

"How you doing?" asked my son when he had unwrapped sufficiently
 get it out.
 to ~~say it.~~

"A bit threadbare, to say the truth. Winter seems to be a whole
 hell of a lot longer than it ever used to be, not to mention deeper."

"I notice the sheep are looking a little lean." Lean didn't begin
 to say it, Varick, they were getting to resemble greyhounds. "You got
 enough hay to get through on, you think?"

"Rob and I were just discussing that." I scanned ~~out~~ the white
 ridges, the white banks of the North Fork, the white roof of the sheep
 shed. The jolly clouds in white winter mirth/are come down to live upon
sitting everywhere on us
the earth. Are they ever. Another week of this supreme snow and we
 had might as well hire the coyotes to put the sheep out of their hungry
 misery. "Neither of us thinks we do have anywhere near enough, no."

Varick was plainly unsurprised. He now said, part question and
 part not, "What about that Dakota spinach they've got at Valier?"

Trainloads of what was being called hay, although it was merely
 slewgrass and other wiry trash, were being brought in from North Dakota
 to Valier and other rail points and sold at astounding prices.

"What about it?" I nodded to the east, across more than thirty miles. "It's in Valier and we're here."

"I could get loose for a couple days to help you haul, ~~from Valier,~~ offered Varick. "Even bring my own hay sled--can't beat that for a deal, now can you?"

I said nothing, while trying to think how to tell him his generosity was futile, Rob and I were so far beyond help. [#] Eyeing me carefully, Varick ~~urged:~~ ^{persisted} "If you and ~~Rob~~ ^{Unk} and me each take a sled to Valier, we can haul back a hell of a bunch of hay, Dad." 

"Varick, our workhorses can't stand that much journey. This winter has them about done in." As it about has me too, I kept to myself.

"How about if I get you fresh horses?"

Well and good and fine but also impossible. Every horse in Scotch Heaven and anywhere around was a sack of bones by now. There wasn't a strong set of workhorses between here and--abruptly I realized where Varick intended to get fresh teams.

"Yeah, they'd be Isaac's," he confirmed.

Isaac. My ^{nemesis} ~~friend~~ who was never my enemy. In a better world, there would have been an Anna for each of us. In a better world, he and I would not both be mourning his wife.

"Don't worry, Dad. He'll loan you the horses."

Why would he? Although I said it to Varick as: "What makes you so sure of that?"

"I already asked him. The old boy said, 'I hate for anyvun to get in a pince. Tell Annguz the horses is his.'"

A pinch definitely was what winter had us in, you were purely right about that, Isaac. I stared east again, the white length of Scotch Heaven, the white miles beyond that to the railroad cars of hay in Valier. Why try, even. A sled journey of that sort, in a winter of this sort.

There is so much of this country, Angus. That quiet mountaintop declaration of Adair's. People have to stretch themselves out of shape trying to cope with so much. Montana sets its own terms and tells you, do them or else.

Or else. There ⁱⁿ ~~is~~ the snow of the valley where Rob and I had just pitched to them half the hay they ought to have had, the sheep were a single gray floe of wool in the universal whiteness. I remembered their bleating, the blizzard day we were late with the feeding; the awful hymn of their fear. Could I stand to hear that, day after day when the hay was gone?

Finally I gave Varick all the answer I had. "All right, I'm one trying it. vote for ~~going~~ But we'll need to talk to Rob."

"He'll be for it. Dead sheep are lost dollars to him. He'll be for it, Dad."

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In the winter-hazed sky, the dim sun itself seemed to be trying to find a clearer look at our puzzling procession. A square-ended craft with a figurehead of two straining horses was there in the white nowhere, plowing on a snow sea. Then an identical apparition behind it, and a third ghost boat in the wake of that.

Three long sleds with hay racks on them, Varick at the reins of the first, myself the next driver, Rob at the tail of this sled runner voyage toward Valier, our ^{convoy} ~~convoy~~ crept across the white land.

But if slowly, we moved steadily. The big Reese horses walked through the snow as if they were polar creatures. Copenhagen and Woodrow, my pair was named. Even Isaac's horses had the mix of his two lands, horse alloys, strong there in the dark harness in front of me. But we were all a mix, weren't we. See us now, Nethermuir, your Angus and your Rob, men stiff with cold on the racks of hay sleds, the drastic space of Montana winter all around them. See my son, mine and Adair's, ours and the Two Medicine country's, tall soldier against winter.

We stopped at the Double W fenceline, half the way between Gros Ventre and Valier, to eat from the bundle of lunch Adair had fixed us. Rob and I got down to stomp some warmth into ourselves while Varick

cut the barbed wire strands so we could get the sleds through; of the four-wire fence, only the top two strands were showing above the snow. While he was at that, I gazed around at the snow-held prairie.

Cold and silence, stillness and snow. Once upon a time there were two young men, new to Montana, who thought they were seeing snow.

This is just a April skift, the freighter Herbert's croaking assessment.

That April and its light white coverlet sounded like high summer to me

now. That snow that had taken the mountains and the wheeltracks from

long-ago our trek toward Lucas and nowhere his town wasn't a pinch of salt, compared

to this. And Rob and I of then, how did we compare with what we are

now? The journeys we had made together, across thirty years.

Steamship and railroad and horse and foot and every kind of wheel,

and now by ash sled runners, enmity accompanying us now. What, were

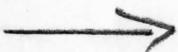
we different Rob and different Angus, all the time before? Else how

did the enmity manage to come between us? In all likelihood I am not

the ~~the~~ best judge of myself. But I can



tell you, from trudging through the days of this winter beside the
 unspeaking figure now known as Rob Barclay, that this was not the Rob
 who would throw back his head and cockily call up to the hazed sun,
Can't you get the stove going up there?

Onward from the fence now, the marks of our sled runners falling
 away into the winter plain behind us. Silence and cold, snow and
 stillness. The murmurs within myself the only human sound. Adair
 asking, when Varick and I went into the house with his offer to make
 this hay trip: Do both of you utterly have to go? Reluctant yeah from
 her son, equally involuntary yes from her husband. From her: Then I
have to count on each of you to bring the other one back, don't I.
 Toussaint, ~~arranged for him to~~ when I asked ~~him to come out and~~ feed the sheep while we
 were gone, saying only: This winter. You have to watch out for it,
Angus. And myself, here on this first ground I ever went across on
 horseback, ~~in search of~~ ^{scouting for} a homestead site. Did I choose rightly, Scotch
 Heaven over this prairie? That farmhouse 

there on the snow horizon. If I had chosen that spot, ~~those~~^{those} years ago,
I would right now be in there drinking hot coffee and watching hay-hungry
sheepmen ply past on their skeleton ships. No, not that simple. In
the past summer of drought and grasshoppers and deflated prices, that
farm too was bitter acres. The year 1919 had shown that farming ~~was~~^{could}
be a desperate way of life too. Maybe everything was, one time or another.



It was dusk when we came around the frozen length of Valier's lake and began to pass stray houses of the outskirts. Valier did not have as much snow as Scotch Heaven or Gros Ventre, but it still had about as much as a town can stand. The young trees planted along the residential streets looked like long sticks stuck in to measure the snowfall. The downtown streets had drifts graceful as sand dunes. Stores peeked over the snowbanks. Pathways had been shoveled like a chain of canals, and at the eastern edge of town we could see the highest dike of snow of all, where the railroad track had been plowed.

Along the cornices of the three-storey hotel where we went for the night, thick icicles hung like winter's laundry.

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When we three numb things had managed to unharness the teams at the stable and at last could think of tending to ourselves, Varick gave his sum of our journey from Scotch Heaven: "That could've been a whole hell of a lot worse."

And Rob gave his. "Once we get those sleds ^{heavy} ~~loaded~~ with hay, it will be."

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It

"a whole hell of a lot more."

As long as they were eating the dead ones, ^{maybe} they weren't eating the live

ones, was my flimsy theory.

Along the cornice of the three-story hotel where we went for

of all, where the latticed track had been blown.

and at the eastern edge of town we could see the highest hills of snow

over the mountains. Particles had been scattered like a chain of smoke,

down the streets and hillsides as wind whirled. Snowflakes

as much snow as Scotch Whisky of Glenlivet, but it didn't melt

and began to hiss spray masses of the particles. Water did not

It was that when we came along the frozen length of water, a lake

At morning, the depot agent greeted us with: "I been keeping your hay cool for you out in the icebox."

When no hint of amusement showed on any of the three of us, he sobered radically and said: "I'll show you the boxcar. We can settle up after you're loaded."

We passed a dozen empty boxcars, huge husks now that the hay was out of them, and came to a final one with ^a ~~walls~~ ^{barricade} of hay behind its ~~side~~ slatted side. The agent broke ice from its door with a blacksmith hammer, then used a pinch bar to pry the grudging door open. "All yours," he stated and hustled back inside the warmth of the depot.

The railroad car was stacked full of large bales like shaggy crates of hay. Rob thrust a mitten under his armpit, pulled out his hand and thrust it into a bale. The handful he pulled out was brown crackly swampgrass, which only in a winter of this sort would qualify as hay at all. "Awful stuff," Rob proclaimed.

"The woollies won't think it's as awful as starving," I told him. "Let's load and go." The weather was ever over our shoulder, and this

was a lead-colored day that showed no intention of brightening. First thing of morning, I had taken a look out the hotel window to the west for the mountains and they were there, white-toothed as if they had sawed up through the snow prairie. As long as the mountains ~~remained~~ stayed unclouded we had what we needed from the weather today, neutrality.

Our work now was harsh, laboring the bales from ~~the~~ their stacks in the box car to the sleds alongside, as if we were hauling hundreds of loaded trunks down out of an attic. Oftener and oftener, Rob and I had to stop for breath. The smoke of our breathing clouded between us, two aging engines of work. To say the truth, without Varick's limber young strength I do not know how we ever would have loaded those three hay sleds.

When the last bale was aboard, ~~Varick~~ even Varick looked close to spent, but he said only, "I guess that's them." A marker in our journey, that final bale; with it, the easy half of our hay task was over. Now to haul these loads, and ourselves, all the miles to Gros Ventre before nightfall, and on to Scotch Heaven the next day. Rob and I headed for the depot with our checkbooks to pay an outlandish

price for this godawful hay that was the only hay there was, and then we would have to get ourselves gone, out onto the prairie of winter.

We had our own tracks of yesterday to follow on the white plain west of Valier, smooth snow grooves of the sled runners and twin rough channels chopped by the horses' hooves. The Reese horses strained steadily as they pulled our hay loads. With every step they were rescuing us a little more, drawing us nearer to Scotch Heaven and out of this width of winter.

All was silence except for the rhythm of the horses' labor, harness against muscle, hooves against snow. Now existence crept no faster than our sleds, as if time had slowed to look gravely at itself, to ponder what way to go next, at what pace. I know I had thoughts-- you can't not--but the lull we were traveling in held me. ~~Walking~~ Keeping the team's leather reins wrapped in my mittened hands was the only occupation that counted in the world just then.

The change in the day began soon after we were beyond Valier's outlying farms and homesteads, where our tracks of yesterday went on into the prairie of the Double W range. At first the mountains only seemed oddly dimmed, as



if dusk somehow had wandered into mid-day. I tried to believe it as a trick of light, all the while knowing the real likelihood.

In front of me I could see Varick letting only his hands and arms drive the team, the rest of him attentive to those dimming mountains. Behind me Rob undoubtedly was performing the same.

So the three of us simultaneously ~~was~~ watched the mountains be taken by the murk. As if a ^{gray} stain was spreading down from the sky, the mountains gradually became more and more obscure, until they simply were absorbed out of sight.

~~taken by the murk.~~ Now we had to hope that the ~~any~~ weather covering the western horizon was only fog or fallow cloud and not true storm. We had to hope that mightily.

The wind too began faintly enough. Simply a sift along the top of the snow, soft little whiffs of white dust down there. I turtled deeper into the collar of my sheepskin coat in anticipation of the first gust to swoosh up onto the sled at me. But a windless minute passed, then another, although there were constant banners of ~~most blown~~ snow weaving past the horses' hooves ~~down there~~. I could see Varick and his sled clear as anything; but he and it seemed suspended in a landscape that was casually moving from under them. A ground blizzard. Gentle

enough, so far; a breeze brooming whatever loose snow it could find, oddly tidy in its way. Another tease from the weather, but as long as the wind stayed down there at knee-high we were out of harm.

I believed we were nearly to our halfway mark, the Double W fence, yet it seemed an age before Varick's sled at last halted. I knew we were going to feed ~~the~~ our teams, and for that matter ourselves, at this midpoint. But when Rob and I slogged up to Varick, we found he had more than replenishment on his mind.

"I don't know what you two think," he began, "but I figure we better just give up on the notion of going back the same route we came by."

Rob gave a grimace, which could have been either at Varick's words or at the sandwich frozen to the consistency of sawdust which ^{he} had just taken first bite of. "And do what instead?" he asked skeptically.

"Follow this fence," Varick said with a nod of his head toward it, "to where it hits the creek." Half a fence, really, in this deep winter; only the top portions of the fenceposts were above the snow,

a midget line of march north and south from our cluster of haysleds and horses. "Once we get to the creek," Varick was postulating, "we can follow that on into Gros Ventre easy enough."

"Man, that'd take twice as long," Rob objected. "And that's twice as much effort for these horses, not to mention us."

Varick gave me a moment's look, then a longer gaze at Rob.

"Yeah, but at least this fence tells us where the hell we are," he answered. Now he

~~Varick~~ inclined his head to the prairie the other side of the



fence, where the wind's steady little sift had made our yesterday's tracks look softened. "It won't ^{need} ~~take~~ a hell of a lot more of this to cover those tracks."

"Even if it does, Varick, we know that country," Rob persisted.

"Christ, man, the hills are right out there in plain sight." The benchlands north of Noon Creek and the Double W were like ^{distant} surf above the flow of the blown snow.

"We won't know an inch of it in a genuine blizzard," Varick insisted.

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"If this starts really storming

and we get to going in circles out there, we'll end up like the fillyloo bird."

Rob stared at him. "The which?"

"The fillyloo bird, Unk. That's the one that's got a wing shorter than the other, so that it keeps flying in littler and littler circles until it disappears up its own rear end."

Rob gave a short harsh laugh, but credit him, it was a laugh.

I chortled as if I was filled with feathers.

Were we all going giddy, the cold stiffening our brains? Would they

find us ^{here} in the springtime, ~~right here~~ with ice grins on our faces?

"All right, all right," Rob was conceding, as much to the notion of the fillyloo bird as to Varick. If I had been the one to broach the fence route to him, Rob would have sniffed and snorted at it until we grew roots. But here he was now, grudging but giving the words to Varick. "Lead on to your damn creek."

We began to follow the Double W fenceline south. The low stuttered pattern of the fenceposts could be seen ahead for maybe a quarter of a mile at a time, before fading into the ground blizzard. Occasionally too there,

was a hump, or more often a series of them, next to the barbed wire [⊙] carcasses of Double W cattle that had drifted with the wind until the fence thwarted them. I wondered if ^{Wampus Cat} ~~the~~ Williamson in his California money vault gave a damn.

A tiny ~~white~~ cloud caught on my eyelash. I squinted to get rid of it and it melted coldly into my eye. I blinked, and there were other snowflakes now, sliding across the air softly. The stillness of their ^{descent} ~~fall~~ lasted only a few moments, before the first gust of wind

hit and sent them spinning.

Quickly now, it was snowing so hard there seemed to be more white in the air than there was space between the flakes. In front of me Varick's sled was a squarish smudge.

The wind drove into us. No longer was it lazing along the ground. From the howl of it now, this blizzard was blowing as high as the stars.

The Reese horses labored. Varick and I and Rob got ~~down~~^{off} and walked on the lee side of our hay sleds, to lessen the load for the teams and to be down out of the wind and churning whatever warmth we could into ourselves. I had on socks and socks and socks, and even so my feet felt the cold.

This was severe travel, and before long the ghostly sled in front of me halted and Varick was emerging from the volleys of wind and snow to see how we were faring. Rob promptly materialized from behind. A gather seemed needed by all three of us. There we stood, with our flap caps tied down tight over our ears and scarves across our faces up to our eyes. Bedouins of the blizzard. One by one we pulled down our scarves and scrutinized each other for frostbite. Rob said of my icy

beard, "Whenever you decide to shave, I'll lend you a hammer and chisel."

"It's been a lot of years since I had to have you as my barber,"

I retorted.

"We're doing about as good as we can, seems to me," Varick assessed after our inspection of each other.

"I can only see a fencepost or two at a time in this, but ~~that's enough.~~ that'll do.

Unk, how's it going with you, back there?"

"Winterish," ~~was all~~ was all Rob replied.

"How about you, Dad--are you all right?"



That question of Varick's was many in one. I ached with cold, the rust of weariness was in every muscle I used, I knew how tiny we three dots of human-horse^s-and-hay were in the expanse of this winter-swollen land. But I took only the part of the question that Varick maybe had not even known he was asking: was I afraid? The answer, surprise to myself: I was not. Certainly not afraid for myself, for I could make myself outlast the cold and snow as long as Rob Barclay could. If one of us broke, then the other might begin to cave. But our stubbornnesses would carry each other far, we would not give one another the satisfaction of dying craven, would we, Rob. ^{Too,}

"I'm good enough," I answered my son. "Let's go see more snow."

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Trudge and try not to think about how much more trudging ^{needed} ~~had to be~~ done. Here was existence scoured down as far as it could go. Just the flecked sky, filled with fat snowflakes and spiteful wind; and us, six horse creatures and three human. Hoofprints of our horses, sliced path of our sled runners, our bootprints, wrote commotion into the snow; yet a hundred yards behind Rob you would not be able to find a trace that

we had ever been there. Maybe winter was trying to blow itself out in this one day. Maybe so, maybe no, it had been trying something since October. I felt pity for Woodrow, the horse of my team who was getting the wind full against his side. A Reese horse, he turned his head and persevered with his work. Reeses were that way, firm-minded, weren't they. Isaac. Varick's Beth. Anna.

I pounded my arm against my side and trudged. The wind whirled the air full of white flakes again. Old mad winter, with snow hair flying. This must be what mesmerism is, every particle of existence streaming to you and dreamily past. A white blanket for ~~your~~ ^{your} mind. A storm such as this blew in all the way from legendary times, other winters great in their fury. The winter of '83. The Starvation Winter, these Blackfeet call that, and by Jesus they did starve, poor bastards them, by the hundreds. Pure gruesome, what they went through. Gruesome was the apt word for such winters, Lucas, yes. The winter of '86, Toussaint's telling of it. That winter. That winter, we ate with the axe. And Rob saying, A once in a lifetime winter. It depended on the size of the lifetime, didn't it.

Every so often Varick, tall bundle

of dimness ahead in the blowing snow, turned to look for me. I did the same for Rob. Rob. Rob who was all but vanished back there. Say he did vanish. Say he stumbled, sprawled in the miring snow, could not get up in time before I missed him, next time I glanced back. Say Rob did vanish into the blizzard, what would I feel? Truth now, Angus: what? As I tried to find honest reply in myself, a side of my mind said at least that would end it once and all, if Rob faltered back there in the snow and Varick and I could not find him, ~~that~~^{the} poisoned time that had come between us-- this entangled struggle between McCaskill and Barclay--would at last be ended. Or would it.

Whether it was decision or just habit, I kept watching behind me periodically to Rob. The team he had were big matched grays, and against the storm dusk they faded startlingly, so that at a glance there simply seemed to be harness standing in the air back there, blinders and collar ~~and harness and~~^{straps} as if the wind had dressed itself in them. And ever, beside the floating sets of harness, the bulky figure of Rob.

seemed to be harness stretching in the air back there, rattling and colliding
the storm that they faded startlingly, so that at a glance there simply
perched on the eaves, and every bedstead and a few bed and meat and
whether it was decoration or that part, I could not tell, and it seemed

As I tried to find honest reply in myself, a side of my mind said at least
old vanish into the distance, what would I feel? I think now, what?

I blinked against the motion of the snow

We had stopped again. Varick came slogging to me like a man wading surf, and reported that the fenceline had gone out of sight under a snowdrift that filled a coulee. We would need to veer out and around the pit of snow, then angle back in once we were past it to find the fenceline where it emerged from the coulee. # "If we've got to, we've got to," I assented to Varick, and while he returned to his sled I beckoned for Rob to come up and hear the situation. He looked as far from happy as a man could be, but he had to agree that was all there was to do.

The horses must have wondered why they had to turn a corner here at the middle of nothingness, but they obediently veered left and floundered down the short slope.

Now the problem was up. The slope was steep and angling, the top of it lost in the swirling snow, so that as the horses strained they seemed to be climbing a ^{stormcloud} ~~white cloud~~. This was the cruelest work yet, the team plunging a few steps at a time and then gathering themselves for the next lunge, all the while the loaded sled ~~laying~~ dragging backward on them. I sang out every encouragement I could, but the task was entirely the horses'.

Up and up, in those awful surges, until at last the snow began to level out. The horses' sides still heaved from the exertions of getting us here, but I breathed easier ~~about~~ now that we were atop the brow of the coulee and our way ahead to the fenceline would be less demanding.

Varick had halted us yet again. What now?

One more time I waved Rob up to us as Varick trudged back from the lead sled.

"This don't feel right to me," Varick reported. "I haven't found that fenceline yet and we ought've been back to it by now."

"We must not have come far enough to hit it yet, is all," Rob impatiently spoke what was in my mind too.

Varick shook his head. "We've come pretty damn far. No, that fence ought to be here by now. But it isn't."

"Then where to Christ is it?" demanded Rob, squinting belligerently into the concealing storm. Our faces said that each of the



three of us was morally certain we had come the right way after veering around the coulee. Hop with that first leg of logic and the second was inevitable: we ought to have come ^{to} the fence again by now. But no fence, logical or any other kind, was in evidence. And what were we supposed to invoke next, against the tricks of a blizzard.

"There's just one other place I can think of for that fence to be," Varick suggested. "The sonofabitch might be under us."



With his overshoe he scuffed aside the day's powdery freshfall to show us the old hardened snow beneath. Rob and I stared down. A snow bridge, was this? If it was, if we were huddled there on a giant drift where the snow had built and cemented itself onto the brow of the coulee all winter, fenceposts and barbed wire could be buried below us, right enough. Anything short of a steeple could be buried down there, if this ^{truly} was a snow bridge. And if we were overshooting the fenceline down there under the winter crust, we next were going to be on the blind plain again, in danger again of circling ourselves to death.

"Christ of Mercy," Rob seemed downright affronted by our predicament, "who ever saw snow like this?"

Varick had no time for that. Rapidly he said, "We can't just stand around here cussing the goddamn situation. What I'd better do is go out here a little way"--indicating to the left of us, what ought to be the southward slope of the long hump of drift we were on, if we were--"and take a look around for where the fence comes out of this."

His words scared my own into the air. "Not without a rope on you, you won't."

"Yeah, I'm afraid you're right about that," Varick agreed. The three of us peered to the route he proposed to take. Visibility came and went but it was never more than ~~about~~ a hundred feet. I repeated that Varick was not moving one step into the blizzard without a rescue rope to follow back to us, even though we all knew the ~~time~~ ^{cumbersome minutes} it would cost us to undo the ropes that were lashing the hay to the sled racks, knot them together, affix them around his waist--"It won't take time at all," I ~~said~~ ^{uttered} unconvincingly. ~~It's not at all.~~

Hateful as the task was, stiff-fingered and wind-harassed as we were, we got the ropes untied from each of our hay loads. Now the reverse of that chore. "Rob, you're the one with the canny hands," I tried on him. He gave me a look, then with a grunt began knotting the several ropes together to make a single lifeline for Varick. One end of the line I tied firmly around Varick's waist while Rob was doing the splice knots, then we anchored the other end to ~~the~~ ^{Varick's} hay rack.

"Let's try it," Varick said, and off he went into the blizzard.

Rob and I, silent pillars side by side, lost sight of him before he had managed to take twenty effortful steps.

With my son out there in the oblivion of winter, each minute ached in me now. 

But I could think of no other precaution we ~~could do~~ ^{might have done.} If Varick didn't come back within a reasonable time, Rob and I could follow the rope into the blizzard and fetch him. I would do it by myself if I had to, it might take every ounce of energy left in me, but I would get Varick back out of that swirling snow if I had to.

The rope went taut now. It stayed that way a long moment, as if Varick was dangling straight down from it instead of out across a plain of snow. Then the line alternately slackened and straightened, as Varick pulled himself back to us hand over hand.

His face, strained and wincing, told us before his words did.

"I didn't make it to the fence. Ran out of rope."

Rob swore feelingly. I tried to think. We needed more rope, more line of life, to explore again into that snow world, and we did not have more rope. We just had ourselves, the three of us.

"Varick," I began. "Can you stand another try at it?"

"Floundering around out there isn't really anything I want to make a career of," he admitted. "But yeah, I can do it again if I have to."

"Then this time I'll go out with you, for however far he can still see me." I jerked my head to indicate Rob. "You give us a yell when we're just about out of sight, Rob. Then you go out beyond me, Varick, while I hold the rope for you. What do you think? It would gain us that much distance"--I nodded now to the edge of visibility out there-- "for looking, at least."

"That sounds as good as any," Varick assented. Rob only bobbed his head once; we McCaskills could take it for yes if we wanted.



"for looking at that."

that much distance,--I needed him to the edge of the water and there--

and he was the only one who had a gun. I was the only one who had a gun.

if I have to. What've you got in mind?"

Varick and I set out, the snow to our knees in a fresh drift.

A drift atop a drift, this latest dune of snow would be. And other layers beneath that as we slogged. October snow. November on top of that. And December atop that, and January, and February.... How many tiers of this winter could there be. This wasn't a winter, it was geologic ages of snow. It was a storm planet building itself layer by layer. It was--

Abruptly I stopped, and reaching a hand ahead to Varick's shoulder brought him to a ^{halt}~~stop~~ too. When he turned, the apprehension in my manner made words unnecessary.

We looked back. Nothingness. The white void of snow, the blizzard erasing all difference between earth and sky. No glimpse of Rob. No sound in the air but the wind.

We stood like listening statues, our tracks already gone into the ~~whirling~~^{swirling} snow we had come out of. Again, yet, ~~nothing~~ no voice from the safety of there.

The bastard.

The utter betraying triple-slippery unforgiving bastard Rob had let us come too far. He was letting the blizzard eat us. Letting us

vanish like two sparks into the whirl of this snow. Letting us--

Then a sound that was not quite the wind's.

...arr...

...ough...



The blizzard swirled in a new way, and the wraith figure of Rob was there, waving both arms over his head. # "Far enough," his voice faintly carried to us now. "Far enough."

Varick's heavy breathing was close to mine. "He always was one to press the luck, wasn't he," my son said. "Particularly when it's somebody else's."

We breathed together, marking the sight and sound of Rob into our senses, then turned ahead to squint for any sign of the fenceline. None.

"You ready to go fishing?" asked Varick, and away he ^{plunged}~~went~~, the rope around his waist and in my mittened hands.

Through my weariness I concentrated on the hemp in my hands. To see a world in a grain of sand... Would grains of snow do? By the dozens and hundreds they fell and fell, their whiteness coating my sleeves and mittens. ...Hold infinity in the palm of your hand... Would mittened palms be deft enough, for that? The rope paying out through my grip already had taken Varick from sight, into the snow

cyclone. Thoughts swarmed to fill his absence. What if he stumbled out there, jerking the rope out of my stiff hands? Hold, Angus. Find a way to hold. I fumbled the end of the rope around my waist, clutching it tightly belted around me with my right hand while the left hand encircled the strand going out to Varick. If he fell I would fall too, but nothing would make me let go of this rope. I would be his anchor. Such as I was, I would be that much. A splice knot caught in my grip an instant before I let it belly out and away. The knots...Rob's knots. What if he hadn't tied them firmly, what if just one began to slip loose? No. No, I could trust Rob's hands even if I couldn't trust him. Only a few feet of rope left. If Varick did not find the fenceline now, we never would. My heart thundered in me, as if the enormity of clothing around it was making it echo. If we couldn't go on we would need to try to hide ourselves in caves of the hay, but if this cold and wind went on through the night, our chances were slim. More likely they were none. If any one of us could live through, let it be Var--

Tugs on the rope, like something heavy quivering at the end of the hempen line. Or something floundering after it had fallen.

"VARICK!" I shouted as loud as I could. The wind took my words.

I might as well have been yelling into a bale of ~~substance~~ that Dakota hay.

The tugs continued. I swallowed, held firm, clutching the rope around me. I resisted a hundred impulses to plunge forward and help Varick in his struggle. I resisted another hundred to whirl around in search of Rob. The distance back to him and the hay sleds was the same as it ever had been, I had to recite to my bolting instincts, only the snow was in motion, not the white distance stretching itself as it gave every appearance of. Motion of another sort at the invisible end of this rope, the tugs continuing in a rhythm that I hoped had to be--

Varick suddenly coming hand over hand now, materializing out of the whirl. A struggling upright slab of whiteness amid the coiling swirl of whiteness.

He saved his breath until he was back to me, my arms helping to hold him up.

"It's there," he panted. "The fenceline. It comes out of the drift about there"--carefully pointing an angle to our left, although everything in me would have guessed it had to be to our right. "The sleds are actually on the other side of the sonofabitch. We about went too far."

Fixing ourselves on the waving figure that came and went through the blowing flakes, we fought snow with our feet until we were back beside Rob. Varick saved him the burden of asking. "We got ourselves a fence again, Unk."

Laboriously we re-tied the ropes across the hay loads, as well as men in our condition could. Then Varick turned his team to the left--they were glad enough to, suffering in the wind as they had been--and I reined Woodrow and Copenhagen around to follow them, and Rob and his grays swung in behind us. Once our procession was down off the mound of snow, the tops of fenceposts appeared and then the topmost single

strand of barbwire, the three strands beneath it in the accumulated snow, ≡ this white iron winter, with ^abrutal webs in ~~it~~ it. That single top strand, though; that was our tether to the creek, to survival ~~sureness~~. I had never known until then that I could be joyously glad to see barbed bramble.

Now how far to the creek? It did not matter, really. We had to keep going, following the ~~line~~ line of fence, no matter what distance it was. Time did matter, but there was ^{no} knowing the hour of the day either. The storm had made it all dusk. The complicated effort of trying to fumble out my pocket watch for a look, I couldn't even consider. Slog was all we needed to know, really. But how far?



Another half mile, mile; who knew. This day's ~~moment~~ distances had nothing to do with numbers.

Then thin shadows stood in the snowy air. Trees, willows of the creek. Dim frieze that hung on the white wall of weather, but guidance enough, as if it was all the direction posts on earth, and every one of them pointing us to Gros Ventre and safety.

Varick halted his sled and began to slog back to meet Rob and me.

Now that we had the creek, consultation wasn't needed any more; but maybe he simply had to share success with us, maybe--then

no 9 As I squinted at the tree line of the creek, something moved in the bottom corner of my vision, there where the fence cornered into the creek. I blinked and the something still moved, slowly, barely. A lower clot of forms beneath the willow shadows: Double W cattle, ~~white~~ white with ~~the~~ the snow coated onto them, caught there in the fencecorner.

"The two of you go ahead and take your sleds across the creek, why not," my son said as ~~calmly~~ nonchalantly as if our day of struggle was already years into the past. "I'll snip the fence for these cattle and give them a shove out into the brush, then catch up with you."

"Man, why bother," Rob spoke bitterly. He still wore that bleak look, as if being prodded along by the point of an invisible bayonet.

"They're goddamn Williamson's."

"That isn't their fault," Varick gave him back. "Head on across, you two. I won't be long."

I made my tired arms and tired legs climb atop the hay on the sled, then rattled the reins to start Copenhagen and Woodrow on their last few plodded miles to town, miles with the guarantee of the creek beside us now. When we had crossed the narrow creek and made our turn toward Gros Ventre, Rob and his gray team copying behind us, I could hear faintly above the wind the grateful moans of the ~~around~~ cattle. Varick was freeing from the blizzard.

In the morning, our procession from Gros Ventre west toward home was a slow glide through white peace. New snow had freshened everything, and without the wind the country sat plump and calm. Even when we reached the North Fork, the breeze was only usual. None of the bullying bluster of the day before.

As we passed the knob ridge at the mouth of the valley, branchloads

in the tops of its pine trees were dislodging and falling onto the lower branches, sending up snow like white dust. The all but silent crash of snow in the pines and the sounds of our teams and sleds were the only things to be heard in Scotch Heaven.

We went past the empty Duff homestead, and then the empty Erskine place, and what had been Archie Findlater's homestead, and the silent buildings of Allan Frew's. The lone soul anywhere here in the center of the valley was George Frew, feeding his sheep beside the creek. George's wave to us was slow and thoughtful, as if he was wondering whether he too would soon be making such a journey as we had.

And now we were around the final turn of the valley to my homestead, mine and Adair's, and ~~there~~^{there} on their feedground beside the North Fork were the sheep in their gray gather, and the broad bundled figure of Toussaint distributing dabs of hay. For a long minute he watched our tiny fleet of bale-laden sleds, Varick in the lead, next me, Rob at the tail. Then Toussaint gripped his pitchfork in the middle of the handle, hoisted it above his head and solemnly held there as if making sure we could see what it was, as if showing us it was not an axe.

#

... then descending through the middle of the ...

... next we ...

... but we ...

... as it ...

... of the valley ...

... was a lead-colored day that showed no signs of brightening.

First thing of the m

We had hay now, but we still had the winter too.

Each day was one more link in the chain of cold. For the first week after our Valier journey, Rob and I were men with smoke for breath as we fed the sheep in the frozen blue-and-white weather.

I would like to say that the Dakota hay and our survival of the blizzard made a poultice for the tension between Rob and me. That we put aside the winterlong wrangling--the yearslong enmity--and simply shouldered together toward spring. I would like to say that, but it would be farthest from the truth.

Maybe Rob would have been able to hold himself in if sheep had not continued to die. We found a few every day, in stiffened collapse; weak from the long winter and the short ration of hay, they no longer could withstand the cold and simply laid down into it and died. You could look on the hay journey as having saved the great majority of the sheep, as I did. Or you could look on the fact that in spite of that journey and its expensive hay, some of the sheep still insisted on dying, as Rob did.

It was about the third time he muttered something about "this Dakota hay of yours" that I rapped back, "What, you think we ought

to have let the whole damn band just starve to death?"

"God damn it, you didn't hear me say that."

"If it wasn't that, it was the next thing to it."

why don't

"Up a rope, ~~will~~ you," he snapped back. It occurred to me we

really ought not be arguing while we had pitchforks in our hands.

Wordlessly we shoveled the rest of the day's hay, and wordlessly I headed home to Adair and he to Breed Butte. The feedground wasn't far behind me when I heard the KAPOW of Rob's rifle when he blazed away, as he lately had begun doing, at some coyote attempting to dine on one of our dead sheep. The Winchester thunder rolled and rolled through the cold air, echoing around in the white day that had no horizon between earth and sky for it to escape through. Myself, I was not giving the coyotes any aggravation this winter. As long as they were eating the dead ones maybe they weren't eating the live ones, was my wishful theory. But apparently Rob had to take his frustration out on something, and as a second KAPOW billowed through the winter air, the coyotes were the ones getting it at the moment.

When I got home with the hay sled, Varick's horse was in the barn. These visits of his through all the snow between here and Noon Creek were more than outings, they were major pilgrimages. For Adair's sake, I was greatly glad that he came across the divide to us as often as he did. In full honesty, I was just as glad for my own sake.

Stiff and weary and chilly to the bottom sides of my bones, I clomped into the house. My wife and my son were at the table keeping coffee cups company. "Easy life for some people," I chattered out.

Greatly casual, Varick remarked: "There's news on Noon Creek. I been keeping this table warm for you until you could get here to hear it."

Hot coffee was all I wanted to hear of. Adair reached to the stove for the pot and poured me a cup as I thumped myself into a chair and began to unbuckle my overshoes. "If the news has winter in it," I tiredly expelled ~~wearily~~ to Varick, "~~I~~ ^I ~~can~~ stand not to hear it."

"Yeah, well, maybe winter had a little something to do with it."

Our son grinned all the grin a face could. "Beth's going to have a baby."

Adair stood up. Her face spoke Take care of her, while her voice was saying: "Varick, that's fine!"

"You're ready to be grandma, are you?"

She hugged him ^{from behind} and declared: "It's bound to be easier than raising you ever was."

In her encircling arms our son turned his head to me. "If, ah, if he's a he" -- Varick laughed at his word tangle -- ^{"Beth and I are} ~~the~~ going to give him that Alexander someplace in his name. Both of us figure maybe we can stand that much of the old country in any son of ours."

A bit dizzily I said, "Thank you both," which of course didn't come within a million miles of saying it enough. Then from Adair: "And if it's a girl?"

Varick paused. "Then we'd name her after Beth's mother."

There was nothing I could say. Not of Anna, not to this family of mine that had put itself through so much because of my love for her.

It was Adair who moved us beyond the moment, put something major behind us. "That's an apt name too," she said quietly to Varick. "You and Beth are honoring both families."

#

The second week in March, the chinook at last came. It arrived in the night, as if ~~admitting~~ ^{guilty about} how tardy it had been, and when I realized from the changed feel of the air that this was a warm gush of wind instead of yet another icy one, I slid out of bed and went to the window.

Already there were trickles of melt, like running tears, down through the frost pattern on the glass. The warm wind outside was a steady swoosh now. I looked back to the bed and my sleeping wife. In a few hours, at her end of our shared night, Adair would wake up into spring.

—

That morning at the feeding, I wished Rob was still in hibernation somewhere.

"Where the hell was this six weeks ago, when it would have saved our skins?" was his bitter welcome to the thaw.

—

His mood didn't sweeten in the next few days of warmth either. Now that there was melt and slop everywhere, he grumbled against

the thaw's mess as fervidly as he had against the snow it was dispelling.

Maybe the chinook air itself was on his nerves--the change from winter coming so sudden that the atmosphere seemed charged, eerie. Or maybe this simply was the way Rob was any more--resentful against the world.

Whatever his case was, it was not easy to be around. Not far from where we had stacked the Dakota hay there was a pile of dead sheep we had skinned throughout the winter and I had dragged off the meadow when the chinook came, and the boldest of the coyotes sometimes came to eat away at those corpses now that they were thawing. Rob took to bringing the rifle with him on the haysled, to cut loose a shot if he saw a flash of coyote color at the dead pile. The first time he yelled at me to hold the team and aimed and fired, I had all I could do to keep the workhorses under control.

"Why don't you give the artillery a furlough until we're done feeding?" I tried on him. "The horses don't like it, the sheep don't like it, and I hereby make it unanimous."

He didn't even deign to answer, unless you can call a cold scowl an answer. He simply hung the rifle by its sling, back onto the ~~rack~~^{upright of} the hay rack ~~post~~ where he kept it while we pitched hay, in a way ~~designed~~ designed to tell me that he would resume combat with the coyotes whenever he damn well felt like it.

Where had this Rob come from, out of the years. Watching him at this kind of behavior, I couldn't help but remember another Rob, of another spring, of another hard time. A lambing time, back in the years of '93. It had been one of those days to wonder why I didn't just walk away from the sheep business and join Montana's other certified lunatics in the Warm Springs asylum. The bunch herder we'd hired had lost thirty lambs in the past ten days, and another five had died on him ~~today~~^{that day}. At that rate, by shipping time Rob and I were going to need to buy him a total new supply of lambs if we wanted to have any lambs to ship.

We've got to send this geezer down the road, I said to Rob that remembered day.

I know, I know, he agreed glumly. The man is a mortal enemy

to sheep. I'll take the band while you trundle him to town, why not.

Hire the nearest breathing body in the Medicine Lodge, McAngus--you

can't do any worse than we did with this disgrace to the race.

What if the nearest is Lucas? We both had to laugh.

Then the sheep would hear in a hurry what's expected of them, Rob

vouched. Lads and lasses, his voice so very like Lucas's, that's

pure wonderful grass you're walking around on, so I want to see your

noses down in it, ay? Do you know how much money you're costing me

by your silly habit of dying? So let's have no more of that, you woollies,



and we'll all get along together grand.

As I had gone off, still laughing, I stopped to call back:

Rob, do you ever wonder if we're in the right line of work?

His cocked head, his bright face. There's an occasional minute
when I don't, McAngus.

In those times I would have walked into fire for Rob, and he
for me. Yet that was the Rob who eventually cost me Varick, those
years after the Two Medicine. Yet again, that was the Rob who had
gained me Adair, all but brought her with frosting and candles on.
Done that, and then put a boot through my family because of Anna.
Where was the set of weights to measure such things; where was balance
when you tried to align the different Robs. If they were different
ones.

Going home that day, I heard another clap of Rob's Winchester
thunder. He wasn't getting much done in life except trying to ambush
coyotes. The man had me worried.

—————

I had some downright dread the next morning. I knew this was the day we were going to have to move the sheep to a new ^{and higher} feedground, the chinook having made a soggy mess of where we had been feeding them in my hay meadow. In other times it would have been a task as automatic and easy as scratching an ear, but I could already hear Rob in full bay about having to work the sheep to a ^{fresh} site for their hay. Then too, there was the ^{small} ~~little~~ chore of liberating Scorpion out onto the coming grass, and Rob had already made himself known on the topic of the old horse and his menu.

And so I asked Adair. "What about coming with, today?"

"You want me to, do you?"

I smiled to the extent I could. "It can't hurt, and it might help."

"All right then," she agreed readily. "I'd better come see spring while it's here, hadn't I."

"Then why don't you ride Scorpion out and we'll turn him loose to graze up there where the sheep are going to be--he and the woollies will be some company for each other, that way. I'll saddle him for you, all right?"

"No," she informed me. "I've known how to saddle a horse ever since five minutes after I married you. You get your old workhorses ready, Scorpion and I will take care of ourselves."

A good sight to see, Adair atop Scorpion as the pair of them accompanied alongside the hay sled and myself. If she pressed me to the hilt, I would have had to say that the day's most ^{enchanting} ~~glorious~~ vision was the rivulets of melt running from beneath every snowdrift we passed. Glorious, the making of mud where winter had stood. But definitely this wife of mine and the tall brown horse, elderly and stiff as he was, made the second finest scene today.

Try tell that or anything else to Rob, though. # "What's this, a mounted escort for us on our way to the poorhouse?" he met us with



at the haystack.

Degraded as that was, it seemed to be the top of his mood this day. I told him shortly that Scorpion was on his way out to pasture, which drew only Rob's scornful study of the elderly horse. At least he didn't start a recapitulation of how mawkish I was in keeping Scorpion among the living. But then as soon as I suggested that we needed to move the sheep from the muddy feedground in my meadow, the Rob response to that was hundred-proof sarcasm.

"So that hay can be grown to be fed to sheep that are worth less than the hay, do you mean? That definitely sounds like the McCaskill high road to wealth, I can be the first to vouch."

"Rob, there's no sense in being owly about a little thing like this. We always put the sheep onto a fresh feedground after a chinook. You know that as well as I do." Or you would if you'd let your Barclay mind rule your Barclay mouth, for a change. "They can at least get a little grass into them if we move them onto the butte there," I went on, indicating with a nod the slope beside his reservoir,

where broad ~~patches~~^{swathes} of ground showed themselves amid the melting patches of snow. The ~~large~~ earthwork of the reservoir itself was already ~~partly~~ clear of snow, a chocolate pocket on the mottled slope of Breed Butte.

"Put the bastards up the backside of the moon, for all I care,"

Rob grumped next and turned his back on me. He climbed onto the hay rack and hung his rifle by its sling onto the ~~rack frame~~^{upright}. "Let's get this feeding done," was his next impatient pronouncement.

Adair's gaze seemed to silence him after that, at least during our effort of loading the hay onto the sled rack. When we were done and standing there puffing, ~~she~~ she announced she would drive the team for us now rather than ride Scorpion up the slope--"Adair needs the practice," she stated. Scorpion could follow, his reins tied to the back of the hayrack as they were; no problem ~~there~~ to that. The problem anywhere in the vicinity went by the name of Rob, and I knew as well as Adair that the true need for her to be on the sled was to stay between her brother and me when he was this sulphurous.

The sheep were curious about the sled going up the slope instead of toward the meadow and them. Prrrrr prrrrr, I purred as loudly as I Percy and could, and the first few ewes began to get the idea and started toward the slope.

The siege of winter was withdrawing, but not yet gone. Gray snowdrifts still clutched the treeline of Breed Butte and any swale of the broad slope. The entire country looked tattered and hungry. Up here above the still-white valley our sled runners were passing across as much muddy ground as they were snow, and in those bare damp patches the sickly grass from last year lay crushed, flattened by the burden of a hundred and fifty days of winter. Yet under the old clots of stems there was a faint almost-green blush, even today, after just this half-week of chinook and thaw, that said new grass was making its intentions known.

"Where to, gentlemen?" Adair called back to us from her position at the team's reins.

I asked Rob, "What do you think, maybe here?"

He said acidly, "It's the same muck everywhere, so this is as good as any."

He was going to be thoroughly that way today, was he. Then the thing to do was to get this hay flung off the sled and the sheep up here onto

their new venue and be done with ^{the man} ~~Rob~~ and his red mood. That curative ^{its own Rob remedy as needed--} for today--tomorrow would have to contrive ~~another one~~ could begin

just as soon as Scorpion was turned loose out of the ^{flight} ~~way~~ of the hay as we ^{tossed} ~~pitched~~ it off, and so I climbed swiftly down to take his saddle and bridle off. I was untying Scorpion's reins from the back of the hayrack when Rob's voice slashed above me.

"Angus." [#] The first time in years he had used my name. And now it snapped out quick and bitter, as if he wanted to be rid of it.

I swung around to see what this fusillade was going to be.

"Don't turn that geezer of a horse loose yet," Rob directed. "I just saw something I need to do with him."

"What's that, now?" I said up to him in surprise.

"My reservoir. This is a chance to tamp it." There atop the hay, he was gazing in a stony way along the slope to the long narrow mound of the dam and the ice-skinned impoundment behind it. Rob aiming his chin down at the valley and its creek, now and that first time I had watched him do it: By damn, I didn't come all the miles from one River Street to live down there on another. "The sheep have got to come up here anyway," he was saying, "the bastards might as well tromp across the dam and do me some good while they're at it. I'm going to ride old horsemeat here down and start shoving them ~~down~~ to the reservoir."

"Why don't you wait with that until the next time we move the ~~band~~ band," I tried. "The ground will be drier by then and the tamping will ~~work~~ ^{go} better."

"Rob, yes," Adair interceded, "Angus is right about waiting for another day. Let's just get on with the feeding."

That brother of hers ~~just~~ shook his head, his gaze still fixed across at the reservoir and its watery gray disc of ice. So far as I could see, winter and spring were knotted together there, ice and slush

in the swale behind the dam versus mud on its sides and top; whatever moment of opportunity Rob Barclay thought he was viewing there made no sense whatsoever to me. But then we had made our separate decisions about water, about Breed Butte and the North Fork, a full thirty years ago, so when had we ever seen with the same eyes?

One thing I was determined to enforce: "Scorpion isn't the best horse for this, after all winter in the barn. You'd be as well off on foot. I'll walk down with you to the sheep, what about, and the two of us can--"

Rob came down off the hay sled. But I saw he hadn't come anywhere toward my line of thinking. His tone was ^{its} most scornful yet, as he unloaded the words onto me:

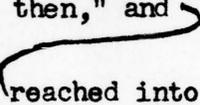
"Pushing the sheep across that dam is a minute's work, is all. This goddamn horse has been gobbling up hay and doing not one thing to earn it all winter long. And you'd let it be that way." His helmeted look, his high-and-mighty mood when he wouldn't hear any words but his own. He gave me a last lash: "Your heart always has been as soft as your head."

Through it all, he still scanned with determination the reservoir,
the sheep, the saddle horse. He would not ~~look~~ ^{so much as glance} at me. Heart, mind, tongue,
and now eyes, the last of Rob that was left to turn from me.



"Rob, Angus," Adair spoke ~~up~~ up from the front of the hay sled where she had been waiting for this to abate. "You know how you're supposed to settle these things."

I was reluctant to toss Scorpion to chance one more time, but if that's what it took...

"All right," I said with ^{disgusted} resignation, "we'll cut the cards for it, then," and  reached into my coat pocket for the well-worn deck. "If I draw the low, Scorpion gets turned loose here and now. If you draw it--"

"No."

Before I knew it he had Scorpion's reins out of my hand, snatched into his. "This horse has been living beyond his time ever since you won that other card cut." The face in front of me was cocked to one side, atilt with anger and the ~~need to declare it.~~ ^{abrupt spill of declaring it.} "He can do this one bit of work, and he's by Christ going to." With that, Rob shoved his overshod foot into the stirrup and swung heavily onto Scorpion, the horse grunting in surprise at the force of the rider clamping onto him.

I managed to get hold of Scorpion's bridle and kept Rob from

reining the brown head around as he was trying to do. # "Rob, I'm telling you, once," I delivered my own cold anger to this situation. "Behave yourself with this horse or I'll talk to you by hand."

There was a startled whinny from Scorpion as Rob jammed his heels into him and spun the horse out of my grasp, down the slope toward the approaching straggle of sheep. # "Go operate a pitchfork," Rob flung back at me without looking. "It's what you're good for."

So we had reached this, had we. Rob storming off, breaking the last of the terms I knew for enduring him. How in the name of anything were we going to survive lambing, shearing, summering the sheep in the national forest, all the steps that needed decision, if he wouldn't hew to any way of deciding? We had come through the winter and now here was winter coming out of Rob as a white rage.

I climbed onto the back of the hay sled. His coyote rifle hung there on the ^{upright} ~~rack post~~ from its sling. # I reached and unslung it, the grip ^P of the wooden stock cold in my hand.

I could feel Adair's eyes on me. ⁴ I met her gaze as I jacked the shells out of the rifle one by one and pocketed them. When I had checked the breech to be thoroughly sure the weapon was empty, I hung the Winchester back where Rob had left it. "Just in case that temper of his doesn't know where to quit," I said to Adair.

"I'll talk to him, Angus," Adair said. "Let him get today out of his system, and I'll talk to him."

"I'm afraid ^{just} ~~it's more than today that's~~ his case is more than today, Dair."

"We'll just have to see. Why don't we get on with the feeding-- it'll bring the sheep up here that much faster if they see the hay."

She was right, ^{Barclay} this day and Rob in it should be sped along, any way

possible. I nodded to her to start the team, and began breaking the bales and pitching the dry brown Dakota hay off the sled. I cast glances along the slope as Rob commenced to work the sheep up to the embankment of the reservoir. They were not keen for the scheme. Recalcitrant sheep weren't going to help his mood at all. I would have to try every way in me to steel myself to let this behavior of Rob's pass until tomorrow, as Adair was asking of me. Because I knew, as if it

was a memory in my fists, that I would pound Rob if I saw him mistreat Scorpion down there. With the rifle empty, he would be able to do nothing but take my beating, if it came to that. I would try not let it come to fists again, but given the mood the damn man was in, the trend wasn't ^{promising} ~~good~~.

I kept a watchful eye on Rob's doings while I kept at the feeding task too. At last the sheep were skittishly filing across the top of the dam, a first few, then several, then many, the avalanche of behavior by which they went through life. Even now that the sheep were crossing the dam in maximum numbers, Rob kept reining Scorpion back and forth impatiently close behind the waiting remainder of the band. Scorpion was performing creakily but gamely, like an octogenarian going through remembered steps on a dance floor. The wind blew, the hay flew, and for a bit I had to take my attention from ^{the escapade at} the reservoir to feed some bales off the lee side of the sled.

When I looked again, the last of the sheep were halfway across the dam and Rob was right on top of them with Scorpion, shoving them relentlessly. Half that much commotion would gain him twice the results. There are so goddamn many ways to be a fool a man →

can't expect to avoid them all, and our Rob was ~~trying~~ ^{determined to try} them all out today, ay, Lucas? By Jesus, I missed Lucas. If he were alive, Rob would not be down there in a major pout, furiously performing the unnecessary and making an overage horse labor like a--

I saw Scorpion make his stumble, then his hindquarters slip off the edge of the embankment toward the ~~water~~ ^{reservoir} as he tried to find his footing there at the middle of the dam. Rob did

not even attempt to vault off him to safety, ⁼⁼ instead he yanked the reins and stood back hard into the stirrups, seeming to want to stiffen the horse back into steadiness with the iron line of his own body. But Scorpion still was not able to scramble back securely onto the muddy rim of the dam. He tottered. There was an instant of waver, as if the horse's sense of balance was in a contest with his aged muscles. Then Scorpion began to flounder backwards down the brown bank, sliding, skidding.

It took a moment for the sound to travel to me-- a crisp clatter, thin iceskin breaking as horse and man tumbled through it. The sheep ran, heads up in alarm, never looking back.

"DAIR!" My shout startled her around to me. "Turn the team! Get us to the reservoir!"

She jerked the team and sled in a quick half-loop as I plunged through the hay to the front of the rack. There beside her I grabbed the rack frame with one arm and held Adair upright with my other as she whipped the team with the loose ends of the reins and the ~~hay~~^{hay} sled began to trundle and jolt. The sled seemed monumentally awkward, slow, although I knew it was going faster than I ever could on foot through the mud and snow. # Ahead of us there in the reservoir I kept expecting Rob to ~~get~~^{throw} himself out of Scorpion's saddle and ~~swim~~^{or swim} lunge his way the eight or ten feet to the embankment, but he and the horse ~~were~~^{continued to be} a single struggling mass amid the shattered ice.

Scorpion was thrashing terrifically while Rob clung down onto his back and brown-maned neck.

The stubborn fool, to be trying to maul Scorpion out of that water instead of getting himself to the shore.

The top of the reservoir was too narrow for the ~~hay~~ hay sled.

Where the embankment began Adair jerked the team to a halt and I leaped down from the sled, running as I alit. [#] Rob and Scorpion ^{were} thrashing ^{even} worse now, Scorpion tipping far down onto one side with all of Rob except head and arms under him, struggling together like water beasts fighting. The goddamn man, why didn't he leave the horse and start toward--Rob's face, shining wet, appeared for an instant between Scorpion's jerking neck and the murky water. His expression was perplexed, as if the world had rolled over beneath him and left him hanging horizontal this way. Then I heard his hoarse gasped shout of the word.

"Stirrup!"

Good Christ, he's caught in the stirrup, those overshoes of his.

^{Rob}
~~He~~ was not stubbornly staying with Scorpion, he was trapped on the underside of the off-balance horse.

[#] I ran and ran, slipping, sliding, at last slewing myself on one hip ~~and side~~, down the bank to where they had ~~gone~~ ^{tumbled} in.

The star-jagged circle of broken ice. Brown roily water.

Scorpion's head and neck and side, ~~was~~ crazily ^{tilted} ~~tilted~~ as if he was trying to roll in a meadow and dark water had opened under him instead.

I swallowed as much fear as I could and made myself start the wade into the reservoir. # The embankment was ungodly steep: my first step and a half, I abruptly was in the cold filthy water up to my waist. Eight feet out from me, no, ten, the splashing fight raged on, Scorpion for all his effort unable to right himself with Rob's weight slung all on one side of him, Rob not able to pull free from the thrashing bulk of the horse angled above him.

"Rob! Try pull him this way! I can't reach--"

I was in the shocking cold of the water to my breastbone now. Down in the hole in the water. Chips of ice big as platters bumped my shoulders. The horse and man still six feet away from me. If I could manage another step toward the struggle, if Rob ^{would} let go his death grip around Scorpion's neck and reach ~~me~~ toward me--"Rob! This way! Reach toward--"

More sudden than it can be said, they went over, Scorpion atop Rob.

The water-darkened brown of the horse's hip as it vanished. The ~~m~~ brand glistening wet there.

Now only the agitated water, the splintered ice.

The reservoir's surface burst again, Scorpion's head emerging, eyes white and wild, nostrils streaming muddy water, ears laid back. I could not see Rob, the horse was between us, I was reaching as far as I could but the water was at my collarbone. Scorpion's splashes filled my eyes and mouth. I managed to splutter, "Reach around him to me, Rob, you've got to." Scorpion still could not find footing, could not get upright to swim, could not--abruptly the horse went under again.

The hammering in my chest filled me as I waited desperately for Scorpion to come up again.

The water was not so agitated now. The ice shards bobbed gently now.

For as long as I could I refused the realization that Scorpion

was not coming up. ^{Then} I made myself suck in breath, thrust my head under the water.

Murk. Nothing but murk, the mud and roil of the struggle between trapped Rob and ^{burdened} ~~trapped~~ Scorpion.

My head broke the surface of the reservoir again and I spewed the awful water. Adair's voice from the embankment was there in the air: "Angus! You can't! They're gone, you can't--"

I lurched myself backward toward the sound of her, fighting the clawing panic of the water pulling down on me, the skid of my footing on the slant of the reservoir bottom.

Then somehow I was on my side, mud of the reservoir bank under me, the water only at my knees. Adair was holding me with her body, clutching me there to the safety of the embankment. Gasping, I still stared out at the broken place in the ice, the silent pool it made. I was shuddering with cold. Knowing ^{that} the hole in the water had Rob and the horse of us both.

#

Seven days now, since Rob's drowning.

More thaw has come. I saw in my ride up to Breed Butte yesterday to check on the sheep that the reservoir ~~now~~^{is} has only a pale edge of ice here and there. Today will ~~shrink~~^{shrink} those, too. From here in the kitchen I have been watching the first of morning arrive to the white-patterned mountains, young sunlight of spring that will be honestly warm by noon. After so much winter, the constant evidence of spring is a surprise. Grass creeps its green into the slopes and valley bottom of Scotch Heaven noticeably more each day. The North Fork's lid of ice has fallen through in sufficient places to let the sound of the creek out into the air. And the first lambs were born the night before last. The sheep we have left I can handle by myself this lambing time, with a bit of help now and then from Varick. Judith made her decision while still in widow black there at Rob's funeral, asking me to run the sheep until they have lambled and then sell them all for whatever we can get. It was there at the graveside, too, that Judith asked me to write the Gleaner remembrance about Rob.

So, here at dawn, the shining mountains up there are the high windows

of memory. My night thoughts were a stopless procession, thirty years returning across their bridge of time, to here and now. I have thought through the past and so words ought to come now, oughtn't they. But which ones. The word is never quite the deed./How can I write what you can read? Whatever words will make all the truth, of course. But there is so much of that, starting so far back. The dock at Greenock, where one far figure turns to another with the words Are we both for it? and that other makes himself say, Both. What began there has not ended yet. This autumn, luck willing, there will be Varick and Beth's child. Luck willing, maybe other McCaskills in other autumns. And there will be Adair and me, here where we are. This morning as I began to get up in the dim start of dawn, she reached across the bed and stopped me. I had not been the only one with night thoughts processioning through. Adair's grief for Rob was deep but quick; after all, she is a Barclay and life hasn't yet found how to make them buckle. Now she has put this winter away. As Adair held me she told me she will stay in Scotch Heaven as long as I do--which I suppose is the same as saying as long as I have breath in me. It makes everything ahead less hard,

hearing that decision from her. How long before the sheep business and the Two Medicine country and for that matter Montana recuperate drought and from the winter of 1919, there is just no telling, what is certain is that I will be buying another band of the woollies at the earliest chance. And the teaching job at the South Fork school this autumn is mine for the asking, Fritz Hahn of the school board has informed me; I will ask. It seems that the McCaskills will get by. We start at the next of life in another minute: Adair will come right out and cook you her famous sidepork for breakfast, old Angus McCaskill, she has just advised me from the bedroom. I am glad she will find this crystal day, the mountains now glistening and near, when she comes.

Lad, at least Montana is the prettiest place in the world to work yourself to death, ay? You were right more often than not, Lucas, handless Lucas who touched my life time upon time.

Angus, you are one who wants to see how many ways life can rhyme.
 Anna. The divide between our lives, twenty years of divide. It is permanent at last, our being apart, but you were the rhythm in my

life I could do nothing about. You still are.

See now, McAngus, it's time you had a talking to. Rob. My friend who was my enemy. Equally ardent at both, weren't you, bless you, damn you. You I knew longest of any, Rob, and I barely fathomed you at all, did I.

Hard ever to know, whether time is ^{truly} letting us see from the pattern of ourselves into those next to us. Rob's is my remembrance that will appear in the clear ink of the Gleaner ^{this coming} ~~next~~ week. But where are the boundaries, the exact threadlines in the weave, between his life and ours? Tell me, tell me that, whoever can.

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