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Art Roebuck Comes To Born With A Tooth

Daniel James McBain

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montréal, Québec, Canada

January 1987

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ISBN 0-315-35545-X

ABSTRACT

Art Roebuck Comes To Born With A Tooth

Daniel James McBain

Art Roebuck Comes To Born With A Tooth is a tale combining realism and fantasy, recounted by a naturalistic narrator. While the surreal or magical occurrences in the municipality of Born With A Tooth are dealt with as actual events, they are metaphors for the invasion of a foreign culture into an insular region through the medium of television. The story's plot, read allegorically, illustrates how television in Canada, especially since cable and the satellite dish, functions as a Trojan horse which is stealthily undermining the Canadian sense of self.

Let us compare mythologies.
Leonard Cohen

Years later when the acrid smoke of poplar roots stung her nostrils in the Buffalo Plains churchyard, after all the inexplicable changes to befall her family and the municipality of Born With A Tooth, Ida Cole would long since have forgotten the dream she'd had the day of the chickencoop: from the river's edge a fat brown and white goose comes to feed on grain beside the house-trailer, then a hook-beaked eagle swoops down from the TV antenna and breaks the goose's neck. "Ah say, be glad!" roars the bird. "Be glad, ah say, and weep not, for your lord and master is home." When she awoke she was digging her fingernails into her husband's arm.

Ida clenches a clothespin between her teeth and drapes a sheet over the line. Her four-year-old son plays nearby.

Deep in their sockets blaze eyes the colour of hazel-nuts. Hot morning sun illuminates a corona of tiny white hairs on the boy's cheeks and ears as he sits splay-legged

next to the rusted metal wheel of a gas wagon. Auburn in the aluminum sheen of the gastank, the brushcut hair outlines a broad white forehead and hollow temples that could have been squeezed by heavy fingers too soon after birth.

A canning sealer beside the boy's k[illegible] is clouded with brown grasshoppers who climb over one another's backs and heads, sliding down the jar's smooth sides as they struggle for a triangle of airholes punched in the tin lid. The boy screws off the ring. He holds the inner lid in place and shakes the jar up and down until the grasshoppers lie in a tangled knot on the glass floor. He lifts the tin disc, snatches a leg and snaps the top on before the others can escape. The boy dunks the insect headfirst into a pitcher of motor oil and recites:

> Our Father, who ark in heaven,
> Howled be thy name.

He pulls the grasshopper from the oil pitcher and releases it. "Two really big jumps, a pretty big jump, then a little jump." The grasshopper sits glistening on the hard white dirt where the tractor parks to get gassed up.

The boy takes another grasshopper from the jar.

> Our Father, who ark in heaven,
> Howled be thy name.
>
> Thy king does come. Thy will be done
> On earth, as it is in heaven.

"One really big jump and a pretty big jump. A

quick drink makes them jump far, but the longer they drink, the less they jump before they stop and just sit there all shiny." Ida considers telling him to stop drowning the grasshoppers but in the end says nothing. The boy shakes the jar.

> Our Father, who ark in heaven,
> Howled be thy name.
>
> Thy king does come. Thy will be done
> On earth, as sit is in heaven.
>
> Give us this day our daily br--

Suddenly a loud squawking erupts in the chickencoop.

"Hartland go chase that pup away from the chickens," says Ida, clipping a tea towel to the line.

He waits and watches the grasshopper make its leap. "One middle-size jump." A louder noise comes from the chickencoop, not a chicken noise.

"Get going now."

The boy scrambles to his feet and runs. Ida hangs a final facecloth, throws the clothespins in the laundry basket and follows.

The henhouse is quiet. The hens are sitting still in their roosts, none of them pecking in the wooden grain-trough or squabbling over the waterbucket. In the middle of the coop the rooster, usually out following the hens around, has his beak pressed into the floorboards. Claws hooked inward, his left foot sticks up in the air, while the white feathers of his left wing are ruffled like

mussed hair. Every few seconds the left leg twitches.

Her son is staring at the bird's head. He pinches the skin of the red crest. The boy's jaw muscles bulge in and out as he grinds his teeth. He flicks the head and winces as it flops to one side on the limp neck. A puddle of dark blood has seeped onto the gray floorslats.

Ida pushes him aside. "Get away from there."

Slowly she circles the rooster in a squat; she starts as she glimpses the pantlegs of her husband: palms pressed against crisp bird dung rosebuds on the windowsill, dry lips slightly parted, hazel eyes glazed and staring into the centre of the chickencoop. A red-orange splotch fills a corner of his right eyeball.

Ida's heart thuds. She moistens her throat and utters a cracked whisper: "James?" The man doesn't blink.

She stands frozen while her son steps closer and taps the bristly fingers clutching the windowsill. "D-d--d--ad?" He grabs a fistful of his father's oily blue pantleg and shakes it, making a soft snap like laundry in a breeze. The man bolts from the boy and lunges blindly to the centre of the room, nearly trampling the dead rooster. A low dry growl rattles in his throat as he stares vaguely in the direction of his son.

The boy clings to Ida's leg. Suddenly she kicks the dead rooster sprawling and wraps her husband's arm round

her shoulder. The gray pup yips and jumps at their heels as they walk to the housetrailer.

"A marine was killed today when a heavily-populated section of Beirut was destroyed in mortar fire. 21-year-old Franklin Miller, a farmboy from near Fredonia, North Dakota, was to have enrolled in North Idaho Veterinary College in September. An honours student and all-star basketball forward, Franklin is survived by his parents and older brother. Deaths from the attack are estimated in the hundreds."

Ida stopped feeding her husband to change the TV channel. Even with a choice of 45 stations she could never decide on anything she wanted to watch. Six months earlier when she was in the city getting the old black-and-white television repaired she had filled out an entry form. A week later a truck came creeping down the valley hill and a representative from Electrohome took a polaroid picture of Ida while two men installed a television satellite antenna outside the trailer. It still felt funny watching such a multitude of programs on the old blue-gray screen; an antiquated pair of rabbit-ears remained on top of the box, tinfoil snowballs crumpled onto the tips.

James rocked in the rocking chair, eyes dull as boiled eggs. He seemed unaware that his meal had been interrupted. Warren Putnam snored on the chesterfield, the dog asleep at his side. The housetrailer's small gas furnace made a soft "whump" as it cut in.

"All right Frank, how do you think Tracy responded to this question: What are you most proud of about your husband? What do you think your wife is most proud of about you Frank?"

Studio audience chuckles.

"Probably when I became head of my department."

"I'm sure she's proud of that achievement but that's not what came first to her mind. When we asked Tracy what she was most proud of about her husband . . . well it had something to do with your stamina."

Audience erupts with laughter.

Ida spooned macaroni and cheese into James's mouth and scraped the creamy orange dribbles from the corners of his mouth.

If she were on the TV show with the other couples Ida knew she would have trouble finding something that made her proud of Warren. She was pregnant with Sarah by the time she realized he was just going to be another motionless body for her to look after. When he wasn't sleeping he was in the Buffalo Plains beer parlour throwing darts.

She knew in an instant what made her proud of James but she couldn't put it into words. It was in everything he did, like the way he used to tell the time by the sun, the way he could spend an entire day alone in an ice-fishing hut without getting lonely. It was in the way he had passed up big money from a gravel company that wanted to dig up the valley hillsides. "Who am I to destroy these hills?" he said. "They're not mine. I'm borrowing them for a few years, then somebody else'll borrow them." It was in the way he had quietly and firmly put an end to the bullying of Etienne Beaudoin at a Buffalo Plains Sports Day shivaree.

Etienne Beaudoin was a wild-eyed trapper who had squatted in a scoop-roofed shanty near the beaver pond until he burned to death beating wet gunnysacks against his cabin one night when spontaneous combustion ignited some damp turnips in the old roothouse. The fire razed most of the valley including the old Cole homestead. James had always welcomed the grizzled Frenchman, who would appear at the house smelling of kerosene and ermineskins, always with some pretext for coming: the gift of a syrup-pail of rosehips or a warning that for two nights running he had observed an unearthly glow around the chimney flashing on the Coles' roof. He was a real pioneer, he said, an original trailbreaking, sodbusting, bushwhacking homesteader. He'd timberjacked lodgepoles

in the Kootenays, catskinned deadfall in Peace River Country and chuckdriven smokewagons on the Shaganappi Circuit. He'd been a bushpilot in a Coppermine whiteout and gone snowblind on a Whitehorse trapline. It was he who had started the joke about the ice worm, he who had invented the corduroy road, he who had built the first Saskatchewan sodshack. He claimed to hear the nocturnal yips of a family of coyote pups whose spirits were buried beneath the stonepile in the far corner of the valley, and one night he arrived with the yarn that, on the path from his place, he had come face-to-face with a gleaming-eyed man robed in white who catechized him in a patois of Algonquin and Jesuit Latin without moving his lips.

It was the year they stopped running the Bennet buggy races at the Sports Day. Too drunk and decrepit to defend himself, the old man was being pushed back and forth by a circle of drunks. He staggered like a clubbed moose. "Why, Etienne," said James in a clear loud voice, "don't you think a gentleman your age should find this sort of roughhousing a little undignified? I thought you were a bit more refined than that." The circle of hoodlums parted, James took Etienne's arm in his and calmly led the old man to the car.

Ida pushed the spoon toward James's mouth but his head moved sideways. This is new, she thought. He usually ate until she stopped feeding. There was a

glimmer of expression in his eyes. Then she realized he was looking past her at the television. A girl in a bikini was chugging a Diet Pepsi. After the commercial James's eyes went back to normal. Ida snapped her fingers in front of his face and waved her hand back and forth but he didn't respond.

Entire weeks passed on the farm when no one spoke more than a couple of sentences. James had sat wordless in the rocking chair ever since Ida and Hartland found him in the henhouse with the dead rooster. Not long afterward Ida noticed Hartland was having trouble talking. He would jabber faster and faster, scrambling to keep up with his racing mind and tangling words and sentence-scraps into snarled heaps. The teasing of his schoolmates, along with the wheezing attacks caused by his asthma, eventually trained him to speak only in cases of urgency. Whenever Warren had something to say, which was about once a month, "little," came out like "widow," "raccoon" like "wac-coon." And their daughter--Warren and Ida's daughter--was mute.

Sarah did not giggle when tickled, she did not sing. Ida worried the girl would get caught somewhere on the farm--under an abandoned piece of machinery or in a hole in the ground--and be unable to yell for help. Unable or unwilling. The doctor, after examining her tongue, teeth, vocal cords, the roof of her mouth, had said she was

capable of speech and would likely start to talk when she found it necessary.

Ida wiped her husband's mouth with a facecloth and went to the kitchen. A woman Ida had met with a whole family of children like Sarah had once recommended "television therapy" for the girl. Warren had the TV on constantly now that they had the new antenna. It hadn't done anything for Sarah but maybe it was working for James.

"Mr. President, there's an anecdote you've told time and again about an old football coach from your college days. With the season warming up once again, would you mind repeating it for our viewers?"

The glassy rust ball of the rooster's eye reflected a needle-sharp sun and the spare figure of a man. Hartland Cole's shoulders were stooped and the weight of his lanky frame rested on the balls of his feet as though he were hung over a post by the breastbone. A dozen white hens and the reddy-brown rooster clustered around his boots as he stood shivering in the chickencoop doorway. The rooster eyed the pail in Hartland's hand. Hartland rubbed the knuckles of his gloves together. The snowglare of winter sunlight burned his eyes. Finally the bird stepped outside by a small tarpaper-lined bin and pecked at an eggshell in the snow.

Hartland glanced at the housetrailer then ducked back quickly. Slowly he peeked round the corner with one eye as his mother's head and shoulders filled the kitchen window. The new TV satellite dish, pointed to the sun, shaded the southwest corner of the trailer. Hartland's chest wheezed above the henhouse din as he stood and spied on his mother while she washed dishes.

"Maybe you think it'll go unnoticed," he muttered in

a voice that was all nose. His wheezing increased in speed then subsided.

He stepped out of the chickencoop, nearly trampling the red rooster with his long feet. He flapped open the springy lid of the feedbin and scooped out a pailful of wheat. Tough bungs of twisted steel wool choked rat-gnawed holes in the plywood sides of the box. The gabbling birds hushed when he dumped the grain into the feedtrough then fluttered as he walloped the pail against a snowshovel to loosen a cake of rotten wheat.

On his way to the barn he passed a smouldering barrel. The fire's heat soothed a dull ache in his ears. He moved closer to the barrel and looked inside. Frantically he looked around until he found a short branch leaning against the chickenfence. He speared into the barrel and flung out a charred snowshoe reeking of burnt babiche. "That asshole Warren!" He poked the branch into the webbed pouch of a lacrosse stick and tossed it on the ground. Unless it was an early type of fishnet he had no idea of its original purpose. What he did know was that it had belonged to his father like the other articles in the barrel. He hauled out the remains of a second snowshoe, some rusty skates and square brown hockey kneepads, a pair of skis and a smoking canoe paddle, and left them to cool in the snow.

"Maybe you think so," he muttered.

At the barn he filled two five-gallon pails with a mush of vegetable slops and spoiled grain. He carried the swill to feed the pigs and had just filled the last trough when he heard the porch door slam. Through the barn doorway he saw Warren Putnam walk out into the snow wearing open galoshes, greasy trousers and a whitish undershirt. Warren opened the door of his station wagon, sat inside for a few seconds and came out with a lit cigarette in his mouth. Hartland watched him stomp up the steps and go back into the trailer.

"Maybe you think it won't be accounted for," he said. The wheezing started up again.

Hartland climbed the ladder to the hayloft and kicked a couple of bales through a rectangular hole in the floor then dropped himself down, yanked on the twine binding loops to spring open the bales and carried armfuls of coarse slough-hay to the stalls of the cow, the pet goat and the mule. He climbed again to the loft and entered an unused stall.

Atop the trunk Hartland's grandfather had wagoned from Ontario were a canvas tarpaulin, the bones of a saddle and an ancient washbucket full of old blue and green jars. He quickly peeled back the tarp, moved aside the junk, and lifted the lid. A portrait of King George in military uniform, a sour-smelling sheaf of blotty old letters, and a black metal box lay in a neat stack.

Hartland leafed through the wad of his own secret papers inside the box for a clipping from the previous month's Midwest Monthly: a letter column entitled, "Wake Up, America!" by a thirteen-year-old prodigy preacher named Little Dothan.

> Dear Buffaloed in B.P.,
>
> Your father's problem is a common one in our times. The emptiness in his eyes that you describe indicates an absence of the spirit. Satan has stolen into your father and simply snatched him away, leaving only the earthly shell which we all know to be nothing more than a vulgar mask over the soul. Only the hand of God can save your father. But don't despair, I will be in your town soon and together we'll "beat the devil out of him!"

A photograph at the top of the advice column showed a bright-eyed, smiling boy with full healthy cheeks. The evangelist's signature flowed confidently across the bottom of the picture, a dashing fanfare swooping back over "t"'s and "i" in a spirited flourish.

"Hartland," his mother's voice called faintly. He wheezed a few times, took a long breath of the musty barn air and stuffed the clipping in his shirt pocket. He stowed the tin box and went and peeped through the bottom corner of a high diamond-shaped window.

"Hartland. Are you coming?" His mother stood a few seconds in front of the porch step then began walking toward the valley road by the river. The truck was always

parked on a hillside because the battery was dead. Once it was rolling it could be started by popping the clutch.

Hartland stood on tiptoe and pointed a bony finger. He aligned his sharp nose with his finger and followed his mother as she climbed into the cab and clanged the door. "Maybe--you--think," he bit off each word, "that the sins you commit in this world don't get paid for in the next." The green pickup came rolling down the shaded valley hillside and over the small bridge, a great cloud of blue smoke coughing from the tailpipe just before his mother turned in the yard gate. Hartland left his perch and clambered down the gaunt ladder two rungs at a time.

Jaws clenched, eyebrows curved like the horns of a wild steer, Hartland saw himself dressed in a broad-brimmed black hat and long black coat as he strode fiercely toward the trailer until, spotting his mother get out of the idling truck, he stopped and stood, feet set wide, hands on hips, eyeing her. "Maybe you think . . ." he murmured. When his mother looked his way and waved, he trod on, cutting a straight path in the snow until he was looming, wheezing, before her, close enough to bite the top of her head. She had begun to scrape the frosty windshield with a stainless steel egglifter.

"Why don't you come into Buffalo Plains?" she said, shading her eyes as she turned halfway toward Hartland. The porch door closed and Hartland's half sister Sarah

came down the steps, dressed to go to town. "You never know, this fair might be really--"

"Maybe," he elbowed in, "m-maybe you th-th-th, m-m-m--aybe you th-think that, you-you th-th-m-m-maymm . . ." He broke off, wheezing so hard he had to lean over the hood of the truck and breathe. He began to cough hoarsely.

"Sarah go get Hartland's inhaler," said his mother, but the little blonde girl was already halfway up the steps. In an instant she was back with a plastic pump. Hartland inhaled twice on it. He slowly caught his breath.

"Rest for a little while," said his mother. "Take Warren's car if you decide to come."

Hartland nodded and turned wearily toward the house.

Inside the porch Hartland unzipped his overalls and hung them over a pair of deer antlers mounted on the wall, then climbed into a navy blue skidoo-suit, pulled a green facemask toque over his sandy hair and rolled the mask up over his forehead. He searched through the pockets of Warren Putnam's jacket for his car keys but found only empty matchbooks, soft as flannel. Various keychains were hooked onto the wire cage of a dartboard hung on the porch wall, but not Warren's. Across from his father's

Winnipeg couch in the sunny kitchen he checked the table, the counter, the lost world of coupons and clothespins, epoxy glue and lock de-icer in the kitchen junk drawer.

Warren's car was a faded blue station wagon littered with Du Maurier cigarette packs, sunflower seed shells, Molson beercaps, the greasy stem of a hydraulic jack. In the back was a mould-blue foam mattress and in the corner of the rear window, hiding a faded CKRM sticker, an orange plastic hand that waved side-to-side on a stiff wire when the car was in motion. Hartland knew Warren would allow him to use it if he asked but he didn't want to ask.

"But Looo-see, we're all gonna be rich! Deese tine I got a fold-proof plan."

"I think you mean a fool-proof plan."

"No, I mean fold-proof. Look!"

James Cole sat in the living room, staring, the gray army blanket over his lap as it had been most of Hartland's life. Hartland tiptoed gingerly past his father's rocker to the chesterfield where Warren's soft snoring body formed a sloppy "S". On the floor next to the couch lay James's old gray dog Pogey, who had gone unnamed until Warren arrived and gave him a name that stuck. Warren's hair was darkened to an oily crow colour from need of washing. Bits of lint stuck to his black whiskers. His undershirt had ridden partway up his back, exposing a bulge of pink flesh. The crack of his buttocks peered

sadly over his belt.

Hartland lightly patted Warren's left pocket. No keys. He craned over the greasy body to see his other pocket but it was buried under the long sausage of Warren's right thigh. His eyes darted about the room as he wondered where else Warren might have left them. They might be in his mother's bedroom, he thought, but he disliked going in there and having to look at Warren's dirty clothes draped over a chair, Warren's cigarette butts in the night table ashtray.

Hartland glanced at the blue picture on the television screen. King Kong is clinging fiercely to the Statue of Liberty, a buxom blonde in his hand. Distressed, the woman shakes a box of "Poppervescent" candies into his mouth. Kong's eyes swirl in their sockets as the screen explodes in sparkles, accompanied by a fizzing sound. "Popp-pervescents . . ." whispers a chorus of sexy female voices. In the next shot Kong is lying passively beneath a palm tree with the blonde, who continues dropping candies in his mouth. His eyes spin and his head sizzles. The camera dissolves from the tropical island to a box of Poppervescents held in the Statue of Liberty's hand.

"Profligacy," said Hartland under his breath. He changed channels.

"Under no circumstances will this administration

tolerate the presence of another government in this hemisphere falling into the clutches of the Soviets."

Warren's snoring died with a gulp and he rolled onto his left side, bouncing heavily like a rocking bobsled and sliding the cushion another inch from the back of the couch. Hartland stood motionless until the groaning rhythm recommenced. He gently patted Warren's right pocket. No keys.

He spun around. His father had stopped rocking and was staring at the television set. Immediately he started to rock again and his eyes went blank like they always were. Hartland decided he'd imagined it.

Then he spotted the keychain lying behind Warren's rump, a brown leather flap with a silver medallion inscribed, "DART PLAYERS DO IT WITH THEIR POINTY PARTS." He reached into the split between the two olive-green cushions and he snapped up the keys as well as a penny, two quarters and a nickel.

Next he turned to his father. Hartland jumped. His father was leaning forward in his rocker, pointing to the TV screen where a microwave oven was being displayed. Then the man resumed rocking like usual. Must be the inhaler making me see things, he thought. He gripped his father by the shoulders and hoisted him to his feet. The rocking chair rocked to a stop. Disregarding the crumpled flannel that clotted up at the joints, he stuffed

his father's pyjama-clad legs into a pair of trousers and pushed his arms through the sleeves of a woolen sweater. He swathed the man in the gray blanket, eased him onto his shoulder and slowly stood erect.

It occurred to Hartland that Warren's snoring had again ceased. He turned, his swaddled father slung over his shoulder, to see two dewy blue eyes peeking through the creases of Warren's puffed eyelids.

"What ow you up to?" Warren's speech had a childish, sponge-mouthed quality that made him sound like a cartoon character.

Hartland's neck muscles tensed and his face grew hot. His eyes burned into Warren's as he struggled to keep his breath regular. "I'm up to g-g-gettin' a man his soul b-b--ack!" he blurted, each breath a slight rasp.

Warren made a farting noise with his lips.

Ida missed talking with Sarah the way she had with Hartland at age four. She did not explain about the dead battery as she backed the truck up the grain elevator ramp, how the engine would not turn over unless popped into gear while the truck was rolling. It would have seemed pointless to comment on the heavy snow, the cold, the darkness, or the new white colour of the elevator, which used to be orange. She recalled mentioning similar trivialities before Hartland was able to engage in proper conversation; she had since grown used to remarking these kinds of details alone in her mind.

Sarah stood quietly on the truck running board while her mother dug a cookied kleenex from her windbreaker and wiped the girl's nose. Ida wound the child's soft blue scarf around her face and throat, pulled her parka hood over the matching wool toque and led her by the hand down the steps from the elevator and along the traintracks. All without saying a word.

Ida stopped on the train platform. She set her parcel of paperback books on the bench armrest, opened her purse and took out a mirror and lipstick. The round

mirror, reflecting the Via Rail clocklight, cast a pale moon on her face. As she rubbed on the lipstick something caught her eye in the mirror. A man was jogging down Mainstreet. He was lugging something over his shoulder that resembled a huge gray potato. Ida turned and stared at the running figure while Sarah shuffled around the platform, collecting wet March snow on the toes of her boots. The man disappeared behind the elevator. Sarah stooped for a mittful of snow and put it to her mouth.

The boxcars were unfamiliar to Ida. Neither cocoa-coloured graincars nor heavy equipment flatbeds, these cars wore brightly-painted murals: dancing poodles dressed in tutus and hats; a bald man in leopard skin holding a barbell suspending a pair of shetland ponies; an adult-looking boy, eyes closed, touching the forehead of a man on crutches; and a two-headed calf whose four eyes stared sympathetically at Ida and Sarah. Glittering blue firework-stars sparkled throughout the designs, trailed by red and white streamers.

A sign on the front car red,

COLONEL WINCHESTER'S TRAVELLING CARNIVAL
ANIMAL ACTS
GAMES OF CHANCE
FEATS OF STRENGTH
LITTLE DOTHAN, CHILD HEALER OF SICK, LAME

Ida took Sarah's hand and trotted briskly toward the

gray hump of the Centennial Arena. An auto repair lantern faintly illuminated a sign of which Ida could discern,

ring Ag cul l air

the other letters splatted with sticky snow. Now and then the door opened and a thin light ushered in a few silhouettes.

Just then the man with the large--duffle bag?--scooted under the lavender beam of a mercury vapour streetlight, flung wide the rink door and backed into the cold light inside.

At the rink Myrtle de Havilland took Ida's three dollar admission and stamped a bird's footprint on the back of her hand. "It's all the Co-op Store had in the way of rubber stamps," she explained, pulling off Sarah's mittens and letting them dangle from their idiot-string while she printed a meandering trail of birdtracks across her knuckles. Sarah examined the tracks while the women chatted. She flattened her thumb over one of the marks and inspected the purple rings in her thumbprint, then put the berry-purple ink to her tongue. She did not grimace, as though she had known all along it would taste awful.

Ida pretended, for the moment, not to notice Louise Bronfman and Margaret Rose who were working at the food counter. Each time Ida encountered these two women she was grilled endlessly about James: Had there been any

improvement? Had he shown any sign of recognizing Ida or Hartland? There was always an oblique reference to Warren, asking if he was still helping out with the farmwork, conspicuously forgetting he was the father of Ida's daughter. Though they always spoke sweetly to Sarah.

A fleamarket had been set up in the refreshment area. Ida strolled through the picnic-style tables, looking at the mishmash of goods people had brought to get rid of: a French-English dictionary, a Wheat Pool rain-gauge, real Down East maple syrup, a dozen Petro-Canada Prairie Lily tumblers, a clothespinned wad of crossword puzzles clipped from the Leader Post. Proceeds went to the Buffalo Plains Blues for uniforms.

As well there were hand-knit toques and socks and mitts, a pair of toddler's bobskates, moccassins from the Indian Reserve, a speckled graniteware bedpan housing a family of slightly pruned cactuses, a Labatt rumpus room mirror, an Ookpik doll and a stack of records beginning with the 1812 Overture. Then Ida felt a stab of nostalgia.

Beyond a model railroad and a set of Barbie Doll wigs were a white hat and cane. The hat was flat-topped, made of stiff compressed straw. The cane was spindly and brittle; it would be unable to support any weight.

It was not the first time Ida had scrutinized the

party cane--just a few years ago she had unloaded it at a similar junk depot. One day when Hartland was five months old James arrived home from an auction sale at Phil Springhill's. He burst into the house, twirling this very cane and dancing around, making such silly faces and singing so foolishly that Hartland, laughing uncontrollably, filled his diaper. Ida had never before (or since) seen James act with such abandon, and she liked it. Four years later, the day of James's . . . accident, the only handy crutch was the useless vaudeville cane. Her husband's arm around her shoulder, Ida stumbled him to the living-room rocking chair where he had remained, the rocker runners carving ski-tracks into the braided rug.

Ida shook off those thoughts and chose a handful of used romance books to trade for the ones she had brought. Margaret and Louise were waiting with fat grins. "Well," said Margaret, "lookit what the cat dragged in!"

"Here comes trouble," chimed in Louise. Hefty arms crossed under their bosoms, the two women formed a fleshy-smelling bar solid as a graintruck bumper.

"Look what the cat dragged in!" repeated Margaret.

The women inquired about life on the farm, fussed over Sarah, commented sagely on the rigours of raising two children as a single parent (tickling the subject of Warren Putnam without mentioning his name) then, "How's James doon?" boomed Louise.

Almost imperceptibly, Ida nodded her head. She stared, eyes unfixed, at the armoured chest in front of her. Had there ever, she wondered, been any space where the two breasts did not press together like sacks of flour?

"He earns his keep."

Louise chuckled. "Hey?"

"Sure, we dress him in castoffs and prop him up in the field. It's better than a scarecrow." Unwavering, she clipped her gaze first on Louise, then on Margaret. The women eyed her, unsmiling, until she lifted her upper lip into a cold smile, pulling taut the cheeks of her tired face.

The two wives began cautiously to cough up bits of snickers and soon they were roaring loud as horses. Crowned with back-combed waves of mannish hair, the large heads shook heavily until finally their laughter abruptly died and was replaced by businesslike speech as the books were bartered.

Barnyard smells wafted sweetly into Ida's nostrils as she stepped into the rink. Sheets of plywood lay over the ice and a layer of moist sawdust covered the plywood. In the centre of the rink two rows of stalls and pens were occupied by livestock. The rink's perimeter was flanked by a camp of roofless tents held taut by guy ropes roof-

ing-tacked onto the plywood sheeting. One or two languid people sat on plastic pop-crates outside each tent. A hundred or more people milled about, adding to the low din of moos and baas and oinks; more voices, and some other unrecognizable sounds, could be heard inside the tents. Ida began to wish she'd curled her hair.

A young man dressed in a siwash sweater and designer blue jeans stopped in front of Ida, dropped a paper plate to the ground as he took the last bite of a piece of pie and, casually lifting one foot and then the other, chiselled a keel of wet sawdust from the soles of his cowboy boots with the handle of a plastic fork. Ida decided he must be a Selkirk because of a peculiar, not unattractive overbite which the mother had given the six children. Beside him was a tall, neatly-dressed man whom Ida recognized as a Born With A Tooth Métis, Paul Brulé, who had come to take away the telephone when Ida's debt to Sasktel grew too large. The Indian man winked at her as he ate from a bag of Humpty Dumpty Potato Chips.

Ida strolled over to the first animal pen, tugging Sarah by the hand. Inside was a less than year-old billy goat whose two horns had sprouted so close together they were fused into one unicorn-horn. He nudged his head through the fence rails toward Sarah. The girl reached between the wooden rails, trying to grab hold of the horn, but the goat twisted his head around so he could lick her

fingers. He singled out her thumb and began to suck.

"Looks like he still needs his mom, eh?" The voice was a resonant hoot that sounded like it came through a long pipe.

Ida turned to see Reginald Fort, the square bruise-nailed fingers of his right hand stuffed through the handle of a rooster cage. A crew of other farmers stood nearby with more roosters in cages. Bud Mackenzie, who each summer custom-mowed Ida's hay sloughs, had set his cage by his side and was masterfully rolling a cigarette in corded hands missing the right index finger, the left pinkie, and half the left ring finger. Mike Batoche, an old bachelor with thin white hair and a tree of tiny red veins on his nose, smiled a shy, toothless smile while young Lance Richard, a swaggerer in a hockey jacket who had caused a scandal with a young teacher while her husband was up north working on his sodfarm, gave Ida an insolent smirk.

Bud Mackenzie smiled devilishly at Sarah and gestured with a gnarled hand. "Nice-looking boy, eh? Isn't that a fine-looking little boy?" This was the only technique Ida had seen Bud Mackenzie use with children: telling girls they were boys and boys they were girls. Boys, if taunted to the point of rage, would respond with kicks to the shins, girls with a hammered fist to the thigh. Little girls sometimes insisted tenaciously, "I am <u>not</u> a boy,"

while both boys and girls often burst into tears.

Sarah showed no reaction whatsoever, merely stared at the deformed hand holding the rolled cigarette and watched the inverted V of smoke flow from the man's nostrils each time he took a puff.

"What are you going to do with the roosters?" asked Ida. The question made the men kick at the sawdust and look at each other for answers.

"Contest."

"Judging, y'know."

A man, one of the carnival people, waited anxiously ouside one of the tents. Occasionally one or two men entered, many carrying roosters in cages.

"We best get in there," said Bud Mackenzie, taking a wooden match from his pocket. He struck the match on his fingernail and relit the burnt-out cigarette in his mouth. He rubbed out the matchflame on his pantleg as another cloud of smoke Veed from his nostrils. "Sorry you and your little boy couldn't come. Just us and the judges are allowed." He picked up his rooster cage. The rooster, at eye level with Sarah, let out an ear-splitting squawk.

"Cack-ca-caw-CRAW!"

In the pen next to the unicorn-goat, a single chicken picked at kernels of grain in a tinfoil pieplate, making the sound of a child's drum. A newspaper photograph stapled to the front rail of the stall showed a ruffled

hen who squinted quizzically at two eggs, one round, the other bowling-pin-shaped. The caption under the picture, clipped from the Buffalo Plains Bi-Weekly, identified the hen as "Bowling Betty."

Ida looked tiredly about the place. A barker outside a tent hooked her glance, pointing at her and Sarah as he recited, "Bring the kids, bring grandma and grandpa, bring yourself, see the impossible, experience the inexplicable, be amazed by the amazing--witness the horrendous realities of the savage world . . ." Meanwhile a great hubbub had erupted in the tent where Bud Mackenzie and the others had entered with their roosters.

In a nearby stall a boy posed beside a young black bull while his mother snapped a Polaroid picture. The mother looked around for a place to set her cigarette and finally gave it to the boy's younger sister to hold. After the flash the boy, wearing a white stetson and western shirt, hopped over the stall and stood for another photo as he was awarded a blue ribbon by the mayor, Bill Seagram. A group of the boy's friends teased him as he wriggled his shivering arms into a parka. Other cattlemen stood smoking and talking with the boy's father. One of the boy's friends frisbeed a paper pieplate at the hockey timeclock, hitting the "Visitors" sign.

A long rubbery man with skin the colour of old moss stood in the shadow of a tent flap. His black eyes darted

from one person to the next while he fingered the slender blade of a sword like the stops of a wind instrument. Eventually he sidled up to the cattle group, leaned his head back, exposing a lean, snakelike neck, and was about to slide the sword down his throat when a short stocky man in a cowboy hat took one long stride forward and stamped his foot. "You git on outta here!" he growled.

Ida wished Hartland could have had the chance to do the things that required a father, like 4-H. In the few short years that James had actually been a father to Hartland he had taught the boy a lot about plants and animals and the weather. He used to tell Ida how when Hartland grew bigger he would teach him to break horses as he had done as a boy, how to make a shelter in the wild, how to snare rabbits. Now and then, against Ida's wishes, he took the boy over to the reserve for an afternoon visit with old Pa Lacasse, who had taught James to fish with a gunnysack and how to distinguish edible berries from poisonous ones.

It was painfully comical now for Ida to remember her hopes that Warren Putnam would be a father to Hartland. It was funny to think of Warren doing anything! Apart from playing darts with his beer-buddies.

Seven years ago the municipal grader had come scraping down the valley hillroad of the Cole farm. Ida watched the grader shave the short stretch of road past

the yard gate then, through the trees behind the house-trailer, she heard the diesel engine labour as the grader continued, trying to climb the scrap of a trail that dribbled off into rock and prairie wool on the back hillside. With a gnashing of gears the grader retreated down the hill and in a few minutes Ida spotted Warren at the well, pumping water into his cupped hand. She invited him in for a glass of iced tea. Two months later when a new municipal counsellor was elected and gave his son the grading job, Ida hired Warren to work in the vegetable fields she was struggling to cultivate on her own. He ended up staying.

Ida's hopes that Warren might play a fatherly role were quashed the first winter. When the willow-banked river froze hard enough to sustain weight, Hartland shyly brought out the old hockey stick, skates and gloves that had been his father's and asked Warren if he'd like to come play on the ice. Warren responded with a quick snort which seemed to indicate he understood the joke and found it a funny one too.

As a boy Hartland had stood longingly by his father's rocking chair, trying to imagine the gray-faced man active in the leather-smelling hockey gear, trying to remember him as joyful as he had been, quiet eyes full of light instead of staring perpetually at nothing. In recent years his sadness about his father had hardened into a

bitter stone of hatred for Warren and, Ida felt, for her too. Everything he said now had a sharp edge to it. A couple of days ago she had asked him to go prime the waterpump and he had snapped back, "Why don't you get your lover to do it?" making the word sound as thick and greasy as possible.

Ida continued her way around the rink. She was uninterested in the agricultural exhibits and wasn't curious enough to enter one of the carnival tents. She didn't even like having to say hello to the people she knew.

An albino standing outside a tent calmly inserted a flaming stick into his mouth and closed his lips then held a second torch near his mouth and exhaled, causing a yellow gob of flame to leap out. Behind him passed a gray-haired man in tight paisley trunks who was tattooed everywhere Ida could see except his eyelids. Across the man's back, over one shoulder, down under the opposite arm and around his chest, a faded blue panther chased its own tail in the blue jungle covering the man's torso. The man draped a raincoat over the shoulders of a woman dressed only in a tiger-stripe bikini. The woman had dark brown eyes, pencilled-in auburn eyebrows and long hair the colour of ripe wheat. They looked road-worn.

Ida pulled Sarah through a clog of people gawking into a tent doorway where an animal act was taking place.

In front of the next tent a young man clad in black tights and top hat, wearing white pancake make-up over his entire face, performed magical illusions in mime. He pinned his dark eyes on Sarah, theatrically pressed his right thumb and forefinger into a pair of tweezers, tilted his head sideways and poked the finger-tweezers into his ear. Slowly at first, then faster, in mock alarm, he reeled out a string of finely-knotted silk scarves: coral-lime-fuschia-banana-orchid.

Sarah pressed her fists to her mouth and grinned as the mime stared in bewilderment at the tropical rainbow of silk dangling from his head. He looked sadly to Sarah for help, then his face brightened, he held his left forefinger aloft--even to Ida a comicbook lightbulb seemed to appear over his head--the long slender fingers probed into his left ear and tugged out, first the stems, then the only slightly rumpled heads of a bouquet of white carnations, the coloured scarves sucking back into his opposite ear like a long wet noodle.

The mime passed the flowers among the ladies of the applauding crowd and reached casually behind Sarah's ear where he found a white dove; he placed the bird in Sarah's small white hands. She allowed it to peck gently at the tip of her nose until the man lifted his hat and the bird flew to the top of his head.

The crowd chuckled as the magician bowed low,

elegantly ran his hand along the brim of his hat and placed it squarely overtop the dove on his head. Then, with a grandiloquence of facial and corporal gesticulation, he turned to Ida and silently beseeched the company of her daughter. Soft eyes wide and asking, he tilted his head and held forth his open palm as if offering the girl candy. Sarah pulled away from her mother, entranced by the kindred mute. The magician took her by the hands and studied her, fixing his eyes on her black boots, her brown parka, the blue knit scarf hanging loosely from her neck, her open child's face. Everyone eyed the pair curiously as the young man stared into the girl's blue eyes, she returning the gaze.

"POOF!" The magician reached into a chalice by his side and dashed a pellet into a pewter dish; a smokey cloud smudged the air. Seconds passed in gray opacity as the ring of spectators waited for the anaemic white light to filter down from the fluorescent tubes, slowly swallowing up the black motes.

The audience gasped as the two figures took shape amid the smoke.

There before them were not Sarah and the magician but an adult woman with Sarah's blue eyes and yellow hair standing in a black mime-suit beside a fine, dark-haired boy in snowboots and a blue scarf. The boy stood expressionless, quietly waiting. The woman, at

first leaning indolently on one leg, pulled herself to her full height. Blue eyes experienced, lips curved, softly mocking: it was a face of quiet power. Sarah, fully-grown, turned and gave her mother an enigmatic smile until Ida was forced to look away.

All noise in the rink ceased as a pounding filled Ida's head. A black midget clown, weaving through the crowd with a tray, held a paper horn of pink snow under Ida's nose. She closed her eyes until he had gone.

As the next puff of smoke cleared Ida felt Sarah's childfist curl around her thumb and squeeze. The magician doffed his black hat, spun it, and bowed.

The snow crunched under the car tires like the grinding of Hartland's molars as he pulled into the lot behind Hank Best's Fivepin Palace. A faded collage of rusty tin signs--the red Daily Mail airplane, the Scottish-looking Export A lady, the Player's sailor--came weakly to life in the glow of the headlights. Hartland opened the tailgate, wrapped his father's head well in the blanket and carried him toward the rink.

He had parked in the blind alley to avoid anyone spotting Warren's station wagon--he knew he had beaten his mother to town because he'd glimpsed her backing up a blocked side road--but when he walked by the hotel beer parlour he had to pass three of the McLuhan pickups idling line-abreast with the McLuhan brothers and their wives inside. A sedan with Manitoba licence plates stopped across from the elevator and a gang of Indians inside asked where they could buy gas. As Hartland directed them a handful of kids ran by, chasing a volleyball in a game of broomball-shinny. Finally the Indians thanked him and drove away, the undercarriage of their car scraping bottom as it rumbled over the level crossing.

Hartland pulled his toque-mask over his face and ran. James's body, flopped over Hartland's back, jounced with the chugging motion; each step made him grunt, breaking a dry grumble that rattled in his throat. The noises--James's closest sounds to speech since the day of the chickencoop--faded as Hartland weaved through the cars parked at the arena.

Inside, he gaped at the camp of black tents, dazed by the crowd and the noise. He grabbed the sleeve of a man carrying an armful of batons and tennis balls. "Where's Little Dothan?" he demanded. The man, dressed in tights and an open parka, lithely raised a runnered foot and pointed to a long tent halfway down the rink.

"Little Dothan'll be on after the animals," he drawled.

Hartland made a beeline for the tent. He backed into the tent-flap doorway and let the flap fall shut. A narrow pathway led past a small stage and through the penalty exit to the bleachers where a dozen people watched a muzzled bear cub waddle after a fish on a stick held by an acne-scarred blonde. Presently the woman led the bear to a small cage, undid the leather muzzle and flung in the fish. She closed the door after the bear and draped a purple tie-dyed sheet overtop the cage.

The next performer was a green parrot who warbled scattered, halting lines from "Dixie" and "Swanee River,"

then flew back and forth between two open cages at opposite ends of the stage, making a dramatic dive through a hoolahoop in the centre. A crew of gawkers, led by a stooped man with long ears and a rubberish face, clodded together in the doorway. For the show's finale the bird perched on a mini-trapeze, held a doll's baby bottle to its beak with one foot and toppled over as though drunk. The trainer milked nervous applause from the audience, allowing "Magnum" to cling upside down until everyone was clapping loudly.

"That's all, folks!" croaked the parrot.

A pair of overalled men hauled away the bear cage on a dolly. White flames of frost had formed on the dark sheet from the bear's breath. Next, the man who had directed Hartland climbed onto the stage, took off his parka and began juggling firesticks. The carnival manager, dressed in a gray, wide-lapelled suit, came and broke up the crowd blocking the doorway. Only the big-eared man entered, the others moving on. The juggler tossed more and more items into the air while another man hopped onto a unicycle and wheeled back and forth. A paper plate struck the cyclist on the ear.

When the show finished, Jonathan York, the Presbyterian minister, stepped onto the stage. He introduced Little Dothan as a big little evangelist where he comes from, an inspiration and a young go-getter, then he led

the crowd in applauding the pre-adolescent boy who bounded onto the stage.

The evangelist stared at the audience as if memorizing faces. He wore a navy blue suit, white shirt and black tie; his buckskin hair was brilliantined back, exposing a large clear forehead. A pair of quick brown eyes poked out of the pudgy cheeks like cloves in a ham. Finally he spoke. "Ah know what yore thenkin' . . . Right about now, yore mind's askin' you a few tough questions an' yore haffin' to do some fancy footwork just to come up with the answers . . . Who is this guy anyway? Isn't he just another one of those preachers that spews off a lot about the word o' God, throwing out big words like salvation an' heavenly ree-wards? Furthermore, this one ain't even a man, he's just a punky kid."

Little Dothan's family watched proudly from the side of the stage. The mother sat at a portable electric organ; the father stood at her side, petting the long blond braid of Little Dothan's older sister.

Little Dothan pointed to a barrel-chested man sitting with his wife and two daughters. "Is thet what yore thenkin'?"

The man smiled reverently. "Yes sir," he crooned.

"Well I'm gonna let you in on a little secret," said Little Dothan in a confidential tone. "If I was you settin' there an' listenin' to some knee-high ramble on,

I'd be wonderin' too!" He let out a round jovial laugh, echoed by a spatter of nervous titters from the audience.

"I won't bore you with how the Lord chose me for to be his spokesman an' how empty my life was before an' all o' that stuff . . . but I will tell yew this: that I ain't got no more choice in the matter than any one other of God's chosen speakers. Whatever words thet come out," he slapped his chest with a hand puffy as a pincushion, "are the words God put there. Could be that's why I don't tell such good jokes!" He flashed a polished smile then suddenly became serious.

"But I ain't here for to tell no jokes. I'm here to tell you it's time." He gave a hard stare. "Time . . . that you threw off them old shackles keepin' you out of God's house. Shackles of sin, of hate and selfishness and greed . . . and of lust. Because, brother, there ain't much time left."

Hartland leaned forward, his neck tight as fence-wire. His head bobbed in a continuous nod as he mouthed Little Dothan's words, repeating aloud the ends of sentences: ". . . much time left." There was a slight rasp to his breathing.

"We are livin' in the End-days, my friends. <u>Verily I say unto yew, this generation shall not pass</u>. We are witnessin' the end of Satan's free ride on earth and I know and you know it cain't go on much longer. <u>The day of</u>

the Lord cometh, cruel both with wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate: and He shall destroy--the--sinners."

Hartland turned excitedly to his father. The man's eyes remained as empty as they had been at home in the valley.

"I bin hearin' lots about drought in these parts, 'bout how the ground's all dried up and there's no grass in the pastures. 'Almost seems like the heavens have forsook us and the world's comin' to an end,' I heared one farmer say over to yore little Chinese restaurant right here in Buffalo Plains, Canada. But I wanna tell you that you ain't seen nothin' like what's gonna happen come the last days on this here earth. Isaiah seen it far off in the distance: Suddenly, in an instant, the Lord Almighty will come with thunder and earthquake and great noise, with windstorm and tempest and flames of a devouring fire. You talk about yore wrath of God--there's gonna be some spankings all right!

"The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins . . . And yew better pray, like Luke says, that you may be able to escape All that's gonna happen, 'cause what's gonna happen's conflagration and perdition right here on this earth. If you-all wanna end up crispy critters you know exactly

what road to follow. The road of avarice, the road of sensuality and vile acts, the road of baseness and cruelty and falseness and excess!"

"Excess," repeated Hartland hotly. Little Dothan dabbed his boyish brow with a gray silk handkerchief.

"He blasted the sodomites one time, right offen the map, and now he's started up toilet-cleanin' again. Just take a drive through San Francisco once, they're dropping like flies. An' it's not just the homos, the fornicators'll be next.

"I seen in one o' yore farm newspapers here, The Western Producer: 'Farmers. Condominium co-op offers two weeks annually in tropical paradise.'" He gave a sneering smile. "Well I hain't been around long as most of yew folks but even I know eternity in paradise sounds a darn sight longer than two weeks!"

Little Dothan's mother broke into the opening chords of "Christ Whose Glory Fills the Skies," while Little Dothan's sister held up cardboard cue cards. Silver braces glinted as she sang. Little Dothan's father mopped his son's face with a towel and handed him a large Coke in a waxed cup. The plump boy slurped through the straw, took a deep breath and took over holding the cue cards for his sister, overpowering the other voices with an unbroken soprano--"Dark and cheerless is the morn . . ." The blue-eyed girl squeezed up and down the

bleachers, collecting money in a tambourine. She smiled sweetly at Hartland as he dropped in a couple of quarters, the tambourine making a "zlissle" sound.

Little Dothan warned of the threat of nuclear warfare. He stressed the necessity for western nations to stand together against the Red Menace, fortifying their resolve in fulfilling their NATO commitments. He cited scripture, he cited John F. Kennedy. He shouted and whispered and raised his chubby fists in the air.

Fiery red fever splotches kindled the boy's cheeks; he slipped off his blazer, rolled up his shirt-sleeves and loosened his tie.

"Ladies 'n' gennlemen, I hope 'atcherall here with a open heart tonight," drawled Little Dothan, "'cause we just might see some miracles happen! Fill yoreself with the almighty Lord," he shouted, sweeping a stubby forefinger across the bunch, "and you fill yoreself with the protector of good and the avenger of evil."

". . . venger of evil," said Hartland.

"I wanna tell you people that you got to have faith, you got to believe, and not only that, you got to believe in belief. I'm askin' you to have faith in faith, belief in belief and trust in God. Place yourself in the hands of the Lord Almighty, let yourself go, feel yourself melting back into your chair and Know that the good Lord is there with a giant catcher's mitt to hold on tight. He

won't let you down. What I say is true, it is the truth, the Lord will not let you down. See yourself floating through the air and coming to a big woolly cloud. Just ease yourself back into that old fluffy white cloud."

Organ tones hummed, soft as fuzzy bowstrings, as Little Dothan's mother toed the lowest notes. Little Dothan soothed and consoled in a voice warm as felt.

"What I say is true, it is the truth. Yore a child o' God. Faith in faith, belief in belief, trust in the Father, He won't let you down, He will not let you down." Hartland's head spun. Happily numb, he watched the blonde girl float like a white-robed angel between the rows. The tambourine in her hand was padded with blue and purple bills. Hartland grubbed euphorically in his empty pockets, jostling the body of his dozing father while the girl smiled and waited, her blue eyes placid and cool.

A rooster crow broke the calm.

Abruptly Hartland's father's weight left his shoulder. Hartland cranked his head to the right and watched as the man straightened from his slouch. He blinked, squinted, wiped his eyes, picked his teeth, rubbed his nose, scratched his ear. Somewhere amidst the whirling eddies of sound reeling through Hartland's brain he heard bits of phrases in a strong high voice: "reach out . . . heart in your hands . . . and ye shall find . . ." James Cole slapped his knees. Slowly he rose to his full

height--his spine giving out a series of pops and cracks as he arched his back and stretched--smeared an enormous yawn-tear across his cheek, dug deep in the pockets of the trousers Hartland had crammed him and his pyjamas into, and dropped a wadded five dollar bill onto the pile.

Little Dothan stopped speaking. He looked puzzled, watching Hartland's father who stood examining his own white breath. "Okay, you're blockin' the view sir. You'll hafta sit down now."

Hartland jumped to his feet, a smile peeled across his face.

"He's <u>saved!</u>" he shouted.

"It's James Cole," said someone.

"This kid's better'n Kreskin."

Little Dothan stood stunned for an instant.

"Yea-ess!" he exclaimed. "Yea-ess! Hold the phone folks, we have a miracle. Yea-ess! The hand of God. The blind shall see and the cripples shall get up and . . ." He stopped and stared, speechless, at James Cole. Little Dothan's mother tore a camera from a vinyl bag and started flashing pictures.

Little Dothan was standing next to Hartland's father now. <u>Flash.</u> Jonathan York stepped in beside Little Dothan. <u>Flash.</u> Someone had an arm around Hartland's shoulder but he didn't know who--everything was disappearing around him: sounds, sights, smells. Everything except

. . . a hand.

Hartland, eyes glued to the hand extended warmly between his father and him, afraid to look up, afraid not to, slowly, as if in a dream, raised his right hand--not feeling a part of his own body: an offering--and allowed it to be squeezed, his ears full of distant ebbing sounds as he swallowed hard and forced his head to tilt upwards and meet the friendly, cheerful face of his father, the man who hadn't looked at anybody since Hartland was four years old, hadn't spoken--hadn't so much as quivered his lips or turned his eyes in their sockets--giving his son a radiant grin, eyes crinkling sunnily at the edges.

"Hey, Buddy," said his father. "I'm Art Roebuck."

Warren Putnam pushed aside the blankets and sat up on the couch. He'd never slept on it at night before and Ida had insisted that with her husband back to normal, sort of, Warren couldn't sleep in the bed. The old guy was still sleeping on his cot in the kitchen "for now." Warren's feet were cold.

He felt around on the floor for Pogey. The dog seemed to recognize James, who introduced himself as Art, but he had reacted strangely. Pogey lifted his head, walked to the feet of his old master (though he had really become the dog of his snoozing pal Warren), and slumped down at his feet in what seemed like sleep. Warren felt sick remembering the glow in Ida's eyes when Pogey went to her husband's side.

They couldn't get the man to talk right, though, and finally they'd put him to bed.

"Pogey." Warren got up and walked by moonlight to the lump of Pogey's back, still by the door. "Come on, come to bed," he said, tugging the dog's ear. He jerked his hand back.

Warren threw open Hartland's door and whispered

frantically, "Get up! Pogey's not bweathin'." Hartland sat up on an elbow, still half asleep.

"Pogey's dead. Get up, we gotta go bury him."

"Get up," said Warren. He was sweating cold.

"Why now?" said Hartland, lying back down. "It's d-dark. How're you sure he's d-dead anyway?"

Warren felt like an egg-thieving weasel he'd cornered once in the henhouse. He trembled, darting his eyes round the room. His head hummed. Suddenly he yanked the covers off the bed and flung them in a corner. He lunged at Hartland's throat but the boy straightened his leg, kicking Warren squarely in the stomach.

Hartland stood up from the bed, wheezing. "Okay! Let's go bury him now."

The two men worked by jacklight, warming the frozen road allowance with a welding torch as they hacked a trunk-sized rectangle. Layer by layer they melted the frost and dug a few more inches. The digging calmed Warren. When the hole was deep enough for Pogey's fat body they wrapped the dog in a swather canvas and laid him in the ground.

"That's all right, you can go back to bed now," said Warren.

The eastern sky glowed on the valley hilltop as Warren began shovelling dirt over Pogey's covered body.

Ida peeked into the kitchen where James--or "Art"--was doing calisthenics: hands on hips, he twisted his torso first one way and then the other. So he really was cured after all these years.

The television! It had worked as therapy for James the way they said it might for Sarah. Thank God and Electrohome for the satellite dish, thought Ida.

Still, he was not completely right. Suddenly he was talking with a funny little accent like . . . Andy Griffith. And why did he insist on calling himself this new name?

I don't ever remember him doing exercises either, thought Ida. But back in those days nobody did them.

The Winnipeg couch in the porch was made, blankets and quilts folded with military tautness. Art--up with the sun--was already shaved and dressed in the trousers he had requested the night before; the plaid shirt Hartland had given him remained on its hanger, hooked over the kitchen doorframe.

He extended his arms and cut circles in the air, larger and larger, faster and faster until he was a

deadly, whirring windmill. He danced around in a boxer's stance, jabbing with his left hand, switched into a baseball position for a leg-in-the-air pitcher's warmup and froze, right arm high, ready to pass an invisible football through the kitchen doorway. He faked twice, stepped long and hurled the pretend ball with a grunt. His eyes met Ida's in the hallway.

"Mornin' Ma'am," said Art, grinning. He rubbed his right forearm and said, "I notice your water's not running." He took the shirt from its hanger and put it on. "The line must be froze up."

Ida stared across the room. Sleepwalker-like, she went to the sink and turned the numb tap. "The pump will have to be primed," she said weakly.

"Give me a bucket," said Art, "and I'll get some snow."

Ida took a pitted copper boiler from under the sink and began emptying it of leathery red potatoes but Art nudged her aside and unloaded the potatoes in fistfulls.

There's something different about him, thought Ida. Why doesn't he remember his own wife?

Art returned from outside in an instant with a load of hard-packed snow. The oblong boiler covered two burners on the stove; it sizzled and spat as the burners reddened. A dull white blind steamed the window.

Hartland came into the kitchen.

"So how are ya anyway old Buddy?" said Art, standing and clapping Hartland on the shoulder. "Y'know, I really oughtta thank you for rescuing me from that squirrel cage of a carnival. I've had enough of that tune for a while."

What kind of nonsense is this? thought Ida. Hartland glanced at his mother who shook her head to say, "Pay no attention."

"After a while you get a bit tired of trains and sem-eye-trailers," he said. "Even though I grew up with it, life on the road gets kind of old."

Ida glanced around the room, taking note of changes her husband would not recognize when he fully regained his senses. There was the new orange-and-yellow-flowered wallpaper. The cupboards had always been a sort of yellow, only Ida had brushed over the old custard with an enamel bright as dandelions. Same white crepe curtains dotted with sunny yellow-centered dogwood blossoms.

"I thought I'd left the carnival life for good," continued Art, "years ago. But I've been searching for my father and it was as good a means as any of getting around. The only sure thing about carnival life is that you travel." As he spoke he massaged his neck, shoulders, biceps.

The water hissed in the greenish boiler, sending up lines of bubbles like the pea-string necklaces Hartland had made for his mother as a boy. Ida scooped out a

saucepan of water, measured a cup-and-a-half of Red River Cereal and dumped it into the pot. "Hartland can you come give me a hand?" she said in a calm voice. The boy took a spoon and began to stir. She felt a chill as she whispered, "Don't say anything to get him excited."

When the cereal was ready Ida spooned steaming gray gobs into three bowls. She set them on the tiny table along with fresh cream and a bag of sand-chunky sugar.

"Yep I've done just about everything under the sun," said Art as he reached for the sugar bag. "But I guess you always come back to what you know best." The sugar-lumps became dark candy islands as he plopped them into the cream. "My father had us all juggling and balancing on miniature high-wires the minute he caught us taking our first steps. He inherited the business from my grand-father, y'see. During the thirties, forties, fifties, it was the biggest family-run operation in America.

"My grandfather learned about the circus from his father, who ran all the animal acts and some of the trapeze stuff for Ringling Brothers back in their heyday. Died with his head inside a lion's mouth." Art blew on a spoonful of porridge. "He had this bad habit, y'know, of eating onion sandwiches." He whacked his thigh and lunged forward to clean off his porridge spoon. "Onion sandwich-es!" he chortled between swallows.

"Old Etienne used to gather up the stinkweed around

his cabin and make it into salads," said Ida. "He said he found it good for the sinuses." She directed the anecdote to Hartland in case Art didn't respond.

"So my father inherits the business but, you know, movies and television . . . nobody's made real money in the circus, jeez, since the war anyway.

"What he wanted was to build up the biggest family circus act in the world. And if he hadda been born a little sooner, he just mighta done 'er.

"My mother was an orphan, y'see, that my grandfather found in El Paso. She came wandering through the audience one night peddling a set of onyx chessmen, getting in the way of the vendors with their cotton candy and helium balloons and all o' your standard circus junk. Just a little kid. He took pity on her, like, and brought her along with the show, pretty soon she's got all the animals wrapped around her little finger, without ever saying a word. It was like she didn't have a tongue."

Ida watched in the corner of her eye her husband ravenously shovelling down porridge as he talked. Only yesterday she had fed him, washed him, shaved him. He wasn't talking the same as James--as he--used to. It would have normally taken James a whole week to say as much as he had already said this morning. Where were these silly stories and jokes coming from? And why was he talking with this accent, this--drawl? He sounded like he

had stepped out of a cowboy movie.

"Anyways, one evening between shows when my mother was sixteen, this Mexican ranchero singer Juan Ramirez was backstage. He thought my mother was quite a beauty, I guess, and he told her so, figuring she wouldn't know what he was saying. Well she lit right into him and went peeling through his hide first one side and then the other just like she'd been talking Mexican all her life. She told that Ramirez dude that it didn't take very good manners on his part to go around making personal comments about young girls, that it only showed how all artists were egotists who all they ever did was use people, and that his cheap flattery reflected nothing less than a poor upbringing and if his father and mother had been proper parents he'da known how to behave instead of annoying people who minded their own business and she would thank him to keep his feelings to himself. And then she shut up. Never said another word, even on her own wedding day. My father was so stunned by all o' this here harangue--he never once thought of her as Mexican before--that he dragged her straight to the altar the very next Saturday."

Sarah padded expressionless into the room.

"Morning, Honey-pie," said Art as she slipped past. She settled into a chair and stared diffusely out of cool blue eyes.

Honey-pie?

Ida sliced a loaf of bread and began making toast. She brought out a pint sealer containing gooseberry jelly.

Abruptly Art said, "So where's this Putnam fit in?"

Ida stared at Hartland, who stared back. She moved her lips silently. She glanced around the kitchen. She spatulaed butter onto a slice of yellow toast. Hartland started to wheeze.

"He's Sarah's father," she croaked.

Ida rose and poured a dipperful of water into the kettle. She took out a jar of instant coffee then changed her mind, reached back into the lower cupboard and took out the coffee percolator she and James had received as a wedding present. She fingered each scoop of the old coffee grounds for bugs before dumping it into the pot. When the brew was ready Art took a large swallow from his mug and gazed dreamily at the rising corkscrew of steam.

"My father's main target in life was one day to have a set of quintuplets." He chuckled, smiling into his coffee. "Sometime after the crash he heard about a family someplace who'd had a set of five identical girls that were adored by all the world. When he married my mother he had his head fixed on this notion they'd make a matched set of kids, only his'd be all boys that he'd teach the circus trade, teach'm to do acrobatics and the whole shebang and he'd make the Ringling Brothers look

like the Three Stooges.

"It happened he and my mother did have quite a few multiple births, just from sheer determination, I guess. First there was me and my twin bro' Franklin, then there was some other twins, two groups of triplets, even a set of quads, only it wasn't enough for my dad. Know something? He wore my mother out with all of this. Eventually old Pop, he just decided to go for it once and for all. No more messin' around. Went on a nine-week abstinence, dieted on crabmeat and mango butter--next thing you know there's Mom back to normal in her maternity dresses and sure enough, round five months comes balin' out these seven sealish kinda outfits. The three that survived went right straight into the incubator and pretty soon it was down to one. I remember it to this day: fishy sorta deal, y'know, with its veins all showing through the skin like if you've ever seen an unborn mouse. Finally one afternoon in Atlanta, Georgia it went into convulsions and ended up choking on its own vomit after it got stung on the earlobe by a bee."

"Sarah!" cried Ida. She snatched the girl's wrist and peeled open her fingers to retrieve a crayon. Sarah's clenched teeth displayed green wax-smears as Ida dug her finger around the pink gums.

"She's never done anything like that before."

"What happened then?" pressed Hartland. Ida looked

up sharply and scowled a warning. Hartland's eyes were big and round. She ran a glass of water and made Sarah rinse.

"Well, he was a broken man, y'see. He wasn't making any money, and by now he had like twenty-two mouths to feed. One day he hopped off the circus train and walked straight out into the Sierra Nevada basin." Art shrugged and sighed. "We got a few postcards: Philippines, Alaska, Puerto Rico, Hawaii. It sounded like he was aching to come back home to the family only he couldn't face us and so he got into doing a magic act on cruise ships. Every time a letter arrived, I struck out to find him. And I haven't caught up with him yet."

The living room couch springs groaned and the TV hissed to life. "So how can we apply these Zen ideas on Wall Street?" Presently Warren shuffled past the kitchen table to the porch. Everyone listened to him take his coat from the deer antler rack. Ida watched through the window as he clomped out to the chickencoop.

"Talkative kinda guy," said Art, swirling the dregs of his coffee before knocking them back. He slapped his knees, "So where do I start?"

"Start what?" said Ida.

"Working. What do I do to earn my keep?"

Ida stared at the coffee rings on the flowered oil-cloth. Hartland, a deer easing its tongue towards a

salty human hand, mumbled into his bowl, "I guess you could help m-me feed the s-s-ss--tock." Ida considered. Of course. Get him back in his old routine. After all, he was basically the same man as before with a bit of dreamed-up stuff tossed in. He's had long enough to dream up anything! thought Ida.

"You got it!" Art stood up brightly. He snapped his elbows back several times and rolled his right shoulder around as though working out a kink.

As he was leaving Ida grabbed Hartland aside and said, "Now don't you start believing any of this, mind."

"But maybe it all k-kinda happened when he was y-young and he j-just sorta lost track of the t-tt--ime."

"James Cole never got any farther than the North Stoney. He only ever left Born With A Tooth Municipality the time he had his appendix out."

Ida leaned against the sink and sighed. It all made her woozy. Even though she knew the stories were false, she couldn't sift any "James" out of them. Not even in the telling.

James Cole had had a quiet way of doling out tidbits of knowledge or instruction, explaining the watertightness of the beaver lodge or waking little Hartland in the middle of the night to watch a sow deliver; he could call a loon or a coyote so well the animal would answer and come near, and at night he thrilled Ida and Hartland with

Depression tales she had heard hundreds of times, like the baby who had to be thrown from the cutter to fend off the rapacious wolfpack that grew closer and closer while the horses whinnied in fear. But most days, as they worked together on the farm, the man hadn't uttered more than a couple of words. And above all, from everything Ida could recall about him, her husband had been content with doing things the regular way. Hadn't he?

Her morning had got off to a bad start. All these tales had stirred themselves into her memories of James--it had been fourteen years after all--and for the moment she couldn't completely separate them. She dumped her coffee in the sink and made a cup of instant to clear her head.

Maybe it was a sort of winter madness. One fall the old Dutch elevator agent, who always opened his dropleaf desk and gave Hartland a piece of salty Netherlands licorice whenever they went to dump a load of grain, boarded his windows and headed North to work as a cook at a mining camp. Unaccustomed to solitude, he went bushed, and according to his workmates, arose from bed one night to fry up every egg in the place. A dishwasher, sleeping in the next room in the cookshack, woke to the sound of hammering and found the old Dutchman singing the German anthem and nailing the eggs, sunnyside up, to the wall.

Ida avoided Art's eyes when they returned to the

housetrailer. She took the pailful of eggs and placed them in the little hollows inside the fridge door. "You can't know how I've needed you all these years," she said.

"Aw shucks ma'am, it's my pleasure to lend a helping hand. This here farm must give you a good pile of chores to take care of come summer. Y'know I'd be of a mind to stick around and help out with the gardenwork if you figured you could use a guy who doesn't mind working. Your kids are just swell but this Putnam's about as useful, if you don't mind my saying so ma'am--"

"Just--never mind. Look, how about if you . . . primed the waterpump?"

"Done!" said Art. "Just show me the way."

"Let me go with him this time," Ida whispered to Hartland as they passed in the hallway.

"Was my d-dad really in the c-circ--"

"Don't pay any attention to that crap."

Hartland's breathing sped up. "But where'd he g-get it all from?"

"I don't know. He's not all there. Maybe give him a couple of days to readjust."

The boy's jaw muscles bulged in and out as he ground his teeth. "But isn't he better, isn't he b-better now than he w-was? He's cured!"

"He's half cured."

"W-what's wrong with him this w-way?"

"He's not your father this way, that's all. No more so than Warren."

Hartland's chest gave a painful wheeze.

Ida led Art, a hot kettle of snow water in each hand, over the trail through the copse of willows behind the trailer. Here and there an insulation-wrapped pipe poked out of the snow, finally ducking into a slope-roofed shanty that listed over the riverbank. A small electric motor was plugged into an extension cord which ran to the house inside the pipe's fibreglass blanket. Art pushed the electric plug tight into the extension cord and examined the motor like one who enjoys knowing how things function. He used some of the hot water to thaw the lodged ice and the rest to prime the pump. In a minute water was gurgling up the pipe from the ice-capped river.

On their way back through the trees Art stopped at a trail of split, pointed tracks. "Some kind of hoofed animal?"

Ida moved closer and peered at the prints. "White-tail, I guess."

A large nest, thatched with coarse sticks, stood naked in the boughs of a nearby poplar. "What kind of bird made that mansion?" asked Art.

"Magpie."

This is good, thought Ida. Even though he's forgotten everything, he'll soon be back to normal if he keeps asking all these questions.

"I really appreciate your hospitality," said Art. "You folks make me feel right at home."

Art also noticed where a porcupine had neatly stripped the bark off a young tree's base, exposing a spindly white shinbone, and stopped to cup his ear, listening to a bird-melody Ida couldn't identify. The old James could have. It looked like a storybook farm, she realized, looking at it through new eyes. Hemmed on three sides by the spring-fed creek, the broad flat fields spread open from the road like the wings of a moth. The land had been so parched in recent years that the beaver pond, ice-topped now, thawed each summer into a sagging bog that bred snails and reeked. Ida envisioned taking Art on a fieldtrip like when her great-aunt came up from Spokane: the beaver lodge, the wiry-haired buffalo boulders where the great beasts had scratched enormous itches. There were all sorts of new and interesting things they could show the man.

She flinched as she realized what she was thinking.

"You might think you're foolin' us all." Hartland wheezed a little and looked up from the porch step, trying to see in the kitchen window. "You might think we'll believe anything around here." He took his inhaler and gave himself a shot.

He was waiting for Art. The man always insisted on helping with the chores now, but when he saw Hartland's mother washing dishes he stopped to help her dry. Hartland already had his skidoo-suit on so he waited outside. The sun was hot.

Art hadn't stopped talking since the moment he arrived: when he was in bootcamp, the time he watched an alligator eat a man in a Louisiana bayou, why the best college quarterbacks have Italian names, where to go in El Paso to get really good frijoles, how a guy who was smart could make boatloads of money importing from the Pacific Rim. Hartland was tired of it.

"You might think we're a pretty slow bunch."

Hartland's thumbsmudged memories of his father--patched together with scraps of his mother's stories and artifacts such as the musty hockey pads--were

not at all like Art. The fantastic stories aside, he was unlike anyone Hartland had met around Buffalo Plains. He'd been on the farm two days and already he'd taken over.

There was something . . . tricky about this Art. He knew all about everything without being told. Things he shouldn't know, innovations that had arrived long after the day of the chickencoop, far from the living room rocking chair. Art had stood on the porch the night before and pointed out lights that came from satellites, not astral bodies; he described what would occur in the event of a full-scale laser war. He knew what the UHF knob was for on the TV.

Art even had Warren pegged. His second evening on the farm, when Warren put on his coat and stomped out, presumably to the henhouse, Art continued shuffling cards at the cardtable and muttered to himself, "That fool will set the whole place on fire one time."

If Hartland wasn't careful he found himself thinking of the man, who was obviously a not-fully-recovered James Cole, as someone else, someone new.

As Art.

He came out onto the step dressed in a red mackinaw and cowhide workgloves.

"You m-m-might th-th-th--youm mm--igh--th mink--" Hartland wheezed, feeling he was going to vomit. He took

a shot from his inhaler and caught his breath.

"Yeah," said Art, patting him on the shoulder. "You got a great spread here. A great spread." Hartland had to breathe hard to keep up with the man as he walked toward the barn. "Just look at how that old sun makes the snow glisten and shine. Won't be long before it all melts away and you're into spring."

Art held a creamcan-sized slop-pail while Hartland scooped feed into it with a coalshovel. The pigs pushed and grunted as Art dumped the mash into the first trough: an old claw-footed bathtub with one side cut down. Art pointed to a yearling with a black Hudson's Bay map on its loin.

"Look at that one there," he said over the pig noise, "There's something funny about the way he's walking."

The pig was having trouble squeezing through the row of buttocks by the trough; it scurried back and forth on three legs, holding its left rear leg in the air.

"Single him out and let's have a look," said Art.

Hartland wedged a grainshovel between the lame pig and the others and pushed it to the edge of the pen. The pig wriggled wildly as Art held it pinned on its back. A fencing staple was stuck between the two horns of the hoof. Hartland ran to the workshop for a pair of plyers. Bloody screams split the air as Hartland wrenched out the staple, making the other pigs squeal and dance around

nervously. After the wound was sterilized the pig continued running on three feet for a while before testing out the fourth one.

Art spoke sweetly to the mule and cow as he forked hay into their stalls, "There you are, old girl," "There you go, Brown Eyes." He held a whisk of crested wheatgrass under the snout of the goat, tenderly rubbing the pet's head as it chomped the stiff stalks. The goat's ceramic eyes remained crossed on the grass as it chewed. A soft breeze warmed their faces as they walked from the barn to the chickencoop; the screaks of the wheatpail's handle scratched the valley's calm. They met Warren in the henhouse, grinning foolishly amidst the chickens.

"Hello there Sad Sack," said Art, briskly dumping grain into the trough. He affected a British accent: "Hobnobbing with the hennies?" He took a broad shingle laying on the windowledge and spread the grain evenly across the bottom of the trough. "Having a chitty-chat with the chook-chooks?"

Hartland stood by warily, eyes on Warren, who said nothing. Art inspected the roostbunks and reached into the moist straw for eggs the colour of tea and milk. He disregarded the reddy-brown rooster who glared defiantly at his rubber boot.

In the afternoon Hartland took his father for a

skidoo ride. Past the truck, parked at an anxious tilt, up the bit of dead-end road until it disappeared, the machine laboured up the scarp to the hilltop. The skidoo slowly caught its breath on the upper flatland. Hartland skirted the edge of the Indian Reserve, buzzed the unfenced brow of the valley and the jagged fields that teased the sharp drop. When they came full-circle back to the east end above the farmyard, Hartland turned off the key and let the skidoo glide to a stop. The motor blubbered, choked and died.

The sides of the valley were white with snow for only the third time this year. In the womanly curves of the opposite hills dark V's of coarse brush were crammed into the rounded clefts. The hillside at the feet of the men had shifted under its own weight, slicing open a waffle-patterned gopher network beneath the tough sod. A wind-eroded demoiselle stood eerily alone like an earthen totem pole.

"The second p-pp--ingo that used to be next to this one got b-broken off last year," said Hartland. "One of the Indians--Parker Lacasse--went over in a snown-mobile." Bluish squares of windshield glass glittered at the base of the stump.

"You're lucky folks to be living in such an awesome environment," said Art at the same instant as the rooster crowed in the henyard.

The traverse of bald prairie was broken by orderly farmstead windbreaks that from this distance looked foolish and artificial compared to the natural poplar bluffs on the Reserve side. In the Cole yard were the red and white barn, two gable-roofed granaries, grayboard workshop, chickencoop with its fenced-in pen (Warren Putnam, hands deep in his pockets, leaned in the henhouse doorway). A U-shaped sandbag stack--used during years of heavy spring run-off--was roofed with planks from an old CNR snowfence, converting it into a winter storage shed for the tractor and some small field implements. Along the fenceline separating the yard from the field stood a snow-covered binder reel, an old multi-passenger bombardier and other assorted junk.

Hartland had never seen anything special about the area; it was like having a visiting dignitary on the farm. He pointed down at the sharp brink. "The b-b--buffalo used to graze up here on these flats. An' these cliffs here, the Indians used to run 'em over an' s--s-slaughter 'em."

He folded his arms and leaned back as Art's eyes plumbed the buffalo drop. Hartland prodded hoarsely, "But you really know all ab-bout this already, d-don't you?" His chest wheezed like a kicked accordion.

Art scuffed the snow from a lichen-skinned boulder. Hartland followed his gaze as he looked off into the sky,

long and blue save for one friendly flat-bellied chinook cloud and, far to the south, an old white trail of jet smoke that fluffed out like a crocus in water. Finally Art nodded and cleared his throat.

"Ayuh, I guess so." He shaded his eyes and stared into the distance. "You see, long before Sitting Bull kicked Custer's butt--and I'm not saying it's for sure the Sioux pulled this old trick at Little Big Horn--these kinda bluffs played a part in some heavy massacres." He reflected. "And just add a few pointed sticks and you got yourself a mantrap like the Cong used to greet us with in Nam."

"When you cast your vote for county judge, make it a vote for integrity."

Ida fanned herself with her crocheting. All the windows were open but the trailer was as stuffy as a grainbin. She glanced around the living room at the others.

Warren, feet up on an overturned laundry basket, snored softly in the rocking chair. Sarah sat splay-legged on the rug colouring pebbled flowers on squares of paper towel. Hartland slouched into the chesterfield and eyed Art at the card table.

Art divided the deck of cards, all crease-cornered and out of snap, into two soft piles. He lifted the top card from the left pile and turned it, the Queen of Hearts, so Ida and Hartland could see. Hartland looked bored. Art replaced the card and slapped the other stack overtop it. He shuffled deftly and cracked the cards on their sides, then flashed the top card: Queen of Hearts. He cut the deck and spliced the two floppy piles, riffling the corners together with a zip. He lifted a block of cards off the deck and displayed the bottom card: the

Queen of Hearts.

Ida smiled acknowledgement. Hartland scratched his head and yawned.

The accordion of blue-and-white bicycle cards stretched wider and wider as Art shuffled. Finally he spread the entire deck face down, end-to-end on the table. He took a random card and flipped the rest over like a row of dominoes, then snapped down the lever card: Queen of Hearts. Next he ordered nine cards into a square: three columns, three rows. He turned up the centre card: Queen of Hearts. He flashed the top left corner card: Queen of Hearts. Bottom centre: Queen of Hearts. Left centre, bottom right . . . Art bundled the cards in one hand and fanned them, displaying a nine-card straight, in spades, three-to-Jack. He winked at Hartland, who was leaning forward slightly, then shuffled and cut.

Leathery muscles tensed along his wire-haired forearms as he laid the cards in strict rows. Without even speaking he's different, thought Ida. Ida could not imagine her husband's hands--practical gardener's hands, accustomed to the shiny-smooth hoe handle, the velvety texture of rich black soil--possessing Art's nimbleness.

His face was a dark Indian colour. The square back of his neck, a triangular scarf over his throat, and his arm, from mid-bicep downward, were all sunburned copper.

Farmwork is making him manly, she thought.

Ida went silently to her bedroom, pushed aside a few pieces of clothing in a drawer and took out an old black-and-white snapshot of James turning the bingo cage and calling out numbers at the Buffalo Plains Hall. It was the year Hartland was born. In the living room she held the picture next to the doily she was crocheting and pretended to examine her work, glancing from the photo to Art, who whistled as he played. The only physical difference between Art and the man in the photograph was the red splotch in Art's right eye.

She could squeeze James's personality into Art's body if she concentrated hard, but the past seemed so distant now, as if it had been related to her by someone else like the plot of a movie. Her memories of their life together felt as foreign and unreal as old tin daguerreotype photographs. The lingering nostalgia she had felt all these years--she could remember the way it used to gnaw at her. But she no longer felt it. In spite of whatever comfort she had felt from Warren, Ida had always cherished her memories of simple contentedness with James. At any time she would have welcomed her husband's recovery.

Unladen with the disappointments and unfulfilled dreams of a real past, gifted, perhaps, with a memory full of adventuresome, romantic tales, Art had swooped in and

seized control of everything. Warren showed him actual respect--he was intimidated by Art. Already there was a silent bond between Art and Sarah.

It was frightening. Art's description fit the neighbourhood family man convicted of a string of heinous sex crimes: able, intelligent, exuding human warmth and charisma, yet in spite of all appearances, completely isolated within his own reality. Yet where did a reality of tightrope-walking and juggling merge with the neckframe Art had constructed to prevent the cow from sucking her own milk, or the garden tractor's faulty power takeoff, which Art had dismantled and somehow instinctively reassembled in such a way that it worked? James would never have dared attempt such a thing.

"You know, Will Rogers said he never met a man he didn't like. Well those Democrats never met a tax they didn't like."

Art's arrival was like being awakened from a dream by the clanging of dishes; James still hovered somewhere nearby but he was growing fuzzy. Ida felt like she actually hadn't seen him during the past fourteen years--disappeared like one of those men in magazines who go out for bread one day and never return. Now Art continually wormed his way into her memories of her husband--the stories, the accent, the voice itself. Art spoke the way old wealthy farmers eventually took to speaking after

Sunday dinner: stuffed and groggy with the biggest meal of the week, the men cooled their tea in their saucers and smoked, giving opinions in slow loud voices on the death of the small town, the Crow Rate, the general folly of Ottawa; eulogizing an era, they talked from the gut, allowing themselves to predict rather than to wonder, to know rather than to think, corpulent and prosperous in their harvest years. Art spoke in that self-assured voice all the time. If he had something to say he stated it without any humming and hawing, without any of this correct-me-if-I'm-wrong "eh?" which Sunday tourists from Montana and North Dakota mimicked as they asked where they could find beer.

James, softspoken about his achievements, polite to old ladies wearing hats--James Cole, expert at undoing knots and straightening pictures on the wall, who could make a whistle by squeezing a blade of grass between his thumbs and blowing through his cupped hands--was this the man sitting before her?

"I don't know what you're trying to pull . . ." mumbled Hartland over the clamour of rushing water.

His father--or Art--by now acquainted with every corner of the farm, from the beer-bottle-brown implements along the fenceline to the final unbroken acre of stone-studded pasture, was at the riverbank, a roly-poly sandbag on each shoulder. The river had started rising the night before and they'd sandbagged through till daybreak.

"I don't know what you're trying . . . It's not going . . ." He dropped two sandbags into place and went back for more.

The runoff was the worst Hartland had ever seen. It was coming earlier and more furiously than in other years. But why? Hartland wanted to know. There had barely been any snow all winter.

Gullies trickled down the hillsides in little rollicking waterfalls. The U-shaped river had broken up into tombslabs which heaved overtop one another in an ice-jam, bordered on each shore by a jagged barricade. The wrenching twist of one ice-cake had rent the plastic

pipe from the pumphouse, making it necessary to draw water from the handpump in the yard. The water had spewed right over the stacked floes on the beaver pond and into the field.

Somehow Hartland knew that it had come with Art.

"I don't know what you're trying to pull on this here farm but it's not gonna . . . you're not fooling . . ."

He lifted another pair of the bags from the sandbag machine-shed and clumsily lugged them toward the river, bunting them with his knees.

So far he and Art had sandbagged a line that started south of the barn and curved around the yard, laying the bags not right at the water's edge, but on the inside of the willow border; the pudgy gunnysacks settled into large firm bricks. Now they were making a second row. Hartland wearily laid his two bags in place.

"I'll never forget Hurricane Consuelo down in Corpus Christi," hollered Art. "Here we come over a hill with a convoy of trucks all carrying the animals, you know, at that time we had a full show of cats so we had one cattle-trailer with lions and another with tigers, and we head down into a sort of dip, trying not to hydroplane, the way it's raining and blowing, and here we go up over this hill and straight down into a big washout, water right up over the hood of the Peterbilt I was driving and my brother Floyd right on my tail."

They each grabbed two more sandbags from the stack. Hartland's arms felt like rubber as he dragged them to the dyke. Gotta keep going, he told himself.

"Well the first thing to do was let loose all these lions and tigers so they don't drown. Of course the next thing we had to do was go rounding 'em up again."

Hartland stumbled to the wall and accidentally dropped a sandbag so that it rolled over the other side and splashed into the rising water.

"Look I d-don't really wanna hear ab-b-bout it," he said.

"Huh? Whatya say?" shouted Art above the roar.

"I said . . . I said it's t-too hard to hear over this noise. I'll hafta c-catch ya later on this one."

"Oh yeah okay. 10-4."

By the time Ida called breakfast they had constructed a stodgy wall from the edge of the field to the barnyard. Warren swallowed a bowl of porridge and sulked his way to the river where he trudged from the stack to the dyke carrying one bag at a time. Before long he stopped in mid-path and set down the sandbag he was carrying to tie his shoelace. He stood up stiffly, grunted and sighed as he lifted the bag again, then finally dropped it on the trail and headed toward the chickencoop. Just then Art arrived, marching briskly with his usual two sandbags. He swung the bags down onto the

ground and took a long quick stride.

"No way Jake!" He spun Warren around by the shoulder and steered him back to the abandoned sandbags. "There ain't gonna be no chickencoop this morning." He set his own two bags on Warren's shoulders. "Visit your friends some other day." Art lifted the man's dropped bag and doubled the load on his right shoulder, nearly toppling Warren. "Big hunky guy like you oughta be able to manage more than one." He pushed Warren in the right direction and patted his broad behind. "Come on Sad Sack, look alive."

Warren, taciturn, hobbled along the troughed cowpath to the river.

When it became too far to walk to the pile they loaded both the pickup and the hayrack. Hartland pulled the rack to the bridge and began a line that squirmed through the trees towards the trailer. His shoulder muscles were so tight he had to stretch to scratch his head.

There was no mud between the trees. It was hard to believe it had snowed just three weeks earlier. The ice had loosened up a lot; it was melting fast. Hartland took off his sheepskin vest and set it on the tractor fender.

"Whosoever shall put away his wife causeth her to commit adultery."

He started the tractor and moved the hayrack a few

metres toward the trailer. The walk through the trees was longer and more rugged here.

"He that knoweth his wife then sayeth he knows her not is like unto him that giveth a writing of divorcement unto his wife and thus causeth her to commit adultery."

He stopped to tighten his bootlaces.

"He that denieth his wife and his son and yet keepeth his rent and his cattle denieth the Lord.

"I will visit thee with fire and earthquakes and . . . and floods!"

When he got back to the hayrack he stopped and watched Art still working vigorously near the pumphouse. Warren Putnam came into view, carrying a sandbag in his arms like a baby.

Hartland sighed. "Saving for the cause of fornication."

He met the other two men halfway between the trailer and the pumphouse. Art startled him, slapping his hand into Hartland's and snaking it tightly the way Hartland had seen American Blacks do on television.

"We're gettin' there!" said Art, grinning.

Warren turned the other way, rooted around in his ear with his finger and yawned. He wiped a crud of brown wax on his pantleg.

Around noon Ida and Sarah came from the housetrailer

with a lunch of boiled eggs, potato salad and ham sandwiches. The men were working fire-brigade-fashion to reinforce the wall, Art heaving the bags off the hayrack to Warren and Hartland.

After they had eaten they rested for a few minutes. Warren went to sleep on the sandbag wagon and Sarah began playing with her shadow, freezing in various poses: hands on head, feet apart; walking amidstride, peeking sideways at her stunted noon shadow.

The sun, scintillating on the water, forced Sarah to squint. Art formed his hand into a knife, raised it in an arc until it cut the beam, then pulled his hand back so the waterlight again played on her grave face. He moved his hand in and out of range until Sarah turned to him. He flashed a conspiratorial smile and immediately looked away. From where he was sitting Hartland could see his sister smiling to herself.

Hartland recalled a memory of his father. Once when the yard flooded, James laid down planks to walk over the mud to the henhouse and barn; the next morning the boards were floating, huddled against the workshop like sheep in a storm. James put Hartland in a tub and pulled it around the yard like a little boat. Hartland couldn't fit the memory with . . . Art.

Hartland kicked his heel against a sandbag and searched the valley walls for the rivulets that had

glinted there the day before. If any more water was running off the upper fields it was seeping down into the bushy hollows and collecting there. Yet the river had already climbed to the first sandbag row and beyond the farmyard where they hadn't yet dyked, the water spilled over the field in a huge slough. Soon they would have to sandbag the fenceline.

"Where's it all coming from?" asked Hartland. Ida turned and looked tiredly at the creeping lake. Art, standing out of earshot, surveyed the valley floor, shielding his eyes from the windshield glare of an old De Soto sitting on blocks by the fenceline. The field on the pond side shimmered silvery-white.

"It makes no s-s-sense that the water's gone all c-crazy like this. I wanna know where it's c-coming from."

Hartland stood up and followed the wall until he came to a spot where the willows had been tramped down.

"Don't you go near that raft now, mind," called his mother.

He climbed over the sandbags and promptly skidded down a muddy slick into shin-deep water. The numb chill of the river permeated his gumboots.

He sloshed his way to a stripped ashpole standing in the water, seizing fistfulls of leather willow branches as he went. The pole, used for pushing the raft up and down

the river, was about four feet from the bank. Hartland let himself fall forward and grabbed onto it. For an instant it stood sturdily, then began to lean into the rushing current. Hartland quickly hand-over-handed, gripping rounded nubs where branches had been trimmed until the pole tipped back toward the bank. He heaved it out of the sucking gumbo. The raft was hidden from sight, behind a large willow.

He reached the slender pole around the tree and raked at the water until he hitched a ragged gray rope tied to the trunk. He tugged on the rope until from behind the tree floated a raft of scrag-barked logs lashed to oil barrels. Hartland planted the pole midway between himself and the raft and tried to vault himself over the swift water but succeeded only in driving the sharp-pointed staff firmly into the mud. He hung onto the pole, not wanting to get wet.

Icy waterchimes tinkled past.

He kicked madly and goosenecked around over his shoulder to see that the heavy raft had been dragged back to its harbour, tautening the rope. The pole refused to sway back toward the bank.

Finally he loosed his grip and shinned down the water-sanded pole, wood-knuckles sliding smoothly through his fingers. His boots gulped full of water. Numbing water raged between his thighs as he wobbled the pole till

it pulled out. Stiffly he wielded the pole to retrieve the raft, waded in up to his knees and bellied his way onto the logs. He picked at the frozen knotlump with his fingers.

The raft was yanked away instantly, carried by the strong river current before Hartland had a chance to start poling. For a moment it snagged on a protruding willow-clump and Hartland bailed out into a bed of branches on the opposite bank. He scrambled through the springy trees then sloshed knee-deep through the still water at the hill's edge, muck and ooze squeeging through his toes. His teeth chattered.

"That was stupid," he muttered.

He could hear the calls of the others over the noise of the water. His family stood on the haywagon, watching him curiously over the treetips: rudfaced Art, hands on hips; Warren and Sarah, arms straight at their sides; Ida shaking her fist at Hartland and shouting a furious upbraiding, all the sharp and gritty sounds of which were filed away by branches and wind and waternoise--and an even louder noise, a roar funneling down the tree-flanked gulch from further upstream.

Hartland fixed his eyes on Art. "I don't know what you're trying to pull," he said slowly. He trudged a short distance on the uneven ground and stopped. He turned. "I don't know what you're trying to pull over on

us . . ." He wheezed slightly. He scratched his head and looked upriver at the source of the ravine. The ground itself rumbled as if a herd of beasts was galloping through the inside of the hill, bellowing with the voices of men.

"I don't know what you're trying to pull on this here farm but it isn't gonna work . . ." He considered. "As long as I'm in charge."

He strode on.

At the base of the hill stood a saskatoon grove. Fed by the spring which kept the leafmould soggy all summer, the saskatoons had flourished into a dense thicket the size of a machine shed, bearing bushels of purple berries. Now the trees swayed and rocked as though battered by a gale. The heavy trunks shuddered, boughs flinging shivering fingers of water. Hartland climbed up the grassy hillside, slumped down on the ground and panted, a fine shower spraying his face. A rainbow arched over the raving saskatoons like a magical Quonset hut.

Hartland poured out his boots and clambered along the edge of the hillside, grabbing wiry saplings and hanks of stiff grass. He wanted to see where the water was coming from. The spring had always just seeped from the base of the hill, so weak that it never really spouted out in any one spot.

He couldn't even hear his own gasp of pain as, blinded by the dense mist, he grasped the thorns of a rosebush. A chunk of hillside gave way under his feet and he slid, scraping his belly and uprooting a small tree. For an instant he glimpsed a black cavern with long pointed spikes hanging from the ceiling. Then a wall of gelid water slammed his chest. He bobbed up long enough to gulp for air, swallowing instead a mouthful of slush, and was immediately thrashed through a tangle of flailing saskatoon branches that battered his kidneys, shins, the bridge of his nose, until a huge surge of hillwater chuted from the great black mouth and hurled him through the wrangle, somersaulted, finally, into the river.

He sputtered to the surface and dog-paddled to the riverbank where he clung to a willow with the crook of his left arm. The water rushing away from him was was pale red.

"Art," he heard himself call.

"His poor eyes look like teabags," said Ida. She placed a facecloth containing two icecubes across his eyes, one cube in each socket, and tucked the blankets along his sides. His body tensed as Art dabbed iodine onto his chin.

"Looks like he was tied up in a bag of cats and the cats did better'n he did," said Art's voice.

"Doozer of a creamin', eh?" offered Warren in his cartoon character voice.

"Strangest little cuts," said Art. "They're everywhere."

Ida had no idea how Art had heard Hartland's cry for help. The way he darted to the riverside and went thrashing through the willows alerted her that Hartland was in trouble. When she caught up with Art he was just pulling Hartland out of the water by the shoulders. Immediately he tore open Hartland's shirt and pounded the boy's red chest until his breathing was once again strong, then he briskly rubbed his muscles.

At that moment, watching his fast and efficient actions to save her--to save their--son, she had a

thought she felt she should be ashamed of, but wasn't. It began the same as when she'd watched Art play cards and listened to him tell his stories: she saw the sure expression on his face, the lack of hesitation in his movements, and said, James was never like this. James would probably have saved Hartland from drowning, but not with the same style, the same self-assuredness. She had grown used to looking at her husband and thinking how differently he acted now, almost as if three weeks ago when he came to, he was reborn, a truly other person from the one she had married. But this time when she thought, James was never like this, she couldn't help adding, It would have been nice if he was.

"Well doctor," she said, "I think you deserve a cup of coffee. Actually you deserve a medal!"

"Aw, well, I think I'll settle for the coffee just the same," said Art.

The porch door slammed as Warren went outside.

If only he could keep his new Art side, with all its able good humour, and at the same time be reminded somehow who he really was, that he was James Cole, her husband.

She realized she was rubbing the soft flannel of his sleeve and staring at the way the material was stretched tight over his bicep. She dug her fingers into his arm. Before she knew it her mouth was inside his and

she was being lifted and carried out of Hartland's--their son's--room and into her own.

He started to unbutton his collar but Ida pushed his hands away and took over, finally tearing open the shirt. She pulled it back over his shoulders and rubbed her hands across his hairy chest. Everything felt the same. She struggled out of her own shirt as his calloused hands slid up her sides. He was kissing her neck, hands busily unfastening hooks-and-eyes and dome snaps. Oh James I missed you, she whispered in her mind. She didn't have the nerve to speak the words. She stepped out of her jeans and allowed him to ease her backwards onto the bed.

They moved like a pair of trapeze artists swinging netless over a sawdust floor. She'd forgotten what he could be like, this man with the lion-tamer body. Art was--James was--James-Art-James, what difference did it make they were the . . . where'd he learn to . . . he was doing things she didn't even know were . . . "That's--" . . . he knew more than card tricks, this--Art . . . how had she gone this long without . . . she had never . . . James never

tried anything

like

this

Hartland shivered and sweated through a feverish sleep, an endless portage through a dark sweaty land, dotted here and there with landmarks from home: sunny brown-eyed Susans peeking through a mound of fieldrocks which Art had said resembled the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier; a certain minty hayslough bordered by wild roses, in the dream black with tent caterpillars; the beaver lodge, which Hartland and the others entered quite naturally like the barncat-overrun farmhouse of their bachelor neighbour Hank Bourassa. The beaver wearily counted heads, set out a package of stale gingersnaps and scalded a pot for tea. The sandbagging continued with gunnysacks which were filled at a central depot and fastened with bindertwine, only to grow lighter on the way to the dyke as they leaked a slippery trail of noxious wild oats.

Charged with a mission of elemental importance, Hartland found himself using his father's folding bed as a sailboat, tacking his way across what was at times the floor of the trailer's living room, at others a bitter, flint-gray sea mined with lowering icebergs. Nearby Art

demonstrated how he had extended the rocking chair tracks in an oval around the room. He explained the features of the new system while he pushed James in the rocking chair over the course on the heels of its runners. James's knuckles turned white as he clutched the arms of the chair.

Golden shafts of floating dust stood in the west window when Hartland awoke. Dopey-headed, he had to squint to see the image on the television screen.

A cartoon Pony Express rider skids his horse to a stop at the lip of the Grand Canyon. Momentum propels the rider, saddle and all, across the gorge, to the tune of a guitar-string being tightened; on the opposite side he clutches a slim tree and the elastic saddle catapults the horse across. The horse slams into the rider and wraps its four legs round the treetrunk.

He staggered through the busy motes to the doorway. The sun felt hot but the air smelled damp. Art and the others were sandbagging alongside the fence separating the farmyard from the field. Two creeping sloughs--one spreading from the pond, the other from the spring--had forded the road and joined in the centre.

Hartland climbed stiffly into a pair of jeans, a windbreaker and his rubber boots, which had dried and hardened on the hot porch step. His forehead pounded as he walked around behind the trailer and followed the

sandbag wall to the bridge.

A magpie swooped to its stick nest, beak clenching the heel of a bun picked from the burning barrel.

The raft had wedged between two bridge timbers, nosing in diagonally so that a cowcatcher prow jutted into the water and sludge. A heap of ice-shards had piled onto the raft and welded under the sun into one glittering glob the size of a tractor engine. The searing glow of the huge crystal cauterized the wounds on Hartland's face, already warm with wind- and sunburn.

He lifted a rock and hurled it at the ice monstrosity on the raft. A shatter of sharp white cracks exploded inside the sculpture.

A gawky tree branch floated down the river. Hartland watched as the green crown drove into the protruding corner of the raft, the end branches clipping on while the trunk pivoted around toward the bank. He climbed over the sandbags and hugged an upright post with one arm as he fished at the snagged branch with his foot. The creosote of the timber stuck to the flannel pyjama sleeve, burning through to the flesh like a hot tractor seat. His boot latched onto a little wishbone branch near the bottom of the trunk. The white insides, torn from the hip of a tree, were sinewy like chicken flesh. He heaved the limb out of the water and the upper branches rained an icy shower down his back.

The leaves were rounded smoothly at the stem while the tips were pinked with jagged points. Saskatoon leaves.

Hartland gripped the bushy crown in his two hands and pointed the stem of the branch away from him like a divining rod. The branches drooped with stubby ice-blobs which jangled like dull chandeliers. He tried to use the butt-end of the trunk to dislodge the raft from the bridge-struts but the branch had too much spring; it was like playing hockey with a gardenhose.

Finally he squatted down on his haunches to rest, holding the branch in his hands. He scratched his burning head madly. It's too hot for the beginning of April, he thought. This was the season for raw winds to dry the fields.

"I don't know what you're trying to pull, but I do know there's been some strange . . . acts of God . . . going on on this here farm."

Clear coals of ice hung from the branch. He snapped off a slender shoelace stem, popped a chunk of ice into his mouth and flopped the tree back into the river current. He slurped on the ice then took it out of his mouth and spat. The ice hade a sulphur taste. He squinted at it.

Inside was a perfect green leaf . . . and something else. He held it up to a gleam of light filtered through

the poplar trees. There was some sort of picture inside.

He tried grating at the ice with a fistfull of gravel, but that only dulled its sheen. He held the small lump in the palm of his hand and smashed it against a big square bolt on the bottom of the bridge. A shell of ice cracked off.

A sailorboy with a dog--Crackerjack--it was one of those adhesive-backed pictures that changed images depending on the angle of light. He flipped it over and rubbed the ice, trying to melt it. It was a sun, smiling, the kind of drawn sun whose rays were snakelike hairs framing a sunflower face. He traced the face with his thumb but it slipped from his numb fingertips. The snakeheaded sun tilted downward, dropping one eyelid in a wink just before it landed in the river. It floated underneath the bridge.

A "BOOM" came from over by the spring. Hartland stopped and listened. It sounded like a damburst. In a minute a fresh surge of riverwater came flushing around the horseshoe bend, in some places spilling overtop the dyke. Hartland hurried to a high point and watched a lazy-boy recliner rise to the surface and resubmerge, followed by a coffee table, a popcorn-maker and a velvet painting of Elvis Presley.

Hartland shaded his vision with his hand and soothing ice water trickled down into his smarting eyes.

Warren Putnam woke with a slurp. He had nearly slid from the rocking chair while sleeping; he pulled himself up, blinked and rubbed his fingers over his itchy scalp. He screwed his head round to see Art sitting squarely at the card table, snapping cards down in a circle. Ida was crocheting on the chesterfield--Warren's new bed--and Sarah was on the floor colouring on paper towel.

She was drawing a man. The man's short stocky body faced forward, arms tense at his sides, while his head was turned sideways towards the sun. The yellow ball sent jagged rays to all edges of the horizonless landscape, casting a scrabble of blue shadow behind the man. One sunray pierced a large Egyptian eye looking outward from the side of his head.

"Oh, what am I gonna do, Dad? Dwayne'll be here any minute. I can't go to his graduation with hair that looks like it's been freeze-dried."

"Just wear a bone in your nose and tell him it's your traditional African dress. Anybody named "D-wayne" ain't gonna know the difference."

Audience laughter.

"I wanted the straight-look, not the stray-cat look."

Audience laughter.

Ding-dong.

Warren stood and stretched and scuffled to the porch. Navy skidoo-suits hung like empty men from the deer antlers on the wall; a twenty-two gauge rifle leaned against a box of toques and scarves. He squashed his feet into a pair of workboots and stomped out with the boots flapping open.

Warren leaned sleepily against the porch rail and inhaled the hot night air. Any dampness in the valley had left after the flood. The beaver pond had already seeped into the soil; a few frogs croaked drily in the musk-rat-tracked mud.

Startled by a burst of Ida's amazed laughter inside the trailer, Warren shoved himself from the stair rail and lumbered across the smelly farmyard, guided in the darkness by the lazy pitch of the henhouse roof. His right foot splooshed in the waterbasin and collected dirt across the penned henyard. He scraped the sole of his boot on the doorsill.

Warren screwed in the lightbulb hanging from the ceiling. The hens were in their roosts, pointed heads flopped to one side. The red rooster slept drunken-ly, eyes open a crack; his head gave a dream-twitch. Two or three hens opened their eyes and blinked. One

chuckled.

The feedtrough screeched over hard wheat kernels as Warren slid it to the middle of the floor. Abruptly he stopped and listened, then unscrewed the lightbulb and stumbled to the window. He kept his eyes on the trailer until Art appeared in the light, singing passionately. Warren watched him perform a romantic cowboy ballad, closing his eyes tightly and clutching his fist to his heart during the final fiery note.

"Latin lover jerk."

Warren turned the light back on. He pushed two fingers through a ringpull and creaked open a trap door made of the same tongue-in-groove boards as the rest of the floor. The rooster stood officiously by the feedbox, looking Warren up and down and scowling.

He squinted again through the window at a silhouette of Art and Ida waltzing, snorted, hooked the trap door under the windowsill and leapt clumsily into a forgotten tornado shelter built by James Cole's grandfather.

A propane torch on the dirt floor stood aimed at the burnt-out bottom of a three-legged barbecue. A sprung sparkflint dangled from the torch's neck. In the barbecue was an antifreeze can, its painted label all but scorched off, the metal a cold bruise colour with a purplish rainbow running up the seam. An inverted funnel was soldered to the top rim. The funnel spout was gagged with

a rubber stopper out of which curled a pig's tail of copper tubing, and a rubber drainhose, clothespinned in the middle, ran from a T-junction in the copper tube to a plastic vinegar jug hanging from a squashed coathanger. The copper artery eventually spiralled to a green plastic juice pitcher on the ground. The pitcher's bottom glimmered, reflecting the round ceiling light.

To one side of this apparatus was a plastic garbage pail of stewed potatoes and peels; an empty mickey bottle, lying concave-side-up, served as a dish for a mound of green rat poison.

Sharp gas burped out as Warren lifted the lid. He inhaled and tilted the pail to the light. Bites of potato bobbed like mouseheads in a swill the colour of rusty rainwater. Warren dipped his fingers in, played the brown slop into a froth, then snapped the lid back on the pail.

He lifted the green pitcher and peered inside. A glinting beetle floated, limbs spread, in a shallow pool of clear alcohol. He scooped out the beetle and flung it across the chickencoop floor where a trio of disoriented hens were now pecking at grains of wheat. He tipped the mouth of the jug to his lips and drank.

Wincing and wheezing, he swished his tongue over the sharp beard growth under his lower lip and lapped a dribble from his wrist. He replaced the pitcher under the copper tube, bellied his way out of the hole and skidded

the graintrough back over the trap door. He leaned against the windowsill, breathing heavily.

Three more hens hopped down from their perches and jerked across the floor to the graintray. One ventured to the open door, looked out into the darkness and ran tittering back in, spooked. Another pair of chickens left their bunks to peck around Warren's feet. There was a steady cackle now in the building.

Warren cupped his hands around his eyes like a welder's mask and pressed against his reflection. The trailer was in darkness. He continued to stare through the window, fogging the glass with his colognèd breath. Hot forehead flush with the cool windowpane, he flattened his nose and rolled side-to-side, letting the glass chill the thistleprick of his whiskered cheeks.

Next to the trailer were his station wagon and the pickup truck which Art had repaired so that it no longer needed to be parked on a hill. Warren stared at his car then at the tiny housetrailer. He aimed an invisible shotgun at the living room window. "BOOM." Minutes passed before he stepped back from the window.

He turned to see the red rooster once again giving him a dirty look; a pair of hens truckled along behind the male. Warren lifted his boot and kicked at the legs of the birds who squawked and fluttered, "Bluck-buck-buck-buck!" to the far corner of the building. Immediately

they started step-dancing their way to the graintrough.

The rooster, out of range of the clumsy swipe, swaggered forward, bulged his gullet as though retching his own gut and spat a gray porridge-gum on the toe of Warren's boot.

Hartland felt sorry for Warren for the first time. It was hard on everyone, the way his father was acting, but Warren looked actually scared. Before long one of the two men would have to leave, and it didn't look like it would be Art.

Warren sat by the TV, flipping the dial:

"Only the biggest coke dealer in Miami, that's who . . . the longest reach in the NBA . . . author of an illuminating biography of Merv Griffin . . ."

"Let's have a game of blackjack, Warren," said Art. "You deal."

"Don' wanna," said Warren without turning.

"Okay, an armwrestle then." Warren said nothing.

"Come on, Sad S--Warren, buddy, what're you good at?"

Hartland's mother, who had been watching Warren, averted her gaze.

Warren stopped turning the TV dial.

"Darts."

Hartland sat up on the couch. It was true. Warren was an actual champion. There was a trophy behind the bar with Warren's name engraved on it, and he'd even placed

third last winter at a tournament in Winnipeg.

"I'm into it," said Art.

"Why don't you both just do something constructive," said Hartland's mother suddenly, "like read a book."

"Lemme go get my daouts," said Warren, looking actually excited.

Hartland got up and paced nervously in the hallway while Warren went out to his car. He was taking forever. To occupy his hands Hartland cleared away a pair of boots and a recharging battery from the floor of the porch, where the dartboard hung. Art sat unperturbed in the living room, shuffling cards. Finally Hartland peeked out the window. Warren was walking from the chickencoop, wiping his mouth. His sleeves were rolled and he was moving faster than usual. He opened the door of his station wagon and took a woodgrain case--Hartland had seen it dozens of times, but never with such anticipation--from the glove compartment.

"Okay, let's go," he said, smelling of alcohol.

"Are you sure this is such a good idea?" whispered Hartland's mother as she and Hartland crowded into the kitchen doorway to watch. Hartland gave an "Okay" sign with his hand.

The men had to work through the numbers one to twenty. Warren won the bull's eye toss for first throw. While he lined up to throw, Art stood behind him and

started to sing,

> Well, the first thing you know, old Jed's a millionaire.
> Kinfolk said, Jed, move away from there!

"All right, you better cut that shit!" snapped Warren. He threw his dart and it landed firmly in the One-space.

Hartland had to bite his tongue to keep from laughing. He stole away from his mother's side and danced a little jig in the living room. Art was throwing for the Two when he returned.

He cupped his hands into a megaphone and gave a play-by-play: "Ladies and g-gentlemen, welcome to the d-d-darts-match of the century, the challenge to the reigning ch-champeen--"

"Knock it off, eh?" said Warren. Hartland wheezed.

The men tied three games in a row. Warren looked haggard but Art was still fresh.

"I've g-got it," said Hartland. "A tie-b-breaker." He would have added, "to sift the wheat from the chaff," but he didn't want to waste time. He went out to the workshop for a rusty pair of cast-iron castrating tongs. The handles were hammered loops of iron, big enough for a dart to pass through. When he explained they would have to toss the dart through the centre of both handle-rings, then actually hit the dartboard, Warren looked at him like

he was crazy. Hartland winked and rubbed Warren's shoulder; he whispered to his mother, "Warren's g-gonna win for sure. When Dad loses it'll snap him outta this Art stuff and he'll be back to n-normal."

"Just be careful you know what you're doing."

Warren's hand shook as he plucked his dart from the corkwood but he became steady when he took aim. Hartland spread open the tongs and lined up the two handles like gunsights. Warren threw, clearing the two tong-handles and sticking the target slightly left of centre.

"And the champion hits the b-board in the t-t-t--iebreaker!" announced Hartland.

Art took aim. Hartland's mother's fists were clenched.

"Now we know who you are," Hartland planned to say.

The rooster crowed.

The dart flashed from Art's hand, straight as an arrow through the rings, grazing neither, and thudded into the bull's eye.

Hartland wheezed loudly. Ida's hand was at her mouth. Warren's face was gray. He lunged past Art and Hartland and out the porch door.

"Woops!" said Art. "I think I smell a chicken-coop-attack comin' on."

The station wagon whined awake and clanked into gear.

"Shut up," said Hartland's mother.

Ida eyed Art as he sliced a potato into quarters and dropped them into a bushel basket of creepy-tentacled chunks. He dumped the spuds into a hopper-sided wagon parked by the step and spanked the red dust from the bottom of the basket. Ida had tried to speed up her pace but felt she was still lagging behind. Art thrust his hand into a fifty kilo gunnysack and cut up another potato. They were shrunken like little old heads after wintering in the barn.

It had been hard watching Warren leave, humiliated. But it was for the best. She had kept him around even after she'd lost most of her affection for the man, but now that Art was here . . . well, there was just no comparing the two. A real man like Art was what it took to handle the Warren Putnams of the world.

Ida scooped a stack of rubber-hided potato parts from the porch step and deposited them in the basket. She watched the cultivator shovels raise a dusty smokescreen as they lifted hydraulically from the soil just before Hartland turned a neat hairpin at the edge of the field. The tin exhaust-pipe flap stood erect as a black

smoke-geyser snorted out the stack; the tractor lurched and momentarily grunted at a higher pitch.

Hartland's face wore a bushman's shadow as he bounced over the field. The front tires kicked up clouds of dirt as they broke through the baked crust; a gray plume of dust dragged along behind the diamond harrows which jostled over the furrows of the V-shaped cultivator shares.

This spring was hotter and more parched, more hopeless than ever before. It hardly seemed worthwhile going through the motions of tilling, planting, hoeing if any weeds grew, only to harvest marble-sized potatoes, finger cobs of corn, paper-flat pods containing undernourished pea foetuses; last year Ida had simply boiled the pods whole like at the Chinese restaurant in Buffalo Plains.

On the brim of the valley a murky haze of blowdirt bleared through fuming heatwaves, the kind that sometimes magnified distant elevators and farmsteads. Two days of strong wind had stacked a firm drift in front of the housetrailer, dust so fine and dense it could be sliced like brown sugar candy. And suddenly the tops of knolls were baring chalky knobs like scraped elbows, the bloodless undersoil phosphorescent as a buffalo skeleton dug up and scattered by the shovels of a field implement.

Easter was barely over and already the valley trees

were covered in leaves, brown from the heat. In other years there had come plenty of killing frosts well into May. That would surely mean disaster. Not so much for the poplar and willow trees, which were hardy and had a backup leaf-system, but especially for the vegetables. Yet it didn't matter. Disaster seemed no more avoidable one way than another.

Sarah played quietly on the ground while Ida and Art carved through the sack of potatoes. She was making a magnificent oasis city in the dirt-drift, using Ida's cookie-cutters, jello moulds and measuring cups to cut the velvety dust. Ida became so absorbed watching Sarah that she nicked the tender webskin between her thumb and index finger.

She started at the sound of Hartland's nasal voice: "Come here, I w-want to show you something." He stood stiffly beside the potato wagon. The red tractor sat in the field, melting in its own heatwaves; the exhaust-flap tang-tang-tanged over the idle of the engine. [illegible] hadn't noticed it stop.

Ida and Art set down their paring knives and followed the boy. The sun made Ida's forehead throb; the field-dirt, a bed of roasting ash, boiled her sweaty feet in their runners. She stole Hartland's Buffalo Plains Homecoming cowboy hat and put it on her head.

Art whistled long and dry.

The edge off the field was slivered by a long ragged crack. The cleft's opening was no wider than an axe-head--Hartland had cultivated one width over before he'd noticed it, drawing enough soil to fill it in--but in the middle, the split broadened to a chasm an adult could dangle his feet in. The white inner sides of the crack looked like rough concrete, the clay undersoil bone-dry from one end to the other. Art took the yardstick that was used to measure gasoline in the tractor tank and chiseled brittle shards from the craggy walls.

Another crack splintered away from the main one at the base of the hillroad, the two splits forming a crude "y" as if scratched deep into the earth with an enormous wand. And in the crusted lakebed where, James had told Ida, they had planted oats during the dryest summers of the thirties, the ground had broken open in a petrified star like the teepee symbols at the Born With A Tooth Sundance Ceremonies. The cracks were full of junk washed up by the flood.

"It feels like a big prank's being played on us," said Ida. She wrenched a thistle from the tractor toolbox and dreamily used it to scrub a dustcake off a grease nipple.

They walked back to the yard. Sarah was still playing in the dirt-drift, cool in the morning trailer-shade. A slack breeze flagged through the valley, cooling

in the shade, broiling elsewhere. Art and Hartland flopped on the front step. Their red faces dripped sweat.

Ida, still buried in Hartland's hat, dragged herself into the house to make coffee. She took some Easter-painted boiled eggs from the fridge and placed them in a bowl.

On the table was an aborted letterhead:

Hartland Cole
R.R. 15
Buffalo Plains
Saskatchewan.
Canada
S4P 3B6

Dear Dear

He even stutters when he writes, she thought.

"Here boys, have some more breakfast," she said as she returned outside.

Hartland was lying sullenly in the hedge of green weeds bordering the trailerfront. The weeds, with their supple pithy stalks, were full of spring like a bed of evergreen boughs. They were really miniature trees, the weeds, scale replicas of the full round poplars that had grown tall in the burntland behind the trailer in the few years since fire took the old two-storey house.

Ida remembered when Hartland used to play intently by the porch like Sarah. When neither James nor Warren would join him in his games he sat alone on the ground and

tilled a miniature farm for which the perfect green bunches formed an essential windbreak. They would not do in the little world Sarah was creating in the blow-dirt. Her city, exotic and foreign with its cool, firm lines, did not belong near a forest of poplar trees. If anything it required a single palm. Ida reached down beside the step and stripped the lower branches of one weed, trying to produce a lanky cocoanut palm. The top was not right, though, so she plucked the weed from the weak earth and cast it aside.

In a few short weeks they would all be rooted out by the wind, brittle skeletons damned to roll through smokey haze in a somnambulistic quest for barbwire and a bed of other tumbleweeds.

"Look at the hat with the woman inside," said Art, smirking. Ida tilted her head back to give him a cowboy's evil eye. The hat fell forward over her nose and the two laughed.

Hartland sat up and scowled. He reached into the bag for a pair of egg-shaped potatoes and started to juggle, clumsily tossing and catching the two spuds until they collided in mid-air. He let them fall and stumble to their rest.

Art clapped him on the shoulder. "Hang in there old Buddy," he said cheerfully. "We'll get them taters sown if we have to do it on our hands and knees."

"It's no damn use," barked Hartland. Tears sprung to his eyes and he turned away. The hot breeze floated insistently in the air like close breath. It made Ida weary. Hartland grabbed up the two fallen potatoes and began rolling them one around the other in his hand.

"Look here," said Art lightly. He dug into the bag for three like-sized potatoes and tossed them into the air, now and then passing one behind his back. His eyes were sharp and alert as he juggled the three balls in a brown oval. Finally he gave each potato one last high throw, catching them in his left hand, one two, three, as they fell. He turned, smiling broadly, to Hartland.

"Where'd you learn that?" asked the boy softly.

"My daddy taught us all to juggle before he taught us to talk." He snatched up the two potatoes Hartland was fidgeting with and began to juggle all five in a tight loop. He stood on the step, purposely throwing wide the occasional potato so he could reach deftly to the side and rescue it from its errant arc.

Suddenly Hartland leapt up and swatted the potatoes from their orbit. Ida felt her hand fly to her mouth.

"Listen. I don't know what you're tryin' to pu--pp--pull around here with all your tricks and hocus and fu-ff--fables. What we got g-goin' on here's a disaster, not something to be dancin' around juggling p-pp--otatoes over." His chest rasped like a rusty handsaw.

"You look here." Hartland reached down and picked up a clump of hard clay the size of a horsepuck. He smacked the clod on the wagonwheel and crushed it with the heel of his hand. Ida and the two men kept their eyes on the mound of burlap-coloured dirt and in a few seconds it appeared to start smouldering. A tiny dust-funnel rose in a spiral, a dollsize model of a Palliser's Triangle twister, until finally the whole surface of the pile gave itself to the slight wind, wisping away so that not a speck remained.

Hartland stood stoop-shouldered against the wagon-wheel, his back to Ida and Art. His neck twitched as though it was being shocked. Ida placed a hand on the boy's shoulder and nervously rubbed, rolling the rope of muscle in her fingers. Art gave him a pretend punch on the bicep. "Hold steady," he said. Presently Hartland's rasping breath was broken by a string of hiccoughing sobs.

"It's just like Little D-dothan said," he stammered, "We're all headed for destruction. We're into another Dirty Thirties, an et-t--ternity of fryin' sun and wind howlin' grit through our brains until it sands 'em all down into s-sawdust an' the cracks in the earth'll open up so bb-ig we'll all fall in like a horde o' z-zombies. It's the wrath of God, He's dryin' us up in this heat an' we're gonna b-blow away like a heap of ashes.

"It's all startin' off just like the Depression years . . . My f-f--ather told me--"

Hartland gasped. His eyes leapt up from the potato wagon and pinned Ida's, then he yanked himself away from her and Art and staggered into the trailer.

Two minutes later he was outside again, a khaki duffle bag slung over his shoulder. He stomped down the porch steps without looking back and marched, breaking into a trot, toward the valley road.

Ida lunged after the boy but Art caught her tightly. He pulled her close and crossed his arms like a straightjacket when she squirmed to free herself. She gave a low howl, followed by a jerking chain of blubbering gasps. Art pushed her face into his collar, smothering her sobs. Her chest heaved against his as he lightly stroked the back of her head, soothing her, until her head grew hot and she let out a high wail and stamped both her feet. She tried to pull free once again and when Art tightened his bearhug she kicked him in the shins. Art grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her, flopping her head like a doll's. When he stopped shaking and just held her she stared at him, astonished.

"You're surprisingly strong for such a light woman," he said softly.

Ida's chin began to quiver; she felt her lower lip bulge and curl. She clung quietly to Art, arms round his

waist. He tilted her face upward and smiled sadly into her eyes. His eyes are blue as the sky, she thought.

"Be strong now."

He pushed back a curl that had fallen over Ida's left temple.

Then, gently, he kissed her there.

Art and Ida sowed the garden together, steering around the crevices that carved up the fields, and within ten days a host of tenacious little shoots broke through the hard soil, each spearing a junction of tiny cracks. The green potato sprouts popped up first, followed by beets, turnips, carrots, cabbage, cauliflower, peas, beans onions, cucumber- and pumpkin-vines, lettuce. All stood up valiantly in the glaring heat, managing a steady, if slow, growth in the biscuit-dry soil, sucking from the sun the energy denied them in water. Unmolested, the crop may have yielded not badly.

One day the plants were black, as if diseased. But what had appeared a kind of smut proved a swarm of hard-shelled insects that wafted about in a clicking black cloud, gobbling every leaf and stem in sight. Unlike the scuds of locusts that had blotted the sky five decades earlier, no one had seen these creatures arrive.

Ida was terrified of the monsters. Art had driven to Buffalo Plains for insecticide, but at the rate they were eating, there wouldn't be much left when he got back. She swathed her face and neck in scarves and stepped

cautiously through the field squirting potato-beetle poison from a Windex bottle. First relieved, then frustrated, Ida found the little flying combines constantly moved out of her range, then soon as she was gone, pounced with renewed vigour on the poison-drenched plants. Finally, defeated, Ida tramped back over the roasting field to the house.

It was then that she noticed the change in Sarah.

Ida had left her playing in the blowdirt in the morning shade of the trailer. She found the girl sitting in a doll's pose: legs straight, dress spread over her knees, demurely fanning herself with the broad-brimmed sunhat Ida had insisted she wear. Ida set down the bottle of bugspray and lingered on the step, eyeing Sarah who sat silent, motionless save for the slow sensuous wave of her hat. Finally she knelt beside the girl and tried to determine what was different.

The hands, for one thing. The hands holding the hat had none of the jerky weightlessness of four-year-old hands. They were not the square little paws that curled up into clumsy fat childfists. Ida unpeeled the two hands from the hatbrim. Knuckles and joints smooth and well-defined, each finger strong and lean with a pearl-pink oval fingernail, tiny white moon peeking from under the cuticle: these were hands that had outgrown nostrils and the rigid limbs of dolls. She squeezed the

four fingers, gazed at the blue-veined backs. Supple, firm, th[illegible] knew all kinds of textures; experienced, unshockable hands.

There was a certain padded chubbiness Ida hadn't noticed before: buds pregnant with new growth. Sarah's luxurious expression as she let the slow hot breeze kiss the front of her neck, her hair tumble drunkenly down the back of her dress, made Ida want to cuff the girl and say, "Cut that out!"

She weighed the golden mane; moist in spite of the aridness, it whorled in rabbit-soft coils the colour of wheatfields. It had to have grown half a foot since the agricultural fair. Her brown cheekbones, sharp and angular, glowed amber beneath a ruddy windburn. Creamy, as if her skin had been anointed with oil from a tropical plant.

And her eyes--but surely they had always been like this?--her eyes were a frozen blue whose icy depths made Ida short of breath. There was even something different about her teeth: the baby set had grown into mature adult teeth with no bumps on the tips. The jaw, though small, was sharp.

Ida snatched Sarah by the hand and hurried her into the house. It had to be the heat. Ida had read about girls from these equatorial countries delivering babies at nine or ten. The hot sun made them develop too quickly.

She dragged the girl into the bathroom and stripped off her clothes, then ran a hot tub with the last bit of water in the reserve tank and plunked Sarah in. Among the medicine bottles above the kitchen sink she could only find a tin of McAmisk and Sons Candlefish Unguent and an empty brown castor oil bottle.

"If you're in there and can hear me, announce yourselves."

"What?" Thinking she'd heard Art, back from town, Ida went into the living room. But it was only the TV she had heard.

A solitary soldier, clutching a grenade, peers into the basement stairwell of a gutted building.

Ida waited for the actor to speak again. The TV was silent for what seemed like minutes.

"Come on out or you're gonna get blown out."

It was Art's voice and accent.

"You've got ten seconds."

"Television therapy . . ."

The soldier counts under his breath, pulls the pin on the grenade and tosses it down the stairs. There is a muffled explosion as he dives into a shell crater.

A rush of sweet drowsy air belted her when she reopened the bathroom door. Steam clung to the doorknob, the window and mirror, every piece of chrome and ceramic. Ida took short breaths, inhaling the strong perfume of

lilac flowers and blinking through stinging tears. She waded through the heavy vapour to the tub; the bathwater was tinted a pinky saffron. Ida rubbed Sarah's downy forearm and sniffed her fingers. The perfume was breathing from the girl's pours and filling the room like chokedamp. Gagging and blinded, Ida staggered to the front door to escape the cloying scent.

She leaned over the porch rail, her head swimming in the heat. The sweet smell had made her nauseous. Big yellow and black bumblebees, half a dozen of them, nuzzled the screendoor.

Dizzy, she reeled down the steps into the yard. She felt flushed and couldn't breathe; it felt like a burdock flower were stuck in her throat. Move, she had to keep moving, striding round the tiny yard, swinging her arms, breathing as smoothly as possible. Everything looked bent and distant yet at the same time sharper than ever before as though she were wearing somebody else's glasses. She tried to breathe calmly as she walked, marching a straight path to the henhouse, to the trailer and back, but ended up walking and breathing faster and faster, crossing one foot drunkenly over the other, flapping, wheezing to catch her breath, dizzy, whirling. If anyone were to arrive now, she thought, the Watkins man or the Co-op agent to fill the gastank-- Then it occurred to her that no one had come to the farm in weeks. Since before the agricul-

tural fair.

She found herself hanging over the rail of the porch steps with no idea how long she had been pacing to and fro. Already she began to doubt it had happened.

When she looked up there were forty or fifty men in the potato patch. Sprung from the earth armed with long-handled spades, they checkered the field in coal-blue suits, gray undershirts and tweed caps pulled low over faces that stared at the chickencoop, the yard, the housetrailer.

Ida thought immediately of the pink aroma drifting their way. She took a gulp of air and bounded up the trailer steps and into the bathroom. Sarah was tickling her nose with a fan of fat hair, her face a purr of sleepy luxury. Ida slid the windows shut, locked the trailer door behind her and trotted into the field wielding a hoe.

"Go away," she cried weakly, shaking the hoe above her head. The men stared dully at her but did not move. A cool breeze slipped through the herd, rippling the hems of their suit jackets. When the men didn't budge she took a few running steps and they swung their heads around and plodded towards the hill. Ida followed along doggedly.

"Go away," she said louder, though this time her voice broke. Nightfall had darkened the field, bringing a slight chill. The closer Ida came to the men with caps the darker became the sooty shadow under their hatbrims.

The air around them smelled of mouse urine and musty newspapers. The men breathed as one, rasping like an old miner. Ida trudged heavily behind them as they marched toward the hillside. Her head spun gently; a swarm of faraway voices seemed to be reaching at her.

"Go away." It was a dream-filtered little girl's voice. Her own voice was becoming smaller and smaller, while the other voices, the distant voices speaking to her alone, she was certain, whispered and sighed like a field of ripe wheat. Ida cast around as if for a buried memory, straining to use a sense she hadn't been aware of as she tried to tune into the voices calling her. The men with caps walked slowly a few paces ahead, shovels resting on their shoulders like rifles.

"Go away." She saw her voice as a tiny person who shrinks down, down, a living clone of an entire family of painted-mouthed Russian dolls; soon, "zing," no bigger than a spark, it would effervesce and be gone.

She was being taken by a floating feeling. Yes, please, hurry, she urged the tangled voices in her mind. She felt as if she were already somewhere else, though her feet continued to move her along. The men walking before her grew pale and watery as if seen through silk curtains. She began to pick out crisp sounds among the faraway voices, sounds that meant something to her, she knew, though hard as she wrung her mind she could not

remember what. Voices groped like hands, pulled at her, invited her like an unearthly choir to leave all and come with them. Take me, she heard herself plead. She was slowly being abandoned here. One by one her family was leaving her. Please take me away, she cried out in her mind, swaying as the voices rocked and petted her. Away to where she would be loved and warm, she could feel them carrying her.

"Go aw--" Sarah flashed to her mind, naked in the trailer, her smell drifting in the wind; at once Ida was surrounded by the thud of the men's boots; she felt her feet hitting the ground; the voices were gone.

Go away. And the thought, for she could no longer speak, crashed off the valley walls and came ringing back to her, only her, ears: "Ggogoogaoaagowaawaaowayayayyyw . . ."

The men, like the locusts, kept their distance, treading ahead of Ida in a gray herd. Go away. Ida slogged after them with her hoe, her feet growing heavier the faster she tried to move. Go away. The chant of the men's bootfall as they slouched along with their shovels; men at the hillside turning back like billiard balls; she slowing to a stop; a row of men with caps sleepwalking toward her through the mothblack; trying to stop but the force which had slowed her now kicking her forward; other men reaching the end of the garden, turning and walking

towards Ida; go away.

She let the hoe drag so the blade would cut in and anchor her but it only clattered dryly over the baked soil. The rows of shovel-bearing men bore down on her from the hillside. She tried to turn but her feet padded lightly along. The men still marching to the hill passed silently between the ranks of returning men. Finally, pushing backwards as though against a rolling truck, Ida managed to stop and turned to run, the men breathing down her neck. But I've hardly gone any distance at all, she thought, wrapping her fingers round the fencewire and pulling; her feet remained lodged in place; squeezing the braided black wire, she tugged with all her weight; "I should have brought the bug poison and sprayed the insects while I was here;" releasing, she left the ground and floated toward the fence. Why, I'm flying in the air, she caught herself thinking, then dragged like a stoneboat. The men with caps strode on steadily, black beetle-locusts clinging to the coalcloth of their pantlegs. The dank cough of blacklung swallowed Ida, skunking her.

Go away.

The setting sun, hidden behind the western hill, shimmered in an apricot puddle on the trailer window; I have to get there to save Sarah, she thought; weaselling through the strands of wire she sprinted like a deer and bounded up the porch steps before she realized she had

passed Sarah coming from the henhouse with an apronful of eggs; faceless silhouettes, the men with caps bunched along the fenceline like tumbleweeds; Ida ran back and yanked Sarah's wiry arm; brown-shelled eggs leapt into the air and crashed on the concrete earth; fried sunny-side-up in a second, the eggs stared into the empty sky.

Hartland loitered his way along the busy city sidewalk, fascinated by out-of-date concert advertisements glued to a plywood excavation barrier: The Cold Parts, The Four Horsemen, Petals of Disaster. A large black and white photograph with dirty jagged shadows advertised a dance production entitled Ennui: six sexless people in black body tights with black stockings over their faces. A glossy poster by the corner of the construction pit depicted a creature with a man's face, horse's body, locust wings, womanly hair, long sharp teeth, a black armoured breastplate and a scorpion's tail. A caption read, "The sooner the better."

The street was full of all sorts of people. A gang of shaven-headed men dressed in studded black leather and heavy boots tramped grimly behind their leader who barely restrained a snarling doberman. The dog wore a spiked collar. A trio in black suits painted with gleaming white bone-structures looked from a distance like real walking skeletons. A trunk-sized portable tape player carried by one of the skeletons blasted a macabre male voice droning, "I need your stiff formaldehyde

love." The ghetto box jostled a goateed Black man in white robe and skullcap standing on the corner selling incense. A short distance away were other robed men with incense, only these men's heads were shaved like those of the leather gang. And earlier, Hartland had seen a pony-tailed and bearded man wearing a priest's collar under faded blue overalls, walking a coyote on a leash.

Eventually Hartland found what he was looking for. Behind the construction lot loomed a stone edifice bearing the sign, Church of the Select Majority. White plastic letters clipped to a slotted black board spelled "LITTLE DOTHAN: CHILD PROPHET OF WONDERS." Below was a quote from a television broadcast: "I ain't no more of a prophet than you are. I just know how to read." Hartland heaved open the timbered door and peered into the immense darkness.

"Folks, I want you all to picture a circle in your mind. Visualize it now, a circle. Now this circle is divided up into three parts, like three pieces of a pie. You got that? A circle with three parts."

Hartland recognized Little Dothan's voice; he padded up the aisle and slid into a lemon-smelling pew.

"Okay so in one of your three pie sections you got the number 18. The number 18. See it in your mind. In the second section you see a big silver spaceship, a big ol' shiny flyin' saucer. Then in the third section we've got a taxicab. A big yellow Checker cab. So your

circle, three parts with the number 18, flyin' saucer, and a Checker taxi."

Little Dothan's face was plumper and redder than Hartland remembered it. He was dressed in a crisp charcoal suit with a burgundy tie and pearl tiepin.

"Now we're gonna move closer and have a better look at what this here circle is made of. If we move on in for a close-up shot we find it's all people standin' in a big circle, whisperin' to each other. And the word they're whisperin' is "WAR." Then we look closely at the lines dividing up the circle. They're made of people too, three long lines of people on their way from the outside of the circle to the middle where there's three booths.

"In the first line you see all kinds of pale, skinny folks with dark eyes and shrunken faces, all with their left sleeve rolled up, an' when they get to their booth there's a nurse gives 'em a needle in their arm, y'see. Next lineup is of people holding a hundred dollar bill in their hands and at the end of the line there's men at wickets that each of 'em got signs sayin' "MESSIAH." Got that so far? Then you got your third lineup. These people are even sicker and skinnier than the ones waitin' for the shot in the arm. This bunch ain't nothin' but skin an' bones, and each one's holdin' a cup. At the end of the line is a old woman with a milk-can and a ladle, but the milk's all gone. The can's empty."

Hartland looked around at the wine-candy windows, the rich dark woods of the roofbeams and benches. A pocket-size pamphlet peeked over the wooden rack behind the next pew. Hartland picked it up and read the title: "Re--winning the West: The New Improved America Under God."

"All right, we're gonna look real close at this here number 18. When you get up real close you see it's cut right into the ground, but not by a bulldozer or a pick and shovel. The ground's cracked because of an earthquake, into the shape of a 18. An' over to the taxi there's a woman inside, ready to have a baby. She's rushing to the hospital and the pains are coming faster all the time. A little while ago they were every ten minutes, then every five, now they're comin' every minute."

Little Dothan reviewed the picture for the audience, drawing the items in the air with his chubby fingers and challenging individuals to identify them.

"Now just hang onto that picture while I give you a little history lesson. Only this ain't gonna be no ancient history, or even past history. What I'm gonna talk about is future history. The future history of the world. But how can that be? How is that possible? How can there be history of what ain't yet happened?" He gave the audience a long hard stare. "Because it's all wrote down right in the only history book you'll ever need, the

book that's got the whole story on mankind. And by that I mean your own Good Book.

"Ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars . . . You remember the circle of people all whisperin' it to each other, "WAR"? One o' your local papers here has it spread across today's front page in big letters, 'WORLD WAR INEVITABLE IN NEXT FIVE YEARS DECLARES U.N. OFFICIAL.' . . . nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. You all know how many wars there is goin' on right now? More'n 45, last time somebody counted. Sure, I know your answer to that one. There's always been wars. You bet there has. But there's never been so many natural disasters as there is now.

". . . and great earthquakes shall be in many places. Remember our number 18 cracked into the earth? 18 earthquakes in the past 15 years, the world's never known anything like it. And that's just counting the real big ones. Scientists say the whole planet's so busted and splintered up with fault zones runnin' ever' which way, and especially now that there's dams and nuclear plants built on top of lots of them, the whole planet could quake itself to smithereens from one minute to the next.

"Fearful sights and great signs there shall be from the heavens. You read about it every week. UFOs, just like our shiny old spaceship in the picture. Last week

the aliens picked up a little girl in Georgia. Out pickin' berries with her mama. She went mesmerized--that's how they get ya--an' walked right into its magnetic field and gone.

"Pestilence. Boy, I'll tell ya, if you count just the social diseases alone it's enough to make you stagger. If you added up the people in America with gonorrhea and the people with syphilis and the people with AIDS and genital herpes and this here chlamydia an' all them others and got them to hold hands," (he cleared his throat and rolled his eyes), "they'd stretch all the way from New York to San Francisco and back again.

"False Messiahs. Sure, we got our share of them too. <u>. . . there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and they shall show great signs and wonders . . .</u> You got your Jim Joneses, you got your Sun Myung Moons, you got your Maharaj Jis." He laughed and said, "Shucks, I like my Kool-Aid as much as the next guy, but until I see it's been stirred by the hand of Jesus Christ hisself I ain't touchin' a drop." Laughter rippled through the crowd, a few people clapped.

"An' your famines--the bony people with cups linin' up for a dribble o' milk but the old woman at the crock ain't got no more to give. You recall all that in our picture? That old woman is Mother Earth, folks. She's runnin' out. An' you know why? Think about this: when

God made Adam the world had a population of one. It took until the time of the California goldrush before there was a billion people on earth. Next let's jump ahead to just after the Wall Street crash. Only eighty years later it's 2 billion. By the time John F. Kennedy gets elected there's 3 billion: 1975, 4 billion. And now, just a few years later there's over 5 billion and the next stop'll be 6. There's more'n a billion Chinese alone, don'tcha see. It's just like the skateboard ramp I got home in Indiana. It starts to curve and goes up and up till it's goin' straight vertical an' you know, you come to the top an' if you don't turn around right gentle-like--look out!

"So let's review our little picture: the circle of people spreadin' the rumour of war, lineups of people with epidemic diseases, people starvin' to death in Africa, people worshippin' phony Messiahs. We got our 18 earthquakes in the past 15 years. And we got our spaceship--fearful sights from the skies.

"But there's one thing we ain't got to yet. What in the heck is this poor lady in the taxi got to do with it all, rushin' on her way to the delivery room? Well, friends, just like when a lady's birthpains start comin' faster an' faster you know y'all better not go out to the ballgame, it's the same thing with all these here signs. Corruption, moral decay, overpopulation. Faster and faster, the birth pangs are hittin' harder all

the time, airplanes bein' blasted right outta the sky by the Reds, a buncha guys in turbans chargin' us so much for oil and gas you gotta mortgage your house just to drive to Yellowstone Park. Why, she's breakin' apart at the knee-joints, folks, she's breakin' apart at the elbows, she's creakin' and a-groanin', our dear lady America's hurtin' more every minute an it's time--it's time . . . to call in the doctor."

"Amen!" shouted someone.

"Jesus told his apostles--you can look it up in the gospel of Matthew--he said, Now learn the parable of the fig tree; When its branch is tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is nigh: So likewise ye, when ye shall see all these things, know that it is near, even at the doors." He leaned forward and swept a pudgy finger across the audience. "Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled. All what things? Why the things we're seein' before our very eyes: wars, famine, plagues, and the event they're leadin' up to.

"Because remember--these are just the birthpangs. You ain't seen nothin' yet. If this is just the earth feelin' her contractions, you mothers in the congregation can imagine what the birth is gonna be like."

A muffled siren whined from the street. People began to squirm but Little Dothan motioned with his hand for

them to stay put. "It's comin', friends. It's on its way. Armageddon cain't help but come, the state the world's in. We're most of the way already towards the Third World War. Jesus said the first thing to happen is the Jews would get back together in their own country after bein' scattered over the earth. Since Israel became a nation them poor Jews ain't had nothin' but strife. Why they've had all the Ay-rabs you can imagine down their backs.

"God said that before the end, the old Roman empire would rise again, ten nations would group together. The European Common Market got its tenth member when Greece joined up an', now they got their very own parliament. Now there's them as says this here coalition will grow to be mightier than even America. They're gonna do pretty good for themselves, with a leader who's gonna make such peace on earth that for a while he'll be more popular than Jesus Christ hisself. Until Israel gets attacked.

"Now who do you suppose attacks Israel? Here's a few hints: they've already opened up their way through Afghanistan an' they're makin' friends left an' right with the Arabs and the Iraqis. And they're settin' right on our doorstep down in Spanish America." Little Dothan closed his boyish eyes and pressed his finger next to his temple. "<u>On that day when my people Israel are dwelling securely, you will bestir yourself and come from your</u>

place out of the uttermost parts of the north . . . a great host, a mighty army; you will come up against my people Israel like a cloud covering the land."

Little Dothan raised his eyebrows and cocked his head back. "Out of the uttermost parts of the north . . . the uttermost parts of the north." He guffawed. "And we're not talkin' about the Minnesota Vikings, folks."

"That reminds me of my mom," said Little Dothan. "'What's the difference between your dad an' Rudolph the Reindeer?' she wants to know one day. 'Heck, I don't know,' I replied. 'When Rudolph the Reindeer's nose lights up, at least it's useful for something,'" she says.

"We just tease him now an' then just to keep him going," said Little Dothan. "See, he's just gotten outten that Johnny Cash outfit, where he went. But he's doin' real good," Little Dothan turned partway, so he could look toward his father yet speak into the microphone at the same time. "We're behind you all the way, Pop. Folks, let's have a hand for my dad." Hartland craned to see past the heads of the applauding people. "He's a bit shy," said Little Dothan.

"On that day," he continued after a pause, "there shall be a great shaking in the land of Israel; the fish of the sea, and the birds of the air, and the beasts of the field, and all creeping things that creep on the

ground, and all the men that are upon the face of the earth, shall quake at my presence, and the mountains shall be thrown down, and the cliffs shall fall, and every wall shall tumble to the ground. I will summon every kind of terror against the Russian, says the Lord God; every man's sword will be against his brother. With pestilence and bloodshed I will enter into judgment with him; and I will rain upon him and his hordes and the many peoples that are with him, torrential rains and hailstones, fire and brimstone.

"Ladies an' gentlemen, life ain't gonna be worth livin' here, either. I don't need to tell you about all the M-X missiles pointed our way. If you wanna find out what's gonna happen to America, just write to the World-wide church of God for their little book, The United States and Britain in Prophecy. It's a humdinger.

"But never mindin' all that, what can we-all do about it? What do we do to prepare ourselves for this awful period of history? Well, lemme just give you one more history chapter. This part's called the Rapture."

Another sirencall made the crowd wriggle about uneasily. Little Dothan gestured for them to hold still.

"The Rapture, my friends, is the payoff for all true Christians." Little Dothan's parents were hastily packing posters of Little Dothan that had been on sale along with a thin book written by him entitled, Armaggedon: What's in

it For You? The congregation inched its way towards the edges of the pews. "Yes sir, for those who aren't saved, it's gonna be hell on earth--literally! The earth is utterly broken, the earth is rent asunder, the earth is violently shaken. The earth staggers like a drunken man, it sways like a hut . . . An' where're all your heathen friends gonna be in the midst of all this? Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth are scorched, and few men are left . . . Behold the Lord will lay waste the earth and make it desolate, and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants."

The siren cried again and this time continued to wail steadily. Little Dothan's father whispered in his ear and the family hurried out a side door.

"Hellfire and conflagration, nuclear fallout, flashblindness, babies abortin' theirselves left and right, people peeling the skin off their faces and eatin' it raw, entire cities taken over by rats and cockroaches, mutant life forms you cain't even bargain with."

Little Dothan's boyish face glistened under the interior lights. The stained glass windows had darkened to a murky plum.

"But you don't hafta see any o' this." He held his gaze on a woman who had lifted herself from her seat, forcing her to sit down again. "You don't hafta see any

of this here. Those of us who have chosen (or been chosen by) the Lord, why we'll be observin' from a real high-up bleacher seat. The moment our Lord Christ steps onto the earth for his second comin', we're just gonna disappear into the air. Heaven, don'tcha know. That's your Rapture, that's the beauty of it all. And just us are gonna experience it."

Hartland watched as whole families squeezed toward the aisles. Little Dothan stood a moment catching his breath.

"Ladies and gentlemen, let us bow our heads in prayer. Lord Jesus, help us all to be virtuous in our hearts an' live to witness the rapture when you descend on earth. Give America the strength to continue her peace-keeping and freedom-fighting efforts in order to prolong the earth's existence. Guide us in fulfilling our divine mission as a world leader in capitalism and democracy, especially in Central America and the Middle East. And bless the Church of the Select Majority for all its fine efforts in persuading our politicians to follow the path of righteousness.

"Good-night, you-all."

The people skinned each others' heels all the way to the exit doors. Hartland stood in the aisle, not knowing what to do as Little Dothan snatched his attaché case and hopped onto the floor. The boy beckoned Hartland to join

him as he walked briskly to the door.

"Got your letter. Glad you could make it." Looking straight ahead, Little Dothan absently shook Hartland's hand as they walked.

Down the darkening street crept an army jeep that scanned doorways with a machine-gun-mounted floodlight.

"What's going on?" asked Hartland.

"It's just a drill. A pretend emergency curfew. Come on." He grabbed Hartland by the sleeve and hustled him down an alleyway. At the next street they saw two machine-gun-bearing soldiers talking in low voices to a pair of young women in dresses. The women, who looked like office girls, pressed themselves against a brick wall. Little Dothan led Hartland in the other direction.

"Darn curfew messed up the timing of my sermon. Didn't get to build it up just right," he said, waving at an unlit taxi which didn't stop. Two soldiers scooted around the opposite streetcorner, dragging a bloody-faced man by the arms.

Little Dothan opened his case and took out a plastic-wrapped comicbook of The Incredible Hulk. "Look what I found today. May, 1962." He flipped open the black and gray pages. "Guy in a used record store had it. Didn't have the first clue what it was worth. See," he said, showing the unbroken spine of the magazine, "the back's cherry."

Little Dothan waved his comicbook at a crammed taxi. The car came to a quick halt and they climbed awkwardly onto passengers' knees as it squealed away.

The big arms and back of the rocking chair hugged Ida; Sarah's limp body weighed on her lap like a bag of soil. Strewn about the floor lay big dead bumblebees, crooked black legs frozen in prayer. The choking flowery smell had mostly dissipated, no more than a strong perfume now. Blinds drawn, windows and doors locked, the trailer was a tin roasting pan.

"Consuelo Sanchez, come on down!"

Ida tilted her head; the chair stood stiff on its hind legs as she listened. The truck's coming down the hill, she thought. Her arched feet relaxed and the chair began to rock again, thumping like a grandfather clock. A minute later the truckdoor slammed and Art waddled into the house carrying a large television with a dark wood cabinet.

"Lookit what I rounded up in town. I did a favour for a guy starting up a TV store, so he let me have this tube on credit." Ida's stomach tightened at the word "credit." Art unhooked the antenna wires from the old TV, whose screen immediately turned to snow. He connected the new television and tuned in the gameshow that had been on

the other machine.

"So, what's it gonna be, Consuelo? How much for the bedroom suite?"

"Um. Eighteen hundred dollars."

"Eighteen hundred dollars for the bedroom suite!"

The image was so clear and true it was as though the people were actually in the room with Ida.

"You're not going to like this news," said Art as he adjusted the colour tone, "but there's no more insecticide anywhere in Born With A Tooth County. I even drove all the way to Regina. The strongest poison they can mix up that won't kill every animal in the county, these dudes gobble up like cherry Coke. Crops between here and the city look like they been doused with Agent Orange."

Art looked around at the bumblebee corpses. He sniffed the air. Sarah, facing her mother on her knee, stared at nothing in particular. Her soft lips were curved into a small red heart, her eyelids heavy as though from satisfaction. She sighed to stifle a yawn.

"Tell me," said Art finally, "did the men get here?" Ida's eyes gazed at the floor.

"Joe-Salvation Army kinda guys in caps all black with trainsmoke. I ran into them in town, humungous crowd of 'em just arrived on the train platform and hungry for work. Some archeologist character counted out the first hundred, plans on making a fortune digging up dinosaur

bones and these dog-sized prehistoric horses that used to run around here. Then there was a big brawny dude thought he knew me, hired a dozen men to work on a crew digging wells.

"Which gave me an idea." Art knelt in front of Ida, forcing her to look at him.

"You see I got it figured that even in the best of times this here valley must be dryer than it is wet. Those rusted-out irrigation sprinklers you got hid in the trees are okay if your water supply hangs in there, but if we use our manpower right, we can fix things so that little spring of yours'll get the water to where it needs to get and give the ground a good drenching before the season begins. So the seeds'll be going into moist soil. And the way we're gonna do that: canals running between the rows from one end of the valley to the other. Then we're gonna get some grapes and oranges in there.

"Yessir, me and Luther Burbank. Look out!"

Art laughed in a way that made Ida's head jerk up. Not his hearty, joyous laugh, but a coarse guffaw.

"The tastiest part of the plan," said Art, rubbing his hands, "is the cost." His cheeks and eyes glowed with an inner light. "The cost is less than paltry, less than meagre, less still than the old song and dance, and the way your precious soil's taken to flyin' away after greener pastures, you might even call it dirt-cheap!"

His face smelled of warmth and energy. "<u>These--poor--clones</u>--are so desperate . . ." He cleared his throat. "Well, they're in hard times, y'see, and I want to help them out, and they're willing to work for no wages whatsoever. Just food." He paused to wipe a laugh-tear from his eye. "I've already arranged the meals. Breakfast, lunch and dinner: boiled wheat. Made a deal already to clean out some of the Indians' granaries.

"And the grain's still good. Edible, totally.

"Hey, they wouldn't have already gotten here, would they?" His eyes glowed at Ida until her head bobbed.

All at once, Art's eyes softened. "Good stuff!" he said. He chuckled, playfully tweaked Sarah's sharp straight nose and went out the door singing, "It's a wonderful day in the neighbourhood . . ."

Warren Putnam sat up on one elbow under the station wagon ceiling, dragged a faded blue windbreaker over his legs and burped up a 7-Eleven Hoagie. Chilly sweat glued the bottom of his back to the foam mattress. He scratched the exposed skin and pulled his flannel shirt down to meet his pants. An itchy heat remained in his limbs from the dream that had woken him; he wriggled his body to shake it out.

He had been in the chickencoop. The hens were in their roosts, squawking and reviling him while Elmer Stolz, Bud Ulmer and two young farmhands dressed in green overalls and John Deere caps stood above, shouting, "How about it, Old Cock? Gonna do us proud?" Warren gaped around the building, took a step back and nearly tripped. Before him stood the chippy red rooster, his spindly ankles hooked with razor-sharp cockspurs. The rooster bobbed forward to close the gap as Warren stepped back. He danced around Warren, deking blows and kicks, hopping, dipping. Abruptly he stopped. He held his wings open and shrugged, waiting until Warren ran forward to attack. Then with a wolverine lunge the rooster swiped at Warren's

throat.

Warren felt coolness as air licked the open cut, then a growing sharp burn. He reached to press on it to stop the bleeding but his stiff wing only bumped awkwardly against the side of his neck. The rooster clawed at Warren's soft belly, making him hunch forward, and while he was still tottering the rooster sliced at his ear.

Warren hugged his stomach and caught his breath while the red rooster performed a series of deep knee bends, pushups, jumping jacks. "Get in there!" yelled the men, "Mix it up! Scratch his eyes out!" The red rooster bounced back, taunting Warren, daring him to go for his chin. "Come on, Sad Sadie, a stationary target." The instant Warren lumbered towards him the red rooster dove and tore open the soft flesh of his inner thigh then swatted the side of his skull with a backhand wing. Warren stood stunned, head ringing as the rooster seized his neck in a clinch. Helpless, he darted his eyes around at the jeering chickens, at the men yelling, "What are ya, a fuckin' egglayer? Are you just gonna stand there and take this chickenshit?"

One of the hens had stood up from her roost and was squatting over the edge to pee. She looked back over her shoulder and gave Warren a coquettish smile. Warren wriggled slipperily out of the red rooster's hold. He thought he glimpsed an invitation in the lift of the hen's

tailfeathers as she sauntered back to bed.

Warren hipchecked the red rooster and hopped up into the little woman's nest--cozy with warm damp straw. It smelled like the wet fur of a lynx who had stolen into the chickencoop one night and bolted with a pullet in its teeth. But he didn't care.

Warren's heart pounded as the hen eyed him apprais-ingly and teased in a husky voice, "So you think you can put your shoes under my bunk anytime, do you?" She rubbed his ear playfully, making him flinch as she broke a gelled clot of blood where the rooster had cut.

"Look at him. Whattaya bet she goes on top?" he heard one of the overalled men say down below.

"Ha, ha!" Warren cried out boldly. "Were not I the man to redress fair Castonia's wrongs!" He turned to his hen, made a flourish with his wing, as with a plumed hat, and bowed low. Swashbuckler-style, he swooped down onto the wooden floorboards, eager for the blood of the red rooster. The hen smiled sadly and turned away. "Well, you blew it," she clucked. "Now it's your turn for the worse."

"Glad to see it, Sad Sack. Didn't think you had it in you," congratulated the red as he completed a set of toe-touches. Warren panted as they faced off, the red smiling amusedly at Warren's defiant glare.

With a rush the red charges, tearing and slashing at

Warren, spurs, claws ripping through feathers into soft white skin, clouting him with wingblows, kicking him sprawling to the chickencoop wall where a galvanized pipe spews fine choking chaff, itchy as barley dust, only to be booted forward again by the cheering men, now blinded by his own red blood, a gurgle in his throat, chaff coating thicker and thicker his feathers, burying the wrinkled toes of his splayed feet, more and more unable to move as the red rooster hacks again and again at his breast and neck and stomach and Warren, too weak to raise a clawed foot and strike back, cowering, flapping one wing to keep his balance, trying to shield himself with the other wing from the clutching hooked nails . . .

The men literally worked day and night, not in the least hampered by darkness. Art ordered them to dam the river below the saskatoon trees so that when the springwater began to flow again it would flood the field. Three-foot-deep trenches gridded the fields, joined under the road by corrugated steel culverts.

The digging of the canals revealed the frightful scantiness of the drifting topsoil; the dark upper layer was being dragged away in daily black blizzards that eclipsed the sun, putting the chickens to sleep in their roosts. Underneath was a rusty layer of sand and gravel, and at three feet, the spades of the men with caps clanged on a flat-topped bed of rock. If the dirt continued to blow the valley would be left an immense parking lot.

Ida's waking hours were spent shuffling between the kitchen and the truck, scooping out the gamy Indian Reserve wheat from the truckbox and cooking it in the copper boiler until soft enough to chew. She tried to sweeten the mush the first morning by stirring a dollop of molasses into each batch, but the mollasses ran out before noon.

The men in caps ate wordlessly at a long table of plywood sheets laid across sawhorses, breaking off in shifts from sunrise until nightfall. Caps low over blackened faces, they moved in unison, lifting their spoons at the same instant and shovelling the coarse porridge into their mouths. Each man took a cigarette butt from his suit pocket, lit up, pinched the ash and stowed the butt in his pocket before striding back to the field in time for the next crew.

Three nights after the men began the canals, the mule gave a shrieking bray and shuddered birth to a bandy-legged colt.

Sarah grew more and more beautiful and more languorous. Each morning her blond locks had grown another half inch, her skin soft as handsoap despite the dry air. Ida could have used Sarah's help with the bowls as she lugged the boiler of sodden porridge to the men's table, but the girl had so little energy; all she ever did was sit fanning herself or tickling her face with her hair.

Furthermore, Ida was terrified of the reaction of the men with caps if they glimpsed her daughter's beauty. She dragged the sheets of plywood and the sawhorses to the edge of the field and reassembled the table next to the barbed wire fence; the reel of a half-buried binder

creaked in the hot breeze like a tired weathercock. A big out-of-style purse served as a satchel for clean bowls and spoons; the empty boiler carried them back dirty, to be scalded.

Still, the men always had some excuse for coming into the yard: to nail a wobbly shovel handle in place, to brush a dollop of tar over the cracked sole of a boot. With the river dry, the only water in the valley was in the well, so each afternoon a lineup stretched from the handpump past the toolshed, each man jacking the long handle for the next, who slurped from cupped hands, all the time gawking toward the housetrailer where Sarah sprawled on the living room couch like a Persian cat. By the end of the day the normally clear water was busy with flecks of rust.

She could hear them mumbling from the trailerstep, a low moan that rose and fell like wind through winter trees; the men were still as weathered gray fenceposts. As Ida came near the conversation faded like night into day. Her eyes never left the men's bowls as she ladled out the boiled wheat, and she never said a word to the men, chilled by their snoose-gummed breath.

In fact, since the day she chased them with the hoe, Ida hadn't spoken at all, hadn't even opened her mouth to see if her voice was back. Cocooned within the batting of her own thoughts, she felt trembling and overcome, yet at

the same time soothed by simple things like rocking, the throbbing tedium of scooping, boiling and dishing out wheat. She liked to hum, inside her mind, old dance tunes that were popular when she was a girl.

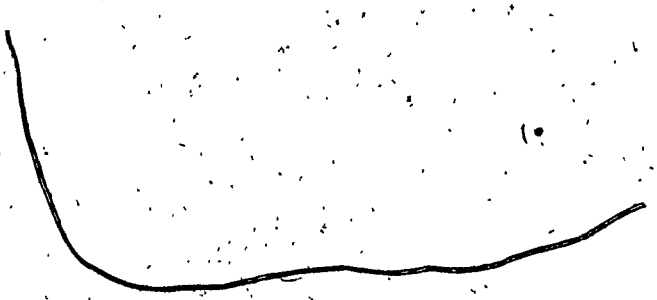
Art's presence swallowed her up. The very largeness of his personality took up all the space, breathed all the air; it comforted her like the glow of a snapping bonfire. The canal project gave Art more vigour than ever: hurrying between field and yard shouting out orders; working with Ida rinsing the towers of wheatbowls before the gluey dregs concreted; talking nonstop, breaking into round laughter or lines from sentimental ballads, Art was slowly sucking out Ida's breath and replenishing it with his own.

Where did I ever get any energy before he came along? wondered Ida. She surprised herself by managing to squeeze in little daily activities like setting out a ration of water for a weary armadillo--presumably washed up by the flood--who trundled past the porch step every afternoon.

Once in the kitchen when Ida was stirring wheat, Art removed the wooden spoon from her hand and held out his arms, left hand gallantly poised to lead. Ida untied her apron and folded it over the ovenhandle. Art waltzed her around the room in tight circles, leading her adroitly past the small table and chairs, dodging fridge and stove

and pedal garbagecan until the melody, a musicbox minuet playing in Ida's mind, twinkled childlike to a stately end. Ida smiled and giggled, feeling a flattered schoolgirl.

Though no sound left her lips.



"You see, I don't gotta be no fool to believe in Christ," said Little Dothan. A video cassette whirred in a portable tape machine connected to the hotelroom television. The room was long and broad with wine-coloured bedspreads, curtains and carpet. A Filet-O-Fish Sandwich lay half-eaten in its blue styrofoam carton on the sidetable.

Little Dothan sat on the edge of his bed and played a hand-held video football game while the cassette rewound. He pressed buttons frantically, chattering a fast play-by-play: "Third down, a minute, 45 seconds left in the fourth with the Forty-Niners 17-12 on the Raiders' 20 yardline. Ball's snapped to Prescott, nobody in the clear, he carries it--taken down by Wilson on the 15. Forty-Niners, fourth down, a minute, 14 left in play, ball goes to Prescott. Prescott passes to Jackson--FUMBLES! Dexter snatches it up for Oakland, nobody in his way, takes it to the 50 yardline, he's at the 60, look at him go! he's on the 70, 80, TOUCHDOWN! The Raiders take the bowl."

He grabbed a remote control box and clicked the

idling tape into motion, filling the screen with an advertisement for a single-rider recreational toy called Amphibug that crashed through swamps and roared up hills, followed by three of the same vehicles. Little Dothan froze the picture and pulled a mini tape recorder from his pocket. "Look into gittin' one of them Amphi-bugs," he said into the microphone.

"Nope, I don't gotta be no fool at all. You see, Jesus says it's hard for a rich man to git into the kingdom of heaven. It's hard. But thet don't mean it's impossible. Now I know an' you know it's darn hard to squeeze a big old camel through a needle's eye, but you seen in the Bible how anything's possible. With God all things are possible.

"Now you take Washington Jefferson now. Do you think Washington Jefferson didn't get into heaven last month when he left this here world? It'd take a mighty small needle to keep him out."

"Who's Washington J-jefferson?" The air in the room felt stuffy to Hartland but he was afraid to say anything.

"A mighty small needle. And I'll tell ya, there ain't nobody had a collection of Cadillacs like old Washington: a convertible and a hardtop of every year since 1955. Washington didn't have just a car for every day of the week. Nope. Ol' Washington, he could go for a couple months an' not drive the same car twict. Sometimes

he'd come home for lunch from Baptist Headquarters and say, I'm tired of 1963, or I'm sick of powder blue, think I'll switch.

"I tried gettin' an option on his collection after he passed away but his family'd already had a auction. They all didn't even wait for him to get cold, don'tcha see.

"But old Washington, he did all right. And I ain't gonna add, 'For a Negro,' either. He did all right by anybody's tape measure. And generous! I never did go over to his house and didn't come home with a motorboat or an Atari computer or a DC-powered microwave oven for my Winnebago. Pop'll say, jokin', of course, 'Let's not all forgit an' drive off without puttin' the trailer-hitch on. We're goin' to Washington Jefferson's, remember.' Why, I used to tell him, 'Now, Washington, you shouldn't oughtta do this. I'm just a little impressionable kid, you know, you don't wanna run the risk of spoilin' me.' And he'd slap his knee and laugh and shake just like you was holdin' him down and ticklin' him. Then he'd give me one of them turnin'-all-aroun' Negro handshakes.

"And you wanna know what he was doin' when he collapsed at that Democratic convention in Dallas? Prayin' for all them Africans starvin' in Ethiopia. Yep. A man with all the millions you'd ever need, one o' the biggest preachers in America, and here he was, his dying words for ever'body but hisself. That's what he was

sayin', he said, 'Lord, send your bounteous aid to those afflicted by famine and drought in parts of the world less blessed than these great states. Help us find it in our hearts to reach into our pockets and give to this worthy cause.' An' you know what they found in ol' Washington's suitpocket after he fell down dead from his stroke? A cheque for--five--hundrett--dollars,--made out to Ethiopia.

"So you see, it's not how poor and shrivelled up you are from hunger that gets you into heaven. Blessed are the poor--in spirit. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst--after righteousness. These here beatitudes, all o' this blessed are this an' that, have been taken outten their context so much, don'tcha see, that now ever'body figures it's a sin to have a dollar in your wallet. What counts in this business is how many hearts you touch--that's why I'm goin' on television; my lawyer's writin' me up a contract proposal for NBC--and, most important: how many souls you save.

"How's your father?" he asked, rolling the videotape.

Hartland hesitated, then wheezed, "I'm not really sure."

"Now The Seven Wonders here's the greatest TV show ever made," said Little Dothan over the musical theme. "It's got the most powerful collection of super heroes you ever did see. I get my secretary to tape the episodes I

miss when I'm out on the road. Korok, that's the blond guy out in space smashin' the two planets together," Little Dothan waved the remote switch at the screen, "he's got a handshake more powerful than one hundred neutron bombs. Once each show he offers to shake hands with somebody evil like Dr. Slime. You oughtta see them explode!"

The seven super heroes gleefully battled sinister villains who used germ warfare and interplanetary terrorism to seize control of a universe that, despite its advanced technology, was populated by such prehistoric creatures as woolly mammoths, sabre-toothed tigers and docile, plant-eating dinosaurs who benevolently offered their beastly strength to Korok and his crew. Little Dothan cheered the shattering climax as Korok invited Dr. Freeznichov (a brilliant madman who held the Earth hostage with a weather machine) to step into outer space and shake hands. Mother Earth securely returned to the forces of good, Korok and the rest of the fun-loving team hitched a ride home on the neck of a passing pterodactyl and resumed life as usual, surfing and dancing on the sunny beaches of Malibu.

Little Dothan then dug through a large suitcase and showed Hartland a motorized skateboard, a framed photograph of him and Michael Jackson and an award from the American Society of Religious Broadcasters.

There was a soft knock at the door. Little Dothan's sister peeked in and smiled radiantly. Her braces were gone. She extended her hand to Hartland and quietly introduced herself as Cheryl-Ann. By the time Hartland and Little Dothan had arrived at the hotel the night before, a blackout was in effect and the nightclerk led them to Little Dothan's room by flashlight.

"What are you guys doing?" asked Cheryl-Ann.

Little Dothan, sullenly fiddling with a Walkman, trying to make it play a tape of an award-winning sermon he had delivered, finally pitched tape and machine, headphones dangling behind, against the wall.

"Nothing a girl'd be interested in," he snapped.

"It's okay, I'll l-listen to it some other t-time," said Hartland, fighting for his breath. Cheryl-Ann gave Hartland a warning shake of the head, then she backed out the door.

There was something wrong with his breathing. Whenever he spoke his breath seemed to rush out a one-way valve that didn't let air back in. For six days on the road he'd barely said a word to anybody. Now it was a chore every time he had to talk.

Ten minutes later Cheryl-Ann returned with a tray of chocolate milkshakes in tall glasses. She sat down on the bed with Hartland and her brother and handed each a drink.

"You shoulda just got room service to bring 'em up,"

said Little Dothan, taking out the long-handled spoon and sucking on the straw. "You're such a goof-head sometimes."

"I don't mind," Cheryl-Ann said cheerfully.

Little Dothan drained a third of his shake at one draught. "Yuk," he grumbled. "This ain't nothin' like a McDonald's shake."

Cheryl-Ann handed her glass to Little Dothan. "Here, try mine then," she said, smiling at Hartland.

"It's the same, gook-brain," said Little Dothan. He picked up his spoon and cracked her on the skull.

Cheryl-Ann winced. "I was only trying to make a joke," she said, sniffling once. She blinked her eyes, turned and flipped through a People magazine as she sipped her milkshake.

Little Dothan discarded his straw and drank from the glass. He started replaying the highlights of the sci-fi cartoon and after a while his father came into the room. "Are you going to answer a few letters this afternoon?" he asked in a gentle voice.

"Maybe," said Little Dothan, staring at the TV screen as he rewound the tape. "If I get around to it."

Little Dothan's father gave Hartland a small embarrassed smile.

"A children's hospital phoned and asked if you could come talk to the kids." It occurred to Hartland that

everyone else in Little Dothan's family spoke in an ordinary way, using standard grammar. Little Dothan was the only one with a Southern accent.

"It'd be good publicity," said the father encouragingly. "You might sell a few records."

"Yeah!" spurted Little Dothan, keeping his eye on the television. "Sell a few records!" Hartland had seen the box of records, of Little Dothan preaching in Las Vegas.

Little Dothan's father frowned and slowly walked to the door. "Let me know what you decide," he said as he left the room.

"It's too bad when you gotta be your father's keeper," said Little Dothan quietly and clearly. Cheryl-Ann tched her tongue.

"Watch this," said Little Dothan, suddenly nervous.

<u>One of the super heroes, Tordon, a hunky rockstar whose means of transport is his electric guitar, plays a blistering solo until the guitar begins to smoke. Red flames erupt from the guitar's body and Tordon is launched into black space where he glides past stars and floating debris, fingers scurrying over the fretboard as he plays. Eventually a small planet comes into view and in the next shot he lands firmly on his feet at the mouth of a cave. The cave is guarded by a three-headed dog, all three heads snapping and snarling.</u>

<u>Taking his guitar pick from his belt, Tordon plays</u>

slow sensual lines, swaying the neck of the guitar before the dog like a snake-charmer's horn. Coloured laser lights float from the strings and intertwine. The dog's three heads grow heavy as it becomes mesmerized by the floating neonmusic until the cords of musiclight wind themselves insidiously around the three necks. As Tordon continues to play the laser strings tauten, strangling the dog who slumps to the ground in a three-headed heap. Tordon slings his guitar over his back and leaps into the black hole.

After a while Little Dothan left to go help his parents answer the letters to his advice column. Hartland sat thinking about his father. It was hard for him to believe Little Dothan was responsible for his'. . . recovery. Maybe his faith-healing was only half-successful because he's only a beginner in the trade.

He stood up and gazed out the window. It was a sulky gray day. Black streaks drooped like mascara tears from the windowledge corners on the graystone building across the street. The permanent stains and murky sky gave the illusion of a rainy day.

Cheryl-Ann came and stood beside him at the window.

"I miss my friends a lot, staying in hotels like this. Dothan likes it better on the road I think. He feels more lonesome at home because he has no real friends. Nobody his own age at least. Just the TV

preachers like Washington Jefferson and Hubert T. Spence who invite him onto their shows. And Mr. Falwell. They treat him like a novelty the way Johnny Carson used to treat that Black boy whose growth was stunted because of his glands."

Hartland looked at her silver-yellow hair, tied at the back in a simple ponytail.

"M-mm--y little sister has hair j-just like yours," he said. He forced himself to breathe slowly and smoothly, feeling that he was on the verge of a wheezing attack.

"She must feel lucky to have a brother like you," said Cheryl-Ann. "Do you get along?"

"I dd--on't know, she n-n--ever--we d-don't really t-talk m-much." He took a long slow breath. His lungs were shrinking balloons that held less and less air as they became smaller and smaller. Instinctively he patted his pocket for his inhaler but it had run out days ago.

"How did your b-brother learn to t-tt--alk like that?" His chest tickled as he breathed in. "The r-r-rest of you t-talk n-normal."

"He was born that way. As long as I remember he talked like he came from Dixie." She turned and looked at Hartland who was wishing he could just disappear and not have to talk anymore. "Oh he's not putting it on just to sound like a real evangelist or anything. That's just

. . . the way he talks."

"Are you v-v--ery g-good f-ff--riends?" he said, spending a blast of stored air. He felt winded like the time a shetland pony kicked him in the stomach as he tried jump-mounting it from behind. It felt as though hairy-legged insects such as snowfleas were scrabbling around inside his lungs. He wished he could get a prescription.

"He's just moody. Other times he's all right. He's really very brilliant."

Little Dothan came back into the room holding a sheet of paper.

"Here Hartland, run through this one time. We're gonna get ya to give a testimony tonight. You'll be a star! Go ahead, read through it. If you have any trouble tonight with your speech impediment I'll prompt you."

Hartland winced at the words "speech impediment" and automatically checked Cheryl-Ann's eyes.

He took the paper and looked at it.

"Go on, read it out loud."

"Dothan . . ." said Cheryl-Ann.

"Hush up now, he's gonna read. Get down Hartland!"

"Little Dothan cured m-my f-father. Ever since I was a b-boy my d-dd--ad was lost inside him-s-self. And I yearned for his re-cc-cc--covery. Until the d-day Little D-dothan c-came to t-t-t-town. S-s--since th-th-that

d-day, my f-father has b-been c-c-c, has bee-bb--b~~e~~en, been, m-my f-fa--th-ther bee-bb--"

"Good enough," said Little Dothan. "It'll come out clean as a whistle tonight."

There's going to be trouble as soon as Art leaves, thought Ida as she scanned the field. All through the morning while she carried the loads of boiled wheat Ida could hear the windlike voices of the men with caps debating something excitedly, if that were possible. Whenever Art drove to town the men huddled together in a black flock, leaning on their shovels and droning like an encroaching beeswarm, their capped heads turning as one and staring calculatingly at the housetrailer. Now as Art climbed into the truckcab, stubby pencil and supply list in his shirt pocket, the men buzzed at a feverpitch; when Ida neared the feedtable the talk died like the muffled whimper of a child.

The instant the truck disappeared over the valley hilltop the men in caps flung down their shovels and slipped through the barbed wire fence as though covered in skin that could not snag. Their boots clomped over the stiff blanched stalks of crested wheatgrass as they marched toward the trailer.

Ida turned instantly and fled, the dropped boiler vomitting porridge over the baked earth. Inside the

trailer she locked the windows and doors, snatched Sarah who lay on the couch fanning herself with a broad green leaf--Ida was too frantic to wonder where she'd found the leaf--carried her limp body to the bathroom and lowered her out the window. The girl landed squarely on her feet, not in the least astonished.

Ida slung Sarah over her shoulder and thrashed her way through the knotted trees to the dry riverbed. She heard a shatter of glass and a minute later heavy feet came crashing through the riverbank brush. Ida used her free hand to clutch at small trees and hanks of grass on the hillside, panting as she scrambled to the top; the men in caps strode behind her up the hill, swinging their arms briskly. Ida stumbled over a stone that rolled, sliding her a few feet back down the hill. A gang of men with caps lunged at her feet.

All at once the green pickup came racing down the valley road, a gray plume of dust funnelling out behind it.

The men with caps froze. Then they scattered, some taking big leaping steps down the hill, others clambering up over the hilltop into the flat fields above. A confused group rushed madly from the river trees right into the path of the truck.

Art skidded to a stop and jumped out, meeting each man with two hooking punches, one left, one right. The

men stood with their arms at their sides. Soon a line formed beside the truck. Each man received his two blows without argument then walked contritely back to the field, picked up his shovel and resumed work. Even those who had panicked and run and hid in the Indian Reserve forest turned back, walked down the hill, across the riverbed and into the lineup of men with caps to be punished. Soon they were all quietly working.

Ida huddled with Sarah on the hillside until long after the last man had returned to the field. As the sun began to set, casting long shadows across the valley floor, she sneaked down the hill, up the riverbank through the trees and slipped silently into the trailer where Art had already swept up the glass from the front door and replaced it with cardboard from a motor oil case.

Art and Ida sat at the kitchen table drinking coffee. Art's knuckles were swollen, crosshatched with red scratches.

A papery knock, like sanding blocks clapped together, came from the front door. Art's eyebrows creased; he stood and left the room. Ida peeked around the kitchen curtain to see one of the men in caps on the step. He remained still as a scarecrow when Art opened the door, but it sounded like they were having some sort of conversation. The man's face under the dirty tweed brim was shadowed with field dirt and whiskers; Ida couldn't see his lips move with the garbled rumble of his speech.

"What?" said Art, pointing. "Out there?"

The man leaned slightly, craning to see inside the trailer as Art's eyes squinted at the field. Ida left the window and went to the living room where Sarah reclined wearily on the couch. Gray shadows ringed her eyes. Ida wound the girl's hair into a thick sheaf--it was losing its bounce--and held it pinned under the centre of her back as she lifted the limp body. The child no longer smelled of perfume. Ida closed the porch door with her

foot, shutting out the speech of the man in the cap: the wheezing sigh of an old abandoned granary.

Art came into the trailer and stood outside Ida's room as she tucked Sarah into bed. He nodded towards the door and said, "Looks like the men've hit some sort of problem."

Ida followed Art to the field, the man in the cap shadowing them with long baggy-pantlegged strides.

The men spaded the earth with the rhythm of a railway handcart, stomping on the shovel blades with their felt boots and dumping the dry dirt in heaps. The first field was nearly done, squared like the map on the Wheat Pool calendar. Art led Ida across the trenches, her small feet sinking into the loose soil then drumming on the wooden planks laid over the wider ditches until they arrived at a scattered mound of goods.

Faces dark under tweed brims, a crew of men with caps rose from an immense caved-in mouth lugging a totem pole, mobile blood transfusion equipment, dogsled harness, a sourdough pouch, a peace pipe, slotted snow-glasses, insulin tubes, an ice auger, toques and mukluks, RNWMP badges, a whale-oil lamp, a travois, a telephone, a harpoon, a skatelace-puller, a toboggan and a completely worn-out hockey stick. Behind followed more men with caps bearing G.I. Joes and Barbie Dolls, rollerskates, pogo-sticks, hoolahoops, skateboards, blackwork legirons, a

space suit, cottonseeds, a white hood, pigskins, a coon-tail cap, a kite, a key, a cherry tree, Cornflakes, napalm cartridges, a lantern and thousands of red coats, a sherriff's star and sixguns, baseball bats, two chrysanthemum atomizers\. . .

Warren Putnam angle-parked his station wagon in front of Palliser Hardware store. It was a town where he knew nobody—and nobody knew him. He entered the store and walked directly to a gun cabinet. A bald man in a carpentry apron looked him up and down and went to the case. The man took a spiral nail from the apron pocket and picked at the dirt under his fingernails.

"Something for alligators?"

Warren jerked his head up. "Ewagatows?" The man met his glance sternly, then broke into a grin.

"You never know these days. My wife turned on the tap yesterday and out came a school of little yellow and blue fish. I put a filter on the tap after that. Wanna buy a filter?"

Warren looked at the waterfilter display then turned back to the guns.

"What's the pwice on that Winchestew wifoe?"

Ida got up in the middle of the night to check on Sarah--the girl had been sleepwalking lately; each time Ida found her on her way to the barn--and had found the little bed empty. Armed with a broom--she'd had to kick and kick at an old vulture she'd found dozing in the yard the day before until it finally got up and flapped away--she walked out into the yard.

The men could still be heard working, finishing up the trenches. There was only a tiny fingernail of a moon, but as Ida neared the barn she spotted a yellow crack between the halves of the big sliding door.

Cool dry air met Ida's nostrils in the barn; she thought of the poor old milk-cow whose nostrils had lately been crusted with blood because of the drought. The black rafters and stallboards swallowed the slow light of the single bulb, a magnet for giant moths and many-legged crawlers. All the animals were awake. The pigs pressed their snouts against the stall rails, watching as Ida passed their pens; without a sound they shifted from one corner to the other, following her with their little red eyes. The goat stood quietly, eyes wide open; the

cow, head cranked stiffly around, eyed Ida as she walked to the end of the barn. Finally she turned and gave a long lick to a painted metal hinge on her stall door.

Sarah was crouching in the mule's stall where the mother mule lay sick on her side. Beside her the new colt stood up straight and alert on brittle legs. The young animal stared intensely at Ida.

Sarah pushed a dry wisp of hair from her eyes and turned to the baby. With calm sleepwalker steadfastness, she pulled the top from a baby bottle that had nursed the orphaned billy goat. She set the rubber teat on the stone floor, placed the open bottle under the belly of the newborn mule and began squeezing the baby dugs in her wrinkled hands. The colt stood as if its hooves were nailed to the floor, one hind leg jerking occasionally as though itching to kick, bright eyes darting around like hot flies, always lighting again on Ida. A quiver rose through its shoulders and neck. Sarah rocked on her heels with the grasping-fist rhythm, squeezing harder, one teat then the other, forward-and-back rocking on square little feet, her worn face blank in the pale white light. A watery dribble trickled through the fingers of her right hand, ceasing before she had time to aim the flow, squeezing, pulling. The baby mule shuddered, eyes rolled back . . . rocking . . . hind legs half-collapsed then quickly recovered; it tossed its head. Sarah patted its rump, not

missing a milkbeat. The baby animal's eyelids rested heavily over the big brown marbles, nostrils flaring open-shut with its quick breath. Sarah rocking, pulling, squeezing--left, right hand, baby mule standing silently weary-eyed, pushing but not knowing where, rocking, breath slowing gradually long, hard, full, chest swelling, sinking, trance-gaze fixed on Ida; Sarah rocks, squeezes, mule quicktaps hoof on floor . . .

Next to Sarah lies the mother; an eyeball glimmers cold white. The animal's limbs lay heavy on the stone floor, coarse brown fetlock-hair matted with sweat. Ida hugs her shoulders and rubs the gooseflesh on her arms. The mule's abdomen is bloated.

The baby mule twitches its ear and gasps. Spurt--a healthy white stream squirts from one teat, then the other, running in smooth shots as Sarah pulls, aiming the milk into the baby bottle's narrow mouth. The young mule breathes in gulps as its milk fills the bottle. When it runs clear white over the glass sides, Sarah releases the colt who totters on its hooves as if suddenly awakened.

Sarah grips the bottle in her liver-spotted hands and fastens on the nipple. She rubs the soft muzzle of the mother mule, soothing her, then quickly pokes the rubbery teat into the animal's mouth. The mule draws weakly, slowly sucking the milk of its offspring, while Sarah massages the animal's belly and ribs and pats its out-

stretched flanks. The mule chokes and coughs, sputtering milk over Sarah's fingers. Sarah removes the bottle, allows the mother to swallow, then places the nipple back in its mouth: Wide-eyed now, the mule sucks vigorously, quickly draining the bottle.

Suddenly it lurches and tries to hoist itself up, but promptly falls back on its side. Sarah strokes the mule's head and the animal rubs its muzzle along the top of her hand, then settles into a calm sleep.

"If you figure I'm going to read this false testimony . . ."

Hartland stood behind a speaker cabinet and watched Little Dothan give directions to the stage hands preparing for his evening show. Tonight's extravaganza was to take place in a football stadium, and featured not only Little Dothan and his family, but a trio of Black women gospel singers backed up on the organ by Booker T., from Booker T. and the MGs. Several guests were expected, including a local boys' choir and a shirt-tail cousin of either Pat Boone or Johnny Cash, no one was sure.

"If you want me to tell a big falsehood about my own father just so you can get rich . . ."

He looked again at the prepared script. There was no way he could read it smoothly even when nobody was around, let alone in front of hundreds, maybe thousands, of people. If what Little Dothan wanted him to say were true it might be possible. He had always been able to read with no trouble; he only had difficulty in ordinary conversation. But to say his father was cured when really all that had happened was that some other man had taken

over his body . . . It made his throat constrict whenever he tried to speak the words.

Hartland helped set up the stage. Little Dothan's father told Hartland that Little Dothan had been appearing before larger and larger crowds, except for the Church of the Select Majority, which was an essential engagement because its followers were vocal and had influence with the press. Hartland's chest was fine as long as he didn't ask any questions so he just nodded his head.

There's just no way I can read this . . . bullshit, he thought as showtime approached. He got busy setting up chairs on the playing field to take his mind off of the testimony.

Just before Little Dothan went to his trailer to change, he told Hartland, "I'm gonna feel out the congregation to decide when to hit 'em with the testimony. I might get you on right near the top. When you see me pull on my ear like this, that'll be your cue that you're on in five minutes."

Hartland looked around for Cheryl-Ann but couldn't spot her anywhere. He jumped off the stage and walked across the artificial turf to the bleachers. Stationed throughout were sign language interpreters who were to repeat the sermon, the lyrics of the hymns and Little Dothan's jokes for the hard of hearing. He kept his mind occupied by watching one of the interpreters, a

young woman, converse with someone in the front row. He looked at his hands. How comforting it seemed never to have to talk, just to move one's fingers around.

A local minister took the stage and tapped the microphone.

"If you think I'm gonna disgrace my father . . ." Hartland muttered between chestwheezes. "If you think I'm gonna sin by telling these good people a bunch of . . ." His throat tightened and he had to stop grumbling in order to catch his breath. He wished he had his inhaler again. He concentrated on the way the young woman interpreted the minister's introduction of Little Dothan.

". . . one of the most charismatic and entertaining preachers to come out of today's evangelical movement . . ." The sound, amplified through several columns of speakers stacked like black coffins on the playing field, reverberated off a row of brick apartment buildings across the street. The interpreter rolled her eyes as feedback shrilled from the speakers. Smiling, she shrugged and pointed to the speaker cabinets, then put the two first fingers of her right hand to her mouth and mimed whistling while wearing a pained expression and holding her left ear. High-pitched titters came from the people surrounding Hartland: old people, high school kids, middle-aged men and women with hearing aids, one boy whose ears were

no more than wrinkled curls of flesh.

". . . please give a warm welcome to--Little Dothan!" boomed the minister's voice.

The translator placed the fingertips of her right hand to her lips as though blowing heat onto them, then moved her hand forward with its five fingers spread. She held the three middle fingers in a W-shape and drew her hand to her body in a welcoming motion, pointed her thumbs and forefingers like sixguns to make L's and moved the two hands closer to one another in front of her chest. Next she strung together a series of small one-handed signs. Hartland made out the shapes of the letters d-o-t and surmised that "Dothan" was being spelled. Enthusiastically he applauded along with the others. He looked excitedly around the group and exchanged nods with an elderly man beside him who gave a two-fingered salute. Hartland happily returned the "Hello" gesture, missing Little Dothan's first few words. The translator signed, ". . . thank you all for coming."

The sign language felt perfectly normal to Hartland, as though he had known it all along and was merely a little rusty.

Whenever he thought of the testimony his throat tightened a little more. The trouble was, he felt an obligation to Little Dothan. The kid had, after all, woken his father out of the stupor he was in. Hartland

was growing dizzy. "Lord, help me out of this," he prayed.

"I think tonight we'll all have lots of fun and we may even save a few souls too." Hartland leaned forward in his seat as he watched the interpreter. "I know quite a few of you've come a long distance to be with us tonight and we're gonna try to keep the show moving so's you can all get home before curfew. We've got a pretty good lineup for you." A list of the show's guests followed. When the renowned mime Carlitos was mentioned Hartland nearly stood in his chair. He clapped enthusiastically, smiling around at his deaf friends.

Carlitos was a small black-haired man whose eardrums had been blown out when he was a boy in Colombia. A paint factory had exploded near where Carlitos lived, killing the rest of his family. Since then he had devoted his life to entertaining the deaf; his mimed performances of popular biblical scenes such as Christ's passion and the loading of the ark touched the hearts of everyone with their simple compassion. Though right now Hartland couldn't remember how he knew this.

"We're going to open tonight's service with a hymn: 'Safe in the Shadow of the--'" Suddenly the interpreter clapped her hands to her ears. Laughing, she repeated her earlier series of gestures, showing how the speakers were emitting a whistling sound. "Who let the

bats loose?" she asked, smiling. A few of the deaf people smiled, but most, like Hartland, sat stonefaced. He couldn't remember what sort of sound bats made. Then he realized the joke was not the interpreter's but Little Dothan's. He spotted Little Dothan on the stage; his scalp shone under the lights as though he were balding. This was the first time he had looked at the stage since the service began.

Little Dothan tugged theatrically on his earlobe.

His heartrate doubled. He looked around the stadium. Girls in Brownie outfits were mounting the steps with tambourines in their hands. People in the higher seats had started to move their lips. Three rows of boys in smart white suits stood on the stage, their pink mouths perfect round O's that opened and closed in unison. The interpreter was translating the lyrics into sign language:

> I trust in Him,
> I trust in Him,
> My fortress and my tower.

He found himself standing. He ran his fingers through his hair and scratched his scalp. He wobbled his jaw back and forth. When he saw the collection coming he dipped into his pocket for a quarter and dropped it silently into a tambourine. His heart slowed to a regular beat. He stepped carefully over feet and purses to the aisle and watched the interpreter lead the group

through a few bars:

> From fears and phantoms of the night,
> From foes about my way . . .

Then, unsurprised that his feet made no sound, he walked down the stairs to the exit.

When Ida awoke it took her a full minute to realize what was different. The sun shone brightly through her window, the grasshopper-cockroaches having eaten all the leaves on the trees; there was no birdsong but it had been that way for weeks. Then she heard the silence: no clanging and pitching noises in the field, the constant grumble of excavation that from this distance had sounded like a host of maggots resolutely gobbling a carcass. She lay back in bed, grateful for a break in the wheat-boiling routine. No more men in caps.

"There now, you take that and you spread it on your toast, like this." Art was talking to Sarah in the kitchen. "In California they practically grow in the streets, these things. Whenever the family was there we always had 'em for lunch, in salads, or in a sandwich with tomato." His speech became garbled as he started to chew.

Ida slowly straightened her legs and arched her back, tensing the sore muscles then letting them go limp. She rubbed her back with her hand. How can he keep talking to her this way? she wondered. The girl was in a complete stupor these days. Sarah had always been one step ahead

of Ida; now she didn't even seem to notice her mother's presence.

"We had a big old chim-pan-zee we used to drag along with us on the road--sort of a mascot I guess you'd say. We'd get this guy--called him Uncle Cal after President Coolidge 'cause he never used to say much--get him to peel our oranges for us, let's say you were ridin' in a train or at the wheel of a eighteen-wheeler. You just chuck him the orange, or banana, he did bananas too; 'Have after 'er, Uncle Cal,' an' he'd tear that ol' skin off slicker'n a greased pig. Course he'd eat about every third one." Art laughed. "Yeah he was quite a character, old Uncle Cal. Quite a man for peelin' oranges."

Ida rolled stiffly out of bed, stepped into her slippers and jeans and pulled a T-shirt over her head.

"Shane!"

In the kitchen Art spooned the mushy green insides of a leathery-skinned avocado into Sarah's mouth and wiped a dab from under her bottom lip. The skin touched by the creamy fruit became moist and supple while the rest of the girl's face remained dry. Folds of skin hung under her eyes, the corners notched with crowsfeet; tiny crinkles creased the edges of her lips as she swallowed. Her hair hung flat and stringy down the sides of her head.

"Morning, morning!" said Art. "How's the boss

today?" Ida acknowledged Art's grin with a tired smile.

"Shane!"

Sarah hunched over the kitchen table, staring at nothing. Two dry creases cut the parched skin from the corners of her mouth down to her chin. Three horizontal lines crossed her forehead.

Ida picked up the greasy avocado stone and rolled it in the pit of her hand.

"Found it hangin' on a twig down by the spring," said Art. "Musta grown up since the insects got their fill and moved on. And you better get on down by that berry patch. You got yourself a whole mess o' ripe juicy ones there probably last all winter."

Ida turned to the sink, ran water into a small preserve jar and dropped in the avocado seed. Absently she licked her fingers. She went to the cupboard and took out two large icecream pails.

"You'll need bigger containers than that," guffawed Art. "You'll need a truck!"

Ida stroked Sarah's hair. It was as brittle as August quackgrass. Dewy blue eyes stared like taxidermist's beads from the potato-hided face; her hands lay folded on her sagging belly, thumbs idly twiddling.

The leafless saskatoon branches bowed like worn fieldhands; grape-sized balls hung, raisin-wrinkled and

succulent, from the drooping boughs. She plucked a berry and cautiously bit through the soft pulp, bursting a fruity wine fountain that scratched pleasantly as it rolled down her throat. It was the sweetest, most exquisite taste she had ever experienced.

Ida picked the plump saskatoon-raisins until the pails were full, then tried to retrace her path out of the bluff. The trees, thick as a hedge, blocked her view of the valley hill, the field, the barn. The glaring sun, straight above, informed her only that it was roughly dinnertime. If only the rooster would crow she'd have an idea where home was. She wandered through the trees, feeling she was in someone else's dream. Eventually she could see the hill where knobby young cactuses reached crooked arms out from the hillside.

What had once been the spring was now large enough to drive a combine into; the blackness inside flared out into a great cavernous stomach. A breeze whispered from the cave's insides, at once hot and cold on Ida's cheeks. Water-sanded rock lined ceiling and walls like seamless tile beneath the gray prairie sod. A pair of stone icicles stood out in the darkness like lynx teeth, but beyond a short distance all faded into black.

Ida took a few steps, invited by the cool-hot breeze. The smooth stone had a feeling of sacred heaviness under her rubber-soled feet. She found herself

always able to see an arm's length ahead; she padded alongside the left wall where a mural in dull earthpaints depicted scenes of men, women and children actively planting, reaping, battling and reproducing. How long has this been here? she wondered.

Ida sl'd her hand lightly over the history and squeezed through two stalactite-stalagmite pairs that nearly joined ceiling to floor. She continued to run her hand over the flat paint as she entered a huge, seemingly ceilingless hall. It's big as a church in here, she thought. The hills are hollow.

Something on the wall was pasty to Ida's touch. She rolled it between her fingers and looked at the black smear. Batshit. The wall-paintings grew thicker with distorting black splotches which bearded babies and turned young into old. Within a few feet the wall had become black as charcoal.

Ida walked on, conscious of hundreds, thousands of bats hanging overhead, now and then a flapping of wings. The soft breeze which she had felt all along grew no stronger as she approached the dark centre, but the hot and cold breaths became sharper. Broiling one instant in a stubblefire, she shuddered the next, coatless in a January snowfield. There was no in-between, the air currents switching with each step, forcing Ida to quicken her pace as she craved first heat then cold, trotting

along through an invisible quilt-grid of torrid and glacial airshafts, running finally, choking, lungs freezing, wheezing, whimpering silently as airblocks whizzed at her cold-hot-cold.

The instant it occurred to her to turn and run back, the stone floor sloped keenly, pitching her headlong into a round-bottomed pit. When her eyes adjusted Ida saw that the pit's walls, or wall, for there were no corners, curved upwards to a narrow brim. She was at the bottom of an eggtimer, the sides smooth as curling ice. The air, at least, was neutral here.

So this is how I will die, she thought.

How long did hunger strikers last? They went blind first, she knew. She slid along on her backside to the other side of the bowl. It looked exactly the same. Ida shut her eyes and tried to breathe calmly. Cold hands seemed to squeeze her by the throat. Better to be blind than to end her days staring at this--seamlessness.

Just then a deep boom rumbled off the walls. Echo after echo followed, distorting the first noise--it could have been a pebble falling somewhere--into a sound like "BOO-BOO." For an instant there was silence then the noise began again, throwing itself back and forth off the walls of the stone cavern: "BOO-BOO, BOO-BOO-BOO."

The bats flew around in a frenzy and swooped down into the stone belly where Ida cringed, arms over her

head. She tried to scream, unable even to squeak, though the thought reverberated madly in her head, spliced with the booming cave-echo.

When the noise sounded again it was closer. What was being echoed was words, too muddy to decipher. Eventually the calls ceased and Ida lay in silence.

In a few minutes a light clipped the rim of Ida's stone bowl. Echoed footsteps resounded, the clamour growing into the same sound as before: "BOO-BOO." The light bounced off the ceiling, irritating the bats who took to the air and whirled about in dense flurries. The calls began again, a confused stew of garbled words no more intelligible than the bark of a dog.

A rope flew across the pit-mouth obviously hooked onto something--a stalagmite, probably--and was pulled taut. A minute later Art walked out onto the rope, firmfooted as if on solid ground. He stood still until the swooping bats disappeared then said in a hushed voice, "Just thought you'd drop in, I see." He chuckled. "Well don't worry, we'll get you out quicker'n you can say Huckleberry Finn." Art slipped a coil of rope from his shoulder, tied it to the middle of the tightrope and climbed down.

He crouched in front of Ida and looked seriously into her eyes. "So, you okay?" he asked. She nodded. Art swallowed and scratched a fingernail on the stone wall.

"I guess it must've been a pretty scary experience for you. I've been wondering how safe it was just leaving this place open with no signs or anything. We'll have to put up some sort of barricade." He paused and Ida nodded. "Paintings are really something though." Ida nodded again and Art looked up into the dark circle overhead, cut in two by the stiff rope. "It's--quiet!" he stage-whispered. He sat down beside her, his hand resting lightly alongside hers.

"Guess I should tell you about my good news. I found my family. Yep, I was pretty well busting with it last time I came back from town but well, there's been so much going on and all. Got ahold of 'em finally in Kansas City. I guess Mom finally snared old Dad. I think she's got him hobbled pretty good this time.

"Well I guess you're about dyin' to get outta here." He tied a fixed loop at the end of the rope.

"Now when I give you the signal from up top, you step into this here hole and let it catch under your arms." He tugged on the dangling line, looking up at the knot tying it to the tightrope. "I hope it won't be an imposition if they come and visit for a day or two." His back was to Ida. "Y'know they've heard a lot about you. Mom's kinda tough to crack I guess, but everybody likes Pop." He fiddled with the rope, swirling it so that it wound up on its own twist. It was the first time Ida had seen him

act nervous. "I told them I might be married by the time they got here." He turned and looked Ida full in the face.

"How would you feel about that?"

He woke up one day and couldn't remember. He was in a dirty old station wagon parked next to a Texaco and all around there was nothing but sloughs and bush and a motorhome with a TV satellite dish. There was a rifle and a box of bullets lying next to him.

"What did I go and do now--go off on a huntin' trip and steal the Indian's car?" He grunted his way over the seats and started the engine. "Don't even like huntin'."

"One thing fo' sho'--hyuk!--this auto-mo-byle's missin'."

He pulled in front of the pumps. "Where is this place?" he yelled at the man who came out to the car.

The service station attendent looked at him through small eyes. "It's here."

"I can see that, son, but where is it?" He raised his voice in case the man couldn't hear properly.

"It's the same place you are," shouted the man into his ear. "What do you want, gas?"

He dug in his trousers pockets and pulled out what felt like money but had a bunch of different colours on it so you could tell it apart. "You take this?" he said.

The gas jockey shrugged and said, "Sure, why not?"

Then he remembered.

Ida took her big roastpan from the cupboard and tried to gauge if three chickens would fit. The oven preheated while she washed the chickens (already plucked and gutted) and made a stuffing of dried breadcubes and chopped onion. She would have to do without the celery and other groceries on the list she had given Art when he went to town, he was just taking too long getting back. In the cupboard she found a crisp bag of walnuts rolled up in a rubber band; she chopped them up along with some chickenhearts from the freezer. She stuffed the birds, rubbed chickenstock over their skin and settled them into a bed of onion and water, then tipped their bums up again and poked a few dried saskatoon berries into the dressing.

"Now Janet, Bob is like a brother to me, even though we've had our differences. If you really believe I knew all along those oil shares were a hoax . . ."

She had spent all the previous day baking saskatoon pies but there were thousands of berries left over, not counting those still drooping from the trees. As well as pies she had baked six dozen oatmeal cookies, four dozen buttertarts, trays of brownies and nanaimo bars, an

angelfood cake. And a fruitcake.

It felt like she was preparing a pretend tea party for imaginary guests.

The old wringer washer had groaned like a graintruck in super low as the clothing sloshed back and forth. Every piece of cloth in the house had been washed--towels, blankets, pillowcases, curtains, altered dresses of Ida's, special outfits of Sarah's, even an old crocheted doily which, after twenty years of off-and-on unravelling the stitches and starting over, she had finally become satisfied with and completed. The sagging clothesline sprang back to semi-life as Ida folded the clothes and laid them neatly in a cardboard apple box. She put the clothespins in a cut-down bleach bottle. Heavy bedclothes sprawled over fencewire and barren lilac branches. One white sheet--the one that would go on the nuptial bed--had worn so thin in the centre she was able to see the silhouette of the henhouse through it. She ripped it up the middle and joined the strong outside edges on the sewing machine. It would wear another couple of years this way.

Sarah went doddering past the kitchen window, hunched over like a little old monkey. Sag-jowled and drop-bellied, she hugged her bony forearms as she shuffled across the yard, socks bunched at the ankles below the hem of her cotton sackdress. Ida decided to let the girl play

for a few more hours before she cleaned her up and dressed her prettily for the wedding.

"Brian, you know I want to believe what you're telling me . . ."

"Believe me then."

"It's just that . . . How do you explain what Bob's secretary saw?"

"Janet who are you going to believe, your own brother or some . . . vocational school dropout?"

"You of course."

Ida dusted every surface in the trailer, leaving a fresh lemon scent in the air. She gently wiped away grease spots on the walls with a small brown sponge. It thrilled her to think of Art's mother scrutinizing her home, starchily running a gloved finger along windowsills and baseboards and making apologetic little remarks like, "Oh I see, these are your good dishes."

She had never had a mother-in-law before. James's mother was a Buffalo Plains schoolteacher, an English warbride considered hoity-toity because she carried her cigarettes--tailor-made--in a mother-of-pearl case, and because she persisted in speaking like a grammarian in casual conversation. Ida recalled her strict rote-teaching of important dates in British History in the seventh grade--Norman Invasion: 1066; Magna Carta: 1215--and her crisp smoke-resonant voice reading Sir Walter Scott's

The Lady of the Lake. A year later she and James's father were killed in a tragic car pile-up near Maple Creek during a Victoria Day snowstorm.

There would be no maid of honour. Ida had asked two schoolmates to be her bridesmaids when she married James. Marge Fraser had since died of a lung problem caused by inhaling asbestos insulation fibres; Dell Cabot, Ida was told, had developed a morphine dependency after her vericose veins were stripped and was now wasting away in a Vancouver rehabilitation hospital.

Apart from them and the older women who used to visit her mother while she was still alive, Ida had never had any friends. Her family had lived seventeen miles northeast of Buffalo Plains in the scrubby region known as the North Stoney, so she only saw people her own age at school, and then only when the roads were dry or completely snowed-in so they could be traversed by cutter.

She had grown fond of James during the shy summers of her adolescence when he used to come to cut hay and break her father's horses. After they married they had lived more or less in isolation in the valley, even more so after the rapidly-successive deaths of her parents, who had married late. She had seen fewer and fewer of the townspeople following the henhouse incident, until recently, no one but Sarah and Art.

Ida stood on the porch step and scouted the valley

for Sarah. The wedding was to begin at four o'clock, and soon she would have to bathe the girl and tie ribbons in her hair. I should have brought her in earlier, she thought.

The girl had been wandering around a lot lately, mostly to the barn, but sometimes Ida wasn't sure where she went. Sarah slept so much during the daytime--on the floor of the truck cab, on a quiet piece of ground--that Ida was never certain whether she was moving about in a waking state or walking in a daysleep. She went sleep-walking nearly every night, rising from her bed and treading creakily to the door and out into the night as if answering a call. Day or night, her face always wore the same expression of inner absorption.

Kids find it tough sitting still at weddings anyway, thought Ida.

It was a shame Hartland couldn't be there to see the ceremony, but at the same time Ida couldn't help being relieved that he was away. Despite his affection for Art, all of his confused feelings that had been stewing ever since Warren came into the house--his jealousy, his protectiveness towards his father--could boil over into an ugly scene.

Ida went to her bedroom. She had been over it countless times, making sure everything was in just the right place. The bed was made smooth and tight, while not

too stiff; the two petit point pictures, depicting a pair of lovers from Marie Antoinette's court, hung perfectly square with one another in a way that would have pleased even James's discerning geometrical eye. The curtains stood crisp-pressed, each pleat prim as a Sunday school dress; the dresser-top, neatly feminine, contained dainty bottles and jars arranged over the crocheted doily; and Sarah's cumbersome wooden bed had been dragged out to the junkpile, her mother believing her old enough to sleep on the kitchen cot. Yet something was wrong. Ida nervously squeezed a bulb of perfume into the air.

She went to a bottom drawer of the dresser (even it was in perfect order, three empty drawers ready to be filled with Art's shirts and socks and undershorts, until now stuffed in the living room hassock) and pulled it all the way out onto the floor. Under the drawer space, on the white linoleum itself, was James's Sports Day picture. Ida winced as balls of gray fluff skittered to dark corners when she lifted out the photograph. She blew the dust off the glass. It was uncanny. The two men were identical as two eggs, except for the blood-smear in Art's eye. If not for the fact that Ida had aged while Art resembled James at thirty, a hidden camera tonight would capture this room as it was fourteen years ago.

That was it. Ida looked round the bedroom. With Sarah's bed gone it was exactly as it had been when James

last came to her. There was nothing she could do--the room was too narrow to be arranged any other way. The dresser had to go at the foot of the bed and the bed had to stay where it was to allow the door to swing open. Besides, it was too late to start thinking of such things. Ida set the photograph in its hiding spot and slid the drawer back in place.

She couldn't see Sarah from the porch step so she walked to the barn and peeked into the stalls. The animals regarded her silently as if holding their breath till she passed. The donkey colt stood sturdily beside her mother whose healthy brown gaze followed Ida as she glanced into the manger Art had filled with oats that morning.

Ida returned to the housetraller. Everything had a purple tint for a minute as her eyes adjusted from the glaring sunlight. She had gone to the well in the relative cool of early morning and filled every vessel in the house. Now she poured pails and jars of water into the copper boiler and started to heat it for a bath. She had hoped to wash Sarah in the same water but it was getting late. If the girl showed up at all she would get a sponge bath and that would have to do.

While water-droplets spat on the stove burners, Ida laid out the items of her trousseau on her bedspread: lacy underthings, patterned pantyhose she'd been saving in the

package for seven years, a made-over suit of peach linen, a single string of cultured pearls James had given her for her first Mother's Day, the slim-braceleted gold watch she never wore, slingback sandals, out-of-style, it was true, but which Ida had dyed bone to match the small purse she had chosen.

She pulled off her jeans and T-shirt and sat before the dresser mirror. They wouldn't have to leave the house before three-thirty, which gave her over an hour and a half. She began to brush her hair. She had dyed and set it the night before and would give it a light spray just before leaving today, but for the moment she just felt like brushing the brown curls and watching her face in the mirror.

Every time she saw her reflection she had to remind herself this was her face. If she looked hard and long into the eyes she could see herself deep inside like the first glimmer of Art's searchlight in the hillside cave. The eyes and mouth were the closed features of a woman who didn't live on her face. She wasn't sure where she lived, really. If she let it go for, say, a month, she doubted she would ever remember who this person was in the glass. Soon it would be too great an effort.

Ida settled into the tub slowly and luxuriously, tingling as the steamy water touched her skin. She leaned her head and shoulders back on the cool enamel and

stretched her limbs out in front of her, feeling the muscles loosen all the way up. The callouses on her feet burned deliciously, her calves and thighs melted.

She examined her body in the hot water. Her thighs were still slim and she had only a little mamma's belly. She was certain she could still fit into the white bride's dress she wore for James. She had saved it, packed in mothballs in a trunk underneath the bed, to wear one year on their anniversary.

Art would be wearing James's charcoal wedding suit. Ida had turned James's entire wardrobe over to him shortly after he arrived wearing James's pyjamas. After all, they were the same size: chest, waist, inseem. The two side-by-side--that would be a sight. Only their stances and the meanings in their eyes would distinguish them. Art had the look of an ex-marine, a land-developer, a quarterback; James: a small city newspaper reporter, a farm-raised prairie schoolteacher. Ida had watched James in action with men like Art: James standing back and listening, letting the other man do the talking, allowing the other man to feel in control, which sometimes was the case. Ida feared that Art would dominate James--maybe not the old James, in his youth, but now--Art would swallow James whole.

She prayed that, after all the changes which had occurred, James would not come back. One or the other,

but not both men together under the same roof.

If only my parents had lived long enough to see this day, she thought.

Ida pulled out the tub plug first so she couldn't drown if she happened to slip and strike her head. She stood up and dried one foot and then the other and stepped dripping onto the stubbly hooked bathmat. Once dry, she pushed her arms through the sleeves of a fireweed-coloured bathrobe and went and sat at her dresser mirror. She rubbed a base of white cream into the dry skin of her face, then a fleshtone cream that evened out the sunburned redness of her nose, the tired veins under her eyes; a faint blush on each cheek and a thin dark line encircling her eyelids.

There was a shadow of fine hairs on her upper lip. The soft whiskers could hardly be called a moustache. Ida leaned close to her reflection, puckering and twisting her mouth from side to side.

She dressed quickly and went to the kitchen where she searched through the cupboards until she found a box of green waxbars Hartland had used on his skis. Also inside the box were a window-scraper and a small sterno stove. Ida recalled using the sternoheat one winter day a dozen years earlier to thaw a sprayer boom where Hartland had stuck the tip of his tongue.

Once in springtime when he was following toothpick

boatraces in runoff gullies, Hartland's rubber boots had lodged so firmly in gumbo that he had to plod home in his socks through bone-numbing fieldmud that clung to his feet like pine resin. Another time he had stabbed himself near the spleen with a jagged stick of red snowfencing that had broken as he climbed overtop. Luckily Ida hadn't had time to worry about Hartland since he left the farm, whether he had slid off any rooves as he had done while reshingling the Buffalo Plains Arena, or pulled anyone into a cistern as he had done saving a drowning kitten in the crawlcellar of Hank Best's Fivepin Palace.

Ida was glad she never had to worry about Sarah doing such foolish things. Today, for example, there would be no time to dress her for the wedding, so she would simply have to fend for herself for a couple of hours. Ida knew the girl could manage.

She turned on a stove burner and set a cast-iron frypan on to heat up.

Ida took one of the waxchunks from the box and was just about to set it in the frying pan when a creepy thought occurred to her. What if Hartland, like Art, had found his father? What if he had somehow got wind of the wedding and was right now dragging his father to Buffalo Plains to disrupt the ceremony?

The warmth radiating from the cast-iron pan vied with the yellow sunheat beaming through the kitchen window.

Ida examined her thumbprint in the green wax.

She was ready for one of Hartland's tongue-tied wheezing rampages. But she could not take James's silent gaze.

The gravelhush of trucktires shshshed from the hillroad.

The red rooster nods in the sunny henpen, chickenwire casting hexagons on his dozing face. A spasm twitches his left thigh. Hens tiptoe jerkily past the sleeping male and dunk their beaks in the waterpan where tiny white feathers float like snowflakes under an onionskin sky. The rooster's head jerks then slowly droops until it lies sideways on his breast. A rubber eyelid quivers. His head rolls across his chest. A passing hen glances and clucks. He sighs in his sleep.

The rooster's tailfeathers lift slightly as if imagining a breeze in the still heat. Left foot raises, claws curled in roosterfist, then stomps in the dirt, claws splayed flat. A fly lights on the spread foot and licks a dungspeck freckle. The rooster's chest swells with a long breath, leg- and wing-muscles loosening; he nuzzles his beak into ~~his~~ collar. The hens have gathered in the opposite corner of the pen to peck under a chicken's tail. White worms bulge from its anus like a mouthful of noodles.

Eyes shut, the rooster takes two sudden sidesteps, twists his head over his right wing while shielding his

face with his left. A raucous squawk chokes in his throat. Snowtires hiss on the road, turn in the fence-gate with a gravelcrunch. The rooster raises his wings and gives a mighty, dustraising flap. Closed eyelids twitch: left, right, left, left, right as though batting out a code. The bird's body lurches and he takes a flying hop backwards, wings folded steeple-like above his head, until he bounces off the twisted fencewire. He lands spinning, opens his eyes and gawps wildly about the henyard.

The rooster clamps his eyes shut, jacks his head up high and scrapes the barnyard air with an ear-rending crow. The gabbling hens freeze, then scatter, shrieking, when the red male gallops toward their corner. He windmills as though headless through the cluster, flaps overtop the honeycomb-wire and darts in a mad beeline for the oncoming truck . . .

Art stood in the doorway staring at Ida. A grin spread across his face.

"You look . . . ravishing."

The road, as it crossed the valley floor, withered out altogether in the middle where floodwater had washed it away. The white crust of the two fields merged into one flat surface, broken only by jagged earthcracks and the empty canal-system, a maze-shaped mass grave. Little orange and grape trees had sprouted between the trenches.

Art, familiar with the road, slowed to ease the old truck over a narrow crevice then gunned the engine to climb the hill.

Ida hadn't been out of the valley since the Agricultural Fair. The jostling of the truck on the pitted road was already making her carsick, but the delicious engine-warmth at her feet reminded her of trucking grain on her father's wheatfarm, well supplied with field tea and her mother's freshbaked cogwheels.

James's black-shined shoe pinned the gas pedal to the floorboard. Ida's eyes followed the sharp crease of the

wool pants, the matching jacket. Art was even wearing James's centennial tiepin. The clumsy tieknot tight around his large throat made him ruggedly handsome. Ida looked at his face, this unmistakable Artface which could never be confused with James's. She stared at the Indian red splotch in Art's right eyeball. When he turned and gave her a questioning glance she pointed to the bloody eye.

"Oh that," said Art as he turned down the sunvisor, "that's where I met up with the wrong end of a rooster-claw."

Oildonkeys bobbed here and there in the treeless fields. Dustdrifts leaned against red snowfences in the ditches. Black clouds were fulminating in the west, but when she looked closer, Ida realized the storm contained no rain--there were no downward streaks in the sky--only rolling billows of dirt. The eastern horizon glowed a dull red, as if beyond the slow incline of the earth's surface the sky itself were ablaze. Ida turned on the radio but with a sizzle, as from distant lightning, it went dead.

Art handled the truck firmly through a sanddrift, correcting a fishtail as though he had driven through snow all his life, then he drove slowly over a section of newly built-up road creeping toward the valley. The road crew

oiling the new all weather road waved their caps and hooted as the truck passed. Art honked and saluted.

Ida saw that a yellow logging machine was cutting its way through the poplar windbreak in Reginald Fort's farmyard, leaving the fallen trees to be strapped onto a heavy flatbed truck. The earmuffed machine-operator smiled and waved and Art waved back.

Art took his foot off the gas, letting the truck drag through a sandskiff as a herd of goats trotted across the road. Ida had never seen this many goats together at one time. The yard was barren. Old tin signs advertising Cat's Paw Shoe Polish and Camel Cigarettes blanketed the low-ceilinged Fort house. Whoever lived there had a TV satellite antenna like Ida's.

A high frostfence topped with coils of barbed wire surrounded the adjoining pasture where Reginald had grazed his horse; inside stood a white silo, its cone open to the elements. Tumbleweeds clung to the interlocked diamonds of the frostfence.

A man wearing a straw hat, ragged bluejeans and an untucked shirt rose from the ditch bearing a stick in his hand as the last of the goats ran bleating across the road. He lunged with one long stride to prevent a straggling kid from running round back of the truck, nearly falling as he went over on the loose heel of his cowboy boot. He aimed kicking the young animal's rump

then turned and smiled at Art, who leaned over his arm out the open truck window. The man's embarrassed grin revealed several missing teeth; those remaining were rotted and brown.

For a second it seemed the men were going to say nothing to each other, then at the same instant they cocked their heads and said, "¿Bien?" The bloodshot-eyed goatherd avoided the gaze of Ida, who waited anxiously for Art to introduce her as his soon-to-be-wife. Art just sat, smiling, one hairy wrist hung over the steering wheel. "Looks like its gonna rain," he said in a put-on gravelly voice, then the two men erupted with vulgar laughter, both now looking in the opposite direction of Ida. The goatherd shook his hand as he laughed, making his index-finger snap. Finally they chuckled and nodded and the man ran off after his goats. He stole a quick glance at Ida as he opened a barbwire gate.

Art looked straight ahead, smiling silently. Eventually he turned partway towards Ida.

"Goats fair about the best of any livestock in this drought," he said as he slipped the truck into gear.

Near Buffalo Plains, Mack dumptrucks hauled loads of gray ore from a clean-scraped pit, blanched by the watchful afternoon sun.

A long gray smoke-cloud caught Ida's eye as they neared the town. The train. Ida scanned the heads in the windows, frustrated by a staggered wall of billboards that blocked her view: Holiday Inn; Daily Non-Stop Flights To Dallas, Denver, Spokane; G.M. Sparkplugs; Kodak Superdisc; Take the Pepsi Challenge; Still The Real Thing; For A Full Year, Till He's Full Grown; Join Mickey And Pluto And Their Pals; Discover Yellowstone Park; Take A Bite Of The Big Apple . . .

A team of three Black men peered into the diesel engine of a snowblower; the dried weeds beside the road were dusted khaki-brown.

"Changes everywhere!" thought Ida as they passed the Buffalo Plains fairgrounds, crammed with wrecked automobiles; the dinosaur hump of the rollerskating arena; the Texaco station, the Gulf station, the Exxon station; McDonalds, Burger King, Wendy's, Dairy Queen; Kentucky Fried Chicken, Tennessee Mountain-Fried Chicken, Louisiana Cajun Gumbo-Fried Chicken; Boston Pizza, Chicago-Style Deep-Dish Pizza, Oklahoma-Style Home-On-The-Range Pizza . . .

Art had to swerve to miss a surfboard-stacked van airbrushed with an immense wave and a winking seagull who said in balloonscript, "DON'T BOTHER KNOCKIN' IF THIS RIG'S A-ROCKIN'!" Kids in shorts wearing headphones and knee- and elbowpads skateboarded and rollerskated over the

new white trainstation sidewalk, charging through the machine-gun spray of the lawn sprinkler. The deep green of the tiny plot stood out amidst the sundrenched whiteness.

The train rolled to a hissing stop as Ida and Art stepped onto the crowded train platform. A solid-bellied man wearing a "ROEBUCK FOR SHERIFF" badge and chewing a toothpick came and stood beside Art. He tipped his head back and held the toothpick in his fingers, looking at it against the blue sky. He ran his tongue slowly between his upper gum and his top lip, then he ran his tongue between his lower gum and his bottom lip, then he sucked his two upper incisors and stuck the wooden toothpick in his mouth.

"He won't budge," he said.

Art kept his eyes on the chugging train. "Aw don't you worry about him. He's a good guy. He'll come around." The man with the badge frowned, eyes hidden behind mirror-lensed glasses.

"He sent his kid out to pour grain in my gastank when I wasn't lookin'."

Art laughed good-naturedly. "Well then I guess you shoulda been lookin'!" He dismissed the man with a pat on the arm and moved toward the edge of the train platform. Ida followed.

At the bottom of a short stairway they sauntered along the railroad ties beside the ditch, yellow with one-eyed asters. Men and women came to the traincar steps. A skinny black porter hustled from one doorway to the next, stomping stepstools into the gravel so they wouldn't slide and grumbling, "Awright, awright, you'd think you were escaping from a burning cathouse."

Men with wide foreheads; men with razor-burned necks; men with stubby fingernails; men with hand-tied-fly-collection fishing hats; men who've never missed a day's work in their lives; men with national park stickers on their windshields; men who've done it this way all their lives and it hasn't hurt them any; men who sharpen their own lawnmower blades; men with aching backs; men who wouldn't go anywhere near a place named Khurramabad if you paid off their mortgages; men who'll just see about that; men whose pills don't do a damn thing anyway; men who elected him and they'll damnwell stand by him, by Jesus; men with tidy basement workshops; men who can't be bothered with all this fool nonsense; men who don't believe a word of it; men who know the exact location of their prostate glands; men who like a little prune juice now and then; men who know a quality-built car when they see one; men who fought and sweated to make their country what it is today and they'll be damned--they'll be God-damned--if

they're going to stand by idly and let a bunch of bloody fools and know-it-alls go ahead and tear it apart; men with callouses that'd never go away no matter how long you soaked them; men with company medical insurance; men who wouldn't let anybody talk to their wife like that; men with campertrailers; men who've never seen their wives' genitals ~~in~~ daylight; men who feel itchy every time they see a man with a moustache.

Women with half a stick of Doublemint chewing gum in their purses; women with an extra pair of shoes in a plastic bag; women who wish they'd never plucked/shaved/waxed; women with rubber gloves; women who treat themselves to a piece of pie at a lunch counter when they're out shopping; women who put a bit of cotton in their brassiere-cups if they go anyplace where it's liable to be chilly; women who remember it as a tickle; women who haven't set foot in a cinema for twenty years; women who dye theirs blonde instead; women who take a good look around the place before they venture to try the food; women who'll never have to worry about going to any fitness class with all the cleaning up after everybody they have to do; women with organized drawers; women who are going to put their foot down; women who hope their children grow up to have ten kids and each one of them is a real terror; women who line public toilet seats with paper; women whose husbands work hard, hard; women who one

thing they won't tolerate is smut; women with a small cigarette ashtray in their purses; women whose children's fathers were regular heartbreakers when they were young; women who can't wait for menopause so they can dispense with all the mess; women who know without trying it would make them gag and that's that; women who just thank their lucky stars when they realize how blessed they are not to have a husband who fools around.

An icecream-cone-shaped woman wearing glasses with little bows moulded into the corners pushed her way to a door and squealed, "Ooooh, I just <u>love</u> seein' all that fresh air!"

"Just leave some for the rest of us to breathe," said a pepper-haired man in maroon-and-tan spectator shoes. "'I just wanna get at them ski-slopes.'"

"What a card!" roared the woman as she aimed for the stairsteps.

Suddenly Art broke into a trot. Ida looked over the heads--Hartland! Stepping carefully in the gravel, she hurried behind Art who grabbed Hartland's hand and gave it a powerful shake. Hartland set a black-hooded birdcage on the ground and the two men slapped each other on the shoulders. Ida waited patiently for Hartland to notice her. Art led Ida forward by the hand.

"Ida Cole, my brother Floyd." He placed Ida's hand

in Hartland's and let out a joyful yelp. In the next doorway a haggard man was trying to step down with three blanketed newborns in his arms. Art gently took the babies from his father and Warren Putnam, looking older and more tired than ever, stepped down onto the gravel.

"Crawk-ca-clew CRE-W-W," crowed the draped cage.

Ida's ears rang. She looked from Art to the young man to the old man to the babies. Slowly she stepped forward, shoved Floyd aside and climbed up into the train-coach. In the first seat, surrounded by diaperbags, ointment jars, washcloths, a little white-haired old woman was just finishing nursing two infants at once. Sarah wiped the moist nipples of her breasts, droopy and flat like trout heads.

Ida moved dizzily into the ladies' washroom and hovered over the basin till her head cleared. When she came out into the blazing sunshine Art was chatting with his mother and father, fussing over the new babies. Everything that was said was repeated in sign language for Floyd.

The train whistled and Art looked around excitedly. He spotted Ida in the doorway. "Ah!" he said, and helped her down from the traincar. The porter snatched up the stool, muttering, "Yeah sure, hurry up so I can wait until you's all made up your mind where it is you're goin'. Don't matter to me. I starvin' just as good if this train

don't never leave this place." The cars slowly shunted into motion.

Art's mother sucked her teeth and glared sourly at the grain elevator and Fred Banting's welding shop. A milky film ringed her quick blue eyes. The sun hovered unblinkingly above. Looking nowhere in particular Art's mother--Ida's daughter--jabbed Art sharply in the ribs with her knuckle and spoke her first words:

¿No me digas que ésta es la mujerzuela que te vas a casar?"

Ida had gobbled through an entire box of Chicken-fingers before she realized Art's family had long ago finished their meal and gone on ahead in the big baby-blue car Fatboy had given them a deal on since they were kin of Art's and might even decide to stay on here and buy it outright since Pop liked a lot of legroom.

In vain Ida searched for a familiar face as they drove to the church. Art turned down a sidestreet to escape the heavy Mainstreet traffic, but immediately stopped and backed up when he saw police using a water-cannon to subdue a mob on rollerskates. Three men stood in the rubbled lot of a demolished building roasting something on sticks over a burning barrel.

Ida started as an errant thistle staggered into the path of the truck, cartwheeling up over the hood and windshield and landing in a panic in the truck's slip-stream. The tumbleweed seemed to want to go in every direction at once, spiralling around on the new black asphalt until squashed by the tire of a Coors truck.

The lawns were all green as a National League ballpark, inhabited by plaster ducks, geese, hens and

chicks, donkeys with wicker baskets, red wheelbarrows, wishing wells and windmills spinning wildly in the hot wind.

In the empty churchyard a trio of mongrels scampered through a flock of ground-pecking chickens. One of the male dogs mounted the female who looked around in mournful concentration until the second male attempted to climb between them; she spun about, snapping, while the first male danced to keep its balance. The pair were soon locked end-to-end, side-stepping over the dry lawn. On the step the rooster crowed indignantly in its hooded cage.

Ida watched as Bob Monroe, the one-eyed gravedigger, poked at a great smouldering stump, the gnarled toothgaps between its roots spewing curls of smoke. By its side lay an immense tree, hacked into sections. I remember that tree, thought Ida. That was where my father and mother and I used to sit and eat our picnic lunch after church and I would have on my pretty pink Sunday-school dress and there were squirrels who would come up to us, bold as brass, standing like mischievous litle men, and that tree gave shade for all of us. We used to come and sit there right up until Mum and Dad died.

A man in ash-coloured horn-rimmed glasses and a marine-style haircut welcomed Ida and Art at the doorway. To Ida he gave a stiff-lipped nod that could almost be

called censorious, but when he smiled at Art his dentures nearly leapt out of his head. A scrap of cigarette paper clung to a shaving nick on the side of his throat.

Inside, a trio of musicians--two trumpets and an egg-shaped mandolin--stood stiffly next to the pulpit where Little Dothan had already begun the service.

". . . omnis mundi creatura . . ."

Little Dothan's black jacket bulged, his belly threatening to pop the one button fastening it. Beads of sweat glistened on his balding skull.

One of the trumpet players pressed a valve on his horn and shot a quick jet of saliva into a spittoon at his foot.

". . . quasi liber et pictura . . ."

Ida turned to Art. He smiled lovingly. Slowly he extended his hand and clasped her fingers in his. The usher--or whoever he was--stood unobtrusively at the rear of the chapel, hands folded behind his back. The musicians began to play a soft silvery music. Art released his fingers from Ida's and took a step down the centre aisleway.

". . . nobis est in speculum . . ."

In the pews to the right, the side of the groom's people, sat Art's father and mother with the five tattooed babies--Buster and Billy-Boy and Brick and Buford and Beau--as well as Floyd and several rows of men with caps,

respectfully holding their tweed hats in their laps. Those will be some of the other brothers, thought Ida.

Then she turned her head to the left, the section for the bride's people.

". . . nostrae vitae, nostrae sortis . . ."

She saw two heads. A woman's with gray hair tinted slightly purple, glasses attached to a chain around her neck. She had been the last to enter before the music started. And a young man, closer to Art's age than Ida's, though all she could see from behind were a strong neck and a marine-style haircut.

". . . nostri status, nostrae mortis . . ."

Brassily the mariachis leapt into "Here Comes the Bride," the trumpetists blaring over a mandolin-strummed waltzbeat. A smiling sunshaft spotlighted the empty place at Art's side; Little Dothan's wine-filled chalice cast a teary eye on the ceiling. The two heads began to swivel. The mother sat up a bit in the pew and adjusted her glasses while outside the hooded cock crowed sanctimoniously. The brother stared blank-faced. A crack appeared in the sunbeam's smile. The two pairs of eyes clipped on Ida were identical. Like eggs. The sunray burned at the bride's absence. It shifted its glance perceptibly and glared down the burgundy aisleway; the ceiling chalice-eye blazed. She knew they must be feeling proud, happy of her choice and eager for her

future happiness. Smiling, on the inside.

". . . fidele signaculum."

Hushed footsteps came from the rear of the chapel. A chill ran up Ida's back as a hand took her arm. Military strength squeezed her bicep just enough to say, "You may think you're pretty grown up sometimes, but . . ." And as she walked slowly up the aisle to the beat of the mariachi mandolin, she steeled herself to endure the pent-up reproof in the faces of what must have been her family: her brother, who it was only natural would feel a bit protective over her even though he was several years her junior; her mother, frowning stiff-backed in her pew, eagle-eyes inspecting Ida top-to-bottom for a loose hem or an out-of-place hair, hoping not to have to add slovenliness to the list of family disgraces; her father at her side, making it tacitly and abundantly clear as he gave her away that this time she'd better not mess it up because humiliating himself in full view of everybody and his aunt was a blow he could live with once but not twice; decent, clean-living people; people who were as understanding and forgiving as propriety would allow--certainly not grudge-holders; people with vaguely-familiar faces she felt she might have seen someplace before.