

STEVEN PATTERSON

*A Good Pig*

Bridy McDaniel dreamed of avalanches and earthquakes, how they might bear his quick release, honor intact, burdens gone with a scour and a swallow. It was his one repeating fantasy. But there was no high terrain for miles, no chance for velocity, so that was one possibility robbed. And those cracks deep underground, the ones that split wide and made this sky thick with smoke and cinders long ago, had settled into slumber for decades, puny. The chance for climax, a disaster with purpose, was remote. So he waited it out, gnawed that bone. The thing his father had taught him—"Eyes on the horizon, kid"—came to him as a heartsick wish. It was better, he thought, to keep his head down, tipped to his feet, and not consider how much of nothing was out there.

This is what it had come to: Bridy with his chin on the rim of a lukewarm tub, eyeballing a lone turkey chick that worked its nerves, wandering the linoleum floor of the tiny bathroom. It was not easy footing for a fowl, and its wings would make mad whirls to right itself when it started to slide. The chick wobbled back and forth, leading with its head like an awkward boxer. Sometimes it rested under the sink, its neck crimped to study the copper plumbing above. When Bridy leaned back into the filmy water the turkey startled and began its circuit again, leaving little feathers in its wake. Bridy tried to sink down into the murk, his bony knees rising up to accommodate his trunk. He wanted to silent the scratching of those little feet.

"God help us," he announced. He held his breath and went under.

The wall of the trailer shook and the little window above the bath whistled at its seams with the wind gusting. Bridy could sense all this even underwater, and he enjoyed that the submersion was like his pills that way, shutting out some things and amplifying others. He could imagine the wind cutting through the landscape outside, rising up every night and rattling everyone to sleep. It arrived out of the west, rolling over the low terrain, the scrub and sage lava hills. Farther out it swelled over the large ranches, rippling the hay fields

and parting around the dark cows that grazed on public land. It swept the dairy farms, with their feed lots and catch ponds, gathering up the stink. Finally it accelerated downhill into town, heeling into a collection of old farmhouses with blistered paint and newer trailers with plastic veneers slowly getting sandblasted to a dull finish.

This was Ash Springs, a settlement on the high edge of the Snake River Plain. Bridy's place was at the very edge of town, in the shadow of the tall, smokestacked plant that processed whey from the dairy milk. Standing at the southeast corner of the lot he could imagine his years in the Navy, beholding the sagebrush sea from the prow of inhabited land. But this vessel was wrecked—a one-acre collection of tall weeds, the earth powdered and compacted by years of footfall. Aside from the trailer there was one broken down corral that took up about a quarter of the lot but which held no livestock. Chicken wire was tacked to its inside edge three feet high, holes gaping in several places. Nearby was an old shed and tack room with a partly collapsed roof and the smell of leather and horsehair still in it. Around the whole lot was an old post fence with cross beams that wouldn't support a man's weight anymore. It was only sturdy on its northern face, where Bridy shared it with a neighbor, Don Roy Keeler. There it was shored up, nailed neat and solid on Don Roy's side with planks, walling him off.

It would be bath time for Cassie as well. He thought this from underwater, forcing deep, relaxing breaths through his periscope nose. His daughter was six, a little beauty tough enough to scrap with boys her age. She looked to blossom like her mother, a third-runner-up for Miss Rodeo Idaho, dazzle and poise under the arena lights. In a few years Cassie herself would surely quicken the air around her and a bronc rider, full of his own juice and polish, would circle to her, dancing like a yearling colt. He'd be the one to tip her head back, shielding her eyes with the brim of his own hat. Bridy tried to remember this: when he had the time to make the three-hour drive to Pocatello, when her mother would let him in the house, he should talk with Cassie and warn her about boys like that, like him. He felt certain that she would not listen, because she was part his, and horses don't hop—they hustle.

Bridy exhaled a furious lungful through his mouth, spending his breath to ripple the water because he liked its sound. He used his braced feet to push his torso back up into the chilly air, his knees

descending. He saw that the turkey had come to the tub's edge and was peering up with its black opal eyes. It took fright at his reappearance and scrambled toward the closed door, landing on its soft breast whenever its legs went out.

"Don't blame you, kid," he said to the bird. "You're the last one standing." There was gin in his laugh, a little hoarse rumble that turned the bird's head. "Maybe we should make plans for Christmas. I'll let you decide which one of us we carve first."

The turkey turned away and examined the door, its feathers bristling as it fluffed itself against the cold. How tiny and precise it seemed, a perfect replica of all its strutting kin who, one week earlier, had filled the corral. There had been exactly fifty-two of them, which Bridy had bought with a bounced check during the Monday livestock auction down in Shoshone. He had intended to be a turkey rancher, fattening the juvenile birds on grain to dress and sell for the holidays. It seemed like an easy way to raise a few dimes for a man with poor, dry land. He laid out four rows of six-foot tin feeders and two water pans in which they could dip their beaks. He bought the rolls of chicken wire and closed in the corral in an afternoon. The simple beauty of this plan ended swiftly on the third night when something—neighbor dogs, coyotes, skunks—massacred twenty-six birds while the sun was down. He mended the fence, but the next night it was fifteen more gone. Bridy spent the third night perched in worry on the stoop with a flashlight and an old twenty-two rifle. But the gin and painkillers put him to sleep. When daybreak roused him and he realized his busted vigil, he wandered around defeated, finding the lone survivor standing in its water pan in a daze. Since then he and the bird had spent nights together in the trailer, each regarding the other with disbelief.

"Strike three," he said to himself. The bathwater was cool and it made him shiver.

Dead turkeys were one end of things. At the other end was a shiny dude, captain of the high school rodeo team, with girls lined up like a pack string behind him. Then it was three years skimming the world's oceans, an ordnance man on a carrier, enough excitement to live on. But the doctors pitched him out. All those years holding on to airborne, twisting creatures, all the collected weight of those heavy bombs, they had compressed his backbone, the pain getting worse. So it was back to the high, Idaho desert with a tiny disability

check and his rodeo queen waiting in a veil. What followed was four years of sitting at the wheel of a milk truck, hauling for the dairies, and even that sorry regimen seeped down to his back over time. With a growing taste for those pain pills he ditched the truck for the sofa, slowly using up all his chances at home. The funny part was that when Bridy left he thought it was his idea, proof of his own control. He had said, "A man walking out is a man going somewhere."

The house in Ash Springs had been the cheapest he could find. The only luxury it came with was a half-stray cat abandoned by the family who sold the homestead to him. It showed up casually, crawling through the cat door Bridy never did close off, and curled on his sleeping chest, slowly kneading him awake. These were soft moments he craved, but which always ended after a day or two when the cat took its claws to something and got tossed, yowling, into the sagebrush again.

After some weeks of testing his limits with the gin Bridy decided he needed an income to keep up. His first attempt was worms. A dizzy rumor had been traveling the countryside allowing that worms were the certain future.

"In Japan, they built too many skyscrapers and now they're low on worms. Same thing in Hong Kong China. They'll pay ten dollars a pound." You heard talk like this nearly everywhere.

So Bridy equipped himself with a pair of two hundred gallon tanks that roiled with pink bodies and black loam. But the Japanese never showed up with the money. In two months he managed to sell three pint containers to a couple of Seattle fishermen who didn't know they'd be better off casting dry flies.

Next he tried ostriches. He laid out fifteen hundred dollars for a sturdy male bird before he realized that a breeding female to make the pair would go for nearly ten times that. There was no luck in peddling the services of an ostrich stud, no market at all. So that muscly devil just circled the corral day after day, eating up grain at a fearsome pace and getting meaner by the minute. If Bridy lingered by the fence the bird would lunge like a snake striking, in search of a fleshy prize like an ear. When he was ready to surrender he had a traveling butcher dispatch the wicked thing, and gave over half the meat in payment. He had heard it was savory dark meat, like the best part of a dressed steer. But he found it tough and iron-rich,

perhaps an embodiment of its personality, and he could not bear to eat more than a couple of steaks before he gave the rest away.

Screeching roused him, and he found the turkey tight up against the door with its legs peddling a riot. In fact, he could now see that it had managed to squeeze its head through a hole in the cheap pine door where a knot had dried and ejected. The little thing's shoulders banged against the wood as if it might force itself through. Bridy could hear commotion on the other side of the door as well.

"Oh, shit. The cat," he said as he rose from the water. Trying to hurry he caught a knee on the side of the tub and splayed forward, landing hard and sliding on his belly. He reached for the turkey's body and gathered it, his legs like a frog's, inching him closer.

"Goddamn it cat, don't you take that head!" There was a surprising panic he felt gush in his chest, an unwillingness to concede. Rolling to his side he reached one arm to pound the door while he cradled the downy breast of the chick with the other. The little bird's claws raked his forearm as the banging continued. Finally Bridy felt the slack in its body as the cat did seem to spook and release the turkey's head. He rolled to his back and gathered it to him. It gaped with one wild eye, the other having been lost to the cat, and put up a persistent screaming racket.

"Jesus, kid," he said as the bird shot a hot stream of crap across his neck. "It's over."

The sad thing stopped its hollering and jerked its head, open-mouthed, in all directions, scanning with its one eye.

"It's over," Bridy repeated.

He ejected the cat again that night. Afterwards he tossed in bed for a while. He had one dream about carrying a bomb with him into the bathtub, and then he didn't sleep much. In the morning, he carried the turkey outside and set it on the ground beside him. He did not cage it in the corral.

"You've had your trials, kid," he said calmly. "You've earned your freedom."

The bird did not react to him. It stood there with its one eye and slack in its beak, holding silent horrors in its head.

"Morning." A voice called from over the northern fence. Don Roy Keeler gave a stiff, two-fingered wave from the post he was leaning against. Don Roy was a one-time cattle man who had given up cowboying ten years earlier, selling his ranch and moving onto his

three acres in town. Now in his sixties he fiddled with a handful of horses and mules, saddle-breaking the horses and getting the mules ready for harness work. He made a small income this way, and his social security checks filled in the cracks.

“Paper this morning says I live below the poverty line,” he said without prompting. “Can’t figure what the big deal is. Own my truck, got no mortgage. Maybe I’m too stupid to know better.” His grin gave him away. Bridy smiled himself, weakly, feeling a scald in his throat.

He looked back toward Don Roy’s house. A young woman was rifling the glove box of the truck in front. He recognized Teresa, the Mexican girl who lived with Don Roy. She had come with her family to work the ranches and had gone to school through the eleventh grade, learning English and getting a taste for American afflictions. She couldn’t go for long without an ache for methamphetamine, and she dealt a little on the side. Bridy knew this because sometimes drivers would pull up to his trailer and call out in Spanish. He’d have to jerk his thumb toward the fence, the eyes of the drivers fuzzy and doubtful. He did not blame his old neighbor for overlooking all this. The girl was in her twenties, not all of her beauty drained, and that allowed Don Roy to brag a bit to his old cowboy friends, the ones who didn’t know such ruin existed, thinking the girl’s wild eyes were her tropical past welling up.

“What’s the story, Don Roy?” Bridy’s eyes traveled the ground as he walked.

“Take a look.”

The solid fence blocked his view, but as Bridy came closer he could see that Don Roy stood separated from him by a couple of body lengths, and that between them was a newly-built pen, about fifteen by fifteen. Right in the middle, with its snout in the air, was an enormous pig, a pink oil drum with legs. It grunted at Bridy’s approach.

“God damn,” he said. “Where’d that come from?”

Don Roy gave it an admiring grin. “Right there’s a good pig. Axel Foster gave it to me in trade for a couple of mules and harness. He didn’t have enough in the way of cash so we squared it off with this girl here.”

Bridy stepped up on the low rail of the fence and leaned over to have a better look. "Yeah, that's some pig, Don Roy. Gonna keep her?"

The older man considered this by tipping his hat back. "Not much of a pig farmer myself. And I wouldn't know what to do with all that meat. Figure the Mexicans will pay a good price. Maybe Teresa's family will want her."

Bridy stared hard at the sow. "They could tuck away that much bacon, you suppose?"

"Sure," Don Roy said. "I went up once with Teresa and the family was fixing up some kind of party for a baby girl's christening. God almighty if they weren't frying a whole damn pig in an old iron tub full of sputtering oil. And they had the head hanging in a tree to keep the dogs off it. They saved that for last, the best part."

Bridy nodded his amazement. "It's a different life," he said.

They watched the pig shuffle for a moment, sniffing the ground. "How's turkey farming?" Don Roy asked.

Bridy felt his ass twitch. "Down to one," he said. He looked over his shoulder and saw the chick slowly approaching them, not really fixing its eye on anything, pausing to stand dumbfounded in the morning light.

"Not much of him, is there?" It sounded like concern in the older man's voice. "Maybe he'll be ready for Easter."

Teresa came up quickly behind Don Roy, scraping gravel with her heel, and threw her arms up. "Where'd you put my cigarettes?"

He twisted around, his arms rising from his sides like he might fend off a blow. "I didn't touch your cigarettes." Don Roy was quiet and kind. "Did you look on the dresser?"

"They ain't never in the same place. How is that?"

"Doll, you move them and then you forget. That's all."

The girl shook her head. "Maybe you hide them just to mess with me. Don't you like me better?"

A grin flowered on Don Roy's face. "You're fine as wine, I call you mine," he crooned.

"I don't need that." Her voice rose. "It don't do me no good right now."

The old cowboy flinched at her hollering, flashing an apologetic glance at Bridy.

Teresa noticed. "You got any cigarettes, cowboy?" She questioned Bridy with the same kind of fire.

"No, ma'am," Bridy said.

All of a sudden the girl seemed to ease, a grin and a growl heating up. "Maybe you got something else for me? Something a young man can keep straight? Maybe I come over tonight to see if you got it." She watched for Don Roy to react, her eyes stony, then marched away.

Don Roy watched her go. When he swung back his face was hot.

Bridy turned away to hide his own embarrassment and found that the chick was gone. It had made a quick escape. Then he heard that telltale flapping of tiny wings below him. The bird had found another hole, this time in the fence. Its scraggly neck thrust through while its body wriggled and scratched on the other side. The pig turned toward the squawking clamor. When it saw that meaty head it hopped straight up on all four legs like live current had seized it. In a whirring scramble it covered that gap in no more than a second. There was a flash of teeth and the turkey's body fell back, headless, in a soft heap.

"Shit a monkey," Don Roy exclaimed.

Bridy stepped off the fence and lifted the chick by its legs. He held the carcass up and away from him as blood splattered the soil.

"God, I'm sorry, son. Not even enough there for a sandwich." Don Roy squinted his apology.

"Damn bird had a thing for holes," Bridy said dumbly.

All this while the great pig huffed and circled its pen, thrilled by the taste of blood. Bridy held out the carcass, giving an eye to Don Roy, who bobbed his head. With this assent, he dropped the bird into the pen and watched as the pig tore into it. In a minute there were only a few puffs of down rolling under the fence posts, heading with the breeze.

"Figure you're going to need a new trade," Don Roy finally offered.

Bridy absently nodded. He watched the pig rooting soil for any scraps it had missed. It gave off a burst of grunts when it finished and raised its snout to the air. Bridy grunted back and this froze the animal, questioning.

"I know a man who might have some mill work," said Don Roy. "Are you handy with a saw?"

Bridy nodded, lying. "Let's give her a shot."

The men drove in Don Roy's truck, heading out of town. They spent the first few miles in silence. Bridy noticed that the older man acknowledged oncoming cars by raising a single finger off the wheel—a bare, economical wave.

"Allen's liable to give you a rough hello," Don Roy finally said.

"He running the mill?" Bridy asked.

"Yeah." Don Roy paused. "He likes things his own way. Not mean, exactly, but tough as a boiled owl."

Bridy tensed up. "I don't make trouble."

"Don't take it personal. He ain't had much to go on since his boy died." Don Roy left it at that.

After another ten miles they pulled off the highway into a dusty compound out in the desert. Bridy had driven by before and remembered thinking it had been a scrapyards. There were plenty of junked-out heaps taking up space—tractors and trucks, old box trailers, a row of washing machines, stacked pallets. Almost lost in this mess was a long rig for ripping board lumber, a five-foot circular standing saw blade at the center. It was silent, stopped mid-cut in a two-foot center timber. There was no one in sight, no activity of any kind.

"How many men in this outfit?" Bridy asked. The set-up looked doubtful. There was only a small stack of fresh boards and a couple of uncut logs.

"Just Allen." Don Roy's voice trailed as his attention was caught by something. He leaned over a debris pile and came up with a worn iron relic—it was an old bear trap, its giant teeth clamped together.

"Look at that," the old man said with wonder. He spun the heavy thing in his hands, looking it over. "They must have built that before the alphabet." He placed it carefully in the truck bed behind the cab. "Allen won't miss it. He can't make money on rust." He leaned in the truck window and sounded the horn.

A trailer door kicked open. Bridy had not even considered that the crumpled old container, half-buried in bits of salvage, might be occupied. A man leaned out, shielding his eyes with his hand. Don Roy gave a wave and the man limped toward them—he was in his fifties, wearing a torn blue jumpsuit with the insulation coming unstuffed at the knees. He carried a tall plastic cup, holding it against his chest, frowning.

“Allen,” said Don Roy. “Caught you at lunchtime.”

Allen raised the cup. “It’s portable.”

When Allen reached them, Bridy could smell the woodsy sugar of the whiskey. It made him want to swallow.

“Gut must be getting old,” Allen said, gulping from the cup. “I need to mix it with bromo to keep it down.”

Don Roy nodded. “Heard you had some trouble with the Forest Service.”

This made Allen scowl. “That goddamn district ranger cited me for cutting trees. Said my permit was for deadfall only.”

Bridy looked around—there was nothing but grass and brush except for two old cottonwoods in the distance. He figured Allen must drive a truck to the mountains and haul trees back here to mill. It would be a stiff day’s toil for a small reward.

“Well ain’t that true?” Don Roy asked. “Can’t cut on Forest Service land.”

Bridy noticed a trace of a smile in the old man’s face. He figured it was a remark meant to rile his friend.

Allen looked back at Don Roy, hurt. “That ain’t the point. It’s about fiddling with a man’s simple living. All them government clowns, they all think they’re big boyos. But they ain’t worth a pinch of shit.”

Don Roy laughed. “Well, I just wanted to acquaint you with this young fella here. He’s a neighbor of mine says he can work all kind of magic with a saw.”

Bridy held out his hand. “Bridy McDaniel.”

Allen took his hand without shaking it, inspecting him with doubt. “For a young man, you got some hard wear. You look like you was pulled green and dried that way.” The two older men shared a laugh.

“He’s been trying to be a turkey man,” Don Roy said, “but they haven’t been cooperating.”

Allen nodded. “Well, you stick to the gobblers, son. I work alone. Not enough wood around this place to shingle the hen house.”

Bridy looked to Don Roy, confused. The older man made no protests, simply snapping his hat brim.

“We’ll see you around town,” Don Roy said, as Allen wandered off into the scrap.

Back on the road, Bridy turned to Don Roy and studied him. The older man wore his skin tightly, his neck permanently tanned. His fingers were thick, muscled from years of hefting bales. Overall he had held up under the weight of his years.

“I guess the man likes it out there by himself,” Bridy said.

Don Roy stared ahead, raising his eyebrows. “Maybe. But a man’s mind changes from time to time.”

Bridy waited for more, but that was it. He turned to the cracked windshield, kicking at debris by his feet. He reached down and grabbed an odd piece—it was a tin funnel that had been extended by welding a one-foot cone of bent sheet metal to it. Bridy turned it over. “What’s this for?” he asked.

Don Roy turned briefly. “I use that for my prostate.”

“You do what?”

The old man nodded. “I read once that sometimes doctors use—what’s that called?—radiation. So I rigged up that deal and once a month I head over to that nuke lab out east of here. They’ve got thousands of acres of old rotting bombs and power plants—ponds full of that stuff.”

Bridy shook his head. “I don’t follow.”

Don Roy grinned. “Well, I just get downwind of there with my ass end as the break. I strip down, settle on all fours and plant the tip of that thing firmly. I give it about thirty minutes, until I start to feel all warm inside.”

Bridy stared with his mouth open. “You’re shittin’ me.”

Don Roy started to laugh, then stopped. He turned to Bridy who held the funnel outstretched, then started sawing that dry chuckle again.

While they were still out of town they drove by an old homestead, long abandoned. There was a hay barn out by itself in the tall yellow grass. Its boards were a silver gray, curling back from the frame and pulling out the nails. The roof was mostly gone, carried away on the breeze. The barn had settled to the left, listing, bowing into a roundness at its base as if holding its breath. It was an unhurried collapse, decades of falling down and apart. And Bridy thought, “There I go.”

Don Roy dropped Bridy on the highway by his trailer and headed on into town. Bridy kicked slowly up the gravel drive. He knew Don Roy would walk into the store and sit with the same four or five old

cowboys, drink his coffee and unroll the story of that morning. He would explain about the last pitiful turkey, about the idea of a mill job where there were no trees, and about how easily Bridy had been duped by a ridiculous lie. The store would vibrate with laughter.

Bridy walked by the empty corral, went into the empty trailer. He sat in the one overstuffed chair, felt the warm ribbon of alcohol go down him, the pills in his throat. He watched through the little end window until he fell asleep.

The wind kicked up again, reliably. It was already dark, and he woke thinking of Cassie. There was something fine he remembered about her posture, the way she seemed to rear up full-throated, back on her heels. It was easy to smile at this cocky display, his baby ready to face a whirlwind. But he grew up with kids like that—they were the ones who had to settle for scraps, looking the part, always open to attack. They couldn't stretch tall enough to get respect. Once fingered, they rarely got out from under the weight of it. Realizing this sparked something like anger in Bridy. It was an odd feeling, hot at the center without his body responding, like a floating coal.

He pushed himself upwards and walked to the back bedroom. He fished in the dark closet and found his old competition rope, stiff and white, coiled on a coat hanger. He lifted it gently and fingered it as he headed for the door.

It was maybe a three-quarters moon, plenty to see by. Bridy leaned into the whistling breeze, blinking hard. He got to the fence and leaned over. The pig was on its side in a far corner, its pink skin almost aglow in the soft light. When Bridy clicked his tongue it jerked up its head with a snort, awake and alert. It pushed up on its little legs and watched Bridy from across the pen.

"You killed my last hope," Bridy whispered to the porker, forming a plan in his head. Pigs didn't have brands, so the law was out of it. To make it look good Bridy would kick out a rail or two. He'd load the animal up, stake it on a leash somewhere in the desert and then retrieve it the next day. To be safe he would drive it the extra thirty miles to Twin Falls, where he would not be recognized. The pig would slaughter well and bring a good price.

Bridy hopped up and swung his legs over the fence, sitting on the top rail. The pig walked side to side, sizing him up. He slowly

uncoiled the rope, working it into a shape that he dimly remembered. He did it twice, searching for some memory of touch.

“Hey, cowboy.” The woman’s voice surprised him. His eyes shot up, finding the hot end of a cigarette thirty feet out. It was Teresa. She walked closer.

“I think you’re looking for something,” she said as she reached the other side of the pen. The pig moved forward to keep a distance from both of them.

“I’m just having a look,” Bridy said, trying to hide the rope between his legs.

Teresa smiled with an open mouth. As still as Bridy tried to be, she seemed to vibrate. Her hands were in constant motion: she touched her nose, pushed back her black hair, scratched her shoulder, looping and repeating these moves. He couldn’t take his eyes off her. Standing there in pink spandex bike shorts and an oversized sweatshirt in the soft blue light she made for a thin, jumpy angel.

“Nobody just wants a look,” she said grinning. “They want a taste.”

Bridy sat there swimming in his head. Maybe this was the crash landing, the point where he started to actually gouge the soil. “I’m a good father,” he said softly.

Teresa tipped her head, smiling like it was a conspiracy. “If that’s what you want. But that’s yesterday and tomorrow.”

He could feel his heartbeat in his tongue. “I just want you to know I used to try.”

“We don’t got to play no games, baby. I’m here. You just got to ask.” In her outstretched arm he saw the glint of a handful of tiny plastic bags. Her sleeve jerked like it was a heavy load.

“Jesus, I thought...” Now Bridy was just lost, circling through strange pasture. “I don’t believe I need any of that.”

“Don’t have nothing to do with believing,” Teresa said. She stood on her side of the fence, holding out her quaking arm. There was something comforting about this gesture, about her wired smile and the softness behind her old-woman eyes.

The pig jumped before either of them could react. It managed to get some height, snapping at Teresa’s outstretched hand. Instead of sinking in its teeth it only knocked its snout against her knuckles. She snatched her hand back, clutching it to her chest.

“Loco pig!” She scowled at the animal, which ignored her, its head bent to the dirt. She hopped back and forth on her feet like she was posturing, displaying her strength and erect, human luster. The pig lifted its head and watched, then moved off slowly, hugging the walls of its enclosure. Teresa huffed and seemed satisfied. She turned and hurried off, forgetting Bridy there on the rail.

Bridy sat there. The wind had dropped and it was quiet except for the pig. It circled its pen clockwise, now in a steady pig trot, crossing every few seconds right under Bridy’s feet. It was so regular, the pig so absorbed, he imagined dropping down onto that bristly back and standing, like a trick rider, winding in slow rotations with his arms outstretched.

“What you do with it?” Teresa was dashing back. “I had six, now there’s four.” Her wide eyes filled up with moonlight, staring right at Bridy.

“Ma’am?”

“My crystal. Where is it? No joke!”

Bridy shook his head. “I haven’t moved an inch.”

Teresa looked groggy for a second. “It’s in there somewhere.” She pointed in the pig’s pen. Almost at once she started to climb the fence to get in.

“Wait!” Bridy put up his hands. “That pig will tear you apart. She’s had her taste of blood.”

This stopped the girl. She frowned at him, pleading. “I need those bags.”

He felt like obliging her, coming to her aid. “Just let me get her slowed down.” From his seat on the rail he gathered the rope once more. Swinging the loop over his head, he eyed a spot across the pen, tried to time the pig’s arrival. He let the animal make two circuits to be sure, then loosed the rope at the right moment.

Bridy did not adjust for his narrow perch. His toss unsteadied him. While that lasso sailed out, he tipped back. He watched the rope miss the pig, then he went over entirely, his boots above him in the night sky. The hard landing winded him, those bones in his back popping like rivets.

He stayed there for a minute on his back, one leg dangling on the bottom rail. A car started, crunching gravel as it fled. He gently rolled to his side, feeling that stiffness in his spine that would surely have him seized up in the morning. He would need more pills. On

his hands and knees he coughed, trying to gather air. When he could stand he went to the fence and peered over. The pig was there, but Teresa had run off. The animal had stopped running. It stood there taking fast, difficult breaths, puffing out its ribs. Its eye was wide, glassy, staring back at him.

Bridy reeled in his rope, coiling it while he tried to imagine what to do. All he could think of was to limp back and crawl into his bed. After he laid himself down he could still imagine that pig breathing, his own lungs taut with the same kind of effort. When the painkillers settled, he felt gripped in a warm fist and he relaxed, letting himself be held.

Just as the sun was creeping up, Bridy woke to tapping. It sounded like it might be someone at the door, and that thought shrank him. No good news knocked this early. He did not want to face anybody, but he raised himself. It was difficult, the muscles in his back fluttering like guitar strings. He managed to pull on his boots.

By the time he got to the door, it was clear the sound was farther out than that, repeating. He stepped outside and turned up the collar on his coat. He could see Don Roy over the fence, swinging with a hammer. Walking closer, he saw that the old man was knocking down the posts and rails from the pig's corral. Bridy came up quietly and watched. Don Roy didn't see him right away. The pig was there on its side, its four legs stiffened straight.

Don Roy noticed Bridy on a hammer swing. "Got myself a quitter," he said.

"Shame." Bridy nodded.

The old man still had plenty of strength in his shoulders, toppling the fence with ease. "Bad part is it'll take the magpies too long to strip this bastard, so I gotta haul it off."

Bridy figured he better take his licks. "I'll help you get her in the truck."

It took the two of them another hour to get the fence down and drag the carcass up on the truck bed. Bridy's back was tight enough to bend him slantwise, but he fought it. By the time they were on the move, the sun was starting to burn the frost off the sage.

Both men stared at the road. A flatbed semi piled with one-ton alfalfa bales sped opposite. Don Roy gave the driver his one-fingered wave.

"Probably headed to one of the big dairies," Don Roy said.

Bridy nodded. "Good price for hay this year. I should be in the hay business."

It was quiet for a mile or two. Don Roy tapped the wheel and sighed. "Teresa left in the middle of the night. I think she meant that pig as a goodbye." His mouth puckered up. "Seems like her handwriting."

Bridy looked at him. "They always give us another chance." It tasted sour to him, but Don Roy nodded back anyway.

At the transfer station they stopped at the attendant's shack and Don Roy paid the fee. They drove slowly, crossing between piles of other debris, and found the corner with the animal carcasses. The men surveyed the gore, neither one of them commenting on the stench. Both of them hopped up on the truck and put their shoulders into the pig, heaving it until it went over. It settled on its back, legs still pushed out like glove fingers.

The ride back was mostly quiet, until out in the scrub land three antelope leapt up out of a low spot and darted right in front of them. Without moving the wheel Don Roy gassed the truck right between the last two, not even creasing a hide. When Bridy looked back that third animal just stood there sniffing the air.

Back at his driveway Bridy stepped out and shut the door. Don Roy leaned to shake his hand.

Bridy didn't take it. "God in heaven," he said instead, staring at the rear of the truck.

Both men walked back. The pig was still there, on the road. A noose of baling twine cinched around one leg for lifting it had looped on the ball of the trailer hitch; they had dragged it all the way back with them. The carcass was on its side, worn nearly to its midpoint, a long greasy skid going all the way out of sight.

"Now that's a sorry outcome," the old man said.

Bridy looked up and saw that old metal trap still in the back of the truck. It had a heavy chain to stake it with, and tight iron springs. There was a trigger in the center, a weight-sensitive lever that would trip the jaws, send them flying inward with a clatter. He could imagine that sound. There would be that moment before the iron bit, a noisy instant, when the trap would announce itself. Skin would tense, hairs raised, heart firing in a burst. And in that blink, ahead of the inescapable weight, entrapment would be clear. That struck him as an odd sort of kindness, fate delivering its intentions.

He tried but could not remember having heard that noise, and he wondered if he had missed it, groggy on medication.

Don Roy stroked his ear, looking at the half-pig. "I guess the easiest thing is just to flip it over and drive it back."

When Don Roy turned the truck on the highway he let the tires squeal. Bridy sat next to him and watched that pig spin around. There was no other traffic, no police, so they tore through that country like outlaws.