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Wonder Valley

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

William Hillyard

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University of California, Riverside

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Wonder Valley

You might have passed through here, maybe. Out for a drive with time on your hands, you might have taken the long-cut to the casinos of Vegas from the soulless sprawl of LA. You'd have driven way beyond the outer reaches of suburbia, beyond its neglected fringe of citrus groves, past the outlet malls and the Indian casino, past that remote high desert national park and the Marine base, past the Next Services 100 Miles sign and any reason anybody really drives out this way. You'd have blown through here at 60 miles an hour, probably, toward a forgotten remnant of the old Route 66, along a potholed and corrugated tarmac, the only asphalt for miles. If you were messing with your radio, fiddling with your phone, you might not have even noticed the grid of washboard tracks scraped from the sparse scrabble of greasewood shrubs in this nowhere corner of the Mojave Desert.

You can turn off of the pavement, of course; turn onto any one of the bumpy dirt roads. These are public rights-of-way, county-maintained easements between dry homestead parcels. You probably didn't, though. Few people do. And that's the way the people who live out here like it.

If you turned off the pavement on dusty Steeg Road, however, drove north through the miles of stinted scrub, past the empty shells of homestead shacks, you'd come to the dilapidated cabin outside which Ned Bray found Ricka McGuire lying nude in the old cream-colored school bus that was her home.

You wouldn't find the old Wayne school bus parked there now, though. Ricka's son towed it to his place; then Ned Bray bought it. It's now another mile up the road,

past Willie Mitchell's place, and the old circus elephant trailer and the rusty Volvo once owned by one of the Beach Boys. It's parked on Ned's five acre parcel next to what's left of his homestead cabin way up there at the northern edge of Wonder Valley.

* * *

Wonder Valley. This patch of desert gets its incongruous name from a joke, really, a sign along the highway marking an old homestead. It just as easily could have been called "Calloused Palms" or "Withering Heights," names of other homesteads in the area. Back in those days anyone could get a homestead spread out here for the cost of the filing fee; make a claim under the Small Tract Homestead Act of 1938. Congress passed the Homestead Act to give land to veterans of the Great War; land in this dry desert climate, a climate thought recuperative to mustard gas-scorched lungs.

Anyone could apply for a parcel, however, but until the 1950s, few did. Then Hollywood Westerns sparked a nostalgia for simpler times. Out in the desert the old west lived—the purple mountains majesty, the changing colors of the desert sunset, the wide-open skies, the limitless stars. And in Wonder Valley, people discovered, you could get your very own home on the range, claim your own personal piece of the Wild Wild West. Soon, lines trailed out of the government land office; thousands registered homesteads. Even movie cowboy Ronald Reagan staked a Wonder Valley claim.

For a $5 filing fee you chose a five-acre rectangle from the General Land Office map. The Land Office had divided the valley on paper into 336-by-660-square-foot parcels, overlaid on the land without regard to topography. There were no roads then, few markers; it was up to you to find the property you chose. Once you did you had three

years to "prove-up" your parcel, clear the land, build a cabin. Ronald Reagan didn't "prove up" his parcel. Neither did most people. Few could stand the scorching months of triple-digit heat or the icy winter chill, the snow and the flash floods, or the constant wind that blasts like a furnace in the summer and bites to the bone in the winter. Most drove the three hours out here from L.A. and took a look at the dry, scruffy land blistering in the summer heat—no roads, no water—and they got right back into their cars and drove right back home. Those folks lost their homesteads, gave up their claim. Eventually, however, the flat valley filled up with cookie-cutter cabins, twelve feet by twenty, an outhouse out back. Construction companies even sprang up offering prefab units ready-made to satisfy Land Office requirements. Over the years, some cabins grew into houses; rooms were added, water wells drilled, flush toilets and indoor plumbing installed. Most, however, sagged into disrepair.

After the homestead blip of the fifties, this corner of the Mojave became a blank space on the map once again. The interstate freeways had bypassed the area; any tinge of a town died on the lonely road's withered vine. Homesteaders passed properties to heirs with no interest in grandpa's wasteland clapboard shack. Squatters squatted in the old, forgotten cabins. L.A.'s downtrodden, drifting east from town to town chasing cheaper and cheaper rent, occupied others. Mental institutions resettled patients out here, prisons dumped inmates out on early release. Those cabins still vacant had their windows scrapped, their metal scavenged, the shacks stripped to bare shells, doors and chairs and siding and walls hauled away and burned to heat the newcomers' homes in the freezing high-desert winter. Open squatters' fires built on bare concrete floors sometimes spread

to the walls, the roof. “Improvement fires” the fire department calls them. They let them burn, let them “prove up” Wonder Valley by removing another run-down shanty. Remaining residents burned down eyesores, too, tore down drug dens, dismantled desert blight. A county-funded program, “Shack Attack,” paid contractors to demolish even more. Today, few of the 4,000 original cabins remain.

But when the nearby national park was established, others began to venture out this way. Snowbirds’ motor homes retraced the corrugated pavement of this forgotten byway. Retirees discovered the quaint little cabins--the rustic charm! Writers found solitude in the lonely desert; artists, inspiration. The artists and writers and snowbirds and retirees look at the mountains, this is the real purple mountains majesty, they say, the changing colors of the desert sunset, the wide-open skies, the limitless stars—it’s like living in a painting!

These days, maybe a couple thousand artists and writers and snowbirds and retirees, drifters and squatters, mental patients and ex-cons people the 150 square miles of Wonder Valley, each on the vestige of a homestead. You can tell the artists and writers and snowbirds and retirees by their Direct TV dishes, their raked-sand, Zen-garden yards, their manicured desert landscaping carefully sculpted and formed—nature, “proved-up.” You know them by their cars: how few of them there are, none of them on blocks, all of them running. They live in houses, proper houses, with windows and walls and rooms, kitchens with running water, garages. Pride of ownership. But they look out over the desert, look out at the sagging shacks and single family favelas of scavenged cast-offs, old lumber, doors, scrap metal and weathered furniture, the cars on blocks or left for dead

where they died. Can you believe the way some people live? they ask one another. The empty shells of homestead cabins are historic, they tell themselves, quaint reminders of a bygone era—little ghost towns now being trashed by indolent little ghosts.

*   *   *

Ned Bray lives on five acres out at the northern edge of the valley. Some anonymous artist or writer or snowbird or retiree had called the county, reported Ned—his place is an eyesore; his place needs to be cleaned up, the junk everywhere, the mounds of wood and stucco, the piles of parts, the wind-blown trash that flaps from the greasewood scrub like withered fruit. Ned's parcel had been "proved-up"; at one time it had a cabin on it, indoor plumbing even, and a big mesquite tree out front near the road. His folks bought the place twenty years ago, sight unseen, then they packed him up and shipped him out here. Figured he couldn't harm anyone way out here in the middle of nowhere. Ned used to live in the cabin on his property and for a while Cindy McCullom and her son Danny lived there, too. Cindy had lost her home in town and Ned invited her to share his Wonder Valley cabin with him. Back then it had a bedroom and bathroom and lace curtains. But that damn tree out front, that big mesquite tree had spread its roots like tentacles under the house, into the walls, and would give Ned no rest with its constant talking. If you asked Ned he'd tell you five different voices came from the walls, the swamp cooler, the toilet. It was like five radios you could never turn off, man. Ned had to keep the toilet sealed tightly to keep that demon thing from getting out into the house. He spent nights on end crouched there waiting for it. He caught the demon thing once, he'd tell you, caught it running back to the bathroom. He beat and beat the little

bastard with a baseball bat, tried to kill it. He tore the walls out looking for the voices, destroyed the cabin, chopped down the tree and dug out the stump. He dug down into the septic tank and flung the muck out, disgusting work, man, until he got that thing out and the voices were gone.

It was Ricka McGuire who finally got Cindy out of Ned's place, took her and her son Danny to a friend's to stay. Ned had been ranting on about the voices, that damn tree, its roots! He had been sitting in the corner rocking back and forth waiting for the demon when four-year-old Danny stumbled sleepy-eyed to the bathroom. Ned beat him with that bat until the child passed out. Danny woke up vomiting blood. The police were called; they wouldn't come. It was too far, it was a domestic dispute. Ricka came and got Cindy and Danny out of Ned's house. There was no ambulance, no hospital. Children heal.

Ricka didn't live in her old Wayne school bus back then. She had ten acres in a sandy pass in Valley Mountain, the rocky crag that scars deeply into Wonder Valley. She had her bus parked there, though, next to the cabin. She'd had the bus for years, had bought it when she lived in Oregon, kept it outside the Portland Victorian where she raised her family. There, a single mother on welfare, she picked beans and berries to get by--her kids never realized they were poor. But after those kids had grown and gone, a heavy weight lifted from her and Ricka floated free. Sea to shining sea. The sky was the limit. In that Wayne school bus she set out south, an old hippy bumping down the coast, she spent some years in Humboldt trimming marijuana bud for cash and living in the school bus she had outfitted like a motorhome. From there she followed her son south,

drifted to the edge of town after town until the towns ran out and she ended up in Wonder Valley. She parked her bus behind the cluttered cabin where her son brought his family. It was tough on her at first. But if you'd have asked her, she'd have told you she came to love the desert, the wide open skies, the limitless stars. When the wind wasn't blowing and the heat wasn't so bad, she'd have said, the ear-ringing quiet was more calming than lonely. After a while, she found a place, that old homestead cabin on ten acres nestled in the rocks of Valley Mountain. An old woman agreed to sell it to her--$15,000—she'd make payments, a couple of hundred a month. She had no well, no water, but that didn't matter. You can't drink the well water out here anyway, she'd have told you, too full of salt and minerals. And the well water's hot in this part of the valley besides, 140 degrees straight out of the ground. No, Ricka would haul water like most everyone else. Her cabin had a 2000 gallon tank--that'd last her about a month.

Ricka had polio as a child and wore a leg brace, but that disability meant she got $750 Supplemental Security Income every month from the government. She could live pretty good out here on that. And besides, she was smart, she learned the system, the way things worked. Once she got a real address, became settled, she could take advantage of county services. She hired Cindy McCollum as a county-paid in-home service worker. Cindy would clean Ricka's cabin periodically and help her get around. Ricka also convinced Meals-On-Wheels to drive all the way out to her place; she was the last stop on the route, got the last of the food—enough for her and her dogs and her cats.

But only a few years later, you'd have found Ricka McGuire back in her old Wayne school bus, parked in front of that dilapidated cabin down by her son's

ramshackle shack. She'd moved back into it, had it towed off the Valley Mountain property, the property that was no longer hers. You see, Congress had voted to purge fugitive felons off the SSI roles; they matched old arrest warrants with Social Security records, tracked down the aged and infirm, revoked their benefits. That's how Ricka lost hers. She got a letter in the mail: "We are writing to let you know that we have paid you $17,323.00 too much Supplemental Security Income (SSI) money. You were overpaid because our records show that you have an outstanding arrest warrant." Her SSI payments abruptly ended. And the government wanted its seventeen thousand dollars back.

Back in 1965, Ricka had done something dumb. She was raising three children on welfare when she found some woman's checkbook. As another mother drove her around town, Ricka wrote bad checks. Busted and booked, she did time--five months. But she never completed her probation.

Now, forty years later, she was back in the bus. It no longer ran; she towed it place to place with an old yellow van she had. She bootlegged power at vacant shacks using her daughter's info or made-up names until the power company caught on. She was smart, she knew the system, but without a fixed address, she lost other benefits, too, the Meals-On-Wheels, the county-paid in-home service worker. The artists and writers and snowbirds and retirees watched her through their tinted windows; can you believe the way she lives? Her son had gotten into meth; his wife had left him. He had moved to an apartment in town and left his place to a crew of low-lifes. And in her struggle to survive Ricka had burned some bridges. Now she was all but alone in the desert.

The heat peaked at 118 degrees the day Ned Bray stopped by to check on Ricka and found her lying nude on the bed of her cream-colored bus. Ned had been worried about her—she'd run out of water, she wasn't tolerating the heat so well. He had convinced her to go to town the day before, to get out of the record heat, to go to the library where there was air conditioning. Wonder Valley has a community center--it's on the paved road next door to the fire station. The county runs it, residents pay for it with their taxes. The community center is supposed to be a sanctuary from the heat. It's supposed to be air conditioned; it's supposed to be opened to the public on days when it's really hot. But it wasn't open. Wasn't open because the plumbing was bad, or the floors needed work, or because the last time someone used it they didn't keep it clean. So Ricka and Ned drove that old yellow van through the miles of stinted scrub to town. She had no air conditioning in that van of hers; the heat was unbearable.

They never made it. On the way, she had a seizure or something, right in the middle of the road. She just stopped. Ned got the van over to the side. Sheriff deputies came by: move that damn thing or you'll be ticketed or towed. But they just sat there, four hours. As the sun set and the day cooled, Ricka recovered; she drove herself home. Ned brought her a couple of jugs of water. When he returned the next afternoon, walked the mile from his place to hers, past Willie Mitchell's place and the circus elephant trailer and the sun-baked Volvo once owned by one of the Beach Boys, he found the water untouched.

In the stifling heat, Ned ran to Willie Mitchell's. Willie had a phone; he called 911. It took the paramedics thirty-seven minutes to drive out the forgotten remnant of

corrugated asphalt, up the washboard dirt road, past the remains of old homestead cabins, cross over the wash, past Ricka's son's ramshackle shack to the dilapidated cabin where Ricka had parked her bus. It didn't matter. Ricka McGuire, lying in the bed of her bus, had long been dead.

*   *   *

I drove out there, out to Wonder Valley. Out past the Next Services 100 Miles sign, I turned off the corrugated pavement and rattled north through the miles of stinted scrub, billows of dust roiling behind my car. It was hot. Ahead, a dust devil stumbled like a drunk across the sandy road ripping wind-blown trash from the greasewood scrub and flinging it into the air, up and over the dilapidated shack in front of which Ned Bray found Ricka McGuire dead.

It was Cindy McCollum who first told me about Ricka McGuire, told me about how she lived and how she died. I had called Cindy because she wrote a column about Wonder Valley for the weekly paper in town. I'd hoped she could help me with my story. I had gotten an assignment, you see, I was to write a story about rural poverty. I got the story idea from the manager of the video store in town. He complained about the people from Wonder Valley, they'd rent stacks of movies, they'd stink up the bathroom, bathe in the sink, fill up jugs of water to take back home. He had to keep the bathroom door locked, he told me. I couldn't believe people lived that way.

Cindy herself got by on a part time job at the salt mine at the east end of the valley. Danny, too, had two jobs in town to supplement their income, but they had a hard

time keeping a car running to get them both to work. Cindy bristled when I told her I wanted to write a story about rural poverty. There was no poverty out here, she'd said.

Cindy grew teary as she told me about Ricka. She had been her friend. Over the years, she and Ricka had drifted apart, however. If you asked Cindy, she'd tell you that at times Ricka McGuire was a hard woman to love. She had lost touch with Ricka completely in the months before she died.

I got Ricka's coroner's report. It concluded that "Probable Heat Stroke" was a "significant condition" contributing to her death. But not the cause. Ned had tried to explain to the officials that Ricka hadn't been well. She had run out of water; the week of record high temperatures had taken its toll. But they had found some pot in the bus, a pipe, determined she had a "history of smoking cigarettes and marijuana," and listed the cause of her death as "Chronic Drug Abuse." There was no toxicology report. When I asked about it, the coroner's people just shrugged, agreed it makes no sense, there is nothing in the report to justify those conclusions. They'd have to look into it. Pull the file. Call down to archives and have it brought up. They'd have to talk to so-and-so when she got back from wherever.

Out in Wonder Valley I parked my car in front of the dilapidated cabin where Ricka had parked her bus, the spot where Ned had found her. The lonely silence made my ears buzz. Ricka McGuire isn't the only one who has died out here, died from the heat. A man named Gary lived in the cabin right next door to this parcel where Ricka died. His truck broke down between here and town; he tried to walk home. He didn't make it. And there's Shawn Pritchard. Shawn grew up in Wonder Valley, lived for a

time in the cabin next door just to the east. He was out with his girlfriend scrapping on the Marine base, out collecting bombs and bullets to recycle when his car got stuck. She stayed with it, he tried to walk for help. The Marines found their crow-picked and coyote-eaten bodies weeks later. There have been others too, others who no one bothered to look for, who no one knew were missing. Like the guy whose femur Jill Davis shows to visitors. Jill has the next place to the east. She found the leg bone in the wash at the east end of the valley. Poor chump. The cops couldn't even be troubled to drive out from town to retrieve the guy's sun-bleached remains.

You can see Ricka's son's ramshackle shack from the place where Ricka died. From there, it looked like a pile, a swept together pile that no one ever bothered to pick up. An old Fotomat booth stands like a gatehouse in front the shack walled in from the world by parapets of scavenged lumber, campers, and cars. If you asked Jill Davis, she'd tell you she wanted to buy it, buy it just to clean it up. Can you believe people live like that?

Up close, the son's house looked like it had exploded. The doors were flung open, the windows smashed out, the insides thrown outside, scattered everywhere--household items, children's clothes, books and papers. Cars left where they died. A bible standing on end blocked the dirt drive, its pages swollen thick in the heat. A couple of pit-bulls bounded at me from under a ten foot travel trailer parked behind the house.

"You looking for Nutty Ned?" a woman answered me through the window of the trailer; her short blond hair and bare shoulders visible through the ragged curtains. She didn't seem too used to visitors. Plopping out of the trailer, she pulled an oversized shirt

over her body; her heavy pale breasts squished out through the cut-off arm holes as she pointed the direction to Ned's. She's been living out here for a couple of years, she said, waiting for her SSI to come through, then she's moving, going to get an apartment somewhere out of the dirt and the heat.

I drove the mile up the road, past Willie Mitchell's place, the circus elephant trailer, the Volvo once owned by one of the Beach Boys. Ned lives in Ricka's old Wayne school bus now; he towed it up there and parked it next to the ruins of his homestead shack. He tore the cabinets out of the bus and the bed and the floors, stripping it down to a shell. People are too attached to things, he'd tell you; you got to simplify your life, man. As I walked up, Ned was organizing, moving carburetors to the carburetor pile, the rearview mirrors to the rearview mirror pile, the bicycle wheels, toilet seats. He stacked and restacked his stuff with swift jerky movements, winding his way through an elaborate maze of things. "It's not right what the county's doing, man," he said. He had received that notice of violation from the county; a neighbor complained, they insist he clean the place up. "I use everything here once a year, man." What that meant I didn't know.

From Ned's place, I could see Ricka McGuire's ten acre parcel less than a mile to the west, in a low saddle in Valley Mountain. To the east dozens of wheeless cars surrounded a clapboard shack protected by a "No Trespas" sign. George Stadler's place, I would learn. It separates Ned's from the white-washed fences of the Ostrich Farm, a homestead spread Dominic and Naomi had then only just bought. Whitefeather still lived at the Cat Ranch in those days. Raub McCartney was in his wooden rocker in his rock-

walled cabin, Pizza Richard still lived out by the Sheephole. Of course, as I stood watching Ned that day I didn't yet know about the Cat Ranch or the Ostrich farm. I had never heard of George Stadler or Pizza Richard or Whitefeather. I hadn't yet visited The Palms bar. That was all to come. I was there, I thought, to find that old bus and to write a story about the poor, the poor Cindy McCollum told me were not to be found in Wonder Valley.

As I stood there looking around, a water truck lumbered up the road, turned and backed onto Ned's place, sinking into the soft sand. Ned threaded his way through the maze of stuff to a group of blue plastic barrels. He rolled them close to the belly of the truck as the driver, Moose, a burly guy with a grizzly beard, unwound a section of canvas hose, sticking the end into one of the drums. He opened the valve and water began to flow, droning into the hollow of the barrel, drumming its sides. Ned moved the hose from barrel to barrel, filling half a dozen, 55 gallons each, splashing water over his dirty feet and tattered flip-flops as he stepped around white flags of toilet paper waving surrender from desiccated clumps of human shit. As the last barrel filled he dug his hands into the water. Reaching up with arms full, the water cascaded over his tanned face, through his stubble of hair, his shadow of whiskers, and over his thin, leathery body, darkening the waist band of his frayed shorts.

"I'm going put the rest of this water in that hole there," he shouted to Moose, gesturing to an open pit in the dirt. "I dug a well down there, I'm going to fill it up."

Ned dragged the hose to the hole. Moose shot me a hesitant look, then opened the valve on the truck. We stood with our hands in our pockets and watched the water gush forth from the open end of the canvas hose.

"You got to have water, man," Ned said as the remaining thousand gallons of water sank into the thirsty desert sand. "You can't live out here without water."

Laying Tracks with Jack McConaha

Jack McConaha answered my knock in a white undershirt. “Come on in; have a seat,” he said. “Say hello to the kids.” His ‘kids’, two toy poodles, yipped at me from the side of the king-size bed that practically fills the landlocked living room of his sprawling Wonder Valley cabin. Their bed, and their food and water bowls sat in the rumpled covers. The whoosh of the swamp coolers covered the room with a blanket of white noise reducing the TV at the foot of the bed to a murmur.

Jack disappeared to finish dressing. “Must have picked up a nail,” he shouted from deep within the warren of the cabin. “I checked the air in my tires this morning and one was a little low.” It seemed he was continuing a conversation that had begun before I arrived. “Don’t matter,” he went on, “it’s just down a couple of pounds.” He didn't like the Firestone tires that came on his new patrol jeep, he continued. He’s going to replace them, get BF Goodriches—they self-seal if you get a puncture.

Jack reentered the room dressed for his desert patrol. Summer-weight camouflaged fatigues--Marine Corp issue—draped from his short, stout frame, a 40-caliber Smith and Wesson on his hip. The tin star on his breast designated him “Captain of Security.” He looked as I remembered him, as he looked when I first encountered him at the firehouse a few weeks before. I had gone to the firehouse to inquire into Ricka McGuire’s death, and as I reached the door, Jack was leaving. He walked his penguin walk to the door where I stood. As the sun hit him his wire-rimmed tri-focals gradually tinted dark obscuring his tiny gray eyes. The glasses were held up by gristly flaps of ears

molded to the spherical orb of his head, mottled and pocked as a Galilean moon. He smiled a toothless smile. The firehouse supervisor introduced us, and Jack shook my hand like we had been old friends. Jack's been in Wonder Valley a long time, she said of him after he left, he knows this valley like the back of his hand. She gave me his phone number. I'd like to go on a ride-along with you, I suggested when I called, like reporters do with the police. We agreed to meet.

When I showed up at his door, a week later, Jack spoke to me as though he had always known me. He led me through the landlocked bedroom, past a pool table stacked with junk mail and old newspapers, his wife's sewing, photos and keepsakes and doodads. As a Marine in the fifties, he said, he was stationed at the nearby base, and on his days off, he crawled over the dirt roads of Wonder Valley and up into the mountains in an old war-surplus jeep. The Wonder Valley Jack found was then peopled by the original homesteaders, people like-minded to Jack, simpaticos. He felt right at home. When his tour in the Marines ended, he started a steel fabrication business down at the coast, but he continued coming to the valley.

Jack waves his hands as he talks, hands that show the faint scars of the accident that cut his welding venture short, that earned him his lifetime of disability checks, the money he has lived on for his nearly 40 years in Wonder Valley. After that accident he returned to Wonder Valley for good.

Jack would tell you Wonder Valley back then was like the Wild Wild West—you could be anyone you wanted to be, do anything you wanted. If you asked Jack McConaha, he'd tell you that he'd always wanted to be a policeman, but his stocky frame

made him too short to qualify. Out here, though, Jack got a police scanner and started responding to calls. And he'd tell you he beat the fire department to fires as often as not. Once there, he'd make sure everyone was safe then wait for the firefighters to arrive. Eventually, he got a spot on Wonder Valley's small all-volunteer fire brigade and later even did a stint as chief before the county took it over and forced Jack out of a job.

As we walked through his cabin, Jack pointed out framed newspaper clippings on the walls above the pool table, clippings of drug busts and manhunts, traffic accidents he'd attended to and fires he'd fought. Dolly Parton made a music video at the salt mine out east, Jack provided security. The Navy bombed Wonder Valley, attack planes missed the Marine Corps range in bombing run after bombing, dropping 500 pound bombs each time, thirty-two in all. The paper interviewed Jack for the story. Jack chattered about the photos of him with sheriff's captains and fire commanders, the luminaries he met in the line of duty. He talked to me about the meth labs he busted, the all night stake-outs, the search and rescues. The abandoned cabins out here attract a bad element, he said. People come from L.A. and that mess down there by the coast to cook up drugs or dump a dead body or just wander out into the saltbush scrub and blow their own brains out. Jack told me about a man he came upon, standing in the sandy lane, bashing his wife's head in with a rock. He pointed out the commendations he'd been awarded, the citations. He told me about the people he's helped, how they tell him how much they appreciate what he does how important his job is as the self-appointed guardian of this remote corner of the Mojave.

As he talked he opened a cabinet full of rifles, shotguns, assault weapons. Semi-automatic pistols and revolvers hung from hooks, an antique repeater hung above a door. He pulled a 9mm pistol from a hook. “I prefer this one,” he said testing the pistol’s weight. The 9mm has a larger magazine, can hold more ammunition. Important, he said, because there’s a kook out there hell-bent on getting him. Years before, the man emptied a .45 at him as he drove past The Palms bar sending patrons scattering. But the 9mm’s barrel is too long. “It hits the jeep seat and jacks my belt up all cock-eyed!” he said. The 40-cal he usually carries is shorter.

Outside was Jack’s jeep, a clean, new, forest green four-by-four with big gold star decals on its doors, flashing lights mounted on its hood. Inside was a nest with barely room for the two of us. I climbed in shotgun and propped my feet on a metal first aid kit, my head nestled in the mass pushing against me from behind the seat: blankets and jackets, shovels and jacks, jugs of water and gas, anything he might need while on patrol in the desert. The police scanner crackled to life as we threaded through the clutter of mining equipment on his five acre parcel, the rusting metal, old car parts, wooden contraptions collected from the desert and arranged into a life-size diorama of a turn-of-the-century gold mine. We passed through the locked gate, through the wall of wind-ravished saltcedar trees and past the Marine Corp flag flapping wildly in the furnace-hot breeze, and turned out on to the lattice of dusty dirt roads that divide Wonder Valley into the empty rectangles of greasewood and snakeweed.

The original homesteaders cut these roads out here—more than 400 miles of them. Most are easements along property lines, though some zig and zag as they

negotiate the various hills and washes of the valley. It was the power company, when they ran the power lines, that straightened and widened the roads, each one giving access to a string of power poles. They named the roads, too, I'm told, took the names from those of residents and prominent features and the like.

It is the county, however, that maintains the roads, plows them periodically with a grader paid for with a special assessment on meager property taxes. In fact, the roads had been plowed the morning I headed out with Jack, the usual washboards smoothed, the golden sand silky as softened butter under the hot sun. "I've got to talk to that tractor driver," Jack mumbled in jest, "He's erased all my tracks!"

The trackless roads took us past the remains of old homestead cabins, stripped and bare, their windows gouged out, doors agape, each yawning a lifeless grimace over the bleak desert landscape.

As we drove Jack channeled ghosts from the past and rattled off genealogies, reciting names as though I should be familiar with them. Each parcel had a story, the story of a mid-century homesteader who came to Wonder Valley, cleared the land, built a cabin, an outhouse. The cabins now endure the whipping wind, the crackling heat, the desiccating dryness as lifeless shells.

"This place here belonged to Vera Sabrowski's daughter, Anita," Jack said as we looped around a cabin. "Vera owned that house back there where that pile of furniture was." The skeleton of a dog lay against the house still chained where the departed family had left it.

We drove around another cabin, circling the shack before driving to the next. At a small house with pasty, peeling purple paint Jack said, “This place back over here belonged to Margaret Malone.” He circled the cabin, leaving his tire tracks on the scoured sand. “Margaret Malone, her place used to be known as the purple mansion ’cause it had all kinds of purple rocks. See all them purple rocks?” he asked, pointing to a line of cobbles painted a faded lilac, mostly buried by the wind-blown sand. “All them purple rocks—she had rocks everywhere--they made the place look like shit.”

“This one over here,” Jack said at another cabin, “Steve Staid--his dad and ma had the place--they gave Steve their place, they let him come out here, and he got so juiced and screwed up, I had to call an ambulance. He was about two days from dying from booze and dehydration. We just about lost him.” He paused a moment, lost in a thought. “I felt real bad about that. I’ll put some tracks on it.” Circling through the property, he laid a trail in the dirt and dust, marking the parcel, giving it a pulse, a sign of life.

He recognized his own tracks as we drove around the lonely cabins; he looked for others crossing over his. Cabin after cabin, his were the only tracks.

Further on, we crept through another cluster of cabins. “And those two over here,” he said, “there’s some kind of battle in court over them.” He looked around apprehensively. “Matter of fact, technically, I got no right on this property.” He drove between the shacks, laying tracks through what in suburban America would be the front yard. I sensed we were someplace we shouldn’t be. “All I do is put some tracks on a property and somebody’ll go and call the sheriff and—but the sheriff pretty well knows my tire tracks.” He paused, pensive. “Well, they don’t know these, these are the

Firestone tires, they're different than my usual ones." We drove off the property and out into the desert.

As we drove, Jack talked a lot about tires and tracks. He talked about tracking criminals back to the scenes of crimes, about photographing tracks to deliver to the sheriff as evidence only to have it ignored or lost or forgotten.

"Oh and this one here, a lady had it," he said as we circled another abandoned shack. "I came by here one day and a guy was coming out with stuff, so I held him at gunpoint for about five minutes," he chuckled. "He'd bought the place for back taxes."

Drawing a bead like that on a couple of area kids a few years ago got him two years probation for brandishing a weapon. He hadn't recognized the kids; they'd practically gown up since he'd seen them last. He stopped them coming from the direction of a burglarized cabin. Their parents called the police; Jack was arrested, his guns confiscated. These days, the sheriff prefers Jack keep his pistol holstered and unloaded.

In the distance a dust devil kicking a mushroom into the sky caught his eye. "Is that smoke?" he said shielding his eyes against the sun. "I thought that was smoke," he laughed. "Oh, but there ain't nothing over that way." He waved his hand at the dust dismissively, but then he fell silent. Jack had seen some fires, had lost friends in them because they couldn't escape the flames, trapped by a lifetime's accumulation of junk in their homes. His friend Dutch, an old man active in the community who lived in a block-built homestead cabin on Schooler Road, the one that had the sign that gave Wonder Valley its name. He perished out here because he couldn't escape the flames, he died

trapped by piles of rat-packed papers and junk-become-tinder in his home. Jack had warned the man "One of these days you're going to be trapped." If you asked Jack, he'd tell you he heard the fire call on his scanner; he was the first on the scene. He found Dutch inside, dead from the smoke.

Jack roused himself as we approached the ruins of a homestead cabin virtually buried in scavenged refuse. "Here's what you get faced with out here," he said, thumbing at the shanty. The bare dirt lot was covered with remnants of plywood and scrap wood cobbled together into make-shift lean-tos and corrals of pallets littered with rubble. No water, no electricity, it looked more like a stockyard than a home. A silhouette stared back at us through a glassless window. "They ain't got nothing," Jack muttered, his tinge of sympathy quickly replaced by disgust. "We give them water and helped them, give them food and helped them, but that's when they first moved in, but now they've got all that shit there. We've just sort of ignored it so far," he said. "We've left them alone."

I wondered who he meant by we. The artists and writers and snowbirds and retirees were gone for the summer, escaped to cooler climes, visiting the grandkids, spending time on the coast. Even The Palms bar was closed. That shape in the window was the only other soul I saw in three hours of laying tracks.

I thought about that silhouette sitting there in that cobbled-together shack. I later learned that that man had had cancer; destitute, he had come to Wonder Valley to die. Inside the Jeep, the thermometer read 115, I was sweating, the air conditioning overpowered by the roasting heat. I thought about that man sitting there in the heat gazing out the window. I thought about the guy whose car broke down between here and town

and the ones who got stuck scrapping on the Marine Base. This is an easy place to die. I asked Jack about Ricka McGuire. “We knew she wasn’t going to make it,” he replied.

As the sun drifted west, we treaded along a road that traversed a long bajada, the erosional skirt at the waist of the Pinto Mountains. Jack stopped the jeep on a hill overlooking the highway. My parents’ house was just over the rise to the west. Around us trash caught in a greasewood snapped in the wind. The sky was white with dust; the distant mountains floated in a silver mirage that danced with a shower-glass shimmer in the stifling heat. Jack pulled a juice bottle filled with ice water from behind his seat and poured himself a glass. All the old-timers are gone, he told me, none of the original homesteaders are left. He fell silent, contemplative. We just sat there, looking out over the valley, each lost in his own thoughts. Slowly the sun colored the clouds to the west. And down below us in the floor of the valley the furnace-hot breeze worked to erase our tracks.

Falling to Heaven

Night in Wonder Valley is vast and limitless, no lights distract the stars. Looking up, you see infinity. The heavens shroud the earth with the dust of the Milky Way, the ancient pulse of countless stars in that eternity of darkness. Out there, the sky appears torn from the earth along the jagged silhouette of the mountains—those mountains, along with the dilapidated homestead shacks and the empty sand and scrub of the Wonder Valley floor, sink into a featureless black void. Late, in the calm of the deep night, you can find yourself out there in an ear-crackling silence, in a darkness without form. All you are is your breath rasping in your chest, your heart lub-dubbing in your ears. Life, the entirety of your existence, collapses to a mere spark, the briefest blush of daylight in an endless night.

Out there, with the cosmic canopy hanging heavy above, Tom Whitefeather sits in an old rocking chair staring out the open door of Raub McCartney's rock-walled cabin. Raub's dusty, half-drunk jug of wine sits at his feet. The rock-walled cabin sits anchored to the flank of an island, a scab of weathered boulders, part of that inky nighttime silhouette rising from the barren basin of the valley. Whitefeather will make his bed on Raub's antique settee behind the old rocking chair, wrapped in a blanket against the cold darkness of the rock-walled room. He never goes into Raub's room; it sits just the way they left it, with the boxes overturned, the bed covered with clothes and photos. They left it with the closet door sprung open, the contents spilling out onto the floor. They left it with the box fan on the floor and the bullet hole in the wall.

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Raub McCartney came from a family of stonemasons; they built the rock-walled cabin by themselves from heat-varnished stones gathered from the open desert. This was throwaway land out here, worthless government property—free to any who would improve it. That's what Raub's family did. His grandparents homesteaded this land in the fifties, cut the roads along property lines, fought back nature's relentless destruction. The rock-walled cabin grew, the porch added, a guest cottage. The low stone walls keep back the invading desert sands.

The cabin faces west toward the glow of town. In the darkness, the lights of the few occupied cabins float in the inky void like ships adrift, the nearest to Raub's cabin is half a mile away. Within the cabin's rock walls, Raub rocked alone in his old chair, rented movies as his company.

In a calendar on the table next to his rocker Raub recorded his life. "Sad," he scrawled in his shaky hand across an entire week. "Worse than normal," was his self-diagnosis on another. Mostly, his days were blank.

In his previous life, before he came to Wonder Valley, Raub had been a sociable guy, gregarious. He had lived the San Francisco gay scene in the sixties, had sold smack to Ike and Tina, had partied in L.A. only a few degrees of separation from the Hollywood hipster in-crowd. He had come to Wonder Valley because his parents needed him. His father had fallen ill. Slowly his father died, then his mother, but Raub was still out there, stranded now, alone in the desert as on an island, separated from humanity by a sea of sand and saltbush.

Raub had with him a starling, Gary Bird, the reincarnation of his previous life's best friend who had died years before of AIDS. When it died, he put it in the freezer, unable to let it go. Then his dog died, and he buried them both in the drifts of sand next to the rock-walled cabin.

For a while, Raub worked at a store in town, making the thirty-mile drive through the tangle of dirt tracks and string-straight stretches of asphalt pavement, but he couldn't keep a car running. After the store closed, he lost the will and the energy to look for more work. As his mood faltered, his health failed, medications prescribed—for diabetes, his heart problems, nerve damage, his anxiety, serotonin reuptake inhibitors, anti-depressants, a daily cocktail of a dozen or more pills. He self-medicated with alcohol, as well. Marijuana. Methamphetamine. He sank deeper into his isolation.

At some point, Raub McCartney met Tom Whitefeather adrift in the desert. Whitefeather was a desert rat, Indian, he'd tell you, who walked miles alone every day scrounging a living. Like Raub he was marooned out there; he had nothing, save the cats he kept as company. He lived on the little work he could find and the charity of those who had but little more than he. At night he crashed in a ramshackle shack with no electricity or water. After they met Whitefeather frequently walked the mile from his shack to visit Raub, help him out a bit, do odd jobs for cat food for his kitties, and cigarettes and wine and beer. Raub was glad to have someone around to talk to.

The two formed an unlikely pair, a tumultuous relationship. After ten years alone in the desert, Raub was set in his ways. And his depression and his drinking made him volatile at times. Whitefeather, too, was strong-headed and opinionated. He disapproved

of Raub’s homosexuality; he grew evangelical as he drank, tyrannical. He ate Raub’s food, drank his booze and constantly needed money to feed his kitties. They argued and fought. But Raub craved company, human contact. Someone was better than no one, and out there, there was no one else.

*   *   *

By the end of May, any chill is gone from Wonder Valley nights. On one dark night, the moon would only rise near dawn. Raub and Whitefeather spent the evening drinking. They had picked up a gallon of wine in town, rented some movies. As he drank, Raub grew morose and moody. They began to bicker and fight. “You promised you’d only have two glasses,” Whitefeather bitched to Raub. Raub became depressed when he drank and Whitefeather lorded over him, tried to control him, to control his drinking, treated him like a child. Whitefeather wrenched the jug from Raub’s hands and hid it outside.

Raub exploded. “I’ll go get a jug of my own!” he screamed. He climbed into his van and rattled away. From the rock-walled cabin, Whitefeather watched the van’s headlights float off into the desert’s black void. Whitefeather called the police to report him as a drunk driver.

Isolated on their desert island, their blow-ups were frequent. A few months before, on a hot autumn night, Raub, in a drunken rage, pulled a gun on Whitefeather, a .22 caliber revolver, pointing it at his chest. Whitefeather backed against the wall. “Shoot me,” he murmured. “Put me out of my misery.” The two men stared at each other.

Raub fired the gun three times, out the open door and into the desert night, then sunk into a kitchen chair and turned the weapon to his own temple. Whitefeather lunged and grabbed the revolver, turning the cylinder before Raub could wrench it away and press the barrel to his temple again. Click. The hammer hit an empty chamber. Whitefeather dove again for the gun, snatching it away and firing it into the kitchen floor, emptying it of bullets which ricocheted into the stove and walls.

Raub stumbled out of the kitchen to his rocking chair. Whitefeather, agitated, continued to berate him, scolding him, chiding him. They were as usual drunk. As Raub rose to confront Whitefeather, Whitefeather hit him with two jabs, blackening both his eyes and crumpling him back down in the chair in a daze.

Months later, on that moonless night in May, Raub returned with his second jug of wine, and evicting Whitefeather from his home, sat down in his rocking chair to drink. Whitefeather sat outside with his own jug, fuming and drinking. The police never came. Deputies responded with sirens to Whitefeather's drunk driver report, but they rolled up to the wrong house—one 80 miles away.

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On those moonless nights, under that immense Wonder Valley sky, the world becomes detached from the lights in the heavens above. Out there, your hold on the world seems tenuous. You feel upside down, hanging off the planet, hanging above an abyss—the stars pulling you to them. Gravity, the law of gravity is just another law in this lawless place, and on those nights you could trip, you could just lose your footing and fall, fall from the planet, fall into the void of space.

Whitefeather heard a bang from within the house. It was a .22 caliber pistol. Raub was left handed, but that hand was weak; he held the gun in his right hand and steadied it with the other. Bang. Raub shot the box fan on the floor of his bedroom, the bullet lodged in the wall. He put the gun to his temple. Bang. That bullet lodged in his brain. Instantly, Raub McCartney was dead.

These days, Tom Whitefeather sits in Raub's old rocking chair staring out into the blackness of night. Disembodied voices enter the cabin through his radio, news that the world still spins, that there are others beyond the ocean of night. He rocks in Raub's chair in front of Raub's new television. The television sits largely abandoned, only occasionally visited by the characters from the stacks of videos on the floor.

This is still Raub's house, and it will be until the state takes it, until they auction it off to recoup the medical money they paid to maintain the cabin as Raub slipped into ill health and deep depression. In the meantime, Whitefeather sits rocking in Raub's chair, the concrete floor and heavy rock walls of the cabin anchored to the bedrock of the valley, terra firma. Outside, the moaning wind claws at the cabin, which holds its ground against the pull of the heavens and the black void of the Wonder Valley night.

The Palms

If it's approaching three o'clock, you might find Curtis standing in the cracked, sand-covered asphalt of The Palms parking lot waiting for the bar to open. Others will arrive too, and they'll mill about out front waiting for Tonya, the bartender, to arrive. Tonya will be late, of course, but her truck will eventually rattle up if she can keep it running, or she'll be towed there by someone going that way if she can't. She'll check her make-up in the rear-view before throwing open the creaking door and stepping her high heels onto the cracked pavement, then she'll walk around back and unlock the bar's heavy wooden front door from the inside.

George will be there. He's never late. His wheezing green van is in the parking lot even before Curtis arrives. He'll sit in his van smoking or talking to those who come to buy cigarettes from him or gas from the jerry cans he keeps in the back of his wheezing old van.

George and Curtis and the others file into the bar when Tonya finally opens the door. It's bright inside at this hour; daylight through the dingy windows illuminates the old booth in the corner, the slapdash paintings on the walls, the antique rifle hanging in the hall. Sand crunches under your feet against the bare concrete floor. If you're not quick enough, you'll probably land in one of the barstools that are bolted to the floor. , The regulars know to grab the free-moving ones first.

You can buy beer there, of course, cold in the winter, and wine if they have it. And Tonya'll make you a cocktail, as long as it ain't nothing fancy, something, you know, like Jack and Coke, except usually there ain't no Jack.

There're used t-shirts and caps on a rack, paperbacks: one dollar. On the shelves behind the bar—headboards, actually, from old waterbeds, propped against one another and shimmed

more or less to level—are a clutter of half-filled liquor bottles, slim jims and lighters, and cigarettes sometimes. DVDs and video cassettes. Motor oil. In the corner there's a jukebox. It doesn't work. The balls get stuck in the pool table. The CD player skips. The blind eye of a dusty Super 8 film camera stares down at the till, an old fashioned cash register left in the open position. Close it and there'll be trouble--only James, the owner's son, knows how to open it.

George shambles up to the bar, not saying anything to anybody. He'll ease himself onto a barstool humphing and grunting to himself, his wet, tired blue eyes peering out from under the weathered old hat slouched on his head, a gray brillo of beard rests on his chest. Tonya'll slide a Dr. Pepper in front of him as he sags himself into place. George doesn't drink before four, it's a rule he set for himself, one, he'll tell you, that separates him from the others in the valley. After four, though, Tonya brings him Old Milwaukee. He'll drink them one after another, stacking the cans into a tower as he empties them. The first beers he'll buy with pocket change, the nickels and dimes and quarters he'll spill out onto the counter and stack in one dollar mounds. Tonya'll bring his beers over and open them, then slide a pile of money from the bar.

Pizza Man might come in, and if it's Monday, he'll bring pizzas, leftovers from the lunch buffet at the parlor where he works down the hill. George is bartender on Mondays, and Sunday nights, too, Tonya's nights off, and on Mondays Pizza Man brings George the leftover buffet chicken that will be his dinner for the night. On those nights, George'll lean against the waterbed headboards humpfing to himself and scowling through his beard, not saying much to anyone. He'll reach down and lift a chicken leg to his mouth or he'll grab for his Dr. Pepper. He doesn't drink when he's working, that's another of his rules for himself.

Regulars will filter in. The man with slicked-back hair and a white Fu Manchu will arrive in his old conversion van and find his station in the booth in the corner.

Red might show up to try to buy beers on the pizza man's tab. He's a thick-built man with red hair and a perpetual sunburn he seems not to notice. The name on the patch of his threadbare mechanic's shirt says 'Bill.' . He crushes his beer cans flat as a hockey puck as he empties them.

If you've given him a ride, Tom Whitefeather'll be there, too, drinking the beer you buy him for a buck or given to him as charity by Tonya. Or he'll be out front, scrounging cigarette butts from the dirt by the door, puffing a couple of drags from each as he finds them or shoving them into a clear plastic bag for later.

Others will pop in, too. Dingy and Fluffy. Mark and Bernie, Desert Dave might drift through, Scruffy Eddie, Slim. They'll drink a beer maybe, then buy an 18 pack to go.

Tonya banters back and forth with regulars at the formica-topped bar, still sticky from the night before. She talks inhumanly fast, teasing and taunting and joking. Someone will have challenged her to a game of pool, though, or she'll be outside smoking a cigarette when you want another beer. When she notices you waving, she'll race over. She might linger if she thinks you're a tipper, leaning against the bar, or wiping it down, her breasts heaving out of her leopard skin top or low-cut crop as she wipes, tendrils of brown hair cupping her face on either side. She'll smile Mona Lisa at you maybe. Her dark eyes are sad and telling. But she won't hold your gaze for very long. She'll grab your empties from the bar, crushing them flat--a trick she learned from Red. Or maybe she'll stack the cans into a pyramid on the bar. You knock it

down, you buy a round, she'll tell you, but the only one anyone ever saw knock one over was her.

If Curtis notices you, he might wander over. He'll introduce himself: "Hi, I'm Curtis. I'm the Wonder Valley drunk." He'll fling his arms wide open as he says this, inviting you to give him a once over, a quick up and down, and see for yourself that what he says is true. He'll fix you squarely with one blue eye, the other will wander skew-whiff off into space. Or he might bend forward to let you feel the soft spot in his skull or he'll trace the scar across his head with a finger from ear to ear or demonstrate how a boat on a lake sent his nose through his brain and crushed his noggin flat.

Curtis drinks Natural Ice, because he says, it has the most alcohol. Most others at The Palms drink it too. They'll order it calling for Nattie Ice or Naughty Ice or just plain Ice, or more likely Tonya will just know to put one in front of them. Curtis won't have any money, though. Tonya gives him credit, but there's a limit. If he's reached it he might lean into you and say in his gravelly way, "Hey boss, can I borrow a twenty?"

You don't have to drink Nattie Ice or Old Milwaukee however, there are other dusty bottles behind the bar--Bud and Bud Light, Coors, some microbrews--not beers The Palms has necessarily, but choices they'd offered once or sometimes even have or maybe can find buried in the bottom of the cooler in a pinch. They have Pabst Blue Ribbon, on draft even, but that's only for the hipsters and passers-through, and besides, the keg is flat and the beer, except in winter, is warm. Order one and George will make a comment. He'll come over and sit next to you and he'll ask you if he knows you. Tonya might give him an *Oh George*, and tell him to leave you alone, but he'll ignore her and she'll move on not paying him any mind.

He'll slide on to the barstool next to you and tell you his ex-wife has been married nine times. He was her third, he'll say. Then he'll laugh a nasally laugh. George'll tell you his ex-wife ate a tuna fish sandwich and got pregnant. He'll laugh. He'll tell you how he told that story to Mary, the owner of the bar, in front of Laura, her daughter, and he'll tell you how Laura quit eating tuna fish after that. Again he'll erupt in nasally laughter. He'll tell you about his time in the Marines, his grandfather who built a clipper ship in Nova Scotia that sank on its maiden voyage. He'll tell you about his law degree, but he could never pass a bar. Get it? Another nasally laugh. He'll tell you about his MBA in finance. His master's in taxation. Tonya will ask if George is bothering you, she'll shoo him away from you if you'd like. But George will pay her no mind. He'll tell you how he asked Tonya to marry him once, he wanted her to marry him but only for a year, just long enough for her to move in with him and fix his place up. And then he'll laugh again. Overhearing, Tonya might smile that smile and roll her eyes. It'd take more than a year to clean *that* sumbitch up, she'll say.

George lives on Virginia, a road he'll make a joke about, referring to a Virginia you don't know, a woman you suspect is probably long dead. He'll tell you about the bitch he lives with, that's how he'll say it and he'll laugh his laugh again. A female dog adopted him soon after he moved to Wonder Valley and had a litter of puppies under an abandoned travel trailer in his yard. Those pups grew and bred into a pack of some thirty feral pitbulls that George fed but couldn't get close to. If you go to George's place, those dogs will bound at you from all quarters, from under the old travel trailer, the motorhomes, the little MG he's had since law school, the wheezing old van he bought from Nutty Ned for parts for his other wheezing old

van. Dogs will bound at you from under the boat, a tiny, fast-looking mother with no cover on its motor or wheels on its trailer. The dogs'll circle you with their tails down and fur raised.

George lives in only one of the rooms in the cabin on his property. The others are filled with books and magazines, magazines from the hundred-maybe subscriptions he didn't realize he didn't have to subscribe to win the Publisher's Clearinghouse Sweepstakes. The books and magazines, his university degrees and credentials, his bills and junkmail cover the floor and the table and line the hallway in head-high stacks that are iced over with a thick layer of white pigeon shit from the pigeons that have invaded through the hole in the roof and roost by the hundreds in his living room. He feeds them too, only outside, where he hopes to convince them to relocate. George will tell you this, all this after he asks you if he knows you and slides himself over next to you at the bar. And the next time George sees you he'll tell you these stories again, and the next time again, and the next time again until you, like everyone else, has them memorized.

Eventually George will slip off his stool and go out front to smoke. You don't have to go out front to smoke, you can go out back, take your beer with you even. There's a firepit out there, a shade pergola covered with camouflage netting, a big date palm tree. Roger might be out there, his ruddy face shaded under his cowboy hat.   He'll be sitting at the rickety picnic table smoking, or on a rusty bar stool around the mesquite tree, or on the benches up against the wall. There are some old church pews out in the dirt, too; they face the stage, a platform of splintered plywood topped by the inverted skeleton of a skateboard ramp. Behind the stage is an old silver-sided motor coach, the aluminum bus that Mary and her kids lived in when they first bought the bar. A hose trickles well water in to an old iron ore cart which drips a beard of

green slime into a rusty bathtub made into a pond. The little propane barbeque is over there too, right outside the kitchen door. You can get food at The Palms—burgers and fries, ham steak, tacos—just tell Tonya and she'll call next door to Laura. Laura will drive over after she finishes what she is doing; she'll open the kitchen and she'll cook.

Passers-by taking the back way to Vegas stumble upon The Palms, wander in, as do tourists, from Europe often, who amble around the desert in a sort of befuddled awe. The restaurant sign attracts them, maybe. They might come in, maybe, see all eyes in the bar turning on them, then push back out the door, parents hurriedly shuffling their kids out in front of them. Some, however, hipsters mostly, drift up to the bar. They might order a Pabst Blue Ribbon or point at a dusty beer on the shelf or ask for a Jack and Coke. Tonya will paw around the bottles or dig through the cooler to find an acceptable substitute, holding up bottles until a choice is made. They might take pictures, these hipsters and tourists, they might order food, they might hang out at the bar until George sidles up next to them and asks them if he knows them then tells them how his ex ate a tuna fish sandwich and got pregnant. Tonya'll wipe the bar in front of them if she thinks they tip.

Eventually, Laura will bring your food. She'll shuffle around back behind the bar with the self-conscious posture of a child. She has sapphire blue eyes and tow-colored hair and thick, full lips that hang open seemingly of their own weight, giving her a slightly bewildered, slack-jawed appearance as she looks for you up and down the bar. Her face brightens and pretties considerably when she smiles, but she probably won't smile. In fact, she may not look at you at all. She might just turn and leave, she might just head straight out through the back door, get back into her car and drive herself back home.

Laura brings George his dinner, sliding the edge of the plate close to him. George eats at the bar every night—every night but Tuesdays, the bar's closed on Tuesdays. He'll have a George Special most nights, that's what he calls it, a thick hamburger steak with lettuce and tomato and cottage cheese. No bun. Tonya will stick the ketchup and salt and pepper in front of him, and give him a fork and even a napkin if she can find one. Or George will just get up and get these things for himself.

He settles down as he eats. After dark most of the locals drift away, down their beers, pick up an 18-pack and go. Pizza Man will be long gone, and Red and Whitefeather, Desert Dave and Scruffy Eddie and Slim. It's quiet at night usually, few people come in after dark.

Jill Davis might stop in. Jill owns a Wonder Valley cabin over by the Cat Ranch near the Volvo once owned by one of the Beach Boys. She bought it as a getaway, but found herself in an unexpected divorce and living in her second home primarily. Sometimes on Tonya's day off, she and Jill went to the bars in town and made a game of picking up Marines. Other nights Jill might come to The Palms and sip a tequila and chat with Tonya if George will leave her alone.

Kassandra'll sit at the bar in the evenings too, on occasion. She worked at The Palms for a while after the Sibleys bought it, tried to teach them what she knew about running a bar. She'd come to Wonder Valley as a girl, she'd tell you, thirty years ago; her mother owned the bar back then. She'd worked here before she was even of legal age. It was just a little shack when they owned it. Her mother added the back room, built the kitchen. She'd tell they had built up a great business, one that attracted motorcycle clubs and hikers and miners to the area. But then her mother took to drinking and her husband died and she lost interest. Didn't show

up some days, business fell off. She sold the bar to the men who would years later sell it to the Sibleys.

Tonya will pour Kassandra a glass of wine and she'll sit upright on her stool with her legs crossed, her arms folded across her buxom chest. She and Jill are Tonya's friends, they'll talk together softly under the strings of Christmas lights that light of the bar. There's also a light over the pool table and one swagged over the regular with the slicked back hair and white Fu Manchu in the corner booth. Tonya will turn it on for him when she's working. George will let him sit in the dark.

George works on Sundays after Tonya finishes her breakfast and lunch shift. On that day, the bar begins serving at nine in the morning and by the time George arrives Scruffy Eddie or Biker Richard may have been sitting at the bar for six hours already. Roger, that ruddy ex-Marine with the cowboy hat, might be out back at the rickety picnic table or on a rusty bar stool or the benches up against the wall. Behind the bar George'll lean against the waterbed headboards humpfing to himself and scowling through his beard, not saying much to anyone. Usually it's quiet on a Sunday night. Sometimes it isn't

It was a Sunday, as a matter of fact, when Devon Million got clocked in the face with a bar glass. He'd just been convicted of molesting a girl and someone, drinking since the a. m., took issue with his presence in the bar. The glass shattered Devon's face but remained intact and in the dirt outside the door for most of the next week. Devon's blood stained the cracked, sand-covered asphalt for as long.

It was also a Sunday when that Mexican, Miguel, smacked Caroline around, right in front of everyone, until Roger punched him so hard it sent his glass eye skidding across the

floor. Caroline found it under the pool table. Miguel returned later with family and guns and pistol whipped Roger, then shot up the bar.

Roger was a bar regular because he was married to Darlene, a Palms bartender until she died, then he married her sister, Diana.   Diana sometimes works Sundays alongside Tonya. Roger'll come and hang out out back, smoking cigarettes and drinking beer. He'd been a Marine, spent his career as part of a Marine Corps anti-terrorism team, a quick response unit sent to protect American diplomatic installations around the world.   He'd been captured by terrorists in Cypress, he'd tell you, held until his team rescued him. Then they bombed the terrorists compound, killing every man, woman and child. Roger, however, will tell you this you this only on the condition you repeat it to no one. That action in Cypress is still classified.

Roger was out back one Sunday when a man with a prison yard build and flames tattooed on his head brandished knives and taunted onlookers. The man was as fast as a spark with those knives, in a flash he threw them, one after the other, sticking then into the picnic table where Roger sat. An inch apart, they stuck with a thud.   The man looked down at Roger, dared him to pull to the knives out of the table. If you ask Roger, he tell you he knew better than to touch those knives. Be stupid, he'd tell you, to give the guy cause to stick one in you. Instead, he pulled the pistol he kept in his waist.   "Didn't your mother ever warn you not to bring knives to a gun fight?" Roger said to him. At least that's what he'd tell you. He'd tell you the man with the prison yard build and flames tattooed on his head left early and without incident. George had been bartending that night. He never knew it happened.

The bar is open until ten if there isn't a band playing. George will keep it open the whole time, no matter if anyone's there. He'll lean against the waterbed headboards humphing

to himself or sip his Dr. Pepper or slip out front for a smoke in the evening gloom. If Tonya's working, she'll keep the bar open for George or Curtis or if Jill or Kassandra are around, though she might just close it early if she feels like it. She'll lock the heavy wooden door behind you as you leave, slipping the wooden bar through the metal rings barring it closed. She'll pour herself a drink and count out the till—twenty percent of the take is hers, plus tips—and she'll stash the rest in the secret spot for Mary to collect in the morning. Then if her truck starts, she'll go home. And maybe if she sees Curtis walking, she might stop and give him a ride too. If she can't get it started, she'll call someone and wait.

The People vs. Thomas Ritchie

Tom Whitefeather wakes at two in the morning on the days he has to go to court. He scarfs a quick breakfast, then bundled against the cold and the Wonder Valley night, he heads out from the old rock-walled cabin where he lives, threading a path through the high desert greasewood scrub. A dim headlamp bobs a blue-white orb ahead of his bike as he rides in the pre-dawn stillness following his own tracks, cutting across abandoned homestead parcels, through the sandy washes and rattleweed thickets until he reaches the washboard dirt track of Godwin Road. Down Godwin he peddles to the lonely asphalt of the paved road, then turns his back to the rising sun for the last twelve miles to the bus stop in town. He'll make this trek a dozen times—the arraignment, the fact-finding hearings, the readiness hearings, postponements, postponements, postponements. On the mornings he goes to court, he gives himself plenty of time, arriving at the bus stop with time enough to scrounge discarded butts and roll a smoke. He gets there early and he waits. To miss his court appearance would mean another felony, and more time in jail.

Tom Whitefeather had already spent five days in jail. Sheriff's deputies had handcuffed him at the Cat Ranch, pushed him into the back of the patrol car, arrested him in violation of Section 597, paragraph B of the penal code of the State of California. Too much pussy, Whitefeather'd tell you. Cruelty to animals is what the People of the State of California say, failing to provide his kitties with proper food and drink and shelter and protection from the weather. A felony.

Over the next week, a county animal control officer trapped 53 cats at the Cat Ranch--the old Wonder Valley homestead where Whitefeather had lived. They took them to county shelters, and they destroyed them.

Tom Whitefeather would tell you all this himself, if you met him. He'd tell you that after Raub McCartney died, he had moved himself into Raub's old rock-walled cabin. He's not squatting there; Raub's cousin said it was OK. When the cousin came out from back East to take care of Raub's final affairs, she told him she thought it'd probably be best if someone were around to look after the place—you know how things are out here, as soon as people find out a place is vacant, they'll break in, steal everything, the doors, the windows, burn the furniture for firewood, trash the place. She'd hate to think of what would happen to the old rock-walled cabin if it were left abandoned. It's a temporary thing, anyway. Raub's dead, and once the county figures that out they'll be coming for the cabin. It's only a matter of time. The county will auction it off to recoup the money they loaned to Raub to do repairs on the place, to fix the roof, repair the septic. It's only a matter of time.

Whitefeather would tell you that even after he moved to Raub's he has taken good care of his kitties. His kitties were healthy, he'd tell you, ask anybody. He worked just for his kitties, asking people to pay him in cat food rather than cash. Whitefeather'd tell you how every day he cooked for the kitties: ten pounds of chicken with two pounds of dried beans, adding potatoes, and rice and sometimes canned vegetables all bought with his meager food stamps and boiled together for eight hours. Every day. He'd tell you how he pedaled over the rocky crag that separates Raub's from that isolated parcel of the

Cat Ranch dragging the red wagon filled with food, the ten pounds of chicken boiled with beans, how he returned again, every day, with ten gallons of water, did the best he could until that one day, when he arrived to find two patrol cars pulled up against the scrap wood walls of the Cat Ranch compound, two deputies inside. They had an arrest warrant for someone Whitefeather had never heard of at a house nowhere around here. Were these his cats? His kitties? How many? Eighty?? This place looks like the county dump! You can't tell me this place was maintained! The deputy with the raptor head and the deep set hawk eyes did all the talking. Sure, the place had gotten away from him what with having to cook every day for eight hours and haul the food and water behind his bike the rocky mile from Raub's place. But he did his best.

Sheriff's deputies had been at the Cat Ranch for 45 minutes before Whitefeather arrived that morning, photographing the cats, documenting the conditions. The overwhelming stench of cat urine and feces. The smell of decomposition. No food, no water for the cats. They'd photographed countless cats amid filthy squalor, videotaped the dead kitten lying on the kitchen floor, another cat eating it. They documented the bones of dead cats strewn about the place, gnawed-on and half eaten, paws and fur still attached. And then there was the whole cat, rotten to a pool of putrescence curled up in the fridge—you could still see its little ears and eyes and nose.

* * *

You probably wouldn't even notice the Cat Ranch even if you drove the rattletrap roads that mark off the square of scrub desert where it sits. Not that you'd have any reason to drive up that way, to turn off the paved road and rattle up the washboard track

to the fringe of Wonder Valley, dust roiling up into your car like smoke. You'd probably have a hard time seeing it even if someone—like Ned Bray, maybe--pointed it out, telling you about that Indian, Whitefeather, he had like a million cats, man, and he was arrested--yeah, he spent like five days in jail. You should go talk to him, man. You want a story, go talk to Whitefeather. He lived right over there. But he'd be pointing to a void, no right over there over there, just an accumulation of lumber and pallets and strewn about rubbish in the middle of a quarter section of empty desert.

Tom Whitefeather might take you to the Cat Ranch, if you met him, take you up the rattletrap roads that mark off the square of scrub desert where it sits, dust roiling up into your car like smoke, around the rubble of boards and junk, past piles of cat shit, three feet high and ten feet in diameter, to a palisade of up-ended plywood, sun-burnt and sand-blasted. Fortifications, Whitefeather'd tell you, to keep the marauding coyotes away from his kitties.

Inside the worn gate of the Cat Ranch, the acrid reek of cat piss hits you like a cold-cock. It invades your nose, soils your tongue, it pricks at your eyes, dousing you in stench, washing through your hair, you wear it in your clothes. The cabin, its walls and floor, and the litter and trash and the cats and the gnawed-on, half-eaten bones are the color of dust. Dry, dust-colored twists of cat shit hang weightless from the edge of plant pots, fill the basin of the sink, the rumpled covers of the bed. A litterbox overflows, more shit than sand. Gray bags bulge with garbage.

Tom Whitefeather'd tell you he did his best to keep the place clean. He lived there for three and a half years, and the place wasn't like this then, ask anybody. He

loved his kitties, all of them had names—well, except for the last few litters, there were just too many, it'd all just gotten away from him. He'd prayed to God to help him. If you talked to Whitefeather, he'd show you the raked-up heaps of feces ready to be hauled outside and dumped in the mounds outside of the plywood parapet, except that his wheelbarrow has a flat. He's patched it over and over. He'd show you the bones the cops saw strewn about the property. See? he'd say, goat bones. Bones from the goat he slaughtered to feed the kitties. He'd tell you he saw that little kitten the cops found dead the night before when he came to feed the cats and bring them their water. He'd seen the kitten, it ate well, but later seemed sick, like it was on its way out. He'd picked the kitten up, it felt limp to his touch. He put the kitten with its mama, he'd say, and was going to return the next day with a box to carry it back to Raub's place to give to Mama Kitty, the mother of them all, to nurse back to health. And that's what he was doing when he showed up at the Cat Ranch that morning in August when the two patrol cars were there and the two deputies inside.

* * *

Of course, Tom Whitefeather doesn't own the Cat Ranch. It belongs to a German artist who bought it as a place to produce his art. To the German artist, Wonder Valley, this new artist Mecca, was a place between worlds. You drive out from Los Angeles, past the last of civilization, the trappings of American excess so glaring, and into a land of drifting tumbleweeds, nights dark as death, a people from another century living with no water or electricity.

When the he bought the place Whitefeather came with it. The German artist didn't stay long, and you know how things are out here, as soon as people find out a place is vacant, they'll steal everything, trash the place. He felt sorry for Whitefeather, too. Whitefeather could live there he told him, live in that old broken down motor home parked out front, look after the place. Whitefeather had two kittens back then: a boy and a girl. The German artist never returned.

* * *

Over a beer Tom Whitefeather might tell you he came to Wonder Valley way back when to lay low after his undercover work with the DEA, busting a drug kingpin—his former employer--down in the city. Wonder Valley is a good place to hide out, to fly under the radar. He's not here because he wants to be. If you had the kind of past he's had, you'd understand. You shouldn't even ask about his time in the Corps, his time as a Marine Corps sniper, black ops. You can't just leave that life behind, you know, you can't just walk away—they won't let you. He was in 'Nam, he'd tell you, De Nang, doing wet jobs deep up country first, then elsewhere around the world. He can't tell you where they sent him, of course, during those eight years, but suffice it to say that the jungles of South America are as dank and nasty as anything in South East Asia.

Everybody knows not to talk to Whitefeather about his time in the Corps. They just give him that knowing nod for his sacrifices, let him help himself to their beer, their cigarettes, slip him a couple of bucks for his kitties.

But now Whitefeather's stuck in Wonder Valley. First stuck cooking for the kitties eight hours a day, and now stuck with The People vs. Thomas Ritchie, this animal

cruelty felony hanging over his head. Whitefeather is Tom's Indian name, he'd tell you, that's how everyone in Wonder Valley knows him. His mother gave him that name he'd say. He doesn't remember much about her, she wasn't around much. His childhood is a flash of images, a slideshow with no chronology, no narration, out of order snapshots of a kid in San Diego. He remembers getting hauled into the police station with his brothers, his earliest childhood memory. Police picked him up while eating out of trash cans in a back alley; his two older brothers, aged four and five, fended off the stray dogs with sticks so their little brother could eat. Tom was two.

He and his brothers were taken from their drunken, drug-addled mother that time, and various others, and returned to her again until ultimately authorities removed them to an orphanage. He remembers he got a toy tool set for Christmas that year, wooden hammer and screwdrivers, the only thing he'd ever had that was truly his. Time and again, Tom's brothers escaped the orphanage, leaving little Tom alone until they were apprehended and returned to the home. Finally, authorities shipped the boys off to relatives in corn country Iowa.

Tom had a fondness for cats even back then. In fact, he felt closer to animals than he did people. While his brothers teased, tormented, and tortured the farm cats, Tom fought to protect them.

In Iowa, the boys attended high school, hot-rodded the corn tunnel roads, pilfered liquor to swill behind under cover of darkness. In the late sixties, Tom's brothers shipped off to Vietnam: one became a sniper in the Marines, the other went into the Navy. Tom, still in high school, knocked around the Iowa town until a family with a cute daughter

knocked on his door. When they knocked, the missionaries and the daughter, Tom let them in. They prayed. When they asked to come back, Tom looked at the daughter and said sure. Together they read the Bible, and, for Tom, the world began to make sense, and soon Tom found himself a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses living in their dorms in Brooklyn. He evaded military service as a conscientious objector.

He married and divorced and married and divorced. He lunked around the country, held good jobs at times through the nineties, banging nails when construction was booming, working as an exterminator, sometimes living in a proper apartment, bringing home a proper paycheck. He was forty-two when he got the first of his string of DUIs, lost his driver's license. He was in the desert by then, at the beginning of a slow spiral--a third marriage in a drugged-out and drunken fog, a second and third DUI, then finally convicted and sentenced to a bullet--one year behind bars.

Jail was his last real home. Paroled, he lived in an old broken down camper, towed it up to Wonder Valley, moved it around until those kids gave him those two kittens and he ended up in that ramshackle shack bought by the German artist. By then, Thomas Ritchie was Whitefeather.

* * *

If you were hanging out with Tom Whitefeather on a certain morning and you were driving past the Cat Ranch, you'd have seen a car parked there, a rental car. And sleeping in the back of the car, hugging himself against the January chill, you'd have found the German artist. And you'd have seen Tom'd knocked on the window, and the German artist wake with a start and look at Tom and you in a jet-lagged haze. The

German artist, having arrived after dark, wouldn't have seen the condition of his property yet, not seen the notice tacked to the gate warning against admittance under penalty of a misdemeanor, calling the Cat Ranch "Unsafe for Human Habitation." He'd have received the notices of violation from the county, though, the requirements for the abatement of the cat urine and feces, the list of infractions including structural defects and building code non-conformities in the decades-old homestead cabin like wrong size windows and too small rooms, as well as the bills for the fines incurred for non-compliance. And you'd have found him a little testy.

"I let you stay here, gave you money. You were supposed to clean the place up, get rid of the trash!" he snapped at Tom, spinning in circles, his arms held wide in a just-look-at-all-this gesture. The sun had already begun to pink the German artist's balding head, redden his nose. He was wearing shorts and sandals in spite of the cold.

"You only gave me $800 dollars!" was Tom's retort, incredulous. "Only $800 in three years!" Tom's creased face was accustomed to the sun; his grey goatee on his clenched set jaw jutting out of the shade of his rolled boonie hat.

"I gave you $1000 dollars!" the German artist snapped, backing up, stepping to avoid a pile of dusty turds.

"It was only $800, remember? You took $200 back because you were going to L.A. and needed the cash…"

"Oh, well, I gave you $800! I paid you! I paid you and you did nothing!" You were supposed to take care of the place, you call this taking care of the place?"

“I…I moved that pile of trash there,” Tom said pointing to a heap of rubble. “That stuff used to be IN the cabin! “You should have seen this place before,” he’d say to you, trying to draw you in to the argument. “What did he expect for only $800 in three years?”

“I paid you $800! *I* paid *you!* Most people have to pay rent to stay in a house! Look at this place!” Again, the German artist spun in circles, his mouth agape, stammering speechless. A dust-colored cat slinked past haltingly.

After his arrest, the court had mandated that Tom have no contact with animals as a condition of his release. But Animal Control only picked up 53 cats from the Cat Ranch, leaving the rest. What was Tom supposed to do, let them starve? He fed those kitties, pedaling to the Cat Ranch from the rock-walled cabin under cover of darkness, a bag of cat food strapped to the front basket of his bike. When the German artist showed up at the property a dozen or so kitties remained there.

If you had been there that morning, you’d have heard the frustration in the German artist’s voice. “You have to get the rest of these cats out of here or I’ll call animal control,” you’d have heard him say with resolve.

That spark detonated Tom, “You do that and I’ll sue you!” he screamed, clomping after the German artist, who tramped away over the trash and rubbish, a matted tomcat staring down at him from the corrugated metal roof.

“You have three days to get these cats out of here.”

“I need a week.”

“Ok, you have a week,” was the German artist’s resigned reply.

*   *   *

Hindsight is 20/20, Tom Whitefeather'd tell you. He'd not have taken that female kitten for one thing if he'd known how this would all turn out. That was his mistake—he'd never had a male and female before. He wouldn't have tried to get them fixed though. He doesn't believe in that, it's against the will of God, his kitties are God's creatures, not his. That's why he never gave any away. He just couldn't trust anyone to take care of them, not the way he could--what with the coyotes--you know the way people are out here.

Sure, he'll tell the court that he couldn't afford the spaying and neutering costs: $125. Each. And he'd tell the court how he'd tried to get county vouchers, talked to that woman who approached him while he was buying all those bags of cat food, offered to give him spay/neuter vouchers, but the vouchers never arrived. He'd tell the court how he just couldn't find the kitties proper homes.

Six months after his arrest, after a dozen trips threading through the high desert scrub in the middle of the night, a jury of Tom's peers would deliberate for eight hours about the charges in the case of The People vs. Thomas Ritchie. They'd have sat through days of testimony, pictures of countless cats amid filthy squalor, description of the eye-burning stench, ninety-some-odd exhibits, debates about cat bones and goat bones, and a video of an emaciated cat eating the head of a dead kitten. Tom was overwhelmed, they'd hear, that he couldn't care for all the cats, that he had let them breed rampantly with no thoughts as to the consequences. They'd hear how he worked not for money, but cat food, how he bought it by the 16-pound sack, a dozen at a time. They wouldn't hear

that Tom cared for those cats like he hadn't cared for anything in the world before--not since the little toy tool set--that they gave him purpose. Yes of course he was overwhelmed, they'd heard him say. And they'd hear the recording from the back of the patrol car, Tom to the deputy with the raptor head and hawk eyes. "I prayed to God just this morning," he'd said, "Prayed to God to help me, to lift this burden, and when I arrived, you were here."

The jury would find Thomas Ritchie not guilty of felony cruelty to animals. If you asked them, they would say it's a matter of degrees. Sure, he was guilty of something, but not a felony. They'd complain of the waste of time and money, here when the state is going broke.

The jury would have seen Tom well up with tears as they announced their verdict. He'd go home that afternoon acquitted of all charges. Maybe you'd have given him a ride, through the dots of desert towns, past the Marine base and the national park back to Wonder Valley, driving down the last lonely strip of corrugated asphalt with the setting sun at your back. Congratulations, you might say, congratulations beating that rap. And you'd drop him off there, at his home, at Raub McCartney's rock-walled cabin, and you might see his old broken-down motor home, towed over from the Cat Ranch, sitting in the drive. And maybe you'd have noticed that it was already filled with cats.

The Census

Of course you know there's a town way out here, and a huge military base, thousands of people, normal people. Just like you, these people get up in the morning and go to work, pick up fast food on the way home, watch reality TV on the tube. And like you did, these folks got their US Census Bureau census forms in the mail, way back when, right to their houses. Maybe they filled them out and returned them, maybe they didn't, that's SEP in the parlance—Somebody Else's Problem. But out beyond town, beyond the tracts of stucco homes and rainbird-greened lawns, past the fast food joinst and the liquor stores, in the grid of washboard tracks scraped from the sparse greasewood hardscrabble where the mail service ends, people live, too. It was the my job, as a US Census Bureau enumerator, to count them.

I hadn't come out here to work for the Census Bureau, actually. I came to write a story, a story about the census, about taking the census in this isolated patch of nowhere. And it was going to be such a great story, too: A vast, remote area spotted with the rubble of broken down and uninhabitable shacks, a place peopled by misfits and methheads with no interested at all in participating in any census or for that matter of even being found. They lived out here with no running water, some no electricity. And there was no mail service. The Census Bureau enumerators would have to go door to distant door to do a physical head count by hand.

I pitched that story idea to a big glossy magazine, a lifestyle magazine with blondes with buxom cleavage on the cover and ads for Swiss watches inside. I would be the Census Bureau's first-ever embedded journalist, I told them. I'd accompany Census

enumerators as they did their job, as they rattled around the area's washboard tracks, trudged up to broken down shacks, knocked on doors that hadn't been knocked on in years. Already, I told them, the material was proving to be ripe and colorful. A crotchety old desert rat, for example, had frog-marched another Census enumerator off his property and down the road at the muzzle of his rifle. Seems the old man booby-trapped his road too, scattered nails in the soft sand and barricaded parts to discourage people passing. The Census worker called the sheriff who confiscated the man's weapons and charged him with threatening a federal agent with a firearm. They say the old man passed away before he could stand trial. The court, however, still lists his status as fugitive. The magazine editors loved the idea. The assignment came the promise of a hefty check.

Even the Census Bureau gave me the go-ahead. "This story could be really good for the Census," the regional director had said. He had pulled the strings to get me involved. But as Albert Einstein once said, Bureaucracy is the death of all sound work. Reconsidering, and citing issues of census respondents' privacy, the director called the writer a few days later and cut me off. "It's a free country," the regional director said to me over the phone, "you can go where you want to go, but we can't allow you to go with Census employees." And that was that. My time as the first-ever journalist embedded with the forces of the US Census Bureau was over, before it really began.

*   *   *

But I was tenacious. I knew I was on to a great story, and then there was that promise of a big fat check. As it so happened, the Census Bureau was hiring, so said an ad on the radio, and from my experience talking to Census employees, I knew just what

kind of person they were looking for. They wanted someone with a four wheel drive vehicle—I borrowed one. Check. They wanted someone who spoke Spanish—I'd taken classes in college. Check. They wanted someone who lived in the area—and coincidentally, I was at that moment in his life going through a phase where I found himself sleeping on my parents' couch right there in the area, so Check. I volunteered to work in the desert outside of town--few people, I knew, were willing to do that. Check. Thus, as the Census Bureau denied me access as the first embedded journalist in the history of the census, they hired me. I was now a Census Bureau enumerator.

Oh, but the thing is, now that I was a Census employee, I can't tell you anything about my time with the Census. In taking the job as Census enumerator, I took an oath, signed legal documents forbidding me from divulging any Census data. Under the terms of that oath, I am expressly prohibited from disclosing PII—that's Personally Identifiable Information. I'm to avoid saying anything about census participants. Nor can I divulge information contained on Census Bureau documents, including addresses and locations indicated on the rather generic Census maps, nor Census tract numbers or operation specifics such as where the census is even being conducted. For the rest of my life. And since every HU—that's every Housing Unit in the parlance of the Census —was to be enumerated, every single domicile or structure that could be or maybe once was a domicile in the whole entirety of the country is conceivably PII.

I can't even tell you where I worked. The details of my AA—Assignment Area in the parlance--are protected information too. Maybe my AA covered about 60 square miles well off any pavement, crisscrossed by rattletrap roads and dry dusty washes in the

arid wastes of the Mojave Desert, and maybe it didn't. Nor will I say if the 800,000 scenic acres of heat varnished rocks and twisted Seussian trees bordering my AA to the south was a high-desert national park. I can confirm nor deny such rumors.

I will tell you, however, that my first day as an enumerator took me down a corrugated road past a skull and crossbones sign that read "No Trespassing, Armed Neighborhood." I stopped there to ponder that sign. The armed part I got--armed like a Taliban stronghold or an outlaw hideout. The claim of neighborhood, however, was a gross exaggeration. Neighborhood implies neighbors, people—this was better described as habitat, home to jackrabbits and coyotes, scorpions and snakes. Greasewood scrub crouched in low clumps, late spring wildflowers tinted the arid wastes yellow. A covey of quail undulated across the road single file like a deconstructed snake.

There were the signs of human habitation, of course. Oh sure. Hundreds of skeletal cabins leaned against the whipping wind as lifeless shells. According to the last census, 1,200 Housing Units remained in the area, more than half of them vacant and most of those unlivable. Wind rattled the corrugated metal of the forgotten cabins of my AA, howled through the bare studs and banged flapping doors, regurgitated owl pellets littered bare concrete floors. Now you might suspect that each of these dilapidated shacks was a spot on the Census Bureau map and that it was my job to tramp across the arid wastes over the abandoned junk and rubble to bang on broken doors or peer through glassless windows to determine if anyone—desert rat or squatter—lived there, and if so, enumerate them. But that is Census business, the details about which I am not prepared to comment.

However, I will tell you that down in that Armed Neighborhood, that first day, materializing out of a cloud of pure nowhere like some kind of desert djinn, a man in a dust-stirring truck skidded up, out almost before it had stopped, "Can I help you?" the man said. A silver stubble grew stunted on his cheeks, an American flag cap slouched on his head. His tone was the desert's gravel and dust. "Can I help you," he said in the parlance of the desert: *What the hell do you want?* He stared at me for a beat. The old man grinned a toothless grin, but he wasn't smiling. "You're liable to get shot out here!"

I thought of that crotchety old desert rat marching that enumerator off his property. I suddenly understood why so many Census workers avoided this area. Besides, the dangers are not just the residents. The heat and the sun coupled with the shear isolation and poor road conditions meant a breakdown could be disastrous. Not long before I started with the Census, an enumerator trying to negotiate these rutted tracks in a Japanese car hit a rock and cracked his oil pan. His oil ran out and his engine seized before he could make civilization. His long walk and hundreds of dollars in tow fees weren't covered by his 50 cents-per-mile Census Bureau reimbursement. There were other dangers, too, like people's dogs—pit bulls predominantly—chained to the front stoop if you're lucky, or let to run wild to "guard" a cabin. Packs of feral dogs roam the area even, scavenging human waste and growling threateningly at anyone stupid enough get out of the sanctuary of his car. People had been mauled. In training, Census workers were admonished not to leave their car doors open when they approached a house--an open car door could risk the exposure of PII to wandering eyes. But I learned

very quickly to leave the car door open in case I needed to make a dash fleeing vicious dogs. I got good at the routine and was only bitten the once.

I had gone up to a scroungy place where an old dog with a gray muzzle bared its teeth and growled at me viciously from inside, smashing against a duct-taped window as I approached the cabin. Other dogs joined in, howling and barking, banging against the door. No one answered.

When I returned later that day, a truck was there. The dogs piled out the door when the cheerless owner answered. "Can he help you," the owner said, staring at me defiantly. The dogs yelped and jumped around me, jockeying for attention. The old dog with the gray muzzle trickled out last. "They won't bother you," the owner said as the old dog with the gray muzzle clamped its jaws down on my arm just below the elbow. I danced in place swinging my arm trying to avoid the old dog, which just stood there looking up at me, silent.

"Did you get bit?" the owner asked, a cold smirk drifting across his face.

"YES!" I cried, my elbow quickly turning blue. I examined the bite for punctures.

"Which one did it?"

"The black one!" I pointed an accusatory finger at the old gray-muzzled dog. I cradled my throbbing elbow.

"Oh, it couldn't have been that one," the man said dismissively. Now I'll tell you, however, that the dog bite proved to be a boon, because the owner, now a little concerned that his dog had just bitten a Census worker, gave me the interview without the typical

fuss. I rubbed my throbbing arm, writing down the man's responses. As I worked my arm turned purple, which yellowed to black over the coming week.

*   *   *

With so few of the cabins out there inhabitable, let alone occupied, you probably think I did very few actual enumerations--that is, counting the people who live and sleep at a particular Housing Unit. You probably think that my job with the Census came down to little more than driving around the open desert checking cabins and crossing them off a list. But then you aren't thinking like the federal government. If you were thinking like a government bureaucrat, you might expect enumerators to confirm the occupancy status of every Housing Unit in their AA, even the most broken-down, dilapidated, windowless, bare stud-walled, gaping-roofed and clearly uninhabitable pile of rubble (Open to the Elements, in the parlance of the Census) by getting a statement from a Proxy--a neighbor or knowledgeable person--who can attest to the occupancy status of the Housing Unit, which may or may not be what Census enumerators were required to do. Statute prevents me from saying either way, but I will tell you that I did stop at any house with glass in its windows and a car out front to ask questions about the clearly unlivable dwellings. Maybe I made those stops on Census business or maybe I was just being friendly, I'm not at liberty to say.

I will say you that you got so you knew which cabins were occupied and which weren't. You looked for signs. Occupied cabins had cars with all four wheels, and often even current tags. They had fresh tire tracks in the dry dirt, signs that people come and go, trash and garbage and junk and dogs. There was this one house, for example, that

was surrounded by dozens of broken-down cabins that I may or may not have needed someone to proxy, as per Census protocol about which I am prohibited from discussing. In the window of the house a woman washed dishes, her gray hair pulled tightly into a bun. I didn't knock. She saw me approach, I overheard her talking over her shoulder, something about the goddamn something or other. A man came to the door, a man with a deeply grooved face and no front teeth. His eyes fixed on me through the door's tattered screen. "Can I help you?" he said in the parlance of the desert. I held his Census badge out like a crucifix.

"Does anybody live in those places," I eventually asked. I was aware, I'll admit, how ridiculous the question sounded. The man with the deeply grooved face just looked at me for a moment, just looked at me through the tattered screen like I was some dumbshit from down below. "Down below," in the parlance, the big city, the concrete desert people come up here to get away from. The man just looked at me shaking his head. "That one was old man so-and-so's place 'til he died," he offered finally, pointing at a rubble of two-by-fours. "That one was never nothing, just a shed." A smile crept to the man's face, "See that place over there with the bus? Stay away from it. One night a SWAT team came rappelling out of helicopters raiding the place. Rappelling right out of their goddamn helicopters. It was a meth lab."

He pointed at places and rattled off road names, none of which matched what was on my Census-issued map. "I'm looking for a road," I said, "My map shows it runs right by your cabin…"

“Sweeney?” the man said. Or something similar. If you think I’m going to tell you the actual street names and disclose PII at a risk of a $250,000 fine and five years in jail, well, you better think again.

“Sweeney?” the man said, we’re pretending.

“No, it’s…”

“Halston?”

“No…”

“Coyote Trail?”

“No…umm…”

“End Run?”

“No…”

“Prickly Pear?”

“No…on this map…it says this should be Piedmont?”

“Never heard of it. This road here is really Sweeney but when them people there built their cabin they changed the name to Halston. And that jerk on the end, he wants it to be End Run. Prickly Pear is that up there, but it’s just that old lady’s driveway. Everybody wants to call these roads something different and the county just lets them; they don’t give a shit. It gets so confusing. I once had a tractor-trailer pull in here looking for an address. Turned out he was 20 miles off. I never could figure how he got that rig across the wash.”

The man with the deeply grooved face certainly would have been a great proxy for all the wrecked cabins around, giving me the story of each, check, check, check, if that was what I needed, which, of course, I'm not saying it was or it wasn't.

Some cabins were so isolated, however, I often found it difficult to find anyone to talk to me at all. At one particularly remote part of my AA I watched a car buzz cabin to cabin like a bee to blossoms, a swirling contrail of dust in its wake. I eased my truck up to an abandoned cabin, the driver of the other car noticed me, yanked the wheel over and barreled toward me. It was a fancy German SUV, a rare vehicle in these parts. I gunned his truck up another road and but German SUV flanked me, careened over to me and skidded up oppositemy driver's side window. Frantic, the driver waved at me, through her open window she thrust something at me, her badge. "Hi, I'm with the Census…" she said breathlessly. I held up his Census badge. "…and so are you." She collapsed down dejected like she'd sprung a leak.

* * *

The enumerator in the fancy German SUV told me about a clutch of cabins out bordering what some of you are convinced is a high desert national park--though I have said nothing to lead you to that conclusion--all alone miles from any others. She doesn't want to take her fancy German SUV out there, she said, not on these roads. I had the map and the addresses before I could say no.

The cabins out there were in good shape, the windows covered and locked, but no signs anyone had been there in a long time, no tire tracks or empty beer cans or water

tanks for water. Vacation cabins, I thought, and now that it was summer, there was little chance anyone will come out. Shit. I felt duped.

Leaving an NV—Notice of Visit in the parlance of the Census—at the door of the last cabin, I turned around into a din of buzzing, a black rain of insects fell over me. Hundreds of tiny little bees came tumbling out of the eaves, stingless bees, I discovered to my relief as they fell onto my head, into my shirt, tangling in my chest hair, climbing over my sweaty body. They followed me like a cloud as I jumped into my truck, they crawled around on my face, into my ears until I wrenched the truck to a halt and flung open the doors and dashed into the sand and scrub ripping off my shirt as I ran.

Later that day, a woman called. That was her family's cabin, she said, what a coincidence, they hadn't been there for years, but came out that day and found my note. A miracle, I thought. The cabin had been in her family for a generation, she told me, and so-and-so has the one beyond and such-and-such the other and they used to all come out together but none of them used their cabins anymore. Check, check, and check. The woman didn't mention the bees.

Had no one called, I may or may not have required to go back time and again according to Census protocol until I found someone home or someone to attest to the status of the Housing Unit. There was one isolated cabin in his AA, for example, where I saw all the signs of occupation: laundry on the line, cat food in a bowl, the accumulation of junk and rubbish around, yet no one answered the door. It was the only occupied cabin in an area of broken down shacks that I may or may not have needed to find someone to proxy in accordance with US Census Bureau procedures about which my lips

are permanently sealed. Every time I drove out to the cabin, however, my Notice of Visit was gone, but no one ever came to the door. I visited the cabin every day over the course of a couple weeks.

One time, as I walked around the cabin, knocking on doors and windows, a truck appeared from the barren nowhere and a kid got out. "Can I help you?" the kid asked in the parlance, then he banged on the cabin door calling out a woman's name.

"Who lives here?" I asked. "Can you tell me about these vacant cabins?"

"I don't know," he said, "I don't live around there." Then he jumped back into his truck and as fast was gone.

On another visit, a man in a fedora jumped out of a taxi, a taxi cab with a turban-wearing New York driver, a taxi cab that came down the rutted roads and across the wash, then out of the cab almost before it has stopped, "Can I help you?" man in the fedora asked.

He carried a bottle of Black Velvet and told me about the steaks he'd brought to grill—but he had no steaks, just that bottle of whisky. I asked him who lived there, about the cabins around.

"I don't know, man. I'm not from around here."

Then a week later, my phone rang. It was the woman from that isolated cabin. She talked, blathering, racing, "I found your notes, sorry, I've been sick, I really think the census is important, I want to participate, I don't want to lose my benefits, I'm on disability…"

Out at her cabin, she invited me in. “Sorry about the mess, I’ve been sick,” she went on, still flying through words. “I had the flu for three days. The medication makes me sick, I’ve got cancer and the medication messes with my immune system, let’s go back here. Don’t mind the mess.” She was pinging, redlining, 10,000 rpm. Her blond hair was piled on her head, scooped and stacked there, stray tendrils sprouted from the nape of her neck, looping to her shoulders. She was pretty once, I thought to himself.

We went into her bedroom, a cave with the windows blacked, clothes scattered. She sat on the bed, a mattress on the floor, and patted a spot for me next to her. She bounced her leg up and down as she jammered, the hem of her dress creeping up the thighs, her breasts swimming freely in her top. Census workers are admonished in training not to go into anyone’s house, to do all interviews at the front door. But here I was practically in bed with a woman wearing little more than a negligee in an isolated cabin in the middle of flippin’ nowhere. I could barely write her responses the bed was shaking so. I stammered through the interview. Did you live here on April first? Is this your usual home? How many people live here? Your name? Sex?--sorry, I have to ask… Age? Date of Birth? She answered everything in a breath, going on about the neighbors, the dilapidated, tumbledown cabins all around her, shaking that leg, jiggling all over, until I stood up to leave, she was talking, talking, as he backpedal to the door, goodbye, goodbye, comeback later, I’m having a sale, all this stuff out here I’m selling, and out the door and into my truck and I was gone. Check, check, check.

Things didn’t always work out so well. At a place further down the road, a small shack with boarded windows facing the wide open mountains in what may or may not be

a national park, a man walked out as I pulled up. I could tell that that man was not from around here. The guy had all his teeth for one thing, and standing braced against the sun with a hipster's tussled bed head and a scruffy three-day beard he was too young for these parts--late 20s or early 30s tops. "Can I help you?" He said, in the parlance.

"Hi, I'm with the Census."

"I do not live here," he said, "I am here only for the day." He was European; his accent French, I thought. There was a little Korean car parked in front, I couldn't imagine how he got it down that rutted, sandy road.

"Is there someone else I can talk to?"

"The owner, he is not here," the man replied in that halting French way.

"When is he going to be back?"

"I do not know."

"Well, when did he leave?"

"I do not know."

I had the feeling that the man didn't understand me, that I was with the Census, and it was his job to ask these questions. "I'm with the federal government; I'm here to take the census…" Surely they must have the census in his country, I thought.

"I know who you are," the man spat back. "You do not scare me, Mr. Federal Agent! You are on private property, you must leave!"

I was suddenly in a scene from a Monte Python movie. "Your mother is a hamster and your father smells of elderberries!" I filled in the dialogue by rote. "Now go away or I will taunt you a second time!" But the man just stared at me until I slinked away.

When I went back later the little Korean car was gone. No one ever returned. In fact, it seemed as though no one had ever been there, ever in a million years. There were no proxies, if that's what I needed, I would never check the place off. Now it's SEP—Somebody Else's Problem in the parlance of the federal government.

And that was that. That was my time with the Census. I had gathered so much great material, I was going to write such a great story. Oh, but then I got a letter from the Census Bureau. There were restrictions, the letter said, in addition to the lifetime oath I took to uphold the confidentiality of census information, that sacred oath the violation of which carried a fine of $250,000 and up to five years in jail, there were also prohibitions on writing and publishing about the Census, a ban on writing about Census programs, operations and the assignments I was given as a Census Bureau employee. The ban, the letter said, specifically forbade me from receiving payment for writing about my time with the Census. The payment restrictions turned out to be the least of my problems, by the way, because when the lawyers for that big glossy magazine read the letter from the Census they fired me on the spot, tersely informing me that in case of prosecution they would be obliged to testify against me. They advised me in the strongest possible terms to find a good attorney. Seems I had crossed some big, fat, black line between embedded reporter and sworn federal employee.

There would be no census story, no hefty check. I didn't even complete my Census assignment, or so it seemed. I wondered, thinking back, what was it with that hipster guy with the hipster's tussled bed head? Was he some shape-shifting djinn, a desert nagual straight out of a Carlos Castaneda book? He wondered about some of those

others, too—guy in the taxi cab, jittery woman, the dust-stirring truck man warning, "You could get shot out here." And then there's the guy who frog-marched the enumerator off his property. They say he died. I went to check his place out.

I drove to his cabin, down his road. There were no tracks on it; no one had been there for a while. The end of the road was barricaded by barbed wire buried in the sand. I stopped in front of the house—it looked normal, like a regular house; it had trees, still green, well cared for. A six-foot wooden fence isolated the house from the ramshackle shacks and the world beyond.

Out of the dirty, dry nowhere, down the trackless road, a truck turned toward me, raced my way, the driver, a woman, glaring at me. She barreled around the buried barbed wire barricade and out of the truck almost before it had stopped, grabbing a chrome garden spade, and in a flurry sand flew while she prairie-dogged up and stared at him between shovelfuls. I pretended to be writing. Then it dawned on me, and hI walked over to her. "Can I help you?" I said, you know, like you do. The wheel of her fancy new Jeep was buried to the hub.

"Oh, darn," she said, her badge flapping in the breeze, "Are you with the Census too?"

Nobody Fucks with George Stadler

Nobody fucks with George Stadler. Not the classless cocksuckers in Wonder Valley, not Jack McConaha and his band of criminals, not even the pigs or the US fucking Army. Stadler's on to all their shit. It's taken him 22 and a half years, but now he knows the shit that goes on. They harass you to get your property, see, that's what they do; they're after your land. And there's no one who'll do a thing about it—certainly not the crooked cops, they're in cahoots with Jack McConaha's gang. See, they've been fucking with Stadler from his first trip out here, slashing his tires, death threats, condemned his cabin with false information, incarcerated him on false charges, once, twice, thirteen hundred days in jail before a jury declared him innocent. Now he's onto these sonsofbitches. And someone's going to get hurt, someone's going to get hurt real bad. Because nobody fucks with George Stadler.

That's what George Stadler would tell you, if you met him. But of course you'll never meet George Stadler. You'd never find him for one, laying low like he is in a 50s-vintage singlewide on a packed-dirt homestead parcel with the charred remains of a burned-down cabin and a riprap of wheel-less cars and sagging travel trailers on the western fringe of Wonder Valley, California.

Stadler's vantage from the single-wide gives him a view over the riprap cars and trailers, down over the Gladys's place and the Jojoba Farm, all the way to the paved road. And anyone stupid enough to drive in past the "No Trespas" sign, the repeated warnings, the posted private property, will no doubt hear the boom of his .454 before they ever lay eyes on him. That's one thing for sure. Just ask that guy who came driving up the

property just last week. They said he was a meter reader, but Stadler knows he wasn't no meter reader. Everyone knows there ain't no meter readers anymore; the meters are all digital. Here's the trick they pull on you out here: they pretend they're out reading your meter, see, and you won't get a bill, and you go in and say 'I didn't get a bill,' and they say 'Oh they missed you last time. We'll get you next month.' The next thing you know they're out there to cut your power off. It's been going on for a long time--that's how they get your land. So coming on to Stadler's property to cut his power will get you shot, which is what must have happened last week--Stadler doesn't know. He'd tell you he wasn't there at the time. He was out in the desert, out toward Essex. That's what he told the cops that when they came to arrest him. The cops, they don't come to his house by themselves or empty handed, they came with a SWAT Team, helicopters, the whole fucking shop. But the pigs didn't find no guns on Stadler's place, just the replica black powder pistols—perfectly legal, don't need to be registered--which couldn't have been the weapons used in the shooting because they don't shoot bullets, unless you happen to have a conversion cylinder adapting it to.454 Casull cartridges which the stupid fucking pigs probably don't even know about and at any rate didn't even find. But they hauled him in anyway. But not for the shooting. Stadler had a warrant for his arrest, a Failure To Appear. County code enforcement was after him because they say he was storing junk cars on his property and refused to have them removed. We're not talking about these cars, not the riprap of cars surrounding the single wide— this ain't his property. Code enforcement is concerned about the cars on *his* property, the one he bought in 1988,

the one up past Ned Bray's place, next to the Ostrich Farm. They arrested him for not removing *those* cars.

But there wasn't a fucking thing the pigs could do to him, he'd tell you. Those cars were evidence, stored there as evidence of a crime committed back in 2004 when this bunch of Guatemalan motherfuckers went over there with end loaders and semis and stole all 22 junk cars, plus six old motorcycles, broke into the cabin, wrecked his fucking campers. After he got them back, George would say, code enforcement tried to force him to get rid of them--but they were evidence of a crime. There's one straight cop out here and he told him so. After spending a few hours in jail last week, the judge just sent him home.

George Stadler bought his cabin next to the Ostrich Farm back in 1988. He had come out to Wonder Valley to die. His heart was failing; he had to fight for medical coverage, to get the medication he needed, the nitroglycerin patches, the drugs to treat his strange symptoms which flared periodically swelling his joints and further damaging his heart. Stadler'd tell you he contracted this strange illness in 1956 while he was in the Army, had his first illness-induced heart attack at 20 years old, developed a heart murmur while aboard a Navy transport ship on deployment to Europe. He spent three months in an Army hospital in Germany where doctors found unidentifiable spirochetes, a type of bacterial pathogen, in his blood. They evacuated him stateside, sent samples of the spirochetes to the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta. He was declared unfit for further military service, to be discharged immediately with a full pension.

If you asked George Stadler about all this, he'd tell you he was a guinea pig for biological warfare, that the spirochetes in his blood were a weaponized bacteria, that he was an unwitting participant in the CIA's covert human research program code-named Project MK-Ultra. He'd tell you all this is in his medical records. But he has no medical records. An Army colonel took them, he'd tell you, left Germany with them under his arm. And since then, all record of Stadler's military service have disappeared, his discharge papers, everything, gone. He can show you a letter from the National Personnel Records Center: the US government has no record that George Oscar Stadler ever served in any branch of the military at all.

If you asked George Stadler, he'd tell you the Army nagged him at every stop for his medical records, the records that colonel took with him when he left. Without records they wouldn't discharge him, they just bounced him around, from Great Lakes Naval Hospital to Fort Sheridan to Fort Benning, Georgia. At Fort Benning they stopped treating him, withheld his medications, but refused his medical discharge, holding him in limbo, stuck where he'd fallen between the cracks of Army bureaucracy. He sat out the rest of his enlistment there, unable to work and doing nothing except passing his time. Finally, he'd tell you, he just packed his duffle and left, drove himself back to his home in Wisconsin and dumped his gear at the recruiting office where he'd entered the service two years before. With him he brought home a new wife, Shirley, a Michigan Finn he met at Benning; she was expecting their son.

Stadler spent the next 30 years battling flare-ups of this disease and working odd jobs during the remissions. If you met George Stadler, he'd tell you he was the best,

brightest, most capable mechanic, machinist, carpenter, electrician, computer technician, farmer, lover, and fighter that anyone had ever seen, and that the flare-ups of the disease would take it all away.

Chasing work, Stadler took his small family to California. His marriage dissolved when his wife became mentally ill, was institutionalized, and Stadler, with custody of their son, worked intermittently as his health allowed. Much of the time, however, father and son were homeless. Son Neil grew up on the road as Stadler jumped from place to place, job to job, hassle to hassle. Through all this, it seems, the two men had only each other. Neil, as Stadler tells it, would disappear for weeks or months or years on walkabout only to return to find his father in much the same place he'd always been. The two men had been homeless together, living in a motorhome, when the Santa Barbara cops started hassling them, writing them tickets, threatening to tow the camper. He sued them. Around this time, too, the State of California had declared him indigent and fully disabled. He began receiving $400 a month of Supplemental Security Income. The $400 didn't go far in Santa Barbara, though, as expensive as it is. It was a social worker who suggested the desert to Stadler. And Wonder Valley was the cheapest patch of desert of them all. So, like so many poor, homeless, disabled seniors, with son Neil on walkabout, George Stadler left Santa Barbara for Wonder Valley.

Stadler bought the one-room cabin up past Ned Bray's place, next to the Ostrich Farm. He paid cash for it--$9500, money he'd won in the lawsuit against the Santa Barbara cops. It was isolated, and moving out there, he figured there'd be no one around; he'd be left alone. But if you asked George Stadler he'd tell you the classless

cocksuckers out here started fucking with him his first day out. He’d tell you about his first night, how the cocksuckers smashed all the windows of his car, slashed the tires, and left a note: ‘If you move out here, we’re going to shoot you in the ass and burn you out.’ And he’d tell you his response: We’ll see who kills who.

Stadler would tell you how that crazy Jack McConaha “tacked” his road, dropping roofing nails on the washboard ruts. He’d tell you he got flat tire after flat tire, thousands of flat tires, sometimes all four at once. McConaha and others followed him everywhere they went. He used to leave out of Wonder Valley at four in the morning to head out to get his mail. You see, the post office in town had started throwing away his social security checks. He didn’t get utility bills for over a year. That’s why he changed his post office box, moved it to a hamlet up on the interstate 60 miles to the north. He’d leave at four in the morning to get his mail and when he’d go, he didn't go there directly. They would follow him, see, so he drove east to the Colorado River, then looped north, then west, 200 miles one way. He’d leave Wonder Valley at four in the morning, gas up in town, and head east with his headlights out. He'd hear them talking about him, “He's just left for Essex,” they'd say as he drove out of the area. He had a scanner, he’d tell you, one that could pick up people's cordless phones. They say you can’t hear a cordless phone from over 500 feet away--well, they couldn't, but Stadler could, he could listen to them from miles away. He could hear them talking about him as he drove around, planning how they were going to get him.

If you met George Stadler he’d tell you how Jack McConaha shot at him and how he returned fire. Stadler says he’d been coming home from Essex on the paved road

when McConaha pulled across it, blocking his way. He had drawn his gun. Stadler’d tell you he drove around him flipping the bird. Then McConaha shot out his rear window, and the game was on. Stadler opened up on him with his .45, emptying his clip as McConaha zoomed away like the chickenshit he is. The pigs would arrest Stadler, but he was never charged. The witnesses couldn't identify him.

But the Wonder Valley cocksuckers wouldn't give up. They planted bombs in his cars; they planted false evidence in his cabin. They hauled Stadler’s son Neil away, hauled him away on false charges. Stadler’d tell you it was he who shot at that Blevins kid, tried to kill the sonofabitch before the sonofabitch could shoot Neil, but the pigs hauled Neil away, committed him to Patton State Hospital, the hospital for the criminally insane.

Then, ten years after he moved to the area, the classless cocksuckers of Wonder Valley finally got him. The crooked cops and the cocksuckers with the county red-tagged his place. His little one-room cabin up past Ned Bray’s place, next to the Ostrich Farm, was condemned. Condemned, George Stadler'd tell you, on false, trumped-up information.

* * *

Evicted, and with nowhere to go, Stadler moved to Essex, the hamlet 60 miles to the north on the interstate. If you ask him, he’ll tell you he merely found the black powder, the Pyrodex, about a pound of each, found them in the cabin he was living in. He’d tell you he was taking it to give to some local miners--maybe they could use it for blasting--when a Highway Patrol officer stopped him. It was a routine traffic stop, the

cop told him, but the crooked cop started routing though the things in Stadler's back seat, performing an illegal search, uncovering what the cop said was bomb making materials, eh powder and Pyrodex, pipe and caps. The cop arrested Stadler and charged him with possession of explosives and the making of destructive devices.

The court found him mentally incompetent, unable to stand trial. They ordered him to Patton State Hospital for treatment. Two years later, he was back in court. He got a venue change. He tried to get the judge removed. He filed writs of habeas corpus. He fired his court-appointed public defender, then the next one, then the next one, then the next one. Finally, two years, nine months and ten days after his arrest, he stood trial. Carrying pieces of pipe ain't illegal. Nor is transporting a pound each of black powder and Pyrodex –two pounds of black powder is, but one pound of each isn't. A jury acquitted him of all charges. Nobody fucks with George Stadler.

* * *

Old-timers in Wonder Valley remember George Stadler. He hit everyone's radar after his son Neil moved in--he arrived a few months after his father. The old timers remember the gun shots, they remember Neil riding up and down the roads on a motorcycle, naked, yelling obscenities. And they remember, soon after the Stadlers' arrival, the nails that appeared in the roads.

Ted Meyers remembers George Stadler. Stadler says he knew Meyers in Detroit, beat his ass back in 1956. He says Meyers has been hassling him his whole life. Meyers is from Detroit, but he was too young to have known Stadler. Meyers remembers him from Wonder Valley, though—the nails in the roads, countless flat tires. He complained

about Stadler to the sheriff, but of course they could do nothing; no one could prove it was Stadler tacking the roads.

Suddenly, randomly, it seems to those who remember it, George Stadler opened fire on Jack McConaha. Roxie Shaw had been driving east on the paved road; Jack McConaha was in his Jeep behind her. Suddenly, she saw the driver of an on-coming car stick a gun out of the window; she thought he was pointing it at her. As she passed him she heard the gunfire. McConaha says he saw everyone simultaneously duck as he passed The Palms bar--he thought it was a prank. It was Roxie's husband Dennis who called him and told him he'd been shot at. Dennis had been in the front yard, had seen the whole thing, saw a man coming the other way shooting, the .45 slugs hitting the stucco of The Palms. McConaha had missed all the action. Later deputies told him about George Stadler, his vendetta against him. They called it a one-way feud. The eyewitness evidence proved insufficient, however, and charges against Stadler were dropped.

Being the chief of Wonder Valley's volunteer brigade gave Jack McConaha close access to sheriff's deputies, however. He complained time and again about Stadler, but he knew there was nothing they could do. Off the record, Jack would tell you, they suggested he fight fire with fire. One night McConaha went up the dirt road past Ned Bray's place and the Ostrich Farm with a fifty pound box of roofing nails. When he returned the box was empty. He got a phone call from a neighbor the next day telling him George Stadler was stuck in the sand with all four tires flat.

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It was George Stadler who wanted to meet me. He had a story to tell, a story you wouldn't fucking believe, we could sell it to Life Magazine or something, make a movie about the cocksuckers out here in Wonder Valley and the fucking Army and how all these sonsofbithces have been fucking with him his whole life. I drove up the washboard track up past the Jojoba Farm and Gladys's place and pulled onto the packed-dirt homestead parcel, past the "No Trespas" sign, the repeated warnings, the posted private property, past the charred remains of a burned-down cabin and the riprap of wheel-less cars and sagging travel trailers and stopped in front of the 50s-vintage singlewide. I blew the horn. A full minute passed in a silence interrupted by the banging clatter of an aluminum panel slowly being stripped from the side of an old motor home by the wind. Suddenly the door of the trailer flew open and Stadler stood there, buck naked, "Hold on, let me put some clothes on."

After a moment, he emerged from the trailer, bare to the waist. He is a barrel-chested man—a formidable fighter I thought, seeing him for the first time. But old age and ill health had ridden him relentlessly. His biceps and forearms--once his guns—were now sagging and spindly. Nitroglycerin patches were stuck like post-its to his chest. He sat in an old kitchen chair in front of the singlewide as we talked, the wind tussled his hair, still a youthful strawberry blond; his only gray hairs curl from his chin and frame his jaw and his sparse, blackened teeth.

He talked breathlessly about the cocksuckers in Wonder Valley, how they have been fucking with him all his life, how they followed his son on his walkabouts, chased him across the country trying to kill him. He produced computer printouts as proof,

printouts of names from internet directories, last names that match last names of people here, Blevinses and Shaws and Meyerses in Ashland, Wisconsin and Detroit and Georgia and here, look, they have been fucking with him the whole way, proving in his mind that they'd been after them for years, were behind all the bad that had happened in his life. He told me about his problems with the Army, how his service records and medical records have been destroyed maliciously to cover up a conspiracy.

The thing is, his service records *were* likely destroyed. A fire in 1973 destroyed the National Personnel Records Center and 80 percent of Army personnel records, Stadler’s among them. If you write the Army and ask for his records, that's what they'll tell you. But after his discharge from the Army, George Stadler had done one thing that was pretty smart: he recorded his discharge papers at the Ashland County courthouse. The records are still there; they are still on file in Ashland, Wisconsin. They say Stadler had been drafted in 1955 and had served two years in the Army as a communications specialist. He received an honorable discharge.

His medical records are another matter. Stadler had been begging, pleading, harassing, cajoling veterans’ groups around the country for years hoping for help finding the medical records lost in 1956. Finally he caught the attention of Gary Douglas, a veterans' advocate with AmVets, a veterans’ service organization. Douglas found records, hundreds of pages, representing only a fraction of the total. “George might be a little strange,” Douglas told me, “but what he's saying is true.” George Stadler, however, could show me only half a dozen pages.

The pages he showed me did indicate he was declared 100 percent disabled by Navy doctors in 1956. Based on the symptoms, they had diagnosed him with Rheumatic Fever, an illness caused by the streptococcus bacteria, a follow-on disease to strep throat. Stadler says it destroyed his heart; the records mention a murmur. The Navy treated the swelling in his joints with aspirin. The records make no mention of spirochetes.

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I came to the conclusion as soon as I met Stadler that he was insane. Paranoid, delusional, schizophrenic, maybe--I didn't know what, but I was certain he was crazy and more than a little dangerous. Stadler has a verbal quirk, the royal "we," referring to himself in the plural. It makes him sound all the crazier: "They've been fucking with *us*, it took *us* 22 and a half years, but now *we're* on to their shit. I thought it a symptom of schizophrenia or something. Or those spirochetes, syphilis or Lyme disease or something untreated eating his brain—it's well known that these diseases can lead to heart problems, joint and muscle pain, and eventually can lodge themselves in the brain causing psychosis. But maybe it's something else. Maybe the "we" is Stadler and Neil, father and son, together through thick and thin, homeless together, father protecting son as son sank into mental illness.

If you asked George Stadler, he'd tell you that Neil was committed to Patton State Hospital due to seizures, or that Neil is gaming the system, getting free room and board from the state, or laying low, hiding out from the classless cocksuckers who are out to kill him. He told Neil's mother that her son is suffering from cancer. She was

institutionalized herself in the early 1960s—and remains so today. There seems to be a family history.

Socially and physically isolated, living alone with Neil, maybe Stadler became "infected" with Neil's delusions, suffering a folie à deux, a rare, shared delusional experience. Maybe the two men fed on each other's paranoia and psychosis, until, acting out aggressively they began to suffer in actuality, the hostility they before only imagined.

But what the hell do I know.

I called Gary Douglas again; he was the veterans' advocate that had helped Stadler locate his records. I wanted more information, to see more of the records, maybe bounce my new theory off of him. Douglas's outgoing message says he's on medical leave until further notice and gives an alternate contact. That mailbox is persistently full. His boss told me he'd look into it, then his boss's boss told me the same, then his boss's boss's boss. I never heard a word from them again. Stadler told me he can no longer reach them either. He thinks it's a conspiracy; they're fucking with him again. It doesn't matter how or why, but it looks like Stadler's ball has again been dropped.

The irony is that now that Stadler has located some of his medical records, he might be able to recover some of the disability income he was denied for all those decades, income owed to him--some $250,000 by his own estimation, the lack of which resulted in his homelessness. Of course, he'll likely never see the benefit of that money: The appeals process takes years, and now with his veterans' advocates MIA, his chances are slimmer yet. And there's the unsettled issue of his shooting at the meter reader and the renewed cries to get rid of him, to arrest him, put him away for good. His cabin up by

the Ostrich Farm is condemned and there's a notice of tax default filed on the single wide. He has only a couple of years there at best, then he'll have to go. Though I suspect when they come to get him, they'd better bring the SWAT team, the helicopters, the whole fucking shop, because nobody fucks with George Stadler.

Neighborly Road

Driving up Naborly Road, you wouldn't even notice my little cabin. Bleached white like the bones of the dead, it sits like a fossil on a barren gravel yard empty except for an old Chevy, chalky-white and oxidized by the sun, the hood ajar.

You wouldn't notice the neighbor's place behind, either. Not anymore. The cabin's gone, so is the old municipal bus and much of the crenellated wall of scavenged plywood and bent, banged metal that surrounded them. And the flags, they're gone too.

But if you'd have driven up Naborly Road before, you'd have noticed the place. Maybe you wouldn't have noticed the cabin, the wall, maybe not at first. Maybe the first thing you'd have noticed would have been the flags, the flags flying over the place. You'd see the Confederate flag, maybe, and the Nazi one with the swastika, the German SS flag, and the Arizona flag, flying with the others like some kind of new racist symbol. And maybe you'd have thought, that guy there must be a real asshole.

The day I met that guy I had driven up Naborly and pulled into the compacted desert drive of the bleached-white cabin. He was sitting in his minivan across the road when I arrived, sitting there with a camera photographing the cabin. He filled the cab of his gunmetal gray van; his tan arm, pudgy as a baby's leg, held the camera. He pointed it at me. It was as though he were expecting me.

After a tick, the van crunched the packed sand road and stopped. He stared at me menacingly. "You the family?" he asked, the camera trained on me in his thick-fingered hand, his face masked by a gray beard like a bandana, his eyes behind cheap iridescent shades. Cold hostility was in his voice.

“No,” I answered with as much fuck-you as I could muster.

“You buying the place?”

“No.

We stared at each other.

“I’m thinking of renting it,” I offered finally.

“Was that you flying over here yesterday?”

“Yeah.” I had no idea what he was talking about. At that moment, though, I wanted him to think I have an air force, and maybe ground support, and if he’s thinking of messing with me, well, he’d better think again.

He stared at me, “Tell Fangmeyer you met the asshole.”

Now whether I suspected anything about him or not, that statement confirmed it. He himself said he was an asshole, and as I looked around at those flags and that walled compound, that menacing look and that goddamn camera, I knew for certain he wasn’t lying.

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Fangmeyer is the owner of the bleached-white cabin, now my landlord. He rents the cabin to me dirt cheap, cheap even for this nowhere corner of the Mojave where places with solid walls and windows and roofs that aren’t open to the elements are rare. He’d said he wanted someone in it he could trust, someone to keep an eye on the neighbor behind. The neighbor’s a paranoid schizophrenic, he’d said, dangerously violent. And an asshole.

Because of the asshole neighbor, my landlord always comes to the bleached-bone cabin prepared. As he took me through the house he pantomimed how he chambers a round in his 9mm before he opens the front door. He then crept through the cabin, checking each nook for intruders while sighting down the barrel of the imaginary pistol gripped tightly in his outstretched arms. This was all meant to be instructional. You can't be too careful, he said; the problems with the neighbor are constant. The asshole, he told me, is trying to take the side road we share as his own property. He tries to prevent anyone else from driving on it. He drags an old piece of carpet up and down it out of spite creating a haboob of dust. He shines spotlights in the windows of the bleached-white cabin. He bends the bottom of his own fence up so his dogs can torment the neighborhood--the dogs even mauled a kid as he walked to the school bus stop on the paved road. He accuses my landlord of spying on him.

That first day, my landlord ran through the quirks of the cabin, the bad propane valve, the water storage tank and pump—there's no running water; the water must be delivered. Oh, but don't drink it, the asshole might have poisoned it. My landlord always brings his own from home, a five-gallon jug of water he can trust, back-ups are on the floor sealed and labeled with the date he filled them.

He walked me through the use of the security cameras, too. They're infrared. You can see the whole property from all directions on the two 32-inch video monitors inside. The cameras are arrayed in banks of four; they are motion activated and record everything on internal hard drives. There are also half a dozen dummy cameras pointing this way and that, to confuse intruders. He reviewed the recordings as he spoke, jotting

the comings and goings of the asshole in a small notebook: Tuesday11:42 he left for water, 1:04 he returned; Thursday 3:43 he dragged a piece of carpet up and down the side road, Friday, 10:30 he left for town.

My landlord then pointed out the binoculars, gave me a run through on the night vision scope. There is a motion detector that fits into one of the fence posts that sounds an alert should the asshole park in a camera blind spot. He showed me the lockbox behind the door—there's a pistol in it. Walled into the wall of the closet there's a rifle--unregistered. He carries a 9mm in his belt, two-shot derringer in his pocket. He suggested I get one too.

Fangmeyer's not the only one wary of the asshole. If you met Red, for example, he might tell you how the asshole tries to keep him from driving on public roads, on that side road, and even Naborly. He'd tell you that the asshole follows him, taking his picture, harassing him and his wife. Maybe he'd tell you how the asshole steals his mail, about how when he caught him, the asshole jumped him and beat his ass. The asshole and the neighbor to the north call the police if they see Red or Gary or Pizza Richard driving too fast or too slow on Naborly or the side road or cutting across the desert or taking the ATV past their cabins to get the mail. He'd tell you how the two have called the police on him so many times and how he had spent so much time in jail that when he got sentenced to 90 days for his second drunk driving arrest, he already had 88 days in the bank. He'd tell you he was out of jail within hours.

And then there's the neighbor Gary. Gary moved to Wonder Valley after he retired from a job as a heavy equipment operator. He built a nice new home next to his

homestead cabin on the paved road at the foot of Naborly. He's half a mile from the asshole. If you asked Gary, he'd tell you about the problems he's had with the asshole, how the asshole slows as he drives past his place, takes pictures of him in his own home, always flips him the finger. He'd tell you how the asshole parks next to his cabin at night, shines his headlights through the kitchen window, has frightened his wife to the point she'll no longer come to Wonder Valley choosing to live with her adult son out of fear for the neighbor. Gary'd tell you how the asshole stalks him in town. It started when the asshole took his dog. The dog had wandered across the desert to the asshole's property and the asshole snatched it. Gary's dog is no desert dog, no scroungey, half-feral mutt. It's a Bassett Hound, pure bred. Gary'd tell you that that dog is his best friend. The first time the asshole grabbed the dog, a sheriff's deputy negotiated to get it back, threatening the asshole with jail time if he didn't return the dog. The second time, however, the asshole hauled the dog to the pound—not the pound in town, but an animal shelter 50 miles away.

Everyone in the area, in fact, knows about the asshole. He had a long standing feud with Rick Swan, hated anyone who associated with Red or Gary. And how when Rick's cabin mysteriously burned to the ground, everyone just knows that the asshole did it.

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The asshole's name is Chris, Chris Bolin. Until recently, Chris lived in the old municipal bus parked next to the cabin, behind the crenellated wall. He'd lived there for nearly 20 years. Like so many people in Wonder Valley, Chris had drifted his way to the

desert from L.A., starting by the beach, then an inland town, then further and further east, landing here because it was cheap. He bought the property with a girlfriend, a mean woman, he'd tell you, that took no shit from anybody. But then that woman turned that meanness on him, and then she left him. Chris owns the cabin next door, too, his mother bought it for him, or he bought it for her, the drift and shift like sand in the dunes. If yo asked Chris, he'd tell you he tore the walls and windows out of that cabin to remodel it, but his mother preferred town, and the cabin sat gaping, yawning open to the desert.

Unlike so many others out here, Chris had always had a job. He worked on the Marine base and then the dollar store in town. When the dollar store closed, he collected unemployment while it lasted, resold salvaged junk he came across, worked a booth at a swap meet down the hill. Mostly, though, he just holed-up in that crenellated compound, kept tabs on the riff-raff out here, their comings and goings. You don't see him going breaking into people's cabins, he'd tell you, you don't see him driving where he doesn't belong, tearing up the desert or cutting down people's private roads as a shortcut to the bar.

That's why Chris closed the side road that runs in front of his property to traffic. His is the only place on it, no one else needs to be driving down it. He's the one who maintains it, besides, towing a homemade drag up and down it to erase tire tracks so he can monitor its use. Fangmeyer, my landlord, he just drives on it anytime he wants, though, leaving his tracks so that Chris can't tell if drug dealers or thieves or whoever has been driving by. Fangmeyer didn't even live here. He lived down below and only came up on holidays and such and drive his damn jeep around his property and across other

people's, tearing up the land and riling up Chris's dogs. Chris has half a dozen dogs, Belgian Shepherds—not purebred or anything, but dogs he planned to breed and sell all the same. On the weekends Fangmeyer was at the bleached-white cabin he'd throw table scraps out to the animals attracting coyotes and other vermin, letting Chris's dogs eat the bones and scraps to too. Then Chris's dogs started dying. Fangmeyer was throwing out those scraps and suddenly, one a day, his litter of puppies died. And then the mother went. Fangmeyer, Chris is certain, had poisoned them. Or Red did. Or Gary. If you asked Chris, he'd tell you someone poisoned his dogs—you just don't lose a whole litter at once like that.

If you asked Chris, he would tell you that yes, one of his dogs bit that kid that time while he walked to the school bus stop on the paved road, but that kid had wandered onto his property, opened the gate, walked past the no trespassing signs. The kid let the dogs out; he ran and the dogs chased him. Because of that, Animal Control seized all his dogs, took them to the pound. They destroyed them before Chris could come up with the nearly $500 each to retrieve them. All he could save were two. One Fangmeyer poisoned, the other Rick Swan purposely hit and killed on Naborly.

The dog had gotten out. Chris would tell you Fangmeyer deliberately bends the bottom of his fence out so his dogs will escape. Rick saw the dog on Naborly and purposely punched the gas and ran it over. Gary came along behind and swerved out of his way to hit the dog again. No matter what Gary says, Chris knows Gary ran over his dog too. He heard the dog squeal until it finally died.

Gary Chris, he would tell you, ran over his dog because he was bitter that Chris took his dog to the pound. Gary used let his basset hound run loose up the road. It'd shit in front of people's cabins. When it came up to his fence, Chris thought it might kill his peacock chicks. So Chris caged it. The next time he drove it to the pound, one where he thought Gary would never find it. If it happens again, Chris won't hurt it, not like they'd done to his dogs, but Gary won't find that dog in this county, in this state.

In fact, it was Gary, Chris would tell you, who turned Red against him. Before he showed up, Chris and Red had been friends. Chris had started a neighborhood watch with a neighbor who lives to the north on Naborly. Together, they'd call the police whenever they saw anything suspicious--like when Red started running around with Gary, driving around drinking, cutting across the desert where they shouldn't be, going where they had no business going, and probably, Chris would tell you, stealing stuff from the junk cabins and abandoned cars. Red retaliated against the neighbor to the north, yelling and screaming at the poor guy, zooming up and down Naborly dusting him out. He threw caltrops--spiked balls welded together out of nails--on his driveway. They pierce your tire when you run over them, then shake loose into the dirt for you to run over again and again. Terrified, the neighbor built a compound ringed by saltcedar trees; he lit it up at night like a maximum-security penitentiary. He'd seen Red watching his young nieces through the trees, he told Chris. Red is a registered sex offender, you know, a convicted child molester. Just watch, he always goes to get his mail just as the school bus is dropping off the kids. The neighbor to the north got a restraining order against Red, one that Red consistently violates, violations he challenges in court using video

surveillance recordings supplied by that damn Fangmeyer. Red put boards hammered through with nails across Chris's driveway. He threw rocks at his van. Chris called the cops, had him arrested, but the charges didn't stick, they never stick because he's some kind of police informant, or something. When Red attacked him at the mailboxes, they both went to jail. Red's face was black and blue, his eye was swollen shut, but through fat lips he said to Chris, "I'm going to get you. I'm going to burn you out."

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Ask anybody, they'd tell you what Red's face looked like after that asshole Chris beat him. If you'd been at Pizza Richard's that one night, maybe Red would have told you himself. In Pizza Richard's cabin that night voices became raised above the drone of the swamp cooler. Maybe Gary had been there, and maybe he told you about his dog, about that asshole Chris stalking him and taking pictures. And maybe Pizza Richard, the smoke from his hand-rolled cigarette curling around his face, maybe he brought up Rick's place, how someone burned it down. It was arson, proven, someone kicked in the door and doused the cabin with gasoline. They say that asshole Chris had done it. And maybe others had been there that night too, drinking beer after beer and telling you about Chris, the stuff he does, the things they'd heard, until maybe someone, in a fog of bargain beer, suggested that someone has to do something about him, that someone should do to him what he done to Rick, burn him out, burn his cabin down. And maybe all that would have been empty words, just the beer talking, if, just a week later, three thick, black columns of smoke, visible for forty miles around, hadn't risen from the asshole's compound in the still air of dusk so that the next time you drove up Naborly, drove up to

your little bleached-white cabin, you'd see the asshole's Nazi flags and the crenellated wall, his cabin and old municipal bus gone.

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As it happened, Red was the first to see the smoke. He climbed to the roof of his cabin a half a mile away. The fire department showed up on the scene within minutes, the sheriff to Red's shortly thereafter. The fire? Couldn't have happened to a nicer guy, Red would tell deputies, but he didn't start it. He had an alibi: he'd been home with his wife the whole day.

There were no witnesses. Chris was down the hill when the fire broke out, had taken a friend to a funeral. There are cameras on the bleached-white cabin, though. They are motion activated, recording when they detect motion. On the day of the fire, at 18:03--6:03 P.M.--narrow black shadows triggered one of my landlord's cameras. It recorded the shadows climbing across the desert and quickly broadening to a dark cloud shimmering with heat. Five minutes later the west-facing camera clicked on, triggered by some motion, Chris's spite flags, perhaps, or his cabin or the tinder-dry junk or the old municipal bus behind the crenellated wall roiling in flames that popped with the blasts of the stockpiled ammunition. The cameras recorded the fire department arriving; they recorded them backing away and letting the fire burn. Six minutes later, flames ate through the power lines and the cameras went dark.

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A week after the fire, I went to see Chris, see how he was doing. It was the neighborly thing to do, you know. Chris had moved into the cabin next door, the one he

bought for his mother, the one with no walls and no window or doors. He had no electricity. The tires on his water trailer had melted in the fire; he had no water, no way to get any. It was 110 degrees out. I drove to his mother's wall-less, windowless cabin laying fresh tracks on his road. I beeped the horn.

"WHAT DO YOU WANT?" he bellowed from within as he burst from the cabin, all six-foot-whatever and three hundred pounds, fists clenched.

He stared at mean in cold fury, then he softened. "I got fucking nothing!" he said suddenly, shaking. "They took everything from me!" That rekindled him. All emotions, sorrow, despair, turned to anger. He fumed and just as quickly he burned out.

He stared in silence at the blackened waste, the charred hulk of the municipal bus, the waste land ash pit of the cabin, the single nightmare trunk of a burned and blackened tree. "Huey Lewis," he mumbled suddenly. He was making a mental inventory of his loss, remembering each of his five hundred CDs, his books and DVDs, family mementos, the photos and documentation, the evidence against my landlord and Rick Swan, and Gary and Red. As he spoke, a thermal rose from the ash pit. A swirling column of charred papers lifted skyward, swirling like buzzards over the carcass of the cabin, reaching three hundred, four hundred feet into the air.

A week before the fire, Chris had found footprints on his road. He tracked them, he said, tracked them as they came from the east around the vacant cabin behind the neighbor to the north. It was Red, he told me, he could tell by his shoeprints. "Why didn't Fangmeyer's cameras record him walking around? Why didn't he give that video to the fire inspector?"

The fire inspector visited Fangmeyer at his home in town; he reviewed the footage of the fire on his big plasma screen. But the recording begins with the cabin fully engulfed in flames; there is no footage of anyone arriving before the fire or fleeing from it. Fangmeyer didn't tell the fire inspector about the person walking around Chris's cabin the week before. He saw that person, though, saw him on the recording. And if you asked him he'd tell you that that person wasn't Red.

At the firehouse they saw three distinct columns of smoke, three distinct starting points: an indication of arson. Or maybe the fire simply jumped quickly from the cabin to the bus and as the electrical line burned through, it dropped into an old tinder-filled boat starting the third blaze.

"I don't think it was arson," Chris told me later. "It was an electrical fire." He'd heard rumors that if the power line started the fire the power company will take responsibility for the blaze. A power company-started fire could mean a check for Chris, a new start. Arson means he can expect nothing. Chris is still hopeful. The fire inspector's report is pending.

A few weeks later Chris ran into Gary in town. Gary mouthed off to Chris and Chris stabbed Gary's tire. It was all caught on a liquor store's video cameras. Gary filed for a restraining order, but Chris ran the process server off at the barrel of a shotgun. Gary asked me if I'd serve the papers the next week. I called Chris before I went. As he read the documents I looked out over his tumbledown cabin with no walls and no windows, the ash pit, the charred hulk of the municipal bus, the single nightmare trunk of

that burned and blackened tree. From there you could barely notice my little white cabin sitting like the bleached bones of the dead over there on Naborly Road.

Pizza Richard

If you pass a joint to Pizza Richard, he'll take it. He might wave it around absentmindedly as he talks or use it to dot the period on the point he's making in that way he does, oh yeah, yeah, *exactly*, his perfectly white acrylic teeth shining like piano keys from under his boot-blacked mustache. Eventually he'll catch a glimpse of the smoldering baton in his hand, then, likely as not, he'll clip a pair of surgical pliers to the wet end of it and with his chin skyward stare cross-eyed at the glowing cherry as he draws a bit of the smoke in through his pucker. Or he might just pass the joint along, not hitting it at all—it's his weed, sure, but hey, hey, he gets it for his friends, trading leftover buffet pizzas for some shake and seeds during brief stops on his way back home, back home to Wonder Valley.

If you'd been at The Palms bar on a Monday afternoon, you might've met Pizza Richard. He'd have been there in his work shirt, he'd have brought pizzas. He'd have been just off work, in fact, have just driven east, made the stops along his 100 mile route: the Indian casino for gas, the smoke shop for tobaccie, the liquor store for beer, 30-packs—enough for the night.

When Pizza Richard entered the bar, Tonya would have put a Bud in front of him. It'd been free, that was the deal, a trade for pizzas. The beers Tonya put in front of Red or Whitefeather, though, were not free. Pizza Richard'd have paid for those, a buck a piece and a "Hey, hey, keep a dollar for yourself." If Red arrived before Pizza Richard, he'd have run up a tab, a tab for Richard to pay.

Free or not, Pizza Richard would only drink a couple of beers at the bar, though. When he was ready to leave, he'd look around, and, if you were there, he might have leaned over to you, fixed you with his eyes, one blue, one brown, and said to you in that way he does, "Hey, hey, you, uh, want to come overs?" Then he'd go, leaving a couple of pizzas on the counter for anyone left behind. In the parking lot, maybe he'd grab a beer from the cooler in the bed of his truck, maybe he wouldn't. It didn't matter. On the way home from the bar, he kept off the paved road, cut across the valley leading a caravan up the rutted dirt tracks, through the wash, and over to his little one room cabin out by the Sheephole at the east end of Wonder Valley.

Pizza Richard enjoys the company, all the people that come over, mi casa es su casa. Exactly. But he doesn't want absolutely everyone to come over, doesn't want to have to supply beer and weed to the entire valley. Out at that one-room cabin by the Sheephole, he'd have a house full every night. Red would follow Richard home from the bar on his ATV. Dominic and Naomi would come over, Whitefeather, maybe, maybe Dingy and Fluffy. Curtis might walk over and he might already be drunk.

If you asked Pizza Richard, though, he'd tell you he needed to save money. He was turning 62, retirement age. He needed a nest egg. And with all these people coming over, all the beer, the bud, it got expensives, as he would say in that way he does. Besides, he had that stepson living in the cabin next door--and the stepson's kids, and the grandkids, nieces and nephews. They played video games, the TV always on, ran the AC all summer, electric heaters in the winter. Pizza Richard paid the electric bill, that was the deal, but $300 a month? And even when he was gone, Red was always over there, in

and out every day helping himself to any beer left in the fridge, drinking a couple there and loading his pockets for the trip back home. Red looked after Richard's two pet Chihuahuies, his Chihuahuas as he calls them in his way, but come on! Every day?

The thing is Pizza Richard was gone a lot. Every weekend. Friday mornings, Richard'd roust himself predawn and make the 100-mile drive down the hill back to work. He doesn't make that drive everyday, of course. Once he's down there, he stays there, works his shifts, Friday through Monday.

Pizza Richard'd make it to the pizza parlor just before seven A.M. When he arrived he'd rap on the parlor's backdoor and the owner would let him in. He'd set up the salad bar, fry the chicken, the potatoes, make the pizzas for the buffet, the ones for the school parties and the corporate lunches, work his eight-hour shift, then another five or so under the table, ten bucks an hour, no overtime, no vacation, no benefits.

After his shifts his work shirt comes off and he'll pour himself a pitcher of beer--not the pizza parlor's beer, not at $10 to $12 a pitcher. Exactly. He'll pour budget beer from the cans he's hidden in the walk-in, oh yeah, four cans fill a pitcher perfectly. He'll drink a couple pitchers in the parlor bar, watch the game on the flat screens. Then he'll smoke his last cigarette, one he pre-rolled over the week at home, and climb into the bed of his pick-up and snuggle into the foam pad and sleeping bag that will be his home for the next four days. But hey, hey you can't beat the commute, I mean, come on!

* * *

The boss, the owner of the pizza parlor, is Pizza Richard's brother. While he and Richard's younger brother went to college, worked hard, established themselves in

careers, Richard went to prison. Even as a kid, Richard was in and out of juvenile hall for petty theft. He was selling two dollar's worth of reds to a narc then doing six months in county when he should have been graduating from high school. After that first long stint in jail, Pizza Richard moved Oregon. There he married, had kids, and became the Backdoor Bandit, made famous in the newspapers for his basement backdoor smash and grab. He'd burglarize on his bike, riding around the rich neighborhoods. After he cased a place he'd kick in the door, grab the cash and jewelry, stuff it in the victim's pillow case, and toodle Santa Claus style to the pawn to trade it for the cash needed to maintain a smack habit far richer than his job as a short order cook could support. If you ask Pizza Richard, he'll tell you about the time he saw the cop cars stream up to the house he was robbing from an upstairs window. Seems a neighbor had watched him break in. His career as the Backdoor Bandit ended behind a basement couch in that house with police flashlights and revolvers trained on him. "Let's see just how slowly you can climb out from back there," a cop said. You'd be amazed, Richard would tell you, how slowly it was he stood up. For that one heist he did three years. His wife left him while he was in prison. After his parole prosecutors charged him with the 200 other burglaries. He skipped town. On the lam in Phoenix, he remarried, had more kids, worked again as a short order cook. After a drunken motorcycle wreck, he developed a taste for pain-killers, pharmaceuticals washed down with liquor—bourbon his preference, a fifth a day. He robbed drug stores for drugs. They caught him. He did more time. They shipped him back to Oregon for the 200 burglaries. He never saw his wives or his children ever again.

If you asked Pizza Richard, he'd tell you all that was thirty years ago, he'd tell you he's been clean since then, never touches hard liquor, lost that taste for hard drugs. He's worked at the pizza parlor since his brother opened it, 18 years, had been married to the third wife just as long. He moved to the one-room cabin in Wonder Valley with his old lady--her son owned it, the one who lived in the cabin next door. Rent was cheap, they would save money. Richard stayed with his mother down the hill when he worked. When she died, he moved into the back of his pickup parked behind the pizza parlor. Then his wife died and left him in the one-room Wonder Valley cabin alone.

Well, not exactly alone. Most nights Red would show up. And Dominic and Naomi. And Curtis would walk over and he'd already be drunk. The one-room cabin was way out there besides; out by the Sheephole, more than 20 miles one way to town. That's nearly $10 in gas just to pick up a 30-pack. Richard was supposed to be saving money; he has his retirement to think about.

Whitefeather had a guesthouse, next to Raub McCartney's rock-walled cabin. After Raub shot himself, Whitefeather just stayed there, he took the rock-walled cabin as his own. Nobody seemed to care. Whitefeather told Richard he needed money to get his grow going again, he only wanted $100 a month, plus electricity, and beer, and weed. And Whitefeather's rock-walled guesthouse is bigger than the one room cabin. It's closer to town, too—more than ten miles closer, that's like 20 miles round trip, a gallon of gas saved in his Richard's old truck. Besides, Whitefeather was right there, next door. He could take care of the Chihuahuies while Richard was working.

Whitefeather fixed the place up for Richard, moved the junk from the cabin to the yard, painted. Richard bought the materials, of course, and paid Whitefeather: cash, plus beer, and weed. Red helped, and Dominic. Then, after seven years in the one-room cabin, Pizza Richard loaded up the Chihuahuies and moved into the rock-walled guesthouse.

* * *

On Mondays Pizza Richard comes home to Wonder Valley. There's a Formica-topped table in the living room, and a big leather desk chair. If he's in his chair, he's tied a bandana around his head, he's pulled off his work shirt, and if it's summer, he might even sit there bare-chested. His arms are colored with the veiny lines of faded tattoos, Aries, the ram, his astrological sign, and others too faded to see and lost, too, even to his own memory. Those arms, tan to the shoulder from his sleeveless muscle tees, seem stitched to his stringy, patchwork corpus, itself stretched taut with the sinewy scars of the skin grafts from that drunken motorcycle accident, burns that came as he lay unconscious, shirtless, on the summer asphalt, his flesh literally cooking on the road like the proverbial egg.

Once Richard's in his big leather desk chair, he rarely moves. You get up to get a beer, get him one too. They're in the cooler, or the freezer, or the fridge. And see who else wants one. Whitefeather'll take one. He can drink beer, a lot of beer. That's OK, that's the deal, he gets beer, all he can drink. But Red can put it away, too, plenty, and when he leaves he'll take a beer in hand and a couple more for the road, tossing the cans out into the desert, not even bothering to recycle. Curtis might already be drunk, but he

can always drink more. And so can Dominic and Naomi. And Dingy and Fluffy. And the others who always drop in now that he doesn't live way out by the Sheephole. They'll shoot the shit, smoke some weed, have a beer or two, take a couple to go. Richard'll go through two or three thirty-packs a night, that's like, $40 a day. Like $500 a month. It's gotten so he has to run to town everyday to buy beer, $5 a day just on gas. Pizza Richard gets the beer for his friends, the pizzas, the weed, but, I mean, come on!

Limitless Stars

If you know Wonder Valley, of course, you know that a dozen cars scrawled across the dirt in front of a cabin is nothing unusual. But these cars were different. They all had tires, all four. They were clean. And just looking at them you knew that with the slightest twist of the key, each of them would fire right up. The cars were parked on the dirt lot of a compound, a fenced property with a house, a guesthouse, a hot tub and a pool of sorts--a Wonder Valley-style vacation rental. I had arrived uninvited. I pulled through the gate and parked my truck among those clean, running cars and walked to the house. L.A. people were staying in there, Hollywood actors and musicians, a morphing group of friends, thirty-somethings, who came to Wonder Valley to marvel at the changing colors of the desert sunset, the wide-open skies, the limitless stars, making for themselves a kind of Wonder Valley summer camp of guitars and campfires.

As I walked up to the vacation rental, one of the girls, the actress with the stunning green eyes, strode out from under the saltcedar trees in a towel. I imagined she was naked under that towel, making her way to the house from the hot tub or the funky-cool boat-hull pool where she swam under the warm sun of a Mojave autumn. The actress gave me a smile of casual recognition. She entered the house as another actor exited. "They're inside," that actor said pausing to grip my hand. I rapped on the open door with my knuckles, then entered twirling the joint I brought in my fingers. Jill had given me a joint, and I, not wanting to visit the Hollywood actors and musicians empty-handed, brought it as a sort of gift to the house.

Nobody noticed my entrance. The singer with the booming voice was shoveling food and beer into the open fridge. The T.V. was on. I stood fidgeting for a moment, rolling the joint around in my fingers. As i walked to the house I had stuck the joint in my pocket, then lipped it, both ends, stuck it in this ear, then that one, but finally twirled it in my fingers so that when the Hollywood singer with the booming voice finally looked up and said, "Hey, look who's here!" sticking out his hand to shake, I had to switch the joint from one hand to the other and missed the hand the singer offered. It didn't matter. The singer grabbed me and pulled him into a hug as the musician's girlfriend brightened with the sight of me offering a genuinely welcoming "Hey there!" They had baby carrots and hummus, she offered, a fresh supply of beer. Did I want one? I handed off the joint.

The Hollywood actors and musicians come to Wonder Valley every year. They always rent this same vacation rental. The house and guesthouse sit in a clump of saltcedar trees on a sandy knoll near Raub McCartney's rock-walled cabin. There's a hot tub and swimming pool--except the swimming pool was really the hull of an old boat sunk into the ground. The day I came, it had no water in it. The Wonder Valley-style vacation rental is owned by the Sibleys, the family who owns The Palms. That's where I'd met the Hollywood actors and musicians a few days before.

I had been there with Whitefeather and Pizza Richard when the singer with the booming voice and the classically trained guitarist stopped in. They ordered beers, beers chosen from among the row of bottles along the top shelf of the bar, the beers The Palms would like to stock and even maybe sometimes do—not all at the same time, of course, and in this case not the particular beer the Hollywood musicians had chosen, nor their

next choice, nor the next. In fact Tonya had just found a beer for the musicians when Whitefeather walked out of the bathroom drying his hands on his soiled jeans. Whitefeather had been in town with Pizza Richard all day--in the back of Richard's pickup with the cooler and the beer--and was sufficiently drunk to lean awkwardly into the Hollywood musicians' personal space pushing them back against the bar with his approach and come-on. Whitefeather insisted they come to Pizza Richard's, drink some beers, smoke some smoke. It was a Thursday, though, and Pizza Richard doesn't like to have anyone back to his place on Thurdays; he has to work the next day, has to get up at four in the morning to make the long drive down the hill. On Thursdays he just wants to drink a few beers and get to bed early. But the Hollywood musicians had acquiesced to Whitefeather's persistence. "These guys are coming over!" Whitefeather said as Richard rolled his eyes with a distinct displeasure.

The two Hollywood musicians brought beer and guitars to Pizza Richard's rock-walled guesthouse. They stood talking then playing and singing and after an hour or so left, but having had a good enough time to show up the next night at my bleached-white cabin with more actors and actresses and musicians and beers and guitars. They took pictures of the sunset, the mountains, asshole's burnt-out cabin, his crenellated wall, the charred remains of the old municipal bus. They smoked a joint under the gaze of the bleached-white cabin's infrared cameras.

The pinnacle of the Hollywood actors and musicians' stay in Wonder Valley would be their own performances at a concert at The Palms the next night. The concert was the finale to a weekend art event where the artists of the area open their studios to

visitors from down below, setting out plates of cubed cheeses and round crackers and talking about the inspiration of the desert, of the changing colors of the sunset, the wide-open skies, the limitless stars. Earlier on the day of the concert, I'd visited the studio of an artist who had painted a canvas of Ricka McGuire's 1950 Wayne school bus. In the painting, the bus sits on Ned Bray's parcel way up there at the northern edge of Wonder Valley. The artist called the painting "Vega" for Ned's little red car sitting lifeless next to the bus. She had painted the canvas of the 1950 Wayne school bus from a Polaroid snapshot she'd taken on a foray off of the paved road and into Wonder Valley's grid of washboard tracks. It was part of a series of Wonder Valley paintings she was working on, paintings that depict the "remnants and relics of this quasi ghost valley settlement." Her work, a blurb about her says, "eulogizes abandoned habitats and domestic landscapes." Of course the artist didn't know the bus was Ricka's or the Vega Ned's. The expediencies of her work, she told me, were such that she painted the pictures, then learned the back stories later, if ever. She was working under a grant, she said, had more Wonder Valley to paint, but she was heading off soon, had a fellowship and a showing on the East Coast. The painting of Ricka's bus and Ned's Vega hung in a gallery in town along with a price tag of $9,500. A good investment, it will surely go up in price, she said.

The "Vega" artist encouraged me to attend the performance art exhibition that would be at The Palms that evening. The open studio weekend culminated on the weathered ply-wood stage behind the bar, lit by lights strung up on the skeleton of the inverted skateboard ramp. In the art performance, a man with a Charles Manson look and

a prison jumpsuit writhed like a snake on the stage while pushing a guitar in a plastic grocery bag around with his head. He rose occasionally to adjust the levels on the guitar's amp. Near the bar's rear entrance two men in dervish trances raked up sand and drained it through their fingers, drizzling it in arcs on the ground and on themselves. The artists and visitors from down below watched the performance in silence from an assortment of chairs scrounged up for that purpose. At one point Whitefeather, seeing a friend in the doorway of the bar, inadvertently wandered between the sand-pouring men, and noticing them, and stood staring, slacked-jaw and baffled. Finally Diana, the bartender, broke his trance. “It's supposed to be art!” she bellowed into the quiet.

At the performance art exhibition, the Hollywood actors and musicians sat inside The Palms drinking beer as they waited for the Sibleys to finish cooking for bar patrons and take the stage as a band. After the Sibleys, the singer with the booming voice would sing, then the other Hollywood actors and musicians would play mostly in ensemble bands and mostly for one another. They'd sing “Won-der, Won-der Valley / Won-der, Won-der Valleeey,” a song they had written at the Wonder Valley-style vacation rental and released as a single. After they played, the Hollywood actors and musicians watched the sunrise from a hill above the valley.

When I arrived with the borrowed joint that next day it was nearly sunset. The Hollywood actors and musicians were gathering out back, a clutch of new arrivals harmonized over their guitars as others debated the math surrounding ’shrooms. The classically trained musician was dividing an ounce of psilocybin mushrooms into teabags and preparing the tea that would provide that night's *experience*. There are eight eighths

in an ounce, one eighth is a dose. They counted participants. “You in”? they asked me. “Umm, uhh, sure, I guess, just a taste,” I stammered in response.

“That's what I like about you,” the blond actress said. “You're open to anything! I guess it’s ‘cause you’re a writer and into *experiences*.”

“We tripped the other night,” the singer with the booming voice added. “Ando took half a dose and still had a pretty good trip. Take half of a half of a dose. You should still trip pretty good.”

Soon, the discussion turned to which was the best hill to watch the sunset fast approaching. Ando was for the rocks over Whitefeather's rock-walled cabin, Mount Ando, he'd dubbed it. “It's not just a name, it's a suggestion!” Up there you get a 360 degree view of the valley, he told the newcomers as a means to sell his idea. It feels like no one had ever been up there before, he joked, that he had been the first, the trash and broken bottles placed there by God. The quickly setting sun soon vetoed his idea. They passed the joint I brought and debated the knoll to the south but settled on the hill to the west, the one with the rock cairns they erected at sunrises and sunsets over the past week. Walking to the hill a newcomer asked me how I knew the Hollywood actors and musicians.

“I live here,” he said. “I met them in the bar a couple of days ago.”

“Oh, it must be wonderful living in such a beautiful place,” the newcomer responded. I nodded and looked away, not sure what to say. Like them I could leave any time I wanted, my truck parked in the dirt in front of the house would fire up with the

turn of a key. I come and goes on a whim, head down the hill to a home at the coast. Others, I know, don't have so many choices.

The sun broke into rays, its orange orb disintegrating into the horizon. The singer with the booming voice played guitar and sang. The others turned into silhouettes haloed by glowing aureoles.

"Look at the mountains," another newcomer, the one in the cowboy boots and a denim miniskirt exclaimed. "Oh my God, they're beautiful! Look, look! They're purple!"

As the colors changed, I walked down off the hill, back to the parking lot in front of the Wonder Valley-style vacation rental. I walked back to my truck. The Hollywood actors and musicians would be returning down below in the morning, back home to L.A. From my truck I watched them, shadows against the orange glow of the horizon. They chatted in groups, danced, and sang. I wouldn't stay, wouldn't take his half of a half of a dose of mushroom tea. The Hollywood actors and musicians would have their *experience* without me. They wouldn't miss me. In the failing light I drifted home, across the valley and up Naborly Road to my bleached-white cabin.

What to Do About Dude

If you've ever been in Wonder Valley you might have heard about this. Frank Burum stabbed Dominic and Naomi Bruxer one night at The Palms bar. An ambulance raced Naomi 65 miles to the hospital in Palm Springs; a chopper airlifted Dominic to ICU in LA. Burum was a skinhead, a known white-supremacist. Naomi, everyone would tell you, was black.

It was the day after Halloween. Naomi and Dominic had come to the bar for a quick drink with others from a meeting at the community center, but soon, just after seven in the evening, those others went home, leaving them with a few remaining regulars, and George behind the bar.

Naomi joined Dominic outside for a cigarette, he was out there with that fool Frank Burum. Burum started up his shit, mouthing off, called Naomi a nigger. Dominic urged her to go back inside. In there, she grumbled to the regular with the slicked-back hair and white Fu Manchu, Fuck that fool, she said. Fuck all this Wonder Valley bullshit. Then she heard Dominic scream. "*You motherfucker! You motherfucker!*" She leaned over to the regular and told him she was going to take care of the situation, whatever it was. She was going to regulate. That Frank Burum motherfucker just doesn't know when to quit. He didn't scare her. She strode back outside.

The moon hung full, heavy overhead. It cast a gray pall over the parking lot, washed the color from the few remaining cars, left a void of black in the shadows. Naomi found herself alone. She called for Dominic. Nothing. She stepped out of the warm glow shining from the bar's front window and into the cold light of the moon. A

floodlight warmed the peeling paint of The Palms Restaurant Bar sign and its splintering plywood buffalo. Naomi walked around Dominic's truck, parked where they'd left it. She looked around the remaining cars, no one. She shrugged and turned to go back inside.

He was in the black void. From out of it, he crept up behind her. She swung around to face him. He smiled. Then, with a quick flick of his Buck knife, he slashed at her throat. Her severed artery fountained with the beat of her heart. She shrieked and grabbed her neck, and slowly sank to her knees, sank down into an ever-widening pool of her own blood, black as tar in the moonlight. Frank Burum, into the void, once again disappeared.

* * *

Others had warned Dominic about Frank Burum, that he was a racist, that Naomi might be in danger around this man. In fact, Dominic and Naomi had known Burum well.

They lived at the Ostrich Farm, that maze of six-foot fences, pens, whitewashed stalls up past the Cat Ranch, past Ned Bray's place, up next to George Stadler's on the edge of Wonder Valley. The ostriches are long gone; tumbleweeds now grow in the sand of the corrals.

Naomi recognized Wonder Valley when she found the Ostrich Farm on the internet; she had been to Wonder Valley before, as a youngster, had come out here with friends, stayed at their parents vacation cabin, drove up and down the roads on their motorcycles. She remembered those times as good times. Besides, it was the cheapest place in the state with five acres and a well. She got the Ostrich Farm as a foreclosure,

paid for it with the settlement from her divorce. She bought it sight unseen. And as it turned out, it came with a squatter. The old man who homesteaded the land, built the place, raised the ostriches and over-leveraged his investments, and simply stayed on when the bank took the place back from under him. Evicted and bankrupt, Naomi dragged him and his trailer and his junk to the vacant land to the north, and there he stayed, supplied with water and power by Dominic and Naomi, until, at 85, he died.

Other than that old squatter, Dominic and Naomi were slow to meet people in Wonder Valley. Dominic at least got out, though. He pounded sand looking for work as a handyman around the valley and even went to The Palms occasionally in the afternoons. Naomi, on the other hand, had only been to the bar a couple of times in the past.

Of course, if you'd been at the bar the night of the stabbing, you'd have noticed her. She is striking, not like other Wonder Valley women. Her alabaster teeth are straight, for example, and all present and accounted for. And her skin, the color of oiled mahogany, is smooth and unblemished. She's tall—nearly six-foot--and fit, you'd have noticed, with strong hands and toned biceps well-defined. If you had been at The Palms that night you'd have seen her cover her mouth as she laughed her nervous laugh, and as she talked your eyes might have drifted, and with your peripheral vision scanned the cut of her western shirt—clean, fashionable—and the nape of her chocolate-brown neck, her Adam's apple, shaded under the broad brim of her matching cowboy hat. If you'd have followed the line of her leg up from the boot to the hollow of her tight black skirt, you

might have suspected—quite correctly--that hidden up there, tucked up in that little shimmy of charmeuse, hung her penis.

She grew up a dark-skinned boy in white suburbia, son of a Dutch engineer and an Indonesian mother. In fact, when he was a young man, women found him exotic and attractive. If asked Naomi, she'd tell you that that young man could have had any woman he wanted. He hopped woman to woman, bed to bed. Maybe, she'd tell you, he had something to prove. At a young age he married and had children. It wasn't enough for him. He was conflicted; he struggled with his identity. Deep down, he always knew. He sought therapy: two years of sex reassignment counseling and soul searching. Then, with doctor-prescribed hormone therapy and psychiatric oversight, that young man blossomed into Naomi.

As part of her transformation, Naomi played the tranny scene in the bars of L.A. She dated men with the same abandon she, as a young man, had dated women. As a woman, though, she finally felt right in her skin. She eventually settled down with a man, moved to his apartment in the San Fernando Valley. It was through this man that she met Dominic—he was his best friend. As Naomi and Dominic hung out, they too became friends. She was returning home with him, in fact, when they discovered their friend on the floor of their apartment. Of a bad heart, the boyfriend had died. Naomi and Dominic have been together since.

Dominic's biker's look, his goat's tuft of gray beard on his chin, his silver hair pulled into a knot behind his head, attracted Naomi. He reminded her of her brothers, all of whom had been in jail, one, for murder, in prison. Naomi eschewed the drugs and

petty crime, the gangster affiliations and associated violence that her brothers fell into, but that life fascinated her. Despite Dominic's bad-boy looks, however, he's clean, has never been in jail, has no criminal record, hasn't even had a speeding ticket in years.

Frank Burum, on the other hand, was the real thing. Naomi knew his type when she first saw him through the Ostrich Farm's dark windows. He sat on the front porch of the spartan cabin across the road drinking beer, throwing the empties into the bare sand of the yard. Right away she recognized that prison yard build, his skinhead tattoos. Through the window as she watched him, she felt a certain attraction. She knew his kind. She knew there'd be trouble.

* * *

The last time Frank Burum was in The Palms, he sat at the bar and leered at other customers over his beer. If you'd have seen him come in, you'd have wanted to look at him, you have wanted to eye him up and down, that shaved skin head tattooed with flames, but you could feel those menacing eyes of his, and you'd do anything not to meet them.

He didn't go to The Palms much. At least not inside. He'd stop out front on occasion, wait in his car for someone to bring him beer or cigarettes or whatever. He didn't go in the bar much, because, for one thing, the terms of his probation prohibited him from entering drinking establishments. And for another thing, he'd been kicked out of this particular drinking establishment after he threatened to kill Mark Bennett, the bartender, because they'd run out of Jack. Bennett, behind the bar with a baseball bat, finally convinced him to leave. And that wasn't the first time he'd caused trouble at the

bar. On the bar's back patio a few weeks prior, he had picked a mouthy woman up by her throat, squeezing her windpipe. Bystanders stood by, mouths agape, sure they were witnessing a murder. Finally they compelled Burum to stop and encouraged him to go.

Frank Burum had a wife—common law—and raised her children and his own. Some loved him as their father. For all his flaws, they felt his love for them. Others have disowned him. Of Burum's own childhood, no one really knows the abuse—physical and sexual—he suffered. They do know, however, that he flashed easily to anger; his knee-jerk emotion was hate. In his 47 years, Burum racked up a string of priors that included assault, battery with gross bodily injury, witness intimidation, Latino bashing, and felony possession. It was the hate crimes and felony stalking, however, the threatening and harassing of his neighbors that got him his most recent time in the pen. The neighbors, he thought they were Jewish. He blared blinding lights through their windows all night, blasted anti-Semitic hate songs at them until their children knew all the words and sang them for the judge in court: "We're taking down the ZOG machine Jew, by Jew, by Jew. The white man marches on." The fact that the neighbors weren't Jewish didn't save him from a three-year stint in the joint. After his parole he found the spartan cabin north of the Cat Ranch and Ned Bray's place and across the corrugated dirt road from the Ostrich Farm at the far back side of Wonder Valley.

*   *   *

Naomi had been hanging laundry in the Ostrich Farm yard when Burum first approached her. In a hot summer's twilight, she'd been out in a bikini top--out of sight, she'd thought, unaccustomed as she was to having neighbors. Walking back to the cabin

in the deep dusk, she heard him over at her gate. He called to her, had brought a carton of beer, the half-filled remains of a twelve pack. He handed her one over the fence. In the gloom she noticed his smile.

Burum could be charming, but Naomi most found his danger thrilling. The intensity in his eyes, like a wild animal, instilled fear. Like a lion tamer, Naomi thought she could control him. She flirted with him, giggled at his jokes, covering her mouth as she laughed. In the days after Burum first met her over the Ostrich Farm fence, he had began coming over regularly, crossing the dirt road with a box of beer. Naomi avoided being left alone with him. Slowly, though, he gained Dominic's trust. After a short while, Burum moved from the spartan cabin into a single-wide down by The Palms, but he stayed friendly. One night, he took Dominic and Naomi to a restaurant in town, then a bar to shoot some pool. Burum paid for everything. Then they went to The Palms—Naomi's first time there. By this time, they were all well drunk. This was the night Burum grabbed that mouthy woman by the throat on the patio--Naomi thought he was going to kill her. She intervened, saving that woman's life, she'd tell you. She convinced Burum they should leave. The three went back to his place.

It was at Burum's that Dominic and Naomi fought. It was late and Dominic had to work in the morning, a handyman job. But Naomi was drunk and testy, she didn't want to leave. Dominic left her curled up on Frank Burum's floor.

In the dark, Naomi'd tell you, Burum melted. If you asked her, she'd tell you that through the night, he told he of his childhood, the violence and abuse. Then he kissed her. Frank Burum, she'd say, was under her spell. In the morning, they lay entwined

together, Naomi's burnished body in Burum's white arms. "What are we going to do about Dude?" he asked her.

"What are we going to do about Dude?" Naomi let go a nervous laugh, but she saw the cold seriousness in Burum's eyes. Dominic was in the way of his getting what he wanted.

Over the following weeks Burum got more serious. If you asked Naomi, she'd tell you he was falling in love, that he had turned into her kitten, that he was no longer a tiger. Besides, he drank himself impotent and was usually unable to get it up. To her, he had lost his appeal, her interest. "What are we going to do about Dude?" he repeated.

They were nude together in the salon of the Ostrich Farm one afternoon when Dominic returned home unexpectedly. Caught in the act, it was an opportunity for Naomi to break off the affair. She told Dominic everything, she made amends with Burum's wife. Months passed and Dominic and Naomi put their relationship back together. Then Frank Burum started to call. Late night calls imploring, cajoling her to come back to him. He loved her, he said. Then the threats. He'd kill Dude, he said, how would she like that? He'd kill them both, if she didn't come back to him. She unplugged the phone. Then two weeks later, the night after Halloween, Burum found them at The Palms.

* * *

Dominic and Naomi were finishing their beers when Burum entered. Neither of them would meet his gaze. Burum's eyes fell on Naomi; he mad-dogged her as he

walked across the room, pulling up a stool a few down from Dominic. The bar fell silent. Naomi finally leaned in to Dominic, “He keeps staring at me,” she said.

Jesus, Dominic thought. He and Naomi were just about to leave, he wanted grab Naomi by the arm and get the hell out of there. But Dominic knew Burum, he knew, he preyed on the weak. He worried that their leaving in the face of his arrival might embolden him, that he might take their leaving just as he walked in as a sign of fear, of weakness, that he might follow them out, that there might be trouble. He feared that if he didn't disarm the situation, they'd forever have to watch their backs. Dominic sighed and ordered another beer.

Dominic tried to remain casual—nothing’s wrong, everything’s cool. He challenged Burum to game of pool, just like old times, like nothing had happened. Dominic suggested doubles, he and Burum versus Naomi and the bar regular with slicked-back hair and a white Fu Manchu. Burum smiled. Dominic racked the balls and Burum broke; he was affable and friendly, the charming neighbor they had known. Dominic took his shots. It was Naomi’s turn, but she was still back at the bar talking. Dominic and Burum waited, then gave up and stepped out front together for a smoke. Naomi soon followed.

Outside, Dominic rolled a cigarette for Naomi. They smoked in the light of the open door; Naomi, with a couple beers in her, got mouthy. “Man, don’t be calling me at home, man! I told you, this shit’s over!”

Burum pushed up close to her. “Bitch, you’d better watch your fucking mouth!”

“Nigga, you’re just a pussy!” she spat back at him.

Burum flashed to anger. "*Nigger?* You're the nigger!" He stepped up in her face. Dominic pushed between them. Grumbling, Naomi went back inside the bar.

As Dominic turned around, Burum's hand came out from behind his back, the chrome steel of his Buck knife flashing white in the moonlight. He lunged. Dominic, more of a reflex than a reaction, axe-kicked the knife from Burum's hand. It clanked to the ground at their feet. Burum stared at Dominic in stunned silence, his nostrils flaring with each breath. Dominic took a step backwards. "We don't want no trouble, man" he said. He again tried to disarm the situation. "Come on, man, let's just go back inside and finish our game." As Dominic spoke, Frank lowered himself down. He crouched like an animal leering up at Dominic, fumbling for his knife. Dominic watched him return it to behind his back and the sheath. He pushed open the bar's door. Burum didn't follow. He had softened, though, his tone changed; he seemed courteous, apologetic. From just outside the warm glow of the doorway he called to Dominic. "I need to talk to you," he said.

"Talk to me in here," Dominic replied from the threshold.

Burum smiled a sheepish smile. Dominic backed into the bar further, but Burum implored him.

"Come on, man. Come here for just a second."

Dominic stepped back outside.

If you asked Dominic, he'd tell you he doesn't know why he went back outside. He might tell you about Burum's smile, how he had seemed to have calmed down, the fury in his eyes had passed. He might tell you how he thought Burum just wanted to

gripe about Naomi, to tell him, yeah, man, your old lady's a fucking bitch. He might tell you he never thought Burum would actually stab anybody, that his psycho skinhead hater-thing was just a bunch of bullshit.

"Come on; come here for a just second," Burum said to him. Burum smiled that smile, a naughty boy's self-conscious smirk. Then his eyes went cold. He lunged at Dominic with the Buck knife he hid behind his back. Dominic felt the knife's polished steel painlessly slice into his throat, piercing his esophagus, his larynx, his trachea. Burum pulled the knife back as quickly as he'd jabbed it, its blade now candy apple crimson in the warm light of the window. He held Dominic's gaze for a heartbeat, then fled into the void of darkness. Dominic grabbed his own neck. "You motherfucker! You motherfucker!" he yelled, furious. Anger and adrenaline surged through him He pushed through the bar's door and strode back inside. Duped, he wanted Burum brought to justice. Blood frothed up in his mouth as he panted. Someone grabbed a t-shirt from the sale rack and pressed it to Dominic's neck. "Call 911!" they yelled to George behind the bar. George stood and stared, immobile.

Inside the bar, Naomi was agitated after her exchange with Burum. Standing with her back to the door, she bitched to the regular about all the Wonder Valley bullshit. She heard Dominic yelling, but as he burst through the door, he passed behind her. Distracted as she was, she hadn't seen him come back inside. Hearing Dominic yell, however, pissed her off. She leaned into the regular, told him she was going to put Burum in check. She went outside. Seconds later, Dominic heard her shriek. By the time he

reached her, she was slumped down to her knees, painting the cracked, sand-covered asphalt with her own blood.

Dominic ran back into the bar. His heart throbbed in his ears as he grabbed a handful of t-shirts. “Call 911!” he screamed again, his chest bloodied by the flow from his neck and the drizzle of his mouth. Adrenaline surging and unaware of the extent of his own injuries, he ran back outside to help Naomi. George fumbled with the phone, stammered confused instructions to the emergency operator. At the operator’s insistence, he handed the phone off to another at the bar, who then passed it to another. George slammed the bar’s heavy wooden front door, sliding a timber through steel loops across it, locking the victims with the perpetrator outside.

*   *   *

The Palms sits at the geographic center of Wonder Valley. It’s on the paved road where the dirt track of Palm Drive meets the asphalt. And it’s only fifteen miles outside of town, fifteen minutes away even if you obey the speed limit. An emergency vehicle dispatched from town could be there in no time. But emergency vehicles aren’t dispatched from town. Wonder Valley is unincorporated county, not serviced by deputies under contract to the nearby municipality. If you called 911 from a place like The Palms, you’d find that County Sheriff’s deputies are sent from a county station about twenty miles further west, some thirty-odd miles from The Palms, giving a man ample time to flee the scene of any crime. You could drop into the wash behind the bar, skirt the one or two inhabited places, the salt mine, and then you probably wouldn’t see another soul until you hit the state line and the river some ninety miles distant. Or you could beeline south,

over the mountains and through the park and the miles of uninterrupted desert to Mexico. Burum did none of that.

When sheriff's deputies finally arrived that night, they cordoned off the parking lot, strung up crime scene tape, took pictures, performed interviews, wouldn't let anybody in or out of the bar. The investigation lasted three hours. All the while, a drifter's Chihuahua yapped and yapped at the bar's banged-up dumpster.

The next morning local radio would announce: Good police work by Sheriff's Deputies found Frank Burum hiding on the property behind the dumpster. He was taken into custody.

Frank Burum still had the bloody knife in his hand.

Burum died in prison a few months later. The news reported liver failure as the cause of death; it was the second Centinela Prison death in a week. There'd be an investigation into prison conditions. Shortly thereafter, if you'd gone to the tobacco store in town, you might have seen a coffee can on the counter with Frank Burum's picture on it. Family members were asking for donations; they were taking a collection for his funeral. Rumor has it Burum didn't want a prison cremation. It was his last request: he didn't want his ashes mingled with those of niggers.

* * *

Naomi doesn't much leave the Ostrich Farm these days. Through the dark windows of her home, she watched the owners of the spartan cabin remodel the place, move the door and windows so the front porch faces south, away from her cabin. When

she talks about Frank Burum, she touches the nut of brown flesh at the base of her neck, her scar, the location of her stab wound. She loved him, too, she'd tell you.

When the ambulance arrived at The Palms that night, they found Naomi stabilized, the blood flow stopped by the t-shirts Dominic used as compresses. She called family from the ambulance. At the hospital, a nurse thought she must have come from a Halloween party, that she was masquerading as a woman, her western wear a costume. A helicopter airlifted Dominic to surgery then a week in ICU at that hospital in L.A. Burum had severed an artery; it had been hemorrhaging into his esophagus, filling his stomach with blood. As he attended to Naomi's wounds, he nearly bled out. No one expected him to live.

At The Palms they talk about the he-she, that *thing* that was stabbed. If you asked them they tell you *she* was a man, that the *woman* was a *man*. An *it*, they'd snigger. What was *it* doing messing around with a guy like Frank Burum anyway? Arguing with that guy? *It* was asking for it. *It* just needs to learn how to shut *it*s fucking mouth.

These days, Naomi and Dominic spend their evenings together at home. Dominic's throat still pains him; scar tissue rasps his voice. Neither has ever been back to The Palms. They are no longer welcome there.