THE MISFITS

Arthur Miller

The Men and Horses are misfits
They are both a dying breed.
Don’t want to be tethered by wages
The horses are no useless, they are fit and larger than normal, but the men cannot think outside of the job, the chase.

The Misfits. Arthur Miller. Short story collection Presence. The Misfits. Kindle edition
T

The Misfits

Wind blew down from the mountains all night. A wild river of air swept and swirled across the dark sky and struck down against the blue desert and hissed back into the hills. The three cowboys slept under their blankets, their backs against the first upward curve of the circling mountains, their faces toward the desert of sage. The wind and its tidal washing seethed through their dreams, and when it stopped there was a lunar silence that caused Gay Langland to open his eyes. For the first time in three nights he could hear his own breathing, and in the new hush he looked up at the stars and saw how clear and bright they were. He felt happy and slid himself out of his blankets and stood up fully dressed.

On the silent plateau between the two mountain ranges Gay Langland was the only moving thing. He turned his head and then his body in a full circle, looking into the deep blue sky for sign of storm. He saw that it would be a good day and a quiet one. He walked a few yards from the two other sleepers and wet the sandy ground. The excitement of the stillness was awakening his body. He returned and lit the bundle of dry sage he had gathered last night, dropped some heavier wood on the quick flames, perched the blackened coffeepot on the stones surrounding the fire bed, and sat on one heel, staring at the fresh orange embers.

Gay Langland was forty-five years old but as limber as he had ever been in his life. The light of his face brightened when there were things to do, a nail to straighten, an animal to size up, and it dimmed when there was nothing in his hands, and his eyes then went sleepy. When there was something to be done in a place he stayed there, and when there was nothing to be done he went from it. He had a wife and two children less than a hundred miles from here whom he had not seen in more than three years. She had betrayed him and did not want him, but the children were naturally better off with their mother. When he felt lonely for them all he thought of them longingly, and when the feeling passed he was left without any question as to what he might do to bring them all back together again. He had been born and raised on rangeland, and he did not know that anything could be undone that was done, any more than falling rain could be stopped in midair. And he had a smile and a look on his face that was in accordance. His forehead was evenly tracked with deep ridges, as though his brows were always raised a little expectantly, slightly surprised, a little amused, and his mouth friendly. His ears stuck out, as they often do with little boys or young calves, and he had a boy's turned-up snub nose. But his skin was browned by the wind, and his small eyes looked and saw and, above all, were trained against showing fear.

Gay Langland looked up from the fire at the sky and saw the first delicate stain of pink. He went over to the sleepers and shook Guido Racanelli's arm. A grunt of salutation sounded in Guido's head, but he remained on his side with his eyes shut. 'The sumbitch died off,' Gay said to him. Guido listened, motionless, his eyes shut against the firelight, his bones warm in his fat. Gay wanted to shake him again and wake him, but in the last two days he had come to wonder whether Guido was not secretly considering not flying at all. The plane's engine was rattling its valves and one shock absorber was weak. Gay had known the pilot for years and he knew and respected his moods. Flying up and down these mountain gorges within feet of the rock walls was nothing you could pressure a man to do. But now that the wind had died Gay hoped very much that Guido would take off this morning and let them begin their work.

He got to his feet and again glanced skyward. Then he stood there thinking of Roslyn. And he had a strong desire to have money in his pocket that he had earned himself when he came to her tonight. The feeling had been returning again and again that he had somehow passed the kidding point and that he had to work again and earn his way as he always had before he met her. Not that he didn't work for her, but it wasn't the same. Driving her car, repairing her house, running errands – all that stuff wasn't what you would call work. Still, he thought, it was too. Yet, it wasn't either.

He stepped over to the other sleeper and shook him. Perce Howland opened his eyes.

'The sumbitch died, Perce,' Gay said.

Perce's eyes looked toward the heavens and he nodded. Then he slid out of his blankets and walked past Gay and stood wetting the sand, breathing deeply as in sleep. Gay always found him humorous to watch when he woke up. Perce walked into things and sometimes stood wetting his own boots. He was a little like a child waking up, and his eyes now were still dreamy and soft.

Gay called over to him, 'Better'n wages, huh, Perce?'

'Damn right,' Perce muttered and returned to the fire, rubbing his skin against his clothes.

Gay kneeled by the fire again, scraping hot coals into a pile and setting the frying pan over them on stones. He could pick up hot things without feeling pain. Now he moved an ember with his finger.

'You make me nervous doing that,' Perce said, looking down over his shoulder.

'Nothin' but fire,' Gay said, pleased.

They were in silence for a moment, both of them enjoying the brightening air. 'Guido goin' up?' Perce asked.

'Didn't say. I guess he's thinkin' about it.'

'Be light pretty soon,' Perce warned.

He glanced off to the closest range and saw the purple rocks rising in their mystery toward the faintly glowing stars. Perce Howland was twenty-two, hipless and tall, and he stood there as effortlessly as the mountains he was looking at, as though he had been created there in his dungarees, with the tight plaid shirt and the three-button cuffs, the broad-brimmed beige hat set back on his blond head, and his thumbs tucked into his belt so his fingers could touch the engraved belt buckle with his name spelled out under the raised figure of the bucking horse. It was his first bucking-horse prize, and he loved to touch it when he stood waiting, and he liked to wait.

Perce had known Gay Langland for only five weeks, and Guido for three days. He had met Gay in a Bowie bar, and Gay had asked him where he was from and what he was doing, and he had told Gay his story, which was the usual for most of the rodeo riders. He had come on down from Nevada, as he had done since he was sixteen, to follow the local rodeos and win some money riding bucking horses, but this trip had been different, because he had lost the desire to go back home again.

They had become good friends that night when Gay took him to Roslyn's house to sleep, and when he woke in the morning he had been surprised that an educated eastern woman should have been so regular and humorous and interested in his opinions. So he had been floating around with Roslyn and Gay Langland, and they were comfortable to be with; Gay mostly, because Gay never thought to say he ought to be making something of his life. Gay made him feel it was all right to go from day to day and week to week. Perce Howland did not trust anybody too far, and it was not necessary to trust Gay because Gay did not want anything of him or try to manipulate him. He just wanted a partner to go mustanging, and Perce had never done anything like that and he wanted to see how it was. And now he was here, sixty miles from the nearest town, seven thousand feet up in the air, and for two days waiting for the wind to die so the pilot could take off into the mountains where the wild horses lived.

Perce looked out toward the desert, which was beginning to show its silent horizon. 'Bet the moon looks like this if anybody could get there.'

Gay Langland did not answer. In his mind he could feel the wild horses grazing and moving about in the nearby mountains and he wanted to get to them. Indicating Guido Racanelli, he said, 'Give him a shake, Perce. The sun's about up.'

Perce started over to Guido, who moved before Perce reached him. 'Gettin' light, Guido,' Perce said.

Guido Racanelli rolled upright on his great behind, his belly slung over his belt, and he inspected the brightening sky in the distance as though some personal message were out there for him. The pink reflected light brightened his face. The flesh around his eyes was white where the goggles protected his face, and the rest of his skin was burned brown by wind. His silences were more profound than the silences of others because his cheeks were so deep, like the melon-half cheeks of a baboon that curve forward from the mouth. Yet they were hard cheeks, as hard as his great belly. He looked like a jungle bird now, slowly turning his head to inspect the faraway sky, a serious bird with a brown face and white eyes. His head was entirely bald. He took off his khaki army cap and rubbed his fingers into his scalp.

Gay Langland stood up and walked to him and gave him his eggs and thick bacon on a tin plate. 'Wind died, Guido,' Gay said, standing there and looking down at the pilot.

'It doesn't mean much what it did down here.' Guido pointed skyward with his thumb. 'Up there's where it counts.'

'Ain't no sign of wind up there,' Gay said. Gay's eyes seemed amused. He did not want to seem committed to a real argument. 'We got no more eggs, Guido,' he warned.

Guido ate.

Now the sky flared with true dawn, like damp paper suddenly catching fire. Perce and Gay sat down on the ground facing Guido, and they all ate their eggs.

The shroud of darkness quickly slipped off the red truck which stood a few yards away. Then, behind it, the little plane showed itself. Guido Racanelli ate and sipped his coffee, and Gay Langland watched him with a weak smile and without speaking. Perce blinked contentedly at the brightening sky, slightly detached from the other two. He finished his coffee and slipped a chew of tobacco into his mouth and sucked on it.

It was a pink day now all around the sky.

Gay Langland made a line in the sand between his thighs and said, 'You goin' up, Guido?' He looked at Guido directly and he was still smiling.

Guido thought for a moment. He was older, about fifty. His pronunciation was unaccountably eastern, with sharp r's. He sounded educated sometimes. He stared off toward the squat little plane. 'Every once in a while I wonder what the hell it's all about,' he said.

'What is?' Gay asked.

Perce watched Guido's face, thoroughly listening.

The Misfits. Arthur Miller. Short story collection Presence. The Misfits. Kindle edition

Guido felt their attention and spoke with pleasurable ease. He still stared past them at the plane. 'I got a lousy valve. I know it, Gay.'

'Been that way a long time, Guido,' Gay said with sympathy.

'I know,' Guido said. They were not arguing but searching now. 'And we won't hardly get twenty dollars apiece out of it – there's only four or five horses back in there.'

'We knew that, Guido,' Gay said. They were in sympathy with each other.

'I might just get myself killed, for twenty dollars.'

'Hell, you know them mountains,' Gay said.

'You can't see wind, Gay,' the pilot said.

Gay knew now that Guido was going up right away. He saw that Guido had just wanted to get all the dangers straight in his mind so he could see them and count them; then he would go out against them.

'You're flying along in and out of those passes and then you dive for the sons of bitches, and just when you're pulling up, some goddam gust presses you down and there you are.'

'I know,' Gay said.

There was silence. Guido sipped his coffee, staring off at the plane. 'I just wonder about it every once in a while,' the pilot said.

'Well, hell,' Perce Howland said, 'it's better than wages.'

'You damn right it is, Perce,' the pilot said thoughtfully.

'I seen guys get killed who never left the ground,' Perce said.

The two older men knew that his father had been killed by a bull long ago and that he had seen his father die. He had had his own arms broken in rodeos and a Brahma bull had stepped on his chest.

'One rodeo near Salinas I see a fella get his head snapped right clear off his chest by a cable busted. They had this cable drawin' horses up onto a truck. I seen his head rollin' away like a bowlin' ball. Must've roll twenty-five yards before it hit a fence post and stopped.' He spat tobacco juice and turned back to look at Guido. 'It had a mustache. Funny thing, I never knowed that guy had a mustache. Never noticed it. Till I see it stop rolling and there it was, dust all over the mustache.'

'That was a dusty mustache,' Gay said, grinning against their deepening morbidity.

They all smiled. Then time hung for a moment as they waited. And at last Guido shifted onto one buttock and said, 'Well, let's get gassed up.'

Guido leaned himself to one side with his palm on the ground, then got to his feet by moving in a circle around this palm, and stood up. Gay and Perce Howland were already moving off toward the truck, Perce heisting up his dungarees over his breakfast-full stomach, and the older Gay more sprightly and intent. Guido stood holding one hand open over the fire, watching them loading the six enormous truck tires onto the bed of the truck. Each tire had a twenty-foot length of rope wired to it, and at the end of each rope was a loop. Before they swung the tires onto the truck Gay inspected the ropes to be sure they were securely knotted to the tires, and the loops open and ready for throwing.

Guido blinked against the warming sun, watching the other two, then he looked off to his right where the passes were, and the fingers of his mind felt around beyond those passes into the bowls and hollows of the mountains where last week he had spotted the small herd of wild horses grazing. Now he felt the lightness he had been hoping to feel for three days, the bodiless urge to fly. For three days he had kept away from the plane because a certain carelessness had been itching at him, a feeling that he always thought would lead him to his death. About five weeks ago he had come up to this desert with Gay Langland and he had chased seven mustangs out of the mountains. But this time he had dived to within a foot of the mountainside, and afterward, as they sat around the fire eating dinner, Guido had had the feeling that he had made that deep dive so he could die. And the thought of his dead wife had come to him again, and the other thought that always came into his mind with her dead face. It was the wonderment, the quiet pressing-in of the awareness that he had never wanted a woman after she had been buried with the stillborn baby beside her in the graveyard outside Bowie. Seven years now he had waited for some real yearning for a woman, and nothing at all had come to him. It pleasured him to know that he was free of that, and it sometimes made him careless in the plane, as though some great bang and a wreckage would make him again what he had been. By now he could go around in Bowie for a week and only in an odd moment recall that he hadn't even looked at a girl walking by, and the feeling of carelessness would come on him, a kind of loose gaiety, as though everything was comical. Until he had made that dive and pulled out with his nose almost scraping the grass, and he had climbed upward with his mouth hanging open and his body in a sweat. So that through these past three days up here he had refused to let himself take off until the wind had utterly died, and he had clung to moroseness. He wanted to take off in the absolute grip of his own wits, leaving nothing to chance. Now there was no wind at all, and he felt he had pressed the sinister gaiety out of his mind. He left the dying fire and walked past Gay and Perce and down the gentle slope to the plane, looking like a stout, serious football coach before the kick-off.

He glanced over the fuselage and at the bald doughnut tires and he loved the plane. Again, as always, he looked at the weakened starboard shock absorber, which no longer held its spread so that the plane stood tilted a little to one side, and told himself that it was not serious. He heard the truck motor starting and he unfastened the knots of the ropes holding the plane to the spikes driven into the desert floor. Then the truck pulled up, and young Perce Howland dropped off and went over to the tail handle, gripped it, lifted the tail off the ground, and swung the plane around so she faced out across the endless desert and away from the mountains. Then they unwound the rubber hose from the gas drum on the truck and stuck the nozzle into the gas tank behind the engine, and Perce turned the pump crank.

Guido then walked around the wing and over to the cockpit, whose right door was folded down, leaving the inside open to the air. He reached in and took out his ripped leather flight jacket and got into it.

Perce stood leaning against the truck fender now, grinning. 'That sure is a ventilated type jacket, Guido,' he said.

Then Guido said, 'I can't get my size any more.' The jacket had one sleeve off at the elbow, and the dried leather was split open down the back, showing the lamb's-wool lining. He had bombed Germany in this jacket long ago. He reached in behind the seat and took out a goggle case, slipped his goggles out, replaced the case, set his goggles securely on his face, and reached in again and took out a shotgun pistol and four shells from a little wooden box beside his seat. He loaded the pistol and laid it carefully under his seat. Then he got into the cockpit, sat in his seat, drew the strap over his belly and buckled it. Meantime Gay had taken his position before the propeller.

Guido called through the open doorway of the cockpit, 'Turn her over, Gay-boy!'

Gay stepped up to the propeller, glanced down behind his heels to be sure no stone waited to trip him when he stepped back, pulled down on the blade, and hopped back watchfully.

'Give her another!' Guido called in the silence.

Gay stepped up again, again glancing around his heels, and pulled the blade down. The engine inhaled and exhaled, and they could all hear the oily clank of her inner shafts turning loosely.

'Ignition on, Gay-boy!' Guido called and threw the switch.

This time Gay inspected the ground around him even more carefully and pulled his hatbrim down tighter on his head. Perce stood leaning on the truck's front fender, spitting and chewing, his eyes softly squinted against the brazen sun. Gay reached up and pulled the propeller down and jumped back. A puff of smoke floated up from the engine ports.

'Goddam car gas,' Guido said. 'Ignition on. Go again, Gay-boy!' They were buying low octane to save money.

Gay again stepped up to the propeller, swung the blade down, and the engine said its 'Chaaahh!' and the ports breathed white smoke into the morning air. Gay walked over to Perce and stood beside him, watching. The fuselage shuddered and the propeller turned into a wheel, and the dust blew pleasantly from behind the plane and toward the mountains. Guido gunned her, and she tumbled toward the open desert, bumping along over the sage clumps and crunching whitened skeletons of cattle killed by the winter. The stiff-backed plane grew smaller, shouldering its way over the broken ground, and then its nose turned upward and there was space between the doughnut tires and the desert, and lazily it climbed, turning back the way it had come. It flew over the heads of Perce and Gay, and Guido waved down, a stranger now, fiercely goggled and wrapped in leather, and they could see him exposed to the waist, turning from them to look through the windshield at the mountains ahead of him. The plane flew away, climbing smoothly, losing itself against the orange and purple walls that vaulted up from the desert to hide from the cowboys' eyes the wild animals they wanted for themselves.

They would have at least two hours before the plane flew out of the mountains driving the horses before it, so they washed the three tin plates and the cups and stored them in the aluminum grub box. If Guido did find horses they would break camp and return to Bowie tonight, so they packed up their bedrolls with sailors' tidiness and laid them neatly side by side on the ground. The six great truck tires, each with its looped rope coiled within, lay in two piles on the bed of the truck. Gay Langland looked them over and touched them with his hand and stood for a moment trying to think if there was anything they were leaving behind. He jumped up on the truck to see that the cap was screwed tight on the gas drum, which was lashed to the back of the cab up front, and it was. Then he hopped down to the ground and got into the cab and started the engine. Perce was already sitting there with his hat tipped forward against the yellow sunlight pouring through the windshield. A thin and concerned border collie came trotting up as Gay started to close his door, and he invited her into the cab. She leaped up, and he snugged her into the space between the clutch and the left wall of the cab. 'Damn near forgot Belle,' he said, and they started off.

Gay owned the truck and he wanted to preserve the front end, which he knew could be twisted out of line on broken ground. So he started off slowly. They could hear the gas sloshing in the drum behind them outside. It was getting warm now. They rode in silence, staring ahead at the two-

track trail they were following across the bone-cluttered sagebrush. Thirty miles ahead stood the lava mountains that were the northern border of this desert, the bed of a bowl seven thousand feet up, a place no one ever saw except the few cowboys searching for stray cattle every few months. People in Bowie, sixty miles away, did not know of this place. There were the two of them and the truck and the dog, and now that they were on the move they felt between them the comfort of purpose and their isolation, and Perce slumped in his seat, blinking as though he would go to sleep again, and Gay smoked a cigarette and let his body flow from side to side with the pitching of the truck.

There was a moving cloud of dust in the distance toward the left, and Gay said, 'Antelope,' and Perce tipped his hat back and looked. 'Must be doin' sixty,' he said, and Gay said, 'More. I chased one once and I was doin' more than sixty and he lost me.' Perce shook his head in wonder, and they turned to look ahead again.

After he had thought awhile Perce said, 'We better get over to Largo by tomorrow if we're gonna get into that rodeo. They's gonna be a crowd trying to sign up for that one.'

'We'll drive down in the morning,' Gay said.

'I'll have to see about gettin' me some stock.'

'We'll get there early tomorrow; you'll get stock if you come in early.'

'Like to win some money,' Perce said. 'I just wish I get me a good horse down there.'

'They be glad to fix you up, Perce. You're known pretty good around there now. They'll fix you up with some good stock,' Gay said. Perce was one of the best bronc riders, and the rodeos liked to have it known he would appear.

Then there was silence. Gay had to hold the gear-shift lever in high or it would slip out into neutral when they hit bumps. The transmission fork was worn out, he knew, and the front tires were going too. He dropped one hand to his pants pocket and felt the four silver dollars he had from the ten Roslyn had given him when they had left her days ago.

As though he had read Gay's mind, Perce said, 'Roslyn would've liked it up here. She'd liked to have seen that antelope, I bet.' Perce grinned as both of them usually did at Roslyn's eastern surprise at everything they did and saw and said.

'Yeah,' Gay said, 'she likes to see things.' Through the corners of his eyes he watched the younger man, who was looking ahead with a little grin on his face. 'She's damned good sport, old Roslyn,' Gay said.

'Sure is,' Perce Howland said. And Gay watched him for any sign of guile, but there was only a look of glad appreciation. 'First woman like that I ever met,' the younger man said.

'They's more,' Gay said. 'Some of them eastern women fool you sometimes. They got education but they're good sports. And damn good *women* too, some of them.'

There was a silence. Then the younger man asked, 'You get to know a lot of them? Eastern women?'

'Ah, I get one once in a while,' Gay said.

'Only educated women I ever know, they was back home near Teachers College. Students. Y'know,' he said, warming to the memory, 'I used to think, hell, education's everything. But when I saw the husbands some of them got married to – schoolteachers and everything, why I don't give them much credit. And they just as soon climb on a man as tell him good morning. I was teachin' them to ride for a while near home.'

'Just because a woman's educated don't mean much. Woman's a woman,' Gay said. The image of his wife came into his mind. For a moment he wondered if she was still living with the same man he had beaten up when he discovered them together in a parked car six years ago.

'You divorced?' Perce asked.

'No. I never bothered with it,' Gay said. It always surprised him how Perce said just what was on his mind sometimes. 'How'd you know I was thinkin' of that?' he asked, grinning with embarrassment. But he was too curious to keep silent.

'Hell, I didn't know,' Perce said.

'You're always doin' that. I think of somethin' and you go ahead and say it.'

'That's funny,' Perce said.

They rode on in silence. They were nearing the middle of the desert, where they would turn east. Gay was driving faster now because he wanted to get to the rendezvous and sit quietly waiting for the plane to appear. He held on to the gear-shift lever and felt it trying to spring out of high and into neutral. It would have to be fixed. The time was coming fast when he would need about fifty dollars or have to sell the truck, because it would be useless without repairs. Without a truck and without a horse he would be down to what was in his pocket.

Perce spoke out of the silence. 'If I don't win Saturday I'm gonna have to do somethin' for money.'

'Goddam, you always say what's in my mind.'

Perce laughed. His face looked very young and pink. 'Why?'

'I was just now thinkin',' Gay said, 'what I'm gonna do for money.'

'Well, Roslyn give you some,' Perce said.

He said it innocently, and Gay knew it was innocent, and yet he felt angry blood moving into his neck. Something had happened in these five weeks, and Gay did not know for sure what it was. Roslyn had taken to calling Perce cute, and now and again she would bend over and kiss him on the back of the neck when he was sitting in the living-room chair, drinking with them.

Not that that meant anything in itself, because he'd known eastern women before who'd do something like that and it was just their way. Especially college-graduate divorced women. What he wondered at was Perce's way of hardly even noticing what she did to him. Sometimes it was like he'd already had her and could ignore her, the way a man will who knows he's boss. But then Gay thought it might just be that he really wasn't interested, or maybe that he was keeping cool in deference to Gay.

Again Gay felt a terrible longing to earn money working. He sensed the bottom of his life falling if it turned out Roslyn had really been loving this boy beside him. It had happened to him once before with his wife, but this frightened him more and he did not know exactly why. Not that he couldn't do without Roslyn. There wasn't anybody or anything he couldn't do without. She was about his age and full of laughter that was not laughter and gaiety that was not gaiety and adventurousness that was labored, and he knew all this perfectly well even as he laughed with her and was high with her in the bars and rodeos. He had only lived once, and that was when he had had his house and his wife and his children. He knew the difference, but you never kept anything, and he had never particularly thought about keeping anything or losing anything. He had been all his life like Perce Howland, sitting beside him now, a man moving on or ready to. It was only when he discovered his wife with a stranger that he knew he had had a stake to which he had been pleasurably tethered. He had not seen her or his children for years and only rarely thought about any of them. Any more than his father had thought of him very much after the day he had gotten on his pony, when he was fourteen, to go to town from the ranch, and had kept going into Montana and stayed there for three years. He lived in this country as his father did, and it was the same endless range wherever he went, and it connected him sufficiently with his father and his wife and his children. All might turn up sometime in some town or at some rodeo, where he might happen to look over his shoulder and see his daughter or one of his sons, or they might never turn up. He had neither left anyone nor not-left as long as they were all alive on these ranges, for everything here was always beyond the farthest shot of vision and far away, and mostly he had worked alone or with one or two men, between distant mountains anyway.

In the distance now he could see the shimmering wall of the heat waves rising from the clay flatland they wanted to get to. Now they were approaching closer, and it opened to them beyond the heat waves, and they could see once again how vast it was, a prehistoric lake bed thirty miles long by seventeen miles wide, couched between the two mountain ranges. It was a flat, beige waste without grass or bush or stone, where a man might drive a car at a hundred miles an hour with his hands off the wheel and never hit anything at all. They drove in silence. The truck stopped bouncing as the tires rolled over harder ground where there were fewer sage clumps. The waves of heat were dense before them, nearly touchable. Now the truck rolled smoothly and they were on the clay lake bed, and when they had gone a few hundred yards onto it Gay pulled up and shut off the engine. The air was still in a dead, sunlit silence. When he opened his door he could hear a squeak in the hinge he had never noticed before. When they walked around they could hear their shirts rasping against their backs and the brush of a sleeve against their trousers.

They stood on the clay ground, which was as hard as concrete, and turned to look the way they had come. They looked back toward the mountains at whose feet they had camped and slept, and scanned their ridges for Guido's plane. It was too early for him, and they made themselves busy, taking the gas drum off the truck and setting it a few yards away on the ground, because they would want the truck bed clear when the time came to run the horses down. Then they climbed up and sat inside the tires with their necks against the tire beads and their legs hanging over.

Perce said, 'I sure hope they's five up in there.'

'Guido saw five, he said.'

'He said he wasn't sure if one wasn't only a colt,' Perce said.

Gay let himself keep silent. He felt he was going to argue with Perce. He watched Perce through the corners of his eyes, saw the flat, blond cheeks and the strong, lean neck, and there was something tricky about Perce now. 'How long you think you'll be stayin' around here, Perce?' he asked.

They were both watching the distant ridges for a sign of the plane.

'Don't know,' Perce said and spat over the side of the truck. 'I'm gettin' a little tired of this, though.'

'Well, it's better than wages, Perce.'

'Hell, yes. Anything's better than wages.'

Gay's eyes crinkled. 'You're a real misfit, boy.'

'That suits me fine,' Perce said. They often had this conversation and savored it. 'Better than workin' for some goddam cow outfit buckarooin' so somebody else can buy gas for his Cadillac.'

'Damn right,' Gay said.

'Hell, Gay, you are the most misfitted man I ever saw and you done all right.'

'I got no complaints,' Gay said.

'I don't want nothin' and I don't want to want nothin'.'

'That's the way, boy.'

Gay felt closer to him again and he was glad for it. He kept his eyes on the ridges far away. The sun felt good on his shoulders. 'I think he's havin' trouble with them sumbitches up in there.'

Perce stared out at the ridges. 'Ain't two hours yet.' Then he turned to Gay. 'These mountains must be cleaned out by now, ain't they?'

'Just about,' Gay said. 'Just a couple small herds left. Can't do much more around here.'

'What you goin' to do when you got these cleaned out?'

'Might go north, I think. Supposed to be some big herds in around Thighbone Mountain and that range up in there.'

'How far's that?'

'North about a hundred miles. If I can get Guido interested.'

Perce smiled. 'He don't like movin' around much, does he?'

'He's just misfitted like the rest of us,' Gay said. 'He don't want nothin'.' Then he added, 'They wanted him for an airline pilot flyin' up into Montana and back. Good pay too.'

'Wouldn't do it, huh?'

'Not Guido,' Gay said, grinning. 'Might not like some of the passengers, he told them.'

Both men laughed, and Perce shook his head in admiration of Guido. Then he said, 'They wanted me take over the ridin' academy up home. I thought about that. Two hundred a month and board. Easy work too. You don't hardly have to ride at all. Just stand around and see the customers get satisfied and put them girls off and on.'

He fell silent. Gay knew the rest. It was the same story always. It brought him closer to Perce, and it was what he had liked about Perce in the first place. Perce didn't like wages either. He had come on Perce in a bar where the boy was buying drinks for everybody with his rodeo winnings, and his hair still clotted with blood from a bucking horse's kick an hour earlier. Roslyn had offered to get a doctor for him and he had said, 'Thank you kindly. But I ain't bad hurt. If you're bad hurt you gonna die and the doctor can't do nothin', and if you ain't bad hurt you get better anyway without no doctor.'

Now it suddenly came upon Gay that Perce had known Roslyn before they had met in the bar. He stared at the boy's profile. 'Want to come up north with me if I go?' he asked.

Perce thought a moment. 'Think I'll stay around here. Not much rodeoin' up north.'

'I might find a pilot up there, maybe. And Roslyn drive us up in her car.'

Perce turned to him, a little surprised. 'Would she go up there?'

'Sure. She's a damn good sport,' Gay said. He watched Perce's eyes, which had turned interested and warm.

Perce said, 'Well, maybe; except to tell you the truth, Gay, I never feel comfortable takin' these horses for chicken feed.'

'Somebody's goin' to take them if we don't.'

'I know,' Perce said. He turned to watch the far ridges again. 'Just seems to me they belong up there.'

'They ain't doin' nothin' up there but eatin' out good cattle range. The cow outfits shoot them down if they see them.'

'I know,' Perce said.

'They don't even bother takin' them to slaughter. They just rot up there if the cow outfits get to them.'

'I know,' Perce said.

There was silence. Neither bug nor lizard nor rabbit moved on the great basin around them, and the sun warmed their necks and their thighs. Gay said, 'I'd as soon sell them for riding horses but they ain't big enough, except for a kid. And the freight on them's more than they're worth. You saw them – they ain't nothin' but skinny horses.'

'I just don't know if I'd want to see like a hundred of them goin' for chicken feed, though. I don't mind like five or six, but a hundred's a lot of horses. I don't know.'

Gay thought. 'Well, if it ain't this it's wages. Around here anyway.' He was speaking of himself and explaining himself.

'I'd just as soon ride buckin' horses and make out that way, Gay.' Perce turned to him. 'Although I might go up north with you. I don't know.'

'Roslyn wouldn't come out here at first,' Gay said, 'but soon as she saw what they looked like she stopped complainin' about it. You didn't hear her complainin' about it.'

'I ain't complainin', Gay. I just don't know. Seems to me God put them up there and they belong up there. But I'm doin' it and I guess I'd go on doin' it. I don't know.'

'Sounds to me like the newspapers. They want their steaks, them people in town, but they don't want castration or branding or cleanin' wild horses off the ranges.'

'Hell, man, I castrated more bulls than I got hairs on my head,' Perce said.

'I better get the glasses,' Gay said and slid out of the tire in which he had been lounging and off the truck. He went to the cab and reached in and brought out a pair of binoculars, blew on the lenses, mounted the truck, and sat on a tire with his elbows resting on his knees. He put the glasses to his eyes and focused them. The mountains came up close with their pocked blue hides. He found the pass through which he believed the plane would come and studied its slopes and scanned the air above it. Anger was still warming him. 'God put them up there!' Why, Christ, God put everything everywhere. Did that mean you couldn't eat chickens, for instance, or beef? His dislike for Perce was flowing into him again.

They heard the shotgun off in the sky somewhere and they stopped moving. Gay narrowed his eyes and held the binoculars perfectly still.

'See anything?' Perce asked.

'He's still in the pass, I guess,' Gay said.

They sat still, watching the sky over the pass. The moments went by. The sun was making them perspire now, and Gay wiped his wet eyebrows with the back of one hand. They heard the shotgun again from the general sky. Gay spoke without lowering the glasses. 'He's probably blasting them out of some corner.'

Perce quickly arched out of his tire. 'I see him,' he said quickly. 'I see him glintin', I see the plane.'

It angered Gay that Perce had seen the plane first without glasses. In the glasses Gay could see it clearly now. It was flying out of the pass, circling back, and disappearing into the pass again. 'He's got them in the pass now. Just goin' back in for them.'

'Can you see them?' Perce asked.

'He ain't got them in the clear yet. He just went back in for them.'

Now through his glasses he could see moving specks on the ground where the pass opened onto the desert table. 'I see them,' he said. He counted, moving his lips. 'One, two, three, four. Four and a colt.'

'We gonna take the colt?' Perce asked.

'Hell, can't take the mare without the colt.'

Perce said nothing. Then Gay handed him the glasses. 'Take a look.'

Gay slid off the truck bed and went forward to the cab and opened its door. His dog lay shivering on the floor under the pedals. He snapped his fingers, and she warily got up and leaped down to the ground and stood there quivering, as she always did when wild horses were coming. He watched her sit and wet the ground, and how she moved with such care and concern and fear, sniffing the ground and moving her head in slow motion and setting her paws down as though the ground had hidden explosives everywhere. He left her there and climbed onto the truck and sat on a tire beside Perce, who was still looking through the glasses.

'He's divin' down on them. God, they sure can run!'

'Let's have a look,' Gay said and reached out, and Perce handed him the glasses, saying, 'They're comin' on fast.'

Gay watched the horses in the glasses. The plane was starting down toward them from the arc of its climb. They swerved as the roaring motor came down over them, lifted their heads, and galloped faster. They had been running now for over an hour and would slow down when the plane had to climb after a dive and the motor's noise grew quieter. As Guido climbed again Gay and Perce heard a shot, distant and harmless, and the shot sped the horses on again as the plane took time to bank and turn. Then, as they slowed, the plane returned over them, diving down over their backs, and their heads shot up again and they galloped until the engine's roar receded over them. The sky was clear and lightly blue, and only the little plane swung back and forth across the desert like the glinting tip of a magic wand, and the horses came on toward the vast stripped clay bed where the truck was parked.

The two men on the truck exchanged the glasses from time to time. Now they sat upright on the tires, waiting for the horses to reach the edge of the lake bed, when Guido would land the plane and they would take off with the truck. And now the horses stopped.

'They see the heat waves,' Gay said, looking through the glasses. He could see the horses trotting with raised, alarmed heads along the edge of the barren lake bed, which they feared because the heat waves rose from it like liquid in the air and yet their nostrils did not smell water, and they dared not move ahead onto unknowable territory. The plane dived down on them, and they scattered but would not go forward onto the lake bed from the cooler, sage-dotted desert behind them. Now the plane banked high in the air and circled out behind them over the desert and banked again and came down within yards of the ground and roared in behind them almost at the height of their heads, and as it passed over them, rising, the men on the truck could hear the shotgun. Now the horses leaped forward onto the lake bed, all scattered and heading in different directions, and they were only trotting, exploring the ground under their feet and the strange, superheated air in their nostrils. Gradually, as the plane wound around the sky to dive again, they closed ranks and slowly galloped shoulder to shoulder out onto the borderless lake bed. The colt galloped a length behind with its nose nearly touching the mare's long silky tail.

'That's a big mare,' Perce said. His eyes were still dreamy and his face was calm, but his skin had reddened.

'She's a bigger mare than usual up here, ya,' Gay said.

Both men watched the little herd now, even as they got to their feet on the truck. There was the big mare, as large as any full-grown horse, and both of them downed their surprise at the sight of her. They knew the mustang herds lived in total isolation and that inbreeding had reduced them to the size of large ponies. The herd swerved now and they saw the stallion. He was smaller than the mare but still larger than any Gay had brought down before. The other two horses were small, the way mustangs ought to be.

The plane was coming down for a landing now. Gay and Perce Howland moved to the forward edge of the truck's bed where a strap of white webbing was strung at hip height between two stanchions stuck into sockets at the corners of the truck. They drew another web strap from one stanchion to the other and stood inside the two. Perce tied the back strap to his stanchion. Then they turned around inside their harnesses and each reached into a tire behind him and drew out a coil of rope whose end hung in a loop. They glanced out on the lake bed and saw Guido taxiing toward them, and they stood waiting for him. He cut the engine twenty yards from the truck and leaped out of the open cockpit before the plane had halted. He lashed the tail of the plane to a rope that was attached to a spike driven into the clay and trotted over to the truck, lifting his goggles off and stuffing them into his torn jacket pocket. Perce and Gay called out laughingly to him, but he seemed hardly to have seen them. His face was puffed with preoccupation. He jumped into the cab of the truck, and the collie dog jumped in after him and sat on the floor, quivering. He started the truck and roared ahead across the flat clay into the watery waves of heat.

They could see the herd standing still in a small clot of dots more than two miles off. The truck rolled smoothly, and in the cab Guido glanced at the speedometer and saw it was past sixty. He had to be careful not to turn over and he dropped back to fifty-five. Gay, on the right front corner of the truck bed, and Perce Howland on the left, pulled their hats down to their eyebrows and hefted the looped ropes, which the wind was threatening to coil and foul in their palms. Guido knew that Gay Langland was a good roper and that Perce was unsure, so he headed for the herd's left in order to come up to them on Gay's side of the truck if he could. This whole method – the truck, the tires, the ropes, and the plane – was Guido's invention, and once again he felt the joy of having thought of it all. He drove with both heavy hands on the wheel and his left foot ready over the brake pedal. He reached for the shift lever to feel if it was going to spring out of gear and into neutral, but it felt tight, and if they did not hit a bump he could rely on it. The herd had started to walk but stopped again now, and the horses were looking at the truck, ears raised, necks stretched up and forward. Guido smiled a little. They looked silly to him standing there, but he knew and pitied them their ignorance.

The wind smashed against the faces of Perce and Gay standing on the truck bed. The brims of their hats flowed up and back from a low point in front, and their faces were dark red. They saw the horses watching their approach at a standstill. And as they roared closer and closer they saw that this herd was beautiful.

Perce Howland turned his head to Gay, who glanced at him at the same time. There had been much rain this spring, and this herd must have found good pasture. They were well rounded and shining. The mare was almost black, and the stallion and the two others were deep brown. The colt was curly-coated and had a gray sheen. The stallion dipped his head suddenly and turned his back on the truck and galloped. The others turned and clattered after him, with the colt running alongside the mare. Guido pressed down on the gas and the truck surged forward, whining. They were a few yards behind the animals now and they could see the bottoms of their hoofs, fresh hoofs that had never been shod. They could see the full manes flying and the thick and long black tails that would hang down to their fetlocks when they were still.

The truck was coming abreast of the mare now, and beside her the others galloped with only a loud ticking noise on the clay. It was a gentle tacking clatter for they were light-footed and unshod. They were slim-legged and wet after running almost two hours in this alarm, but as the truck drew alongside the mare and Gay began twirling his loop above his head the whole herd wheeled away to the right, and Guido jammed the gas pedal down and swung with them, but they kept galloping in a circle, and he did not have the speed to keep abreast of them so he slowed down and fell behind them a few yards until they would straighten out and move ahead again. And they wheeled like circus horses, slower now, for they were at the edge of their strength, and suddenly Guido saw a breadth between the stallion and the two browns and he sped in between, cutting the mare off at the left with her colt. Now the horses stretched, the clatter quickened. Their hind legs flew straight back and their necks stretched low and forward. Gay whirled his loop over his head, and the truck came up alongside the stallion, whose lungs were hoarsely screaming with exhaustion, and Gay flung the noose. It fell on the stallion's head, and with a whipping of the lead Gay made it fall over his neck. The horse swerved away to the right and stretched the rope until the tire was pulled off the truck bed and dragged along the hard clay. The three men watched from the slowing truck as the stallion, with startled eyes, pulled the giant tire for a few yards, then leaped up with his forelegs in the air and came down facing the tire and trying to back away from it. Then he stood still, heaving, his hind legs dancing in an arc from right to left and back again as he shook his head in the remorseless noose.

As soon as he was sure the stallion was secure Guido scanned the lake bed and without stopping turned sharply left toward the mare and the colt, which were trotting idly together by themselves. The two browns were already disappearing toward the north, but Guido knew they would halt soon because they were tired, while the mare might continue to the edge of the lake bed and back into her familiar hills where the truck could not follow. He straightened the truck and jammed down the gas pedal. In a minute he was straight on behind her, and he drew up on her left side because the colt was running on her right. She was very heavy, he saw, and he wondered now if she was a mustang at all. As he drove alongside her his eyes ran across her flanks, seeking out a brand, but she seemed unmarked. Then through his right window he saw the loop flying out and down over her head, and he saw her head fly up, and then she fell back. He turned to the right, braking with his left boot, and he saw her dragging a tire and coming to a halt, with the free colt watching her and trotting very close beside her. Then he headed straight ahead across the flat toward two specks, which rapidly enlarged until they became the two browns, which were at a standstill and watching the oncoming truck. He came in between them, and as they galloped Perce on the left roped one, and Gay roped the other almost at the same time. And Guido leaned his head out of his window and yelled up at Perce, who was on the truck bed on his side. 'Good boy!' he hollered, and Perce let himself return an excited grin, although there seemed to be some trouble in his eyes.

Guido made an easy half circle and headed back to the mare and the colt, and in a few minutes he slowed to a halt some twenty yards away and got out of the cab. The dog remained sitting on the floor of the cab, her body shaking all over.

The three men approached the mare. She had never seen a man, and her eyes were wide with fear. Her rib cage stretched and collapsed very rapidly, and there was a trickle of blood coming out of her nostrils. She had a heavy dark brown mane, and her tail nearly touched the ground. The colt with dumb eyes shifted about on its silly bent legs, trying to keep the mare between itself and the men, and the mare kept shifting her rump to shield the colt from them.

They wanted now to move the noose higher up on the mare's neck because it had fallen on her from the rear and was tight around the middle of her neck, where it could choke her if she kept pulling against the weight of the tire. They had learned from previous forays that they could not leave a horse tied that way without the danger of suffocation, and they wanted them alive until they could bring a larger truck from Bowie and load them on it.

Gay was the best roper so Perce and Guido stood by as he twirled a noose over his head, then let it fall open softly, just behind the forefeet of the mare. They waited for a moment, then approached her, and she backed a step. Then Gay pulled sharply on the rope, and her forefeet were tied together. Then with another rope Gay lass'd her hind feet, and she swayed and fell to the ground on her side. Her body swelled and contracted, but she seemed resigned. The colt stretched its nose to her tail and stood there as the men came to the mare and spoke quietly to her, and Guido bent down and opened the noose and slipped it up under her jaw. They inspected her for a brand, but she was clean.

'Never see a horse that size up here,' Gay said to Guido.

Guido stood there looking down at the great mare.

Perce said, 'Maybe wild horses was all big once,' and he looked to Guido for confirmation.

Guido bent and sat on his heels and opened the mare's mouth, and the other two looked in with him. 'She's fifteen if she's a day,' Gay said, and to Perce he said, 'She wouldn't be around much longer anyway.'

'Ya, she's old,' Perce agreed, and his eyes were filled with thought.

Guido stood up, and the three went back to the truck. Perce hopped up and sat on the truck bed with his legs dangling, and Gay sat in the cab with Guido. They drove across the lake bed to the stallion and stopped, and the three of them walked toward him.

'Ain't a bad-lookin' horse,' Perce said.

They stood inspecting the horse for a moment. He was standing still now, heaving for breath and bleeding from the nostrils. His head was down, holding the rope taut, and he was looking at them with his deep brown eyes that were like the lenses of enormous binoculars. Gay got his rope ready in his hand. 'He ain't nothin' but a misfit,' he said, 'except for some kid. You couldn't run cattle with him, and he's too small for a riding horse.'

'He is small,' Perce conceded. 'Got a nice neck, though.'

'Oh, they're nice-*lookin'* horses, some of them,' Guido said. 'What the hell you goin' to do with them, though? Cost more to ship them anywhere than they'd bring.'

Gay twirled the loop over his head, and they spread out around the stallion. 'They're just old misfit horses, that's all,' he said, and he flung the rope behind the stallion's forelegs, and the horse backed a step, and he drew the rope and the noose bit into the horse's lower legs, drawing them together, and the horse swayed but would not fall.

'Take hold,' Gay called to Perce, who ran around the horse and grabbed onto the rope and held it taut. Then Gay went back to the truck, got another rope, returned to the rear of the horse, and looped the hind legs. But the stallion would not fall.

Guido stepped closer to push him over, but the horse swung his head and showed his teeth, and Guido stepped back. 'Pull on it!' Guido yelled to Gay and Perce, and they pulled on their ropes to trip the stallion, but he righted himself and stood there bound by the head to the tire and his feet by the two ropes the men held. Then Guido hurried over to Perce and took the rope from him and walked with it toward the rear of the horse and pulled hard. The stallion's forefeet slipped back, and he came down on his knees and his nose struck the clay ground and he snorted as he struck, but he would not topple over and stayed there on his knees as though he were bowing to something, with his nose propping up his head against the ground and his sharp bursts of breath blowing up dust in little clouds under his nostrils.

Now Guido gave the rope back to young Perce Howland, who held it taut, and he came up alongside the stallion's neck and laid his hands on the side of the neck and pushed, and the horse fell over onto his flank and lay there; and, like the mare, when he felt the ground against his body he seemed to let himself out, and for the first time his eye blinked and his breath came now in sighs and no longer fiercely. Guido shifted the noose up under the jaw, and they opened the ropes around the hoofs, and when the horse felt his legs free he first raised his head curiously and then clattered up and stood there looking at them, from one to the other, blood dripping from his nostrils and a stain of deep red on both dusty knees.

For a moment the three men stood watching him to be sure he was tightly noosed around the neck. Only the clacking of the truck's engine sounded on the enormous floor between the mountains, and the wheezing inhale of the horse and his blowing out of air. Then the men moved without hurrying to the truck, and Gay stored his two extra ropes behind the seat of the cab and got behind the wheel with Guido beside him, and Perce climbed onto the back of the truck and lay down facing the sky, his palms under his head.

Gay headed the truck south toward where they knew the plane was, although it was still beyond their vision. Guido was slowly catching his breath, and now he lighted a cigarette, puffed it, and rubbed his left hand into his bare scalp. He sat gazing out the windshield and the side window. 'I'm sleepy,' he said.

'What you reckon?' Gay asked.

'What you?' Guido said. He had dust in his throat, and his voice sounded high and almost girlish.

'That mare might be six hundred pounds.'

'I'd say about that, Gay,' Guido agreed.

'About four hundred apiece for the browns and a little more for the stallion.'

'That's about the way I figured.'

'What's that come to?'

Guido thought. 'Nineteen hundred, maybe two thousand,' he said.

They fell silent, figuring the money. Two thousand pounds at six cents a pound came to a hundred and twenty dollars. The colt might make it a few dollars more, but not much. Figuring the gas for the plane and the truck, and twelve dollars for their groceries, they came to the figure of a hundred dollars for the three of them. Guido would get forty-five dollars, since he had used his plane, and Gay would get thirty-five including the use of his truck, and Perce Howland, if he agreed, as he undoubtedly would, would have the remaining twenty.

They fell silent after they had said the figures, and Gay drove in thought. Then he said, 'We should've watered them the last time. They can pick up a lot of weight if you let them water.'

'Yeah, let's be sure to do that,' Guido said.

They knew they would as likely as not forget to water the horses before they unloaded them at the dealer's lot in Bowie. They would be in a hurry to unload and to be free of the horses, and only later, as they were doing now, would they remind themselves that by letting the horses drink their fill they could pick up another fifteen or twenty dollars in added weight. They were not thinking of the money any more, once they had figured it, and if Perce were to object to his smaller share they would both hand him a five- or ten-dollar bill or more if he wanted it.

Gay stopped the truck beside the plane at the edge of the lake bed. The tethered horses were far away now, except for the mare and her colt, which stood in clear view less than half a mile off. Guido opened his door and said to Gay, 'See you in town. Let's get the other truck tomorrow morning.'

'Perce wants to go over to Largo and sign up for the rodeo tomorrow,' Gay said. 'Tell ya – we'll go in and get the truck and come back here this afternoon maybe. Maybe we bring them in tonight.'

'All right, if you want to. I'll see you boys tomorrow,' Guido said, and he got out and stopped for a moment to talk to Perce.

'Perce?' he said. Perce propped himself up on one elbow and looked down at him. He looked very sleepy. Guido smiled. 'You sleeping?'

Perce's eyelids almost seemed swollen, and his face was indrawn and troubled. 'I was about to,' he said.

Guido let the reprimand pass. 'We figure about a hundred dollars clear. Twenty all right for you?'

'Ya, twenty's all right,' Perce said, blinking heavily. He hardly seemed to be listening.

'See you in town,' Guido said and turned and waddled off to the plane, where Gay was already standing with his hands on the propeller blade. Guido got in, and Gay swung the blade down and the engine started immediately. Guido waved to Gay and Perce, who raised one hand slightly from the truck bed. Guido gunned the plane, and it trundled off and into the sky, and the two men on the ground watched as it flew toward the mountains and away.

Gay returned to the truck, and as he started to climb in behind the wheel he looked at Perce, who was still propped up on one elbow, and he said, 'Twenty all right?' And he said this because he thought Perce looked hurt.

'Heh? Ya, twenty's all right,' Perce answered. Then he let himself down from the truck bed, and Gay got behind the wheel. Perce stood beside the truck and wet the ground while Gay waited for him. Then Perce got into the cab, and they drove off.

The mare and her colt stood between them and the sage desert toward which they were heading. Perce stared out the window at the mare, and he saw that she was watching them apprehensively but not in real alarm, and the colt was lying upright on the clay, its head nodding slightly as though it would soon fall asleep. Perce looked long at the colt as they approached, and he thought about how it waited there beside the mare, unbound and free to go off, and he said to Gay, 'Ever hear of a colt leave a mare?'

'Not that young a colt,' Gay said. 'He ain't goin' nowhere.' And he glanced to look at Perce.

They passed the mare and colt and left them behind, and Perce laid his head back and closed his eyes. His tobacco swelled out his left cheek, and he let it soak there.

Now the truck left the clay lake bed, and it pitched and rolled on the sage desert. They would return to their camp and pick up their bedrolls and cooking implements and then drive to the road, which was almost fifteen miles beyond the camp across the desert.

'Think I'll go back to Roslyn's tonight,' Gay said.

'Okay,' Perce said and did not open his eyes.

'We can pick them up in the morning and then take you down to Largo.'

'Okay,' Perce said.

Gay thought about Roslyn. She would probably razz them about all the work they had done for a few dollars, saying they were too dumb to figure in their labor time and other hidden expenses. To hear her, sometimes they hadn't made any profit at all. 'Roslyn goin' to feel sorry for the colt,' Gay said, 'so might as well not mention it.'

Perce opened his eyes, and with his head resting on the back of the seat he looked out the window at the mountains. 'Hell, she feeds that dog of hers canned dogfood, doesn't she?'

Gay felt closer to Perce again and he smiled. 'Sure does.'

'Well, what's she think is in the can?'

'She knows what's in the can.'

'There's wild horses in the can,' Perce said, almost to himself.

They drove in silence for a while. Then Perce said, 'That's what beats me.'

After a few moments Gay said, 'You comin' back to Roslyn's with me or you gonna stay in town?'

'I'd just as soon go back with you.'

'Okay,' Gay said. He felt good about going into her cabin now. There would be her books on the shelves he had built for her, and they would have some drinks, and Perce would fall asleep on the couch, and they would go into the bedroom together. He liked to come back to her after he had

worked, more than when he had only driven her here and there or just stayed around her place. He liked his own money in his pocket. And he tried harder to visualize how it would be with her, and he thought of himself being forty-six soon, and then nearing fifty. She would go back East one day, he knew, maybe this year, maybe next. He wondered again when he would begin turning gray and how he would look with gray hair, and he set his jaw against the picture of himself gray and an old man.

Perce spoke, sitting up in his seat. 'I want to phone my mother. Damn, I haven't called her all year.' He stared out the window at the mountains. He had the memory of how the colt looked, and he wished it would be gone when they returned in the morning. Then he said, 'I got to get to Largo tomorrow and register.'

'We'll go,' Gay said.

'I could use a good win,' he said. He thought of five hundred dollars now, and of the many times he had won five hundred dollars. 'You know something, Gay?' he said.

'Huh?'

'I'm never goin' to amount to a damn thing.' Then he laughed. He was hungry, and he laughed without restraint for a moment and then laid his head back and closed his eyes.

'I told you that first time I met you, didn't I?' Gay grinned. He felt the mood coming on for some drinks at Roslyn's.

Then Perce spoke. 'That colt won't bring two dollars anyway. What you say we just left him there?'

'Why, you know what he'd do?' Gay said. 'He'd just follow the truck right into town.'

'I guess he would at that,' Perce said. He spat a stream of juice out the window.

They reached the camp in twenty minutes and loaded the gasoline drum onto three bedrolls and the aluminum grub box in the truck and drove on toward Bowie. After they had driven for fifteen minutes without speaking, Gay said he wanted to go north very soon for the hundreds of horses that were supposed to be in the mountains there. But Perce Howland had fallen fast asleep beside him. Gay wanted to talk about that expedition because as they neared Bowie he began to visualize Roslyn razzing them again, and it was clear to him that he had somehow failed to settle anything for himself; he had put in three days for thirty-five dollars, and there would be no way to explain it so it made sense, and it would be embarrassing. And yet he knew that it had all been the way it ought to be even if he could never explain it to her or anyone else. He reached out and nudged Perce, who opened his eyes and lolled his head over to face him. 'You comin' up to Thighbone with me, ain't you?'

'Okay,' Perce said and went back to sleep.

Gay felt more peaceful now that the younger man would not be leaving him. He drove in contentment.

***

The sun shone hot on the beige plain all day. Neither fly nor bug nor snake ventured out on the waste to molest the four horses tethered there, or the colt. They had run nearly two hours at a gallop, and as the afternoon settled upon them they pawed the hard ground for water, but there was none. Toward evening the wind came up, and they backed into it and faced the mountains from which they had come. From time to time the stallion caught the smell of the pastures up there, and he started to walk toward the vaulted fields in which he had grazed; but the tire bent his neck around, and after a few steps he would turn to face it and leap into the air with his forelegs striking at the sky, and then he would come down and be still again.

With the deep blue darkness the wind blew faster, tossing their manes and flinging their long tails in between their legs. The cold of night raised the colt onto its legs, and it stood close to the mare for warmth. Facing the southern range, five horses blinked under the green glow of the risen moon, and they closed their eyes and slept. The colt settled again on the hard ground and lay under the mare.

In the high hollows of the mountains the grass they had cropped this morning straightened in the darkness. On the lusher swards, which were still damp with the rains of spring, their hoofprints had begun to disappear. When the first pink glow of another morning lit the sky the colt stood up, and as it had always done at dawn it walked waywardly for water. The mare shifted and her bone hoofs ticked the clay. The colt turned its head and returned to her and stood at her side with vacant eyes, its nostrils sniffing the warming air.

[*1957*]