

OLD MAN BOWING HIS HEAD

1

In Eden, Montana my great-grandfather woke before most people. He sat in a straight-back chair, hands folded. What he knew was in his eyes, and he gave things out through his wire glasses.

The day we arrived I was twelve. The bee farmer/pastor looked out over his twice-removed children. When he looked at me I looked away. Then I was wandering off in the dry wind, hiking up the side of a butte, climbing randomly between rocks. There was a sudden rattlesnake, coiled against a mound of brush and stone. I picked up a rock the size of a fist and threw it. The hillside covered over with silence.

I walked over to it. I expected it to leap up at any moment and clamp its crushed head onto my leg and not let go even through its own massive death.

But the snake was dead. I bent down to the animal, but I could not touch it. I wanted to. I walked away and let the body stay there. All the way down that hill, all the way back to the house I thought about the snake, and my great-grandfather in that chair. And then I was there, and he looked at me, and I told him what happened and he--

2

a man of God,
of *his* God,
the God of passionless work and level days,
of days like the Iowa plains where he was born into
His service,
God of the black robe and altar where he stood Sundays
reading Scripture,

of the frame church built by hand,
God the Provider of steel tools,
of saws cross-cutting for the frame and ripping for
the sheathing,
of hammers and square nails being driven like heart-
beat into the milled wood,
of supply stores and trains for shipping,
of roofing and siding and ladders and beams,
of doors set into rough openings,
of sills and jambs,
of sweat on the handles of chisels and wood chips on
the ground,
of windows stained with the pure colors of blood, of
wheat, of sky, of hope, of resurrection,
God of the finished church,
God of the first Sunday,
of the pews and of the congregation filling them for
the first time,
God of the singing of hymns,
of Psalms and of Revelations,
God of that first Spring,
of births and baptisms,
of Sunday picnics on the lawn,
of the dogwood and apple blossoms in the valley there
between the great plateau and butte-studded foothills,
of the summer that followed,
of thunderstorms and the dry lightning that struck
one night,
his God that allowed the church to burn to the ground
while he and his wife and fifty others watched
without talking,
knowing this fire would not be stopped.

And God of the morning.
his God,
showing him what was left,
what had not been taken away,
what he would cherish the rest of his life,
God of the healthy congregation,

of the able-bodied farmers and ranchers in the
valley,
of their women, their children,
their knowledge and sense of husbandry,
and God of *his* family,
his sons helping manage the apiary,
the bees and machinery,
God of the crates of tins and jars filled with honey,
God of the comb,
of the elms growing around the barns and house,
of the sons and daughters marrying and spreading
out and raising children of their own,
and those children raising their children, and one
day gathering them, and returning--

3

sat in his chair, and must have seen that I knew
what I had done, that I could feel already I'd violated
laws, that I'd met *my* God, somehow, out there on the
butte, that I'd killed a snake, that's all, that this
one action would reverberate the rest of my life, and
my great-grandfather saw, and knew, and looked at me,
and nodded.

