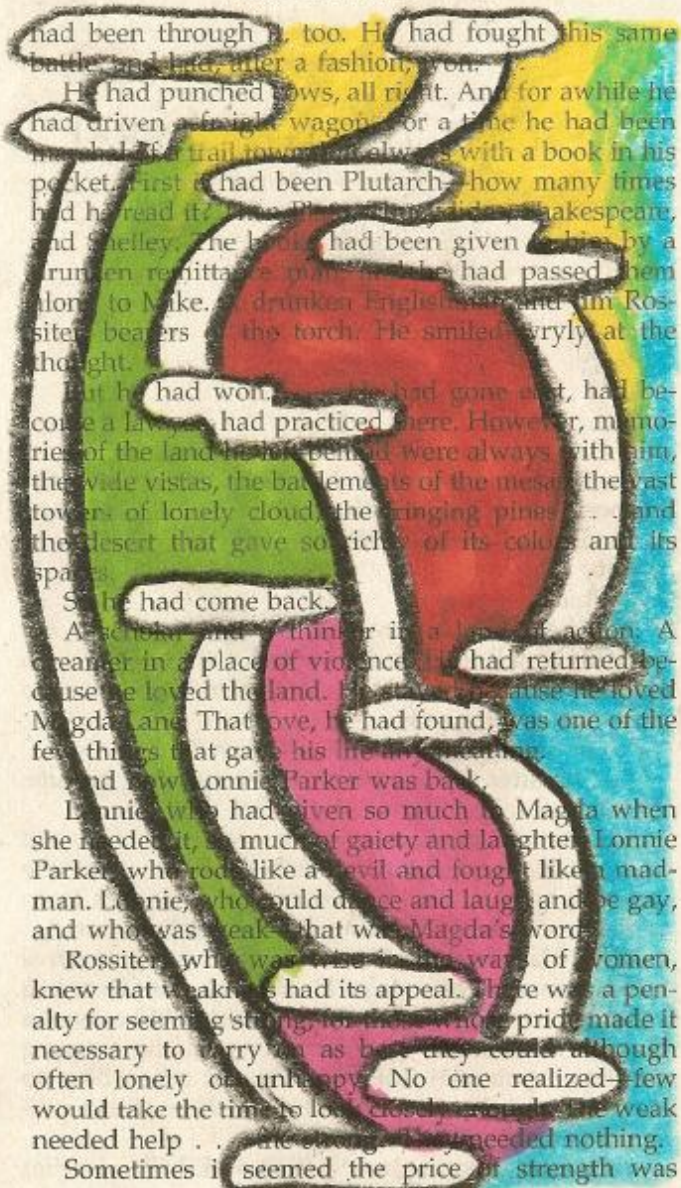
questions and I am only interested in the time period in which you knew him, nothing more.

So check out the names in back if you want to help and drop me a card at the address at the end of the list. I'll enjoy hearing from you. I hope you all enjoy this collection of stories. It surely was a mind and we are proud to present it to you.

Until we meet again . . .

—BEAT



had been through it, too. He had fought this same battle and lived, after a fashion, won.

He had punched cows, all right. And for awhile he had driven a freight wagon. For a time he had been [illegible] trail town, always with a book in his pocket. First it had been Plutarch—how many times had he read it? Then Plato, and Aristotle, Shakespeare, and Shelley. The latter had been given to him by a drunken remittance man he had passed them along to Mike. A drunken Englishman, and Jim Rossiter bearers of the torch. He smiled wryly at the thought.

But he had won. He had gone east, had become a lawyer, had practiced there. However, memories of the land he had left behind were always with him, the wide vistas, the battlements of the mesas, the vast towers of lonely cloud, the singing pines . . . and the desert that gave so richly of its colors and its spaces.

So he had come back.

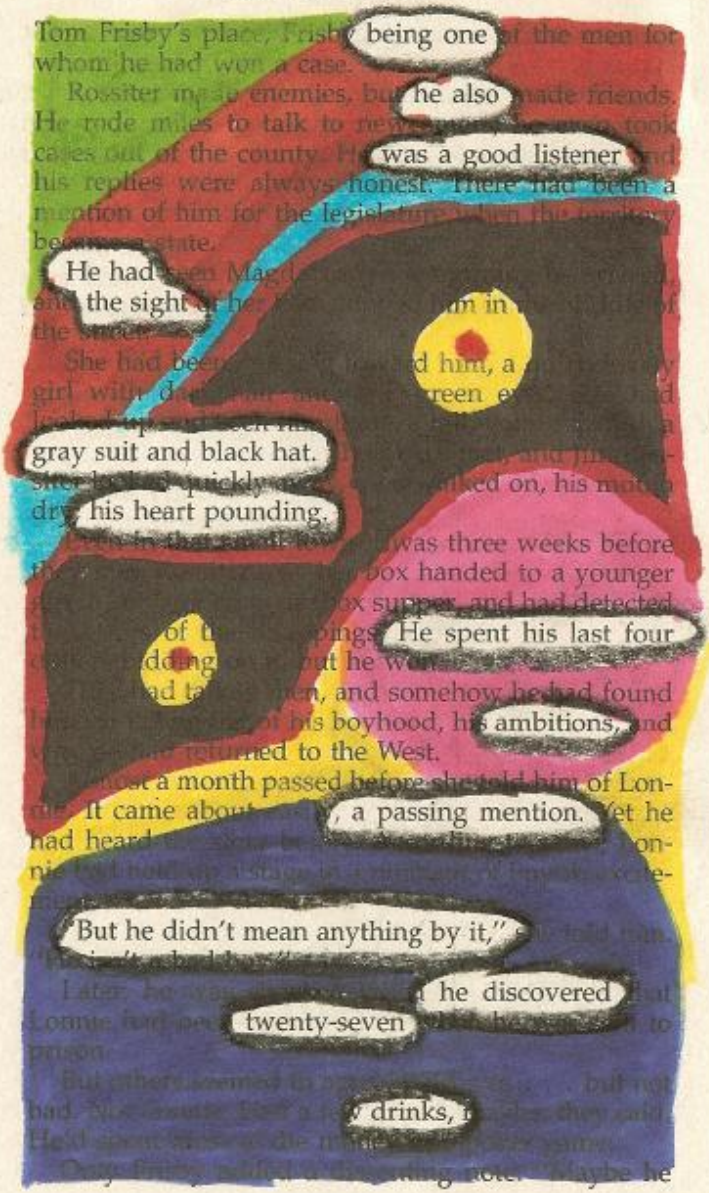
A scholar and thinker in a land of action. A dreamer in a place of violence. He had returned because he loved the land. He had come because he loved Magda Lane. That love, he had found, was one of the few things that gave his life [illegible].

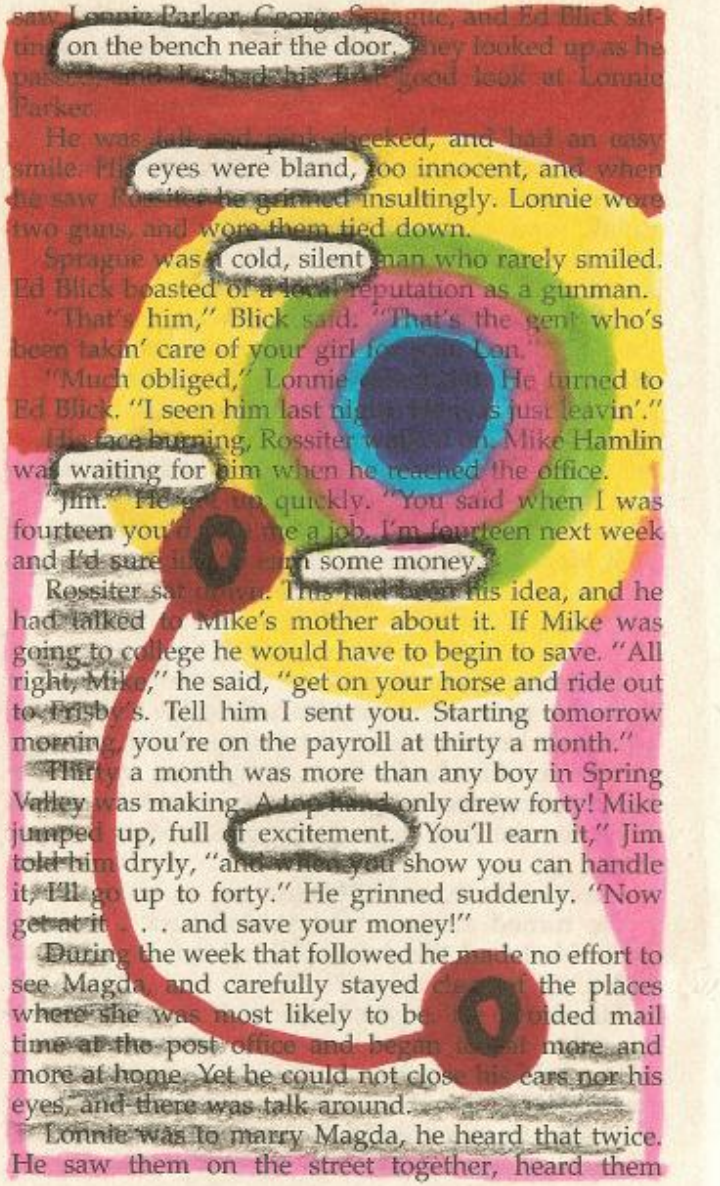
And now Lonnie Parker was back.

Lonnie, who had given so much to Magda when she needed it, so much of gaiety and laughter. Lonnie Parker, who rode like a devil and fought like a madman. Lonnie, who could dance and laugh and be gay, and who was weak. That was Magda's word.

Rossiter, who was wise in the ways of women, knew that weakness had its appeal. There was a penalty for seeming strong, for those whose pride made it necessary to carry on as best they could although often lonely or unhappy. No one realized—few would take the time to look closely enough. The weak needed help . . . the strong needed nothing.

Sometimes it seemed the price for strength was


being one
he also
was a good listener
He had
the sight
gray suit and black hat.
his heart pounding.
He spent his last four
ambitions,
returned to the West.
a passing mention.
But he didn't mean anything by it,"
he discovered
twenty-seven
drinks,



saw Lonnie Parker, George Sprague, and Ed Blick sitting on the bench near the door. They looked up as he passed and he had his first good look at Lonnie Parker.

He was tall and pink-cheeked, and had an easy smile. His eyes were bland, too innocent, and when he saw Rossiter he grinned insultingly. Lonnie wore two guns, and wore them tied down.

Sprague was a cold, silent man who rarely smiled. Ed Blick boasted of a local reputation as a gunman.

"That's him," Blick said. "That's the gent who's been takin' care of your girl for him, Lon."

"Much obliged," Lonnie [illegible]. He turned to Ed Blick. "I seen him last night. He's just leavin'."

His face burning, Rossiter walked on. Mike Hamlin was waiting for him when he reached the office.

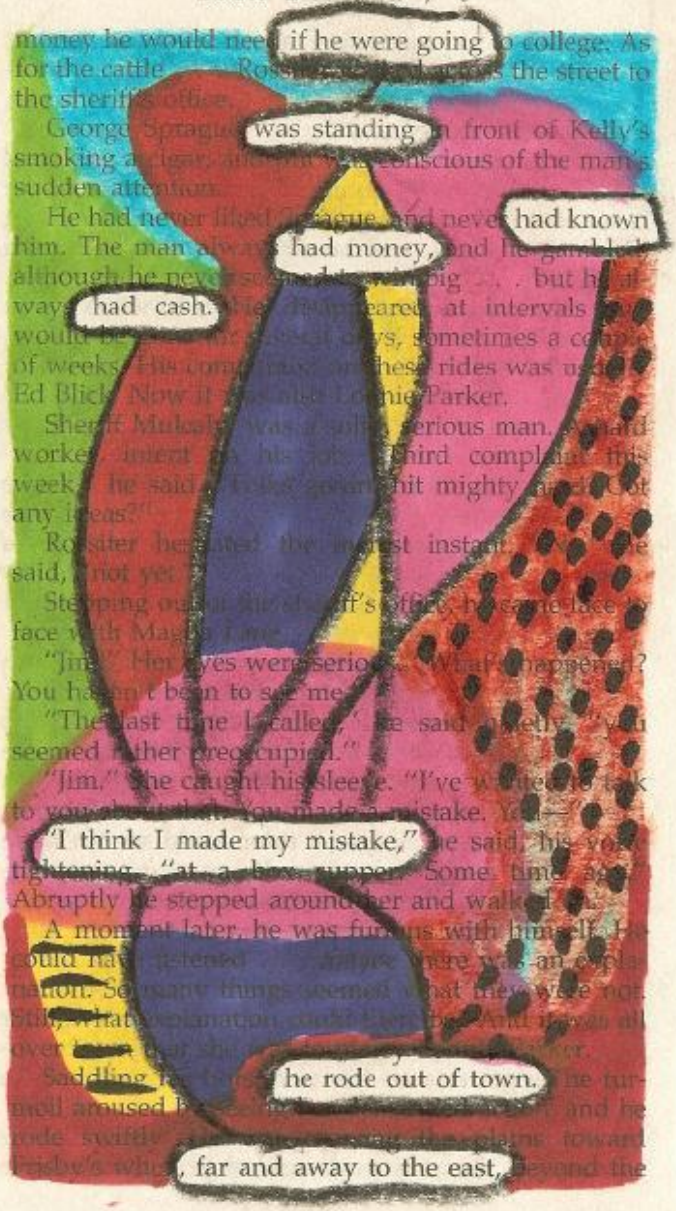
"Jim," he [illegible] quickly. "You said when I was fourteen you'd give me a job. I'm fourteen next week and I'd sure like to earn some money."

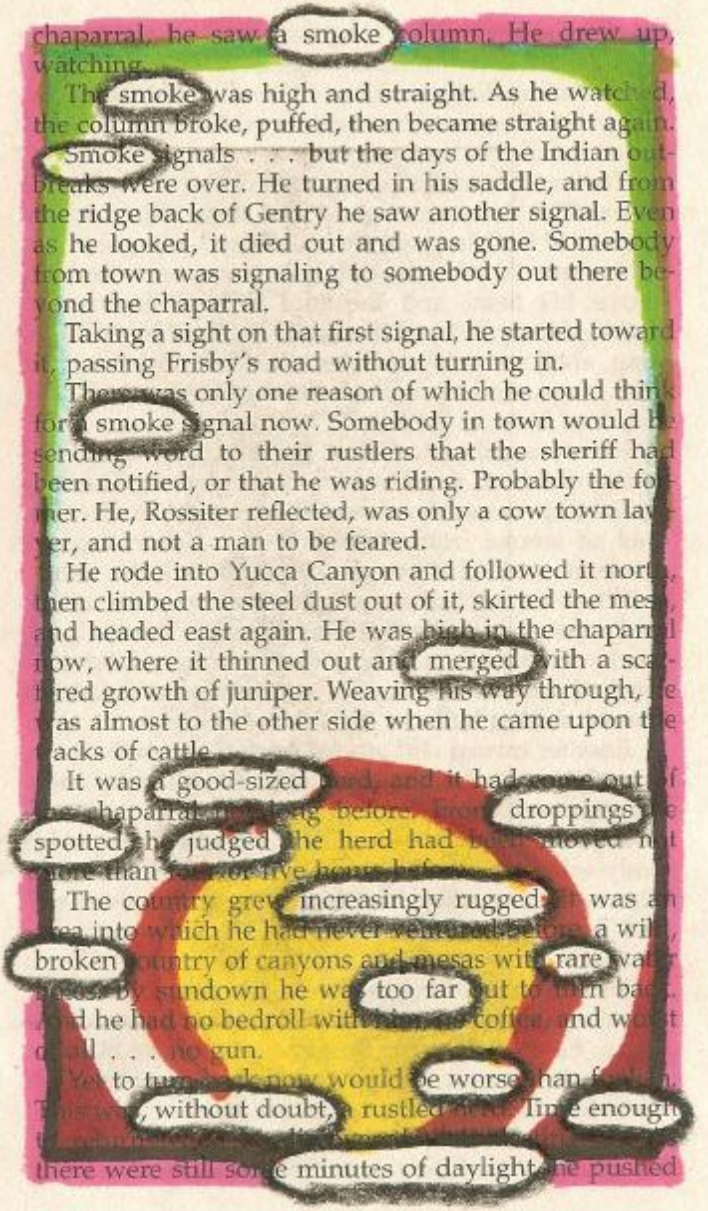
Rossiter sat down. This had been his idea, and he had talked to Mike's mother about it. If Mike was going to college he would have to begin to save. "All right, Mike," he said, "get on your horse and ride out to Frisby's. Tell him I sent you. Starting tomorrow morning, you're on the payroll at thirty a month."

Thirty a month was more than any boy in Spring Valley was making. A top hand only drew forty! Mike jumped up, full of excitement. "You'll earn it," Jim told him dryly, "and when you show you can handle it, I'll go up to forty." He grinned suddenly. "Now get at it . . . and save your money!"

During the week that followed he made no effort to see Magda, and carefully stayed [illegible] the places where she was most likely to be. He avoided mail time at the post office and began [illegible] more and more at home. Yet he could not close his ears nor his eyes, and there was talk around.

Lonnie was to marry Magda, he heard that twice. He saw them on the street together, heard them


if he were going
was standing
had known
had money,
had cash.
"I think I made my mistake,"
he rode out of town.
far and away to the east,



chaparral, he saw a smoke column. He drew up, watching.

The smoke was high and straight. As he watched, the column broke, puffed, then became straight again. Smoke signals . . . but the days of the Indian outbreaks were over. He turned in his saddle, and from the ridge back of Gentry he saw another signal. Even as he looked, it died out and was gone. Somebody from town was signaling to somebody out there beyond the chaparral.

Taking a sight on that first signal, he started toward it, passing Frisby's road without turning in.

There was only one reason of which he could think for a smoke signal now. Somebody in town would be sending word to their rustlers that the sheriff had been notified, or that he was riding. Probably the former. He, Rossiter reflected, was only a cow town lawyer, and not a man to be feared.

He rode into Yucca Canyon and followed it north, then climbed the steel dust out of it, skirted the mesa, and headed east again. He was high in the chaparral now, where it thinned out and merged with a scattered growth of juniper. Weaving his way through, he was almost to the other side when he came upon the tracks of cattle.

It was a good-sized herd, and it had come out of the chaparral not long before. From droppings he spotted, he judged the herd had been moved not more than four or five hours before.

The country grew increasingly rugged. It was an area into which he had never ventured before, a wild, broken country of canyons and mesas with rare water holes. By sundown he was too far out to turn back. And he had no bedroll with him, no coffee, and worst of all . . . no gun.

Yet to turn back now would be worse than foolish. This was, without doubt, a rustled herd. Time enough there were still some minutes of daylight he pushed

em kill

?"

oing let them kill hat

ow. His eyes measured him

em stopped," he said, "you st

m."

"I w pec g trouble. I'm not packi

an."

It was as well as M

Yet he he knew men, in this one t

was a basic mathem of personal p

and i Each man s his code, no matter ho

ar do e scale."

The fellow got to his feet and strolled over to his

war b . From it he battered Colt. "Catch," he

said, walked back t

Jim Bossiter step back into the shadows, gun in

hand. He seen Mi 's guns on hi and in Mike's

eyes there h been do a reader o

books, t in and this was time r violen

Sprag ink he fire a

Sprague l ly around. "Did I hear y

talkin'

"To heck if he w

Sprague st ne man f a long minute, aspi-

cion t ck upon "Don waste the g He

started sit the gap in the open ar

bag. W th and

rolled h ed at the rawhide that bound

him, then th

Blick was led be ale The man in the red

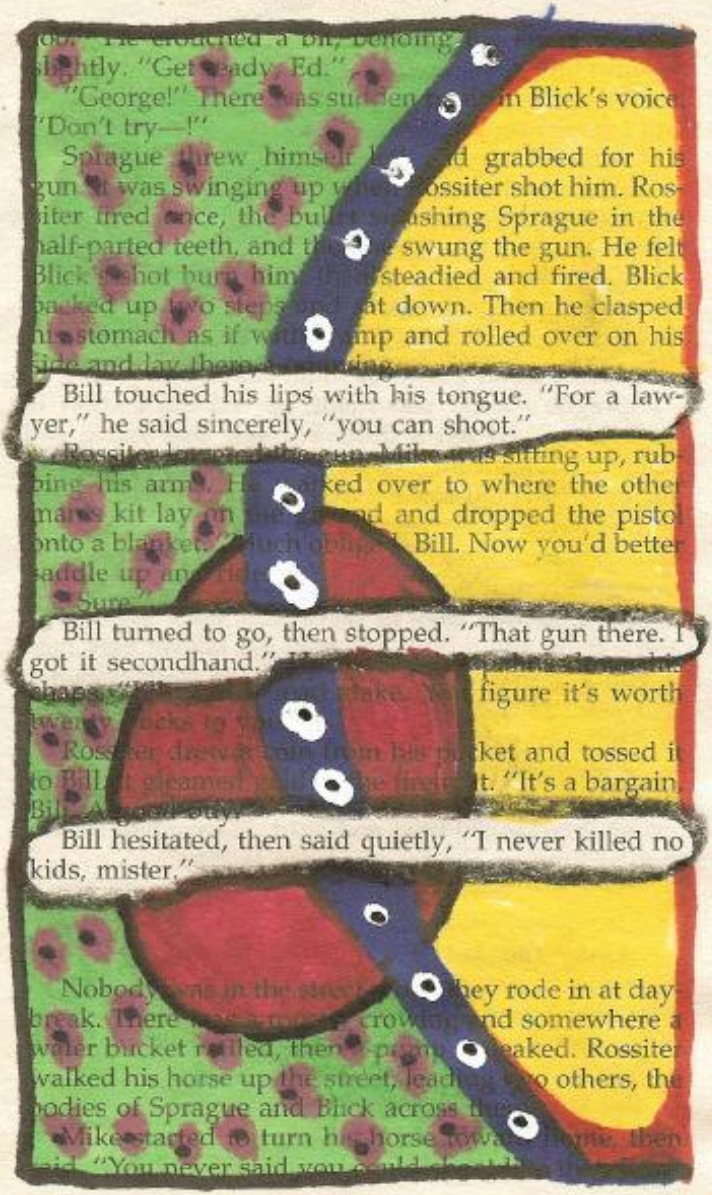
shirt stood ver e to

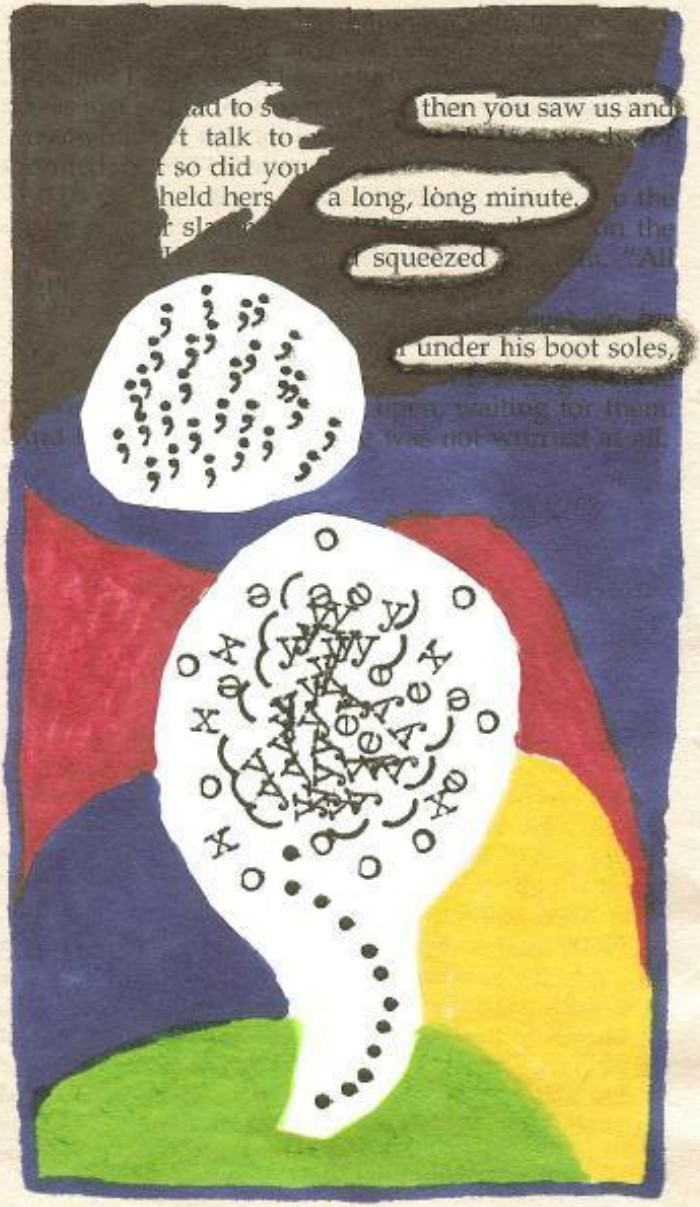
The gambler straightened up and turned slowly.

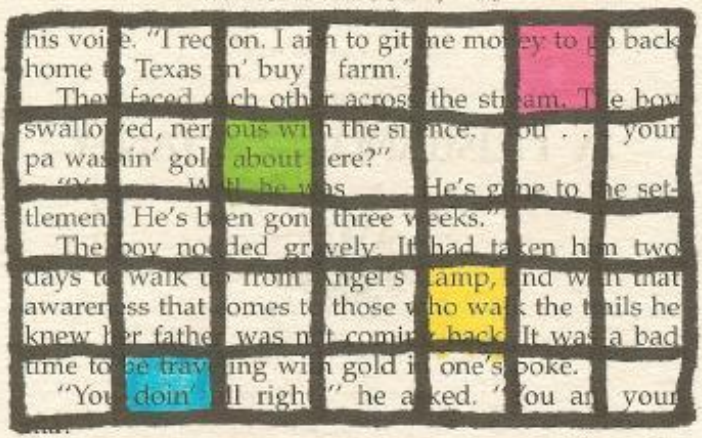
Bill, where's that other gun ours?"

"I ain't s

smelled the acrid smell


slightly. "Get ready, Ed."
"George!" There was sudden
Don't try—!"
Sprague grabbed for his
gun. It was swinging up
Rossiter shot him.
Rossiter fired once, the bul
shing Sprague in the
half-parted teeth, and th
swung the gun. He felt
Blick
steadied and fired. Blick
at down. Then he clasped
his stomach as if
mp and rolled over on his
side and lay there
Bill touched his lips with his tongue. "For a lawyer," he said sincerely, "you can shoot."
Rossiter
ked over to where the other
and dropped the pistol
onto a blanket.
Bill. Now you'd better
saddle up
Sure."
Bill turned to go, then stopped. "That gun there. I got it secondhand."
figure it's worth
Rossiter
ket and tossed it
t. "It's a bargain,
Bill hesitated, then said quietly, "I never killed no kids, mister."
Nobody
hey rode in at daybreak. There
nd somewhere a
water bucket
eaked. Rossiter
walked his horse up the street, leading
o others, the
bodies of Sprague and Blick across
Mike started to turn his horse
ne, then
said, "You never said you


then you saw us and
a long, long minute.
squeezed
under his boot soles.



his voice. "I reckon. I aim to get me money to go back home to Texas an' buy a farm."

They faced each other across the stream. The boy swallowed, nervous with the silence. "You . . . your pa was sayin' gold about here?"

"Yes. Well, he was. He's gone to the settlements. He's been gone three weeks."

The boy nodded gravely. It had taken him two days to walk up from Angel's Camp, and with that awareness that comes to those who walk the trails he knew her father was not coming back. It was a bad time to be traveling with gold in one's pocket.

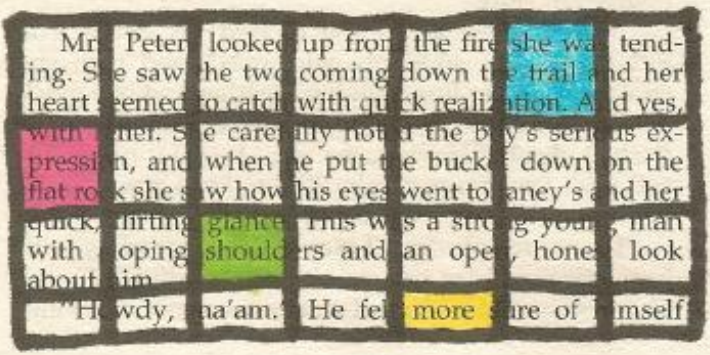
"You doin' all right?" he asked. "You an' your . . ."

Janey hesitated, rubbing her palms on her apron. She was shy but she didn't want him to go off on his way, for it was lonely with no one about of her own age, and without even neighbors except for Richter. "Ma—she's just back here. Would you like some coffee? We've some fresh."

He crossed the stream on the rounded stones and took her wooden bucket. "Reckon I'll get it for you," he said. "It's a big bucket for such a little girl."

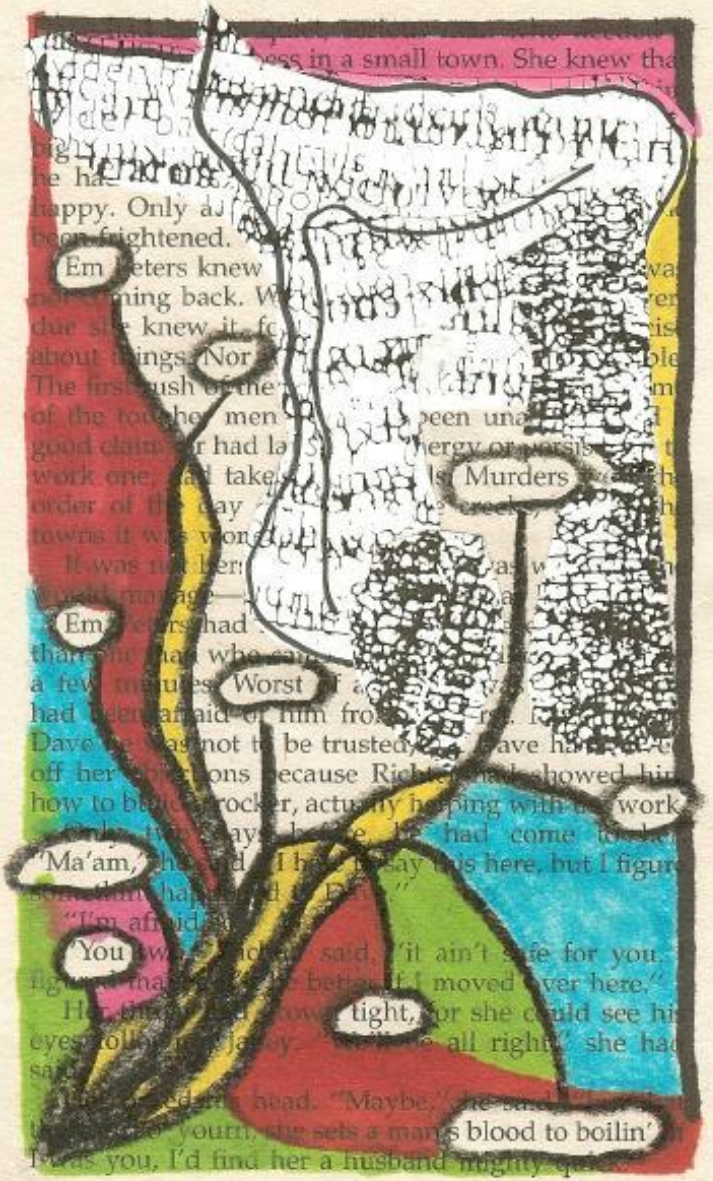
She flashed her eyes at him. "I ain't . . . I mean, I'm not so young! I'm sixteen!"

He grinned at her. "You're nigh to it."



Mrs. Peters looked up from the fire she was tending. She saw the two coming down the trail and her heart seemed to catch with quick realization. And yes, with her. She carefully noted the boy's serious expression, and when he put the bucket down on the flat rock she saw how his eyes went to Janey's and her quick, flirting glance. This was a strong young man with sloping shoulders and an open, honest look about him.

"Howdy, ma'am." He felt more sure of himself


ess in a small town. She knew tha
happy. Only a
been frightened.
Em
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knew it fo
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ush of the
men
been una
had la
ergy or persis
work one,
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Murders
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Em
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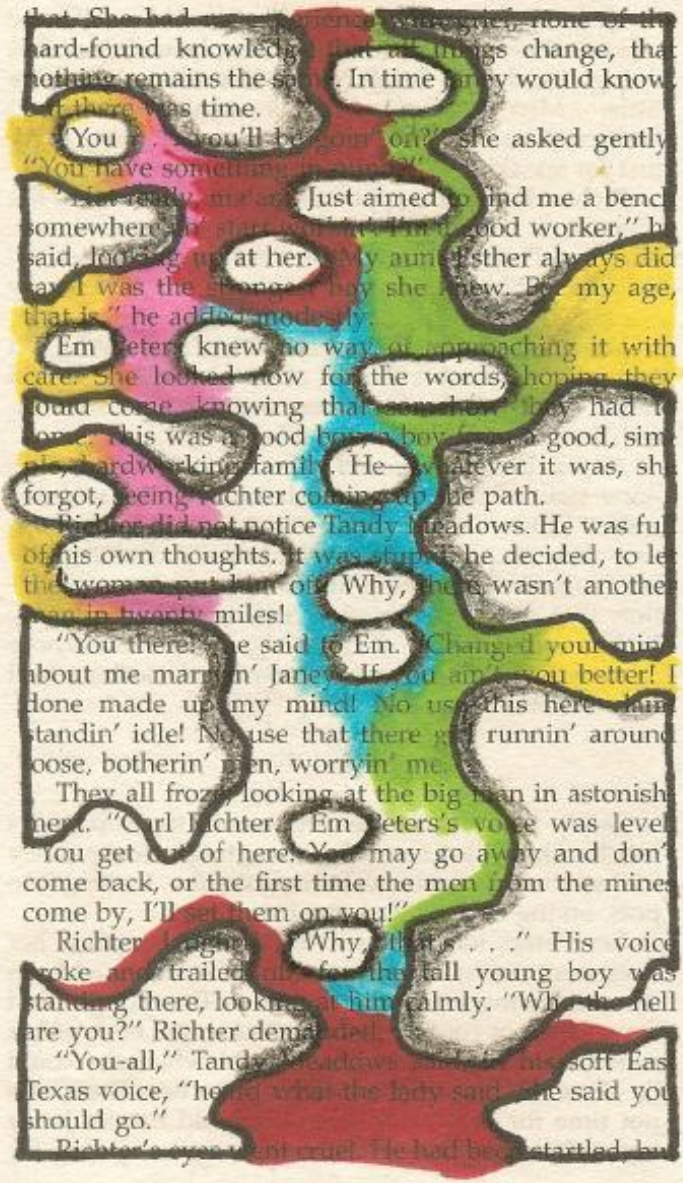
Worst
had
afraid of him fro
Dave
not to be trusted,
ave ha
off her
ons because Rich
showed hi
how to bu
rocker, actually helping with
work
had come to
"Ma'am,
I h
ay
is here, but I figur
"I'm afraid
You
said, "it ain't
fe for you.
bet
I moved over here."
tight, or she could see hi
eyes
all right," she ha
head. "Maybe,
youth, she sets a man's blood to boilin'
I was you, I'd find her a husband mighty


ard-found knowledg
gs change, tha
nothing remains the s
. In time
y would know
there was time.
You
you'll b
on?" she asked gently
"You have something
Just aimed
find me a bench
somewhere
good worker," h
said, looking up at her.
Esther always did
I was the
she knew. B
my age,
that is," he added modestly.
Em Peters knew no way of approaching it with
care. She looked now for the words, hoping they
would come knowing that somehow they had
This was a good
boy from a good, sim
hardworking family. He—
ever it was, sh
forgot, seeing Richter coming up the path.
Richter did not notice Tandy Meadows. He was ful
of his own thoughts. It was stupid, he decided, to le
the woman get him down. Why, there wasn't anothe
one in twenty miles!
"You there!" he said to Em. "Changed your min
about me marryin' Janey? If you ain't you better! I
done made up my mind! No use this here
standin' idle! No use that there girl runnin' around
loose, botherin' men, worryin' me.
They all froze, looking at the big man in astonish
ment. "Carl Richter," Em Peters's voice was level
"You get out of here. You may go away and don't
come back, or the first time the men from the mines
come by, I'll set them on you!"
Richter laughed. "Why, that's . . ." His voice
broke and trailed off for the tall young boy was
standing there, looking at him calmly. "Who the hell
are you?" Richter demanded.
"You-all," Tandy Meadows
soft East
Texas voice, "he'd
what the lady said. She said you
should go."
Richter's eyes went cruel. He had been startled, bu


Between bites

Once they found a nugget the size of the end of his finger and she danced with excitement.

When he cleaned the riffles and the sponge after two hours of work, he had nearly an ounce and a half of gold to put in the leather sack.

It was a good claim. No wonder that Cochino was bothering around. Trust him to be thinking of the claim as well as Janey. Although he decided, beginning to show some intelligence about girls, it would be better not to suggest that to her. At sundown, when he walked wearily back up the path to the cabin, he had two ounces of gold.

Em smiled at him. "My! You've worked hard! How did it go? Did Janey bother you?"

"Naw!" he said. "I didn't even know she was there."

Janey flared. "Oh—Oh, you didn't?" She flounced away and began rattling pans.

Tandy stared after her, deeply puzzled. Em put her hand [illegible] "that's all right, Tandy," she said. "Girls are like that."

"That's right!" Janey called out angrily. "Take his side!" She burst into tears and walked away toward the edge of the woods.

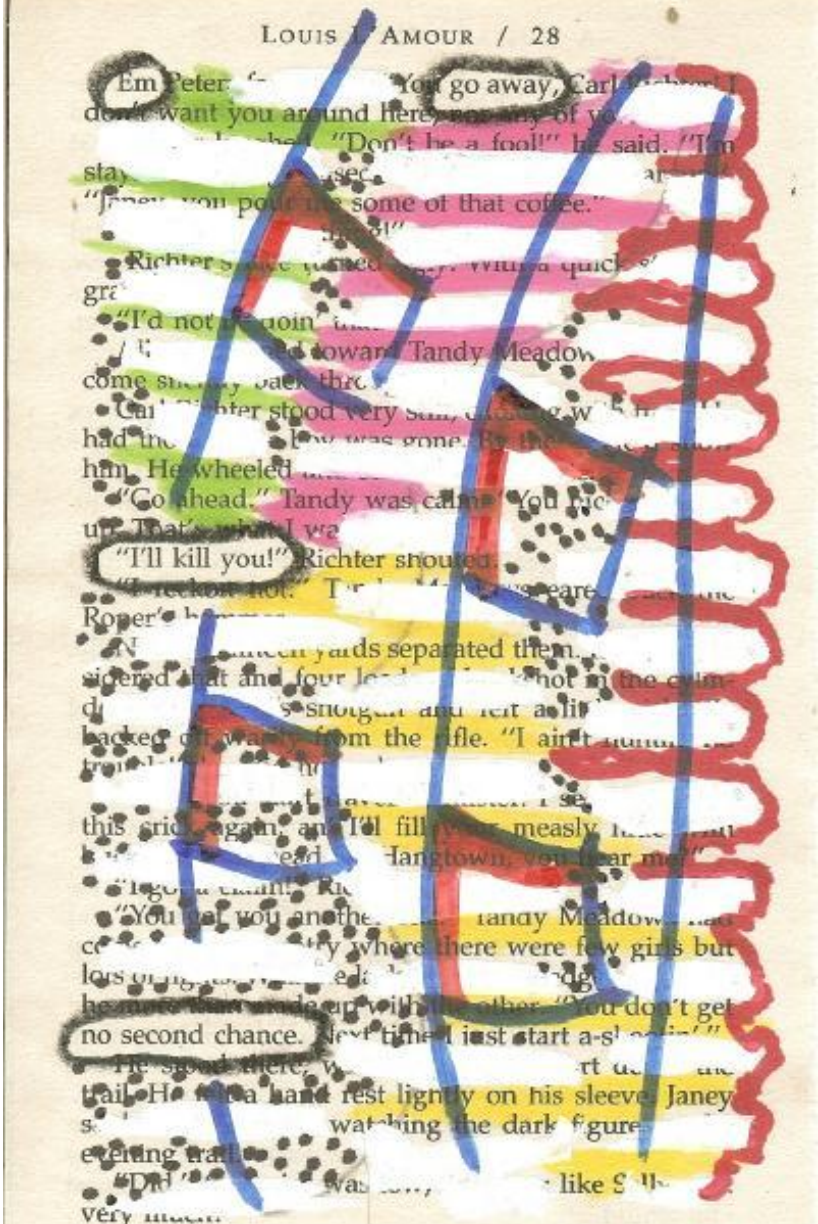
Tandy stared after her helplessly, and then dried his hands and followed. "Look," he protested. "I didn't—"

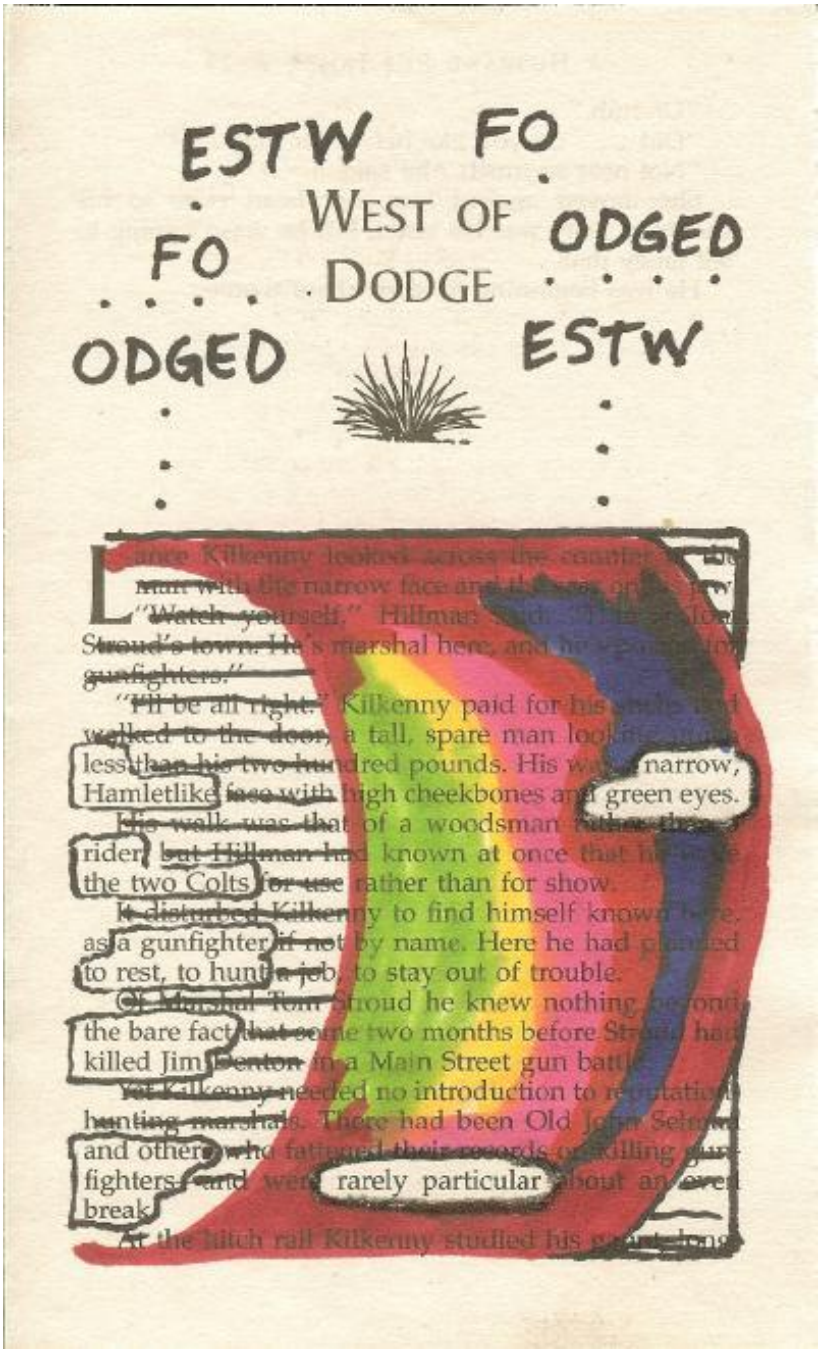
"Oh, go away!" She turned half around, not looking at him. "Don't tal[illegible]

He looked at [illegible] whorls of hair cu[illegible] against a whiteness [illegible] not reached. He [illegible] but the thought [illegible] lifted a tentative hand [illegible]

She let [illegible] minute, then jerked her shoulder away. "Don't *touch* me!" she said.

[illegible] at her, then slowly turned and walked back to the fire [illegible] Em smiled kindly and handed [illegible] cup. He sat down, suddenly [illegible]

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holding pens, it had been built by the merchants who . . . the town grew. There were carefully built buildings made of whitewashed planks or brick, with boardwalks connecting one to the next so that the shopper or businessman only occasionally had to leave the rutted mud of the street. There was only one saloon in this part of town, and it was a pretentious affair situated on the ground floor of the new two-story hotel. Behind the stores of the street were grids of one- to five-acre lots where the townspeople lived. Most of the houses had vegetable gardens growing corn and tomatoes, and each had a carriage house, stable, or barn. At the bottom of Main Street was the livery, where Kilkenny now stood, and opposite him, the marshal's office . . . a bridge, or a barrier, separating one world from the other.

Kilkenny crushed out his cigarette. He wore black chaps and a black, flat-crowned, flat-brimmed hat. Under his black Spanish-style jacket he wore a gray flannel shirt. They were colors that lost themselves in any shadow.

He was weary now, every muscle heavy with the fatigue of long hours of riding. His throat was dry, his stomach empty. His mind was sluggish because of the weariness of his body, and he felt short-tempered and irritable because of it.

Normally, he was a quiet, tolerant man with a dry humor and a liking for people, but in his present mood he was wary of himself, knowing the sudden angers that could spring up within him at such times.

Darkness gathered in the hollows of the hills and crept down into the silent arroyos, crouching there to wait their hour for creeping into the empty streets. Kilkenny rolled another smoke, trying to relax. He was hungry, but he wanted to calm himself before walking into the company of strangers.

A stray dog trotted up the street . . . a door slammed. The town was settling down after supper.

"It is a way of making a living."

"A gracious way." She looked at him more directly as he spoke. "It is a way one misses."

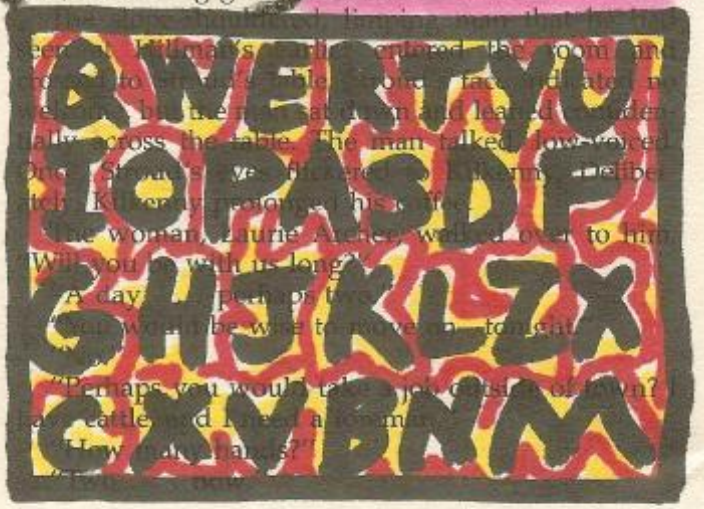
A small frown gathered between her eyes. "I wonder—why is it that most gunfighters are gentlemen?"

"Some were born to it," he said, "and some grow into it. Men are rude only when they are insecure."

He was eating his dessert when the door opened and a man came in. It was, Kilkenny guessed at once, Tom Stroud.

He was a square-faced man with the wide shoulders and deep chest of mountain ancestry. He was plainly dressed and walked without swagger, yet there was something solid and indomitable about him. His eyes were blue, a darker blue than that usually seen, and his mustache was shading from brown to gray.

Stroud himself, glanced at the menu, and then his eyes lifted and met those of Kilkenny. Instant recognition was there . . . not of him as a name, but as a gunfighter. There was also something else, a narrow, measuring gaze.



in0I2 late0
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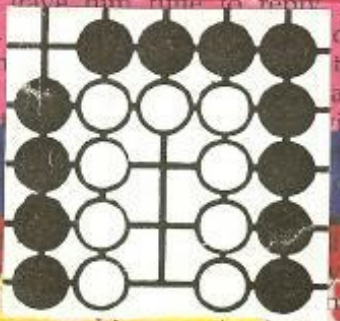
edged along the bar, faint conter
him dead to rights. He got you
"Why should I shoot him?"
me.
"He's gunnin' for you."
"Is he?"
"Everybody knows that. Sure
"I've seen no signs of it." Kilkenny lifted his eyes. "And I can read sign. If you ask me there's a lot of skunk tracks around here."

Kilkenny gave him time to reply, but the man stood silent, d. Events had taken a turn t like. After a moment he ack across the room and sa ith papers. He



"I never my," said Kilkenny. "His troubles were his own. Anybody who hopes to promote a battle is wastin' time. I fight my own wars . . . this one ain't mine."

Irritably, Kilkenny walked to the hotel, got a room,

LOOK AROUND

__were I to choose an auspicious image for the new millennium__

_____

_____

_____

_____

him that never ceased to worry Kilkenny?

What about Laurie? Where did she stand? Despite her comment that he was not to take up Haldon's quarrel, Kilkenny was not at all sure. She was poised, intelligent. Her interests would seem to be aligned

A kid . . . proud, defiant, loyal . . . a kid riding for the brand, and Pike Taylor arrested. Remembering his own youthful feelings, Kilkenny knew how Corey must feel. He would believe Pike must be freed—but how had he known about Pike?

Somehow, someone had gotten word to him. That meant the man behind the scenes was setting up a situation that could only lead to violence, and somehow, in the confusion, Stroud would be killed.

Only Stroud?

Very likely he, Kilkenny, was to be killed, too. That meant they had to get him on the side of the fight, and that meant Laurie was part of it somehow. But she had led him nowhere—she—he stared around him, suddenly.

A half dozen cottonwoods and some willows behind a building . . . a blacksmith shop. And next door? Suddenly he came to his feet, tense and ready.

They had succeeded, they had led him into a trap. They had gotten him close to Stroud, and when they killed both it could be signed off as a gun battle. Didn't everybody know they were hunting each other?

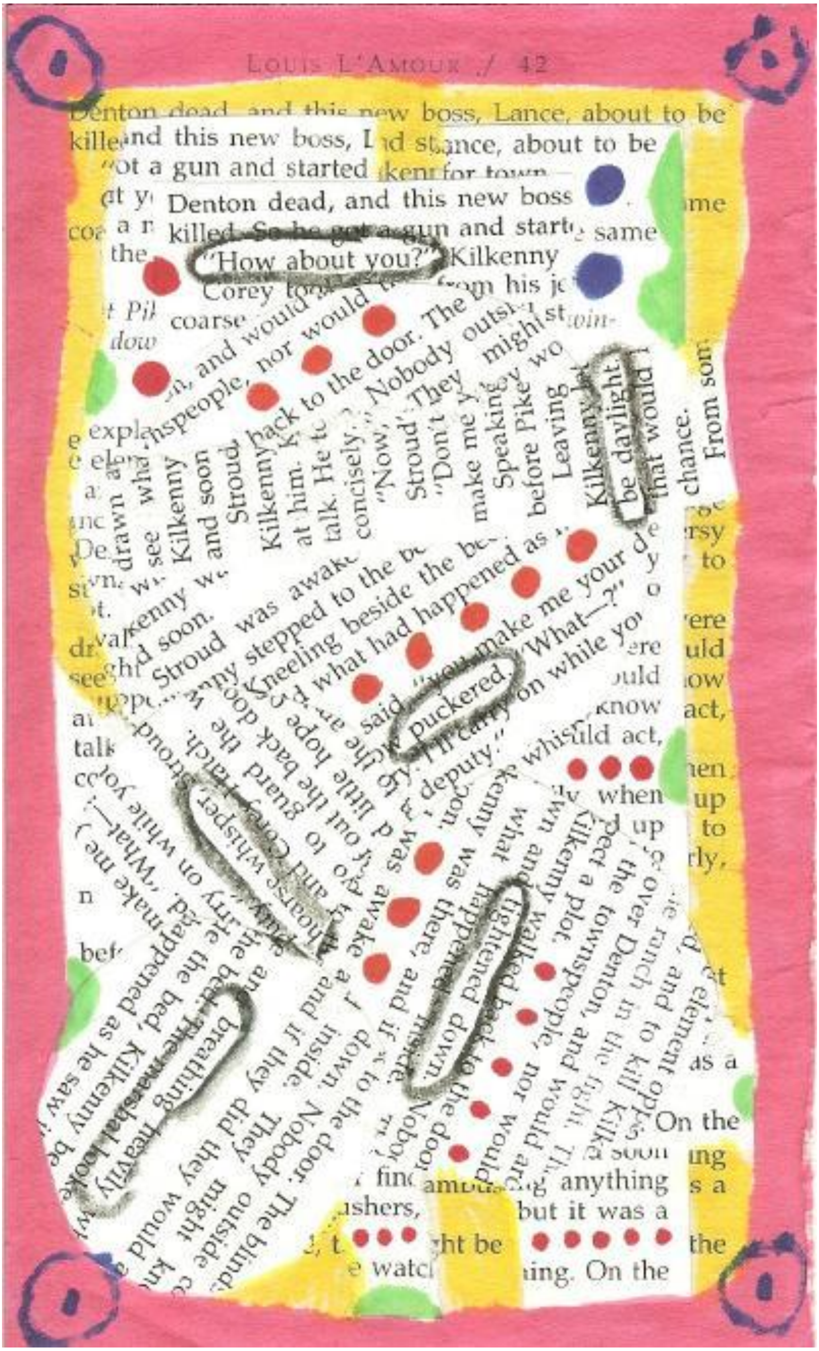
For the building next door to the blacksmith shop was the jail—and Tom Stroud lived in the front of the jail.

Time was short, only seconds must remain, for they could not hope to keep him here long. . . .

A crash from the jail started him running. He ducked around the blacksmith shop, and was just in time to see the marshal step into the door. The moon had come from under a cloud and he caught a fleeting glimpse of Stroud in the doorway. At the corner of the building was Corey Hatch, gun in hand.

Kilkenny opened his mouth to shout a warning, and then the night was ripped apart by a crashing volley. Tom Stroud took one step forward and then fell headlong, sprawled across the steps.

Kilkenny triggered his gun into the darkness from



Louis L'Amour / 42
Denton dead, and this new boss, Lance, about to be
and this new boss, about to be
got a gun and started for town
Denton dead, and this new boss
killed. So he got a gun and start same
"How about you?" Kilkenny
from his
coarse
be daylight.
puckered.
breathing heavily
whisper,
tightened down.
anything
but it was a
ght be
ing. On the
On the

"Yes. . . . Did you leave this house last night? Or very early this morning?"

She shook her head. "I had a headache. I came home early and went to bed. I had just gotten up when you came."

He glanced around him again. Everything was nearly perfect. Had it been someone else wearing her clothes last night, one of the girls from down on the tracks, perhaps?

She noticed the star on his chest, and she frowned. "Where did you get that?" Her voice was a little sharp. "Who's Tom Stroud?"

Patiently, he explained. He was startled to see her face turn deathly pale. She put a hand on the table at her side. "He . . . he . . . like? I mean . . . ?"

"I think so.

"I must go to him."

"No."

She . . . name of him really startled her. She looked up quickly, but before she could speak she said decisively, almost brutally: "Nobody will see him but my colt and my two men until this is cleared up. He's being cared for."

"But—"

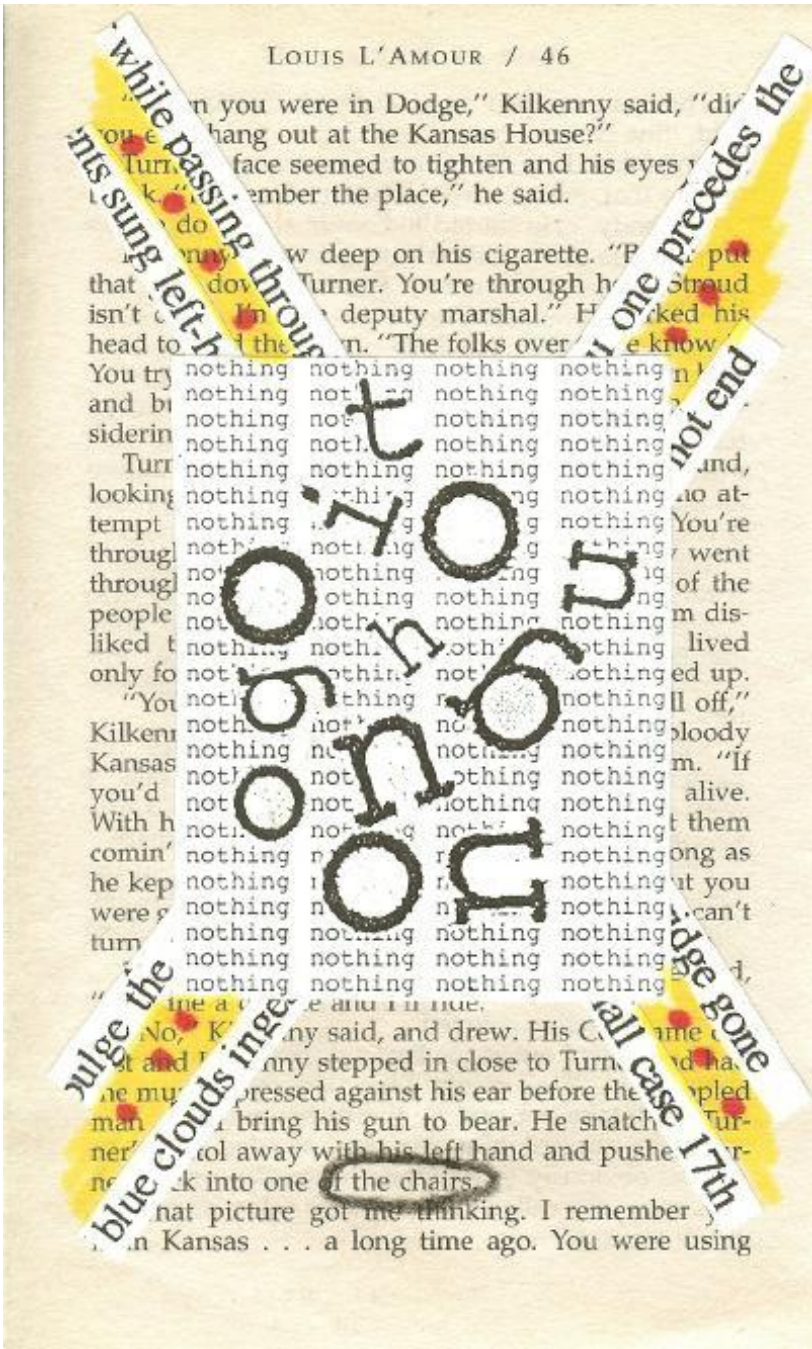
"No," he said firmly and definitely. "Too many people want him dead."

Leaving the house, he walked swiftly down the street. The limping man . . . Mike had said his name was Turner, and told him where to find him. He went up the walk to the house and, without knocking, shoved the door open and stepped in.

Two men were sitting at a table cleaning rifles. They took one look, glimpsed the badge, and the nearest one grabbed for his gun. Kilkenny shot him in the throat, his Colt swinging to cover the other man who slowly lifted his hands, gray-faced.

"Fast," the man said. "You're fast, Lance."

"I've had to be." Lance looked at him and said, "The other name is Kilkenny."



n you were in Dodge," Kilkenny said, "di
hang out at the Kansas House?"

Turn face seemed to tighten and his eyes
ember the place," he said.

w deep on his cigarette. "P put
that do Turner. You're through h Stroud
isn't deputy marshal." H cked his
head to n. "The folks over e know
You try
and b
siderin

Turn and,
lookin no at-
tempt You're
throug went
throug of the
people m dis-
liked t lived
only fo ed up.
"Yo ll off,"
Kilken bloody
Kansas m. "If
you'd alive.
With h t them
comin' ong as
he kep t you
were can't
turn

No, K ny said, and drew. His C ame
t and ny stepped in close to Turn d ha
he mu pressed against his ear before the pled
man bring his gun to bear. He snatch Tur-
ner' col away with his left hand and pushe r-
n k into one of the chairs.

nat picture got me thinking. I remember
n Kansas . . . a long time ago. You were using

"Open the safe, Hill," Turner said, "we're getting out. I've just had a shoot-up with Kilkenny."

Hillman looked incredulous, and the li man sh "I'm not crazy. That gunfighter —he wa kenny. I should have remembered. used the ge before.

ve got to move! Get the safe. He's in hape, bu ple heard the shots and he'll get h

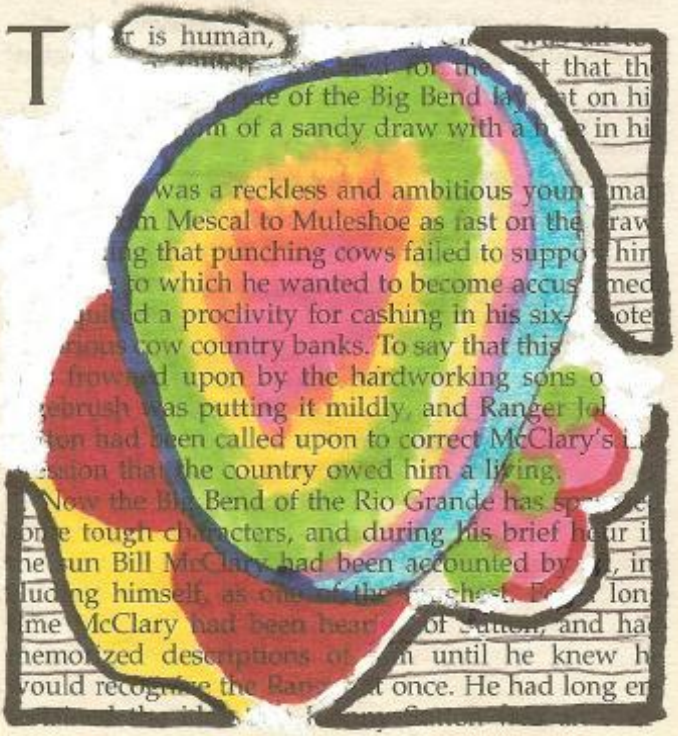
ook in Hillman's eyes stopped hi lman wa king in back of him, over his shou

eman turned and stared, his hand ging. Kil y stood in his che vered wi od from th t across bone an ulder. Stan e doorw was a dangerous ing figu ven- ge

ian drew b ilkenny. ut of it. made life l Barney He's the doorway, e still-oozing cu ding silent in th figure, a loom "Not me, K ell for all of us dirty jobs. And ck. He could feel speak. He was He was losing an was a mur f and a card cl and uncle carry dled the reins. who left Kilken ith a knife in h ng given up Barney t now," Barne ent down for th Kilkenny took ist, and someth

ey Housem times ov e was a thi eat, but ys he ha his brother the burn susp ile he ha In Dodg had be it was he y's sad rtner de an alley w s back. nny had l the chas t his me was good imping ma Housem eat you jus y said, do it ag His hand w e gun ar sped the and then a step forward, his gu ang to his ing slapped at Barney's pocket. He was angry that anything should disturb him now. He started to lift his gun, and

The Passing of Rope Nose



To Rope Nose George, proprietor of the Mustang Saloon, the arrival of Johnny Sutton posed a problem of the first order. Rope Nose was unofficial boss of Paisano, the official boss being Pink Lucas, but Lucas was below the border on a raid. Rope Nose was disturbed, for he recognized Sutton the moment the man stopped in front of the saloon, and he guessed what he carried. Now the guns of a Ranger are feared, yet seven thousand dollars has been known to turn many a yellow streak into the deepest red of battle lust. This Rope Nose realized, and with misgivings.

He was aware that the town of Paisano existed solely because the Rangers had ignored it, being busy with immediate problems, but he was quite sure that if a Ranger were killed in Paisano the town would instantly be awarded first place on the list of Ranger business. In fact, even those not given to superstition in any form were willing to testify that killing a Ranger was bad luck.

Johnny Sutton carried his saddlebags when he came through the doors. With scarcely a glance at the hangers-on, he stepped to the bar. "Howdy, George! Mine will be rye, a meal, and a bed. How about it?"

"Sure thing! Surest thing you know, Mr. Sutton." George spoke that name loud enough so anyone in the room would know who had arrived and be hesitant to start anything. Seven thousand or no seven thousand, Rope Nose wanted nothing so much as to get the Ranger out of town.

Hurriedly, he put the glass on the bar, and a bottle beside it. "There's a good room right at the head of the stairs," he whispered confidentially. "You'll like it there." He hesitated, his curiosity struggling with his better judgment, and the better judgment lost in one fall. "You . . . you run into Bill McClary?"

John Sutton's black, steady eyes centered on Rope Nose and the saloonkeeper felt a little chill go up his spine. He'd heard about the feeling those eyes in

bulged, Sutton added, "And don't get any[illegible] know just how much there is in the [illegible] sonally accountable for every dime of [illegible] heart pounded. Seven thousand dollars [illegible] outlaw dreams were [illegible] He was a notorious coward who lived in fear of both the law and the other men in Pink Lucas's gang, but this was sorely tempting.

Sutton watched him stow the bags carefully into the safe, and when the door was closed he [illegible] followed the girl outside. She said nothing [illegible] walked toward the light from the next door with free swinging stride.

She pushed open the door and instantly [illegible] was a yell of enthusiasm and a rush. "She's back, [illegible] She's back! Let's teach that filly [illegible]!"

The rush stopped so suddenly that one man almost fell down, for Johnny Sutton had stepped through the door after the girl. "Go back an' sit down!" he ordered. "An' damn you for a lot of mangy coyotes!"

Four men sat at a card table. The girl's father was obviously enough. He was not only so drunk he couldn't see, but two men were holding him upright in his chair and one of them was playing his cards. Johnny crossed the room and looked them over cynically. The redhead behind the drunken [illegible] looked up sheepishly. "Is he winnin'?" Johnny asked.

The redhead's flush was deeper. "Well," he said guiltily, "he ain't been holdin' much. Right now he's losin'."

"How much has he lost?"

Red hesitated, then swallowed. "Right at a thousand dollars," he confessed, "maybe a mite over."

Johnny Sutton's right eyebrow [illegible] The man did not look like he had a thousand cents, [illegible] dollars. "Did he have that much, little lady?"

"You bet he did!" the girl flashed back at him. "And more, if these blisterin' pickpockets haven't stole it off him!"

You open your face again," Johnny said calmly, "an' you'll have a mouthful of loose teeth. Shuffle those cards, Chiv. This will teach all of you a lesson you'll remember next time you try to take a harmless old man who's just passin' th cut!"

The man looked at the car taste, then, belligerently, he looked time I cut as I want, and it's on th If the old man wins he gets it all, a

The girl started forward w , but Sutton waved her back. "All "but with your permission I'll cut f ked a thumb toward the old man.

The gambler looked up and his hard eyes brightened with malice. "Why, sure! You cut for him!" He gathered the cards and shuffled them briefly, then slapped the deck on the table and took hold with his thumb and middle finger. "Okay?" he asked, and at Johnny's nod, he cut the cards and showed a queen of hearts, and smiled.

Johnny leaned over and shaved the deck with his fingers, then struck them sligh and split the deck.

At the cut the gambler's fac ent white with fury and he grasped the arms of h chair, staring at the ace of clubs. Sutton was showi "Your own deck," Sutton said quietly.

"Lad Sutton slid sudde to his feet and stepped back from the table, "p up the money. Tie it up in something and we'll le e." His black eyes held the gambler's. "Next time," he advised, "don't use a deck with slick aces."

The gambler stared at him, his face taut with hatred and pent-up fu

As the girl moved toward the door, Johnny Sutton looked the room over, letting each man feel the weight of his attention. "If that girl is bothered again, or if there is any more trouble during my stay in this town, I'll burn the place to the ground, and the ones who are lucky will go to jail."

could only figure out how to keep from being caught by the Ranger or Pink Lucas.

He got his boots on, struggled into his pants, and hastened to the door. Then he stopped abruptly. *The wagon was gone!*

For a minute he stared, mindful of the approaching riders, thinking only of the missing wagon. Then he thought of Chip Ponti. The gambler had fled!

He turned for the stairs to the Ranger's room. He scrambled, panting up the stairs, clutching his unbelted pants with one hand. The Ranger's door stood open and on the rumpled bed was a note.

Sorry to leave like this. I got my money.

Got his money? But? . . . ! Turning, Rope Nose stumbled down the steps and into the saloon. The room was empty and still, and the safe was closed. Hurriedly, he spun the dial and opened the safe. Where the money had been placed was another note.

You should be more careful. I read the combination when you opened the safe earlier. I've taken my money and you had better keep your mouth shut. Sincerely, Chip Ponti.

The door rattled, and he went to it. Opening it, he found himself pushed aside by Pink Lucas. The big man now swaggered to the bar and picked up the bottle left by Sutton. Pouring a drink, he turned on George. "All right, where is it?"

"Where is what?"

Two others had come into the room behind Lucas. One said now. "I told you he was scared, Pink. The money is in the safe."

"No, it isn't." George shoved the note at them. "Sutton took it and he's gone, the wagon with him."


The horses strained into the harness and

moun[illegible] that cliff at the top. Johnny Sutton sat on his horse and [illegible]

From [illegible]here the[illegible] sat they could see him plainly and he wa[illegible]ed to them. One of the men threw his rifle to his sho[illegible]lder[illegible] fired a shot, but the distance was far too gre[illegible]t fo[illegible] to be effective. Sutton rode forward, not certain whether he would find what he sought or not, but [illegible]hen [illegible] came to the bridge of stone, he grinned with [illegible] faction.

He was now well beyond the mesa that blocked the westward vie[illegible] the outlaws [illegible] this stone ledge under wh[illegible]ch the water [illegible] was in fact a part of that same mes[illegible] The water had undermined the solid rock of th[illegible] ledge and left a natural bridge some fifty feet wide[illegible]nd [illegible]t twenty yards long ample to bridge the [illegible]w at that point. Johnny rode across the stone bridge a[illegible]d [illegible]d on horse through the rain to the [illegible] mesa. On this northern side it broke sha[illegible]ly off and [illegible]asy of access in several places, as it w[illegible] the [illegible], although inaccessible for a rider from either the south or east.

Wh[illegible] within [illegible] forty yards of the rim below which [illegible]he hor[illegible]men were trapped, Johnny Sutton swung down and drew his [illegible] rifle, keeping [illegible] the w[illegible]n back under his slicker. He walked up behind some boulders and looked down on the [illegible]ders standing below. He chuckled, then fired a shot into the ground at the horses' feet. Several animals started to buck. All heads swung around and guns came up.

"Drop 'em, Pink!" he called out. "All of you! I've got you [illegible] my gun and I can pick you off like ducks in a barrel! You," Sutton motioned to one of the men, "collect all the guns, an' I mean *all*!"

They sat dead still, staring up at him. Before and behind were roaring rivers, impassable for many hours. East, the ground fell away into a vast flat covered with a stand of water, much of it now treacherous with quicksand. On foot they might climb the

"Well, I'll be [illegible]! Warner [illegible]. "Pink Lucas an' his crowd. [illegible] you ever get this bunch?"

Johnny Sutton shrugged wearily. "They got tired of livin' lives of wickedness and [illegible] surrendered, isn't that right, Pink?"

Pink Lucas answered with a burst of profanity. Chris Pontious only stared at Sutton, his eyes wild with murderous desire for a weapon.

Johnny Sutton looked at Stormy and met her eyes. "You'd better eat something," she said. "You'll [illegible] and wet."

"That ain't all," Pink Lucas threatened. "He'll stay cold an' wet."

Johnny Sutton herded the [illegible] into a barn and left a cowhand to watch them. There had been no sign of Red, and secretly he was pleased. He had liked the way Red played Knight's hand the night before. At least, he liked the way he had played it after he, Sutton, moved in.

Sutton walked to the house and dropped the saddlebags against the wall. "I needed Lucas," he said, looking around at Warner. "He's been hiding across the border. I'd been trailing him when I ran into McClary. And that Pontious—he's wanted in New Orleans and Dallas, both places for murder."

"The rain has stopped," Stormy said suddenly. "Maybe we can go on [illegible]."

The rain had stopped. Johnny listened [illegible] heard no sound, but he heard another sound. A faint clop, clop of a walking horse. "Somebody coming in?" he asked, turning his head. "Maybe one of your boys?"

"Maybe. There's two still out," Warner got up. "I'll see."

The big rancher turned toward the door. Suddenly he started backing toward them, and Rope Nose George was standing in the door with a shotgun in his hand. He wore two six-shooters, but [illegible]

shotgun rested on the back of a chair with the muzzles pointed at Sutton, not ten feet away.

"Now," he waved to Stormy, "you tie these gents up. Tie 'em good an' tight because I'll look 'em over after. Then I'm takin' out. Sure do hate to take your money, young lady, but I'll need it an' you're young."

Johnny Sutton was the last one tied. The girl drew the ropes about him, then tied a knot and, opening Johnny's hand, placed the end of the rope in it. Instantly, he realized what she had done. She had fumbled and tied a slip noose.

Rope Nose called her over and proceeded to tie her hands. Then he picked up the sacks and, with the shotgun, backed to the door. As the door closed after him, Sutton jerked on the rope. His wrists were tied, and he could only pull a little at a time. Sweat broke out on his face and body but he fought with his fingers, struggling to pull the knot loose. He heard a horse whinny, then another. He heard one of the outlaws call out from the barn, and Rope Nose yelling.

Suddenly the noose slipped, and then he was jerking his hands and shaking loose the loops of rope about his wrists. Swiftly he untied his feet and grabbed for his gun belts. Whipping them about him, Johnny rushed to the door. Rope Nose had both blacks saddled. He hung the saddlebags and sack on one, then swung to mount the other.

Johnny heard Eucan swearing from the barn, and heard the refusal of Rope Nose to give them aid. Then Johnny stepped out and let the door slam behind him. Rope Nose whirled as if stabbed, the shotgun in his hands. He was all of fifty yards away and his mouth was wide, his eyes staring with incredulous horror.

Suddenly he shouted, almost screamed, "No! No, you ain't goin' to stop me!" He stepped forward and lifted the shotgun waist high, and then Sutton fired. The widely scattered pellets of the shotgun choked

like a man suddenly awakened in unfamiliar surroundings. Vaguely, he felt something was expected of him.

"He asked for it," he said then, striving for that hard, confident tone that would convince them he was a man not to be trifled with. Inside he was quivering with shock and yet through the startled horror with which he looked upon the man he had killed came the realization that he had actually defended himself successfully in a gun battle. The thought filled him with elation and excitement.

Hurley was not a man accustomed to violence. He carried a gun only because it was the custom, and because in the daily round of activity emergencies might arise with wild steers or half-wild horses when a gun was needed, but he had never dreamed of actually killing a man.

From time to time he heard talk around the post office some talk of gun battles, but that was another world than his, and he could [illegible] the names he had heard and [illegible]

Hurley had come west from Ohio, where he combined his farming with occasional [illegible] When he first arrived, he drove a freight outfit for a season. The [illegible] wagon train was attacked by Indians who attack broke off before he was able to fire a shot. Leaving the freighting, Hurley had bought a few head of cattle and settled on a small stream with a good spring [illegible] by, and true to his Ohio upbringing he put in a crop of corn and a few acres of barley, and planted a [illegible] was the first vegetable garden in that part of the country. He cut hay in the nearby meadows and stacked it for the winter feeding.

He had [illegible] no trouble, and expected none. He was a quiet [illegible] working man who had never lifted a hand in violence [illegible] his life.

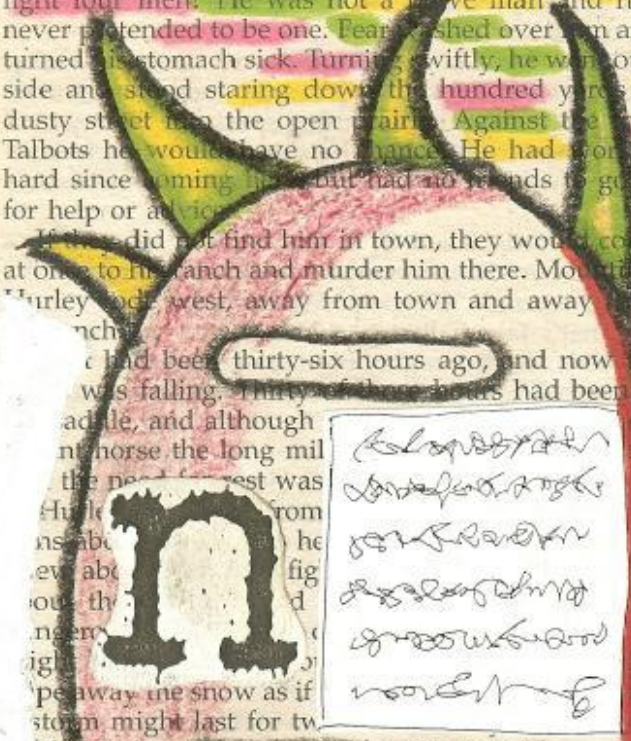
"He asked [illegible] he repeated.

"Not [illegible] argue that." Pearson was the saloonkeeper, a [illegible] had seen [illegible] times seen

fight four men? He was not a brave man and had never pretended to be one. Fear washed over him and turned his stomach sick. Turning swiftly, he went outside and stood staring down the hundred yards of dusty street into the open prairie. Against the four Talbots he would have no chance. He had worked hard since coming here but had no friends to go to for help or advice.

If they did not find him in town, they would come at once to his ranch and murder him there. Mounting, Hurley rode west, away from town and away from the ranch.

It had been thirty-six hours ago, and now the snow was falling. Thirty of those hours had been in the saddle, and although his horse the long mile to the near forest was

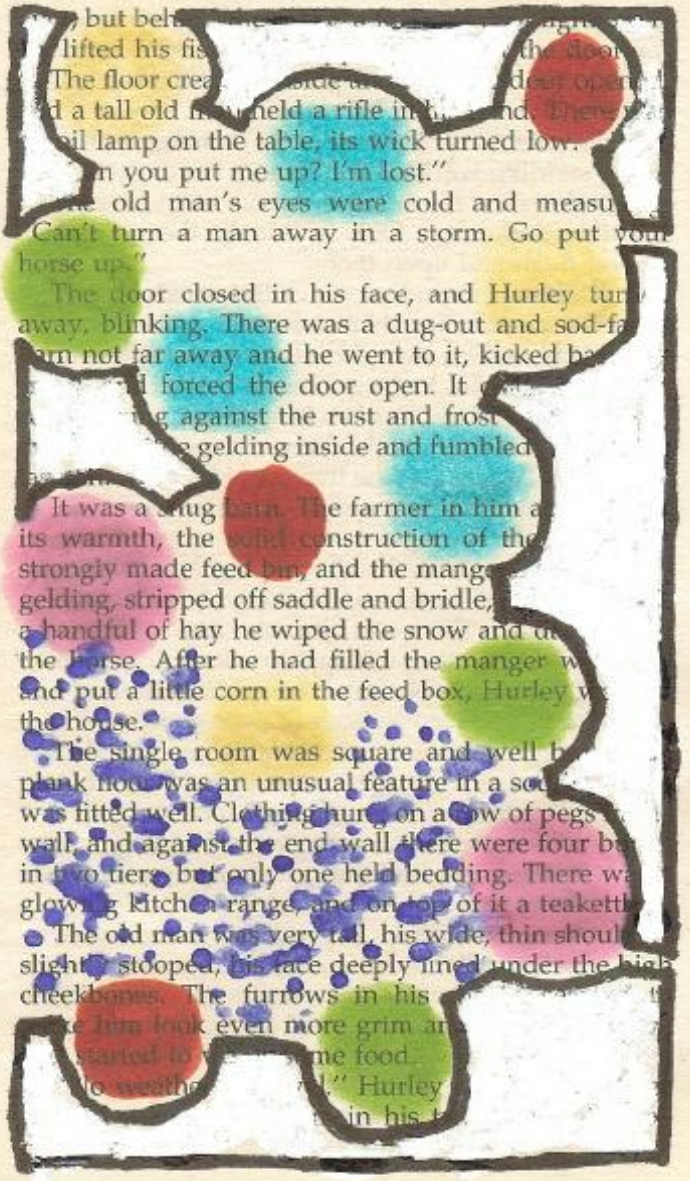


away the snow as if the storm might last for two or three weeks.

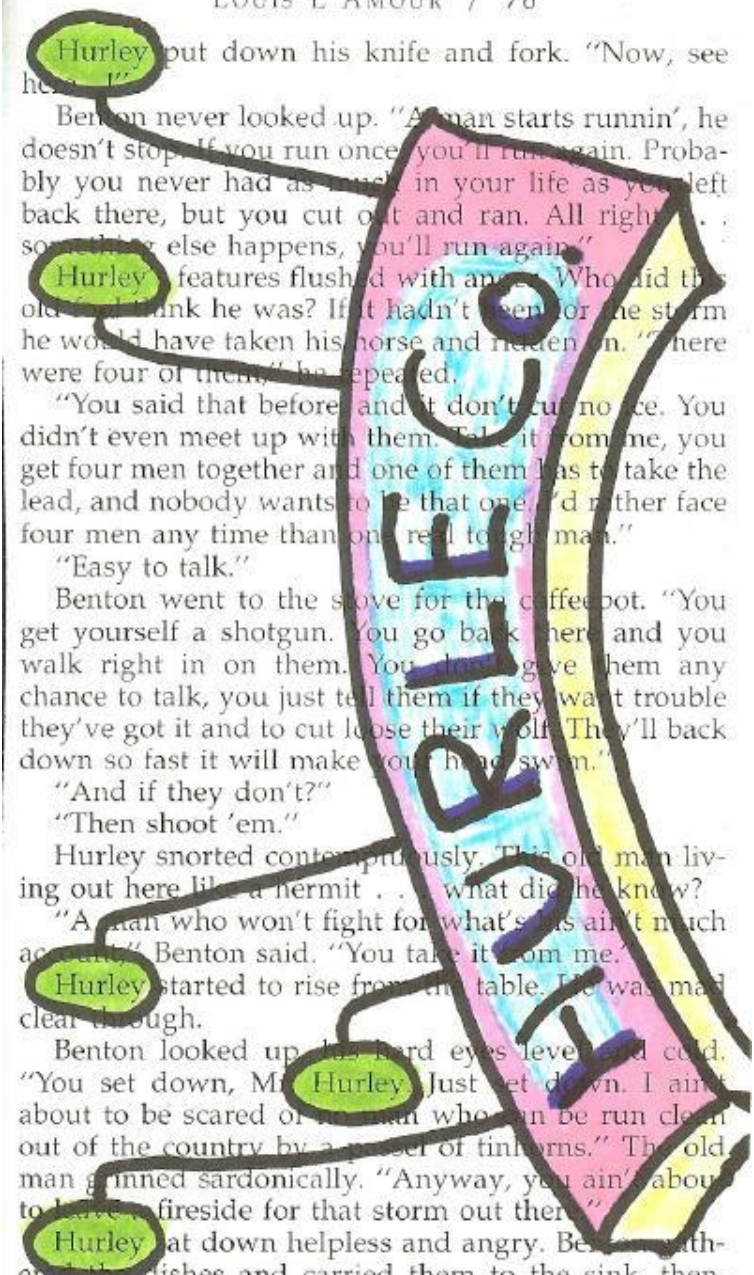
Until now his mind had been a blank, with no thought but to escape, to get away from the danger of the whipping bullets that would spill his life's blood on the ground—and for what?

Hurley had looked upon the dead face of Talbot and had seen himself lying there, knowing better than most how narrow had been the margin. That he had scored with his second shot had been luck of purest variety, for it had been almost no better than the first.

The snow fell steadily. The trail he followed was no longer visible, but he could feel the frozen ruts with his feet. It was not a narrow trail, but one a hundred yards or more wide where wagons had cut deep ruts



but beh
lifted his fis
The floor crea
d a tall old
held a rifle in
il lamp on the table, its wick turned low.
n you put me up? I'm lost."
old man's eyes were cold and measu
Can't turn a man away in a storm. Go put
horse up."
The door closed in his face, and Hurley tur
away, blinking. There was a dug-out and sod-fa
rn not far away and he went to it, kicked ha
forced the door open. It
g against the rust and frost
gelding inside and fumbled
It was a snug barn. The farmer in him a
its warmth, the solid construction of th
strongly made feed bin, and the mang
gelding, stripped off saddle and bridle,
a handful of hay he wiped the snow and d
the horse. After he had filled the manger w
and put a little corn in the feed box, Hurley w
the house.
The single room was square and well b
plank floor was an unusual feature in a so
was fitted well. Clothing hung on a row of pegs
wall, and against the end wall there were four b
in two tiers, but only one held bedding. There wa
glowing kitchen range, and on top of it a teakettl
The old man was very tall, his wide, thin shoul
slightly stooped, his face deeply lined under the high
cheekbones. The furrows in his
e him look even more grim an
started to
me food.
o weath
d." Hurley
in his



Hurley put down his knife and fork. "Now, see he[re], I"

Benton never looked up. "A man starts runnin', he doesn't stop. If you run once you'll run again. Probably you never had as much in your life as you left back there, but you cut out and ran. All right . . . so something else happens, you'll run again."

Hurley's features flushed with anger. Who did this old [fool] think he was? If it hadn't been for the storm he would have taken his horse and ridden on. "There were four of them," he repeated.

"You said that before, and it don't cut no ice. You didn't even meet up with them. Take it from me, you get four men together and one of them has to take the lead, and nobody wants to be that one. I'd rather face four men any time than one real tough man."

"Easy to talk."

Benton went to the stove for the coffeepot. "You get yourself a shotgun. You go back there and you walk right in on them. You don't give them any chance to talk, you just tell them if they want trouble they've got it and to cut loose their wolf. They'll back down so fast it will make your head swim."

"And if they don't?"

"Then shoot 'em."

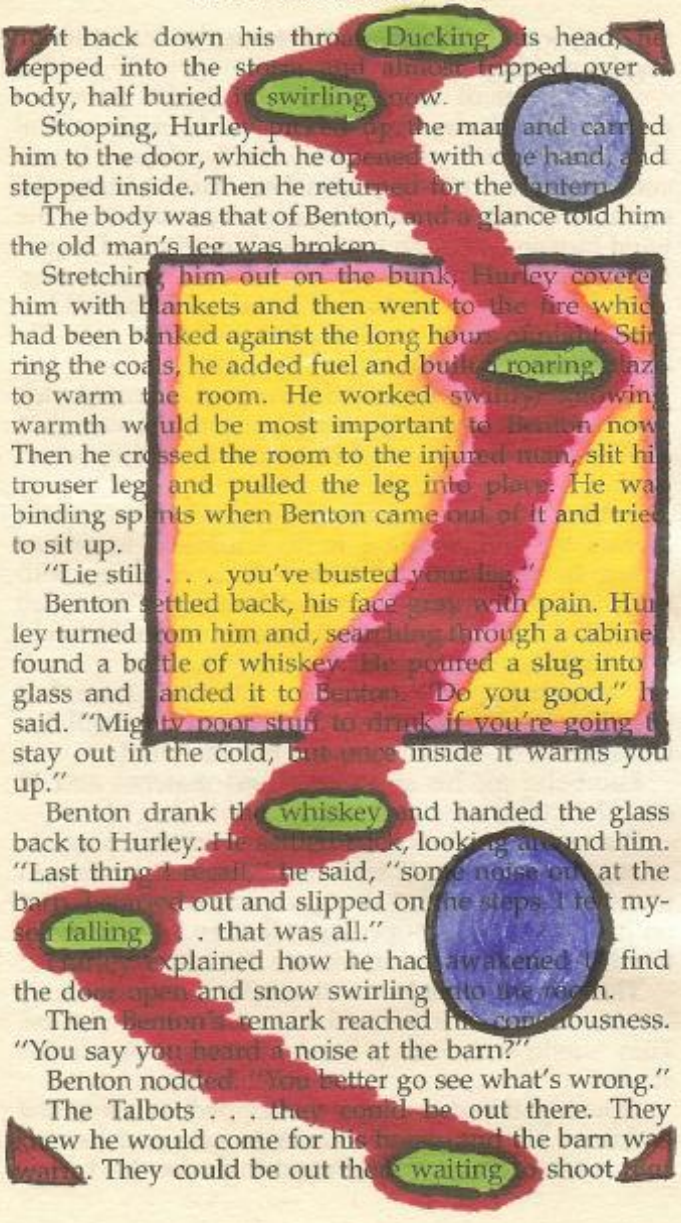
Hurley snorted contemptuously. This old man living out here like a hermit . . . what did he know?

"A man who won't fight for what's his ain't much account," Benton said. "You take it from me."

Hurley started to rise from the table. He was mad clear through.

Benton looked up, his hard eyes level and cold. "You set down, Mr. Hurley. Just set down. I ain't about to be scared of no man who can be run clean out of the country by a passel of tinhorns." The old man grinned sardonically. "Anyway, you ain't about to leave the fireside for that storm out there."

Hurley sat down helpless and angry. Benton gathered the dishes and carried them to the sink, then,



...t back down his thro... Ducking ...is head, ... stepped into the st... ...almost tripped over ... body, half buried ... swirling ...ow.

Stooping, Hurley ... up the man and carried him to the door, which he opened with one hand, and stepped inside. Then he returned for the lantern.

The body was that of Benton, and a glance told him the old man's leg was broken.

Stretching him out on the bunk, Hurley covered him with blankets and then went to the fire which had been banked against the long hours of night. Stirring the coals, he added fuel and built a roaring blaze to warm the room. He worked swiftly, knowing warmth would be most important to Benton now. Then he crossed the room to the injured man, slit his trouser leg and pulled the leg into place. He was binding splints when Benton came out of it and tried to sit up.

"Lie still . . . you've busted your leg."

Benton settled back, his face gray with pain. Hurley turned from him and, searching through a cabinet, found a bottle of whiskey. He poured a slug into a glass and handed it to Benton. "Do you good," he said. "Mighty poor stuff to drink if you're going to stay out in the cold, but once inside it warms you up."

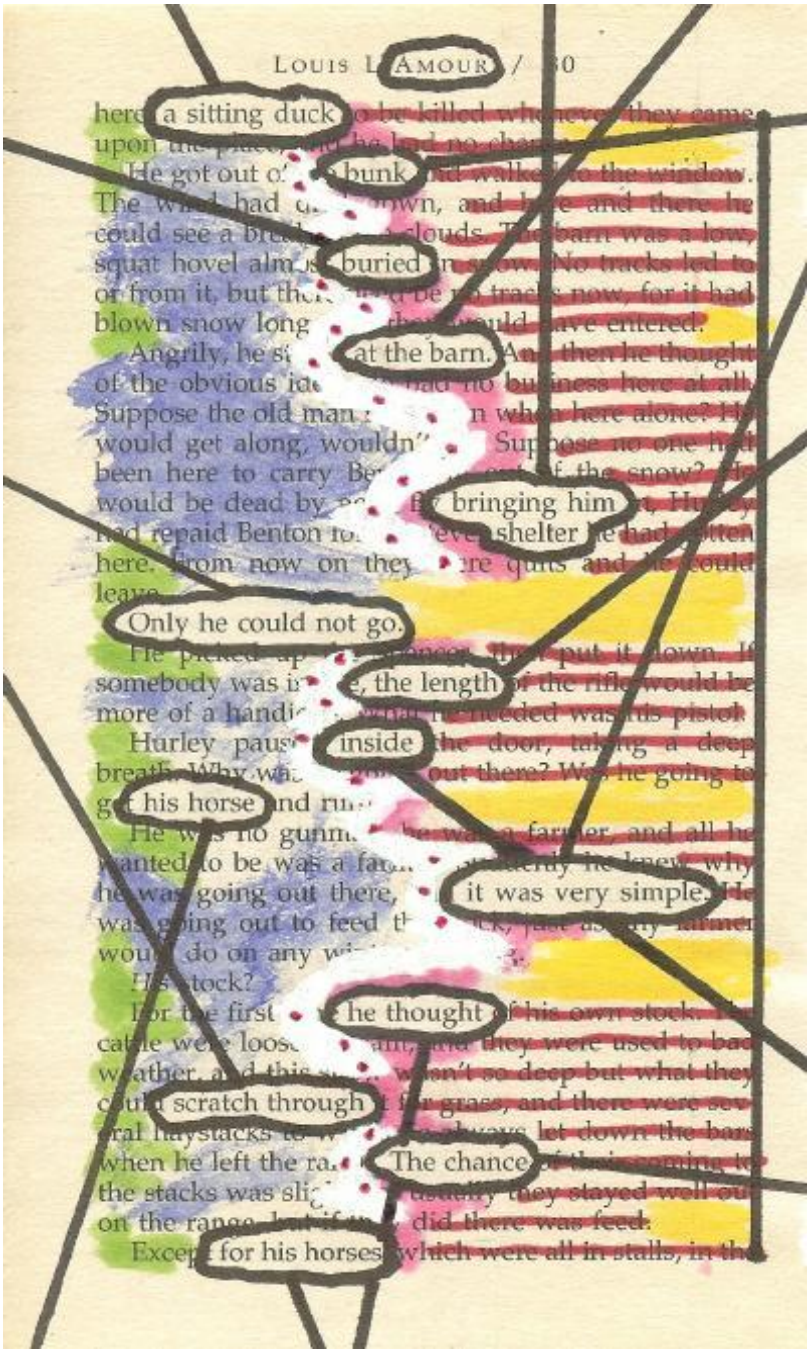
Benton drank the whiskey and handed the glass back to Hurley. He ... looking around him. "Last thing I recall," he said, "some noise out at the barn. I went out and slipped on the steps. I fell my- ... falling ... that was all."

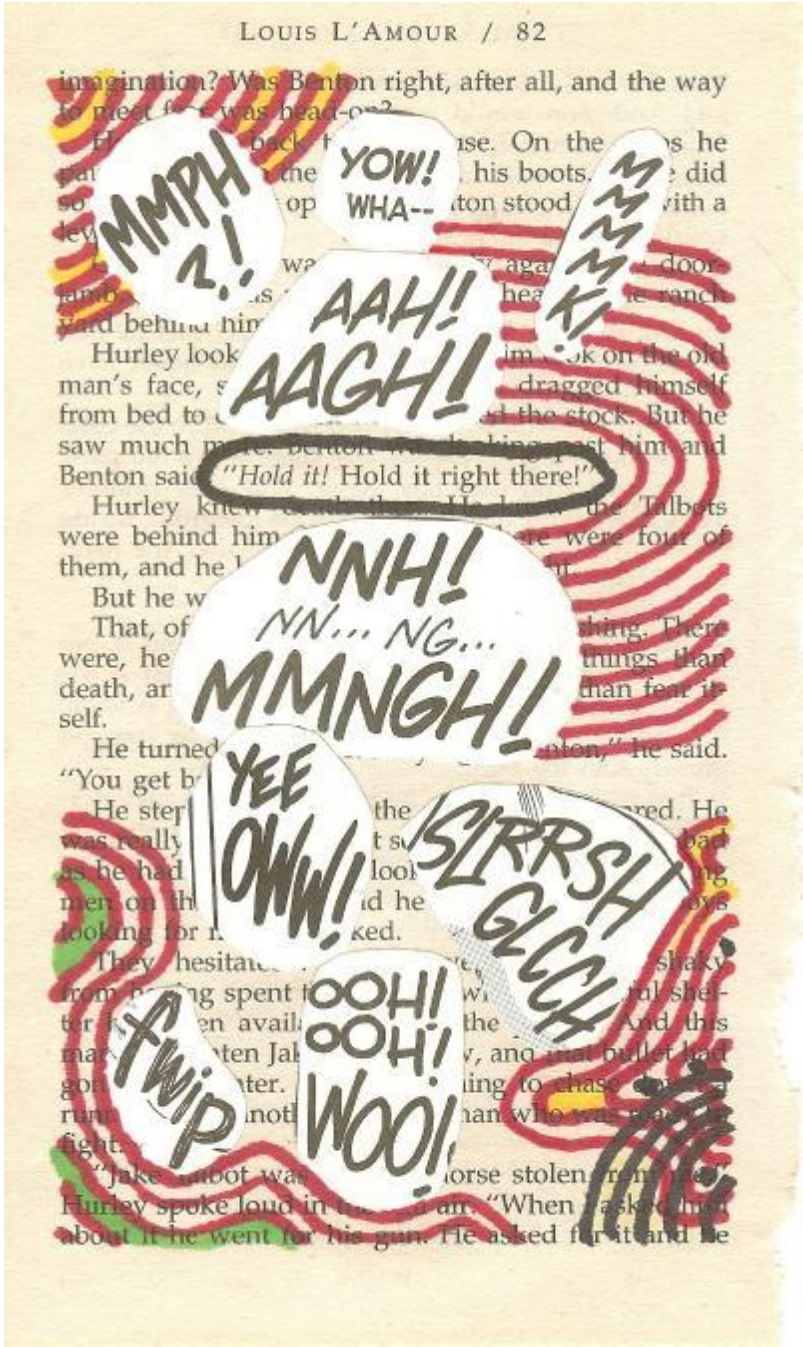
... explained how he had awakened to find the door open and snow swirling into the room.

Then Benton's remark reached full consciousness. "You say you heard a noise at the barn?"

Benton nodded. "You better go see what's wrong."

The Talbots . . . they could be out there. They knew he would come for his ... and the barn was empty. They could be out there waiting to shoot him.





imagination? Was Benton right, after all, and the way
to meet [illegible] was head-on?
[illegible] back [illegible]ise. On the [illegible]s he
put [illegible] the [illegible] his boots. [illegible] did
so [illegible] op[illegible]ton stood [illegible]with a
dew[illegible] wa[illegible] aga[illegible] door
and[illegible]s [illegible] hea[illegible] ranch
yard behind him.
Hurley look[illegible] im[illegible]ok on the old
man's face, s[illegible] dragged himself
from bed to [illegible] the stock. But he
saw much m[illegible]re. Benton was looking past him and
Benton said, "*Hold it!* Hold it right there!"
Hurley knew [illegible] the Talbots
were behind him[illegible]re were four of
them, and he [illegible]
But he w[illegible]
That, of [illegible]hing. There
were, he [illegible] things that
death, ar[illegible] than fear it-
self.
He turned [illegible]nton," he said.
"You get b[illegible]
He step[illegible] the [illegible]red. He
was really [illegible]t s[illegible] bad
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men on th[illegible]d he [illegible]ys
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They hesitat[illegible] shaky
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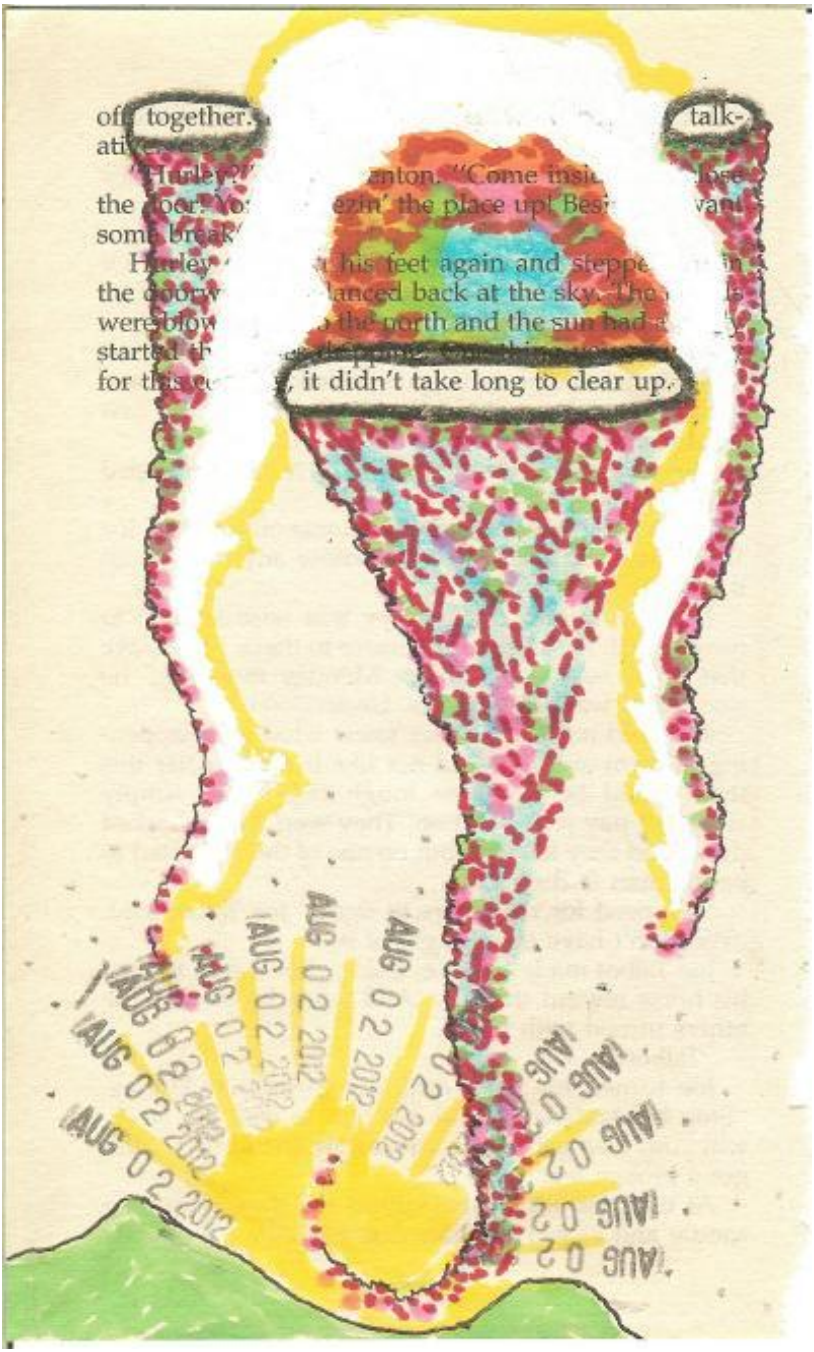
ter [illegible]en availa[illegible] the [illegible] And this
mar[illegible]ten Jak[illegible], and that bullet had
got[illegible]ter. [illegible]ing to chase [illegible]
run[illegible] not[illegible]han who was [illegible]
fight.
"Jake [illegible]oot was [illegible]orse stolen [illegible]"
Hurley spoke loud in the [illegible] air. "When I asked him
about it he went for his gun. He asked for it and he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