

1918

It is now one year, a year with blood on it, since America entered the war in Europe. Any day now, the millionth soldier of the American Expeditionary Force will set foot into France. Nothing would be less surprising, given the quantities of young men of Montana who have lately gone into uniform, than if that doughboy who follows the 999,999 before him in the line of march into the trenches should prove to be from Butte or from Hardin, from Plentywood or from Whitefish--or from here in our own Two Medicine country. We can but pray that on some future day of significance, a Pasteur or a Reed or a Gorgas will find the remedy to the evil malady of war.

--Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner, April 11, 1918

"As sure as thunder falls into the earth and becomes stone,"
cried the king the next morning, "I am struck dumb by what you are saying, Remembrancer! You can stand there in truth's boots and say time will flee from us no matter what we do? The sparks as they flew upward from the fireplace last evening were not adding themselves into the stars? The whipperwhee of the night bird did not fix itself into the dark as reliably as an echo? The entire night that has just

passed is, umm, past? Where's the sense in all this remembering business,
then?"

"Those things yet exist, sire. But in us now, not in the moments
that birthed them."

"If that is so, we'll soon overflow! Puddles of memory will follow
us everywhere like shadows! Think of it all, Remembrancer! The calm
of a pond lazing as it awaits the wink of a skipping stone. The taste
of green when we thumb a ^{summer} pea from its pod. The icicle needles of winter.
The kited fire of each sunrise. How can our poor heads hold the least
little of all there is to remember? Tell me that, whoever can."

called out
"Let's stop there for today, Billy, thank you the world," I ~~said~~
from my ~~waterstand~~ perch at the rear of the classroom to the ~~Reinking~~
so earnestly
boy ~~reading~~ aloud at my big desk. ~~Blinking~~ ⁴ regretfully behind his round

eyeglasses, like a small owl coming out of beloved night into day,
Billy Reinking

~~carefully~~ ^{carefully into} put the place marker in the book of stories and took

his seat among ~~the~~ ^{my} other pupils. "Now tomorrow," I instructed the

~~ment of~~ ^{ment of} assorted craniums in front of me, "I want your own poor heads absolutely

running over with arithmetic when you walk into this schoolhouse, please."

Then out they went, to their saddlehorses or their shoeworn paths,

that birthed them."

"If that is so, we'll soon overflow! Puddles of memory will follow

as everywhere like shadows! Think of it all, Rememberer! The calm

of a pond lazily as it waits the wink of a skipping stone. The taste

of green when we thump a ^{summer} ~~ped~~ from its pod. The icicle needles of winter.

The lited fire of each sunrise. How can our poor heads hold the least

little of all there is to remember? Tell me that, whoever can." watch the children start for home, the walkers up the south fork,

the riders up the North Fork. The white horseload of little Findlaters, Susan Duff aboard her blood bay and Jimmy Spedderson on his black pony with the blaze face, Davie Erskine urging his roan with Rachel tight behind him. It was Davie I was seeing most of all. Seeing older Davies, although their names were Rob and Angus, hearing their own tunes of a far place.

A late afternoon near the end of the school year, Ninian Duff appeared in the schoolroom as I was readying to go home..

"Angus, I've been by to see Archie and Willy and we have made our decision on next year's school teacher."

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~~Thorkelsons~~

~~Hebner girl~~

~~Thorbjornsons~~ and Keevers and Toskis and the wan ~~two Tabbet~~ children and

the bright Reinking boy to their 'steeper families in the south benchlands, the

Van Bebber and Hahn girls up the South Fork, the Busby brothers and

the new generation of Roziers and the Finletter boy down the main creek.

After watching them scatter ^{like tumbleweeds} from the school, I picked my own

route through the April mud to my new mount, a ^{lively} bay mare named Jeannette.

Scorpion I'd had to put out to pasture, he was so full of years by now. I felt

a little that way myself--the ^{yearfull} ~~years~~ part, not the pastured one--as

I thought of the lambing shed duties waiting for me before and after

supper of Rob, scowling or worse, telling me in fewest words ^{of the} which ewes

were adamant against suckling their newborn and ~~would~~ ^{ad} need to be upended

and made to let the lambs dine. I would like to see the color of the

man's hair who could look forward to ending his day with stubborn ewes

to wrestle and Rob Barclay as well.

Prancy Jeannette and I entered the wind as soon as we rounded

the base of the knob hill and were in the valley of the North Fork,

but it was not much as Montana breezes go. Reassuring, in a way.

The waft felt as if it was loyally April and spring, not a chilly leftover of winter. My mood went up for the next minutes, until I rode past Duff's where Ninian was moving a bunch of ten-day lambs and their mamas up the flank of Breed Butte onto new grass. Across the distance I gave him a wave, and like a narrow old tree with one warped branch Ninian half-lifted an arm briefly in return and let it drop.

I rode on up the North Fork, in the mix of fury and sorrow that the sight of Ninian stirred ~~up~~ in me. ~~the~~ Scotch Heaven now had its first dead soldier, Ninian's and Flora's son Samuel. Longboned boy fascinated with airplanes and wireless. Little brother of the ~~great~~ ^{immortal} Susan. Heir to all that Ninian and Flora had built here in the North Fork the past thirty years. Corpse in the bloody mud of France.

A life bright against the dark/but death loves a shining mark.

Samuel was our first casualty but inevitably not our last. Suddenly every male in Montana between milkteeth and storeteeth seemed to have ~~gone~~ ^{this} gone to the war. Was it happening ~~so~~ drastically in all of America? A nation of only children and geezers now? Why wouldn't Europe sink

under the Yankee weight if our every soldier-age man was arriving over there? Of my own generation only Allan Frew was young enough to enlist, and he of course figured on settling the war by himself.

But our sons, our neighbors, boy upon boy upon boy who had been pupils of mine, were away now to,

the war. Maybe that was my yearfull feeling, the sense of being

beyond in age whatever was happening to those who were in the war.

Yet, truthfully, who of us were not in it? ^{Here} ~~There~~ at our homestead

that I was riding into sight of, Adair would be in her quiet worry

for Private Varick A. McCaskill ^{of} Company C, 2nd Battalion, 91st

Division, in training at Camp Lewis, state of Washington.

And Anna, invisible but ever there, on the other side of Breed Butte

from me, Anna was doubtless riding home now from the Noon Creek school

just as I was from mine, maybe with her own thoughts of pupils who

already were in the trenches of France but definitely with the knowledge

that her own son Peter was destined into uniform too if the war went

into another year. →

Like the smoke-thick summer of 1910,

the war was reaching over the horizon to find each of us.

#

"Hello, you," I gave to Adair as spiritedly as I could when I came up from the lambing shed to supper.

She knew my mood, though. She somehow seemed to, these days.

The winter just past was the first that Adair and I had spent together since Varick turned his face from me. The first, too, of trying to live up to this hornlocked partnership with Rob. To my surprise, when he and I had begun feeding hay to the sheep she insisted on getting into her heavy clothes and coming with. "I can drive the sled team for you," she said, and did. Of course the reason was plain enough. She was putting herself between the slander Rob and I could break into at least provocation. And it had worked. Seeing her there at the front of the hayrack, small bundled figure with the reins in her hand, seemed to tell both her brother and me that we may as well face the fact of her determination and plod on through this sheep partnership. At least that was my conclusion--I could never speak for Rob these days. By midway through the winter I was able to tell Adair she could abstain from her teamstering--"Rob and I are never going to be a duet, but we can stand each other for that long each day." She scrutinized me, then nodded. But you'll let me know if

you need me again? I hoped it would never be again that I needed her between myself and Rob, but I answered, Dair, I'll let you know.
I most definitely will.

"How many today?" Adair asked as she began putting supper on the table.

"Forty," I gave the report of the day's birth of lambs.

She gave me a smile. "I'm just as glad you didn't bring them at once." all in for the oven." I had to laugh, but I was still hearing her

how many? question. This was the first lambing time Adair had ever asked that, night after night, the first time she had shown interest in the pride and joy of any shedman, his daily tally of new lambs.

A new ritual, was this. Well, I would gladly take it. Anything that emphasized life, I would gladly take.



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At the end of May came our news of where Varick would be sent
next by the Army.

It's going to look just a whole lot like where I've been, his
to Adair.
handwriting on the brief letter, Maybe because it's the same place.

He was staying stationed at Camp Lewis, he ~~was~~ explained, in a
headquarters ^{company} ~~battalion~~. They think they found something I can do,
without me jeopardizing the entire rest of the Army, so for now
they're going to keep me here to do it. So here I stay, for who knows
how long. I sure as h--- don't, and I think maybe the Army doesn't
either.

—————→

As they did each time, Varick's words on the paper brought back the few that had passed between ^{him and me} ~~us~~ before he went off to the Army.

He had ridden into the yard just after I had come home from the school.

I stepped out of the house to meet him. He dismounted and said only,

I came to see Mother.

Unless you close your eyes quick you'll see me, too, I tried.

No grin at all from him. Well, that could be because of the war rather than just me. But for three years it hadn't been.

Your mother's out at the root cellar, I informed him. But I couldn't stand this. Since time out of mind, Varick was the first McCaskill to wear the clothes of war. A ticket of freedom had let my great-grandfather shape the blocks of stone at the Bell Rock rather than face the armies of Napoleon. Neither my Nethermuir grandfather nor my deaf father were touched by uniform, nor was I. Which led inexorably to the thought that Varick was bearing the accumulated danger for us all.

Varick. Son. Can't we drop this long enough to say goodbye?

Who knows when--if--I'll see you again.

Sure, we can say that much. And that was going to be all, was it. Varick held no notion that this could be our last occasion. He was at that priceless age where he thought he was unkillable. He drew a breath, this man suddenly taller than I was, and came to me and thrust out his hand. Goodbye then.

Goodbye, Varick. Your mother...and I...you'll be missed every moment.

I saw him swallow, and then he went off around the house to the root cellar. I felt my eyes begin to stream, tears that have been flowing since the first man painted blue fought the first man painted green and still have not washed away war.

Now Adair was putting Varick's letter in the top drawer of the sideboard with his others. Without turning, she asked:

"And which do we hope for now, Angus? That they keep him and keep him in that camp, or that they ship him to France?"

I knew what was in her mind, for it was abruptly and terribly at the very front of mine as well. The Army camps were becoming pestholes of influenza. Generally that was not something to die of,

but people were dying of it in those camps. On the casualty lists in the newspapers now, as many were dead of what was being called the 'flu ~~epidemic~~ as of combat. There in the midst of it at Camp Lewis, our son who came down with something in even the mildest of winters; as the months of this year advanced, Varick would be a waiting candidate for influenza. But to wish him into the shrapnel hell of the fighting in France, no, I never could. Twin hells, then, and our son the ~~soldier~~ soldier being gambled at their portals.

"Dair, I wish I knew," was all the answer I found to give her.

"I wish I did."

#



In early June, Rob and I met to cut the cards for a shearing time.

This year mine was the lower card, contradictory winner in Adair's

order of things, and so we would shear late in the month, when I

thought the weather was surest. Rob looked ^{as} ^{as usual} sour at losing, but before

I could turn away to leave, he broke out with:

"Any word from the Coast lately?"

By that he meant the Pacific Coast and Camp Lewis and Varick,

and I stood and studied him a moment. We would never give each other

the satisfaction of saying so, but he and I at last did have one thing

we agreed on, the putrid taste of the war. They're rabid dogs fighting

in a sack, England and Germany and France and all of them, I had heard

him declare in disgust to Adair. Why're we jumping in it with them?

Yet I knew too that the war's high prices for wool and lambs were the one

satisfaction to him in this lockstep partnership of ours. Well, nobody

insubstantial

ever said Rob Barclay was too ~~bashful~~ to carry contradictions.

"Nothing new," I said shortly, and turned from him.

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In the Fourth of July issue of the Gleaner was published the
Two Medicine country's loss list thus far in the war.

The Men Who Gave All

Adams, Theodore, killed in action at Cantigny.

Almon, John, fought in the Battle of the Marne, died of wounds.

Duff, Samuel, killed by a high explosive shell in the Seicheprey

sector.

Florian, Harold, contracted influenza and died at Camp Dodge, Iowa.

Jebson, Michael, while returning from a furlough, was killed in a

train wreck between Paris and Brest.

McCaul, George, saw service in France, taken ill with influenza,

died in hospital of lobar pneumonia.

Ridpath, Jacob, killed in action at Chateau-Thierry.

Strong Runner, Stephen, entered the service at Salem Indian Training

School in Oregon, died of tuberculosis at the Letterman General Hospital,

San Francisco.

Zachary, Richard, killed in action at Belleau Wood.

#

A hot noon in the third week of August, the set of days that are summer's summer. I had my face all but into the wash basin, gratefully swashing off the sweat of my morning's work with cupped handfuls of cool well water, when Adair's hand alighting on my back startled me.

"Angus," she uttered quietly, "look outside. It's Rob coming. And Davie."

The first of those was supposed to be taking his turn at campending our herder with the sheep up in the mountains, and the other was that herder. They could not possibly both be here, because that would leave the sheep abandoned and--yet out the west window, here they both came slowly riding.

I still was mopping myself with the towel as I flung out to see what this was, Adair right after me. At sight of us, Rob spurred his horse ahead of the lagging Davie and dismounted in a hurry almost atop Adair and myself.

"Davie's come down ill," he reported edgily. "I didn't know what the hell else to do but bring him out with me--it's all he can do to sit on that horse." Rob looked fairly done in himself, showing the strain of what he'd had to do. His voice was rough as a rasp as he went on: "Davie has to be taken on home to Donald



and Jen, but one of us has got to get up there to those sheep, sharp.

Do we cut to see who goes?"

"No, I'll go up. You tend to Davie." I stood planted in front of Rob, waiting for what he would be forced to tell me next.

"The sheep are somewhere out north of Davie's wagon, a mile or more. I threw them onto the biggest open patch of grass I could."

He told me this without quite managing to look at me. If you ever wanted to see a man cause agony in himself, here he was. Leaving a band of sheep to its own perils went against everything in either of us.

I could all but see the images of cliff, storm, bear, mountain lions, coyotes, stampeding in Rob's eyes; and for a savage moment I was glad it was him and not me who'd had to abandon that band to bring Davie.

I went over to the sagging scarecrow on the horse behind Rob's.

"Davie, lad, you're a bit under the weather, I hear."

His feverish face had a dull stricken look that unnerved me more than had his bloody battered one beneath the horse's hooves, the day of that distant spring when Adair and I jolted across the Erskine field to him; that day. Now Davie managed in a ragged near-whisper, "Couldn't... leave the...sheep."

"I'm going up to them this minute. The sheep will be all right, Davie, and so will you." If saying would only make either of those true...

As Rob and his medical burden started down the valley toward Davie's parents' place, I headed for the barn to saddle the bay mare. I hadn't gone ~~six~~^{three} steps when I heard:

"Angus. I'm coming with you."

I turned to my wife, to the gray eyes and auburn ringlets that had posed me so many puzzles in our years together. "You don't ~~need~~ have to, Dair. I'll only be a day or so, until Rob can fetch another herder up."

"I'm coming anyway."

I hesitated between wanting her along and not wanting her to have to face what might be waiting up there, a destroyed band of sheep. The wreck of all our efforts since the reading of Lucas's will. "The sheep are a hell of a way into the mountains, Dair, up on top of Roman Reef. It's a considerable ride."

"Adair knows how to ride, doesn't she."

True. But true enough? The saddle hours it would take to climb Roman Reef, through the sunblaze of the afternoon heat, to the grim

search for adrift sheep--I recited the reasons against her coming, then asked: "Do you still want to?"

I swear she said this, as if the past twenty-one years of her avoidance of the Two Medicine country's mountainline were ^{unceremoniously} null and void. She said, "Of course I want to."

All afternoon Adair and I went steadily up and up, not hurrying our saddlehorses but keeping them steady at the pace just short of hurry. At midpoint of the afternoon we were halfway up Roman Reef, the valley of the North Fork below and behind us, Scotch Heaven's log-built homesteads becoming dark square dots in the distance. Our own buildings looked as work-stained as any. Then a bend of the trail turned us north, and the valley there was Noon Creek's, with the Reese ranch in easy sight now, easy sight to where Anna was, anyone but me would ^{not} have known the years and years of distance between.

glanced

At the next climbing turn of the trail I ~~looked~~ back at Adair.

She had on Varick's old ~~hat~~ brown Stetson he had left home when he went away to the Army, and her riding skirt, and a well-worn blouse that had begun as white and now was the color of cream. My unlikely wife, an unlikely mote of light color against the rock and timber of the mountain. I wondered if she at all had any of the division of mind I did on this journey of ours. Part of me saw, desperately, that if the sheep had found a way to destroy themselves since Rob left them atop this mountain, Adair and I would possess what we had on our backs, and that homestead down there, and the rest you could count in small coins, all over the hemisphere, Yet if the sheep were gone, stampeded, eaten, dead a myriad of ways, also would mean that ~~would be~~ the end of my teeth-gritting partnership with Rob. As we climbed and climbed, there was a kind of cruel relief for me in the fact that the sheep in their woolheaded way were doing the deciding, whether this enforced pairing of Rob and myself was to be the one thing or the other.

Atop, with the afternoon all but gone, Adair and I urged our horses toward where Davie's sheepwagon showed itself like a tall canvas igloo on wheels.



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Rob had shut Davie's dog in the sheepwagon so that he wouldn't follow down the mountain. When I unjailed him he came out inquisitive as to why I was not Davie, but otherwise ready to participate. I climbed back on my horse, leaned down from the saddle and called, "Come up, Scamp. Come up, boy." # The dog eyed me a moment to see if I really meant such a thing, then crouched to the earth and sprang against my leg and the stirrup, scrambling ~~to my lap~~ gamely as I boosted him the rest of the way into my lap. There across my thighs between the saddle horn and my body he at once lay quiet, exactly as if I had told him to save all possible energy. If the sheep were not where Rob had left them, this dog was going to have to work his legs off when we found them. If we found them. If we found them alive.

Adair and I and my border collie passenger in about a mile found what I was sure was the meadow Rob had described, and no sheep. An absence of sheep, a void as stark as a town empty of people.

Adair and I,

sat on our horses and listened. Except for the switching sounds of our horses' tails, the silence was complete. I put the dog down. "Find them, Scamp." But the sheep had been over so much of the meadow that the dog could only trace out with his stymied dashes what I

already knew, that some direction out of this great half-circle of grass they had quit the country.

Below us, the last sunshine was going from the plains, the shadow of these mountains was now the first link of dusk. ^{This} ~~The~~ meadow in the fading light looked like the most natural of bedgrounds for sheep.

Tell that to the sheep, wherever the nomadic bastards had got to. Here Rob had made his decision that flung the sheep to their own wandering. Now I had to make mine to consign them to their own perils for the night.

"We'll take up the looking in the morning, Dair. It won't help anything for us to tumble over a cliff up here in the dark."

Back at the sheepwagon, Adair began fixing supper while I picketed our horses and fed Davie's dog. Then I joined her in the roundtopped wagon, inserting myself onto the bench seat on the opposite side of the tiny table from the cooking area. That was pretty much the extent of a sheepwagon, a bench seat along either side, cabinets above and below, the bunk bed across the wagon's inmost end and the midget kitchen at its other. I suppose a fastidious cook

"The company is the best thing about it."

"You have to understand, of course, this is the deluxe way to do it. Usually there are a couple of thousand noisy animals involved."

Sheep sound like the exact thing to have, Rob responding to Lucas's suggestion of our future in my newfound valley called the North Fork.

Now if we only had sheep.

"Tomorrow will tell, won't it," she answered my spoken and unspoken disquisitions on sheeplessness.

Well, if today was its model for ^{revelation,} ~~imparting,~~ it would. Adair volunteering



herself into these mountains: I could have predicted forever and missed that possibility. My curiosity was too great to be kept in. "Dair, truth now. Coming up here today where you could see it all, what did you think of it?"

In the light of the coal-oil lantern, ~~her~~ her eyes were darker than usual as she searched ~~up~~ into mine. [#] "The same as ever," she told me forthrightly, maybe a bit regretfully. "There is so much of this country. People have to stretch themselves out of shape trying to cope with so much. Distance. Weather. The aloneness. All the work. Montana sets its own terms and tells you, do them or else. Angus, you and Rob maybe were made to handle this country. Adair doesn't seem to have been."

"For someone who can't handle that"--I inclined my head to the sweep of the land beneath our mountain--"you gave a pretty good imitation today."

"Such high praise," she said, not at all archly, "so late at night."

"Yes, well," I got up and ~~went~~ ^{stepped} to the door for one last listen for the sheep. The dark silence of the mountains answered me. I turned

around to Adair again, saying "Night is what we'd better be thinking about, isn't it. That bed's going to be a snug fit."

Adair turned her face toward me in the lanternlight. She asked as if it was the inquiry she always made in sheepwagons:

"Is that a promise?"

The buttons of that creamy blouse of hers seemed to be the place to begin, answering that. Then my fingers were inside, on the small pert mounds of Adair's breasts, and eventually down to do away with her riding skirt. Her hands were not idle either; who has said, the one pure language of love is Braille? If no one else, the two of us were inscribing it here and now. We did not interrupt vital progress on one another even as I boosted Adair into the narrow bunk bed and my clothes were shed beside hers. Two bodies now in the space for one, she and I went back and forth from quick hungers of love, our lips and tongues with the practice of all our years together but fresh as fire to each other too, to expectant holidays of slow soft stroking. Maybe the close arch of canvas over us ^{cupped} ~~held~~ us as if in a shell, concentrating us into ourselves

and each other. Maybe the bachelor air, the sheepwagon's accumulated
loneliness of the ~~Davies~~^{herders} spending their hermit lives, demanded dispelling
when woman was here to pair her ~~lovmaking motions~~^{passion} with man's. Maybe
the desperation of the day, of the marriage we somehow had kept together,
needed this release. Who knew. It was enough for Adair and me that
something, some longing of life, had us in its supreme grip. Something
drives the root, something unfolds the furrow: its force was ours for each other,
here, now. # As ever, Adair's slim small body beneath mine was nothing
like Anna's the single time it had been under mine; as ever, our
lovmaking's convulsion was everything like Anna's and mine. Difference
became sameness, there in our last straining moments. This was the
one part of life that did not care about human details, it existed on
its own terms.

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At first hint of dawn, we had to uncoil ourselves from sleep and each other. No time for a breakfast fire, either; the two of us ate as much dried fruit from Davie's ~~barbar~~ grocery supply as we could hold, and then we were out to ~~the~~ ^{our} saddlehorses and the eager dog. As we set off into a morning that by now was a bit fainter than the darkness of night, my hope was that we were getting a jump on the sheep of maybe an hour.

That hour went, and half of another, before we had sunrise. Adair and I tied the horses and climbed up to an open outcrop of rock where we could see all around. As we watched, the eastern sky converted from orange to pink; then there was the single moment, before the sun came up, when its ^{golden} light arrived like spray above a waterfall. The first hot half of the sun above the horizon gave us and the rock outcroppings and the wind-twisted trees long ^{pale-gray} shadows. Scrutinize the newly-lit brow of the mountain as we did, though, there were no shadows ^{with} ~~that~~ sheep attached to them.

~~were sheep.~~

"All this," Adair said as if speculating, "you'd think something would move. Some motion, somewhere."

I took her arm to start us down from the vantage point. "We're it, Dair. Motion is our middle name until we catch up with those goddamn sheep."

We worked stands of timber, sheep sifted out of none of them.

We cast looks down over canyon cliffs, no wool among the harsh scree below.

We found at least three meadows where the grass all but shouted invitation to be eaten by sheep, all three times, no least trace of sheep.

An hour of that. Then another. Too much time was passing. I didn't say so, but Adair knew it too. The day already was warm enough to make us mop our brows, ~~and~~ if we didn't find the sheep by ten o'clock or so, they would shade up and we would lose the entire hot midpart of the day without any bleats of traveling sheep to listen for.

Now Adair and I were ears on horseback, riding just a minute or two and then listening. How could there be so much silence? How could the invisible ligaments that bound the sky to the earth not creak in tense effort at least once in a while?

But nothingness, mute air, answered us so long and so steadily

that when discrepancy finally came, we both were unsure about it.

I shot a glance to Adair. She thought she had heard it too, if you could call that hearing. A sliver of sound, a faintest faraway tink.

Or more likely a rock dislodging itself in the morning heat and falling with a clink?

The dog was half-dozing in my lap. One of his ears had lifted a little, not enough to certify anything.

Adair and I listened twice as hard as before. At last I had to ask, low and quick, "What do you think, Dair?"

She said back to me in a voice as carefully crouched as my own: "I think it was Percy's bell."

By now we were past mid-morning, not far short of ten. We could nudge our horses into motion, toward the direction where we imagined we'd heard the tink, and risk losing any repeat of it in the sounds of our ~~own~~ riding. Or we could sit tight, stiller than stones, and try to hear through the silence.

With her head poised, Adair looked as if she could sit where she was until the saddle flaked apart with age. I silently clamped myself in. I say silently. Inside me my willed instructions to the bell wether

clamored and cried. Move, Percy, I urged. Make that bell of yours ring
just once, just one time, and I promise I'll feed you graham crackers
until you burst. If you're up, don't lie down just yet. If you're
down, for Christ's sake get up. Either case, move. Take a nice nibble
of grass, why not, make that bell--[#]the distant little clatter came,
and Davie's dog perked up in my lap. I put him down to the ground
and away he went, Adair and I riding after him, in the direction of
the bell.

But for the dog, we still would have missed the sheep. They
were keggered up in a blind draw just beneath ^a~~the~~ rimrock, as if having
decided to mass themselves to make an easy buffet for any passing bears.
The dog glided up the slope and over into the draw, we followed, and
there they were, a couple of thousand gray ghosts quiet in the heat,
contemplating us remorselessly as we rode up.



Adair asked, "Is it all of them?"

"I can't tell until I walk them. Make the dog stay here with you, Dair."

I went slowly on foot to the sheep, easing among them, moving ever so gradually back and forth through them, a drifting figure they did not really like to accept but did not find worth agitating themselves about. All the while I scanned for the band's marker sheep. Found Percy, with his bell. Found nine of the ten black ewes, but not the tenth. Found the brownheaded bum lamb with a lop ear, but did not find the distinctive pair of big twin lambs with the number brand 69 on their sides.

When I had accounted for the markers that were and weren't there, I went back down the slope to Adair.

"Most of them are here," I phrased it to her, "but not quite all."

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It was noon of the next day before Rob appeared with a herder in tow, a snoose-filled Norwegian named Gustafson. "And I had to go all the way to Cut Bank even to come up with him," Rob gritted out. His eyes were on the sheep, back and forth across them, estimating. "Much loss?"

"At least a couple of hundred, maybe a few over."

"Lambs, do you mean? Or that many ewes and lambs together? Spit it out, man."

And so I did. "That many of each, is what I mean."

Rob looked as if my words had taken skin off him in a serious place. In a sense, they had. He knew as well as I did that such a loss would nick away our entire year's profit. But dwelling on it wasn't going to change it, was it. I asked him, "How's Davie?"

"Sick as a poisoned pup." Rob cast a wide gaze around, as if hoping to see sheep peeking at him from up in the treetops, out the cracks in rocks, anywhere. "Let's don't just stand here moving our mouths," he began, "we've got to get to looking--"

"Dair and I have done what looking we could," I informed him,

"and now that you're here, the three of us can try some more. But there hasn't been a trace of them. Wherever the hell those sheep are, they're seriously lost."

—

We never found them. From that day on, the only existence of those four hundred head of vanished sheep was in the arithmetic at shipping time; because of them, our sheep year of 1918 subtracted down into a break-even one. Not profit, not loss. Neither the one thing nor the other.

"Sweet suffering Christ," Rob let out bitterly as we stuffed the disappointing lamb checks into our shirt pockets. "What does it take, in this life? I put up with this goddamn partnership Adair keeps us in, and for no pay whatsoever?"

"Just think of ^{all} the exercise we get out of it, Rob," I answered him wearily.

—



By that September day when we shipped the lambs and turned toward the short weeks ahead before winter, Davie had recuperated. What was growing darkly apparent, however, was how lethal that malady of his could be. It was the influenza which had ~~been~~ first bred in the army camps. The spread of it was beginning to be called an epidemic, and here in its first appearance in Scotch Heaven, it let Davie live, barely, while it killed his father.

From all we heard and read, the influenza was the strangest of epidemics, with different fathoms of death--sudden and selective in one instance, slow and widespread in another. Donald Erskine's fatality was in the shallows, making it all the more ~~more~~ abrupt and horrible. One morning while he and Jen were tending Davie he came down with what he thought was the start of a cold, by noon was feeling a raging fever. For the first time since childhood he went to bed during the day. Two days after that, we were burying that vague and generous man. Donald and Ninian were the first who homesteaded in Scotch Heaven, and now there was just Ninian.

...Man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets.

I only half heard Ninian's Bible words, there at graveside. I was remembering Adair and myself, our night together in Davie's sheepwagon, our slow wonderful writhe onto and into each other, there on his bedding. Davie had not been in that wagon, that bed, for some days before his illness, tepeeing behind the sheep as he grazed them on the northern reach of the mountain. Had he been, would one or both of us now be down with the influenza? Or be going into final earth as Donald was?

...Ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern...

What kind of a damn disease was this, that could simultaneously find a Davie remote and alone on his mountainside as person can ever be and an army camp of thousands at the end of the continent? Was there some universal infection now, felling a shepherder here, a hundred soldiers there? ...Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was...

Adair and I were silent on our wagon ride home from Donald's funeral. I knew that her thoughts were where my own were, at Camp

Lewis. Winter was coming, Varick's frail season. What chance did he have, there in one of the cesspools of this epidemic?

What chance did anyone have against the epidemic, the question began to be. Suddenly the influenza was spreading in the cities, towns, countryside.)

(no 4)

People were trying whatever they could think of. Out on the bare windy benchlands, 'steeper families were sleeping in their dirt cellars, if they were lucky enough to have one, ^{in hope of keeping} ~~to keep~~ warmer than they could in their drafty shacks. Mavis and George Frew became Bernarr McFadden believers, drinking hot water and forcing themselves into activity whenever they felt the least chill coming on. Asafoetida sacks appeared at the necks of my schoolchildren that fall. Newspaper stories said gauze masks must be worn to keep from breathing 'flu germs. No, said other stories, the masks were useless because a ^{pass} microbe could ~~go~~ through gauze like a mouse going through a barn door.

During all the precautions and debates, the 'flu kept on killing.

Or if it didn't manage to do the job, the pneumonia that so often followed it did. A year of two wars, 1918--as if the outright bloodshed in Europe drew with it the shadowy carnage of the epidemic. And neither had a truce in sight yet.

—



Less than two weeks after the beginning of school that autumn, every schoolhouse in the county had to close because of the influenza danger. It seemed that the last piece of my life that I could count on to be normal was gone now. At the homestead the next week or so, I went from chore to chore, rebuilding my damnable west fence that always needed it, patching the sheep shed roof, anything, everything, to attack with my restlessness.

How Adair was managing to put up with me, I don't know. It must have been like living with a persistent cyclone, and one whose mood wasn't improved by how achy and stiff he felt from all his labors, besides.

She persevered with me, though. "There's just one item on the place you haven't repaired lately," she told me one noon, "and that's you. Let me give you a haircut."

"What, in the middle of the day? Dair, I've got--"

"Right now," she inserted firmly, "while the light is best. It won't take time at all. Go get yourself sat, while I find the scissors."

I grumpily took my place by the south window. The mountains were gray in the thin first-of-October light; the year waning down toward

winter every day now. Toward another season of feeding hay with Rob, ample justification for gloom if I needed any further reason.

Over my head and then up under my chin came a quick cloud of fabric, Adair snugly knotting the dish towel at the back of my neck. "Stop squirming," she instructed, "or the lariat is next." From the edge of my eye I could see the dark-brown outline of the barn, and ^{impatiently} reminded myself I'd better go repair harness as soon as Adair had trimmed me to ~~her~~ ^{my} satisfaction.

Her scissorwork and even the touch of her fingers as she handled my hair were an annoyance today. After I flinched a third or fourth time, ~~she~~ Adair ruffled my hair with mock gruffness as she used to do to Varick when he was small and misbehaving, and said ~~she~~ questioningly, "You're a touchy one today."

"It's not your barbering. I've got a bit of a headache, is all."

The scissors stopped on the back of my neck, the blades so cold against my skin I felt their chill travel all through me. "Angus, you never get headaches."

"I'm here to tell you, I've got a major one now," I stated with an amount of irritation that surprised me. But it genuinely did feel as if

a clamp was squeezing the outer corner of each of my eyes, the halves of my head being made to press hard, severely, against each other.

"Dair, let's finish making me beautiful," I managed to say somewhat more civilly. "I need to get on with the afternoon work."

It wasn't an hour until she found me, ^{in the barn} sitting on a nail keg with my head down, trying to catch my breath.

When Adair asked if I was able to walk, I sounded ragged even to myself when I told her of course I could, any distance.

"The house, Angus," she answered that, her voice strangely brave and frightened at once. "Hold onto me, we're going to the house."

#

House, the distant echo of the woman's voice said. But we were in a wagon, weren't we, at the edge of cliffs. River below. Those Blackfeet, Angus. The Two Medicine. Those Blackfeet put their medicine lodge near. Two times. Wait: the horses didn't answer to the reins. I yanked back but they were beginning to trot, running now. The cliffs. I fell through life... The woman beside me clung to my arm. ~~House was a building~~ Bodies below. Bigger than sheep,

darker. Cows, no, bigger. Buffalo. The buffalo cliffs, Angus. They
were good ones. The river was so far, so far down. Harness rattling.
 She clung to me. The cliffs, I could see down over the edge, the
 buffalo were broken, heaped. Fell through life. She clung to me,
 crying something I couldn't hear. The horses were going to run forever.
 Our wagon wheels were inches from the cliff, I had to count the wheel
 spoke with the white knot of handkerchief ^{one} as it went around two count
 the wheelspin three as the ground flew... What. She was crying something.
 Hooves of the horses, wagon bumping. Hang on, I tell the woman, we've
got to... Count the wheel spoke, start over. One, no, two. Tell the
 woman, you count. While I... what. Helpless. They don't answer the
 reins. Quiet now, horses run silently. But so close to the cliffs.
 Two Medicine. Those Blackfeet. Two times. Count, I tell her. While I...
 what. The spoke is coming loose. Rim ^{breaking from} ~~off~~ the wheel. Can't, I tell her.
A spoke can't just... Wheel coming apart now, nearest the cliffs. Iron

circle of the rim peeling off, the spokes flying out of the hub.

Hold on, tell the woman.)

Tipping, falling. I shout into her staring face: Anna! Anna! Anna!

#

The bedroom was silent except for the heaviness of my breathing.

"You decided to wake up, did you." [#]Adair's voice. Her face followed it to the bed and me. The back of her small hand, cool and light, rested on my forehead, ~~resting~~ a long moment, testing. "You're a bit fevery, but nothing to what you were a few days ago. And if you're finally well enough to wonder, the ^Wdoctor says you don't have any pneumonia." Adair sat on the side of the bed and regarded me with mock severity. "He says you're recovering nicely now, but it'll be a while before you're up and dancing."

I felt weak as a snail. "Dair," I croaked out. "Did I...shout... something?"

A change flickered through her eyes. And then she was looking at me as steadily as before. "You do know how to make a commotion." She got up from the bedside and went out of the room.

My head felt big as a bucket, and as empty. It took an effort to lick my lips, an exertion to swallow. [#]In a minute or several, Adair was back, a bowl of whiteness in her hands.

"You need to eat, " ^{she}~~Adair~~ insisted. "This is just milk toast. You can get it down if you try a bit."

The spoon looked too heavy to lift, the ~~plate~~^{bowl} as big as a pond.

I shook my head an enormous inch. "I don't want--"

"Adair doesn't care," stated Adair, "what you don't want. It's what you're going to get." And began to spoonfeed me.

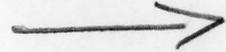
In a few days I was up from bed in brief stints, feeling as pale as I looked. My body of sticks and knobs was not the only thing vigor had gone out of. It was gravely noticeable how quiet Scotch Heaven seemed. No visiting back and forth, no sounds of neighbors sawing wood for winter.

As my head cleared, thoughts sharp as knives came. Donald Erskine being put into his grave, gone of the same illness I had just journeyed through. Those reports of the epidemic's efficient carnage in the army camps. Varick. No, Adair would have told me if-- Yet could she have, deeply ill as I was, wobbly as I still was. She had said nothing about our son, was saying nothing. That was just Adair. Or was it what I could not be told. ⁹"Dair," I at last had to ask, "this influenza. Who else--?"

The gray eyes of my wife gave me a gauging look. "I've been keeping the newspaper for you. Maybe you're as ready to see it as you'll ever be. It has the list."

I pushed the prospect away with a wince. "If it's so bad they have to have a list, I don't want to see it."

Adair gauged me again. Then she went over to the sideboard, reached deep in a drawer and brought me the Gleaner.



Victims of the Epidemic

My eyes shot to the bottom of the page.

Munson, Theodore, homesteader. Age 51. Died at his homestead
east of Gros Ventre, Oct. 11.

Not anyone I knew; but more M names were stacked above that one.

My scan of the list fled upward through them, Morgan... Mitulski...

Mellisant... toward the dreaded Mcs:

McWhirter...

McNee...

McCorkill...

McCallister...

And then Jorgensen... Kleinsasser... Varick was safely absent from this list, among the living. Mercy I sought, mercy I got. I was as thankful as any person had ever been. But while Adair and I still had a son, a name known to me even longer than Varick's came out of the list at me.

Frew, Allan, soldier of the American Expeditionary Force. Age 43.

Died in a field hospital near Montfaucon, Sept. 26.

Allan in the shearing contest I had let him win. Allan dancing with Adair afterward, the two of them the melody of my hope that ~~she~~ she would find a husband and a Montana niche for herself, in that far ago summer, while Anna and I--life isn't something you can catechize into happening the way you intend, is it. I looked up now at Adair, whose marriage could have been with Allan, for better or for worse but surely for different than all she had been through with me. "It's too bad about Allan," I offered to her, and she nodded a slight nod which was agreement but also instruction for me to look at the list again.

Erskine, Jennie, widow of Donald, mother of David... "Not Jen," I squeezed out of my constricted throat. "Not old Jen too, after poor Donald..."

"Yes. It's an awful time, Angus," Adair answered in a voice as strained as mine.

My thoughts were blurred, numb, as my eyes climbed the rest of the list. Benson... Baker... Between them would have been Rob's slot, if Barclays were susceptible to the mere ills of the rest of the world. What would I be feeling now, if his name stood in stark print there? Or he, if mine was in rank back down there in the Mcs? I ~~was~~ did not

know, you never can except in the circumstance, but I could feel it all regathering, the old arguments, the three angry years apart from Rob after the Two Medicine and the angry time with him since then in this benighted damn sheep partnership--I was too weary, done in, to go where that train of thought led. I fast read the rest of its list to the first of its names, Angutter, Hans, homesteader... and put the Gleaner away from me.

"Angus." I heard Adair draw a breath. The newspaper was back in her hand, thrust to me.

"Dair, what?" I asked wearily. "I read the damn list once, I'm not going to again."

Then I saw. Beside Adair's thumb there on the page, ~~the~~ ^{that} name at the bottom of the list, Munson, Theodore ~~Joseph~~; but the small print beneath that, list continues on p. 3.

"Angus," my wife said with a catch in her voice, "you have to."

No.

No no no.

But I did have to. ~~I~~ did have to know. The newspaper shook in

my hands as I opened it to the third page, as I dropped my eyes to the end of the remainder of the list and forced them, the tears already welling, back up to the Rs.

Reese, Anna, wife of Isaac, mother of Lisabeth and Peter. Age 44.

At the family ranch on Noon Creek, during the night of Oct. 12.

So if I was never far from the fact that Anna was gone, that fact
 which stood like a stone above all tides, at least now there was the
 I had
 shelter of Varick and Adair. I had them on the plus side of the ledger
 What I did not have, as spring made its
 way toward the summer of 1919, was any lessening of Rob.

1919

Times are as thin in Montana as they can get. No one needs telling that this has been a summer so dry it takes a person three days to work up a whistle. But we urge our homesteading brethren to hold themselves in place on their thirsty acres if they in any way can, and not enlist in the exodus of those who have given up heart and hope. As surely as Montana's weather will change from this driest of times, so shall its business climate.

--Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner, Aug. 21, 1919

Let it tell itself, that season of loss.

By first snowfall, as much of me as could mend was up and out in the tasks of the homestead, of the sheep, of the oncoming winter. Had I been able I would have filled myself with work twenty-four hours a day, to have something, anything, in me where the Anna emptiness always waited. Yet even as I tried to occupy myself with tasks of this, that, and the other, I knew I was contending against the kind of time that has no hours nor minutes to it. Memory's time. In its calendarless swirl the fact of Anna's death did not recede, did not alter. Smallest things hurt. A glance north to read the weather,

and I was seeing the ridge that divided the North Fork from Noon Creek, the shoulder of geography between my life and hers. A chorus of bleats from the sheep as they grazed the autumn slope of Breed Butte, choir of elegy for the Blackfeet grass and the moment when I recognized Anna at the reins of the arriving wagon. And each dawn when I went out to the first of the chores, the slant of lantern light from the kitchen window a wedge between night and day--each was the dawn of Anna and myself and the colors of morning beginning to come to the Two Medicine country. Each time, each memory, I told myself with determination that it would be the last, that here was the logical point for the past to grow quiet. But no known logic works ~~against~~ on that worst of facts, death of someone you loved, does it. ^{even} I tried the blunt end on myself: Angus, you major fool, it is in no way possible that a person can lose someone who never truly was his, am I right? ~~logically~~ Yes, as sure as the word has three letters. But the pain pays no heed to that answer or any other.

By Armistice Day, when the war pox in Europe finally ended, the influenza epidemic was concluding itself too; in the Gros Ventre cemetery the mounded soil on the graves of Anna and its dozens of other victims was no longer fresh. When the schools reopened and Ninian came to ask if I was well enough to resume teaching, I told him no, he would need to make a new hire. Whether ~~or not~~ it was my health ^{or not} that lacked the strength, I could not face the South Fork schoolroom just then. Anna dancing in my arms there the first time ever, my voice asking And we'll be dancing next at Noon Creek, will we? And hers answering, I'll not object. Before Ninian could go, I had to know: "What's being done about the Noon Creek school?" He reported, "Mrs. Reese's daughter is stepping in for them there." Lisabeth. In younger replica, the same beautiful face with an expression as frank as a clock, still in place at Noon Creek. ^{But} ~~And~~ not.

By Christmas week, Rob and I were meeting wordlessly ~~at~~ each day at a haystack, to pitch a load onto the sled and feed the sheep. ~~There~~

Maybe the man knew how to keep a decent silence in the face of a sorrow. Maybe he thought the hush between us added cruel weight to his indictment of me and my hopelessness about Anna. Who knew, and who cared.

no #

Whatever I was getting from Rob, cold kindness or mean censure,

I at least had mercy from the weather. There was just enough snow to cover the ground, and only a chill in the air instead of deep cold.

Day upon day the mountains stood their tallest, clear in every detail, cloudfree as if storm had forgotten how to find them. Any number of times in those first days of feeding, I saw Rob cock his head up at this open winter and look satisfied.

On New Year's Day of 1919, Varick came home.

#

He was taller, thinner, and an eon older than the boy-man I had fearfully watched ride the Fort Benton steer. To say the truth, there was a half-moment when I first glanced down from the haystack at the Forest Service horse and the Stetsoned person atop it, that I thought he was Stanley Meixell.

"'Lo, Dad," he called up to me. His gaze shifted to Rob, and
in another tone he simply ~~said~~^{uttered} with a nod, "Unk."

"Varick, lad," Rob got out. I watched him ~~look~~^{glance} at me, at Varick,
confusion all over him. When no thunderbolt hit him from either of us,



he decided conversation could be tried. "You're looking a bit gaunt.

How bad was the army life?"

Varick gave him a flat look. "Bad enough." It was not until the weeks ahead that I heard his story of Camp Lewis. Christamighty, Dad, the 'flu killed them like flies. Whole barracks of guys in quarantine. You'd see them one day, standing at the window looking out, ^{even} not especially sick, and the next day we'd be packing them out of there on stretchers to the base hospital. And a couple of days after that, we'd be burying them. A truckload of coffins at a time.

I didn't figure you and Mother ^{needed} ~~had~~ to know this, but I was ~~the~~ doing the burying. They found out on the rifle range this eye of mine only squints when it takes a notion to, so they decided I wasn't worth

shipping to France to get shot. ^{Instead} They put a bunch of us guys who knew which end of a shovel to take hold of ~~how to use a shovel and our muscles~~ onto the graveyard detail. The

Doom Platoon, we were called. That was the war I had, Dad--digging

all the graves for the ones the 'flu got.

Now Varick moved his gaze from Rob, not saying anything more to him

but somehow making a dismissal known. →

My breath caught, as I waited for the version I would get from him.

Varick swung down from the borrowed horse. Reins at the ready, to tie to the haystack fence, he called up to me: "Can you stand a hand with that hay?"

"Always," I said.

—

When the sheep were fed and Rob went off alone ^{and silent} to Breed Butte, Varick rode home ~~in~~ with me on the hay sled, his horse tied behind, and we talked of the wonderful mild winter, of his train journey from Seattle to Browning with his discharge paper in his pocket, of much and of nothing, simply making the words bridge the air between us. I am well beyond the age to think all things are possible. I had been ever since Anna's name on the death list in the Gleaner. But going home, that first day of the year, my son beside me unexpected as a griffin, I would have told you there is as much possibility in life as not.

As the ~~sled~~ ^{sled} crunching sounds of our sled and the team's hooves halted at the barn, Varick cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted toward the house:

"Mother! Your cooking is better than the Army's!"

Adair flew out and came through the snow of the yard as if it wasn't there. She hugged the tall figure, saying not a word, not crying, not laughing, simply holding and holding.

Ultimately Varick said down to the head of auburn ringlets, "You better get in out of the weather. We'll be right along, as soon as I help this geezer unharness the horses."

Amid that barn chore, Varick's voice came casual above the rattle and creak of the harnesses we were lifting off. "I hear we just about lost you."

"As near to it as I care to come." I hung my set of harness on its peg. When my throat would let me, I ~~wasn't~~ said the next painful words: "Others didn't have my luck."

"Dad, I heard about Mrs. Reese." Varick stood with his armful of harness, facing me. His eyes were steady into mine. They held no apology, no attempt at reparation for ~~the~~ the years he had held himself away from me; but they conceded that those years were ended now. The Varick facing me here knew something of the storm countries of the mind, latitudes of life and loss. Now he said with simple sympathy: "It must be tough on you."

————— "It is," I answered my son. "Let's go in the house to your mother."

At long last, ^{now} Varick's life took its place within comfortable distance of mine and his mother's.)

Stanley Meixell provided him work and wage at the ranger station through the next few months of that shortest ^{and mildest} of winters, then in calving time the job of association rider for the Noon Creek cattlemen came to him.

"I don't remember raising a cow herder," I ~~said~~ twitted Adair. "He must be yours."

"And I don't remember doing him by myself," she gave me back, with a lift of her chin and a sudden smile.

The other climate was warmer too.)

(109)

Spring came early and seemed to mean it. By lambing time the last of the snow was gone from even the deepest coulees. Rob and I shed our overshoes a good three weeks earlier than usual, and the nights of March and ~~early~~ on into April stayed so mild that Adair never had to have lamb guests in her oven.

So if I was never far from the fact that Anna was gone, that fact which stood like a stone above all tides, at least now I had the shelter of Varick and Adair. What I did not have, as spring hurried its way toward the summer of 1919, was any lessening of Rob.

better
transition?

Varick's life took its place within comfortable distance of ours.

restless and I was faced to, as if I had the whole world
before me, and I was alone in the world.

So I was never far from the fact that I was alone, that I was

alone, and I was alone in the world.

and I was alone in the world, and I was alone in the world.

and I was alone in the world, and I was alone in the world.

and I was alone in the world, and I was alone in the world.

and I was alone in the world, and I was alone in the world.

The other side was never too.

a little of her side and a sudden smile.

"and I don't remember going out by myself, where I was back, with

what he looks."

"I don't remember taking a son never," I was sitting down.

distance of mine and his mother's.

at long last, Varick's life took its place within comfortable

With ^{just} one more year ahead of us to the fulfillment of Lucas's will

and the sale of the sheep, Rob seemed to be growing inversely perverse.

to work with.

no #

A day soon after lambing began ^{in mid-March,} when I asked him something he

at first didn't answer all, simply kept on casting glances out the

shed door to the valley and the ridges around. Eventually he rounded

on me and ~~announced~~ declared as if lodging a complaint:

"There isn't enough green in this whole goddamn valley this spring to cover a billiard table."

Despite his tone I forbore from answering him that the wan spring wasn't my fault, that I knew of. "It's early yet," I said instead.

"There's still time for the moisture to catch up with the season."

But when the rest of March and all of April brought no moisture, I became as uneasy as he was.

It ought to have been no bad thing, to have us joined in concern

about the scantiness of the grass and the grazing future of the sheep,

the air around us could stand a rest from our winter of silent antagonism.

But Rob took that spring's lackings as an affront to him personally.

"Sweet Jesus!" he burst out in early May when we were forced to throw ~~back~~ the sheep back onto a slope of Breed Butte they had already eaten across once, "what's a man supposed to do, pack a lunch for fifteen hundred sheep?"

Before thinking, I said to him the reassurance I had been trying on myself day after day. "Maybe we'll get it yet."

It. A cold damp blanket of it, heavy as bread dough. It had happened before; more than a few times we had known mid-May snowfalls to fill this valley above our shoe tops. Normally snow was not a thing Scotch Heaven had to yearn for, but we wildly wanted it now, one of May's fat wet snowstorms, a grass bringer. Let that soak the ground for a week, then every so often bestow a slow easy rain, the kind that truly does some good, and the Two country's summer could be salvaged.

Not even so much as a dour retort from Rob, he simply sicced the dog

after a lagging bunch of ewes and their lambs and whooped the rest of the sheep along. I swung another look to the mountains, the clear sky above them. What was needed had to begin up there. No sign of it yet.

#

On through the moistureless remainder of May, I wanted not to believe the mounting evidence of drought. But it was wherever I looked. Already the snowpack was gone from the mountains, the peaks bare and stark. Hay meadows were thin and wan. The worst absence, among all that the drought weather was withholding from the usual start of summer, was of sound from the North Fork; the rippling runoff of high water from the mountains was not heard that May. The creek's stillness foretold the kind of season that was coming to us immediately with June the weather turned hot and stayed that way.

The summer of 1918 had been dry. This one of 1919 was parched.

#

"Fellows, I hate like all hell to do it," Stanley Meixell delivered the edict to Rob and me when we moved the sheep up onto our national forest allotment. "But in green years when the country could stand it I let you bend the grazing rules a little, and now that it's a lean year we got to go the other way. I like to think it all evens out in the end."

Rob looked as if he'd been poked in a private place. I did a moment of breath-catching myself. What the forest ranger was newly rigorous about was the policy of moving our band of sheep onto a new area of the scant grass every day. Definitely moving them, not letting them graze at all in the previous day's neighborhood.

"We can't fatten sheep by parading them all over the mountains every day," Rob objected furiously. "What you're asking is damn near the same as not letting them touch the grass at all. So what in the goddamn hell are we supposed to do, have these sheep eat each other?"

"It's a thought," Stanley responded, looking at Rob as if in genial agreement. "Lamb chops ought to taste better to them than grass as poor as this."

"Just tell me a thing, Meixell," Rob demanded. "If we can't use this forest for full grazing right now when we most need it, then what is it you're saving it for?"

"The idea is to keep the forest a forest. Insofar as I can let you run sheep on it--or ^{Wampus Cat}~~Walter~~ Williamson or the Noon Creek Association run cattle on it--I do. But I think I maybe told you somewhere before along the line, my job is to not let any of you wear it out."

"Wear it out?" burst from Rob. "A forest as far as a person can see?"

"It all depends," answered the ranger, "how far you're looking."

—————

What do you do when the land itself falls ill with fever?

Throughout that summer in Scotch Heaven and the rest of the Two country,

each day and every day the heat would build all

morning until by noon you could feel it inside your eyes--the wanting

to squint, to save the eyeballs from drying as if they were pebbles.

And the blaze of the sun on your cheekbones, too, as if you were standing

too near a ~~fire~~^{stove}. Most disquieting of all, the feel of the heat in your lungs; not even in the fire summer of 1910 had there been this, the day's angry hotness coming right into you with every breath.

Then after the worst of the heat each day, the sky brought the same disappointment. Clouds, but never rain. Evenings of July, as sundown neared, the entire sky over the mountains would fill with thick gray clouds.

As the clouds came over us they swirled into vast wild whorls, as if slowly

boiling. Then there would be frail rainlike fringes down from the distant edges of the cloud mass; if those ever reached the ~~valley~~ ground, it was not in the valley of the North Fork or anywhere else near. Ghost showers.

The first to be defeated by the hot brunt of the summer were the 'steaders. With no rain, their dry-land grain withered day by day. The high prices of the war were gone now too--last year's \$2-a-bushel wheat abruptly was \$1-a-bushel or less. By the first of August, the wagons of the 'steaders and their belongings were beginning to come out of the south benchlands. The Thorkelsons were somehow managing to stay, and to my surprise, the Hebners; but then there was so little

evidence of how the Hebners made a living that hard times barely applied to them. The others, though, were evacuating, [REDACTED] The KeEVERS, family and furniture. The wagonload of the Toskis. Billy Reinking rode down to return the copy of Kidnapped I had lent him and reported that his family was moving into Gros Ventre, his father was taking a job as printer at the Gleaner office.

I watched the wheeltracks of the 'steaders now undoing the wheeltracks when I marked off their homestead claims. And I watched Rob for any sign he regretted the land-locating we had done. I saw none in him, but by now I knew you do not glimpse so readily into a person.

—

It was midsummer when I rode up onto Roman Reef on a campending trip and heard a dog giving something a working over. The barking was not in the direction of our herder and sheep, but farther north; unless I missed my guess, somewhere in the allotment of the Noon Creek cattle. At the next trail branch in that direction, I left the pack horse tied to a pine tree and rode toward the commotion.

I met the red-brown file of Double W cattle first, lolloping down the mountainside. Then the dog who was giving close attention to their heels. Then the roan horse with Varick in its saddle.

My son grinned and lifted a hand when he saw me. "That's enough, Pooch," he called to the dog.

"That's not very charitable of you," I observed as I rode up and stopped next to Varick. "All Walter Williamson wants is your grass as well as his."

"We go through this about once a week, Dad," he told me with a laugh. "Wampus Cat sends somebody up to sneak as many cattle as he can here onto the Association's allotment. As soon as I find them, I dog them back down the countryside onto his allotment. Those cows are

going to have a lot of miles on them before the summer's over."

Watching the last tail-switching rumps disappear into the forest, I was doubly pleased--at the thought of Wampus Cat Williamson having to contend with a new generation who pushed back as quick as he pushed, and at this chance to visit with Varick. "Other than having the Double W for a neighbor, how is cow life?"

"About as good as can be expected." Varick's tone was a good deal more cheerful than the words. In fact, he looked as if this was a high summer in Eden instead of stone-dry Montana. He lost no time in letting me know why.

"Dad, there's something you better know about. I'm going to marry Beth Reese."

Everything in me went still, as if a great wind had stopped,
Across the plain of my mind
 gathering itself to hurl again. The girl--almost woman--Lisabeth
 looking at me in that steady gauging way, the Two Medicine morning.
 Knowing there had been something between her mother and me, something,

"And how is cow life?"

for a neighbor? how is cow life?"

and at this chance to talk with Vasyok. "Other than raising the problem

to contend with a new generation who looked back as dark as he looked,

I was doubly blessed--at the thought of Marina and Williamson raising

through the last fall--with the same darkness into the forest,

but having no way to know that from my direction it was deepest love. Maybe worse if she did know, if she had asked Anna, for Anna would have told her it all. That springtime pairing, Anna and I, that had come unclasped, and now the two resemblances of us, about to clasp?

I managed to say to Varick: "Are you. When's all this to happen?"

He grinned. "She doesn't quite know it yet."

I stared at this son of mine. Doesn't any generation ever learn the least scrap about life from the--

"Don't give me that look," Varick said. "Beth and I aren't you and--her mother. All this got started at a dance last spring when we kind of noticed each other. I didn't know what the hell else to do, so I just outright tried her on that. Told her that I hoped whatever she thought of me it was on my own account, not anything that had to do with our families. She told me right back she was born with a head with her own mind in it, so there was no reason why she couldn't make her own decisions--you know how she has that Sunday voice when she gets going." Like Anna. "Christamighty," Varick shook his head, "I even love that voice of hers."

Varick won where I had not. Beth said yes to his proposal,
they were to be married that autumn after shipping time. Alongside
my gladness for the two of them was my ache where Anna had been.

Solve that, Solomon. How do you do away with a pang for what you have
missed in life, even as you see it attained by your son?

If you are me you don't do away with it, you only shove it deeper
into the satchel of that summer's hard thoughts.

The latest worry was waiting for me in the hay meadows beside the



trickle of the North Fork. I knew this was the thinnest hay crop I'd ever had, but until I began mowing it there was no knowing how utterly paltry it was. This was hay that was worth cutting only because it was better to have little than none. I could cover the width of each windrow with my hat.

I stood there with the sweat of that summer on me, dripping like a fish, and made myself look around at it all. The ridges rimming the valley, the longsail slopes of Breed Butte, the humped foothills beneath the mountains, anywhere that there should have been the tawny health of grass instead was simply faded, sickly-looking. The stone colonnades of the mountains stood out as dry as ancient bones. There was a pale shine around the horizon, more silvery than the deeper blue of the sky overhead--the silver of heat, today as every other day.

But the sight that counted was the one I was avoiding looking down at, until at last I had to again. The verdict was written in those thin skeins of dry stalks that were purportedly hay. Now the summer, the drought, had won. Now there was a yes I absolutely had to get.

When I came into the house for supper at the end of that first day of cutting hay, Adair looked drained. Cooking over a hot stove on such a day would boil the spirit out of anybody, I supposed. I took a first forkful of sidepork, then put it back down. I had to say what I had seen in the scantiness of the hayfield.

"Dair, Lucas's sheep. We've got to sell them this fall."



"The lambs, you mean. But we always--"

"I mean them all. The ewes too, the whole band."

She regarded me patiently. "You know I don't want ^{to} to."

"This isn't that ~~at~~ this time I don't mean because of Rob and me being like cats tied together by the tails. I can go on with that for as long as he can and a minute longer, you know that. No, I can even put up with Rob, for you. But it's the sheep themselves. There's not enough hay to carry them through the winter. We won't get half enough off our meadows. Oh, we can buy whatever we can find, but that's not enough to fill your hat either. There just isn't any hay to speak of, anywhere, this summer." She still looked at me that same patient way. "Dair, we dasn't go into winter this way. That band of sheep can't make it through on what little feed we're going to have, unless we teach them to eat air."

"Not even if it's an open winter?"

"If it's the most open winter there ever was and we only had to

feed dabs, maybe, they might."

"Last winter was an open one, Angus."

"That was once, Dair. Do you ^{really} want to bet Lucas's sheep on it happening twice in a row?"

She studied her plate, and then gave me her grave gray-eyed look.

"Those sheep will die?"

"Dair, they will. A whole hell of a bunch of them, ^{if not all.} They and the lambs in them. We've never had so poor a grass summer, the band isn't going to be as strong as it ought to be by fall. And you know what winter can be in this country. I ^{realize} ~~know~~ this is sudden, but I figured if I pointed it out to you now we'd still have time to get out ~~of~~ of this sheep situation with our skins on. All I ask is that you start thinking this over and--"

"I don't need to," she answered. "Sell the sheep, Angus."

#

"Sell the sheep now?" Rob repeated in disbelief. "Man, did you and Adair check your pillows this morning, to see whether your brains leaked ~~drained~~ out during the night?"

He may have been right. Certainly I felt airheaded at this reaction of his to my news of Adair's willingness to sell. This person in front of me, Robert Burns Barclay as far as the eye could attest, from the first minute in the lawyer's office had been the one for selling Lucas's sheep, and now--

"There's not money to be made by selling when prices are as low as they are now," he was saying to me contemptuously. "A babe coming out of his mother could tell you that. No, we're not selling."

"Christ on a raft, Rob! You don't remember the years of '93? Four years in a row, and prices stayed sunk the whole while."

"That was then, this is now." When that didn't brush me away, he gave the next flourish. "I remember that we hung on without selling, and we came out of it with full pockets."

"We didn't start with a summer like this."

"Will you make yourself look at the dollars of this situation?" he

resorted to. "For once in your life, will you do that?" He cocked his head, then resumed: "The first year of these goddamn sheep of Lucas's, we made decent money. Last year, we only came out even. This year we're not making a penny on the wool or the lambs either, and if we sell the ewes at these prices we're all but giving them away, too. It'd mean we've spent three years for no gain, man. And I want a lot better pay than that, for having to go through this goddamn partnership with you."

"You can wait until you turn green with it and that still doesn't mean it'll happen. Rob, for Christ's sake, listen--"

"Listen yourself," he shot back. "Prices are bound to come back up. All we've got to do is wait until next year and sell the whole outfit, ewes and lambs and all."

"And what about this winter, with no more hay than we've got?"

"We've never seen a winter in this country we couldn't get through. I even got through one with you, somehow. If we have to buy a dab of

hay, all right, then we'll trot out and buy it. You'd worry us into the invalids' home if you had your way."

I shook my head and took us back around the circle to where this had begun. "Adair and I want to sell now."

"Want all you please. I'm telling you, I'm not selling. Which means you're not."

I had pummeled him down to gruel once, why not pound him again now? And again every day until he agreed to sell the sheep? I was more than half ready to. But the fist didn't exist that could bring an answer out of Rob that he didn't want to give. I drew a steadying breath and said:

"We can't agree, then. So we have to let these do the deciding."

I brought out the deck of cards. "Go ahead, you can cut first.

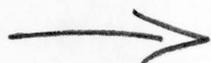
If you draw the low card, you win, we don't sell the sheep now.

If I draw it, I--"

"I'm not cutting at all." He could have saved his mouth those words; his face said them all too plainly.

Damn him, he seemed to take pleasure in being perverse. "Cutting for it is the only fair way to decide," I tried.

"How big a fool do you take me for?" He looked both riled and contemptuous now. "This isn't any case of



deciding how to run the sheep, it's deciding whether or not to sell. And that takes all three of us to agree--remember that part of Lucas's famous goddamn will? You and Adair trot into town to that lawyer and you'll find out soon enough. I'm not cutting cards over this, ^{and} I'm not listening to any more of your mewling about it. And we're not selling these sheep until a year from now."

#

What walloped me ~~worst~~ ^{next} was Ninian Duff's decision to leave the North Fork.

"Ay, Angus, I would rather take a beating with a thick stick." For the first time in all the years I had known this man he seemed embarrassed, ~~As~~ if he was going against a belief. "But I know nothing else to do." Ninian stared past me at the puddled creek, the scant grass. "Had Samuel not been called by the Lord, I would go on with the sheep and say damn to this summer and the prices and all else. But I am not the man I was." Age. It is the ill of us all. "So, Flora and I will go to Helena, to be near Susan."

That early September day when I rode home from the Duffs' and the news of their leaving, the weather ahead of me was as heavy as my mood. Behind the mountains the ~~weather~~^{sky} was turning inky, a forming storm all the way from the South Fork to Jericho Reef. The clouds lay in a long gray front, woolly, caught atop the mountains, yet beneath them Roman Reef and Grizzly and Jericho still were standing bright in the sun, blue and purple in their cliffs. It was as if the mountains were too big for plain colors of rock and tree; to cover them took gray, forest green, blue, purple.

Despite the homestead houses and outbuildings I was passing as I rode, the valley of the North Fork seemed emptier to me just then than on the day I first looked down into it from the knob hill. Tom Mortensen and the Speddersons, gone those years ago. The Erskines taken by the epidemic. The year before last the Findlaters had bought a place on the main creek and moved down there. Allan Frew, gone in the war. And now the Duffs. Except for George Frew, Rob and I now suddenly were the last of Scotch Heaven's homesteaders--and George too was talking of buying on the main creek whenever a chance came.

A person could count on meeting wind at the side road up Breed Butte to Rob's place, and today it was stiff, snappy. In minutes it brought the first splatting drops of rain. The first real rain in months and months, now that the summer of 1919 had done us all the damage it could.

—————
Beside me on the wagon seat Adair said, "I wish they had a better day for it."

I put an arm around her to help shelter her from the ~~October~~ wind. ^{the start of}
Only October, and already the wind was blowing through snow somewhere.



Above the mountains the sky looked bruised, resentfully promising storm. It had rained almost daily now since that first September gullywasher and today didn't seem willing to be an exception. She sure beats everything, Montana weather. That was maybe the most lasting gospel of the three decades since Rob and I hoofed into this Two Medicine country, those words of Herbert the freighter. Below Adair and I now as our wagon climbed the ~~rest of the~~ shoulder of Breed Butte before descending the other slope to Noon Creek, we could see Rob's reservoir brimming as if it had never tasted drought; a glistening portal of water in the weary autumn land.

By the time we were down from the divide and about to cross Noon Creek, clouds like long rolls of damp cotton were blotting out the summits of the mountains. Weather directly contrary to Adair's wish. I tried to muster cheer: "If you can remember ^{so} ~~that~~ far back, the night of this counts for more than the day."

Her arm came inside my sheepskin coat and around my back, holding me. "Adair remembers," she declared.

How dreamlike it seemed, when we arrived at the old Ramsay place and stepped into the wedding festivities of Varick and Lisabeth. I had not put foot in that house since my time of courting Anna. In my memory I saw again the vinegar cruets that were Meg Ramsay. So, Mr. McCaskill, you too are of Forfar. That surprises me. Plump Peter Ramsay, silent as a stuffed duck. Not only were they gone now, but so was the one I saw everywhere here: Anna. # She came to the door now on the arm of Varick to greet Adair and me. She was in every line of Lisabeth, Anna was; the lovely round cheeks, the eyes as blue and frank as sky, the lush body, even the perfect white skin hinting down from her throat toward her breastbone. Beauty bestowed upon her full receipt, vouching her in every way complete.

"Mother, Dad," Varick greeted us. "You came to see if Beth is going to come to her senses before the knot gets tied, I guess?"

"We came to gain Beth," Adair said simply and directly. Our daughter-in-law-to-be gave her a gracious ^{enough} look, but in an instant those

steady blue eyes were gauging me. I got out some remark I hoped wasn't damaging, then Adair and I were moving on into the house out of the way of the other wedding-comers arriving behind us.

Glad as I was for Varick and Beth, this event of theirs was a gauntlet I had to make myself endure. Over there was Isaac.

Despite the efforts of that concealing mustache and the unreadable crinkles around his eyes, the year since Anna's death was plainly there in the lines of his face. His son Peter was hovering near him, still too young to quite believe marriage was a necessity in life but enough of a man now to have to participate in this family day. Then over here was Rob, with Judith beside. For once he was not as brash as brass, whatever was on his mind. I saw him glance every so often toward Varick and Beth.

I hoped he was seeing the past there too, and I hoped his part of it was gnawing in him. Probably remorse would break its teeth if it even tried to gnaw him, though.



Then through the throng of the wedding crowd I saw with relief that Stanley Meixell had come in. While Adair was occupied accepting congratulations for the union of the McCaskills and the Reeses, I crossed the room to him.

Stanley ~~Meixell~~ was at the window that looked west to the mountains, a glass in his hand. Since the inanity called Prohibition, we were reduced to bootleg whiskey; I had to admit, whoever Isaac's source was, the stuff wasn't bad.

After we had greeted, I asked: "What's this I hear about you aiding and abetting matrimony here today?"

"Yeah, when Mac asked me to be best man I told him I would." He paused and resumed his window vigil. "Though it's closer to a preacher than I promised myself I'd ever get."

"Maybe it's not catching," I consoled him.

"Yeah, I'm trying to ward it off with enough vaccine," Stanley said a bit absently with a lift of his glass. The major part of his attention was not on our conversation. Still gazing out away from the hubbub of the room, he said to me: "Angus, take a look at this, would you."

I stood by Stanley at the window and saw what he was keeping vigil on. The mountains ~~still were~~ ^{by now were entirely} concealed by clouds, but along the ragged bottom of the curtain of weather occasional patches of the foothills showed through. White patches. First snow.

"It's christly early for that," seems to me," Stanley mused. "You ever know it to come already this time of year?"

"No," I had to admit. "Never."

Stanley watched the heavy veil of weather a long moment more, then shrugged. "Well, I guess if it wants to snow, it will." He started to lift his glass, then stopped. "Actually, we got something to drink to, don't we." He looked across the room toward Varick and Beth, and my eyes followed his. I heard the clink of his glass meeting mine, then Stanley's quiet toast: "To them and any they get."

—

I was returning around the room to Adair when the picture halted me. Just inside the open door into the bedroom, it hung on the wall in an oval frame the size of a face mirror. I had never seen it, yet I knew the scene instantly. The wedding photo of Anna and Isaac.

I stepped inside the bedroom to see her more closely. A last visit, in a way. She was standing, shoulders back and that lovely head as level as ever, gazing forthrightly into the camera. Into the wedded future, for that matter. I stood rooted in front of the photo, looking now not only at Anna but at the pair there, Isaac seated beside and below her in the photographic studio's ornate chair and seeming entertained by the occasion, and I thought of the past that put him in the picture instead of me.

The presence behind me spoke at last. "It's a good likeness of them, isn't it," Beth said.

I faced around to her. My words were out before I knew they were coming.

"Beth, I'm glad about you and Varick."

She regarded me with direct blue eyes. Her mother's eyes.

Then said: "So am I."

Operas could be made from all I could have told this young woman, of my helpless love for her mother, of what had and had not happened that morning above the Two Medicine when she registered her mother and

then me. Of her mother's interest in me, of the verdict that was never quite final. But any of it worth telling, this about-to-be Beth McCaskill already knew and had framed her own judgment of. She was thoroughly Anna's daughter, after all.

By her presence in front of me now, was Beth forgiving me for having loved her mother? No, I think that cannot be said. She would relent toward me for Varick's sake, but forgive is too major. Probably more than anyone except Anna and myself, Beth knew the lure I was to her mother. The daybreak scene at the Two Medicine would always rule Beth's attitude toward me.

Hard, but fair enough. For twenty-one years I endured not having Anna as my wife. For however long is left to me, I can face Beth's opinion of me.

"Beth. I know we don't have much we can say to each other. But maybe you'll let me get in this much. To have you and Varick in a life together makes up for a lot that I--I missed out on." I held her gaze with mine. "May you have the best marriage ever."

She watched me intently for another long moment, as if deciding.

Then she gave me most of a familiar half-smile. "I intend to."

H —————

Beth and Varick said their vows as bride and groom ever do,
 as if they were the first and only to utter those words. The ritual
 round of congratulations then, and while those were still echoing George
 Frew was tuning his fiddle, the dancing was about to begin. Adair here
 on my arm in a minute would be gliding with me, so near, so far, as
 the music took her into herself. Music and Adair inside the silken
 motion I would be dancing with, the wife-mask with auburn ringlets
 on the outside. Well, why not. There was music in me just now as
 well, the necessary song to be given our son and daughter-in-law,
 in the echoing hall of my mind.

Dancing at the rascal fair,
Lisabeth Reese, she was there,
the answer to Varick's prayer,
dancing at the rascal fair.
 And Varick too, he was there,
 giving
~~bringing~~ Beth his life to share,
dancing at the rascal fair.
Devils and angels all were there,
heel and toe, pair by pair,
dancing at the rascal fair.

—————

Winter was with us now. The snow that whitened the foothills the day of Varick and Beth's wedding repeated within forty-eight hours, this time piling itself shoetop-deep all across the Two country. We did the last of autumn chores in December circumstances.

That first sizable snowstorm, and for that matter the three or four that followed it by the first week in November, proved to be just the thin edge of the wedge of the winter of 1919. On the fifteenth of November, thirty inches of snow fell on us. Lacelike flakes in a perfect silence dropped on Scotch Heaven that day as if the clouds suddenly were crumbling, every last shred of them tumbling down in a slow thick cascade. From the windows Adair and I watched everything outside change, become absurdly fattened in ~~new~~ fresh white outline; our woodpile took on the smooth disguise of a snow-colored haystack. It was equally beautiful and dismaying, that floury tier on everything, for we knew it lay poised, simply waiting for wind the way a handful of dandelion seeds in a boy's hand awaits the first flying puff from him. That day I did something I had done only a few times in all my years in Scotch Heaven; I tied together lariats and strung them

like a rope railing between the house and the barn, to grasp my way along so as not to get lost if a blizzard blinded the distance between while I was out at the chores.

The very next day I needed that rope. Blowing snow shrouded the world, or at least our polar corner of it. The sheep had to be fed, somehow, and so in all the clothes I could pile on I went out to make my way along the line to the barn, harnessed the workhorses Sugar and Duke, and prayed for a lull. When a lessening of the blizzard finally came, Rob came with it, a plaster man on a plaster horse. He had followed fencelines down from Breed Butte to the North Fork, then guided himself up the creek by its wall of willows and trees. Even now I have to hand it to him, here he was, blue as a pigeon from the chill of riding in that snow-throwing wind, yet as soon as he could make his mouth operate he was demanding that we plunge out there and provide hay to the sheep.

"Put some of Adair's coffee in you first," I stipulated, "then we'll get at it."

"I don't need--" he began croakily.

"Coffee," I reiterated. "I'm not going to pack you around today like a block of ice." When Adair had thawed him, back out we went into the white wind, steering the horses and hay sled along the creek the way Rob had done, then ^{we} grimly managed to half-fling half-sail a load of hay onto the sled rack, and next battled our way to my sheepshed where the sheep were sheltering themselves. By the time we got there they were awful to hear--a bleated chorus of hunger and fear rending the air. Not until we pitched the hay off to them did they put those fifteen hundred woolly throats to work on something besides telling us their agony.

That alarming day was the sample, the tailor's swatch, of our new ~~winter~~ ^{season}. The drought of that summer, the snow and wind of that winter: the two great weathers of 1919. Through the rest of November and December, days were either frigid or blowy and too often both. By New Year's, Rob and I were meeting the mark of that giant winter each day on our route to the sheep's ^U feedground. At a place where my meadow made a bit of a dip, snow drifted and hardened and drifted some more and hardened again and on and on until there was a mound eight or ten

feet deep and broad as a low hill there. "Big as the goddamn bridge across the Firth of Forth," Rob called it with permissible exaggeration in this case. This and other snow bridges built by the furrowing blizzards we could go right over with the horses and hay sled without breaking through, they were so thickly frozen. Here winter plies his craft,/soldering the years with ice. Yes, and history can say the seam between 1919 and 1920 was triple thickness. Truly, I do not know how to convey the daily experience of such weather except to say it was constantly startling; a person just could not get used to so great a quantity of snow and cold. Thank heaven, or at least my winning cut of the cards, we had bought twice as much hay as Rob wanted to, which still was not as much as I wanted to. Even so, every way I could calculate it now--and the worried look on Rob said his sums were coming out the same as mine--we were going to be scratching for hay in a few months if this harsh weather kept up.

It kept up.

As the chain of frozen days went on, our task of feeding the sheep seemed to grow heavier, grimmer. There were times now when I would have to stop from pitching hay for half a minute, to let my thudding heart slow a bit. The weariness seemed to be accumulating in me a little more each new time at a haystack; or maybe it was the sight of the hay dwindling and dwindling that fatigued me. In those catchbreath pauses I began to notice that Rob too was stopping from his pitchfork work for an occasional long instant, then making the hay fly again, then lapsing quiet for another instant. Behavior of that sort in him I at first couldn't figure. To look at, he was as healthy as a kettle of broth; no influenza had eroded anything of our Rob. But eventually it came to me what this was. Rob's pauses were for the sake of his ears. He was listening, in hope of hearing the first mid-air roar of a chinook.

From then on, my lulls were spent in listening too. But the chinook, sudden sweet wind of spring, refused to answer the ears of either of us.

—————

Maybe I ought to have expected the next. But in all the snip and snap that went on between Rob and me, I never dreamt of this particular ambush from him.

Usually I drove the team and sled to whatever haystack we were feeding from and Rob simply met me there, neither of us wanting to spend any more time than necessary in the company of the other. But this day Rob had to bring me a larger horse collar--Sugar's was chafing a sore onto his neck, which we couldn't afford--before the team could be harnessed, and so he arrived into my barn just as I was feeding Scorpion.

No hellos passed between us these days, only dry glances of acknowledgment. I expected Rob to pass me by and step straight to the workhorses and their harness, but no, anything but.

He paused by Scorpion's stall. "That horse has seen his days, you know."

What I knew was the hateful implication in those words. To close off Rob from spouting any more of it, I just shook my head and gave Scorpion's brown velvet neck an affectionate rub as he munched into the hay.

Rob cocked a look at me and tried: "He's so old he'd be better off if you fed him your breakfast mush instead of that hay."

I turned away and went on with my feeding of Scorpion.

"The fact is," Rob's voice from close behind me now, "he ought to be done away with."

So he was willing to say it the worst he could. And more words of it yet: "I can understand that you're less than keen to have him done away with. It's never easy--the old rascals get to be like part of us." They do, Rob, my thought answered him, which is why I am keeping Scorpion alive this winter instead of putting the bullet you suggest into the brainplace behind his ear. "But," that voice behind me wouldn't ^{not} stop, "I can be the one to do away with the old fellow, if you'd rather."



"No. Neither of us is going to be the one, so long as Scorpion is up and healthy. Let's put a plug in this conversation and go feed the sheep."

But Rob blocked my way ~~from the manger~~ ^{out of the stall.} "Do you take telling?" he snapped. "We can't spare so much as a goddamn mouthful of hay this winter, and you're poking the stuff into a useless horse as if we've got worlds of it. Give yourself a looking at, ~~why~~ ^{why} don't you, man. This winter is no time ~~to be a sentimental ninner~~ ^{for charity cases. Any spear} of hay that goes into Scorpion doesn't go into one of those ewes half-starving, out there."

I knew that. I knew too that our hay situation was so ~~bad~~ ^{wretched} that Scorpion's daily allowance mattered little one way or the other. We needed tons of the stuff, not armfuls. We needed a chinook, we needed an early spring, we needed a quantity of miracles ^{that} the killing of one old horse would not provide. I instructed Rob as levelly as I could:

"I know the word doesn't fit in your ears, but I've told you no. He's my horse and you're not going to do away with him. Now let's go, we've got sheep waiting for us."

He didn't move. "I have to remind you, do I. He's the horse of us both."

Then I remembered, out of all the years ago. The two of us pointing ourselves down from Breed Butte toward Noon Creek on my horse-buying mission; that generous side of Rob suddenly declaring itself, clear and broad as the air.)

Angus, ~~and~~, you'll be using him on the band of sheep ^{we own} together, so it's only logical I put up half the price of him, am I right?

And now the damn man demanded: "Get out the cards."

What word is strong enough for all I felt against this person I was yoked to, this brother of Adair's whom I had vowed to persist with ~~for her~~ because she wanted it so. Not loathing. Loathing does not even come close. I turned so that Scorpion was not in my vision, so that I was seeing only this creature Rob Barclay. I slowly got out the deck of cards.

Rob studied the small packet they made in the palm of my hand. As if this was some teatime game of children, he proclaimed, "Cut them thin and win," and turned up the top card. ~~From me~~ The four of diamonds.

I handed the deck to him. He shuffled it twice, the rapid whirl of the cards the only sound in the bar. Now the deck lay waiting for

me in his hand.

I reached and took the entire deck between my thumb and first finger. Then I flipped it upside down, bringing the bottom card face-up to be my choice.

The two of us stood a moment, looking down at it. The deuce of hearts.

Rob let out a heavy breath. "All right, all right," he grumbled, "The immortal Scorpion has the luck on his side today. But it's going to take more than that for the rest of us to make it through this goddamn winter."



#



Near the end of January I made a provisioning trip into town. Every house, shed, barn I passed, along the North Fork and the main creek, was white-wigged with snow. Gros Ventre's main street was a broad rutted trench between snowpiles, and no one was out who didn't have dire reason to be. All the more unexpected, then, when I stomped the white from my boots and went into the mercantile, and the person in a chair by the stove was Toussaint Rennie.

"What, is it springtime on the Two Medicine?" I husked out to him, my voice stiff from the cold of my ride. "Because if it is, send some down to us."

"Angus, were you out for air?" he asked in return, and gave a chuckle.

"I thought I was demented to come just ten miles in this weather. So what does that make you?"

"Do you know, Angus, this is that '86 winter back again."

no #

That winter. That winter, we ate with the axe. No deer, no elk. No weather to hunt them in. West wind, all that winter. Everything drifted east. I went out, find a cow if I can. Look for a hump under the snow. Do you know, a lot of snowdrifts look like a cow carcass?

"That '86 winter went around a corner of the mountains and waited to circle back on us. Here it is."

"As good a theory as I've heard lately," I admitted ruefully.

"Just how are your livestock faring, up there on the Reservation?"

Toussaint's face altered. There was no chuckle behind what he said this time. "They are deadstock now."

The realization winced through me. Toussaint had not been merely making words about Montana's worst-ever winter circling back. Again now, humps beneath the vast cowl of whiteness, carcasses that had been cattle, horses--the picture of the Two Medicine prairie that Toussaint's words brought was the scene ahead for Scotch Heaven sheep if this winter didn't break, soon.

I tried to put that away, out of mind until I had to face it tomorrow with a pitchfork, with another scanty feeding of hay by Rob and me. I asked the broad figure planted ~~here~~ by the warm stove: "How is it you're here, Toussaint, instead of hunkered in at home?"

"You do not know a town man when you see him, Angus?"

I had to laugh. "A winter vacation in temperate Gros Ventre, is this. Where are you putting up?"

"That Blackfeet niece of Mary's." Nancy. And those words from Lucas, echoing across three decades: Toussaint didn't know whether he was going to keep his own family alive up there on the Two Medicine River, let alone an extra. So he brought Nancy in here... "She has a lot of house now," Toussaint was saying. "That Blackfeet of mine"-- Mary--"and kids and me, Nancy asked us to be her house guests this winter." He chuckled. "It beats eating with the axe."

#

February was identical to the frigid misery of January. At the very start of the, last of its four white weeks, there came the day when Rob and I found fifteen fresh carcasses of ewes, dead of weakness and the constant cold. No, not right. Dead, most of all, of hunger.

Terrible as the winter had been, then, March was going to be worse. Scan the remaining hay twenty times and do its arithmetic every one of those times and the conclusion was ever the same. By the first of March, the hay would be gone. One week from today, the rest of the sheep would begin to starve.

A glance at Rob, as we drove the sled past the gray bumps of dead sheep, told me that his conclusion was the same as mine, with ~~more~~ even more desperation added. He caught my gaze at him, and the day's words started.

"Don't work me over with your eyes, man. How in hell was I supposed to know that the biggest winter since snow got invented was on its way?"

"Tell it to the sheep, Rob. Then they'd have at least that to chew on."

"All it'd take is one good chinook. A couple of days of that,

and enough of this snow would go so that the sheep could paw down and graze a bit. That'd let us stretch the hay and we'd come out of this winter as rosy as virgins. So just put away that gravedigger look of yours, for Christ's sake. We're not done for yet. A chinook will show up. It has to."

You're now going to guile the weather, are you, Rob? Cite logic to it and scratch its icy ears, and it'll bounce to attention like a fetching dog to ^{go bring} ~~ask~~ you your chinook? That would be like you, Rob, to think that life and its weather are your private pets. Despite the warning he had given me, I told him all this with my eyes, too.

The end of that feeding day, if it could be called so, I was barning the workhorses when a tall collection of coat, cap, scarf, mittens and the rest came into the yard atop a horse with the Long Cross brand. If I couldn't identify Varick, I at least knew his saddlehorse. I gave ^{him} ~~him~~ a wave and he rode across the thick snow of the yard to join me inside the barn's shelter.