

## Wa-chaah!

Deputy Poore, fallen upon hard times, has turned to senseless terror, shooting wild from city to city, expanding his haphazard jurisdiction as he goes. Neither a vigilante nor official servant of the state, and lacking any of the expressive qualities of the hero, the man has become no more than a regional bias to the uncertainties of life, a slight gradation toward the gully of death.

Days earlier, Blumquist and his men had been lined up face-to-wall, each man's shoulders pulled in, sweat on each in streaks you could read from a half-mile out, half-helices from nape to collarbone. Deputy Poore's whip knocked blood from their backs like it was popcorn leaping out a frying pan, long-running blood, like it couldn't control its temper. Blood with legs. Pup pup. It ran all day, ran with ambition. Not that there were buckets of it coming out — no not that there was very much at all — what there was was all ambition.

That day, Blumquist's face whitened, as if threatening to never become mere shadow thrown against a too-near, face-facing wall.

"I said shaddup!" That was Poore. His whip: wa-chaah! And then Blumquist collapsed.

When his men revived him later, when he smiled and opened his eyes, dazed, he slid his tongue out between his lips and revealed a small nickel-plated key upon it.

The men, confounded, knew to tell him this isn't a jail caper: "This isn't a jail caper."

Blumquist smiled wider, reptilian, tongue back in, key and all.

That was days ago. And Poore is still running wild, pure hurt. Blumquist meets him, surprised, well-liquored, outside of a barn dance, taps on his right ear with the butt of a pistol. Oh do they wrestle, and oh, if it's not in a manner that disrupts it all. A burly old boy, the county judge, kicks out one of their teeth, and the rest of the crowd starts in upon them.

When they recover next morning, sunning upon the grass, they cannot discover which of them it ever belonged to, the tooth. Their mouths must have already changed too much with sleep or the tooth too much with freedom.

Blumquist and Poore refuse to speak to one another, but ail too much to move along.

Poore rolls on his side, intermittently, pausing as often as needed to find again the will. He rolls on his side towards the thicket across the road. Blumquist chews a stalk of straw, rolls his cuffs above his swollen knees, and plays at Tom Sawyer laziness for the afternoon. At times he turns his head to see Poore, rolling off in the distance, dragging a twisted leg, and bawling with each new thistly burr that grabs him on the skin or sticks him in the face. For some, Blumquist thinks to himself, slow progress is progress enough. Satisfaction is what it is. The grass flattens beneath Poore as he rolls, clears a straightaway that bows to accommodate the poor form of Poore-himself-as-rolling-pin and what it appears to him to be straight.

Blumquist lays alone among the unflattened grass. The twilight hour seems to extend unseasonably late, the shadows reaching a point where they seem satisfied with their length and hesitate. As if the shadows were young women passing by a wall-hung mirror, they hesitate. In this hour of slow grace, unable, like shadows, to say what it is that draws them, Blumquist's men travel up the flattened path of flattened patches of grass that now runs like a thoroughfare from the road to the field where their compatriot was last reported to be alive, half-dead, beaten but breathing.

At the end of the path the men find a tooth. In the retreating light of dusk, they do not see the man himself, lying further off, fallen once again asleep. The tooth's ivory shines in eerie sympathy with the moon, when it comes out later, and the men remember reaching the California coast and the land's sinking into ocean. There is a gold filling in it, the tooth, that will pay for the evening's drinks. Blumquist, somewhere retreated for the night, they think, will have to find his own. Oh, what little lessons we learn from harm and its ministrations.