Once, here, on this high plain, there were only Horse, Bear, Rhino. No words to put to things, no call to put them. But today? Ginny and Dan in the barn, and words like this: "You fucked me over. You fuckin' fucked me over."

Ginny behind the heaving mare said, "Her water's broke. I broke it."

"He was fucking her while you were fucking him and thereby fucking me over," said Dan. "Now that foal's too big for her."

She swatted flies. Her hat was filthy from mucking. Her coveralls were unzipped to her waist. One arm hung free folded to the knee, the other was stuffed inside itself. Her flannel shirt was rolled up her elbow. The dust filled the doorway like the bees and flies.

"That foal will turn her inside out," Dan said. "That foal will bust her."

"No one knows how things go."

"How they go, how they go," he said. "Look at her belly." He spit and stirred the dirt with his boot. "Behold the suffering of an innocent creature."

Ginny spat too. "Behold?" she said. And: "I've got things to do."

Out at dawn, Ginny was in the barn as midwife. Dan saw to the cows. Most of the herd already speckled the south field to the east, burned two weeks back and quickly regreened. The cows ate the grass. Dan was a punctual rancher. He'd slapped them through the gate with his stick, one black, one white, then a tricolor bull calf. The calf turned his head and paused at the ongoing ruckus in the barn: a hoof to a stall and a bucket kicked over. "Easy, easy," Ginny cooed.

The calf ran on to mingle with the herd in the boulders and grass, grazing, shitting, swinging tails. They would cut off his balls in a week. Dan listened to the barn, which was red and peeling, the shed too, the corners a quarter-century off-plumb. When the hoof kicked the stall again, the gutter shook to the loft that yawned black, empty of hay. The cat slipped out of a raccoon's hole. Morning is the very best time for reproductive suffering. This is well-known.

Seven horses—a little cavvy—swayed likewise, in their own time, out into the corral. The palomino first, the chestnut last behind the cob, the gang in the middle biting on each other's necks. They bunched at the fence and sniffed new air. The little mare followed, a pony, small-framed to begin with, bought at the cannery auction and never fully past the effects of starvation. She lumbered between the crossties, stepped out past Ginny after the herd. She was a mixed breed, brown, with her big belly swinging. Any fool could see Shaw's Percheron had got her. What's monogamy to a horse, after all? A rare discipline in the animal kingdom. For millions of years, grazing on these same fields, the primal inhabitants of the Great Plains spared it not a thought. Fretting over infidelity about as much as Horse, Rhino, Sabertooth

concerned themselves with the continental plates pushing patient below the earth. In millennia since, we've learned that both the earth and a good fuck can turn around and get you killed if you're not keeping a close eye. But what's the earth to a horse, after all?

"How could you do it?" Dan said to the barn wall. "You fucked me over." Ten years married. Ten years in love before that. A young man still.

"Settle down now," Ginny was saying, following the mare out into breaking day. "I can't help you if you kick me."

Dan caught a fly in his palm. He would tell Ginny about the fly, a private joke. The yard will fill with flies when the sun gets in, *easy easy*, soon, a few hours, but the Mormora Mountains still cast their long blue shadow and these flies were young, cold, dumb from smoke. The last calves shouldered through the gate. Another black, another white, then the acorn calves, more heifers, not impatient or impolite. Dan slapped their rumps and they romped and kicked across the field to find their mothers. The haze sat on the ground waiting for a breeze. He should forget about the fly.

"We'll get that foal out of you," Ginny was saying. "I promise."

Now the horses. Pacing and pawing. The little mare after. Dan turned the first seven out to the south field, the cob going first this time, the chestnut last again, always last, the Old Man, and Dan closed the gate after them. The mare hung her head over the top rail. She watched the herd break free into morning, trotting then halting, drifting by boulders, tossing heads, flicking tails. The young ones galloped the sidehill to the creek. He ran his hands across the mare's belly, withers

to stifles, which bulged under her great weight. He listened at the enormous bulge.

"Still two heartbeats," Ginny said.

"I'll burn Shaw's house down if this comes out badly."

"You're not some caveman."

The mare wanted out the south gate. Dan offered the north. She acquiesced, bobbed out of the corral, and he followed. "Maybe I am," he said. "You should hear them in town. For days, nothing else. You and Shaw." He nodded toward the oak. "You should've closed his gate. You're smart. Should've covered your tracks. Protected us."

The mare headed up the north field, the last field to be burned, just yesterday. The ground still smelled strong, black-stubble char the quarter mile up to the old oak. Dan followed.

"I'm sorry," Ginny called after him.

"I'd like to be a caveman," he called back. "I'd like to try it."

"I've said sorry a hundred times." His back was lean and dry and split in the middle.

"Say it again anyway."

"I'm sorry I did it."

He bent, rubbed his knees that were always sore now. "I don't feel better."

"I'm sorry."

"I've loved you right, haven't I?"

"Yes you have."

"What's he got?"

"I don't know."

"I've been good to you, haven't I?"

"Don't know why," she called. "It felt good. I couldn't stop it."

He held his head. "You should hear them talk and talk."

"Forget them. It's only us."

"Only us?" His grin was wrong. He turned back uphill after the mare, who was on a beeline. He walked with long fast strides, three miles an hour uphill. He'd clocked it. He liked a straight line as well as any. If he stayed to the line past the oak, he'd jump Shaw's fence, which ran the knob above Shaw's house and barn, and keep going up Hinton's Hill to Barryman's Quarry, two more hours along the ridge to the base of the Mormoras where the land was too broken up for grazing.

"She's headed for shade," he called back. "Come on. I'll need you."

They made a parade of three up the quarter mile. An oak was a rarity in the region, the seed no doubt delivered in the excrement of birds. "Hurry the fuck up," he said, but calmer now, praise be.

"I'm hurrying the fuck up," she said in a matching tone, but hung back in body and mind near the outer range of his mutterings.

What's the earth to a horse? A place to place the hoof, a cradle of grass, a prop to rest his nose while ripping grass out by the roots. And the Herd would have had no interest in eons. Seasons maybe, days maybe, the change of the wind certainly, the daylight hours on their pelts. No interest in geysers. In salt licks, maybe. Horse was a watcher, a minder of his own business, with eyes screwed in on the side of his tin-can skull, peripheral observer, yes, but what of those objects right in front of his nose? Expert in grass and wind, in the locations where rodents bored their

holes, since such pits will break a forelock with one misstep. And then Horse would be left by his Herd. And then Wolf would come.

"Can't fucking trust anyone," Dan was saying, flaring again. "Least of all, it seems, our fucking wives and mothers."

"I'm no mother. What do mothers have to do with it?"

"Mothers start it."

He listed the usual local bad examples since the past is ever useful for lecturing.

Twelve million years back, we're talking, with Horse grazing in the walnut's shade with his clan, his wives bossing him, giving in to him or not while offspring and rivals stood off on distant hills watching for changes in the Herd and wind, for any mistake. Bear rumbling farther off, waiting for the same thing, digging a root to chew, ever hungry, ever exiled for his fearsome looks, and ever more fearsome keeping his own company. The Herd swished their tails at Bear's scent, also to express the desire to mate, also to say hello to the morning sun on their withers, also to deter Fly, though Fly is never deterred for long, will survive all catastrophe, since he thrives on debacle and disaster: internal bleeding, contagion, volcanic eruptions. What creature doesn't seek blood? What creature doesn't keep flesh on with flesh? Bear eats Foal. Foal blood soaks the soil where the grass will grow deep green and thick. Mare will feast in that very place, grief forgotten when her hunger is satisfied.

"Though Ella's fine," he was saying. "As mothers go. To be fucking fair."

"Fuck yeah," Ginny said sweetly. "Be fucking fair to fucking Ella who's fucking the fuck fine," since she had limits too and

could out-cuss Dan eight days a week and sometimes you have to kill fire with fire.

Sabertooth crouched. Rhino and Camel ripped branches for berries that blackened their tongues. Earth dervished on the business of planets. The eruption was merely due. When it came, Horse chewed on, blinked, as the sky thrilled black and tall for a thousand miles. Buzzard spied the tower-cloud coming, tipped her wings and flew fast south across many rivers and fat bodies of land, but wings fatigue and clouds do not. The air was full of tiny shards, microscopic glass, and these snowed down on all. Chickadee fell first, the most fragile webbing in the lungs, then Crane, who had flown straight through the cloud thinking oh, it is only a cloud, fell with his throat full, legs a tangled mound of ash. Rat keeled over from a bird's nest he'd been raiding, an egg escaping from his paws when he fell, no mother to meet Chick when he hatched, no heat, no worm or regurgitated grub. In the few hours he lived, Chick thought the world was a gray and silent place and he its only inhabitant, his kingdom, all he would ever know, and he ruled it from high in his branch, good and fair to all. To him his life was long and full of interest, but for the chill on his naked bumpy skin and the unexplained pain in his belly, his eyes scanning the sky, his mouth panting open with vague expectation.

"Saul's a goddamned lucky man," Dan was saying.

"Hell, yes. Since Ella's a fucking peach."

Badger fell from a limb, Dog from a cliff, floated downriver.

For Horse, the pain was exquisite, long and thirsty. The Herd marched slow to the water hole. Mud was cool on their hooves, the only soothing possible. They nuzzled the foals,

a small comfort for lives so short. Breathing was hard, got harder, more shards in each inhalation, more blood. Weeks went by. Bones decayed as the Herd swayed and waited, organs swelled and pressed into organs that pressed and overlapped and crushed each other, no other place to go, one side wins, the other subsides. It was one of those rare conjunctions of scale, when nature, for reasons of its own, takes time out from the routine of hatching life to make good and sure that a few beloved offspring have been well and truly annihilated.

"Ella, Ella," he was saying, so—

Rhino was last to collapse, the biggest lungs, the grandest capillaries. From a distance his belly was a smooth round boulder.

"Why me?" he was saying.

The sun came up anyway. Tomorrows are blind and ruthless. With them came humans, rabbits, sweet grass. Then new, strange humans in wagons. Wives already with child, walking with sticks beside the wheels; tins of meat riding under the canvas. The new folk drank from creeks. They saw painted faces in the bushes, feathers and spearheads, and kept their powder dry. Men circled the wagons with the women and children safe in the middle. They drove off the natives, ate the rabbits, chased bison through reeds for meat and tanning. Dan knew the story of westward struggle like everyone, and as he trudged up to the oak in failure, he tried now to gather strength from it, from success, from the men before who'd sweated through troubles, dug wells with picks and shovels a few seasons on when there was time for "leisure," since a creek was fine for running water. They made gates for their oxen with split trees, ate their oxen when starved. Wives

died left and right. Oxen died. The men married sisters off trains from Baltimore who thought they'd come out to see the new babies.

"Cheer up," she said. "You can always get yourself some other wife. Pick of the litter."

Dan doubled over and she passed him by. He took up the rear.

"Life moves in mysterious fucking ways," he said, or asked.

"No it doesn't," Ginny said without turning. "It's all happened ten million million times before this, ten billion times fifty."

"Not this exactly."

"Nothin' new under the sun."

"You're fucking wrong."

"No I'm not and you know it."

The old folk planted eastern corn that sometimes grew, scrawny and mealy. Potatoes were best against western birds but the elk and bison liked them. Sluices turned mills till drought. Plows broke against hidden rocks. Blades were ordered from St. Louis. They came in three months. Blades and sisters arriving by train. The men built barns and doors of rough-sawn. It was always sunshine, terrible sun, Indians in every crack and crevice, scheming. Girls made wildflower crowns and waited for eastern boys. In other times, in other places, cheating wives fed volcanoes. Fornication versus copulation is a delicate point anywhere, something to do with pleasure or sin? But these mountains were sedimentary, or lacked calderas. For somewhere to chuck a faithless wife you'd need to go south, the Yellowstone region or farther. But wait, didn't volcanoes want virgins? Virginia, *I do take Virginia*,

for ovulation, ejaculation, insemination, fertilization. Who decided those words should rhyme?

"What in hell are you on about?" Ginny said. Then, "Quit this muttering and march on up."

She was pointing at the poor little mare up at the big old oak that didn't belong here, that shouldn't have set down roots here, not by rights or nature, and the sight of the mare's suffering moved Dan to action. He rose and walked but talked on still.

No volcanoes here, maybe, but plenty of carbon and flame, plenty of fire worship. Dawn-risers, field burners, Dan's people, his valley. They burned their fields from low to high, whole families in long pants and steel-toed boots, up and across, up and across, rubbing their eyes from neighbors' smoke. The valley was wide and dry. The Mormora Mountains east, black cliffs without foothills, mile-high curtains for keeping out witnesses. Keeping out the sun, too, till long after daybreak.

"Fucking's the crux," he said. "Fucking's the beginning. Fucking's the end."

"Amen."

"I do love saying it."

"Say it all you need to."

From the oak, all the valley spooled out. Fields burned across its rises and falls. The inheritors of the plain—just specks from here, skittering at the ends of plumes—carried hoes, rakes, and gas cans from their barns to their lowest fences. Ginny and Dan didn't need to see it close. Far off was fine. Their neighbors uncoiled the hose, paid it out across hard pack, turned spigots on full. The water sputtered then flowed before the weed burners were lit. Last year's grass

was dry and matted. Burned fast and hot with the smallest puff of breeze. The first hills, each year, are a quarter burned before the sun tops the Saint's Head. Neighbors wave shovels and rakes across creeks to neighbors who wave shovels and rakes. For a hundred years now they've marched up and across the fields herding fires. Up and across toward the knobs of knobby hills. For a hundred more they will stamp the flames with their boots on top, then walk down again and start another, till the valley smolders black. Kids will always jump the fire lines. Parents will forever scold—such tedious work—and hot as hell even in morning. These people will drink from hoses and creeks as smoke rises between hills, mixing with sticky spring shoots and new buds, dung on skin, gritty teeth gritty. Tongues and lips will spit as a plane flies over. The plane is counting fires all over the region, this flight from Elkins to Romeo. The commissioner's report is due Monday, saying, "Burning two weeks near St. Cecilia, mostly small livestock operations, sheep, cattle, and a few equestrian. Two hundred to two thousand acres is average. It will soon be too hot, dry, and foolish for burning. Heat lightning will soon decide ignition: spike down after midnight, skimming west to east over hills and hills, farms and ranches, forking down from time to time to touch off neglected fields, a barn roof dried for decades, an unfortunate home, then exit, the innocent culprit, twenty thousand feet above the highest ridges, off across the Reservations."

"Except that no goddamned commissioner talks like that," she said.

The people wave their hoses at the plane. Water arches in sun, nozzles glint. Always the same: their eyes water.

They dab sweaty wrists. The plane dips its wings, a friendly stranger. The lines of fire are pretty and memorable. This is modern aviation. The plane banks toward the Saint's Head Ridge, aims for the Gunsight.

"Quiet, I'm thinking," Dan said and shaded his eyes. "How's about I bash him with a baseball bat."

"You don't own a baseball bat."

"I'll poison his well."

"You've never been mean."

"I'm mean now."

On the hills smoke still skimmed the ground. Only lazy ranchers burned this late in the day. Here was an oak that could still remember the settlers' wagons. Arms out and tired in the air. The mare fell in its shade like a sack.

"Get her off that root," Ginny said.

Dan sat on a low branch. "She doesn't feel that root. That root is nothing."

"Comfort isn't nothing." Ginny tried rocking the mare then sat with her.

"Don't talk to me about comfort."

They waited for the foal, nothing else to do. A bell rang down at Shaw's. The villainous Percheron made an appearance at Shaw's fence. Ginny's hand was up inside the mare's back end.

"Almost crowned." She wiped her hand on her pants. "Come on, darlin'. Come on out."

"Grab a leg."

"Not yet." The sun went on rising and the morning shadow shrunk. Dan threw rocks at the stud, but his aim was poor. The Percheron only flicked his tail.

"Sure, throw rocks if it makes you feel better."

"Nothing makes me feel better."

The Percheron kicked the gate. The new steel clanged, coped and fitted, full welds, new J-bolt hinges, all busted in where a truck had rammed it. HORSES KEEP THIS GATE CLOSED hung on the top rail. The stallion was gray and enormous, eighteen hands, a ton and then some.

"Percherons were bred for war," Dan said.

"Cut it out. Concentrate."

She pulled her flannel shirt off to a T-shirt. Her hand went back up the mare.

"The French beat the Arabs. Took their horses back to France. Bred them to free French stock. A thousand years." The gate clanged.

"Task at hand, Dan."

The mare arched. The stud's molars were noisy from thirty paces, chewing last year's dried-up mats, since Shaw's people, way back, were from Chicago and they did not burn their fields in Chicago.

"This foal's residual from war and theft," he said. "What do you think of that?"

"I could use a hand."

"Grab a leg and pull."

"Where's this blood from?" It was her hand she was talking to.

The head came, then the neck. It was a private time. Dan cut a stick and whipped the air. "A Percheron's the second-biggest horse. Shires win first, largest on the planet. Clydesdales win third. Clydesdale people bicker. Percherons hold all the records. That's undisputed."

"Shut up," she said. "Get over here."

The mare pawed the air. Dan fanned the flies from her face. The Percheron grazed and grazed. What are life and death to a horse, after all? Unworthy of comment is what.

The foal fell out, gray and enormous. The mare nuzzled its gray ears folded back, licked the face and spindle legs tucked up to the muzzle, tucked down and still. The foal came to them warm but was getting cold. Dan dragged it downwind by one back hoof. He dropped the foal on the far side of the oak in the sun. The mare gave up sniffing and laid her head on stubble. Her belly rose and fell.

"Better think of getting up," Ginny said and slid her hand inside the halter, didn't tug, not yet. Tripped to the fence and sat, her face in her knees, in the meantime. Peeled her coveralls off to jeans, flung the coveralls. A young woman still. The Percheron nibbled her hair from over the fence with his big lips. She shoved his face. The wind was hot. Dan walked down to the barn and returned with a shovel. He dug a hole. Ginny raked the afterbirth in. She pried a stone.

"A stone's just for show," he said. "Only slows the coyotes."

"They won't bother," she said. "Plenty of food this time of year."

He set the stone over the hole. Sat back down on his branch. All this was once a tide of stone, rockslides from the Mormoras. Imagine the tumble. The new piles and gorges. How strange the new mountain must have looked after the slide! The little gorges later filled by wind, leaves, and dust, then covered over with roots and sod until even the tallest rocks were buried to their chins: *Here Lies a Stone Big as Your Barn. I Will Crush Your Barn at the Resurrection.*

"It's incurable," he said.

"Silence is the only cure for the incurable."

They urged the mare up, to no avail. They watched the cows and horses below, the fires blurring the neighbors' hills, Milton's and Johnson's, Baltazar's and Cortez's, the Mestizo cluster, though intermarried now, mixed with Bolts, Blakes, and Native clans who'd lightened up and gone to Congress, come back disgusted. Shaws. A plane with pontoons was bound behind the Saint's Head, to lakes you couldn't walk to on the Old Swede's Trail. Dan thinking *grin and bear it*, sisters again, weddings. "In storms or raids," he said, "they pushed the oxen in their own cabin doors, shoveled dung out their tiny windows, dried it, stacked it, burned it in winter for baking."

"Ah uh," Ginny said.

"It flavored the skin," he said. "Washed at quiet pools."

He looked at his wife, thought of women who'd turned their chins from side to side between mossy rocks, their mirrors drowned in Nebraska rivers behind their swimming oxen. Squares of glass twirling away toward the Mississippi, tumbling south, sharpened by stones, till they slit some poor stomach open at the Gulf of Mexico. He liked the thought. For lip paint, berries. It made the women rosy. Good thing those pioneer men weren't too choosy.

"She'll have to stand soon," Dan said of the mare.

"She'll stand."

"Or it'll be two for the pit instead of one."

"Give her time to get herself collected."

They dragged the foal to the cow pit. The foal was light, two hooves each down the slope to the corral, around the barn. The backhoe stood at the edge. They swung the foal like a

hammock, one, two, three. It cartwheeled down to join new dead calves, also chicks that had frozen and a fox Dan had shot. The walnut shaded the cow pit. They shoveled in lime.

"We'll need more lime," he said.

"I ordered it yesterday."

"That foal was pretty." He powdered the foal lightly. "Might've won a ribbon." A butterfly skipped so close they heard its clicking muscles and screws. "So many wouldn't believe one can," Dan said.

"Can what?"

"Hear a butterfly."

A little brown with white trim and hardly worth notice. It flew through a lime cloud. They coughed and covered their faces with sleeves and skin.

"It would be easier if you'd died too," he said next.

"Well I didn't."

"Like a splinter. Like a tapeworm. It's going to bust out of me."

"Don't let it."

"I might feel better if I hit you. It might relieve me."

"Do it then," she said. He balled his fist. "Get it over with."

He slapped the top of her head, but was too upset to aim right. He picked up the shovel, but she took it from him. She threw it in the cow pit. "Enough already."

They sat on the edge despite the stink. "Am I a good man? Or not?"

"You're a good man in a bad mood."

"I'd like to feel better. How can I accomplish that?"

"How should I know?"

"We have to be careful. We have to think."

"I agree. We need clear thinking."

He moved closer. "You should be more affectionate. That's one thing."

"I know it."

"You should put your hands on me. Like you did him." He wrapped his legs around her legs, his arms around her middle. He sniffed her neck. "For peace again."

"Soon," she said. "Give me time."

The butterfly dropped down to the pit. He rocked her on the edge and she let him.

"A horse has the largest eye of any land mammal."

"You've told me."

"People think lions, people think elephants. People overflow with mistakes and blunders."

"I know, I know." She pried his arms off. But gentle. "Let's get on back."

They stood and brushed themselves off. The butterfly roamed the high dirt walls between landings on a rump, then a forehead, then an ear with a tag beginning to rot where it sipped, then a hoof to a lip to a sunny flank to a scrotal sac until the lime burned its pinhead feet. It skipped off to cool them. Elsewhere, the planes landed too, spun down the ends of runways, tied down, refueled. Others dropped into blue lakes and scattered ducks, fishing lines off pontoons, rolled cuffs, sunburnt knees, toes swinging cool as bait.

They walked together from the cow pit, stiffly, arm in arm.

Word travels fast over hills and creeks. Saul and Ella were first to arrive in a plume of dust.

"Sister to the rescue," said Dan.