COUNTERREVOLUTION
AND OTHER STORIES

by

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B.A., University of Kansas, 1967

Submitted to the Department of English and the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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That day was half my life ago. I was twelve then, very stupid, very frightened. Now, twice as old, I'm no longer frightened, but afraid. I cannot think that day away. My thoughts only make me nervous. It's as though I am hated for knowing and spilling this bloody secret. But I will just the same. I need to confess.

It happened on a Saturday, the day my family moves to the locker plant. Dad's there all the time, of course, but Mom comes down that day, too, to work on the books and send out statements. But she's not concerned with the real life of the place on Saturday, the slaughtering room. Just the clean, neat books out front. But I go back there every Saturday, and even some weekday mornings before school.

Two outsiders help. Edna works on weekday mornings, wrapping meat and doing some of the lighter work, and Mel comes in from his farm on Saturday afternoons to slaughter. But since that day the extra help has changed
faces many times. They come and go. My family, Grandfather before Dad, stays and has stayed for eighty years.

Mom arrives and in ten minutes she has fathomed everyone's mood, Dad's and mine and the help's, if they are working. I don't have that talent. To me it is always the same old place and the same old people. My mother is always amiable enough to me. I don't even know if she has moods. She just smiles and condescends and tries to keep everything working on that busiest day of the week. Dad, on the other hand, is just a mystery. He is unpredictable, volcanic inside. I have tried to understand him since that day and do a little, but mainly I just stay out of his way and ignore him. Unfortunately so. I should love him, as I should have loved him before. Nevertheless, until I was twelve, until that Saturday, my life was undisturbed. I was comfortable, however unaware.

Mother warned me it was to be a bad day. When I asked why, she said Mel wasn't going to butcher today, that his back was hurting him again, that Dad was going to have to do his own butchering. I saw nothing wrong with that at first, nothing which promised such a bad day. In fact, slaughtering was the best part of the game. I used to invite my best friends down to watch Mel and, before that, Lloyd slaughter. I remember Billy Harkness shooting a short horn right in the head, place the gun right up to his skull and pull the trigger once, twice because the
first wasn't enough. And others came, too, and all of them were excited about it.

The slaughter room contains the smokehouse and there is the smell of fresh smoked pork, ham and bacon, hanging over hickory and the smell of lard being rendered, the smell of cracklings; bologna is being smoked, all meat, all beef bologna, some rings so tightly packed they break open in the smokehouse and the grease drips down, sizzling on the coals. So, wrapped in the smell of this smoked, salty meat, the slaughter room was always a delight, until that Saturday.

It was afternoon and one of my jobs was to slice the bacon. I stood near the front of the building, next to where the customers walked in, pushing and pulling a tray on the stainless steel slicing machine, the bacon on one side in long slabs, on the other side coming out in neat little slices. The bacon was only partly cooled since I had just taken it from the smokehouse that morning. Laid out on sheets of wax paper, the warm bacon tempted every customer who walked in. It made me proud.

Then Dad came storming in. He wore a white apron with the name of our locker plant stitched in red, a pair of the same khaki pants he wears everywhere, all the time, and a white short-sleeved shirt. His shoes were covered with salt and mud and red blood stains ran across the middle of his apron, cutting-table high. He is a big man,
and strong, built like a butcher should be. Stout, hairy arms with a little slouch in his back and shoulders. Slowly he is growing bald, which shows all the more with his hair brushed straight back. Normally his face is drawn, a little fat and loose hanging, but that day when he came in it was all angry wrinkles and taut. He looked mad. Even I noticed and that was before I thought to care.

He said he had been unloading Perkins' steer into the back room and it was the "wildest sonofabitch" he'd seen in a long time. He was mad, too, because we already had four steers and two hogs to butcher, which were more than enough when he had to slaughter them himself. Now he had this wild Perkins' animal in addition.

Mrs. O'Malley, a short country lady, walked in. Like most country customers, she was quiet and nice, never said too much, smiled and went about her business. Her dress, a print of small faded flowers, was frayed but clean. Wearing bib overalls and a gray shirt, her husband came soon after. It was his newest bib overalls, for Saturday was go-to-town day. They got their key and proceeded to the freezer.

Mr. O'Malley pulled open the heavy oak door to the freezer, the long iron handle popped, the door creaked as it opened. The white vapor came pouring out from the freezer and deep inside, very muffled, the motors hummed, keeping the room below freezing.

Dad was talking to somebody over the phone who wanted
to bring in another steer that day to get butchered. Dad kept saying, no, that we were full and we couldn't take it today. He said we could take it next week if they would wait. And then he told them to take it to Wilsey if they had to get it butchered today. Finally he told them to take it to hell. He was that mad. When he hung up, he went over to the door Mr. O'Malley had not quite shut and he swung his hip against it, popping the door angrily back into place.

He came back cursing the little old lady and man. Then he came over to see my work and told me to slice it thinner. That's the way he is; if anything goes wrong he jumps on me if I'm around, or anybody else in his way. Even a nice person like Mrs. O'Malley. He made me mad, but I ignored him. I adjusted the knob that controls the thickness of the bacon and went on with my job. I didn't say a word.

He reached underneath the counter and pulled out a pair of black rubber boots covered with blood and salt, and a thin black box. He slipped off his shoes and wriggled his toes around. He paused for a moment, relaxed, just wriggling his toes like it was a great pleasure, like there was no cause to be mad. Then he slipped his stocking feet into the boots and looked, not mad, but very serious.

The black box contained knives he had not used for ten years when he quit doing his own slaughtering. He
hadn't butchered since. He opened the box and took out
two of the four knives there. They were short and their
blades were curved. He ran his thumb across their edges
to see how sharp they still were.

They were ugly little knives. They were worn and old,
but still were the best knives made. They had been my
Grandfather's, too, and came with him from Germany. Plugging
in the grinding machine beneath the counter, he laid the
edge of each knife carefully on the spinning emery stone.
Bright orange sparks flew as he slowly moved each knife
dge across the stone, leaving the surface brightly shining
steel. When he had finished, he unplugged the machine and
worked the long steel hone and each knife together in the
air, rubbing each edge along the hone until all were
perfectly sharp. He tested their sharpness by shaving
paper he held in his hand. All this he did without speaking
a word. Then he picked up his knives and carried them as he
disappeared through the hallway door to the slaughter room.

Soon the bacon was sliced and after cleaning up the
machine I asked mother what else there was to do. I pre-
ferred to ask her. Dad expected me to find things to do
by myself. If I asked him, he got mad and found anything
to keep me busy rather than let me off. For being so stupid
as to ask, I have washed every window in that place a
hundred times. But Mom is willing to let me get by with
just doing all that must be done. That way sometimes I get
to go home early. So, as usual, I asked her. Left was
cleaning up the cooler and after that, as far as she was
concerned, I could go.
The cooler is an in-between room. Meat not to be frozen is put there, some to age like the halves of beef and pork which hang at one end of the room and others to cool like the hams and bacon slabs I took from the smokehouse that morning. The floor is covered with sawdust that must be changed when it becomes bloody or greasy or water leaks from the ceiling. Two heavy, wooden doors lead into the cooler, one from the slaughter room, one from the front room. I entered from the front room and dragged in my rake, a cardboard box and a gunny sack of fresh dust. I scooped up the dirty sawdust with a scraper and threw clean sawdust down. I raked that evenly over the floor. This done, I straightened up the stacks of meat on the shelves.

The hardest job in the cooler is at the far end where freshly butchered halves of beef and pork drip blood on the floor. The door to the slaughter room opens once in a while and two more still warm, still steaming halves come sliding in on the overhead rail. They still twitch in places, the blood dripping. Slowly the bodies cool and harden into long, still, sweet-smelling hunks of meat.

What goes on past that back door to the cooler I once watched for fun. Now that I work in the plant I have other things to do. But I remember the cattle or hogs were brought out of the small back room into a narrow metal cage against the wall. It's so narrow they can hardly move. The butcher pokes his rifle through the bars until it almost
8.
touches the forehead and shoots. Usually the animal stumbles and falls. If not, the butcher shoots until it does. Then he clumps his foot on a steel pedal and out the animal rolls from the bottom of the cage. Sometimes the animal is only stunned. In any case, the butcher takes one of his knives and quickly slits its neck from chin to chest. Cutting deeper into the neck he sticks his knife and hand in until there is a gush of thick red blood. The animal bleeds and kicks awhile and then is rolled on its back. Two long blocks of wood on each side keep him there. The butcher slits the hide all the way down the body. He skins it off the head, then the neck and downward. As he works down he breaks each of the forefeet off. A bar with two hooks is lowered from a machine and the hooks are stuck in the hindlegs. Slowly the machine drags the body across the floor and up. The intestines, Lloyd called them shoe-strings, spill out into barrels. After the body is cleaned on the inside, the head is cut off and the hide skinned and thrown in a corner. Then the big chain saw splits the animal down the backbone. Hooks on rollers running on overhead rails replace the hooks on the lift and the halves are rolled into the cooler.

From the number in the cooler I could tell Dad had four more to butcher. I scraped the muck off the tin trays and spread clean sawdust in them. Finally I was finished, and I went out to ask mother if it would be all right to go home. After all, I told her, it was about five o'clock.
But she insisted that I ask my father, so I started back to the slaughter room. Doors with glass windows stand at either end of the hallway which leads to the back room. In the hallway I saw what I have not yet forgotten.

I started to open the second door, thinking how my Dad would be mad and how he would probably think of some little things to have me do. Then I saw the steer on the floor. The biggest steer I've ever seen was lying on its back, its feet stretching up in the air. All around the room in big barrels were the remains of two cattle already butchered. The whole room stank with excrement.

Blood streamed from the steer's neck and Dad was skinning the hide from it. He had completely skinned the head and the two front legs which were dangling by pieces of hide from the sides of the animal. Suddenly the hind legs began to kick. That happens plenty of times, some sort of nervous reaction, but the steer kept kicking and finally rolled over on its side. The steer was trying to get up! It rolled over further and tried to stand on the two stumps that were left as its front legs. Its head, red and bloody, all muscle, swung around and around, streaking blood over everything. The hide hung limp and dripping from the animal like a wet rag and it swung around when the animal swung its body. The steer opened its mouth like it was going to bellow and a gurgling sound came out, and blood oozed.

I wanted to scream, but couldn't. I didn't know what
to do. I wanted to run away, but couldn't. I just stood and looked. Something made me silent. I too quickly imagined myself, hide hanging, swinging my head, standing on stumps for arms, trying to yell, but my voice muffled by a clot in my throat. I imagined the steer, then, with its bloody head and hanging hide breaking out of the room and running through the streets. It had to be killed. No one should see that.

The animal slipped around the floor, standing on its hind legs, but its head dragging on the floor. Then the stumps it tried to use as legs gave way. The hind legs slipped, too, and the animal kicked around the floor and tossed its head. It tried to bellow, but only gurgled and spouted blood. It tossed its head and red dots streaked across the window panes in front of me.

My Dad grabbed the gun again and shot wildly at the side of the animal's head. When it tried to raise itself, he got in front and put the gun next to its forehead. He shot point blank into its brain. And he shot again and again. The animal quit moving and immediately Dad grabbed one of his curved, stubby knives and reached into the slit already in the throat and cut deeper and deeper. A stream of dark red blood gushed out, across the wet cement floor and over the gutter drain. My Dad stared a moment and then grabbed the hose that lay in one corner and nervously washed the blood off the walls and floor. I turned around and left
without letting him know that I had seen.

Mother was in the front room chatting with Mrs. O'Malley, whose husband had left for the pool hall. I waited until they were through and asked her if I might go home. I told her Dad was in no mood for talking. As always, she understood and said she would tell Dad for me when he got through.

I left and walked home. Usually when I get off work it is a great feeling. You know then that you can go home and clean up. But as I walked home and as I lay in the streaming bathtub once I got there, I kept thinking about that steer and about Dad. Whatever the meat market had been before, it could be that no longer. However much I had ignored my Dad in the past, I could not ignore what he had been at that moment.

I dressed in comfortable clothes, fixed a sandwich and sat in front of the television until my folks came home. When at nine o'clock their car pulled up outside, I went in the kitchen and turned on the carport lights. My mother reached in the car for some sacks. I went out and helped her carry in the groceries. She said Dad wasn't feeling too well. He was braced against a rock wall with his back to me. I heard a choke and a cough. The vomit splashed on the ground. He bent over and I heard it again. I carried the last of the groceries inside and he followed later.

I have thought about this for half my life and all my thinking has taken me nowhere. But every time I see that steer in my mind, every time I think of that ugly, cruel struggle, I also begin to smell that cool, clean meat. I
feel my hands slicing through still warm, salty and just smoked bacon and I remember how I love the taste of meat.

There was a time when I thought I could share such a thing away, but that is not true. I no longer even want to. I have found that I can reveal this secret, tell the ugly history behind my love of meat, and all who hear it will hide it quickly, make it a secret, even to themselves. That adds savor to the meat, a double joy, of the admissible and the secret.

The taste of meat, even its smell, has been good but now for half my life meat tastes sweet. And my father, who makes it so, who for half my life I have cared for, knows joy uncontrolled.
A bullet flies overhead and nicks the wall above them both. Camille rises, fires four quick shots, ducks again. A bullet stirs the dust on the embankment. Harold presses his cheek further into the mud at the bottom of the ditch. Harold believes he and Camille fight on alone. It is early Saturday morning.

Harold was no giant on Monday. Harold was merely a file clerk content to process data, run from basement to third floor, punch cards in hand, finding mechanical synapses to make jump and spark like living thoughts. Then the revolution reprogrammed Harold. It made him jump and spark like a living thing.

After five days of fighting Harold no longer looks forward to victory, just silence. Harold inches his way up the embankment. He can see no one running through the streets as they had in those first days. Debris is piled down the silent streets. He feels alone in the early Saturday morning.

A bullet strikes nearby, throws dust in his eyes. Harold quivers, burrows back down again. The world spins around him, his vision grows a fuzzy red, his head aches.
with a fever. If he could run, he thinks, he would run down through the cool, wet mud.

Outside town the paths are lit by moonlight. Harold runs downhill past an unlit farmhouse and out onto the prairie. He mistakes moonlit clumps of bushes for soldiers. He runs faster, more frightened, on into the dark.

Suddenly before him the tree looms like an ancient tower. He suddenly stops. Then, as his fears catch up with him again, he scrambles up the side. It is a huge tree and Harold can hold onto only the vines which grow up it. Halfway up, Harold finds a hole in the hollow trunk, he crawl's in. He cries with relief and listens to his wildly beating heart. Sleep follows, then morning.

Harold awakens at daylight. Outside of his hole the savannah is silent and still wet from the morning dew. A dream of someone lingers in the back of his mind, but the face is forgotten, and the name. He searches the savannah carefully, but no one comes. His insecurity is mixed with an incredible loneliness. He wonders who has died, for someone surely has, but he has forgotten the face and the name. He remembers his flight from the city and his orderly job in the firm. He remembers how he crawled inside and he remembers how he slept.

Vines have stuck to his ankles during the night and they crawl up beneath his pants and around his legs. He abandons his watch for someone and he congratulates himself on a damp,
but otherwise perfect retreat. He begins again to order in his mind the events of the revolution, then of the counter-revolution, but he can only picture frenzied movement and disjointed images. Then they grow faint.

A rifle cracks. There is a constantly firing machine gun. A ricochet flies off the rock wall: pieces of cement fall near his half-buried face: dust settles on his left ear. He hates something intensely, something besides just being here. Glass shatters: the fragments shatter on a concrete surface and spin out across the cement. They stop. There is silence.

Old timbers crackle as they burn. Harold hears them, but cannot see. He reaches out towards Camille and touches her silent and motionless body.

Harold's thoughts spin chaotically in his head, bounce off its bony walls and dance on its periphery. Meanwhile deep inside his head he feels the link between the front and middle of his brain slip and twist, then snap. Down his granite face and nose the forefront of his consciousness tumbles. He cannot believe he is so alone. He cannot believe he is so exiled.

After groping in the dark Harold finally finds his pack. The vines rustle as he digs for his rations. Tendrils keep climbing his legs and body and they attach themselves to his arms. Using the key from the bottom of the tin, Harold
twists the can open. In his comfortable though damp and sticky hole, Harold dips his fingers into the marinated-in-soy-sauce sardines and feasts. It is cool inside and quiet. And growing pleasant.

Harold jerks about. He feels he is falling forever. Soybean oil is running down his leg. The tin has dropped and has cut his foot, but there is no bleeding.

Harold cannot move freely. He swings in a hammock of vines growing down from the ceiling. The vines secrete a sap on his skin, but he cannot wipe it away. Nor does he care to: it is not irritating, especially after it dries. When it dries, he finds his feet no longer dangle, but are cemented firmly to the floor. He merely hangs as his cradle clutches him. He is in free fall without falling. He is free, purely free. The cradle rocks: he falls asleep.

Camille clutches her shoulder. Beneath her hand the blood oozes down her shirt. A faint cry comes from her throat and Harold sees her eyes turn glossy. Just as quickly, though, she forgets her pain, releases her shoulder and continues to fire her rifle. The slight breeze covers the stain with a white powdery dust. Harold presses his ear downward into the mud, which muffles the noise.

Harold hears muffled voices outside. Just over the lip of the hole the figures of four natives crouch down close to the ground, pause and wait, confer among themselves. They are naked except for straps tied about their waists.
Harold yells for help. He cannot move.

The natives become motionless and squat on their haunches. They listen again for the yell, trying to sense its direction. Harold loses sight of them, but yells again louder. He sees them bounding frantically away like wild animals across the flat savannah.

"Blasted damn natives!" and the words spin out to chase them all the faster. "Please come back! Help me!" he sputters and spits out some leaves.

Minute green vines clutch his head and hang it from the roof like a cocoon. His temples and cheeks are embraced understandingly, lovingly. His mood switches from irate to wounded, from enraged to serene. He rages at the ignorant savages who leave him then and he is pleased when they are gone. While his feelings churn, his thoughts drift back to Tuesday.

He had been assigned to the printshop. He was in charge of the paper, of carrying the paper in from the trucks, of preparing the paper for the press, of printing the paper, "Be careful not to smear it," then of making sure that ten thousand pounds of paper with its ten million words in ink somehow made their way through channels to the angry eyes of a revolting population. Soon Harold was idle. The authorities abandoned the printshop. Harold never saw it again after the fury came dropping from the sky.

A rifle cracks. A soft thud, Camille bends over clutching her belly. Her back bulges and the bullet emerges, or is
that flesh which flies out and strikes the wall behind her? She crumples to the ground, flops over, her arms outstretched, and grows steel blue and motionless. The blood curls down into a puddle. Harold pounds his fists on the ground and tears blur his vision, make mud on his dusty cheeks.

By shifting his body, Harold has finally worked an apple up the inside of the tree to his mouth. There are bruises and dark spots on it: it is almost spoiled, how long has he been in there? Yet, it tastes sweet, even soft and pulpy to Harold. He is glad he has brought food and is without whoever has just died.... He pauses to calculate. Yes, it will last twice as long. He bites madly into the fruit and apple juice runs down his chin, as he stares blankly outside.

Harold has been pouting about the disappearing natives when he hears them return. They seem to be arguing among themselves in some disjointed and unfamiliar language, as they near his tree, Harold can see that four native hunters lead a whole group nearer him. Thirty yards away the chief hunter stops them with his hand and they all squat. The chief hunter talks, his back towards Harold, and he frequently gestures toward the tree with his spear.

At last the youngest of the group rises from his haunches; he and the other new men jeer at the old rambler. There is laughter. The young hunter spits on the ground near the old man. He shakes his spear towards Harold and heaven. He walks cautiously towards the tree and Harold's
hiding place. Harold sees courage in the young warrior's face and he hopes that he may find help yet. When the warrior is fifteen yards away, Harold can contain himself no longer. He yells:

"Hey!" There is a pause. "Do you speak English?"

The young warrior stops, his face frozen in terror. He squats on his haunches, he cocks his spear.

"English!" Harold repeats, trying to stretch himself so he might be seen outside the hole. "I need your help. I need to borrow a knife. Please come closer and cut loose these vines."

Harold has panicked. He twists and turns in the vines. The leaves rustle. He tries to pull himself up, his feet from the floor, his hands from the walls, but nothing gives. His feet are firmly in place, the rest dangles helplessly.

Harold cannot even duck when the spear comes singing into the tree. It hits near his cheek. When he looks again, the natives are on their way over the prairie, screaming in their primitive tongue.

"Superstitious bastards," Harold yells after them and the words spin out and are lost in the quiet evening. He would also like to shake his fist.

Throughout the night, Harold is disgusted. Often he sits up and spits out curse words for the benefit of those natives who are sneaking up on him in the dark. But whenever he looks out, it is quiet: nothing moves. The moon has
everything glowing.

Nothing moves. Then screaming down on them, it seems forever, comes a single shell. Suspended, then crashing down. A dull thud and the earth shakes, window panes rattle. A few bricks fall from the roofs of nearby buildings, strike on the concrete sounding like metal. One sliver from the shattered brick strikes the dead hand of Camille. Dust and plaster sift down through cracks and form small piles on the sidewalk and street.

Harold feels the pains where slivers from the shell have burnt him. White light floods his eyes as he grows blinder. Harold has been running, and he cowers for a moment in a doorway; still he cannot see. He screams and stumbles about all through the dark morning.

It is quiet when the blindness leaves his eyes and the ringing in his ears fades to a whisper. His clothes are burnt and they fall away in crumbly pieces. Scavenger birds fly overhead, caw at him, swoop down close by. The morning air seems fresh and silent; even the dust has settled. Lonely, half-conscious, Harold wanders aimlessly down streets filled with rubble. Hobbling, he stumbles and falls. There are only the birds to hear him cry.

Harold awakens with a cry for he has been dreaming of an endless fall. He does not know how long he has hung in the tree. Outside it is a steel-gray of no distinctive tone.
Inside it is a darker gray and a constant temperature which is likewise indistinguishable except for its comfort.

Harold loves his comfort. He just hangs, his eyes open on his face as though carved, not blinking as they stare out passively over the brown, dry savannah. Thoughts and distinctions and fears fade away and Harold hangs.

He is irritated by thirst. His two canteens are empty, but Harold is not yet frightened. Nor is he frightened to see his hands covered with a green glaze, nor at the vines which pierce his skin and cheeks and grow like a lattice beneath his epidermis. Thirst alone does not arouse dangling Harold. Patience cures all things. He starts indifferently at his hands, then out across the brown savannah. Perhaps, he thinks, it is noon.

By the length of the vines Harold tries to determine how long he has been there. There are more of them, they have filled the opening in the trunk, leaving only a narrow slit. They have pierced his cheeks and wound down his face, almost to his mouth, where they push out to a bud. The sticky sap flows into his mouth and cheeks and down his throat, like saliva. The taste is bitter. The brown haze far away on the horizon, he thinks as he feasts, perhaps is a dust storm.

Not until after the camps were pitched, still in the distance, and campfires built does Harold guess that the dust was the natives returning. Evidently there are more this time, perhaps the whole tribe, perhaps two hundred.
They dance through the night. Their chanting and incongruent singing carries across the savannah and are tossed in the wind and heard by Harold.

In the morning, the men move towards the tree. Many are cautious, some are awestruck, all are fearful. Watching them, Harold begins to laugh to himself. He despises their puniness.

The natives form a semicircle around Harold and he can see most of them through the slit. Although he is a little nervous, he feels now that he can live alone, that he wants to live alone, sometimes he wonders how else he has even lived and the laugh grows slowly audible.

The natives remain silent and wait. Harold hangs inside the tree, laughs to himself and waits. Still deep inside there is a desire to speak again, to ask for, perhaps to find help. Harold grows more nervous again. He will try again. One word. At the same time he hopes one word will frighten them again. As his mouth fights through the vines, he blushes a cool green with frustration. A word is finally spoken: it sounds like rasping across a dry, rough surface or like someone far off calling from the bottom of an empty oaken barrel.

The natives hush, then break into rapid chatter, pausing as they turn their eyes anxiously to the tree. Harold's breath is labored. It sounds like a slow pant or a leak in a pressure system. The natives bow their heads in fear, but they do not run. A gray-headed warrior puts on his feathers and steps forward, just in front of Harold. The warrior lifts his hands in a dizzying and quite mystical way.
He stumbles over Camille whose body lies dead and colder than yesterday. Her face is drained of fiery red. He lies down beside her and caresses her cold, still hand. His whispers and pleadings, the intermittent sobs and curses quiet the rats which dig through the garbage spilled out into the streets. He throws rocks at those which appear indifferent to him. They leave.

He runs a single finger from her hips up across her belly to her chest and shoulders, up the tendons of her neck, her cheek, her temple, around her ear. So light, so gentle, he barely feels it himself.

He rises when gusts of wind break the calm beating of the sun. Grabbing pieces of paper which blow down the sun-drenched streets, he wraps her body in them and covers it with debris. He hesitates, then decides not to make a wooden cross. Instead he writes her name in dust which already covers the mound. He chases away a digging rat.

Sniper fire carries from the edge of the city. It is less than yesterday, and soon it will be over. Soon it will be deathly quiet. Quiet enough to sleep.

Harold's breathing sounds as though it comes from a long hollow reed, and his heart beat, like pounding on a wet, hollow log. The natives outside mumble in low tones while they run back and forth from the camp. Harold hangs indifferent, nursing a little spite which animates his soft laughter. The sun falls and its final rays fill Harold's passive eyes and they grow warmer.

When his vision returns, Harold sees flickers outside.
There is a fire before his hole, but Harold can only
distinguish the gray-headed warrior. Behind him, Harold
can see the dark hills, the far away flickers of the camp-
fires, above them the bright evening star whose brothers
grow brighter in a pale red sky.

The gray-headed man stares directly at Harold and
Harold wants to laugh out loud. Strongly, boisterously,
now he feels his strength growing within. A strength which
like his laughter comes from hatred. A vegetable strength.
A sidewalk uplifting, city uprooting, sewer infesting
strength which roots itself deeply. A strength which
laughs loudly and often.

He laughs, he cannot help it, hysterically, out loud,
to no one. His new strength causes the past to fade to
insignificance. In Harold's throat the laughter sounds
like shingles clapping together.

The gray-haired man's hands fly up and the drums
stop. There is a sparkle of excitement in the old man's
eyes, even a hint of fire, and Harold laughs his wooden
laugh again. Harold knows he has been believed in.

The drums resume more passionately than before. The
fire is built up so high that Harold can barely see the old
man's head behind it. The others can be heard rustling
about giving choral supplications. The drums stop again,
the voices are silent. A body is lifted above the flames,
that of the young warrior who sent his spear towards Harold.
For the first time Harold sees that he is worshipped, that he
is loved, and he laughs.
The young man with a prayer on his lips and a calm look on his face, when he hears the rasping, does not wait for them to push, but jumps into the flames.

The flames die down as the women from the camp unload their vegetables and hunks of meat onto the coals. The long procession continues as the men rake the fire and stir the coals. When all is finished, they wait throughout the night as the fire smokes and sizzles and the red embers slowly die.

Not until morning do they dig through the fire and throw the young warrior's leg into Harold. The flesh, he thinks, is quite good, like potatoes. He thinks the natives, though, eat like pigs at a feast, like cannibals. The flesh makes him feel good inside, so he laughs the entire day. For joy or contentment. For good health or for madness.

Each time they hear the rasping tree, the natives pause. A pleased look grows more radiant on their faces throughout the feast. Afterwards all but three of the natives leave. These three seem to stay forever, even when the tree awakens after the winter rains and the leaves fall after a desperate summer. One leaves and comes back. Another leaves and comes back. One dies. A new gray-headed chief comes, leaves and comes back. It stretches out forever, like the laughter in the tree. Harold waits for something, they watch for it to laugh again. They even pray for it.

The city is rubble. It is late Saturday morning, almost noon. Harold shakes his head which bursts with pain. Far
down the broken avenue two men pull a wood-wheeled cart over the scattered rocks and mounds of debris. They stop and lift another body onto their cart. One at each side of the pull bar, they move on again. Their heads move from side to side, their eyes eagerly search in corners and sidestreets. Far down the street dust rises where a building collapses. Beyond a bridge gives way. They pause and dig through a mound of papers and dirt. They lift the paper-covered body out, it must be a women's judging by their smiles and gentleness. They turn their full cart around. The creaking wheels fade as in unbroken monotony they move slowly down the broken avenue. Harold bolts from the shadowy doorway and races blindly out of town.

His disgust knows no measure. He plans to plant himself somewhere and wait until the time is right. He races out of town downhill. He mistakes a clump of bushes for rebels he has never seen. Suddenly a tree looms up before him like an ancient tower.

Dust covers his trail.
I just happened to be there by accident. I just happened to be driving through the part of the state where I had grown up and thought I might stop. I needed to stretch anyway. I had been driving all day.

On the other hand, it seemed intentional. These last few years seemed to have been directed towards this so-called accident. I seemed to have been driven here by my bones or spine or nape of neck, impelled to come here, seemingly by accident, but I could not admit this to myself.

It was just an old schoolhouse I had attended when a child. For old time's sentimental sake I pulled my car off the highway and stopped. It seemed so long ago and seemed as though I had never really been there ever.

Everything just seemed, after all. After all those years, even when it had been happening, I recalled a sense of seeming, the same which I had always suffered, as though my mind consisted only of vast, empty tracts.

Memories of those years seemed to hang about me, like a sack from the back of my head, perhaps from the nape or the spine or whatever impelled me. I thought to have
opened it here, to make it go away, at least to make it seem real, to reveal it. Whatever. The ambivalence was confusing. What had happened, or was happening to me? The antinomy was tiring me. I wondered what had been, or was real, and why I could not admit any of it.

It was late in the October afternoon and cold. The schoolhouse was the only building in miles, two stories of cold, dark brick, two wings on either side.

(It fed on me, and I grew it, like a tumor on the back of my head. I fed on it, I don't know why.)

Now late in the afternoon, the school was deserted; whoever had left last had turned out the lights inside.

There was still enough light left in the day for me to see clearly. The wind whined around the building and myself. Everything else was silent. The approaching night and winter seemed to demand it.

The sky was an October one, endless steel gray, ice splinters meshed together. The prairie, too, stretched wherever I looked, no trees, only knee-high grass which bent to the constant, steady wind. All of which faded to a growing darker gray in the distant.

Winter had sucked away the color, except the dark brick red of the schoolhouse. I felt it sucking at me, too.

The doors were locked. The echo of them being jerked sounded hollow inside.

The ground was frozen. The bricks felt so, too, when I touched them.
(A hand reached up holding a piece of flint and scratched initials on the brick. Below in a shadow there was giggling. The flint was thrown against the window. A slightly moustached lady pulled up the window, her gray hair in a bun. She saw two of them laughing, racing off.

(It was the all-school picnic they watched, sitting on the crest of the hill, lying down, rolling into each other, wrestling. They heard the shouting and the cheers of some game, a form of baseball. Then nervously he stopped and took her hand, even in the afternoon.)

It was growing dark. The schoolhouse looked like a tomb now. My car behind me on the road had died. Another car came rapidly down the highway, its lights on, and finally passed and vanished. The windows on the schoolhouse were like obsidian, black and reflective.

(He was late for the lyceum. The trucks and cars were thickly parked outside. The schoolhouse lights were singular on the hillside. He could hear clapping in the auditorium as he entered the hallway. Down a short flight of stairs, then he opened the door.

(The performer was onstage, a temporary platform three feet tall. The performer wore a tuxedo, his gray hair was stiffly brushed back on the sides, his beard was grizzled and neatly trimmed. Behind him a mural stretched across the wall. It was life-size, with objects jutting out across the stage, so that it seemed like the real inside of a portable barber shop. In the center of the stage sat a porcelain barber chair.
A tall boy with a cowlick was on his way to the stage. Hesitantly he sat in the barber chair and the performer, with a shake and a flourish, tied the smock on him. The performer smiled to the audience, and as they silently watched, he carefully, very carefully, clipped the hair.

Everyone watched with big eyes. The gymnasium was silent except for the snipping of the scissors. He stropped a razor on the leather hanging from the chair. The cowlicked young boy sitting on the chair kept his eyes straight ahead. The barber-performer daubed on hot lather, then shaved around the ears, down the nape of the neck.

Then he stopped and in the silence laughed, smiling to the audience, the razor in one hand, the cowlick in the other. In one even stroke he severed the head, turned to the audience and yelled, "Next!"

There was a scramble to the door. Some crawled under chairs. The performer was down from the platform, slashing with his razor. The boy fought through legs, through doors, down a corridor, and found a place to hide in a dressing room locker. All night a giant stalked the halls looking for stragglers. A huge green hand reached in the door of the dressing room, its fingers scratched along the walls and floors. When morning came it would be safe.

It was night. I could barely see my reflection in the windows. The building was black against the less black sky. Walking back to my car I ran into a maze of steel-tubing squares, a jungle gym we had once called it. I once had swung among the bars and climbed between them.
I touched one bar. It was cold, like I remembered them, and slick, worn by many hands, greasy even.

(The bars seemed to glow. They were arms and the junctions were where arms met, hands held. The horizontals were legs. There were even faces of children I had known, statues of ice in a maze. One face was a frozen laugh. Every arm touched another, hands joined as if forever. I touched the cheek of a girl I had loved and maybe loved still.)

I couldn't see the bars any more. I could barely see the flakes of sleet.

I thought I heard something behind me, and turned quickly to see it, but nothing was there, or I could see nothing.

There was something there, but I was reluctant to admit it. Like a crawdad or lobster attached to the nape of my neck or the back of my head, turning with it, so invisible. But it was there certainly.

I stuffed my hands deep into my pockets and they fumbled with the lint balls there. I turned my head to spit and did onto the powdery snow now falling.

It just seemed like something was there. Everything always seemed to be so true. It was so difficult to tell. Those seemed so real, but they were surely dreams. Certainly just imagination.

Inside the car it was warm, if only because there was no wind. The air was stuffy with cold, stale cigarette smoke, but freshened when I lit another. The car started easily.
How strange it was. Had someone seen me by the schoolhouse, they would have thought me a thief. And I had felt so out of time. My memory had played tricks on me. There was nothing there, nothing at all.

The heater began to function. My lights etched out a wedge of night and I was soon speeding down the highway as fast as I had been before.

It had been a dirty joke, and I had acted childishly, foolishly.

Refreshed, I drove all that night.
Introduction

One spring morning. Young boy Jeb disregards the fourth grade, sees the blue sky. The storm door slams, bounces, taps the doorframe again, again. He wanders out into the sweet morning yawn.

Through the kitchen window Naoma watches her son pause, depart from the creaky wooden porch. The flagstones are wet; Jeb takes his time. He is twelve, old for his grade, awkward and square-jawed, with overlarge features and infantile skin and eyes too bright and moving much while not focusing ever on any one thing.

Naoma had whipped him when he was younger, but Jeb was not bothered by pain. He took no notice of the punishments. Jeb does what he wants.

His father half-sleeps over breakfast and is senile and prefers to grandfather, not discipline, that strange little creature who maliciously ignores him.

Jeb heads for the garage, looks for, finds his fishing pole, a carefree smile on his face, looking like an innocent,
half-mischievous, normal boy of ten, at least in Naoma's dreaming eyes.

Dreaming, she could make Jeb what she wished, whatever Jeb was, and that she could not fathom. His aloofness and distance gave her mystery enough to dream, although tinged with fear. Naoma feared to speak to him, her dream might turn to nightmare. What could he then do in the night? Or how far, how much farther could he withdraw from her into himself? Or was he really one of God's favorites?

Tired of the worry over Jeb, every night she prayed: could I outlive him just one week? Dear God, give him a full life, but please, give me the same and one more week. Then let me die, but let him die one week before.

Second thinking, she yells for Jeb to stop. The window is closed, her mechanical hands continue to wash the dishes. She stares wistfully out the window, too busy now for Jeb. He disappears down the alley, a bamboo pole over one shoulder.

She scratches her head with a soapy finger. Taking a drag on her soggy cigarette, she crushes it out, brushes back her hair and wipes the sweat from her forehead before returning to her dishes with vigor.

JEB

Jeb walks without thinking. Nothing is on his mind, not skipping school, not his mother whom he knows has seen him do it. There is a sparkle; something moves. How fresh is green; what is that slash of color? How the sun glistens: Jeb doesn't think glistens, he thinks sun: through the trees
under which he walks. Or bluegrass grows beneath his feet, is soft; brittle twigs and grass crunching with every step.

Tied by laces, his shoes dangle from one shoulder. He head for his secret place and his just as secret friends. That does not stop him from being passive, from frequently closing his eyes because the day is too bright or because he wants to smell, because he wants to feel the heavy breeze on the shaded side of his face as he walks through the timber by the river side. His mind is both charged and aimless.

Up a dike. Down. Cool. Shaded, the river moves in summer lethargy. The watermelon seeds have not yet sprouted Not even the one he has grafted to a thorn tree. Nor are his friends there yet, though he is sure they will be soon, some of them, at least one. They are the only ones who know of his secret place.

Much like the farm had been, the place is sealed off in peace. Jeb baits his hook with a still struggling worm and tosses it in the river, to a shady spot beneath a log.

One friend is Emil, the old river rat who has no family, no one to fear. Emil spends his life as Jeb wants to spend his, just on the river, roaming around, living in a secluded shack, with no family and no one to fear. Another friend is Ewack, a dwarf, even smaller than Jeb, who does nothing all day, and is not as friendly but more cheerful than Emil. Jeb likes Ewack, love Emil. Many others are there, too, all secret from his parents.

He spots Emil downstream near the shallows, lying on a rock, looking down at the passing water.
Dirty, white clumps of Emil's hair hung over his yellow, wrinkled face. His eyes are sunken and seem on the verge of bleeding, although their quick movements are eagerly childlike.

Jeb yells. "Morning, Emil. Come on over here and sit yourself down."

Emil raises his head, looks across the river.

Emil is tall and old and it takes some time for him to rise, to shake the age out of his legs, to unfold like a dried flower, but he does, then wades through the shallow water across the river cautiously.

"Haven't seen you for a coon's age, Emil. What have you been doing? Fine day for fishing, too, don't you think? And if we make a catch, why then we can just haul off and build ourselves a little fire and cook them right here, don't you think?" Jeb spoke without pause.

The old friend sits down on the bank near to Jeb and Jeb lays out his handkerchief and puts some bread from his lunch sack on it. "You're sure welcome to that until we get us some fish."

Jeb does not need to ask. Emil already indulges in the little feast. Jeb meanwhile talks hard and fast, leaving little room for Emil to answer. And while talking, Jeb concentrates on the bobber, waiting for the sudden jerk down to yank on his pole. Now fishing is serious, since there is a promise of someone to share with.
Jeb talks first about the farm. "Sure was beautiful there, out there on the farm. Had some friends, more friends there really than here, but not as good of friends. Petey lived in a bush, never would come out though, so I had to go and sit by that bush if I wanted to talk to him. Didn't though, as much. Then, too, there weren't no secret place like I got here. That bush was just near our house, along the drive to the highway, right in a hedgerow, couldn't get too close to that bush, say, if you wanted to. But it wasn't secret, but nobody seemed to mind then that I go out there, like they did later. Like they do now.

"But that farm. Sure some place. Heard of Father Padilla? Well, you should. He was one of the first people here in the whole state, see, come over with a guy called Colorado who was looking for the gold city but didn't find it yet.

"Anyway the Indians came up and chased them away and all of them took tail, except Father Padilla. Now I get most of this from him himself, understand. No sir, I don't have to go to no damned books, you see. But old Father Padilla, he wasn't one to turn tail and run like old Colorado, so he just sat there, telling everyone that the Indians could be loved and weren't all that bad.

"Well, old Father Padilla sat out there on his lonesome, see, and these Indians came up and bashed him on the head with a hatchet, without even asking him his druthers and that was Father Padilla's last mistake. But Colorado he
come back later and put him in the ground and built that there monument which is on that hill just south of town, right there on our farm.

"Well, Father Padilla is one of my friends. A good one, too. Cause at night, I used to lie in bed and Father Padilla would come down off his hill and come in my window— only if I asked, mind you. I would sleep on one side of the bed and leave him half, then he could sleep there, too.

"He went all over town, Petey told me so, and he catered to people and did things for them, once he helped the goat lady, she told me herself just the other day, cause she lost all her goats, then she found them the next morning right in their shacks with the door repaired and everything. So I figured now, who am I to go and ask Father Padilla to do all them sorts of things for me? So if I wanted to stop him to rest awhile at my place and get a little sleep— I mean he must've been tired, doing all them things all night for people, going all over town— well, I would let him rest and gave him a place to do it, too, though I didn't think he would ever stay very long. Only time I asked him to help me was when the witch who stays under my bed— well, usually she will just cut at my foot if I step out on the floor at night, that's all, but that night she was doing more. That night she got ahold of Cookie, our dog who is dead now, and infected her with rabies. That's how she died, but much later. Anyway, I thought Cookie'd had rabies and that night she kept walking around in the house, sort of restless, coming through my room. I could hear
her toenails on the floor and I was down in the corner of my bed, with all of my covers over me and tucked under at the edges, so if I was bitten, maybe the teeth wouldn't break the skin and maybe I wouldn't have to take all them shots, but that night, I asked Father Padilla to come in and take care of that witch and keep that dog out of my room so I would not be bitten.

"Which he did, because that was the last time I ever thought of the witch and I wasn't bitten and Cookie didn't even have rabies the next day when I got up, although that is what she died of later.

"So cause of that I went up to the monument in the daytime often enough and talked a lot to Father Padilla because I figured he was lonely in the daytime, but he couldn't go nowhere in the daytime, see, so I kept him company if he was lonely. I don't know if he listened to me, but he didn't have to.

"He was one of my best friends ever. I even saw him once, coming down the hill one evening from his monument. All of a sudden it seemed like a second of daylight, like at noon, and the sun had already set! Then I looked around and there I think I seen him about a quarter of a mile away running. But I'm not sure it was him. I don't know and I never asked, see, cause if I asked, well, that's like saying I don't believe in him, which I do."

Jeb talked on and on until the sun was near to noon. Whenever he looked back he saw the silent, friendly face of
Emil chewing the bread slowly. Jeb smiled remembering these things and kept on fishing. He was happy and it was a quiet morning and Jeb laughed often.

Chas

Downtown the morning bustled. Chas left the house just after his son, Jeb, and picked his way slowly through town to the bank steps, to the railing where he sat. He nodded to the bank president, to an employee he knew, he thought perhaps a distant relative. An unacknowledging nod back.

It took him longer today than yesterday to make the walk. Every day it exhausted him more. His eyesight had worsened since last winter, so much so in December he gave up snooker, in February he gave up pool. He gave himself over to dominoes which he played with a cautious air because he might mistake the fuzzy dots and because this was how he measured his life.

Others came every morning, too. Emil, an old railroader, Fred, the town's handyman and garbage collector, and Chas himself, the only farmer, retired. Every morning they gathered there, sometimes to talk, sometimes just to sit and stare, sometimes to go as a group to an otherwise morning-lonely poolhall, and play dominoes or checkers. It gave them a chance to prove they were not misfits, lost, lonely, foolish, something, whatever every morning they had to prove they were not.

So lonely they tolerated each other.
Some walking by the bank steps in the morning noticed the old duffers. Some were surprised to see someone still chewing tobacco, as all three did, their jaws moving with the regularity of a grandfather clock. Sometimes a passer-by recognized one of the tired old faces, stopped for a few moments to speak at it, then passed on. But for the most part the old duffers were just an intimate part of the scenery, to be ignored along with the gothic stonework on the bank.

The old men talked quietly among themselves about the better times. Usually by late afternoon they were silent and stared at anything which moved. By late afternoon even their eyes had lost the desire for life.

Earl, ex-railroader, arrived. His head shook faintly, constantly, his powdered white, gray face drawn, the wrinkles like tiny claws holding his face to his eyes. His eyes were sunken red. Earl sat down, muttered a greeting, his voice matching the tempo of his quivering hands.

Fred was coming over the bridge at the end of the street, his wagon creaked as he plodded along.

"Yep, there's Fred coming. See him there on the bridge?" said Earl.

"Yep. Looks like he's been out early this morning. Got himself a wagon full already."

Chas's hands gripped the railing, his butt hanging over the back.

Fred's cart was half full of rags, empty bottles, folded cardboard boxes, pieces of wire, stray boards, which he had found or bought and would sell or lose again.
"I can tell you this," Earl said. "He's still pretty mad at you. He's been swearing up and down that it is your Jeb who's been pushing over his wagon."

Fred's wagon was both his wheels and his better self. To push it over was a form of rape.

"I know, Earl, damn him. I damned well know what Fred's been saying, but, by God, it wasn't Jeb, I know, sure, and if it was, how am I suppose to know that and what does he expect me to do about it anyway, and I know for a damned fact that no ten-year-old like Jeb could push that cart over by himself anyway, so I don't figure that damned Fred ought to just go out and blame Jeb, who ain't gonna go out and defend himself anyway. And I tell him that and I tell him that and he just goes right on believing like he damned ne'er'well pleases, and it don't do no good at all to say nothing. So I just let him go on like he damned ne'er'well pleases and I told him if he ever catches Jeb doing that to his damned wagon, well then, by God, he's got my permission to whip the tar out of that boy and whoever's with him helping."

While talking, Chas gripped the rail so hard his yellowed hands showed white. Then he leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, looked at a crack on the sidewalk, and spat at it, a long slow spit that dripped from his lip, missed its mark. Chas bowed his head, mad and embarrassed.

Jeb. He could not admit anything about Jeb. Not about pushing over a cart, although that had nothing to do with Jeb. Chas simply had to fight any such accusation, true or
not, and that was made easier because he knew nothing about Jeb, or would admit he knew nothing, or would admit nothing he knew. It seemed to him easier to do so.

At best he considered Jeb a curse. Perhaps Chas had been too old, his wife too young, and a marriage like that was sinful. Too long as a bachelor to do anything but lust after Naoma, who knew no better love. There was something too brutal about those first few weeks of marriage, that made their sexless life thereafter an unspoken agreement. There was no sex while Naoma ballooned in ignorance. He wondered who finally told her that was a child in her belly? Certainly not him. Then no sex after that while Jeb happened in. He just showed up and stuck like a stray cat. Chas wondered where Jeb’s name came from. Jeb. Chas wondered how they even decided to name it that. Did they name it? How would you name it? Did it name itself? It just happened in and stuck like a stray cat. It just happened in and stuck like a Jeb.

He could say nothing about Jeb because he knew nothing. He didn’t fear Jeb. Yet, he wasn’t indifferent to him. Sometimes Chas was even interested, though such moments were rare. But Chas was aware a mystery churned before him. But he was just tired, so tired he could barely chew his chaw, and if he found the strength to chew (the inclination was always there), sometimes he was too tired to spit, and when he was too tired to spit, he let it seep out of the corner of his now brown stained mouth, where it stayed until he
wiped it away with his sleeve.

"I swear, you know," Chas said to Earl, "that kid's doing better. In fact, just last night I got him down to talking with me, real man to man, you know? And, by God, I'm going to get that kid straightened out if it is the last thing I do. Why, he's just as normal as I don't know what. A little too set on dream-making maybe, but then what kid ain't? You know, one time when we still were on the farm I caught him talking to a bush! No lie. Right out along the driveway...." Chas paused, thought about that for a moment, decided it was best to pretend he had forgotten what he was talking about.

"Sure is a good-looking kid, all right, Chas," Earl said. "Just that some people around town are a little worried, that's all, about him hanging around with their own kids, getting them to run all over hell and all, and telling them stories and all. And he can tell them, too, Chas, I swear. Why he told me one you would never believe, about Mrs. Cashman, you know her, up on the hill there by the water tower. He calls her the goat lady, but it is Mrs. Cashman, sure as shooting, I know. But there are them people who don't cater to such nonsense being told their kids, I know that, too. They just figure Jeb's too damned.... Well, too damned different. That's all. Now I never would have said a thing, you understand, except I think you ought to know what they is saying."
Emil's hand, which had stopped quivering while he spoke, now quivered again. His eyes were on Fred, who drew nearer. Chas let another spit glob hit the ground, chewed on deliberately.

"Well, Earl, I been working on it, sure. Set him down just last night, but he's a hard one to talk to. 'Ever got him to spit out fifteen words in a string in his whole life. Not to me, leastwise. I just sat there last night and I talks to him and he sits there, sort of like he's just kind of looking right into my head and he knows just exactly what I'm going to say, but just like he's not hearing one damned word you say or ever said. Then you ask him if he understands, and he nods back to you and gives you the goddamnedest smile you ever seen. But I put it on him last night thick and fast, you can bet on that, sure."

They stopped talking as Fred drew nearer. He drew his cart up next to the curb and walked over into the shade of the bank.

"Scorcher today coming, sure," Fred said, took off his grease-smeared, unraveling straw hat, wiped his sleeve across his sweaty forehead where the hat rim kept it a freckled pink above his sun-dried face. "About ready to cool myself off with one of them beers over at the parlor before I done blow my head clean off my shoulders, it's so hot. Reckon I done enough collecting for one morning, leastwise."

Earl was up, looking over the junk, picking through the cardboard. "Got anything here I might be interested in?"
"Nothing maybe you want to buy, but I got something maybe that'll interest you, yes, you bet." Fred dug beneath the folded cardboard and pulled out a gunny sack, then a silver box from inside it. "Found it, Chas, not far from where you used to live. On the road, matter of fact, to that monument south of town."

Chas looked interested for the first time. He stepped off the railing, and went over. He held the box of heavy silver with four legs. He could not open it. It was locked.

"Found it in a ditch right below that monument, I did. Wouldn't have been for a pop bottle lying there, shining like it was, wouldn't never have seen it."

"Wonder what's in it," Chas said. He shook the box.

"Don't know. Locked tight. Don't want to break it open though. Might ruin the box and all."

Chas shook the box near his ear.

"Rattles."

"Now don't you go rattling that box, Chas. Might be something valuable you'll break." Fred took his box back, returned it to his gunny sack. "Maybe it belongs to somebody anyway. But they're going to have to have a key."

Earl stood apart, looking across the street where he saw the manager of the pool hall unlock his door. "Looks about time for a beer, all right? And dominoes?"

The other two nodded their heads, followed Earl across the street. Fred had his gunny sack looped through his belt for safe keeping.
Like they did every morning, the three old men and Emmanuel, the manager, played dominoes. Emmanuel, shell-shocked in the last war, kept jumping up and down nervously, waiting for the others to take their turns, compulsively wiping, polishing glasses, mopping the floors, serving the occasional customers a morning beer. The three old men were not big spenders, but they were constant, dependable. Quiet and inconspicuous, they sat in a corner out of the way at their special table. Their demands were small. They neither added to the monotony, nor took away from it. They simply marked time with the x's of their scores, with their playing and crossing, with their shuffling and drawing, building intersections and whole cities, then tearing them down, at ten cents a creation.

Naoma

The population of the town had seeped in from the countryside. Naoma, husband, child had seeped in two years ago.

The town had not changed in one hundred years, since it had been founded by social misfits. Wandering on the prairie, they had to cross a river, had crossed it there. Some had stayed, some had feared to cross the river, and so they bought and sold to those who did cross. Reason enough, this persistent caution, that this town had been considered for state capitalhood one hundred years ago and lost.

After that others came. There were several hundred reasons why. The first settler, an old hermit, embodied them all, and was immortalized by the cop who gave the
historical tour to occasional tourists. 'The old man lived on that hill (1832-1865), where the sign is, Hermit's Cave. Was all alone then, when Indians were here, and it's after them we name this river Neosho-- means 'wet bottom' in Indian. He lived through two floods. That's why his cave is on the side of the hill just above the valley. No trees here then. No houses, no people, just Indians, the hermit....'

Naoma saw the town as thriving. She had wasted her life on a dirt farm in a poor part of the county. That was her excuse for abandoning the farm, succumbing to the city. To Naoma, she had abandoned salvation which was linked to the ownership of land. But Naoma had felt herself growing old on the farm too quickly, and Chas, much older than she, had made her afraid. She wanted to spend these years in the city, even ignorant of what was there. It could be no worse than the farm. She made Chas move, bring her and the child, bring the pheasants in a borrowed truck, build a pen in the back yard. Naoma built most of it herself and she cared for the pheasants and the garden. He was too old to farm: she was too young to sit out on the prairie and count the last few days passing. They traded what they owned of the farm for the shack on the edge of town and two acres.

She finished the morning dishes, prepared herself for a walk into town, her favorite part of the day. She slipped on her favorite dress, faded, covered with pink flowers, several seams safety-pinned together. She brushed through her dry red hair, getting out most of the knots, while
she wondered what Casey might say today, what she might say to Casey.

She put on lipstick and added a touch of her last bit of rouge to her cheeks. This was Thursday, sometimes the busiest day of market, depending on the weather, whether it was time to plant, which would not alter Casey, the grocery clerk, except he might be more inclined to talk, say, if he were not so busy.

She picked up her shopping bag by the door, paused for a moment, decided not to wear a coat, since this was a warm day, the first one, and rushed out, singing an almost forgotten ballad, one she had heard Chas' mother sing after they were first married, not long before her death.

There were no sidewalks leading to town, just a path by the highway and one other through the woods following the railroad tracks. She took the one through the woods. She was happy to be alone.

As she walked through the woods she sang to herself, taking her time, walking carefully on the railroad bridge which passed over the creek. She sat down for a while, exhilarated, catching her breath in the timber's coolness. Sure no one watched, she took out her pipe.

For a moment she relaxed, as once she had after good days in the country. There had been moments like this, she thought, when at the cool of the evening, when the sun had set, no matter how scorched the earth was, how red it and
the sky, when she was out on the porch, the dishes already washed, rocking in the chair. Down below in the feedlot there sat Chas talking politics with a neighbor, or of the drought. There had always been a drought, since she had married him. The weather was hot, no rain, water had to be brought from a well two miles away, Jeb was.... She wasn't sure where Jeb was. He wasn't with his father. Out walking, she supposed. He did that often, out on the hills where the moon tinted the brown grass, red clay, where there were coyotes baying. She listened to them. Chas talked. Perhaps Jeb was out listening to the coyotes, too. She understood them, something which she had only dared to tell one person, who had laughed so long and so loud, she had never told anyone else. No one, it seemed, was interested in the coyotes. No one was interested in what they said, except herself.

She brushed those thoughts from her mind. She rose, knocked the ashes from her pipe, put it carefully back in her purse where no one would accidentally see it, forgot her reverie which was most unurban-like, paused, looked at the woods, stood for a while, wondered about nothing, walked on. Town was just over a plowed field.

Jeb

"Where's Ewack, I wonder?" asks Jeb. "Flutters around sometimes like to think he owned the place. You never see him do a lick of work, neither, just fluttering around, like to think he owned the place. That'd be the life, I reckon."
"Just like my pa. He ain't done a lick of work, neither, since I can remember, leastwise. I remember him just sitting out there in the feedlot come evening time, right down on his haunches, the neighbors down there, all of them spitting and cussing, but, by God, he figured right, that his days of working would slip by quick enough, and they did.

"Course I was never down there. No, sir. Sometimes, though, I heard them, cause I would lie in the barn loft and look down, or sometimes I would just be walking by, but I heard them."

Pause. "I'm sure wondering where Ewack is," Jeb says. "I sure would like to see him today."

Jeb sits and fishes. The river rolls on slowly. He turns around to Emil who seems lost in thoughts of his own. Jeb jerks his pole when he thinks the bobber ducks, but there is nothing on his hook but a light pink, stringy worm. He tosses it back in.

"Sure don't like most people around. Sure wish I was back on the farm. Except for you, Emil, and Ewack, and the goat lady now there is someone to reckon with. Like her all right. And all them goats and cats and dogs she's got. Now that's all right.

"Maybe, of course, I haven't said much to you about the goat lady. No, I guess I haven't. Well, see, Emil, I was downtown, walking along the river, looking for whatever I might find, doing nothing. Nothing to do. Well, when I got
north of town and got tired I come back, over through the
woods, up by where she lives and I seen her. It must have
been sunset two days ago, yes, and she was standing out on
the porch of a new hut of hers, one she built. She has a
string of them, you know, and just built this last one, but
this one she built out of concrete. Just standing there
alone, with her hands raised high, the sun right in her
eyes, saying something I couldn't understand. Then the dogs
barking, there must be twenty dogs there, all tied up to
trees and in sheds, barking like they was going to eat me
alive, but they was all tied up.

"Anyway, I just stood there and stared, sort of scared
at first, wondering what she was doing, but pretty soon her
arms drop and she turns around, and looks me right in the
eyes. I thought I was hidden in a bush, but she knew right
where I was. Thought first I'd better cut out of there, but
her with all them dogs, that wouldn't be much good, but she
ain't mad, as it turns out. No, sir.

"She comes over and sits down on a log and starts
talking to me. Course I was still scared, but she was
friendly, all right, talking like she knows me. So pretty
soon I start talking, too. And that went on for quite a
while, then I had to go, but she invited me back and every-
things, and I'm going, too, because she said I could help her
some evening feed her dogs and goats, too. She's got goat in
a whole string of shacks, and geese and chickens and cats
everywhere, which is why she has to keep those dogs tied up and she said I could help her feed them anytime I wanted, so I might go up there sometime, maybe today or tomorrow, don't know.

"And she promised to show me her latest house which is that concrete one, not like the other sheds she's got, which are just made out of scraps and junk, but poured concrete, she said. So she lives there, and it's got a basement and a cave into the hill where she is going to go, and she invited me, too, if I wanted, and I am the only other person. Of course, she is going to take all her goats and chickens and geese and dogs with her, but she said I could go, too, when there is the bomb and the fire and all. Which I thought was nice."

Chas

The game progressed little. Chas had lit a cigar, a once-a-week special treat he allowed himself when nervous. He brushed the smoke away from his eyes, blamed it for his poor eyesight.

"These bones ain't no good at all," Earl said as he peered down at his few remaining dominoes. Everyone else sat quietly watching Earl's forehead and glaring from there to the board to their own hands spread out on the table. Finally Emil hesitantly laid out a domino. The bartender quickly crossed Emil's six with his own double six, marked down thirty nonchalantly on the corner of the table and
jumped up to wipe more glasses.

"God damn, I figured you might have that," Earl muttered.

Chas covered another end with a six in hopes of blocking the rag picker, with no success. He brushed aside thoughts of the game and talked to Emmanuel. "Heard you're going to coach the baseball team again this summer. "Hat so?"

Emmanuel wiped the glasses, glanced over to Fred who returned his glance. Emmanuel chewed lightly on the inside of his cheek, a momentary excuse for not talking.

"Figure I might. "Might not. Don't know."

"Going to need a good first baseman if you do."

"Already got a first baseman. Good one, too. 'erkins' kid," Fred said. His eyes were on Chas' face. Then Fred's eyes were back to the dominoes.

Chas spoke again to Emmanuel. "Figure 'eb might be old enough this year to do you some good, 'Manuel."

"Don't take little hoodlums on baseball teams, no how," Fred said, interrupting. Fred kept his eyes on the dominoes.

Finally Chas broke the silence stuttering, grew confused, finally pounded his fist on the table. "Goddamn it, Jeb's no hoodlum."

"And some says he can't be held responsible for what he does, neither," Fred said. "Course there's still something to be done in any case."

"Maybe, goddamn it, but it's none of your business."

Chas pounded once more on the table, but everyone else remained cool and quiet. There were no reactions. They looked at
Chas as though he were locked behind a glass wall, as though they could not hear a word Chas said. Emmanuel's eyes moved from Chas to the glass he continued to polish; Earl's moved from the glowing end of his own cigar to a point on the wall somewhere behind Chas' head. The rag picker dug a finger into his nose and sniffed. There was a long silent pause while Chas' mind stumbled among violent thoughts.

"He's... he... he's, goddamn it, he's natural enough."

Chas pounded once more on the table, wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his coat and stomped to the door.

"Natural enough," they heard him mutter before they tossed in their dominoes and rolled them for a new three-handed game.

Out on the street, Chas began to walk home. He tossed his soggy cigar butt against a sewer grate and spat after it. He did not suddenly feel lonely, but dead. He decided to go home and sit in the shade. Perhaps that evening he would have a good long talk with his son. Maybe he would even play a little catch with him. Maybe not. If he felt up to it, anyway.

Naoma

It was the busiest day in town. Naoma made her way down the crowded sidewalks with shopping bag and shopping list in hands, staring into passing people's faces. Sometimes they glanced back. Should they recognize her? But no one stopped to talk, which was what she wanted. Her
eyes followed them as they passed. She wondered why they never stopped to talk as she hoped. She never dared to speak to them first.

She left the grocery store for her last stop. If she had a friend, it was Casey. He had been raised in the same part of the county. She had known of him, but he was much younger. She had known his parents, now dead. An old aunt who still lived had been a neighbor. They shared a common history.

Walking towards the store, she planned her greeting. It must be perfect. It must elicit a response. Or she must have a reply. And she wanted to lead him into a conversation. She was lonely for someone to talk to. Everything planned, she opened the door with a confident smile, checked her make-up and her hair in the reflection of the glass door. She pulled out a grocery cart and pushed it boldly down the aisle.

She heard Casey talking behind the "Employees Only" door, so she paused there for a while, by the vegetable case, picking over a large pile of oranges she could not afford to buy, trying further to perfect a speech. Casey was asking questions about a display, but she could not quite hear all of the details. She had picked over oranges and started into apples when he came through the door. She acted pleasantly surprised.

"Why, Casey, how are you?" Without waiting for an answer, she went on. "I was just thinking of your Aunt
Beth and I was wondering how she was getting along now after the operation. We haven't gotten out there yet and...."

Casey paused, a little dumbfounded, but spoke as soon as he recognized Naoma.

"The godmaned little thief! Have you seen him? Have you seen him yet today, Naoma?" He waited for an answer.

Plans smashed, Naoma stood for a moment in chaos. Finally: "Seen who?"

"That godmaned Jeb. Have you seen him at all? He was seen around here last night, and this morning we find that all our pop bottles and milk bottles out back have been smashed, and some are gone, and the lock has been pried off of the bottle shack and we don't know what all is gone. We've been looking for him all morning. He's not in school and nobody seems to have seen him. Mr. Lowell is on his way out to your house now. We're looking for him, Mrs. McDifft. And if you know where he is, you best be saying. It's for his own good that we want him now."

She just stood and looked at him. There were tears in her eyes. She could not think. Then she turned and ran for the door.

"You'd best find him. If a stop isn't put to this sort of thing right now, Jeb's going to be one sour apple."

He hurled one final insult after her, already out the door. "And he's crazy enough to be one."
There is a rustle in the bushes. Jeb holds himself motionless and listens. The rustle comes again. He turns around, lays his pole on the mud of the embankment and goes up the dike.

"Somebody back there?" Jeb yells out. Emil, frightened, moves a little way down the river beneath the twisted roots of a cottonwood tree hanging out over the river. "Somebody up there?" Jeb repeats. There is no answer. He goes on up the dike. "Hey, it's Ewack. Why didn't you say something? Gave us a fright, you did."

Ewack is twisted up in the vines and shrubbery in the brush near the embankment. Jeb goes up and helps to release the dwarf, who keeps fighting, stops, then struggles to get free again. "Yep, you should have said something. We would've been glad to come get you out."

Jeb quickly helps the infuriated dwarf pull the vines from his legs and arms. The dwarf is panting heavily, but thanks Jeb in his high squeaky voice.

"Boy, Ewack, I haven't seen you in a coon's age. In fact since school been took up. But that ain't been working out too well. They might just as well be up there whistling Dixie and spitting quarters as talking about whatever they've been talking about."

Jeb helps the bald-headed dwarf down the dike and the three of them sit together, although Emil stays in the cover of the cottonwood roots. Jeb keeps talking, so happy to see
an old friend, telling Ewack about everything he can think of, as fast as he can think of it. Everything else seems insignificant. When he invites Ewack home to meet his parents, he even forgets that he is not supposed to have any friends, he even forgets to say goodbye to the old river rat. It is as though he is not even there.

Chas

Chas did not go straight home, could not go straight home. He would be trapped into answering questions. He hated that. He existed silently, no one knew what pricked at his brain. Not even Chas.

Down Union Street, not far from the river. Thoughtless, excepts for the beginnings of thoughts about Jeb but he dismissed them immediately. He wished he had not allowed himself to be taken from his farm where he could putter away at his own pace and live his own life. He had never heard of a farmer retiring. Who had? Naoma had, or she had invented it.

Then there were Fred and Earl. They weren't against him, although he thought of that possibility. Fred surely hadn't planned what had happened, though Chas thought of that, too. And Jeb, he thought now, might well have shoved over a cart, Fred's cart. Chas had been ornery when he was young, God, so long ago, but Jeb.... But Chas had thought long enough so he tried not to think now. He turned west and walked up the hill.
He saw her, Mrs. Cashman, as they called her, just at the top of the hill, the red wagon bouncing as she pulled it over the limestone jutting out in the road. Then she turned downhill and disappeared into her row of shacks to the right.

Chas stopped shuffling and stood still. The breeze turned cold, blew though his stubble whiskers, turned the spit in the corner of his mouth cold. He tried to think of the story. Something Earl had said Jeb had said about Mrs. Cashman, but Earl had left it unfinished. He went on up the hill, stumbling slowly up the road cut between the clay walls, red and green clay exposed, layered. There were woods to the right and left and the shiny aluminum-colored watertower to the far left above. He heard dogs ahead, and chickens hustled across the road.

He passed the row of shacks, which leaned uphill like a series of cardhouses against the goat lady's house, which was not much of a house, covered with brown asphalt shingles and a red asphalt roof, two windows in the front with broken glass repaired with cardboard, a broken screen plugged with wads of cotton and rags. The goat lady, Mrs. Cashman, stood just inside the open door in the morning shadow. Her gray hair flat on top, hung straight down to her ears where it became a hundred corkscrews a hundred years yellow which whirlled down to her shoulders. Her faded blue dress, almost a see-through, so worn, hung down to her calves, to her heavy black shoes and brown socks rolled down to her ankles.
Chas stopped in the middle of the road and looked. She looked back at him from the door, at his gray pants, frayed where they fell under his heels, at the frayed navy coat a long ways from the sea, at the one hand yellowed, calloused, knuckles swollen, with which Chas pulled down the rim of his brown felt hat and put his hand back into his pocket. She looked at the stubble on his face, at the corners of his mouth stained brown.

The dogs barked, strained at the ropes. Chas turned and moved on, wondered what strange story Jeb had been telling. Thought he might ask him about that.

He plodded home.

Naoma

Occasionally a car, sometimes a pick-up truck came barrelling down the highway into town. Naoma hardly noticed. She fumed and took her time in walking home. She cowered, she walked on the other side of the ditch so she did not have to face the traffic, she was ashamed. As soon as she had stopped crying outside the grocery store, she had turned her thoughts to Jeb, whom she blamed for all this, and she trampled faster, determined to find him, and she yelled out his name at every place which might hold a small boy. She surveyed the cemetery where Jeb used to play, but he was not there, or was well-hidden. She stood and yelled at the top of her voice for fifteen minutes, but no response. At every convenient point she called out his name and so made her way towards home.
She paused in the shade of the bridge, near their house and leaned against one of the abutments. She wanted desperately to find Jeb and whip him for what she assumed he had done. It would make her feel better, though no doubt it wouldn't change Jeb. Then, she thought, maybe it would. It was worth a try. And, she was convinced, at least it would make her feel better.

She sighed and looked down the creek. There was not much water; it had been a dry winter. There was only a broad weedless slope of mud, and the creek standing stagnant. She knew the mosquitoes bred there.

She saw footprints on the muddy slope. Looking closer she saw a bamboo pole lying half in the mud and half in the water, but there was no sign of Jeb now. She yelled loudly down the creek, but there was no answer.

"Damned water rats," as one plunged into the water. She saw nothing around her to throw at it. The rat's snarling, wrinkled face with its red eyes sped across the water. She reminded herself to tell Chas once again to exterminate the rats along the creek.

The traffic across the bridge had increased now it was noon. The noxious fumes from the traffic burnt her nose, flowed down, glided across the smooth surface of the green, stagnant water. It made a foggy, almost enchanting picture. But her mind was still made up to punish Jeb and to get Chas busy with those rats. She set out again more determined.
Afterword

It was not far to the house. Before she was there, she could see Chas propped up against the side of the house, in the shade of the porch, sitting in his chair fast asleep.

Jeb saw her coming and he ran towards her, so excited he did not notice the expression on her face.

"Mommy, mommy, mommy. Daddy's already met him," Jeb shouted as he ran.

"Met who?" Naoma demanded in a firm voice.

"Why, Ewack, of course," Jeb answered and opened his cupped hands. Inside was a small dead sparrow, its wings wet from Jeb's sweaty palms. "One of my best friends, do you mind? Do you mind?"

She stopped, said no word, nothing about school, nothing about Casey or what he had said. Jeb ran off to play with his friend in the backyard. Passing Chas on her way to the door, she decided not to speak, but some words came from under his hat rim.

"Dead most likely from human handling, as near as I can figure."

The storm door slammed against the house frame and the inside door hissed as it was shut tight.
C. thought and he thought:

if the house had been on fire, then,
either he had been at the door and the door had been open,

45 degrees of room opened before him: the room was not yet on fire, only filled with lazy smoke, above the attic was well into flame, outside the flames had broken through part of the roof, C. had seen them:
the upstairs rooms were already stripped of furniture:
the bustle downstairs was the neighbors carrying out the rest, this upstairs storeroom had somehow been forgotten:

38 degrees from his left in the arc of storeroom light hung his sword: the grayish smoke curled around the stacks of magazines and papers, around an old picture frame and wicker chairs to be repaired since fifteen years ago, a portrait on the wall beside a blue-ribboned citation from an obsolete county fair: in a corner the sword and scabbard hung from a nail: the gray smoke changed evenly to yellow-red layers, churned a little and generated heat, or heat from above generated the churning: the papers,
magazines, wallpaper and citation turned yellow, brown, then black: C.'s eyes ached from seeing it: his face felt bubbly and numb: C. flew backwards some undefined distance, a few inches above the stairs: the arc of room decreased to 5 degrees: 4 degrees from the left he saw the sword still hanging untouched in its scabbard: or he had been at the door and the door had been closed: apparently locked, it had not been opened: everything else upstairs had already been carried out, once Ma C. had decided that the house was indeed on fire and asked all the neighbors to help put it out, to move out the furniture, certainly we should save the furniture: at first she did not believe there was a fire at all: there had been no flames after the lightning struck, C. had crawled up into the attic to see: there were only red glowing nails, especially near the chimney, but somehow the lightning rod should have taken care of that, so C. came down the ladder, closing the attic hatch above him and for a few moments C. and his wife forgot it: they picked up the pieces of the glass picture tube which had blown out from their television set across the living room: then they smelled the smoldering in the attic, and Ma C. began to worry about the smell getting into her clothes, the many clothes from many years which were stored on the second floor, though they never slept
66.

up there any more, stored in the two empty children's bedrooms and the empty guest room, so they opened the windows on the second floor and the wind came blowing through: they had forgotten the store room because the door was locked, and locked doors are safe, they thought, even from smoke: and fire: now C. stood in front of the door to the storage room, worried about the sword and the scabbard he had earned in a war in which a friend had died: the paint on the door began to turn brown and bubble, run down the door in a brown mass: faint blue wisps of flame raced lightly over the door until tongues of flame rolled under the door and burned steadily upward: C.'s head felt dizzy, he could smell his eyebrows curl, burn like chicken feathers: he was rolling down the stairs, he must have fallen down: someone's feet stopped him: two hands reached under his shoulders: they lifted him up: or the door had been closed when he got there, but C., though an old man, heaved his body against it, broke it down, found himself in the room: the air was still and hot, something was in the air, not like the attic where the smell was like that of burnt wiring, but stale and hot: while he stood there the wallpaper on the ceiling buckled and peeled, fell down in curls and in one implosion the room became to C. one throbbing pain: the strap which held the sword and scabbard on the wall burnt through, they fell on the floor with a
clatter: C. felt himself falling: outside he could hear the sound of the neighbors chopping with an ax at the eave of the house, or perhaps by now they were on the roof, the eave of the house had not allowed them enough room to throw up the water, not enough got in to cool off the glowing nails: too hot, just need to cool it off, get some of this water in there, make a little steam: the cool air was sucked in through the first cracks, but the water splattered against the boards of the eaves and ran down the outside of the house: the cool air generated heat in the attic, and flames, the same flames that were sinking C. to his knees, now: he fell to the floor with a clump: two hands were under his shoulders: he felt them dragging him out of the room, down the stairs: his feet flopped down each stair:

or when C. got there the door had been open, but he could see no one had removed the storage and papers which had accumulated since the Spanish-American War in which a friend had died: the fear of losing it drove him up to retrieve his sword: he could see it hanging in its scabbard on the wall: the flames began to come through the ceiling: the room was filling with smoke: he had been outside on the hayrack just sitting, they hadn't let the old man help move furniture: the two strongest neighbors were on a ladder up the side of the house, chopping at the eaves, throwing water, chopping
more at the eaves trying to get a hole large enough to take the water: Ma C. had not wanted them to go traipsing through her house with pails of water, up through the attic ruining her best carpets and floors, not when there were only red glowing nails in the attic which the lightning rod should take care of: they didn't use the house, either, not if it was going to rouse Ma C., and there didn't seem to be any fire anyway: Evans got on the roof and began to chop there while the rest of the neighbors, now many of them had arrived, Ma C. had called the emergency ring on the county telephone line, the rest of the neighbors formed a bucket brigade to the eave and the water they threw up ran down the side of the house, passing the window to the storeroom: from there C. saw wisps of smoke begin to filter out of the ill-sealed window: while everyone watched the house, C. hobbled to the door with his cane: the women and children streamed out of the house carrying furniture and dishes now that Ma C. saw that her house was going to fill with smoke: no one stopped him, not even when C. hobbled up the stairs, now vacant after the bedroom rug was brought down: he stood in front of the storeroom door, opened and he felt no heat, no burning on his face, not even the curling of his eyebrows: he watched the flames creep down the wallpaper and curtains burning across the top, fall to the floor and the leather
strap which held his sword and scabbard to the wall burn through and snap: his sword and scabbard fell to the floor with a clatter: someone's hand was beside him, on the doorknob of the room: it pulled the door shut: C. said nothing: two hands from behind him went under his arms and someone struggled from behind to guide the dodderer down the stairs: he never said a word: he was returned to a hayrack: and if one of these was how it was, then the old man was on the hayrack again and a doctor came with the ambulance, C. had forgotten his name, a familiar name: the flashing red light screamed into the barnyard: a light mist fell, formed moisture on old C.'s charred face: Ma C. stood over him now and several farm women offered her their handkerchiefs: the furniture was sitting around the barnyard, lit by the flames from the burning house behind them, gathering up their share of moisture, too, from the suddenly wet night: a slight tingle in his left arm and C. had been hurled away in a glass cage, the red light spinning around him in the dark night: C. had said nothing: but if there had not been a fire, C. thought, then, either he was on the front porch, Ma C. beside him, the clouds to the north were blowing up, dark underneath with some tiers of yellow, smoothly layered clouds which meant hail: his hand was on his wife's shoulder: they stood watching the road before them: the wind blew towards the clouds, lifted dust from the road and
from the fields across the road, which had been recently plowed and were as dry as had been the spring and summer: now they were sitting on the porch in the middle of an August evening, looking calm as Evans drove up in an old '49 Ford truck, the first neighbor to arrive, C.'s cousin's son and best friend: his hired hand was with him, a young school boy working for the summer, and Evan's son sat between them in the cab of the truck: they were agitated: C. and his wife looked calmly on: Evans got out of the truck and asked C. where the fire was: Ma C. had phoned just after the lightning struck: the lightning had been seen and heard all around that part of the county because C.'s house sat on the highest hill: but though Evans was anxious, the C.'s stood there calmly as though they were expecting company, said C. had already been up to the attic, that although the television set had burnt out, the attic was safe, only some red glowing nails: Evans went up to check for himself and wasn't too concerned, but thought they should be cooled off: they were not going to carry water through Ma C.'s house, not and ruin her carpets and floors: young Evans went to search for a ladder and an ax: the hired boy stood with C., who was old and supported himself on a cane and was still panting from his one trip to the attic to check the damage: he smiled a strange smile to the boy, a
toothless smile, neither of them knew why he did it: his wife followed old Evans up the stairs: young Evans found an ax and was out in the barn looking for a ladder: another neighbor dropped in: C. stood on the porch non-plused by the activity around him, watched by the young, hired-for-the-summer young man: who likewise said nothing: or C. was inside the house, sitting in front of the television set, just after his spoon-fed, special-diet supper: he thought about his wife, how much younger she looked, regardless of the years of farm wife drudgery, how he had been young for so many years: something had suddenly caught him that summer: he seemed to die inside and had been dead inside all summer: he had merely watched while his neighbors for a share in the crops planted his wheat, cultivated his corn, fed and cared for his few prize cattle: he had spent the summer riding in a truck until the heat became too much to trust him with driving his own truck full of wheat to the elevator: he had ridden beside the hired farm hand: he had been useless and dead inside: perhaps in contrast, perhaps truly, his wife had grown all the younger: he paid no attention to the television set, not until after the sizzle and the pop and the glass had spread out in front of it and the smoke curled up: they had not heard the lightning since their house was part of it: just outside they saw the flash of light:
or he was away from the house going home, the day abruptly interrupted when the first blast of cold air hit the baler and C.'s truck which pulled an empty hayrack: it even woke up C. asleep inside the cab: Evans drove the baler: the city-bred, young, hired-for-the-summer boy stacked a bale on the hayrack behind the baler, then looked for himself at the yellow, several-tiered hail clouds: Evans shut off the baler and headed the tractor, baler and hayrack, young boy bouncing with the bales, across the meadow, yelled to C. who dazedly sat unsure of what to do, saw the boiling thunderheads moving ever nearer, rapidly: burning in grandma gear, lowest low, he followed the operation towards the barn, the one at the abandoned farmhouse: the windmill there was disconnected so the blades turned furiously in the wind: the young hand and Evans tossed the bales into the hayloft, slammed the loft door against the wind, tied it, it fought, slamming against the barn: C. meanwhile removed the cotter pin from the hayrack behind the baler and the one which connected the empty rack to his truck: Evans in a hurry backed the baler into a dilapidated shed, which had leaned in some other forgotten storm and was covered by shrubs, over shaded with trees: Evans and the hand hastily threw a tarp over the rear of the baler which stuck out of the shed, tied it down with baling twine: C. removed the cotter pin from the baler and tractor, otherwise useless, too
old, too old, once today he had come too near already to heat stroke: he waved as they drove off, the hired hand riding on the tongue of the tractor, Evans driving, dust whipping off the road they took: small wind twisters flew across the road and fields: the light turned yellow: the popping of the tractor moving down the road was soon muffled by tree limbs brushing against tree limbs and against the side of the leaning shed: the empty, futile whirring of the windmill, the loose ends of the canvas beating rhythmically against the baler and the first few balls of hail hitting against it like a drum, C. stood and watched, abandoned, got in the cab of his truck, watched and listened with the window rolled down: he didn't want to go home, but he went: or he had been in the house and going away from it: it was morning: he saw a pheasant cross the road, a covey of young pheasants behind her: when he got to Evans' house, they were already gone: Evans' hired man and Evans' son were already at work in C.'s fields: Evans' son plowed, the hired hand mowed the meadow behind the old Cowpert place, C.'s now: Evans himself was in town getting a part for the baler and twine, charged to C.: C. felt old, late for work, unconsulted: he had overslept, his wife had insisted, for good health, she said: the Ford tractor was unused, so C. hooked it to the rake, left the truck and drove down
the road, he was going to work, heat or no heat: morning had been cool, but C. had slept through most of that: out in the field, he noticed the young hand looking at him, no words exchanged, some sort of a smile came from C.: the young hand responded unenthusiastically: he supposed it was all right, it was C.'s hay and C.'s field: the hay no doubt was cured, could be raked into windrows for the baler to lap up and pressure into bales: C. began his sweeps around the field, the sun growing hotter, sweat on his forehead and armpits, beads rolling down his back: sweating, he stopped, he could hardly bear the sun: he moved along: the rake behind him spun faster: the tractor bumped against something: C. never saw it: he watched the spin of the rake until he wavered and passed out: the tractor died against the fence and the young hand took C. to the shade of the windmill and tree, around the red abandoned farmhouse: or maybe, C. thought, there was no house at all, no lightning rod on the top of it, and no door, whether it was opened or closed or to be opened or closed and if there was no door, there was no fire, nor a fire to be, there had been no fire, and no fire was coming into being, dropping from the attic: C. had imagined it all while standing in a meadow, early morning, knee deep in the grasses, and pivoting around 360° to move,
360 possibilities to take, he shuffled a foot forward and stepped down, unsure of which of the 360\(^\circ\) to take, why he had taken the one he had, whether the one he had taken was the right one: now 359\(^\circ\) around him of new possibilities, he pivoted, the 1\(^\circ\) behind him was the one he had taken, it would have been moving backwards to have taken that: he pivoted around, dizzying himself, could not tell which of the degrees he had come from, could not tell which one to take, took another faltering step forward, the sun grew bright, wondered if the second step he had just taken was the right one of the 129,600 possibilities if he could go backwards, but that was not right: he had taken a direction by default: he had taken in his three steps already one direction of 46,656,000 possibilities, and in those three steps he had merely stumbled, and that neglecting the minutes and seconds which exist between the grosser divisions of degrees: C. stumbled again, and now had voided 16,796,159,999 directions for his life: he fell down under the weight of what he had lost:

or C. thought, there could have been a fire, a door and he was imagined: in which case the proliferating complexities of the day were foolish nightmares of no consequence, as was also C.: as C. was imagined, so was that day so many years ago when he as a young
man finished the house, building it dangerously on the hill, but it was picturesque, something to show his new bride: before he left for town he climbed once more to the roof and added the lightning rod, running the ground wire down the side of the house, and all was completed: this was all imagined, too: so the lightning had not been attracted: the house had not burned down, it had not been erected: nothing existed to char C.'s face, which was at any rate unburnable:
or,
the light flashing all around him, red in the falling rain, red on the drops which were flattened against the window:
C. thought,
but not very clearly since that prick in his arm, something was in him, and something was in that old gray face in front of him, the face of the doctor, the old doctor, whose name C. kept forgetting: or perhaps he was being imagined to imagine all this, he couldn't imagine why.
DOG

Outside room 564 a key scratched, inside a phone rang. The key slid into a lock, turned a bolt. Door 564 swung on its hydraulic arm. Robert, a Negro in a khaki medical-research, dog-surgery uniform, entered and kicked a wedge beneath the door.

564 smelled of alcohol and vitamin pills and moldy refrigerators, while from the hall entered the odor of straw and manure and dried dog food. The cold fluorescent lights flickered a hazy blue. The gray cement floor was freshly mopped. Wrapped around the room were stainless steel cupboards holding yellowed packets and tool-filled trays. Three stainless steel tables covered with newspapers were scattered in the room. Red lights glowed from machines.

Mrs. Comstock followed Robert. She was a short woman, light Negro, wearing a white uniform dress and white uniform shoes. She picked up the phone.

"Animal Surgery.... Yes, Doctor Taylor, you could have a table this morning.... Yes, Doctor, we'll be ready right away. Shall I send Robert down to get your dog now?.... And a bleeder?.... Your assistant, Zec?.... OK,
I'll call him."

She hung up the phone and found Robert in the hall laying fresh newspapers in the bottom of a stainless steel cage.

"Doctor Taylor wants one of his dogs ready right away, Robert."

Robert nodded affirmation and finished neatly laying out the papers. Then, shuffling, he pushed the portable cage down the hallway.

The phone rang in Doctor Taylor's lab. Zac slammed his chair onto four legs, closed the Tempest on Act Three and answered.

"Yes, Mrs. Comstock.... When? Right now?.... Sure, I'll be right up."

Zac panicked and blushed. Something would go wrong as usual. And, as usual, Doctor Taylor would blame him.

Doctor Taylor's logic was simple. As a scientist, he believed in the infallibility of instruments and nature. They were not expected to offer explanations and apologies for squandering the doctor's research grant or his precious, nervous time.

But he considered Zac fallible. As a human Zac was automatically suspected of stupidity. Zac helped his suspicions. He had learned to assume the responsibility for failure. At one time he thought the mistakes were his fault. Later, he assumed the blame to humor the doctor who considered himself infallible. It had given
him a poor, but real contact with a man he had respected once; but now he had no desire to be a surgeon. He saw too much in Dr. Taylor he despised.

Apprehensive, Zac left his lab and his Shakespeare.

Upstairs Robert found a dog, drugged it and wheeled it down the hall to Dog Surgery. He opened the cage door. Stumbling under the effects of the drug, the dog rolled onto the floor.

One hand on the front legs, one hand on the hind, Robert turned the dog over and flung it onto the table.

"Morning, Robert." Zac nervously entered the room, self-conscious of the baggy uniform he had just put on.

"Mawn," Robert muttered under his breath.

The experiments were no longer interesting to Zac. He just didn't want to be blamed, rightly or wrongly, for ruining them. During the previous days Zac had carefully worked over every detail so there would be no errors which he could prevent, or at least any which might be traced to him. Now, seeing the dog, Zac hoped for an immediate flop. He had what he considered a sentimental concern for the dog.

"How long do you think it will go today?" asked Mrs. Comstock. Since the experiments often lasted through the night she was anxious to know if she would face a mess in the morning.

"I don't know. You'll have to ask the doctor. I haven't seen him since last week."

"Maybe another all-nighter, do you think?"
"I don't know. I hope not." Thoughts of staying up all night alone in the room with the dog, listening to the squeaking heart machine, enduring the experiment to the end, crawled through Zac's mind. He hoped not.

Zac re-checked every procedure, every piece of equipment. He would have washed every instrument again, were they not all sterilized. Everything seemed ready, but Zac was never sure.

Hobert had stretched the dog out on the table, shaved its belly and was painting it with mercurochrome. The dog was in a stupor. Its temperature was being recorded and Zac inserted electrodes into its legs so its heart beat would flash onto a screen of an electrocardiograph.

Everything prepared, Zac stood and waited and remembered a conversation with his wife the night before.

"Absolutely nothing can go wrong next time. I rechecked everything, rewashed everything. I swear, nothing can go wrong. "Nothing my fault, anyway."

"Then maybe the next time you work he'll be pleasant."

"No, because I know what he'll bitch about. The pressure gauge. That metal thing with a plastic top, you know? Well, the threads are worn and leak until the blood coagulates to stop it. Nothing else works, unless you just leave a little scud in the threads. Like a fool I've been cleaning them out and the damned thing leaks and will leak the next time sure. It doesn't hurt anything. There's nothing wrong with it really. He's mentioned it twice,
but sometime when he can't think of anything else, he'll use that to blame me for screwing up the whole experiment. Just because I wash his damned gauge too well."

"Don't let that bother you."

"No, it won't bother me. After this, though, I'm going to leave it dirty. And I'm going to quit this job as soon as we have the baby."

After thinking such thoughts for a half an hour, Zac excused himself.

"I forgot a data sheet, Mrs. Comstock. If the doctor comes, would you tell him I'll be back in a minute?"

"Okay, Zac."

Across the hall Robert tied down a freshly shaven monkey whose life was dedicated to the science of burns. The monkey looked courageous and ignorant and drugged.

When Zac returned, data sheet in hand, the doctor was in his operating clothes, impatient to get started.

Zac despised his baggy uniform provided by Dog Surgery. In it he felt dirty and somehow naked. All shirts and pants were size extra-large so everyone would be completely covered, but Zac's hung like a potato sack and scratched. Doctor Taylor was somehow numb to his, like he was to anything not connected with the dog stretched out on the table.

"I'll take the bleeder now, Mrs. Comstock."

The doctor expected immediate action and Mrs. Comstock tried to comply, although three other doctors by now were working in other surgery rooms across the hall. She had
given all of 564 to Doctor Taylor. She, too, was afraid of him.

Robert brought in the second dog, the bleeder. The mangy dog had suffered through someone else's non-fatal inquiries and its blood would be used to prime the heart pump and to replace blood lost during the experiment.

Robert gripped its legs and flipped it onto a table. Doctor Taylor cut three incisions on the first dog and tied the blood vessels. He began work on the bleeder.

Zac watched and kept quiet. There had been a time when Zac asked questions. When he first began work, he had asked Doctor Taylor what the experiments were about.

"Oh, to take the pulse out of the pulse."

"Oh, and what is the purpose of that?"

"Well, we want to depulsate the blood, then circulate it through the dog under a steady pressure. Then we can compare the results of that with the effects of pulsatile flow."

A dissatisfied Zac asked no more questions. Either the doctor considered him stupid, he thought, or didn't trust him, or was stupid himself, or was being curt, not caring to be questioned by the hired help. Zac had grown to favor the last explanation.

The bleeder's spasms drained the last bit of blood. The doctor delighted at having three pints, more than enough for the experiments, plus a good margin.

"Fill the pump and we're ready to go."
Zac filled the apparatus which brought the blood from the dog, pumped it, depulsated it and returned it to the dog. In an artery in the dog's leg where the blood would re-enter, the doctor had tied a small cannula and Zac hooked the end of one of his plastic tubes into that. The blood was brought out from the heart itself by means of a longer twelve inch steel cannula running down through a vein in the neck.

Inserting this longer cannula fascinated Zac. Inside it was a small rod a few inches longer. The doctor slit the vena cava in the neck and pushed the cannula with the rod inside down the vein until it reached the wall of the heart. Then he lowered the inner rod and punctured the wall between the right atrium and the left ventricle. All the heart's blood thus found an exit from the dog's body.

The doctor removed the inner rod quickly. Zac pinched the tube attached to the end of the cannula while the doctor hooked it to the pump. The clamps were removed, the pumps turned on, Zac released his hold and the blood was re-routed.

"Blood pressure's down a little, Doctor Taylor."

The doctor looked up. "It's still sufficient."

"And temperature's down a degree."

"Okay. If it goes down any further, we'll cover the dog and use another light to keep him warm."

Zac adjusted the speed of the pump to equal the flow of blood from the dog.
"Mrs. Comstock," Doctor Taylor asked, "would you come here a moment? I think we are going to have to give him oxygen."

Mrs. Comstock was across the hall in the other surgery room helping Dr. Evans burn the monkey.

"Mrs. Comstock!" His voice was demanding. "We have to get this dog on the respirator. He needs oxygen."

The doctor was irritable. Both his hands tied threads around the cannula and sewed up incisions. Each finger worked at a separate job. Zac felt only in the way.

"The heart is fibrillating, Doctor." The doctor grabbed the cannula sticking from the dog's neck and twisted it gently. The speck of light on the EKG machine fluttered nervously back and forth.

"This cannula's irritating his heart. I can't seem to find the right spot." The doctor spoke to himself.

Mrs. Comstock finally came in and hooked up the respirator. The blood was a deep purple. The machine clicked with every breath.

In about ten seconds the respirator took effect and the blood returned to bright red. The doctor still searched for a non-irritating spot. Helplessly Zac looked on. Something cool and metallic seemed to rub in his own heart, pushing against its walls, scratching it.

"Have you taken the blood samples yet, Zac?"

"No, Doctor."

"Well, get them now. You must get them as soon as
the pump is turned on or you'll ruin the experiment. Take the readings, too, rather than just sit around."

Humiliated, Zac did his chores and forgot the dog for a moment.

The irritable heart calmed down.

"The pressure gauge is leaking again, Doctor."

Doctor Taylor left off sewing incisions and went over. Zac held gauze under it. Not rapidly, not offsetting the readings, the metal cylinder dripped.

"Is the top on tight enough?"

"Yes, I believe so." After thinking, Zac added, "But you might check it if you wish."

Disgusted, the doctor gripped the top and tightened it. They waited. It dripped the same as before.

"I think the plastic grooves are worn, Doctor, or the grooves on the metal base."

The doctor ignored Zac. "Now it's too tight." They both bent down and watched the threads and the blood flow around them and out the seam. "Do we have another cap?"

"Yes," and Zac dug through the equipment on the shelf. "But it's not sterile."

"That's all right." The doctor clamped off the pressure gauge, removed one cap and twisted on the other one. Opening the clamps, it dripped as before.

"I really believe it is worn threads...." Zac only half tried to explain.
The blood swirled around the threads and out.

"Zac, did you knock this base against anything when you washed it?"

Zac blushed. "No, doctor. Not to my knowledge."

Zac resigned himself to watching the doctor fiddle with the gauge until he despaired and quit, just as he had resigned himself to the doctor's assumption of his guilt. The blood eventually clotted in the threads. Zac vowed he would not wash them so well next time. Leaving some of the scaly blood would clot it more quickly. It might not even leak at all.

"Did you mark down the time the pump started?"

"Yes," Zac looked up at the clock and guessed the pump was turned on about ten minutes ago. "Ten-thirty," he said, "right on the nose." It was convenient. No sense in precipitating another 'We-must-have-the-time-exactly' lecture. He considered the experiment crude guesswork at best, anyway. It fitted in perfectly with the doctor's statistical truth, too.

"We need five more c.c.'s of anesthetic, Mrs. Comstock," the doctor yelled out. "Whenever it shivers like that, Zac, it throws off our oxygen consumption data. Keep your eyes on the dog while you're just standing around."

Zac watched Mrs. Comstock hurry in and administer the drug, but the dog wanted to die. Zac watched the dog try to shake off the drugs, to shiver itself conscious so, as its own master, it could jerk its head and die.

Zac leaned against the counter, his arms folded, waiting
for the doctor to tell him what to do. He thought of his father, a butcher, and how his father and he had cut and sliced and slaughtered and dressed and plucked and skinned and smoked and eaten animals, yet that was different from what the doctor did to each dog, shaved, painted with mercurochrome, pumped full of drugs, and kept always just alive.

Zac worked mechanically. He found it necessary. Those who were not born with a temperament for science were soon brutalized into it, once they came under its influence. Zac felt the doctor wishing he would become his artificial third arm, remaining only human enough to be blamed for mistakes.

The experiment went smoothly. The doctor had a determined smile on his face. He cut slowly, felt with his fingers inside the incision, out again, down this time, dug with the tweezers until he found the proper vein, slipped two threads under it.

"Here," he told Zac. "Hold this thread up and keep tension on it." The doctor slit the vein lengthwise between the threads. "Keep the thread tense or we'll have blood all over the place. Not too much, now, or you're going to break it." He pushed a thin plastic tube up the vein. "Release it now, Zac.... More." The doctor grabbed the thread from Zac. "Damn it," as blood spat out, a few drops on his medical cheek.
Zac stepped back, not knowing how to help. The doctor held the threads and shoved the tube and mumbled curses under his breath. Zac looked around, hoping to find some usual task, one not easily muffed. Something he could do correctly for self-satisfaction and to keep busy.

He inverted a pint of blood and fed it to the dog.

The air pressure in the cylinder had to be measured. It had to be the same as the dog's blood pressure in order to cushion it. If the pressure was too low, he would add some with a syringe. A crude barometer made of a U-shaped tube filled with mercury measured the pressure.

Zac attached the barometer and the cylinder, then opened a stopcock. A whizzing sound came as the mercury vanished and something strange trickled on his head. The air stopped rushing through the barometer where mercury had been. He shut the stopcock and emphatically goddamned it.

Zac looked around self-consciously. Doctor Taylor cut, inserted another tube. Mrs. Comstock went about her business, but both she and the Doctor had noticed his clumsy blunder.

Zac was sorry he had cussed, but he could not imagine what had happened. Somehow pressure had built up in the cylinder, but Zac thought strangest of all was what he must have looked like, half asleep, engrossed in monotony, connecting a hose, then whoosh! Up flies a column of sparkling mercury and down again on his head, splash, and little beads roll out of his hair. He stands there,
dumbfounded, astonished. Right on top of his head!
Better than a pie in the face, scientific slapstick. Whoosh!
Straight up in the air, then splat! Right down on his head.

Zac looked around. Someone should be laughing. Doctor Taylor cauterized an incision and looked intense and impatient to get on with it. Mrs. Comstock searched the countertop for a special-sized needle, found it and on her way out mentioned casually, "I'll send Robert in here to clean that up. Let me know if you need more mercury."

Nobody laughed. The doctor, Mrs. Comstock, both busy. Robert did not laugh. He shuffled and muttered to himself as he tried to sweep the slippery beads into a dustpan.

The dog was dying. The steady heart beat on the EKG was gone. The white dot danced wildly, sputtered inharmoniously. The heart contracted in a thousand different places at a thousand different times. Each fiber was mad, anarchic, pulling and relaxing at its own rate.

The dog twisted on the table. The ropes holding its limbs were strained. Its blood grew purple.

"Doctor, there's fibrillation."

The doctor's hand was on the cannula, gently twisting and turning, trying again to find the non-irritable spot. The blood from the heart grew darker.

"Mrs. Comstock, we'll need oxygen."

Zac slowed down the pump. "The flow's down to one liter per minute, Doctor."
Mrs. Comstock came running and turned on the respirator. The blood regained a little redness, but the heart continued to fibrillate.

Then the dog was dead, despite the occasional pulses on the EKG. Then they, too, were gone. The doctor quit, leaned back in disappointment against the counter. Mrs. Comstock hastened back across the hall to the monkey. Robert chased a mercuric bead around the floor with his dustpan. The research assistant pulled the electrodes from the legs and gently his unskilled hands pulled the one cannula from the dog's throat and the other from his right rear leg. He loosened the straps.

Mrs. Comstock yelled for Robert and he plodded across the hall. "You can take this dog off the table, Robert," the doctor told him and Robert nodded and plodded away to get a cage. He used them to wheel about the dogs.

"Well, I guess that's all for today." The doctor stared perplexedly at the dog, wondering what had gone wrong, how to correct it for next time.

"Although there are some men, no doubt, who cannot profit from their mistakes," Zac had read in the doctor's lecture notes and now saw in his face, "what is science, but a making of mistakes? If one of my dogs lives, what have I learned? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. The dog simply has to be sacrificed in a few days. I mean we just can't set it free. We have to kill him to see how he lived. When my experiments produce nothing but healthy dogs, and
I dread that day, then I know only that my experiments have had no effect, that they result in nothing. I might just as well pat a dog on the head and then watch him for fifteen weeks and note the effect. But if we infect him with rabies, or reroute his entire blood system or watch him develop without his frontal lobes, then we can make determinations and find a cause, and show where it belongs within the system of science and correlate it and make postulates, too. And if it is not the dog we are killing, it is the germs with which we infect it. We can observe both the dog killing the germs and the germs dying. We pry into nature with science. But just health! I can find no cause for health, and, students, if it has no cause, can it have effects? And if it has no effect, it cannot be dynamic, it cannot cause change, it cannot alter conditions. It is a static state. It is death. Scientific medicine is the study of sickness, not health."

Robert returned pushing a stainless steel cage with a large paper sack laid on top. He removed the ropes holding the dog's limp legs. Robert moved hesitantly, trying to catch the doctor's approval. Robert, like everyone else, dreaded making a mistake because the doctor would point it out. One mistake might interrupt, even ruin, a scientific procedure.

For no reason at all Robert acted as though something had gone wrong and he was being blamed for it, although it could not have been his fault. He went through his chores automatically, moving his wide eyes back and forth.
"Take him away. We're finished." The doctor waved his hand as he brushed away a fly.

Robert grabbed the four legs, two in each hand, and dropped the 45-pound dog into the sack.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders, sorry to have wasted research money, angry to have wasted precious minutes. "Well, Zac, you can clean up," and as an afterthought, "Please be careful when you wash that pressure gauge. It's worth three hundred dollars." He changed his clothes across the hall.

Robert set the sack on the stainless steel cage and pushed it out and down the hall.

The doctor returned in a few moments, a white lab coat over his shirt and tie. He acted amiable, mentioned a pile of unread journals to which he should be devoting his time.

"We'll be working next Thursday, Mrs. Comstock."

"Okay, Doctor, we'll have a dog ready for you."

And Zac assured himself that he would be ready, too. The doctor left.

Unscrewing the top of the pressure gauge, Zac dropped it on the floor. It bounced and rolled to a stop. When he picked it up, he noticed a crack. Certainly next Thursday he would be discovered. He could imagine the conversation already. Zac shrugged his shoulders.

The dog had died as he had wished and Zac felt guilty.
He hoped he had not caused its death, though the dog had been saved many hours, perhaps days of drugged existence, perhaps a painful recovery, only in the end to be killed and picked at. To die early in the experiments was the least painful, since, once started, there was no hope.

Across the hall the monkey screamed.
MR. WALKING STICK

I told her I assumed she had a magic walking stick because all five-year old girls have magic walking sticks. She asked me what they were and I said that a walking stick helped a person when he walked and if it was a magic one it could at least talk and probably do other things. She told me she had left hers outside.

Felice and I decided to go out for a walk because my wife wanted to read and I did not know what else to do all day with a five-year-old girl.

We had taken her for a day as a favor to Zoe who was keeping Felice while her parents fought out a divorce. Zoe worked all day and she was tired of dragging Felice to work with her. She wanted one day's reprieve. I said I would sit with Felice for the one day. I had nothing else to do anyway. Zoe dropped her off at eight-thirty.

We went out for a walk and when we did Felice found her walking stick, a fallen limb, quite thick and gnarled, which I broke down into a small stick, a little taller than Felice; we walked off towards the hill.

I had asked Felice to leave her gold lame slippers at
home, the ones my wife had given her because spiked heels were for a long time to be out of style and because all little girls like to play dress up. After trying them on and stumbling around the apartment Felice agreed not to wear them on our walk although she was conscious she was not fashionably dressed. I told her of course the occasion was informal. That took the edge off of her dressing down. Still she insisted that she wear the string of black plastic beads my wife no longer wanted, those and a noisy wooden bracelet, nor could she leave without her purse. She wanted to look polite. I agreed that that would look fine.

The beads swung from her neck as we walked up the hill. "I'm glad I found Mr. Walking Stick."
"Is that his name?"
"Certainly." She gave me an incredulous look.
She gripped her walking stick tightly, her hand just fit around it. The top end was knobby where the branch had joined the trunk and down through the bumps and gnarls the stick grew skinnier.

"You haven't introduced us yet."
"Oh, of course not. Excuse me. Mr. Walking Stick, this is my friend Tom. Tom, Mr. Walking Stick. I hope you'll both enjoy knowing each other. You're both such old friends of mine."

We walked on. I was not sure of where we were going. I talked it over with Felice. She definitely wanted to go to the Natural History Museum and then over to the pond
to see the ducks, which I had suggested. I was told that Mr. Walking Stick had never seen the pond with the ducks on it.

"Mr. Walking Stick says he likes you."

"Can't he tell me himself?"

"No. He said he would like to, but he's a magic walking stick and can only talk to me. But I'll tell you anything he wants you to know."

"That'll do very nicely if you would," and I thanked her.

It was a long way, mostly uphill, to the Museum. I led the way and Felice followed. She used her walking stick quite deliberately. Finally needing a cigarette, I stopped to rest. There was a clearing with a fountain in it below somebody's house. The side of the hill up which we walked was woody.

Felice caught up quickly. She was not at all tired. She seemed quite happy, quite quiet, quite big-eyed as she looked around her. She leaned her walking stick up against the fountain. The string of beads, now around the head of the stick, barely touched the water.

"These beads look good on Mr. Walking Stick."

"I gave them to him, you know. He wanted something to wear so badly. And I thought since he had helped me to walk so much it was the right thing to do. One must be polite, you know."

"That's true."

"We had such a nice talk on our way up here and we are
such good friends. You really must get to know Mr. Walking Stick better."

"I'd like to. What did you talk about?"

"Oh, some of the places he's been. But I suppose mainly secrets."

"Oh? And what secrets did you tell Mr. Walking Stick?"

"You must promise not to tell."

I promised. Her finger motioned down my ear. "My boyfriend's name is Edward."

"And who is Edward?" We talked on in hushed voices.

"Don't worry, Felice. No one can hear but you and me and Mr. Walking Stick."

"Well, he's tall and has yellow hair and he drives a beer truck. That's a very good job, you know. There's quite a bit of money in driving a beer truck."

I agreed, of course. We walked on up the hill, I in the lead. I could hear the rattle of the bracelet and fragments of conversation behind me, but Felice would have invited me had she wished me to share in the passage of secrets.

The Natural History Museum is an imposing rock structure, partially covered with vines. Inside it was cooler. Felice brought in her walking stick. The necklace dangled from a gnarl.

Glass cases encircled the room and were filled with stuffed animals in semblances of their natural habitats. Felice walked around paying respectful attention to them,
but not pausing until she came to an owl sitting serenely on a large tree trunk.

"You know, Felice, that that owl is smart. Of all the animals in here, he's the only one who's alive. He just pretends to be an old stuffed owl, so nobody will stuff him."

She said nothing, but stood there looking up at the yellow eyes.

"You can tell because the owl has to blink every once in a while. You can see him do it if you watch his eyes closely."

She looked up at the owl's eyes, but said nothing; she blinked.

"Oh, you missed it. The owl blinked just as you did. You know the old owl is smart and will blink when you do just to make you think he's another stuffed owl."

She didn't say a word, but for a long time just stood staring. Then I could tell she had to strain to keep her eyes from blinking. It was almost painful to watch her. Finally she had to and blinked.

"There, Felice, did you see that? Did you see the owl blink?"

She shook her head and without saying a word went around the rest of the room carrying her Mr. Walking Stick. She passed the other animals without stopping, paying only token, respectful attention to them.

When we were outside again, Felice told me she did not wish to see the ducks in the pond, that Mr. Walking Stick who now carried her small purse and wore her wooden
bracelet around a protruding twig was tired and they wished to go home. It would be the only polite thing to do.

They followed me back down the hill and again I could not hear the one-sided conversation. When we got back to the house, Felice brought Mr. Walking Stick in with her, which was all right with me. My wife, who was in the other room reading her book, knew nothing about it. Felice laid her walking stick down beside her in her automobile, which was actually the leg space beneath my study desk. I wasn't invited because it was I whom she was coming to see.

She was a good driver. She and Mr. Walking Stick exchanged pleasantries about the passing landscape. Felice pulled up in front of my house, opened the car door, got out and I told them to come in. They did. Mr. Walking Stick was laid in a corner.

"How do you do? I'm so glad to see you."

"Just find, Felice. It's sure nice of you to drop over."

She took off her imaginary coat and folded it neatly over a chair. She sat down on my lap and sighed very maturely.

"Well, I just had to get away from that house. I thought perhaps we could get out. Maybe you would take me out someplace this evening. Go out for dinner somewhere where we could be alone."

She had ahold of my hand and her eyes were begging me to go. She was sincere. Mr. Walking Stick stood silently in a corner forgotten.

"Well, I don't think so, Felice. Zoe and you and I
could maybe go out for a coke...."

"Oh, please, somewhere where we could be alone. Don't worry about money. If you need money, I've got some saved up, almost a dollar. If you need that, you can have it. But I've got to be alone with you now. You won't get into trouble."

She had her arms around my neck and was holding her head against mine. "Please."

"Well, not tonight, Felice. Maybe some other night. Maybe you could come back again sometime for dinner...."

Before I had finished, she had put on her imaginary coat and some gloves.

"I'll be back when you're sure and when I've got things settled at home." She was out the door and into her car beneath my desk. She drove away, but had to come back to pick up Mr. Walking Stick whom she had left propped up in a corner.

When she got home she played house and dressing up to go out to a dance with Mr. Walking Stick in the other half of our small living room. I was not invited over, although she did call once to see if I had changed my mind, which I hadn't.

Zoe picked up Felice at five-thirty. Felice's parents had gotten their divorce that afternoon in court and Felice was to be her mother's ward.

"I hope Felice has not been too much trouble. I
really appreciate you taking care of her."

After some debate, Zoe let Felice take her walking stick home. Before they left, Felice came over to me. Her wriggling finger called down my ear.

"My boyfriend Edward took my mother and me to the museum before and Edward said that all the animals are stuffed and Mr. Walking Stick agreed with me that that old owl was nothing but a dead bird stuffed full of sawdust. I just wanted to say, I don't happen to think it's polite that you lied to me like that." Her lips were pursed and her expression was quite cold and adult.

She ran outside to her mother's waiting friend and they drove off. I have never seen her since.
MISTER JOHNSON

Johnson no longer had time for people. He was too busy surviving.

Johnson had been alarmed recently about survival. It seemed to him the longer he survived the more desperate the struggle to survive became. He had the statistics on hand to prove that, both short run and long term, on air and water and basic foods, on population birth and death rates. Johnson was bracing himself for the future.

When Johnson rose from his well-worn chair, went to the closet, pulled out his boots and overcoat, his wife and daughter took no notice. Nor did Guy Lombardo, nor any Royal Canadian, whose activities were coming to a climax as New Year's Eve approached midnight. Neither his wife, nor his daughter turned her head from the screen except to sip a drink, though Johnson had pulled on both boots and was putting on his cashmere overcoat.

It had been a pleasant evening at home, but the business of survival was taking place outside.

Johnson walked out the door, but flew from house to car, it was so cold. Sleet covered his car with ice and the short, squatty man flustered about, trying to open the door.
It was midnight and the sleet had changed to snow. A shot rang out, a firecracker burst, to the north a roman candle burnt its way up, when individual clocks around the suburban neighborhood began their individual New Years.

Wet, heavy snowflakes fell on Johnson's coat, turned to beads of water and disappeared in downy fibers. His coat was buttoned around his neck and hung down to his knees where it overlapped his high leather boots.

Johnson clapped his hands to warm them. His foggy breath panted out beneath his nose which looked like a beak on his round, reddish face. His red curly hair was cropped close. His hands were a cold red and white.

Finally the sheet of ice cracked and the door broke open. Johnson slid in on the brittle cold vinyl seat and slammed the door behind him. More ice cracked and fell on the concrete driveway.

The wind blew sharply across the treeless prairie, like air escaping from a tin whistle, only cold, like air escaping from a pressure can, it swept across the treeless suburbs, two stories high at most, hardly pausing as it whipped around the thin metal sheets encasing Johnson. The car fired as though it hated being alive, and loved hating it, it was that cold. A frost pattern spread its delicate way across the windshield. The defroster's cold air retarded its progress.

Johnson sat rigid, his hands on the steering wheel until the car was as warm as the house had been and almost as cozy.
Then he relaxed, wriggled about on the silk lining of his coat. Johnson hated clothes, except his soft overcoat and snug boots. He buckled his safety belt as the last moisture dried from the window.

Johnson drove a special car, his own. The red lights of authority were concealed in the bumpers, not intentionally hidden, though it was often advantageous to be unidentified, and not because Johnson was a detective, requiring more status than a patrol car offered. But because Johnson was a reserve officer, a part-time cop and Johnson had to use his own car, Sampletown provided the lights. It was cheap authority.

He flashed on his lights, they blinked. Johnson smiled and felt stronger, like Sampson growing hair.

Johnson was not a detective. Johnson was an itinerant computer programmer, and before that had been a credit investigator for a quick-loan company and before that had been a lieutenant in the Quartermaster Supply Corps and before that had been at the university studying statistical analysis and before that had watched his mother drink herself into a mental hospital at Topeka and his sister screw herself sluttish and his father die of lung cancer and before that they had all lived a hybrid of living in a suburb of Kansas City and before that Johnson had been a precocious little snot whom nobody liked except his mother, his grandparents and mothers of other precocious little snots who felt the competition had been vastly overrated.
But programming had its drawbacks, for all of Johnson's love of numbers and his talent for them, too. Johnson was well known for his ability to reduce any data to significance or to express a crisis in formula, at least any Kansas City crisis.

His hobby, too, if it could be called a hobby, was as reknown; he juxaposed irrelevant data in search of correlation, seemingly irrelevant data. *t was Johnson who predicted the spread of Negro ghettoes for the next two hundred years and caused a small crisis of his own in real estate. It was Johnson who predicted to an accuracy of one percent the increase in American-made small arms manufacture which would result, if there was a national embargo on foreign-made small arms, and thus it was Johnson who brought that new industry to Kansas City. It was Johnson who predicted in 1990 the nuclear city would reek death for eighteen square blocks, defying anyone to enter, and surrounding that would be broad rings of sterility which might stretch out as far as Sampletown. Not all of Johnson's statistics were taken seriously, which Johnson predicted with uncanny accuracy. But he was not interested in the way they were received. Johnson was intent on knowing and survival.

Also as a reserve cop he worked for cash, more dependable than his itinerant computer operation, and for cash biweekly he worked evenings and loved it.

Copping gave him satisfaction. As a cop each number gained importance, each datum came alive. The 312 murders
per year, 62.4 per hundred thousand population, 0.000624
per person, 0.385 per day, which Johnson projected for the
coming year were interesting, compared to 28 per year for
London, say, or the ratio of policemen per murders, or cost
of policemen opposed to the number of murders, or expendi-
tures by city and state in dollars per murder from 1940
to 1970, or the drug traffic vs. drug convictions, plotted
against crimes of various sorts, or the wholesale cost of
drugs plotted against the state anti-narcotic expenditures--
that is, the increase in illegal profits vs. the increase
in legal preventitives, say, all was interesting, important,
how else could the city and state budget their moneys, but
to hear a gunshot, to break into an apartment and find the
wife strangled, having laid in the bathtub for three days,
to rush the eight-year-old-gang-beaten kid to the hospital,
to wait, to itemize information as it was discovered, to
cover the multitude of data, to question everyone, to
trace out the story, to trace out the history, the cause,
the effect, to find the cause, to question the man, to
listen to his story, to put it all together, to listen to
it once more, to see it played formally in the courts from
beginning to end, to see it evolved finally into art, then
see it finished, some decision made, to see justice, all
this was Johnson's dream, this communion with data. Johnson
was a fascinated part-time cop.

But in two months of working nights, he had found nothing
important. No accidents beyond mere fender benders, a family
spat, shoplifting, speeding tickets, burning leaves in the gutter before six o'clock. The suburbs were divided into many little bedrooms and his Sampletown was the smallest in size and imagination. Tonight, he thought as he drove out onto the shiny street, something might happen, though the radio was strangely quiet. After all, it was New Year's Eve.

He drove around the business section, a midnight deserted. "Nothing on the radio, but a 20-man fist fight in some other suburb's bedroom complex. Johnson stopped the two other patrolmen who were out, Sampletown's entire New Year's Eve force. They talked while they sat in their own cars and drank coffee each had brought in his own thermos.

"Things are quiet." The patrolman peeped out through a crack in the window. He was a full-time officer, ex-Marine, ex-pinball machine artist. "Nothing's happening."

"Well, I'll take one more turn through town and go back then." Johnson was just an extra observer and a possible help. He knew it and they knew it. "Things" looked quiet enough, however, for him to go home.

"Okay."

"Say, what's this about Police Chief Allen? I heard on the news before I left that his wife shot him, right?"

"Yeah, he's in the hospital. Took over some beer for the sonofabitch today. His wife is sure a piss poor shot. He doesn't look too bad. Just a gut punch."

"Wonder why she shot him?"
"Don't know, but I have my ideas. Mayor came down to the station and packed away some of Allen's things, but Allen doesn't think he'll get the boot. Got too much on the mayor, I think. I think he thinks I'm after his job, though, the chief does, that is, and then the mayor thinks I'm the one who's been out blacking Allen's ass all over town, which I ain't. But the mayor's pissed at me, now, cause his old friend's got his butt in the wringer and his old friend, the chief, thinks I'm the one who put it there, so I'll probably end up with no promotion when Allen gets back, and probably no job if he doesn't, all cause his wife gave him an old gut punch with his own forty-five, can you imagine?"

Johnson checked beneath the seat to see if his forty-five was there. It was. "No, can't." He wondered to himself how many police chiefs were shot by their wives every year and the reasons for them.

Later they parted, Johnson to take one more tour through town. He wished he could work on the police chief's case, but that would be done of course by more important people. Television had already been there, so the story was touchy, too touchy for Johnson to handle, and he hadn't been there but for two months. Nevertheless, he did feel a little excited that something had happened nearby. He did know the chief, that was something.

Johnson felt a thrill. Some real violence beyond numbers and television. As long as the world was violent, Johnson, who was not violent himself, found there was at
least a solution being worked out. A very practical one, too. For every murder there was more air, for every imprisonment there were so many years of sterility for so many otherwise virile men, it was as simple as that.

The town was quiet, but the radio came alive. "Accident, MacQuinn Avenue and 51st." That was just eight blocks away. Johnson turned on his red lights, his speedometer hit a safe forty-five on the sleet which had turned to snow. "Possible hit and run."

This is it, he thought to himself, something big and he would be there. But the accident did not occupy his mind. For the eight blocks he thought of the things he had missed: the kidnapping which took place just two blocks out of his district, including a shoot-out, an escape from jail, a recapture, which was all big news and might even make T.V.'s FBI; or the murder, the girl naked, dead, frozen, found in an empty lot, raped. The county had taken over on that one and the Police Chief was the only city officer who had participated: and now Johnson was somehow excluded from the police chief's shooting which was already on television. He was approaching his chance. The radio gave his call numbers, but he was already there; he had already seen two bodies on the road, had already opened the door; the radio called on; he raced back through the snow, red lights on the front of his car blinking.

The road led between two pastures, a road which connected two of the sleeping suburbs. One boy's arm
moved back and forth monotonously, his face bled, he spit up blood. The other didn't move, breathed erratically, shivered.

Two girls stood beside them, above them, talked to them, talked to each other, threatened to run for help, down again beside them on the road. "We should have pulled them off the road...asking each other to fight... guy that hit them took off...fifty-seven Ford...don't know what color...should have pulled harder...red, I think... almost got hit by someone else...blond-haired kid got out, then they took off...if we'd only have pulled harder...." They talked in breathless spurts.

Johnson yelled out and took over. His soberness gave him command. "Don't touch them...get blankets... call an ambulance...did you get the license numbers... call the police...." Then he remembered he was the police. He could hear the ambulance already on its way. "Stop the traffic...they can't be moved...what did they look like...who is your family doctor...."

One had a black eye, a broken arm, his ribs caved in, his other arm moved monotonously back and forth. The other's head was bloody, looked broken, breathed shallowly, didn't move except for shivers. A neighbor had heard the fighting. "Two guys out there fighting, don't know who they are...heard the car hit them, thunk, like that, you know...my wife's in there calling the police, I think... saw the car, yessir, fifty-six Chevy, red, I think..."
stopped, but they took out as soon as they saw what was going on."

Johnson brought out a blanket for the one who didn't move. A twenty-year-old wife, now drunkenly joking with her nineteen-year-old sister-in-law, put her coat neatly over her husband whose wagging arm knocked it askew.

An ambulance and two more police cars came screaming in, their flashing red lights reflected on the snow no longer falling. Johnson stood up and stepped back as the serious, quite busy ambulance drivers rolled out the stretcher, wasted no time, heard no complaints, took no passengers. Johnson spoke with the other policemen. He would go to the hospital, yes, apparently it was a hit-and-run, there are the two neighborhood witnesses. Johnson got into his car and followed the ambulance disappearing down the county road, veiled by the snow, thick and wet which began to fall in the windless evening. Johnson's red light blinked from his bumper, he could see it reflected in the ditch. A nineteen-year-old girlishly giggled in his back seat.

After Johnson helped the drivers unload the two injured, there was nothing to do but wait. The bodies were slipped into the emergency room of the small local hospital. The doors flapped shut, the hall was quiet, they waited.

The doctor on call came down the hall and hurried through the swinging doors. Johnson plied the girls for
the name of their family doctor, but they had none. He convinced them they should call the boy's parents.

"Is it that serious?"

"It's just a matter of form." Of course it is that serious, you drunken broads, Johnson thought to himself, didn't you see them on the road? But tactfully, Johnson remained silent and wondered if he cared anyway.

The girls were sobered by the time the in-laws came to the hallway waiting room. Another doctor had been called for and was in the emergency room. The boy with the wagging arm was wheeled out to a recovery room, his arm now limply hanging over the side of his portable bed. The twenty-year-old was relieved, but had no notion of the gestures to make, dazedly followed the bed halfway down the hall into darkness, then came back to joke with her brother's wife about the foolishness of worry and the wasted night.

Both grew more settled and continued to wait. Johnson perched on a magazine table and watched.

An unshaven, impatient man walked in, carrying a black bag, entered the swinging doors of the emergency room. He came out not much later, his coat under his arm, his bag in his hand. He took his considered time to put on his coat.

"Who's the patient's wife?" The nurse attending him pointing her out. The nineteen-year-old, quite-sober-by-now young woman replied that she was.
"I've done everything I can as a neuro-surgeon, but I'm afraid there's not much hope for your husband coming out of his coma. He's in a condition which I call brain death. Apparently the car knocked his head against the pavement."

He waited for a reaction. The wife said nothing, sat back in ignorant, chaotic disbelief. The boy's mother faced the doctor and Johnson and ranted about the hit-and-run driver. "Get him, but don't let me near that son of a bitch or I'll kill him. That's all I want now is for you to get him."

Then her mother-in-law paused for breath and the young wife looked at the doctor. "Is he alive?"

"What's being alive if you haven't got a brain?"

A few seconds passed. No one suggested euthanasia, so the doctor left.

The night passed into four o'clock. A call came for Johnson. It was from the police station. The hit-and-run driver had left the accident to call the ambulance and police, it had appeared to him everyone else was too drunk to do anything. They were the reason the ambulance had been there so quickly. They had left their proper names and addresses over the phone and they had turned themselves in. Those things were in their favor. But their lawyer had advised them not to take the balloon test for intoxication. That would be against them.
Such was Johnson's first real accident. Two young college students flying down a county road, two other young bucks on it fighting. The two students now sat in the Sampletown police station while police and detectives tried to piece together what had happened—Johnson left to write his report at the police station and to question the driver and his passenger friend. In the hospital that Johnson left, the chief of police, proficient at such paper work, lay in a room, a bullet hole in his side, enjoying a very late New Year's Eve movie and a few beers the patrolman had sneaked him. In another room one of the accident victims had pounding, sluggish dreams, his black eye from the fight began to hurt, his brother-in-law, meanwhile, died; the twenty-year-old widow and her nineteen-year-old sister-in-law were screaming their disbelief.

And Johnson drove home in the snowy early morning, January one. His car was too warm.

He pulled into the driveway, parked, was glad to get out into the fresh air, waddled up to the porch, stopped, looked out as far as he could, seeing the house across the street, color muted gray, the roofs of houses which stretched down a rolling slope, up the side of another, all the roofs the same, the same gray, now muted creamy in the falling snow. He stepped up on the railing of his porch and perched there.

He squatted down on his haunches, his butt hung
between his legs and over the railing. He faced the wind which came and curled around the porch, around his boots and his body, beneath his downy cashmere coat.

His elbows on his knees, he folded his hands.

Johnson was not sorry. He was glad. Now the world had one less mouth to feed for sure. And he had been of prime child-bearing age, and no doubt, within two years, according to statistics, he would have had a child, so there were two mouths gone, wanting food, breathing, consuming, smogging about, driving cars. Then the brother-in-law, too, might be out of breeding for a while, and he, too, was in his prime. Perhaps, Johnson hoped, he could never have children, justly rewarded for not having died. Johnson had seen the driver of the car, a smart, nice looking and serious young man, now despondent, afraid, and guilty, which was most important. The guilt would surely corrode him, and he was on his way to Vietnam, so the young man had said. Chances were that was true. A felony, he said, would keep him from officer's school. So Johnson and the others called it reckless driving and gave him a ticket for that. Johnson was satisfied that the guilt was there and unpunished it would be all the more difficult for the young man to bear. He would always hear the thunk beneath his car, which might drive him into some sort of bravery and suicide. One more young man who would not bear children, pollute the air, consume the everyday more precious resources. The rider, too, how long would he remember, be important? Important questions
when every minute, every cubic foot of air was precious to Johnson.

Inside, behind him, his wife and child slept in the suburban forest. Johnson pivoted around like a penguin following the antarctic night, an egg on one foot, alone and not alone. There will be other survivors in the flock in the antarctic darkness. He turned back again to face the morning breeze. Many, surely, had died that night, this after all was only a small corner of the world, and how many seconds had been saved for him and his family, for survivors, precious seconds now, to Johnson, who would be a survivor.

The early morning breeze was cold and his face felt clean. It carried the strange metallic taste and smell of hatred in the air. Johnson enjoyed squatting there, tasting and smelling the early morning, January one. Pivoting on the porch rail, a survivor took notes.