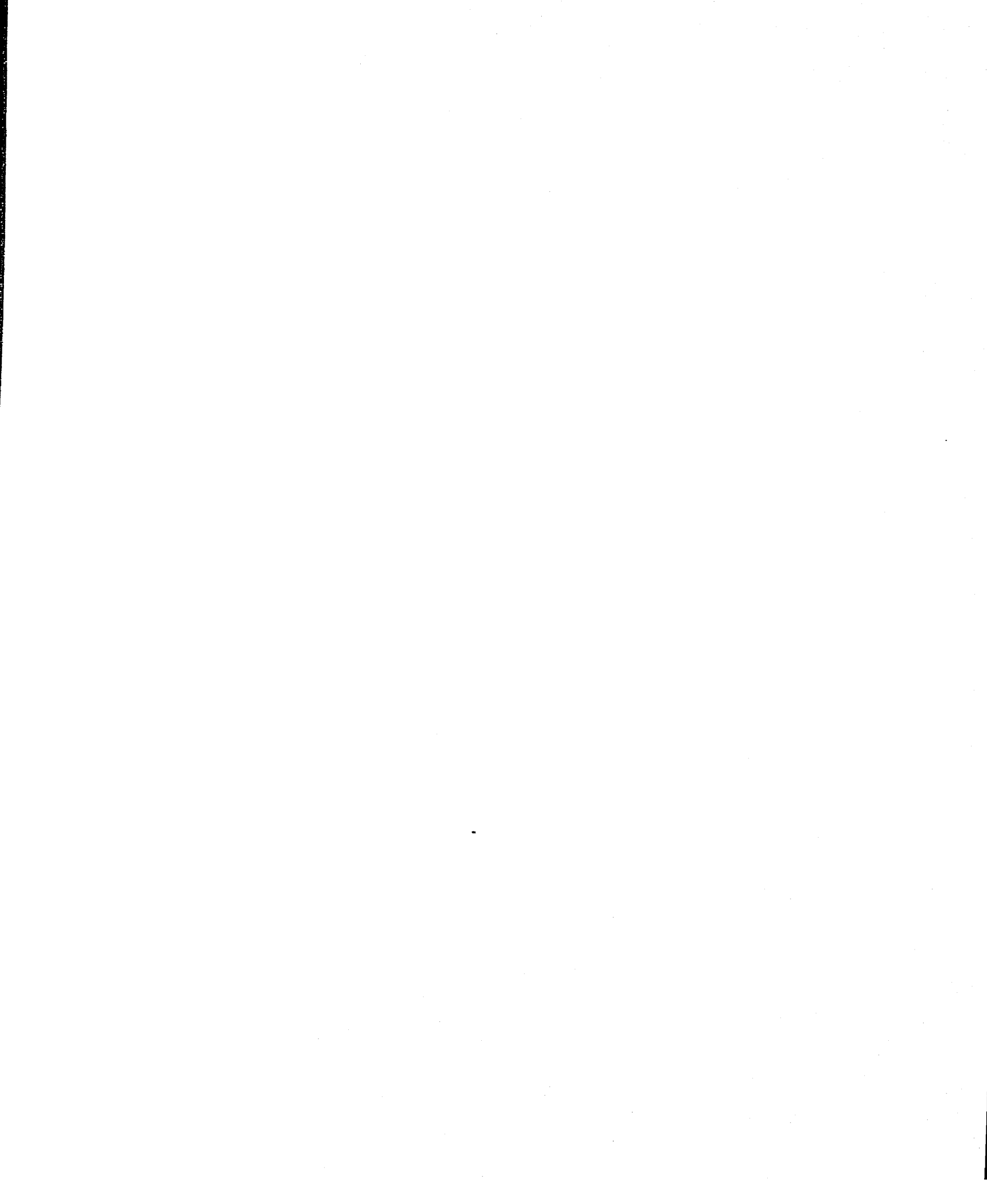


NOTE TO USERS

This reproduction is the best copy available.

UMI



The Bastard Out of St. Louis

By

Jonathon Muller

**A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of**

MASTER OF ARTS

**Department of English
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba**

(c) August, 2001



National Library
of Canada

Acquisitions and
Bibliographic Services

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada

Acquisitions et
services bibliographiques

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence

Our file Notre référence

The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-62804-3

Canada

**THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA
FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

COPYRIGHT PERMISSION**

THE BASTARD OUT OF ST. LOUIS

BY

JONATHON MULLER

**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University of
Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the degree
of
MASTER OF ARTS**

JONATHON MULLER © 2001

**Permission has been granted to the Library of the University of Manitoba to lend or sell
copies of this thesis/practicum, to the National Library of Canada to microfilm this thesis
and to lend or sell copies of the film, and to University Microfilms Inc. to publish an abstract
of this thesis/practicum.**

**This reproduction or copy of this thesis has been made available by authority of the
copyright owner solely for the purpose of private study and research, and may only be
reproduced and copied as permitted by copyright laws or with express written authorization
from the copyright owner.**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|------------------------------|------|
| Abstract | 4 |
| Thesis Summary | 5 |
| The Bastard Out of St. Louis | 14 |

Abstract:

The Bastard Out of St. Louis is a creative writing M.A. thesis. The text is a prose piece written in the form of a novella, consisting of the first two sections of a proposed longer work.

The text is narrated in the first person by the main protagonist, Thomas Bullfinch; an ex-Jesuit priest who has left the Order to seek his fortune and other various misadventures on the plains of Kansas, eventually ending up in the cattle town of Abilene.

Through the use of this often myopic and self-obsessed narrative voice, the text addresses the diverse and problematic issues of narrative construction and storytelling. Some of the narrative structures explored by the text include biographical/autobiographical writing, traditional Christian narratives, as well as the genre of the pulp Western novel itself.

As the narrative progresses, the integrity and reliability of the narrative voice becomes increasingly questionable, as the narrator is consistently haunted by the need to place his own story and the story of those he meets into a narrative construction that allows events to seem purposeful and comprehensible to him. As a result, the portrayal of events and characters in the text seems to display more of an allegiance to the narrative construction of popular nineteenth century novels than to any notions of objective reality. Fantasy dissolves indistinguishably into reality, and narrative digresses further and further into seemingly irrelevant minutiae, while apparently leaving out entire plot elements pertinent to the 'action' of the story. Eventually, the narrative begins to implode upon itself, fragmenting into multiple points of view, all originating from a single mediating source.

Thesis Summary:

Preface:

I have included a copy of my original thesis proposal preceding the main summary text in order to provide a context for the references made in the summary. By presenting these two documents in concert, I hope the evolution of the current thesis text will become clearer. I also hope that a reader will be able to see that while many of the goals stated in the proposal are not fully realized in the current text, they are at least initiated with the intent of further developing them in accordance with the proposal in the future.

MA Thesis Proposal

I propose to write a text in the form of a novella that considers, through the development of its own narrative, the processes and machinations of how various narratives are formed out of and around individual circumstances, ideas and characters. These narratives include the history/myth making aspects of the biographical narrative, as well as the evolution of political, ideological and religious movements. Guy Vanderhaeghe's The Englishman's Boy, and Michael Ondaatje's The Collected Works of Billy the Kid, are two literary models of texts which I feel examine the various and often problematic ways event is transformed into narrative. While these texts tend to focus more on the genesis of historical and biographical narratives, the proposed text will also address more directly the possibility of entire ideological movements that may eventually emerge from these narratives.

Specifically, the text will employ traditional Western Christian narratives and ideologies as a medium for the exploration of narrative formation, though in such a way that the text is concerned more with the mechanisms of narrative than with any specific Christian dogmas. The Christian narrative(s) is simply one I am more familiar with than others that could work equally well: for example, Salman Rushdie's use of Islamic narratives in The Satanic Verses.

In the tradition of Vanderhaeghe's and Ondaatje's texts, as well as Jim Jarmusch's screenplay Deadman and David Webb Peoples's screenplay Unforgiven, I will be writing in the revisionist western genre – a landscape which I feel is particularly conducive towards the emergence of the legendary. The text will also draw heavily from the fantastical, 'magic realist' tradition of Rushdie's The Satanic Verses, Timothy Findlay's Not Wanted on the Voyage, and, particularly, the short fiction of Jorge Borges.

The text will chronicle the mysterious and enigmatic events surrounding the life, death (disappearance?) and subsequent lionization of the equally enigmatic, mysterious and charismatic character of John Carson. Carson, however, is never fully present in the text. Rather, his story emerges through the accounts of those who knew him, as well as those who simply knew of him. His numerous and proliferating legends quickly supersede anyone's individual recollections.

Stylistically, the text will be polyphonic in voice, ostensibly consisting of first person memoir/journal-type entries by Carson's various acquaintances, friends and enemies, primarily those of one Thomas Bullfinch: a personal friend of Carson's who is increasingly haunted by the ballooning and contrasting accounts of his friend. In this regard, the text will be indebted to Ondaatje's Billy the Kid, and Rob Budde's Catch as Catch, in that the story will "accumulate", (as Budde describes his narrative structure), with coherency slowly emerging from a palimpsest of multiple accounts. Throughout the course of the narrative, however, the authenticity and reliability of these voices will steadily disintegrate, as it becomes less and less clear as to who is speaking, and from what position. For example, how would the authenticity of the narrative voice be affected if a character were to, say, narrate his or her death? Carol Shield's narrator in The Stone Diaries, Daisy Goodwill, or Robert Kroetsch's narrator in The Studhorse Man, Demeter Proudfoot, provide good literary examples of the type of narrative ambiguities I am interested in here.

The ambiguity and contradictions in both the narrative voices and events they narrate play into some of the primary theoretical concerns of the text. From where does a narrative derive its legitimacy, if any at all? What role does "truth" – be it truth in regard to historical facts, fundamental ideals, functional expediency, or the perceived authority of the narrator – play in the legitimization of a given narrative, or, conversely, said narrative's marginality? In exploring the answers to these questions, the text will draw from numerous critical and theoretical sources,

including the socio-religious theories of Emil Durkheim and Max Weber regarding the routinization of charisma, as well as the entire spectrum of thought on literary canon and textual authority as to what makes a text legitimate: from Aristotle's "catharsis" to Derrida's notion of the "transcendental signifier".

Structurally, much of the narrative action in the text is *loosely* culled from the Apocryphal Acts of Thomas, making the text, in a sense, an apocryphal version of an already apocryphal text. This meta-narrative of apocryphal or marginal texts is extended by the fact that most of the characters are themselves marginal characters or outlaws, who are 'apocryphal' versions of historical characters. Bill Longely, Wes Hardin, and Jim Miller, for example, do not appear in the text as biographically accurate characters, however, characters in keeping with their 'legends' do appear.

Ultimately, I think the text I propose to write will speak to issues of narrative articulated best by Karen Brennan in her essay, "Dream, Memory, Story, and the Recovery of Narrative", in which she proposes the function of narrative to be a reclamation, or, perhaps, creation of one's self by enveloping what could just as easily be termed arbitrary or disconnected events within a linear, progressive narrative, "... we are creatures of context, of narrative."(Brennan) Historically 'accurate' recollection becomes irrelevant to the end result of narrative, in this view: "I confabulate to fill in the gaps. I perserverate to bide time....indeed my narrative, I believe, benefits from this forgetfulness. I believe it brings me mysteriously closer to the truth."(Brennan)

Summary:

The text I have ended up with currently seems to display very few of the features set out in my thesis proposal at the beginning of the term. In this regard, at least, I consider the project a successful one. For the sake of academic clarity, however, I feel should attempt to address how and where these apparent divergences occurred, if not precisely why. Of course, much of the explanation for this is beyond me, but I can at least detail what I thought I

was aware of doing at various times in my writing, to the extent that such an awareness may actually account for what ended up happening.

I suppose the most surprising and significant departure from what was outlined in the original proposal would be the development of the voice of the narrator, Thomas Bullfinch, which seemed to take over the entire project in terms of definitively shaping how things would progress from a very early stage. I had originally intended to explore various issues involving the mechanics of story telling and narrative construction through a polyphonic approach. The use of multiple perspectives in telling the same stories about the same people and events would, I believed, provide the opportunity for a juxtaposition of the different narratives, and hopefully make some of the processes employed in the telling of the stories occupy a more explicit, foregrounded position in the text. Although the voice of the narrator is arguably the complete antithesis of the polyphonic strategy originally considered for the text, I don't believe that the end goal of foregrounding narrative mechanisms need be abandoned all together. In fact, I believe this goal can still be accomplished just as effectively through a solipsistic narrative voice as otherwise – if not more so.

First of all, the mediation of the entire narrative through a single voice allows the text to directly address many of the issues associated with biographical/autobiographical writing. The notion of narrative selectivity becomes an important consideration as far as the disparity between what a reader might expect the narrator to include in terms of characters' actions and interactions, as well as the often obtuse and digressive elements the narrator chooses to direct a reader's attention towards. In this way, the first person narrative creates a sort of 'shadow' text (or texts) comprised of the information *not* provided, and the story (stories) that is invoked by this lack.

The biographical form used in the text also demonstrates the problem of how biography necessarily becomes autobiography. In other words,

everything we are told about other characters in the narrative ultimately reflects more upon the nature of the voice of the narrator than on the characters being described. Although much of the text is overtly autobiographical, there are many cases where the narrator positions himself explicitly in the mode of biographer; recorder of the *facts* about people in precise detail for the supposed sake of posterity. In these situations, the normally discrete and self-effacing voice of the biographer is brought to the foreground for closer scrutiny. The voice describing events and characters becomes as much or more the subject of interest than the events and characters themselves, since the accuracy of the *reportage* is (or at least should be) suspect to a reader. The biographer appropriates the voices and lives of his subjects to serve his own ends, whatever they may be. In this way, I hope that the lines between biography and autobiography might start dissolve in an interesting way, or at least in a way that brings more attention to itself than would normally be the case with the use of a less obviously problematic, conventionally self-effacing narrative voice.

In addition to appropriating the voices of others through the mediating effects of the biographical form, the narrative voice in the text carries the process one step further by actually shifting into a third person omniscient voice to narrate events, as in the case of chapters two and seven in the second section; or by completely adopting the first person voice of another character, as in the case of the short segment 'narrated' by the young girl seated across from Thomas on the train to Abilene. Although these appropriative shifts in the narrative voice occur sparingly in the first two sections, I plan to increase the frequency and intensity of these schisms in the voice as the text progresses, to such an extent that any sense of an integral, authentic voice is almost completely and irrevocably disintegrated through its persistent fragmentation. Each different 'voice' will tell a different part of the story from its own perspective, allowing events to emerge in a way similar to a more conventionally polyphonic text, but with the added dimensions of insularity

and self-implosion. In this way, a sort of polyphony of voices occurs within the narrative under the umbrella of a single, all-consuming voice.

Had I written the text in the truly polyphonic way I had originally planned to, I believe each voice would have possessed its own internal cohesiveness and individual wholeness in a way that the 'voices' in the context of the current text simply do not. While there would still be the benefit of multiple perspectives in such an approach, the implied author of each voice (i.e. myself) would exist outside the text in a position of authority relatively inaccessible to a reader. This implied author would essentially be performing the same acts of voice appropriation as the narrator of the current text, only in a more implicitly sanctioned mode. By asserting the solipsism of a single voice that is subsequently schismed into multiple narratives, the process of fragmenting the narrative is 'once removed' from myself as author, and shifted to an implied author that exists within the text itself, and is arguably much more accessible to a reader. I also feel that Thomas Bullfinch's own twisted impressions of what other characters in the story are doing and thinking is *much* more interesting than anything I could come up with.

In addition to the characteristics of the narrative voice in the text, I tried to evoke a sense of polyphony on a more semiotic, textual level, as well. I wanted to create the distinct impression that this text was one that was constantly in conversation with – and heavily informed by – other texts. From the direct references to Melville, Dickens, Dumas and Edwards, to the contemporary pop/pulp references to dime novels and church hymns, I wanted this text to be as much about other texts as anything else. Along these lines, the narrative is peopled with stock characters from the pulp western genre. They are written as parodies of the genre types that exist, but also – I hope – as three dimensional, fresh versions of these characters, and not simply over-the-top farces. I am thinking in this regard of the lead character in Woody Allen's *Purple Rose of Cairo*, who steps off the screen as an incredibly clichéd stock character, but because of these characteristics and the way they are positioned in the narrative, the character becomes compelling and real. In

other words, I hope that the characters in this narrative are taken seriously as discrete individuals precisely because of the implicit conversation their characters have with the stock characters and texts they are parodying.

On a less overt level, the companion text of the narrator, *The Life of David Brainerd*, plays a significant role – in my mind, at least – in establishing a tone of intertextuality for the narrative. Originally written as a personal journal not ostensibly intended for wide publication, David Brainerd’s initial text was subsequently edited, abridged, re-worked, re-written, and re-packaged at least nineteen different times over the next hundred and fifty years or so after its first unabridged publication by the *Society in Scotland for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge* (1746-8). In some cases, as in the case of Jonathan Edwards, the manuscript was heavily and selectively edited in order to get rid of the more “blasphemous” elements he felt were counter-productive to the inspiring message the account had to offer. In more extreme cases, editors like John Styles, and Edward’s grandson, Sereno Edwards, took the liberty of actually re-writing large portions of the text to suit their own purposes. Until very recently, the unabridged ‘Brainerd Journal’ had been completely out of circulation and presumed lost or non-existent. In this way, the text had become one of the most influential and inspiring texts for Christians of every denomination, without actually existing on its own as an autonomous text. For all intents and purposes, “The Life of David Brainerd” did not exist as a definitive, singular entity, but rather as a series of proliferating and ever changing narratives. By having the narrator write his story within the margins of this text, crossing out passages, changing words, and appropriating sentences for his own story, I wanted to endow Thomas’s own narrative with the same amorphous editorial qualities of Brainerd’s narrative. I plan to include more detailed physical descriptions of the manuscript throughout the remainder of the story in order to highlight these ideas more than they have been in these first two sections.

Another outside text that I tried to have Thomas’s narrative interact with is the Gnostic Christian writing, *The Apocryphal Acts of Thomas*.

Although the parallels between the events of Thomas Bullfinch's story and those in the story of the Apostle Thomas are of the loosest kind, the relationship between these two texts helps locate the narrative in the realm of apocrypha; texts that are marginal, suspect in terms of authorship, and lacking the perceived authority and authenticity of their 'legitimate' counter-parts. This notion of the events, characters, and voices in the text being bastardizations of some kind or another – on the outside looking in at the narratives they would like to be a part of, but can't – is probably the aesthetic I was most conscious of trying to achieve by way of creating a tone of intertextuality through the various means described above.

In terms of devices that occur within the narrative itself, and not through interaction with some outside text, I feel the concept of the cattle herd is one that speaks well to what the narrative might be about. Although I wasn't aware of this relationship for a long time at first, I think the images and ideas associated with the herd embody the direction of the narrative. There is a sense of passive transience and acquiescence among all the characters in the story that parallels the omnipresent animals in the text. Nobody knows for sure why they are there or exactly where they are going, but the herd gives them a reason to keep moving, which seems to be the only imperative the characters in the text consistently respond to. The entire narrative seems to project a tone of confused and misdirected longing for some sort of wholeness, yet is also haunted by the unsettling suspicion that such a thing might never have existed in the first place. The notion of moving a herd of cattle from point A to B for no other apparent reason than to just keep moving and maintain one's own inertia in life seems to manifest this tone nicely. As the herd starts to disintegrate later on in the text, so too do the characters' sense of purpose and relationships with each other. The herd may be an arbitrary form of order and organization, but it is still an effective one that is hard to replace once lost.

In addition to providing an arbitrary sense of direction for the characters and the narrative, which must be confronted when it is taken away, the herd also has obvious parallels to the Christian narrative of the shepherd and the flock. With this idea comes the sense of impending and inevitable doom of lambs being led to the slaughter that permeates the narrative and its characters. The human characters come to resemble a herd themselves, being guided along towards some unavoidable fate they know nothing about, but still seem to be aware of on some level.

If I had to provisionally classify this text, I would say that it is primarily a satire. However, if it is a satire, it is an *affectionate* satire; one that operates in a mode of *homage* towards the texts and ideas it is exploring rather than one of caricature and ridicule. While I found this mode very freeing at times, in terms of an apparent license to go completely over-the-top with some of the writing, I honestly tried to maintain some kind of integrity within the text and characters that allowed it to develop its own identity, independent from whatever satirical context I may have originally had in mind. I didn't want to end up beating a reader over the head with anything, and I think I was more concerned with succeeding in this goal, perhaps, than with any other 'literary' aspirations I may have had for the text.

THE BASTARD OUT OF ST. LOUIS

Now, gods, stand up for bastards.

- ***King Lear***



May 4, 1869 – “Go west young man.” This is the battle cry of a burgeoning civilization to ford the great Mississippi and venture into worlds unknown where its destiny awaits. I, Thomas Bullfinch, have alike felt the need to answer this beckoning, this call, this summons away to

May 4, 1869 – There comes a time in every man’s life when he must question where he stands, and move in order to know he is not standing still. I am seated on a train. Yet I am moving. Thus I seek my destiny across the great Mississippi which calls me, summons me, if you will, to cease standing still and to commence movement even if

May 4, 1869 – Today I leave St. Louis behind. Destination? Unknown. Destiny? Also unknown. I travel only towards the vague and insistent

sensation that life looms large somewhere over the horizon of the setting sun. Beyond the great Mississippi, beyond the genteel affectations of our modern lives, a greatness extending its hand to mine, summoning me, if you

May 4, 1869 – My name is Thomas Bullfinch. Missouri is beautiful from the window of a passing train.

May 4, 1869 – For my own private satisfaction, etc., (may it likewise be for the glory of God) I make the following remarks upon the various scenes of my life. I was born April 20th, 1718.

That would make me 151 years old.

I am not.

I stole these opening lines from *The Life of David Brainerd* by Jonathon Edwards; a copy of which I have in my valise. I have no particular fondness for this work, it just happened to be what I was reading at the time of my departure. Had I given more thought to the fact I wasn't coming back, I would have picked something else to read on the journey out...

May 4, 1869 – I believe myself to have been born somewhere around the year of our Lord Eighteen Hundred Forty Five, somewhere in the British Northwest Territories. I have known neither father nor mother in the time in between then and now. The Society of Jesus in St. Louis has been both to me.

I have no various scenes of my life to recollect, at least not now, or not yet. I suppose that's a big part of why I am leaving. I was a teacher at St. Louis University, after having grown up as its ward. I don't think I was a very good teacher. By the end I was answering most questions with the phrase 'Good question', and not much more. Before that, I was actually a priest in the Jesuit order. I think I still am. I never took to the cloth the way I think those who raised me had hoped I would. The way I *know* they'd hoped I would. After the first year or so, things happened. Not any one thing ... everybody just knew I wasn't going to have a long life in the order. I think most people knew even before I did. I was pretty into it there, for a while. I was the

personal ward and protégé of Father Matthew Mark Du Smeille: co-founder of the University, legendary missionary to the Indians, Knight of the Order of Leopold, Prefect, Professor of English, European publication of memoirs pending. He is a good man. It didn't work out.

For the most part my life has been unmemorable to me, and, I imagine, to others, as well. I don't feel I'm leaving anything behind. Only separated from it. I imagine my students sitting frozen in their chairs, suspended until I come back. Perhaps their hair and beards are growing, their fingernails curling around the edges of their desk blotters. I like to picture all of St. Louis fading into nothingness, slowly melting and falling away in large chunks behind me as I leave. I know this is not happening. Perhaps it is what's happening to me. There is a spider on the windowpane next to me, I just noticed him now. He was sitting so still. He is quite large. The train car has become unbearably hot.

*May 4, 1869 – There once was a priest from Missouri,
Whose life was all dull and dreary,
'Til one day he left,*

May 4, 1869 – The train car is about thirty feet long and smells dimly of fresh pine and varnish. Three hurricane lamps swing together from the ceiling like dance partners along the center aisle. (One of these bludgeoned me on the head while I was boarding – they are much heavier than they look.) The windows are shaded with slat blinds, which, when opened, tattoo the car and passengers alike with thick horizontal bars. Moving bars. Such an odd sensation watching these faces ripple and slide with every passing tree and cloud.

The seats are benches arranged back to back and facing each other, so one is always either placed in direct confrontation with the knees of a stranger in front, or periodically cracking one's skull against the skull of the person seated behind – if dueling hat brims don't provide some buffering first. Or, one is faced with both situations. Like me. Right now. The benches are very

hard, and slick, too. No matter how much one shifts and wriggles to change position, one's backside inevitably slides back to the original, and apparently only, buttox position achievable.

One's this. One's that. I don't talk like this. Very amusing for one to write as though one does, all the same.

May 4, 1869 – I find myself still wedged between wood, glass, and humanity. This, in itself wouldn't be so bad if the car weren't shaking like a cat shitting razor blades. Yes, I've heard all types of colorful phrases, and I like that one particularly well. There is a portly older woman to my left who does not fit entirely into her own seat, and a rather gangly woman of approximately the same age across from me. Needless to say, her legs are longer than the circus midget length that would fit comfortably between us. Each time the car rocks, the one on the left leans into me, causing my head to knock violently against the window, tipping my hat up to the cock-eyed angle of a Spaniard. All the time the knees of the one across from me swing back and forth against my thigh like a meat mallet fixing a tough steak. Every time this happens, each smiles sheepishly, feigns embarrassment, says something like "Oh dear", "Oh my", "My, it's bumpy, isn't it, Father?" I nod politely and continue writing to fend off conversation. They don't fool me. They are tormenting me and they know it. The car continues to shake so much, I fear I may no longer be a virgin in the eyes of the Church. There is a young girl across the aisle I wish were seated here instead. She, too, is writing in a book.

The woman to my left smells funny. Her dress is blue with red and pink flowers. The one across from me has a red dress with blue and green flowers. Both have hats as big as mine, covered with flowers on all sides. They don't smell like flowers. I can barely write legibly, but I dread closing this book. It's not a problem yet, but what if the situation hasn't changed when nature begins to call, summoning me, if you will? This can't be good for my constitution. I can feel vital organs and other such necessary innards shoving around against each other in there.

If I could just fall asleep, I can hold it longer when I'm asleep. Everyone can. I don't think I can fall asleep like this – head banging against the window every two minutes. I have decided to fake it until I fall asleep for real. I simply can't tolerate consciousness any longer. I must make it look like I nod off while writing. I mustn't close this book. It would probably look more believable to fall asleep reading rather than writing, but to go rummaging into my valise for a book at this point is well beyond my courage. I just banged my head so hard my hat fell off onto the woman across from me.

“Are you ... all right Father?”

There was genuine shock and concern on her face as she handed back my ridiculously crumpled hat. I could see one eye only between the broad brim of her hat and the thick shadows wrapped around the side of her face, bending around her bony shoulder and continuing down the front of her dress. In the motion of the train the other eye would make brief appearances and then disappear again like a blinking lizard I saw once at a carnival.

“Yes yes fine ma'am thank you kindly” I muttered I think.

It's so hot right now. I can feel sweat pooling everywhere on my body, and the worst part is I know it's not all my own. I want to take my jacket off, but the very fear of moving overrules this. That last blow to the head thankfully brought on a wave of dizziness that I believe made me look very sleepy. Perhaps the next blow will knock me out. I am horrified by the thought of waking up with my head buried in the ample bosom of the smelly woman next to me, a puddle of drool down the front of her bodice and my hand clutching her thigh like the quilt in my apartment.

‘Oh, Father’, she would say, ‘you looked so peaceful, I just couldn't wake you.’

If only the car weren't shaking so much. Such a vivid picture. And why didn't the cat realize this would happen eventually when it ate the razor blades in the first place? A moral lesson for us all.

May 4, 1869 – There is a priest starin at me from across the aisle. Truth be told, I can't say as though I mind this all together entirely, on account a he is not hard to look at back, though him bein a Holy Father is a little disquietin to me on that scale. I once heard of some Holy Fathers who was allowed to get with women all legal and Christian like, I think it was probly New York or some such fancy place I seen in a picture book. Maybe he ain't even a Holy Father a t'all, but why would he wear such a silly lookin hat? He don't act like no Holy Father I seen before. He's all quiet an nervous lookin, an when he looks at someone his eyes go up to his eyebrows on account a his head is sort a tilted forward, instead a the other way round, which is the way most Holy Father's look at folk. I don't think he's even from Missouri, unless maybe St. Louis, which would explain a lot.

I think even once there he was even fixin to talk me up some, but then these horrible smellin ladies came and set down next to him and made him look even more nervous. I know the type, we even got them in Lafayette county where they never got no manly attention they whole lives and so they get older an start hangin round the Holy Fathers on account a the Holy Fathers got to give them attention 'cause it'd be a sin not to. I know the type, an' I pray ta' Jesus everyday that it may never be me ever in a thousand long years.

He's asleep now. Just like a baby. I think maybe he knocked hisself silly on that window there just to get away from them smelly ladies. I almost hope he's fixin to get off and come be the Holy Father at Lafayette county, if it ain't too sinful to think so.

May 4, 1869 – I'm not sure how long I've been asleep. I hope it's been a while. I don't have a watch. It is cooler now. I opened the window but I didn't like the smell. The spider is gone. My mouth is dry. My head is very sore and a little swollen, and the inside of my right knee feels very tender.

Very hot this afternoon. I passed out without taking off my coat or hat, both of which are very heavy, very black, and very priestly. I have decided to leave my jacket on now that it is cooler. There will be huge stains on my shirt,

I can feel the greasy damp patches where my arms were folded against my chest. I still wear the broad, round felt hat of the Order. It gives people the wrong idea, but so far my appearance has seemed to keep strangers at bay. I should get rid of the crucifix around my neck, too. Nearly strangled myself more than once while sleeping.

The car is maybe three-quarters full now. The women are mercifully departed, and no one has taken their place. You'd think a priest would be considered more approachable than others on a train. Maybe I'm just lucky. No one seems to be talking too much anyway.

May 4, 1869 – *There once was a priest from St. Louis,
Whose demeanor was one of great*

May 4, 1869 – Fell asleep again. Awoke when the porter came to light the lamps. The car has taken on a cozy, insulated glow I can't say I can describe, but do like very much. I can see nothing but black outside my window. If I take my hat off and cup my hands around my eyes, and press them to the glass, I can make out the ghostly silhouette of a landscape sluicing past in the far distance. The whole scene has the appearance of the artificial – pasteboard cutouts being slowly walked past my window by some underpaid stage hands. The car jostles and shakes and the lamps sway back and forth but there is absolutely nothing outside, and - more than once - I experience the powerful sensation that the car is standing still in space, no ground beneath it, vibrating merely for effect.

May 4, 1869 – A very large man has seated himself next to me. I'm not sure where he came from, having fallen asleep again. He looked as though he was in the mood for conversation when I woke up, so I busied myself writing as soon as I could. He is quite fat. I say this because he can't see what I'm writing and it amuses me. His breathing is labored and he has a nose whistle, which, I have to say, is really bothering me. A very pretty young girl was sitting across the aisle a few hours ago, I wonder if she's gotten off. I thought

about starting a conversation with her, but ...the hat. I contented myself staring at the side of her neck when she cocked her head to one side to look out the window. Must've been about fifteen or so. I am a sick man. I'll give the fat man my best patronly nod the next time he looks up at me.

Look up at me.

Look up at me, fatboy.

I think he's gone to sleep. His nose whistle is strangely charming.

May 4, 1869 –I have no real notions about east or west. I'm not looking for land, or gold, or adventure. If I felt a likelihood of meeting a gruesome, violent death by travelling east of the Mississippi, I would probably be headed in that direction now. I don't consider myself suicidal in any way, nothing as sinful as that. I would like to die as soon as possible, but this is surely nothing new for someone raised in the ways of the Holy Church.

I asked the porter how far west I could go on this train. He asked where I would like to go. I said further. He said most people seem to get off at Kansas City, which is technically the end of the Missouri Pacific Line, even though the train keeps going and becomes the Kansas Pacific, even though some people call them both the Union Pacific, but he still hadn't got used to calling them that. I said I had no desire to visit Kansas City. He said from Kansas City I could go on up to Chicago lickity split, lots of folk liked Chicago plenty. I said I wanted nothing to do with what lots of folk like plenty and reminded him I was interested in travelling further *west*. He said well, there's Junction City. I said I didn't like the sound of it being a city. He said there were lots of places I could go that weren't cities, but this train would be turning around at the wheelhouse in a town called Abilene, Kansas, where there were more cows than people and not many folk seemed to like going there, only coming *from* there, and after which point I would be traveling further *east*. I said Abilene would suit me fine as I much preferred cows to Jayhawkers. He was quite polite considering how rude I was to him. I didn't mean to be rude, I'm just saying that, looking back on the conversation, I

could see how what I said could be taken as rudeness. I hope he didn't think so. Didn't seem to. I have to piss like a racehorse. The fat man is gone. I feel very bad about what I wrote earlier. But I also feel obliged to leave it there, that it would be worse to just cross it out and pretend it didn't happen. There's no penance in that. Perhaps none of this will make the final draft of whatever it is I'm writing, if I ever sit down to copy it out into manuscript form. I truly feel I've gotten off to a rather weak start with it all. I really have to urinate.

May 4, 1869 – Took train from St. Louis, Missouri to Abilene, Kansas.
Weather was hot and I couldn't find the water closet.



May 7, 1869 – **A**bilene is a cow town. I've never even heard of it before, but here's what I've learned in two days (which is a lot – people here are so friendly and willing to open up. I think maybe it's the hat.):

There was no Abilene as little as two years ago. As far as I can tell, there was no Abilene until there was a Joe McCoy who said there would be an Abilene. Before 1867 it is said there was but one shingled roof in town, the rest being an assortment of grass roofed sod shanties. Not many homesteaders and even less businessmen of any sort. But, there was all that grass, as far as the eye could see, just sitting there on people's roofs.

The railroads were all planning their inevitable expansions west. Joe McCoy knew this, as did just about anybody. At this same time, cattlemen in Texas had begun driving their herds in all directions north, east and west in desperate search of whatever markets could be found. These drives were scattered, unfocused acts of arbitrary commerce. Meanwhile, markets in the

east were screaming for beef which was in short supply following the war, not to mention all the new Indian treaties that called for the government to supply annual quotas of beef to the reservations. I can't say I noticed these goings on in the market place back in St. Louis, but I didn't notice much of anything in St. Louis, and maybe that's why I don't live in a big house on top of a hill in the middle of nowhere, Kansas, like Joe G. McCoy does.

When you look at it all on paper like this, it seems foolishly plain, I admit, but apparently old Joe G. was snubbed by the Kansas Pacific line and actually thrown out of the Missouri Pacific offices before some rail line called Hannibal and St. Joe or St. Joe and Hannibal agreed to let Joe ship copious amounts of livestock back east where it was hastily chopped up and returned to him in the form of crisp new hundred dollar bills. Or something like that.

I have to say I'm not sure about that episode of him being thrown out, as Mr. McCoy was pointed out to me on a passing carriage when I first arrived here, and I observed him to be an amply large fellow I don't think could be man-handled in such a way. He reminded me of Father Du Smeille: older, balding, a bit of a paunch, but stronger than hemp rope after you've gotten it wet. One of those guys who doesn't look like much sitting behind a desk, but who'll come and heft down a few hundred pounds of bacon, flour, and axle grease off the back of a wagon while you're off looking for a ramp and a dolly, all the while muttering how they lifted much more when they were your age and how they have to do everything themselves if they want it done right.

On the other hand, another fellow was pointed out to me just today as being the man in question, and he certainly looked like he could be thrown out of a railroad office, or any office, for that matter.

Other folk have told me that no one's ever seen Joe McCoy, that he never leaves his mansion for anything, hiring different men to go into town and perform his business as if they were him. It is said that those who have seen him are sworn to secrecy, and any disloyalty in this regard, or suspicion thereof, would most certainly effect the direst of consequences.

After getting a railroad on board, Joe still had to find a town along the projected route that could handle that much beef and not upset the locals. As Abilene had very few locals and an abundance of grass, I am able to write here today from the premiere shipping station of Texan cattle to the east. That first year Joe managed to convince (blackmail, extort, and kidnap according to some very enthusiastic talkers in town who heroically managed to fill me in on all the details between shots of various liquors) Texas herders to drive thirty-five thousand head of cattle through his fine little steam train stop that year. Last year that number reached seventy-five thousand, a barbershop, and two new warehouses that the locals kindly refer to as 'dance houses'. This year there is a hardware store, another barber shop, eight new saloons, card houses, or drinking institutions of some variety, and a ten-pin alley in anticipation of over three hundred fifty thousand head of walking sirloin bound for Chicago. There is, as of yet, no chapel.

May 8, 1869 – I have been in Abilene for three days now, and am somewhat surprised to find myself still alive. I won't say I'm discouraged by this, but from what I'd understood in St. Louis, my life should have been in serious peril as soon as I crossed the Missouri River – if not before. Of course I've been out of St. Louis before, very far out. I've sat down to break bread in the homes of those considered to be the most hostile of Indian tribes in the Dakota Territory. But these were not Jayhawkers. An Indian needed a reason to kill a man from Missouri, (and, I believe, they were in no short supply of these), all a Jayhawker needs is a gun, or possibly a blunt object of some sort. Or so I was told. I haven't seen nearly as many guns as I would've expected or liked to have seen here. Or gunfights, or gun play of any kind, for that matter. I may have to re-think my current strategy.

May 8, 1869 – The bowling alley has become somewhat of a second home to me, here in Abilene, my first home being this small room with wash pan and complimentary breakfast here at Big Sally's Boarding House for Men. There

is even a small desk and a chair in front of a small window, where I'm writing now.

Big Sally is indeed very big. She has a low booming voice and broad shoulders and I secretly believe her to be a man. I think others here and in town believe the same, but nobody says anything out loud, and I think that works out just fine. She has been nothing but overly kind to myself and to the other guests I have seen here. Of course, I've seen many a mannish woman in St. Louis, so perhaps Sally is just such a one as these. Either way, I am quite happy to stay here for two dollars a night or twelve dollars a week. I'm not sure if this is a good rate as I have never boarded before.

I have fifty eight dollars and seventy five cents left after paying for my room, three cheese sandwiches, four dinners of bacon and eggs, two pickles, six glasses of lemonade, three sarsaparillas, four pieces of chocolate cake, two picture postcards, a new watch chain (I couldn't justify buying the whole watch), a fine sounding whistle just like the sailors use, a pair of socks, and seventeen games of ten pin including four shots of whiskey at fifty cents a piece I had to buy when I lost to betting men. I will soon have to cut back spending or find a job of some sort. Of course, not for a while. I am becoming more and more confident, however, that I will live to have to deal with this dilemma.

I mostly stay out late at nights just walking up and down the street, looking at horses and listening to the music from the dance houses. The two most popular dance houses, by virtue of their being the most expensive dance houses, are located at opposite ends of the street. This way I can walk back and forth all night and make like I'm just coming from the one or just on my way to the other. I'm sure I will go in sometime. No one has given me a second look in this regard even though I still wear my hat and dark coat and crucifix everywhere. Nobody seems worried I might be here to evangelize them into the Holy Church. People are so nice here.

At the alley they sometimes call me the 'Rollin' Reveren', especially when I'm playing well. I've blessed all the balls in that place, and the lane and some of the pins, too.

Last night on the street, one fellow yelled at me, "Hey, Carson! Where'd ya get that funny lookin' hat?"

I think he was trying to say 'Parson', but you must understand that drink will take a man's language from him by that time of night.

May 10, 1869 – I have taken the first steps towards my goal of cutting back on spending. I have bought a loaf of bread, a block of some mighty tasty cheese, a rather nasty looking knife, and some waxed paper. I now go nowhere without cheese sandwiches wrapped in my coat pocket that you couldn't tell from store bought if I paid you to try. I maintain my bowling habits by betting the cost of the game against whiskey and winning a good percentage of the time. I still consider chocolate cake a reasonable expenditure, and the lady behind the counter has of late given me a clergyman's discount since I blessed both the cake pan and her husband's checkers board. I have also taken to wrapping up extra pieces of bacon from breakfast so I can easily slip them into one of my sandwiches later for a more substantive meal.

I now have thirty-six dollars even left (the cheap knives looked so small) minus the seventy-five cents I spent on a pair of lovely cloth ribbons for Sally's hair. She was so tickled she put them in her hair right then and there when I gave them to her, and went running for the looking glass in the parlor. The ribbons are the same light yellow color as the ones in the hair of that girl on the train.

Sally's neck has a lot more hair on it, and is quite muscular. She caught me looking at her neck in the mirror and just smiled and said, "Oh, rev'ren, you sure do make it easy for a girl to get excited 'bout religion."

Her voice got even lower when she said this and she wouldn't take her eyes off me so I said, "The Christ Jesus surely is exciting stuff, Sally," and went to my room and locked the door. She really is a sweet lady.

May 11, 1869 – This morning at breakfast Sally gave me so much bacon I could barely fit the left overs in my front pocket and had to put a few slices in my trousers. In retrospect, I suppose this may have been a mistake considering the compromising grease stains that now grace the more delicate areas of my trousers. It was fine bacon, though, and I am planning to buy a new suit, just the same.

Some of the other fellows at Sally's were looking at me a little strange at breakfast, but this is understandable, as I was wearing my hat at the time. I plan to get a new hat yet, too, but the business of blessing various items has proved a good one for me, and I don't think it would work out nearly as well without the hat.

Today at the bowling alley I had a very hard time getting any betting men to play me. There was one ugly fellow there that I guess was new to town, or at least to the ten pin, who agreed to roll me for a double shot of liquor and 'a kiss on the cheek' as he put it. He seemed awful entertained to be in a contest of any kind with a man of the cloth, and the first few times I was in the middle of my delivery he would yell out "Here goes the Hooly Roooooller!" and laugh himself into a fit. I am here proud to say I rolled a two seventy-five to his ninety six, and he got a bit upset.

He was a meaner looking man than most I'd seen and was one of the few wearing a gun. It looked far too big for him and jabbed into the side of his thigh when he walked. He had never taken it off all game, and twice it had fallen out. I figured a bowling alley was as good a place to get shot in as any, so I insisted he pay up when he refused.

"Don't you know that faggitty-ass Jesusfuckers like you ain't suppos'd ta engage in games of chance?" was what I got back.

He was a good six inches shorter than I, but he got his face up just as close as he could to mine when he said this. He had maybe three teeth that I could see under a gray, spikey moustache. He breathed heavy in and out of his mouth which was sort of pursed closed, but not quite, so little brown bubbles came and went out of the corners of his lips which were the thinnest and driest

I've ever seen on a human form. The odor he was blowing directly up my nostrils brought back thoughts of large women in flower print dresses and this is not so pleasant a thing as it might sound.

"It's two bits a roll here. I guess I figured you for a sure thing, *my son.*"

That last bit just came to me right there, and I did an awful job of hiding the grin that came with it. There were a few chuckles from the crowd that had gathered, too, which I'm sure didn't help calm the man's attitude.

"You know, *father,*" he said, clutching at the butt of his gun and breathing out through his nose in between words, "I ain't never been one to take much account of *popery* and the sack 'a shit *liars* that come with it."

His eyes were just blank. I mean to say I saw nothing of the rage – or even delight – that I thought I might see. Just empty, brown, bloodshot holes that I'll never forget. I can't say whether he was looking past me or right through me, but I got the strangest sensation from looking at those eyes that I might not even be there in the first place.

"In fact," he said, slowly unholstering the clunky weapon and raising it towards my head – too slow, for my preference – "now might be a good time to tell you I'm a balls-to-the-bone, born and raised Scotch Presbyteri

May 12, 1869 – Last night I heard Sally coming up the stairs while I was writing, and figured she'd be in less of a mood to talk if my light was out and I was under the covers snoring up a low-grade tropical storm. I don't know if she tried to get in to talk or not, because after I got under those covers I hadn't faked a half dozen long snorts before I was sawing them off for real. I slept through breakfast and everything. Must've been all the excitement from yesterday finally grabbing me by the neck and throwing me down for the count. It turns out Sally did have something she wanted to say to me, though. I found this note slipped under my door this morning:

Dear Reverend Bullfinch,

It is with deep regret that I must ask you to terminate your lodgings here with us, as it is contrary to business to house men of such a risk to the safety of the other guests and of the establishment. You have until 12:30p.m. Thank you again kindly for the ribbons, they are just lovely.

Signed,

*Sally Walker,
Proprietor*

P.S. I am glad you are still alive and my prayers are with you to stay that way.

She really is a sweet lady. I don't know if it is past 12:30, though I doubt it. Seeing as how I slept in the only clothes I have and my valise is sitting behind the door, I suppose I'm ready to go right now. I think I will make some of those fine cheese sandwiches, first. I suppose I will have to do without bacon for today.



May 12, 1869 – Today has been a most interesting day for me. Beginning with my aforementioned eviction from big Sally's, I arrived at the ten-pin shortly after to discover I was banned from there, also.

When I first walked in, I was greeted with a friendly cheer of "Here comes the Hooooly Roooooller!" from the drunk who sits by the back wall. Stringbean Page, (one of the regulars, and probably the finest roller in the place), got up to shake my hand. Others patted me on the back or raised their glasses. I even blessed a score card – a respectable frame of 252, I believe.

I have lectured to classes of upwards of seventy five of St. Louis's brightest young men, I have preached to a holiday Mass of over two hundred eighty of the parish faithful, but in this regard I was just a talking head, and I know it. Those people weren't paying attention to *me* – nodding their heads thoughtfully, furiously taking down notes, or staring out the back window – they were there to hear 'the Priest', or 'the Professor', whomever that might be. But these men were shaking *my* hand, patting *my* back. Me. *The Rollin' Reveren'*. By the time I got to the counter for my shoes, I was a little giddy. I could feel the eyes on me, and my earlobes were on fire.

"Awful sorry, Rev, you cain't be here no more."

I giggled a little, I think. That's all. I looked around, smiling, waiting for a revolution of the patrons on my behalf. Someone coughed. A ball rumbled down the lane and some pins fell, followed by some indistinguishable comments.

"Just 'til this thing you got with Shorty blows over, see. I know it ain't yer fault, Rev, but I cain't have no trouble here. I reckon I run a clean ten-pin here, and I aim 'ta keep it that-a-way."

"Of course, Clancy. I understand perfectly," I said in a wise and magnanimous voice, giving the counter man a reassuring wink as he turned

away from me, too saddened and ashamed at the whole situation to even look at me.

This didn't happen. Instead, I giggled a little more and started an odd looking shuffle towards the door, sort of half backwards and half sideways. On my way out the drunk piped up, "There goes the Hooooly Rooooller!"

Abilene has only one street to speak of, and at that time I wished it had a few more. I walked down that street towards Harper's Market to see if I was banned from chocolate cake and lemonade, too.

I don't generally make a habit of looking directly at people when I walk down a crowded street, but I never realized how hard it is to *not* end up meeting someone or other's gaze when you're specifically trying to keep your eyes to your feet. Every time I looked up to get my bearings I caught someone else staring at me. I hoped one of them would be a friend of Shorty's with a big, long, shiny pistol of some sort pointed in my direction.

I passed the rain barrel where I would usually break for a few cheese sandwiches and some shade. I always had thought it was a nice, out of the way place, but today that rain barrel looked to me like a big barker's stage right in the way of everything. Some folk I didn't recognize touched their hats as they walked past, muttering things like 'way ta go, Rev', and 'he had it comin, sure'. Others gave a real wide berth when I passed. One girl smiled at me. I smiled back. One fellow yelled out, "Hey Carson! The Judge is gonna be right pissed at you if you don't get back! And where in'a hell'd you get that gawdawful hat?" Folks surely do get drunk very early around here.

I kept walking for quite a while, past the dance-house on the east end of the street, past the train platform, off the end of the sidewalk. And then I was alone. I hadn't noticed when the transition had occurred, but I was no longer in town. The road wasn't a road, and there was grass up to my waist. I had to throw my knees up out in front of me to wade through it all.

I spread my hands out palms down beside me and continued to walk like this, part for balance and part to feel the grass stroking my hands. I imagined that if I did start to fall, those bristly waves would somehow hold me up, floating me gently in whatever direction the breeze happened to be blowing. Then I did fall forward and cut my lip on a smooth white rock. I didn't get up, though. I just rolled over onto my back, tasting the blood and slowly running my tongue back and forth over my lip. I could feel it swelling up bigger, pulsing against the underside of my nose. For a moment I thought it might actually bust, it was getting so firm and hot. One of my students once told me that if you were to feed a pigeon enough seltzer tablets, it would swell up and pop, not being able to vent any of the excess gas. I wondered what a popping bird would sound like. Would it be loud and all at once, like a firecracker? Or more gradual; a slow hissing from nowhere in particular, like a pickle jar left out in the sun? When I was a kid, I threw a little brown tree frog into a hot fry pan to see if it would pop, since its eyes looked so big and bulgy as it was, but all it did was jump right out again.

The grass where I lay felt spiky and hard at the roots, and it jabbed into the back of my legs and my neck. By this time my lip had stopped swelling and the sun was beating down on the right side of my face, making me close my eyes. My hat had fallen off. I stretched out my arms and dug my fingers into the soil beside me, like I was running my fingers through someone's hair. First parting my fingers wide to collect grass stems in between, then squeezing the earth as if to form a ball. The dirt there was not soft enough to actually do this, but I repeatedly scratched my fingernails inward over its hard, crumbling skull to clutch a fistful of grass and topsoil, carving out smooth and comfortable ruts. I fell asleep out there like that, underneath the grass: drooling a little, hands buried, invisible to anyone who might happen to look out over the horizon away from town, only fifty yards away.

When I awoke, it was dusk. I gathered up my hat and valise and urinated right there, in the grass. It seemed like the right thing to do. There was grass in the back of my pants, in the cuffs of my trousers, in my hair and down my collar. I plucked up another few long blades and stuck them in the side of my mouth – my lip was killing me, and this seemed to make it feel a little better, though not much.

The lights at the dancehouse were all on, and the echoes of music and conversation seemed to reach me before the actual sounds. As I got closer, I observed a larger crowd than usual outside. One man was crouched on top of another man who was cradling the back of his head and shielding his face with his elbows. The man on top was beating the other man's face with the butt of his revolver, just like he was hammering nails. The crowd was pretty silent, you could hear the man on top grunting and the dull cracking sounds of the man's face and elbows underneath.

I walked right up to them both, closer than anyone else. The man on the bottom's elbows were beginning to relax and fall, occasionally jerking back up in reaction to a blow landed seconds before. The man on top now had two guns drawn butt-first, one in each hand, beating the other in tandem with a clockwork rhythm. There were no more cracking sounds, each blow resulted in an eerily silent *thud*.

The man on top finally noticed me and looked up. I was staring down at the face of the man beneath him. The eyes were swollen shut and the cheeks were puffed out. It looked like he was smiling, his eyes all slanted and squinty. Like the miniature statue of the Buddha someone had given Father Du Smeille on one of his trips.

I looked back at the man on top who was now looking at me, his head swaying a little, scrunching his eyebrows and struggling to focus. He was only a boy. His shoulders were broad and muscular, much bigger than my own, but his face was smooth, covered in a few wispy, patchwork whiskers. His eyes big and round and close together, and even as he screwed up his

eyebrows and squinted to make me out through the drink and the dark, there was hardly a wrinkle on his shiny forehead. Then those eyes brightened, and his pursed lips stretched into a startling grin. Dimples appeared from nowhere like stars and his eyes flashed and it was the most innocent, intoxicating smile, and all I could do was smile back, powerless.

“Carson!” he spat gleefully, “Whudder you doin’ here?”

He started cleaning off the butt of one of the guns on the hem of his shirt and stood up as if from playing a spirited game of marbles. That smile. Unbelievable.

“Car-son,” he half sang, eyes resting on my pants as he was getting up, “did you piss yer pants, Carson?”

I looked down.

“It’s bacon,” I mumbled, still staring at that smile.

“C’mon, let’s go get laid, buddy.”

He finished wiping off the other gun and holstered it. He was slapping me kind heartedly on the back and pressing down hard on my shoulder to keep his balance. The crowd had already disappeared back inside, and we were alone, save for the man on the ground, who had begun flexing and kicking his legs a little like a newborn trying to roll over.

“No, thanks,” I said.

His eyes could never quite focus on mine, each time coming close, and then gently sliding off to one side or the other, that smile never waning for a second. I couldn’t take my eyes off his.

“I’ng gonna go get sum pussy while I can still get it up, O.K., buddy?”

“All right.”

“Yer all grassy, buddy.”

“I fell asleep.”

A deep concern seemed to interrupt his smile. My grin fell with his. He reached up and brushed my lip a little with the tip of his finger.

“Someone ... did you get hit? Someone hit you?”

I thought he might cry.

"I fell down."

His eyes slid almost closed for a few seconds. Then all the dimples were back in a rush, head just swaying and smiling at me and whatever else existed for him to smile at.

"Whus with the...the hat there? Whaddya call that, there?"

"I'm not sure."

He just stood there holding my shoulder and smiling. I think he passed out for a second or two like that. He took his hand off my shoulder and brought it down again to give it one more slap and missed. Then he stepped over the man on the ground and pulled himself up the railing and inside. I decided to proceed to the dancehouse at the other end of the street.

My room here at the Longhorn Parlor and Hotel is a spacious one.

The walls are thin and I can hear the couple next door engaging in various carnal activities. This usually only lasts for a minute or two at a time, though I don't have a watch to be sure. The Longhorn is one of the 'dance houses' in town I knew I would end up in sooner or later. I didn't think I would be taking up lodging, however. It's nice enough here. I walked in the front with my hat pulled down over my eyes, waiting for the awed hush to fall over the room. No one seemed to notice me at all and I stubbed my toe quite badly.

The room costs two dollars a night, same as Sally's. Then there is the three drink minimum and the five dollar 'room service' charge, which I gather is the price of female accompaniment, whether you actually cash in on it or not, and I think the girls charge even more once they get to the room, sort of a 'cash on delivery' system. I've had my three drinks sent up to my room one at a time out of pure spite for this extortion. They sat on my window sill for quite a while, (as I was planning on throwing them out), until I decided this would be letting them get the best of me, and that it might just be a good idea to soak my lip in the edge of the glass for a while in order to help the swelling,

and – I won't lie – there is a good possibility that I am slightly inebriated right now.

I have only enough money to stay here one more night, but I am not worried. Today, out there in the grass, I realized I wanted to stay out there, under nothing but sky. To begin a roofless existence. The roof here is creaky. As are the walls.

The wall paper here is also the same as Sally's: big, yellow flowers with long green curly stems with lots of big floppy green leaves coming out of them. Both places must have gone up around the same time. Or maybe one went up first and had a bunch of leftover wallpaper for the other to buy when it was being built. Actually, I imagine wallpaper can go up any time after a place has been built, so I guess it could probably be just coincidence.

I wish I knew the names of those flowers. I never taught biology. They're probably not even a real flower anyway, just some factory that had a bunch of yellow and green paint and decided to invent a flower to go with that. Sure are pretty, though. Next door is going at it again.

May 13, 1869 – There is nothing that keeps wicked men, at any one moment, out of Hell, but the mere pleasure of God.

I have been thinking of a sermon I read many times in St. Louis. "Sinners in the Hands of an Irate God", I think it was called, by Jonathon Edwards. In one way I'm not sure what it was doing in the library, I never heard anything like it from our own pulpit, but our library's philosophy was one of exhaustive inclusion, and for this I am grateful. I have read Milton, Shakespeare, Pope, Dryden, Chaucer, Swift, and do not here claim to understand them to any great extent, or to be an expert in any way, though – or, perhaps, *because* – I was a professor of literature and composition. I just thought they were beautiful. I don't know that I can say exactly how they expressed God's will to man, though I graded compositions based on how well my students could explain this to me. Like an irate God.

Edwards' lines just keep coming back to me. I remember, after first reading it, being hardly able to walk straight for days, just thinking: *in due time their foot shall slip, and they shall be left to fall as they are inclined by their own weight...he that walks on slippery ground needs nothing but his own weight to throw him down. O Sinner! You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about...*

I had the image of an enormous hand suspended above me, the thinnest, finest silk threads extending from its fingertips to the shoulder seams of my tunic. I dreaded walking under trees or through doorways and arches, for fear one of these threads should snag and break, sending me hurtling into an abyss of flames which was never anywhere but directly beneath where I was standing. To this day, when I cross any threshold, my hand automatically reaches for the doorjamb and hangs on firmly until I am across.

Later, I read Edwards again and again for the sheer vigor of his hellfire and divine wrath. When I read him I could see tongues of fire in everything I saw, waiting to devour my sinful flesh, inch by agonizing inch. I saw this wrath as powerful – as powerful as anything in the universe – and in some perverse way it was a power I wanted to experience, or at least witness in some way. Edwards made divine wrath so much more real to my understanding than any divine love. The love part seemed nothing more than a clemency and toleration towards an otherwise repulsive and disgusting species. Christ the loophole. At least a sinner got to experience the true extent of divine energies – got to be the center of a sincere and focused cosmic attention.

Yet, I did not sin so that hell may abound. I felt my fate was precarious enough as it was, and I need do nothing to damn myself further. I did think a lot about what holy righteous fire would feel like, and if maybe I would get used to it after a while. Father Du Smeille was eager to disavow me of these notions, though he never suggested I stop reading Edwards, only that I should widen my reading, and consult with him as I did so. His face showed such concern for my abhorrent fascinations, leaning back in his oversized chair for

his oversized body, fiddling with his rosary and looking pensively out the window. His jowls creased under his chin and buried his collar. ('Jowls' has always seemed a strange word to me, but on Father Du Smeille, they were jowls.)

His huge paunch was a firm flour sack that stayed in place directly under his chest and over his belt without ever swaying from side to side or spreading out when he sat. He never looked at me when giving this advice, or listening to me, for that matter. He was like a blind man: you knew he was giving his undivided attention, but at the same time you kept finding yourself trailing off, waiting for him to give some token sign of acknowledgement – a nod of the head, an affirmative grunt, anything. When he was talking – and he did talk – I would end up practically out of my chair from leaning to one side, trying to enter into his field of view. I like to think he was inwardly pleased with my extra-curricular reading and my singular take on Edwards' treatments of divine wrath. Inwardly, of course.

I ate a fair breakfast this morning: flapjacks and sausage. Not as good as Sally's. I asked if I could substitute bacon for the sausage. Maybe tomorrow morning.

The Longhorn is a much different place in the early morning. Empty, for one thing. I have a whole table to myself and have been nursing a pot of coffee for the past two hours. A card game is going on across the room. They've been going for nearly fourteen hours, now. There is no conversation, only the hollow clinking of chips and inaudible bets, raises and calls. One of the girls has fallen asleep unglamorously leaning up against one of the players. Her mouth hangs open and her head jostles like a cadaver each time he leans in for a card. I observe all this from behind a forest of chair legs overturned on the tables between us for cleaning. This coffee is cold. There are a few girls sitting at the piano, drinking coffee and plinking at the keys. Occasionally one will try and sing out a few bars of a tune she thinks she's

recognized, but soon turns out to be mistaken, shutting up with as little warning as when she started.

One of the girls is glaring at me. I smile and raise my cup. She is the prostitute who came to my room last night. She is the one who got me thinking about holy righteous hellfire. For a moment I truly feel I can read lips as she mutters to a girl at the piano stuttering out a butchered version of *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*.

I tried to explain to her that I just wanted the room. She asked me if I hated her. I said no. She called me a liar. She said I hated her because I hate what I can't have and that I was a huge hypocrite because she knew I wanted what I said I didn't want and told everybody else they shouldn't want it either. I said I was very tired. She said she could see I had a hard-on a mile a way – which was not true – and that it was shameful for me to get my jollies at her expense that way. I said I thought that was the way it was supposed to work in the first place, and she didn't have much to say to this, so she just stood there.

I couldn't think of anything to do but stand there, either, so I stood. We were both still in the doorway, the door half open, my hand gripping the jamb. Her face was all painted and her hair looked like ... I don't know. She smelled like hard candies if you soaked them in bourbon and then drank a bucket of that blue stuff at barbershops. I realized later that the bourbon smell was me.

The girl at the piano is looking up at me, that other whore's mouth still working in her ear. Her hand still plays a melody from the hymn, but it is slow and disjointed. She looks very young. She is very beautiful. Her nose is long and angular, her eyes are perfectly set above high, majestic cheekbones. Her neck must be a foot long and made of polished marble, setting her head at that perfect picture-portrait angle. I never taught art. I can see nothing but curiosity in her gaze, none of the venomous contempt that the medusa is oozing over her shoulder. Her arms are pale and thin, and I imagine they are very soft. She is not painted.

The girl at the card table has fallen over and woken herself up. The players don't seem to notice. She gathers herself back up into the chair, tries to look alert for a bit, then leans her head back on the man's shoulder. My own shoulder aches terribly. That Jezebel made me sleep on the floor last night. She said it was really her bed, and that she was sleeping in it with or without me. She made me buy her breakfast this morning and eat it with her while she glared at me and made little chuckling sounds under her breath that made her head wiggle like she had a broken neck, and then her hair started to wiggle, too, only a little bit out of time with her head and I had to go find the water closet and it turned out those sausages were a waste of money anyway. She's really not so bad. I saw the men in here last night, and I don't really like to imagine the things that come to my mind. I think she cried a little, last night, too, her eye paint was all mussed this morning. I'm sorry I called her a Jezebel, and a medusa. Her hair does look kind of funny.

After I had given up on the coffee and started pretending to sip gingerly from an empty cup, the piano girl started walking upstairs. My eyes followed her upstairs and she looked right back at me and I didn't look away. I just about lost all the flapjacks I'd so proudly packed away when I saw a great big hand floating above her, threads straining to hold her up, about to break. I swear that staircase started to wobble.

I looked over at the card table, and some of the players' legs were already starting to catch fire. The sleeping girl's dress was a flaming mass and you could here the players' fingers sizzle and pop everytime they touched a card. The piano strings *zinged* and *twanged* as they snapped from the heat. The seat of my chair started to get uncomfortably warm and I felt the slightest hint of a tug at the shoulder seams of my coat.

I sat absolutely still and held on to the edge of table so hard I couldn't feel my fingers. I felt my chair tipping forward, and the floor seemed to be taking on a downhill slope. Chairs and tables began to slide across the room.

My legs started to cramp up my body was so tensed. The seat of my trousers was inching off the chair in horrible, bouncy spurts, and I could smell wonderful fresh bacon and I refused to look up at those card players. And then it was over.

At this point I went up to my room for a nap.

May 14, 1869 – I have spent my final night at the Longhorn Saloon and Hotel. My recollection of it is sparse, which – besides a haunting sense of speculation on some points – is fine with me.

I woke up some time in the early evening last night. I felt hungry and weak, although I did sleep much better in the bed than I had on the floor. The mattress still smelled faintly of Cecelia – that’s her name, the one with the funny hair – causing my stomach to quiver on and off like a tuning fork all afternoon.

All of the regular sounds of wine, women and song were coming from downstairs. I got up and stood outside my front door, which opens onto a corridor overlooking the main floor. I could not see the piano girl. I saw tops of heads. Animated, lively hat brims, large, gaudy feathers, shiny broaches and hairs clips. It was not hard to imagine there were no actual heads beneath these bobbing packs of felt and hair. Just a mass of floating accessories, hovering above full busted corsets and broad shouldered coats. Occasionally one would look up, or lean to the side, and the illusion was lost, but it returned easily enough.

I spent some time there, leaning against the railing and one of the large, round posts holding up the roof. It was smooth and I rested my head against it. From time to time I would lean over the rail and casually spit, then duck around behind the timber, wondering why I did it, waiting for some heavy cursing, or maybe a few high, beautiful shrieks. Nothing. So I would do it again. Never anything. Nothing is going as I expected.

I have never seen the ocean. I should have gone east. Spent a day on the beach. I’ve heard salt water smells different. I suppose it tastes something

like tears. I would join the navy. Or a fishing boat. Or a whaling boat, if they still have them. To hear a sermon by a grizzled old Father Mapple in some quaint and haunted sea-side chapel, and shortly afterwards be ripped to shreds in the gaping maw of an angry sperm whale, still alive on the way down, drowning comfortably in a warm, salty mess of innards, harpoon shafts, and ships' riggings. It would be completely dark. Only some sloshing digestive sounds, insulated from the ocean outside by mounds of slippery fat and cartilage. Curled up in a ball. Rising and falling and pitching and rolling with each graceful, elongated movement of the beast. Utterly pitch black.

My shoulder ached even more today. Cecelia came to my room again last night. I was still outside at the railing, in the process of coaxing up the thickest, heaviest projectiles I could from my lungs. She said something I can't remember. I swallowed and said I would like to apologize for last night.

For what, she asked? I said for not sleeping with her, and whatever else I had done to upset her. She was looking at me and our odors were mixing again and my head began to feel buoyant and detached. I was grabbing the post with both arms wrapped around it the way a toddler might ride the leg of a lumbering father who grins and pretends he doesn't notice the extra weight. I explained that I had been very tired and sore and a bit drunk the other night and that I never meant to offend her in any way, even though I obviously had, which was the last thing I wanted to do, and did she notice that the floor outside my room was a little uneven, almost sloped down?

She thanked me for the apology and then got really close to me and started playing with the lapel of my coat. I said I meant to buy a new one, but that I was running out of money, in fact, I would be broke after that night's rent. She said, well, why not make it a night to remember? I said, well, that sounded like a good idea to me, I was just so glad that she wasn't still mad at me. She giggled and tickled my chin. What happened to my lip, she asked? I had forgotten all about it. I reached up and touched it, then sucked it in under my bottom lip. Salty. She leaned in to kiss it, and I guess I must have cringed a little bit or turned away or something, and it's a good thing my stomach was

so empty, or those people would have surely noticed what would've come over the railing after that woman socked me square in the gut and huffed off into my room, slamming the door behind her. I hung on to that post for quite a while; eyes watering, nose running, gasping for air, my whole body shuddering and retching with violent dry heaves. Like a cat shitting razor blades.

After things had settled, I went downstairs and set to taking care of my three drink minimum. And I think I must have bought one more. And I think I may have had one bought for me. And I think I might have transubstantiated some water into five year old single malt scotch. And I think that water may have actually been, in part or in whole, urine, which may or may not have been my own, though in some strange way I prefer the notion that it was mine.

I woke up this morning on the floor next to my bed, which Cecelia was sleeping in, apparently quite comfortably. I did not feel good, and my pants were on backwards. There was a pool of vomit under the bed I can only assume was my own, as my mouth tasted ... bad.

Cecelia bought me a big breakfast with biscuits and real bacon as well as sausage. She sat and ate with me, and everything went down surprisingly well. I drank a lot of water. She dipped a napkin and scrubbed at patches of dried vomit on my lapel and collar, leaning across the table. She's really not so bad. I thought about trying to apologize again, but decided against it.

The stars will be out soon, I hope. I am seated next to a smooth, white rock fifty yards out of town. I smell horrible. I've neither bathed nor shaved in over ten days. The wind through all this grass is perhaps the most beautiful sound I have heard in my life to date. Everything looks blue. The sky is not dark yet, but the sun is gone, and a pale blue grey blankets everything in so completely I feel I may be able to throw this rock hard enough that it would bounce off of it, somewhere just above the horizon, rolling to a stop against the seam where night arches smoothly down into earth, grasses nuzzling

gently against the lowest of the clouds. I can feel the weight of this sky, and it causes my back to bend over this book as I write. I have eaten the last of a stale cheese sandwich, and I spent the remainder of my money on a slice of chocolate cake and a glass of lemonade in town.

My legs are crossed and I have removed my shoes. My coat hangs around my shoulders like a cape; my arms withdrawn from the sleeves. I can barely see what I am writing now, though I am confident it is legible. I can write extremely well without looking down at the page. The sky is not dark yet, but the sun is gone.

Things come to mind. I am thinking of pale yellow ribbons, and of green and yellow flowers. Of the bright purple, red and yellow of a man's face erased. Of the brown-black where a man's eyes should've been. Of smiling fat prophets, of fat, nodding blind men, and fat sleeping men with nose whistles. Of fat, smelly women. Of skinny smelly women. Of smelly, painted women. More flowers. More smells.

Dirt.

Night.

Wind.

Grass.

There is a life there, somewhere, among these things. My life. My lack of a life. I have a space here. I do my part with the rest of this grass, slowing the wind down. Something for it to blow through, something to help make it *wind*, instead of just moving air. I take up space, I come out of the ground.

It is getting darker, cool blues staying blue, but getting thicker, sweating deep black tones from a million tiny pores. Heavier.

I come to the end of a page and turn it, stretching it out to the borders of the book cover, flattening it with my palm, and lining up the corners with my thumb and forefinger to find the upper margin and start in again. I can tell when the ink is running low by the way the nib scratches over the surface. I wonder if I am leaving entire words out because of this, because of a miscalculation. Leaving cryptic half words, or incomplete phrases. Only

etched, barely visible, into the surface, there to tilt back and forth in the sun, to fill with the ink of shadows. Or to hold above a smoldering candle as the words are burned into existence. I used to do this as a child, writing secret messages to myself, to read much later, after I had forgotten what was there. That was the thing: I had to forget first, they had to be gone from me, so what I did was really bringing something back. Sometimes the words were my own. More often than not, someone else's whose I didn't completely understand, but I knew must mean something. Something I could understand if I could forget it and see it again for the first time, after I had learned more. Words forced to speak, to reveal themselves, when threatened with flames. This appealed to me. The sun is gone, the sky is darker. There are no stars yet.

I suspect it is too warm to freeze to death tonight. I don't even feel a chill. It has been a few hours since the cake, but I feel starvation is also a far way off. There is a wonderful sound all around me now: a low chorus of melancholy groans, calling and echoing to each other. Cattle.

I have not seen a cow in this here cow town. There must be thousands, tens of thousands, all spread out. They could be right next to me, I can't tell. The air is thick with the musky smell of hyde and sweat. Maybe that's just me. I imagine they are walking all around me. A herd of thousands, and I am huddled underneath them in the grass.

Utters, plump hairy bellies and genitalia sweep over me, skimming the top of my hat, brushing my shoulders. Horns clack and scrape further above. Occasionally I feel the sharp moist bursts of warm air from a snout not two inches from the back of my neck. The steady, unhurried clumping of their hooves sound here and there beside me, in front, in behind, swishing the grass back and forth. It is only a matter of time before one of them eventually tires and beds down on top of me. A healthy, two year old heifer with stiff, clumpy hair. Her warm, firm belly spreading generously around me and pressing me down into the earth. The muted, underwater sounds of her pulse massaging my sinking body. Deep, long breaths inflate, swelling against my back, my forehead in between my ankles, my knees behind my ears, forearms crossed

and pressing hard into my thighs and shoulders at the same time, until my breathing matches hers. Until my pulse matches hers.

When they find me, there will be a watch chain, a naval whistle, and a large hunting knife on my person. Perhaps some crumpled waxed paper and bread crumbs. Shoes placed neatly to one side. A valise containing Edwards' *Life of Brainerd*, and this soiled composition book. A crucifix. An odd looking hat.

There come the stars, now.

Everywhere.

THE CAMP



He begins, as always, with a prayer. His eyebrows are creased and bushy. His head bowed, his chin thrusting downward into his chest. His shoulders rocking a little with the articulation of each word.

“Our great and heavenly Father, we come before you today as wretched sinners, unworthy of your vast and unending love, deserving of your vast and unending wrath ...”

He does not belong there. Standing at the railing of the pulpit, gripping it with both hands, shifting his weight from one leg to the other with an awkward looking two-step: planting one foot forward, one back, and jutting a hip out to one side, then back again. His eyebrows are dark and his hair is white. His lips seem to be moving slightly out of sync with his words. All of this disturbs me, kneeling in the third row, my hands folded in front of me, my eyes cast upwards, not towards heaven, but resting firmly on him. He does not belong.

“... and let us not lay up treasures for ourselves on earth where moths and rust destroy and thieves break in and steal, or submit to the evil temptations of worldly pleasures, but let us be a beacon which shines Your

light onto the despicable nature of the world and the despicable nature of man as it is Your will, for where there is Light there can be no darkness and no man can hide his truly shameful nature...”

The chapel walls resound with his booming voice. The stained glass windows are all monochrome shades of black and white. The figures on them are shapes I can't make out. A sword. A head. A lion. A snake. Everyone around me is kneeling silently in their pews.

St. Louis. I'm in St. Louis.

Who is he? Where's Father Du Smeille?

“Who is he? Where's Father Du Smeille?” I turn and whisper to a boy kneeling beside me.

“That *is* Father Du Smeille,” he spits out under his breath. The boy is Brother Paul DuPont. I grew up with him in the Society, only he is still nine years old here. It's been so long. It's good to see him. The prayer continues.

“... and let us be in the world, and not of the world, patiently waiting with lighted lamps for the Bridegroom's return to his Holy Church, when we shall be at last taken across the River Jordan, to take part in the feast of plenty, where the heavenly roll is called, and the streets are paved with gold, and the sheep are separated from the goats, the chaff separated from the good seed and cast into the fire, and we are free from all those revolting wicked fuckers who live in audacious states of sin, Lord have mercy on our souls...”

He shouldn't be saying that. He does not belong.

“He shouldn't be saying that.”

“Saying what?” Paul looks annoyed, and returns to praying fervently, muttering “*Lord, have mercy on me, a wicked fucker*” over and over in a passionate, whispering monotone. The cowlick on the back of his head bobs back and forth to add emphasis. He says these words as many times as will come out in one breath, and keeps saying them while inhaling, catching words in a lispy whistle between his tongue and teeth, until his lungs fill, and the words come pouring outward again.

Cecelia is sitting two rows up from me and a bit over. I didn't know she went to church. Her hair wobbles, a bit out of time with the rest of her head, above the closely cropped hair of the boys around her. She looks back at me and smiles. I smile back and raise my still folded hands in a weird salute. She returns her gaze to the man at the pulpit, who is not Father Du Smeille. A wind is rushing through the chapel in lazy gusts, smelling of dung and rainwater.

"Windy in here," I note to Paul, "and where's all this water coming from?"

My feet are soggy and cold. A large puddle is advancing on us underneath the pews. He doesn't seem to notice.

Lord, have mercy on me, a wicked fucker. Lord, have mercy on me ...

The breeze has blown the preacher's white hair (I call him the preacher) down onto his forehead, mixing with those bushy, black brows. There are no eyes that I can see. A strong, sloping nose rising out from under the mess of white and black hair, two or three chins (though he is not fat) framing a perfect scowl. He is barking out something, violently. I can't make out exactly what for the howling wind in my ears, though I believe it to be a string of further profanity.

Cecelia is now up in the pulpit with him, staring at him adoringly, putting one hand around his shoulder, the other up under his arm to stroke his chest. The congregation continues praying, he continues shouting. The figures in the stained glass look shocked, though I'm still not sure what they are. I think that one might be a goat.

The preacher's arm has stretched over Cecelia, huddling her into his body, cloaking her in white and purple robes. Her hand is reaching up under his tunic, between his legs. She is giggling. He shifts his weight and juts his hips to accommodate her.

"Look, now that's just not right," I protest to Paul, raising my voice above the wind, but still quiet enough to maintain the decorum of the worship service, "I know her. And who *is* that man?"

Paul's face is angry, and this, of all things, genuinely shocks me.

"Why did you come back? You left us. You left *us!*"

I have never seen this face on him before.

"I ... Paul. I was confused. I *am* confused. Aren't your feet getting wet?"

He slaps me. Timid at first, then hard.

"You wanted us dead! You wanted all of us dead! What makes you think you can do this? Abolish us all yourself? It's not time. You left *us!*"

Light is pouring in. The figures in the glass are washed out. I can hear groaning from the pulpit, the preacher's voice now stilted and breathy,

"Beacon! ... Fucking Beacon!"

Paul's slim, nine-year old hands sting my cheek, shaking my jaw, and making my ears ring. His hands are soft. There is water up to my knees.

"Paul ... *please.*"

I taste tears, and I think my nose is bleeding. My hands are still folded. I am squinting to see him in all the light. He doesn't stop. His eyebrows look bushier.

"Who sent you here? You think we haven't been sent, too? It is not time for our destruction, by you or anyone else. What are you doing here? You left *us*, Tom. *You left us!*"

What the hell is he talking about?

"What are you talking about? Why are you hitting me?"

"Cuz we thought you were dead, Father."

Two men, standing over me. The sun is behind them. It hurts. They have no faces; only thick, stabbing shafts of light. One of them might be a goat.

"Should we just leave 'm here?"

Grass. A smooth, white rock..

"We oughtn't ta just leave'm, man a God, an' all."

Their boots are heeled and pointed. Only a thin layer of day old dust covers the mail-order shine. My clothes are wet with dew. I can barely move my neck, my hands are stiff and folded on top of my chest.

One of the men leans down and grabs my lapels. The skyline of Abilene leaps up out of the grass and now I'm looking down on it, now I'm hanging over the back of this man's shoulder. My hat falls off, and I see the other man carrying my valise bend down, pick it up, dust it off and follow us.

The man carrying me turns and Abilene disappears like a film grabbed out of a view-master. There is only grass, and sky, bobbing gently up and down with the man's swaying, nautical gait. In the distance, just over the grass line, I can see the messy white hair of the preacher, floating on bristly, dark eyebrows, and the funny, bobbing hair of Cecelia. I hear giggling and gruff, barking sounds that make out the words, "*Fucking Beacon! Fucking Beacon!*"

'They shouldn't be doing that... He shouldn't be doing that... Paul?'

"Yes, Father."

The man carrying me doesn't sound like he is answering anything in particular. He says it low and soothing, like I've heard men talk to their horses. I like his voice a great deal.

The preacher and Cecelia are gone, my face is buried in the flank of a horse's rump. The man's gigantic hand reaches back and grips the side of my rib cage, pinning me against the back of his saddle. My face begins to pound against the rippling granite of galloping horse muscles. It feels good.

Sweat and sharp, short hairs get up my nose and in my mouth. Tears and snot are knocked loose and pounded out of every gland in my skull. I turn my head to one side, and then the other, working over both cheekbones, imagining I can hear the soft *frritt frrit* of my hair whipping down against horse flesh with each stride.



They came upon the body of a man just after dawn, not fifty yards out of town. It was lying in the grass, barely visible until the two riders were nearly on top of it.

Gentle Steve McQueen got off his horse and knelt by the man. His hands were folded over his chest, and his legs stretched straight and crossed at the ankles, like a corpse without the coffin. He was even wearing a plain, dark suit, the way Steve thought people might dress when they were buried. Perhaps this man was an escapee body, one that had risen slowly up through the earth after it was buried, finally breaking through the dusty surface of the soil to float around aimlessly in the grass. The smooth, white rock next to him looked like it could be a grave marker.

“Is he dead?”

Big Jack Earl was still in his saddle, looking nervously from the man on the ground to the boy crouching beside him.

Gentle Steve held the tips of two fingers underneath the man’s nostrils. He could feel the man’s lip was puffy and scabbed under his beard with the back of his knuckles. The man’s face was gaunt and pale, his hair greasy, black and wild. He did not smell good. He reminded Steve of someone, he was not sure exactly of whom, the man seemed to look like so many people. He had seen dead people before, and they had always looked just a bit like someone else, even his mother. He had looked at his mother for a very long time, the way he was now looking at this man, flirting with recognition, trying

to place a face that looked as though it did not belong anywhere specifically, that could have come from anywhere.

Breath.

Very soft. Steve waited for the faint coolness of inhale on his fingers to be sure, his hand poised absolutely motionless over the man's face. There it was.

"He ain't dead, Big Jack."

"Good," the other man said, pulling his lips back from his teeth in an absent-minded gesture of confusion which was neither smile nor snarl, "that's good he ain't dead, Steve. I'm glad."

He was glad Steve had gotten down from his horse first, the sight of the body had made him hold his breath and bite down on his tongue involuntarily. But the boy had gotten right down without hesitation. A look of intense, calm concern on his face that Jack wished he could get to come out of his own eyes, which were, for the most part, beady and vacant.

"What do ya think we oughtta do, Big Jack?"

The boy was looking up at him, strands of blonde hair pushing into his eyes from the breeze, his stare remaining constant: inquiring and genuine.

"Well, Steve," Big Jack shifted his enormous frame in the saddle, causing his horse to shudder, "I ain't rightly sure I know what we should do, I guess."

The boy was still staring up at him, waiting for instruction, and Jack loved him for it.

"Maybe we should try an' wake 'em up, Big Jack. Find out who he is. How do ya figger?"

Big Jack shrugged and nodded passive agreement.

They slapped the man on the face a few times, (Steve did, Jack being somewhat incapable of the delicacy required), who was at this point muttering incoherently, as men do when first recovering from a long and deep sleep. Unfortunately, the man seemed unable to come completely out of his stupor, either too drunk, or too hungry, or both. Neither man recognized him from

town, and they decided they didn't have the time to take him back and find out from the locals there, as they were already late getting back to camp.

"We oughtn'ta just leave 'em here, Big Jack," the boy was standing now, his face contemplative, hands on his hips, "I mean, he don't look well, an' I think he's some sort a clergyman or something."

"I was just gonna say that, Steve," Big Jack said with a welling pride in his deep, melodic voice, "He looks like some sort a priest er sumthin, I was just thinkin' that, yeah." He and the kid thought alike.

Big Jack got off his horse. He didn't lean forward and swing one leg over the saddle, the way most men do when dismounting. When he wanted to get off his horse, Big Jack simply took one leg out of its stirrup, and stepped off backwards, sliding right over the rump, his legs were so long. He stood eight feet one inches tall in his stocking feet. A land surveyor had measured him with a piece of yellow string while a man from the newspaper asked him what he had done to grow so large. Big Jack said he didn't know.

Gentle Steve watched Big Jack sling the mumbling priest over his shoulder as casually as an overcoat on a warm day. Steve carefully placed the man's shoes back on his sock feet while Big Jack held him there. They were still damp from the rain the night before. The man began to call out, very disturbed about something that made no sense. Big Jack spoke to the man, low and soft, swaying rhythmically back and forth as he walked to his mount. The man slumped back down into silence, his hat falling off. The boy picked it up and dusted it off as he followed behind with the man's valise. It was a strange hat, with a broad, round brim of plain black felt; no feathers, shells, or colored silk bands. He assumed this must have something to do with God.

They rode out onto the prairie at a cantering pace, Big Jack in the lead, Gentle Steve behind. They must look quite a sight, Steve thought, quite a sight. He still had not gotten used to seeing Jack ride, expecting at every moment that the horse's legs might snap in holes made by its own weight, its back sagging and broken in the middle, but this never happened. And now

Jack rode with one hand in front on the reins, the other behind, cupping a man's torso, belly down, to the back of his saddle.

The man's head and arms jerked wildly up and down, bouncing off the horse's flank as they rode. Jack didn't seem to notice. The boy hurried his mount along to catch up and tell Jack, he feared the man may have actually broken his neck in the process. He believed Jack would never hurt anything on purpose, but it stood to reason he might have a lower awareness of the fragility of normal men. He wondered if he hadn't cracked a rib or two, squeezing the man tight like that. He thought of his mother.

He rode up alongside the rear of Jack's mount, matching speed. He looked at the flailing body for signs of life. The man's hair was whipping around in the wind and from the motion of the ride. Then he appeared to pick up his head and move to one side, then the other. Steve leaned in as close as he could without falling off, which was a long way – he was an excellent horseman. His face was maybe two feet away from the bouncing man's, staring intently as he had before, as he always did, one hand on the reins, the other craned up over his head, holding down the strange black hat he was now wearing on top of his own. He stared hard. He thought he saw something. He leaned even closer, his hair blowing in his eyes. There it was again.

The man was smiling.



I spent the first four days after I was picked up in a bivouac somewhere on the prairie outside of Abilene. It was a big canvas tent, a wood pole in the middle with a lamp hanging on it. I think it may have been military. I was flat on my back with a fever.

Hours spent with my eyes closed and without really being asleep. Except I must have been asleep, because I was all over: the University, the chapel, my apartment, the train, Dakota, the Longhorn, Big Sally's, a smooth white rock. I talked to people I hadn't seen in ages, dead people, people I didn't recognize. But the whole time, I knew I was lying down on a cot in a tent. I knew my eyelids were glaring bright pink and yellow from the sun shining in. I knew there was a fly caught inside buzzing periodically to get out. I knew I had to urinate, and that my left leg had gone numb. I knew that I was naked under soft linen sheets, and that I was drooling a little onto a goose down pillow. Still, these facts just seemed to fit together.

Sometimes, I would dream that I had gotten up to piss, then realize, without waking, that I was still in bed and still had to go. I dreamt I was asleep and dreaming. I dreamt I was sleeping on a bench in a train car, or in a smooth, porcelain bathtub, or on the bar-top at the ten pin, or on a hardwood floor at the Longhorn, or on top of a large woman whose face I could not see. I would realize that I was in Kansas, but St. Louis would not go away, would not disintegrate the way it should have. Two worlds were super-imposed. I would open my eyes and see exactly the same things I saw when they were closed. Matters of impossibility didn't seem to bother me or anyone else involved. There was no drifting in and out, I was always there, in the same place, which could be many places at once.

There was a man who came in every few hours. Dark hair, peppered with gray. I don't think he was very old, though. He wore a light blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up and a patterned, red scarf around his neck. An apron was tied over his shirt and around his waist very tightly. It was covered in green and yellow flowers on a blue background, with embroidered edges.

There was a pocket sewn into the bib of the apron, as well, with a hair comb, and what looked like a real flower in it. He wore heavy looking brown boots with his trousers stuffed into the tops of them, bunching up in rings around his knees. He smelled like bacon and biscuits.

His movements were very deliberate, everything was an effort in concentration and focus. He held the match to the lamp with his head strained back as far as it could from his outstretched hand, then smile when the flame took without blowing his head off. He would stand and watch the lamp flickering to life like that, tilting his head to the side in deep approval, until the match burned down to his fingertips and he would jump in absolute fear for his life, fanning his hand so vigorously it looked like he had twenty fingers. Every time. Then he would be gone and I don't remember him leaving.

And then he was back. Tenderly sponging warm salt water on my chest, arms and face. His eyes never left the rag in his hand, carefully squeezing out just the right amount here and there, and then following it back to a steaming pan, dipping it in, ringing it out just so.

My clothes hung on a peg behind him. The lamp cast moving shadows on a face full of deep acne scars. Reddish craters and bumps dimpled both cheeks and his chin, spilling over down parts of his neck. His nose was bulbous and puffy looking, the smallest red and blue veins spreading out over its surface.

He was singing under his breath, I don't think he knew he was doing this. Still, each word was enunciated precisely with teeth and tongue and fully extended jaw. Syncopated notes were held for exactly one and a half beats, emphasized by a deliberate bounce of his head.

I reached up and touched his face. The singing stopped. His hand froze where it was halfway down my other forearm. I could feel the moisture pooling, gradually gathering enough weight to trickle lazily down my skin in tiny rivulets onto the sheets. I passed the inside of my palm over the terrain of his face, past his cheek, up onto his forehead, down onto his nose, barely

making contact. Barely touching. Just enough to track the rises and falls, the ridges, valleys and ravines of smooth and rough tissues. It didn't feel like it looked, like it might crumble off in tiny flakes at the slightest touch. It was warm, textured. Firm.

His eyes were still fixed on his hand. Shadows slid quietly across his face, playfully changing shape. I let my own hand sink away, very slowly, the back of it finally coming to rest on my forehead. The song resumed, and his dripping hand made its way steadily back to the dull tin pan, carefully watched all the way.

I remember a man with glasses. He would come in to light his pipe from the lamp. He took the glass mantle right off and tilted his head into the flame with the pipe gritted firmly between his teeth, sucking and spitting streams of spicy blue smoke down onto me.

He would look down at me, take the pipe out of his mouth and look at the wall of the tent, or sometimes the ceiling, running his tongue over the front of his teeth underneath his lips. His hair was slick and parted in the middle. He wore his moustache waxed, and it curled up at the sides. He stood there with his hands in his pockets, or with one hand tucked under his elbow across his compact, round belly, the other hand cradling the bowl of the pipe and running a thumb methodically back and forth around the rim. I would often start a conversation with him at these times, and then realize I was asleep, and that the man had been gone for hours. I seem to remember he was quite a talker, though.

I remember my skin tingling with sweat that just wouldn't come out. I could feel it pressing up from underneath, trapped by everything dry, hot, and itchy. I remember being bunched up into a ball, wrapped tight in the covers so that even the slightest movement would create vacuums, sucking in gusts of freezing cold air to go to work on the sweaty sheet stuck to my back and between my knees. I remember scalding beef broth spooned over my lips and dribbling over my cheeks, pooling and soaking into the pillow at the base of my ears. I remember I felt something pressing into the side of my skull, under

the skin, but outside my brain. It seemed as though I might be able to pop whatever it was out by clenching my teeth as hard as I could, which I did. I would go to sleep biting down and jamming my fingers into my temple, and wake up unable to spread my jaw, the muscles were so cramped.

I have no idea what the weather was like outside that tent. Sometimes the lamp was lit, other times broad shafts of dust-filled sunlight stuck through the door, and still other times there was a sort of luminescent greyness that made everything look the same color. I think it may have rained. I could hear cattle and footsteps and birds, and low conversations that got louder and then dimmed as they passed by where I was. I heard the man with the face singing not too far away and smelled boiled meat and steamed vegetables and manure.

I try to explain a fever, and things come out wrong, but I keep trying anyway. There is a compulsion to recount. There is a vivid memory of events, but this memory is suspect. And this is the catch.. False memories register as real events, and are stored in the mind as such. Once this happens, there is no separating the two. Dreams, arbitrary recollections, random thoughts, new ideas, real perceptions of the world around all become one mass of memories, and you know some of them simply *cannot be*, yet still, the mind does not cooperate. They have been recorded as happenings, and will remain so. I have wonderfully clear memories of those four days on my back, but that is all, and it is not enough.



The man with the glasses is named Hartley Cavanaugh, he is from the Northeast. He came and sat next to me on a folding wooden stool on the morning of that third day, when I was just coming out of it.

“You’re looking better, there, what?”

He was staring at the wall.

I don’t think this was a question. I coughed a little and massaged my temple. His face was soft and pale looking. Smooth, like fresh-kneaded dough. He spoke with his bottom lip, his teeth clenched, the pipe nodding in agreement with each syllable.

“Look here, you ever ridden a horse before?” His face broke into a little smirk, “ I mean, besides on your way here, that is.”

My face was still badly bruised at the time, I liked the way the skin buzzed and itched. I wasn’t sure if I was awake or not, if he was really there, if I was really there. I contented myself to watch comfortably from behind half-closed eyes. He finally broke his stare at the far wall and looked down at me, expectantly. I was a little embarrassed at this.

“Yes. Yes.”

I had to say it twice, the first time came out as a bubbly, whispering cough, and my lips were still sort of stuck together.

“A long way, was it?”

His eyes were back on the wall.

“What?”

I looked at my clothes on the peg and pulled the sheets up over my nipples.

“Have you ridden a horse a far way, see, is what I’m trying to say. A long way at a time. Follow?”

“Yes. The Dakota Territory”

“Mmmmm...”

He tucked his chin back into his neck and took the pipe out of his mouth, stroking his knee to flatten out the creases in his pants. He seemed

impressed by this – my horse riding, that is – though I don't think his smooth, tan cotton trousers disappointed him too much, either.

“From Dakota, are you?”

“St. Louis.”

The pipe went back in between his teeth.

“Saving souls up there, what? Civilizing savages?”

The ‘s’ sounds came out fuzzy and slurry through his teeth and around the pipe. He had to pull his bottom lip down and back as far as he could to get them out, exposing healthy, pink gums. It felt like talking to old friends of Father Du Smeille at University dinners who hadn't seen me since I was an infant, asking me how catechism was going and if I wanted to be a priest when I grew up.

“I guess. Not really.”

“Right, then. Ever herded cattle before? You know, drive ‘em, brand ‘em, round ‘em up, that sort of nonsense?”

His interest now seemed to be focused on the green hurricane lamp hanging on the pole above him. He wore a two-toned blue shirt with thick white stitching, and a matching silk scarf. The dark blue upper part of the shirt was jeweled with rhinestones in the shape of bull horns on the back. The front shoulder was monogrammed with the ornately stitched letters, “*HC*”.

“No. We had a milking cow. I did that a few times.”

“Ahhh,” he nodded, squinting and puffing a few times, changing position on the stool. He looked impatient. He had rotated slightly in a clockwise direction so that he was now in a position to address the vicinity of my feet. He planted both feet firmly on the floor, spurs jingling, and held his hands out in front of him. Flexed, palms out, like he were bracing himself to catch a particularly fat baby.

“Now, look here, old boy, I like you. I like you a lot.”

I waited for elaboration.

“I heard what you did down at the ten pin last week, and that took real moxy, my boy, real moxy. I respect a man who can take care of himself.

That's just the kind of quality we're looking for on this here outfit, see. True grit," he patted my leg, still looking at my feet, "true grit."

"Thank you, sir."

"Hartley, son. Hartley."

"Thank you, Hartley."

I don't think he was much older than I was. Maybe thirty. His patronly attitude was comforting, though, I couldn't help but warm to it. He continued.

"Here's the thing, uh, I didn't get your name..."

"Tom."

"Tom. Here's the thing Tom: our outfit is a man short, and I'd like it very much if you'd join us."

"Driving cattle?"

"Driving cattle."

I tried explaining to Hartley that I was horribly underqualified for the job, though not in so many words. Something about him inspired a brevity in me.

"Nonsense, my boy. It's a cinch. Just point them in right direction, what?" was all he had said.

He slapped me on the knee again and got up to leave the tent. When I protested further, he paused at the door, looking out over whatever landscape was out there, I hadn't seen it yet.

"Are you currently employed elsewhere, then?"

"No."

"Are you on your way somewhere in particular? I mean, you know, on a mission, that sort of thing?"

"Not necessarily. No, I'm not."

"You, uh, can... I mean to say you're permitted ... This sort of work wouldn't be against your religion in some way, what?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, I don't see a problem, then. Do you?"

He didn't give me a chance to answer.

“And besides,” he said, pausing halfway out the door, “ we have a few men of the persuasion on the payroll. You’d be good for, you know,” he took the pipe out of his mouth and cleared his throat, “ you know, guidance in things spiritual and such.”

And he was gone into town to buy me some horses.

I stroked my beard, realizing for the first time that I had one.



It could be said that the sun has an odor. Not just the smell of sun-dried grass, or sun-baked earth, but its own, distinct olfactory *essence*. This is my belief. Not always, mind you, and not everywhere – but on hot summer days in Kansas, when there’s no wind, and it hasn’t rained in a few days, and the cloud cover is just right, the nostrils may occasionally flare with an unidentified tinge. I discovered this on my first walk around Hartley’s camp.

The sun was high and alone in the sky, and we were far enough away from Abilene that I could not see it. And I could see far. I had heard that prairie boys made the best sailors because they are used to an endless horizon in every direction. No pale, hazy mountain silhouettes, no distant treelines marking an advancing forest, no seascape with a harbor and a wharf and seagulls and a man on the beach painting what might already only be a painting – rolling shadows and plays of light simulating the movement of waves. Nothing to rest their reality against in order to say ‘There: There is where it ends’.

I saw grass, a few wooded bluffs that all looked the same and were all about the same distance apart. There was a constant, palpable buzzing sound that went along with the view. A combination of bugs, birds, and the wind through the grass, all in a balance and mixed up with each other. If you stopped to listen with a purpose, you could make out the individual sounds: crickets, swallows, maybe some gophers, or a grunting badger. But the slightest break in this concentration, the first distraction of the mind to some other thought – even for a second – and it all melts back together, dissolving into the general slurry of ambient prairie buzz.

Of course, this will be interrupted occasionally, by the call of some lonesome, invisible bird, or the rapid-fire bravado of a male prairie chicken thumping his chest. But even these sounds register only after they have happened, causing the listener to pause and cock his head to one side, deciding whether he heard it or not, waiting for it to happen again. But it never does. Mostly it is the wind, eroding all sounds around it the same way it would a sandstone cliff, peeling away layers and shaping it into a part of itself, something smooth for it to drag its belly across for another thousand years.

But this day, for a few moments every now and then, there was no wind. Or, at least, not much. When this happened the air felt heavy, unable to sustain its own weight. It pushed down on my hat and on my shoulders, making the muscles in my legs warm and achy. I had to heave my shoulders back to winch up the breath through my nose and hold it there long enough before it all tumbled out again. It was then that I smelled the sun.

It was very subtle at first, partially hidden by the bouquet of grass, dirt, and sweat, (mostly from my suit, which had not yet been laundered), but it was there. A burnt quality, like the atmosphere itself was browning nicely at the edges. Pungent and sweet at the same time, coating the insides of my nostrils and slipping down the back of my throat, expanding into my lungs like thick spoonfuls of some hot, dry soup.

And then the wind would pick up again, and that would be it.

Gone.

Not that the wind didn't come with its own wonderful smells, but everyone knows this, the wind leaves no one out, sharing itself with any old fool with a half plugged-up nose. For my money, though, there is nothing quite like the smell of the sun on a hot afternoon. Nothing quite like it, at all.

I sat down on top of a gentle rise in the landscape and hugged my knees to my chest. There were horses grazing in the distance – Hartley's horses, I guess. About fifty of them. They were far enough away that I couldn't hear them. Small clouds of dust rose in silence as a wild looking mustang stomped his hoofs and rocked his head back and forth, whipping his mane around, snorting, I imagine. For the most part they were still, matching the silence that went with the image. Leg muscles spasmed and jerked to keep the flies off, hovering above them in flitting, manic strongholds. Tails swept rhythmically, keeping time to a silent beat. Long, muscular necks bent gracefully up and down – melodramatic courtiers giving obeisance in some Elizabethan drama, all the while plotting a coup of some sort. But horses are nobler than this, I know. They maintain all the dignities of a curtsy that a human simply cannot.

A horse had come to me in the tent those first four days. Silently, as well. A mare with the most beautiful warm, dark brown coat, the color of rich, freshly baked chocolate cake. She would come and stand beside my cot, pressing her muzzle lightly in between my neck and shoulder, breathing out in long, soft, steady gusts until I awoke. She wanted something – something from me, or to tell me something, I couldn't tell. I would rub her forehead up and down with the butt of my palm, propped up on one elbow in the cot. She would look right at me the whole time, opening and shutting her eyelids, her eyes deep brown and patient. And I would look back, helpless to know what else to do. And then she would leave.

I would dream of being woken up that way. Breath, soft and wet against my skin, starting at my neck and bathing the whole left side of my

body with warmth – the right side if I was on my stomach. And then the sharp coolness of its absence, my flesh breaking out into goosebumps from the cold, and from anxious anticipation for the next wave of heat. I would lie still long after I was awake, pretending to sleep, listening to that smooth, rushing air from her giant nostrils, before rolling over to face those giant, waiting eyes.

I never had the best relationship with horses growing up. I was a competent enough rider, for sure, but the horses always approached me with reserve – a healthy suspicion of this awkward looking boy. I didn't blame them for this, either. I felt deep down that they shouldn't trust me, and I can't say I know why.

Once, I had been thrown by a three year old pinto who had a reputation for her gentleness towards novice riders. I hadn't even gotten her out of the paddock when it happened. After I was down, she stood casually beside me, barely breathing hard, a look of calm indifference about her. I remounted without incident and rode a full day's journey on her back. She knew, though. She knew that I knew, that I was up there through her benevolence, on her terms. I don't know why I got this attitude from horses, but I did. They knew something. Fine with me. But this horse, this chocolate brown mare, there was only trust in her posture, and this confused me.

On her last visit, she was agitated, in some sort of pain. I reached up to her muzzle and it was burning hot. My stomach went cold when I caught sight of those eyes. Her back hoofs shuffled spastically. Her eyelids closed and she stiffened, regaining control. Still, she just stood there, waiting for me to do something. I got up out of the cot, my clothes were back on me, now. I ran my hand down the front of her neck and across the bottom of her belly. She quivered and shook. Beads of sweat gathered along the broad side of my fingers and fell onto the floor like I was wiping off rainwater. Everything was hot, I felt weak and desperate. She craned her neck around to look at me, standing in silence at her shoulder. Waiting for me.

I led her shakily outside and started to bury her in the snow. Her lying there, flat on her side – I've never seen a horse do that – just flat on her side

with her legs straight out. I was naked again, shoveling handfuls of snow against the front of her chest, smearing it over her rib cage and under her belly. Her head was tilted up, just a little, absolutely still. Her eyes never left me, full of nothing but a calm belief in me. It was the silence that got me, the calm of it all, of her.

Steam was rising from her body, clinging to her dark brown hair in gray foggy patches, sending up single, lazy wisps of smoky vapour. It was dark out. Everything was shades of blue, gray and black. I think I was crying. Thick cords in her neck began to vibrate from the exhaustion of holding her head up, her breath came out in violent, stuttering bursts. I mumbled hopeless pleas under my breath over and over, high pitched and whiny sounding. I was losing and I didn't know what. She was still looking at me. Most of her body was completely submerged now, the top of her shoulder and her front left knee still showing through the snow. I pushed some snow up under her neck and ear. She let her head fall back into the silvery mound with a heartbreaking scrunching sound, molding the snow to the shape of her skull, burying half of her face, never breaking her calm stare. I lay next to her a long time, propped up on one elbow, stroking the exposed part of her forehead and staring back. She looked tired.

Her single eye followed me as I walked backwards away from her, back into the tent. I could still feel that eye on me as I got back under the covers. Complete trust. I went to sleep hoping I would be woken by the kiss of horsebreath on the back of my neck; knowing I wouldn't.

The next morning I kept having the urge during our conversation to tell Hartley I had buried one of his horses out there in the snow next to the tent, that he should go check on her, make sure she was all right. Somehow there didn't seem to be any point to this.

I looked for a chocolate brown mare in that dusty, far off herd, resting my chin on my knees, not expecting to see one. I didn't. I heard a bird call,

very clearly, somewhere behind me. I cocked my head to listen for the reply. It never came.



I met some of the rest of the outfit at lunch that day. We were seated roughly in a semi-circle around the back of a large chuckwagon parked a few yards away from Hartley's tent. The tailgate folded out into a cooktop and serving table for a large coffee urn and a stack of tin plates and cups. The meal was a steaming pot of sweet smelling beans mixed with large chunks of bacon. Freshly baked biscuits complemented the spread. I sat on a rock. It wasn't very comfortable.

There is something about scraping the side of your fork along the bottom of a plate, tin on tin, that makes everything taste better, *especially* beans. Now that I think about it, I'm not sure if it was beans or not that we had that first day. It was damned good, whatever. I ate four full plates of the stuff and nine warm, crumbly biscuits. The best part was, I was not alone in my appetite. It was a communal gorging.

No introductions were made, Hartley was still in town. It seemed to fall upon him to take care of such things, and no one there appeared ready to take up that mantle. I received a few glances, but not as many as I would have thought. There was food, and people were eating.

Meals at the college refectory were not unlike this one. We would sit in long rows at even longer wooden tables, anonymous sounds of chewing and swallowing mixing with the hollow clinking of ceramic and glass. Occasionally, there would be a few stifled coughs from one corner or the other, only made worse by the attempts to hold them back, coming out again and again in broken, determined grunts throughout the meal. What were we eating? It was dull, I remember that much. Often wet. It was supposed to be a time of meditation, I think. The air in the refectory was always damp and cool, the only lighting coming from high, glassless windows during the day; tired, stumpy candles at night. A small bird flew in once, making light whistling sounds with its wings. Those who weren't looking up at the time couldn't place this mystery sound, but I saw it. It flew around the ceiling in one large circle, banking smoothly and surely around the rafters before flying straight out the same window it had come in.

There must have been at least some conversation at these meals. Thousands of them, taken at the same place, in the same way, with the same people. I don't recall saying a word. It must have been the priests, in the corners, in the doorway to the kitchen, or sitting at the head table. Speaking in desperately hushed tones, always leaning to one side with their entire bodies, their heads motionless extensions of these. They always had to lean before they could talk, had to lean to listen. They never faced each other, only leaned into the general vicinity of another leaning head and started mumbling in a quick, guilty monotone. Then these heads would straighten up, a cool silence rushing into the space between them, drawn in by the suction of retreating torsos.

Conversations could go on like this for some time: a leaning in followed by a straightening up, then one would remember something else and

lean in again for a short addendum before popping right back up again. Sometimes, thoughts would occur in mid-rise on the way back up, and the speaker would dart back down again, making the listener flinch.

We never talked, though. Paul sat next to me, drizzling small amounts of whatever it was we were eating into his beard, periodically wiping it with his napkin. His beard had grown in well ahead of mine, ahead of anyone else's that I remember. I think he was fourteen when his pimply face started to cover itself with long, curly brown strands. Now it was thick and black and grew all the way up his cheeks towards deep gray eyeballs. This earned him a bit of celebrity with the other students, I think, as well as myself – by association.

When he had finished, he would stroke and twist the hairs on his chin into a devilish point, tilt his head forward and arch his eyebrows, pulling his lips back in a maniacal grin, revealing crooked, yellow teeth. He looked just like the illustrations of Satan from the huge illuminated reference bible in the library. He would sit like that, staring intently at the boy across from us, whose eyes were always dropped to his mush, lost in thought, or lack of it. What was his name? It started with a 'B'. Benson? No. I sat across from him for thirteen years.

Paul would lean in closer – actually leave his seat – until he was inches away from the other boy's face. I would exchange grins with the boy with curly hair next to him, each of us waiting for the daydreaming boy to look up into the face of Lucifer himself and jerk his head back with a violent snapping sound, which he always did.

This boy with the curls, I can't remember his name, either. He is one of the first people I remember from St. Louis, that curly hair on the oversized head of a four-year old body. We would wrestle until we were sick, eventually pinning each other and letting a gob of spit hang timelessly over the other's forehead, sucking it back up and letting it seep gently down again under its own weight, closer and closer until it finally dropped onto a squealing face. We would see how far we could pee out into the grass behind the outhouse, making different patterns in the air by wiggling our hips back

and forth in different ways. I sat with him in the woods for an hour after he got beat up by some older kids while he just cried, picking clumps of blood and spit covered dirt and grass from his face and teeth. Why can't I remember his name? For some reason we were never that close after we were about seven or eight years old.

One day the other boy (Berthold! – that was his name, Berthold!) was in mid-slurp of his mush when he finally looked up at Paul's glowering face an inch from his own, spraying that devil-beard with half chewed remains of lamb and carrots and whatever other unfortunate animals made it into that slurry. The boy with curly hair leaned his head back and shrieked an awful, uncontrollable spurt of laughter that filled the entire refectory with echoes of itself. Stiff priest heads snapped up from conversation. Paul buried his face in his napkin. Berthold's face was flushed red, and I was biting my lip 'til it bled, trying not to laugh myself, while the curly haired boy shrieked on.

A year or so later, he ended up getting expelled for having gotten a girl from town pregnant. She was twelve and worked at the laundry. We could see her hanging clothes on Wednesday afternoons. After that, we saw them hanging clothes together on Wednesdays. He looked serious and she looked sad, her stomach heavy and drooping. I never understood what she saw in him.

Now I was eating another meal in silence. Why should it bother me now? The men around me spoke in short sentences to each other – not to the group, and not to me. I stole my own glances in between gulps, half expecting one of them to be an inch away from my face, his beard twisted and his eyes rolling.

The man from the tent – the one with the face – was there, sitting on his haunches next to some sort of portable oven where the biscuits were coming from. Apparently, he was the cook. He sat rocking back and forth, what looked like a new flower in the bib of his apron, singing quietly to

himself. He hummed the tune while he chewed, paused to swallow, then continued singing, enunciating each word diligently while the next mounding forkful was on its way to his mouth. It was a hymn I recognized, *There Is A God*. He sang in a falsetto for the melody, dropping his voice instantly to a baritone for the counterpoint lead-ins, then right back to the falsetto again. No one else seemed to pay any attention, and I soon lost track of what verse he was on, but it was nice. The man could sing. Where did he get those flowers from?

I recognized the boy seated across from me, I don't know from where. I caught him looking right at me twice, but he didn't seem to care. Neither did I, it just threw me, a little. He had dusty blonde hair that blew in his face and long, fluid arms. He couldn't have been more than fifteen or sixteen, even though he stood over six foot tall. You could just tell. Something about the eyes, maybe, or at least the way he looked at you. I wasn't sure what to make of him, but there was no threat there, I was sure of that. Why there had to be a threat, I don't know. I was assessing the situation. He reminded me of someone. It looked like I reminded him of someone, too.

The man seated next to me was an unqualified giant. He ate with his plate to his lips, tilted at an angle so I couldn't see his face. The shoveling movement of his fork would stop periodically for him to utter a single syllable response to someone, the plate never moving. What a voice! Deep and warm and round like it was coming from inside an empty rain barrel, or the bowels of a cozily burning cast iron stove on a bitterly cold day (both of which, incidentally, could have easily fit inside the chest cavity of this man).

The man seated across from him (the giant) was also an odd looking fellow. Stocky, fully bearded, he wore a

This is not working at all. I know all of these men. I rode with them for over five months, and I hope to God they're all still alive. I was trying to build a little mystique around their characters, bring them into the story

gradually. Like Dickens. He never satisfied himself to simply blurt out characters' names as soon as they walked into a room. Certainly not. And what would happen if he had? Jagers would just be Jagers instead of the fat, soapy smelling man from Miss Havisham's. Herbert would just be Herbert instead of the awkward young pugilist. And that slow, thick seeping of identity into the meeting between Pip and his true benefactor under cover of night on the stairs of the Temple chambers, like a soggy rag emerging from the bottom of a draining tub full of dirty water – that would all be lost. Magwitch is a great name, for sure, but I like his character so much more without it. There is too much of a draft in here, I find it hard to concentrate. I wish I had some Dickens to read right now, maybe *A Tale of Two Cities*. I've never been to Paris. *City of Lights*. I will ask the guard tomorrow.

This is what I'm looking for, I think. These moments of recognition. Some would call these moments epiphany, or revelation, but I would say that's going too far. I'm not talking about Saul on the road to Damascus, or John the Baptist and Christ standing in the middle of a river, doves and voices and all. I'm talking about some moment in time (I haven't had one, yet, I don't think – at least, not that I remember – but I must have, everyone has, a little) when you recognize something as belonging in your life, as part of something that happened before and that makes sense; these two events (or people, or ideas, or whatever) reach across time to each other, propping you up like a roof truss, making you see some sort of pattern in your life where you can see how you got from one point to another in a way you couldn't before. Gloucester on the Cliffs of Dover with Tom O' Bedlam, truly seeing his son for the first time only as a blinded exile, with only the sound of those crashing, vindictive waves to let him know how high up he really is. Maybe that's a little extreme, but I have had such a headache the past few days, and that damned draft! I can't get away from it, I swear it blows exactly wherever I'm sitting! Oedipus and his mother. No – too much, again. Sufficed to say, I'm no Dickens. Let's continue.

The boy across from me was named Steve McQueen, (everyone called him Gentle Steve McQueen), the giant next to me was Jack Earl, (known far and wide as Big Jack Earl), next to him was Joseph Hatty, (no nickname at that time, I sometimes called him Joe; to say his new nickname would be to give too much away – let us keep some mystique), and next to him was Jack the Cutter (I think his real name was Jaques Cloutier, or Coulteille, or Couteau. It was French, anyway, and he was an expert knifesman. Hartley called him ‘Jock’, though I wouldn’t call him that, myself.) I never learned the cook’s real name, everyone just called him The Pock-Marked Kid, for obvious reasons. He was at least thirty five years old, but mentally speaking – you know. This name was never abbreviated, either. No matter what the situation, those four clumsy syllables would come clomping out of people’s mouths like a busted wagon wheel.

The rest of the outfit consisted of John Carson and Oliver Campbell, who were out tending to the small herd, (a mix of about three hundred head of one to five year old steers and heifers), and The Judge, (real name Jud Ascot), and John Calvin (Cal) Jones, who were still in town.

Of course, I didn’t know who any of them were at the time; there really *were* no introductions, and the whole meal was horribly, horribly awkward for me. My bowels were rolling (even though I couldn’t stop eating – fantastic food, really) and I sure as hell didn’t want my first words to these men to be “Good afternoon, my name is Tom, I know I look like a priest but I’m not, and, by the way, where’s your shitter, cuz I got a real donkey-choker on tap?”

It turns out the awkward silence was all due to me, after all, so I wasn’t just being paranoid. Nobody had told them about me. As far as they could tell a strange priest was sitting in on lunch with them, unannounced. (Wouldn’t they have noticed me in the tent? Didn’t one of them bring me there in the first place? Hartley, probably. He certainly was an odd sort.) It seemed I was exuding all around me that same sort of churchly conversation

taboo that made farmers take off their hats and mothers hiss at children picking their noses.

Finally, when I got up to dip my cup in the water bucket, I nodded at one of them (I think Gentle Steve) and mentioned loud enough for the others to hear that Hartley had hired me on to work with them all. This brought no response, so I sat back down on my rock.

“You mean, like, convert us?” one of them said after a while. Probably Big Jack. Yes, of course it was Jack – that voice.

“I’m Cattalic halready, der, Fadder,” Jack the Cutter put in with his pensive, lilted growl.

“I been saved, too, by His Holy name, praise Jesus, King of Kings, Lord of Hosts in the highest,” the Pock-Marked Kid said to no one in between verses, and went right back to singing. I thought it might be a lyric from the hymn. It may have.

I can’t remember what I said to explain things to them, I couldn’t have done a very good job – I didn’t know what I was, myself. By the end, I think they were just confused enough to accept me as a colleague and stop trying to figure it all out right there along with me. I was happy to shut up.

After the air was cleared as to who I was and what I was doing there, everyone relaxed, and conversation turned to cards, women, and horses (*hosses*, I learned, is the correct pronunciation). Jack the Cutter whittled a moss-covered branch with a long, thin blade he had pulled from a scabbard in a belt that hung across his chest, full of other scabbards holding different looking knives. I could tell he was censoring his speech a lot every time he got excited about something, trailing off and motioning his hands to complete the phrase, glancing involuntarily at me as he did so. Steve and Big Jack threw pebbles into an empty coffee cup by the fire pit. Big Jack kept knocking it over, wincing with embarrassment. Steve would go over and set it upright each time, picking up the pebbles that had missed, or had fallen out of the cup. The Pock-Marked Kid kept singing, it was nice. Joe Hatty sat in the shade with his waist coat off and draped over his knee, sewing buttons back on with

a needle and thread. There were even stewed apricots for dessert – good for scurvy, I understand.

VII

There had been blood on the sheets when he and his landlady, Mrs. Halloway, changed the bedding. He remembered that much. Dark and matted against the linen forming a quiet island in the middle of the mattress. He knew it came from his mother, but it didn't seem likely, the brilliant deep red from such pale, cold flesh that didn't look like flesh at all. Nothing but bone and plaster of Paris and death, not a place where blood like that could come from. Blood from that flesh should've been grayish, tepid and oily. Not what was there in the morning, on the sheets. And her face. Waxen and shiny, strands of frizzled, strawberry blonde hair creeping over a damp forehead and into those watery, soft blue eyes framed with yellows and pinks at the edges. The back of his palm on her forehead made her eyes shut slowly and open focused directly on him, irises curved into a smile, lighting the whites that were now glossy and bloodshot.

Steve shifted his position under the shade of the chuckwagon, trying to imagine it was cooler there, hoping sleep would come. And now this man had come. Floated up out of the prairie in front of him. This man who didn't look anything like his mother – yet reminded him so strongly of her, of a lot of people. And he had talked to him, first, out of all of them, at lunch by the water barrel. Pale, thin fingers; a stringy, black beard; a shy, uncertain smile. This man of God, from God, running away from God... whatever he had said,

it didn't make sense. He could hear him and Joe Hatty conversing awkwardly between long silences a few feet away next to Hartley's tent. He couldn't place any of it; faces, memories, notions – they were all right in front of him and he knew it, but couldn't make any of them fall into place and explain themselves. He didn't try that hard. It was better to leave these things be, let them play themselves out.

There was a triangle-shaped spider web stretched between the cart's axle and wheel a few inches above Steve's face, billowing up and down in the breeze. The metallic green body of a horse fly wriggled and buzzed randomly in one corner of the web, checking every now and then to see if it was still trapped. Other than that it seemed calm enough. Steve touched the fly, felt its wings vibrating against the back of his fingernail. His mother had taken eleven and a half days to die. The men had given it to her, gave her the fever. Steve hoped she had given it to some of them before the blood had showed up to scare them away. Something he could never seem to do on his own.

A chubby brown spider skittered out from under the axle and crawled upside-down toward the fly. Steve tried to extricate the torso of the fly without tearing the web too badly, but succeeded only in pulling off its wings. The buzzing stopped. He watched the fuzzy backside of the spider crawl on top of the now passive mound of plump shiny green and busy its limbs, up and down, machine-like. He held the wings up to his eyes, stuck to the tip of his finger. They caught the light here and there, showing translucent, branching veins. A breeze stirred up, blew them spinning off into the grass.



“Buttons come off?”

I’m not usually one for starting conversations.

“Mm-hmm.”

The others had gone away somewhere, except for the Pock-Marked Kid who was washing up the tin plates and cups in a big metal tub, providing the background vocals, as always. Two sock feet stuck out from under the chuckwagon – I think the boy was taking a nap, but I suppose maybe he was fixing it or something. That left just myself and the tall man in the surprisingly clean suit; a steely gray wool-cotton blend with black and white trimwork on the lapels and hems. He wore a matching satin-backed vest over a pin striped shirt with a starched collar, the whole ensemble topped off with a stunning blue silk cravat. I felt much less conspicuous sitting next to him in my stiff wool suit, sweating furiously alongside this man, who made such clothes seem the epitome of comfort on the plains.

“So ... you just sew them right back on?”

“That’s right.”

“Where’d you learn to do that?”

Where did I learn to be so annoying? He looked at me out of the corner of his eye – he had been squinting a bit of black thread through a needle he held out from the bottom of his nose.

“Why, my mother. Who else?”

“I never had a mother.”

I think the fever was still wearing off.

“Well, I never had a father, hence, my forte among the more womanly arts.”

He lifted the jacket to his mouth by the thread and bit it off, letting the jacket fall back over his knees with one more button attached. I’d like to say I had enough tact to stop pestering the man, but...

“I never had a father, either.”

I’ve always prided myself on being silent, reserved, even aloof.

“Come now,” he pursed his lips to wet the end of the thread, his eyebrows went up and I thought he might be grinning, “you’ve been surrounded by Fathers your whole life, have you not?”

“So why do the buttons keep coming off?”

It was a grin.

“Saddle horn. Eventually it works its way under the front hem and pops ‘em out, one by one. I’ve got a whole pickle jar of spares.”

He was clean shaven with thin, shapely sideburns framing a lengthened face that stretched out elegantly from under his hat in smooth, uninterrupted lines. His hair was combed and oiled, and he probably smelled good, too, if I hadn’t stunk more than enough for the both of us.

“You ever done this before?”

“I had a – we had a lady that we sent our shirts and such to for pressing, and she would take care of any missing buttons, I suppose. I never took much notice, to be honest.”

“I meant herd cattle, Father. You know, were you ever a ...” he rolled his wrist in front of him, drawing circles in the air with the needle, “... a cow puncher, as they say?”

“We had a milking cow. I did that a few times.”

He started back in on a new button with a mild grunt and perhaps a smirk, I couldn’t tell.

“I thought not.”

I wasn’t sure what to make of this, I don’t think it was an insult. No, not an insult. Hardly an insult.

“What about you?”

He only looked at me sideways again before going back to his needlework. For one anxious moment I thought the conversation was ending there. I don’t know why, I just wanted him to keep talking. I don’t claim to be clairvoyant in any way, or a seer into men’s truer natures, nor do I believe in modern day prophets, or men endowed with the authority of the voice of God, but if anyone could explain things to me, whatever they were, I knew it would

be this man. That much was clear to me, and I've learned not to question such intuitions. I knew you, Joe. I knew you that very first day.

"They're stupid beasts, really." he spoke to his coat after a long pause. Then he fell silent again, I had to say something.

"Just point them in the right direction, and ..." I made a broad, swishing motion with my right hand that didn't really seem to indicate anything, but I don't think he was paying attention.

"It's all about the bluff, you understand. Any one of those steers could take care of a man on horseback inside of five seconds. The man knows it, the horse knows it, but the one with the set of six foot pointy horns, he doesn't know it. As long as man and horse can get him to keep thinking that, well, I guess the house wins. Except for the dumb steer who gets hot iron laid to his ass, and the business end of an axe square between the eyes. I find the whole business quite pathetic, to be perfectly frank with you, Father. Distasteful."

He paused to bite the thread, and again the jacket fell down to his lap with one more button attached.

"At least at cards, you know everyone at the table's a liar, and you know everyone of them trusts you about as far as they can throw your dead grandma in a box. There's something more honest about that. Everyone knows the arrangement going in. But you know them cows, they look at us as their protectors, as someone to sing to them when it thunders, as someone to find water for them and run off coyotes and timberwolves and such. And all along we're just towing them along to their mass slaughter, and they're happy about that. Don't that just beat all, Rev'ren? Six hundred of them and six of us. Doesn't matter. They think we're in control, so we are. Don't that just beat all... I tell you, I don't know if I have the conscience for this job, you know, Father?"

He smiled, somehow without really moving his face, but I could tell he knew exactly what I was thinking.

"Everybody needs to get away, sometimes. You know how it is, surely Father. I reckon a trail outfit is a good a way as any for a gentleman to

disappear for while, when a gentleman's situation might demand he disappear, wouldn't you agree, Rev'mn?"

"But then, how ... I mean, ... if you're not ...?"

"Hartley heard I beat General Sherman at a single hand of poker to save near half of Georgia from his raiders. He said that took good mud for a man to do. So tell me, Parson," Joseph Hatty mused while tugging firmly on a needle and thread held delicately between his thumb and forefinger, "what makes you famous, if you don't mind me asking?"

The question would have caught me off guard if I had been paying attention to what he was actually saying. He spoke beautifully. He was from Georgia. *Savannah*, Georgia.

His speech flowed out over his lips like ... like a bolt of red velvet thrown down a stairway for welcoming royalty. His drawl sounded all of self-assured confidence. A refined state of comfortable relaxation instead of that lazy ignorance conveyed by other southern dialects I've heard. A man's voice is his music, and Joe Hatty had a Stradivarius among men. I could float away on that gently rolling cadence all day long and not care where it took me, whether through the finer points of Mexican Black Jack, or the intricacies of laundering sweat stains out of silk with only cold well-water and some fine grain sand. (Even recalling your voice now in my mind makes these granite walls seem a bit softer. I try to recreate it here in my cell by reading back what I've written aloud in my best impersonations of you and the others, but it is a pale comparison, indeed, my friend. A pale comparison, indeed. My own voice is nasal and confined, but sometimes, when the acoustics are just right in here, I hear you speaking my words, Joe. You echo off the walls in sonorous, liquid phrases that make me close my eyes, and then, of course, you are gone, because I have stopped reading in order to listen. If only I could do both.)

"I, uh ... I'm not famous, Mr. Hatty."

"Why, I beg to differ, *Mr. Bullfinch*. You may not *think* you're famous. But you're famous. Or you will be."

He stretched out his long arms, swinging the jacket back over his head and sliding it down onto his shoulders by snapping his elbows out in front of him and tugging forward on the lapels. He got up to face me, wiping dust off his jacket and trousers meticulously. He shrugged and took a cigarillo out of his breast pocket, that most sophisticated and dignified of tobacco products.

“Well, maybe not *famous*, famous. But infamous, at least,” he struck a match and cupped it to his face, those leathery cheeks caving in to reveal the contour of his skull, smoke curling up around the brim of his hat, “Like me.”

He took the cigarillo out his mouth and touched his hat, strolling away as smoothly and effortlessly as he talked.

The singing of the Pock-Marked Kid seeped back into my consciousness. This time it was *How Great Thou Art*. He was on to drying the dishes, now, his head cocked to one side in concentration. His hair feathered out from under his hat like two limp mule ears, bouncing gently as he moved. The socks sticking out from under the chuckwagon shifted and rolled over, accompanied by some light snoring. I took my own jacket off, it was so hot. I didn't feel famous. Of course, I couldn't be sure.



I was not to tell anyone in town about my new job. I was to go directly and take a bath, get a haircut, a shave. I was then to buy a completely

new set of clothes – boots, long underwear, all of it (except for the hat). After that, I was to go directly on to the train station and buy a one way ticket to Houston. Following this I was to go get very conspicuously drunk at one of the main dance houses in town. It would probably be a good idea to get laid, too. Maybe lose a little money at cards. Buy drinks for the house.

These were my instructions from Hartley himself. He spoke soft and slow, teeth clamped around that pipe, pausing after each direction to wait for my nod of understanding. He wore a matching green silk chemise and neckerchief, a ten gallon straw hat with an enormous eagle feather stuck in the band. A bald spot in the grass seemed to hold his attention for much of the conversation.

Mounted on a three year old chestnut gelding named Esau, an ungodly large wad of bills in my pocket and a renewed sense of mission in my heart, I had set out to town with the notion of pleasing my new boss the best I could. And that I did. Mostly.

I was partnered in this *sortie* with none other than the legendary John Calvin Jones. I don't think he recognized me, but we had met a week earlier in town outside a dance house where he had been involved in a spirited row with another fellow. I understood he had been given the same instructions as I had, but now I think he may have been there to make sure I followed mine. Either way, I'm glad he was there.

He talked the whole way there. In the stall next to me at the bath house. Waiting for his turn at the barbershop. In line at the ticket office. All night at the bar. Early morning seated on the edge of my bed. And I listened.

He talked about anything and everything, mostly about his horse, (a fine looking Morgan named Paddymelt), or horses he had had in the past, or would like to get in the future. Breath-taking accounts were painted before my eyes in the finest detail of the imaginary races that would take place between these imaginary horses. I ended up losing five dollars when my Esau was just edged out by a sleek Spanish mare he had seen a Chickasaw warrior riding in the Indian Territories last spring. It was a close race, though, and later on Esau

and I beat a six year old Pinto named Tubaguts he had ridden a whole winter while trapping on the Indian line by a handy margin. That race was only for bragging rights, he said, but I think it made Esau feel a bit better about himself.

He had a mother and two little sisters at Crotchety Peak, back on the Matigorda Peninsula in Texas, where he was born, which had also been one of the main beach heads of the Texas navy during the war. He had seen his first dead body when he was six, a soggy blue soldier he guessed was probably the same age he was now, curled around a little keg of molasses that he brought home to his mother along with two coons he'd also treed that day. He built his family a regular mansion of a shanty out on the beach from timbers of various navy cutters washed ashore, he being the man of the house, and all. He left the humble abode at the end of the war when he was thirteen to find work, eventually finding some as a bell boy in a St. Louis hotel. I told him I was from St. Louis.

Well, *whoopdy-fuckin'-doo*, Tom. *Whoopdy-fuckin'-doo!*

I had taken baths in St. Louis – indeed, a monastic life is a very hygienic one – but I never had a woman with red hair draw the water for me and pour scented oil in it. I never sat and soaked; I stood and scrubbed. I never smoked a cigarillo and sipped soapy bourbon while carrying on a conversation with someone I'd just met, with only a stained linen sheet hanging between us.

“Hey, Deacon, looky here,” he reached over and pulled the curtain back.

He sloshed back into his tub and sat with his elbows resting on the sides, his eyes closed in supreme concentration. He lifted his index finger to me and stifled a laugh, biting his lip to regain his focus, “Wait, wait ... hold on – shh-shh – wait for it...”

The sides of his tub vibrated with a low, guttural *mmmwamp*, the water in the center boiling with musically popping bubbles. His body shook for a little bit in silent hysterics before the high pitched yelps finally whistled and sighed their way through in hoarse, heaving coughs. He would hold his hand curled under his nose like he was expecting a sneeze, muttering "I'm okay, I'm okay," then sit absolutely still for a few seconds before slapping my arm very, *very* hard and going right back into his convulsions. This behaviour alone almost always ensured that he was never laughing by himself for very long. On rare occasions I found this annoying, but that is neither here nor there.

The woman with the red hair was named Lucinda, and we called for hot water to be added many times. Each time she poured it, I would sink to my shoulders and cup my hands around my genitals for modesty's sake. Her blouse was necessarily damp, and it would cling to her even when she leaned over here or reached up there. Her hair was pinned up over her head and her neck glistened with sweat and steam. She smelled like spiced fruit. She smiled and winked at me when Cal told her she had a fantastic ass and I tried to see outside through the fogged window on the other side of the room, craning my neck and resting my chin on the side of the tub until she was gone.

By the second bottle of bourbon, (I think it was watered down), and after much coaching from Cal, I managed to make my tub sing as his had. I had to hold my breath for what seemed like minutes, gripping the sides of the tub for support and clenching my teeth. The side of my temple thumped with pain and Cal said my face had started to turn a glowing purple color and it looked like my eyes might swell up and pop before it finally happened. He called it a 'a left cheek squeaker'. A prolonged, haunting contralto that wavered and reverberated around the room with the piercing melancholy of an Irish choir boy. We both agreed it was quite a beautiful sound. (I have tried to duplicate this effect by pressing myself against the smoothest parts of the walls here – often having to climb and perch myself in awkward positions to do so – but I've only managed a wet, breathy hissing so far.)

Cal wore a pair of Model '51 Navy Colt revolvers at all times. These had also washed up onto the beach head at Crotchety Peak, attached to the soggy blue corpse of a Texas Ranger whose face was missing, but whose sidearms were perfectly in tact. I imagined the beach where he grew up as a veritable marketplace of goods, tended to by soggy blue vendors in various military uniforms.

He named the guns Jack and Sasha, after his two sisters, and wore them for three years before he was able to find ammunition for them. He found they made excellent tools in the mean time, hammering together most of his mother's Crotchety Peak Mansion with them, and solving more than one argument with the ample nose crunching power of those six-plus pound chums hanging at his side. They were both identical coal black, with shiny patches around the trigger guard and the hammer where the finish had been rubbed off. I asked him how he told the two apart.

"Because," he jerked his head up, the barber snapping his wrist back to avoid slitting Cal's throat with the razor, "*Jack* is on my starboard, (*slap!*), and *Sasha's* on my port, (*slap!*), ya dumb fuck!" He leaned his head back for the cautious barber to go back to work. Any time he spoke to people like this it was always followed by a sparkle in his eyes and the appearance of all those dimples that defied taking offense. Unless, of course, he meant it.

Cal had hardly any facial hair, but he insisted the old man lather him up and give him the works, just the same. I, on the other hand, took a little longer, Cal passing the time going on and on about the exact shape of Lucinda's 'titties'. Like two hard boiled goose eggs hanging wide-end down, though a little bit bullet shaped at the ends. Her nipples were either small points of bright red, or broad sprawling fried eggs of a pale rosy flesh tone; he couldn't tell through that damned double-knit cotton, although he hoped it was the latter. No, wait, her breasts were more like a pair of swollen bull testicles, which, if you looked closely, had a firm oval shape, but a different aesthetic

all together from hard boiled eggs. What did I think? I hadn't taken too much notice. Maybe the left one was a little lower than the right, and hung slightly off center. Yes, he thought so too, but he could live with this – it added character.

“God-*damn*,” he said when I got up and was toweled off, “you look exactly like Carson, swear to God. Maybe a little shorter. But the face ...”

He kept staring at me, waiting for me – for someone – to explain to him how this could be. I shrugged. I had seen John Carson earlier in camp, though we were never properly introduced. He sat in a three man conference with Hartley and the Judge around the fire, their attention focused on a map and a notebook Hartley occasionally jotted things down in, or crossed things out from. Hartley and the Judge seemed to be deep into the debate; Carson said few words, but it looked like they were always the deciding ones. When he got up to leave the other two, he walked right by me, and he was, in fact, an inch or two taller than I. His hair was dark, like mine, but I could see no other resemblance, although he was a strikingly handsome fellow. He had a character-filled Roman nose balanced between sturdy, though not overbearing cheekbones, whereas my own nose is decidedly Grecian and void of human experience, floating crooked and unmoored between generically rounded cheeks and accentuating an already weak jaw line. There was a tattoo of a butterfly, or maybe a dragonfly on his neck, crawling out from under his collar and up towards the bottom of his ear. I always had to fight the instinct to slap at it whenever I saw it, just to shoo it away. On top of that, it seemed obvious to me that he had Indian blood in him, perhaps quite a bit. If you could see us together, you would agree we look nothing alike. Still, the perception of our likeness has been a problem for me. I think it's all the open air ... men start to look like each other, their features molded by a common environment, their birth traits beaten soundly into submission. That, and Cal did have a fair amount of single-malt blend in him by that point.

The Longhorn was its usual mildly rambunctious self: just loud enough to mask your own conversations, but you couldn't, say, break a chair over someone's head without getting noticed. We arrived just after eight, which is very late in Abilene, as the serious drinking starts around half past two in the afternoon. Cal hadn't been able to decide between a pair of high heeled boots with white stars stitched in the tops of them, or blue stars with little white quarter moons around them. I asked him which were a more comfortable fit and he called me a dumb fuck. Myself, I chose a pair of non descript brown boots, (the kind farmers wear), and a pair of black trousers and a black vest. I also picked out a black, floor-length riding coat with a carapace and split seam down the back and everything. It looked the most like Father Du Smeille's vestments, except without the bright red sash around the middle, although I still wore that clunky crucifix, and, of course, the hat. When I asked for a pickle jar of spare buttons, the tailor asked me to repeat myself, at which point Cal asked him if he had a hearing problem and, if not, would he like one? I got my jar as well as an extra jar of buttons and some thread to take back to Joe.

We wasted more time at the train station, where Cal had to show off the finer points of his boots to a pair of young girls from Independence, one of whom kept looking at me like I should know her. If you ask Cal, of course, it was my fault we were late because I had to go take a squat when we couldn't find a water closet outside the station. My new coat provided an astonishing amount of privacy, and Cal took the opportunity to pee on some horses while he waited. Luckily, Cal and I had had the presence of mind to start the party on our own from the bath house on, so we didn't have much catching up to do by the time we finally stepped through those fake swinging doors.

The piano was played by a professional this time: a rollicky, up-tempo hymn to match the mood of the room. *Salvation Has Been Brought Down*, I believe. We moved through the room towards the bar in a series of slow stops and starts and turning sideways to slide by people moving towards the door,

the stairs, the piano. It was Cal's strategy: first go for the bugjuice, then bring on the whooers. He seemed to know what he was doing, a battle-hardened lieutenant guiding a fresh recruit through his first offensive.

I saw Joe playing cards at a table under the stairs beside the bar. He was seated against the far wall, across from a tiny, moustached man with muscular, stubby hands and graying hair who had to sit on two copies of the King James Bible in order to reach the table. Next to him was a regular size man with long, silky brown hair covering his entire face – nose, forehead – everything. I caught Joe's attention with a wave over top of some smelly trapper who was walking in front of me. He looked confused for a moment, even a little frightened, until he finally recognized me and a broad grin spread across his face as he looked me up and down. He put his cigarillo in his mouth and touched his free hand to his hat before returning his gaze to the card game at hand. I asked him once if all good gamers play with their backs against the wall so they can see danger coming. He laughed a little and then laughed harder when I asked him what was so funny. I always write with my back to a wall. It's just common sense.

After doing two shots in quick succession, (I think these were watered down, too, but not nearly as much – they made my throat burn to the point of losing my voice), Cal asked the bartender if he had any watermelon. No, but he did have a fresh box of dates. That won't do, that won't hardly do at all, Cal said shaking his head. He looked at me for an answer, his eyes starting to glass over.

"*Shit!!*", he pounded the bar hard with his fore-arm and turned around to lean his elbows against it. He slumped his head into his chest in silent contemplation. Now the bartender was looking to me like I should have an explanation for it all. That damned hat of mine! I smiled at him, and he seemed to take offense. Cal sighed. Then he sighed again, harder this time.

"All right," he said quietly and turned around to face the bartender again, "all right. Do you have any cod liver oil?"

The bartender nodded.

“Good,” he muttered, thinking hard to himself, tapping his lips with his fingers, “Now, do you have any boot-black?”

“Black or brown?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

The bartender placed a small corked bottle on the counter along with a flat round tin of boot polish and began to walk away.

“Oh, and two glasses, please.”

Yes, we got our two glasses and yes, the bartender had a very disturbed look on his face. I’m not sure what my face looked like, but I can guess. Cal was shaking his head again in somber reflection as he held a match to the polish, igniting an invisible, blue-green flame.

“You heard me, Rev. You heard me ask fer the watermelon first. You *always* ask fer the watermelon first, and *goddamit*, they usually have it. But, they don’t have watermelon, ya heard the man yerself, so, whudderya gonna do, Deacon,” he smothered the flame with the tin lid and poured a quarter inch of steaming black into each glass, still shaking his head, “whussa feller like you er me ta do?”

I never taught medicine, so I can’t attest either way to Cal’s theories of erectile function and the counter-amorous effects of alcohol that he explained to me while topping up our glasses with fish extract.

“The only way ta get yer manhood back after too much of the courage,” he mused, holding the glass high out in front of him. He shrugged, “except, of course, fer watermelon.”

After he swallowed he closed his eyes and placed his palm flat on the bar. A second later his face twisted nearly all the way off and he lifted his hand and started slapping down hard on the bartop with a steady determined rhythm. This lasted for about a minute with those new boot spurs chiming in every now and again with a few good stomps. Then, God Almighty, he picked up the other glass and handed it to me, tears streaming down his face, “Bottoms up, laddie.” And there was that smile.

I could see his face talking to me through blossoming clouds of bright yellow light that changed shape and color with slow, rolling movements. Something about how Carson (I guess he was back on about our supposed resemblance) was actually the bastard son of Kit Carson, and had actually fought against his father in the Navajo wars before escaping federal soldiers somewhere along the forced march to Bosque Redondo.

“Cen ya beat, that, Rev? I mean, after they run outta ammo, an food, them fool injuns was jumping straight offa’ cliffs as soon as they seen them bluecoats comin’ fer ‘em. I knew the feller whut was in charge uv pickin’ em’ off with a long-barrel Sharp. Just like they was woodpeckers. Y’know, I ain’t never had no patience fer no breech-loadin’ musketry, but they do pack a whallop, don’t ya know.”

“I’m going to lie down now, Cal,” I said from the floor.

He squatted next to me and propped my head up on the boot-rail. Someone stepped on my shin. Cal kept talking.

“Makes ya wonder, though, don’t it? What you would do ifen it was you up there, see? I think I woulda’ saved that last cap ‘n ball fer me, ya know? Up there, hopefully ya got a little tobaccy er sumthin’, take one last time to pump yer squaw full a’ yer future generations en such, mayber two or three times just ta be sure, then find a quiet corner and set to pullin’ the trigger with yer big toe – which is the only way ta do it with those goddamn long-barrels, don’t ya know... even so, you best be at least five-foot-nine or you just muss up yer hair real bad, that danged barrel bein’ four foot ifen’ it’s an inch, see? An’ then – *BANG!* You just redecorated yer little cave in a nice, splattered-brains motif, which is just gonna smell worsen’ en sin after a few days, you better believe, yer poor little squaw just tryin’ ta fend off them buzzards long enough to chop up yer balls ta feed to the littl’uns fer strength. *God*, what an awful thought.”

He was staring straight ahead, his elbows hooked around his knees.

“Naw, I reckon I’d do the same thing as them fool savages, after all: shove that last piece a lead as far up whitey’s ass as I could an’ then see if I couldn’t fly after all. Go make my peace with the Great Grandfather Jagged Rocks, know what I mean? Lord Jesus, that’s awful. At least my kids wouldn’t get ta eat my balls.”

He slumped back against the boot rail and let his legs splay out in front of him. Someone tripped, but caught their balance. He was staring down at his groin, cupping himself gingerly, his face heavy. Then he smiled a lazy half grin, “Hey ... there’s the little feller. ”

He gave himself a few long tugs through his pants.

“See Rev’,” he patted my knee, “I told ya. Now we’re ready ta do us some ser-ee-us gallin’, see?”

I couldn’t see. Cal ordered another whiskey with extra water in it and poured it in my mouth. The rafters of the Longhorn’s ceiling began to re-solidify out of blistering pops and flashes of light. I had the most wonderful sensation that I was sinking through the floor. I kept grabbing at that last breath to hold it in before I finally went under, the surface of the floor coming back together in a swirling eddy over the tip of my submerging nose, but I just kept sinking without really going anywhere.

By the time we both made it over to the piano where the girls were I had vomited twice and was feeling much better. At least once was into a spittoon, or some other appropriate receptacle, and a new silk kerchief—compliments of Hartley— took care of the bits still hanging from my nose and lips that Cal was kind enough to point out to me before we presented ourselves to the ladies of the house.

And there she was. Standing at the piano next to Cecelia, her head turned away from me, propped up on a smooth marble neck, at that perfect, picture-portrait angle.



Colleen.

Col – leen.

Coll-llleen.

I can see my breath when I say your name. It comes from the warmest parts of my lungs and curls into the shapes of neck and arms and hips and legs and big toes before condensing onto the walls in little slick patches of moisture. I can almost speak you into existence. If I could give birth to you in the manner of mythic pagan gods, I would, Colleen. Grow you out of my forehead, have you cut fully gestated from the inside of my thigh, shed bloody tears and have you grow up in that far corner of the cave as some exotic poisonous flower – if I could I would. For now, I can only playfully kiss the round parts of your heels with an ‘n’ sound as you float up to drip off the walls. Still, we both know that woman was born of man, I feel the ingredients for you somewhere inside me. It’s only a matter of time and determination before I wake to find a stitch in my side, and you contemplating your reflection in a calm pool of your own collected name.

Colleen.

Cal had done all the talking. I don't remember. Then we were on a bed together, at the same time, one on each side. Me in nothing but my brand new flannels and my hat, and she in one of those cotton nightgown numbers that gives away nothing and absolutely everything at the same time. Her hair was down and combed to one side at the back, hanging over the front of one shoulder. She was combing it that way, out in front of her, head tilted, one leg tucked up under her, the other stretching for miles out to the end of the bed. We said nothing. Her name was Colleen.

I don't know how I let it get that far, (who took my clothes off?), and I'm sorry, Colleen, you were just a girl. She was just a girl, you see. Only a girl.

I tried to say something, something about woman being a tool of Satan and that I should probably sleep on the floor, which was actually quite comfortable, so long as I could stay afloat.

She leaned her head on my shoulder and traced her finger up and down my front buttons. Her hair was smooth, and I was glad my cheek was tender and sensitive from the shave. It had an earthen smell, like grass and dew. The breath from my nostrils gently parted it in the middle, and some of it curled up and around my ear, mixing with my own black hair. Her hair was black. She spoke into my chest, the words vibrating.

"What's the matter? You think I haven't been with a priest before, is that it?"

I could tell she was lying.

She slipped her hand down further, (her fingers were so long), my back arched and spasmed, everything warm and numb.

"Please ..."

She looked up, and I guess my eyes explained things better than I could, because she took her hand away and put it back on my chest.

"I'm sorry," she said.

I kissed her hair, I don't think she noticed.

She was sorry.

“Colleen,” I wanted to tell her, just in a whisper, the words raindrops sliding off my tongue and down her hair, “Colleen, oh dear, sweet, wonderful, long-necked Colleen, don’t think what you’re thinking. Don’t think that because I’m a priest and you’re a whore – because I’m not, and you’re not, and even if we both were, it wouldn’t be because of that, or because it’s not allowed, because of some abstract concept of virtue, to hell with all that, to *hell* with all that, because it’s not, it’s not why ... it’s just this room, and this wall paper, and boot black and fish guts and your hair smells like grass and I just can’t have it this way, Colleen, you and your beautiful black hair and your long white neck, here, like this, it doesn’t work, you see? It’s not you, it’s not me, it just doesn’t fit here, this way...just – for God’s sake – don’t be sorry, all right? Please...”

Of course, I was still furiously drunk at the time, I think I ended up saying something like, “Priests ... whores ...you know, Colleen, it’s not ... priests ‘n whores, it’s ... wallpaper. You know, sorry?”

We lay silent for a while and I liked the weight of her head on my chest. Her head wiggled a little bit. My head jerked forward and back again. *Whuump!* The wall behind us shuddered. *Whuump!* Again. *Whuump* ...*whuump* ... *whuump!* A steady beat developed, accompanied by various creaks and groans from the room next door. I could hear Cal’s voice chanting something in time with the rhythm, it sounded like, “*Spread ... the ... cheese!*”, or maybe, “*Frogs ... have ... knees!*”, I couldn’t make it all out.

Green eyes looked up at me and tittered, covering her mouth like a school girl. I lay as still as I possibly could, the jiggling motion was making me a little nauseous. Colleen was up on her knees touching the palm of her hand to the wall – tentatively, as though it were hot. She belly-laughed this time, one of her knees pressing into the side of my head. Such wonderful knees.

“*Tend ... your ... bees!*”

Now our own bed started lurching up and down, clacking my jaw and sloshing my bowels. It was Colleen, her black hair fanning out around her in lazy flapping wings, jumping on the mattress in time with the wall. I made the best of the situation by closing my eyes and imagining myself going over a waterfall or some heavy rapids, my body crashing against rocks and fallen logs on the way down, Colleen following me in a canoe, laughing and inadvertently slapping me on the head with her paddle. Somewhere John Calvin called from the shore, "*Watch ... those ... trees!*"

Because I was actually *bounced* off the bed, I managed to hit the floor flat on my back, instead of rolling over to let my face soften the blow. Again I had to wait for the ceiling to come back into focus through all the brilliant white sparks showering down on me from the gables.

She was still bouncing, and now moaning a little, in farce. I don't think she noticed I was gone. The concussion had cleared my head; breath through my nose was cool and sharp. In a moment of inspiration, I moved to the foot of the bed and grabbed the bulky brass (iron?, oak?) frame, bracing my shoulders against it. Pulling it out an inch or two from the wall, I shoved the whole thing back as hard as I could.

Thawhuump!

It was loud – really loud. Colleen let out a squeal of delight, so I did it again.

Thawhuump!

I worked up my own steady rhythm, gave those goddamn ugly wallflowers the what-for. She groaned and rocked and cooed and bounced and giggled and flopped. My arms and shoulders burned from the inside out with holy righteous hellfire, my knees skidded back and forth over the floor trying to dig in, wearing bald patches in new wool underwear.

Thawhuunk! Thu-ump! Thawhuump!

I couldn't hear the other side any more, either they were finished or had stopped to listen. Sweat ran off my eyebrows and down my chin, I think my nose was bleeding and short snorting sounds were spouting through

clenched teeth. Then the words came, my own chant to fill the void, give things a proper cadence:

"Patria! ... Filius! ... Spiritus! ... Sanctus!"

It was all I could think of, and it had a nice rhythm to it. The words sounded masterful and authoritative in a way they never had for me, all blasphemy aside. The bed slammed faster and faster and I bellowed myself hoarse, ripping out each syllable from somewhere deep beneath all the whiskey and boot black, down around fatty marbled tissues of purples and reds and sickly yellows. I could only see Colleen when she floated into view over the footboard; as far as I could tell she wasn't even touching the mattress anymore.

I ended with an explosion of rapid-fire thrusts that surprised all of us, flipping Colleen over; milk-white thighs kicking in the air; a tuft of fuzzy light brown. I collapsed under the bed, my whole body vibrating and my left temple pounding.

A man and a girl in a bed. She is asleep, he is not. The room spins at a leisurely pace. A warm breeze swells the curtains with momentary life. Bathed in moonlight and shadows and evaporating heat; a man and a girl on a bed. You must forgive my waxing poetic. I have to set the scene just right before I can fully enter in.

A warm breeze pushed through the curtains beside her, giving them temporary life. There was something liquid about that night air, and when it came I felt I was breathing underwater, or at least that I could. I should have been unconscious hours earlier, but sleep wouldn't come. Perhaps I wouldn't let it. She lay on her side, facing away from me, towards the air and the light.

I traced the moonlight pooling dully on a bare, gently heaving shoulder. It spilled over the steppes and coulees of ribcage and armpit and side of breast, down into the low valleyed chalk-white midlands just above her

hips, and into the warm shadows of the swiftly rising marble escarpment immediately beyond, where it emptied into a serene lake overlooking the whole landscape on the peak of her left buttock.

Her back curved around seamlessly into perfectly stacked thighs drawn up in front of her before doubling back gracefully down rounded calves, tapering to the smooth defined bone of ankles to slim, elongated feet, impossibly jointed toes bowing slightly under in unison, keeping vigil in a silent prayer. I wanted to quote Song of Solomon, but nothing came to mind.

I looked down at my own pallid torso – I had stripped to the waist to help cool off. The breeze tickled and sent mixed wafts of fresh sweat and bath oils up my nose. Patches of emaciated black hairs growing in all weird directions peopled the top of my chest. A single thick, corded hair snaked out of one of my nipples forever like a creeping vine. (I'm looking at it right now – Good God! – it must be six inches long!). A skewed crater of a navel rested atop an undefined rise of baby fat, covered by a swirling pattern of light brown fuzz that thickened and disappeared under my flannels in what Cal called the 'treasure trail'. I dragged my fingers up and down between my navel and that place where the bottom of your rib cage comes together in an inverted 'V', plucking at invisible blonde hairs along the way, making my skin dance with tiny jutting points that popped up and disappeared.

She had invisible blonde hairs. At the base of her neck, trailing down her back, riding knobby humps of spine. On her forearms, (these were a little darker, but still invisible under the right circumstances, like moonlight), lying straight in rows. The kind that would stand up all at once if I leaned over and blew on them just barely, but just enough. Like eyelashes, all opening together.

John Calvin at the door. John Calvin in a gray chemise, a gun belt and nothing else, dirty blonde hair mussed and standing in random peaks. His toes crack as he walks across the floor and sits on the edge of the bed, sloping it

towards him. He is back-lit by the tepid brown-orange of the gas light in the hall. He sits for a while. Colleen is still asleep, I hear her exhale deeply.

His gaze shifted to Colleen, then back to me. His face was half shadow, but I could see both his eyes clearly. He hunched over and giggled to himself a little, then slapped my shoulder lightly with the back of his hand. I giggled a little, too.

“Jee-zus fuck, Rev, you sure ride ‘em hard.” He slapped my shoulder again and started to laugh harder, under his breath, so as not to wake Colleen. He looked back at her. “Christ, I’m surprised she’s still *all there*. Looks young, too. I thought I heard some hips crack in there, somewhere, ya know?”

I told him he wasn’t exactly a soft touch, either.

“Some smelly whore with wiggly hair,” he grunted, “I white-warshed her insides but good, Deacon.”

You have to understand I would’ve laughed at anything at this point, Cecelia. I wouldn’t have been able to sit through the final scene of *The Passion* without at least smirking at the public nudity. The liquor, kind Cecelia. The liquor.

“I was thinking,” he said, “an’ I wanted ta ask you, Father.” He picked his nose a little and flicked it across the room, “D’you reckon we’re born with a soul, ya know, like all ready set ta go right there that’s *us*, or do we sorta grow one later on, like a goiter, dependin’ on where ya been ... whut ya done?”

He looked like he was trying to say something else, his teeth showed and he put his hands out in front of him and held them still. After about a minute he dropped them.

Sometimes I think we’re all just part of one soul – the hands, the feet, that sort of thing. Or that maybe only one of us really has a soul, and the rest of us are just there around that person to provide them with some sort of

meaningful life experience. Other times I just feel like ... nothing. I think I shared some of these theories with Cal, and his hands just went back up for another minute.

He had quite a lot to say about the subject. So did I. We talked about the afterlife, and how if you couldn't remember who you were, you might as well be dead, anyway, but if you did remember everything and everyone, there wasn't much point in dying, either. Who was to say we weren't already dead, or that we weren't just born yesterday, only full grown, with all life experiences in place? It all made perfect sense at the time. We agreed to start a church together someday, elucidating our painfully obvious insights to the general public. We had a few horse races in there, too. I still owe him ten dollars for losing to a glistening purple mare who could breathe fire and eventually sprouted wings by the end of the race. I rode Esau as usual, though I think his tail was a little longer, and braided nicely with gold ribbons that reflected the sun a thousand different ways.

“Cal?”

We had both been deep in thought for some time. I punched him softly in the kidney.

“Cal, what makes you famous?”

The curtains billowed to help me get his attention.

“Whaddya mean, Rev? What makes you wanna ask a question like that?”

“Nothing.”

He sat quiet a while longer, I thought maybe I'd offended him.

“What makes me famous?”

One of a thousand different voices he did. This one sounded like a Scotts-Mexican with a bit of a lisp.

“My beeg, hairy *cock*, laddie, that's what!” He gave it a few good yanks for emphasis. “Huh? You know what I'm talkin' bout, huh?” *Tug, tug.*

His face froze in a twisted grin, his bubbling eyes locked on mine without mercy until I finally broke into the reluctant laugh he wanted. Those things could shoot sparks when he wanted, I swear it.

“Naw, naaw ...”, I ran my fingers through my hair and left my hand there on my forehead gripping a clump of smooth oily black, “ I mean have you ever ... have you ever killed anyone? You know, even by accident?”

He looked away, at the wall for a long time. He picked at his nose a little more and bobbed his head, but I couldn't tell if he was nodding. He just swayed like that and slumped towards the wall, mumbling in a broken whisper at no one in particular, maybe those green and yellow flowers, “ ...my big cock ... big cock ... I gotta big cock ...”

Then he was straddling my midsection, leaning over to stroke Colleen's hair. He caught it up in his fingers and held it as high as he could, letting each strand slip back into place one by one. The sound of hair falling. His weight made my bowels scream and I had to clench everything to keep from messing the sheets. My bowels have never been cooperative, not from day one. This got my temple thumping again. I had been so comfortable, now even my teeth were sweating cold. She was still asleep – at least she wasn't moving. Why hadn't I thought to touch her? Lift her hair like that? She wouldn't have minded. I always think people will mind, but then it turns out I'm the only one that takes things that seriously. Or maybe it was just Cal she didn't mind. Maybe she was still asleep. Didn't matter now – gut ached like I was passing a bowling ball.

Now a finger with a cracked, dirty nail was sliding down her shoulder to her elbow and back up again. His eyes were disconnected, floating in her direction, leaving an empty smirk on his face, him breathing through his mouth when he remembered to.

Another breeze from the window came in over us, causing his eyelids to flutter and making the peaks of standing brown and blonde hair quiver

eerily like leaves on an unbending tree. The finger kept back and forth, occasionally joined by a palm circling the top of her thigh. I could feel him stiffening and pressing into my belly. Every move sending waves crashing and gurgling around inside me, held back by clenched fists and cramping flexed thighs, all in time with the pounding in the side of my head. I thought this couldn't go on much longer, but it did. Much longer.

Finally, the corner of his eye shifted, almost imperceptibly from her to me and then back to her. He was squeezing and massaging her buttocks with the one hand like he was pinching off dough to make sweet rolls.

“ I gotta ... I gotta ... ” he was mumbling, trying not to giggle, looking from her to me, from her to me, “ I gotta ... I gotta see what she says, Tom ... see what she says...”

He lifted one leg up to get off of me and onto her and I felt the cool damp of where he had been, and just as he leaned forward I felt the warm tapping of his member flopping against me, right where your rib cage meets in the form on an inverted 'V' and that's when my hand was around his neck and he flopped right back down to where he'd been and I squeezed harder to hold everything in, like it was gonna come out of his neck if I didn't. In the same instant, Sasha flashed and clicked and was pressing against my eyeball. The barrel sight was sharp and pointed and dug into my eyebrow, opening it up. I felt the warm blood follow the same route tears would down the side of my head. His eyes showed surprised and a confident control of the situation at the same time. It was another one of those long paralyzed moments, there must have been a hundred that night, freeing ourselves from one washed-out section of time only to bog down again a few feet later in another.

My right hand wriggled farther up towards his jaw, loosening and tightening, adjusting the grip. He made gagging laugh sounds, his eyes never leaving mine. Everytime I felt the air punch out from his lips like this I squeezed harder, sliding my thumb up under his jaw and tilting his head back and forth in the light for my one eye. I felt larynx and trachea and esophagus and whatever else was in there, rolling and sliding off each other. The bulge in

the front of his throat pressed up and down against the inside of my palm. An odd sensation. Not unpleasant. I think he was trying to swallow.

Sasha dragged her cool metal down the side of my cheek and started pressing against my lips. The sight caught again and now my lip was bloody and swollen. Cal's eyes were glossy and pink but still all there. He was prying my teeth open with the barrel, it had a tangy pungent flavor that made my eyes water. My thumb found his jugular and pinched. His pulse bounced back, strong and unstoppable. He was moving the gun in and out of my mouth, slow and smooth. The barrel made a scraping sound against the back of my front teeth and the sight tore the roof my mouth open, filling it with a sappy nauseating warmth.

Now I was the one making the gagging noises, I heard them more than felt them. My grip on his throat relaxed but I kept my hand up there for effect, to feel his pulse. To feel the breath come back, to feel him swallow. I saw the beginnings of a smile as a tiny bit of blood ran out of his nose and his face rushed a glowing red. Then everything was still again, and we remained like that: neither of us really wanting to go forward, but still deciding whether or not we could go back.

Occasionally one of us let out a spasm of coughs for a few seconds before settling back into position. The curtains ballooned and slapped playfully against his face. One of them got hung up over his ear and he had to tick his neck to one side before it slipped submissively back to the windowsill.

Then she rolled over and kissed me beneath the ear, placing her hand on my chest, you know, where the ribcage comes together in an inverted 'V', and all my insides curled up into a quiet little ball underneath the warmth from her palm, and her breath on my neck was a thousand motionless blood-red clouds at sunset and I decided that's where I wanted to be, and that's where I went.

When I woke up Cal was gone, and she was drooling a little on my neck, stale dry morning breath floating up my nostrils and making my eyelids flutter.

Cal said it never happened, that I'm full of shit, (of course, his eyes sparkle in the good way when he says this), but I remember. I can't even think about it without my intestines starting a slow cleansing twist like a cheese press. I can't blame him, she was beautiful. I think its easier since she's gone for him to forget it, it's easier for us who have to face each other. He always was pretty damned efficient that way, he didn't dwell on things much, that Cal. I think he knew what he was doing, knew what he was forgetting and why. I think he had the best memory of all of us that way, I think he remembered everything that ever happened to him. He was able to sift through and remember what needed to be remembered, not like the rest of us who had to cling to whatever happened to cling to us. We had flotsam and junk rafts, lashing together bits and pieces that floated up within reach. Cal was able to build a ship, selecting only the sturdiest timbers, throwing away everything leaky and misshapen for people like me as he sailed on by.

I wonder what things would've been like between us if she were still in the picture. In a way she still is.

She's driftwood now, but she's mine.

Colleen.

XII

Day Five or Six – I feel it appropriate to describe my prison, but cannot think of a way to do it other than as doting house matron giving the

grand tour to first time dinner guests. A lovely cliff-dwelling marrying bold design with a bare bones utilitarian aesthetic, the only man-made sections are the heavy oak and iron door grafted onto the cave's opening, and the three slim (yet sturdy) iron bars over the natural window fifteen feet up the westward wall. The cell extends some thirty-six feet or so from end to end along the front wall, and penetrating as far back as eighteen feet into the cliff-face at some points, though the ceiling ducks down to three feet or less of clearance within five feet of the front entrance. I estimate the ceiling at its highest point measures over twenty-three and a half feet.

Over in that corner is where I sleep on a buffalo robe laid over as much snow as I can shovel in from the drifts at the door and around the window. Over there is where I shit plump greasy turds, and on that far, concave formation is where I piss, making different patterns on the wall depending on how I swivel my hips, although lately the whole process has become too painful for me to put any real creative effort into it.

On the opposite side is the reservoir where I collect fresh run-off from the wall, sometimes adding an icicle or two from the window to inflate the portions. The vintage from this puddle has a stiff earthy bouquet with a crisp, gritty texture that is both refreshing and surprisingly filling. Over here, we come to the natural rise in the flooring of the cave, facing the window, where I like to crouch and gnaw on the waxy, tasteless square of hard-tac that is thrown through the window on a daily basis while I watch the sunset. I also like to – when feeling extra peckish – chew on the hyde of my buffalo robe, which I'm convinced provides me with the lion's share of my nutrition in this place. On the first day, my meal was served to me in person, but there was some ugliness, and it was decided, for the benefit of all involved, that my food would be dropped in through the window. Like manna from heaven. No quail as of yet, but I'm ready for one should it decide to make an appearance.

I will assume this is a military prison, as I am still alive and relatively unharmed. Only the government could see this wonderful, naturally occurring shelter and have the genius and fortitude to see in it a means for incarceration.

You can be sure they intend my death, however. Bureaucracy demands a state-sanctioned extermination to avoid the grizzly concept of murder: a proper judge is needed for a proper hanging. And so it all takes time.

We are some distance from anywhere, I imagine. My best guess is somewhere in southern Dakota Territory, or possibly northeastern Wyoming. We might still be in Nebraska, but I doubt it, unless I was taken back south, which I suppose is a possibility, though I suspect a judge would have been here by now if that were the case. Regardless, the proceedings for my execution have to start sooner rather than later at this point, which is why I must try and make as full a record of events as possible for the courts – not so much for my own defense, that would be immoral and grotesque now, but for the others who might not yet be in custody or shot for the bounty. Their story must be told in full, or history and the law will tell it for them, and, I fear, not with the kind of sensitivity and objectivity needed to fully understand their actions. Or mine. Complete precision in detail. Details, details. God is in the details.

To maintain concentration in this task I diligently practice mortification of the flesh. This started with the placement of awkward shaped rocks under my bedding, but I soon found I could sleep soundly with or without them. I've left them there just to be on the safe side. Since then I've also decided to forego the small comfort of my clothes, coat and robe for extended periods at a time during the day. Nudity, however, comes with its own breezy calm; clothing providing just enough of an idea of warmth to accentuate the cold. My naked limbs seem to take on a weightless quality as they grow progressively numb, leaving my mind disembodied and floating; clear in its thought. I permit myself to wear a pair of thick calfskin gloves to keep mobility in my hands, and I have learned to write quite legibly with them on. My own distant, floating pair of hands to guide across the page at my will. Pure translation of thought into word – a truly vatic process.

To increase mortification, I have recently taken to balancing on one foot in the center of the cave floor, (sometimes on a foot-size rock, or a pile

of rocks), my arms outstretched and my free foot planted firmly on the opposite knee. Not unlike a crane of some sort, I suppose, though I have never seen one. I have been able to hold this position up to a count of five hundred 'Hail Mary's, (four hundred ninety seven – we must be precise), though for some reason I have only been able to hold this same position for two hundred thirty eight 'Our Father's. Strange.

It is during these times that I meditate on the exact nature of my own death by hanging. The rope is surprisingly soft, even a little oily. It was once used in a block and tackle rig for loading fir timbers onto flat-bed railway cars. A faint odor of pine gum and dried sap. It is warm and heavy on my shoulders at first, like the mammoth hands of Father Du Smeille bracing me gently in front of him when I was a child balanced on three or four volumes of *The Relations*, reading at a lectern two feet taller than myself.

I am hooded with burlap – blindfolded at the very least. Still, the light bleeds in through the material in hues of rose and ochre –no – grayish-platinum, the day is slightly overcast. I close my eyes to avoid this distraction. Now sounds without referents float amplified around me, disguising the distance of their sources. The slightly laboured breathing of the hangman, the mild torrent of a horse relieving itself.

Concentrate. Concentrate on the litany of saints martyred by hanging. None come to mind. Stoning, burning, ripped to shreds by wild and exotic animals, hanging was not among the favoured modes of extermination throughout antiquity. Judas was hanged. Perhaps this fact has made hanging a pariah among cannonizable forms of martyrdom. As my luck would have it. But wasn't his sacrifice all the greater, offering up not only his mortal flesh, but also damning his immortal soul in bringing about the kingdom of heaven on earth? An overlooked state of affairs, to be sure. Even so, would the cause of my death be considered a verifiable persecution of the faith? Indeed, St. Clement of Rome stated that 'it is the part of the wicked to vex the righteous' in his edict on martyrdom. Hanging would certainly seem to be vexing to me, and my claim to righteousness would seem to be vindicated by virtue of my

being vexed by wicked people, which is undeniably the case. But still, as I see it, the cause of my death always comes down to a lack of breath ... possibly a snapped neck. The reason will have to come later, as it always does.

Concentrate. Recite the prayer of the martyr as spoken by St. Polycarpus burning alive on his own funeral pyre: *I give thee thanks that Thou hast counted me, worthy of this day and this hour, that I should have a part in the number of Thy martyrs, in the cup of thy Christ, the resurrection of eternal life, both of soul and body, through the incorruption imparted by the Holy Ghost.*

Do not wait for the stool to be kicked out, the horse to be spurred, the lever to be pulled, but run plunging forward off the platform, momentum causing your legs to flail gloriously out in front of you as your topside is snapped cleanly back like the cracking of a bullwhip, followed by a lazy carefree swinging, your body following the broad, sweeping arc of a giant pendulum. All to the awe and wonderment of inspired on-lookers. Run. Jump. Try not to bite off your tongue.

It is damned drafty in here. My toes are blue.

We had to leave town by way of the train station, and then double-back to camp around the southern outskirts. Cal insisted we spend the rest of our money on licorice, hard candies and dime novels, which we did.

I had never seen anything quite like the books: slimly bound paper volumes with frantically colorful illustrated cover plates and great, booming title banners claiming adventure, intrigue and romance. There was a man on the cover of one; a bright blue jacket, red suede bootleggings with tassels, his hands outstretched to either side of him, his gaze fixed boldly on a distant horizon. On the end of each arm a flailing red-skinned savage was impaled through the chest with one of the large bowie knives the man held in each

hand. *Red Plume the Renegade: A Tale of the Blackfeet Country*. The marquis lettering curled in and out of the scene, blocking out the clouds and trees in the distance, but settling humbly in behind the stern countenance of Mr. Red Plume. It looked as though the savage on the left had had his tomahawk strike parried by an oversized capital "R". The Renegade seemed not to notice this stroke of luck.

Cal also picked out *The Island Bride: A Romance of the "Enchanted Isles*, and *California Joe: The Mysterious Plainsman*. I picked out one called *The Missionary's Daughter: A Story of the Pacific*. The young girl on the cover wore a wreath of flowers and her dress appeared to be torn a little. Her hair was coal black and hung partly over the front of her shoulder as she looked longingly toward the heavens. It would've bordered on insult to return to Hartley with just a dime left over.

We saw the dust a good three and a half miles outside of camp.

"Looks like weather," I had said casually.

"Rev'rn, how long you been dumber 'an horseshit? That there yonder's just trail dust. They must be movin' the herd."

It was a beautiful day. That low hanging dirty cloud was the only one in the sky. Cal snickered and looked at me.

"Shoot, I's just foolin' there, Rev'rn Tom. I mean the part 'bout you bein' dumb, that is. That really is just dust, though, that part's true. But I reckon that is a pretty fuckin' stupid thing ta say, bout the weather 'an all. That's all I'm sayin' is all. Rev'rn? You all right?"

By this point I was staggering down from Esau and heading in a semi-straight line for a small bluff of scrub oak ten yards off the trail.

"I'll be damned," Cal chuckled, "you just went not a half-hour back. You got a hollow leg 'er somethin'? Where you keepin' it all?"

My abdomen felt swollen and firm and full of rusty forks. A low hanging bough kept me upright through the varying states of consciousness

that came with each flaming surge of pain. I prayed out loud I wouldn't die that way, hugging a tree with my trousers around my ankles, my horse waiting patiently for me to finish my business.

"Maybe ya ought ta try a cork or somethin, huh? Plug it up? Whaddaya think, a really big cork'd do the trick?"

I found a twig's worth of shade and lay on my back, shuddering with the cold sweat that comes after complete exhaustion, waiting for my strength to come back and savouring the temporary silence of that angry god, pain. Cal trotted over and looked down at me with what looked like concern. Let's say a passing concern.

"I don't mean to rush er nothin, but we got to go, Tom. We're late as it is, an the Judge don't get any happier the more time we take."

"Must be that ...manhood drink ...fooling with my insides I guess," I said, crawling back onto Esau. "I've a ... weak constitution."

"Manhood drink?" A look of pure incredulity spread on his face. "Ain't nothin' help with a feller's manhood but watermelon, everybody knows that. Nothin but."

"But you said... you know...boot black and such... You drank it too."

"Yeah, that.... I was just funnin' with ya there, Rev'rn. All good fun, see? You can get a man to drink pret'near anythin when you get enough bugjuice in him first." A reverie of sadistic nostalgia settled into his dimples. "You'd be surprised, I mean, I seen a man drink his own piss, once, b'lieve it er not, but boot black and fish oil, that's just foolish ta fall for that, ya ask me."

"But you drank it ...too..." I wanted to argue the point, I really did. He made a convincing case, however.

"I drank jackshit-all is what I drank, hear? Now come on, I want ta get back ta camp afore that storm there hits."

He broke himself up laughing and spurred Paddymelt into an all-out gallop, howling out in his best picaninny holler, "Hurry, Rev'rn! Da rain's goan get us! Lawd a mercy, da rain's goan get us!"

We had to stop two more times along the way. I think I have stomach cancer.

We found out that all the extra dust was coming from Hartley's most recent purchase of eleven hundred new head of cattle, which brought the herd up to around fifteen hundred strong, by my count. The chuckwagon and Hartley's tent were gone when we arrived, and the fire pit buried. Gentle Steve and the horses were nowhere to be seen either. The newly inflated herd was milling restlessly, spread over a vast stretch of low lying prairie below the camp. The sea of jostling backs and heads and horns looked like the earth itself had decided to liquefy and sluice back and forth against itself in a syrupy mass of stinking bovine flesh. The whole scene made me a little queasy (I suppose I should say *more* queasy, my stomach having eased itself down to a steady, visceral tremolo).

All around the herd the others were patrolling the perimeter, bringing back single minded loners, and keeping the more rebellious elements from leading the innocents astray. Big Jack was leaning in off his horse with one hand and twisting horns around to get them going in the right direction. Jack the Cutter was swearing loud enough for us to hear at one calf who kept walking out from the herd everytime he turned his back. Its mother was twenty yards up the hill behind him, casually grazing as she watched the stocky Frenchman gradually go insane, calling her calf back to her everytime he had finally hemmed it in with the rest of the herd and moved on.

Joe was cantering elegantly up and down the left flank of the herd, expertly dodging groups of heifers in the process of breaking ranks with the rest and heading out onto the plains, where patient old Oliver appeared to have rounded up a small herd of his own from the ones Joe had let by.

The lead bulls were being turned expertly back at the front by Carson, he and his mount matching their every evasive maneuver before, it seems, they had time to even turn their heads in that direction. He would stop short

from a full gallop, turn his horse full about and be back up to speed, cutting back and forth violently at sharp angles, all the while never breaking his calm stare at his quarry, directing traffic and calling out one word orders with only one hand on the reins. The Judge, in turn, was barking out these orders to no one in particular, riding a few strides behind, strategizing Carson's moves to him after he had started to make them. Hartely was the mantelpiece of this whole operation, enthroned statuesque on a golden palomino on the far flank of the herd. He surveyed the entire spectacle of his creation, taking off his silver-buckled hat every few moments and shouting, "*Tally-ho, gents! Tally-ho!*"

The Judge was the first to notice us, quickly breaking away from his work with Carson at the front of the herd and making his way toward us at a fierce gallop. He started into growling out the orders about fifty feet away.

"Your ruck-sacks and whatever gear you left in camp are on the chuck wagon. It went ahead with the horses two hours ago." He pulled up on his reins ten yards short of us so he still had to yell at us, which I think was the intent.

"We moving the herd somewhere, Judge?" Cal asked, apparently unintimidated.

Judge turned and spat, not looking at either of us.

"Jones, you ride the flank with the Cutter. Deacon, you're in the rear with Hatty. Now let's go, goddammit!"

"You mean we're movin the herd out onto the trail? Right now? But we ain't never even cut-out the new ones for even a trail brandin' er nothin, which is at least another two days work, an we don't even know where we're supposed ta be taken' the fool things. Hell, the sun's already been up for three hours today anyway."

The Judge had already started back towards the herd when Cal spoke up, and his head snapped back towards us, his eyes flaring. Blotches of red and purple showed through patches of stiff white stubble on his loose hanging neck, which tensed up and down as he swallowed once and licked his lips

involuntarily. The words struggled to steady themselves on the way out. They did, but the knife edge of madness that cracked underneath them seemed as though it might break through at any second and taste flesh.

“You ride the flank with Cutter, and Preacher there’s got the rear with Hatty. We’re late enough already.”

He kicked his horse back up into a gallop towards the herd, so as to leave no opportunity for further discussion. Cal took his time rolling a cigarette before cantering out to the right flank of the milling herd to meet up with the cussing Frenchman. On the way he nudged the grazing heifer back to its calf where they were both absorbed quickly into the throng of hairy meat.

After a quick word from the Judge, Carson turned his mount and headed due northwest out onto the plain. The lead bulls followed, and the herd began a slow, pronounced stretch from front to back. Hartley galloped up and down the flank, hat in hand, hollering at the top of his lungs, “*Sally forth, my good lads! Sally forth, by God!*”

I saw Joe making his way back to the rear, pausing to slap some dirt from his trouser leg, reaching back over the rump of his mount to tap the ash from his cigarillo. After offering up a silent request for truce to my colon, like the fool that I was, like the fool that I have come to believe all men are, or must eventually become, I gave Esau a gentle squeeze and headed for the few straggling animals at the end of the disappearing herd.



I don’t know what time it was when I first saw the Cavalry appear over the horizon. I estimate six past three in the afternoon. I didn’t actually see

them appear, they were already there. I can't be forever looking out my window, though since they've arrived my arms have become cramped against my chest from holding myself up to the bars for so long. My elbows and knees are bloody and scabbed from digging into the rock. The arms make it harder to write, but I have adapted.

I tried to fashion a makeshift clock by marking where the sun hits on the opposite wall of the cave in the manner of the ingenious Abbe de Faria, infamous prisoner of Chateau d'If, but the sun's rays here are erratic and diffuse at best, and I have no idea what time it is when I make a mark, or how much time has passed when I make the next one. If I had a watch I really think I could make a go of it.

I must say my incarceration has really been a failure in this regard. I haven't even found a rock suitable for keeping track of the passing days on the wall. I tried using my pen, but the walls are too damp and rough for the ink to take. The single square of hard-tac provides neither the slender fishbones needed for sewing needles and writing quills, nor is it served in any sort of vessel conducive to being broken down into assorted digging tools and lethal weapons.

Everything has happened too fast. A man needs time in these situations. That ellipses of perception whereby the intolerable pace of an inch an hour becomes the blinding speed of two feet a day. Time for everything human and loving to evaporate from his heart leaving only the dry dusty sediments of hatred and revenge. If only I had time, my escape would be rigorously calculated, exacting and beautiful in its cold precision, its shrewd, inconceivable patience. So far I plan to hurl my shit pile at the first person through that door and see what opportunities present themselves.

Their bivouac is only about five hundred yards down the plain, on the other side of a shallow, gently bending gorge. They haven't been able to get any closer for the past day and a half; a herd of bison has been crossing the gorge between us for the past two days straight. At first they tried to shoot their way through. Six to eight men, all with Henry repeaters. They didn't

even aim, or at least I don't see how they could've. It was two hours of pure moving mass. I can think of no other way to describe it. Our herd had numbered fifteen hundred at its peek, and I had thought that was impressive. Sometimes it could stretch as far as three miles stem to stern, but these ... these beasts are simply innumerable. They must be over a hundred animals across at the thinnest points, and I can't see the end in either direction. My conservative estimate is that over seventy-five thousand have passed already, with who knows how many to come. The dust is so thick I haven't seen the sun in two days (another bane to my wall clock). Some might liken the scene to a river. A river of wool, a river of horns, or dust or something else, but I can't do that, it is nothing like a river. I've seen rivers, and this is thousands and thousands and tens of thousands of bison and nothing else. Although, at times, looking down on them from the angle I do, it honestly looks as though, if I timed it right, I could launch some sort of craft onto their backs and stay afloat indefinitely. It would be a difficult ride, to be sure, but - *my* - wouldn't that be something, waving to those bluecoats on the way downstream, navigating snags with a long pole, ruddering hard to port around that rock formation to the north. In that respect it would be much like a river, I suppose. But it's not a river. No, not a river at all.

Before they started shooting, things had been moving along at a relaxed pace. I really think maybe some greenhorn on their side just wanted to bag one for supper; quietly drag it to the side, cut some steaks and make himself a coat, that sort of thing. Once the stampede started it took all the firepower they had to try and keep the fast moving wall of instant death from shifting in their direction. The more they killed, the more the obstacles piled up to divert the flow in all directions, and since one side was solid rock face, well ... I think it's safe to say that it was a learning experience for all involved.

For the first time since I got here, I was glad to be on this side of the wall and not the other. For a few hopeful moments it looked like a real possibility that the ceiling might give way to a rockslide and that the cliff

might implode, everything was shaking so much, but it was not to be. In the first twenty minutes I counted sixty-four animals down, either by shot or by trampling, probably a little of both. The snapping of their bones was so loud the soldiers believed they were being fired upon, ducking in their saddles and whipping their heads around desperately looking for the beasts who had somehow managed to arm themselves.

The pack horses were the first to go, dragged in by the harnesses still attached to the wagons already twisting and flipping down the gorge, now and then disappearing beneath the throng only to surface again in progressively smaller pieces. One horse actually made it out the other side. It hopped around on three legs trying to climb the cliff face, one rear leg swaying lazily behind it, twisted the wrong way round at an angle perpendicular to its body. After a minute or so the leg got caught again by something and the poor thing's entire body was snapped around like a whip back into the herd and it did – *it did* look like it was drowning.

After about another twenty minutes of the lever-action orgy, the soldiers finally decided to simply ride back onto the plain in the opposite direction and wait it out. The herd slowed down and started to casually spill around the little deltas of dead bison that had piled up mid-stream. The animals from farther back giving only half curious looks and wondering what might have happened, the ones up the other side of the gorge already putting it behind them, snorting and blinking the grass, dust and fur from their faces.

A young bluecoat with his head twisted around lay flat on his stomach and stared up at them as they graciously stepped over and around him. One even stopped to lick his face a little. His face was pale and freckled, his hair a deep, dirty red. He kind of reminded me of Steve, but everyone looks a little like someone else when they're dead. The face changes and becomes a little bit more ... general in its features. Generic. I have one of these faces already, a face that reminisces about other people but never tells you its own story. You could say *who* I look like, but not exactly *what* I look like. Maybe a little bit like a child with his head on backwards staring up at the sky. Maybe a little

of that puzzled wonderment in the eyes, maybe, but only at times, only when you look at me just so. Perhaps death will give me a face of my own. Harden the features.

These must necessarily be the last words I write. The last of the bison finished crossing the valley early this morning. The stragglers looked no different than the lead animals. I wonder if they knew they were the last of thousands, if they even cared. If they had always been at the end of the line, or if they just decided to fall to the back one day to see what it was like, to experience what it was to feel as though they were the ones pushing everyone else along. To know that wherever they went, a half million had already gone before. They didn't even seem to notice the mounds of flies and birds noisily digesting their own as they passed. Then again maybe they did, maybe they'd seen it before and that's why they were where they were – you can't get run over at the back of the pack.

They buried the red-haired boy first, about fifty yards from where they found him, in a slight rise in the prairie, overlooking the expanse of the entire gorge. It certainly is a fine resting place, even if it isn't where he actually died. Although I suppose no one could say for sure that he wasn't dragged from that spot to the other less scenic one after his neck had been snapped. The fact remains, however, that the best gravesite in the immediate area is now occupied, not that I believe they will put much thought into my burial when I am dead. I'm sure they'll cut me down, though, as good rope is hard to come by in these parts.

The captain (or whoever, I couldn't see his rank from here) took his hat off and spoke words I couldn't hear to the other soldiers gathered around holding their own hats against their chests and staring at the mound of freshly turned earth. I yelled a liturgy out of my window, followed by a benediction, and a few other relevant blessings that I could recall to mind. It just seemed

necessary. I hope they turned his head back the right way round before they laid him in there. I couldn't see that part.

My last words. It would be a lie to say I hadn't thought about them before; what I would say to my loyal friends and admirers gathered around me in barely subdued hysterics; what I would write to future generations of would-be martyrs all over Europe reading my confessions in the latest volume of *The Relations*. But now I can think of nothing to say. No verses. No maxims. If it weren't for that fucking draft, I might be able to think straight. I'd like to hunt it down and kill it.

I can hear them coming. I wonder if they'll do it in here or outside. Many good places to secure a rope to in this place. I should probably fix that draft before I have guests, though, it really is becoming a pest of a thing. Last words, last words ... Mostly I'm just tired. The whole thing seems anti-climactic now. I don't know what comes next, and I know it's blasphemous to say so, but if there were just darkness and quiet and nothing else, I could be happy with that, I honestly could. No trumpet blasts, no heavenly hosts, just ... quiet. That wouldn't be so bad. I can't even get worked up about holy righteous hellfire anymore. The thought bores me now. The strings holding me up have definitely snapped, but I can't feel anything but a maddening weightlessness – not really going anywhere, not having any real weight of my own anymore, if I ever did. Like floating naked in tepid water, blind and deaf, no feeling... just floating around.

I really hope they turned that boy's head right before they put him in there.

I really do.