to help him find his head again. Time kept rolling out in front of him like a gigantic unraveling spool of thread over the other side of the rounded earth and though he chased it, he couldn't catch it and behind him, when he looked backward, came that same

spool again, barreling over the horizon, rolling at him, empty now, trying to mow him down, trying to squash him. He pulled off the pile of hemlock limbs that covered the skiff. The bark and dried needles pricked and burned his palms that were already raw and bloodied from the spills he'd taken on the hike; the limbs were heavy and wet and he heaved them aside and dragged the nylon tarp from the overturned skiff. All this camouflage seemed now a precaution working against him, sapping the allotted ticks of the clock; he'd never seen another soul at this lake except when he brought Sarvah and her mother. No guidebook had ever found it. Verdin turned the skiff upright, loaded in his backpack, the fishing poles, the oars and the bell-shaped anchor and dragged it by the stem post out of the copse and down to the lake. Rocks ground underneath the shallow wooden hull and the vibrations came up through the wood; the palms of his hands and all along his arms tingled.

Getting the boat up to the lake had taken Verdin five days and most of a fifth night. He was in better shape then, but it nearly killed him. He'd mounted rusty metal casters, too small for the task, on pilfered railroad ties, screwed down a sheet of plywood and strapped the skiff onto the shoddy conveyance. He'd been in the midst of a huge fight with Sarvah's mother and took the skiff from their driveway and drove it off on the roof of his car. Sarvah was just a small bundle of white cotton, writhing and wailing, a wrinkled red-faced contortion on a leopard-print beanbag chair in the corner of the kitchen. With a quarterback's athleticism Verdin marveled at, Sarvah's mother had launched a half-full bottle of Pabst and it thudded on the skiff bottom, rolled forward and staggered its way across and down the windshield as he sped away and pulled out the

wiper knob. She couldn't follow him then because she didn't yet know the lake's whereabouts. Not yet. Verdin barely did. He pushed and tugged and leaned his shoulder into the skiff and sometimes had to turn it on its side for the narrower passages and the new finish turned old fast. Many times the straps snagged on brambles, slackened and unknotted. Again and again the skiff rotated with a fierce groan on the plywood until it skidded off the platform and Verdin had to remount the whole thing and he felt like an idiot performing an idiot's task and began to ask himself, on that fifth night when he was hungry and thirsty and cold with sweat and covered more with grime than not, what the hell he was doing. What the hell was he doing? Only later after they'd made up and he took her back or she him, did he show Sarvah's mother the lake and though they'd had some good times together—chasing butterflies and grasshoppers with Sarvah and a mayonnaise jar, or swimming naked together, waving to their little girl on the lake shore who pointed, but never waved back, or catching fish, many not yet suspicious of man-made tricks, or making love on sleeping bags together greased with bug gunk and skin slick and slippery under the hanging Coleman lantern in the tent on hot summer evenings while the crickets deafened the quietude—he now regretted doing so.

Sarvah had come on land to search the shore for clamshells and pretty lake stones. When she saw Verdin lugging the boat she picked up the bait can and waited. Her feet looked horrible, like little dead animals drained of blood and turned inside out. Verdin pushed the skiff's bow into the lake, picked up Sarvah's backpack and shoes and socks and threw them in. Sarvah climbed in and sat on the lid of the live well that doubled as a seat at the

stern. The seam of her jacket pocket had torn and Verdin could see the yellow bag of jellybeans. The petty rain had stopped. The sky and sun were all one forceless color that did not cast shadows on the slate surface as Verdin pushed the boat into the water and stepped in the craft and broke the flatness of the lake. He sat on the center brace board seat and slotted the oars through the tholepins. They faced one another, but Sarvah bent that broad head and looked over the side and dragged her fingers along the surface of the water and said nothing. He was tired, but he rowed well and though the handles had warped, the oar blades stayed true and the keel cut smoothly and made a knife line that feathered out on the water under the skiff. Verdin felt comfortable as he arched into his pulls. He had made the boat himself, cut, planed and sanded the cedar planks himself, hammered and sunk each rosined nail, caulked every seam with roofing cement and brushed on all five coats of marine paint. Water and lake, these were elements of solace that he could grasp and make sense of and his past addled ways of ill-conceived goals that came to fruition had all culminated at this exact point, this exact time, this precise element and he realized that he could make all the wrongs he'd ever committed right for the first time. Everything is this, he thought.

He rummaged through his pack, found a slice of buttered white bread, took off the wax paper, and handed the crushed food to Sarvah. She had already taken up the shorter rod and had it rested against her leg so she could pull the line up through the tip guide and rig the hook with a hangman's knot. Five loops in the monofilament nylon executed and tied off with a quick, nearly alarming dexterity. After eating the bread in three bites, she dug in the bait can with pudgy fingers, found a salamander with flecks of soil

clinging, pulled it out by the tail and pinched its head between her thumb and middle finger while she punctured the fishhook through the polished abdomen. It writhed and twisted and Sarvah's face was set and determined and her tongue, stained all varicolored from the jellybeans, pushed out through her thick purplish lips as she concentrated and prepared herself to cast. Two blackish specks of salamander blood dotted her cheek. She stood firmly within the rocking of the vessel and Verdin told her to wait until they found the center of the small lake and dropped the anchor. She sat. She watched the salamander bobbing and folding into itself on the hook as it dangled from the pole. When he found the lake's center Verdin tied off the anchor rope through the eyebolt screwed into the skiff's sideboard. He lowered the anchor and watched the coil of rope at his feet snake over the gunwale into the black depths. Sarvah had cast her line already. She'd set the drag and just stared at the nearly invisible silver thread slanted across the tiny wakes the anchor started. They were tethered to the deepest regions and everything surrounding them was calm and noiseless and the land rose up green and close, with streaks of red and golden rocks pressed into the hills. Sarvah waited for the strike, the whiz and hum of line running from the reel and then the snatch and the dazzling arc of the fiberglass. Verdin had never seen such patience in anyone when bites didn't come, but for Sarvah these times were rare, of short duration. The gray morning passed slowly into a grayer afternoon. Verdin baited his hook with a plump worm, cast and listened for sounds, but the forest, the lake, made none. After a while he laid the pole at his side. Once, a large fish jumped clear of the lake and arched sideways in midair above its own

dim reflection, spraying a fan of water from its silver tail. Sarvah pointed at the expanding oval dimple on the lake's surface and looked at Verdin.

"There's your fish," he said.

She said, "Fish." She turned back to the lake.

A bird called from somewhere far off. Another whistled back; there was a dry flutter of wing beats and then all was quiet once more. Verdin closed his eyes; Sarvah fished. They both waited.

Suddenly the listing boat woke him. Sarvah yanked back on the pole and reeled in her line. Her legs, squat and contorted, planted and readjusted with the skiff's wobbling and she was stable, always upright, like a buoy. She made no noise and kept pulling back the pole wedged under her armpit and spun the reel to take in the catch. The rod arced like a bow and the taut harp string, with sparkling beads of water quivering on it, looked ready to snap, but Sarvah knew when to let the fish run and when to pull in the slack. Verdin watched. Everything he taught her, she did well. She did some things even better, things you couldn't teach. Ten yards from the boat the fish surfaced belly-upward amid its own fatigue. With a listless tail-kick it flopped and righted and made one last dash downward for the swaying reeds of the lake's undermost realm. But it was Sarvah's. She bent, reached over the side of the skiff, wrapped the line twice around her wrist, and lifted out from the water a glimmering largemouth bass. It was a good-sized fish, but not the one that jumped. She rested it in her lap while she inserted her thumb into the wide-opened skeletal mouth, working the hook out of the almost transparent skin under the lip. She

held it up for Verdin to see and he said it was a nice two-pounder and the dripping silver-yellow scales looked like wet armor inside her pink, mottled hands and her bitten black-tipped nails curled around it. The skiff still swayed and Sarvah leaned carefully over the side and lowered the fish into the lake. Its tail fin caught the dim light and shone under the water's surface and when Sarvah opened her hands it kicked up a splash, became ghostly faint in the upper depths for an instant and then was gone; and then the voices came.

Sarvah heard them, too; she cocked her head. It was all indistinct and senseless, a chattering tribal and distant, but minutely acquiring the shape of loudness and clarity as it crept hidden behind the hill and gained closeness and purpose; there wasn't anger in these voices because they hadn't banded yet, remained divided and sounded more like a faint moving collection of overheard voices spilling together to be rejected and banished, leaving each other partials; nor was there urgency yet in these voices, for the breadth of mountain space, though closing, kept all these things absent and so, undiscovered by Verdin; but they would arrive.

Sarvah simply stared at some empty waiting space on the ridgeline past Verdin's shoulder; those mismatched eyes not sullen, not seeing anything yet. He drew the anchor up from the water and lugged it dripping onto the skiff bottom where it struck the planks with a hollow wooden thud. He undid the knot at the eyebolt. To shorten the rope, he tied a sheepshank, halving its length, and watched the lake water squeeze out from the twined strands as he pulled the cord firm. He opened his arms to her. The rope hung from his hand. "Come here," Verdin said. "You should come here." She walked to him,

one step, splay-legged, tilting and righting with the skiff's sway. He wrapped the anchor rope twice around her waist, unbuckled the plastic belt that he'd put on just two nights ago and double half-hitched the loose end of the saturated rope underneath it. He re-buckled the belt and bent to lift the anchor, studying its heft. Sarvah seemed not to inspect the slope of hill shielding the voices, but rather scrutinized some white point of infinity far beyond it, some mysterious brink of threshold behind a gap in the sodden cloud formation. Her eyes caught the wan sunlight, held the glow of the falling day. The voices came.

The posse hatched from the tuft of foliage on the hillcrest, emerging haggard and scowling and filthy and dispersed. Sarvah's mother stood in front, pointing down at Verdin and the child floating silently on the lake, her hair, entangled with twigs and bark and plastered leaves, shot out from her head as if electrified. She shouted down threats, imprecations that Verdin failed to understand and kept pointing so the others would sight her line, but surely they'd all spotted them so close and there were four in all—two cops sweating in brown uniforms and baseball caps that veiled their features in half-hooks of shadow and Eddie Funt hunched over, nearly doubled; and he crutched himself with his hunting rifle to catch his breath, leaning onto it as if crippled from war. Then they seemed to reform all at once, joining into one great awful shape that crashed down the mossy hillside.

Verdin turned to Sarvah and she peered up into his eyes. She was bundled in the rope. Verdin held the anchor and it was cold and it was heavy. Her cheeks and that broad pale forehead were slashed with red crisscrossing welts from when the brambles

had sprung back behind him. Her kitchen-sink-cut bangs rose up crooked and jagged above the lower-set eyebrow and her hair was colorless or better the color of the quills in hawk feathers and she looked like a beautiful old sick man. The approaching shouts had transformed into a solitary concentrated wail of anguish at the shore bank and with that glassy ancient gaze Sarvah looked toward her mother and then into the infinite open space above the farthest mountains and then back at Verdin. She lowered that pale vast head again and looked into the lake's black waters. She looked back to Verdin for the last time. She said softly, "Lake."

With his scrawled callused palm pressing onto Sarvah's forehead Verdin pushed. She toppled backward, soundless and collapsed upside down over the skiff's sideboard, reeling headfirst into the smooth lake, with the jellybeans spilling out from the torn pocket and raining like vibrant multi-colored hailstones onto the cedar planking. The mirrored plain hardly rippled with Sarvah's falling; the small splash settled on the water. She floated head-down at first, then came almost upright as she kicked her legs and pumped her arms, pulling herself through the water. Then she stopped. She began to tilt backward again, falling away. Her hair hovered around her spectral face in slow-motion billows, waving like sea plants. A string of pearled bubbles leaked from the corner of her closed mouth, passed over her white face and rose to the surface. Sarvah's eyes were open, staring at the ashen sky. She kicked again. Verdin tossed the anchor over with her. The excess slack of rope came alive and slithered like a live wire up and over the tholepins. The white soles of her upturned feet looked like the creamy bellies of two fish bobbing within the current. The rope holding her grew taut, whiplashed her body and

took her down. The two pale forms of her feet wavered and shone dimly, then sunk into greenness, then into blueness, then into blackness and were gone.

Verdin turned in the skiff. A slight breeze came and pushed it back toward shore. One of the policemen removed his khaki ballcap and tossed it aside, dove into the lake—fully clothed—and was swimming out. Verdin raised his hands and spread his arms up to that great gray sky. The clouds were hanging low and heavy and would break soon and pelt the land and he felt as if he could almost reach high enough to touch them. The forest trees stood frozen in the windless dusk. The lake water spread out like a sheet of smoky glass under Verdin's feet. Even the armed and ragged hunters struck poses, unmoving and voiceless on the looming shoreline. The swimming policeman treaded water; his feeble wakes—any noise he brought with him—hadn't yet reached the skiff.

Then the policeman on shore yelled something. Eddie Funt raised his hunting rifle and aimed. The woman, too, leveled her own rifle and Verdin saw where it pointed. The silver barrel caught the sparse light and a glare of streaks ran down its length. Verdin looked up to the sky and the fragrant green hills were close all around him. Somewhere, off among the lush knolls, the deer will bed down soon; the osprey will nest again and the great horned owls and stealthy night cats will begin to rouse and search for prey. Daylight faded. When night comes, the fish, the lake, will sleep. Everything smelled and felt good. This is the world, Verdin thought, and the shots that rang out through the valley sounded like a few hands clapping very slowly and very far away.

Bad Matter Worse

(It happened like this, but different.):

Normally I don't pick up hitchhikers. There are far too many sick motherfuckers out there just lurking, waiting to pounce on the innocent, the unsuspecting do-gooder. This may be a reverse opinion, but it's not the passenger, it's the driver who's placed in jeopardy. It's too risky. I mean, who needs to suffer the consequential embarrassment and humiliation of being discovered naked, down in a ditch, among the weeds, with a severed left arm and the wooden handle of a garden hoe shoved up his ass. It's inevitable. Everyone staring and pointing. Cops, coroners, FBI pukes, gathered, all poking and pinching, putting you under a lens. Fuck that. And just my luck I'd have this shit-eating grin on my face a mile wide, like I might have enjoyed the whole ordeal or something. (I wouldn't have, though.) All these maggots swarming on me, nuzzling my sorry carcass and scratching their heads in utter befuddlement, wondering why in God's

name this dead lump of shit is smiling, knowing that tomorrow's headline might read:

Slain Man Didn't Mind Splinters.

So you can see why I avoid thumbers. It's just a rule. Born from necessity and common sense—a safety issue. It's not that I have anything against drifting pedestrians. (Even *I've* been known to waggle the appendage on occasion.) Nor am I in any way an anti-Samaritan. It's just that I have this inane hope of preserving the few tiny shreds of pride and dignity I still have left clinging to my wretched entrails (or wherever it is such fabrications dwell).

But there are exceptions to every rule (yes, even the rules that I make) and my hitchhiking rule is no exception, not even to the “exception to every rule” rule. (Figure it out yourself.) Anyway, I picked up this hitchhiker.

It was one of the twelve months in century twenty, and I was headed somewhere in my battered derelict jalopy, when I saw this girl standing on the side of the road with her thumb sticking out like she might be looking for a ride. There's a duffel bag at her feet. She's wearing, what we used to call in high school, a “tube top”. They were popular, but I hadn't seen one for a while. It's nice to see some of the distinguished fashions do withstand the test of time. It's a band of elastic material that slips over the head and covers the bulk of a girl's torso. At least it's supposed to. (You've seen them? Well not everyone has.) This particular girl's tube top was a little too small for her. Maybe this girl was just a little too big. At any rate, she was sort of overflowing.

(Hey, I know what you're thinking, so just stop it right now. I picked her up for one reason and one reason only: to lend a hand. And let's get one thing straight before I

even continue this fucking epic; you can't judge fairly a man you don't know.

Remember this if you remember nothing else in your entire wasted life.)

So I pull over for her. Through the rearview mirror, I watch her bounce along through the clouds of dust toward my car. Her duffel bag, which looks full but light, swings at her side. I roll the passenger window down and she pokes her face in at me, filling the open window. Quick chitchat. The typical careless scrutiny. Like she's examining what blouse to wear from her closet. She tells me she's going to some place and I tell her that's right on the way to the some place where I'm going so she gets in, tossing her duffel bag into the back seat.

She could be pretty. She's tall, ample, with long wide legs wrapped tight in fading blue jeans. Her hair is shoulder-length, brown, caramel-colored, but stiff and frazzled from the overuse of chemicals and beauty toxins. Her skin is so pale that it's almost a light blue color, like nonfat milk. Her eyes are dark, buried mysteriously in even darker sockets. (Oh yeah. In the last paragraph when it says, "...she pokes her face in at me, filling the open window..." the line's not done; it should finish, "...like a mule's face peering outward at me from inside a stable." Now *that's* an apt simile.) When she sits down next to me, the translucent skin of her belly hangs partially over the silver buckle of her leather belt. Her fingernails and lips are painted an identical shade of red. There's a tattoo of a red rose with a yellow-winged butterfly on her chest. (No, I wasn't peeping.) The stem of the rose trails down into her top, off somewhere into the shadowy ravine of her cleavage.

We drive for a certain number of minutes. (Forty.) We don't say too much to each other, at least nothing of importance. I find out she goes to some school where she takes classes and does other school stuff. She says she's even on some committee and everything. Three-point-eight-five. My ass. Perhaps she said board, not committee. It was something where she and other women, students, get together to discuss issues and drink coffee and devour éclairs and crullers. It didn't sound interesting to me, and I wasn't interested. She tells me her name is Rhonda (not her real name, you jerk) and I tell her that I'm sorry. She asks me why I'm sorry, what do I mean by that, and I say nothing.

"What's yours?" she asks me.

"Joshua. Or just Josh," (not my real name either, wiseass; I'm just joshing you), "but my friends call me Dobey." (Actually I don't have a nickname. You're not going to pin me to a single thing.)

Rhonda stops talking after this name business. She's probably miffed about me having a better name than hers. Let her sulk. People get jealous over the stupidest things. Christ. It's just names. One happens to be much better than the other is all.

This highway we're on is pretty desolate, traveled for the most part by only huge, commercial trucks. And as I said, she's not hardly talking anymore at all. She's just looking away from me, out her window at the grazing cows or at the brown hills that float by in the distance. Some gigantic crows pecking at a squashed coon. Whatever it is, she sees something out there that she likes. I'm just driving and glancing at her every now and again to see if she'll look at me, but she won't. She just won't. It's an admirable

stubbornness, perhaps, but one that could surely turn pissoffable if you had to live with it too long.

After a while though (I knew she'd cave) she starts looking at me. It's like how you know someone is looking at you even if your back is to them. You feel it more than you actually see it, and I feel her now, don't see her, but feel her, staring at the scar on my chin. Really, the scar starts just below my right ear and ends down by the corner of my mouth. I once tried growing a beard over it to hide it, like planting grass over barren soil, but the hair never grew directly on the scar. What I was left with was a thin, bald stripe running through the black hair that made the scar stand out even more.

It doesn't matter though, because most women I know are really turned on by the scar. They find it sexy, alluring. It adds a new dimension to my personality, an aura of intrigue and mystery. I'll be at bars and the women all say, "Ooohh. What happened?" all sympathetic and fascinated, and I'll say, "You really wouldn't want to know," as if I'm too shy or humble to boast about the heroic exploits that led to this manly disfiguration. Leave 'em pondering... Was it earned in a knife fight while fending off armed intruders? How about a hockey incident? Ah, yes, of course, a dog-attack. Rottweiler? Pitbull? If not, an equally vicious breed. Perhaps an estranged and jealous lover became so enraged that she shoved his face through a plate glass window (stained glass) at a sordid roadside dive in Tijuana. The shy, humble answer always works best: "You really wouldn't want to know." See, leaves them guessing.

There was a time once, back a ways, but not too long ago, when this lady and I were laying on this bed and she said that the scar looked as if it were alive. She said that

when the moon or the flickering neon sign shone on it through the window, the scar seemed to move and flow like a tiny river in the light. “It’s as if it’s undulating,” (sic) she said, and started nibbling at it and kissing it and licking it, running her tongue along the bumpy ridge (goddamn Mexican surgeon). She started talking about the scar some more and how beautiful it was and just kept going on and on and on about its resplendence, until finally I had to tell her to shut up and fuck me already before I took my wallet and vamoosed.

They continued down the highway and not another car passed—with or against them. Rhonda stared at the driver from the passenger seat. She was slightly repulsed by his crudity, his boorish, ill-mannered way of conversing, but found herself somehow attracted to something—an intangibility she could not quite identify. He was in good physical shape, tall, with a slim waistline and firm, muscular arms and shiny dark hair that ruffled easily in the breeze. Where he’d cut the pants into shorts, the material hung in frays, like tassels, and his legs were tan and shapely in the snug cutoffs. His teeth—she noticed when he smiled while letting her into the car—were straight and very white. His fingers, curled around the steering wheel, were tipped with clean, polished nails, with the little half-moons visible at each base. He said what he wanted to and seemed to speak his mind with unabashed confidence. He certainly didn’t seem to be trying to impress her by putting on any false airs, which was unusual for her. Nearly every man she encountered tried to woo her somehow, but not this one. He was secure, almost to the point of indifference. But why the cruelty about the name? Why belittle her about something so trivial and something she could not control? Why did he have to insult her

so? Perhaps he truly was vile. The scar across his face was definitely sexy, though. She'd always had a weakness for rugged features. She preferred lumberjacks and wrestlers to the prettyboy, sissy types that littered the grounds of her college. She kept looking at the scar as the two of them sped along the freeway in his souped-up, oxidized hotrod. It truly is a sight to behold, she thought to herself.

Joshua sensed Rhonda's gaze, though now he kept both eyes fixed on the road ahead. He knew that if he clenched and flexed the muscles in his jaw real tight and could lean his face so that the sun hit it at just the precise angle, the scar would perform its magic. He would have her, then. So he maneuvered and shifted and adjusted his profile so that the sun's beams burst through the windshield and greeted his face with warmth and kindness, and his scar danced and shimmered and came to life like some new thing emerging from an egg or womb, born to see—and be seen by—the world. He turned to Rhonda, who had watched the whole glorious performance, and smiled.

“What happened to your face?” she asked him.

“You really wouldn't want to know,” he told her.

“Well it's really quite hideous,” she said.

Just like that. She comes straight out and says it. ‘Well it's really quite hideous.’ The little bitch. Like how does she know that I'm not some deranged lunatic who's going to reach over and crack her one right in the fucking snoutbox? Or pull a baseball bat out from under my seat and cave in her fucking head? How does she know this? Is it because I have to control the car? Shit, I can do two things at once.

“Oh yeah,” I tell her, gathering my wits. “Well maybe I should just drop you off right here. Out in the middle of nowhere.” (I wouldn’t be afraid to do it either.) “How’d you like that?”

She doesn’t say anything and we cruise along in rattling silence. She may have thought the question was rhetorical, but I wanted an answer of some sort. I wanted a facial expression, a curt, offhanded apology, or even a precious bon mot for me to contemplate would have been nice—but nothing. Goddammit, that threat was not idle. In fact, I started veering across the freeway to the breakdown lane ever so slowly to prove it. Bbdddtttt... Bbdddtttt ...Bbdddtttt... Bbdddtttt... Under the tires. She’s oblivious, unfuckingfazed.

Instead she turns and reaches into her duffel bag in the back seat and pulls out a book. (I never get a decent view of it, so you may want to dismiss the description that follows as inaccurate. Or just skip it.) It’s some two-and-a-half-inch-thick, pulp romance novel with a virile, shirtless man in billowing pantaloons on the cover. He might be a Viking, sans the horned helmet, or a stalwart buccaneer brandishing a cutlass at his inferior, hapless foe, who cowers somewhere, off-cover, soiling his breeches. He’s been wounded by a dastardly recreant in a blind-sided cheap-shot ambush, and the gash (nick, to him) on his rippled abdomen drips red blood, but his face is chiseled, set and determined to defend the affronted, the dishonored, the libidinous. A buxomly, nymphomaniacal supplicant in a tattered bodice, through which abundant portions of her alabaster skin are revealed, kneels at the hero’s feet, clutching his thighs with bejeweled hands. She gazes upward into her savior’s cobalt-blue eyes. She’s free from harm’s way

here, safe from any imminent wrongdoer on the horizon, and soon in for a rollicking bout of lovemaking to boot. (Did you skip it? I didn't think so.) Rhonda opens the book and starts moving her fingers along the words. Her lips move too, but with no sounds emerging from them.

"How can you read *that* trash?" I ask her.

She doesn't answer my question (yet again), and doesn't even look up from her book when she says to me, "That comment simply reveals to me that you are an ignorant, ill-informed man, and it is simply nothing more than a case of rash floccinaucinihilipilification on your part."

The nerve of this girl. She spits out this accusation at me without even pausing one iota to consider the ramifications it could have. Just who in the hell does she think she is?" 'Rash floccinaucinihilipilification!?' The nerve! She's either very brave or very stupid, and at this point I am yet to determine which, but I am leaning heavily toward the latter. With a name like Rhonda, there is simply no leeway for poor judgment.

"Who's that," I say, trying to catch a glimpse of the elaborate, Gothic script on the cover, "Danielle Steel?"

"No," she says, "it isn't. Why don't you just watch the road?"

"Well I'm sure it's something equally putrid. Besides, I can do two things at once."

She turns and glares at me and asks, "What do you read, hotshot?"

"I don't read *that* shit," I say. "Actually, I write more than I read." (Yeah I write, you knuckleheads; you're reading me right now.)

She doesn't say anything. She turns back to her book. The bloated typeface is readable from here.

"You know," I say, interrupting her gliding index finger again, "I've talked to her on the phone."

Rhonda closes the book irritably. "Who?" she asks.

"Danielle Steel," I say. "Yeah. I called her on the phone once and spoke with her. A buddy of mine delivered a nine-thousand-dollar Italian leather sofa to her house once. He had to call her up from the furniture store to get directions to her mansion from her. It's on this big hill in San Francisco and her kids get taken to school in limos. After the delivery I copied down the number from his ledger when his back was turned. So about three months later, so she wouldn't suspect anything, I called her up, long distance and everything, and when she answered I shouted, 'Fuck you, Mrs. Steel. Your books suck,' and then I slammed down the phone in her face. Is that something or what?"

All this time I'm alternating views from Rhonda back to the road, trying to catch a glimpse of her reaction. "I just hope it wasn't one of her kids," I continue. "She's got like twenty kids or something. She must fuck like a ferret. If it was one of her kids, well, shit, I guess I wasted eighty-five cents."

I look over to Rhonda. She's squinting at me in anger. "You're disgusting," she tells me.

"No I'm not," I say. (And I'm not. She's really got a lot of kids.)

Rhonda turns back to her book and starts reading again, apparently unimpressed by my discussion with a famous authoress. (She's green; wishes she had the number,

too.) But it's nice to see I've begun riling Rhonda now. Though she seems to be reading, unperturbed, she can't fool me. She's been on page 338 and 339 since she reopened the damn thing. Unlike me, it appears, she cannot do two things at once. Fume and read. Fume and read. Fume and read. How fucking hard is that?

It's quiet between us for a long time, and she maybe even thinks she's let off scot-free now, weathered the storm, outwitted the Sphinx, but there's more stashed away in my repertoire that she doesn't even know about. I tell you it's fucking endless. But it's all about timing. DiMaggio. Ali. Sinatra. Bogart. Leonardo da Vinci. M.L. King Jr. Name 'em. It's about how and why *sometimes*, but more than that, it's about when. They knew it, and I know it, too. (Page 352 and 353. Shit. The time is now.)

I lean and reach over Rhonda's lap to the glove compartment to grab my cigarettes. (Pall Malls.) She won't take her eyes off that book for nothing. (Probably on a steamy sex scene. Let her have it, Pirate Boy.) I let my elbow linger over her legs, just let it dangle there, keeping my eyes fixed above the dashboard and on the flat black road hissing in front of me. I sort of brush my forearm on her left thigh as I fiddle through the junk, just to remind her whose car she's in. Registration. Ballpoint pen. Two roadmaps. A cassette tape spinning off its reels and out the bottom holes. A condom. A kazoo with a punctured diaphragm that only makes spitting sounds when you hum into it. Crammed papers. A bottlecap from a Pabst.

I finally find a crushed pack with three smokes still left. I sit upright again, light two at once, and offer her one. She doesn't look away from the book, but responds anyway. (It's like she's got this wicked peripheral vision. But that's hardly two things at

once.) “I don’t smoke,” she tells me, and licks her thumb and finger to turn the page of her book with them. (356.)

“Really? You look like you do,” I say. “You look like you smoke a lot.”

“Nope.”

“Let me guess; you used to, right? Pack...pack and a half a day? Two? But you’re reformed now, right? All better?” (Nothing worse than a quitter.) A huge semi careens by us in the oncoming lane less than twenty inches from my elbow that’s resting out the car door and my gimcrack ride jiggles like a detoxing drunkard. The noise from the passing behemoth drowns out my words even to my own ears so I have to start it all up again. “That’s good for you. Great, in fact. You’re gonna live a long, long time, baby. You’ll outlive the cockroaches. Whoopee. You’re Methuselah. But the pallor’s still there. You can’t shake that shit. That gray sheen will be there till it’s over.” I hand the cigarette toward her again. “Sure you don’t want to come back to the good life?”

“I told you already. I don’t smoke. Never have.” She’s still on the book.

(Still pointing at 356.)

“Fine by me. No skin off my nose. I ain’t pointing a gun at your head.” (That “gun” ought to get her.)

I flip her cigarette (or at least the one that could have been hers) out my window into the seventy-mile-an-hour wind.

“You really shouldn’t do that,” she says, eyes still fastened to the book’s pages like steel girders. (Pun intended.) “You could start a fire. Plus, it’s bad for the environment.”

“Oh, is it really bad for the environment? I didn’t know that. I had no idea. I thought it was good. Healthy. Saluuuuuubrious. I really thought that cigarette butts helped prime the soil. Maybe a beautiful Pall Mall tree will sprout and flourish there. It’ll provide shade for the weary traveler. A nice respite. He can sit and rest his tired bones and pick free, wild-growing cigarettes and smoke them under the branches. Gee, I really truly honestly thought I was helping Mama Earth. Creating beauty.”

She slams shut the book (again) and glares at me (again). “You mean to say *healthful*,” she tells me, “not *healthy*.”

“What?”

“You said you thought it was *healthy* for the soil, but it’s supposed to be *healthful*.”

I’m inwardly pleased she had been listening to me so closely and even somewhat taken aback, but I hate being corrected just about more than anything else in the world so I march onward, bypassing the lesson on semantics. (No, wait. I mean syntax.)

“What about that shit you douse your hair with,” I continue, before she can say, even if she’d wanted to, anything further. “Is that good for the environment? Does that help the ozone layer? Is it... healthful? (See, I learn quickly.) I don’t give her time to answer. (Gotta keep the ball on my half of the court.) “You know, I have to breathe that shit, those chemicals. That hairspray is fucking up my lungs more than any cigarette can.”

“Quit yelling at me,” she yells.

“I’m not yelling at you.”

(I'm yelling at her.)

"And it doesn't even do anything for your appearance. Your hair still looks like a fucking rat's nest." (I've never seen a rat's nest, but heard they're messy.)

Here, at this juncture in the narrative, it happens at last; she starts sobbing—big wailing bellows that make her whole body shudder with each forceful exhale. I realize, never doubted, that my timing is impeccable. Not tardy, not premature. Just right. Perfect. I've joined the hallowed ranks, and nestled in among the great ones. Einstein. Gandhi. Columbus. Josh. Confucius. Nixon. Picasso. There I am. Smack-dab in the middle. Snug. And while perhaps I exaggerate slightly for effect (to hammer home the point through your thick, brick-walled craniums so that even *you* can get it), the essence is distilled: it's all about timing. It's knowing the subtle difference between when and when not. One misstep, one nanosecond late or early, can be calamitous—the difference between notoriety and obscurity, success and failure, joy and sorrow. Any two poles, any opposites, are separated only by the timing of the individual involved. Death and life.

Rhonda seems to care not a whit about timing; she just cries. Is that her appreciation? Tears? It's my reward, but is it hers? The book slides off her lap and tumbles down her legs onto the floor by her feet. She's gulping in huge mouthfuls of air, trying to catch her breath, trying to keep from doing that stupid, hysterical cough-cry that spoiled little rich punks do at the supermarket when their mommy won't buy them a toy in the checkout line.

"Just (sob)... let (four short hiccups)... me out," she tells me. "I want to go."

"Fine," I say.

I pull onto the side of the highway and skid to an askewed stop on the dirt embankment. “Get the fuck out,” I tell her. I reach across the car, unlock the passenger door, and shove it open for her. “Go on.” The highway stretches on straightly for miles and miles in both directions. The only vehicle I’ve seen since I’ve picked Rhonda up, other than that semi-truck that blew past, was an empty horse trailer being towed by a sagbacked Cadillac. (That was back on page 334 and 335 and long before the semi.) There’s a huge field of some crop off to the left, but no farmhouse anywhere to be seen. Dust is filtering into my car. “Get out.”

“Gladly,” she says. She pivots toward me in her seat and reaches into the back for her duffel bag. Her cheeks are irritated, flushed red and streaked with tears. She’s not crying anymore, but she’s panting like she just finished a six-mile footrace. She’s stretching between the two car seats, facing me, leaning.

I grab the tube top in my right fist and yank it down around her waist. Her breasts fall loosely, freed from their confinement, and rest softly upon her stomach like two blanched, unwrinkled gourds swaying slightly. There are tiny blue veins pressing feebly against the surface of each mound of delicate flesh. The aureolas are the color of light coffee and as big around as teacup saucers.

I see the stem of the rose tattoo. It’s a dark, vivid green, almost black against her milky skin, and as smooth and polished as the stem of a crystal wineglass, without a single thorn on it. It curls like the sleek tail of a salamander and disappears into the crease of skin her right breast makes where it presses against her upper belly.

I hook the back of her neck with my right arm and force her mouth down to my crotch. She's not nearly as strong as I anticipated. She's big, but soft. I feel her resisting, and see a blue cord bulging underneath the skin of her neck. Her neck seems to stretch and elongate inside of my hands like I'm molding wet clay. Her contorted face is attached to the end of this swaying tendril, grimacing as it is pulled toward my opened zipper. Her crispy hair pricks my hand and arm.

She says something that sounds like, "I want it bad, you little rascal," but I really can't be sure because her voice is garbled, words muffled by corduroy. It may have been, "Stop it right now, you fucking bastard," though that doesn't sound right either.

She makes a squealing noise and bites me hard in the thigh and I decide to let her head go. She's almost lying down across the seat now, supporting herself on her elbows, puckered nipples lightly brushing the cold vinyl. Somehow she manages to do a sort of backward pushup, and she slides out the open door onto the hard-packed dirt, landing firmly on her ass.

I punch down the accelerator to the floor and the back end fishtails, shooting bits of gravel into the wheelwells like shrapnel. The passenger door slams shut in the wind, in the momentum of the car. I see Rhonda in the rearview mirror. She's standing in a thick cloud of dust, pulling the tube top up over her breasts, stuffing and adjusting. She doesn't watch me as I drive off. I reach into the back seat and grab her duffel bag and toss it out the window to the side of the road. It jumps along in the dirt, skids, and rolls over twice until it comes to a stop upside down in a roiling hurricane of reddish powder. I pick up her book from the floormat. She had kicked at it and the cover is partially torn

away from the binding. Our hero is still intact. I throw the book out the window as well. It catches the wind splendidly—pages ripping and fluttering—shreds of paper lifting in the drafts and floating like the feathers of some fragile bird.

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My leg hurts and I think I may nearly be out of gas. The skin may be broken. There's a smear of bright red lipstick on my pants,

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and there are things she never said.

She never said, "Gee, those cows look so peaceful, grazing there in that pasture. I really admire their simple, tranquil life."

And she never said, "Despite all of life's agonies and frustrations, there are enough moments of sheer joy to make the whole trip worthwhile."

And she never said, "Thanks a lot for the ride."

And she never said, "I'd love to read some of your work."

And she never said, "You know, Steve, you're really a pretty nice guy."

The Red Wolf

And then everything spun. What had been above was below, what had been still was moving, and what had existed perished.

And then everything spun. What had been below was above, what had been moving was still, and what had perished existed.

When she pulled her hand away from the back of her head, it was damp and slick with blood. “Oh,” she said. “I believe a piece of my head has gone.”

What was coming had arrived.

She examined her hand in the meager light the way one might gaze upon an object foreign and mysterious, turning it at various angles toward the pallid moon. It dripped with an untimely rhythm.

What had arrived was coming.

He bullied the car door with his shoulder, but it was smashed shut, pressing snugly against his hip. He tried to climb over the wrecked side panel of the convertible that was not theirs now and soon no one's. The seatbelt bit into his waist, pulling him back into the bucket seat. The radio blared a western tune.

While speeding through the desert, they could hardly hear the songs through the wind, but now, in the desolate stillness, the rude, immusical sounds pummeled his temples with all the determined rage of a brutish prizefighter's punctuated jabs slipping past his feeble guard.

He unbuckled his seatbelt and rolled over the crushed closed door like a weary pole-vaulter. Glass from his shirtfront tinkled to the pavement, sounding like a giant maraca shook once. Reaching back into the car, he turned several knobs on the radio until finally the cowboy stopped singing. Thin wisps of smoke seeped from underneath the car's accorded hood and curled skyward. The engine hissed softly, spasmodically ticking.

He remembered, as they drove, having to shout at her, but not what he shouted. She had leaned in closer to him, straddling the stickshift until she was almost on his lap, her hair everywhere. He swigged the whiskey from a bottle with one hand and reached around her to steer with the other. She faced him, kneeling on his thighs, leaning in closer to hear what he shouted, her hair everywhere. He shouted again into her hair that was whipping everywhere and he cannot remember what he shouted then and she leaned back and shrugged and laughed and then everything spun.

He went to the girl who stood in the dirt off to the side of the road in her threadbare lavender dress. One of her highheeled shoes was missing and she tilted slightly against the downward slope of the highway, leaned into it as if struggling against a fierce gale. The bare foot was shorn of much of its skin and rested underneath her ankle at an acute angle, twisted nearly backward from proper, pivoting loosely in its socket like a broken toy. She held what was once a liter bottle of booze at her side, but it was shattered now and only the jagged neck remained, clutched tightly inside her slender fingers like something you scribble with.

When he reached the girl and stood in front of her, she ceased studying her hand and let the outstretched arm fall swinging at her side in a pendulous fashion. She looked to him. The pupil of her right eye veered deviantly, mislooking upward past his face toward the constellations, wobbling without fixity. The other eye's socket filled slowly with thin, murky jelly, an obscene eclipse, ruinous and unappealable.

"A piece of my head has gone," she said again.

She bent to her knees and started crawling amongst the crushed beer cans and strewn shards of liquor bottles, a baby regarding baubles. "I will find it," she said. "You watch me find it."

She picked at the debris on all fours, her glossy hair dangling in front of her spoiled visage, sometimes pinching something shiny from the pavement to contemplate it, and then putting it back down gently again where she had found it. The raw, naked stub of her shoeless foot scraped behind her along the blacktop and it sounded like a piece of chalk on a slate. He went to her again. A flap of bone directly at the crown of

her skull had flipped open like the hinged wire door of a pet cage. A string of dark fluid funneled outward from the jagged hole, spattering the recement beneath her knees and freckling the smooth skin of her slender hands with minuscule crimson spots. He stood her upright, hoisting her by the armpits. Her head tottered loosely on her neck and the flap of bone snapped shut again with a soft popping noise.

“We’re gonna get you to a hospital,” he told her. “Come on.”

“A hospital. Yes.” She smiled. “A hospital. This will be nice.”

He guided her back to the car like a father might teach his infant daughter her first steps; she pulled the mangled foot along with her, tugging it as if against its will, as if it resisted being taken somewhere it did not want to go. She still clawed the bottleneck so he pried it loose from her hands and kicked it away from her path with the scuffed toe of his canvas workboot.

“A new dress, too,” she said. “Another dress, purple, with white lace and buttons down the front.” Her voice was quiet, barely audible, though her head rested on his own shoulder just inches from his ears. “You promise.”

He opened the door and sat her in the passenger seat and pulled the seatbelt across her lap, fastening the buckle into the slot.

“Papayas.” She barely whispered now. “Papayas y mangoes con mi familia. En el otro lado.” She shut her eyes and rested her head back upon the seat. “¿Dónde está mi mamá?” He had to press his ear to her lips, and though he could not understand all of her words, her voice was beautiful, plangent. “¿Dónde?” She coughed weakly and moaned or sighed, keeping her eyes closed. “¡Tú me prometiste!” He pushed back a lock of hair

from her forehead and curled it behind her ear and feeling his touch she opened slowly one ravaged unseeing white eye inside all of the red. “¡Oh, qué lástima!” she said.

“¡Dios ayudamé!”

When he walked around the front of the car and got into the driver’s seat, she was dead.

He carried her into the desert—a stunned groom transporting his idle bride across the threshold on his honeymoon. He walked and his arms ached and the body in his arms became heavier and finally he became tired and he stopped walking and laid her down beside some wilted sagebrush that smelled faintly of a street kitchen he once walked past some time ago. He thought he should give her a respectful and proper burial and say words that would send her soul to the right place, but he knew no such words and the ground upon which she rested was dense and unyielding and he did not have a shovel to dig the pit. He took off his leather jacket and wrapped her gently, shrouding her from the waist up.

The moon had spent itself for another evening. Behind mountains far off and vague, the sun began to melt upward with some unknown purpose, turning the land ashen. Some paces off, a black-tailed jackrabbit, emaciated and gaunt, stood on its hindquarters and sniffed at the air for scents, peering quizzically at the queer episode occurring before it. Hairless, pink patches poked through the sparse, peppered fur where the animal had gnawed at parasites into its own flesh. Its gigantic ears, like the ears of an ass transported somehow to the smaller animal, twitched and swiveled forward, and with

a single, graceful bound, the rabbit was gone. Something brown blurred into a shale fissure.

He knelt, broke a desiccated twig into two unequal lengths and formed a crude cross on her body, but knew not what such a gesture could possibly mean. He folded down the collar of his jacket to look at her face. In this new coming light he could see how her crushed head looked so wrong now, an eggshell punctured in, and the shelf of bone folding down into the membranous cavity beneath the matted and madid hair. A horsefly the size of his thumbnail hovered above her wound with an enraged buzzing that was palpable in the halcyon morning. The black spot seemed not to move, but hung suspended on the horizon, swaying as if from a gallows, slightly, like a man just gibbeted. It fell onto her scalp, ropecut, like an ash flake from some distant fire and finally nestled into the split bone beneath her hair, rubbing its angular and segmented legs across its bulbous green eyes. He swatted at it, grazing her flesh with one of his silver rings and it recoiled as if yanked sharply backward by a length of invisible fishing line.

On her lower lip, where a droplet of her blood had dried, the horsefly lighted again, squatting, its transparent gray wings, like veined parchment, trembling. As he reached carefully to brush it away, the clinging horsefly crawled across the tiny spot of blood, between her parted lips and down along her tongue into the tunnel of her mouth. The hem of her lavender dress trembled slightly, but it was only a warm breeze.

Some miles down the highway, he had to abandon the car. The tire on the front right side had peeled away from its rim like the rind of a piece of rotted fruit and the motor seized

with a final violent shudder that shook the vehicle into submission. He had crept along in the car hobbling, issuing silent, vain pleas as the temperature gauge pegged into the red and so much smoke enveloped the cobwebbed windshield before him that it appeared not to be of the car's creation, but rather that he drove into something being fashioned long ago, at a time when the moons and the planets and the stars were mere visions of some yet unborn eye. He pushed the car down a slight declivity into the desert. With a final heave it came to rest like the carcass of some fallen beast, a tarpitted mastodon. He walked slowly back up toward the road and when reaching it, turned and squinted back down toward the desert. His bootprints, pressed weakly into the indurate soil, revealed his progress in two distinct sets of tracks like crowprints in sand. In one, leading downward and accompanied by the deep-set, continuous flow of the tire treads, the prints were set wide apart and occasionally smeared into elongated smudges. In the other, returning upward and unaccompanied, the prints were close-set and the steps were regular and even, barely denting the soil below him that, with the incessant rising of the sun, had assumed an incarnadine glow.

The road stretched out before him like a tremendous serpent slain, flayed, and pinned tautly upon a glimmering steel table for dissection, and though lifeless, still innately aiming to coil again. He walked. With each plodding stride he seemed to push the sun upward by minute degrees into the vast, colorless sky. He stepped; it rose. He stepped; it rose, an object clumsy, ponderous, almost procurable, and yet somehow evasive. He stepped. It rose.

And then, ultimately, the sun shone directly above him, a quivering, hanging sphere, pressing him downward, into the earth, until it was the sun that pushed him, gently, almost kindly, but heavily to the ground, where he lay on his back, in the middle of the road, burying his sunburnt face into the crook of his arm to shield his tired eyes from the flaming light above.

The pickup truck came to an abrupt halt next to him with a chirping of tires that sounded like a small dog being stepped on. He did not know for how long he had lain in the middle of the road, but it was now dark, and when he pulled his head out from inside of his folded arm to look about him, the stars burned with such ferocity that, in order to see his surroundings, he had to crease his eyelids against the night sky.

A pair of faces floated, looming over him, two bobbing specters, nebulous umbrae seemingly detached from the bodies to which they belonged. He could not discern the darkened features of either face, but the subdued voices of both were easily discriminated—one male, the other female. He could recognize none of the actual words being spoken by the two shapes and wondered momentarily if they in fact conversed in some language that he did not comprehend. They appeared to be having some sort of an argument, though through the flattened tones and dull, even pitch of their debate, neither participant seemed very adamant about defending his position.

He lay listening. The pavement, through the thin, cotton workshirt, cooled against his back. Still he remained motionless, gazing up to the two forms as if viewing two stringless marionettes in a makeshift puppet show.

The man mumbled a series of cacophonous sounds together that arrived to the ears of the supine man in a harsh, hissing staccato patter and as if from some great distance or through a door thickly solid and closed, that nullified any former sense these words once owned. The woman however, laughed at this insensible clamor, laughed so gently that there laying on the ground he had to strain to hear her and to make certain it was actually laughter, for to his ears it was as if a tiny, ancient music box had been dug from dust and pried open and the familiar song inside played again, after centuries of laying dormant, for only those who would care to listen.

Her shadow bowed over him, blackening the stars behind it. He could smell her perfume. Her hair swayed in front of her, nearly brushing his chest. He saw her reach a hand out to him, but still he did not stir. The gentle laughter continued and the perfume made his head swirl in confusion. He tried to move, but could not. His face hurt. He could feel himself drifting back to unconsciousness, but at the same time his thoughts were acquiring a structure and clarity, as he began to remember the things that had once happened. It was a baffling, frustrating mixture of oncoming lucidity and cognitive vibrancy coupled with the complete, inevitable abandonment of the senses. The aroma of the perfume wafted into his nostrils and the laughter—that glorious, gentle laughter—sprinkled down upon his inert body like mist from a crashing wave. Her fingers, pressed softly on his cheek, were cool against his skin. Still she laughed and as the spool in the music box turned and turned and turned and the golden tines were lifted and dropped and lifted and dropped again, he laid on the cooling pavement and wondered how these

beautiful sounds of laughter, so dulcet and soothing, could have ever emanated ever derived from the man's cruel, vile utterances that he would never come to understand.

He awoke again when his head, jarred from an unreclected slumber, rattled against the glass of the passenger window as the pickup truck stutterhopped around a sharp turn. The road, steep and swerving, wound upward at severe angles and was banked on either side by a sparse cropping of trees that hemmed agrestal land beyond. The wind plunged in through the partially opened window upon which his head bounced and assaulted his face with icy slaps that pricked his skin and teared his eyes. He reached to roll up the window, but could find no handle on the door. The door convulsed with perpetual, noisy seizures, shuddering despite the press of his shoulder against it. With an exertion, he forced himself to sit upright.

"You won't find it." The driver spoke from across the long, bench-style seat. "It's broke. Tore clean off."

Inside the truck it was dark and the glowing tip of the man's cigarette bobbed in the gloom conducting his voice with trails of orange light.

"You need them there pliers," he said, motioning vaguely without removing his hands from the steering wheel. His clipped, raspy words evaporated in the chilled air almost as soon as they left his mouth, leaving nothing in their wake except a swirling wind that fluttered some sunbleached sheets of ledgerpaper on the dashboard. His mouth, behind the swelling and pulsing ember before it, was nothing more than a ghastly, bone-colored rictus carved into his reddish beard and his face seemed to be lit from within by a

taper, like a pumpkin hollowed to a husk and flickering yellow, where the dim light shines through the knifeflits.

“In the glovebox,” he said. When he spoke it sounded as if he were cracking tough, dry seeds between his front teeth and spitting out the shells onto the floorboard beneath his feet. He wore a cowboy hat, outsized and flamboyant nearly.

The woman sat between them, staring straight ahead at the dark road that seeped into the cab. Though closer to him than the man driving, her features were buried in shadows and veiled by a curtain of hair that cradled her face and fell loosely down her right cheek. He almost reached out to brush it aside but did not.

He turned away from her and looked out the windshield. An old, wooden piecemeal rifle rested in a homemade metal gun rack mounted over the dashboard. The hardwood stocks were worn and polished smooth and the raised cheek piece was strapped with strips of black electrical tape. The burnished scope gleamed dully with the moon’s faint glare and the entire gun—as if trying to shake itself free—rattled in the clamps of the gun rack with the intractable tenacity of a shackled hound. He could see nothing beyond the hood except what the waning crescent moon allowed and he realized that the world had shrunk around him and that the planets now were only plastered bugs on the glass and that the stars above him were simply cracks on the windshield caused by flying rocks and that these stars looked like nothing more than asterisks drawn crudely by the hand of a witless child.

“It’s dark.” It was his own voice, but briefly he recognized it as someone else’s or not as anyone’s at all.

“Yeah,” the driver said. “Headlights are all busted out.” He stopped momentarily as if pausing to consider his words carefully and then went on again. “I done took a tire jack to ‘em a while back. I did the left one first just ‘cause it was closer to where I was kneelin’ at the time. Then a little later I pulled off the road again and got out and did the right one too. To make ‘em even I guess.” He chuckled softly, almost to himself and finally added, “Or else I’s just angered ‘bout somethin’.” And then he continued, “Don’t worry none. I know this road good.” His cowboy hat had a rawhide chinstrap and it dangled in a loop in front of his hairy neck with the triangular turquoise drawclasp uncinched and swooping in front of the pointed flexing knob in his throat. He looked straight ahead, and the motor rumbled the rearview mirror and it hummed as if winged insects lived trapped inside. He shrugged and slowly shook his head from one shoulder to the other and then back again to the first. “Hell. I reckon it’s better to have two things the same as each other than one different, ain’t it?” He paused again, removed the cigarette from his mouth, worked at a fleck of tobacco between his teeth and spit it away crisply, before finally answering his own question. “At least I think it is,” he said, still shaking his head, but his voice lacked conviction as he drove the truck into the blasted darkness.

The passenger sat as the driver finished speaking and the coils beneath the thin, vinyl benchseat on the passenger side of the truck pressed up against him like lit cattle brands. He shifted, but could find no solace from their incessant poking and even these simple movements shot bolts of pain across his shoulders and down his back in the form of a burning T. All of his bones hurt.

And so he sat and just kept watching the front end of the pickup truck swallow the road in measured, moonlit portions and he wondered for a time where they were taking him, but soon this became as tiresome as watching the black road and caused him pain inside his forehead and his face throbbed so he stopped doing this as well.

And when he swallowed it felt like someone poured a bag of rusty tacknails down his throat. How long had it been since he last drank? And even then it was booze. Just booze straight. When was the last time he drank some water? Straight. When he finally spoke again, the small metal spikes tapdanced in unison in his esophagus.

"The wind..." He had difficulty connecting more than two words. The thoughts were starting to form, but he couldn't drag them free from out of his arid windpipe. He could see clearly in his mind the objects; where were the words that matched them? Can these be lost? "The wind..." he said again. "It burns."

"Sure it does," the driver replied. "Your face is a hell of a mess, all swelled up and cutted. Sunburnt too. Wind'll sting the hell out of it."

They drove on.

"Do you have anything to drink?" the passenger asked finally. "Some water?"

"Water? Nah. Not water. None here at least. At the campsite there's a creek though. Water ain't that clean, but it's wet. It's just up the road a piece."

The driver rolled his window down partway and flipped his languished cigarette toward the opening. The dimming arc of focused light struck the window ridge and erupted into a vivid burst of miniature sparks. The enraged butt pinwheeled briefly in the blackness held aloft in the wind of the rectangular window frame in a frantic, petulant

tantrum of proclamation, before finally being sucked through the gap and onto the side of the road, where it lay in some dirt in a clump of ragweed, smoldering until it went out.

The pinpoint flakes of ash that remained flitting inside of the cab seemed not to trouble the driver. As they roosted onto the wide brim of his ludicrous cowboy hat and eddied like gnats about his now darkened face, he, in a movement rehearsed, fluid, and deftly economical, produced new another cigarette from behind his left ear and clamped it fixedly between his narrow lips. A steel lighter snapped open, the wick ablaze already and now, once again, the face, seemingly lit from behind inside the cavity of the hollowed head by a chunk of hardwood or by chips of coal, loomed, discovering its nascent form, while before it the fresh flame danced anew.

To the passenger it seemed they were coming to their destination soon, but why he felt this way and what their destination was were unclear to him. The steep, winding road had leveled and straightened somewhat. The land around the clattering pickup truck had turned thicker with trees and shrubs and bushes and on the roadside, pointed stalks, like primitively honed scytheblades protruding from the earth, bowed in the truck's current as it shot past. It was not until the banging metal contraption had teetered around a slight bend and vanished from sight that the fibrous plant spears righted themselves again and stood upright, unmoved and still, under the silver slice of moon.

They drove on.

Suddenly the man driving yanked the steering wheel down toward the left with a grunt and they were across the oncoming lane with a screech of rubber. "Here's the trail," he said. "I goddamn near missed it." He wrestled with the wheel trying to keep it

steady as the truck lumbered over the hump of the road's earthen embankment and down into a stretch of waist-high cocklebur. The stiff, spiny limbs, ripped free from the plants, tumbled in the wheelwells in fractured somersaults, a boisterous grinding chorus, and inside the cab they sounded like repeating thunderclaps bursting forth from the earth up into the decaying floorboards that seemed to barely withstand the barrage.

"Whoo-ee," the driver said as he fought to maintain control. "Goddamn." His cowboy hat had come to a rest at a slant over his eyes; the back brim hiked up on the back of his head, pushed forward by the glass wall behind him. The ever-present cigarette had vanished to somewhere and the driver's face was just an outline to the passenger—a penciled silhouette with a sharp, hawk nose and a jutting beard from the chin. The passenger could hear the driver's raspy, labored breathing and he watched numbly as the driver wrestled with the steering wheel that tried to writhe free from his grip, and he heard the driver say, "Goddamn," again, almost joyously, as the woman between them leaned forward and spread her arms on the darkened dashboard to brace herself against everything that would not stop moving around her.

When the truck finally settled upon calmer, more navigable land, the girl collapsed easily against the backrest and crossed her hands upon her lap on her skirt. They traveled in a low gear as the engine whirled through a level expanse of heath and grassland almost luminescent under the cloudless skies. Though the driver had referred to it as a trail it was more accurately flora that had been flattened through minimal passage, barely discernible to the eye if at all and certainly not if not looking. How the driver knew where he was and where he was going was truly astounding and the

passenger felt a grudging admiration and envy toward such a practical skill—a skill he lacked. He tried not to swallow and wondered if such a talent could be acquired through experience and diligent study or if it were simply something one is born with, like blue eyes or the mottled smear of a birthmark across pale smooth skin.

The driver turned left and left again, went relatively straight for a while, never pausing to gather his whereabouts, never confused or disoriented and then turned left once more and finally stopped the truck suddenly and said, “Well, here we are.”

He shut off the ignition and got out of the truck. The girl followed, sliding her legs under the steering wheel and out of the driver’s side door after the bearded man who was dragging again on another cigarette. He slammed the door behind her, leaned over and peered into the cab. His pinched, narrow features barely filled the open window and his hat, still slanted sharply over his close-set eyes, appeared ridiculously large for the smallness of his head. “Camp’s in them trees yonder,” he said, removing the cigarette from his mouth and swiping it at a cluster of netleaf oak trees about fifty yards distant. “This is as far as we go by truck. It’s kinda rocky from here on so we always walk it in.” He took two puffs, long draws from his cigarette that made the tip of it throb. “You can make it that little bit, can’t you, boy?” He laughed and pushed himself back from the truck door and began walking in the direction of the trees with the girl in tow stumbling, every few steps closely behind him.

The man left stranded in the truck cab reached down and pulled on the handle of the passenger door to let himself out, but the door would not budge against his weight. He rammed his entire body into the door and nearly cried out from the pain in his right

shoulder and arm. He checked the door panel to see if the door was locked. The lock knob was broken off and only a jagged burr pushed out of the tattered vinyl door panel like the emerged tip of a tiny, rusty iceberg. He tried but could not get a firm grasp on the slippery metal. The knob glided through his hands as he worked frantically to pull it up from inside the door and his fingertips quickly became scored and raw and useless. So he shimmied his way with the palms of his hands across the bench seat, under the steering wheel, and out of the door that was at one time across from him. When he stepped down from the truck, his ankle buckled on some latent and devious unevenness of the land and his foot folded wickedly underneath him. It made some kind of stretching noise. He winced, almost pitching forward headfirst into the reeds.

“Watch your step gettin’ out.” The driver’s choppy voice traveled through the thin air from somewhere in the semi-darkness up ahead. “There’s some little stacked-up boulders hidden in that grass there. It was our marker, but the grass grewed over it.” He had never turned around. He mumbled something to the girl who walked behind him, carefully finding her footing before attempting her next step, arms spread out like those of a young child playing airplane. He had never turned around. He made a wet, viscous gurgling noise in his throat that was laughter but did not sound like laughter or the clearing of a throat or the gargling of a medicine or laughter, but rather like used crankcase oil poured from a narrow-necked milk bottle into a paper funnel shove in an engine block. She walked behind him, arms spread out, intent only upon maintaining her balance and on not falling upon the rubble underneath. This time she did not laugh.

The passenger tested his weight on his ankle on a flatter piece of footing near the toppled pile of concealed rocks. He could see the small orange dot of the cigarette trailing away from him across the field. Everything was silent now except for the mellow knocking of the cooling truck engine and the tremendously repetitive litany of cricketwings squeaking in a piercing, unified canticle. A lone, vagabond cloud floated slowly through the sky like some enormous sailing vessel adrift and roaming, lost at the mercy of the wind and when it passed in front of the moon in its sluggish, guideless progression, the two shadows of the driver and the woman, coursing within the grassland below, faded and dissolved to nihility into the earth. Then the meandering cloud passed over and the moon reemerged out the other end of it like something digested, pulling forth from the waving reeds with its rediscovered light the two ambling shadows once again, wide-spaced, smaller now and further away than before, becoming slowly taken in by the assemblage of trees just in front of them where the cowboy said their camp was. From somewhere distant, far, near, he thought he heard the hushed chimes of water cascading over rocks, but could not be certain. He swallowed and coughed weakly, painfully. He forced himself to walk, a methodical, attentive gait that took what he had left, thinking of cold, sweet water and thinking of nothing else at all.

He laid on his belly on the creekbank and plunged his entire torso under the slow-moving, glassy surface of the narrow waterway. Shared by both land and water, he drank greedily, with his puckering fishmouth down close to the dirt and shallow rocks and tremulous grasses like some parched, oversized salamander with its slick, spotted body

divided by both its natures, halved by its two diverse habitats. He came up gasping and sputtering and went down again into the iciness and it made his head throb and he could hear his heart beating strongly and loudly in the comforting, muted silence of this natant world. The water glided smoothly over his neck and shoulders; he kept drinking in the soothing silence and he could feel something below brushing up against his face gently as if shyly caressing his features—a vague yet familiar touch and the water liquid metal in his throat.

Then he remembered waking, laying in the road and seeing the strange shadow of the girl poised above him and how she had pressed her cool fingers against his face and how her perfume, that smelled like wildflowers and melted sugar, had made him dizzy. He had stared up from the pavement and her laughter, that music—that pacific, hushing lullaby—settled upon him like a blanket and she had touched his cheek with her hands. She had touched him gently with the backside of her soft hands as if trying to comfort a frightened child from something he could not see or know.

But when he opened his eyes in this aquatic haven there was only a biting, chilling blackness and the brackish creekwater tasted foul and sulfuric and the abrasions scalded on his face. He arose stunged and stood creekside, dripping, gazing into the creek, seeing nothing. A roosting Seminole bat aroused and plummeted from inside an overhanging clump of Spanish moss and swooped down to his head, darting zealously about where the midges and mosquitoes and mayflies had congregated in a shrunken tornado. He spat out a brown glob of gritty sediment into the creek and watched the pewter current pull it away.

He came up from the creek up a slight slope, with the water still running over his chin and onto his sodden shirtfront. He heard the voices of the man and woman inside of the trees and went to them. His stomach began cramping and he feared he was becoming nauseated. His nape hairs dripped water under his collar and down the skin of his back all the way under the belt that held up his trousers and when he doubled over to vomit up a vile-smelling gusher of rancid, acidic juice, the same water ran back up his spine to from where it had just come.

He pushed his way through a prickly hedge and entered the assemblage of trees where the two dark figures sat before the barren flames of a paltry campfire. The man sat closer to the fire than the woman, low on a mesh folding chair, legs sharp-bent like partially opened jackknife blades, knees nearly level with the brim of his cowboy hat. The flimsy interwoven strips of the fraying fabric of the seat nearly met the ground under him and when he shifted his weight the frame creaked unmusically like a complaint. He prodded at the smoldering twigs with a busted-off tree branch that looked whittled and charred at the tip, but in the shallow pit, enclosed by a circle of rocks, his efforts were proved futile.

She sat away—perhaps on a similar mesh folding chair with fraying strips of fabric and creaking framework—perhaps to avoid the constant eruption of wood smoke that surged up from pile of debris that the man poked at with his polished walking stick burned at one end. Peripherally she appeared as some amorphous, aphotic stalagmite or as an earthen mound of caliginous heaped mud.

The creekwater-filled clothing leadened the passenger's steps and his comprehension of what had happened, what was happening, and what would happen remained equally cumbersome, but he knew it was she—that shadowed distant, almost shapeless form—and he watched her as he advanced further into the campsite on wobbly legs with his cold eyes bulging out into his face beneath his forehead. She sat on the outskirts near the wall of trees behind her. She moved very little and languidly, only once or twice, to wave the smoke away from her eyes with something flat like a large tree leaf or a sheaf of paper.

The smoke floated low and thick in the shabby camp area. The man sitting at the fire placed the stick on the ground at his feet and fanned the scant flames with his cowboy hat, revealing a buzzedcut dome of red bristles on his squarish but small head. When he stopped, the smoke crept back into him and he jammed his hat back down on his head looking grimly into his work. “Goddamn,” he said to the girl. “It’s more smoke than light. Or heat.” The trees’ topmost branches, entwined like the arms of grappling combatants, joined overhead forming a tight canopy, almost a ceiling, blocking out the moon and the night sky. The fire smoke rose briefly, but could go nowhere. Everything grew darker as the few remaining flames died.

He pushed himself up from the low-sitting chair with his stick as a prop and the sinew cracked in his knees. “I didn’t want to have to use the light if I could of helped it,” he said, “but I think I got no choice now. This wood’s too damn wet or somethin’. It just ain’t catchin’.” He arched his back and twisted his upper body back and forth with little grunts in the fading light. “Did it rain when we were gone away?” he asked the girl

though she could no longer be seen sitting down in the chair in the outlying darkness, for only a stifled orange glow pulsed from within the fire pit.

When the sole of one of the passenger's soggy, canvas workboots snapped in half a dry twig on the ground, the man in the cowboy hat stopped his improvised calisthenics and glared in the direction of the noise. He had been in mid-pivot and his body froze that way like some malnourished Greek athlete preparing to hurl an invisible discus. The two men stood only several yards apart and the smoke still hung palpably between them though now the failing fire gave little more. The man righted himself, adjusted the brim of his cowboy hat, and finally placed his hands on his hips, studying the dripping figure before him. "Goddamn, boy," he said. "You look like a goddamn waterlogged possum." He laughed and pulled a pack of cigarettes from an inside pocket. He put two in his mouth and with the silver lighter lit both simultaneously, offering one to the soaked man who now shivered slightly shaking his head.

The passenger walked deeper into the campsite until he stopped in front of the fire and rubbed his hands together above the expiring warmth. From somewhere he heard the girl cough three times and then stop. He looked up but the trees joined overhead forming a roof that closed out the world. His emptied stomach ached.

"Suit yourself," the man in the cowboy hat said as he dropped one of the cigarettes onto the ground and stepped on it. Gravel crunched under his shoe and the man in the wet clothes stopped rubbing his hands over the fire to watch and he was surprised to notice for the first time that the cowboy's shoes were clean white leather and seemed built perhaps for a tennis player or for a member of a country club or for

someone who walks on the decks of yachts. “You know,” the cowboy said, “you’re smart not to smoke. It’s a goddamn nasty addiction.” He laughed soberly. “I know I can’t quit it. Though I suppose I ain’t never tried.” He stepped off the cigarette and motioned to the man who stood by the fire that was no more. “C’mon,” he said, “let’s go get the light.”

The man turned in his clothes that had little dried from the worthless pile of wood that would not burn and would not warm and followed again the glimmering speckled tip of the cigarette and the white shoes that rose and fell rhythmically so close in front of him, so matched in time with his own steps, that it could have been his own legs that lifted them up from the ground and let them fall only to be lifted once more to be dropped again.

The two men walked toward one of the outer trees that encircled the campsite and the smoke here became thinner and was soon gone. The passenger’s hair had begun to dry slightly but the cotton workshirt still pressed against his skin coldly though he thought the night might be humid. The socks in his canvas workboots remained damp and the right had worked its way down from his calf to under the arch of his foot in a wadded, uncomfortable clump of wetness. His sprained left ankle throbbed dully with each step and the boot of that foot fit snugly against the swelling.

The man in the cowboy hat who walked in front of the passenger along a narrow path of dirt through the weeds stopped suddenly and the passenger nearly collided with him in the half-light of the moon that leaked in through the close-spaced column of oak trunks. The man stood on the toes of his white shoes and reached up and pulled down a

flaking metal oil lamp that hung by a wire coat hanger from a low-hanging limb. He removed the charred-looking glass wind-shade, adjusted the length of the cloth wick and held the tip of his cigarette to it until it caught fire. He readjusted the wick length to dampen the smoking flame and replaced the ash-smudged wind-shade between the tarnished metal prongs that held it loosely in place. The bowed glass had a hairline crack running down the length of the chimney that captured and reflected the wick flame brilliantly and shone like a thin line of pulverized diamonds stretched jaggedly along a mudbank.

“This is the last of my lamp oil,” he said, swishing the contents of the oil lamp within the palm of one hand as though it was a gigantic brandy snifter. “Feels less than half full.” He cursed under his breath as the glass cylinder rocked jeopordously in its tine settings. His face, in the ambient-yellowed flares of emitted lamplight, bloomed like some ruddy, freckle-petaled flower and the slanted grin, sliced into the umbra of his bearded jaw, flashed teeth that looked like the broken remains of a crushed conch shell and he looked not old nor young or not of any age at all.

Under the tree limb where the oil lamp had been hanging a dog laid on its side. Its breath came in short, shallow exertions that the men could hear and it viewed the men warily through one yellowish, almond-shaped eye wherein the blackrimmed pupil expanded and contracted through its rheumy curtain as it strove to fix itself on the apparitions before it. It did not lift its head from the ground and its ribbones like barrel staves stretched outward against the dog’s hide in parallel furrows. Two pie tins one overturned and both empty, save for files of red ants, had been licked clean two days

before by the dog's dry rough tongue. The animal was tied to the trunk of the tree with a length of electrical cord that had been slipped through a red kerchief around the dog's neck and knotted. Something had been chewing upon its hindquarter and the white of the shinbone was exposed where the skin had collapsed like an unraveled sock around the dog's hindpaw and it rested in filth of its own making. Black flies nuzzled inside the exposed flaps of flesh and the dog didn't bother to shoo them anymore. The dog growled low and deeply and bared its hooking canine fang as the two men approached.

"Goddamn," said the man holding the lantern and he halted abruptly in his tracks. "Somethin' got at her." He extended the lantern toward the dog and stepped closer slowly and leaned in over the dog a little but the dog popped its teeth at him and kept growling from its stomach all the way up through its throat so the man pulled the lamp back and stepped back himself away from the dog that had never lifted its head off the ground. "Goddamn," the man said again. "She's shore in a bad way."

He turned from the dog and faced the other man who stood watching over his shoulder from behind him in his wet shirt that still clung to his skin and lifted the oil lamp almost eye-level so the two men could better see one another. The dog could be heard breathing heavily again but that was the only sound it made and didn't growl now. The flame in the glass sputtered and the man lowered the lamp to his waist and advanced the wick by turning a side knob until the light returned and he brought the lamp almost eye-level again in order to tell this:

"You don't need to know this," he began, "but I'll tell it to you anyways 'cause it don't truly matter none more at this point. I can see by the way you're lookin' at me that

you think I'm cruel or don't care nothin' 'bout animals to let it get like this but that ain't the way it is. I treat that dog kinder than anything but we was gone longer than expected. Me and," he nodded at the campsite, "the girl." He shuffled his feet as if the ground were hot beneath him but kept the lamp held aloft between them with a stubborn adherence.

"We was at the doctor's in town," he continued. "I only did it in her once. Just one time. She didn't want to go. I made her though. When I first found it out I punched her in the stomach when she was sleepin'. That's what Wilton said to do to stop it. But it didn't work no good. Maybe I didn't hit her good enough, you know, in the right spot or somethin' but I never tried it again. So Wilton tells me he knows a guy in town who can take care of her for seventy-five dollars. It was just one goddamn time. One. It's just bad luck is all.

"And on the road in I got a flat and I didn't have a spare nowhere. No money to buy one neither. Shit, I had the jack but no tire to go with it. But I got one though. Eventually. And then in town there was some more problems. She bled on the inside so she had to take some pills and rest in bed longer. The guy said there was some trauma that ruptured in her. She's fine now. Just kinda sore is all. She's a good woman—as good as any other—but unlucky." He looked down and kicked at a rock with the toe of his white shoe. "Ain't everyone though?" he said.

He said nothing more for a moment and just stood there in the flickering light of the oil lamp with his face bowed slightly underneath the large brim of the cowboy hat and the dog's labored shallow breathing hissing upward from the ground behind him and then he looked up again into the other man's eyes and said finally, "She don't like always

runnin' this way. She don't like livin' like this." He nodded his head twice, once to the campsite and once to the dog somewhere behind him to indicate just what *this* was. "She don't like it none but knows it can't be this bad forever. I tell her it's gonna get better. She believes me. She trusts me. She's a good woman."

He stopped and the tale was over and he started walking back into the campsite with the oil lamp swinging at his hip and the shadow cast by the lamplight was a shrunken unformed version of the bearer himself that mimicked poorly the strides of its maker.

The other man still undried though drier but colder now followed the man in the cowboy hat who followed the shadow that in turn followed the light cast from behind it by the oil lamp and the four moved as one thing. His right sock had become completely unfooted and lay severed in the toe of his canvas workboot like a balled mass of rainsoaked newsprint. With each step his toes squished into the sodden lump of fabric with faint metronomic squeaks and then they were back by the firepit that had gone cold and smokeless in their absence.

The cowboy set the oil lamp on top of the stump of a recently felled tree that wasn't there before but came only when the light brought it forth. He sat down at that same low-sitting chair with his knees bent up and motioned for the other man in the wet clothing to sit but not where and the other man sat on the leveled stump next to the burning lamp with his boots still damp with creek water dangling above the ground.

He sat on the stump and his dangling feet were chilled and his left foot throbbed inside of the canvas workboot and his thick damp dungarees felt no warmth from the oil

lamp's little flame that put forth little heat at his hip. He watched as the cowboy removed his cowboy hat and placed it at his feet in front of the low-sitting folding chair and for a time the cowboy only sat smoking almost reverently until he put the large cowboy hat on his head again and said loudly, "Get my rifle from the truck. Bella's been attacked by somethin' and she done gone rabid on me. I gotta put her down."

The girl rose up from her place near the shadowed fringe of trees and walked through them and out into the field toward the truck. The men sat and waited, sometimes looking at each other and sometimes looking elsewhere. One smoked sitting low and the other didn't smoke and sat higher looking down at the one who smoked just a man's height distant. Both men thought in ways different and about things different. The outside night turning to morning quieted or the noises could not get in and the man sitting lower said, "She says it was a girl," and that was it.

They sat.

The same man later asked, "Do you hear that?" because time was passing and he wanted to fill it and the other man sitting higher up on the treestump nodded his head in affirmation though he had heard nothing.

"That there's a red wolf's howl. Nothin' else sounds like that. No coyote, no gray, no timber. Nothin'. It's probably lost. It's callin' to its pack." The cowboy sat up straighter and cocked his head sidewise in sudden jerks like a jay aiming its ear to the urgent squawks of a mate. He nearly stood but caught himself and didn't and kept his bearded, stretched neck craned. "Goddamn." Something entered his voice that wasn't there previously and he said, "They're so fuckin' rare. And gettin' rarer. You never see

‘em and you don’t hardly never hear ‘em. Hell I never seen one and only heard one once years ago north more from here.” He paused and seemed to relax more resting back into his chair. “It’s stopped,” he said.

Both men listened but the wolf had moved on to somewhere else taking all that was the wolf with it.

“You know red wolfs are funny animals,” the cowboy continued, not wanting to let the wolf leave. “They’re smart and cunning yet sometimes stupid or at least they do stupid things. They breed with the coyotes and their species are gettin’ all blended together. The offspring ain’t pure. Ranchers are startin’ to cooperate with the wolves now and they don’t shoot ‘em as much no more, but the pups are only half red wolf and half coyote mixed up and inbred. How stupid is that? Huh? In some years from now they won’t be no more. They’re fuckin’ themselves to extinction.”

He shook his head and laughed at his last statement though he found it humorless and continued speaking to defend the red wolf though his defense began with reprisal. “Red wolfs are slow runners too,” he said. “Not slow like a cow or sheep or somethin’ but slow for a predator. That’s why they usually hunt as a group. The lone wolf’s a different story. It’d be a complete waste of his efforts to go at anythin’ that wasn’t sick or injured or inferior someways. Smaller. Slower. See he’s smart. He knows he prob’ly can’t catch a healthy buck without the help of the pack so he takes a doe or a newborn instead. Or maybe he gets one that’s been wounded already by somethin’ else and dyin’ anyways or expectin’. He’ll scavenge too.” He hesitated for a moment, sitting and smoking in the pale light. “He’s doin’ nature a service really. Goddamn that howl was

something. Some say it's scary to listen to or they find it eerie like a omen but I think it's beautiful. You were damn lucky to hear it."

They sat.

The bushes shook and parted and the girl stepped through carrying the rifle crosswise on her shoulders like a yoke and she walked up to the cowboy as he stood from his low-resting chair and unslung her arms from over the rifle and handed it to him. He flung his cigarette into the firepit though there was nothing there inside any longer to catch it and accepted from the girl the offered gun. "Well," he said turning. "Let's get this done."

The cowboy started to walk away into the shadows toward the dog and from behind, the rifle barrel appeared, to the man sitting next to the lamp on the planed hewed stump of tree, to be an extension of the cowboy's arm or like a piece of something screwed onto a piece of something else to make it all one thing.

"Grab that light," the cowboy said.

The other man pushed himself from the stump to his feet and grabbed the oil lamp by its makeshift coathanger handle and picked it up and noticed that the wire was warm nearly hot from the flame beneath it. But his chilled hand cooled quickly the metal wire and when he eventually looked away from the flame he saw that the man in the cowboy hat had walked on out of the light into somewhere the lamp could not trace and he heard the soft footfalls the white shoes made on the earth but could not see the white shoes themselves nor could he see the cowboy, the glowing cigarette tip, or the rifle anymore or again.

He stood. Unmoving. Unable. And then suddenly her glowing white face appeared clearly wavering in the oil lamp's light rising up closely before him and he felt her hand resting softly on his shoulder pressing the cold damp cotton against his skin.

"Leave here," she whispered and he felt her breath on his face, could smell it. It was something stale almost rank but like cinnamon too. But her face was not one he recognized anywhere from his memory or from his imagination or from creation his or elsewhere. Yes, he could see her. She became more than just shadow. The once mysterious almost mystic features of her face now gathered in front of his own in a garish display of violent grave angles and asymmetries cruelly betrayed by the lamplight. What had once been soothing calming laughter—music of unheard beauty—was now a brutish voice hissing harsh piercing commands at him. She was all too clear now. Visible and whitely revealed. Her words were all too clear now. Everything was all too clear. Now. Everything was clear to him except meaning. Now. For the first time in his life he heard and saw everything clearly and for the first time in his life he understood absolutely nothing of what he saw or heard.

She took the oil lamp from his hand with one of her own and pressed gently on his cheek her other but it was not until she turned away from him into the grayness, turned away from him to the distant quieting footsteps of the cowboy, turned away from him to poor rasping wounded Bella, turned away from him to the lightless realm outlying, that she at last became familiar to him once more and all meaning was finally clear now and he understood now all he once didn't, once couldn't, and when she whispered almost

savagely to him as she began retreating, “Leave here,” again from within that very darkness that she had entered and took away with her, he did.

New Mown Hay

Far away the world keeps moving always. Close by too, but I didn't believe this once. A time was I believed that the things I knew—pretty Dora, my neighbor down the road, my parents and our chicken coop, that white-faced barn owl set high on the ridge beam in the rafter shadows, the cotton rats it ate—all stopped with me when I didn't watch them going, because when I saw them again they were right there and so was I. Late nights bring the far world to me from the little transistor radio on the peach crate next to my bed. Hissy voices preaching the gospel across the flat thin air over the mountains and sometimes a ballgame somewhere and the bat crack and the cheers of a crowd spilling out of the speaker sound like millet poured from a sack into a tin pail. My brother would tell me to shut up and turn the damn radio off and he'd lean over from the upper bunk and throw BBs down at me in the dark one at a time and tell me I was afraid to go to sleep and laugh at me until I shut the radio off finally and he started snoring before I did. He ain't around no more to do this. He was bigger than me and could pick up off the ground

the back end of Papa's harrow that I couldn't and tote two fifty pound bags of cement, one on each shoulder, that I couldn't, but he ain't around no more to do that either. All that strength and bigness didn't amount to much in the end. Maybe I just never thought hard enough about it much, that notion of far away and close by worlds. It seems silly now. As I slept, things moved close by.

Then Papa shook me awake out of a dream I wouldn't recollect none of until some time later in my life, six months or maybe more months even than that onward, when I redreamed it and traced it willful or watched it run off on its own back to that exact morning when Papa sat on the edge of my bed and shook me awake too early. It's funny how it came back after all that time, but by then of course, it'd been much too late to learn anything from the dream or do anything smart with it like going back to sleep and telling Papa his idea was a bad one, a dangerous one, and that he should get on back to bed too if he knew what's good for him, because the dream told me nothing but trouble would come from rousing like this and going out to try and get my Mamma back in his life again. But he couldn't've knowed that. I wasn't then superstitious and I ain't now prone to fantastic thoughts about signs or warnings coming down from some higher power to help people steer clear from wrongness or lapses in judgment, but a omen is a omen no matter what guise it sneaks around in and should be regarded serious and took advantage of if laid out clear before you. I'd sure a paid this one heed, but Papa shook it outta me before I had the chance to. When something like that gets lost, finding it even just six months or so later don't do any bit a good.

Papa's breath stunk. "C'mon, Will," he said, "get on up." His face sounded right next to mine in the dark. When I opened my eyes the walls of the narrow room, lit only by a oil lamp hung off Papa's outstretched arm, shrunk and grew around me in the swinging flame. He leaned over me and his words smelled like the skim of warm stagnant pond edges in summer where bullfrogs and clumps of green scum float. "Get yer ass up, boy," he said again and shook me with his big left hand vising my shoulder. This started waking me good. I could smell some strong coffee as well, turning rank and gamy in his mouth, as I sat upright. Mamma's throwquilt slid down to my waist and left me cold up top without a shirt on. My chest had goosepimples on it and was the color of a boiled soup bone in this weird partial light. Papa's slick cheeks glowed smooth and shined when he put the lamp closer to us and I could smell his Three Flowers aftershave that he didn't wear no more except to Sunday Mass and on Saturday nights to Classie's Pour House with Dubbs and the other men that he played cards with. From the kitchen the wallclock ticked faintly like some far away and tired woodpecker. Papa had his black hair oiled and combed nice and flat and the pink-scrubbed skin of his part cut straight across and behind the top of his scalp.

"What time is it?" I asked. My voice sounded like someone else's, someone talking to me instead of from me.

"It ain't but quarter to three," Papa said and as my eyes adjusted I saw in the waves of lamplight the smokes of our breathings joining together as one mingled cloud in the waterish space between our faces. "Damn power's gone out again." Papa unhanded me and stood, careful not to bump his head on the top bed's sideboard as he ducked out

from under it. "Your ma's down at Classie's," he said, "causing some sort of ruckus."

His face went hid behind the upper bunk when he'd stood and I saw him without a head only; he'd done himself up pretty nice in a white button shirt with a collar and suspenders and his blue knit pleated dress pants and it looked like those wedding cufflinks he was so proud of that didn't look right on him here. I couldn't see his feet though. He said, "Sayer called just a little while ago, said he's gonna keep serving them drinks until we get down there."

I hadn't yet fully rid myself of sleeping and just sat there shivering muddle-headed, not sure at first I'd heard right or what was needed from me. Mamma hadn't been around since two years come this June fifteenth. Papa'd given up searching of late. Last summer he bussed himself all the way up to Missouri looking for her because he heard a woman fitting her description was seen working at a JC Penney in Kirksville, but it turned out to be a different red-headed woman with freckled skin. A shorter woman, Papa said, and not as pretty.

He turned to go with the oil lamp waving on its hanger back and forth and dragged the light with him toward the kitchen and his steps clicked then thudded the hardwood floorboards that squeaked in places under his weight. It looked like the shiny patent leather oxfords he dug out seldom and they were glossing fresh polished and the cedar trees were took out and they looked made from melted candle wax not yet hardened and white like glue. His huge flat shadow pressed on the wall behind him and folded up and crossed part of the paneled ceiling above his head, pulling into a long twisting shape of Papa that moved in quick flickered motions and it jumped out the bedroom door after

him on the last back-swing of his stride as if he tugged it through and its leaving left me in dimness. Some silverish light passed in through the open curtains, moonlight I guess, and soon some other kind from the kitchen where I heard pots clanging and firewood started popping in the cookstove that brought some warming into my bedroom now. Sitting up like this my head nearly touched the bed slats under my brother's box spring that looked kind of like a railroad track if I laid down and got farther away from them or maybe just a piece of railroad track taken out from a whole line that didn't come from or lead to nowhere. When my brother used to sleep up there they'd each one creak and looked liked to bend down at me when he shifted from a dream or uncomfortability, but that was some time ago and Papa made the bed himself and cut and planed the pine headboards and lathed the spindled posts while I stood off safe and unbothering and watched him working in a machine buzz of sawdust flying so I trusted it to hold and not come down on me.

From the kitchen Papa called out, "Wear your good shoes and the clean trousers I put in the top drawer and the shirt Ma made with the pearl buttons." That shirt was too small for me now. I heard the cupboard door shut, creak open, cookware rattle and shut again. "Pick up the books off the floor and comb your hair." His words rushed around the little kitchen and came at me from different locations behind the bedroom wall. I stood on the cold floor and pulled the stiff creased slacks over my longjohns and put on the shirt, but it didn't tuck in good when I tried. I put on my dark socks and found my brother's old pennyloafers under the bed and put those on too and sometimes when I walked in them my heels slipped out and once when running in some mud my whole foot

and I lifted out of the shoe with a sucking noise and left it behind me in a copse and had to go back and fetch it later and by then that sock was holed and flapping and I had to wear the shoe bare and muddy-footed and then just threw it away because it dried ruined.

I went to the window to find the weather. It wasn't raining and hadn't for a few weeks and the sky was clear with lots of stars and a moon, but the wind was blowing hard and the thinner leafless trees were bending from the upper parts of their trunks and the weathercock on the barn roof spun around fast and it was bright out. In the windowsill a mud dauber on its back with its broom-bristle legs sticking up had gone stiff and brittle where the cold had killed it. When I blew it out the glass pane clouded and the wings and legs and the skinny body segments all broke apart in different directions and left the sill clean. "Hurry up dammit," Papa yelled and I hurried up.

When I got to the kitchen Papa was leaned over throwing more fir logs into the stove that turned his face reddish. It was too much. The kitchen was hot in my tight shirt and the pants that didn't let any air through made my legs itch under the longjohns. "I want a nice warm house waiting when we get back," he said after he righted and saw me. He kneed the loading door shut and I saw he'd cleaned up the mess that our kitchen always was. For the first time in a while I didn't see dishes in the sink or piled in stacks on the counter. Papa stepped heavy to the axe-hewn corner table with a short-legged wobble in it and lifted the lamp chimney with his handkerchief and blew out the flame. Light faded and the square skylight that leaked in hard rains let light in after a second or two and the crackle logs burning through the grates pushed out some too and Papa replaced the smudged chimney back in the prongs and the burnt cloth wick was sending

forth oily smelling smoke. We walked to the short hallway off the kitchen and Papa swiped with his handkerchief at a cobweb dangling in the jamb and snapped a couple times the handkerchief in front of him to undust it and folded the handkerchief neatly and put it back in his back pocket. We felt our way through the dark hall and grabbed our coats down from the wallpegs and I followed Papa out the door into the night. Wind whipped Papa's hair all messy before he'd even closed the door behind us and mine must've too.

"What do you mean them?" I asked him.

"What?"

"You said Sayer's serving them drinks. Who's them?"

Papa started leaving faster. "She's with some guy," he said.

In my dream Mamma stands at our kitchen cookstove setting in the middle of a new mown alfalfa hayfield. A low sun's going down behind a tower silo I don't recognize. On the stovetop griddle a big cast iron stockpot smokes unlidded and Papa's standing at Mamma's side watching her peel vegetables over a compost bucket. Both their backs are facing me and they're talking words I can't hear because I'm far away or they're too quiet as if whispering. Mamma steps aside to let Papa shove in more wood and the pot boils over and hisses under it and Mamma laughs as I walk slowly toward them. Gage, my dead hound, is alive and sniffing at a trickle of blood trailing behind me from a shot jackrabbit I'm carrying by its scruff. I walk at Mamma and Papa and get closer and I realize the jackrabbit's still alive and not shot nowhere. I pet the soft baggy jowls of

thick fur warm under its chin and its whiskers tickle on my wrist and I let it run loose and Gage whimpers and lunges against his leather collar I'm restraining him by. Hay kicks up underneath the jackrabbit's long rear feet with each bound and a perching hawk drops off the silo and lifts it away.

Next to the stove Papa's hunched over the andiron, restacking the slabs that'd tumbled, but struggling to grip good and dropping more than his share of wood. Mamma's peeling a big parsnip. They hear me rustle hay and turn around. We three look up together. Rising slow on the blue sky with powerful wingstrokes flies the hawk. Clamped in its talons the jackrabbit's shaking, making its long ears flattened, looking at me and then they're both—hawk and rabbit—just one dark speck against the great yellow, becoming smaller and smaller on the falling half of sun beyond the silo. "There goes supper," Mamma says.

She starts to peeling the parsnip again, but I notice it's not a parsnip no more but Papa's cut off arm instead and the skin curling through the peeler blades is his human skin falling into the compost bucket. Mamma puts the peeled arm into the pot but its too long and Papa's fingers stick out the top and clutch over the lip and when she tries to put the lid on it won't cover right so she hurls it into the dirt and cropped browning stalks of alfalfa and then begins to stir the stew hand in hand with the arm as a ladle and Mamma lifts the arm out to sip from the turned-up cupped palm to taste the broth. While all this time Papa kept screaming.

Classie's Pour House sat, and I got no reason to not suppose it still don't sit, sunken down in a little tree-packed gulch about a mile from our house, one of those places that if you'd not knowed was there or was looking exactly close for it or wasn't a regular, you'd never find. Part wood, part sheets of corrugated rusted metal laying in overlapping flaps, Classie's looked pieced together from scraps stole from junkyards or torn off from various dwellings no one wanted no more and its front and only casement window didn't open and Papa said on summer nights when the mosquitoes and stable flies hovered up in potholes from the reeds and got into the bar, some of the men couldn't get cooled off no matter what and just about went into madness with the swatting. Classie's was lifted up off the ground by some cinderblock stilts under each corner because without failure every spring the thaw-waters carved their paths right straight at it and formed a swampish tarn underneath that never stopped with a untiring insect droning until fall and there was talk of moving it to a drier location, but the men and sometimes, though not often, the women, didn't seem to mind and never stopped coming to drink and a sandpaper ramp led up to the front door.

Papa told me once about a truly awful storm one April that struck us when Mamma couldn't leave the house and had to sit and stay at home and nurse her new baby boy. Mamma watched her child standing up and looking around to support himself with whatever was handy to keep from foundering and he could walk a few steps already and then he'd buckle at the knees and fall and be sitting too and looking unsurely at her whether to laugh or cry or neither and he wasn't my brother yet, but my Mamma was swelled rounded up with my pregnancy and cumbersome. That storm pelted our house

roof with tearing noises and Mamma moved about heavy inside and Papa was out card playing when Classie's got unsupported in one corner after the ground wasn't ground no more and one of the cinderblocks got pushed away rolling off in a current of mud and rubble and Classie's, Papa said, landed all of a sudden with a booming thud in the corner by the fireplace as sparks exploded in the hearth and he told me all of Classie's was tilting and alive with moving noise and bedlam and shattering glass with beer pictures and neon signs scraping down the walls and unplugging and blinking out to the floor where the jellied filament tubes bursted and Dubbs, who already had his straight flush to the queen fanned out up-faced on the poker table to collect the pot, smoothly slipped sideways away on his chair like he was prodded in the ribs on a frozen bog sent skating and he tried to grab at his winnings through the gap widening between his chair and the card table with his arms flailing and a look of half-duped perplexion on his face at what was happening or couldn't be and the mound of chips centered on the drifting slanting felt tabletop was razed and toppled plastic disks clattered into that downed corner along with all of Classie's insides and the separate dwindled stacks of cardplayers' unbet chips paltry at each elbow also in a confused heap clattered rolling off and bodies scrabbling up the inclined platform greased in booze and brine slippery and Dubbs never got to collect that pot accurate and didn't stop telling folks for a long time about how God went and shortchanged him on the best hand he'd be liable to ever get in his life.

Afterwards people crawled around Classie's floor looking for unhurt bottles to salvage, but most were past saving and some of the men were drinking out of the shards. Everyone worked hard and together, Papa said. With Milt Ferner's trailer jack they

hoisted Classie's up again and Papa and two other of the stronger men pushed the cinderblock back up that slope it'd spilt down and came up hacking phlegm and curses in the sheeting torrents and they were mud-blackened and monstrous looking. They flattened the area best they could and slapped the soil firmer with shovel backs and slid the cinderblock back in under the end joist and Milt Ferner lowered Classie's gently until it was restudied and leveled again though Papa claims to this day it still pitches slightly downward to that fireplace corner where most everything wound up that night and by Thursday Classie's opened for business and Sayer's cuts had already pretty much done healed and in June I was born.

Me and Papa walked past Mamma's vegetable garden long withered and set out left along the skirting byroad hunched into our coat collars and our stiffened hands pocketed and the one time he spoke to me as we were passing Dora Clemens's house I couldn't hear what he said because the wind coming at our faces made louder noises than he did and he didn't say nothing after that the whole rest of the way to Classie's. Two tumbleweeds bounced past us on the dirt road to from where we'd just come and I turned to watch one get pinned under Mr. Clemens's pickup bumper where the wind kept at pushing it, but it wouldn't budge free and clung wobbly like a hornets nest forming there and it was cloudless and the dirt road we traveled was almost glowing underneath a near-full close moon and those flung stars smeared above so bright everywhere and uncountable. Off in the woods on the right, I could hear the river and on either side of us the weaker soapberry limbs occasionally cracking off. Several times I had to jog to catch Papa's

long pace and we both breathed and walked hard through our own pale puffs of breath and then left them behind us where they disappeared in the hollow night air and nothing alive was about anywhere but me and Papa and his polished white shoes were dust-swallowed and his slicked-down hair still unordered and partless. Everything was crisp and my cheeks and eyes stung a little. Downwind a dog somewhere must've smelled us because we made no noise us together. It barked.

Mr. Clemens would be up in less than a hour and be upset the power'd gone out during the night which always made his morning chores more troublesome and he'd have to milk by hand in bad light with the cows nervouser and more like to fidget and back-kick. Then he'd wake Dora up later and she'd make breakfast for her mom and dad and little sister and after dishes she'd meet me at her front fence and we'd walk to school together and Mr. Clemens with his face shaded under a straw cartwheel hat would be standing out in the yard in his little orchard of fruit trees holding a billhook and he'd ask me as we're leaving how Papa is doing and if he'd heard anything about Mamma lately again and if everything was going all right with me at school and at home and I'd tell him I thanked him for his concern and didn't know for sure but all that didn't look too good. I could see plainly he didn't know what this meant and probably wondered if his daughter did, or me, and when we started to walking to school again and got a little farther from her father Dora reached out and took my hand and held it.

A narrow footbridge was suspended low across the river and me and Papa turned off the byroad and hiked down a small hill and crossed it. The river's banks were muddy and it ran fast and noisy and it was white and frothy off the sky down the reflective center

foam and churning. In a few months sallow-skinned kids would be coming in bathing suits to float down the flow on homemade rafts and patched tractor innertubes and some just swimming the currents with nothing and on July fourth after the parade Carlton Beryl misestimated his release and fell from the ropeswing onto a rock ledge and seven days later died. But I wasn't let out to his funeral and I heard that for a while only the braver older kids swung out on that rope, but by early August after that unlikely mid-July rainfall even the once scared younger kids had forgot Carlton Beryl or pretended to and they ran and kicked off the ledge and swung out once again brave over the slowing-down river that didn't surge as hard in summer, whooping and hanging, paused, hanging, and then letting go and dropping straight into the cool deep water liked lopped off summer squashes from a vine with their splash rings gone before they even formed just like I used to do and seen them do so many times before and their sleek otter heads would break the surface down-river and rise gasping and spitting mist into the air and they'd paddle back up the current to do it all again. Afterwards they all lay spread out together on the shore in drying hair and bathing suits dripping, licking grape and orange ice-pops and sipping Fantas from sweating bottles and Dora laughing and getting tan on a towel in the hot sun and pulling down the straps of her top so she doesn't get lines on her shoulders and further down where the river bends, in the stiller pools, shirtless boys have their rods jutted for trout and after a while, Dora, she forgets, too.

When Papa scrambled up the front side of the gulch rise Classie's squatted behind he mounted the tableland and stopped atop the ridgeline. We'd left the bridge and river

behind us though I still heard its farther water softly rumbling through the valley and the wind rumbled through as well, but thunderous at times and at other times just barely a breeze that set you up for the next one coming that even so you couldn't much well prepare yourself for. He'd created quite some distance between us and I stood stomping my feet against a rock and back into the pennyloafers that'd unheeled in the swag at the bottom of the little hill. I looked up at Papa standing on the plateau there and he made a flat inked-in outline traced and cut out and pasted against the huge white butcher-paper moon behind him. He looked not to be moving, but the wind puffed out his coat at the back and inflated his dark form to some transformed size distorted and unproportioned until the gales rested and he went squeezed back to thinned again in the sighed hush. Wind pushed into my face now as I climbed up the rise, slipping in those flat-treaded dress-up shoes and I went down to my knees one time in the pungent milkwort that'd just begun flowering up past my belt, but I could see good in the pelt sheen of this night Papa's faint new combed pathway pressed into and through the reeds leading up so I stood and I followed it and Papa waited silently for me to get there.

I got there.

Standing at Papa's side on the low peak I looked down into the gulch and he looked down into the gulch and Classie's was down at the bottom of the gulch as if it was accidentally dropped from its right place somewhere higher and landed askew and haphazard and near broke from the falling and was left unbothered and unfixed and left to fester untended but still used some ways by some one some how because a gray half-formed shred of smoke bled out from under the chimney pipe's rain cap and seeped

into the grayer blacker night where the wind consumed it. Sayer's beat-up Plymouth was parked in the little gravel patch behind Classie's and next to it a late-model car I didn't know whose and it was a sports car fancy with bicycle-spoked wheels and the rag top folded back even in the cold and a long hood buffed and gleaming that held in its paint the moon and swaying tree limbs from above. That lone rectangular slit of window under Classie's scab-crusted roof glowed barely yellowish-orange from inside and peered up at me and Papa like a wounded mountain lion's unblinking eye fading and untrustful and I couldn't, for as much as I tried as I looked up into Papa's face, discover, or even come close to imagining, what he might be thinking on that hilltop behind his own eyes, unblinking themselves, but gathering heat and intense under the spilled wash of starlight like embers being bellowed.

Together we walked down the hill toward Classie's into the gulch.

Me and Papa stood leaning back standing on the ramp outside Classie's warped front door that didn't close true and I could see in the space back between the hinges a cut of smoky light flutter forceless from inside like it was going out soon and the whole place wasn't much bigger than a hen house. I set my foot back in good in the shoe again, but standing one-legged on the narrow ramp didn't feel too safe and the wind still batted and draped itself over the steep-banked roof and hit into us a little, but Classie's backside blocked most of it and somewhere inside was Mamma and she didn't know, or she did know, me and Papa were standing outside here about to come in and nothing inside made any noise. Papa fussed with his hair and raked his fingers through the tangles and I

fussed with mine too and pulled a stem or spiked thistle out. I'd seen Classie's quite a few times from the outside before and mostly from far, but only've been inside twice; once that night to hide when I'd shouldered my way in from a squall and faked at looking for Papa and pretended that I needed him for something I hadn't thought of previous and couldn't invent then on the spot and it wasn't a Saturday and Sayer and I think even some of the drunkards drinking drinks set up like posts at the bar found something suspicious in my story and I knew it sounded unsensical even as I was saying it. So I just run out again. The other time, the first time, was this time.

When Papa turned the doorknob on Classie's door it didn't turn. He kicked twice loud on the washed-out varnished door panel above the weatherboard and I sensed he was angry or strove to make himself so. I heard footsteps approach and then a click sounded and the latch bolt slide and then the doorknob did turn and Sayer stood before us in the open door and looked bothered or worried or maybe just fed-up tired at this always worst time of night or morning depending on how he looked at it. "Hey, Sid," Sayer said to Papa and wiped a bar rag inside a shot glass. "Listen," he continued after Papa nodded, "I don't want any trouble. I just want you to get her out of here so I can close up the place." He stepped aside as if to let us in, but Papa didn't move yet.

After a moment Papa asked Sayer, "Is he big?"

"He ain't small," Sayer said, "but they're both drunker'n hell." He peeked back over his shoulder like he was double-checking the truth of his statement, but I couldn't much see past Papa in front of me to where he was looking or what at. "They got here as I was cleaning up for the night," Sayer said, stepping back into the doorway. "At first I

wasn't even sure it was Lorraine since I ain't seen her for a while. I mean, she don't look the same." Sayer hung the bar rag across his neck like a boxer's cutman and put the shot glass into the big front pocket of his apron. "But it's definitely her. I been serving them free drinks for the past hour," he said, "just waiting until you got here."

"Anyone else here?" Papa asked.

"No, no one."

"Where's Snowcap?"

"Hell," Sayer said, "probably in bed sleeping like we should be. We were dead so I sent him home." He didn't say nothing more for a second and I thought he'd decided not let us in no more because he hadn't cleared a second time a path for us to go in by. I started getting warm and unbuttoned my coat and the pearl buttons on the clung-tight shirt each looked like tiny moons in close different phases running in a line down my stomach. Then Sayer said to Papa slow and soft like he was sad and talking to a little boy, "She don't look too good at all, Sid; it's like she's stopped taking any kinda care of herself," and I felt sad too, but it seemed like more for Sayer than anyone else because good deeds and bad deeds look so much like each other at first that it's easy to mix them up and at that point when one becomes the other you get fooled and done wrong to and Sayer had that defeated look on his face like he was being done wrong to and fooled and it wasn't possible anymore for him to go back and hang up the phone before Papa picked it up because he already done mixed the good and bad deed up and he knew it. "Will," he told me, looking around Papa, "you best wait outside," and then he turned and walked into Classie's murk leaving me and Papa alone.

Waiting for something to happen I stood behind Papa waiting. He unpocketed his hands and made fists at his sides that he kept clenching and unclenching and shifted his weight on the plankboard ramp we stood on until it rocked under us and he sucked in deep breaths through his nose that added bigness across his back and then he forced air out his nostrils blowing hard and the smoke came out with a faint reedy whistle and then he walked over Classie's raised threshold with a deliberation summoned upon and I did too and we were both inside and the wind sent the door behind us slamming and any sounds outside got shut outside and stayed outside and it wasn't until what would happen passed that I heard any outside sounds again.

Without electricity a half-gloom brooded inside Classie's and everything was setting so close to everything else and nowhere else to put these things except where they were put and if I could've seen better it'd been cage-like and confined but it was anyway even without seeing better and it was hot or just felt hot from the compared outside I'd left. I saw Mamma right off before I saw anything else, right as I stepped into the room behind Papa, almost like she'd set herself where she knew my eyes would first go to and Papa had to've seen her when I did or even before that. Candles of all sorts had been lit and jammed into their own wax pools on pickle jar lids and spaced without thought and careless along the back shelf between corked bottles none full or with labels and beveling liquids see-through and mostly without colors in them. Doubled by the tinted wall mirror behind Sayer the candle flames imitated their own fits when the door'd slammed and they casted or revealed misformed figures strange and divided and echoing back into the smoked glass. With these glowing candles everywhere Classie's looked like our church

sacristy—light-dotted dark walls and heavy-mooded dusky—with Mamma drowsy and droop-lidded sitting in it, squinting and leaning propped back on her elbows arms outspread against the bar and her barstool tilting two-legged with her worn out sackcloth dress of gardenias sewed on riding homemade up her thighs which had went gaunter since I'd last seen them. Her legs came out from under the bunched up gingham hemline like the handles of picks hanging in a shed. Down from her knees her shinbones pressed out under the skin and the flesh there was spotted sored and inflamed almost like pests had bit at her and she scratched it all angry and she held a highball glass loose almost full of gold-brown gasoline-looking liquid and she was alone and it was Mamma despite what I saw and I couldn't look nowhere else to see if Papa saw the same thing I did. She was alone.

She was alone and didn't look none too worth retrieving or even meeting for the first time, but there must've been something between them both that even looking so past gone like this couldn't take away and Papa stepped once toward her, but she was already right there. "Let's go, Lorraine," he said and reached his hand out as if to help her up onto a high step or over a puddle and I thought Papa's voice blustered the right amount in the candles' flame-shakes and convinced; "let's go home." I'd never heard him call her by her full first name before.

Mamma stared at the hand, but with distaste or approval I couldn't determine; she didn't make no motion of any sort toward it or from it. Red hair dyed redder lately or tinted redder only in this uncompleted light sagged unkept from hairpins in two sickle strands down each of her cheeks. Almost I could see her eyes green and yellow-marbled

like glass watermelon skins as they studied the hand and what to do with it before her and it was still her face, the same, my Mamma's and I imagined us planting okra and snap peas and peppers as I spaded furrows into the rich soil clumping and we crawled the earth on all fours and the April air was cool on our dampened knees when we stood to see what we'd done and the coming sun warmed our necks and sighed when we got back down again to working and the same face smiled then as now; the same face smiled, but different. Those garden eyes were even then looking somewhere past Papa to a different man, a different house, to a place not nowhere near the seed packets laid out at the heads of each row and she was planning to leave him, us, by then or even before that though I didn't know it until I saw those exact same eyes looking now not seeing nothing clear with candle flames instead of sunlight in each big dark pupil shaking and seeing another different place. Mamma looked off Papa's hand a second directly at me as if to give me a better look and to prove the finality of her decision and show that yes I hadn't imagined nothing and not just the garden but her life as the Mamma I knew had gone disappeared somewhere lost behind her eyes and she turned off me to the hand again and drunk from the glass and put it down on the bar half gone. Papa still had his arm reaching and touched her shoulder lightly and said, "You need to go home now," and again said, "you need to come home." Off in a back corner dark behind Classie's bar counter a toilet flushed and I turned to see a door swinging open and from the bathroom's pit a man transpired zipping up his jeans and smoking a cigarette and I heard Sayer mumble something not audible with his head bowing. When I looked back Papa's hand still

rested on Mamma's shoulder and he hadn't moved his gaze nowhere else and that sorryness I felt for Sayer started welling up in me again stronger.

The man was a big man, though not as big as Papa was, only barely broader or heavier, beer-bellied, but certainly no taller or more muscled and his denim workshirt he wore untucked nearly brushed my coat when he stomped by and I could've touched him if I'd wanted he was so close. He wore a type of hat I'd never seen any man wearing before or since and he said, "What the hell's going on?" but not with much astoundment or even angry, more annoyed like at a inconvenience or like he was reciting without enthusiasm a line memorized for such a occasion and Papa finally did turn from Mamma to receive the blow.

This was the ruckus.

When Papa fell he'd dragged down Mamma's drink off the bar with his arm sweeping as he reached out to clutch balance from that, or when he kept crumpling, at a gardenia on Mamma's dress and the glass and Papa's head hit the floor at the same time. It surprised me to see Papa start coming up with a knife flash he'd pulled out from some concealment, but that was kicked quickly out of his hand and sent skidding under the card table before Papa even had it held right or got stood up to wield it good and the man kicked Papa again with a cowboy boot in the same eye he was punched in before—the right one—and this time Papa went flattened and stayed down on the floor and groaned into his arms long and lowly like a branded calf mewing.

The man took Mamma's hand and helped her down off her stool and she pulled down her dress some to fix it and stepped over Papa who'd fell in front of her and still lay

fallen, but quiet and groaning no more. They walked out the door and I heard their footsteps on the ramp going down and Classie's lurched inside a little from their weight and the door closed in after them a silence left behind. Sayer came around from behind the bar with the bar rag wrapped around some ice cubes in his hands. When Papa'd regained his senses and seemed to have all his wits or most back about him enough to cuss Sayer gave him the ice, but Papa pushed it away. He stood himself up in stages with the barstool and pushed Sayer away again when Sayer'd offered to support him. On Papa's white shoe was a drop of blood.

Outside a car started and the engine revved three times perfect throttled roarings. Tires peeled rubber and ricocheted gravel off the wheel wells pinging and the car shot away up through the trees on the dirt road from Classie's lot and they turned onto the paved road higher up in one motion of sound and screeched away with that tuned machine singing under the long hood and grabbing sure each curve of roadway fast until I couldn't hear it no more not remotely and they both cried out in some kind of fearless joy reckless and rode cutting by trees and fence posts and cattle sleeping in piebald clusters close in moonlit fields by the roadside all just lengthened blurs and I could see their hair blowing and the man's hat catching wind and flying and the headlights showing just enough road ripping past and under and giving less than what most need or want except the brave and I thought that driving in that car, or any car like that, would be enough for me. In the corner the fireplace had gone cold. Me and Papa and Sayer didn't say nothing. When Papa went out the front door I followed him. Some of the candles had burnt down past stubs and went out.

Going to somewhere always seems to take so much longer than the coming back, even if you come back the same way, the same distance, to the same place you came from in the first place, but this must be merely some sort of trick because the mind returning is now more occupied and fixed on thoughts about the strange somewhere it's left than it is about the familiar place it's coming back to. I don't remember too much of the going back home. It felt to me like the sun should've been up by now, but it wasn't. I suppose me and Papa climbed that ridge again and then climbed down and then crossed the footbridge again and saw the river purling loud underneath us and walked again by Dora's house and maybe the dog smelled us again and barked or didn't; I can't remember, but we were home before I really new what'd happened and after I'd hung up my coat Papa sat down at the kitchen table in his coat still and the fire still burned in the stove and as he'd wanted, the house was warm. The shiner under his right eye kept getting swollener and purpler and it looked like a plum going over-ripe and beginning to split its skin and the last time I looked at his face he was still sitting at the kitchen table with his head down staring at his hands crossed in front of him and his kicked eye had now closed shut completely and he turned slow to look up at me with his one good eyeball blue in the bloodshot cavity floating like the bubble inside a level and he said, "Get the hell away from me."

So I walked out of the house and the chickens gabbled excited when they heard me coming, but I didn't have no feed for them and didn't pack nothing for me to eat neither and hadn't changed into better walking clothing or eaten any breakfast or grabbed

my coat on the way out and I kept walking and the sun came up and froze mid-sky and dropped and the power'd came back on sometime that first day and the wind'd gone away and the moon replaced the sun and did so again and I walked for several days each one grewed less distinct from the next and I drank from streams or garden hoses or wells and a birdbath once and found or stole food from grocers or vegetable patches and first a truckload of crated swine passed and then a season and it was hot nights and days and I walked into trouble and out of it and back in again to a newfound trouble identical and found work of all sorts all shameful and so damaging and hurtful that no one else wanted it and I had the work took away against my wishes or fled deliberate from that same work I'd just pleaded for without wages paid only to find more work down the road of a worse kind than I'd ever knew existed. I crossed the state line without realizing it and meant to turn around and find my way back home one night late when it was raining and muggy and I felt sick and lonesome. I was hungry and couldn't talk or think good no more and I'd lost my penknife and a palmful of sour buckshot-sized apples at the same time and didn't remember where I lived anyway so I kept walking on roads and not roads to where I judged home was and stumbled into by accident Classie's, dripping rain off its roof, went in and ran out from it far off again and finally I must've got awful looking and dire because now the farmers who answered their doors didn't even want me picking their fruit no more or even getting near their horses to clean the shit out of the stables.

When they found me I was sleeping in a abandoned automobile in a junkyard. They emptied out my pockets onto the hood. I had sixteen cents and a book of matches with three matches left in it and a pearl button with some thread still wove through the

holes. I had only one shoe on, clownish and devastated. Even so—as they led me to the squad car that was just a regular car and these were just regular men in suits, but with pistols at their sides—I dragged my foot along the dirt to keep the shoe from falling off and my shirt flapped open and I couldn't remember no more what color Mamma had originally sewed it. The men in suits joked and pee-yewed and held their noses laughing and the bald one, as we drove along, handed me back a candy bar and I ate it. From here everything kept getting worse and worse for me. Things I'd thought I'd hid and forgot forever floated back to the surface. They asked me so many questions I couldn't keep track of my answers good and my past few months and even more months farther back than that came out and soon I was stealing a pocket watch again and a fountain pen and then I took that bridle and the saddle with the ivory horn from a locked-up livery and I did more things they already had on me and some they hadn't but did now and it didn't matter that I got nothing for these things, no money and then they asked about the girl and I said, What girl? but they knew what girl and thought I did too and I did and like Sayer, I couldn't go back now and hang up the phone, because what's done now is done forever. Today and tomorrow and yesterday and everything's that night. Everything's that morning. Everything's my brother. Everything's a good and bad deed mixed up. Everything's Dora and everything's something I don't want it to be no more.

Even if Papa was capable and fit-minded I don't think they'd let him take me back. If they could find him. He ain't come to visit once and every letter I've sent him goes unanswered. Sayer came once to visit me about a month ago, but not since and no one else and he told me Papa don't play cards at Classie's no more and when he knocks

on our door the lights are always out and the place is locked up and looks deserted and he believes Papa might've moved away somewhere and no one else came to visit me after Sayer did.

It might look all right here, but it ain't. Jent, my bunkmate, stole a car and lit it on fire. Plus some other stuff. But he gets visitors: his parents and sometimes a girl about his age and he won't tell me who she is. We know each other's stories. I've told him most of mine, any happy ones with Dora, most all others too, except the one about the night at Classie's when my Mamma left for forever in a hot rod, but I've told him Papa's and Mamma's stories, the ones they've told me and he's a good listener. Jent's smart and he knows I'm not telling them all. Also he knows if he waits, I will. Jent's patient and I guess I could have a worse roommate. Like anyone you see too much of though, sometimes I can't stand him. He's fat and huge and won't switch bunks with me and since he was here already when I got here he'd took the top bed and I can't do nothing about it. When Jent turns eighteen in November, just over two months away, he's gonna get the hell outta this place and become a mountain man and live off the land and build with his own hands a stone house next to a lake and have fresh-caught fish and condor eggs for breakfast and venison for supper with wild onions grilled in grizzly bear fat and at night he'll have his way with his mountain woman wife by the campfire under the stars and they'll have mountain kids and the world can't touch them, but I can't see him climbing any mountain or fending for himself in the wild or for that matter finding a woman to make kids with; he can barely climb the ladder to the top bunk.

If Papa or Mamma don't come sooner, I've got a year and nine months left and then I'm gone like Jent, I hope. They won't come. But so far I'm good and the men in suits have stopped coming by and asking me questions lately. Jent says that when he splits I can take the top bunk but for now he rules the roost. While the other boys are playing baseball me and Jent lay on our beds and talk or read and sometimes watch out the window and make fun of strikeouts victims or clods who've dropped pop flies and we brag about how we could've beat out a throw to first or scooped up a easy grounder. We both hate baseball, Jent because he's too fat and me because I was never taught to catch a ball or swing a bat and was doing other things and we're supposed to be out there, but Deevers, who's a little fat himself, lets us stay inside and gives us library privileges and sometimes at night keeps our light on until ten-thirty and none of the other boys tease Jent anymore after he broke a kid's nose and that leaves me not teased either.

One night I decide to tell Jent the whole story of me and Papa and the man who hit Papa and took Mamma away and how Classie's had no power and all the candles inside. I think he'd already pieced some of it together anyway out of the bits of stories I'd told in the past that overlapped. Our room's quiet and it's late sometime after midnight and we've been talking for a while about nothing much and it's silent and the curtains are open and the parking lot lamp posts shine in turning the dark silverish and I start in talking suddenly after a silence where I think Jent might be asleep, but he says for me to go on so I start retelling the tale.

I don't know how long it takes the way I tell it, but Jent listens wordless the entire time and I know he's still awake because his breathing's soft, not snoring and it's maybe

a hour or a hour and a half of me talking nonstop and my throat going chapped and when I'm to the end, finished, that's when that forgotten dream suddenly pops into my head like I triggered it by going back to Papa shaking me in the retold tale. So I tell the dream to Jent maybe placed wrong in the story at the end like this and it occurs to me now that it's too late and I'd a been better off not having told it to Jent and not remembering it at all in the first place.

From the bunk above my head Jent waits a long time before he speaks. When he does talk he says the dream's not about my father; it's about the rabbit. He says that if the alfalfa hadn't been cut the hawk wouldn't've spotted the rabbit and the rabbit would've got away. What the dream symbolizes according to Jent is that when man screws around with the natural environment—the primeval blueprint, he calls it—the wild animals become more vulnerable to predators. When Jent goes into the wild he won't screw around with the environment. “It's that new moan hay,” Jent insists. “It ruined it all for the rabbit, kicking up like that under his paws when he's running. That's what the hawk saw. Men and animals can't live together any more. It's just all gotten too far out of hand.

“There's no such thing as omens anyway,” Jent continues. “That's all chick stuff, like astrology, make-believe.” He's getting worked up a little like he does sometimes when things for odd reasons get him riled. “Say you tell your dad about the parsnip arm and the human stew. So what. Do you think that's gonna stop him from going after your mom? Is he gonna say, ‘Oh, she peeled my arm, well forget it then, Will, let's get back to bed.’?” Jent laughs. “It's the hay, man,” he says, “the hay.”

The bed slats flex and whine wooden above me as Jent's big body shifts and the entire two beds linked move with his moving and I hear him sliding across the sheets and he leans over the top bunk and stares down at me in the half-dark room and his big round face looms down like a fry skillet bottom and I can't see his true expression in the shadows just a skullish outline and he laughs and I'm beginning to hate him once more all over again.

"You're a coward," Jent says, "plain and simple. You want that dream now so you can warn yourself, not your dad, but you can't go back." His long hair dangles down in a loop from off the upper bunk and I could grab it it's so close and yank him hard off the high bed to the floor and show him just what a coward can do, has done. But I don't.

"I ain't a coward," I say. "It wasn't my fight."

"You just stood there and watched while some drunk loser whapped on your dad. That," he says, "is a coward." He throws down a ratty Kleenex at me and laughs again and everything's everything. I shake it off the bedcovers and it's funny or it ain't but it's the same thing all over again. It's exactly the same.

The bed creaks as Jent gets comfortable and I can tell he's almost going to sleep because his voice is so peaceful and nearly fading to nothing when he asks from the top bunk, "What's the same?"

Done

He saw her again, didn't plan to, planned not to actually, planned to be out of Texas before they would ever have the chance of stumbling into one another again, but it happened, that stumbling into, and once their eyes met and the recognition, the undeniable awareness of each other's presence occurred, he had no choice but to cross the empty dirt road over to her side, where she was shading her eyes from the late afternoon sun with one hand and waving slightly, hesitantly to him with the other.

His boots crunched, breaking clods, leaving low tired clouds of dust in his wake. The road was rutted with deep-sunk tire tracks and pocked with occasional hoof prints from horses or cattle treading. Some narrow runnels of wagon wheels cut through the dirt as well though these imprints were mostly old now. A car passed behind him as he made his way to her. The driver honked the horn, a long moaning blare, and shouted out his name, "Hey, Fenton!" but he did not turn around. Too many people knew him here. He knew too many people. He carried a cardboard suitcase too big for what it held.

She waited for him in front of the tailor's shop, pretending to search her purse for something. When he stood next to her she looked up at him and smiled awkwardly. She had on a white summer dress with yellow dandelions printed on it, though it was already September and starting to get cooler earlier. The dress was cut low in the front and he could see the lace trim of her brassiere inside. It was a dress he'd never seen before.

"Since when you start wearin dresses like that?"

She brought her hand up from inside her purse and pressed it lightly against the skin above her breasts as if it were too hot to fully touch.

"Like what?" she asked him.

"That," he said flatly.

"I've always wore dresses like this." She kept her hand there as if in pledge. "It ain't no different than any others."

She glanced over his shoulder and nodded and smiled weakly to acknowledge someone walking on the other side of the road.

"Yeah," he said finally. "It's different."

She let her hand fall away to her side. She looked up into his face, squinting into the slanting sunlight behind him.

Fenton stared into her eyes and then quickly downward at the neckline of her dress again. Some of the dandelions were folded under at the hem so that they hardly resembled flowers anymore. Her skin looked brown and smooth and soft. Warm. He could see the curving tan-line where the little freckles stopped and the skin turned white again when the material opened forward. On the lace trim of her brassiere were tiny pink

roses and Fenton wondered why someone would put them there, what purpose they could serve. He could not look anywhere else.

She brought her hand up to her breast again. Then she patted around the soft, indented surface just below her Adam's apple as if feeling for something with her fingers that wasn't there anymore. She fidgeted on the clapboard walkway.

Fenton watched her. He couldn't pull his eyes up from inside her dress, though now her arm blocked part of his view. A bird squawked from a fence post. She turned quickly and turned back again. Fenton saw this.

"It's broke," she said finally. "I normally wear it. I always wear it, all the time, but the clasp broke." She kept feeling around under her chin. "So I'm not wearin it now. Until I can get the clasp fixed."

Fenton kept staring directly at her chest.

"Then I can start wearin it again," she said. "You know. Like I used to."

Fenton looked up, into her face.

"What?"

"The necklace you gave me. With the gold horseshoe."

He thought he'd nearly forgotten about it. It'd been a long time. Maybe it just seemed long.

"Yeah," he said. "The horseshoe necklace."

"You told me it was for good luck."

"That's right," Fenton said. "For luck."

It was Friday after her classes. Fenton sneaked off early from his father's machine shop to meet her at the bus stop. They walked through town together holding hands along the walkways in front of the various shops. She stopped, looked in the store window, pointing, tugging him backward by the arm, laughing. Her finger left behind little smudges on the glass. He carried her books under his arm. She wore a bright red sweater and two-tone saddle shoes and drank cream soda from a dark bottle. She was graduating from high school in two weeks.

Fenton went back later that afternoon, after walking her to her doorstep.

"How much is that horseshoe chain in the front window? In the green box?"

He'd never been in this store before and was unsure how to conduct business here.

The shopkeeper walked over, found the key on a ring at his hip, and unlocked the cabinet. He came back, turning over a little paper tag on a string attached to the necklace. He perched on a tall, padded stool behind the cash register. On the wall behind the shopkeeper, an assortment of machine parts, rusty tools, and farm equipment was displayed on various pegs and hooks. High up, near the ceiling, a muddy garden hose had been coiled and tied with twine and hung in the crook of a bent-up 20-penny nail.

"It's eighteen dollars."

"Eighteen?"

"That's real gold, son. Solid. Not plated." The shopkeeper knuckled his gray mustache. "It's worth a good deal more than that if it's in a jeweler." The shopkeeper leaned forward and handed the box over to Fenton and said, "Is this for your girl?"

"Yessir. It's a graduation present."

"Ah. That's nice of you. Any girl'd love to have this beauty. Horseshoes are lucky." The shopkeeper grinned and Fenton saw a wad of leaf tobacco wedged back in his cheek behind the yellow teeth. "Is it a surprise?" He still offered the box to Fenton who hadn't yet taken it

"Yessir. Well, she's seen it already, but she don't know I'm gettin it for her."

Fenton took the box from the shopkeeper and it was slightly fuzzy like the fur of a newborn fieldmouse. He looked at the horseshoe. It looked smaller there in his hands than it had in the window, but it caught the fluorescent light overhead and sparkled like something magical.

"Tell you what," the shopkeeper said, standing. He took the box back from Fenton's hands. "How much you got?" He closed the box and slid it down into an enormous pouch in the front of his apron.

Fenton stood before the shopkeeper and emptied his pockets onto the counter next to the cash register. The bills had been fisted into tight nuggets of dirty paper. The coins clattered onto the Formica surface. A penny whirled in small frenzied orbits like a child's toy unwound. A quarter rolled off the edge of the counter. The shopkeeper lunged deftly and caught it before it fell to the floor. The shopkeeper smoothed flat each bill and sorted the coins into like piles. He counted.

"You got six dollars and forty seven cents," the shopkeeper said, shaking his head, chuckling slightly. "I can't let it go for that. I was thinking more like fifteen." He walked slowly back to the front display case and set the box with the horseshoe necklace back inside. He closed and locked the door. He walked back past Fenton without looking at him and pushed his way behind the cash register and sat again on the tall stool. He pushed the money away from his big belly toward Fenton. "If you got something to trade me for," he said, "I'll consider it."

Fenton went back the next morning, Saturday, early, just as the stores were opening, and found the shopkeeper where he had left him the previous day. He carried at his side a grainsack of things to trade.

The shopkeeper looked up from behind the cash register. He had been looking through a rectangular magnifying glass at some sort of kitchen utensil that Fenton didn't recognize. "You got anything good for me?" he asked, the high stool wobbling underneath him as he shifted his weight.

"Yessir. I think so."

Fenton dumped the contents of the bag onto the counter.

"Take it easy, fella," the shopkeeper said. "Don't go breaking nothing now."

The shopkeeper picked up Fenton's small transistor radio and turned some of the dials on it and held it to his ear. "This thing work?" he asked.

"Yessir, it works," Fenton replied. "It just ain't got no batteries in it."

The shopkeeper opened up Fenton's pocketknife and tested the blade against the hairs on the back of his hand. "Not bad," he said.

"I keep it real sharp," Fenton said. "It's a real Uncle Henry. The name's just wore off the brass plate."

Fenton picked up his cigarette lighter from the counter and handed it to the shopkeeper. "This lighter works too," he said. "It's just out of fluid. Them's my initials on the side."

The shopkeeper shrugged. "How's that help me any?" he asked. "You think that makes it more sellable? Now I got to hope for someone to come in looking for a lighter who has the initials..." He looked at the lighter. "...FD."

Fenton was quiet.

"Are these your cufflinks?" The shopkeeper regarded Fenton with suspicion.

Fenton had taken them from his daddy's bureau drawer the night before.

"Yessir," he said. "They're mine. They're real silver, I think, and the black stuff's somethin too." Encircling the smooth ebony stones were silver flecks that reminded Fenton of the little plastic jars of glitter that preschoolers pasted onto butcher paper. He hoped the shopkeeper wouldn't notice them.

"When you ever wear cufflinks like these for?" the shopkeeper asked.

"I worn 'em lots of times. Mostly to dances and socials with my girlfriend."

The shopkeeper eyed Fenton warily. He examined the pocketknife again, checking to see that the blade wasn't loose and that it closed cleanly. "Well, to be honest," he said after a moment, "this all don't truly amount to too much." Fenton

couldn't see the cufflinks inside of the man's thick hands. "The knife's about the valuablest piece, and even that'll only bring me in a couple bucks. I just don't get much business for stuff like this." He waved his hand at Fenton's belongings scattered upon the countertop. "Business is slow. You been in here a bit and ain't no one else come. And it's a Saturday. When they do come they're mostly looking for mower blades or saddles and the like."

The shopkeeper stood and put his hands in the pockets of his slacks. "Tell you what I'm gonna do though," he said, rocking back on his heels and then forward again to the balls of his feet. "I'm gonna make you the first sale of the day." He took his hands out of his pockets and out from under his apron and clapped them once loudly in front of his large stomach. "Would you like that, son?" he asked Fenton.

"Yessir," Fenton said. "I would."

"You don't want to disappoint your girl now, do you?"

"Nosir."

"Good. Now I already told you that what you're trading me ain't enough to cover the price of the necklace. But if you were to give me those five ones we counted out yesterday, I suppose you'd be close enough."

Fenton watched the shopkeeper lumber toward the front of the store across creaking pine floorslats so heelpitted and so worn they looked bleached.

The shopkeeper stooped to unlock the display case, slid the door open, took out the green box with the horseshoe necklace in it, and slid the door closed again. He locked the door and walked back toward Fenton with the box cupped inside his big

hands, smiling. "I'll still be taking a bit of a loss," the shopkeeper said. "But I'll do it." He stepped around Fenton and pushed his way through an opening and settled onto his stool behind the cash register. The chair cushion hissed air out underneath him. "Hell. If I can sell the lighter for three dollars, I guess I might could break about even." He leaned over and slowly handed the box to Fenton who had already fanned out the five one-dollar bills flat upon the counter.

Fenton reached out with a shaky hand and took the box from the shopkeeper. "Thank you, sir," he said quietly. Inside the box, the horseshoe pendant sat like something lifted from a pirate's treasure chest.

When Fenton turned to leave, the shopkeeper was already looking through the magnifying glass again, and the money Fenton laid on the countertop was gone.

Fenton stepped out of the pawnshop onto the sidewalk. Only a few people were out this early on a Saturday. It was hot already. He thought that maybe he would take her down to the lake later to the ropeswing if her daddy let her out of the house. He took a final look at the horseshoe necklace. It had flipped over on its face, the thin-linked chain twisted and slightly kinked. Fenton turned it right again. He snapped closed the small felt box and shoved it down into the pocket of his bluejeans.

The cufflinks won't be missed, thought Fenton. His father hadn't worn them since he married Fenton's mother nineteen years ago. On the way home he stopped at the five and dime to buy some wrapping paper. He'd make his own card.

The sun began to drop behind the mountains and the wind started swirling dust and leaves in circles around their feet. The tailor came out of his store, locked the door behind him. He nodded toward the couple as he passed. "Afternoon, Fenton," he said.

Fenton tipped his hat. "Afternoon, Mr. Culler."

"I'm closing early," the tailor said. "To watch Jimmy play tonight. First game of the season." He smiled at Fenton.

He turned to look at the girl. "Your dress will be ready by six tomorrow. Is that enough time?"

"Sure, Mr. Culler," she said. "Thank you."

The tailor walked on.

Fenton reached into the pocket of his shirt and pulled a cigarette from the pack. He swiped a wooden match on the sole of his boot. It hissed and then flared. He cupped the flame to block out the wind. He felt its warmth on his cheek. His fingernails were chewed across and black underneath. He shook out the match and flicked it away with his thumb. The thin trail of smoke arced into the dirt. He put his hands in his pockets, but pulled them out again. He had to smoke.

"I'm gettin a dress fixed here," the girl said, nodding toward the tailor's shop behind her. "It's for the dance tomorrow night." The wind blew some hair into her face and she brushed it away. "You goin'?"

"No." He paused for a minute and took a long pull from the cigarette. "I ain't."

She knew him well enough not to press it further. They stood without talking for a bit. Fenton saw that she wore sandals and her toenails were painted red. One of her

toes, the little one on the left foot, had a ring around it. She turned her wrist up slowly and moved her eyes down to her watch. The moon shone, pale and big above them, and the sun shone with it, dropping off the opposite end of the sky.

“You got to be somewhere?” he asked her.

“No,” she said. “Just to Maylene’s later.”

“What, you gettin your hair done, too?”

“Just trimmed up a little.”

Fenton shook his head and smoked. She rubbed her brown arms, and she seemed to shiver slightly. Fenton just looked at her. She looked at him. Neither spoke. She said finally, “How your folks doin?”

“They ain’t complainin none. Don’t see ‘em much no more.”

“I heard your daddy kicked you out.”

Fenton pulled deeply from the cigarette again. “Yeah.”

“I’m real sorry.”

“It’s alright.”

“Where you been stayin.”

“Around. I was at Wickets a few days last week.”

Fenton saw something in her eyes weaken for a moment and the hard lines of her face went soft.

“It ain’t so bad. Besides, that’s over now. I ain’t there no more.”

“They sore at me?”

“My folks?”

“Yeah.”

“Sore? Naw, they ain’t sore. Not at you.”

Fenton let the cigarette fall onto the wooden planks at his feet and smothered it, twisting his heel.

After a while he said, “I’d better get on. Wouldn’t want him seein you with me. Might cause trouble.”

“He ain’t jealous.”

“That’s good. That’s a good trait for a guy to have. Save him a lot of aggravation later on.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Nothin.”

“It means something. Everything means something.”

“Not everything.”

“Listen,” she said. “I’m real sorry about everything. I don’t hold nothin against you.”

“You got no reason to.”

“You hate me?”

“You’re just wearin me out is all. It don’t matter none if I like you or hate you. If it’s your conscience’s botherin you then tell me what to say and I’ll ease it.”

“It wouldn’t be you tellin, it’d be me.”

“Same thing.”

“How’s it the same?”

Fenton didn't answer.

She looked at him hard for a moment, studying his features. She started to say something, stopped, took a step forward, and then said something else.

"What you gonna do now?"

"There's always somethin to do if you want to. I'm goin to farm my Uncle Chester's land in Michigan. He's always lookin for a hand. I'm leavin tonight."

"Michigan's cold."

"I like cold. Used to live in Montana."

"I didn't know."

"No," he said, "you didn't."

She stuck out her hand and for a moment Fenton just stared at it, unsure what she wanted of him. Finally he took her hand and felt the familiarity, the frailty, the smallness of it inside of his. He'd never shook a woman's hand before and it felt foreign, as if it weren't connected to anything at the other end. The skin was cool to his touch.

"Well," she said, "I wish you luck. Take care."

"Thanks." He touched the brim of his hat slightly. "I will."

He reached down and picked up his cardboard suitcase. It was very light. He turned from her and started walking toward the bus depot. There were no streetlamps, but it wasn't quite dark yet. The sun was gone, but enough of its light remained to guide Fenton forward. He pulled the collar of his denim jacket closer about his neck to shield the wind and cool. He didn't look back to her, but she watched him leave; he saw her reflection in the glassfront window of the post office across the street. The weather

whipped her dress against her body in bursts and pulled her long brown hair back on her head. When he reached the end, the corner, where the window of the post office stopped and the road headed north out of town, she was still standing there watching. His image quavered next to hers in the darkened windowpane. He drew the pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket. His first step pulled their images apart. His second never saw them again.

The Industry of Preservation

I. LEFT FOR DEAD

For the first time in his life Jonathan Layber could do nothing but sit and think. He didn't like it. If he had learned anything at all through this most primal of educations it meant nothing now, arriving far too late, and it would be something else entirely, some interference far away from and far beyond any willful beckon he could muster within that would pull him through this dreadful mess he'd gone and found. Or that wouldn't. He sat and thought about this and all of the other things that shouldn't be but were. He was in pain, wounded, on his way to dying. Thinking about such things made the pain worse, but he couldn't stop it. All the nevers came up rising from a debilitated suppression, not for the first time, but perhaps for the last: never could they have known when they'd stolen his boots they'd stolen sixty-five hundred of his dollars along with them. Never

could they have thought such a man—a man who looked like *that*—possessed so much money, or even any amount of money at all. Never could they have mistook so fortuitously scrap refuse, cast-off garments, for trove. Surely they couldn't have. But they'd robbed him anyway. And they were two. One, lanky, tall—or maybe just tall in relation to the other—with soft, sunburned cheeks pudgy slightly and a constantly anguished expression behind his eyes like that of a baby getting ready to cry, had stuttered. Despite the malady he did most, nearly all of the talking, pointing the rifle and blurting laborious commands at Layber, conducting the robbery with a rehearsed assurance, though his voice was set at too high a pitch and he seemed physically ill-suited for a criminal undertaking like this one, with his doughy childish face and sluggish spider-limbed movements. As if neighing repeatedly, he'd pull back his bluish blubbered lips and flash crooked imbecilic grins of long yellowing teeth, all cockeyed to each other, some in the process of going bad, others already noteworthy for having achieved the process some long time ago. Like some swooning hypnotist, Layber dangled the pocketwatch by its chain before the skinny thief and watched the horrible sunlight prism inside the revolving pitted silver. Already hamstrung, thigh split wide open, and teetering on his knees on the rocky desert ground, he slowly submitted his pocketwatch over toward the gangly, outstretched arm, the white skeletal hand reaching out under the drooping rifle, as the other man called him Corvin. "Careful, Corvin," he said.

The other man, a Negro and a dwarf, sheathing a ludicrously large machete, stood watching the scene from a fair distance, shirtless in dusty battered black shoepolished brogans, child-sized, yet as thick and wide as he was tall, maybe even thicker and wider,

with sinewed, striated flesh, glistening like a black bear that had come up out of a river before it'd shaken itself dry. Huge anvilled obsidian jowls catching the sun, all sleek with sweat and hatless above a thatch of dense black curls and cabbage leaf ears, he'd only moments earlier unhorsed himself and slid about with the deceptive deftness of a dancer to help ransack Layber's belongings with loosely fluid motions that belied the truncation of his blunted limbs. Now he stood safely slotted behind Corvin, off near his small horse, tipping Layber's boots upside down and shaking them, thrusting his fibrous arm inside of them like a starving anteater thrusts its nose into a colony of ants. Before Corvin had pitched face forward into the dust and died, he groaned, trying to shout, but squealing callowly instead, "G-g-g-get the hell out of here, F-F-Finn, he's got my g-g-gun," but Finn—hunched over and half-swallowed by the mound of pillaged goods stacked on his pony's croup—had already spurred the animal, and his legs splayed out perpendicularly from the pony's swayback until he scooted forward and clamped the withers on either side and rode almost on the neck as he galloped rapidly away toward the faraway eastern mountains. With his right hand the man named Finn flailed wildly with the quirt, repeated downward bludgeonings of his muscled arm against the titian mane, and Layber thought, even from this distance, inside the still echoing gunfire resounding in his ears, he could hear the sharp whip-cracks beating the pony's thrusting neck. He could see his boots dangling from Finn's left hand—mere shadows now, only fuzzed shapes of boots dangling—and then he couldn't. Drop em, he thought, drop em. He pumped Corvin's shotgun. When he fired again, this time at the speck Finn was becoming, the shell ejected past Layber's cheek, and his flayed leg gave way from under

him and the recoil knocked him to the seat of his trousers. He'd fired in haste and poorly, with a stupidity that sunk in only later. Powder had singed his right eye and it'd felt like a mule hoof when the butt plate kicked back into his shoulder. From his fallen position, sitting, he pumped the rifle again and pulled the trigger. Click. Layber sat panting, dripping sweat. Click. He jerked back the action slide a final time to ready the chamber, but he knew the gun was empty.

Near a gradual dawn the next morning, gone moonless, still yet sunless, a starless sky blanching in reluctant imperceptibilities, Layber sat himself upright from the hard desert varnish. So during the night he must have slumped over, toppled from his guarded perch, and curled up on the ground in some fitful imitation of sleep. But he didn't remember doing this. Corvin's rifle, no more now than a paper-maché prop from some destitute back-alley stageshow, rested across his lap almost weightless. Now he slid his way backward a few feet—his inutile leg smearing a shallow swath through the pebbled topsoil—leaned back up against the rough bole of the solitary Joshua tree again as he had the night before, before toppling, stocking-footed and weary. Fallen leaves, dead, stiff shivs, pierced upward through the seat of his thin dungarees, had so all night long, and no amount of shifting his weight freed him. A killing thirst hazed inside his throat, but only a leveled desert plain of saguaro and nubs of devil's claw spread out everywhere around him, and Layber'd drunk the last of his water in the dark night previous. The flattened waterskin lay at his side in the dim light like some worthless organ removed and discarded after a surgery. Thirst, thought Layber, crazes a man more than hunger ever

could. Or will. Several paces off his horse lay dead on its flank with a bullet hole through her forelock. It had been a good horse and he'd known her for longer than two of his wives. Now it wasn't a good horse anymore. Layber found its years of loyalty and steadfast service had cracked apart along with the shattering of her skull and amounted to nothingness now. The saddlebags with Layber's pack gear and Colt revolver inside had been stripped off and stolen, along with the new double-rig saddle, the latigo hitches, his knife, and the coarse-woven horse blanket which he'd traded a fiercely tattooed Mojave Indian a harmonica for once. And his boots, his three-dollar Mexican ropers, worth less even than that to anyone else but him—especially the stunted son-of-a-bitch Finn—were gone, everything gone. At least the bastard never got my flashlight, he thought.

Morning light and its baleful heat came on. And came on. Layber watched it coming, and the fading blue morning air all around him lifted away and evaporated, casting him alone inside a pale, quavering atmosphere as the early white sun of dawn tipped over the far east mountains, gigantic and pernicious. Corvin's corpse lay close by facedown in a drying red paste of dirt mixed with blood. Urine. Overhead, within the gnarled uplifting branches of the Joshua tree Layber watched a flicker with a twig in its bill hop into a small bored hole in the bark, into shade. Two scorpions scuttled quickly under a little stone pile, their armored underbellies grating in unison with Layber's own scraping breaths softly along the sand. All of this, this animal life, must mean water nearby, somewhere, but he was in no shape to go about finding it, couldn't even crawl more than a few yards, he feared. Wind shot down into the canyon, furrowed blowouts along the vast brown fabric of the plain, but the gusts were only hot, malefic pesterings

without deliverance. This desert sand ever shifting yet always unchanged. Half the sun like an abscess revealed now, and then more, and then its awful entirety hanging above the mountain. All about Layber, as a spectral light began to recognize the world, animals sought shelter, home. Everything knew what was coming, had sense enough to take cover from it. Except for the sporadic blasts of fetid wind sweeping over Corvin's rapidly festering corpse—a sibilant friction—everything was becoming very quiet, an unstirring soundlessness foretelling the oncoming day. At the base of a flowering cholla a rattlesnake emerged, uncoiling just slightly to bask. Today its sunbathing would be short-lived. Soon, the earth ground here would capture the sun, imprison its power in the deepest pits of the desert's core and deliver it back upward until there was nowhere it wasn't. Too soon this earth fire would begin to bake the snake's pearly underscales so quickly, force even this cold-blooded reptile toward its shadowed rock chink—another home where it could continue living for another day.

And the hot morning came still, would do so without abatement. Layber leaned and stretched, dragged by its rawhide neckcord the waterskin over, unstopped it and placed the spigot against his cracking lower lip with a hand just trembling so, and tilted back his head and squeezed the sack. It was empty, not a drop. This, he'd known already. He tossed the waterskin away in disgust as recent regrets, wrong decisions he'd made, began seeping in to his mind to torment him. But were they decisions? Or were they enactments pre-governed in a passed time or one not yet commenced? Until now he'd never thought much about such things, didn't like to and never had much reason to. But perhaps cleansing out his leg wound with the water had been foolish. Wasteful.

What would plain water do for a gash like this? The little he'd saved swinging at the bag's bottom like a cysted paunch, he'd too rapidly consumed. Or did he? He knew it was not uncommon to find men dead in the desert with water still left yet in their canteens, saving it for later. He'd heard such stories bandied around at Claybird's general store, as, behind the counter, he'd wrap parcels of back bacon and hock joints for crop-sooted farmers and greasy workmen who chuckled morosely at this perfect irony they had no term for. "Another'n thirsted to death," they'd say, "with life sittin right there in his flask next to em." And then with either unbelief or some ingrained commitment to brotherhood and empathy against the world's aloofness, they'd shake their heads all together while Layber tied knots into the butcher's twine. Perhaps shredding his shirt into a tourniquet was a mistake. Without a shirt, his skin would cook rapidly underneath this soon shadeless tree. Undoubtedly. But he would have bled to death otherwise, wouldn't he? Yes, he assured himself. At least this gave him a chance, didn't it? Surely it had. He'd done right. He'd given himself hope where before none had existed. No matter how minimal. So Layber pushed aside these self-doubts, these nagging second-guesses, and forgot them, even enjoyed the cool moment of satisfaction in that no matter what happened to him from this point forward, he'd done the right thing, and that's all that a man can do for himself.

But it wasn't long until a horde of different, not so recent regrets—regrets not so decisively pardoned—took their place—a seemingly incalculable number of rash decisions and broken choices he traced backward through his lifetime to a definitive point he thought might be the furthest, maybe even the first, the beginning of it all, but then

always he could find another further back and then further back yet again, until he became more exhausted from the redundancy and futility of this brooding, and found it best simply to try to live with and accept the totality of the path, because it was enough for him to realize that solving the origin didn't make a difference when the very next origin, and then the next again, all of them aligned in a fathomless succession, led him here. Well, he thought, here I am. Suddenly he almost envied Corvin, for whom it was finally over. Almost.

Then, more savage winds like air afire ripped over the land. A pair of dust devils rose up like twinned congregators from the oblate brown immensity swirling and strode across the remoter badlands like shrunken conic nomads hopelessly lost forever in some near-blind, ceaseless and trackless gallivanting. Layber lifted his arm to shield his eyes and mouth from windspun grit. In its nest the flicker slept and the Joshua tree stood again without sound or motion inside. When he looked for it, the rattlesnake had lifted its spade-shaped head swaying in survey. It elongated itself along the ground, head still raised, then half spiraled around back into its own twisting and untwisting esses off to some cooler crevice—some home for today just or for the rest of its days left—hidden beyond the cholla. Layber sat, waited. He pictured his own home, a home he'd never thought of with very much fondness until now. Home. He spoke the word softly, scanning again the monstrous world around him drenched in a dry yellowing radiance. Home. That's where he was headed before this, all of this, befell him.

II. THE BOOTS

In his meager workshop Layber stooped over and clicked on the bandsaw, and the pleasing industrial buzz pierced and ruptured the quiet as the machine stiffened into life. The cement flooring rose up cool into his feet through the thin woolen stockings, which had been darned so many times they were now two sizes too small. It was very early morning and the noise would wake his wife Mellie, whom he'd left sleeping still in their little three-room close-by house. Only a sparse light filtered in through the dirty windowpanes of the toolshed shop. The bald, paint-spattered overhead lightbulb, still swinging from its cord from when Layber'd pulled the chain, left the room drab and one-dimensional, excreting a weak haloed pit of phosphor from within. Yet fluctuant shadows oscillating on the walls and ceiling and floor were already stilling into the flung black cutouts of their true objects as Layber worked at the saw in the sepia gloom. Outside, a new day's light progressed. The saw needed oiling and it chugged and heaved at times roughly in shuddering fits almost tubercular. But soon he'd have a brand new one if he wanted. Soon he could have any new tool he wanted. If he wanted he would soon be the first man in Paddis Grove to own an automobile. And this, he wanted. But when he did this he'd do it wisely, in such a way so that no suspicion got aroused in anyone, so that no one ever would get to meddling with questions and ask how such a thing like that could have ever happened to such a man as him. He'd find a way.

Somehow the musty air and whirring motor groans soothed Layber, enclosing his world, holding the hard luck he'd been stumbling into for all the past years at abeyance. All that bad luck wouldn't matter any more with this good luck he was fashioning now.

His pale forearms flexing at the machine became dappled by the accretion of bad light bleeding through the speckling panes. Though the saw motor toiled through its donkeywork, he'd just recently changed the blade for this and its fresh teeth cut through the hard rubber boot heel easily, paring away the seven-sixteenths-inch slice and lopping it off onto the saw table where it came to rest like a smallish slice of pumpernickel bread. When he'd done the same to the second boot, the left one, he stooped again to click off the bandsaw and it came to rest in an utter silence, and he set the two severed slices of heel onto his workbench where he had already laid out an accordence of various handtools. He placed the right boot heel-upward in the bench vise and cranked the jaws tight around the sole. Then he grabbed the new secondhand rubberheaded mallet and gouge and began hammering the U-shaped tip into the exposed heel. Shavings curled neatly away from the tip of the gouge with each downstroke and he blew into the dish he was making in the heel to clear them away. On the heels' perimeters he would leave enough of a border to secure the screws, eight per. Now and again he had to readjust the boot in the vise if it began falling through the jaws. So old and worn they were, so fragile, he feared destroying them should he clamp them too tightly. It felt good to work though, to have a goal after so long a period of shiftlessness and waste. Sweat pebbled his brow and trickled off the tip of his nose on occasion, for in places the rubber heel seemed nearly fossilized. Here, for a moment, the gouge failed to budge, until he struck harder. Then, instead of the neat curlicues, chips, small brittle chunks would break away from the walls and he was forced to reach in with his fingers to pinch them out when even blowing hard failed. So only with effort did the hollowing come. Over two hours

he'd spent the previous evening on his armchair, spread burlap sack and little tin oilcan in his lap, honing the gouge edge and a few drill bits on a whetstone to a straightrazor's precision; each scraping pass along the stone sent little shivers up his fingers. Behind a wall just a few feet away in the kitchen, Mellie washed the supper dishes. Between sips of his coffee and angled passes of the metal along the surface grit, she reminded him again amid the splash of water and overkill clanging of pots, how ridiculous a thing he'd become. "It'll never work," she said. "It's ridiculous." Something solid and heavy and clanging like cast iron fell or was knocked from the dish drainer onto the counter, slid along the counter and fell hard to the floor, reechoing through the house like a hammered bell. "It's ridiculous," she said again. "*You're* ridiculous."

Now, at the workshop door she stood, looking in at her husband. "What's all this racket about? What the hell you doing?" She hadn't yet shaken the morning phlegm from the words so they came husky like a man's.

Layber turned halfway from his work, still holding the mallet and gouge. Early sunlight rising from behind, transpired the gauzy nightgown draped loosely about her figure as she leaned slightly framed in the doorway with one hand pressed against the jamb and the other resting balled on the jut of her hip. Just behind her bare feet a cigarette butt smoldered uncrushed on the dirt pathway that led back to their house. Her hair was a pile of mayhem pinned recklessly atop her head with a bunch of metal barrettes, and her face, pressed into an almost lopsided oval from sleep, looked just about tired of it all. A false eyelash dangled from her eye, a furry little brown caterpillar with only four legs on a leaf. She was overall unlovely and naked inside the nightgown. He

could see the buoyant sway and smooth arch of breasts and the backlit silhouetted curve of buttocks, the bushy patch of dark pubic hair. It looked good inside there, like it always does on most women. Even when the faces don't.

“I already done tol you what I'm doin.”

“You still following through with this stupid nonsense?” She was squinting. A martyr's wince, Layber thought, for effect, to let him know, You woke me up with this godawful clamoring and I'm still sick to death with the same headache you gave me last night.

He dropped the mallet and gouge on the workbench, turned fully to face her. “I tol you yesterday I was.”

“You told me lottsa things you ain't done. Even things yesterday.”

“Well I'm tellin you this today.”

She looked almost ready to shut up and go back to the house, as if through this colossal inconvenience she'd persevered, made her point, and could now go back to sleep it off. Instead, she went on. “It's a stupid idea, and you're stupid for trying it.”

“Listen,” Layber said. “That's the third time you called me stupid. There won't be a fourth.”

Neither of them moved for a moment. They stared at one another. Outside a few mourning doves began cooing in the treetops. Their feral housecat, in heat under the farmer's porch, moaned as if in the throes of death. The tight square room grew incrementally lighter around them. When Mellie coughed, everything inside the see-through nightgown quivered, seemed to absorb the new day's light and shimmer against

the fabric, until the fabric itself disappeared, became one with the skin, became the skin, left her truly naked and close, so close her breath expelled left a warm, musty presence on the air.

Their best bouts in bed came always on the heels of their most savage arguments. The more intense, more violently energized her shouting became, the more sexually aggressive she became in turn, later. Only at bedtime, after the fighting words in her had marched their windy parade and fizzled out through sheer exhaustion, could she reignite the simmering furies that had never fully died, and through sex, ultimately kill them. For him this made the often-pointless battles worthwhile. Last night she'd entered the bedroom where Layber lay atop the quilt to avoid the heat, with her hair pinned up and lipstick and mascara and blush, practically lovely, and she smelled sweet from her bath, and she wore only a white towel wrapped around her then, and looked to him still irate deep beneath her eyes, but when she dropped the towel and came toward him everywhere else on her body already appeared soothed.

How quickly, without fail, she could recuperate come morning. Fused now within the sooty scent of machinery and metallic tinge of handtools, he could smell on her skin, inside from between her legs, his own musky exertions of the night before, and hers, all one. He turned back to his bench and the tools and the second boot's heel nearly finished in the vise's grips. "I got work to do. Instead of all this harpin you could get in, make me some coffee, some breakfast, pack me some provisions."

"When you leaving?"

Exhaling sharply, he drew his dimstore watch from his pocket and stared at its face as if he'd inscripted the answer to her question there long ago and had merely forgotten what it was. He'd told her this already: "After noon. I want to be at the desert by nightfall. Through it before sun-up. Hang around Keyland for a bit. Be at Claybird's after he closes shop, goes to sleep. In, out, and back home early next evening at the latest, richer than sin." He set the watch down face-up on the workbench, watched the second hand revolve slowly around in the sub-dial for a few moments, turned the watch around and leaned it up against a cigar box of hoof knives on a shelf so he could see Mellie inside the nickel finish. Then he took up the mallet and gouge again, a few more firm hammerings that rattled the nails in the coffee can on the shelf beneath the pegboard.

"Sin is right," Mellie said, shoving herself nearly out of the watch and away from the doorjamb to a more upright stance, fully centered within the doorway's rectangle, but half removed in the reflection. She slid her wedding ring up her finger to the first knuckle, rubbed at the white band of skin at the base of the finger and slid the ring back down the joint. Three years ago she'd married Layber for all of the noble qualities she saw inside of him that didn't exist. He didn't hear her bare footsteps, but when he glanced up again her form smeared inside the watchcase entirely, and the next time she spoke her voice came from even closer, louder, its tone tinged with something working its way toward exasperation, perhaps about to land finally at the terminal hatred that had been coming on for so long and now directly behind him. "Stride won't make it, you know; she's getting old. You neither. And those boots are going to fall apart before you're even around the corner past the drive. They ain't made for activity."

“Stride’ll be just fine, she’s stronger’n she’s ever been, and these boots you’re so fond of criticizin are gonna make me rich. Us rich. And when I come back and people see me ridin into town and steppin into Conrad’s Saloon outta that shiny new gold Model A chewin on a sugarcane sweet cigar, it’ll be like Warren G. Harding all over again, but better, because my car’ll be better than his was. And I’ll be wearin those brand new caiman-hide cowboy boots from Keller’s and big smile along with em. Hell, there’ll still be plenty left over for whatever you want, that Singer from the catalog, the dishware, I don’t care, whatever you want. A place in the city. We’ll be set. And these here boots are why. And then you’ll be talking outta the other side of your mouth. You’ll see just how stupid it is, you all will, just wait and see.”

“You go through with this shit, even if you make it back, which you won’t, there won’t be an us anymore. No more. I’ll see sure to that.” Despite her volatility, it wasn’t often she cursed. Without turning, Layber removed the boot from the vise, tapped the heel on the workbench to clear the cavity and examined his handiwork. He reached up and pulled down his Fulton hand drill from a hook on the pegboard already fitted with the proper bit. In the watch, her vague form wavered, like an image on water, carelessly erased below the soft starburst of lightbulb. “And I’ll be waiting for you, all right,” it said, “on the porch with a shotgun. You’re bad enough, dangerous enough, now. You think I’m going to live with a criminal? A no-good robber?” He marked off eight points in pencil around each perimeter of the cut-off heel slices.

“Yeah, I think you are.”

“Well, you’re wrong.”

He C-clamped a woodblock onto the edge of the workbench with one of the cut-off slices of heel tucked securely on top. When he turned the drill's crank the gears clicked efficiently and the chuck spun the bit quickly into the rubber and out through the other side into the wood. Fifteen to go. Then sixteen more on the boots themselves. He paused with the drill poised above the next pencil mark. That's thirty-one.

"All this fussing and preparation... For nothing. If you'd only put that much effort into getting real work. Honest work... You quit your job, or get fired, to this day I don't know which, and drag me out here to this shit hole dump, away from everything, away from my friends, my mama, with nothing, for six months nothing but sitting around and drinking our shred of savings away."

"You think it's easy findin work?"

"Well I know it must be especially difficult from your armchair. I know that much."

Layber jerked his head up to stare at a spot in the corner where a netting of cobweb dust hung like dirty gauze. "Besides, this ain't for nothing. It's for everything." He struggled to keep his voice steady, calm. "They check the boots. They tip em upside down and shake em."

"Who's they?"

"Highwaymen. Bandits."

"Oh, you mean men like you."

The drill bit slid spinning off the cut segment of boot heel. When he reached to catch the careening drill the bit caught the palm of his hand. A bubble of blood rose from

the white skin within the center of blackened creases, swelling, and when he lifted his hand to look more closely at it, he saw the bubble reform into a moving line, trickling, almost with a weirdly defiant manner of lethargy down his palm, over his wrist, coursing as might course an unfamiliar passage upon a navigational chart when the hesitating eye follows it, until he rubbed it away on an underwear grease rag. His pocketwatch had slid outward, half-rolled away from the cigar box, and came to rest flat on the shelf next to a sunken cake of beeswax.

In all their time together, through all of their fights, even the most vicious, he'd never once struck her; he'd been tempted, on more than one or two occasions came so close with her pinned backed against a wall, but he never did. When he whirled quickly around from his workbench, bleeding from his palm, clutching the blackened underwear in his fist, with still a long and dangerous few days ahead and little assured patience left to take with him anymore, he thought this should be the first time. It wasn't until he'd taken two strides toward the door that he realized Mellie had already left. He could see the back of her, walking up the path through the weeds to the house, her buttocks flexing through the skin of nightgown with each step, her hair pulling loose from its pins and falling down her back, swinging back and forth, in sway to her rhythms, holding the memory of the sun inside. "Goddamn woman," he muttered. He turned for the last time back to his workbench. He got to working. He grabbed the drill. He stuck the bit into the next pencil dot along the orbit around the heel, a divot quarter-ways through begun inside the smudge from when the drill had slipped earlier. He cranked the handle. Too

fast. He staunched a little blood, kept the rag wrapped around his hand. He steadied himself and cranked again. He finished boring the hole. That's thirty.

He'd begun devising this specific plan just days ago, but once he'd started plotting, the precise and exacting mechanics involved came rapidly and with a fulfilled and surprising clarity. Because for months he'd bandied about variously vague ideas, wild pipedreams to get money; he'd considered a general robbery, lying awake at night next to Mellie's heavy breaths, imagining himself capable of a pawnshop sacking or a jewelry store holdup or perhaps even a bank heist. It seemed impossible, ludicrous. It's not that he was afraid; he'd committed worse crimes long ago, and even a few recently behind Mellie's back nearly as despicable as these conjured now, enough to keep them plugging along for the past few months at least, and had been through enough sinning in his forty-four years to forget what fear felt like. Fear wasn't the problem. It's just that no matter how much he speculated he could never arrive at a pleasing notion, a safe, surefire scheme where the rewards outweighed any risks involved, by a boundless margin. All he knew was he was sick and tired of plugging along, scraping by like a nobody. In the past he'd taken gambles, sure, but only when the odds were stacked securely in his favor. He'd need, somehow, to stack those odds again. Dealing with armed guards, watchdogs, prideful landowners, defiant store merchants, panicky bank customers, tripwires, the police, unfamiliar building layouts... Well, it all looked better left forgotten. So that's what he did; he forgot it.

Then he thought of Claybird.

After finishing his work on the boots, he went out back and watered and fed Stride and inspected her shoes and brushed her and spoke to her encouraging words, gentle praises she could carry with her on the long ride before them. Her eyes were bright and clear, big and brown like chestnuts. He'd been babying her for the past three days and she looked good, had more than enough life left in her yet. On the fencepost he'd hung her saddle and the saddlebags themselves, ready to go, stocked with the implements of his journey: first aid kit, a new loaded pistol, bullets, compass, flashlight, blankets, knife, screwdriver and a few selected handtools, flint wallet, horse feed, some farrier supplies; his load would be heavy; he'd forgotten nothing. Only thing left now was his own food and water. Mellie sure as much better have that ready.

On the short walk up from the paddock back to the house the boots, though flimsy from wear, had felt like they always had under his feet, rickety yet yielding confident faith. The heels, with their newly chiseled compartments, held strong, and when he'd examined them in the bright light of midday, passed even the closest scrutiny undetected; each screw had been countersunk and set with such precision that they looked made that way from the Mexican factory. No one, even if they'd seen the screws, and they wouldn't ever think to look there, would suspect a thing.

When he walked up the porch steps and into the kitchen it was after noon. Mellie had put on some clothes. She sat at the kitchen table smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee. Layber found a bandage inside the utensil drawer, covered the puncture in his palm with it, grabbed down a coffee cup from the cupboard, poured himself some from

the percolator on the stovetop, and sat down across from her at the pineboard table. In front of her the ashtray was filled with snuffed-out butts piled like broken gray stones in a crumpling wall. He sipped from his coffee, cold, said, "Did you pack me some foodstuffs like I asked?"

She pulled the cigarette from her lips and ground it out, masoning another stone at the base of the wall. Then she shook a fresh one from the pack, put it in her mouth, and lit it with a blue-tip wood match. She sucked in as he watched the tip glow. She held the breath for a long time, released a lazy scud of smoke before her face, and answered him without removing the cigarette from her mouth. "No."

"Well you just good for nothin, ain't you."

"I'm not good for abetting, that's something."

"Look. This is a sure deal. When I..." But he trailed off. He reached for his coffee then pushed it away, gathering his thoughts. If he couldn't appease her with the promise of money, then he simply couldn't appease her. Nothing could, not ever. "It's at least four or five thousand dollars," he began. "Five thousand. Do you know what that means?" At least she was listening now, and though he'd revealed to her the gist of his stratagem before, he explained it all again, if for anyone, perhaps solely for himself, as if hearing the story reaped with such conviction from his own mouth, in his own words, borne without a glitch from the very start to the finishing point with the fortune fully achieved, made it manifest, already actual.

"How does a little storeowner like that," Mellie asked him when he'd finished, "get so much cash?"

“I tol you, Claybird’s been whorin out his daughter Clara for at least the past twenty years or more. That’s a long time, and he never spends a dime on hisself. Or her. Plus he does decent sellin goods. I used to pull in sometimes twenty, twenty-five, thirty bucks a day.”

“Thought you said she was retarded.”

“Well, she ain’t retarded. She’s off some, yeah, not quite all there in the head, maybe odd-shaped and ugly and fat, but some guys, a lot of guys, go for that sort of thing. Even’ll pay extra for it. She’s at least mid-forties now, and they’re still linin up last I checked. S’pose he’ll just keep whorin her till she gets to the point where she’s even odder-shaped and so ugly and so fat men don’t want her no more.”

Mellie glared at him, glanced down to crush out her last cigarette, looked back up again, glaring. “That’s a point that’ll never be reached,” she said, “not to my knowledge.”

“All the better for us.”

That she still sat at the table asking questions was, to Layber, a promising sign. She came at him with another: “How do you know you can even get into the safe?”

“Because Claybird was drunk one day, bragging to the guys, to me, about some nudie photographs he had, and I followed him to the back room and saw it sittin there on the floor and watched him open it, saw the false wall behind the basin, saw the numbers on the lock, pretty sure I got each one as he stopped there and spun the dial to the next, I took a mental note of over his shoulder and wrote em down later, saw the little stacks of cash inside, a lot of other junk, yeah, but the one-hundreds and even some five-hundred

dollar banknotes all just sittin there. A whole bunch. It was just a quick peek, but there's a lot of money. A hell of a lot of money. And I can get in and get it, no catches," Layber finished, "because Claybird's an idiot."

"He's got some stiff competition in that department."

If he'd ever had her on his side, he'd lost her now; somewhere along the line, he lost her, and though he couldn't finger the conclusive moment of her departure, never saw the snapshot of shame and disappointment crystallize behind eyes as he spoke to her, she was gone. And she was gone, out of the kitchen to their squalid back bedroom, and she shouted out from behind the door that had just slammed, "This is the last straw. Don't you never come back here again." She punched or kicked something or tipped something over. "I mean it."

He pushed himself away from the table to gather some food and water, his hat and Mackinaw from the coattree by the door as he walked out.

When he'd stacked Stride with his cargo the sun was just beginning its descent along the western quadrant of the sky. He heeled her flanks, setting her off westward into a smooth canter down the lithic washout toward the town's lone byroad. When he glanced back to see if Mellie was gazing out the window or standing on the porch to watch him go, she wasn't.

III. A RESCUE

When his fever set in—and the sun, a colossally terrifying explosion of light, balanced at its zenith over the land—Layber wrote himself off as dead. Oddly, something like comfort began to creep into his body as the fever and the killing heat of midday began in earnest their stupefaction. All in all not a bad way to go, he thought. It could certainly be much worse; in fact, he'd seen much worse, as many times as he'd envisioned his death. No matter how diverse and convoluted the scripted passages he took to arrive there, death always met him in one or another form of agony: an excruciating disease, being lit on fire, a paralyzing nerve disorder, drowning. Never could he get himself to die in tenderness. This was different. With the dizziness that came and went and came and went again, came a pleasing euphoria that he imagined children must feel when twirled around by their fathers and set onto the ground to stumble drunkenly and topple headlong amidst their laughter. If not for the awful sun and its malign intent, this would be almost soothing, a lulling onset he could almost savor. All it would take from him, he hoped, when the moment came, would be to close his eyes and let sleep come. Any pain from the previous night vanished or was replaced with a fervid numbness that seeped inward from his chilled outer layers into his veins, his blood, his organs, a plenary slowing he let come. The sublime grog. Soon. Just like sleep.

He removed his hat and wiped the sweat from his brow with a leftover scrap of shirt and placed the hat back on his head with the brim slanted downward across his face to block it from the sun, but it did little good. He picked at the bandage on his palm, encrusted with desert grime, dug grains of sand away from the sticky edges with a black-tipped fingernail, and squinted down at the feet jutting out of his dungarees; the big toe of

his right foot poking through the stocking was pleated with sediment in the knuckle, and the toenail was likewise encrusted with black dirt at the tip, a mudded roof over the clear windowpane of nail, and there was nowhere he could see on his body that was not powdered reddish-brown, or, where the sweat gathered most heavily, black. Much of his time leaning against the Joshua tree that late morning was spent brushing flies from Finn's machete wound on his thigh—a not entirely unpleasing occupation. Their constant buzzing proved enough of an annoyance to keep him from nodding off for too long, though when they set down on the open flesh there, inside the white fatty globules of tissue, rubbing their spiky front legs across their huge red eyes, he couldn't even feel them. Yet he regarded their presence as a premature intrusion. So, as if bound by the sense of duty of one at vigil, he kept sweeping them away, though as the day advanced and the heat and sun further crushed him, he did so with less and less diligence and enthusiasm. "Get to Corvin," he said once, shooing them backhandedly. "He's already dead." But they were there, too. His voice sounded totally strange and nearly negated in the monstrous diffusion of openness before him. Far off, thirty miles or more across the planar land that looked like a tremendous terracotta plate dropped and shattered and glued back together again, the mountain ranges quadruplicated eastward into cool streams and shaded groves. Somewhere at their bases stood friendly taverns; he heard the music; saw the pretty ladies dancing; tasted the whiskey on his parched, thirsty lips. Buzzards pinwheeled like an infant's mobile overhead, casting three helical phantoms across Stride's inert body. They dropped in unison as if tethered, with heavy scaled claws clutching her hide, ripping strips of flesh from her soft throat, then lifting and jerking

their red naked heads about with the meat dangling from their curved beaks. He found a stone so hot to his touch and tossed it feebly in their direction. Their sprawled wings flapped, raising dust from the ground, and the raptors floated only momentarily in suspension above nature's charity, until screeching at Layber with beady scowls of contempt, they fluttered down again to feast. He closed his eyes, brought as much darkness as this blazing world would allow. As he drifted into a half-sleep, half-stupor, he thought might be the last one, the sounds of his horse's remains being torn away by the buzzards were the only sounds to be heard in the empty immensity all around him. There were so many ways to die out here, and he'd gone and found one. Two or three other future possibilities came to mind as well. He knew he'd not see a second night. The figments that entered his mind as his chin fell to his chest and he slipped away into that fitful somnolence fever brings were not haunting ones, but plenished rather with glorious resignation. They brought the reminiscent coolness of the previous night to him, and all of the false comforts such coolness brings.

A softly candent moon and everywhere stars tailing across the night sky had bathed the land with gentle light. When the sun had long been snuffed behind the mountainous horizon, the daytime torridity plunged along with it, and the bluing desert evening came abruptly awake with the sounds and movements of animal life everywhere. Though he'd been in the desert many times, he'd never once sat anchored to it at night, and though he'd heard about these drastic variances in temperatures before, he always felt they must be greatly exaggerated. For once he was glad to be wrong. Without his shirt, as the

sweat chilled in the pits of his arms and on his pale stomach, he even shivered. He sat sprawl-legged against the Joshua tree, cradling Corvin's Model 12 crosswise on his bloodsoaked lap, a nice rifle gone worthless now. Over his head he had heard the night lizards slithering along the uppermost limbs. Woodrats worked noisily along the lower tiers, incessantly, relentlessly gnawing off the spiny leaves for their nests. He listened to the crunching rodents work. He admired the industry of their preservation. The tree vibrated faintly against his back as if a weak electrical current pulsed inside. At one point he thought he detected human murmurings—a visitant afloat in the night or perhaps Corvin's soul departing its body with queerly serene wailings. But Layber didn't believe such things. Off in the outer skirting of darkness, the eyes of beasts bobbed like distant lanterns. Low guttural growls and porcine snuffling accompanied the glazed lenses as the creatures foraged, shortening at once the open space Layber thought divided them. He felt as if everything was coming at him—everything. Between Stride and Corvin it was like he'd opened up a restaurant out here in the middle of nowhere. He drank the last of his water. Stay awake, he'd told himself, just stay awake. You can outlast them. Make some noise, scream if they come too close, but just stay awake. For the most part, he did.

What woke him from the cooling recollections of this partial dream and back into his delirium furnace, was hoof beats from a walking horse. He opened his eyes to such a piercing white blankness that it stung behind his forehead, and it took several seconds for even the crudest shapes around him to materialize. The cadenced knocking of the horse along the petrified ground traveled to Layber through the thin air from somewhere

beyond the curvature of his vision, where the flatlands arced downward from the horizon. A few minutes passed, and though louder came the stepping animal, it still hadn't shown itself. This must be some cruel joke, he thought, a nasty trick of the mind. A last-ditch aspiration of a brain saying farewell. Could it be Corvin's horse returning? Not if it had any sense. Only a duplicitous sleight, nothing more, came the verdict. But, finally, through the shimmering bands of heat a screen of dust lifted from the suture of land and sky. Then, from within that dust at its nethermost regions rose the silhouetted dome of a man's straw boater; then the back-tilted broad-brimmed corona encircling and protecting his poll from the trailing sun; then the rider's head and face, both overdarkened by the generous breadth of this fringe; then the narrow shoulders squared across entirely sheltered as well; then the slender torso elongating upward, stemmed into the big roan's back as if both man and horse were one mythical satyresque creation, two species conjoined with the exemplary halves of each; then the four spindled legs below, two coming off the ground on one side with every step as the other two on the other side of this connate invention plodded back-to-front along the intractable terrain, producing the wooden clacking Layber woke to; all of it ascending as if from out of the very foundation of desert, as if struggling to pull itself out of quicksand, sluggish, still chessman-sized and anonymously penumbral on the prostrate sheet of country before it, dilating from out of its piecemeal singular existence into its truer duality as if with leisure, getting bigger and bigger, nearly definable, as it advanced. From here, as Layber fought to keep his eyes opened, and couldn't always, it came to him like a wavering cartoon flipbook figure with every tenth page torn out. As the hardpan tilted upright through his blur of fever the

horse clung to it sideways like a tarantula on a wall, and when Layber reopened his eyes again the man already stood dismounted before him, beating trail dust from his baggy woolen trousers. Layber trained the gun on him.

“You shoot me, sir,” the man said, “that’s as good as shooting yourself. People don’t travel these parts. No one’s ever out here. You’ll be dead right alongside me in three hours tops.” He spoke with casual indifference, as if mentioning to his barber how he wanted his hair cut.

“You’re here,” Layber said. “He’s here.” He nodded at Corvin. “Or was. And I know another guy that was here not all that long ago. Countin me that makes four people who’re never out here.”

“Well, sir, that’s just a blind coincidence. Some kind of chance.”

“Yeah, it’s some kind.”

The man coughed, bent over perceptibly, and spat out a dry white pellet of phlegm. He straightened and looked back at Layber, the dead man, the dead, half-consumed horse. “Looks like you found something of a mess here.” Behind him his horse whinnied, blew foam from its nostrils. He still held the reins. Some froth speckled the shoulders of his tailored tan overcoat. “That’s quite a cut.” He whisked an index finger at Layber’s leg. “By the way.” He nodded toward Layber’s bloody tourniquet. “Those often do more harm than good, lead frequently to the loss of the limb. They should only be used in extremely desperate cases. When no other option presents itself.” Behind the man’s gray eyes a grave composure emanated.

“Thanks for the advice.”

“Looks as if you can keep it, though, if you want it. It’s not too late yet.” He leaned in on tiptoes for a closer view. “Still has good color, pretty clean. Actually appears in better shape than you. Maybe you can’t see it, but under that sunburn, under all that dust, under all that clamminess, you’re pale as a mime. Surely you feel it. You’re sick, my friend. Fortunately I know a little bit about medicine. Consider yourself lucky I found you.”

“I don’t feel lucky.”

“Listen. I could easily have shot you in your sleep already. If you put that rifle down I can help you.” He took one step toward Layber. His clothes were dandyish, as outlandish here as armor at an opera house. The shirt of black silk under the pale yellow suit looked new; the broad yellow necktie pulled tight to the throat and tucked in out of the way between oyster shell buttons unacknowledged the climate. Golden cufflinks affixed with turquoise gems pinched the sleeve ends together where they poked from the suit jacket. A thick gold watchchain swooped across his breast, tucked into the pocket of a slightly lighter yellow vest under the jacket. When he’d stepped toward Layber, his shoes, though mostly covered in dust, shone like black lacquer just below the felt spats, confining the sunlight there as if in mirrors. On the pinkie of his right hand he wore a gold ring with a similar turquoise stone set in the prongs. To Layber everything looked foreign, nearly farcical, each garment, except the overcoat, too large for his spare frame. Atop it all balanced that outsized hat, also, he could see now, yellow, like dead grass, a vibrant green feather jutting out of the dark red silk hatband. He may have been half

Layber's age. He wasn't even sweating. "Look at you," he said. "You can barely keep your eyes open. You really don't have much of a choice."

By the time the sun drifted behind the Joshua tree and offered him some shade, Layber would join Corvin and Stride as companions, wherever they were. Resting the butt of the rifle against his hip, he lowered the barrel, sighting it on the man's midriff, held it there for the span of five willful breaths until his arms got tired. Sure there were choices. Always. Just no good ones. When he laid the gun at his side he said, "It ain't loaded anyways," and asked the man what he was doing out here.

"Maybe the same thing you were doing."

Layber looked again at the man's foppish attire, chuckled. "I don't think so."

"Regardless, sir, you made a wise decision." He pulled his horse forward, dropped the reins, and crouched at Layber's side to get a better look at the wound. "That's about as nasty a cut as I've ever seen. And I've seen some bad ones in my line of work."

Layber didn't ask what line of work that was. Instead he asked, "Why you want to help me?"

"I might want to, and then again I might not. Why don't you just tell me what all this"—he spread his hands to the carnage surrounding them—"is about and we'll just see."

Already this was the most he'd spoken in three days. His throat ached; his mind reeled. If the man wanted to hear his tale he'd need to drink something first. Even then, he doubted he would get through it. "Give me some water."

Straightening himself and reaching back into his saddlebags the man rummaged around some clanking and turned back holding a military style canteen. Before handing it over to Layber he unscrewed the cap, attached to the canteen by a little chain, and took a long swig himself. Layber drank until the man pulled it away. It was very warm, heavily mineralized water from some barren rock pocket the man must have lucked upon in his travels. "Not too much," he said, pulling away the canteen. "Too much will make you sick." After giving a few palmfuls to his horse, he put the canteen back in the bag, pulled out a tin box and a small stone mortar and pestle. He sat down next to Layber and opened the box, which Layber saw was filled with various vials, wooden sticks, cotton balls, jars of different shapes and sizes, dressings, bandages, rolls of tape, little paper packets, silver utensils, scissors, unused tubes and many half-rolled to their caps. He poured white powder from one of the larger vials in to the mortar bowl, then sprinkled in from a cardboard envelope what looked to Layber like hard berries or seeds, so dark blue as to appear black in the exploded sunlight. From a hand-folded packet secured with string he selected with delicate precise fingers four leaves, brittle green with yellowed veins. Scraping the pestle along the coarse sides of the mortar he began pulverizing the ingredients into a neat pile at the bowl's center, squirting in runny brown paste from a tube as he ground. He looked at Layber. "You can start any time."

The drink of water had rejuvenated him somewhat, gave him a strength he thought had disappeared forever, though still he doubted he possessed the wherewithal to tell a sensible story. "I don't know where to start."

"Start, as they say, at the beginning. Tell me your name and go from there."

“I’m Layber,” he began, clearing his throat, “Jonathan Layber.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Jonathan. My name’s Edwin Gearson.” He pulled a cork from one of the vials and added the entire contents of red fluid to the concoction; a vaguely astringent scent, like rubbing alcohol but less medicinal, maybe more like turpentine, wafted under Layber’s nose. “I can’t stitch you; I’ve no thread, no needle. Too late for that now anyway, most likely. But this should do the trick.” From where he sat, milling crosslegged with the stone dish in his lap, he appeared older than Layber had guessed initially, but with that baronial hat tottering on his head with each down-thrust of the pestle and the cufflinked silk sleeves stretching to the middle of the back of his hairless hand, he evoked a carefree boyishness. In no time he’d formed a light grayish paste the consistency of concrete. “This poultice will burn when I pack your wound, but shouldn’t be anything you’re not used to. Don’t let it detain you from the details of your predicament. Much, everything in fact, rides on the outcome.”

“I thought you weren’t gonna help me until you heard what I had to say.”

The little man laughed, pulled a flat, broad wooden spatula from the kit, and scooted closer. “Helping you and saving you are two different things. I was brought up to help others. Always. It’s one’s civic obligation. Only if they’re worth saving, will I save them. We’ll see soon enough into precisely which category you fall.” He pulled the twig crank, covered in drying blood, through the tourniquet knot and tossed it aside. After untying the sodden scrap of shirt he tugged it out from under Layber’s leg; it hung heavy from his hand until he flung it away. “Don’t let any of this detain you. It’s nothing. Please, continue.”

So Layber began, going rigid and sucking in air when Edwin cleansed the area with a little iodine solution and slathered the medicament into his wound, but renewing quickly with some trance-like momentum the thread of his narrative, embellishing and withholding information when necessary to conceal any of his wrongful transgressions until, swallowing three white pills that stuck halfway down his gullet and another sip from the canteen and a bite of hardtack from a satchel Edwin carried looped over his shoulders, he finished. Sweat poured down his naked chest, ran in tiny rivulets through the coats of dust on his belly. He closed his eyes. For how long he'd talked, what he revealed, what he kept hid, he didn't know for certain, but never had Edwin discontinued his canard, and the sun had dropped by degrees in the sky by the time he was through, even if the temperature had not. Layber's attendant said nothing afterward. Everything had gone quiet. Occasionally wind flustered the Joshua tree, jostling the leaves; the horse would whinny, stomp now and again, but when Edwin tossed some oats at its feet and it finished eating, only silence remained. Even the buzzards had long departed. He opened his eyes and noticed his pant leg had been cut away and the leg had been wrapped with a wide stretchy bandage, secured with surgical tape and miniature metal fasteners. He said again, if only to break this restive silence, "They took all my money, killed my horse, left me here for dead. All I wanna do is get my money back somehow, get home. Will you help me?"

"I've helped you already. The question again is, will I save you?" He walked over to Corvin's body, flipped it over on its back, searched the pockets, socks, boots, everywhere, even the hat that had blown off a few paces, came back empty handed, sat

down again at Layber's side and said, "That money, even if you hunted down the Negro and found him, will have been spent by then, or stashed away somewhere safe and hidden."

"He ain't spent it. He don't even know he's got it."

"What do you mean?" Edwin asked, opening his dark gray eyes a little wider. "I don't understand. You said he took your bags; he'll find the money soon enough."

"It wasn't in my bags. It was in my boots."

"So. When he searches your boots he'll find it there."

Layber shook his head, might have smiled. "Not in a million years."

The two strangers sat across from one another on the hot hard desert rock. In another two hours, perhaps three, there would be a thin slant of shade at their backs when the sun began finishing its passage into nighttime. And then the blessedly cool second night. He'd been granted a provisional extension of life. Those were hopeful moments that would now arrive, Layber felt, as he hadn't merely minutes ago, with his wakeful observance. But to what end, for what purpose, and for how much longer? Why thwart the inevitable for an extra day? So he spilled his secret if only because he hoped someone, before he died, anyone, even an absolute stranger, would marvel at his ingenuity, even laud his handiwork. Cloudbanks spitting fine threads of silver lightning tumbled over the faraway mountain ranges to the east, but that weather would never find them out here, nor could they hear out here the rumble of thunder refilling the vacated jags of lurid sky.

“Well that is mighty clever,” Edwin said after Layber had explained to him how he’d safeguarded the money in the heels. “Clever indeed, but your plan backfired a little bit, didn’t it? Or if not backfired, at least went slightly awry.”

“I guess it did, yeah.”

Edwin paused briefly, as if gathering his train of thought, then went on. “Do you believe in fate, Mr. Layber? Are you a religious man?”

“Not ordinarily, no, but for about five minutes last night I was. When I thought I felt a wolf’s nose sniffin on my stocking foot. Even said a little prayer, I think.”

“The reason I ask is because I know the Negro who has your money, and if that isn’t fate, or the willful design of some greater government, then I don’t know what is.”

“You know him?”

“Quite well. Too well, in fact. The squashed ears, the huge, bushy head, the stout musculature, the machete nearly as big as him. Couldn’t be anyone else. I can take you to the town where he lives, should you wish, if you make it. We can get your money easily enough. He runs a... I guess you’d call it a pawnshop of sorts, lives in a big, castle-like dwelling up on a hill overlooking the town, behind a high stone wall and wrought iron gate, with servants, guards, call them what you will. He’s left alone, if you know what I mean. Among other things, this is what he does: he robs people, strips away whatever he desires, and whatever he claims, if he doesn’t keep for himself, he sells. The dross. From what you’ve already witnessed yourself, he’s not what you’d call a reputable man. He’s a highly dangerous, unscrupulous individual. Be that as it may, he is not, as you said, a dwarf. His name is Bawnie Finnraike, but they just call him Finn.”

Layber laughed quietly, a tepid effort to prove himself easeful within his angst.

“Why? Because he’s only a small part of the creature, the part sticking out of the water?”

“No,” Edwin said. “No. He’s the entire creature.” He stood and picked up the mortar, pestle, and tin first aid box from the ground. “On rare occasions I’ve heard people call him other things, but never to his face.”

“Not unless he was standin on a milk stool.”

“You may find humor in all of this, Jonathan, but you shouldn’t.” He walked over to his horse and returned the items to the saddlebags. When he came back he handed Layber a piece of dried apple. Then he let him drink a little more water. When he pulled the canteen away again, he asked Layber, “Do you think Finn would recognize you if he saw you again?”

“Don’t know. He might, but I doubt it. He only got real close to me for a split second, just long enough to bushwhack me, it was all so fast, then he stayed away, off to the sides. That guy,” he signaled to Corvin’s corpse with a quick, nodding glance, “did most of the up-close work.”

Edwin replied softly, almost as if addressing himself, “Of course, that’s how he always operates. Lets his flunkies put themselves in jeopardy.”

“You know him?”

“Not this one, no.”

“Plus,” Layber said, stroking the stubble along his sickly jaw, “I probably look like something different now than I did even two days ago.”

“That’s true, you could grow a beard. It will be weeks, at least, before we get in there. Plenty of time.” It was, to Layber, as if this man were before him assembling some sort of mental jigsaw puzzle. “Now, how much money did you say was taken from you?”

Layber hadn’t said. “A thousand dollars.”

Edwin looked at him with eyes pulled to better appraise the veracity of the statement. “All right, I will not ask you what on earth you were doing with that much money. Probably you wouldn’t tell me anyway. But I will say that such a loss is a dreadful misfortune, a misfortune you may or may not deserve, but a misfortune nonetheless. In any case, Finn is no more entitled to that money than you. Or I, for that matter. Right? That money, if I trust my hunches, belongs rightfully, lawfully, to no one anymore. So, conversely, it must belong to anyone. And if anyone, then why not us?” He shuffled the puzzle pieces and joined them again. “I told you I know Finn well, but what is worse, for me, for you, too, I suppose, is that he knows me well.” Edwin crouched to place himself more eye-level with Layber, who still leaned against the tree trunk, squinting up into the sun. “Am I making myself clear?”

“No.”

“You may be asking yourself why I don’t go retrieve the boots myself. Why don’t I go into his shop, buy the boots for a trifling, and walk out a much wealthier man? How many pairs of boots can he have among his wares? Surely I could find the screws, the cuts in the soles, if I examined them closely enough. Why do I need you?”

“I don’t know. Why?”

“I don’t. Maybe. But let’s just say that Finn, to put it mildly, would not be very happy to see me again. Actually, he would kill me, or attempt to. I could send someone else in, perhaps, but you see it all quickly gets too complicated, too messy. Plus, I am nothing if not a respectable gentleman, and that money is no more mine than yours. An equitable split, fifty-fifty, to me, seems to reward both our functions justly in this matter. While it’s clear you need me far more than I you, I remain willing to save your life anyhow. With due compensation, of course. You remove any risk on my end. I...” He trailed off. “Well, without me, none of this would be possible. You would, I hate to say it, die.” He stood from his crouch with a sudden sense of urgency. “But we’re wasting valuable time here. You’ll succumb to your fever in less than two day’s time, even with the administering I’ve given you. Come with me, and I can treat you with better medicine, proper bed rest, a cool, quiet room in which to recover.” He reached out a hand to Layber. “Are you with me?”

“Them boots ain’t worth a nickel.” He couldn’t bring himself to take Edwin’s hand. “Wouldn’t do no good for him to try and sell em. They’re fallin apart.”

“Splendid. Which means they will still be there, unsold. With Finn it’s never the quality of the product or even how much he can get for it. It’s getting something, anything, for nothing. What do you have to lose? If the boots are gone—and they won’t be—they’re gone. You walk out no worse off than before. If the boots are there—and they will be—you barter with him, make it realistic, purchase the boots, walk out, give me half, and set off on your way a richer man, a man lucky to be alive. So I ask you for the last time: are you with me or not?”

“Don’t think I got much choice.”

“You’ve got many choices, sir, an infinite number. Only, as is always the case, one correct one.”

“Better get me them boots. I’ll need somethin for my feet.”

The man retrieved Corvin’s boots from where he’d left them on the ground and dropped them next to Layber. They stank, and they were holed through in several places on each sole, and they were far too big, but Layber put them on. He reached out his hand. Edwin Gearson helped him to his feet.

IV. ROBBING CLAYBIRD

As they left Paddis Grove behind, its dingy unpaved road forever cross-rutted long ago from the few wagon rims that once passed this way, Layber gauged Stride’s gait, the vigor of her prance beneath her cumbrous load. She stepped strong, sturdy between his legs. Only a few of the falling town’s few inhabitants were about, mostly wives puttering around their meager vegetable gardens in drably flowered smocks or shapeless housedresses similarly patterned. All looked up from their woven sunhats or from within the frills of their bonnets to watch him pass, but none waved. And he did not tip his hat or wave to them in return; he’d made few friends in his short time here. Mellie and he, by their squabbles that spilled outward at all hours loud and big into the quiet and little Paddis Grove ecosystem, had become an instant spectacle, and if Mellie had, in spite of him, garnered sympathy and endearment from her neighbors, such favors they kept

separated from the couple and extended to her exclusively, when Layber wasn't around. Two haggard crones drinking lemonade from the same glass and gossiping over a picket fence ceased their talebearing just long enough to swivel their heads together like the synchronized cogwheels in some ghastly machine. Not until man and horse cleared the property line did the heads finally circle back into their notches, and only then did the prattling resume. Kids were at the schoolhouse next to the ramshackle church on the hill where Pastor Everson taught, preached, and lived. All of the men of Paddis Grove were off working somewhere Layber didn't know—their saving grace from this funereal shawl. Money would take him elsewhere, anywhere. Only a foxlike red dog, balding pink and raw at the base of its rattail, seemed to truly acknowledge their departure. It scurried behind Stride and nipped at her hooves with curt, reedy yips and ceramic clacks of its jaws. Without altering her step, Stride kicked back her rear foot and sent the mutt yelping, busted open along the snout. He cut the horse right, across a grown-over foot-trail that led toward Conrad's and the side alleyway where his saloon and the adjacent abandoned blacksmith formed a channel leading northward to a few better places than this, and finally to the open ambits beyond. The Dry Law—any law, for that matter—didn't mean much out here in this neglected vicinity, but the saloon was dark inside through the front plate of smoked glass, closed until five or six, until the men began returning home wanting drink. Through the dim interior he could see, hanging mounted on the wall just above the slatted swinging doors of the back card room storage area, Conrad's six-point buck elk head from whose antlers Layber often hung his hat, and his favorite stool at the end of the bar beneath it. Empty wooden crates not yet splintered for

kindling, and stacks of unloaded cardboard boxes, some soggy at their corners from breakage during transport, lined either side of the alleyway against the stucco walls. He could smell booze. But he kept going. And with that, he was off.

Soon, only two more towns, each in various stages of advancement to Paddis Grove, did Layber have yet to pass through along his route. In the second, the final one, there were small mills and plants and warehouses and offices of sorts in which he knew not what products were manufactured, what tasks were accomplished, and many buildings, some of three and four stories gleamed high in the sky of sun, and here there existed a sense of toil and the bustle of commerce, and there were automobiles equal to the number of horses and buggies and carriages along the roadsides, and mustachioed men walked confidently down the cement sidewalks in striped blousy gray Oxford business suits and felt bowlers, attaché cases dangling at their sides. They all paid him little if any heed as he ambled Stride through the middle of their daily lives, a shabby passerby they must have seen the likes of countless times before him, searching somewhere else for something else they had none of here. A long convertible Buick touring model pulled in front of his horse from out of a brick-front filling station. He reined in Stride slightly and then followed close behind. Their reflection—broad, brown horse, man above in blue denim—twisted inside the burnished steel bumper. A baldheaded man drove, reposed, one hand on the wheel, and a woman sat in the passenger seat with her elbow propped on the car's door, wind streaming her hair, and Layber heeled Stride's flanks to keep as close as he could, but only for a little while, until

the engine rumbled and the car sped from sight around a narrow corner. He slowed Stride, inhaled deeply the exhaust fumes.

As quickly as these young cities, these fostering towns, came, they went, and Layber soon found himself without the company of buildings, houses, automobiles, lamp posts, people. The transition arrived to him imperceptibly, without a salient delineation he could note as the instant clock-tick where the civilizations ended and the wild lands, the desert, began. But when he looked up again, there it was, the flattened savanna behind him, leading back for perhaps three miles to the last settlement he'd passed through; and then it was there again, when he turned back around, in front of him, for too far to comfortably fathom, the wide open expanse of desert plains. As he'd predicted, as he'd planned, it was just dusk when he arrived there, mild enough on the southern border, getting dark enough, to put on the Mackinaw. An eerie glow, the mingling forces of a weakening sun and strengthening moon, lingered on the air. Just for an instant, a fleeting notion he quickly shot down, Layber thought about returning back to that last town, the stables there, that last illicit tavern already singing toward evening. No need. Stride was fine. He was fine. He found the compass in his saddlebag and tilted it to catch the skylight. Northeast, just sixteen miles or so. Even at night, even on rugged ground, even with rest for Stride, if necessary, what's that, "Ten hours at the most? That's it, easy as pie." Claybird, all that money, just waiting for him, that's all he needed to drive him onward. Not so long ago he'd made this trip the opposite direction, no sweat. And that was with Mellie behind him on the saddle, nagging him the whole way, a damning irritant that seemed to pause only infrequently to catch her breath between

derisions. Here, his situation was much more favorable. "Let's go, girl." He tugged Stride's reins to the right and goaded her onward, gentle digs against her sides with his heels.

Sure enough, maybe even to Layber's surprise, though he'd painted it in his imagination only this way, the northeast night desert crossing proved, indeed, easy, actually uneventful. Stride never faltered, maintained a steady, even clip. When he walked her, she walked well. When he trotted her, which wasn't often, she trotted just as well. Though the partial darkness restricted his view, the effect only served to comfort his spirits, calmed his nerves, as does the hooding of a skittish falcon. What he couldn't see, he told himself, couldn't harm him. Enough natural light shone to lead Stride safely, and she seemed almost to recover the memories of her last trip across this land, with alacrity, and a welcomed surefootedness Layber appreciated. Nevertheless, he rode keenly alert, ever-watchful, stopping on occasion, cupping his hand behind his ear to snare any whispered proclamation of the invisibles, but they encountered no one, no thing. What could be out here now? Nothing his new revolver couldn't take care of. He never tired. It stayed cool, grew nearly cold in the deepest hours of morning. They rested once, at a little after two o'clock by his watch, at the foot of a squat singleleaf pinyon, among its fallen cones, ate and drank their own fare, and even picked some nuts from the ground he spotted in his flashlight's beams, and ate those too, and after this they both drank again and then rode on, and kept on riding through the night now turning morning through a land more approximately familiar, and he talked to his horse, to himself, and time passed, and before he knew it, his destination skewed rightward, and

the thinned, open desert terrain had begun thickening by degrees into crowded flowering trees and fauna greener, more cultivated, and he spied the irrigated brink of Keyland County, the promised town where once he lived and worked, and the electric lights of this town not yet extinguished by the dawn swept up to join the margin of remaining night above the treetop-line, and he heard a few quiet human voices within, from inside a house with windows open to the new day awaiting, and he piloted Stride through this living precinct, and came out from dirt into the other side onto the fresh asphalt thoroughfare known as Whitewood Road, which led to downtown Main Street and directly to Claybird's General Store.

Layber planned to pass the day being as inconspicuous as possible. People knew him here, some even knew the circumstances of his departure, but he'd never been one to attract the attention of others, at least not until he took Mellie to Paddis Grove and they threw their chaos there. For the most part, they had got along well enough here, and when they didn't, the house where they boarded was far enough removed from the central hub of town to keep them anonymous. His reappearance after six months shouldn't arouse suspicion, but he needed to play it safe, just in case. Even if they eventually associated him with the robbery—and they wouldn't—how could they find him? No one knew where he lived now.

Two tousled kids approached him before he had even dismounted, and asked if he'd like them to take his horse to their daddy's stables where they could water and feed her and groom her, and she could rest for a bit. A few automobiles hunched along the sides of Whitewood, but mostly it was still a horse and buggy town. He could get good

care for Stride if he wanted, and he did; she must have looked roughed-up to strangers' eyes, he, too, probably, and though he didn't know these young brothers well, he'd seen them around before. Layber took them up on their offer. "Why ain't you boys in school?" he asked them.

"It's Saturday, mister."

He tossed them a few pennies, told them to bring her back no later than five o'clock to Max's Café, and they strode off together laughing, with his horse in tow.

Now he had some time to kill. Best to sit and rest and get some food, get ready for tonight. Max liked him, he thought. He liked everybody. If he didn't he was at least always cordial enough, often even downright friendly. One thing they had in common was their genuine dislike of Claybird, and Layber had spent many a night and the bulk of his wages—both on plates of biscuits and gravy and sometimes rotgut hooch snuck from some nook behind the counter—bending Max's ear.

When he got to the café and went inside, a group of diners was coming out, and Max was rubbing down a corner booth table with a damp rag, a stack of plates and balled napkins and cups and saucers piled in a plastic tub on the vinyl seat next to him. He slid the tip money into his apron pocket. The front door closed to the tinkling of bells on strings. A man in overalls, the only other patron, sat drinking coffee and reading his newspaper at the three-stool bar. Max dried the table a little, set it, and centered the napkin dispenser. Then he looked up and said flatly, "Hey, Jon, where the hell you been?" Not much surprised him.

“Oh, nowhere, really. You know. I had to move on.” He held out his hand and Max shook it. “I just come back to fetch a few things Mellie left behind at the old place. Been ridin all night, just got in a bit ago.”

Max took off his Navy cook’s hat, ran his hairy tattooed forearm along his forehead, put the hat back on. He had the basin of dirty dishes held balanced on his hip, a girlish, domestic pose at odds with his gruff exterior. “Damn Nina’s late again. I oughta can her anyway. Shoulda canned her two years ago, the day I opened up the joint and hired her.” He was a tall, big, ruddy man, who’d seen a lot in his many years, and he went through life always squinting, indoors or out, as if the world were too bright a thing and could only be faced with narrowed eyes. He lived in the café’s storeroom.

“You’re too nice to can anybody. You know that.”

Max walked past Layber and set the dirty dishes on the stainless steel porthole sill dividing the dining room from the kitchen. Potatoes with bell pepper and onion steamed on the greasy black griddle, and cartons of eggs and loaves of bread, a hunk of ham joint, waited next to it. Max grabbed the coffee pot from the burner and refilled the man’s cup. When he came back to where Layber remained still standing stupidly by the corner booth, he asked him, “Well, what can I do for you?”

“I sure could eat some,” he hesitated, “but there’s more than that,” and he explained his situation.

“Sure you can set here for a while,” Max said when Layber had finished, “if that’s what you want. Sure, get some rest. Clean yourself up a little. If they can’t meet you at Mellie’s and your old place until six-thirty, that’s fine. You can sleep in back if you

want, sure. But let's get you some breakfast first. Some coffee. Here, sit down." He motioned toward none of the café's five empty tables. Layber sat at the closest. For the first time he noticed how tired he was, all through his bones. Max, good ol' Max, came back and placed a cup and saucer in front of Layber, and filled the cup halfway with hot coffee. Layber spooned in four spoonfuls of sugar and poured cream into the cup until it was full. An older couple entered, sitting down at the farthest table from Layber. They put their glasses on to read the chalkboard menu on the wall. Then Nina came in. She hung her sweater on the coat tree by the door, stormed straight back to the kitchen, said loudly, "Don't say anything!" and returned to the dining area while tying a bow into the strings of her pink apron. When she saw Layber she ran to him and hugged him before he could even stand. "Aren't you a sight for sore eyes," she told him.

"I wouldn't think so, no. But thanks anyway."

The man at the next table over cleared his throat. "Be right there, honey," Nina said, without even a glance in his direction. "What can I get you, Jon? What brings you back to Keyland County after all this time?"

"It don't matter none. Whatever Max is cookin up is fine by me."

When she walked to the old couple's table, he leaned back in his chair and shut his eyes. The glorious smell of coffee perking, the sizzle of meat frying, filled his head. He felt himself dozing. Only when Nina came back to his table to refill his coffee and place his breakfast before him, did he open his eyes. "Here you go, Jon."

The platter was heaped with stacks of fried ham slices, and seasoned potatoes fried crispy, and four eggs fried sunny-side-up with lots of salt and pepper, just how he

liked them, and four slices of buttered toast ready to dunk through the soft yolks, and he ate it all, and pushed the plate away, and sipped the rest of his final cup of coffee, and stood from the table nearly deliriously sated, but ready now more than ever for a good long nap. He left a quarter on the table for Nina, and on his way toward the short hallway to the storeroom in back, he hugged her again, said thanks, again. Then he stopped in the kitchen to give Max—who was scraping down the griddle with his spatula—two dollars, his last two dollars, for breakfast, and for any services he'd graciously offered, for any trouble Layber might have caused him, might have caused him down the road, and for his bed he'd generously shared. Max punched buttons on the cash register; a bell rung, and the till slid out, and he put the bills in the drawer, and he shut the drawer again. At the deep metal sink with some dishes still left to wash inside, Layber cleaned himself as best he could, scrubbing desert sand, the dust of his travails, from his face and neck and the corners of his eyes with a burred counter rag. After he'd dried himself somewhat he said to Max, "If I ain't already, wake me up by four," and he trudged further down the remaining steps of the hall, opened the door to Max's windowless bedroom piled high with boxes and sacks of flour and canned goods on crude shelves up on the walls, fell onto the unmade cot as if he were pushed from behind, fully clothed, boots still on, and before he even closed his eyes in the humid pitch black crampedness he felt sleep overtaking him, and then sleep came, and he did not dream.

Instead of four, it was nearly six when Layber woke, and not because Max woke him. An anemic light seeped in under the door and from around its edges where it didn't fit right in the jamb. He could hear activity—Nina's shrill voice and a few pot lids

chiming—Max calling out an imperceptible order—outside the bedroom. He wound his watch and put it back in his pocket, astounded he could have slept so long, so hard.

When he got to the kitchen, Max was ladling a thick stew into a bowl. After he placed the bowl on the porthole sill and Nina snatched it away out the other side, he noticed Layber standing there and looked at him a little guiltily. “Don’t worry,” he said, “you still have plenty of time.”

“Why didn’t you wake me?”

“I shook you at four o’clock, like you said, but you just kept sleeping. You looked so comfortable I didn’t have the heart.” He put the ladle back into the pot, shut off the gas, and rubbed his hands on his dirty apron front. “You still have half an hour. Sit. Have some goulash before you go.”

After all Max had done for him, Layber couldn’t muster up any anger. It wouldn’t be right. “Can’t. Gotta see about my horse.”

“Your horse is fine. The Miller boys brought him back a couple of hours ago. Hitched him right out front.”

Layber stepped halfway into the dining area. Only one customer left, a young, goodlooking man with his hat set next to him on the countertop, hunkered on his stool over a smoking bowl. Nina had flipped the front door sign to *CLOSED*. He could see Stride out front through the window, standing tied at the hitching post, the sun going down behind her. No one, nothing else, was around her. “It’s a her,” he told Max. “My horse is a her.”

“Oh, sure she is. Sorry about that.” Max came from the kitchen with a bowl of goulash, and set it on a table next to Layber. “Here. Eat a little something before you go.” Nina had removed her apron and sat down next to the man at the counter, who Layber thought must be her boyfriend.

“Thanks, but I can’t. I wanna catch the last of that daylight out there.” Inside, the café had grown darker, but the gaudy chandelier above had yet been lit. Layber felt rested, nearly hearty, still full, but invigorated from breakfast. The two men shook hands again. “I appreciate all you done for me,” Layber told him. “You done helped me out more’n you know. If anyone asks about me ever, just tell em you ain’t seen me in a while. At least not since April when I moved away. Could you do that for me?” Max looked at him quizzically, but nodded. “And tell Nina the same, okay?” As he walked out the front door he said goodbye to Nina. She waved from her stool, but neither she nor the man eating next to her turned around.

Stride’s saddlebags had not been fussed with; everything was where he’d left it, including the Colt revolver. She’d been groomed to a silky sheen, and she nuzzled Layber’s hand when he held it out to her. Her saddle and blanket seemed almost renewed through some treatment they’d received. He unhitched her, stepped into the stirrups and mounted her, and set her off toward the main road at the center of town. The new night had thrown its netting of darkness on Main Street’s cobbles. He rode anonymously in shadow past the occasional shops already closed and lightless, a few streetlamps nearly ineffectual, burning for no traveler but him. Claybird, or at least one of his factotums, always opened before anyone else, every day, usually long before sunup. His store was

closed now, too, but the second-floor window directly above it, where the shopkeeper lived with his daughter in the two-room hovel, remained lit behind the curtains. Before nine o'clock, Layber knew, they'd be soundly asleep—Claybird, heavily, passed out and drunken, his daughter, in fitful twitches on some unrolled matting at the foot of the bed, unaware of the horrors of her day, the nightmares soon to come. Off behind Claybird's a little ways, a few hundred yards up in the back hills among the oaks, he knew of an isolated hollow within a brake so dense you could walk right by it, less than a foot away, and not know it was there—not that anyone ever walked there. But he prided himself on the foresight of this precaution. He would wait tucked securely inside here until he was certain Claybird and his daughter slept. He would lodge Stride here during the robbery and reconnoiter afterward until all was clear and he could safely head home. If worse came to worst, he'd need not dash off in a frantic panic, but could simply wait it out in this covert fortress where no one would ever find him. So he led her up the grassy incline, and Stride entered the knitted thicket easily, and he tied her to a branch inside where it was very dark and enclosed, and they heard nothing anywhere, nearby or afar, and they waited past eight, past nine, past ten, and it wasn't until almost midnight that Layber tucked the flashlight into his belt, pushed his way out from the brambles, and walked slowly down the hill to rob Claybird.

After checking the street and the plankwood walkway along the storefront for any lurkers, he unlocked the front door of the store with the key he'd never given back. It swung inward with a rusty squeal of protest, and Layber pushed ever more gently until the space was just wide enough for him to slip through sideways. As he knew would be

the case, lazy Claybird had never changed the lock, and he shut the door softly behind him and bolted it again and headed for the back room through the store's main aisle. He ran his fingers along the rough-textured sacks of dry goods and cracker and cereal boxes and cans of potted meat and deviled ham. It became nearly pitch black the further inward he walked away from the front window, every sound muted, save his own footsteps upon the parquet floorboards, but he knew the layout from routine, could maneuver his way from the front door to the rear even if he'd been blind. Nothing had changed. Yet a queer smell, one he'd never noticed before, sterilely chemic like bleach, but sweeter and more cloying, surrounded him, draped along the circumference of wainscoting, as if someone had recently cleaned the walls with some sort of homegrown solvent.

He felt himself through the swinging half-doors to Claybird's back storeroom. He pulled the flashlight from his waistband and clicked it on. Nothing happened. Only absolute darkness. He banged the cylindrical casing against his leg and shook the batteries inside, flicked the switch back and forth, nearly frantic. He flicked the switch back on again. "Not now," he whispered, jiggling the flashlight more furiously. "You can't do this to me now." One more rap on the leg. Nothing but total darkness. Why'd he waste it in the desert? For what? For a few measly pinyon nuts? Where had his good luck gone? His easy desert ride through the night, his meal and good rest at Max's, no one spotting him, the store key sliding effortlessly into the familiar lock, Stride tucked away safe and waiting; where was all that now? But then, as if fearing his building wrath, the flashlight came on. A flood of relief overcame him. Through its narrow point of diluted light he found his way through the surplus stock to the washbasin at the back

wall. Four numbers were grease-penciled on the rip of butcher paper he pulled from his pocket. They'd sat stashed untouched, unsmudged in his dresser all those months, entirely forgotten until that night he bolted upright in his bed next to Mellie.

How much life was yet left in the batteries, he couldn't say, but he knew he must work fast. The dismal beam of light kept fading and regrouping, fading and regrouping a little weaker each time. He got to his knees and crawled underneath the bottom of the washbasin. Claybird had done a great job camouflaging his hiding place, but after pressing the wall a portion gave way, flexed inward. He pried the false square of wall panel out and set the fake veneer sheet aside. And there was the safe, the inert, immoveable block of it, squatting like a burly mastiff guard dog in the flashlight's vapors. Layber's heart beat more rapidly; he thought, in this silent vacuum, he could hear it, thought the entire town must hear it. On the face of the safe's thick steel door in fancy golden letters were the words *MOSLER SAFE & LOCK CO.* Their gilded painted scripts sparked as he panned the flashlight across them. In the center of the door, like a cyclopean eyeball, the silver lock dial stared—every tenth number designated in full, the others assigned black slashes around its scleral perimeter. Just next to the dial the shiny lever angled downward. He pressed his palm against the flat hard black steel of the door, felt its dispassionate coldness.

Left to twenty-three. He spun the lock dial three times left and stopped at twenty-three. He could hear the clicking as he slowed, a more definitive click at twenty-three when he stopped, the grumbling of the tumblers inside. He spun the knob to the right past twenty-three twice and stopped at seven. Did it click audibly that time? Had he got

one of the numbers wrong? Everything was so quiet here Layber's head roared. Would it be better simply to start the sequence over again? He turned the dial slowly back to the left past seven once and stopped at fifty-two. He couldn't feel or hear much of anything now, as if the senses in his fingers and ears had froze. He turned the knob back right again, toward the final number. His hand, shaking, stopped at thirteen. He placed the flashlight on the floor, where it rolled over once to a stop, its light not much more now than a dying candlewick aiming off to the washbasin's rear claw foot. He pressed down the safe lever, released a long gasp of breath he was unaware he'd been holding. The safe door swung open to him.

Then, somewhere above Layber's head, a door slammed shut. Footsteps creaked the stairwell outside. No, it couldn't be. He'd been quiet. Surely this couldn't be happening, not from the slapping of the flashlight on his leg. The front door lock to Claybird's store rattled, and the hinges whined again their protest, and the unclad footsteps came muffled and maladroit through the aperture slowly and deliberately to calculate the floorboards in the night, the cumbersome and laborious progression of one passing through blackness or through territory unfamiliar. "Is anyone there?" It was Claybird's voice, the slightest taint of a slur, and with a dry and distant twigsnap sound, light was everywhere.

Working fast now, Layber reached into the safe and pulled from one of its lower cubbyholes two slender stacks of money, almost weightless sheaves of parchment rubberbanded together, resting on the bandage of his open hand. There were a few other items in the safe, among its staggered compartments, just as he remembered, but they'd

looked like only legal documents, the racy photographs, and other paperwork all meaningless and of no interest to him. Mostly the safe was empty, of a size comically exaggerated for what it held. He picked up the flashlight—the thread of filament still barely burning pointlessly behind the glass lens in this back room now completely ignited with light—and stood, shoving the money into his pants pocket. As Layber hid behind the wall next to the storeroom doors, Claybird called out again, from what sounded like the middle of his store’s main aisle, “Show yourself or I’ll gladly shoot you dead,” with conjured menace auguring his tone. Layber waited behind the wall, flashlight raised above his head. First the barrel of Claybird’s shotgun nudged open the swinging door closest to Layber. Should he grab for the gun now? Wrench it free and... Well then what? Though he might have begun reaching for the weapon, it didn’t matter, because already the storeowner, fat and barelegged, had leapt fully into the storeroom with an awkward pounce, overshooting Layber in hiding. He stood half-crouched with his back turned to Layber, sweeping the rifle from one corner of the room to the other, and he said, “I’ll blow your—” before Layber clubbed him with the flashlight.

With the first blow, Claybird staggered to one knee with a sickening, heaving grunt. His shotgun fell from his hands, but, to his credit, he made a move for it; Layber kicked it, sent it spinning away. When he looked up at Layber standing there above him holding the flashlight raised again, not shock, but something more like mild surprise awoke behind his widening eyes. A thin trickle of blood ran out from under his hairline and down his wrinkled forehead. One drop fell, flowered red on the scrubbed cement floor. He said, “What the hell’s going on, Jon?” but Layber struck him again, this time in

the temple, and something cracked, yielded—the tubular metal casing or Claybird’s skull—as the batteries went flying and the dented flashlight sailed wildly from Layber’s hand slippery with blood. Claybird collapsed in a heap. He didn’t move, made no sound. In the fall, his nightshirt had ridden up, exposing his haunches, pale and flabby in the storeroom’s vulgar light. Layber began to run.

He ran out from the storeroom into the store itself, down the main aisle, beneath its drooping electrical cord of light bulbs strung on hooks along the low ceiling overhead. Each bulb was imprisoned in a wire metal cage, and the light they sent forth was, to Layber, demonic. From outside, the store would look, at this peculiar hour, like a colossal bonfire ablaze amidst a dark green island floating on a sea at night. The two switches were mounted on a rough wood floor beam running up to the rafters from behind the front counter next to the cash register. He ran to them, vaulted over the counter, and batted at them, each switch at once, down and off. Again the store stood in darkness, and Layber stood in the darkened store. Only the moonshine angling through the front window offered him vision—Main Street was vacant and desolate and watery under its charnel lambency. His panting and the cool breeze tunneling through the open front door were the only sounds he heard. He straddled his way back over the counter, but his legs, when he touched down on the other side, had gone momentarily rubbery underneath him. He inhaled deeply, gathering himself, then ran to the front door and stepped over the sill onto the storefront boardwalk. He glanced left, right, saw no one, heard no thing. He fished the key from his pocket, felt the crisp money inside, and locked the door, stepped back into the street and threw the key as hard as he could over

Claybird's store into the ravine behind it. Everything had changed so much, had gone so magnificently wrong, that stealth at this point seemed to Layber a wasteful futility. What was never to be, ever, was now. So he began to run again, clomping his way off the center pavement along the broken stone roadside in his flimsy Mexican ropers, stumbling more than once, but never falling, a mad, desperate dash, and he broke sharply to the left at the promenade's end, and bolted through an unlit alleyway toward the camelback hills silhouetted by the big waxing moon above them, and he never slowed, and he reached the base of the woodlands and looked up into their trusting oaks, and he ran as fast as he could run up into the trees, and the spindlier low-slung branches he bothered not to duck whipped his face, and he closed his eyes just instantaneously to avoid their lashes and opened them again to find his way to the familiar brake denser than all others and the hollow inside, and he did find it, and when he parted the limbs and stepped through, he felt the air then go warm around him, and he could see nothing in the suddenly pitch-black enclosure, but he heard Stride snort her welcome, and he could smell her musky secretions on the air, the pleasing herbage of her breath between their two faces close together, and the fecund musk rising sultrily from her recent droppings.

They waited it out in the darkness absolute for a half hour or slightly more, but no sounds came to Keyland County, no human voices, no hounds brought forth or stirred to agitation by the commotion. He stroked Stride's nose and spoke gently into her ears to soothe her, and he could feel her silky hairs against his lips, but she wasn't nervous at all. When he felt the time was safe he untied his horse and led her out from the hollow. Layber walked her at first, up the wooded slope away from the town, until they reached

the bluff; then he rode. The beacon moon was high, raised up in the night sky like a cresset to shepherd their passage along the outlying crown of land. After a mile, the hogback rucks began tapering down into the open tableland valley. They had by now bypassed the scene of the crime with enough distance to begin wending their way down from the hills to the birth of the great desert below. Fewer than twenty-four hours ago they'd emerged from a spot not far from here. So much had happened since then, some of it gone as he'd predicted, some of it gone horribly awry, but all of it gone. When they lit upon level ground, he goaded Stride through the last crop of green land and forward into the desert. They stepped slowly from one world crowded and dense onto an opposite otherworld that spread out everywhere in front of them into one huge chasmic starlit argent endlessness. Layber checked his compass and set off due southwest, reading the cynosures mapped in the heavens. Only when the distant contours had plateaued in all four directions did he whoa Stride next to a stunted shrub, dismount, and tie her off. He grabbed his water and a screwdriver from the saddlebags and sat, and removed his boots, and by the light of the moon and stars he unscrewed each screw in the bootheels and set each screw one by one on the rocky ground next to him, and then he set the severed heel pieces next to the screws and reached into his pocket for the money, and before he counted it, before he even looked at it, he took a shallow sip of water, spit into his hands and rubbed them together with sand to wash away the dried blood, and he rinsed them again and pressed the loosening bandage back over the drill cut more firmly to keep it clean. He hung the wineskin around his neck by its rawhide cord.

There were twenty-nine bills in total, and he fanned them out like playing cards in a too-many hand to see them all at once: nine five-hundred dollar banknotes and twenty one-hundreds. He'd never before seen a five hundred dollar bill except when peeking over Claybird's shoulder that afternoon nearly a year ago, the top one on the stack, half-blocked by the thick safe door, the basin bottom, and his boss's bloated neck. He held one up to the lunar rays, close to his face, read the words, the succession of random serial letters and numbers, the big *500s* at each corner and the bigger one offset to the right of McKinley's dour portrait. Hard to believe this one little scrap of paper could almost by itself buy a brand new automobile. He made two stacks of the bills, one of fifteen and one of fourteen. He folded the bills in threes so they would fit in the gouged-out heels. Then he screwed the heel slices back onto the boots, over the money, tightly, no gaps in the seams. He put the boots back on and stood, astonished at what his life had become, what it would soon be. Just like that he'd gone from poor to rich. Just like that. When Mellie saw the money she would forget all of her threats; she would have no cause to gripe anymore. "We're almost home, girl," he said to Stride as he untied her reins from the shrub and pulled himself up onto her back by the saddle horn. He heeled her flanks and gave her a kindly *giddyup*. She trotted forward, a bit swifter of foot now. They rode, pressing a trace of shallow hoofprints into the flinty ground. Breezes came and went and came again to spread the dust and sand and broken crust of earth and make smooth the world again, reclaiming their passage behind them. They didn't stop in the night, not once. They rode, and soon the desert country became a little more familiar again, the direction home a little more legible in the hints of new light slowly opening

behind the mountain verges, bleaching the lower ring of black sky to blue. Layber checked the compass, then turned and shoved it down into the saddlebags. He drew out his watch and yawed its face to the moon, and looked through the scratched glass at time. From the farthest outreaches, the day crawled in. Stride kept on moving with stoic grace. He leaned into her, ran his fingers through her mane and stroked her tendonous neck. “We’ll be home in time for dinner,” he told her. When he pulled her reins slightly to the right she stepped right and seemed to nod.

V. HEALING

Eventually the wound healed, but it healed ugly. The fever, too, broke, but only after Layber had lost irreplaceable moments of his life through a lengthy convalescence. These sizeable chunks of memory had been excavated from his brain along with the dizzying fever, scooped out as if with a shovel and slung aside over the digger’s shoulder only to break apart on the ground. For a good while he lived his life in glimpsed snatches of consciousness, canted visions he could not put perpendicular. He thinks he woke the first time on the back of Edwin’s horse amidst a desert landscape turned small and claustrophobic inside his swimming head. Maybe he had never lost consciousness, but he didn’t remember mounting. It was near dark, and stones embedded along the trail in the twilit air at the horse’s feet shone white as they passed. With each of the horse’s steps Layber’s head bobbed about as if on a spring, and he noticed, he thought, that he was tied together with Edwin by a rope around their waists. Edwin whistled a tune

Layber couldn't place, so he didn't try to place it. His bandaged leg, hanging free off the horseback like salami strung in a deli window, throbbed. Where he was headed, he couldn't say with certainty. To Finn, that's all he knew. At times, both of the men's hat brims touched back to front as they rode. They were coupled tightly bound chest to back though Layber had been placed as far rear in the saddle as the cantle would allow to accommodate them both. A poncho had been draped over him. Sweat continued to drain from his body and an illimitable tiredness filled it. Perhaps he felt thirsty, hungry, but he didn't. Corvin's too-big boots were slipping from his feet. Let them fall, if they will. Six thousand five hundred dollars, that's all he tried to hold onto through the fever, through the sureness of the world now fading away from him again. The clip-clop rhythms lulled Layber, and the animal's steady patterned swagger rocked him back toward sleep. In the last of moments of the day, the moon above and a whitened boulder embedded below changed places and he leaned forward into Edwin's jutting shoulder blades to brace himself against the upending. Then full darkness came, to the world and to Layber simultaneously.

Next time Layber thought he woke, he was in a narrow bed on his back. At the small square window where the halfclosed oilcloth drapes failed to meet, daylight shafted into the room. It was a small, low-ceilinged room with peeling wallpaper, he could see, not much larger than a modest cloakroom or jail cell, but neatly, if sparsely kept and ordered, and pleasantly cool. The bedclothes pulled to his neck were of a coarse twill fabric that scratched his throat below the line of new beard. On a low nightstand next to the bed a candle burned unnecessarily, a yellow waxen nub impaled on a brass picket.

Next to the candleholder, in an eggshell China basin with blue leaf patterns painted around the interior of the bowl, a rag floated in water gone pink with his blood. All four walls were bare, save the crucifix mounted above the bed. From outside the room's closed door, voices, Edwin and another man's, deeper and less affectedly mannered, could be heard. As he drifted back into another crippled daze not quite sleeping, Layber realized he wore another man's pajamas. He began nodding off as the candle sputtered and the men's babble outside the door receded, whether in his own receding consciousness or to a further place in the adjoining room, and again, as he had each time before this, Finn came back in a daydream to appall his resting mind that he realized, with almost consolation, grew a little less feverous, a little less baffled upon each new reawakening. Yet more than appall him the dream reenacted verbatim never failed to torment him with a frightful realness, the very illusiveness of its message, even upon this, the very last of its visitations. Had he known these revenants would never again return, perhaps he could savor the doctrine through their departure. With their guaranteed recurrence always imminent, the backhanded gift evaded him and he could only remember the other side of the dream, how close, so very close he had been, how he had already felt the silky glide, the tremulant hiss of the automobile tires along the roadways, his hands curled on the polished steering wheel, the ladies' dazzling, admiring eyes on him as he sped past, stepped out, a newly wealthy man almost home. But like this, Layber's easy life had been stripped away from him far faster than he acquired it:

Finn and Corvin arrived on horseback from two entirely different, opposite directions, like two rays about to meet and make together an infinite line. Stride stood off a ways from where Layber relieved himself under the Joshua tree with his back turned; she was nibbling some oats he'd mounded on the desert ground before her. Above, the mid-morning sun not yet nearly engorged with the full heat it prophesied, bobbed low from its apogee, and it felt good on his back as he urinated. Behind him, as if she were spooked by a sidewinder, Stride stomped and flapped her lips through the blowing, and when Layber turned to see what the problem was, and stepped out of the rhombic patch of shade cast by the tree into the open light, Corvin already stood next to Stride, reaching into her saddlebags while holding in check by its reins his own fidgeting horse. Before Layber could even ask what the hell this man was doing, Corvin had found Layber's Colt revolver and pulled it out from Stride's saddlebags and had it pointed at her forehead. When Corvin pulled the trigger the blast shattered the desert hush. In one deflating motion Stride's legs broke apart from underneath her flattened as if she were an old rotted table someone put something too heavy on. Dust erupted around her elegantly veined neck, the cracked speckled head when it flopped dead to the earth. Before the gunshot knell had yet ceased echoing, Corvin had already put the pistol in his own saddlebags on his black stallion, yanked a shotgun from the horse's side scabbard, and came in a gawky lope toward Layber who stood with his pants half zipped, eyes gaping.

"Leave him be." The voice, just three words, came loud and gravely hard, but so soberly measured and chary as to efface any brutishness. Layber realized he held both his hands up, but could not remember lifting them, had never been told to do so. He

looked away from Corvin toward the speaker and saw Finn—a powerfully muscled Negro not more than five feet tall—climbing down off his miniature steed. “Leave him be and get all his things and put them on the back of my horse.” So Corvin turned and picked up the reins of his own horse over-burdened and led it to the inert lump of Stride lying wasted, and he unbuckled the bags at her belly and tugged mightily at the straps until they slid free from under her ponderous weight and her underflesh jiggling. Then he carried the goods, stolen now, to Finn’s already semi-loaded animal, where he worked them into the awaiting load like a sculptor at his clay and he adjusted the balance and evenness of the lopsided stockpile until it was all one and the same load, all rustled, all Finn’s.

That hulking dwarf’s compressed deep voice came loudly, came starkly again, but nearly soothingly as he scratched at his scalp beneath the tight dense curls, unsheathed the great machete, and approached Layber with the serous movements of a man walking underwater. With what at first seemed like a non sequitur, he said, “I don’t carry a gun. I just never took to them; always felt they were impersonal, aloof. They lack the intimacy of the blade.” He was only ten yards from Layber until another step he took made it less. “Any sniveling coward can shoot a man.”

For a moment Layber thought about picking up a rock or a handful of dirt and tossing it into Finn’s face, but by then Corvin had returned and stood next to Finn with his rifle at his side. “Listen,” Layber said. “I don’t got anything but was in those bags.” His hands were still raised. The two robbers, almost burlesque in their diverse aspects, stood in front of him, and Layber felt at that instant all of his hard work—the risks he’d

taken, the reward they'd brought, the better life he made for himself—completely evaporating before him, blotted like his puddle already sucked dry under the Joshua tree behind him. But if he could stay alive, he had the boots. If he could stay alive. "I ain't armed," he continued. "You already took everything I got of value. Why don't you just let me go, give me a chance? You got no reason to kill me."

"We won't k-k-kill you," Corvin said. "K-k-k-killing a m-man is easy. It's l-l-letting a man l-live that's tough." He peeled those purple bloated lips back, revealing his long yellow teeth that gnashed as if he were chewing cud, and the laugh discharged from that hideous maw inside the head thrown back was like the cackle of a hag at a cauldron. And he was still laughing when Finn swung the machete.

At first Layber couldn't recognize what he experienced as actual pain, because he'd never felt pain like this before in his whole painful life. This was more the type of death he'd once conceived for himself, the being set on fire he believed could, however fancifully, signify his end. But this was far more excruciating than the whimsical doodlings of his paltry imagination. This burned indeed like a fire if his leg were the log drenched in gasoline and lit, a searing of his flesh centralized and concentrated at first to a pinpoint through the front of his thigh muscle, then spiking through the bone and out the hamstring; then all through his entire body, from the soles of his feet up through the ends of the hairs on his head, the intense whitehot fire devoured him. By the time he fell to his knees his blood had pooled onto the sand, and still pooled, and he landed in his own life source spilling out from the crude carving Finn's keen blade had engraved into his thigh, into the fulfillment of Finn's sequitur.

The dwarf had turned—his broad black back glistening rippled in the sun like an oiled onyx figurine—to walk back to his undersized horse, his stocky pony, burro-height, all banked with took wares lurching under their own excess. Dripping machete still in hand, he checked the cumbrous load and readjusted it some to his own liking, and he turned back again to face the scene, to watch what would transpire, and he wiped the steel from red to clean silver on his pant legs, and he said, “Get the rest of his things,” so Corvin scurried around behind Layber and knelt behind the kneeling man to pull off the sixty-five hundred dollar boots whose soles, whose heels were here turned up exposed in the open sunlight but so neatly masked as to hoodwink the sharpest eyes, even the closest eyes of Corvin who wiggled them free and off and stood them upright in a legless stance on the flattened world a foot from Layber’s reach, and he patted down Layber’s pockets, talking motley gibberish the entire time, stuttering even in his thoughts, but there was nothing there, nothing, so Corvin stood, stooped, but tall again, and lumbered off with oafish strides and the ragged boots and handed them over to Finn, who resheathed his sparkling machete to receive the sagging leather boots and tip them upside down and shake them, digging into their cavities with a massively thick forearm like that anteater’s snout nuzzling into an anthill, and Corvin came back to Layber, a grinning imbecile with his flaunted shotgun swaying before him barrel outward, sloppy, careless, asking for the watch because he must have seen the chain sticking out from the breast pocket of Layber’s shirt now totally drenched in sweat, and Layber felt for it, drew it out, unclasped it, held it out, flaunted it equally taunting to Corvin’s outreaching hand coming closer and closer, and this is when Layber lunged.

The first shot lifted away a chunk of Corvin's shoulder. Layber was surprised when the gangly man, after reeling backward on his heels, kept coming. The second shot opened a cavity of red and shards of white sternum in Corvin's chest, lifting nothing away but his life and his soul if he had one. With the first shot Corvin's horse reposed snapped up its head, stampeded in three directions first, then set a straight course for itself in no direction but one, a headlong disappearing act into a certain unparticular realm of future oblivion. With the second shot Finn's horse opened its stance, made its saddle lower to clutch the vaulting dwarf, stampeded before the first kick to its side—the first whip of the quirt to its neck—even landed.

When Layber woke soaking from this dream, his fever had broke and subsided completely to never return. It was night and dark in his foreign bedroom. All the dizziness, the perpetual disorientation, the burning forehead and the sweat forever outpouring, were gone. This dream, too, never returned. Thereafter, many times, of course, lying in the strange room waiting for his leg to heal enough to bear his weight, he thought often about what had happened to him: being robbed and left for dead, disarming Corvin and shooting him, the death sun fixed on killing him, Stride's thin legs splintering apart underneath her. But he would never relive the circumstances of his money being robbed from him with the former disturbing clarity, the sheer actuality the dream had always carried with audacity; the fever, when it departed, must have taken the dream with it. He would not miss it. He wiled his waking moments wishing, actually plotting to kill Finn when he met up with him again. First the money, the boots, yes, that was the most

important thing, but one murder deserves another. He was killed enough. Time meant very little to Layber as the days and nights and the next day and night he greeted hobbled on his back all linked as one long chain neither day nor night but a melded makeshift daynightdaynightnightnightday of continuum; he knew, however, he hadn't a limitless supply of it. Every day he felt stronger, more clearheaded. Once, early on in his convalescence, he recalled Edwin and another man entering the room in the heat of the afternoon to clean the wound and reapply a salve and change his dressing and listen to his heart and check his temperature and clean out the bedpan and wrap his head in a towel dunked in cold water to bring down the fever or hold it in check, and they talked together about other things than their patient's health, and Layber recognized the other man's voice as the same he'd heard on a different day passed outside the door, but he'd never opened his eyes then and fell back asleep before they were done attending him and he made any sense from their words. After that, as Layber kept getting fitter and fitter, it was just Edwin alone who came frequently, several visits daily and one or two at night, to give him broth at first, then small portions of deer meat and roasted potatoes, and he could now have all the water he wanted. They shared a common goal; their needs for each other, while not quite equitable, not even quite fully disclosed, perhaps by either man, had them nevertheless united.

One morning Edwin helped him out of bed and he put his weight on the wounded leg for the first time, standing first with his arm draped across Edwin's shoulders, testing the strength of the muscle that had lay unused for so long, then letting go and stepping tentatively as one would on a tightrope. Then he walked; he walked of ginger foot at

first, out through the bedroom door, through a tiny kitchen with a pot steaming through its lid on the woodstove and out the front door, half-limped down a two-step cement stairway to a flagstone pathway that cut through a small lawn freshly mowed at the front of Edwin's little home, and he stood blinking in the penetrating light of the rising sun, flexing his legs, and he gazed across the town's street he'd never before seen, at the few people walking along the roadsides, and a few horses walking their riders in the road past a dry goods store and a seamstress's domicile with the sign *ALTERATIONS* painted in a blue arc across the front window and two old men sitting on hickory Morris chairs smoking cob pipes under its awning, and Layber heard from somewhere he couldn't see the distant rumble of an automobile and from behind him up on the porch Edwin's voice say, "Well, I guess you're almost about finally ready to do this now." Then Layber realized with some unease that he didn't know where he was.

V. AT FINN'S

After a few more days of recuperation, through some replenishing meals and several short walks of increasing briskness and durations along the trails behind Edwin's house, Layber returned close to his former self; never once what you'd call robust, and not so now, he attained, after time, a passing semblance of the old man. On a very early morning overcast with the grayness of another autumn's first hints of rain, the two men set out for Finn's store. Edwin, hesitant to label it a store, said, as they climbed aboard his horse and situated themselves in the finely tooled saddle, "It's more like a child's

crooked tree fort lifted from its branches and set on the ground. Architecturally, it's rather juvenily constructed. It's... Well, why am I telling you this; you'll soon enough have quite a good look at it." They rode past the seamstress, saw the fleshy dowager in her frilly shopdress through the broad plateglass window already more than two hours spent in toil at her appliances. Needles and stickpins protruded from her pinched lips like stiff walrus whiskers, wetting glittered in some of the light honed on the feed dog of her Vickers sewing machine; and even more porcupined from the pincushion strapped to her plump wrist. Edwin had waved to her, but she had not looked up.

Soon they had threaded the town and were on a dirtpacked trail leading through wide-open grassland unfamiliar to Layber under these nubilous skies. Edwin's horse was a good one, Layber could see now that he was lucid—confident and lithely resilient to any cloaked betrayals the trail presented on occasion under its grassy coat. While his leg still throbbed on occasion, it did so randomly, and only weakly, not due to any nasty bump in the ride or any mild gallop Edwin set forth to clear an oncoming upsurge of land. Under the loose-legged slacks too long for him and rolled twice at the ankles, he still wore a bandage, but Finn's machete hack had meshed well enough uninfected, and the dressing served only to absorb any fluids yet seeping from the scab. Corvin's boots had been replaced by another pair still too large for him, but in far better shape. The work shirt he wore fit too snugly, but he was pleased to see it had none of the gaudy flamboyancy Edwin preferred for his own dress—just plain black cotton, black steel buttons, sensible button cuffs rolled up his forearms. Luckily he still had his own hat; he'd salvaged at least that much of his past. At Edwin's bedroom mirror that morning he

had viewed himself before their departure, leaned into his reflection to examine the beard he'd grown. He'd been moderately chagrined to see all of the gray mottling the first beard he'd sported since his twenties, and he stroked it now, on the back of Edwin's horse, enjoyed the muskrat bristle pelt smooth on the down strokes with the grain, rough with the strokes back up against the grain, enjoyed it because if his past had been altered—had turned to gray in the barbate growth on his cheeks and chin and neck—his future, then, had been altered too, right along with it, turned in the graying toward a future newly adapted, one he'd made his present by restarting the past at each dead end, each fatal obstacle that plummeted from the heavens and attempted to claim his life: past, present, and future. All.

They spoke little to one another as they traveled, for they had little to say. They made no plans, for they had not plans to make. Go in; find the boots; barter a bit; buy the boots; walk out; meet in their hiding spot; divvy up the riches; go their separate ways; never see or hear from one another again. Simple as that. At one point a few drops of rain fell on them as they scaled a rocky chine and butted upon railroad tracks stretched out in both directions to their vanishing points. "I'll show you the station," Edwin said, turning slightly on the saddle back to Layber, "where you can pick up the line that gets you back close to Paddis Grove." Then he steered the horse left under the Saturn ring of his hat brim, and they followed the tracks that way for while, a mile or so, until the rails veered sharply off and away into a coppice just yellowing from orange from green in the season coming. When Edwin halted his horse so abruptly Layber actually slid along the saddle and up against his back, though they hadn't been moving fast. "Just past that

company of cottonwoods,” Edwin said, freeing his hand from the reins to point with it, “you’ll find the train station.” The horse lifted its tail and defecated and he tugged it left and sent them off again along the hilltop for a short spell, and soon, on a leveled parcel of land, he checked the horse by its bridle again and aimed it downward toward the little empty dale below. “See that small cockeyed looking building between those two massive boulders?” he asked, pointing again. Layber couldn’t see it. Then he could. “That is Finn’s.”

“Who the hell ever comes to this place?”

Edwin almost chuckled. “Finn.” Then he did chuckle. “Others also. Now and again.”

At a distance that could trick the eye into doubling or halving its true span, the recessed hovel appeared abandoned or condemned or not at all, enfolded into the immutable shade in which it roosted as if plaited through the other textiles of the landscape with a stupendous darning egg. From its mossedover roof to its gnarled woodfront siding, Finn’s possessed every aspect of having cross-pollinated to life from a blown seedling, with no window to glass its unnaturalism across the antediluvian makings of the world—its front entrance door a blackened knothole in a majestic trunk.

“That is Finn’s automobile,” Edwin motioned, gold pinkie ring blenching dull under the cloud cover on the hilltop, “the back end there, sticking out from the side of the building.” Layber saw the shine of chrome he hadn’t before. “It’s a Rolls Royce 4-door Drophead, custom made for him, special seats, raised accelerator and brake pedals, smaller steering wheel on an extended column. Cost him a fortune.” Though he couldn’t

see any roads leading to or away from Finn's store, Layber assumed they were somewhere. "His house," Edwin continued, "castle really, is just through those tree limbs there. You can barely spot one of the turrets; maybe it's the guard tower. See it?" Layber saw it. It was far away, it looked, high atop a mountain crag, but stony and huge even from this distance, partially blocked by the wilderness walled in front of them. "You could say that this is his own little private corner of the world. The criminal life has been good to him."

Layber started feeling a little sick. He pushed the feeling aside, removed his hat and handed it to Edwin and wiped the sweat from his brow on the sleeve of his shirt that wasn't his. "He might recognize the hat. I think it'd be best if I didn't wear it in there." He dismounted, looked up at Edwin high on his horse. He scratched his beard. "I don't got no money for the boots, you know."

Edwin pulled out a wallet from inside his coat, took two dollars from it and handed the bills to Layber, who shoved them down into his front pocket. "Don't do anything foolish. Start at a dollar. He will not accept it. But I know him; he will accept two. You'll see men in there, armed men. They will pat you down at the door. If you behave rashly, you will die. It's that simple. Do you have any questions?"

Layber could think of nothing. Then he thought of this: "What if them boots ain't in there? Then what?"

"If they are in the condition you said were, then they will be there. They will. But if not, walk out, calmly, coolly. Anything else?"

He could think of nothing else.

“Very well. Meet me back here immediately after the transaction. I’ll be waiting behind that outcropping of rocks there,” and he pointed them out. “If I’m not there, wait for me to return.”

Layber headed down the hill to Finn’s. Not enough rain had fallen to make his way treacherous. His leg felt fine. He took a deep breath. This is it, he thought. No sweat now. It all comes down this. Surprisingly he wasn’t nervous. Excited, yes, but not scared, not jumpy, only primed and ready after all this time, all he was forced to endure, to get back what had rightfully belonged to him. He thought it might be inconsequential at this stage, but what troubled him most was that he couldn’t recall ever telling Edwin where he lived. So how could he know? How could he know Paddis Grove? Layber arrived at the bottom of the hill and walked across the damp glade to Finn’s. Soft winds bent the long blades of grass, and his tread flattened them, and when he got to the front of the anomalous building he stroked his beard again, pushed open the knothole door and stepped through.

Before his trailing rear footstep had landed on the floor behind him and the door had even closed, he was indeed accosted, searched, by two men so akin they could well have hatched from the same womb. Both of considerable size, both within tight black short sleeve tee shirts, both with guns holstered at their hips, they took him aside to allow the door to swing shut. “Just a formality, sir,” one said as they ran their hands over him. “He’s clean,” the same man said after they squeezed down the length of the oversized boots, and they let him go. Layber lowered his hands, turned, and headed all the way in.

Finn's store, if you could consider it such, was small and shaped like a wedge of cheese cut from a wheel—fairly wide at the entrance and tapering down along a center hallway, which was like a trail blazed through the bulwarks of paraphernalia at either side, ending almost into a point at the back corner wall, where his gigantic oak desk was raised from ground-level on a wooden platform like a low-set stage, a single step at either side leading up. Several offshoots—narrow pathways progressively shorter the further inside you ventured—branched off from the hallway and cut through items of every imaginable sort heaped in disarray upon tables, shelves, the carpet flooring, each other. All of the goods for sale did not look good. Crypt cool like a wine cellar, yet almost airless, what little oxygen lingered in the tight triangular room, hung laced with smoke thick and heady. Layber picked through a heap of garden tools mixed in with chipped statuary and a leather bound Bible all cocked precariously on a torn velvet ottoman as the giant reciprocals watched him from their posts by the front door over crossed arms. An infant's terrycloth bib smeared pea-green across the embroidered giraffe hung draped over the back of a highchair. Boots of all makes and shapes and sizes, from men long dead and those still possibly alive, had been dumped everywhere—onto the floor, onto broken nightstands, onto a plywood sheet bridging two sawhorses, onto other piles of tangled clothing for sale, and even, it appeared, added onto other piles of boots into mismatched, piebald humps of rubble, each one wasted and abject in the bleary light. A ceaseless dusk now, at midday, and always. It would take him forever or longer to locate what he was looking for in this mess. And such browsing would arouse suspicion, if it hadn't already. He put the large plastic-handled hunting knife he'd been studying back

down on the cracked slate of a snooker table. No way. Tempting, but no way. Then he saw them.

On a derelict shelf slanting against the wall under the weight of an army footlocker at its far end, were his boots. Just sitting there alone in all this time passed. They looked terrible, worthless there, still consumed by the dust of the desert and unable to stand up straight on their own. Layber walked to them slowly, stepping over a dented samovar lying rusted on its side, and reached up for his boots with a hand he willed from trembling. His flint wallet sat on the shelf next to them. He took the boots down and held them up close, the first time he'd done such a thing since that night in the desert when he hid the money in their heels. How long ago had that been? He couldn't even guess. A few weeks at least. The course of their fates took them here, to this strange place, to this shoddy, aberrant kingdom overlorded by a ruthless musclebound Negro dwarf and his twofold ogrish henchmen. When he untucked his or Edwin's shirt and rubbed the boots with the tail of it, the black cotton powdered reddish and his desert sepulcher under the Joshua tree flooded back into his memory, just a vivid, instant flash of image—him, outside of himself sailing airborne near the skies looking down on his own small figure bleeding, thirsting against the bole, dying with dead Stride, dead Corvin, a dead dream vanished forever, he'd thought, all his achievements squandered by a few arbitrary strokes of luck, all bad, a set of circumstances so malicious and so absurdly unlikely as to defy reason, but he held that dream again, right now in his hands, a final reclamation under a new surveillance not his, not judicial, only incognizant, each three typhlotic under the forlorn gaslight illuminating nothing in this cold shim of a

warehouse but the hint, the outline of Finn's littered spoils, merely their synopses and not the true stories each contained. Layber held his breath, turned the boots over to look at their soles. The heels were still secured firmly, appeared not to have been tampered with. He ran his fingers over the shiny eight screw heads, each one, then eight more on the other heel, and he exhaled. No one had found them. He kicked off one of Edwin's boots and kneeled stocking-footed to try his ropers on. A few trial steps, a pivot on the ball of his foot, and then he knelt again and took off the boot and put Edwin's back on, and stood and pinched his old boots together by their dips, let them dangle loosely at his side as he shuffled again over the strewn junk back to the central hallway, stepped onto it, and made his way to Finn's desk jammed back into the point of the cheese wedge.

Finn sat upraised on the platform like a black stone gargoyle inside a swirl of milky smoke. He had his opium tray laid out in front of him, set methodically with a brass ladle, several pills in a porcelain saucer, and as Layber placed the boots on the Chinese figures carved under glass into the desktop, Finn reached forward with his massive block of a hand—a torpid uncoiling—to adjust the wick flame on his enamel opium lamp. The black wooden chair upon which he perched, varnished to brilliance, had purple velveteen cushions and its hand-carved back rose so high that Finn reached only halfway up the scrolling woodwork. He hadn't yet looked at Layber with interest, curiosity, or anything else in his eyes, and still hadn't when he stuck the long bamboo stem of the opium pipe into his mouth and inhaled. Inside the canyon of his cupped palm the pipe's ivory bowl peeked through the black fingers like the fur of a winter hare being constricted by five different snakes. Finally he lifted that anvil head—the ears like

rotting cabbage leaves tacked low onto the solid neck flesh below the dense thatch of black sheep curls—to acknowledge Layber. “What do you want?” he asked him, and the slowly measured voice of the desert was slower, more measured here. His eyes were glazed over, abstracted, white slits through the heavy black lids. Layber couldn’t be sure what they saw. Finn inhaled again from the opium pipe and blew the dual plumes of smoke out his wide bullish nostrils.

Layber gazed up at him slightly, though the two men’s eyes were on almost level planes. “Just them boots there,” he said, nodding in their direction though they sat virtually right under Finn’s nose. “How much you want for em?”

Finn leaned forward from his chair and picked up one of the boots to inspect it. He put it back on the desk. “Those boots are five dollars.”

“I think,” Layber said, “that they’re only one dollar.” He felt a little lightheaded wondering how to play this.

“You think wrong. They’re good boots. Still a good deal of life left in them. Perhaps four.”

“Brand new these things only might go for three, maybe three-fifty. And these ain’t new.” He clutched one of the boots in a hand that he realized had begun to sweat, if just a little, and turned it upside down to display the sole to the dwarf. “Look at this.” He pointed to a small hole forming in the leather. “That ain’t good life left in em.” Behind him, one thug, or the other, laughed.

As he set the opium pipe on the tray, Finn seemed to analyze this statement, tilting his head from side to side at Layber, his drugged eyeballs twitching to focus.

It felt to Layber as if his heart stopped; he cleared his throat to start it beating again. "I could give you one-fifty," he said, forcing steadiness into his voice. He feared he'd backed himself into a bad, very bad corner.

"If these boots are so," Finn paused, and kept pausing, chasing, until he proceeded with, "so worthless," (He hit the word, he knows something, Layber thought.) "then why do you want them so badly? The boots you're wearing look pretty good to me."

"They don't fit so great. And these," he said, holding up the boot in his hand, "do." He put the boot back on Finn's desk. "Plus," he continued, "my father had a pair just like these, or real close. He ain't alive no more. So I got some sentimental reasons too, I spose." Through a fierce squint, Finn regarded him again, scrutinized him. Did he recognize him? His voice? His eyes? Had he shaved the beard and seen the man naked underneath? Layber knew he was dead now, or alive, but either consequence had just then in that instant been determined. He pulled the two bills from his pocket and set them on the desk next to the boots. "It's all I got."

Finn took up the money and looked at it as if it were of a foreign currency he couldn't honor. "This," he said, "will not buy me one drop of the cologne I wear to the whorehouses each night." Yet he pulled open the desk drawer soundless along its perfect grooves, and dropped from head-high with a flourish the two bills. They wafted down, in, and he shut the drawer. He took up his pipe to smoke, but it had gone out, and he fumbled with fingers too stout for delicate work another opium dose from the saucer, and he placed the pill in the pipe bowl and set the pipe aside on the tray readied for its next use. Layber thought he was finished, that they were both finished, but Finn continued,

said, "But I am as sentimental as the next guy. Perhaps even more so." He shoved the boots back toward Layber just a little bit and stared at him hard. "You let that be known in your travels." Finn signaled to the men at the front of the store, a dismissive sweep of his arm that could have meant virtually anything, and turned away head down to raise the wick on the burning lamp burning too low. When he said, "Now get out of here," Layber grabbed the boots and did as he was told.

Outside in the little lush clearing in front of Finn's store the air was nearly crisp, prickling Layber's skin, and though the darkening hours fast approached, the trifling light dropping in through the sheaves of gray clouds overhead, after the oppressive shadows inside, seemed potent. He ran. By the time he'd topped the rise, he was already panting. He stood on the low peak holding his boots, scanning the horizons to fathom the lands before him, each direction from this portion of world something he'd never in his life seen before. He'd arrived here with Edwin from the east, he thought, on a westbound trail. So he turned his back to the bottoming sun now and set off in a trot across and down the backside of the hummock. No one followed, and Finn's sylvan bazaar had withdrawn back into the stitching of its parturition—a termite's bore inside a knothole inside a tree trunk on a tree inside a knoll inside a forest inside a town inside a state inside a country on a planet all expanding or contracting depending on the direction its guests took—a parturition he could no longer see or hear or smell or feel and wouldn't ever again. At the base of the hill in a sheltered gully Layber found ground nearly plumb for his balance where he knelt on a plot of grass still cradling a few drops of that early rain, and he pulled Edwin's boots off. He put his own ropers on, then stood again in the

leather cracking around his feet. They were stiff with their recent unuse but had not forgotten the contours his feet had long ago molded inside. He tossed Edwin's boots into some bushes. In a month's time water would be running through here. In two months, perhaps snow. He set off again. Nothing looked familiar, because nothing was. He kept on. Then he arrived somewhere.

A half mile later, after reaching the top of the second hill, he came across the railroad tracks. Nothing much was out here, just open country. The only hint of man laid out in wood and steel and rivets at his feet. To his left, farther away than before, a good deal farther, the daub of cottonwood trees flamed all their colors in the last rays of the setting sun. Layber walked to them. And he kept walking from his overshot origin. His legs grew tired, the scarred one achy. But he never rested. When he came across the horse's droppings blazing like golden stones upon the dirt, he knew he was there. And so was Edwin.

Eclipsing the sun that had sunk and found a clear point in the band of blue sky below the cloudline, Edwin's shadowform stood there tall in the middle of the railway line and pointed its gun at Layber. The wide brim of his hat helped obscure his features, though he seemed to be grinning underneath the silvered aurora it made against the dusk of this day. Neither man had spoken upon first seeing one another in this displaced rendezvous; neither man spoke now. Above their heads, a V of geese honked homeward athwart the dropping lid of galaxies still unphenomenal in the final minutes of the afternoon's delicate gloam. All became silent again with the geese gone. Neither man moved to converge with or flee from this convergence. When Edwin finally spoke, the

sun had dropped out of sight and hid for a minute behind the far mountains and then rose again into the darkening sky as the bruised left sector of moon. "I thought you might forget me," he said.

"I ain't forgot you. I went to the rocks and you wasn't there."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah," Layber said. "That's so."

Edwin looked down at Layber's boots in the moonlight. "I trust everything went well at Finn's." His little derringer winked in the movement.

"Well enough." No train came. Nothing came. "Well I believe I owe you five hundred dollars," Layber said after the silence. He lifted a leg and reached to pull off a boot. "I'm sure you got a screwdriver."

Edwin stepped forward. "Just hand them over."

"What?"

"I said hand them over."

"What happened to our deal?"

"Why don't you tell me what happened to our deal? Seems to me you are the one who has terminated it. Not me."

"I ain't terminated it. It's right here." He held out the boot in his hands.

"Just give them to me, Jon."

"What's wrong with you?"

"There is nothing wrong with me."

"Somethin's wrong with you. What kinda man are you to do somethin like this?"

“I don’t know. What kind am I? What kind are you?”

“You’re crazy, you know that? You want these boots you’re gonna have to shoot me first.”

So Edwin did.

It was a gut shot, and when Layber regained consciousness the piece of moon was high and the night around him utter blackness. He was on his back. He stared up at the stars. His neck rested on the cold steel track, his head on the ties. Rocks and a railroad spike gored his back through Edwin’s thin cotton shirt. The socks at the end of his legs were thick wool and probably warm, though he shivered under the blood pooling on his belly. Even after he’d been shot, he wrestled with Edwin, had never given up. Until he had to. Clouds slithered across the sky, across the moon, across the stars, across Layber’s tired eyes that didn’t turn to watch them cross the mountain ranges of the distances. But then he did turn his head. He spat out another strand of blood. He swallowed some and felt a little queasy. Then the railroad tracks began vibrating slightly, then rumbled deeply in the ear he pressed onto the oncoming curve of metal waking alive with motion. Hugging his stomach together, he sat up, groaned. The rumbling intensified. The entire world seemed to quake. From within the darkness of the cottonwood junction around the bend of railway line, the coal-black behemoth steam engine tugged out its freight. Its big round headlamp shining solitary and dimly yellowed kept coming, enlarging. Black-gray smoke poured forth from the train’s coomed stack and continued to erupt in dense clouds around the gleaming steam whistle gaping open-valved and shrill in the night. Then the

train was on him, lumbering by so closely he could have reached out to touch one of the cars, the caboose as it passed. He'd raised his hand to the conductor he never saw, to the passengers in the dining car eating steaks and drinking coffee not there, and only when the hard ground upon which he sat ceased its tremors and stilled again did he bother to lower it. His hair had barely ruffled in the excruciating patience the train took to leave—his sodden shirtfront not at all. The night crawled onward. Somewhere, Edwin sat at a table counting his money. The night crawled onward. Somewhere, Mellie lie in bed sleeping with his shotgun ready. The night crawled onward. Layber sat and waited. He sat and waited. He sat and waited. There was nothing else to do.