And the good mood among the cluster of us was about to get better. My mother turned to Marie and asked: "Do you suppose these scenery inspectors have earned any food?"

"We'll take pity on them," Marie agreed, and the provisions began to emerge from the pair of boxes.

The blue blanket became like a raftload of food, except that such a cargo of eating likely would have sunk any raft.

There were the small chickens my mother was preparing that morning—delectable spring fries with drumsticks about the thickness of your thumb. That morning too, Toussaint had caught a batch of trout in the Two Medicine and now here they beckoned, fried up by Marie.

Blue enamel broilers of fish and fowl, side by side. The gateposts of heaven.

Marie's special three-bean salad, the pinnacle of how good beans can taste. My mother's famous potato salad with little new green onions cut so fine they were like flakes of flavor amid it.

New radishes, sweet and about the size of a thumbnail, first of Marie's garden vegetables. A dozen and a half deviled eggs arrayed by my mother.

A jar of home-canned pickled beets, a strong point of my mother's.

A companion jar of crab-apple pickles, a distinction of Marie's.
A plate of my mother's cinnamon rolls. A loaf of Marie's saffron bread. Between the two, a moon of home-churned butter.

A lard pail of fresh donuts by Marie. A gooseberry pie from my mother.

My eyes feasted while the rest of me readied to. My father said, "Dive in, Toussaint," and the passing of dishes got underway.

"Been a while since breakfast," Pete proclaimed when he had his plate loaded. "I'm so excited to see food again I'm not sure I'll be able to eat.

"Too bad about you," Marie said in that soft yet take-it-or-leave-it way so like Toussaint's. And my mother didn't overlook the chance to put in: "Wait, we'll sell tickets. People will line up to see Pete Reese not eat."

"Come on now, Bet," came the protest from Pete. "I have never eaten more than I could hold."

As they should do at a picnic, the conversing and the consuming cantered along together in that fashion. I think it was at the start of the second plateload, when a person lets out a dubious humm..."
than he was before.

"Airplanes," my father announced. "Airplanes are the apparatus of the future, at least according to this one we heard from over there."

The hell. How's that gonna work?

"I didn't say it was going to work. I just said what the hoosier told us. They're going to try parachutists--like these guys at fairs?"

"Say on," urged Toussaint, squinting through a mask of eager puzzlement. Toussaint always was avid to hear developments of this sort, as if they confirmed for him the humorous traits of the human race. "That radio stuff," he had declared during the worst of the drought and the dust storms, "it monkeys with the air. Dries it out, all that electric up there."

"Out in Washington they're about to test all this out," my father continued his report of up-in-the-air science. "Send an airplane with a couple of these parachutists over a mountain smoke and see if they can get down there and tromp it out before it grows to a real fire. That's the cheery theory, anyway."

Pete shook his head. "They couldn't pay me enough to do that."

"Hell, Pete, the jumping would be easy money. The landing is jump out of one of those."

"Fact is, my father readied to bite into another drumstick, but just offered then said as if in afterthought: I told them I'd volunteer--my mother's
full skepticism was on him now, waiting to see if there was any seriousness in this—"if the parachute was going to be big enough for my saddlehorse and packstring too."

The vision of my father and assorted horses drifting down from the sky the way the cottonwood fluffs were floating around us set everybody to laughing like loonies.
Next it was Toussaint's inning. The mention of horses reminded
him of a long-ago Fourth of July in Gros Ventre when everybody got
catch horse-race fever. "How it happened, first they matched every saddle horse
against every other saddle horse. Ran out of those by middle of the
afternoon. Still plenty of beer and daylight left. Then somebody
got the notion. Down to the stable, everybody. Brought out the
stagecoach horses. Bridled them, put boys on their backs. Raced
them against each other the length of Main Street." The Toussaint
chuckle. "It was hard to know. To bet on the horse, now or how high
the boy would bounce."

Which tickled us all again. Difficult to eat on account of laughing,
and to laugh on account of eating to give me that dilemma any time.

All this horse talk did remind me about Mouse, and I excused

picket him
myself to go move Mouse onto another patch of grass. Truth to tell,
getting myself up and into motion also would
it also was an opportunity to shake down some of the food in me and
possibly make room for more.
Thinking back on that scene as I wended my way to the edge of the park where Mouse was tethered, I have wished someone among us then had the talent to paint the portrait of that picnic. A group scene that would have preserved those faces from English Creek and Noon Creek and Gros Ventre and the eastern farming benches and yes, Toussaint's from the Two Medicine. Would convey every one of those people at once and yet also their separateness. Their selves, I guess the world should. I don't mean one of those phoney-baloney gilt concoctions such as that one of Custer and all his embattled troopers there at the Little Bighorn, which hangs in three-fourths of the saloons I have ever been in and disgusts me every single time. (To my mind, Custer can be done justice only if shown wearing a tall white dunce cap.) But once I saw in a magazine, Look or Life or one of those dead ones, what one painter tried in this respect of showing selves. He first painted little pictures of tropical flowers, in pink and other pastels; wild roses I guess would be our closest comparison flower here in the Two country. Some several hundred of those, he painted. Then when all these were hung together in the right order on the wall, the flower colors fit together from picture to picture to create the outline of a tremendously huge snake. In any picture
by itself you could not see a hint of that snake. But look at them together and he lay kinked across that entire wall mightier than the mightiest python.

That is the kind of portrait I mean of the creek picnic. Not that very many of those people that day in Maria Wood Park could be called the human equivalent of flowers, nor that the sum of them amounted to a colossal civic snake. But just the point that there, that day, they seemed to me each distinctly themselves and yet added up together too.

I have inquired, though, and so far as I can find, nobody ever even thought to take a photograph of that day.

When I came back from re-tethering Mouse, my parents and Pete and Marie were in a four-way conversation about something or other, and Toussaint was spearing himself another trout out of the broiler. His seemed to me the more sensible endeavor, so I dropped down next to inflict myself on the chicken supply. I was just beginning to do good work on my favorite piece of white meat, a breastbone, when Toussaint turned his head toward me. The potato salad had come to rest
nearest my end of the blanket and I reached toward it, expecting that he was going to ask me to pass it to him. Instead Toussaint stated:

"You have become a campjack these days."

Probably I went red as an apple. I mean, good chrismighty. Toussaint's words signaled what I had never dreamt of: moccasin telegraph had the story of my sashay with Stanley.

Everything that coursed through me in those moments, I would need Methuselah's years to sort out.

Questions of source and quantity maybe hogged in first. How the hell did Toussaint know? And what exactly did he know? My dimwitted approach to a bobwire fence in an electrical storm? My tussle with Bubbles? My alcoholic evening in the cabin? No, he couldn't know any of those in detail. Could he?

The possibility of Toussaint having dropped some mention of that last and biggest matter, my night of imbibe, into the general conversation while I was off tending Mouse made me peer toward my mother. No real reassurance there; her mood had changed since the parade of the food onto the blanket, she now was half-listening to my
father and Pete and half-gazing off toward the ripples of English Creek.

Whatever was occupying her mind, I could only send up prayers that it wasn't identical to the topic on mine.
Geography next. How far had the tale of Jick-and-Stanley spread?

Was I traveling on tongues throughout the whole damn Two country?

"Hear about that McCaskill kid? Yeah, green as frog feathers, ain't he? You wonder how they let him out of the house by himself?"

And finally, philosophy. If I was a topic, just what did that constitute? The mix of apprehension and surmise was all through me. Plus a corner of something which felt surprisingly like pride. Better or worse, part of me now was in Toussaint's knowledge, his running history of the Two. In there with Phony Nose Hogan and the last buffalo hunt and the first sheep and the winter of '86 and Lieutenant Black Jack Pershing and the herded Cree and—and what did that mean?

Being a part of history, at the age of fourteen years and ten months: why had that responsibility picked me out?

They say that when a cat walks over the ground that will be your grave, a shiver goes through you. As I sat there that fine July noon with a breastbone forgotten in my hand, Toussaint again busy eating his trout after leaving the track of those five soft words across my life—You have become a campjack—yes, I shivered.
My father's voice broke my trance. "If you two ever would get done eating for winter, we could move along to the gourmet part of the meal. Some fancy handle-turning went into the making of that ice cream, you know. Or at least so I hear by rumor."

My mother was up, declaring she'd bring the cups of coffee if a certain son of hers would see to the dessert. Toussaint chuckled.

And put up a restraining hand as I started to clamber to my feet, ready to bolt off to fetch dishes of ice cream, bolt off anywhere to get a minute of thinking space to myself.

"Do you know, Beth," Toussaint began, stopping her and my heart at the same time; "do you know--that potato salad was good."

A picnic always slides into contentment on ice cream.

All around us as each little batch of people finished eating, flopped onto men lay on their backs or sides while the women more primly sat up and chatted with one another.

I, though; I wasn't doing any sliding or flopping, just sitting there bolt-upright trying to think things through. My head was as gorged as my stomach, which was saying a lot.
My father acted as if he didn't have a thing in the world on his mind, though. To my surprise, he scotched around until he had room to lie flat, then sank back with his head in my mother's lap.

Pretty close to perfect, he said. Now if I only had an obedient wife who'd loosen these dress shoes for me.

If I take them off you, my mother vowed, you'll be chasing them as they float down the creek.

This is what I have to put up with all the time, Toussaint, came his voice from under the hat. She's as independent as the air.

My mother answered that by sticking out a thumb and jabbing it between a couple of his ribs, which brought a whufl out of him.
Down at creekside, the high school principal Mr. Vennaman was stepping up into the stump rostrum. Evidently it was time for the program, I tried to put at the back of my mind the cyclone of thoughts about Toussaint and mocassin telegraph and myself.

"--always a day of pleasure," Mr. Vennaman's voice began to reach those of us at the back of the park. "This is a holiday particularly American. Sometimes, if the person on the stump such as I am at this moment doesn't watch his enthusiasm, it can be a little too much so, which Mose Skinner, a Will Rogers of his day, proposed I am always reminded of the mock speech written for this nation's one-hundredth birthday in 1876:

"Any person who insinuates in the remotest degree that America isn't the biggest and best country in the world, and far ahead of every other country in everything, will be filled with gunpowder and touched off."

When the laughing at that died down, Mr. Vennaman went on: "We don't have to be quite that ardent about it, but this is a day we are thankful to be with our other countrymen. A day for neighbors, and friends, and family."
"Some of those neighbors, in fact, are here with a gift of song for us."
Mr. Vennum peered over toward the nearest big cottonwood.

"Nola, can the music commence?"

This was interesting. For under that towering tree sat a piano. Who came up with the idea I never did know, but some of the Gros Ventre men had hauled the instrument—of course it was one of those old upright ones—out of Nola Atkins' front room, and now here it was on the bank of English Creek and Nola on the piano bench ready to play. I'd like to say Nola looked right at home, but actually she was kept busy shooing cottonwood fluff off the keys and every so often there'd be a plink as she brushed away a particularly reluctant puff of it. Nonetheless, Nola bobbed yes, she was set.

I think it has to be said that the singing at events such as this is usually a pretty dubious proposition, and that's likely why some out-of-town group was invited to perform every year. That way, nobody local had anything to live down. Now this year's songsters, the Valier Men's Chorus, were gathering themselves beside Nola and the piano. Odd to see them up there in that role, farmers and water company men, in white shirts and with the pale summits of their foreheads where hats customarily sat.
Their voices proved not to be golden, but not really unlistenable either. The program, though, inadvertently hit our funny bones more than it did our ears. The chorus's first selection was "I Cannot Sing the Songs of Long Ago," and then, as if offering proof, they wobbled next into "Love's Old Sweet Song." The picnic crowd was full of grins over that, and I believe I discerned even a trace of one on Nola Atkins at the piano.

Mr. Vennaman came back up on the stump, thanking the Valerians "for that memorable rendition" and introducing "yet another neighbor, our guest of honor this day," Emil Thorsen, the sheepman and senator from down at Choteau, rose and said in a voice that could have been heard all the way downtown that in early times when he was first running for office and it was all one county through here from Fort Benton to Babb instead of being broken up into several as it is now, he'd have happily taken up our time; "but since I can't whinny any votes out of you folks any more, I'll just say I'm glad to be here among so many friends, and compliment you on feeding as good as you ever did, and shut myself up and sit down." And did.
Mr. Vennaman was on his feet again, leading the hand-clapping and then saying: "Our next speaker actually needs no introduction.

I'm going to take a lesson from Senator personal and not bother to fashion one." Two traits always marked Mr. Vennaman as an educator: the bow tie he always wore and the way, even saying hello on the street, he seemed to be looking from the front of a classroom at you. Now he peered and even went up on his tiptoes a bit, as if calling on someone in the back row of that classroom, and sang out:

"Beth McCaskill?"

I knew I hadn't heard that quite right. Yet here she was, climbing onto her feet and smoothing her dress down and setting off toward the speaker's stump, with folded sheets of paper clutched in her business hand. I almost I was the most surprised person in the state of Montana right then, but Pete and Virginia were not far behind and even Toussaint's face was squinched with curiosity.

"What--?" I floundered to my father. "Did you know--?"

"She's been sitting up nights writing this," he told me with a cream-eating grin. "Your mother, the Eleanor Roosevelt of English Creek."
She was on the stump now, smoothing the papers onto the little stand, being careful the creek breeze didn't snatch them. She looked like she had an appointment to fight panthers, but her voice began steady and clear.

"My being up here is anybody's suggestion but my own. It was argued to me that if I did not make this talk, it would not get made. That might have been a better idea.

Maxwell

But Iva Vennaman, not to mention a certain Varick McCaskill, has the art of persuasion. I have been known to tell my husband that he has a memory so long that he has to tie knots in it to carry it around with him. We'll all now see just how much my own remembering is made up of slip knots."

Chuckles among the crowd at that. A couple of hundred people being entertained by my mother: a minute before, I would have bet the world against it.

"But I do say this. I can see yet, as clearly as if he was standing in long outline against one of these cottonwoods, the man I have been asked to recall, Ben English. Many others of you were acquainted with Ben and the English family. Sat up to a dinner or supper Mae put on the table in that very house across there. Heads turned, nodded. The English place was the one just across the creek from the park, with the walked-away look to it. If you were driving north out of Gros
Ventre the English place came so quick, set in there just past the highway bridge, that chances were you wouldn't recognize it as a ranch, rather than a part of the town. But from there in the park, the empty buildings across there seemed to call their facts over to us. The Englishes all dead or moved away. The family after them felled by the Depression. Now the land leased by Wendell Williamson from the 66 Ranch. One more place which had supported a family, now populated by Double W cows.

"Or, my mother was continuing, "or dealt with Ben for horses or cattle or barley or hay. But acquaintance doesn't always etch deep, and so at Ira Vennam's request I have put together what is known of Ben English."
"His is a history which begins where the history of America has to: elsewhere."

Benson English was born in 1865 at Cobourg, in Ontario in Canada.

He liked to tell that as he and his brothers one by one left home, their mother provided each of them a Bible, a razor, whatever money she could, and some knitted underwear." My mother here looked as if she entirely approved of Ben English's mother. "Ben English was seventeen when he followed his brother Robert into Montana, to Augusta where Robert had taken up a homestead. Ben found a job driving freight wagon for the Sun River Sheep Company from the supply point at Craig on the Missouri River to their range in the mountains. He put in a year at that, and then, at eighteen, he was able to move up to driving the stage between Augusta and Craig."

She lifted a page, went right on as if she'd been giving Fourth of July speeches every day of her life. "Atop there with six horses surging beneath him seemed to be his place in the world. Soon, with his wages of forty dollars a month, he was buying horses. With a
broke team in the lead and his green ones in the other traces, he

nonetheless somehow kept his reputation as a driver you could set

your clock by." Here she looked up from her sheets of paper to glance

over to Tom Larson. "Ben later liked to tell that a bonus of stage
driving was its political influence. On election day he was able
to vote when the stage made its stop at the Halfway House. Then
again when it reached Craig. Then a third time when he got home
to Augusta."

When the laughter at that was done, my mother locked up from

her pages to the picnic crowd. "There was a saying that any man who

had been a stagecoach driver was qualified to handle the reins of

heaven or hell, either one. But Ben English, as so many of our

parents did, made the choice halfway between those two. He homesteaded.

In 1893 he filed his claim southwest of here at the head of what is

now called Ben English Coulee. The particulars of his homestead on Ben's papers of proof may sound scant, yet many of us

here today came from just such beginnings in this country: 'A dwelling

house, stable, corrals, 2½ miles of wire fences, 30 acres of hay cut
each season--total value, $800.'"
"Around the time of his homesteading Ben English married Mae Manix of Augusta, and Ben and Mae moved here, to the place across the creek, in 1896. Their only child, Mary, was born there in 1901. I remember of Mary that, when we were schoolgirls together, she could recite a verse Ben had taught her. 'Smile and the world smiles with you/Kick and you kick alone/For a cheerful grin/will let you in/where a kicker was never known.' As might be imagined, somewhat Mary was always able to practice that philosophy a little better than I could.

Here my mother paused, her look fastened over the heads of all of us on the park grass, the trunk of the big cottonwoods farthest back; as if, in the way she'd said, someone was standing in outline against the gray bark.

"A lot of you can remember the look of Ben English. A rangy man, standing well over six feet, and always wearing a black Stetson, always with a middle crimp. He sometimes would grow a winter beard, and in his last years he wore a mustache that made him look like the unfoolable horse dealer he was. Across thirty-some years my father--Isaac Reese--and Ben English knew each other and liked each other and tried to best each other. Put the pair of them
and my father together, my mother used to say of their visits, and they would examine a horse until there was nothing left of it but a bank of tail hair and a dab of glue.

Once when my father bought a horse with an odd stripe in its face, Ben told him he was glad to see a man of his age taking up a new occupation—raising zebras. My father got his own back when Ben bought a dark bay Clydesdale that stood twenty-one hands high at the shoulder, possibly the biggest horse there ever has been in this
valley, and upon asking what the horse's name was, discovered it was Benson. Whenever my father saw Ben and the Benson horse together he called out, "Benson and Benson, but t'ank God t'vun of t'em years a hadt."

Of all the crowd, I am sure my father laughed loudest at this Isaac Reese tale, and Pete was nodding in confirmation of that accent he and my mother had grown up under. Our speaker of the day, though, was sweeping onward.

"Anyone who knew Ben English more than passing will recall his knack for nicknames. For those of you old enough to remember them around town, Glacier Gus Swenson and Three-Day Thurlow both were christened that way by Ben English." Chuckles of recognition spattered amid the audience. Glacier Gus was an idler so slow that it was said he wore spurs to keep his shadow from treading on his heels, and everlasting local Three-Day Thurlow had an immortal working reputation as a dandy worker his first day on a job, a complainer on his second, and gone sometime during his third. I believe his nicknaming had no malice behind it, however; Ben likely did it for the pleasure it gave his tongue. In any event, in their pauper's graves both Glacier Gus and Three-Day lie buried in a suit given by Ben English."
She put the page she had just finished beneath the others, and the next page she met with a little bob of her head, as if it was the one she'd been looking for; "So it is a justice of language that a name himself lives on in an extra name. Originally this flow of water was just called Gros Ventre Creek, to go with the town.

But it came to be a saying, as the sheepmen and other travelers would pass through here, that they would stop for noon or the night when they reached English's Creek. An apostrophe is not the easiest thing in the world to keep track of, and so we know this as English Creek."

She paused again and I brought my hands up ready to clap, that sounding to me like the probable extent of the Ben English history.

But no, she was resuming. Do I never learn? My mother had her own yardstick as to when she was done with a topic.
"I have a particular memory of Ben English.

My father had his head cocked in a fashion as if what she was reciting was new to him. I figured that was just his pride in her performance, but yet—

"And that memory leads to the next, of Ben English in his fields across from us here, moving the water. Guiding the water, it might be better said.

For Ben English used the water of his namesake creek as a weaver uses wool. With care. With patience.

Persuading it to become a product greater than itself." Once more she smoothed the page she was reading from.
"Greater than itself. As Ben English himself became, greater than himself. From the drudgery of a freight wagon to the hell deck of a stagecoach to a homestead to a ranch of green water-fed meadows that nicely supported a family, that was the Montana path of Ben English. Following his ability, trusting in it to lead him past the blind alleys of life. This is the day to remember a man who did it that way."

Was I the only one to have the thought brim up in me then? That suddenly, somehow, Alec McCaskill and the Double W had joined Ben English in this speech?

Whether or not, my mother had returned to the irrigation theme.
"Bill Reinking has been kind enough to find for me in the Gleaner files something which says this better than I can. It is a piece that I remembered was published in the Gleaner when the first water flowed into the ditches of the Valier irrigation project. Who wrote it is not known. It was signed simply 'Homesteader,' which among the hundreds who were homesteading this country then, maybe isn't quite as anonymous as 'Anonymous' but awfully close--and it is titled 'The Lord of the Field.'" She drew a deep breath. "It reads:

"The irrigator is the lone lord of his field. A shovel is his musket, gumboots are his garb of office, shank's mare is his steed. To him through the curving laterals the water arrives mysteriously, without sign of origin or destination. But his canvas dam, placed with cunning, causes the flood to hesitate, seek; and with an eager whisper, pour over the ditch bank and onto the grateful land. The man with the shovel hears the parched earth drink. He sees its face of dusty brown turn to glistening black. He smells the odor of life as the land's plants take the water in green embrace. He feels like a god, exalted by this power of his hand and brain to create man-made rain--yet humble as even a god must be under the burden of such power."
I honestly believe the only breath which could be discerned in that crowd just then was the one my mother let out. Now she looked her attention to her written sheets, and the words it gave her next were:

"Ben English is gone from us. He died in the summer of 1927, of a strained heart. Died, to say it plainly, of the work he put into this country, as so many have. My own father followed Ben English to the grave within two years. Some say that not a horse in the Two country has had a good looking-over since their passing." Which was one of the more nasty things she could have said to this audience, full as it was of guys who considered themselves pretty fancy horsemen. But she of course said it anyway and sailed on.

"Ben English is gone, and the English place stands empty across there, except for the echoes of the auctioneer's hammer." A comment with larger barbs yet on it. Ted Muntz, whose First National Bank had foreclosed on the English place from the people Mrs. English sold it to, without doubt was somewhere in this audience. And all out among the picnic crowd I saw people shift restlessly, as if the memory of the foreclosure auctions, the Depression's "hammer sales," was a sudden chafe.

My father by now was listening so hard he seemed to be frozen, an ice statue wearing the clothing of a man, which confirmed to me that not even he knew how far my mother was headed with this talk.
"English Creek is my second home," she was stating now as if someone was arguing the point with her, "for you all know that Noon Creek is where I was born and grew up. Two creeks, two valleys, two claims on my heart. Yet the pair are also day and night to me, as examples of what has happened to this country in my lifetime. Noon Creek now is all but empty of the families I knew there. Yes, there is still the Reese name on a Noon Creek ranch, I am proud as anything to say. And the Egan name, for it would be easier to dislodge the Rocky Mountains than Dill Egan. But the others, all the ranches down Noon Creek but one—all those are a matter of the gone. The Torrance place: sold out at a loss, the family gone from here. The Emrich place: foreclosed on, the family gone from here. The Chute place: sold out at a loss, the family gone from here. Thad Wainwright's place, Thad one of the first cattlemen anywhere in this country: sold out at a loss, Thad passed away within a year. The Fain place: foreclosed on, the family gone from here. The Eiseley place: sold out at a loss, the family gone from here. The Nansen place." Here she paused, shook her head a little as if disavowing Alec's news that this was where he and Leona would set up a household.

"The Nansen place: foreclosed on, Carl dead by his own hand, Sigrid and the children gone from here to her parents in Minnesota."
What she was saying was a feat I hadn't known could be done. Her words, the tolling rhythm of "sold--foreclosed--gone from here," expressed outright the fate of those Noon Creek ranching families. Yet all the while she was telling an equally strong tale by omission. "All the ranches down Noon Creek but one," had been her phrase of indictment.

Everybody in this park this day knew "but one" could only mean the Double W; knew that each and every of those sales and foreclosures ended up with Wendell Williamson holding the land, by outright or by lease from the First National Bank of Gros Ventre. A silent echo I suppose sounds like a contradiction in terms, yet I swear this was what my mother was achieving; after every "sold--foreclosed--gone from here," the ringing unspoken fact of that family ranch swallowed by the Double W.

"English Creek," she was going on, "thankfully has been spared the Noon Creek history, except once." We knew the next of her litany, it stared us in the face. "The English place. After Ben's death, sold to the Wyngard family who weren't able to make a go of it against
the Depression. Foreclosed on, the Wyngards gone from here."

"A little bit ago, Max Vennaman said this is a day for friends and neighbors and families. So it is. And so too we must remember these friends and neighbors and families who are not among us today because they were done in by the times." This said with a skepticism that suggested the times had familiar human faces behind them.

"But an auction hammer can shatter only a household, not the gifts of the earth itself. While it may hurt the heart to see such places as the home of Ben English occupied only by time and the wind, English Creek is still the bloodstream of our valley.

It flows its honest way—" the least little pause here; just enough to seed the distinction from those who prospered by the auction hammer—"while we try to find ours."

She looked up now, and out across us, all the islands of people.

Either she had this last part by heart or was making it up as she went, because she never looked down at the paper as she said it.

"There is much wrong with the world, and I suppose I am not known to be especially bashful about my list of those things. Maybe I
But I think it could not be more right that we honor in this valley a man who savvied the land and its livelihood, who honored the earth instead of merely coveting it. It could not be more right that tall Ben English in his black hat amid his green fields, coaxing a head of water to make itself into hay, is the one whose name this creek carries."

She folded her sheets of paper once, then again, stuck them in the pocket of her dress and stepped down from the stump.

Everybody applauded, although some a lot more luke-warmly than others. Under our tree we were all clapping hard and my father hardest of all, but I also saw him swallow in a large way. And when he realized I was watching him, he canted himself in my
direction and murmured so that only I could hear: "That mother of yours."

Then she was back with us, taking compliments briskly. Pete studied her and said: "Decided to give them some particular hell, didn't you?" Even Toussaint told her: "That was good, about the irrigating."

But of us all, it was only to my father that she said, in what would have been a demand if there hadn't been the tinge of anxiousness in it:

"Well? What did you think?"

My father reached and with an extended finger traced back into place a banner of her hair that the wind had lain across her ear.

"I think," he said, "I think that being married to you is worth all the risk."
One thing sure: that was enough picnic to last me a while.

Toussaint's murmur to me, my mother's speech to the universe. A person's thoughts can kite back and forth between those almost forever.

It was just lucky I had specific matters to put myself to, fetching Mouse from where he was tethered and riding through the dispersing picnickers and heading on across the English Creek bridge to the rodeo grounds.

I was to meet Ray Heaney on the corral alongside the bucking chutes, the best seats in the arena if you didn't mind perching on a fence pole.

Again this year my father drilled home to me his one point of rodeo protocol.

"Just so you stay up there on that fence," he stipulated. "I don't want to see you down in there with the chute society." By which he meant fifteen or twenty the clump of hangers-on who always clustered around the bucking-chute gates, visiting and gossiping and looking generally important, and who regularly were cleared out of there two or three times every rodeo by rampaging broncs. Up onto anything climbable they all would scoot to roost, like hens with a weasel in their midst, and a minute or so after the bronc's passage they'd be right back in front of the chutes, preening and yakking again. I suppose the chute society offended
my father's precept that a horse was nothing to be careless around.

In any case, during the housecleanings when a bronc sent them scrambling for the fence, it was my father's habit to cheer loudly for the bronc.

No Ray yet, at our fence perch. So I stayed atop Mouse and watched the world. In the pens behind the chutes the usual kind of before-rodeo confusion was going on, guys hassling broncs here and there, the air full to capacity of dust and bawling and whinnying.

Out front, about half the chute society was already planted in place, tag-ends of half a dozen conversations mingling. "That SOB is so tight he wouldn't give ten cents to see Christ ride a bicycle backwards."

"Oh hell yes. I'll take a quarter horse over a Morgan horse any time. Them Morgans are so damn hot-blooded. With haying coming and one thing and another, I don't see how I'm ever going to catch up with myself."

I saw my mother and father and Pete and Marie and Toussaint—and Midge Withrow had joined them, though Dode settling themselves at wasn't yet in evidence—go into the far end of the grandstand, farthest from the dust the bucking horses would kick up.
People were streaming by, up into the grandstand or to sit on car fenders or the ground along the outside of the arena fence. I am here to recommend the top of a horse as a site to view mankind; everybody below sees mostly the horse, not you.

Definitely I was ready for a recess from attention. From trying to judge whether people going by were nudging each other and whispering sideways, "That's him. That's the one. Got lit up like a ship in a storm, out there with that Stanley Meixell--"

Keen as I could be, I caught nobody at it--at least for sure--and began to relax somewhat. Oh, I did get a couple of lookings-over. Lila Sedge drifted past in her moony way, spied Mouse and me, and circled us suspiciously a few times. And the priest Father Morrisseau knew me by sight from my stays with the Heaneys, and bestowed me a salutation. But both those I considered routine inspections, so to speak.
People kept accumulating, I kept watching. A Gros Ventre rodeo always is slower to get under way than the Second Coming.

Then I happened to remember. Not only was I royally mounted, I also was carrying wealth.

I nudged Mouse into action, to go do something about that dollar bill my father had bestowed. Fifty whole cents. Maybe the Depression was on the run.

The journey wasn't far, just fifty yards or so over to where, since Prohibition went home with Hoover, the Gros Ventre Rotary Club operated its beer booth. I swung down from Mouse and stepped to the plank counter. Behind it, they had several washtubs full of ice water and bottles of Kessler and Great Falls Select stashed down into the slush until only the brown necks were showing. And off to one side a little, my interest at the moment, the tub of soda pop.

One of the unresolved questions of my life at that age was whether I liked orange soda or grape soda better. It can be more of a dilemma than is generally realized: unlike, say, those options of trout or fried chicken, you can’t just dive in and have both. Anyway, I had voted grape and was taking my first gulp when somebody inquired at my shoulder, "Jick, how's the world treating you?"
The seyer was Dode Withrow, and his condition answered why he wasn't up in the grandstand with my parents and the Reeses and Midge. As the saying has it, he evidently had fallen off the wagon and was still bouncing. Dode was wearing a maroon shirt and nice gray gabardine pants, and his dress Stetson, so he looked like a million, but he also had breath like the downwind side of a brewery.

"Lo, Dode. You looking for Midge and the folks? They're down at the far end."

Dode shook his head as if he had water in his ears. "That wif's of mine isn't exactly looking for me." So it was one of the Withrow family jangles that happened every year or so. During them was the only time Dode seriously drank. Tomorrow there was going to be a lot of frost in the air between Midge and Dode, but then the situation would thaw back to normal. It seemed to me a funny way to run a marriage— I always wondered what the three Withrow daughters, Bea and Marcella and Valeria, did with themselves during the annual temper contest between their parents—but this summer was showing that I had everything to learn about the ways of man and woman.

"Charlie, give me a couple Kesslers," Dode was directing across the beer counter. "Jick, you want one?"
"Uh, no thanks," dumbly holding up my orange soda the way a toddler would show off a lollipop.

"That stuff'll rot your teeth," Dode advised. "Give you goiter."

St. Vitus dance."
"Did you say two, Dode?" Charlie Hooper called from one of the beer tubs.

"I got two hands, don't I?"

While Dode paid and took a swig from one bottle while holding the other in reserve, I tried to calculate how far along he was toward being really drunk. Always tricky arithmetic. About all that could be said for sure was that of all the rodeo-goers who were going to get a skin full today, Dode was going to be among the earliest.

Dode tipped the Kessler down from his mouth and looked straight at me. Into me, it almost seemed. And offered: "Trade you."

I at first thought he meant his bottle of beer for my orange pop, and that fuddled me, for plainly Dode was in no mood for pop. But no, he had something else in mind, he still was looking straight into my eyes. What he said next clarified his message, but did not ease my befuddlement. "My years for yours, Jick. I'll go back where you are in life, you come up where I am. Trade, straight across. No, wait,
I'll toss in Midge to boot." He laughed, but with no actual humor in it. Then shook his head again in that way as if he'd just come out from swimming. "That's in no way fair. Midge is okay. It's me--" he broke that off with a quick swig of Kessler.

What seemed needed was a change of topic, and I asked: where you watching the rodeo from, Dode? Ray and I are going to grab a fence place up there by the booth, whyn't you sit with us?"

"Many thanks, Jick." He made it sound as if I had offered him knighthood.

"But I'm going to hang around the pens a while. Want to watch the broncs.
All I'm good for any more. Watching. And off he went, beer bottle in each hand as if they were levers he was steering himself by. I hated to see Dode in such a mood, but at least he was a quick mend. Tomorrow he would be himself, and probably more so, again.

Still no Ray on the fence. The Heaneys were taking their sweet time at that family shindig. When Ray ever showed up I would have to compare menus in detail with him, to see how the Heaneys could possibly out-eat what we had gone through at the creek picnic.

By now my pop had been transferred from its bottle into me, and with time still to kill and figuring that as long as I had Mouse I might as well be making use of him, got back up in the saddle.

I sometimes wonder: is the corner of the eye the keenest portion of the body? A sort of special sense, beyond the basic five? For the corner of my right eye now registered, across the arena and above a chokecherry-colored shirt; and atop that, the filing crowd and top pole of the fence, a head and set of shoulders so erect they could not be mistaken.

I nudged Mouse into motion and rode around to Alec's side of the rodeo grounds.
When I got there Alec was off the horse, a big alert deep-chested bay, and was fussing with the loop of his lariat in that picky way that calf ropers do. All this was taking place out away from the arena fence and the parked cars, where there was open space which Alec and the bay and the lariat seemed to claim as their own.

I dismounted too. And started things off on an admiring note:

"I overheard some calves talking, there in the pens. They were saying how much they admired anybody who'd rope them in a shirt like that."
"Jicker!" he greeted me back. "What do you know for sure?" Alec's words were about what they ever would have been, yet there was that tone of absent-mindedness behind them again. I wanted to write it off to the fact that this brother of mine had calf roping on his mind just then, but I wasn't quite convinced that was all there was to the matter.

It did occur to me to check whether Alec was wearing a bandanna this year, and he wasn't. Evidently my father had teased that off him permanently.

"Think you got a chance to win?" I asked, just to further the conversation.

"Strictly no problem," he assured me. All the fuss he was giving that rope said something else, however.

"How about Bruno Martin?" He was the young rancher from Augusta who had won the calf roping the previous year.

"I can catch a cold faster than Bruno Martin can a calf."

"Vern Crosby, then?" Another quick roper, who I had noticed warming up behind the chute pens.
"What, you taking a census or something?" Alec swooshed his lariat overhead, that expectant whir in the air, and cast a little practice throw.

I explored for some topic more congenial to him. "Where'd you get the highpowered horse?"

"Cal Petrie lent him to me." Cal Petrie was foreman of the Double W. Evidently Alec's ropeslinging had attracted some attention.

I lightly touched the bay's foreshoulder. The feel of a horse is one of the best touches I know. "You missed the picnic. Mom spoke a speech."

Alec frowned at his rope. "Yeah. I had to put the sides on Cal's pickup and haul this horse in here. A speech? What about? How to sleep with a college book under your pillow and let it run uphill into your ear?"

"No. About Ben English."

"Ancient history, huh? Dad must have converted her." Alec looked like he intended to say more, but didn't.
There wasn't any logical reason why this should have been on my mind just then, but I asked: "Did you know he had a horse with the same name as himself?"

"Who? Had a what?"

"Thank God I'm not the only one around here--"

"Ben English. Our granddad would say, 'There goes Benson again.'"

"Look, Jicker, I got to walk this horse loose. How about you?"
doing me a big hairy favor?"

Something told me to be a little leery. "Ray's waiting for me over on the--"

"Only take a couple minutes of your valuable time. All it is, I want you to go visit Leona for me while I get this horse ready."

"Leona? Where is she?"

"Down at the end of the arena there, by her folks' car. As indeed she was, when I turned to see. About a hundred feet from us, spectating this entire brotherly tableau. Leona in a clover-green blouse, that silver-gold hair above like daybreak over a lush meadow.

"Yeah, well, what do you mean by visit?"

"Just go on over there and entertain her for me, huh?"

"Entert--?

"Dance a jig, tell a joke. " Alec swung into the saddle atop the bay. "Easy, hoss." I stepped back a bit and Mouse looked affronted as the bay did a little prance to try Alec out. Alec reined him under control and leaned toward me. "I mean it, about you keeping Leona company for me. Come get me if Earl Zane shows up. She don't want to see any that jughead hanging around her."
Uh huh. Revelation, all 22 chapters of it.

"Aw, the hell, Alec. I was about to declare that I had other things in life to do than fetch him whenever one of Leona's ex-boyfriends came sniffing around. But that declaration melted somewhere before I could get it out, for here my way came one of those Leona smiles that would burn down a barn, and she simultaneously patted the car fender beside her. While I still was soldered in the middle of all that, Alec touched the bay roping horse into a fast walk toward some open country beyond the calf pens. So I figured there was nothing for it but go on over to Leona and face fate.

"Lo, Leona."

"Hello, John Angus." Which tangled me right at the start. I mean, think about it. The only possible way in this world she could know about my high-toned name was from Alec. Which meant that I had been a topic of conversation between them. Which implied—I didn't know what. Damn it all to hell anyway. First Toussaint, now this. I merely was trying to have a standard summer, not provide word fodder for the entire damn Two country.

"Yeah, well. Great day for the race," I cracked to recoup.

Leona smiled yet another of her dazzlers. And said nothing. Didn't even inquire "What race?" so I could impart "The human race" and thereby
break the ice and— substituted.

"You all by your lonesome?" I asked. As shrewd as it was desperate, that. Not only did it fill the air space for a moment, I could truth-fully tell Alec I had been vigilant about checking on whether or not Earl Zane was hanging around.

She shook her head. Try it sometime, while attempting to keep a full smile on your face. Leona could do it and come out with more smile than she started with. When she had accomplished all that she leaned my way a little and nodded her head conspiratorially toward the other side of the car.

Holy Jesus. Was Earl Zane over there? Earl Zane was Alec's size and built as if he'd been put together out of railroad ties. Alec hadn't defined the possibility, any of Earl Zane already being on hand. What was I supposed to do, tip my hat to him and say "Hi there, I'll go get my brother Earl, just stand where you are, my brother wants so he can come beat the living daylights out of you?" Or better from the standpoint of my own health, climb back on Mouse and retreat to my original side of the arena.

For information's sake, I leaned around Leona and peered over the hood of the car. And
was met by startled stares from Ted and Thelma Tracy—Leona's parents—and another couple with whom they were seated on a blanket and carrying on a conversation.

"Your folks are looking real good," I mumbled as I pulled my head back to normal. "Nice to see them so."
Leona, though, had shifted attention from me to the specimen of horseflesh at the other end of the reins I was holding. "Riding in style, aren't you?" she admired.

"His name is Mouse," I confided. "Though if he was mine, I'd call him, uh, Chief Joseph."

Leona slowly revolved her look from the horse to me, the way the beam of a lighthouse makes its sweep. Then she asked: "Why not Crazy Horse?"

From Leona that was tiptop humor, and I yukked about six times as much as I ordinarily would have. And in the meantime was readying myself. After all, that brother of mine had written the prescription he wanted from me: entertain her.

"Boy, I'll have to remember that. You know, that reminds me of one. Did you ever hear the joke about the Chinaman and the Scotchman in a rowboat on the Sea of Galilee?"

Leona shook her head. Luck was with me. This was my father's favorite joke, one I had heard him tell to other Forest Service guys twenty times; the heaviest artillery I could bring to bear.

"Well, there was a Chinaman and a Scotchman in a rowboat on the Sea of Galilee. Fishing away, there. And after a while the Chinaman puts down his fishing pole and leans over and nudges the Scotchman and says, "Jock, tell me. Is it true what they say..."
about Occidental women?" And the Scotchman says, "Occidental, hell, 

I'm certain as anything that they behave the way they do on purpose.

I absolutely believed I had done a royal job of telling, even burring
the r's just right. But a little crimp of puzzlement came into Leona's
smiling face, right between her eyes. She asked: 'The Sea of Galilee?'

I cast a look around for Alec. Or even Earl Zane, whom I would
rather fight blindfolded than try to explain a joke to somebody who
didn't get it. "Yeah. But you see, that doesn't--"

Just then, Mouse got into the act. Why he could not have waited
another two minutes until I found a way to dispatch myself from Leona;
didn't
why it hadn't come into his horse brain any other time of the day
that very moment
up until right then; why--but no why about it, he was proceeding,
directly in front of where Leona and I sat, to take his leak.

The hose on a horse is no small sight anyway during this process,
but with Leona there spectating, Mouse's seemed to poke down, down,
down.
I cleared my throat and examined the poles of the arena fence and then the posts that supported the poles and then the sky over the posts and then crossed and uncrossed my arms, and still the downpour continued.

A wild impulse raised in me: Mouse's everlasting whiz reminded me of Withrow. Dode sprawled atop that boulder the second day of this ricocheting summer, and I clamped my jaw to keep from blurting to Leona that scene and the handhold joke. That would be about like you, John Angus McCaskill. Celebrate disaster with a dose of social suicide. Do it up right.

Meanwhile Leona continued to serenely view the spectacle as if it was the fountains of Rome.

"I'll take over now, Jicker." Alec's voice came from behind us, he outside of the had circled the arena on the bay horse. Peals of angel song could not have been more welcome. "How'd he do as company, Leona?"

Leona shined around at Alec, then turned back to bestow me a final glint. And answered: "He's a wonder."

I mounted up and cleared out of there--Alec and Leona all too soon would be mooning over each other like I didn't exist anyway--and as soon as I was out of eyesight behind the catch pen at the far end of the arena I gave Mouse a jab in the ribs that made him woof in surprise. Chief Joseph,
my rosy hind end. But I suppose my actual target was life. This situation of being old enough to be on the edge of everything and too young to get to the middle of any of it.

There was this, though. At least Earl Zane hadn't showed up.

Is it wolfsbane that the stories say will ward off a werewolf? If nothing else, maybe I had a future as Zane bane.

"Hi," Ray Heaney greeted as I climbed onto the arena fence beside him. The grin cuts were deep into his face, the big front teeth were out on parade. Ray could make you feel that your arrival was the central event in his recent life. "What've you been up to?"

"Oh--summary seemed so impossible, I chose neutrality--far out of the question, I chose neutrality--about the usual. You?"

"Pilot again." So saying, Ray held up his hands to show his calluses. One hard bump across the base of each finger, like sets of knuckles on his palms. I nodded in admiration. My shovel calluses were mosquito bites by comparison. This made the second summer Ray was stacking lumber in his father's lumber yard--the 'pile it here, pile it there' nature of that job was what produced the "pilot" joke--and his hands and forearms were gaining real heft.
Ray thrust his right hand across to within reach of mine. "Shake the hand that shook the hand?" he challenged. It was a term we had picked up from his father--Ray could even rumble it just like Ed Heaney's bass-drum voice--who remembered it from his own boyhood when guys went around saying "Shake the hand that shook the hand of John L. Sullivan, the heavyweight boxing champ of then.

I took Ray up on the challenge, even though I pretty well knew how this habitual contest of ours was going to turn out from now on.

We made a careful fit of the handshake grip; then Ray chanted the start, "One, two, three." After about a minute of mutual grunted squeezing, I admitted: "Okay. I'm out-squeeze."

"You'll get me next time," Ray said. "Didn't I see Alec riding around acting like a calf roper?"

Some years before, Ed Heaney drove out from Gros Ventre to the ranger station one spring Saturday to talk forest business with my father. And with him, to my surprise and no little consternation, came his son my age, Ray. I could see perfectly well what was intended here, and that's the way it did happen. Off up the North 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, but somehow I felt that might not hold the fascination for others that it did for me. Ordinarily horses would have been on hand to ride, one solution to solving the situation, but the day before Isidor Pronovost had taken every one of them in a packstring to a spike camp of CCC tree planters. Alec was nowhere in the picture as a possible ally; this was haying time and he was driving the scatter rake for Pete Reese. The ranger station itself was no refuge; the sun was out and my mother would never let us get away with hear of us lolling around together inside, even if I could think up a reasonable loll. Matters were not at all improved by the fact that, since I still was going to the South Fork grade school and Ray went in Gros Ventre, we only knew each other indistinctly by sight.

He was a haunting kid to look at. His eyes were within long deep-set arcs, as if always squinted the way you do to thread a needle. And curved over with eyebrows which wouldn't needed to have been much thicker to make a couple of respectable mustaches. And then a flattish nose which, wide as it was, barely accommodated all the freckles assigned to it.
When Ray really grinned—I didn't see that this first day, although I was to see it thousands of times in the years ahead—deep slice-lines cut his cheeks, out opposite the corners of his mouth. Like a big set of parentheses around the grin. His lower lip was so full that it too had a slice-line under it; this kid looked more like he'd been carved than born. Also, even more so than a lot of us at that age, his front teeth were far ahead of the rest of him in size; at any school there always were a lot of traded jibes of 'beaver tooth!'

but Ray's frontals really did seem as if they'd been made for toppling willows.

As I say, haunting. I have seen grown men, guys who ordinarily wouldn't so much as spend a glance at a boy on the street, stop and study that face of Ray's. And here he was, thank you a whole hell of a lot, my guest for that day at English Creek.

So we were afoot with one another and not knowing what to do about it, and ended up wandering the area around the ranger station, with boredom building up pretty fast in both of us. Finally I got the idea of showing him the pool a little ways downstream in English Creek where brook trout always could be seen, hanging there in the clear water.

I asked Ray if he felt like fishing, but for some reason he looked at
me a little suspiciously and muttered "uh-uh."

We viewed the pool, which took no time at all, and then thrashed on along in the creek brush for awhile, just to be doing anything. It was semi-swampy going, so at least we could concentrate on stretching or jumping across the wet holes.

Ray was dressed in what I suppose his mother thought were old enough clothes to go into the country with, but his old clothes were considerably better than my everyday ones and he maybe was embarrassed about that. Anyway, for whatever reason, he put up with this brushwhacking venture of mine.

Whacked was what he got. My mind was on something else, likely how much of the morning still was ahead of us, and without thinking I let a willow spring back as I pushed past it. It whipped Ray across the left side of his face and brought a real yelp from him. Also the comment to me: "Watch out with those, beetle brain."
"Didn't mean to," I apologized. Which undoubtedly would have buried the issue, except for what I felt honorbound to add next: "Sparrow head."

You wonder afterwards how two reasonably sane people got into a slanging match like that.

"Slobberguts," Ray upped the ante with.

"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 battle degenerated into a wrestle. More accurately, a mud wallow.

Neither one of us ended up permanently on top. We both were strong enough, and mad enough, to be able to tip the other, so neither one of us ended up permanently on top. Simply, at some point we wore out on
wanting to maul one another any further, and got to our feet.

Ray's clothes looked as if he'd been rolled the length of a pig pen.

Mine I guess weren't much better, but they hadn't started off as fancy
and so I figured my muss didn't matter as much.

Of course, try convince my mother of that. We had to straggle
in at noon to get any dinner, and when she saw us, we were in for a
more ways than one. Ray changed into
marathon of scrubbing. She made me sit on a set of my clothes--

funny, how improved he looked when he was out of that town gear--

and put us at opposite ends of the table while we ate, and afterward

she issued two decrees: "Jick, I believe you would like to

Read in the Other Room. Ray, I think you would like To Put Together

the Jigsaw Puzzle I Am Going to Put Here on the Table for You."

When I started high school in Gros Ventre, Ray came over to me

at noon the first day. He planted himself just out of arm's reach

from me and offered: "Horse apple."

I balled up both my fists, and my tongue got ready the words which

would fan our creekside battle to life again: "Beaver tooth." Yet the

direction of Ray's remark caught my attention; "horse apple" was pretty

far down the scale from "turkey dink."

For once in my life I latched on to a possibility. I held my
stance and said back to Ray: "Mud minnow."

It started a grin on him while he thought up: "Slough rat."

"Gumbo gopher," I provided, barely managing to get it out before

we were both laughing.

Within the week I was asking my mother whether I could

stay in town overnight with Ray, and after that I did many

a stay-over at the Heaneys' throughout the school year.

Not only did I gain the value of Ray and me being the best

of friends; it was always interesting to me that the Heaneys

were a family as different from ours as crochet from oil

cloth. For one thing they were Catholic, although they really didn't

display it all that much, just through a grace before every meal, and

by eating fish on Friday, which eventually occurred to me as the reason

Ray had looked at me suspiciously there at the creek when I asked him

about fishing.
Now that we were established atop the arena corral, I reported
to Ray my chin session with Dode Withrow at the beer booth.

Ray took what might be called a spectator interest in the Withrow family.

He never really came right out and said so, but his eye was on the
middle Withrow girl, Marcella, who was in our same high school class.
Marcella was trim in figure like Midge and had Dode’s world-capturing
grin. So far Ray’s approach to Marcella was distant admiration, but
I had the feeling he was trying to figure out how to narrow the distance.

Maybe the day would come when I was more interested in a Leona
or a Marcella than perch ing up there above general humanity, but right
then I doubted it. I considered that the top-pole perch Ray and I
had there next to the bucking chutes was the prime site of the whole
rodeo grounds. We had clear view of every inch of the arena, the dirt
oval like a small dry lake bed before us. And all the event action
would originate right beside us, where even now the broncs for the
first section of bareback riding were being hazed into the chutes
alongside my corral perch. The particular Gros Ventre bucking chute
setup was that as six broncs were hazed in for their set of riders,
pole panels were retracted between each chute, leaving the half-dozen chutes as one long narrow pen. Then as the horses crowded in in single file, the panels were shoved in place behind them one by one, penning each bronc into the chute it would buck into the arena from. About as slick a system as there is for handling rodeo broncs, I suppose. But what is memorable to me about it is the instant before the pole panels are shoved into place to serve chute walls; when the horses have swarmed into the open chute pen, flanks heaving, heads up and eyes glittering.

From my perch, it was like looking down through a transom into a long hallway suddenly filled with big startled animals. There are not many sights like it.
Above and to the left of Ray and me was the announcing booth and its inhabitants, a proximity which added to the feeling that we were part of the inside happenings of the rodeo. To look at, the booth resembled a little woodshed up on stilts, situated there above and just in back of the middle of bucking chutes. It held elbow room for maybe six people, although only three of the booth crowd did any actual rodeo work. Tollie Zane, if you could call his announcing work. Tollie evidently was in residence at the far end of the booth, angled out of view from us, but a large round microphone like a waffle iron standing on end indicated his site. Nearest to us was the scorekeeper, Bill Reinking, editor of the Gleaner, prominent with his ginger mustache and silver-wire eyeglasses. I suppose he did the scorekeeping on the principle that the only sure way for the Gleaner to get any accuracy on the rodeo results was for him to originate the arithmetic. Between Bill and Tollie was the space for the timekeeper, who ran the stopwatch to time the events and blew the whistle to signal when a bronc rider had lasted eight seconds atop a bareback or ten in a saddle ride. The timekeeper's spot in the booth was empty, but that was about to be remedied.
"Wup wup wup," some Paul Revere among the chute society cried, "here she comes, boys! Just starting up the ladder!"

Heads swiveled like weathervanes hit by a tornado. And yes, Ray and I also sent our eyes over to the little flight along the side of the announcing booth and the hypnotizing progress it up than of Velma Simms.

"Tighter than last year, I swear to God," someone below us was contending. "Like the paper fits the wall," testified another. And yet another, "But I still need to know, how the hell does she get into those britches?" Velma Simms came of eastern money—plumbing equipment I believe was its source; I have seen her family name, Croake, on hot-and-cold spigots—and in a community and era which considered divorce usually more grievous than manslaughter, she had been through three husbands. That we knew of. Only the first was a local, the lawyer Paul Bogan.

They met in Helena when he got himself elected to the legislature, and if my count is right, it was at the end of his second term when Velma arrived back to Gros Ventre and Paul stayed over there at the capital in some kind of state job.

Her next husband was a fellow named Sutter, who'd had an automobile agency in Spokane. In Gros Ventre he was like a trout out of water, and quickly went. After him came Simms, an actor who was in some summer performance at one of the Glacier Park lodges. By February of his first Two country winter Simms was hightailing his way to California, although eventually did show up back in Gros Ventre, so to speak, as one of the cattle rustlers in a Gene Autry movie at the Odeon.
Lately Velma seemed to have given up marrying and instead emerged each Fourth with the current beau—they tended to be like the scissorbill following her up the ladder now, in a gabardine stockman's suit and a too-clean cream Stetson, probably a bank officer from Great Falls—in tow. I cite all this because Paul Bogan, the first in the genealogy, always had served as rodeo timekeeper, and the next Fourth of July after his change of residence, here Velma presented herself, bold as paint, to take up his stopwatch and whistle.

It was her only instance of what might be called civic participation, and quite why she did it, nobody had a clue. But Velma's ascension to the booth now was part of every Gros Ventre rodeo. Particularly for the male portion of the audience. For as you may have gathered, Velma's Fourth appearances were encased in annual new slacks of stunning snugness. One of the theoreticians in the chute society just now was postulating a fresh concept, that maybe she heated them with an iron, put them on hot, and let them shrink down on her like the rim onto a wagon wheel.
I saw once, in recent years at the Gros Ventre rodeo, a young bronc rider and his ladyfriend, watching the action through the pole arena gate. They each held a can of beer in one hand, and the rider's other hand was around the girl's shoulders. Her other hand, though, was down resting lightly on his rump, the tips of her fingers just touching the inseam of his Levis back there. I'll admit to you, it made my heart turn around and face north. That the women now can and will do such a thing seems to me an advance like radio. My awe of it is tempered only by the regret that I am not that young bronc rider, or any other. But let that go.

My point here is just that in the earlier time, only rare self-advertised rumps such as PennyThorpe's were targets of public interest, and then only by what my father and the other rangers called ocular examination.

It registered on me there had been a comment from Ray's direction. "Come again?" I apologized.

"No hitch in Velma's gitalong," Ray offered one more time.

I said something equally bright in agreement, but I was surprised at Ray making an open evaluation of Velma Simms, even so tame a one as that. The matter of Marcella maybe was on his mind more than I had figured.
Just then an ungodly noise somewhere between a howl and a yowl issued above us. A sort of high HHHRUNGGHHH like a cat was being skinned alive. I was startled as hell, but Ray knew its source. "You see Tollie's loudspeaking getup?" he inquired with a nod toward the top of the announcer's booth. I couldn't help but have noticed such a rig.

The contraption was a pyramid of rods, which held at its peak a half-dozen big metal cones like those morning-glory horns on old pointing to various points of the compass. Just in case those didn't cover the territory, there was a second set of four more 'glory horns a couple of feet beneath.

"He sent to Billings for it," informed Ray, who had overheard this information when Tollie came to the lumber yard for 2x4s to help brace the contraption into place. "The guy who makes them down there told him it's the real deal to announce with."

We were not the only ones contemplating Tollie's new announcing machinery. "What the goddamn hell's Tollie going to do," I heard somebody say below us, "tell them all about it in Choteau?" Choteau was 33 miles down the highway.
"WELCOME!" crackled a thunderblast of voice over our heads.

"To the Gros Ventre rodeo! Our fifteenth annual show!
You folks are wise as hooty owls to roost with us
here today. Yes sir! Some of everything is liable
to happen here today and Tollie Zane, father of the famous
Earl, held the job of announcing the Gros Ventre rodeo on the
basis by which a lot of positions of authority seem to get filled: nobody else would be caught dead doing it. But
before this year, all that the announcing amounted to was
shouting through a megaphone the name of each bucking horse
and its rider. The shiny new 'glory horns evidently had
gone to Tollie's head, or at least his tonsils.

"The Fourth of July is called the cowboys' Christmas
and our festivities here today will get underway in just--"

"Called what?" somebody yelled from the chute society. "That's
Braider for you, sweat running down his face and he thinks it's snowflakes."

"Damn talking. Santy Claus must have brought him that contraption;"

"Now, you guys, lay off now," a third one put in. "Braider's maybe
right. It'd explain why he's as full of shit as a Christmas goose."

Everybody below us hee-heed at that while
Tollie roared on about the glorious tradition of rodeo
and what heart-stopping excitement we were going to view
in this arena today.

Braider was a kind of blustering talker anyway, and now with him slowed
down either out of respect for the new sound system or because he was