I answered to the effect that Major Williamson can afford any price we could ever cost him. Monty's expression told me he was not remotely satisfied with that, so I added that really, he needn't worry, the Major had no shortage of either funds or hope for this musical endeavor of ours.

He wagged his head as if considering that and after a moment said:

“Well, he is a praying man, even if he can't get down on that knee any more.”

His skeptical tone surprised me, given his mother's life of gospel. (“Angel Momma” is long dead but still ticking, from the way he cites her.) Without thinking I said:

“For him it seems to have worked.”

He wanted to know how I meant. Monty is more than bright enough to realize that Wes and I did not find each other in baskets in the bulrushes, and so I went so far as to say:

“The Major once told me he felt the cupped hand of God around him, in the war.”

By now Monty has seen, any number of times, Samuel's picture on my makeshift desk. I may be imagining, but I think sometimes I catch him studying
it. This time, he did me the cold kindness of not looking in that direction when he said:

"I guess maybe in any sort of situation, there's soldiers and then there's officers."

That woman was going to drive him to desperation.

Breathe, breathe, breathe. You would think she was a lifeguard pumping away on a drowner.

Monty eased the Duesenberg across the cattle guard at the main gate of the Double W, grimacing as the bumps made the elegant car bounce and groan. The county road on in from the ranch was no bargain either, with ruts fried into it by the abrupt turnaround of weather. He wished the Major would go back in the legislature long enough to do something about these christly awful roads that he was always having to baby the car along on.

Even this day off from her tasted bad, thanks to her. "Breath capacity, I hate to keep bringing it up," she had brought it up, last thing yesterday. "Yours is lazy. That's not your fault, it comes with chasing around the countryside with the Major and otherwise never exercising."
"I'm exercising now, seems like," he had pointed out.

"It doesn't come out in your singing, yet. You must keep at it and at it."

Her and her at-it-itude. All he wanted was to sing. No, that wasn't quite all. He wanted to sing as free and easy as Angel Momma had, and have the world sit up and listen, and make enough money at it that one wrong turn of a card or stray shimmy of the dice wouldn't leave him flat busted, and for that matter not have to shine up another man's car and then right away be called on to drive it over these dustbaths called Montana roads. (It went without saying that he was always going to have a general desire for a Leticia Number Two, which he had not had much time to have on his mind lately until damn Dolph touched it off the other day.) Granted, turning yourself into something took work: he knew that in every fiber of his being, he had put himself through plenty back there in rodeo clowning. But these dipsy-doodle nose and gut exercises she kept after him about--it was like she was trying to turn him into one of those carnival freaks who could tie parts of themselves in knots. "'Smell the rose, blow the bugle,'" he mimicked.

Even the way he talked, she had started giving a going-over. The other day when she was soft-soaping another exercise prescription by claiming it had
probably let her hang on an extra year in New York back when she was trying to make it as a singer there, he had chimed in without thinking: "I been there myself, one time with the rodeo, and that New York ain't to be sneezed at, for tough."

"'Have been,'" she instantly repaired that, "'and 'isn't' wouldn't hurt, either. Any good habit like that will help with your singing."

She had laid that on him mildly enough, for her, but it produced a spat. He huffed up and let her know that the Noon Creek schoolhouse was not shabby and that his last couple of years there, the seventh and eighth grades, were under Miss Ramsay, a stickler for words if there ever was one. "Then you had better get back to stickling," she came out with next. "It doesn't take that much."

"I do that, I'll hear about it from the boys in the bunkhouse."

"So? Your singing has to count for more than your hearing."

That was like her, to have the first word and the last and the majority in between. Not only that, but she was keeping the Major posted on his every up and down by way of mail. How do I know that? Because he did know, was as sure as anything that she was making his ears burn. Yet there she was, still persevering on him when she any number of times could have said 'That's it' and folded the whole deal.
He frowned, then had to half-laugh, at all this arguing with himself. He had never come up against anything like her. It hardly even did a person any use to get a good mad on. Last thing she had said to him in yesterday’s go-round was: “If it makes you happy to be cranky, you go right ahead.”

He was Johnny-on-the-spot at the Valier depot. Swaying under its pushing finger of smoke, the locomotive of the Two Medicine & Teton Railway teetered across a final coulee on a trestle that had seen better days and came laboring across the last mile or so of prairie into the scant town. Monty was as ready as he could be when the private coach drew to a halt exactly even with the waiting car. “How you doing, Major?”

“I expected you to set that to music.”

“Not just yet.” Monty contrived not to notice that the train porter wanted him to take the Major’s suitcases off his hands, instead holding the trunk of the car open for the man to heft the luggage in. Enough bags that it looked as if the Major was here to stay for a while, so at least there might be some stretches of driving when he wouldn’t have to be huffing and puffing trying to please the unpleasable over there on the North Fork. Seeking some topic of conversation other than that, Monty asked: “How do you like your railroad?”
“At least it’s wide enough.”

Monty shook his head as if that was a good one. When he tenderly shut the trunk of the Duesenberg, he turned around to find the Major still standing there looking him over.

“You can’t keep me in suspense, you know,” Wes prompted as if the report was considerably overdue. “How are you and Miss Duff coming on your musical education?”

“Scuffling along. She probably can fill you in on me better than I can.” Monty ducked into the driver’s seat, and after a moment, Wes climbed into the rear seat. But before starting the car, Monty mustered the request he had worked on all the way from the ranch. “Major? On that. Ask you a favor, can I?”

“It depends on the calibre of the favor, doesn’t it.”

“Keep Dolph at the ranch, when I go for my lessons? Dolph is the sort, anything that comes into his head runs out his mouth.”

“Am I hearing right, Monty? Here I thought the two of you were fast friends, all this time.”

“Something like that, I guess. Doesn’t mean he hasn’t got a tongue on him like a longbox wagon.”
"That's as may be. Whit insists you have somebody along with you over there."

"Then how about somebody right there handy?" Monty had in reserve.

"School's close to out, I was thinking that what's-his-name teacher--Mister McCaskill?--maybe he could be around to do it." This was an original approach, Wes had to admit; he hadn't expected Monty to already be finicking over the exact composition of his entourage. He would need to ask Susan if artistic temperament was the first thing she taught.

Head still turned to implore, his erstwhile chauffeur kept on: " Couldn't we work it out some way, he be the audience or whatever when I'm at my lessons, and I pitch in on his chores?"

Only at times such as this did Wes long for his military service, when he could snap out an order and watch everybody involved fall all over themselves following it without any quibble. "Damn it, Monty, this is Whit's department," he confined himself to. And he knew Whit wouldn't speak to Angus McCaskill if he met him in Hell in charge of the ice concession. Still, if it would smooth Monty's feathers any, maybe someone else from the ranch crew could go in
Dolph's place. "Oh, all right, I'll take the matter up with Whit. But I don't promise anything. Now, does this car still have a motor?"

Monty wheeled away from the depot, creeping the car over the potholed byways that passed for back streets here in Valier. At the intersection where the three-story hotel anchored the young town, he was actually looking forward to the road back to the ranch when he heard the back seat command:

"The other direction."

Mystified, he slowly turned the Duesenberg onto the road out to the eastward prairie. *The man just came from this way.*

Taking a pleasure in this that he knew he shouldn't, Wes let him drive a mile or so, shoulders skewed questioningly, before saying:

"I should have warned you to bring your baby pictures. We're going to Fort Assinniboine for the day."

"Fort Skin-and-Bone?" Monty blurted. "I thought there's not much there anymore."

"Enough to buy," Wes replied mildly. It was true that the abandoned fort persisted in burning down, from vandals or lightning fires or spontaneous friction with the prairie it so incongruously reared out of. But there had been so much of
it, when it was built as a Presidio of the north to make sure the plains tribes did not rise from defeat, that rambling buildings still stood and the land that had pastured hundreds of cavalry horses still grew grass.

Monty glanced at him by way of the rear-view mirror. "The Double W need its own fort now? You gonna take on Canada?"

"Very funny. The whole military reservation is being auctioned, the buildings come with. They'll do for a line camp." Wes was a bit miffed at the turn the topic had taken. The need, and Monty and every other bunkhouse prognosticator doubtless perfectly well knew it, was for a ranch to set up for Whit's son, Wendell, whenever he flailed his way out of Stanford. *The Eastern Front*, Whit had called the quiltwork of prairie they had their eye on, until Wes's reaction cured him of it. Wes now gave due regard to the human question box serving as his driver, and in turn wanted to know: "Remember it when, do you?"

Remembering had already taken Monty over. In his farthest reach of mind the Tenth Cavalry wheeled on the vast parade ground at Fort Assinniboine. The big, big horses, clatter of everything on the men and animals, the band tootling on horseback too. Here and there a white officer, but all the blue riders, faces on
them like his mother's and his. "See him, Montgomery? See your papa? Can you salute him like a little man?"

"Only just barely," he finally answered the Major. Those first three or four years of life might as well have happened in Bible times, so far removed were they from growing up under the crisscross of clothelines at the Double W. Distance was the only reliable arithmetic he knew for Fort Assinniboine. The road unrolling straight ahead of the car, Monty calculated the time to the Marias River and a similar stretch after that to Big Sandy Creek, and then they would begin trending north. "The fort, it's a ways."

"This will give you and the Doozy some exercise," Wes replied, settling as comfortably as he could and reaching his attache case to him.

"That's a thing I never did get a good understanding of." Monty checked quickly over his shoulder, getting this in before the Major drifted too far into his thicket of paper. "How my folks ended up at the ranch from all the way over there?"

As neutrally as he could, Wes gazed back at the dark face that was the remaining result of that other. "As far as I know, your father rode in out of the
blue. There was a job on the place for someone like him, he was quite something on horseback. And of course, for your mother when he fetched the two of you.”

“Been different if I could remember much about the man,” Monty chanced slightly farther. “It sort of keeps the curiosity going.”

“Montgomery, sit down here by me. You know you’re my treasure. More so now.” Her face so twisted, it hurt him too. “Your papa--Mister Warren tells me he quit the country on us. Him and another. I don’t quite know what they got up to. But the mister, he tells me we better not look for him back.”

“It would have been different, yes.” Wes, older, all too well remembered Mose Rathbun. The same dark brow on Monty, maybe some of the same slant of shoulders from a life on horseback. If Monty was lucky, all resemblance stopped there. Mose’s ilk, in denatured white form, Wes had met up with again and again in the AEF: lifer sergeants, old stripers, who thought the chevrons on their arm meant they could get away with anything. He’d had to bust some of them so far down in rank they slunk around saluting civilians, but Mose Rathbun had never been his to command, thank the Lord. Soldiers not in the manuals became the pencilings of fate.

“Major? Something I did?”
"Why, is there something on your conscience?"

"Not any more than usual."

"Then concentrate on the road for a change, will you."

That put a stopper in Monty, and Wes tried to find his way into the maze of papers in his lap. In them lay the route to bring bald-faced cattle to the dun hills of the Fort Assinniboine country, a fresh new Williamson brand seared on their left hips. But this other business, the Rathbuns and their wander into nagging orbit around his own father and now Whit and him, kept slipping in between the lines.

"Damn it," he murmured. Then notched up more civilly: "Monty, I take it back."

What now? was registered in the pair of eyes that met Wes's in the car mirror.

"These papers can wait a bit. How's that voice of yours?"

"In operating order, I guess."

"Then why don't we have a sample." Wes swished his sheaf of papers down onto the seat next to him as if the matter was decided. "What type of thing are you and Miss Susan working up?"
“You’ve pretty much heard them, one time or another,” Monty hedged.

“Try me on a fresh one then.”

“Uhm, lot of songs in the world, Major.”

“The kind your mother would have sung.”

For once Monty was glad of all Miss Susan’s bellyaching at him about posture, what with the man making him sing while he had to sit here like a lump. He squared himself up behind the steering wheel, pouter-pigeoned his chest for all available capacity, lifted his chin to a goodly elevation and here came as safe a song as he could think of:

“Look there, my son, my sleepyhead one,

the moon followed you home.

It’s yours to keep, until you sleep.

Show it your dream and it’ll not roam

Until the night is done....”

“Very moving,” Wes stated when the last verse was finished, leaving Monty in doubt as to whether it was high praise or he was merely acknowledging that the song had propelled them a little way along the day’s long road. Back into his documents went the Major, and Monty once more settled into chauffeurdom.
Both men were accustomed to Montana’s long-legged miles. But this journey on a day that had turned sultry, hot air blasting in through the car windows, seemed to go on and on, methodically, doggedly, hypnotically. Gradually the tawny hills gave way to homestead farms, spotted onto flats of land rimmed by benchland on every horizon. On the section-line roads across the prairie they met no other travelers, black-locomotived Great Northern trains passing them by on the distant northern horizon the only other moving things in the blaze of afternoon. Wes caught himself drowsing, snapped awake and checked on Monty; he was peering ahead over the steering wheel the same as ever.

“Hateful weather,” Monty eventually offered above the steady purr of the Duesenberg. Wes entirely agreed.

Time upon time now, the big car topped a rise and the two men were gazing down at lustreless expanses. There had been a distressed air to farms all along the way, the houses and outbuildings brown howls of dry wood, the cropland even more stricken. Through his sweat, Wes blinked and studied the fatigued fields. To every horizon, the earth had been plowed and anemic grain was trying to grow, but its stalks would barely tickle a person’s ankles. He knew
this turn of weather would furl up even more of the homesteaders, those who
were still left. He had been reluctant to see it on his route from the East, but the
hard seasons of the past years all led to this reaping of the wind. The puddled
settlements on the great prairie were drying up. Banks were evaporating, entire
towns would go next. It was incredible, the reversal of the wave of settlers that
had made Montana and the Dakotas the coming places, before the War. Buy, he
knew he was going to hear out of Whit the minute he set foot on the ranch, get out
there and buy them out. That had been the Williamson way, it had built the
Double W ever since their father had come into the Two Medicine country on the
fading hoofprints of the buffalo and swamped the prairie with cattle.

This weather though, good God, how many summers of this weather
were there going to be? Wes felt himself turning into hot salt soup in the stifling

he wondered aloud to Monty as though the weather was more car. “What do you think might this bring rain?” readable from the front seat,

"Got me. The air does feel sort of funny."

“Could,” Monty responded, as though anything was theoretically possible. “The air’s a funny kind of dry, though.”

Even though the road ran straight as a rail for a dozen miles ahead, Monty
never shifted his eyes from it now. Wes, gandering, was the one who puzzled at
the smudged sky to the west. The horizon there had gradually roughened with
hills, breaks, coulees, and now that banked horizon of hills was dimming away into the sky’s haze. He knew it had to be cloud, but the formation was strangely edgeless, almost more a tint that anything else. “Does weather always have that much trouble making up its mind out here, I wonder?”

Monty sneaked a look, then jerked his foot off the accelerator and all but stood on the clutch and brake pedals until the car slewed to a halt. He put his head out the window and stared west to be sure.

“Dust,” he said as if afraid of the word. “We better get ourselves there before it does.”

The butter-bright car sped on the dimming road for the next five minutes, ten, fifteen, with Monty pursed and restless over the steering wheel while Wes tried to watch both the road and the phenomenon to the west, the earth rising in wrath. A half-light, yellow-green, descended, perceptibly darkening as if a shadow-dye from the dust storm was flowing ahead into it. Wind began buffeting the car, the steering now gone woozy in Monty’s clenched hands. Wes registered, to the instant, the full arrival of the dust, the prairie now flooding by him in the air, a dirt-sea surging up into the next element.
Abruptly a cascade of antelope, blazewhite at throat and rump, fled across the road, flickers of Africa in the dust eclipse.

Monty braked and veered, swearing, and just managed to miss the last leaping animal. "Your headlamps!" Wes ordered in a shout and Monty already had darted a hand to the button on the dashboard and refastened his gaze to the road. The pair of men now saw in the headlight beams dust blowing across the surface of the road like wisps of brown snow.

They were in past the parade ground before they could discern any of the buildings of Fort Assinniboine.

Before Monty could see it coming, a rolling washtub met the Duesenberg's radiator grill and bounced away.

He managed to steer in close to an abandoned barracks that sat broadside between them and the dust storm, the building's turret dim over them like a castlement in the fog of some terrible era. The dust fury kept on without letup. They could hear it stinging wherever it could find wood, scouring off the paint of buildings around them. And the two men watched astounded as on the pathway between this barracks and the next, not mere dirt but gravel, actual small stones,
blew into thin drifts. Tumbleweeds spun tirelessly across the parade ground, and every so often a stovepipe flew by.

Held in confinement by the groundstorm, each man went into himself as they sat waiting it out in the sanctuary of the car. Wes’s mind was reenforcing itself with sound principles for investment here, the airborne nature of Fort Assinniboine at the moment notwithstanding, but Monty’s thoughts were speculative. Hidden somewhere out there was everyplace a sergeant of colored cavalry had courted a hymn-singing laundress, and the exact room in the married men’s quarters where they had done their business of bearing and he had squalled his way onto this earth. But for the life of him he could not pull back anything substantial from his first handful of years here. What he best remembered, as if he could reach down at this instant and touch its magical cool skin, was the fire escape at the post hospital. It must have been the latest thing, a chute like a metal tunnel that even a mite of a boy could climb up inside, barefoot, and then slide ecstatically down. He wasn’t to go climbing the ones of the other big buildings, the post headquarters and like that, but the hospital’s was the best one anyway. Up he would go, then the glorious seat-of-the-britches ride down, shooting out the end and there would be his mother in the white field of wash. But that, and
nothing beyond dimness about the parade-ground figure whose seed desposited
him into this Jericho of the prairie. That and his mother’s drumbeat of verdict: "I
tried so, with that man. And for him to pick up on us with never a word."

At last Wes roused and peered out into the lessening hurricane of murk. "I
think we better give it a try, now."

Monty crept the car through the ghostly fort until Wes pointed. An
aftergust of the storm caught them before they could make a run for it to the
building where other vehicles were haphazardly parked and lights glowed wanly
in the first-floor windows. The brown blown grit could be heard doing no favors
to the glossy finish on the Duesenberg, and they could feel the dust collecting on
them as deep as their teeth, the air about thick enough to chew. Wes tied his
handkerchief over his face like a bandanna, and at a motion from him, Monty
quickly followed suit. They struggled against the wind to the door of the
building. When they clambered in, the small crowd of bankers and ranchers and
the bowler-hatted auctioneer looked around in alarm at the masked invaders. Wes
yanked his bandanna down, and Monty rapidly followed suit. As they swatted
dust off themselves, Wes said to those assembled: "The Fort Assinniboine land,
gentlemen--we had better hope it’s not blowing by for good out there."
“It’s going to be the ruin of a good choreboy.”

“Whit, he has a rare voice. You’ve said so yourself any number of times.”

Still feeling sanded down by the dust blizzard of the day before, Wes was in no particular mood for debate, but that had never stopped his brother.

“Calling cows is one thing,” Whit stated. “Putting on a bib and tucker and squalling out ‘Doo Dah’ is another.”

Wes plumped up a neglected cushion of the chair on the visitor side of the desk--his brother made a point of doing the same on his rare New York visits--and settled in. “For Lord’s sake, man, you had him sing for the Archbishop.”

“That was here. Under our own roof.”

“Monty deserves this chance to get out on his own. He’s not ours to do with as we please, forever and ever, amen.”

“Next thing to it. Monty still wouldn’t have a pot to put under his bed if we didn’t keep giving him a job.”

“Giving him?” Wes grated the words out. “You know better than that.”

Whit ran a hand across his forehead. “Aaah. There’s the woman, too.”

“Susan Duff came into this of her own free will. She can take it.”
“So you’ve already proved.”

“I told you at the time she’s no concern of yours,” Wes abruptly was giving this private speech his all. Whit eyed his brother there on the far side of the scarred old desk. Was his case of petticoat fever coming back? No, there had been more to the Duff woman than that. Which must have made it even worse for Wes. There were times, though, when he wondered whether Wes was secretly glad to have been cut out of the governor’s race, even the hell of a way it was done. Not glad, that would be too much to say. But relieved, maybe? Absolved somehow? Whit still couldn’t tell. Wes was too complicated for him.

“What she gets out of this is her damnedest pupil ever. Are you listening, Whit? I’m seeing to it myself that she’s taken care of, on the money end. I don’t tell you how to run the cattle—”

“Good thing, too. When it comes to cows, you don’t know which end eats.”

“--and I’d appreciate it if you didn’t volunteer your every thought about this.”

“Have it your way. But this haywire notion of Monty’s that Dolph all of a sudden isn’t good enough to tag along with him--does he want tea and crumpets,
too? I’m not pulling Dolph off this and putting someone else to it, no way in hell.

There’s no sense in creating hard feelings among the crew.” Whit settled deeper into the ancient office chair on his side of the desk. “Could we talk some business about where we’re going to put cows, you think?”

Word always raced around the ranch when the Major, natural inspector-general of corral-sitters and dawdlers, set foot out of the big house, but for once it failed to reach Monty and Dolph before he did. Splattered just short of polka dots, they halted amid their task of whitewashing the harness room and looked around at him.

“Caught you at it,” Wes said sternly enough to maintain his reputation.

“Working. Are you trying to ruin the reputation of the whole crew?”

The two told him that choreboys always had more to do than they knew what to do with, which for both of them had an element of truth in it, and stood waiting to see what he wanted, brushes dripping.

Conveyance to the North Fork, he informed them.
Where's this come from? Monty's thoughts lined up in alarm. Why don't he just go over there with us tomorrow when we do? Very slowly he wiped his hands. "Take me a little while to get cleaned up enough to bring the car around."

Wes waved that off. "Let's keep life simple. Just hitch up the grays for me, I'll go cross-country." Everybody on the Double W knew singular from plural, particularly when uttered by a Williamson, and Monty and Dolph apprehensively slid away into the main barn to fetch the horses.

They watched the Major drive the buckboard up to the big house, hating to admit to themselves that he handled the reins as spiffily as either of them could. Minutes later, team and well-kept wagon went back past them at rattling velocity and kept on at a smart pace until starting up the incline of the benchland.

"So what do you suppose?" Dolph was intrigued. "He's heading over there to git your report card from her?"

"Or maybe yours," said Monty.

Once atop the broad bench of land, Wes spanked the reins across the rumps of the horses, setting them into a prancy trot again, and anxiously studied the sky to the west for indication of how the weather was going to behave.

Indeterminate, as usual in the Two Medicine country. He put the weather
question aside as best he could and concentrated on the pleasure of handling fine
horses again, the leather feel of the reins tethering him to the moment. A kind of
pleasure he had almost forgotten took him over, the team of grays fresh and
wanting exercise and snappy at the ends of the reins, the bolster beneath his knee
with almost the feel of a saddle, although he knew that was stretching imagination
some. The commanding officer who came up out of the cavalry had singled him
out even in France, that incredible time, to remark on how lucky Wes was to have
grown up in such glorious horse country for a soldier. Wes ruminated on that
now, the assumption that where you were born fitted you to the country. As sure
as anything, before his leg wound he would have cantered across this benchland
on a saddlehorse as if under a satin guidon. But he didn’t mind at all having been
dealt out of Indian fighting by chance of birthdate. San Juan Hill and the St.
Mihiel salient had been enough wars to hold him. Those and Montana politics.

So, he concluded contentedly, take the horse part out of the equation and it
still was glorious country on a day such as this. Up here on the level divide
between the creek valleys the scope of earth opened, the Rockies suddenly
enlarging with the skyline expanse of cliff and reef and cuts of crag chipped like
the faces of arrowheads, and the sun-browned prairie boundless in the other
direction. As ever to Wes's eye and mind, the sweep of it all curved away
through the profound distances of the Two Medicine country to where geography
turned into history. This reach of earth drew its name from the canyoned river
thirty miles to the north where the Blackfoot tribe in legendary times twice built
their medicine lodge for sacred ceremonies; but in more ways than that, Wes knew
to the innermost timber of his being, this had been a land of two medicines, two
sets of the most potent beliefs a people could hold. The struggle for the prairie
could be said to have begun here, when Meriwether Lewis and his exploring party
bloodied the Blackfeet in a parley that turned into shooting, in 1806 on the banks
of the Two Medicine River. Evidently inheritors by nature, one of the creeds of
the Williamsons which they did not even need to discuss out loud was that if they
had not put together a cattle empire on swaths of land here for the taking after the
eventual diminishing of the Indians and the buffalo, someone else would have. It
played through Wes’s mind now that he was on his way to take his medicine from
Susan, who had once told him that when it came to owning chunks of the Two
Medicine country, he and his father and Whit behaved like St. Bernards in a
windowbox.
Long thoughts ended abruptly as he came to the edge of the benchland and had to wagoneer the still spirited team down the slope and across rough meadow to the ford of the North Fork. He eased the team and wagon into the clear creek. Pulling into the yard with the wheels still shedding water, he whoaed the horses vigorously enough announce himself, but no one appeared. Women’s voices in duet carried from the house. Wes had to smile. Susan would not interrupt a song no matter what. He stayed in the buckboard, listening, the ears of the matched horses up sharp in curiosity.

When the singing concluded, the door of the house opened with alacrity.

“If it isn’t Major Williamson,” Susan announced for the benefit of the interested. He saw her shoot a look past him for Monty and Dolph.

A smaller figure joined Susan at the doorway. Wes climbed down from the wagon, good leg first, and made himself sociable:

“Mrs. McCaskill, isn’t it? Don’t break up your songfest on my account. You sounded like a set of larks.”

“No, it’s time I wasn’t here.” Adair too seemed to search the air around him, more than addressing him with her eyes.

“Please, don’t let me run you off.”
Adair looked squarely at him now, as did Susan beside her.

Uncomfortably Wes amended: “I didn’t know I would be interrupting anything, I only came over to make sure everything is squared away. With the music enterprise and all.”

“I dasn’t take too much advantage of Susan,” Adair said, leaving the impression there might not be enough to go around. She plucked out a pocket purse and paid some coins into Susan’s hand. “If I don’t go home and get at things, we’ll have to eat sin for supper. And probably borrow the salt and bread from you for that, even.”

Susan gave a hoot at the old saying. “Careful, or you’ll set off that sin-eater you’re married to. He’ll be rhyming sin and thin at you until the words wear out.”

“Wouldn’t he, though.”

Wes let all this pass as obliquely as if he had wandered into a conversation between Frenchwomen. Adair mounted her horse in climbing fashion as Wes held it by the bridle, then her small solo form went from sight around the bend of the chattering creek.
He assembled himself again for what he had come for. "Here I am, as summoned."

"'Summoned,' that will be the day. Won't New York fall down, without you there to support it? We thought you had forgotten your way back to Montana." The tingle of the song still seemed to be all over Susan. She spun to go back in the house, but he made no move to follow. "Wes? You could step in. Homesteads don't bite."

"Actually, I was hoping we could make an outing of it--I haven't been up under the Reefs in ages." He stayed rooted in the yard, appearing abashed.

"More fool, me. I'd forgotten that even up here there would be the matter of the neighbors."

For her part, Susan looked highly amused. "Neighbor, singular. You haven't that much to worry about, here. Adair McCaskill holds to herself, in every way I can think of."

"Well, then." Wes drew himself up. "If this won't set tongues off, near and far--I brought fried spring chicken and hard-boiled eggs and biscuits and chokecherry jam and a jar of Mrs. Gustafson's dreaded pickles and a bottle of chenin blanc."
“A picnic! Who would have thought the soldier man had jam in him.”

“Susan, damn it—if you don’t want to go, just say so.”

“Don’t be so touchy, of course I want to go. What’s left for me to provide? Ah. A representation of strawberries. There’s a patch of wild ones along the creek bank. Let me change, and pick those, and I’m at your service, Major.”

Their route took them west on the uneven scrape of road, hedged with tall brome grass. After the climb out of the creek valley they were up onto the shoulder of Breed Butte, the buildings of the abandoned Scotch Heaven homesteads here and there below them like wagons in a looping circle, left to fall apart. Wes clucked encouragement to the horses when he wasn’t regaling Susan with everything he had stored up for this. She listened eagerly to his account of what was on in New York, even to his dodgy report of subscription evenings—"conscription is more like it"—at Carnegie Hall with Merrinell’s circle, and all the good dirt about politics in Coolidge climes. When this ran out they found enthusiastic things to say about the day’s weather, the sun holding the Two
Medicine wind at bay for once. To look at, the two of them might still have been lovers unencumbered by discovery.

But Susan was careful not to promote touching against each other in the sway of the buckboard over the thin-tracked road, and they both looked relieved when the wagon reached timberline. They agreed on an open grassy circlet that gave an opening of view there near the top of a foothills ridge, where the rimrock of Roman Reef capped the entire sky west of them. Finding a spot with a welcoming smattering of wildflowers, they spread a serviceable tarp. Cork came out of bottle, mutual faces were made in scorn of Prohibition, and they sipped at the wine and the day.

From this elevation they could see the distant gray-tan of drought, off to the east where Wes had told her about the prairie dust storm. Here under the mountains the snowbank-fed coulees held a tinge of green yet, but hayfields and grazing land already looked wan. The country was going gaunt, like the flanks of a greyhound.

“You were right,” Susan gave him his due. “It’s best to be up here, before the summer gets everything again.”
Wes smiled slightly. "Even a tossed coin comes down right half the time."

Turning his head, he searched along the base of the towering reef to a particular swatch of timber with an open park many times the size of the grass pocket they were in. "That's where my father took Roosevelt after elk, that time," he said as if refreshing his knowledge from a guidebook. He and Whit along as youngsters who would be heirs to such behavior someday, watching in awe and envy as the men sat around the campfire drinking whiskey chilled with fistfuls of snow. Theodore Roosevelt full of bounce as he emerged from his tent the next morning and woke the entire camp with his yelp to their father, "Perfectly bully country, Warrie!" Wes grew aware Susan was giving him her studying look.

"What?"

She merely shook her head and gave him another look over the top of her wine glass as she sipped.

Caught by the day and the chance to see it all from up here, he scanned out eastward again over the dun grasslands and fields. To him it resembled a sand map, in the vastest headquarters, but instead of the croupier sticks of staff colonels and toy troop movements, the contest for land was deployed to see on
that miniature of earth. He could have recited it to the nearest dollar to Susan, if
she wouldn’t have batted him off the ridge. There below them the west pasture of
the Double W broke off, like a salient that had been blunted by the boundary of
the Two Medicine National Forest. Wes could even pick out the wood gate,
called so because the Double W used it as access to timber for firewood and
corrals and buckrake teeth. Over the shoulder of Breed Butte from there lay
the North Fork of English Creek, the old Duff and Erskine and other homestead
pastures where Angus McCaskill’s band of freshly-sheared sheep were as visible
as peeled eggs. Beyond the last barb of McCaskill’s wire fence the rangeland was
the Double W’s, all the way to the irrigated farms around the fledgling town of
Valier and the blue eye of lake there which seemed to be returning Wes’s
appraisal. In the boom before the war he’d had to talk like a good fellow to
convince Whit to yield that land to the Minneapolis grain concern and their
irrigation engineers—*Cattle are no good to us unless there are stomachs around for
them to find their way to.* He had been ahead of things then, guessing with
terrible rightness that the dry-land farming that was bringing needed people to
Montana would someday go drier yet. Irrigation, roads, towns that amounted to
more than wooden tents, progress paid for by taxing the extractors; he had seen
the shape of what could be. On what proved to be the sand of a political career.

And now he was faced with a brother who wanted blowing-away homesteads bought to make up for the Valier irrigation tract.

Susan brought him back to himself. "Wes. On most picnics, there's food."

"Let's dig in, then."

The wicker picnic basket disgorged. They passed its ingredients back and forth, foregoing conversation for flavor, until Wes no longer could stand not to ask.

"All right, I give. What's a sin-eater?"

"If you were lucky enough to be a Lowlander instead of one of those ridge-runners in plaid skirts," Susan responded with mock severity, "you wouldn't have to ask such a silly question."

The ins and outs of the Scotland-born were beyond him; Williamson's had been this side of the ocean since hiking their kilts after the Battle of Culloden.

"Deprived as I am, you could take pity on me."

"I'm to instruct you in sin-eating, am I. Very well then, it's, mm, a kind of wake. I wasn't all that old when Gram Erskine passed away and I saw it done,
right there.” She inclined her head toward the Erskine homestead, next up the North Fork from the Duff place. Wes felt the stir of his father’s voice in him: “That Erskine is another one—in cahoots with Ninian Duff.”

Susan was saying, “Scotch Heaven’s first death, she must have been. So, they were all still full of the old country,” pronouncing it auld countrrrry, “and nothing doing but they had to have a sin-eater. They take and put a piece of bread and a salver of salt—oh, it’s easier to show you. Assume for the moment I’m not among the living.” She took one of the biscuits and the salt shaker in either hand, lay back on the tarp and carefully positioned them atop her chest, where her clavicles met. With eyes shut and held breath, she made a perfectly still body there on the shroudlike canvas. Wes watched, fixed as if hypnotized, as one hand ever so slowly came up out of the grass holding a single shooting star and joined the other hand in folded repose beneath her breasts, the tiny flower in mischievous droop there.

“You’re spoofing and you know it,” he burst out. “That damned posie—”

“You caught on, but it’s a nice dramatic touch, isn’t it,” she sat up and tossed the tiny flower at him as biscuit and salt cascaded off her to the tarp. “The rest of it, though, I swear to you is done just that way. I remember being
surprised my father wasn’t the one to do it for Gram,” she glanced again to where
the Erskine place was in slow descent into kindling. “Anything civic and grim
usually fell to him. But maybe he was too much artillery for the occasion. ‘Ay,
Gram, as ye were better than ye were bonny, it is beyond our imagining that ye
could have been up to anything, in your younger time over across the water. But
on the odd chance that ye strayed from the beaten path into yon bushes of sin,
we’ll relieve ye of that indiscretion now.’”

Her uncanny mimickry of her father sent Wes’s blood a bit chill. Susan
sobered out of her role, but her lips twitched at the complicated remembrance.

“The Erkines asked Angus McCaskill to be the sin-eater instead. He always had
the knack, at any of that old ritual. There he stood, right by the corpse, I can see
him yet. Eating of the bread and salt, to lift the sins off the poor old deceased.”

Wes seemed to be in one of his deeper mullings. After a long moment he
said: “A penitent for all concerned, it sounds like.”

“If you have to be Latinate about it.”

Stung, he scowled across the carpet-width of tarp at her.

Tell her, it all screamed in him. See how she likes knowing. Let her try

all the bread and salt in the world, then judge the lot of us.
“Leave it to me to take the shine off a picnic,” Susan apologized, torn by the abrupt twist in his expression. Someone who had been patted by Presidents and supreme generals, and she was having him on as if she were a devilish schoolgirl. She never would see why he let a stuffy church stand in the way of all else available in a life such as his, but—“Wes, really, I’m sorry I got so wound up.”

Wes sat up. “Water under old bridges, some in Rome and some not.”

His face found its mask of command. “Wasn’t I promised strawberries?”

They ate the thimbles of flavor, then Wes, seeing the afternoon go, brought out the name of Monty and it was Susan’s turn at serious.

“That’s what I need to talk to you about. I have to know, how long are you willing to put into this? He has quite a way to go.”

“How do you mean?” Wes propped on his side facing her directly, the better to take issue. “Training in anything worth doing takes some while, why should singing be different? I thought you told me once there were songs it had taken you all your life to learn.”

”Monty picks up most things, he’ll outwork the clock,” Susan granted.

“With any other pupil, I’d be thrilled silly by now at what comes out of him at
times.” She stopped to gather the exact words. “But there’s something holding him back, he cannot seem to get his wind built up. I’ve tried everything on him but a tire pump. His breath capacity just isn’t there. Without it, he’ll never be more than a kind of human hurdy-gurdy.”

Wes had to laugh. “All the lungpower he puts into conversations when he’s ostensibly driving me, I’d have thought Monty has as much breath in him as anybody.”

“He needs half again as much as mortals with tin ears,” she took a bit of the point off with a smile.

The expression on Wes she could no longer read. He retrieved the crumpled shooting star from the surface of the tarp, sniffed it as a bullfighter might a rose, and tossed it back to her. “As long as it takes, Susan.”

She hoped they were talking about the same thing. “Very well, then. We’ll battle on, Monty and I.”

“That’s what I bargained for. Oh, speaking of, I need to borrow our prize student back around the end of this week. Helena business, a couple of days should be enough.”

“Make him practice his breathing while he’s in your tender care.”
“What am I, the assistant choirmaster now? Here we go, there’s a drop of wine apiece left. Mustn’t let it go to waste.” He sat up to perform the pouring. They toasted out of habit, then Wes put his glass out of harm’s way and turned half toward her. “I did recognize that song when I pulled in, I’ll have you know. Not bad, for me.”

“It’s just an old ditty.”

“It didn’t sound so, in Edinburgh.”

His words came out lightly enough, but Susan froze, locking a look onto him over her tilted wineglass.

“Wes. I don’t know, this may be something run-of-the-mill to you. But I have it bad.”

“Catching, isn’t it.”

Restraint had gone out the mullioned windows of one French hotel after another, then Vienna’s, that of Rome, one or two in Belgium, and now the casements of the misnamed sleeper train to Edinburgh. Something in the water in St. Mihiel, they naturally joked; how else account for such a sudden onset of the malady of love? After the first curious but cautious dinner together, then a second
and third as if they were plenipotentiaries returning to a truce table, it had them.

Now here they were, two weeks into a romance as full of sway and pulsation as this galloping train compartment. She was a woman grown, whose heart had been lent more than once before and retrieved with no great fuss. He had the world, what need had he of an elongated spinster lover? Ridiculous for the two of them to be bumping around Europe in a fog of love. And proving irresistible.

"How much longer can you fib by cable?"

He said nothing, then caressed her cheek with an odd shy stroke. They still were getting used to touching each other. When he managed to speak, his words were soft with regret. "Until Monday. I have to be aboard the Carpathia or they'll be sending a search party for me."

She knew nothing to do about that except acknowledge it, brisk as a whisk broom. "At least we have somewhere that a weekend amounts to about three days, a Scottish Sunday is so slow."

At the railway station they raced to a black taxi with Mackay primly lettered on its door in gold, and were trundled up the hill to the Royal Mile. Restless with the thrill of their affair, both of them wanted to walk and walk, go arm-in-arm through this sky island of stony grace, stroll unafflicted under the
exclamatory church steeples jabbing home their points to the clouds over the city. They gawked at sites thick with the soot of history, lunched, kissed behind a kiosk, sampled bookdealers’ wares, took tea, and at last worked their way up to the Castle, various in its stone textures—all dark, but subtly different, like some natural palimpsest of the centuries. Susan felt as if she had stepped into someone else’s life. But at last she had to admit: “My feet are about worn off. Where are we putting up?”

With the sorcerer’s aplomb she had come to know, Wes gently pulled her into the doorway of the building just outside the Castle gate. “Here.”

They bumped and laughed their way up the corkscrew wind of the stairs, to the top-floor flat. “The agent said it should be “—he triumphantly plucked a key from the top of the doorjamb—”here!” In they went, breathless. Every window threw them a view of another essence of Edinburgh. Down in the Princess Street Gardens, the flower clock told time in autumn blossoms of heather. Regularities of roofline chimney pots thrust up as if each street was a soberly engineered steamship. On the Castle side of things, the room offered a pert ironwork balcony which looked onto the stone-laid parade ground.
“It’s an enchantment, Wes. We had better treat it as such.” She went to him and they ardently invented each other all over again, starting at the lips.

After, they lay in bed facing each other, lazy and replete, not needing to say anything. They burst out laughing together when a whistle shrilled and bagpipes began to drone under the window as if mocking their dormant state.

Hiiiyuhhh! came a rouseful shout from practically beneath their bedsprings.

“That’ll be a sergeant-major, sounding the tattoo,” Wes identified as if by rote.

“Come on, let’s get ourselves decent and see this.”

By the time they reached the balcony, the Castle parade ground had been turned into a vast drumskin, the slow-step of the kilted marching contingent seeming to be echoed in the bass thuds and staccato rustles of the drum corps. “I suppose you ordered this up, too,” Susan put to Wes as she hooked her elbow in his in reckless dance-like fashion, maybe some innate Lowlander defense against ferocious Highlands music. “That would take tall ordering,” Wes answered in a voice husky enough that it caused her to peer at him. “They’re from the Black Watch. ‘The Ladies from Hell,’ the Germans called them. They were two or three down the line from us, when we took St. Mihiel.” Now, with the pump of a dozen elbows at once, the piper corps resumed its determination to make the
wind work, earn its supper by inhuman humming. Flaunting their plaids to gray rational Edinburgh, the Black Watch honor guard marched confidently to music like no other.

Wes held Susan close as life itself while they watched the spectacle. He wondered what accompanied the skirl of tunes through her mind. His own thoughts spiraled, but back and back to the same place to ponder from. If Susan had not been avid to know all she could of Samuel’s service unto death, and if he himself had not been just as conscience-bound to make her know that only the war’s worst havoc, in the form of the desperate barrage with which the Germans tried to head off the St. Mihiel assault, had been able to kill Private Sam Duff, the two of them would not be on this balcony with arms twined around one another. How in God’s name—and it was a question Wes was addressing to the higher order of things more than nightly—could love be sired by war this way? He kept feeling that some eternal apology was owed to Samuel Duff. Men by the hundreds in the Montana battalion, enough for almost any soldier to be anonymous to any officer if fate would let him keep his head down: but not that one. While Wes stood seemingly entranced by the ceremonial soldiers below the
balcony, the trench scene populous with his own men kept insisting its way back into him.

"You're in for it now, Sammy."

"Whooey, listen to them over there-- 'Mein Gott, Mein Gott!'"

"Too good a shot, old kid!"

Not liking the way that commotion sounded, he had come out of the HQ dugout to tend to the matter himself. The sergeant spun around to him and reported:

"It's Bucky, sir. Sam Duff bagged him. He dropped out of that tree like a ton of bricks."

By then the battalion had made something like a mascot of the German sniper possessed of buck fever, or instructions to merely pester the Amis but not make them mad, or perhaps some personal indisposition to chalk up kills of time-serving trench inhabitants no more careless than himself. More than a week before, the men had assured Wes the sniper they had inherited with this sector couldn't hit a bull in the ass with a shovel. Wes had taken time to make sure, but the bee buzz that flew harmlessly high over helmets maybe half a dozen times a day backed up their assessment. In one of the infinite manipulations that
constituted the conduct of war, Captain-soon-to-be-Major Williamson accepted this ineffectual sniper as a token from his German counterpart across the way.

Oblique considerations of this sort had invisibly grown in these armies mired in years of blood and mud. The shouting back and forth, the enlisted men’s common language of jocular calumny. Patrols that didn’t go out of their way to pick a fight. Reluctance by either commander to call in salvoes, with shells that fell short, shells that were overshot. It sporadically tore apart into savagery and blind killing during the offensives--Wes knew more than his share about that, too--but there existed a morbid mutual etiquette of the trenches.

Heart sinking, he singled out the big-boned young soldier in the mob crowded on the duckboards. “Duff, come with me,” he said with enough bite in it for the others to take notice and led the way into the HQ dugout, Samuel ducking his head to follow through the doorway. Wes waved off the lieutenant and went on into backmost area where there was an actual scavenged door. “In here, Private.”

This was going to take a while. Wes dropped into one of the prized chairs that had found their way here from some wrecked French farmhouse. Alone there, difference in rank notwithstanding, the two men looked each other over with utter
frankness. They were a long way from the Two Medicine country. They were a long way from anything as simple as rangeland feuds.

"Oh, at ease, Sam, before you solidify."

The young soldier shifted his weight just enough to comply. Wes studied the lean unyielding face, wondering what blade of fate had created the Duff family line. As much curiosity as rank as in his tone, he couched the reprimand:

"I thought I passed word for everybody to lay off that miserable sniper."

"I didn't hear the straight skinny on that, sir." That last word obviously came hard to him. "I just this morning got back from the field hospital."

"You're a wicked shot, Private Duff."

"That's the way I was brought up, on the homestead. Sir."

Samuel's gaze gave nothing. Wes knew better than to try to wait him out, the young man's version of soldiering--which was to say his springsteel approach to life--would never be amended by anything either of them could say. Sitting there, Wes felt the weight of command push at him from another of those oblique vectors. Trained as he was to both politics and war, there were times when he could sense the force of the future moving over him like wind-kited clouds; here standing opposite him, he could tell, was a certainty on the casualty list that would
arrive to his desk after the next patrol or the one after that. Soldier Samuel Duff
was too fearless for his own good. Then and there, compelled by something he
did not want to put a name to, Wes had called in the lieutenant and ordered that
Private Duff be taken off combat duty and assigned as HQ runner.

And put him in the eventual path of a barrage? Or granted Samuel a few
more vital days or weeks before the slaughter market herded him in? Wes became
aware he was gripping the wrought-iron railing hard enough to cramp his hand.

There on the balcony, the long figure of Susan lithe and warm against his side, he
retreated again from the past. He had told her everything he could bring back
about Samuel, except the sniper episode and its aftermath, consequence, call it
whatever. How do you tot up the incalculable? The parade ground was drawing
a curfew for him, he was glad to see. The pipers were winding down, the drums
muffled, as the honor guard slow-marched away in the dusk toward a portal of the
Castle. Gratefully renewing his clasp on Susan, Wes realized she had been deep
in her own drift of mind. To help bring her out, he pinched his nose closed and
made a try at the drone of Edinburgh accent they had been hearing all day: “And
where ha’ ye been, Miss Duff, while the laddies were makin’ their march?”

“You asked. My father marched here.”
Wes almost fell off the balcony in surprise.

"He never did! Ninian Duff, on parade at Edinburgh Castle?!"

Susan failed to see amusement in it. "Wes, you’re a famous soldier. But you’re not the only soldier there ever was."

"No, no, not that." Wes covered as best he could: "All I meant was--kilts on your father?"

She had to laugh at that.

But Wes could not leave it alone. As they went inside, he said as if it was merely curiosity getting the best of him: "Humor an old soldier on this, can you? Outfits like the Black Watch, regulars probably since Waterloo, usually have the honor of marching here. What on earth deposited your father onto that parade ground?"

"Some shire regiments’ whoop-te-do, I don’t know any more. He and the others from Fife carried the day, you may be sure.” Susan paused. When she looked around at him, her assessment came with that alarming Duff Frankness.

"Now one for you. Why does every man who has meant most to me have to be a soldier?"

Wes would not go near that.
Opportunity saved them, footsteps on the stairs bringing victuals enough--Wes never was one to underdo—to suffocate all their appetites but one. Back to the basics of laughing and love, they rollicked through that evening as though it was the only one they would ever have. Before long they revisited the bed, where kissing led to teasing—she had to disprove his speculation that her exuberant new floor-length French nightdress copied the dimensions of a Breton woolsack; he in turn had to abandon brocaded pajamas that she claimed made him look like a misplaced bullfighter—and vice versa. By the time proper night had found Edinburgh, they were drenched in each other.

Eventually the fireplace had to be fed. Susan said it was her turn and Wes lay watching and making her laugh with his preaching of admiration for her, high and low. “The shins of the father are not visited upon the daughter.”

“You.” She came back to bed with a flounce, but there was something serious to be asked. “How soon will you be in Helena?”

“It’ll have to be after New Year’s.”

“That’s a scandalous length of time.” No sooner was that out than she regretted her choice of word.
"The best I can do. Susan, you have to know--there's going to be a lot of that."

"I didn't exactly think I had title to you all of a sudden."

I...you...sudden. All this was a field of thought that his imagination at its most wild could not have led him to, back when he had been safely loveless, with only a war to worry about. But here Susan Duff indisputably was, next to him in their mutual state of altogether. A woman a man could make love to six directions from true north and she would slyly keep track of the compass for next time.

With her he felt as if he had fresh blood in his veins, brewed by the makers of Romeo's, Cyrano's. And each time, after lovemaking, he knew that everything outside of that was stacked against them. Any number of times in these past two weeks he had tried to break through rationality--it was surprisingly like the coldness of combat bravery, a pane in him that covered as if with frost and that he could not see beyond--and make himself give up everything for her. Pull a Gaugin, flee off with her to the South Seas, why not. And vegetate happily ever after; that was why not. He hated being incapable, even--especially--in the one capacity that would demolish all the others in his life. Now the mustered words came out of him haltingly:

Grasping that, knowing it in himself as deep as the fissure in the heart where the soul pools up, he still could not let go of theanguished wish to be otherwise than he was. He hated being incapable in any capacity, especially the one--call it flight--needed to leave behind all the others in his life.
"I'm not much at this, you know."

By now Susan had learned that like all heroes, Wes had a side to him that didn't always come into daylight. She could have told anyone interested that he liked to fool people by going around as if he were the pluperfect example of a stuffed shirt; until the shirt came off him.

"No, I didn't know that at all," she issued back to him. "Here I was hoping for a cross between Sergeant York and a sultan who knows his way around a harem. Why, Major, you're blushing. All over, I do believe."

"You're a handful."

"What, me? 'Jaunty as a feather, faithful as the heather.'" There was another of those cloud-bringing words, faith.

Wes shifted carefully on the bed, maneuvering his game leg with the help of a hand. To preserve the night, he said:

"The martial music about did me in. Could I talk you into singing something for the occasion? Us, that is?"

"Ah. All this is a plot to coax me, is it." Susan gave him a mock discerning look, like an abbess who knew very well what Chaucer was up to.

Then laid a solemn finger on his lips, as if marking her place, and was up and
searching for her nightdress. More or less sufficiently attired, she strode back, performance already perking in her, came to the foot of the bed and folded her hands in professional ease on the bedstead there. She gathered herself, with the slight lift of her chest that drew breath in, and softly delivered:

"The evening brings all home, 'tis said

Those who stray, and those who roam,

The evening brings all home.

In the restless light of day,

We abandon ourselves to quest.

When the blushing sun kisses the west,

We awake and find our way.

The evening brings all home, 'tis said

From islands far, and Heaven's dome.

The evening, the evening,

The evening brings all home."
There on the picnic tarp, Wes immediate and intent across from her, Susan knew better than to remember a golden blush over that time. The two of them had been no perfect fit, from the start they had known which parts were ill-suited for the other. It can grow musty in the loft of the mind; Wes, when he wasn't activated by politics, tended toward an attic-headed collecting habit: rare books, manuscripts, scraps of language that pleased him, property. Herself, she had constantly had to wonder, another possession in among those? In turn, Wes understood of her that she was of brusque blood, given to directness when that wasn't the route that had come to be expected, as a Roman road will fly like a spear from the past through the modern swerving muddle. Not a match, a Williamson and a Duff, that either of them would ever had dreamed of. Yet they had coupled as naturally as wild creatures, until they were found out.

"Susan? Something?"

"Yes. We should be getting back."
The Sunday morning of the Helena trip, Wes walked the few blocks home from early Mass at the Cathedral pondering how he had ever thought he was in any way fit to govern half a million people, given his record lately on a number he could count on his thumbs. He tried to put the mood away, box it in the admission that the lives of others are not something you can catechize. But no sooner was he into the house than Mrs. Gustafson came swooping on behalf of his breakfast with a glint of intrigue that would have done credit to a stiletto, and that was that. After her third hovering pass with the coffee pot, he told her: “All right, tell him I want to see him.”
Monty gingerly stepped into the breakfast room.

"Let me hear your side of this." The Major, as if he had a wayward boot recruit in front of him.

"Things got a little out of hand, is all."

"A little? I have to bail you out of jail and haul Doc Walker away from his breakfast to wrap you like a mummy and that doesn’t amount to anything?"

"Major, I got more than I bargained for." This was tricky ground, Monty knew, but it had to be negotiated. Saturday night had to belong to a wage hand, not a hell of a lot else in life did. "Knocked up, locked up, and doctored up, like they say--I didn’t go looking for any of those."

"How are your ribs?"

"Tenderized." He winced with the word. They would have to go after his ribs. Those Chicago brakemen had some sort of instinct, when it came to working a person over. Ten years ago, he’d have taken any of them on, the entire Zanzibar if it came to that. But that was ten years of the general wear and tear of living. Deep down he knew he had been lucky last night’s brawl had been only fists. Clore Street wasn’t a gun place so much, but you could easily get cut there. At least he hadn’t run into somebody who would have worked those ribs over
with a clasp knife. "Honest, Major, it don't amount to anything. I can be on the
job right this minute, I can drive."

"What was it this time? Fantan again?"

"No, sir," indignation ringing through. Pause. "Wrong spots on my
ponies." He could still see the fatal dots on the dice that wiped him out of the
crap game. "Had them loaded, is what I think, and slipped them in on me despite
how I was watching. I called this bruiser on it, and next thing I know, him and
another ugly case were giving me what Paddy gave the drum."

Wes still eyed him, standing there stubborn as a government mule. From
long experience he knew you couldn't take the spree out of a man, but you could
shunt the man out of a spree. He would make sure there was no more Helena for
Monty for a good long time. As to the here and now, what harm had been done,
other than to Monty's epidermis?

"This stays between us, you hear? It's not to reach the ranch, and
particularly not the North Fork."

The North Fork was murmuring a diminished tune now that spring runoff
was past, and Susan could hear the first splashes of the pair of saddlehorses
finding their footing as they forded the creek these mornings. Readying herself, she kept track of the scuff of hooves coming up from the creek crossing, then heard tones of voice that sent her out into the yard.

"Makes no difference to me what you do," Monty was saying crossly to Dolph.

"Snowball, I still bet you there are fish in there big enough to halter, now that the water is down." Dolph dismounted and came over to her at just short of a trot. "Ma'am? I'm pretty much caught up on the chores except milking and the woodpile and little stuff like that. Would you mind if I was to go fishing a while? I'd be right down there at the creek, first hole or two."

"I would very much like for you to go fishing, Dolph, especially if you guarantee a batch for my supper."

"The fish doesn't live that can resist me, Ma'am." Whistling, he headed off to dig worms for bait.

Monty was a case of another sort today, she saw at a glance. His trip into Helena with Wes did not seem to have refreshed him. His eyes were not exactly bloodshot, but they were not the picture of milk-like calm either.
He hugged his elbows warily, aware that she was looking him over as if she were candling an egg.

"Ready?" she asked in a tone that was pretty close to an opposite verdict.

She put him through the same songs as before. As the last note waned prematurely, she did not even have to say the obvious.

He ventured: "Can't I stick to songs that don't take that much breath?"

"Only if you want a career of singing Mother Goose ditties," she snapped and stormed across the room. "One thing singing is, is processed air. Breath made wonderful, into a kind of painting that the ear can see. Yours is still daubs."

She swung around and stood gazing at him as if he were put together wrong. "Monty, I can't understand this," she said, her voice wound tight. He watched her warily. She could crank out indignation like a jay when she got going, but he had never seen her like this. "This runs against human nature," she let him know in no uncertain terms, "that your breathing isn't working up the way it should. I saw Jack Johnson in his prime. He had a chest like an ox"—elbows flung back, she dramatically held her hands wide either side of her own not inconsiderable chest—"he could have sung Caruso off the stage in Pagliacci!"

"I'm no kind of a Jack Johnson!"
“That’s not the point, you’re not any approximation of a living breathing singer and by now there’s no reason you shouldn’t be!” She flung out a hand as if to indicate him to himself. “You don’t have that many years on you. And you haven’t led as dissipated a life as some, I wouldn’t think.” He looked askance at her, but she seemed to intend that as a compliment. Susan dropped silent for about a breath and half, then said as if draining the last words out of herself: “I have tried until I’m sick of myself at it, you seem to give it all that’s in you, and we get nowhere on this. I have to tell you, I don’t know why but we’re up against it.”

Monty shifted around, trying to decide. She would wear him down to a dishrag, with these everlasting exercises, if he didn’t own up to it.

“There was this bull.”

One moment your feet are under you, dancing zigzag in the arena dirt, the scarred steel barrel all the barrier you’ve ever needed between you and the horns, then you take the least little step wrong and stumble, maybe on a hank of a rider’s grip rope, maybe on a heel-size rock brought up by the frost since last year’s rodeo here, maybe just on the blunt edge of the law of averages. The crowd
responds with glee, thinking you are teasing, pretending to go down on a knee in prayer in front of the bull. The noise reverses to a gasp as the bull piles in on you, butting, hooking. Over by the chutes they all yell at the bull and someone dashes out and bats it across the face with a pair of chaps, keeping the animal off you until Dolph can wedge his horse between. Whit Williamson charges down on you, whey-faced. "Snowball! It get you?" You can't quite catch your breath to answer. Somebody knows enough to keep them from moving you until the doctor waddles from the grandstand with a black bag in his hand.

_The hell with it_, he tried to maintain to himself after the story spilled out of him. _If this's all she wrote, then that's how it has to be._ Telling her lifted the teetertotter off him, the ceaseless back-and-forth in himself about whether the goring was a mere excuse or an everlasting pinch his body was in. But at the same time it emptied him, left him voiceless inside as well as out. Dully he looked back at the fierce face throwing questions at him.

"How deep did the horn go?" Susan demanded for what was probably the third time.

"Collapsed my lung."
"Aha!" Apparently sympathetic as an ice pick, she pressed him: "And when exactly was this?"

The terror of that time flooded back. White sheets, unnaturally so, and while he was flat on his back like death warmed over, the real thing kept trundling by, its spore maybe in every labored breath he took. Lying out there in the arena dirt after getting gored was nothing compared to weeks in that Helena hospital with corpses being wheeled past almost hourly. Remembering, he gritted all the way to his wisdom teeth before managing to get the words out:

"Same year as all the flu."

For a moment Susan seemed stopped in her tracks. Then she asked in steely fashion: "Why on earth wasn't I let in on this?"

"Wasn't any way to, was there," he burst out. "What was I supposed to say, 'Oh, by the way, I'm a one-lunger'? The minute you figure I'm some sort of cripple in the chest, you'd drop me like a bad habit."

"That's not so!"

Isn't it? everything in his stance asked.

Susan thought furiously. All this time she had been trying to build up diaphragm strength in this man but if the muscles in there were mangled beyond
repair--she glanced in despair for her copy of Hargreave's Illustrated Musical Corpus, snugly on its shelf in the music parlor of the house in Helena, then rounded on the living subject.

"Take off your shirt, please."

Monty looked everywhere around, then straight at her. "I can't do that. It wouldn't be right."

"There are only the two of us here," she said.

"That's why it wouldn't be right."

Red spots appeared on her cheeks. "Monty, for heaven's sake. I need to see your ribcage, is all. If you're going to be bashful about it, it's merely a matter of pulling your shirttail out and yanking it up to about here," she pointed a finger to the base of her breast.

He shook his head, eyes cutting to the nearest window. You never knew.

"Very well. I'll fetch Dolph up from the creek to--"

His "No!" filled the corners of the room. The last thing in Creation he wanted was to have the whole Double W bunkhouse in on this.
“Please.” He angled half away from her, but his plea was painfully direct.

“If this counts so much, I can come back tonight, on my own. Get Mister Angus here, can’t you? His missus, too, if she’ll come.”

“Honestly, Monty.” The rosettes were not entirely gone from her face.

“If that’s what you want, I can fetch them.”

Angus contemplative, Adair indeterminate, and Susan grim, the three of them gathered on straightback chairs.

Susan leaned to the lamp and turned up its wick as far as it would go, casting more light to where Monty was standing tense as a stag.

“I’m still sorry about the need for this,” she said delicately to him, knowing he was on simmer, “but I don’t see any way around it. Now then. Please show us.”

He stayed still, gazing across the circle of light to the jury of their eyes.

Even the cat came out from between ankles and leveled him a green gaze, its pupils like black darts. Monty felt like the biggest fool there was. Why had he bothered to come back over here on his own? It wasn’t as if he was able to trust white people, even these toned-down ones. Yet how could he get anywhere in this
lopsided world without them, most especially her, sitting there as if she held all the secrets.

Hating the moment, all it brought back—*Memory is what we forget with*, Monty, his mother’s baffling prescription whenever he pestered her too much about then instead of now—slowly he tugged the tail of his shirt out of his pants, unbuttoned, and pulled the cloth up. He looked at it with the rest of them. There on the right side of his rib cage, centered on the dark bronze skin, the puckered scar where the horn went in was the size of a large tire patch.

Susan arose and came over. As if with her head down into an anatomy text, she traced spread fingers back and forth above the wrecked skin, careful not to touch him.

“Missed your sausage works,” Angus contributed. “There was a bit of luck.”

“Mister Angus,” Monty set him straight, “there’s been too many times when if it wasn’t for bad luck, I wouldn’t have any luck at all.”

Nodding to herself, Susan still was examining him. “Wait. Those scraped places—those are still healing.”

“Those were something else.”
“Such as?”

“Little difference of opinion.”

“At the level of your chest?”

Monty wadded his shirttail in his fist, then let out a weary sigh. “Couple of people jumped me, when I was in town.”

Susan’s face said she knew which town and which part of town.

“Poor old body.” Adair’s murmur surprised them all. “It’s all a person can do to rub along in this world, isn’t it.”

Not sure whether that was specific sympathy or ready-to-wear epitaph, Monty attended to the matter of his bare skin. He looked straight at the one who had put him through this. “Miss Susan? Are you happy now?”

Susan managed to meet his eyes. “Monty, hear me out. As much damage as we can see there, I can tend to.” He closed his shirt, dubious. “I promise you,” she insisted, “I see now how to build up your breath. A lot was learned from the lung cases in the war, there’s an entire literature on it. But there isn’t one thing easy about it. You’ll need to work at it until you’re blue in the face.”

He stared at her. Angus and Adair, their heads cocked like fascinated owls, kept mum.
“Monty, I only meant--”

He allowed himself the smallest of smiles. “That could be quite some while.”

Air was at a premium. How had he ever outrun all those bulls but one?

Breed Butte loomed over him, he was barely halfway up its slope and pretty far toward done in. He gasped, trying to make more breath gust into him than was whooshing out. Both directions, it burned between the back of his nose and the bottom of his chest. The rest of his laboring body simply wanted to call it quits. His feet, in the shoes for this that were the Major’s latest contribution, felt heavy as buckets of water.

Riding a dozen yards behind him, leading his horse behind hers, she called out: “A bit faster if you can stand it. The day is hotting up in a hurry.”

Susan was having him run on the shank of mid-day, after his voice exercises but before the blaze of noon bore down on them. “It’s merely roadwork of the sort Dempsey and Gibbons put themselves through all the time,” she told him at the onset, sheer reasonableness. “And at the end, you don’t have to do battle with either of them.” No, only with her. Monty concentrated on the ground
in front of him, picking out a stunted jackpine ahead alongside the baked set of
wheeltracks and forcing himself to keep in motion that far, then taking aim on the
weathered gatepost beyond that and closing his mind to anything but making it to
that stout pillar of wood.

Water was the reward when he jolted into the yard of the old Barclay place
at the brow of the butte and could at last pull to a halt. Susan swung down out of
her saddle and proffered the canvas waterbag to him. She watched critically as he
swished water in his mouth, spat it out, then took a few moderate gulps from the
bag. They did not speak much, Monty generally too winded and Susan absorbed
in putting him through his pulmonary paces. The Barclay homestead here was the
halfway mark on the course she’d picked out, the steep half as he could have told
anybody. The next leg was the old sheep trail angling west under the shoulder of
the butte, across the dry cracked reservoir, and gradually down the long incline of
the valleyside to the road, where she permitted him a cooling-down horseback ride
home to the Duff place. In Susan’s mind it was a perfectly logical circuit, uphill at
first and then coasting downhill. To Monty it was like running up one side of a
Nile pyramid and down the other.
Barely visible back at their starting point, Dolph was hammering battens over the cracks in the barn walls, and Monty imagined that even at this distance he every so often could see him gawking up here and shaking his head in disgust over these jackrabbit games.

“Ready?” she asked promptly as a metronome.

“Not so you could notice, but let’s go,” he said as usual, and set off onto the sheep trail at a lope. His gait improved with every long stride on the more level trail and by the time he was jouncing down the welcome incline toward the creek, you could see hints of the limber rodeo clown.

Susan would not exactly have said she was glad to be out here running him ragged, but there was undeniable pleasure in being on horseback again. She rode astraddle, in her comfortable old velveteen divided skirt, and sat as natural on a steed as only someone brought up on the back of one from the age of three could. The first day Wes came across the butte in his buckboard to take a bemused look at this new regimen, she galloped down on him as if he were the buffalo and she the huntress. Whirling to a stop, she lit into him. “Why didn’t you tell me I’m dealing with damaged goods?”
“That’s a bit strong, isn’t it? Maybe Monty is somewhat beaten up around the edges, but--”

“His goring? That’s more than edges.”

“His what? When?”

“He told me it was during the--it was in 1918.”

“Susan, I was overseas, wasn’t I. All I ever heard from Whit about ranch doings in those scraps of letters from him were the sky-high prices of hay. I knew Monty had been laid up somehow from rodeoing. But he never told me he had caught a horn, I swear to you.”

She had looked at him as if she could not believe it. But neither could she doubt it. His brother’s habit of paying no more attention to other members of the human race than if they were the Williamson family furniture seemed to irk Wes, she was glad to see. Meanwhile Monty, standing at a distance, panting, had his mind solely on the swimming bath he would take in the creek when this sweaty jaunt was over, the water as warm as fresh milk.

Weeks went this way, then a month, but time of this sort cannot be so easily summed. For there came a particular day when Monty did not plough to a stop and seize the reins of his horse from Susan when he reached the road but
instead loped on for another quarter of a mile, the ease of it leading him on and on
in astonishment at himself, until he finally spun around to her with the realization
he had run years off himself.

I must take care to put this down with every exactness, she wrote of their
turning point. Angus would have the poetry appropriate to it, Adair its cockeyed
essence, Wes would chalk it up to the wily ways of God and the reward of duty.
I have only my pair of astonished witnesses, my ears.

It already had been a day to mark on the wall. Monty’s vocal exercises
had gone well—this in itself is like saying the earth took a turn around the moon—
and his performance of the practice repertoire grows stronger as he does; it is the
sort of leaping progress that a teacher always hungers for. He had just ripped
through “Moses” without evident effort (at last!) and I was about to call it good
for the day when he announced: “I have me something of my own I want to
sing.”

I was surprised, to say the least. What could I say but, “Be my guest.”
Looking very determined he took his position in the middle of the room, studied
off into nowhere—the next habit I need to cure him of—then clapped his hands a
couple of times and out it came. I render it here on the page in as close a manner
as possible to the way he sang it, for the lines were distributed in the air like
poetry:

"Does the hawk know its shadow?

Does the stone roll alone?

I am vexed,

I am hexed,

I kneel before Your throne.

One out of many

Just another praying Jones."

That was the first verse of several confounding ones. The song sounded
as old as the hills and yet unknown as the next heartbeat. Monty's is a propitious
voice for such a song. In his new bottom range, he can put such resonance into
the "ohs" of "stone," "alone," "throne," and that ending-line surpriser "Jones"
that it makes one wonder, How could one throat hold that?

When he had finished I remember that I rested my chin on my fist until I
could trust my words. Finally I managed: "I know most gospel songs. Why
have I never heard the likes of that?"
Monty shrugged as if to say my musical education, or lack of, was no doing of his. "Just a spirit song I learned when I was little."

When he saw that the phrase threw me, he said: "What I always heard songs like that called. The spirit moves a person, I guess you'd have to say, and next thing they know, these words show up out of them."

"Why did you sing it now?"

He puzzled at that a moment himself. "It runs through my head sometimes, and this once I wanted to try out my new air on it, is all."

I hardly dared ask. "Are there more where that one came from?"

"Oh, some."

"Then let's have them." I at once got out music sheets, Monty as surprised as if I had produced a rabbit from a hat. By then Dolph was stomping around out in the yard, both their horses saddled and waiting, but I didn't care. I took down several--"Mouthful of Stars," "End of the Road," "The Moon Followed You Home," "Unless I Be Made To," all of them music up from the bones--as fast as I could write while Monty chanted or half-sang them, before I could stand it no longer: "How did you come by these songs, exactly?"
He looked as discomfited as if I had asked him where the wind keeps its nest. "You won't laugh?"

"Of course not."

"Promise not to think it's loco?"

"Monty, I will not think anything, I will not laugh"—at this point I probably could have been heard a mile up and down the creek—"but I will take the broom to you in about half a minute if you don't tell me where on earth such songs came from."

He said, word for word:

"Angel Momma and the holy rollers."
The congregation was short on ecstasy, and Jones was having to bide time by dinning Deuteronomy into them.

"Give ear, O ye heavens, and I will speak! And hear, O earth, the words of my mouth!"

Sister Satterlie, usually the first to quiver with the posession of the spirit, was barely even swaying. Jones himself was trying his bottom-dollar best to will the outbreak, but you could never hurry the Lord. The jolt of exaltation would happen when it happened, that was the weekly history of it all the way back to their knotholed church in the mountains beyond Gatlinburg. Their Appalachian
faces hung out from under Stetsons and catalogue bonnets these Sundays, but they kept to their strenuous religion here in the foothills of the Rockies where the whole passel of them had been shipped in as tie-cutters for the Great Northern Railway. Third- and fourth-generation sawyers back in the Smokies, the men were proud to call themselves timber beasts and the women had long practice in making do at gulch logging camps such as the one up Noon Creek from here. They were God’s patch pocket on this land where the ways of the world had sent them. Looking out over the small assembly, Jones as their lay preacher duly cherished every one of them, but he did wish somebody would feel the call and start thrashing or declaiming in tongues; he didn’t have all Sunday up here at the portable pulpit.

“My doctrine shall drop as the rain! My speech shall distill as the dew, and the small rain upon the tender herb, and the showers upon the--who’s out there?”

Every head in the room turned. “I feel the presence beyond the door,” Jones boomed. He had seen movement through the window. “Who comes calling at this holy house?”
The door peeped open, then swung wide to reveal a Negro woman, lank as a carpet-beater. Down where her dress billowed, a wide-eyed seven-year-old clasped onto her. When Jones looked at the boy, the dirtiest face in the world was looking back at him. Jones was prepared to take umbrage on behalf of the Sabbath, but realized the smears on the small dark face came from exuberant eating of berries. If childish joy didn’t qualify as wearing your Sunday best, Jones didn’t know what did.

The woman gestured apologetically. “I don’t want to bother, in no way. We been chokecherrying,” she indicated the lard can half full of wine-colored berries the boy was shyly holding. “But I couldn’t help but hear. Voices like your ones—I don’t know what got into me.”

“We’re having church,” Jones hardly had to point out.

“People I work for,” the woman hurried the words, “I heard them say folks like you fought on the side of the North like they did.”

“The sunrise side of Tennessee did not follow Jeff Davis to perdition,” Jones stated with pride. No one in this room was ever going to forget the Confederate Army’s clamp on their small-holding plantation-scrning corner of
the South. The oldest of the congregation, Brother Cruikshank, had fought in
blue at the battle of Pigeon Forge and had the mime ball wound to prove it.

“My husband,” the high-tan woman was saying, “he was a soldier, out
here.”

“That so? Auntie, who do you be?”

Angeline Rathbun identified herself while the boy peeked around at all the
hawk-nosed faces. He wanted to tell the people about picking the chokecherries
and where all he and Angel Momma had been along the creek, but it wasn’t nice to
interrupt grownups.

“Service in the uniform of our country, that’s all well and good,” the lay
preacher allowed. “But if you’d excuse us now, we have the Lord’s business to
tend to yet.”

“Mister? Couldn’t I sing with you? Just sing? I could”—she swallowed—
“wait outside between songs, if you’d want.”

Jones gave her fresh regard. The congregation had visibly perked up.
The spirit making itself known, was this? Jones waited on his own words,
wetting his lips. Then heard himself poke the question out: “Just what sort of
singing do you know?”
"By your leave?" Angeline moved a little farther into the room. She clapped her hands a few times to set a beat for herself, then began to carol in a voice dexterous as fine fiddling:

"Take a mouthful of stars,

Set your ladder 'gainst a cloud.

Go hammer up Heaven,

Oh hammer up Heaven,

Fixin' up Heaven,

Slickin' up Heaven,

Silver nails of Heaven,

Driven nails of Heaven,

Heaven, strong roof of my soul!"

Jones took a fresh grip on the pulpit. "We make our own singing, but this's a new one on us. Yours sounds like our spirit music," he mulled, "yet it don't quite, either. Am I right, brethren?" The congregation murmured affirmation. Jones felt a tingle. "Where'd you ever pick that up from, Mrs. Rathbun?"
“Slave days, when I was a bit of a thing like him here. In the war times. Every day before sun-up, what we called in Kentucky ‘cain see’--”

“We call it that to this day,” Jones could not help but put in. “‘Cain see’ to ‘cain’t see,’ that’s our working day in the woods.”

“--my Momma and me had to take the mistress’s white saddle horse up in the woods and mind him there.”

“Nothing goes over the Devil’s back that don’t buckle under his belly,” Jones chanted in contrary praise of those forced to shoulder the work of the world.

“The mistress was afraid the War Department was gonna see that horse and take him for the army,” Angeline ventured on. “My Momma, she’d pass the time remembering songs, maybe make some up. Got me to doing it with her. Then when night come, she and me led that horse home in the dark--”

“In the dark,” Jones crooned experimentally, “Satan’s satin dark.”

“Yes sir. And the mistress would go out and ride that white horse with a black blanket over him. And Momma and me still had to wait, to all hours. So then we’d sing those songs we put together. Play we was a whole church, like your one here.”
“Why are you not singing them this Sabbath, somewhere with your own people?”

“Mister, we’re it,” Angeline Rathbun smiled forlornly down at her fidgety son. “No other colored, not in all this county.”

Jones brooded there in front of everybody, the congregants as still as the prayer-worn benches under them.

“She brings mighty fine songs, brothers and sisters,” he felt moved to put the matter to the general will. “What say you?”

“She been sent!” Sister Satterlie shouted, with a lurch that gladdened Jones’s heart. “The Lord ever is mysterious in His ways!”

Brother Cruikshank climbed to his feet and testified: “I for one see no reason our congregation cain’t have a colored auxiliary.”

Jones turned back to Angeline. “You may stay,” he spoke for them all.

“We will together sing the songs of one tongue, Our Maker’s. But there’s another consideration.” He pointed a not unkind finger.

“The boy here, he’ll be fine,” Angeline vouched. “He has a voice, too. Don’t you, Montgomery.”