This thesis is a work of literary non-fiction. It is divided into six sections. The first, "A Sense of Place," and the last, "Pulling a Geographical," are collage essays which establish and then reiterate major themes in the work: movement, work, geography, climate, people, and education--some curricular, some not. The middle four chapters--"Daybreak" through "Nightshift"--are a mix of related essays and poetry, grouped according to theme, and together form a memoir.
Gandydancing: A Nebraska Education

by

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

I: A Sense of Place  1
II: Daybreak  9
III: Sun to Sun  21
IV: Twilight  32
V: Nightshift  51
VI: Pulling a Geographical  71

Bibliography  85
Gandydancing:

A Nebraska Education

I: A Sense of Place

There is something about lines drawn on the huge, empty canvas of the high plains grassland: like grids on graph paper, the lines are drawn straight—the rails, the streets, even the invisible lines marking towns, counties, states. Only when they hit a river do the lines curve in conformity. All of the lines are real, in a sense; if you are driving a county road south of McCook, Nebraska, traveling arrow-straight over rolling pastureland, and you hit a sudden "S" curve, you know you're entering Kansas. It's as if the state border had rippled the road as it crossed; the snaking is merely a signal to those responsible for maintaining these roads, but as you come out of the curves, you begin to notice that Kansas feels different. The scenery is the same, the roads, the
same, but a Nebraskan feels no more at home there than he would in L.A. A McCookite feels similarly alien in other Nebraska towns; a sense of community exists there, but apart from you. Stay long enough, and you may become integrated beyond distinction from the locals by someone even more lately come; but still, like a stepchild, you will never fully share the roots. In the true community--that place of first perceptions--you are family. It is something akin to blood.

I think part of the attachment to these communities has to do with the familiarity that isolation on the plains brings to them and with an equal unfamiliarity to any place else. It breeds a sort of provincialism, though it isn't true bigotry: intolerance of others must surely presuppose actual contact with them. We weren't completely isolated--every once in a while we would travel the two hundred and fifty miles west to Denver or east to Omaha to see "the city." We would quickly retreat from that confusing, unfriendly maze of people and buildings and noise, however, shaking our heads in amazement that people in their right minds would want to live that way. McCook was home, its people family, and anything we needed could be found there or brought in by rail or by truck.
When you drive a road all day and only pass two cars, it seems natural to wave a greeting; when the same man checks the moisture content of your wheat every loving trip to the elevator, weighs your truck before and after you dump the load, writes up your receipt--pretty soon you begin to feel a kinship. It doesn't take too many years before you know and like--or at least understand--most everyone.

A remnant of pioneering spirit lingers, too, a weather-worn stubbornness that pulls you through the bad years. The ability to work long and hard despite setbacks is a source of both pride and respect. Refuse to quit in frustration: work on, ignoring obstacles. Continue to cut wheat despite pitiful, drought-parched yields; stoop to salvage yet another ear of corn from among the acres of stalks that have been pounded to the ground by hailstones, beyond the reach of a combine. Cuss the stuff and hate the chore and feel like saying, "To hell with it," but do not give it up. Finish the job, and then, even if you take a beating, you sense success.
My daughter's third birthday was on September 9, 1989; it was a Saturday. On Sunday morning we climbed into the car, its front end nose skyward as if it knew that flying would be a much better way to cover 1700 miles of Oregon Trail—actually the rear suspension was no match for the misloaded U-Haul which contained the few possessions we couldn't bear to sell.

We stayed at Grandma Loshbaugh's from the first on to avoid paying double rent for the month. A birthday supper was a culmination of sorts, complete with the "house cake" that Hannah had picked out in Grandma's forty-year-old recipe pamphlet. It was the same cake my kid sister had chosen on her third birthday, though I'd like to think Aaron, who was sitting there on her lap, will choose the firetruck, as I did. I can see in him the same qualities that infuriate me in his mom, because they are mine as well—somehow in him, though, they flatter. The same cake: Hershey bar rectangle shutters and doors; hard sugar candy flowers mortared to the foundation with frosting; M&M shingles; green-tinted coconut grass.

But this was also a time for going-away-goodbyes. Grampa and Grandma Hyke came the sixty miles from the farm. I waited all evening for Shob to say again what
he did not say directly to me before, but to his wife who told her daughter who told me--I believe they all spoke the truth--and which he did not say again on this night. He did not understand why anyone would want to leave Nebraska; I could probably get a job at the Hendley Elevator, and they would treat someone who knew how to put in a day's work very well. He meant it with all of his heart. He saw it as the perfect solution. But it wasn't to be.

Hannah gave him a hug, finally--tight enough to last a while but not to squeeze out a tear: he is very strong that way, or at least he sees it as strength. It's kind of endearing, really, for he's quite transparent despite his stiff upper lip. Up to then he was content just to have her sitting there on his lap, as if for the last time.

We all knew it would be awhile. He will not go where he can not drive in the span of one day--his preference is for those places to which he can go and return under the same sun. Anyplace else is too far from his land (his father's land, his grandfather's homestead). He showed me a bunch of old photographs once, taken after a tornado, to compare with the aerial picture of the spread that the bank had awarded him for
being selected Southwest Area Conservationist of 1987, and which now hangs above the dining room table next to a picture of Beau, a jug of iced tea in his mouth, trotting toward the tractor.

He must be there, in that house, every morning when the sun comes over that familiar horizon, out past the barn and the cattle and the manure and the carefully crafted fields, out toward where the old house used to be, before the tornado. His house. His barn. His cattle and his manure. His fields. Even his horizon. Any place over a day's drive from there is no place at all.

It is different for me. I share the roots, and I feel them tugging at me sometimes. The lure of the plains, those beautifully flat, arid, naked plains--sometimes when Oregon's rain and trees, her fog and her foothills, have me feeling claustrophobic, I feel the pull quite strongly. But only sometimes. I think I'm more tumbleweed than tree.

After teaching in a little secondary school in eastern Nebraska for a few years, it was time for a
change. I do love to teach; I've discovered that. But I wanted something more than diagraming sentences and lunchroom duty; I wanted something different from coaching tennis and eighth grade angst. I wanted to be an English professor. To discuss literature with students equally caught up in the lure of books; steering young, enthusiastic writers along the intricacies of creating that which we both so admire: that, I've resolved, is what I want to do with my life. So we're in Oregon now, and I'm back in school, taking classes and learning first hand what's involved in teaching college students.

I've discovered, of course, that within any job there are distractions and disappointments—grading sixty freshman essays is not nearly as romantic as I'd imagined it might be. But I feel like I'm honing in on something, like I'm getting closer and closer to doing just the thing I'd most like to do with my life. The restlessness is subsiding some; the constant doubt, the constant desire to try something new, someplace else, is ebbing.

I've had a chance to watch the ocean out here, though. I picked up a tide table at a little seafood shop over on the coast, a shop where they rent out crab
baskets to the tourists. On the back of the table are crabbing instructions--which you can keep and which to throw back; how to measure them, some cooking tips. I never tried crabbing, but I did read a nice student essay about how it's done by serious crabbers with their boats and their pots and their long, soggy days on the sea. And I still carry that dated table in my wallet to remind me not of crabbing but that the tides of our lives ebb and flow. I'm sure that I'll want to move on again, soon, to wander and watch, to listen and muse, to develop a sense of yet another new place. That, I suppose, is a different story--and yet it also seems integral to this one.
II:  Daybreak

Greg and Binky's mom drops them off.
Lying on the floor, I peer up her dress:
Whiteness,
Slips and straps.

Kitchen match held to jutting house corner,
Greg and I attempt to lure firetruck.
Hard drops of dripped paint, dark with dirt,
Hang there; foundation's cracked.

"Reach!" screams Mother again, and I
Strain tippy-toed, arms stretching high,
Breathing the breath
Bounced back off a wall in my face.

Sinewy forearms shove shirt across washboard,
Into tub, through wringer.
"Fingers away!"
"No talking into the fan!"

"Reach," we whisper behind the garage.
Cold hands on teeny, warm penises—
Giggle.
Fill scooter gas tank with sand.

Bad boys; such bad boys.
My mother is a tough woman. That's not surprising to me, for looking back on what I know of her life—though I really don't know much; a few admissions, reluctantly let free during rare moments of reflection—I see little that would soften and much that might petrify.

She was born in 1922, the stubborn product of a rebellious Amish girl and a drifting cowboy. I never knew my grandmother—I don't even recall seeing a picture of her. She died when Mom was three. Grandpa remarried at least a couple of times, I know, and Mom was raised by her "granny": I'm not sure which one, though I suspect it must have been the Irish strain of McCracken ranchers rather than the pious Zooks. Her father was in and out of her life, I guess—I seem to recall her mentioning living with him for a time while she was in high school. He must have been between wives, for she spoke of "taking care of him": cooking, cleaning, the regular old housekeeping chores.

She grew up on the plains of Colorado, around 75 miles due east of Denver. I never do get the name of the nearest town right, but it was somewhere around
Anton or Lindon, those tiny, lonely shadow-towns that
you slow through if you ever drive the quiet route--
Highway 36--from Denver back toward McCook. Somewhere
between Last Chance and Cope.

Her granny's mark is most visible in Mom's strong
hands and forearms. Milking and churning, darning,
knitting, and quilting; scrubbing clothes on a
washboard in a big galvanized tub before feeding them
through a wringer; hanging them, ironing them--years of
these things made Mom stout. The dairy work I never
saw her perform (though she won't touch a glass of
milk), but to this day she knits afghans and
potholders, embroiders dishtowels and decorative
wallhangings, and transforms discarded clothing into
quilts on a makeshift frame: two sawhorses and a
couple of one-bys, a series of numbered holes drilled
along their ends, with four large nails pinning the
whole thing together. The washing, too, I saw
performed for several years as a boy, done down in the
unfinished basement of our huge house--we didn't get a
washer and dryer until the late sixties.

Even her cooking I remember as a physical display:
the rough slapping and pounding, twisting and kneading
of the dough, first, flour flying everywhere; then the
waiting while it rose, sitting in deep, dishtowel- 
covered tins on the dining room radiator, under the 
south window, bathed in the bright winter sun. She'd 
flour the whole kitchen table, next, and stretch the 
dough wafer-thin; pour on the butter, sprinkle on the 
cinnamon, the brown sugar, the oodles of raisins; roll 
the whole mess up like a sleeping bag and slice off the 
rounds. Wedge the pans full and cook. Dump the 
bulging pans on racks to cool, out on the frosty back 
porch. And then the clean-up, before the first bite, 
the table scrubbed and pulled apart, flour scraped from 
its seam while I filched raisins from beneath the 
cooling rack where they fell.

Whine because Judy gets fussed over; 
Wind up in dancing lessons. 
Shuffle-ball-step. 
Walk old lady's dog, two bucks a week.

Home from school, sore throat. 
Trace animals, Mom cooks. 
Thin paper on window pane, 
Radiator roasting butt, raising dough.

Crush on Miss Schaffer: 
Trudge across town with Jimmy S. 
"Trick or Treat!" we shout. 
A husband. A big husband.
Picked to be Korean boy's helper.
Lie that both brothers in Nam--
Really stateside. One tests
Nuclear subs, one stocks store on base.

Show my tracings at Show and Tell
And tell the truth, "These are traced."
Dance "Tip Top Tap" at recital,
And "Clown Dance" and "Frankie and Johnny".

Pretty Christy on my knee at the end--
I'm not sure which one of us is Frankie.

I began my first job in 1965, working for Mrs.
Kleven. I was six years old, and the only indication I
had that there was any evil in this world--any wars
being fought, any ghettoes erupting in the flames of
civil riot--came in those fleeting moments when I
arrived, promptly at 7:30 every morning, seven days a
week, to fetch Peter, her poodle. Her television,
tuned to the Today show, was turned up loud--she must
have been seventy, then, at least; I could hear Joe or
Hugh or Tom with the latest dire reports as with final
small-boy steps I approached her apartment door. But
that was all I knew of anything ugly: Peter and I,
both bundled in winter coats on frigid days, both
panting and slowed a bit on scorchers, proceeded out
into the vast wonderland of the quiet, early morning
streets of McCook.
We took the same route most days--down two blocks, west two, back north, then across in a large square--stopping occasionally so he could attend to the business of our outing while I, politely, looked away. We'd venture into alleys, once in a while, where I'd collect cigar butts in little plastic mouthpieces--someone's wife must have shooed him out back to indulge in his after-supper smoke--and I would smell them and draw on them unlit, fascinated by the aroma of the weed. Once Mrs. Kleven entrusted me with a letter to deliver, and, seeing a local address and thirsting for adventure, I passed by several corner dropboxes and even the Post Office on Main Street to sneak up the steps at the proper address and place it in the box myself. The dog was winded, and his duties were neglected that day, I remember, for we went twice as far as usual on this walk, and I rushed to arrive back in the normal time.

I remember the birds; I remember the dirty ridges of refrozen slush and the awkward way the dog shat, tippy-toe in the high snow, steam rising from the soft, brown curls. I remember the few people I would inevitably see each day: Ma Teeter, who would be my American History teacher ten years later, walking her
own white dog; the simple-minded man who washed windows downtown, as he still does today; the paperboy, occasionally, if he was late; Mrs. Jones, out for her morning walk, a collie and two or three cats—all unleashed—following quietly behind. There must have been some light traffic on the streets, people heading for work, but I don’t remember much. Most stores downtown didn’t open until nine, I guess, so maybe that explains the sense of quiet. The trees towering over my six-year-old head, the birds (and once a kitten, which I gallantly rescued) in them, the wide expanse of dawn-hued sky, and the carefully manicured lawns we soiled: these things I remember.

On our return the routine was repeated without variation: "Did he go both ways?" she’d ask. "Yes," I’d usually say, whether it was true or not; occasionally, if my conscience was troubled, I’d admit, "Number One, but not Number Two. . . ." I don’t know how we’d come to agree on these euphemisms—I’m positive she never said, "One will be Pee, Two will be Poo"—but they served us fine the full time I was employed there. She gave me two, crisp dollar bills each Friday after the rounds; to this day, the very first two, framed by swimming ribbons and medals, are
tacked in the center of a bulletin board, buried in the closet of my old bedroom, in the house where I grew up--the house where Mother still lives.

On Christmas morning she always had a tin of homemade peanut-brittle waiting for me: my end-of-the-year bonus, I guess. It went on that way for two years, and then the dog died--I still remember her sadness, her concern for my reaction when she gave me the news that winter dawn. Her TV was oddly silent, and she clutched two final dollars for an uncompleted week in her aged hand.

This wasn't the end of my morning work: I soon had a paper route, *The Omaha World-Herald*, which got me out at six-thirty or so to see the sun rise along the same, downtown route I learned with Peter. Mrs. Kleven was gone by then though, moved to a carehome across town: I never saw her again after that odd final day. When I hit junior high I was on my way downtown in the 5 o'clock darkness to wash stacks of bread pans, cake pans and cookie sheets, first, and then to take the several racks of deep-fried donuts from Ponch and glaze them, trying not to burn my fingers, before placing them on a transport rack and heading up front. It wasn't until then that the venture into the morning
lost something: maybe the stirrings of an adolescent mind blocks the senses; maybe it was the waiting pile of pans to wash; maybe, too, I'd merely come to realize that the world I was venturing into was a long sight from paradise.

Worhol's right:
The ten o'clock news shows me Holding my trophy--
Triple winner: Breast, Free, I.M.

Long day; fell asleep and missed it. Damn commercials. She's Hanoi Jane, she's Barbarella-- "Poor Henry, a Nebraska boy."

Bank President sends newspaper clipping in card-- "See you're in the News!"
Jacket patches, name sprawling left chest, Hair slicked back, shy grin.

Nixon's the one-- "Damned Republican"; Ride train to Chicago, see supply officer, Buy peace sign, hippie costume, and Easy Rider poster--map shows McCook.

Poor Henry.

Mother raised four kids ahead of my little sister and me, starting with Marvin, born in 1942, six months after Pearl Harbor. It was just the two of them during the war years what with Dad in Europe. Then the second
wave, starting in '47--Rick, Lana, Carol, all a couple years apart. By '59, when I came along, Marvin was ready for college. In '64, I hit kindergarten, Rick finished high school, Lana started, and Carol toted her French horn the cold mile to junior high. Mom was 43 that year and Dad 50. I think they may have been getting a little tired of having kids underfoot--Dad especially what with the extra seven that showed up each morning as he was leaving for work, dropped by their mothers into Opal's capable hands. (All the kids called her Opal except my sister and me: Judy said "Mommy," and later "Mom"; with me, for as long as I can remember, it was a formal, arm's-length-like "Mother.")

Dad pretty much stayed away all day and in the evenings after supper drowsed in his recliner while the TV flickered shadows around the quiet, empty living room. With Mom it was more subtle. She mostly just kept on the go, and if you got her stopped for a second she quickly found some game or project which would keep you self-absorbed for another hour or so.

She was big on determination, will-power, self-confidence. She wouldn't hear an "I can't" nor acknowledge the thought that there was anything ("and I
mean anything") you couldn't do if you'd "just put your mind to it." I could be a baseball player or a swimming champ or an artist; I could tap dance the best and sing the best and tie the meanest shoe in town. I grew up a snob, an egotist, for I was convinced that believing the best of myself was three-fourths of the battle. It wasn't until high school that I realized that there were just some things--hell, most things--that I couldn't do "the best." When I started getting honest with myself, the list grew (to my horror) to include everything. I wasn't, and never would be, best at anything. It took me a long time to admit that to myself--longer, I think, than most.

There had been plenty of opportunity for me to hone my expertise. By the time I hit junior high I'd taken in dance, piano, and drum instruction; I'd been on the swim team for four years, played baseball, raced bikes. I'd been to Church School each summer, each Sunday as well; I'd been to Art Camp and Y Camp, had joined the Boy Scouts. I was trustworthy loyal helpful, friendly courteous kind, obedient cheerful thrifty, brave clean and reverent. On my honor, I swore to do my best.
I sold candy door to door to earn my Y membership, sold soup supper tickets to raise swim team funds. I walked the dogs or delivered the papers or mowed the lawns. I practiced my piano, my dancing, my drums, was shooed off to the library, the park, the museum. I stayed damn busy doing my best--and doing it someplace else.

Don't judge a scout by his pledges. A guy learns to walk the walk and talk the talk, to practice at hypocrisy.
III: Sun to Sun

There are times
when all the world's asleep
the questions run too deep
for such a simple man. . .

--- "The Logical Song"

I used to listen to Supertramp on Dickmeyer's stereo, and that refrain always seems to come back to me--I even catch myself murmuring it aloud sometimes when the world has me baffled.

I first fell in love with the group while a gandy for BN. I was on this really cake Smoothing Gang with Jonesy and Hiatt and some jerk named Carl. We drove to Holdrege every morning, left at five, and then headed out on the highline where there were no bigshots around and a guy could fuck off if he wanted to. One of the machine operators, Dickmeyer, took a liking to me and Jonesy because we were essentially the only ones working. Everyone else was either lying crosswise on
the rails--using their hard hats for pillows--or sneaking off to blow one or slamming a shot of Tequila (to heal ya) or just leaning there on their shovels. I always figured that eight hours passed much more quickly if I stayed busy, and besides, I felt a little guilty if I did nothing at all for the kind of money they were giving me. Jonesy, he was just hyper I think, but maybe a little conscientious, too.

Dickmeyer was running the tamper, and if he was going to make any headway at all, he needed rock thrown up around the ties for him to jam under. Me and Jonesy, we stayed beside those bouncing paddles at his front end and shoveled ballast for eight solid hours. It was fun, really--no shit. And besides, it wasn't as loud or as hot up there.

So, like I say, Balls took a liking to us, and invited us to stay with him and his brother, Bear, at their house on Johnson Lake. I don't remember what happened to Hiatt or ol' Carl--they may have been bumped, maybe they quit, maybe they stuck it out for the duration, driving together every day. Me and Jonesy, though, we cut our travel time drastically and yet still were on full expenses. And Balls' house was great, a constant party from early evening into the wee
hours. Balls, the son-of-a-bitch, was the only one who ever got much stray, but just having some girls about was nice. We'd go over to the Marina every evening around eight or so and listen to the bands and get shitfaced and then talk at least a couple of vacationing little rich girls into coming back to the place for a while.

Jonesy got to calling me a twice-a-day soak. It was true, kind of--I did have a couple of beers after work, lying there in the small living room in the cool and the dark and listening to Supertramp ponder life, a sax always crying between climactic verses until I fell asleep. I'd get up to eat around six or so, have a shower and some chow--Bear was a great cook--and then off we'd be to the Marina; next morning up early, go through the fuzzy first hour of coffee and some junk food, maybe, depending on how drunk we still were, then off to another eight hours of shoveling ballast, sweating out the whiskey, feeling gradually better as the sun climbed to full, overhead blaze. Off at 2:30, ready to do it all again. It was great.

In mid-August I quit--headed to Lincoln to try out UNL. I blew my saving in just over a semester drinking lots of whiskey and staying home more and more from the
tough classes and strange environment of that maze. I spent a lot of time listening to Supertramp, singing along on the "questions run too deep" part and on the "Won't you please, please tell me who I am?" and remembering the life I'd passed up.

That's the last time I was ever a gandy—I had done it the summer before Johnson Lake, but I was on a mainline Tie Gang, then, where white hats were all over the place and you worked your fucking ass off. I don't remember much of that, just the pain of the work. But I remember Johnson Lake and Balls and Bear and me and Jonesy, living the high life. I remember, sometimes, when I catch myself thinking I must be simple, much too simple, for some of the deeper questions in this life, questions we were able to forget about, then, that we were able to ignore in the simple reality of getting enough rock under the tampers while the rhythm of its motion lulled us through hour after hour, day after loving day, one tie at a time.

I took the first job I could find after dropping out of UNL—as a roustabout in the oil fields near
McCook. Flipper got me on with the outfit he was working for; he was a "wild kid" I'd graduated from high school with. We hadn't had much to do with each other then—we were a different breed of boys, him hellraising, refusing to play at school, me a joiner, eager to please. But we'd gandyed together the first time I'd tried it and we drank together amid the same group of friends.

It was in the old L&S Saloon that I ran into him one March evening shortly after returning home; "Loose and Smith's" it had been, but the two old men were gone. It was mainly just a pool hall after Ben and Steve took over. They quit serving food—it had been a popular lunchtime hangout for the working class crowd in my old man's day—and they put in an impressive stereo system. It was still a working class bar, but a younger, rougher crowd. A few of the old boys did come in during the day, though, the snooker players mostly, and they could sure humble us cocky young guys if egged into a game of regular stick.

"Want a job?" Flipper asked me that night. He walked over to the phone at my nod, made a quick call. "I'll pick you up at 6:30," he said on his return. "Got workboots? Got gloves?"
It was a straggly bunch, the guys we worked with setting pumping units, laying flowline, hauling tubing or surface pipe or rods to the drilling units from the field office grounds near Stratton; it was hilly country, pasture mostly, long grass and yucca, rattlesnakes and cattle, with scattered fields of wheat and a little irrigated corn. Hitchcock and Dundy counties, Nebraska, in the extreme southwest corner. Open land and dry under a wide, circling sky, crisp blue or bright white. From any hilltop you could see for miles west into Colorado, the ranch land where Mom grew up, or southeastward into Kansas, where in 1887 Great-grandfather Albert Dennis Loshbaugh claimed a homestead in Smith county, smack dab in the middle of the USA.

We built fences around the rancid water pits near drilling sites and around the pumpers, too, to keep the cattle out; we set storage tanks—tank batteries they called them—and dressed them out with catwalks and fire berms, rectangular, shallow ditches trenched around each battery with the backhoe, the displaced dirt piled up along the outside to create a small mound.
clear around. The emphasis, I remember, was on neatness, on symmetry: fenceposts all the same height and lined arrow straight—we'd snap a chalk-line sometimes on the hardpacked soil, though we learned fairly quickly to eyeball things. The berms, too, dressed with shovel and rake until the slant on either side was perfect and true, forming a uniform wedge.

There are moments from that time I will never forget: we watched a tornado for an hour one day as it stirred up the dust, maybe five maybe ten miles away, moving from southwest to northeast. I'm not sure how far away it was, but it curved a long thin tail down from high in the sky, off on the horizon. No one in charge seemed overly concerned—we worked steadily along, though we kept our eye on the thing and took a gander around the sky, occasionally, watching for more to appear. We were stringing flowline, the stinger of the ditchwitch slowly cutting its five-foot deep trail, and I remember thinking if things got chaotic and that powerful, wonderful tentacle of nature came at us that I'd merely try to squeeze myself as tightly as possible into the trench between the powdery soft mounds of backfill, sideways, I decided, so I could watch it rip by.
I jumped down in a header hole once to make some connection--attach a riser or something in that gravelike box we'd dug--and I looked up in the middle of my work to see a bullsnake inches from my face. For a moment, just a moment, I was sure it was a rattler, and I damn near shit: all I wished for was a shovel and all I carried was some PVC connection--a "tee" I think--a can of cleaning solvent, a rag, and a can of glue. I didn't know whether to chuck something at it or what; I was so unsettled I finally just dropped everything and scampered out. It was gone when I looked back down from above and I returned, somewhat sheepishly, to finish the job, taking a ribbing from the country boys: "Shit, Losh, it's just a bullsnake."

Lightning, too, would attack the field now and then; I've never seen anything to equal the destruction of a tank battery hit in a storm: huge holes ripped in the sides of the massive tanks; connections twisted and strewn widely about in the explosion, catwalk tattered and ripped, metal dark with char and oil. You climbed down quickly from the top of those tanks if a storm rolled in after seeing something like that. But I liked it up there on the top of the batteries, liked it most of all. It was hotter than hell in the summertime
there and on windy days or atop oil-slicked tops you really had to work for balance, but I never feared a fall. I loved to look out over the land from there, to realize that nature with her tools of swirl or spark or snake could never hope to hit all of our unnatural targets--the land was far too vast for her to wipe away those tiny traces of man carved on its surface.

It was fine while I was a hand; eventually, though, I became a foreman, since I could write out acceptable invoices--reporting the work done, the labor and equipment hours--and without screwing up the work sites. Each of the units had a name and number, a combination of the landowners name and a quadrant designation, say the Neiman 15-2, where old man Neiman sculpted a large mound along side the pumping unit so a pivot irrigation section could still swing by--my original foreman kept screwing up the tickets.

When I was a hand I could bask in the pleasure of the work, work that always lasted sun to sun, shorter days in winter and some dandy overtime in summer, followed by a stop at the nearest tavern on the way back to the yard--Tom's Tavern in Bartley or The Half
Moon in Culbertson or Nighttracks in Indianola or The Lebanon Pool Hall, depending on where we had finished that day. We'd grab a six for the ride home if we were bushed, but often we'd hang around awhile to shoot pool, shoot the breeze, mainly just clear the dust and be boys—gossiping, playing practical jokes, giving each other shit.

As a foreman, though, I had less time to gaze in private speculation over the vast land from atop a battery; as a foreman, I began to run equipment—drive the winch truck (which I rolled once) or run the hoe or the ditcher; as a foreman I let less able workers handle the shovels or the tubing or the wrenches; as a foreman I had to worry not only about doing my job but about every other lazy mother's son doing his, which some did but some did not. I began to take the job too seriously; I began to hate the job.

I quit, headed to California for a couple of months to check out the fabric business my brother was building—15 stores now. But the land of sun was the wrong land, buried under people and buildings and freeways, the sun itself lost in a haze, even the palm trees somehow fake.

No, I didn't want to run a fabric store—
especially in L.A. I just wanted to go back to some barren land and find a grunt job, out in the harshest of elements, to occupy my body while my mind roamed free, sun to sun.
My father was an old man by the time I was a boy—which was for the good, of course. Maturity, security, having been there a bit: all fine father traits. Took me a while to figure that out, though.

I was plain uneasy around him. If he didn't talk I laid low and if he did I jumped. He wasn't a tyrant; just distracted, mostly. I could slip about the house, day in and out, without him seeing me. Walking down main street, him coming up, I had to call him, startled, from reveries. In cars, too, later on—drive right through a wave.

Just didn't see me was all. Took me a while to figure that one out, too.

For a long time I was ashamed of my father. Now I'm ashamed of that shame, though that's too little too late. He was just different from other kid's fathers. He was more like a grandfather there at swim meets and class plays. If we played basketball it was only
Twenty-one, and then he was likely to shoot his freethrows like a girl—kind of an underhanded squat-throw. He didn't bow his legs and come up from between them, but he might as well have. I was embarrassed; and he won, mostly, which didn't help a bit.

He was unsocial, too, or at least it seemed so then. Out shopping or dealing with any know-it-all who happened by, he seemed downright rude. I realize now that it was experience I saw in his demeanor. He had a habit of asking all the hard questions, no matter how unpleasant he seemed. I saw his cutting through bullshit as bullshit itself though, then.

He was moody, would go about frowning and impatient for several quiet days at a time. Then he'd erupt, usually over the simplest things, his anger bomb-like: contained and so volatile that the merest spark could set it off.

He would telegraph his outbursts with visible signs—Mother calls them birthmarks on me. "You've got your father's birthmark," she'll say, noticing the red splotch at the base of the hairline at the back of my neck. My daughter has it too—Grandma checked, right after she counted toes. On our foreheads, just like
Dad, we'll get a little red diamond right between the eyebrows when we anger, and the mark on the back of the neck will glow then, too. It was kind of handy on my father; from the front or the back those glowing marks would tip a guy off: the old man's about to blow.

It was always just verbal abuse: I never saw him strike anyone. Mother used to spank us, occasionally, and we'd do a good job of poking and pawing at each other, but Dad never touched one of us kids. He'd just rant and rave--temper tantrums. Then he'd stalk off somewhere and when he came back he was meek as a puppy dog. He never apologized outright; the subject was just dropped and he, relieved of the stress, would go about in his fidgety, distracted way until the pressure built again.

Dad was as alone in this world as anyone I've ever known. He had no friends though he was well respected by many: it wasn't until after his death, though, that I discovered this. The funeral packed the huge church, and for several years after that people who had known him, people who had come there to pay their respects that day, would approach me to tell me what a fine man he was. Honest. Intelligent. Competent in any job he was given at BN--signalman, warehouseman, ticket clerk,
dispatcher—even though he hated them all, hated the 35 years he gave them. I don't think they'd told him these things, and I think it might have made a lot of difference in his moodiness if they only had. But like I said, he didn't get close to people; there was even a cushion of space between him and his children. He didn't spank us, but he didn't hug us either. He didn't belittle us, other than the occasional harsh word during one of his spells of anger—words that were invariably on the mark anyway—but neither did he praise us.

Maybe it was his own childhood. His mother died from complications of his birth, and his father left him to be raised by an aunt and uncle. That was in 1915. His father fought in "the great war to end all wars" and then came back to begin the railroading tradition which his son would later carry on. But Grandpa was a welder, a job that took him all over the place, and so he seldom saw Dad. By the time Mother met him in the late thirties, Dad was working full time as a storekeeper and picking up any odd labor job that came along. His Aunt was diabetic and going blind. She needed some taking care of, and he'd managed that, too, until it became necessary for a full time nurse. That turned out to be Mom.
He was 25 and she turned 19 on the day they married in 1941. They decided they wanted a big family, maybe to make up for the families they'd never had. Both motherless, both raised fatherless, one brother for Mom and Dad an only child, they found each other and began, immediately, to have children.

Along about when I hit junior high, somehow it got into my head that I'd never told him I loved him and that I should. While Christmas shopping, I came across a little ceramic statuette that seemed just the ticket, it reminded me of him so. The same bald head, the roundness of the belly, and at the base it said, most importantly, "I Love You Just The Way You Are."

Ruined that Christmas Eve, I did. I had focused on the words, but all he saw was the fat, the baldness. The red marks shone like the ornamental Star of Bethlehem he'd hung between the windows over the front porch. He looked at me in total confusion, said something like "If that isn't a hell of a note," and disappeared upstairs. I cried. I tried to explain to the rest of my bewildered family what I'd meant by the gift, and I think they understood. But still I cried,
because the person I had wanted so desperately to understand did not. He stayed upstairs.

When I helped Mother go through his things, a few years later, I found that figurine stashed in the knickknack drawer of his dresser. He had saved it after all, though I was sure he must have destroyed it that night in his rage. Maybe Mom explained it to him. Maybe he figured it out. Doesn't matter, I guess. At least he knew what I meant, no matter how awkward my effort had been. At least he had saved my token of love.

"Your father always said you had to be handled with kid gloves," my mother told me once, after he was gone. I'd never heard the expression before, but when I found out what it meant I saw I'd been practicing that skill all along. Dad, too, demanded an oh so delicate touch. . .
Sunday morning in the aisle,
Swirling carpet, popcorn crumbs;
Sticky spills stain the concrete
Down the slope of bolted seats.
Paper boxes, gum and dust,
Smelling soap, first, then musk.

Heaven?
"But it hurt," she said.
Rubber?
"Didn't break," she said.
No we really shouldn't,
Not again. Once again.

Dirty. Not the best and
Not the worst yet
Far from great. But
Dirty. Surely dirty--
Will I ever penetrate
Without shame?

Jack Jones was a big old man with a shock of gray
hair and gray fingers, too, from the carbon. He had
tits like a woman, and his gut was pocked with red
spotches. He taught me how to run the projectors at
the Fox when I was 15.

It was warm in the booth and cramped; the space
was barely adequate for him and with two of us was
really strained. He hovered over me and perspired,
showing and telling me just what to do, then making me
show and tell back.

"When you thread the sound box, here, get 'er snug
but not too tight--back off two slots from firm," he'd say every time. "She'll bounce just like Jello if she's right. See there? Thump her. See?"


Or the orchestration of a changeover, begun with earnest yet careful energy at the sound of a bell--it was attached to a stick and had been tracking an exasperatingly slow arc downward, riding the ever-shrinking upper reel, bouncing rhythmically over undulations until. . . Ping!: Fire up the lamphouse, the current flipped on, the negative gold carbon inched up at a 45 into contact with the positive one, horizontal and gray. Backed off quickly, then, and fine tuned according to the color and shape of the flame's reflection on a graph.

"There we go! Just that shade of green, just so and just there. That's just right, just there. Now get up to the window. Watch for the dots."

"Upper right hand corner." I'd say.

"That's right."
And there I'd bend, my right hand curled under the switch of the quiet motor which would set the film twirling, my left crooked upward and back and gripping the douser handle, my eyes, focused and fighting off blinks, glued to the corner of the screen.

"First dot," I'd say, flipping the switch. "One."

Rise to upright, my eyes still locked on the screen, my right thumb moving to the button at my waist, wired to send the paddle of the other machine's douser flapping down between its lamphouse and film.

"Two," then, in clipped rhythm. "Open douser."

Left hand moving to sound switch now, right thumb still on douser relay, eyes unwavering.

Then "Three," as the second flurry of dots flashed by: douse the other projector's light and flip the sound. "Changeover!" I'd confirm as I let out my breath. "That one was clean!"

"Clean indeed," he'd say. "Now get your film rewound, and get reel six threaded. Don't forget to check your carbons."

A pause, for effect. "Yep, all in threes. Rewind, thread, carbons: one, two, three. Intermittent, soundbox, bottom loop: one, two, three. Everything in threes. Just remember that and you'll do fine."
To be alone in the booth is to be caught in a gray area between audience and actors. I was an integral part of the production: I'd spliced together the preview reel, had raised the heavy curtain and dimmed the stage lights—bright whites first, the soft glow of the reds and blues allowed to linger on the expanding whiteness—to show it. I'd changed the flat lense for a scope one, then, for previews were always flat and square, yet most movies were CinemaScope, the characters all stretched and thin on a shorter, wider screen. I'd adjusted the masking and curtain to the new format; I'd stepped from the booth to check out the volume. I took care of my one, two, threes, and the film and the glue and the carbons coated my hands with actual pieces of Hollywood.

But I felt part of the audience, too. I watched with them time and again, same film twice a night and sometimes two weeks running. I always missed the same scenes what with threading and all, but I listened and followed along as I went through my paces. And when I tired of watching the film, I watched the audience.
Anticipating some moment of mirth from the screen, I'd delight in watching their delight; with music building ominously, a shark or knife or bodypart about to flash on screen, I'd take the same perverse pleasure as a filmmaker might in watching the watchers jump.

There was a surreal quality about watching them. Sometimes I don't think I saw them as any more real, as any more three-dimensional, than the actors on screen. They were just an extension of the screen; they were just another show. The arc of light would cut through the smoke above those in the balcony to fill the screen with my heroes--Clint, Burt, Robert, Paul--and always by their sides some lovely woman. Under the light, sitting sometimes close, sometimes entirely alone, were my classmates, my peers, their families. To me, I think, they were just another movie I watched through glass, characters as far from me as those more famous ones beyond, and acting in a film without sound.

Have you ever watched someone laugh without hearing the laughter? Have you ever watched a hundred people start, all at once, all a group, without hearing their collective gasp? I would watch them until I almost felt a part of them. But my ears, then, picking up only the hum of the machines and my own crackling
laughter echoed off sooty walls—my ears reminded me that I was, after all, all alone.

On the back wall of the booth was a small wooden window that was always open for air. Beyond the window I could see most of Norris Avenue despite the marquee, its red neon humming, its white bulbs flashing laps up the center staff, around the loop, back down the other side. The Fox was only half-a-block from the top of the hill where the County Courthouse, Methodist Church, YMCA, and Carnegie Library framed a four-way stop around the heart of the town.

South from here, all the way down the long hill to the depot, was business: newspaper office, theater, Keystone Hotel, and post office on the first block; bakeries and clothing stores, shoe stores and banks, drug stores and hardware, insurance men and barbers—seems like there were two of each—scattered on down to the Speakeasy and the lumberyard, butted up against the tracks. From the depot at the foot of Norris Avenue many pictures have been taken, the gradual angle of the hill's rise giving this small town a false sense of
towering height. It's odd, but it looks just as big from the opposite angle—looking down that long hill from high above.

The street was brick and glistened with ice. Taillights left neon streamers there and the bricks hummed under the tires of white teenagers flashing laps up the street, around the loop, back down the other side. The building were all huge, all brick, all three-quarters of a century old. Dying, too; dead, mostly, by now. The Y, ballroom stacked on gym over pool—abandoned, replaced by one more spacious and sprawling. Post Office, it's hugh pillared stairway out front, its wood-paneled courtrooms and law offices on the third floor—ditto. Ditto library and newspaper and banks; even the donut shops and lumberyards spread to town's edge. It wasn't that way though, then: downtown was still vibrant.

North from the hilltop, Norris leveled into a beautiful residential street, although a mortuary or flower shop did encroach; the street widened to accommodate center islands, green with clipped grass and bushes. Trees a good century old loomed over candle-like streetlamps; the houses, tall and porched, were set back from the street behind broad terraces.
that were green or white (depending on season) but always open and clean. You saw people or hints of them through large windows or on porches or weeding yards that were unfenced and hedgefree. You knew most of the houses by family name--Sutton, Cottingham, Donohue, Ault; Morris and Vap on up a bit, and then Bradley and Karrer. There were 8,000 people and you pretty much knew where they lived.

East and west are symmetrical: East First, West First, Second, Third, Tenth. It is all residential for a couple mile stretch except a parabolic curve around downtown; 6 & 34 runs along the south edge, parallel to the tracks, and is fronted by motels and gas stations, fast food and car lots, liquor stores, auto parts, shit like that. Eighty-three comes in from the dryland up north, skirts the west side, hangs hard left onto 34 through town, then flips back south on the viaduct over the tracks, over the Republican River Bridge, bound for Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas. Get five miles south and the green tapers off substantially--more pasture, less crop. By the time you hit the Oklahoma panhandle, you haven't seen a tree for miles and the grass is about to fade out, too.

There are some green spots clustered around rivers
and streams down there, of course, and the same is true way up north of town. Springtime—a short Spring—it's all pretty green. But most days you'll just find a wide barren space between the rivers around McCook: there's a good stretch of nothing north and a smaller but just as desolate stretch south. Good country to get away to, to cruise through in pickup trucks on cold winter nights or muggy summer ones, out where you can hoot and holler and drink and stop to walk or piss or just sit silent listening to the heater or the insects or the wind.

The smell of schnapps
Carries with it memories
Of breezy pickup rides
Over moonlit, snowpacked country roads,
Sipping and smoking
And cheerfully chatting
The night away.

The sight of a bottle of sloe gin
And I'm in the dark backseat of Jonesy's Chevelle, parked
At the edge of some field,
With Debbie or Connie or Terri;
Or else I'm crawling over
Into that backseat
As the car speeds back
Down the road toward town
To squeeze between some pair of them
Or some pair like them
And thinking I must be
In Heaven.
It was in the evening, an early evening in February, when evening still comes early, that Mother called with the news. I was living in Kearney, living alone, for Jonesy had quit school, had headed to the big patch in Wyoming with Egghead. Flipper was already out there. Me, though, I had stayed in school, switching to an English major, math minor--I'd decided at least I might teach.

Dad was glad of that, I think, glad I was finally focused on something. He'd had a sense of calm those last two years, since he'd retired. He read the Bible a lot and joined a study group at the church in the evenings. Daytime, he'd taken a part-time job--more for something to do than for the money--driving a delivery truck for the Gazette. The Newsboy, it was called, those words painted in fancy script on the side of the little pickup he drove on a route covering the small towns to the east and south of McCook, dropping bundles of papers for the real newsboys. He'd head northeast on 34, first, following the Republican through Indianola, Bartley, Cambridge and Arapahoe; swing south then to hit Beaver City before heading back southwest through Wilsonville, Lebanon and Danbury, tracing Beaver Creek along a twisting path downstream
toward the Kansas border. Back north on 83, finally, circling back into McCook. Farm country and farming towns—a pretty drive, really, in the late afternoons. Mom rode with him sometimes, keeping quiet company, I imagine, as she tends to do on a drive; but alone mostly, alone with his thoughts on the road in the few hours leading into dusk each winter day.

And then one day, one day in late February, on a curve just east of Bartley, between the bluffs to his north and the Republican to his south, it ended. A kid, a young kid from Montana, traveling from a failed attempt to work for his Nebraska uncle toward a stab at it with another one in Colorado—that poor kid swerved from his lane on that curve into my father's. There was a picture of The Newsboy on the Gazette's front page the next day; it wasn't pleasant to look at for long.

Dad hung in there for an hour or so—he was still alive when the first call came. "Bob?" It was my little sister. "Dad's had an accident. We're in Cambridge at the hospital."

"Is he okay?" I stammered. "I mean, he's going to be all right, isn't he?"

Silence. I could hear her gathering her
composure, fighting for the right words. "I don't know. It's pretty bad. His pelvis is broken and both legs, too. He's pretty bruised up; they think there might be bleeding inside. . . ."

"I'll be right there. Tell Mom I'll be there in an hour or so. I'm coming. . . ."

"No. . . Mom says no. Stay there. They may be flying him there any minute. . . ."

So I waited, a tense twenty minutes I waited and wondered and tried to shake off the shock. Mom called, then, to tell me my father was gone. I drove the dark road back that night, remembering the things I'd said and the things I hadn't; I swerved erratically, once, oversteering in response to some tumbleweed, suffering from something like tunnel vision. The road home led me past the site of the accident, though I couldn't see anything--I thought maybe I saw some rubber on the road, but wasn't sure. I lost it then though, cried for the first time. And behind my tears loomed the vision of my father as I had seen him last, standing there in the driveway next to the house and waving to me as I left for Kearney State College, winter term.
His face caught the glow of the late afternoon sun, and the shadows of branches flickered on his face. Waving to me. Just standing there smiling contentedly at me and waving. He'd never done that before; now he'd never do it again.
V: Nightshift

Cheers.
Notice the smile on my lips as I say that.
Notice the smile on your own as we toast.
Lift your glass high now; do it for me.
Come along with me and share with me
My cheer.

I worked the nightshift, once: Electric Hose and Rubber, a division of Dayco Corporation. It was McCook's one bigtime factory, built south of the tracks in the early seventies; it employed several hundred people, mostly housewives forced to work by hard times, older men whose lives had consisted of shuffling from job to job, a few displaced farmers, and the young riffraff who couldn't--through lack of initiative, imagination, or skill--do anything else. Fresh back from California, I hired on, 11-7, in Finish. It was grunt work all right, but inside that place, all iron and sheetmetal, broiling in summer and nippy in winter, all cooped up like that--just wasn't the same.

We made hose--garden hose, both vinyl and rubber, automotive hoses, and electrical casing. Eight hours a
night in Finish, surrounded by people I was sure were secretly laughing at me, the big shot, the brain, humble enough now to stand at the end of a conveyor belt trying to keep up with the steady flow of coiled and tied garden hoses. My job: clamp a male coupling to one end, a female to the other, both quickly dipped in soap, inserted into the hose, then jammed into an expansion mechanism, which with a press of my foot clamped them, the air streaming out onto my fingers. End of the line, all most. I handed them, two at a time, to a tattooed, long-haired kid from North Platte, who in turn packed them six to a case on a pallet, thirty six cases to the load.

He would slap gooey tape on each box and cinch up each palletful with twine, his oversized street-fighting knife flashing sometimes too near me as he cut the twine from its spool. The fork lift scooted them off to the warehouse, then, ready to be shipped. Didn't take many brains to do that job; I'd become proficient during the first hour.

I was a diligent worker. I avoided conversation with the others; didn't, as many did, take frequent bathroom or smoking breaks; didn't come to work loaded or drunk. I just did my job and did it well. The
supervisor, a lady named Claire, wandered from station to station, face not quite frowning but far from friendly, watching silently, pausing occasionally to give a stern scowl to quiet a giggling conversation or get a daydreaming link in the chain back on task. I didn't know what she thought of me until she asked, one morning toward dawn (though you knew so only by the clock), if I'd like to stay over half a shift to pack pallets.

"Sure," I said, though I don't know why--I really wasn't interested in overtime, didn't really relish the thought of twelve instead of eight hours in that dungeon--but, somehow, I understood that a good worker asked no questions, refused no requests. I did that frequently after, and one night when a big shot came in looking for a replacement worker in the compound area--someone sharp and steady--Claire knew immediately the man for the job.

One month along and already promoted. The old man was encouraged: "Work your tail off in a large company," he said, "and eventually the cream will rise to the top." I snickered; then, seeing how serious he was, held my tongue. If I'd spoken my mind, though, I'd have told him he was nuts: I had no desire to make
EH&R a career, as he had BN. Did he want me to end up like him, feeling bitter and trapped by family obligations, stuck in a job I hated, yearning for the final few years to pass until I was eligible for early retirement? Shit.

Compound was better: more money, first off, but the luxury, too, of variety in the work. I mixed the various dyes, according to what hose was on line that night, adding them to the fifty pound bags of compound that I sliced open and poured into the large hopper. An auger dumped the mixture into a huge bin where it slowly flowed into the hot tubing machine: powder flowed in; hot, fused, shimmering snakes of hose flowed out. Occasionally I'd climb the ladder to check the depth of the mixture in the hopper, lingering there, usually, to look out over the masses of people, watching them work or loaf or try to look busy. I'd climb down to check with the foreman how many more loads he thought; often I needed to clean the auger if switching from vinyl to rubber or changing color. I was often ahead, the next batch of dye already mixed, the bags of compound carefully counted and stacked by the hopper, an hour, sometimes, before the mixing. I'd sweep religiously--kept the area spotless--for the
powder would fill the air as I mixed, then slowly float down to blanket everything, a fine silt layering the floor, tracked about and slick if left unattended. I helped the machine operator grind defective hose into a reuseable pulp sometimes, feeding the misformed scraps into the noisy grinder. Again, too, when the foreman asked, I stayed over an extra four.

When the man who trained me retired, shortly after moving to daylights, I was his temporary replacement. The day shift! The old man, again, was impressed. Two weeks into this shift, shortly after three in the afternoon— I'd agreed reluctantly, once more, to stay—as I pulled the plate from the underside of the huge auger to let the last of the green tinted compound drain (for yellow was next), while I cursed the man for waiting until the last minute to ask me (I could have had this done an hour earlier, had I known it would happen on my shift), my index finger strayed too far into the machinery and was instantly tattered. Pulverized.

A local doctor took it off to the knuckle; when the useless, jointless stub wasn't getting in the way, it was getting bumped, causing me to grit my teeth or yowl in pain or merely swear vehemently. I went to
Denver, where a hand surgeon removed the remaining stub. I collected unemployment all summer; the doctor said I could return to work on August 15, but on that day I quit. When the $5,600 dismemberment check came—that's what a finger's worth, I guess—I put it in the bank and headed back to school, Kearney State College this time, thanking EHR for the second opportunity out of that town.

There are many forms of escapism; booze is only one. My first term at Kearney State was a second chance, of sorts, an opportunity to do things right. You can overthink along those lines, though—having decided that my problem at the university had been not so much lack of focus as misdirected interest, I gave up the humanities. Jonesy and I found a house to share that August and both enrolled for fall term courses in something practical: business.

It was easy to fall back into the routine we'd started at Johnson Lake a couple years before, boozing and chasing women night after night at the Fireside Inn. Sure, it was completely irresponsible, behaving
like that--especially having gained a second chance to do things right, but that's what I mean when I talk about escape. Business majors: what a joke. Both hating the tedious business of accounting, both skeptical of the somehow dishonest manipulation of marketing, we tried to ignore the reality of the choices we'd made by hiding out nights in that dark and decadent world of young male fantasy.

The shakers would start at 4:30, a different one each week. They were fine looking girls, though some were a little rough around the edges--what can you expect, though, living the life they did? For all they'd show you, they were most stingy with their eyes. I tried often to make eye contact with one of them, but when I did, briefly, they'd quickly look away and not look back. Too personal, I guess.

Tina, sweet Tina, all skimpy black dress and dimples, would keep us well set up, and we, hungry for the friendly attention, consistently over-tipped her. The band would start around 9, and the crowd became mixed then--lots of dancing and the like, but we were drunk enough by then that Tina was generally the only girl to come close. It was a pretty pitiful mode of escape, but it worked for a while.
By December, of course, we knew we must make some choices. Jonesy lined up a job roustabourting in Wyoming. I told him he was going to freeze his ass off, but I was glad he had something solid lined up. Me, I decided what I needed was a good dose of discipline, something I seemed to lack. I went and saw an army recruiter, drove down to Grand Island one evening to take the aptitude tests, and was all set to sign up until they discovered my trigger finger was missing. They don't want soldiers without trigger fingers, they said.

When I went home at Christmas time, all I knew was that I would not stay. I'd come whining back home to the folks once before, and it left a bad taste. I talked it over with the old man, and when he asked me what the hell a degree in English was good for, I responded defensively that I could always teach. He liked the idea; he liked it more and more when I mentioned, thinking fast, that I probably had enough math credits to get endorsed in that, too, if I took a couple of classes. There we were--math was practical; math teachers were in demand.

So like I said before, I returned to classes that January finally focused on something. The math classes
were a chore, but I could cut it. The English classes
--well I had my escape, and a productive one at that.

Mortician's van in the driveway;
In the house across the street
I see a curtain waver.
"I'm counting on you," the man says.
"Get his best suit out,
See if it needs cleaned."

An afterthought:
"Won't need shoes or socks..."

"Who won't?" I want to shout.

First volley: flinch.
Second volley, braced: flinch again.
Third volley, resolved, I just can't stop it.
Brother sobs then, while I,
Feeling silly for cowering so,
Break into a nervous grin.

Hang my head and pray
Nobody saw.

What the hell are they looking at anyway?

More distractions, then, back at school; some new,
some old. I kept up in classes--as I said, literature
is a fine form of escape. The grammar, the teaching
theory, the math I kept plugging away at; the end was
in sight. A new distraction, next--another English
major named Connie. She was a fine, Catholic girl,
bright and creative, and together we explored the mysteries of reading, writing, and sex. Kept me plenty occupied.

Then Sut showed up in town for the summer; he'd got on as a signalman for BN and was working Broken Bow--sixty miles north into the sandhills. We got shitfaced every day. Some mornings we had Apple Jacks for breakfast: Jack Daniels and apple juice, mixed quarts at a time in a big water cooler. We would cruise the streets listening to Leon Redbone pluck and warble, beeping the horn of Sut's LTD and leering, the car jerking lazily forward in spurts as he toyed with the brakes, looking for women but just as happy not to find any, to catch instead the five o'clock act at the Fireside, out of the glaring sun.

The only thing I remember clearly from that summer was Ponch's wedding. Jonesy and Egghead drove all the way in from Casper. None of us really knew Ponch that well--I got my Eagle on the same night he did, and we had worked together at Sehnert's Dutch Oven, but we hadn't seen much of each other for years; Jonesy shared an apartment with him once. Egghead was just looking for an excuse for a road trip, and since he was crashing the wedding, Sut decided he would, too.
It was in a little chapel at the Newman Center—the same place Connie had lived. One of her roommates sang in the wedding and eyed me skeptically; she must have heard about one of the crazier times from Connie. We were a sight coming in, the four of us, late and hungover. They put us up front on folding chairs. Sut and Jonesy and Egghead were all Catholic and weren't thinking about weird sex, I don't suppose, but I wasn't Catholic and was remembering Connie and feeling mighty out of place.

The service was just a formality, just a ritual to be gotten through—luckily, I wasn't required to genuflect or kneel to pray or any of that sit down stand up routine. The important thing was that we'd be out of there soon, and the reunion bash could begin.

When it ended, I was in jail. Nothing serious—drunk and disorderly—but I did have to sit in a cell all night and most of the next day while the guys tried to scrounge up some bail. I didn't mind the jail part so much, didn't feel much shame about that. It was the "disorderly" part: I'd never been called disorderly before in my life, and I couldn't figure out how I'd come to be that way.
When a drinker wakes up with no recollection
Of the previous night; when he doesn't remember
Whole blocks of time: a day, three hours, a fling:
They say that's a sure sign to shape up, to stop.

The brain, though, is a powerful thing--
I've been fighting mine for fifteen years,
And I've won my share of battles, too,
You bet your ass.

I've taken out thousands, maybe millions,
Of those tiny, bastard cells.

But still, I remember too much.
Some is fleeting and blurry,
Some too strange to be true; yet
Some is strange and true all at once.

I've seen things that sobered me damn quick
Once or twice--I'm damn straight; it's like
The 95 pound woman who lifts a tractor
Off her husband in an adrenalin rush.

How can we do the shit we do?
What more could we do if we tried?

I'd been working out of the Nebraska Job Service
all summer--helped a mover unload furniture one day;
helped salvage a couple of derailed boxcars full of
Coors beer the next. Stinky job. I trudged through
the muck and torn up ground at the sight, carting
twelve after twelve from the tipped cars to a U-Haul
truck, and I remember watching with envy the real
gandys, laying and lining new track on the hillside above me--good jobs were hard to find that summer. Got on with this contractor out of Lincoln for a couple of weeks, next, feeding bale after bale of straw into a blower from the back of huge tractor-trailer rigs, down from the sandhills. The straw blew out to cover newly seeded grass along side a new road south of Culbertson.

Finally got lucky and found a construction job with an outfit out of Kearney. Concrete work, replacing various sized patches of Highway 34 right there in downtown McCook. That was good work: jackhammer and shovel, snip wire and pull rebar out of the old shit all morning; dress out the holes around lunchtime--leveling, spreading sand, drilling holes for tiebar; pouring and finish work in the afternoon. That's the kind of grunt work I love. Just temporary, though. Winter was coming and the job was ending and then one day I saw an ad for a bartender at the Speakeasy and I thought, "Hell, I could do that."

Bars are like separate little communities on the periphery of a town; they are a kind of shadow town, coexisting with and sometimes crossing into the world
of the daylight folks, but mostly separate. In a bar it's always night.

Buff was in occasionally in the early afternoons, a bartender from a competing business. He tipped generously, as only those who've relied on tips to survive do. Taught me early about "baiting my trap," a crisp one placed in a large goblet, prominently displayed in the center of the bar.

"That's the first thing I do when I get to work, you goddamn right," he said, his eyes gleaming. "I don't do anything until the trap's baited. You've got to put the idea in most of these assholes heads, you know. Hell, people just don't think about it otherwise."

So I began baiting, though I took a little shit from the oldtimers for initiating such a practice at the Speak. One day I forgot, and Buff, arriving early, chewed me out for my negligence, hustled around the bar for the large goblet, and baited it himself with two crumbled bills: "Goddammit, Losh, you never learn!"

But learn I did, and eventually even the tightfisted old men occasionally tossed in their change, or even, once or twice, a dollar.

"Throw those coins in there hard!" I'd rib them.
"Make that puppy ring! I want people to hear that pot grow. . . ."

I began tipping generously myself, too, for the first time in my life. "What goes around comes around," Buff had said one day, as I chastised him for passing his own hard-earned tips to me. I doubt that he was right, but I liked the philosophy so much I adopted it, too. It wasn't logical, but it felt good.

The regulars began to fill the bar around four. Frank was an old boy who'd spent his life working for the State Department of Roads. He had missed only one home Cornhusker game in twenty-five years (the day of his mother's funeral); he sometimes complained that the toil of the 500 mile round trip--always completed in one, exhausting day--was getting to him, especially if the trips came three or four consecutive weekends in a row. He couldn't hear very well, but he could sure talk football.

Charlie was in around four-thirty, five; Ron usually came in about then, too, followed by Jim and Jan, and Jackie joined Charlie around 5:30. You got the feeling that they'd been gathering there for years; they talked about people and places that had long ago vanished. Jim, who ran Vogue Clothing, was always
immaculately dressed and combed; always had JB and water ("In a real glass, please—not those damn plastic things," he'd told me the first day); always left a one dollar tip on the bar when he left. Jan had one (and only one) vodka and water with a lime, light (very light) on the vodka, and always drove them home in the wintertime, to the cabin at the lake in summer.

Ron was a bigshot with a construction outfit; he'd sized up the younger guys who hung out at the bar his first week or so in town, and then promptly put about twelve of those who passed muster to work. He beat me in frequent games of pool on slow afternoons, and he tipped generously—often buying the house a round. After I'd hustled to set everyone up, he always made sure that the tab included one for me before he'd agree to pay.

Charlie was a jack-of-all, doing carpentry work one day, roof work the next; I helped him replace some rotting gutter boards and a couple windows one morning; Buff and I spent a week helping him pour a basement floor. He rarely tipped, but these part-time, tax-free jobs he provided were far more valuable to me.

I helped Red paint a house down south of Indianola one week, too; Steve, whom I rotated with, took all
days, and I took the nights. It really sucked for us both. He got stuck with all the cleaning, and the daytime tips are lousy; me, working all day outside and then until two behind the bar, busy, like you are nights--well, that wasn't much of a picnic, either. But if you wanted work you could usually find something in a bar.

And if you kept your mouth shut, you could pick up a lot of history and a little philosophy and a gob of down-home truisms from the old boys, about the weather or people or work or sex. You learned diplomacy dealing with the assholes and weepers, the spongers and the fools; you learned humility serving a tray of drinks to a tableful of laborers at the end of their day, one of them invariably saying "Nice ass!" as you turned to walk away. You learned to keep your head down if some impatient, demanding jerk was elbowing his way up to the bar to order yet another round; if you were busy at that moment, though, trying to remember the six new drinks that had just sat down, way in the back, and you didn't want to be interrupted, you just looked away from the guy, pretended not to hear his impatient demands for attention until you were damn good and ready. And always, the glasses to wash, the
fruit to cut, the juice to mix, the bottle of grenadine or scotch or schnapps to fetch from the back; the ice bucket to refill and pour in the drainer; the tank of pop syrup to change or the keg to tap or the spilled pitcher to mop up and replace; the ashtrays to empty and quickly wipe, over and over again. And, now and then, a tip to pick up, a drunk to cut off, a fight to steer outside.

The DJ started at nine, reading the age and dress of the crowd to decide if it would be Patsy Cline and Hank, Jr., or if it would be Poison, Def Leppard, Motley Crue, played always too loudly, yet still they'd cry, "Crank it!", their hearing numbed by the drinks. The rope lights would run around or flash intermittently to the beat; the red and blue and yellow spotlights would trace arcs across the floor and back, blinding the dancers now and then. And all around the floor, tables of people watched the prettiest or the least dressed girl, some with a sad and yearning look of despondency; some with a glint in their eye, a cocky grin, a plan of attack; some looking down their nose at
the brazenness of such behavior, yet sneaking jealous, sidelong glances at the competition in spite of themselves.

Or it was a middle-aged couple in western dress, the floor completely theirs, a fresh sprinkle of dance wax before and a hearty round of applause after they'd dazzled the crowd with their country swing.

Or old Gus and his girlfriend, both pushing eighty, out there making slow turns and smiling contentedly at each other; the bartenders used to hustle to be the first to serve Gus, for he often paid with Silver Certificate ones, still as crisp as the day they were new, years ago. I felt guilty one night and pointed out to him what they were. He merely smiled knowingly and replied, "Yeah, I've been saving those things for years--got a whole shoe box full. It's time I let someone else hang onto 'em for a while."

You can't help love those bar folks sometimes.

"I know what he isn't saying," she says:

"He doesn't tell you
That while he sits and
Drinks and laughs too loudly
At the television
Which is also too loud--
And not even funny--
That I am getting
A splitting headache
And he doesn't even see it."

"He doesn't mention how terribly
His breath stinks
When he rolls over
To flop his arm across me
In the middle of the night,
Or about thrashing about in the bed
And snorting and snoring until
I have to get up from the tangle of sheets
To go and sleep on the couch."

"He doesn't mention the times
He himself falls asleep there,
Spilling his drink in his lap,
Then rolling over
To break an arm
Off his glasses,
Waking up
Cursing and muddled
And vile. . ."

"He tells nothing of any of this," she says.
VI: Pulling a Geographical

Movement, in some respects, means life; in others, it signals death. I was driving the eight miles home from the small Czech community of Wilber, where the school was, to the even smaller German town of Clatonia, where we lived, down in Southeastern Nebraska; I was teaching in a recently built, consolidated high school, bearing the hyphenated name of these two towns that had once been rivals. Clatonia, though, was dying, like so many little midwestern farm towns have died before it; in the three years I was there I watched the restaurant fold, first, then the only grocery store; the people, the old, tired people of the town met death with dignity, too, one by one.

Driving home from the chaos of an eighth hour, eight grade study hall, head pounding from the travesty of trying to contain 25 kids in a stuffy lecture hall, from the brutal folly of insisting that they sit quietly and contentedly study those same irrelevant lessons they'd been force fed all day, they themselves
feeling the intense internal swell which would soon burst these innocent buds into bloom—I began to wonder, as I drove, why, at that stage of their lives, we didn't just let them run and play and massage away their growing pains before we tried to finish them, to polish them with algebra and history, with literature and science. A new junior high curriculum, I envisioned: two years of dancing and sports, of music and games, with books available in some quiet corner if they were interested in after school extra-curriculrals. Let them move! Let them run and shout, turn cartwheels and throw snowballs! Set them—if only temporarily—free!

My wife was beside herself with excitement when I arrived. She had felt our baby's first kick that afternoon. I calmly held my hand to her abdomen, waited patiently to feel what I could not feel, tried to share in her glow. A few nights later, as my bride curled snugly into the curve of my back, my daughter finally reached out to me, slugging me or kicking me with one of her tiny limbs, right in the kidney. A life, I realized with elation, was truly coming. Knowing it from tests and stethoscopes and ultrasound images is one thing; but believing it begins, the reality of it sinks in, only upon feeling it move.
The plains have been called "a sea of grass"; the first European immigrants to cross them noted that, especially in the daze of late afternoon, when the heat was shimmering on the horizon, and the wind blew ripples through the tall prairie grass—an ever-present, never-resting wind—they said it looked just like an ocean.

Before these immigrants, a nomadic people roamed over this land, the Sioux and the Pawnee and the other ancestors of those who had trekked across the Bering Strait eons prior; the Plains Indians moved in large circles over the land because the bison did, as eons before them the mastodons had, before the ice itself crept slowly but surely all the way down into Kansas, stripping all life from the land and even pushing up huge chunks of fertile soil in its path. There is movement at the core of life and death on that land.

It's odd how occasionally the varied branches of
one's life seem to merge, to move—if only for a moment—in a common direction. Life so often seems fragmentary, chaotic, piecemeal, that in those moments when everything seems to be related, tied together, somehow—in those few, brief, glimmering moments, you can almost sense that you've found the common thread, that you've somehow, miraculously, stumbled across life's thesis. But then the weave unwinds, the streams branch and twist away haphazardly, and you chide yourself for being so naive as to really have thought—even for a moment—that distinguishing the imaginary from the true, the myth from the reality, could be so simple.

I wrote an essay, once, for a class called "The Essay as Literature"; we were studying the aspects of the personal essay that make it attractive from a literary standpoint, that make it unique. I remember some of the traits I found important: a conversational, nearly intimate style; a sense of discovery, almost, of the important aspect of the piece—as if the writer, in wandering conversationally through his various
associated thoughts, had suddenly stumbled upon his point. Naturally there is craft involved in creating that sensation within a good piece of writing, but that is beside my point here. The essay I wrote had to do with my own tendency toward wandering—not in writing, but in life. I was trying to develop the theme that some people "live essayistically": exhibit in their lifestyles some of the same characteristics found in good literary nonfiction.

I was excited by the germ of this idea; I was amazed to find that the various classes I had enrolled in that term all seemed to focus on the same thing: movement. In an American Studies class I read Crévecour's characterization of those on the fringes of colonial American society as ruffians, pathbreakers into the isolation of wilderness only because they were unfit for the refinements of society; I read Frederick Jackson Turner's notion that in order to understand the evolution of the American mind, in order to see how we had come to be whom we were in the late 1800's, we had to look to the fluid line of an expanding frontier, a line that had disappeared, the space having finally been filled.

In my Lit of the American West class we explored
the difference between the myth of the West and its reality. Centers of civilization had been moving westward for years, from Egypt to Rome to London to New York, and then rapidly, like a distance runner coming down the stretch and pulling from somewhere deep within his straining lungs a second wind, across the vast continent to the glittering golden shores of the Pacific. It was the myth of some non-existent—or at least irrecoverable—Eden that pulled people westward, again and again, only to discover in the harshness of its reality that the new land was as brutal as the old.

Yes, I conceded, it would not do to romanticize the West—there was ugliness there that shouldn't be overlooked: people eating dead companions in the snow on Donner Pass; whole herds of cattle corpses littering the ground in the aftermath of a blizzard; women dying in childbirth, children dying of smallpox, whole cultures uprooted and dying slow, bitter deaths. Lonliness, too, driven sometimes by the mocking, huge land into alcoholism or suicide or murderous insanity: Capote's cold-blooded Kansas drifters; Charles Starkweather on a rampage through Nebraska; even the Nokes, whose son I'd swam with on the swim team, killed an elderly couple and then cut their bodies up like
sides of beef and dumped them in Harry Strunk Reservoir; I was happy I had not been the fisherman who had discovered the severed hand, floating in the water, the wedding ring it still bore the first clue to identifying the dead. No, it wouldn't do to forget the ugly side of reality.

But the myth—even though it was only a myth—did inspire some peoples lives. If you do not know that what is driving you is a myth, are you any less driven? By believing strongly enough in the unbelievable, isn't it possible even to taste—occasionally if fleetingly—the fruits of Eden? All I really knew was that I had believed that I might take control of my destiny, and that the first part of my plan involved a fresh start in school in a clean little town at the heart of a valley near the end of the Oregon Trail. I believed in the possibilities of the West. I had been pulled into a new life, a fresh start, and had pulled my family with me. I felt happy; I felt focused. Even if I were living in the midst of false hope, even if I had been inspired by a false myth, at that moment, I was living in a reality, even if one built on a foundation of sand.

And so I began my "living essayistically" piece. I called it "Wandering and Watching": 
Yes sir, I'm a restless spirit. That might mean a lot of things and it might not mean anything--some people might think I'm caught up in some kind of westering myth, always searching for an Eden that doesn't exist; some might think I am merely one of those fringe ruffians who must keep moving on. I suppose both may be true to a certain extent, but neither is my basic motivation. I just get antsy and itchy if I stay in the same place too long. I like to be moving, even inside of places. I don't like to sit, much. I like a change of scenery and a change of perspective.

But then again, once I get to the new places, I guess I do like to sit. I sit in the cab while I cruise country roads. I sit at my desk and stare out the window at the mountains or the pasture or the yard. I sit on my front step and watch night fall on my new neighborhood, smoking and orienting myself. I watch the world, study the visual aspects of each new place; capture them in my brain, somehow, make them comfortable there so I can be comfortable there. Then, as soon as I get as close to comfort as I can, I become restless again. The various angles of my perception tire and need something new.

My professor liked the "living essayistically" theory, wanted me to keep going with it, but I didn't. The threads had already begun to untangle.

There was one other class I'd enrolled in that spring, a class of a different sort, a class that wasn't on my program, that wouldn't appear on my transcripts--and that is a good thing, too, or I'd never have gone. It was at this place called ACES:
Addiction Counseling and Evaluation Services. It was mostly weekly group meetings with other people struggling with one addiction or another, discussing some aspect of alcoholism or sharing stories or establishing priorities and the like; coming to terms with the seriousness of the problem, first of all, and then seeing it as common, as not unusual, as not unique to us individually. Admitting it was a problem was the hardest for most, especially those there against their wills. Denial and all that. But another part of the program involved attending AA meetings.

I went to AA meetings for about 18 weeks--during the course of the treatment program. I don't go anymore. AA wasn't "my salvation" or anything; maybe I still am not ready to make the kind of commitment necessary for that program to really work for me, a commitment I saw in evidence among the group's most firm adherents. I admire those people very much, and I'm glad they've found what they needed to pull their lives together. But it wasn't for me.

There were some things said there, though, that really stuck with me, I guess. Phrases, adages, mottoes--the lingo of the place comes back to me every once in a while as I'm trying to get a sense of myself,
of who I am and who I want to be. The first that comes to mind is "What you hear here/What you say here/When you leave here/Let it stay here." That's part of the second "A"--the guarantee of anonymity, and I purposely want to avoid violating that. I'll never blab about the particulars of the meetings I attended. But some of the generals--the philosophies they tossed about--these I want to relate.

"The Serenity Prayer"--we opened each meeting with it: "Lord, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." I like that. The past is one of those "things I cannot change," one of those things I need merely face and accept. The serenity, I think, comes after, not before, the acceptance.

"Admit your shortcomings, and share your story with at least one other person." That explains all of the talking about the bad times that goes on in meetings. Part of it is to help others see that they
aren't alone in their misery; but part, too, is to remind the speakers of what they are striving to avoid. Again, a facing of the problem, head on, rather than a retreat from it. I like that, too.

"No excuses." That's important. When I look back at my past I hope to avoid just looking for excuses. Trying to excuse my present behavior by offering up angst from my past merely means I haven't learned anything. If the mistakes can teach us something--and not merely overwhelm--then they have some value after all.

And finally, "pulling a geographical." "My ex is gone now--pulled a geographical," I heard someone say one day. The phrase had been used once before, and I hadn't understood it. But in the context of her story it became clear to me what it meant, and I began to see my restlessness in a new light.

To pull a geographical is a coping strategy. It literally means merely to move, to alter one's geographic location. But in the context of an
alcoholic's life, it has to do with denial, too, with refusing to turn and face the reality of one's plight; not confronting it, but opting instead to ignore it, to run, to leave it behind. Most of those in recovery realize that failure to admit that the booze is the problem, not the transitory troubles of the moment, of the immediate environment--failure to see this results in dragging that which you are trying to escape along with you. You can get away from particular people and predicaments, but no matter how far you run, if you take your addiction along, the snares will eventually resurface. AA people say "pulled a geographical" with something near derision in their tone.

This was the complication; this, after all, was a loose thread I hadn't considered, the thread which eventually unraveled my whole concept that being guided by myths could actually work. There were other colleges I could have gone to--I could have stuck much closer to home. The family would have liked that; the move would have been much less troublesome. I had come because it was the best school for me, hadn't I? I wasn't really running, was I? I had done what I thought was best for my future, for my family's future life. Surely, surely, I hadn't done something selfish
and foolish, not again, not now that there were others in my life to consider, people floating closely enough to me in the sea of our lives that the wake of my actions could topple them.

Raymond Carver is one my favorite writers, and he, too, was chased by the demons of alcoholism before he finally quit drinking for good, a few years before he died. In an interview once, he was asked if his house out in Washington--the state of his roots--felt more comfortable than the one in New York, where the interview took place.

"No," he replied. "Wherever I am is fine. This is fine."

When I first read that, I didn't believe him; I thought that only some sense of utter resignation could cause him to say such a thing. Surely there were places which spoke to him, which called to him, just as the places I know--and those I don't--call to me. I'd read his stories; I knew his history: he was a restless wanderer, too. Surely he still had the itch, now and then, to cover new ground. Surely he yearned,
sometimes, for a old, familiar view. He didn't mean it, I decided. He'd merely given up, gotten old.

But I understand now what he meant. He had finally discovered that so long as we are facing our past squarely, studying it, learning from it, distinguishing good from bad; so long as we accept what we cannot change and change what we can--so long as we do that, it doesn't matter where we are. What he actually meant is that each and every place is great.

You see, he hadn't given up on the wandering or the watching. It was only the restlessness he had shed. Yes, I think he had found the serenity, finally, the peacefulness of understanding his life fully enough that he could rest, that he could sleep in natural slumber, without tossing and turning, without dark disturbing dreams; without waking in the dead of night to understand nothing save the fact that sleeping, at that moment, was not among his options.
Bibliography


