

TO WHERE THE WEST BEGINS

The pocked and wide-flung prairie, level and stony, that is the flat landscape of Piedra County stretches swollen in April as emerald-y green as Eden, or at the very least the promised land realized in saturated tints in the embossed five-pound bound King James illustrated Bible that recorded the Tavoncrae family names,—but the flame yellow ten a.m. sun is high above the puny trees and already so blazing hotter than any imaginable hell on either side of this known world. Recent-drenched swathes of fresh April grass and mounds of clover spread to the horizons a greenly benign veneer of springtime; nevertheless, already, in the basins of depressions, heat-addled, imaginary lakes rise quavering as silver waves of heat that shimmer and then move evaporating ever further into the far distance—as if blown about at random by the puffing of heating gusts. After the frenzy of early morning pecking for breakfast insects or a

seed underneath among the hard scabble of red sand and ochre rocks chipped on their decline to dust, the quick birds have quieted into the lulled oven-y torpor that sedated them into the flickering canopy of sparsely clumped mesquite tree outbreaks here or there; and what few lizards that remain scurry into the warm safe shadows of crevices where they will abide luxuriatingly away from prying eyes. As indifferent buzzards perch bareheaded, gloomy, black patient morticians, on austere posts in the heating glare, only hawks wheeling high in the blue upper currents patrol the brazen sky in this steep rising morning, and flutter a shadow far below to the ground. The air smells of sunshine and dust; the few bluebonnets that are out in brief splendor teetering in the constant wind. It was thus always—and likely to remain so—as in the words of the old hymn: morning has broken like the first morning. Time circling on itself like the silently gliding predatory hawks.

Cody Tavoncrae searches as far as he could observe, sweeping his fresh and rested—although they had as usual been

opened since before first light—eyes, which are the same colour as the bluebonnet too, toward the distant horizon and across to the other. There is not, as hereabouts they often note, a cloud in the sky. This morning he rides roan Syrupbucket; and at a slow walk. Everything looks as it should; fences upright; tank water levels brimming constant. Nothing is out of its place. Some clumps of fly-specked tufty steers have already settled knelt into the hot air stressing the sandy terrain while other wandering cattle still graze the tough prairie grass with malingering interest. If any cows are calving they are doing it hidden out of sight, uncomplicated and private as it should be, natural birth into an expansive, though wobbly, world. Under his hat Cody has shade, but still the growing morning heat sends a drop of wetness down the hollow of spine below his shoulder blades. The far distances, far flat stone sediment infrequently crested by a level mesa, interminably beyond those shifting heat mirages, remain a hazy silver blue edged by the light glossy sky. Cody, letting Syrupbucket take head at his own leisured pace,

not only enjoys but ever looks forward to his rotation on the morning look-out alone out here with only a horse and creatures and abundance of wide open spaces, as untainted as any place is likely to be. He can breathe easily out here, unspoiled by intrusion. Cody has ten months since passed his nineteenth birthday and he pursues these customary mornings, grazing on his own sprouty thoughts as well, peering at the horizons of "the future". It is one of his favorite best times of day; and gives him the opportunity to consider seriously that looming future that has necessarily abandoned the corralled little world of district high school and crept fleeing into the few desolated streets of Arrowpoint Flats and the further alone reaches of Piedra County. Thinking clear ahead is something Cody seems better able to accomplish, as it was, daydreaming, out here looking into the sky rather than into the raftered ceiling of bunkhouse B of the Rocking Bar S ranch, which he at present shares with only three others. Very little time is not consumed by some work activity anyway and what downtime comes the hand's way is filled, in

the relentless company of bunking together, with stints of time-killing games or nonfocused on-call boredom.

His partners in the half-occupied bunkhouse B are little older than Cody's age but have a few seasons of ranch work behind them—still they seem only testing the current, really undecided about a crossing. Evenings they sometimes talk aloud about their unformed lives, goaded often by remembered childhood games or the movies they had seen. "It's the last of the old frontier. It's freedom", they say, or "Cowboying is a life for real true Americans. It's in the blood—heritage." or sometimes even, only half-jokingly, "A man's got to do what a man's got to do." Only Tomas, shy, the alert watchful eighteen-year-old Mexican, remained serious. Cody will listen, but keeps his own counsel. He experiences truly some magnetic pull, somewhat inexpressible yet heavy as gravity, to the dust-choked scrublands and the boundary-less sky around Arrowpoint Flats. He gazes upon it through young just-open eyes, though already in this life's range he has known trials: of a crushed family, of

loneliness, of dry poor meals of beans, of threadworn winters. Still somehow, you always got through, managed to crawl ahead; like the mesquite always that relentlessly put out leaflets in the spring, or the dried up shallow creeks that fill refreshed from the spring thunderstorms.

Bunkhouse A is where the eight old hands bunk, in just plenty enough room to spread about their homey belongings and feel they have a proper place, like a part of the fences at the Rocking Bar S. Some have been at the ranch for more or less nearly twenty years. Some came and stayed a while, then drifted; some came and went like the seasons of winter snow; some few have come to root; and others come only at the busiest times of roundup to fill out the empty spaces left in bunkhouse B. Cody best liked to hang around them because they talk, when inclined, of the people they have known, and the vaguely remembered old days, and even beyond in some nostalgic memory of when their father's or grandfather's

generation had worked wrangling on this land. They, laconic, earthbound, say things like:

“Cowboy is a true survivor. Keeping alive a past that is slipping”, or

“Country may be going to hell, downhill, but it’s fret no mind to a cowboy—has a worthy horse and a creek to put the beer in”, or

“My Pop said back then he never saw a quieter peaceful place—when the yahoo come-lately-s were a-sleeping”, or, they will say:

“Devil would rather live in hell, and rent out Texas. Cowboy can see that.” Or

“They can’t make them any more like the old ‘old man Staunton’.”

The foreman, Will Crowder, lives in the yellow-shuttered foreman’s house with his friendly polite but not exactly legal “wife”, Adeline, participating as the ranch hand’s cook where she serves them meals behind the foreman’s house in a screened

pavilion in both summer and winter (when heat is supplied by *chimeneas* in all the corners) and the tradition of no beer drunk—procured in Cody’s case by the older hands anyway— until in the privacy of the bunkhouse after eight-thirty p.m.. They called Will Crowder “Chief”, foreman at the Rocking Bar S for twenty-three years. The “Staunton place” house, the main house, sits up a long driveway that is an *allee* of well-watered pecan trees. Towering there a great expanded structure of original orange-ish native rock and added-on bricks imported ninety-six years ago (1910) all the way by wagonloads from Fort Worth, and then embellished with a pedimented portico of Ionic columns, inside the edifice the walls adorned with impressive rattlesnake skins and longhorn’s polls, genre paintings, varied collections and books, heirlooms, and long-ago hunting trophies like the buck and *javelina* heads and skins of bobcats. Its respectable size suits Mrs. Marian Idabelle Staunton, as well as old Mrs. Staunton, Marian Idabelle’s mother-in-law, Rusty’s mother, who lives in the east wing of the old house, anchoring the more than

twenty-eight thousand acres of the Rocking Bar S that had been Staunton ranch acquired for one-hundred-thirty-nine years, leaving behind Tennessee and ruckus-ing westward into Texas to begin a rejuvenated life, and continue to add a muster of names to the heavy gilt-edged Staunton family Bible. The early Staunton settlers, with their freed black stragglers, felt at the start this flat hot earth might be ideal for cotton, except for the unpredictability, so they learned, of the rainfall that came all at once too much or not at all. Most of the freedmen moved on, or returned south. Cattle came. Cattle for beef to send east became the bull-headed business of the Stauntons, as well as of the Lovings and the Goodnights. Now, inheritor in these times of the epithet , old man Staunton, R. C. (Rusty), sixty-ish, and brick-hard himself, reigns over it all—himself in the small plane overseeing each mid-afternoon the wide spiney *nopales* lands that are his. Otherwise he drives his dust-encrusted pickup truck, when not horseback, over the rough pasture trailroads and around Piedra County, keeping his so-called town car, a

classic creamy white Rolls-Royce, for Marian Idabelle Staunton and her periodic trips into Abilene or Fort Worth, some hundred more or less miles away. The Staunton children—one son a doctor with a practice in Mineral Wells, one daughter in law school in San Francisco, three daughters married to the sons of Texas ranchers—were scattered, the only one still living at the Staunton place, Beau Pearce, undecided about becoming a minister, or a missionary, or merely an assignment in the Peace Corps.

Cody has occasionally seen the car, the heavy-weighting cloud that is the Rolls-Royce, leave the garage, watched its easy parade out along the *allee* of driveway; but he prefers at any rate to spend his time among the horses and the warm close dust smell of the animals, using a ranch truck when he must, his own clanking high school Ford pickup now up on blocks. The horses, as reliable as the Rolls, are as likable as pets, though steady and stalwart working colleagues; and are his best friends. To others Cody seemed to wear a serious expression. He is slow

to smile. He looks pleasant but studiously serious, an air of confused startlement, and, lightly freckle-faced, somewhat ordinary, with his eyes, serious and steady, ready to search and perhaps trust, fresh. At nineteen, he retains young posture—somewhat yet unformed, but resilient, sturdy and springy. He is thin, scant even, but wiry—tall with long arms and legs, but thin at the wrists and thighs. Cody had learned to ride essentially in his time at the ranch, while working part-time for a year and then for the eleven months since graduation, only a few rides with other schoolkids being his previous minimal experience. He was too poor to have a pony or a horse, even if his disrupted family life had allowed for it; but he holds a tremendous affection for them now. A horse listened when he talks; and they did not ask questions, unless obliquely, each revealing traits of individuality that could be observed and noted, learning the levels of trust between rider and bearer. He shares as much time now as possible with them, as much as he spent hanging around with the old hands. Cody has become fascinated with

the old ways, with the simple ways, clear ways of bygone times. Once he had overcome the early soreness of a beginning rider, and learning the equipment for dressing the horse—though he was still intently investigating the various tack that bookish eastern riders made reference to—he settled into relaxed relations, still at present practicing the perfection of the essential skill of roping from the saddle. Though Cody disdained the cellular phone he must now for efficiency keep in his saddlebags, some aspects of the cowboy life did not change. He appreciates that fact, because earlier on his young life had seen too much change.

(When his grandmother died while Cody was eight, his mother was left with an enormous and unbearable depression so that after two years slowly agonizing time she was also gone. After that Cody was unfenced to live a mustang's life, scattered back and forth between his father and his other part-time guardians, his Uncle Hess Tavoncrae and Aunt Lynda. After four years of that back and forth shuttling one day Cody's father

vanished, just up and disappeared, discovered later to have followed a waitress out to Las Vegas, where presumably he still was. It was not long after, also, that Lynda left Hess, moving out and taking the eleven-year-old twin boys and the nine-year-old girl. Cody still sometimes saw these cousins, but he moped about ever more withdrawn into his own shrinking world where he was alone with Uncle Hess at the small empty house where they were staying when Cody was fresh in high school. The community of Arrowpoint Flats treated Cody, when they saw him going about his business on the streets of the town, with soft-hearted friendliness but also with light-handed circumspection as if they did not quite know how to approach him and his troubles. Cody got along well with the other high school kids, in the usual strained ways, and he liked the teachers well enough; but he remained, for the most part, alone—until, as a high-school junior, he finally noticed Kim. Kim warmed like a ray of sunshine through a cloud. Dreamily prompted, he thought about work and life after high school, and drew up the familiar easy image

of a cowboy, a familiar life right outside the doorstep, and eventually started part-time at the Staunton place. After Cody graduated Hess had been able to take a job as a security guard at a junk yard in Wichita Falls; but even without Hess Cody would sometimes be able to wrangle up a visit to his grandfather Tavoncrae, his only other relation, also a rather lonely man who occupied a spartan nursing home, a victim of back-breaking futile itinerant farm or ranch work and an early tendency to forgetfulness.)

In a few moments Cody might see Johnson come riding over the next rise from the mornings'-check on his share of sections, another lone rider trotting, if there were no emerging troubles to report, out of the miles of placidly baking hazedusted rangeland; Cody's recyclable reverie ready to be refolded neatly and stuffed back for now into the saddlebag toward awaiting another day. There at the concurrence he and Johnson, or whomever other, would meet up and ride side by

side back to the corrals, exchanging only a few pleasantries observations in passing, to where, after putting away their mounts, perhaps stout cups of coffee awaited their camaraderie before the next chores, another bright day unfolding, its own time, its own same place.

To distinguish Cody Tavoncrae from the two other hands at the Rocking Bar S named Cody, the old hands had taken to calling him "Little Spit". They find fun in the little simple ways they could. At the beginning he tended to follow Chief around, shadowlike, observing, his questions sidestepping from the necessary timed expectorations of Chief's brown tobacco juice infrequently into the dust nearby rather than into an old coffee can which he often habitually carried around. Chief is one of the old hands who enjoy a long chew, not a cigarette. "Little Spit" had even taken to carrying a packet, no longer a tin but now in these days a plastic packet, of Copenhagen in his pocket, but he rarely partook of it. It really did not suit him; and Kimmie dislikes it—though she, for a lark, once, tried it herself. After a

time the “Little” part got dropped for brevity and Cody’s weaning independence, and now around the ranch hands he is called simply “Spit”, when not necessary to use his given name.

He had first noticed Kim Pinkerton, Kimmie, in the distance skimming through the hallways of NW Piedra district high school where they were two at the same moment in history among those other only couple hundred Piedra Pumas. Cody had, shyly, covertly, followed her—blonde and blue-eyed and lively—around with his blue eyes, and floundered about a bit with moony eyes until eventually she began to acknowledge that she had seen him too by saying to him “I think it is time you told me ‘hello’”; and then they began to walk around together and at some point spend time having longer after-school walks and sharing cold soda waters at the drugstore fountain or the bleachers of the football field or the paddock of the stables. Kimmie was one of the town girls, if that could be said of Arrowpoint Flats with its population of only eleven hundred in-town residents, and she lives in an old but neat white house at

the town's edge before it gave onto the spread prairie. Cody, however, as well as Kimmie, together in a shy privateness, rather steered clear of letting her parents know how much time they were spending as new-found friends. She would take her father's old white horse from the vacant lot back of their house and ride out to meet Cody however far into the countryside he could coax his rattletrap pickup to carry him. There, while lingering over particularly difficult schoolwork, they would share rides and bottles of Dr. Pepper and gossip and thoughts about when schoolwork would end. They smiled a lot, shyly, hesitant, laughing sometimes. The changing days, grown green then tan and finally opalescent, blew by. Though she had been with her parents to Wichita Falls, and as far into the outer world as any satellite-dish television could take one, Kimmie—so blonde and bright and shining, so sprung up like a fresh breeze—could make you believe that undoubtedly in her rippling breeziness her farthest trip from sunny home had still been no further than the Dairy Queen over on Route 16. They could, at their leisure,

spend the languishing hours surrounded by immensities of open space beneath the azure sky of the dry afternoon gliding into rosy sunset of a waning day. During the football season, or basketball in the spring, was the only chance for evening excursions, unless counting the occasional youth nights at churches, or, on some pretext involving her girlfriends, Kimmie stole an evening with Cody for a movie with the girlfriends tagging along, and daring afterward only a stop at the neon-fizzed Wagon Wheels Drive-in instead of at the brightly lit and noisy Burger Barn. Of course, a bit of talk about the shared sodas eventually went around causing strange awkward hushes between Kimmie's parents when she entered the room. But Kimmie had never been belligerent, and nothing changed. Summer leapt by, with Cody spending much time in work with his new part-time duties at the ranch, the first such earthy chores he had really known as the Tavoncraes had lost their family place out to the east of Arrowpoint Flats in the days of his grandfather's faltering last bloom and a bad year and a financial

recession. The next September he and Kimmie would return as senior year at the high school. Other than the easily grasped pleasure there of spending time together, that year would be a chore as well, seeming to drag out to endless months but punctuated, rollicking times among the routine, with football rivalries and homecoming and Christmas holidays and New Year's and spring rodeo and school picnics, and highlighting with his first part-time involvement with the Staunton May roundup; otherwise the high school year an intricate monotony. Seldomly Cody or Kimmie gave over to thoughts of what they must do when the senior year ended—Cody, less inclined to explore elsewhere even if the finances had not been a consideration, thought only ahead to his full-time occupation at the ranch, and Kimmie, though somewhat encouraged by her parents to apply to colleges, could not seem—perhaps beyond a certificate in childhood education—to find a distinct overriding interest on which she could focus in any but the most indefinite way. She considered the local options, strip-mall retail or small office work

or beauty school, allowing the prospect of leaving home to loom difficult; but yet lately wiggling thoughts had begun to consider moving to a city, though even the closest one a big distant step off the familiar prairie—and though seeming near enough they were nothing more enticing really than over-sprawled suburbia, with no center—the opportunity they presented not really offset by the dense fenced crowdedness. Certainly as alternatives those middle-urban crossroad sprawls were not the improbable distance, physical and mental, of Chicago or Los Angeles, or Las Vegas, or even Denver. And much like Cody, there was the tempting feeling within their deepest selves of not really wanting to leave behind the country of open land—of distant untouchable sky—of the freedom of being surrounded by great open space, the vast sky blue as polished turquoise, the warm sunshine so thick and heavy it could be squeezed in the palms of your hands. The cocoons the two had spun about themselves were yet intact, un-breaking. While Kimmie listened quietly to the other girls chatter about their futures' plans, or Cody weighed the

gnawing pensive interests of his acquaintances' daydreaming foresight into a life of travel driving the long-haul trucking or, even more brightly fascinating, being on the road riding the rodeo circuit, Kimmie, seemingly undeterred in her attachment to Cody, or Cody, in his desire to attach himself to this land, felt they wanted to stay where they were and not disrupt any cling that they had to the close familiarity of this place. Looking with yearning and determination into the FFA feedlot at the high school on a blustering late winter dreary day, with Cody listening against the shrill of the wind, one or another wistful youngster, with new hat, with one booted foot raised against the fence rail as if about to leap, the eyes in his fuzzy cheeks shining with a glimpse of upcoming bright unclouded future, would ponderingly declare, "Nothing for me like riding the rodeo. That is the best life I can imagine; traveling around, big crowds, earn nice money if you are good at it, and there's the girls. Show them you can get yourself a super-deluxe pickup and a double horse-

trailer; maybe do some stunt work in the movies. That's a great life; free to come and go, no being tied to the same place."

"Yeah. That is the ticket", adds another. They all agree.

"You can't beat being a whup-ass rodeo star. That's a no-brainer. Girls follow you around, just to watch you—and everything else, want to come up and talk to you."

As the weeks passed Cody soaked in all the conversations, about rodeo circuit, about the dream ranch or moving to California or trucking, or even the military or Nashville and music, but he remained unconvinced about straying from being a good hand in a good outfit or from ranching and Arrowpoint Flats—and Kimmie. Cody's track aimed determined, more or less, straightaway. He, facing the wind full of clear sunshine, falls sentimental about the smell of schoolyard grass, just mown, in those first baseball days of spring. The world for which Cody surveyed, the world past high school, did not seem to move from right here in Arrowpoint Flats and the ranch hands with whom he had become acquainted. What other world, better,

could there possibly be?—even in this present one’s quiet and methodical pace, its slow procession through the seasons of unvarying years? Long live John Wayne—although the “Duke” was now dead (for more than twenty years); nevertheless long live (in memory) John Wayne whether Thomas Dunson or Jake Cutter or G.W. McClintock or even “Rooster” Cogburn, depending, as one would guess, on one’s own memorial perspective. Long live John Wayne; even Roy Rogers, too. The world, evolved confusion, of new experiences, of electronic gadgets and ATM’s and internet connections, of web-cam conferencing and streaming video, while familiar enough to Cody from growing up surrounded by such things and their ever-excessive abundance, was a world huge and strange in its pervasive enormity and complexity, with a tangle of machinery; a world for which some other young people surrounding Cody longed to enter at a breakneck lunge, but from which Cody himself has turned a leery eye. He, and as he believed Kimmie too, were just as grudging to linger into Graham where a new

four-screen multiplex, with a small popcorn box costing the higher price of a burger dinner, had killed off the old Adobe Theatre, leaving its crumbling hulk as abandoned as a burned-out covered wagon with a broken wheel a thousand miles short of Hollywood. Some other teenage compadres accepted these things with hardly notice, the techie gadgetry and synthesized electric guitars and designer pills; but Cody, and Kimmie, held back. They could hold on to the older ways not hard enough. Even the John Wayne rentals at the video store were being replaced, even as they looked at them, by DVDs and needing a special newer and, of course, improved machinery for viewing. Little wonder Cody prefers the horses—at least they stay the same, still traversing the crumbling country that a Land Rover or a Jeep could not, even as old man Staunton only spent a quarter of as much the time to fly over it, his fuel the price whatever that it was, and mattering as it did to the old man in the most abstract way since he had banks full of family money. At least by a fraction, often more, each and every day the long shadows

of the comforting old ways fell further back into time, with Cody and Kimmie standing on the edge of a vista where they dare not predict the shifting tangle of shapes of a new world, hesitantly uneager to enter it—alone, or otherwise.

One unsettled day, a Saturday morning of that senior year, in the spring when the blue April winds buffeted the cloud-draped skies, Kimmie wandered from the kitchen door to be with Cody at the Rocking Bar S. She had baked cookies as a gift. They were spending increasing time sought in only each other's presence, exploring perhaps the farther boundaries beyond the classroom day, assaying the comfortable weight of time accompanied with each other. When Cody had said, "Let's go riding", Kimmie agreed. She consented determinedly to indulge him in this pleasure which he enjoyed endlessly, and it was a chance for them to be again alone. A great amount of time lately Kimmie had debated herself trying to pin down her thoughts on the questions posed by her parents about college; and herself having once been used to riding for hours, she at

times since felt herself having grown on, and now she thought of the horses as sometimes troublesome and too slow to provide adequate transportation. One of her parents' enticements had been the offer of a car, a competent used car. Still, riding horseback continues as constant pleasure for Cody. They led off out of the corrals aside the stables, and across the open toward the southwest. When out of sightlines of the main house they raced a bit cautiously, whooping, but only at an easy gallop, then slowing into a walk while the horses ambled like sleepwalkers. A tower of blue clouds, far in the distance, piled above them outlined as a wall against the surrounding grey, reducing the couple to specks in the landscape. Dust smote the eyes. Though just crossed the threshold of spring, across the bare spots on the prairie when the wind blew uninterrupted, which was constant in every season—except for those perhaps sparse few moments of eerie drowsy calm in summer or in a frozen-over day of winter—constant and eccentric winds would lift miniature whirlwinds, "dust devils", scouring the dry flats

before bumping into rocky outcrops and flinging debris into awkward moving clumps. Spring mischief was in the clouds.

“What a day!” shouted Cody, breathing the smell of earth. “I never get tired of being out here—seeing this country; it’s so awesome. For me, I’m as comfortable as lying in a hammock, staring at the river. Look at those clouds.”

Kimmmie concurred, “They’re beautiful.”

After a moment falling behind, watching Kimmmie astride the palomino, Cody drifts alongside her, lifting his hat and setting it more squarely deliberate against his head. “I’ve been thinking,” he said.

Kimmmie turns toward him; but he did not immediately say more. He had maintained a certain reticence, both were even after a year still shy, coltish; and he always let Kimmmie determine their proximity, hesitant himself to push, fearing she might bolt. “Yes?” She looked at his down-turned face, biting her lip then, struck with a sudden thundery premonition.

Kimmmie barely jostled astride her saddle.

Cody could only imagine the luminescence of what was beneath her Tide-scented cotton pants, the tense taut flesh, pale thighs white as a new calves' pink blue-veined underbelly. Cody, whose thoughts climbed there, had not seen that high country meadow, nor was likely to until Kimmie decided she was ready, which was apparently a wearying long journey off over rocky treacherous ground. It seemed as far away as the border, and a sight twice again more blindered, and as sublimely patrolled. Cody glanced at Kimmie's profile, her bouncing blonde hair pulled into a ponytail beneath her hat, as he pressed on, "I'm going to be working here, and if you are not going away to school, as you promised you weren't, I think we ought to get married."

Kimmie could not help but smile, dizzying into a glow of being needed and wanted, though it might hardly befit the churn of what she felt really inside. Here she felt a chill dampish gust pass by them. "Without waiting?" she questioned. Inside the

candleglow of her mind's eye she saw herself, poised, in the long white frilled dress, standing, a fluttering life-altering vision.

"We are waiting," Cody sighed. "We've *been* waiting, so far."

"But you can't live married here, in the bunk. You...We don't have anything saved up. Cody, you know I want to, sometime soon, I... but I don't think you've thought it through. And you know my parents might balk—they're still hoping I'll go to yet more school. They'll say we're too young, and want to make us wait."

"They didn't wait." Cody looked into the line of approaching cloud.

"I know," Kimmie replied. She sighed.

"What a time," Cody said. "It's hard to make heads-or-tails." He drawled, "Who thought decisions would be so hard to figure—so big? I do know I want to be with you, to be in this place where we can live a life together, to grow as one, to simply *be*. There's no possible life better. Just look around. To

be where you can feel the breeze blow the sunshine across your skin, feel that, what could be better—more alive? This place is good—still plain, not cluttered...Well, I'm working," Cody offered. "I've got a good start here, on a good place, going well. I'll put by some money. This is the best place around, and soon we could have our own little place, with me moved out of the bunk—or we could even have a trailer on an acre right here rented from old man Staunton. It'll happen somehow. Let's not wait any more—but only for a little as we have to. We'll work it out."

"I know."

"I want us to be married." It was hard for Cody to be especially outspoken about sentiment, and Kimmie understood that. It did not come naturally to her as well, and she had come to be torn with indecision so much lately. Beyond the hallways of high school, facing uncertainty, decisions of life were becoming more complex, not easier. "We'll start our real life together, right here, now", Cody went on, pausing, thinking. He

thought Kimmie understood, though he had only brought up “love” once or twice when feeling particularly open and somewhat forward, Kimmie knowing it made her feel warm and soft and that Cody must at those moments be exceptionally frisky. Cody grasped his plan, constructing the here and now, and some distantly attainable future (though however amorphously set in some cherished long-past nineteenth century vision). “It’ll work out.” He searches her profile, attempting to gain a glimpse straight into the depths of her eyes, as blue grey as the clouds; then he blew her a kiss, and squeezing his knees into the pinto’s ribs, trotted ahead, momentarily settled in his visions. Kimmie followed along until she came up alongside him.

The next day, a Sunday it was, when Cody, after cadging a ride into town as was his custom while his decrepit pick-up was up on the blocks, after the morning service at which he sat quietly in a back pew, spent anxious nerve-numbing time looking at what could only best be described as “promise” rings, since stone-less, small faceted nevertheless still shiny bits of metal

signifying golden leanings toward commitment if not largesse. Cody had begun to save a bit of wages toward his truck rehabilitation and the reinstatement of its collision insurability, but that slight bankroll was yet a very small outward dent in his jeans' pocket. Wages were consistent, or even better, when contrasted with other ranches in the whole region around the Rocking Bar S, and even with the meals provided via Adeline, but it was still difficult to save money nowadays in any case. Cody reflected, shrugging, how the Staunton kids and grandkids had it good, money mouldering in the sacred walls of the Rancher's and Merchant's Bank and Trust only a step ahead down the street of the Bank of America or the newly-re-arrived (though there was also Staunton money there, too) Wells Fargo. Still in all, Cody considers that he has his own good things as well. He is young, so is Kimmie. He is healthy. He enjoys his place in the world, that place of natural habitat, the stark windswept ranchlands: green in spring, tan in summer, frosted in winter; and he does not long for anything other than

cowboying and staying close as his grandfather had to this land of immense air and rugged beautiful barren space. He is content. But he does long ardently for Kimmie, and to start his own family as soon as practicable. If the insistent urgency of sustenance sprang up through this land, as it did through the rattlers and scorpions, the jackrabbits and coyotes, the mesquites and devil's claws, even listlessly through the dull-witted cattle who Cody assuaged, even through the inanimate and come-lately poolhalls and taverns and Walmarts, so it sprang also in Cody, and as well flickered in Kimmie, the object of his desire.

In the weeks that followed they spoke of these vague plans again. They weighed: sun-illuminated pros and stone-cold cons. They dream; then they look askew at momentary realities. All their scenarios came to rosy conclusions. Not so were the visions of Kimmie's parents who, after a great deal of rearing and bucking, finally gentled enough not to fly dodgily snorting at the very mention of the idea. Gradually they assented to the

seemingly inevitable, unable to offer any real objections other than youth and finances; and Kimmie's father, a butcher at Specialty Meats on Market Street (a fresh-cut outpost of the still tradition-popular locker-plant slaughterhouse), and rather hard-pressed in the finance department himself even agreed halfheartedly that he was willing to provide all that was necessary to see that they had a proper ceremony and all that was needed, if he were able, to set them off down the traditional path. Once Kimmie's mother was aligned up she threw herself full throttle into planning a daughter's wedding that would be a picture-book memory, the eventful start to a future which highlight promised to be the awaited arrival of many grandchildren, towheaded, fresh, and impishly exuberant. But right now, things—practical things—needed to be done. The wedding was set to be in November, after the autumn roundup. So many various plans, feasible and detailed, needed to be made for Kimmie and her mother: dresses, and arrangements, showers, and cake, and reception, everything kept small in

number but exhaustive in planning. Mrs. Pinkerton was kind with Cody, and solicitous, asking him what he thought about this and that rather than thus and so, then shooing him away and assuring him that her hand was firmly on the reins. It did not much make him feel better. When he and Kimmie were alone they dream of smaller and more intimate things, reveries of time spent together, quiet moments in the peaceful unhurried future which they anticipate would commence the minute the ceremony was ended. On fine May days they discussed the possibility of a wedding trip, which, in view of the circumstances, seems an extravagant luxury. But, of course, it is another once-in-a-lifetime moment. Ignoring it altogether seems to offer a bad choice at the outset. They consider simply spending a night or two at the Drover's Bed and Breakfast in Graham. It is quiet and picturesquely inundated with old-fashioned frontier-flavored amenities, copper-plated bathtubs and the ornate canopied Victorian beds that represented the intricate romance and heavy immensity of a stable marriage, carried over meticulously from a

previous time. Other afternoons poring over a Sunday edition of the Star-Telegram which carried (not that anyone too much heeded) the world-worthy news this far, they would contemplate outrageously the spirited fling of a few days' wedding trip honeymooning in Fort Worth. Fort Worth—hard-riden locale that was once an outpost aface the edge of the open range frontier, that had with boisterous effrontery begun as once a respite and diversion on the cattle trail northward—"Cowntown", the town acclaimed as "where the west begins", a celebratory oasis of now citified diversions. Moments of furored excitement crowded there where memories could be collected and taken home for showcasing away like delicate china cup souvenirs in a glass cabinet. Fort Worth, while spurred on forward lunging wild-eyed, life clamped in its teeth, prancing, could be in many accounts deemed modern, jangling, could boast of giant hotels, and shops with elaborate treasures for the looking. Cody and Kimmie, on a jaunt, impertinent, could tour lively museums and the former stockyards, walk down peopled streets; and they

could celebrate in the immense yellow-lighted dance halls or hidden dark honky-tonks, swaying and kicking unabashedly to the music until two a.m. They daydreamed it, once, twice, over again. Improbably, they would discuss dreamily, timidly intrigued, how much fun it might be: to see some of the big outer world together, to ride the shiny mechanized bull, to try some new experiences together, some illicit tingle for a few days, to celebrate most memorably the union that would be the foundation of their lives. These fanciful plannings invariably led Kimmie to a quiet place of contemplation, not only about decisions of finances but as well about the entire terrain of the expansile future laid as predictably flat as the Llano Estacado. The view ahead pleases Cody, who hitched a new pride as silver as spurs to his walk, and even crowed a bit to the hobbled idle old men at the nursing home where his grandfather resided telling them of his planned marriage to the prettiest girl in Piedra County; Kimmie began to intuit the view as littered with stony outcroppings where the trails became lost on hard earth. With

determination she, and with her mother guiding, persevered beyond momentary wavers. Sometimes the whingy quality of the high school girl just leaves her voice, replaced with a tension, a tightly strung vibration that she tamped with a certain aloofness or, when with Cody, a veil of quiet. Cody, his mood at those times just momentarily falling as well, wonders if she might be possibly thinking of someone else, other options. Mrs. Pinkerton kept, as much as possible, Kimmie occupied in a simmer of activity, in preparations regarding the monumental event. Though obviously the ceremony was to be held at the Faithful Rest Baptist Church, and the reception to be in the church fellowship hall and as much outdoors as the weather would allow, Mrs. Pinkerton became so entranced, and desperate for advice, that she and Kimmie sought out any and all available possibilities—as she chirped, it did not cost anyone to check out the circumstances, and it surely added to the excitement. When they looked at the picturesque rooms of the Drover's Bed and Breakfast, the proprietress suggested the most

renowned barbeque-master in Piedra County. Someone recommended the experience of some lady, a stout woman given to wearing a rather vast assortment of fringed denim dresses, in Arrowpoint Flats who was known around the region as a party planner. Cody accompanied Mrs. Pinkerton and Kimmie on this excursion to the lady's pink and beige ribbon-bow-bedecked shopfront on a side off West Street where they spent an hour or so discussing flowers and looking at frilly photographs, until they were somewhat dizzy and filled with coffee, and while miming adorably awestricken rapture Cody was struck—Kimmie, too—with the only-partially amusing aspect of making tulle-ish plans about bouquets and doves and satin with so ebullient a lively well-intentioned lady in a converted old saddlery storefront in Arrowpoint Flats on a half-vacant street paved only with gravelly sand. Alienly Cody smoothed the doily under his coffee cup and Kimmie mimicked him, bright-eyed, her little finger arched in the most antagonistic way. Mrs. Pinkerton thanked the woman for her time, telling the smiling lady, as pink

as her shop, and as naively intrigued regarding a fee, that they would certainly consider her services. Then they made an appointment with a printer to look at invitations. Mrs. Pinkerton was convinced her so-called window-shopping investigations were progressing well; and she had already determined to enlist her sister-in-law, a middle-school teacher, to assist in the actual planning and setting up at any rate.

Weeks of summer swelter on, each shriveling to dryness and blowing away, revealing the next, parching, to repeat the same. The wedding planning fancies were the thunderous relief to the monotonousness of that dry season. Plans are analyzed and reconstructed, particularly by Mrs. Pinkerton adopting the fervor of a newly converted zealot—plus Kimmie in tow. One dry calm morning, passing the bus station, where a large rumbling Greyhound was unloading a package, Kimmie stood to watch the dust-encrusted coach easily pulling away, diminishing in a blast of departure into distance, and wondered what it might be like to climb on board, silently, and not get off until El

Paso, or Montana, Reno, or even Vancouver. Inside her suddenly deserted head, some miles drifting down the highway, she could almost hear herself echoed as crying out, "I am here".

Whitened grass lay faded and limp around the sandy flats; even the heat mirages dried down to a brittle crackle. While Cody diligently strove into his rotation of duties and "riding the line" and chores at the ranch, counting out his small checks into scribbled columns of hopeful figures, even studying a manual on engine repair, with the Chief's help on late Saturday afternoons, to get his truck up and running, he does not waver for he has gripped his plans like a bronc rope. There is no going back, or stepping aside, now; nor did he want to. Once in the late summer of September when the heat has frazzled everyone to a limp exposed nerve sizzled at the ends, when the planning had wound down to the defining decisive moments, Cody sensed a certain lassitude in Kimmie's demeanor. He could define it no better than she would; and she dismissed it wearily as nothing more than tiredness and anxiety at waiting. They had seen

several of the town kids off to college, to Wichita Falls or Abilene Christian, to Dallas or even far into the thumpingly rigid bonhomie of A&M. Kimmie had, at their parties and departures, waved them good bye, good luck. Others had simply moved away, to one of those bigger towns, to chase down some opportunity, to simply follow the road. Kimmie's road had converged inextricably with Cody's, and she, because she felt about him as no other boy, she determined to follow it with tradition as guidepost, becoming the wife of a cowhand. Cody would be a boulder of steadfastness for her, and she would stand by him. That was her decision. Cody takes for granted that his plans for the future were laid out parallel and straightaway as rail tracks, and on those occasions when he senses in Kimmie an unaccustomed moodiness it sends him losing his way into a deep shadowy canyon. He knows truly that she is not going around with anyone else, for things like clandestine rendezvous could not be kept secret for long in a place the size of Arrowpoint Flats, plus the opportunity had

never really presented itself in any public way. The idea of any discontent was too unlikely for entering his head. Entranced with the beloved notion of the vast preeminent country here, he lopes on, willing Kimmie, as anyway she almost was, to be just as enamoured, strangely, of the sharp biting winters, the long summers of intense heat, and dust, the warm smell of animals, the flies and thorns, the colours, the cooled-down moonlight on summery evenings.

Temperatures are still hovering up to ninety-seven degrees at the first of October and preparations for autumn roundup. As this his third roundup approached Cody considered himself a fairly seasoned hand. It is hard bone-bouncing work, and he enjoys it, the young man's work, the outdoor physicality and even the wearying aches. For the most part the older hands face it as stoic duty, staggeringly long days in the saddle, the herding and counting, branding of the newest calves since spring, weaning, doctoring, separating of beef steers to be sold;

Cody called it the beginning of his life's work. He believes in carrying on the tradition, keeping that tradition moving into the future, no matter the obstacles of mechanization or the so-called conveniences of cellular phones or ethanol or income tax software or computers.

Roundup came that autumn as the seasonal rite of tradition as always, days of whipping grinding work riding the land, chasing startled cattle over rough country, roping the running from the saddle, wrestling them into chutes and onto the stony ground, inspecting, vaccinating, cutting, smelling a hot shaped iron branding into hairy hides, and ending at last with numbed evenings of campfire chili with cornbread or tortillas and tired talk, a collection of comradely joshing and tall tales and reminisced "war stories" from the roundups of previous year's seasons; the whole excruciating week's routine to be followed at the conclusion by a giant barbeque, a day's resting up, and the fandango of an autumn dance a day or more before Halloween. Cody escorted Kimmie to the dance, where there was a great

deal of merriment, diversion, and camaraderie under a party tent dance floor set up near the cabana of the Staunton poolside; but, however, Cody could not partake of the dancing as a result of his perplexing injury. During the roundup in a freakish turn on the very last day while Cody was afoot on the ground about to inspect a problem steer the jumpy steer lunged sideways against Cody pushing him to twist in just the wrong direction while falling to the hard ground, pulling several ligaments and fracturing a bone in his lower leg on which the steer had placed a kick on his way down. Cody, the wind knocked out of him, failed even to curse. It was the sort of unanticipated accident that could happen, and often enough did, any day. So on the night of the big dance Cody, under his best dress Stetson and pressed white shirt, sported a pair of old jeans slashed up one leg to accommodate his cast, and crutches. He felt quite a bit better than before, except for the embarrassment of being incapacitated, but the doctor had told him he would need to wear the cast, and no strain, for six-to-eight weeks. Assigned to

light duties now around the barns and bunk he passes the time slowly with braiding or tack repair or such things as he is able, involving himself in activities without the chance of riding or bouncing too much. While other hands ride off and go about their business, Cody's days slowed to a sluggish crawl and left him a touch morose. Soon enough, with Thanksgiving approaching rapidly, the wedding day—after all the weeks of planning, after the showers and tabulations and fittings, after the old hand's obligatory but somewhat subdued bachelor party—was now at hand. The rehearsal, a quickly-paced-through formality shepherded by the coaxing Brother Goodacre, and the supper which followed was attended by the small party inside the hand's dining patio at the Rocking Bar S, the church itself prepared and awaiting only the placement of the flower baskets on each side of the aisle. Cody, intensely anticipatory, on the verge of tomorrow, was overly quiet, flushed red in the face, excitable, bobbling around on his crutches. Kimmie sat with her mother, and Aunt JoLynn, and Tiana Deavers, a friend who

remained in town from high school who would be a maid of honor, and her younger sister, Kassie, who would be another. The preachers' wife soothed them, with divinely blessed assurance, out of any outward nervousness, and kept them entertained by interjecting remarks into their chatter. The men clumped gathered near the entranceway. The stars were bright in the cooled-down evening brushed clear by a strong northwestern wind. Before the table laden with brisket and ribs Brother Goodacre led a prayer, a thoroughly Baptist prayer—lengthy, overwrought, a little too flashy for piousness, sacrificial (in many senses) yet on the scythe-edge of a demanding belligerence—everyone agreeing it was a rouser. Cody listened, thinking of the Tavoncrae family bible, its fading registry pages with a succession of now-barren lines as withering as the falling leaves. Tomorrow, at least, he would be a married man, and thinking of the day in the future when the lines would reflect more births and baptisms, to be filled in with a flourish, with

Cody righting the scattered herd to its narrow path, back on the trail.

Next morning, pink roseblossom dawn arising sooner than expected, a vibrantly sunny Saturday, Cody arrives at the church forty minutes before the ten a.m. ceremony, plenty of time to prop up his cast-trussed leg on a folding chair, his other foot encased in a tooled boot shined like it had never seen, and have Uncle Hess hover over him, asking if he needed anything and checking his pockets for the ring box. Cody's grandfather sits, waiting, in a pew at the back of the church, staring at the whiteness of the flower decorations and the new sunlight pouring through the windows. Cody, his leg propped up on the folding chair until the last minute, in the anteroom, hears the Pinkertons arrive, the car strewing the loose gravel of the parking lot. A voice from outside, door clunks, crunching footsteps, clicks, then a moment, and even longer moments of silence. Then a pianist begins, guests entering the sanctuary. Time sped up, then slowed down. Uncle Hess interrupts Cody's

reverie, handing him his crutches from the floor, and, a hand at his back, guiding the two of them to their place. His grandfather has moved closer to the front, near the cousins, and the pews are filled with people. Cody stands supported by the crutches; in the pause of the music Cody catches glimpse of Kimmie at the far end of the aisle, standing in the portal of the sanctuary. She is beautiful. He smiles, but with a befitting seriousness. Kimmie's face is radiant with moisturizer, perhaps a tear. He knows, for forever, he would see her at this moment into forever. Beautiful. She wears her white eyelet dress, and a cowboy's hat—creamy-white with a pristine white veil flowing from the back.

-- J. F. Lowe