



Natural advantages have a habit of eroding away under spirited exploitation. And the spirit of the West, of Montana, of America, has been what the legends speak of as grand and truth has to call aggrandizing. The consolidating, the biggening, goes on yet and with consequences below; as economic structures become more global somebody has to become more granular, and the rancher is among those. The marketplace that is the land is slipping out from under him. If you possess your own television network or have the spare change to own a professional football team or are paid an anchorman's salary for your face or are commensurately compensated for your appearance on the big screens of the movies, yes, you can maybe compete with corporations and foreign buyers to own enough ground to be a Montana squire. But this rancher born on a few thousand family acres doesn't have those infinite pockets. Instead what he owns is a penchant for counting too much on next year, and the notion that he's not actually working himself to death because he's doing it outdoors. Well, those are possessions too. But not the marketplace kind.

The rancher goes back and forth in his mind—give it up, tough it out. The past stretches from him like a shadow, recognizable but perplexing in the shapes it takes. He knows too well he is alone here in trying to look from those times to this. He rubs at that eclipse-line across his forehead and wonders how he and his way of life have ended up this way, forgotten but not gone.

IVAN DOIG

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