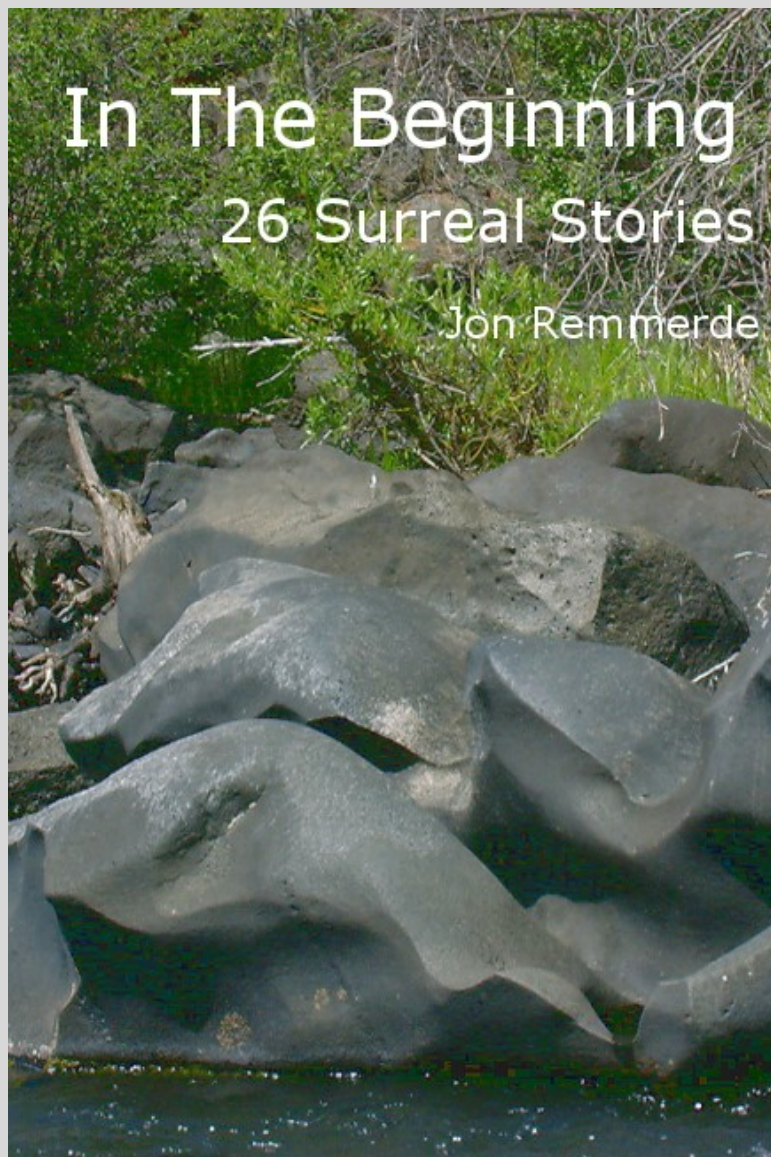


In The Beginning

26 Surreal Stories

Jon Remmerde



In the Beginning: 26 Surreal Stories
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The Last Great Western Stock Drive

When they ran out of money where I was working, I offered to finish my work in trade for chickens and a trailer to haul them.

Then I called Steve and told him I'd be there early with a trailer load of Aracauna chickens. "Just what we need. Very hardy chickens. They lay colored, low-cholesterol eggs. Try to get a chicken house and pen set up."

I built cages on the trailer and stretched a tarp across the top. I headed for Oregon April 10 with everything I owned, including 150 chickens, and two dogs. It snapped cold before I got to Yreka, and I drove back down into the Sacramento Valley so the chickens wouldn't freeze to death traveling. I set up camp at the base of the foothills east of Redding.

I let the chickens out of their cages, and they scattered out and started scratching and pecking in the brushy grassland, with pine trees and scrub oak some places. Smells of spring grass and wind and new flowers dallied with us in spring sunshine. I said, "Find everything you can, because we may be here a while, and we're not carrying much feed. I didn't expect to get delayed like this."

Kylie, the pup, went after a chicken and sank his teeth into it. Chickens screamed and flapped and scattered. I yelled him down and yelled him down until he heard me and quit while the hen was still able to squawk and flap away. The pup cowered on the ground. "You're a stock dog, and chickens are stock. Don't kill 'em. Don't even bite 'em. Guard 'em and learn to drive 'em." His mother understood better than he did, but he understood at least that he was not to injure any chickens.

The chickens calmed down and began to develop their social positions. Chickens threatened other chickens, pecked and clawed, clucked and squawked. From the cacophonous mass, seven hens emerged dominant. Those seven seized social territory and territory on the ground and defended their sense of ownership. Only those hens who would acquiesce to leadership could share the territory with the dominant chickens.

The roosters roamed at will. One scratched and pecked at the ground, then made a feather-flapping run to drive a hen down and mount her. He ran and scratched tender grass and created a small area of open ground again, while another rooster pursued another hen. Roosters paired off and fought more savagely than the hens. I thought I probably had too many roosters. They didn't have enough hens to use all their energy, and they dimmed the brilliance of the day by threatening and fighting each other.

I caged most of the chickens that first night, but some roosted in nearby trees, and I couldn't get them

down. The second day, I worked on the cages in the morning and watched the chickens the rest of the day. They were easier to put up that night because I penned each band together. When I got the leaders of a band into a cage, the rest followed. They liked being together in a secure place for the night, in their own subdivision of the herd, secure in their sense of order.

The cold weather hadn't lifted by the fourth day, and scratching around camp thinned out. If we dipped too far into the grain, we wouldn't have enough to make the trip. So my dogs and I drove the chickens to better feed.

Chickens scattered in every direction. I ran around the herd one way, tried to push them, got in front and tried to lead them, called and clucked to them, and then ran around and tried to push again. The dogs figured out what I was trying to do and joined in to help, and we got shape and direction to the herd and made the trip. Five chickens drowned immediately they got to the creek, and about fifteen holed up in some dense manzanita and wouldn't come out, though some rejoined us on the drive back to the pickup and trailer just before dark. The next morning dawned warmer, so I fed the chickens in their cages, and we headed up the highway. It was a good day to drive, bright sunshine, clear air, good times ahead. The trailer tracked well, and I took it steady at fifty miles an hour.

I picked up a hitchhiker just after I drove into Oregon, and we rode along quiet for a hundred miles, through forests and grass lands and small towns. New smells of spring filled the air. The engine-oil pressure dropped. I pulled off the road and poured three quarts

of oil into the engine. Forty miles down the road, I had to put in two more. Roger, the hitchhiker, slid under, took a look, got back up, and said, "The rear main seal is out."

I drove a ways, and then he said, "My place is about ten miles off the road up here. If you want to drive up there, I can fix it. My wife wants to get some chickens. Maybe you could trade us chickens for work on the truck."

"Sure. I have plenty of chickens, but I don't have enough oil to get to the next town at the rate it's pouring through."

Ten miles up a gravel road. Their house is set into the south slope of the ridge, well-designed to use the sun's heat in winter and exclude it in summer. Large garden. Greenhouse.

Darla, big with child, came out to greet us. I parked the trailer between the garden and the forest and let the chickens out and stayed there while Darla and Roger walked to the house and sorted out their time however they did. Darla came out of the house after a while and walked over to where I watched chickens eat from the bounty of the meadow where no chicken herd had ever been. Chickens sorted themselves out socially as the order of the herd changed and settled and changed again. Darla said, "Roger said you'd trade us some chickens. I'll have to get the fence finished and the chicken house set up. Come on. I'll show you where to wash up, and then I have to see what else I need."

Several days went by while we all worked toward futures we liked to think about and work toward. Darla

cooked roosters ten different ways, ten meals in a row, and Roger said, "I hope they reproduce fast, because with you turning out meals like this, I could eat a lot of chicken."

Roger worked on the truck. I helped Darla finish building the fence. Roger located and ordered parts, worked on fence and the hen house with Darla and me, then drove off in their car to get the parts and came back. Between chores and meals and living, he put the truck engine back together, finished when sun shone warmly into morning and said, "What if we set all the cages off and took the truck in and got lumber and this piece of fencing and the rest of the roofing. Put almost eighty mile on that engine, see if I got it right. I think I did."

I said "Let's all go in. I'll buy us some kind of lunch in there."

Darla said, "Will the chickens be okay?"

"Sure. They're happy where they are. They won't go anywhere. Kylie and Silvie feel enough at home, they'll stay with the chickens."

We loaded the materials, had lunch around a small table behind the restaurant with food smells and smells of the tree and of automobiles passing on every side, under a tree in sunshine. We drove back and finished the chicken house the next day. Roger and Darla worked on details in the chicken house while I worked with the chickens. Darla said, "Everything's ready."

I said, "I have this band separated out. Let's drive them in."

We funneled them through the gate while the dogs

stayed with the main herd. I said, "That's fifteen. Let's watch the herd a while, give 'em some time. They'll restructure, and then we can separate out another band. We'll try to get about thirty chickens all together. There's still too many roosters, so let's keep picking 'em out and eatin em."

The last morning I was there, Darla proudly divided two eggs three ways; her chickens had begun to settle in. She brought blue shells to the table. "They really do lay colored eggs. I mean, I believed you, but I didn't completely believe it until I saw it."

I left there with about a hundred chickens in good shape from scratching ample feed and doing some ranging around. The engine sounded good, and I relaxed into the day. I drove out through back country, old paved roads, gravel roads, slow driving, nobody anywhere, the shortest way home, directly northeast, no towns, a few ranches. forest, meadows, dirt roads; a cloud of dust boiled up behind us as I kept the truck at about 42 miles an hour.

Way out in the flatlands, ninety miles from anywhere, the truck started to vibrate and rattle. Sounded like a u-joint going, and I kept praying for a few more miles, because we were in the middle of a long dry stretch, no way to get through if it gave out there. The truck rattled and vibrated thirty miles more, until a stream ran near the road, and I drove down, forded the stream, and parked in some brush, out of sight of the road.

I let the chickens out and talked to them. "There's no traffic on these back roads. If I tried to get into town

and get parts and get back here, it might take me several days, and most of you probably wouldn't survive. The only thing I can see to do is make the rest of the trip on foot and get you all set up in a secure place, then come back and get the truck.

"You chickens have to work on this. You're a lot smarter than you think you are. You have to keep organized and keep moving when we leave here. Your survival depends on it. There's hawks and owls and weasels and coyotes out there, and you're smarter than you think you are, that's for sure, but they're smarter and faster than you are. Trust yourselves to the dogs and to me, and we'll protect you from predators and get you to a place where most of you can live to a ripe old age well protected and well provided for. But you must cooperate, and the main thing is, think. Take care of yourself all you can; help your fellow traveler when she needs it and keep in mind our distant goal and the fact that we want to arrive there together and in good shape."

I took the dogs aside and had a private conversation. "You did well last time, getting these chickens herded, and I'm counting on you to help me get em there. We're going short-rations, because I'm the only one set up to carry anything. Now, we find ourselves in a complex, not to mention morally-hazy situation. You can't hunt for food, because it's going to be all the three of us can do to keep these chickens moving right, and you won't have time." The mother dog wagged her tail, and the black male kept his tall ears pointed at me.

"We have somewhere around a hundred and thirty

miles to go, if we don't have to detour too much for water. These chickens need water pretty often, so I'll carry all I can. But that means I can't carry food for you. So how does a chicken diet sound? Yes, I thought it might. Phew. But I do not want a couple of chicken-killing dogs on my hands, so I guess I'll have to kill the chickens and pluck 'em and cook 'em, so you don't even know it's the same animal. I don't like that, but right now I can't see what else to do. You just absolutely can't kill a chicken. Run off anything that looks like a chicken killer, and you have to stay close at night. If you go off in the morning, you have to show up by sunrise. If you miss move-out call more than once, I'll have to chain you up nights.

"Well, if you don't have any comments, let's get a good night's sleep and hit it about sunrise. Feast up on dog food, and maybe we can get by without eating tomorrow."

The dogs did take off that night, and they didn't return until midmorning, but it worked out all right, because it took me that long to get the chickens unloaded and grained and watered. "Load up, because it's what you can scratch from here on out." Three chickens drowned from stupidity, walked into the water, fluttered and squawked, waterlogged and sank. Three more got pushed in and drowned, but the rest got wise and did okay. I went downstream and pulled the drowned chickens out of the water, threw them up on the bank for some hungry animals.

I tied three gallons of water to my pack and a canteen on my belt, and we set out as soon as the dogs

came back. Waiting had given the chickens time to arrange order within the herd. They scattered quite a bit when we started to move, and for a while, we didn't make much forward direction. "Keep it together. Northeast. Northeast. Move it out. Get some direction to it."

I got up front, scratched, clucked, bobbed up and down like I was pecking, flapped my elbows like wings, ran forward a ways and scratched and pecked some more. The chickens looked at each other, looked back at me, and then started to follow me. "Hey, hey, you dogs, look at me. Buck buck, buck, squawk, I'm the biggest chicken. Buck, buck, buck. They're following. Keep the stragglers rounded up. Come on. Come on. Buck, buck buck buck. Good scratching up here. Lots of good stuff."

I soon gave up most of the scratching and clucking and still maintained a good point to the herd, with renewed sessions of big-chicken behavior when their attention wandered.

I had to work with Kylie to keep him from forgetting about the chickens and laying up in the shade or just taking off over the hill. "You dogs were energy spendthrifts, taking off last night, and now you're paying for it, but we're going to keep moving."

We did make fair progress, but the dogs quit early in the afternoon, took to shade and would not budge. I said, "Okay. We'll take two hours rest time," and I let the chickens scatter out and scratch.

Then I said, "Okay. Let's put some more ground under us. If you dogs rest all afternoon, you'll be off

again tonight, and that could lead to hassles between us, chains and unpleasant things like that. Bring those stragglers up. Move em. Come on. Move. Let's go. Move em out."

The chickens moved well that afternoon, and I ranged a little, dropped back and walked alongside or at the back, though if I stayed off point for long, it began to dissolve; direction dissipated.

Four chickens straggled so severely, they were holding us up, and I finally said, "All right. Leave em. We just can't keep em with us, so they're on their own." From the top of the first ridge, I looked back and saw one of them scratching and pecking out in the sagebrush. Two more quit a little farther on, and I dropped back of the herd and killed and cleaned them, put them in a plastic sack in my pack and caught up with the herd, that had started to scatter and lose all direction.

We made it over the ridge into a hollow behind it, where a few juniper trees grew. At dusk, the chickens flew up into the trees and roosted on the limbs in small groups, ten to twenty feet off the ground. I cooked the dead chickens and shared them with the dogs. We all settled down for the night.

The chickens came out of the trees at daylight, flapping, feathers flying, discussing and disputing. I rationed out six quarts of water to the chickens. I tried to be sure they all had some, but with about ninety chickens jumping and changing positions, climbing over each other and running around, it was hard to be sure. I gave the dogs the rest of the cooked chicken and

a cup of water apiece. I ate dried fruit and had a cup of water.

The dogs worked well that day. We made steady progress, but we didn't reach the creek I hoped for. I rationed the remaining water, didn't save much for the dogs or me. "We can go a couple of days if we have to. These chickens aren't too good at it." Four chickens dropped dead the next morning, and we just left them behind. The next three that died, in the afternoon, I gutted and plucked, stayed well back from the herd so the offal didn't attract the dogs or chickens and interfere with our progress.

We reached the stream in the middle of the afternoon, and everyone watered down well, with no losses. The chickens harvested a good crop of insects, seeds, and young plants. The dogs laid up in the shade. I roasted three chickens and cooked a pot of brown rice, and the dogs and I ate together. I found the next water on a Forest Service map, a spring not far out of our line of travel, and we set out for it at daylight.

Scratching was sparse on the Oregon desert, and we pushed for distance. I kept saying, "Make distance while we can and get to water. There's not much to eat out here anyway. Just keep moving."

That day, six chickens dropped dead, I suppose from thirst. I gathered and cleaned them and hauled them along until we got to the small, open spring with five cottonwood trees around, and one old willow below the spring. I had to guard the head of the spring from the chickens to keep them from spoiling the water, as they crowded around to drink from the runoff before it

soaked into the ground.

I tried to get Kylie to do guard duty, but he didn't see how to keep them away without force and snapped at them and killed one chicken, so I took him off duty, filled all my containers, and gave the spring up to the chickens.

I roasted four chickens and cut up three more. When the chickens came down out of the trees in the morning, I fed them the pieces. I said, "They are also served who only fall by the wayside."

We made good distance that day. In the early afternoon, we reached a stream that wandered through meadow country. I emptied my water containers, glad to be relieved of the weight as we traveled upstream.

We had covered a good distance from the truck and trailer, but the chickens were thin and ragged, so we took it easy up through the meadows. The chickens found plentiful food, including many grasshoppers, which they caught with quick skill. "You'll be good for keeping the grasshoppers under control in the canyon. Keep em from eating the garden."

High, quiet, and clean country. We kept direction but made only four or five miles a day. A rattlesnake killed a chicken, and I drove the herd around and left it there to try to swallow it.

Clouds gathered dark north of us, and I heard a distant rumble of thunder. I tried to get the chickens up to some speed. We headed for the shelter of the forest, but the storm rolled down the mountain. Lightning snapped, and thunder rolled, and the chickens stopped and milled in confusion. Lightning struck in the trees

across the creek. Thunder roared. The ground shook, and the herd split. About a third of the chickens ran for the woods and flew up into trees, but the largest part of the herd turned and stampeded wild-eyed down the meadow, trampling everything in their path.

Chickens fell, and the herd trampled them. Darkness settled into the high meadow country as rain began, and all I could do was get out my poncho and take what shelter I could find under the trees. A cold, wet night.

Clear sky and sunshine in the morning. Fresh, clean smell. I walked five miles down one side of the meadow and up the other. I found chickens roosting in trees and roused them out when I could, but some of them sat in shock and wouldn't move. I found small groups of chickens out in the meadow, scratching and chatting together. I found loners out scratching here and there.

We kept grouping them up.

A large hen came out of the tall grass, running full speed. She leaped right for me, flapped her wings squawked, and feathers flew. I backed up, ducked, turned, and I tried to run, but I tripped over the dogs and sprawled in the grass. The hen flew by me full speed, and I tried to slow my hammering heart as I realized she had been and still was in pursuit of a fleeing grasshopper.

Both dogs watched me get up. I said, "I wasn't afraid of her. I ran because I wanted to catch her, so I was trying to stay ahead of her. Okay Kylie, don't forget that time a little doe called your bluff and charged you, and you ran from her. And Sylvie, you're afraid of

motorcycles. Come on, let's get her rounded up."

We grouped up more than sixty chickens. I gathered the carcasses that were in good shape and roasted the meat. "It's just as well it went that way, because this is an easier herd to handle. Water lasts longer; feed lasts longer, and we have meat enough to last three days if we eat all we want. We're in good shape. Let's be thankful the stampede didn't bust up the chuck wagons and destroy our supplies like they usually do."

The herd was faster and more responsive to our direction than it had been before the stampede trimmed it. We kept a rapid pace up through the meadow country and onto the high plains. I figured out I had four bands of about ten chickens each; and about fifteen chickens that kept changing from one band to another without quite attaching to one band. By early afternoon, there were only eleven chickens that had not attached to one band or another with fair stability. The unbanded chickens started to get confused. When we stopped, the unaffiliated chickens were excluded from the herd. They entered only at the price of blood.

The same chickens were more confused and excluded the next day. It slowed us down to try to keep them with us. That evening, I drove them out away from the herd. I killed eight of them, and the other three figured out what I was doing and escaped into the sparse brush. I went after them, but they were fast and expert dodgers, so I left them, hoping they'd make a life for themselves there.

I cleaned and plucked the eight. I was tired of the smell of blood and chicken guts and tired of feathers

sticking to me, but I saw the job through. I roasted three carcasses and fed the other five to the rest of the chickens. "Eat all you can, because tomorrow, we're going to sprint, try to make Bear creek in one day."

I had about forty-five chickens left, in four well-defined bands. The new herd kept good speed and direction. I was pleasantly surprised when we made it to Bear creek about three hours before sunset. The remaining chickens were strong and aggressive food-grabbers. They went right to work scratching and eating while I took a much-needed bath in the icy water, and the dogs took time off in the shade.

Something got up with the chickens during the night and killed two of them before the dogs and I could run it off. One of the chickens killed was apparently a leader of a band, and the chickens discussed and retested and restructured the herd, but we put respectable distance under us by noon, and we topped Strawberry ridge midafternoon.

The ridge fell away in front of us. Sparse scrub brush and stunted grass grew in the dry soil all the way to the edge of the wide reservoir. Far below us, a long way across dusty, hot earth, flat, brown water reflected sunlight toward the sky above us.

I pointed across the wide water, upstream to where Wolf creek ran into the reservoir. "See that? That's home. Right up that canyon. Chicken houses and good places for dogs to take it easy, and a good bed for me to sleep in. We'll be home tomorrow."

We made a good drive the next morning, until we took the ferry to cross the reservoir. All the people on

the ferry stared at us. Dirty clothes, dirty pack, greasy sleeping bag tied on the pack frame; the strong smell of rancid chicken fat had soaked into the pack. Tall, thin, dusty man headed down the hill toward the river, forty-five chickens grouped closely at his heels, pacing it out. Two dogs brought up the rear. Chickens squawked and clucked; dust rolled up behind us.

The ferry man demanded three dollars. "I got to charge you the same as if you took them in a truck. I should charge you more, cause this way, I wind up with chicken shit all over my ferry."

There were nine people in four cars, a man on a horse, and the ferry man. Everyone except the ferry man looked us over. He didn't care. I tried to be at ease.

The man tied his horse to the railing and came over. The chickens grouped up close behind me and talked nervously among themselves. "You for real driving them chickens? Every man, dog and chicken on foot like I think I seen?"

"You seen it right."

He shook his head and walked over and leaned on the railing, but every minute or two he looked back at me, the chickens, and the dogs and shook his head again. The ferry rode smoothly east. A wide, low wake spread out behind us on the muddy reservoir.

A young man, with his lady closely entwined, came close and said, "Hey man, are you for real? I mean this what you're doing, is it real? You working for the movies or something? You doing this all by yourself, or are you doing this for movies or t.v.?" He looked around for anywhere a camera might be, and I said, "It's

for real. No movies. The real thing."

"Phew. Wow. I just never would have thought. Phew. Hey, you know, these are kinda funny looking chickens. I never saw any like that before."

"They're Araucana."

"That right? Araucana, huh? They look different, you know?"

"They're from Peru."

"Is that right? Way down there in Peru, you mean way down there?"

"Yeah. They're Peruvian chickens. Araucana."

"You told me that part."

"They lay colored eggs."

"Colored?"

"Yeah. Kind of like easter eggs. Blue eggs, and maybe green ones. Kind of gold ones too, I think."

"Is that right? Hey man, you got yourself an act? I mean, you go around doin this, tellin people this stuff, getting friendly people and layin this stuff on em, makin fun of em, what d'you get out of it? Somebody pay you for bein funny to people?"

"I wasn't doing anything funny. Just answering your questions."

"Yeah. Hey, I come over here to be friendly. Make a conversation, see what's up, you know? Cause what you're doing here is different. Whatever it is, it's different. But you got to get smart. I mean I just ask some questions to be friendly, and you start tryin to make me look dumb. Maybe you think I'm dumb."

"No. I don't think that. I don't know you at all, so how would I know if you're dumb or smart?"

"You been drivin them chickens a while? Yeah? You look like it. I mean, you look like you been on the trail for a while. All the way from Peru, huh? You look kind of jumpy, you know, kind of wired up, a little bug-eyed, like some kind of wild man. Another thing, you know, you're really dirty. With a strong smell to you. What? I can't hardly hear you, you say it so quiet. You took a bath, but you come through a lot of dust? Well, you're even dirtier than you think. Here, I'll give you a mirror, and you see what you think." He detached himself from his girlfriend, pulled her purse around, took a small mirror from it and held it out to me. I made no move to take it, and he stepped a little closer and held it up to my face, and I said, "Back off."

"Well sure, man, but you know, you got somethin' in your beard. Looks like some chicken shit right here." He reached for me, and I caught his arm, stepped under and up, brought his arm sharply up behind him, grabbed the seat of his pants, and goose-stepped him over to his car, shoved him down in the seat. "Stay off me, friend." The girl got back in the car, and they stayed there the rest of the way across.

Nervous chickens scattered out and regrouped, got under some of the cars. Nervous dogs couldn't work well in close quarters. The kid took off in his bright-yellow car the instant the ramp touched down. Fortunately, there were no chickens under his car, and though they were hard to handle after the noise of the car driving off, some of the people worked with me to get them back together. An elderly man who drove a pickup spoke up, "Let's all wait here and let him get

these chickens driven up across the road so they don't get upset when we start our cars."

The ferryman said, "Hey, I can't wait all day," and the old man said, "This will take just a few minutes. It'll be faster to get the ferry cleared in order than if we go in confusion."

We grouped the chickens, went up the ramp and onto the gravel road, heard the accelerating engine, and I realized the kid had waited down the road and was coming back fast. I yelled, "Go. Run. Go," ran at the chickens, yelled at the dogs, "Up, up, go on."

The chickens, the dogs and I hit the bank in tightly packed formation and climbed it, apparently clear of the road, but my momentum carried me into the herd, and seven chickens scattered away from me back onto the road. The bright yellow car hit five chickens square, sent two more glancing along the road, swerved, slid, and came to a stop slewed off in the shallow ditch.

The kid piled out and started running back, with his girl friend close behind. I slid down the bank and started to pick up the two mortally-wounded chickens, and then the kid was on me.

"You think you got away with putting me down in front of all those people? I'm gonna kick the shit out of you while they're still watching."

He hit me in the side of the head. I sidestepped the next swing, swung him by me, and he slid full length in the gravel. He got back up with a rock in his hand.

"Them fucking stupid chickens of yours broke my windshield, you fucking dumb dirty hippy chicken fucker." He threw the rock, and I ducked it, but up close

he threw another, and it caught me heavy under the eye and glanced off. I felt sick and went to my knees, but I still kept track of what was happening, and I fell out of the way as the kid threw another rock.

He rushed me. I rose from the ground and smashed him in the face with both fists in one motion. He fell away from me, skidded in the gravel, and rolled over, started to get up slow. I picked up one wounded chicken, still kicking, and when the kid made it up, I hit him full in the side of the head with the chicken. "You dumb stupid kid jerk. You killed my chickens. You coulda killed my dogs and me too." I slapped him open handed with the back of my hand, which rattled his head and broke three of my fingers.

He came back at me, and I hit him with the chicken, first from one side and then from the other, and then again, and again, and the chicken came apart and splattered guts and shit and blood all over the kid, who went down and looked like he might stay down.

One chicken, badly smashed but still alive, spun itself in circles in the dirt. I picked it up, and the girl ran between me and the kid. "Don't kill him, mister. You keep hitting him, you're going to kill him. Don't kill him. He's a no good son of a bitch, but he don't need to die. He won't bother you no more, but don't kill him."

I sat down on the edge of the road and tried to gather my senses. The girl said, "You got hit pretty hard. Don't look too pretty."

The elderly man and the man with the horse came up. The older man said, "She's right. We'll have to get you to town."

"No."

"You need to have a doctor look at you."

"No. What happened to the rest of the chickens?"

"Your dogs have them grouped up the hill. They're all right."

I felt dizzy and weak. I said, "Leave me alone a few minutes." I took deep, even breaths, gathered myself together, put down the sick feeling, thought of wholeness and completeness until my vision cleared. I stood up, and I walked around.

I said, "I appreciate your concern, but I'm going on up with these chickens. I've brought them over three-hundred miles, and I'm going the last five. I'm all right."

The kid got up and walked around like he was looking for something but couldn't remember what. He wiped chicken blood and shit from his face on his sleeve. The men talked to him and got him started for town.

He tried to take the girl with him, but she said, "You tried to mess over this man, and I'm not sure he's okay, so I'm going to help him get these chickens up there, make sure he gets there. Don't you get tough with me, you son of a bitch. You get your ass in that car and drive it to town and get yourself cleaned up and stay put until I get back, or you'll never in your life see me again, I swear to God." He got in and drove away.

It was some work to get the rest of the people assured that I was okay so they'd leave me alone, but I got it done, and then I tried to get the girl to go back to town, without success. We got the chickens pushed up to Wolf creek road and started up the canyon. I felt kind

of weathered and had to sit down a while. I was glad the girl was with me, because she kept calling me into consciousness until I could work on it and pull up out of feeling sick.

My hand hurt and started puffing up. I had trouble putting that away because I knew I'd been stupid, hitting him back-handed like that, shades of ten years gone by.

Steve has bladed out the road. The bulls are gone. The house on the river is unoccupied. Midafternoon sun hot; we head up the road. One man, one woman, thirty-five chickens, two dogs. Strung out over a hundred yards, the chickens make no scratch in the barren road but stick to it without complaint. They sense the end of the journey.

Dust kicks up around us. Kylie circles out and drives back four chickens that head for green grass. Step step step, thump thump, pacing up the road. A flutter and a cluster of clucks. I start to feel dizzy, put it away, focus on the day around, heat of the sun, clean smell of the canyon.

Steve saw us from up the hill and came to meet us. "Right up this way to the chicken yard."

In the morning, he said, "The chickens got out of the pen and roosted in the trees by the creek last night. There's an old raccoon been living on this creek for years. I think he got a chicken. I just built the pen for normal chickens, so we'll have to revise it some."

The girl came into the kitchen and examined my face and hand. "Your face looks better than it did last night. Your hand is puffing up, but like you said, you did that

one yourself. Dizzy or anything?"

"No."

"Is anybody going into town?"

"Steve's going in for fencing in a while."

"I'll catch a ride with him."

"Why don't you stay around a while?"

"I got things to do in town."

"Come back out for a visit."

"Look. Don't get any romantic ideas. You like me cause I helped you in a jam and cause I was tough, but I helped you cause my boyfriend messed you up in the first place and cause if I was tougher when I shoulda been, I coulda stopped him from doing that stupid car stunt in the first place. Don't get any dreamy ideas, cause what I'm going to do is go back to town and marry that dumb, hotrod cowboy and get him tamed before he messes somebody up bad and gets himself in real trouble. I'm glad you're feeling okay, and I hope everything goes like you want it to here."

That afternoon, Steve and I revised the fence, got the chickens secured, hiked up to the foot of the mountain, and watched the sun set. We stood there in all the changing light, under a wide sky golden and red with sunset, quiet until the colors faded to grey. Then Steve said, "That girl's going to remember those chickens when she's eighty years old and somebody's grandma."

"Me too."

Down in the Dumps

I never know when I'll be here. I'm just here, so I go back to work. The work needs doing. I like the sense of continuity I get from picking up where I left off last time. This was a dump. Car bodies, kitchen refuse, city dump truck leavings, discarded appliances, destructed houses, concrete rubble, clean fill, industrial waste. I've sorted, piled, burned, and composted.

I built a shelter of bottles, boards, timber, and rubble, sheets of glass and sheets of metal, to use some of the material and to have a shelter. Sometimes it rains. But I rarely use the shelter. Mostly, I work.

I've never before thought much about my progress, but now that I have thought about it, I see the house and the garden, the spring and its clean runoff going down the clear channel, and I remember when I didn't know there were three separate ridges and a spring under the garbage.

This time, I cut car bodies into movable pieces of sheet metal and manageable pieces of steel frame. I have almost the entire center canyon cleared of garbage.

The compostable material has helped build good soil in the garden and in the swale below the spring. The profusion of lush weeds in the unused ground doesn't look disorderly to me. There was metal and glass and garbage, and now there are living plants, dense, varied and healthy.

No one dumps here anymore. It was abandoned long before I began to come here. Still, I find ten broken

bales of alfalfa that haven't deteriorated. Good. I haul them to the garden and use them for fertilizer and mulch.

The garden is in good shape. Tomatoes ripen on the vines. But no ripe ones. Corn fills out. Squash hangs heavy on the vines. Melons ripen. But no ripe melons.

Did I ever eat anything from this garden? Or did I always grow it and then leave before anything came ripe? I don't think I ever ate anything here.

I never thought about anything much before. I just worked. I liked it better that way. It was much less confusing. So I start back to work on the boards. I pull them out and sort them. Someone has been eating tomatoes. I realize that as I'm loading boards onto the wagon.

That's why I kept wondering, have I eaten, did I just eat? Because someone has eaten tomatoes and, since I'm the only one ever here, I must have eaten them.

I scratch my hand on a nail. I put the board down, observe the cut, suck the blood, and spit it out. Did I cook the tomatoes? Or why do I keep thinking of the stove? Thinking too much. That's why. I never found it necessary to think about it before. It won't bear scrutiny. Better get to work, quit maundering, getting careless. I wouldn't cook a ripe, fresh tomato, so I didn't cook it, and I didn't eat any, period, so the answer is no, I didn't eat.

I find large panes of glass, some of them whole. I'll use them to build a greenhouse.

Someone hung a mobile in the greenhouse I built from those boards and panes of glass. Snowflakes cut

from thin sheets of white plastic. I even know which material pile the plastic came from.

I stepped into the greenhouse and saw the mobile, and my reaction was as strong as if someone approached silently and yelled in my ear. I jumped back, yelled in fright, and fled from the greenhouse. Then I thought, what's this? I put that mobile up myself.

Didn't didn't didn't. I stacked that plastic up there, put other stuff on top of it and never touched it since.

I put it up. No other way it could have gotten there, because there is nobody else here. Ever, before or after. Then what's it all about?

Something to do. Clean it up. Make order of it. Disorder progressing into order. The next step is, cut up six more cars and move the parts up the hill. Then I'll have another half acre clear for garden.

Thinking about it is something I've never done before. Now, thinking about it interferes with getting anything done. I cut my hand on a nail over thinking about a tomato. Somebody, not me, ate a ripe tomato. And other vegetables. And that other voice, that keeps saying forget thinking and get back to work, that's not me. I know to work. That's why I'm here.

The first time I was here, I didn't wonder, where'd it come from, what's it about, why am I here, who's in charge? I just started digging down through garbage, looking for dirt. Get the dirt opened up to light, and something will grow. That's all I thought. Cut, pile, sort, and use. Burn, judiciously. Build a shelter. Build the soil. Build a future. That's the part that bothers me. The future. I've built a shelter and planted a garden. Do

I eat? Do I sleep? I don't think so. Why have I been afraid to consider the processes? Whose voice is that, saying get back to work?

It's the voice saying if you become too analytic of processes, you'll expose the dream and wake.

And I woke and thought, "Who ate the tomatoes?" I knew it was more than tomatoes, much more.

I told my wife, "I've been having a developing dream for more than thirty years, only I didn't realize it until this morning."

"What's it about?"

"I'm going to a dump. It's deep in cans, bottles, car bodies, all kinds of garbage. The kind of dump where people just dump. They don't bulldoze or cover up or burn. Things haven't deteriorated, but it hasn't been used in years. There's nobody else there."

"What happens when you're there?"

"I'm cleaning it up. Over the years, I've made a lot of progress."

"I could see you doing that, cleaning up a dump."

Somebody did eat a tomato. Tomatoes. A whole stew, with cheese in it. Where did I get the cheese?

My wife asked me, "You don't think there's anybody there? In the whole world?"

"There is. But that's just starting to happen. I don't know yet just what is happening, except when I don't think about it, and then the whole picture is clear. If I try to think of it, it goes."

"What does it look like?"

"A dump. Only now you can see the contour of the land, and there's a garden and a shelter. Still a lot of

work to do, but progress shows."

And someone eats tomatoes. That's good. Eat the food. I grow it to eat. Only, how come, now that I'm looking for tomatoes, there's never any ripe for me? If a man works to grow the plants, he should eat of the food.

There's never anyone home. There are ashes and coals in the stove. A little bit of smoke rises above the chimney. How about leaving a few ripe tomatoes for a working man? Maybe leave a melon ripe on the vine. That voice I didn't name earlier says, "Leave a melon? Leave a tomato for a shadow thought, a passing dream? You gobble and forget."

"Shut up."

"Don't change anything."

"Shut up."

"Don't change anything. Everything unknown brings danger."

"Shut up."

Still, the work is real. I wait and watch for someone as well when I pile sheet-metal or plant garden as when I sit in front of the shelter.

I've seeded another quarter acre to alfalfa, to build the soil.

Everything changes every day. A trucker hauls all the metal, all the glass, all the recyclable materials away. Good. It opens up so much ground. The trucker, I know him. I went to eighth grade with him, only he's running a recycling business now, used to drive a garbage truck. He made a deal with my wife.

My wife? The sun's shining in my bedroom window,

and I'm reaching back into the dream, trying to remember. My wife? You mean my wife?

I asked her, "If you could sell something of mine without me knowing and keep the money, would you?"

"Certainly not. You know how I am about money."

And she is, fair to the penny, honest to a fault.

Nobody ever said I wouldn't get money from selling the materials. I want to ask my trucker friend. I can't remember his name.

I never get there when he's there. Once, I see him leaving. I run and try to catch him, but I just breathe oily dust; he never knows I'm there. Okay. I don't care. They can have the money. Money. That's not the worry, come to think of it. What's up? What's next?

Why is there never one, not even one ripe tomato for me?

I used to enjoy this work. Now I'm nervous most of the time, watching for someone to show. I've cut my hand twice on sheet-metal, and I have a glass sliver embedded in my thumb. Why didn't I have gloves on? Oh, I do, the same gloves. I skim sheet-metal flat through the air, toward the wagon.

I'll leave a note in the shelter, on the stove. Another on the door. Just write, "What's up? What's next?" signed, "Jason." No, signed, "The gardener."

I'll leave a note. Up the hill, down the hill, through the house. I can't find pencil and paper. I pick something up for a pencil, but it's a stick, and it sticks to me when I try to drop it, sticks harder when I try to throw it down, and it's biting me. I wake, and my hand is numb because I've been sleeping on my arm.

Dream it. Dream it again. Finish the dream. But I can't sleep. I don't dream. Then I dream phony dreams. Fine dreams, beautiful dreams, but they're phonies, set up the instant before I wake to cover what I'm actually dreaming. It doesn't matter. It drifts out of my mind.

Then one day, the sun shines through my office windows, and I'm sorting invoices and find one that says I've bought a huge quantity of recyclable materials. At a good price. I could make some money on it, but where will I put it while I sort it out and make deals to sell it?

It's confusing. I don't remember doing that. I phone. No phone is hooked up at that place. I go around to see. An old bakery, but it's shut down. There isn't any metal there, no glass, no garbage, no trucks. Okay. Somebody's having fun. Forget it. But I did write a check, or someone did, and it got cashed, and I can't tell the signature from my own.

I can't put it out of my mind.

After dinner, Elaine asked, Are you down in the dumps, honey?"

"No. No. I forgot about it. I have been dreaming, but I haven't remembered the dreams, only now I do."

The note. It's taken care of. The note on the stove in the shelter. The note on the door of the shelter.

But wait. I didn't write it. I'm sure of that. Almost sure. They're there though, so I must have written them. Go back to work. It's taken care of.

No, wait. I didn't write those notes. I didn't write them.

Okay. But it's taken care of. Don't worry about it.

I didn't write them, I know that, so I don't know if they're right or not. I have to look at them.

No. You'd better not. Wake up.

It could even be a message for me from someone else.

Hardly. Wake up. Better wake up now.

Maybe two messages for me.

Wake up.

Phooey to you. Shut up. The note says,

Wake up.

Familiar handwriting. It says, "Wake up."

The one on the stove says, "Jason; wake up.

Howard's here to see you."

Sunshine. It's hot on the cot. I'm sweaty. I sat up and leaned against the wall in the sunshine. Howard stood in front of me. I said, "What are you doing?"

The woman stepped forward. I've always known her, but I don't know her at all.

"He has the check for you."

"Who are you?"

"Ellen. Remember me? I'm your wife."

"Oh. Oh yes. I do. I've had the strangest dream."

Howard said, "Anyway, here's your check. It puts you in good shape to finish your projects."

"Did I say sell?"

"Sure you said sell. Don't you remember anything? You said it would look good and open up ground. It does look good too. See it yourself."

"It does. It does. Sure. I'm glad to have it out of the way. Wow, it does look good. Have I been here all the time, full time?"

"Honey, you're rarely here. Not so's you'd notice and doing anything useful. You fell into a vacation when Howard hauled away the last load."

"Was this a dump?"

"Boy, when you go on vacation, you really go on vacation. Lunch. Howard, can you eat with us?"

"The meals you fix here, anytime."

Tomatoes. Great, ripe, red tomatoes. She quarters them with a small, sharp knife. Roast ears of corn, steaming. Small carrots. Medium size carrots. Kohlrabi. Cheese that Howard brought.

"Howard." He follows one tomato quarter down with another. I pick up a piece. "Howard, did you haul everything away, everything?" Juice runs from the tomato, clear, pink drops in sunlight.

"Everything."

"Didn't miss anything?"

"Hey, what is this? You're head clean-up man, and me and Ellen, we're no slackers either. You know we didn't miss anything. What's on your mind?"

"What's that noise, what's that noise, ringing noise? Did we miss something? Somewhere out there, that ringing noise. Is there a clock, alarm clock ringing?"

Bite. Bite the tomato. Eat. My jaws don't work. Ellen, you beautiful, Howard, I'll be right back. I've got to find that thing and shut it off.

I woke and grabbed for the alarm clock. "Shut it off. Shut it off."

"Okay. Okay. I got it. Geez. What a grouch."

"Who missed it?"

"Missed what?"

"The alarm clock." Then I looked at her. "Who are you?"

"Oh boy. This morning's starting out right. Do you want me to call the office and tell them you won't be in?"

"What office?"

"Oh boy. I'm phoning."

The phone rings and rings again. If you're calling out, why does it ring here? Only it isn't the phone, and I wake up and sit up in bed. Helen comes into the room. I ask her, "What's that bell?"

"A bell rings on the trucks when they back up. So they won't run over anybody."

"What trucks?"

"They're delivering the materials you bought."

Out in the back yard, they've dumped cut up car bodies, glass, wood, metal, a pile of copper, another pile of car radiators, broken appliances. More trucks wait to dump.

"Howard. Howard, wait a minute. It's a mistake."

But it isn't Howard. It's his younger brother. He hands me the contract, with my signature on it, and I try to assimilate what it says.

Helen starts shouting, "Jason. Jason. Don't do it. Wait."

Howard's voice comes from somewhere. He says, "Bite the tomato."

Elaine screams, "Jason, Jason, you wait." She runs between the trucks toward me. If they don't run over her there obscured in the dust,

Howard says, "Jason, bite."

I bit. Sweet burst of tomato. Ellen sliced cheese for me, sliced cheese for Howard. She said, "I didn't mind living in a dump, but I'm glad it's gone. It's clean and open and fresh."

Howard said, "Here's to hauling it away," raised his carrot in a salute and then bit it and chewed.

I bit my carrot, crisp, and the longer I chewed, the sweeter it tasted.

Eating Rattlesnake

He didn't own the cabin, but somehow he had come to be the one who decided who could live there. He said I could move in if I shaved my beard off. That seemed cheap enough rent, so I scissored it close and borrowed the tools, shaved my face clean.

I hired out to help him with a foundation for a house he was building. During that two weeks' work, neither of us said anything about the hair that was rapidly growing on my face. We both knew what he had said.

Virginia said I had saved her from suicide seven times. Nobody else on the ridge wanted to talk to her much; she seemed so crazy. Her husband loved her, but he thought she was pretty crazy too. He looked like sometimes he thought this late-in-life marriage was too hastily begun. He could have had peace and quiet at seventy. The eighth time, I was down in the valley. She asked Dutch where the pistol was. Since he had hidden the ammunition and was tired of arguing with her, he

told her. He didn't know she had two bullets in her purse. She called him to come in, and he said he would as soon as he got the mail. When he got back to the house, she was dead in the doorway, a bullet in her brain.

I went to the graveside service because I thought Dutch might need me to be there. He was very pale that sunny afternoon, but he nodded at me and smiled.

I've spent parts of many days in that cemetery, two hundred yards from my cabin. Some of the graves are more than a hundred years old. Farthest from the gate, there is a father, mother, and four children. They all died the same day, late Winter, 1886. There are fourteen graves marked "unknown," no dates, small concrete headstones.

Children died, a year, two years apart, four years old, six years old, eleven years old. Those from the same family are buried side by side. Near the gate is a concrete headstone marked, "Baby Person."

Geese at a distance sound like hounds baying. They flew up the canyon and directly over me, just visible twenty feet above me in the fog. I tipped the camera up and released the shutter. I developed the film that night and printed the pictures the next day. Gravestone, gravestone, gravestone, geese silhouettes against the fog. Airplanes still have so much to learn.

I saw Dutch only once more, just before he sold the place and moved to the city to live with his son. He said, "She couldn't help it. Did you notice? The last few months, her forehead bulged out. I think she had something growing in her brain. She wasn't so crazy

when I first met her."

"I did notice that."

"They say people who kill themselves don't go to heaven." He waited for me to say something.

"How would they know that? I think you're right. She couldn't help herself, so who could blame her? Who could hold it against her?"

There's a spring below the cabin, boxed in so the water flows from a pipe. When Joe lived there, he laid plastic pipe up the hill, worked on the fifty-year-old water-ram pump until he got it working and piped a slow trickle of water up the hill into the water tower above the cabin so he had running water. I didn't care enough about it to keep the pump running and the pipes and tank patched. I packed household water up to the cabin. I bathed in the water flowing from the pipe. Very cold water, but why carry that much more water up the hill?

Andrea stayed with me three days a week there. The rest of the time, she attended the college in the valley. We had thought I would stay with her during her times in the valley, but that quickly dwindled. The city, the people, the college, all were more and more alien to me. I stayed on the ridge most of the time. Pines and firs, locust, white oak, black oak. Manzanita, whitethorn, wild ceonothus grew there, grass, flowers, uncountable numbers of small plants. Purl and Dutch and some of the other old timers said sixty years ago, you could start at the top of the ridge and walk to the floor of the valley in a day, unimpeded by the dense brush that grows there now. Loggers and mills and burners took the

trees, and the brush grew in thick. Now, even though the second-growth timber is tall and sometimes dense, the brush has stayed, impassable in many places.

There are two Indian burial grounds here on the ridge, one of them only a few hundred feet from my cabin. The graveled road to the cemetery bisects that one. Every heavy rain washes dirt out of the cutbank and leaves beads exposed. Mostly glass trade beads, but a few bone and shell beads that the Indians made. When I see them exposed, I brush them out of the road and cover them over with dirt again. The other burial ground is a mile on down the road, a hundred yards from the paved road. Seekers of artifacts have turned it into a trench a hundred feet long, with another, forty-four foot long, trench growing at an angle out of one side, both of them from four to five feet deep.

Mrs. Edson has lived on the ridge for fifty years. She showed me four one-gallon jars filled with trade beads and six trays of bone and shell beads. She hasn't dug there for more than ten years, and she disapproves of the people who dig there now, without filling it back in when they're finished. "Someone could fall in there and get hurt, and it doesn't look good."

Just beyond that burial ground is a five-acre place where a man collected disabled automobiles for twenty years. When he died, his son sold all the autos to a wrecker, who came in and took the engines, radiators, wheels, all the most valuable parts and left the sheet-metal bodies, that aren't worth enough to make hauling them away profitable.

There is a presence on the ridge that is unexplainable

in physical terms. Some of the local people have experienced it, and some of them call it evil. Old Annie Trembo, who lives down past the end of the pavement, says it is something the Indians left when they died. Throughout this area, they were shot on sight by the white settlers, even though these Indians, the Modocs, had no tradition of war and offered the settlers neither threat nor resistance.

Annie said, "It isn't ghosts, you know; it isn't spirits of people who died, nor any part of them. Why would they stay here? This world became very ugly to them, and after all their terribly hard times, when they died, they were released to something more beautiful than they had known on this earth even at the best of times.

"Most of the white people who live up here don't have the sensitivity to know of the spiritual presence here. Without a better-developed attunement to spiritual presence, the white men, who so greedily coveted and took away the Modocs' paradise here on earth, will never experience the state of being the Modocs found when their spirits left this earth."

I spent parts of some moonlit nights sitting on the bench in the cemetery. Oak leaves turned color and began to fall. Walking was noisier with dead leaves underfoot.

At the top of the ridge, just behind the cemetery, I found mountain lion tracks. One late night, I woke from a deep sleep and heard a cougar cough on the ridge behind the cabin.

Andrea called from outside one early morning. "Do you want to see a big rattlesnake? Wake up and get out

here if you do."

He lay across the driveway, watching Andrea. The half-grown cat came out of the cabin and immediately attacked the rattlesnake, just playing, but the snake took it seriously and struck at her twice, then started to coil for some serious cat-killing effort. "Get away, you stupid cat." I couldn't stop her or catch her, so I grabbed the shovel and cut off the snake's head. For the first time, it buzzed its rattles.

"I don't know if I would have wanted it to live here anyway. Might make me pretty jumpy if I was walking around on a dark night. Now that I've killed him, I guess we'd better eat him." I scooped up the head with the shovel. The snake's fully alert eyes fixed on me, and he showed me his fangs. I buried the head below the fence.

His body was still active. I reached for it several times before I said, "I can't make myself handle it. Can you do it?"

"I think so. Let me have your knife." Andrea gutted the snake and skinned it and cut it into five pieces. Then I could handle it, though I still jumped a little when the pieces flexed this way and that. I put the cast-iron lid on the frying pan to hold them in. "Hard to convince this one he's dead."

We pulled flesh from the bones with our teeth. "I've heard people say it tastes like chicken, but I don't think so. What do you think it tastes like?"

"Rattlesnake. Good, tough rattlesnake."

I was sitting at my desk near midnight, when the hair on the back of my neck rose, and a chill ran down my

spine. I think someone stands somewhere a ways behind the cabin and watches me through the window. For a moment, I try to tell myself I'm having an attack of active imagination. Then my dog, Kylie, starts a low, steady growl from his spot under the corner of the house. If it were an animal out there, he'd be barking.

I slumped off my chair onto the floor, rolled to the switch, and shut off the overhead light, unplugged the desk lamp, then lay in the dark, listening. I crawled down into the kitchen and took a long time opening the door, rolled across the porch, onto the ground and over to the corner of the house, hoping to see where Kylie is looking, but it's too dark. It's a long time before the moon comes up. Then I hear something in the manzanita clear out at the edge of the bluff. Noisy. Crashing around in the brush.

The sun came up. I spent the morning investigating every square inch from right behind the cabin to a hundred yards down into the canyon. One place in the manzanita, the leaves have been churned up. Some of the branches have been broken, smashed down, bark skinned off. No tracks to it or away from it. A small pool of fluid in the dry leaves, smells like, looks like a mixture of blood and oil.

The next night, I watched from my sitting spot on the porch as the moon rose above the pine forest across the canyon. Then Kylie started growling. He came from his corner under the house and lay down in front of me, looking out toward the manzanita, keeping up a steady, fierce growl. Look and look in the moonlight, but I don't see anything.

He leaped up and ran snapping and growling out across the open ground, then circled back, obviously trying to bite and run off something that dodges him in a crazy zig-zag pattern, something that he's biting down toward, so it must be smaller than he is, but something that even in the bright moonlight, even as clearly as I see Kylie, who is mostly black, I cannot see. But I do hear something, and I do smell something fetid, foul. He is finally successful at chasing it back into the brush and comes back to lie down panting in front of me.

In the morning light, dog tracks. Plenty of dog tracks, but nothing else. I talked to Kylie about it, but he just knew what he knew and kept his mouth shut.

Fall rains began. Heavy rain, day after day, all day and all night. I put on my poncho and walked in the rain. Hard wind scourged the ridge. Pine trees bent so far over the cemetery road, I thought they would break or uproot.

Virginia's grave caved in. They didn't pack the dirt as they filled the hole, or the coffin was flimsy and collapsed. Or both.

Development spreads up the ridge. Purl paid four hundred dollars for his two-acre place in 1936. A man from the outfit that's building mobile home and modular home parks farther down the ridge offered him forty thousand for the place. He doesn't want it. He tells the man to leave and stay gone.

Indian Summer. Then snow. Andrea doesn't make the trip up the mountain much anymore. Even with the stove going full blast, most of the cabin is too cold to be comfortable. I said, "Try typing with gloves on."

"There's room for you at my place. It's warm, and it won't cost you any more to live down there."

"I'm like Purl. Can't pry me off the ridge with a crowbar."

"His place is well-insulated and warm."

"He needs it that way. He's seventy-six years old."

I still bathe in the rush of water from the pipe at the spring. I used to wash my hair there, but now I don't. Every time I put my head into the fast-flowing water, my sight, hearing, and sense of smell were blocked, and I was nearly overwhelmed by panic. Violent images of being brutally attacked filled my mind. I chided my active imagination, but now I wash my hair in the cabin, with the door locked.

I walk along the ridge in the snow. It's very quiet. I saw a large bobcat on the cemetery road. We looked at each other a moment, and the cat faded into leafless winter brush. Wind drifted snow over cat tracks.

I turned and looked behind me. Wind blew snow over my tracks until all along the top of the ridge, there was only quiet, undisturbed snow.

American Dreaming

Most of my friends were traumatized by their thirtieth birthdays. Turning thirty didn't bother me, but I did decide it was time to settle into a good job and convince the woman I was living with we should get married and begin building a more materially

substantial existence.

I rode to Eastern Oregon on a B.M.W. R-50 and lined up a job with the Forest Service, mostly outdoor work, mostly useful work. Early morning, under the huge cottonwood tree in their yard, my brother and his wife stood while I straddled the machine and started to put on my helmet. My brother said, "Will she say yes?"

"I think so. I'm pretty persuasive."

Julie said, "Either way, by yourself, or with Andrea along, you can stay with us until you get a place lined up."

I buckled my helmet, started the motor, emerged from the shade under the cottonwood tree, accelerated down the dirt road, onto the paved road, and across the Oregon desert.

I rode into Northern California, euphoric, with proposals of marriage and dreams of the future dancing like sugar-plums in my head.

The man in the Rambler Rebel turned directly in front of me. I slammed 550 pounds of motorcycle into the front of his car, crushed my lower left leg into a thousand pieces of bone between the machines, flew over his car, shattered my helmet on the asphalt, fractured my skull, severely abraded my face, and ripped muscles, tendons, and intestines. I slipped out of consciousness, came back into consciousness, and slipped out again.

I cursed the man who was fool enough to drink and drive, who didn't see me until I hit him. I cursed unbearable pain, blood, and injury. I cursed blind chance that destroyed my hopes and plans.

On the way down the mountain, red lights flashing into the sun and siren bouncing from rock bluffs beside the highway, I used up fury. I came into consciousness full of fear. I wanted out of the ambulance, out of a future of pain and hard times. I sat up, on my way out. The attendant grasped the rails on each side of me, pressed his chest against mine, and forced me back down.

That was the end of consciousness for me for a while.

I came into my senses again in the hospital. I was filled with a sense of peace, a sense of humor and joy, new in its intensity and startling. In simplest terms, I was alive, full of life, in love with life, and grateful for life.

The guy who hit me said the first he saw me, I'd already left the motorcycle smashed into the front of his car and was flying over him. I heard the judge fined him nineteen dollars and suspended his driver's license for six months for drunk driving. He owned nothing, had no insurance, no job.

I was on my own. The uninsured motorist' policy on the motorcycle paid the medical bills and left me four grand, with six months in a cast ahead of me and six more months, no weight on the leg that had been crushed between the bike and the front of the car. More medical bills coming.

I could see the money wouldn't last long. I invested. I built up a good business along the ridge. Marijuana and psychedelics. Organic psychedelics only. No chemicals. No hard drugs. Low volume, just people I

knew and just enough business to pay my way.

Twelve years before that, when I graduated from high school, I got National Defense Education Act loans from the government so I could go to college. Three years of college, majoring in math, then philosophy, then English, into and out of a marriage that started strong and crumbled quickly, and I felt like I didn't fit into anything. I couldn't figure out where I wanted to be. After a lot of good grades and comments about how well I would do when I decided what I wanted to do, I flunked fourteen classes in a row.

I aimed at something specific when I flunked those fourteen classes, but I couldn't articulate what it was. I knew freedom from the established system of education was part of it.

There is potential that has no place to develop in contemporary culture. How many Shamans are there in the U.S.A? How many Johnny Appleseeds? How many teachers of peace? How many poets whose vision isn't dimmed by the struggle to make a living?

There is no bread for mystics. No bread for raindancers. Not enough soil, not enough bread for men of the soil who are not men of machinery. Scant living for painters, potters, people of vision who hear a different drummer than the monotonous, lock-step rattle of Mammon's traps.

I came into consciousness in the ambulance sirening down the mountain. I sat up to get out, and the man pressed me back down.

I came into consciousness in the hospital. A policeman asked me questions. "Have you been

drinking? Have you taken any drugs?" I couldn't see him, but I asked him who he was, and he told me. I asked him why the hell he didn't ask questions of the guy who hit me, and he said, yes, they were doing that too, and I came into consciousness again, and I knew I was badly busted up. I couldn't focus in consciousness long enough to figure out what my next step would be.

Andrea stood beside my bed. I said, "Let's get married," because that had been my plan. I would ride into the yard, get off the machine, put it on its stand, walk in the sunshine up onto the porch of the cabin by the lake and say, "Let's get married." She was frightened when I said it. The doctors weren't sure yet if I'd live.

I said, "I meant that as a joke. To me, it's enormously funny how little our plans and intentions mean. I'm sorry. I shouldn't make jokes like that. It's the same type of humor as that cartoon, two guys standing on the world, a bombs going off all around them, so the end of the earth is at hand, the end of the men, a matter of seconds, and one has turned to the other and is saying, 'This reminds me of a joke you haven't heard yet.'"

George stood behind Andrea. I said, "What are you looking at, George?"

"This air cast they put on your leg."

I couldn't see it. I could see him a little. "You got your camera, George?"

"In the rig."

"Take my picture."

"Now?"

"Now."

"You look like hell. They haven't even cleaned you up."

"I want to see it. Later, when I'm back on my feet, I want to see it. You got color film?"

"Sure." He went out and got his camera and came back in and took a picture of me.

Andrea stuck with me long enough to help me, but eventually, she left.

In that time of dealing drugs up on the ridge, I fell in love again, with a woman and her child. A baby didn't simplify matters any. Did I ever say I tried to go the simplest and most logical ways? That isn't the name of dreams nor of love.

If you're dealing drugs, your household won't be the steadiest. You'll get strange visitors at strange hours. You'll fear the possible bust and time in jail, and you'll distrust the people you associate with.

There wasn't room nor time for our love to blossom. We pulled out and moved to the Oregon desert. I did what work I could, a little farm work, irrigating row crops. I couldn't stay on my feet very long at a time. We got welfare.

I didn't know enough not to be happy. We had a house for shelter, enough food, trees in the yard, a perfect place for a child, and for me. I was grateful every day that I was alive and healing, and the world was so beautiful. Vegetables and fruits began to produce bountifully in the garden I built.

Poverty ground Diana down, and she left and took Michael with her.

My ex wife and the guy she married wouldn't let me

see my children anymore. There wasn't anything I could do about it unless I'd go outlaw and kidnap the kids. I had all I could do to take care of myself. I probably couldn't get to where they were anyway. It takes some money to travel, even hitchhiking. Kids need some kind of stable shelter.

Rent on the house I was living in was cheap. But the farm sold, and the new owner tore the house down to farm the ground under it.

I worked my way south again, into warmer country. I camped out. I worked when I could. When I met Elaine, the woman I would spend the rest of my life with, I had a twenty-dollar bill in my wallet. She thought that was a lot of money. I could see there might be a future for us together.

Remember Madame Ruby? She was a stationary gypsy. She told fortunes. Elaine and I went to her for a lark.

Madame Ruby said, "You have had much trouble, pain, and injury in your life. This has not been your fault." She didn't look at my palm. She didn't have a crystal ball. She looked at me and talked. "This trouble in your life, it comes from a curse put on you by a woman you have loved. This woman, she is evil. She wants to hurt you. She wants to destroy you. You know who this evil woman is, don't you?"

I hesitated. Garbage. All garbage, this stuff about a curse. On the other hand, she told me a lot of what I thought, down to specific words. She couldn't know that unless she had extraordinary power. On the other hand yet, she can read my mind, so she knows what

fears prejudices, hates and loves I have. She can harvest for her own use from that garden. I felt caught between. Fate works in mysterious ways. I nodded. "Sure, I know."

"I can remove this curse from you. I can take away its power for five dollars."

"A curse couldn't work unless I believed in its power, could it?"

"Look at your life. Look at what you've been through. Do you think this curse is not working?"

What's five bucks when you're almost broke anyway? I gave her another five bucks to remove the curse. She did something mysterious to a nickel. Then she gave it to me. She said, "Keep this separate from your other money. Go to the ocean. Face away from the ocean and throw this nickel over your shoulder, as far out into the water as you can. This takes on the power of the curse, and you will throw the curse away from you with it. Don't look back when you throw it. Also, take this."

She gave me a round, hard ball, which was the ovary of a flower. If you tore it apart, it would come apart into silky, fluffy floaters, with a little seed attached to each.

Madame Ruby said, "This woman you love now, who is in the waiting room, she is loyal, as no other woman has been for you. Tear a piece from one of her scarves and wrap this in it and always keep it with you. Never unwrap it. This will protect you from harm."

"Anything else?"

"I can have the priest pray for you."

"The priest?"

"I will have to give him a small gift. If you give me five dollars, I will buy the gift."

"You already got it all. Read my wallet, and you'll see."

I was a long way from the ocean, and I couldn't get there. After a few days, I realized I'd dropped some change into the same pocket with that nickel. Now I had five nickels, and I didn't know which one was the nickel. One of them had been stamped with the year of my birth, so that was probably the one, though I couldn't be sure, because I hadn't looked at the date when she gave it to me. I thought I'd better do something about it before things got more messed up.

I went down to the Sacramento River. It was the biggest body of water I could get to right then. Eventually, it connects up with the ocean. It's all one water. I stood with my back to the river and threw all five nickels over my shoulder. I'm right-handed, so I threw them over my left shoulder. I heard them hit the water. Plink, plink, plink, plink, plink. A smooth, short rhythm.

The seed ball, I carried in my guitar case. One afternoon, I went by to see Mike and Verona, and I played them some songs. Their boys took that seed ball out of the case and unwrapped it. I saw them unwrapping the seed ball, but I didn't stop them. They got those silky seed-carriers floating all over the house and out the windows. Those seeds aren't easy to get out of the ball, but leave it to a four-year old and a six-year old. Some of those seeds found dirt and grew.

Elaine and I married and had two children. I could

work enough that we got by. We had food stamps sometimes and welfare checks sometimes. We didn't have any excess, but we were happy with our existence.

I built gardens for other people and gardens for us. I landscaped, built the soil, planted and tended. A lot of good food came from the gardens, but not a lot of money from the work.

The U.S. government started harassing me. U.S. does not spell us, all of us, the people. It spells United States, without regard or compassion for the people. The central government of the United States. They wanted me to repay the loans I took to attend college.

I explained my situation. I couldn't pay anyone anything. I didn't mean to be in arrears, but I had been injured, and it had changed everything. I had so far been unable to work much.

My situation didn't matter. I got more threatening letters.

I tried to declare bankruptcy, but you can't declare bankruptcy on federal loans. The federal government is outside the law.

A grey car, with a picture of a missile in a circle, with the letters, B.M., pulled into the driveway, and a man in a green uniform got out and came to the door. He said he was appointed to collect the money the government lent me, plus interest. "We want it back. We don't carry deadbeats. Not any more. We need the money. We need new weapons. You don't pay taxes; you don't boost the Gross National Product. You don't pay your debts. You're not an asset to this nation; you're a constant liability."

Years before, when my brother filed with the draft board for classification as a conscientious objector, he listed me as an influence on his thinking. An F.B.I. agent found out where I was working and came and talked to me. After we talked for a while, I asked him, "Aren't you here to investigate and to attempt to understand how I think and why I think that way? Every time I answer a question, you attack my position. You're stuck inside such a narrow perspective, you haven't understood what I'm telling you. Your function isn't to convert me, admonish, nor punish me, but to investigate and report what you find."

"Wouldn't you defend your country?"

"You asked me that before. Yes, I would, but not with physical force, not with lethal weapons."

"What else is there?"

"There's attempting to see that right by might doesn't triumph. There's attempting to make some effort to counterbalance the rush to solve all problems with the use of force. Please write it down that I'm telling you you aren't an investigator seeking information, but someone who is determined to prove me wrong and to make a case that my religious beliefs make me less than a good citizen."

"Damn right. They do. A lot less. God, guns, and guts, that's what built this country to where it is now. You're refusing the guns, and you haven't got any guts, so you'd better pray to God for help."

"Are you writing it down?"

"Sure. I'm writing it down. So what? Who's going to read it? People who think just like I do." That was when

they investigated my brother's claim he conscientiously objected to war.

Years later, I told the man wanting money I owed the government, "I've done everything I can. You know my situation. I own nothing you can take that's worth anything, and I don't make enough money to live on."

"Get a job."

"I'm not physically able to do most jobs. I can work, but not very many hours in a row, and not day after day. I do what I can."

"Pay up. Tap your family."

"Dry. Untappable. These are hard times for working people. You'd just as well go ahead and take the next step, because I can't do anything about paying, and it doesn't do any good to explain to people who don't listen. If you check the records, you'll see that I've tried to cooperate. When I could, I made payments of ten or fifteen dollars a month. The interest more than ate the payments, and it didn't help at all. When I have deductions from my earning returnable from the government, you take them without permission or legal process, and it still doesn't even dent the interest. Attempting to cooperate and communicate hasn't done anything, so let's end all discussion." Maybe I still thought it made a difference what part of the continent I stood on.

In the morning, a car drives slow past the end of the driveway. I know who it is. They're looking the place over. I go out the back door, run down the bank, jump from rock to rock to cross the creek. When I'm across the creek, I run across the open field. There isn't any

place that's safe, but I'm headed for the big garden I planted on a donated piece of ground by the old barn the other side of town

Here they come. Men with guns. A helicopter gunship swoops low over the south ridge and roars up the valley. No time. No time at all. I stretch into a full run. No time to open the gate. I jump the fence, but my undependable leg gives, and I crash down on the fence. What have I done? Ripped myself open on a steel post? No. They're shooting, and I've been hit.

I meant to try to make it into the corn, tall, golden corn that I planted early in spring, a place to hide, but I've been hit hard, and I'm bleeding a lot and crawling, and I'm getting weak. I make it as far as the turnip patch. The ground is soft. I can't go any farther. Prime turnips, big as softballs, that I planted when I still thought there was a future.

I'm sprawled across the well-weeded bed. I haven't had time to look, but I'm out of strength to move, so I look down. My chest and guts bleed profusely. Bright blood soaks into the dark, rich earth between the plants, covers some of the round, smooth globes with a darker color. This thought comes to me, that nine times five is forty-five, and four plus five is nine; nine times four is thirty-six, and three plus six is nine; nine squared is eighty-one, and eight plus one is nine; nine cubed is seven hundred and twenty-nine, and seven plus two is nine; 9 to the fourth power is 6,561, added together is eighteen, added, nine again. 9 to the 5th power, 59049, added, is 27, thrice 9, or 2 plus 7 is 9.

Unique to nine, it goes on, through all the powers,

through all the multiples of nine and all the multiples of nine at all powers. It drives my mind toward a beautiful construct, but the bright blue sky goes black, and I can't see anything at all, curl forward around my chest and guts in my last movement, face down in the bloody soil.

In the Beginning

The Great Spirit created the earth and then the animals. Each animal looked the earth over and began to do what seemed suitable for it to do.

Beaver and her mate, Beaver, walked along the banks of several rivers and decided they would live in the river and forage on the land. They thought if they dammed the river, they could spread the water over a large area and use the pond for dwelling, for a buffer from land-dwelling animals, and for growing and storing their food.

They felled softwood trees and saplings, chewed them into pieces, dragged them into the river and built a dam. The river spread to a large pond, and Beavers found their idea worked very well. They built ponds and marshes up and down the river. Willows, cottonwoods, aspen, and alder, marsh grasses and low shrubs spread and grew densely along the river.

Beaver bore young, and the young grew and bore young. Colonies of beavers spread up and down the river. Beavers journeyed over ridges and mountains to other creeks and rivers. Colonies spread up and down

those streams.

At the same time, all the other animals made their way in the world.

A restless and far-ranging animal, Kiyoti explored mountains, valleys, canyons, and ridges. He saw oceans, deserts, rivers, and smaller streams. He made his living as he went, and he multiplied his species as he went.

Kiyoti trotted through the densely-growing pine trees toward the river. The valley had changed since he last traveled through it. Multitudinous willow, alder, and cottonwood dams spread the river wide and lazy now. Rich smells of wildlife blew to him on moist breezes, smells of ducks, geese, swans, rails, small marsh birds that hid in the grasses, snakes, turtles, fish, insects, frogs.

Kiyoti had become bored with his diet of berries, roots, grasses, and mushrooms. He thought a kiyoti's teeth might be just right for turning one of those beaver kits going down the long slide into a meal. He approached in a friendly and well-concealed manner, pounced, snapped, and found the kit tasty, tender, filling, and nutritious. The kit's broad, flat tail was particularly rich and tasty.

Beaver pursued Kiyoti, but Kiyoti picked up the remnants of his meal and trotted up the ridge. Beaver was out of his element and had to give up the chase.

Beaver said Kiyoti had stepped far outside the bounds of civilization, but he didn't know what to do. Then Kiyoti killed and ate a second kit, and a third. In the midst of his grief and anger, Beaver went on with

his work, since going on with his work fulfilled his nature. He cut willow saplings and dragged them to the river. One sapling he had cut off at a sharp angle caught behind a willow stump, bent, and then sprang straight and jabbed him in the leg, bringing blood.

Beaver studied his wound. He studied the sapling that had wounded him. Then he selected stouter saplings and cut them into lengths and chewed them very sharp.

The next time Kiyoti leaped from cover to try to take a beaver kit for his lunch, Beaver and a dozen full-grown offspring attacked Kiyoti. Thirteen spears penetrated Kiyoti's body. Only his immortality as the progenitor of his species saved his life, but he was nonetheless sorely wounded.

Kiyoti had great difficulty fleeing up the hill. Spears protruded from him in every direction and banged against everything he passed. It took him a long time and cost him great pain to extract all the willow spears and to heal his extensive injuries. He made no effort to quell his anger nor to blunt his desire for revenge. He owned sharp, deadly teeth and swift and silent paws. He had never thought of using anything else to defend himself.

But this thing Beaver had done, modified something from his environment and used it for a weapon, pierced his mind more sharply even than the willow spears had pierced his body. What Beaver had done suggested so many possibilities.

While Kiyoti picked leaves from a bush for a poultice for his wounds, he got his first really powerful

idea. Consumed by his thought, not really devoting his attention to what he was doing, he picked leaves from the bottom of a branch. The branch bent down, and when the leaves broke away, the limb sprang up and slapped his face.

The idea hit him much harder than the branch did. He never did finish dressing his wounds. He limped and hobbled busily about all afternoon. Spots and dribbles of blood traced his paths as he gathered tools and materials, experimented, figured, and refined his idea to fit what he could find to work with.

By late afternoon, his wounds stopped bleeding, though he was sore and stiff all over. He knew he should lay up in the shade and heal for a few days, but he was driven by the idea that there was no time to waste. Strike while the willow is supple, he thought, for time will make it brittle.

Two days later, he had a working model. But it was neither powerful enough nor accurate enough, so he began building again, trying to correct the deficiencies in a second version. He hadn't eaten nor rested since he started the project. A fever ran through him from the effects of his wounds, and he focused completely on what he was doing, so he didn't know Bear was coming until Bear broke into a full, roaring charge. Kiyoti's mind functioned at very high speed, and he had his machine ready, so he just turned it into position and cut the line.

Bear had been examining the day and making a meal of berries, barks, roots, insects, grubs and herbs as he wandered. He topped the ridge and spotted Kiyoti

busily building at the edge of the brush and timber in a small hollow down the ridge. Bear sank down into the brush until nothing showed but his eyes, ears, and nose, and he watched, listened, and smelled. He watched for a long time, but he still hadn't any idea what Kiyoti was doing.

The opportunity was too good to pass up; he did know that. Usually, Bear didn't hold a grudge, but Kiyoti had made himself an exception. Kiyoti loved to make the point that wit, speed, and agility meant more than brawn, power, and steady determination. Until now, Bear's peaceful constitution kept him from wanting to attack Kiyoti just to attack, so their confrontations, when Kiyoti provoked Bear to attack, always came at Kiyoti's choice of place and time.

Kiyoti always planned his escape ahead of time and made Bear the buffoon. Bear knew he was as fast and as agile as Kiyoti, though his greater size made his turns wider and his stopping longer, and he could not fit into nor through the places Kiyoti could. When Bear was angry, his determination made him look more the fool as he tried to squeeze into, dig under, or fight his way through when Kiyoti was long gone and up at the top of the ridge, laughing at him.

Down through the edge of the brush Bear stalked, as quiet on his feet as any cat, slowly, one careful step at a time, keeping Kiyoti always in the center of his vision. When he reached the edge of the brush and nothing but open ground lay between him and Kiyoti, he stopped and watched a moment longer, but he still couldn't figure out what Kiyoti was doing, so he trotted silently

out of the brush.

When he was close enough to know beyond doubt that Kiyoti was lunch meat, he broke into a full gallop, and a great roar of victory and joy rose from his ground-thumping feet, clear up through his massive body and out his gigantic, pearly-toothed, wide-open mouth.

Kiyoti looked up, turned the agglomeration of willow parts he had built, and cut the line. He had selected a jagged stone about half the size of Beaver's head for his catapult, figuring it would destroy Beaver's skull and carry away his brain and his higher sensory organs. Some forms of physical destruction gave even the immortal progenitors a rough time to pull through.

Though he had not selected the stone for Bear, Kiyoti nonetheless felt fairly well satisfied with the damage it did. It hit Bear in his wide-open, roaring mouth and immediately quenched both his roar and his forward motion. The stone drove straight down Bear's throat and took all his teeth with it, through him lengthwise, and out his anus, not bothering with any of the subtleties of curves or convolutions of tissue. As it exited, it cut off his long, bushy tail and then stuck deep into a pine tree behind Bear, splattering blood, gore, and shit when it hit.

Kiyoti nearly ruined his own guts laughing at what had happened to Bear and how he looked now. "Haw, haw, haw, hee hee. Bear, you should have seen it. Haw, haw, haw, listen, Bear, hee hee hee haw, you sure did shit a rock. Haw Haw haw."

He fell down in the sand and lay rolling about,

helpless. Bear realized later he could have had him right then, even without teeth. A few rips from his powerful claws would have ended Kiyoti's enjoyment in short order, but Kiyoti had just become a much more dangerous beast than he had ever been. Bear didn't know it would take Kiyoti time to cock and reload his machine.

Even in the midst of his weakening hysteria, Kiyoti pulled himself up by his machine and started rewinding it. Bear turned and retreated up the hill. He didn't feel well. His insides gurgled and sloshed as he ran. He had to stop and plug up his blown-out asshole to keep his contents from sloshing out of him onto the ground.

He put several ridges between himself and Kiyoti before he holed up in a blown-down thicket and tried to figure out how to start putting himself back into shape.

Kiyoti danced and sang. He had done it. It worked. He was victorious. He was invincible. He was hungry. He was weak almost to paralysis. He fell down with giggling every time he thought of the rock reaming out Bear and sticking, kathud, into the tree. If he didn't get something to eat very soon, he'd fall down and be unable to get up. He set off upriver to see what he could find.

When he had gone, Great Blue Heron and Sandhill Crane landed in Kiyoti's work area and examined his machine. Crane said, "I don't think it can shoot straight up."

"Don't bet your nest on it. All he'd have to do is tip the whole thing back, and it would shoot up."

Crane said, "I think we'd have a very hard time

building anything like that. We aren't built for that kind of work."

Heron said, "Well, I know one thing we can do. We can ignite branches at that smoldering coal seam up on the ridge and drop them on him."

"He's pretty fast on his feet. He could probably dodge. But we could burn off his cover and drive him out of this part of the country."

Heron said, "I don't know about that. Trouble is, his cover is also our cover and habitation for the things we eat."

"Security means something, doesn't it?"

"Sure it does. Sure it does. But..."

Bear suffered a lot of pain. He worked steadily and patiently and put all his innards back into order. He also put together a plan. He thought he could pull logs out of the blowdown and prop them above the trail so they would fall on Koyoti and crush him. Bear thought he might be able to rig it so they would fall on Kiyoti even if he, Bear, wasn't there to trigger it.

These ideas spread like the fire in summer-dried marsh grasses, that animals could use tools and techniques to protect themselves from other animals, that the power they took for self defense could be used to usurp the possibility of other species developing more dangerous weapons and then attacking them.

No animal need fear the future.

Armaments and more refined armaments spread like the fire that burned the grass in the marsh and spread into the surrounding forests.

What started as territorial disputes between

individuals soon involved entire species. Cranes, herons, geese and ducks allied to attempt to drive coyotes into the sea. Bears, coyotes, and ravens allied in an attempt to save their species from attacks on all sides, from various phalanxes of formerly prey species, defending their future by attacking who ate them most.

Vultures would not ally with anyone. Nor would they fight, beyond their normal defense of puking on the attacker and flying away. "Foolishness," they said, "Eating up the future. There is far more than we can eat now, but there will come a famine."

Foxes researched the plants around them, extracted poisons, and used them effectively, in water, in the air, on sharp weapons. Eaters of those killed by poisons died from the poisons.

There were few. All were hungry. The earth lay quiet, except for dry desert wind blowing through burned over forest.

It hadn't happened before. It would have been impossible even to conceptualize, ten generations ago, when the cranes and herons destroyed most of the shorter-legged birds and then began to quarrel and declared war between their two species, but the progression of history eroded resistance and gradually wore away moral standards. Animals of the earth progressed into ever more developed forms of war, into ever smaller need for a reason to go to war, and they opened a place for the concept to root.

Kiyotis looked at kiyotis and thought, "There are too many in your pack, and your pack is crowding us," and they began the first war between members of the same

species.

The Grand Old Heron, who had commanded eight generations without question, was saved from assassination only by an in-quarters war, in which 14 of the herons attempting and 11 of the loyal were killed. Warfare rendered the quarters and the area around the quarters uninhabitable.

The survivors expected to be given refuge at a nearby community, but instead, the warriors of that community, who understood the times were changing and all must protect their own survival, ambushed them as they approached. A world ravaged by warfare simply could not support very many herons. A community that accepted refugees risked starvation as too many herons gobbled up resources.

The ambush did not win the quick victory the attackers expected. Surprise gained them an advantage, but they didn't kill fast enough. Those who were attacked were veteran warriors, and they reacted quickly and effectively. The resulting battle lasted all that day and far into the night and destroyed a large part of the habitat.

Early in the development of warfare, the Great Spirit revoked the immortality of the progenitors, because it gave them an unfair advantage over their opponents. Other than taking that action, he did not intervene. In the beginning, he had agreed with all the animals that they would have free will.

Those few who listened to what he told them of peace and harmony and refused to fight against other species or their own, he gathered up beside him, and

together they watched as warfare ate the earth.

The Great Spirit decided it would not be necessary after all to create man.

Leo Rising

"My name's Leo, and I'll buy you a drink."

I said, "No thanks on the drink, but I'm glad to meet you. My name is Jason." I offered my hand, but he turned to signal the waitress. When she started toward us, he turned to face me again. Gold hair. Craggy face, shaggy brows, golden beard growing high on his cheeks.

"No drink, Jason?"

"No. Thanks for the offer, but I just came in for the music."

"Don't you drink?"

"No."

"Huh. What about that? Do you give lessons? No, no, I'm not making fun of you. I'm about half drunk and more than a little serious. I'm trying to get a control on it, get a little buzz going okay, but don't get drunk. Getting drunk really lays the boom on me."

He ordered another drink. "It's harder and harder to pull back up out of hangovers. They nearly destroy me. I'm set up here. The barmaid and I have a deal, four drinks and out the door. That helps. But if I run into a friend who invites me over, if he offers me something to drink, I'll keep drinking as long as he keeps

offering."

He drank and choked on his drink. He coughed and coughed again, a sound that started deep in his chest and reverberated into the room and startled several of us. A man with grey hair, in a grey suit, peered at us and then spoke loudly, "Ladies and gentlemen. Leo is going to roar for us. Come Leo, out with a good, full-bodied roar."

A woman stepped forward. "Harold, shut up. You're drunk."

"Well, you heard him. He's getting ready to roar. He was just getting ready, sort of clearing his throat. It's just like the old days. This young man is new here, and he hasn't met Leo before, and Leo was going to give him an old time demonstration. Weren't you Leo? Wasn't he, young man?"

Leo said, "Harold, the old days are gone. I didn't mean to do that. I choked on my drink, and I couldn't help coughing."

The strange shape of the pupils of Leo's eyes made sense to me then.

Harold rocked on his feet, looked at Leo and then at me. "Oh, I see. Oh dear. I blew your cover. This young man just met you, and he didn't know, and you were just sitting here having a man to man conversation. So now he's beginning to realize, to look at you again, more sharply."

I said, "It doesn't matter, except it probably has something to do with what we were talking about."

"And what was that? What were you and Leo talking about?"

Leo said, "Drinking too much. We were talking about people who drink too much."

"People? Just people? Don't you drink a little much yourself, Leo?"

"Harold, go sit down."

"Yes, Harold, come back and sit down and leave them alone. They don't need you, and you're quite drunk, you know."

"Well, if they're talking about drinking too much, then they do need me, because I know a lot about it." Over all protests, Harold came forward, pulled out a chair and started to sit down.

Then Leo did roar and shook the building. Harold tipped his chair over backward and rolled out of it away from us. People screamed and tried to see what was happening. Harold crawled away into the crowd. "He did roar. I'd forgotten just how powerful that roar is. My goodness. He did roar. I believe he's quite sobered me up. He did roar after all this time."

Leo said, "I'm sorry, Jason. I just couldn't take Harold anymore. Listen Jason, I got to go. People are going to settle out of being startled. Then they're going to get mad. They're going to come down on me. It's a nice night out. If you'd like to go along with me, we could talk."

We walked out into the night and walked together down the concrete hill. Leo said, "A place where people get together to drink is a bad place for me to be, because sometime in the evening, someone will focus on me and start talking about what they see. These days, I go early, have my drinks, and leave. I was about

to leave when you came over and sat down.

"When I first started drinking, I didn't know what it would do to me until I was stretched out on the floor. Then people thought it was funny to get me drunk. I didn't know anything about turning down a drink.

"Then I got to where I thought it was funny to get drunk. I'd get drunk and take off my clothes and leap around and roar. All the other drunks would go 'Ohh, and oooohh,' and 'Leo, oh my.' Makes me ashamed to think of it now, trying for that kind of glory. So I read, if you want to stop drinking, don't associate with people who drink. But that would be hard. All my friends drink. Except Ernie. You're the first person I've met in a long time who doesn't drink."

"You aren't likely to meet non-drinkers in a bar."

"I know. Habit's got me there. I don't know of anyplace to go to meet people."

"You could try some Christian organizations. Not many drinkers there."

"What? Sarcasm from you, Jason? The Christians and the lion?"

"I didn't think of it that way. You don't have to think of it that way. Only lions held captive by the Romans ate Christians. Most Christians will probably know that."

"That would take some thought. But that's what I need to do. I need to think my way out of what I've been trying to drink my way out of."

"What are you trying to drink your way out of?"

He had been walking rapidly, so I was hard put to keep up without running, but now he drooped and

slowed down. "Right now, I'm having trouble paying my own way, that's part of it. I haven't worked for five months, only a few penny-ante jobs in the past year and a half."

"What kind of work do you do?"

"I'm a lion. That's what I've always done for money. I was captured in Africa when I was a cub. I think my mother and father and my brothers and sisters-- well, the men grabbed me, and there was a lot of shooting. I'm the only lion they took."

We walked in silence to the corner and stood under the street lamp. He pointed at the street sign. "Six years ago, I came by here in a parade. I hired on with a circus for a while in the lion act. Two dollars a day and board and room. But I didn't stay long. The whole show was too primitive.

"When I first got over here, I went to a wild animal act. I was young and smart and cooperative. I didn't hold what other men had done against the people I worked with. I wanted to learn the language. People helped me."

"Sounds good."

"It was good. It worked out okay for a while. Well, from here, I don't know where to go. What are you doing tonight? We could head down the hill, have coffee downtown. Or we could head up this way and go to my place. Ernie'll be there. He rarely goes out. He'd join in this conversation."

"Let's go to your place then. I don't care about coffee."

"Good. This way." We walked up the hill. Most of

the people in the city were settling for the night.

"What happened to the wild animal act?"

"Went broke. The trainer's wife cheated on him, and she went at it as a big spender. There wasn't enough money to keep her going and the act going. Claude shot himself in an alley behind a bar in Klamath Falls, Oregon six months after the act folded. I read about it in the papers.

"I got work in children's stories for a while. That was good living. I was working. Ernie was working. The rent was paid, cupboards full, and both of us had money in the bank. I liked the work, too. Some of the clothes, they felt funny, shorts with suspenders and patent pumps, but if a good fitter put them together right, so I could move, they were okay. That's good work, cause the work's clean. I've been offered violent work and dirty work, and I wanted money, but I'd sit in the gutter and starve before I'd do that.

"I had about two dozen good jobs in about eight years, plenty to go on, enough time off. The last job I had, I really liked that job. I didn't have to dress up in clothes. I was the tawny scrawny lion. I'd eat a giraffe one day and a zebra the next.

"I didn't really eat them, you know, but we said I did. I chased them through the book and yelled at them. I said if they didn't run so hard, maybe I wouldn't need to eat so many of them, and maybe I wouldn't be so skinny. I had to chase them so much I kept getting skinnier. That role, I really got into it. Skin and bones. I dropped a hundred pounds getting ready. I really roared. Hair standing out all over, and I really screamed

at the other animals.

"One day I went home from work, and I was still caught up in the hungry, wild animal role, pacing around and kind of jumpy. Ernie was reading the paper, and he looked over it at me and said, 'What'd you do today, Leo?'

"I roared, 'Today's Saturday. I eat elephants on Saturdays,' without really thinking about it, because that's the way the book goes. Saturdays, the tawny scrawny lion eats elephants. Ernie folded his paper and put it down. Then he took his glasses off and laid them on the coffee table. No way he could go but walk right by me to leave of the room.

"I watched him trying and trying not to do it, but he shuddered as he went by. Then he bolted out of the room and shut and locked the door. I heard him moving furniture up against the door. I almost ruined my stomach muscles trying to keep the insane laughter that was pouring out quiet enough that he wouldn't hear it, but after he moved the stuff, it was quiet, and I couldn't stop giggling, and Ernie said, 'Leo. I hear you laughing. I don't think it's funny, Leo.'

"I said, 'Ernie, I'm sorry. Honest. That's just the way the story goes. I didn't even think of you being an elephant until after I said it. It's only funny because I'm laughing about how deep I get into the role. The elephant on the set isn't afraid of me. He gets a kick out of the roaring and the yelling and all the chasing around, but he knows I'm gentle. We have tea together in the cafeteria. Ernie, how long have you known me?'

"'Four years.'

"'You're my closest friend in the world. We could be brothers. I didn't mean to upset you. All I'm laughing about is me liking the work I'm doing so much I live it and forget where I really am.'

"He didn't come out until Sunday morning. I took to wearing business suits and doing paper work when I came home on Saturdays. He settled back down.

"I did live that role. Beyond the book. In the book, all the big animals set it up so this apparently dumb rabbit hops right up to me and invites me to his place for dinner. I'm going to chow down right then, but he tells me about his brothers and sisters, so I wait, and we head for his place.

"We stop on the way, and he catches fish and picks flowers, and I get hungrier and hungrier. I think about just going ahead and eating him up, but I hold off for a bigger meal. We get there. Rabbit, he cooks the fish. One of the little rabbits brings me a bowl of carrot soup. Carrot soup? A lion? Well, why not? Might be a good appetizer.

"All these little rabbits argue about who gets to sit on my lap first. It'll be the fattest one there, right? But the carrot soup tastes good. Really good. And hearty. Sure, another bowl would be good. And umm, boy, rabbit, you sure know how to cook fish.

"So that's the story. I settle down and get fat. I bring in fish and bouquets, and I get soup and cooked fish, and it works great. All the big animals come around to see what's up, and there's a big celebration. End of the story. Fold the set. Everybody goes on to other jobs.

"But no more job offers came in. I liked it there.

Rabbit, he never was a professional. He was just handy to the location, and he said sure, he wouldn't mind earning a few bucks acting in a children's book.

"After everyone left, Rabbit said 'Just stay here. No need to go anywhere.' We could have gone on forever eating fish and carrot soup, me doing some babysitting and storytelling so the older folks could get out some. I really didn't care that much about creativity, acting, making a name for myself. Get up in the morning, go fishing, come back, have a couple of bowls of carrot soup.

"Rabbit, he smoked a pipe, and I took it up for a while. We'd sit out in front of the hollow tree, a dozen bunnies running here and there. We'd polish off a last bowl of cold carrot soup and light our pipes and watch dusk settle."

We walked more than a block. I said, "What happened?"

"Development. One housing project. Then another. Some of the kids went to hunter's tables. Some went to the dogs. A bulldozer shoved the hollow tree down and piled it with brush, and they burned it.

"I wanted to kill people. I really did. Rabbit, he looked old and weary, but he wasn't broken. He said, 'No Leo. We can't do that. We can only be gentle and trust in the Life Force.'" Leo cleared his throat and then cleared it again. Some people passing us on the sidewalk were startled by the deep sound echoing in a concrete city and stared. Leo turned his back to them, and we kept walking.

"Here we are. Four flights, no elevator." I tried to

keep up, but I had to stop on the second landing. Leo came back down and sat on a step while I rested a minute. "Since then, it's been small jobs now and then. I don't get jobs as well as I used to. I see people's greed for money and power. I think of Rabbit's family and subdivisions spreading. It's more than I can do to be polite and remain professional. The interviewer sees my anger, and I don't get the job.

"Here it is. Come in. Ernie, this is Jason. Ernie's been getting jobs, and he has a better head for business than I do. He still gets royalties on work he did years ago. He's carrying me financially, sad to say."

"No Leo. Not sad to say at all. You've carried me through some rough times, and I'm honored to be able to help and very comfortable with the situation, and I want you to be comfortable with it."

"Ernie's been getting some pretty good jobs."

"Well, some of them are a little silly, but they do pay well. And I suppose I'll get some silliness because it seems to be on the rise, along with sex and violence, which I won't do. I had an offer to play an elephant who stampedes through a crowd to assassinate a political figure, and I would not do it. They said, 'The people you trample will only be models.' I said, 'Do you expect children to know that?' They offered me a lot of money for half a day's work, but I didn't want it. Did you tell him about the Penthouse offer, Leo?"

Leo growled and threw his hat on the couch. "No. Jason, you want a cup of tea, something to eat? I'm going to have some crackers and cheese and an apple."

"Crackers and cheese and tea sounds good."

"Ernie?"

"Tea, please."

Leo busied himself in the kitchen. Once, he called out, "I didn't name myself Leo, you know. I wouldn't have done that. But I'm used to it."

Ernie said, "Leo's going through some difficult times. In fact, he's had quite his share."

"Yes. He's been telling me a little about it."

"It's good that he's talking to you about it. He doesn't usually talk about it. He bottles it up. Or drowns it."

Leo brought the tray in and put it down, and we ate and drank tea for a while.

Leo said, "I met a girl who was always on the make. I thought she was joking at first, and I didn't like her sense of humor. Then she cornered me at a party and made me an offer. We'd do a set of pictures for Penthouse. She had a contract already drawn up for it. I'd maul her and gnaw on her and tear her clothes off little by little, picture by picture."

"The scratches and wounds would be simulated, but she wanted a few real ones out of it too. And, well, you probably know the magazine, so you can figure how the pictures would go."

"She offered me three thousand dollars. She called it the lion's share of the contract. She also had a movie contract. She kept bidding until she offered me ten thousand dollars for a few days' work. All I wanted to do was slap her ugly. Fortunately, Ernie was there. He doesn't go to many parties, but he was there."

"I got in between them and just kept moving around. Leo couldn't get at her to slap her, and she couldn't get

at him to keep bidding. Finally, she left."

Leo poured more tea into his cup. "I was down and out flat-broke, and she knew it. That's half the reason I wanted to slap her a couple of good ones."

Ernie stood up and gathered the empty cups onto the tray. "That's enough of that. It isn't good to dwell on that kind of memory."

We drank tea and talked quite late. I said, "Leo, maybe you should try something besides acting."

"What could I do? I'm good at being a lion. What else do I know?"

"You tell an interesting story."

"Story teller, huh?"

Ernie had been slumped on the couch, apparently asleep, but he sat up and said, "Leo, why don't you become a speaker? Tell people what it's like to be a lion in the western world, when jobs were good, when they weren't. The good times, the rough times. Some people make their living going around giving talks. You could do it."

And they did it.

I received a post card in January. "They're eating it up. I love it. I just don't talk anyplace they're serving drinks. All the jobs I can handle. I love it. Ernies' starting into it. Leo."

I read about them. Leo and Ernie ran for political office and received the vote, but they were disqualified from serving. Leo was interviewed on television. By then, he wasn't giving biography and trying to be entertaining anymore.

He was saying, "Quit it. Leave us alone. We never

invited you in. We never gave you any land. We never agreed to anything. Open your eyes. Every other form of life is as important as you are. Broaden your narrow perspective. Slow down."

A popular television preacher said animals don't have souls.

Ernie said, "God bless you sir. Do you speak for man or God?"

Ernie phoned in July. "Jason, could we come out and see you for a few days?"

"Sure Ernie, come on. The garden's doing really well. We'll make carrot soup."

We sat in the garden in the evening. Leo said, "I'm going back to Africa. I can't be here anymore. I've become too aware of how man's world works. I'm in it without meaning to be. Do you know what I mean?"

"I take a jet to New York to speak. I'm supporting the airline. I speak on animals' rights to a group in Florida. Part of the money they pay me goes for air fare, part for taxes, some to restaurants, some for clothes, taxis. None of that's environmentally conservative. No animal ever voted for a 747 or a Ford taxi, or a Howard Johnson restaurant or the weapons my tax money buys. People nod their heads and shake their heads. They know about the problems in the world. They say they want to help, but they don't change."

Ernie said, "It takes people time to change, Leo. They want to change, but it takes time."

"There isn't any more time. The only thing I can think of to do is go back to Africa. Maybe I can forget

for a while that mankind is eating the earth and just be a lion in the time we have left."

Ernie said, "Tell Jason what you've been thinking about, Leo. Maybe he can think of something."

"Well, uh, I don't know what to think. I don't know if I can be a lion, an African lion. I started thinking about it when we were in New York. We went upstate, and I, I went hunting. The woods were beautiful. I loved being out. I felt really good, but I didn't catch anything at all."

"Tell him why, Leo."

"I couldn't. I saw deer, and I knew I could catch them, but I couldn't kill them and eat them. They're beautiful animals, and the life force is as strong in them as it is in me, and I just couldn't do it.

"I thought, try something that isn't so beautiful. We went back to the city. I wandered one night until I found an old, crippled up, half-blind, stray dog raiding garbage cans in an alley. I thought, this is it, I can do it. This old black and white, scruffy-looking dog isn't far from death anyway.

"He smelled me and turned away from the garbage can. He backed into a corner, faced me, and growled and growled. That dumb, half-crippled, twenty-five pound dog wasn't even afraid. Just mad. He was telling me to get out of his alley and leave his garbage cans and him alone. When I didn't move, he charged me. I rolled him back into the corner, but I didn't hurt him. Ugly old, diseased, stinking, garbage-eating dog, I came here to kill you and eat you, and all you have is courage and the Life Force strong in you.

"I left him there. He went back to his garbage cans, and I started thinking there was no place in the world for me anymore, nothing I could be or do."

"There still is something to be, something to do." I read aloud, "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den."

"They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the seas."

We were quiet for a long time. Then Leo said, "The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. The Life Force in harmony, covering the earth, as the waters cover the sea. I know that. I've known that before, but not so clearly enough to say it, think it, be at peace in the knowledge."

They stayed a few days more. Quiet days.

Leo read a lot.

Melons ripened four and five a day for a while, and we all browsed through the garden. We cooked a lot of carrot soup, just grind the carrots and cook them enough to be hot.

Leo said, "Jason, would you help make the arrangements to get us to Africa? We have the money. We just need a temporary owner to make all the arrangements."

"Sure. I'd be glad to help."

Making all the arrangements and getting them there was more complex than we wanted it to be. We had to have cages.

We flew in and then hired a truck to get us farther from civilization. We sent the cages back with the truck.

I camped there for a while, but I never talked to them again. After two weeks in the area, I decided to pack up and go. I headed up the ridge for a last look around. Late morning, I spotted them from the top of the ridge.

Ten elephants, six lions, three anteaters, a group of springboc, a group of baboons and chimpanzees, and many birds travel together across grasslands drying yellow in intense sunlight. Around the group, traveling along, but at varying distances, are many other animals. Some come in closer and begin to merge with the group. Others observe from a cautious distance.

I made no effort to contact them. When they went out of my sight, I headed down the ridge in the opposite direction. I had miles to walk in the hot sunshine to meet my transportation, and I strode out and put some African ground behind me.

Superman is Dead

A small woman in a white uniform stood beside Clark Kent as he came into consciousness. She held his wrist and studied her watch. He realized immediately

where he was and looked around him at the stark, white room.

A tall, lean man walked into the room and shut the door behind him. Clark looked away from the man to the window. He saw nothing out the window but the wall of another, close building.

Clark didn't want to be touched, but the man uncovered him, flexed his limbs, tapped him here and there, and listened to his body through a stethoscope. He said, "Clark, you're in the pink of condition." The false heartiness of his voice scraped like dirty gravel in Clark Kent's ears. "You can leave in the morning." The man walked out of the room and shut the door behind him.

Clark didn't want the sympathy he saw in the nurse's face. He didn't want anything from anyone, except to know one thing, that he was almost sure of, that he didn't want to know. "What happened to... is... Did he... Did...?"

The nurse said, "The doctor is a coward, to leave it to me. There was nothing we could do. Superman is dead."

Clark Kent felt lost, like doing nothing at all, like ceasing all existence.

Early the next morning, two nurses escorted him to the front door. They opened the door for him, and he walked out of the hospital. The door closed behind him. The nurses turned and went back to their indoor duties.

Clark stood in sunshine. He knew he couldn't just stand there vacant, thinking everything was dead and grey. He must do something. He must leave the hospital

behind him. He squared his shoulders. He walked. He caught a cab and went to his apartment. In the morning, he went back to the newspaper office. His hardest work was to keep going.

Clark Kent wondered why he was still here. Sometimes he said it aloud, testing the reality of it, "I'm still here." And sometimes he asked, "Why? Why am I? What is there to be here for?"

He was so lost in depression and despair, he often forgot when and what.

Thursday after work, he walked away from the newspaper building, lost in grey depression. He knew he needed to hail a cab or catch a bus, but he did nothing about it. He just kept putting one foot in front of the other, without purpose.

He turned the corner to a chaotic scene. It took him a moment to make sense of what he saw. People fled from a muscular man in a white shirt and dark slacks, who held a meat cleaver and ran at one person and then another, cleaver raised as if to strike. People got out of his way as fast as they could, but the dense crowd made escape difficult. People who were not in immediate danger stayed to see what would happen, and they made retreat difficult for those who would.

Clark's fog of depression blew away. He leaped into a phone booth, ripped off his clothes, and stood there in his underwear, astounded, no uniform, no body of steel, just Clark Kent, aging, muscles softening, the suggestion of a paunch, of adiposity across his chest and buttocks.

There was nothing to do but go on with it. Would-be

Superman in blue and red uniform and cape, actually, it was Clark Kent in his red and yellow flowered boxer shorts and yellow undershirt who emerged from the crowd and walked toward the man with the cleaver. "Here now. We can't threaten about with deadly weapons. We'll have to talk about it and come up with a better way."

"Here now yourself, mister. You're out in public in broad daylight in your underwear. Don't you see all these people looking at you? Here, take my shirt. At least it'll cover you part way, and I'm wearing a t-shirt, not one of those skimpy little shoulder strap outfits like you got. Put it on, now. That's better. Come on. Let's get out of here before people wake up and start asking questions."

He still carried the meat cleaver, but he didn't threaten with it now. "Coming through," he said, "Excuse us. Clear a way. We've an emergency here. Give us room. Thank you. Get back to your business, all of you, and let us through. You've better ways to spend your day than gawking at some poor bloke out in his underwear."

Clark's clothes had disappeared from the phone booth. Some satisfied man had gained a \$300.00 suit and \$125.00 worth of shoes. Oh hell. Wallet, cash, keys, the works. That happened every time of course. Superman had been used to it. He had his uniform to wear while he rounded up what he needed, and he charged it all off as an operating expense. Clark Kent slowed down and stared at the empty phone booth. The man with the cleaver pulled him along. "Come on. We'd

better keep moving. There are laws, you know, and someone could decide to make trouble."

Around one corner and down the block, and around another corner. The man flagged a cab, and they got in. The driver pulled away from the curb. The man with the cleaver asked, "Now where to? We need to get you to your place and get some decent clothes for you. What address do we give the driver?"

He had Clark wait in the cab while he ran up and got clothes for him. Clark dressed in the taxi, and then they both walked up to his apartment.

Clark thought, Phooey. Did my brain come through in one piece? What if I'd seen this man from the office window, 17 stories up? Would I have leaped before I thought, come down in my underwear in Superman's perfect form, one leg flexed, one toe reaching for the concrete, into which so-breakable Clark Kent would slam? Surely that would have brought this man's threat of violence to an end as effectively as striding forward in underwear and argyle socks, with less continuing pain for Clark Kent than still being here tomorrow and next week promised to bring.

It had come slamming into his consciousness, the tragic, deeply bereft realization as he burst from the phone booth, "Superman is Dead," even as he moved toward what he knew demanded action from him.

Afterward, up in Clark Kent's apartment, they looked at each other in silence. The man extended his hand, and Clark reached to shake. The man said, "Thanks. From the depth of my existence, thanks to you. It worked. Totally."

"But you're still carrying the meat cleaver."

"I have to take it back. I'm a butcher. It's one of my tools, but it's only a tool. I'm okay now. The world is different now. Even if somebody jumps me from an alley just for the joy of hurting or killing someone, I'm ready for it, because in my mind's eye, at the moment of crisis, I'll see this black-haired, going to grey, medium tall, medium weight, square-jawed man in his underwear and socks walking toward me out of a crowd full of fear, saying calmly and authoritatively, 'Here now. We don't do that sort of thing. There's a better way to go about this. Let's talk it over.' And I'll know the world hasn't gone completely bad. There really is still a lot of good in the world."

Phone booths are for phone calls. Undergirding everything he deals with in an apparently coherent fashion is an intense, agonizingly insistent pain that Clark Kent hadn't before really realized that Superman, Superman is Dead.

He said it aloud, "Superman is Dead."

"I know. I know, man. That was a tough break for the people when that happened."

Tears ran down Clark's face. The man put down the cleaver, punched Clark very lightly on the shoulder, gripped his shoulder. "We just got to keep going anyway, man. That's all there is, keep going, do the best you can. Wouldn't Superman himself have said that, if he was standing here with me and you? I bet he would. 'Keep going, you guys. That's all you can do. Keep going and do the best you can.'"

In the days that followed, part of doing the best he

could was remembering, "Superman is Dead."

So that's it. He's dead. What really hits Clark, people say, or sometimes he reads in the paper, in letters to the editor or sometimes in an article, or in a t.v. special or a magazine, "There never was a superman. Such things are outside the boundaries of reality. There never was a superman." They do that, too. They don't even capitalize the name; they print it lower case.

When he hears that or reads that, sometimes he cries.

In the concrete and steel building, high in the city sky, the editor looks away, out the window, at the face of the next building, a narrow mountain of stone and glass. Clark is sure Jack, the editor thinks he's crying out of self pity, when really, it's unbearable frustration.

"Jack, can't they see what's real? Don't they trust their own senses, their own memories, the word of the people all around them, who were there, who saw those leaps over these very buildings, the locomotive stopped from a runaway 90 miles an hour, the tidal wave turned, always gently, without damage or danger to anyone or anything, muggers, burglars, rapists and murderers foiled in their violent intentions?

"Do people want chaos? Crime and violence rampant and no champion for the people? Our memories are so short. Our history is full of lies. Our gratitude dies in an instant."

Clark holds the newspaper out toward Jack and taps the story he's been reading. "Jack, you know Superman was real. Why don't you answer these idiotic assertions? Blast them on the front page. Tell them what you know. Doesn't anybody stand for anything

anymore?"

Jack turns his chair and faces Clark. He waits a moment, obviously organizing his thoughts and then says, "Since you attack it that directly, I'll have to tell you I simply wouldn't state in a public document, in writing, that Superman ever was. We've kept you on, Clark, because we know how difficult the transition is for you. We know when you get it worked out, you'll get back to being a top reporter, but you need more editing in your mind.

"We tell the people what they will understand. There's no use trying to tell them what they won't understand."

On the verge of exploding and scattering the newspaper around the office in fury, Clark stops himself, quells his temper, swallows what he was going to say. He could lose his job if he pushed too hard. He never worried about losing his job before. There's a lot of newspapers shut down and more good reporters than jobs. He's over fifty. In this nation, you're classified as too old to hire before you've even hit your stride.

He was afraid of everything, losing his job, getting hurt, getting attacked by someone when he, Clark Kent, knew he would be unable to hit anyone, even in his own defense, because he didn't know anymore how much strength he had and could not use it judiciously.

He was afraid of getting out in high places; maybe it would be something he couldn't control, like with the phone booth, and he'd jump off, probably in his underwear, before he remembered he couldn't do that stuff anymore.

He walked out of Jack's office and tried to calm himself and go about his existence. He concentrated on what was real now. He kept it always in his mind. Until, finally, shot through his entire consciousness, preconsciousness, flesh, bone, and sinew, he knew it. Superman is Dead. That part of existence is gone, finished, behind him.

He didn't read any article that mentioned Superman. He never asked anyone if they thought Superman was real or myth. If he heard any conversation about Superman, he left.

He saw the young family trapped in their car under the overturned truck. Clark prayed for strength and put every ounce of his only human power against the unyielding steel. Two policemen, who he once could have set aside as easily as paper dolls, pulled him away.

"Come on, Mister. You're nuts to think you can lift 40 tons of truck. Who the hell do you think you are? Superman?" The gas tank in the car blew up. Flame-laden air knocked Clark and the policemen to the pavement. They were gone, dead, the family in the car, the truck driver.

Clark didn't notice his burns, his torn clothing, the angry words from the policemen. They pulled him to his feet, pushed him farther away and called for help. "Get this guy away from here. He's going to get himself killed. Everybody move farther back. The tanks on the truck could blow."

When Clark got back to his apartment, he tried to face it. "All right. What I could do, I can't. That's all. I have no super-human powers. I was stupid not to see

the treachery that brought me into contact with Kryptonite, but that's done with. Nothing can turn time back. Lamenting, hating myself, grieving changes nothing. Somehow, I have to go on from here with what I have."

He cleaned up and caught a bus across town to the butcher shop. The butcher said, "See what you showed me. There's a lot of disorder, violence and senseless death in the world. If we give up, if we give in to that, then it has the victory it's trying for. We have to keep a hold on the good there is. We have to keep our heads up and keep going and keep working for the victory of good.

"Do what you can, and after that, don't torture yourself for not bein' able to go beyond where you can go. Don't you know? I'd give anything in this world if I could say Shazam and be powerful when I see something needs doing and I can't do it.

"We'll have to do it with what we got, and that's human beings, and as a human being, you're doin' okay. You're doin' your best, and it's a good best, so keep going. You have to believe it will turn out to be worth not giving up."

Clark thought, cowards quit. Courage isn't super human. It's human. Superman didn't need courage, not true courage that means you face what has to be faced, even when you know there's a strong possibility you'll lose. Superman never faced anything he couldn't beat.

I still have courage and faith in the power of good over evil. I believe in the power of the press to bring about change in the world, and I am part of the press. I

am going to go on. The butcher is right. To do otherwise would be to capitulate to evil forces and give them victory.

Clark focused his energy as he never had before, as he had never had time to do before. He read a lot of the work he had written in earlier years, in the years of Superman. Now, he saw it lacked depth. It lacked development. He had written the facts, but not much beyond the facts. He had never really dug in and tried to make sense of the facts he reported.

He had to go on from there. What do these facts mean? What is being done about the facts? What can be done? Who can do it? Is there a moral dimension implied by the facts, that needs exploration and development?

He wrote. He rewrote. He tore everything he wrote apart and wrote it again. He read. Every writer who sparked his interest, he studied, trying to see, beginning to see what techniques worked to make the facts sensible, to suggest changes that could push a chaotic world toward more sensible possibilities. He didn't know what the future would bring. He didn't know if he could bring about change in the world. He did know he had to try.

He wrote a long article on ways to limit fires and explosions after wrecks. For a long time, nobody wanted it. Then a national magazine showed interest and suggested revisions. He spent his evenings at home rewriting the article. Move over, Lincoln Steffins, Ralph Nader, he thought, there's room on your bench.

At the office, Jack brought in the article about the

labor situation on the docks. "It's good, Clark. It's necessary. Sunday Special with photos, just the way you wrote it. Let me see two more special features like this, looking at issues. You could work up a daily column. Call it Kent's Ken maybe, something like that, more of this what we need to think about approach, looking at the principles in operation, or the lack of principles. Make a run at it if you want to, and we can start thinking about what that would be worth to the paper."

Going on was worth it. It still took telling himself that every day. He still felt drained. Okay, but still, deep inside, lonely to the core.

It was late, nearing dark. Clark had been so absorbed in his work, he'd let the time slip away. The little cafe on the corner where he usually ate dinner would be closed. He didn't think he had the energy to go anywhere else. It would be easiest to go on home and just forget dinner. He put his hat on, and his overcoat and walked down the hall and out onto the sidewalk. It rained lightly, from a very dark sky. It looked like heavier rain coming.

Someone caught his elbow, with strong but gentle fingers. "Clark, I've hardly seen you in months. I've missed our conversations and lunches together. I intend to talk you into taking them up again."

"Oh, hello, Lois. I... I'd love to. I've missed them too. I guess I've been preoccupied and not seeing all of what's around me."

"I know, Clark. Ever since Superman died, you've been really hard to reach."

"Lois, I... I'm glad to see you. I've wanted to talk to you. What are you doing now? Do you have dinner plans? Why don't you go to dinner with me? I just got a substantial raise, and I'd like you to help me celebrate."

They caught a cab and chose an expensive Italian restaurant. They looked at menus. For the first time in a long time, Clark felt hungry. He had been eating only because he knew he needed to eat, but now, tomato, spice, and pasta, cheese, meat, and vegetable smells weighted the restaurant air. He ordered and smelled and tasted and ate eagerly.

Lois said, "I'm glad to see you have an appetite. You've lost a lot of weight. More than you can afford to lose. Since I pushed you into inviting me to dinner, I'm paying the bill."

"No you aren't, Lois. You didn't push me into anything. You didn't even mention dinner. Only lunch. We're celebrating my raise, and I'm paying the bill."

"I'll at least pay for my part of it."

"No. I won't hear anything more about it. My raise, my bill. Our celebration."

"Then may I pay for lunch tomorrow?"

"I think I could accept that."

Over thick, bitter coffee after dinner, he said, "Sometimes I wonder, how can people get as far along in life as we are and still be living alone, unless it's just absolutely their preference? It isn't my preference, really. It's just, well, I don't know. Certain preoccupations, or, or, uh, well, Would you like some ice cream with your coffee? They make their own ice cream here, you know."

"No ice cream, thanks, but when he comes around again, I'd like a little more coffee. It isn't my preference to live alone. I think sometimes a person, some people can develop very narrow vision. They can really limit their lives by developing a, well, a misunderstanding, really, of what they want, of what would be good for them, unreal images or ideas. Carl Jung wrote about a young woman on a ship falling in love with a crew member she didn't even know, and,... yes, I would like more coffee please. Thank you." When the waiter left she touched Clark's hand. "If we aren't careful, we could bog ourselves down in a very weighty conversation here."

He turned his hand and held hers. "Yes, we could. I've been a long time realizing it, but what's past is past. There's only now and the future that lies ahead of us."

Clark went up to Lois's apartment with her and paced about her rooms with rising energy. He said, "Your place seems small. Maybe you should think of moving to something bigger, with more of a future to it."

"Yes. I am thinking of it." She squeezed his hand, and they smiled at each other. They agreed they would discuss the topic more at coffee at the office in the morning, and at lunch, Chinese food brought into her office, and they would shut the world out and speak of vegetables and rice.

Clark forgot he'd driven to work that morning and walked the three miles home. Later, he would have to disimpound his car, but he would do it cheerfully, considering it money well spent. Meanwhile, a block from home, he passed the gym he'd seen a thousand

times before, and he stopped in and bought a short membership. The future was not certain, but it did seem to be shaping up in a really good direction. Whatever it brought, it would be good to be in respectable physical condition for it.

Tomatoes

A mountain lion, a wolf, and a coyote lived as neighbors high on the side of the rocky mountain, where pine forests, groves of aspen, fir trees, and meadows grew green and lush all spring and summer.

That year, snow did not accumulate as deeply as it usually did. Only small snows fell from the reluctant, grey sky, and those small snows soon blew away or melted away. Most of the spring rains looked down on the jagged, rocky side of the mountain, became uncharacteristically afraid, and stayed in the clouds as the clouds passed above that side of the mountain and journeyed out over the plains.

Summer rains that periodically soaked the high meadows and forests decided not to, that year. Streams ran low in their beds, and many mountain springs dried up.

The mountain lion, the wolf, and the coyote had enough water for their gardens, but only by planning carefully and by planting smaller gardens than usual. Each of them grew enough vegetables and fruits to meet her own needs but little excess.

Deciduous trees turned many colors and lost their leaves. Nights turned cold, and the sky and the forest threatened frost. The mountain lion walked through her scant garden one sunny, cool morning. She decided to harvest everything a frost would kill. She gathered beans, peppers, and melons into her basket. Onions, garlic, peas, and cabbages would survive some frost, so she left them growing.

She had only been able to provide water for two tomato plants that dry summer. She harvested all the green tomatoes to ripen indoors, and she picked four large, very red tomatoes. She looked at them, so red and inviting in her garden basket, and she decided she could get by with three tomatoes.

Cougar took the basket into her den, put away the fruits and vegetables, and set out down the trail, carrying the tomato.

Cougar saw Wolf out in her garden with a large basket, nearly full of garden produce. Wolf called out, "Where are you off to this sunny morning, Cougar, my golden friend?"

Mountain Lion stopped and looked over the fence. "I also harvested most of my garden this morning. I thought I might spare one tomato. I sometimes need a little cash money in the winter, so I thought I would take this tomato down to the junction of trails and see if some animal would like to buy it. It's a luscious, large, lovely looking tomato. I think it might fetch me rather a good price."

"Brilliant." said Wolf, shaggily dark grey and black, with a magnificently-furred tail and large, upright ears

that she swiveled about, quite independently of each other, to locate and identify every sound from the forest around her. "My tomatoes have done well, despite the shortage of wateh. My spring has neahly dried up, but I have had enough wateh for my own use and for a small gahden. I wondeh if you would mind if I took one tomato and joined you? I have wondehed what I might do for winteh money."

"Not at all," said Mountain Lion. "I wouldn't mind at all if you joined me. I'll wait while you put your basket away."

Wolf trotted into her den. When she came out, she carried one large, red tomato and one smooth and shiny red bell pepper. She said, "I think I will sell one peppeh, too. What do you think? Do you think it would sell? Do you mind if I also take a peppeh?"

"Certainly I don't mind. Why should I mind? The more we have to sell, the better it is. I do wish we had had a better year for gardens, and perhaps we could sell baskets full of produce, but then, I'm grateful for what we were able to grow."

"Grateful. Yes, yes, Puma, my friend. You are quite right. The summeh could have been even drier, and we might have had nothing at all."

Mountain Lion and Wolf set out together, down the trail. The lion carried one lovely tomato, and the wolf carried one tomato and one pepper. They walked through a broad meadow and through an aspen grove at the edge of the meadow, where aspen trees had shed their leaves and stood barren for the coming winter. Leaves lay dry and rustled under their feet.

In her garden at the edge of the meadow, just before the conifer forest, Coyote heard the rustling leaves and looked up from her harvesting work. She immediately felt nervous. She and Wolf and Catamount had recently had several disagreements in which she found herself odd one out, blamed by both Wolf and Cougar for transgressions when she knew she was innocent. She didn't know what their moods might be, this fine and sunny morning, beginning now to feel pleasantly warm.

She thought she could retreat quickly out of sight, but while their disagreements had been loudly acrimonious, they had never come to actual biting and scratching. Perhaps Wolf and Mountain Lion, warmed and cheered by the clear mountain sunshine would be in a good, even a sociable mood this morning. Coyote pretended she had not yet heard them and went on gathering the production of her garden.

Wolf and Catamount both knew Coyote owned the most acute hearing among them, and she engaged in pretense. They would not accept in themselves or in each other any degree of sham, but because of the largeness of their character and because of the warm sunshine and warm companionship elevating their moods, and because they had known Coyote a long time and recognized she was different from them but nonetheless a goodhearted animal, they accepted her pretense.

Wolf cleared her throat loudly to announce their approach. Coyote jumped, as if startled, and turned and said, "Ah. Good morning, Wolf. Good morning Cougar. Where are you going this fine morning? I'm just

finishing my fall harvest. Early frost this year. The air feels like it. Do you think so? Do you think I might be right?"

Cougar said, "I do think so. This morning, I harvested everything in my garden that a light frost might damage, and Wolf did too. We are taking these two tomatoes and this one very fine pepper down to the junction of the trails to see if some animal might buy them so we will have a little cash money for winter."

Coyote said, "Tomato. Pepper. Cash. Ah yes, yes. A good idea. A very good idea. Um. Ummm. Produce to sell. Oh yes, indeed. I wonder. Umm. Maybe not, no? But then. Would you mind... I have, I also have a very small amount... You probably have as much as you want, as many as you want... sufficient."

Wolf said, "If you have some produce to take, a tomato, perhaps a peppeh, I think we don't have too much. What do you think, Cougah, my fine and shorteh-haihed companion?"

"Oh, certainly. The more produce, the better, is what I think. You certainly are welcome to go along. Just bring whatever you have in excess, and we'll see if our plan works or if it doesn't work."

Coyote scurried about. "A melon, perhaps. Maybe two. Um. Ummm. Tomato. Beans. Ah yes. Peas, a few peas. Are you in a hurry? Are we in a hurry? Would you like a cup of tea? Perhaps a drink of water? Oh yes, yes. I won't be a minute. Let me see. Oh. I do think I will need these about midwinter. Perhaps just a few of these. But then, they keep well. Wait, wait. I'll just put away what I have in my basket."

Coyote carried a large, beautiful tomato and a small basket of strawberries from her den. She said, "Yes. I do think so. At first, I thought, but then I decided,... Oh, would you like a ripe strawberry? They're really good. The best I ever grew. We can eat three strawberries each on the way, and then I will sell what remains. Please don't hesitate. They'll refresh us on our way. That's why I picked them. Strawberries don't keep well, you know, and I have many of them."

The large, ripe, juicy strawberries did refresh them on their way. At the confluence of the two streams which defined their part of the forest, water still flowed, clean and cold. They stopped and drank water and then crossed several small meadows to where two trails coming down the mountain joined.

Cougar, Wolf, and Coyote placed the three tomatoes, one pepper, and half a basket of strawberries in the Y of the trail, sat down by them, and chatted together about how things had gone for them lately, about what they had been thinking about, and about the coming winter.

The sun, warm in the day now, moved across the center of the sky above the mountain, the forest, and the meadow and above the three predators sitting together and chatting. Wolf said, "I don't think I've ever seen the trail stay empty so long."

Coyote said, "I certainly don't know. Never have used this trail. Don't keep to trails, myself. I follow scents, mostly, wherever they go."

Mountain Lion said, "I didn't think this would take so long. I thought we'd sell out, and then I'd go up the mountain and see some of the high country before snow

begins to fall."

Coyote said, "Well, I went clear to the peak just a few days ago. I don't mind staying here. I like sitting in the sunshine. If you want to go, go. I'll stay here and see if I can sell our produce."

Wolf said, "I'd like to go with you, if you don't mind having company. I haven't been up there for a long time."

Mountain Lion said, "I think it's a good idea. Soaking up sunshine is great for a while, but then I need to do something else."

Wolf and Cougar set off toward the peak of the mountain, and Coyote stayed in the sunshine at the fork of the trail. Several animals came down the trail toward her, but they smelled her and reacted to her coyoteness, not to the fact that she was there to sell produce, and they ran off the trail into the brush. "Nuts," she said to herself. "I'm never going to sell this produce. The sun is downright hot. I'm hungry and thirsty."

She looked at the bright red tomatoes, the red pepper, and the strawberries, and she said, "Well, one of the tomatoes is mine, and the strawberries are." She ate the strawberries, savoring their juicy sweetness. They were very good and gone too soon. The sweetness of the berries left her with still a small thirst.

"It is my tomato," she said. "I never would have thought of selling anything from my garden if Panther and Wolf hadn't come along. I never had cash money any other winter. Why should I need it now?" She ate the tomato from her garden. It was very good and an effective thirst quencher.

A while later, she said, "The only problem with a vegetable diet is I get hungry again quite soon, especially if the vegetables I eat are mostly juice."

Coyote stared at the remaining two tomatoes and one pepper. She said, "What I say, I say they should have known better than to leave me in charge of the produce. They should have known no animals would come along and buy anything. They know the strongest part of my character is not dependability in a situation like this but courage facing danger and love and friendship unaltered by stress and changing circumstances." She ate the tomato from Wolf's garden and then the red pepper. They were both exceptional, as she said, "Among the very finest I have ever eaten."

She began to worry. "What have I done?" she asked with one part of her mind, and another part immediately answered, "Don't play dumb. You know what you've done. You've eaten everything but one tomato, and you know quite well you're going to eat that one too, if they don't come back soon."

Before she could argue the point further, a small rabbit hopped down the trail, oblivious to Coyote's presence because of the shift in the wind's direction, until it was too late. The tomato caught the rabbit's full attention, bright red and obviously juicy, probably delicious.

Coyote spoke from just beyond the tomato. "That tomato is for sale." The rabbit froze in place, nothing moving but its nose as it sniffed the rich odors all around it.

Coyote dropped all ideas of being a vegetable vendor

and ate the rabbit. She thought she would save the hindquarters, the very best part, for Cougar and Wolf, but when it came time to set them aside, she ate them, too. "It was inevitable," she thought. "They were so small. I'm sure Wolf and Cougar would disdain them and catch something larger themselves. That rabbit had no money, anyway."

She sat back and licked her lips and cleaned her paws. "That was a tasty rabbit," she said, "but small. It leaves an empty corner, that could be easily filled by..." and she picked up the tomato and ate it, slowly, in small bites, savoring its rich juiciness, licking all the drops that ran down the bright red globe, trying to let nothing escape and fall to the ground and almost succeeding in her efforts.

She sat back on her haunches again and sighed a deep sigh of contentment. The sun of a fall day shone warmly. Her full belly slowly digested good food, and she really had no further need, she thought. She yawned a large, hearty yawn.

She let her thoughts dim and drift toward sleep, but then she heard Wolf's low, melodic voice and Cougar's higher, clear voice raised in harmony as they came down the trail singing "Nearer My God To Thee."

Coyote snapped fully awake and realized. "Oh no," she said, "What have I done? I've lost my very good friends, betrayed their confidence, eaten their vegetables, destroyed their chances for acquiring a little cash money for winter. What will they say. What will they think of me?"

Part of her mind said, "The only problem you really

have is now you have to run with a full stomach when you would rather luxuriate in a warm nap. Out of sight quickly, and you'll have time to think up a convincing story about why all the produce is gone and rabbit fur and intestines lie strewn about the place of the produce stand. Wolf and Catamount will never believe what you tell them, but they'll be too polite to call you a liar.

"Their sense of outrage at what you've done will fade in the face of your abject and grinning desire to maintain what friendship you have left, and they will eventually realize it is all their fault for leaving you in charge of edibles in the first place. They will realize they should have immediately foreseen what would happen, and they will accept that it's actually a shortcoming in their character not to act on the knowledge they have."

As full tones of catamount and wolf voice resonated clear harmony across the autumn mountains, Coyote slipped away from the trail into the forest and ran toward her home on silent feet.

Wolf of Winter

The Man:

Clouds above, snow on the ground. Falling snow blocks my view of the horizon. I can't see any landmarks. I think I've been walking in circles for days.

I have no food left. It is very cold. Out of the falling snow in front of me comes the largest wolf I have ever

seen. He rises onto his back feet and places his front feet on my shoulders. His steaming breath warms my face.

I feel stupid. Dull. A better man, a man who is more alert, would know what to do. The wolf's intense, yellow-eyed gaze into my eyes strikes almost no response in me. Perhaps the inner core of me has frozen and starved into nothing. My heart thuds a little in fear, but even my fear is dulled.

I am not afraid that he will kill me. I am afraid because I don't know what is coming.

I am prepared to die in this cold and barren land. There is some comfort in the cold certainty of death. There is some comfort in knowing it is over, and I will not have to continue the exhausting struggle to survive, the struggle to figure out how to find my way out of this featureless place.

He pushes hard on my shoulders and interrupts my cold and sluggish thoughts. I stagger backward. He has pushed away from me to gain space to turn and drop to all four feet. The wind dies. Snow falls only lightly now. The wolf walks away from me. When he is almost out of sight in the falling snow, he stops and looks over his shoulder at me.

I shake myself, trying to cast off the dullness that tries to consume me. I lift and kick my snowshoes forward, walking again. He walks faster. I match his pace, about ten feet behind him.

All I know of time is that it is still light when he leads me beside a frozen stream, into an area of sparse, stunted evergreens. I follow him to a place sheltered on

two sides by the jagged black rock bluff rising forty feet higher than the trees. In the lee of the wind, a small area below the rock is clear of snow, with grass frozen in its greenness.

Close beside the black rock, he circles several times and then lies down and looks at me.

"Ah. This was a way to begin to build hope." My voice is cracked and dry, a strange sound where I have heard nothing but the wind for many days. "But you see, I have no food. I haven't eaten for at least four days. Nor drunk any water. I have no further strength to travel out of here. I will die anyway."

I took my pack off and dropped it onto the ground. I kicked my feet free of the snowshoes, and I sat down. I leaned back against one of the stunted trees that grew a few feet from the rock face. On the ground beside me, there are dead branches from this tiny tree. "Ah, well," I say, "Maybe it isn't finished yet. I haven't much ambition for it, but I see I might be able to gather wood for a fire. I could melt snow and at least have water to drink." The wolf shows no reaction. He just stares at me.

I rested. Then I gathered branches. The lower limbs on the trees are dead and easy to break off. I took flint and tinder from my pack and built a small fire against the base of the rock. I placed the stand I carry over the fire as soon as I had a steady flame eating into the branches. I scooped snow into the pan and kept adding more snow as it melted and as I added branches to the fire. I kept at it until I had several ounces of water. I drank that and started over and soon drank again.

I felt more alive as the water added fluidity to my thoughts.

The fourth pan of water, with more than a cup in it, I carried over and placed in front of the wolf, and he lapped it dry.

I crouched close to the fire, elated at having water to drink, holding my bare hands close to the flame and letting my mittens dry on sticks I leaned up close to the fire.

I went through my pack item by item and then did it again. I said to the wolf, "It's no use. I could go through it ten times, and there would still be nothing to eat."

I rested again. I felt better, but weak. I slept.

When I woke, the wolf was dead. I couldn't understand that. He had seemed to be strong and very much alive. I felt him, moved him, pried open his eyelids. He was dead.

He had not died of starvation. He was well-muscled, with a layer of fat under his thick fur.

I looked at him for a long time. Then I drew my knife, disemboweled his body, partially skinned him, cut away one hindquarter, and roasted it over the fire. I cut away the flesh as it cooked and ate the thin pieces while the rest continued to cook.

I ate slowly. The meat was ready only a little at a time, and I knew I must eat slowly or risk being sick, after starving for so long. I kept at it, eating a little at a time, all that morning and most of the afternoon, until the hindquarter was a third gone, and I was satisfied. I slept. I woke before daylight, built the fire up again and again ate slowly but steadily most of that day.

I knew that morning when I woke that it had been his intention to furnish my sustenance, to provide for my survival. As I digested his flesh, I became some of what he had been; my dreams were dreams that he had dreamed.

My memories broadened. I remembered maturing as a wolf in this wilderness. I began to understand what had led him to give his life that I might live.

That day, I finished eating the first hindquarter and started on the second. I knew what I would do. I cooked the thick, long muscles that lie along both sides of the backbone and allowed them to freeze. I deboned the front quarters and cooked the meat and allowed it to freeze.

When I finished eating the second hindquarter, I felt strong and ready to travel. I packed all the frozen meat, put my pack on, and slipped into my snowshoes. I left the pelt, the bones, the flesh that I had not cut away. I understood there was no need for ceremony. Still, I made ceremony in my mind and in my heart.

I know now that this land is not featureless. Above the bluff, a very low ridge, no more than ground raised just above a gentle swale, runs far south and marks the beginning of a trail to a river that runs to human habitation. I can find and follow that river.

I climbed the bluff and started down the trail.

In the days that follow, when I am hungry, I gnaw the frozen, cooked flesh. I am strong, and I travel fast.

When I stop to sleep, I dream of him. Sometimes when I am traveling, I think for a moment that I see the wolf, trotting to one side of me, keeping pace. When I

turn to look directly at him, he is gone.

I stop trying to look directly at him, and then he is always with me. Sometimes I hear the broad pads of his feet causing the crystal, cold snow to squeak as he walks on it.

The Wolf:

I understood the meaning of the man when I first saw him. But my ken was fragmented. It would be clearer and more cohesive as necessary. Some parts of it seemed unwolf.

However, the life force gave me direction. I began to do what I knew must be done.

He did not circle with intent. He could not keep direction as he meant to. Unwolf as that thought was, still it came to me, and I knew it was correct.

I led him to the lee side of the black bluff above the trees, because he would be better able there to bring together his skills for survival.

Life was dim in him, but he built a fire and melted snow for water. He drank. He gave me water to drink.

While he slept, I killed and ate several voles and did not digest them. When he woke, I regurgitated the meat for him. At first, he did not know what I meant, but life spoke patiently to him until the man understood and ate. The next day, I brought him more.

He gained strength rapidly, with food and water.

The third morning, he died.

The wolf-mother, the mother of the pups I have fathered, denned up and has birthed. Even in

wilderness, change comes. We have not been without food, but these last few voles I gave to the man are all the food I've found since I first saw him.

I ate of his flesh. At the den, I regurgitated meat for the wolf mother. The pups experimented with it and ate a little of it.

The second day, I traveled back and forth twice carrying food for my family.

When I digested some of the man's flesh, I digested some of what he is, some of his memories, some of his ken of manness and of Life.

Spring softens the land. There is more prey. Enough for the mother and the pups. The flesh of the man is all eaten. I crack and eat his bones for the energy to hunt for my family. I have something to say to him, a gratitude.

He is with us. In our minds. In our spirit. In the flesh of the pups who live and grow.

From the edge of the forest, he watches us. That I do not understand does not matter. It is.

It would be unwolf to have a man so close to us. Because of what has taken place, it is right, it is wolf. The pups venture out. They play around his feet. They scramble over him, nipping gently at his face and hands. He plays with them and laughs. We bring him food, and he eats. Then he goes and does not return.

Yet I see his gaze in the eyes of my pups when they look at me in quiet moments. I see the depth of his kenning in their mother's mind, in her flesh.

Sometimes when I hunt or when I run for the joy of running, he is there with me, within me and running

beside me, fast, powerful, as quiet as a wolf on the snow that is melting away into spring.

The Woodcutter's Bargain

The woodcutter lived in a small house in the forest with his wife and children. In the mornings, his wife cooked him a hearty breakfast, and he ate, kissed his wife and children goodbye and went to work, carrying his lunch with him.

He cleaned up the forest. He cut down dead trees and dying trees and cut them into firewood lengths. He made firewood of trees that had blown down or broken in a windstorm, and he sold the firewood to people who lived in the valleys below the forest.

He liked his work. The forest looked good when he finished. The trees in the forest were healthier and grew better. The people he sold wood to said he sold good wood and never short measured the buyer by a twig.

Except Jackson, his closest neighbor. Jackson bought wood from him. Jackson never accused him of delivering short measure, but he always commented and asked questions. "Now," he said, "did some wood fall off the load on the way here? Does a cord of wood grow smaller from one year to the next, or is the measure always the same? Do you think this load reaches quite as high as the loads you brought me last year? Ah, the woodcutter prospers, and the buyers plunge to the bottoms of their purses."

The woodcutter responded to Jackson's questions and comments in good humor, as if they were part of a jesting relationship between them. Nevertheless, he always made sure Jackson measured the load and said he was satisfied before he unloaded the wood.

As for Jackson's comment that the woodcutter prospered while the buyer dug deep, the woodcutter chuckled at the irony of it. Jackson owned more forest and farm land than any man in the area, while the woodcutter's holdings were so small, he could see it wouldn't be long before his supply of wood to cut was gone. Already, he cut green trees to stack and season to sell the next year. Soon, further thinning would not benefit the forest.

He brought a load of wood into Jackson's yard. Jackson measured it and agreed it was full measure. The woodcutter began to unload it. Jackson said, "Ah, the price of wood these days astounds me. A man might have to choose whether he would be warm or eat."

"You have the largest herd of cows in all the area. You have enough chickens, geese, ducks, and sheep to feed everyone in the area for several years, even if the animals didn't have young."

Jackson laughed. "Yes, you say right. But it's foolish to eat my income, isn't it? What I can sell for cash, I would be foolish to put into the pot, wouldn't I? Firewood is the only thing I spend money on that does not bring me more money."

"I see a way around that."

"Tell me."

"You have a large forest on your land. Clean it, tend

it, and improve it, as I have done mine, and you will have firewood to use and firewood to sell."

"I have no time to cut wood. I'm too old to work so hard."

"You could arrange to have someone else do it."

Jackson stepped forward and looked into the woodcutter's eyes. "Ah ha. And who, anywhere near here, cuts and sells wood, who could make an arrangement with me? I can think of only one, and I'm looking into his face. If you were not interested in the arrangement, you would not have brought it up. Make me an offer."

"I could clean all the dead wood from your forest and sell it for firewood, with no charge to you and no trouble to you. It would improve the growth of the living trees and reduce the chance that fire could destroy your forest."

"And what price? what price?"

"The completed work, at no cost to you."

Jackson laughed heartily. "Oh, woodcutter, your humor lightens my days, that you could have the production from my land at no profit to me. It's good for a laugh on a quiet autumn day, but you know it isn't the way I do business."

The woodcutter unloaded more wood. "No, I suppose it isn't. It is work that needs to be done though, to improve the forest. Well, I would cut the wood you need in the part of the forest closest to your house, so it would be little work for you to load it and bring it home, and I wouldn't charge you for cutting the wood."

Jackson snorted. "You aren't amusing me as much

anymore. I don't intend to load and haul my own wood for anyone else's profit."

"It would be for our mutual profit. Wood for you at no cost, and a living from my work for me."

"If that's your best offer, we'll let the dead wood rot, and the forest can take care of itself. That's what it's done until now."

The woodcutter unloaded the rest of the wood. He stood one chunk of wood on its end and sat down on it. "My oldest son is big enough to load and haul wood now. It is not an even bargain, as I see it, but we could also load and haul your wood here and unload it."

"And a small cash payment for each load of wood you sell, say ten percent of its price."

The woodcutter stood up, turned and checked the harness to be sure it didn't chafe the horse, and straightened the reins.

Jackson said, "I've seen your forest. You have very little wood left to cut and sell for firewood unless you begin cutting the large trees, and I know you want to save them for mill timber and for the forest."

"That wouldn't justify striking a bargain my business won't sustain."

"Raise the price for your firewood."

"These are hard times. Poor people have barely enough now to purchase the wood they need."

"Raise your price to your wealthier customers."

"That's an excellent idea. We won't strike a bargain for me to work in your forest, but your wood will cost you a third more next season."

"I said for the wealthier. I am a poor man, too."

"I know, Jackson. And how many will admit they're not poor? I think I'll have to cut down part of my own forest and use the land for farming. I will begin to leave cutting wood behind."

"You're not a farmer; you're a forester."

"Changing times call for changes in the way we live."

"I will settle for five percent. No less."

"No, Jackson. Thank you, but delivering wood for your use is really more than it's worth, and I can only do that because my son will help me with the work. You've lost sight of the fact that improving your forest will eventually profit you. In twenty years, you'll have twice as much high-quality timber."

"In twenty years, I won't be here."

"You have sons."

"Little good they do me. Spendthrifts and wastrels. They can make their own way in the world."

"Then, if you'll pay me for this wood, I'll be on my way. There's enough day yet to cut half a cord of wood."

"Ah yes. Well. Would you take a horse in trade for several loads of good firewood?"

"Oh Jackson. If you would buy good medicines and tend him carefully, he might survive."

Jackson laughed. "Well, yes. Let me get my money. I think we neglected to measure this load, didn't we?"

"Here are the measurements we scratched in the dirt, and you multiplied them together and agreed the load was full measure."

"That's right. Now I remember." He went in the

house to get his money. When he came out again, he said, "When I think about it, I see the sense of some of what you say, that the forest would benefit if we took care of it. Who knows how long I might live? I am old, but I am not so old that I couldn't live twenty years. I have a policy of never giving anything away without some income from it, but as a favor to you, so you can go on making a living and supporting your family, I would settle for a very nominal fee, a mere two percent."

"I'll give you two percent, but if we're paying two percent, we won't stack or split your wood. We just throw it in the yard."

"You are a difficult man to strike a bargain with."

"I've been selling wood to you for fifteen years. I couldn't bargain with you that long and not learn something."

"Ha ha. You do enliven my days. Really, that's the only reason I would strike such a bargain with you, that benefits me so little. Every year, one cord of wood more than this year, though. My wife wants to use that back room, and the stove is ready if she had the wood."

"Done."

The woodcutter found it a workable bargain. He hadn't realized, though, that Jackson had so much time free, to allow him to nose about the woods, counting and measuring loads, venturing the opinion that the woodcutter should not have left this log and that log.

"They are rotten, Jackson. They would not be good wood. They are better left to rot the rest of the way and become soil."

"They are still sound enough to burn and provide heat."

The woodcutter poked at the log they discussed. "Well, it could be you're right and I'm wrong. We'll cut this log and the other one you mentioned, that one over there, and haul them up as part of your wood."

"Well, you might be right. Maybe they're too far rotted and would be better left to make soil. Now Wednesday last, when you paid me for two loads, didn't you take a third load after dark?"

"No. I don't work past dark. If a third load went out, then someone stole some wood, though I haven't missed any. Did you see a load go out?"

"No, no. I didn't see anything. It just seems to me there's more wood gone than is accounted for."

"Do you think I'm cheating you?"

"Oh no. Oh no. It's just, it pays to keep a very close accounting."

"And so I have done and will continue to do."

Jackson said he would be home Thursday morning, so the woodcutter sent his son up with a load of wood. His son came back and said Jackson hadn't been there and neither had his wife. "I couldn't think of what else to do, so I just threw the wood off in a pile, like usual."

Jackson sent word down the next evening that he'd stacked the wood and found it short measure. "I'll have to go up and talk to him," the woodcutter told his wife.

His wife said, "The children and I will go with you, then. I know you've never short measured anyone even a twig, and I want to hear what the man has to say."

Jackson said, "Eight sticks and three blocks. I

measured and remeasured it, and you know I never tell a lie."

The woodcutter went out and got his saw and brought it in. He cut the lower halves of his legs off and then again at the hips, and he threw the pieces into Jackson's woodbox. "That's four sticks," he said. He cut through his body halfway up and again just below the shoulders and threw those pieces into the wood box." Two chunks," he said. He cut his left arm into two pieces, then ran his right arm through the saw twice. "That's four more sticks. And the head that's me, that's block number three."

He smiled and winked at Jackson. Jackson reached over, shut the other eye, and thrust the block into the stove.

It made a roaring great fire that lasted all night and part of the next day. Jackson's wife told the woodcutter's wife and children, "Well, you should get some good from the heat too. You're here anyway, so why don't we work together and cook a good meal and get everyone fed?"

Jackson grumbled at his wife for giving away food, but she was the one person in this world Jackson sometimes deferred to, so he quieted and ate in the best grace he could muster. When the woodcutter's wife asked for the woodcutter's ashes, however, Jackson said, "All the ashes go on my farmland. They are good for the soil, and since he became part of my wood, his ashes are also mine."

Thus it happened the woodcutter became part of the soil, the crops, the food of the nation.

An Afternoon Off

I sent the cab away and walked in to pick up my car. The mechanic came from the shop into the office area and said, "It isn't ready." He wiped his hands on a dirty red rag and said, "We got held up for gaskets, and we're running behind schedule."

"How much behind?"

He wiped his hands faster and studied the rag as he did it. "We might not be able to get it ready tonight."

"Section 361 of the consumer code requires 3 hours notification for any delay over an hour, 6 hours for an overnight. I'm sure you're aware of that."

"We called and couldn't reach you."

I knew he was lying. My call through is failsafe, and I'd never been away from wires. I didn't have to think of anything to say next, because he knew I knew he was lying, but he wasn't giving it up yet. He said, "I'll get the schedule on this job," and he reached for the desk drawer.

Just when he got the drawer open, that's when I shot him. He reached for the drawer. He dropped the rag and pulled at the drawer handle, and I shot him. It almost looked like he dropped the rag because I shot him, but it had already left his fingers when I pulled the trigger, and he hit the floor just when it did, right on top of it.

Two of his employees came up from the shop, guns ready. I had them covered, and they knew they'd be on

shaky ground if they started shooting, because they didn't know why what happened happened.

I kept my weapon ready in the general direction of the two mechanics, but 45 degrees toward the floor so they would recognize the absence of threat. For the first minute or so, I studied the body, partly blocked from my view by the counter between us and the corner of the desk. I saw enough to know there was no need to keep him covered.

Four police showed up at four minutes and thirty seconds, from three directions, in armor, with medium to fast firepower, all well above legal civilian equipment. Three moved in close. One stood back, covering everybody there with a quad barrel 35 caliber rotator.

One of the closer police asked, "Who fired?"

"I did."

"What were the circumstances?"

"Gross violation of consumer 361, an unscheduled vehicle overnight, without prior communication."

"That doesn't give you grounds to kill him."

"I'm not finished. We had a few words, and he reached for that desk drawer."

"You didn't even let him get it open."

"Circumstance and body language led me to think he was going for a gun. I think you'll find a gun, but even if you don't, section 12-16437 will clear me on reasonable suspicion."

They did find a gun. One of the closer ones said, "You'd stand more certain if you'd wait til the gun was in hand,"

"You must be new to your work. Nobody who's ever met a side-sprayer opened wide would think to say that. Side-sprayers brought in the reasonable suspicion laws, and I'm within the law."

Had they not found a gun, I would have cleared myself through legal channels, but that can be messy and costly.

They scanned my record. The closest officer to me said, "You're within definition. You're seventy percent due for a full court regional review. I'm required to tell you that this incident goes on your record. By the authority vested in me by the constitution, I request the privilege of inspecting your firearm or firearms."

As he said that, his three co-workers fanned out a little. The one with the quad shifted his stance. You could see these guys had hit a sticky place right here in the procedures during their work before. I admired their professional, careful approach. I kept thinking number three might be a woman, the feline way she moved, ready to go in any direction, even straight up. Didn't matter in the least, male, female, young, old. I said, "I don't mind if you inspect my weapon. I am wired and on. Anything that happens here will be recorded and public record."

If I had a quad rotator or an electro-hydro-feed 29, would there be a chance in a million I could wipe out all four of them? Purely idle speculation, of course; I handed.

They disassembled, inspected, inscribed and reassembled the 6. A very legal weapon. Previously inscribed by federal and state agents.

You hear about shootouts. Is that what happens? Somebody is illegally over armed. Maybe he has a marginal, no clear decision, or two on his record. Maybe this time he pulled the trigger, and there really might have been another way to work it out, and maybe he knows they'll figure that out, and he's facing the big decision, does he keep the barrel down in deference, or does it come up flat and blazing? Does he chance they'll strip him, publish his record, put him on the streets carrying nothing but first level self-defense weapons, or if there's criminal intent, behind bars and unarmed?

Split-second decisions aren't any easier when a guy's hopped up from killing somebody, thinking, maybe I can get my name in the Book of World Records. The first man to wipe out a shootist squad. The first man to get more than one of four.

When they handed back the 6, I took it apart, inspected it, and put it back together. They stood guard, according to the forms, until I had it reassembled, loaded, and holstered.

The mechanics had holstered and gone back to work soon after the police arrived. When they saw it looked like I was a survivor, one of them hit the com. button and said, "We can have your vehicle ready by 6:30, first notification under this management, with an overnight without notification procedure if secondary suppliers delay the process. Alternate transportation is your responsibility, since obligations of the past proprietor don't accrue without formal trial, according to clause 65-3, section 14 and the addendum to that section, 'Deceased Proprietors.' We marginally claim delay

rights under section 41, 'Shoot Out Survivors and Liability Claims.'

That was reaching for it, and they didn't need the addition. I thought of offering them law counseling in swap for repairs, but I just said, "Whatever. Call me when it's ready."

I caught a cab. I thought about getting away from everything for an afternoon. It takes me a while to settle down after I kill somebody, especially when it's someone who's useful to the community. This guy was a licensed mechanic.

What got into the guy? Was he suicidal? I had that happen before, a guy raises a fuss and draws on me just because he can't handle living anymore, but this wasn't like that.

It was like, to the mechanic I wound up killing, I came from nowhere. He hadn't expected me to be there, even though everything was arranged that way. Maybe he thought I'd been wiped out. Maybe it was some kind of acquisition scheme on the car. That is 65,000 worth of trade any market this side. Could still be going on, though his mechanics would be nuts to try now.

Nevertheless, I'm going to file for an emergency force of four and code 4 for suspicion of threat for a temporary permit for advance firepower group 5 when I go to pick up the car, and I'll request a federally-supervised scrub from their records and electrical interconnections.

Beyond that, I can wonder till the fish come back, but I'll never know. I don't have time to investigate. The police might, but they won't tell me what they find out.

I asked the cabdriver. "How far to someplace quiet, where a guy could have a picnic lunch and just be real quiet?"

He looked at me over his shoulder until I thought he'd head on somebody, and I said, "Okay. Just a possible place then. A place as peaceful and quiet as you can find. Do you know such a place?"

"Sure. A possible place. Fifteen miles maybe."

"Sounds good. Stop someplace and buy something for lunch. Outdoor kind of food. Here's 110, against expenses. If we get to 110, let me know. Where is this quiet place?"

"Hey mister, I better tell you before I accept that, it's my own backyard. Quietest place I know of. Nothing fancy. A fig tree. Two apricot trees. A garden. A patio area to sit. You hear the traffic, but not too close, airliners, but high up. My wife's there, but she'll stay out of the way. You say that sounds okay, I'll call her and see can she put a lunch together this soon."

Tomorrow at the office, people are going to rib me about my afternoon off, but that's the way it's going to have to be. He drives. I look out the windows at the city. It's grey, all across the city, grey sky above a grey city. I don't think I realized it before, but I wonder now when they quit using colors in the city.

Wild Call

A dirt road wound up the steep mountainside,

through dense evergreen forest. Aspen trees stretched lighter green leaves toward the clear sky. Dark granite bluffs thrust jaggedly above the forest. Smells of granite, of dust, of greenly-growing plants stirred through the air. Far up the mountainside, travelers stopped, climbed down from their wagon, looked at the mountain day, and listened to the sounds of the mountain, to the sounds of the forest all around them.

The mother of the family stood with the father and their two children beside the road. Birds flew from tree to tree. A jay scolded them for invading its quiet forest. Then loud, almost melodious, wild calls echoed up and down the heavily forested canyons and ridges of the mountainous country. Rick, the son, asked, "Why do they do that?" He seemed a little frightened.

The mother answered. "It's mating season. Those are the mating calls of the bulls."

"What are they saying?"

"Well, of course, they don't have a language like we do, so it isn't as if they are speaking sentences back and forth like we do to each other."

Rick was pleased to hear his mother's voice gain a note of excitement as she explained. He knew if he could get her started on a lecture about nature, she would overrule his father's nervous objection, "Are you sure dear, that the children are old enough to hear the totally unexpurgated story?"

"Nonsense, Richard. They've seen kittens born. They know more than you think they know. Stop fidgeting about getting on with the journey. In all these years, you should have learned, once you marry, you're no

longer subject to your parents. You mustn't let your fear of their reaction if we're late dull you to the opportunities here for education for your own family, where your first responsibility is."

He said, "Yes dear. I know. Well, I'll just get..." he turned and started to get the picnic basket, but she said, "Don't always worry about food. It isn't lunch time yet. Education is not only for the young. There is much here you could learn, too. Remember, my doctor's dissertation was on mating calls and rituals among wild beasts, with particular emphasis on the bulls we hear on the mountain above us right now."

"I know. I just thought with it almost lunchtime, and since it seems like we'll be here a while, and with the chil..."

She turned to her son and daughter. "No, the calls are not in words, but they do express complex ideas to others of their species. Probably the most important idea is that every species must reproduce, and, for this species, this is the season. The message to others of their species is two part. To other bulls, it says something like, 'I am a powerful bull. If you invade my territory or try to steal females from my harem, I will make a great deal of trouble for you.'"

"Do they fight?"

"Sometimes they do. Sometimes a younger bull will know from the power of the older bull's voice that there isn't any hope. He'll realize he might as well go somewhere else. Sometimes, the challenging bull will come close, and both bulls will shake trees, or they might attack logs and paw in the dirt to try to scare each

other, to try to show each other how powerful they are. Sometimes they do fight, but usually, as soon as one realizes the other is stronger, he'll quit, and the stronger one will let him go. But sometimes they do fight to the death, especially when there isn't any new territory for the younger bulls to move into, when the herd has gotten too large."

"And when the herd gets too large, the way Mother says it is this year, that's one good reason for having a hunting season," interjected Laurie, who hoped to hunt this year for the first time, over Rick's protest.

Rick thought it wasn't fair that girls got to go hunting, but boys usually weren't allowed. He turned from Laurie to his mother. "Then the bulls are the leaders of the herd."

"No. The leader of the herd is usually an older female, past bearing age. Sometimes, several older females share leadership. They keep the herd together in large enough numbers to discourage most predators. They find the best places for good food for the herd and show the rest of the herd where they should go. They intervene if members of the herd begin to squabble amongst themselves. There is a good deal of very structured social order to the herds, something that hadn't been realized in scholarly circles until we began to study them. It appears now that they are more intelligent than we had supposed.

"Most of the year, the bulls don't stay with the herd. Late summer or early fall, the bulls, who have stayed together in small groups apart from the main herd, rejoin the herd. The older males drive the younger but

mature males out of the herd, and the younger males live alone or in small groups, close to the herd, but at a safe distance from the dominant males.

"Only for about three weeks, in mating season, do they become fiercely competitive and round up harems. Two bulls who fought each other fiercely will be close, peaceful companions again, apart from the herd, once mating season is over.

"Oh. My word. Now, everyone, look where I'm pointing, at that outcropping of granite above that spire of a dead tamarack. This is indeed a rare opportunity. See, there's a bull, just back in the shadows of the trees. Oh, we might get to see..."

On the bluff, Wojen stepped out into the full sunlight. Below him, scattered amongst the forest of young trees and granite boulders, his harem was making a midday meal.

Wojen was hungry too, but he wouldn't eat for quite a while yet. There was too much to do. Too much to watch.

He knew there were two young bulls down by the creek, hanging around close, but he wasn't too worried about them. One charge at them, and they gave up and ran. The irritating thing was, they kept coming back, as if he emanated some sign of weakness that might make him vulnerable.

And too much of the harem was susceptible. He spent so much of his time running off young bulls and fighting with older bulls, he hadn't been able to spend much time with the harem. You couldn't expect the females not to run away with some attractive harem

raider if you didn't give them young yourself.

He decided to work up an extra strong stay-away-from-my-harem warning and see if he could convince some of these young bulls to give him some room.

He emerged from the deep shade of boulders and trees into direct sunlight. He saw the tourists and their vehicle far down the ridge, but they weren't important in his environment as long as it wasn't hunting season and as long as they stayed some distance away from him and his harem, so he went about his business.

He bellowed a long, savage-sounding call, that boomed out over canyons, valleys, and ridges, and after the call, he grunted deep, belly-ripping grunts that echoed through the mountains as evidence of his size and strength. Then he ran to the very edge of the bluff and beat on a resonant log with the long hardwood club he carried during mating season. The power of his blows echoed far beyond the territory he claimed as his own.

The tourists were stunned. The mother whispered, "To actually see it happen. How very rare." Laurie couldn't help thinking, "Oh, if only I had my bow with me and it was hunting season. That is an absolute, record-setting bull."

Rick, as if reading her mind, said, "You can't hunt them during mating season. You could at least try to see it as something beyond a trophy for your wall and meat for the table."

The four of them stood quietly for a long time and watched the bull standing, one foot on the log, club rested on the ground, surveying the side of the

mountain. Sometimes the tourists caught glimpses of the females and the young of the herd moving around in the forest below the big bull.

The bull turned away from the log, rested his club on his shoulder, and walked from the bluff back into the trees and the huge granite boulders.

They couldn't see him anymore. Still, they stood quietly, looking up the steep side of the forested mountain, where rock bluffs thrust up above the evergreen trees, for a long time. Then the mother said, "It's time to go."

They all climbed into the wagon. The mother took the reins between the halves of her hoof and said, "Hup."

The beasts strained into their harnesses, leaning so far forward to get the wagon started, they pulled at the ground with their fingertips.

The Writer Rides in Autumn Sunshine

Cold autumn wind blows down from the mountain peaks west of me.

I ready my camp for night. Then I get out my notebook and pencils, and I sit down close to my fire. I want to write about where I am and why, in case later, in some hard scrape, I wonder, how the hell did I wind up doing what I'm doing?

The sky darkens toward evening. I organize my memories into words. I write.

When I was a senior in high school, my social studies class traveled in a big yellow bus to an American Friends Service Committee conference on civil liberties at Asilomar. Somebody circulated a notebook on the way down, and everybody wrote.

I wrote about what I saw out the windows. Suburbs. City. Between, fields, meadows, hills. Not enough between.

The teacher read what we had written in the notebook. She told me, "You have talent. You could be a writer."

So I was a writer. Not immediately. It took me a while to get started, but I knew I would be a writer. I would sell stories to Esquire, The Atlantic Monthly, Harpers, The New Yorker, for a thousand dollars each. I would buy a Matchless 500 motorcycle with the money from one of those stories, and I would be a writer, and I would ride a motorcycle.

I almost didn't graduate from High School. I almost flunked English.

My Social Studies teacher told me she talked to my English teacher. She said, "If you flunk this guy, he'll be here all next year. Do we want him here next year?" She knew how to get what she wanted from my English Teacher. My English teacher gave me a passing grade, and I graduated.

My Social Studies teacher was tall, blonde, and modern. She almost got fired for her stand on civil liberties. My English teacher was short and broad. I don't know if she had a political life.

I went to college because my Social Studies teacher

thought I should. She thought I was smarter than I realized. I decided she might be right, give it a try.

Working in a service station didn't excite me. The owner promoted me to manager, and that was fun for a while. It paid better than just pumping gas, but the managers sat in a bar after work and drank beer. That was inside and dark. After three times, I knew what we were going to talk about next time. We'd talked about it last time, and nobody had any new vision.

I went to college. That might lead to something more interesting than working in service stations, than installing lawn watering systems, something more interesting than cutting dead trees from the top down and lowering the pieces to the ground with a nylon rope so nothing would fall on tightly grouped houses.

The sun falls deeper behind the spinning earth. Coolness of a mountain evening in autumn descends on my darkening camp.

I put my notebook down on the dusty ground, get my jacket, shake it out, and put it on. Down-filled nylon. A concession to modernity. Noisy. I don't wear it when I want to be quiet, because nylon rubbing on nylon makes noise.

I slip the down and nylon jacket on, wind my green silk wild rag three times around my neck and tie it. Silk is the warmest material per weight in existence, no matter what synthetics manufacturers say. I had to have this wild rag cut and seamed special to get one large enough to wrap three times. Hunter green.

I toe the coffee pot, checking its weight, where it sits on the ground, just away from the dying coals of my

dinner fire. Should I drink a cup of coffee? I'll need to climb out of my sleeping bag and piss into the freezing night at least twice if I drink coffee, but it would taste good, and this writing-it-down project grabs me tighter until I might not be able to quit until past midnight.

I brush coals together with two small sticks, then put the sticks down on glowing coals. Fire erupts from the new wood.

I edge the coffee pot into the yellow flames. There's plenty left for a big cup.

I sit down and stare into the flames. How much will I write? I don't want to write another book. Writing books never took me anywhere useful, but this project I'm on seems to be developing into a book. I'll write enough about girlfriends, sex, wives, kids, chaos almost to violence, good times, hard times, to tie together the main line I want to tie together. Which is, what I am, how I got up here on this mountain by the campfire, with brilliant stars scattered across the sky above me.

"What do you do?" people ask me. They mean, "What do you do for a living?" Sometimes they used to ask, "What would you want to do for a living, if you could choose whatever you want to do?" I didn't hear that question anymore after I started my 28th year. People just asked, "What do you do?"

I went to college. I became a writer. I needed something, but I couldn't get it with religion, as I understood religion, which wasn't much, just what other people said or wrote about religion. I sold a few poems to small magazines, for a dollar each or two dollars or five dollars, not enough to pay postage for everything I

was trying to get published, but enough to encourage me to keep writing.

Way back then, the editor of *The Fiddlehead* said, "Don't send any more short stories, but we would like to see more poems." Eventually, I sold him a poem, but he was right. My stories were bad. But I didn't quit. I got better at writing stories. I sold a few stories.

A drunk driver busted me up. For a long time, I didn't write much. I played guitar and invented a couple hundred songs. When I progressed toward an imagined future again and had a home, I started writing again.

The drunk driver who hit me had no insurance, money, property, job, so litigation toward financial ease was useless. I had no property, money, nor insurance. I learned the social safety net in this country is full of holes.

I've written other stories about how I survived.

Eventually, Laura and I married and had two daughters. We took care of a remote hay and cattle ranch in northeastern Oregon. Wild birds, elk, deer, coyotes, bobcats, every kind of wild animal in northeastern Oregon, lived on the ranch.

I wrote about the ranch and wildlife on the ranch. I wrote about educating our daughters ourselves and the close family we became. I wrote about our creative, rewarding existence, almost outside the consumer culture, without electricity or running water, sometimes without an automobile. I sold essays.

After we left that ranch, I wrote a book about our time there. I wanted to share the experience. I thought a book might alleviate our financial stress. There had to

be a way to solve our problem of too tight a material existence. The way we lived called to something deep in people around us, in people who read my essays. Readers would buy a book about our experiences on the ranch.

I put together a collection of essays, too.

Several editors said they liked the books, but they didn't fit their list. I got tired of hearing it. I got to where I preferred impersonal rejection slips to, "We loved these, and they inspired every editor who read them, but we don't publish this kind of books." My fire burns down. I drain the coffee pot into my cup and set the pot away from the fire. I made the coffee strong and reheated it twice, so it's powerful. I sip coffee between sentences. I set the empty cup on the ground by the coffee pot. I add more wood to the fire, and I continue writing. The night turns colder and colder. I hold my notebook close to the fire. Flames cast light on the page. The flames keep my hands warm enough, I can write legibly. I shift often, right side close to the fire, left side close to the fire, and turn around again.

The moon rises above the high plain east, far down the mountain from me, and hangs above the horizon, huge and golden, then climbs the sky and turns smaller. Above the smog close against the earth, the moon sheds its golden color and glows white and cold.

My horse and my mule, hobbled in meadow grass beyond the thin point of ponderosa pine trees extending from dense forest growing up the mountain from us, stomp and move around in moonlight. I hope they crop grass through the night, because we're going to be on

the move tomorrow. There won't be much time for them to eat.

Publishers rejected my books. I read it's hard to get books published now, when publishers treat literature like business and seek large profits and to hell with human and literary value. Misery might love company, but knowing other authors had the same problem with unresponsive editors didn't help me.

I decided to publish my own books. Presses that publish writers who pay for the process didn't tempt me, because I didn't have money to pay them.

I found the cheapest photo copier in town. Five cents a sheet copied both sides. I printed my book about taking care of the ranch in northeastern Oregon. I printed my collection of essays. I had the books copied and bound with plastic binding, like cook books.

I advertised in magazines and newspapers that had published my essays. I sold about a hundred books, and sales trickled off. The books were expensive. If I could reduce the font size and then reduce the size of the books by printing two copies side by side on typing paper, the copy guy could cut the two copies apart and bind them. Two books copied for the price of copying one. I could sell the books cheaper, and they would be more handleable, maybe a little less home made looking, simple in theory, but not that simple to execute, it turned out.

My printer quit. I bought a new one. I bought new software for my computer, and a new operating system, seeking a way to print two copies of the same manuscript side by side on typing paper. No computer

expert I consulted knew how to do that. I knew how a compulsive gambler must feel. I couldn't afford to buy what I needed to keep going, but I bought it anyway. My next move, my next project completed would buy my way clear of poverty, would justify the financial risks I took.

Sitting in the dust tires me out. I put the notebook down and roll the log I lean against closer to the fire. It's too high to sit on and get light from the fire, but I sit in the dust and lean against the log as I write, and that's more comfortable.

The moon travels halfway across the cold sky. Stars close to the moon wash invisible in the moon's light, but all along the horizons, stars hang bright in the darker sky.

I did the work required for my halftime job taking care of the Girl Scout ranch. Then I worked six to ten hours a day at the computer that winter. I thought I was massively stupid, that winter.

My software was defective. So was my operating system. The people who wrote operator's manuals for the software were malevolent, mentally deficient, or both.

Sometimes I took breaks from trying to get my books into the form I wanted them in, and I worked on *In This House of Images*, that had been born as a 20 page short story and, through 18 revisions grew into a 336 page novel about art and the artist, business, cannibalism in the modern world, and the loss of intuitive vision in contemporary, rational society. I revised essays and short stories. I put together two

collections of short fiction and two more collections of essays and sent them to publishers. I tried to find a literary agent who would handle my work.

From almost every agent, I received a letter saying, you're close in your obvious talent and your writing ability but not quite there, let the outfit we recommend teach you how to rewrite these books, for a fee, so they'll sell to publishers, and then you'll write just like 423 New York writers, all academically correct but without much to say. Recent Master of Fine Arts graduates paid \$6.00 an hour by a book doctoring outfit will teach you. The fee you pay for their work will be quite large, but it will enrich managers, not workers

That winter, when I worked many hours at the computer, my back, butt, shoulders, and neck ached, hurt, cramped, drove me wild with pain, but I couldn't stay away from the keyboard. My salvation lay in getting the words right, getting the books ready, attaining mastery of word processing software, computer operating systems, so the machinery would do what I told it to do, and I could put my words, perfected by hundreds of revisions, into the forms I needed.

Flu, a very heavy cold, unidentified illness that infested my bones with pain and stiffness hit me hard. Snow blew past my windows at ten degrees below zero. Raven, black and shiny Raven, who watches me all year, flew between thickly-falling snowflakes, rode the wind on black wings outside my window and laughed raucously at my absurd human condition, trying to work at the keyboard while I coughed up ropy mucous

and blew my nose until I thought I was blowing my brain into the soaked tissue paper accumulating by my desk in grocery sacks.

I no longer felt my fingers on the keyboard. I barely remembered what a word is. I lost all concept of sentences, paragraphs, stories, essays, books. I staggered to bed, shivered massively, covered up heavily, sweat, ached, hurt, dreamed crazy dreams of writing fulfilled, of wealth and good times, crazy dreams of poverty so abject I crawled sick and starving in filthy gutters while the world in splendor passed me by and laughed at my failure and my illness. I cried in agony of existence.

Laura, home from her new and better job now that our children are grown and on their own, put water and food on the stand by the bed. She said, "I think you should go to a doctor."

"All doctors know is prescribe medicine. Every medicine I take almost kills me. I don't care anymore if I die, but I want to die on my own, not from some doctor selling poisons to kill me."

"You're not going to die. Sit up. Drink this water. Drink all of it. You need lots of fluids. Keep drinking water."

"Then I have to go to the bathroom more, and it's really hard for me to get there. I almost can't walk. I don't think I'm going to make it this time. I don't care. I don't want to keep going if I feel like this. Oh God, I hurt all over. I feel so sick. I want to live. No, I don't want to live anymore like this. I don't care if I die. I just want to get it over with. I want to live. I know things

are going to get better. I don't care if I die. I have to go to the bathroom, and I can't even get there on my own."

Laura got hold of me under my armpits and pulled to help me get out of bed. I leaned on her. She helped me walk to the bathroom. She waited for me and helped me walk back and climb back into bed. She covered me up. She said, "You are going to get better. You're on your way to recovery." She sat on the bed beside me and talked soothingly to me. I no longer heard the words she said. I drifted into sleep.

Laura drove away to work. I leaned on the wall and walked to the bathroom. I was so sick, I couldn't walk. I crawled to the bathroom, pulled myself up onto the toilet, and crawled back to bed. Days and nights passed. The storm blew itself out. Two feet of clean white snow covered the ground.

Sun shone in my window, soaked the floor, and warmed the room. I peeled off my top blanket, let it fall on the floor, then realized I had enough energy to do that. I cared if I was too warm or too cold. I slept a while, more comfortable than I could remember being. I woke again to sunshine and realized I was hungry for the first time in days. I sat up on the edge of the bed and ate fruit and cheese my wife had left for me.

I looked at the chaos on my desk beside my bed. I might never be able to look a keyboard in the face again, this lifetime. Unfinished plans scattered on my desk. Somewhere in the depths of delirium and deep illness, I had found ideas that might ease the work I'd been doing, and parts of the ideas skidded and bounced in my waking mind.

I got out of bed. Naked, I turned on my computer. I could maybe write some of it down. I should maybe write some of it down. I waited for the operating system to get my computer ready to operate. I looked through operator's manuals for computers, printers, modems, software and hardware. I picked up a manual, grey and ashes of rose, I couldn't remember seeing before, and yet it fit my hand in a more familiar way than any book I've ever held. I read my own name in the title, written in black, and purple so dark it almost became black, but shaded into a lighter, undemanding purple before the lettering gave up surface to grey cover. I opened the thick, heavy book.

My God. I sat down hard on the edge of my bed. I read again. I held my own operator's manual, my original operating instructions. I was astounded at what I'd found. I paged through.

The book told what I was supposed to do and how, from the beginning of my life into eternity. Some of the book was random scribbling by a young and untutored hand, perhaps my own. A phrase leaped out at me and rang bells, alarm bells, bells of recognition, sudden bells of freedom, the phrase, "freelance rider."

I thought, "Oh my dear Lord in heaven, all these years of hard, hard work, bitter disappointment, poverty, and lack of recognition, and all of it, all all all of it was because I misunderstood from the beginning, quickly read, and in my typical haste to get on with the actual work and to hell with too much explanation, set off full speed ahead down the totally wrong path. How typical, how typical, or even, maybe I read correctly,

but I set about, spoke aloud, and had repeated back to me by those who misheard, "freelance writer," and in my absurd need to please those around me, accepted their misunderstanding, their mishearing, as defining reality and changed my own concept of what I had heard, what I had read, what I had said, what I was going to do.

I shut the book and put it down. I climbed back into bed and lay there in deeply warming sunshine. I thought, "My God. My God."

I slept, and woke, thinking, "Why not?"

Chains fell away from me. I might float out the window and up into the mountain blue sky.

My wife said, "I don't think you're well yet. You were really sick. Give yourself more time before you make any changes about the way you live, the way we live. You're so excited, you're hysterical. You still have a fever."

"I'm not sick anymore. I'm more well and more sane than I've ever been. I know what I'm supposed to do, and I feel free."

"We're still in this together."

"I know. But I don't have any choice. I have to go the direction that's right for me, for the first time ever. It's getting late. I might not have much time to go in that direction if I don't start now."

"That's what you always said about writing when it consumed time, energy, and money. It's getting late. You got to do it now. I went with you all the way, even when I thought there could be better ways to go, that didn't keep us always right on the edge of poverty."

"I know."

"This time, I'm not going with you. I have a good job now, and I can do better than living in poverty. I think you'd better think about what you're doing and stay with me. This idea sounds really crazy to me."

I did think about it. I thought about it for a long time. I still had to do what made sense.

It took me two months. I served notice at my halftime job that provided house, utilities, and a small wage. I'd been hanging on in desperation. It got harder and harder to work, because physical problems from injuries I suffered when a drunk driver hit me years ago never totally healed and got worse as I aged. I passed the age when it made sense to do physical labor.

I sold or gave away most of what I owned. I thought of keeping my guitar, but I sold it and bought a cheaper one so my heart wouldn't break if outdoor weather and rough existence on a pack mule ruined it.

I got enough from everything to buy a good horse, a usable saddle, a mule for my packs, and all my basic equipment.

Laura rented an apartment down the mountain, in town. She said, "I can rent an apartment big enough for both of us, or I can rent one that works for me. It's time for you to make that decision."

"I have made that decision. I'm not going to live in town."

I thought she stepped springier. She hummed as she packed. We'd been through hard years together.

My operating manual got lost in the packing, or maybe Laura got rid of it when she was still trying to

talk me out of what I knew I had to do. It didn't matter. I knew what it said.

Now I'm on the mountain with my horse and my mule, and I like the change. The only sad part is, it's modern times, and there isn't any more need for a freelance rider than there is for a misdirected freelance writer. I taught a two week class in horsemanship at the dude ranch across the highway, and that brought me a few bucks. I might have continued with that through the summer, but the manual didn't say freelance teacher. I joined in two round ups, and I helped drive the cattle down from summer range, earned winter feed for my animals, a few beans, a few bucks.

So I don't seem to be in any better economic shape than I was before, and I'm still without anything set aside for the days when I can't work anymore. But I wake up every morning looking forward eagerly to the day, not filled with fear, even though I face winter in the mountains.

Fear of cold winter is a remnant of my pansy-assed freelance writer days. I'm a freelance rider now, and the world is outdoors. A rider endures what comes his way with gratitude for the beauty of the stars on a below-zero night as much as gratitude for days of warm sunshine when the cattle graze lazily in deep grass and the drover dozes astride his sleeping horse.

I named my horse "In This House of Images." His name connects me with my past, with directions wrongly taken. My horse's name serves as a reminder of different times and different perspectives. It brings that title, *In This House of Images*, to meaningful

existence.

The sky shades pearl grey along the eastern horizon with morning light. The sun sends orange light and red light above the horizon to scout a way for its rising, then rises gloriously warm and brilliant and lights up heavy frost on the mountain with rainbow colors of refracted morning light.

My horse and my mule snort and stomp among the frosted, sere meadow grasses. They want morning grain. I need fresh coffee and breakfast of sourdough biscuits and sprouted beans.

I'm saddling In This House of Images when Eric rides through the drying high meadow grasses on the big paint he bought last year, pulls up by me and says, "Jambo sent me up, says, you want to clean out Dutch Meadows and on down into the canyon, push cattle down to the home ranch, there's a hundred-dollar bill in it for you."

He reaches into his saddlebag and pulls out a white cellular phone. "He sent this up, said, you get a good gather ready to go, you call, he'll send me up, and I'll bring a couple dogs, keep the cattle from scattering back into the canyon on the way down the mountain."

Eric's big paint, broad across the hindquarters for fast turns behind a high-tailing steer, gets bored, pretends he sees a rattlesnake close to his feet, rears, whinnies, dances on his hind feet, and tries to stampede off the mountain, but Eric don't believe in horse imagination, reins him down and around and walks him stepping tiny sidesteps, back beside me.

"Jambo says it gets pretty cold in these mountains

come January. Anytime you want, he says come down to the ranch. That old bunkhouse is pretty warm. Nobody uses it. Got a stove. You help feed cattle, he'll give you firewood, a few bucks.

"Year I moved up here, maybe, I guess seven years ago, it dropped off 36 below zero second week in January, stayed there almost two weeks. Gets like that, that old bunkhouse beats freezin to death. Jambo says I should bring your mule and pack down if you want, leave you freer to herd cows."

I hand him the mule's lead rope.

Horse imagination is contagious. Images decides he sees the same snake Eric's paint imagined, rears, snorts, paws the air. I snap his head down with the reins, just hard enough to remind him while I'm on the ground in front of him isn't a good time to start acting out wild horse dreams. I say, "Images."

Eric leans on his saddle horn. He says, "I been wanting to ask you, how in hell you come to name a horse In this House of Images?" He watches me while I cinch the saddle. I walk around Images, check the blanket, check the headstall, and pull the stirrups down ready to mount. Eric gets uncomfortable with the time going by, nobody saying nothin, so he says, "You mind if I ask?"

I say, "Don't mind. Go ahead and ask." I run my hand under the leather, run my hand along under the cinch.

In this House of Images blows into the mountain sunshine. He's ready to go, wants to work this warming, clear day, always wants to work. I lift my left foot into

the stirrup, grab the horn, and pull myself up, settle deep in the deep western saddle, check my rope and rifle scabbard.

I look into Eric's flat blue eyes. He's young. He's a good man, going to be a hell of a good cowboy if the modern world of rich consumers don't jerk him out onto the freeways and into the cities and make him leave this mountain-cowboy life behind.

I spit into deep dust, smelling of granite dust and dried out, chopped up horse manure, and I say, "No way to tell you sixty years history in the brief time we got before them maverick cows hit the head of the draw headed for high country. You think I ought to ride, or you think I ought to yarn yarns in sunshine?"

I touch rein to In This House of Images' neck. He knows what I'm ready for without my heel digging into ribs, without no leather snapped.

He rears high onto his hind feet, dances about five steps while he taps the higher air in a light tattoo with his front hooves. I stand forward in the stirrups, my greying head as tall toward dark granite bluffs rising close above us as his roan and white head. He comes down onto his front hooves, spins like a cat in the deep dust, me with him, riding deep into the saddle when he's down, easy on reins because he knows what to do, and I'm easy in the smooth motion of this powerful horse. He leaps into a gallop around granite stones too big to jump, leans toward the ground left, comes up straight and fast. We gallop down pine grass, juniper bush, toward the head of the canyon, where maverick cows move in the early morning, where rustlers,

rattlesnakes, bears, cougars move with the cows in the new day's sunshine, where adventures wait for me like the suddenness of new morning sunshine.

Dragon Bay

For the years of its quiet existence, it was known by the local people as Blue Water Bay.

At first, it was called Dragon Bay in derision of an old fisherman who said a dragon surfaced near his boat as he sailed back into the bay. He said it was a small dragon and seemingly harmless. The people didn't believe him. He said, "I fed it a fish. It will come back. You'll see."

And they did see, because the dragon approached other boats. One boat that had no fish to offer, the dragon capsized, but it swam away without harming the fishermen. After that, no one questioned its right to part of their catch, and a peaceful coexistence lasted for several weeks. Then the dragon came with another of its kind, and both of them grew rapidly.

The fishermen began to complain of the severe taxation that the dragons put on their catch. Those who held that the fishermen should offer no violence, but should continue to feed the dragons as a due tax to nature, met with, "Your boat hasn't been visited yet, that's all. Small boat, bad day at sea, they can clean out your hold in minutes."

Grey Man brought his boat into the bay after an

unproductive day at sea, and the dragons made their demand. He fed them his entire catch, but it was not enough. One dragon dove beneath the boat and rose up and capsized it, and the other slashed down upon it and broke it in half. Both dragons attacked the halves and broke them into smaller pieces.

Grey Man swam for it. One of the dragons turned from destruction of his boat and swam after him, but Arn entered the bay and saw what was happening. He steered his boat close to the dragon and threw it fish to divert it, then pulled Grey Man on board with him and kept feeding until the dragons were satisfied and swam away.

The fishermen held council that night. Grey Man said, "You've seen how they grow. In the spring, they were the length of Arn's boat. Now they are that plus half the length of the brother's boat. Keep going at that rate, and they'll be eighty feet by fall, and their appetites grow apace. As for a tax to nature, I'll share with gulls and pelicans and seals and otters, as we have always done, but these dragons aren't nature. God, who made the birds and the fish and the otters and you and me, didn't make these creatures."

"Then who did?"

But Grey Man had had his say and waited to see what would develop from the meeting. The fishermen agreed that no boat would come in alone. Each boat would hold at sea until there were several, and they would come in together and see what happened if they refused to feed. They hoped if they stood together, the dragons would leave them alone.

They wouldn't. The dragons capsized three boats and broke up Arn's boat. Grey Man took the end of a line and jumped into the sea and dove for Arn, who was injured and unconscious. One of the dragons turned after him, but two of the men still on the boats began to throw fish to the dragons. The dragons desisted their violence to eat their fill and then retreated into the depths as the men in the water were pulled aboard, and as the men salvaged what they could of the damaged boats.

They carried Arn ashore and laid him on his bed and sent for a doctor to take care of his broken legs.

Arn's oldest son said, "You must give me two or three days," but he was yet a boy, and the men did not listen to him but set to sea the next morning, heavily armed.

In that first battle, the dragons killed two men and badly injured three, and Arn's brother went mad. He had helped pull Arn, insensible in pain, out of the water at the first confrontation, and the anger had begun to build in him then. It continued to build as it seemed clear that Arn would never again have full use of his legs. He saw two close friends die, and he stood tall in his boat and fired nine shots from a high-powered rifle into one dragon, four of the shots sure hits in the eye, and the dragon was slowed no more than if they had been blanks fired from a toy gun.

Arn's brother tried to leap overboard to attack the dragon with his knife, but Grey Man hit him with an oar and knocked him unconscious and then commanded a rescue, recovery and retreat, effected only after the

dragons had fed on all the fish in the holds as well as on parts of two men.

Newspeople immediately immigrated into the area, and scientists, thrill seekers, and recorders. Visitors had little skepticism. Two men dead, four men injured, one man gone insane, five boats broken up put it beyond hoax or imagination, and the only question seemed to be what are the beasts, and where do they come from?

Grey Man told the reporter, "We cannot feed them and feed ourselves. There will be no boats put to sea until they are destroyed."

With no food offered them in the bay, the dragons came ashore. The people retreated into the hills, and the dragons ate a cow and her calf and about thirty chickens. A camera crew worked from the bluffs and showed the attack on the village across the nation on television. The dragons came up out of the bay and into the village, smashed fences and houses until they found enough to eat, and then they went back into the ocean.

Sportsmen hoped for a chance to kill this very big game, and showmen, who hoped to exploit the situation for financial gain, arrived in numbers. They brought in cattle for feed and built bleachers. They sold tickets for seats.

The showmen stalled the sportsmen; if they didn't attempt to kill the dragons yet, scientists would have time to make whatever observations they could, and the showmen would have time to build publicity for the big event. The sportsmen formed an organization and drew lots for positions so an orderly battle could be undertaken.

The first day, the dragons surfaced in the bay, swam around, and then came up on the beach where the cattle and goats had been staked. They ate three steers and two goats and retreated into the ocean.

The second day, the dragons came ashore and began feeding. Five sportsmen who had drawn the first lots opened fire. The dragons showed no more reaction than cattle would to bothersome flies. The men who drew lot numbers six and seven moved into position and opened fire with a fifty-caliber machine gun and a rocket launcher. The weapons didn't injure the dragons, but the force of the heavier armaments was enough to stop their feeding.

They charged the men and quickly killed them and then charged up into the bleachers. On the bluffs, the camera crew stayed on the job and broadcast "The Dragon Bay Massacre." When the bleachers and most of the spectators were destroyed, the dragons returned to the sea.

The next day, military forces arrived, but they agreed to delay their attack for two reasons: the area needed to be cleared so that the very heavy weapons they intended to use would not destroy any of the people, and scientists wanted the chance for further observation if the dragons only fed and did not attack.

Arn's son said the dragons grew when they were attacked. They seemed to soak up the force used against them and make it part of themselves. The scientists said that could be true, but they couldn't be sure without some means to measure or weigh.

Arn's son went inland and selected yew wood, cedar,

and ash. He worked quickly but carefully with blade and fire and abrasive stone. He cleansed himself and his weapons. He stayed secluded and prayed all night.

In the morning, when the dragons surfaced, Arn's son walked toward them from the trees on the low hill above the bay, carrying the bow and the two arrows he had made. The dragons paid him little heed until he was within thirty feet of them, and then the largest dragon turned and looked at him. Arn's son called out, "Through me, you come to an end."

The dragon rose to its great height and attacked. Arn's son pulled the bow and sent the first arrow deep into the dragon's breast. The dragon coughed, spat blood, and sank to the sand. Its mate charged.

Arn's son loosed the second arrow, and it pierced the second dragon when it was only fifteen feet from him. The dragon dropped, skidded a deep furrow in the sand, and lay dead at his feet.

Arn's son walked back up into the hills before the observers got anywhere near him. Two men who knew him, who talked with him, reported that he had little to say, only that we ignore and lose the knowledge and power we are freely give.

"He said though he defended us by killing the dragons, he will do none of our thinking for us, and he would speak with us no further."

[The Sphere](#)

A man decided to build a sphere. His wife said,
"Why a sphere?"

"Why not a sphere?"

"Why not indeed?"

They agreed.

They gathered materials and sorted them out by types and sizes; nuts and bolts, steel hubs and hinges, new wood and old wood, plastic beams and braces, boxes and cans and piles of odds and ends.

He cut and shaped pieces; she bolted them together. He welded the seams. She carried and cut, and they both lifted the beams.

Until they had a sphere. They went in the door and sat in the quiet and looked at the sky through the top. They shut down the window and looked at each other and were still.

When the sun went down and it started to get cold, they went outside and looked at the sphere in moonlight.

The next day, she said, "Make it a boat so it'll float."

"A boat so it'll float indeed." The man cut struts and shaped sheet metal, bolted joints and welded seams. The woman gathered food, clothing, and tools, planned and packed, and replanned and repacked. Until what took up less room was more. They had a boat, well-supplied.

"It's a boat that'll float," they said, "and we did it quite well."

He said, "It will turn in the frame, with the heavy part down, when the pontoons roll to a high sea. Everything's bolted down tight."

They slept on a pallet in the flat area built up at the bottom of the sphere, with everything stored and ballast to help keep their decided-upon up up.

They had thought it was soon, but they didn't discuss it. The water came at midnight. The sphere shot to the top of the wave with force that nearly crushed them. The sphere dropped back from the crest and rode roughly in the debris-filled water, beaten by trees and stumps and parts of houses, but everything held, down to the tiniest weld.

Each collision slowed them, so they dropped farther from the raging boil at the edge of the wave. Another wave hit the first one from the side. They rose to the crest of a new wave. That wave dropped from under them, and the sphere came down on its pontoons on a falling wave. Forceful changes in direction at the tops and bottoms of waves compressed them, pushed them out against their restraining webbing until they felt crushed.

They both thought, just as it started, before the force of terrific speed came into the sphere, of all the people who had not built spheres, and they felt an immense sense of guilt at leaving them behind, but there had been no other way. It had taken place as it took place. They left the thought behind them on the gathering wave. And both thought they had not rescued themselves but cast themselves into an unbearable hell with the terrific force of their speed compressing their bones.

More and more water joined, until the currents gentled each other with meeting. The ride became

bearable. The platform rode the high, rough waves and took the jolt of collisions with debris in the water. The sphere rolled inside the pontoon feet, with still a lot of up and down motion, but easier, like a fast elevator.

And later, it was nearly gentle. They both bled in their intestines and were quite ill, but they knew they would be well.

He came in from the deck and said, "This area still smells bad, but I think we'll find clear water soon." They kept the sphere closed that night, dark, but gentle in its roundness.

They opened it the next day to sunshine and air, clean water around them. He put up strong windows and stored the metal plating that had been in the window places. They extended the deck, a place to be outside in the open air. Sometimes they had to close up the sphere for the smell of what had died, but they had windows to the sky, and each other, and the round, inside of a sphere.

Bacteria, fish, birds, and plants feed on decaying matter. They did their work, and the water was more consistently clean, and then cleaner than it had been when they built the sphere and always clean when they figured they had sailed one hundred thousand miles and circled the earth four times in their sphere.

Their hair had turned grey. They were lean from the years on the sea, and strong and tanned, and the sphere held, but the elements told on the materials. Sea ate at steel; salt wind carved wood and plastic. The sphere rode the gentle seas well, but they didn't know if it would make it through a really rough sea again.

The sea provided a bounty of food. There were hard years at first, when the sea reeled about, without pattern of force nor temperature. But the oceans established currents. The fish began to thrive, and the plants of the sea, and then so did the woman and the man and the plants they grew on board.

Contrivances had stayed afloat and come to land. People lived on the land, people who stayed to themselves and made their way in the world, and some who banded together and began to change the land.

The man and the woman stayed a year or two each way, but they thought none had really learned what they could have learned from everything that had happened. They didn't really want to be part of living either way, so they said farewell to the people and the land and sailed to the setting sun, sitting on top of the well-repaired sphere, hand in hand.

Fire on the Ridge

He drove up the road, one spring afternoon, in a lightweight, four-wheel drive, diesel-powered sedan, pulling a small trailer with two fifty-gallon drums in it and covered stowage area.

Sam, Jed, and I walked down to the car. The driver got out and held out his hand, "My name is Jabe," he said. "I'm hoping to find a meal and a place to spend the night." We stepped forward, told him our names, and shook his hand.

Jed said, "We can feed you and give you a place to spend the night."

Sam pointed at the drums in the trailer and said, "If that's fuel for this rig, you can put a lot of miles on it."

"I put a lot of miles on it already."

Jed asked, "What do you see?"

Jabe untied a rope, folded the tarp back, and pulled out a satchel. "I see a lot of places like this, where a few peaceful people get together and build a place. I still see a lot of disorder and people jumpy, but more order all along, seems like. You got a place I can wash up, put on some clean clothes?"

"Sure." Jed took him down to show him the cabin. After Jabe looked it over, he came back and got his rig and parked it behind the cabin. We added a place to the big table, and we all sat down and ate dinner together.

After dinner, we moved out to the front yard, in front of the dining hall and stood around or sat around as dusk and then darkness folded down around us. The moon rose above the heavily-forested mountain east of us, hung huge and orange-red, and then flattened out white in the open sky.

Jabe answered questions, but he didn't volunteer much. He seemed comfortable, and we felt comfortable with him. We celebrated having company, but conversations eventually ran down. Everybody had worked hard that day, getting the spring gardens started, so we quit and went to bed.

When the eastern sky lightened to pearl gray, I got out of bed and dressed, and I walked down to the lower edge of the big meadow. I sat on a rock above tall grass

damp with dew, and I watched the sun rise clean and strong above the cedars. I heard a gas engine running, way down in the valley. I walked back up through the meadow.

Jed stood by the gate. He'd heard the engine, too. He said, "Busy days. We don't see anybody all winter, and then two rigs show up in two days."

I said, "Somebody's burning a lot of fuel coming up the road. Gas V-8."

The rig came up the road in a cloud of dust, moving right along. It was a high-bodied sportster, four-wheel drive, with four men in it and a trailer behind it. They stopped at the gate. The driver shut the motor off and got out. "We're looking to do some trading for food and fuel. We got cartridges, fresh meat, and some cotton material."

The man on the passenger side got out. He wore a handgun in a holster on his hip. He stood beside the rig and looked us over, looked the place over.

Jed said, "We grow our own meat, so we don't hunt, but we'd like to look at the cotton. You're welcome to what food we can give you. We don't have any fuel."

"What's that tank up there?"

"Nothing in it."

"Check it out, Dave."

Jed stepped toward Dave as if he would object to that. The driver reached into the car, grabbed a rifle, stepped back, and leveled it at Jed. Dave walked around Jed and up the hill toward the tank. The two men got out of the back seat, with hunting rifles held ready. The driver said, "Get the rest of the people out here."

"Most of them are sleeping."

"Wake them up. Get them out here. You got any weapons here?"

"No."

Dave came back down the hill. "Empty. There's a rig back of that last cabin, got drums on it."

"Check the drums. You guys check for weapons."

Jabe stepped out from behind the center cabin, carrying a submachine gun. He yelled, "Freeze, freeze. Don't even..."

The man who had driven swung his rifle toward Jabe, spun toward him. Jabe pulled the trigger. The submachine gun roared, and a barrage of forty-five caliber slugs slammed the driver backward and slapped him down into the dirt, dropped the man beside him almost as if by coincidence.

The two men still alive threw away their weapons and fell forward with their hands above their heads, palms out, toward Jabe, who seemed for a moment as if he would shoot them, then pointed his weapon toward the ground and motioned. "Get their guns and ammunition. Check them for any more weapons. Not that way. Go around them. Come up to them on the side. I should have kept firing. I couldn't shoot them like that. Now somebody has to figure out what to do with them."

All the people came out of the buildings, frightened and confused, seconds after the shooting stopped. It took time to get everyone calmed down and to explain what happened.

Jabe kept his weapon pointed at the two men while

Sam and Jed and I searched the men and then their vehicle. We found enough weapons to outfit a small army.

Jabe said, "We have to have a decision from you people about what to do with these guys."

Sam said, "We might have to execute them."

Jabe said, "It's the only possibility. I knew as soon as I let off the pressure on that trigger, I'd made a mistake, but by then I couldn't pull it again, just looking at the palms of their hands. Now too many people are involved in it, and it'll have to be an execution by agreement of all the people here."

"Execution for what crime?"

"They're predators. They wipe out communities, take what they want, and move on. They kill everybody, and there's no one to hit back."

"We don't know that was their intention."

"I couldn't believe it when I drove in here and saw you had no guards. In the valleys, every community has armed guards, because this happens a lot down there."

"We don't know that was what they were going to do. It looked like it, but we don't know for sure."

"Wouldn't be sure until your people lay dead in the dirt. These two guys headed out so they could stop anyone from going out the back or sides. These two guys were stepping away from each other, in case anybody did step out with a weapon, they wouldn't be as easy a target."

"If I'd waited just a few seconds, we'd had some pulled triggers on their side to prove their intention, but by that time, they would have been scattered over more

area, little chance for one man with one weapon against them.

"There was only that one instant. They knew it. Them showing me their hands was all the more reason to keep that trigger pulled, and I knew it. What stopped me was there were so many people watching, and they probably weren't going to understand them falling like that took professional knowledge, showed a career attitude toward the whole thing.

"That fast, they saw their chance for gunning me down was gone, and they did the one thing that gave them any chance to live. Both of them doing it that way, in an instant, took planning ahead. It took knowledge that most of the people they'd be up against would be armed for defense, not cold enough to shoot anyone who surrendered. I should have kept that trigger pulled back, but that moment's gone. I can't see anything but execution."

Jed said, "I can't see it on what we saw. You might be right about their intentions. I had the feeling as soon as they started spreading out that it was going to be quick. But they didn't actually do anything to bring us harm."

"If you turn them loose, they'll bring harm to others."

"We'll leave them unarmed and without transportation."

"As long as there are people as naive as you are, they'll be able to get whatever they need."

The children and their mothers surprised me. My thought was, shield them from this ugliness, blasted bodies in the dust, the smell of blood in the sunshine,

men discussing executing other men, but they looked and listened and were quiet.

When I turned to Paula and said, "Maybe the kids should go up to the house," Carrie said, "I have as much say as anybody. I live here too, and if someone did come and kill everyone here, I'd be killed, and my mother and my father and my brothers and my sister."

Jabe said, "What do you advise doing with them?"

"What do the two men say?"

They were brought forward. Paula asked, "What did you plan to do here?"

"We were going to look for gas, see if we could trade you cloth for food and then go down the road."

"Why did he tell you to look for weapons?"

"Can't have too many good weapons. If we'd come across any good weapons, we'd seen about trading you for them."

"Bullets for rifles? You'd trade us bullets for rifles?"

"Anything we had to trade. We're carrying some good hand tools we could offer to trade. What would you do, somebody jumped you with a submachine gun? Jim tried to shoot him because this fellow here was starting a shooting match."

Carrie's recommendation at the meeting was, "Execute them. We shouldn't turn them free to destroy a community somewhere else. It's too bad we aren't totally sure they intended to shoot us, but we are sure they intended to take whatever they wanted without considering our survival. What he says sounds good now, but if they planned to trade, why did they point their guns at you and start giving orders? If they didn't

shoot us, but if they took what we need for survival, that could have caused us to die."

Sam backed her up. All the kids did. I thought we were a peace-loving community, but everybody under eighteen said the same thing, execute them. Sam said, "I wonder how many owners of those hand tools they say they brought to trade are dead so they could carry off the tools and trade them where armed guards called for trade instead of steal whatever you want. Everybody saw what happened. There isn't any other explanation for the way they spread out, with their rifles ready, except they were going to start shooting or hold everybody covered. Why did they say get all the people out here? You think they were going to have a picnic?"

Jabe said, "Get an execution set and get it done. The longer it gets discussed, the more complex it will get, until there isn't any chance left for coherent action."

Which is what happened. It became too complex. If the children had votes, we would have had an execution that afternoon. They insisted they had a right to vote, but they hadn't ever had a vote, and there was the question, at what age do you draw the line if children vote? Does a four-year old have a vote on the execution of two men?

So the two men went up the hill with us and helped bury the dead men. Then we freed them, unarmed and on foot a long way from anywhere, and nobody was much at ease about that choice either.

Jabe stayed around for a few days. He said, "Set up armed guards. A high-power rifle in the timber, and a shotgun and a rifle at camp. If anybody shows up

intending to hit this place, facing weapons under cover will slow them down."

"We came here without weapons intentionally, to live in peace."

"Live in peace. Arm defensively."

The children made themselves heard again. Sam said, "You're over conditioned. You've seen war, so you say, no arms, but it isn't weapons to be afraid of but the attitudes of the people holding the weapons."

"If somebody crazy can come in and shoot us down even though we mean to live in peace, then we need to guard against them. We can't sit here in peace and say, here, share our bread, shoot us in our beds."

Jabe packed and left. He said he might be back, and then he drove down the road. Work settled back toward normal, except a man stood guard with a rifle in the trees, and everyone kept weapons within reach at the houses and in the gardens, barns and fields.

Jed and I set posts for chicken fence, midsummer. I thought I heard something, sat down and listened. Rifle-fire. High-powered rifle, spaced shots; several together, a long space, several more. Could be two rifles, A long time, and then submachine gun fire; a long burst, a long wait, one more shot.

Jed ran for the top of the orchard at the first shot, got to where the sound was less diffused by trees so he could hear the direction better.

We waited a long time. Nothing. I went up to the wild meadow above the orchard, where Jed stood, listening. He said, "Probably on the road. About the junction. Eventually, I think we'll know about it."

Jabe came in late the next day. His car had a lot of bullet holes in it, and the front and one side were smashed in. He got out of his car and walked to the gate. "New gate. Looks good. Can we open it up so I can drive in?"

Sam was there at the gate. He said, "No vehicles, no weapons of any kind past here."

"Hey, you know me."

"By anyone."

"Are you going to disarm me?"

"No. You do it yourself. Leave your car and trailer here and your weapons. Walk in unarmed."

"What if I don't want to leave my rig or my weapons?"

"Then any communication will take place out here. You're welcome on foot and unarmed, and we'll set a place for you at dinner, but the rule says no weapons, no vehicles. If you don't want to leave your rig or your weapons, we'll bring you something to eat out here."

"You're easing your grip on that shotgun a little, looking almost friendly."

"Zack just got to a clear view of you with a rifle, and Jed's in back of your trailer now with a rifle, so the responsibility for dealing with your weapon capability spread a little. The two Johnson's needed some smoothing out in the actions, but I figured out how they work and spent some time with them. Now they spit them through steady. Hell of a racket."

"I've been gone for about three months, and I come back, you speak my language as if you were born with it. It warms my heart. What's for dinner?"

"The car and trailer goes out of sight down there behind that thicket of pine trees."

"I don't mind if somebody moves it, if anybody wants to. Just give it back when I'm ready to go, and don't make toys out of any of the equipment."

After dinner, Jed said, "How'd your car get so messed up?"

"At the junction yesterday, couple of mutual acquaintances laid for me on the road coming up. I got out of the car and behind the rise of the road and got to a culvert going under the road and got to cover.

"Their mistake was specializing in long-distance work. Once I got to cover, the difference in range capabilities of our weapons didn't much matter, because I kept moving until I got to a good range, and they didn't get a clear shot at me in between. You got a good defense set up here, good approach to it. Who put it together?"

"Everybody,"

"Even that answer is a good part of the defense system. I'm not prying. I'm admiring it. I like the gate and the gate policy. No weapons, no vehicles. Bring you dinner if you're hungry, but you don't come in unless you're willing to trust your weapons to us while you're in. Even me. I like that part of it, too."

"We had good beginning instruction, and we've had the opportunity to examine the effectiveness of our methods."

"From open commune, we give food away if you need it, to armed camp in three months. Very efficient change."

"We still give food if you need it. Just stand at the gate and wait if you don't want to be separated from your weapons."

"I'm glad to see it. Now our ex acquaintances, they were on their way here armed for long-range work. Sit down at the big curve and chunk anti personnel explosives up here. Strictly long distance work, out to settle a grudge. I was tracking them, because I heard about the weapons they were carrying, and they were tracking me to settle a score. They thought they had a chance to settle that one first. You should keep a watch on the roads.

"There's several communities down both sides of the ridge. You could all get together and put a gun at the top of this ridge. Cover a twenty-mile radius, and you'd have the whole valley covered, including the road, every way anybody could get near."

"Jabe, what have you been doing to your mind?"

"Does that sound extreme, symptomatic of a personality disorder? People have mentioned that idea to me. I don't know. It just seems like a sensible idea to me. I mean, you want to stay innocent of violence, and that's a good and constructive idea, but what would have happened if your friends down the road hadn't run into me on their way here? By now, this ten acres would be blasted level.

"Is that paranoia, to be able to understand what could happen and to take defensive steps? If it is, I'll live longer in this world by being paranoid than you will by being in psychological balance. Paranoia was what threw me out the passenger side of the car with a good

grip on my weapon the instant something smacked through metal. Nothing about brakes, steering wheel, where the car was going, just it hit, hit for cover.

"I could easily have been killed, flying out of my rig at forty miles an hour on an outside curve. Could have hit a post, or a rock or a tree, or a barbed-wire fence, just flew into something at forty miles an hour, but I didn't. I hit exactly right, bounced and rolled, came up right in front of a culvert, in it and through it before I could think about it. Did I aim for that culvert? Did it go the way it did because I was hyper tuned to the possibilities for safety and danger around me? I don't know. I just know what happens and what I think about, and when I was coming up the road, I thought several communities ought to go together and put a 140 millimeter rifle on that hump up there in case you ever need it."

"We'll take it under consideration."

"If you want to do it, I can get you a decent deal on one."

"Jabe, the arms merchant?"

"I haven't been, but when I ran across the recently-deceased friends of ours, I also ran across some of what they were dealing in, which was weapons. Since I couldn't give the reasons I was checking around, I showed interest in weapons, and I learned something about what's available. Currency is stable enough now, it's becoming important in trade, and weapons are part of what you can buy with currency."

I couldn't cope with what he was saying. "People don't ever learn anything, do they? The whole thing

starts over again. Make a buck selling a weapon; make a buck shooting somebody with it."

Jed said, "Hey, we don't even have to think about it. We don't have any currency if we had the inclination."

"Sometime I have to find a place and stay there. One thing that isn't happening yet, at least anywhere near here, is the manufacture of fuels. Fewer vehicles on the road all the time now. More hijacking of vehicles and fuel, too. You can lose your life by owning fifty gallons of gasoline. I could put a good rifle on the ridge in exchange for a place to live."

"Jabe, you're welcome to stay here, share the work and the crops. Unarmed. We don't have an armed camp, just an armed border, and we don't want a rifle on the ridge."

"I wouldn't live in a place as vulnerable as this one. I'd have to arm it better first."

Several days after Jabe left, Jed said, "Sam and I are going to the valley. We want to see if we can trade seed with other communities. I can't settle in my mind what Jabe said about rising arms down there. I need to find out."

I said, "What Jabe said he saw is probably there. The degree to which it dominates is what's uncertain."

"You mean when does legitimate caution become paranoia?"

"Or when does undue trust in peace become insanity? I can't put it together. We probably wouldn't be here now if Jabe hadn't showed up armed, but on the other hand, too much attention to armaments always leads to war."

"Anyway, we're going down to look around."

"Armed or unarmed?"

Jed sat for a long time. "Sam says take two rifles and keep them out of sight. Keep pistols where we can get at them. We don't know what we're going to find."

"Sam's young to go on a trip like that."

"He's old enough to effectively organize defense here. He carries his own weight, and he knows more about armaments than anyone else here."

"Take care of yourself. Stay in God's care."

We harvested the last of the sweet corn and put up the meal corn, squash and pumpkins, got ready for the first frost, which hit strong four nights, and then we had warm weather for a week. Everyone looked toward the valley, praying that Jed and Sam were on their way up the mountain, because they were overdue.

Jabe drove to the gate, walked into camp in morning sunshine.

At lunch, we polled how a vote for his acceptance as a resident would go. Probably the vote would go for membership, but against long-range defense weapons, somewhat subject to what Jed and Sam found out.

Jabe said, "I didn't see them, but I hit one place they'd been, two and a half weeks ago, and they were doing fine then." He was restless. He checked the boundaries and approaches.

"You're too open on too many sides. You need about four more armed guards."

"We have two men away. Any more guards out, and we don't have enough workers to run the place."

"You should put at least two more rifles out. One up

at the top of the meadow, and one down by the junction."

"Why? How can we live and be so nervous about being attacked?"

"You were. Once you were attacked, and if it hadn't been for me and modern armaments, you wouldn't have been able to do anything. Nothing. The garden grown up with weeds, cabins falling down, or burned down, and most of the ashes blown away in the wind. Nobody. Just bones in the courtyard."

"Jabe, you're a poet."

"I was. A real, writing, publishing poet. And now, about two more trips to the valley, I'm out of fuel." He walked out across the grass and back.

"I'm not a farming man. Never was a farming man. Thing to do is set up an effective defense and put a man in charge of it full time, as his job here. A soldier is a professional man. He has to live as a soldier, perspective, preparation, and armaments. He needs to be a little apart from the people he protects, a little more objective and prepared than pastoral existence lends itself to.

"Farmers don't make very good soldiers. Oh, they do if someone's trying to move in on them. Take up pitchforks, axes, rifles, and submachine guns to protect their land and their lives, but take the pressure off, and they're back to farming, not prepared every moment for a possible attack. A military man, by being a little distant from the basic life processes, can cultivate that state of preparation and expectancy."

"Jabe, do you believe that you could trigger an attack

by expecting it, by preparing for it?"

"No. Not as long as you don't get trigger happy because you think someone's attacking when they're just driving through. That happens. Get somebody nervous on a big rifle, could start a war. But a professional military man doesn't get nervous. He knows when an attack is starting and what to do about it. He knows his layout, who's coming and going and what weapons are where and what to do if anything happens anywhere."

"All seeing. The eye of power everywhere."

"No. Just in contact with strategic lookouts."

"Jabe, you're talking about more manpower than we could get together if we wanted to."

"That's why I'm talking about an alliance with other communities."

"Jabe, I have to tell you I don't like discussing it. Of all the people here, I'm the one most opposed to arming ourselves. I'm against keeping armed guards right now, despite the fact that armed guards were apparently all that kept us from trouble once, discounting the four men who came the first time you were here.

"When Jed and Sam get back, you can discuss it with them. It's more grandiose a suggestion than we could implement, but they might like to hear about it."

Jabe left for the valley. He said, "I'm going to see if I can find out why they're late. They might need some help."

I wanted to go with him. I started to say so, but then I didn't. We couldn't spare another man. I didn't want to travel his path with him.

Several days later, Zack called me. "There's a fire down below the junction."

We walked up the ridge and looked down the mountain. "No way that could be anything but somebody messing up. No lightning in two months."

Rifle fire. Almost out of hearing. More. Some closer. "That's a Johnson."

"Doesn't have to be. Could be any ought-six on semi automatic."

"I'm going down there." I headed back for the dining hall.

"No. Wait. You can't. You walk down into that, you have no idea who's under cover where, even who it is. If it is a Johnson, it doesn't have to be ours. I know you want to do something, but don't go yet."

"I'm going."

"Reason never did mean much to you, did it? Okay, if you're going, you're going. Don't run right into the middle of it. Get up on the ridge above it, out of range, and see if you can figure out what's happening. If you can't, don't move any closer until it's been quiet a long time. Then move in real slow."

"Yeah. That's what I was figuring on doing. No, I probably was going to run out in the middle of it yelling, 'Hey, you guys, stop all this shooting. Are any of our people in on it?' Just like you thought I was when you said wait. Okay. I'm going."

Canteen. Louise brought me dried fruit and nuts. I put them in my belt pack. Johnson. Two cartridge pouches. "It changes if some of our people are under fire. I'm going."

"Go with God."

I ran down the road. Up the shoulder, across the lower end of the garden and along the ridge. Steady. A ways to go. Can I? Can I go with God while I'm carrying this rifle? Are you still with me, God, when I'm running with this rifle?

Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not kill. It's drumming in my ears as my feet hit the ground, through pine duff, through the forest, my feet landing soft on spongy humus. Thou shalt not kill, whispering to me as I run through oak leaves, gain the shoulder of the ridge, jarring, thumping rhythm as it thuds in my ears, feet landing on rock, Thou shalt not kill, going looser in my knees, too much ground to cover to hit it this hard now. Slowing a little more.

The pack smacks me in the hip every time I land on my right foot, and the Johnson's heavy. I stop at the top of the meadow to listen, breathe, adjust what I'm carrying, listen. Off again. Down through the meadow. Tall, dry grass slaps flat against the ground as I run it down. Dust sharp in my nose. Back into the forest. Above the bluff and down the slope beyond it.

Then I stopped, sat in the dirt, watched, and tried to figure out what was happening.

The fire burns a thin line up the hill, spreading wider as it burns, eating brush and trees and grass at a leisurely pace.

Shots. Two rifles fire from the other side of the swale from me and one responds from this side, maybe four-hundred yards below me.

The one below me has cover back of him. If I was

where he is, I'd be moving, because one of the riflemen across the swale climbs the hill to get altitude on him.

I don't know who's where. What do I do, get closer and yell, "Hey, who's where? Which side am I on? Either?"

The stationary rifle across the swale from me is going to have to move, because the fire burns close. The rifleman below me might not be moving because he hopes the fire will cut them off, and he'll have a clear burn to shoot across if they try to move up when he starts backing up the hill.

The guy who's climbing the hill might get around the point of the fire. He could die in the fire. I have to get closer to see what's happening.

Down through the timber. Let's hope there isn't anyone around who hasn't spoken up yet.

Then the man below me does move. He's up, out of cover, running for cover, and if I could see him, but only motion, out of the trees, into the trees. He's moving because the man going up the ridge might make it around the point of the fire. If this guy set the fire as part of his warfare, I tend to vote him down, even if he is outnumbered. Got to get closer.

I'm three hundred yards from him. Still can't get a look. He keeps moving, but his attention is in the other direction, so I'm gaining. Nobody's shooting now. Just working for position.

There he goes again, and I sprint. How could he see me?

I'm almost directly behind him, but just before I break cover, he spins, swings his rifle and fires. A

quarter of a second before the bullet snaps air above me, I dive for dirt and roll. That spin to shoot at me stalled him in the open, and he falls and then crawls toward cover.

Bullets kick up dirt above him, and then he's covered from them but not from me. He looks up the hill, but I'm in cover, and I still can't tell who it is.

He got hit in the legs. His rifle lays out in the open dirt where he got hit. He belly crawls to timber. Who are you? I could shoot you this last instant before you take cover, but I don't know who you are. You shooting at me would be reason enough, but then you don't know who I am either, and he's under cover now anyway.

Up around the timber. Wish I knew if you have another weapon. Maybe not. Close some ground.

Wind rises. Smoke smells sharp and strong in the wind.

KABOOM. Hey. Hit the dirt, roll, jump for rocks, run smack, face first into a big boulder and lie there dazed a moment, but covered. Broken tooth, maybe a broken nose. Hello rock. Whose side are you on? Mine by covering me anyway? Or theirs by smacking me one? My vision's blurry. That's got to clear fast. I pinch the bridge of my nose to stop the blood.

He has a handgun. Something big. Now the guys over there know something's changed over here, because he wouldn't plug at them with a handgun from here.

I yelled, "Hey, who are you? I might be on your side."

No answer here. I doubt they hear me over there.

Down behind a log, through some brush. Close, pretty close. I got the game down in the thicket, and he's wounded, but I don't know how bad, and I don't know if I'm going to shoot if I get him jumped to view.

Wind sighs through the trees and brush. Fire burns faster, moving toward us now, with the shift in wind. I hear it popping and sucking air. Sometimes it sings a high-pitched whistle when pitch pockets ignite. Sounds like artillery shells arcing through the air.

Don't want to be here long. Come out. Come out, buddy, or you're going to burn. Your house is on fire, and your children, they will burn.

Out across open ground. I don't think he's paying as much attention. Maybe he's hit bad. Maybe he's waiting for the best shot. I dive for dirt, and that hand gun roars.

"Jabe. Jabe, it's me, you fool. I'm on your side. Hold your fire."

He didn't seem to recognize me. Shock. He sat backed against a down tree with his legs twisted in front of him. He said, "What did you say? What did you say?"

"Don't shoot. I came to help you."

"Help me."

"Let me look. Here. Scoot back a little. I'm going to have to get a tourniquet on it. Who's up there?"

"Couple of friends. They were headed up your way. They waylaid me. Would have got me too, but I'm faster than they thought. Oh God, that hurts."

"Sorry. It's hurt or bleed to death. Who set the fire?"

"They set it. They burned me out of cover, but the smoke worked for me, and they never got their shot."

"We have to move. The fire's coming fast. Come on. I'm going to have to carry you. Bound to be painful"

"No. Don't move me."

"You want to burn?"

"You can't carry me out of here and keep to cover."

A bullet slapped the log. I pulled him around the end of the log, with him trying not to scream from the pain of being drug across the ground. I said, "He moved. I'll see if I can get a shot." Here it comes, Lord, get a man in the scope and pull the trigger. Get me out of it somehow, Lord, but I can't sit here and wait.

I crawled along behind the log and into some trees and tried to pick him up in the scope. Some kind of a voice spoke inside my head, and I turned and looked to see Jabe trying to get his pistol lined on me. I just jumped, tore my belly up scraping over a high log, but fell into cover in the dense brush and downed trees.

For a man dragging himself on his belly, Jabe moved fast. He got one shot off, and the bullet barked a tree just above my head. I ran for it, dodged, jumped, and ran for cover. I heard that thing boom, and I prayed.

I could only concentrate on one source of danger at a time. A slug from across the swale smacked me in the side. I spun, hit the ground, scrambled, tried to roll. Bullets came from three directions. I fell into a root hole that was left when a big ponderosa pine fell in the wind a long time ago, and I tried to breathe. Hurts so bad. "Jabe, Jabe, how come you're shooting at me? How can I help you now?" Hurts so bad, I can't get any volume of sound out, just talking to myself.

Hurts pretty bad. Doesn't hurt much; I just can't

move very well. Hurts pretty bad.

Unless Jabe picked up a lot of speed, he's going to burn in about a minute. He should try to get out of the thicket into the open. Oh yeah. Escape the fire, but catch a bullet. I got to go. Try to go. I do not know why you started shooting at me. Get my legs under me. Fire's moving up fast.

Jabe. Shut up. Shut up. Oh God, I do not want to hear that man scream like that. I tried to get him out of there. Me next.

If I can make the road. Get to the road. Hurts. Lot of blood coming out of that wound. Okay. Up. In the open. Let em shoot. I do not want to die by burning, like Jabe did.

The smoke's got me covered. Up the ridge.

They didn't try to follow me. They haven't the faintest notion where I've gone. Maybe they never did know there were two of us for a while.

What was it? Who is it? If I'm going to die, I want to know who killed me. I don't think I'm hurt bad enough to die. I have to get up there. I have to get home. Jabe's dead.

The fire burned out when it reached the road, didn't have enough wind to jump the road. I went a lot slower going back than I did coming down, but I made it. I worried because I just kept bleeding, no matter what I did. I felt dizzy and sick and weak, but I made it to the gate, and they took me in and worked on me, and the pain of having people touch me dropped me out of my senses.

I came to lying on my back on a table. "Go back out.

We have to clean this wound better. You rolled in all kinds of junk. Wish I had something to give you."

"Jabe died in the fire."

"I know."

"There's at least two men headed up here."

"They got here." Then he started probing, and I think I screamed. I thought of Jabe screaming in the fire. I passed out of consciousness again.

Sunlight shone through the windows again when I woke. "Sam. You got here. What about Jed?"

"He's okay. Shot through both legs, but I think he'll walk."

"What happened?"

"Jabe."

That didn't make sense. I couldn't understand what he said. As soon as he said it, I forgot what he said. I looked out into the garden. The kale grew very dark green, leaves thick on the stalks. "I'd like some greens. That's what I'd like. Almost raw. Just cooked enough to be hot."

Then I heard what he said, as if he was saying it again. "Jabe. You were across the fire from Jabe, you and Jed." I laughed. I couldn't help it. "Hey, I don't know if you know this yet, but you shot me."

"We're all wishing I'd had steel-jacketed slugs. That soft point made a mess going through."

"I'm going to live."

"Yes."

"Everybody's worried about infection. I can feel it all around here. Clean this place up. Sanitize those thoughts. Feed me a lot of greens, and I'll be out

working in the garden before you can get used to the idea."

"Jabe was over confident when he jumped us. Looks like he meant to wipe us out and report it as proof that we need better defense."

"He set the fire."

"Yes."

"Do we need better defense?"

"We need to be alert and armed. We don't need a big rifle on the ridge. Not everyone down there would tell you that. There are some big rifles. There's plenty of trade in weapons. Some people own lots of weapons and barricade themselves. Sometimes a couple of forces blow each other up, but plenty of communities exist with minimum defense. Even some unarmed communities do pretty good, but the unarmed ones have religion to a depth we haven't got to yet."

I hear a difference in Sam.

I say, "It's not real. The threat. The danger."

"It's there. It's just not all of what there is. It's all of what he saw."

I say, "I thought you would be the one to recommend heavy armament, Sam. What I'm hearing is different from what I expected to hear."

"I probably would have recommended heavy armament, until we had the battle with Jabe. I saw where his beliefs took him. I don't want to go there. I don't want the community to go too far in that direction."

"I want enough weapons to survive but moving toward less armament. I want to have us about halfway between what Jabe recommended and what you

recommend, but moving toward your recommendation.

"If everybody keeps getting more weapons, there isn't any turning back. Nobody's going to be giving up weapons when everybody else is getting more. So we'll stick with what we have and aim toward trimming that."

"Jabe taught you more than he meant to teach you."

"Yeah. He did."

Jabe died in the fire. I know why he started shooting at me. He thought if I got the scope on Jed or Sam, I'd see who it was and understand what was going on.

They brought back a lot of seed. Different varieties of a lot of what we already grow. New seeds to try. Some of them, we can plant this fall.

Time falls away from us. Winter's on its way. I get around pretty well, sore, a lot of the time, with still some healing to do, but I work in the gardens.

Jed's walking. It looks like he's going to have full use of his legs. We're both spending most of our time getting the gardens ready for winter, ready for the first warmth of early spring, for next year's crops. We move slow, but that's okay. Gardens, plants never rush.

Sometimes I think if I wasn't so stupid, I'd shot Jabe when I first saw him, and I wouldn't be still healing.

But the song that matched its rhythm to my footsteps running down the ridge comes back into my mind. I eat the hardy plants from the garden, still producing through frosty nights and cooler days, and I work in the garden, and I'm getting stronger, and I'm at peace.

Jake's Song

I got me a twelve-gauge magnum, far-shootin gun.
Now don't that sound like a whole lot of fun? Got me a
two-seventy Weatherby magnum rifle with a high-
power scope, don't leave the wild game no hope. Got a
four-wheel drive, Jeep V6 with high flotation tires. I
can shoot ground animals faster than they can run, run,
run, and I can kill wild geese when they fly high in the
sky, sky, sky.

That's my song.

I got me a ranch. Desert for two hundred miles
around. We irrigate farm ground from the creek and
grow plenty to sustain a man and his family, another
family or two, though I don't know. I feel like me and
mine going it on our own.

My wife Clarine is tough enough to cope and soft as
butter to me too. Our boys are tough. We snapped them
into line. I've stocked this ranch well for sure. I've
stalked it well for sure. I've killed deer and antelope and
elk for twenty years, since I was ten, fuel and
ammunition enough now to last a century. They won't
take what's ours from us without a lot of men dying.

Gabe shoots well. Clark is sure. This year, they bring
in most of the meat. Gabe comes in and says, "We got
an elk skinned and quartered, hangin in a tree where we
killed him up on Scrimshaw ridge. How do we get him
home?"

"That's your nut to crack, boy. Carry right on
through."

He don't like it, but he goes out and doesn't quit till

he has the meat brought in and hung to cool.

Clarine is lonely. She says we should have brought two more families, and I know she's right, but it's too late now.

Four years ago, when I told him it was his nut to crack, Gabe got the tractor and drove up on Scrimshaw ridge with a trailer and brought the elk home, but this time, he says, "You eat the meat, so you go bring him home. He's hangin in his hide in the big pine tree on the point of the ridge."

"Hunter brings in the meat."

"Whose rule is that? Are you the king of everything, so you make all the rules?" but I slapped him down for that. Clark took the jeep and headed up the ridge. Gabe wanted to swing on me, but he knew I'd knock him flat. He went out the front door and down through the near field of alfalfa, alfalfa young and light green in early spring.

Clarine jumped down on me. "The boys are too big for you to knock them around. You could work it out by talking about it."

"One thing we got to have to hold this place together is discipline."

"Discipline doesn't have to be that rough."

"It's a rough world we're living in. If we're not rough, we won't keep living."

"You don't know that. You don't even know. It's been ten years since we heard anything at all. The only people who came around were afraid of you with all your guns and ran away before we could find out what they might know. For all we know, everybody got

settled down, tired of fighting and dying, and maybe everybody's living quiet and peaceful."

"Not much chance."

"Some. Some chance of that."

"Clarine, you're yelling at me. Don't get so excited about it."

"Why not? Why not get excited about something? You think there's anything exciting about staying here year after year, never going more than a hundred miles, scaring away the few people we do see? You think that's any way exciting?"

"Clarine, we'd better not get into that. It don't go anywhere we want to go."

"What makes you the boss? What makes you rule what I say and what I think about? Who says you should run things for all of us? The boys are old enough now to have a say, and I'm old enough to have a say."

"Say. But don't yell at me, and don't get hysterical on me."

"Don't get hysterical on me. Who the hell are you to know what my emotions are? Any show of emotion is hysteria to you."

She didn't just say it. She screamed it at me, like she meant to break my eardrums, and I openhanded her to shut her up. She spun from the blow, and I thought she would fall, but she caught her balance and came up straight. I thought she meant to jump me, and I got ready for her, but she stepped back, with her hand to her face where I hit her, and looked at me for a long time.

"You're not the king. You're not the king of

everything." She stepped back until she was at the door, and she turned and walked out and shut the door behind her.

So Clark's up on the ridge. Gabe's gone down through the alfalfa, and who knows where Clarine is going?

Quiet. Very quiet night. Moon coming up like that, might be a good time to get that coyote down on the creek. Everybody'll settle down. Give em time. I picked up the 243 and checked the ammunition. I walked out into the moonlight.

Then Gabe's seventeen, fillin out heavy, like a growed man. I don't hit him nowadays. We get along fair, but we don't talk much. Midwinter, I'm talking to Clarine about spring seeding, he says, "Once that first seed's down and the weather's good, I'm leavin here."

"No, you ain't. You'll be here two more years at the least."

But about once a week, he says, "Weather gets right, get the seed down, I'm gone."

"No way you're leavin here. You got more than two-hundred miles of desert any way you go, and you ain't takin any machine or animal from here."

But he did leave. We got the spring seed in and tilled the ground for summer's seed, and then he was gone. Far as I could tell, he took his rifle and pack, some food, maybe a gallon of water.

Clarine fretted.

I said, "He'll be back in five or six days, really wantin a drink of water," but when he didn't show in five days, I had to shut my mouth and try to help her

along. Biggest chance is he's dyin on the desert, doesn't even know where he's going.

She says, "He's young and fast on his feet and smart. He'll make it." And she didn't seem to worry about it as much anymore.

Things was different between her and me since that time I slapped her. We worked together and got along okay, no harsh words or bad feelings, but she turned cold. We rarely even touched each other.

Once in that time, we had strong words between us, and she got to yellin at me. I thought of shutting her up, but she seen me winding up, and she just got real steady and said, "Jake, you taught me to be a damn good shot. I'm telling you now, if you ever hit me again, one day, maybe a long time afterward, when you're starting to think you might live a while. I'll get up in a good spot, and I'll shoot you down like shooting a coyote."

Clark is a real quiet boy. Works hard. Keeps things in shape. Spends a lot of his spare time up in the timber or up on the ridge, watching the desert west of here.

Two years since he's been gone, Gabe comes back. Spring garden planted. Summer garden worked. Everything's about caught up.

Clark busts through the house up to his mother's room. Ain't many things could excite him like that. I pick up my rifle and head up the ridge. I throw down on Jabe when he comes off the desert. He reins in and shows me his hands. "I'm unarmed. Not so much as a knife."

"I told you if you left, don't come back."

"Still the king of everything?"

I pulled the trigger, but the firing pin snapped down on a dead shell. "Ammunition is getting old. Half the time, it don't fire."

I work the bolt and put another shell in the chamber, but I can't pull the trigger. I pull and I pull, but my finger don't move.

Then Clark says, "Drop it on the ground, or you'll have an arrow through your chest. This bow, it never misfires." I throw the rifle down in the dirt, and Clarine runs up through the brush and trees, and everybody hugs and kisses and cries and laughs, all three of them.

I just go down the ridge back to the house.

When Clarine comes in, almost dark by then, we look at each other a long time. She says, "There are places out there where people live in peace. Some people still fight, but peace and love, Gabe says they're winning out."

"I got what I got, and I'm keeping it."

"What have you got? What fuel is left is so old it doesn't burn right, and the machines aren't much use. Ammunition is getting so old, it won't fire. You got you. That's all you got."

"I got you. I got Clark."

"We're going. We're going out there with him. You're going too."

"No. You ain't going." I started for the rifle cabinet.

Clark said, "Pa, I been around and unloaded every weapon on this place, and I got the ammunition stashed."

Gabe said, "Pa, peace is the only king. Peace is the king of everything."

I'm the king. I'm the king. I got me a twelve-gauge magnum, far shooting gun, kill wild geese as high as they can fly, shoot ground animals faster than they can run, run, run. Don't that sound like a whole lot of fun? Got me a four wheel drive Jeep V6 get anyplace out in the sticks, tear up more back country than you can own, own, own, and the wild country is my home.

"You'll never make it through the desert."

"I made it two years ago on foot, with less experience. It isn't just that we need to be out there. We're needed out there. What you know about building and farming and machinery could go to good use out there."

"They're still fighting. Killing each other."

"Some. Not so much anymore. I've traveled thousands of miles unarmed."

"But you're a fool, that's clear to see. Lot of people won't harm fools. It's bad luck. I'm not going with you. This is where I worked to be, and this is where I'll be. I see I can't stop you, so I won't try, but don't try anymore to take me with you."

Clarine come to me one night before they went and tried to talk to me about going, opened up to me physically like she hadn't done for years, but now it was me was cold. I never been there before, and it set me back on my heels.

I don't care anymore about anything. I just want them to go, leave me alone. You say you're going, so go.

Before they leave, Gabe comes in and tells me how to find water halfway across the desert going west. He

says, "Early spring's the best time, because the sun's so intense in summer..."

"Gabe, you slipped your tracks? I been living in this country all my life."

"You didn't know about the water."

"No, and didn't need to or want to. You'd best get on your horses and ride out. I see you or anybody else coming on this place, I'll find me some live cartridges in that box Clark's leaving for me."

For a long time after they go, I do nothin. Sit in the house until it's dark, then go to bed. The next few days I sit under the trees down at the other end of the alfalfa.

I have to turn water into the alfalfa, and that gets me started back into a routine, and I pick it up, and it's quiet, but it's all right.

The alfalfa goes to weeds. Some of the weeds are good food, little work to me. Rabbits get fat down in the fields, and I trap them for meat. Cougar gets the two horses I got left, one, and then, when I give it up and quit laying for the cat, the other horse. Don't matter. I got nowhere to ride to.

The few chickens I still got got sick and died the third year. Don't need em. Less work for me. Never really was a farming man. I'm a hunting man. Shoot my food when I can. More trapping than shooting now. Shoot an elk with the bow once in a while to remember.

Clark come back the third year of the drought. I think he did. Sometimes, I'm sure.

He come back and come walking down the ridge, bent into the sand wind. I stepped out shooting at him, and he turned and ran. That must be a dream, cause

every time I pulled the trigger, it fired, and I haven't had good ammunition in years. If I'd fired once, I'd hit him I know, but he just ran into the trees, light as a deer on his feet.

He come back, and I let him get water. Then I told him to move on. He moved on, never said a word to me.

He come back, and he got water and ate. He said, "I come to get you. This drought is closing down, gonna squeeze you in here tight," and I told him to go and go alone.

I was fevered through a lot of that time. Wind come up and kept blowing day and night, and it blew a fever up in me. Sometimes I didn't know what I'd done and what I'd dreamed.

Clark, he come back, the third year of the drought, and he stood up on top of the ridge in the wind and waited for me to come up and talk to him, but I never left the house, just lay fevered in my bed and watched him through the window.

That's when I first seen the king. Big old turkey vulture, sailin in the wind, turns to stall against the wind, lands beneath the ridge peak and stands there more'n a day, just lookin the place over.

I dragged my rifle over to my bed, stuck it out the window, snapped down on one dud shell and another and another. The fourth time, the rifle fired. I wasn't expectin it anymore and missed, splintered rock above him, but he just sat still there and watched.

I was too exhausted to keep at it. I dropped the rifle, said, "Okay. Okay. You win. You're the king of

everything. Got a new king. Long live the king of everything."

Drought goes into the fourth year; the wind hasn't quit in two. Stream runs enough for the garden, the close field. Everything else long since dried, died, blew away in the wind.

Ground we spent fifty years building dried up to dust and blew away in the wind.

Wind blows all day, every day. All winter, all spring, all summer, all through the fall. Never clear lets up. Dry wind. Dusty wind. Sandy wind.

Equipment shed blows apart. Sheet metal blows away into the desert, and the sand wind carves away at the wooden framework. Sand piles up on the foundation.

Sand wind wears the walls thin on the house. Sand keeps piling up at the garden. I build walls around it to block the sand, but I have to shovel em clear every few days to keep the sand from pushing em in on the garden.

Two years, the wind quits, but no rain comes. I spend long days walking what was an island, an oasis in the desert.

Most of the timber up on the ridge died. On the windward side, the trees died, and the wind sanded them half away. The wind carves beautiful, strange forms in massive tree trunks, then erodes them to nothing, blows them east across the desert.

The meadow is gone, a sandy swale high on the dead ridge now. Sand buried most of the alfalfa. I've been turning water into the field near the house. Some

places, alfalfa's pushing up through the sand, but I keep turning water in there, the rest of the vegetation down the drainage is going to die.

I'm a little dry, just like this place has gone near dry. Sand wind carved away a lot of what I was and blew it across the desert.

I'm thinking about going. It isn't so much there isn't enough left to stay with but more there isn't enough of me left to stay.

I don't know yet. I walk up to the open desert north and stand there and look out across the barren sand. Then I walk back to the spring and sit in the shade, and then I look at the desert east and walk back to the spring. I walk out and look south.

Looking west, I stay the longest there. Out there, a few hundred miles, there's an ocean. There's people out there.

I wonder what they're doing out there. Clarine, you get you another man? and has he been good to you all these years? You ever think of me? Gabe and Clark, you got wives and children now, growing big and strong? Clark, maybe I told you go too soon.

That big old vulture soars over about once a day, looks down to see what I'm doing. "Hey there king, how's everything? Way you keep checking me out, must be a bad year for dying out there on the desert."

Leg's a little gimped up from a fall I took about four years ago. It's a long way across that desert. That water Gabe talked about maybe dried up in a long drought like this. If I get through the desert and run into people, who knows what will happen? Maybe they'll shoot me.

Maybe they'll need something I can do.

I put together a pack and what water I can carry, head out across the desert. The old vulture checks me out a couple, three times a day. "Hey king. You can have it all, be the king of everything. If I don't make it, I'll be a few good meals to you, but I kind of think I will. I kind of think I will make it."

Man limping along, using a homemade cane. Cane sinks into the sand and don't do him a whole lot of good. Sun shines down so hot against the burning sand. Black vulture flies over, high in the desert sky.

Recycle through the Goat

How it happened the goat ate my poetry records, some of my fiction records, and some of my newest writing is, we packed everything up and moved.

I was a bit weary, feeling scattered out with trying to do more than I thought I could do, and that contributed to being less alert than I should have been. I get tired of moving. I would like to live in one place the rest of my life. Probably, I will never own a place.

As I get older, some dreams wither by circumstance. It is harder to earn enough money to buy a place than it was for our parents and grandparents, everyone seems to agree. That's the way it seems to go for me. Some dreams, maybe the loss doesn't make us smaller but opens up possibilities we hadn't seen when we were preoccupied with dreams of material gain in a culture

where ownership is everything, the substance of dreams.

Losing some of my records, some of my songs, poetry and fiction and some stuff I haven't even figured out what's missing, apparently has made me more philosophical. Whether that's good or bad or just a fact of existence, I haven't figured out yet.

I felt a deep cavity, a yawning chasm when I saw the goat, Jewel, our brown, white, and black nubian-cross milk goat standing by the box, contentedly munching papers, with who knows how much stuff already gone. All I could think of to say was, "Oh no."

I ran from inside standing by the window, looking out into sunshine after rain had washed the day clean, to the goat pen. I rescued what was still in the box, more than half gone.

Everything I had ever said to any writer who lost some writing sounded empty. I remember when I told Ansel, "What you lost when the computer crashed, it's still in your mind. You can put it together again even better. Have faith in your own intelligence."

Out there at the goat pen, I fumbled in panic with the fastener, trying to get the gate open. I said, "Jewel, Jewel, stop eating my papers, please stop. Don't eat any more." I finally got the lock to release, swung the gate open, ran through the gate in the spring day's warm sunshine, pushed and pulled solid, almost immovable Jewel away from the box of papers.

I remembered saying that to Ansel, and I wondered if I would have been much smarter to keep my mouth shut, just get out of the way, let him complete his

agonized fury at what had happened.

In the slow process of moving our possessions to our new place, I had carried a heavy box from my desk area out toward the pickup. The phone rang. I stuck the box into the goat shed for cover from the rain, and I ran for the house. A waste of time. Phone company trying to sell me some kind of a plan. Lightning storm crackled on the phone, and I said, "Lightning," and hung up.

Lightning and thunder flashed and roared all around us in our mountain forest, and rain blew heavily in hard wind. I filled more boxes inside the house until the sun shone again.

I thought the gate between the goat shed and the pen was closed, but it wasn't. Jewel found the papers and happily munched.

It could have been worse.

Maybe it was worse. Jewel leaned against me, burped up partially digested papers, and chewed her cud, a mixture of very important literature. I said, "Jewel, my dearest darling, some people eat goats. I am tempted. I am terribly, terribly tempted."

She leaned against me like my very best friend and contentedly chewed her cud. She knew I always said a lot of dire stuff I didn't mean at all. She knew if I hadn't meant for her to eat the rich, organic papers, delicately flavored with soybean-based ink, I wouldn't have offered them to her in the first place.

I looked through the papers left in the box, trying to assess. She ate where I keep track of what I have and where I've sent it seeking publication. She ate many poems. She ate some essays, maybe some stories. I'm

not sure what I had before she edited that box of papers.

It isn't true that goats will eat anything, metal cans, shoes, all that stuff you see in cartoons. Every goat I've known has been a picky eater, wants good, fresh, clean food. But those papers attracted Jewel, and she ate all she could before I got there and rescued what was left.

We had dried Jewel off, knowing our move from one habitation to another would disrupt schedules and make it hard for us to get her milked every day. Dried her off means she was no longer giving milk and would have to be bred and give birth before we could start milking her again.

What this leads to, I try to remember where I've already sent a piece of my writing. I send it out, wait six months or more (many small magazines, literary magazines are unconscionably irresponsible about how long they take to get around to reading submissions) and the editor writes, "Didn't like it last time you sent it; still don't like it."

So I mostly quit sending out poetry and essays and fiction I don't have records for. I tried to see that change in the work I do as a silver lining, since I have more time to write fiction now that I'm not using so much of my time trying to sell that stuff. But the new stuff I write doesn't sell either, so the silver lining leaks rain.

One advantage of moving not very far was, we didn't have to do it all in one load. Least essential stuff, we moved first, while we went on living. Last thing, after we started living in the new place farther up the mountain, I cleaned out the goat pen. A garden is essential, and goat manure is some of the best fertilizer

there is, so I raked it into piles, shoveled it into the pickup, transported it, and dug it into the ground at our new place, built a fence around the garden area before the ground froze solid in mountain winter and prevented digging postholes, left it alone over the winter, then started planting seeds early spring.

Late June, we ate our first salad from our new garden, fresh lettuce, edible-pod peas, spinach, radishes, carrots, kale, green onions. Tomatoes, we bought from the farmers' market in town because it's too cold, this high in the mountains, to grow tomatoes, but everything else in the salad, we grew in our garden.

After dinner, I started remembering. By dark, I had remembered almost every place I sent poems to and what poems and when. I wrote everything down, amazed at the way it flowed smoothly back into my mind.

My daughter, Amanda, said, "I have a new song. Do you want to hear it?"

We said, "Sure." She sang. Beautiful song. It always amazes me that someone so young can create such beautiful songs, such beautiful poetry. In her song, I recognized some of my poetry that I hadn't seen since the goat ate my papers, but the way Amanda put the parts together and her own additions, from the rich soil of her own young but very perceptive, very alive existence, and from the rich soil of the new place we lived improved the original images a bunch, so I knew the song was hers.

Laura, my wife, wrote a story that night and let me read it the next day. I recognized the basic plot and

some of the description as similar to a story I had been working on before Jewel munched about half a box of my papers.

The new, upbeat direction Laura headed it in to come up with a conclusion based in hope, in a goldenly glowing view of the possibilities of life, made it all hers, so I didn't say anything about the story I hadn't finished and had forgotten about through the winter.

We ate fresh vegetables from the garden every day.

I wrote many new stories, essays, poems, and songs, filled with ideas and images I'd worked with before, but with new directions and new conclusions. I began to break free of the negative views I'd held for a long time without realizing how much I was bound in habit, in a narrow and pessimistic view of the world.

As my view of the world broadened and lightened, I realized the world around us tends to be the way we see it. For the first time, I realized much broader, more optimistic views were also valid, were creative and helped create a broader, more optimistic world around us.

My appreciation for beautiful, clean grass, vegetables, clean, well-cared-for alfalfa hay, fresh, clean water, my appreciation for the freshness of each new, life-filled day permeates my new writing, leavening and infusing with hope my understanding of the human condition.

I've learned something about goats, about humans, and about recycling. At first, I dreaded the move, but now, from higher up the mountain, we see much more of the world and every day, we touch the harmony of

life around us.

Raven and Coyote

She is Raven.

He is Coyote, the trickster.

She is thief and sage, who understands more than she speaks of, who is black in raven form, but iridescent green, silver, changing according to the way the light changes.

She is child, human child, full of wonder, growing toward Raven.

He is man, who had been Coyote but who left his identity and entered the modern world. He left his coyoteness so thoroughly behind, it faded from his memory, as he meant it to. What would be the greatest trick the trickster could play? to trick himself, to fool everyone about who he was, even himself.

Stimulated by memory of his history that never quite entered his conscious thoughts, he studied cultures rendered asunder by the modern world. In all cultures, as they attempted to modernize, he saw the loss of their center, of their religious force, of family cohesion.

He said, "Modern culture is rational, scientific, electrical, mechanical. The non rational, all mythology, and all religion is disproved, scientists say. The people believe what their scientists tell them. Even the people who hold onto some sense of religion put their religion into a special time and place, where it won't interfere

with their material existence.

"Physical force is evident to the five senses, so people believe in physical force, and they believe in the material world. Except certain abstractions assume religious importance, wealth, political power.

"All religious practice and observance comes second. Material survival comes first, the new religion of the masses."

Raven understood most of what he said, though her experience so far was not broad. She understood what he said about initiation rites, because her reading about other cultures and religions paralleled what he talked about.

He said, "The modern culture killed all minor gods, the gods of weather, the gods of war, the gods of the hunt and the harvest among them. The people disowned the major God as irrelevant. Along with the bath water of superstition, the scientific, rational culture threw out the baby of human needs that cannot be fulfilled by material means. It threw out the bathtub and plumbing, all the symbolic, mythological systems of learning and support among tribes and families. It threw out all connection to sources of water for future baths. It threw out the means to fulfill the human need to worship, to revere and emulate in a sensible fashion, to have order and sensibility in human lives, to reflect order and sensibility in the structure and operation of the universe."

She understood that violence and disorder come because human needs are not fulfilled. People lack food. Violence augmented by modern weapons uproots

people from their homes and homelands.

Even the people who have basic needs for material survival, food and shelter, lose the symbolic, mythological systems of learning within and among the tribes that knit together humankind in a sensible and orderly universe.

Raven wanted initiation rites. One can start a revolution in understanding. One can achieve order in the midst of disorder. One can establish a beginning.

She began to prepare herself before she knew what she would do. By seeing and revering the mystery of all life, of all natural forces around her, she knew she declared order.

She read. She tried the schools that most other children attend. She found little possibility for education there. Business necessary to conduct the everyday material world comprised the largest part of the body of knowledge the schools tried to make the children understand. She found little of mystery and mythology and little that led to understanding, compassion, and reverence.

She found it difficult to be among people who seemed to have little sense of human history, of their own insignificance in the midst of billions, and yet of their significance as one, one human, one moment in time, one link in the flow of existence and meaning.

After her brief time in school, she pursued a diverse education. She studied "subjects," geography, history, mathematics, science, with her mother and father as teachers when she needed teachers. She read many books not classifiable under "subjects."

She walked with family and friends, and she walked alone in the meadows, in the forests, high in the mountains amongst basalt and granite rock formations near their home, along rivers and streams and ponds and lakes.

She saw a father elk in the lower pasture, an elk who saw her. She walked slowly down from the dirt road. She lay down and rolled under the barbed wire fence. With his massive antlers spread above him, against the mountain blue sky, the big animal watched her stand up and walk closer to him. He tore away lush clover and chewed it. When she walked to within ten arms' lengths, he began to match her steps by steps away from her. She wondered if he moved away because, after all, she was human, or if he moved away because she was simply other.

The father elk, brown, tan, grey, black and golden, munched clover and told her nothing.

Explanation of everything the father elk was in material terms didn't touch the majesty Raven sensed in him, the intelligence she sensed in him that let him know she would bring him no harm, that insured her safety in this huge beast's territory.

She walked along the top of the ridge where ancient ponderosa pine, Douglas fir, and white fir trees grew. Low ground cover of juniper and small juniper trees, and yellow and blue and orange wildflowers, and several kinds of grasses grew, north and west of the house.

Her long, black hair and her thoughts blew in cool, brisk wind. A bear frequently traveled this trail. She

had seen scat and tracks. She heard the bear, upwind from her, moving toward her with no attempt to move quietly, noisy feet through dead limbs beneath the trees and snuffling sound of deep breathing.

When the black bear, shading to grey, came into view through the trees, Raven said, "Greetings, Bear." She did not want to surprise it. Beyond middle age, large and powerful, the bear stopped, rose to her hind legs and looked Raven over.

She said, "It's me, Raven." The bear dropped to all fours again and walked past her, just more than an arm's reach away. Once past, she rose to her hind feet again, smelled all the odors on the breeze, looked Raven over carefully, then said "whuff" in a friendly greeting to this human who would be Raven, kin in a wild world, and went on her unhurried way into the forest, across the face of the earth.

Raven thought there was no explaining her own intelligence or its sources in material terms, and there was no explanation, in terms those of the material world of five senses would understand, for the certainty within her that everything was touched, organized, held cohesive by an intelligence that transcended the bluebird, the elk, the bear, her, and knit all together into a sensible whole. Coyote was her father. She studied her mother and wondered who she was. Sometimes she seemed Crane, majestic and yet gangling, graceful in flight and striding, yet clumsy gaining the air, a creature of three elements, air and earth and water.

Her parents trusted her to be safe in all her explorations. They trusted her surroundings to be safe

for her. They trusted the bear, the elk, the eagle, the rattlesnake, thunder and lightning and wind, water and mountains and stone ridges to think of her safety.

Sometimes she thought Coyote understood she was Raven. Sometimes she didn't know. She knew it wasn't time yet to discuss it.

It was time to learn. In less than a hundred years, the buffalo were gone, the plains as they had been created by the Great Spirit, God, were destroyed. The rivers ran with pollution.

Modern man defined everything in material terms and then set about to destroy it. Modern man had no reverence for life, no understanding of the teachings mythology made available. Places of wilderness dwindled.

Despite his objections to the lack of initiation rites in the modern culture, Coyote gave her nothing that would serve. Originally, when he said, "rites," she thought he said "rights," and she still thought of her right to the rites. She began to know that he had only history to give her, knowledge about what had been, despair at what could be but was not.

He had no rites to give her for initiation. He was too Coyote to attempt anything untrue to the underlying mythology that had served a hundred different cultures over thousands of years. But he was too modern to attempt to reinstall rites dead for twenty years, fifty years, a century. He had never been the giver of rites, but the trickster, the one who shook and jested at the accepted forms, that they might fall asunder or settle more firmly into place, proven.

He tried to change roles, to fulfill his duty as parent by fulfilling her need.

She saw the pain in him as he split himself into warring parts. She said, "I'm designing my own ceremonies for initiation. Nobody can give me ceremonies that will work, because what I do will grow out of everything I've learned in fifteen, almost sixteen years. I'm the only one who knows what I've learned."

Relief mixed with disappointment and regret in his reaction. He said, "Oh, well, I thought..." and he seemed unable to say anything else.

She said, "I will need your help with some of the ceremonies. I just want to design them myself."

His disappointment cleared. She thought of talking to him about what caused his sense of conflict, but she thought it was not yet time. Once initiated into adulthood, assuming her full identity as Raven, her words would have weight they lacked from her as a juvenile.

She took her sleeping bag, a ground cover, and food and water, and she stayed at the top of the ridge northwest of the house four days and nights. Coyote said, "I'll check on you once in a while up there."

She said, "No, I don't want you to do that."

"Indian youths coming into adulthood had mentors from the tribe in attendance, checking on them frequently."

"I'm not going to be fasting or going through physical deprivation, so I don't require tending. The point of what I'm doing is the endurance of solitude to achieve deeper contemplation. I want it to be a time

away from the modern world, so being checked on won't fit into what I'm doing. I'm not copying the Native American rituals. I'm designing new what will work for me."

But she was checked on. Eagle flew down from higher on the mountain the first day and twice every day after that. She sat in the top of a juniper tree just three trees away from Raven's bed, where Raven sat, being still and praying. Eagle observed but didn't intrude, then flew away into the day. Owl came at night on silent wings. Raven only knew Owl was there because she saw her silhouette, a dark shadow against the lighter sky.

Late in the afternoon of the second day, the biggest rattlesnake she had ever seen, beautiful shades of green and yellow, with bright yellow eyes, came from the rocks above her bed into the open sunshine and watched her from a few feet away.

As with the eagle and the owl, Raven knew there was no need for conversation. All of them understood her ceremony, brought as gifts their quiet participation in what she was doing, then left the position of watcher, giver of knowledge of life, open for the next to come, a young deer one morning, a badger, a skunk, hawks in the blue sky above her, where small white clouds hurried from horizon to horizon, and smaller birds that lived closer to the ground flew around her, and perched nearby.

When Raven returned to the house after four days, she knew what Coyote and Crane had given her, though they had not given her rites. They had given her

opportunity. They had given her the freedom of her curiosity and they had given her help in satisfying her curiosity without attempting to limit what she would learn and what she would become. They had given her almost nothing material, but this small intangible, they had given.

Freedom, support, and help in defending her freedom from the definitions coming from all around her had been essential in the rites that worked well for her now.

She dreamed. She saw visions. Dreams and visions told her she was and would be Raven. She did not yet fully understand, but she prepared.

She needed to build an image. She looked for materials. In the shop, she found a pile of cardboard. She said, "Dad, what is all this cardboard for?"

"Nothing. I'm going to take it to the recycling center when I go to town."

"Could I use some of it?"

"Sure."

"Do you have black paint and a sharp knife?"

She visualized what she wanted. Without drawing on the cardboard, she cut. Then she bent the cardboard and folded it and glued and painted most of it black, and she had the head and shoulders of a raven. The raven's bill was more than two feet long, but still, it looked very much like a raven. She put it on, head and shoulders over her head and shoulders, and she saw out through the open bill.

She thought of animal hides and heads aborigines had worn when they acted the parts of animals in ceremonies. She didn't want the real head and hide,

because she didn't want a raven to die. She had no mirror, but she saw herself clearly, as if she stood ten feet away and looked at herself. Despite the disproportionate size of what she had made, she looked very raven-like.

Coyote was stunned. Raven stood just outside the shop. What she had built was only cardboard and paint and glue and tape, but she far transcended the materials she had used. She really did look like Raven.

Again he was torn in different directions. She was only sixteen. He was her father, and he wanted to hold her and protect her. Yet, he knew all her life had aimed toward womanhood and independence, toward this moment. Her focus on mythology of human existence, on heights of spiritual meaning called to depths he had been able to keep capped, out of consciousness, for more years than he could remember.

For a long time, her work parallel to Native American mythology had nudged and pried at what he had kept successfully below the surface, until symbols and hints of knowledge surfaced in his dreams. He let his dreams fade into unconsciousness in the morning light, and the symbols and knowledge began to surface in his daily existence.

He saw images in the mirror of himself as wild animal. What he saw puzzled him. He dismissed what he saw as he dismissed his dreams. Then he saw images, as if he stepped out of his existence and observed himself from a distance and saw himself as wild animal.

Without allowing it to come into that part of his

consciousness made up of verbal knowledge, he began to know who he was and to know he couldn't continue to keep his knowledge contained.

He held Raven's individuality sacred. He could guide her, teach her and advise her, but he had to allow her to go in her own direction.

He had known all this for a long time, though he had not allowed it to coalesce in his conscious, rational mind.

He stepped forward to give her the small, wooden, carved Raven he had saved for her sixteenth birthday. He was not sure of its origins. His father had given it to him just before he died.

He thought it might have been carved by northwest coast Indians. He didn't know. Where it came from meant less to him than the awe he felt each time he looked at it or handled it. It was almost alive, almost Raven. It seemed to hold the power of life and of wisdom that Raven had, beyond the individual raven, the symbol that Raven had become in aboriginal mythology.

Sudden wind blew down out of the tall trees on the hill behind the shop, lifted dust and dead pine needles, and swirled around them with noise and activity.

"You are Raven," he said. He hadn't known he would, but he said, "I am Coyote."

He handed her the small, carved piece of wood that felt warm and alive in his hand.

She reached to take it, not with a girl's hand with fingers and fingernails, but with a raven's foot, with hard, sharp claws below a scaled leg, below black

feathers ruffled by the wind.

He stood on his hind legs, long, bushy tail assisting him to balance in his upright stance, front paws held out in front of him.

Then he dropped to all fours. She was prepared. Without consciously visualizing it, she had expected this. He had not. He was not prepared, or he would have run as soon as he heard Orville's pickup coming down the driveway. He stood still and looked at himself, Coyote manifested.

Orville's pickup skidded to a stop in the gravel. Orville jumped out and reached back into the cab for his rifle. Coyote killers of the west never grow out of their training. They never develop finesse. A neighbor's yard is as good a place to kill coyotes as any wild country around.

Raven cried out in alarm. Finally, Coyote realized what Orville was doing. He leaped, twisted in the air, and came down at a full gallop, headed the shortest way into the cover of dense timber. Wind blew dust from his tracks and nudged Orville enough that he didn't make the clean shot he intended.

The rifle bellowed into the wind. The bullet knocked Coyote's feet from under him, rolled him with the force of the blow. The bullet blew his left rear leg off above the foot. Coyote grabbed the foot in his teeth and disappeared at a three-legged gallop into the forest.

Orville was so startled by the coyote's actions that he didn't get his second shot. He said, "I'll be damned. I never saw an animal do anything like that before."

Raven rose on fast, black wings when the pickup

came down the driveway. She screamed at Coyote to run and at Orville to stop. From her wings, high in the air, she watched Coyote roll, grab his foot in his teeth and run. She thought coyote killers were not raven killers. She wasn't sure.

Orville set off into the timber, looking for tracks and blood to follow. Raven watched from high in the air. Orville concentrated on the ground and didn't know Raven circled above him.

Raven had no idea what would come next. First, they must somehow get Orville off the trail. If Coyote lived through the next few hours, and her knowledge of mythology gave her hope he would, then they must begin to understand how to live as Raven and Coyote in the modern world.

Raindancer

Granger pulled into the driveway in his red and white pickup, and Jason walked out from the house. Granger rolled his window down, but he left the engine and the air conditioner running. He said, "The corn is dry down on the end by the road."

Jason said, "I can't get water down that far. There isn't enough water in the ditch."

"Figured that was the problem. Can't run it down the field if you don't have it. We sure do need some rain."

Neither of them said anything for about a minute. Then Granger said, "We'll be gone five or six days for

the wedding. Do the best you can with what water you have."

"Want me to do a rain dance?"

Granger laughed, "Sure. Do a rain dance."

After Granger left, Jason couldn't get it out of his mind. He knew the Hopi danced for rain. They believed man is an integral part of a complex, spiritually-driven universe. If any part doesn't function correctly, the entire universe will be out of balance. Man is responsible to maintain the complex structures of ritual that give recognition, reinforcement, and reverence to the creator and to the complex forces that knit the universe together in harmony.

The Hopi didn't dance for rain. They danced to fulfill man's function, reverent performer of rituals in a harmonious universe. In a harmonious universe, rain comes as it is needed.

Jason thought he would be unbearably presumptuous to think that he, acting alone, could fulfill that function. Then he thought, he didn't know what he could or couldn't do. He did know he could define himself into total impotence by accepting what we think we know. What about Black Elk? Neihardt wrote that Black Elk, Sioux, raised a rain and thunder storm for him and other witnesses.

The Hopi, the Sioux, all the tribes, fulfilled their function as man in harmony with the earth for over fifteen thousand years.

So he danced. Down between the corn rows in the dust-dry soil, soft under his bare feet. He stepped slowly and softly this way and that, into the next row,

down it, across two more rows, corn stalks taller than he was. He didn't know what to do. He was too conscious of what he didn't know. He felt clumsy and grinned apologetically to the corn stalks and to God. He didn't want to be a Hollywood Indian. He was not an Indian. He was a man alone before God, asking for rain.

He danced a dance like the sandhill cranes dance. He walked up and down corn rows in the stately crane walk, knowing the creator of the universe still drives it in perfect harmony. He was a bear, down in the dust in a wallow, a bison in a dust wallow, a ground squirrel inventorying corn, a grouse, a crow, dancing, running, flying, all of them knowing the creator of the universe still drives it in perfect harmony.

He was a man. Alone before God. Reaching for harmony.

He didn't know the rituals or the dances. All he had was trying to resonate in harmony with God, with the universe in harmony, in this moment fulfilling the potential, the responsibility the creator of the universe gave man.

He had no sense of time passing. He forgot the purpose of his activities. He found himself deep in reverence and gratitude for life, for all of life, for the life force.

The sun set. Clouds came over the mountains, gathered dark above the valley, and it rained. Jason knelt in the dust that quickly became mud.

Rain poured down on him, and he felt cold. He laughed. He stood up and started toward the house. Mud caked up on his feet, thicker and thicker. He

laughed again and said, "Elephant's feet. I got elephant's feet." He walked through the mud like an elephant. He scraped mud off his feet at the door and went in and listened to the hard rain on the roof.

When Granger came back, the days had become hot again. They talked of a few things. Granger said, "That rain sure put things in shape."

"I danced for it." Granger looked at him. "Don't you remember? You said dance for rain, so I danced for rain, and it poured down."

Granger looked at him and laughed.

Then Jason laughed. He wasn't laughing away anything that had happened. He laughed because he realized the prevailing beliefs are narrow and self protective. He'd let those beliefs slip away in the cornfield, through the rainstorm, through the days following, because he was alone, without the influence of anyone else's ideas. Granger put the dance into perspective.

Once or twice, when conversations touched on unusual experiences, Jason mentioned dancing in the corn that day, but mostly, he didn't talk about it. He did what he thought of as backing up in his thoughts. Probably it would have rained even if he hadn't danced and prayed in the cornfield. Probably.

Years later, a hot, dry, dusty summer. Lightning set fires in the forests. Marshes started to dry up. Grass that could have fed wildlife and cattle crisped brown and brittle in the sun. Smoke hung heavy in the valley.

Jason felt nervous and irritable. The unnatural dryness became outlaw electricity to him. Everything

metal he touched shocked him. He got shocked when he touched other people. They felt it too, but it didn't jolt them, almost knock them off their feet, the way it did Jason.

The 4th of July was hot even before the sun came up. Jason's wife turned in bed to see if he was awake. She said, "Can you imagine the parade downtown in this heat, with crowds of people?"

"We're committed to it. We promised the girls we'd go. Besides that, it's the perfect place to dance for rain."

Jason wasn't a highly public person. He was almost formal, a little reserved. Yet, he walked into the street in the middle of the parade. He put on his bright yellow rain pants, then the yellow jacket and the hat with a close brim over his face and a long brim over the back of his neck. He danced and spun down the street, and people laughed at him. He told them, "It's going to rain."

It was 108 degrees. Sweat poured off him in his airless rain clothes.

Spectators wished they could believe. His daughters believed without question. His wife was embarrassed.

Jason wondered if he would pass out from the heat. He wondered if he was a fool.

Clouds rolled in from the coast range, and it began to rain, then harder. People laughed, cheered, shouted and danced in the street. At first, before they had time to think it over, Jason saw the people's gratitude for rain flowing upward as rain poured down.

He walked home in the pouring rain with his wife and daughters. He put the rain coat on his oldest

daughter and the rain hat on his youngest daughter and carried the pants rolled up under his arm. He loved getting soaking wet. He took his wife's hand and didn't get shocked. He laughed.

Coincidence, people would say, if they thought about it at all, and he agreed. Coincidence is when two or more events coincide, and there is always meaning in their coincidence. Nothing is by chance.

Some mornings, Jason went to the restaurant near the freeway for coffee. Granger and some of his farming friends gathered there for coffee before starting their day's work. Jason liked to keep up old contacts, hear how the world and their work in it looked to that group of men.

The morning after the rain stopped, Jason went in for coffee. Everyone talked about the rain. As soon as Jason sat down, Mike spoke to him. "Granger says you danced for the rain. He says you do that. He says you're a rain dancer." Jason looked at Granger, and Granger grinned at him.

"If I danced for rain?"

"I don't know. I'd have about half a mind to kick the shit out of you, if you danced for rain and if that caused the rain, if I believed that."

"What? Wasn't it good to have that rain? Didn't we need rain?"

"I didn't. Not me. Hell no. I had 6,000 dollars worth of hay cut, and that rain ruined it. It's not worth baling now."

Granger put his hand on Mike's shoulder. "It's got to rain some time. I guess somebody's going to lose some

way every time it rains, but we still have to have rain."

Mike said, "Well, this is stupid, anyway. Dance for rain all you want. I don't believe in that B.S. in the first place. Anybody who does is some kind of retard, and my mother taught me not to pick on retards, so I guess you're safe if you're a rain dancer or not a rain dancer."

Jason sorted carefully through what he might say, but Granger said, "Jason, why don't you come out and drive tractor a couple of weeks for me, just so you don't forget how?" and Tony asked Red about his new tractor, and the subject was gone. Jason drank black coffee and tried to figure out all the ways anyone could get hurt by rain.

Jason transferred to a southern Oregon branch in shaky condition. He took the operation apart and started putting it back together in more effective patterns.

Jason and his family put a music group together. They took some engagements. Sometimes they performed at churches.

Snow melted in the spring in southern Oregon mountains, but spring rains never came. Nor did any summer rain. Hay dried brown and gold without making full growth. The rivers ran low. Springs and small creeks dried up. Jason felt the drying out of the earth more acutely than he could speak of. He prayed for rain.

His daughter came to him in the afternoon. Anna said, "Dad, dance for rain."

Smoke lay heavy above the mountains, where fire ate the forest.

Jason was startled. "I didn't know you remembered

that. Do we believe in that? Don't we work through prayer?"

"Yes. Is prayer thoughts and words and nothing beyond that? Music can be prayer. Dance can be prayer. Anything we do can become prayer."

Somehow, he realized, he had come to believe he was of this apparent world. He had buried some of the meaning of his experience, because it seemed to have no context in the contemporary world. Some of what he was had slipped away from him.

He thought, me? Just me? Why me?

That evening, they had what he called "one of our secular engagements," in the park, low emphasis on religious music, heavier emphasis on entertainment, popular music, popular forms. No admission fee, no pay for the musicians.

When they were working well together and Jason thought they had the audience in their pockets, he sang out, "Do we need rain?"

Some in the audience responded, "Yes."

He and his guitar sang it again, louder, "Do we need rain?"

More voices, "Yes."

Some wavering in the audience. This might not be what they came for.

"Do we need rain?"

"Yes." They were more sure.

"Then let's make rain."

Some attentions scattered. A man over by the oak trees boomed in a deep voice, "How do we make rain?"

"Here's how we make rain." He built a rising

structure with his guitar, and he sang, "Thank you God, for the rain you are bringing us."

Bell like, his wife and daughters sang it in three-part harmony right after him, as smoothly as if they had rehearsed it. He felt a rush of heat all over him. He broke out in sweat, and tears poured from him. He remembered the hot city street and sweating floods inside the rain clothes and the clouds gathering dark and rain and the rain dance in the dusty cornfield and rain and pounds of mud caking up on his feet and laughing and crying and rain and rain.

Morris picked it up percussive, and Billy built banjo patterns around what he did with the guitar as he built it up again, "Thank you God, for the rain you are bringing us." Again, and again. That part of his detached consciousness which was observing said he was losing the audience. It was too radical.

But his wife and his daughters and Morris and Billy understood what he had started and helped him build it, and it became more and more compelling, and more and more of the people added their force to the building. "Thank you God, for the rain you are bringing us." Over and over. Not as a chant, but as a building musical structure.

He walked, a stately crane, up and down the bandstand. "Thank you God, for the rain you are bringing us." He became a heron, walking in the rain, knowing the universe is harmonious, and rain in its time is harmonious. "Thank you God, for the rain you are bringing us."

It spread through the park in the hot evening. He saw

raptors, peacocks, deer, bears, a porcupine, and people, people, people, all of them knowing rain in its time is harmonious, all of them working together to manifest harmony and gratitude, to receive.

Some of them sang different names for God's name, the names they could sing, "Nature." "Spirit." "Father." "Mother." All who stayed danced and sang. And clouds came, and in their part of the valley, it rained. Rain poured down through summer air, soaked the people, soaked the trees in the park, soaked the asphalt and concrete, filled the gutters, and ran muddy toward the ocean.

For a long time afterward, Jason had trouble in his deepest thoughts. That this much, rain into a parched valley, was so possible, made him understand again the potential and the responsibility given to man. That understanding brought him to gratitude and joy, and that understanding brought him to sorrowful frustration with the fractioned modern world, with himself, with all his fellow raindancers.

Ponce de Leon

Ponce de Leon was a Portuguese adventurer who discovered the fountain of youth in the United States of America. Some people said his name meant punch the lion. Some people said his name meant pounce on the lion or pounce like a lion.

Nobody really knew what his name meant, because

there wasn't much English yet. A few people who lived on an island off the coast of France used English when they couldn't think of what to say in Portuguese or Spanish or French, but that was about all the English in use, because the United States hadn't been found yet.

People looked for the United States. Lief Erickson, Eric the Red, George Washington, and several others looked for it, but they hadn't found it yet, not any way they could really prove it was there.

Nobody knew what a lion was anyway, because Africa hadn't started much by then, either.

Anyway, Ponce de Leon went to Queen Isabella's court and arranged an interview. When his turn to talk to her came up, he said, "I just wondered if you would finance me for the purchase of two or three boats to cross the sea."

She said, "Why would you want to cross the sea?"

He said, "I want to look over there on the other side for the fountain of youth."

She said, "Oh, the fountain of youth. Well, I don't know about that. Boats are expensive. Why don't you look for it over here?"

Ponce said, "Well, I'm pretty sure it isn't over here, because everywhere I've been, all the people get old."

Queen Isabella had been pretending she was paying close attention to what Ponce said and looking right at him, and she was paying close attention to what he said, but she was looking just past him, at the mirror behind him, and she was noticing how many of her hairs were turning grey already. She wasn't even that used to being grown up, let alone ready to get old yet.

She curled a lock of her hair with a lot of grey in it between her thumb and her fingers, and she said, "Probably makes pretty good sense, to look for the fountain of youth. Sure, have a couple or three boats built."

Ponce said, "Well, if I thought there was all that much time, I wouldn't be so hot to find the fountain. What do you think if I buy some ready mades?"

Isabella looked in the mirror again, and she thought more hair went grey just while they sat there and talked, so she said, "Sure. Go for it."

Isabella didn't think anybody else would be able to rule Portugal very well, so it would be better if she stayed around and did the job. Besides, she kept thinking there was a lot she hadn't had time to do yet.

Ponce de Leon bought three pretty nice boats. He decided to go by sail, because the ocean is usually pretty windy. He named the biggest boat after the queen, since it was her money he was traveling on. Queenie, he called it.

The middle-sized boat, he called Santa Maria; I think that was because he hoped eventually to land at Santa Maria, California. Obviously, he didn't know his geography very well, because he was headed for the wrong coast, but that's the way a lot of the people were back then, and that's pretty much the way they did things. Sometimes they didn't get completely ready. They just started off any old way.

The smallest boat, he called pinta, because if he found the fountain of youth, he was going to bring a pint back to Isabella, since it was her money he was

traveling on, and in Portuguese, pint is pinta. She gave him forty fifty-gallon drums to fill for her and bring back, but the business about the pint was their little joke. Some of the people back then had a sense of humor, even if they didn't speak much English.

They sailed forty days and forty nights. Some of the crew wanted to anchor nights, for safety, and Ponce would have been willing, at first anyway, but they never had enough rope on the anchor for it to reach bottom, so they just had to keep on sailing. That was a good thing, because their food and water would have run out before they got there if they anchored every night and waited till after breakfast to start out again.

They sailed through a lot of sea serpent-type ocean, but every time a serpent looked like it would attack the boats, they had a guy there to exercise them. He'd jump up, hold up a caduceus, and yell " $E=MC$ squared," and the serpent would go all weak. He'd do it again, and the serpent would just disappear, sink out of sight down into the deep blue sea.

When it was a line of dolphins or porpoises, instead of a serpent, nothing happened no matter what the guy yelled or held up, so that's how people first started to know dolphins and porpoises are intelligent mammals.

Years later, in history books, some people said the guy who exercised the serpents was Merwyn, the great magician. Part of the reason they said that was they said whenever he wasn't exercising serpents, all he ever did was sleep, but they weren't there, so how would they know? I don't think anybody really knows who he was, or a lot of other people on the boats. Most of the people

were extras, not in the main story, but just there to fill in space or to lift sails or take sails down, all that kind of stuff.

After forty days and forty nights, they landed at Plymouth rock. It was called Plymouth rock, because the Plymouth Indian tribe met them there. Later on, there were cars named after those Indians, because they gave corn, pumpkins and dead turkeys to Ponce de Leon and his people. But the cars were later on.

Ponce offered the Indians a whole chest full of beads and trinkets to trade for all their land. Ponce thought it was okay to call the people there Indians, because he didn't know where he was. He didn't know about native Americans or anything like that. He concentrated so hard about the fountain of youth, he didn't pay much attention to anything else.

The Indians he offered the beads to said, sure, why not? Go for it. They thought Ponce and his people were pretty dumb, but then, the Indians knew what was going to happen to that country, now that Europeans had landed, and Ponce didn't. Ponce didn't have any foresight. He had to explore all over, because he didn't know about visions.

Indians had visions of the future. They threw water on the rocks, rubbed bear grease in their hair, and jumped in the river. This gave them visions. Ponce de Leon didn't know about that, and he didn't have any bear grease. He didn't even know about bears, yet.

They got canoes from the Indians and hired on some of the Indians to paddle. They paddled up every river they could find, which was quite a few, because there

were more of them back then.

They explored all the land next to the rivers. They saw deer, bears, elk, moose, eagles, hawks and geese, but they only knew the names for hawks and geese, because that's all they had in Portugal, so that's all they ever told anybody about.

They had a lot of adventures with Indians. One of their guides and paddlers was named Hiawatha. She was beautiful and young, but very strong.

Hiawatha's father was president of the tribe, and he didn't like these invaders in his land. He captured Ponce and tied him up. He got ready to cut his head off.

Ponce said, "Talk him out of it, Hiawatha."

She said, "Speak for yourself, Ponce." He said it again, and so did she. Ponce probably didn't know those Indians had a rule, ask something three times, and it can't be refused, as long as it isn't illegal or against the ten commandments.

It was probably just coincidence that he asked the third time, so she couldn't turn him down. She had to say, "Don't do it, Dad."

Her dad said, "I'm all set up for it honey," and he started to swing the sword.

Hiawatha threw herself across Ponce's neck and said, "Cut this Portuguese, cut me," so her dad had to stop what he was doing and put the sword down.

Well, they explored for forty days and forty nights. They drank from hundreds of rivers and streams, and they drank from thousands of springs, but they never found anything that made them young, so they sailed forty days and forty nights back to Portugal.

Queen Isabella was pretty mad, but there wasn't much she could do except threaten to cut Ponce's head off for him and stomp her foot and look at all her grey hair in the mirror. Ponce had already been pretty close to getting his head cut off once, so he wasn't too scared of that, and he let Isabella stomp around and be mad until she threw him out of court, and he knew he'd be okay.

Ponce couldn't keep up the payments on the boats. He found gold when he was in the new world (it was the same old world, but new to him) but it wasn't what he was looking for, and it didn't make him young. He thought it would take up a lot of room he had to save for water when they found the fountain of youth, so he left most of it there. When he knew he wasn't going to find the right kind of water, and he would have plenty of room for gold, it was too late to go back for it. Everybody was mad at him, his crew and most of the Indians, and all the Portugese just wanted to go home and forget the whole thing.

Isabella repossessed the boats and sold them to someone else, probably George Washington, who sailed to the new world and stayed there so he could be president.

When Ponce de Leon was 162, he started thinking maybe he hadn't understood what a fountain of youth would do. He would have talked to Isabella about it, but she was long gone. He wondered which of the thousands of drinks he'd taken did the job.

He didn't know anyone influential any more. It goes that way for old people lots of times. They lose all the

influence they had, even if they have something sensible to say. Ponce didn't think he wanted to go through all that again anyway, especially since he didn't have any boats anymore. Hiawatha was bound to be long gone, so Ponce de Leon just knew what he knew and went on living.

Everybody was starting to get scientific by then. He knew they wouldn't believe him, so he moved often enough so nobody knew him too well and never thought to ask, "Why is it you never get old and die?" He didn't tell anybody what had happened.

Driving Dreams

When he was very young, Jason dreamed of a secret passage leading to a hidden habitation. In his house, hidden from everyone but Jason, a passage wound between the attic and the roof and led into a secret room. The passage into the hidden part of the house was very difficult. He was almost too big to get through. He bent, twisted, and struggled. He started to panic. He would be trapped in the tight, dark passage, but he emerged into the place no one else knew about, or in some dreams, only careful sharers of the secret.

The only place he knew of at all like that, in waking life, shared none of the numinous quality of the place in his dreams.

When he was seven, he and three other boys crawled down a tunnel in the earth into a room excavated from

the earth, covered with boards, with dirt on the boards deep enough that it seemed earth all around. Diggers of the hole had shaped benches from the earth all the way around the room.

A low table stood in the center of the room. Three candles lighted the earthen room. Two boys sat on the bench.

Several others came and jumped and landed hard on the roof above their heads, rapidly and continuously.

The boys inside the earth yelled in anger and terror, with no effect on the outside jumpers, he remembered that. Dirt fell from above them in streams, in clouds of dust, and Jason thought the roof would cave in on them. He knew then, for the first time, humans are capable of evil, and he knew evil is the ability to persist in cruel behavior without hearing the pleas of those affected.

He couldn't remember getting out of the cave. He couldn't remember what happened afterward. He couldn't remember where that was. He couldn't remember who the other boys were nor what they looked like.

In his dreams of secret passageways, someone waits for him, no one he knows in his waking life, but in his dreams, someone he looks forward to rejoining.

Jason grows up. He begins to understand the meaning of his dreams about the difficult passage into a secret room. Then he sees it isn't meaning but meanings, and he wonders, why isn't art more like dreaming? Why isn't life more like dreaming?

After he learned to drive, the second dream began, a simple, short dream. He drove his house.

He sat down at the controls and drove the house out onto the streets and highways. He mingled with traffic. He merged, passed, stopped and started. People in cars, busses, and trucks drove about their business, and no one paid him any more attention than they would have if he had been driving a car or a truck.

He had to be cautious about the size of what he drove and the extensions of it he couldn't see, but the people in other vehicles gave him room and worked with him, so his trips at the controls of his house always went just fine. He always found a place to park when he needed to park.

In waking life, Jason sometimes thought there really was a set of controls like in the dreams. Some houses really could be driven, if he could just get to the place where the controls were. When he was in the kitchen, they were in the bedroom. If he walked into the bedroom, the control place was in the bathroom or upstairs, at his desk. He paced the house rapidly, searching, trying to catch up, until his wife, Paula, said, "What are you after?"

He stopped short and said, "Nothing. Nothing. Just pacing," and then he was just pacing, and driving houses was all just dreams, fading from his consciousness.

Communication with his children became more difficult. Jason thought they were a close family, touching, confiding in each other, and depending on each other, but that seemed to be slipping away from them. Jase refused to be called Jase now. His name was Jason, and he wouldn't be called Junior. The Second

was acceptable. Otherwise, Jason, and, at that, don't call him anything most of the time. Just leave him alone.

He had his world and his friends, and he didn't want to share that world with his parents. And Pauline seemed to model her behavior after his. His children were growing into a secret world, with little room for parents and other adults.

And Paula, his wife, more and more, seemed distant. If he touched her, she recoiled. If he tried to discuss what was happening to their family, to the modern world, she wasn't there. Her attention wandered, or she didn't have time to sit and talk. She sighed and said, "Jason, we've talked this over a dozen times before, and it hasn't gotten us anywhere. Why would it get us anywhere now?" She walked away.

Paula was away from home more and more. Most of the time, Jason didn't know where she was. He didn't know if changes in the way she lived were a result of what was happening with the children or something else entirely. He had dreamlike intimations of breakup, some kind of tragedy, something unpredictable and understandable.

His job stayed dependably the same. The same place, the same routines, the same people. He could count on his work staying the same. He lost himself in his work.

He made more money than he needed, but money didn't buy him the feeling that he was achieving anything. It didn't buy him love. It didn't buy him peace. The work he did didn't damage the world, but neither did it bring about any positive change.

He drove buildings in his dreams now, not just

houses.

Years ago, the third day of their move east, a major change into his managerial, high-paying job, a big step toward financial success, evening falling, darkness calling, exhaustion settled on everyone in the family, but he had misunderstood the lay of cities and highways, and they had driven beyond the last motel for a long ways.

Except, there on the left, an old place. The restaurant was open. Jason and Jason Jr. and Paula and Pauline went in and ordered dinner. Paula asked about the motel.

The waitress said, "They rent out some of the rooms during hunting season, but that's all they use it anymore."

"Would you consider renting us a room? We really don't want to go any farther tonight."

The man who was cooking came out of the kitchen. "The rooms haven't been cleaned. They could be used, but they're a mess."

They went back and looked at the rooms, and they were a mess. Jason felt lost and helpless, but Paula said, "We can clean them up and use our own bedding and towels." Jason couldn't see how they could do it, but Paula told him to sit and rest, and she and the kids cleaned and got the beds ready in two adjoining rooms. They built fires in the stoves. The rent was so cheap, their meals that night and the next morning and the room rent added up to less than a regular motel room. Jason thought the waitress and the cook might keep the room rent and not tell the owners anyone had been

there.

Before morning, he relaxed. Everything was okay. Even the dirty bathrooms were okay. Paula put newspapers on the floor and cleaned the toilet and the shower. You didn't have to touch the dirt to use the toilet or to take a shower.

The highway ran by close in front. The river ran beyond the highway. Wild white water roared down the deep, steeply-falling canyon. The traffic ran busy and noisy. The river ran high in its banks, full with the mountain melt off of early spring.

Now, years later, he drives that motel in his dreams. He pulls out onto the highway and continues the trip east in the ragged old motel.

Sometimes his wife and children climb the mountain above the motel. They wave at him and continue climbing. They know he's just out for a drive, and he'll come back for them. Sometimes they stand by him in the control room or ride along in some other part of the motel, and they drive together toward some important destination.

Someday, when he has time, he will investigate the fragmented state of his memory of childhood. Many of the people he knows have a much more complete memory of their childhood. They draw energy and guidance from that memory, from the unbroken continuity of their lives.

This he remembers as part of the continuity of his adult life, not as a fragment. He was 26, living with Anna Leese. They visited Randy and his wildly extended family in the big house on the ridge. Too

many people lived in the house. The toilet was plugged, but some of the people used it anyway. That whole side of the house stank like defecation.

In the evening, five adults climbed into the attic. There were no stairs. They climbed slats of wood nailed to a closet wall, through a trapdoor, crawled down a small passageway into an open, light, airy room behind the chimney, with a skylight open to the stars. They spent the night in the high, secret room. Whatever disorder there was in the lower house and its surrounding faded and then was gone.

He mentioned his dreams of passages to secret places of habitation and found he was not alone. Other people had similar dreams.

Randy said, "I never will build a stairway up here. We don't tell people about this room. I don't want most people in my dreams. Lela and me built it like this because of our dreams. Now we come up here sometimes and dream."

They stayed in the room and shut off the lights, no opening to the world around them but the skylight open to the summer sky with all its stars and the heavens above them. In the morning, they climbed out the skylight and sat in morning sunlight on the roof, silent, for a long time.

That was a long time ago. Anna Leese went her own way.

Jason met and courted Paula. They married, and he settled into a good job. They bought a house and a bigger house. They had children, and the children grew, and his dreams became more mundane, he thought. He

didn't remember most of them, so he wasn't sure.

Nothing turned out like he thought it would. The physical details of his life were much like he would have predicted, but the measure of satisfaction he had expected wasn't there.

He had thought everything would get steadily calmer and more secure. The family would knit together tighter and tighter, and their goals would be clear. They would achieve many of them. The world would become more and more comfortable.

It hadn't turned out like that. It had something to do with the way the world had changed in the last thirty years, he was sure of that.

Sunday morning, he paced the house. Paula left. She had said "A church function." About ten years before, she had stopped asking him to go with her to church functions. He never said, "Yes," so why would she keep asking?

Jason the second left with his tennis racket. Jason the first didn't even know where Pauline had disappeared to.

Jason paced the house. He wondered why he felt so discontented. It had crept up on him a little bit at a time, until he faced deep discontentment, almost a sense of emergency. So much depended on his family, and they weren't even there to talk with. He walked up the stairs and down the stairs and through the downstairs and then up the stairs again.

When he walked into his study the second time, the controls to drive the house were there, right at his desk.

He was not dreaming. He was awake. These were

unlike any controls he had ever used in his waking life, but he knew how to work them, because he remembered them from a dream.

He sat down at his desk, looked at the controls, and reached for them, then stopped before he touched them. He got up and opened the windows in front of his desk and the east window. It was a beautiful day, with the sun just clearing the mountains. Less smog hung above the city east of the house than he'd seen in a long time.

He sat back down, took a deep breath, released it slowly, and eased the house off the foundation.

It wasn't going to be like his dreams. The house didn't glide smoothly off the foundation like it did in dreams but ripped away. Wood tore, squealed as nails gave way and wood scraped across wood and then broke into shattered fragments. Concrete shattered, and the loud explosions echoed through the neighborhood.

He thought he could ease by the big spruce tree he'd always worried might fall on the house, but the house didn't respond minutely to his actions at the controls, the way buildings always did in dreams. He lurched up against the tree. He pulled back on the controls, but the house wouldn't stop as fast as he wanted it to but pushed harder against the tree.

The tree tipped slowly away. A piece of ground almost as large as the garden ripped up with the roots and took part of the driveway. That side of the house rose higher and higher as the roots levered it up. The house finally responded to his efforts at the controls, and he backed away as the tree slammed through power lines and telephone lines, crashed down and hit the

ground so hard, he felt the house hesitate and shake. The root wad threw dirt into the air. A cloud of dust moved toward him on summer's breeze. Dust poured in through the open windows.

One corner of the house dropped into the hole left by the torn up roots of the fallen tree. Jason pushed the forward control again, poured on power, and brought the house out of the hole and into the street.

He was glad Paula and the kids were out in the world that morning. He would not have wanted to miss this opportunity.

Square in the street, he slid the lever forward and picked up speed. Always in dreams, he fit wherever he wanted to go. Now, he uprooted two small elms between the sidewalk and the street and ripped down telephone wires with the chimney. He'd have to head for wider roads. Out the bypass and onto the freeway would be good.

Something else was unlike his dreams; none of the other people driving that early Sunday morning took it as normal that a house would take to the road. People stared. People yelled. People were afraid and got out of the way. At least they got out of the way.

He couldn't stop the house. He could slow it down, but he couldn't bring it to a complete stop. Jam and jam on the brakes, and the building wouldn't stop. It just moved ponderously forward and refused to answer his commands.

Okay. Okay. Roll then. He would figure out how to stop eventually. He didn't want to stop now anyway. He wanted to drive to wider roads, put on some speed, and

see how this house cruised.

Thirty miles an hour on the bypass, then 60 on the freeway. The house handled easily, once he had room to roll and once he got up some speed. Warm wind blew through the open windows, messed up his hair, caressed his face. He liked the wind.

He wondered what Paula would do when she got home. Probably, she would call the insurance company and the police.

He might have stopped for the police cars if he could have stopped. He could maneuver, slow down, speed up, but he couldn't stop. He didn't know how. No matter what he did, the house kept rolling. So he racked it up to 85, 100, 120. He didn't know if the police cars were still with him. He wished he had a rearview mirror. He couldn't see anything but straight ahead and east, or east when the house had been stationary. He didn't know what it was now, left.

He had to think what to do. Maybe if he slowed way down, he could communicate and let them know he couldn't stop the house. It was beyond his control. That rankled. What if they boarded and took control and showed him how to do it?

He could communicate with them and not let them board.

As he thought, he let it slow. 75, 60, 45, 40. Police cars all around him, flashing lights messing up the sunlight. 38, 35, 34. He couldn't bring it down any slower. Voices on loudspeakers and sirens, and two helicopters overhead.

He thought, had I known how it would go, I would

have designed my office bulletproof. He hopes they won't sacrifice a car, stop in front of him when he really and truly can't get it under 34 mph.

They swarm around him like flies. He can't stand their noisy, officious efforts. He'd better get out in front far enough that he can figure out what to do. He steps it to 41, then 47, 59, 73, 111.

They clear a way for him, but as he passes them, glass from the east windows shatters into the wind. Then jagged little holes appear in the wall to his left, and bullets pop the air beside his ear.

The windows in front of him shatter into thousands of pieces. The wind of his high speed blows the glass through the room. Glass cuts him, forehead, hands, below the right eye. Nothing hurts. He isn't bleeding much, yet. He punches it and watches the needle climb, 151, 187, 209. If it was all cars, he wouldn't have a problem, but here come the choppers and the planes.

Damn, he thinks. Randy knew what he was doing. He didn't get all the way there, but he was trying. Maybe he got closer and closer, these years since.

I'm the one who designed this house. Why didn't I design a secret passage and a habitat, a place where everyone in my family has room and reason to grow, still closely knit, toward eternity? Why did I forget to take care of living, all the critical years of my life?

All Jason can think of to do is push the control and watch the needle climb.

Buffalo Thunder

The copter chopped away over the ridge, whap, whap, whap sound of foils slapping air growing faint.

Diesel engine revved, and the truck pulled the last trailer load of cattle away from the loading pens, rolled toward the highway, running slow down the winding dirt road.

Horse and rider turned, climbed diagonally up the ridge, along it to the big ridge. They stopped there and listened to the diesel as it pulled onto the highway and geared up to speed.

Out of hearing. Jack eased in the saddle. Just him and the horse. And quiet.

He didn't mind working with the chopper. It saved many rough hours work for horses and men. But when it finished its rapid work and left, he relaxed again.

"Next," he said to his horse, "they'll have mechanical horses. Lot of places right now, they use Jeeps and motorcycles. I've seen sheep drives, two men on Honda 90s, two dogs. But next is an articulated horse, legs, no wheels."

He picked up the reins, and they started up the ridge. "A mechanical horse wouldn't need a man to ride on it. You could put the controls in the horse to handle all the decisions. Take it out, wind it up, turn it loose, and wait at the pens for the cows to show up."

He pulled up the reins. Dust rose above the trees. Heavy rumble of hooved animals at a gallop.

"Hup." He kneed his horse, and they headed up through trees. Out of the trees into meadows.

"Buffalo," he shouted. "My God, it's a whole herd of buffalo." He urged his horse and galloped alongside the herd. He slapped his forehead to clear or strike away the image, but there was still a naked Indian riding crouched, bow ready, closing in on the herd. Then Jack remembered.

He screamed, "Stop. Stop." But the Indian heard only buffalo-hoof thunder and rode into the barbed wire fence at a full gallop. The buffalo slammed through another hundred yards of fence. One bull, skewered on a steel fence post, struggled to run and then died. Several of the animals milled about, stunned or injured. The buffalo closest to him snorted and trotted away toward the herd still galloping up the meadow. Jack rode to where the Indian had hit the fence.

The Indian was dead. A large bull lay near him, still alive, but bleeding in gushes where the tightly stretched barbed wire had slashed his nose and throat. His front legs were broken. He looked at Jack and snorted blood, tried to rise, but sank back to the ground, mewling in pain.

Jack knelt by the Indian. He didn't know what to do yet. He just waited to see if thoughts would come to him.

Two horses galloped. Two Indians hit the dirt running. Jack backed, showed his hands. They knelt by their dead companion.

One of them stood and walked toward Jack. Sorrow and anger lit his eyes as he motioned Jack to mount and ride.

Jack mounted and rode. Before he entered timber, he

turned and looked back. The Indians walked to where the fence was still standing and looked at it.

Curt said, "Indians. Buffalo. Jack, I think you'd better stay in town a while, take a vacation. Loneliness can cause hallucinations, you know."

"Have your fun. We got about a hundred yards of fence to rebuild, and while we're checking that job out, you can have a look at a few interesting things in the area."

The dead Indian was gone. Jack said, "They took him, of course."

"Of course."

"Curt, look around. Can't you see this busted down fence?"

"Where's the dead buffalo? You said there was dead and dying buffalo all over."

"Look at the tracks. Look at this. What's this if it isn't buffalo blood? They took them. They were hunting buffalo, so they took them."

"Two Indians? Two Indians took what, twelve buffalo, a dead Indian, a dead horse? Buffalo? There's private buffalo herds, and maybe some buffalo could show up, and something sure tore this fence up, but two bona fide wild, naked Indians?"

"Three. And they were just some of the hunters, out shooting buffalo for the whole tribe. Enough Indians to handle a dozen buffalo or more."

"You're living in the movies, Jack. Okay. I'll be in the movies with you enough to check this rifle and say we'd better pick up a couple helpers before we start rebuilding fence."

"They didn't offer me any harm. They could have captured or killed me easy as not."

"They're busting up fences."

Jack, Curt, Riley, and Earl rode through the trees and reined up, sat their mounts and looked down into the meadows. Riley spat tobacco juice and said, "Buffalo. Double-damned and dirty if that ain't buffalo. Sit easy. They ain't winded us."

They watched the herd graze a while. Earl said, "I haven't seen any Indians yet, but I don't feel like joking about it anymore."

"There's two for you." Two hunters rode slowly along the opposite ridge, well down from the top.

"They're flanking the herd. Gonna hit it high and try to split it."

Curt loosened his rifle in its scabbard. Jack said, "Don't be too ready with rifles. Nobody's offered us any harm."

"They haven't seen us yet either."

Some of the buffalo shied from the approaching hunters, trotted away. The motion spread through the herd as more and more buffalo began to move.

"Hey, they're coming this way."

"They won't run the trees. They'll stay in the open."

"Here they come." Hundreds of buffalo broke into a gallop. Hoof thunder rumbled up the mountain. Sudden dust obscured the Indians.

Riley's horse bucked and tried to bolt. Riley rode him down, pulled him around, spurred him forward. "Buffalo hunt," he yelled and galloped directly toward the herd, turned to flank it, and pulled his rifle from its

scabbard under his leg.

"Riley, you crazy. You crazy dumb idiot. You're nuts," Earl yelled and slapped his horse, kicked his ribs, galloped toward the dust-thundering, tightly-packed herd. He pulled his carbine, leaned out of the saddle. His hat spun into the rising dust.

"Indians. You guys aren't even thinking about Indians. Nuts. Slipped your gourds. Gone buffalo mad." Curt cradled his rifle across his saddle. The rest of the herd galloped past. Curt urged his horse to a gallop, up the meadow, aiming to cut across the curve the herd was taking along the timber.

Jack stayed where he was. If Riley was right and they wouldn't run trees, the buffalo that went up would be back because they'd run out of meadow. In about a mile and a half. That would be the place for hunters, because the herd would be boxed by the dense forest there. He didn't want to shoot any buffalo or any Indians.

Rifle fire. Evenly spaced. "That's Riley. Gets a bead on a buffalo, drops it, picks another, steady for a good shot. Or Earl. Maybe both now. Don't shoot any Indians. Don't start any trouble."

The herd rumbled toward him from up the meadow. Down the meadow, rapid gunfire. The distinctive bellow of Curt's magnum. "Curt wouldn't be shooting buffalo." Rifle fire. Then no rifle fire.

The herd galloped down, and Jack saw one of the hunters drop a buffalo. The hunter didn't see him.

He started down the way the herd had gone. He knew it was safer to head out, but he had to know what

happened.

Dead buffalo lay here and there down through the meadows. Jack thought of keeping to timber, but he didn't. He just rode down through the interconnected meadows counting dead buffalo.

Then the butchering party, men and women on foot, with pack animals, saw him. One of the men mounted a horse and galloped away. The rest of the Indians watched him with their weapons ready. He circled them widely and rode up toward the timber. They set to butchering and skinning.

Then he saw more Indians than he could have imagined, mounted and riding toward him. He wanted to ride toward them, say, "I told them not to shoot. I haven't fired on you, and I won't."

Thunder of Curt's magnum. One of the Indians has it, and Jack is his target. He turned, urged his horse to a gallop. Headed toward timber. "You're right, though. What do you mean, we, white man?"

Full gallop, leaning low over his horse, diagonal to the Indian's line of sight. The magnum thundered again and then again. "Takes a little practice to use a telescopic sight on a moving target."

The wounded bull charged before he or his horse was aware of it. Jack kicked loose from the saddle as his horse went down. He tried to land rolling, but he was sure he broke his shoulder. Up, running, crouched. He gathered his injured arm to his chest. Timber close ahead. "Where's the cavalry, where's the cavalry? Where's the double-damned chopper when I really need it?"

Run. Zigging. Zagging. Magnum thundering, sharp snap of bullets. Dust puffed ahead of him. Rifle fire again. Hooves thundered on the meadow dirt.

Ansel and Eagle

Ansel said, "Mom, I went up the hill this morning, and an eagle landed in front of me, and I rode on him. We flew way up the canyon and back."

"Ansel, an eagle couldn't carry a boy as big as you are."

When his dad came home from work, Ansel asked him, "Dad, could an eagle carry a boy as big as me?"

"No. You weigh, what? Sixty-five pounds, I think. I don't think even a big eagle could carry more than three or four pounds."

Early the next morning, Ansel hiked up the hill behind the house, through white oak trees, around thick patches of poison oak with bright red leaves, and up through manzanita to his high place at the top of the first hill. The sharp smell of ceonothus and whitethorn mixed with the dry, red-dust smell of the hot summer day.

At the top of the hill, he sat down on his rock and watched the sky. High above the mountain, the great bird circled. He dove for the ground, opened his wings, landed in front of Ansel and folded his wings. Ansel saw his own tiny image reflected in the bird's intense black eyes.

"You're not an eagle."

"I'm not? You said I was."

"I guess I was wrong. An eagle could carry a rabbit, but not a seven-year old who weighs sixty-five pounds."

"I see." The bird looked down the hill and around. He spread his wings and said, "Do you want to fly again?"

"Yes." Ansel climbed onto the bird's shoulders, and they leaped into the air and flew down the hill. Ansel's hair blew in the wind.

The bird climbed the air with steady flexion of powerful wings, above Carpenter's ridge, above thick fir and pine forest, sharp evergreen smell and sunshine high in the clear air. Birds sang in the trees and brush below them. Sunlight reflected bright from the river.

"Am I too heavy for you?"

"No. You don't weigh anything."

Ansel laughed. "A bird's-eye view. I'm light as a feather and flock together."

The bird came up steep, and Ansel clasped his neck to keep from sliding off. The eagle thrust his wings down against the air and climbed until Ansel said, "This is really high. This is higher than yesterday. Wow, look at that. I can't even see where the house is." They flew nearly flat then, wing-locked glide high above the changing earth, as time fell away from them until Ansel sat partway up against the wind and pulled them up toward a stall. "I want to turn around."

"Afraid?"

"Yes."

"Too high? Too fast?"

"No. Just, I've never been so far from home before."
They banked a long, slow curve and glided straight and fast back the way they had come.

The bird said, "Want to dive?"

"Yes."

"Lock on tight."

Head down, wings curved in close, straight down, wind sang past them Ansel wanted to say, "I'm afraid," but he had no voice. He shut his eyes and held on tight. He felt heavy, heavier as they curved flat, as if he would compress and pass down into the bird's body. He lightened as they came up level, and they landed back on the hill.

Ansel got off and sat down on his rock. He didn't say anything for a long time. Then he asked, "How many miles did we go today?"

The bird said, "What's a mile?"

That evening, Ansel said, "Dad, is there a bigger bird than an eagle?"

"Gee, I don't know Ansel. I think a condor is bigger, at least maybe a longer wing spread, but I really don't know much about birds."

"A condor is like a vulture, isn't it?"

"A carrion eater, yes."

"That wouldn't be it."

His father put down the book he was reading. "Want to go to the library? We could see what information and pictures they have there."

The next day, Ansel told the bird, "Eagle. You look like an eagle, talons, wings, beak, eyes, everything, but

if anybody's ever seen an eagle like you before, they haven't written about it in any of those books. Do you have a name for yourself?"

"What's a name?"

"I'll still call you Eagle."

Eagle said, "Do you want to fly?"

That evening, Ansel said, "Dad, how far is the ocean from here?"

"About a hundred and twenty miles, as the crow flies."

"As the eagle flies."

"Straight over, anyway. By road, it's about a hundred and eighty."

Saturday after dinner, his mother asked, "What did you study at the library today, Ansel?"

"I was just seeing what some places looked like up in the hills over there."

"Topographical maps?" his father asked. Ansel nodded.

"Ever look at any south of here?"

"We don't go south. He says there's too many cities."

His mother said, "He?"

Ansel didn't say anything, and his mother said, "Who's he?"

"He doesn't have a name. Or else his name is Eagle. Anyway, he's that eagle I told you about, only he's not an eagle. He looks like a predatory bird; he's built like an eagle, but he's a lot bigger than an eagle."

"A predatory bird bigger than an eagle? You saw one around here?"

"I told you about it a long time ago."

"Oh. I remember that. You said you rode on his back when he flew."

"Yes. And I wasn't afraid. Once, I got scared and asked him to turn around, but I was scared because we were getting so far from home, not because we were too high or fast. We go farther sometimes now, but I don't worry. I know where we are now, and I know I'll always get home. We flew every day except when it rained, and then the day after that, I asked him to bring me back right away because it was just too cold up there."

"Ansel."

"What?"

"Oh, I don't know what. Ansel, would you take me up there and show me that bird?"

"Katherine, that's not necessary."

"But Ron..."

"The bird might not want to be around people, and it should be his choice."

Ansel's mother looked at his father as if she were going to say something more, but she didn't say anything. When Ansel was telling them good night, his mother said, "Ansel, what if you fell off?"

"He said if I fell, he could catch me and carry me, but I haven't even slipped."

It rained a few days, and then the bird didn't show up for the next several days, but on a sunny morning, Ansel went back to the top of the hill. Eagle screamed, a black, circling spot high in the hot sky and came down in a deadfall dive, pulled his wings out at treetop height and stooped to puff dust where he landed in front

of Ansel.

"Eagle."

"Ansel. Today we have something to do. Can you go to the ocean?"

"Yes."

They took off and flew higher than Ansel had ever been. Then they dove into a shallow glide that took them quickly west. They flew too low approaching the coast range, and Eagle veered north. They rode a thermal current that rose from rock bluffs and carried them higher and higher.

Eagle said, "Sometimes you work your wings, and sometimes you just stretch out on the wind." He spilled warm air past his wings, banked west and leveled off. They cleared the pass through the mountains just above treetops. Then the mountain fell steeply away from them, and Eagle dove.

They soared down the intense wind, treetop high, curved tiny wing motions and followed the contour of the land toward the great curve of the ocean. Ansel rode far forward and watched the earth rush below them, molded himself to Eagle's form and let the air flow by. Above high cliffs that rose from the beach, Eagle folded his wings and plummeted down, a wing's length from the jagged stone face, braked just above the sand, and settled on the beach. Ansel stepped off and took a moment to get his legs steady under him.

Eagle said, "Wait here," and flew up over the cliffs, south and out of sight.

Ansel found shells and anemones and small fish in stone pools at the end of the narrow beach that gave

access only to fliers and swimmers. The sharp clean smell of the ocean made him feel strong.

The sun moved. The sea retreated farther down the beach. Eagle came back. He had another bird with him, and that bird had a passenger. When they landed, she dismounted from the bird's shoulders and came over and said, "My name is Brook."

"Hello. I'm Ansel. This bird is named Eagle."

"So is this one."

"Where do you live?"

"Not very far up there. But I've never been to this beach before."

The bird Ansel knew first, who was smaller and of a less intense red on his head and neck came to Ansel and Brook. "If you would like, tomorrow we can begin to teach you to fly."

"Would we like?"

"By ourselves? Fly by ourselves?"

"I want to. I want to, but we don't have wings or feathers. We aren't built like you are."

"It isn't necessary. We have wings and feathers because we are birds. You won't need them because you are not birds."

At dinner, Ansel said, "Dad, do you think it would be possible for a boy like me to fly?"

"Sure. On a hang glider or in a plane."

"Ansel, you're not going on a hang glider. You're too young for that."

"No. I mean just fly like a bird. With nothing."

"I don't know, Ansel. Have you tried it?"

"I did sometimes, a long time ago. You know, run

and try to move my arms like wings, but I never did fly. But I didn't know what to do then. They'll show us how. They said they'd teach us."

"Who's they, Ansel?"

"Eagles."

"There's more than one?"

"Two. They're both named Eagle." He told them about the flight to the coast and about Brook and the other Eagle.

His mother said, "Ansel, this is too much. Huge eagles that fly around with boys and girls on their backs and talk and promise to teach you to fly. You can't fly. You must stop making up these stories."

"Katherine, how do we know he's making it up just because it doesn't fit with what we know? Did you ever have a bird try to teach you to fly and fail at it?"

"Do you mean you think I could do it?"

"I don't know, Ansel. It seems to me that if anyone could teach you, a bird could, because they're experts at it, especially eagles. You're not built for flight, but they say a bumblebee isn't either, and we've all seen bumblebees fly."

His mother said, "Ansel, how are they going to teach you to fly? Take you up and drop you?"

"I don't know. They didn't say how they'd do it. I guess they'd do it like that."

"What if they dropped you and you couldn't fly?"

"I don't know. What do you mean?"

"If they dropped you and you couldn't fly, wouldn't you smash into the ground?"

"No. They wouldn't let that happen."

"I don't like it. Ron, how fast would he be falling? What if they couldn't catch him?"

"Katherine, two minutes ago, you didn't believe him at all. Now you're worried that he won't live through it. If I'd had a chance like this when I was seven or eight years old and my mother stopped me from trying it, I would never have forgiven her."

Katherine said, "Ansel, do you think Eagle would talk to me if I went up there with you?"

"I don't know."

"Would it be okay with you if I tried?"

"I guess so. What if I ask Eagle tomorrow about the next day?"

Katherine and Ansel hiked up the hill together, and Eagle didn't hesitate but landed on the hilltop, and all three talked together. Ansel's mother went back down to the house.

She said, "He is very real. If anything, Ansel was conservative when he estimated his size. He still doesn't seem big enough to carry that much weight, but every time I mentioned it, he just said that Ansel weighed nothing, until I realized that he means it literally. I don't pretend to understand what's going on, but I came away with complete confidence that Ansel is safe. He's in good hands, er, talons."

Ron said, "Katherine, I think allowing Ansel all his fantasies is good for him. It encourages creativity. It's been encouraging his education, because he wants to learn a lot about some of the real world that's closely related to his fantasy. Creating an adventuresome story beats letting his mind be absorbed by television. But I

didn't... It surprises me that you're so ready to join in the fantasy. I mean, in front of him is one thing, but just the two of us?"

"Ron, if I had known you weren't expressing an honest view of the situation I would have consulted with you before I let him go."

"I, uh. It was honest. Actually, it was honest. If he can fly, and if he wants to fly, he should fly. I just hadn't thought it out well in a real situation, because I didn't think it was a real situation. I had an imaginary companion when I was about his age, a man I called Spaghetti Johnson. He took me flying in his airplane. Sometimes he let me fly it, and we rode horses and climbed mountains, all kinds of adventures. My parents convinced me I should give up that fantasy, and it dimmed my enjoyment of my childhood. They were worried about my sanity. Anyway, I resolved long ago that I would never try to squash my children's fantasies."

Katherine said, "Well, here it comes, Ansel, Eagle, fantasy and all. "They watched the great bird fly down above them and bank sharply, not more than twenty feet above them. Ansel's father saw him quite clearly, stretched out on the bird's back, holding onto his neck.

Ansel waved and called out, "See, Mom, Dad, it's all right."

Ron tipped his head back so far to look up that Katherine had to catch him to keep him from falling.

"Kathy, are you sure he's safe?"

"Eagle doesn't even understand the concept that Ansel could come to harm. I'm his mother, and I came

away feeling confident."

"Oh my. What did I jump into? I didn't jump into it. Ansel did. Kathy, I guess there's nothing for me to do but rely on your confidence."

On the beach by the surf, smells of the ocean and seaweed and birds blew in sunshine. Brook said, "You shouldn't have told your parents."

"What do you tell your parents when they ask where you've been?"

"They don't ask. I've always gone for long walks, and I haven't been away longer since I met Eagle. We haven't gone as far as you have, though."

Eagle took Ansel up very high and dropped him, folded his wings and fell beside him. "Spread your wings now. More. Lay out flatter. That's good. Just glide. Good. You're going forward. Feel the motion? You're also still falling. Lay out on the air, spread your wings wider. Feel the air rushing past? Keep it from going by you. That's good. That's better." Eagle picked him out of the air just above the ocean, and they flew back to the beach.

Brook said, "You went a long way forward, and it looked like you almost stopped falling once, but then you fell again."

"I got scared when the water started getting close, and I think I stopped trying when I got scared. I didn't know where Eagle was anymore."

The eagles called them over. They walked around Ansel, had him spread his arms and legs as if he were flying and studied him. The largest bird said, "Fledglings may fall the first time. Brook, do you want

to fly?"

Brook fell a long way before she did anything at all. Then she spread her wings, turned into her downward motion, and curved up in a smooth arc, soared flat out over the ocean and curved back toward the beach. When she tried to gain more altitude, she fell out of flight and plummeted toward the beach. Eagle grasped her shoulders and slowed her fall the last twenty feet. She landed, sat down hard, and looked stunned. Ansel said, "Brook, are you all right?"

She looked up at him as if she didn't know who he was. "I got afraid. I didn't know how to land, so I gave up, and then I fell."

The eagles conferred, and for the next two days, they took Ansel and Brook on their backs and flew hundreds of maneuvers. "This is how you stall. Just stand up, present your wings like this, fall straight down. Now, come in low, do that right above the ground, like this, come up, pick up the air, put your feet down, standing on the ground. Another way is to stoop from a ways up, like this, stoop, fall straight down. Now, raise your wings, catch the air, more, more, wing thrust down. Here we are on the ground."

"There's nothing wrong with falling. It's part of flying. Fall, like this, turn, wings balanced, back into flight. If you fall, don't be afraid, just roll like this, catch yourself, up again."

"Take off like this. Stretch up tall, reach up, thrust down hard but short, reach, thrust. Off a branch or a cliff is easy. Just lean out, spread your wings, fall onto them, into a glide, like this."

Ansel's father asked him, "How are the flying lessons coming along?"

"Pretty well. We really fly sometimes. We go forward without falling for a ways, turn and dive. Diving or stooping is easy, because you're trying to go down, like falling, but under control. Neither of us has been able to gain much altitude or take off at all. Landing is hard, because we can't stall up to a dead stop very well.

"We got to where we are fast, but we haven't made much progress for a while. Eagle says what we need to do now is work on our thoughts. He says we must go back and unlearn everything we've been told that says we can't fly, and then we'll fly."

When Brook landed on the sand, Ansel said, "You looked like a bird then. I mean a real bird, with wings and feathers."

Then Eagle dropped Ansel, and he caught the air and it felt right. It was right. He banked, gained, banked again to glide, and in part of his mind, he knew he had wings and feathers and a tail fan that was one with his thought of flight, but he didn't think about it, just flew, up, up, up, toward the sun, a strong bank, and a screaming fast glide back toward the beach, straight up above the cliffs. Eagle flew up beside him; they both rolled up on their wings, heartbeat close, before they turned out away from each other and then close again in a falling spiral to land on the beach.

The four of them stayed on the beach a long time without saying anything at all. Then Brook said, "The sun's almost down. I have to go back." She leaped into

the air, flew south along the cliffs and then high over them, flying inland. Ansel took the high sky, to fly across the mountains home.

Ansel thought Brook might have been right in not telling her parents. It had been all right before to talk to his mom and dad about flying, but he didn't know now. Everything had changed.

He avoided conversation for several days. He woke before daylight every morning, hiked up the hill and flew from there at first light, low along the river. He watched the early morning life, glided above the bluffs west of the canyon and caught the first updrafts as sunshine struck the dark rocks and developed heat.

Sometimes he flew very high up, plummeted and broke into a long, very fast glide before turning homeward. Sometimes Eagle joined him, and they flew together before Ansel turned back home, still quite early.

When he flew up into the high mountains, he saw the dogwood changing to red and the aspen to yellow. A hundred hues of fall color spread toward lower elevations. Frost lingered in the mornings. Ansel could not describe the smells of dirt, plants, animals, water, frost, the earth moving slowly toward winter, but he breathed deeply, and the rich smells became part of his existence in flight above the earth.

School would start soon. Even more than other years, he did not want to go.

He talked to Brook about it. She said, "I like school. Mine starts in two weeks, but I can fly out here after school, and you can fly over on weekends."

"Brook, you know, we could live like this. Just fly, just stay out."

"Where would we sleep? What would we eat?"

"Sleep in a tree. Eat rabbits and mice."

"Raw? Without cooking them? Not me. I like to fly, but I like being a girl too, and I like going to school, and I will never eat raw meat."

Ansel talked to Eagle about it. Eagle asked, "What's a school?"

"Well, it's a place people go to be taught. You taught us to fly. So we had a school, except usually in schools, there's hundreds of kids and a lot of teachers, and it's all in a building."

"Do they teach you to fly?"

"No. Eagle, I don't want to go back to that school. What can I do?"

"I know nothing of schools. Speak with your parents about this question and seek the guidance of Spirit."

His dad said, "In an indirect way, you can learn to fly in school. You can learn the mathematics, the communication, the science, and you can learn to be a pilot."

"To an eagle, an airplane is obscene."

"Yes. I can see that. Ansel, your mother should join us in this conversation."

One question his mother asked was, "How do Brook's parents react to this?"

"They don't. They don't know about it. She's happy to go to school, live just like always, be a girl."

"Aren't you happy to be a boy?"

"Yes. But I'm not happy to go to school. If being a

boy means I have to go to school, then maybe I wouldn't be happy to be a boy."

"You said maybe. Do you mean you're not sure?"

"No. Not positively sure."

"Would you start school, give it a good try, and we can talk about it again when you're positive one way or another?"

Two weeks later, Ansel said, "I really tried. Everything is too different now. They try to make us be something instead of trying to teach us anything. The first year they said we'd have to learn how to pay attention, work together, be obedient and clean and considerate and next year they'd teach us something real. Then the next year, they said, 'Well, that kind of learning starts later. First you have to learn how to learn by doing all these stupid exercises.'"

Ron said, "Didn't the birds give you exercises to do before you learned to fly?"

"No. They didn't make us practice something else before we could learn to fly. They started right with that. And we didn't have to learn to be good in a class inside a building before they took us outside and taught us to fly."

"But Ansel, you can't see where your education is going. You're learning many valuable things that you won't know the value of for years."

"That's not right. Just because I'm eight years old doesn't mean I'm stupid. Most kids, their parents and teachers tell them, 'Oh, you're just a child, so you can't understand that, so don't think about it,' or, what about, 'Of course not. Boys and girls can't fly,' and most of the

kids don't know any better, so they just accept it. They say, 'I'm just a kid. I'm dumb, you know, like all kids are, and so are you. Later, we'll get smarter, with a lot of years of teaching from adults.'

"The adults teach us to be small, and I don't want to learn that. Do you want me to learn that?"

They both said, "No." Ansel's father said, "Why haven't we known that before?"

Katherine said, "Maybe we thought, 'We're dumb. We have to accept what's available, without thinking too much about what it's doing to accept it, because we've always accepted. We've learned to be small.'"

Ansel said, "Does that mean I don't have to go back?"

His parents looked at each other. They said, "Yes."

"Yay, yay. Wow. Free, free, free." He hugged them both as hard as he could hug and took off up the hill. In his exuberance, he didn't take thought that he had not spoken to his parents of wings and feathers, and before he was off the lawn, he leaped into the air, flew up the hill, swooped back over the house, "Yay. Yay." and then out over the ridges.

They watched him out of sight and, after a long time, Ron said, "We were talking about acceptance. Do we accept that?"

"What is there other than acceptance?"

"What if, in the beginning, we had just kept saying, 'Boys can't fly. You didn't go on the back of any bird. This is nonsense.' and kept him from going up the hill?"

Katherine said, "Is it better to be a boy than an eagle or both together?"

"I don't know. What he's doing could be really dangerous."

"When he was talking about school, it sounded dangerous to be a boy."

Blue sky softened; dusk settled. Katherine said, "I should have told him not to stay out late. Do eagles see at night? Ron, when I was a child, I wanted to fly. I tried and tried."

Three weeks later, they had an evening conference. Ansel's father said, "We have a notice to appear in court. We're legally responsible for you, so we're legally responsible to keep you in school. They say we could go to jail, your mother and I, if we don't comply with the law."

"What about me? Why would they put you in jail if it's me staying out of school?"

"You don't have legal status until you're of age."

"Boy. They promise you all this stuff later to keep you in line. If you buy it now, and you get there, what do they give you? They're still pushing on you, and you're of age."

Ron sat down, "Phew. I know it. But it comes down to there's no way out of it. I don't want to go to jail, and I don't want your mother to go to jail. But I think we can work it out better than it was before. There's a school north of here, up the coast, that you might like. They let the students decide what they're going to study and how they study. It's a pretty place in the mountains. I think you can get in there."

Katherine said, "It's a boarding school, and I don't like that very well, but it's close enough that you can fly

home any evening you want to. We'll work with the teachers there to get you as much freedom as possible."

Ansel liked the school. He had time enough to himself to fly nearly every day. He had access to books and teachers to learn about the places he saw, the animals and wildernesses he saw. He went home often and stayed at school often and enjoyed his birdness and his boyiness. He saw Brook on Saturdays, and he flew home Sundays.

One evening, he brought a guest home. Katherine said, "Ansel's home. He just buzzed the house. He has someone with him. It's too small to be Eagle."

"Brook."

But it was Mary. Mary was small and quiet, sharp-featured, bright-eyed, attentive to her surroundings.

Katherine said, "We're pleased to have you with us, Mary. Dinner is ready. Do you go to school with Ansel?"

She nodded and ate heartily.

After dinner, they made blackberry ice cream. Ron gave the cranking to Ansel and asked Mary, "Did you learn from Eagle?"

"No, from Ansel. We talked to Eagle about it, and he said anybody could teach anybody to fly."

"He said if I could teach Mary, he would go back, and I think he's gone now. We haven't seen either of them all week."

"Is Brook teaching anyone to fly?"

"No. I don't think she's flying anymore. Last time I saw her, she said she was afraid she'd forget how to be a little girl if she kept flying."

Katherine said, "Ansel, are you ever afraid you'll forget how to be a little boy?"

"No. If I thought I could forget how to fly, I'd be afraid."

The next Saturday, he brought Mary home with him again. Right away, they began speaking of new developments. "There's a no-flying rule at school now."

"The headmaster was against it. He said if the kids could fly, they should do it, and he thought it beat mathematics any day, but he was the only adult who voted with us."

"They're all afraid of it. Even at that school. Adults are the most afraid."

"We weren't as careful about not being seen as we should have been."

"Well, it's done now. We're not going back."

"Couldn't you go back and just be more careful not to be seen?"

"If there's a rule against it, and we break the rule, we're outlaws. Even if nobody knows we're doing it, we do."

"A rule against it makes it something to hide and be ashamed of. We can't do it that way."

"Ansel and I have decided to live as Eagles."

"Mary, do your parents know about this?"

"They know about flying, but they don't know about this new rule."

"I think we'd better get them in on this conference."

When they were all together, Mary's father said, "Do you know what could happen to us and to Ansel's parents if you decided to live as eagles and just

disappeared?"

"No."

"We would be outlaws. We couldn't tell them anything they would believe about what happened to you, and we'd be very likely to end up in prison."

Ansel said, "Dad, did you ever want to know how to fly?"

"I don't know. I guess I did."

"Mom, did you?"

"Yes. When I was a child, I did."

"What is there about being an adult that made you no longer want to fly?"

"I didn't grow into not wanting to fly. I grew into knowing I couldn't fly."

"But now you know you can if you want to. You've seen me do it. What would you lose if you learned to fly?"

"Now, because of everything that's happening, I might have to face a decision I don't want to make. This world is where I live; this is who I am; this is reality. I can't fly off into fantasy when the going gets rough here."

"It isn't fantasy. It's the same world. None of the problems with it are solved. Some of the problems are even more dangerous to eagles than to humans."

"It will add a perspective that will broaden your humanness, if you decide to stay. If you decide to go, it will leave all those crazy people sending each other papers and investigating their noses off while I show you some of the really beautiful, nearly wild country I've been looking at lately."

After noon of the next day, six great birds took off from the front lawn of what had been Ansel's home and flew north, a straight, steady flight toward the mountain wilderness.

Ballad for Hermit Jim

Warm wind rose from the canyon. Jim stood below the burial grounds in the shadow of the west ridge and watched the sunlight climb the steep, dry slope east of him.

Way down the river, below the reservoir, a truck started up the winding gravel road. The big diesel engine hammered a deep, explosive roar into the afternoon sunlight. Dust exploded from beneath the wheels and swirled up around the massive bulldozer chained to the trailer. Dust broke away from the rolling rig and hung, a grey cloud above the road, settled down the bank and onto the river.

The sound ran up the river canyon, and Jim heard it eddying up Wolf Creek canyon as the trucker geared down for a hard grade, then pushed it high speed through the long curve below the dam. Coming up fast, pulling a heavy load.

Jim thought, "Plenty of big trucks come up the river. Nothing different about this one." It faded from his hearing as the truck went behind a sharp ridge that shielded the sound from where he stood. He walked up through the burial grounds.

Yesterday's rain had washed out bone beads and obsidian arrowheads. Jim picked them up. He felt the smoothness of time-treated bone and the intricate workmanship of the points and then reburied them, deeper.

As he left the burial ground, the truck emerged from behind the ridge, two miles closer. The diesel sound eroded his sense of peace in the summer afternoon. Diesel sound chiseled away the sunshine's brightness.

He climbed the ridge and looked down the west slope to the road that ran by the river. Red, white and black truck pulling a bulldozer thundered up the last stretch, geared down, pulled into the Wolf Creek road and stopped. Diesel engine idled in the mouth of the canyon.

Rick had said maybe five years. This was only two. The lean old man stood at the top of the ridge and looked down at the machines.

Sunshine shot straight above him and left him in the shadow of the high west ridge. Wind plucked at his thin shirt. He set his ancient, broad-brimmed, felt hat more firmly on his head against the rising wind and walked back down the ridge.

As he picked carrots and cabbage for his dinner, he heard the bulldozer unload and shut down. Then the truck rumbled back down the river road, out of hearing, and the evening carried only sounds of birds; nuthatches, and two camp robbers who flew down and complained that his dinner scraps were late being served. Ravens quarreled somewhere up the ridge. Before dark, coyotes yipped back and forth at the top of

the ridge.

Before sunrise, the bulldozer started working on the canyon road. Diesel pistons slammed sound against breaking rock, bounced exploding sound from canyon walls, shattered the day. Dust and diesel fumes rose high above the canyon and hung and stank in the still morning air.

It was a long day for Jim. His senses wore thin. Late afternoon, he put a bedroll together and hiked up the canyon to the cliff house, a cave in the dark basalt rock underlying the limestone mountain. The mountain rose high above the ridge there. Thin, tall spires stood away from the mass of the central mountain. Centuries had eroded distance between the rough spires and the mountain itself. Juniper trees grew on the tops of the spires and on the top of the mountain. Limestone cliffs exposed white and varying shades of light green and blue.

Thirty-five years before, he had started to spend a night at the cliff house. Something kept him awake that night. "Bullfeathers," he had mumbled into the fire. "I don't see nothin nor hear nothin to put me jumpy this way. Ain't a thing here could hurt me."

Still, he didn't sleep. He carried his bedroll up to sleep through the dark hours of the morning in the trees a mile away from the cliff house.

This night, he didn't build a fire. He sat in the wide entrance to the cliff house as darkness settled into the canyon below him and closed him in on the cliff face. He wrapped himself in a blanket and leaned back against stone, dozed, and woke to watch the night.

The moon rose. Clear, yellow light opened the broad face of the dwelling. A tall man crossed the cliff face on the trail, puffed dust under his moccasins as he crossed the ledge, and sat down in the shadow of the moonlight, facing Jim.

The moon continued its climb into the sky. Coyotes sang far down the west ridge.

The tall man spoke. "Blind Man's Spirit and Wounded Bear will be here. What would you have us do?"

"What can you do? It's this mountain they're after. Tear it down and haul it out of here, grind it up for cement."

"There is nothing for us to do. But you should stay here tonight."

Four old men sat in the warm dust in the moonlight. They talked of other times in this mountain and river country. Before daylight, they left all conversation. Jim leaned against the stone that still stored the daytime sun's heat and slept.

He woke when sunlight struck the cliff house. Through the rock of the mountain, he felt stone and earth shatter as the bulldozer ripped rock ten miles down the canyon. He sat on the ledge in front of the cliff house all morning, trying to have everything around him resolve again to harmony.

He walked down the canyon to his cabin. The cabin was five miles closer to the working bulldozer, but he didn't feel the vibrations there. He thought, "This cabin sits on dirt, not on rock, and dirt cushions it. It don't matter as much here, because it ain't this cabin they're

after."

Wounded Bear had asked him, "Will they take your cabin?"

"They'll come about from here to the end of the ledge to it with the road. Might as well take it for that. If they get the road up this far, they'll run trucks by there all day."

"Our history becomes your history."

"You fought."

"Yes. We fought."

"That part of your history becomes part of mine."

"There is something to be learned from the time that has gone between the time of our fighting and now."

"And there's something to be learned because I understand what's coming at us better than you did then. I can't see what to do yet, but I know I got to do something."

Rick drove up the dirt road to see Jim the next morning. He said, "That's a mess down there. They've already bladed out my grandfather's walnut trees. They're moving pretty fast. They want to get it well-started before more people get interested in trying to save the mountain."

Jim said, "Well, let's see if we can buy some time. Maybe we can catch some attention. I'll talk to the driver."

He told the driver, "This is a holy place, this canyon and this mountain. You can't tear it apart."

The driver said, "I'll tell you how it is. If I go down and tell them I quit, can't tear up a holy place, two hours after I leave, there'll be another man up here

running this machine and chances are, he won't care as much as I do. I care, see, but it's going to happen regardless; you already know that, and I need this job."

"You'll have trouble keeping your machine running."

"I'm going to forget you said that, in case somebody asks me. If I come out here and the machinery don't run, I fix it if I can. If I can't fix it, I go back to town and get somebody who can. I get paid if I run the dozer or if I drive back to town to get a mechanic. If it breaks so bad it can't be fixed, they'll bring out another dozer. They got plenty."

At the top of the ridge again, Jim said, "Maybe he's right. Maybe they're coming through here regardless."

"Does that mean don't fight it?"

"No. It might mean know the battle is lost and still fight a good battle. That might be part of sharing the history."

Jim walked down the dark ridge that night and put sand in the engine and transmission oil.

For two days, no machines ran in the canyon.

Rick hiked up the canyon past Star Junction and camped there.

The third morning, a truck roared up the winding canyon road and unloaded another machine, and that machine worked the rest of the day.

Rick hiked down the ridge and looked at the day's work, then walked back up to Jim's cabin. He said, "There's a watchman down there now. Got a little fire and a bedroll and a pickup truck."

Jim said, "I seen that. Well, it gives us some idea what they can do."

Jim started a fire in the cookstove and cooked corn and beans, and they ate. "You think we can stop them, Rick?"

"I don't know. Not many roads get abandoned half-finished. If they finish the road, they'll use it. I don't know what to do."

"They'll bury me before that road goes by my cabin. I still know some things to do. Thing for you to do is go back to the city and stay there until I finish what I know how to do. Will you do that?"

"Yes."

"Get a long ways away. If you're close, you'll be up here and in it, and that ain't what you're to do. Get back a ways, and you might see a way to slow it down some more when I'm finished."

"Do you think we can win?"

"I don't know win or lose. I just know I have to do what I can."

In the bright sunshine two days later, a big young man came up the ridge. He said, "I'm Jack McCann." He offered his hand.

Jim motioned with his rifle barrel. "Keep about five arms' lengths between us, or you'll make a cloud of dust rolling back down the hill."

"Sure. Okay. That thing's loaded, huh? Shell in the chamber?"

"Back off another ten feet. You got a way of edging up while you're talking. Who's Jack McCann to me?"

"I own that equipment. You told the men you'd start shooting if they didn't stop working."

"That's right."

"Why?"

"Don't play dumb. Look at what you're doing down there."

Jack McCann sat down in the dirt on the steep slope and looked down into the canyon. Sunlight reflected silver and gold from the water running in the stream.

"When I was eighteen, I spotted that mountain. I knew it was limestone, and I thought, millions of dollar's worth of cement standing there needing to be used, thousands and thousands of yards of concrete. Build a lot of houses, bridge, roads, dams. Ten miles to a railroad.

"You're hungry, you see an apple, you pick it and eat it. This mountain's ready to be picked, and if I don't pick it, someone else will." He dropped a rock, and the rock rolled a long way down the steep face of the ridge.

"You'll pick this one after I'm buried."

"Do you own the ground you're built on down there?"

"Solid lease."

"You know Bob Graham, lives over that ridge?"

"I know him."

"I used to go up there and mine with him and his brother when they were washing it out. You know Hershel Crowder? He used to live up Strawberry Canyon? He moved into town about five years ago. He was getting older, and he had more trouble doing everything he had to do up there. He's got a real nice garden now, and he can keep going under his own steam. He couldn't have done it much longer up there by himself."

"Like I told your driver, I'll tell you. Start those machines for any reason other than load and haul them away, I'll put bullets in the radiator and fuel tank, just for starters."

"We can shoot back."

"Help yourself."

"I'll buy that cabin from you. Pay you four thousand cash."

Jim started up along the top of the ridge. McCann said, "Name your price. I'll give you six and help you find a good place anywhere you want and get you built on it, to order. There's better places than this. Places where it's warm all winter. You can have a garden year round.

"Hey, you crazy or something? You don't even listen to me; you just keep walking away."

Jim said, "It ain't so much I don't like your company, though we got that to think about. It's more you got a real loud, irritating voice, and you keep edgin' up on me. Keep twenty feet, or I'll put a bullet through you, and then I'll have me some peace and quiet."

"Eight thousand dollars."

"No road's going up this canyon while I live."

"Then you're going to die, you know that? Die for a damned cut in the rock. Listen Jim, I don't want to see you get killed. I don't want to see anybody get killed or hurt."

"Haul the machines away."

"That's not going to happen. One man can't stop it. You can't stop it. Put up the rifle, and we'll work it out."

"Hoping you'll excuse me, McCann, but I got places

to be before the day goes."

The sheriff brought the news back to McCann that Jim wasn't coming down. "It's not so much do I have grounds to arrest him as can I do it? I could put charges against him on what you and your drivers say, but he isn't surrendering his weapon and coming in. I'm not shooting it out with him on what I got to go on, nor calling in a lot of men to try to run him down. I saw him today because he was willing to see me, but I won't see him again unless I'm unarmed, on foot, and a long ways from anybody else."

McCann started the dozer, nervous because the noise it made shut him off from everything around him. He didn't know where Jim was. He worked a half-hour and thought maybe he was going to get away with it, and then he was sitting in a lot of diesel fuel. He turned around and found two bullet holes in the fuel tank. Streams of fuel ran onto the ground and onto the back of the seat. He hadn't heard the shots over the engine.

He shut down and scanned the ridges, tried to spot Jim. He'd expected him to be on the east ridge, but the bullets came from the west ridge, maybe in the timber above the low spring.

McCann had his rifle with him, but he couldn't see anything to shoot at. It looked like Jim wasn't shooting as long as the machines were shut down, so McCann went back to town to see what he could do about getting the law into action.

The sheriff agreed he had more to go on, with Jim shooting things up. He took four men up the canyon. They found jackrabbits and coyotes, seven rattlesnakes.

McCann ran the bulldozer when the men went out hunting Jim. He figured Jim would run for high country, but bullets let the water out of his radiator and put a side window out of his pickup. He went madder than hell four wheeling up toward where he thought Jim was. He couldn't drive the loose slope, and he lost one tire to a bullet.

Jim's cabin burned down that night. Men destroyed his garden. McCann watched for him at the cabin, but Jim didn't go back to the cabin site.

It got into the news. For a man working alone, Jim did a lot. McCann ran cat all one day without interference and then stood armed guard the next day himself, high up, where he could see most of both ridges. But Jim came down the river and up the road and stood there holding his rifle until the driver saw him and shut it down and got off.

Jim did what damage he could to the machine with a high-powered rifle and disappeared into the timber before McCann could clear the point of the ridge and get to where he could see where Jim had been.

Rick wanted to go back then, but he knew he couldn't do anything, because he wouldn't be carrying a rifle, and it was still rifle-carrying time. Jim had said, "You'll know when there's something to do. It won't be what I'm doing, because this is an old style that's got to go. But you'll see a place they can't go past, and you'll know something to do."

They buried Jim on a Monday. Jack McCann was still in the hospital, would be for a while yet.

Grey rain drifts across the river from Idaho. Rick

stayed at the cemetery for a long time after everyone else left.

In some of the news reports, a crazy old hermit fought a heroic battle and lost, and the forces of progress rolled on. In other reports, the battle was not lost. People with political clout were interested in the mountain.

Rick went to the hospital to see McCann, and McCann told him, "The old man didn't win anything but getting his last ticket punched. You can't beat it. No way in the world you can win. I'm not trying to tell you what's right, just trying to tell you how things work. Save your sacred mountain. What's that do? Concrete's got to come from somewhere.

"You buy cement; your friends buy cement. The strongest mountain savers buy cement, don't they? Don't they use concrete? Save this mountain and another one comes down, where people don't care as much. Or that much more limestone gets strip mined. If they strip mine it, the overburden gets pushed out of the way, and more plant and animal life goes than it would from this near barren mountain. You got tunnel vision.

"Or you save this mountain now, and in a few years, some salesman makes a study of how many jobs can come out of this mountain coming down and being used, and the people build a model of it for posterity and tear it down for prosperity, and you want to know, you're talking to the wrong man anyway.

"I contracted to build the road and haul. Cement company's been here seeing me, and they'd like to buy my contract so they're running the whole show, and I'll

probably sell. I doubt I could meet my contract deadlines now anyway. So, for that part of it, you got what you're asking. I'm resigning from it, looks like. But, like I've been saying, that doesn't gain you much. You might as well see that."

Rick went to the cabin site and sifted through the ashes. He found charred, melted, burned-up memories. He took a few square nails that wore shiny in his pocket when he went to the city and repeated and expanded his walking and talking circuits and found more interest than he had before.

Enough interest that he wasn't really needed. The work moved forward. The mountain might be saved. At least tearing the mountain down would be delayed. The cement company worked quickly and skillfully, but the bulk of people and bureaucratic entanglements between the mountain and the bulldozers became daily more ponderous.

Rick had lost more than a deeply treasured friend. He thought now he might lose more than a sacred mountain. In the midst of people who would work hard to save the limestone mountain, people who treasured what Jim had symbolized, who encouraged Rick in his thoughts and actions, Rick felt more and more isolated, a stranger, an outsider, despite their common cause.

If he received, "Have a good day," he responded, "Sure. Save another whale today. Save another mountain. Have a good day," and he meant it to be funny, a comment on the times, when every laborious step toward good for all needed constant verbal affirmation, like members of a baseball team talking up

their spirit on the field.

The people he talked to didn't see his humorous intention. They seemed to worry about what he meant.

He filled his pack. He thought he should write a note to someone (I love you all. I'm fine. Don't worry."). He sat for a long time with paper and pencil, but he found himself unable to begin even the simplest note. He couldn't get Jim off his mind.

Maybe he understood why Jim had been a hermit. Maybe it was the only way you could live and not do damage. He noticed the deterioration of the environment more every day, and he felt it as if every instance of destruction was against his own body.

He went into the Sawtooth wilderness, stone mountains, high timber, cold wind in the early autumn mornings.

He walked all day in intense mountain sunshine. He found a sun-warmed shelter in dark rock and slept. Up again and walking by daylight. Going nowhere exactly, just north and east. He thought he could wait for the falling snow. That could be the way to go, in the wilderness in the snow.

He had a plan worked out. "Or maybe it's a daydream and not a plan," he said, but he saw it like a movie in his mind.

Opening with trucks thundering up the river road. They left a dozer and a loader.

He was surprised there was no guard with the machinery. "I guess they think old Jim is dead."

Or maybe there would be a guard, but he knew how to take care of a guard.

He was six miles downriver and across the dam when the first charge went off and blew the machinery to hell.

Sheriff's cars and company cars and trucks and sightseers sped up the river road. Rick watched from the hills in Idaho until the road was clear. Then he sent the impulse that lifted 200 yards of road high into the air. It broke up into a billion pieces, floated aloft long enough for the sound of the explosion to smack Rick back a step, then dropped in slow motion into the lake as the shock wave in the earth rolled under his feet. Dust, smoke. Water spouted high. "Wow. What you can do with a little dynamite."

It might be the thing to do, if they brought machines again. He didn't know yet what he would do. Ten days of hiking brought him back into his own territory.

He camped some nights at the cliff house and some in the west ridge timber. Since the place had been in the news, a lot of people had come up the canyon. Beer cans, fireplaces, broken glass. The steep slope is a four-wheel drive challenge, well-tested now. Someone has dug and sifted in the cliff house.

Rick remembered Jim saying, "Some people, they don't feel anything in a place like that. It goes on around them, but they don't see it or feel it or hear it, because they're not looking or listening, you know how I mean."

Rick felt something. The mountain. A numenous aura that touched sight, hearing, even tactile sensations.

Chilly winds began. In the early hours of the morning, he rearranged his sleeping gear to be warmer.

Jim stood in the cliff opening, a dark form against the starlight sky. He said, "Fighting them can't do anything more. This ain't a battle of war on the ground, us with weapons and them with weapons, fighting it out. It's of spirit and understanding. Jack McCann had his ears shut. His spirit was dimmed. We have to decide we're going to listen before we can hear what makes sense."

Rick dreamed of a bear who fought men who came to tear down the mountain. The bear was mortally wounded. His bones fed the machines that tore up the mountain. His bones were ground up and used for cement. And yet, he was not defeated nor lessened in spirit. The wounded bear never lost the power he gained from battling for truth.

Jim said, "My way ain't your way."

The wounded bear said, "This is the last of this kind of battle. You are in a new time. I'm glad my way was strong and clear, battle and die. Your way will be more difficult than anything I had to face."

In the early morning sunlight, Rick ran downstream, jumping from rock to rock, feet landing on stone in a rapid, uneven rhythm, daring a broken leg. "Leg, leg, mumblety peg. Stone, stone, falling home. Mountain, mountain, I'll keep on countin'" Up the steep bank at a run. He rolled onto the deep grass, came up running, up and around the spring.

And stopped at the ashes of the cabin. Souvenir hunters have sifted through the ashes. All the remnants, all the artifacts are gone. He leaned against Jim's cherry tree. The bark is scorched from the heat of the cabin fire, and charcoal rubbed off on his shirt.

Rick asked himself, "Who says that's not my style, dynamite and rifles and what the hell, machine guns and grenades? It has to stop somewhere. I could get all the dynamite I need.

"But McCann's right. Blow up the machines. So what? They'll build more. Blow up enough of them, and they'll have to build a whole new plant to keep replacing them. Build the plant out of concrete. Mine the cement to build the plant to build the tractor that mines cement."

He took the square nails from his pocket and pushed them into the soft ground under the cherry tree and smoothed organic detritus over them. He didn't want any thing. Just the memories, tumbling images in his mind. He knew what Jim said, "We have to decide to listen before we can hear what makes sense." He tried to quiet the busyness in his mind. He heard the earth, the sky, the stream running toward the river that runs to the ocean, every rock singing its song in the current, the harmony of all the voices together.

He might never know if the forces of destruction can be stopped. He did know the Wounded Bear never lost the power of battling for truth. Rick claimed the truth that Wounded Bear had given him, the truth that Jim had given him, even the truth that McCann had given him. He knew it was time to gather his forces and do what he could do, wherever he could do it. It's wider than one mountain. There's still the entire earth, all of life.

He slid down the bank and ran down the creek, jumping from rock to rock through smells of algae

drying at the high-water mark, and dust and water. Rick ran slower now, sure of his footing, down into the narrows of the canyon as white clouds flew across the pale blue sky above him and reflected their rapid, white flight in singing water around him.

Meeting the Muse

We sat down at the bar, and Jean said, "There's that guy again."

"Yeah. I saw him. So, lots of guys I see around, still don't know them."

"He keeps looking at you."

"Yeah. I saw that. Maybe he thinks he knows me."

As I was coming out of the restroom, he was going in. We nearly collided, and I realized, "Phew. Very big dude."

When I sat down, Jean asked, "Did that guy talk to you?"

"No. But he wanted to. He was just slow getting started, and I stepped around him and came on back. You know something? I do know him. I started remembering on the way back here, I've had dreams about him. Kind of scary dreams, but I can't remember how they go."

"You mean you dreamed about him before you ever saw him down here? Or you dreamed about him since the other day when we saw him?"

"I think I dreamed about him quite a while back. I

never remembered the dreams until now, so I can't be sure when it was."

The next morning, I told her. "I dreamed about that guy again. I can't remember all of it, but it's an upsetting dream. He keeps trying to tell me something but can't get it said, or he says it, and as soon as he says it, I lose my grasp of it. While he's saying it, it makes sense, and I'm glad I'm finally knowing it. I'm amazed at what he's saying. But the instant he's through, it's gobbledegook; my memory of the sense of it is gone. There's more to it. He threatens me. I can't remember what he says, but it scares me when he says it."

That day, I left the garden midmorning and started back on the novel I'd been working on before we began the spring garden. For about five days, I gardened for an hour or two and then wrote for the rest of the day.

Saturday morning, Jerry showed up with a pickup load of horse manure. We unloaded it and went back for a truck and trailer load of spoiled hay he had located. We spread that and tilled most of it into the area we derocked the last time we put in some long days of work.

We took the trailer back and agreed we'd done plenty for one day. But when we got back, we picked up rakes, worked the roughed out ground down a little, and got the water set up on it. We finished about moonrise.

Jean came in from work with beer. We all sat with our backs against the wall and looked at the garden in the moonlight and drank beer.

Jerry said, "It's coming along great. That first part we worked is really fine soil now."

"One season working our butts off to get the soil in shape, then it'll be very little work. Mostly just add to the top when it needs it."

After the heavy work and the beer, I fell asleep and had a little dream, or I had a hallucination, or a different reality impinged, but I was facing the big guy, who looked like he wanted to talk to me. He said, "Preparation now, and then very little time devoted to the garden once it's set up; that's just a story. Are you a gardener, or a writer, or a handyman taking odd jobs, or a honky-tonk man or what?"

I said, "What's a honky-tonk man?"

Jean said, "You know that. A guy goes out honky-tonking, hits all the bars, dances, gets into the music, one place and then another. That's honky-tonking. We could go honky-tonking. Hey everybody, let's go honky-tonking."

Second bar we hit, I saw that big guy. I got nervous and wondered what was happening. Was that a dream, or what? How come I didn't want to hear what he was saying? I could just walk up to him and say, "You wanting to talk to me?"

I had several more beers. Jean looked at me and said, "Something the matter?"

"Just honky-tonkin real quiet."

"Putting away a lot of beer."

"Don't I s'posed to?"

"I don't care. You just looked like you were nervous and drowning it, so I thought I'd ask if everything was okay. Didn't know you'd jump out and bite me."

I had a couple more beers. When I went over to talk

to the guy, I had a little trouble getting there. Weavy and wobbly. I couldn't bring myself to tap him on the shoulder, but he turned. I said, "Lookin fr me."

"What?"

"You. You been lookin fr me."

"I've been looking at you. I don't have to look for you because I already know where you are, but I have been looking at you."

"Yeah. What's that s'posed to mean? What's that for?"

I was feeling drunker and drunker the more I stood there, and I was hoping those last two beers were about soaked up already.

He said, "Your work. I been lookin at you and wondering when you're going to get to work."

"Work? Work? Hell, din I work all day? Hot sun. See? Blisters. Here and here. What was that you said?"

"Not gardening. Your work. Your own work. Your creative output, that you've just now drowned in about ten fast beers."

"Hey, you, who you think? What was that you said? So what if I drank ten beers? Twenty beers? So what?" I couldn't remember what it was he'd just said. "Hey, what are you to me? What's work to you? So what?" I marked on his chin with my eye the spot I was going to plant my fist, bring it up from the floor, step underneath it and drive it home, right on that little x mark. As soon as I could gather it up. I shifted my footing, and Jean came up beside me, slipped her arm through mine.

"What's up, honey?"

"Well, listen, what's up. This dude here, what he

said, well tell you, let me whisper it to you."

"Come on, time to head home. You got to work your feet." Jerry came up and took my other arm, and they mostly carried me out and then helped me along until I got my feet going. Jean said, "What'd that guy say to you?"

"Work. Somethin. I don't know what the hell he said. What did he say? He called me a honky-tonk man. No. I don't know. I was gonna deck him. He's got a little x mark on his chin, and I was gonna plant it right there."

"Oh, I know. You're crazy, you know it? That guy's six three or four. He weighs, what? two-forty, two-fifty? He knew you were winding up, you crazy man."

In the morning, she said, "You remember now what that guy said to you?"

"What guy? Oh. That big guy. Did he talk to me?"

"You were going to hit him."

"Boy. Wouldn't he have gone down with a crash? He's so big."

"Drunk as you were and big as he is, I don't think you would have sent even a shiver through his timbers. I'd be talking to you in the hospital now instead of here at home."

"I'm pretty sure I should be in a hospital now anyway. I haven't had a hangover like this ever. I don't think I'll live through it. Did that guy hit me? That big, pushy bully following me around and watching me, did he sock me one?"

"No. You were going to hit him though."

"I remember that. I think I remember that. He said something to me, and it made me mad. I was going to

deck him, but I don't remember what he said."

"Next time, why don't you just go talk to him while you're still sober?"

"I don't want to talk to him. At all. Ever."

"Why? You don't even know him."

"I do too. I don't know how or when or what, but I know him. He's some kind of threat to me, and I don't want anything to do with him or it."

"You sound more irrational than usual to me."

"And more hungover than ever. We just can't talk about it now."

"I'll get you something for a headache, and you go to sleep."

She did, and I did, only to dream the guy was following me down the street. I walked faster, and he walked faster. I started to run, and he kept up.

I yelled, "Leave me alone. Get away from me."

He yelled, "Right!" but he kept after me. "Right! Right!"

I woke up; Jean was touching me. "You're yelling in your sleep."

"My head still hurts. It really hurts."

"Right."

"Right? What do you mean, right? Right? Right it, set it aright, or right, that's right, or turn right, right on, righteous, right now?"

"Hey, what is this? I just meant right, I know your head hurts. I can see it. You're a little bit crazy right now. I'll call in and tell them I'm sick and stay with you."

"No. No, I'm okay. Bad dream, too much hangover,

but I'll get through."

So she went to work. I spent most of the afternoon sitting in the shade in the garden sipping ice water.

About sunset, the gate opened, and the guy walked through and shut it after him. First I said, "I'm dreaming again," but no, I was awake, and it was really him. I said, "I don't think you're somebody I want to see."

He said, "Boy, don't I get all the shit down on me? I wonder what I ever did to get this assignment. I ain't looking forward to seeing you either, I tell you. It's a job I got to do, you know? If I had another offer, I'd sure take it, whatever it was."

"A job?"

"Yeah. A job."

"A job of work? For pay?"

"I wouldn't do it for free."

"What kind of job? They call this a contract? You got a contract on me?"

"Now you got a lively and somewhat morbid imagination. That you got a working imagination is good and will help if we get everything else together."

"What did you mean, right? Right away, right turn, right a wrong?"

"I know, I already know that you will go a long way to not hear what I have to say to you. I know that, and that is an example. How come you could only hear me say right? How come that couldn't be with a double u, write?"

"Wright? With a double u? Mill wright? Orville Wright?"

"Oh damn. You playin funny games with me?"

"Games? You're the games man, come on to me with these stupid words, try to make me guess what you're up to. All I got is a hangover and a wish to be left alone."

"Okay. Why couldn't you hear w-r-i-t-e, write?"

"Write?"

"Right. Write."

"Huh. I don't know. Was that what you were saying? Write, w-r-i-t-e? Huh. That never occurred to me."

"I know it."

"So, write. That's what it was."

"Yeah."

"Well. Now, why would you be saying that to me? Or you know, how did you know what I was talking about? That was a dream."

"Yeah. Sure. I been trying to talk to you in dreams, but mostly you ain't listening. You listen some, but in the morning, you get busy doin something and let it slide away. You don't remember a half-hour after breakfast what we worked out in dreams."

"I think I have an inkling. Phew man. I still got a hell of a headache. Really a vicious, brain-splitting headache. I just am not into talking about this right now. You stay here and enjoy the garden if you want to, but I'm going in and crash out a while. Sorry, man. I could talk to you later, when I feel better. I just can't handle it now."

"But, hey, this has been going on a long time. I mean, I been trying to get you to let me talk to you a long time, and even getting your attention is a problem. Then, when I do get your attention, there's something

you have to shuttle off to, so you can't hear me at all."

"Maybe there's a reason for that. See, you ain't even. Phew man, this is bullshit, you realize that? Ow man, don't make me holler like that. Drives the blood up into my head and just really really hurts."

"I didn't make you holler. I can hear you if you talk just gentle. You hollered your own self."

"Okay. Sorry. Don't get upset. I will listen to you. I really will. Only not now. I'm really sick right now. I'm pretty sure I'm going to start vomiting if I don't lie down. If I get started, I know it won't quit for a while. I'm going in. You try to use force, grab me, I'm so sick right now, that would just kill me. I'd let go and die. You stand in front of me to stop me, I'll vomit all over you and then lay down and die, I swear it." I went in, walking just as slow and steady as I could, lay down without unbuttoning or unlacing anything. I felt Jean take my shoes and socks off when she came in at midnight.

I woke about six and ate a small breakfast and started fixing a larger one for when Jean got up. She came in a little before eight, upset. "Curt."

"Breakfast is ready."

"I just looked out the bedroom window, and that guy's sitting under the tree out in the garden."

"How come you see that guy?"

"What? What do you mean?"

"I decided this morning he's a dream I've been having."

"Looks pretty real to me, sitting out there under the tree. Doesn't look like a dream."

"You ever hear that guy say anything all the times you've seen him?"

"No."

"See. That's it. He's a dream I'm having. It's so strong that sometimes you see the visuals on it, but you don't get any of the sound or anything like that. It's weird, I know, but you can probably imagine, it's weirder yet to me, because I'm the one having the dream."

"Curt."

"What?"

"Are you asleep right now? Am I part of the dream?"

"What're you? Funny or something? You're a dream, honey, but I ain't dreaming you. Hey, where you going? Your breakfast'll get cold."

I'd already decided I was not going out there, so I just waited until she came back in. "I spoke to your dream, and he spoke to me, and I touched him, and he's real."

"Where'd you touch him?"

"Oh Curt. Criminey. He won't tell me what he wants. Just says he has to talk to you. He assured me he meant you no harm, and I believe him. He has some business he has to settle with you. Do you know what it's about?"

"More than I did before, but not enough to talk about."

"Well, I wish you'd get it settled. If you want to know the truth, I think you've been a little strange about this. Do you think he means you harm?"

"Not physical harm, no. Oh hell. It just can't be."

After she left, I washed dishes and tried to work

inside, but I knew there were some plants that needed water, so I went out and got the hose. I ignored him and watered the garden.

He said, "You're feeling better this morning, looks like."

I kept watering.

"I don't mean to come on strong or put you off. People tell me I don't know what tact or diplomacy is. I just do the best I can. I guess you can see what a position I'm in."

I put the hose down and pulled a few weeds.

"You can see why I got to talk to you, can't you? I can't just leave and drop it, or I sure would, cause I don't like sticking with something that just don't go."

I threw a handful of weeds to the ground. "You can't be what you say you are. You just can't be. Phooey. I think what you're trying to say is you're a muse."

"Not a muse. Your muse. Yours."

"No damn it. No way. Something got messed up."

"You want to see my work card? It says there."

"A muse is a beautiful woman who comes to you in spirit form and whispers in your ear and plants supportive inspirations in your mind. And in the second place, there's no such thing anyway. You just got things goofed up a little is all."

"No. You know, deep down. Already, part of you says this is right, what I'm telling you. That's why you're fighting it so hard, 'cause you know it's right, and you don't want to accept it. You got what a muse is confused with a variety of legends and a lot of your own imagination. A muse is a function, a force, not

defined as to physical form. You're too confident in your own self, where you should give more weight to the forces that feed you. Your strength only comes together when you let go of your individual identity a little and accept the forces that are given to you."

"Accept the forces, okay, but no damn way some six foot four, two hundred and sixty pound moose of a football player is going to be my muse."

"Going to be? What's going to be? The good ones, the ones you like best yourself, I worked with you on them. The ones you put away and don't circulate anymore are the ones I couldn't relate to and help you with."

"Some of those are still good story ideas."

"Sure. Good ideas. But no inspiration. You got to have the muse working to keep the inspiration high. I never played football in my life. How about if I started calling you a runt because you're so little and skinny next to me?"

"I'm muscular."

"Muscular? At one hundred and fifty pounds, nobody over five foot seven is muscular."

"Don't I have any choice who I get for a muse?"

"Some. You could solicit for a new muse. No guarantee what you'd get, somebody who's out of a job, who knows why, or if you time it wrong, you could run with a vacancy for a long time. It would put you in an unfavorable position to come to a good working relationship with your new muse. He's gonna know you threw me off without just cause, so he's gonna be worried enough about his future with you that he won't

be working at his best. He's bound to hedge on being honest with you, to protect his position, and that would be disastrous."

"You keep saying he."

"A convenient word. You might get a female muse."

"Are you worried about your position?"

"A little. It's hard times right now to be without a job, and it's going to be tougher to get a position if I've been fired. But I'm not so worried that I'd compromise ideals. Frankly, you're not easy to work with, so in a way, it'd be a relief to get on unemployment and just quit hassling with you."

"What's so hard about working with me?"

"What've you been doing all summer?"

"Lots of things. Worked at a job for a while, got the garden going, been writing sometimes."

"Sometimes? Once. One time you got down and did some work for a few days. You've been drinking beer and trying to be a honky-tonk man, and gardening and daydreaming. You haven't even been writing any of the daydreams down."

"Gardening is good."

"Sure. But you don't just garden. You sculpt the ground, make nice shapes in the garden, put it together for show."

"That is not bad. No way."

"No, it isn't. Unless you use it as an excuse not to get back to your desk, make the work four times fancier'n you need, take four times as long to do it, keep telling yourself you're doing it from necessity, to get lots of food coming in. Deep down, you know a lot of the

projects stretch out so long because you just don't want to get back to writing. That's why I've been trying to get you to listen to me. And that's been hard."

"I still don't have to listen to you or do anything, you know. I never signed a contract with you or about you."

"Things in my line of work don't run on signed contracts. When you started writing seriously, you prayed for inspiration. You qualified, and I was put on the job. You accepted the help. That's a contract. Now you got some obligations to fulfill, and some work to do. That book's too far along to quit now. If it doesn't come through, I'm probably going to have to find another line of work."

We sat in silence, looking down the rows of vegetables. Then he said, "Maybe that would be okay. Get into another line of work."

The sun set. He said, "You gonna write?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Then I won't be seeing you for a while, at least daylight hours, you know, like this," including in his gesture his own physicality and that surrounding us, and he left.

I sat there against the wall until Jean pulled in the driveway. I went through the back door to meet her as she came in the front door.

After she slowed down a little from getting home from work, she asked, "What happened to your friend?"

"He left."

"What did he want?"

"He talked to me about getting to work on my writing."

"Really? Is he a publisher?"

"No."

"An agent?"

"Agent? Well, in a way, he's an agent. Yeah. He is an agent."

"A literary agent?"

"This is going to take a little while to tell you. You want to go down and have a beer, and I'll explain it to you?"

I had five or six beers and didn't explain it very well. I didn't believe it, I discovered as I was trying to tell about it. It seemed so absurd, I started laughing and couldn't get anything said. Then I got drunk and stopped trying to explain. I said, "You never really saw that guy, did you?" until she stopped saying she did see him and started saying, "Whatever you say, Curt. I don't want to argue about it."

She had to help me walk home. I woke up late in the morning with a hangover. I got up and took a shower and ate. Then I sat at my desk and sorted pages. After a couple of hours of trimming redundancies and rereading, it clicked, and I wrote straight through until daylight. I just said, Hello, Goodnight to Jean when she came in from work, ragged out from the night before and then a full shift.

It kept clicking, and I kept at it for about two weeks, most days six to ten hours at my desk. The form of the book was coming together, starting to function.

We had an abundance of radishes, peas, lettuce, and spinach from the garden. Some of the cabbage started to head up, and the tomatoes and peppers blossomed and

started to set on. The new ground worked well; the hay rotted; worms moved in, and we turned it again to get it ready for late planting. I started splitting my days between gardening and writing.

Jerry and Lynn came back from vacation and took care of the garden while Jean and I hiked into a wilderness area, something we'd been wanting to do for about three years. It was really good, healed up some places in us that needed to be somewhere with nothing but country, God, and a few people on foot.

When we got back, Jerry had most of the greenhouse framed up, and we spent several days finishing it. I set up benches and prepared soil.

We had bills coming up, so I worked four weeks driving tractor, ten hours a day, six days a week. Jerry and Lynn kept the garden going. By the time I finished farm work, we had vegetables to freeze and can, melons and berries ripe every day, dozens of things to walk around and eat, pull weeds away from. I sat quite a few hours under the tree in the garden, just draining the remnants of tractor driving out of myself.

Jean changed jobs and had her evenings free. We went to some of the restaurants and bars.

I'd almost forgotten the guy, so I had to think a minute when we came out of the movies about midnight and Jean said, "There's that guy again."

Then I did know who she meant, and I said, "Where?" and she pointed. I grabbed her arm, and we headed up the other way fast. We trotted almost around the block to get to the car, and I squealed tires pulling away from the curb. After a while, she said, "Curt?"

"Yes."

"Are there things in your past you haven't told me about? Big things?"

"What? No. Oh, you mean that guy keeps popping up. He's not out of my past. Just the very present time."

"You're so afraid of him."

"No. Actually, I'm not afraid of him. I just don't like him, and I don't want to talk to him."

That night, I dreamed I went into a bar and ordered a beer, and the bartender looked up, and it was him. He shook his head and gave me water instead of beer.

The next day was Jean's day off, and we worked in the garden part of the morning and then spent some quiet time together. At lunch she said, "Are you going to do any more writing while you have some time? I don't like this job much, so you might have to take a job for a while again sometime."

"Did you dream about that guy last night?"

"What guy?" Blank look. Maybe too blank.

"Yeah. I'm going to get back to it. I have to do it when I do it, though. I can't be pushed into it. Pressure just makes me nervous."

"Well, I didn't mean to pressure you. I was just asking about it and talking about this job. That's all." Quiet time of being in close touch began to drift away from us.

I tried to get to it that afternoon. I couldn't make sense of what I was reading. Everything I'd written seemed like so much disconnected trash. Jean was in the house, going about here and there, and I put my attention on her instead of on what was on my desk. I

thought she looked at me with disapproval when my pencil wasn't moving. She stopped and looked at me, and I said, "I tell you, I can't write if you're pushing at me. It has to flow."

She threw the towel she had in her hand to the floor. "I was standing here thinking what a fine-looking man you are and just about to say something about it. If my presence bothers you that much, I'll go do something else."

The next couple of hours, I didn't get anything done. I started wondering what she was doing and went looking for her. I found her, and we ran into some friends and went for a pizza.

When I reached for my beer and there was only water in the glass, I was startled, inhaled, and choked on the water. Jean pounded on my back, and I got it cleared. I said, "That son of a bitch."

Jean said, "What son of a bitch? Whatever is going on?" I didn't answer. She explained to the people we were with, "He's been kind of funny lately. I don't know what it is."

The moon was full. We drove home, and Jean went in and went to bed. I went out into the garden, sat in a lawn chair in the moonlight.

After a while, I realized there was someone sitting in the shadow of the wall. I said, "I can't be pushed into writing. It just doesn't work."

"What does?"

"I don't know. But I know you have to get off my case."

"I was off it. I wasn't around for a while, I think you

might remember."

"You been doing anything in my wife's dreams?"

No answer. I said, "Well, I tell you what. Can't find privacy in my own garden, I think I'll go downtown and have a beer before the bars close."

"The more you spend on beer, restaurants, movies, the sooner you have to get a job. Jean isn't going to stick out that job more'n two or three months, you know that."

"Something will get published and bring me in enough money to get by on a while, buy me some time."

"Something will get published. You have a grand total of three stories in the mail, and you haven't had a publication for more than a year. You're playing a game."

"Well, those beers I was talking about, if you'll excuse me."

He stood in my way in front of the gate. I said, "Ah phooey." I stepped to his side and came up from the ground with it and landed on his chin as he turned toward my motion. He bounced against the wall and sat down hard. I started through the gate, but he reached out and caught my ankle, and I went down, managed to kick loose, rolled and came up just as he came charging head down through the gate.

He went low to the ground, reached for my legs, coming on like a bull buffalo. I stepped sideways and brought my knee up full force into his charging head, but he caught me with his shoulder and arm and slammed me down with two hundred and sixty high

speed pounds, drove me into the ground. I didn't breathe for a while, slipped around almost deserting consciousness.

I got one breath pulled in finally. Then one more. I kept working at it until I had a rhythm going. I wiggled and squirmed and got out from under, and he sat up and looked at me blank eyed. I said, "See you later," and walked away.

I was two blocks toward town when I felt the ground rumbling and turned to meet the charge. He veered and circled me and then stopped, breathing hard. I hit him, and he let one go that threw me six feet backward, and I landed hard in the grass. I got up and went for him, and he changed tactics. He didn't hit me anymore but started trying to get hold of me.

I ran, danced, circled and jumped. I tried to slow him down by smacking him in the head again and again. Smack him, leap back, dance to the side, hit him again. His face was getting puffy from being beat at. I hit him, and he jerked backward, stepped back, like he might retreat but then bore down again with more focused intent. He was a damn tree, so massive that my blows were just pecking at him.

I had to stop hitting him with my right hand, because some or maybe all my fingers were broken in that hand from my first haymaker. The bone ends grated, and that slowed me down so much that he caught me by the shoulder. He spun me around and got both arms wrapped around me from behind.

I had trouble getting my wind because of the falls I'd taken and because I'd been dancing and working so

hard. Then he tightened up a little. All I could do was catch very shallow breaths and say, "Phew. Wait a minute. Ease up a little," in a very small voice. He bore down a little more, and I said, "Uncle."

"Uncle who?"

"Anybody. I'll talk. I'll listen. Okay. Whatever you say. Just ease up." I caught up on my breathing a little. Then I said, "You can let go of me. I won't leave."

"Sure?"

"Yeah." I walked over to the grass and sat down against a tree and rested a while. He sat down on the grass and then lay down and put his arm across his face. I said, "You okay?"

"Okay. You?"

"Okay. I know I got broken fingers, and I think I might have some broken ribs. Something's kind of grating in there. Only last thing I want to know is, how come I drew a huge, heavy dude like you for a muse?"

"Well, what's it take?"

"Yeah. Yeah. Well, it's time to get at writing anyway. I got to do something, so I might as well do that. Give it a really good go and see what happens." Then I started laughing, and that caused my ribs and lungs to really hurt, and that was funny, that laughing should bring on pain, and I laughed harder and sat there hunched over, laughing and saying, "Ow, ow, ow, that hurts, and that ain't even funny," and that was funnier yet, so I devoted a lot of attention to trying to relax everywhere so the pain would ease, the laughter come easily, without fighting anything.

He said, "What's so funny?"

"He he he, ow, ow, he he, oh ha, ow. What's funny is, oh wow that hurts, not funny, no way, ow. What's funny is, all the fingers in my right hand are broken. He he he, ow, oh, ow. I think these two are pretty bad. I guess I hit you about a dozen times after I broke them. He he he, see, I can't write; my fingers are broken."

He sat up quickly. I looked at his battered face in the moonlight, and my laughing came in storms. The pain clamped down on me hard. He moved. I stopped laughing, took an even breath and said, "Of course I can write. No problem. Just kidding you a little. Sit back down and take it easy. We don't want to do any more of that. Anybody could look at us and tell that's not healthy. Even if they put my hand in a cast, I could have them set a pencil into the cast and make it along okay."

They put my hand in a cast that goes halfway up my forearm. Turned out I also broke a metacarpal, and that will take a while to heal, but my thumb and forefinger come far enough out of the cast that I can get hold of a pencil. It's fatiguing to keep moving the weight of the cast, but I'm holding out pretty well and increasing the length of time I can keep writing at a stretch.

They also put a tight wrap on my ribs, and I'm looking forward to the day we can take that off.

I'm beginning to pile up a substantial amount of work. Jean has her own projects going, and she's happy with focusing our energies more at home. We don't see many people.

Jerry and Lynn come over, and we all work in the garden, but it doesn't take as much time now that it's all

set up. Lot of the work, I can't do too well until this cast and tape goes anyway, so I sit at the outside table and keep writing. Everybody else drinks beer, but I don't, because alcohol befuddles my word sense, and I still have some catching up to do.

Feels good to be in the rhythm of it. I think this run may last a while.

About Jon Remmerde, the Author:

I've published essays, fiction, and poetry in *Back Home*, *Bellowing Ark*, *Bugle*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Crab Creek Review*, *The Doula*, *The Fiddlehead*, *Manzanita Review*, *Men's Fitness*, *Northwest*, *Summit*, *The Sun*, *a Magazine of Ideas*, *Yoga International*, *The Wolf Head Quarterly*, *Zyzyva*, and other magazines and newspapers.

I've published two books in paperback, *Somewhere in an Oregon Valley* and *Quiet People in a Noisy World*. You can order them from my website, Oregonauthor.com. Free reading and free listening are available on my website, and you can purchase ebooks.