"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, one witness: Frank 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 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 could doubt that. Meixell was a number of years younger than myself or Rob, but he definitely had the look of a man with a lot of before in his life.

"Every one of those places," Meixell 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 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 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 accept the notion of this national forest, prove to them it's not just going to be another honeypot for the Williamson's of the world. Prove it to me, for that matter. And Stanley, drifting away from the lantern light, saying only been a interesting evening.
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 a small 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 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 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."

Came across them, yes, with my help. It would take a man weeks to ride an inspection of those mountains, and Stanley had only days; I'd cited him chapter and verse, places to see for himself the overuse and erosion from Williamson cramming the land with Double W cattle. "Manure
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 incredulous—it was worth being here today just for that. "Am I hearing you right, that you've already told Williamson you're cutting him to just two hundred head of cattle in those mountains?"

"Yeah." Stanley looked 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 church of the Forest Service—"claim President Roosevelt himself goes around saying. 'I hate a man who skins the land.'"

Deep silence again. Until 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 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 climbed. Erskine's hand vaguely 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 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 too. For better or for worse, in trepidation and on something less than faith, Scotch 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 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 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 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 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, needed doing. But a water project such as the one around the townsit called Valier, eighty thousand acres of irrigation being achieved and homesteaders pouring off every train, was reason enough to rethink Montana and what it was going to be.

Yet you have to wonder. If someone among the prairie homesteaders, Illinoisan or Missourian or Belgian or German, if some far-eyed soul who had come to plaid himself or herself into this Montana land and 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 be able to go down the road without horses...*
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 Ninian and brother of inimitable Susan, 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. 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 aged in him; he had a capacity for being just what he was and not caring 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 that 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 to see 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 pace 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 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.
There were shades of change, anywhere I looked in these years—except within me. This person me, permanent in the one way I ought 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.

If I could have changed myself from that, would I? Yes, every time. For it was like having a second simultaneous life, 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 to the community—the other the Angus who did nothing but love Anna Reese.

One was 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 seems 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 1916. A summer that would have frightened the devil. We of Scotch Heaven had seen hot before, we had seen dry persistent forest fire before, we had even seen 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, halfway to Seattle, all the way over in the Bitterroot Mountains along the Idaho border.

Every splinter of that distant forest must have caught aflame, for the 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 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 something you still believed, Rob? After you had returned
Did you still believe the black gospel of what you had just said, Rob?

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 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. O0 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 smoky heat seeming to make the air ache as 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 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 or three times since I've been in this country, it didn't rain 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 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, an inky streak the length of the tree, that gives off the smell like burning; like a 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 that freed odor 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 seen a worse fire season and we're
not likely to."

"I'm 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."

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."

"Varick and I will not turn into smoked kippers in the meantime," she 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? The memories-to-come of the next McCaskill: what tints 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?
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 town site, 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 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. 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 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 springing 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

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. 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 crisp 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. It is past time you did." For the benefit of the Valier teachers, he further identified us: "These two have been the bearers 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. We both know that,
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 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 look from her, and then her words: "I could say that even without prompting out of the wind any awser." We stepped around the corner of the schoolhouse 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 lumber yard, 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 stai​rstep 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
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," 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.

"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, take her in my arms and kiss her until her buttons melted.

"Isaac thinks you are right." I instantly 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 fine summer?"

"They're as well as can be. Varick gets an inch taller every hour."
Her voice was fond of the thought. "Lisabeth 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."

"And the weather?"

"Well, it's been a bit stormy lately."

"Any new developments?"

"Yes, I've been working on a new project."

"That's great! What's it about?"

"It's about time travel."

"Time travel? That's fascinating!"

"I'm still exploring the concept."

"I'm sure it will be interesting."

"Thank you."

"It's my pleasure."

"Good luck with your work."

"Thank you. I appreciate it."
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, when 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 one was any standard, Valier was going to be a clamorosme 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.
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. Dumbly I stared all the questions to his tense bright face: Adair or Varick, Varick or Adair, how bad, alive or--

"It's Varick. He was chopping wood. We got him in to Doc Murdoch. 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 goodbyes. 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.
On the rattling ride to Gros Ventre Rob told 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 ahhhh, a low cry of surprise and pain.

Then the awful silence in her ears told her Varick's chopping had
stopped. I ran out, the screen door flying open and closing 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 and
don't touch your eye 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, 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 town 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 could turn against its young.

"We'll just have to wait," judged Murdoch 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 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 guest bed at Lucas's house, the same bed where Rob and I
had spent our first night in Gros Ventre, Varick lay as still as an
eleven-year-old boy could 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
Now bat your eyes, that's the boy." All those too, Varick performed.

"If that eye was any better, 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 the one I had left the week before. I rode off to Valier, a boy who knew something about life now, and who had inserted 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 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 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, thinking 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 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, had the honesty to look uncomfortable. "I know you think I'm poking my nose in--"

"You're right about that, anyway."

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

"You're going to have to. " eyes straight into his eyes feet away, 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 syrumped 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 doiled to a farc-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 an expert on infatuation, 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 duct.

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."

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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.

Living out there at English Creek I always was stumped about what of my existence would interest any other boy in the world.

There was the knoll with the view all the way to the Sweetgrass Hills, "hop me some... I kick myself..." I'll be glad to help you...

"Where's that farm? I kick myself that I never..."
He meant for this conversation to work as a poultice, I knew. But it wasn't going to.

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

"But 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's 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 wouldn't 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 stood in a hurry instead would stand here in-lawing me relentlessly. I got rid of sad and stayed with angry. "Rob, I'm telling you. 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 I meant. All I want is for you and Adair not to come apart over--over Anna. Can you at least promise me that?"
"Booger eater," I promptly gave him back.

"Pus gut."

"Turd bird."

As I remember it, I held myself in admirable rein until Ray came 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 swings, then the fistcuffs degenerated into a wrestle. More accurately, a mud wallow.

We each were strong enough, and outraged enough, to be able to tip the other, so neither one of us ended up permanently on top. Simply, you know, you know. I know we forever...
"Promise--? Where in all hell do you think you get right like that—that I have to promise you anything about my own marriage? Listen to yourself a minute, Rob. This is idiots out at play, the pair of us yammering on and on at this. 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 it 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 perturbation 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 edge of the
Two country, which now, immediately who would have ever thought it, was
drawing in people precisely 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 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 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 the next summer and the summer after that, I couldn't not ask,

if only to myself:

[Handwritten note: Was this what the land was meant for—grain rows like columns on a calendar, a house and chicken coop every quarter of a mile? In indubitably homesteading terms, it was. But when can the land say, enough? We of Scotch Heaven believed we were doing it right; you can't live anywhere without some such belief— 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 ones out on the thirty treacherous benchlands... I grant that Rob and I knew next to nothing dry land...]

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 Metlakatla in February 1914. Beattie called Duncan's arguments "disconnected ranting" and urged his superiors to "bring authority to bear on Mr. Duncan and cause him to cease his tyrannical treatment of the natives." Secretary of
If Rob and I did not know much about homesteading when we came to
Montana to undertake it, 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, I was waylaid when I was in my lower meadow making a peaceful reconnaissance of the hay prospect there. Angling a look into the buggy as it halted briskly beside me, I 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 they're 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 smilegreatened more yet. "And we can be their land locators."

Lucas broke in: "Angus, it's something I ought to've listenedit 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 Caristom 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 me know all this land around here *this country by the inch. You're just the ones to supply homestead sites."

I studied from Lucas to Rob, back to Lucas again. Rob alone I

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, 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 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 threw open the doors of freight cars in St. Paul, and Montana-bound families tossed 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 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 bare 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 was, when you and I walked into this country behind Herbert."

"By our lights, maybe it is scanty land," Rob granted. "But to these 'steaders it's better than whatever to hell they've had in life so far. 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 sure 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 prosperous
put the idea on your pillow for a few nights, answer this very minute. Just think on it, say?"

Had they been asking my answer right then, it would have been No, The prosperous problem. in high letters. But. The perpetual problem with livestock, or maybe just working yourself gray, year after year, and always seeing the debt years eat up 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 thoroughly 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."

"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."

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 rather than let the next years take care of, came to my tongue. If there were three McCaskill lives 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 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 the next, and the next, and the square

was drawn, here was your homestead utter and complete:

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 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 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, I do not really know, do I.

In just less than a shout:

I introduced myself, and received from the man, "Our name's Redbet, 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 a look at me, up they came.
The ride into the south benchlands was a few miles, and would be longer than that 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 more hardship than any one soul rated. I squared around to Lebbet and repeated my question louder and slower. In a braying voice, he responded:

Relief came over him. "Couldn't cut through your brogue, that feller first time. A person gets so used to hearing American he gets kind of spoiled, I guess." I gazed at Lebbet 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."

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

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

Having had my fill of conviviality Otto Lebbet style, I whipped 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 Lebbet 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 wife to benefit to the hay-green valley
of the North Fork, the newly-lamb'd 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 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 moved 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. Tebbett, you major fool,
you're looking at twenty years of stark work. 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,
tireless ambitions.
you're looking at the ventures of Rob Barclay, you're looking at the durable
into the ground
routes Scorpion and I have worn back and forth between sheep and
schoolchildren, you're looking at wives 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 feet of the world to available acres, such as they were now. Try to dis this homestead flood with myself and all I would get was reputation for being all wet.

I drew a steadying breath. My own gaze down into Scotch Heaven helped. On the shoulder of Breed Butte between Rob's homestead and mine, a rider was moving Varick, on his way up to check the sheep, while I was in the midst of this 'steading enterprise. Varick looked 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 in the fall. not many at all, Angus, yours 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. Tobbot, so there's--"

"Otto," he corrected me with a bray.

was setting out

"Otto, then. As I was saying, 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 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 00 about Anna you're only half married And to Adair. That's not enough."

"it'll have to be."
I want to startle you, but here we are at the available land for you
to have a look at." Nebbett gawked south now, across the flat table of
gravelly earth sprigged with bunchgrass, while I took the girl
down from his wife and then helped her out of the wagon. We stood in a
section marker stone,
covey, the wind steadily finding ways to get at us under and around the
wagon, until Nebbett 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
brown furrows of the Keever and Thorfjorn homesteads, he demanded: "You're
here new ground
dead-sure this is the best piece of land?"

Anyone with an eye could see that the benchland was equally stark,
stone, unwelcoming, wherever a look was sent. "None of it is fair Canaan,
is it," answered Nebbett. "But if here in this end of the Two country
is where you want to homestead, right where we're standing is as good
as any."
Not much 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 and the Tebets 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 wellwater there is!" "Then you ought to have brought one of those wells with you." I faced around to his wife, on the chance she might not be so hopeless a case as him. "Mrs. Tebret, you had better know too--the water 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 sit there wordless and let this Tebet 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

you don't sound all too enthusiastic about this here ground," Tebet

now gave me with a suspicious frown.

"Mr. Tebet, listen--"

"Otto," the man insisted.

"Otto, then. Listen a minute. None of this is going to be easy

or certain, for you and your family. 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 that you left us any room back down there along

the creek," he retorted, making 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 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!" 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 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. If you're still set on finding a site, someone in town can do your locating for you."

"Nothing doing," 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 is what I'm going to claim, right where we're at."

"Even against my advice, you want me to mark off the claim?"
"That's what we came all the way out here for."

I wrote \underline{HEBNER} on the corner stakes, climbed into the buggy and counted the \underline{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 crew could not hold any
more 'steaders, ever. Any more 'steades were going to have to dry-land
in bed that night, themselves to death without my help. As sup'ra, 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 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 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 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 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, 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 Choteau geezer either 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 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.

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 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 to think I said: "I'll take the sheep up." I felt Lucas study me. Probably it was all too plain that I didn't want to see the spring crop of 'steaders. Then from him:

"Angus, you're made of gold and oak. We'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 blattering back and forth, why leave proven grass for not proven? That first morning it seemed that every time I looked around a bunch breaker was taking off across the countryside at a jog trot, her lamb and twenty others in a scampering Relentlessly tail behind her. Eventually Varick and Davie and I dogged that foolishness out of them, and the band 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 should be no 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, "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 felt deeper, truer, even as I began to say 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 when you feel like. But just come, why don't you. See all that country again." With me who is your even if the country and I husband, because you innocently are not what you came expecting. With our son of this country and its namesake Two Medicine River. We three 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 stay." 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 buried without a crowbar--"

she

Surprising again, how strong my pang that wouldn't be sharing this Two Medicine journey with me. "Goodbye, love."

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 was saying. I hadn't come to have a gun in my pockets or wear a white tie. But first came

with great fear, you can see that company again. With me there, who to talk

even if the company and I understand sense and I never want you come anymore. With an end come and

and now of this country and the remember the Mendenhall River. We drove

make us, the complete Greene, the Mendenhall of Montana America.

She wandered me as it disappeared to work I mean nothing else.

If I was able to

speak for the rest. I suppose I saw the company that they gave

where

case of paper while you and Artist have to be there.
The bell of the lead wether, the latest Percy, led us all.

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 possibly miss us. Well, we of Scotch Heaven had seen weather before. The perils that sheep invite on themselves were another matter. There could be fatal patches of death camas or lupine ahead amid these grass miles that neither Davie nor I had local knowledge of. Alkali bogs that lambs could wander into. 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 know, 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. 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 the short bridge across Noon Creek. In less time than it takes to tell, Varick and I in our 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.

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 the one I had seen every day for more than twenty years were somehow an encouragement, a 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 country ahead. I called out 
to Davie, and to Adair in my imagination, that these bare ridgelines 
were in dire need of our shepherder 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
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 to be sure of water, our band of sheep was hard to spot at all.

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, 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.

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, blattering, and when there were no more kinds of panic to invent, swimming. This I can do.
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 told journey as if it already had happened, as if now we, Varick and I and our poor 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 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.
The land rolled north with promise in every ridge. The pothole lakes I was passing, with clouds of ducks indignantly rising at the sight of me, seemed a wonderful advent. Even Felice seemed more interested in 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 distanced life together our strange son 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 like the edge of an older and more patient planet. Every minute of it I keenly would have lived over and over again. This I 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 1924.
What can you have in life? Who gets to do the portioning?