THE 'STEADERS

> The Great Herdsman Above must have thrown up his hands over the territory of bald plains between here and North Dakota and ordained it to be eternally stampede country. First of all, He turned loose the buffalo there; next the cattle herds in the days of open range; and now the homesteaders are flocking in by the thousand. Nearest us, a Paris of the prairie called Valier already exists on the maps the irrigation company is providing to hopeful immigrants, and there can even be found in the townsite vicinity occasional buildings which, if rounded up and bedded down into some sort of order, might constitute a town eventually.
>
> --Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner, May 13, 1909

I mean this better than it will sound. Adair was the biggest change my life had known since sheep came into it.

#

"Dair? You don't snore."

She stopped the work of her fork, that breakfast time in the early weeks of our marriage, and looked across at me curiously. "Such high praise so early in the day."

"All I meant was--it's a nice surprise." Surprise and cause for wonder, this small woman silent in the dark as if she wasn't there in the bed beside me. My years of alone life had made me think that adding

a second person to a household would be like bringing in a crowd. Whenever you looked up, there would be a presence who hadn't been, now at the stove, now at the window, now in the chair across from you, now in the blanket warmth next to you. But not so, with Adair. She was not what could be called a throng of wives. No, instead she was proving to be a second solitude on the homestead, a new aloneness daily crisscrossing my own. That was the parallel I meant with the sheep. Which is to say, as much as words ever can, that in the way I had needed to aim my mind as fast as possible--faster, really--in at least the same general direction as those pathless clouds of fleece when Rob and I became men of sheep, I now had to try to fathom this sudden young gray-eyed woman with my name joined onto hers. This quietly-here newcomer from the past. This afterthought bride in the lane of time where I foresaw only Anna. The saying is that to be successful with sheep, even when you're not thinking about them you had better think about them a little. Now that I was coupled into life with Adair, even when I was trying not to wonder I had to wonder whether I was up to this.

And now that I was letting this be seen bald by remarking to the presence across the breakfast eggs from me about her snorelessness, wasn't I. Figuring

I'd better get out of the topic before damage was done, I deployed: "You're sure you're related to Rob Barclay, the Scotch Banshee?"

"Would you like me to ask Rob for lessons in sawing with my nose?" she said back, lightly enough.

"No, no, no. I can step out and listen to the coyotes whenever I feel too deprived."

My wife lifted her chin at me and declared softly, "Adair has the same news for you, old Angus McCaskill. You aren't a snorer either."

"Now where do you get the evidence for that?" For if she was asleep as she seemed while I lay there searching the night--

"I wake up early, well before you do. And you're there, quiet as a gatepost."

So Adair and I were opposite wakefulnesses, were we, at either end of the night. The dark quiet between, we shared.

"See now," I always knew marriage would agree with you," Rob accorded me. "You don't have that bachelor look on you any more." He sucked his cheeks in to hollows and meanwhile crossed his eyes, just in case I didn't happen to let me know what abject bachelorhood looked like.

Adair had barely come across the threshhold when Rob and I had to trail his wethers and my lambs to the railhead at Conrad for shipping. Quick after that, school began again and I was making the ride from homestead to day of teaching and then back. In weekends and other spare minutes, ~~Dawns, dusks and weekends,~~ winter had to be readied for. It sometimes seemed I saw more of Scorpion than I did of my new wife.

She said nothing of my here-and-gone pace, just as I said nothing of her beginning attempts at running a household. Accustomed to tea, Adair she applied the principle of boiling to coffee and produced a decoction nearly as stiff as the cup. Her meals were able enough, but absentminded, so to speak; the same menu might show up at dinner and at supper, then again at the same meals the next day, as if the food had forgotten its way home. Courage, I told my stomach and myself, we'd eventually sort such matters out; but not just yet. There already was a problem far at the head of the line of all others. Adair's lack of liking for the homestead and, when you come all the way down to it, for Montana.

Again, words were not what said so. I simply could see it, feel it, in her whenever she went across the yard to fling out a dishpan of

Montana winter having no known remedy,

water and ~~came~~ strode back, all without ever ~~looking up~~ elevating her eyes from her footsteps. The mountains and their weather, she seemed only to notice when they were at their most threatening. I counted ahead the not many weeks to winter and the white cage it would bring for someone such as Adair, and tried to swallow that chilly future away.

Before winter found its chance to happen, though, there was ~~the~~ a Friday end-of-afternoon when a session of convincing Ninian on the need for new arithmetic books--ay, are you telling me there are new numbers be learned these days, Angus?--didn't get me ~~home~~ home from the schoolhouse until suppertime. During my ride, I had watched the promise of storm being formed, the mountains showing only as shoals in the clouds by the time I stepped down from Scorpion.

"Sorry, Dair," I ~~said to~~ provided her with a kiss and headed ~~right~~ sharp for the wash basin while she put the waiting food on the table. "It's just lucky I didn't end up arguing with Ninian by moonlight."

"The old dark comes so early these days," she said and took the glass chimney off to light the lamp wick.

"We get a little spell of this weather every year about now," I mollified her as I craned around to peer out the window at the clouds atop the mountains, hoping they would look lessened, "~~and~~ but then it clears away bright as a new penny for awhile. We'll be basking in Indian summer before you know what's hap-" The sound of shatter, the cascade of glass, spun me to Adair.

She was staring dumbstruck at the table strewn with shrapnel of the lamp chimney, shards in our waiting plates and in the potatoes and the gravy and other food dishes as if a shotgun loaded with glass had gone off. In her hand she still held a glinting jagged ring of glass, the very top of the chimney. I went and grasped her, wildly scanning her hands, arms, up the aproned front of her, up all the fearful way to her eyes. No blood. Mercy I sought, mercy I got. Adair gazed back at me intact.

She did not look the least afraid, she did not look as if she even knew what the fusillade of glass could have inflicted on her.

Tunnels of puzzle, those eyes above the twin freckle marks. She murmured, "It just--flew into pieces. When I put it back on the lamp."

"That happens the rare time, the heat cracks it to smithereens. But what matters, you're sure none of it cut you? Anywhere? You're sure you're all right, are you, Dair?"

"Yes, of course. It surprised me, is all. And look at poor supper."

Adair sounded so affronted about the surprise and the stabbing of supper that it could have been comical. But my heart went on thundering as I stepped to the shelf where I kept a spare lamp chimney.

#

In the morning I said what had lain in my mind through the night.

"Dair, you need to learn to ride a horse."

She thought it was one of my odder jokes. "I do, do I. What, do I look like a fox-hunting flopsie to you? Lady Gorse on her horse?"

"No, I mean it. As far back in here as we are, no one else near around, it'd be well for you to know how to handle a horse. Just in case, is all." In case lamp chimneys detonate in innocent moments, in case any of the accidents and ailments of homestead life strike when I am not here with you, I was attempting to say without the scaring words. "I'm living proof that riding a horse isn't all that hard. Come along out, Scorpion and I and I'll have you galloping in no time." I got up from my chair and stood waiting.

"Now?"

"Now. Out to the barn." I put my arm in hers, ready escort. "Scorpion awaits."

Her gaze said all right, I will humor you, show me what a horse is about, if you must. At the barn I demonstrated to her the routine of saddling, then unsaddled Scorpion and said: "Your turn."

"Angus. This is--"

"No, no, you don't do it with words. Hands and arms are unfortunately required. They're there at the ends of your shoulders if I'm not wrong." No smile from her. Well, I couldn't help that. "Just lift the saddle onto him and reach slowly under for the cinch."

Beside the big gingerbread-colored horse, Adair was a small pillar of reluctance.

"Now then, Dair," I encouraged. "Saddle him and get it over with."

She cast me a ~~whyf~~ glance full of <u>why?</u>

"Please," I said.



~~"Please."~~

The saddle seemed as big as she was, but she managed to ~~lift~~ heave it onto Scorpion. Then in three tries she struggled the cinch tight enough that I granted it would probably hold. "There," she panted. "Are you satisfied?"

"Starting to begin to be. Now for your riding lesson. ~~What you do~~ Over Pegasus I'll fling my leg/and never a shoe will I need to beg."

Verse didn't seem to loft her any more than the rest of my words. ~~"All~~ "What you do is put your left foot in the stirrup," I demonstrated with myself, "take hold of the saddle horn, and swing yourself up this way." From atop Scorpion I sent my most encouraging look down to Adair, then swung off the horse. "Your turn. Left foot into stirrup."

"No." She sounded decisive about it.

"Ah, but you've got to. This isn't Nethermuir. Montana miles are too many for walking, and there are going to come times when I'm not here to hitch up the team and wagon for you. So unless you're going to sprout wings or fins, Dair that leaves horseback."

"No, Angus. Not today. I have this dress on. When I can make myself get a riding skirt--"

"There's nobody to see you but me. And I've glimpsed the territory before, have I not?" I hugged her and urged her, ~~thinking~~ wishing to myself that ~~I wished~~ I knew how to ~~snip up~~ snipper into five-foot chunks Yo Barclay stubborness and sell it as ~~nails~~ crowbars. "You can do this. My schoolgirls ride like Comanches."

"I'm not one of your wild Montana schoolgirls. I'm your wife, and I--"

"I realize that makes your case harder, love, but we'll try to work around that handicap." She didn't give me the surrendering smile I'd hoped that would bring. By now I realized she wasn't being ~~coy~~ stubborn, she wasn't being ~~stubborn~~ coy, she was simply being Adair. At her own time and choosing, riding skirt newly on, she might ~~consent to~~ announce her readiness. Fine, well, and good. But this couldn't wait. "I'm sorry, Dair, but there's no halfway to this. Come on now," I directed. "Up."

"No."

I suppose this next did come out livelier than I intended.

"Dair, lass, you came across the goddamned Atlantic Ocean! Getting up into a saddle is no distance, compared. Now will you put your foot ~~the~~ here in the stirrup--"

"No! Angus, I won't! You're being silly with all your fuss about this."

Adair herself wasn't quite stamping that foot yet, but her voice was. She sounded as adamant as if I'd wakened her in the middle of the night and told her to go outside and tie herself upside down in the nearest tree.

The only thing I could think of to do, I did. I stepped to ~~her~~ Adair and lifted her so that she was cradled in my arms. Surprised pleasure came over her face, then she ~~was laughing~~ smiled and put her arms rewardfully around my neck. The ~~laughing~~ smiling quit as I abruptly took us over beside Scorpion.

"Angus, what--"

"Upsy-daisy, lazy Maisie," I said. "Whoa now, Scorpion," and with a grunt I lifted Adair, feet high to clear the saddle horn and I hoped aiming her bottom into the saddle.

"Angus!

"AnGUS! Angus, quit! What're you--"

"Dair, let yourself down into the saddle. Whoa, Scorpion, steady there, whoa now. Don't, Dair, you'll scare the horse. Just get on, you're all but there. Whoa now, whoa--"

Her fists were rapping my back and chest, and not love taps either. But with no place else but mid-air to go, at last she was in the saddle, my arms ~~clamp~~ clasped around her hips to keep her there. Scorpion gave us a ~~perplexed look~~ perturbed glance and flicked his nearest ear. "Dair, listen to me. Sit still, you have to sit still. Scorpion isn't going to stand for much more commotion. Just sit a minute. You have to get used to the horse and let him get used to you."

She was gulping now, but only for breath after our struggle; her tears were quiet ones. "Angus, why are you doing this?"

"Because you have to know how to handle a horse, Dair. You just absolutely do, in this country." I buried my face in her dress at

her hip while the sentences wrenched themselves out of me.

"Dair, I'm afraid for you. I could never stand it if something happened to you on account of marrying me. An accident, you here alone, this place off by itself this way..."

The ache of my fear known to both of us now. I had lost one woman. If I lost another, lost her because of the homestead--"But this place is all I've got. We've got. So you have to learn how to live here. You just have to."

A silent time, then I raised my head to her. She was pale but the tear tracks were drying. "Hello you, Dair Barclay. Are you all right?"

"Y-yes. Angus, I didn't know--how much it meant to you. I thought you were just being--"

I cleared enough of the anxiety out of my throat to say: "Thinking will lead to trouble time after time, won't it. Now then, all you need to do is take these reins. Hold them in your right hand, not too slack but not tight either, there's the way. Don't worry, I'll be hanging tight onto Scorpion's bridle and first we'll circle the yard. Ready?"

"I wonder if I am becoming feral," Sue Hubbell speculates equably

either owns or is owned by eighteen million honeybees in the Missouri Ozarks. By the evidence of her every sentence, she is also a beautifully blossoming writer. How about: "There is a magnificent dappled brown and gold house spider changing her skin today in a

#

You won't find it in the instructions on the thing, but for the first year of a marriage, time bunches itself in a dense way it never quite does again. Everything happens double-quick and twice as strong to a new pair in life--and not just in the one room of the house you'd expect. ~~new pair in life.~~ Here, now, in the time so far beyond then, when I see back into that winter after Adair and I were married, it abruptly is always from the day in May. The day that stayed with us as if stained into our skins. Take away that day and so much would be different, the history of Adair and myself and--

~~But~~ even on the calendar of memory, though, winter must fit ahead of May, and that first winter of Adair and myself outlined us to one another as if we were ~~ebony~~ black stonepiles ~~cubs~~ against the snow. After the first snowfall the weather cleared, the mountains stood up as white majesties in the blue and the sun, the air was crisp without being truly cold yet: being outside in that glistening weather was a chance to glimpse the glory the earth can be when it puts its winter fur on, and Rob and I tried any number of times to talk Adair into bundling up and ~~riding the~~ riding the haysled with us as we fed the sheep. "Come along out and see the scenery. There is. They'd charge you a young fortune for an outing like it in

the Alps." But nothing doing. Adair quietly smiled us away, brother as well as husband. "Adair can see ~~the~~ the winter from where she is," she assured us.

For a while my hope was that she was simply content to be on the inside of winter looking out, the way she paused at any window she passed to gaze out into ~~the~~ Scotch Heaven's new whiteness. That hope lasted until ~~the~~ a choretime dusk soon after the start of ~~winter~~ the snow season when George Frew, quiet ox in a sheepskin coat and a flap cap, trooped behind me into the house. "Anything you'd like from town besides the mail, Dair?" I asked heartily. "George is riding in tomorrow."

"Yes," she responded, although you couldn't really say it was to George or myself. Times such as this, conversing with her was like speaking to a person the real Adair had sent out to deal with you. Wherever the actual ~~Adair~~ mortal was otherwise occupied at the moment, the one in front of us ~~said~~ stated now: "Adair would like a deck of cards."

George positively echoed with significant silence as he took those words in. Flora Duff might want darning thread, Jen Erskine might want dried peaches for pie, but what did Adair McCaskill want but a--

"You heard the lady, George," I ~~said~~ produced with desperate jolliness. "We're in for some fierce whist in this household, these white nights. Kuuvus's best deck of cards, if you please--I'll ride down and pick it up from you tomorrow night."

Thereafter, Adair would indeed play me games of whist or gin rummy when I took the care ~~to suggest~~ to put my reading aside and it in an evening. But her true game was what I had known she intended: solitaire. After the deck of cards arrived, I began to

notice the seven marching columns of solitaire laid out on the sideboard during the day. Aces, faces, and on down, the queues of cards awaiting their next in number. Adair amid her housework would stop and deal from the waiting deck to herself, play any eligible card where it belonged, and then go on about whatever she had been doing, only to stop again her next time past and repeat the ritual.

#

But I soon was repeating my own silent ritual that winter, wasn't I. My own solitary preoccupation. Against every intention in myself, I was soon doing that.

The schoolhouse dances brought it on. At the first dance in my schoolroom, fresh silver of snowfall softening the night, I was in mid-tune with Adair when I caught sight of Anna and Isaac Reese entering. The sensation instantly made itself known within me, unerringly as the first time I ever saw Anna. Toussaint Rennie once told me of a Blackfeet who carried in his ribcage an arrowhead from a fight with the Crow tribe. That was the way the feeling for Anna was lodged in me: just there, its lumped outline under the skin same and strong as ever.

The sensation fell on me from full height, unerringly as the first time I ever saw Anna. Dair, here in my arms, what am I going to do with myself? Marrying you was supposed to cure me of Anna. Why hasn't it? Until that moment of Anna entering from the snow-softened dark, not having laid eyes on her since the day Adair and I were married I was able to hope it was my body alone, the teasing appetite of the loins, that made me see Anna so often as I waited for sleep. I am not inviting any of this, I never invited it. Her in the midst of this same music, that first night of glorious dancing with her here in my schoolroom. Her in the Noon Creek school, turning to me under a word in the air, her braid swinging decisively over her shoulder to the top of her breast. Dair, I wish you could know, could understand, could not be hurt by it.

Her beneath me, watching intently as we made the dawn come, arousing each other as the sun kindled the start of morning. Double daybreak such as I had just once shared with a woman, not the woman I had wed. Night upon night I had been opening my eyes to explode those scenes, driving sleep even farther away. Beside me, Adair who slept as if she was part of the night; there in the dark was the one place she seemed to fit the life I had married her into.

But this other inhabitant of my nights--I knew now, again, that whether she was Anna Ramsay or Anna Reese or Anna Might-Have-Been-McCaskill, every bit of me was in love with the woman as drastically as ever. But can't a person somehow, sometime, say to life: Wait now, there's been a misreckoning, you've put the wrong man

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~~Told that~~ ney

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here in love with the wrong woman, I only want to go along the years making life right for the woman I wed?

How many times that winter, to how many tunes, was I going to tread the floor of my South Fork schoolroom or her Noon Creek one, glimpsing Anna while Adair flew in my arms? Can't a person, somehow, sometime? I am going to need to try like almighty, aren't I. I couldn't not come to the dances, even if Adair would have heard of that--which she definitely would not have. To her, the dances were the one time that Montana winter wasn't Montana winter.

"She's another person, out there in the music." This from Rob. He meant it to extoll, but that he said anything at all about an oddness of Adair was a surprise.

"She is that," I couldn't but agree. Dancing with Adair you were partnered with some gliding being she had become, music in a frock, silken motion wearing a ringleted Adair mask. It was what I had seen when she danced with Allan Frew after the shearing, a tranced person who seemed to take the tunes into herself. Where this came from, who knew. At home she didn't even hum. But here from first note to last she was on the floor with Rob or me or occasional other partners, and it was becoming

more than noticeable that she never pitched in with the other wives when they put midnight supper together. To Adair, eating wasn't in the same universe with dancing.

"Angus, you look peaked," Adair remarked at the end of that first schoolhouse dance. "Are you all right?"

"A bit under the weather. It'll pass."

#

But then the Monday of school, after that dance. A squally day, quick curtains of snow back and forth across the winter sun, the schoolroom alight one minute and dimmed the next. By afternoon the pupils were leaning closer and closer over their books and I knew I needed to light the overhead lanterns. Yet I waited, watching, puzzled with myself but held by the mock dusk that seemed to find the back of the schoolroom and settle there. Davie Erskine in the last desk gradually felt my stare over his head toward that end of the room. He turned, ~~looked~~ peered, then at me. "Is something there, Mr. McCaskill?"

"Not now there isn't, Davie." Of all the tricks of light, that particular one. Slivers of cloud-thinned sunshine, so like the moonsilver when Anna and I lay with each other on the floor there. You've got

to let the moonbeams in on a dance, Davie. The silvered glim had come and gone in the past half-minute, a moment's tone that I had seen in this schoolroom any number of times without really noticing, that now I would always notice.

"Davie!" I called out so sharply his head snapped up, "help me light the lanterns, would you please."

That winter, then. Adair and I so new to each other, and the snow-heavy valley of the North Fork so new to her. I at least believed I could take hope from the calendar. Even as the year-ending days slowed with cold and I fully realized that Adair's glances out into the winter were a prisoner's automatic eye-escapes toward any window, even then I still could tell myself that with any luck at all she would not have to go through a second Scotch Heaven winter →

with only cards for company; with any luck at all, this would be our only childless winter. Children, soon and several, we both wanted. Adair seemed to have an indefinite but major number in mind--it came with being a Barclay, I supposed--while I lived always with the haunt of that fact that my parents had needed to have four to have one who survived. It would be heartening to think the world is growing less harsh, but the evidence doesn't often say so, does it. In any case, the next McCaskill, the first American one, was our invisible visitor from the winters to come.

#

It was a morning in mid-March when Rob and I declared spring. Or rather when the sheep did, and he and I, fresh from the lambing shed, came into the kitchen bearing those declarations, a chilled newborn lamb apiece.

"Company for you, Adair," sang out Rob.

She gave a look of concern at our floppy infants, who in their first hours of life are a majority of legs, long and askew as the drone pipes of a limp bagpipe. "But whatever's wrong with them?"

"A bit cold, is all," I told her. "Bring us that apple box, would you please."

"Poor things." She went and fetched the box. "What are you going to do with them?"

"Put them in the oven, of course."

"The oven?"

"A cold lamb's best friend," vouched Rob.

"In--this oven? The oven of my cookstove?"

"It's the only oven there is," I replied reasonably.

"But--"

"They'll be fine," I provided instruction to her as I dropped the oven door and Rob arranged his little geezer in the box next to mine, "all you need do is set the box behind the stove when they come to. In you go, tykes." With their amplitude of legs out from sight under them, the lamb babes in the open oven now looked like a pair of plucked rabbits close to expiration, their eyes all but shut in surrender and the tips of their tongues protruding feebly. "They're not as bad off as they look," I encouraged Adair. "They'll be up and around before you know it."

"But, but what if they climb out of the box?"

"In a situation like that," Rob postulated, "I'd put them back in. Unless you want designs on your floor."

"How long are they going to be in here?"

Rob gawked around studiously. "Do you have an almanac? I can never remember whether it's the Fourth of July or Thanksgiving that

whether it's July or August when we take the lambs out of the kitchen. McAngus, Angus, can you?"

"You know better than to listen to him," I counseled her. "He'll be up to get these lambs when they thaw out in an hour or so. Dair, the lambs are our living. We've got to save every one we can, and when they're chilled, as a lot of them are always going to be, this is the only way to do it."

"How long did you say lambing goes on?"

"Only about six weeks."

#

So ~~spring~~ May was a double event for Adair, an end to lambs in the oven and the beginning of weather that wasn't winter. Her spirits rose day day by day, taking mine with them. By the holy, if you can't believe in possibilities in the greening Montana of May, when can you? Compared with how we had wintered, Adair and I were next things to larks the afternoon when we were to go to Gros Ventre for provisions. "You're ready for town, are you?" I called in through the doorway to her. "Or can you stand to be away from the company of lambs for that long?"

"Adair is more than ready for town," she informed me.

"If she's that eager she can practice her driving, can't she. I'll go see whether ~~Prince~~ Jupiter and ~~Blaze~~ Beastie are agreeable to you handling their reins."

"Tell them they'd better be if they know what's good for them."

The day was raw, despite the new green of the grass and the fact that the spring sun was trying its best. We were a bit late starting because I'd had to take a look at the last bunch of ewes and fresh lambs that had been put out to graze. Even so, how fine it felt to have a change from the muck of the lambing shed. "This must be what they mean by the civilized life," I said with my arm around Adair as she handled the reins. "A carriage and a driver and the kind of day that makes poets spout.

Have you heard this one: My life your lane, my love your cart/come ~~xxx~~ take my rein, come take my heart?"

"I've heard it now, haven't I. Depend on you and your old verses." We were almost at the sideroad up Breed Butte. "Had we better see if Rob and Judith ~~want~~ anything from town?"

"Rob was in just yesterday, there'll be no need. Let's make up ~~a bit of~~ the time instead. Poke the team along a ~~little~~, what about. ~~I~~ Then I'll take a turn driving after we cross the creek."

~~Prince and Blaze~~ Jupiter and Beastie stepped along friskily as we passed meadow after meadow of half-grown hay beside the North Fork. I never tired of reviewing Scotch Heaven, the knob ahead where I first looked down into this valley, ~~the~~ Breed Butte and the south ridges on either side of us and the plains opening ahead through the benchland gap made by the creek.

"A ~~quarter-penny~~ halfpenny for them," spoke up Adair eventually. "Or are you ~~too~~ lost in admiration for my driving to have any thoughts."

"Actually, I've been watching that horse." Considerably distant yet, the ~~animal~~ stray was moving along the fenceline between the Findlater place and Erskines' lower pasture. It acted skittish. Going and stopping, going again. Shying sideways. Too early ~~for~~ in the season for locoweed. Odd.

"Dair, stop the team. I need to see over there."

With the buckboard halted, I stood up and peered. The distant horse shied once more, and the inside of me rolled over in sick realization. That stray horse had a saddle on.

"Angus, what--" Adair let out as I grabbed the reins and slapped the team into a startled run.

"Something's happened over there, we've got to go see what. Hang on, Dair." She did, for dear life. We left the road behind and went across the Findlater pasture at a rattling pace.

The wire gate into the Erskine field was closed: it would be. I saw the scene in my mind as Adair held the team and I flung the gate aside, the rider starting to remount after having come through the gate and closed it, his foot just into the stirrup, the horse shying at the sudden flight of a bird, or a dried weed blowing, then in alarm at the strange struggling thing hanging down from its stirrup...

I swerved our team from the worst rocks and dips in the ground but we could not miss them all and keep any speed, so we jolted, banged, bounced, Adair clinging part to me and part to the wagon seat, closer and closer ahead the antsy saddlehorse and the figure dragging below its flanks.

By the time I got ~~them stopped~~ stopped they our own horses were agitated from their run. # "Dair, you've got to get down and hold them by their heads. Don't let go, whatever happens. Talk to them, croon to them, anything, but hold onto those halters. We can't have a runaway of our own."

"Good ~~Blaze~~ Beastie, good ~~Prince~~ Jupiter, yes, you're good horses, you're good old dears..." Her words came with me as I slowly approached the restless saddlehorse, my hands cupped as if offering oats.

I was halfway ~~to the animal~~ when there was a sharp jangle of harness and a clatter behind me; I looked fearfully around to where our team had jerked Adair off her feet for a moment, but she still clung to their heads, still recited "Beastie...Jupiter...be good horses now," she still bravely had a ton and a half of animals held in her small hands. # "Are you all right there, Dair?" I called with urgent softness, not to startle the saddlehorse off into another dragging of its victim. # "Yes," she said, and resumed her ~~talk~~ chant to ~~them~~ Jupiter and Beastie. # "Easy now," my voice added to Adair's horse chorus as I turned back to the saddlehorse, "easy now, fellow, easy, easy, easy..."

The false offer of oats got me to within a few steps before the saddlehorse snorted and began to turn away. I lunged and caught a rein, then had both hands clinging to his bridle. "~~Easy~~ Whoa, you son of a bitch, ~~easy~~ whoa, you ~~dimwitted~~ demented bastard, ~~easy~~ whoa..." The worst wasn't done yet, either. Somehow I had to hold his head rock-firm and at the same time sidle along his side until I could reach the stirrup and the ankle and foot trapped in it. For once I was glad of ~~my body's length~~ the long bones of my body as I stretched ~~xxxxxx~~ in opposite directions to try this rescue.

When I managed to free the ankle and foot I had time to look down ~~xxx~~ at the dragged and kicked rider. The battering he had ~~xxxxx~~ undergone, it took a long moment to recognize him.

"Dair," I called. "It's Davie Erskine. He's alive, but just. You'll have to lead the team and wagon over here. Slow and easy, that's the way."

Adair caught her breath when she saw how ~~badly~~ terribly hooves and earth had done their work on Davie. "Angus. Is he going to live?"

"I don't know that," I answered and tried to swallow my coppery taste of fear for poor Davie. He was a bloodied sight it made the eyes pinch together in pain just ~~squint~~ to look at.

"~~I don't know.~~ He looks as if he's hurt every way he can be. The best we can do is get him home to Donald and Jen." Now our ride to the Erskine homestead had to be the reversal of the careening dash we had just done--as careful as possible, ~~Adair~~ our coats under Davie in the back of the wagon while Adair held his head steady, the saddlehorse docilely tied to the tailgate.

By the time the doctor had been fetched to the Erskine place and delivered his verdict of Davie to white-faced Donald and Jen, his news was only what Adair and I expected. Oh, it is hindsight, there is no way she and I could have known as we conveyed him home in the creeping but still jolting wagon, that the places of shatter in Davie could never entirely true themselves, that he would lead the limping half-atilt life he had to afterward. But I still feel, we both somehow did know.

#

Six days after that, Adair had the miscarriage.

"Angus, you dasn't blame yourself."

Seeing me silent and long-faced, Adair herself brought the matter into words. "We had to help Davie. That's just the way it happened. You heard the doctor say it's not even certain the wagon ride caused it. Maybe so, maybe no. Isn't that the way everything is?"

I had heard. And as best I could divine, Adair entirely meant it when she said there was no blame on me. As well blame the rocks for jarring the wagon wheels, or the wheels for finding the rocks. If bone strike stone, a hurt for bone. If stone strike bone, no hurt for stone.

No, I knew where Adair put the blame. On Scotch Heaven itself, on Montana, on a land so big that people stretched dangerously to meet its distances and seasonlong moods. Not that she came out and said so. Another case of dasn't; she did not dare lay open blame on our homestead life, for she and I had no other footing of existence together. You would have to say, then, Adair took the loss of our child-to-be as well as a person can take a thing such as that. Not so, me. To me, a double death was in that loss. The child itself, the packet of life, we had withheld from

us; and the miscarriage also had cost us a possible Adair, Adair as she could be, Adair with the son or daughter she needed to turn her mind from the homestead, the isolation. I had lost my own best self when Anna spurned our life together. How many possibles are in us? And of those, how many can we ever afford to lose?

"Angus." Adair by me now, touching me, her voice bravely bright. As if the ill person had climbed from bed to dance and cheer up the mourning visitor, she was doing her best to bolster me. "We'll have other children," she assured me. "You're definitely a man for trying."

#

That December, Adair miscarried again. This time, four months into her term.

I see that winter as a single long night. A night in the shape of the four walls of a bedroom. The man Angus with thoughts hammering at him from the dark. How has it turned out this way? I saw where my life ought to go, to Anna. Why then this other existence, if that is what it is, of Adair and me not able to attain the single thing we both want? The woman Adair this time the one staying grievous, silent as the frost on the window and as unknowable. A pair patternless as the night, us.

I turn onto my side, to contemplate again the sleeping stranger who is my wife. And am startled to meet her awake, her head turned toward me.

"Angus. Angus, what--what if we can't have any children." Silence of darkness, our silence added into it. "If I can't have any children."

"You don't seem like a stone field to me." I move my hand to her. "Or feel like one either."

"I need to know. ~~Without it~~ Do you still want me for a wife, if?"

How to answer that, in the face of if?

"Dair, remember what the doctor keeps saying. 'There's not that much wrong; as young ~~and~~ strong as you are, there's every chance...'"

"Every chance. But none has come yet, has it." She didn't add but it ~~was~~ is there anyway: will it ever?

Suddenly I was angry with life. Not in the spit-against-the-wind way of exasperation, but vexed all the way up from my core, from whatever heartpit of existence I have. For life to be against this marriage of ours was one matter--Adair and I could answer for that, we were answering for it--but why begrudge us our child, life? A child would be the next link of time, the human knot ~~made~~ woven from all McCaskills and Barclays there

ever had been, the new splice of Scotland and America and Montana and what was and what needs to be. But here where our child ought to fit--by your own goddamn logic of us, life--the only strands of time in sight to us were the old harsh ones of winter and night. Well, you haven't done us in yet, I vowed silently to the winter thorns of frost on the windows and the ~~empty black of~~ faceless night, we will stave you off a while yet. Adair did her utmost to bolster me after the wagon ride cost us our first child. My turn now.

#

"Dair, listen to me."

I touch to her, stroking the gentle horizon of her body.

no #

"Dair," I say with the kind of declaration that can be said only in bed, "we'll get you a baby."

We I rise over her and kiss her lips will next kiss, for the point of her chin get now down to her throat for the next kiss and the tender unbottoning you this kiss on her breastbone a kissing back and forth on her breasts now baby as she lifts to me with her quickening breath.

#

It was one of those May mornings which could have just as well saved itself the trouble of posing as spring and simply admitted it was leftover February.

A washday, too, and Adair was hard at it when I pecked her cheek and went out into the day.

In the gray chilliness of the barn I had untied my sheepskin coat from behind Scorpion's saddle and gratefully put it on, and was ready to swing onto the horse when I heard Adair, calling from the house: "Angus! Come look!"

I wrapped Scorpion's reins and hurried out of the barn. ~~A May~~ snow had begun to fall, a fat and feathery May squall, so that I saw Adair as if through cloud tufts ~~in the~~. I strode across the yard to her calling, "What's happened?"

"Just look around you! It's snowing!"

I peered at her, then had to laugh. "Either that or it's awful early for dandelions to fly."

Laugh was the least thing this wife of mine was in a mood to hear. She was the closest I had ever seen her to open anger when she fastened her gaze ~~look~~ on me and demanded:

"But how can it snow? This is May! Almost summer!"

"Dair, In Montana it snows any time it takes a sweet ~~whenever it takes a notion~~ to."

She scrutinized ~~gazed at~~ me as if I'd told her the sun was due to go cold.

Then she was reminded of her basket of wet laundry. "My poor wash, though. What'll I do about--"

"Hang it as usual. If nothing else it'll freeze dry."

"Angus, you really don't care that it's snowing in May?"

If I couldn't say truth about the weather, then what could I. "Worse than that, Dair. I'm glad to see it."

"Glad?" as if I'd said treason.

"But what will this do to the grass? And the lambs?"

"I was on my way to shed up the ewes and newest lambs. They'll be fine, under roof. And a spring snow is just exactly what the grass wants. After an open winter such as we had, the country needs the moisture."

Adair blinked steadily against the snowflakes as we stood looking at each other. "A strange way to get it," she told the country and me.

The next did not surprise me. I had only wondered when it would come.

Two days after the snow, when slush and mud were everywhere and spring was starting over, Adair asked:

"Angus, do you ever have any feeling at all to see Scotland again?"

"No, Dair. It never occurs to me." We might as well have the next into the open. "But it does to you, doesn't it."

"I don't mean going back for good. But for a visit."

"If it's what you want, we can get the money ahead someway for you to go."

"But you won't come?"

"No."

"Is it the ocean? Adair doesn't really like the old Atlantic either."

"No, it's not the ocean, at least not just. Dair, everything I have is here now. Scotland is an old calendar to me." To hear that from me who once stood pining up the Clyde to yesterday. Angus, are we both for it? And to have the sister of Rob the America prophet turning back like a compass needle toward Nethermuir and all its defeats. Straight paths simply are not in people.

Adair at least deserved to have the terms between us made clear, here. "If you feel you want to, you can go--for however long you like."

She did the next clarifying. "Do you want me to, Angus?"

"No." The full answer was greatly more complicated than that, but that was the uppermost edge of how I felt. I wanted not to be alone in life, and whatever else marriage with Adair [redacted] wasn't, it was not utter aloneness. →

My way of saying so came out now as: "What would I do without you?"

She answered as simply as those gray eyes gave their knowledge of me: "You would still have a life to look ahead to."

Time to be honest, said the thief in the noose. Since the moment of my wedding vow to this inexplicable woman, I had spent four-thirds of my time imagining how I might ever be found out, and here when it happened, it was nothing at all like the rehearsed versions. Time and again in those, out of somewhere it would come, Adair's question Angus, after all this while, haven't you been able to forget Anna? There we would be at last. On the terrible ground of truth that I had hoped we could avoid. Adair would be staring at me in appeal. Convince me otherwise, her look would be saying. And I would ready myself to begin at it. Dair, you are imagining. There is nothing between Anna and me any more, there has not been for-- for years. You are my wife, you are the one woman I hold love for. The disclaiming would marshal all of itself that way in my head, ready to troop along my tongue. And instead I would look at Adair and in eight words give up all I had. Dair, you're too right. I still love Anna.

But now it had happened, and not that way at all. Whether Adair saw it in the manner I tried not to watch Anna at the dances, or whether it simply stuck out all over me as I tried to be a husband, she knew my love for Anna was not changing. More than that. In her distance-from-all-this way of doing so, Adair had just told me she knew that Anna maybe was possible for me yet, in time. And more than that again. By invoking Scotland, Adair was saying that our marriage need not be a lasting barrier keeping me from Anna.

Straight paths are not in people: amidst all my relief that Adair knew, and granted, my helplessness about Anna, I was sad that the knowing had to cost her. She was carefully not showing so, she was staying at that slight mocking distance from herself as she calmly answered my gaze with her gray one. But cost surely was there, in her and in our marriage from here on.

Our marriage, if that was what it was going to continue to be. Wedding vows are one thing; the terms of existing together are another language altogether. "Dair, where are we coming out at here? Are you going back to Scotland?"

My wife shook her head, not meaning no she wouldn't like to go, just that she wasn't deciding now. "I'll see." We both would.

"Adair seems a bit drifty lately," Rob remarked when he rode by, the next day.

"Does she," I acknowledged without really answering.

His head went to one side as he studied me. "Angus, you know I only ask this because Adair is my sister and you're all but my brother. Is life all right between you two, these days?"

"Right as ever," I provided him, and managed to put a plain face over my quick moment of irk before I added: "But you didn't come all the way by to take the temperature of Adair and me, I know."

"You're right, you're right, there's other news. I've been up looking at the grass"--he gave a head toss toward Roman Reef where we grazed our sheep each summer--"and there's no reason we can't trail the sheep up in a week or so." A good early start toward fat lambs in the fall, and I nodded in satisfaction with his news. Or rather, with that much of it.

"We've got a new neighbor up there," Rob went on. "The Double W."

My turn to cock a look at him. "With how many cows?"

"No more than a couple of hundred head, is all I met up with. I gave them a dose of dog and pushed them north off where we've been pasturing.

But that damn Williamson," Rob said in what almost might have been admiration. "The man has already got cattle on every spear of grass he owns on Noon Creek, he 'borrows' on the Reservation, and now he's putting them up in the mountains. Old Wampus Cat must have invented the saying, 'all I want is all I can get,' ay?"

"We'd better hope he doesn't make a major habit of putting cattle up there."

Rob shook his head. "They're big mountains. No, Angus, I don't like having Double W cows within mouth distance of our summer grass any better than you do. But Williamson will have to put enough cows up there to tip over the world, before he makes any real difference to us. That's what brought us to Montana, wasn't it--elbow room when we need it?"

True enough, Rob. But as you gave me a lifted hand of goodbye and rode away that day, Montana even then did not seem to me the expanse it had been.

#

At first I thought it was bad pork. Just an evening or two after our inconclusive circle of Scotland, Adair took her opening bite of supper and then swiftly fled outside, where I could hear her retching as if her toenails were trying to come up.

I pushed my plate back. Even our meals could not go right. When a marriage ~~breaks~~ begins to come apart, the stain spreads into wherever it can find. The thunder between my father and mother within the stone walls of River Street. The worse silences between whatever Adair ~~wanted~~ sought of life and the unattainable, the Anna shadow, that I wanted. Those mindblind days before Adair and I said the vow there on Breed Butte, why had I ever, why had she ever--

The screendoor slapped again. Adair leaned against the doorway, one hand ~~on~~ cupped onto her stomach. She still ~~looked~~ appeared a bit weatherish, but ~~queerly~~ strangely bright-eyed too. Fever next? "Dair, are you all right?" Her heart of a face had on the damnedest expression, a smile-try that wasn't anything like a Barclay smile; a nominated look that seemed a little afraid to come out. Adair gazed at me with it. Then she moved her cupped hand in a small arc out and down over the front of her stomach, as if smoothing a velvet bulge there.

appeared tummy?

as she looked up at me it nodded, ? more,

unsure gazed

I can only hope my face didn't show the arithmetic racing through me before I stood and went to my wife-with-child. May-June-July-August-September-October-November?-December? That calendar of pregnancy could not have been worse. If we lost this child as we had the other two, it would be with Scotch Heaven winter staring Adair in the face.

#

"McAngus, the third time is the charm," Rob proffered with a hearty smile but worried eyes.

"Something grand to look forward to, Angus, pure grand," from Lucas, his eyes not matching his words either.

#

We count by years, but we live by days. Rightfully, we should do both by seasons. Even now, looking back, it makes greater sense to me to recall how that springtime, when the baby was yet invisible in her, nurtured Adair's hope along cautiously, as a sun-welcoming tree unobtrusively adds a ring of growth within itself. That summer, when the creekside meadows became mounded with haystacks, Adair began to round out prominently. Then as autumn came and remorselessly wore on toward worse weather, a gray strain began to show on Adair as well. But so far so good, we said to each other in our every glance. Each season in the procession had handed her along without jolt, without fatal jostle to the life she was carrying.

Drawing ever nearer to the birthtime, I cosseted her every way I could think of. The oldest Findlater daughter, Jenny, for months now had been on hand as hired girl to do our cooking and washing. Adair was the first to declare of herself, "Adair has the life of a maharanee these days." I knew it was put somewhat differently by others in Scotch Heaven. "Adair is still feeling delicate, is she?" I was queried by Flora Duff, who marched babies out of herself as if they were cadets. Elbows of the neighbors

I didn't care about; Adair and her ~~imperceptible~~ inching struggle to bring us a child were all that counted. She had become a kind of season herself, a time between other times. I noticed that once in a while now she would lay a game of solitaire, but only seldom. Almost all of her existence now was waiting. Waiting.

One single day of that time stands out to be told. The day of Isaac.

It came courtesy of Ninian. "I'm here to borrow a favor," he said straight off. "We have a wagon of coal coming for the school." Ninian stopped to glance sternly at the sky. This was late October now; first snowfall could come any hour. "But Reese's man can only deliver Sunday or never. Ay, he's busy as the wind these days. Everyone in Gros Ventre has caught the notion they can't live without coal now. Sunday, though. ~~can't live without coal now. Sunday, though.~~ You see my dilemma, Angus." I did. Any hard breathing on Sunday that wasn't asthma was frowned upon by the Duffs and Frews. "Angus, I will trade you whatever help you need around your place when Adair's time comes, if you'll handle

this." I agreed to be the welcomer of sabbath coal, and on the day, the big wagon and its team of eight were no sooner in sight on the road from Gros Ventre than I knew. Isaac Reese himself was the teamster today.

"An-gus," he greeted when he had halted the wagon. "You vish for coal?"

"Isaac," I reciprocated, my throat tight. "I'll see if your shovel fits me."

Not much more was said as we began unloading the coal. I suppose we were saying without words, letting our muscles talk. Coal flew from our two shovels. I wondered if he had any least idea of my love for his wife. Of those words of hers to me, If I ever see that Isaac and I have become wrong together, I'll know where to turn for rightness, Angus. Those were words with only the eventual in them, though. The ones with the actual in them had been the ones that counted: Angus, you know how you and I were, [illegible] there in your schoolhouse together. Isaac and I have been that way, all this summer. I sent a glimpse at him as we labored. Since when did Denmark manufacture Casanovas? Isaac Skorp Yun Reese. Scarecrow of sinew and mustache and unreadable face. If you had tried to tell me, the day I bought Scorpion from him, how this man was going to figure in my life, I would have laughed you over the hill. Yet maybe Isaac

in turn was living in silken ignorance of me and what I might someday --in the eventual-- do to his life with Anna. Wasn't that more than possible? With an ordinary human, yes, but with a horse dealer... I would have given a strip of skin an inch wide to know what Anna's mate in life knew. ~~But~~ in that mustached face, though, there was no sign I ever would. Through everything, I had never managed to hate Isaac Reese. Not for lack of trying; how many thousand times easier it would have been had I been able to despise the man who was Anna's husband. With him as a target my despair would have had a place to aim. But Isaac was not a man who could be despised. Calm, solid, entirely himself in the way a mountain is itself; that, and nothing else, so far as could be seen, I had might as well despise the black nuggets we were shoveling, equal good it would do. No, all I



ever felt when I was around Isaac was a kind of abrupt illness, an ache that I was myself instead of him.

Exertion greatly warmed the ~~November~~ chilly day, and as soon as Isaac stopped to peel off his coat, I did too. As we stood and blew, he asked: "How are your missus?"

I told him Adair was fine, hoping as ever that ~~the moment wasn't~~ our history of misfortune wasn't making a liar of me at that precise moment. Then I was privilged to ask: "And your better half. How is she, these days?"

Isaac Reese gave me a probably smile under that mustache and gabled out:

"Ve got a stork on de ving."

I held my face together not to laugh, and cast a glance into the air around for the hawk or crane that Isaac was trying to name. Then his meaning came.

"So, congratulations," I got out, trying not to swallow too obviously. Anna now with child, now of all times? Now as I watched Adair grow with our own creation, Anna with this man's--~~then~~ "When does the baby arrive?"

"Sometime of spring." He gave me a twinkling look, unquestionably grinning under his handlebars now. "Foalz, calfs, lamps," he recited, as if the busyness of the animal kingdom then was contagious. I stooped to more shoveling, more pondering. But Isaac's hand came down onto the haft of my shovel. When I looked at him I found he had something more he wanted to say. It came out: "Ve vill be feathers of our country, An-gus."

I had to hope Isaac was right even if his corkscrew tongue wasn't. I had to hope he and I indeed would be fathers of children whose dangerous voyages into life somehow would do no harm to the women we were each wed to.

On the eleventh of November, 1899, Adair's baby came--[redacted] weeks early but alive, whole, healthy, squalling for all he was worth.

"It's a wonder a son of yours didn't come out spouting verse," Flora Duff tendered to me when she had done the midwifing.

In our bed with the tiny red storm of noise bundled beside her, Adair was wan except in her eyes. I leaned over her and said low and fervent, "He's the finest there ever was. And so is his mother." She smiled up while I smiled down. Our son found higher pitch. We didn't care. He could yell for a year, if that was the fanfare it took to bring us a child. Softly Adair asked, "Whatever time of day is it?"

"Early. Flora is fixing breakfast and right after I'll need to feed the sheep. And you're going to have a feeding of your own to do, with a prettier implement than a pitchfork." When I went out into that day and its start-of-winter chores I felt as exultant as any being ever has, I felt that this was the morning the world was all possibilities. Adair and I and in the frosty November daybreak this miracle of a baby, our son of the sun.

To balance this ~~son~~ boy of ours, Adair and I gave him a name from each side of the family. Varick because it was her father's, and then the traditional McCaskill Alexander for a middle, in spite of it being my father's.

I measure the next span of years by you, Varick. You who were born into one century, one era of Scotch Heaven and the Two Medicine country, and by the time you were approaching eight years of age, different ~~time~~ epoch and place had been brought around you. Or so it very much seemed to me, as sentinel called father.

You were~~n't~~ not past your first birthday before your mother and I knew by doctor's verdict that you were the only child there was going to be for us. You weren't past your second before our hearts ticked on the fact that keeping you in life was never going to be simple. Every winter from then on you worried us, coming down with alarming coughs and fevers and bouts of grippe, as influenza was called then, for which spring seemed to be the only cure. Strange, the invalid ghost of yourself that you became as soon as cold weather cooped you in the house. As if ~~something in you~~ your vitality dwindled when the length of daylight did. But in your hale seasons you more than made up for that, sprouted long and knobbly, like me, and rapidly you were out and roaming into every corner of the homestead. The first major talking-to I ever had to give you was about wanderlust, the afternoon spring I found you in the barn: down ~~amid~~ under the workhorses ~~"~~, crooning happily amid ~~the fetlocks and pasterns and~~ at their oat trough, those hooves that with a casual swipe could have smashed you as if you were ~~you like~~ a pullet egg. Had your mother seen you there innocent among the feet of death, she would have forfeited years of her life ~~to the~~

Of course I had my own everlasting fret about you

fright. To say the truth, my own heart pounded several months' worth before I managed to sidle among the big horses and snatch you. Snatch only begins to say it, for I also gave three-year-old you a shake that rattled your eyeballs, and the appropriate gospel: "If I ever again catch you anywhere, anywhere, around the hoof of a horse, I'll lather you black and blue! Do you understand me? Varick? Do you?" You looked downright shocked--at me rather than realization of your peril. But you piped up apologetically, "I unnerstand," and lived up to it.

You went on, in the next year or so, to your lasso period of trying to rope the chopping block, the dog, the cat, the chickens--and fortunately got over that.

But horses, you did not ever get over. By the time your were five you could ride as well as I could, and by six you were twice the person I was on the back of a horse. The more horseman you became, the more worrisome it was for your mother; that hauntful day of our finding Davie Erskine bloody as a haunch of beef never wasn't there in her eyes when she watched you rollicking across a meadow aboard Scorpion or some other mount. But she braced herself, as a person will when there seems

nothing else to be done, and like a person who has simply decided to suffer--there is no less way to say it--she watched you out of sight the school morning when you proudly set off toward the South Fork on the back of your own pony now, Brownie.

To say the truth, I had my own ~~great~~ overwhelming fret about you. The dread deep as the bloodstream in me. What I feared for you, from the time you began to toddle, was what I had until then always prized--the water of the North Fork and its easy nearness to the house. I who would never swim was determined for you to become complete tadpole; water and the McCaskills were already several generations late in coming to terms with each other.

~~tadpole.~~ And so the ~~im~~ minute you were old enough I got Rob to teach you the water, your small strokes dutifully imitating his there in the North Fork's beaver ponds beneath Breed Butte, until he was saying, and meant it: See now, McVarick, they couldn't drown you in a gunnysack.

Did it lead on from there, the alliance between you and Rob? "Unk" as you called him from the time you were first persuaded to try your tongue on "uncle." No, even without the swimming you and he would have doted on one another, I have to believe. The two of you made a kind of inevitable league against your girl cousins, Rob's daughters who for all that he treasured them like wealth were unmistakably four versions of Judith. Your tenet of those years, girls are bossy, fit snugly with his customary joke about unexpectedly running a convent on Breed Butte, and it was your Unk more often than not who enlisted you into riding the gutwagon with him during lambing time or a buckrake during haying, you little more than a tyke but the reins taut in your small hands as Rob taught you to tug the workhorses into their necessary routes.

You just don't know how lucky you are, Angus, I heard from your Unk ~~frequently~~ regularly in that time, having a Varick.

I maybe have some idea of it, Rob.

I did not take the school that first year of South Fork yours, on the doctrine that you ought to be spared the awkward load of having your own parent everlastingly up there at the teacher's desk. But when that first year

produced as little in you as it did, I tossed away doctrine and became ~~the South Fork~~ schoolmaster as quick as the annual offer came again from Ninian. And found out for myself that as a pupil, you were reminiscent of the fellow who declared that his education simply hadn't happened to include reading, writing and 'rithmetic. Oh, you could do well enough to ~~get~~ scrape by in the schoolroom, and did, with prods from me; but the main parts of you were always outside the walls rather than in. Riding beside you to and from the schoolhouse, I ~~xxxxx~~ saw day by day what made you absent-minded above a book. Absent to the mountain canyons like ~~xxx~~ crevices in the wall of the world, absent to the warm velvet back of Brownie, absent to the riffles and trout holes of the North Fork--you already were a fishing fiend--absent to anywhere your volition could be your own, rather than an arithmetic book's or a teacher father's. ~~So, you,~~ There were points ~~when~~ at which, as maybe all parents ever have, your mother and I wondered where we got you. Except in the lines of your body, there was much about you that did not necessarily seem to be my son. Except in your ~~war~~ annual war with winter and a certain habit of drifting quietly into yourself, there was ~~much~~ considerable about you that did not seem to be your mother's son. You seemed to be the Two Medicine country's son.

Your chosen curriculum, even then, was with Rob and me in the year's rhythm with our band of sheep, lambing-shearing-summering-shipping-wintering. With us as either Rob or I rode up atop Roman Reef once each summer week to tend the camp of our sheepherder, Davie Erskine, whom I had hired as soon as he grew from twisted boy into twisted man. With us as we more and more discussed--cussed and discussed, as Rob put it--the jumping total of Double W cattle on the mountains' summer grass ~~with us~~ after the Blackfeet Reservation was fenced against the Williamsons of the world in 1904. With us, jackknife in your earnest small hand, skinning the pelts off our ~~heavy~~ loss ~~of~~ in the winter of 1906, when almost ~~half~~ a quarter of our sheep piled up and smothered during a three-day blizzard. With us to every extent a boy could be in his greenling years.

A last thing that needs saying of those earliest years of yours, Varick; in all that was to come, I hope it was not lost to you that some supreme truces were made of ~~them~~ those years. Your mother's with the homestead. Mine with the everpresence of the shadow between your mother and me, the shadow named Anna; Anna now with children of her own, Lisabeth born half a year after you and Peter a few years after that, children who might

have been mine, instead of you. Truce, yes: your mother's and mine with each other, for I believe--I hope with all that is in me--that you grew through these years without yet having to know that a truce is not full peace.

#

typed by Merlyn

In the spring of the year that Toussaint Rennie ever after spoke of as that 19-and-7, you at rambunctious seven-going-on-eight. A Saturday morning amid lambing time, you were helping me at the sheepshed, watering the jugged ewes with as much as you could carry in a bucket while I suckled a freshborn lamb onto its reluctant mother. As you were making one of your lopsided trips from the creek, outside the shed door I heard a voice with Missouri in it say to you:

"Hullo, mister. Funny how water turns heavy when you put a bucket around it, ain't it."

"Uh, yeah, sure is, I guess." I could hear too the startlement in your question back to the Missouri voice: "Who is it you're looking for--my dad?"

"If he's the sheep boss of your outfit here, yeah, I'd kind of like to talk to him about something."

You plummeted into the shed as nearly running as a person can with a bucket of water tilting him sideways. "~~Dad~~ Daddy!" your face still lit from having been mistered for the first time in your life, "~~Dad~~ Daddy, There's ~~a~~ some man--"

"I hear, son. As soon as little Fiddlesticks here gets his breakfast, I'll be ~~there~~ there. Tell our visitor so, will you please?"

bread buttered. Ours, though, said grace only once every [illegible]
sixty-five days, and that one a joke--my father's New Year's Day invocation in that Scotch-preacher burr he could put on: Hogmanay that's born today, gi' us a year o' white bread and nane o' your gray--and other than that, a McCaskill meal started at random, the only tradition to help yourself to what was closest and pass the food on clockwise.

But you lurched on toward me with your water bucket until near enough to whisper: "Dad, he's wearing a badge!"

An added fact such as that does take the slack out of a person's behavior. I finished with the lamb quicker than I'd have thought possible and stepped out of the shed, you shadowclose to my heels, Varick.

And both of us very nearly tromped on the nose of a chestnut-colored saddlehorse, so much white on his head he was the sort called an apron face, grazing the tall new grass beside the shed.

"Hullo," the figure atop the horse greeted. "Sorry to pull you off of your work this way." He wore a campaign hat and a soft brown leather vest, and was lazing on the horse with one knee hooked over the saddle horn in an easy way I knew I would never learn. His face had good clean lines but only a minimum of them: a sparse, almost pared look to this Meixell. And while the badge on his vest seemed to say he was a lawman, but he was more casual about it than any I'd ever seen. "You the gent of this enterprise?"

"I am."

"Myself, I carry the name Meixell. Stanley Meixell." He put down a hand and I responded with mine and my own name. The restlessness behind me was close enough to feel, and I added: "This bundle of fidgets is my son Varick."

"Him and me has met just now, though we didn't get quite as far as names. Pleased to know you, Varick," and the rider put down his hand again. While your small one was going into his large work-brown one, I snatched the chance to look hard at the man Meixell's badge. Not a law star; not anything I had ever seen: ~~It was not a star, but~~ a shield with a pine tree embossed in its middle.

Stanley Meixell moved his head to take in the ridgeline above the creek valley, the summit of Breed Butte above that. "This's a pretty valley in here. Kind of up toward the top of the world, though. Get some snow in the winter, do you?"

"A bit," I submitted. "Then a few feet more for sauce on ~~on top of~~ that."

"Winter," he repeated, as if it were an affliction of the race. Meanwhile the chestnut saddle horse chewed on at the high grass, the only one of us getting anything accomplished.

more? chestnut horse chewed on, only 1 of 4 of us getting anything done

Whatever this Meixell's business was he seemed to have forever to do it in, but I had a maternity ward of sheep waiting.

"Your badge isn't one I'm familiar with. What, have the trees elected you sheriff?"

"Not exactly the trees. A character named Theodore Roosevelt. I'm what's called a forest ranger," he went on, in his same slow voice, "The country up west of you here is gonna be made a national forest." Meixell shrugged in what seemed a mildly regretful way. "They sent me to make it."

"Mr. Meixell, I have to ask you to trot that past me again. A which forest?"

"A national one." He began giving me an explanation of the new United States Forest Service, and then I remembered that what were called forest reserves existed a number of places in Montana, mostly west of the Divide where trees grew big enough to be made into lumber.

"Mr. Meixell, I'm afraid you've got your work cut out for you if you're looking for timber to reserve anywhere around here. It reserves itself on this dry side of the mountains. No self-respecting logger would bother with these little pines of ours for anything but kindling, now would he?"

Meixell's gaze had been all around our valley and up the pinnacle of Breed Butte and back and forth across the mountains we were talking of, and now it casually found me, and stayed. ¶ "No, I don't guess he would, Angus--if I can go ahead and call you that?" ¶ I had to nod; civility said so. ¶ "But actually it ain't just the trees I'm supposed to be the nursemaid of," Meixell went on, "it's the whole forest. The soil and water too, a person'd have to say." ¶ He contemplated me and added in a slower voice yet: ¶ "Yeah, and the grass."

I felt as if a tight rope suddenly was around my insides. It was then I blurted to you, Varick, "Son, you'd better get on with your watering, before those ewes come looking for you."

"Aw." But you went as promptly as a reluctant boy ever can. And I have regretted since that I sent you, for if you had stayed and heard, the time ahead might have come clearer to you. You who were born in the Two Medicine country with its rhythms and seasons in you had a right I did not manage to see just then, there in the welter of apprehensions instantaneously brought on me by Stanley Meixell's words, a right to witness what was beginning here. We both know it was not the worst you could ever hold against me, but if I had that exact moment back... Instead, as soon as you were out of

earshot I spun around to the man Meixell. "But we summer our sheep up there. Everybody here, on both forks of the creek. That's free range and always has been."

"Always is something I don't know that much about, Angus. But I just imagine maybe the Blackfeet who used to have free run of this country had their own notion of always, don't you suppose? And if there was anybody here before them, they probably knew how to say always, too." Meixell shook his head as if sorry to be the herald of inescapable news. "As I get it--and I'm the first to admit that the Yew Ess Forest Service ain't the easiest thing in the world to savvy--the notion is we can't go on eating up the land forever. As the lady said to the midget, there's a limit to everything."

I could feel the homestead, seventeen years of labor, hours incalculable spent on the sheep, all slip beneath my feet as if I were on a 160-acre pond of ice. with surprising quickness ~~Quickly~~ now, the forest ranger spoke to my wordless dismay:

"Don't take on too hard about the national forest, though. More'n likely you're still gonna be able to summer your sheep up there, or

at least most of them. There's gonna be grazing allotments and permits I'll be doling out, and prior use is something I'm supposed to take into account." Up there on his chestnut horse he began outlining to me how the permit system was to work, every inch of it sounding reasonable in his laconic tone, but I was still unready to let myself skid back to hope. I broke in on him:

"But then, if we can still use the range, why bother to--Mr. Meixell, just what in holy hell is it you and President Teddy have in mind for us?"

"The idea ain't to keep the range from being used," Meixell said as if it was a catechism. "It's to keep it from being used to death."

Now the summer mountains filled my mind, the rising tide of Double W cattle we sheep graziers were encountering now in each grass season up there, Wampus Cat Williamson's offhand imperial complaint You people would sheep this country to death. The awful echo of that in what this--what was the word for him, ranger?--had just said. Prior use. But whose prior use of that mountain range? Suddenly cold with suspicion, I studied the hardworn lean face above the badge, beneath the campaign hat: had he come as agent of the Wampus Cat Williamsons of the world, those who had the banks and mills and fortunes in their white hands? I clipped

my next words with icy care: "I hope while you're so concerned against grass being sheeped out, you'll manage to have an eye for any that's being cattled out, too."

From his saddle perch Meixell gave me a look so straight it all but twanged in the air. "Yeah," he spoke slowly, "I figure on doing that."

Did he? Who knew. Ruin's wheel drove over us/in gold-spoked quietness. I had thought it wouldn't be like that in America. Maybe it wasn't yet. Maybe so, maybe no. I kept my gaze locked with his, as if we were memorizing each other. Say for this Meixell, he did not look like anyone's person but his own. Yet even if he was coming here neutral, that eternal seep of Double W cattle to wherever Williamson's eye alit... "You may as well know now as later," I heard myself informing the man in the saddle, "there'll be some who have their own ideas about your government grass."

"Oh, they won't have no real trouble telling the difference between the forest grass and their own," Meixell mused absently. "There's gonna be a bobwire fence for the boundary. And I'll pretty much be on hand myself, if the fence ain't enough." Still absently, he tacked on: "And if I ain't enough, then Assistant Ranger Windchester likely'll be." The butt of his Winchester rifle stuck out of its scabbard as casually ready as this forest ranger himself.

Oh, you must beware, maidens all,
that wear gold on your hair
to come or go by Charterhall
for young Tam Lin is there.

About the dead hour of the night
she heard the bridles ring
and Janet was as glad of that
as any earthly thing.

"Fellow there in the saloon in town," Meixell resumed as I was striving to blink all that in, "he told me you're the straw boss of the school up here. I wonder if I could maybe borrow your schoolhouse for a meeting, just in case anybody's got any ~~[illegible]~~ questions left over about the national forest." Meixell paused and scanned the long stone colonnade of Roman Reef atop the western horizon. "The Yew Ess Forest Service is great on explaining. Anyway, next Saturday wouldn't be any too soon for me about your schoolhouse, if it wouldn't for you."

I answered, "I'll need to talk to our school board," which meant I can tell you Ninian. "But the likelihood is, people here are going to have questions for you, yes."

Meixell nodded as if that was the fairest proposition he'd heard in years. "Well," he concluded,

"I better get to getting. Figured I might as well start here at the top of the valley with my good news and work on down. Noticed a place on that butte"--he inclined his head an inch toward the summit of Breed Butte. "I suppose you maybe know the fellow's name up there?"

Only as well as I knew my own. And although this forest ranger

was a stranger to me, and maybe a dire one, I felt impelled to tell him at least the basic of Rob Barclay. "He has a mind of his own, especially where his sheep are concerned."

Meixell cast me another look from under his hat, a glance that might have had a tint of thanks in it. "There's some others of us that way. Be seeing you, Angus." Before he swung the chestnut saddlehorse away, he called into the shed to you: "Been my day's pleasure to meet you, Varick."

While the man Stanley Meixell rode away, I stood staring for a while at the mountains. National forest. They did not look like a national anything, they still looked just like mountains. A barbed wire fence around them. It did not seem real that a fence could be put around mountains; but I would not bet against this Meixell when he said he was going to do a thing. A fence around the mountains not to control them but us. Did we need that? Most, no. But some, yes. The Double W cattle that were more and more. It bothered me to think it in the same mental breath with Wampus Cat Williamson, but even Rob's penchant for more sheep was a formula the land eventually would

not be able to stand. And without the land healthy, what would those of us on it be? The man Meixell's argument stood solid as those mountains. But whether he himself did ~~not~~ proven.

I heard you come out of the shed with your ~~bucket~~ bucket and ~~stop~~ start your next dutiful journey to the creek. When I ~~looked~~ glanced around at you, I found ~~you~~ that you had taken a sudden ~~new~~ new interest in your hat. You were wearing it low to your eyes as the forest ranger did. I registered then, Varick, that from the ~~moment~~ instant he reached down to shake your hand, ~~you~~ you looked at Stanley Meixell as if the sun rose and set in him. And I already was telling myself that you had better be right about that.

#

"What in goddamn hell"--Rob, full steam up--"are we going to do about this national forest ~~thing~~ nonsense?"

"You're of the opinion there's something to be done, are you."

"Angus, you know as well as I do that's been our summer grass up there ever since we set foot into this country. We can't just let some geezer in a pinchy hat ~~come~~ prance in here and tell us how many sheep we can put on this slope, how many on that one. What kind of a tightfart way is that to operate, now I ask you?"

"There's maybe another piece to the picture, you know," I had to say. "Those grazing allotments could mean Williamson can't pour every cow on earth up there any more, too."

"There is another piece to the picture, you know. It'll mean Williamson can't pour every cow on earth up there, too."

"Williamson has never managed to crowd us off those mountains yet."

"Yet."

"Angus, are you standing there telling me you're just going to swallow the guff this man Meixell is trying to hand us? Just because he wears a goddamn tin badge of some kind?"

"I'd say it's not the worst reason to pay the man some" (Rob, "There are worse reasons to pay attention. And no, I'm not swallowing anything, just yet. I do think we all need to do some chewing on the matter, though."

Rob shook his head slowly, deliberately, as if erasing Meixell and the heresy he called a national forest.

"I'll tell you this: I can't stand still and accept that any sheep I own has to have a permit to eat grass that doesn't belong to a goddamn soul."

"Rob, there's a fair number of sheep you own one end of and I own the other."

That drew me a sharp look. I had not seen Rob so het up since

our ancient debates over how many sheep we ought to take on. Yet why wouldn't he be; this matter of the national forest grass was the same old dogfight, simply new dogs.

Rob must have realized we were fast getting in deep, for he now backed to: "All right, all right, I might've known you're going to be as independent as a red mule. If it'll keep peace in the family, you can go around daydreaming that we can run sheep with reins on every one of them." He cocked his head and made his declaration then and there: "But if that forest ranger of yours thinks he's going to boss me, and a lot of others around here, he has his work cut out for him."

When I made a quick ride down to Duffs' after supper, Ninian was bleak, even for Ninian. "Ay, we can open the schoolhouse next Saturday and give a listen to the man Meixell," he granted. "But if what he has to say isn't against our interests as sheepmen, I'll be much and pleasantly surprised."

#

That night at bedtime, I told Adair: "I think we'd better make a trip to town, after school Monday."

She glanced over at me in surprise. Any town trip other than a periodic Saturday was rare for us, and during lambing time it was unheard of.

"Davie can handle the lambing shed until we get back," I elaborated. "That way, we can take our time a bit, have supper with Lucas and Nancy."

She still ~~looked~~ gazed at me. She knew as well as I did that my elaboration was mere fancywork, not revelation.

"Dair, I need to talk to Lucas about this national forest."

"Rob has made his opinion clear."

"Rob isn't Lucas."

At least that turned off her ~~look~~ gaze. "No," she said. "No one is anyone else."

#

Gros Ventre these days was a growing stripling of a town, all elbows and ~~xhx~~ shanks. The main street was beginning to fill in--fresh buildings for the Gleaner newspaper, for a new saloon that called itself the Pastime, for the stagecoach office next to Dantley's stable, for an eating place that had opened beside the Medicine Lodge; pure convenient, ~~pleasure,~~ as Lucas put it, whenever the notion of a meal happens to strike one of my customers--but still had plenty of room to go. in every conceivable way, though, I was assured by Lucas in the next breath after I stepped into the Medicine Lodge, the town was advancing grandly. A barber, a lawyer, even a tailor, kept themselves honed in Gros Ventre these days. "And we're about to get ourselves a bank, Angus. It's bad business to let such places as Choteau and Conrad have our money in their pockets."

All this he ~~was~~ tendered to me as I was noticing that now that a bridge of bright new lumber hurdled the creek ford, by weathered comparison the Northern Hotel looked as if it had been in business since Lewis and Clark spent the night there.

And Rob and I preceded the Northern, and Lucas preceded us...

I took a sip from the glass Lucas had furnished me and speculated, "Then if we were to put the royal mint next to the bank, with a chute between for the money to flow through, and spigots on the front of the bank..."

Lucas had to laugh. But he came right out of it with: "Angus, you'll see the day this town of ours is the county seat, and of our own county, too. Gros Ventre is a coming place."

~~is a coming place."~~ I could agree with that; it had been coming for nearly twenty years that I knew of personally. Before I could say anything to that effect, Lucas produced a glass for himself, between his stubs, then ~~tipped~~ the whiskey bottle, freshening my drink after he had poured his own. "But enough progress for one day. Lad"--for a change that was not me but Varick, who had wanted to tag along with me rather than endure while his mother and Nancy were fixing supper--"what would you say to a fine big glass of buttermilk?"

"Uh, no thanks," uttered Varick with that eloquent dismayed swallow only a boy can perform.

~~"Uh, no thanks," said Varick with all the swallow a boy~~ the dismayed swallow only a ~~boy can perform.~~

Lucas peered over the bar at him. "It's a known fact that buttermilk will grow a mustache on you practically overnight. How do you think this father of yours got his? I'm telling you, this is ~~your~~ yourself chance to get a cookie duster." Varick grinned up at him and gave out a skeptical "aw."

Lucas shook his head dubiously. "If you're going to pass up perfectly good buttermilk, I'm afraid the only choice left is root beer." That resolved, while Varick happily started on his rich brown glassful, Lucas remarked all too casually in my direction: "It's not usual to see you in town on a school night, Angus."

"I thought we ought to talk, Lucas. You just maybe can guess what about."

"Angus, Angus." Lucas's great face behind the bar, his bald dome and his still-dark beard, and those gray Barclay eyes; how many times had I known this moment? "Life was a lot simpler before this man Meixell, wasn't it," Lucas was saying.

"You've met up with him, haven't you?"

"The day he hit town. This was the next place he found after the Northern."

"And?"

"And once I'd picked my jaw up off the floor after hearing the words national forest and what they meant, I stood him a few extra drinks while I tried to figure him out. That, I have to say, didn't even come

close to working." It was an admission chipped in stone, the chilly way Lucas said that, then this: "Our Meixell definitely is a man with a hollow leg, and by the time he strolled out of here I was the one wobbling."

Lucas stopped and cocked a look Varick's direction. Then, soul of discretion, said: "That was Meixell's first half hour in town, Angus, and his second was a visit to Uncle Dolph," which was to say Spenger and his "nieces." A fellow who attended to priorities promptly, this Meixell, ay, Lucas?

All of this Varick was taking in avidly. The first Montana McCaskill, trying to hear beyond his years. Even to myself I couldn't have specified why, but I now wanted my son to know as many sides as there were to this thing called the Two Medicine National Forest, this matter of the land and us on it, and the sudden forest ranger on whom our future pivoted. I asked Lucas straight: "Other than Meixell's ~~various~~ social capacities, what've you concluded about him?"

To my surprise, Lucas Barclay hedged off to:

"The talk I hear, this national forest notion is about as popular around here as a whore in church."

"I've heard similar, just recently. But unless our conversation walked out the door while I wasn't looking, Lucas, we're talking now about Meixell himself and what we can expect from him."

"Angus, Robbie is not wrong about what this national forest can do to us and the way we're used to going about things. Now I know as well as you do that Robbie can be the quickest in the world to get a wild hair up his"--Lucas's eye caught the attentive face of Varick below--"nose." But this notion of divvying the grass as if it was the oatmeal and we were the orphans--by Jesus, I don't know why that should have to be, Angus, I just don't. What I do know is that we've always run whatever sheep we could manage to, up on that grass, and we've built ourselves and Scotch Heaven and Gros Ventre and the entire Two country by doing it, ay?"

"That's been the case, yes," I had to agree. "But how long can any piece of ground, even one the size of those mountains, keep taking whatever sheep get poured onto it?" I studied Lucas to see how he would ingest this next: "Or cattle either, for that matter."

Lucas rubbed a stub across his beard as if reminded of an unfriendliness there. "You mean Williamson. Our dear friend Wampus Cat. I don't have the answer there either, Angus, any more than I do to this geezer Meixell. I'm as fuddled about this as the old lady of Ecclefechan when she was told that astronomers had found planets named Mars and such up there among the stars. 'I've nae doubt they can see those things with their long glasses and all,' she

said, 'but how did they find out their names?'"

And that proved to be Lucas's say on planetary matters this night. Even after the lilt of that joke, though, I was certain of this much: certain that I saw come back into Lucas the same bleakness I had found in Ninian Duff two evenings ago. Ay, the one of them beginning dourly about Meixell, and the other concluding dourly, ay? Not pleasant to be squeezed between, Ninian and Lucas. If these two old stags of the country set their minds and horns against Meixell; if they led the many others who would listen to them into rank behind Rob's anger...a fence could be built around a forest, but a fence could be cut, too; grass could be allotted, but sheep could forever stray onto the unallotted, too; a forest ranger could be sent to us, but that forest ranger could rate early replacement if everything he touched turned to turmoil.

I looked down at my son and had the sudden wish for him to be twice or three times his not-quite-eight years, to be old enough, grown enough, to help me think through what I ought to do. To bring his native attunement to the land into my schoolmasterly mind.

Lucas too now put his attention on the inquisitively watching boy. Leaning across the bar, he announced:

"Varick, ~~lad,~~ I happen to know for a fact that Nancy has ginger cookies ~~on hand~~ in oversupply at the house. Go tell her I said to give you the biggest one, ay?"

Varick couldn't help blurting his astonishment at such ~~good~~ unheard-of fortune: "This close to supper?"

"I know just ~~what~~ who you mean by that, lad," sympathized Lucas. "But tell that mother of yours that I've known her since she was just an idle notion up ~~my~~ my brother's leg"--I'd wanted Varick to have full education, tonight, had I--"and I don't want to hear any whippersnap arguments out of her about when a cookie can be eaten. ~~Will you tell her that for me?~~ Tell her that for me if she needs it, ay?"

Varick scooted out of the saloon for the house and I sat wondering if the Barclays maybe constituted an entire separate human race. It would explain a lot. Lucas now turned his magnanimity my way and proclaimed: "We've just time to top off these drinks before supper." He poured and ~~toasted~~ toasted, "Rest our dust." As we put our glasses down, Lucas asked: "And how if life treating its schoolkeepers?"

Schoolkeepers. That s whispering more than just yourself and you know who I mean by more, Angus.

I studied my glass while all the other whispers of Anna whished whispered in me, years of accumulated echoes of not having her, a chorus of whispers adding and adding to themselves until they were like the roar of a chinook wind.

~~added and added onto themselves.~~ Angus, I've told Isaac yes....Angus, Angus, take it slow now, both on this whiskey and yourself....Angus, man, this is the best news in the world!...Angus, I'll try with whatever's in me to be a good wife....An-gus, ve got a stork on de ving. And ever around to first words again: I am called Anna Ramsay. And it is Miss Ramsay.

improve "whirl"

The ~~whirl~~ swarm of it all was too much; if I ever once began letting it ~~out~~ free... Even here now to Lucas, I could stand only to say the minimum of my anna situation: utter

"We get by, Lucas. That seems to be the story of schoolkeepers."

"And that's enough, is it?"

"I try to make it be."

#

George and Abraham traded their eternal stoic stares ~~across~~ along the schoolroom wall, and the bunch ranged below seemed to have caught ~~its~~ their mood ~~from them.~~ If faces could ~~ever~~ somehow be said to be sitting there with crossed arms, these of Scotch Heaven's sheepmen on Saturday morning were.

Stanley Meixell half-sat half-leaned on the corner of my big desk in front of us. By years, he was the youngest person in this gathering, but with his hat off, the start of a widow's peak was there in his crow-black hair, and the lines webbed in at the corners of his eyes by wind and sun and maybe personal weather as well made his face seem twice as old as the rest of him. Having just told us the full particulars of the land he was boundarying to create this Two Medicine National Forest, Stanley paused to let it all sink in, and it definitely sunk.

"Why don't you just arrange your goddamn boundaries to the North Pole and the Atlantic Ocean while you're at it?" spoken lividly by Rob.

To say the truth, the empire of geography the forest ranger had delineated to us was stunning. Grizzly Reef. Roman Reef. Rooster Mountain. Phantom Woman Mountain. Guthrie Peak. Jericho Reef. Anywhere in the high stone skyline to our west, name a rimrock bow of mountain or a sharp flange of peak, and it sat now within the Two Medicine National Forest. And its foothills below it, and its neighbor crags behind it, all the way up to the Continental Divide. All the way up to the moon, may as well say. And Stanley hadn't only taken his indelible boundary west to the Divide and north to the Two Medicine River: to the startlement

of us all, he already had put a Forest Service crew to building his ranger station here on the east edge of Scotch Heaven, at the juncture where the North Fork and the South Fork met to form the main creek. The narrow panhandle of national forest boundary he had drawn from the mountains down here to the station site took in only 4 hogback ridges of rocks and stunted pine that could never be of use to anyone, but still. Everyone of Scotch Heaven and the South Fork both would need to pass by the ranger station, and the bold flag atop its pole, whenever they traveled to or from town. Like having an unexpected lodger living on the front porch of our valleys, although I knew from Stanley's own lips why he had done it: You're asking me if I absolutely have to bring the national forest all the way down to the forks of the creek, Angus, and yeah, I figure I do.

"Yeah, Angus, I figure I do. If I hide the ranger station way to hell and gone out of sight somewheres, that's not going to do either side of the situation any good. This station and the forest are gonna be facts of life from now on. They're a part of this Two country and people just might as well get used to them as quick as they can." My answer, "Some aren't going to like your station out there so prominent."

I didn't much myself. Me and the forest got plenty of time, said Stanley,

for them to change their minds.

Changing of minds wasn't the fad yet, if this schoolroom audience was any evidence. In the seat next to me Rob was tight-jawed, fired up as a January stove. On the other side of him, Lucas was the definition of skeptical. Around us, a maximum Ninian frown and variations of it on Donald Erskine, Archie Findlater, the two Frews...the only unperturbed one in the room was Stanley.

He wasn't going to stay that way if Rob had anything to do with it. "Christ on a raft, man! You're taking every goddamn bit of the country we use for summer range!"

"I ain't taking it anywhere," Stanley responded quietly, "it's still gonna be there."

"What makes you think," Rob spoke up again, "you can parade in here from nowhere and get us to swallow this idea of a national forest and like it?"

"I wouldn't necessarily say you got to like it, Bob," answered Stanley. "If you just got used to it, that'd be plenty to suit me."

"But man, what you're asking of us"--pure passionate Rob, this--"is to get used to limiting our sheep on that mountain grass. That's the same as limiting our livelihoods. Our lives too, may as well say."

"I'm not here to fool you, any," Stanley responded. "You're probably not gonna be able to put any more sheep onto that mountain than you've already had up there, and maybe some fewer." Glower from Rob, on that. His look changed to bafflement as he realized the ranger didn't intend to expand that response. Rob burst out:

"You mean you're telling us there isn't anything we can do about you and your goddamn grazing permits?"

"Me personally," Stanley said to Rob, "I guess you could get rid of someway. Or at least you could try." The schoolhouse filled with consideration of that. "But about the grazing allotment system, no, I don't really see nothing for you to do."

Before Rob's fury found a next tangent, the forest ranger went along us from face to face with his eyes. "But none of what we been saying so far here today goes through the alphabet all the way from A to Why, does it. I've told you what the national forest is gonna be, you've told me what you think about it. Seems to me we both better take a look at just why I got sent here to make the Two Medicine National Forest."

I shifted drastically in my chair, not just for the exercise. Was this going to work? Was I several kinds of a fool for abetting Meixell as I had? The night after my visit to Lucas in town, another visit.

this one in the lambing shed after supper: Stanley Meixell appearing again where Varick and I first laid eyes on him. Found your note under my door ~~this morning~~, Angus. I almost hadn't gone to the Northern and left that message, when I announcedly ~~was going out to~~ got up from Lucas and Nancy's table to go harness the team for our drive home to Scotch Heaven. Yet I did, yet I had to make the effort to give Stanley the words, the thoughts, for fitting this national forest onto the Two Medicine country, with as little woe as possible to all concerned. My words to him there in the lantern light of the shed, that the national forest ~~is~~ was actually the pattern of homesteading writ large: lines of logic laid upon the earth, the weave of land and utility, toward the ~~making~~ pattern of America. A quiltpiece of mountains and grass and water to join onto our work-won squares of homestead. The next necessary sum in trying to keep humankind's ledger orderly. Those words of mine, Stanley's tune of them now to listening Scotch Heaven: "I guess you're all familiar with the term public domain. It's the exact same ~~land~~ bunch of land you were all able to homestead on..." Land, naked earthskin. America. Montana. We can be our own men there, the Rob of then to the me of then. Maybe so, maybe no. What can you have in life, of what you think you want? Who gets to do the portioning? Stanley's voice going on, low, genuine: →

with as little woe to anybody as possible

utility

designated

"The national forest is a kind of pantry for tomorrow, for your youngsters when they grow up and inherit all this you've got started..."

In the lambing shed as Stanley and I met, our one witness: ~~Varick~~ Varick.

Your mother doesn't need to know about this, son; one more item put into that category, sorry to say. But Rob and Lucas already were more Barclays than any sane man ought to have to contend against, without an Adair salient too. I hated for Varick to see me sneak. But I wanted him there that night, to absorb whatever he could of the words of the land as Stanley and I knew them.

"My life maybe don't count up as much in years as some of yours, but I been quite a number of places in it." No one of us in his audience could doubt that. Stanley was a number of years younger than myself or Rob, but he definitely had the look of a man with a lot of befores in his life.

"Every one of those places," he went on, "I seen some pretty sad behavior toward the country." I watched him twice as carefully as I had been. There was none of me in these words, this was undiluted Stanley now.

"I used to ask people about that. What was gonna happen when the land wore out. And they always said that when they'd used the country up, they'd just move on. But I don't know of anything you can just keep on using up and using up and using up, and not run out of. And that's all the Forest Service is saying with this Two Medicine National Forest. You can use it, but not use it up."

The schoolroom was quiet. Stanley was finished with that part of the task. But now the next. I wanted not to be the one to ask it. Yet no one else was. I would have to, Stanley had to have the chance to answer. Before I got my mouth to agree, though, I heard my intended words coming out of Lucas:

"What about cattle? Do your grazing allotments take in the fact that cattle eat grass too?"

"I guess I know what you got on your mind, Mr. Barclay. Its initials are Double W, ain't they." Stanley paused to gather his best for this. "I went and did some riding around in the mountains, taking a look at the ground wherever the snow was off. Trying to figure out for myself just what the country up there can carry. How many sheep. And how many cattle." There's one thing you've utterly got to do, my last words to him in the shed those nights ago. Somehow prove you're going to put a rein on Williamson as well as on the rest of us. If you're going to have people of Scotch Heaven accept the notion of this national forest, prove to them it's not just going to be another honeypot for the Williamsons of the world. Prove it to me, for that matter. And Stanley easing away from the lantern light, saying only Been a interesting evening.

the watching boy?

And to the watching boy not much higher than our waists:
Good night, Angus, and ~~many~~ thanks. My pleasure one more time, Varick.

Now I waited with the rest, waited for proof.

"Arithmetic has never been my long suit," Stanley was saying unpromisingly. "But I do ~~know~~ savvy that old formula, which I guess all of you know better than I do, that you can run five sheep on the same ground it takes for one cow. Now, each of you in this room has got a band of a thousand sheep, by yourself or in partner with somebody"--here a Stanley glance along the line from me to Rob to Lucas--"or whatever. So, the fairest thing I can think of to do is what I went ahead and did--tell Williamson I'm allotting him a grazing permit the equal of a band of sheep. Two hundred cows."

A massive thinking silence filled the schoolroom.

Stanley spoke again: "If it'll help your own arithmetic along any, I figure he's been running a couple of thousand cows up there the last summer or so. Fact is, I came across some bald places around springs and salt licks where it looks like he's been running a couple million." ~~Manure up~~ Came across such places ~~them~~, yes, with my guidance ~~help~~. It would take a man weeks to ride an inspection of those mountains, and Stanley ~~many~~ had only days; I'd cited him chapter and verse, where ~~places~~ to see for himself the overuse and erosion from Williamson cramming the land with Double W cattle. "Manure

up to your shins, and the grass worn away just as deep," as Stanley was saying it now. "I asked our friend Williamson about behavior like that. He told me any overgrazing up there was done by you sheep guys. I kind of hated to have to point out to him I do know the difference between cowflops and sheepberries when I see them on the ground." →

Ninian now, starkly incredulous--it was worth being here today just for that. "Am I hearing you right, that you've already ~~told~~ instructed Williamson you're cutting him to just two hundred head of cattle in those mountains?"

"Yeah." Stanley ~~looked~~ peered out the window toward the mountains, as if for verification.

"And then--?" demanded Ninian.

"Some other stuff got said, is all. Mostly by him." Stanley still studied the mountains. "As long as I'm the ranger here, though, he ain't gonna get treated any different than the rest of you."

Now Stanley Meixell looked out among us.

"None of us needs any more trouble than we already got," the man at my desk with a face older than himself offered. "For my part, I can always be worked with if you just keep one thing in mind. It's something they"--the jerk of his head eastward, to the invisible churck of the Forest Service in Washington--"claim President Roosevelt himself goes around saying. 'I hate a man who skins the land.'"

Deep silence again. Until Stanley ~~Meixell~~ cleared his throat and said: "Just so we all know where we're coming out at here, can I get a show of hands on how many of you go along with the idea of grazing allotments the way I intend to ~~mark~~ do them?"

To be pioneers in filling such emptiness. At least we can be our own men there, the Rob of then to the me of then.

The North Fork there, that's sinfully fine country, the Lucas of then.

I raised my hand.

No other went up.

Indecision was epidemic in the room. Stanley had said much sense. But the habit of unrestricted summer grass, the gateless mountains, the way life had been for the twenty years most of these men had put into their homesteads, those said much too. Skepticism and anger and maybe worse weren't gone yet; I could feel Rob's stiff look against the side of my head. My hand stayed lonely in the air, and was getting more so.

Then, from the other side of Rob:

"Will a slightly used arm do?"

Lucas's right sleeve, the stub barely showing out its top, slowly rose into the air.

The next assent that went up was that of Ninian Duff. Then Donald Erskine's hand vaguely ~~rose.~~ climbed. Archie Findlater's followed, and George Frew's, and Allan Frew's. Until at last Rob's was the only hand not up.

The expression on ~~him~~ Rob was the trapped one of a man being voted into exile.

I felt some sorrow for him. The horizon called Montana was narrower for Rob after today.

¶ But you never wanted to be too quick to count Robert Burns Barclay out, as if by volition of all the other assents there in the air, Rob's hand at last gradually ~~rose~~ began to rise too. For better or for worse, in trepidation and on something ~~less~~ a bit than faith, ~~Scotch~~ all of Heaven had taken the Two Medicine National Forest for a neighbor.

#

~~Squint as hard as you will, you can't see into tomorrow.~~ There wasn't a one of us who stepped out of that South Fork schoolroom into the spring air of Montana and put a glance to the mountains of the new Two Medicine National Forest who didn't think he was looking at the a principal change. But those of us that day weren't even seeing the first wink of what was coming. In the next few years, change showed us what it could do when it learned the multiplication table. Change arrived to the Two Medicine country now not in Stanley Meixell's mountain realm west of us but onto the prairies everywhere to our east, it arrived wearing thousands of farm boots and farm dresses, and it arrived under the same names we ourselves had come with, homesteaders.

Overnight, it seemed, the town Lucas had always said Gros Ventre was going to be was also arriving. But it was arriving twenty miles away, at a spot on the prairie which had been given the name Valier. A town made from water, so to speak, by a company fueled by water.

Irrigation was the word on every wetting lip now. The waterflows coursing from the Rockies would be harnessed as if they were clearcolored mares, and made to nurture grainfields. Dam to canal to ditch to head of wheat was going to be the declension. And soon enough it began to be. Scotch

Heaven ~~only~~ simply watched, because the valley of the North Fork was narrow and slanted to the extent that only a smidgen of hayfield irrigation could be done, or, ~~really,~~ honestly needed doing. But a water project such as the one around the townsite called Valier, eighty thousand acres of irrigation being achieved and homesteaders pouring off every train, was reason enough to rethink ~~Montana~~ the world and what it was ~~going to be.~~ quick becoming

more?

quick becom's

Yet you have to wonder. If someone among ~~the~~ those prairie homesteaders, Illinoisan or Missourian or Belgian or German, if some far-eyed soul of 1908-9-10 who had come to plaid himself or herself into this Montana land ~~had~~ could have taken an occasional moment to watch Scotch Heaven, would we up there have seemed as fixed in a rhythm of life as we assumed we were? Riffle into us in those years, and you find Scotch Heaven's first automobile-- Rob's Model T Ford. "See now, McAngus, I haven't laid eyes on one of these contraptions yet that has a wheel worth the name. But the thing is an amazement, am I right? To ~~go without~~ be able to go ~~without horses...~~ down the road without horses... →

took

1908-9-10

even

overall

Blearily my son managed to locate the manure-dipped figure of young

Withrow,

You find Mavis Frew telling anyone who would listen that the suffragettes will prevail, that women will attain the right to vote.

You find in my schoolhouse a long-boned boy named Samuel Duff, son of inimitable Ninian and brother of inimitable Susan, — Samuel my first pupil, whose dreams and passions are of airplanes and wireless messages that fly between ships at sea.

So, no, even spaces of time that seem becalmed must be riding a considerable tide.

I knew I was. Not that whatever carried me and my thoughts could be called a clear current of history, not that at all. I was no resemblance to a Gibbon, cawing the decline of naughty old Rome/tome upon tome upon tome upon tome. But season by season, those around me were altering. Varick was ever taller, like a young tree. His quiet beyond-the-schoolbook capabilities grew and grew in him; he had a capacity for being just what he was and not caring an inch about other directions of life. A capacity that I could notice most in one other figure, when I did my wondering about it. Was it in any way possible that Varick somehow saw the knack he wanted for his own, began to practice it in himself even then, that first time the two of us laid eyes on Stanley Meix

My son, then, was steadily becoming some self that only he had the chart of. And as he did, my wife just as surely began ~~seeing~~ glimpsing ahead to the time when Varick would leave us. Several years yet, yes, but Adair saw life the way the zoo creature must see the zoo; simply inexorably there, to be paced in the pattern required. The requirement beyond raising Varick through boyhood was losing him to manhood, was it? That being life's case, she would go to the only other manner of pacing that she knew. She was preparing herself to be childless again. While I watched with apprehension. Not that Adair was in any way ending, yet, the companionable truce that was our marriage. We had our tiffs, we mended them. We still met each other in bed gladly enough. The polite passions of our life together were persevering. But in the newly watchful gazes she sent to the mountains now, in how the deck of cards occasionally reappeared now and she would be absorbed into the silent game of solitaire, I could more than notice that this was beginning to be the Adair of our first winters of marriage again, the Adair of Angus, I don't want you disappointed in me. The Adair of A person just doesn't know...Or at least this one doesn't know.

the doubt. And now was too late. Doubt didn't count now.

#50 There were shades of change, ~~then~~, anywhere I looked in these years--except within me. This person me, permanent in the one way I ~~should~~ ought not to have been: in silent love with a woman not my wife, not the mother of my son; seeing her at dances, thinking across the divide of the North Fork and Noon Creek to her. Angus the Hopeless.

more Anna continued

(no 91) If I could have changed myself from that, would I? Yes, every time. For it was like having a second simultaneous ~~life~~ existence, two sets of moments ticking away in me at once, one creating the Angus who was husband to Adair and father to Varick and partner to Rob in sheep and schoolmaster to my pupils and all other roles ~~x~~ to the community, the other the mute Angus who did nothing but love Anna Reese. One ~~life~~ existence too many, for the amount of me available. It was cause enough to wonder: was everyone more than the single face they showed the world? It ~~more than occasionally~~ periodically did seem so. The side of Adair I could not get to. Angles within Rob that could catch me by surprise even after twenty years. If so, if others too were no more their single face to the world than I was, then what were we all doing--going through life in the kind of

armistice that my South Fork pupils used as time-out in their games at recess, thrusting up crossed fingers and calling out King's X? But how long in this life can you keep fingers constantly crossed.

For all the surge of change it brought,
1908 did not answer that. Nor did 1909.

1910 was our year of fire.

Our year of fire was 1910. A summer that would have made the devil cough. We of Scotch Heaven had seen hot before, we had seen dry before, we had even seen persistent forest fire smoke before. But this. This was unearthly. What seemed worse than the acrid haze itself was that the great source of it lay far beyond the horizon to the west of us, all the way over in the Bitterroot Mountains along the Idaho border; halfway to Seattle. Every splinter of that distant pine forest must have caught aflame, for its smoke seeped east to us day after day as if night was drawing over from the wrong side of the world. Somebody else's smoke, reaching across great miles to smear the day and infect the air--it rakes the nerves in a way a person has never experienced before.

And next, as if our own mountains were catching the fire fever from the Bitterroot smoke, in mid-August a blaze broke out in the Two Medicine National Forest. From the shoulder of Breed Butte the gray-black cloud boil of smoke could be watched, rising and spreading from the timber gulches north of Jericho Reef. Stanley Meixell rounded up crews and fought that fire for weeks, but it burned and burned--We'd might as well been up there spitting on the sonuvabitch, Angus, for all the goddamn good we ended up doing, Stanley told me after.

With the Two Medicine smudge added into the Bitterroot smudge, the sky was saturated with smoke: the day the Northern Hotel caught fire and burned like a tar vat--by a miracle of no wind, not quite managing to ignite the rest of Gros Ventre along with itself--none of us in Scotch Heaven even noticed any smoke beyond usual in the murky direction of town.

On the homestead we went through the days red-eyed, throats and noses raw, nerves worse yet.

I felt a disquiet in myself even before the season of smoke honestly arrived; somehow I had smelled the smoke coming, a full day before the sky began to haze; an odor of char, old and remindful of something I could not quite bring back into mind. No other aroma so silky, acidic... It hung just there at the edge of being remembered, pestering, as each dusklike day dragged past.

Was that ~~some thing~~ a gospel you still believed, Rob? After you had returned from the Two Medicine and hotly ~~told Varick~~ spilled your words to Varick, did you want them back, want them unspoken? Want yourself not to ~~be~~ have been the tool of anger ripping between Varick and me? Your face now had as much anger as it could hold, but ~~belief in what you had done~~ belief in your sabotage wasn't total now, was it, try as you were. And now was too late. OO didn't count now.

¶ By turns, Varick was wide-eyed and fretful--"It can't burn up all the trees, can it, Dad?"--and entranced by the fire season's undreamt-of events--"Dad, the chickens! They went back in to roost! They think this is night!" ¶ Adair looked done in. These days of soot, of smokey heat seeming to make the air ache as ~~you breathe~~ the lungs took it in, how else could she look.

A suppertime in our second or third week of smoke, she said across the table to me: ¶ "How long can this last?" ¶ At first I thought ~~her~~ her words were ritual exasperation, as a person will wonder aloud without really be wondering, Isn't this day ever going to end? But then I saw she was genuinely asking.

"Dair, I'd rather take a beating than tell you this. But ~~two~~ a couple or three times since I've been in this ~~country~~ country, it didn't rain ~~at all~~ enough in August to disturb the dust. And it'll take a whopping rain to kill fires as big as these." I had delivered that much bad news, I might as well deliver worse. "They might go on burning until first snow in the mountains, Labor Day or so."

"Really?" This out of Varick, as he tucked away yet another unheard-of

It was a month later, mid-October, the corral this time was the big round one at the Egan ranch on Noon Creek.

prospect. After he went outside to his nightly woodpile chore, his mother turned her face to me again. "And yet this is the one place you want to be."

"Times like this, I could stand to be somewhere else a minute or two."

"Angus. I don't want this to sound worse than I mean it. But Montana never seems to get any easier."

And anywhere else in life does, does it? Famous places of ease, Adair, such as Scotland and Nether--

Abruptly I knew the smell; the disquieting connection that had been teasing in my mind these weeks of the forest smoke. Angus, is your sniffer catching what mine is? That unvarying question from Vare Barclay, Adair and Rob's father, to me there in the Nethermuir wheelshop. It is, I reply. Better see to it, Angus, best to be sure than sorry. Out I go into the woodyard to inspect for fire, the wheelshop's worst dread; but as ever, the sawyers merely have halved an ash tree. It is the black heart of ash, when it is split, an inky streak the length of the tree, that gives off the smell as much like burning; like a mocking residue of char.

And now in the →

air of Scotch Heaven and much of the rest of Montana, that old odor from Nethermuir. I wondered if Adair, daughter of that wheelshop, somehow was recognizing the freed aroma of the ash's heartwood, too, in her this latest dismay of hers against Montana. I was in no mood to ask.

Instead, levelly as I could:

"Dair, this isn't a summer you can judge by. I know the country is so full of smoke you can cut it with scissors, but this is far out of the ordinary. None of us has ever seen a worse fire season and we're not likely to."

"I'm trying not to blame the country for how awful these days are. I truly am."

I wonder if you are, ran in my mind. It'd be new of you. But that was smoked nerves squeaking. I made myself respond to her: "I know. It's just a hard time. They happen. You're perfectly entitled to throw your head back and have a conniption fit, if it'll help."

"Adair would do that," she went that mocking distance from herself,

she thought
from the moment, "if it would help."

#

either
It helped matters none that a few days later I had traveling to do. With school to begin in not much more than a week and the flood of pupils from the homestead influx that was upon us, the county superintendent was calling all country-school teachers to a meeting in new Valier.

"I'll be back the day after tomorrow," I told Adair. "Any stray rain I see, I'll bring home with me."

do our best
"Varick and I will [redacted] not turn into smoked kippers in the meantime," she [redacted] gave me in return.

Riding into Gros Ventre just before nightfall--although it was hard to sort dusk from haze any more--I stayed over with Lucas and Nancy,

and in the small hours got up and resaddled Scorpion and rode eastward.

The face of the land as dawn began to find it took my breath away. The land I had ridden across so gingerly when Rob and I first came to Gros Ventre, the bald prairie where I had met only the one Seven Block rider in my three days of scouting, now was specked with homestead cabins. Built of lumber, not our Scotch Heaven logs. This was as if towns had been taken apart, somewhere distant, and their houses delivered at random to the empty earth.

The rainbow eyes of memory/that reflect the colors of time. My remembering of a hawk hanging on the wind, steering me with his wings to this prairie that was vacant of people then; these people now in these clapboard cabins, would they in twenty years be recalling when their plump farms were just rude homesteads? And the memories-to-come of the next McCaskill: what tints of any of this change in the land were waiting to happen in Varick's mind? For that matter, if people continued to flock in, if the scheme of earth called Montana grew ever more complicated, where was there going to be room, land, for Varick to root his life and memories into?

4 With more and more light of the morning, which was tinted grey-green even this far from our smoke-catching mountains, I could see the upsloping canal banks of the irrigation project, and machinery of every kind, and then, not far from the Valier ~~townsite~~ townsite, the whitish gray of several tents near a corral. As I passed that encampment the many colors of horses grew apparent, muted a bit by the hazy air but still wonderfully hued; big ~~workhoses~~ workhorses standing like dozens of gathered statues. Quickly I began to meet and greet men walking in from homesteads to their day's work of teamstering, another session of moving earth from here to there in the progress of canals. 9 I rode on trying not to dwell on those tents and the brand on the hips of those

workhorses, Isaac Reese's Long Cross.

At Valier, or what was going to be, a plump three-storey hotel of tan brick sat mightily above the main intersection of almost houseless streets, as though lines had been drawn from the corners of the world to mark where the next civilization was to be built. The other main enterprises so far were lumber yards and saloons. There was something unsettling about coming onto this raw abrupt town sprung from the prairie, so soon after Gros Ventre nestling back there in its cottonwood grove. Valier did not possess a single tree--no, there, one: a whip being watered from a tub that a tan-faced woman had just carried out and dumped. I touched my hat brim, the washerwoman gave me a solemn Toussaint-like Morning, and we went our ways.

Say this for the Valier fledgling town, it was only half as smoky as anywhere else I had been in recent history; the other half of its air was an enthusiastic wind. Squinting, I saw through the scatter of buildings to where the schoolhouse sat alone, and directed Scorpion that way.

Past noon, south gained the majority of my watching. Rob did not and did not appear from the direction of Scotch Heaven as promised.

The rural teachers from nearer were already there and of course the Valier ones, six in total, more than Gros Ventre's school had. The ~~hello saying~~ rounds of hello revealed that four of the Valier contingent were young single women, none so pretty as to make a man break down the door but each unhomely enough that in all likelihood four marriage proposals were around not very distant corners.

If the Valier maiden teachers wanted a lesson in loveliness, she was the next to arrive after me. Anna.

left Davie with his browsing cloud of sheep, the Reservation grass

crispened
had begun to crispen from green to tan

I knew she had been spending the summer here where Isaac's horsework was. For how many years now had I had ears on my ears and eyes on my eyes with the sole specialty of gathering any news of Anna, and the early-June item in the Gros Ventre Gleaner had shot out of the page of print at me: Anna Reese has joined Isaac at Valier. Isaac's crew will be the fortunate beneficiaries of her provender the duration of the summer, as they engage in canal construction and on the irrigation project and grading streets in the forthcoming metropolis. She was in the cook tent of that corralside assemblage I rode past, she was here in front of me now as the county superintendent solemnly joked, "Mrs. Reese, you and Mr. McCaskill may have made each other's acquaintance. If not, it is past time you did." For the benefit of the Valier teachers, he further identified us: "These two have been the ~~bearers~~ pillars of education at Noon Creek and the South Fork ever since the foundations of the earth were laid."

"Angus, how are you." Her half-smile, glorious even when she was being most careful with it.

"Hello, Anna." And you know how I am, [redacted]. We both know that, Anna.

I but half-heard the morning's discussions of school wagons to bring children from the nearest homestead farms into Valier, of country schools to be built east and south of town for the more distant pupils, of the high school to be begun here next year. My mind was ahead, on noon. When that hour came, picnic dinner was outside in the wind because every new Montana town tries to defy its weather. I got myself beside Anna as we went out the door into the first gust. "Wouldn't you say we've eaten enough wind at our own schools," I suggested, "without having to swallow this place's?" The truth of that brought me a bright glance from her, and then her words: "I could say that even without any prompting." We stepped around the corner of the schoolhouse out of the wind and seated ourselves on the fire-door steps there. Promptly a high-collared young man, more than likely a clerk at the hotel or a lumberyard, strolled by with the most comely of the Valier teachers. There went one.

What do you talk about when you can't talk about what you want. As Anna and I began to eat, we resorted to conversation confined to our schools.

"Three of my pupils this year are children of some of my first pupils," she noted.

"I have that beginning to happen, too." And after them will it be these children's children in our schoolrooms, and the two of us still separate? By all evidence. I stood up abruptly. Seeing her look, I said, "Just a cramp in my leg."

I drew breath and hoped it had as much resolve in it as it did smoke and dust, and sat down beside her again. Even from our stairstep Valier and the irrigation future could be seen being built, a steam dragline shovel at continuous work in the near distance. It was like a squared-off ship, even to →

hangs

~~The steam dragline shovel was like a squared-off ship, even to~~ the smoke funnel belching a black plume at its middle. Its tremendous prow, however, was a derrick held out into the air by cables, and from the end of the derrick a giant bucket was lifting dirt, swinging it, dropping it along a lengthening dike for the lake that would store irrigation water. Handfuls of earth as when a child makes a mud dam, except that the handfuls were the size of freight wagons.

"People come from miles just to watch it work," Anna said.

"It does dig like a banker who's lost a nickel down a gopher hole," I had to grant. "Turning a prairie into Holland. You need to see it to believe."

"Yes. A town built from a pattern," she announced as if storing away the spelling of a fresh word. "They are planning for ten thousand people here."

"They've got a ways to go."

"And you don't think they'll get there?" Not disputing me, merely curious to hear so minority an opinion; her instinctive interest in Not Proven.

"Who knows?" Things are famous for not turning out the way I think they will, aren't they. "Maybe all this time we've been living in the Two Medicine grainfield and never realized it."

I forced my attention back into my plate. It was as much as I could do not to turn to Anna, say Here's something ten thousand Valierians ought to be here to cheer for, wrap her in my arms and kiss her until her buttons burst.

"Isaac thinks you are right." I instantly was looking at her, into those direct eyes. "To have stayed with sheep as you and the others in Scotch Heaven have and not be tempted off into farming or cattle," she went on. "He tells our neighbors that if they want to go on being cowboys, they had better buy some sheep so they can afford their hats and boots."

"Isaac"--my throat couldn't help but tighten on the name--"has always been the canny one."

Now Anna's plate was drawing diligent attention. After a bit she gazed up again and offered, carefully casual: "With Isaac out and around in his work so, we don't see much of Scotch Heaven any more. Except at dances, and there's never any real chance to visit during those. I don't feel I even much know Adair and Varick." She paused, then: "How are they this fire summer?"

"They're as well as can be. Varick gets an inch taller every hour."

Her voice was fond of the thought. "Lisabeth and Peter too. They're regular weeds at that age." But when she turned her face directly to me to ask this next, I saw she was starkly serious. "And you yourself. You really didn't answer when I asked this morning. How is Angus?"

"The same." We looked levelly into each other's eyes, at least we always were capable of honestly seeing each other. "Always the same, Anna."

She drew a breath, her breasts lifting gently. "How much better if we had never met." What would have been simpering apology in any other woman's mouth was rueful verdict from hers. "For you, I mean."

"Anna, tell me a thing. ~~It'll help if I really know.~~ Do you have the life you want?"

She barely hesitated. "Yes. Given that a person can have only one, I have what I most want. But you don't at all, do you."

I shook my head. "It's never as simply as do and don't. The version I walk around in, there's nothing to point to and say, 'this is so far wrong, this can't be borne.' Adair and Varick, they're as good as people generally come. It's the life I don't lead that is the hard one."

"How is your family?"

"They're well. Varick gets an inch taller every hour."

I turned to her, that face always as frank as it was glorious. She had hesitated, before answering my question about her life. There was something there, something not even the remorseless honesty of Anna wanted to admit. I needed to know. Was I alone in the unled life of all these years? Or not alone, simply one separate half and Anna the other?

"I wonder when I'll get used to it," I suddenly was hearing Anna say. But this was not answer, I hadn't yet asked, she had slipped her eyes away from my gaze, past my shoulder to a chugging noise down the street. "Every automobile still is a surprise," she continued. If this coming one was any standard, Valier was going to be a clamorsome town. With no patience I waited for the racketing machine to pass by the school.

It didn't pass. The automobile yanked to a stop and sat there clattering to itself while the driver flung himself out. And with a lift of his goggles became Rob.

"Angus!" he ~~called~~ tumbled his words out as he came, "there's been--you have to come. There was an accident."

Anna and I were onto our feet without my having known we'd done so, side touching side and her hand now on my arm to help me stand against Rob's words. He stopped halfway to us, the realization of Anna and me together mingling with what he had to ~~tell~~ report. Dumbly I stared all the questions to his tense bright face: Adair or Varick, Varick or Adair, how bad, ~~dead or~~ alive or--

"It's Varick. He was chopping wood. We got him in to Doc Murdoch. ~~Murdoch, Murdo.~~ You have to come." He jerked his head almost violently toward the chattering automobile.

"I'm coming." But to what. I pressed Anna's hand in gratitude for her touch, in gratitude for her. "Goodbye."

"One of Isaac's men will bring your horse home for you," Anna said before echoing my goodbye. I climbed into one side of the Ford while Rob banged shut the door of the other, and in a ~~whirling~~ roar we ~~were gone.~~ hurled away.

11

On the rattling ride to Gros Ventre Rob provided me the basic about Varick's accident, and then we both fell silent. In those miles of fire haze and dust from the Ford's tires, I seemed already to know the scene at the homestead that morning, before Adair's words told it to me. I was just ready to bake bread, before the day got too hot. And I heard the sound. An auhhh, a low cry of surprise and pain. Then the awful silence in her ears told her Varick's chopping at the woodpile had stopped. I ran out, the screen door flying open and crashing shut behind her like a thud of fear. She knew there would be blood somewhere, but she was not ready for the scarlet fact of it on our son's face, on the edge of the hand he was holding over his left eye as he stood hunched, frozen. Varick, let me see, I've got to see--Adair lifting his red wet hand far enough away for the eye to show. Hold still, darling. Perfectly still. The blood was streaming from the outer corner of the tight-shut eye, there was no telling whether the eyeball was whole. The stick of wood, Varick was gasping. It flew up. I-- She held both his hands in hers. Sit. Sit right here on the chopping block Varick, and don't touch your eye at all while I go-- With water and clean rags she tended the bloody mess, then half-led, half-carried the boy big as her into

the house. Listen to me now. You have to lie here on the bed until I get back. Hold the rag there against the cut, but don't touch your eye. Varick, no matter how it hurts, don't touch your eye. Varick ice-still as she left him on the bed holding back the red seep, as she went to the barn silently crying and saddled Varick's mare Brownie and swung herself up and still was silently crying when she halted the horse on Breed Butte in front of Rob. Then the Ford journey to Grass Ventre with Varick, past the fenceline where she and I had found Davie Erskine being dragged by his horse, where she and I first learned of the impossibly unfair way life can turn against its young.

"We'll just have to wait," judged Doc Murdoch to Adair and me that night. "To see whether those eye muscles are going to work. I do have to tell you, there's about an even chance they won't." Precisely what we wanted not to hear: flip of the coin, whether Varick would be left with one powerless eye, a staring egg there in its socket. "But the eyeball looks intact," the doctor tried to relent, "and that's a piece of luck."

Luck. Was there any, and if so, where. Had the chunk of wood flown a fraction farther away Varick would have only a nicked cheek or

ear, one quick cry and healed in a few days. But a fraction inward and the eyeball would have been speared. The tiny territory between, the stick struck. That must be luck, the territory between.

Varick was to lie still for at least a week. Then the doctor would lift the bandage and gauge the eye.

In the big guest bed at Lucas's house, the same bed where Rob and I had spent our first dazed night in Gros Ventre, Varick lay as still as an eleven-year-old boy ever has for a week. Then the doctor lifted the bandage and gauged the left eye and its eyelid as Adair and I and Lucas and Nancy wordlessly clustered to watch.

"Blink for us now," the doctor directed. And Varick did. "Open wide. Close. Excellent. Look this way. Good. The other. Good again. Now bat your eyes, that's the boy." All those too, Varick performed.

"If that eye was any better, my boy," the doctor eventually stepped back and announced, "you'd be seeing through these walls." Then as Varick

Varick regarded him, and the others of us, with his two good eyes.

This can only be retrospect, but I swear I ~~thought~~ already was seeing a Varick considerably ~~different from~~ further in years than the one I had left ~~the morning day~~ when I rode off to Valien the week before; a boy who knew ~~something serious~~ of the worst about life now, and who ~~had~~ was inserting some distance, some gauging space, between it and him. Because, when all at once Varick was grinning up at the doctor, the smile maybe was as boyish as ever but that left eyelid independently dropped down to half-shut.

As it ever did thereafter when something pleased him, my son's wise wounded squint of amusement and luck.

#

"Varick is twice the son you deserve, McAngus," Rob acclaimed when I went by Breed Butte to tell him and Judith of Varick's mend. More, he clapped me on the shoulder and walked out with me to the gate where I'd tied Scorpion. I stopped there, with Rob beside me, just to enjoy all around. I didn't come all the miles from one River Street to live down there on another; this day supported those lofty homestead-building words of Rob's. The first freshfall of snow shining in the mountains had sopped the forest fires, the air was cleansed and crisp with autumn now, and the view from Breed Butte was never better nor would be. My own outlook just as fresh as the moment. Varick's restored eye, another year in my schoolroom about to begin, the Valier minutes spent with Anna so recent in my mind--I felt as life had just shed a scruffy skin and was growing a clean new one.

Absorbed, I was about to swing up onto Scorpion when Rob stopped me with:

"Angus, I think it's time you had a talking to."

I turned to him with the start of a grin, expecting he had some usual scold to make about my taking the school again.

"About Anna Reese," he said, destroying my grin.

"Rob. She's not a topic for general discussion."

"But she's one that's generally on your mind, isn't she. Angus, this is no way to be."

"Is that a fact?" It was and it wasn't. By choice I would not be the way I was toward Anna, carrying this love through the years. But choice was not in this. "Rob, who the hell do you think you are, my recording angel?"

Rob had the honesty to look uncomfortable. "I know you maybe think I'm poking my nose in--"

"You're right about that, anyway."

"--but Angus, listen, man. Adair is my sister. I can't just stand by and see you do this to her."

"You're going to have to." My eyes straight into Rob's eyes six feet away, suddenly a gap the size of life. "Dair and I are managing to live with it, it shouldn't be a major problem for you."

"Living with it, are you? That's what you call this, this infatuation you won't let go of?"

liberties with their food that I'd never dreamt of. Take hotcakes as an example: Ray and Mary Ellen poured some syrup on, then rolled each hotcake up, then syruped the outside and began eating. A kind of maple syrup tamale, I now know enough to realize. When I first began overnighting with them they urged me to try mine that way, but the thought of my mother's response to something like that made me figure I might as well not get converted. At other meals too Ray and Mary Ellen squooged their food around in remarkable ways and ate only as much of it as they felt like. I tell you, it shocked me--people my own age leaving plates that looked more as if they'd been walked through than eaten from.) Ray's mother, Genevieve, kept that big two-story house dusted and doilied to a fare-you-well. Mary Ellen already had her mind set on being a nurse--she was a kind of starchy kid anyway, so it probably was a good enough idea--and you couldn't scratch a finger around there without her wanting to daub it with Mercurochrome and wrap you up like a mummy.

Then there was Ray's father, Ed. You could hang your hat on

I wanted to shout in his face that there had been a time when he was the expert on infatuation, enough right; that if Lucas had not outwitted him and sent Nancy out of reach and us here to the North Fork, Robert High-and-Mighty Barclay would have taken his own uncle's woman. ~~How soon they forget/truth is a duet.~~ must be

What had been a quick infection in him had escaped every cure I could try on myself but it was the same ill. Why couldn't he of all people see so, why--

Rob was resuming, "I kick myself--"

"You needn't," I tossed in on him, "I'll be glad to help you at it."

"--Angus, serious now. I kick myself that I didn't see this earlier, why you and Adair aren't more glad with each other. It wasn't until I saw you with Anna there in Valier that I put two and two together."

"Rob, you have a major tendency, when you put two and two together, to come out with twenty-two."

Rob surged on: "I've known you forever but I can't understand this Anna side of you. How it is that you're still smitten with her."

Smitten? I was totally harpooned, and this man was not willing to make himself understand that. Rob stood planted, earnest, waiting. "All I'm asking is how you can let a thing like this go on and on." →

was over Ed sat at the kitchen table going through the Falls Leader and visiting with Genevieve while she did the dishes. his deep voice came his son my age, Ray. I could see perfectly damn well what was intended here, and that's the way it did happen. Off up the South Fork our fathers rode to eyeball a stand of timber which interested Ed for fence posts he could sell at his lumber yard, and Ray and I were left to entertain one another.

He meant for this conversation to work as a poultice, I knew. But it wasn't going to.

"Let me understand this, Rob. You're telling me I owe you more about this explanation than my own wife is content with?"

"Adair is not content with this, how can she be? You moping like a kicked pup, another man's wife always on your mind. What woman can accept that?"

What Barclay? was his real question, wasn't it. Now that I saw where this storm had come from I was sad as well as angry. The old great gulf, life as it came to the McCaskills and as the Barclays expected it to come to them.

But Rob, you ~~of all people~~. You who indeed had known me forever. You, now, who ~~That you~~ would not listen and then say, yes, I see, you have a friend in me for always, if I can help I will and if not I'll stand clear. You who ~~That you~~ instead ~~would stand~~ stood here in-lawing me relentlessly. I got rid of sad in a hurry and stayed with angry. "Rob, I'm telling you. This isn't yours to do. You can't interfere into my life and Adair's this way. So don't even start to try."

"Interfere? Angus, you're not taking this in the spirit it's meant. All I want is for you and Adair not to come apart over--over Anna. Can you at least promise me that?"

out with "turkey dink."

For some reason that one did it. I swung on Ray and caught him just in front of the left ear. Unluckily, not quite hard enough to knock him down.

He popped me back, alongside the neck. We each got in a few more

"Promise--? Where in all hell do you think you get a right like that--that I have to promise you anything about my own marriage? Listen to yourself here a minute, Rob. This is idiots out at play, the pair of us yammering on and on at this, is what this is." I swung up onto Scorpion and looked down at Rob. "If it'll close you on this topic, I'll tell you this much: Adair and I are not coming apart over Anna Reese. All right?"

Rob as he studied up at me was a mixture of suppressed ire and obvious discomfiture. I at least thought the decent side, discomfiture, won out when he spoke: # "All right, Angus. We'll leave this at what you just said."

—

I let my breath out slowly over the next several days. But it seemed to have passed, that notion of Rob's that he had a say in how Adair and I were to manage our marriage. Rob being all he was to me, I was able to forgive him the incident, although not entirely able to forget it.

—

Rob's spate with me was not the only perturbance that lingered in the smoked memory of 1910. The other had begun to show up in the benchland country to the south of Scotch Heaven and Gros Ventre; the wind-blown and slope-skewed landscape where Herbert's freight wagon tilted its way through, twenty years earlier, while a pair of greenlings named Angus McCaskill and Rob Barclay trudged behind. The dry and empty bottom edge of the Two country, which now, ~~incomprehensibly~~ who would have ever thought it, was drawing in people ~~precisely~~ exactly because it was dry and empty.

They were a few families at first, and then several, and then more. ~~The~~ homesteaders who were alighting on dry-land claims instead of the irrigated acres of Valier and the other water projects.

It took Stanley Meixell to dub them so sadly right. After riding past one or another of their shanties optimistically sited up a wind-funneling coulee or atop a shelterless bench of thin soil and plentiful rock, Stanley bestowed: "Homestead, huh? Kind of looks to me like more stead than home." And that is what they became in Scotch Heaven's askance parlance of them: the 'steaders.

Settlers who were coming too late or too poor to obtain watered land and so were taking up ~~dry land~~ arid acres and trusting to rainfall instead.

Men and women and children who had heard of Montana's bonanza of space and were giving up their other lives to make themselves into farmers instead.

Investors of the next ~~three~~ years of their hopes, into a landscape that was likely to give them back indifference instead.

Watching the 'steaders come, the first few in 1910 and more in ~~1911~~ the next summer and the summer after that, I couldn't not ask, if only to myself:

(no q!) Was this what ~~the~~ that dry land was meant for--grain plowed rows like columns on a calendar, a house and chicken coop every quarter of a mile? In homesteading terms, it indubitably ~~definitely~~ was. But when can ~~the~~ land say, enough? Or no, not here? We of Scotch Heaven believed we were doing it as right as could be--you can't live anywhere without some such belief, can you--but then we had the North Fork, water bright and clear on the land. At Valier and the other irrigation projects, those settlers too had water, ditch water. But ~~those~~ these ones out on the thirsty ~~treacherous~~ dry land... benchlands... ~~I~~ I grant that Rob and I knew next to nothing

There was that, too

Maybe it was my years

more pointedly, Duncan turned off the pipeline to the public hydrant which was the central source of water for the village, then fenced off the wharf so that the Indians could not use it either.

These troubles brought school administrator Beattie to

ary's legal basis for ownership. On June 26, 1915, Lane issued a decision that the government owned all structures on Annette Island. Superintendent Beattie, who had changed his mind about resigning when the Department of the Interior stiffened against Duncan, was ordered to take over the sawmill, cannery,

typed

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~~If Rob and I did not know much~~ about homesteading when we came to Montana to undertake it, but we were royal wizards compared to many of these freshcomers. Here were people straight from jobs in post offices and ribbon stores, arriving with hope and too little else onto the benchlands and into the June-green coulees. Entire families down to the baby at the breast, four-five-six people living in a shanty the size of a woodshed or in a tent while they tried to build a shanty. And meanwhile were struggling too to break the sod and plant a crop, dig a well, achieve a garden. Lads, think of it as a bet the government is making you that you can't last three years on the land. I suppose these 'steaders had to be as Rob and I were when we began in Scotch Heaven, not daring to notice yet that they were laboring colossal days and weeks for a wage of nothing or less. I suppose there is no other way to be a homesteader. Yet, bargaining yourself against the work and the weather is always going to turn out to be greatly more difficult than you can ever expect. Even in Scotch Heaven we had the absences around us, the Speddersons and Tom Mortensen, to remind how harsh and unsure a bet homesteading was. Yet and again, agog as I might be at the numbers of these incomers and aghast as I often was at how little they knew of what they needed to, I could not deny that the 'steaders on their raw dry quarter-section squares were only attempting the same as we had, trying to plaid new lives into this Montana land.

This was bright June. Winter waited four or five months away yet. Nonetheless I began saying a daily prayer to it: be gentle with these pilgrims.

#

Not many days later,

The two waylaid me when I was in my lower meadow making a peaceful reconaissance of the hay prospect there. Angling a look into the Ford as it halted briskly beside me, I couldn't help but put the query:

"What's this, now--a war council of Clan Barclay?"

Out they climbed, here they were.

"Mark this day, McAngus," Rob proclaimed, Lucas equally sunny beside him. "We're here with the proposition of a lifetime for you."

"Wait. Before I hear it"--patting each appropriate neighborhood of my body I recited: "Testicles, spectacles, wallet, watch. There's proof I had all my items before the two of you start in on me, just remember."

"Angus, Angus," chided Lucas. "You're as suspicious as the deacon of Ecclefechan. Just hear what we've got in mind, ay?"

"That shouldn't take all day. Bring it out."

"There's hope for you yet, Angus," Rob averred with a great smile. "Now here's the word that's as good as money in the bank: 'steaders." He cocked his head and waited a moment for my appreciation before proceeding: "You know as well as we do that there's starting to come into this end of the Two country

by the hatful and they can barely recognize ground when they're standing on it."

"And?"

Rob's smile greatened more yet. "And we can be their land locators."

Lucas broke in: "Angus, it's something I ought to've listened to when I first came to Montana, when I was mining." Into his coat pockets



How many times had I seen this, now. A Barclay locked into

had torn his
rightness. Lucas becoming a builder of the Montana that tore h

hands from him. Rob so outraged toward me about Anna that he pried

away from
my son from me. And now Adair bolting Rob and me into impossible

partnership.

went his stubs, as if he was whole again there at the start of Montana life. "Someone asked old Cariston there in Helena, the same geezer you worked for in his mercantile, Angus, what he did for a living. Do you know what he said? 'I mine the miners, there's where the real money is.' And it's pure true. Every word of it and then some. In a new country the one thing people need is supplies. And what's the supply every homesteader needs first of any? Land, Angus. You and Robbie know all this land around here by the inch. You're just the lads to supply homestead sites."

I studied from Lucas to Rob, back to Lucas again. Usually Lucas was as measuring as a draper, but Rob plainly had him entirely talked into the gospel of land locating. Rob alone I would have given both barrels of argument at once, but for Lucas's sake I went gentler. "Just how does this rich-making scheme work?"

"Simple as a dimple," Rob attested. "I'll meet people right at the the depots, in Valier and Conrad and Browning--you know they're pouring in by the absolute trainload." They were that. Just recently an entire colony of Belgians came to the Valier land--men, women, children, grandparents, babes, likely cats and canaries too. The Great Northern simply was throwing open the doors of freight cars in St. Paul, and Montana-bound families were tossing in their belongings and themselves.

"I'll ferry them out to here in the Lizzie," Rob strategized, "and here's where you come in, Angus--you're the man with the eye for the land. You'll locate the 'steaders onto the claims, mark the claim for them, tell them how to file on it, all but give them their homestead on a china plate. Lucas just said it, really. What we'll be is land suppliers, pure and simple."

The arguing point to all this couldn't be ignored any longer. "If we had the goods, I could see your supply idea," I told Rob. Then with a nod toward the south benchlands: "But what land is left around here is thin stuff for homesteading." I paused and gave him a look along with this next: "Concentrate a bit and you'll maybe remember what ~~a paradise it definitely wasn't~~ we thought of it ourselves, when you and I walked into this country behind Herbert."

"By our lights, maybe it is scanty land," Rob granted. "~~But to these 'steaders~~

~~"By our lights, maybe it is," Rob granted.~~ "But to these 'steaders it's better than whatever to hell they've had in life so far, (now isn't it?) Man, people are going to come, that's the plain fact of the matter--whether or not we lead them by the hand, they're going to file homestead claims all through this country. They might as well be steered as right as possible, by knowledgable local folk. Which is the same as saying, us.

In that way of looking at it, McAngus, we'll be doing them a major favor, am I right?"

"And charging them a whack for it," I couldn't help saying of Rob's version of favor.

"Are you so prosperous you can do it for free?" came back at me from him. "Funny I don't notice the bulges in your pockets."

"Lads, now," Lucas interceded. "Angus, we're not asking for your answer this very minute. Just put the idea on your pillow for a few nights, ay?"

Had they been asking my answer right then, it would have been No, in high letters. But. The prosperous problem. The perpetual problem with homesteads, with livestock, or maybe just with McCaskills: working yourself gray, year after year, and always seeing the debt years eat up most of the profit years. To now, Adair had never said boo about the fact that where money was concerned we were always getting by, hardly ever getting ahead. So the dollar thoughts were delaying my No a bit, and I decided to leave matters with the Barclays at:

"I'll need to do a lot of that pillow work, and to talk it over with Dair."

"You can save your breath there," Rob tossed off. "She's thoroughly for it."

I gave Rob a look he would have felt a mile away. "You know that already? From her?"

"I happened to mention it to Adair, yes. Angus, she is my sister. I do talk to her once in a blue moon. Not that I'd particularly have to in this case--she's bound to be for anything that'll fetch money the way this will. Who wouldn't be?"

#

"Angus, I know how you feel about this country and the 'steaders," Adair said that night. By then we had been thorougly through it all. Adair's point that here was a plateful of opportunity on Varick's behalf, as easy a chance as we would ever have at money for his future, his own start in life and land in the years not far ahead now. My lack of any way to refute that, yet my unease about the notion of making myself into a land-locator. "But change always has to happen," she was saying, "doesn't it?"

"The question is whether it happens for the better or the worse."

"Either case, what can you really do about it? You and Rob came as settlers to Montana. So are all these others."

"[redacted], if they were bringing their own water and trees and decent topsoil, I'd say let everybody and his brother come. But good Christ, this dry-land craziness--Dair, they say there are 'steaders on the flats out north of Conrad who haul all their water a couple of miles, a barrel at a time on a stone boat. They strain that cloudy water through a gunny sack as they bucket it into the barrel. My god, what a way to try to live. And these have been wet summers and open winters. What are those people going to do when this country decides to show them some real weather?"

"I suppose some will make it and some won't," she answered in all calmness. "It's their own decision to come here and try--it's not ours for them." The deep gray eyes were steady on me, asking me to reason as she was.

I could do that. What I wasn't able to manage was the waiting conclusion: that I ought to join in, bells, tambourines and all, with Rob and Lucas in putting people onto land that ought not have to bear any people.

"There's something more, Angus," my wife offered now. "We need "It's not just Varick we need to plan for. It's each other as well." Her silence, my waiting. Then from her: "Adair doesn't know if she can stay, after Varick is grown and gone."

So Here it was, out.

Adair and how long she would reconcile herself to Scotch Heaven, once it became a childless place to her again, had been in my mind with an entire Anna at Valier and so I could not call this surprise. Stunning, yes, now that it was here, openly said. But all the years since Angus, do you ever have any feeling at all to see Scotland again?, since Do you still want me for a wife, if?, all those years led here, if you were Adair.

I reached her to me, but there was too much in me to speak straight to what she had just said. Adair herself, myself, Anna, past, future, now--it all crowded me beyond any saying of it. No, only the one decision, the one I had to do at once rather than let the next years take care of, came to my tongue. If there were three McCaskill lives ahead that needed finance--mine of Scotch Heaven, Varick's of the Two Medicine country, Adair's of Scotland or wherever--then I had to find money.

"All right, Dair," I whispered. "We're in business with a couple of Barclays."

#

Squint as hard as you will, you can't see to tomorrow. Had I been told in the wheelwright shop in Nethermuir, Angus, the day will arrive when you trace the hopes of homesteaders onto the American earth with a ~~handkerchief-wrapped buggy~~ wagon wheel...when the turns of that wheel become the clock that starts dew-fresh families on three years of striving...when the wheeltracks across the grass single out another square of earth for the ripping plow...I would have gawped and gulped

out, You have the wrong Angus. Yet there I was, that summer and the next, on the wagon seat with a white handkerchief tied around a wheelspoke to count revolutions by, counting the ordinations of wheelspin. Fifty. Seeing the craft of my unhearing father, the band of iron encircling the spokes, holding all together to write the future of 'steaders onto Montana. That's a hundred. Conveying, in a single day, lives from what they had abandoned to where they had dreamed of being. A hundred fifty. Here is your first corner of your claim, Mr. and Mrs. Belgium. Mr. Missouri bachelor. Miss Dakota nurse. Mrs. Wisconsin widow. Then to the next corner, and then next, and the next, and the square was drawn, here was your homestead utter and complete:

legal description

SE ¼ Sec. 17, Tp. 27 N, Rge. 8 W: the land has been made into arithmetic.

A sort of weaving, wasn't it, these **numerated** homestead squares, the lives threaded in and out. The weaving mill was America, Montana. But these bare dry-land patches amid the mesh of homesteading... It was said there were twice as many people in Montana now than five years ago. The growth, the 'steader-specked prairies and benchlands and coulees, the instant towns, they were what Lucas dreamed of and Rob calculated on, and I was earning from. →

If I could dance ahead into time yet to come, what would I see in this procession of 'steaders that ought not have been let to happen, and what ought to have been encouraged instead? But we never do dance ahead into time, every minute is a tune-step of ours to the past. Say it better, the future is our blindfold dance, and a dance unseen is strangest dance of all, thousands of guesses at once. That was what my 'steaders amounted to, after all. Say that each of these people beside me on the wagon seat was a flip of the coin; half would turn up wrong. And so for two summers I watched Montana's 'steaders, Rob and Lucas's 'steaders--my 'steaders--and wondered just which of them were wrong tosses, which would meet only distress and failure and maybe worse here on this free dry land which was not costless, not nearly.

#

It was a Saturday early the next May that there was the Helmer occurrence.

The family of four was Rob's first delivery to me, this new season of 'steaders. As Rob and the Ford receded back down the road to further depot duty, the newcomers and I sized each other up. The man was loose-jointed, shambly, with a small chin, a small mouth, a small nose, and then a startlingly high and wide forehead. The woman was worn, maybe weary after their journey from wherever to Montana, maybe just weary. Two children thin as sticks, the boy a replica two-thirds the size of his father, the girl small yet. Both children and the man stared at me as openly as hawks. As to what they saw in all this eyework on me, I do not really know, do I.

I introduced myself, and received from the man in just less than a shout: "Our name's Helmer, but you got to call me Otto."

I invited them into the wagon, and after an odd blank little pause while the rest of the family looked at him and he fidgeted an untrusting look at me, up they came.

The ride into the south benchlands was a few miles, and would be longer than that ~~[illegible]~~ without conversation. I inaugurated:

"Where is it you're from?"

The man peered at me in dumb dismay. Hard of hearing, the poor pilgrim must be. Deaf and a 'steader too ought to be more hardship than any one soul rated. I squared around to the fidgeting Helner and repeated my question louder and slower. In a braying voice, he responded:

Relief came over him. "Couldn't cut through your brogue, there first time. A feller gets so used to hearing American he gets kind of spoiled, I reckon." I gazed at Helner hoping that was what passed for a joke wherever to hell he had been spawned, but no. He rattled on:

"Anyhow, we come from Oblong, Illinois. Ever hear of it?"

"Illinois, yes."

"Oblong is only a couple days' travel from Normal."

"Is it truly. I wouldn't have thought so."

Having had my fill of conviviality Otto Helner style, I whapped the team some encouragement with the reins. Delivering this man and his wan family to their 160 acres of delusion couldn't come too soon for me.

Atop the rim of the benchland, I halted the wagon. Beside me Helner Rept had his head turned in a gawk toward the mountains and the North Fork for so long that I truly wondered if he and I both belonged in the human race. Now he gesticulated for his family's benefit to the hay-green valley

of the North Fork, the newly-lambed bands of sheep on its ridges around, the graceful wooded line of the creek and its periodic tidy knots that were our houses and outbuildings.

"Hannah, honey, those're what I been telling you about," ~~Those're~~ he resounded to his wife. Noticing that the boy's stare was still fixed in my direction rather than onto the Scotch Heaven homesteads, Hebner added sharp to loud in telling him: "Garland, you listen up to what I'm saying here, you hear?" The boy's gaze slowly drifted from me to the North Fork. His father by now had reached his proclamation point: "Those're what our homestead is going to be like before you know it."

Bring that moment around to me again and I would utter what I furiously kept myself from uttering at the time. Hebner, you major fool, you're looking at twenty years of stark work down there. Twenty years of building and contriving and fixing and starting over again. Twenty lambing times, twenty shearings, twenty hayings. Twenty Montana winters, each of them so long they add far beyond that. You're looking at the stubborn vision of Ninian Duff, you're looking at the tireless ambitions of Rob Barclay, you're looking at the durable routes Scorpion and I have worn into the ground back and forth between sheep and schoolchildren, you're looking at chorewornwives who put up with more isolation

Yet I had to be concerned. It was not like Rob Barclay to not be where he said he would.

and empty distance than anyone sane ought to have to. You cannot judge this country by idle first glance. I am here to tell you, you cannot. But no, I was there to guide the ~~Tebbets~~ Helmers of the world to available acres, such as they were now. Try to dike this ~~homestead~~ 'steader flood with myself and all I would get was reputation for being all wet.

I drew a steadying breath. My own gaze ~~[illegible]~~ down into Scotch ~~was helping now.~~
Heaven helped. On the shoulder of Breed Butte between Rob's homestead and mine, a rider ~~was moving~~ had come into motion: Varick, on his way up to check ~~the~~ our sheep, while I was in the midst of this ~~'steadering enterprise.~~ Hebnerian episode. Varick ~~[illegible]~~ on a horse now looked as big as a man. Already his first year of high school was nearly behind him. His school year of boarding in town with Lucas and Nancy and returning to Adair and me only on weekends was his first footprint away from home, and this summer would bring his next--he had asked Stanley Meixell for, and received, the job of choreboy at the ranger station until school began again ~~[illegible]~~ in the fall. ~~It would~~ not be many years now, not many at all, Angus, until this son of ~~mine~~ yours would need to find his own foothold in this country, and so I swung back to the task of delving with 'steaders.

"Those of us in Scotch Heaven do have a bit of a head start on you, Mr. ~~Tebbet,~~ Helmer, so there's--"

"Otto," he corrected me with a bray.

"Otto, then. As I ~~beginning~~ was setting out to say, there's no real resemblance between a settled creek valley and a dry-land homestead. So I don't

"I'm not accepting that you can ~~miff~~ sniff off after her"--he

jerked his head north toward Anna's route--"Whenever you get the least
can't see that when you're
how is that you the way you are about Anna,
chance. Angus, when you're OO about Anna you're only half married

And
to Adair. That's not enough."

"It'll have to be."

want to startle you, but here we are at the ~~in~~ available land for you to have a look at." Helmer hopped down and ~~Tebbet~~ gawked south now, across the flat table of gravelly earth sprigged with bunchgrass, his son duplicating the staring inspection while I took the ~~boy and~~ girl down from his wife and then helped her out of the wagon. We stood in a covey at the section marker stone, the wind steadily finding ways to get at us under and around the wagon, until Helmer ~~Tebbet hopped down and~~ strode off twenty or so paces toward the yawning middle of the benchland as if that was the favored outlook. After a long gander and kicking his heel into the soil, what there was of it, a number of times, he marched back and took up a stance beside me. Still scrutinizing the benchland, the shanties and chicken coops and pale gray-brown furrows of the Keever and Thorbjornsen Thorpelson homesteads, he demanded: "You're dead-sure this here is the best piece of ~~land~~ new ground?"

Anyone with an eye could see that the benchland was equally stark, stony, unwelcoming, wherever a ~~look~~ glance was sent. "None of it is fair Canaan, is it," I answered ~~Tebbet~~ Helmer was all I could. "But if here in this dry-land end of the Two country is where you truly want to homestead, right where we're standing is as good as any."

Not ~~much~~ a lot of satisfaction for him to find in my words. He leaned away from me and turned a bit so his silent wife would see the shrewdness of what he asked next: "How deep is it to water?"

The question I had been dreading. "I can only tell you this much: the ~~Sopers~~ Keevers and the ~~Paynes~~ Thorkelsons dug about forty feet to get their wells."

"Forty! Back in Illinois we could dig down fifteen feet anywhere and get the nicest softest vein of ~~water~~ wellwater there is!"

"~~Then~~ You ought to have brought one of those matchless wells with you." I faced around to his wife, on the chance she might not be so hopeless a case as him. "Mrs. ~~Tebbet~~ Helmer, you had better know too--the water up here is hard."

She made no reply. "Just so you know, come first washday," I tried to prompt, "and you won't cuss me too much." Still nothing from her except that abject gaze at her husband. By the holy, if she could stand there wordless and let this Helner commit her to a homestead eternity of clothes washed out stiff as planks and of a sour grayness in every teaspoon of water she ever used, why then--

"Seems like you ain't overly enthusiastic about this here ground," Helner now gave me with a suspicious frown.

"Mr. Helner, listen--"

"Otto," the man insisted thunderously.

"Otto, then. Listen a minute. None of this is going to be easy or certain, for you and your family. Even at its best, homesteading is a gamble, and it's twice that in these benchlands. A dry-land homestead is just what it says it is, dry."

"I didn't notice as how you left us any room back down there along the creek," he retorted, making only a small attempt to smile around the resentment.

Roust yourself twenty years ago from Lopside or wherever it is that spawned you, and there was room along the North Fork, along the South Fork, room everywhere across the Two Medicine country. And in the same thinking of that I knew that I would not have welcomed

Otto Helner ~~Tebbet~~ even then; that anyone who did not come accepting that the homestead life was going to be hard, all of it hard, I did not want at the corner of my eye.

"Let's call this off," I said abruptly. "We're not doing each other any good here."

"Call it off!" Helner ~~Tebbet~~ blinked at me, thunderstruck. "This's a funny doggone arrangement you're pullin' on us, seems like," he brayed. "Leadin' us out to this here ground and then givin' us the poormouth about it. This's ~~dang~~ doggone funny exchange for the money we paid, is what I say."

"I thought you might want to know what you're in for, trying to homestead country such as this. I was obviously wrong. I'll give you your money back and take you ~~to town.~~ in to Gros Ventre. If you're still set on finding a site, someone in town can do your locating for you."

"Nothing doing." Helner ~~Tebbet~~ did not look toward his wife and children, did not look around at the land again; he fixed his gaze onto my face as if defying me to find any way to say him nay. "This here's what I'm going to claim, right where we're at."

"Even against my advice, you want me to mark off the claim?"

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"That's what we came all the way out here for."

I wrote HEBNER on our corner stakes, climbed into the buggy and counted the one hundred and fifty wheel revolutions north, east, south, and finally west to the section stone again.

#

By the time that day was done, I knew my craw could not hold any more ~~Tebbets~~ Helmers, ever. ~~Any more~~ all 'steaders from here on were going to have to dry-land themselves to death without my help. ~~At supper,~~ In bed that night, I said as much to Adair.

"We're back where we started, then," she said as the fact it was.

"Back to just getting by, and putting nothing ahead ~~for Varick~~."

"There may be a way we can yet," I ~~said~~ offered to her in the dark. "Dair, if I'm going to get us and Varick anywhere in life, it's going to have to be some way where I savvy and believe in what I'm doing--something I know the tune of." I could feel her waiting.

"Sheep," I announced. "If we were to take on another band of sheep, the profit from that we could set aside for Varick."

Silence between us. Until Adair spoke softly: "You've never wanted to take on more than the band you and Rob run."

"I'll need to try stretch my philosophy, won't I." Try, for Varick. For you, Dair. For myself?

"Do we have the money for another band of sheep?"

"No. Half enough, maybe."

"Lucas would have it," she contributed.

"Lucas took his turn in backing me with sheep, long since. Besides, he's in up to his neck in land dealings these days. No, I think I know who would ~~would~~ be keener than Lucas for this." Although I didn't look forward to hearing it from him: I never thought I'd see the day, McAngus, when you'd start sounding like me--'More sheep, that's the ticket we need.'

"Dair, I thought I'd see if Rob will partner with us on another band."

Adair ~~said~~ spoke what I was counting on, from her, from her brother.

"He will."

#

What I had not counted on was Rob's notion of where we ought to put a new band of sheep. "Angus, I won't go for putting any more sheep up there in Meixell's hip pocket, even if the damn man would let us." If not on the national forest, then we'd have to rent grazing somewhere else, I pointed out to him--maybe in the Choteau country, ~~maybe~~ not that there was that much open range left there or any--# "Give me a couple of days," Rob said. "I just maybe know the place for those sheep, where Meixell or some ~~[illegible]~~ Choteau geezer either one won't have a hoot in hell to say about them."

#

The couple of days later, Rob's announcement was pure jubilation.

"The Reservation! Angus, you remember that Two Medicine grass--elephants could be grazed on it. The Blackfeet don't know anything to do with it but sit and look at it."

I stirred. "Rob, hold your water a minute here. Those days of You know as well as I do why the Agency fenced the cow outfits out. That old business of 'borrowing' Reservation grass--"

"'Borrow', who said anything about 'borrow'?" We'll be paying good lease money to the Blackfeet. ~~This is every-dot legal, Angus. The agent~~ --you can ask your pocket whether there's any 'borrowing' to this. No, this is every-dot legal, Angus. The agent will let us on ~~[illegible]~~ that big ridge north of the Two Medicine River with the sheep the first of the month. Man, you can't beat this with a stick! A full summer on that grass and we'll have lambs fat as butter."

I gave it hard thought, sheep on the Blackfeet grass. Sheep were not plows that ripped the sod, sheep with a good herder were not cattle casually flung Double W style.

~~I gave it hard thought, sheep on the Blackfeet grass.~~ Prairie that had supported buffalo herds vast as stormclouds ought to be able to withstand a careful load of sheep.

(no 4) If Rob saw this band as a ladle to get at the cream of Reservation grass, so be it. With Davie Erskine as herder, I could see to it the summer of leased grazing was kept civil and civic. I wanted it begun right, too.

"Those are some miles, from here to the Two Medicine," I pointed out. Forty or more, in fact.

"Sheep have feet," retorted Rob. As I knew, though, the days it would take to trail the sheep were not going to be his favorite pastime. "I hate like the dickens to lose that many days of the locating business, but I suppose--"

Without ~~having~~ needing to think I said: "I'll take the sheep up." I felt ~~Lucas~~ Rob study me. Probably it was all too plain that I didn't want to see ~~the spring~~ his next crop of 'steaders. Varick and I can, with Davie along." Then from him:

"Angus, you're made of gold and oak. If you can handle ~~the sheep~~ the Reservation band until shearing I'll make it right to you when we settle up this fall."

#

They were a band of beauties, our new sheep: the top cut of ewes and their six-week lambs from the big Thorsen sheep outfit in the Choteau country. And confident grazers, definitely confident. The morning Varick and Davie and I bunched them to begin the journey from Scotch Heaven to the Reservation, making them leave the green slopes above the North Fork was sheer work. You could all but hear their single creed and conviction in the blatting back and forth, why leave proven grass for not proven? That first hour or so it seemed that every time I looked around a bunch breaker was taking off across the countryside at a jig trot, her lamb and twenty others in a scampering tail behind her. Relentlessly Varick and Davie and I dogged that foolishness out of them, and the band at last formed itself and began to move like a hoofed cloud toward the benchland between the North Fork and Noon creek, toward the road to the Two Medicine River.

Telling Varick and Davie I'd be with them shortly, I rode back down to the house.

"Varick and I ought to be not more than a week, Dair. Four days to get the sheep there, a day or two to help Davie settle in, and then the ride home."

"I'll look for you when I see you coming," she said.

"We're going a famous route, you know. A wife of mine came into this country by way of it," I said from high spirits. "My expectation is that there'll be monuments to her every mile along the way."

Adair smiled and surprised me with: "I hope there's not one at a certain coulee south of the Two Medicine River." Coachman, a so-young Adair to Rob at the reins, are there any conveniences at all along this route of yours? Myself ready to throttle Rob as she disappeared to piddle: Your idea was to get her over here and marry her off to me, wasn't it? The inimitable Rob: If it worked out that way... Rob's was the way it had worked out, although whether life after the wedding vow was working out for Adair and me seemed ever an open question.

"Dair?" The impulse of this felt deeper, truer, even as I began to speak it: "Come along with us, why not. To the Two Medicine."

Now the surprise was hers. "To christen the monuments?" she asked lightly.

"I'm talking serious here. You can ride the wagon with Davie, or have a turn on Scorpion ~~or~~ whenever you feel like. But just come, why don't you. See all that country again." With me ~~your~~ who is your husband, ~~because you innocently~~ even if the country and I are not what you came expecting. With our son of this country and its namesake Two Medicine River. ~~We three~~ Come and make us the complete three, the McCaskills of Montana, America.

She watched me as if sympathetic to what I was saying, but then shook her head. "I suppose I think I saw the country as much as I am able to that first time, Angus. No, I'd better ~~may~~ stay." ~~Adair~~ She lifted her head in the self-mocking way and pronounced: "Adair will take care of here while you and Varick have to be there."

"Well, I tried. But if you can't be budged without a crowbar--" Surprising again, how strong my pang that ~~Adair~~ she wouldn't be sharing this Two Medicine journey with me. "Goodbye, ~~Love~~ Dair."

~~She~~ This wife of mine came up on tiptoes and kissed me memorably. "Goodbye yourself, Angus McCaskill."

#

She watched me as if sympathetic to what I

The bell of the lead wether, the latest Percy, led us all.

(no 41) A thousand ewes and their thousand lambs, and Varick and Davie and I and two sheepdogs to propel them across forty miles to the northern grass. By all known rules of good sense there was much that I ought to have been apprehensive about. Weather first and last. The very morning we started, the mountains looked windy, rain-brewing; one of those restless days of the Rockies when a storm seems to be issuing out of every canyon, too many to ever possibly miss us. Well, we of Scotch Heaven had seen weather before. The under-the-sky perils that sheep invite on themselves were another matter. ~~There could be~~ fatal patches of death camas or lupine could be hiding ahead amid these grass miles that neither Davie nor I had local knowledge of. Alkali bogs that lambs could wander into, which would be their last wander. ~~The creeks~~ Of course, coyotes. Cayuse...Papoose...Coyote. Rob, Angus, is our serenade coming from a coyote? Badger Creek two days ahead, and Birch Creek a day before that, creeks usually lazily fordable but if spring runoff was still brimming them... Things left, right and sideways all could go wrong, but they were going to have to do it over the top of me, weren't they. I had never in my life felt so troubleproof. This I ~~can do~~ master, know the tune of,

conviction sang in me from the first minute of that sheep drive. This band of sheep was Varick's future, his foothold into Two Medicine life when he would need it. ~~Furthermore~~ For his sake, if it ended up that I had to carry each and every last wonderful woolly fool of a sheep on my back these forty miles, this I know the tune of.

As the first hard drops of rain swept onto us we were shoving the sheep ~~onto~~ across the short bridge over Noon Creek. In less time than it takes to tell, Varick and Dave and I in our ~~slick~~ slickers were wet yellow creatures, the ewes and lambs were gray wet ones, as we pressed across creek water through storm water. But the rain was traveling through so swiftly that the lambs did not stay chilled and begin to stiffen too much to walk, and there was the first woe we hadn't met.

This I ~~can do~~. know the time of.

All of life seemed fresh, sharp, to me as we spread the sheep into a quick grazing pace. The mountains from an angle different ~~from~~ than the one I had ~~seen~~ known every day for more than twenty years were somehow an encouragement, chorus up there, news that the world is more than the everyday route of our eyes. I could even look west to the Reese ranch nestled in the farthest willow bends of Noon Creek and not crush down under the weight of what my life and Anna's could have been, much. After a last glance west I swallowed away the thought of her,

love for Anna Ramsay Reese, at least away as far as it would ever go, and dogged my wing of the band of sheep into quicker steps, and pointed us north.

Now the rise of the long hills beyond the Double W, their pancake summits the high flat edge of the Birch Creek country ahead. I called out to Davie, and to Adair in my imagination, that these bare ridgelines were in dire need of our sheepherder monuments. But there are monuments not just of stone, aren't there. When the sheep were topping that first great ridge north of where the buildings of the Double W lay white and sprawling, there on that divide I climbed off Scorpion, unbuttoned my slicker, and pissed down in the direction of Wampus Cat Williamson.

Overnight at Birch Creek, and then across the ford of the creek at dawn and through the gate of the Reservation fence and into the first of the Blackfeet Reservation and a land immediately different, drier, more prairielike, the benchlands flatter and more isolated.

Here toward the northern heart of the Two country, every distance seemed to increase, as if giving space to the Blackfeet grassland. The mountains no longer were head-on and near, but marching off northwestward toward the peak called the Chief which stood out separate as if reviewing

them. Benchlands here were bigger and higher and more separate than we were used to, so that cattle and horses looked surprisingly small in the Indian pastures we passed, and when I rode ahead a mile or so for noon, to be sure of water, our band of sheep was hard to spot at all. know the tune of. But did I. cut that?

This I ~~can do~~. At the end of that day, bridgeless Badger Creek. Bridgeless and brimfull. Time to turn sheep into fish. I had Varick lead Percy across, the wether, the sheep pet uneasy about the creek water up to his belly but going through with his leadership role. His followers were none. For an endless hour there on the brink of dark, we relearned that making sheep wade water is a task that would cause a convent to curse in chorus. At last by main strength Varick and I half-led half-hurled enough sheep into the water to give the others the idea, and the community swim began. cracker,

no 9 There was a last mob of lambs, frantic about not being across with their mamas but also frantic about the water. Varick and Davie and the dogs and I fought them into the creek, lambs splashing, thrashing, blatting, and when there were no more kinds of panic to invent, swimming. This I ~~can do~~. know the tune of. cut this.

From dawn of the next day, with not a stormcloud in the Blackfeet sky and a fine solid bridge ahead of us at the Two Medicine River, I could feel our great journey as if it already had happened, as if now we, Varick and I and our poor bent Davie, we incomparable three had only to walk steadily in its tracks. Hour on hour, life sang out to me.

Any moment that my eyes were not on the sheep and the land, they were on Varick. More and more he was growing to resemble me; the long frame, the face that was a mustacheless version of mine, probably of all McCaskills back to old Alexander hewing the Bell Rock lighthouse into the sea. The job was there...it was to be done. We still were living resemblances of old Alexander Angus McCaskill in that, too, this son of mine born attuned to this country's work and I who had spent every effort I knew to learn it. Time upon time that day, I stood in my stirrups and gazed for the sheer pleasure of gazing.

1304

no 41

The land ~~rolling~~ rolled north with ~~promise~~ grassy promise in every ridge. The pothole lakes ~~I was~~ we were passing, with clouds of ducks indignantly rising at the sight of ~~me~~ us, seemed a ~~wonderful~~ wondrous advent. Even ~~Felloe~~ old Scorpion under me seemed more interested in ~~him~~ being a horse.

By the holy, I was right. Right to have brought these sheep, for Varick's sake. Right, even, to have married Adair and persisted through our strange ~~if~~ distanced life together if this strong son was our result.

We came to the Two Medicine River in sunny mid-afternoon and were met by gusts of west wind that shimmered the strong new green of the cottonwood and aspen groves into the lighter tint of the leaves' bottom sides, so that tree after tree seemed to be trying to turn itself inside out. In the moving air as we and the sheep went down the high bluff, a crow lifted off, straight up and lofted backwards, letting the gale loop him upward. I called to Varick my theory that maybe wind and not water had bored this colossal open tunnel the Two Medicine flowed through. And then we bedded the sheep, under the tall trees beside the river.

When morning came, I was sorry this was about to be over. All the green miles of May that we

~~I was sorry it was about to be over. All the green miles of May that we~~ had come, the saddle hours in company with Varick, the hand-to-hand contest with the sheep to impel them across brimming Badger Creek, yesterday's sight of the Two Medicine ~~cliffs~~ and its buffalo cliffs like the edge of an older and more patient planet. Every minute of it I ~~eagerly~~ keenly would have lived over and over again. This I ~~knew~~ knew the tune of.

The sheep crossed the bridge of the Two Medicine in a series of hoofed stammers. Up the long slope from the river Varick and Davie and the dogs and I pushed them. When they were atop the brow of the first big ridge north of the river, we called ourselves off and simply stood to watch.

On the lovely grass that once fed the buffalo, the sheep spread themselves into a calm cloud-colored scatter and began to graze, that first day of June of 1914.

mec
Angier-Lucas NF
discussion?

What can you have in life? Who gets to do the portioning?