

1

If the foothills of the Two were the edge of habitable country,
some of English Creek's people had sited themselves up on the lip of the edge.

*wind clouds -
can hear
wind coming
over mountains*

Merle Dorrance, ^{a bachelor} who had the place farthest ⁱⁿ up under the mountains,
homestead land ^{which} [^] butted right against the national forest line, faced
almost combat conditions. In winter the wind slammed through there like
you wouldn't believe, and snow drifted until it covered Merle's fenceposts
and left him guessing its depth beyond that. Summers, Merle retaliated
on at least three fronts. His days he spent ransacking the ranch for
hay, mowing every coulee that showed enough grass to fill a sheep's
belly. Then each dusk he went over to the north fork with his shotgun
and sat sentry for beaver. His contention with beaver about the north
fork--Merle of course wanting water for his hay coulees, ^{the beaver insisting} ~~they figuring~~
they deserved it for their dams and lodges--was never-ending.

Mink have got all the reputation, but these buggers outbreed them all
to hell, Merle said in half-admiration. His third field of contention,
though, made the beaver battle look like a skirmish. Bears. Merle was
a burly man with a big low slaps of jaw his neck sort of sloped up into,
in a way that always reminded me of a picture of a pelican. The notion
of him out after a bear was strange enough to be amusing, that pelican
jaw in pursuit of, say, a half-ton grizzly. I

2
suppose the bears never saw the entertainment in the situation, though,

remorselessly
for Merle trapped them ~~relentlessly~~ ^{remorselessly}. More than once my father veered off from some little stand of timber where Merle had laid poles to keep

livestock out and nailed up a sign saying WATCH OUT BEAR TRAP to warn

humans; in there would be a can of bacon grease dangling over a huge

steel trap, or if the pole pen showed disturbance, in there would be

perpetrated
the bacon grease bait and the trap and a damn ^{ed perturbed} ~~upset~~ bear. No man's land,

my father called Merle's neighborhood of the Two, and gave it the widest

berth he could.

Next to Merle's place George and Aggie ~~Emrich~~ ^E ran a shirt-tail outfit, a few cattle and a little

hay and a broken-backed barn for the benefit of both. The Emrichs

lived on terms no one else could penetrate, let alone savvy. About

99 99/100ths of the talking for the two of them was done by ~~Mag~~ ^{Aggie,} and it was all pretty general.

Whatever might have been going on in George's head got translated by

her. ^{this time} George figured we'd try lumber on that shed roof that keeps

ablowing off, ^{in her near-baritone,} she would declare, ^{his wisdom was} as if George were dead and being

recalled. Which may, in fact, just have been habit with ~~Mag~~ ^{Aggie,} for

she'd been a widow when she married George, and her first husband,

Tom Felton, she always referred to as "the other one."

in her near-baritone

The third of the ranches on our into-the-mountains route was Walter Craig's. Although he was ~~much~~ the oldest of these North Fork ranchers Walter was

much the newest to the area. Only three or four years ago he had moved here from down in the Ingomar country in the southeastern part of the state, where he had run several bands of sheep. I have never heard of a setup like it before or since, but Walter and a number of other Scotch ~~3~~ sheepmen, dedicated bachelors all, lived there in the Ingomar Hotel and operated their sheep outfits out of their back pocket, ^{and hat,} you might say.

Not a one of them possessed a real ranch, just grazing land they'd laid their hands on one way or aⁿ other, plus wagons for their herders, and of course sheep and more sheep. Away each of those old Scotchies would go once a week, out from that hotel with boxes of groceries in the back of a Model T to tend camp. For whatever reason, Walter pulled out of hotel sheep tycooning--my father speculated that one morning he turned to the Scotchman next to him at the table and burred, Jock, for thirrty yearrs ye've been eating yourr oatmeal aye too loud, got up and left for old Flatley good--and bought the ~~so~~ ranch ~~here~~ here for next to nothing.

The general opinion was that the isolation up here under the mountains had bent these people, as a prevailing wind will hunch a tree. Walter Craig for instance would have nothing to do with banks; the ~~theory~~ theory ran that whatever money he had was planted around his place in Mason jars. (Although, as my father pointed out, who's to say Walt's not just a helluva lot smarter about banks than the rest of us.) Merle's beaver and bear fixations, George and Aggie's one-tongued conversation: they could be spoofed at, but generally by persons who had no idea what it took to survive in the very shadow of the Two's mountains.

1

Although there were few things surer to hold my eyes than a rider
cresting that rise of road, ^{with} all the eastern horizon under him as if he
was traveling ~~down~~ out of the sky, and then the outline of him and his
horse ^{in gait} ~~coming~~ down and down the steady slow slant toward the forks of
English Creek, almost a mile of their combined ^{parading} figure approaching, I did
my watching of Alec and Leona as I crossed the yard to the ranger station.
I knew better than to have my mother call me time number three.

not
descrip
of station,
kitchen

after pace
a short
rest time

I went on in to wash up, and I suppose was a little more deliberately
offhand than I had to be by waiting until I'd dipped water into the
basin and added hot from the kettle before I announced, "Company."
The word always ^{will} ~~does~~ draw an audience.
(My father looked up from where he was going over paperwork about
the grazers' allotments, and my mother's eyebrows drew into that alignment
that let you know you had all of her attention and had better be
worth it.

"Alec and Leona," I reported through a face rinse. "Riding like
^{prettiest one of them}
~~the first one here~~ gets to kiss the other one."

"You seem to know a remarkable lot about it," my mother said.

Actually, that sort of thing was starting to occur to me. I was fourteen.

Fourteen, hard on to fifteen, as I once heard one of the beerhounds

around the Medicine Lodge saloon in Gros Ventre describe that complicated age.

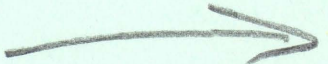
But there wasn't any of this I was ~~going~~^{about} to confide to my mother, who
 now instructed: "When you're done there you'd better bring in that
spare chair from your bedroom." She ~~gave~~^{cast} the pots and pans atop the
 stove a calculating look, then as if having reminded herself turned
 toward me and added: "Please." ~~When I went~~^{left} ~~By the time I was out of~~ the room
 she already had rattled a fresh stick of wood into the kitchen range
 and ~~starting~~^{was} ~~to do~~^{in an} whatever it is cooks like her do to ~~multiply~~^{connive} contrive
~~a supper~~^{food} for three into ~~one~~^{a supper} for five.

Remind me in the morning, I could overhear my father say, to do
the rest of this Uncle Sam paper.

I'll serve it to you with breakfast, promised my mother.

Fried, he said. Done to a cinder would suit me, particularly Van
Bebber's allotment. It'd save me arguing the Section Twenty grass with
him one more time.

You wouldn't know how to begin a summer without that argument with
Ed, she answered. Are you washed?



By the time I came back into the kitchen with the ^{spare} chair which had been serving as my nightstand, Alec and Leona were arriving through the doorway, him inquiring Is this the McCaskill short-order house? and her ^{beaming} ~~looking~~ up at him as if he'd just recited all of Shakespeare. I will always admit, they were a pair to look on. By now Alec was even taller than my father, and had the same rich red head of hair; atop each of them, a blood-sorrel flame which several hundred years of kilts and skirts being flung off had fanned into creation.

^{necessarily}
Resemblance isn't ~~duplication~~,

though, and I see in my mind's eye that there was the message of that ~~as~~ as promptly as my father and my brother were in the same room that evening. Where my father never seemed to take up as much space as his size might warrant, Alec somehow took up his share and more. I noticed this now, how Alec had begun to stand in that shambly wishbone way a cowboy adopts, legs and knees spraddled farther apart than they need to be, as if hinting to the world that he's sure longing for a horse to trot in there between them.



*Richard
W. 6/2/67*

me 6/2/67

Alec was riding for the big WW ranch, his second summer as a hand there.

It had caused some ruction, his going back to cowboying instead of

taking a better-paying town job this summer, such as driving truck for

Adam Kerz as my mother particularly suggested. But the past year or so

he had had to shut off his ears to a lot of opinions my parents had

about his cowboy phase. Last Fourth of July when Alec showed up in

rodeo clothes which included a red bandanna around his neck, my father

asked him: What, is your Adam's apple cold? ^{4/} Not that you could ever

dent Alec for long. I have told that he had a head-up ^{way} ~~went~~ of riding,

as if always trying to see over a ridgeline in front of him. A young

king might ride that way going home from his coronation. How I should

have said it is that on horseback Alec looked as if he was riding the

world itself, and even afoot as he was here in the kitchen he seemed

as if he was being carried to where he wanted to go. Which, just then,

I guess you could say he was. Everything had been coming up aces for

him that year. Beating Earl Zane's time with Leona. Riding for the ~~big~~ ^{Double W} this green high-grass summer.

~~WW ranch, his second summer as a hand there.~~ And in the fall he would

be headed for Bozeman, the first McCaskill ^{to manage} to go to college. Already

my parents had pieced together ^{enough of} the financing of it, a loan from my

my mother's brother Pete Reese, and my father arranging a part-time

job for Alec with a range management professor at the college who knew

us from having spent some time up ^{here} ~~her~~ studying the Two. College

cost was going to take some exerting, ^{by us all,} but then, what didn't? Besides,

Alec hadn't hit anything in life yet that had stopped him. We none of

us ^{held} ~~had~~ a doubt that four years from now, ^g he would step out of Bozeman

as an engineer, if he listened to my father, or as an architect, if my

mother's ambition for him prevailed. ^{Alec} ~~He~~ was a doer, as people said of

him. My own ^{earliest} ~~first~~ memory of this brother of mine was the time--I must

have been four, ^g and him eight--when he took me into the pasture where

the ranger station's saddle horses were grazing and said Here's how you

mooch them, Jick. He eased over to the nearest horse, waited until it

put its head down to eat grass, then straddled its neck. When the horse

raised its head Alec was lifted, and slid down the neck into place on its

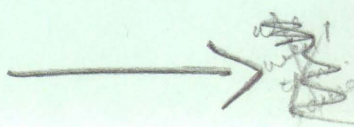
back and simultaneously gripped the mane to hang on and steer by. Now

you mooch that mare he called to me, and I went beside the big chomping animal and flung my right leg over as he had, and was elevated into a bareback rider just as he was.


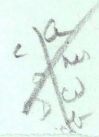
'Lo, Jicker, Alec said across the kitchen to me now after his greeting to my mother and father. How's the world treating you?

Just right, I said back automatically. 'Lo, Leona.

not ~~A~~ Leona too was a horseperson, I guess you'd call it these days.
Tollie
When ~~Tom~~ Zane held his auction of fresh-broke saddle horses in Gros Ventre every year, he always enlisted Leona to ride them into the auction ring because there is nothing that enhances a ~~horse~~ ^{saddle pony} more than a good-looking girl up there on his back.
Right now, though, ^{entering} ~~in~~ my mother's kitchen ^{Leona's} ~~her~~ role was to be milk and honey. Which she also was ^{first-rate} ~~good~~ at. A ~~man~~ ^{stepped} kind of pause ~~came~~ in with Leona whenever she arrived somewhere, a long breath or two or maybe even three during which everyone seemed to weigh whether her hair could really be so gold, whether her figure actually lived up to all it advertised on first glance. I noticed once that her chin was pointier than I like, but by the time any male looked Leona over enough to reach that site, he was prepared to discount that and a lot more.



We still were getting used to the idea of Leona, the three of us in the family besides Alec. His girls before her were from the ranch families in here under the mountains or from the farm folks east of Gros Ventre. Nor was Leona in circulation at all for the past few years, going with Tollie Zane's son Earl as she had been. But this past spring, Alec's last in high school and Leona's next-to-last, he somehow cut Earl Zane out of the picture. Swap one cowboy for another, she might as well have stayed put, my mother said at the time, a bit perturbed with Alec about his intention for the Double W job again and also, I can see back now, about the instant enthusiasm both Alec and Leona were bringing to their romance. Well, it will happen: two people who have been around each other for years and all of a sudden finding that nobody else in history has ever been in love before, they're inventing it all themselves. At least it was that way with Alec and Leona then.



4 Anyway, there in the kitchen
~~So~~ we went through that pause period of letting Leona's looks bask
 over us all, and on into some nickel-and-dime gab between Alec and
 my father--

Working hard?

Well, sure, Dad. Ever see me do anything different?

Just times I've seen you hardly working.

The Double W sees against that. Y'know what they say, nobody on
 the Double W ever gets a sunburn, they don't have time.

--and then my mother was satisfied that she had multiplied the
 food on the stove sufficiently, and said: I expect you brought your
 appetites with you? Let's sit up.

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

"How's cow chousing?" My father was handing the mashed potatoes to Leona, but looking across at Alec.

"It's all right."
~~"All right."~~ Alec meanwhile was presenting the gravy to Leona, before he realized she didn't yet have spuds on her plate. He colored a little, but notched out his jaw and then asked back: "How's rangering?"

When my father was a boy a piece of kindling flew up from the axe and struck the corner of his left eye. The vision was ~~aved~~ ^{saved} but ever after, that eyelid would droop to about half-shut whenever amusement made him squint a little. It descended now as he studied the meal traffic piling up around Leona. Then he made his reply to Alec: It's all right.

I had the bright idea this conversation could benefit from my help, so I chimed in: Counting starts tomorrow, Alec. Dad and I'll be up there a couple three days. Remember that time

you and I were along with him and Spencer's herder's dog Moxie got full of porcupine quills and we both--"

Alec gave me a grin that was tighter than it ought to have been from a brother. "Don't let all those sheep put you to sleep, sprout."

4 Sprout? Evidently there was no telling what might issue from a person's mouth when he had a ^{blond} girl to show off in front of, and ~~I told Alec so~~ ^{the look I ~~gave~~ ^{sent}} Alec told him so.

2 seemed
 100 off balance

He a
 three do

57A

~~7-23-51~~

✓
OK

more
New York
#

Melander dabs that bit of stick to the New Archangel earth;

Baranof Island he draws, and the Queen Charlotte group, and Vancouver

Island, and fourth, last, this coastline between the Strait of Juan

de Fuca and the mouth of the Columbia River. ^{One hundred fifty} ~~900~~ miles lie between

strait and river, although Melander did not ^{have} ~~have~~ that number when

he drew, nor does Karlsson have so much as a ~~measured~~ cross-eyed guess

of it as he cadences in the dark off this ^{final} ~~last~~ coast. The miles of this shore,

Even had either of these unlikely canoe captains known the total,

the miles of this shore do not much resemble those of the Alaska-

British Columbia coast to the north, that crammed seaboard of waterside

mountains and proliferated islands. In certain profiles, in the ancient

pewtered light of continent and ocean alloying, this cousin coast ^{does} ~~stands~~

handsome; but strong in detail rather than soaring gesture. Tidepools,

arches of rock, the tidemark creeping higher on its beaches with each

are they feeding
"How ~~do they feed~~ at the Double W?" My mother, here. "Leona,

take some more ham and pass it on to Jick. He goes through food like

a one-man army these days." I might have protested that too if my plate

hadn't been nearly empty, particularly of ^{fried} ham.

It's--filling. The question seemed to put Alec a little off

balance, and I ^{noticed} ~~saw~~ Leona provide him a little extra wattage in her next gaze at him.

disc.
Y-L. said
give him a Y

"So is sawdust," said my mother, plainly ^{awaiting} ~~waiting for~~ considerably more report.

"Yeah, well," Alec fumbled, I was beginning to wonder whether cowboying had dimmed his wits, maybe driven his backbone up ^{through} ~~into~~ the

judgment part of his brain. "you know, it's usual ranch grub." He

sought down into his plate for further description and finally ^{proclaimed} ~~said~~

again: "Filling, is what I'd call it."

"How's the buttermilk business?" my father asked Leona, I suppose

to ^{steer} ~~get~~ matters off Alec's circular track. Her parents, the Tracys,

ran the creamery in Gros Ventre.

"Just fine," Leona responded along with her flash of smile. She

seemed to be on the brink of saying a lot more, but then just passed


a full share to my father and another
that smile around to the rest of us, ~~a share~~ to my mother and then one

to me that made my throat tighten a little, ^{then} letting it rest last and

^{coziest}
~~warmest~~ on Alec. She had a natural ability at that, producing some

pleasantry ~~and~~ then lighting up the room so you thought the remark

amounted to a whole hell of a lot more than it did. I do envy ^{a that knack} ~~smoothness~~ in
^{a person} ~~people~~, though likely wouldn't have the patience to ^{use} ~~practice~~ it myself even
if I had ^{it} ~~the knack~~.



How's this, how's that, fine, all right, you bet. If this was the level of sociability that was going to go on, I intended to ~~make~~ ^{damn promptly} excuse myself to get back to working on my saddle, the attractions of Leona notwithstanding. But then just as I was trying to ~~gauge~~ ^{estimate ahead to} whether an early piece of ~~pie~~ ^{rhubarb} could be coaxed from my mother or I'd have to wait till later, ~~when~~ Alec all at once put down his fork and came right out with:

"We got something to tell you. We're going to get married."

This kicked the conversation in the head entirely. My father seemed to have forgotten about the mouthful of coffee he'd just drunk, while my mother looked as if Alec had announced he ~~was going~~ ^{intended} to take a pee in the middle of the table. Alec was trying to watch both of them at once, and Leona was favoring us all with one of her searchlight smiles.

"How come?"

Even yet I don't know why I said that. I mean, I was plenty old enough to know why people got married. There were times, seeing Alec and Leona mooning around together, when I seemed to savvy more than I actually had facts about, if that's possible.

Focused as he was on how our parents were going to respond,
the philosophy question from my side of the table jangled Alec.

"Because, because we're--we love each other, why the hell do you think?"

~~about notice~~

"Kind of soon in life to be so certain on that, isn't it?"

suggested my father.

"We're old enough," Alec shot back. And meanwhile gave me a
snake-killing look as if I was going to ask old enough for what, but
I honestly didn't intend to.

"When's all this taking place?" my father came up with next.

"This fall." Alec looked ready to say more, ~~but~~ then held on
to it, finally just delivered it in one dump: Walt Williamson'll let
us have the Foster place house to live in.

It was up to my mother to cleave matters entirely open. "You're
saying you'll stay on at the Double W this fall?"

"Yeah. It's what I want to do." The unsaid part of this was
huge, more colossal than anything I had ever felt come into our kitchen
~~huge: Alec was choosing against college.~~
before. Alec was choosing against college.

"Alec, you will End Up as Nothing More Than a Gimped-Up Saddle

Stiff, and I for one Will Not--"

as big as
anything I
had ever felt
in our fam.

More out of samaritan instinct than good sense my father headed
~~my mother~~ off with a next query to Alec: "How you going to support yourselves
on a cow chouser's wages?"

"You two did, at first."

"We starved out at it, too."

We ain't going to starve out. Alec's grammar seemed to be
 cowboyifying too. Walt'll let me draw ahead

on my wages for a few heifers this fall, and winter them with the rest
of the outfit's. It'll give us our start."

My father finally thought to set down his coffee cup. "Alec,
let's keep our shirts on here"--language can be odd; I had the vision
 just then of us all sitting around the table with our shirts off, Leona
 across from me in full pure double-barreled display--"and try see
what's what."

I don't see there's any what's what about it, Alec declared.

People get married every day.

So does the sun rise, my mother told him, without ~~particular participation~~
~~complication~~ by you.

Mom, now damn it, listen--

We all better listen, my father tried again. →

to
 see
 he com
 too

mod

"Leona, we got nothing against you. You know that." Which was somewhat short of true in both its parts, but I'll delve into that situation a little later. "It's just that, Godamighty, Alec, cattle have gone bust time after time these last years. That way of life just has changed. Whether anybody'll ever be able to start off from scratch in the cow business and make a go of it, I don't see how--"

Alec was like any of us, he resisted having an idea pulled from under him. "Rather have me herding sheep up on one of your allotments, would you? There'd be something substantial to look forward to, I suppose you think, sheepherding."

My father seemed to consider. "No, most probably not, in your case. It takes a trace of common sense to herd sheep." He said it lightly enough that Alec would have to take it as a joke, but there was a poking edge to the lightness. "Alec, I just think that whatever the hell you do, you need to bring an education to it these days. That old stuff of banging a living out of this country by sheer force of behavior doesn't work. Hasn't for almost twenty years. This country can outbang any man. Look at them along this creek. Spencer, Ed your Uncle Pete. Van Bebber, the Busbys, Withrow, They've all just managed to hang on,

and they're as good a set of stockmen as you'll find in this whole
goddamn state. You think any of them could have got underway, in
years like ~~thunder~~ there've been?"

with that litany of the local optimists.
"Last year was better than the one before," Alec defended. "This
one looks better than that."

"And if about five more come good back-to-back, everybody'll be
almost to where they were fifteen or twenty years ago."

Dad--Dad, listen. We ain't starting from fifteen or twenty years
ago. We're starting from now, and we got to go by that, not whatever
the hell happened to--to ^{any} ~~some~~ body else.

You'll be starting in a hole, my father said. And an everlasting
climb out.

That's as maybe. But we got to start. Alec looked at Leona as
if he was storing up for the next thousand years. And we're going to do
it married. Not going to wait our life away.

We aren't
starting from
15 or 20 yrs
ago. We're
starting from
now.

1

Les Withrow's sheep were late, I don't know whether because of a ~~late~~^{slow} start by his herder or if it just was one of those mornings when sheep are reluctant. I had learned from my father to expect lateness, because if you try to follow some exact time when you work with sheep you will rapidly drive yourself loony.

I might as well go up over here and have a look at that winter-kill, my father decided. A stand of pine about ~~half~~^{half} a mile to the north was showing the rusty color of death.

How about you hanging on here in case the sheep show up. I won't be more than an hour. He forced a grin. Think about how to grow up saner than that brother of yours.

This whole family could stand some thinking about, I thought in reply but didn't say. My father climbed on Mouse and went to worry over winter-kill on his forest.

I took out my jackknife and started putting my initials into ~~the~~^{bare} fallen ~~on~~ log I sitting on. The J ~~wasn't too bad~~^{wasn't too bad} ~~was easy enough~~^{needed} but the c's of McC ~~had~~^{needed} to be carefully done. So that ~~was absorbing~~^{absorbed me, to}

the point where I was startled by the first blats of the Withrow sheep.

2

I headed on down through the timber ^{on foot} to help bring them to the counting

vee ^{could} a sheepman ~~might~~ have the whole Seventh Cavalry pushing his
band along ^{and he'd still} ~~but always~~ seemed ^{of} glad ~~for~~ further help. Les Withrow

^{spotted} ~~saw~~ me and called, "Morning, Jick. That father of yours come to his
senses and turn his job over to you?"

"He's patrolling to a winter kill. Said he'd be back by the
time we get ^{up} to the vee."

"At the rate these sonsabitches want to move ^{along} this morning, he's
got time to patrol the whole Rocky Mountains. ^{This was} ~~Les~~ said ~~this~~ loud
by Les figured alone.
enough that I ~~know~~ it was not ~~just~~ for my benefit. Sure enough,

an answer ^{shot} ~~came~~ out of the timber to our left: "You might just remember
the sonsabitches are sheep instead of racehorses." Into view over

there came Les's herder, Pete Hoy. For as long as I had been ac-

companying my father on counting trips and I imagine for years before,

Les and Pete ^{Hoy} ~~had~~ been wrangling with each other as much as they wrangled
their sheep.


"Hello ~~there~~, Jick. Don't get too close to Les there, he's on the
prod this morning. ~~Wants~~ the job done before it ~~gets~~ started."

insert -
this was
said by
Les that
figured

I'm told you can tell the liveliness of a herder by how his sheep
move, Les suggested. Maybe you better lay down, Pete, while we send
for the undertaker.

If I'm slow it's because I'm starved down, trying to live on the
grub you bring. Jick, Les is finally gonna get out of the sheep business.
He's gonna set up a ^{stinginess} school for you Scotchmen.

That set all three of us laughing as we pushed the band along, for
one of the anthems of the Two was Les Withrow's lament about staying on
and on in the sheep business. According to Les, both the sheep and the
humans who had anything to do with them would have shown Job true affliction.



(no 4)

This one time, the herder I'd had lost the band and was sitting in the wagon quivering that the bear were gonna get him, so I fired him and then was so hard up for a new herder that I hired a guy right

off the street there in Gros Ventre. Never'd herded sheep before, but

Well, he ^{must have} stood ~~about~~ six-six or so, said he was game to. ~~He was about big enough to eat hay~~ about big

enough to eat hay, and I guess I figured that if nothing else, he

might be good bear-wrestling material. So we got up there onto the

range and I happened to look down and see he was wearing oxfords.

"Where's your other shoes?" I say. "Got none," he says. ~~Well~~ I told

him to go off along the mountainside and look for the sheep while I

^{to try} rode up on top of the reef. Of course it started in raining, and fog,

and cold and miserable. No sheep, anygoddamnwhere. ~~Well~~ I'd been up

there most of the afternoon when all at once my horse stopped dead.

Couldn't get him to move. So I climbed off and walked ahead about

fifteen or twenty feet to take a look, and here there was a cliff that

dropped off about eight hundred feet, right down the north end of the

reef onto ^{Billy} ~~the~~ Creek. If the horse hadn't had good sense we'd've dove

right off that. So that was enough hunting sheep for that day, and when

I got back to the wagon the big guy was in there feeding his face and

he says, "I'm gonna have to have new shoes." Walking in those rocks up

there had just tore those oxfords all to hell. So, okay, I told him

I'd go to town in the morning and bring him out some damn shoes.

"What size do you take?" "Thirteens," he says. Drove into Gros Ventre
first thing the next morning, and do you think there was a shoe in the
whole damn town that big? I ended up going all the way to Conrad to
get a pair. Got back up onto the range about noon, the guy was sitting
in the wagon waiting and eating up the groceries. So I had this gonna-be
herder, with a pair of shoes I'd had to buy him out of my own pocket
as an advance on his wages, if he ever stuck with the job long enough
to earn that much wages, and still no sheep. So I sent him off around
the mountainside the other way from yesterday, and I started working
the timber on horseback, and of course here comes the rain again, harder
and colder than ever. I kept saying to myself, "This is the end of the
sheep business for me. If ~~then~~ I ever find those damn sheep this time,
this is it." About four hours of that and ^I~~we~~ finally came onto the sheep.
So I got the big guy over there and told him, "All right, now you got
something to herd, push the sonsabitches back down toward camp," and I
rode down to the wagon to try dry out. I remember standing in there
some of the water out of them,
over the stove, all my clothes draped around trying to get them dried out,
standing there with goosebumps all over me and saying, "This is it. This

does it. I am going to get out of the sonofabitching sheep business."

That was about fifteen years ago and yet here I am, still in the ^{sonofabitching} sheep
business. God, what a man puts himself through.

On up the mountainslope Les and Pete ^{Hoy} and I shoved the sheep. It took a while, because up is not a direction sheep particularly care to go, at least at someone else's suggestion. Sheep seem perpetually leery of what's over a hill, which I suppose makes them either terrifically dumb or terrifically smart.

My father was waiting for us at the counting vee, and after greetings had been said all around among him and Les and Pete Hoy,

Les handed my father a gunny sack with a couple of handfuls of cottoncake in it, said Start 'em, Mac, and stepped ^{around} ~~back~~ to his side of the counting gate.

Up at Palookaville, where the dozen bands that summered on the north end of the Two entered the ^{all at the same place} mountains, there was an actual counting corral. But here on the ^{spread-out} English Creek range the count was done on each allotment through a vee made of poles, ^{spiked onto trees,} the sheep funneling through while my father and the rancher stood beside the opening at the narrow end and counted. To head off arguments my father used a tallywhacker, a gadget about the size of a pocket watch which recorded a hundred each

time he clicked it. There weren't all that many disputes, though, the English Creek sheepmen and my father generally getting along like hand and glove.

41 ~~the narrow gate~~ ~~vee,~~
My father went through ~~into the corral,~~ to the

front of the sheep. He shook the sack in front of him, where the sheep could see it, and let a few cottonseed pellets trickle to the ground.

Then it came, that sound not even close to any other in this world,

my father's coax to the sheep: the tongue-made ~~prrrrr~~ ~~prrrrr~~

~~prrrrr~~, approximately a cross between an enormous cat's purr and the

~~cooing of a dove.~~

~~rattling buzz of a rattlesnake.~~ Maybe it was all the rs built into

a Scotch tongue, but for whatever reason my father could ~~do~~ croon that luring

call better than any sheepman on the Two. Les and Pete and I watched

now as a first cluster of ewes, attentive to the source of the prrrrs

~~prrrr~~ ~~prrrr~~, caught the smell of the cottoncake. They ~~swarmed~~ scuffled,

did some ewely butting of each other, as usual to no conclusion, then

forgot rivalry and swarmed after the cottoncake. As they snooped forward

on the trail of more, they led ~~the~~ other sheep out the gate and started

the count. You could put sheep up Mount Everest if you once got the first

ones going so the others could turn off their brains and follow.

My job was at the rear of the sheep with the herder, to keep them pushing through the counting hole and to see that none circled around after they'd been through the vee and got tallied twice. Or, whenever we counted Ed Van Bebber's band, I also was back there to see that his on instructions from Ed, herder, didn't spill some sheep around the wing of the corral while the count was going on, so that they missed being counted into the allotment.

to the enterprise

Not that I had much to add, when Pete Hoy was on hand~~s~~ at the back of the sheep. I ^{always} watched ~~him~~ Pete all I could without seeming to stare to try learn how he mastered those woolies as he did. Someway, he was able ~~to~~ just to look ewes into behaving better than they had in mind.

One old independent biddy or another would step out, size up her chance figure out who she was facing and of breaking past Pete, then shy off back into the rest of the bunch.

This of course didn't work with lambs--^{who} they have no more predictability ~~to them than chickens in a hurricane--~~ ~~behavior than quicksilver does--~~ but in their case, all Pete had to do

was say Round 'em, Taffy, and his carmel-colored shepherd dog would be sluicing them back to where they belonged.

mod
There was no better herder anywhere than Pete Hoy the ten months of

stayed
the year when he ~~was~~ sober and behind the sheep, and because this was

what
so, Les put up with ~~everything else~~ that was necessary to hang onto him.
after the lambs are shipped and then another one

The sonofagun has to have a binge just before lambing time, go down to

all
Great Falls and get bent out of shape. He's got his pattern down real

pat. The Star Cigar Store, Lena's place, he makes his headquarters, and

for the first week he drinks whiskey and his women are pretty good lookers.

The next week or so he's mostly on beer and his women are getting a

little shabby. Then for about two weeks after that he's on straight

Generally
wine and squaws. ~~Often~~ it took Les three or four trips to Great Falls

to fish Pete out of a spree. I'll get there to Lena's and track him

down and sober him up a little and have him all lined out to bring home,

and ~~then~~ he'll say, "Oh hell, I about forgot, I gotta have ^{ten} five dollars

to go pay a fellow." Then he takes off with that ten ~~dollars~~ and that's

the last I see of him. I wish to hell I had a nickel for every hour

I've spent leaning up against the cigar counter in that joint, trying

that buggin'
~~him out.~~ that buggin' out. *will*
to wait ~~that instant~~ Jesus, one time I ~~will~~ never forget, I drove

bound and
down there just determined to get him back on the job, and I went into

the Star, and no Pete. Lena told me, "He's around here somewhere, Withrow,

you just wait, he'll blow in here." So I waited. And waited. Leaning
a hole into that goddamn counter. The bar was full of guys, it's ^dbeen
railroad payday, and Lena's whores were working the crowd, Big Tit Lou
and Bouncing Betty and Nora Buffalo and some others. Bouncing Betty
had the first table, right in front of me, and she'd smile like a
million dollars at everybody who came in. And all the time those gandy
dancers were getting more and more boozed up, the place sounded like
sitting there at the bar
Hell changing shifts. So ~~there~~ ^{one of} was this one pretty good-looking gal,
about twenty, in Lena's bunch, and she was well-dressed, in a good gray
suit and I couldn't help noticing her. So did some big brakeman, who
kept buying her booze and putting his arms around her and patting her
back, down a little lower every pat. He must have been a live one,
because this girl wouldn't leave her seat at the bar for anything, I
guess figuring one of the other girls'd pick him off. Eventually of
course she wet her pants. A big wet splotch there in back of her skirt.
I could see this brakeman patting lower and lower until finally, sure
enough, he hit that spot. He had just brought his hand up in front
of his face, trying to figure out how come he's struck water, when Bouncing
Betty got up and came over to me and said, "Withrow, I think you need some
fun. On the house. We'll make it up out of Pete's next wages." I thought
about how I'd been leaning there ~~half~~ ^{two-thirds} of

the night watching all this disgusting stuff, and I thought to myself,

"By God, she is about a hundred percent right. I think Withrow does

need some fun." Right then, wouldn't you just know, in the door comes

goddamn Pete. "You looking for me?" he says. "I'm ready, let's head

on home."

Type as separate page

no 4

I was misfortunate enough to come out here to work for old Unk about
the time he bought his first car. A Model T. He figured it was a
wonderful advance, you know. Any time he wanted now he could scoot in
to Gros Ventre and get liquored up. The only thing was, going home
there were two bobwire gates between the county road and the ranch, and
the old bugger'd be so lit up he couldn't be bothered to stop and open
them. Just hit the sonsofguns with that Model T and break them down
and drive on through. And it'd be my chore the next morning to have
to go out and fix those damn gates up. I finally said, by the Christ,
I'm getting a little bit fed up with all this. I went and got me a
couple great big old railroad tie cornerposts, set them way down in the
ground, you know, and then strung just a hell of a stout gate--I put
on six strands of bob and then hog wire over that, and nailed in a
bunch of stays besides. I thought, old boy, that'll fix you. Then
a week or so, and off Unk goes on another spree, and next morning at
the breakfast table he says, "You know, Murray, you sure built some
good gates down there. I had to back up and take a run at them three
times before I could get them broke down."

type as separate page ✓

~~4~~ 7

Ed Van Bebber's parents had homesteaded not far south of Pendroy,
next to the ~~Shle~~ Sheble place. In the summer of 1917 when a four-man
surveyor crew arrived to run the route for the railroad to push north
from Bynum to Pendroy, two of them boarded with the ~~Shle~~ Shebles and the
other pair with the Van Bebbers; probably the best crop either family
ever did get off those homesteads was those surveyors. When the railroad
arrived in a few years it brought with it Ed's vision of his future.
I'd see those cowmen come into Pendroy when they shipped their stock,
they'd be pretty sorry lookers, cook over a campfire and sleep under
their wagons and kind of slink off home the next day. But sheepman,
hell, they'd arrive and ship their wool and then hang around and drink and whoop
and raise general hell, maybe party for three or four days before they'd
drive off in a fancy car of some kind. And five months later they'd
be back to ship their lambs and do it all again. Right then, I
figured the money was in sheep.

1

The day book ^{constituted} ~~was~~ my father's worst bother about being a ranger.

Early on, someone ~~had~~ told him the story of a rider-turned-ranger down

on the Shoshone ^{forest.} Cut short my horses tail and the wind blew all day,

read the fellow's first day book entry. Then with further thought,

he concluded: From the northeast. My father could swallow advice if

he had to, and so he did what he could with the ~~perpetual nag of having to jot~~ ~~the daily perpetual jotted~~

^{his activities} ~~reports~~ into the day book. When he did it was entirely another matter.

Two or three weeks he would ^{stay} ~~be~~ dutiful, then ^{came} ~~would come~~ a

Saturday morning when he had seven little yellow blank pages to show

for his week, and the filling in would start.

"Beth, what'd I do on Tuesday? That the day it rained and I
worked over the horse stalls?"

"That was Wednesday. Tuesday you rode up to look over the Noon
Creek range."

"I thought that was Thursday."

"You can think so if you like, but you'd be wrong." My mother was
careful to seem half-exasperated about these ^{scribing} ~~sessions~~, but I think she
looked forward to the chance to set my father straight on history, even
if it was only the past week's. "Thursday I baked, and you took a

rhubarb pie for the Bowens when you went to the Ear Mountain station.

Not that Louise Bowen is capable of recognizing a pie."

"Well, then, when I rode to the Billy Peak lookout, that was--

only yesterday? Friday?"

"Today is Saturday, yesterday was Friday," ^{most likely} ^{was glad to confirm} my mother ~~confirmed~~

for him.

When I became big enough to go into the mountains with him for some days at a time, my father perceived relief for his day book situation. I think we had not gone a mile along the trail above the North Fork that first morning when he reined up, said "Whyn't you kind of keep track of today for me?" and ^{presented} ~~handed~~ me a fresh-sharpened stub pencil and a pocket notebook.

It did take a little doing to catch onto my father's style. But after those first days of my reporting into my notebook in the manner of We met up with Dill Egan on the south side of Noon Creek and talked with him about whether he can get a bigger allotment to run ten more steers on and my father squashing it down ~~in~~ in his day book to Saw D. Egan about steer proposition, I adjusted.

1

About my name. John Angus McCaskill, I was christened. As soon as I began at the South Fork school, though, and gained a comprehension of what had been done to me, I put away that Angus for good. I have thought ever since that using a middle name is like having a third nostril.

out of all
I hadn't considered this before, but by then the John must already have been amended ~~beyond~~ ^{out of all} recognition, too. At least I ~~have~~ ^{can find} no memory of ever being called that, so the change must have happened pretty early in my life. According to my mother, it next became plain that "Johnnie" didn't fit the boy I was, either. "Somehow it just seemed like calling rhubarb vanilla," and she may or may not have been making a joke. With her you couldn't always tell. Anyhow, the family story goes on that she and my father were trying me out as "Jack" when some visitor, noticing that I was fair-complected but didn't have the freckles they and Alec all did, said something like: "He looks to me more like the jick of this family."

So I got dubbed for the off-card. For the jack that shares only the color of the jack of trumps. That is to say, in a game such as pitch, if spades are led the jack of clubs becomes the jick, and in

the taking of tricks the abiding rule is that jack takes jick but

jick takes joker. I explain this a bit because I am constantly

astonished by how many people, even here in Montana, no longer can play

a decent hand of cards. I believe television has got just a hell of

a lot to answer for.

Anyway, Jick I became, and have ever been. That is part of the

pondering that I find myself doing now; whether some other name would

have shifted my life any. Yet, of what I might change, I keep deciding

that ~~that~~ would not be among the first.

1

Out like this, my father tended to survive on whatever jumped out of the food pack first. He did have the principle that supper needed to be a ^{cooked} ~~hot~~ meal, especially if it could be trout. But as for the rest of the day, he was likely to offer up as breakfast a couple of slices of headcheese and a can of tomatoes or green beans, and if you didn't watch him he might do the exact same again for lunch. My mother consequently always made us up enough slab sandwiches for three days' worth of lunches. Of course, by the third noon in that high air the bread was about dry enough to strike a match on, but still a better bet than whatever my father was apt to concoct.

^{an applebutter}
We had eaten a ~~chokecherry~~ jelly sandwich and a half apiece and were sharing a can of peaches for dessert, harpooning the slices out with our jackknives to save groping into the pack for utensils, when a rider appeared at the bend of the trail downhill from us. He was on a blaze-face sorrel, who snorted at the sight of us. A black pack mare followed into sight, then a light gray with spots on his nose and his neck stretched out and his lead rope taut.

2 ✓
"Somebody's new camp tender, must be," my father said.

The rider sat in his saddle that permanent way a lot of those old-timers did, as if he lived up there and couldn't imagine sufficient reason to venture down off the back of a horse. Not much of his face showed between the buttoned-up slicker and the pulled-down brown Stetson, but thinking back on it now, I ~~believe~~ ^{am fairly sure that} my father at once recognized both the horseman and the situation.

The brief packstring climbed steadily to us, the ears of the horses sharp in interest at us and Pony and Mouse. The rider showed no attention until he was right up to us. Then, though I didn't see him do anything with the reins, the sorrel stopped and the Stetson veered half out over the slickered shoulder nearest us.

"Hullo, Mac."

"Thought it might be you, Stanley. How the hell are you?"

"Still able to sit up and take nourishment. Hullo, Alec or

Jick, as the case may be."

I hadn't seen him since I was five or six years old, yet right then I could have told you a number of matters about Stanley Meixell. That he had once been an often presence at our meals, stooping first

over the wash basin for a cleanse that included ~~his~~ the back of his

neck, and then slicking back his hair--I could have said too that

it was ^{crow-}black and started from a widow's peak--before coming to the

table. That unlike a lot of people he did not talk down to children,

never delivered them that phony ~~guff~~ guff such as, "Think you'll ever

amount to anything? That he was taller than he looked on that sorrel,

built in ~~that~~ ^{the} riderly way of length mostly from his hips down.

Of his eight or nine years since we had ~~last~~ last seen him, I couldn't

have told you anything whatsoever. So it was odd how much immediately

^{arrived} ~~came~~ to mind about ~~this~~ this unexpected man.

"Jick," I clarified. "'Lo, Stanley."

It was my father's turn to pick up the conversation. "Heard

you were gonna be campjack for the Busby boys."

"Yeah." Stanley's ^{that} "yeah" was the Missourian slowed-down kind, huskier than it ~~it~~ ought to, as if almost in two parts: yeh-uh. And his voice sounded as if a rasp

had been used ~~across~~ across the top of it. "Yeah, these times, I guess

being campjack is better than no jack at all." Protocol was back

to him now. He asked, "my father, "Counting them onto the range, are you?"

~~"Yeah."~~ ^{Spencer's} Withrow's band yesterday, and Dode ~~Cooper's~~ today."

"Quite a year for ^{feed} ~~grass~~ up here. This's been a million dollar

4 ✓
rain, ain't it? Brought the grass up ass-high to a tall Indian. Though
I'm getting to where I could stand a little sunshine to thaw out with, myself.

Probably have enough to melt you, my father predicted, soon enough.

"Could be." Stanley looked ahead up the trail, as if just
noticing that it continued on from where we stood. "Could be," he
repeated. Nothing followed that, either from Stanley or my father,
and it began to come through to me that this conversation was seriously
kinked in some way. These two men had not seen each other for the
larger part of ten years, so why didn't they have anything to say
to one another besides this small-change talk about weather and grass?

Finally my father offered: "Want some peaches? A few in here
we haven't stabbed dead yet."

"Naw, thanks. I got to head on up the mountain or I'll have
sheepherders after my hide."

My father fished out another peach slice and handed me the can
to finish. ~~At this time~~ Along with it came his casual question,

"What was it you did to your hand?"

It took me a blink or two to realize that although he said it
in my direction, the query was intended for Stanley. I saw then

5

✓

that a handkerchief was wrapped around the back of Stanley's right hand, and that he was resting that hand on the saddle horn with his ~~that~~ left hand atop it, the reverse of usual procedure there. Also, as much of the handkerchief as I could see had started off white, but now showed stains like dark rust.

"You know how it is,
"Aw, that Bubbles cayuse"--Stanley looked over his shoulder to the gray packhorse--"was kind of snakey this morning. Tried to kick into next week.
me. Took some skin off, is all."

We all contemplated Bubbles. As horses go, he looked capable not just of assault, but ^{maybe} pillage and plunder and ^{probably} ~~maybe~~ arson too. He was ewe-necked, and accented it by stretching stubbornly against the lead rope even now that he was standing still. ^{constellation of dark} The nose-spots which must have given him his name--at least I couldn't see anything else namable about him--^{just} drew a person's look, but if you happened to glance beyond them, you saw that Bubbles was looking back at you as if he'd like to be standing on your spine. How such creatures get into pack strings, I ^{I suppose} just don't know. ^{Good Help} The same way Hebners get into the human race, ~~I suppose.~~

insert description
 1 *Burke*
 "I don't remember you as having much hide to spare," my father
~~then to Stanley.~~
 said. Then, as if the idea had just ~~walked~~ *strolled* up to him out of the

trees: "How'd you like some company? I imagine it's no special fun
running a packstring one-handed."

Evidently my father had gone absent-minded again, this time about
 something he'd mentioned not ten sentences earlier. I was just set
 to remind him of our appointment with Dode ~~Cooper's~~ *Spencer's* sheep when he
 added on:

~~put in:~~ "Jick here could maybe ride along with you."

I hope I didn't show the ~~amount~~ *total* of surprise I felt. Some must
~~promptly enough~~
 have lopped over, though, because Stanley ~~promptly~~ *quickly* was saying:
"Aw, no,
Mac. Jick's got better things to do than haze me along."

→



"Think about morning," my father came back at him. "Those
packs and knots are gonna be several kinds of hell, unless you're
more left-handed than you've ever shown."

"Aw, no. I'll be out a couple or three days, you know. Longer
if any of those herders have got trouble."

"Jick's been out ~~with me~~ that long with me any number of times.
And your cooking's bound to be better for him than mine."



"Aw, ~~well~~ well," Stanley began, and stopped. He seemed to be
considering. Matters were passing me by before I could even see
them coming.

I will always credit Stanley Meixell for putting the next two
questions in the order he did.

"It ought to be up to Jick." Stanley looked directly down at
me. "How do you feel about playing nursemaid to somebody so goddamn
dumb as to get himself kicked?"

The corner of my eye told me my father ^{suggested} ~~expected~~ a ^{enthusiastic} ~~prompt~~
response to any of this.

"Oh, I feel fine about--I mean, sure, Stanley. I could, uh,
ride along. If you really want. Yeah."

Stanley looked down at my father now. "Mac, you double sure
it'd be okay?"

Even I was able to translate that. What was my father going to face from my mother for sending me off campending into the mountains with Stanley for a number of days?

"Sure," my father said, as if doubt wasn't worth wrinkling the brain for. "Bring him back when he's dried out behind the ears."

Well, then. The brown Stetson tipped up maybe two inches, and Stanley swung a slow look around at the pines and the trail and the mountainslope as if this was a site he might want to remember. I guess we ought to get to getting. Got everything you need, Jick?

I had no idea in hell what I ~~might~~^{ad} need for going off into the ^{Rocky} mountains with a one-handed campjack, but I managed to ~~say~~^{blurt}: "I guess so."

Stanley ~~gave~~^{delivered} my father the longest ~~look~~^{gaze} he had yet. "See you in church, Mac," he said, then nudged the sorrel into motion. →

black and the light gray ^{ugly} one
The ~~two~~ packhorses had passed us by the time I swung onto Pony,

and my father was standing with his thumbs in his pockets, looking
at the series of three horse rumps and the back of Stanley Meixell,
reined around onto the trail.
as I ~~rode past him.~~ "Don't forget the day book," I muttered as I
rode past him.

"Thanks for reminding me," my father said poker-faced. "I'll
give it my utmost."

#

Any of this of course goes against what my mother forever tried to tell the other three of us. That the past is a taker, not a giver. It was a warning she felt she had to put out, in that particular tone of voice with punctuation all through it, fairly often in our family. When we could start hearing her commas and capital letters, we knew the topic had become Facing Facts, Not Going Around with Our Heads Stuck in Yesterday. Provocation for it, I will say, came from my father as reliably as a dusk wind out of a canyon. Half a day at a time he might spend listening to old Toussaint tell of the roundup of 1882, when the cattlemen fanned their crews north from the elbow of the Teton River to the Canadian border and brought in a bigger and earlier than that, hundred thousand head. Or ^{the} ~~a~~ tale even before ~~that~~, the last vast buffalo hunt, Toussaint having ridden up into the Sweetgrass Hills to see down onto a prairie that looked burnt, so dark with buffalo, the herd penned into place by the plains tribes. Strange, but I can still recite the tribes and where ^{they pitched} ~~their~~ camps ^{to surround} ~~were around~~ those miles of buffalo, just as Toussaint passed ^{the lore of it} ~~them~~ to my father: Crows on the southeast, Gros Ventres and Assiniboines on the northeast, Pieguns on the west, Crees along the north, and Flatheads here to the south.

provocation
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surround

"Something to see, that must've been," my father would say at supper.

"Varick, somebody already saw it," my mother would answer. "What you'd

better Put Your Mind To is The Regional Forester's Visit Tomorrow."

Or if she didn't have to work on my father for the moment, there was

Alec when he began wearing a neck hanky and saying he was going to
choose cattle over college. That my ^{own particular} knack for remembering, which

could tuck away entire grocery lists or whatever someone had said

a couple of weeks before, made me seem

likely to round out a houseful of men ~~men~~ tilted to the past must have

been the ~~last~~ final tweak. "Jick, there isn't any law that

says a McCaskill can't be as forward-looking as anybody else. Just

because your father and your brother--"

Yet I don't know. What we say isn't always what we can do.

In the time after, it was ^{her} ~~she~~ more than anyone who would ^{and return} return to

where all four of our lives made their bend. "The summer when--" she

would start in, and as if an old three-note trill had been sung, I

knew she was turning to some memory of that last English Creek summer.

We were alike ^{at least} in that, the understanding that such a season of life

provides more than enough to wonder back at, even for a McCaskill.

#

That month of June swam in. In my life until then and only a time or two since, I had never seen the hills come so green, the draws stay so spongy with run-off. A wet May evidently could ^{sweeten} change the universe. Already my father ~~had~~ encountered cow elk drifting up and across the Continental Divide to their calving grounds on the west side. They, and the grass, and the hay meadows, and the benchland crops, all were a good three weeks ahead of season. Which accounted for the fresh mood across the Two Medicine country. They say spring rain in range country is as if someone is handing around halves of dollars bills with the remainder promised at shipping time, and so in the sheepmen, the cowmen, the Forest Service ^{people} personnel, the storekeepers in Gros Ventre, in just everyone that start of June, hope was up and would stay strong as long as the grass did.

Talk even could be heard that maybe we had seen the bottom of the Depression. Last year, after all, ^{after all, a practitioner of no nation said} ~~had been~~ ^{was} a little better than the year before; ⁼⁼ a close point of measurement which managed to overlook that the several years before that had been ^{purely} godawful. The eastern professors who write as if the Depression set in the day ~~the~~ Wall

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Street nosedived in 1929 seem not to know it, but Montana had been

on hard times for ten years by then. The winter of 1919-20 delivered

the stockmen terrible losses. As ^{Dode} Jim Cooper, who had the ranch

farthest west up English Creek, used to tell: "I went into that winter

with 4,000 head of ewes and by spring they'd evaporated to 500."

Livestock and crop prices of course ^{had fallen} fell when the war in Europe

ended. And the homesteaders who'd flocked into Montana after the

turn of the century now started flocking right back out again. It's

not much remembered, but half the banks in the state went under in

^{about the same time} the early Twenties. You could still see that right in Gros Ventre,

the English Creek Valley National Bank in business there on the

east side of the main street and ^{catty} kitty corner across from it the

West Pondera Stockmen's closed down and boarded over all those years.

So it was time hope showed up.

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itself

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drought-
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(see
Malone)

about the same time
fell
began to fall
because of
and 1. war

but the
it up

about

"Supper's in the creek," my father said. "Hide behind a tree to bait your hook, or they'll ^{swarm} ~~come~~ right out of the water after you."

Up here ~~in~~ its north fork English Creek wasn't very big. Most places you could cross it in a running jump. But ~~it~~ ^{stream} had ^{pretty} some riffles and pools with fish in them...

Each of us took our hat off and unwound the fishline and hook wrapped around the hatband. On our way up, before the willows gave out we'd cut a pair of decent length, and now notched them about an inch from the small end, tied each fishline snug into each notch so it couldn't pull off, and were ready for business. My father still had a reputation in the Forest Service from the time ^{some} ~~one~~ of ~~another~~ District One muckymuck who was quite a dry-fly fisherman asked him what these English Creek trout took best. Those guys of course have a whole ^{catechism} ~~liturgy~~ of hackles and ~~OO and OO and OO and OO~~ ^{muddlers and goofus bugs and stone flies} and nymphs and midges. ~~and OO.~~ "Chicken guts," my father informed him.

We didn't happen to have any of those along with us, but just before leaving home we'd gone ~~out~~ ^{near} to the old haystack bottom behind the barn and dug ourselves each a ~~taber~~ tobacco can of anglegorms.

advised

did not
want to
muck

if fish might
lay in either
or both.

Why the hell anyone thinks a fish would prefer a dab of ~~horsehair~~

hank
(deers
hair?)

to something as plump as a stack-bottom worm, I never have understood

the reasoning of. ⁹ The fish in fact began to prove that, right then.

I do make the concession to sportsmanship that I'll fish a riffle

deers
riffle
out of a
place...

now and again, and I pulled out my half dozen in the next quarter

hour or so. It pleased me a little that my father, at the pool

^{to loot,} ^{some} he'd chosen, took ~~about~~ five minutes longer to complete his six.

to work
over
to loot

Those little brookies, Eastern brook ~~xxx~~ trout, are among

the best eating there is...

There was a downed tree~~s~~ poking out over the trail, just above the height of a horse. I'd have to get off and lead Pony and Bubbles through. But given the disposition of Bubbles, I thought I'd better do it a horse at a time. I tied Bubbles' lead rope to a tree ~~with~~ ^{with} doubling ~~and doubling~~ the square knot just to be sure--and led Pony up the trail beyond the windfall. "Be right back with that other sonofabitch," I assured ~~him~~ ^{her} as I tied ~~his~~ ^{her} reins to the leftover limb of a stump. ~~was standing with~~ Bubbles ~~had~~ his neck in the one position he seemed to know for it--stretched out like ~~it~~ ^{he} was being towed--and I had to haul hard on his lead rope for enough slack to untie ~~the~~ my knots. "Come on, crowbait," I said as civilly as I could, and tugged ~~Bubbles~~ ^{some} ^{ing} ^{got} ^{him} into motion.

~~He~~ ^{Bubbles} didn't like the prospect of the downed tree when we got ~~up~~ ^{there.} ~~to~~ I could see his eyes fix on the shaggy trunk overhead, and his ears laid back a little. But one thing about Bubbles, he didn't lead much harder when he was being reluctant than when he wasn't.

I had him most of the way past the windfall ~~he~~ when he managed to ~~step on~~ brush against a broken branch hanging down from the trunk. It whisked in across the front of his left hip toward his crotch, and Bubbles went straight sideways off the mountain.

"Just how old're you?"

"Fifteen," I maintained, borrowing ^{the next} ~~a~~ few months.

"Well. I guess a swallow or two wouldn't hurt you." He passed me the bottle.

I swigged somewhat ^{deeper} ~~more~~ than I intended, and was blinking hard when I set the bottle back on the board table. Stanley was ^{feeding} tending the ~~fire~~ stove while I was at this.

"So, what d'you think? Will it ever replace water?"

I didn't know about that, but ^{thaw} ~~it~~ did loosen my tongue. Before long, I heard myself asking, "You haven't been in this country the last while, have you?"

"Naw. ~~It~~ "

"Where you been?"

Wyoming?
"A lot ~~lots~~ of places." He seemed to review. "Down in Colorado for Talk about dry. ^{Then} awhile. ~~And~~ over in the Big Hole Basin, a couple of haying seasons."

He considered, summed: "Around." Which moved him to another drink from the bottle.

I had one, too. "What ~~are~~ you doing back up here?"

"Tending camp, as you can plainly see. Don't you know, they advertise in those big newspapers for one-handed camptenders?"

Got to
7:00
sometime
wet your
neck

brand
name
007
Dr. Hall

y'know

you
bet.

Alec and I had gone to the South Fork school, along with the children of the ^{families} ranchers along that stretch of English Creek--the Busbys, the ^{Spencer} ~~Cooper~~ girl, ^{the Withrows,} ~~Gronlunds,~~ ^{the Van Bebbers,} our Reese cousins, ~~Van der Wendes,~~ and then of course the Hebner kids who made up about half the school by themselves. Alec got along well enough, but I think the South Fork school did me more good than it did him. You know how those one-room schools are, that the younger students overhear the teacher giving the older ones their lessons. By a fluke, Twyla Hebner and I were the only ones of our age at South Fork, so as a class of two, Mrs. Thorkelson didn't need to spend much time lining us out. By the time Twyla and I reached, say, the sixth grade, ^{in our slack time} we already had heard the geography five times. I still know what the capital of Bulgaria is, and not too many people I meet do. Parts of poems lodged in the mind then, too. "The holiest of all holidays are those kept/by ourselves in silence and apart./The secret anniversaries of the heart."

we didn't
take up
much of
the time to
line us
out as
one room.

~~Canada Dan's~~

~~Frank Dant's~~ band was sort of bunched in the ~~timber~~ ^{trees}. A herder

who is good in the timber probably is good in open country too, but not necessarily vice-versa. A herder new to timber country and uneasy about it will dog his sheep, keep them together. I saw Stanley study the way these sheep were crammed along the slope.

~~Canada Dan~~

"Been lookin' for you since day before yesterday," ~~Frank Dant~~

^{goddamn near}
greeted us. "I'm ~~about~~ out of canned milk."

^{near}
"Lucky thing ~~that about~~ isn't the same as out," Stanley said.

~~Canada Dan~~

~~Frank~~ was looking me over now. "You ^{that} ~~the~~ ranger's kid?"

I didn't like the way that was put, and just said back: "Jick McCaskill." Too, I was wondering how many more times ^{that day} ~~today~~ I was going to have to identify myself to people I'd had no intention of getting involved with.

~~Canada Dan~~

^{targeted on}
~~Frank~~ ^{again.} ~~turned back to~~ Stanley. "Got to have a kid along with you now? Must be gettin' on in years, Stanley."

"I bunged up my hand," Stanley responded shortly. "Jick's been generous enough to pitch in with me."

~~Canada Dan~~

~~Frank~~ shook his head as if my sanity was at issue. "He's gonna regret ~~charity~~ ^{goddamn} charity, when he ~~sees~~ ^{goddamn} the ~~chore~~ ^{goddamn} chore we got for ourselves up here."

^{Dan}
"What would that be, ~~Frank~~?"

"About fifteen head of ^{goddamn} dead ones, that's what. They got onto
back.
maybe three days, ~~and~~ ^{as} themselves
some death camas, ~~Poisoned~~ before you could say 'sic 'em.'" ^{Canada Dan} ~~Frank~~

reported all this ~~as~~ as if he was a bystander instead of being
responsible for these animals.

Former
animals,
they were
more.

of casualties,"
"That's a bunch," Stanley agreed. "I didn't happen to notice
the pelts anywhere there at the wag--"

"Happened right ^{up} over there," ^{Canada Dan} ~~Frank~~ went on as if he hadn't heard,
gesturing to the ridge close behind him. "Just glommed onto that

gesturing
to
ridge
close
ind

death camas like it was ^{goddamn} candy. C'mon here, I'll show ya." ~~Frank~~

The herder took off his coat, tossed it down on the grass, pointed
to it and ~~xx~~ said to his dog: "Stay, Rags." The dog sat on the coat,
facing the sheep, and ~~Frank~~ ^{Canada Dan} trudged up the ridge without
a glance back at the dog or us.

even
glancing

^{more} > I dreaded the way this was trending.

^{Canada Dan}
The place ~~Frank~~ led us to was a pocket of OO-grass meadow with
gray mounds here and there on it. The mounds were the dead ewes.
Even as cool as the weather had been, they were bloated large.

dark
camas
or
lupine

"What are we gonna do about supper?"

"I don't just feel like any, right now. You go ahead."

So now things had reached the point where I had lost out even
on my father's ^{scattered} version of cooking, and was going to have to invent

my own. After fighting the stove for awhile to get ^{any real heat out of it} ~~it~~ going, I

managed to ^{warm} ~~heat~~ a can of pork and beans and ate them with some

~~slices of bread smeared with mayonnaise because there wasn't any butter.~~
~~unbuttered slices of bread.~~ Frank Dant's cooking must have stuck with

me more than I was aware, ^{as} ~~because~~ I didn't even think to open any

canned fruit for dessert.

S: I seem to
distinctly remember
Canada has
feeding us.

J: That was a
while back.

I defended

I know
there was
be any
butter in
a pack
out of

"That's them," ~~the herder~~ ~~Frank Dan~~ announced. "It's sure good timing

of you fellas to show up, I can stand some help with all that goddamn skinning."

Stanley did take the chance to get a shot in on him. "You been too busy the past three days to get to 'em, I guess?" But it bounced off ~~Canada Dan~~ ~~Frank Dan~~ like a berry off a buffalo.

"Well," Stanley ~~expounded~~ ~~said~~ next. "There's no such thing as one-handed skinning." Although, I thought to myself, there is one-handed tipping of a bottle. He was looking off in some direction carefully away from me. "I can be unloading the grub ~~into the wagon~~ while this goes on. Guess I ought to get at it."

My head
dropped +
I felt said
what was
steaming
my head
that there
though.

all
some
while

Canada Dan

~~Frank~~ beaded on me. "Don't just stand there in your tracks, kid.

Plenty of these goddamn peltsers for both of us."

So for the next considerable time, I was arm-deep in sheep carcasses,

slicing the hides loose...

Canada Dan

At first I was careful not to work fast, in the hope that ~~Frank~~ would

thereby skin more of them than me. It of course turned out that he had

a similar strategy, and I finally went at it quick as I could, to get it

done with.

Canada Dan's

~~When I finished, Frank's~~ estimate of fifteen turned out to be eighteen. Also,

I noticed that six of the pelts were branded with a bar above the

number, signifying that the ewe was a ~~mother~~ mother of twins. Which

summed out to the fact that besides the eighteen casualties, there

were two dozen newly motherless lambs who would weigh light at shipping

time.

This came to Stanley's attention too as we put the pelts into

the packs. "Guess we know what all that lamb blatting's about, now."

Canada Dan

~~Frank~~ didn't seem to hear this, either.

change

Have
you
ever
skinned
a sheep?

pelts brought
= a dollar each
each 1/4 a dollar then
Barley 2/100
back with
up hair

I had had
you more
slow
disposal than
I had
Begin
raining

Instead, he
was
climbing
into
"wogen
to produce
lunch

Canada Dan

Onto the table Frank plunked a metal plate with a boiled chunk

of meat on it, followed by a ~~blackened~~ stained pan of what looked like

small moth balls. "Like I say, I figured you might finally show up

today, so I fixed you a duke's choice of grub," he crowed. "Help

yourself ^{yes} to that hominy." Then, picking up a hefty butcher knife,

~~the~~ Canada Dan

Frank ~~slabbed~~ slabbed off a thickness of the grayish greasy meat and toppled

it aside. "You can have mutton." He sliced off more. "Or then again

there's growed-up lamb." The butcher knife produced a third plank-

thick piece. "Or you can always have sheep meat."

add
sentence
Frank
dined...

"Yeah," Stanley said slower than ever, and swallowed experimentally.

choices
choices.

The report crossed my mind that I had just spent an hour and a half

elbow-deep in dead sheep and now I was being expected to eat some of one,

but I tried to keep it ^{traveling} moving. ~~Anytime~~ Time, as ^{it's said} they say, was

the essence ^{here.} The only resource a person has against mutton is to eat

it fast, before it has a chance to congeal. . . I poked mine into me

pretty rapidly, and even so the last several bites were greasy going.

Stanley by then wasn't much more than getting started.

Follow

"Stayin' the night, ain't ya?"

actually,

"Well, no," Stanley said. Maybe there was some hope for him

after all. "We got ~~the~~ all this pack gear to keep dry, so we'll just

go on over to that line cabin ^{down} on Cooper's. Fact is, we better be

getting ourselves over there, if we're gonna beat dark. You ready,

Jick?"

Was I.

"Aw, I'll get it looked at when I get to town." There's some
bag balm in my saddlebag. ^{there. the lid off that} Get ~~that~~ open for me and I'll ^{dab} ~~smear~~ some
on."

Stanley slathered the balm ^{thick} across the back of his hand ~~and~~ and I ^{stepped over}
^{& began to}
rewrapped it for him. He noticed that the wrapping was not the
blood-stained handkerchief. "Where'd you ^{come up with} ~~get~~ that?"

"~~Get~~ ^{off} the tail ~~of~~ my clean shirt."

~~Stanley~~ "Your ma's gonna like to hear that."

I shrugged. Trouble seemed lined up deep enough in these next
few days that my mother's ~~share in it seemed far off.~~ ^{was a long way from having its}
~~turn at it was a long way off.~~

~~turn yet.~~

"Well," Stanley said, ^{moving} ~~looking at~~ his bandaged hand with a wince
he didn't want to show and I didn't really want to see. "Sounds like
we got a ^{deavy} ~~wet~~ night ahead of us." The rain was steady now. Stanley

got up and casually went over to the packs. "Guess I'm more foresighted
than I knew," he said, "to bring Doctor Hall along."

"Who?" I asked. Gros Ventre's physician was Doctor Spence, and I
knew he was nowhere in our vicinity.

repeated
"Doctor Hall," Stanley ~~said~~ as he brought ~~up~~ out his good hand

color
with a bottle in it. "Doctor al-co-hol," he ~~pronounced.~~

Out like this, my father tended to survive on whatever ^{jumped} ~~came~~
out of the food pack first. He did have the principle that supper
needed to be a hot meal, but as for the rest of the day, he was
likely to offer up a couple of slices of headcheese and a can of
plums or peaches, ^{as} ~~and~~ breakfast, and if you didn't watch him he might
do the ^{exact} ~~same~~ again for lunch. My mother consequently always
made us up enough slab sandwiches for three days' worth of lunches.
By the third noon ^{in that high air} ~~at these elevations~~ the bread was about dry enough
to strike a match on, but still a better bet than ^{whatever} ~~what~~ my father was
apt to concoct.

We had eaten a currant jelly sandwich and a half apiece and

esp. by
it if
ed he
fish

what
any
chocolate

~~We~~ were sharing a can of peaches for dessert, harpooning the slices out with our jackknives to save groping into the pack for utensils, when a rider appeared at the bend of the trail down ~~the~~ hill from us. A sorrel packhorse followed into sight, then a gray with his neck stretched out and his lead rope taut.

"Somebody's ~~Camp~~tender, must be," my father said.

The rider sat in his saddle that permanent way a lot of those old-timers did, as if he was up there because life looked a little better from the back of a horse. Not much of his face showed between the buttoned-up slicker and the pulled-down Stetson, but thinking back on it now, I believe my father at once recognized both the horseman and the situation.

The ~~white-crowned~~ packstring climbed steadily to us, the ears of the horses up in interest at us and our horses. The rider showed us no attention until he was right up to us.

"Hullo, Mac."

"Thought it might be you, Stanley. How the hell are you?"

Alec or Jick, as the

"Still able to sit up and take nourishment. Hullo, Jick, I guess case may be."

~~it'd be? Alec favors your ma more in looks, as I remember."~~

ed. help
but

Woun-
gray?

Pony
→
Cordly
Mound

sharp in
interest

re call

4 I hadn't seen him since I was small, yet I ^{right then} could have described ~~him~~ ^{Stanley Meixell}

to you in a ^{number} ~~couple~~ of ways. That unlike a lot of people, he never

talked down to children, ^{phony guff} met them with that hateful question, "Think

you'll ever amount to anything?" That he had once been a presence

at our meals, stooping first over the washbasin and slicking ^{back} his hair--

I could have told you too that it was OO--before coming to ~~the~~ the table.

neatly

Stanley Meixell was a fairly far memory for me. I couldn't, in fact, have told you anything whatsoever about his eight or nine years since we had last seen him.

"Jick," I clarified. "'Lo, Stanley."

It is strange
how much came
to mind of him

"Heard you were gonna be campjack for the Busby boys."

"Yeah." Stanley's "yeah" was the Missourian slowed-down kind,

almost in two parts: yeh-uh. And his voice ~~xxxxxxx~~ sounded as if

a rasp had been used on it... "Yeah, these times, ^{I guess} being campjack is

~~"Campjack is~~ better than no jack at all."

Busby
Boys
run 3 bands

or "yuh"?

"Counting them onto the range, are you?"

"Yeah. Haugland's yesterday, and ^{Dode} George Cooper's today."

"Quite a year for grass," ^{This is} ~~Stanley said.~~ "Been a million-dollar
^{ain't it?} rain, ^{to thaw out with,} Though I'm getting to where I could stand ~~to~~ a little sunshine
myself."

"Probably have enough to melt you, soon enough."

"Could be." Stanley looked ahead up the trail, as if just noticing
that it continued on from where we stood. "Could be," he repeated.
Nothing followed that, either from Stanley or my father, and ~~in~~ it
began to come through to me that this conversation was kinked in some
way. ~~Nothing~~ Finally my father offered:

"Want some peaches? A few in here we haven't stabbed dead yet."

^{Naw} "Nope, thanks. I got to head on up the mountain or I'll have
sheepherders cussing me up one side and down the other."

My father fished out another peach slice and handed me the can
to finish. "What'd you do to your hand?"

I saw then that a handkerchief was wrapped around the back of
Stanley's right hand. The handkerchief had started off white, but
showed stains like dark rust.

after my hide.

make
apparent
gm is to S

seriously
These
men
had
seen
each
other
for years
so why
did I leave
how
anyone
to say
besides
small-
change
talk
weather
to guess

"Aw, that Bubbles ^{cayuse} ~~horse~~"---Stanley looked over his shoulder to the

gray packhorse--"was kind of snakey this morning. Tried to kick me.

Took some skin off, is all."

"How'd you like some company? I imagine it's no ^{special} ~~great~~ fun running a packstring one-handed." ⁴ Evidently my father had gone absent-minded again, this time about something he'd mentioned not ten sentences earlier. I was just set to remind him of our appointment with ^{Dode} ~~George~~ Cooper's sheep when he put in: "Jick here could maybe ride along with you."

"Aw, no, Mac. Jick's got better things to do than haze me along."

"Think about morning," my father came back at him. "Those packs and knots are gonna be hell, unless you're more left-handed than you've ever shown."

"Well. I'll be out a couple ^{or three} ~~days~~, you know. Longer if any of those herders have got trouble."

"Jick's ^{s been} ~~be~~ out that long with me ^{any number of times.} ~~anyway~~. And your cooking's bound to be better for him than ~~mine~~ mine ~~was~~ was."

Matters were passing me by before I could even see them coming.

I will always credit Stanley Meixell for ^{putting} ~~saying~~ the next two questions ~~things~~ in the order he did.

"It ought to be up to Jick." Stanley turned to me...

"How do you feel about playing nursemaid to somebody ^{so goddamn} ~~dumb~~ ^{as} ~~enough~~ to get himself kicked?"

The corner of my eye told me my father expected a pretty prompt response to this.

"Oh, I feel fine about--I mean, sure, Stanley. I could, ~~uh~~ uh, ride along. If you really want. Yeah."

Stanley looked down at my father now.)

"Mac"
"You double sure it'd be okay?" asked Stanley. # Even I was able to translate that. What was my father going to face from my mother for sending me off campjacking into the mountains with Stanley for a number of days?

"Sure," my father said, as if doubt ^{wasn't worth the breath for.} ~~had never found its way~~ ^{wrinkling the brain for.}

"Bring him back when he's dried out behind the ears."


"Don't forget the day book," I muttered as I rode past him.

"Thanks for reminding me," ^{my father} he said poker-faced. "I'll give it

my utmost."

The Busby brothers, I knew, ran three bands of sheep on their forest allotment, which stretched north of us from the north fork of English Creek. "Which camp do we ^{head for} ~~go to~~ first?" I inquired.

"~~Canada Dan's,~~
~~Frank Dan's,~~ he's the furthest south. If we sift right ^{couple} along for the next hour ^{or so}, we'll be there."

Stanley's notion of steady progress turned out to be different from mine. It couldn't have been more than ^{fifteen minutes} ~~half an~~ a quarter of an ~~hour~~ after we left my father when 

Stanley ~~had~~ reined his horse off the trail into the clearing and the packhorses followed. When I rode up alongside, he said:

~~Jick.~~
~~"You go on ahead, I'll catch up. I got to go visit a tree."~~
"I got to go visit a tree. You keep on ahead, Jick. I'll catch right up."

I had the trail to myself for the next ~~several~~ ^{some} minutes, and just when I was about to rein around and see what had become of Stanley, he came into sight. "Be right there," he called, motioning me to go on.

He caught up very gradually, though, and in fact must have made a second stop when I went out of sight around a switchback. This time, I was determined to ~~wait~~ ^{was with me} until he ~~caught~~ up. And this time, I could hear him long before I saw him:

"My name, she is Pancho,

I work on a rancho.

I make a dollar a day."

His singing voice surprised me, a clearer, younger tone ~~than~~ than his raspy talk. So did his song.

"I go to see Lucy,

To play with her poosy.

Lucy take my dollar away."

There was a lot of blatting and a kind of uneasiness among ^{these} ~~the~~ sheep.

this
Even though they were on a slope of the entire continent, they seemed
penned.

this herder's

My father told me his last name was something like Canaday,

which I guess accounted for what he was called.

That next afternoon, Friday, was the homestretch of my digging.

It needed to be, with my father due home sometime the next morning.

And so ^{once more unto} ~~one more time I went~~ into the bowels of the earth, so to speak,

Taking down with me into the outhouse pit an old short-handled lady

shovel Toussaint Rennie had given my father and a bucket to pack the dirt out with.

My mood was first-rate. My mother's ^{discourse} ~~performance~~ from the evening before still occupied my thinking. The other portion of me by now was accustomed to the pit work, muscles making no complaint whatsoever, and in me that feeling of endless stamina you have when you are young, that you can keep laboring on and on and on, forever if need be. The lady shovel I was using was perfect for this finishing-off work of

dabbing dirt into the bucket, ^{To make it handy} ~~for handiness~~ in his ditch-riding,

Toussaint always shortened the handle and then ground off about four

inches of the shovel blade, ^{cutting it down} ~~making it~~ into a light implement about

two-thirds of a normal shovel but which still, he proclaimed, "carries

all the dirt I want to." And working as I had been for a while each day

1A

without gloves to get some good calluses started, now I had full

benefit of the smooth old shovel handle in my bare hands. To me,

calluses have always been one of the marks of true summer. ~~My Body and~~

~~soul, I could not have been better than right then.~~



13

How long I lost myself to the rhythm of the lady shovel and ^{the} bucket,
I don't know. But definitely I was closing in on the last of my project,
bottoming the pit out nice and even, when I stepped toward my ladder to
heft up a pailful of dirt and found myself looking into the blaze face
of a horse. And above that, a hat and grin which belonged to Alec.

"Going down to visit the Chinamen, huh?"

Why did that get under my skin? I can run that remark ^{of Alec's} through
my ears a dozen times now and find no particular reason for it to be
rilesome. ~~I'd likely have commented something similar,~~ in my brother's ^{lofty}
I'd likely have commented something similar.
position. But evidently there is something about being come upon in
the ^{unhinge} very bottom of an outhouse hole that will ~~dander~~ me, for I ~~said~~ snapped
right back to Alec: ^A "Yeah, we can't all spend our time ^{roosting} sitting on
top of a horse and looking wise."

Alec let up on his grinning at that. "You're a little bit owly
there, Jicker. You maybe got a touch of shovelitis."

I continued to squint up at him and had it framed in my mind
to retort "Is that anything like wingwangwoo fever?" when it dawned
on me that Alec was paying only about half-attention to our conversation
anyway. His gaze was wandering around the station buildings as if he

2

✓

hadn't seen them for a decade or so, yet also as if he wasn't quite seeing them now either. Abstracted, might be the twenty-five cent word for it. A fellow with a lot on his mind, most of it blonde and warm.

find out:

One thing did occur to me to ask. ~~ask~~ "How much is 19 times 60?"

"1140," replied Alec, still looking absent. "Why?"

"Nothing." Damned if I was going to bat remarks back and forth with somebody whose heart wasn't in it, so I simply asked, "What brings you in off the lone prairie?", propped an arm against the side of my pit and waited.

Alec finally recalled that I was down there and maybe was owed some explanation for the favor of his presence, so ~~he~~ ^{he} announced: "I just came by for that ~~wine~~ ^{town} shirt of mine. Need it for ~~the~~ rodeo day."

town

Christamighty. The power ~~of~~ ³ of mothers. ~~It had been about 26 hours~~ ^{Barely a full day had passed} since Mom forecast to Pete that it would take the dire necessity of a shirt to draw Alec into our vicinity, and here he was, shirt-chaser incarnate.

It seemed to me too good a topic to let him have for free. "What, are you entering the pretty shirt contest this year?"

Now Alec took a squint down at me from the summit of the horse, as if I only then really registered.

on him. "No, wisemouth, the calf ~~roping~~ ^{roping}." Hoohoo. Here was going to be another Alec maneuver just popular as ~~hell~~ ^{all} with our parents, spending money on the entry fee for calf ~~roping~~ ^{roping}.

"I guess that color of shirt does make calves run slower," I deadpanned. The garment in question was dark purplish, about the shade of chokecherry juice, distinctive, to put it politely. "It's in the bottom drawer there in our--the porch bedroom." Then I

figured since I was being helpful anyway, I might as well ~~xxx~~ clarify

the terrain for ^{also} ~~him~~. "Dad's in Missoula. But maybe you'd already heard that, huh?"



But Alec was glancing around in that absent-minded way again,
 which was nettling me a little more every time he did it. I mean,
 you don't particularly like to have a person choosing when to ~~ignore~~
 phase in and out on you. We had been brothers for about 14 5/6 years,
 so a few seconds of consecutive attention didn't strike me as too ^{angry} much
 to expect of ~~him~~ Alec. ~~Didn't happen, though.~~ Evidently so, though.

^{more}
^{there is good}
^{around}
 you. He had reined his horse's head ^{up} to start toward the station
^{before}
 when he thought to ask: "How's Mom's mood?"

"Sweet as pie."

~~Good enough.~~ He might as well know there was an early limit

on my aid to this visitation of his. "How's yours?"

~~I~~ I got nothing back from that. Alec simply
 With that Alec passed from sight, his horse's tail giving a last

little waft as if wiping clean the field of vision which the pit

framed over me. ~~But~~ as I was reaching down to resume with my bucket
 , though,

of earth I heard the hooves stop and the saddle creak. "Jicker?" Alec's
 voice came.

"Yeah?"

"I hear you been running the mountains with Stanley Meixell."

While I knew you couldn't have a nosebleed in the English Creek
 valley without everybody offering you a hanky for a week afterward,
 it had never occurred to me that I too was ^{automatically} part of this public pageant.

I was so surprised by Alec knowing of my Stanley sojourn that I could

only send forth another "Yeah?"

"You want to be a little more choosey about your company, is all."

"Why?" I asked earnestly of the gape of the pit over me. ~~Today~~ Two days ago I was hiding out from Stanley in this very hole like a bashful badger, and now I sounded like he was my patron saint. "What the hell have you got against Stanley?"

No answer floated down, and it began to seem to me that this brother of mine was getting awful damn cowboyish indeed if he looked down on a person for tending sheep camp. I opened my mouth to tell ^{him} something along that line, but what leaped out instead was: "Why's Stanley got everybody in this damn family so spooked?"

Still nothing from above, until I heard the saddle leather and hooves again, moving off toward the ranger station.

—

→

The peace of the pit was gone. Echoes of my questions to Alec drove it out. In its stead came a frame of mind that I was penned seven feet below the world in a future outhouse site, down here, ~~in a hole~~ while two members of this damn McCaskill family were resting their bones inside the ranger station and the other one was gallivanting off in Missoula. To each his own and all that, but this situation had gotten considerably out of proportion.

The more I steamed, the more a dipper of water and a handful of gingersnaps seemed necessary to damper me down. And so I climbed out with the bucket of dirt, flung it on the pile as if burying something smelly, and headed into the house.

—



the station.

"Your mind is still set," my mother was saying as I came through the doorway ^{into the kitchen.}

Alec, but warily.

"Still is," ~~Alec~~ agreed. Neither of them paid me any particular

attention as I dipped a drink from the water bucket. That told me

^{plenty} something about how ^{hot and heavy} intense the conversation was in here.

"A year, Alec." So she was tackling him along that angle again.

Delay and live to fight again another day. You could try college for a year and decide then. Right now you and Leona think the world begins and ends in each other. But it's too soon to say, after just these few months."

"It's long enough."

"That's what Earl Zane likely thought, the day before Leona dropped

him for you." That seemed to me to credit Earl Zane with more thought

capacity than he'd ever shown. Earl was a year or so older than Alec,

and his brother Arlee was a year ahead of me in school, and so far as

I could see the Zane boys were living verifications that the human head

is mostly bone.

"That's past history," Alec was maintaining.

41 I punctuated that for

him by popping the lid off the Karo can the ginger snaps were kept in.

Then there was the sort of scrabbling sound as I dug out a handful.

And after that the little sharp crunch as I took a first bite. All

of which Alec waited out with the ^{too-patient} ~~forced~~ annoyance of somebody held

up while a train goes by. Then declared: "Leona and I ain't--aren't

skim-milk kids. We know what we're doing."

My mother took a breath which probably used up half the air in

the kitchen. "Alec. What you're doing is rushing into trouble.

You can't get ahead on ranch wages. And just because Leona is horse-

happy at the moment doesn't mean she's going to stay content with a

ranch hand for a husband."

"We'll get by. Besides, Wendell says he'll boost my wages after we're married."

This stopped even my mother, though not for long. "Wendell Williamson," she said levelly, "has nobody's interest at heart but his own. Alec, you know as well as anybody the Double W has been the ruin of that Noon Creek country. Any cattle ranch he hasn't bought outright, he has sewed up with a lease from the bank--"

"If Wendell hadn't got them, somebody else would have," Alec recited.

"Yes," my mother surprised him, "maybe somebody like you. Somebody who doesn't already have more money than he can count. Somebody who'd run one of those ranches properly, instead of gobbling it up just for the sake of having it. Alec, Wendell Williamson is using you the way he uses a handkerchief to blow his nose. Once he's gotten a few years of work out of you"--another kitchen-clearing breath here--"and evidently gotten you married off to Leona, so you'll have that obligation to carry around in life, too--once he's made enough use of you and you start thinking in terms of a ^{real} raise in wages, down the road you'll go and he'll hire some other youngster--"

"Youngster? Now wait one damn min--"

"--with his head full of cowboy notions. Alec, staying on at the Double W is a dead end in life."

While Alec was bringing up his forces against all this, I crunched into another ginger



4# snap. My brother and my mother sent me looks from their opposite ~~side~~ sides of the room, a convergence about as taut as being roped with two lassoes simultaneously. She suggested: "Aren't you supposed to be shoveling instead of demolishing cookies?"

"I guess. See you ^{around,} Alec."

"Yeah, ^{Around.} ~~See you.~~"

—

11

Supper that night was about as lively as dancing to a dead march.

~~4~~ Alec had ridden off toward town--Leona-ward--evidently altered not one whit from when ~~he~~ arrived, except for gaining ^{himself} the rodeo shirt. My mother was working ^{out} her mood on the cooking utensils. I was a little surprised the food didn't look pulverized when it arrived to the table. So far as I could see, I was the only person on the place who'd made ^{true} any progress that day, finishing the outhouse hole. When I came in to wash up I considered cheerfully announcing "Open for business out there," but took a look at my mother's stance there at the stove and decided against.
~~not to~~

So we just ate, which if you're going to be silent is probably the best thing to be doing anyway. I was doubly glad I had coaxed as much conversation out ^{of} her last night as I had. I sometimes wonder if life is anything but ^{an} averaging out ~~of~~ one kind of day and then its opposite, ~~and then it's all over~~

Likely, though, the mother of Alec McCaskill would not have agreed just then that life has its own simple ^{average.} ~~arithmetic.~~ For by the time my mother ~~she~~ washed the supper dishes and I was drying them, I began to realize she wasn't merely in a maternal snit, she was thinking ~~and~~ hard about

→

something. And if I may give myself credit, it occurred to me

that her thinking ^{deserved} ~~merited~~ my absence. Any ~~idea~~ new idea anybody in

the McCaskill family could come up with deserved all encouragement.

4 "Need me any more?" I asked as I hung the dish towel. "I thought I
ride up to check on Walter's and fish my way home till toward dark."
~~might fish till dark.~~ The year's longest

day was just past, twilight would go on for a couple ^{or three} ~~of~~ hours yet.

"No. No, go ahead." Her cook's instinct roused her to add: "Make

it a mess big enough for three, your father'll be home tomorrow."

And then she was ^{back} ~~into~~ the thinking.

debated
country
in Bath - 197

Nothing was amiss at Walter Kyle's place. As I closed the door on that tidy sparse room, I wondered if Walter didn't have the right idea. Live alone and let everybody else knock bruises on one another.

The fishing was ^{as} close to a cinch as fishing can ever be. ~~Now~~
~~that~~ ^{Since} I was using an honest-to-God pole and reel and ~~since~~ it was a feeding time of evening, the trout in those North Fork beaver dams all but volunteered. Do I even need to say out loud that I limited? One more time I didn't owe my father a theoretical milkshake, and there still was evening left when the gill of that fifteenth trout was threaded onto my willow fish hanger and I went to collect Pony from the tall meadow grass where she was grazing.

My mother still was in her big think when I came back into the ranger station toward the last of dusk. I reported that the mess of cleaned fish were in a ^{pan} ~~bucket~~ of water in the spring house, then stretched myself in an obvious sort of way, kissed her goodnight, and headed for the north porch and my bed. I honestly didn't want to be around any more heavy cogitation that day.



That north porch, ^a ~~one the length of~~ ^{affair,} ~~screened-in for summer,~~ had been built to take advantage of the summer shade on that side of the English Creek station, but in late spring Aled and I ~~had~~ always moved out there to use it as our bedroom. Now that he was bunking at the Double W ~~if~~ I of course had the room to myself, and I ~~do~~ ^{testify here that} have to ~~say,~~ gaining a private bedroom goes far toward alleviating the absence of a brother. # Not just the privacy did I treasure, though. It seemed to me at the time, and still does, that a person could not ask for a better site than that one for day's end. That north porch made a sort of copperwire bubble into the night world. ~~and English Creek~~ Moths would bat and bat against the screening, especially if I'd brought a coal-oil lamp out with me. Mosquitoes, in the couple of weeks ^{in early} ~~each~~ June when they are fiercest, would alight out there and try to needle their way in, and there's a real reward to lying there knowing that those little whining bastards can't get at you. Occasional scutterings and ^{in the grass} wishes brought news of an owl or skunk working on the fieldmouse population, out there beyond the lampshine. Many an evening, though, I would not even light the lamp, just use the moon when I went out

to bed. Any bright night filled the width of that porch with the shaggy wall of English Creek's cottonwoods and aspens, and atop them like a walkway the flat line of the benchland on the other side of the water. Out the west end of the porch, a patch of the mountains stood: Roman Reef, and Billygoat and Phantom Woman Peaks on top of it. With Alec's cot folded away I had room to move mine longways into the east end of the porch, so that I could lie ~~there~~ looking ~~there~~ at the mountains, and ~~get~~ ^{enjoy} the bonus too that, ~~the morning~~ with my head there below the east sill, the sunrise would overshoot me instead of beaming into my face.

I recall that this was a lampless night, that I was flopping into bed without even any thought of reading for awhile, more tired from the day than I'd realized, when I heard my mother at the phone.

more?



"Max?"

~~Ira~~? I'll do it. I still think your common sense has dried up and blown away. But I'll Do It." And whanged down the receiver as if her words might sneak back out of the telephone wire.

What that was about, I had no clue. ~~Ira~~? ^{Max} The only ~~Ira~~ ^{Max} I could conjure up was Max Devlin, the assistant supervisor at the national forest office down in Great Falls, and why she would be calling him up this time of night just to doubt his common sense, I couldn't figure. But maybe the go-round with Alec had put her into her mood to deliver the Forest Service a little of what she considered it generally deserved. I definitely was ^{not} ~~was~~ going back out there to inquire. Sleep was safer.

4 ~~The next day~~ my father arrived back from Missoula full of sass and vinegar. He always came away from a Region Headquarters session avid to get back to the real planet again.

Even the fact that it was Saturday and he had a blank week of daybook entries to catch up on didn't dent his spirits. "Always" easy enough after one of these ^{Mayoola} ~~Missoula~~ schools. Let's see--Monday: snored. Tuesday, tossed and turned. Wednesday, another restless day of sleep."

Fort Peck crew
As for my handiwork out back, he was duly impressed. "The entire ~~see~~

~~now~~

couldn't have ^{dug} ~~done~~ better."

—

What ought I to tell about the days between then and the Fourth of July? The outhouse got moved in good order, ^{fitting} ~~moving~~ over my pit like a hen ^{onto fresh} ~~on~~ a new nest, and I put in another shovel day of tossing the dirt into the old hole. My father combed the Two up, down, and sideways, checking on the fire lookouts and patrolling the allotments to see how the range was looking and siccing Paul Eliason and the CCC crews onto trail and road work and any other ^{im} ~~improvements~~ that could be thought up. Shearing time came and went; I helped wrangle Dode Withrow's sheep in the pens the shearers set up at the foot of the South Fork trail to handle the Withrow and Hahn and Kyle bands, then Pete came and took me up to the Blackfeet Reservation for a couple more days' wrangling when his were sheared out there on the open prairie north of the Two Medicine River. Nothing more was seen of Alec at English Creek. My mother no doubt posted my father about the going-over she had given Alec when he came by for the shirt, although a reaming like that has to be seen and heard to be entirely appreciated.

Beyond that, I suppose the ~~news~~ main news by the morning of the Fourth when the three of us began to ready to go to town for the holiday was that we were going. For my father didn't always get the Fourth of July off; It depended on fire danger in the forest. I in fact was getting a little nervous about this year. The ~~weather~~ ^{cool summer} of the ~~summer~~ ^{itself} turned around on the ~~the~~ last day of June. Hot and sticky. Down in Great Falls they had first a dust storm--people trying to drive in from Helena reported hundreds of tumbleweeds ~~rolling~~ rolling across the highway on Gore Hill--and after that, about fifteen ~~minutes of rain that came down~~ ^{thunderstorm with rain coming down} as if from faucets. But then, the Falls receives a lot of bastardly weather we don't; particularly in summer, its site out there on the plains gives storms a chance to build and build before they strike the city. The mountain weather was our concern, and so much of May and June had been cool and damp that ~~the~~ even this hot ~~start~~ of July wasn't really threatening the Two yet. Final persuasion came from the holiday itself. That Fourth morning arrived as a good moderate one, promising a day warm enough to be comfortable but nowhere near sweltering, and my father said his decision at breakfast: It came complete with a sizable grin, and the words of it were: "Watch out, Gros Ventre. Here we come."

I had a particular stake in a trouble-free Fourth and ~~holiday~~
 parental ~~moment~~, good humor. By dint of recent clean living and
 some careful asking, and I suppose the ~~recent~~ example of son-in-
 rebellion provided ^{to my parents} by Alec, ^{won} I had permission to make a separate
 horseback sojourn into town in order to stay overnight with my best
 friend from school, Ray Heaney. # As I cagily pointed out, "Then the
^{after the Fourth,} ~~next~~ morning, I can just ride back out here and save you ~~an~~ trip into
 town to get me." # "Strange I didn't see the logic of all this before,"
 commented my mother. "You'll be saving us a trip we wouldn't have
 to make if you didn't stay in there in the first place, am I right?"
 But it turned out that was just her keeping in practice. # Of course,
 receiving
 permission from your parents is not the same as being able to hang
 onto it, and I was stepping pretty lightly that morning to keep from
 inspiring any second thoughts on their part.

^{not} In particular, as much as possible I was avoiding the kitchen and
 my mother's culinary orbit. Which was sound Fourth of July policy
 in any case. A reasoning person would have thought she was getting

As much as possible I was avoiding the kitchen and my mother's culinary orbit. A reasoning person would have thought she was getting ready to lay siege to Gros Ventre, instead of only going in there on a picnic.

My father ventured ~~in~~ through for a cup of coffee and I overheard my mother say "Why I said I'd do this I'll never know" and him respond "Uh huh, you're certainly downright famous for bashfulness" and then her response in turn, but with a little laugh, "And you're notorious for sympathy." As I was trying to dope that out--my mother bashful about a creek picnic?--my father poked his head into where I was and asked: "How about tracking down the ice creamer and putting it in the pickup?"

I did so, meanwhile trying to dope out how soon I could decently propose that I start my ride to town. I didn't want to seem antsy about it; ~~but~~ on the other hand I sure ^{desired} ~~wanted~~ to get the Fourth of July underway.

But here came my father out and over to me at the pickup. Then commemorated himself with me forever by saying, "Here. Better carry some weight in your pocket so you don't blow away." With which, I was handed a half dollar.

I must have looked my startlement. Other Fourth of Julys, if there was any ~~change~~^{ing} spend^{ing} money bestowed on Alec and me, it was more on the order of ~~25¢~~^{10¢}. If there was any.

"Call it shovel wages." My father stuck his hands in his hip pockets and studied the road to town as if he'd never noticed it before. "You might as well head on in. We'll see you there at the park." Then, as if in afterthought: "Why don't you ride Mouse, he can stand the exercise."

41 When you are fourteen you take a step up in life wherever you can find it and meanwhile try to keep a mien somewhere between At last!

and Do you really mean that? I stayed adult and stately until I was behind the barn and into the horse pasture, then gave in to a grin the dimension of a jack-o-lantern's. A by-God full-scale horse, mine for the holiday. In the corner of the pasture where Pony was grazing she lifted her head to watch me but I called out, "Forget it, midget," and went on over ^{and} to slip the bridle ~~and~~ onto Mouse.

—

~~Up on~~ ^{and} Mouse, I scooted right along that road toward Gros Ventre.

He was a fast walker, besides elevating me and my spirits more than

I'd been used to on Pony. The morning--mid-morning ^{and past,} by now--was full

of sun, but enough breeze was following along English Creek for a

person to be ~~just~~ ⁱⁿ pure comfort. The country still looked just glorious.

All the valley of English Creek was fresh with hay. Nobody was mowing

quite yet, except for the one damp green swath around Ed Van Bebbler's

lower field, where he had tried it a week too early as he did every

year.

In most ways, then, I was more than ready for the Fourth. A lot seemed to have happened since that evening, back at the start of June, when I looked up and saw Alec and Leona parading down the rise to join

us for a family supper. One whole hell of a lot. No longer was I

even sure that we four McCaskills ^{quite} were a family. It was time we all

had something else on our minds. Alec plainly already did, the way

he intended to trig up on behalf of Leona and a calf. And given how

my mother was whaling into the picnic preparation and my father was

grinning like a Chessy cat about getting the day off from rangering

and I was strutting atop this tall horse with coinage heavy in my pocket,

the Fourth was promising to the job for the other three of us as well.

to cage 7
up the units
up to 4

Yet in one ^{little} way, this was ^{also} a day I ~~always~~ hated to see come and go.

It might well be asked how I could both hunger for the Fourth and then ^{turn around and}

be leery of it. But the case was this, that for all the glory of the holiday, the Gros Ventre creek picnic and then the rodeo and then the

dance and on top of that my overnight ^{stay} ~~visit~~ with Ray--at my age then,

the day that ^{promised} ~~held~~ all this also meant to me the mid-point of the ^{season} ~~summer~~.

The bend beyond which my English Creek summer would begin to trickle away.

By the calendar ^{this} ~~that~~ wasn't anywhere near true. School had been out

not much more than a month, and there still lay the remainder of July

and all of August and even the front edge of September--which in fact included ^{that 15th} ~~the~~ birthday I was anticipating, two months from this very day--before I would be in a classroom again. Nonetheless the Fourth


seemed the turn of the summer. I sensed, almost the way you can feel a change of weather ^{coming} ~~ahead~~, that faster time waited beyond this day.

^{-and-five/sixths years} ^{possible}
 # Life. Maybe fourteen ~~wasn't~~ the highest ~~ground~~ to view it from. ⁸

But I was seeing enough this summer to get at least a beginner's notion of its complications.

 In maybe an hour and a half, better time than I would have thought possible for that ride in from the English Creek station, Mouse and I were topping the little rise near the turnoff to Charlie Finletter's place, the last ranch before town.

From there a mile or so outside ~~of town~~, Gros Ventre looked like a green cloudbank--cottonwood trees billowing so thick that it took some inspection ~~at first~~, to find traces of houses among them. My own hunch is that the cottonwood example was taken from Choteau, the next town south down the highway, where trees were spaced along all the streets early on so that restful tunnels of shade developed with the town. If that theory is correct, it surely follows that the early civic thinkers of Gros Ventre told themselves they could damn well do twice what Choteau ever could; for when they went along Gros Ventre's neighborhood streets they proceeded to plant double. A line of trees along the front yards, then another between sidewalk and street. Then the same colonnade again on the other side of the street. All this



of course had been done fifty or more years before, a period of time that will grow you a hell of a big cottonwood. By now every street of Gros Ventre was lorded over by these twin files of fat gray trunks, so wrinkled and gullied they looked as if rivulets of rain had been running down them ever since the deluge floated Noah. Nor did this tree domination stop there. Together with the original cottonwoods that already rose old and tall along English Creek before Gros Ventre was ever thought of, the streetside plantation produced almost a roof over the town. This cottonwood canopy was particularly wonderful

just before a rain, when the leaves began to shiver, rattle in their papery way. The whole town seemed to tingle then, and the sound picked up when ^{a gust of} ~~the~~ wind ~~arrived~~ from the west ^{ushered in} ~~with~~ the rain, and next the air was filled with the seeth^e of water onto all that foliage. In Gros Ventre, even a dust-settler sounded like a real weather event. ✓



The English Creek road enters ^{ed} town past the high school--one of
 tan-brick
 those two-story ~~brown-brick~~ crates that seemed to be the only way they
 knew how to build ^{high schools} them in those ~~days~~ days--and I nudged Mouse into ^{an even}
 quicker pace so as not to dwell on that topic any longer than necessary.


We were aiming ourselves across town, to the northeast end where the
 Heaneys' house stood.

Block on block as we made our way, the trees more than ever looked
 like the most thriving things around. Gros Ventre of those Depression
 years looked--I don't know how else to say it but roadworn.

That I can remember this state of appearance in itself says something
 of the ~~importance~~ attraction of Gros Ventre, for I am

not naturally a person who cares a lot about towns. I suppose the case
^{though,}
 is that if any town stays with you, it will be the one from your high
 school years; for good or ill, the details from then last and last,
 piled up in your memory by your ^{growing} ~~increasing~~ capacity at the time to take
 them in, to realize that you yourself are lengthening out into a member
 of the community rather than being merely a waist-high tourist in it.
 Whatever accounts for it, the look of Gros Ventre then is vivid in
 me yet. Not a decrepit community, for the neighborhoods had been quite
 substantially built in the first place: a lot of dignified dormers
 and tidy picket fences and inviting porches. Nor even really lackadaisical.

Although Gros Ventrians, I suppose like people anywhere, had had to pull back from the earlier boom mood that anybody could come to Montana and take up a homestead and prosper as a farmer, or slap together ~~some kind of a building~~ ^{four walls} and thrive as a merchant (I have always subscribed to the observation Bill Reinking once wrote in the Gleaner, that the one benefit of hard times is ~~that~~ they make you do some things the sensible way you ought to have been doing them all along anyway), I recall no falling off of energy during the Depression. If anything, many people were working harder



than they ever had, contriving like hell to try to make ends meet.

, for instance, Mouse and I were passing
I knew without looking that behind each house ~~there~~ was a vegetable

garden, and the gardens of that time were tremendous, any food that

could be grown was that much less to have to buy. Too, a lot of town

~~families~~ people still raised chickens, and quite a number, the Heaneys among

~~them~~, had a milk cow. Besides doing as much as possible to feed

themselves, people did a great deal of puttering around. Men with

no other job in sight ~~did~~ ^{tackled} house ~~repairs~~, or fenced the yard, or split

wood--almost every back yard held a woodpile like a small hill. The

women planted flower gardens to splash some color into life. So

anything that was a matter of energy, of puttering and contriving,

the hard times didn't particularly quench in Gros Ventre. What had

come to a standstill were the parts of life requiring actual money.

Build or repair something, but then you couldn't afford to paint it.

(That lack of paint, houses fading toward gray and machinery turning

to rust, to me is the ~~tint~~ ^{tone} of those Depression years.) Cars got more

and more jalopy-like, the triumph simply was to keep them running.

~~and~~ Whenever somebody moved away, the house or business simply stood there

empty, the life cored out of it.

Just, as I say, a roadworn town. Weathered by all it had been through in those Depression years.

Mouse and I now had crossed Main Street at the bank corner, ^{past} ~~where~~ the First National ~~Bank stood~~, and were into the Heaneys' side of town. An early priest ~~had~~ persuaded the Catholic landowners, who platted this particular neighborhood

to name the streets after the first missions in Montana, which in turn bore the names of ~~many~~ ^{current} saints. This created what the Gros Ventre postmaster, Chick Jennings, called "the repeater part of town," with mailing addresses such as St. Mary St., St. Peter St. and ~~so on.~~ ^{St. Ignatius St.}

It was at the end of St. Ignatius St. that the Heaney house stood, a white two-story one with sills of robin's-egg blue. Ed Heaney owned the lumber yard, and so was the one person in town with ^{some} access to paint.

The robin's-egg blue ^{had been} ~~was~~ a shipping mistake by the manufacturer--it to put up against the weather of Montana-- is a shade pretty delicate ~~for western taste~~ and Ed lugged the can

home and made the best of it. [#] The place looked empty as I rode up, ^{was as I} which ~~I fully~~ expected. 

4044
Heaneys
2-1-40
you in house
no

30

✓

Rather than the creek picnic, the Heaneys always went out to a family shindig at Genevieve's parents' farm, quite a ways east of Gros Ventre on the Conrad road. So with Ray out there, I wouldn't link up with him until the rodeo, and I simply slung my warbag inside the Heaneys' back porch and got back on Mouse again.

I figured I still ought to kill a little time before the creek picnic, plus getting all the use out of Mouse that I could, and so I rode along that far edge of town, out to where the


highway comes in from the south. To me, that is the most interesting approach to Gros Ventre. What might be called the sheep's-eye view, for ~~most~~ every the bands that flowed through town ~~and~~ spring on their way to the Blackfeet Reservation came to Gros Ventre from this direction.

I can't really say that the sheep spent time thinking about this, but for anybody else nearing Gros Ventre, ^{of the} ~~this~~ highway curving down from the southern benchland delivered you into the town in such a way that you had to wonder at first whether the place was anything but cottonwoods and houses. A community where they had forgotten to have a downtown. At least, no sign of any until the road kinked sharply to the right, and



around that bend lay the sudden straight shot of Main Street. A street, let me say, wide enough to turn a freight wagon and an eight-horse team around in, in the early days, and which now made the downtown look bigger than the half-dozen blocks it actually was. ~~On the first~~ Then around another curve, this one to the left, the highway sneaked across the English Creek bridge and out of town to the north, making the route for people traveling through Gros Ventre--or as I have pointed out that the more plentiful visitors were, sheep--a sort of long puzzling Z.

Contained between those civic curves was a community in the same business it had been born to in the early 1870's: supply. The selling of wares. Settlement here dated back to when some weary freight wagoneer pulled in for the night at the nice creekside sheltered by cottonwoods. As the freighters' trail between Fort Shaw on the Sun River and southern Alberta developed, this site became a regular waystop, nicknamed The Middle since it was about midway between Fort Shaw and Canada. (Although some of us also suspect that to those early-day wagoneers the place seemed like the middle of nowhere.) True, the first permanent structure was a more-or-less hotel and definite saloon, put up by a fellow named ^{Luke} Barclay, but before very long Barclay's spa was neighbored by a store, some



other alert freighter having seen that an extra wagon of supplies could be left at The Middle--Gros Ventre-to-be--and draw the business of the cattlemen who were taking up the range north of the Missouri and the Sun. Then grew

the ranches along English Creek and Noon Creek, and with those families a post office and a high school, the Catholic church and then the Presbyterian, and businesses, more and more businesses.

If I put my mind to it, I am capable of reciting every enterprise of Gros Ventre of that Fourth of July day. ~~(This, in itself, says~~

Helwig's grocery and merc, with the Eddy's bread sign in its window.

The Toggery clothing store.,

Musgrove's drugstore, with the mirror behind the soda fountain so that a person could sit there over a soda (assuming a person had the price of a soda, not always the case in those times) and keep track of the town traffic

(if you had the price of a soda)
a person could sit there over a soda and keep track of the town traffic behind him. # Grady Tilton's garage. # Dale Quint's saddlery, and leather repair shop, maybe a

decent description of Gros Ventre of that time was that it still had a ~~saddle and~~ leather man but not yet a dentist. (A person went to Conrad for tooth work.)



4 Saloons, the Pastime and Spenger's (although Dolph Spenger was a

dozen or more years dead.) 4 The Odeon movie theatre, the one place

in town with its name in neon script, the other modern touch ~~was~~ lent by the
 was its recent policy of showing the
~~Odeon lent to the town was to repeat~~ movie twice on Saturday

night--first at 7:30, then the "owl show" at 9. 4 The post office, the

one new building in Gros Ventre since I was old enough to remember.

4 A New Deal project, ^{this} ~~it~~ had been, complete with a mural of the Lewis

and Clark expedition portaging around the great falls of the Missouri

River in 1805. Lewis and Clark maybe were not news to postal customers

of the Two country, but York, Lewis's Negro slave standing out amid the

portagers like a black panther in a snowfield, definitely was.)

Doc Spence's office. Across the empty lot from Doc's, the office

of the lawyer, Eli Kinder. (Who, strange to say, was a regular figure

in the sheep traffic through this street. Eli was a before-dawn riser

and often would arrive downtown just as a band of sheep did. It was

odd to see him, in his suit and tie, helping shove those woolies ~~through~~ along

Main Street, but Eli had been raised on a ranch down in the Highwood

Mountains and knew what he was doing.)

#The sidestreet businesses,

Tracy's creamery and Ed Heaney's lumber yard and Adam Kerz's coal and

trucking enterprise. # The set of bank buildings, marking what might be

called the down of downtown: the First National Bank of Gros Ventre in

tan brick, and cater-corner from it the red brick of what had been the

English Creek



Valley Stockmen's Bank. The Valley Stockmen's went under in the early 1920s when half ^{of all} the banks ⁱⁿ Montana ^{failed} ~~did~~,

and the site now was inhabited, if not exactly occupied, by Sandy Stott's one-chair barber shop. The

^{set into} style in banks in those times was to have ^{a fancy doorway in} ~~the door at~~ the corner nearest the street intersection--~~both of Gros~~ ^{pair of} ~~Ventre's~~ ^{in exactly} buildings stared down each other's throats ~~in~~ this fashion--and when ^{Sandy} ~~he~~ took over the Valley Stockmen's building he simply painted barber-pole stripes on one of the fat granite pillars supporting the doorway.

¶ What have I missed? Of course; ~~the Gleaner~~.

Also there on the Valley Stockmen's block, the ^{newspaper} ~~Gleaner~~ office with its name proclaimed ^{ing} on a plate-glass window in the same typeface as its masthead. ^{Gleaner} Next to that, ^{Shaw's} ~~a~~ ~~Pauline's~~ more recent enterprise, Pauline ~~Shaw's~~ Moderne Beauty Shoppe. The story was that when Bill Reinking ^{of} the ~~Gleaner~~ first saw his new neighboring sign, he stuck his head in the shop to ask Pauline if she was sure she hadn't left an "e" off Beauty.

¶ I heard somebody say once that ^{the business section of} every Western ^{Town} ~~main~~ ~~street~~ he'd ever seen looked as if it originated by falling out the back end of a truck. Not so with Gros Ventre. That is, Gros Ventre never started off from a blueprint, staked off onto the planet before the first outhouse was erected, the way Valier was laid out by ^{its} ~~the~~ irrigation

business section

project bigwigs. But for all its make-do and mix of styles--brick for banks, clapboard for saloons; terra cotta up top if you wanted to sell clothing (The Toggery), an old-style wooden square front (Helwig's Merc) if groceries were your line--to me downtown Gros Ventre held a sense of being what it ought to be. Of aptness, maybe is the term. Not fancy, not shabby. Steady.

Once in a while things are what they seem. As Montana towns go Gros Ventre was an unusually stable one. It grew to about a thousand people when the homesteaders began arriving to Montana in droves.

~~when the homesteaders began arriving to Montana in droves~~
 in the first decade of this century. My mother could in her childhood after wagon remember coming to town and seeing wagon~~s~~ of immigrants heading out onto the prairie, a white rag tied on ~~the~~ one spoke of a wagonwheel so the revolutions could be counted to measure the bounds of the claimed land. ~~About 1910~~
 and that population total never afterward varied more than a hundred


either way. Nor varied much in quality either, I think it can be

said. Gros Ventre simply tended to

draw people who were there from choice rather than merely lack of

imagination.

Settlers from Scotch Heaven or other homestead areas that played out, who had come in and found some way to start over in life. Others who had moved into town for high school for their kids, then stayed on. The store people; the ranch hands and sheep herders who hung around to live out their spans when they were beyond work.



The south-to-north exploration Mouse and I were taking through Gros Ventre, I now have to say, had more than sheep-route logic to it. It also saved for the last what to me was the best of the town. Three buildings at the far end of the east side of Main Street: last outposts before the street/highway made its second curve and zoomed from Gros Ventre over the bridge across English Creek. The trio which dealt in life's basics: food, drink, sleep.

The night during our campjacking trip when I was baptizing my interior with alcohol and Stanley Meixell was telling me the history of the Two Medicine National Forest from day one, a surprise chapter of that tale was about the hostelry that held the most prominent site in Gros Ventre. Stanley's arrival to town ^{where he came here to be} as the ranger for the Two was along the route Mouse and I had just done, from the south, and as Stanley rode around the first curve back there and could see along the length of Main Street, here at the far end a broad false-front with a verandah beneath it was proclaiming: