

FALL LINE  
A WORK IN PROGRESS

by

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the  
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

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MAY 1989

Blacksburg, Virginia

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(ABSTRACT)

An experimental novel, based on the critical theories of Jacques Lacan and Helena Cixous, which explores the exclusion of women from the cultural ideal, and their redefinition as cultural "others" in Western American Society.

The novel incorporates three separate narratives: two first person narratives (Paula Tjunic and Kate Hargrove) and one third person narrative. The two first person narratives examine entire lifetimes. The third person narrative recounts one night in a bar. The first person narratives are written in opposing columns, and are designed in blocks and gaps so that each character can be heard separately, and the reader can interact with the text as a third cultural "other."

A short examination of the theories of cultural "other" in relation to women in the American West, is included in the preface of the novel.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When projects are completed, shelved for future reference, it is easy to forget to say "thank you" and acknowledge indebtedness to those individuals who helped the project progress. Their input and assistance dim in much the same way as the smell of sage after rain to someone ten years away from the memory. So, with this in mind:

To                    for taking a risk and providing  
 endless encouragement (not to mention the ending);  
 To                    for                    , and  
                           for being a terrific committee;  
 To                    ,                    ,                    ,  
 and                    for their feedback and for putting  
 up with my constant ramblings and ravings;  
 To                    for giving Paula a voice when I  
 had almost forgotten what she sounded like;  
 To my twelve year old computer and eleven year old  
 cat for surviving the ordeal;  
 To                    and                    for supplying the  
 bar voices late at night;  
 To                    for pointing out that there was no pos-  
 sible way to handle 147 major characters;  
 To                    for her initial and continuing  
 support of the project since last spring;  
 To                    for helping with photo-  
 copies and keeping me financially solvent this past  
 year;  
 And, to the Graduate Committee of the Department of  
 English for approving the project in the first  
 place:

Thank you.

PREFACE TO FALL LINE

Up until World War II, Southcentral Montana and Northwestern Wyoming functioned, precariously, on the outer edge of the American economic and cultural systems -- a landlocked socio-economic "other" that remained unidentifiable in the collective American mind. The country took note only during mining booms, otherwise choosing to ignore the desert between Minneapolis and Seattle. They had a vague notion that the rugged individuals and the myths of the pulp western frontier existed, perpetuated by the monochrome magic of Hollywood, but it was easy to ignore.

Then came television and station wagons. The two coastlines discovered the interior. Television shows like Bonanza, Gunsmoke, and The Virginian perpetuated the myths of the dimestore western. It was a world where, like the television screen, everything was black and white. In an increasingly complex world, the East Coast readily accepted this, feeling, somehow, secure, knowing that they could visit simplicity on their vacations.

Fall Line attempts to address the conflict between the external definition of the American West (a West perpetuated by Mass Media and the Chamber of Commerce) and the reality of the region and of the people. It is about two women in a single dusty town at the edge of the High Plains, reluctantly tied to the tourist industry and slowly losing their identities.



The tourists pass by the Fall Line Saloon on their way through town, heading for Yellowstone in search of the True West. They pass through just slow enough to keep from breaking the speed laws, occasionally stopping to buy souvenirs and postcards to send back home just to prove that they had been there. If they stop, they say the requisite "Geez, it's pretty here", and buy the kids rubber tomahawks from Japan and commemorative plates for the woman next door who is sitting the dog. Then they pile back into their dusty rv's and stationwagons, fill the tank with gas (since they know that Exxon and Texaco do not exist in the wilderness), and breathe a deep sigh of relief as they climb over the pass and out of sight of the High Plains.

In a sense, the West is like the child in Lacan's mirror. Although the image the child sees may not, ultimately, be the most satisfactory "self", it is, nonetheless, the image that is created by the woven pattern of the culture, the socio-economics, and, most importantly, the language and images that serve as the foundation. The mirrored image is what is required by the "norm" and, therefore, desired. In his lecture "From Interpretation to the Transference", Jacques Lacan discusses the "ideal ego" by showing the child's relation to his or her reflection in the mirror. He notes that "by clinging to the reference-point of him who looks at him in a mirror, the subject sees appearing, not his ego ideal, but his ideal ego, that point at which he

desires to gratify himself in himself" (257). The child recognizes himself in terms of an external definition written in ideal terms. It is this ideal that the child will desire and, thus, strive for, suppressing the "other" (those attributes that do not come up to or fit neatly into the definition) in his or her personality.

When the West looks in the cultural mirror, it finds an almost alien image looking back. The reflection says "you are a land of pat answers (right and wrong), cowboys (good) and Indians (bad), sheriffs (white) and outlaws (black)", a land grounded in and defined exclusively by a predetermined set of binary oppositions, imposed by the patriarchy. For economic reasons, the West embraces the reflection in the mirror.

Tourists in search of the True West, pass the True West in search of postcard vistas. They rarely notice the dusty towns that border the highways leading to Yellowstone, Glacier, and the Tetons. To them, cowboys exist only in Jackson Hole and Louis L'Amore's Tucson. The tourist West brings in money by selling the great American myth: a myth that populates the turkey traps and the dude ranches of the Rockies, a myth that creates mountains in Kansas and individual decency in the Virginian's bunkhouse, and, perhaps more tragically, a myth that finds its way into the moral code of the broken rancher and the laid-off factory worker.

As a child growing up in the West, it was easy enough

to laugh at the depiction of mountains just outside of Dodge City, Kansas, knowing that Dodge sat near the heart of the Great Plains, two hundred miles east of the front range. But the television images were hard to reconcile with the realities of prairie fires, electric storms, drouths, and poverty. The television shows didn't show the government foreclosures, or the domestic violence brought on by too long winters and too little money.

The Mythic West sells. It pays the bills and keeps an entire region afloat. In a sense, the West has made an uneasy peace with the television myth. The small towns that border the front range mine the myth. Tourist industry employees develop public swaggers, while mourning the influx of outsiders. The towns welcome the boost to the economy while damning those responsible for it. Promotional news from the Chamber of Commerce over-shadows the stock and grain reports. In some ways, the people are beginning to believe in the myth or, at least, publicly acknowledged it (regardless of whether or not they worked for the tourist industry). The mythic creed of rugged individuality is being taken to heart. In the past, people were rugged because the arid environment demanded it. Now, they are rugged because it is expected. Unfortunately, in the process of embracing the image, the West pushes the "reality" of the region into the realm of the "other".

In fiction, "the oldest of the classic ontological

themes in poetics is that of the 'otherness' of the fictional world, its separation from the real world of experience" (McHale 27). In the fiction of the popular and marketable West, the definition is reversed. Instead of defining "otherness" in terms of the fictional world, separated from the "real world of experience", it survives by forcing the real into a zone of "otherness", and places the fiction in Lacan's mirror. In *Fall Line*, the conflict between the image in the mirror and the suppression of the "other" is seen through three separate narratives: two first person narratives and one third person narrative.

When I first began *Fall Line*, I had a vague notion of what I wanted to write on but lacked a workable method that served my needs. I knew I wanted to write about women and the effects of sage on the memory. But, somehow, it kept getting lost in the third person narrative structure that they forcefeed creative writing majors in college. The linear structure didn't fit the women I wanted to write about, and the women I wanted to write about didn't fit with the image of the monochrome West. They are strong, independent women who spend their working lives denying their very existence in order to pay the mortgage and the power bill, yet manage to retain in private the "other" they suppress in public. If the reality of the West is the "other", then they are the "other" of the "other". They are non-participants in a myth that assigned them minor space in

the kitchens and brothels of the Mythic West.

In addition, I wanted to write about the Tourist West: the damage that it is doing and the hypocrisy it breeds. Since the setting of the novel is/was my hometown, I thought that the narrative should cover one year and the four seasons: Yellowstone season (June-August), the off-season (September - November), the ski season (November - March), and the second off-season (April-May). I decided that by focusing on four weeks of "action" (one per season), I could give a pretty good overview of the tourist industry, and the effects that it had on the employees. In addition, I decided to base the entire novel in a bar, primarily because the bars are the social center of most, if not all the "tourist-based" towns. A larger cross-section of the industry employees are found there after work.

The initial attempt at structure, a straight narrative, failed miserably. So, having deleted it from the memory banks of the computer, I started over, focusing on the bartender not so much as a character but as a vehicle. I retained the time frame (one year, four seasons), but switched from a linear structure to a web structure (an idea I got from reading Cixous last spring). I thought I needed to be fair by covering as much territory as possible. I came up with a list of forty-some characters, representing a cross-section of the population of the small Montana town I had bartended in for three years. The initial idea was that

I would center the action in the bar, using the bartender, as the go-between. Because I am not particularly adept at writing third person narratives, I decided to let each character tell his or her story. The Introduction to each character and his/her narrative would be made by the bartender, then the focus would switch to the other character. After the bartender had introduced the majority of the main characters, then the narrative would switch from character to character keeping everything off balance. I really didn't want a definable center to the novel. By doing this, all of the parts would feed off of each other, intertwining like gossip in a small town.

A nice idea, but it didn't work. Three months and 150 pages of first person narrative sketches later, I was no closer to having a workable piece than I was when I started in June. While I liked the web idea because of its decentering effect, it was, perhaps, more disorienting than I really wanted to deal with. While it succeeded in throwing off the mainstream center, it also led to mass confusion. I found that I wasn't saying what I had intended, and that the characters and setting were taking a backseat to the structure. So, I stopped writing and started re-evaluating what I had, looking for the patterns that might emerge. What I discovered was that not only was the narrative structure not workable, but neither were the characters (in their present form) nor the time frame.

I did, however, have two characters (actually one and a half) that I felt some connection to: Paula Tjunic (the Cocktail Queen of the Fall Line) and Kate Hargrove (the bartender). I threw out the idea of working first on a narrative structure and then, only after the structure was in place, force fitting the characters into the frame. In a sense, I stepped back from the traditional method of writing (and all of the rules that my previous training had bolted into my subconscious) and decided to let my characters work on themselves. I dug out the Jerry Jeff Walker albums (usually the ones with the most static on the jukebox) and sat back and wrote, running without any real direction. I wrote, in large part, about my own experiences bartending, and about the women I had worked with. In addition, I set up interviews with the two characters in order to get at their public voices. The interviews had no set direction or predetermined outcome. I typed a question at the top of the page, sat back, thought about the women I had known and the voices they would use to answer, and wrote. Out of those ramblings, Kate and Paula took form.

What struck me as I went back and read the prose was that the women represented a different type of "other", much different from the "other" of the region, or the "other" of women in the East. If the West is a misdefined and often overlooked region, the women are not only overlooked, but practically non-existent, even in their own world. One of

the features of the tourist industry is the behavioral and speech patterns that are forced on the workers out of economic necessity. I found that the language Kate and Paula used when talking about their lives was very different from the language that they used while working. There was edge to their public voices. In a sense, they sounded crude, like unrefined ore rusting in the slag heaps on the East Bench. There was nothing particularly poetic in their public voices, just a harshness that I understood, but found difficult to explain. In contrast, their private voices, those voices I heard late at night, had a rolling pattern to them, like a soft chanting. I wanted to capture those voices and store them in the memory banks of the computer. Wonderful voices I've heard all of my life, but never paid much attention to. Voices that entirely negate the monochrome western of American popular culture. Flute voices.

I'm not sure I created either character; they just evolved. Paula is the combination of four women I have known, to one degree or another, for the past twenty years. Women who, in public, are very hard, almost disconnected from whatever inner emotions they have. Three out of four of the women were, and still are, cocktail waitresses (making their livings by being what the customers want them to be, by flirting and turning emotional tricks while remembering the orders of everyone at the table). The fourth woman is a



waitress in a two-bit cafe, a member of AA, and a fifty year old Lesbian who had her closet door yanked open in public when she was forty-five. I don't think I was consciously thinking of these women when I started working on Paula Tjunic's character. But listening to Jerry Jeff Walker brought back a lot of images that I had buried when I moved to Virginia, images that seemed incompatible with my new surroundings.

As she stands now, Paula is a fifty-three year old cocktail waitress, who really expected her life to go in a different direction. In public, she is crusty, rough, and, occasionally, very hard on those people she works with. While she knows she wears a mask in public, she fails to realize that those she works with, namely Kate Hargrove, do exactly the same thing. In a sense, she is so busy hiding and protecting her inner self, that she doesn't look beyond her "self" or her "mirror" image.

Kate Hargrove is, in one sense, very much like Paula, and, in another, very different. Her public image is very similar, especially in her dealings with customers. She employs a crude humor, and pays attention to the slanguage and the body movements that are required within the parameters of the myth. On the other hand, Kate's denial of the "other" within herself, is much sharper and much more detrimental.

While Paula is denying the aspects of her

personality that do not fit in with the "Miss Kitty" vision of womanhood, i.e. self-reliance, strength, intelligence, she is not denying, or playing against her "sexual" identity. Kate is. Paula, publicly and privately is heterosexual. Kate, on the other hand, is a lesbian. So, in a sense, Kate represents a woman who is three times removed from the image in the mirror: first, from the image of the monocrome West, second from the male dominance of the "real" West, and, finally, from the definition of woman/ self. Paula, while she doesn't fit with the image in the mirror, does, to a degree, fit into the "real" as defined by the male-based culture of the region. While she flirts in excess because of economic necessity, she still laughs at the tit and ass jokes told in the bars late at night; she still steps out to two-step on her nights off, and still dreams of a ass jokes told in the bars late at night; she still steps out to two-step on her nights off, and still dreams of being carried away, although she is much more pragmatic about her chances than she was at Kate's age.

Kate is defined by a woman/poet's language, so the economic language that she is forced to use during her work hours wrecks havoc with her "other" self. In essence, bartending at the Fall Line, while an economic necessity, is producing a conflict between her public/mirror language and her private/ self language. In the bar, the poet and Lesbian disappear, buried by necessity. It is not that her language

doesn't exist, but that it is publically denied, and when spoken hated.

Writing Kate and Paula brought back some interesting memories about bartending, especially bartending in tourist bars. Your personality changes when you work in a bar. By necessity, you become very outgoing, in a sense you become an external person. You put on a mask. So how you act in the bar, while you are working, is very different from how you are outside of work. You hide intelligence because it doesn't get tips. You joke. For reasons of self-preservation you learn the jokes that affect you most directly. In the case of Paula, Norwegian and Spinster jokes get under her skin, but she can't let it show. In order to get her tips, she must stand there and laugh with the customer, despite the fact that her private self is in a rage. For Kate, the effect is increased because, in a sense, they are much more private attacks. Paula can step back (partly because she has had thirty-five years of practice) and tell herself that they are just joking, and nothing is meant by them. Kate can't do that. To her, the jokes are much more personal because they damn her private voice/self.

In addition, Kate and Paula do not see each other beyond their public images -- what they see in the bar. They each have very narrow views of the other. Outside of the bar, they don't socialize, which means that their views of each other are dictated by their personalities at work.

In the process of defining the two characters, of trying to discover the public and private voices of each, I redefined the entire novel. It stopped being a story of a region, a town, and an industry. So, once again, I sat back, examined what I had, and started over. The narrative structure and the time frame needed to fit the stories of each of these women. What I had were separate private voice/selves and a growing conflict, not only between each character's private and public voices, but between the two characters themselves. I wanted each character to tell her own life, in her own words, but I also wanted to show the two characters in relation to each other using their public voices, in a setting that is conducive to that. So, I went back to the bar.

My original time frame didn't work with the story that was coming out between the two characters, so I narrowed it to one night. In order to show the public and private voices of each woman, I decided to mix narratives. Each woman would have her own narrative, separate from the other and from the bar. In order to avoid the confusion I ran into with the first bar narrative, I switched it to an undefined third person narrative (although that might change).

The third person narrative is set in the Fall Line Saloon on a Friday night during the peak of the summer season. The bar is packed with locals and tourists listening to a band named "The Clark's Fork Outlaws" with

lead singer Billy "Bandit" MacIntire. The band plays an odd combination of polka, country swing, and rockabilly. Friday nights usually result in absolute mayhem, especially if the local police department is enforcing the open container laws. I wanted to choose a night where the tensions intensified. Busy nights will bring out the absolute worst in people. You are talking about being on your feet from 5 pm until 3 am, without a break and without slowing down. I decided that if the tensions between Kate and Paula were going to come to a head, it would happen on a night that was particularly busy. While they might have had their blowout on a quiet night, the chances are pretty slim. Bars on slow nights are about as laid back a working atmosphere as you will find. Paula and Kate have worked together for about eight years. In those eight years, they have never really gotten to know each other. Again, what they see is the other's working mask.

To avoid the confusion I ran into in the first attempt at mixing narratives, I decided to physically set them off from each other. The position of the narratives reflect the characters. Kate's voice is positioned in a single column, flush to the left. Paula's voice is also in a single column but flush to the right. The third person narrative spans the entire page because it spans both characters. In addition to the positioning of the voices in relation to the page, I also wanted to position the voices in relation to each other

and to the reader. For this reason, I decided to open up some space in which the reader can respond, and to play each woman's private voice off of the other's and the reader's. Sometimes their voices overlap, at other times, they are completely separate.

While what I have doesn't resemble my initial intentions, it does address the myth and the reality of the West, and the effect on those who are forced to make a living by perpetuating the myth(s). But I think it goes far beyond what I started with, primarily because it addresses not only the monochrome myth, but the patriarchal myths that are inherent to Western culture and the position and the suppression of the "other".

The novel remains a work in progress. While the basic document is complete (or as complete as a early draft can be), there are still changes, additions, and deletions to be made. The bone structure of the third person narrative is in place but not complete. The shifting narrator allows freedom of movement within the narrative but tends to be confusing at times. The revision of this will have to wait until a later date.

One final note. The present resolution to the third person narrative is, in part, due to an observation by Tom Gardner. In one of our final meetings, he mentioned that he didn't feel there would be a major blow-up. After thinking about his comment, I decided there was a great deal of

validity to what he said, threw out my first fourteen, or so, attempts at finishing (all of which had ended with my writing myself into a corner), and wrote the rough draft of the final chapter in one sitting. It is a much quieter ending than I would have initially expected, but works better than anything I tried before. Thanks Tom, for the suggestions.

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There are two ways you can go  
in a small town: out or into  
the bars. Not much of a  
choice.

I started waitressing in 1953.  
At that time, if you were just  
workin' 'til you got married,  
you worked over at the cafe.  
Tips weren't much, and 'bout  
all you saw were the older  
ranchers, oh, and the members of  
the Rotary as they passed  
through to the back for their  
meetin', but you didn't serve  
alcohol. Or you did, butcha  
didn't on a regular basis.

East of town, the country  
levels off and turns brown.

Good girls didn't go into the  
bars. It just wasn't the thing  
to do if you were tryin' to  
save your reputation. Now,  
it doesn't seem to make much  
difference.

Not a mixed brown like back

east in August. Not the kind  
of brown that's softened by  
green.

Then, it made all the  
difference in the world.

Not a healthy brown. Burnt  
brown.

I took a job down at the  
Silver Dollar 'cause it paid  
a damn sight better 'n  
waitressin' at the cafe. Them  
cowboys tipped more for a beer  
'n' a wink than they did for  
a cup of coffee. Still do.

Everything looks dead, dying  
by the end of June in a good  
year.

Dad was all ready for me to  
meet some nice ranch hand,  
marry, and settle down with a  
hoard of kids, chasin' dust  
balls.

The fenceposts blend in. Grey  
wood against the dusty wheat,  
straw shade bunch grass,  
broken only by scrub pine.

You couldn't tell him a damn thing. When I started workin' down at the Dollar, he stopped listenin', didn't care about the economics of it. God, I tried to explain. Tried, standin' in the kitchen, inch deep in the dust of late summer, but the man just wouldn't hear.

Juniper mostly. Gnarled,  
slanting from the wind. Mostly  
brown.

I took the job 'cause it paid a damn sight better, and 'cause I couldn't handle bein' stuck out on that ranch another minute. I'll tell ya, I went from bein' my dad's favorite to bein a damn hooker in his eyes.

In the dry years, the dust layers, covers, chokes.

I just didn't want to spend my life like my Mama did.

It rises in small clouds

with each step.

She fought the dust and the  
wind the whole damn time they  
were married.

In the dry years, you can see  
a truck coming ten miles away.

She was a town girl. Married  
up right out of high school.  
Her dad and brothers worked  
the mine over at Bearcreek.  
Lost a couple of 'em in the  
'55 disaster. One of my  
brothers was workin' swing and  
missed by a couple of hours.

Dust like the streaks in the  
sky left by some jet running  
patterns out of Great Falls.  
Like that.

Used to be that the dust would  
cover everything in the house.  
It didn't make much difference  
now often you wiped down the  
furniture and the woodwork.  
Soon as ya turned around,  
there'd be another layer  
gatherin'.

You can run away from the  
scent of sage and the dusty  
summer winds, but they follow,

Sometimes, it felt like all we  
did was fight that damn dust.

a constant reminder of your  
roots and your future

You know, I've seen a lot of  
'em come through this place.  
Most of 'em work a couple of  
years, meet someone, and get  
married.

and the lies you tell yourself

'Bout what I thought  
I'd be doin' by now.

when it's too damn cold  
outside to do anything else.

You can tell by lookin' at 'em  
whether they've been doin'  
this for awhile.

Winter nights are the worst.  
A good winter wind, the cold  
norther, sweeps across,  
driftin' memories in the back  
of your mind.

The ones that stick, stay in

the bars,  
 Stirring up patterns against  
 the toolsheds and outhouses.

age pretty quick after thirty.

Banking them against the  
 consequences. Somehow, in  
 plowing through the drifts,  
 you miss what you hated the  
 most.

Sometimes, mostly after hours  
 when I can sit, I think it  
 would be better if they  
 married and got out of here.

watching the alpine spring  
 break through the thinning  
 layer of snow while  
 overlooking the charred,  
 broken lodgepole pines,  
 remnants of a previous summer.

Even if their husbands knock  
 'em around, it's better 'n  
 stayin' in a place like this.

You leave and forget, or, at  
 least you forget all but the  
 dust and the sage and the  
 wind.

You know, at the time, servin'  
seemed like a real good bet.

Dave Larsen sits on a barstool behind the bar, scanning the room in between trying to balance his accounts. Watches Lisa place glasses in the stainless steel sink behind and below the counter. Watches as she takes the barwipe over the tap, empties the overflow tray, putting it back without rinsing. Wonders how he managed to end up owning the place. Looks forward to the end of the summer season, being able to hand Paula the account books and leave. Thinks about what he'll do with his time. Maybe go see California. Maybe take one of those Hollywood tours or go and lay on some beach. Maybe Hawaii. Thinks about being greeted at the airport by a woman in a grass skirt, just like he's seen on the late night reruns of Magnum. Looks back at the account book.

Pete Carlson pushes open the door, props it open with the brown rubber wedge, and walks over to him. Takes a seat across the bar. "How's it goin' there?" Waves to Lisa and waits.

Dave nods, scans the room. The place stretches back about forty feet to the bathroom partition, fifty to the back door. To his right is the nine inch riser he put in when he bought the place. It starts at the front wall and runs back about twenty feet or so, even with the end of the bar. He raised the area, fenced and paneled it in granite gray barnwood. Installed a orange gas fireplace in the front corner. Some for heat, mostly for color. Under the windows



and along the half wall, he put in cable spools and matte black iron and red vinyl chairs, chairs built to be tipped back in. He liked the spools when he got them, thought it gave the place a different look from everywhere else. But, somehow, after eight years, they didn't look so good anymore. Paula hated them. Wanted to get rid of them and buy wooden tables, the kind with the galvanized iron pedestal in the center. The kind the Major put in the back end of the Golden Rose.

Lisa walks the bar. Smiles at the two hands drinking drafts. Winks at one of them. "Hey, honey. You interested in goin' out for dinner? I'm in town for a couple of days and sure could use the company." Brown hair and mustache looking at her, scans her from the chest up. Wonders why Wyoming and Montana always pick their girls on the basis of personality rather than looks. Tries to remember if anyone from outside of Texas ever won.

"I ought to be outta here by five. Where do you wanna meet?"

"How 'bout across the street. I hear they've got pretty good food in the back." Nudges his friend. Shoves his mug towards her. "We'll take another round." Decides it has something to do with the weather. Not enough exposure to ultraviolet rays or something.

She passes the barwipe along the edge of the counter, looking busy for Dave. Picks up their mugs and puts them in

the water. Reaches back for two more mugs and draws the drafts. Places them on the square, white bar napkins, smiles, winks, and walks towards Pete.

He watches her stop and talk to the cowhands. Sits and waits to give an order. Would like to raise his hand, motion to her again, look impatient, yell an order down the bar, talk about noney in winter. He's always wanted to go into a place and raise his hand, give it a slight twist, and say 'garcon'. He'd like to do it, but about the fanciest place he's ever been in is the International Room at the Golden Rose, and the Major doesn't have Garcons. Looks at Dave. Sits. Waits. She walks up. "What can I getcha?" Ice tones reacting to his laughlines and sagging middle. Knows if he were ten years younger.

"Whiskey-stitch." Wants to say 'the usual', wants to be recognized as a regular, wants a twist of lime, knowing it will sit forgotten when the drink is delivered. The Major has Jan Bruning. She's not a garcon, but she remembers his twist of lime. Watches her walk, stop at the cowhands, laugh, back to the end of the bar.

Dave watches, listens. Thinks about getting out of the business. Thinks about turning it over to Paula in a month and moving South, maybe down to New Mexico where he doesn't have to think about snow tires in late August and early June. Spent every winter here, eight winters watching the snow pile against his back door, waiting for June. He plants

his garden the first week of June, only to watch it bake brown in the dry heat of August. Hates Montana. Hates Lutherans and the Downtown Improvement Council. He sometimes wishes he had the gumption to tell them to go someplace like Iceland or Greenland or New Jersey. Likes the idea of being an absentee owner from the winter. Looks down past Lisa, down past where the indoor/outdoor stops and the floor turns to gray and dried blood red tile. Looks at the dim yellow of the Coors hanging lamp above the pool table. Genuine imitation plastic tiffany, gradually falling apart.

Periodically, a piece falls out and he ends up gluing it back with superglue. Epoxy works better, but he got tired of measuring and mixing resin. He always meant to get a new lamp, maybe something a bit fancier. Just like he meant to get a new pool table and a new jukebox. Thinks about the pool table. worn, a quarter-a-game. The felt cover, gouged in spots, is worn at the triangle marker by the years of racking, sliding the white plastic back and forth to tighten up the stripes and solids. He looks at the thin yellow light, casting shadows across the cue ball, cut by the sticks as the players line up their next shots.

The jukebox, leaning in the corner, was top of the line a few years back. Looked pretty good when he put it in, but like the spools, it just doesn't fit anymore. Supposed he should of gotten a service contract on it, but it didn't seem important at the time. The records skip at the angle,

cracked plastic where someone chipped the cue ball, sending it up and over the bumper to smack against the front cover. Two songs for two bits, five for four. The popular songs sing static and scratches.

Thinks about changing the forty-fives, but figures he'll leave it to Paula come September. Remembers the last time they changed the music. She stood there, holding a pool cue, snaking it, and threatening to put it through the front cover. Threatening to go find "Stormin'" Norman McGellup to put his head through it like he did the poker machine at the Black Garter. The jukebox company came down and put in the new forty-fives. Same songs. Unscratched vinyl.

Lisa places the whiskey-stitch in front of Pete and returns to the cowhands, laughing.

"So how's business, there?" He picks up the drink. watches the sweat bead and run down the sides.

Dave looks up from the accounts. "Oh, it's pretty good." Caps the pen and closes the account book, reaching for his coffee. "Thinkin' maybe I should get out of this business. Maybe go south. Just don't know." Takes a sip. Snudders from the cooked caffeine. "How's the ranch?"

"Not so good. We're gonna need a bad winter. 'Course the way it's goin', with the fire and all, we may not be around much longer to have ta worry one way or another." Takes a swallow. Thinks about the dust clouds that rise around his feet when he checks the hay crop. Thinks about

having' to buy hay from places like Illinois and Kentucky, and the fire over in Yellowstone, and the orange sunsets. They remind him of the Second Coming. Remind him of all the things he swore he'd do but just hasn't gotten around to it. Looks back at Dave. "You thinkin' about gettin' out again?" Plays with the water rings on the bar.

"Ja. Maybe this year I really should. 'Course, I guess I don't really have to be here. Paula could pretty much take care of tne place."

Pete shifts, thinks about the dust and Armageddon. Listens to their conversation, recognizing the pattern. Same pattern every year. "Why don'tcha sell?"

"Ah. Just don't know about that." Walks behind the bar to the dull steel coffee maker and picks up one of the glass pots, fills his cup, and returns to the chrome and red vinyl barstool. Remembers when he bought the stools. Paula damn near threw a fit. She took one look at them, shook her head, and laughed. He always liked her laugh. A deep soil laugh, like the sage and the goldenrod up on the west bench. Props a foot on the galvanized footrest and scans the backbar. Polished mahogany. It was painted a light cream color when he bought the place. Maybe it was white, cream from cigarettes. He doesn't know. Couple years back, Kate and Paula got some wild hare and took Strip-eeze to it. Late May. He always came back in late May. Always came back to find the place going as usual. Came back to find it closed,

doors and windows wide open, the two of them sitting at one of the tables, jeans and flannels, drinkin' beer and laughing from the thick fumes.

"If you decide to sell, let me know."

Dave looks at him, thinks about moving south and staying. "Geez, you know, I could probably leave this place with Kate and Paula and move to New Mexico and they'd never miss me. They'd probably run the place ok, don'tcha think." Looks at the shelves of liquor, three and four brands of each, and the assorted high ball glasses ordered by shape and size, flanking the eight foot mirror set into the dark mahogany. The backbar's the only thing original to the place, ordered and installed while the town was still booming from coal up over the east bench in Bearcreek and silver on the sides of Silver Run.

Pete looks at his drink, shoving it back and forth between his hands. "Ja, you know, I don't know these days. Seems if that fire comes up over the pass, you won't have to worry about sellin' out. Whole damn place is going to burn at this rate, if you ask me."

Dave looks at him, shakes his head and laughs. Thinks about orange sunsets and moving to New Mexico. He waves to Lisa and points to the bank bag. Stands up and pats Pete on the shoulder. "Mind keepin' an eye on the place? I gotta make a run to the bank before she closes. I'll buy you a round when I get back." Turns, heading for the door, passing

Ernie Tinden and the Commissioners, coming in on county  
business.

I remember you. Sitting in the  
back corner of Survey of  
American History. Sleeping  
through the Revolution.  
Through the revelation that  
we, I had no rights in the  
Constitution.

You were sitting at the  
bar, drinking that cheap-  
ass draft beer you always  
drink, lookin' kinda  
scruffy. I think you had on  
that brown jacket that  
never seems to fit right  
and a wrinkled white shirt  
or somethin' of the sort.

You slept in the back corner,  
opposite. Continuing your  
morning as though eight  
o'clock histories didn't  
exist. Dark hair covering your  
profile as your chin bent  
towards the notes you weren't  
taking.



You were just sitting there,  
sort of slouching against the  
bar and doodling in that  
goddam note pad you always  
carry.

Breath lengthening out as  
Benson wrote dates and  
movements on the board.

I can just see you, walkin'  
into the Fall Line and sitting  
at the bar with your note pad  
and your draft, watchin' me  
take orders, until you finally  
got the nerve to ask me out to  
dinner.

I remember you. Walking up and  
asking for notes a week before  
the mid-term. Offering beer in  
exchange for a passing grade.

You kept lookin' at the floor  
the whole damn time, scuffin'  
the toe of those hushpuppies  
you used to wear.

Wanting to know what you'd  
missed while you were  
continuing your morning.

We went to that steak house up  
in Billings, as I remember.  
Your car blew a hose on the  
way, and you ended up lookin'  
even more rumpled than you  
usually do. We sat there, in  
that Western Sizzlin' and the  
waiter kept starin' at your  
hands, at the grease in the  
cracks, I s'pose.

A six-pack of beer between us,  
studying for History, speaking  
individual histories.

We were sitting in Western  
Sizzlin' and you kept askin'  
me questions about my family.

You from a city, talking about  
driving to Vermont, watching  
them tap syrup in the Fall.

What did they do.  
Where are they from.

I listened and thought of the  
smells,

Yours 're from the Southwest.

sage after rain,

Tucson, Arizona.

the town dump after a  
midnight burning.

As I remember it, I talked  
about leavin' for awhile and  
you wanted to know why I came  
back. God if I know. You sat  
there, with your greasy hands,  
drinking cheap draft and  
talkin' about the sand and  
cactus and the summers where  
it gets over a hundred and no  
one goes outside.

You listed colors, maples  
shedding crimson. I saw the  
embers against the east bench,

I sat there, just watchin'  
you talk,

the bench obscured by ash  
picked up and mingled with the  
dust by the wind.

and thinkin' about the dust  
buildin' up on the shelves  
in the front room.

I remember watching you slide  
out of blue jeans, draping  
them over the back of the

chair, reaching for the  
bathrobe on the nail.

I remember watchin' you change  
your shirt, and take Lava to  
your hands, when we got back  
from the Western Sizzlin'.

You wanted to take a shower  
before dinner.

You wanted to go someplace for  
a nightcap.

I wanted to reach out, touch,  
ignore the dining hall and  
recapture the revolution you  
slept through.

I just wanted to reach out and  
touch the dark hair that runs  
from your throat down.

## II

Paula Tjunic stands in front of Myjanos Hardware looking at the new line of decorator washers and dryers. She does this about once a day, stands, admires the colors of the front-loading Whirlpools and her reflection in the plate glass window. Avacado. Ivory. The line from the small of the back to the upper inside thigh. Beige. White. She moves from side to side, checking her angles. Proud that her stomach is flatter now than when she left high school. She ponders the three dial, easy set dryer with the double-lint control. If she turns the customers right, sidles up and plays egos, she'll pass the tip mark for the washer. By Christmas she'll have both. Paula backs up a couple of steps to check the overall view. Reflection overlaying machines.

In the corner of the reflection, Jerry stands three paving squares to her left. Hands in his pockets, pushing the front of his jeans down and out. His sports jacket is covered with a fine layer of grey from shooting pictures of the dust up on the east bench. He watches her take a step back, watches her thigh to waist as she watches the front-end loaders.

"Hey, stopped by the house to see if you wanted a ride in."

"Ja. Just wanted to walk." She glances again at the reflection. At his reflection. "You didn't get the pressed

shirt out of the closet this morning?"

He stands, looking at the cracked concrete six inches from the toe of his boot. Reaches out and gouges at the place where the top layer is separating and chipping up. Tries to raise a three inch section no longer attached. "Same one. Had to drive up to Columbus this morning. Simmons wanted shots of the McGrady's new prize ram."

"Hell, looks like you got into a wrestlin' match with it."

Jerry hates it when she sounds like his mother. Sees his mother standing in the Arizona dry heat, wearing one of those flower print house dresses, the kind that look like a moo-moo. Stares at the concrete, following the wandering cracks to the corner of Myjanos' Hardware. Thinks about the drive to Columbus. Thinks about dust. About walking across McGrady's upper field, watching the dust billow up with each step, fading faded blue. Hates dust and shooting pictures of dust and having to drive the forty mile stretch to Columbus to shoot pictures of a prize ram obscured by dust with dust colored wool. Looks back up at Paula re-examining the double-lint control. Checking for pant lines under her skirt.

"Which do you like better? Avacado or white? Carl says they may be getting in dusty rose this fall."

"What are you talkin' about?"

"Washer and dryer. What color should I buy?" Guess the

beige and white would go with the kitchen."

Jerry watches cracks. Thinks about her catching her three inch heel in one and breaking a leg. Thinks about what it would be like to have a month or two where he didn't have to compete for attention at night. Considers ordering violet orchid moo-moos from Wards and praying for a broken leg. Sometimes, when he comes in during shift, he calculates the number of men he will murder in the course of one night. He gives up on following the crack and looks back at her.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't listening. What were you saying?"

"I wanted to know which color I should..." Looks at her. Thinks about cracks and moo-moos and his Mama in the dry Arizona heat, fanning herself with one of those cardboard church fans with the pictures of Jesus and lambs and children on it. The kind with the popsicle stick handle and the inspirational verses he had to memorize. Thinks about Paula, cast, heel to thigh, sitting in the recliner wearing Orchids. He looks at her, hates the paint, hates what she does to her six a.m. eyes. She never seems real this way. Dressed for tips she calls it. He hates it.

"You got time for a quick cup?" He nods towards the Golden Rose, two blocks up.

"No. Friday night crowd'll start early. Promised Kate I'd meet her to restock and clean before the damn fool tourists start drinkin. You'd think they'd learn." She looks at the top-loading washer, thinks about capacity, thinks

about bein' able to dump a load and go do somethin' else without having to worry about the clothes being eaten. Thinks about beige against the white cabinets. Maybe she should repaint the kitchen to go with the machines. Scratches dusty rose off the list. Looks at the lines and reflection.

"Learn what?"

"Huh?"

"You said 'you'd think they'd learn'. Learn what?"

Paula shifts. Jerry steps curbside and offers his arm. Paula, a parting glance, turns and steps away from her reflection and the front-loading dryer with the double-lint control.

"You know. Think they'd know better'n ta put down three or four manhattans on an empty stomach. Fools come in and drink like they're sitting in some fancy-ass place in New York City. Can't seem to get it through their thick heads that drinking at six thousand feet ain't quite the same. You gonna come in this evening?"

He looks at her, looks ahead, contemplates the broom motions as Al Teiszek sweeps the indoor-outdoor on the front step of the Crystal Cadillac Saloon. Thinks about names and tourist and the lengths the owners go to to snare 'em. As they say, turkey season starts in June, goes to October til the snow closes the pass for another year. Thinks about the orange coming from the park and the pass closing early.



"Maybe later. Simmons wants a series of shots of the people on Broadway watchin' the pipers. Isn't Kate's friend one of em?"

She puts her arm around and pinches his left side. Thumb and forefinger defining the role just above his beltline. He watches Al sweep as they step off the curb, across first, past the two banks on opposing corners, past the Congressional Lounge.

The Congressional looks like it belongs more in an industrial park than on the main drag. In the upper right corner of the front window, an old neon Great Falls Select sign, half the tubing burned out, hangs at an angle. "You'd think Shelby'd take that damn thing down." Jerry looks at the sign as they pass. Tries to figure how Shel stayed immune to the tourism fever. 'Course he doesn't have much tourist trade through there, a locals bar. The Chamber's been on his back for years, trying to get him to spruce up, to take down the Select sign, to just wash his windows. He told them all to go to hell, left the sign hanging, and ignored the summer season. He had his regulars, so he didn't care. About a year back, the Downtown Improvement Council took him to court, requested that the sign at least be removed since it was an eye sore. He stood there in the Billings courtroom and said "No. That's not an eye sore there. That's an antique." The court agreed.

A block down and across the street, next to the Kodak

place, the Black Garter and the Beartooth Tavern share a common wall. Both are gearing up for the Friday night trade. Jerry looks at the "Ye olde's" prefacing the signs, transplanting Europe to Broadway. Buildings filled with import shops and taverns and pubs. He avoids Broadway, except when he walks with Paula. Tries to remember why he wanted to write news stories on this town. Thinks about winter winds and going back to Arizona and taking Paula and orchid moo-moos with him.

McKinney waves, standing out in front of the Beartooth, sweeping the green indoor/outdoor with a bristle broom. Low clouds of dust float toward the curb. Paula waves back. Stops in front of one of the import shops and looks at the genuine Scandinavian floral pattern coffee mugs with the interlacing patterns in the background, made in Japan or Korea.

"Don'tcha think they'd look good in the kitchen? Thought maybe after I paint and put in the washer and dryer, I could hang some stuff. You know, some of these fancy mugs or potholders. They'd look pretty good, there. Don'tcha think so?"

He looks at her, thinks about marriage, about walking into the five and dime down the street and buying one of those turquoise inlay silver rings that they always have on sale. The kind with the coral triangles. Buying one and asking.

"Course, if I redo the kitchen, I s'pose I'll have to do the rest of the place." She looks at the coffee mugs. Thinks about appliance covers, brown gingham chickens covering the toaster and the electric mixer. Maybe ivory would be better than biege. "The place could do with a new paint job."

They turn and stroll past the Silver Dollar. "You gonna quit the paper?" He looks at her, surprised, knowing he hasn't mentioned it in awhile. "Was talkin' to Kate after closin'. She thinks you're pretty good there with that sketchin'. Maybe you could quit and work on that and write that piece you've been talkin' about for the past eight years." He looks at her, thinks about the way news is going with his new editor, owner. Hates Simmons, especially when he wants pictures of prize rams and tourists, wants stories about corruption in the county seat. Misses the Dry Creek stringer who wrote in about Aunt Bessie visiting up from Cody for the weekend and how Delbert McGuinnis' prize heifer got loose and took out Mrs. Sanders' delphiniums one late afternoon.

They stroll past the Golden Rose, window-shopping at the bakery and the Western Store. Jerry steps in to price boots, whistles, steps back out shakin' his head.

The town never seems to change much. Layers of dust in mid-August make the town look poor, used like the red '47 Chevy at the back end of the town dump.

My dad had this old '35 Ford pickup he drove while I was growin' up. 'Bout once a week, least in the summers, he'd drive that old truck into town.

You walk down Broadway and it looks the same. Same neon out at the movie theater, green awnings greying in the late summer.

Drive in to hear the news. It was big do's to go with him. We'd all pile into the back. Hang out over the sides, yellin' towards the front until our throats were parched from the dry air.

The houses on the east side of

Broadway, over in Little  
Italy, turn a deeper shade of  
grey every year, like the  
barns on the bench.

Then we'd sit back and watch  
the dust hang behind the truck  
as we drove from the ranch to  
the paving at Luther. By the  
time we got to town, our  
clothes and hands and faces  
would be about the color of  
rose granite up the West Fork.

You can tell it's been a bad  
year by the looks on the faces  
of the ranchers down at the  
Co-op and the number of  
merchants in the bars during  
hours. Looks that'll drive you  
crazy in the dry years.

He'd park behind the bank,  
deposit us in a booth at the  
back of the Rexall, and he and  
Jack'd walk a couple of blocks  
down to the elevator and the  
Co-op.

In the years when the land

looks more like a tinderbox,  
when the sky glows red in  
evenings from the smoke and  
dust, the faces age ten years.  
Lines appear overnight.

We'd be sitting in the Rexall,  
with the ceilin' fans going--  
stirring up the dry air and  
the dust. You could sit there  
and watch it float up and off  
the shelves.

They lean against the porch  
rails and stare down the  
track, past the old brewery,  
trying to imagine the Northern  
Pacific hauling in rain like  
they would, if they still ran  
the try-weekly in from  
Billings, barbed wire and  
baling twine and seeds.

The trip back was pretty  
quiet, not like the trip in at  
all. He and Jack would sit in  
the front talking commodities  
and foreclosures. It was a  
helluva deal.

The old ones sit the counter  
at the cafe talking feds and  
rain. In the years when  
foreclosures are weekly,  
daily, their faces lengthen,  
stare out the front window at  
the tourists passing through.  
Commodity reports give way to  
desperation, etched in the  
voices that float from the  
counter to the booths.

There was a fella a couple of  
places over towards Luther that  
took out an old carbine and  
damn near shot up his entire  
herd. Then he shot himself.

They say townies don't  
understand. Maybe not, but the  
town looks dead,

Sometimes it seems like things  
don't change much. I can see my  
Dad's look in the faces of the  
ranchers lining the bar.

dying in the bad years. Brown  
as the bench in August.

These bad summers play games

with your head. The dry  
wind'll make you crazy if you  
let it.



### III

Kel leans back against the dark green vinyl and watches as Kate lights another cigarette, inhaling deep into her lungs. Smoke curling, bending back, circling as it comes out. Every summer, they spend from four to five sitting in the Golden Rose watching the smoke curl, bend back, circle. Doesn't change much summer to summer except for the shade of grass in June. Some years, when the winter's been wet, the grass sticks green 'til the fourth week before the sprinklers get turned on.

"Do you play tonight?" Kate taps off the end gray, exposing ember, into a square glass ashtray and reaches for her coffee. Thinks about Kel in kilt, pipes slung. In the bar, she can hear the pipers two blocks down, turnin' right angles by the bank. Looks forward to the parade cause everyone clears out and there's ten minutes of silence and no orders. Ten minutes to sit and contemplate the backbar. Figures she sits through the practice sessions, so she doesn't need to see the parade. "You comin' in this evenin'?"

Kel sips coffee and nods. "You know I'm goin' back in three weeks. Doesn't seem like much time, but I guess I say that every year, don't I?" Reaches for the pack of Marlboros. Red pack. About the only kind Kate ever smokes because of the old geezer on the backside of Bearcreek. He

tips in cigarettes. Crows feet connecting to the laughlines framing the mouth. Grey hair. He comes when he's over the bench, out of Dry Creek. Comes and drinks whiskey stitches and beer chasers. The smoke curls and bends back.

"Jesus, Kate. Why don't you get the hell out of this town. You're just spinning wheels." Kel removes one of the cigarettes, taps the filter on the cream formica table, and reaches for the Golden Rose Cafe "Finest dining north of Denver" matches. "You could leave in three weeks. Put the place in the back of your mind. I make enough. You could write."

Kate stares towards the cash register, mind wanders over the Golden Oak pie case back of the counter. Takes in the waitresses and the glass front cabinet with the sundae cups and the chrome coffeemaker. Green vinyl booths, cream formica and brown indoor-outdoor. Thinks about writing odes to green vinyl and the dark brown coffee mugs they give to regulars. She's ranked dark brown for just short of eight years. Sometimes it flies by, brown mugs from four to five.

"Damn it. You're not even listening. Why is it that I always do the traveling? I've seen the inside of O'Hare and Stapleton more times..."

Kate swings her attention, looks at dark eyes, eyes that greet her in the morning. Long lashes over coffee looking towards Silver Run and Mount Maurice. Hears the sound of the pipes warming up while she's in the shower. Bag

pipes and cello defining the mornings and the evenings when she isn't studying the tourists and polishing down the backbar. Hey Kel, remember that hike couple of years back, she sees pictures of dark eyes in her mind. Eyes that play through the dark as the chinooks come through mid-winter. "Yea, I'm listenin'. Just not sure I want to live back East. Back on the flats."

"Christ. I live in Massachusetts not North Dakota."

"I don't know. It always seemed like they were about the same. Can't see myself livin' in some city. Hell, I don't even know the language. Sometimes I think about it, but not long. Besides, if the tourists that come through here are any indication, you live in an area comprised largely of assholes."

"Get off it. They're not that bad. Why don't you fly back this Fall, just to take a look. It really is pretty."

"The hell you say. The way I hear it, whole damn coast is one slab of concrete." She chain lights another cigarette, grinding the filter into the square, glass ashtray and pushes the pack across the table.

"Jesus. You know you are a bad influence. It takes me two months to quit smoking. Seems I do the same routine every year. Fly out here for three months, get hooked, go home, spend two months quitting. The least you could do is come visit and upset the pattern."

"Why can't you move back in this direction?"

"Do you know what the job market is like for cellists?"

"Yea, I s'pose."

"I've got a job offer in North Carolina. Would that suit you any better? They've got mountains."

"That's what you said about Massachusetts." She looks at the clock over the glass front sundae cabinet and shakes her head. "I gotta get to work. Friday night crowd and all. You didn't answer my question earlier."

"What question?"

She looks at Kel and smiles. "You gonna come in this evening?"

"Yea, maybe for a little while. Depends on where the crew wants to go drinking."

Kate nods, stands, and walks towards the cash register.

Between the pea factory and  
Main stretches Little Italy.  
Small four, five, six room,  
story, story and a half, white  
frame houses.

The hay dust is the worst. The  
stuff would damn near kill ya.  
You'd be coughin' it up weeks  
after stackin'

Houses that haven't seen a  
coat of paint since the pea  
factory closed.

The horse barn was about  
thirty feet or so back behind  
the house. In August, our  
jeans would turn grey soon as  
we stepped out the back door.

Houses with half standing  
picket fences and sage for  
grass.

You know, Mama tried for the  
better part of twenty years to  
get grass started out there,  
so she could have a real lawn.

houses all but forgotten by  
the fire department on those  
cold nights when the flues  
catch and scorch the roof  
tiles.

Everytime she tried, Daddy  
would trample the cows through  
there. She finally just gave up.

Tar paper over wood frames.  
Junked cars rusting in between  
the houses. A greying  
outhouse, separated from the  
main structure by twenty yards  
of sage and dust, in the  
winter, twenty yards of snow.

We had a lot more green longer  
than the folks down towards  
Luther. The ranch sat right up  
against the Rosebuds. You  
could see the Crazies on a  
clear day.

The yards were grey green and  
tan, burnt brown in August. By  
mid-July, only the garden  
showed green. Bean plants  
against the pale grey soil.

Out back of the horse barn was an old rusted out International Harvester, Dad parked when he bought the new John Deere.

We used to spend hours playin' on that damn thing, pretending we were drag racin' in the hay fields.

Carrots labored to grow past three inches. Parsley and rhubarb for color.

Jack did the sound effects since he could sound more like a machine than any of the rest of us.

Twice a day, Mama would send us out with pails to water the plants. We would carry bucket after bucket, watching the water disappear as quickly as we poured.

Mama had marigolds planted just outside the kitchen door. She'd water 'em twice a day, sayin' she'd be damned if she was goin' to live without

color. She had marigolds and  
hollyhocks and delphiniums.

Each summer, until my older  
brother Michael learned  
plumbing and fixed the outdoor  
spicket, we played bucket  
brigade, pretending the garden  
was on fire and time was of  
the essence.

Dad thought the marigolds were  
damn foolishness, but they  
kept her going for years.

The garden was our daily chore  
and our life sentence in the  
summers.



#### IV

Lisa leans against the bar and watches the early drinkers. Watches the asses as they pass, crossing to the pool table. Sometimes undresses them as they lean, lining up shots. Watches the seams and bumper shots. Most of the time, in between drawing drafts and laughing at the same jokes she's heard all her life, she leans and ass watches, waiting for the shift to end. Times, when business is slow, she thinks about shift shifting, picking up the nights from Kate. Tips are better. Asses are better.

"Hey Lis. You hear the latest 'bout North Dakota?" She looks at Pete Carlson. He's been nursin' the same whiskey-stitch for the past hour, talkin' county politics, road repair and snow removal, with Ernie Tinten. Commissioners campaigning, promising clean roads if elected. Same pattern each year like the forty-fives in the jukebox. Carl wants to know what they can do about the dust and the orange air comin' from Yellowstone. Wants to know what they can do about the cleaning up the sunsets and clearing the view of the Crazies. Wants to know what they can do about farm relief. Jukebox skips, stick on the next line. Ernie promises.

Most of the time, Pete stays away from town, choosin' to spend his days kickin' up the dust of his alfalfa fields. He stews about rain and the orange sunsets and the Crazies

missing from his livingroom window.

"Can't say I have there Pete." She runs the bar rag over the taps, wipes the base, and empties the over-flow pan. "S'pect it's pretty good there."

"Ja, ya bet! Heard it down at the hardware this mornin'." He picks up his whiskey, rolls it around the sides of his glass, watches the liquid change color with the light. Lisa draws a pitcher for the hands playin' pool. One of them starts up the jukebox. Skip. "T for Texas, T for Tenne tenne tenne." Lisa tops the head. The hand kicks the box. "See." The commissioners make the rounds, casting for votes. Pete drains his whiskey. "What's the best thing to come out of North Dakota?" He sets his glass back on the bar and shoves it towards her. "Another, same."

"Can't say." She picks up his glass, dumps it into the lukewarm bar water. "That's a stumper." Lies, knowin' she's heard this one a hundred times in the past week. It was pretty funny the first time, but it loses the punch with the retellin'. She looks at him while she pours the housebrand into a clean ten ounce, knowin' what's comin'. Hates this sometimes.

He smiles again. "Highway Two."

She laughs. Tips increasing with the response. Tip laughs. The box skips again. Stalls. A pool player jabs it with a cue. Waylon Jennings missing beats. Ernie wanders back over, a commissioner's gait, drapes his arm over Pete's

shoulder, and looks at Lisa. "Hey, honey. How 'bout gettin' us another round?" Winks at her. "We'll have longnecks. You can keep the damn glasses for the tourists." Laughs. Turns to Pete. "Don't worry about the smoke comin' from the park. Ain't a damn thing any of us can do about it. 'Sides, I hear the ash is good for the soil." She doesn't hear the response. Doesn't have to. Reaches into the cooler and pulls the brown bottles. Pops the caps with the church key, and sets them, one at a time, on the round brown bar tray.

Pete's laughs. "Ja, I was just tellin' Lisa that joke about Highway Two." Shoves his glass back and forth between his hands.

"I got one better 'n that." Ernie pulls up one of the chrome and red vinyl barstools. Gives her a quick glance, undresses her behind the bar, and turns to Pete. "You remember Sophie Tucker?"

In the background, a hand dumps four-bits into the jukebox, punches the numbers and turns back to the game. "God damn, you sure as hell 'r' takin' a long time rackin' them son-of-a-bitches. My sister could rack 'em faster." Jukebox skips the first line. "Mothers who have raised their sons so well. He's thirty-four and drinkin' in a honky-tonk." Static sails across the room.

A couple of mailorder nikers come in, find a table over next to the windows, and wave at her for drinks. They lean forward to talk over the static.

"Anyway, they climb into the back seat and Ernie says Soph you got no tits 'n' a tight box, and she says Ernie get off my back." Winks at Lisa. "Get it there Lisa? No tits 'n' a tight box."

Pete plays with his second whiskey-stitch, thinks about the dust in his alfalfa fields. Thinks about switchin' over to sheep. Thinks about smoke so thick in the evenin' light it turns the sky a dark orange. Moves the glass between his hands and thinks about not seein' the Crazies 'cause the dust and smoke hang up like permanent fog. Thinks about retiring. He listens to the farm reports and the foreclosures down at the co-op and thinks about profit margins and dust.

Lisa rounds the end of the bar and walks towards the tourists. "What's your pleasure?" Pressed jeans tilting back in the matte black and red vinyl metal chairs. Checks his inside seam.

"What kind of imports you got?"

She looks at him. Laughs. "Let's see. Got Corona, Dos Equis, and Chinahau up from Mexico. Grizzly, Moosehead and Molson's down from Canada. Be honest with you folks, you want a bigger selection, you'll have to go 'cross the street. The major carries most of 'em in the back room."

"We'll take a couple of Mooseheads." She nods and turns as they spread a topo map on the table. The Commissioners are arguing in the background. Jukebox skips again.

Pete nurses the whiskey stitch and thinks about dust clouds and mud. "Sure could use some rain there. Doesn't seem like there's been much in past couple. Maybe I should retire. Chuck it." He pushes the glass back and forth between his hands, watches the water leave streaks on the polished wood. "Whatcha think of that?" Lisa laughs, knowing this is the third time in a month.

Lisa finishes the last glass and drains the bar water before she starts another round. "You excuse me Pete, I gotta deliver drinks to the turkeys over there." She nods towards the mailorder hikers.

"Ah, you shouldn't be so hard on 'em. They're the only thing keeping this area going."

"Ja, I s'pose." Pulls out two Mooseheads. Green bottles, twelve ounces, napkins, a clean ashtray placed on the round brown bar tray. Picks it up and heads back around the end of the bar, past Pete, towards the window.

"Here ya go." Puts the napkins on the table, pours the beers into the twelve ounces, sets the rest in front.

"Whatcha know about the Park? We heard they've closed the pass. Is that true?" He reaches for the glass, condensation drips onto the topo.

"Really can't tell you. Might want to ask one of the Commissioners. They're s'pose to know this kind of stuff." Calls to Ernie, waves him over, and leaves.

Kate pushes open the door, nods to one of the hands on

his way out to dinner. Kicks the brown rubber doorstep into the crack between the door and the brown tile. Turns and walks towards the bar, scanning the room. Two hands playing pool. A couple of hikers over next to the second window. Peter Carlson at the bar. A slow crowd.

"Hey there, Pete." Stops to check his drink and chat. "How ya doin' these days?"

"I'll tell ya, Kate, not so good. Don't think I've seen it this dry in a couple of decades. Doesn't look so good, there." Tilts back his drink, crunches ice. "Think I could get another one of these since you're at this end of the bar?"

"Sure, you bet." She picks up his glass, walks behind Lisa, dumps the remaining ice into the bar water, and pours him another. Reaches over, picks up a slice of lime, twists, and puts the rind in the trash on her way by. "Her ya go. Whiskey-stitch with a twist." Smiles. "Christ, you're predictable. You know that?" Laughs.

"You get a good thing, you stick to it, ja." Takes a swallow, sets the glass back on the small bar napkin. He likes her laugh. Likes to listen to the soft drawl. Likes to look at the dark eyes behind dark lashes under dark hair half down her back. Likes to watch her behind the bar. Move. Dip. Turn. Looks like ritual movements. Like dance. Sits and watches her between sips. Looks at her, watches her eyes. Notices that her laughlines are getting deeper, more

defined.

She leans against the counter, arms folded. "So, how's the ranch?"

"I'll tell ya, it's been bad this summer. Been bad the past five years, but this beats all." He looks at his drink. "You know, it used to be it only took a couple of these ta get the dust washed down. Now it seems ta take a damn sight more, don'tcha know..."

Kate watches his hands turn the sweat a murky brown. Looks at the farmer's tan, brown red scarred. Wonders about Pete sometimes. Wonders why he stays with ranching, knowing his alfalfa fields are more sage and Dry Creek sand than grain and soil. Working a family claim in a valley that should have been ignored.

"...have ta buy hay again this year. Keep trying ta get ahead and end up takin' 'bout ten steps back. Christ, it's a helluva life." Polishes the rest of the whiskey-stitch and shoves the glass towards her. "Another, if ya don't mind, ma'am."

She mixes a second, draining the bottle. Turns to Lisa. "We got another bottle of this stuff?" Stoops and looks in the locker. Two bottles of gin, one of tequila, one of vodka. No whiskey. Stands. "When was the last time you stocked?"

"Haven't. I didn't need to. Had plenty to cover the last few days. 'Sides, I figured if I ran out, I could

always go across the street."

Kate turns back. "Great. I take a couple of days off." Finishes Pete's drink. "Folks over next to the window need another round."

Lisa throws the barwipe in the sink. Swings around. "Look. You're not my goddam boss, so just back off. If they want another round they can walk over and order it themselves."

Pete listens, watches her jaw tighten. Watches as she turns, picks up his drink, and walks towards him. Cheekbones defined by stressed muscles.

"Here ya go. Sorry it took a bit." Passes by and walks towards the couple by the second window.

Man, mid-thirties, leans back and watches the bar. "Christ. You'd think we could get some service." Waves a second time. Turns back to the map and their vacation. "Hear the Hellroarin' Plateau's pretty good for hiking. Might be a good two, maybe three day trip if we start at this point." Points to Cascade and the West Fork.

"Afternoon, folks. Looks like you could do with another round." Smiles at them.

He looks up. "Yea." Attention refocuses, scanning dark eyes. "Hey, you know this area. How's the packing?"

"Where're you thinkin' about goin'?"

"Hellroarin'. A friend said it's a helluva hike."

"Might be, but not this summer. That whole area's



closed 'cause of the fire over in Yellowstone. Part of the Plateau's already been charred." Looks disappointed. "Why don'tcha stop down by the Ranger Station. Ask for Kyle. He ought to be able to recommend somethin' else." Straightens. "Back in a minute with your beers." Turns.

Dave, back from his bank run, walks behind the bar, stopping to talk to Pete. Watches Kate walk back. "What are you doin' takin' orders?"

"Had to be done." Walks down the bar, pulls out a legal pad, and starts taking inventory. "Lis. You shouldn't of let it go this low. Hope like hell they got this stuff in stock." Finishes and walks back towards Dave. "Got a helluvan order. Did ya go to the bank?"

"You asking if I'm solvent enough?"

"Ja. Somethin' like that."

"Sure. Whatcha need?" He leans over, looks at the list on the counter. "We're runnin' this low?"

"Hey. I've been off the last few days." She smiles, laughlines creasing the skin around her dark eyes. "Seem to be gettin' pretty low on whiskey and gin. Could probably use a couple of cases of each. Same with Canadian. We're ok on tequilla. A little low on vodka." Lights a red-pack Marlboro and sets it in the square glass ashtray, borrowed from the Golden Rose a couple a years back. "Pretty low on B'n'B and Kaulua, oh, and completely out of bourbon." Takes a drag, watching the smoke curl off the end of the cigarette.

Watches the layers of smoke fold back, double over in the sunlight coming through the door.

He reaches for the money bag, thumbs the bills inside, doing a mental count. "Seems like a lot to be buyin' at once." Hands her the bag. "Here. You know a damn sight better'n I do what we need. Why don'tcha just go buy the stuff rather than tellin' me." Watches Lisa return from delivering beers as Kate leaves.

I think I would've liked the summers a whole lot better if it hadn't been for hayin' season. Dad put up hay twice a year, once in early July and again in late August. God, I nated that.

In the summer, in late June, my father would go out and remove the plastic from the windows. A ritual, like the rodeo on the Fourth.

Every summer, the five of us were sent out to the hay barn to unload the flatbeds as they came in. Took two to throw, three to stack. It's a helluva way to spend a week.

He'd start at the front, so the neighbors could see, work to his left around the side, the rear, and back up towards the front. Start at the bottom of each window, clawed tackhammer gouging the wood.

I knew nayin' season arrived when I could smell the coffee at five and hear footsteps comin' up the stairs. I'd scootch down with the covers over my head and pretend that I didn't hear. Never did any good though. She'd come in, pull the covers off, and stand there 'til I got up. Just stand there and look at me.

As each panel came down, he'd set the tackhammer aside and carefully fold the plastic, take out a black grease crayon and write the number of the window.

The five of us would get dressed and file down to the kitchen, knowin' we would find lumpy oatmeal. Mama had some strange ideas about nutrition. We'd sit there and stare for what seemed like hours. Sit there, sippin' coffee that was more milk n'

sugar.

Set the plastic on the ground just below the window and pick up a rock, the same rock every year and place it on the plastic so the wind wouldn't pick it up and carry it into the neighbor's yard.

When he couldn't stand it any longer, Dad would hand out the workgloves and prod us out the back door. We'd file out 'n' trudge to the hay barn. Some mornin's that distance felt like it'd go forever.

I remember, as a child, watching him, fascinated by the ritual. He walked around the house, starting at the front, moving left, the side, rear, stooping, removing the rock, picking up the plastic, window by window, coming back towards the front.

Stackin' hay's gotta be one of the hottest jobs in the world.

You're standin' up in the  
rafters, pourin' sweat and  
itchin' from the hay down your  
back.

When he finished, he'd put the  
plastic and the clawed  
tackhammer in the front  
closet, next to the  
snowshovel, beneath the winter  
coats and hats and mitts. The  
front window plastic on top,  
then side, rear, and back  
around, neatly folded and  
weighted with the clawed  
tackhammer.

You stand up there, and each  
time one of them bales was  
hefted, you'd have to reach  
out and catch it with the  
balerhook and your right hand,  
haul back and push up.

I hated that closet. Mama  
believed in moth protection.  
Bought out the mothball supply  
at Myjanos Hardware.

We'd start about six and go to

noon, take a break for lunch,  
and work 'til supper at five.  
There was never much of a  
chance to sit down. Soon as we  
had one bed unloaded,  
another'd take its place.  
Seemed pretty damned endless  
sometimes.

In the winter, she would  
carefully fold all the summer  
clothes, put them in brown IGA  
grocery bags, seal them with  
freezer tape, label each with  
the owner's name, as if we  
wouldn't recognize our own the  
following spring, and stack  
them, neatly, behind, over,  
under the mothballs.

Jack used to use the catchers  
for target practice. He had a  
mean streak that came out  
durin' hayin' season. As soon  
as you weren't lookin', he'd  
haul up on a bale and throw it  
at ya. If you didn't see it  
comin', it'd hit and knock the

breath out of ya.

My father would stand there,  
inhaling the stale remnants of  
a season of cigars, then  
slowly, as though every step  
was critical, he crossed the  
living room to the front  
windows, pulled the couch away  
from the wall, and opened.  
First the front, then, moving  
to his right, the side, the  
back, and round again.

After the last flatbed came  
through, we'd climb out of the  
rafters, trudge back, sheddin'  
hay 'cross the yard.

It took two, sometimes three  
weeks when the air was still  
in the house, for the cigars  
to dissipate. My mother hated  
cigars, but she was old stock,  
the kind that said you  
followed movements and orders.

Didn't make any difference  
whether it was hayin' season  
or not, or whether we were



bone tired from haulin' on the  
bales. We lived the same  
routine everyday.

The kind who believed in the  
wedding vows, reliving the  
ceremony everytime my father  
pulled the tab on a beer.

We'd come in, shed our work  
clothes, put on the clean ones  
that we'd be wearin' the next  
day, come down and stand by  
our chairs 'til grace was  
done.

She never said a word. My  
father was like her father.  
They were even, parallel in  
habits.

Never figured out why we had  
to stand for it, other than  
Dad's sense of religion. We  
were Lutheran.

After the plastic disappeared  
from the windows, locked in  
the front closet with the  
mothballs and the IGA bags,  
she would take down the

curtains, starting with the kitchen.

We'd stand there, heads bent, our hands glued to the back of the chair, prayin' for the prayer to end.

Most families in Little Italy had ringers. There were newer machines, machines on display at Myjano's Hardware, white porcelaine machines, the kind that top loaded. And dryers. They came in decorator white and avacado. Front loading dryers with fabric controls and heat settings. We had a line out back.

God, I remember the harder we prayed, the longer he'd go with it. Standin' there just prayin' as hard as we could, knowin' that the mashed potatoes were gettin' cold.

She'd start with the kitchen. Removed the curtains, one by one, and bend over the board,

trying to scrub out the winter  
cigar yellow.

Talking wasn't allowed. You  
had to sit there quietly,  
except when you wanted  
something. At six o'clock, Dad  
would turn on KGHL out of  
Billings. We'd sit there,  
eating, listening to the market  
report, the local news, and  
Edward R Murrow. I s'pose Dad  
figured God listened as well.

She was like her mother, who,  
five years after her husband's  
death, removed the curtains,  
starting in the kitchen, bent  
over the board and scrubbed.

We'd sit there, shoving the  
cold mashed potatoes around  
the plate, listening to Murrow  
broadcasting from London.

After each curtain was  
finished, she'd run it through  
the ringer, bundle it up and  
take it out to the line, hang  
it and return. She went

through the house, one window  
at a time. Curtain to the  
line, return with the one  
before, hang it and go to the  
next.

He was our connection to the  
world beyond the haybarn and the  
Rosebuds and the Crazyies.

Remove. Scrub. Ring. Hang.

Window by window.

Jerry stops at the door and looks back down the street. He sometimes feels like the Chamber of Commerce and the Downtown Improvement Council are stalking him, laying in wait to kidnap him and make him write articles on flowerbox beautification and petunia plantings in the vacant lot. He imagines being cornered with tourist information as they try to get another article written about downtown revitalization. He hates walking down Broadway.

"I'll see ya later, ja?"

He looks at her, trying to picture her in violet orchids. He almost ordered her one, a moo-moo violet orchids against an orange and green lattice background. Tries to imagine what she'd look like in a moo-moo and cast. "Yea, I'll be in after..."

Lisa walks out of the bar and crosses the street, heading for the backroom of the Golden Rose, past the state liquor store. "Hey Lis." Paula calls after. "Hell, that's strange." He thinks about her and revitalization. She wants to repaint. "Don'tcha think it's strange?"

"Huh?"

"Oh, Christ. Never mind." She looks at him, trying to decide how an ironed shirt can collect so many wrinkles in one day. Looks grey. Looks the color of the Alfalfa fields on the bench. "Why don'tcha go home and have some dinner

before the parade? I left a tuna casserole in the fridge. All ya got to do is put it in the oven at three fifty for a half-hour or so." She reaches up and straightens his collar. Pats his shoulders, watching the dust rise. "It's the way ya like it, with extra cheese and all."

He smiles and thinks about turquoise rings at the five and dime.

"I'll see ya later." She turns and walks into the Fall Line, shoves her bag under the counter, and looks at Dave behind the bar. "What in the livin' hell are you doin'?"

"Dishes. What does it look like?" He reaches into the water, bulls out another ten ounce, runs the barwipe along the rim and rinses the suds off under the tap.

"Ja. Ok. So, why are you doin' the dishes?"

"I fired Lisa. Guess I figured someone had to do them."

"You fired Lisa?"

"Ja."

She turns to look at Pete. "True?"

He nods and studies his whiskey-stitch. Thinks about going to New Mexico. Maybe finding a nice small place. They raise sheep there. Thinks about finding a nice small place and taking his herd with him. Looks back up at Paula. "You got a piece of paper and a pencil I can borrow?" Plays with the water marks, white against the mahogany counter.

"Sure. She reaches under for ner bag. Places it on the counter and reaches in, pulls out a green steno pad and one

of those fancy roller pens that Jerry always brings home. She flips past the first twenty or so pages, a letter she's been writing to sister, Connie, for the past six months. Figures she can send it around Christmas. Figures, by then, there will be something real to tell. Can write about buying the front-loading dryer with the double-lint control. Write about repainting the kitchen. Write about hanging cups from the import shop down the street, and pot holders, and a brown and cream gingham appliance covers. "Here ya go." She tears out a couple of pages, shortening her sister's letter. Same thing every year. Fills a steno pad and mails it to Minneapolis. She hands him the sheets and the fancy pen. "Whatcha doin?"

"Thought I'd make a pro and con list." Writes pro and con at the top of each sheet in block letters.

Paula smiles, turns, and walks back towards Dave. She picks up one of the glasses he's just finished and holds it to the light. "Kate'll have both our hides if you put these on the back bar." Sets the glass back on the drain board. "Move over, darlin'." Dave steps aside. She tests the water, reaches in and pulls the stopper. "You'll never get 'em clean if ya use cold water." Laughing, turns on the hot tap, pulls an apron over her head, and ties it in back. "So why'd ya finally decide to can Lisa?" Places the glasses from the drain board back into the soapy water. Watches the steam rise.

"Just got tired, I guess." Leans back against the counter and watches the hands shoot pool. "You interested in managing the day shift too?" Watches her bend over, placin each glass in the water. "You do it nine months of the year. Thought maybe you would consider doin' it during the summers too." He shuffles, shifts his weight. "Thought maybe you might consider managing the place full time. I'll putcha on salary. Hell, you and Kate damn near run the place as it is." He watches her rinse another glass under the tap, setting it on the drain board. Thinks about grass skirts and sand and warm Januarys.



My brothers shared a room at the front of the house. Across from the door was a gabled window, a small window that let in some light and less breeze. From their window, I could see the east bench holding in the dump.

My oldest brother, Jack, hated ranching, hated cows, hated everything that had to do with it. He used to say he'd get out when he had the chance. He did and Papa hasn't talked to him since.

If the wind was coming across from Billings, you could smell, touch the thick black smoke. You could smell the wax milk cartons and the paper egg cartons, and the Cream of wheat boxes melting, fusing, becoming ash.

Dad lived his religion, a

religion that he never fully explained to the rest of us. Mama tried to temper it a bit, but he had a real rigid view of what we could and couldn't do. Things were either right or wrong, mostly wrong, but the rules for tellin' the difference weren't laid out. Carl was pretty good at guessin' the limits, but Jack never could.

It was a sweet, heavy smell that defined the eastern breezes. Sometimes, when the house was quiet and dark, I'd go to my brother's room and look out. On those nights, the dump glowed red, soft embers inviting.

I remember when Jack left. My parents took a run up to Columbus to pick up a tractor part from a fella over there. They left Jack in charge with orders to run a new top wire

around the feed lot. Soon as they left, Jack disappeared.

when I was about six, Jess and I walked across the Brewery grounds to the dump to see if it was as red as it was at a distance.

Carl spent most of the mornin' lookin' for him, madder 'n hell. He finally gave up and started fencin' without him. By the time our parents got back, he was about half through and mad as a hornet. You could hear him swearin' clear to the house.

We padded down the stairs, stockingfoot, waiting until the backstep to put on our shoes. New white Keds, with blue stripes on the side.

We didn't hear from him for about six months, not 'til he was past his eighteenth. Got a letter from him, post marked Fort Benning, Georgia. I guess

he'd just been waiting to leave, join up. It was the thing to do then. He wrote to say he'd be home on leave in a couple of months.

Went out the backdoor, knowin that our parents would think outhouse, around the corner next to the rusting storage tanks, and down the dump road. It looked about, and smelled about, the same as it did from Jess's window.

Dad told him not to bother. He'd walked away from the ranch for somethin' else.

The next morning, when we got up, white Keds were grey, ash colored. We were told to stay clear of the dump, and the evidence of our disobedience was on our feet. When we walked into breakfast, trying to look, sound, act as though we only looked at a distance, our father looked down, noted

the color, and sent us back to our rooms.

When I moved into town and started workin' at the Silver Dollar, Dad told me not to show my face out at the ranch again. Like Jack, I wasn't welcome.

Later, bored, looking out my own window towards the west and Silver Run, I heard him on the stairs. He had a heavy step that managed to land on every crack, sending a squeak ahead of his progress.

At the landing, he stopped, stood. Silence. He turned. Jess's door opened, closed, the muted sound of a willow rod, and silence.

I guess neither of us fit into his religion.

## VI

The smoke hangs heavy near the ceiling. Crusty on the tiles, yellow. Kate stands in the door, glancing at the smoke and dreaming of ventilation systems like they have back East. Thinks about the report of non-smoking laws, thinks about quitting.

Jensen Pritter nudges her as he passes, trying to climb through the boxes of liquor stacked in the doorway on his way to a seven and seven or a bourbon and water. It mostly depends on the kind of day. Bourbon for the days when he hasn't ended up ass flattened, smelling of dung and lanolin, mixing with the sage that is eternally threatening to take over his grazing land and the upper pastures. He passes, over the boxes blocking the doorway, smiles and moves to the bar.

Jim counter leans, talking to Pete Carlson about the dust, top soil blowing against the equipment barn, banking, layered against the unwashed windows. Pete, playing with the water rings from his whiskey-stitch, saying it isn't getting any better. Jim looks over at Kate blocking the doorway, nudges Pete, and moves around the end of the bar.

"You want some help with this stuff." Asking as he covers the ten feet from the bar to the door. Nine boxes stacked, three on the dolly. She leans against the door jamb, surveying Jim, the smoke, Paula changing orange

candles. watches the patterns of the smoke in the late afternoon light.

"Sure." Moves back behind the dolly, kicks the wheels forward and hauls down on the handle. The boxes tip back, settle against the metal supports. Backs in towards the bar, pulling. Jim follows with a couple of boxes. Pete with a couple more. "What are you doing behind the bar?" She looks at him as she reaches for the front edge of the carton and tips down.

He groans as he sets down the two boxes. Thinks about how he used to lift weights, used to bend down and lift without the dull ache in his lower back. Straightens and heads for the next round of boxes while Kate begins to unload. Pulls a bottle of each and sets it in front of the backbar mirror, glass reflecting labels and colored glass. Places the rest in the locker below the bar, checking them off the list as she shuffles the bottles from brand to type. Jim sets down the last box and draws a pitcher for the seismo crew lining the bar. Pours a bourbon and water for Jensen.

To his right, across the room, Paula wipes down the cable spools with a barwipe, stopping at each to check the ashtray and the candle. She carries spares on one of the round brown bar trays. Takes the barwipe, passes it over the rough wood, leaving snagged threads in the grain. Circles the edge, circles on circles as the excess streaks and soaks

in. Thinks about giving up bars and barwipes and orange candles. They never change color, small orange candles near impossible to light. She carries fireplace matches or bar straws, twisting the end, lighting with the throw away butane lighter in the genuine Navaho turquoise holder Jerry brought back from Arizona. It's real fancy, flowers and thunderbirds. She twists the end of the straw, lights it, watching the plastic flame orange and blue, tips the candle and inserts the straw, watching the glass change cloudy.

Jim pushes the drink across the bar towards Jensen. "How's it goin' there?" Carl pulls up the stool and leans, playing with his drink.

"I got ta get outta this business. You know, I just can't see it gettin' any better there." Sips on the drink. Carl sits, nodding, knowing the next lines. "Keep listenin' to the the hay prices going up. Damn, you get a bad year and gotta buy and they raise the price."

"Ja. Heard they're talking about one, maybe one fifty for a ton. How in the bejesus they expect us to afford that's beyond me." The voices mix in Kate's head as she listens. She shoves the bourbon bottles to the left, cheap to expensive stacked back on the dusty shelves. Listens as the voices mingle, subject following parallel paths. "It's gettin' to the point that I may have to sell the herd. Hate like hell ta do it." Mingle. Hay prices float above her, "Ja, I 'spect it'll get a lot worse. Here McKinney is



plannin' on sellin' out. Damn, his people homesteaded..." Puts the vodka in rows. Absolut at the back. Turns the labels forward. "...says he's doin' it now while he can still get somethin'. Gotta feel sorry for the..."

She looks up at Dave. "Mind reachin' over there and handin' me a barwipe. Might as well wipe 'er down while I'm down here." He dips it in the lukewarm water, rings it out, and tosses it to her. "Jesus, sometimes I just don't know. Ja, know whatcha mean. I walk out across that back pasture and it's like the top soil's not even glued down there any more now. The bunch grass isn't even doin' so hot these days there. Ja. Know whatcha mean. Got sheep..." She runs the damp wipe over the pine stained plywood shelf, moving the bottles to the left and back after each swipe.

Dave leans down, nudges her shoulder. "I've been here mosta today. You mind takin' over. Think I'm gonna go home." She finishes the last row, stands, and reaches for one of the red pack Marlboros on the backbar. Lights it, watching the smoke curl, bend back, pass beyond Dave and into the path of the sun, joining the defined grey cloud.

Jukebox sings in the background. Jerry Jeff and Waylon. Skip. "Night I play the places." Skip. "Playin' that honky-tonk music. That's the kind I like to..." Skip. Paula hums the tune, not hearing the words. She doesn't listen to them anymore. Fills in the skips and scratches. Sometimes wishes they'd change the forty-fives. Hates the way the slide

guitar scratches the strings on "I'll fix your flat tire, Meryl." Moves to the next table. "Hey there Ernie. How's the seat of government these days?"

"Jesus, I can't go anywhere without hearin' some jackass remark."

Paula picks up the ashtray, replacing it with a clean one. "I hear you posted a sign down at the courthouse that really pissed off the new clerk." Picks up his bottle and runs the barwipe across the table. "How you boys doin' on beer?" Scans the bottles to check levels.

"Yea. It's pretty funny. Damn woman's got no sense of humor." Takes a long pull on his beer, tilting up and back to drain it. "She's probably a man-hater or somethin'." Looks at the others and laughs. Tips back in the matte black and red vinyl chair and checks her legs.

"Jer said you're openin' yourself up for a harassment suit?" She leans over, touches his shoulder to guarantee her tip, and picks up the orange candle. Twists the bar straw. Pulls the turquoise lighter out of her skirt pocket, lights the end, and reaches in towards the charred wick.

"Hell, there ain't gonna be no harassment suit. That's a bunch of bullshit, unless, of course, you're talkin' about the one I'm gonna file against that new editor of Jer's. He laughs. Shoves his empty towards her. "All I did was give her a friendly pat on the ass. She's just one of those goddam feminist types. You know, can't take a joke." Looks

at the rest of the bottles on the table. "How 'bout another round, sweetheart?"

"You got it, darlin'." Collects empties, turns, and feels the hand on her ass. Left as usual. She steps towards the bar.

"Hey love, I need four long-necks. The Commissioners are having their weekly." Waits. Reaches over and rubs Jensen's shoulders. Thumbs digging into the muscles running parallel from the collarbone up. Pushes the heel of her hand into the soft between the shoulder blades and the spine.

"What flavor?"

"Guess Ranier. Seems to be what they're drinkin' today."

"County must be runnin' out of money." Paula smiles, knowin' their taste for imports.

She reaches into the cooler, pulls out the green bottles, applies the church key, and sets them on the round brown bartray. "You done with the tables?"

"Ja." Picks up the tray and heads back. Kate likes watching Paula move between the tables. Likes watchin' her navigate the chair legs in three inch heels. Listens to the scratches humming harmony to Willie Nelson on the jukebox. Scans the bar to make sure the guys are set.

Jessie from the Golden Rose pulls up a stool between Pete and Jensen, flirts and waves. "Hey, I want a White Russian. Think you can handle it?" Smiles. Changes her drink

of choice every couple of weeks. Changes lovers about as often. Watches the asses of the seismo crew at the end of the bar.

"You bet." Kate watches the cream mix with the brown. Like marblin' paint, like the inside covers of the older books in the town library. "You want a cherry?"

"Boy is that a leading question." Laughs and leans toward Pete.

Paula moves towards the Commissioners. Keeps her ass away. "Here ya go boys." Moves around the table, setting a oottle in front of each. "Weekly meeting goin' ok?" Stops next to Ernie. Touches his snoulder to insure the tip.

"You remember Sophie Tucker?"

"If your gonna tell me that damn joke 'bout no tits, forget it. Jer beat ya to it." Laughs. Winks at Sven Christiansen.

Jensen shifts on his barstool and reaches for an ashtray. Takes out a pouch and papers. Measures and rolls. Licks the flap. Kate watches, fascinated by the process. Wonders if it could be applied to joints. Kel hates joints, smoke, bitches in the late evening. Tries to explain, but sometimes quitting seems easier than convincing. Watches the small flame as the paper catches. Watches as the ember fades grey.

Jukebox skips. "its organic and it comes from the vine. It's also legal and it gets you so high." Skip. "Sangria."

Skip.

Paula walks towards the pool players as the shooter sinks the eight. "Hey fellas. Think I can con a couple of you into helpin' me move this damn thing?" Nods at the table. "It's worth a free pitcher." Laugh and nod.

"Sure. Where do you want it?" Points to the wall by the bathroom. Kisses one of them and heads towards the bar.

There are days when the wind  
comes down along the front  
range. Down past the Crazies  
and the Absorkees and the  
Rosebud.

It's a way ta pay the bills,  
and, hell, most of the time  
it's pretty easy. There's an  
art to rememberin' whatcher  
customers are drinkin'. If  
they're regulars, you remember  
easy. I've served more whiskey  
stitches and seven 'n' sevens  
than I can count. But, hell,  
it gives me a chance ta  
circulate. I hear every damn  
bit of gossip that goes  
through this town, and even  
some that hasn't hit the  
streets yet.

There are nights when the  
temperature drops and the wind  
pushes the layers of the  
building. Slides in between  
the clapboarding and the

barnwood, swirling the  
cigarette smoke above the  
Coors lamp.

I like watchin' the men that  
come through here. None of 'em  
are like the ones I knew  
growin' up. Dry like.

Days when the same snow drifts  
back and forth across the  
nighway, down Broadway, past  
the front door.

Like walkin' up and kneadin'  
their shoulders. Spend half my  
time, on the slow nights,  
givin' shoulder rubs to my  
regulars. They just come in  
nere to pass time. Hell,  
there's not much else ta do on  
the cold nights.

Spins against the plastic on  
the windows.

My family didn't drink. It  
wasn't Christian. Or maybe it  
just wasn't Lutheran. In my  
family, that's about the same.  
Don't think my parents ever

had a bottle in the house,  
'cept maybe when Carl got  
married.

The northwesterners are the  
worst.

When I started workin' down at  
the Dollar, I was about as  
clean as they come. Didn't drink  
at all when I started servin',  
but it kind of grows on ya.  
There are nights when I've  
been workin' that I just go  
home and lose my shit. Only so  
much you can take before it  
closes in and raises the damn  
devils under the bed.

They pass down the front  
range,

Been doin this for so damn  
long, it seems like I'm just

assaulting the fence lines and  
haybarns,

spinnin' my wheels.

hugging the slopes,

Most of the time, I like  
workin' nights, leaves me my



days to myself. But, goddamn,  
it's a drag some days.

spinning along and over the  
bench, down Broadway.

There are days when the last  
thing I want to do is walk  
into this goddam bar and  
serve drinks.

The days the northwester blows  
are meant for woodstoves and  
trash novels. Not meant to be  
walked in. They cut, rub cold  
against, between the layers.

Days when I don't want to know  
who the hell's screwin' who.  
When I don't want to have to  
deal with bein' felt up while  
takin' some bastard's drink  
order. Days when I want to  
just sit.

Days I'd rather stay wrapped  
in the smell of coffee,  
listening to the wind,  
watching the snow pelt the  
window plastic, coming  
straight, horizontal.

Hell, some nights, when the  
last one's been chased out and  
the place is quiet, it seems  
like home. There are routines  
to this place.

There are days when the  
northwester blow over the  
bench that I can't face work.  
Can't face leaving and walking  
the blocks, five down, two  
over. Don't want to give up  
the woodstove for the gas  
fireplace.

Sometimes, after closing, I'll  
pour a whiskey 'n' seven in  
one of the brandy sniffers.

Think about going east,  
leaving, learning a new  
language.

Just sit there and kinda swirl  
the liquor around, watch the  
reflections.

Finding new patterns east.  
Think about it while walking  
the blocks. Two over, five  
down.

Makes it easier to face the  
northwesters at three a.m.

## VII

Bagpipes in the street. Short scale conflicts with the jukebox. Drone filling in the skips. McTavish checks the microphones, tapes the wires to the floor with black plastic. Stands to check height. The platform sags under the weight of the drums and speakers. Lee re-adjusts the cymbals and blocks, takes the key to the bass drum and snare, tuning them to tones in his mind. He turns the key, watching Paula wipe down another spool and empty the cigarette butts into a plastic tub. Most of the customers are out on the street watching the pipers march by on their way to the civic center and the evening show. Paula walks over to Billy and hands him a Moosehead.

Skip. "Just a semi-good-looker, but the fast trail." Skip. "Just trying to." Skip. She wants to throw the jukebox out, dump it in the back alley. Hang a sign on it that says "Steal Me," encourage a rise in the crime rate. Hopes that someday the cue ball will pop up and over the bumper, shattering the front cover. "That's why I drink a cheeseburger, eat a six pack, take a Darvon to kill the pain." Skip. "And I live through it." Skip.

Billy takes the beer, finishes taping. Listens to the skips and fills in the blanks with memory. Tries to even out the rhythm guitar and the backbeat. Compares his voice to the static. Takes a long draw on the beer and looks up at

Paula "Hey, we're gonna try out a new one tonight. If it works, maybe we'll cut the cover pieces." She looks down at him. Skip. "Bordering on insane." Slide guitar tangles with the static. "I'm gettin' awful damn tired of playin' the same pieces every week. Seems like I've been doin' the Outlaws for so damn long, I've forgotten what new stuff sounds like." Takes another swallow.

Kate listens to the pipers through the open door. Imagines Kel doin' steps in a kilt. Two over, military corner turn. Thinks about the sound of the pipes tuning up in the morning. About dark eyes. About living out on the flats and learning a new language.

Paula looks down at him. Skip. "Pays thirty-two fifty." Skip. "I don't know if folks will take kindly to the change. You got some nice stuff, but you're known for singin' Texas." Shifts position and watches Lee bend over the snare. "Hell most people come to dance. Half the time, they don't even hear the music."

He swears under his breath, pulls up the tape, and moves the mikes. "That's the helluvit, isn't it." Runs the cords in front and to the side, pressing and taping. Stops, looks at the equipment and takes another draw on the bottle. "Ask me, they're missin' out. We got this one piece from Kev. It's pretty damn good stuff." Drains the Moosehead and hands her the empty. "Darlin', I'll take another one of these if you don't mind. Stands up and turns towards the

mixing board.

Kate wipes the shelves of the backbar and rearranges the bottles by brand. Cheap in front, expensive towards the rear. Gin, vodka, bourbon to the left of the divider. Whiskey, rum, tequila to the right. Miscellaneous along the base of the mirror. Sprays Windex and runs circles on the glass. Smears Paula's reflection. Obliterates McTavish with the mist. Pipes follow behind. The dry barwipe moves, circles on the glass. Watches the patterns of streaks fade. Thinks about patterns and listens to Kel playing on the street. Pipes competing with Waylon and McTavish. Wiping patterns and listening.

Watches Paula approach, smile, set an empty on the bar. "You mind pullin' another one of these for me?" Pushes the green bottle across the bar, label towards Kate. Reaches into her pocket and clears out the quarter tips not spent in the jukebox. Thinks about coming in after hours and dumping pitcher after pitcher of water on it, hoping to drown the needle, hoping to flood the forty-fives. Kate shoves the Moosehead across the bar and returns to the mirror and the bottles.

She walks back towards McTavish. Watches him adjust the microphone, bend, shift the bass. "Here ya go."

"Christ. When you folks gonna get a new box? That one's about had it." He tosses the black plastic tape into a tool box, stands and checks height again. Listens to

another song start. Skip, missing the chorus he likes. He curses the jukebox, wishing once a week that it belonged to the bar, rather than some rental place up in Billings. "Don't they ever come down and fix the damn thing?" He moves the guitar stand and the feedback speakers. "Northern lights. Never seen" Skips "Hawk on the hawk on the hawk" and sticks. Lee walks past, rapping the top on his way by to the bathroom. Increases the scratches and static. "on the wing." Pipes coming through the door, in front, drowning out the remainder of the chorus. Silent thanks.

Marcus Simmons and Ten-Sleep Rogers come in, passing Lee as he walks back to his drums. Laughing at a private joke, they stake out a table next to the fireplace, across the room from the Commissioners. Paula doesn't know Simmons. Doesn't want to know him. Knows only what Jer tells her when he's too damn drunk to watch his tongue. Hates turnin' tips from a man who spends half his time diggin' dirt in a town that ignores the dust, and the other half drinking to wash it down. She passes Kate, tilts her head, and steps up on the platform, past Billy. "What's your pleasure today?" She puts a clean ashtray on the table and reaches for the orange candle.

Ten-Sleep regards her as he tilts back. Looks at her ankles, legs, eyes running upward. Thinks about the ten years he's seen her pushing drinks. Thinks about a decade of marriages and hospital rolls and DUI teenagers drag racing

the ski run road at midnight. Sometimes, when he can't stand the smell of the press ink and the overcooked coffee in the front office, he comes in and drinks. Makes printing the same news easier. He thinks about getting out, staying in the town, and exploring the bars lining Broadway. Maybe retiring and starting up a part time printing business. Gets awfully tired of hearing about Aunt Bessie coming up from Cody for the weekend and the skunk infestation on South Hagan. Shifts in the seat and imagines her thighs.

Simmons lights a cigarette with Golden Rose Cafe "Finest dining north of Denver" matches, shakes the flame, and tosses the spent wood into the round black plastic ashtray with the Budweiser logo printed on the bottom. Pulls on the end and looks at her. "I'll take a dry martini." Turns. "You want the same?" She looks at them, wondering if half of what Jer says is true.

"This is my first year here. Guess you already know that though. Does this racket keep up long?" Ten-Sleep laughs while Simmons leans on the table. She doesn't like the tone. Wonders why she sticks to waitressing. Walks towards the bar thinkin' 'bout kids and white frilled curtains and Jer.

"Need a couple of dry martinis." She nods in Simmons direction. "Goddamn, he's a pain in the ass."

"How dry?"

"S'pose 'bout usual. Splash of vermouthe. Christ I don't



know."

Kate looks across, reaches for the bottle of bar gin. "He specify a flavor?" Paula shakes her head. She measures liquid, shakes, pours, stabs an olive with a blue plastic sword. "You mind answerin' a question? Why'd Lisa get canned?"

Paula watches the process. Reaches down and adjusts the strap on her right shoe. "Ja. I'll tell ya later." Thinks about difference, sameness, lookin' at Kate. Sometimes, when the crowd's playing slow, when they're sipping rather throwing back, She'll stand at the end of the bar, down next to the tip jar and the round, brown bartrays, and watch her mix drinks. Sometimes wonders why in the hell she sticks and stays. Sometimes thinks about breeds and their place. Thinks about reaching across the bar, reaching white towards breed, and jarring her. Wants to know why she stays in a place where the men don't marry breed. Words questions for Kate in her mind. Why not move where breed meets breed, marries, has breeds. She never asks. Or, at least never asks Kate. Sometimes asks Jerry who says leave it be. "I'm gonna check the Commissioners. I'll be back by in a couple for Simmons' drinks, so take your time." She turns.

A couple of seismo members sit down next to Pete. Laughin' boys barely old enough to drink, not old enough to know how to handle it. Wearing rock shirts for groups she's never heard of. Kate pushes an ashtray to the center of the

bar, wipes the lip with the barwipe. "What can I getcha?"

"Schnapps. Peppermint if you got it. Otherwise, cinnamon." They swagger, knock shoulders, laugh.

She smiles at them. "Pete, you need another." Blond sets a boombox on the bar and turns it on. Noise. "'Fraid I can't let you guys play that thing in here. You want to listen to the music, you'll have to go out back on the patio." They nod and rise. "I'll send your drinks out with the waitress."

Pete pushes his glass towards her. "No. Thought I'd go 'cross to the Brass Weed and get somethin' to eat."

Jessie giggles. Kate picks up the glass. "You gonna be back in later or do you want to settle up now?"

Pete pulls a cap out of his back pocket. A Ford cap flagging his profession. "Nah. Not in the mood to listen to McTavish again. Probably head back after dinner." She runs his tab.

Jessie reaches over and up, readjusts his cap. "Don't let the Major hear you callin' it that. He gets pretty touchy about nicknames." Pete laughs, pays his tab and shoves a couple of ones under the corner of the ashtray, pack of Marlboros on top. "Thanks, Pete."

"You bet."

"Think I can get another one of these damn things?" Jess pushes the glass towards Kate. "You know my feet are killin' me, but I'll be damned if I spend my Friday night

havin' a relationship with a pan of epon salts." She steals one of Jensen's cigarettes and lights it with the bar matches. Reaches down to flip the shoe off her heel, hangs it off her toes. Thumb presses against the arch. Rubs, pressing.

Paula carries the martinis over to Simmons and Ten-Sleep. "I want to do a story on the old brewery. Way I hear it." She sets the drink in front of Simmons and walks around the table. "The place was full of corruption, you know mismanagement, till-dipping, double accounts, the whole bolt as it were." He looks at her. Watches as she places the square cocktail napkin on the table, martinis on top. Thinks about the differences in bars. The Major prints his logo in the center. Black and red against the white. Thinks about trying to increase the job printing, thankful the other printer went out of business. Watches as she turns back towards the bar. Reaches for his martini, tastes the vermouth in back of the gin and curses the bartender. Thinks about the Major.

I didn't plan to spend my life  
in a bar. But, by damn, it  
just sort of happened.

Sometimes Jess and I would  
slip out and wander downtown  
to listen to the music in the  
bars. They wouldn't let us in  
'cause we were underage, so  
we'd sit on the front step and  
listen to the music as it  
flowed out the door.

Hell, I guess I'm just along  
for the ride.

I was going to go back east,  
explore the cities, send  
postcards written in foreign  
languages. He was going to go  
west, join a band in  
California, live in the bay  
area, as it was called, and  
raise general hell.

I'm only ten years from  
retiring. That's a helluva  
kick. Never figured I'd be

doing this my whole damn life.

I wanted to learn language,  
 wanted to play with line  
 breaks and stanzas and rhyme.  
 wanted to sketch verbal lovers  
 in Chicago. Great writers  
 always live in Chicago. Or so  
 it seemed when I was in high  
 school.

When I started, my family damn  
 near disowned me. You'd have  
 thought I was out walkin' the  
 streets, or somethin'.

Wanted to paint fenceposts  
 with words. Wrap the dust and  
 the sage with the language of  
 the East.

I remember sittin' there,  
 lookin' at Mama as she was  
 washing the dishes, thinkin'  
 how in the hell am I gonna  
 tell this woman about the job.

wanted to sit in a cafe in  
 Paris or London or Rome and  
 watch the traffic, knowing  
 that my parents were ten

thousand miles and a world  
away.

She kept turnin' around and  
askin' me if I found anything.  
Started to tell her, but just  
couldn't do it. Just didn't  
have the nerve.

I got a scholarship to a  
school back east in St. Paul.  
It wasn't Chicago, but it was  
close. They paid everything.

It finally came out that I was  
workin' at the Dollar. Someone  
told my Papa. He came marchin'  
into the place, called me a  
slut and a hooker in front of  
God and everyone else.

Four years of language, of  
watching words play across the  
page. My father decided there  
was no sense in my going,

Figured, hell, that's it.

'cause it didn't serve a  
purpose.

I was renting a place over off  
of Hagen at the time, 'bout

five or six blocks north of  
here.

I wrote the school and told  
them I was coming. I told Jess  
I was going. Jess borrowed a  
friend's car and drove me to  
the bus station in Billings.

Next mornin', 'bout eight  
o'clock, they showed up. Both  
of 'em.

I got a letter from Jess a  
couple of weeks later telling  
me to not bother coming home.  
So I didn't.

Papa said he'd prayed the  
whole damn night, and wasn't  
gonna have me out caddin'  
around like some hussy.

I could hear my father  
snuffling to the fridge,  
popping the tab, shuffling  
back in the dark of the dorm  
room. Could hear him swearing  
as he climbed the stairs. Stop  
at the landing. Silence. Could  
see his figure in the dark,

hear his silence five hundred  
miles east.

They'd brought the pick-up  
into town to move me back  
out to the ranch and, by God,  
find me a husband. I told him  
to get the hell out of my  
house and my life.

He died my junior year. Died  
and left his silence. Even  
after, I could hear the steps  
squeak with his weight. Hear  
him climb, swear, stop,  
silence. He haunts the  
darkness.

Goddamn him. He had no right.

I wanted away from the wind  
and the dust and my father's  
silence. Ran five hundred  
miles to the east to escape,  
only to find I'd carried it  
with me. I missed the smell of  
sage after rain. Missed the  
glow of the dump after hours.  
Missed and wanted to forget.

I stuck with the Dollar for a



year or so, then left  
town to get away from him.

Four years is a long time to  
hear silence.

## VIII

Ten-Sleep Rogers tips back in his chair, watching the movement of the bar. Thinks about getting the hell out of the newspaper business. Glances at Marcus, trying to figure out why in devil he'd want to move to some backwater town. Why anyone with a chance to get out and make money would buy a two-bit rag. Contemplates his third martini. Tries to remember the last time he went home right after work, and the last time he ate something that wasn't marked special on a menu. Watches Marcus watching the Commissioners, knowing that the evening's doings will appear in the editorial column next Tuesday. Raises his glass, tilts back the rim, and sets the glass back on the table.

Marcus waves to the waitress, trying to get her attention and another round of drinks. "As I was sayin', we've got a responsibility to expose the bullshit that goes on in towns like this. Damn waitresses. Can never get their attention when you need 'em." Ten-Sleep lights a generic menthol, watches the smoke drift around Simmons' head. "The way I see it, it's about time to clean up the corruption in this town. Just look at them over there." Nods towards the Commissioners. "Bunch of backwater whazoos that act like they own the place and the county funds." Ten-Sleep takes a drag, smiles, knowin' that they always have.

Jerry pulls up a barstool and counterleans, watches

Kate mix one of those sweet grenadine drinks. Only tourists order drinks with umbrellas and pineapples. Watches while she places the umbrella and a Corona on the round, brown bartray and waves to Paula. Turns and watches as she weaves between the tables, brushing hands off her ass, three inch heels clickin' time to the static on the jukebox and the orders. Paula picks up the tray while cleaning her pocket of tips, tips in the mason jar at the end of the counter. She looks at the quarters and dimes sifting to the bottom, and silently calculates for the double-lint control. Mostly small tips, quarters mostly, some dimes, few dollars. She walks towards the table where a couple sit, mail-order hikers from the looks of them. She weaves past the commissioners, past the couple drinking slow screws, past the back speakers on the platform.

Jerry likes people watching, guessing lives, calculating the future murder rate for the town. Likes to watch Paula pass between the tables. Likes trying to see her early in the morning, graying hair against the floral print pillowcases that he gave her a couple years back. Sees her leaning over pulling weeds in the vegetable garden, trimming back the hollyhocks and delphiniums, tying up the bean plants and tomatoes with the thin white strips of sheet inherited from her mother's estate. Thinks about the way she stretches out, long legs pressed against the browning grass, drinking a gin and tonic, reading travel books and Tunisia

on \$2 a Day. She has a complete set of National Geographic stored in the back bedroom. Sees her in a orchid print moo-moo, watching travelogues and reruns of Death Valley Days. She can whistle the theme, does in the shower. She leans over.

"Whatcha have, Jer?"

He turns, looks at her across the bar. Short. Thin. Sometimes thinks she looks more male than female, like the way she squares her shoulders when she's in a fight. Likes to watch her, figure her. Sometimes, when she isn't looking, he thinks about tracing her collarbone. Tries to imagine her dark skin against an orchid moo-moo. Thinks about the dark against the orange and green lattice background. Reminds him of another, but can't put his finger or memory on the other face. "Well, s'pect that a beer and a shot'll set me for awhile. Ranier draft if ya got it."

"Same as usual, huh? Jesus, I don't even know why I ask anymore." She reaches down, pulls a mug from the freezer. Only regulars get 'em frosted, like the brown mugs at the Golden Rose. Locals avoid the tourist bars on Fiday nights, would avoid this if McTavish wasn't playing.

Paula moves, brushes a hand off her ass, makes a pass at the bar to collect drinks. Jer adds another name to the list he'd like to murder when he has the chance. Maybe slow poison, the kind the paralyzes the hands first. "Ho need a couple of Buds and a GT." Heads for the couple from

Pittsburg. Moves between the tables towards the mailorder hikers, on their way to Yellowstone. He wears an oxford, creases still in place, hiking boots, squeak on the tile floor.

"Here ya go." She places the umbrella and pineapple in front of the woman, Corona in front of the man. "If you folks are on your way up to the park, you might want to check at the ranger station just south of town. Last I heard, the Silver Gate entrance was closed."

Two hikers in from slope slipping lean over the jukebox, dump in a couple of quarters and punch the numbers. Pure Prairie League, modern for the jukebox, sing boulder skies. Unknown words and little static. The sound fades with the conversations, mixes with the tenors and altos of the early evening drinkers. "T for Texas, T for Tenne, tenne, tenne, tenne." Man with his back to the box, reaches behind and raps the plastic cover, jarring the needle. "See. She focuses on the music, trying to forget the bar.

Paula smiles at the mailorder hiker, plays for tips. "My heroes have always been cowboys and they still are it seems." She thinks of ways to kill the box. Thinks about breaking in and drowning the needle. "Sadly in search of..." Tries to focus on her customers' drink order, hearing scratches instead. Thinks about maybe walkin' over, handing over her tips, hiring a hit on the jukebox.

"What's the orange sky from?" The woman giggles as he

asks.

"Smoke from the fire, I s'pect."

"I've been telling my wife that there are bears around here. Hear they have grizzlies up in the Park." Paula shakes her head. "slowly in search of their sad..." Hearing the his words echo other men, knowing what's coming. "I wouldn't mind baggin' a couple for the den. It would look great above the fireplace. Like prima, you know." He laughs and picks up his beer.

"Look. I'm pretty sure the Park is closed at this end. why don't you go south to the Tetons?"

Bastard looks at her and smiles. "Hell, you just keep your concern to yourself. A woman like you might be afraid of some smoke, but I know better. I pay taxes so I got every right to go into that Park if I want to." Stupid fool. She shakes her head, smiles, holds her comments, knowin' they will cost her the tip.

"Looking for blue eyes." The jukebox skips, adding static. Seismo crew member, just in, yells for a draft, punching a buddy in the back as he waves. Shot of Canadian, draft, leans, pours, and turns, placing the glasses in front of Jerry. Marks the drinks on his tab. Turns, draws a pitcher, walks to the end of the bar, grabbing two glasses on the way by. Sets the pitcher in front of them. "Guess we don't rank mugs." The kid shoves his friend. "Hey barkeep, we deserve good service." Laughs. She pours their glasses,

sets them down and walks back down the bar. Stops on the way by Jessie and Jensen.

"You doin' ok?" He looks up, not quite focusing, glancing past her at the mirror. Thinks about dung and retirement.

"Yea." Looks back down. She moves towards the register, opens the drawer, uncrumples the seismo crew bills, and places them under the pressure clips. "Along time forgotten." Runs the rag over the back bar. "She's a good hearted woman in love with a good timin' man." The music passes her, bounces off of the back bar mirror, returning in echoes.

Billy walks in, band members trailin'. "It's time. Send a round of Grizzlies over when you get a chance." Winks at her. Slaps Jer on the back. "You gonna get Paula out there tonight." Winks again. Only does it when he's been drinkin'. Pulls green bottles from the cooler, pops the tops with the church key, placing them on a round, brown bartray. Cork surface soaking up the sweat. She picks up the tray and rounds the end of the bar, past the seismo crew and Jer. Places the tray on one of the speakers and heads back.

"I'd like to welcome you folks out this evenin'. It's a fine one for dancin'. The management has asked me to remind you folks about the nightly barstool contest out back. Hope you fella's along the bar are gonna give it a try." Reaches down, picks up a beer and hands it back to Lee. Kev tunes

his bass, tryin' to remember when he last played in a place that didn't smell like a brewery. He hates bars. Hates playin' with McTavish, but he can't figure anything else he'd rather do. Listens to McTavish's voice, trying to guess the key he'll start in. "Like to introduce a new song written by Lee Prather, our drummer. Hope you like it. One. Two." His guitar a half a step out of key. Billy doesn't notice, Grizzlies ruling his ear.

"Look at those bastards." Simmons picks up his martini, trying to focus on the Commissioners. "Bet they're out drinking on county funds. Come-on, whatcha want ta bet." Ten-Sleep watches Lee pound the bass, watches arm muscles. Wonders what happened to them. "See their pet bruiser's with 'em. I ought to get up and confront them." Looks at Ten-Sleep. "Christ, you're not even listening."

Kate walks back to where Jer is sitting, people watching. He looks, smiles, and tips the shotglass. Warm Canadian and cold beer. Sets it down and plays with the water circles on the polished wood. "See my boss is in tonight." Nods towards Simmons. "Damn if I know why. He usually drinks 'cross the way." Traces initials in the moisture from the beer.

"Probably has something to do with the commissioners." She laughs, imagines the headlines on Tuesday: Commissioner harrasses Cocktail Queen with tax-payer money. "So, any hot stories besides Ernie's ass pats?"



"Naw. Same shit. New never happens much around here, don'tcha know." He sketches Paula's profile with the water. "Booster club's havin' a cowplop contest this year to raise money. I'm s'pose to shoot a roll of the cow tomorrow." Adds details to the drawing, shading with the sweat.

"Cowplop?" Kate passes the barwipe over Jer's art, smearing Paula's image into the wax of the bar.

"Some fundraisin' scheme the PTA ginned up." Redraws the profile, adding details. Looks up. Smiles, knowing she'll wipe the bar in a couple of minutes. "Seems the general idea is to stick a cow over on the football field and..."

Paula stops and checks the commissioners. They need another round to speed the decision making. "My daddy always told me to be damn careful/ never to trust a man with an ace up his sleeve/ and devil in his eyes." Two couples, over by the dance floor, want a pitcher of Ranier and a couple of Olys. She walks to the bar, trying to remember why she wants to stay in the business. Man at one of the table pinches her on her way by. Jerry adds another to his hit list and turns back to Kate.

"Need four Raniers, a pitcher of the same, and two Olys. Take your time. I need a break somethin' awful." Kate moves off, collects a clean pitcher and glasses from the backbar. "How ya doin', Hon?" Paula reaches down, pulls off her left shoe, leans against him, and rubs her foot. "Damn.

I gotta get lower shoes. These damn things are 'bout to kill me."

Kate moves, bends, collecting bottles from the cooler, popping tops with the church key, and sets them on the round, brown bartray, ten ounces covering the necks. Long necks. "So, what's goin' with Lis?" She draws the pitcher, looking at Paula. Wipes the sides with a bar rag.

"Well, not real sure. Dave was pretty hacked about something. Be honest, I'm not really sure." Puts the pitcher on the tray. Thinks about dancin' and bein' seen. Pushes it towards Paula. Billy starts his Walker set. L A Freeway passes by, bouncin' off the mahogany and mirror.

"That a fact."

Paula picks up the tray and turns. He nods as she moves away. Billy shifts keys mid song. Grizzly having its effect.

Kate reaches out, barwipe extended, erasing Paula's profile, pours a scotch neat for the crew chief at the end of the bar, and waits for Jer to finish his round. Old man at the far end wants a draft. Not a regular, but she gives him a frosted mug anyway. Says he's going to the Park with his wife and grandson. Says he used to bring his kids here every summer. Takes the beer and swirls the contents, watching bubbles rise to the head. Woman next to him shifts and turns. Kate returns to Jerry with the barwipe.

He leans across and steals one of her Marlboros, watches the bar match flare. Leans over to talk to Jessie

about skunk infestations and the vigilante committee. "Yea. Got the chief to make a statement. You know, the police response to the skunk infestation. You know what that old sonuvabitch says to the newspaper." Plays with the cigarette, flicks the ashes, misses the ashtray. Kate reaches with a barwipe. "Well, I'spose we could always shoot 'em, but there really ain't a helluva lot we can do with them, don'tcha know." Takes a long drag. Exhales. "You'd never of heard that sort of response in Phoenix." Turns and watches Paula slip between the tables. McTavish takes another step out of key. Thrashing New Riders of the Purple Sage.

The smoke collects in small clouds at the ceiling, clouds that shift each time the door is open. Jer watches the smoke play off the end of his cigarette and wonders why he never bothers to quit. Maybe someday. The water pools at the bass of his mug. He ignores it in trade for the red tip. Traces the patterns of Paula's movement in the air.

Sne stoops, clears bottles on to the round, brown bartray. A businessman from Sidney, in town for the festival, reaches for her. "I don't get down here very often, hon. Whatcha doin' after hours?" Pulls her down onto his lap. She feels the hard-on through her skirt. Pushing away, she stands, straightens and turns. Jerry adds another to his hit list.

"Sorry, darlin'. 'Fraid my boyfriend wouldn't be too

nappy with me if I took off with someone else on a Friday night." Thinks about saving tip. Thinks about quitting, spending evenings at home, getting married. Measures the man against the tips needed for the double-lint control. "But, hell, if I wasn't already attached, I might be tempted." Shivers in her mind, tryin' to imagine this man. Middle-age spreadin' out and over the Sears Roebuck belt buckle. "What can I getcha, darlin'?"

"Take a martini, dry." She winks at him and moves to the next table.

Honey, do ya two-step? I  
 always liked a man who could  
 do a two-step waltz and a  
 jitterbug swing.

On Saturday nights, you can  
 walk down Broadway and listen  
 to sounds creating boundaries,  
 east and west.

I like ta work the nights when  
 there's a band playin' the  
 two-step. When you can feel  
 the rhythm comin' up through  
 the floor boards.

East be-bop pop, bee-gee heart  
 beat rhythms from the Crystal  
 Caddy.

Sometimes I'll take a break  
 and grab a partner.

Piano bar and rhythm machine  
 unsettling the dust with "New  
 York, New York" at the Golden  
 Rose.

Used to be I'd only hit on  
 married men.

Back beat blues, mixing

western swing with dusty  
depressions

everywhere else

Boundaries separating and  
creating the town and the  
lives.

Lives created by rhythm and  
tempo.

The constant flapping of loose  
roof tiles in the wind.

The patterns of the alfalfa  
crops just before harvest.

Movements of clouds passing

Hell, they're about as safe a  
partner as you can find,

and 'sides, the older ones  
sure as hell know how to swing  
a woman right.

The younger ones, hell, give  
'em time and they'll learn.

But it takes awhile, kinda  
grows on ya.

Takes a while to learn where  
ta put the hands

ta put the feet, ta know what  
dance to pick for the rhythm.

across and beyond the horizon.

The wind mixes  
with the blood.

On Saturday nights, I stand  
back and watch the patterns on  
the dance floor.

patterns spinning in and out,

across, through.

Watch while dancers pattern  
their lives on the dance  
floor.

The swing gets mixed

with the blood.

Gets mixed and comes out after  
seven when the croud's  
beginnin' to build.

I like spinning out and bein'  
caught 'bout the time I feel  
like I'm not goin to stop.

There's somethin about bein'  
spun, knowin the hand's gonna  
catch ya as ya pass.

Like to go dancin' on my  
nights off sometimes, although  
I used ta do it a damn sight  
more than I do now.

Used to be, you could walk

into any bar in town on a  
weekend night and find a good  
dance band.

Music, defined by northers and  
chinooks,

There were some you could  
really put cher feet down to.

patterns reflecting the lives  
of dancers.

Had a partner, a few years  
back, that wasn't much into  
talk, but, damn, he could do a  
jitterbug and a two-step waltz  
better'n any man I've ever  
known.

I stand back behind the bar  
and watch the dancers

He understood the patterns and  
knew how to swing a woman out

compare movements and connect.

and bring her back without  
losin' a beat.

Dance, movement, rhythms  
define our culture.

Sometimes, when I'm listenin'  
to Mctavish, I can see him,



just kinda picture him out on  
that floor.

Sometimes we sit in the  
darkness of the apartment,

When you got a good bunch of  
two-steppers,

speak of patterns, movements,  
rhythms.

you'll see movements that are  
just as fancy as any ballet.

You speak of clefs and the  
keys that map your life.

You can give me a good dance  
band to work to anyday. People  
are just in a better mood. My  
tips always go up the nights  
we've got music, even from the  
tight-assed tourists.

I feel your movements in the  
dark, on the dancefloor. Watch  
as you move to rhythms,  
defined by signitures, tunes  
arranged by clef and key.

They come through here and  
don't know a damn thing about  
dancin'. Half the time, they

either don't like the music,  
or they sit back and tap their  
feet a half beat off.

Listen as you talk about music  
and rhythm as something  
created out of the soul.

You can spot 'em as soon as  
they hit the floor. They've  
got no goddam sense for the  
music. Just stand out there  
movin' cause they don't know  
what else ta do.

Listen

Sometimes, they remind me of a  
bunch of drunk geese just  
wobblin' around.

feeling the patterns and  
rhythms of time and space,

Sometimes, they seem to be  
afraid to even touch once  
they're out there. Stand about  
four, maybe five feet apart.  
Movin' for the helluvit.

patterns and rhythms creating  
soul,

They've got no damn connection

to the music. Just got no  
sense of the rhythm.

passing through and beyond.

When I'm listenin' to the  
radio, I can see and feel the  
rhythms.

In private, we dance our  
connections.

I guess, in a way, those  
rhythms have pretty much  
defined by life for so damn  
long, I would miss them if  
they weren't there.

In public, we dance our  
cultures.

## IX

Lee sits back, sticks rapping the snare, left leg pumping the bass beat. Listens to Al on pedal steel, sliding to keep pace with McTavish. Sits back laughin' cause he doesn't have to keep tune, just raps rhythm at the back of the stage. Same rhythm, song to song, requires no thought. Raps snare, pumps bass, watches the women pass, tight Levies matching the movement of his sticks. Watches Paula cross the bar, step up, delivering another round to McTavish. Each representing a half step more out of key. Thinks about the tight levies clicking beats in the off hours. Paula approaches from the side, looks at him, offers him a beer, and wonders why he sticks with McTavish. Shakes his head no, and watches her move towards the front corner. Back beats McTavish in his mind.

She bends, picks up the empty cigarette pack from the floor and sets it on the round brown bartray. Looks at Simmons chain-light a Winston, tossing the spent match towards the black ashtray. Misses and lets it sit, smoking against the rough cut pine. She reaches towards the ashtray, stacking the clean one on top, removes both, sets the clean one back on the table. Stands, looking at Ten-sleep, wondering why she even bothers covering up the dirty ashtray. Why not just set down the clean one, pick up the dirty one. Makes sense. Time economy. But the thoughts don't

change her actions. "I got eat a cheeseburger. Drink a six-pack. Take a Darvon to kill." Stands there looking at Ten-sleep, nodding in the matte black and red vinyl chair. Reaches and shakes his shoulder. "Come on. Wake up darlin'. Why don'tcha go home?"

Simmons looks at her. Glares and thinks whore. "He can't. He's helping collect the news, don'tcha know." Tries to match the local speech. "I'm a rodeo-deo-deo-deo-d cowboy." Tries to look like a local out for the night. Polished black shoes and creased pants look out of place. "Bordering on insane." McTavish bass runs a scale as ending. Simmons looks at her, trying to remember the last time he bought a woman. Tries to remember how to raise the subject without causing trouble. Knows she hooks like the rest. Do in Denver, do here. Imagines leaving the bills on the dresser, or maybe the coffee table, on his way out. Figures she's like the rest. Lives in an apartment over one of the bars, or maybe the autoparts store. Gives copies of her key to customers, tellin' them to sleep it off, and winks as she takes another order. Like the rest. Figures thirty-five at best since the cheap ones are fifty in Denver. "We'll have another round." Looks at her, starting with three inch heels.

"I don't think he can handle another round." Nods towards Ten-sleep. Head thrown back.

Lee raps cymbals. Rolls sticks across the brass as

McTavish introduces the next song. Starts in, G running to C running to F. "She's a railroad lady. Just a little" She turns and looks at Simmons. "bit shady. Spends her whole life" Watches as his eyes travel ankle to thigh. "on a train." Jerry adds his boss to his hit list. "She's a semi-" Thinks about committing murder. "goodlooker, but the" Slipping through the backdoor on the night when Simmons is pasting up. "fast rails" Slipping in and strangling him with the power cord from the Headliner. "they took her" Or, perhaps, waiting until he goes to check negatives in the darkroom, creeping in, and drowning him in the stop bath or the developer. "She's trying, just trying" Paula looks towards him and back at Simmons. "to get home again." "Doesn't look like he's doin' you much good in his present condition."

"Yea. S'pose so. Bring him a cup of coffee." Imagines reaching for the zipper in the back. "Also, tell your bartender I like my martinis dry." Thinks about the bars in Denver. Backbeat bass plays his mind, driving thoughts like nails. Thinks about reaching out and up, pulling her down, asking her price. "When I say dry, I mean it."

Paula looks at him, wondering what constitutes dry. Figures Kate will know. "I'll have 'em for you in a minute." moves back towards the bar, passage blocked by the seismo tables. Listens to the chorus again, trying to decide if she tunes she serves to. Sometimes thinks about writing Jerry

Jeff and asking him, asking Waylon, asking Willie to write new songs so she can have a change. "Just a semi-goodlooker, but the fast rails they took her." Collects some of the empties on her way by. "If you fellas can wait a couple, I'll be back to clear away some of this."

Crew chief, nodding time with McTavish, looks up and smiles. "Take your time, love. We could do with a couple more pitchers when you get the chance, but no rush."

Refocuses back on a pair of Levies. A younger crew member reaches for Paula, wonders about the price.

Jerry pushes his draft between his hands. Tries not to think about random hands and straying thoughts. Thinks about three incn neels catching in the cracks in front of Myjanos, as she checks out the front-loading dryers with the double-lint control. Draws her, cast nip to ankle, in the sweat from his draft. "Jer? You doin' ok, there?" Looks at Kate looking. Dark eyes, black under black eyelashes, under black hair, hair half down her back in the backbar mirror. Tries to imagine white and breed moving to music, moving to rhythms and patterns. Tries to figure why Kate sticks rather than moving. East. White and breed.

Kate leans against the backbar, shifting her weight from one leg to the other. "a railroad lady, just a little" Glances at the space-saver digital clock under the counter. "bit shady." Figures she's doing well when there haven't been any fights by nine. "Tryin', just trying to get

home again." McTavish thanks the audience, tells them of slow songs. Talks about moving your hand down, defining waist lines and squeezing. Talks about pattern and love. People moving on the dancefloor like they would in bed. watches McTavish play up to a woman at the table just in front. He removes the mike, bends over, sings "You are the woman that I always dream of" in her ear. He reminds her of Tony Orlando. Needs girl singers singing do-wha in the background, word bopping to Lee's backbeat. Jess is lucky he didn't stick, moved with his guitar and his rambling arpeggios to Northern California. Clean cut teaching music to seventh graders. Thinks about the ventilations systems in the bars back east, and about moving east, away from McTavish and the Park tourists and the constant sound of the wind.

Seismo kid wanders over looking for drafts. Blue jeans and a dusty Stockman's Saloon "Liquor in the front, Poker in the Rear" Tee-shirt. "Hey, squaw. How 'bout gettin' me a couple more pitchers?" Jerry reaches over, grabs the kid by the collar and shoves back. Kate looks up, over the bar. Sees Paula crossing from the front corner. She reaches across towards Jerry, trying to catch the collar of his shirt and haul him back on his seat. "Let it go, Jer. If I got pissed everytime..." He doesn't hear her. Focuses on the kid in front.

"We don't use those terms here." The kid laughs.



"Fuckin' drunk." Turns to Kate. "You can send 'em over to the table with the old lady." Nods towards Paula. Jerry spins, catching the kid in the stomach.

"You goddam little..." Jensen steps in between, catches the kid by the shoulder, and holds him at arms length. Motions to the crew chief at the table. "Think you'd better either gag him, or take 'em outta here. He's gonna get into some sizable trouble, if he keeps up."

The crew chief grabs the kid's arm, yells walking towards the front door. Paula steps off the platform. "Jesus, can't leave you alone for ten minutes." Winks at Kate. "What's the trouble?" Jerry shrugs, turns towards his beer. Thinks about whites and breeds and girlfriends and marriage. Sees her cutting back the delphiniums in late July. Hauling compost and bedding the plants. Has a hard time seeing her as old. Can't picture it. Pictures, instead, Kate young. Pictures kids as children, not drafting age. But they don't have the draft anymore. Reaches for one of Kate's Marlboros. Raps the end on the counter, tamping down the tobacco so it burns slower. Strikes the match, watching the yellow cyan blue flame flare, build off the end of the cardboard stick.

"Let's see. I need a couple of sloe screws, a sunrise, two pitchers, another martini. But this time, make it dry. Must of gotten too much vermouth in the last one." Rounds the corner and sets down the round brown bartray and

empties. "Oh, and a cup of coffee." Watches Kate rinse out the plastic pitchers, suds sticking and streaking the sides. Runs them under the tap and sets them on the grey steel drain board. "Jesus, it's a busy one tonight." Scans the room. "They're out drinkin' early tonight."

Kate laughs, reaching for the empties. "Give it another hour or so and all those folks from the festival will be in." Bends half around, depositing them into the sectioned box reserved for returnables. "How's the beer garden?" Glasses into the lukewarm water.

Paula bends, readjusts the strap on her left foot. "Don't know. I'm just about to head out that way." Shifts the heel. "Damn, I gotta get different shoes."

She looks at the glass supply getting short. "Think you could slow down a bit and let me catch up?" Paula smiles. "It's been a helluva evenin'." Pulls two plastic pitchers off the backbar. Sets one on the drainer below the counter, pulls the tap for the other. "What do you mean wants it dry?"

Paula finishes emptying the tips from her pocket. "Said it wasn't dry enough, or something to the effect."

She finishes the first pitcher, deposits it on the round brown bartray, and starts the second. "Like hell. What does he want? Straight gin?" Head runs over and down. She reaches for the barwipe and runs it down the side. "Here you go. I'll have the rest for you in a couple." Paula slides

the tray off the bar. "Coffee'll take a while. I'm gonna have to brew some." She turns to collect ten ounces and tequila. Pours, watching the grenadine mix with the orange juice. Shades changing. Likes the colors of the drink. Picks up a manhattan and pours gin, no vermouth, and stabs an olive with a blue sword. Sets the drinks on one of the round brown bartrays and starts on the screws. Sloe gin, Southern Comfort. Jigger of each in the blender, orange juice to the top. Blender whines. Jessie snouts for another white russian, pulls Jensen towards the dancefloor, forgetting the Major and the epon salts. Passing Paula as she rubs a shoulder guaranteeing tips.

"What's yer pleasure, fellas?" One of them looks up at her, grins. Looks young. "'Fraid I'm gonna have ta ask for an I.D. guys." Each rises, reaches for packer wallets, flagging them as students. She takes each one, looking, checking for 68. All pass, two barely. She smiles and hands them back. Kid on the far side punches his friend. "Go ahead, ask her." She looks at them, younger than her nephews, 'cept one. Wonders why they start drinking and why, on Friday night, they'd be spendin' their time in here. College kids hang at the Black Garter.

"...wondering if the barstool contest is tonight?" Catches tag ends. Sounds mixing patterns of movement and the back beat rhythm of Lee's bass. Looks at the kid, shaking her head, and motions at her ear. "The barstool contest."

Kate walks the bar, checking drinks. Old man at the end, working on his third draft, smiles and motions for his tab. "I mean, like we were layin' out the cable 'n' charges...grandson's fourteen. I've got a picture of him in...just passed in over a twenty degree slope and that pole sittin' surveyor...I'll tell you Ernie, we're gonna have ta do... "Livin' it day to day"... field's look about..."Just lettin' it roll, lettin' the high times carry low..." Reaches for the barwipe draped over the tap, pulls the empties, and wipes the sweat and ashes from the bar. Kid at the end tips schnapps, clear liquid spreading out, over the edge. "I'm really sorry about this. We were just..."

"Don't worry about it." Smiles at him, reaching for the roll of paper towels. Turns back and wipes. Pours a second shot, pushes it across to him. Smiles. Nods. "It's on me."

Paula returns, exchanging bartrays. "Know you said you wanted a vacation, but couldn't work it this time. Need three pitchers, couple a margaritas, a g'n't, and two Olys."

Kate walks back down the bar, stopping long enough to scoop a tab off the bar and deposit it in the cash register. "Poured straight gin. If that isn't dry enough, tell 'im to join AA." She smiles, moving past McTavish announcing the last song of the set.

Lee watches, pounds back beats against the mirror. Keeps rhythm with the snare and left leg.

Get a band like McTavish, and hell, ya spend the whole damn night movin'. I do anyway, but I don't seem to notice it quite so much other nights.

Sometimes, when the house was quiet, when my father had shuffled for the last time to the fridge and back, I'd sit and look out the window.

It can be a real pain, trying to walk around all these people. The place is packed and you always have some sonuvabitch feelin' ya up as ya go by.

The mountains glowed gray green in the moonlight. The color of sage at the top.

Guess I hate that more'n 'bout anything.

I'd look at the the dark slice of the West Fork, runnin' up past Silver Run.

Seems like just 'cause yer  
servin' drinks, it gives 'em  
the right.

Sit and wonder what Silver Fun  
looked like before his people  
arrived, mixing with her  
people.

I spend eight 'r' ten hours  
haulin' my ass, wipin' down  
tables, talkin' to folks that  
got sense what work is.

Wondered how her people saw  
the bench and the West Fork  
before his people came.

That's the way my Daddy was.  
Had this idea that bar  
waitresses aren't a damn sight  
better than hookers on a  
street corner.

Sit and look across High Bug,  
trying to picture the mountain  
without the ski run cutting  
angles in the slope.

Never mind that I spend most  
of my time puttin' up with  
shit that most people would

pro'bly walk away from.

wondered if the dust hung  
different in the air, if the  
wind played different patterns  
in the bunch grass and the  
sage.

They come in here, drink for a  
couple of hours, pay their  
tabs, and stiff ya cause yer  
part of the atmosphere and  
ain't worth a tinker's damn.

I heard the jokes, the  
laughter all the way through  
school.

Sometimes, it hurts like hell.

Heard the neighbors saying  
"Isn't it too bad she had to  
look like her Mama."

I'd like to see some of 'em  
get out here and do what I do.

She was small, dark. Met Daddy  
when he was workin' over in  
Coal Strip and would come to  
the Friday night dances over  
in Lodgegrass.

I'd like to see 'em try to

balance a tray, walk in heels,  
try to slip between the tables  
when this place is packed,

He promised the world beyond  
the reservation.

and try to keep your damn  
sense of self, as Breed calls  
it, when every damn jackass in  
the territory thinks ya belong  
to 'im, but isn't willin' to  
pay for the pleasure.

Guess he married her when he  
still liked breeds, still  
liked lookin' at her dark  
eyes, behind dark lashes,  
under dark hair, half down ner  
back.

People can be real  
sonuvabitches when they've  
been drinkin'. They come in  
here, lookin' for a good time,  
figurin' yer part of the deal.  
The seismo crews and the  
lowlander's are the worst.

John Mueller nicknamed me  
Breed in grade school, a name



that stuck, still sticks.

Half the seismo kids aren't old enough to drink and when you card 'em, they get real pissed and start yellin'. It's hard, sometimes, to tell a kid he isn't old enough ta drink and to come back in a couple a years when he's got some whiskers.

Michael, ashamed to be seen, kept distance. He was light, like Daddy. Light eyes, mixed skin, light hair. He'd disappear in the mornings, get out of the house before his friends were out.

Lowlanders are different kinds of drinkers. Just don't understand what the altitude will do ta ya. They'll order up a couple three rounds and put 'em down in no time, usually on an empty stomach.

Friday nights, he'd go cruise with friends, but they'd never

pick him up at the house. He'd meet 'em someplace, up at one of the bars.

Doesn't do much good ta tell 'em ta take 'er easy 'cause they aren't used to it. Damn fools never listen, and then spend the evenin' bein' sick as dogs.

Took a job with an oil company out of high school, and left. Hating like our father.

Sometimes they'll get obnoxious as hell. Act like they own the place and everything in it, including me.

We had an old brown Lay-z-boy recliner in the front corner of the living room. After he got layed off, he'd spend hours, just sitting. A slow rock. Left arm stretched along the chocolate brown arm of the chair, hand enclosing a Bud.

You know they're drunk when

those nice tones disappear and  
they start callin' ya honey  
and baby and bitch. If ya want  
a tip, ya just shut up and  
smile,

The sweat from the beer  
collected on the brown vinyl  
in small pools, would run, in  
small streams, down the side  
of the chair, beading on the  
linoleum.

and hope like hell ya get a  
chance to dump a drink on  
their laps, on those fancy ass  
hiking pants that only get  
worn once a year. I've only  
done it once.

Mama timed running the sweeper  
to his soaps. He never moved,  
except to shuffle into the  
kitchen, open the fridge,  
shuffle back.

Remember walkin' over to the  
bar and orderin' a drink for  
'im that he'd never order  
himself. One of those sticky

drinks with the mint liqueur  
that stains deep. The kind  
that soaks and stays in the  
fabric.

I don't know if he ever looked  
for another job. I don't  
remember him ever going out  
and interviewing, or driving  
over to the employment office  
in Billings.

He'd been a real pain all  
evenin'. Kept callin' me mama  
and bitch, and would lean out  
and make a grab.

He'd just sit there, watching  
Days of Our Lives and General  
Hospital and re-runs of Andy  
Griffith, until dinner.

Now, that's ok with the guys I  
know. I don't pay much note to  
their squeezes 'cause it's the  
way they are and you figure  
it's the way it's always been.

Shuffle in, drop into one of  
the chairs, and move his food  
around the plate.

Anyway, this lowland sonuvabitch grabbed right there in front of his wife and the whole damn bar. Least wise, that's how it felt. He just sat there and laughed when I turned around. Laughed at my anger. Laughed, saying if I couldn't take it, I was in the wrong business.

At seven, Jan Meyers would stop, pick 'em up, and they'd go down to the Congressional. He damn near lived there the entire time I was growing up.

I marched over to Breed and ordered up the stickiest drink she could make. I picked it up and walked back over to that bastard. He didn't even have time to react. I just poured it over his head.

At ten, when the bartender cut him off, he'd come home. I could hear him in the dark, yelling breed. Could hear the

snuffle and fridge door. Could  
hear muffled anger coming up  
the stairs, crawling the hall,  
bouncing against the bedroom  
door.

Damn, it was a helluva mess to  
clean up. It went all over the  
place, matted down that slick  
hair of his, soaked into his  
fancy-ass Western shirt, least  
wise that's what they call  
'em.

Sometimes, he'd stand in the  
living room, shouting  
responsibility. The fault of  
his unemployment settlin' on  
her dark hair. Nobody hires a  
breed-lover.

He stood up and started  
yellin' like the world was  
gonna end. If I hadn't been so  
damn mad, I would've stood  
there and laughed.

I can't remember if she ever  
said anything back. Probably  
not. She was like her mother.

It wasn't her way.

Kept callin' me a fuckin' whore and yellin' that he could do anything he damn well pleased and that he was goin' to talk to my boss, or as he said, "the pimp that owns this place" and get my ass canned. Wanted to know what in the fuck had happened to all that western hospitality he'd always heard of.

On the nights he was yellin' strong in the front room, I'd climb out of bed and step to the window, hoping I'd stepped light enough to keep him from climbing the stairs.

Hell, they probably heard him all the way down to the Nickle.

I'd look out across High Bug and the bench at the dark cleft defining the West Fork, and Silver Run.

I remember lookin' over at

Breed an' she was laughin' so  
hard she was darn near doubled  
over. I coulda killed her on  
the spot.



Jerry sketches dancers in his notepad, a green steno pad he uses to record the town, the land. Sketches the dancers, reaching, extending, crossing arms and paths on the dance floor. Sketches the tourists, separate from the rest, from each other, shuffling to Lee's backbeat, Jan's fiddle. Tries to remember the last time he tried cuttin' the floor with Paula. Been awhile. He leans against the bar. Under page soaking up the sweat from his draft, warming from neglect.

"Hey. Jer?" Kate reaches across, touches his shoulder. "Earth to Jerry." He turns, looks up. "You doin' ok? Need another?"

He contemplates the mug, trying to remember the count. "No. But I'll take a cup of that coffee you just brewed." She turns, pulls the cream from the small fridge under the counter, pours, adds the coffee on top.

"Here ya go." Pushes the cup across the bar. "What are you drawin'?" Pulls the barwipe from the tap and passes it over the polished wood. He offers the pad across the bar and turns back to the dancers. "Damn, these are really good." Sets the pad back, smiles, and moves down the bar, checking customers. Seismo crew regrouping, growing at the end.

Jerry picks up the sketchpad and returns to the dancefloor. Thinks about murder and art. Thinks about the

solitude of prisons. Wonders what they give doodlers. Life sentences for drawing noses on the Commissioners legislating passes at clerks and cocktail queens. Glances at Simmons, Ten-sleep. Tries to decide if he should mingle. Discounts and returns to the dancers.

Paula checks drinks with the mail-order hikers. Another round of pineapple and Corona ordered up. She bends to replace the ashtray with an empty. The black plastic ashtray with the Budweiser logo printed across the bottom, ridge in the center to catch and hold the butts. "You folks doin' ok?" The bear catcher looks at her. Tries to guess bust size in the back of his mind. Tries to remember why he wanted to come west for the summer. Tries to remember ESPN, thinks about the reruns of the Black Hawk Islander's game, the woman two seats in front of the camera.

"John, you want to go across the street and eat?" His wife, pineapple and umbrella, shifts and reaches across. Shakes his shoulder while looking up at Paula. "We drove a bit today. Don't mind him. He got a bit nervous driving across all that empty space." Couple across the table, smile. "Were gonna stick around for awhile. We'll take a couple more of these things.

She looks at their glasses, trying to remember what they ordered the first time. Trying to remember if she even took their first order. Man behind squeezes her waist for attention. "When you're done with them, we could use with

another round." Attention shifted. She tries to remember. Can't and asks. Screwdriver and bourbon and ginger. Southerners. Sometimes thinks about shifting careers, shifting out and away from the bars and the men with wandering hands and the wives that glare as though she's some sort of hooker playing for more than tips.

Lisa walks in with her latest, squeezes past the seismo crew members lining the bar, and walks over to the Commissioners' table. She introduces her ranchhand, leans over and kisses Sven Larsen, sits on Ernie Tinten's lap, stroking the bald spot above his left ear. Leans over, whispers pointing back towards the bar and Jerry. He watches her. Watches as she whispers, points. Wants to know why she's pointing at him. Rummages through the morgue of newstories he's written lately.

McTavish slurs the last song of the set. Stops half way through and talks about yoëling and the local mountains, and the fire over in Yellowstone. "Folks. We're gonna finish out this set with an old favorite. Just a reminder for all you folks heading towards the park. If you wanna go in, you'll have to swing over through Gardiner and down. Forest Service says..." Bear catcher with the Corona yells about taxes. Chair flips as he stands.

"I pay goddamnit. I send a fucking check every year. I got a right." Continues as his wife smiles at Paula. Mumbles about driving across emptiness. Makes him nervous.

Jerry sketches as the dancers step out, come together, swing, extend. Erases Lisa from the page, replacing her with an electric chair for Ernie. Wonders how many years he'd get if he strapped him down and flipped the switch. Doesn't like being laughed at. Mingled glances bouncing off the backbar and the mirror. Kate pours a couple of pitchers for Paula, one for the seismic crew at the end of the bar. The wife continues to smile.

Sometimes, when the wind is  
 coming off the East Rosebuds,  
 when the plastic pushes  
 against the glass pains,  
 molding against the mullions,  
 I listen to voices.

Used ta watch the electric  
 storms ridin' the Crazies,  
 watch the light'nin' hit,  
 bounce offa the eastern  
 slopes.

Haunted in mid-winter. Voices  
 calling memories riding  
 northners.

It's a helluva sight, just  
 watchin' ti go from the clouds  
 down and hit. At night, it's a  
 kinda lavender and straw.  
 Turns the sky velvet.  
 Used ta get up an watch. There  
 was hell ta pay if ya got  
 caught, if Papa heard us.

Tell me breed is ok.

That's about the only time I  
 ever really thought there was

somethin' like a god up there.

I guess I always thought he was  
pissed off on those nights.

Tell me to leave, pull roots  
and move.

It's hard to believe in much  
of anything when you got to  
work and half your damn family  
thinks you're hookin' for a  
livin'.

Tell me that languages run  
parallel, mingle, twist and  
mold like sage trunks. Play  
against, with other languages.

Hell. I'd like to believe in  
somethin'. I'd like to believe  
that people are good by  
nature. I'd like to believe  
that you give 'em a chance,  
they're not gonna hassle you  
about something or another.  
But I got no proof of that.

I came back 'cause I thought I  
was losing my language. I  
couldn't hear the wind playin'  
along the front range, piling

snow and dust against the  
storm fences of the east  
bench.

From what I can tell, East  
Coasters are 'bout the most  
cause oriented group of people  
I've ever met. Sure ya get  
those people up from the West  
Coast that want ta save whales  
and slap deposits on beer  
cans. They're a bit on the  
crazy side, but safe. Ask me,  
the folks back East are rabid.

I couldn't find the patterns  
of my grandmother, my mother  
in the cross-sectioned skyline  
of St. Paul.

Had a group of women come into  
the bar a couple of seasons  
back. Sat there and told me  
that they were drinkin' here  
cause we were woman operated  
and didn't have a phallus in  
the name. Had to ask Breed for  
a translation. Thought she was  
goin' ta split a side tellin'

me what they meant.

You drug me off to look at the Native American exhibit at the Natural History Museum. Looked at my heritage ranked right up there with the sabertooth tiger and the mastodon.

Got ta wonder about women that make wantin' to be a man a cause. Just doesn't seem quite right, does it?

My grandmother lives south of Lodgegrass. Was raised south of Lodgegrass at the base of the Priors. She sits out on the backstep of the government built house, smoking Lucky Strikes and drinking Wild Turkey that her son brings down from Hardin.

Don't think I'd ever want to go to the East Coast. Listen to the news sometimes, and they're always gettin' the back up over somethin' and marchin' on Washington.



In the summers, my mother  
would send Jess and me down  
with her brother to visit our  
grandmother and to learn the  
naming.

I think if I were president,  
I'd string up some barbed wire  
and tell 'em ta quit  
interferin'.

She'd sit out on those back  
steps, grey weathered like her  
back yard, and tell us the  
namin' while taking long draws  
off the bottle. Sit there and  
tell us to learn 'em and  
forget 'em, cause they didn't  
exist anymore.

East Coasters seem to be into  
causes, or least wise, that's  
what they call 'em.

I would sit on her back porch,  
looking across towards the  
Priors. Her land slopes off  
and down, running into the  
Little Big Horn, south of  
where Custer ran into,

through, past, and up, meeting  
battalions on the opposite  
side.

There was one that came in  
here a couple of years back.  
She laid into Breed for  
sellin' out her people. Don't  
that beat all. This woman was  
about white as the day yer  
born, standin' there tellin'  
Breed ta be true to her  
heritage.

She's Northern Cheyenne. Not  
Crow. Living on the Crow  
reservation because it is  
home, was history.

Told her she was sorry for her  
since she was sellin' out to  
the establishment, letting  
some men with Doctors in  
something steal her  
birthright. Breed just stood  
there lookin at her.

On the warm nights, she sits  
on the back stoop and looks at  
the Priors, trying to remember

their histories, their names.

Sne tries to name them,  
snaring her memory with a  
bottle of wild Turkey her son  
brought down from Hardin.

The woman went on about  
writing protest poems and  
join' traditional beadwork and  
picketing the Indian bureau up  
in Billings. Never mind the  
fact that sne can't even sew  
on a damn button without  
stabbin' herself.

Sne'll be seventy five come  
October. My mother is fifty-  
seven. I'm thirty-two. We  
stack generations in the  
family.

Asked her wasn't she proud of  
her heritage and all.

Language, history, naming,  
passed mother to daughter.

Asked her why wasn't she  
carrying signs and wearin  
buttons protestin'.

Our language no longer exists

outside of the namin' in  
 families. The government and  
 settlers couldn't pronounce  
 them so they renamed the  
 mountains, flowers, rivers.

Breed just stood there.

Stripped the mountains of  
 their histories. Stole the  
 sounds that run rapids on the  
 Snake and Yellowstone.

Sometimes, when the wind plays  
 against the plastic, I try to  
 hear the names floating past  
 Silver Run and Mount Maurice.

I guess trying to figure out  
 the words to say or something.

My mother moved back to the  
 reservation when my father  
 died. Moved back, naming her  
 history with the Priors. Try  
 to hear her tongue twist down  
 the West Fork, down the East  
 Rosebud, down the Clark's  
 Fork, down the Yellowstone.

But what the hell do ya say to  
 some lady from the coast who

deoesn't know a damn thing  
about your life, and sure as  
hell wouldn't live it,

I tnik now about going east,  
learning a new language,  
listening to tongues curling  
around, stumbling.

standin' there tellin' you to  
change 'cause you're not doin'  
tnings the way she thinks they  
ought ta be done.

Think about goin' back east  
where the names are captured,  
held behind glass, in a  
natural history museum.

Kel stands in the doorway, surveying the confusion from a safe distance. Doesn't like bars, doesn't like the noise bouncing against the ceiling, disrupting the cigarette smoke gathering. Sometimes wonders how to explain summers spent twenty-five hundred miles west of Boston, to colleagues spending summers in Europe. Sometimes runs scales on the cello, looking out the back window towards Silver Run. Tries to picture Boston, cobbled streets, narrow, dark in the late afternoon, while looking at the space opening up left of the ski run, running out east along the bench. Tries to remember what the apartment looks like, Museum of Art posters framed in silver clashing with the Native American Kate sends. Watches Kate pull the tap handle. Watches her move, twist, seeing her, imagines her thin back, dark against the white sheets at mid-morning. Thinks of running a finger down the spine, along the edges of the shoulder blades. Wonders if Kate looks any different during the time when twenty-five hundred miles separates them. Spots Jessie from the Golden Rose at mid bar and walks towards her.

Jessie looks at the white russian. She likes to coat the sides of the glass, watch the liquid layer, bead, and run back in small streams, gathering in the bottom. Motions to Kate for another and waits, coating the sides with the last ounce. Thinks about finding someone to take home, to

massage her feet, offer her epon salts and orgasms. Can see the hands working on her insteps, feel the soreness. Tries to feel her feet obscured by white russians. Turns and sees Kel walking towards her carrying pipes. "Hey. How was the concert?"

"About par I guess. Wish we'd vary the selection a bit. I've been flying out here for ten years just to play the same damn songs. Getting a bit tired of 'Cock of the North.'"

Kate wanders over. Smiles and reaches across for the pipes. "I'm going to go over and sit with the guys. We thought we might play a couple if you don't mind and McTavish doesn't get insulted." Kate nods, shrugs.

"You want the usual?" Looks at Kel, at the dark eyes. Tries to picture them on mid-winter nights. Wants to reach across, hug, acknowledge presence. Instead, turns and pours the scotch and water, Glen Livet and a splash. Watches Kel cross to the pipers' table while she adds rocks to the ten ounce. Carries the drink to the end of the bar, sets it on a round, brown bartray and walks back towards Jessie. "You need another?"

Jessie tries to remember why she quit college. History of Economics. "Jessie? You doin' ok?" Looks up, nods, and looks back at the glass. Rolls the white liquid around the sides, watches it turn clear to frosted. Tries to remember the name. Something like Jones or Johnson, or something, up

at the university. Remembers hating eight o'clock classes, and the sound of the alarm clock on the mornings after she'd been over at the Stockman tipping tequila. Remembers walking in, slumping into one of those formica and metal chairs with the built-in desk and trying to take notes on the history of American Economics. He was a monotone. Looks up at Kate.

"You gonna make a fresh pot of coffee. I'd ask for a cup, but I know how long it's been cookin'. I wouldn't even tar a roof with that snit." Kate laughs, nods, and reaches back for the glass pot, empties the remainder into the sink and runs fresh water. She moves across, reaching under for a pre-measured package, silver plastic, tears the top and empties into a filter. Jessie watches her back, watches the motions of her shoulders, arms, neck as she reaches down, stands, shifts. He was a monotone. Monotoned words and dates and statistics at eight a.m.. She tried to take notes, gave up and waitressed. Always meant to go back, but somehow just couldn't quite gin up a good reason to quit work.

"Coffee will be ready in a couple of minutes. You still want a cup?" She nods. Thinks about economic history and Epson salts.

Seismo kid yells for another pitcher of Bud. Kate nods and moves back down, reaching for a plastic pitcher on her way by.

Paula waits at the end of the bar. "Need two pitchers of Ranier and three scotchs for the pipers. Also, need



another martini and some fresh coffee."

"How're the Commissioners' doin'?"

"Drinkin' or otherwise?" She shifts, clears her pockets of the tips, adding quarters, more dollars. Thinks about the double lint control. Ivory. She could go with ivory and do chocolate woodwork. She saw it in one of those women's magazines by the checkout line. Thought about buying a copy just to look at the kitchen ideas. Thinks about the article saying country's in. Thinks about ivory and chocolate and those brown gingham appliance covers in the shape of chickens. Wonders if they make them large enough to cover the mixing bowl set she inherited from her mother.

"Figures they'd do half their business tonight. Wonder if Simmons..." Paula looks at Kate.

"God, sometimes I feel like I'm losin' it. Did you ask me somethin'?"

"Skip it." Kate places the pitchers on one of the round, brown bartrays. "How many glasses?"

"Five. Others are drinkin' scotch." Turns and scans the crowd. "Think they're about primed for the barstool?"

"Give it another fifteen. Think we advertised ten, maybe ten-thirty as the starting time." She picks up a barwipe and runs it along the edge of the bar. Leaves damp streaks against the dark wood. Thinks about the changes she'd make if she owned the place. Jukebox would be the first to go. McTavish starts again "Come on Mama take a red.

Ooo there mama." Jukebox would go first, then the hanging lamp and the pool table. Hates listening to the banter on mid-winter evening. Balls clicking shots, abusing the bumper and the back wall as they're chipped up and over, sent smacking against the dark panel of the bathroom dividers. "Take a red, take a red, till it really fucks your head." Listens to McTavish changing words mid-stride, changing key with each beer.

McTavish steps to the microphone, readjusts the angle, and clears his throat over the sound. "Folks, we'd like to finish out this set with a song that pretty much expresses our view of what we're doin' here." Turns to the band. Slide guitar moves up the neck, starts the melody. Glass slide playing against the metal strings. Lee light raps, heavy raps back beat. "Nights I like to play the places, neon lights and smilin' faces." Words blend, bounce against the crowd, stir up the dancers two-step jitterbugging on the tile floor. Lisa pulls Ernie up. "Just playin' that honky-tonk music." Moves him across the floor to the slide guitar. She moves, spins. He stays stationary, arm extending only to catch her. "I've been in bars I didn't care for. I asked myself what was I there for." Ernie extends his arm catching and push Lisa spinning out. "I wouldn't change things" Ducks under. "even if I could. I'm just playin'" Paula sets two more pitchers on the seismo table, watches Lisa dance, spin out, snap back "that honky-tonk music. That's the kind I

like to play." Drum rolls the end, slide guitar working up the scale.

"Folks, we're gonna take a break now for the barstool contest out back." Reaches for his beer. Takes a draw, shoving the label, rolling it up the bottle with his thumb. "Now, before you go out, let me give you the rules of the game. Ya gotta tip back on two legs and balance for ten seconds." Takes another draw. "Now, you gonna have to get your number over at the bar and chip in a buck for the purse." Scans the crowd, trying to guess the winner before the contest begins. Does it every Friday night. Scans. "Now the winner takes the purse and gets a free pitcher of yer choice. So you just walk yerselves over ta the bar over here and getcher number from the barkeep." Finishes the beer, stepping back away from the mike.

Kate pulls the numbers from under the bar and places it, along with the purse jar, on the bar. Leans against the counter watching the crowd sift out the back door, into the beer garden beyond. Watches as each takes a number and shoves a buck in the jar. Sees them tilting back on two legs, chrome feet digging into the cedar chips. A hand in the air, hand between the legs grabbing air, legs up and bent. Most hold three, four seconds at the most. She looks forward to the quiet for an hour. McTavish judges. Hand in back dumps a couple of quarters in the jukebox. Wants to continue dancing without the band. Skips and static sailing

across the room. "playing that honky-tonk music." Passes his partner under, spinning out and snapping back.

It's took about ten, maybe twelve years before I realized that drinkin' in this town is about as close to an organized religion as you can get without walkin' into the Congregational church.

I used to trace the patterns of the fence lines and the switchbacks climbing the pass in the darkness of St. Paul.

It's hard ta convince somebody ta go worship every Sunday morning when their crops are gettin wiped out by a seven year drouth.

Trace patterns, movements, rhythms in the darkness, filling in the details with greys and browns.

'Round here, people don't pray when they're about ta lose another crop. Most just shrug their shoulders and come into

the bars.

The first year there, I  
celebrated my exile. Danced  
the streets, wandered book  
lined aisles in the public  
library, sang culture in tin  
tones.

Worshipping a whiskey bottle  
has a damn sight more  
predictable results than  
sittin' in some pew sing "Rock  
of Ages." Takes care of the  
problem damn near immediately.

Celebrated until I discovered  
I couldn't find a horizon.  
Discovered I'd moved to the  
bottom of an elevator shaft  
and couldn't find the way out.

Drinkin' goes up in the bad  
times. You lose your crops, or  
worse, your farm, and it hits  
pretty hard. Gotta remember,  
people here are tied to the  
land.

Celebrated Wordsworth and  
Browning. Listened to their

voices telling me what poetry  
was. Finding my primary  
emotions locked in the scent  
of sage.

It damn near defines them. Why  
else would someone stay in a  
place like this if there  
wasn't somethin' pretty strong  
holdin' em down.

Found my language wasn't  
language of Pope and Dryden. I  
tried to fit the wind coming  
off the bench into my sestinas  
and sonnets.

Hits pretty hard when you lose  
a place your family's been  
workin' for damn near fifty  
years. Get awfully used to  
walkin' the fence lines in  
patterns. The routine gets in  
your head and sticks.

I walked the aisles looking  
for my language, finding  
volumes of Samuel Johnson and  
Ben Franklin and Chaucer.  
Their patterns of culture

didn't include the chinooks  
and northers and the electric  
storms that blew dark down the  
front range.

Whiskey worships routine. You  
know it's been a bad year when  
you look at the faces on the  
barstools in here. They come  
in here with parched faces,  
parched throats, throats so  
dry from yellin' at the land  
that sometimes takes three,  
four, five, on upwards, shots  
to clear out the dust and  
deaden the anger.

Found I'd carried my language  
to St. Paul, locked in the  
darkness, silent. Carried the  
smell of sage and the town  
dump and the watercress  
growing the banks of the West  
Fork.

In the bad years, the  
preachers have a hard time  
sellin' God in this area. It's  
hard to believe in somethin'



when you're watchin' your  
alfalfa crop turn dust and  
blow up against the  
fencelines.

Left to find I belonged to a  
landscape five hundred miles  
to the west.

Can't always say I blame 'em.

## XII

Kate looks at the stack of ten and twelve cuncers, mugs and pitchers piled along the lower counter, running away from the bar sink. Glances up, surveying the remainder of the crowd. Simmons sits in the front corner glaring at the Commissioners, talking out of the side of his mouth to Ten-sleep. Surprised to see Lisa sitting on Ernie's lap talkin' while she plays with his ear. Would kill him if she was married to him. Thinks about his wife, never sees her outside of the grocery store and the feed 'n' seed when during bulb season. Knows she goes to the Congregational on Sundays while Ernie's in drinking bloody marys and settlin' county business. Wonders how much business is settled at the court house. Sees it as a formality, like the raising of the flag over the rodeo grounds on the Fourth. Sometimes they'll come in on the slow nights, come in and borrow the front office left of the front door. Go in and shut the door. Most people accept it as the course of things. County business settled before the meeting. Ernie's been a county commissioner for twenty years, or maybe better. Lisa leans over, takes one of his cigarettes and waits for a light.

Crew bosses, over by the windows, back of the band, stretch out and relax. All their boys are out back trying to break their necks on the chrome and red vinyl barstools. She keeps expecting someone to break their fool neck during the

contest. Hasn't happened yet, but she calls over to the dispatcher anyway, putting them on alert. Aside from a couple of broken arms, most come away with some bruises they don't know they own 'til the next morning. She runs the hot tap, watching the suds build around the stream of water, expanding up. Starts with the pitchers. Washes in order of type. Pitchers, mugs, ten, twelve ounces drying in the rack.

Jerry sits across the bar and watches the top of her dark head, watches the reflection of her shoulders and dark hair half down her back. Tries again, like he's been trying for eight years to remember who she's like. Can't place face, movement, gestures with his past. He shoves the coffee mug towards her and contemplates the tap handles and having another draft. Feeling more sober than he'd like. "Ahm, when you get a chance." She looks up, face damp from the steam and the hot air.

"You want another cup of coffee?"

"Nah. Give me another beer. I have anymore coffee, I'm gonna be awake half the night. I'll end up havin' to sleep on the couch if that happens." She smiles, creases running out from her eyes towards her hairline. Reaches down, opening the fridge under the bar, and pulls out a mug. Frosts on the way to the draft tap. She pulls the lever, watches the liquid meet the frost and foam.

Paula walks the tables, emptying the ashtrays, running

a barwipe to catch the yellow along the edges. Listens to the jukebox, trying to decide if she can hire killers, hire property vandals. Jerry Jeff echoing McIlavish. "M is for the mud flaps you give me for my pick..." Skip. "Up against the wall, redneck mother." Takes another, wiping down tables, checking the orange candles, collecting empties. "He's thirty-four and drinkin' in a honky-tonk." Watches the hand two-step in hiking boots. watches him move his arms catching his girl as she spins out, brings her back. Brings empties and glasses back after each. Stops and talks to Jer as she unloads the round, brown bartray, then returns for another round. A seismo kid stops her, asks about pitchers on his way to the bathroom. She nods and heads back towards the bar. "Kickin' hippies asses and raisin' hell."

Kate looks across. "Give me a couple of minutes. Need to change the kegs." Reaches under, untangles the hoses, and rolls the empty aside. Hauls the new keg from the cooler and re-attaches the hoses. Lets the tap spit for a couple of minutes while she collects the pitchers and checks the levels and pressure on the others. "Christ, we've gone through a lot of beer tonight." Not talkin' to anyone in particular.

Kel walks over and pulls up the stool next to Jerry, watches the progress. "Hey, Paula. How are you doing this evening?"

"Can't complain. Or I could, but it never does me any

good." Turns to Kate. "Need to go check Simmons." Walks off, stepping up and across between the tables, moving chairs back under. Kel watches her walk, turns back to Kate. "Given anymore thought to moving?"

Kate washes ten ounces, trying to remember why she came back after college. Tries to remember tryin' to fit with back east. Remembers the language. Stagnant language that cuts the horizon like the sky line of downtown St. Paul. words chopped and cut by block, encased in concrete. Hears the underground passages in the words, systems under the surface intentions. Plays with the images of parks and language, evenly cut and distributed, patchworks and grids of parks and roads, dependent thoughts hidden in the underground.

"Jesus. Why not give it a try." Watches her. Watches the dark hair, damp on the ends, steamed straight. Black. Looks at the reflection in the mirror, removing her shirt in his mind, touching the dark skin. Spends nine months running the hand down long distance. Would like to do it short distance for once, for one winter. Would like to show her Boston Common, show her the history of forefathers. Would like to show her the originals of the posters in silver frames. Kate straightens, looks across the bar. Smiles.

"Mayoe." Returns to the glasses. Plunges a hand into the hot water, catching the rim of a ten ounce and hauling it out. Skin turned red with the heat. Runs it under the

tap, rinsing suds, and places it on the drainboard. Language running east along the interstate, changing, modifying at each overpass. Tries to imagine her mother's culture in Boston. Wonders if the sky rules lives.

Jerry watches Simmons rise and head towards the front door. Ten-sleep stays put, tilting back in the black matte and red vinyl chair. Waits until Simmons passes the door jamb before approaching. "Ten-sleep, how you doin'?"

"Fair to middlin' I s'pose." He reaches for his coffee cup, at his reflection in the cold liquid. Wonders why he stays with the newspaper. Wonders why Jerry stays. "You just missed..."

"I know." Laughs. Slumps into one of the chairs. "Gone off to write up the drinkin' and carousin' habits of the Commissioners?"

"No. Even better." Looks at his coffee. "Think it's possible to get a fresh cup around here?"

"What do you mean, even better?" Waves at Paula.

"He went to get a camera. Said something about proving their moral degeneracy to the community." Looks across, past Jerry, at the bar. "You know, she's a looker?"

"A camera?" Paula walks up, looks at Jerry laughing. "I can't believe he'd be that stupid." Pulls her down on his lap, massages the small of her back, pinching the muscle bordering the spine. "Hell, everybody in town already knows where to go to talk to the commissioners." Finds the

situation amusing.

"Ten-sleep, you need somethin'?"

"Yea. A fresn cup of coffee and the lady at the bar."

She looks and starts laughing.

"I'll see what I can do."

13

When I was twenty, I took off for California. Had customers come through here tellin' me all about it. Said things like you could eat oranges right off the tree and there were jobs there for the takin' and a good lookin' woman could make a fortune in the bars. Be discovered.

When I was twenty, I got a job drawing drafts at a pool hall over on Sixth and Hennepin in downtown Minneapolis.

Hell, you know how ya are at twenty. You'll believe any damn thing a good lookin' man tells ya. Thought I'd heard the gospel truth.

It had a plateglass front window with "Blue Ribbon Pool" painted in a semi-circle around the eight ball. Outside, above the door, a Golden Grainbelt "on and off



premise" sign hung. It was a white light sign, red letters, gold trim. The light from the wall cut triangles in the pavement, lighting at an angle the empty bottles and crumpled cigarette packs from the night's business. The city crews swept at six a.m., after hours, before the business traffic passed heading for banks and Dayton's.

Moved to L.A. following a circuit rider who worked for some movie company as a trick rider. The fella used to come through here every summer with the rodeo circuit.

The pool tables had burn marks running the edges where cigarettes were set and forgotten as the shots were lined up. The place smelled of tobacco and beer and the bitter smell of the disinfectant required by the

state for cleaning glasses.

He could talk sweet. Told me all about Southern California and the kinda life I could live there. I'll tell ya, to a girl raised rinsin' dust outta her hair, it scounded pretty damn romantic.

Graffiti covered the wall above the green vinyl booths, words classifying women as cunts and hookers, mirroring the women who haunted the dark doorways of lower Hennepin.

Got down there and found out what the sonuvabitch forgot ta tell me. Forgot thatcha gotta make two, three times more just ta make the ends meet. That poor there ain't poor here. I've never seen anything like it. Millions of people and hardly any of 'em were makin' it.

They'd come in, pass under the Golden Grainbelt sign, looking

for Johns on the nights when  
the wind blew humid, cold down  
Hennepin. They'd walk booth to  
booth checking availability  
and income.

Just after I got there, I  
bought myself a used '55  
Chevy. Lord, it was a pretty  
car. Bright red with fins.  
Hell, they don't make cars  
that look like that anymore.

Usually two, sometimes three,  
would swing back along the  
bar, faces laquer tight from  
the layers of make-up, frozen  
by humidity. Their voices  
crossing the counter, telling  
me not to damn what I hadn't  
tried.

Got myself a job down at the  
Golden Peacock Lounge over on  
98th. Guess you could call it  
a dive. Got paid a buck an  
hour and whatever in tips. The  
management insisted that we  
chip in twenty-five percent

for our costumes, health  
insurance, and protection.

I'd walk out of work at two  
a.m., down the street to  
Nicolette and back up to  
twenty-sixth.

Seemed real strange to have to  
shell out fifteen percent to  
the bouncer at the front door,  
especially since he was never  
there when you needed him.

would walk out, past the  
hookers dressed crimson and  
mauve for the evening, doing  
come-ons to whoever walked  
by. They would whistle, crook  
a finger as I walked the one  
block down Sixth.

Hear women ask me how I  
can put up with the hands from  
behind now. It's a helluva lot  
easier to live with when you  
know that's all they want. The  
boys around here aren't  
interested in much besides a  
smile and a good time while

they're arinkin'. Hell, I've  
known most of 'em all my life.  
They don't mean anythin' by  
it.

They'd do come-on's from the  
dark doorways of Hennepin and  
Sixth, crooking fingers trying  
to corner, selling self for  
twenty-five.

It's not like that in  
California, or at least it  
wasn't. Hell, the men there  
are out for a damn sight  
more'n a good time.

I hated closing the bar, hated  
the walk one over, twenty down  
on the cold February nights.  
I'd walk out to find it  
spitting snow, riding the  
humid north winds along Sixth  
and Nicolette. Walking down,  
past the hookers, wondering  
what drove someone to stand,  
blue chilled at two a.m. on a  
downtown street corner. Would  
watch them step out of the

dark doorways, flag cars in  
the street, and offer an hour  
of warmth for twenty-five.

Took a couple of times gettin'  
knocked around by a man ta  
convince me that I'd made a  
mistake in movin'.

Sometimes, when the nights got  
too cold, they'd move into the  
bars, hooking tables. They  
always looked stoned on the  
nights they came in. They may  
have been all the time, but  
you can't see their eyes in  
the dark doorways of Sixth and  
Hennepin.

Guess ya don't miss things  
'til they're not around. Never  
thought I'd miss the dust  
pilin' up in my front room or  
the sound a those Lutheran  
fellas down at the co-op  
talkin' feed prices and  
weather.

Watching them work the  
booths and street corners.

Facing down one in early February, who leaned six inches from my face and yelled bitch. Hand moving up, pushing me against the brick wall of a dry cleaners, palm against my collarbone. Asking me who gave me the right to judge behind the bar.

I made up my mind that I was gonna get outta there 'soon as I had the money. You can get stuck places if the means aren't there to get out. I got stuck for two years.

Palm pressing against the collarbone, shoulder blades, back, picking up the imprint of mortar lines between bricks, engraved in red. Telling me to get an escort in the future.

End of the second year, a Santa Anna came through. Makes people loco, like blizzards ridin' northers here. I had

some jackass corner me one  
night over at the Peacock.  
Just backed me into a corner,  
dropped his drawers in front of  
God and everyone and asked me  
if I wanted it.

I got arrested for street  
walking my second year  
working. Spent the night in  
the city jail, locked in a  
room with the hookers I passed  
on Sixth. I recognized half of  
them from the cold nights when  
they'd wander in to warm and  
find Johns.

I looked at him, yelled for  
the bouncer who's never  
around, and then just kicked  
the hell outta him.

One wanted to find out if  
young felt different than old,  
holding me down.

Figured, that's it. Walked  
into the dressing room,  
changed, and walked over to  
the bar. Had a 'tender named



Leroy. Can't for the life of me remember his last name. Anyway, walked up to him, demanded my tips, handed him the costume I was s'pose to be wearing, and walked out.

Women rape women.

'Bout the only time I've ever walked outta a place without given due notice. Anyway, I drove back to the house I was renting, packed about as much stuff into that '55 as I could fit, and left. Had about twenty in tips to my name. Drove straight through and got into town 'bout six a.m. a couple days later.

I couldn't face the crooked fingers and the come-ons from the darkness of Sixth, so I never went back to work. Just quit.

Walked back into the Dollar and asked 'em for a job. Worked there for 'bout fifteen

years, up to the time I met  
Dave.

For months after, I sat in the  
darkness of the apartment  
seeing the steel springs of  
the second bunk, feel hands  
holding shoulders, teeth  
biting.

Tell ya, the Santa Anna sure  
makes ya do dumb things. Hell,  
I walked outta there and left  
a whole house a furniture just  
sittin'. Never could get up  
the nerve to mail the key back  
to my landlord. Guess I didn't  
want anyone to know that I'd  
given up and come back.

Darkness is only safe when  
shared, and for years after,  
my father's darkness seemed  
much friendlier. At least I  
knew the hands holding me  
down.

'Bout the only thing I learned  
was that a bar's a bar. It  
doesn't seem ta make much  
difference where you're

workin', you're always gonna  
have someone makin' a play  
atcher ass. It's just a  
helluva lot easier when you  
know who the hand's attached  
to.

### XIII

Jerry leans back in the chair. Watches the flame play against the orange glass, burn black. Thinks about getting out of the newspaper business, writing westerns, the type where you can tell who's good, bad, moral. Thinks about writing the Downtown Improvement Council in as vigilantes, maybe rabid vigilantes. Wonders if western towns had Downtown Improvement Councils and Chambers of Commerce and County Commissioners. Wonders if they insisted on planting petunias in vacant lots and chasing reporters until they agreed to write feature stories on beautification. Tries to transplant them into his vision of the West. Elma Bentworth could be a temperance leader, a Carrie Nation, waltzing into the thirteen bars, one by one, with an ax. Could waltz into the Fall Line, chop at the mahogany, scar the backbar. She could preach temperance on the street corners, chasing reporters until they agreed to write feature stories on the benefits of not drinking. Decides he needs a whiskey. He pushes up and away from the table. "Simmons' idea is the dumbest damn thing I've heard in a long time. See if you can con him into keepin' that damn camera out of Tinten's face. Somehow, I think he'd take pretty serious offense at something like that."

Ten-sleep looks up at him. Wonders why he sticks with the newspaper. Wonders why he doesn't quit and spend a

couple of years exploring the thirteen bars, picking up women in each one. "Hell, you know him when he gets off on this corruption idea. Don't figure he'll listen to me or anyone else." Contemplates the coffee mug, watching the steam rise short in the warm air. "'Sides, it might be kind of interestin'. Thought I'd just sit back and watch the show."

Jerry shrugs and turns, passing Paula on the way back. Reaches out and down, establishing rights. Sometimes sits and looks at her, looks at her face trying to remember the set of the cheek bone and the color of freckles under the make-up. She seems washed out in the bar light. Blue black highlighting the brown circles under her eyes. Her hair is teased up and back, held in place by perms and clips. He'd like to stop, reach up and run his hand through like he does in the morning over coffee. He'd like to see her in a housecoat, like his mama's, like a moo-moo, sitting in the front room drinking coffee and watching Days of Our Lives.

Ernie flags him as he walks towards the bar. "Hey Jer. Got a minute?"

Looks at the draft on the counter, head disappearing into gold. "Yea, sure. Give me a minute to get my drink and I'll join you." Walks over, picks up the beer, and returns.

"Have a seat." Ernie shoves out a chair for him. Sven Larsen circles behind, leaning against the wall. "There are a could of things I want to talk to you about." Lisa shifts

on his lap, runs a hand along the back side of his shoulders, down across his collarbone and chest. "Not yet, honey."

McTavish steps back up to the mike, clears his throat. Lee, five feet to the side of the commissioners, back beats the bass, watches Lisa. Sometimes, when he's got nothing better to do but pound the same rhythm, he scans the room. Sizes women. Thinks about the dents they make in mattresses. He likes a seven. Levies fives are too thin. "Just a little number we wrote to start this last set of the evenin'." Turns to the band. Motions to Lee. Four dead raps on the rim of the snare. Slide guitar and fiddle start on the fifth, McTavish on the sixth. Slow notes signal waltz to the dancers, moving closer. "Darlin', I'm the only cowboy that you'll ever know who'll love." Paula prays for Walker re-runs. Hates the originals. Ten years she's wanted to tell him to stick with the covers. But it keeps him happy, keeps him playin' Friday nights. Only the tourists listen to the new stuff, locals block it out like they block out the key changes and the drinking. Dance to the backbeat and the snare raps.

Ernie looks at Jerry, offers him part of the pitcher. "What in the hell is yer boss up to?" Shifts Lisa. "I'm gettin' real tired of seein' him every time I want to go out in public." Jerry listens, watches Lisa. Tries to figure how to escape the Downtown Improvement League. Feels like

they're watchin' him. "I'll be honest with ya, Jer." Lisa stands, moves next to Larsen. "He keeps this up, I may have ta do somethin' pretty drastic." Understands being followed, but somehow doesn't think it's quite the same thing. "Now, you tell your boss to lay off or he'll find himself in a passle of trouble."

He thinks about tellin' the Civic League to find another, cameraman, find someone else to tell their stories to. Wonders what it would be like to go a month without taking pictures of petunia gardens in vacant lots and Rotary functions and new members of the Elks club. Thinks about writing Westerns. He could use Paula as the heroine, could write her up with a heart of gold. Could put her in a long dress and bustle and protect her ass from pinches. Maybe make her a rancher's wife, or a widow. She'd make a good widow. He could turn everyone in town into a stereotype.

McTavish finishes out the original. Thinks about starting another one. Stands, looking at the crowd and signals Jerry Jeff to the band. "Two, three, four." Snare raps. "Pot can't call the kettle black and the trains all run on the same damn track..." Lee thinks about laying Lisa when he gets off.

Ernie talking to him. He tries to refocus, tries to remember why he wanted to work on a newspaper to begin with.

"The other thing's a damn sight more personal. You know Lisa, here, got laid off today. She came to me to ask for

nelp. I thought maybe you could put in a good word with the nighttime boss lady." Jerry looks at him, trying to decide why he didn't ask directly. "Sure seems a shame to keep a uiesel breed and fire a lady, don'tcha think." Doesn't understand the reference. Thinks about his novel instead. He could write about politicians and the U.S. Army and Indian attacks. He's not quite sure what to do with Kate. Maybe have some townsman marry her, bring her back sayin' it's ok. He could center a story about how she saved some cowboy from the braves or the cavalry, and he married her 'cause it was the noble thing to do. He could have her brought to town in buckskins, ride herd on her, and marry. Remembers a Big Valley episode where Heath saves some deaf Indian girl from being shot, or she saves him, or something. He doesn't marry her though. Just saves her. Wonders how to work it so he can nave a breed in town rather than off on some reservation. Paula's easier. He knows how to work her. "Seems a shame to keep a breed and fire a nice white girl like Lisa. You talk to Paula about it. She'll understand comin' from you."

"Oh." He looks back at Kate, trying to fit her into his novel. Not quite sure what to do with her. Tries to picture letting her live in his western town. Just doesn't seem to work. "I'll mention it to her." Stands, wanders back towards the bar, trying to decide whether he should raise the issue at all, or let it sit.



I remember calling you from the jail. Calling, asking for a ride. Calling because I didn't know who else to call.

Growin' up, I always thought I'd be an actress or a dancer or somethin'. Just didn't seem to work out that way. Gave up wantin' to be a dancer when I started workin' at the Dollar.

Sitting in the waiting room, watching the movement of uniforms, officers and hookers, wool coats, rubbed thin from the Salvation Army, worn by winos on Hennepin. Curled against the wooden bench, daypack protecting my lap from the movements of the room.

Lord, it seems like a long time ago. I had looks then. Didn't have ta create 'em with this stuff I put on every night.

The booking officer standing  
in front of me, apologizing  
for the inconvenience and  
asking didn't I understand.  
Handing me a cup of coffee  
while I waited.

You wanta make money in this  
business, you dress for tips. I  
wouldn't wear this paint if I  
didn't have to. Same with the  
shoes, but men like ta see leg,  
like lookin' at muscles  
stretched tight.

Sat, curled on the wooden  
bench, thinking about the  
smell of sage and the  
fencelines frozen in winter  
marking boundaries.

There are days when I get up  
and look at those shoes and  
think, God I'd like ta burn  
'em. But they're part of it.

Sat, curled on the wooden  
bench, thinking about cities  
and great writers, wondering  
if I could be one without

being in the other. Waiting  
for you.

My father's hands, silence,  
whiskey breath breaking the  
sound of the norther played  
down the corridor, past the  
waiting room.

You took me to your apartment  
because I couldn't face the  
silence of my own. Arms  
holding, voice saying "It's  
Ok" divided the darkness.  
Lying there, listening to the  
sirens shatter the triangle  
white of the street light.  
Your kind frightened me,  
threatened my silence.

But they're part of it. Ya  
either ante up or get out.

Sure, workin' tips is a game,  
but so's most everything else  
ya do. Guess it depends mostly  
on what you're willin' ta do.

Just the same, there are days  
when I'd rather spend the  
evenin' sittin' out back, when

I dread goin' in. Somedays, I  
just don't want to deal.

## XIV

Kel looks at Kate, watches her move between the row of bottles and the mixers. Whiskey-stitch. Manhattan. White Russian. Bourbon and ginger. Figures there must be a southerner in the crowd, since, according to Kate, only southerners mix ginger into their alcohol. Obscures the taste. Kate approaches, setting the Manhattan in front of a mail order tourist. "You want another scotch?" Kel nods. "I thought you were gonna sit over with the guys?"

"Thought I'd sit over here and bug you for a couple." Smiles, reaching for a book of bar matches. "Probably will head back to the house in a couple. What time do you think you'll get home."

Kate looks up from adding an umbrella, a small blue tissue paper umbrella with the toothpick handle. "Probably sometime between two-thirty and three. From the looks of this place, it's gonna take awhile to clean up. Maybe a little less time if we can con Jer into hauling trash."

Kel watches her mix the scotch with tap water, blending with a swizzle stick. "Here ya go. I've got to check the bar and draw a couple of pitchers for Paula. Back in a couple." Walks back down the bar.

The scotch tastes medicinal. Kel doesn't really like the taste, often finds it bitter against the tongue, but drinks out of habit. Wants to reach across the bar, grab

Kate's arm as she passes down towards the taps, say give urban another try. Convince her to move out and away from the sage and the fencelines, grey against the straw shade punch grass. Thinks about the first time, holding against a darkness broken only by sirens. Tries to convince her that Boston isn't Minneapolis. Pictures her sitting on the front porch in the early morning, after work, watching the dump glow red against the east bench. They sit there, sometimes waiting for the false dawn to dim the dump, before walking in, up, sleeping until late morning redefines the shadows in the house. Watches her sit on the back step, looking across the backyards of Little Italy towards Silver Run. Wants to reach down, touch, say it's ok. Wants to get her to sleep in the darkness rather than waiting for first light. Kate walks back, checking.

"Do you need anything before I take off?" Watches her head shake a slow no. Kate reaches under the counter and pulls out the pipes. "You didn't play a tune this evening."

Kel laughs, nods towards McTavish. "What and compete with this?" Takes the pipes and heads towards the door. Kate stands and watches, thinking of the things she'd like to say. Thinks of walking around the end and hugging good night, running a hand through the thick hair, twirling the nape hair around her index finger. Watches as the door swings closed.

Kate finishes the glasses, glances at Jerry lookin' at

her. "Somethin' wrong?"

"Yea. I s'pose you could say that." He sets his glass on the bar. "You nave any idea why Lisa was fired today?" He knows how to work with Paula. Paula's easy. Maybe like Miss Kitty. Tries to figure out what the hero would do in a spot like this. Plays re-runs of Bonanza and The Big Valley in his mind, searching for a reference.

"Can't tell ya. You'll have to ask Paula. It happened while I was over restockin' at the liquor store." Thinks about Dave behind tne bar. Had to rewash his glasses. "Why? She looks at him, puzzled. Sometimes can't figure him out. wants to ask him where he's going in his mind.

Jensen leans against the counter, in from the beer garden, away from Jessie throwing hooks. Tries to figure why he stays in ranching. Melancholy plays tag with his drink.

I'm not sure why I stay in the bars. It seemed like such a safe road a few years back, a place where I could listen to voices without committing emotion.

Asters. I promised myself I'd plant asters and zinnias and maybe some more delphiniums this year. I like a yard with a lot of color. Would spend my all my time outside if given half a chance.

They say the first thing you learn is to check the eyes. watch for violence, hatred, potentials. Don't invest yourself. People drink to resolve emotions by forgetting. Maybe it works, but they carry the pain in the eyes.

There's nothin' like the feel of soil, of reachin' down and runnin' it through the fingers.



I like breakin' up the clods  
when I'm hoein', feeling them  
crumble.

In a bad year, when the runoff  
doesn't meet the need and the  
fields dry by the middle end  
or July, you see loss in eyes.

Guess I got it from my mother.  
She used ta spend hours out in  
the floor bed by the back door.  
would hand weed the hollyhocks.  
She always said you gotta be  
careful of the roots, try to  
crumble the clods, shift the  
dust around the plant so as not  
to upset the growth.

It goes deep, comes at you as  
you take the orders. Don't  
invest emotion 'cause it will  
get to you.

I used ta sit out on the back  
step and watch her weed. She'd  
kneel in that garden for hours,  
tuggin' at the knapweed that  
kept croppin' up and moanin'  
about its invasion. She never

seemed satisfied.

I learned about eyes in Minneapolis. Learned about investing emotion from Paula the second day I worked here. She sat at the end of the bar, tired eyes watching as I dipped and rinsed the ten ounces. She kept asking me questions about coming back, watching me.

She'd dig at the root system, trying to get the tag ends so the plant wouldn't resurface, take over.

Talked about the drouth and the ranchers down at the co-op, liquid Lutheran voices talking foreclosures. Talked about working the crowd while she sipped a gin and tonic, double strength to calm the arches of her feet.

She had a helluva garden. The first couple of years, it was left unfenced, 'til she threw a

fit about the cattle gettin' in  
and takin' out the bean plants.  
God she could be a terror when  
she had to.

Talked until four in the  
morning about investing and  
paybacks. About feeling the  
pain in the eyes until she  
found she carried it with her.  
Sat at the end of the bar  
saying divorce yourself or you  
won't survive.

Ernie Tinton walks up behind Paula, throws his arm around her and looks across towards Kate. "Hey Breed. We could do with a couple of pitchers if you get the chance. You just send them over with this lady here when you get the chance." Nods his head to the side at Paula and looks towards Jerry. "Hey, heard a couple new jokes today. Thought maybe you'd like to hear 'em. You could pass 'em on to your boss. Sure he'd appreciate their finer points." Jerry stares at his notepad, traces the lines of the dancers on the page, weaving, interchanging, motions locked in the black lines of the felt-tip.

"Sure, Ern." Would like to murder him, adds him to the list. Has lost count, jumbles ways of homicide.

"How many Lesbians does it take to screw in a light bulb." Jerry looks down the bar, wonders if Kate hears the joke. Wonders if he's guessed right. Thinks maybe, someday, he'll pull her aside and ask her if she likes the feel of a woman's back as much as he does. Watches for reaction. "Only one. The rest sit around jack naked and talk about how great it felt to do it without a man." Watches Kate stiffen, confirming suspicions. Reminds himself to ask when he gets a chance. Ernie laughs, reaches behind and down, squeezing Paula ass, tracing the pant line under her skirt. "You're a mighty lucky sonuvabitch ta catch this one. You know that

into the patterns of the bar when she'd been pushed out and away. Why not take the chance to move, redefine. Never figured she'd be doing this ne whole life. Frightened by the bottles that line the backbar, by the reflection of their levels in the mirror. "Surprised to see ya in tonight?" Turns to Ernie. "You guys doin' ok?"

Lisa shifts in her chair. "I want my job back. Figured I'd come in and talk to you." Looks at Ernie, moves her hand across, up, rubbing his neck with her palm. "Figured, hell, if you'd keep her on, you'd rehire me."

"Sorry, Lis. Afraid I'm not followin' you." Reaches across for the ashtray. Sets the clean one on top, lifts both, setting the dirty one on the round, brown bartray, clean one on the table. Shifts towards Ernie. "Guess Simmons gave up watchin' tonight. Did you settle yer business?"

She tries to remember whether she was excited about getting the job at the Dollar. Eighteen seems like years back. Can see the mirror reflecting the two-steppers, cutting edges, lines on the tile floor. 'Bout the only thing that's different is the static on the jukebox. Hank Williams to Jerry Jeff Walker. The lyrics slice through the smoke near ceiling. Same backbeat, different words. Feels Ernie tracing the pantlines across her hips. Listens to his voice move through, past. Thinks about watering and weeding, reaching into the grey dirt of the hollyhock beds. "I mean, Christ, at least Lis, here," nods his head to the side,

don'tcha." Jerry sketches nooses on the next page.

Kate draws the pitcher and slides it across the bar towards Ernie. "Figured since you stuck around, you wouldn't mind carrying it back with ya." He picks it up and turns away, weaving towards the back table reserved for county business. She leans against the backbar, assessing the patterns, watching the movement of McTavish as he sings the slow backbeat to a size five. Stroking the mike cord, hand running arm length down and back towards the mike. Voice chisels stone to gravel, loping over words, sliding key to key as the fiddle tries to keep pace with the modulations. She prays for the end of the final set, trial by mistune. Wonders if Lee gets tired of living in the same rhythms, playing the same rhythms week to week. Variations slip under the whiskey shot lyrics, disappearing innovations. Listens while Lee pounds engraved rhythms, etching the patterns deeper, lines and shades locking movement to specific steps. She'd like to step out, away from the shades, learn a new language. Moves away from the backbar, towards the sink and the mounting collection of ten ounces. Looks across, past Jerry, past McTavish and the size five, to Paula pulling empties from the county table.

She stoops, pulls, balancing the round, brown bartray on her palm and forearm. Looks at Lisa, nods, laughlines disappearing in the eleven o'clock haze. Tries to figure why she's back, tries to figure why she'd want to wander back

"likes her customers, knows how to treat 'em." The grey earth, turning charcoal, brown, black with the spray. Soaking in, disappearing as soon as it meets. Tries to weed Ernie's words, feeling them take root, spread, pushing against the hollyhocks and the years of watching the liquor levels lower in the backbar mirror.

Lisa watches her, tries to define Paula as boss. Thinks about working night shift and pulling tips across, taking percentages at the end of the evening. Three years passed, passing since she started pushing ten ounces across the bar. Likes the taste of whiskey at shift end, sitting at the Major's, tossing tip money across the bar towards another bartender. Likes walking up to the men she serves at another time, running her hand across the shoulder blades, down the spine to the belt. She had a job coming out of highschool at the care center. Had a chance to swap light blue bedpans, push a mop soaked in anticeptic across the white tile floors. The bar seemed like a better choice. Watches Paula shift, looking at Ernie. Watched as his words pound against, attempting to redefine her views. Hopes her story, his words, land Breed's nightshift.

There are days when the last thing I want to do is get dressed for work. Most of the time, I just scruff around.

In the off season, I listen to the voices. Sweet voices. European accents blending with the Canadian, Scotch, Irish, Kentucky whiskey.

I get up in the mornin's, least in the summer, pull on a pair of jeans and one of Jer's flannels, and go out back with a cup of coffee.

I listen to their voices on those slow nights when nothing much is happening, when the tourists have disappeared, taking with them their harsh bland words and generic expressions.

Just sit there and look at Maurice and Silver Run. It's a sight first thing. Just



sittin', watchin' the mountains  
turn rose.

About mid-August, when the  
tourists come heavy like the  
first snow of the season,  
coating the shops, the  
sidewalks, the restaurants,  
and bars, I long to banish  
their voices and their tones.

Mrs Hansen, next door, has this  
flower garden that most of the  
garden club types'ld give their  
eyeteeth for. Got all sorts of  
stuff in it. Things like  
nollyhocks and bachelor buttons  
and those giant marigolds.

By mid-September the Czechs  
and Finns and Sweeds are heard  
again.

Me, I grow a vegetable garden  
every year. Beans seem to do  
pretty well, and the onions and  
peas come out ok. I can never  
get the carrots to grow much  
beyond three or four inches.  
Ground's too damn hard and the

season's too short for 'em. But  
they come out just as sweet and  
tender as you'd ever want.

Their voices, like a good aged  
unblended whiskey, are mulled,  
no longer muted.

Some days, when it's real hot,  
I'll go out and weed for about  
an hour, maybe more, and then  
come in and pour a gin and  
tonic and just sit out on my  
back step with a good read.  
Can't abide sittin' still much.  
It'd drive me nuts ta lay  
outside and not do anything.

Paula has one of those voices.  
Soft Czech hardened. I watch  
her in the mirror as I wipe  
down the backbar, wondering  
why she returned, knowing why  
she stays. It's not much of a  
life.

XVI

Jessie watches the tan liquid, thick against the sides of glass, and thinks about returning, going back, picking up the History of American Economics. Tries to calculate the years of tips it takes to pay tuition. Ambitions settle behind the coat of cream. Sometimes, in the morning, she sits on the back step and pushes the grey between the bunch grass with the toe of her tennis shoe. A layer sifts up and over, settling on the white, greying, canvas. Thinks about the collection of re-application forms folded into the cubby of the desk, about taking a black ballpoint and pressing down on the three-part forms she requests every spring. Wonders if her parents will help her with a second round of bills. Promises she'll save the tips over the year, trade them in for a cashier's check at the end made to the order of. Pulls the forms from the cubby, counting the number equaling the years of spent tips. Seems things always come up add to the number of blanks. Looks down the bar at Breed, trying to figure why they both came back.

"You folks have been a fine crowd tonight. I'd like to thank you for comin' out." He leans against the rail in front of the mike, steadies the Grizzlies playing against the back of his head. "We'd like to close out this evening with an old favorite." Steps back, trying to remember the opening bars, chords. Dead raps. Three. Four. Guitar slides

Attention Patron:

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G to C. "This goes out ta all you people that have to explain why you stick around and seem to prefer dancin' the two-step to workin' a nine-to-five." Fiddle bridges McTavish's gaps. Lee thinks about the gaps, about the pauses and canyons that keep him pounding the backbeat bass to McTavish's yodels. "They've never seen the northern lights. They've never." Watches McTavish's arm mark the course rhythm, shoulder moving up and back with each stroke. "Seen a hawk on the wing. Never seen the spring at the Great." Watches couple swing through the final dance, retracing steps they've been doin' for years. "Divide. No they've never heard old camp cooky sing." McTavish yodels, modulating with each pass at the upper range. Practices the tune switch two bars early. "Don't be concerned if the song sounds familiar. Don't be concerned if it all sounds the same. Don't be." Size five stands, weaves to the closing bars. Counts the measures to end. "And it's all just," stumbles against the rail, "public domain."

Kate walks the bar towards Jessie. "Hey, you doin' ok?" Runs the barwipe across the polished wood, beading water on the waxed counter. "Why don't you let me get somebody to run ya home." Smiles, trying to remember a highschool face under the years of tip taking. She'd like to reach across, run her hand across, over Jessie's hair, tell her it's ok. Sees Jessie leaning against the porch post, drinking coffee in mid-morning. Kel stretched out on the railing, laughing at

the jokes collected the night before. A foreign dialect for ner. One making fun of the other as the green lawn shifts dust grey then brown June to August. Tellin' stories on each other, knowin' stories that return to the reflections in the backbar.

McTavish thanks the thinning audience, swings the guitar strap up and over his head, and sets the instrument on the stand. Figures it will be safe enough until morning. Lee leans over and shoves his sticks into the bass drum, pulls the padding over, stands and tightens down the cymbals for the night. Size five plays with McTavish's neck as he leans over, asking for the rest of the night. Agrees and waits for him to cut the power to the amps.

Kate hears Kel's laugh ricochet off the clapboarding and down the cracked concrete walk, diffusing across Little Italy, while she and Jessie tell turkey jokes. Sitting on the porch railing where her father leaned, talked to Carl Meyer, scanned the brown bunch grass running from the house down towards the brewery. Feels the heat of the sun warm the grey floor boards and the concrete walk. Jessie, legs crossed at the ankles scanning Kate to Kel and back, drinking coffee. "Let me ask Jerry. I'm sure he won't mind." Walks back down the bar.

I used to pass Custer  
Battlefield on my way to  
Wibaux and Lodgegrass to see  
mother, grandmother.  
Occasionally, I'd stop, get  
out and wander the dusty bunch  
grass slope down towards the  
Big Horn. Would look at the  
small, white markers scattered  
where they ran, were chased  
down.

Always liked those historical  
type books. Like John Jakes and  
Victoria Holt.

Would look out, past the Big  
Horn, past the Priors and  
Yellowtail Dam, to the  
Beartooths and Rosebuds  
sitting the horizon.

Like reading about history,  
knowing' all that stuff that  
came before. There's a whole  
raft a stuff they don't tell ya  
in high school.

Hear the voices of the

tourists, language praising  
Custer, even though he's been  
condemned by historians and  
natives.

For awhile there, I read all  
those self-help books, but got  
pretty bored with 'em. There's  
nothin' in them you couldn't  
figure out on you own if you  
nad half a mind.

Dear, "Look Herald, look what  
those savages did back then.  
He was such a handsome man.  
I'll bet they weren't even  
Christian. Christians never do  
this. Herald, are you even  
listening..." trailing off  
across the upper slope towards  
the museum.

Read that one, I'm Ok, You're  
Ok.. There were all these jokes  
goin' around about it, you  
know, based on the title. "I'm  
ok, You ain't worth shit."  
Seemed like a kinda dumb ass  
book really.



They drive Winnebagos. Point  
 R.V.'s towards Yellowstone and  
 the Tetons, moving west. See  
 them walk into the bar, voices  
 disrupting melodies, asking  
 questions they would never  
 think of asking at home.

Can't abide sittin' inside  
 much. Maybe it comes from  
 workin' nights in the bar, with  
 the smoke and all, but I just  
 can't seem ta keep myself  
 inside, sittin'.

They ask about Indian attacks  
 and bears and indoor plumbing  
 and snopping malls. Wanting to  
 know if I liked living off of  
 the reservation.

Got friends that spend their  
 days in watchin' those soaps.  
 Just sittin' there. Guess they  
 don't have much ta do, or  
 they're bored or somethin'.

When the day's clear, I hike  
 away from the tourists, wander  
 Hellroarin' Plateau. Practice

naming the flowers.

Somedays I'll get up, have my coffee and head up the West Fork. There's a place up there that's real nice. Takes about an hour or so to walk in, but the fishin's great.

Water Crowfoot. Bitterroot.

Western False Soloman's Seal.

Indian Paintbrush.

Got this graphite rod that Jer gave me a couple of years back, with a fly reel.

Sit at Vista point, looking east. Past the Rock Creek Valley stretching down towards the benches and the flats. Across the flats past Billings and Yellowtail Dam and the grass slope along the Little Big Horn.

Just stand up there in the sun and cast. Don't seem to catch much. Sometimes I'll get lucky and hook a couple of rainbows or brookies, maybe browns, but

most of the time I just cast.

Look across, seeing the dust  
haze of mid-July turning the  
horizon burnt orange from the  
fires.

Guess after a couple of decades  
those damn fish just ignore me.  
The grandpa just looks at me  
and laughs, I'm so familiar.

Hearing your voice below me,  
at the end of the canyon, in  
the summers. Hearing it move,  
pausing in quarter note rests  
over long distance lines, east  
of the horizon in winter.

Every once in awhile I'll get a  
couple to bite, but I don't  
care much whether they do or  
not. It gives me an excuse to  
stand around in the sun.

## XVII

Last call goes out, competing with the skips and static of the jukebox. Some song, seldom played, sails clean across the room. Fiddle whines, shivers in the smoke at the ceiling. Paula moves, table to table, gathering empties, ten ounces, and pitchers. Snuffs the orange candles that haven't burned themselves out by the two o'clock call. Runs the barwipe over the red vinyl seats, bending, down the legs, straightening, pushing each under the spool top. Wipes the spool tops, leaving streaks in the rough grain. Ernie stands, pulls Lisa to her feet, and moves towards the door, waving at Paula on his way out. A remember wave. Arm around Lisa's waist, moving body to body, past the bar and out.

The jukebox starts static. "T for Texas, T for Tenne, tenne, tenne." Seismo crew kid punches the front, watching his last song disappear, needle skipping verses, catching the last chord. He turns and walks back towards his buddies.

Kate watches the seismo crew pack it in, wandering towards the front door. She likes the last two hours, hours after McTavish quits the mike for the night. She runs the tap, steam rising from the sink into the thick air. Separates the glasses by type and lines them up across the bar. Starts with mugs, dipping into the soapy water, rinsing under the hot tap, placing each on the drainboard with one hand while reaching for the next off the bar.

Paula brings the last round, brown bartray of empties.

"Jesus, God it was long night." Unloads the tray, separating the glasses into Kate's groups, pushes the empties to the side. "Guess I hate this night 'bout as much as any, 'cept maybe during the Winter Carnival." Reaches down, undoing the straps of her shoes, steps out, picks them up and hands them across the floor to Kate. "Mind sticking these over next to my bag? I'm gonna mop this place so I don't have to face the beer smell tomorrow morning."

Kate takes the shoes, turns, and tosses them over next to the cooler, figures she'll move them when she's done with the glasses. Watches Paula walk, stiff, towards the back closet. Thinks about finishing up and having a beer while counting tips. Always looks forward to sitting, glad this night comes in the summer, so she doesn't have to face a Norther and an empty house when she steps out the bar. Paula moves back towards her, mop and bucket in hand.

"Any chance I can get some of that hot water before you run the tank dry?" Hands the bucket across the bar, watches Kate bend, drain the water from the sink. "How you doin?"

"Jesus. Feel like I could sit down for a month and it wouldn't make a damn bit of difference." She runs the tap, checking temperature. "You can bet I'm not gonna set the damn alarm clock tomorrow mornin'." Laughs, hauling the bucket, half full, out of the sink and sets it on the counter. "You want something before I put the stuff in lock-up."

Paula pulls the bucket off the bar, water sloshing up and over the sides, splashing on the red vinyl of the barstool next to her. "Yea. Make it somethin' strong enough so I don't feel my feet anymore. Goddam, I gotta get new shoes." Moves towards the tiled dancefloor. Sets the bucket down, takes the mop, dips, and splashes water across the tile, watching it run away from her. Thinks about hiring a professional cleaning place up in Billings to come down and do a once over.

Kate mixes two Irish coffees, sets them on the counter next to the tip jar, pours the rest of the pot down the drain, watching the cooked liquid mix, turn the remaining suds brown. She rinses the pot, runs the bar rag over the machine, and places the last of liquor in the locked cabinet below the counter. Runs a barwipe across the bar and drapes it over the tap. Looks towards Paula splashing water, shoving pools across the tile floor. "Your drink's ready." Paula nods, rings out the mop, and sets it against the wall. Kate walks around the end of the bar, carrying the two drinks and the tip jar on a round, brown bartray. Sits down at one of the spool tables, groans as her body bends from standing. "You know, sometimes I think there's got ta be an easier way." Shifts and pulls the red pack Marlboros from her pocket. Watches Paula walk towards her as she tamps the end and lights. The match flares blue towards the center.

"You mind if I steal one of those?" Points towards the

pack. Reaches across for the Golden Rose "Finest Dining North of Denver" matches, strikes, watches Kate past the flame. "Don't s'pect the Commissioners'll be holdin' anymore meetings here." Lights the cigarette, watching the smoke curl up and bend back, joining the rest at the ceiling.

"What makes you say that?" Kate tilts back, studying Paula as she reaches for her drink.

"Ernie asked me to rehire Lis, tonight. Didn't seem to think her firing was particularly fair given the circumstances."

"Minā translating that?" She reaches over empties the tip jar on the round, brown bartray. Separates the coins into stacks, shoving the bills aside.

Paula knocks the grey into the black plastic ashtray and studies the end ember. "Lisa told me she saw you and Kel up in Billings, comin' out of that bar on Second. Guess she figured I'd fire you for it." Picks up her drink and studies the heat marks left on the glass. "Guess I'm gettin' old. It just doesn't seem to make much difference anymore."

Kate shifts on the red vinyl, chain lights another cigarette and wathes the smoke curl up, bend back towards the ceiling. "Look, I, ah..."

"Guess I shoulda known. She's been coming out here every summer for God-only-knows how long. Guess it just never seemed important." She looks at her, studies the dark eyes under dark hair. "If your worried about your job, don't

bother." Kate sits, quiet, staring at the backbar mirror reflecting the ceiling tiles. "Got just one question. We've been workin' together for eight years. Why didn't you just plain come out and tell me?"

Voice sounds tired. "Figured you wouldn't understand. Never could figure out how ta raise the topic. Just never seemed like there was a good time."

"Guess that's fair." Looks across to the jukebox. "You know, I keep wishin' someone would take out that damn thing in a fight. God I hate listenin' to the same damn songs every night. Dave says he's gonna buy a tape deck when the damn thing dies."

"Kel wants me to move back east, or at least come back and visit." Rolls the cigarette between her thumb and forefinger.

"Maybe we could buy some of those new age tapes. You know like Wyndom Hills or something. Jerry brought home a couple last time he went to Arizona. Real quiet music. Doesn't have any words to it. He thinks it sounds like elevator music, but I like it. Says his brother calls it yuppy elevator music." Lights a second cigarette and tosses the spent match into the black plastic ashtray. "You thinkin' about doin' it?"

"Yes."

"Ok. Just let me know the dates so I can arrange for a temporary replacement."



"How do you know I'll come back?"

She laughs, looks at Kate. "Breed, you've done it once, you'll do it again. I've been to Boston. You'll be back."

She sets down her drink and snuffles through the tips.

"Let's finish divying this up and get the hell outta here. I got this strong desire to spend about ten hours horizontal."

She counts, figures percentage, shoves bills and change towards Kate, pushes the rest over the edge of the spool into her pocketbook, listening to the sound of the quarters sifting to the bottom. "You ready to get outta here?"

Kate nods and stands, carries the the glasses back behind the bar, rinses, and sets them on the drainboard. She reaches for her pack, stands, and walks towards the front door, meeting Paula. Both turn back, scanning for forgotten chores. "Damn. I forgot to empty the bucket. Wait and I'll walk as far as Myjano's with ya." She turns back, walks the length, stoops, picks up the bucket and stands. Thinks about tape decks and elevator music and looks at the jukebox. Turns and throws the bucket and water at the front cover, watches as it hits, pushes, passes through the broken plastic. She turns back towards the door, smiles. "Hell, I gotta cover Lis' shift tomorrow mornin'. I'll clean it up then. You ready to get out of here?"

"Yea." Paula locks the door behind her and moves curbside, walking back towards the Whirlpools and Little Italy.

Gotten caught in a couple of storms when they've come up fast. If you're not careful, not payin' attnetion to the northwest sky, the lighntnin' will bow up before ya get a chance to get down.

I can walk to stars, stars on the horizon, pinned there.

Had days when I've been up on Silver Run and gotten caught not payin' attention. Be out there castin', just enjoyin' the sunshine, and the next think I'd know, there'd be a couple of thunderheads comin' up over.

Stars that make love to the swollen earth, somewhere beyond the west bench.

Best to get the hell off, down the sides as fast as possible. Just standin' there's askin' for trouble.

walk to the stars that spend

their lives pinned to the  
horizon.

Used ta watch 'em come across,  
watch the light'nin' hit out  
across towards Billins, north  
up towards the Crazies.

walk out my door, past the  
outhouse, across the bunch  
grass separating Little Italy  
for Broadway, past the grain  
elevator and the last  
irrigation ditch.

Sometimes, after work, I'll  
drive the car up on the west  
bench and sit back and watch.  
It's a helluva sight, just  
watchin' it go from the clouds  
down and hit.

Walk until I reached the  
plain, northwest, hidden by  
the Crazies and the Absorkees  
and the Rosebud.

At night, it's a kind of  
lavender and yellow, turns the  
sky velvet. In the dry years  
here, light'nin' has an orange

tint.

Now, I lean against the barbed  
strands of a greying fence  
line on the west bench, lean  
and watch, looking east.

Most of the time, I miss 'em  
when I'm in workin'. But, give  
me another ten, maybe fifteen  
years, and I can sit back and  
watch the show all the time.

My eyes follow the fence line,  
running patchwork towards the  
horizon, catching stars caught  
in the snapped and cut  
strands.

You know, I never expected my  
life to go this way,

Don't let go of the strand.  
Barbed wire is nasty stuff  
they say. Let go when it has  
been pulled tight, and it will  
whip around, spring back  
towards your face.

but, by damn, it just sorta  
happened.

Not much of a choice.

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