

Marilyn--please start this at top of a new page.

15

And the good mood among the cluster of us ~~was~~ 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 ~~picnic provisions~~ <sup>picnic</sup> provisions began to emerge from the pair of ~~boxes~~ <sup>grub</sup> 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 ~~fryer~~ <sup>part of the</sup> chickens my mother was ~~preparing~~ <sup>spending that morning preparing</sup> that ~~morning~~ <sup>young</sup> delectable spring fries with drumsticks about the thickness of your thumb. ~~That~~ <sup>This very</sup> 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~~ <sup>sparks</sup> of flavor ~~amid it.~~

New radishes, sweet and about the size of a ~~thumbnail~~ <sup>marble</sup>, 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.



than he was before.

"Airplanes," my father announced. "Airplanes are the <sup>firefighting</sup> apparatus of the future, at least according to this one ~~guy~~ <sup>hoosier</sup> 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~~ there."

"<sup>Over</sup> ~~Out~~ in Washington they're about to test all this out," my father continued his report of <sup>latest</sup> 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 <sup>how</sup>."

Pete shook his head. "They couldn't pay me enough to do that. <sup>jump out of one of those.</sup>"

"Hell, Pete, the jumping would be easy money. The landing is <sup>plow into</sup> ~~eat~~ another of Toussaint's trout, the only drawback." My father readied to ~~bite into another drumstick,~~

<sup>but first</sup> offered "Fact is, then ~~said~~ as if in afterthought: I told them I'd volunteer--my mother's

Toussaint. Say on.

radio

with



<sup>sighted in</sup>  
full skepticism ~~was~~ on him now, waiting to see if there was any color of

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 down around us  
set everybody to laughing as like loonies.





Next it was Toussaint's <sup>again,</sup>inning. The mention of horses reminded him of a long-ago Fourth of July in Gros Ventre when everybody ~~got~~ caught 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,~~ <sup>them bareback.</sup> Raced them against each other the length of Main Street." The Toussaint chuckle. "It was hard to know. To bet on ~~the~~ horse, ~~how~~ 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. give me that dilemma any time.

All this horse talk did remind me about Mouse, and I excused myself to <sup>picket him</sup> ~~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.

H



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~~ <sup>out-east.</sup> farming ~~benches~~ <sup>country</sup> and yes, Toussaint's from the Two Medicine. <sup>That</sup> ~~Would~~ convey every one of those people at once and yet also their separateness. Their selves, I guess the world should ~~would~~ be. I don't mean one of those phoney-baloney gilt concoctions such as that one of Custer and all his <sup>and doomed</sup> 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 ~~hundreds of~~ 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 ~~it~~ 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~~ <sup>there</sup> in ~~Marie Wood~~ <sup>the</sup> 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 ~~fish~~ <sup>trout</sup> out of the broiler.

His seemed to me the more sensible endeavor, so I dropped down next to him to inflict myself on the chicken supply. I was just beginning to him and reached myself one more piece of chicken.

to do ~~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:

*quietly*

"You ~~have become~~ <sup>are</sup> a campjack <sup>these days.</sup>"

#

Probably I went red as an apple. I mean, good christamighty.

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 Methusaleh'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 imbibing, into the general conversation while I was off tending Mouse made me peer toward my mother. No real reassurance there; <sup>plainly</sup> her mood <sup>declined</sup> 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 <sup>M</sup>cCaskill kid? Yeah, green as frog feathers, ain't

he? You wonder how they let him out of the house by himself?"

And <sup>beyond that</sup> ~~finally~~, philosophy. If I was a <sup>Toussaint</sup> topic, just what did that

constitute? The mix of apprehension and surmise was all through me.

Plus a <sup>flavor</sup> ~~corner~~ of something which <sup>seemed</sup> ~~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 <sup>Golman</sup> ~~Hogan~~ and the last

buffalo hunt and the first sheep and the winter of '86 and Lieutenant

Black Jack Pershing and the herded Crees and--and what did that mean?

Being a ~~to~~ <sup>be</sup> 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 <sup>six</sup> ~~five~~ soft words across my

life--<sup>are</sup> ~~you have become~~ a campjack--<sup>these days</sup> yes, I shivered.

Toussaint and Jick

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~~ 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.

Normally, that is ↓...

no #

dessert and coffee

All around us as each little batch of people finished ~~eating,~~ <sup>dessert and coffee</sup> flopped onto men ~~lay~~ on their backs or sides while the women ~~were primly~~ sat up and chatted with one another.

flopped

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.

~~to me~~ <sup>9</sup> My father <sup>though</sup> acted as if he didn't <sup>have</sup> a thing in the world on his mind, ~~though~~. To my surprise, he scootched 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  
<sup>relieve me of</sup>  
wife who'd ~~loosen~~ these dress shoes ~~for me~~.

If I take them off you, my mother vowed, you'll be chasing <sup>after</sup> 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!~~ <sup>moon</sup>

My mother answered that by sticking out a thumb and jabbing it between a couple of his ribs, which brought a whuw! out of him.

of his skin  
 typed  
 the  
 over  
 the  
 eyes

Pete

Marilyn--please start this  
on a new page.

27

Down at creekside, the high school principal Mr. Vennaman was stepping up into the stump rostrum. Evidently it was time for the program. <sup>evidently.</sup> I tried to <sup>contain</sup> ~~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 <sup>become</sup> get 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, <sup>I think.</sup> but this is a day we can simply <sup>be</sup> ~~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. Vennman 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 <sup>readying</sup> ~~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 <sup>stubborn</sup> ~~reluctant~~ puff of it.

Nonetheless, Nola ~~nodded~~ 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 <sup>more than</sup> likely why some at each of these Fourth picnics. 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, <sup>now</sup> were gathering themselves beside Nola and the piano. Odd to see them up there in that role, farmers and water company men, in white <sup>dress</sup> 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 <sup>as much as</sup> ~~more~~ ~~than~~ it did our ears. <sup>Because</sup> 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 <sup>blossomed</sup> ~~was~~ ~~with~~ 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 <sup>state</sup> senator from down at Choteau, rose and <sup>declared</sup> ~~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.



imparting?

popped to  
Mr. Vennaman ~~was~~ on his feet again, leading the ~~man~~ hand-clapping  
and then saying: "Our next speaker actually needs no introduction."

I'm going to take a lesson from Senator <sup>Thouen</sup> ~~Larson~~ and not bother to  
fashion one." Two traits always marked Mr. Vennaman as an educator:

the bow tie he <sup>perpetually</sup> ~~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:

no "Beth McCaskill?"

I knew I hadn't heard that quite right. <sup>#</sup> Yet here she was, <sup>getting up from</sup> ~~climbing~~  
<sup>beside my father</sup> 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. <sup>No doubt about it,</sup> I ~~admit~~ I was the most surprised person in the state  
of Montana right then, but Pete and <sup>Marie</sup> ~~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 <sup>the</sup> a better idea.

But <sup>Maxwell</sup> ~~Ira~~ Vennaman, not to mention a certain Varick McCaskill, has

the art of persuasion. I have been known to tell <sup>that</sup> ~~my~~ husband <sup>of mine</sup> 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 Bank~~ <sup>Southwestern</sup>. One more place which had supported ~~a family~~ <sup>people</sup>, 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 <sup>Max</sup> ~~Ira~~ Vennaman's request I have put together

what is known of Ben English."

"His is a history which begins where ~~the~~ <sup>that of</sup> all settlers of the West ~~has to go~~ of America has to: elsewhere."

*more?* *no 4* 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 ~~little~~ 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~~ Craig."

*She lifted a page, went right on as if she'd been giving Fourth of July speeches every day of her life.*

*young Ben English's* Atop there with six horses surging beneath him seemed to be ~~his~~ <sup>his own</sup> place in the world. Soon, with his wages of forty dollars a month, he was buying ~~his own~~ 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

*Senator Thomen*  
over to ~~Tom Larson~~. "Ben later liked to tell that a bonus of stage

driving was its ~~political influence~~ <sup>civic opportunities</sup>. 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 ~~looked up from~~ <sup>focused</sup> back down to

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.

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

now called Ben English Coulee. The particulars of ~~his claim~~ the English

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,  
 Mary was always able to practice that philosophy a <sup>somewhat</sup> ~~little~~ better  
 than I could."

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

(no 9) "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~~ <sup>grow</sup> 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  
no 4  
they would examine a horse until there was nothing left of it but a  
hank 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 turn back when Ben

bought a dark bay Clydesdale that stood twenty-one hands high at

the shoulder, <sup>very likely</sup> possibly the hugest 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 t Benson, but t'ank Godt vun of t'em vears a hadt."

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

*now* "Anyone who knew Ben English more than passingly 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." *Laughs* 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 Three-Day Thurlow had an ~~immortal~~ *everlasting* local *passable* reputation as a dandy worker his first day on a job, a complainer on ~~the~~ *his* second, and gone sometime during his third. *"Ben's"* ~~I believe his~~ nicknaming had no ~~malicious~~ thought of malice behind it, however; *"He"* 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 *each* 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 <sup>all this time.</sup> "So it is a justice of language  
 that a namer himself lives on in an extra name. Originally this  
 flow of water was <sup>simply</sup> just called Gros Ventre Creek, to go with the <sup>Townsite</sup> 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,

✓ Ah  
Answer.  
mother had  
her own action  
when she  
was alone.

myself. I can see him yet, riding past our ranch <sup>on Noon Creek</sup> on his way to his

cattle range in the mountains, leading a string of cayuse packhorses

carrying block salt. On his way back he would ride into our yard

and pass the time of day with my father while still sitting in his

saddle, but hardly ever would he climb down and come in. His

customary explanation was that he had to get home and <sup>move the water.</sup> irrigate.

more  
water

He seemed to feel that if he stayed in the saddle, he indeed was on

his way, <sup>to that irrigating task.</sup>

# My father had his head cocked in a fashion ~~as if what she~~ 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, ~~and~~ it might be better said.

~~For Ben English used the water~~

of his namesake creek as a weaver uses wool. <sup>With respect.</sup> With care. With patience.

Persuading it ~~to~~ to become a product greater than itself." Once more

she smoothed the page she was reading from.



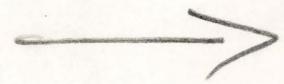


"Greater than itself. As Ben English himself became, greater than himself. From the drudgery of a freight wagon to the hell deck of a stagecoach to a <sup>dry-land</sup> homestead to a ranch of green water-fed meadows that nicely supported a family, that was the Montana path of Ben English. Following 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."

now

Was I the only one to have the thought <sup>brim up</sup> ~~downing~~ 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~~

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 <sup>, no, thousands</sup> who were homesteading this country then, maybe <sup>'Homesteader'</sup>

isn't quite as anonymous as 'Anonymous' but awfully close--and it is

titled 'The Lord of the Field.' ~~It reads:~~ 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 <sup>ofadden</sup> 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 <sup>after that</sup> ~~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 <sup>barbed</sup> ~~risky~~ 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 ~~the~~ 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 <sup>roll call</sup> ~~register~~ 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 <sup>again</sup> 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 buy 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 "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~~ <sup>never once did she glance</sup> looked down at ~~the paper~~ <sup>her ahead of pages</sup> as she said it.

A "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~~ 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 <sup>a few</sup> ~~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

in many  
couldn't  
it -  
it did not  
but  
right

direction and murmured so that only I could hear: "That mother of yours."

*Pete  
Karl (the boy)*

Then she was back with us, taking compliments briskly. Pete studied her and said: "Decided to give <sup>big boys</sup> ~~the~~ 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 <sup>t</sup> ~~time~~ 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 <sup>creep breeze</sup> ~~wind~~ had <sup>lifted and</sup> ~~lain~~ across her ~~side~~ ear.

# "I think," he said, "I think ~~is~~ 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~~ times every rodeo by rampaging broncs. When that happened, 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 all be right back in front of the chutes, preening and yakking again. I suppose the chute society offended back, preening and yakking. 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 ~~all~~ 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 ~~calves~~ <sup>c</sup> there, the air full to capacity ~~of~~ <sup>with</sup> dust and bawling and whinnying.

Out front, about half the chute society was already planted in place, tag-ends of ~~half a dozen~~ <sup>their</sup> 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 wasn't yet in evidence--~~go up~~ <sup>settling themselves at</sup> into the far end of the grandstand, farthest from the dust the bucking horses would kick up.

# other

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 <sup>an advantageous</sup> 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 Morrissette  
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.

1

People kept accumulating, I kept watching. A Gros Ventre rodeo always is slower to get under way than the Second Coming.

Then I ~~slipped~~ 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 <sup>four-bit</sup> ~~dollar~~ ~~piece~~ ~~bill~~ my father had bestowed. Fifty whole cents. Maybe the ~~money~~ 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 <sup>picnic</sup> options of trout or fried chicken, ~~at the picnic~~ 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?"

I never  
saw  
Bully 007

<sup>inquirer</sup>  
The ~~sayer~~ was Dode Withrow, and his condition answered <sup>as to</sup> why he  
Midge and my folks and the others. ~~wasn't~~  
wasn't up in the grandstand with my parents and the Reeses and Midge.

~~expression goes,~~ <sup>Dode</sup>  
As the ~~saying has it,~~ he evidently had fallen off the wagon and was  
<sup>He,</sup> triggered out in a black sateen  
still bouncing. Dode was wearing a maroon shirt and nice gray gabardine  
<sup>stockman</sup>  
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 wife  
of mine isn't exactly looking for me." So it was one of the Withrow  
Dode and Midge built up to about once a year.  
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<sup>ie</sup>, 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~~<sup>grape</sup> 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, <sup>at this rate</sup> Dode was going to be among the earliest.

more customers - really

Dode tipped the Kessler ~~up~~ 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 <sup>grape</sup> orange pop, and that ~~be~~fuddled me, for plainly Dode was in no mood for pop. But no, he had something <sup>other</sup> else in mind, he still was <sup>gazing</sup> looking straight into my eyes. What he <sup>came out with</sup> said next clarified his message, but did not ease

my <sup>bafflement</sup> 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.

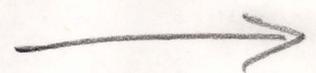
What seemed needed was a change of topic, and I asked: "Where you

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 <sup>swayed</sup> ~~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 <sup>always mended quick.</sup> ~~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, <sup>operating</sup> 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 pple 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.

detail when he showed up.

purple?

mended quick

I, JJ boss in Mike to pop. he figured' but with no humor in it.



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~~ <sup>in some</sup> 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 <sup>hung</sup> ~~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 <sup>couldn't</sup> ~~wasn't~~ quite convinced <sup>myself</sup> 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 <sup>at least</sup> had teased that off him permanently.

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

"Strictly no problem," <sup>alec</sup> ~~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?" <sup>quick-as-a-cat</sup> ~~Another quick~~ roper, who I had noticed warming up behind the chute pens.

ed: quite  
convince  
myself

"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 <sup>laid fingertips to</sup> touched the bay's foreshoulder. The feel of a horse is one of the best touches I know. "You missed the <sup>crack</sup> 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 Godt vun of t'em vears-a--"

"Ben English. Our granddad would say, There goes Benson and--"

"Look, Jicker, I got to walk this horse loose. How about you"

*made  
mistake?*



11

✓

doing me a big hairy favor?"

Something told me to be a little leery. going to be "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 <sup>toward</sup> 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 ~~silver~~ 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 ~~had~~ swung into the saddle atop  
the bay. "Easy, hoss." I stepped back a bit and Mouse looked <sup>admiring</sup> 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. <sup>She</sup> don't want

to see ~~him~~ that jughead hanging around her."



Uh huh. Revelation, all 22 chapters of it.

"Aw, the hell, Alec. <sup>I--" I</sup> ~~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 <sup>melted</sup> ~~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.

lead  
mouse?

"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 ~~trying~~ <sup>attempting</sup> to keep a full  
<sup>in place</sup> smile on your face. Leona could do it and come out with more smile  
than she started with. When she had accomplished <sup>this facial miracle</sup> ~~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 <sup>to me this</sup> ~~that~~ possibility, ~~know~~ of Earl Zane already being on  
hand. What was I supposed to do, tip my hat to him and <sup>merrily</sup> 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



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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. ~~Myself~~ "Dandy." "Nice to see them so."

and in the waiting  
the heap of mail, yours w



Leona, though, had shifted attention from me to ~~Mouse~~ 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 ~~looked~~ slowly revolved her look from ~~the~~ the horse to me, the way the beam of a lighthouse makes its sweep. <sup>Then</sup> ~~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. <sup>and</sup> 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, <sup>see,</sup> there was ~~two~~ <sup>together</sup> 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 <sup>he</sup> 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 cerrrtain as anything that they behave the way they do on purrrpose!"

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

I cast a <sup>wide</sup> look around for Alec. Or even Earl Zane, whom I would rather fight <sup>with one hand in my pocket</sup> ~~blindfolded~~ than try to explain a joke to somebody who didn't get it. "Yeah. But you see, that <sup>isn't</sup> ~~doesn't~~..."

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

The hose on a horse is no small sight anyway during this process, but with Leona there <sup>six feet away</sup> ~~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 <sup>a few times,</sup> and still the down pour continued.

A wild impulse raised in me: Mouse's everlasting whiz reminded me of Withrow Dode spraddled atop that boulder the second day of this <sup>unprecedented</sup> ~~ricocheting~~ summer, and I clamped my ~~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 <sup>come</sup> ~~been~~ more welcome. "How'd he do as company, Leona?"

Leona shined ~~in~~ around at Alec, then turned back to bestow me a final glint. And ~~in~~ 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 <sup>promptly</sup> ~~soon~~ as I was out of eyeshot 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. ~~the~~

This situation of being old enough to be on the edge of everything and too young to get to ~~the~~ 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 <sup>some sort of</sup> 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?" far out of the question, I chose neutrality--

"Oh--" Summary seemed so impossible, I chose neutrality-- about the usual. You?"

<sup>to an out of question</sup>

"Pilot again." So saying, Ray held up his hands to show his calluses. One hard <sup>oblong</sup> bump across the base of each finger, like sets of knuckles on his palms. I nodded in <sup>commendation</sup> 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.

# Now Ray thrust his right <sup>mitt</sup> 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 <sup>in Butte</sup> boyhood when

<sup>still</sup> 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 <sup>hand duel</sup> 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, ~~proof~~ 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 <sup>had driven</sup> 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 <sup>damn</sup> well what was intended here, and that's the way it did happen.

Off up the <sup>South</sup> ~~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

EH from Butte

damn  
was at  
my at





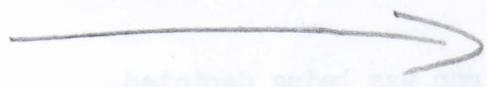
entertain one another.

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 ~~inside~~ 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 ~~and~~ by sight.

He was a haunting kid to look at. His eyes were within long deep-set arcs, as if always squinched 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 <sup>blonde</sup> mustaches. And then a flattish nose which, wide as it was, barely accommodated all the freckles assigned to it.

color?  
blonde?



no 9

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, <sup>as if</sup> this kid looked more ~~like~~ he'd <sup>out of</sup> ~~like~~ a pumpkin 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, <sup>at</sup> any school <sup>yard</sup> 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~~ <sup>this</sup> day at English Creek.

So we were afoot with one another and not knowing what to do about it, and ended up wandering the <sup>creek bank north of</sup> ~~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 <sup>dark</sup> ~~in~~ the clear water.

In fact,  
I asked Ray if he felt like fishing, but for some reason he looked at



me a little suspiciously and muttered "huh-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.

hopping  
remu-  
swamp

It was semi-swampy going, so at least we could concentrate on stretching or jumping across the wet holes.

anything

doing something. 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 <sup>so noticeably ritzier</sup> considerably better than my everyday ones <sup>that</sup> 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 <sup>day</sup> ~~morning~~ still <sup>gaped</sup> ~~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 <sup>drew</sup> brought a real yelp from him. Also

<sup>a</sup> the comment to me: "Watch out with those, beetle brain."

"Didn't mean to," I apologized. Which <sup>most likely</sup> ~~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 <sup>descend</sup> ~~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 <sup>pistcuffs</sup> ~~battle~~ degenerated into a wrestle. More accurately, a mud wallow.

~~Neither one of us ended up permanently on top.~~ <sup>each</sup> We ~~both~~ were strong enough, and <sup>outraged</sup> ~~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 ~~there~~ figured my muss didn't matter as much.

Of course, try convince my mother of that. <sup>Come noon</sup> We had to straggle

in ~~at noon~~ to get any dinner, and when she <sup>laid eyes on</sup> saw us, we were in for a <sup>scouring in</sup>

<sup>in by a scouring, in ways than one.</sup> ~~marathon of scrubbing.~~ <sup>Ray</sup> She made <sup>change into</sup> ~~Ray put on~~ a set of my clothes--

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

and <sup>sat</sup> ~~put~~ us at opposite ends of the table while we <sup>then immediately</sup> ate, and afterward

she ~~sharply~~ 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 <sup>noonhour</sup> ~~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 <sup>5</sup> which

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

direction of Ray's remark caught my <sup>notice</sup> ~~attention~~; "horse apple" was pretty

<sup>back</sup> far ~~down~~ the scale from "turkey dink."

For once in my life I latched on to a possibility. I held my

<sup>tendered</sup>  
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 <sup>made</sup> ~~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.

Start this at top of new page, please.

26

Now that we ~~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~~ <sup>the</sup> same high school class, <sup>we were.</sup>

~~had a~~ world-by-the-tail

Marcella was trim in figure like Midge and ~~had Dode's world-capturing~~

~~grin~~ <sup>like Dode's usual one.</sup>

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 <sup>in</sup> perching up there above general humanity, but right

then I doubted it. I considered that the top-pole perch Ray and I

<sup>like this</sup> 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

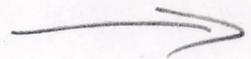
would originate right beside us, where even now the broncs for the

first section of bareback riding were being hazed into the chutes

alongside my corral ~~perch~~ <sup>spot</sup>. The particular Gros Ventre bucking chute

setup was that as six broncs <sup>at a time</sup> were hazed in for their set of riders,

pole panels were retracted between each chute, leaving <sup>what had been</sup> 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,~~ <sup>I suppose.</sup> But what  
 is ~~memorable~~ to me about it is the instant before the pole panels ~~are~~ <sup>were</sup>  
 shoved into place to serve <sup>as</sup> ~~chute walls~~ <sup>dividers</sup>: when the horses ~~have~~ <sup>came</sup> ~~swarmed~~ <sup>ing</sup>  
 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 <sup>perplexed</sup> ~~startled~~ animals. There ~~are not~~  
~~many sights like it.~~ <sup>are its equal.</sup>



Above and to the left of Ray and me was the announcing booth and its inhabitants, a <sup>micro</sup>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 <sup>the</sup> 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 ~~him~~ evidently was in residence at the far end of the booth, angled out of view from us, ~~far~~ but a large round microphone like a waffle iron standing on end indicated his site. <sup>Then</sup> 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 <sup>this</sup> ~~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 ~~stairs~~ <sup>ladder!</sup>"

Heads swiveled like weathervanes hit by a tornado. And yes, Ray and I also sent our eyes ~~over~~ <sup>around</sup> to the little ~~flight~~ <sup>ladder</sup> along the side of the announcing booth and the hypnotizing progress up ~~them~~ <sup>it</sup> 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~~ <sup>herself</sup> 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 ~~had been~~ <sup>was</sup> 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~~ <sup>Velma happened across</sup> 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 ~~he~~ <sup>he</sup> 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. ~~I cite~~

mod
 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 <sup>new</sup> 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 ~~an~~ 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 ~~for her~~ annual new slacks of stunning snugness. One of the ~~the~~ theoreticians in the chute society just now was postulating a fresh concept, that maybe <sup>Velma</sup> ~~she~~ heated them with an iron, put them on hot, and ~~it~~ let them shrink down on her like the rim onto a wagon wheel.



remarks by  
Ray's friend.

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 ~~man~~ bronc rider, or any other. But let that go.  
My point here is just that in the earlier time, only rare self-advertised  
that of Velma Simms  
rumps such as ~~Penny Thorpe'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 ~~asked~~ 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 <sup>between</sup> a howl and a yowl issued above us. A sort of high HHHRUNGH 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.

no 91

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 phonographs, 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 <sup>91</sup> to Billings for it," informed Ray, who had overheard this information when Tollie came to the lumber yard for <sup>a number of</sup> 2x4s to ~~be~~ 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.



either left white space or put dashes.

answer  
↓

"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 ~~the~~ 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 felled: 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. ~~You know~~

5# {

"The Fourth of July is called the cowboys' Christmas and our festivities here <sup>4/3</sup> today will get underway in just--"

"Called what?" somebody yelled from the chute society. "That's

~~Brainerd~~ <sup>Tollie</sup> for you, sweat running down his face and he thinks it's snowflakes."

"Santy Claus must have brought him that <sup>goddamn talking</sup> contraption," <sup>guessed somebody else.</sup>

"New, you guys, lay off now," a third one put in. <sup>Tollie's</sup> ~~Brainerd's~~ maybe

right. It'd explain why he's as full of shit as a Christmas goose."

Everybody below us ~~heehed~~ hee-heeed at that while Tollie roared on about the <sup>splendiferous</sup> glorious tradition of rodeo and what heart-stopping excitement we were going to view in this arena today.)

~~Brainerd~~ <sup>Tollie</sup> was a kind of <sup>plodding</sup> blurdy talker anyway, and now with him slowed

down either out of respect for the new sound system or because he was