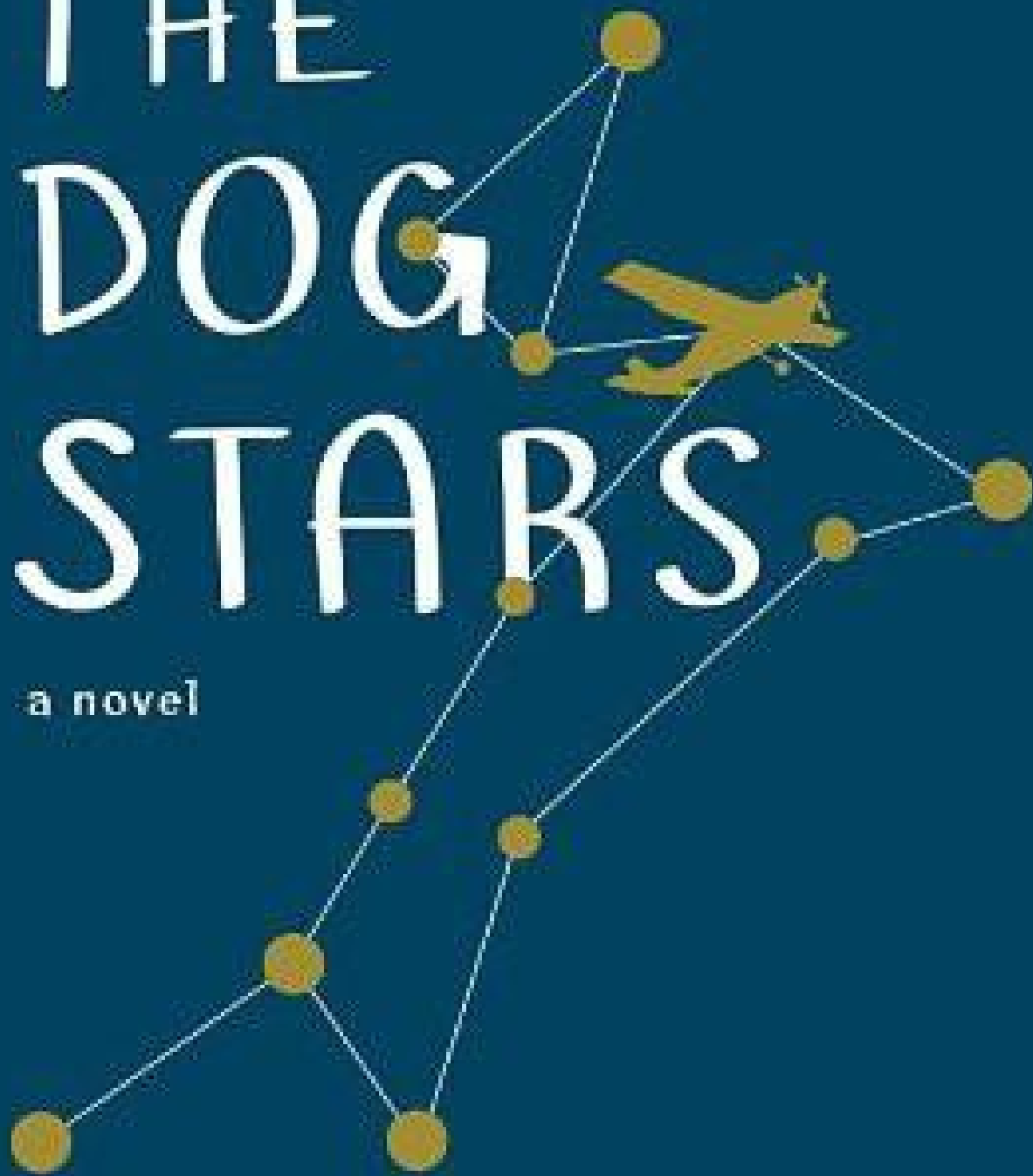


THE DOG STARS

a novel



PETER HELLER



The Dog Stars

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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v3.1

To Kim

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BOOK ONE

I

I keep the Beast running, I keep the 100 low lead on tap, I foresee attacks. I am young enough, I am old enough. I used to love to fish for trout more than almost anything.

My name is Hig, one name. Big Hig if you need another.

If I ever woke up crying in the middle of a dream, and I'm not saying I did, it's because the trout are gone every one. Brookies, rainbows, browns, cutthroats, cutbows, every one.

The tiger left, the elephant, the apes, the baboon, the cheetah. The titmouse, the frigate bird, the pelican (gray), the whale (gray), the collared dove. Sad but. Didn't cry until the last trout swam upriver looking for maybe cooler water.

Melissa, my wife, was an old hippy. Not that old. She looked good. In this story she might have been Eve, but I'm not Adam. I am more like Cain. They didn't have a brother like me.

Did you ever read the Bible? I mean sit down and read it like it was a book? Check out Lamentations. That's where we're at, pretty much. Pretty much lamenting. Pretty much pouring our hearts out like water.

They said at the end it would get colder after it gets warmer. Way colder. Still waiting. She's a surprise this old earth, one big surprise after another since before she separated from the moon who circles and circles like the mate of a shot goose.

No more geese. A few. Last October I heard the old bleating after dusk and saw them, five against the cold bloodwashed blue over the ridge. Five all fall, I think, next April none.

I hand pump the 100 low lead aviation gas out of the old airport tank when the sun is not shining, and I have the truck too that was making the fuel delivery. More fuel than the Beast can burn in my lifetime if I keep my sorties local, which I plan to, I have to. She's a small plane, a 1956 Cessna 182, really a beaut. Cream and blue. I'm figuring I'm dead before the Beast gives up the final ghost. I will buy the farm. Eighty

acres of bottomland hay and corn in a country where there is still a cold stream coming out of the purple mountains full of brookies and cuts.

Before that I will make my roundtrips. Out and back.



I have a neighbor. One. Just us at a small country airport a few miles from the mountains. A training field where they built a bunch of houses for people who couldn't sleep without their little planes, the way golfers live on a golf course. Bangley is the name on the registration of his old truck, which doesn't run anymore. Bruce Bangley. I fished it out of the glove box looking for a tire pressure gauge I could take with me in the Beast. A Wheat Ridge address. I don't call him that, though, what's the point, there's only two of us. Only us for at least a radius of eight miles, which is the distance of open prairie to the first juniper woods on the skirt of the mountain. I just say, Hey. Above the juniper is oak brush then black timber. Well, brown. Beetle killed and droughted. A lot of it standing dead now, just swaying like a thousand skeletons, sighing like a thousand ghosts, but not all. There are patches of green woods, and I am their biggest fan. I root for them out here on the plain. Go Go Go Grow Grow Grow! That's our fight song. I yell it out the window as I fly low over. The green patches are spreading year by year. Life is tenacious if you give it one little bit of encouragement. I could swear they hear me. They wave back, wave their feathery arms back and forth down low by their sides, they remind me of women in kimonos. Tiny steps or no steps, wave wave hands at your sides.

I go up there on foot when I can. To the greener woods. Funny to say that: not like I have to clear my calendar. I go up to breathe. The different air. It's dangerous, it's an adrenalin rush I could do without. I have seen elk sign. Not so old. If there are still elk. Bangley says no way. Way, but. Never seen one. Seen plenty deer. I bring the .308 and I shoot a doe and I drag her back in the hull of a kayak which I sawed the deck off so it's a sled. My green sled. The deer just stayed on with the rabbits and the rats. The cheat grass stayed on, I guess that's enough.

Before I go up there I fly it twice. One day, one night with the goggles. The goggles are pretty good at seeing down through trees if the trees

aren't too heavy. People make pulsing green shadows, even asleep. Better than not checking. Then I make a loop south and east, come back in from the north. Thirty miles out, at least a day for a traveler. That's all open, all plains, sage and grass and rabbit brush and the old farms. The brown circles of fields like the footprint of a crutch fading into the prairie. Hedgerows and windbreaks, half the trees broken, blown over, a few still green by a seep or along a creek. Then I tell Bangley.

I cover the eight miles dragging the empty sled in two hours, then I am in cover. I can still move. It's a long way back with a deer, though. Over open country. Bangley covers me from halfway out. We still have the handsets and they still recharge with the panels. Japanese built, good thing. Bangley has a .408 CheyTac sniper rifle set up on a platform he built. A rangefinder. My luck. A gun nut. A really mean gun nut. He says he can pot a man from a mile off. He has done. I've seen it more than once. Last summer he shot a girl who was chasing me across the open plain. A young girl, a scarecrow. I heard the shot, stopped, left the sled, went back. She was thrown back over a rock, a hole where her waist should have been, just about torn in half. Her chest was heaving, panting, her head twisted to the side, one black eye shiny and looking up at me, not fear, just like a question, burning, like of all things witnessed this one couldn't be believed. Like that. Like fucking *why*?

That's what I asked Bangley, fucking why.

She would have caught you.

So what? I had a gun, she had a little knife. To like protect her from *me*. She maybe wanted food.

Maybe. Maybe she'd slit your throat in the middle of the night.

I stared at him, his mind going that far, to the middle of the night, me and her. Jesus. My only neighbor. What can I say to Bangley? He has saved my bacon more times. Saving my bacon is his job. I have the plane, I am the eyes, he has the guns, he is the muscle. He knows I know he knows: he can't fly, I don't have the stomach for killing. Any other way probably just be one of us. Or none.

I also have Jasper, son of Daisy, which is the best last line of alarm.

So when we get sick of rabbits and sunfish from the pond, I get a deer. Mostly I just want to go up there. It feels like church, hallow and cool. The dead forest swaying and whispering, the green forest full of sighs. The musk smell of deer beds. The creeks where I always pray to see a trout. One fingerling. One big old survivor, his green shadow idling against the green shadows of the stones.

Eight miles of open ground to the mountain front, the first trees. That is our perimeter. Our safety zone. That is my job.

He can concentrate his firepower to the west that way. That's how Bangley talks. Because it's thirty miles out, high plains all other directions, more than a day's walk, but just a couple of hours west to the first trees. The families are south ten miles but they don't bother us. That's what I call them. They are something like thirty Mennonites with a blood disease that hit after the flu. Like a plague but slow burning. Something like AIDS I think, maybe more contagious. The kids were born with it and it makes them all sick and weak and every year some die.

We have the perimeter. But if someone hid. In the old farmsteads. In the sage. The willows along a creek. Arroyos, too, with undercut banks. He asked me that once: how do I *know*. How do I know someone is not inside our perimeter, in all that empty country, hiding, waiting to attack us? But thing is I can see a lot. Not like the back of the hand, too simple, but like a book I have read and reread too many times to count, maybe like the Bible for some folks of old. I would know. A sentence out of place. A gap. Two periods where there should be one. I know.

I know, I think: if I am going to die—no If—it will be on one of these trips to the mountains. Crossing open ground with the full sled. Shot in the back with an arrow.

Bangley a long time ago gave me bulletproof, one of the vests in his arsenal. He has all kinds of shit. He said it'll stop any handgun, an arrow, but with a rifle it depends, I better be lucky. I thought about that. We're supposed to be the only two living souls but the families in at least hundreds of square miles, the only survivors, I better be lucky.

So I wear the vest because it's warm, but if it's summer I mostly don't. When I wear it, I feel like I'm waiting for something. Would I stand on a train platform and wait for a train that hasn't come for months? Maybe. Sometimes this whole thing feels just like that.



In the beginning there was Fear. Not so much the flu by then, by then I walked, I talked. Not so much talked, but of sound body—and of mind, you be the judge. Two straight weeks of fever, three days 104 to 105, I know it cooked my brains. Encephalitis or something else. Hot. Thoughts that once belonged, that felt at home with each other, were now discomfited, unsure, depressed, like those shaggy Norwegian ponies that Russian professor moved to the Siberian Arctic I read about before. He was trying to recreate the Ice Age, a lot of grass and fauna and few people. Had he known what was coming he would have pursued another hobby. Half the ponies died, I think of heartbreak for their Scandinavian forests, half hung out at the research station and were fed grain and still died. That's how my thoughts are sometimes. When I'm stressed. When something's bothering me and won't let go. They're pretty good, I mean they function, but a lot of times they feel out of place, kinda sad, sometimes wondering if maybe they are supposed to be ten thousand miles from here in a place with a million square miles of cold Norwegian spruce. Sometimes I don't trust my thoughts not to bolt for the brush. Probably not my brain, probably normal for where we're at.

I don't want to be confused: we are nine years out. The flu killed almost everybody, then the blood disease killed more. The ones who are left are mostly Not Nice, why we live here on the plain, why I patrol every day.

I started sleeping on the ground because of the attacks. Survivors, it seemed like they picked it out on the map. On a big creek, check. So water, check. Must have fuel, check. Since it was an airport, check. Anyone who read anything knew, too, that it was a model for sustainable power, check. Every house with panels and the FBO run mostly on wind. Check. FBO means Fixed Base Operator. Could've just said the Folks Who Run the Airport. If they knew what was coming they wouldn't have complicated everything so much.

Mostly the intruders came at night. They came singly or in groups, they came with weapons, with hunting rifles, with knives, they came to the porch light I left on like moths to a flame.

I have four sixty watt panels on the house I don't sleep in, so one LED light all night is no problem.

I was not in the house. I was asleep under blankets on the open ground behind the berm a hundred yards away. It is an old airport, it is all open ground. Jasper's low growl. He's a blue heeler mix with a great nose. I wake up. I beep Bangley on the handset. For him I think it was like sport. Kind of cleaned out his carbon, the way for me going up to the mountains.

It was a high berm, just a big mound of dirt, we made it higher. Tall enough to walk behind. Bangley, he saunters up and snuggles down beside me at the top where I am already watching with the goggles, and I smell his rasping breath. He has them too, the goggles, in fact he has like four, he gave me one. He said at the rate we use them the diodes will last ten years maybe twenty. What happens then? I celebrated my fortieth birthday last year. Jasper got a liver (doe), I ate a can of peaches. I invited Melissa and she came the way she does, a whisper and a shiver.

In ten years the additive will no longer keep the fuel fresh enough. In ten years I'll be done with all this. Maybe.

Half the time, if the moon is up or if there is starlight and snow, Bangley doesn't need the goggles, he has the red dot, he just centers the red dot on the moving figures, on the ones standing still, crouching, whispering, centers it on the shadow by the old dumpster, puts the red dot on a torso. *Bang*. He takes his time, plans out the sequence, *bang bang bang*. Breath gets heavier, raspier just before. Like he's about to fuck someone which I guess he is.

The biggest group we had was seven. I heard Bangley lying beside me counting under his breath. Shit on a shingle, he murmured and chuckled like he does when he is not happy. I mean a lot more not happy than usual.

Hig, he whispered, you are going to have to participate.

I have the AR-15 semi-auto, I am good with it, he fitted me with the night scope. I just.

I did.

It was three of them that survived the first volley and after that we had our first bona fide firefight. But they didn't have night goggles and they didn't know the terrain and so it didn't take long.

That's how it started, the sleeping outside. I was never going to get trapped in the house. Like the dragon sleeps on the pile of treasure, but not me. I stay back a ways.

After the second summer they tapered off, like turning off a faucet, drip drip. One visitor a season maybe, then none. Not for almost a year, then a band of four desperados that almost cleaned our clock. That's when I started flying regular like a job.

Now I don't have to sleep on the ground. We have our system, we are confident. The Fear is like a memory of nausea. You can't remember how bad it was or that you just about asked to die instead. But I do. Sleep on the ground. Under a pile of blankets in winter that must weigh twenty pounds. I like it. Not boxed in. I still sleep behind the berm, I still leave the porch light on, Jasper still curls against my legs, still dreams in whimpers, still trembles under his own blanket, but I think he is mostly deaf now and useless as an alarm which we will never let on to Bangley. Bangley, you just don't know with him. He harbors. Might resent the meat I share who knows. The way he sees it everything has a use.

I once had a book on the stars but now I don't. My memory serves but not stellar ha. So I made up constellations. I made a Bear and a Goat but maybe not where they are supposed to be, I made some for the animals that once were, the ones I know about. I made one for Melissa, her whole self standing there kind of smiling and tall looking down on me in the winter nights. Looking down while frost crinkles in my eyelashes and feathers in my beard. I made one for the little Angel.



Melissa and I lived on a lake in Denver. Only seven minutes from downtown, the big bookstore, the restaurants, movies, we liked that.

We could see grass, water, mountains out the big window of the little house. The geese. We had a resident flock and a flock of Canadas that came in fall and spring in great chevrons, mixed with the locals, maybe mated, then moved on. Took off again in raucous waves. I could tell the transients from the wild ones. I thought I could.

In October, November walking around the lake on our evening pre-prandial we'd point them out to each other. I thought she was always wrong. She'd get half mad. She was so smart, but she didn't know the geese like I did. I never thought of myself as really really smart but I always knew things in my bones.

When we got the puppy Jasper I was confirmed: he would chase the wild ones who were skittish but not the mean residents. My theory anyway.

We had no children. She couldn't have. We saw a doctor. Tried to sell us treatments we declined. We were okay with just each other. Then she did, like a miracle. Get pregnant. We'd gotten used to the other and I wasn't sure I could ever love someone more. I watched her sleeping and I thought: I love you more than anything.

Sometimes back then, fishing with Jasper up the Sulphur, I hit my limit. I mean it felt my heart might just burst. Bursting is different than breaking. Like there is no way to contain how beautiful. Not it either, not just beauty. Something about how I fit. This little bend of smooth stones, the leaning cliffs. The smell of spruce. The small cutthroat making quiet rings in the black water of a pool. And no need to thank even. Just be. Just fish. Just walk up the creek, get dark, get cold, it is all a piece. Of me somehow.

Melissa part of the same circle. But different because we are entrusted with certain souls. Like I could hold her carefully in my cupped hands, like to bear her carefully carefully, the country I cannot, but her I can, and maybe all along it was she holding me.

The hospital St. Vincent's was right across the lake. The orange helicopters landed there. At the end we talked about flying west but it was too late and there was the hospital, we went to the hospital. To one of the buildings they took over. Filling with the dead.



Bangley just shows up. I'm changing oil. He could rap on the steel siding of the bay but he doesn't he likes to give me a heart attack. Shows up beside me like a ghost.

What are we monkeying with now?

Jesus, if I have a coronary who will fly your patrols?

We'd find someone wouldn't we? Put an ad in the paper.

His grin straight across his eyes never smiling.

Anyway I bet I could fly this sucker.

He says it every now and then. It's like a warning. For what? If he wanted this windy place to himself he would have. A long time ago.

Now Jasper is awake on his dusty blanket and growling. Jasper can't stomach Bangley unless it's like an emergency visitor situation in which case he keeps his trap shut, he's a team player. Once just after Bangley showed up Jasper snapped at his arm and Bangley unholstered a sidearm big as like a skillet and aimed and I yelled. The only time. I said You shoot the dog we all die.

Bangley blinked he had that grin. What do you mean we all die?

I mean I fly patrols from the air, the only way we know we can secure the perimeter.

That word. It was the only one that hit its target. I almost saw it go in his ear and through the tubes into his brain. Perimeter. Only way to secure. He blinked. He worked his jaw side to side. He stank. Like old blood like when you butcher a deer.

Only reason I am still alive. How do you think I live here by myself?

So that's how the bargain was struck. Without even a negotiation.

No words but that. I flew. He killed. Jasper growled. We let each other be.

I was saying: I'm changing the oil in the Beast and he shows up beside

me like a ghost.

Why do you visit the Druids? he says.

They're not Druids they're Mennonites.

He grunts.

I put down the filter wrench. Lay it on a rolling box. Pick up the safety wire pliers.

Bangley is standing there. I smell before I see him. I feed the wire through the hole in the flange at the filter's base, twist it with the pliers. It's safety wire. Holds the filter on in case. All to spec. FAA regs. Wouldn't want the oil filter to vibrate loose, fall off, spill all the oil midair and the engine tears apart. Has happened. They used to say all FAA rules resulted from a real accident. So the .032 mil wire is maybe a kind of memorial to some pilot. Maybe his family too.

Bangley is picking his teeth with a splinter of wood, watching me. On top of the tool box is a shop rag a square of old t-shirt. The graphic is faded but I can see rows of smudged pink cartoon women: big breasted little breasted all shapes and underneath "melons" "peaches" "jugs" "plums" "raisins" a big "Cabo" bannered across the top. I read all the fruit before I reach in and wipe everything down one more time. Stab of pain. Just that. Fold it. A cartoon. That we are so hard wired that way. That two little arcs or circles of a cartoon boob could stir up memory, a temperature, change, a tightening of guts, a crawling in the groin. I think it's curious. I half gulp, stand still for a second, breathe.

Melissa was cantaloupes.

Cabo is out at the end of a nine hundred mile peninsula. Plenty of fish probably. Is there some survivor like me out at the old municipal airport changing the oil in an antique Maule, flying recon every day, using a Ski Colorado t-shirt as a shop rag? Fishing of an evening off some dilapidated pier that still stinks of creosote? Wondering what it's like to ski.

Why didn't Colorado shirts ever have tits on them? I ask Bangley.

Not much of a sense of humor in old B.

Walk to the north wall of the hangar slide a case of 50 straight weight Arrowshell off the stack. Set it down on a wooden stool. The sunlight is retreating back across the concrete slab to the open doorway. Bangley is wearing his honking sidearm. Night and day. Once he went to the pond in the creek bottom to hook a catfish and a bearded stranger built like a bear rose out of the Russian olive and attacked him. He says. Bangley shot him through his shaggy head. Brought an entire leg back still wearing three sets of ripped pants and a bandaged boot. The left. Threw it down in front of the hangar.

For the dog he said. Angry. Because I didn't do my job. To him. I didn't guarantee the perimeter.

Why do you visit the Mormons? he says again. He is fucking with me. He is ramrod straight and inclines forward real subtle when he is pissed.

I pull at one flap of the cardboard box of motor oil. The glue is heavy, I tear it open tear the other side, four rows of three black quarts. The pale waxy line down the side of each tall rectangular bottle is translucent for reading the level, they remind me of tuxedo pants. One stripe of piping. Twelve little groomsmen.

How do you know that I do?

Bangley gets mad in gradations of increasing internal pressure like a volcano. The veins in his nose turn purple. Madder I mean. He is like one of those volcanoes in Ecuador that is always threatening to blow even when the top looks wisped with clouds like any other mountain.

We agreed, he says. Seismologists at the USGS or wherever seeing portentous tremors on the graph. A certain vein in his forehead just under the bill of his Ducks Unlimited camo cap beginning to throb.

No, you agreed. With yourself.

Off limits. It's off limits.

What are you? The Base Commander?

I should never talk to Bangley this way. I know it as I say it. I just get sick of the attitude sick to death of it. He's working his jaw back and

forth.

I put the funnel, just an old oil bottle cut off halfway, back down on top of the other quarts. I face him.

Look Bangley relax. Want a Coke?

Once every two months I land on a cleared boulevard in Commerce City and restock ten cases of the oil. On the way over one day I found the Coke truck. I always bring back four cases, two for him two for me. A case of Sprite for the families which I don't tell him about. Most of the cans have frozen too many times and burst but the plastic bottles survive. Bangley always goes through his Coke a lot faster.

You'll kill us both. We agreed.

I get him a Coke. Here relax. It's not good for your heart.

He had arteriosclerosis. Has. Once he said: I'm a time bomb. Which he didn't have to tell me.

I open it so he has no choice. At the crack of the top and the sound of the fizz he winces like one more Coke down, one less in the world.

Here.

Hig you will kill us. He drinks, he can't help himself. I can see it work in his throat and down into his barrel chest.

He makes himself stop before he drains the whole bottle. You know just one cough, he says. That's what they said at the end. Not just through blood.

Sharing bodily fluids. I'm not fucking a Mennonite.

A cough is a bodily fluid. Land in your eye. Open your mouth to speak.

I don't think that was ever proven.

What the fuck does it matter if it's proven. You want to get this far and die of the blood?

This far. I'm thinking not saying it. This far. Bangley and Jasper and a low fat diet. Well.

You can't choose for me Hig.

I breathe.

Everything we do is risky. Once in a while they need my help.

For what? For fucking what? They have what? Two, three, five years tops? The luckiest? Every few months one dies. I can tell by how you mope around. For what? Boils and rash and bloody coughs and burning?

They are people. They are trying to stay alive day by day. Maybe some can survive it. There were rumors of survivors.

He is still inclined forward, still throbbing the vein with a dribble of fresh Coke on the stubble of his chin.

They are no threat to us Bruce.

The sound of his given name widens his eyes. He never told it to me, it was always just I'm Bangley, which like I said I rarely use.

The families know to stay fifteen feet back. I've trained them. Not once not ever have they showed any aggression, nothing but gratitude, kind of embarrassing gratitude when I fix a pump or show them how to make a fish trap for the creek. Truth is I do it as much for me as them: it kinda loosens something inside me. That nearly froze up.

Bangley works the jaw stares at me. That last thing—it's like I just spoke perfect Japanese, a whole paragraph ending with a slight bow. Like A, he can't believe I fucking said it, and B, he doesn't understand a single syllable. Psycho spiritual language it leaves him, well, less than cold.

Once I asked him if he thought there was something more. We were sharing two rare Cokes on the front porch of my house I never go in, under the bulb I leave on at night that used to work like a bug zapper for attackers. It was evening and the October sun was making for the mountains. Like some old couple taking their ease. Two wicker chairs

losing their paint and cricking when we shifted our weight. His chair had a rhythm like he remembered what it was to sit in a rocker. Only time I can think of he told me anything about his life before. He grew up in Oklahoma. That's what he told me.

It's not like you think, he added. Long story.

That was it. A little cryptic. I hadn't really thought anything. He never elaborated. Still, seemed like we were making leaps and bounds intimacy-wise.

I told him I used to build houses.

What kind of houses?

Timber frame. Adobe. Odd custom stuff. Wrote a book too.

A book on building houses.

No. A little book. Poetry. Nobody read it.

Shit? He took a measured sip of Coke watching me as he tipped back the bottle, watching me as he set it back down on his thigh, kind of appraising me with a new appreciation, not readable good or bad. Adjusting the context.

Wrote for magazines now and then. Mostly about fishing, outdoor stuff.

The relief it swept his face like pushing off a cloud shadow. I almost laughed. You could see the gears: Phew, outdoor stuff, Hig is not a homo.

Growing up I wanted to be a writer. A great writer. Summers I worked construction, framing. Like that. Tough to make a living as a writer. Anyway I probably wasn't so good. Got married bought a house. Led to another thing then the other thing.

Long story, I said.

Bangley held his Coke in both hands in his lap. He kind of hunched over himself maybe remembering. Suddenly remote like his spirit

retreated to a safer distance. To watch. From a distance. Still rocking the chair that didn't rock.

We didn't speak for a long time. The sun touched one of the higher peaks, broke slowly like a bloody yolk. Wind stirred, rattled the dried rabbit brush at the exact moment. Cold.

I asked him if he ever thought there was anything more than this, than just surviving day to day. Recon, fixing the plane, growing the five vegetables, trapping a rabbit. Like what are we waiting for?

His chair, *crick crick*, stopped. He got very still like a hunter that smelled an animal on the wind. Close. Like he woke up.

Say again.

More than this. Day to day.

He worked his jaw, his mineral eyes graying in the fading light. Like maybe I'd tipped over the edge.

Gotta go he said. Stood up. Hooked a finger in the breast pocket of his flannel shirt, fished out the bottle cap, screwed it on. Carried his Coke off the porch, boot cracking the broken step.

That was maybe the second year. So now in the hangar I know the stuff about thawing out inside will not exactly exact sympathy. Half the time with Bangley I'm thinking about all the stuff I should never say.

I crack a quart of oil and tip it into the funnel made from a cut off bottle and snug it down into its twin. Leave it to drain. Face him.

Who knows maybe one day *we* will need *them*. We can't know.

Ha. A cough of contempt dismissive. Never happen Hig. For funeral detail maybe.

He had consigned them, wished it. All of them dead.

You want to be the only one left? You'd be just as happy. The only goddamn human being left on earth.

If it shakes out like that. Better than the alternative. Anyway I got you. He tipped back the Coke watched me past the bottle.

He meant the alternative if everyone's going to die. I think. I didn't say it: One day I'm gonna climb in the Beast and fly west and keep going.

No you won't he said.

What?

What you were thinking. There is no other safe place. Maybe on the planet. We got the perimeter, water, power, food, firepower. We got mountains close enough if the game gets scarce. We got no internal strife no politics cause it's just you and me. We got no internal to tear apart. Like the Mormons like everybody else out there who ain't alive anymore. We keep it simple we survive.

He grins.

Country boys will survive.

His favorite phrase.

I stare at my only friend on earth. I guess he's my friend.

Don't go killing us, he says and leaves.



Still I go when they ask. The patrol goes west to the mountain front then south. I follow the line of trees that mark the river. At the stacks of the power plant and the reservoir I swing back northwest. The Mennonites are on the creek. In an old turkey farm. Eight metal sheds in two rows of four set at angles like diagonally parked cars. Tall century old trees strung along a windbreak and clustered into a grove in the middle of which cants the asphalt roof of a big brick farmhouse. Two ponds fed by the creek. In one I can see floats, an empty canoe. An array of solar panels to the south of the sheds and two windmills, one mechanical for drawing water. Why they came here in the first place.

In the yard, in the clearing, a thirty foot flagpole, flag long since gone,

maybe stripped for a baby blanket. When they need help they hoist a ripped red union suit. Signal and wind sock. In a strong wind it splays legs and arms out stiff like a headless man.

I land on the straight dirt drive that Ts from the old county road to the west. I can see the sign swiveling in the wind. At the head of the drive they wired a metal sign to two posts it has a red skull and crossbones says DANGER WE HAVE THE BLOOD. The drive floods, gets sliced with ruts. They come out with shovels and fill the holes. They aren't good at maintenance, they're most of the time too weak, but the landing strip is one thing they keep clean. Almost always a strong crosswind from say 330. I slip the Beast so she comes down cocked, almost sideways to the drive, left wing low, nose ruddered over hard to the south, then kick her straight at the last second, the kids in the yard jump up and down, I can see they are laughing from two hundred feet, it's the only time I ever see them laugh.



Jasper used to be able to jump up into the cockpit now he can't. In the fourth year we had an argument. I took out the front passenger seat for weight and cargo and put down a flannel sleeping bag with a pattern of a man shooting a pheasant over and over, his dog on three legs, pointing, out in front. Not sure why I didn't do that before. The dog doesn't look like Jasper, still. I carried him. Lay him on the pattern of the man and the dog.

You and me in another life I tell him.

He likes to fly. Anyway I wouldn't leave him alone with Bangley.

When I took out the seat he got depressed. He couldn't sit up and look out. He knows to stay back of the rudder pedals. Once in a shear he skidded into them and nearly killed us. After that I fashioned like a four inch wood fence but scrapped it after he inspected it and jumped out of the plane and like refused to fly, no shit. It insulted him. The whole thing. I used to worry about the engine roar and prop blast, I wear the headset even though there is no one to talk to on the radio because it dampens the noise, but I worried about Jasper, even tried to make him his own hearing protector, this helmet kind of thing, it wouldn't stay on. Probably why he's mostly deaf now.

When I picked up oil etc I moved the quilt to the top of the stack so he could look out.

See? I said. At least it's good half the time. Better than most of us can expect.

He still thought it was lame I could tell. Not half as excited. So now when I'm not picking up, just flying, which is most of the time, I bolt the seat back in, it just takes a few minutes. Not like we don't have time. First time he sat up straight again and glanced at me like What took you so long? then looked forward real serious, brow furrowed like a copilot. His mood it lifted palpable as weather.

He's getting old. I don't count the years. I don't multiply by seven.

They bred dogs for everything else, even diving for fish, why didn't they breed them to live longer, to live as long as a man?



One weird thing: the GPS still works. The satellites, the military or whoever put them up there to spin around us and tell us where we are, they still send their signals, triangulate my position, the little Garmin mounted on the yoke still flashes a terrain warning if it thinks I am getting too close to high ground.

I am always too close to high ground. That's the other thing about the end of everything: I stopped worrying about my engine failing.

There's a Nearest button on the Garmin. Somebody was thinking. It tells you fast which way is the nearest airport and how far. It pops up a list of the closest airports, their identifiers, distance, bearing, tower frequency. When I used to worry about stuff the Nearest button was my pilot's best friend. Any kind of weather or trouble or just getting low on fuel and I tapped it and there was the list and if I scrolled down and highlighted I could just press Go To and *pop* it gave my vector. Steer the arrow back to the center of the arc. Slickest thing.

Still useful but after nine years so many of the runways are unusable or you have to know where the two foot pothole is exactly and rudder around it. Surprising how fast. How fast it turns back to grass and ground. Back before, there was a TV show: *Life After People*. I watched

every one. I recorded it. I was gripped. By this idea: New York City in a thousand years would look like: an estuary. A marsh. A river. Woods. Hills. I liked it. I can't say why. It thrilled me.

That fast. Because it is amazing how fast girder steel corrodes when exposed to water and air, how fast roots break shit apart. It all falls down. Oh, so the runways: nine years doesn't sound like a long time but it is for the tarmac unmaintained and it is for a brain-cooked human trying to live it. I could make a list. Nine years is pretty fucking long:

To live with Bangley's bullshit.

To remember the ad hoc flu ward and.

To miss my wife after.

To think about fishing and not go.

Other stuff.

But. I lost a cylinder one evening south of Bennet. I was flying the city which I do now and then not too low just to see and. *Tap tap tap* vibration like a mother. Best to get down and troubleshoot, might be just a fouled plug. I didn't need the Garmin to tell me Buckley the air force base was just to the west maybe twelve miles. I banked around and came down with the gold sun straight in my eyes, banging louder, now kind of alarming like it would suck to throw a bearing and practically blind with the sun, using the left pavement edge as a guide, and a hundred feet after I touched down still tearing ass, maybe seventy indicated, *WHOMP*, and had it been the nose gear and not the left main the Beast, and me too, we would be toast. Jasper too. I walked back and checked. The hole was waist deep practically, neatly rectanguloid, it looked like it had been dug out by prairie dogs with little backhoes. Fuck. My back. The jolt. I sat down with my legs dangling in the hole, Jasper sat too and leaned against me like he does, and glanced up at me real quick and polite, and real concerned. Sitting that way reminded me of a Japanese restaurant Melissa took me to once that had instead of chairs, instead of mats and pillows, like a well for your feet, like cheat floor seating for stiff Westerners. The sun threw our shadows about half a mile long down the runway. As it was, the impact cracked the strut, which is when I learned to weld and also it's possible to weld with solar power.

I sat with my feet in the hole and shook myself by the shoulders and

said, What's wrong with you? Is this a game to you?

That took a while to answer.

Do you want to live today?

Yes.

Do you grant that you may want to live tomorrow? And maybe the next day?

Yes.

Then get methodical. You got nothing but time.

So I made a survey. I took the chart we call a sectional and flew every airstrip within a hundred miles. I flew Centennial, I flew Colorado Springs, the Air Force Academy, I flew Kirby, formerly Nebraska, I flew Cheyenne. I flew them all at probably thirty feet in good light and made notes. Surprising how many would have killed me. At Cranton we almost did when I came in for the fly-by real low and parallel to the runway and some xenophobe put a high powered hole through the fuselage. I knew because it exited right through my side window up and out. That's how I knew we had neighbors in Cranton.

So the Nearest button still works but about half I can't use anymore at all. Better to land in an old field. Used to mean Nearest Haven now means Nearest Maybe Death Trap. All good information.



I still monitor the radio. Old habits die hard. Every airport has a frequency so traffic can talk to each other if there's no tower. Important to know where everybody is when you're taking off or entering the pattern. Used to be. Collisions used to happen every year. Between airports there's no designated way to communicate but there's an emergency frequency 121.5. What I do when I'm approaching an airport is flip to the old channel. When I'm within five miles I make a call. Call a few times.

Loveland traffic Cessna Six Three Three Three Alpha five to the south at six thousand en route Greeley. Repeat. Anybody? I'm the only goddamn

plane up here and likely to be til the end of time. Maybe on another planet in another universe they will again invent the Cessna. Ha!

I laugh. I hoot. It's kinda morbid. Jasper glances sideways with mild canine embarrassment.

I have a book of poems by William Stafford. It's the only thing I went back for: my poetry collections. Landing at night on no power, no lights, in the old King Sooper's parking lot, one row a thousand easy feet between low cars, the wings went over and no light poles. Just over a mile from there to the house. Fires burning west and south, some punctuating gunshots. Waiting in the plane with the AR-15 between my legs waiting to see if anyone was left to bother the Beast for the half hour I'd be gone.

I took the rifle and jogged around the lake like so many times before, morning and evening. Used to jog. I ignored the pictures on the mantel, along the stairs, didn't look, packed an old backpack and a duffel full of books, just poems. Fingered *We Die Alone* which is the first book Melissa gave me which was creepily prognosticant in the title only: the protagonist is a true real Norwegian commando back in the last good war. He out-skis two entire divisions of German troops and survives to pose handsomely in distinguished middle age in a rollneck fisherman's sweater for the back of his memoir. I had always envied that guy, a war hero in hearty Norway who must have had a cabin up in the fjordland and a thousand friends and too much mulled cider or aquavit or whatever they drink at parties, and enjoyed skiing now just for fun. If that man could have imagined hell on earth probably. He'd seen its shadow. I fingered the book, didn't read the inscription and slid it back on the shelf. Done. I'd decided I was done with crying about anything.

When I got back to the parking lot I circled in from the outside rows and there were two figures leaning into the open doors of the plane, one about to climb in. I cursed myself and checked the safety, heart hammering, and stood and yelled to get the fuck away, and when they grabbed hunting rifle and shotgun I shot them at twenty yards the first ones. For poems. I gave their guns to Bangley, refused to answer when he asked.

The Stafford book is called *Stories That Could Be True*. One poem is

called “The Farm on the Great Plains” and it begins:

telephone line goes cold;

birds tread it wherever it goes.

farm back of a great plain

begins an end of the line.

all that farm every year,

waiting for it, listening, still

He calls his father. He calls his mother. They are gone for years only a hum now on the line but he still calls.

When no one responds from the airport I’m about to fly over I flip back to the emergency frequency and make a pro forma call

Mayday mayday Cessna Six Triple Three Alpha feeling awful lonely.

In year seven someone answered. I took my hands off the yoke and pressed the headset into my ears. The hair stood up along my arms like it does in an electric storm.

It came out of the static with a doppler fade.

Triple Three Alpha ... tailing off into aural snow.

Triple Three Alpha ... Gust of static ... Grand junk. Whomp like hit with magnetic wind.

Grand Junction ...

I waited. I shook my head. Actually knocked my temple in the headset. Keyed the mike with the thumb button on the yoke.

Grand Junction? Grand Junction? Triple Three Alpha over Longmont.

I’m over Longmont holy shit! Didn’t copy. Repeat: didn’t copy!

I circled. I circled higher. Climbed to fifteen thousand feet and circled til I was dizzy with hypoxia. Descended to thirteen and circled for two hours til the fuel flow gauge told me I had fifteen minutes left, then I banked east.

Whoever it was was a pilot or a controller.

The one and only time.



I cook my meals in the hangar. About a month after Bangley showed up I got him to help me dolly over a Vigilant woodstove from the kitchen of a fancy McMansion on the east side of the runway. Maybe the provisional nature of eating in what's essentially a mechanic's garage makes me feel like none of this is permanent. Part of why I don't live in a house. Like living in a hangar, sleeping outside, I can pretend there's a house somewhere else, with someone in it, someone to go back to. But who's kidding whom? Melissa is not coming back, the trout aren't, and neither is the elephant nor the pelican. Nature might invent a speckled proud coldwater fighting fish again but she will never again give the improbable elephant another go.

Still last summer I saw a nighthawk. First one in years. Flitting for bugs in a warm dusk, wingbars blinking in the twilight. That soft electric peep.

So the hangar is where I cook and eat. I tried eating in my house at the kitchen table like Bangley does, tried it for a few days but it didn't sit.

All the firewood we could use in our lifetimes is stacked up in the walls of the houses around the airfield. A sledgehammer and a crowbar gives me all I can use for a week in a few hours. Not to mention fine furniture.

Took a few wincos to get used to battering apart finish carpentry, cherry and walnut, and maple flooring for firewood. But. Value relative to need. Still I'm taking apart the crummy houses first. Not sure if I'll ever get to the four or five really beautifully built mini-mansions the ones with exotic hardwoods, if I do by then they will hold no cachet probably. Probably just look to me like some refreshingly different scents in the burning. By another unspoken agreement we began harvesting wood in the cheaper houses on the west side of the runway, him working north and me south. That leaves me a not-so-long wheelbarrow roll back to the hangar.

Often Bangley wanders over and joins me. He can't cook I can. Can't

train the man to knock ever, or at least not whisper in like some ghost, which creeps me out a little cause I never know how long he's been watching.

Dinner early tonight.

Fuck Bangley, I nearly scalded myself.

You cook like you enjoy it.

Huh?

The way you move around with the skillet, the knife, like it's a kitchen. Like it's one of those cooking shows.

Bangley's nostrils flare with a gill-like rhythm when he's particularly enjoying himself.

I stare at him for just a moment.

You hungry?

Like one of those cooking shows where they tie on an apron. Like cooking a frigging dinner is some kind of dance. Tra la la.

I put a pan full of fresh new potatoes down on the stove. In the beginning I tried using venison fat for lard but it went rancid so fast.

Well I'm not wearing an apron, as you can see, and I'm not dancing.

Almost no oil in the pantries of houses at the end the last few months they must have been drinking it for the calories. Then in the basement of the big Bauhaus across on Piper Lane I found two five gallon barrels of olive oil. Hidden behind a stack of new bricks.

You were singing though. He flashes that straight across grin. Just makes him look meaner.

The stove is hot with Canadian fir two by fours, the best frying wood for flash heat. The oil is spitting and I prod at the cut potatoes until most of them are in contact with the bottom of the pan. With the steel spatula I reach down and joggle the chrome lever that closes the side

vent to the stove to slow it down. I think: If I were made of different stuff, if I thought I could defend this place myself I would shoot Bangley where he stands and get it over with. Would I? Maybe. And then I would miss this sparring every day. Probably feel it like a big void. We really have become like a married couple.

I don't think I was singing, I say finally.

You were Hig, you were. Wasn't Johnny Cash either. He grins.

Like that was the only approved sing to yourself music in the Book of Bangley.

Well what the fuck was it?

He shrugs. Hell if I know. Some pop girl stuff. From the radio I distantly recall.

Distantly recall. Standing there with a smile of triumph and his scruffy week old beard. I swear. I start to laugh. That's what he does to me: aggravate me all the way to the point of laughter. To the point of ridiculous and then a fuse pops, flicks a switch, and I laugh. Lucky for both of us I guess.

Sit down Bangley. Pull up a stool. We're having catfish, dandelion salad with basil, new potatoes *au* something not *gratin*.

See? he says. Just like one of those shows. If you aren't just a little light in the loafers I'm a jew.

I look at him. I laugh harder.

*

I play music sometimes. I have mp3s, cds, vinyl, everything. I wired my hangar to the main battery bank at the FBO the one that pulls from the wind turbine so power isn't a problem. The mood has to be just right. I have to be careful or it sends me back to that place I don't want to ever be again. Can't be anything we used to listen to: we were a sucker for the decades old singer-songwriter, climb out of the bottle, country road stuff, Whiskeytown to Topley to Sinead. We loved the Dixie Chicks, who wouldn't. Amazing Rhythm Aces. Open Road, Sweet

Sunny South, Reel Time Travelers, the scrappy fine bluegrass and old timey groups just before before. We thought it was heartbreaking then. Try playing it on a fine early spring morning with the hangar door open and a single redtail gyring over the warming tarmac:

And I remember your honeysuckle scent I still adore

I can't believe that you don't want me anymore ...

Or the sweet wrecked mountain tenor of Brad Lee Folk singing *Hard Times*.

Head hung down and homeless, lost out in the rain ...

I never thought I'd be an old man at forty.

What I can play is blues. She was never that into blues. I can salve with Lightning and Cotton, BB and Clapton and Stevie Ray. I can blast Son Seals singing Dear Son until the coyotes in the creek raise up a sympathetic sky ripping interpretation of the harmonica solo. Piercing howls and yelps. Sounds like it's killing them and also like they love it. Which when you get right down to it is the blues.



At night I lie with Jasper against the back of the berm. It's early spring, some late or very early hour with Orion toppling backward onto the serrated edge of the mountains and not crying out but silent, silent as he tries to shoot the bull before it tramples him. Sometimes he is very peaceful not tonight. Tonight he is fighting for his life.

Jasper is unleashed, sleeping on my left thigh but my thoughts are leashed tight. I allow them to circle tight. To brush the green house, the hangar, the possibility of a spring hunting trip for spring bear when the bear are careless with hunger.

He is snoring softly like he does, a little snort on the inhale and maybe a whimper on the way out. Then against all plan I begin to remember the call from Grand Junction. Coming in like a train out of a snowstorm, whomping the bandwidth then receding back into the static blizzard with a long mournful tail of dopplered distance. Lost. *Triple Three Alpha ... Grand Junk ... Grand Junction ...* The voice older, kind, concerned, like a grandparent calling up a steep flight of stairs.

How many years ago? Two or three. It was summer I remember. I

remember the smoke from the summer fires, circling the Beast up into the smoke, and the sunset that night like a massacre. How I circled and climbed and made the circles broader and keyed and keyed the mike. Frantically worked the squelch. Some skip in the atmosphere maybe, how could it travel that far with none of the repeaters working anymore years since. The competence in the voice. An older man. I remember that. It came through the noise. Another pilot, I was sure it was another pilot.

I can fly to Gunnison and back on my tanks maybe Delta the other way. Maybe—if the wind is right in both directions. Which rarely happens. I have thought about it. Again and again. Junction less than half an hour beyond. And then. What? Another pilot at another airport probably much less secure. But.

They had power somehow. They—he—had survived seven years. Maybe still so.

Jasper shifts, straightens his legs in a dreaming stretch and pushes back against me, wakes himself up. Sniffs. Lowers his head again.

ift my head from the pillow

ee the frost the moon.

wering my head I think of home.

Li Po's most famous poem.

Even then: long before before the end, the bottomless yearning.

Almost never home, any of us.

I lie back against the duffel bag stuffed with foam I use as a pillow. Doesn't get dirty as fast, doesn't remind me of my old bed. Rub the band of the wool hat back down on my forehead. The sky is bell clear, the forest fires don't start til mid-June, and the Milky Way is a flowing river of stars profoundly depthless. I mean deeper than can be reckoned. Jasper sighs. Almost no wind. What there is is cooling my right ear, a lazy breeze from the north.

Would I be more at home if I met a pilot from Grand Junction? If Denver to the south was a bustling living city? If Melissa were sleeping

on the other side of Jasper as she used to do? Who would I be more at home with? Myself?

Still I think of the pilot's voice. The competence and the yearning. To connect. I think I should have gone there. Pushed the fuel, backed off the throttle, flown slow, maybe eighteen square, picked my morning and gone. To see. What, I don't know. Still I didn't come close. To going. Admit it: I was scared. Of finding the interrupted dead as I had and had and had again. Nothing but. And running out of fuel before I was even back to Seven Victor Two which is Paonia, the airstrip up high on the narrow flat butte like an aircraft carrier. Running out of fuel in the 'dobe flats east of Delta. Going down in the shadow of Grand Mesa.

Before, I read that they found Amelia Earhart. Conclusive I guess. On the island that had been checked off in 1940 as Searched. Opened clam shells, a jackknife shattered apart for its blade, for maybe a fishing spear. A fire pit. Ancient crumbling makeup. A plexiglas airplane window. A woman's shoe. Bones. Chips of bones. The DNA verified against a living female Earhart cousin. Of course it was her island, she and the navigator castaways for how long until they succumbed to what? The coral atoll from the air: elliptical oasis with a central lagoon. Flat outer reef at low tide like a parking lot. The Lockheed Electra with a landing configuration stall speed of fifty five mph, she'd need seven hundred feet, no more. Wading the meager provisions to shore maybe injured. Maybe not low tide, maybe the gear torn off by water. Maybe blood in the water. Running out of fuel over the Pacific taking gratefully what comes. That they made that tiny island at all. Living off of shells and rain.

Shells and rain.

And the company of another, just one.

Starvation. Slowly burning through time like a fire in wet wood. Attenuating to bone, to walking bones, then one dies, then the other. Or attacked by passing islanders maybe better.

Missing what most the whole time? The babbling faceless agora, the fame, the parties, the pop of flash bulbs? The lovers, the gaiety, the champagne? The solitude carved out of celebrity, poring over charts by

a single lamp on a wide desk in a venerable hotel? Room service, coffee before dawn? The company of one friend, two? The choice: All of it or not? Some or none? Now, not now, maybe later?

I have none of that now. Those choices. And yet. I do not want to run out of fuel and go down in the high desert grass of the western Gunnison valley and die trying to walk with Jasper three hundred miles home. Home. Meager as it is. Nothing to lose as I have. Nothing is something somehow.



Jasper growled. I had slept in my reverie.

Low, mean, serious.

I held my breath, listened. Sat up slow. He is mostly deaf, yes, but his nose is good.

Could be coyotes. Or wolves. The mountain wolves in the last two years: drifting down from the mountains in ragged packs. Growing pressure of the growing repopulation. Because they used to be there in numbers enough and are again.

Jasper growled now in the night and I sat up in the blankets heart thumping. I whispered *Stay* and crawled to the top of the berm.

Jasper knows. He knows when the shit's serious.

He sat back on his hindquarters and cut the noise mid-growl and looked at me with real concern and also with the taut poise of a hunter who is enjoying himself. He was amped. So was I. This hadn't happened in a long time, maybe half a year, and I felt a little sluggish, a little out of practice. A couple of years ago and I would have been at the top of the berm by now and scanning with the goggles with my left hand on the receiver of the AR. As it was I had to dig the rifle out from between the cold damp tarp and the back of the duffle. Next to it the goggles inside an old wool sock. At least I still thought to bring them out with me when we slept. I set the goggles against my brow and stretched the strap over the back of my head and slowly, quietly, tugged against and pulled the charging handle that racked the gun. Climbed the berm slowly, more cautiously.

Jasper stayed still. Straining against the urge to chase down the smell in the dark. Or maybe some sound, some sound in some frequency that penetrated his near deafness. I climbed the steep back of the berm slowly. Prayed it was coyotes, even wolves. Not in the mood for killing, not one bit. Not myself, not to spot for Bangley.

At the top I slid the rifle flat over the smooth top and lowered myself to cold dirt and wriggled upwards until my eyes cleared the lip.

In the light of the porch bulb I saw them. One two threefourfive ... *break onetwothreefourfive pigeonsjustlikethat* ... Five men all fullgrown except maybe one smaller maybe younger.

Shit.

With great effort that first summer we had levered and toppled the dumpster back south maybe a hundred feet further from the house. It was on its side, the open top gaping black. The creek bank was sheer and deep. The stream ran around it so that the airport sat in an oxbowed bite. Perfect moat. The only good ford was a trail that led out of the bottom to this house, the only one we lit. So they naturally clustered against the dumpster, south of it in the shadow of the bulb, shielded from the house where they—anyone not a professional soldier—would imagine the threat and the prize.

Fish in a barrel. Whatever other hapless metaphor for the hapless soon to be dead.

I kill deer. I have no problem killing deer. Dressing, butchering, eating.

Heart now thumping like a blind thing trying to bang its way out of the ribcage. I felt down to my belt and squeezed the sides of the radio, keying the mike button with my thumb three times. Then three then three. Then I counted. Before I got to two hundred Bangley would be sauntering up behind me carrying two guns: M4 assault rifle and a light sniper, probably an AR-10 .308. Counted to myself and shifted the rifle up and over one of the sandbags at the top and snugged the stock into my right shoulder and sighted. Ninety feet. We had measured it to the inch.

Onethirtyone onethirtytwo

They were crouched and talking among themselves, whispering, I couldn't hear them. The wind was light, cool against the back of my neck, westerly from me to them. Carrying sound. Very slowly I thumbed the safety to fire, heard the click, wince, seemed loud, eased the small lever forward to full auto.

Oneseventynine oneeighty

They were not even not pros. They were crouched together as one target at this distance one alone filled the scope, way more than filled it. They were farmers insurance men mechanics. Probably. Haplessly clustered. But. I shifted the scope, just the slightest pressure from the inside of my shoulder, and swept them and they had guns, each one. As I swept, the sight picture tremored with the hammering of my heart. At this stage they were killers. I mean this stage in our mutually culpable history. Who to say how many or how cruelly. At this stage they were gathered in the posture of armed assault. On who knew what remnant of family had managed to survive in that house. And.

The cruelty of it struck me: they in relation to the house, the fictional family, me to them, that any of us should be in this position. *Don't fucking think, Hig. You will get us all killed* Bangley liked to bark.

TwoOfive twoOsix. No Bangley. What the fuck. Never happened not once he wasn't here by two hundred, usually earlier.

I eased my eye off the eyepiece and twisted my head around to the left. No shadow. No figure, no Bangley approaching. *Fuck*. Eye back on the scope. Hand on the trigger guard trembling. Starting to tremble.

They were talking among themselves. I flipped the lever that unlocked the scope with my trembling left hand and released it from its rail. Lay it to the side out of line of the iron peep sight. It opened up my field of view.

Even as a boy, the killing part was my least favorite. I loved to hunt with my Uncle Pete. He was an unreconstructed man of letters and of action in the mode of Ernest Hemingway and Jack London, except that he taught ballroom dancing. On cruise ships. He and Aunt Louise did that for like twenty years and she died, and my normally exuberant and talkative uncle got quiet, more serious. Still fun. He wasn't very

good at either one, either the action or the letters, but I idolized him for a long time, longer than was necessary and went on my first elk hunt with him when I was twelve.

I was good. I mean I quickly understood terrain and habitat almost as if I had grown up with People of the Deer, and I was quiet and careful about the direction of the wind and the sound of twigs whizzing along the cordura of my pack, and the covering sounds of water, and I was an adept stalker and helpful in camp and nearly leapt out of my bag into the icy five a.m. chill of what was still a mountain mid-November night. I adored it all, and it seemed I didn't have any problem putting the cow elk in my sights, but the way she stumbled over the rockfall when I shot, tripping forward and somersaulting over her own neck, and the way her eye shone up at me and she scrabbled her useless legs sideways over the rocks before I shot again right into the head in a panic, and the life went out of her eye and her legs, and then the way when I dressed her the blood spilled onto the frozen ground and mixed pink with warm milk from her still feeding teats—

Didn't like it. Did it every year for years afterward and loved it all including having elk in the freezer, but not that. Don't even like to kill a bug.

Twotwentythree twotwentyfour

No Bangley. I had tried negotiating once. Closest I ever came to dying.

Old rules are done Hig. Went the way of the woodpecker. Gone with the glaciers and the government. New world now. New world new rules. Never ever negotiate.

He loved to say that before he set up to plug someone.

Five was a big bunch, biggest we'd had in a couple of years. They were crouched, the biggest closest to the dumpster had a rifle with scope, was twisted back doing the talking, signing with his right hand, touching the watch cap cocked on his head, the one just beside him had some sort of assault rifle probably an AK, the three others: two shotguns and a ranch rifle all clear at ninety feet with the goggled eye. The third from the left with a shotgun wore a cowboy hat a short man in a big hat. They were bunched and nodding and they were about to

move. My hand shook. They would never be this tight a target.

I planned to sweep right to left. Full auto. Set the peep in the middle of the last one's bulk and planned to cut across through the midline of the bunch.

Moved right index finger onto the cold trigger, took a deep breath, a deep living breath to let out slow the way taught and

Cracked open. The night. Not me. Erupted pulse of flame peripheral from down to my right, the hulk carcass of a truck, the concatenate blast of rapid fire, the group in my sight coming apart entropic, the red dot flying across like a lethal bug throwing their shadows upwards and out to land, to be swallowed by the green ground.

Not me.

I hadn't pulled the trigger.

A shriek and scream, one moaning another writhing, and whimpers, I saw Bangley step out from behind the truck, unholster his .45 walk calmly across the open ground and three shots, the ones crying suddenly silent.

Light wind, cold. Blood rushing in my ears, rinsing the cries. Quiet.

He picked up the scattered guns, slung all five. Walked around the berm, unslung the guns, heard them chink together on the ground, talked low to Jasper, climbed up to me where I was still prone, I would say still frozen on the trigger but more like just stilled with disbelief.

What the fuck.

Good he said. Good job. Not sure you still had it in you.

He meant that I would. That my finger was moving on the trigger.

Before he took over.

What the fuck Bangley. Not sure I still had what in me?

Silent. Knew I knew what.

I've never had it fucking in me. But I do it. What the fuck were you thinking? What if I'd seen you and thought you were one of them?

Never happen: You see me. Unh unh. Not that way.

I opened my mouth, closed it. I said, Unfuckingbelievable. What if they had broke apart. I mean just launched. Sooner.

Silence. Knew I knew now that he had them covered from the get go.

Well how the hell did you know I was about to pull the trigger and why didn't you? Let me?

Silence. Knew that I knew now that he was scoping me more closely than he was scoping them. Scoping my frigging finger while he kept half an eye on the men that could have frigging killed us. Had them sighted all along. Let loose only when he saw me take the big breath maybe. I see him in my mind's eye pulling the trigger on the first man not even looking, watching me first in the good night scope on its own legs, watching me jerk back in alarm in surprise, then casual but efficient tuck down to his weapon and sweep the rest of the group. Not sweep. Bangley doesn't believe in full auto. Two shots probably to each panicked leaping shadow. *T-TAP*. Each one that fast. Maybe he was laughing at my confusion all the while he harvested this bunch of souls.

C'mere Hig. Show you something.

Goes over the top and down the berm. Jasper still down there, this side, trembling. Not with fear. I can see him in the starlight. Sitting on his haunches following my movements with concern, restraining himself from action, somebody doing their job just their job the way they are supposed to.

C'mon. I whistle soft. He jumps, not like the old days but still fast enough up to the top of the berm and over. Bangley is down there among the black figures sprawled. Jasper already moving one to the other, not stopping, nosing, the low growl.

Look at this Hig. They never should have done it.

He doesn't sound unhappy.

Bangley has reached up and switched on the LED headlamp banded to his cap. His cap is on backward. He shines it on the short man, the one in the cowboy hat, the hat now tumbled into a drainage furrow a few feet off. It's a boy. Maybe nine. About the age. Melissa seven months pregnant when. Nine years ago. This boy is thin, hair matted and tangled. A hawk feather tied into it.

Face hollow, a shadow smirched with dirt and exposure. Would have been born into this. Nine years of this. Piecing the jigsaw puzzle of this world into some dire picture in his head to end cast as an extra in Bangley's practical joke.

He grunts. Arms in the hands of babes. Should have left him behind.

Where?

Bangley shrugs, swings his head up, the light up into my eyes, blinding.

I wince down against the harsh white glare but don't turn.

Then when he wandered out of the creek starving tomorrow you would have shot him just like the others, but in full daylight and at three hundred yards not thirty.

I can't see anything but the light, but I know Bangley's grin is straight across and grim.

Hig you haven't learned a goddamn thing in all this time. You're living in the past. Makes me wonder if you appreciate any of this. Goddamn.

He walks off. He means do I deserve it. To live.

I walk away leave Jasper to his business. We will bury them tomorrow.

This is what I do, have done: I strip off haunches arms breast buttocks calves. Slice it thin soak in salt brine and dry to jerky for Jasper for the days between. You remember the story of the rugby team in the Andes. The corpses were corpses already dead. They did it to survive. I am no different. I do it for him. I eat venison, bottom fish, rabbit, shiners. I keep his jerky in airtight buckets. He likes it best of all his food I'm sure because of the salt. Tomorrow I will do it again but not the boy,

I'll bury him not with any tenderness or regret just in one piece with his hawk feather.

That we have come to this: remaking our own taboos forgetting the original reasons but still awash in the warnings. I walk back around the berm. I am supposed to lie back down in our blankets and sleep with the berm at my head like a wide headstone. So I am fresh for tomorrow to fly. I will not sleep all night. I lay the gun down, just the gun, snug it back under the duffel and keep walking.

II

Back then I took up flying with the sense of coming to something I had been meant to do all my life. Many people who fly feel this way and I think it has more to do with some kind of treetop or clifftop gene than with any sense of unbounded freedom or metaphors of the soaring spirit. The way the earth below resolves. The way the landscape falls into place around the drainages, the capillaries and arteries of falling water: mountain slopes bunched and wrinkled, wringing themselves into the furrows of couloir and creek, draw and chasm, the low places defining the spurs and ridges and foothills the way creases define the planes of a face, lower down the canyon cuts, and then the swales and valleys of the lowest slopes, the sinuous rivers and the dry beds where water used to run seeming to hold the hills and the waves of the high planes all together and not the other way around. The way the settlements sprawl and then congregate at these rivers and mass at every confluence. I thought: It's a view that should surprise us but it doesn't. We have seen it before and interpret the terrain below with the same ease we walk the banks of a creek and know where to place our feet.

But what I loved most from the first training flight was the neatness, the sense of everything in its place. The farms in their squared sections, the quartering county roads oriented to the cardinal compass points, windbreaks casting long shadows westward in the morning, the round bales and scattered cattle and horses as perfect in their patterns as sprays of stars and holding the same ruddy sun on their flanks, the pickups in the yards, the trailer parks in diagonal rows, the tract homes repeating the side-lit angles of roofs, baseball diamond and kart track ovals, even the junkyards just so, ragged lines of rusted cars and heaps of scrap metal as inevitable and lovely as the cottonwoods limning the rivers, casting their own long shadows. The white plume from the stack of a power plant tended eastward on the morning wind as pure as washed cotton. This was then. From up here there was no misery, no suffering, no strife, just pattern and perfection. The immortal stillness of a landscape painting. *Nor ever can those trees be bare* ... Even the flashing lights of an emergency vehicle progressing along the track of a highway pulsed with the reassuring rhythm of a cricket.

And for a time while flying, seeing all this as a hawk would see it, I am myself somehow freed from the sticky details: I am not grief sick nor stiffer in the joints nor ever lonely, nor someone who lives with the nausea of having killed and seems destined to kill again. I am the one who is flying over all of it looking down. Nothing can touch me.

There is no one to tell this to and yet it seems very important to get this right. The reality and what it is like to escape it. That even now it is sometimes too beautiful to bear.

Also I wonder how Bangley is built inside and everyone like him. He is as at home with his solitude as the note reverberating inside a bell. Prefers it. Will protect it to the death. Lives for protecting it the way a peregrine lives for killing other birds midflight. Does not want to communicate what the death and the beauty do to each other inside him.

I took him flying in the first week of his arrival. He wanted to recon our perimeter, our weakest approaches. Squeezed him into the passenger seat and gave him a headset so he could talk to me. I made widening circles outward and climbed like a climbing hawk. It was a clear morning with the gullies still shadowed and a flock of seagulls shocked white between us and the ground. At ten miles and a thousand feet he said Druids. Go lower circle.

I'd never heard the word.

Met them on the way in, he said. They have the blood sickness. Yelled across the yard. Shot two that came too close. Wish I had incendiary now.

I glanced at him. The shock of it. Never heard that story but of course how could they know he ended up with me, my partner.

A few of the ragged kids ran out of a turkey shed and waved, jumped up and down. Bangley turned his hunched shoulders in the cramped seat to look at me.

They know you?

Yup. I help them. They're not Druids, they're Mennonites.

I felt his eyes on the side of my face then not. He said nothing the rest of the trip, not even when we flew up close along the mountains and saw the fresh snow blowing off the rock ridges.

III

So I wonder what it is this need to tell.

To animate somehow the deathly stillness of the profoundest beauty.
Breathe life in the telling.

Counter I guess to Bangley's modus which is to kill just about everything that moves.



On the night of the one sided firefight in which I didn't pull the trigger I walked straight past the west hangars and kept going. Jasper has a good nose and I knew that if he looked up and got worried he would just follow. Didn't want to whistle him away from his party, and I knew Bangley well enough that he'd had enough killing in one night not to fuck with my dog. I had no goggles no gun. Bangley always wears a belted sidearm, I'm sure he wears it to sleep. I have never seen him asleep but I wonder how many nights he has watched us at the base of the berm snoozing. There is much about the man that creeps me out but this is the worst, the unrelenting sense of being surveilled. I've learned to live with it the way the Cree in Canada must live with swarms of mosquitoes. Did live. But there is the nagging fear: if he decided the attacks had tapered off enough to defend this place himself or if my visiting the families was too much of a risk he might kill us both, me and Jasper, unimpeded with an easy two shots fifty steps from his front porch. So in this sense I am crazy to sleep in the open, but then if Bangley wanted to kill me he would have limitless opportunities in any one day, so I decided from the beginning to make my daily choices without including Mr. Death in the calculus.

And so, in this way, I thought as I walked past the last hangars west and away from our one burning bulb on the one porch into the not total darkness of the starlit plains, I thought that in this way the visitation by the five men paid a kind of surety against my survival at least for a while. For a while Jasper and I were indispensable, though Bangley had dispatched the group, the killing part, with literally one eye on the ball.

I walked around the old gas tank which was green in daylight, now black, bulked in the tall sage brush, and my feet found without thinking the worn trail to the mountains. My trail. The one Jasper and I had worn over nine years, and Bangley out to his tower. Erie airport had no control tower, it was an uncontrolled field, meaning that the pilots just talked to each other and worked things out according to long used protocol, but Bangley and I had built our own tower four miles out onto the plain, halfway to the mountain front, and this tower was for killing. It had taken us two months to build, salvaging the lumber out of a painstaking teardown of an ugly, blocky, modern, wooden thing on Piper Lane that reminded me of a grade school from the Seventies. We hauled the lumber out to the site in his pickup when it still ran, and in his dry van trailer, the one he had showed up with that was full of guns, weapons of every murderous phylum, and mines and canned food and ammo. We hauled out a generator too from one of the electricity free hangars on the north side, and we ran it on avgas to power the saws and drills. Bangley was not a born carpenter and it was the first and only time I saw him do a manual job with any kind of éclat, the work fired I know now by a vision of the clean, long shots he'd get with his .408. He couldn't wait to get to the top platform and install the bench rest and locking swivel he had spent hours at his desk designing. A separate permanent mount for his spotting scope and another for his laser range finder. None of which—the gun nor the scope nor the range finder—he ever left on the tower. But he left a windspeed/direction indicator out there on its own pole where it wouldn't be queered by wind deflecting and eddying off the roof, and he left his ballistics tables in a neat dove jointed drawer which I crafted for him.

His preferred range was fourteen hundred yards. Close enough with his skills to pretty much guarantee a kill but far enough to flatter his pride. Which meant that there was one spot on the trail that was a place where many people over the years had seen their last living look of the sad world. It was a place literally soaked in blood. The ground here, the dirt between a tall sage on the south side of the trail and tall bushy rabbit brush on the north, was black with the coppery minerals of spilled blood, stained the way the place in a yard or dirt drive where a man changes the oil in his car is stained. That night I covered the four miles plus four hundred yards in much less than an hour. I didn't notice the distance and I didn't notice the time. By my calendar it was

the night of April 21st which to my knowledge is not some solstice or equinox, but seems significant anyway to me like all 21sts of the month. It was also Melissa's birthday. She didn't like parties so we never had one. We had quiet dinners, usually sushi, which she regarded as a ridiculously decadent form of nutrition but adored nevertheless like twice a year. Her favorites were gone by the end, the tuna and yellowtail and wild salmon, and the prices were so high for most of the rest we just stopped going.

I always gave her a book. An old hardback from the same section in the used bookstore where you'd find Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew, and musty scrawled-in *Hobbits*, the painted paper covers often ripped or gone. But some motif from the cover illustration was stamped on the cloth of the hard cover itself, a rearing horse or an ancient elm, so that you could close your eyes and run your hands over the grainy surface and feel the fleet curves of the bucking bronco, the brachial patterns of the spreading tree.

My favorite was a sort of illustrated guidebook of pond creatures on which a very young child had written in pencil on each page under the picture of an otter

I love otter

Under a muskrat:

I love muskrat

Beaver:

I love beaver



I walked past the tower in the dark. The path through the brush absorbed and gave back the light from the Milky Way and was clear in its windings. I walked over the target spot, over a black staining that was not the shadow of the sage. I did not shudder or feel much of anything. I felt the wind. It was west down from the mountains and it should have been cold-snow cold, but it was warm and smelled of earth, and of the cedar on the lower slopes and the spruce higher up. Like rock emerging from ice. Lichen and moss. I thought it did. It

smelled like spring.

Too early in mid-April for a real thaw, but anymore the old seasonal benchmarks were mostly nostalgia. We had snow in the mountains this winter but there were two years running where the peaks were dry holding almost nothing. This scared me more than attacks or disease.

Losing the trout was bad. Losing the creek is another thing altogether.

I still fished in the mountains. The trout were gone because the streams got too warm, but I fished suckers and carp, nymphing the bottom like before, and overcoming the revulsion when I got a sucker, the sluggish resistance that couldn't be called a fight, and the distended lips and the scales. I made myself get used to the taste and the bones. Now that the trout were gone the carp had learned to occupy the niche and feed more and more on the surface, so I even sometimes fished dry flies. Never brought them back for Bangley because he wouldn't have understood. The hours spent. The danger in being so absorbed along a stream which was the thoroughfare for both animals and wanderers.

But I did. He would have called it Recreating, which he called with scorn anything that didn't directly involve our direct survival, or killing, or planning to kill which amounted to the same thing. *Christ Hig we're not Recreating here are we? Good goddamn.* Deer hunting was one thing. The amount of quality protein in one successful trip divided by the risk. The fact that I wanted to go, that I needed it—to get up there, to get away, to breathe that air—he overlooked. Had I hated it, he would have liked that better. Same with flying. He knew that flying for me was life somehow and yet he couldn't count on two hands the times we were arguably saved by the intelligence from some patrol.

He wasn't my boss and I did what I did, but he made sure his disapproval grated hard, and after a while it was easier to not put this stuff in his face. A matter of keeping the needle in the green day to day.

I fished. I'd set down my pack against a still green tree. The kayak sled. My rifle. I passed up the beetle kill, the standing dead trees that broke and fell in a hard wind, and walked further into the green. I always fished a stretch of woods that had not died, or that was coming back. I set down the pack and breathed the smell of running water, of

cold stone, of fir and spruce, like the sachets my mother used to keep in a sock drawer. I breathed and thanked something that was not exactly God, something that was still here. I could almost imagine that it was still before when we were young and many things still lived.

I listened to the creek, and to the wind and watched it move the heavy dark boughs. In a pool below me the dark surface was dusted with green pollen. The roots of a tree exposed in the bank snaked over the water and in their spaces old spiderweb swayed in the wind and glimmered along the threads with its rhythm.

I took out the four pieces of the rod wrapped in flannel and snugged them together, sighting along the guides and twisting the shining metal loops so they lined up true. It was a Sage pack rod, a little number four I'd had since high school. My father gave it to me for my sixteenth birthday just after I came to live with him. He died of pancreatic cancer the next year before he could ever show me how to use it, but I ended up teaching myself and learning from Uncle Pete.

I pulled out the Orvis reel he had given me with the rod, which I'd kept cleaned and oiled when no other part of my life was working smoothly if at all. I slid the tang of the reel foot into the aluminum slot in the top of the cork handle and tightened down the nut. The nut went around the whole rod and rod seat and was stamped with a deep diamond pattern that made it easy for the thumb and forefinger to grab. It turned easily and locked down tight.

All of this, these motions, the sequence, the quiet, the rill and gulp, the ruffle of the stream and the wind souging the needles of the tall trees. As I strung the rod. I had known it all hundreds, probably now thousands of times. It was ritual that required no thought. Like putting on socks. Except this ritual put me in touch with something that felt very pure. Meaning that in fishing I had always all my life brought the best of myself. My attention and carefulness, my willingness to risk, and my love. Patience. Whatever else was going on. I began fishing just after Pop died and I tried to fish the way I thought he would. Which is a little weird thinking about it now: trying to emulate a man I had never seen wield a rod, and with the fierceness of a son this man had never had much of a chance to father.

When I lost my high school girlfriend, I fished. When in a fit of

frustration and despair I quit writing anything, I fished. I fished when I met Melissa and barely dared to hope that I had found someone I could love in a way that surpassed anything I had known. I fished and fished and fished. When the trout got hit with disease, I fished. And when the flu finally took her in an Elks Hall converted to a hospital and crammed with the cots of the dying not five hundred yards from our house, I fished.

I was not allowed to bury her. She was incinerated with the rest. I fished. In the increasing chaos of dwindling supplies and longer gas lines and riots, I fished. By then I was nymph fishing for carp just to get away and follow a stretch of creek, the curves and moods of which I knew as well as I had known the body of my dead wife.

In all the years at the airport I kept bringing my rod into the mountains. I'd set down the pack and put together the rod and breathe and Jasper would take his cue and lie down on the bank where he could get a good view of the action. I put on the light wading shoes which were like hi-tops with sticky rubber on the soles, and stepped down to the smooth stones that were dusty and gray in air and stepped into the water. As soon as these riverbed rocks were wet and covered they came alive with color, greens and russets and blues. I did too. Felt like that. Soon as the cold shocked my feet and pressed my shins.

Never used waders anymore. I just liked the feel of cold running water against my legs.

I was thinking, remembering this as I followed the path toward the mountains and I thought how I hadn't fished in over a year, not at all last summer, and wondered why, and wished now that I had the rod and Jasper, just a pack for a day and no gun and fuck Bangle I wasn't even going to pretend I was going hunting. But I didn't. Have any of it. I'd been walking for as much time as it took Orion to decline over the mountains, probably an hour and a half, and I stopped. I breathed and looked around me for the first time and realized I was very close to the first trees of the mountain front. And I was alone. I came out of reverie and almost called out for Jasper and realized that for the first time I could remember he wasn't with me. An icy fear contracted my guts and I turned and trotted all the way back to the airport.

IV

It warmed fast. Spring gave way without resistance. Two weeks earlier than last by the calendar I had scrawled onto a board in the hangar. I judged the threat of night frost over and furrowed and strung the rows of the garden, and drilled and planted under a benign sun which warmed the back of my neck and turned the fur of Jasper's back pleasantly hot under my hands.

I planted the same crop I planted every year: string beans, potatoes, corn. Also had spinach which I grew in a cold frame along with the little tomato plants I'd started.

In the final days when I decided I would have to bail out of the city fast, those are what I took out of my own cold shed in the backyard. A dirt crusted basket of seed packets and a bucket of seed potatoes. The same five, this now our tenth planting. I'd need to trade seeds with the families soon to keep the plants strong, why I hadn't done it already I'm not sure. A couple of years I used the warm conservatory room of one of the mansions to start seedlings but they died in a hard frost each time when the cold overcame the stored heat in the brick floor. I couldn't be bothered to put in a woodstove and keep them warm. Then I made the cold frame for the spinach so we could have it all year and for tomato starts in the spring. It worked usually. I planted the potatoes later than normal so that we would get a late harvest and have them all winter. With what we had, and with just me and Bangley, I canned more than we could use and stored the jars and a heap of potatoes in a cold room in the basement of my house, the one with the bulb. I never told Bangley but I dropped off fresh vegetables in the summer, and jars too later in the year, to the families who also had a garden but were hapless in their efforts due to the disease.

On this afternoon in late April I worked slowly, enjoying the warmth of the day and letting the sun soak into my winter bones. I talked to Jasper the whole time.

We need a hill, I called, picking up the spade. We need two rows built up nice for the potatoes.

Jasper furrowed his brow and agreed, happy just to lie on a pile of

sunwarmed dirt and supervise.

Hey where are the old stakes for the beans? Where did we put em?

Jasper's ears came up and his mouth opened in his version of a smile. He didn't know. He didn't give a fuck.

Were life that simple, I thought, as I had many times before. Simple as a dog's life.

I spaded up the hills for the potatoes and buried the pieces, each with its eye. I found the split lumber we'd used as bean poles and dug them in and guyed them out with string and strung three lines laddered for the climbing vines over six feet high. There was almost nothing on earth as satisfying as a wall of beans, leaves fluttering taller than you are.

I was in no hurry. What we didn't plant today we'd plant tomorrow. Probably warm enough even to plant the corn. Our shadows puddled to the south at midday and lengthened over the furrows as the spring sun made its transit into the northwest. I hummed almost tunelessly. Melissa always ribbed me for the unconscious near melody I repeated day after day when I worked. Always the same non-song. The comfort. I made a little trough for the beans, sprinkled them along it, covered them firmly. Dirt from shoveling furred the hairs on my arm and smudged my face when I rubbed my nose with the back of a fist. From the dammed-up pond in the creek, I siphoned into the shallow ditch at the head of the garden and broke it in four places with the tip of the spade to run water into the furrows. The silver runnels in the turned earth went ruddy and molten with the low sun. Staining the dirt to either side. By the middle of the night the whole planting would be wet.

I was tired. Tomorrow I'd plant the rest, the tomatoes and corn. The next day if the weather was good Jasper and I would take the sled, and this time the fly rod, and go up to the mountains for a spring buck.

The deer wandered the plains but they knew somehow to stay away from the airport and I hadn't had much luck stalking them on the open prairie. I was a mountain hunter and anyway I wanted to go up there before the creeks got too high.

Bangley sometimes set up on the second floor of his house with a sandbag in an open window and made sport long-shooting what he could. He killed two gray wolves at great distance but then they too steered clear. He sewed the fur of a ruff onto the hood of his winter fatigue coat and wore it like a trophy.

I stood back of the new garden watching the sun touch the mountains and ruddle the turned dirt and the threads of water and I can say there was something moving inside that resembled a kind of happiness.

I would never have named it. Not then. For fear. But I name it now.

C'mon, Jasp.

I speared the spade into the loose earth for tomorrow and turned for the hangar and heard the muffled clapping as Jasper shook himself and came trotting behind me.



Couple days, I said. Maybe three.

I pushed two gallon Ziplocs of Jasper's jerky into the bottom of my pack. Long since over the nausea. My Uncle Pete told me, You can get used to stepping over a dead goat on the doorstep. How about a dead person?

Why three? Bangley said.

I stuffed in my down sweater, the bulky stained brown one I had ordered from Cabela's in my late twenties and taken with me to the woods every trip since. On top of it I lay the bags of my own jerky, the venison, and the folded nylon tarp I used for shelter, and a roll of parachute cord.

Why a couple, three? Plenty snow Hig. The deer should be down low.

I couldn't think of a reason so I said: That last trip in November I saw elk sign. I swear. I know you think it's crazy talk but I saw it. Tracks of a big cow. I want to look some more. Christ, if we could get an elk.

I didn't look at him. Silence.

We were like a married couple unable anymore to speak the truth about the most important things. I had never lied to Melissa about anything except the conviction that she would pull through the flu. She knew it was a lie and did not hold it against me. She was too sick anyway to worry about whether she might survive. She had dysentery-like nausea and diarrhea and her lungs were filling up like pneumonia which was terrifying. In the end she just wanted it to be over. Pillow, she whispered to me. Her eyes were glassy and unfocused, her hair wet with sweat, her hand terribly light, almost desiccated on mine. And cold. Pillow. I'd been crying. I tried with every ounce not to, not to weep as I saw my world, everything in it of any importance, vanishing from my grip. In almost a panic, I can say now, I adjusted her one pillow behind her head on the cot, not sure what she wanted adjusted, so that it bunched a little and raised her head.

No, she breathed. Barely breathed. Her hand scratched the back of mine like a claw, like she was trying to grasp it and couldn't.

Use it.

I stared at her.

Hig. Two, three breaths short, unable to get enough oxygen. Please.

Her eyes glassy, still blue gray, I always thought like a clear sea on a cloudy day, now deepening in color, struggling to focus on mine.

Please.

Please.

I looked around the hall filled with cots for a doctor or orderly, in some desperate hope to forestall, but they were almost all sick anyway, or starting to throw up and cough, this was like some ring of hell, there was no one. A stench, the clamor of coughing and sickness.

Her hand scratched at mine her eyes would not leave my face.

I gently lifted the back of her head off the pillow and laid it back down on the stained sheet and brought the pillow around and said I love you. More than anything in God's universe. And her eyes were on mine and she didn't say a word and I covered her face and used it. On my own

wife.

She heaved twice, struggled, clawed lightly, went still. The clamor in the hall did not stop the moans and coughing. Did not stop.

I loved her.

This is what I live with.

ift my head off the pillow

ee the frosted moon.

ower it down I think of home.

Bangley said, What's wrong with you Hig? You look kind of fucked up.

I shook myself. The way Jasper does.

Nothing.

Maybe you need a vacation Hig. You been working too hard in the garden. Men weren't meant to be farmers the way I see it. Beginning of everything fucked up.

He meant take a vacation lying in the hammock I strung in the shade of the house. Between two ornamental trees, a Norway spruce and an aspen that always looked to me a little lost down here, and like they were shaking their limbs longingly at the mountains where they belonged.

I breathed. Yeah, maybe you're right. But listen I want to go up there. If there are elk. Jesus. We'd be like kings.

We are like kings Hig. It took the end of the world.

He began to laugh. Gravelly, a little like a cough. Unpleasant.

Took the end of the world to make us kings for a day. Huh Hig? Captains of our fate. Ha!

Then he really did cough. A short fit. When he came out of it he said, Well you go up there. Do a little fishing. *Recreating*. Unwind. Get us a goddamn ghost elk. But get a deer, too, why don't you Hig. Something

we can eat.

He smiled straight across, stared at me with his eyes that sparked like gravel in a streambed.

Not more than three days. I mean it. Every day you're gone fucking around we are vulnerable.

I cocked my head and looked at him. It was the very first time he had admitted to my usefulness.

I don't sleep that good he said. To tell the truth.

He coughed once more and spat out the hangar door. Well, good luck, he said, and walked off.

He didn't sleep well when I was gone. Like a wife. Fucking Bangley. Just when I thought I wished him really gone.



We would leave the next morning in the dark. I could cover the eight miles under cold stars and make the trees with the air getting gray and grainy. I packed the pack for three days though I thought if we got on an elk it could be longer. Bangley would have to deal. I could tie the pack into the sled and drag it, but I kept it light and I preferred it on my body with the sled almost weightless behind on the way out. I knew the creeks and I moved from drainage to drainage so I packed two quarts of water only.

I decided to make one more flight. Both to scout the hunt and to give Bangley one more day of security in three directions. The afternoon was fine with just a light breeze stirring off the mountains, warm in the sun but almost winter cold in the shadow of the hangar. I had the woodstove going and the kettle on, steaming. I made tea from the jar of summer flowers, leaves that I dried: wild strawberry, black raspberry, mint, and sat in *Valdez*, the recliner I had pulled out of the home entertainment room of one of the mansions. It was named after the Exxon tanker that had wrecked and spilled in Alaska.

It was a split double recliner for husband and wife presumably, but now for me and Jasper, with a lever on each side and covered in the

finest calfskin. It was very soft. I put an heirloom quilt on his side, patched with prints in blues and yellows, and with a repeating pattern of a log cabin made from squares and triangles in printed cloth, every piece different but with the same twist of smoke coming out of each chimney, paisley or polka dot or ribbed with color, so it gave an impression of a fanciful village evenly spread over a country of geometric fields and flowering crops, and at a retiring hour when everyone was indoors enjoying the warmth of a fire. As we were. It was comforting to look at and comfortable sitting in the deep chair in the waves of heat from the stove, levered halfway back and drinking tea.

I could almost imagine that it was before, that Jasper and I were off somewhere on an extended sojourn and would come back one day soon, that all would come back to me, that we were not living in the wake of disaster. Had not lost everything but our lives. Same as yesterday standing in the garden. It caught me sometimes: that this was okay. Just this. That simple beauty was still bearable barely, and that if I lived moment to moment, garden to stove to the simple act of flying, I could have peace.

It was like I was living in a doubleness, and the doubleness was the virulent insistence of life in its blues and greens laid over the scaling grays of death, and I could toggle one to the other, step into and out of as easily as I might step into and out of the cold shadow of the hangar just outside. Or that I didn't step, but the shadow passed over like the shadow of a cloud that covered my arms with goosebumps, and passed.

Life and death lived inside each other. That's what occurred to me. Death was inside all of us, waiting for warmer nights, a compromised system, a beetle, as in the now dying black timber on the mountains. And life was inside death, virulent and insistent as a strain of flu. How it should be.

It was memory that threw me. I tried hard not to remember and I remembered all the time.

Spencer was his name. Going to be. Sophie if a girl. Very English. In the second trimester we decided we wanted to know. Melissa's family was Scottish. Came over from Melrose when she was seven, enrolled in a West Denver primary school and was made to stand in front of the

class and repeat words like *arithmetic* while all the kids giggled and the teachers died of cuteness assault. She said she lost the accent completely in two months. Adaptable as only a seven year old can be.

Her father's name.

Not sick, not once, the whole time. Never nauseous. Never craved avocados and ice cream.

She didn't like to hunt at all but she loved to fish. She fished with me when she could. In some ways she was better than me. She didn't have the distance and accuracy in her cast but she could think more like a trout than probably anyone alive. She would stand on the bank of a creek and just breathe and watch the bugs flying in and out of the sunlight.

The guides, the freaks, did stuff like pump out the stomach of their first fish with a rubber bulb to see what they were eating right now. As if being caught, netted, held in the scalding air wasn't traumatic enough. They put the fish back, but did they live after that operation? They claimed they did, I doubted it. She didn't do anything like that. She snugged the halves of her rod together, strung it, pulled the line straight down from the top guide with a whizz of the reel and let her slender fingers slide down the length of the leader, the tippet, and pushed back the brim of her Yankees cap, and then she asked me.

Hig what should I put on?

I studied the hatch flitting in the sunlight or swarming the surface, turned over a few rocks to look at the larvae.

Eighteen Copper John on the bottom, a Rio Grand King, pretty big, on top.

She'd move her lips around looking at me like I was putting her on. Then she'd tie on a bead head prince and an elk hair caddis. Big and small just the reverse. Or she'd go with a purple wooly booger, the one with the brass conehead, which is like a swimming minnow mimic and an entirely different strategy.

Why do you ask me? I said. I think you ask and then do just the

opposite.

Her smile, bright and sudden, was one of my favorite things on the planet.

I'm not disrespecting you Hig. I'm doing a survey. Kind of calibrating what I'm thinking against the finest fisherman I know.

Flattery now. Jeez. Fish on.

She usually outcaught me. Except on the big rivers, the Gunnison, the Green, the Snake, where a long cast was helpful. The last time we went fishing we had a terrible fight.

I drank the tea. It occurred to me that Jasper owned more special quilts than any dog in history. He had his *Valdez* recliner log cabin quilt, his flying hunting dog quilt, his outside sleeping quilt covered in Whos from Whoville. He was lying flat on his side with his butt against me and his legs sticking off the cushion and he was snoring.

Is it possible to love so desperately that life is unbearable? I don't mean unrequited, I mean being *in* the love. In the midst of it and desperate. Because knowing it will end, because everything does. End.

I drank in the beginning. Every kind of food, even the horses, were all consumed in the first year, but the booze was still tucked in cabinets and closets, in basements. Bangley and I used it for treating cuts. Bangley never drank because it was part of his Code. I'm not sure if he thought of himself as a soldier or even a warrior, but he was a Survivor with a capital S. All the other, what he had been in the rigors of his youth, I think he thought of as training for something more elemental and more pure. He had been waiting for the End all his life. If he drank before he didn't drink now. He didn't do anything that wasn't aimed at surviving. I think if he somehow died of something that he didn't deem a legitimate Natural Cause, and if he had a moment of reflection before the dark, he would be less disappointed with his life being over than with losing the game. With not taking care of the details. With being outsmarted by death, or worse, some other holocaust hardened mendicant.

Sometimes I think the only reason he kept me around was so he had

someone to witness his prowess in the winning of each day. I wonder if the stunt the other night was just to let me know that it was him. That he vouchsafed our survival every day. Remember that, Hig.

I heard a joke once about a shipwreck. I heard it way back when a model named Trippa Sands was the woman in the posters on the walls of teenage boys. The cover girl of cover girls, the paragon of sexiness. She is on vacation on a big cruise ship that hits a reef in the Caribbean and sinks. She washes up on a desert island with my buddy Jed. The only survivors. They wash up onto the beach, the waves christen them with foam, they are in tatters, mostly naked, and they look into each other's eyes with the dawning apprehension of their unique solitude, and love hits them like a falling coconut. They fall hopelessly. Luckily, the island is replete with low hanging fruit and sweet fresh water, and oysters and fish that jump into their woven baskets, so that sustaining themselves is a breeze and they have a lot of leisure time just to gaze into each other's eyes and make the kind of fierce love I imagine an apocalypse affords. About a week into it Jed says, Tripp?

Ahh. Hmmm. Yes, my fragrant studliness.

I have a favor to ask you.

Of course, my sandbrushed power drill. Anything. For you.

Can you wear my cowboy hat for a few days?

Oh sure, why not!

Next day he says, Trippa?

Yes, Pooty?

I have a favor to ask you.

Anything my little mango.

Can you use a bit of this charcoal and draw on a moustache?

Hmm. Well for you, you big Cumquat, anything.

Next day they've just made love nonstop for an entire tide cycle. They

are sitting on a tortoiseshell bench watching a thunderstorm sweep over the azure water, Trippa in her hat and moustache, and Jed says, Hun?

Yes Poots.

Um, can I call you Joe?

Well, ah sure, you plunging hammerhead shark you.

Jed grabs her and shakes her shoulders.

Joe! he cries. Joe! Joe! I'm fucking Trippa Sands!

Still makes me laugh. Can't help but think of me and Bangle which isn't so funny. That he wants me to be Joe so he can show someone how well he is surviving. *I'm fucking the shit out of this survival stuff aren't I, Hig?* He never told me another thing about his upbringing except that it wasn't what you think, but I imagine that his mother, if he had one, was pretty hard to impress.

Well. I guess. I say it to Jasper who has shifted so his head is hanging down off of *Valdez* but is still snoring. I put my hand on his ribs in the short fur and rub.

Let's go flying.



It's late afternoon, my favorite time after dawn. I fuel up. The pump runs off its own solar panel. Used to use a battery and inverter but the battery died so I wired it directly to the inverter and now can only fuel up if the sun is shining which it is. I have a hand pump if I need it, but it's a pain. I fill the tanks from a stepladder, through capped intakes at the top of each wing, and it's a real pain to be on the ground and pump and keep track of the fuel level which is checked by climbing up and looking straight down into the bladder through the fill hole. I can estimate and get it close, but it's way easier just to stand up there and pull the trigger on the pump hose and hear the reassuring electric hum and the clicking of the numbers rolling on the meter like filling up a car used to be.

Used to. Plenty of gas still out in the world but problem is the auto gas went stale and bad a year or two after. 100 low lead, which I burn, is stable something like ten years. So I expect to lose it one of these days. I can add PRI and nurse it along for ten more years probably. Then I'll have to look for jet fuel which is kerosene and lasts for basically ever. I know where it is, the closest. I know that right now I'm the only one alive who knows, or at least knows how to get it out. But every time I land at Rocky Mountain Airport I feel vulnerable in a way I never do at my other stops. It's too big. A big old jetport with scores of buildings, hangars, sheds and the pumps and the steel fill plates out in the open.

When I have to, me and Bangley will pow wow. Maybe we'll have to break camp. Can't imagine. Or maybe I'll just have to take him with me to cover my back every time I fill up which would be a kind of party for him but would leave Erie wide open for at least half an hour.

Jasper is sitting up in his seat and I taxi past the rows of private aircraft still tied down. All have flat and rotted tires, many cracked windshields from hail. Some, the ropes frayed and wore and broke in big winds, and the planes upended or rolled into others across the ramp, or further. Last spring we had a gale and a Super Cub broke loose and ended up in the second story plate window of a fancy house across the runway, on Piper Lane, which was fitting. The green street sign like a pre-printed headstone.

Why don't I fly one of the Super Cubs or Huskies? Some narrow tandem (one seat in front, one in back), something more agile, that can swoop down and land short, can basically land and take off on a tennis court? Why do I fly my eighty year old Cessna four seater?

Because the seats are side by side. So Jasper can be my copilot. The real reason. The whole time I fly I talk to him, and it amuses me no end that the whole time he pretends not to listen.

We taxi between the rows. There are some beautiful old planes. The colored stripes, the blues and golds and reds are fading. The numbers. One I used to fly, a little home-built plane with a pull down bubble cockpit, stands nose down to the tarmac like a forlorn bird, the U.S. Air Force stars painted on the fuselage burned to washed splashes. It was built by a longtime friend of mine, Mike Gagler. An Alaska bush pilot

who ended up flying jets for the airlines and built planes as a hobby. Never did anything like anyone else almost as a matter of principle. He died early with his family in a yellow house I can see from the open door of the hangar. He refused to go to the hospital, said they were just a way for the government to get the dead in one place. He was the last in his family to die, by force of will, so his wife and two daughters would have someone to hold them. I buried the four of them with the airport's backhoe when it still ran.

In the early days I took it out, Mike's RV-8, and wasted gas. Left Jasper sitting anxious and alone by the gas pumps and climbed straight into the sun and kept pulling the stick until the sky rolled down beneath me and the horizon came down over my head like the visor of a helmet. Big, slow, sickening backward loops and fast barrel rolls. I did it because I didn't know what else to do.

Then I'd buzz the runway at ten feet and see Jasper rooted on his haunches following me with his eyes, and even at that speed I knew he was worried, and grieving that I might leave him like everything else had done, so I stopped.

The wind sock midfield swings northward, puffing without urgency, so we turn south onto the taxiway, and I jam the throttle and we take off. One thing about everybody dying is that you don't have to use the designated runway.

Nothing is designated anymore. If it weren't for Bangley I'd forget my name.



I figure we'll fly the big circle then stop for a Coke. Scout the meadows below Nederland, below the peaks of the Divide, fly the spiral inward, check the roads and the two trails while there's good light, make sure Bangley is clear of visitors at least a day in the three directions, then land at the soda fountain and bring back a couple cases. Only eight minutes out to the northeast toward Greeley. A peace offering. Of bloated cans and plastic bottles. There's a stack of Dr. Pepper I can see with the headlamp in back of the semi, maybe now's the time to spring it on him like Christmas. Bangley seems like a Dr. Pepper man. One of Sprite for the families, land there one time, it's been a few weeks. As

we bank left, north, the lowering sun spills through the glass like something molten.

Look straight down, the tract development north of the airport patterns itself in the head to toe lollipops of feeder and cul de sac, and if I squint, to blur the ones burned, I can imagine a normal late spring evening.

Continue the climbing bank west and level out at eight hundred feet and begin my scan.



Nothing. Nothing the whole way. Roads empty. Blessedly. Usually are. Had there been wanderers it would have fucked up everything, delayed our hunt. Then I would have swooped, cut the engine, played the tape. I have four songs on the CD rigged to the amp and the speakers: they are titled

Turn Back North or Die

Turn Back South or Die

Turn Back East or Die

Turn Back West or Die

The words are easy to remember: just the title over and over. Followed by the exhortative: We know you are here. You will become dog food like many before you.

Bangley made me add that.

Fuck no, I said. That's unnecessary and disgusting.

Bangley just stared at me, his grin half formed.

It's true ain't it? Ain't it Hig?

Hit me like a punch.

Add it, he said. This isn't some debutante ball.

Mostly it works. Enough unknowns, enough survived that visitors can't be sure there isn't some phalanx of Mongols at the airport waiting to tear them apart. Which I guess we are. A phalanx of two. No, three.

And they must think: These guys have an air force, a loudspeaker, a recording, what else have they got? We have Bangley, I think. You have no idea what that means. You better fucking turn back.

If they need more convincing I've gotten pretty good at shooting Bangley's Uzi machine pistol out my window on a left bank. I try not to hit anybody but sometimes I do.

I have been shot at fourteen times. Three went through the fuselage. Most people don't know how to shoot at airplanes. They never lead us enough.

Nobody now. Highway 7 is clear, 287, the interstate. Our trail west. Sun is pouring down Boulder Canyon brushing the tops of the Flatirons. Used to be our favorite day hike, the trail along the base of the slabs, when the when. To the north Mount Evans flushes with blood snow. Misjudged the time, no time to scout the hills if I am going on a beverage run. In truth I don't need to scout them anyway. I do it because it's beautiful to fly low over the foothills but we know where the deer are. If we are going to cut elk sign it will be on the ground. I bank east and beeline straight for the power plant on the St. Vrain SW of Greeley. It's a jackknifed double trailer semi half off the county road, half into a long farm driveway. I can see it five miles out. The dirty red and white sides catch the sun like a billboard. Hijacked for the potable water, I guess, the bottled water inside and all the pop. First time I saw the truck it probably wouldn't have occurred to me to land, but for the five bodies strewn around it. And one doubled out the driver's window. Tableaux of gunplay made me throttle back and circle.

I am not as quick as I once was, I am sure. Sometimes it is fog and shaggy horses. But the bodies spoke from the ground and the truck blazoned. Think, Hig. A gun battle around a Coke truck.

Which led to our monthly treat.

That first time, the farm pond east of the semi was slicked black in a crescent along the north bank, and wrinkled over the rest so I circled and landed on the yellow dotted line to the north, into the wind. I climbed down and turned for Jasper who waited bunched and excited on my seat, and I carried him to the ground. I dragged the men off into

the grassy ditch by their boots so Jasper could—Discovered early on that it is easier that way than by the arms.

The doors of the rear trailer were padlocked, a simple brass U lock. I walked to the farmhouse and across a muddy yard and found the bolt cutters in the tractor shed.

Didn't occur to me til some months later that I could fly Bangley out there and he could drive the truck right to the airport. By then I enjoyed bringing back a few cases at a time. By then I figured to make it last the years of our lives. Little enough in our lives to celebrate.

Didn't occur to me either until much later that by then, by then if it were years, the cans might be utterly ruined by freeze and thaw. No matter. It was a good system now.

That first time I loaded three cases into the Beast and closed and latched the doors. I had the key turned in the mags to start the plane when I climbed out again and tied the strip of a man's red shirt to a mile marker for a wind indicator. Mile 4. I remember.

Riddled with three .22 bullet holes in a three inch group. Pretty good. Probably the farm boy practicing for prairie dogs.

Today it is again from the north. The wind. Shifted one eighty in less than an hour which is typical this time of year. This time of year I have seen the wind socks at either end of the runway at Erie facing in opposite directions, which makes for an interesting landing.

A line of telephone poles runs along the east edge of the road. Doesn't matter, they were set back far enough. The small reflector poles and mile markers easily pass under the wings. My first instructor told me that in an emergency landing a paved road was almost always wide enough if you landed dead center, almost always enough setback on any kind of pole or sign. What got dicey was a nice wide looking dirt road. The signpost you don't see could be the one that grabs a wing and cartwheels you.

Still, I bank left for a final approach into the wind, very high, and float down on full flaps, down the middle of the left lane sighting a spot on the road just short of a tall cottonwood, then at the horizon ahead, the

road rising to meet me, floating downward, and then I smoothly pull the yoke, back back back to my chest and flare and settle one light bump while the stall horn blares. Still, after all these years, the thrill of a good landing. Have done it many times before from this direction and know I don't even need to lean on the brakes, just hold the nose up and let the plane roll out to the driveway and the truck.

One tap of the brakes, Jasper sitting his seat on his haunches on the thick quilt in copilot position, jerked forward just a little, resetting his front feet. Pull the red mixture knob and cut the engine. A prolonged sputter, the whirring prop becoming visible, slowing then silence.

Wind shudders the windscreen, shakes the plane. Windier than I thought. Gusty. Flattening the short grass in the field, intermittent like a breeze through a crew cut. Purple asters in the ditch nodding. The side window is open, I rest my elbow. Smell of damp earth rich with rot and newness. Heady with memory as only smell can be. Still a tang of ancient manure from the mud feedlot back of the sheds. Everything unstable this time of year.

Turn to Jasper.

Welcome to Old Coke City. Another On Time Arrival and perfect landing brought to you by the flight crew at Mongrel Air. Please remain seated until the aircraft has come to a complete stop. Careful opening the overhead bin.

Jasper deigns one glance, disapproving, and continues staring straight ahead through the windshield, brow furrowed like any good copilot. He doesn't appreciate joking while on the job. He knows we're going to the truck so he watches the truck twenty yards ahead.

Then he growls. Short. A low huff that puffs the loose skin over his upper teeth.

Okay we *are* at a complete stop. There is no overhead bin. Don't be a stickler. Jeez.

His growl lower now, continuous. Hackles standing, hair on the rough behind smoothed flat over tight skin. Eyes fixed on the back of the Coke trailer. My hair, the small hairs on the back of my own neck,

prickle and stand. Follow his eyes. The white painted latch back of the trailer angles out from the faded red door. A strip of black shadow between the two. Doors. The right one ajar. Barely. The smell coming north to south down the road. To us.

Without taking eyes off the truck I reach across for the AR. It's racked vertically, muzzle upwards in a bracket fixed to the front left side of Jasper's seat. Next to it the machine pistol. Thumb the latch of the chrome strapping and lift out the rifle. Courtesy of Bangley.

Okay, boy. Good one.

Whispering now, no reason.

Okay, c'mon.

No use to tell him to stay in the plane. He never will. Not in these gigs. Don't want him to sprain something jumping out. I unlatch my door. Two steps, wing strut to ground, half turn and gather him in one arm, the right, and lower him to the tarmac, his claws scrabbling for pavement.

Okay. Heel.

He knows. Has been through this before. Too many times.

We are sixty feet maybe fifty five. I fly with the rifle racked because it is too difficult to do in the air. Pull out the collapsable stock Bangley made me. Thumb the safety. Push the lever over, full auto to semi. The wind is light for a minute, warm in our faces, and rounded a little to the west carrying complex scents, earth, flower, even maybe salt. Of the sea. How far? Nine hundred miles at least. I listen. Just breeze catching in the whorl of my left ear. Jasper's growl has not ceased. I step. Wait. Step again. A kestrel flies over right to left, not high, a stooping, cantered flight. Step again. We cover half the distance and stop. Crouch and then go to one knee. Low as possible without going prone. Prone is best but prone is hard to move fast. Like this, if they fire out of the trailer, I am confident they will shoot high.

Bark of my own voice startles me.

You are dead men.

Wind.

You are dead men. You try to shoot your way out you are definitely dead men.

Jasper's growl. Sun warm on my left brow and cheek.

You are fish in a barrel. You hear me! You try to fight and this is your last minute on earth. Throw out your weapons come out. COME OUT! Hands where I can see them. If you do, do what I say I will not harm you. My word.

Wind. Sun. Bird. I am thinking, Do I mean that? No harm. I am not even sure. Whatever happens here I plan to live.

Three two one—OKAY YOU DIE!

I sight the iron sights. I know the last cases in the back are stacked to the roof. A third of the trailer emptied. Gives me enough angle not to shoot up the bottles and cans, probably. Two shots high—

No wait. A clank of steel, a scrape. Hand holding a crowbar snakes through the gap.

Steel bar, hand, forearm.

Drop it! Drop it! Drop it!

It drops. Hits the road with a clang.

STEP OUT, hands where I can see them.

They are big hands. Hair on the back dirty. Stuck through the gap they look like a thug trying to do a hand puppet show. Forearms in a blue ski jacket too short for his arms, greasy but new. Door pushed wider. Mallet head, wide blonde dreds, camo bush hat. Tangled beard. A huge man stepping down off the bumper, unwilling to turn his back.

There are two more.

Hoarse shout, the voice rolling through a half ton of gravel. Blinking back the sun.

A plane that runs. Where'd you get a plane that runs? Goddamn.

Shut the fuck up. Tell them. The same. Hands first.

Baseball bat, hands, arms in an oiled Australian duster, another Mongo stepping down. Long hair in a thick braid, eyes jittery: my face, the gun, the dog, the ditch. Wants to bolt. Jasper's growl a step lower.

You ain't got no bullets in that thing. World ran out of fucking bullets. Hear that Curtis? Calling back. Edging west. One step two.

Captain Pilot thinks he's gonna shoot us. Eyes skittered: the gun to the ditch.

Woulda done it already. Yes he would. Likes to talk this one.

Me thinking: So far he's been doing all the talking.

C'mon out Curtis. This is copasetic. Man's *kneeling* at thirty feet, got a gun but no bullets.

Him the closest one now three feet from the partly open door. I sight with both eyes open. Always have. Advantages. I can see the door. I can feel the evening pulling taut like a twisting wire. Dreds calling my coordinates like a mortar man. Heat. The heat of pure anger climbing into my neck, pure and clean like a white gas. My finger on the smooth cold curve of the trigger.

Door swings. Open. A shadow. Edge pulling back like a curtain, light following, lighting, lit the man in motion, swinging the bow across and down. I fire. Twice. Arrow like a hole torn in air, angry thwip of a vacuum high and wide, the man blown back, bow clattering, the front wall of Cokes toppling and spilling. Silence. One Dr. Pepper rolls out hits the road.

The two on the road half crouched and frozen, arms in reflex covering their heads. Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee.

The can of Dr. Pepper has rolled over, rested against Pony Tail's boot. A string of blood drips from trailer edge to the pavement where the can fell.

Look what you did. I am yelling. You fucking bonehead scum. Ruined it. Probably twenty cases of pop.

My chest, breath, vibrate with adrenalin and fury.

Killed your buddy too. Nice fucking try.

The men frozen, arms covering, crouched. This the last pathetic gesture before death. Fully expecting now to die. The gun already sighted on Dreds, finger already pressed on the trigger. Breathing hard. I hold there breathe. I will kill them.

Fuckers tried to kill me. For Coke. Well. For a not quite daily Coke. Twenty four in a case, once a month, I bring it back. The week going without—a contrived measure of want to make the next run a treat. For me and. To up my value with Bangley. Face it. Landing at the families' place with the Sprite like a god.

One is whimpering, the blonde one. Not bothering to beg.

Have to kill them. Leave them and they will empty the truck, hide it all in the ditches, windbreaks, no more monthly treat. These few things. Few enough things to look forward to. Plus they tried to kill me.

Dreds kneels, covers his eyes with his huge hands just like a kid playing peekaboo and crying. Pony Tail squeezing his head with forearms watching me in naked terror, half wincing, quivers, bracing for the shot.

Get up.

Get it over with! Dreds screams.

Get up. I'm not going to kill you.

The words like liquid nitrogen. A moment of complete freeze.

What you're gonna do is drag your buddy to the ditch and not say a word, not one fucking word while my dog has dinner.

The images colliding, conflicting in their terror shorn minds. Their own lives, the relief not even digested or believed, the horror of the feeding

dog. Creates a vortex, a crosscurrent like the two flags at the airport facing each other in contrary winds. They both start to tremble. Hard.

I mean it. Not gonna shoot you. Like you said I would have already. Certainly would.

Hands down watching me. Kill them for a Coke. Not a staple, a luxury. The way before we killed for diamonds, for oil. Not. Not today.

You're gonna drag your buddy to the ditch and then you're gonna load twenty cases, fifteen of Coke, five of Sprite, and oh yeah two extra of Dr. Pepper, you're gonna load them in the back of the plane nice and neat and then I'm gonna climb in and fly away. And you can have the rest. Because I can't prevent it. Once I take off. Unless I kill you. Which I won't. Done too much of that. Go on.

The kestrel is over the field. The wind is in the short grass, the sun is almost on the Divide. He will hover and hunt until past dusk. Hover and swoop, hover and swoop. In his little helmet, hovering tireless, treading air. Hunting mice and voles.

I feel sick. Want to throw up on the road but won't. Sick of defending whatever it is I'm supposed to defend.



They loaded the cans. They dragged their compa to the ditch and I whistled once, turned my back. They carried four cases stacked at once, it went fast. I told them to load in the bow and quiver. Pony Tail swung a long necklace of shriveled leather pieces when he bent over. Both of them smelled like death.

You're a dead man anyway, Pony Tail grumbled, passing me with a load.

What'd you say?

Nothin. Grunting the cases through the jump door.

What the fuck did you say?

He turned, passed. I stopped him with the barrel of the AR.

What was that about being a dead man?

Shoved the barrel into his ribs hard. His grunt.

The A-rabs. You can kill us but the A-rabs will kill you.

What d'you mean the A-rabs?

We heard it. In Pueblo. Ham radio. The A-rabs. They're here. Or coming. Kill us all.

He spat. Inches from my boot.

What is that? Shove.

What is what?

That. Your necklace.

He stood straight, swallowed. His eyes gold green in the last full sun. Mocking.

Them are cunts. Dried cunts.

I pulled the trigger. Tore him open. Without thought. Left him sprawled back on the road, guts spilled. The other, the Dreds dropped his load of cases and ran. South. South between two green fields. Beneath a reef of clouds flushed rose an antic figure diminishing to a dot.



Try to do the right thing. Circumstance intervenes. What am I going to do with twenty cases of Coke? Dole them out to Bangley?

V

When I told Bangley about the encounter at the Coke truck he took a can of snuff out of his vest pocket, a new can, and slid his sharp thumbnail around the coping of the lid and pried it off. I could smell it from the workbench, strong salty must like a shovelful of turned peat. He tucked it into his lower jaw, backed up two steps and spit out the hangar door, this one success in the domestic training of the man.

Thanks.

Hell Hig, once I learned this was going to be your kitchen and formal parlor, hell.

He leaned back against the high stool I put there for him near the door. So he could talk and twist and spit. He leaned, half standing, legs straight, arms crossed, never truly sat.

So you gave em a chance to live.

Turned, spat.

You were a Boy Scout.

Watching me. I imagined his mineral eyes when they shift make a dry sound like stirring gravel.

Ready to compromise an important source of caffeine. Not to mention carbonation. Not much carbonation in our lives, Hig. Effervescent we are not.

Couldn't help but smile at him. He turned, spat.

You were willing to sacrifice your own life too. Twice. No, thrice.

What's thrice for four? I can't even keep track.

He loosed a hand from under his crossed arms and winced down his eyes, scrunched his mouth, made to count. He had a three day beard, gray stubble like wire. Gave up.

Let's see: first mistake not working around to the side where you could shoot wide of the cargo and clear the back. You told me the trailer is two thirds full. Well. Plenty of room. And chances are the combatants are huddled up by the door. Got plenty of ammo. Anyway it would've flushed em. The guy with the bow could never have got set up.

Shook his head. Not amused.

Second time: when the guy called back to his buddy behind the door and basically gave your coordinates. Sighted you in, Hig. Gave his shooter angle and distance. Only thing I can figure for a move that bold is they knew they were dead anyway and thought to give this one desperate effort a chance. I mean, they knew they were dead with anyone else in the hemisphere but old Hig. They didn't count on that. Hig who must be trying to get to heaven.

Spat.

So they call out, Here's how to shoot this fucker, and you said you had them sighted. Now that would have been the time to pull off a shot or two. At least three. Kill the outside man first, that fast, the one closest to the shoulder where he could turn the corner of the trailer, then the inside man, then the man who was obviously in the back of the trailer about to try to kill you. Bang bang bang.

Spat.

Nope. Not old Hig. Never fails to astound me. You wait til the door swings open and you see the guy with the drawn bow, and you wait til he looses off a shot just in case maybe he was hunting pheasant or something and didn't have your ass in mind—

Not like that.

He got off a shot or didn't he?

No use arguing. I leaned back against the workbench, crossed my own arms. I was embarrassed. I can say that.

Okay so you plug him. First right move all morning. But how many cases were ruined? If we had set up to the side like a good tactician, well. But okay. He's terminated. Threat neutralized. The other two are

big pussies and freeze, stead of taking that opportunity to attack or retreat.

Shook his head.

They give the Hig one last golden opportunity. Far as you know. Present themselves as perfect targets. Practically begging you to end it.

Spat. Uncrossed arms, lifted the brim of the sweat stained camo cap and scratched his thinning scalp. Replaced the cap. Grin straight across.

But no. We are going to put ourselves in mortal danger again. Fact we are going to *give* them the whole trailer of soda pop for their troubles. Which, by the way, Hig, you never told me it was a semi. Which we coulda drove over here anytime. I always figured a warehouse or something. Never even thought to ask.

Twisted, spat. Stayed half turned looking out into the sun across the ramp and the runway.

Turned back.

Well, your call. You found it. Stared at me.

Where were we? Oh yeah. I mean they tried their best to kill us, it's the best we can do. Give them all the Coke. Consolation prize. I guess. So we're gonna give it to em, but we'll give em another chance to kill us first. We'll get them to load us up with our own tiny consolation prize, and give them proximity while we're at it, you close enough you can touch em with the gun, them big and fast, perfect opportunity for another attack. One of you, two of them, the situation not controlled, not in the least, loading, unloading, the two at constantly moving spots, constantly changing angles, no restraints, not even tied together. Just like a work party, huh, Hig? Well.

Spat.

Well, might have been the best break you got all day. Because maybe it wasn't the smartest fucking move, but you are lucky Hig. That's one goddamn thing I'll say. Because then they gave you intel. Totally out of the blue. Un fucking prompted. Not even under duress. Not from Hig.

We get the beta about the A-rabs.

Now he cursed for real. Under his breath. Now he didn't turn, he spat on the floor of the hangar.

We get the beta about A-rabs and what do you do? You plug the fucker. *NOW* you plug him. Finally realize he's not a Boy Scout like you, and you off him in cold blood. Before they could tell you what the fuck they meant. First intel about a possible *real* visitor, I mean a visitor with some fucking muscle, a possible goddamn *invasion*, and you terminate the conversation. Because you discover, oh surprise surprise, that the man is a rapist and a killer like every other survivor walking around this goddamn country. Holy shit. What a goddamn shock. *Goddamn*.

He was officially steamed. His neck, face were red. That one vein throbbing in his forehead. I felt the heat in my own face. He's right. That's what I thought. If I get caught short and killed one day it's because I'm too soft. Right? Is it worth living the other way? Bangley's way? Well, I'm an apprentice. Still. An acolyte in the School of Bangley. Just by living here. And not too great at it. Still.

Good job, he said. Happy hunting.

Stood up, unkinked his back, walked off.

Well, that didn't work out so well. I stopped at the truck to bring Bangley back a treat. Was thinking of him. Hunh. He didn't even take a Coke not a single one. He wouldn't take one while we were gone either. I knew the man. He might watch us in our sleep through a night scope but he would never touch a thing inside the hangar. Part of his Code. Anyway the Coke is tainted now. Tainted with incompetence. Here at what cost. Because even though I survived the encounter there is a cost. Statistical if nothing else. For Bangley, we only get so many fuckups before the jaws close, so the fight at the truck puts one more in my column which for better or worse is now his column. That's what steams him the most. He doesn't want to lose because he suffered some fool.

I blew the air out of my cheeks. Thought: The mountains will be good. Good to get up there. Breathe some fresh air. Thought: Strange. One other person but the families in a hundred square miles and I still need

fresh air.

VI

Now we walk fast in the dark. Me and Jasper, the sled scraping behind. Cold. Good and cold. High stars nettle the black, no moon, crossing under the Milky Way like crossing a deep river. Never will get to the other side. We never do.

The argument with Bangley still rankles. Now just our breaths. Winter fat. Can feel it in my legs. Good to move, move fast.

I pull the sled on a lead with my right hand then switch. Pack is in the sled, rifle too. This time, Thanks Bangley, wearing a subcompact handgun, a plastic Glock weighs almost nothing. A sense of more survivors around, increasing traffic, don't know why.

Pass the tower on our right. Pass the Spot without a shudder. Thoughts come with the rhythm of the fast steps. Can get used to killing the way you can get used to a goat on the doorstep. Uncle Pete. With his bottle and cigarillos and stories. His living on a yacht with Louise. Their living in a trawler in Alaska. As if somehow being afloat could make a life more compelling. Never liked whiskey, he told me. But I drink it because it has a storied history.

The dead goats multiply. You can pull a goat off into the field, but a memory you can only haul into the sun and hope it desiccates. Dries to something crumbled and odorless.

We walk. We are half an hour from the first slopes, the first trees. The night is without weight: the dark weightless now in its immanent passing like a deer about to bolt. The morning light a thought that is just occurring. Still and quiet, high stars, no wind.

I think about the Plains tribes, the ones that lived here, that moved through. The Utes the Arapaho the Cheyenne. The Comanches came this far, the Sioux moving and hunting and raiding, the Kiowa, the occasional Apache. When I was a boy I read about the wars and raids between them and wondered why anyone would fight in a country this big. Why the landscape ever became a territory that needed division. Well. Bangley and I are two and sometimes our resource base seems cramped. Not because we don't have enough food, enough raw

materials, enough quilts. It is ideological. Ideology that tears apart nations. Tore, past tense. What nations now? Whoever is left still fighting, scrapping over the leftovers. Maybe banding together like me and Bangley.

Still we are divided, there are cracks in the union. Over principle. His: Guilty until—until nothing. Shoot first ask later. Guilty, then dead. Versus what? Mine: Let a visitor live a minute longer until they prove themselves to be human? Because they always do. What Bangley said in the beginning: Never ever negotiate. You are negotiating your own death.

Me versus him. Follow Bangley's belief to its end and you get a ringing solitude. Everybody out for themselves, even to dealing death, and you come to a complete aloneness. You and the universe. The cold stars. Like these that are fading, silent as we walk. Believe in the possibility of connectedness and you get something else. A tattered union suit flying on a flagpole. Help asked and given. A smile across a dirt yard, a wave. Now the dawn not so lonely.

We are philosophers, huh, Jasper?

He's just happy to be moving. Together. He knows where we're going.



Follow the creek trail upwards. A trail long before we trod it, before the Arapaho, the aforementioned Cheyenne. Deer and elk, bighorn before. The coyotes who hunted them. Cougars. The wolves. The wolves again. Maybe mountain buffalo. Grizzlies occasionally, but mostly they are shy of trails, even game trails.

We move in and out of cottonwoods which make a deeper darkness. Thickets of willows. Up the grassy slopes going pale, into a short rock canyon echoing the spilling water. Then a ponderosa forest, smelled before seen, the scent carried downstream: redolent of vanilla, like a sweetshop. These still living. The sled scrapes over the trammeled roots, exposed rock. Clusters of deer scat long desiccated. I stop, let go the bridle, and hug a big tree, standing in a frieze of sweet sage that is also paler than the night, patches beneath the trees, fragrant also and tangy. Hug the thick rough bark, nose stuck in a resined crack, inhale vanilla strong as any small brown bottle, the tree pungent and sweet

as butterscotch. A time when we entered shops that smelled like this. Staffed with high school kids in aprons struggling to scoop the hard ice cream. Seemed cruelly hard back then. Why keep it so cold? Thin girls blowing hair back and approaching each cone like a grudge match. Rum raisin my favorite. Melissa's pistachio. Or anything with chunks of toffee. But adored a butterscotch sundae. The saliva running in my mouth at the base of the tree. Would kill for it now maybe, not even a figure of speech.

Jasper is patient. He sits, then lies down. In other years he would have ranged ahead and swung out on our flanks, wide, crossing and recrossing the trail, following his nose, picking up game, irrepressible, but now he is happy to rest. Me too. We are in no hurry. There is plenty of stored food at the airport and Bangley can get along without me for a few days, though I hope not too well. Always the fear when we take to the mountains that he will learn to like it like this better. Alone. Though he is smart enough, a good enough tactician to know that long term his odds go down. Plus, he is not a farmer. Jasper has been through this before too many times and is polite enough not to be visibly embarrassed. The hugging a tree, the mutterings. Tonight—it is still night, though barely—I don't say a word, because tonight I am watching myself a little and I have always despised the sentimental, maybe because it is a familiar weakness. But the tree smells almost sweeter than anything in our world now and it smells like the past.

Apples used to be one of the sweetest things. In North America. Why they were such a treat, why the student currying favor left one on the teacher's desk. Honey and apples. Molasses. Maple sugar in the north woods. A candy cane at Christmas. Visions of sugarplums dancing in their heads. Sometimes in the fall on the way back from a patrol we land at an orchard north of Longmont. Acres and acres of apples, varieties I don't know the names of, most of the trees long dead for lack of water, those living along the still flowing old ditches gone scraggly, bristling with new shoots, reverting to some kind of wildness, the apples stunted and pecked, ravaged by caterpillars, but sweet. Sweeter than before. Whatever is left of whatever they distill is more concentrated in their complete and dangerous freedom.

I inhale deeply, arms stretched round, palms to the rough skin which is warmer somehow than the air, fingers holding the flaked corduroy of

the bark with almost the same affinity, the same sense of arrival as they would hold to the swells of a woman.

These small what? Gratifications. And smell is always the smell itself and memory, too, don't know why.

We climb along the creek as the grainy gray seeps between the tall skeletal trees, the beetle kill ponderosa and lodgepole, the branches without needles, empty handed in death.

I still don't like it here. The dead forest. Which began to die in great swaths twenty years before. We climb. Step down to the stony bank, the cobbles rounded like eggs. To rest, drink, then climb again. Up into the spruce and fir which are still fragrant and thick with rich darkness yet.

Jasper. C'mon. You're lagging boy. Not feeling so good?

Run fingers through his thick short fur, up the bumpy ridge of his back, to the loose skin of his neck, and dig. Dig. He loves that. Turns his head away to stretch the skin. Have to bring aspirin next time. We have pounds of aspirin. Bangley says we should take it every day so we don't get Alzheimer's.

So we don't forget why the fuck we're here! he shouts, as close to glee as he gets.

So *you* don't forget. Seems to be more important to you than to me, Hig. To remember shit. Eat some goddamn aspirin.

Bangley perceptive in his own way, a judge of character.

We rest. I sit on a bench rock above a pool and Jasper lies over my feet. Does that when he's not feeling well. Morning now, the gray suffused with color. Barely. We rest until the sun filters straight through the trees with, I swear, a slight jangle as of loose banjo strings. The creek responding, a burble and lip.

Last fall I saw elk tracks. One set that wended down from the dark spruce, printed themselves in the silt where the creek ran in summer, and were lost again on the smooth dusty stones of the gravel bar. One. A large cow. A ghost. They, all of them, supposed to be gone.

A shriek. Kingfisher. Sometimes a kingfisher keeps us company. Lilts upstream ahead of us. The dipping flight reminds me of telephone wires weighted with ice, the same arc again and again and again. He perches on a dead limb over the creek, screams, flies again. Telling us, it seems, to keep up. For miles. Maybe lonely, shorn of company. Sometimes a dipper bobbing the stones at water's edge. Maybe once a year we see an osprey.

We like the birds, huh Jasp?

He opens his eyes a sec, doesn't lift his head off my boot. If I say another thing, I know him well enough: he'll lift his head to look at me to check if there is some subject that truly concerns him, that maybe I am asking for some consideration and he will hold the gaze on my face until he figures out what it is, or if it is nothing, so I don't say another word. Let him rest.

We rouse ourselves and climb. The ascent steep here, twisting up into the first bulwark of the hills.

We cross the old state highway at midday. Don't even touch the broken macadam, walk the big corrugated culvert beneath it, dry now since a flood washed the revenant and sent the creek around. Hollow in there. I think of Jonah and the belly of the whale. Used to shout and sing inside it to hear my compounding echo but don't anymore.

Jasper didn't like it.

We cross the highway and continue up the creek. I wait for Jasper to catch up. He looks stiff in the hips, his breath short, panting. First long walk this year, he is probably out of shape like I am, carrying a little winter fat.



Two wolves. Two sets of tracks in and out of the fine mud at the very edge of the water, moving fast. Catches Jasper's attention. For a minute. Hackles rise but he quickly loses interest. Seems preoccupied with keeping up as if the walking is taking all his attention.



At what might be two, I decide to give us both a break. We are in no

hurry. We are still some miles below where I saw the tracks but that means nothing.

Could be anywhere up here, huh, Jasper?

I pull the rod case out of the sled so he knows he is officially off duty.



A shallow run above a short rocky drop, just riffles. A fallen tree sieves the stream. Not quite canyon yet, but the big dark trees still living, the blue spruce and Norway, the doug fir, lean in close, their limbs strung with Spanish moss that tilts and moves in the wind. The moss I wonder how old. It is dry and light to the touch, almost crumbly, but in the trees it moves like sad pennants.

I assemble and string the rod and Jasper lies on a flat rock and watches me. It is the only one sunstruck and he watches me in a patch of warmer light, his own shadow thrown on the cobbles conforming to the round stones like thin water. The stalks of last year's mullein stand on the bar like lightless candles. In the same sunlight I can see a hatch of tiny midges almost a mist.

I take off boots and pants, slip on the light, sticky soled sneakers I've used for years. When the rubber wears out I've got more. On the last trip to the parking lot at the box store I took five pairs my size. Not as light, but workable. Three years maybe a set so that should last me until until. I can't imagine. The pictures don't cohere in my head. To multiply the years and divide by the desire to live is a kind of false accounting. We'll keep track of this little rill. Of tying on fresh tippet and the tufty fly, and we'll blow on it for luck. Of this cast and the next and if we ourselves are lucky it will add up to nightfall.

And dinner. I want to yell that to Jasper but he is sleeping and he knows the word and would get too excited so I won't yell it until I catch a fish. The first one always goes to him.



I fished for a couple of hours. Cast and cast the caddis again and again. I walked to the top of the bend fishing the shallow water which turned silver as the sun came over the cut of the creek upstream. The current was silver and black twining, like mercury and oil. Then the sun

moved over beyond the ridge and put us in cold shadow and the water reflected only the clear sky and I could see the stones again in the shallower runs. Green stones and water blue where it wrinkled and riffed. Somehow Jasper knows even in his sleep when I am walking more than a few steps and he roused himself and followed me and curled in a sand hollow between stones about fifty yards up. I left the fly on and tied a length of tippet to the hook and snugged on a beaded pheasant tail and caught four big carp in a few minutes. I let the bottom fly roll past the pool, the top caddis drifting easily, and it would stop, a small hitch, fleeting, not even a jerk, and then I knew a carp was mouthing the nymph below and I struck and set the hook. They fought without the vigor of a trout but with a sullen reluctance like a mule digging in its heels. They didn't charge upstream or wrap themselves in the branches of an old deadfall, they simply refused to budge which wasn't fun, but then there wasn't much fun anymore and I came to admire their stoicism. A stolid refusal to be yet consumed by the universe.

Like us.

So when I picked the fat torso up in two hands and thwacked the head on a rock I said Thanks bud knowing just what it feels like not to be ready.

I whistled. Jasper may be near deaf but something in the whistle tickles something in his head deeper than hearing and he uncurled and stood a little shakily and shook himself off and came trotting happily upstream and I gave him the first fish which could have weighed seven pounds. I filleted it, gave him the two slabs of gray meat, the head and the tail, and threw the bones back in the creek. The next one I caught I split and cleaned and the stomach was full of midges and a few big crawdads.

Already late. I'd been wading all afternoon and the current was cold where it pushed up against my knees and thighs but my feet were long numb with that kind of dead warmth. Starting to get chilled. I caught a fifth fish, smaller, cleaned it and pushed the butt end of a hooked stick through its gills and slid it down to the others on the stringer. Lay it in the sled. Rubbed my naked legs to get the blood going. The sun was gone, the creek now luminous in early dusk. I felt what? Happy. We were thinking of nothing but the creek, but dinner, but making a camp

just upstream on a sandy bar I liked to visit. I slipped my pants back on, sat on a rock and put on my boots. Jasper was revived after the fish, watching me with his mouth open, smiling because he knew we weren't going far and there would be another fish or two, this time cooked and salted.

Okay, let's go.

We walked around a thicket of willow and alder not yet leafed out and found the path through a stand of green and living and venerable fir trees, the bark, the almost pumpkin orange they get when very old, and we found our fire pit in the sand a few rocky yards from the water and the smooth sleeping place beneath one of the big old trees.

I pulled some fallen limbs out of the denser woods that backed the camp and broke them up and lay them over a pillow of dried Spanish moss and quickly made a fire. So we could warm up. The wood was dry and full of resin and popped and cracked which was a domestic song above the syllabic murmur of the creek and the wind in the high boughs. Darkness was already in the forest, it filled the little canyon like a slow tide, and the flames deepened it but the sky was still bright with the thinnest blue and I could see two stars.

Jasper was happy too. He curled up close to the fire upwind and out of the smoke and lay his head on his paws and watched me cook our fish on a light long handled mountain frying pan which must have been made a hundred years ago. The handle was wrapped in a sheath of shiny tin to disperse heat and stamped with Simpson and Sons Ranchware. A hundred years ago when the ranchers ran their herds up in the mountains in summer on Forest Service leases and camped for days, rounding them up in the fall like a cowboy song. Those hardbitten riders squatting at just such a fire. What they could never have imagined. What we can't, cooking our fish here in the pan heavy with carp and spitting salvaged olive oil. Spit and sizzle, pop of branches, the flutter of flames in a shifting wind, the same wind downstream carrying cold from the higher slopes and rushing in the limbs of the trees like the ghost of long ago surf.

Jasper is sitting up like a Sphinx now watching me closely. His moment. I salt the biggest fish, lay it on a flat stone and pull out the skeleton from the tail up, unzipping the bones.

Provecho.

He is up, tail wagging, first time today, and gobbles his dinner with quiet grunts.

I tie a taut line from the big tree standing sentinel on our camp back to a young alder and string up the tarp just to keep the dew off.

I cook a fish for me and kneel by the water on the rocks and drink and splash my face. In the smooth dark between stones with barely a current a waterskater slides away and a handful of stars shimmer.

I spread out our bed under the tree and lie down. Get up again, untie two corners of the tarp and slide it back to the tree. We'll get dewed on a little but I don't care, we can dry everything out by the fire in the morning. Tonight I want to see the sky. Lie down again and Jasper walks stiff to me almost a hobble, the hike today long, and licks my face all over until I am laughing and turn away. Then he curls against my side with his customary collapse and huff. We listen to wind high, water low. I tuck my arms under my head and watch the Dipper brighten. I feel clean. Clean and good.



In the morning I wake stiff. The sleeping bag and Jasper are covered in frost. So is my wool hat. Maybe not the best idea to sleep uncovered. It's okay, we'll start a fire in a minute.

You must be cold, boy. C'mere. I pull at his Whoville quilt to fold it over him. He is heavy, unmoving. Getting stiffer, the morning's harder.

C'mon, bud, this'll be better. Til I start a fire. C'mon.

He ignores me. I tug at the quilt and lay it over him brush his ear.

My hand stops. His ear is frozen. I run my hand around to his muzzle, rub his eyes.

Jasper, you alright? Rub and rub. Rub and tug his ruff.

Hey, hey.

Pull on the scruff of his neck. Hey, wake up.

I push up to sitting and roll over, chest on his back, and cover him.

Hey, it's okay. Sleep for a while.

Sleep.

I pull him, stiff and curled, closer to me and lay the quilt over him and lie back. I breathe. I should have noticed. What a hard time he was having on the walk. The tears that weren't there yesterday flood. Break the dam and flood.

Now what am I going to do? Start a fire in a few minutes.

Jasper. Little brother. My heart.

I'll start a fire. Put sticks over moss and start. I'll cook the last two fish. I'll eat one. I'll.



e have traveled.

ow you will be the path

vill walk I will walk

er you.



For the day I don't move. I keep adding wood to the fire. I leave him in his quilt wrapped and cozy just his nose sticking out. It is the sight of him there I don't want to leave.

He is the only one now. The only sight. Which. Tomorrow I'll. I don't know.

BOOK TWO

I

I don't. Don't do anything all day. Don't start the fire. Don't cook the fish. Leave them on the stringer hanging from a bough. Attractant to bear and cougar. Don't care. Get up to pee, drink a little water from the creek running colder from the icy night. Lower in its bed, the fallen tree propped on rocks upstream higher off the water. So. Retreat. Heart like the stream contracted too.

Go back to the sleeping bag and lie down next to him. Doze. Shove my leg over so I can feel his weight. Different now, wooden, but it is him. Drink in the afternoon. The day cool. The sun full on the creek, on the two of us, maybe three four hours then gone. Can smell the fish now. So.

Keep the tarp rolled back and wait for night. What was that song? *If I die before I wake, feed Jake, he's been a good dog ...* Maybe better. But then he would have had to be the one to die of heartbreak. Better like this. Like the darkness pouring back into the canyon covering the stream covering us in a black shroud. Still. No resolution ever. None. Nothing decided, nothing finished. The Dipper wheels back into place. Just one turn. One turn of the wheel and we are different, never the same. Not ever. Not even those stars. Even they, they decay, collapse, coalesce, break apart. Close my eyes. It's what's inside. What's inside moving, swimming in the pain like a blind fish forever swimming. Is what lives what remains. Renews, renews the love and the pain. The love is the creek bed and the pain fills it. Fills it every day with tears.

Sometime in the night, sometime when the Twins are over the canyon, I think about the sled and the rifle inside it. What to do with it. I feel the weight of Jasper on my knee where I have wedged it beneath him and I think: He would not approve, no. He would say: what? He wouldn't say a thing. He never left his post ever, he would give me strength that way. We never leave our posts do we? This is just who we are.

Sometime under Gemini I fall asleep.



It is the third day. At daybreak I shift, feel him in the quilt and have a moment. A moment where I have forgotten and then a moment where I remember and still expect him to stir. Fully expect him to resurrect. Because he could. We have defied everything haven't we? Why not this?

And then I sob. Sob and sob. And rouse myself and carry him in the quilt curled, carry him just under the trees and begin to dig. With a stick, with a flat rock, with my fingers.



Most of the morning until it is deep enough to discourage a bear. Fitting. This was one of our favorite camps in the world. Year after year. If his spirit could look out. To the changing creek, season to season. I lay him in wrapped in the quilt and I say

Goodbye, bud. You are Jasper. My heart. We are never apart, not here, not there.

Then I scrape back in the dirt.

I spend the rest of the day gathering stones. Cobbles, eggs, heavy rocks. Smoothed and rounded by the stream. I build a mound as high as my chest. In the top I don't know what to put. I take off my old wool sweater. As much his smell as mine. I lay it over the top and pile on more rocks. To dissolve there like a prayer flag his smell and mine washing in the seasons. As if I could cover him.

Then I load up the sled and walk upstream.



Twenty times today I stopped and turned as if to call. Hey keep up. Twenty times I rolled my shoulders back into the hill. Put my head down, feet to the track.

Stopped once, turned my face full into the sun, eyes closed, let the light sear my tears. Tipped my head back further, a coyote in full throat.

The creek on my right crashing over a ledge. The sun overwhelming eyelids, pouring down like heavy water.

If there is nothing else there is this: to be inundated, consumed.



It is not that there is nothing left. There is everything left that was before, minus a dog. Minus a wife. Minus the noise, the clamor of.

We think by talking and talking we can hold something off. Well. I couldn't, could I? You couldn't. You went along because you thought that was your job. Was I a fool? Were we both? To love is to take one side of the argument and hold it fast unto death. To land on one side with both feet. Or all four, huh, bud?

We fools going up the trail, two fools, now one.



There is a pain you can't think your way out of. You can't talk it away. If there were someone to talk to. You can walk. One foot the other foot. Breathe in breathe out. Drink from the stream. Piss. Eat the venison strips. Leave his venison in the trail for the coyotes the jays. And. You can't metabolize the loss. It is in the cells of your face, your chest, behind the eyes, in the twists of your gut. Muscle sinew bone. It is all of you.

When you walk you propel it forward. When you let go the sled and sit on a fallen log and. You imagine him curling beside you in the one patch of sun maybe lying over your feet. Not feeling so well. Then it sits with you, the Pain puts its arm over your shoulders. It is your closest friend. Steadfast. And at night you can't bear to hear your own breath unaccompanied by another and underneath the big stillness like a score is the roaring of the cataract of everything being and being torn away. Then. The Pain is lying beside your side, close. Does not bother you with the sound even of breathing.



That is some heavy shit, huh, Jasper? Getting all poetic on its ass when what it is is I miss you. I really fucking miss you.



I walked for three days. Barely ate or slept. The lying down in the bag was a pro forma kind of thing. I didn't feel like making a fire or sitting

by it, I didn't feel like sleeping or not sleeping, I didn't know what else to do. Occasionally knelt on the stones and sipped from the creek. Walked west and then north. Straight into the Indian Peaks. When I am really hunting I leave the sled and pack at a base camp or landmark and continue quietly. I bring a smaller pack for the day with the down sweater, a liter bottle so I can take to the ridges or sit the day on some slope away from water. Matches, a game saw, a parka. Now I didn't. I hauled the sled scraping and bumping and made a racket and saw no game, only chipmunks, nuthatch, crows, alarmed squirrels raising chatter from the trees, letting the whole country know: Here comes Hig. Hig with his gun. But he's not serious, he's banging around with that contraption, he doesn't look so good, Where's his mutt? The squirrel on a limb, alarmed, tail curved forward over his back, alive and twitching, the chatter as piercing as an alpenhorn. Might as well just blow a whistle. Olly Olly Incomefree. Ready or not here I come. Even the crows alight, twist their heads, fix us, me, with a shiny eye, open beak, stretch throat and dredge a signal angry cry from croaky mutterings. I inspire them. To heights of outrage. That the hunter is careless. That he is slamming up the trail. That he is heedless, loud, unaware, bungling. That he is upsetting the Order. The chain of. The hunters and hunted. A lack of respect. Something is wrong with him. *CAWWREAACHH*.

Grief is an element. It has its own cycle like the carbon cycle, the nitrogen. It never diminishes not ever. It passes in and out of everything.

The third evening it began to snow. A late spring snow but not heavy, not wet. The temperature dropped as suddenly as the passing of a cloud, cold, cold like midwinter and the wind dropped too. We were on the edge of a small basin above treeline and in the bottom were patches of old snow and a small lake recently cleared of ice. We. I. It is possible to continue together. Say what you like it felt that way to me. Walking behind, ranging to the side, the same but not apparent. Not as. A lake like a gem set in a bezel of tufted tundra and rough scree, the water green with the luminous unapologetic green of a semiprecious stone but textured with the wind. Then it wasn't. The surface stilled and glassed off, polishing itself in an instant, the water reflecting the dark clouds that massed and poured against the ridges like something molten and it was suddenly very cold and the

snowflakes began to touch the surface. Ringless, silent, vanishing. I let go the sled's bridle. I was fifty yards from the water. The snow heavier. A white scrim that darkened the air, that hastened the dusk the way a fire deepens the night. I stood transfixed. Too cold for bare hands but my hands were bare. The flakes stuck in my eyelashes. They fell on my sleeves. Huge. Flowers and stars. They fell onto each other, held their shapes, became small piles of perfect asterisks and blooms tumbled together in their discrete geometries like children's blocks.

Something like laughter. That a flower could be this small, this fleeting, that a snowflake could be so large, so persistent. The improbable simplicity. I groaned. Why don't we have a word for the utterance between laughing and crying?

And I was suddenly very hungry. Took my eyes off of my left sleeve and looked around the col. The rock ridge and peak above me obscured. What the fuck are you doing here? Hic, what the fuck were you thinking? Why are you this high, this late in the day?

Shouldn't be. Benighted above treeline. Storms that move fast this time of year migrating like everything else. The cold. Exposed.

An old panic rose in my chest. The panic of nightfall, of storm, of being alone on open ground. Surprised the shit out of me.

Had to get down, get lower.

I mean the panic was familiar the way a dread nausea or hangover is familiar but so long absent I thought it banished. Like stuck between living and dying there is no use for panic. It wasn't. Banished I mean. Not a stranger at all. Panic close and familiar with its own smell, its own way of compressing the edges. I picked up the pull rope on the sled. Looked back at my own tracks over a field of crusted leftover snow. At the dark that thickened with the flakes. Too late to move. Fuck.

One thing is that Jasper always calmed me down. He didn't get too excited by much except maybe a wolf track, so I didn't either.

But it was calm. Without wind there was no danger. I could make a lean-to of the tarp against a boulder and snuggle into the bag and

sleep. Tomorrow morning if the snow was not too deep I could head down and gain the shelter of the trees without trouble, I could fish the creek easy within half a day. A few hours down.

I had eaten all the jerked venison. A hunger deep, ravenous, alive. Had I not thrown out the other meat, Jasper's, I would have eaten it now. Who to judge? What matters if it is he or I, we are the same. But I had emptied the bags on the trail days ago.

Alright. There was water. There was a boulder pile on the other side, the slope side of the lake. I tugged on the sled and took a step and stopped.

There was a shadow on the ridge. All of this was very close: lake, slope, tumbled scree, sharp ridgeline behind it climbing out of the snowstorm and straight into the low lid of cloud. Just there on the razorback of the spur, just where it disappeared into cloud, a large dark shape. I rubbed the ice out of my eyelashes with the back of my arm and when I focused on the ridge again it was gone.

Made a slant roof of the blue tarp against a rock, tossed out the smaller stones to make a smooth place to curl up, and covered myself and slept. Slept without dreams, without whelming grief, slept to wake in near absolute darkness to hear the ticking of the snow on the plastic sheeting to sleep again. Woke thinking the shape was large enough to be an elk. Thinking that I had seen no sign and wondering whether it was a good thing or a bad thing to wish for things that aren't there.



Tenth day out when I beeped Bangley on the walkie talkie. Early morning. I wasn't worried much about being covered for the few miles in the open, of being shot or followed out of the trees, but it was our ritual. Also it gave him a little time to readjust to me landing back in his world, maybe a couple of hours to remember how to be human. Maybe. Also if he was scoping the perimeter from the tower in the mansion which he would do every hour, it might save my butt from being fodder for friendly fire. How I go one way or the other never much concerned me but somehow that was one way I refused. I mean the thought of it: Bangley's mistake. Or maybe not. Maybe a half mistake, unacknowledged like poor old Francis Macomber. That was it.

Didn't want to be him in the Short Happy Life. So I turned on the unit for the first time and squeezed the mike button twice.

Had two deer in the sled. They were smallish does, but there were two of them, enough maybe to justify the time gone, probably not. Didn't give a shit. He could say what he liked. Wasn't his rodeo anymore, wasn't mine really either, when I thought about it I knew less every day. Didn't know a goddamn thing.

One minute, less, then static, and

Well well. Prodigal Hig. Thought you'd croaked on me. I really did.

Hi Bruce.

Considered pause, kind of long. Stops him in his tracks every time. Reflex like pushing a button. Maybe his mom the only one who ever used the name. When she was mad.

Have some trouble?

No irony now. Which surprised me. Bangley almost sounded concerned. Hard to tell, though, over the walkie talkies.

A little.

Okay. Glad you're back in one piece.

Pause.

Are you? In one piece?

I held the hand radio out and looked at it. Bangley sounded like a frigging human being. Must be the reception, the static, something in the bending of the radio waves, some kind of solar flare kinda thing, distorting. What he meant was: Do you need help getting across?

Yup one piece. Legs arms, everything.

Okay give me ninety minutes.

10-4.

Hig?

Yuh?

You take a fucking vacation?

Ah, the old Bangley.

I keyed the mike. *Ninety minutes. Out.*

It was already light. I was squatting in my spot below a slope of ponderosas—a thicket of willows and poplars at the base of the first hills where the creek swung to the south and our trail continued straight east. Across open ground. If I'd had my ducks in a row I would have been set up hours before dawn and not make Bangley walk across to the tower in daylight. He carried the CheyTac .408 which was a light sniper rifle as light as something with that much power can be. His pride and joy, made for walking if you have to walk and still be able to shoot someone in the lungs a mile away.

I waited ninety minutes with the sun full in my face, which to tell the truth was not the best stratagem, to walk into it half blind, and I was glad to know he was up there in his tower, sun at his back with a clear view to the first trees in perfect light. Had had trouble three times. The one was the girl with the knife which was no trouble at all. I was thinking how trouble was really the last thing I expected, how warm at dawn, fresh with the smell of new grass and early flowers, when I started to walk. I walked for more than an hour the load heavy on the level, both does quartered and piled in the sled, and I was more than halfway to the tower, laboring against the harness, pulling hard, when the radio strapped to my chest came alive.

Hig you got company. Urgency. A rare alarm.

Okay. Company.

I dropped the bridle and spun around. Back along the trail nothing. Tall sage, rabbit brush, gamma grass already knee high. Yellow and white asters blooming, fat bees already feeding, the trail smooth and empty behind me. Heart hammering.

Hig, they are stalking you. Quarter mile back. Read that? Quarter mile, a

little more.

Okay. Okay. Got it.

Say 10-4. Repeat back the info. You're a pilot for chrissakes.

Jesus Bangley.

Trying to get you to calm down. Focus on the details. One at a time.

Mother of christ. Who spawned this guy?

Pause.

10 fucking 4. Quarter mile. I am focused.

Good. Okay, turn back around. Now. Turn back! Look at me. Grab a water bottle. Stretch. Make like you are taking a break. NOW!

Okay, okay, got it.

There is no way they can hear us, Hig. The wind is them to you. They are upwind. Look natural. Stretch. Drink. Key the mike like you are scratching your chest. You are all alone out here. As far as they are concerned, Hig, you are solo. Single prey.

Fucking great.

Where's your buddy?

My buddy? Oh, Jasper. Long story.

Short pause. Could almost hear the clicking, the slight recalibration of strategy.

Niner. Got that? Niner is the number. You got niner pursuers.

Niner? Holy shit.

Hig they know you are armed. They want your meat they want your weapon. They are not armed. Not with guns. Saw no guns. If they had guns you would be dead by now. Copy?

Yes, I fucking copy. Nine?

Hig listen. They have machetes. Looks like machetes or swords.

Swords? Fucking swords?

Hig, calm down. They are willing to take some losses. The way I see it. They really want your weapon.

Fucking Bangle. He was divining all this from two miles away. Standing in the tower leaning into the eyepiece of his spotting scope.

Great.

Willing to take some losses. Each one figuring it'll be the other guy. They want to eat venison and they want the rifle. Read me?

Yes.

Say it Hig. Stay focused.

My heart was hammering. I almost laughed out loud. Right there with the sun at my back looking down the trail through the high brush with a frigging, practically a frigging division of visitors four hundred yards back.

Say it.

10-4.

Good. Settle your breathing.

Bangle, tell me what the fuck you want me to do? What should I do?

Breathe, I want you to breathe. They are stalking you Hig. They have all day. The way they see it. No rush. You are moving slow, they will close the distance. Little by little. Then they will charge you. They have done it before. They move like they have done this before. Copy?

Yes I fucking copy. 10-4.

Okay. You have the advantage. Advantage Hig. Right now you have the edge.

I do?

Fucking A, yes Hig. Listen to me.

I thought right then he sounded a little worried which didn't reassure me. Nine was a lot of fucking visitors who wanted to kill you. Me.

Listen to me. Up ahead, east, maybe eighty yards, the trail drops into kind of a draw. Shallow, but deep enough. You stretch and pick up the rope like you are real fatigued and walk on ahead and down into that gully.

Bangley I am fucking fatigued.

Good Hig. That'll keep you calm. No espresso for Hig, not at the moment. Steady hand. We want your hands good and steady. Now walk. There is a large dense sage bush or something on the north side of the trail right in the bottom. Couple of bushes. Perfect. You drag the sled behind that brush and conceal it. Cut branches if you have to. You got two animals in there far as I can make out. Correct?

You're good Bruce. You're incredible.

Pause while he took that in. Not sure if I was being sarcastic or not, didn't even matter.

Glad that is dawning on you, Hig, I really am. The sled, the meat will be your cover. Case I am wrong about the guns. Case they have a weapon. A crossbow or something I can't see. They don't, but we want you covered. All exigencies.

He loved to say that. All exigencies. Well, it was the reason he was still frigging alive. I had to, I was handing it to him. Bangley.

You hide the sled and set up behind it. Got that?

Affirmative. Pause. Bangley?

Go ahead Hig.

My magazine holds five shots. One in the chamber. Six.

Pause. I could hear the breeze rattling the rabbit brush. Suddenly

seemed really really quiet.

How am I gonna take out nine if they charge me? With six shots?

Radio crackle. Don't know when I was ever so glad to hear that. The sound of intervention, of calm in a firefight, the sound of tactical mastery. Banglely.

Okay listen, Hig. Breathe and listen. Stretch again. You got no clue, not a single inkling those fuckers are behind you. Wouldn't hurt to sing.

Sing?

Yeah, sing. Or whistle. Nothing more goddamn lulling than a whistle. Now listen, listen to me, Hig. When they come over the edge of that draw you wait. Plan your shots. You are going to be moving right to left. That's easier for you. Got that?

Yes.

Say it.

Right to left. 10-4.

Okay. Even if you aren't having your best goddamn morning you will drop two probably three. At least. You will also be firing from concealment. Those first shots will be a total fucking surprise, believe me. Total shock. They thought they had you. They thought you were some poor exhausted deer hunting bastard on his clueless stroll home. Did not know they were walking into our fucking perimeter.

He was giving me a pep talk. It was working. Goddamn Banglely.

Hig?

Yuh?

You with me?

Okay. What the hell are they doing now?

Don't worry about them. They got all day, remember? Long as you're

stopped, taking a break, they don't move. Okay, Hig, you drop two or three first go. Maybe four if it's your goddamn birthday. Now the rest are diving for cover and trying to locate you. They haven't had time to locate you. Now you have your ammo handy. Not all in your hand, you might drop the bullets. Line em out onetwothreefour five. Line out ten. Twelve is better if you're feeling generous. Right there on the sled. Ten.

Ten.

Good. You have a side load magazine. Never understood that fucking lever action hunk of nostalgia .308 of yours. What is that? Savage 99?

He knew exactly what it was.

Savage fucking 99. Goddamn Hig. Well I'm glad. Now I'm glad.

You are?

Fucking A. Side load magazine. That'll be a lot quicker than turning it over. Just thumb em in. One at a time, no hurry. If you have time lever it slow and quiet and feed in the sixth. Quiet cuz you don't want em to locate you if they haven't. And they haven't. Got it?

I took a deep breath. I was exhausted. I was suddenly really really happy to have Bangley as backup. Never been happier.

Got it. 10 motherfucking 4.

That's my Hig. Now there will be anywhere from seven to five left. You are in cover, concealed, and if they think it's worth their own worthless hide to keep coming, after you just dropped their buddies, they are more serious than I think they are. They probably won't. But they might be pissed, too. The pissed factor. Gotta give that some weight. The totally-apeshit you-just-killed-my-retarded-twin-brother factor. Which case you really got the edge.

I started laughing. Right there with the sun on my face, and the breeze coming off the mountains, carrying, probably, the scent eau de marauder, and my dog dead, I started laughing.

You laughing or crying?

He sounded seriously concerned.

Laughing, I'm laughing. Jasper died. In his sleep.

Sorry, Hig. I am. Now pull yourself together. Hig!

Okay okay. The totally-apeshit-retarded-brother factor. I'm with you, Bangley.

On task Hig. Stay on task. You got four to seven left. If they do charge you in anger just pot a couple more, we're all done here. Rest will back off, guaranteed. If they are smarter than they look, they will spread out first. They will try to flank you. That'd be serious but I have a good angle. Remember when you wanted to build the tower twenty feet high? Stop at twenty? And I said thirty and made you cranky for two weeks? Remember? And the porch? My double joisted reinforced porch? This is why. I can see em. Every one. They are gone to ground now, but when they move, even in a crouch, I got em. So stay put. If they spread out, just reload and I'll call em. You face the needle rock, due west, that's twelve o'clock and I'll call em from there. Direction and distance. Be like sporting clays.

Hig? You got that?

Sporting clays. Needle rock is twelve o'clock.

Good boy. You actually sound composed, Hig. Just thought of something. You packing your backup? Your Glock?

Yes.

In like Flynn. We do everything like I just said. All else fails, one gets too close, just draw that sucker and plug him. Make sure it's racked. Wait til you get down out of sight and make sure it's racked. Got it?

Got—10-4.

Now pack up your water bottle, start whistling, pick up the rope and move.

That's what I did. I whistled. I put the harness over my forehead like a tump line, which was a way to relieve my shoulders, and I began to walk again. Real slow. I was suddenly tired to the bone, more tired than I could remember being. There was part of me that just wanted to lie down and sleep in the warm early sun, let them take the meat, the gun, my life. Get it all over with. But then another part wanted to

work with Bangley. I mean I could tell he was excited by this challenge and I could tell the fucker actually believed in me. That I could pull this off. Weird, but I wanted to do it partly for him. Why I guess a team is usually stronger than the sum of individuals. I bent forward and dug in and tugged like a mule in harness and got the sled moving on the smooth trail which, once it was, it was easy to keep going. I got to the lip of the shallow draw and gathered the bridle in one hand, and backed up and picked up the sawed off kayak by the bow handle, and eased it over the edge. I controlled it by hand on the way down the little slope. At the bottom, while it was still sledding, I tugged as hard as I could and ran across. Sandy there, open in the bottom. Went as fast as I could. Once I had dropped out of sight they would be making up ground behind me, running themselves. I hustled the sled into the thick sage on the far side and levered it sideways to the trail. Almost the same movement I reached for the big Buck knife and started cutting thick branches. In less than a minute I had the sled well covered. Had been a green kayak, forest green, and I was suddenly very frigging glad I had had the foresight to pick something almost camo rather than something like bright fuchsia.

Fifty yards Hig. Fifty yards to the draw.

I worked the rifle out of its binding on the sled, the one box of shells, and lay down, lay the rifle over the flat hard hide of a hind quarter. Always quartered the animals hide-on, skinned them later which was more difficult but preserved the meat much better in transport. Glad I did now. The short fur made a good solid rest for the barrel of the .308.

Thirty yards. Thirty Hig.

Whispering now, close to it.

Slowing down. Single file on the easy trail. They don't have a clue, Hig. Got that? Advantage Hig. Just stay calm, wait for the bulk of em to come down into the bottom, and take em right to left, front to back. Reload. Do it again. You'll be fine. Gonna shut up now. Have fun.

He was out. Bangley. Such a weird thing to say: Have fun. But the fucker meant it, that was the thing. It did something to my head. I was amped. Balanced the rifle on the deer hide, took the Glock out of the paddle holster on my belt and racked it, lay it on the fur to the right.

Two feet over. Shook the red plastic bullet holders out of the box and worked each bullet out and lay it on the fur to the right of the rifle point forward, so I could thumb them in without changing their direction. My hands were shaking a little. Just a little. *Have fun*. Kind of changed everything. *You got exactly nothing to lose Hig*. That's what I told myself. So have fun. Heart thumping, but it was the almost happy anxious thump I remembered from playing soccer in high school. I was a goalie, the last stop, the last resort, the ultimate repository of the team's trust, and that's what it felt like now. Fuck up, you might as well crawl under a rock. But once it started it was all action, no thought, and the joy pushed up through the fear. That's almost how it felt now. Nothing to lose is very close to the Samurai *You are already dead*. That's what I told myself.

Lay thirteen brass shells out in a row. Lucky 13. I worked the lever and jacked a bullet into the chamber and thumbed the first into the magazine. Twelve left, a row of bright brass soldiers. Two full reloads. One deep breath and settled. Relaxed weight against the deer's thigh bone under the muscle and hide. Pressed into my chest. Right hand around the receiver finger on the trigger and sighted both eyes open on the patch of dirt that was the trail where it dropped over the edge of the draw, the dirt almost polished with the passage of the sled, the passage of our years. Maybe a hundred and fifty feet. And

The first came over half crouched, neither fast nor slow, came over scanning and slowed, looking puzzled. But came. A very thin man in a full gray beard, bare arms covered in jailhouse tattoos, stars and crosses, carrying a sword. A frigging cavalry sword. Not seeing his prey, expecting to now, uncrouching reflexively to standing and walking down into the bottom and studying the slide of the sled in the sand. The one behind almost toppled him coming over fast, eager for a charge, a huge man, red bearded, also carrying a sword. All the thinking before stopped. Killers. They were killers. I wanted them. *Good goddamn, Hig, way to go boy*. Could hear Bangley's words like some kind of telepathic transmission. I don't know maybe my mouth actually watered. Pity the prey that fell before these men. Third was a long hair, wiry dirty hair to the waist, cleanshaven, in a black leather biker's vest—had a baseball bat bristled with screws. Long, maybe quarter inch screws with the heads sawed off and the shafts sharpened. Red and Screws barreled past the leader and trotted down the open

bank in what could only be bloodlust, and they were just over a hundred feet before they stopped and began to scan. I had these three. Three others were coming over, a blur to me of animated mass. I had these. Front to back, Scrawny leader to Red to Screws was left to right, Oh well, I put the cross hairs on the leader, pulled. Familiar jump, the gun coming off the fur, lifting it just a little, levering and swinging right, I'd done this before scores of times to take two or three deer, swinging right to center mass, barrel now a fist's width off the rest, no problem, center Red and fire. *BANG!* Lever. No decision just fire. Barely conscious of the first two falling, the last, Screws, just beginning to crouch for a dive and *BANG*, the hit shoulder or side, him spinning and thrown and moving on the ground, then up, the mass at the lip uncoalescing, about to fragment, just aim for biggest object, two men together and pull, one arm back, thrown and falls. Lever. Four. Four! A surge of something, not joy not triumph but close. I was, we were, were a team, we nailed four—

Hig, move back! Run!

The radio loud now, urgent, almost insanelly urgent

Run to me buddy! Now! The Glock! Pocket the Glock. Grab the bullets one hand the rifle run! RUN! To me!

Jesus. I did it. Something about the orders, the order, the sequence real clear, god bless him, I grabbed the Glock, shoved it in right pocket, scooped up handful of bullets, the gun, ran. Looked back. Just as I did the five came over the lip in a full tilt run, spread out. They were fast. Lean and fast, unencumbered but for the weapons in each hand. This image: five big men spread and charging. Sand would slow them, they'd be on me in thirty seconds. Just one, just one would kill me. Ran. Gun, bullets in hands, ran. Fast as I could. One more glance back, they were in the bottom now, in the open and closing—

WHROAAWMP

Concussion thrown rain of dirt dirt in mouth eyes

WROOOOAMP

Arms covering head jesus mother of god

WHRAWWWWWWWOMK

Shiver ground shake clawing dirt the dirt moving clods shower of clumps sand in a raining pebbles stalks wood thud a clod and

Silence. Ringing ears, ringing. Wet. Nose bleeding.

Hear out of it the ringing silence, the radio, *Hig? Hig? Hig! You alive? Hig!*

All the pieces. Hands claw back over ground. What? To head. Intact head intact. Ears ringing. Roll onto side, sleeve to nose, bleeding, not bad. Spit. Eyes. Clear eyes, blunt fingers, breathe. Intact

Hig! Godammit you're alive! Take a break, take a break. Nothing broken? All in one piece? Try standing. Slow. Hig!

Okay to knees. Stay there a while maybe a week. Hands and knees. Blood from nose dripping to dirt can see it, that's good, a good sign. Hands and knees breathe. Breathe. Okay I'm okay.

Hig, they're gone, scattered. See one, well parts of one, back a hundred feet. Maybe more casualties. Rest are off the radar. Gone, Hig. Hear me? When you can get it together, locate your weapon your rifle.

Hig? You're alright. Probably a little concussed is all. You still got the Glock? Hig? Check your pocket. Tell me you still have the Glock. Til we are absolutely sure the area is cleared. Tell me.

Hands and knees. Roll back to sitting. Blink in the sun. Talking to me. Bangley is talking to me. The radio. Reach hand to chest, hand stiff slow like slow motion, key the mike squeeze no strength

I. I

Hig you're okay. Thatta boy

I. I got the Glock

Oh man. That's good. Good man, Hig. Just stay put for a minute. Breathe.

Pause.

Bangley

Yes, Hig?

You're always telling me to breathe.

Laughter through the unit. Genuine relieved laughter. A draught of cold water.

Better than if you fucking don't, huh, Hig?

More laughter.

You did good, Hig. You did fucking great. You potted four at the start. Four! Way way past the line out of Vegas, man. We all had you at two tops, the sorta shaky way you sounded.

Laughter.

Thanks.

Pause.

What the fuck just happened? Bangley. What did you do?

Mortar. 81 mil British. Had to use the fuckers sometime. The porch on the tower I made you build? That's what it's for Hig. Save your ass. Wanted it to be a surprise sometime, kinda like a birthday present.

Crackle.

Surprised you, right Hig? It really did. Still have a bunch left. For when the shit really hits the fan.

Sat in the dirt in the sun while the blood in my nose dried to a crust and tried to digest the mortar thing. Fucking Bangley. Had a mortar tube hidden out by the tower all the frigging time. Good lord.

Crackle.

When I first saw the nine coming on you slow I went down and fetched the fucker out of the brush where I had it stashed. Looked like you might really need some high powered help this time Hig.

Pause.

But you did really good. Might have made it without the mortars. Way you were shooting. Damn.

I saw my rifle knocked under a salt bush fifteen feet away. Tilted my head back like before: eyes closed, sun flooding, the ringing subsiding slowly like a vagrant wind. Laughed. Cried too. Laughed and cried at the same time, I don't know how long, just like a crazy man.



I flew that afternoon. Not in any shape to do it, but I did. To look for the other four, to see if they had designs on the families or on us and not a sign. Headed for the hills is what they did. The best thing. To fly. First time in years without Jasper. Still put his pheasant hunting quilt on the seat for luck, I guess, still took the turns more gingerly, the dives less sudden so as not to throw him—how I had trained myself to fly now. Flew the big circle and at the wave of the first hills west I looped back in and swooped low to look at the carnage, the three craters raw wounds in the brush, the bodies where we left them when Bangley walked out to help me bring in the sled. I could barely pull it. Not that I didn't have the strength in my legs. My temples throbbed, an ache in the forehead, just couldn't seem to concentrate long enough to take five steps in a row with a sustained pull. Felt a little nauseous too. Bangley was patient and after sharing the harness he said

Hig take a break. I got this for a while. You've had a long day.

Are you going to tell me to breathe?

He took a sip from the plastic tube of his water pack and looked at me with fresh appraisal. He had a fleck of tobacco on his cheek that looked like a mole. The same exact place as Marilyn Monroe.

Hig?

Yuh.

Breathe only if you want to. You know, when you say that I am relieved. You are concussed Hig no doubt about it. Which I am truly sorry about. But. Better than being dead by a long shot. It's not as bad

as it could be. Your eyes are facing the same direction and Hig hasn't lost his sense of humor.

He put the tump over his forehead leaned into it and walked.

Now from the plane I could see it all: the slide out of the sandy trail and the pile of brush where I had hidden the sled, a bit of red plastic in the dirt the little shell holder that came with the box, the spot I had probably gotten to when the first bomb hit not eighty feet away. The four where I had dropped them, three in the sandy bottom one above, the birds, vulture crow raven magpie, lifting off in a scatter as I flew over. The one mangled by the mortar that could just as easily have been me. One arm, half a head gone. My head still ached and when I flew by low and saw him I leaned over and threw up out the window. Barely anything to throw up just the canned bean and venison salad Bangley made me in the hangar but still it spewed along the fuselage and I had to scrub it off next day. What it was, that might have been me. The mortar is not a precision weapon. Bangley said he had worked out the range the angle for five spots along the trail and was pretty sure about it but. What it was, it was a big gamble he saw me getting overwhelmed and.

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and flew south and east and scouted the approach roads to the families, and nothing. And when I came back around from the east I saw a dozen in the yard and the red union suit hanging limp off the pole and I landed. Bounced up the drive and shut her down. Climbed out stiff.

Aaron is a tall man, craggy, with a hooked beard, a beard like a scoop of carved wood. He was wasted by the blood disease as most of them were and moved slowly with deliberation like a man much older than he was. He waved his hand, huge on the end of the narrow wrist that stuck out of a patched flannel shirt.

I waved and walked and they all, mothers fathers kids, moved toward me in a ragged bunch and stopped and we faced off across the beaten mud of the yard. Fifteen feet. The unspoken irrevocable distance like an old Western movie where the mountain man meets the braves in some meadow. Or the homesteader confronts the landgrabbing rancher and his hired guns, the horses always pulling up to stand in a nearly taut line as if at a precipice. Always that bit of mutually respected

demilitarized zone across which words can be flung followed maybe by bullets and arrows and death. That's what we called it, the DMZ. Awkward at first but not now. In this case we had decided without discussion or even any medical evidence that there was no way the sickness could infect from that far off. Probably not even from five feet, probably not even in a casual touch, but everybody, mostly me, felt better about this gap. If we needed to, we placed objects in the middle of it to be retrieved and that was okay too.

Aaron said Aren't you going to bring Jasper down?

I blinked at him, half turned back to the plane, then just stood. Couldn't breathe for a sec.

They were all watching me, I could feel it like a pressure. I hung my head down, watched a drop of salt water hit the dirt. Wiped it away.

Hig are you okay?

Aaron was bent forward, his thin back, his turkey neck, the beard. Land of the lost. Talk about being already dead. I straightened up.

He died Aaron. On the mountain. In his sleep. He was old.

I could almost see the wave of shock sway the little group. The last death here had been a child, Ben, a boy of eight or nine who got so excited, more than anyone when I landed the plane and carried Jasper to the ground. Many times he forgot the rules and bounded across the zone shrieking with glee and reached his arms out to the dog who stood up off his haunches and wagged and like the figures on the Grecian Urn he never got there, never attained his goal—always some long armed parent or aunt scooped him up with a mild scold.

I'm sorry Hig. We're all sorry.

The sincerity of it, the dignity. After what they had all lost and. It didn't matter. It was mine, my family. The second tear that spilled I wiped away and I told myself there wouldn't be another. Not in front of them.

Thanks.

A little girl stepped forward. Her name was Matilda. She had a handful of wild asters. She crossed to the middle of the Zone and lay it on the ground and smiled at me.

I picked them before, she said. For you.

Just as a present?

She nodded, looking up at me. She smiled, pretty, her skin waxy, dark rings around her eyes.

Thank you, I said. Thank you. And I broke down. Just stood there in front of them all and wept, wept uncontrollably, shuddering, and smiled at the girl through the tears. Her own smile faded and she looked scared and stepped back into the skirts of her mother and I felt bad but couldn't help myself. It was Jasper, not just. It was all of it. Was this hell? To love like this, to grieve from fifteen feet, an uncrossable distance?

I picked up the flowers but didn't step back. They were all little more than an arm's length away, two.

Thank you, I said to them all. Jasper loved coming here.

Which was true. I think the scent of children made him happy.

The flowers are beautiful. I sniffed them. Mmmmm. Wow.

Grinned. The girl smiled again from where she hung on the woman's skirts.

You put up the flag?

Aaron nodded. The last time was a week after the last Sprite. The solar water pump they used to draw from the creek to irrigate had died, just a bad fuse but they didn't have one and I did so the next morning I brought one. Now a tall woman stepped through from the back. She was stunning, half her face. The disease had not yet claimed her vigor. Half her face had been burned horribly, some kind of gas explosion. When she talked she turned the burned half away and looked at you from the side and seemed to speak to air. Her name was Reba like the country singer of before and she could sing too, I had heard her. She

held out a cracked plastic pickle bucket and I took it, hand to hand, the first time ever, and inside it brimmed with early baby lettuce.

We are having a bumper crop, Aaron said. I remember you saying you didn't grow it for some reason. We thought. He trailed off.

I smiled. I squatted down and reached out my hand to the little girl who had given me the flowers.

Go ahead her mother said.

She held out her little hand grubby with dirt and I took it and squeezed it lightly and smiled. I met her hazel eyes, a little bloodshot with the immune system war raging inside her, and held to her tiny fingers for a long moment, held to them like they were a rope and I was a man drowning.



The beans were already sprouting, showing the little curl just out of the turned dirt. The water was running in the furrows. I told Bangley I was heading out again.

We were in his shop which was the old sunken living room of a McMansion to the north of my hangar. It looked out of big double paned plate windows to the west, away from the runway to the mountains. It was a gunsmith shop plain and simple. Bangley made no excuses about knowing nothing about engines, wood, carpentry of any kind, agriculture, especially agriculture, gardening, cooking, especially cooking, languages, history, math beyond arithmetic, fashion, leatherwork, gin rummy, sewing, or especially rhetoric—the decorum, the customs of a respectful rhetorical debate.

Spit it out Hig is what he liked to say in the last instance. Spit it out and don't pull any goddamn punches. It's just you and me here ha ha! No one else to impress.

But he knew guns, knew how to modify them, improve them, and he could build one from the ground up, from pipe and old flatware. In the box trailer he pulled behind his pickup on the afternoon he showed up at the airport he brought with him a heavy drill press, a welder, a generator, grinders, a band saw. When I pointed out that these skills—

the welding, the soldering, the tempering—that they were applicable to all kinds of metalwork, he chuffed his gravel laugh.

Got no use for that is all he'd say.

He had also brought with him about fifty posters, all girls in bikinis or less holding various weapons and bannered with the great names in small armaments from Colt through Sig to Winchester. They were tacked up all over the walnut paneled walls where framed paintings used to hang, taped even to the edges of the windows. They were shooting submachine guns holding pistols in the low ready position like a fig leaf and sometimes not bothering to cover their total nakedness at all and the pain they caused me, I mean the sight of unclad women, actually constricted my throat so I kept my visits to the bare minimum so to speak. Ha. When I did go I hailed him from the yard and waited for a yell back, an invite maybe, trying to train him to do the same and stop giving me a heart attack at my hangar which I knew to be fruitless.

We got plenty of venison, Hig, he said straightening from a large pipe in a vise.

After our dustup the other day he announced that he was going to build a grenade launcher. He actually had one, an M203, but the range was inadequate to save my ass, he said, so he was going to rebuild it. More accurate he said.

Can't have the Hig getting concussed anymore, makes him too goddamn goofy.

Now he straightened and squinted at me while I tried not to look at the homicidal naked girls. Weird: on a low table, by the leather couch he had decided to keep, was a framed picture of the family that had lived here: some ski vacation, three blonde kids in helmets, parkas, their parents standing behind holding skis and smiling broadly, teeth as white as the snowy mountains in the range behind them. Top of one of the mountains at Vail or somewhere. I never asked about it. I intuited that it was not as simple as being reminded of the filial warmth that once pervaded, but more likely some Bangley score keeping, like: Look you Yuppie motherfuckers, you had all that but who is here in your sunken living room today, healthy as a horse and crafting better

weaponry so he can keep ahold of it like you couldn't.

Just a guess.

You thinking you need another fishing vacation? Last one wasn't exciting enough?

Shook my head. I'm flying.

Flying?

Grand Junction. Got a transmission from there a little while ago. From the tower.

His hands, which I thought of as paws they were so big and blunt looking, they let go the pipe, set down the file. He looked at me under the hanging gun rack he'd had me build for him in the beginning—he never did anything without a platoon's worth of firepower within reach.

Little while ago?

Three years.

His grin was straight across. He rubbed the stubble on his cheek and I could hear it rasping from across the room.

Three years.

He turned halfway back to look out the window west in the direction of Junction as if trying to gauge in spacetime the relationship between the distances and the passage of seasons. For just a second, for the first time, I saw him as a man getting old. He turned back.

Goddamn Hig. You weren't very good about returning phone calls were you?

I smiled at him.

Hig?

Yeah?

You having a midlife crisis?

Just behind him to the left on a wall panel beside the big window was a famous Czech model holding a short, wicked looking machine gun, something like an Uzi. She was weighting her left leg, her right hip cocked outward, and all the geometries led the eye from her green gaze to her mound which coyly peaked out of a very spare triangle of dark hair which could not hide the short line, the path to the promised land. It killed me. Breathing immediately constricted. It occurred to me that Bangley was a tactician to the bone. He read the layout of any situation instantly, and found the spring that wound the clock, the vulnerable entry. Was I having a midlife crisis?

Don't really believe in em, I said. Our whole frigging life is a crisis.

You think so?

No.

First the elk, now the control tower. Three hundred miles away. What's your Point of No Return?

He meant fuel. The point at which I wouldn't have enough to get back.

Two sixty.

Maybe you're chasing shadows Hig. You wanna kill us both?

I stood in the middle of the family's living room. There had been a big flatscreen, a surround sound stereo system, a player console on a side table with over ten thousand songs, a lot of country pop. Bangley had ripped it all out, hung up pegboard and the posters. There had been a game controller on the middle table. We had turned it on: *World at War VII*. I thought Bangley would like it. He turned away when I turned it on, and he visibly relaxed when I shut it off.

I know, I said.

He looked at me. His mineral eyes, his grin rigid.

I know it's a risk. Whoever was there who sent the transmission he had power. He was in a control tower so he had powerful radios. Maybe he

knows something.

Knows something?

Some news.

News.

Like about the Arabs or something.

Bangley didn't move. Then he picked up the file and grasped the pipe with his paw and lowered his head.

Hig is a shark, he said. Gotta keep moving or die. Gotta do what he's gotta do.

I thought about that all night as I lay out at the base of the berm alone, Jasper's weight on my leg an aching absence. And watched the last of the winter constellations go under earth in the west. That was his way of giving me permission. Which I didn't need. Still.



Clear calm morning, early May, the wind sock by the gas pump hanging still, the sky over the mountains a ringing bowl of water-clear blue. Our resident redbill floats, riding the first thermal over the barely warming tarmac. Easy circles. His mate's nest is in a cottonwood at the edge of our fish pond and yesterday I heard the squalling cheeps of the chicks. Three I think. She stood, pumped her broad wings once and looked at me with a murderous acuity. Don't fuck with mama. Wouldn't dream of it I said aloud.

I turn on the pump and fill two six gallon gas jugs and load them behind my seat. Under seventy five pounds. Full tanks fifty five gallons usable. The extra gas will give me just under one more hour, not enough if I do any scouting along the way, not enough to get back, but I will take no more gas as I want to be able to land and take off short if I need to. Survival pack thirty pounds including ten days of jerky, dried tomatoes, corn, two jars olive oil. Five gallons water which I probably don't need as Grand Junction is so named for straddling the confluence of two big rivers. But it's a desert town and I don't know what will happen, how hard it will be to get to the river. Always carry

water.

I keep Jasper's bird hunting quilt on the passenger seat. Lock the AR and the machine pistol into the vertical rack at the front of his seat.

What is the plan, Hig? Fly there.

Then what? Contact the natives.

Then what? Swap news.

You have no news.

I have what I have.

Then what? Fly home?

Good question.

Refuel.

Good luck.

Me and Me talking. Bangley is nowhere in sight. Climb the ladder, top off the Beast. Enough direct sun to run the pump, enjoy the old analog clicking of the numbers rolling in the pump's window. The light warm breeze on my left cheek, the single skeining scream of the hawk. Roughed at the edges like his wings. The old excitement of a trip, a real trip, meaning new country. Surge of optimism don't know why. Bangley is right. The odds of any useful news are low, the odds of the man in the tower being a skeleton high. And what news is useful? I've asked myself that every day in the week since. What is news? We eat we sleep we secure the perimeter we defend ourselves I go up into the mountains sometimes to get the news of the creeks and the trees. From the Beast the news of wind. What else is there?

Had to show Bangley how to water the garden for the first time, how to direct the flow from the header into the different marks, how to clean the furrows, show him what is and what is not a weed. He was ornery. He confessed that he'd sworn that he would never on this earth be a farmer, that the only dirt he'd ever dig in his life would be the dirt of a grave.

The hair stood up on the back of my neck when he said that. To know him this long and still be surprised.

My father was a farmer he said.

In Oklahoma?

He stared at me, the double ought spade in his hand looking nothing if not at home.

Okay so you've done this before.

He stared at me. He pursed his lips, looked at the blade of the shovel smeared with clay and half covered in the smoothly flowing current of a mark.

This is your show, he said finally. Were me I would've used the gated pipe stacked in the yard of that place to the north.

Now it was my turn to stare.

You're a farmer, I said.

Nothing. He winced down his eyes and looked off west into the sun. Vagrant breeze moved the hair sticking out under the back of his cap. The flow of irrigation water captured from the creek made a cold ripple and burble. It pushed against clods fallen from the edges, flowed over them in smooth humps that fell into tiny riffles behind them. Eddied along the edges. If I stared long enough I could magnify the furrow in my head, build a perfect trout stream from any straight line of water. I always irrigated barefoot and my feet were numb. I loved the sensation as I sat on Jasper's mound, the one he used to supervise from, and let the feeling come back tingling in the sun. Let them dry with heels propped on a piece of rag. Shook the dirt out of boots and socks before I put them back on.

I stared at him.

That's what it is, I said. In some previous Life of Bangley. That shovel. Looks like a goddamn part of you. Like you were born with it.

Turned his head and looked at me and the hair stood up again. Cold,

icy as the water flowing over my right foot.

It's a spade, he said.

I nodded.

I know.

We looked at each other. What the hell, I was leaving in the morning.

You didn't like your father much, huh?

Hesitated, shook his head slow.

You hated the fucker.

Bangley's jaw working side to side.

You did everything. Jesus. A farmer. That's where you learned it. You could weld, blacksmith, shoe a horse, build a corral, a barn. Probably a better frigging carpenter than me. Holy fuck.

Crossed my arms over the handle of the spade and looked at the mountains. Gentle wind. A harrier, white rumped, beat the sage across the creek, fluttering and gliding just over the brush trying to scare up a rabbit. Two hawks, not the redtails, smaller, maybe Cooper's, gyred. A lot of songbirds vanished even before, but in this world the raptors seem to be doing fine. A hawk's world.

How long? Did you work the farm with him? Hating him?

We stood there. The water in the furrows conversed one to another in overlapping rills. No words and I knew with certainty that Bangley had killed his old man.

When you get back, he said finally. We'll make improvements. If you want. We could make it water a lot easier. But then I always thought Hig enjoyed working out here in the sun moving the dirt around.

That was considerate.

He scratched the blade of his cheekbone under his right eye. It was

weird. I looked at him the way you might look if you'd just discovered your spouse was in the witness protection program. Had been a hit man or something. Or a senator.

Fuckin A.

Fuckin A.

I don't know whether to be mad or go hysterical busting a gut.

He smiled at me. Not the grim straight grin but the real half smile that was at once embarrassed at itself.

Personal choice, he said.

What?

Personal choice. Those are the toughest. When you have to think about shit like that.

You are fucking crazy. A crazy fucking farmer.

He was leaning on his crossed arms too and his grin went straight across again unsmiling and I knew the conversation was over and that I probably shouldn't call him that anymore.

Now I was topping off the wing tanks. I moved the aluminum ladder around the nose, scraped it over the pavement to the left wing and climbed it with the heavy hose and nozzle over my shoulder. Click click click, the numbers unrolled, the fuel gurgled and hissed as it reached the sleeve of the cap. Seventeen point three gallons. Even now with all that it meant I still got a mild kick out of free gas. Free until. The sun was two fingers off the swells to the east, two fingers at arm's length meaning about half an hour meaning it was nearly six. Thirteen hundred Zulu. Greenwich Mean Time. Greenwich. Somewhere in England. Home of the Clock. Center of the Timed Universe. Used to be. Nobody much keeping track anymore was my guess.

When Uncle Pete died of what was probably cirrhosis hastened by cancer and he knew he had only a few months left he did something I thought was way out of character: he spent his days in his cabin organizing his slides. His vast collection of colored positives. He had

grown up with film and had taken exclusively slides which he said were sharper. He put the yellow paper boxes, the white and blue plastic ones, each one a roll, in a foot high stack that mostly covered his kitchen table. In often intense pain, by the light of a small window by day and a standing lamp in the evenings, he unboxed them one roll at a time, slipping each mounted picture into a sleeve in a transparent binder sheet. He labeled them with a Sharpie: on the actual slide he put binder number/slide number, on the page he put the same plus date taken and an up to three word description: Bone Fishing Keys. Beside the three ring binders, which held one to five years' worth depending on how prolific he had been with his camera, he kept another binder of lined paper with a keyed journal. This held longer descriptions, notes of particular pictures which sparked his memory. I visited him once during this time. While he catalogued, I cut and split the firewood for a long winter both of us knew he would not see. Three cords of maple beech ash yellow birch, cut from his wood-lot on the side of a gentle hill, split and stacked along half of the front porch and around the side, the whole of which—me working while he sat inside—embarrassed him. At first I thought he was crazy. I mean he could have been sitting on his little porch watching the Vermont spring turn into a riotously green and sultry summer for the last time, watched the wrens and larks and owls in the lyrical commerce of breeding and nesting, leaf and air. Got bitten by black flies, gnats, then mosquitoes, on the last exquisite evenings. Why wasn't he out there on his Dartmouth rocker? Maybe picking on his beat up guitar?

But lying one night in my old bunk under a wide open window listening to a screech owl trying to terrify me with a woman's screams and only making me happy—the bittersweet cry of undigestible beauty and great impending loss—then it came to me: the obvious epiphany that he was reliving his life. Doh. Slide by slide, picture by picture. He was aggregating memory like a wall against extinction and the little boxes of slides were his bricks.

Up on the ladder in the soft morning, listening to the last pull of fuel gurgle into the wing tank and gauging the time by the sun. Something about that made me think of Pete and his albums leaning into the table in the dim close cabin that smelled of resin and woodsmoke and coffee. Like a man leaning into an incessant wind. Keeping track of things that have no use anymore except as a bulwark against oblivion.

Against the darkness of total loss.

Well. I wasn't going to count the hours. I had a plane full of fuel and good weather and I was going to take off and fly west and see how far I got. I was tightening down the gas cap when I heard a scuff and saw Bangley walking across the ramp. He had a basket on his arm.

I grinned. It was like the old railroad song. Pete sang it. *Johnny's mother came to him with a basket on her arm / She said my darling son / Be careful how you run / Many a man has lost his life just trying to make lost time ...*

It's not a pie, he said.

I grinned. Clicked down the cap cover and climbed down.

He handed me the basket, turned to the stepladder and chopped up on the locking struts so it half folded and carried it back to the pump. Inside the basket were six grenades.

Don't know why I never thought of it before, he said. Working on the launcher got me to thinking.

They lay inside like so many eggs inside a nest. The Egg of Death. Something in a fairy tale I once read and couldn't remember.

How many mags do you have for the AR?

Four. The big ones.

He nodded.

You got the hand pump?

He meant the pump with long hose I could use to get gas out of an underground tank or any tank. Aside from the extra fuel the thirty feet of hose was my heaviest item. I nodded.

What are you going to do when you run out of gas?

Land.

He nodded. He looked at the Beast, at the mountains. His hands were in his pockets. He was looking west into the light breeze, he said

You been a good partner Hig. A little goofy sometimes.

Oh fuck. My chest constricted thought I was going to—Well.

Like family he said.

I stood there rooted to the tarmac.

I'm not a easy man to get along with. Only ones ever got halfway there were my wife and son. And you. Big Hig.

I think my mouth actually hung open. I blinked at him.

Long story, he said. He smiled the half smile.

Keep your eyes rolling in your head Hig. Situational awareness. Don't get goofy thinking about the past and let some SOB blindside you. Try and come back.

I stared at him.

I'll keep the weeds down.

He walked away. I stared after him. Fuckin A.

Fuckin A.

I hand cranked the heavy hose back on its roller and climbed into the Beast, latched the door. Hit the master switch, turned the key in the mags and pushed the starter.



Few sounds in the world as exciting as the exploding catch of a Continental engine firing to life. The first refractory turns of the prop. The roar smoothing out as the prop disappears in the speed of its rotation.

Go fast enough we disappear.

Bounced across the ramp through the lines of wrecked and disintegrating airplanes, turned straightacross the taxiway onto the strip and took off from midfield. Saw Bangley pushing into the door of the house that was his workshop, he didn't look up.



The Beast is hungry. Pulling at air like an excited horse. I look over: the empty right seat, just Bangley's egg basket and the quilt with the hunter aiming at the rising pheasant, over and over. Crumpled against the door. Even half deaf and stiff Jasper was a better copilot than most men. All men. That it has come to this: life distilled in a ratty blanket. The shot will never hit, the bird never fall but neither will that hunter ever miss. Or lose anything. His dog will never die.

The biggest hole torn by a mutt.

... thinking about the past let some SOB blindside you ...

I fly over. Straight over the Divide. Boulder burned below, the triangular slabs of the Flatirons thrust against the greater mass of the mountains like blank headstones. *Prettiest town on earth couldn't sustain. Mark it.* The ski area El Dora scarred with old trails and slopes, the lines of the lifts just below us, can see the empty chairs swinging in the wind. A few bumps, the Beast more than compliant. Sail over the snow saddle. Close enough to see the tracks of a single large animal stringing the ridge. Not possible but. Too high. All of us caught out too high.

Winter Park and the Fraser Valley revealing itself on the other side as we go over. Scores of ski trails tender green against the rust of the dead forests. We used to ski there. The last time Melissa and I split up for a run and I rode next to a big man who said he was here for winter break with a church group from Nebraska. Nondenominational.

We just follow the Bible word for word he said. Word for word you can't go wrong. Shook his head nice smile. I'd be crazy to disbelieve him.

I thought of stones in a river, rock hopping. One rock to the next, nothing to think about. Word for word. Just follow them, man. Breadcrumbs right to God. Sitting the chair next to him, our skis

dangling over sixty feet of air, I thought Maybe there is a different translation for *meek*. Maybe it's not the meek who inherit, maybe it is the simple. Not will *inherit* the earth, they already own it.

I told him I always got stuck at the Begats. I said I had just read Lamentations though and it seemed like *Mad Max*. I mean women eating their babies, everybody dying.

He didn't laugh.

He said, I try to stay on the Right Side of the Bible. Left side was written by Jews. Some things to pay attention to, I guess, but if I were you I'd start with John.

We should have all paid more attention to the Left Side I am thinking now. The Wrong Side, the Side Where Shit Goes Really Really Wrong.

Drop down and follow the Fraser past Tabernash. Most of the valley burned except the firehouse and the discount liquor store which now stands alone at the edge of a field full of bighorn sheep. They rouse, swing and trot in a panic toward the blackened forest as I pass and I see four wolves standing out of the grass and they turn them back like sheepdogs. Fly on.

I know this country all of it. Doc Ammons, I can see his barn still standing in a hundred open acres this side of Granby. The house is gone but. His son Swift was my best friend in college and they were my second family. Three of us fished the Fraser often. Can see the log corrals, the ring where Becky trained her horses and riding students. Could probably find a stack of my old books in the log outbuilding where I used to sleep. Today I don't want the memories. I fly over.

Right through the gunsight slot of Gore Canyon wingtips up against rock both sides. Seems like. Fished here, too, the river dropping so fast, the rapids so loud, reverberating off the cliff—you had to be careful as you walked down the railroad tracks to look back often. More than one fisherman never heard or saw the train coming. Air over the water cold and heavy throwing up mist, the Beast loving it.

Do I? I used to love to fly like this. Twisting through a canyon fifty feet off the water.

Now I don't feel anything. I feel the way my unwaded legs felt after ten minutes in the snowmelt. Numb and glad to be. Glad to be numb.

The difference maybe between the living and the dead: the living often want to be numb the dead never do, if they never want anything.

Sunlight. Out the other end. The river quieting to black water, the rock folding back to hills, woods unburned. I can see duck smattering the pools. Herons out of the reeds, angular, spreading those huge wings at the sound of the plane. Color of smoke.

What do you want? Hig. What?

I want to be the color of smoke.

Then what?

Then. Then.

Pull back hard on the yoke and climb steeply out of the hole at State Bridge. Dry sheep hills, herds of antelope and deer scattered. In the flats along the Colorado River I can see the once swank Eagle Airport. Key the mike and call the tower. Ask for clearance to pass through their airspace. A hope and a habit. *Triple Three Alpha three to the east at niner thousand request transition your airspace en route—*

Where am I en route to? Junction maybe. With a jog south to the Uncompahgre Plateau, the places I used to hunt. For no reason.

en route—

I want to say *En route to Something Completely Fucking Different*. I fly over.

II

Sudden lurch and buck. Again. Thrown to the left, left wing dipping. Hold tight to the yoke, correct and watch the altimeter. I love this. The yoke in my hands is neutral, the plane level and the altimeter needle is circling clockwise upwards. Updraft. The trees get smaller, pressure in the seat cushion like a great lifting hand. Late morning thermal, the still dark woods soaking the sun and throwing up this plume of warm air. The unmasked lift is fast, heady, a little alarming.

Gain fifteen hundred feet with no work at all. Cross high over the Roaring Fork right over Carbondale, unburned, surrounded by rivers and green ranches. I blink. Looks like cattle there. Cattle of old. Black and red. Must be—nothing else that color. Damn. Cattle gone wild, sticking to home, miraculously out of the mouths of wolves. I'd drop to look but don't want to lose this height nor spend the gas to climb again for the next pass.

A ranch. Cattle. The spring river flowing by. A ranch house in the shade of leafing cottonwoods and globe willows. A cracked and broken road winding by. Squint and I can imagine someone in the yard. Someone leaning to bolt a spreader to the tractor. Someone thinking *Damn back, still stiff*. Smelling coffee from an open kitchen door. Someone else hanging laundry in a bright patch. Each with a litany of troubles and having no clue how blessed. Squint and remake the world. To normalcy. But.

More normal the absences.

Huntsman's Ridge. Can see the long rockslide we used to ski, called it Endless. Seemed so then. Be perfect now: spring corn-snow compacted and stable. Zero avalanche danger.

Half the aspen forest still in leaf, still living. On our left the rugged wall of the Raggeds. I nod, fly over.

Now the country gets soft. It will be aspen forests for miles. I tap the fuel gauge.

Twenty nine point three gallons. Not enough gas to get home. As

simple as that.

As simple as that we go over the edge.



I was wondering: Is this what it's like to die? To be this alone? To hold to a store of love and pass over?



We almost moved here. Paonia. Some misspelling of Peony. Melissa was tired of teaching, tired of the principal and the District, was itching to try something else. Organic farming maybe. Building was a lot slower over on this side of the state but I could've probably pieced it together with remodels, cabinets, the odd house. First time I saw it I thought it looked like a train set. Looks like a train set still. I let the Beast fall.

Cut power and glide down the south slope of Grand Mesa, the tops of the soft aspens a few feet under our belly. Still green, the pale trunks still startling, the ferns beneath them still a thick carpet no doubt harboring deer. Whoosh off a band of cliff. And the valley opens: a green river bottom backed by a high double mountain with a swooping saddle between. Orchards, the neat rows of tufted trees on either side of the river. Vineyards too. Tall cottonwoods marking the westward twisting course of the stream. In the west, where the river flows out of the valley into a dry desert scrubland, I can see the railroad tracks, the flat topped mesas and the massing uplift of the Plateau, purple in the morning haze. And the town, more a hamlet, clustered between the river and the hill with the white stone P.

Bought groceries here often, ammo, dog food. Used to wait seven minutes at the crossing while the coal train clattered by. Timed it once, resenting the loss of daylight. Look over at Jasper's seat.

You loved it here, huh, bud. Walk down to the river below the town park and throw the stick in the current. You weren't too good at stick. Or swimming. Loved it anyway. We should all be like that huh?

Bank downriver and aim for the high dry plateau. Guts in a knot.



I cannot live like this. Cannot live at all not really. What was I doing?
Nine years of pretending.



The road we took crossed a green bridge. The canyon was called Dominguez. I am eight hundred feet above the ground. See the bridge. See the orchard pressed against the canyon walls, the dirt track. Follow it.

Sparse forest, piñons, junipers almost black and still living. Desert trees that don't grow up but grow gnarled and thick. Stunted and stubborn. Remind me of Bangley. They just refuse to die at any price. Some of these have been here since the so-named Spanish priest traveled through here with his god.

Never flown this. We always came here in a truck. The road is grown in. Overgrown track swings away from the smaller river to climb a ridge. Bank right to follow it into another drainage and the country I used to hunt. But. Off to the left in the path of the creek a flash of red rock, the upper wall of a canyon just revealed. Always amazed that such a small stream can leave such a landmark, that so much big country stays hidden in these clefts. I bank back to take a look.

As I near, the rim reveals the ruddy face of a high wall, deep red and waterstained in strips of black and ochre. Cut by ledges. Pale printed outline where a huge block came unglued. The cliff two hundred feet high if a foot.

It's a box canyon. I'll be damned. The exploding lime green tops of cottonwoods, a few bristled ponderosas. And. I circle tight. How could I have never seen it? Because I was following the road, if you call it that.

The split and riven little canyon widens into this boisterous green hole. Creek winds through. A meadow on the left bank. And. So shocked and curious I am descending in my gyre and I almost spiral into the high wall.

A stone hut against the cliff. Smoke wafting from. A stone bridge over the creek to the field. Cattle scattered on the watered grass. Half a dozen.

Cattle.

And.

A garden plot larger than ours. Fed by a ditch cut from an oxbow of the creek. And.

A figure in the garden bent.

And.

It's a woman.

Long dark hair tied back. Unbending to stand. Hand to forehead, shading to watch the plane.

A woman in shorts, man's shirt tied at the waist. Barefoot? Barefoot. Tall and lanky. Standing straight, tall, shielding her face and watching me. Mouth in a wide circle. Yelling? Yes.

A figure now out of the house if that's a house, a man with a gun. Old man. Old man with a gun raising it skyward and sighting. Jesus.

I don't hear the concussion but. Twang of bird shot, the tear of aluminum and a new hiss of air. Jesus. Then a pop, burn and sting, my face burning whole left side. Both hands grip the yoke. Pull straight back into a hard climb and roll right wing straight back over the rim almost brush the tops of the low junipers on the edge as I go over and lose sight of them. Bits of shattered glass roll into my collar. Hey. Hey. My window is gone. Left side window, what's left a mosaic of shattered tempered glass clinging to the frame.

Blood soaking my shirt. Air.

★

In that instant I knew what I had come for.

★

Not what you think: you are thinking Woman but that wasn't it. It was to be glad again to be alive.

The moment you realize nothing vital is broken inside you, nor in the

Beast, that you are climbing, leveling out, that the engine is purring, the controls tight. That your trembling fingers come up to the side of your bloody face and touch, and touch gingerly, feel the four splinters of glass and that's it. A few shards. Fuck. And the roof of the cockpit is peppered with holes, just the liner, nothing all the way through metal. That close. The fucker almost took me out. If I hadn't been rolling away over the edge of the canyon all that bird shot would now be in my head. Damn. And in that moment I began to laugh.

My first glad instinct was to climb down there with the AR-15 and turn the old bastard into hash at close range. That felt good. It was feeling something, not morose. Hig, the SOB did you a favor. Woke your sorry ass up. Just was doing what you would have done to defend his hearth and home and woman.

Woman.

Was that his woman? The old badger. Who knew what arrangements were made in this world. First instinct was to climb down there and murder the fucker and take his woman. And. Why not?

Well, anyway Hig, whether you are a good man or a bad man, or just a pretty good man in a fucked up world, you are going to have to land the Beast first. Put her down in a rolling rocky country with one road that is no longer a road.

I banked around, went over the ridge away from the canyon and aimed the nose down into a sage meadow with the rutted track going straight south across it.

Double U-O-M-A-N. First sight of one viable, one tall, one without the blood sickness probably, and not frozen on a poster in Bangley's shop or spilled on the ground behind you, too young, with a kitchen knife in her hand—first sight and you are willing to forget everything. Like checking the landing.

Fuck Hig, get your shit together.

I pulled up. Circled low. The road was deeply rutted. Like it would bury the right main gear up to the strut. Nice one, Hig. Be a long walk back to anywhere.

That's not it. Just. I mean pussy whipped at a thousand feet. I realized, laughing, that it could've been men, or a hag. It was this new relationship to a person of any gender: that I was under no obligation to kill them. Or let Bangley kill them. I mean this was their house, not mine. I was the visitor.

Amazing how not having to kill someone frees up a relationship generally. Despite the fact that Gramps tried to kill *me*. Well. Bygones. I could walk down in there and shoot him or not, which was liberating. Or them. Could've been a whole platoon in the house or somewhere hidden just waiting for me. I circled low twice and mapped the rutted road carefully, where the ditch started, where ended, marked it with bushes and gaps. Could they hear me a mile away in the canyon? Probably. Probably right now they were lining up twelve gauge shells on the rock windowsill, probably she was shaking loose her hair, unbuttoning her shirt, and waiting to bait me in range like a Siren.

Hig!

Focus Hig, breathe. Say 10-4.

10-4.

Focus on the little things. Stay alive.

10 fucking 4.

I would've skipped the rutted track and put down right in the sage meadow but I did not have tundra tires and a rock hidden in the brush could snap a wheel off. Better the known danger etc. Made sure I could see a few feet either side of the ruts because I was going to have to put one wheel on the center hump and the other thwacking through the edge of the bushes. Then I decided to not be stingy. The landing was gonna have to be precise within inches. Better to know exactly how the wind was blowing.

I pulled up, gained three hundred feet, and dabbed the side of my face with a corner of Jasper's quilt. Then reached down between the seat to a little wood box I kept there and pulled the tab of a smoke bomb with my teeth and dropped it out the window. The thick orange plume boiled out of it and trailed after.

Landed twenty feet from the road and blew low and stiff east-northeast.

Damn, that was a bright idea. Good strong late morning crosswind could've messed with my plan. What else was I forgetting?

The reason Bangley was still alive was that he never forgot anything. Maybe he remembered a few too many things, a lot of redundancy, he didn't care. What else did he have to do with his day? It was just occurring to me that maybe the reason I was still alive was that Bangley never forgot anything. Bangley. Husband and father. Farmer. Damn.

Oh, I know. Hig, you forgot that trying to land on a deeply rutted basically a trail in rocky sage country you mostly can't see through—you forgot that it could clean your clock. Or clean the clock of the Beast which might be the same thing.

Okay, breathe. I came around a last time for final and pulled the bar up for half flaps and pushed down the nose, ruddered hard over for a full slip, and floated sideways into the field.



A bush landing has a way of waking you up. If you weren't already. Powered off, engine growl to idle, and kicked the Beast straight just before touch down, left wing down low into the wind and the left gear thwacked into the brush loud. I struggled with the gusts. To keep the nose over the left edge of the ditch and not in it. Then the right main gear, the back right wheel hit the mounding dirt between the old wheel tracks and we jerked left. I struggled to keep that tire out of the rut. Must have, because I didn't feel anything break, just heard the loud rips and tumps and squeals as the thicker sage beat at the plane and held the nose off as long as I could and when it came down there was a merciful clear bald run of low rocks and chewed down grass, thanks bighorn, or whoever, and the Beast bumped and shook and I shuddered to a stop just before the piñons.

Whew. Breathe. First thought: My paint job. The beautiful Beast scoured with stick lines. Second was: That was way too close. That was fucking dumb. All of it was dumb. If I hadn't thrown the smoke bomb I would've wrecked. I looked at the digital fuel gauge before shutting her

down. Just over twelve gallons left. Less than an hour. And less than an hour in the two jugs. Not even close to enough to get back. Dumb. But. I could get to Junction if I could take off with the same luck I had just landed.



Before I augured in the three stakes and tied her down facing into her takeoff, before I put two of Bangley's Eggs of Death in the pockets of my jacket, and slung the AR over my shoulder and walked away from the Beast, I did the first not dumb thing all morning. I took out the jugs and using the strut climbed over the wings and poured one each, the last fuel in each wing tank. Fuel up now. Better to fuel up before you get your undies in a bundle. And I took the key. Put it in my right jeans pocket and said Hig. The key is in the right jeans pocket.

Never know how much of a hurry you might be in later.

III

Well she was not nude waiting for me by the creek, not even dressed out in the grass in front of the house singing, she was nowhere. Need not have tied myself to any mast. The smoke that had leaked from the chimney and billowed downcanyon was gone.

Place looked suddenly dead. Bucket kicked over in the yard, a dirty cooking spoon beside it. The cattle, a few sheep, were there heads down in the meadow all facing downstream. Ribbed thin, sharp hips, nearly starving. One big bird high up on the high wall gyring along the rock face. A peregrine. The ledge marked with a white ribbon of guano must be her nest. Circle out, circle back. Pity the ducks that angled down into this hole. No chickens. That occurred to me. Because of the falcon? No, the old coot had a shotgun. Because they would need a rooster then, or two, to maintain the flock—probably too loud every morning if you want to stay hidden, like letting the whole damn country know you're here. Smart.

I turned the scope upcanyon to where the creek spilled over the wall in a twenty foot falls. The top of the hole completely boxed off by this cliff. And two sides soaring. Pretty neat spot. A length of dead pine was propped against the rock beside the waterfall, limbs stubbed in a crude ladder. Okay. If they went that way in flight they didn't pull up and hide the ladder, maybe only because it was too heavy or they didn't have time.

I was lying at the very rim, scrunched between two rocks looking straight down. Here my cliff was about a hundred feet high, maybe less. I was wedged tight and had to slide the holstered Glock around to my back so it wouldn't scrape.

Think like Bangley. That's what you need to do. Bangley's voice, I can hear it:

Goddamn, Hig. Old man and a scrawny girl got you all in a bundle. So far you got more firepower on your right hip than he's got by a factor of ten.

Yeah but what if there's more of them? Or if he's got more than the shotgun?

You see any sign of more? Stools in the yard, clothes hanging, bedding, old shoes?

Huh.

Good you're thinking like that, Hig, can't take that away. Ticking off the exigencies. Hig is an old dog but he learns shit little by little. But you gotta look at the intel staring you in the face. I'm not saying there aren't three more guys with weapons hidden in the trees. Good to plan for that, too. But you gotta act on what you believe. Plus you also got the rifle, you got the grenades. You got the grenades, right?

Yeah, two.

Hig?

Yeah?

What are you doing here?

Silence.

I mean what do you want? What the fuck do you want?

Silence.

You can't form a plan unless you got a mission. You can't have a mission if you don't know what the fuck you want. First rule. Have a clear mission, have an exit strategy.

I thought the first rule was Never Negotiate. Negotiate, Hig, and you are negotiating your own life ...

That's the first principle. Anyway what the fuck does it matter? You got a bigger problem to solve first. Which is: What the fuck, Hig, do you hope to accomplish?

The canyon darkened and I shivered. A cloud, a swollen cumulus tugged its shadow across the cut. Bearing away the last chill of a long winter. The shadow smelled like ponderosas. It passed over and the sun on the arms of my jacket smoothed out the goosebumps. It was comfortable snuggled like this in the rocks. I could hear the buzz of a

deerfly but it didn't bother me. In the moment I realized I could lay my head on my suntoasted arms and go to sleep no problem. My nose was inches from the ground. I watched an ant climb the stem of a small purple aster. Smelled good here. Like flinty dirt and new grass, mesquite.

Hig!

Uh, yeah. What?

Focus, goddammit. Get your dick outta your hand. Every minute you are lying out here not knowing what the fuck you are up to, you are vulnerable. So is the plane. Whoever was down there may be working their way to the rim to scout your sorry ass. Planning right now how to neutralize the threat that is Hig. What we would be doing and fast. Stead of just lying down there vulnerable, exposed, the way you are doing right now.

Huh.

Fuck. Hadn't thought of that. I blew out, nearly whistled. What is up with you? Are you completely out of it? Have you so totally lost your edge?

Did you ever have an edge?

Hig!

Uh what?

Know why you are sleepy? Why suddenly you could just stretch out and snooze til sundown?

Why?

Because you don't know what the fuck to do! I don't mean you wouldn't know what to do if you had a purpose. I've seen you, Hig. When you have a purpose like getting away from nine marauding motherfuckers and dusting their ass you're pretty goddamn good. Hig on wheels. But you don't have a clue what you're doing here. You're acting like a goddamn lost puppy. One look at a tall girl who maybe doesn't have the sickness and you're goddamn gaga.

That's not it.

Why'd you risk the plane then? I saw that little maneuver. Pretty fucking dicey. Risk everything for a closer look at a crack. What if she hates men? Ever think of that?

Bad enough to risk it all for Something Known is what you're saying.

Then I thought: We're more likely to risk it all for something unknown. For some perverse reason.

I told you, Hig: Get all philosophical in a tactical situation and you're toast.

Toast.

That sounded good. Two pieces of lightly browned toast with butter and jam. Hadn't had butter in nine years hadn't had milk. I bet those cows gave sweet warm milk every day. One or two. I shifted the scope down into the meadow to scan for a swollen udder and I saw them. Pure dumb luck. He must have had at least two guns, which made sense to have a hunting rifle as well as a shotgun, because this was the flashing glint off his scope. A bare instant. Enough to let me place him in a thicket of cattails, at the edge of the creek, on the meadow side, away from the house. A large sandstone block about the size of a car had tumbled there and he was hard against it. Right where I would've sat. Same basic strategy as we used at the airport: the house would be the draw. He sat where he, or they, could sight the open ground between the creek and the little stone house. All of that within shotgun range. Could take care of most passing threats with the two shots from the double barrel. And he, they, had the rifle too for long shots, or for after. They. Once I placed him I could just see the barrel of his rifle, darker, straighter than the reeds, and I could see her shift a mass of dark hair. She had the other gun. Shotgun. And he was not looking across the yard he was sighting straight up at me. Fuck.

The blast blew chips of sandstone from my snug rock all over the right side of my face. I jerked back. The second twanged in air just over my head. Fuck.

Blinked. Stone dust in my eyes. Right side of my face now stinging too. Hand to temple. No blood this time. Fucking Gramps. That's twice. Old

bastard had my head bracketed. If I wasn't more goddamn careful the next shot would be dead center.

I could hear Bangley laughing. As if he were three feet away. Laughing out of the ether, like a not totally benign ghost.

Pickle, huh Hig? A quandary. All you want to do is make friends and now you might have to shoot somebody. Laughter loud and long.



Had a point, old Bangley, my tactical superego. The old bastard down below was a wicked good shot. Like professional good, like Bangley. He had nearly taken me out with a shotgun, like the Beast and I were just one big blue winged teal. Pretty good.

Why was I so giddy? Somehow the pickle I was in made me very glad. I mean, it wasn't a pickle. I could walk away. But. I had an image of a white rag tied at the end of a stick stuck over the edge of that cliff. Waving it like some Hollywood cliché. No one ever tried that with us back at the airport because A) it was always night, and B) we, mostly Bangley, shot them dead before they knew what was happening. If someone had tried that back there, then what? Never negotiate. Bangley would have gained maximum tactical advantage, called to them, *Okay come out in peace* and then he would've blown their heads off. Good old Bangley.

Yup, that was going to take some depth of faith and trust and even then it was a flip of a coin, and plus I didn't have anything white.

I scrambled back a bit, stood up, stretched. Refreshed almost like I'd had a nap. Then I trotted back to the Beast. I kept a stack of Xerox paper in the back seat pocket and a couple of crayons. Also a few palm sized stones and rubber bands. This so if I needed to drop a note mostly to the families I could. But a couple of times I dropped notes on wanderers camped out on the roads too close to the airport who didn't seem to understand my catchy NorthSouthEastWest song: *Turn back north or die etc.* Nor a stick of dynamite. These messages, the ones wrapped around the stones and dropped from the Beast, were very succinct and graphic and they always worked. Power of the pen. I was always very proud of myself when I crafted four lines that got a refractory band of pirates to pack up and scurry back up a road. I

picked up half a dozen sheets and a black crayon and gathered up Jasper's quilt and trotted back across the park.

I was grinning. I could feel it stretching my smarting cheeks. I hunkered back down by the edge of the canyon and wrote on one sheet vertically as big as it would go: *I*

The satisfaction of composing. Remembered that Dylan Thomas sometimes would set down one word of a new poem then walk down to the pub and get shitfaced in celebration. For breaking the void of silence.

Well. Let's see how this goes over before I waste any more sheets.

Crept, wriggled to the edge of the clifftop which for my purposes was auspiciously formed in a real lip, sharp and dropping to a vertical, if not overhanging, face of sandstone. Keeping my precious splintered head well back, I reached out pushed and shook the quilt off the edge, unfurling it like a flag. Made sure the hunter and the flushing pheasant and the dog were right side up from the bottom's point of view and made sure my fingers did not go past the lip.

Most fun I'd had in years except maybe fishing and I think it's because it was a lot *like* fishing, except there were people at the other end of this line. Catch and release.

Soon as the quilt reached air another shot. Creased air right over my hands, head.

You hear bullets make the sound they always do in Westerns and war stories and guess what? They do. They make a *phhhht* like someone opening a poisonous can of soda. The Soda of Death. Like a vacuum following itself at the speed of a diving duck. Followed almost simultaneously by a little hum, a musical exclamation point.

Okay shoot at my quilt if you want. I have needle and thread.

Then silence. Quizzical. That's what it felt like.

Often fishing you can feel right away the spirit of the fish on the other end of the line. That connection. I mean you know right away: is it fierce, scared, experienced, young and dumb, wily, panicked, resigned,

confident, mischievous. Any of it in a rapid tugging and zing of line. I often thought of the silence between people in the same way.

I unfurled the quilt and the shot blasted at nearly the same instant and then silence. A puzzled silence. I grinned. I knew Gramps was scoping the blanket, studying the repeating pattern, thinking, *What the fuck?* I knew from that distance with his scope he would be able to make out the scene. I scabbled the ground for two heavy stones and weighted the top of the quilt and let it hang.

I let him puzzle it out, maybe discuss it. Then I took the paper, stuck it on the point of a four foot broken limb and pushed it over the edge: *I BANG!* Swish. Complete miss. Ha! Not going for the paper going for my head, where it would be if I was just a little tiny bit closer.

Silence. I hung the paper on the stick vertically so he could read it. He could. They were really fucking close. I mean if I wanted to be really mean I could maybe just shove a boulder over the edge. Or spit.

I pulled the stick back. If I was chuckling it was the first time in maybe nine years. Chuckling—that word. It's not a word for the End of Times. I unpeeled the paper off the crayon with my teeth and wrote on the second paper again vertically, *AM*.

Why didn't I just shout down there? Well, conversations can get so crosswise so quick. What I've found. First time I met Melissa was in a coffee shop and I was too shy to speak so I wooed her with a note. Works. One wrong tone of voice and that's it. Nah, this was better. Plus the creek was pouring, plus wind, plus there was no way on earth I was going to stick my mouth over that edge.

Stuck *AM* on the stick hung it over. Now no shot. Silence. Sonofabitch was getting the hang of it. *I AM*. Existential enough. Shit, I could stop right there, just let them chew on that a while. Picked up the crayon, wrote *NOT*. Pulled in my stick, stuck it on. Let that flap in the wind.

The philosophical implications of going from the penultimate assertion to the last were profound. I mean Hamlet had nothing on this. The unfolding dialectic. Dang.

Then A. I wrote A covering one whole page stuck it out. A. A. Flap,

rustle.

Then I sharpened the crayon on the rock turned the page sideways and wrote as big as I could fit: *PHEASANT*.

Hung it out there. Weighted the stick down with another rock and lay back face to the sun, arms crossed under my poor abused head, and let the warmth cover me and the sun work on the cuts.

They weren't going anywhere, neither was I.



If this were a Western I would now put my hat on a stick. I was wearing a hat. A sweatstained fraybrimmed baseball cap that said Cherry Hills Golf Club. I took it off a visitor one night and I liked it maybe because it carried a message of consolation: the End of Everything meant the End maybe for all time, maybe in all the universe, of Golf.

I had nothing against golf.

Anyway there were probably Scotsmen in Scotland who somehow survived the pandemic and after and were now strolling over the heath playing the old game—no irrigation but mist and rain, no lawnmowers but herds of wild sheep. Thwacking their drives into the fog. That was a nice idea.

Maybe Gramps hated golf. Doubt if he could read lettering that small but if he had say a ten power scope, well, he might. I put it on the stick anyway, for fun, shoved it out there to the edge. Nothing. The old crust wasn't buying it. He was gonna wait til he saw an eye, an ear. Hmph. Now what? I could just stand up, walk to the edge and shout. Hey! I come in peace! In friendship! And. If they subscribed to the First Principles of Bruce Bangley I was a dead man. Curiously, for the first time it seemed in a while I wasn't ready to die. Not just this minute. I mean I had more than a casual interest in staying alive. For some reason.

Okay. I had an idea.

I walked back to the Beast got another stack of paper. Had all the time

in the world: none of us seemed to be going anywhere. Unless they bolted for the tree ladder which they wouldn't as I could pot them as easy as the German officers in that awful Hemingway vignette that I loved. *It was absolutely topping. They tried to get over it, and we potted them from forty yards. They rushed it, and officers came out alone and worked on it. It was an absolutely perfect obstacle.* I mean if that's what I had been here to do.

I hunkered down by my rock in the sun, well behind it, and wrote out more words. Put them on the stick one after the other and held them over the lip as before. Deep silence while the fish on the other end thought about it.

I-COULD-BLOW-YOU-TO-SMITHER-EENS-BUT-I-WON'T—PEACE

Lucky I had half a ream of paper.

Then I took an Egg of Death out of my pocket pulled the pin which was pretty stiff and tossed it over the edge.

I threw it well upstream into what in my mind's eye I saw as the top of the meadow—well away from the cows and the cobwebbed sonofabitch and his girl.

The explosion was deeply satisfying. Thank you Bangley. I had the other pages ready and while they were still rattled and pinching their limbs to see if they weren't dead I pushed them out:

SEE?-NEXT-ONE-MIGHT-HURT

Long pause.

DON'T-MAKE-ME-RUN-OUT-OF-PAPER

Pause.

STAND-UP

I can admit I was really enjoying myself. For the first time in what seemed years my head seemed clear. Not like the thoughts were standing out in a meadow like those shaggy Norwegian horses and wondering what they were doing here. Not like one might wander off

into the trees.

Just for good measure I crept the cap out to the edge again. Nothing. Maybe we were coming to an understanding. I crawled to the edge and peered over. They were both standing up in the cattails holding their guns out to the side. He was tall, fit, not that old, maybe early sixties, in a ratty fawn cowboy hat. She was taller than he and I'd have to say handsome. Skinny but strong jawed, high cheeked, dark eyebrows, long dark hair twisted into a braid. Can't say why but she looked smart from three hundred feet. I reached back for the AR and put the scope on them. If a man can spark he was sparking: mouth compressed in rage and his eyes which were gray were throwing off glints of fury. His face had the deep lines of a man who had earned them out in the elements. Her eyes were wideset and what? Violet? Something between blue and black. Her cheeks were inflamed scarlet and she looked scared but also something else: mildly amused. Was that it? She looked to be about thirty five.

Can you fall in love through a rifle scope? Damn. I pulled my head away and looked down with naked eye. Well proportioned, wide hiped, tall. Maybe too skinny. I brought my eye to the gun again and nudged the barrel and let the scope travel down. I admit. Her legs were scratched and inflamed and maybe too thin but they were long and tapered.

Breathe Hig. Say 10-4. Ten four.

Came up to one knee, still aiming, both eyes open. I yelled.

Hi!

He blinked. I nudged the scope over to her face and they both looked like they might be crazy or maybe in a bad dream.

Hi!

Kept the scope on her. She smiled. Actually smiled. It was subtle, small, but at ten power I could see the damn thing.

How should we do this? Yelling.

Silence.

Gramps! Relax! If I wanted to kill and rape and plunder you'd be dead by now!

Pause while he took that in.

I forgive you! I yelled.

I mean for trying to kill me more than twice! Nearly wrecking my plane. Nothing personal. I know. Would've done the same thing myself.

My shouts trailed off on the breeze. But I could see that they could hear me. I mean something was registering. I could also see when I lifted my head back and looked downcanyon that all the cows and a few sheep were huddling terrified against a tall woven brush fence across the bottom of the box.

Sorry for scaring your cows!

They stood there, arms out. I played the scope over both of them. He was chewing his cheek trying to make out what the hell was going on. And her. I wasn't sure. I could see gears turning and I thought something not unpleasant was dawning on her. That was my fantasy. I knew, I *knew* that I was addled somehow, but also that I was as clear as I had been in my adult life.

Okay you can keep your guns. I'm coming down.

Okay?

Okay?

He nodded. Finally. Pulled the gun back in to his body and stood again like a man in command of his world. I'll say this: there was something about the codger that was dignified and proud. He was a fucking good shot, I knew that. I got the feeling that everything the prickly bastard did he did with that amount of confidence. Just an impression from the bleachers.

If you decide to kill me you'll feel really bad later! I promise you'll deprive yourself of the best part of your day!

She smiled. Oh man. I was gone. I thought Maybe, maybe he is her dad. What a fool.

In purgatory there is really nothing else to be. I lowered the gun, stepped back fast and walked back to the Beast.

Just for luck and respect I put another grenade in my jacket pocket to make two and grabbed some venison jerky for a peace offering, then I slung the AR over my shoulder and trotted across the sage meadow. I worked myself upcanyon through the piñons until the cleft shallowed out and I found a game trail down to the creek.

IV

My heart was booming like a bongo but not from the effort. The ground was rough, yes, the way into the creek steep and strewn with boulders. I placed a hand on their warm shoulders as I hopped and pivoted around them, slid on loose dirt following the path of deer. Their droppings lay among the long brown needles of ponderosas and the sun mixed the scents which were strangely close to the musky scent of a living deer close by in pines. So that the hunter in me was roused. But that wasn't it either. My heart was hammering because I felt like I was heading to my first date.

That one, Hig's actual first date—I was so nervous it was a disaster. We went to see *Avatar* in 3D. I kept having to duck away and pee. Every time I brought back more popcorn or candy. She must have thought I was some sort of diabetic or bulimic or something. I didn't kiss her at the end nor try and she was clearly flushed and upset, and I'll never know if it was because she thought I was a geek and couldn't wait to get rid of me or—this only occurred to me months later—maybe she was as nervous as I and kinda liked me but didn't know how to ask and felt rejected when I left so abruptly. My first realization that someone else might be anxious for *my* approval, that they could be scared of *me*. Before the end of the world that was a profound insight. Now I pretty much took it for granted: everybody was scared of me.

Which is a weird way to head out on a date. Poor Hig, poor Frankenstein.

Not her. She smiled. She smiled.

I'd charmed em hadn't I? Charmed em right out of Kill Mode. Right out of their knickers. Hadn't I?

I stopped dead. Squinted down to the creek, took one more careful step into the shade of a pine. Maybe not.

The cute thing with the quilt. Codger had no patience. He placed a high value on his time his attention. While I was lying back in the sun enjoying myself, letting them think about things, he was forced to

hunker down in the wet cattails, his blood boiling, fearing too—for life, for his gal—thinking, I’m gonna kill that smug sonofabitch. First chance. Thinks he’s so goddamn cute, how cute will it be when I make him watch his own balls roasting on the fire.

Like that.

I went on. Nevertheless. With the hair kinda standing up on my neck.

When I got to the stream I turned down it and followed an easy trail along the bank. Tall grass here, tiny white asters like daisies, Indian paintbrush. Wild strawberry, penstemon. Huge ponderosas, the smell of cold wet stone and vanilla. White moths circling each other over a gravel bar. Mating. The first date thing: that was history. My heart was still racing but not for that. I saw the moths flitting, three then two, in and out of sunlight, and thought: Hig, mating is probably not in the cards not this round. Not ever probably.

When you get to the short cliff at the top of the meadow, the one with the waterfall, when you swing down onto that tree ladder and put your back to Gramps, he is gonna shoot you dead with a delicious grunt. So there. Think this is a game, punk? You-are-not-a-pheasant-Correct:-you-are-a-dead-man. Write that on your little sheets. Bang. You just wouldn’t leave us alone. Bang. Stop twitching will ya? Bang.

Bangley: I-told-you-Hig:-never-ever—fuck-you-know-damn-well-what.-R.I.P.

Hmph. Whatever quandary I was in before I was just as much in now. That’s what I saw as I moved fast down the stream. Another thing: he, they, could’ve climbed up the tree ladder into the upper creek in two minutes flat and could now be waiting for me in the willows behind any tree and ambush me at leisure. I froze.

Did not want to die. Not now.

I could be in his sights as we speak. Goosebumps again this time not from the chill.

Scanned down the creek. A box elder at water’s edge, leaves the color of limes. A few cottonwoods below. When the wind pulsed, their leaves turned back, brightening like the palm of a hand held up in sunlight.

Stop. They could be crouched behind those thick shaggy trunks.

Stop, Hig, Stop. Reconsider the folly of mere human connection. Listen to a tree.

When you fished, that's what you were seeking huh? Connection. Think of the cost to the fish. The fish did not want your connection and if a trout could have killed you with one gulp he would have. Gramps is that fish. He can swallow you.

Huh.

I backed up, got my body flat behind a tree. The creek was about thirty feet below me, the current already running clear and shallow enough to wade across. Low water for this early in the season, maybe thigh deep at the deepest. Scanned up the opposite bank. It was a slope, steep, of new grass and flowering weeds running up under an open glade of ponderosas. Toward the top of the ridge, crumbling rimrock broke through like moldering ruins, walls and parapets.

Perfect hiding place. Them. I mean a perfect spot to ride out the end. From here, upstream, you'd never have a clue that the stream would open up into such a wide deep hole, such a meadow. No reason ever to come down here, to follow the water. It wasn't the easiest going and the old track above, the road I'd landed on, would take you more quickly north and east. To places where the road crossed the little river without effort. From ground level at the top you couldn't see the hole, the canyon, at all til you were right on it, right on the edge. And I bet that the way up from downstream was beset by waterfalls and cliffs. It was perfect. A hideout. Outlaws of old would covet.

How did they get the cows in there? Only way in was the ladder. That occurred to me.

Why when I was in the most critical spots did my mind wander to curiosities? Bangley would not approve. Bangley would say *Get down. That ambush idea that's a good one. Hunker down and think about things.*

I did. Backed up the slope ten paces into the cover of a thick juniper that grew to the ground like a shaggy bush. Snuggled in behind it, pushed in to where I could sit and see through branches down the

slope. Stiff twigs brushed my scabbing face stung. The scent was heady. It was like being inside one of those sachets. Why did she do that? Dusty blue juniper berries rained to the ground. Think this is what they made gin out of. Really?

Now what? I was safe. So what have you gained?

Crouched in a mass of prickly twigs. I was a troll who lived at the base of a tree. Looked at the world through a scratchy scrim of needles and branches. Lived on rain, on bits of song and memory.

I lay the rifle on the ground, hugged my knees, leaned into the thicker branches.

Exhausted. To the bone. The untethering that took such an effort. The flight over already seemed like another life. And the airport seemed like a dream. If the airport was a dream, then Jasper was a dream behind a dream, and before before was a dream behind that. Within and within. Dreaming. How we gentle our losses into paler ghosts.

Wait til nightfall that's what. In the dark I can walk downstream. Watch them. Climb down the ladder in safety. One benefit of so many nights fishing, fishing obsessively into the dark: I know how to trust feet to find the way.

A trout could see the smallest fly on the surface in the darkest night. The sky always luminous, luminous to a trout and the bug silhouetted against it. I loved catching fish in the dark. Often just the sound in a quiet pool, the blip, the tiny hyphenated splash then the tug. I loved it.

Darkness. Nothing. Sharp smell of warming needles. Sleep. Okay a few minutes. Sleep.



Up.

Huh?

Up. Back out. Touch that rifle you're a dead man.

Hard and sharp hard sharp thing against back of neck. Stick. Yup a

stick. A long pole. At the other end a man with a gun. Fuck. Fuck. Good one Hig.

Hands on ground. Back out. Crawl.

Crawl. Slow. Now flat, lie flat. Hands behind head. Now!

Knee in back hard. Hand roughly pushing under jacket relieving me of the belted Glock. Hand running down my back, up again, down legs, expert, swift.

Roll over.

Same with the front, fast frisk, relieving me of the grenades. Into the pockets of his own barn coat.

Younger than. Or not. Leaner. White haired. Hard like shoe leather. Creases. Creased lines deep from cheeks down. Grimace lines. Spray of creases from corners of the eyes, outside corners. Gray eyes sparking. Used to sparking back at the naked sun. No bullshit at all. Every movement sure and swift.

Not sure why: up close I felt less afraid. Didn't feel panicked at all. Which was probably dumb right now. Gramps was not the least afraid of me, not a shred. Somehow I reciprocated.

Over again. Roll over.

Knee hard in back, sharp needles stinging right side of my face. Watched him from the corner of my eye. Shrugged a circle of coiled rope off his left shoulder, shook it out one handed, bound my hands tight. One handed.

Must be a rancher, I said. Can tell by your hat.

Shut up.

Ten-four. Kinda nice not to make idle conversation.

Didn't say that, didn't say anything.

Knee hard down on the knobs of my spine, hurt as he yanked up,

tightened the knot.

You shoulda kept on. Nobody bothers us here.

I did, I can tell.

Shut up.

Knee grinding ribs. He stepped back, five steps sideways, uncoiling rope, reached down, picked the AR out of the tree and slung it.

Now stand.

Didn't even give me a chance. One jerk hard on the rope yanked me to my feet, about ripped out my shoulders.

Walk.

I walked. And.

A relief to do what someone said. Someone who knew exactly what he was doing. Just follow orders. It occurred to me as I stumbled down the hill that if he had wanted me dead I'd be dead. Just like me before when I was on the rim and they were cowering below. Reciprocating. He was reciprocating now. A perfectly reciprocal relationship. Damn.

I'd been closer than I thought. Maybe two hundred yards to where the creek went over the lip, poured over the twenty foot falls. I could see the top of their tree ladder sticking up to the left of the current. I could hear the cascade hitting the pool at the bottom. It sent up spray and the spray in the sunlight shimmered with a shifting shred of rainbow.

From this angle through the mist the little box canyon looked like Eden. Green and bounded, waterfed, remote from death. How was I going to get down that? Was he going to lower me by my bound arms—up behind me and tear out both shoulders? Or just shove me over the edge, hope the pool is a few feet deep? Break an ankle or legs, cripple me, all the better.

The whistle pierced, I jumped. Jerked around. Could've been the peregrine but right in my goddamn ear. She came out of the stone hut. She carried the scoped rifle. Bolt action. Also a small blanket. She sat

at a wood slab table, rolled the blanket, propped the barrel on it like a sandbag, sighted upwards, thought better of it, lifted the gun and pulled down a bipod, two legs at the front of the barrel, sighted again. Better angle. On me. She'd done this before, that was clear.

She's very good. I taught her. You screw up just a little, you die.

He stepped forward and with one tug freed the knot on one wrist, left one tied to the end of his rope.

Climb down.

One handed? I'm afraid of heights.

Which was true. Flying is different.

He kicked me in the ass. No shit. A swift boot. Toe in the buttocks which lurched me forward, almost sent me over the edge. That hurt. Like a bastard. Kinda hurt my feelings. What if I had stumbled over? First time since he woke me up I really wanted to hit him.

Use two hands.

I crouched, clutched the tree with both hands swung down.



My name is Hig.

I was born in the Year of the Rat.

I have no serial number but my pilot's license number is 135-271.

I am an Aquarius.

My mother loved me. She really really loved me. My father. Absent but. Well. I had an uncle that taught me to fish.

I wrote thirty poems after college, twenty three of which were for my wife.

Jasper was my dog.

No kids. My wife was pregnant.

My favorite books are: *Shane*. *Infinite Jest*.

I can cook. Pretty well for a guy.

Profession: contractor. I don't like it. I hated it. I should have been a high school English teacher or something. A pet groomer. I am free of disease, as far as I know I am healthy. I visit families with the blood

sickness about twice a month.

My favorite poem was written by Li Shang-Yin in the ninth century.

Maybe it wasn't my favorite poem before before but it is now.

I have always been particularly attuned to loss. I guess. Got a bumper crop now.

May I have some water?



He tied me to a post in the yard. Facing the sun. Sat me on one of the stools, hands behind me. Tight. They stood and studied me. I squinted, tried to make them out. Thought of something.

My right jacket pocket.

He stepped forward reached in, dug around, pulled out two fresh cans of Copenhagen. Nine or ten years old, expired, but still. I'd brought them as gifts, so. He stepped to my side so I could see him bent, his head down, looking at me sideways, close. Then he opened one of the cans with that expert tear of the thumbnail, creasing the paper around the tin lid, the quarter twist and pry. He stuck his nose in, breathed. I could smell it. Salt and dirt. The tobacco was dust dry, I knew from Bangley, but he pinched two fingers, stuck a small load in his upper lip. He was an upper lip man. Spat.

Three points.

That all? Two tins. I think six is fair.

He handed her the tins and I was surprised to see her take a dip. He pulled the second stool around to the side of me, sat.

Sun'll be out of your eyes in twenty minutes.

She stood stock still in front, still backlit. She was tall. I couldn't make out her face. Could feel the bore of her stare though.

Does she talk?

Whoops. Minus three. Back to zero. That's where you like to be. That's what I'm getting.

I like to travel light.

He nodded barely.

That's good. The dip. Been a while. I don't give a shit how you like to travel. You could be carrying around a dining room set for all I care. Looked around. We could use one.

If I say anything you're gonna dock me points right? I mean unprompted. Right?

He nodded. Minus one.

And then I lose my frequent flyer opportunities I'm guessing.

Minus two. Get to minus ten I shoot you dead. No appeal. On the spot. Mention her again I dock you five. Cause now you know better. Tell an untruth, that's ten points, you're dead. Shit your pants you're dead. Piss yourself that's up to you.

Suddenly I wasn't having any fun. I heard the thudding of the waterfall, rhythmic like a tribal drum, heard one of the sheep bleat and that's exactly how I felt. Plaintive and kind of traumatized.

I looked at him.

You know what?

I said that.

Know what? Fuck you. Fuck you and your points. I came here in peace and you tried to kill me twice. I came here looking for something, I don't know what. I don't know what, you got that? Not death, though. We had enough of that back at the airport. Enough death.

I sat tightly bound on the stool and I looked at him and I could feel tears streaming down my face, stinging the cuts on the left side.

I lost my dog a week ago. Jasper. I don't need you or your shit. I got nothing. Go ahead, subtract twenty fucking points, shoot me dead. I'll be fucking glad. Go ahead.

I could taste the salt of my tears.

Let him up Dad, she said. Enough. Let him up.

Her voice was husky. I blinked up at her straight into the sun. Felt his capable hands loose the rope.



I walked away from them to a cottonwood by the edge of the creek and pissed. I didn't care. I wasn't shy. The pour and burble of the stream covered my sobs. Cool in the deep shade. Sobbed so hard I gagged. Maybe they were watching, no, they were definitely watching, fuck them. I just let it finish, then breathed. Knelt and splashed my face, the cuts that were already rashing into a spray of scabs. Drank. Why the fuck was I crying all the time? I didn't give a shit, not really. I wasn't cracking up, it's just what I felt like doing. Nine years barely a drop, then Jasper, now this.

The world opens suddenly, opens into a narrow box canyon with four sheep, and we grieve. Two shepherds, maybe not in their right mind, and we grieve. The relief of company not Bangley, not the blood disease, we grieve. We grieve. That this was once the middle of nowhere and now it's not even that. And I am not even that. Before I could locate myself: I am a widower. I am fighting for survival. I am the keeper of something, not sure what, not the flame, maybe just Jasper. Now I couldn't. I didn't know what I was. So grieve.

I stood in the shade of the tree in the cool breath of the moving water and let the sound, the light breeze blow through me. I was a shell. Empty. Put me to your ear and you would hear the distant rush of a ghost ocean. Just nothing. The slightest pressure of current or tide could push and roll me. I would wash up. Here on this bank, dry out and bleach and the wind would scour and roughen me, strip away the thinnest layers until I was brittle and the thickness of paper. Until I crumbled into sand. That's how I felt. I'd say it was a relief to have at last nothing, nothing, but I was too hollow to register relief, too empty to carry it.

I really didn't give a shit what this old bastard did to me. Nothing to lose is so empty, so light, that the sand you crumble to at last blows away in a gust, so insubstantial it's carried upwards to shirr into the sandstorm of the stars. That's where we all get to. The rest is just

wearing thin waiting for wind.

Certainly not a place to negotiate from. There is nothing to trade. I didn't even think, *I spared his life and his daughter's he owes me at least one. What? One thing. Twenty frigging points.*

Walked back.

I'm leaving. Back up that fucking tree. Pretty clear you prefer your own company.

I looked at her.

Could I please have a dip? Was never a habit, but right now it smells good. Thanks.

Took a big pinch. The nicotine hit as soon as I'd taken the first swallow and I felt dizzy for a second.

Damn. I forgot.

I spit.

Shoot me in the back on the way up and like I said I'm not sure you wouldn't be doing me a favor.

They stared at me. She had a dark stain on her throat like a bruise.

I'll need my Glock, my rifle. You keep the grenades. Housewarming.

He hesitated, picked the handgun off the table, handed it to me butt first. I holstered it. He lifted the rifle to muster, across his chest, passed it to me.

Thanks. Thanks for kicking me in the ass.

I hauled off and slugged him.

The one I'd been saving, a solid short right that connected to his left cheek. It knocked him off his feet clean and hard and he hit the dirt ass first. Knocked his hat off. Total surprise. He pushed up on his hands and blinked at me and only when I let my eyes travel over the whole

picture did I see one hand filled with a handgun. Like magic. A heavy .45, officer issue.

You didn't have to kick me in the ass. Or play executioner. I would've gone anywhere you told me.

Who was I to talk?

I turned around and walked across the open ground upstream, my back as naked and ready for a bullet as for the fall and click of the next moment.

✱

You, You, Hey.

What?

Higs, right? That's what you said.

Hig.

Hig. You want some lunch?

Stopped. She was probably half an inch taller than me. A sunburned scar parted her dark hair, her right eyebrow. Thin and sharp. The bruise at her throat.

Lunch? Do people still eat lunch.

We do.

Glanced back at the house. The old bastard was shoving the gun into the back of his waistband, adjusting his hat, watching us.

He really your dad?

Yes. On my father's side.

No apology for him. No small betrayal. I appreciated that. *On my father's side*. What a funny thing to say. She was smiling.

He may not want to have lunch with me.

I didn't invite him.

She hooked her thumbs in the pockets of her shorts and straightened her arms in a stretch. I did notice. How it lifted her breasts, how it exposed her waist above the waistband.

But I will, if you all promise not to punch or shoot each other.

You all. A country girl. Before. I stared at her. Honestly I didn't know if I wanted to have lunch with them or not. I had gotten kind of used to the idea of living on air, of blowing away. Some comfort in that.

Hig? Yes? Bangle's voice again, disembodied. I could imagine his rough laugh if he knew he was kinda my superego. Which I couldn't get rid of, just like a bad pop song. *The girl is inviting you to lunch. She feels bad you almost pissed your pants. Ha! Be polite.*

Okay.

Okay I said.

Cimarron. She held out her hand.

Everybody calls me—

She stopped, looked around the canyon, smiled.

Cima.



Shepherd's pie with butter. Well salted. Ground beef. I thought I was going to die. Pops was right, the sun traveled over the rim of the canyon and we ate at the plank table in the shade. Close enough to the creek: a pleasant sift. It mixed with the breeze which also sounded like rushing water when it shirred the tops of the cottonwoods. Butter. Melting in glops over the mashed potato, puddling. Who would've thought something so unresistant and pale could mesmerize a man? She kept bringing it, I kept eating it. A steel pitcher of milk chilled in the creek which I emptied twice. Holy shit. Hig had you climbed that stupid tree and flown away or even been shot in the back you would've missed the meal of your life. I was so enchanted with the food I didn't

even notice if Pops was giving me the Wolf Eye or Stink Eye or Shark Eye or whatever kind of eye you give to somebody who has just raised a welt on your face and was now eating your provisions nonstop.

To be offered cold milk. To have your blue enameled plate filled again. By a woman. To have her walk from an outside fire bearing your dish. To sit in the shade of a big old tree, not a metal hangar, and eat. To hear the bleat of a sheep come through the loud rustle of the leaves. To have an older man sitting across from you in silence, eating also, enemy or friend not sure, it doesn't matter. To be a guest. To break bread.

The pleasure almost split me like a baking stuffed tomato. Like my heart swelled and my skin got thinner and thinner in the heat of it. Of company.

Bangley and I ate together often, but it was different can't say how: it was like feeding time in a zoo of our own making. This was different. I was free to leave. They were free to disinvite me. The sense of privilege.

Nobody said much. I moaned, grunted. Hunched over the plate. Only realized it when I looked up and she was smiling. Her face was drawn too thin. Her huge eyes reminded me of a radar dish absorbing everything, unable not to. Like the squelch was set too low and much of what she absorbed was pain. Another bruise on her forearm, the one that handed me the plate. Glanced up once and she was rubbing the back of her neck with a wince. Clearly getting pleasure also from my famished devouring.

Don't get out much Pops said. You.

I stopped chewing.

No not really. Where I live most of the restaurants are too expensive.

Where do you live?

Denver. North of there.

They were both staring at me now. Hungry like me. In a different way.

I set my fork on the boards, took a long swallow of cold milk, wiped my mouth on the sleeve of my jacket.

It was bad, I said. Ninety nine point whatever. Mortality. Just about killed everyone.

Your family? she said.

I nodded.

Everyone. Infrastructure frayed then fell apart. Before the end it was. It was bad.

Reached for the cup of milk and drank as if it could cool.

It was a frenzy. Everyone clinging to some shred: that they might be the one who was immune. Because we had heard of that, too, the mysterious resistance that ran in families. Genetic.

They were staring at me. He opened a pocket knife, picked his teeth.

When my wife died I made my way to the country airport where I keep my plane. I hid out.

You defended it, he said, scanning my face.

I nodded.

With help.

He was reading my own capacity for hell, for death, for wrecking it.

We defended it. Me and Bangley. Who showed up one day with a trailer full of weapons.

Bangley? He grunted. He knew what he was about old Bangley. Didn't he?

He put an elbow on the table, stretched out his long legs, picked his teeth.

He brought you along. Kinda trained you up. Set a perimeter didn't he? He had no problem killing anything that crossed it. Young, old, men,

women. But you did.

But you got over it.

Dad.

Ninety nine point whatever. What's left? Point whatever. One out of two hundred? Three hundred? We've seen what that is. It's not usually pretty is it? Is it Higs?

Hig.

Big Hig.

I stared at him.

Not pretty what's left, is it?

I stared at him. His eyes were alight with equal parts cold knowledge and warm mischief.

He spat a fleck of food off his tongue. You're a hunter. Deer, elk. Before.

Nodded. How—?

He waved it away.

The way you hold your rifle. Way you move down the creek. Looking at sign. Can't help yourself.

My mouth opened. I saw myself stepping in the suncrackled needles studying the piles of scat. He was watching. He could have had me any time he wanted.

Never in the service though.

I stared at him.

Fact you don't like killing anybody. Not even a bull elk I'd bet. If there was one to kill. Not even a trout. If there was one. Too bad. You love to fish too.

Who the fuck was this guy? How—?

I saw you studying the creek. You stood right where I would've stood so as not to spook the fish in the pool.

I stared.

But killing is something you can get used to. Isn't it, Hig?

No.

So you say.

He leaned forward and his eyes bore into mine. He aimed his gray eyes into mine and they sparked like he had lit the fuses.

I suggest you shrug out of your pissant self-righteousness. Like a rattler out of old skin. You'd move easier, smoother. Turned and spat. Nobody at this table is an innocent. That shit with the pheasant? Had you been close enough I would've slit your throat. Not thinking. Glad you weren't. That would've been a real dumbshit move.

The whole thing, the speech, the image, it shivered my insides like a cold and sudden night wind. Who the fuck was this guy? He could've slit my throat in the juniper. While I slept.

He stood up, stretched. He was in his sixties, I guessed, but he was long and lean and looked to be strung together with catgut. He moved easily in his skin. A life bent to work which he loved, was my guess if I were guessing. A rancher clearly, some sort of soldier along the way. I was tempted to play What's My Line with him, too, but it felt gauche. I mean I didn't need to get into a one-up deal with this dude, into any kind of pissing match. He'd just given me maybe the best meal of my life. Or she had.

He said, Thanks for lunch. Touched her shoulder. How's the throat?

She smiled. Been better.

He nodded once, picked a bow saw from a peg on the outside wall of the hut and walked downstream. Opened a gate in the brush fence and went through. I poured another cup of milk from the pitcher. Must

have been my fourth or fifth.

You're not used to it. You're going to make yourself sick. You'll have wicked diarrhea at the least.

You a doctor as well as a chef?

Uh huh.

The cup stopped at my lips. I put it down.

What kind of doctor?

Internist. Public health.

Her mouth stretched into the form of a smile but her eyes weren't smiling. Not even ironic.

Epidemiology to tell the truth.

Everybody around here seemed to be very into telling the truth, the whole truth.

Where?

New York City.

Oh.

Fuck.

What happened to your throat?

He was mean but he didn't seem mean like that. But. He was the only other person around. Unless they had attack sheep.

It's not what happened to. I mean it's the result of damage to my blood vessels. I hemorrhage quite easily. My muscles get very sore as well. A type of fibromyalgia. You see I contracted the flu. I barely survived. One result of the prolonged fever was the systemic inflammation that resulted in these conditions. But I had some resistance which we understand to be inherited from my father.

Biological resistance or sheer orneriness.

That too. I'm sorry we scared you. You scared us.

Again she didn't defend him, didn't feel the need. She was squarely in his corner as it should be. Right?

We talked about it. Dad doesn't pull punches as you see.

She poured herself her own cup of milk, leaned into the table. The breeze played with wisps of curly hair that strayed to her temple, her eyebrow.

You kinda triggered our Plan. He thought we should talk about what we would do when one day we were overrun. When, not if. Or when we were outwitted or outgunned. When you showed up with grenades we thought it might be that time.

Damn.

I thought, Maybe that wasn't a smile I saw on her lips. Through the scope. Maybe that was the face you make when everything is over. Over over.

One of the cows lowed long and deep with a rising inflection the way cows do. Like a question. The cottonwood leaves overhead flitted and ticked.

You have a pact huh?

She nodded.

He shoots you.

The cow mooed again, this time one short note as if answering her own query. Simple country life. Question and answer.

How close were you?

Close. He had the .45 out. After you threw the grenade. But then he said, Let's play this out another step. He said it will be a risk: he—you—can shoot me as soon as we step out. But he said he had a hunch.

A hunch?

He said you were weak. He said, Let's play this out.

That stung. I felt myself flush. Or maybe it was all the lactose hitting my system.

You all aren't diplomatic in the least.

Seems like a world that's way past diplomacy.

Maybe. Bangley feels the same way. My partner.

Anyway he gave me the .45 just in case. In case you did plug him from the rim and try to take me.

Jesus.

That's the world. That was the world we left. I nodded.

He said, You can handle him. If he kills me, you kill him when he gets close. But if there are more. Then.

She touched her throat unconsciously. I nodded. She probably would have handled me if it got to that. Don't take it hard, Hig. It's kind of a compliment. They read you from a hundred yards.

Why didn't he kill me then? In the creek? Instead you all serve me lunch.

I widened my eyes.

You all aren't trying to fatten me up? I mean you've got that taste for human flesh like a rogue shark?

Now she really smiled. She laughed. Leaned her head back, showing me the large bruise, and laughed high and husky.

Ow. Cupped her palm over the ribbed architecture of her trachea. Hurts a little not much. A rogue shark. No. Whew.

She poured herself another mug of milk, drank slowly. No. Finishing her last swallow. No, we need you.

Oh.

Suddenly I did feel nauseous. Funny, but the first image was some sort of forced breeding experiment. Why that would make me feel sick I'm not sure as she was very good looking, I'd say almost beautiful. Though scarred and very fragile. But the image was me screwing her on a stone bed like an altar while her father stood over us with a gun to my head.



I didn't ask. The way these people shared things, I knew I'd be told soon whether I liked it or not. Exhaustion again. It swept over me. Like some sort of mustard gas. What was wrong with me? It was like nine years of vigilance had suddenly caught up. I felt like crossing my arms on the rough wood of the table and laying my head down atop them and falling asleep. Right now.

You don't mind if I take a nap do you? I don't know if I can stay awake.

It's the milk probably. She stood and pointed farther under the trees by the water. There's a sort of hammock under there. Be my guest.

Be my guest. Guest. For better or worse. I thanked her for the meal and lay down by the stream in a suspended blanket and hugged my coat around me and slept.



I dreamt a house in a field that should have been my own, I mean I was returning to a place I had built, the expectation of haven, of a home that was to shelter everything I loved, and as I approached across a field without a road I saw an addition built on the side, the right side as I faced it, an annex bigger than the house itself, and it had angles that were strange to me, to my sense of things—disturbing dormers too high on the roof, juttings where there shouldn't be, and I realized with a sinking heart and growing sense of doom that someone that I would hate lived inside my house and had some sort of squatter's rights, some rights vague to me now and bargained away in an awful negotiation I could barely recall and that I could stop and stay there but only in a capacity of confirmation: confirming this thing that felt

exactly like a nightmare: or I could pass on and relinquish somehow everything I had loved, loved up to this excruciating point, and I was standing in the field unable to make the decision to go in or walk on and I woke up sobbing.

Never occurred to me to break in and take my house back.

All the choices we can't see. Every moment.

Lay in the hammock and oddly there were no sobs in this unreal world, no collar wet with tears, just the cottonwood leaves shifting and spinning above me, the creek slipping past. You could wake from one nightmare to the next to the next and never eat or piss and die of thirst.



When I opened my eyes she was working in the garden. I could see her there through the trees along the creek crouching, probably getting ahead of the weeds. He came through the brush gate carrying two poles of fir, must have been long seasoned because he carried them lightly. Light tufts of feathers blew out of the trees, the parachutes of cottonwood seeds. Didn't float very well. Closed my eyes heard the rhythmic sough of the saw like a raspy animal breathing hard. Later heard the tunk, the crack of splitting wood. A cottonwood seed landed on my eyelid.



After a while I roused, splashed my face in the creek, walked out to where she was weeding, now shaded by the cliff. I squatted down in the next row beside her and began to dig with fingers and pull. She glanced over, smiled.

We have one too, I said. A garden.

She nodded.

Silence. We worked. In silence. The comfort of that.



Next day after breakfast we weeded again. The sun climbed, pushed the shade against the wall.

Do you have kids? I said.

She sat back on her calves, pushed her hair with the back of her wrist.

We were waiting to have children. Until he was faculty full time. He is a musician.

I nodded. Go on.

He finished his dissertation, had passed his orals just as the first cases hit Newark. We lived in a walkup on Cranberry Street that's Brooklyn Heights just across the river from the Seaport the Financial District. We could see the world from our windows. That view you see in all the movies—skyline, bridge. We were always stressed out. I make myself remember that, but now it seems like the happiest life anyone could wish for. The egg and bacon bagel I got every morning and felt guilty about—you had to walk down three steps into this narrow train car practically of a deli on Montague Street, always a line, always others on the way to work, impatient, getting coffee in those blue and white Greek cups, sugar and milk in first. Just that. He called my cell as I waited on the platform. Could just get one bar of reception: What do you want me to bring home? Indian? Pasta? Ha. A life made up of small meals. To remember that. Two people waiting for their real future which I guess was the coming of children like two people waiting for a train. The happiest expectation. Maybe not so happy at the time but seems so now. He taught at Hunter, an adjunct, made squat, loved his students hated the department. Waiting to get the degree. Waiting. Time in its pod. Blown open and scattered.



She talked to me like that. I mostly listening. He worked. Passed me without a word. I never offered to help. Something about his look prohibitive. I hiked up to the Beast and got my sleeping bag. The nights were clear and cool, full of stars, the stream of stars framed by the rim of the canyon like the banks of a dark river, dark but swimming with light. Through the leaves of the big cottonwoods. I slept in the hammock with the leaves above me a rustling roof. They moved the stars around and gave them voice. The first night the hammock hurt my back but after that it didn't. The third day I climbed the tree ladder with my rifle and brought home a large buck. Dragged

it down the creek and lowered it on a rope off the rim of the waterfall and we ate the heart and liver that night.

I did it again the next day and he and I didn't bother to hang the quarters but butchered them together on the board table and cut most into jerky strips. Working fast and easy with no words. They had salt. A twenty gallon barrel they brought with them. We soaked the meat in salt brine in buckets. He didn't miss a trick, which is a thing I made sure not to tell him.



Funny how you can live a whole life waiting and not know it.

She spoke as she lifted a pile of greens from a bowl of pea pods. We sat at the table, in the shade of the big trees.

Waiting for your real life to begin. Maybe the most real thing the end. To realize that when it's too late. I know now that I loved him more than anything on earth or off of it. More than God, the one in my Episcopal liturgy.

She snapped the early peas, her hair hanging in her face, the backs of her hands blotched purple with blood. Her fingertips worked gingerly as if sore. They rolled a particularly tough pod back up to the knuckles of thumb and forefinger.

He died calling for me, looking desperately around the ward calling my name. Confused. Very early on, before all the networks went down and my friend Joel the doctor who ran the wing called me. Before we knew what this was. My mother was dying and it was too late to fly back home to New York, too late and I made the decision to stay with her and Dad. Joel said he would cremate Tomas and hold the ashes. I was beyond grateful. It was apparent that my mother would not survive. I would fly home in a week or two and drive upstate and spread his ashes in John's Brook up in the mountains outside Keene Valley where we spent every weekend we could. I worked for the city in public health so I had weekends, you know, rare for an internist. I was never on call except in a public health emergency and that wasn't often. We stayed in a white clapboard cottage in the village with a view of Noonmark from the sleeping porch. That's a little Adirondack mountain that looks like a parody of a mountain, very peaky like the

Matterhorn but tiny. The little mountain that could. We climbed it often on Saturdays after sleeping in. Trotted happily up the ledgy trail to a rocky top just out of the stunted firs. And in the long evening we'd take the two single gear bikes up the paved road to a stone pothole with a little sluicing waterfall, the water always freezing, and we'd strip and jump in. This was our ritual while we waited for our lives to truly begin and I think now that maybe true sweetness can only happen in limbo. I don't know why. Is it because we are so unsure, so tentative and waiting? Like it needs that much room, that much space to expand. The not knowing anything really, the hoping, the aching transience: This is not real, not really, and so we let it alone, let it unfold lightly. Those times that can fly. That's the way it seems now looking back. Like those pleasantly exhausted bike rides up the side of a country highway on a warm evening. To a bridge. To a little rootsnaked trail through heavy maples. Where we padded barefoot upstream to a swimming hole. Even getting poison ivy so badly one weekend I missed two days of work. Seems from here that that was the sweetest time ever vouchsafed to two people. Ever. On earth. While we waited for him to finish his degree, for me to have a child, to do the real work of living.

She looked up. We are fools, you know.

Oh fuck. One fucking thing I do know.



It hurts you? To snap the peas?

She shook her head her hair swinging over the bowl not looking up from under.

It does, doesn't it?

What is hurt? I get a little sore. More like if your hands get dry and you crack a fingertip.

I watched her hands closely after that. Moving the pods deftly up and down the fingers sometimes switching to the third or fourth finger spreading the pain. Working swiftly without complaint.

Don't, she said. Don't watch.



Once in passing she told me that she didn't expect to live past fifty or fifty five. From what she knew of the damage to organs caused by the fever. She also confessed that in an odd way she was happier here than she'd ever been. Even with all the loss. Happier *being* whatever that was. Than *waiting*.



I lost count. Of the days. Maybe it was five, maybe nine. Time expanding like an accordion making wheezy earnest music.

The weather dry and warming. Day after day. The creek a little lower, a little less push, less strength in its roar, the falls diminished, its white lash narrowing as it spilled over the stone lip. The creek like a mood. Less exuberant. I woke sometime in the middle of the night and lay in the hammock, wriggled my foot out of the sleeping bag into the chill and found the rough ground with my bare foot and rocked myself back and forth. And watched the stars swim against their mesh of leaves. Like fish nosing a net.

That is what we are, what we do: nose a net, push push, a net that never exists. The knots in the mesh as strong as our own believing. Our own fears.

Ha. Admit it: you don't have the slightest idea what you are doing, you never ever did. With all the nets in the world, real or unreal. You swam around in a flashing confused school following the tail of the fish in front. Pretty much. Nibbling at whatever passed, in whatever current you swam into.

Even the love of your life felt like luck, like she might vanish in the finning crowd at any moment. Which she did.

What are you doing?

I don't know.

Rock rock. Back and forth. Lull. Push. Release. Swing back. The stars, the leaves, even the sound of the creek throbbing back and forth. Of a boat. Of a hammock. Of a child's swing. Of a womb. Back and forth. Rock rock. Smell of cold current, of stone, manure, blossom. Sleep.



He put it to me in simple terms. Came at first light to the hammock with a steaming enamel cup. They'd long since run through coffees and teas, now concocted a brew of roasted pine nuts and Mormon tea which was bitter and smoky, not bad. He sat on the sawed stump I used as a side table. Half nod toward it for permission, moved the Glock, lay it on my pack and sat. Handed me the cup. I sat up, straddled the hanging blanket. Turned up the squelch on my brain, on the running current of images. I'd been dreaming of my house again, this time not in a field but my, our, actual house on its street on the west side of town, two blocks from the lake. But it did not look like our house, it was a low brick bunker with chimneys that I knew was a crematorium, and I was standing outside it confused again wondering where I was supposed to sleep, to feed Jasper.

I suppose I'd heard his footsteps over the creek. I woke from the dream confusion into the compounding loss, into the gentle light, but in a world that is all loss that's like waking into air from air.

What can a fish know of water? Plenty I guess.

I shut the dream down, took the cup. He didn't look like he ever slept. I mean none of his features ever blurred. They got sharper in anger but they were always sharp.

In a few weeks if it doesn't rain, which it won't, it'll be time to go.

I sat up straighter.

I told you I would leave anytime. Just say the word.

He shook his head.

You've been more than hospitable, I said seriously. I think I'm getting fat.

He didn't smile.

I don't mean you, I mean us. The three of us. You are going to fly us out of here.

I blinked. Lowered the cup to my lap.

Do you have any frigging idea what it's like out there? Do you? Why would you leave here? This little Eden? Where you and what's left of your family can live in peace?

That's what I was thinking. I said, Why?

Drought.

I glanced at the burbling stream, the green meadow.

Last summer the creek almost dried up. We had to dig in the streambed to pool enough water just to drink. Half our cattle died. Pretty much been getting worse every year. Getting warmer. Just like they said it would.

He drank from his own cup.

We knew we'd have to bail. Probably this spring. We weren't sure where to go. And there is the fear of traveling without water. If it's drying up here, what is happening off the mesa?

He unsnapped the breast pocket of his shirt and dug out the Copenhagen. Took a small plug handed me the tin.

Then you showed up in the plane. To think I almost killed you.

Yup this definitely calls for a chew. I pinched one, handed it back. The familiar pleasure of gripping it under top lip, the mild rush.

You want to come with me?

Not a matter of want, Higs.

Rhymes with Big, I said. The old bastard.

He winced at me.

You two want to fly back with me to Erie, to the airport? And live with us? With me and Bangley? Out on the Plains?

He leaned forward on the stump, spat. I *want* to stay here. To live out my years in peace with my daughter. Call it a draw. The whole damn

episode.

Shook his head as if to clear it. This life that I knew when I came back. Came out of the service, when I came back to the ranch. I knew it would be so much different than it is. Call it a draw.

He puffed out his cheeks. His hand was shaking when he put the cup to his lips. He put the back of his wrist into the corner of his eye.

It was my grandfather's ranch. He ran cattle up here in the summer before there was even a goddamn BLM to lease it from.

It occurred to me that the death of his grazing land hurt him more, incomparably more than the death of the human race. I liked him a lot better in that moment.

Why'n't you dig a well?

He grimaced. Don't think I didn't try. Underneath this whole canyon is ledge rock. Four feet down. Can't even dig a decent grave.



In the minutes we sat, the rough sanded gray of dawn suffused with a smoother, brighter light, like clear water running over wet gravel. The country may have been dying. I knew the snowpack was less every year on the Divide, the runoff earlier, the creeks lower, more bony in the fall. But right now I heard a canyon wren, the six seven eight paced notes whistling down a scale never used by man. Answered by another. I heard a meadowlark across the field and saw the dipping flight of the kingfisher I'd seen almost every morning. Moving fast up the stream. The bigger rivers like the Gunnison weren't drying up. Not yet.

His face was tight, he looked past me. Whoever he was, whatever he'd done, he loved his land, his daughter, with a fierceness as natural and unprompted as weather.

The immediate problem that presented itself was: could I take off from the short sage meadow with the extra weight. Not at all a given. Maybe not with both of them, maybe not with one.

I don't have enough fuel to get back, I said.

He twitched. His eyes shifted back to my face and hardened.

Don't bullshit me, Higs.

Hig. Rhymes with Big if you forget.

It occurred to me too just then that maybe I better be a bit more tactful. If I couldn't fly them out of here he might just shoot me. Damn. I was starting to feel used. Loved just for my air power. Like the United States before. First Bangley then this. What if I had no plane? What if I were just Big Hig, just making my way through the broken world offering what I could, some kindness, some compassion, some technical knowhow but no plane. Who are you kidding? *Bang.*

Ask the guys at the Coke truck.

What?

Sorry. Been so much alone I don't know sometimes when I'm talking to myself.

I turned toward the running stream and spat.

I'm not fucking with you. I flew past my point of no return. That was right around Colbran.

He scanned my face again. The emotion was hard to read but his eyes moved over my features like a mason taking the measure of a very old wall. There was a frank reassessment in his eyes that unnerved me.

Higs, you are gonna fly us out of here. You fly us to a town, a fortified compound, I don't give a shit, and I'll take care of getting fuel.

I shivered. I bet he would.

Auto gas won't work anymore.

What?

After three years none of it would. Even adding lead. Went stale. Not

stable enough. Hundred low lead is far more stable. Still good but pushing its life nine years out. Anyone out here, their gas is long dead.

He chewed the inside of his cheek. Hadn't spit once, I guess he swallowed it.

At Erie I wasn't worried. I had a line on a warehouse in Commerce City full of PRI which "restores gas to refinery condition" according to the literature in each case. Like magic. Enough to last another decade at least. But. Out here who knows. Even avgas might not work. Depends on the condition of the tanks, mostly.

It was hard to look at him. I didn't feel like a stone wall anymore. I felt like a rabbit. Caught out in the open.

Why'd you come here? he said simply.

Didn't answer. Not defensive, not reticent, I just didn't know. Not really.

You got in your plane and flew past your point of no return. In a world maybe without any more good fuel. You left a safe haven, a partnership that worked. For a country that is not at all safe, where anyone you meet is most likely going to try to kill you. If not from outright predation then from disease. What the fuck were you thinking? Hig.

My dog died, I said.

✱

I told him about the radio transmission I'd picked up three years ago. I told him about hunting and fishing and Jasper dying and killing the boy and others, and being at the end of all loss.

I didn't have another idea, I said.

✱

He knew it all. He knew that a Cessna 182 of the Beast's vintage usually carried fifty five usable gallons. He knew the burn rate per hour would be about thirteen. He knew the approximate distances. He had figured it all. He had figured I was right at the PONR, no return.

Figured I had carried a couple extra cans. What he had figured and figured wrong was that I knew what the hell I was doing.



We'll go to Junction. We'll check out what you wanted to check out. The tower, the airport. Then we'll get some avgas. Then we'll fly back to Bangley. And if he doesn't like that we'll convince him.

I don't know if I can take off with both of you. From that meadow.

Oh you will. If we have to cut your legs off and prop you up. I can work the rudder pedals.

He smiled grim but I saw a shadow of worry cross the winter of his eyes.



No point in slaughtering the livestock and making more jerky. We had what must have been twenty pounds from the venison I'd shot and we couldn't take any more weight. Probably couldn't take that. Cima said the livestock, they would fend for themselves and God willing there would be enough rain this season to make it through.

She wanted to take two lambs, male and female.

They can't weigh more than twenty pounds apiece.

I tried to explain that a small plane was more like a kite than a truck. I told her about learning from Dave Harner in Montana, what he yelled at me the first few days as I tried to land the 172 at airports around the shores of Flathead Lake. As I came in on final and the plane swerved and veered like a sick duck he'd yell *Jeesus Hig! You drive a motorcycle? Yes! You drive a pickup? Yes! Thought so! Well this ain't either one! This is a bird! Slight adjustments slight adjustments! Christ! That was atrocious!*

She laughed.

Harner, my instructor, had been a logger. A big timber logger when there were still big trees in the Northwest. He'd run up and down the steep mountains carrying a forty pound chainsaw with a fifty inch bar and cut more wood than anyone else in all that country. Kind of a

living Paul Bunyan.

Remember him? Paul Bunyan?

Of course.

Just checking. For his birthday, his thirtieth, his friends gave Dave a demo lesson at the local airport. It was Kalispell. They said they wanted him to see for himself all the country he had clear-cut. Kind of touching when you think about it. So he climbed in with a kid named Billy, a still wet bush pilot, and took the controls for the taxi and got the feel of the rudders right away, little touches—not like me, I almost ran into a box store on my first taxi—and it was his airplane for the takeoff and they climbed out of Kalispell. He did just what Billy told him, every little thing, and he was remarkably, freakishly relaxed. After all, he told me, how freaky could it be after running up and down forty degree slopes with a vicious cutting blade screaming and a thousand tons of timber falling all around you? It was calm, he said. Just uncannily, almost divinely, calm. Not his exact words. He said, Hig it was like flying inside a photograph, one of those real beautiful ones of country you love, all quiet and still the way you want the world to be. What he was talking about was the disembodied detachment you get flying. Like the world is as perfect as a train set and nothing bad can touch you.

I get that.

Yeah. He fell in love right there. He went batso. It was almost the same for me except that he was a natural, I wasn't.

Were you ever a natural? At anything?

I thought, At loss. At losing shit. Seems to be my mission in life. Course I didn't say it, who am I to talk?

Fishing, I guess. Trout used to throw themselves at me. You?

She shook her head.



I spent some time at the Beast. Climbed the tree ladder, walked back

up the creek and out of the canyon. Summer caught me off guard. I walked shade to shade in the sun, it was no longer pleasant. Hot by midmorning. The water lower perceptibly by the day. Creek bottom showing its ribs. Logs and debris propped on the rocks, the rocks more prominent. Scared me. The stream was dropping early and fast. It would dry up. Even the fish tolerant of warmer water, even they would die. Carp and catfish. Crawfish. Frogs.

The dry pine needles crackled and crunched beneath my boots. Reflected the sun in the shadeless places so there was no relief for the eyes in looking down. Two weeks now, something like it, and the flowers were mostly gone. The fastest spring ever.

In the old cycles the drought would break, the monsoon would come, the snows would sweep in, and the life would come back. How was a mystery. To me. The trout, the cutthroat that had been here longer than us, the leopard frogs and salamanders, somehow they would return the next year. From where? Maybe in the gullets of birds I don't know. Not now. Probably.

I climbed the switchbacking trail up through the archipelago, the islands of shadow made by the ponderosas. Smelled the toasting bark, the still moist ground drying out. Harried by the summer buzz of a deerfly. At the top the cedars were dense. Thick and gnarled in the trunks, twisting into the sunlight, cradling boulders like ugly consoling arms, ever slowgrowing these had never been cut. Some probably seedlings when Cortes was looking at his men with a wild surmise. I walked across the open meadow, patted the Beast on the nose.

Missed you.

Looked down the little park. Short. The piñon and juniper at the end weren't tall, twenty feet at the tallest, but pines set back were forty feet high maybe. We could cut those.

If it was the middle of winter. The heat would make a big difference. Cold air more dense, hot air cutting performance by a shocking amount. We'd leave in the dark, just after, safe enough to see but close to the coolest time.

Here's what I mean. I stuck my head inside, she smelled the same

always. Smelled Jasper, smelled what was probably still the 1950s and pulled out the POH from the vinyl pocket behind my seat. It's the Pilot Operating Handbook, the original from 1956. Thin little sucker probably less than an eighth of an inch, eighty eight pages with an illustration on the cover of the plane. In the back are the performance tables. These are wonderful things—literal and invaluable. What these are is some test pilot got into this very model and took off again and again. From this altitude and this one. At this air temp and that one. Technicians in white coats and those thick framed black glasses recorded the data and plotted the beautiful, simple, unhurried curves. They went home to wives in beehives and drank Seagram's Seven on ice in faceted tumblers. The test pilots, what did they do? They were veteran fighter pilots from the war, World War II, who had firebombed Japan and strafed aerodromes in Austria and settled into the new suburbs like the characters James Dickey wrote about, and back in the little cockpit at the Cessna test center in Wichita, with the plane shuddering in the old familiar way of any prop plane, then the former wing commander was like any lifetime equestrian who swings onto any horse anywhere with that complex and simple feeling of being home and freed from the constraints of the mundane.

In the back of my slim owner's manual were pages of these tables and graphs. Takeoff and rollout distances. I flipped—carefully—I always handled the POH like an ancient and priceless artifact—to the page titled Take-Off Data. Ran my finger across the airfield elevations to seventy five hundred feet and down the columns of air temps in Fahrenheit. Takeoff distance at empty weight to clear a fifty foot obstacle at thirty two degrees with no headwind was nine hundred and fifty feet. See? Don't ask me. Air is less dense as it heats up. Then I did something I never do, hadn't done since my private pilot's license test: I took out the certified weight and balance sheet I kept folded in a pocket in the bulkhead by my knee. Every plane has one specific to the very aircraft. Weights and moments. I pulled a sheet of clean Xerox paper and worked out the problem. I put Pops in front at a hundred eighty pounds and Cima in the rear at one twenty with a bag of provisions weighing twenty. Five gallons of water at forty. No lambs. The full gas cans were gone as I'd put the fuel in the tanks. I figured in the fuel, the guns, two rifles, the shotgun, the handguns, four grenades. Period. Two quarts of oil.

I scratched a nub of pencil over the paper and worked the numbers. Then I left the paperwork on my seat, left the door open, there was no wind, and paced the track through the meadow.



One eighty one eighty one one eighty two. Counted my steps. Reminded me of counting the seconds waiting for Bangley in a firefight. Skirted the ruts. Plowed grass with my shins. Eyed the turkey vulture gyring to the north. And when I got to two hundred and saw how much clearing there was ahead of me I knew. It wasn't long enough. Six hundred forty feet at most. There was no way.

Lastly. I already knew but I double checked. I took a stout wooden paint stir stick out of the same seat pocket. It was ticked with a Sharpie at intervals along its length and marked 5 10 15 all the way up to 30. Gallons. I climbed up on the strut, untwisted the fuel cap at the top of the wing on the wing tank and lowered in the stick. Drew it out turned it away from full sunlight and noted the fast vanishing and pungent wetness. Did it to the other side.



The guys in the white coats. The fighter pilot in his flight suit. With the wife in the beehive. Humming, tapping his fingers on the yoke of the Cessna to Rock Around the Clock. In 1955. All of it about to break open: the manic music, Hula Hoop, surf girls, Elvis, all now from this distance like some crazed compensation—for what? The Great Fear. Lurking. First time in human history maybe since the Ark that they contemplated the Very End. That some gross misunderstanding could buzz across the red phones, some shaking finger come down on the red button and it would all be over. All of it. That fast. In a ballooning of mushrooming dust and fire, the most horrible deaths. What that must have done to the psyche. The vibrations suddenly set in motion deeper than any tones before. Like a wind strong enough for the first time to move the heaviest chimes, the plates of rusted bronze hanging in the mountain passes. Listen: the deep terrifying slow tones. Moving into the entrails, the spaces between neurons, groaning of absolute death. What would you do? Move your hips, invent rock n roll.

The men at the Cessna test center compiling those numbers, those distances. Erecting them against the smallest accidents while the gut

fear of the Big One gripped their dreams. Is that how it was? I don't know. I overdramatize. But given what has happened how can you? Can't really overdo anything. There is no hyperbole anymore just stark extinction mounting up. Nobody would believe it.

The test pilots were working in perfect conditions on smooth tarmac. A soft field knocked off a percentage of performance, and the rough track in this sage field was another story. We could fill in the ruts, smooth it out as best we could, but.

I uncoiled the hose and siphoned the twelve extra gallons back into the cans. We wouldn't need them to get to Junction and it would save us seventy two pounds. Then I thought, Don't cut it too close, and I climbed back on the strut and poured back what I judged to be about two gallons. I left one full can in the sage and emptied the other one out in the dirt and then nestled it, the empty can, back into the Beast. Then I went fishing. I took my rod case out of its bracket behind my seat and the light nylon daypack with flybox and tippet and walked back down into the canyon.



My calculations showed that the best way to have any chance at all of taking off, of clearing the trees, was to leave the old man.

I could imagine how well that was gonna wash. I could imagine the conversation. I could just about hear the snick of his big knife clearing the plastic sheath, my own peep as the point of the blade came to my throat. *Don't bullshit me Higs! I told you not to fucking bullshit me.*

I caught five carp. Rolled a pheasant tail along the bottom and yanked them out one after another. The peregrine glided along the wall above and let herself fall, flaring just over the trees above the creek. I think she was watching me, curious. Do peregrines eat fish? The carp were skinny fish, long and thin and I realized with a whomp of sadness that they were starving. The shift in water temperatures was affecting them, too, or their food. I unhooked them with special care, the care I had always reserved for trout, and held them gently while they finned in my cupped hand against the current, until their gills filled and the undulations of their tail strengthened and they wriggled away. I gave up, didn't feel like fishing anymore.

The trout are gone the elk the tigers the elephants the suckers. If I wake up crying in the middle of the night and I'm not saying I do it's because even the carp are gone.

I pictured the conversation. I can take your daughter, twenty pounds of jerky but not you.

But. The light bulb went off. Hig, you had what they used to call an epiphany. When discovering something, some intellectual connection, had a value like gold. Eureka.

I'd bring the weight and balance sheet, the pencil and worksheet, the fragile POH with its disattached cover and its incontrovertible tables and go through the numbers as if for the first time and let everyone draw their own conclusions.

She had lunch on the table in the shade. Pitcher of cold milk, salted meat, a salad of lamb's quarter and new lettuce, green onions. I sat down. Pops watched me. He followed me with his eyes, watched me while he chewed. She ate. She moved easier today, lighter. The bruises seemed to be fading, her mood brighter. She ate slowly, breathed deep as if smelling the creek, each new blossom.

Can you? he said at last. He put down his cup, wiped his mouth on his sleeve waited.

No.

She put down her fork. The pack was at my feet. I pulled up the slider, loosened the drawstring, drew out the manual, the sheets, took the stub of pencil out of the band of my cap.

Weight and balance, he said. I nodded. Takeoff distance, he said.

Yup.

He was no fool. I had scrawled only the formula, left the weights blank. At the top of the page in the right corner I had jotted down some weights: One gal. avgas = 6 lbs. One gal. water = 8 lbs. Presently in tanks: 14 gals.

I slid it over. I ate.



He was sharp. Whatever he did before on the ranch, in the service, he didn't waste time. He took the pencil and went to work. Didn't ask, Is this right? Is this how you do it? Been a while ... nothing like that. A man without the habit of justifying himself, making excuses. Didn't ever say, Higs check my math, will you? Nope, the SOB looked once at the problem, began to multiply, fill in the blanks work the equation. I saw him make a list down the right side of the page of provisions, each with its weight estimated. He worked it three different ways and each time I saw him scratch two or three items off the list. Saw him reduce the water to three gallons. Scratch off the steel gas can.

Unh uh.

He looked up.

The gas can. The siphon hose. Ten pounds. Need them absolutely. What if we have to walk to get fuel?

He nodded, restored it to the list.

Then he siphoned out avgas, reduced the tanks to 10 from 14.

No.

I interrupted him again. Pencil stopped, eyebrow raised.

Fuel stays.

Thirty five miles to Grand Junction, tops. One twenty mph with a headwind. Point three hours thirteen gallons an hour. Ten is plenty.

Forget it. If we have to circle, check all the runways, taxiways, if we get fired on, if we have to find a road.

He nodded. Went at it again. Finally he put down the pencil, straightened his arms against the side of the table, sat back. Stared at me. Thought I saw hatred. Hard to tell with Pops.

You did it already didn't you?

I nodded.

I stay, she goes.

Nodded.

You already knew that.

Nodded. He stared. A mobile light moved over his features. Gave them a look of animation though I don't think anything moved. I'd say, Could've heard a pin drop, but. Not with the creek right there. He stared at me, nodded slowly.

Okay, he said.

Just like that. It was done. Now I really liked the old coot, have to admit. He took his medicine, no whining.

I smiled at him, maybe the first time.

That's why we need fourteen gallons, I said. One of the reasons.

He looked puzzled, winced, pushed his tongue up under his lip where I knew he kept his chew.

We need fourteen because we've gotta land and take off again. We'll pick you up out on the highway. Won't be a problem. There's a decent straight stretch right at the bridge turnoff. All the runway we want. It'll be no sweat.

He didn't let his face soften, nothing like that. Just that in his stare, in the winter of it, I thought I saw a slight thaw, a reassessing.

You can walk out a day early and we'll pick you up at daybreak.

Okay, he said again and that was it.

BOOK THREE

I

There was no hurry really. Plenty of water in the big rivers if we got stranded in Junction. We'd wait a couple of weeks, fatten up, let the season round out into full summer, ride it while we could. Let the creek drop. I decided to enjoy it. I treated it like a vacation, first one I'd had since.

Since I'd made the unexpected contingency plan, things around the homestead had lightened up a little. Surprised me, frankly, that it had surprised him, the notion of picking him up later. He was so sharp, such a tactician. Like Bangley that way, always thinking three moves ahead in a crisis, and cool.

Then it struck me that the option must have occurred to him immediately. And then I respected him even more. He knew.

It was obvious to him that we could take off without him and pick him up later, but he would keep his mouth shut. Two reasons I figured. One, he was the kind of dude who subscribed to *Never take what isn't offered freely*. And Two, he was conflicted about leaving. Part of him, maybe the bigger part, wanted to stay, to watch the creek dwindle, to help the livestock into the next world, to die with his ranch and molder there into the flinty ground.

For a man his age with his values that option was in many ways preferable to the other. The journey to a strange land—because it was a Strange Land now in every sense. Also, it was the plains, not the mountains—the making of a new life, the having to adapt to new threats, new rules not his own. It was a sucky prospect. And if he had told her that this was his preference he would have hurt her badly, she would never have let him, she would go hysterical to the extent that a woman who had been through what she had been through could go hysterical. She would not forgive him.

So the fragile little Pilot Operating Handbook with the table of takeoff distances, the curve incontrovertible beyond which there was no new life anywhere, only a faltering aircraft struggling to rise over the small trees and snagging its landing gear, then wings, the big cartwheel ... it was his ticket out. Out of the plan. Maybe why he didn't look more

shocked. Why he had worked the weight and balance in front of her.

Thinking about it like that I almost felt sorry I had broached the option. If he wanted to die in place he was a big boy. But.

I swung in the hammock. I recited every poem I had ever half remembered. I went fishing upstream and down. I ate. Took the spade up top and filled in the ruts in our airstrip, knocked down the brush. Helped Cima harvest the garden, the early greens.

It was a good garden. The dirt was rich, a lot richer than ours back at the airport. It was full of worms and black from year after year of spreading manure. The families gave me chicken manure, but it wasn't enough, it wasn't like this. In the early morning, in the shadow of the bigger trees, the dirt was cold and wet, the new plants covered in dew. That smell. The shadow edged back and I liked to strip to my boxers so that my knees were in the damp dirt and the full sun was hot on my back. The dirt encrusted basket beside us, between rows.

Why'd you go back east? I said.

I got a scholarship to Dartmouth.

My uncle went there. Were you an only child?

She shook her head.

Twin brother. He died when we were fifteen. Motorcycle.

Man.

I had good grades. Good test scores. I was going to be a vet, go to Colorado State, come back home and set up a large animal practice. All my life that was what I was going to do. We had a college counselor, Mr. Sykes. He had a very good placement record, but he controlled who went where so tightly all the kids called him Sucks. One day in English class my junior year there was a tap on the glass of the door and he came in and handed me a folded note. It said My office 12:45. During the lunch hour. I remember we were talking about *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. Do you know it?

I loved that poem until they taught it to me in high school. Did you

know there is a Hidden Meaning?

Really?

Yup. Sex, art and scholarship are all class weapons.

Hunh. Funny thing to teach aspiring scholars.

We weren't aspiring scholars. We were supposed to go to work for StorageTek or UPS. Or Coors.

The note. Sykes, I said.

Oh. My heart galloped. Every year Dartmouth gave one scholarship to a kid from Delta High. It was endowed by the man who built the fiberboard plant, an alum. I guess he felt bad for all the formaldehyde smoke which reeked in the winter when there was an inversion. Every fall one kid got a note from Sykes to see him at lunch hour. He controlled it, chose the kid. I don't think that was even legal but that's the way it was. His little fiefdom. Kept all the families, the whole town, kissing his ass all year. For the rest of the class nobody could concentrate, they were all watching me. And my head was rushing with the possibilities, images of a future I had no pictures for. They tumbled together: ivy covered bricks, handsome upperclassmen in argyle sweaters, taking them off to row crew. You know I didn't have a clue. My days consisted of throwing hay before daylight and running cross country after school, and then back home for more chores, mostly giving oats and medicine to horses, and mucking stalls, and homework.

I was beet red, I could tell. The more I tried to concentrate on the poem the more I felt the eyes on me and when I glanced up and snuck a look, they were. I could already feel the envy. Like a wind. By the end of the day I wasn't sure if any of this was a curse or a blessing. Anyway, I went to see Sykes. I couldn't eat anything in the cafeteria so I just went to the Girls' Room and sat on the toilet and tried to breathe. He said, Cima I think you have a good chance for the Ritter Scholarship. He was completely bald. I thought his head was the shape of an egg. I remember seeing tiny beads of sweat on the mottled pink dome of it as if it were he on the hot seat. He was from Illinois, outside of Chicago, I remember. He said, You will write the personal essay in your application about ranch life and losing Bo.

I was shocked. Almost as if I had hallucinated that last request. Well, it wasn't a request. Come again, I said. His hands were resting on the desk and he actually made a careful triangle out of his thumbs and forefingers and pursed his lips and looked into it as if it were some Masonic window into my destiny. He said, You will write about being a ranch girl and losing your brother who was your soulmate.

I stared at him. I had heard that he controlled the whole application process. But nobody had ever said anything like that to me before. I mean put their big fat foot, clomp clomp, into my most interior landscape. Bo to me was like a secret garden. A place only I could go. A source of both grief and great strength. He was smiling at me. He had the smallest mouth and only one side came up. I remember. The turmoil. Life had just opened up really wide and bright then suddenly the horror: that to go there I would be asked to forfeit my soul. Something like that. Terrifying. I know I was flushing to the roots and I couldn't seem to articulate anything. He kept smiling at me. He said, You don't have to thank anyone now, it's certainly momentous. *Deus ex machina*. That's what he said! As if he were God! My word. He thought I was overcome with gratitude and I was actually so furious. I felt violated. I was so mad I could've taken his egg head and crushed it. I just mumbled and ducked out.

Did you write about Bo?

Yes. I wrote about how my college counselor had demanded that I write about my dead twin. I wrote a long essay, twice as long as asked for, about a certain kind of tact that was part of ranch culture and why I thought it had developed and why it was important and how the fact that a ranch girl writing about her missing twin might appeal to the admissions people at the highest caliber Eastern college was another example of the disconnect between us. Eastern establishment and Western land based people. We didn't want anybody's sympathy. I was so angry. Never been so mad I don't think. I sent the application off without letting Sykes review it, which was strictly against protocol. Nobody had ever done it. He tried to scuttle the application, he was such a vengeful little fuck, but it was too late. I guess they were so impressed with my ranch girl grit or something. I got in, of course. Early decision, full ride. The college pressured the high school and forced Sykes to retire. You know the part that still troubles me about

all that is that I knew I would. Get accepted. I mean I flipped the emotional payoff they were looking for, didn't I? I mean I was truly furious, but I also knew somewhere inside that it would make my candidacy even stronger. I have prayed about it often. I mean apologizing to Bo for using him to get into college.

I shook the dirt off some Swiss chard and lay it in the basket.

You didn't use Bo. You wrote exactly what you were feeling.

Yeah, but I've often thought that the move with the most integrity would've been to blow off Dartmouth for having that kind of expectation, those values, and go to Northern State. I mean it's an ag school. Was.

You were what? Seventeen? You wanted to flex your muscles. You were an ass kicker like your dad. Nobody on earth is more righteous than a seventeen year old. And it wasn't the college, it was Mr. Sucks.

You know what I mean. He was right, after all. About the subject that would snare them. I don't know. I think of him sometimes, a middle aged, single man, humiliated out of the one job he was great at. What he did with the rest of his life, how it was for him when the flu hit. Lonely, alone, terrified. Funny the things that keep you up at night after all that has happened.

Amen, I said.

Silence. I pulled out some new meadow grass. Hands black with crumbled dirt like bear paws. She was way too tactful to ask me. Still the ranch girl.

You want to know what keeps me up at night?

She sat back on her haunches in the sun, straightened, blew the hair out of her face. She had a strong straight nose, wideset eyes. A long slender neck, now bruised.

I couldn't say: I put a pillow over my wife's face at the end. That I felt her struggle in the last seconds trying to push away the death she'd asked for. A reflex right? That I held tight and leaned in and kept the promise I'd just made. That was the right decision. Wasn't it?

Could I say that we murdered a young boy in the middle of the night? That we didn't make him into dog food. That we murdered a young girl in broad daylight who was running after me with a kitchen knife probably wanting my help. Or that the memories of fishing alone for trout in a mountain creek with Jasper lying on the bank were maybe my sweetest memories. That so much of that is a dream or might as well be. That I don't know the difference anymore between dream and memory. I wake from dream into dream and am not sure why I keep going. That I suspect only curiosity keeps me alive. That I'm not sure any longer if that is enough.

I smothered my wife with a pillow. At the end when she asked. Like putting down a dog. Other things. Worse.

Her hand was still holding a clump of loose chard. It tightened on the leaves. She nodded. Her eyes were warm and steady.

And I wish I could have been there to do that for Tomas. I wish I could have done it. Why didn't I stay to be with my husband? My mother had hers, she didn't need me as much he did. Well, he hadn't contracted it yet. He was coughing a bit but we weren't sure. No fever. A lot of people were coughing, only a few were confirmed. But I should have known. In my position with the first reports coming in I should have known.

She sat up straight on her haunches and she cried silently. I put my chard in the basket and went to weeding. I shook the dirt from the roots and put the worms back in the ground.



The deepest spot was just beneath the falls. Even at low water it was four or five feet deep and cold. Hard to imagine it drying up, but it would without enough snowpack, enough summer rain. Once the days turned really hot I bathed there every day. I went late in the afternoon when the sunlight still reached the bottom of the canyon. I liked the contrast, hot and cold. It was shielded by willows. I hung my shirt up on one of the branches like a ragged flag so they would know I was there and pushed into the little pool on a beaten path. The spray from the cascade reached the smooth stones on the bank, must've been ten degrees cooler in there. Grateful, as grateful as I was all day, I

unbuttoned my pants and untied my boots, stripped. Sometimes just sat in the mist, the outer stones the warmest, and dangled my feet and calves in the water: cool billow on my chest, sun on my back, the contrasts. And watched the patch of rainbow shift around in the spray.

I wanted to ask her: What *did* you all know about the flu, about the coming pandemic. Did you? Did it really take everyone so by surprise? Why was it so fast? What was the blood disease that came right after and why did so many who survived contract it? Wanted to ask her all that since she first told me she was a doctor, that kind of doctor. But then she preempted with the story of her husband dying without her in the ward and I didn't want to reopen old wounds etc but now I was resolved. She had brought it up. But then she was crying. I would've cried too probably but to tell the truth I was cried out. Wrung out like a human rag.

Sitting bare assed on the stones dangling my feet in the water, feeling the push of moist air off the falls, hearing nothing but the roar of plunging water, hot sun burning the backs of my ears. Thinking of nothing. Grateful for that. My favorite time of day. I could say now: I am at peace. Here on the bank of the dying creek.

The afternoon of the morning we had picked chard, I walked up to the falls and pulled my sweaty dirt smeared shirt over my head and thought I'd better wash it. Which was just rinsing it and slapping it on the rocks and wringing it out. I thought, Another thing to be grateful for, Hig: no pile of work clothes to wash and hang on the line and fold and stuff into the cubbies in the closet which were too small. Melissa and I never had enough room for our stuff. You'd think a carpenter would take care of his own little remodels, but no. Just your shirt, your pants, your socks. One fleece undershirt. A favorite wool sweater darned and darned again. You thought you were leaving Erie for a few days.

So I took the shirt with me and pushed through the willows and she was standing naked in the fogged water, facing me, watching something up high on the wall. She was willowy thin. I could just see her ribs. Long legged, the curve of her hips sweet, her mound prominent, the touch of dark hair not fully hiding her. Her breasts smallish, but not small. Tight as apples. What do I mean? Firm, full. Collarbones, nice shoulders. Strong arms, slender but strong. A bruise

on her upper right thigh. I must have stopped breathing. She was, I don't know. Perfect. My one dumb thought was: How on earth did you frigging hide all that? In a man's too large shirt? My eye must be out of practice! That's what I thought. All in a split second. Because reflexively I turned to look up at the wall and saw the peregrine land in the nest carrying a bird, a pretty damned big bird.

How do you think she'll divide it up? she said over the water.

What? None of this seemed real. I looked back at her and she was half turned away, the small of her back where it dimpled, her sweet butt making another perfect curve. I. The curve that kills me. Dead Man's Curve. I blinked. I thought, She is nothing, not a frigging thing like one of Bangley's posters. She is like a million times more lovely. I didn't say, Sorry to surprise you, or anything. I said, She'll tear it to pieces. I mean I yelled it over the falls and then I turned around and fled.

Big Hig. Pretty cool in a plane, pretty cool with visitors, reduced to babble.

A while later she found me in the shade. Your turn, she said smiling.

She was passing the hammock, leaning her head, wringing out her hair. Where I was lying in a kind of endocrine shock—trying at once to recall and push away every detail I had just seen. Startled again by the sight of her and sure she could read my mind. I grinned back, sheepish as a sixteen year old.

When are you gonna show me yours? she said.

I must've started, flushed. Her smile was broad now and guileless and I saw for an instant the high school runner, the ranch girl who liked to win a barrel race.



Checked on the Beast, topped off the oil, pumped up the tires with a bicycle pump I kept in back. Took naps. The dreams of the old house stopped. Now I dreamt of big cats, tigers and mountain lions flowing down through the rocks to the river at twilight, the unblinking eyes seeing everything. In the dream there was a sense of supreme grace and power and also intelligence. In these dreams I came face to face

with the beasts very close and looked into their eyes and something was transmitted but nothing I could ever name. When I woke, though, I felt infused with something strong and frightening and maybe beautiful. I felt lucky.

I had one dream, lying out in the hammock on an almost windless afternoon, that Melissa and I were bow hunting. She never did that, but I did. If I had the time between jobs to go out earlier and take a longer season, I'd buy a bow tag. In the dream we weren't hunting the cats we were hunting one of those rare ibex deals that went dark way before before, somewhere up in the foothills of the Himalayas, and when she had her bow drawn on a big buck, very close, I cried NO! and the animal leapt and ran and she turned to me and her face was bright with fury and betrayal. When I woke up I was gripping the rope side of the hammock and it took me a minute to realize where I was, that it was a dream, and then the near vertigo, thinking, This is a dream, and a little relieved I was in this one and not that one.

Cima's bruises lightened and vanished and new ones appeared. We seemed to talk nonstop. But I felt very comfortable in the silences that were never silent but filled with birds, wren and lark. With the flashing wingbars of nighthawks at dusk. Later there were bat squeaks, the bustle of leaves, the sough of the lowering stream. All kind of pastoral, a little strange given everything. I felt comfortable working beside her in the garden, cleaning vegetables in the shade of the board table. I'll tell you this: Once everything ends you are no more free. The more lovely this respite, the more some cagey animal inside of me refused to surrender. The more I dreamt of Jasper, of Melissa. The sadder I got. Weird, huh? Once shelling peas our hands touched over the pot and she let her fingers stay over mine. Just a second. I looked up and her eyes were steady, frank, more like the way a glass pond is tannin black, windless, serene, contained, waiting. Lovely. Waiting to reflect a cloud, to be swept by rain. I couldn't breathe.

The openness, the simple being-ness of those eyes struck me as brave and terrifying. I must have recoiled. She smiled inward and went back to shucking peas. I suppose as an internist you see all kinds of raw symptoms, nothing much surprises you.

We had enough venison, no reason to eat mutton or beef so we didn't. Pops thought some of the animals might survive here on their own if it

rained later on, if the winter was as mild as last. When things get better we can come back, he said. Nobody else said a word. Pops was not in the habit of bullshitting himself but there it was, every man has his imaginary refuge.

Another week, two. Some inner wires began to loosen. Never know how tight we are until then. Pops was off cutting wood. I started a dinner fire for her in the outside pit and we sat on stumps and just watched it build. It swayed and whispered with the rhythm of the breeze. This time of day the wind came upstream as it did in all this country but something about the shape of the canyon made it eddy and blow around so there was never a safe spot by the fire away from smoke. We had already moved our seats twice. I was crying with smoke.

Smoke makes you cry and then you grieve, I said. Like cutting onions. Always made me sad.

She smiled.

I never been to New York. Did you like it?

I loved it. Just loved it. You know how some people say they wish they had two lives so they could be a cowboy in one and an actor in another? Or whatever? I wanted two lives so I could live in the Heights—Brooklyn Heights—in one and in the East Village say in another. I couldn't get enough of it. I wanted to go to Yankees games—Yanks not Mets—and to Off Off Broadway and poetry slams and get lost at the Met. Again. I went to every artist's retrospective there was. I could eat Sabrett's until I was sick.

Sabrett's?

Hot dogs. With kraut, grilled onions, mustard, no relish. Some evenings I walked Court Street down to Carroll Gardens and back. I got to know all the hawkers at all the folding tables selling scarves and children's books and phony watches. I thought, When we have kids we'll get their first books here. For two dollars! Probably stolen off trucks by the mob, huh?

Probably.

A world with a mob. That seemed quaint. The good old days. I said, What about the end? Did you see any of it?

She shook her head. She leaned down and pushed the butt of a stick into the fire and when she did her loose shirt swung away from her collarbones and I saw her breasts again fuller than they should have been, deep tanned and freckled on the top and milky below. I couldn't get away from them today. I guess that part of me just woke up. Probably been there all the time, Hig, and you were in the Fog.

The Fog of Being, I said.

What?

Sorry. I talk to myself sometimes.

I noticed.

Really?

She nodded. Do I?

Not that I've heard.

Silence.

I didn't see the collapse, the mass death. But I felt it coming. Like a pressure drop. The kind that is worse than bad weather. We had it a few times growing up at the ranch. A pressure shift you could feel in your pulse, your lungs. A darkening of the sky, a weird green tinged blackness. The cattle restless and upset beyond the usual omens of thunderstorm. That's the way it felt. Why I think I should have known.

Should have. This to myself. So many of those. I could build houses out of them, burn them for fuel, fertilize the garden.

Do you know how it began? New Delhi?

She shook her head.

That's what the press reported. Mutation of a superbug, one of the ones they'd been watching for two decades. In the water supply etc.

Combined with a bird flu. We called it the Africanized bird flu, after the killer bees. First cases in London and blamed on New Delhi. But that's probably not where it originated. We heard rumors that it originated at Livermore.

The national weapons lab?

She nodded. The rumor was that it was a simple trans-shipment. A courier on a military flight with a sample taking it to our friends in England. Supposedly the plane crashed in Brampton. Nobody will ever know—she looked around the box canyon and let the absurdity of those words trail off in the wind with the smoke.

I was wide awake now. She inhaled deeply and I could see—Hig! Her nipples against the thin fabric of her shirt. My god. Hig. You haven't heard any news, real news in almost a decade. It's making you horny!

Genetically modifying flu is an old business.

Right, I said.

Look me in the eyes when you say hello to me.

I shook myself. She was grinning at me through smoke.

Calmate, soldier, she said.

Never learned Spanish, I murmured.



We ate dinner I don't know what time, but sometime in the late evening when the sky was that luminescent blue that might hold a single star and the nighthawks flitted in the meadow and over the creek feasting on the latest hatch. They wintered in Mexico or somewhere and seemed to be doing alright. Shear winged and acrobatic as swallows. White wingbars blinking on a sudden shift in direction. Small peeps. A joy in watching the birds in their single hour of feeding.

I guess they ate then because the bugs were out. It was not cold as it would be later when truly dark and the rosy stars skeined together and

you could feel the heat of the day radiating off the rock wall.

I took the few dishes to the creek and washed them with sand. They cooked outside most of the time in a firepit lined with river stones. On those nights father and daughter sat on two stumps and watched the wind rashed embers like TV. I set the wet dishes on the table and lay in the hammock and tried to see how long I could go without thinking about anything. I think my record was six Mississippi.

One night I fell asleep naked before I could crawl into my bag and I woke in the dark with the weight of the cover settling over me.

Not alarmed, it seemed right. I made to sit up and a hand pushed me back. Shhh, she said. I came out to pee and thought you'd get cold that way.

I lay back.

Thanks.

She leaned over me I felt her hair brush my face, a touch of her breath, then she was lifting the quilt, stretching her length alongside, and she wriggled in her hips, her ribs in the margin of hammock tight against me and she said into my neck

There.

That's all. Then she fell asleep.

She was wearing the man's shirt. Nothing else. I could feel her mound against my leg. Mons pubis, right? The cradle of her pelvic bones. I lay there, heart hammering. I traced her body in my mind from her toes where they touched mine, kind of bony and cold, up her calves, thighs, to the inside of her knees, the kneecap where it burrowed into the crook of my own leg—you get the idea. My brain all on its own took the trip, followed the map, lingered at every place of interest, every scenic view. It was the novelty. My heart pounded and my dick uncurled and straightened and lengthened, and then it was almost pain. It throbbed, and my mind continued to travel. Up and down her length, every point of contact. At some point I must have exhausted myself, run out of gas, I slept.



The next morning I realized that it was the weight of another cramping your space in sleep, that it was hearing another's breathing. That simple. Jasper did that. Past that don't even go there. That was all she wanted or she would've asked.



The next day at breakfast which is cold meat and potatoes, in the garden, at the supper table, tending the fire, she is the same. The same calm eyes absorbing everything, the way a dark pond absorbs sunlight. The marvel of it. Women are like that. Pops is not, I'm not. He's no fool, probably expecting some similar development since Day One. Whatever development it is, maybe nothing. After all we are some of the few people left on earth just about. It's like one of those desert island jokes. The one about the hat. Be weirder if it didn't happen, right, Hig?

Not really. Doesn't feel like that. Feels frigging weird. Not weird, tumultuous. Momentous. Well, it's probably nothing. Probably doesn't mean a thing, I mean just an experiment to see how it felt after all those years. A sleep experiment.

His eyes rest on me a fraction of a second longer. That's all. Subtle but loud. I can't meet them. I look away. I get that Pops is a hard man where he needs to be hard, but beyond that he pretty much minds his own business and expects the same.

Does she want to be my girlfriend? What a stupid idiotic thought. Are you in goddamn high school? You are on the Beach man. Last man and woman left in what? Three counties probably. It's your patriotic duty to follow that through.

It is?

No.

What then?

Shrug.

Do what you want.

What do I want?

I want to be two people at once. One runs away.



The next night she came very late. I realized I'd been waiting most of the night without sleeping. Just waiting. Wondering what I would do, what she would. She lifted the quilt which I'd left unzipped and squeezed in and snuggled her mouth into my ear and murmured, Miss me. And fell asleep. It was an order and a question.

Pretty cramped. She lay in the crook of my arm which fell asleep, went numb. I felt her length, her thigh over mine, her breast against my side, the expansion of her breath. She smelled like smoke and something sweet, tangy the way sage is tangy. I got another bursting hard on. I lay there. You again? Becoming a regular are you? You are welcome, probably, pending good behavior. I lay there trying to make out constellations through the leaves, smelling her hair, listening to the relaxed concourse of her breath. In the middle of the night she found me, it. Slipped her hand down my belly and stroked. Lightly. Not a murmur, not a kiss, as if we were both asleep. We weren't. My body felt like an air base in one of those movies when the incoming siren goes off. Everybody scrambling toward the fighters from everywhere. Every cell awake pouring its attention toward my surprised dick. Felt really really good. Wonderful. Her hand slowed, paused, twitched twice, she was asleep. I was still hanging on a terrible edge. I lay there in a kind of suspended, excruciating wonder.



Pops and I took the spade, the machete up to the meadow, worked on the runway. Worked in silence, moving stones, leveling, tamping dirt, cutting brush. If there was any awkwardness it was mine. We were rooting out a mesquite bush in the middle of the track. He was prying with the spade, I was pulling on a rope we'd tied to the slender stump. I swung around the arc like on a tether to yank from a better direction, and pulled, and a stout root freed itself and kicked dirt into his face. He stopped, stood straight, blinded. Slowly cleared the dirt, spat. He held the shovel with both hands like a pike.

Hig, you're acting squirrely. More squirrely than usual.

He didn't say Higs. He blinked out more dirt, wiped his eyes with a knuckle.

Do you need my blessing or something? Like a corny movie?

Shocked me worse than if he'd slugged me. I held the end of the rope as if I weren't sure why, as if it were the tail of some beast I wasn't sure I wanted to be so intimate with.

At this stage in the game I got bigger fish to fry. I was never that kind of dad anyway. I never once said, Have her home by ten.

I looked down at my hand holding the rope, at the dirt all over his face and started to laugh. Christ. I laughed. The more I laughed the more funny it was. Shit, I don't know, maybe it was the pent up tension from the night before. Deadly sperm backup we used to call it. Maybe it was just the desert island cartoon thing, the protective father thing, the way that no one was acting like they were supposed to act. Was that it? Probably not. Probably simple relief that Pops hadn't killed me yet. Or that he was standing there with dirt all over his face and not mad. Or just that I hadn't laughed, really laughed, in way too long.



Must have been after mid-June. I lost count of the days. Probably not a good thing to do. I mean with no newspaper, no apparatus to tell you the date. Once you lose count, well it's gone forever.

We finished the venison, all but the jerky which we were saving for the trip, and we slaughtered a sheep and had been eating mutton for two days. Mutton and last summer's potatoes and new greens, lettuce, chard, peas. The days were hot and the creek a slow runnel and the nights warm. She came just a little while after dark, after I'd settled in with the flannel bag beneath me on the hammock sleeping only in my shirt. She was wearing a long man's shirt and her hand came to my face and passed over my cheek and she grabbed a tuft of my beard and pulled which made me laugh. There was a quarter moon like a ruddy lightship floating over the canyon and I could see her clearly. She was holding a blanket. She spread it on the dirt beside the hammock and lay down on her back, one arm propped under her head. She watched the moon, I watched her. I stuck my bare foot over the edge of the hammock and touched it to the wool of the blanket and pushed off and

swung myself.

Playing hard to get? she murmured.

No.

I rocked. She unbuttoned the shirt. It parted. She pushed the far side of it off her breast with her free hand and still gazing at the sky she tucked her fingers under a button and pulled the rest of it to the side. It fell open. The rise and fall of her breath. The length of her. In the dark she radiated a soft light of her own like waves breaking at night. The smooth pale plain of her stomach. The—all of her.

Jesus Christ, Hig, don't turn away, don't close your eyes. Breathe, man! You are supposed to look, dumbass! It's not impolite. If you don't look you will insult her. Who the fuck do you think this is for, this is for you! She wasn't, like, just in the neighborhood.

All of that in my clamorous head. Telling myself to be respectful, act like a grownup. Soak up every detail. She has vouchsafed you some portion of pure luck. Be grateful.

The rusty moon painted her without shadow. My toes dug into the wool and I stopped swinging. I held still and watched her. A kind of suspended awe. The way I had watched a royal elk step out of aspen: what you are seeing, Hig, cannot be real, it is just too magnificent. Don't twitch a muscle or it will vanish.

She didn't vanish. She turned her head to me. I cleared my throat.

You were in the neighborhood, I said lamely. My voice came out kind of high like an adolescent who can't control the timbre.

She raised one eyebrow: maybe. She raised up on her elbows and shrugged the shirt down her arms. Then she rolled over and lay on her stomach, her head on her crossed hands. Offering another vista. The world can end but you are not immune oh no.

If you want, you can just look at me, she said. It's probably been a long time. I'm in no hurry.

She raised her sweet butt into the air.

Um, is it okay if we rush through that part.

Unh huh.

I got my ass out of the hammock, shucked my shirt and lay down beside her. I don't know why, but I thought of flying. How there is a checklist you tick down before starting the engine, before taxiing, before takeoff. How if you are flying every day all the motions are smooth, sequential, you barely look at the list, but if it's been a while you are halting, thinking through everything, taking each item one at a time, making sure. So you don't have a wreck.

I forget where to start, I said. I feel like a—

A fifteen year old wouldn't say that.

Yeah. I was thinking more like a pilot. A rusty pilot with a bunch of checklists. So we won't crash.

Touch my back, she said.

I did. I ran my fingers over her lightly. Her skin tightened and smoothed out under them. I thought of wind moving over a field of wheat. She whimpered.

Does it hurt?

No. God, no. She said it into her folded arms. It has to be light but it feels great.

My hand swept over the rise of her ass moved over her thighs the backs the insides.

Mmmm, she murmured. Maybe it's better when you forget.

She rocked up onto her side and her fingers found my hair, my beard, tangled into them, pulled my face into her. When her mouth found mine I disassembled. Not exploded like a bomb or anything, but came apart. A few pieces at a time. They floated away, went into a kind of orbit. A splintering galaxy. An extravagant slow motion annihilation. The only center was her mouth, her hair. It was her. A reconstitution around the core of her. Without thought. I rolled on top of her and she

gasped in pain.

Wait—

Oh. Shit. Scrambling off.

It's okay, okay. Here. I'm not so fragile. She pushed me onto my back. She kissed me. Kissed and kissed her hair covering me. She kissed my eyes nose lips. With her mouth, then she lowered her breasts onto my face and kissed me, brushed with her nipples, eyes, nose, tongue. And then. Surprise. The shock of it. She lowered herself onto me. The first touch. Wet. Like her mouth. Resistance. That heat. Ever so slowly, and slip, surrender.

Oh god, don't move. All those pieces. She moved. Her moving over me called them called them. The way a thousand fish rock together with the swell. Back and forth. The way the stars in the leaves. I reached. In her, in the very center, somewhere the single only stillness where everything cohered. Nothing but reach.

And then I let go. From reaching the strain to what? Nothing. Relinquish. Fall. If I cried and I'm not saying I did. The bliss, the sheer loss of falling.

She keened and I exploded. Whatever constellation, whatever was achieved was riven by light and scattered to the dark and fuck, that's where it should have been all along. She lay on me shuddering her weight and all those bits of us rained down as soft and unapologetic as ash.



Whew, she whispered, her lips moving in my ear.

Yeah, whew.

We crashed, huh?

Yup. In a good way.

How you refill. Lying there. Something like happiness, just like water, pure and clear pouring in. So good you don't even welcome it, it runs

through you in a bright stream, as if it has been there all along.



We lay as still as we could, heart pounding against heart, a sympathetic rhythm that ricocheted and bounced and went counter and synced again, both of us I think fascinated by the music of it and the sensation. After a while she rose up and pulled the flannel quilt over us and snuggled down beside me and we slept. Not like the other nights of confusion. A deep and relieved slumber. Real comfort, simple exhaustion.

Before dawn, to spare him embarrassment, I guess, she rose, buttoned her shirt and went back into the meadow to sleep in the blankets on the thick bed of ponderosa needles she used on warm nights. Out under the stars, she said, where she could see everything. But I think it was the comfort of the cattle breathing, the rhythmic tearing of grass, always two or three who grazed at night beside, around her. And he snored, she said. He came to the creek at first light as he always did, over the burble I could hear the splashing, the brushing teeth with the defunct flattened bristles, a few hawks and spits, a cough.

And she—I could hear her wishing him good morning, opened my eyes, saw her in the shirt but with pants now she must keep by her bed. The wonderful satisfaction of seeing her like that now, out in the world, as conscribed as it is. In knowing her now as I did. Closed my eyes to doze again. She always refused to let me start the morning fire. It's mine, she insisted. My ritual. Don't mess with my habits. They are how we get along around here. Relax. Sleep in. I did. When I got up she always had the mug of bitter tea ready. Welcome as much for the ritual of it I guess as for the puckering taste.

That morning I rose slowly, stretched, took an inventory: Hic, you have your arms? Check. Your legs? Check. You have not really been blown to pieces? Nope. You have your heart? Not a question you've asked before. Not after. Yes I do. A little joggled, a little fuller. Lighter and heavier, too, go figure.

They were at the fire. I smelled roasting meat. I splashed my face, chest, dunked my head, dried myself with the shirt, walked to the fire.

Morning.

Pops nodded. She was squatting, adding a chunk of split wood to the flames and the sunup breeze swirled the smoke around, wreathed her. She winced, grimaced, craned her face to the side, added the wood.

Morning, I said.

She was either too smoked out to hear me or couldn't answer. The grimace. She stood, stepped out of the smoke, put her knuckles to her teary eyes.

Morning, I said.

She wiped the tears, blinked at me out of irritated eyes. Saw her heave a breath. Didn't say a word. She lifted the steaming kettle off a stump, poured it, handed me my mug without looking at me.

Meat's gonna burn, she said. To her dad or to me or no one. Edge of frustration.

I'll get it, I said. I reached for the long fork but she pushed my hand away with her forearm, grabbed the fork, turned the chops on the wire grill.

Relax, she said.

My insides froze. Glanced at Pops who politely turned to the side on his seat, his expression blank. He studied the top of the far canyon wall, sipped his drink.

Again:

Just relax. I'll have chops in a minute.

I heaved a long breath, turned aside, too, studied the far wall with Pops. You have your arms? Hig? Hig? Yes, I do. Your legs? Yes. Stop there. Be grateful for that.

I could've cried. Stood in the billowing smoke and used it for cover. So this is how it is.

After a silent breakfast, silent chewing, I took the dishes to the creek as I always did: three plates, three mugs, three folding knives, three forks,

the long fork. Let the wire grill burn off. I spread the fine sand around on the enamel plates with my fingers, scraped at the grease. Focus on the task at hand, concentrate, Hig. The water. It seemed warm. Warmer. That was frigging sad. Sad. Dug the fork tines down into the gravel bottom, wiped them in my fingers. Fuck. I breathed. When I was done I lay them out to dry on the board table. Pops passed me. He was carrying the rifle, shoulder slung, and the spade.

I'm going to scout the highway, he said. I don't want to walk out there on the big day and find a beat up useless piece of road.

That made sense. We didn't have enough fuel to circle while he filled and packed some potholes.

He took a step, then glanced back at me.

Everybody's been through a lot, he said.

I loved him then.

For the first time I felt him as some kind of family. As much as you could construct from blowdown and debris.

Yeah.

He nodded, walked on downcanyon toward the brush fence.

She was sweeping the packed dirt around the fire with a twig broom. She did it every morning to beat back the crumbs and keep ants and mice away from the kitchen.

As I approached, she swept. No pause. Focused on the dirt ahead of the broom.

Want me to pick some greens for lunch, I said.

My guts were gripped. She kept sweeping.

If you want, she murmured. Swept.

Cima?

Sweep. The harsh twiggy scrape.

I caught her arm. She went rigid.

Ow!

I dropped it like a hot grill. She stared at me.

That's gonna bruise, she said. No modulation.

Cima. Jesus. I'm sorry.

I stood rooted to the dirt. Sheer panic. Couldn't even see straight. Against all will my chest began to heave and then I felt tears running off my chin. Completely paralyzed. She stared at me. A mask. Like a death mask but the eyes alive or gathering life. Her dark eyes still as coins, then somehow gathering light as eyes do and registering, softening. She stood there trembling and studying my face and then I saw the tears well in her eyes and they were hers again, the dark pools. We stood like two trees. Swaying. What was left of the fire's smoke puffed and wisped.

Last night she said. After we fell asleep. I dreamt of Tomas. Dreamt and dreamt of him.

Her lips shivered and her mask crumbled.

He was calling me. He was dying on his cot and calling me, bleating just like an animal that knows it's going to slaughter. Just like an animal, Hig! And I stood against the wall unwilling to help him. My husband. My best friend.

She was sobbing with a hypoxic violence.

My love was frozen. Like a winter pond. I must have dreamt that for hours. In the end I couldn't take it and I picked up my skinning knife and walked over and slit his throat. Oh god!

She collapsed. I stepped forward and caught her. I thought of two trees nearly unrooted and leaning against each other.

I don't know if I can do this, she said. I thought I could.



Pops reported that the highway was good and straight for at least a thousand feet. Good enough, no big holes. He had left a bandana tied to a mile marker for a wind sock. Cima was warm enough, but more withdrawn. She came out to the hammock but not every night nor every other night. We didn't make love again for days. Five. Can't pretend I didn't count. And when we did, when we were about to—I mean we lay on the blanket naked, holding each other, not kissing, not talking, but just our noses exploring ears and necks, and hands reconnoitering a territory made brand new by these new reckonings of loss—when it seemed to be time to consummate or at least somehow celebrate this new vulnerability, I pulled her on top of me and she was not wet and I had trouble entering and I could feel that it hurt her, and for some reason I thought of Tomas—the dream Tomas, bleeding—and a wave of panic overcame me and I lost my erection.

Damn the dream world. His ghost was wading through it and ruining what only a few days ago had been as euphoric as any love affair I'd known.

She gave my wanger a consolatory double squeeze which made me feel worse. Sighed heavily—I read Disappointment—and rolled off to the side. Her arms came around me gently. Lying on the blanket, arm in arm, in an unconsummated paralysis. I felt lonelier than I had felt before the canyon. The hearts thudded and ricocheted against each other, but the spirit did not. I could not stroke her more than absently, or kiss her, or even talk with authenticity. As if failing in consummating love had robbed me of all legitimacy as a lover. Had stripped my license to love or even express affection. It was awful.

It occurred to me as I lay next to her on my side and tried to catalogue this new dread—the dread of separateness when love was so near—it occurred to me that what may have been transmitted at the critical moment the moment of truth, of penetration, was her own memory of the dream. I mean we communicate without speech of course. I thought that in all likelihood that blood curdling image of the dead had passed through her at the same instant or just before. Which meant that none of us was ready. Okay, Hig, I thought. Reason it any way you want. Make yourself feel better any way you can, but you can't rewrite it. It sucks. Can't make it better. I can't, I can't move. Can hardly breathe.

Hig.

She whispered the word, a wind eddying in my ear.

Huh?

Will you give me oral pleasure?

She said it in a French accent and I knew she was referencing that old classic, *Pulp Fiction*.

I chuffed, a soundless laugh without mirth.

Really? You don't want that.

She nodded, her head against my chest.

Okay. Big exhale. Duty calls.

I did. I kissed down between her breasts, her little innie belly button, the shallow horns of her pelvis, the lower plain of her concave belly, the patch of tight curls, the little lips, the smooth kernel, inhaled her, and then I went to work. Like a job. What works? What works best?

For a little while it was like that. And then she was lifting her hips and rolling herself under my lips and tongue and whimpering. And then she moaned, and then I was encouraging, then cheerleading with teeth, lips, tongue. Then tugging and releasing. I was flying her like a kite, that's what it felt like, and then I forgot all my bullshit self and the kite was very very high and tugging harder and the blood reasserted and she was coming. She was arched and coming and I was inside her and she was clutching and clawing my back. I realized I must be hurting her with my weight. I hastily rolled off and spewed in the air and we lay and breathed without thought and we were almost happy again. Almost without reserve.

Go figure.

And then it was three more nights because she was so bruised up. But the mood around camp was better. And I could feel a gathering of momentum toward departure.

II

Pops left before full light. Without ceremony or sentiment. Took one look around the canyon, the last pairs of cows and calves, the sheep and lambs, hefted a light pack, his rifle, and without a word walked downstream and out the brush fence.

Left the only life he had ever given himself to. The life of his own lineage, his father and mother, his father's father. It was in his blood truly and he latched the gate and walked out of the canyon.

I weighed everything again. Made a balance scale with a liter bottle, a five gallon pail, a stick and a rope. Hung it from a low limb by the stream. Five gallons is forty pounds half of it twenty, the liter bottle about two. I weighed the AR-15 rifle, Cima's pack, mine, the hose and hand pump.

How much does a lamb weigh?

The little mixed herd moved in the tall grass heads down. Three lambs shook their heads, their ears, went back to feeding. One butted his mother in the ribs to nurse. Their lives were about to change. If any survived the winter it would be a miracle.

I dunno, maybe twenty?

Let's see. You have a girl and a boy?

She smiled. A ram and a ewe? Yes.

Like the Ark. Here we go.

We wrapped one of the little guys in a sling made of a shirt and weighed him against the bucket. He swung under the branch his ears flopping, his legs splayed extended his tiny perfect shining black hooves, a look of sheer bewilderment on his little face. I emptied the pail until they balanced. About seventeen pounds.

Okay, we can take them. Without your dad on takeoff we should be okay.

Should be?

It's a crap shoot anyway. We smoothed the runway, cut the tall trees at the end. The book says we need a hundred more feet. But they never met the Beast.

Short nod. Cima looked across the meadow, the canyon. If I were a painter—she was that beautiful. Maybe not her alone, but the moment. The green reflected darkly in her violet eyes, and I thought, If we crash and burn tomorrow morning, well.



Made a last fire in the dark, watched the flames lean and light the rock wall for the last time. Ate venison and potatoes, greens, drank the tea. Doused the fire with a hiss, a billow of steam. Heard the low of a cow, the rustle of the leaves.

Had loaded everything yesterday afternoon but the lambs. Cima slept in the fields with her animals, listening to them graze around her. Now we led the two lambs on strings of twine upstream, carried them up the tree ladder beside the trickle of waterfall. They squirmed, bleated. Two moms answered, followed the cries to the top of the field, confused. The sadness of our world, it underlies everything like a water. Set the lambs down foursquare on their feet and they stood tall and stiff, reassessing life from this height. And trundled after us.

Walking a lamb on a string is not at all like walking a dog on a leash. It was a constant conversation, an argument. Full of debate, concessions, sudden capitulations, obstinacy in the face of reason. They balked we tugged. They gamboled ahead, no shit, we ran after. There is no way not to laugh. It was the perfect distraction from the emotions of leaving such a place and all that it meant. Finally I picked up my lamb and carried him.

At the Beast Cima expertly hogtied the little guys and we set them on our packs behind the seats. We climbed in, pulled the seat belt harnesses over our shoulders and clipped the steel buckles at our waists. I handed her the clipboard with the checklists.

You be the copilot. Haven't had one in a while.

I primed the motor, pulled the stiff knob from the dash, listened for the spray of gas filling the carburetor and shoved it in. Repeat. Flipped on the master switch. The revving whir of the gyroscope. Turned the key in the mags, inched the throttle forward a half inch, set my boots against the brakes and pushed the starter.

Two coughs, two half spins of the prop and I shoved the throttle forward and she caught and roared and shuddered. We all did, me, Cima, the lambs. A small plane coming to life is emotional. It's like a whole auditorium standing for an ovation. It's grand and a little frightening. I pulled the throttle back to an even idle which was quieter, less momentous, less shake and more tremble. Let the engine warm a little, watched the dial of the oil pressure gauge ease down into the green.

Okay, I yelled. Go down the Before Takeoff list.

Had to yell. Didn't carry an extra headset with me anymore. What would have been the point? Jasper didn't need it.

Trim wheel to neutral!

Check!

Align heading indicator.

Check!

Run up to 1700.

Check!

Mags.

Carb heat.

Primer set and locked.

Check!

All of it gathering its own momentum as the motor warmed, the digital columns for each cylinder on the engine analyzer climbed, the oil

pressure fell—all while the motor roared, the plane shivered, all heading for the critical moment of takeoff. I loved this. It was this—the anticipation of being finally airborne as much as the flying itself that had kept me coming back again and again whenever I could.

Outside thermometer read fifty two degrees. Good. Nice and cool. Heavier air. Eased off the brakes and she began to roll. Jostled her through the sage into the newly cleaned track using the brakes to steer, turned her down to the east end and spun her in the circle we had cleared. She pointed west. Sun behind us made long shadows of the brush. High desert daybreak pungent and cool. Straight ahead across the meadow the cedar woods that were our limit, our raised bar.

She gave me a thumbs up. I checked the trim wheel one last time, shoved the throttle forward to the panel, glanced at the oil pressure, the Beast roared, shook I yelled, *God is great!* Released the brakes.

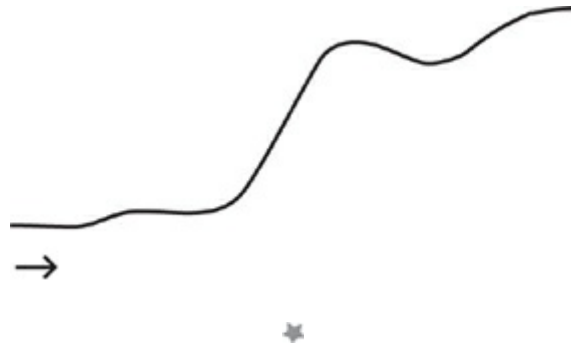
I don't know why I yelled that. It might have been the last thing I said in this life. I wasn't thinking Jihad I was thinking Hig, those Cessna guys in the white coats never tested this. They maybe never imagined a world eighty years hence when their plane would be a Noah's Ark for sheep. She rolled, broke inertia, almost balking at first, way too slow, and the thought flashed No way!

And then she bounded, gathered the runway, reeled it in, the trees at the end came, grew dark, larger, maybe halfway to them I felt her break ground, the airborne moment and I pushed the nose down hard, pressure, she wanted to lift off, climb, but I held her down, held her three feet off the track hard in the ground effect where she could gain the most speed. We hurtled like that barely off the dirt and then I heard Cima scream, the first trees billboarding right in our face, and I jerked up the Johnson bar and pulled the yoke, not pulled it but released to my chest and the Beast flared, the nose leapt, the plane reared, it seemed straight into sky, the single prayer Don't fucking stall, the stall horn blaring, airspeed dial, the needle hovering at sixty, the horn, the lambs chiming in, the weird thoughts you have when it all teeters: the lambs are the same fucking key. The same key as the stall horn. Sounds like their mom.

Not Cima. She just screamed. Once. I shoved the yoke forward again, swung down the nose to near level, prayed for speed for speed, soon

enough the Beast took it, accelerated like a swallow that swoops after veering upwards for a bug and we flew level at sixty five, I looked down at the trees, thought, If we cleared them by two feet.

Not a regulation takeoff. Not in the book even for a short soft field. This is what our vector from the meadow probably looked like:



Well I must've been glad to be alive. I loosed a yell. The junipers rushed beneath us. The Beast rolled over the next ridge fifty feet over the trees, it seemed on her own volition, like a magic carpet. Coastered down the other side. One way to enter the next dream. She was beaming the way a small kid beams after surviving the magic mountain log flume at Six Flags. She reached over and pinched my arm.

We're alive see? Nice work.

We're awake.

You say the strangest things.

Even the lambs had caught the mood. They no longer cried, they lifted their heads off the packs and followed the conversation, floppy eared and guileless attendants. As far as they knew, all this represented the next stage in the normal life cycle of a sheep.

We crossed the big river and Pops was sitting on his pack like any hitchhiker on a shadeless stretch of desert highway. Something in his attitude at once resolute and refractory, pinned to his long shadow, the rifle standing between his knees like the staff of an acolyte. Which he was: bent to the mission, devoted now to a new life. If we could get there. The bandana fluttered on the mile post, barely registering the breeze of a calm summer morning. I banked left and landed and

tapped the brakes to a full stop right across from where he sat.

He climbed in behind his daughter. Noah's Ark, he said glancing at the lambs. That was all. Cima pulled the door shut, latched it and we took off to the west toward Grand Junction.



Something was not right. I won't say wrong because how it registered wasn't anything so definitive. Ten miles to the east I had made the first call. We had cleared the far cliffs of Grand Mesa, the great flattopped butte that looked like it must have been a peninsula in some shallow, plesiosaur haunted sea. A sixty mile long outcrop risen against the sky. It was banded with purple cliffs and covered with aspen forests. In summer they were waist deep with ferns and strung with dark lakes and beaver ponds. Melissa and I had shared some of our best camping trips up there, once tenting for a week on the edge of a lake with no road for miles and the trout just about jumping into our frying pan.

We had flown past it, beneath the rim, staying low to save fuel, the warm wind pouring through the empty frame where Pops had shot out my window, and there was Grand Junction, straddling the two rivers and sprawling over the desert hills. A vast gritty town that stretched all the way to the Book Cliffs to the north.

There were the highways, the streets, the developments, the cul de sacs, the flat blank roofs of the box stores, the vast parking lots. There was the industrial section along the Colorado River, the train tracks, the phalanx of warehouses. The city was threaded with cottonwoods. Many of the old trees that lined the streets and depended on watering were skeletal and dead but many were rooted deep enough and punctuated the thoroughfares with dashes and clumps of violent green like some Morse code.

The canopies of cottonwoods still shaded the river parks, some of the oldest and biggest fighting the drought just half dead, still clothed with leaves on one side. And fire. Not a corner of the city untouched. As if it had been fire not flu that had swept death through the town. The cars, every one it seemed, scorched. Where they were parked in the side streets in their rows, in mall parking lots, out on the highways, where they lay in such a chaos, such absence of pattern some giant might

have thrown them like pick up sticks. Whole neighborhoods were burned to the ground. Others looked as if torched just to melting and left to cool the way a pastry chef glazes a brûlée. The sweet black smell of embered wood cloyed in my nostrils and I'm not sure if we could really smell the town a thousand feet up or if the sight produced it. And if there were skeletal trees there were human bones. I saw them. Not true skeletons as the connective tissue was gone, but the bones of the dead were everywhere gathered into heaps by some predator and scattered by scavengers. Heaps so big we could see them from here.

Cima vomited. Just the sight of the ruined town. Hurriedly she pushed open the side window and stuck her mouth in the gap and sprayed the glass behind her. This was the city where they did their big shopping, Costco and auto parts, farm equipment. This is where they came for a weekend movie when the one in Delta didn't interest them. The two towns being almost equidistant from the ranch. She had not seen it end. She and Pops left just as it was getting really bad. When there was still TV news, when the newscasters appeared more exhausted by the day, then scared and exhausted, then terrified as their colleagues dropped away to the hospitals and makeshift flu wards, or were just not heard from, assumed ill or dead, and the last TV anchors stood in, and the field correspondents taped themselves using tripods, the reports more frantic. And were finally cut short by mayhem. I remembered that. Because they had nothing else to do at the end: broadcast, courageous, the way the band played on the deck of the sinking ship, either that or go home and die.

Sometime in there Pops and Cima decided to leave the ranch and they loaded up the gooseneck cattle trailer and towed a little trailer for the four wheeler behind that, and they drove out to the highway in the middle of the night. With a dozen cattle, as many sheep, two saddled horses, two Australian shepherds, and provisions. And Pops had to fight his way through three barricaded ambushes in just the fifteen miles to the creek road, and shoot three crazy fuckers further on in the cedar hills, all of which he was pretty much expecting and didn't have much problem executing with his guns. But they shot one of the horses and two of the sheep inside the trailer, which made it less easy to pretend the next day that they were driving cows up onto their summer lease as they would on any normal morning in early May. He rode horseback and she drove the ATV, which pulled a small trailer of gear

and supplies, the twelve miles into the canyon. She would have preferred to ride, she was never comfortable on four wheelers, but he was skilled at hazing and herding the livestock on horseback and the dogs were, too, and they were used to taking orders from him in the saddle.

The next morning they walked back downstream and he blew the one ford that crossed the creek with dynamite, and made the track impassable except on foot or horseback, and then only at low water.

They swept their tracks as best they could and obliterated them thoroughly for two miles before they left the rough road for the creek trail and the canyon. It took them all day. And then, thank god, two days later it poured rain.

All this she had told me over the last three weeks. So I understood the shock of seeing Grand Junction. It was one thing to lose the whole world as you knew it, another to see, to maybe smell your old neighborhood as charnel house and killing field.

She had made it out the window, streaked the rearward glass, but the plane still reeked. I handed her the water bottle I always kept between the seats and stole a look back at Pops to see if he would be triggered by the smell or the sights below him. It happens that way on boats and planes, the passengers already queasy and one throws up and it's a chain reaction. But he sat like a Buddha with a lamb in his lap, one strong claw on her shoulder, his face impassive and hard, leaning to the window taking it all in.

This is what you left, I thought. The vindication of the choice you made to leave that night. Vindication and horror. Sometimes being right isn't all it's cracked up to be: how many times in the last few years I thought about bitter fruit, how when what you are right about is—well you can't even look at it.

But it wasn't the burned and devastated city, the pockets of virid trees, that were somehow wrong or simply not quite right. I was now six miles out. I was nine hundred feet off the ground and aiming for the airport, for the tower, where three years ago I had gotten the signal, the beginning of a message. I dialed the frequency—it was still there in my GPS—and made the second call.

Grand Junction Tower, Cessna Six Three Three Three Alpha six southeast at five thousand eight hundred inbound for landing.

Said it again. Then miracle: static. A loud burst of aural snow. I twisted up the squelch excited and called again.

Cessna Six Triple Three Alpha—

It wasn't crystal clear but it was. It was! A woman's voice. Maybe older, a little raspy. Slightly humored, kind.

Cessna Six Triple Three Alpha, wind two four zero at five, make a straight in approach, cleared to land runway two niner.

All formal, all perfect, by the book, just like before before. Said with a straight face. Like a normal business day at the old airport. Can't fully describe what that harkening back to normalcy did to my spirit. As if in pretending that this were airport operations as usual I could also pretend that my wife lived and my dog, that she was in her seventh month and they were back on the Front Range and I was about to touch down after a three hour flight away from them, not one that had taken nine years and on which there was no true return.

What wasn't right was not even that. It was the beacon. Almost every paved airport, has, had, a rotating beacon green and white. And I had seen it flash from ten miles out, and thought nothing of it. And then at six miles I saw it flashing again, pulsing like the heartbeat of a living enterprise and the dissonance—the burned out city at the end of the known world, and the living, pulsing light, the voice of the controller transmitting everyday commands—finally caught my attention and the hair on the back of my neck stood up. Can't tell you why except to say that it was odd to say the least: that they had power. Or: why shouldn't they? We had it at Erie. More and more airports had been supplementing with solar and wind. Or that the beacon shouldn't be on in daylight in clear, VFR conditions. Don't know why, except to say that something put me on edge.

I lined up. I banked twenty degrees left and straightened out for final and there was the long east-west strip built for jets stretching out in front of us like a vision. Smooth too. Looked it from here. Didn't have the buckled, cracked, potholed look of every strip on the east side of

the mountains. Somebody had maintained it. Least it seemed that way from a mile out and descending. Backed off the throttle, set twenty degrees of flaps and let her float down at five hundred feet per, the Beast seeming to breathe relief at this reversion to past protocol. I swear she has an animus or a mind or something.

And as we came down slowly and the strip grew wider and longer and rose to meet us, we could see the rows of hangars, some caved in, some roofs blown half off by wind. We could see the control tower on our left, the cantilevered, green tinted, bulletproof windows. We could see wrecks of planes, a few on either side of the runway, a big jet at the end. As there were at every airport—the tied down craft battered by weather, eventually pulling loose and tumbling, but. That’s when it hit me. Like a frigging bullet.

I was maybe thirty feet off the ground. I had cut power, topped the prop, done all the things you do in the final moments, and was getting ready to pull back the yoke and flare for a soft touchdown and. And it hit me.

The beacon, the tower: the wrecks on the field were scorched like the cars. Can’t say I thought anything, nothing reasoned, articulated, there wasn’t time. It was just the shock of the image: the burned and crumpled planes. Different from Erie. Different from Denver, from Centennial, the old planes ripped from their moorings and cartwheeled over the airfield by wind. These were crashes. Live-engine wrecks. I did pull back the yoke, but not for a flare. I jerked it back and slammed the throttle to the panel and the engine caught and screamed and my palm slammed the carb heat knob back in and we lurched, reared skyward. We jumped off the field maybe steeper even than our takeoff half an hour before from the meadow. And the lambs wailed.

I looked out the low side window, the bowl of plexiglas, and in the same instant the cable came up. Sprung taut, probably missed my wheels by ten feet. Sprung like a trap. Which is what it was.

Holy fuck.

Hig, you are a cool bastard. That was Bangley talking. Giving me the rare Bangley thumbs up. And in that moment too I glanced at the fuel flow gauge and saw we had two gallons left. Ten minutes at most.

Fuck.

I banked left to come around for a look and tensed for gunfire from the ground.

Goddamn. It was Pops. A *taut line*. He had moved the lamb and he had his gun up and he was scanning the hangars, the wreckage.

The cable stretched across the runway about a third of the way down and ten feet off the pavement, held taut by two sprung arms welded from T-bar steel. The arms were articulated downward like the bills of evil herons. The cable was painted black like the tarmac but I could clearly see its shadow and then the evil thread of it. No gunfire. I craned around.

Pops?

That was it, he yelled. Their one big trick.

Want to? I called back.

Get em? Fuck yeah.

Cima?

She looked confused, still sick, unable to appreciate the implications of what had just happened. She nodded.

We don't have much choice, I yelled. We're about out of gas.

I tightened the bank and swooped for another final, this time without checklists, without any thought at all except That motherfucker that motherfucker. I'm coming to get you. And the gut-punch feeling of betrayal. All those years, thinking about that radio call. The hope it had engendered. It drove me wild.

Everything was on automatic. I banked tight and swooped and touched down a hundred feet past the cable. Pops leaned forward and said:

Taxi past. There. Park behind that building, the second west of the tower.

I kept her rolling fast. The radio crackled on. *Nice landing* said the voice and it didn't sound like Aunt Bee now. It sounded frayed and hard. Then laughter. Laughter like hanging metal scraping over pavement, loud and sustained. *Congratulations. You're the first.*

I didn't call back. I turned left onto a broad taxiway and found cover where Pops said and shut her down. We were in the cool shadow of Big River Flight School and Authorized Cessna Service Center and we were close enough to the wall that we couldn't see the top of the tower and they couldn't get a bead on us, whoever they were. Climbed out moved the seat forward for Pops so he could squeeze out. A cricket chirped loudly from the base of the wall. Cima sat. Hadn't unbuckled. I didn't know what to say, I had never seen her like this. She seemed in shock. She was in shock. I walked around to her door opened it. Her long hand pressed against the panel over the oil pressure gauge and a new bruise spread along her forearm. She turned. Her eyes were bleary.

It's not just the meanness of it. The trap. That too. It's the city.

I nodded. She and Pops had retired early from the world before it had fired into full conflagration. They had seen enough, enough to flee but not the full demise. Not what I had seen every day from the air. What Bangley and I had known in the middle of our nights. The charred town and all that it implied.

You want to stay here?

Nodded.

Okay.

I walked back around, reached across my seat and unclipped the Uzi from its rack and held it out to her.

If someone shows up that doesn't look like me or your dad, plug em. It's charged.

She hesitated, nodded, took the gun.

I unsnapped the AR. Also took the handheld radio. Turned it on and dialed in 118.1, the tower. Sometimes it's a good idea to talk to your enemy. Not usually. Bangley had taught me that—the value of

reticence. Also the value of overwhelming firepower. I reached back under one of the lambs and pried out the stuff sack that held the grenades, nodded at Pops, and we moved around the south corner of the building. I followed him. He hugged the wall so that we were still out of sight of the tower. Before we cleared the next corner and crossed the open ramp where small planes had once tied down, and came into full view of whoever was up there, we pulled up. It was about fifty yards to the next building, a single story brick, the offices of the FBO, a hangar adjacent and behind. We could see the back of it: a row of dark windows still mostly intact, and a metal door toward the rear.

Hig that old lady up there sounded just like my grandma.

And?

We're gonna clean her clock and whoever else. No questions asked. He looked at me.

I nodded.

Those cocksuckers invited you out here under false pretenses. Did you see all those goddamn wrecks? How many planes you think they did like that?

A lot. Scores. It's the biggest runway on the way to L.A. between Denver and Phoenix.

He leaned against the bricks.

Why? he said.

Why do they do it?

I mean not for the fuel. Half those wrecks burned. Not for the damn *meat*. Unless you like charcoal.

There'd be survivors. Some maybe not badly injured. And sometimes they didn't burn. Not all the way, sometimes not at all. There'd be supplies, food, weapons. Lambs. *Bahhh*.

Okay so what did they do with the pissed off survivors?

Silence. He stepped around the corner and the shot cracked. Blew brick dust into my face. I thought he was cooked. He fell back. I grabbed at him blindly, hugged him to me.

Fuck. Losing my edge, Hig. Thanks.

He was fine. He was breathing hard. I wiped my eyes.

That's what they do, Hig. Pick em off one by one. Come out of the wreck injured, dazed not even sure what hit em and bang. Or use em for whatever they use em for. Okay now I'm really pissed.

He unbuttoned his patched flannel shirt, scanned the ground behind us and picked up a two foot piece of rusty rebar. Hung the shirt on it.

Stick this out past the edge when I say. Up here like this. We get into that next building we're made. Do NOT move from here until I tell you. He slid the bolt back, checked for a chambered bullet, crouched. Three two one, go!

I shoved out the shirt, the shot cracked, zinged, he was gone. He was sprinting toward that back door running like a halfback, feinting and zagging and two more shots exploded up pavement behind and ahead of him. He made it to the sight shadow of the building, to the spot where he could no longer be seen from above, and walked the rest of the way to the door. Turned, gave me a thumbs up before he tugged it open and disappeared inside. Fucking Pops. Hope I can run like that when I'm—what?—my age. I could never run like that. Damn. I pulled back the shirt. There was a neat hole halfway down, repeated in three folds. Gut shot. Ouch. I waited. One minute, two, began to count like I did for Bangley. At two hundred I wondered what was going on. At two twenty three: one shot. It rang over the airport like a bell. A single toll. Echoed and died. It was Pops's .308. I knew the sound. Half a minute later the door in the back of the FBO scraped open and Pops waved me over. I ran. He held up his hand patted the air like *Take your time, relax.*

What the fuck? What happened?

A fool, that's what. Those windows up in the tower are thick bulletproof. Been like that since 9/11. But they have to shoot out

somewhere. They have gunports. Like an old fort. I knew once I was inside, I'd have all the time I needed to set up the shot.

I stared at him.

You nailed the shooter through a gunport? Like through his scope?

Shook his head. Nah. Turns out they have two ports—a higher one, maybe chest level, for the long shot, one for the angle directly down to cover the base of the tower. He was looking out the upper one and I shot through the lower. You wanna blow the door, go up and pay a visit?

Damn, Pops.

He had shot whoever it was right up their skirts. Through like a four inch hole.

Oh yeah. We walked across. The door at the base of the tower was heavy metal painted green. He unzipped a greasy belt pack took out two sticks of dynamite taped them together with duct tape.

Been saving these. Seems like a good time.

He taped them to the heavy metal door on the hinge side, close to the ground, lit them and jogged back. We ducked inside the Jet Center for good measure. It blew. Small bits of pavement rained against the windows. Reminded me of passing a truck on a gravel road. We jogged back. The door hung cattywampus off the top hinge, swung a sad metronome in drifting smoke. Pops stood in the doorway like a hesitant messenger.

Give me your gun, he said. You mind?

I handed it to him, he gave me his.

This'll be a little better for what we're doing.

Reflex: he tugged back the charging handle, checked that a shell was chambered, and went into commando mode. Not as if he hadn't before. Couldn't wait for him to meet Bangley. That's what I was thinking, even amused imagining the introductions as Pops covered the first

flight of stairs and went up gun to his shoulder sighting up the stairwell both eyes open. The treads were concrete laid over steel and they beat a dull *tong tong* as we ran up. There were five levels. At each one he told me to stay in the well and cover it and he went through the door. He cleared each floor swiftly and we moved up. Leaned into my ear breathing in rasps.

You're gonna love the decorations in this place.

I could imagine. The top door, the door to the control room was locked. Of course. He shot the lock out, pushed through. The smell. A barrier. I gagged and spit. Cats everywhere. Freaked by the shooting, running over the radar keyboards, the comm panels, arched bristled and hissing against the dead black flatscreens. Calicoes and blacks, blue eyed Siamese.

The air reeked of cat piss and swam with light from the tinted windows, infused with green like an aquarium. On the west side, the side we had come from, where I knew the shooter would be slumped on his side beneath the cantilevered windows, was a man choking and crying. He was holding his guts which were spilled onto the floor. Blood seeped from his back, pooled in reservoir and ran across the floor in a sinuous ribbon like a creek.

He was an old man, older than Pops. His beard was white, his grizzled hair uncut, matted now and soaked in blood from the painted steel floor. The one who had first called, the one I had heard years before, must've been. He wore suspenders. His cap had been thrown into the middle of the open room. It was printed with yellow lettering, Peoria Jet Center "Service in the Heartland." Over the nausea, a wave of goosebumps. Fuck. The heartland had come west looking for a safe haven from the flu and hit this bastard's cable. Probably. His rifle lay a few feet from the cap. An AR-10 with a long barrel. Cats drawled in the loud panicked mews of a vet's waiting room. The old man gagged, gurgled, sobbed. One of the bolder cats was already lapping at the crimson creek.

Samuel! Cold shriek. *Sammy my Sammy my Sammy!*

I jumped. In the corner—there was no corner it was all corners, octagonal—on the east side was an old woman with her hair, no shit,

in a bun. It was Aunt Bee. She stood next to a spotting scope on a tripod and wore, no shit again, a calico dress printed in blue cornflowers. She wore wire rimmed round glasses. Could have been your school librarian, your doting grandma, the face on the pancake syrup label. She was at once backed up straight against a nav screen and paralyzed mid lunge toward the shooter who must have been her husband, her hands clawing the air in front of her chest, and her mouth open in a scream. Pops shot her. Middle of the forehead. Twenty cats did hot laps around the tower, then froze in various poses of arched terror. Dropped the decibel level in the reverberant room by half. Now just cats and the old man.

Pops stepped to him, crouched.

Finish Gramps choked. His eyes swum up. They were filmed like poached eggs. *Shoot*. He begged.

Pops said How'd you spring the cable.

Wha—? He gurgled up a gobbet of blood.

The cable. How'd you spring it?

Bucko

Backhoe?

Gramps vomited affirmative.

Fuel? Where's the fuel? You have hundred low lead?

Shoot plea—

Where is it?

Ea tak

East tank?

Yu

Pops tugged on a bunch of keys clipped to the man's belt.

This the key?

Oauuuua

Is this the key?

Yu

Go to hell.

Pops shot him. I gagged.



Looked out the window once before fleeing the cats, the stench. Roof of the Jet Center covered in solar panels. Like Erie. How they pumped their water, fuel, powered the radios and beacon. East gas pumps right below not a hundred yards. Easy shot from here, how they protected it. The survivors? From any of the wrecks? Could have picked them off at distance, or Aunt Bee could have gone to her blocked spot like an actor, waved like a concerned grandma, gestured them urgently over. Easy enough. Damn.



Before we left the tower Pops invited me to the third floor apartment. I said I didn't want to see. He said, You are going to want to see. Cats were already venturing down the stairs. I followed him.

Ever been in a retiree's RV? The one they sold their house for? How spotless and neat, the bed made with a patch quilt, maybe a pattern of sunflowers smoothed taut, a plush bear on the pillow? Silk rose in a velcroed cutglass vase on the veneer booth table? It was like that. Single small bedroom, no window, immaculate plush wall to wall carpet, no cats. Except. In the room that would have been the living room where the TV might have been, one wall was pegged and on a hundred pegs were caps, mostly baseball caps with the logos of FBOs, aircraft service centers, aviation specialists of all types—cylinders, props, skins—from every corner of the country. The rest of the walls were covered with shelves. On the shelves, alternating, were pairs of spectacles—sunglasses, reading glasses, bifocals, everything—and crudely stuffed birds of every type. They were lumpy, dullcolored birds stuffed with some filler without benefit of armatures, eyes sewed shut

without skill—owls, bluebirds, magpies, sparrows, ducks. And bird guides: antique Petersen, Golden, National Geo, Sibley's. Seemed every one that had ever been published in the last century.

Hobbies still going strong, Pops said. That's a relief.

Fuckin A.



We gassed up almost like before, just flipped the lever and heard the electric pump and watched the numbers roll out the gallons. I checked the color, and for water and particulates with a clear plastic tube I carried. We found six more five gallon gas cans and filled them too. Fired the engine. She ran smooth so the gas was good. We took off. Pops said On the ground! Two o'clock. I banked over. Three bison grazed at the end of the strip, hides still patched and ragged from winter.



The buffalo are moving down to their old range, the wolves, the bighorn too. The trout are gone, the elk, but. I've seen osprey up on Jasper's creek, and bald eagles. Plenty of mice in the world, plenty of hawks. Plenty of crows. In winter the trees are full of them. Who needs Christmas tree decorations? Miles and miles of dead forest but the spruce are coming back, the fir and the aspen.



We flew over. The wind buffeted and rushed where my window had been. At Kremmling, in the hills beneath the Gore Range, was a vast fire. New since. Some lightning strike. Trees on the edge caught and exploded. We saw deer running downhill.

Look! she said.

Behind the deer was a grizzly bear. She loped, coming down hard on her short front legs, putting on the brakes, wheeling trying to herd two terrified cubs. Herd them down and down.

In the river, in the flat stretch above the canyon, deer were swimming.



I thought of a painting I had seen at the natural history museum in Denver. A bunch of mixed dinosaurs, I remember triceratops, fleeing across a sparse plain pursued by fire, and volcanoes erupting in the background. I wonder if they could run as fast as a mama grizzly or a deer.



The chairs swung on the chairlifts at Winter Park. New trees came almost to the seats. We had just enough fuel to make it to Erie, but just enough. I wanted to land and put in at least one extra can. In case. Of what? Just in case. We circled back to a clear stretch of highway on the west side of the ski town. Landed, jostled to a stop close to the buildings at the town limit. Stretched, poured in the cans of fuel. Stood on the strut, Pops handed them up. Edge of town seventy yards away, a rec center, a Sinclair station, a gaudy darkwood chalet: Helga's German Food and Spirits. Miraculously untorched, the town.

Cima stood in the road, hands in the pockets of her jeans, staring. Still seemed in some kind of shock. The world beyond their canyon. The empty burning world. The intact buildings the scariest. For me. Because they looked almost normal, because they echoed. They do whatever it is a struck bell does long after the sound fades.

I want to go in, she said. Pointing like a tourist at the German restaurant.

There?

Yes.

Quicker we load up and take off, safer we'll be. Empty, but. You never know.

I want to go in.

I shrugged. Pops was in his own reverie watching the Gore Range, the burning Never Summers from that distance, kind of transfixed. You can get used to a lot but maybe not this. All of a sudden. I whistled to him that we'd be back in a few minutes grabbed the AR and we walked up the frost heaved highway. Tufts of grass and sage, little poplars grew up out of the cracks. Small lizards skittered. We walked straight into

the sun which hung over the snows of the Divide. Still snow up there, anyway.

Did you like German food?

I felt like we were on a date, which was weird. The canyon had been insulated from more than this whistling vacancy.

Hated it, pretty much.

Hunh.

She reached across, grabbed my hand. I'm not going anywhere, Hig, she said. Where would I go?

Lots of places, I thought but I didn't say anything. To the other side for one. Or way way inside. A lot of places someone else can never follow.

I kept my mouth shut. The door was open, there was no door. Maybe they'd burned it in the hearth along with the furniture. The windows were boarded up. Someone had been planning for the end of a bad patch, planning to protect the business, their life savings. Those signs of hope that were so quaint now, even perverse. We stepped inside.

They hadn't burned the furniture: all the tables, the heavy wood chairs, bulked in the dimness, attendant and stolid. There was a hearth in the center, a round fireplace, stone bordered, the requisite centerpiece of every dimwitted après ski designer. Probably fondue pots in the kitchen. Near the front, where rain and snow had blown in, the wood was stained and warped, but further back there was only dry dust and the tracks and shit of mice. Heavy oak bar in the back, tall wood stools, a smoky mirror unbroken. Reflected the light from the doorway like a molten pool on a creek near nightfall. She hesitated, then advanced and stood in front of the bar, looking into the big mirror. Back a few feet, stock still, arms out from her sides, and I thought of a child at a dance recital who has forgotten the next steps. Gone blank. Or a ranch girl at a new bar, a girl from the hills, overwhelmed, who didn't know what to order, how to ask. She looked at herself and she burst into tears.



Who was that ragged, burly, bearded man who held her? Is that you, Hig? You look all patched and tufted and threadbare like those winterworn bison. You're missing a tooth. You look like a homeless hockey player.



Didn't know. A little nervous about coming over the final hump. Over the Rocks, they used to say at the airpark like it was a big deal. Not for me, never was. I mean it was high, it was the Continental Divide, there was almost always snow, a shitty place to lose an engine under any circumstances, a long way down to the first clearings in the lodgepole, the long dead pines. On either side, Winter Park or Nederland. I always left two thousand feet of clearance, flying so high I got a little spaced out once in a while, and it was always okay. But. Now it was a big deal. How would it be? I aimed for the low spot in the pass where the old Jeep road went over the rocks and patchy snow, watched the low country rise up behind the ridge, the way it does when you are making it over, watched it lift and unfurl like one of those bannered flags they used to have at the Olympics, and saw there beyond the final buttress of foothills: old Erie, the airstrip itself soon visible south of the radio tower that no longer blinks, the ribbon of tarmac rolled out like a welcome mat just for me. Nervous about seeing Bangley again, that's what. It had been, by my best reckoning, just over six weeks.



Now we descended over the foothills, and I pointed the Beast toward Erie by rote. I aimed for the dirt escarpment that stood out like a billboard on the other side of the interstate, still fifteen miles off my aiming point from the west that would put me right over midfield. Seeing it, I flashed on the summer I was eighteen: returning home to Mom's little house in Hotchkiss. Surprising her. On walking up the switchback mesa road at dusk. The excitement of returning home, the fear of having it be nothing like I expected. My heart drummed. Could feel it in there trying to compete with the throb of the engine, the lower roar and vibration as I pulled back the throttle to descend.

To our eight miles of prairie. Over the last trees, the very last living pines wandering out onto the plain like disoriented sentinels, our perimeter, our margin of safety, and then I could see the tower, the

one we'd built together. Bangley's sniper deck, the porch where he fired his stash of mortars—and then I was over the place and didn't look down too closely to see the bones, the bodies left unburied and scattered by now by wolves and coyotes, and whatever else. Could have seen, if I looked closely, the white bleat of a rib's arch or skull. And I felt a surge of—what? Of something for Bangley who I realized in that moment had become my family. Because it was to him, like to my mother twenty two years ago, I was returning home. Not my wife, my child, my mother, not anything but Bangley with his gravel voice. For whom it was a matter of pride to be a stubborn dickhead all the time. And I felt a twinge of fear, of recoil. What if he was straight up mad at me?

The warring emotions. And then I felt the fear full bore. When I dropped to six thousand feet and flew over the glinting river which was low, but running, and came in straight for the south end of the runway and saw the charred husks of the houses, saw foundations, saw one half of my hangar ripped open as if by a tornado and burned.

III

Bangley's house, a hundred yards north, the one with his gunsmith shop in the sunken living room and the photo of the blonde family skiing—it was standing, but the windows were shot out and there were scorch marks around the second floor dormer which was splintered, and next to it was a gaping hole in the roof. Oh fuck. Fuck fuck fuck.

Pops was straight up and alert on his pack, I glanced back, he knew it was all wrong, and Cima squeezed my thigh and couldn't keep herself away from the window, from pressing her face to it like a kid at the shark tank.

Before I landed I came in low and took a pass over the garden. It was still there, undisturbed. The water was still running across the head of the marks at the top of the plot, and there was water running in half the furrows.

But. Even from two hundred feet I could see the weeds. They filled the unwatered marks and climbed and crowned the ridges of banked earth.

I jammed the throttle and pulled up and came around again higher. Banked left and aimed for midfield and landed long and taxied straight to Bangley's house. Mixture, mags, master switch. Off. Shut down. The Beast had barely stopped rolling when I shoved open the sticky door and jumped out and ran to the house.

The front door was open, swinging slightly in the light wind.

Bangley! Bangley! Hey! You in here! BANGLEY!

I was surprised by the force of my shout. Sounded like a stranger.

Bounded down into the workshop. Oddly the big plate window looking to the mountains was intact but there was a string of bullet holes running diagonally up the wall over the hearth. The picture of the skiing family sat unmolested on the side table. Bangley's tools lay where he left them, the barrel and receiver of a Sig Sauer .308, one of his favorite guns, suspended over the worktable in two vises.

Jesus.

Pops behind me.

Your buddy, he said. I knew from our first interview that he would be a badass, else how could a guy like you—

Stopped himself.

Never imagined this.

Bangley!

Desperate. For the first time I felt it claw over me, the desperation like a bad odor. Weird. Never know how you feel about someone until their house is torn open.

Flinched. Pops's hand on my shoulder.

They caught him in here. He was working. It was during the day. Never expected a daytime assault like that. They came in from the front and he survived the first burst and he fought them off. He fought them to a retreat, then went upstairs where he could get a better view, better angle, and fought them from there. Probably only a couple of them had guns.

I bounded up the stairs. Heart gripped. What would I see? Had never been up there, never. The hallway lined with photos of the blonde family. Skiing, sailing, in a bamboo bungalow, palm trees, a yellow lab in a flowerfilled field. Saw all that at speed, taking the hall in running bounds on thick carpet, stopping once to orient myself toward the front of the house where the dormer would be. This room here. Shove open the partially closed door.

A child's room, the boy's. Poster of Linu Linu in a bikini over the bed, the bed covered in a quilt patterned with cowboys on bucking broncos. Butterflies pinned in frames on the wall and an electric guitar in the corner. Also slalom skis. Surfboard, a shortboard mounted on the angled ceiling, bright green graphic of the serpent in the apple tree and a naked Eve standing half turned away, her breast barely covered by the curls of her hair: SIN SURFBOARDS. A signed NASCAR poster. Car number 13.

Two hunting arrows, real ones, were stuck in the poster and the wall above it was torn with bullet holes.

Two tubs of Copenhagen and a Folgers coffee can spittoon on the floor by the bed. Night vision binocs and two Glocks hanging in their holsters from a hat stand. Jesus. It was the son's room and it was Bangley's. This is where he lived. Fucking A. Preserved like a room in one of those historic museums. I flashed on Bangley's father, the one he had hated—and I thought, He never had a room like this I bet. He was healing himself or following some instinct of compensation or maybe something more weird, who knew, living in this museum, this play set of a room. And there was sunlight coming through the roof. A hole two feet across. No sign of an explosion, how did it get there? Oh. Almost stepped through an equal sized hole in the floor. The questions racing through my head and colliding in a NASCAR pileup. And the window burned. And sandbags stacked to the sill and up the sides. And no sign of Bangley which was at this point a good thing.

I stood in the middle of the room gulping air, catching my breath. Went to the windowless window and looked down at our encampment, our airport, and couldn't help burping up a bubble of stricken laughter.

He could see just about everything: over the low berm across the runway where I slept with Jasper, right to the dumpster we had dragged away from my house, my house that was a decoy. He could see the porch and front door of that house, down along the line of rusted plane hulks, two sides of the FBO building, the doorway to my hangar. Not much he could not cover from here, which is of course why he had chosen it. Had never occurred to me, don't know why. Or that when I beeped him in the night with an intruder alarm that he could scope the whole scene from here. He would have known how many were stacked behind the dumpster, what they were carrying, how many more were maybe hanging back, knew it all before he sauntered up to our berm in the dark, had probably already planned who he would shoot first and how. Why he never seemed surprised, always seemed way too relaxed to me. Fuck. And the sandbags. He could have probably made the shots with one of his sniper rifles right from here. Fucking Bangley. How far was it? Three hundred yards, maybe. Easy. For him. And I felt standing there rising up in me the revulsion and admiration and I have to say—what? Love, maybe, that I had grown to

feel for that certain fucked up individual.

He was good at one thing, really good at it, and the rest he muddled through with unyielding orneriness. One strategy, I guess. And he backed me up. Unfailingly, unhesitant. And, what? Generously. I mean above and beyond, right? Never even let me know just how in hand he had the whole operation. And so when I left, he knew exactly the increase in threat, in danger. Could probably calibrate it to an exact and lethal degree, the way he would calibrate windage and elevation for one of his long shots from the tower, knew with chilling precision just how in danger he would be living here alone without me and Jasper, then just me, as a warning system. I mean the symbiosis, the extent to which I hadn't even been aware. And that somehow made the surly and ultimately brief resistance to me leaving even more touching. The basket of grenades. Telling me I was family. Telling me in my own way to have a good one, to be safe, not for him, but for me.

And those other trips. The fishing and hunting which he knew were recreational more than anything, or psychological, understood R&R, and which put him at deadly risk. His never once objecting.

This was his room. Kinda touching. Kinda peculiar.

I turned. Pops in the doorway his gray eyes moving over the child's objects, the guns.

That's Bangley in a nutshell, I said.

Well.

Pops's eyes traveling to the sandbagged window.

He didn't die here.

Pops stepped across to the singed hole that used to be the dormer window. Scanned downward, across.

He was wounded here. Pops touched a shredded curtain.

Knew he couldn't stay here, they would burn him out. Knew he had to move, hurt as he was. Had to move and attack. He was a good soldier.

Was?

Pops shrugged.

We both stood there. I couldn't move. I felt frozen.

And then we heard the double shot and the scream.

And then we were running down the hall, down the stairs, through the selectively trashed ground floor, out into the painful sunlight.

The Beast was yards away on the ramp that served as taxiway for these houses on the north. Cima was crouched beside it under the wing trying to make herself as small as the wheel.

Pops stopped short and I bumped into him, almost knocked him to the ground.

Wait.

He shielded his eyes and scanned. She by the plane was crouched and pointing. Toward my hangar which was closed. I mean the part that was still intact. She was okay, had been the sound of the shots that flattened her.

And then Pops was moving.

It's him, he said.

I overtook and passed him in three steps. Never know how you feel about someone until they die and come back. I shoved the hangar door, the one a person uses to walk through, the one cut into the main door which lifts, I hit it so hard I fell into my old digs. Stumbled across the big floor which I had covered in all manner of fine Persians from the other houses, stumbled so hard and headlong I wrenched my back, fuck, and hyperextended a knee, ow, pulled myself erect and stopped and stood like a tree and squinted getting used to the dimness.

There were two corrugated pale translucent panels in the roof that served as lowrent skylights and sort of lit the place with natural daylight when the doors were closed. And saw our couch, the *Valdez*, Jasper's easy chair, the workbench, the stool, the counter in the back

where I cooked, and the red linoleum table where we often had our gourmet meals. Nothing else. But heard. Slight scraping like a mouse in the wall. Metallic.

I had a tool chest, rolling drawers, massive red steel, six feet wide. It was beautiful. Took me and Bangley most of a morning to roll it over from the service center hangar, to get it past the frost heaves and potholes, bridging the bad places with planking. It had a place of honor middle of the north wall. Bangley called it Red Square. I need a ratcheting flat wrench, quarter inch, he'd say. Can you get off your butt and go to Red Square and find me one? Please. The scraping came from the chest and the chest was gapped away from the wall. Bangley's steel toed work boot stuck out from behind it. Next to it, against the wall, his grenade launcher, the one he had been working on.

He was covered in dried blood. Looked like someone had dumped a bucket of it down the lower half of him. His eyes were swollen near shut, a white crust of dried mucus or vomit on the side of his face that lay on his arm. His left leg was bent at a weird angle. He lay on his favorite assault rifle, the M4, and his bloody left hand lay over the trigger guard.

A croak guttered from his cracked lips. The words came in the faintest grit of a whisper.

Fuckin Hig.

That's all. And his hand came up stiff as a claw and touched my beard.



Touch and go. For two weeks. More. If he died it would be from dehydration, blood loss. He didn't. Tough old bastard. We knew that. Cima didn't want to move him. Set him up on the couch. She set and splinted his leg which was shattered from a bullet in the thigh. She cleaned and sewed shut the hole in his left side which had broken a rib and missed his stomach. The hangar was hot in the afternoon but not too bad with the door up and the hole in the west wall. Took him four days to register my face again. For a few seconds. Lapsed into kind of a coma in between. She got water and Sprite into him with a turkey baster. On the sixth day he opened his eyes while she fed him and

stared.

Mrs. Hig, he said.

She said she burst out laughing. Something about his expression, even that: the facial expression of a man half dead. She said it was like a challenge, daring her to deny it, and not devoid of self awareness, something like humor.

Doctor Hig to you, she said. She told me he held her eyes for a significant moment, nodded barely, and went back to sleep.



Pops got less tense by the day. I took him up with me in the Beast and flew the circuit. Pointed out the landmarks like a tour guide. Found him a headset and explained as we went. The tower, the river, the distances, which he could see. The high cutbank which formed our moat, the only decent ford across it, the berm. The thirty mile radius to clear the roads, the families.

When we flew over they ran from the garden, the houses, the sheds, a tattered and ragamuffin welcome, waving. The kids jumped up and down. I counted the children: seven. One less, not sure who. Circled, waved held out a finger. I'll be back.

Cima said Bangley was essentially ICU, needed someone monitoring him 24/7. We took turns. Something about her. Something over the week had grown and flowered, something hibernating in the canyon had come out into the sunlight and liked what it saw. Hard to explain.

In the role of doctor, no doubt there was expertise, an easy competence that needed no thought, a return to a hard won usefulness that made her to me seem bigger. I don't know, taller, broader, a planet with more gravity than it had before. That was part of it. Watch anyone enter their arena of real mastery and you see it, the growing bigger than themselves. Love that. But it was something more too. As if the arrival at this half ravaged airfield on the plains, as alien as it was from anyplace she had lived before—New York, certainly, the mountains and mesas of her upbringing—as if it were an arrival she had been preparing for. For a long time without knowing it. Maybe. I don't know. Seemed that way to me. As if part of her relaxed, as if

there were a shucking of some old skin. A husk of herself that had been a barrier I hadn't even been aware of. And in the sloughing off, she opened and flowered. Corny, huh? Not really. Magical. I mean to watch a person let go of something and flower.

I wouldn't know what it is she let go of.

I loved to watch her sitting on the stool which I cut down to couch height, watch her lean over Bangley and talk to him softly, not like doctor to patient, or saintly minister, but with respect, with humor, like two friends. I loved to watch her check the splint, rewrap bandages, her movements more assured even than when she tended the garden with me—the difference between a half grudging second nature and the assurance of pride, of skill hard won and tempered. I loved to watch her push the dark curls out of her face, tie them back with a string or stretch her long arms and wander out into the blaze of summer sun and walk across the ramp to where the lambs were tethered inside a fence Pops had built in the shade of a globe willow. I loved to watch her undress and dive into the pond by the river and stand as she stood in the spray that first evening and beckon me in. She was simply the most beautiful being Big Hig had ever seen.

We slept in the open on the ground where I had always slept. With Jasper. But we made a willow screen, and we opened two of the flannel sleeping bags and spread them on a double mattress we hauled out of my house, the one with the porch, and I slept as I never had, not since. We slept often holding each other in a tangle of arms and legs which I had never been able to do, not with anyone. I woke in the middle of the night as I used to do and propped my head on my arms and watched the stars and counted constellations and made up others, but now I did it with the pressure of her elbow in my cheek—move it gently over—her hair in my mouth, her thigh over mine and with a sense of having been spared and having been blessed.

Still, some nights I grieved. I grieved as much at what I knew must be the fleeting nature of my present happiness as any loss, any past. We lived on some edge, if we ever lived on a rolling plain. Who knew what attack, what illness. That doubleness again. Like flying: the stillness and speed, serenity and danger. The way we could gobble up space in the Beast and seem to barely move, that sense of being in a painting.

We made love as if the whole thing were new somehow. Maybe because we had to do it so gently, so slowly. Sometimes she moved onto me and took me ever so gently inside and straddled me and we lay still so still the stars moved behind her and we moved infinitesimally and it was somehow like a conversation and it filled me with a happiness, a welling joy I can't come close to reckoning.

Pops took a house next to Bangley's, took an upstairs room with a view down the airfield, ever the tactician, the two like peas in a pod in some way. And sandbagged the one window and introduced himself to Bangley one morning and asked deferentially if he could borrow one of Bangley's rifles, the Sig Sauer. Bangley was well enough by then, it was the tenth or eleventh day, well enough to sit up on the couch and look Pops over, to speak through his sewed up lip.

The other old guy, Bangley croaked. That was the first thing he said.

Pops cracked a half grin and it went straight across, and I thought Fuckin A, they almost smile the same. Bangley's hands were bandaged and Pops reached over and touched his forearm. The gesture was touching and respectful.

That was a fight you put up.

Bangley looked at him steadily out of those eyes that could fragment, go kaleidoscopic. Didn't say anything.

Ten or twelve huh? Maybe three armed.

Fourteen, Bangley rasped. Fourteen and four.

Pops nodded.

What went through the roof?

Rock. Or some damn thing. Had a goddamn light cannon.

They picked up their dead.

Bangley made his best simulacrum of a shrug.

I guess, he croaked. After a silence he said, They bunched once.

His throat caught and he cleared it.

Thought I was dead. In the house. I hit them with the grenade launcher. Took two more on the way here. That was enough. For them.

Bangley studied what he must have been surmising was his new friend.

Who were you with? he said finally.

Navy SEALs, Pops said. Afghanistan. Other places.

Bangley nodded, barely.

Dressed like goddamn Mongols. Six of them female. Had bows. Knew how ...

He trailed off, his eyes turning, coalescing around some memory. The slightest tremor running through his body.

Pops waited. If anyone knew.

I wondered, he said finally. I took the house just to the northeast. Wondered if I could borrow that Sig for a while. While you're in the hospital.

Bangley took a while to refocus. When he did he half nodded. That your daughter? Was his answer.



I took her to see the families. She wanted to go as soon as I landed with Pops. She took her medic bag. We landed on the drive and they came from everywhere, some running, some barely able to walk, mustered like some ragtag company along their quarantine line in the yard. We got out and I watched their expressions change as Cima approached. The dark ringed eyes widened in surprise, the lantern jaws fell open, the little ones like curious and half frightened deer, the heads coming forward. If they'd had swiveling ears they would have swiveled, the looks back to their mothers, the excitement.

Cima stepped right across the DMZ, and as one they fell back half a step, almost cringing, and opened a cove of space before her. She held up a long, strong, bruised hand.

It's okay. I'm a doctor.

As if that explained anything. She smiled. Realized how absurd and archaic.

Hi, I'm Cima.

It may have been her bruises, a subtle sense of frailty, of having survived a terrible sickness. I watched their faces. A few waved, nodded to me, smiled, but. They were studying her with a fascination, a curiosity that almost overcame fear, some kindred welcoming. Of a being maybe that was somehow like them, they weren't sure how. And different, too, different enough to kindle a fierce wonder. Well. They were Mennonites. A visitation was in their ken. And I thought I was the descending angel. I stood there in the yard for the first time ever not knowing what to do with my big hands, feeling like chopped liver and laughing in surprised and uncomfortable guffs.

And. She was a doctor. But.

Cima—I called.

She half turned.

They—

They. Of course she knew they were contagious. We had talked about it minutes before.

She held up a hand, a gesture of All Okay, and also a little of dismissal, and I had to laugh again. How times change. They had closed the cove around her into a circle and I knew that she had already seduced them or won them, that they loved her as I had loved her, I knew from the first moments.

The children reached out, clung to her skirt, one little girl, I think her name was Lily, Lily held her leg like a bear cub hugs a tree.

Hi! I heard Cima say. Hi. You *are* pretty. What's your name? And you? And this handsome little guy.

The wonder of being touched by a stranger. No longer untouchable.

I was worried but. Almost worth whatever would come just to see that scene.

She set up in a room in the old farmhouse what would have then been quaintly called the parlor, and she examined them all. She put on latex gloves. I could see them on her hands as she opened the door to the kitchen and called in the next. Gently. Must have had a stash in her bag. She sewed up bad cuts, dressed wounds, called for buckets of warm water. She counseled a young woman six or seven months pregnant. Consoled, I knew, an older man whose weeping could be heard from outside the screen kitchen door. She told me it was okay for me to come across, to mingle, it was a misperception. Like Hep C, she said. Like HIV used to be. Fluid transfer, blood. Otherwise—

The misperception that had saved their lives. The big signs along the fences at the edge of their fields THE BLOOD. The terror that evoked. The truth of it for anyone with a pair of binoculars to see: the wasted figures bent as if into a stiff wind, the exhausted movements, the hollow eyes. Kept them away, all attackers, preserved their lives as it killed them.

We flew back in silence despite the good headsets.

That night we lay out by the berm, lay close together. Both on our backs, both studying reefs of luminous clouds that tore off from banks over the mountains. They were rinsed by a half moon, and shuddered from within with heat lightning. I watched them fly over and hoped a big rain would send us running into the hangar to be Bangley's roommates. The country could use some rain. She said There were studies at the end. A few convincing reports.

On the blood?

Mm hm.

I waited.

They suggested that the onset of the autoimmune disease was speeded by a breakdown in the body's ability to make its own vitamin D. Really a curious mechanism. Like AIDS with T cells. I mean if there is any known analog.

She paused, watched the clouds.

I love it when you talk like that.

She elbowed my ear.

There was no evidence that the converse is true. Hadn't gotten that far yet. All so new.

That vitamin D could slow the process?

Yes.

Maybe we'll have to make a run to Walmart.

She was quiet. We watched the clouds. They tore off but never thickened. Not over us. The rain, if there was rain, stayed on the peaks.

Hey, I murmured, wanna hear my favorite poem? It was written in the ninth century, in China.

I thought she was thinking medical thoughts, but then I felt her twitch against me. Not the nightmare twitches Jasper sometimes had but the twitch of falling, of letting go.



On or about. The best I can say now. Bangley had checked off the calendar in my hangar until the attack which I thought especially thoughtful. But. So we knew that happened on June 19th. But he never could say afterward how many days he had been lying behind Red Square. At least a week he thought.

On or about the 4th of July I was working in the garden. Killing potato bugs one at a time. Cima was with the families. I had dropped her off in the morning and she said to pick her up for dinner, she wanted to be there all day. She was dispensing a vitamin D infusion, but I knew it was for the children. She couldn't stay away from them.

I was working in the garden. She was away. Bangley was playing chess with Pops. That's what they did. They sat on the porch of my house in the creaking chairs and played chess like it was a country

store in some apocalyptic parody of Norman Rockwell. Bangle's cane against the rail. He was better at chess, but his mind wandered and then Pops could beat him.

I was squashing potato bugs between my fingers and I heard a sound that I had heard so often I didn't look up. But. It had been a long time. I craned my head, wincing eyes past the sun and there: two vapor trails. Parallel but one behind. And the distant dopplered rush of receding engines.

Not dreaming, no.

I hadn't run so fast. In years. Got to the Beast and hit the master switch and flipped on the radio. I had a Narco scanner which ran the digits, the frequencies up through the silence and nothing. Static. Around and around went the numbers. Stopped like a roulette wheel. A break, a fraying of the grayness. A voice, words. Before I pushed the mike button I made myself listen and I couldn't understand. It was Arabic. Had to be. A conversation, laughter. Heading west at thirty thousand feet. Heading probably to California. From up there, we, our airport, would be indistinguishable from the rest of the landscape, the decaying infrastructure. I called and called. *The two jets, 747s, Erie, two 747s Erie. Boeing 747s who just overflew Denver, this is Erie.* I called and called. Until my voice was hoarse and the streamers of steam were a white memory, a mirage. I stared after them kind of stunned. Good or bad?

A week later, exactly, two more. About the same time. And the next week. The fourth week nothing. The four of us gathered on the porch at the afternoon hour like waiting for some fireworks or a dignitary. And nothing.



They could have immunity, she said. A race could have immunity. Or clusters of immunity. The Arab countries are tribal. An entire tribe could be immune.

In September, two more flew over. Never answered my calls.



We sleep outside into October. Maybe we will all winter. The way Jasper and I used to do. Piling on the quilts. Sleep some frosty nights

with wool hats on, with just our noses sticking out. Head to head or butt to butt. We name the winter constellations and when we run out of the ones we know—Orion, Taurus, Pleiades, the Chariot—we make them up. Mine are almost always animals, hers almost always food—the Sourdough Pancake with Syrup, the Soft Shell Crab au Gratin. I name one for a scrappy, fish loving dog.



I still dream Jasper is alive. Before that my heart will not go.



My favorite poem, the one by Li Shang-Yin:

When Will I Be Home?

When will I be home? I don't know.

On the mountains, in the rainy night,

the Autumn lake is flooded.

Some day we will be back together again.

Some day we will sit in the candlelight by the West window.

Some day I will tell you how I remembered you

on the stormy mountain.

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A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Heller holds an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop in both fiction and poetry. An award-winning adventure writer and longtime contributor to NPR, Heller is a contributing editor at *Outside* magazine, *Men's Journal*, and *National Geographic Adventure*, and a regular contributor to *Bloomberg Businessweek*. He is also the author of several nonfiction books, including *Kook*, *The Whale Warriors*, and *Hell or High Water: Surviving Tibet's Tsangpo River*. He lives in Denver, Colorado.

ALSO BY PETER HELLER

*Kook: What Surfing Taught Me About Love,
Life, and Catching the Perfect Wave*

*The Whale Warriors: The Battle at the Bottom of
the World to Save the Planet's Largest Mammals*

Hell or High Water: Surviving Tibet's Tsangpo River

Set Free in China: Sojourns on the Edge

The Dog Stars

by Peter Heller

Reading Group Guide

About the Guide

The introduction, discussion questions, and suggested further reading that follow are designed to enliven your group's discussion Peter Heller's novel about a pilot and his dog trying to survive in a world filled with loss, *The Dog Stars*.

About the Book

A novel of extraordinary depth and power, *The Dog Stars* is narrated by Hig, a pilot who has taken refuge in an abandoned airport in Erie, Colorado, with his beloved dog Jasper and a gun-nut neighbor appropriately named Bangley. Nine years ago a devastating pandemic ravaged the globe, killing off everyone Hig loves, and taking much of the plant and animal life as well.

Hig misses the world that's gone, his wife, Melissa, and all the trout wiped out by the rising temperatures in mountain streams. Bangley, on the other hand, seems born for just this kind of life. He enjoys nothing more than picking off marauders from the sniper tower he and Hig built. He's a shoot-first-and-ask-questions-later kind of guy. "Never, ever negotiate," he tells Hig repeatedly, advice which Hig frequently ignores, to his own peril.

They exist in an uneasy alliance. Bangley needs Hig to secure the perimeter, grow vegetables, and hunt deer. Hig needs Bangley to cover his ass and bring out the firepower—machine guns, grenades, mortars—when things get especially dicey. They don't entirely trust or like each other but they make it work, like a difficult marriage. But Hig wants more than a life devoted to mere survival and fending off murderous intruders.

He visits a village of diseased Mennonites, dropping off supplies and helping them in whatever way he can. He takes frequent trips, with his copilot Jasper, to the high country to fish and bask in the brisk, clean air. He longs for human connection, so much so that he risks flying

beyond the point of no return—the point beyond which he won't have enough fuel to get back—looking for something or someone.

From there, the story takes some surprising turns, some of them tender and some of them treacherous. Indeed, the tension between compassion, lovingness, and the desire for human connection on the one hand, and self-protection and a merciless kill-or-be-killed instinct on the other, is one of the novel's major themes.

As well as being a thrilling page-turner and a vivid imagining of life after global catastrophe, *The Dog Stars* offers a thought-provoking exploration, alternately hopeful and terrifying, of the essential features of human nature—what humans are, or what we may become after the protective veneer of civilization has been stripped away.

Questions for Discussion

The prose style of *The Dog Stars* is clipped, terse, often fragmented. Why would Heller choose this way of writing this particular story? In what ways is it fitting?

At the beginning of Chapter III, the narrator wonders why he's telling this story. What might be his motivations? Who does he imagine his audience will be?

Hig says that Bangley “had been waiting for the End all his life... . He didn't do anything that wasn't aimed at surviving” [p. 71]. He also clearly enjoys killing people. In what ways is Hig different from Bangley? How did “the End” affect him? How does he feel about killing?

How and why does Hig's relationship with Bangley change over the course of the novel?

Jasper's death is a turning point for Hig. How and why does it affect him so powerfully?

When Cima's father asks Hig why he came to their canyon—why he flew beyond the point of no return—Hig can't find an answer. What might have prompted Hig to take that risk? What was he looking for?

When they decide to take a ewe and a ram with them on the plane, Hig says, “Like the Ark. Here we go” [p. 273]. He says it jokingly, but does the novel offer a sense of hope that life on the planet might continue, postapocalypse? What other biblical references occur in the novel?

The Dog Stars is a serious book about a devastating subject, but what are some of its more lighthearted moments? Why is it important that the book have this mixture of tenderness and violence, anxiety and peace?

What has caused the end of human civilization in the novel? Why have the scattered survivors become so savage? Does the postapocalyptic world Heller presents seem accurate and likely, given the state of the world today?

1. Why is Hig's relationship with Cima so important in the novel? What makes it particularly touching, given what each of them has suffered?

2. The novel's ending is ambiguous. Cima, Hig, Bangley, and Pops have formed a kind of family, the spruce and aspen are coming back, eagles and hawks are flourishing, but the trout and elk are gone, water is disappearing, and mysterious jets are flying overhead. What might happen next, or in the next ten years, for these characters and the world they live in?

3. Why does Heller conclude *The Dog Stars* with Hig's favorite poem "When Will I Be Home?" by Li Shang-Yin? Why is this a fitting way to end the story? In what ways is the novel about the longing for home?

4. What does the novel imply about human nature, after the constraints of civilization have been removed? What does it suggest about the possible consequences of the way we are living now?

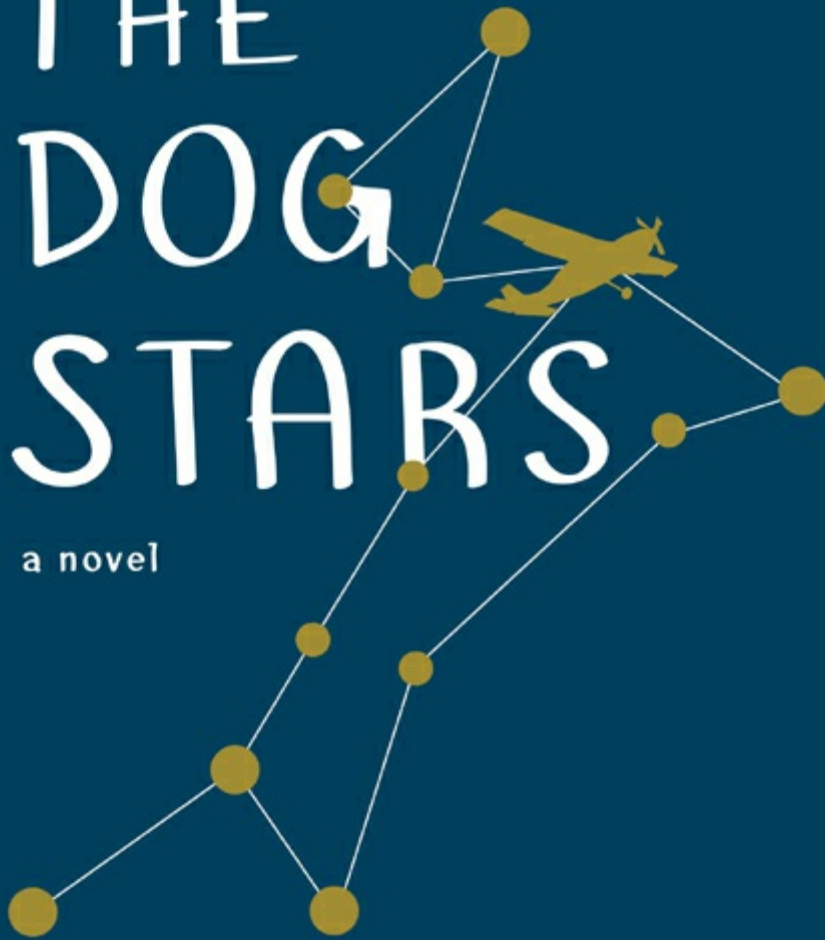
5. What similarities does *The Dog Stars* share with other recent dystopian novels like *The Hunger Games* and *The Road*? In what important ways does it differ from them?

Suggested Reading

J. G. Ballard, *The Drowned World*; Max Brooks, *World War Z*; Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games*; Justin Cronin, *The Passage*; Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*; Walter M. Miller, Jr., *A Canticle for Leibowitz*; Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Wild Shore*; Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*; Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us*

THE DOG STARS

a novel



PETER HELLER